

**READING REFORM FOUNDATION RESPONSE TO THE
DRAFT FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING LITERACY CONSULTATION DOCUMENT**

The Reading Reform Foundation (RRF) finds this document extremely disappointing. It was issued in April 2006 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), but makes little attempt to incorporate the findings of the Rose *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* of March 2006, which it was surely supposed to do. The Rose report, also published by the DfES, focuses firmly on *early* reading in a way which the DfES draft framework fails to do. In particular, the draft framework is virtually silent on the following key points, which are clearly made in the Rose report. References are to this report unless otherwise indicated.

- Phonics is ‘a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that...has to be taught and learned’. Learning to read differs from and precedes reading to learn (para. 113).
- A better understanding is needed of the relationship between the two essential components of reading which the Rose report calls ‘word recognition’ (i.e. phonic decoding – see para. 122 and Appendix 1 paras. 12-16) and ‘language comprehension’ – their relationship is shown in diagrams in Appendix 1.
- ‘Phonic work should be time limited, whereas work on comprehension continues throughout life’ (para. 129).
- The reversibility of reading and spelling needs to be emphasised (paras. 44, 217, 221).
- ‘Synthetic phonics’ is the best kind of ‘quality-first’ teaching for beginners (paras. 47, 51-53) because it recognises all the above.

In these areas, the way forward recommended by Rose differs from the approach hitherto embodied in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The draft framework does not make this clear, however, and even appears to recycle some flawed NLS thinking: for example, its recommendation that children should ‘use knowledge of syntax, context, word origin and structure to establish meaning’ would be acceptable under the heading ‘Understanding and interpreting texts’, but it actually appears under ‘Word reading skills and strategies’, where it is unacceptable because it implies the continuing use of two of the four original searchlights for word *identification*¹ and thus conflicts with what is arguably the crux of the Rose report: that ‘word reading’ and ‘language comprehension’ must not continue to be ‘confounded’ as they were in the ‘searchlights’ model – they need to be separated.

If this framework is implemented in September 2006 as it stands, then what the DfES is implementing, particularly for beginners, will not be the Rose recommendations, despite the acceptance of these recommendations by Ruth Kelly, then Secretary of State for Education. The RRF proposes that a new framework for the first stage of literacy teaching should be drafted before September 2006 by people who have a good track record in teaching beginners and/or in research on beginning reading and who are genuinely committed to implementing the findings of the Rose report.² An outline framework for the teaching of early reading and spelling is suggested overleaf. Broadly speaking, the first year of school is long enough to enable all or virtually all children to learn a significant number of grapheme-phoneme correspondences³ and the skills of blending and segmenting (para. 51). If a few lag behind, they need further help in mastering these essentials before proceeding to higher-level work.

¹ In addition, the only other recommendation under ‘Word reading skills and strategies’ (‘Use phonics to read unknown words’) may imply the retention of the third non-phonetic searchlight (‘Word recognition and graphic knowledge’) if it means that beginners already ‘know’, or need to learn, some words as wholes. This would be at odds with Appendix 1 para. 56 – see footnote 1 overleaf.

² A second group, of comprehension specialists, may need (though less urgently) to draft more detailed guidance on the comprehension skills needed when decoding does not yield instant comprehension. More detailed guidance may also be needed on the teaching of spelling beyond the beginner stage.

³ The RRF finds that most children can, within the first year, learn sounds for all alphabet letters and 20 or more digraphs/trigraphs and can be blending and segmenting successfully using these correspondences.

**SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR THE FIRST STAGE OF LITERACY TEACHING
(NOTIONALLY THE FIRST YEAR) BASED ON THE FINAL ROSE REPORT (MARCH 2006)**

Word recognition/decoding¹

- Beginners should be taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences from simple to complex (para. 36), and ‘in a clearly defined, incremental sequence’ (para. 51)².
- The reversibility of reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding) should be emphasised (paras. 44, 217, 221).
- This teaching should be ‘time-limited’ (paras. 52 and 129), taking months not years (para. 86).
- In the early stages, teachers should put more emphasis than many currently do on all-through-the-word blending (paras. 51, 232, 237).
- Children should be taught to check that they have understood what they have decoded.
- Children’s mastery of the decoding and encoding skills taught up to any given point (grapheme-phoneme correspondences, blending and segmenting) should be frequently assessed and appropriate teaching should be provided for those who need it (para. 59).³
- The use of decodable texts should be considered (paras. 82 and 83).⁴
- There should be no guessing at words from pictures or initial letters (paras. 117 and 237).

The above points are mainly to do with content (the ‘body of knowledge, skills and understanding’ which must be taught and learnt). Delivery should be lively and interactive, making use of mnemonics, plastic letters, music, individual white-boards etc. as appropriate.

Language Comprehension

- Early texts for children themselves to read should as far as possible use language already within their speech vocabulary so that additional comprehension demands are not made (Appendix 1, para. 65). If unfamiliar words occur, their meanings should be explained by the teacher – *beginning* readers should not be expected to work out word-meanings by using knowledge of ‘syntax, context, word origin and structure’ as suggested in the draft framework (though this can reasonably be expected of more advanced readers).
- While children are learning to decode competently, teachers should read stimulating stories aloud to them and use discussion of these stories to increase vocabulary and encourage an interest in reading. (See, for example, para. 104.)
- In the context of a *literacy* curriculum, all speaking and listening activities should be designed to support *literacy* learning rather than as ends in themselves (though group discussion, drama etc. may be ends in themselves elsewhere in the curriculum).
- It should be recognised that comprehension skills continue to develop throughout life (para. 129). They should not be divided into year-by-year objectives.

¹Para. 122 in the main body of the Rose report and paras. 12-16 of Appendix 1 make it clear that ‘word recognition’ means phonic decoding rather than the recognition of words as wholes. In fact Appendix 1 para. 56 makes the point that even the recognition of ‘sight vocabulary’ depends on ‘understanding and application of the alphabetic principle’.

²Experienced teachers in the RRF find that the weaker children, in particular, tend to confuse letter-names and sounds, and would therefore suggest that it is safer to start by teaching all children to call letter-shapes only by their sounds, introducing letter-names at the point where digraphs are introduced.

³At all ages and stages, children may not show equal performance on decoding and language comprehension. The two need to be separately assessed ‘to identify learning needs and guide further teaching’ (Appendix 1 para. 18).

⁴The RRF would prefer that the use of decodable texts should be ‘strongly recommended’, but recognises that the Rose report does not go as far as this.