

Tuesday July 10, 2007
[The Guardian](#)

Sounds incredible

Once upon a time, in a deprived part of Scotland, a plan was put into place to wipe out pupil illiteracy within a decade. Ten years on, it's worked. Kirsty Scott reports



Margaret Mooney gets her young class to shout the vowel sound 'oi'. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

It is mid-morning at St Mary's primary school in Alexandria, a bleak, post-industrial town north-west of Glasgow that often features on Scotland's list of areas of multiple deprivation. In Margaret Mooney's primary 1 class, 20 five-year-olds have gathered on the floor at the teacher's feet, pretending to be trains. "Ch, ch, ch, ch, ch," they intone, small arms circling wildly like the wheels of a locomotive.

Mooney turns the page of a giant, colourful book. "This is the one where you are allowed to be cheeky to the teacher," she says, pointing to the letters "th". "What sound do they make?" The children stick out their tongues and blow through their teeth, before dissolving into giggles. "Cheeky, cheeky children," says Mooney. "Let me see how cheeky you can be."

They are too young to know it, but the children in Mooney's class are part of a remarkable experiment, one that has proved so successful that it is being held up as a model for education authorities across the world and has caught the eye of Britain's new prime minister. Gordon Brown has been taking a keen interest in events in West Dunbartonshire, and has held talks with Dr Tommy MacKay, the educational psychologist who pioneered the scheme.

Back in 1997, MacKay persuaded West Dunbartonshire council to commit itself to eradicating pupil illiteracy in its schools within a decade. This year, it is on track to reach its target, becoming what is thought to be the first local authority in the world to do so.

When the project was launched, West Dunbartonshire had one of the poorest literacy rates in the UK, with 28% of children leaving primary school at 12 functionally illiterate - that is, with a reading age of less than nine years and six months. Last year, that figure had dropped to 6% and, by the end of this year, it is expected to be 0%. In all, 60,000 children have been assessed, and evaluations show that children now entering primary 3 have an average reading age almost six months higher than previous groups. In 1997, 5% of primary school children had "very high" scores on word reading; today the figure is 45%. Across the UK, it is estimated that 100,000 pupils a year leave school functionally illiterate.

Synthetic phonics, where children learn to sound out the single and combined sounds of letters, has been at the core of the scheme but it has not been the only factor. A 10-strand intervention was set up, featuring a team of specially trained teachers, focused assessment, extra time for reading in the curriculum, home support for parents and carers, and the fostering of a "literacy environment" in the community. "The results we have now are phenomenal," says MacKay.

When he approached the council with his proposal, he was not sure what response he would get. "I sent a letter to the director of education. It was one of these things you expect to find they are interested in, but will put in the bin. What I was saying was: why not try doing something that has not been done anywhere before in the world? You could eradicate illiteracy."

His letter coincided with a decision by the Scottish executive to offer funding packages for early intervention in literacy and numeracy. What made West Dunbartonshire different from other authorities launching literacy projects at the time was that it wanted a cradle-to-grave system that involved the entire community.

"What we were looking at doing had never been done in the world before, bringing about inter-generational change in a whole population," says MacKay. "We deliberately built in things other people weren't doing: vision, profile, commitment, ownership and dedication."

The approach was two-pronged. First, a robust early intervention programme from nursery onwards reduced the number of children experiencing reading failure. Then, those who did fall through the net were caught in the later years of primary school and given the intensive, one-on-one Toe by Toe programme. "You pick up every one of them, and you blooter them with individual help," says MacKay.

Lynn Townsend, head of service for education at West Dunbartonshire council, says the project would not have succeeded if they had not focused on the few falling through the cracks. "If we were to achieve our goals, we really needed to be doing something with them," she says. "There used to be a sense that if kids had not got reading by secondary, there was no point in teaching them. That is no longer appropriate. Nobody gets left behind."

"We have seen dramatic results. Kids in primary 7 who could not read at all now can, and it opens the world to them. It means secondary school is going to be meaningful. It really does change lives."

As new research has been done, new strands have been incorporated. "We started very much with the emphasis on synthetic phonics. That's one strand now. We have a West Dunbartonshire approach now," says Townsend.

Headteacher Charles Kennedy noticed the difference the scheme was making when he took up his post at St Mary's school after working in another area. "I was struck by the level the children were at, the pace and the impact," he says. "And also the way they were enjoying it. It's vibrant and it's alive."

A key component has been parental involvement. "Research shows that middle-class kids have had thousands of hours of reading practice before they get to school," says Townsend. "A lot of our homes just can't or don't do that." A home support system was set up and regular parents' evenings held to introduce them to phonics. Nursery children are given a startpack with reading materials to practise at home.

Officials say that often during the parents' meetings, one or two will approach staff and admit that they can't read. They are advised about where they can find help and support.

MacKay hopes the project's success will have far-reaching implications for West Dunbartonshire as a community. "We believe that, ultimately, we are looking at a stronger economy, lower crime rates and a lower prison population."

Townsend believes the scheme has worked because there was a collective determination to see it through. "We stuck to our principles. When the funding was reduced and stopped by the executive, we maintained it," she says.

Interest has been immense. MacKay has spoken about the project in countries as far away as South Africa, and a delegation from Dublin was in West Dunbartonshire at Easter. The Centre for Public Policy Research held it up as a model for other education authorities last year.

The new prime minister has been aware of it for some time. A spokeswoman for Brown confirmed that he had met MacKay and was "very interested" in the project. It is understood that they had several discussions while Brown was chancellor and that he was keen to know how the scheme might be rolled out across the UK.

"Many of our primary schools are in some of the most deprived areas of Scotland, yet they perform above the national average," Townsend points out. "That is staggering. If you say from the outset, we are going to eradicate illiteracy in 10 years, which politician does not want to be part of that soundbite?"