

The Social Market Foundation: Fade or flourish: how primary schools can build on children's early progress.

Chapter One: A central focus on literacy

How can a focus on literacy prevent fade out?

Literacy is the building block upon which all other learning depends. Without developed literacy skills, a child will find it impossible to access, let alone learn, other subjects. This is demonstrated in the fact that literacy improvement programmes often have as side-effects improvements in other subjects, such as maths.¹ It is vital, therefore, that children starting primary school are given ample opportunity to develop their literacy skills and become fluent readers and writers if they are ever to enjoy further academic success later in life. There is also a large body of evidence which has found a significant link between poor literacy and poor social skills. Weaker readers tend to display behavioural problems, such as aggression.² This can also be illustrated in the fact that another concomitant benefit found in some literacy programmes is improved social skills and less hyperactivity.³

Sparkes states that literacy skills are also an important predictor of later life success – she cites evidence which demonstrates the correlation between poor literacy skills and higher rates of exclusion, and greater likelihood of adult unemployment and lower earnings.⁴ Parsons also found that poor basic skills were also significantly correlated to criminality, even when poverty and family background are taken into account.

Thus, focusing on improving literacy skills at primary level is particularly important to prepare pupils for wider learning, to keep them motivated and improve their long term life chances. This is even more important for those pupils vulnerable to fade out – e.g. from more deprived backgrounds – as it is a lack of motivation and ill-preparedness for formal learning which contribute to the fade out phenomenon (see introduction).

The government's current strategy

The importance of literacy as the principle building block of learning is certainly not a new concept, and primary schools have for most of the 20th century dedicated significant amounts of teaching time to reading and writing. More recently, the government introduced the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998.

¹ See Robert Slavin and Nancy Madden, *Success for All/Roots and Wings: Summary of research on achievement outcomes*, (CRESPAR: Washington, 2003) for an example of how the Success for All literacy programme improved maths scores.

² See, for example, Miles, S.B., and Stipek, D. (2006). *Contemporaneous and Longitudinal Associations Between Social Behavior and Literacy Achievement in a Sample of Low-Income Elementary School Children*. *Child Development*. 77: 103-115.

³ Children participating in the SPOKES literacy programme show significant reductions in antisocial behaviour and hyperactivity, as well as a more predictable gain in literacy skills.

⁴ Sparkes, J (1999).

The NLS has proven successful in raising pupil attainment.⁵ In 1996, only 57% of eleven year olds were at the literacy standard expected for their age. By 2002, that figure had shot up to 75% following decades of stagnation. Such progress has been directly attributed to the NLS, the cornerstone of which was a set of challenging national literacy targets.

To help schools meet the targets, schools had to implement the “literacy hour”. In January 1998, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority told primary schools to cut the time spent on history, geography, design and technology, art, music and PE in order to spend an hour a day on literacy. Teachers could ignore the national syllabuses for these subjects, but they should “have regard to” them and maintain a broad and balanced curriculum. Every school also had to produce a two-year school literacy plan. In addition, a national curriculum for Initial Teacher Training was introduced requiring every course to give top priority to ensuring that all trainee primary teachers could teach literacy well.

The NLS was successful in part due to the consensus shared amongst teachers, parents and the public that English and maths needed to be prioritised. A survey by CfBT carried out in 2000 found that 95% of primary heads supported the National Literacy Strategy compared to 89% in the year before.⁶ By allowing teachers the freedom over their curriculum, additional training and some additional funding, schools felt they were supported by the government in meeting an extremely challenging target. Consequently, the 1998-2002 period saw an increase in national literacy rates greater than at any time in the post-war period.⁷

The NLS has not been free of criticism, however. Ofsted has raised concerns that the focus on literacy and numeracy in primary schools has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, whereby those subjects with national targets are being taught to the detriment of the arts and humanities.⁸ Teaching unions have also complained more recently that the literacy hour and various remedial programmes in the NLS have added to teachers’ workload considerably, leaving less time for preparation of other classes.⁹ Various academics and popular authors have also voiced their concerns regarding the NLS method of teaching texts for grammatical and vocabulary purposes, which they argue removes the enjoyment of reading and undermines the sense of the whole text, discouraging children from reading more widely for pleasure.¹⁰

Whilst some may object to NLS methods (most notably the government’s use of national targets), there has been little disputing the importance of effective literacy teaching at primary level. The question we must address, therefore, is whether the

⁵ Earl, Watson et al (2003) *Final Report of the External Evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies* Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

⁶ *Maths Hour Still not Universal*, Times Educational Supplement, 26 May 2000.

