

Gender difference and slower starting learners: Sounds~Write data from the 2007 report

We would now like to present a more detailed look at some of the figures in order to comment upon two particular issues of interest to all primary teachers: (i) gender differences; and (ii) the rate of learning of those who make a relatively slow start to literacy skills acquisition. Before doing so, in order to avoid any confusion about the figures, it is important to bear in mind some of the difficulties of long-term studies. Firstly, there is a dropout rate in respect of parents moving house and their children having to change school. It is quite common for 10% to move each academic year, resulting in a reception class with an intake of 30 having only about 20 of them still in the class by the end of Y3. Sometimes teachers become pregnant, or have long illnesses, during which their classes are likely to be taught by supply teachers who have not had any Sounds~Write training - we then lose the whole class from the study. We have also lost whole classes who have moved from infant schools teaching Sounds~Write to junior schools that do not. Also within our sample we have some pupils whom we know were taught by the Sounds~Write approach very well in their Reception Year, but their school did not start collecting data for us until the end of their Y1 year. This means that we might have perfectly good data on them at the end of their Y1 and Y2 years, but have no test results from the end of their Reception Year.

Over the next few years we hope to collect data on at least 1500 pupils for whom we have test results for each of their four consecutive school years YR, Y1, Y2 and Y3. However, we already have enough data for a preliminary look at the two issues mentioned above. In order to do this we are now going to present the data for all the pupils who have received Sounds~Write teaching throughout the three years of Key Stage One for whom we have spelling test scores at the ends of both their Reception and Y2 years. The number of pupils for which we can currently do this is 437.

Table 1: Spelling data for 437 pupils at the end of Y2 whose spelling ages we also know at the end of their Reception Year

Gender	No: of pupils tested	Number not reaching test baseline of 5.11 years	Pupils who did score on the test			
			Number	Average Age (CA) in years and months	Average Spelling Age (SA)	Months ahead in spelling (SA – CA)
Girls	223	0 (0.0%)	223 (100.0%)	7 years 3-8 months	8 years 4-8 months	12.9 months
Boys	214	1 (0.5%)	213 (99.5%)	7 years 2-8 months	8 years 2-7 months	12.3 months
Total	437	1 (0.2%)	436 (99.8%)	7 years 3-3 months	8 years 3-8 months	12.6 months

Out of these 437 pupils, 376 (86.0%) scored Spelling Ages above Chronological Age at the end of their Reception Year, whilst the other 61 (14.0%) were unable to do so. (Although of course they were all still younger than the minimum possible score on the test.). In Tables 2 and 3 overleaf we show the end of Y2 data for each of these groups separately.

Table 2: Spelling data for the 61 pupils at the end of Y2 who did not score at the end of their Reception Year

Gender	No: of pupils tested	Number still not reaching test baseline of 5.11 years	Pupils who did score on the test			
			Number	Average Age (CA) in years and months	Average Spelling Age (SA)	Months <u>below</u> in spelling (CA – SA)
Girls	19	0 (0.0%)	19 (100.0%)	7 years 2.4 months	6 years 9.5 months	4.9 months
Boys	42	1 (2.4%)	41 (97.6%)	7 years 1.6 months	7 years 0.5 months	1.0 month
Total	61	1 (1.6%)	60 (98.4%)	7 years 1.8 months	6 years 11.6 months	2.3 months

Table 3: Spelling data for the 376 Y2 pupils who did score at the end of their Reception year

Gender	No: of pupils tested	Number not reaching test baseline of 5.11 years	Pupils who did score on the test			
			Number	Average Age (CA) in years and months	Average Spelling Age (SA)	Months <u>ahead</u> in spelling (SA – CA)
Girls	204	0	204	7 years 3.9 months	8 years 6.5 months	14.6 months
Boys	172	0	172	7 years 3.2 months	8 years 6.7 months	15.4 months
Total	376	0	376	7 years 3.6 months	8 years 6.6 months	15.0 months

Looking back at the figures for Reception pupils (shown in Table 1 page 5 of the full report) it can be seen that out of our sample of 2878 pupils the really significant difference between boys and girls is that nearly twice as many boys (402) as girls (217) did not achieve the baseline score of the test. This clearly suggests that more boys than girls are not ready for an academic introduction to literacy when they enter school at 4+.

