

# IMPACT

No.20

Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy

To read or not to read: decoding Synthetic Phonics

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### About the series

Written by leading general philosophers and philosophers of education, IMPACT pamphlets bring philosophical perspectives to bear on current education policy in the UK. They are addressed directly to policy-makers, politicians and practitioners, though will be of interest also to researchers and students working on education policy.

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## Editorial introduction

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‘Research has consistently and comprehensively shown’, says Michael Gove, ‘that systematic, phonic instruction by a teacher is the most effective and successful way of teaching children to read’ (Gove, 2013). His confidence in this claim is reflected in the strong emphasis on synthetic phonics in the new National Curriculum for England, due to come into force in September 2014. But is he entitled to his confidence?

One problem is that the available empirical research appears to show no such thing. A systematic review of the literature conducted by Carole Torgerson and colleagues found that, while there is an association between synthetic phonics and reading *accuracy*, ‘the weight of evidence (from RCTs) on reading *comprehension* was weak, and no significant effect was found for reading comprehension’ (Torgerson *et al*, 2006, p.10).

In this pamphlet Andrew Davis argues that there is another, more basic problem with Gove’s claim. Whatever it is that empirical researchers take themselves to be doing when they investigate synthetic phonics, he maintains, they are not investigating a specifiable method of teaching reading. This is for two reasons. First, there are no such things as specifiable methods of teaching. Teaching is a vastly complex human activity involving contextual and reactive practical judgments that are responsive to the myriad contingencies of classroom life. The idea that teachers might proceed by way of prescribed methods rather than practical judgments is, as Davis puts it, simply a fantasy.

Second, teaching children to correlate letter combinations with sounds, and to blend sounds into sequences, is not teaching them to *read*. Reading is a matter of grasping meaning conveyed by text. While sustained attention to letter-sound correspondences can be helpful to some novice readers, we should neither assume that it is helpful to all nor confuse mastery of such correspondences with the ability to read.

Davis's challenge to government policy on the teaching of reading, and to the empirical research that supposedly underpins it, is timely, radical and compelling. It is also morally urgent: for children already initiated into the 'rich and nourishing human activity of reading', the strict diet of synthetic phonics that currently passes for reading support in the lower years of primary school is, Davis warns, 'almost a form of abuse'. The zeal with which synthetic phonics is championed by its advocates has been remarkably effective in pushing it to the top of the educational agenda; but we should not mistake zeal for warrant.

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This is the twentieth IMPACT pamphlet. IMPACT is an initiative of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. Its purpose is to bring philosophical perspectives to bear on current UK education policy.

Launched in late 1999, IMPACT pamphlets have been commissioned from leading general philosophers and philosophers of education. Some have focused on controversial aspects of current education policy, such as those by Andrew Davis on assessment and accountability, Harry Brighouse on disparities in secondary education, Mary Warnock on provision for pupils with special educational needs, and Colin Richards on school inspection. Others, like those by Michael Luntley on performance-related pay and Chris Winch on vocational education and training, have been critical of new policy initiatives. Yet others have been concerned with the organisation and content of the school curriculum. These have included pamphlets by Kevin Williams on the teaching of foreign languages, David Archard on sex education, Stephen Johnson on thinking skills, John White on what schools are for, Randall Curren on education for sustainability, and Michael Hand on promoting patriotism.

Each IMPACT launch has included a symposium for policy makers and others at which the issues raised in the pamphlet have been further explored. These have been attended by Government ministers, Shadow ministers and other MPs, by members of organisations such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Institute of Directors, the Trades Union Congress, the General Teaching Council, the National Union of Teachers, Politeia, Civitas, Demos and ResPublica, and by leading educational journalists and academics.

IMPACT pamphlets express the ideas of their authors only. They do not represent the views of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. The Society has several hundred members whose ideas and political allegiances are widely disparate.

*Michael Hand*  
IMPACT Editor

# Overview

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The National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies have gone. Apparently, Government is no longer telling teachers how to teach. Yet *Synthetic Phonics* (SP) remains as *the* officially approved classroom strategy for early reading. Since the Rose Report published in 2007, SP has enjoyed a high profile. The Consultation period for the new version of the National Curriculum has ended, and enshrined within its pages is an explicit requirement for SP. We already have in place a universally imposed phonics ‘check’ for all children aged between five and six. It embodies SP philosophy and involves the decoding of twenty ‘pseudo words’, carefully selected so that such decoding is actually possible for early readers who know their letter sounds and can blend them. In our continuing high stakes assessment regime, the impact of this ‘check’ on teaching approaches and even on conceptions of what reading ‘really is’, should not be underestimated.

Now these policy developments are highly controversial. Their supporters represent them as supported by recent empirical research, especially that carried out in Clackmannanshire a few years ago. To some observers, the latest events may be regarded as just a few more exchanges of fire between the various parties in the so-called ‘Reading Wars’ which have raged for decades. The USA and other countries have undergone similar convulsions. Millions of words have been written about this. Sometimes, the protagonists defend their views with the zeal more often associated with religious fundamentalism, and, indeed with a similar brand of exclusivism. Each party is convinced that their particular approach is right. They want their approaches implemented in their purest forms, and insist that no other strategies are appropriate while theirs are being pursued.