⁷ <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Update/strat.html#literacy>

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2806179.stm>

⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1937699.stm>

¹⁰ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1052077,00.html>

goals of improved literacy and appreciation of reading at primary level can be delivered more effectively than through the current NLS.¹¹

Other literacy strategies

A team of researchers from the Institute of Education (IoE) carried out a meta-analysis, evaluating a number of literacy strategies that had been carried out in the UK, US and Australia to support young children experiencing difficulties with their literacy. From this review they were able to isolate a number of key features which were shown to be effective in bringing struggling pupils up to the level of their peers. These features were grouped into three categories – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Regarding the curriculum, the study found that the most successful reading interventions used a broad curriculum, with a strong phonological element, but included text reading, work on comprehension and on writing, particularly spelling.

The recent Rose Review into primary literacy echoes these conclusions. The review, published in March 2006, recommends that reading, writing, listening and speaking skills should all be promoted as part of the primary literacy strategy, with synthetic phonics constituting a central element of each of these practices. Rose also emphasises the importance of engaging children with reading for fun as early as possible by including a range of multi-sensory components and play based approaches to reading.¹² It seems that some of these recommendations are being reflected in the DfES's recent consultation on the reform of literacy and numeracy teaching.

Concerning pedagogy, as expected, the IoE study found those programmes which had more instructional time devoted to reading and writing produced greater reading gains. The researchers stated that children with reading problems should be given more instruction time than the NLS hour, preferably during non-literacy classroom time. To make the most of instruction time, children must be fully engaged with their task. Adult supervision or work with peers may be helpful. The study also found one-to-one intervention is more reliable than group programmes and teachers tended to produce more flexible and responsive reading programmes than teaching assistants.

Finally, regarding the approach to assessment, the study found that the most effective programmes identified the poorest readers and selected them for early intervention through a transparent assessment process, and used ongoing assessment and monitoring to inform teaching decisions.¹³

Many of the elements identified by the IoE review of research are present in some of the more noteworthy literacy schemes. Ruth Miskin's literacy strategy (RML), for example, is primarily a synthetic phonics programme, which until recently appeared

¹¹ The NLS is, in fact, in the process of being reformed. Drafts for consultation have been submitted to teaching and other bodies for comment.

¹² Rose, J. (2006). *Independent review of the teaching of early reading: final report*. DfES.

¹³ Hurry, J. (2000). *Intervention strategies to support pupils with difficulties in literacy during key stage 1*. Review of Research Institute of Education.

to be a departure from Government thinking on the literacy strategy, but which has proved extremely effective. In addition to learning phonics, RML pupils also spend more time working in pairs and practicing their speaking skills, and are grouped by ability across age groups. Each of these elements are proven effective teaching strategies (see chapter four for more information about ability based and small-group cooperative learning), and together they form a highly successful literacy strategy praised by parents, teachers and Ofsted for the significantly larger gains made in reading and writing than via the NLS.¹⁴

Reading Recovery (RR) is another intervention programme which uses other elements identified in the review of research. RR was introduced in the early 90s in England but was originally pioneered in New Zealand in the 1980s.¹⁵ It uses one-to-one, intensive daily literacy lessons for 12-20 weeks for pupils who are the weakest readers after their first year at primary school. Although the various evaluations of RR schemes found them costly (due to the fact that specially trained teachers are used and the programme is based on one-to-one teaching), the benefits were also significant and long lasting in ensuring the weakest readers (often non-readers) had caught up with their peers by the end of the programme. Although Government funding for RR programmes ended in 1995, many schools still fund their own RR projects due to their effectiveness. A Times Educational Supplement survey in 2005 found half of the primary school teachers voting stated the re-introduction of reading recovery programmes was their top investment priority.¹⁶ The Institute of Education's annual review of RR activity in the UK found 81% of the 5,370 pupils subject to RR in 2004-05 (the least able readers) caught up with their class by the end of the programme. 84% achieved "accelerated learning" – gaining a 21 month improvement on their previous reading ability (accelerating at four times the normal rate for their age group).¹⁷

In addition, RR programmes seem to produce long-lasting gains. In the context of fade out, this is particularly relevant. For example, children who participated in RR were still performing above average five years later, at the end of KS2. A study by the IoE extrapolated these findings and concluded that if RR were used nationally, only 4% of children would not reach Level 2 literacy by KS2, compared with 7% currently.¹⁸ It is such programmes, with long-lasting impacts, which are particularly important for those children most at risk of losing such advantages. The RR programme has all the hall-marks of a good booster intervention (with associated high costs, which may in fact be off-set given its long-lasting affects), and will be discussed as such in section five, rather than as a viable mainstream literacy programme here.

