
Report from the (English) Riviera 2006

Well folks, we knew it wasn't going to be good, but this year's annual Easter hot cross bun-fight, also known as the NUT conference proved to be unappetising fare from the moment it opened on Good Friday to the time it closed on Tuesday afternoon.

You know I'm not one to take the mickey normally, but the temptations on offer were just too good to ignore. Take my delegate's freebie, a lovely black NUT bag, complete with the strap-line, **NUT, caring and campaigning**. How New Labour. How ironic that the next 5 days were spent hurling vitriol at New Labour and all things Blairy.

Well they don't care about the 25% of children leaving primary school unable to read and write properly, that's for sure. And judging by the campaigns on offer, they are actually going to make matters even worse.

Synthetic phonics was this year's favourite whipping boy, (closely followed by Israel, but therein lay another tale). From the President's opening address, "We don't need politicians telling us how to teach children to read" to the classic observation from executive member Max Hyde that phonics is s-t-uh-p-i-d and **one size doesn't fit all** (except that all children **MUST** attend local comprehensives and not go to trust schools or academies!) it went on and on and on like a dripping tap.

I do have sympathy with the view that government shouldn't be interfering in teaching methodology, but they've had long enough to get their house in order and the children who are in school need the correct teaching **NOW**, not in 20 years time. And this lot at the conference espoused the view that **THEY** alone know what is best for their class a mixture of methods.

We were treated to a video on the union's CPD programmes. Muzac played in the background, as we heard from participants in the Teacher to Teacher course, learning from each other in an action research type approach. Lots of mind-mapping and chunky felt pens in evidence. No danger of learning anything about the teaching of reading there then.

The only thing that kept me sane was, (no, not a secret hip flask of brandy!) the knowledge that the people at this conference are not representative of teachers as a whole, and that most of the executive are completely out of touch and ill-informed.

There were debates on ASBOs/behaviour, class sizes, testing, Ofsted, workplace bullying, workload, the narrow and restrictive curriculum, all lashing out at the wrong targets. "Try teaching them to read in Reception" was what I wanted to scream at them, and all the above would largely disappear. One executive member said 100 out of the 430 children in her school had special needs, (she's the SENCO) and that smaller class sizes would make a real difference.

No good telling her synthetic phonics would make a difference. Or the other executive member, Hazel Danson, who declared that only SHE was responsible for standards in her class and that **reading, was for meaning**. This got a standing ovation. I went out for some fresh Torquay air at this point, avoiding the early-morning gauntlet of stereotypical, rabid, "militant teacher" pamphleteers, who were still inside baying for Blair's blood.

The **ONLY** time reality cut through the ritual posturing on offer, was the moving speech from ex-President John Illingworth on how the pressures of Ofsted and the DfES and the whole educational climate of bullying had broken him and he had removed the source of the stress, he had left teaching.

How many youngsters joining the profession will quit after a few years? With no proper training and education being full of guff and no substance, they will burn out and leave.

Well they say, don't get mad get even, so I did get up and speak in the Early Years debate, defending **the teaching of reading** in early years and sticking up for Jolly Phonics. It went down like a lead balloon, but at least they didn't get it all their own way

on synthetic phonics.

To me, as a delegate, this was the huge and sad irony. The largest teachers union in the country is lead by people who don t understand how to teach children to read. This caring and campaigning union spent its conference banging on about Equal Opportunities for adults whilst being quite happy to accept a completely avoidable failure rate of 25-30% amongst the children its members failed to teach to read, the majority of whom are from the poorest, most disadvantaged backgrounds, and the most deserving of their help.

We have got a lot of work to do to overcome the ignorance and prejudice that was displayed at this caring and campaigning conference. It showed me yet again that we have to fight this battle at grassroots, school-by-school level, as on present showing there is unlikely to be any support for radical change from among our leaders.

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