In this short book I am going to argue that research into the teaching of reading involves some fantasies. These take the form of imagining that specific teaching methods could be identified, and that their efficacy

would be open to empirical investigation. I show that if any schools were actually implementing such strategies, the adults responsible would have abdicated their role as teachers. In reality, implementations of SP in any one school will not and should not precisely resemble those in other schools, and in any case, current research into SP ‘effectiveness’ is not informed by a detailed blow by blow description of what actually happens in the classrooms concerned. Hence, it is never really made clear what the research is actually investigating. If teachers are actually teaching, there will be and should be nothing common to all SP programmes. The effects of drugs or fertilisers can, of course, be investigated using orthodox scientific methodologies, but we lack the equivalent here in terms of teaching approaches.

It follows from this that there can be no possible justification for the universal imposition of any one teaching ‘method’, and of SP in particular. However, this book does *not* oppose phonics understood broadly as follows: that teachers ensure that children learn conventional letter sound correspondences, and that they support pupils, as and when appropriate, in the use of such knowledge in early reading. Such practices are only justifiable, however, when suitably embedded in the context of reading for meaning.

I show that key ideas in the debates, such as ‘sound’, ‘phoneme’, ‘blend’ and ‘word’ run into some important difficulties when enthusiasts attempt to defend the universal implementation of SP, and that SP ‘check’ in particular. The ‘Reading Wars’ have made the distinction between ‘barking at text’ and reading proper very familiar to generations of teachers and others. Yet I believe that its true character is still not fully understood. I attempt to remedy this in my treatment, by examining in considerable detail the differences between the decoding and blending favoured by SP enthusiasts on the one hand, and reading for meaning on the other.

An important result of this exploration is that the term ‘phoneme’, now apparently beginning to fall out of favour with academic researchers in linguistics, is shown to be widely misused in policy documents, research papers and commercial programmes favouring Synthetic Phonics. The term ‘phoneme’ is often used as though it is more or less a synonym for a sound heard in speech, and there is much talk of blending phonemes, and of ‘grapheme-phoneme correspondences’ or GPCs (the latter used as more or less equivalent to ‘letter-sound correspondences’). However, ‘phoneme’ is an abstract idea. It does, of course, concern sounds heard in speech. But it is not as simple as this. It relates to the kinds of sounds which, if changed in the words of which they are supposedly components, *may* change those words into different words. So the notion

of a phoneme straddles the world of mere sounds on the one hand, and the world of words as involving *meaning* on the other.

The hybrid character of the term ‘phoneme’ serves to blur the distinction between decoding and discovering meaning, because the phrase ‘grapheme-phoneme correspondences’ is so frequently used in situations where ‘letter(s) –sound correspondences’ would be much better advised. The inappropriate terminology almost makes it look as though it is acceptable to speak of readers carrying out blending to produce *words*. While most teachers and educators are well aware that this is *not* the case, and that blending is only one step towards words, it is important to demonstrate this point in detail in order to resist SP ambitions.

By the time I have finished my analysis of phonemes, blending and the true character of words it becomes clear that, if we sought to favour phonics at all, we should support *Analytic Phonics*. In the latter approach, readers begin with words and can be helped, in some cases at least, to understand why they are spelled the way they are. It looks as though a policy insisting on the exclusive deployment of SP fails to take proper account of the differences between blending and reading words proper. It must be remembered that, without wrestling with text at the level of meaning, readers often are unable to work out which word is associated with the results of their attempts to blend letters. In consequence, there are cases in which they will not even know how to *pronounce* the text until they know which word they are dealing with. Decisions about how to *say* a piece of text sometimes may *follow* success in reading for meaning, rather than amount to a step on the way to reading for meaning.

SP fundamentalism threatens the interests of a minority of children who arrive at school already able to read. The vast majority of Early Years teachers handle this kind of challenge with their usual professionalism, and will continue to do so if they are not troubled by rigid prescriptions from Policy Makers. SP appears to be just one element in a fantasy of teacher-proof and even pupil-proof effective teaching methods – methods that, if followed precisely, are imagined to guarantee success regardless of the teacher, the context and the pupils concerned.

# 1. Introduction

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What do you remember about learning to read? I have hazy visions of blackboards covered with lists of words such as ‘coat, boat, float, moat’, and so on. Many will have had similar experiences, even though they may not be entirely clear about how it helped their reading. For some, learning to read is a deeply mysterious process, and a few could read by the time they started school. Before becoming a university lecturer and researcher I was a primary school teacher. I taught children from the age of four to read. Most pupils were drawn from very deprived backgrounds, and hardly any could read before starting school. All the familiar elements of early reading were there in my class, such as learning letter–sound associations and exploring words with the same letter combinations that made similar sounds. Like other early years teachers, I exercised a fair degree of flexibility. I drew from my repertoire of strategies – a repertoire that gradually increased in size and sophistication as I taught successive cohorts of early readers. I engaged in my professional practice on the basis of judgments about individual children, groups of children, and sometimes the whole class.