A broader support programme, based on the same RR principle, was developed in Bradford in 1996. Older children, parents, teachers and adult volunteers trained to become reading partners. They then worked for fifteen minutes a day three times a

¹⁴ See, for example, <http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com/ofsted.html> and Hilary Wilce, *The woman who can teach any child to read*, The Sunday Times, 28 August 2005.

¹⁵ Government funding for the RR scheme ran from 1990 to 1995.

¹⁶ http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story_id=2093102

¹⁷ Douëtil, J. (2005). *Reading Recovery Annual Report for UK and Ireland 2004-2005*. Reading Recovery National Network.

¹⁸ *The Long term effects of Reading Recovery on national curriculum tests at end of Key Stages 1 and 2*, IoE and Reading Recovery National Network Factsheet (date and author unknown).

week for ten weeks, using a range of approaches to help the children improve their reading. As a result of the intervention, children made an improvement of between 150% and 250% on previous reading scores, an average gain of six months in reading.¹⁹ The Volunteer Reading Help (VRH) Programme, whilst mainly a mentoring programme to benefit both children and adults in a wider range of activities than just reading, found that one-to-one interaction between adult and pupil had positive effects on reading ability. A 2002 survey found that 83% of children supported by VRH showed an improvement in reading performance, though tended to be more useful for children who already had some basic reading skills in place.²⁰

Success for All

Most literacy programmes use one or two of the teaching approaches we mention above. The Success For All (SFA) programme, however, is conspicuous for employing all of the strategies mentioned under the IoE's "curriculum", "pedagogy" and "assessment" categories, and so worth further examination. SFA is currently implemented in approximately 2,000 schools serving over one million children throughout the United States. Although it is a comprehensive school reform programme that focuses on promoting early school success among educationally at-risk students, literacy forms a central theme. When SFA was piloted in the UK in 1997, it was introduced primarily as a literacy strategy.

Although the SFA does have broadly similar objectives to the National Literacy Strategy, there are certain important differences. First, all children are assessed at the beginning of the programme and they are placed into reading groups *according to their ability*. This helps teachers manage groups more easily. Second, reading levels are assessed internally every eight weeks, and children are moved into different ability groups accordingly. One-to-one tutoring is provided for struggling children, who are given an extra 20 minutes each day intensive support. This is somewhat different from the NLS Early, Additional and Further Literacy Support programmes, which are implemented only in the second term of each year and usually on a small-group basis. The reasoning behind the SFA approach is that if a child is struggling, this can be detected quickly due to 8-weekly assessments. The intensive boost, provided as soon as a dip in progress is detected, will serve as a short preventative, rather than long-term remedial measure.

Third, the SFA programme is taught in a daily 90-minute block, rather than the one hour designated by the NLS. Fourth, the use of cooperative learning methods is fundamental. Children will work in small groups or pairs within a class, and are encouraged to engage in teambuilding activities and other tasks that deal explicitly with the development of interpersonal and social skills. They are also asked to help their partners with reading and a portion of each SFA session is dedicated to partner discussion. This helps develop speaking and listening skills, the importance of which was emphasised by the Rose Review of primary literacy, mentioned above.