We can also see from the figures for all four year groups that, once pupils can achieve the baseline test score, the girls, on average, **appear** to be ahead of the boys by the following amounts in each year group:

Reception: Girls spelling ahead of boys by 0.3 months
Year One: Girls spelling ahead of boys by 1.6 months
Year Two: Girls spelling ahead of boys by 2.5 months
Year Three: Girls spelling ahead of boys by 2.9 months

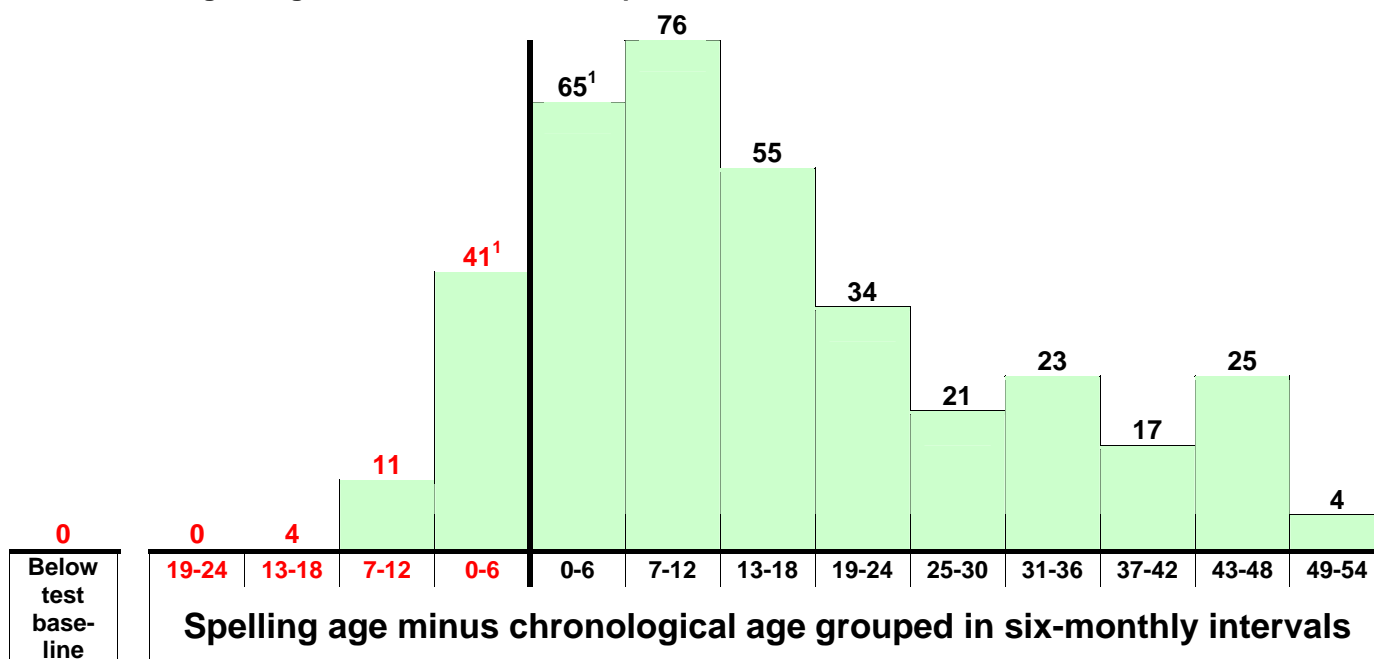
On the surface this would suggest that the girls are acquiring literacy skills and knowledge at a slightly faster rate than the boys. *However, when we separate the pupils into those who did NOT score on the test at the end of their Reception year and those who did score, and then look at their progress, two*