After this, I worked for a good twenty years with a great variety of primary schools in several LEAs to support trainee teachers, especially those focusing on the early years. On occasion, senior staff attempted to standardize how reading was taught. As far as I could see, teachers cherry-picked what they felt was valuable, and refused to follow rigidly any kind of precise guidelines. I am not suggesting that all was rosy in this glimpse of past practice. Yet, at that time, teachers had freedom to choose how to approach early reading. Their choices were normally informed by continual appraisal of their students. This, I want to suggest, is of fundamental importance, and I return to the issue later when I ask whether certain ‘methods’ of teaching reading really exist.

Anyhow when, a few years ago, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies started disappearing from the educational scene, I was delighted that teachers were apparently to be trusted once more to select teaching strategies based on their specific school contexts, and especially on their knowledge of their pupils. This was not because there was nothing good to be found in the Strategies – there was much there of great value. But I believed, in common with the majority of practising teachers, that professional autonomy and trust must be at the heart of their role.

It was, then, with some bewilderment that I watched SP being given not just a high profile, but a central place in the Early Years curriculum. Under the ministry of Michael Gove, the teaching of SP has become almost the only piece of prescription remaining in government education policy. Like many teachers and parents, this made me anxious. I began to hear anecdotes about children in the early stages of primary school: they were being sent home with tins of letters to learn their sounds. The pupils were not even allowed books until this task was completed. These letter sounds had to be absorbed in a particular order. When books were finally authorised, the children were instructed to ‘read’ words by ‘sounding them out’. While doing so, they were not permitted to make use of anything to do with the context, the meaning, let alone any illustrations that might have given them some idea of what the text was

about. Now, I did not assume that these practices were widespread; I had no evidence either way, but the stories alarmed me.

Nor was I alone in this concern. Many of the major teacher unions objected to the Government’s SP policy. Surveys of teachers reveal their lack of

confidence in the statutory phonics ‘check’ for five year olds, featuring 20 ‘real words’ and 20 ‘pseudo-words’ (the official term), all of which can be sounded out by blending the sounds that are standardly linked to the letters in the text concerned. The so-called words are presented in isolation. They are not part of meaningful sentences. Many reputable academic researchers have published uncomplimentary verdicts on this feature of the ‘check’. Well-known children’s authors such as Michael Rosen, Michael Morpurgo and Philip Pullman have expressed opposition to the phonics policy, claiming that it threatens children’s reading motivation. Yet there is no sign that government is going to change its mind about SP any time soon.

## **The teaching of SP has become almost the only piece of prescription remaining in government education policy**

To be clear, opposition to this feature of government policy is rarely, if ever, to do with a dislike of phonics. At least, this is true if ‘phonics’ is broadly understood as helping early readers to use typical letter-sound associations on occasion when tackling words they do not yet know. It is rather that many are very concerned with the apparent attempt to impose SP universally. They worry that teachers are seemingly required, for periods of time early in a child’s school career, to employ SP exclusively and systematically without the ‘distractions’ of anything else that might contribute to ‘reading’.

No doubt avid supporters of SP would retort that the picture I have just painted is a straw man. Advocates of a ‘sophisticated’ version of SP may inform us that, while teachers are now expected to focus strongly on letter-sound correspondences and on blending in the early stages, such focus always belongs in the context of learning to read for meaning. And yet, as we shall see, there is very clear evidence that talk of universal imposition is by no means exaggerated.

Early intimations of the now dominant orthodoxy can be seen in the Rose Review of the teaching of early reading:

*a model of reading which encourages switching between various searchlight strategies, particularly when phonic work is regarded as only one such strategy, all of equal worth, risks paying insufficient attention to the critical skills of word recognition which must first be secured by beginner readers.*

(Rose, 2006, para 116)

*this means teaching relatively short, discrete daily sessions, designed to progress from simple elements to the more complex aspects of phonic knowledge, skills and understanding.*

(ibid., para 36)

Since the UK general election in 2010, explicit statements and guidance on the ‘correct’ method of teaching early reading have appeared in various forms. A clear statement of intent was issued in the Schools White Paper 2010, which confidently described ‘the teaching of systematic SP as the *proven best way to teach early reading*’ and promised to reinforce it through reforming initial teacher training and by making sure that the judgments of Ofsted inspections ‘reflect appropriate expectations’ in this regard (DfE, 2010, p.43, emphasis added).

Clear instruction for trainee teachers is contained within the Teachers' Standards, which stipulate that trainees must, 'if teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (DfE, 2012a, p.7). Meanwhile, official guidance for schools in England published by the Department for Education sets out the criteria that programmes must meet to secure matched funding for their phonic materials. To be deemed 'high quality', programmes must:

*be designed for the teaching of discrete, daily sessions progressing from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills and covering the major grapheme/phoneme correspondences; demonstrate that phonemes should be blended, in order, from left to right, 'all through the word' for reading; ensure that as pupils move through the early stages of acquiring phonics, they are invited to practise by reading texts which are entirely decodable for them, so that they experience success and learn to rely on phonemic strategies. (DfE, 2011)*

In a similar vein, an evaluation by the DfE of Sounds-Write, a government-approved phonics scheme, characterises the first criterion against which schemes are judged as follows: 'The training promotes high quality systematic synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print i.e. a phonics 'first and fast' approach' (DfE, 2012b). The said evaluation made the following comment against this criterion about the Sounds-Write training:

*The disadvantages of alternative strategies such as whole-word learning were exemplified and discussed. (ibid.)*

Later in the evaluation it is noted that:

*The materials in the Sounds-Write programme are clearly designed for regular, short, periods of discrete teaching. (ibid.)*

A year or so ago, a well-established and apparently well-regarded reading programme with a strong phonics element called THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills) was deemed by the Department for Education to be unworthy of matched funding because it included some elements of 'analytic phonics' – meaning, in this context at least, that pupils were encouraged at times to look at whole words and how they were spelled.