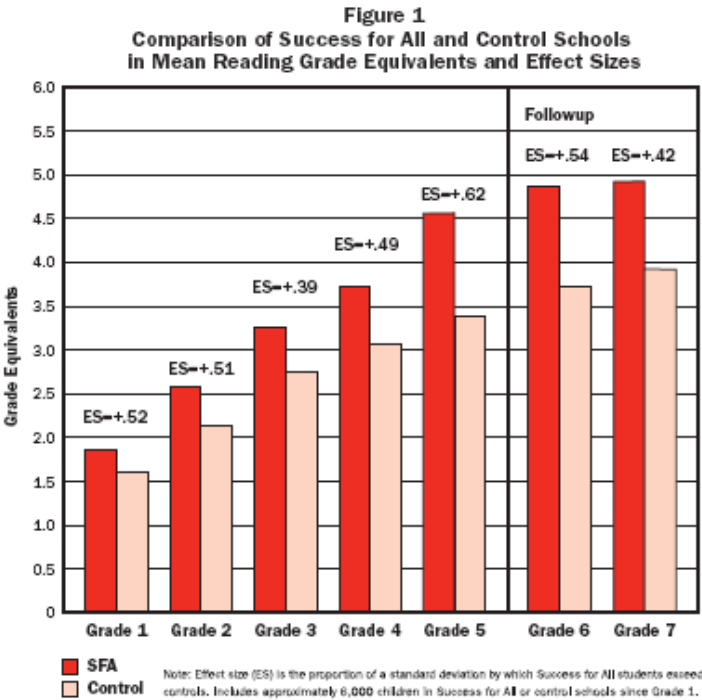
¹⁹ For more details, see <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/>

²⁰ <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/youngpeople/VRH.html>

Finally, SFA programmes establish a Family Support Team. This is comprised of the head teacher or deputy, the SFA facilitator²¹, learning mentors and sometimes a school governor. The role of the Team is to raise attendance, reduce lateness and to promote parental involvement in the programme.

Evaluations from the US, where the SFA programme has been running in various states since the late 1980s, demonstrate the considerable reading gains made by programme children compared with control groups of peers. For example, one study which tested 6000 FSA and 6000 control children in eleven school districts found that FSA first graders were almost three months ahead in standardized literacy tests than control first graders. This difference increased to slightly more than the equivalent of a whole year by fifth grade. A Baltimore follow-up study found that this advantage was maintained into sixth and seventh grades, when students were no longer in the Success for All or control schools²², and another follow-up study that followed students to the eighth grade found continuing significant effects on standardized reading measures and reductions in special education placements and retentions.²³ The graph below demonstrates these findings of sustained advantage in literacy amongst SFA children compared to control children.

Comparison of Success for All and control schools in Mean Reading Grade Equivalents and Effect Sizes



Source: Borman, G., & Hewes, G. (2003). Long-term effects and cost effectiveness of Success for All. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24 (2), 243-266.

There is no doubt, therefore, that SFA is a successful literacy programme. But is it better than the UK’s National Literacy Strategy?

²¹ A facilitator is designated by the head teacher to help the school staff implement the SFA programme. Working with SFA consultants, the facilitator organises all staff development, monitors data from each 8 week assessment and provides support and coaching to all teachers.
²² Slavin, R.E., and Madden, N.A. (2001). *One million children: Success for All*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
²³ Borman, G., and Hewes, G. (2003), “Long-term effects and cost effectiveness of Success for All”, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24 (2): 243-266.