years later at the end of Y2 the picture changes. It can then be seen (in Table 3) that, for those pupils who made a start in Reception, two years later the boys are actually ahead of the girls by 0.8 months on average. Even more interestingly, for those 60 who did not score at the end of Reception, but did score at the end of Y2 (Table 2), the boys are 3.9 months ahead of the girls (i.e., they are averaging only 1.0 month behind chronological age compared to the girls averaging 4.9 months behind.) **What this shows us is that we should not be measuring progress by taking a simple global average of all pupils within each year group.** Doing this simplistically suggests that girls are learning more quickly than boys. The reality, though, is that for most boys taught by a linguistic phonic programme such as Sounds-Write, their progress in literacy is very similar to, or identical to, that of the girls. We cannot of course comment precisely on what happens with pupils following the National Literacy Strategy, but judging by all the Department of Education pronouncements on the subject, boys' relative failure is a major issue when following National Literacy Strategy advice.

Before commenting further on those pupils that are probably not developmentally ready for formal literacy tuition during their Reception Year, we would like to present the data shown on Page 2 in Tables 2 and 3 in the visual bar chart form used previously in the full report. We think this is much easier to grasp for most readers than just looking at blocks of numbers.

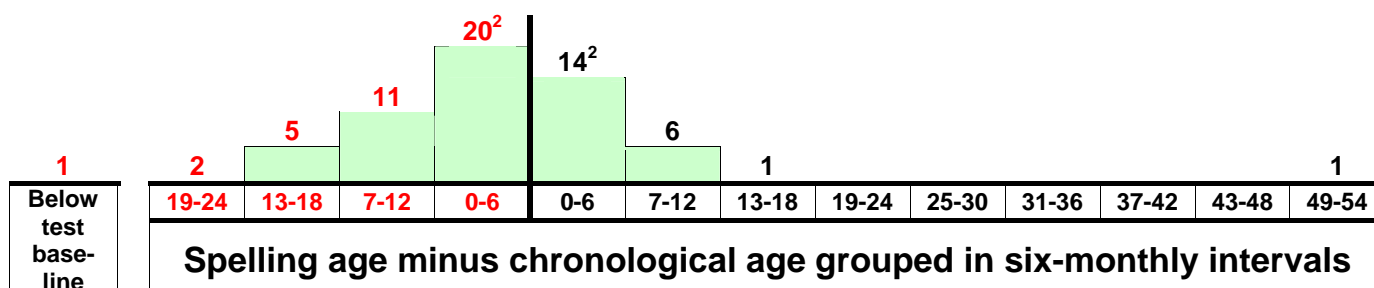
Bar Chart 1: The 437 Y2 pupils for whom we have data at both YR and Y1 (see page 12) placed in six-monthly intervals of spelling age above/below chronological age

(i) The spread of Spelling Ages at end of Y2 for the 376 pupils who did score a Spelling Age above Chronological Age at the end of their Reception Year.



¹ 12 pupils had spelling ages that equalled their chronological ages. 6 were allocated to each of these columns.

(ii) The spread of Spelling Ages at end of Y2 for the 61 pupils who did not achieve the test baseline score at the end of their Reception Year.