Finally, the policy is clearly evident in a *statutory* section of the new National Curriculum Programme of Study for Year 1 English, which states that pupils should be taught to:

- *respond speedily with the correct sound to graphemes (letters or groups of letters) for all 40+ phonemes, including, where applicable, alternative sounds for graphemes*
- *read accurately by blending sounds in unfamiliar words containing GPCs that have been taught (DfE, 2013)*

After some more detail on phonics learning, we are told that pupils should be taught to:

*read aloud accurately books which closely match their growing word-reading knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words. (ibid.)*

In the light of this, I cannot help but conclude that the defenders of SP currently influencing government policy, and the former Schools Minister Nick Gibb in particular, *do* want their approach applied universally and without distractions for a period, however much their strategies are sanitised by the intelligence and common sense of many teachers up and down the land.

## 2. Outline of the argument

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So what is to be done? The so-called ‘Reading Wars’, in which the current phonics policy only represents a temporary skirmish, have raged for decades, and, surely, everything that could possibly be said has been said thousands of times. As I have made very clear already, opposing pure SP is hardly original, and many have been there before me. What I hope to offer here are some particular lines of reasoning that challenge both SP fundamentalists, and also those less zealous advocates who have been led to believe in decisive ‘evidence’ favouring SP. As I argue, such views are misguided, not because the evidence for them is weaker than some researchers may have claimed, but because in the case of teaching strategies promoting early reading, it makes little sense to talk about ‘evidence’ *per se*.

This short book offers two contributions to the argument, which, to the best of my knowledge, are distinctive and original. The first contribution is to show that much of the research purporting to support any one ‘method’ of teaching reading is *flawed in principle* and is perpetually endangering teachers’ capacities to teach. This is partly why those occupying different positions in the debate are able endlessly to research and to trade academic papers, with no resolution between them in sight.

The second contribution takes the form of a return to a fundamental scrutiny of some of the key notions such as ‘sound’, ‘phoneme’, ‘blend’ and ‘word’. It rehearses in detail the gap between sound and word, exposing en route some of the prevailing confusions about these ideas. At the end of this journey, I conclude that SP, with its accompanying phonics ‘check’, fails, at least in its pure and exclusive version, to take account of the true character of reading, and of the gulf between reading and mere decoding. In addition, I urge that its universal imposition is seriously inappropriate for some early readers.

To reiterate, I do not want to ‘attack’ phonics in general. It is rather that I seek to oppose the universal imposition of text decoding outside ‘real’ reading contexts. This does not mean that children should not be taught conventional letter-sound associations, nor does it imply that teachers should never encourage pupils, for instance, to ‘sound out’ simple words. Phonics-based decoding doubtless plays a vital role in the journey of many pupils towards reading maturity. In analytic phonics, which is often contrasted with SP, children learn the letter sounds and some whole words by sight. Children analyse letter sounds after they have identified whole words. Again, I would suggest that there is some merit in aspects of this approach.

In the often fractious debates about the merits of different reading strategies, the different phonics-based strategies are frequently – though as I shall argue, somewhat erroneously – contrasted with a number of

other approaches, the most familiar of which are the ‘whole language’ and ‘real books’ strategies associated with Goodman (1982) and Smith (1985). These authors felt that learning to read should resemble learning to speak. They pointed out that children did not acquire the ability to talk by learning predetermined sequences of skills. Winch (1989) refers to ‘whole language’ perspectives as ‘psycholinguistic’. He

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credits them with the view that reading is qualitatively the same from the earliest stages through to maturity, varying only in complexity. The said philosophy emphasises words as wholes, as carriers of meaning, and that they should be tackled in context. The ‘Look and Say’ strategy, allegedly popular in the 1960s, may be associated with this, though it did not necessarily accord the same importance to context as did the ‘Whole Language’ approach. Children were supposed to be taught to recognise words as wholes by sight.

Also familiar is the combined approach offered by the ‘Searchlight’ method, a key feature of the National Literacy Strategy, which encouraged teachers to develop at least four routes into reading. In the Phonic route, pupils were supposed to use the initial letter to help them think of a word that made sense, to try blending the relevant sounds, and to look for familiar letter clusters associated with particular sounds. Another aspect of ‘Searchlight’ involved using knowledge of grammar. Children

were encouraged to go back to the beginning of the relevant sentence and use their awareness of grammar to try to make sense of the piece of text they were tackling, employing the punctuation, relevant prefixes and suffixes, and the rest of the sentence for further clues. In the third route, described as 'context', children were urged to look at any pictures supplied, to have the confidence to make a guess and then to check that it made sense in the context of the sentence as a whole. Further, where necessary, they were to take account of wider elements of content and genre. Finally, under the heading of 'graphic knowledge', children were supposed to note the shape of the word concerned, to look for words within words and blend them together, to discover familiar words and to use analogies with known words to read new words.