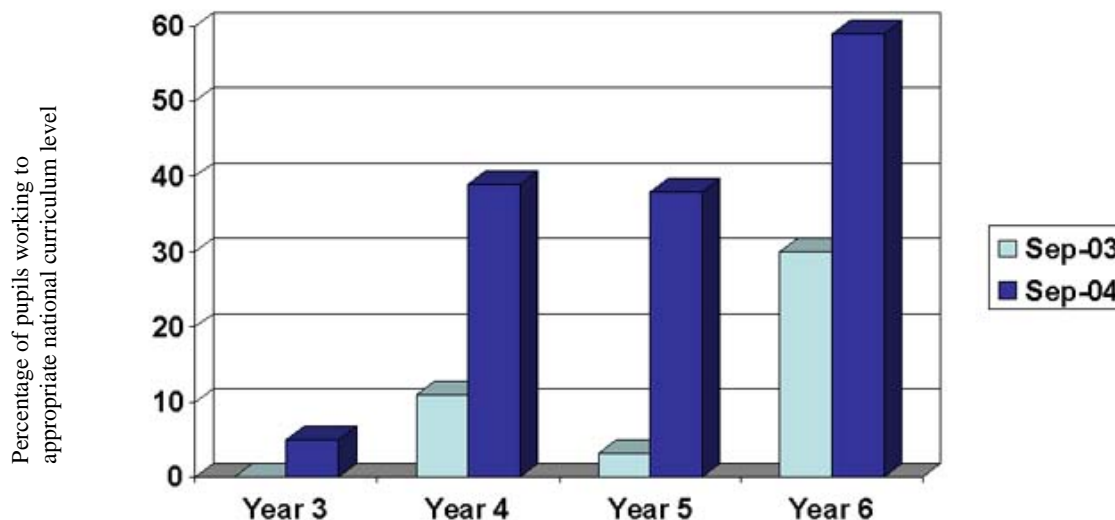
Success for All in the UK

The SFA was piloted in Nottingham in 1997. Using reading progress tests after the first year of implementation, a team from the University of Nottingham found that of the ten year groups using SFA, five had achieved three times the expected level of reading progress, four groups had achieved twice the level of expected reading progress, and one just under twice the level.²⁴ Classroom observations by teachers in the SFA schools have also suggested an improvement in behaviour, and an increase in motivation and attendance. These trends have been attributed to the fast pace and tight structure of the SFA lessons which keep pupils absorbed for the full 90 minutes, as well as the cooperative learning element of the programme which helps improve children's social skills (see section four).²⁵

In more recent years, several primary schools in Hull, London, Walsall and Leeds have adopted SFA as a more intensive version of the NLS. It is thus possible to compare their children's literacy progress before the adoption of the SFA (i.e. when they were only using the NLS) with progress after its adoption.²⁶

The graph below shows the percentage of children working to their appropriate national curriculum level in literacy at the Thomas Buxton Junior School in Whitechapel in 2003 (when the NLS was being used) and in 2004 (when the SFA was introduced). This seems to demonstrate that pupil progress was significantly improved following the introduction of the SFA.

The percentage of children working to their appropriate national curriculum level in literacy at Thomas Buxton Junior School 2003-4



Source: <http://www.successforall.org.uk/>

This second graph shows the percentage of Year 6 children achieving Level 4 and above in the KS2 Literacy SATs at Biggin Hill Primary School in Hull, in 1996, 2000

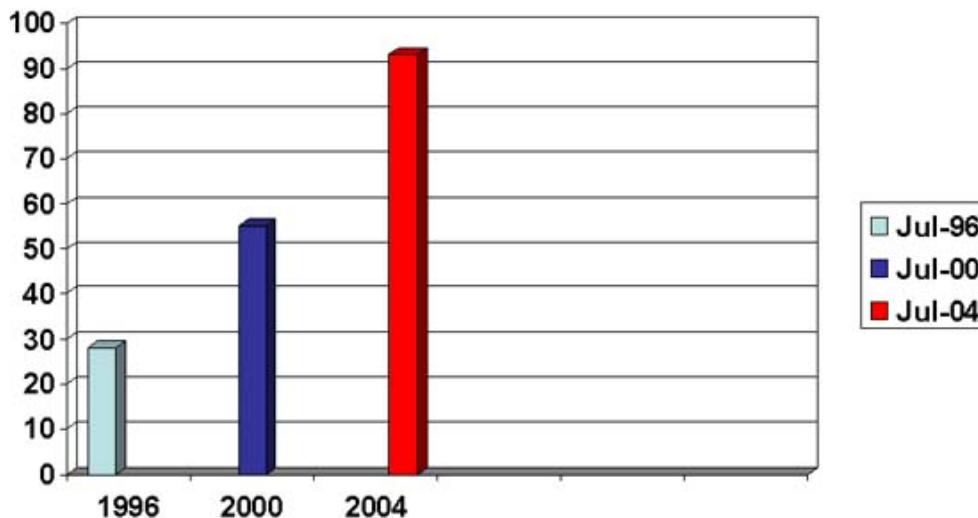
²⁴ Hopkins, Youngman, Harris and Wordsworth (1999), "Evaluation of the initial effects and implementation of Success for All", *England Journal of Research in Reading*, 22 (3).

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ When the SFA was first evaluated in 1997, it was found that the methods and objectives of the SFA were compatible with the NLS and could therefore be used as an alternative within the parameters of the National Primary Strategy – see Hopkins et al, op cit.

(when they began SFA) and 2004.²⁷ The increase in children reaching KS2 in Year 6 was 27 percentage points between 1996 and 2000, and 38 percentage points between 2000 and 2004. Although the NLS was only in operation for two of the four years in the first period (i.e. from 1998), the percentage point increase in the second period, under SFA, is none-the-less impressive – especially when we take into account the diminishing marginal returns that occur as pupils’ attainment increases towards 100%.

