

# A World First for Scotland?

By Tom Burkard

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Throughout the Anglophone world, educators take it for granted that at least 20% of their pupils will spend 12 years in school without learning to read. The human misery that lies behind this statistic can scarcely be imagined by those who have not endured the daily humiliation of colouring in worksheets designed for “dummies”. Nor can many people fully appreciate the daunting task faced by teachers who are expected to “differentiate” the curriculum for the benefit of children who can barely read or write.

Yet we have known for quite a while that all children can be taught to read with a method now known as *synthetic phonics*. This year, the impoverished Scottish school board of West Dunbartonshire announced that *all* 11-year-olds have entered high school with a reading age of at least 9 ½. To put this in perspective, they could all read well enough to read an ordinary newspaper. Reading scores beyond this age are mostly a measure of verbal intelligence. A child with a reading age of 9 ½ should be able to read a sentence like "Civil servants occupy powerful positions in governing the country's affairs".

In a recent Centre for Policy Studies booklet —*A World First for West Dunbartonshire* — I explained that eliminating reading failure across an entire local authority is an astounding achievement. The Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics study — which provided much of the ammunition that blew apart the old National Literacy Strategy —involved an experimental group of only 200 pupils in five schools. Clearly, it is one thing to achieve outstanding results on a small scale, when talented teachers can ensure a high fidelity of implementation, but it is quite another matter to do the same thing across an entire school board. Especially when you have to convince everyone from the council leaders down to part-time teaching assistants that it is *not* normal for at least 20% of your pupils to fail, and that all children from dysfunctional homes *can* be taught to read!

This kind of change cannot be enforced from above. Dr. Tommy MacKay, the consultant psychologist who engineered the West Dunbartonshire miracle, distinguishes between "restructuring" and "reculturing". The former is the stock-in-trade of managerialists the world over, and it rests upon the illusion that improvement is merely a matter of technocratic competence. Reculturing, on the other hand, is the process by which people come to question the sort of beliefs that permeate their profession. It can be achieved only through leadership. Leaders inspire their colleagues by example, whereas managers tell their subordinates what to do. On top of this, Dr. MacKay had to overcome all of the usual difficulties encountered in large bureaucracies, the "friction" that upsets the most carefully-laid plans

— matters like staff-turnover, competing demands of other initiatives, and breakdowns of communication.

The full significance of the West Dunbartonshire miracle has yet to be fully appreciated in Scotland, let alone England or Wales. It has passed virtually without notice in other Anglophone countries. This should not surprise us: for as long as I can remember, educators have been announcing miraculous results for their initiatives — and where are they now? I recently bought an old paperback which excitedly extolled the virtues of “open education” – schools without internal walls, where children wandered from one activity area to another as they pleased. Teachers, and the general public, can be excused their scepticism.

Yet things are changing. As one special needs teacher said to me, "We know that what we are doing now isn't working". The pilots of my own *Sound Foundations* programme, conducted with Reception (K) pupils in 14 English primary schools, have demonstrated how quickly and easily slow readers can be taught to read with a good synthetic phonics program. My program is welcomed with open arms, because it is so easy to use: no lesson-planning, no paperwork—with 10 minutes of individual instruction per day, nearly all of these children learned to read in one short term.

Since then, I have been travelling all over Britain, and I hope I am not being too optimistic in saying that there is something of a sea-change in the air. It's not just that teachers want to know about synthetic phonics, but also that they seem to be throwing off the yoke imposed by their masters in the ministry. And not before time. We need a modern Cromwell to tell these meddling fools, "In the name of God, go!"

*(Mr. Burkard is a research fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies, the London think-tank founded by Margaret Thatcher. He founded the Promethean Trust, a charity for dyslexic children, and is the co-author of the revolutionary "Sound Foundations" decoding and spelling programs.)*