In sketching out these versions, I recognise that the various factions in the Reading Wars may contest these descriptions, or object that I have omitted some other early reading strategies. My point, however, is not to offer a definitive account or typology, but rather to question the very possibility of classifying reading strategies in any meaningful way. I am not assuming that the approaches described are necessarily independent of each other. Indeed, I contend that when examined in any kind of depth, none of them can, or should have, any clear and coherent identity.

### 3. Flawed research into phonics teaching ‘methods’

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In this section, I argue that certain types of empirical research into strategies for teaching reading are either based on fantasies of specific teaching interventions, or threaten to undermine the teaching function *per se*.

Studies allegedly showing that intensive discrete SP lessons improve reading achievement in comparison with control groups of similar pupils, rarely if ever indicate the exact nature of the lessons concerned. By ‘exact’, I mean detailed minute-by-minute descriptions of what the teacher actually does, including an explicit and specific characterisation of how she utters the sounds proffered as appropriate partners for letters, and then a description of just how ‘blending’ is explained. Compare this situation with that confronting researchers investigating the efficacy of drugs. Drugs can be specified precisely, in terms of chemical constitution, dosage and frequency. Whatever else may vary from one patient to another, the drug is a constant. This allows drugs to be trialled with scientific rigour. Yet there is nothing remotely like this available when ‘testing’ for the effects of SP. SP teacher interventions are not comparable to drug treatments. Some educational researchers appear to think otherwise. Let me develop this point further.

Imagine ourselves in real classrooms: minute by minute, teachers scan pupils’ faces, behaviour and replies, seeking to diagnose levels of knowledge, understanding, concentration and motivation. Even in just a few moments with pupils, teachers use the information thus gained to make multitudes of decisions modifying their language, task setting, organisation and timing. In a phonics ‘lesson’ there may be tensions between the

accent or dialect of the teacher and her pupils. One teacher, born and bred in Guildford, spends some time teaching in Sunderland. Her colleague, having grown up in Birmingham, comes to the northeast via a few years in Glasgow. Each does their best to cope with how their personal history impacts on their accent and speech patterns, and to learn the idiosyncrasies of their pupils' syntax, pronunciation and vocabulary. The accents of the pupils themselves may vary, even within any one class. Perhaps the school's catchment includes a shifting population. Some children may have parents whose first language is not English. Such factors demand sensitive and subtle pedagogical decision-making on the teacher's part. So any particular lesson is, and should be, to a degree unpredictable. There is no SP *essence* running through all the lessons that might be credited with the SP label.

If student classroom responses were irrelevant, adults could activate pre-recorded speeches or demonstrations. These adults would not be teachers. At the heart of teaching is the fundamental insight that learners can only acquire new knowledge on the basis of what they already know and understand. Hence, a teacher must constantly monitor and diagnose learners' existing cognitive and motivational states. To the extent that adults withdraw from the interactions with pupils implied by these points, they are holding back from teaching. Those involved with the early stages of reading realise its richness, complexity and individuality. Teacher-pupil interactions are at its very heart.

Suppose I am an Early Years teacher and implement a SP scheme. My implementation of it – my series of lessons taught according to it – would surely fail to mirror exactly that of a fellow teacher following the same programme. Now, the zealous defender of SP might object that if this were so I might not actually be implementing SP. All SP implementations should be the same as each other, our enthusiast might insist.

I could reply that were I to have followed the programme in a very rigid way, then I would, in effect, have ceased being a teacher, for the reasons already given. It is, of course possible that the SP scheme might be expressed in a fashion so as to encourage teachers to interpret it according to their professional judgments. This would be splendid, but, in such a case, how could the scheme possibly be justified on the basis of the kind of empirical research that is supposed to be supporting SP? For those following programmes according to their own interpretations would not be implementing one specific type of teaching intervention.

It would be perfectly possible, of course, and indeed valuable for researchers to conduct ethnographic studies of early reading programmes felt to involve SP. If the teachers are actually teaching, then a range of illuminating narratives of series of lessons focusing on early reading could

result from the research. The healthy diversity, if reported on in a readable and sensitive fashion, could be very helpful for Early Years teachers. What the research would *not* offer is support for a clearly specified model of SP that teachers could follow rigidly and expect success.

I fear that some have persuaded themselves that SP is an element in an alleged technology of effective teaching that is supposed to be, so to speak, pupil-proof, and even teacher-proof. That is to say, it is apparently conceived of as an approach to teaching that ignores anything the teacher learns about her students' knowledge, understanding and motivation. I have described this elsewhere as involving a fantasy of research-based teaching 'methods'. Needless to say, similar points can be made about all the 'methods' of teaching reading mentioned earlier, and, in the light of this, it is pointless for the Reading Wars to continue by means of a process in which the various protagonists trade what they see as academic research papers allegedly supporting their favoured approach in comparison with others.