The percentage of Year 6 children achieving Level 4 and above in Key Stage 2 Literacy SATs at Biggin Hill Primary School in 1996, 2000 and 2004



Source: <http://www.successforall.org.uk/>

Most of the schools adopting SFA in the UK are located in deprived areas. Thomas Buxton Junior School (above), for example, has over two thirds of its pupils eligible for free school meals and nearly all its pupils speak English as an additional language. However, several of such schools are now performing above the national average in literacy. Several of the SFA schools have also managed to reduce the attainment gap between boys and girls in reading. For example, one local press report from 2001 stated:

“Dorchester Primary on northern Europe’s largest housing estate at Bransholme, Hull. Here, where 48 per cent of children get free school meals, the percentage of boys achieving level 4 in English rose from 41 last year to 86 this year. The results for girls were 60 and 64 per cent respectively... in September they started using Success for All (SFA)... What distinguishes it from the national literacy strategy is that children are grouped by ability, not age, and work together co-operatively.”²⁸

Many SFA schools have gained positive feedback on their literacy programmes from Ofsted, and a number of SFA schools also appear on the DfES’s new “most improved schools” league table, with one SFA school (Goose Green Primary School) named as the second most improved primary in the country in 2005.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4053329.stm>

Case Study: Kobi Nazrul Primary School

Success For All

Kobi Nazrul is an inner city London school, which serves a local community characterised by high levels of unemployment and overcrowded accommodation. Over 80% of pupils are of Bangladeshi origin and roughly 95% of pupils have English as an Additional Language (EAL). Most children start Kobi Nazrul speaking very little or no English.

To better serve the needs of pupils, the former head teacher introduced a new literacy programme for pupils from Foundation Year to Year 2. The RML (see above) resources greatly improved the children's decoding and literacy skills but as the children got older, more work on reading, writing and comprehension was necessary to improve their understanding and grasp of English. The school management felt that the NLS was insufficient in raising standards in literacy and that while the NLS suited more able students, it failed disadvantaged children or those with EAL. As a result, the school introduced the Success For All (SFA) programme in 2000.

Initially, staff needed extra training and teachers tended to follow the programme to the letter. Over time, however, teachers have increasingly been able to adapt their lessons and find that there is a great amount of flexibility within the programme to pick and choose appropriate resources, activities and teaching styles. The detailed nature of the plans and resources does however provide a good starting point for Non Qualified Teachers and also has the benefit that cover is much easier to organise without children falling behind.

Children at Kobi Nazrul are placed in ability based classes for their literacy lessons. The classes last 90 minutes and children are divided into groups of 4 within the class. This allows for group, paired and individual work. Because Kobi Nazrul is a one-form entry school, ability grouping has to occur across the school so that children are placed in the appropriate teaching group. This means that in certain groups, children from Years 4, 5 and 6, for example, will be learning together. This also means that literacy is taught across the school at the same time. Despite the use of setting, the school has found no stigma is attached to this process. Staff put this down to the fact that the school has a strong emphasis on PSHE which focuses on improving children's confidence and self-esteem, as well as the fact that movement from class to class is frequent, allowing for rapid progression. In addition, the senior management have found that children become accustomed to setting if it is introduced early.

The implementation of the SFA has also meant that teaching is far more tailored to the needs of students. Many new pupils arrive at Kobi Nazrul speaking very little English. At most other schools, this would prove problematic, especially in the case of older pupils. At Kobi Nazrul, however, these older pupils can be placed in lower ability groups where they work at their own pace. This allows them to make much greater gains than in a higher ability group where they would find it impossible to access the literacy curriculum and may be subject to bullying.

Continual assessment is another integral component of the SFA programme. Informal tests are carried out half-termly and discussions between staff are held frequently. Based on both teacher and test evaluations children are moved to a more appropriate group. This has meant that moving occurs relatively regularly. In order to make sure that children are not affected by transferring classes, the school has taken pains to ensure a certain amount of continuity. The classrooms, for example, are laid out in the same way and SFA displays follow the same structure. In addition, the structure of SFA weekly plans and resources also provides continuity.