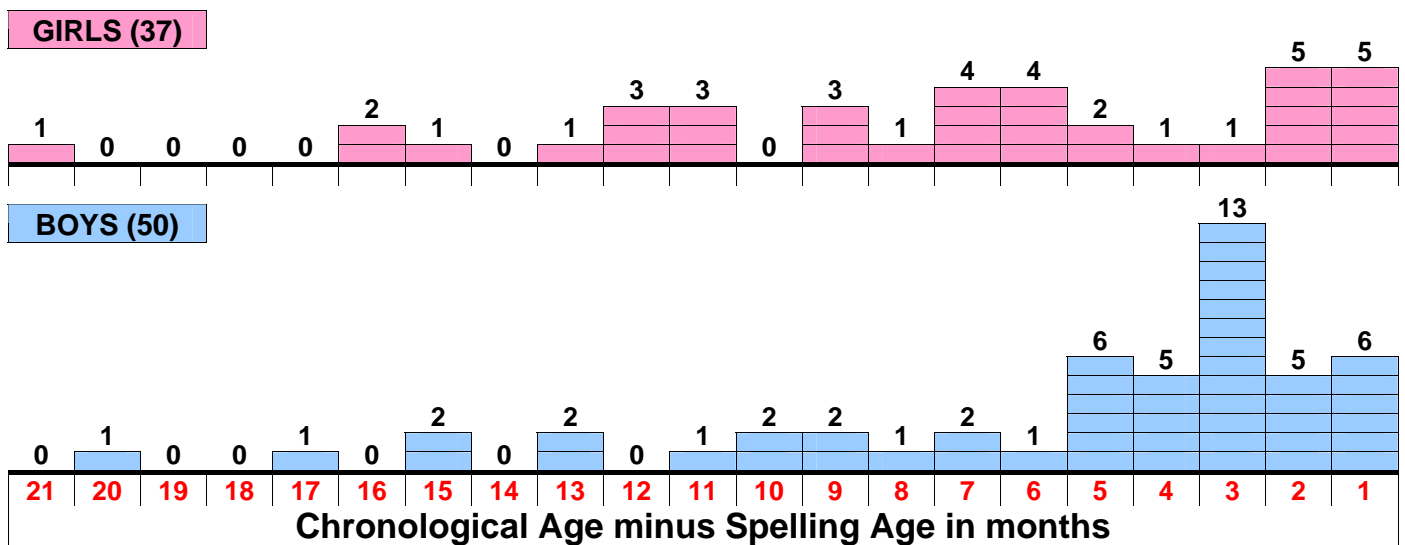


² 2 pupils had spelling ages that equalled their chronological ages. 1 was allocated to each of these columns.

Inspection of the above chart for those pupils who did not reach the baseline score at the end of their Reception Year shows, with the exception of one pupil who is now over 4 years ahead of his chronological age, that there is a much narrower spread of achievement than for their peers – most of them falling within 12 months of the group average of Spelling Age being 2·3 months below Chronological Age (Table 2, page 2). This would clearly seem to suggest that, although most of these pupils appear to be making acceptable progress, their slow start in Reception is probably an indicator that they may continue to make relatively slow progress in future years. Bearing in mind that on average these pupils are only a couple of months below their Chronological Age in spelling at the end of Key Stage One (after three years of teaching) *there seems to be no reason why the majority of them should not eventually achieve future literacy skills of at least 9½ to 10½, providing sufficient time and attention is given to their literacy skills development throughout Y3 and Y4, and for a very small number throughout Y5 and Y6 as well.* We fully support the idea that **every child matters** and it matters very much that every child should become literate if their future lives and learning are not to be blighted.

The figures in the two bar charts on the previous page show that out of this sample of 437 pupils there are only 88 in total (20%) whose Spelling Ages are below their Chronological Ages with the other 80% scoring at or above Chronological Age. One of these 88 did not score on the spelling test, but the others all did and their results are shown, boys and girls separately, on the following bar chart.

Bar Chart 7: The 87 pupils whose known spelling ages are below their chronological ages



This chart is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly it shows that over half of these pupils have Spelling Ages *no more than six months* below their Chronological Ages and should therefore be able to cope with age-appropriate academic work within their classes. Only 33 pupils (7½% of the sample) scored more than six months below Chronological Age, **and just over half of these were girls.** Again this does not suggest that there is any real gender issue affecting learning to read and spell, providing pupils are taught by teachers who have good understanding of linguistic phonics and how to teach it.

Only 12 (2¾%) pupils in this sample of 437 reached the end of Year Two with Spelling Ages more than twelve months below their Chronological Ages. We suspect that these might all benefit from further investigation to try to establish whether or not their progress in literacy is being adversely affected by factors such as: speech and language problems; hearing difficulties; specific or general learning difficulties; environmental/ home support problems; or whether their schools are allocated the resources to offer them sufficient high quality individualised teaching support.