The phonics check for five year olds is yet another ingredient of our continuing 'high stakes' assessment regime. It is called a 'check' rather than a 'test', in an attempt to market it as a helpful tool for teachers, enabling them to discover weaknesses in their pupils, and thus to be able to take rapid remedial actions. Whatever the intentions of the policy makers in this regard, the context of this 'check' cannot be ignored. The results are noted by Ofsted, and either are, or will be perceived as, part of the contemporary pattern in which schools and teachers are held to account through 'performance' as measured by tests of various kinds. While it is not inevitable, it is likely that there will be some 'teaching to the test'. That phrase covers a multitude of sins and, arguably, some perfectly reasonable kinds of teaching. In this case, pupils will learn to recognise letters and the sounds conventionally associated with them. They will be taught how to blend them to form a composite sound on encountering lists of text items. I do not think these 'items' should be called words, and shortly I explain why this is a really important issue rather than a mere spasm of pedantry. Meanwhile, note that supporters of SP would be perfectly happy about teaching to the test in connection with this check.

## 4. Phonemes, letter sounds and how decoding is not reading

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The assumption that SP programmes are about teaching *reading* serves to conceal a number of significant technical and conceptual challenges, and it is to these that I now turn. I will argue that all is not well with SP in the very pure version apparently being recommended by government and others. We will see that educationally appropriate versions of phonics are closer to so-called ‘analytic phonics’, though neither of the terms SP and AP is particularly helpful.

Part of the problem is the inappropriate and misleading proliferation of technical terms such as ‘phoneme’. In my original investigations into this subject I assumed, with many others, that a phoneme was a sound, a kind of ‘auditory atom’ into which speech can be segmented. My first mistaken impressions were reinforced by the wording of policy documents with their talk of ‘major grapheme/phoneme correspondences’, and of blending phonemes. Numerous phonics programmes use the term ‘phoneme’ in this way. They will tell us that the same phoneme can be heard in the middle of each of the following words – ‘farm’, ‘palm’ and ‘heart’. So if we are not careful, our understanding of the term ‘phoneme’ merely focuses on the similarity of the sounds in words like these three.

Returning to the National Curriculum, recall that pupils are expected to read accurately by blending sounds in unfamiliar words containing GPCs that have been taught. GPC, a frequently used acronym, stands

for ‘grapheme-phoneme correspondence’. Some of the wording of the Rose Review itself echoes this: in a synthetic approach, apparently, beginner readers are to be taught ‘grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence’ (Rose, 2006, para 56). Putting matters in this way gives the strong impression that ‘letter/sound’ is synonymous with ‘grapheme/phoneme’. It is not.

A well-known SP enthusiast, Hepplewhite, observes:

*Spoken words can be split up, or segmented, into smaller sounds of which the smallest units of identifiable sounds in a word are called phonemes. For example, the spoken word ‘peach’ can be split into the phonemes /p/ /ee/ /ch/. (A phoneme is expressed within slash marks /-/). The phonemes are then represented by written symbols to create an alphabetic code writing system. (Hepplewhite, 2007)*

Another prominent fan, Miskin, comments, ‘The synthetic approach teaches children to blend phonemes (the smallest unit of pronounceable sound) into words for reading’ (Miskin, 1999). For an example, she offers:

*The phoneme ay is found in words that rhyme with day, bake, made, rage, male, same, train, cape, lace, brave and beige. (ibid.)*

She does not make reference to a particular style of pronunciation, such as that sometimes dubbed ‘received pronunciation’. Her talk of ‘rhyming’ encourages the reader to focus on sounds. As we will see, phonemes are *not* merely sounds in this sense. Phonemes should not simply be viewed as the smallest unit of pronounceable sound.

At least some of the words in her list may be pronounced in a variety of ways, depending on the accent of the speaker. It is for this reason that alternative sound-letter schemes have been invented to suit local accents. These include Manchester English (Barry, 2003), Newcastle upon Tyne English (Watt, 2003) and Liverpool English (Honeybone and Watson, 2006). They are offered as supports for teachers in England who are working with phonics-based elements in the teaching of reading and literacy.

There is a huge risk of confusion here, so we need to begin at the beginning and be as clear as possible about the basic ideas. The words that we hear people say can share sounds. For instance, the words ‘should’, ‘wool’ and ‘pull’ have a middle sound in common. The words ‘dog’, ‘death’ and ‘disaster’ share an initial sound. The words ‘stop’, ‘lip’ and ‘map’ have

a final sound in common. However, on investigating linguistics definitions of the phoneme, I came to appreciate that it was not simply a synonym for such sounds. It turned out to be an abstract way of thinking about certain properties of these sounds. Apparently, the concept of the phoneme is indeed linked to sounds heard when any given language is spoken. However, it is concerned in a very particular fashion with these sounds. It highlights sounds that, when altered, may change one word into another. Suppose someone says ‘hat’. The middle sound in this word may be represented by the symbol /æ/. Now, imagine that our speaker varies the middle sound, and says ‘hart’. When someone says ‘hart’, the middle sound heard may be represented by the symbol /a:/. In English, /æ/ and /a:/ are held to be separate phonemes, just because changing one for the other can change the word concerned, as it does in our example here.

It is important to note that changing a sound may change the word, but that this does not always happen. A northerner says ‘fast’, and she is likely to use /æ/ as the middle sound – that is, the middle sound we hear when someone says ‘hat’. Her friend from the south, in contrast, will probably say ‘fast’ in a different way, using the same middle sound as the one we hear when someone says ‘hart’ – the sound represented as /a:/. In this case, the fact that our second speaker uses a different middle sound from our first, does not change the word they are uttering.