The SFA programme has proved very successful at Kobi Nazrul. Mixed age groups have improved inclusion and social mixing and have contributed to a greater sense of community within the school. It is not uncommon, for example, to see younger and older children play together during break time. In addition, despite the high numbers of children with EAL, Kobi Nazrul was awarded beacon status for literacy and has, over the past few years, consistently performed well beyond local and national averages. In 2005, 85% of pupils achieved a level 4 or higher in English and Maths at Key Stage 2.

From the above, it seems that the SFA programme may be able to achieve better reading outcomes than the NLS. There are several reasons why this might be the

case – one factor will of course be the daily extra 30 minutes teaching time under the SFA. It is likely, however, that the other elements of SFA which differentiate it from the NLS are also important contributory factors. In fact, most of the elements included in SFA programmes are those which this report discusses in following sections, due to their proven efficacy in increasing pupil attainment:

First, the focus on cooperative learning in the SFA to improve social interaction is something which is shown to improve learning outcomes when used in the wider school setting (see section six, below).

Second, the use of one-to-one mentoring (as explained in some of the other programmes outlined above) is also shown to be more effective than small group teaching (see sections four and seven, below). The latter is used more frequently in NLS remedial classes whilst SFA uses the former. In fact, the SFA's one-to-one intensive measures for pupils falling behind the mainstream is a very similar tactic to Reading Recovery programme, which is associated with large catch-up benefits (see above).

Third, SFA groups its children by ability. Whilst such a strategy has proven to have had mixed effects (see chapter four), evidence suggests that its limited use in key subjects can improve the quality of teaching as teachers are able to tailor their instruction to ability levels more readily (see section four for a fuller discussion of this evidence).

Other practices used by SFA programmes are also supported by large evidence bases. For example, there is a broad consensus that intensive preventative measures are more effective than remedial classes employed once a child has fallen more significantly behind.³⁰ It could be argued that the SFA takes a more preventative approach by monitoring and reacting more quickly to a child who is just beginning to struggle than the NLS programme allows for.

Most significantly, SFA programmes all have a dedicated Family Support Team to encourage parental involvement in the programme and in the school more widely. This ranges from ensuring high attendance, to encouraging parents to read with their children at home. Some SFA schools, for example, have a rule where parents must read with their children for 20 minutes at home in order for their team to earn points (SFA classes are split into pairs and teams for reading and cooperative learning). The importance of parental engagement in improving children's educational outcomes, and particularly reading, is supported by a significant body of research, and there is little doubt that this concerted effort on the part of the SFA programme to encourage parental involvement has been a decisive factor in its success. Although section three will look more extensively at strategies to make parents "co-educators" in primary schools and the research evidence which supports the efficacy of this approach, some key evidence relating specifically to parents improving literacy outcomes is outlined below.

³⁰ The body of research supporting the use of pre-school intervention clearly illustrates that earlier and preventative intervention are more effective than later and remedial intervention. See Alakeson's paper on returns to education, *Too Much Too Late*, Social Market Foundation, London 2004.

A particularly influential early study into the effects of parental engagement on a child's literacy was an evaluation of a project carried out in the early 1980s. For two years, children were followed from Foundation Stage to Year One in a group of schools in Haringey. One group of children took reading books home regularly and their parents were given encouragement and support in hearing them read, including home visits by researchers. The reading attainment of project children, as measured by the National Foundation of Educational Research reading Test A, was significantly higher at the end of the two years than that of other children in parallel control classes in the same schools, even though there had been no pre-test attainment differences. In two further schools, the reading attainment of classes given extra *teacher* help was not significantly different from that of control classes.³¹

To cite but three further studies in the large amount of work carried out in this area: Rowe found in 1991 that for children between the age of five and fourteen, reading activity at home had a significant positive influence on students' reading achievement, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom.³² Flouri and Buchanan found that parental involvement in a child's literacy practices is a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education.³³ Senechal and LeFevre also found that of all school subjects, reading was the most sensitive to parental influences, thus the most open to positive parental involvement.³⁴ A DfES survey carried out in 2003 also found that the most common activity amongst parents in helping their children to learn was reading with their child – suggesting the message of the importance in doing so had filtered into the popular consciousness and something which could be tapped into and built upon by school literacy strategies.³⁵

Several parent-focussed literacy strategies have been implemented both at pre-school level (for example, Bookstart) and at primary school level (e.g. the Pairs Reading and Family Literacy projects). Evaluations of such projects consistently find positive outcomes. For example, the SPOKES programme (which also attempts to address anti-social behaviour in at-risk children by involving parents in educational activities) teaches parents to use the "Pause Prompt Praise" approach to reading with their children. The three-term programme carried out in South London in 2004 found that its participants not only had significantly decreased anti-social behaviour and hyperactivity, but also gained seven months in reading skills, an effect size of 0.43. Race, parent education, parent income, and child age and gender did not affect the degree of change in the intervention group compared to the control group, suggesting that the programme is robust and suited to disadvantaged children.³⁶

³¹ Tizard, J., Schofield, W.N., and Hewison, J. (1982), "Collaboration between teachers and parents in assisting children's reading", *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 52: 1-15.

³² Rowe, Kenneth. (1991). "The influence of reading activity at home on students' attitudes towards reading, classroom attentiveness and reading achievement: an application of structural equation modeling", *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 61 (1):19-35.

³³ Flouri, E., and Buchanan, A. (2004), "Early father's and mother's involvement and child's later educational outcomes", *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74:141-153.

³⁴ Senechal, M., and LeFevre, J. (2002), "Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five-year longitudinal study", *Child Development*, 73 (2): 445-460.

³⁵ Moon, N., and Ivins, C. (2003). *Parental Involvement in Children's Education*. NOP Social and Political. DfES Research Report 589.

³⁶ <http://www.incredibleyears.com/research/current-research-spokes-project-uk.htm>

Our proposals

The National Literacy Strategy is now the cornerstone of the Primary Strategy. Despite its detractors, the government has achieved significant improvements in reading and writing with a combination of national targets, the Literacy Hour and intervention programmes. We can assume, therefore, that the NLS is not due for a major reform in the near future and that we must work within the existing structure rather than attempt to start from scratch.

That is not to say that the NLS cannot be improved upon. From the range of evidence described above, there may be several further strategies that could be adopted to improve literacy teaching *within* the NLS framework.

- We feel the government ought to consider ability-based grouping for the literacy hour, in order to maximise the amount of instruction time delivered at the appropriate ability level.³⁷
- We would also suggest, following the Reading Recovery approach, that intensive bursts of one-to-one teaching for pupils who begin to fall behind should be used as and when required, but particularly as soon as possible once problems have been detected to give the best chance of closing the achievement gap. These should replace the existing small group remedial measures of the NLS (Early Literacy Support (ELS), Additional Literacy Support (ALS) and Further Literacy Support (FLS)) which are used during set periods of the year and so may not pick up slowing or falling progress in children until significant problems have set in.
- In order to render this effective, such measures should be combined with more regular assessments of pupil progress in order to detect problems sooner, thus reducing remedial teaching needs.
- We also feel more emphasis should be placed on multi-disciplinary approaches to literacy teaching. The synthetic phonics movement has enjoyed a renaissance recently, which is of course to be welcomed as extensive evidence proves its effectiveness. However, more emphasis on speaking and listening skills, to complement reading and writing, could also be developed. This is because a focus on speaking and listening is a component of the successful SFA programme; it has been recommended by the Rose Review; and it must also usually be delivered via small group and cooperative learning, which have the additional benefits of improving a child's social and interpersonal skills (see section four below).
- Finally, greater use could be made of parents as co-educators in the literacy strategy. The DfES encourages parents to read to their children, and Sure Start and other early years' programmes also have this as a central element. However, at primary level, this focus seems to fall away, and the NLS seems to provide few formal opportunities for parents to be involved in its delivery.

³⁷ In fact, the "guided reading" element of the NLS, if organised and resources properly, does group by ability within classes to good effect already.

Yet several highly successful literacy programmes use parents in a co-educating role, for example employing them as reading mentors. The 2003 DfES survey mentioned above found that reading at home was the most common method parents employed in helping with their children's learning. Schools could gain the most from such activity by ensuring that the parent-led reading carried out at home complemented and built upon the methods and materials used in school.

- An effective way of encouraging parental involvement, as some schools already do, is to invite parents into the classrooms to help their children with reading during the literacy hour, in order to teach parents how to use a similar or complementary approach in the home. Given the concerns of Ofsted and teacher groups that the NLS is too much of a burden on the curriculum and teacher time, it would not only be beneficial for children but also helpful for schools if the government were to actively involve parents in delivering the literacy strategy, including using parents to help in the classroom.