To sum up the points just made, the concept of a phoneme is abstract. Some of the ideas it embraces transcend the acoustic characteristics of the sounds we hear when people speak. The notion of a phoneme has to draw on the distinction between different words for its very definition. As we see later, once we are dealing with words, we are operating in the realm of meaning. I contend that there is a key use of the term ‘word’, according to which a word is not a sound *per se*, though, of course, it can be expressed in sounds.

Accent is not the only factor in how the sounds associated with phonemes may vary. The sound associated with /t/ when the initial sound in the word ‘top’ is heard, is not exactly the same as that associated with /t/ when someone says ‘stop’. The possible sound variants for a phoneme are known as allophones. Accordingly, such variants do not have the power to change the word in which they occur. In any case, no two speakers will pronounce sounds linked to a specific phoneme in exactly the same way.

I also learned that the notion of a phoneme was relative to a particular language. For instance, in English, the difference between the sounds associated with ‘s’ and ‘sh’ is likely to be phonemic. I say the word ‘sock’. I then proceed to alter the initial sound, so that I am now heard saying the word ‘shock’. The change in sound has changed the word, and hence

in English we are dealing with sounds associated with two phonemes here. Yet in Japanese, the two sounds that English speakers associate with 's' and 'sh' count as allophonic variants of the same phoneme. If I said a Japanese word using the sound linked to 's', and then said something similar where the 's' sound was changed to 'sh', I would still be saying the same Japanese word. Incidentally, it is even true that universal agreement about the number of phonemes in English is not to be had.

On beginning to digest these complexities, I started to understand why many commentators described the concept of a phoneme as 'abstract', or even as a 'psychological construct'. I also gathered that linguistics was less interested in the idea of a phoneme than it had been several decades ago, and I wondered why this shift in focus was not comprehensively mirrored by the language used about current approaches to phonics teaching.

In the face of these complexities, I temporarily retreated to ponder the role of letters in English. Few if any letters are tied to the 'same' sound. Vowels are prominent offenders here. Con-

sider 'a' in 'father', 'many', 'cat', 'what', 'rage' and 'water'. Most consonants fare little better. 's' in 'snake' sounds different from 's' in 'harms'. Despite a reasonably robust 'sound' identity in many cases, 'b' occasionally sleeps, as in 'lamb', while 'p' encounters similar vicissitudes in many places, including 'psychic', 'cupboard', 'corps', 'receipt' and 'psalm'. 'l' undergoes sound death in 'psalm', 'almond', 'talk' and elsewhere. A few letters enjoy a more robust and consistent sound association, such as 'f' and 'm'. Yet another source of variation stems from the way teachers actually produce the letter 'sound' when teaching. 'f' may be uttered as 'fer', or as some variant of this. Teachers valiantly attempting a pure version of the said sound, keep their teeth against their bottom lip, breathe out, and, in consequence make the noise 'ffff'.

Now, does it really matter whether SP disciples such as Hepplewhite and Miskin use terms with the technical purity that we would expect from academic researchers in linguistics? Is it just that we fear that this pseudo-technical vocabulary lends a spurious air of scientific rigour to SP advocacy, especially, of course if some liberties are being taken with the terms concerned?

However, I would argue that there is a more serious issue at stake here. In effect, the widespread use of the term 'phoneme' in SP rhetoric blurs the difference between the sounds we hear when someone speaks,

## **The widespread use of the term 'phoneme' in SP rhetoric blurs the difference between the sounds we hear when someone speaks and words**

and words. We do, of course, hear the sounds *as* words, but the sounds *per se* are not words. Our SP enthusiasts speak of blending phonemes to produce *words*, and will go on to say that the process is reversible, words being segmentable into their constituent phonemes. It looks as though the term 'phoneme' as used in linguistics faces in two directions. In one direction is the physical or auditory world of *sounds* that can be heard in speech. In the other direction is the realm of words proper and meaning.

It is quite difficult to provide an uncontentious definition of 'word', and this book is not the place for an attempt. I will concede that there is more than one legitimate way in which the troublesome term can be used. Nevertheless, an important and central notion of word, crucial for my argument here, is an abstract one, being concerned with meaning, and having both speech and text manifestations. In this sense, the same word can be pronounced in various ways for all kinds of reasons, one obvious one being accent. A word can be mispronounced. Indeed, words in the interpretation on which I rely in this book can feature in Braille, Morse and Sign Language.

Meaning is, conceptually speaking, situated at a considerable distance from physical sounds heard in speech. Blending individual letter sounds does not immediately result in words as such. What we gain instead is a composite speech sound. I apologise for the clumsy expression 'speech sound', but, as you will see, we need something to refer to the result and it is really important *not* to refer to it as a word. To continue, the result of sound blending may be just one of several speech sounds to be associated with a particular word. For instance, a reader encounters 'fast' as an item of written text. She blends the sounds she associates with each letter or letter combination to form a composite speech sound. The latter will be one of at least two possibilities, in one of which occurs a short 'a' as heard in 'and', and in another of which we have the sound that is heard in 'farm'. Moreover, when a reader achieves a composite speech sound by blending sounds associated with letters and letter combinations, she may generate a speech sound that is standardly associated with more than one word. For example, she produces a composite sound by blending the letter sounds she thinks appropriate for 'mints', but that composite sound could be associated either with the actual word 'mints' or with the word 'mince'. Similarly, the composite sound that might result from synthesising sounds associated with 'nun' could either go with 'nun', or with 'none'. Or again, she blends the sounds appropriate for 'paws', to produce something that fits not only 'paws' but also 'pause', 'pours' and 'pores'. (These examples are known in the trade as homophones.)

If 'paws' is encountered in a list with no context, she cannot identify the sound she has composed with a word (unless she already recognises

'paws' as text and understands it.). Moving from a blended sound to full word recognition is quite a step. She needs a sentence, or even several sentences to provide a context. She must be able to discover at least most of the meaning of these sentences, and she must know and understand a good stock of vocabulary in order to determine which word she is dealing with.

Note one or two other simple indications of the abstract character of words. It is often pointed out that Shakespeare was capable of spelling the same word in three different ways on one page. So words cannot be identified with specific combinations of letters. It is a familiar observation that the spelling of specific words has changed over time – for instance, 'maiestie' eventually became 'majesty', while 'raine' turns into 'rain'. In a primary classroom, a child asks the teacher how to spell... and comes out with a word that the teacher hears as 'or'. Knowing the child, the teacher realises that she can already spell 'or', so asks her pupil further questions about the context, to determine whether she needs the word denoting something made of wood used to move boats in the water, rock from which metal might be extracted or even the feeling her mother had when confronting her daughter's tidy bedroom.

Consider the widespread phenomenon in English of the heteronym, where the same text can be pronounced in more than one way to say different words. 'Does', for instance, might be several female deer, where it is pronounced to rhyme with 'toes', or a common verb where instead it rhymes with 'buzz'. When a letter sequence involves a heteronym, the reader must understand the meaning of the word concerned before determining exactly how to pronounce the relevant text. She encounters some printed text. She attempts to blend what she understands to be the associated sounds. This sometimes furnishes her with more than one composite speech sound as a possible result of the blending. She must now ascend, so to speak, to words in their semantic and abstract state, in order fully to understand which sounds to use when returning to the level of speech and pronunciation. Once she knows which word she is dealing with, she then links this to one or more speech sounds that she can hear and understand as the word in question. I now explain this process step by step by means of an example. The following explanation is artificial in the sense that readers will move through the processes almost instantaneously, and are unlikely to be conscious of what they are doing.

So, to continue: A mature reader encounters 'bass' as a piece of written text in a whole sentence. She attempts to blend the letter sounds. She could, at least in theory, produce three possible blends. The first shares a sound with 'farm', the second with 'gas' and the third with 'face'. She cannot match the first result with any of the words she knows, so she dis-

misses that one. ('Knowing' a word need not, of course, involve knowing how it would be written). She still has to choose between the second and the third. Imagine that the sentence with which she is dealing is: 'The double bass player sometimes wished she had learned the piccolo'. Her second result would have been a kind of fish, making no sense in this context. Hence she decides that her third blend is appropriate, since she can use it to talk about a musical instrument.

Let us turn to some more examples of heteronyms:

- I want to tear the book. She shed a tear.
- Jones will wind his old watch tomorrow. Go saddle the wind.
- He is rowing with his wife. He is rowing with his wife.
- The leading philosopher insulted the vicar. The leading on the roof was damaged by the snowfall.
- The violin player complained that the piece was inappropriately bowed. After the performance she bowed to acknowledge the applause from the audience.
- She only had a minute to put on her minute brooch before going out.

Often the reader needs to know the context of a piece of text in order to work out whether she is dealing with a noun or a verb. It is only when this is clear that she can then decide how to pronounce the word in question. Moreover, even that may hinge sometimes on her accent. The many common examples include 'use', which rhymes with 'loose' when a noun, but with 'yews' when a verb. Note also that which syllable is stressed in 'protest' depends on its grammatical role. This, of course is just one of very many similar examples in English.

These are not just a few aberrations in a language where readers can otherwise calculate how to pronounce words from recognising their constituent sounds, these clearly associated with the visual symbols for the letters used to spell the words in question. The linguistic phenomena concerned are very common.

It is of course true, and a point often made, that English spelling is exceptionally irregular when compared with most other languages. Yet its very irregularity is helpful in some ways, since it forces us to recognize the gulf between sounds and words. Moreover, heteronyms occur in other languages too. I understand that all three letter words in Arabic are heteronyms, and that in Persian and Hebrew this phenomenon is fairly common. Examples of either homophones or heteronyms are rarer in many European languages, though they are not unknown. Many Chinese characters are heteronyms, meaning each of these characters can be pro-

nounced in many different ways. Also many Chinese characters are homophones, i.e. many different characters (with different meanings) have identical pronunciation.

It might be objected that I have hijacked the meaning of ‘word’ in the direction of abstract meaning. After all, it could be urged, it is perfectly reasonable to use the term ‘word’ in a different way from the one I have favoured so far. It is sometimes said, for instance, that the word ‘bank’ has more than one meaning. In similar vein, it may be observed that ‘bank’ suffers from lexical ambiguity, referring to sloping ground next to a river, a financial institution, and possibly other things too. This way of speaking about words seems to be identifying them as pieces of text or speech. Such a usage is in tension with what I have said here: I have insisted that words are abstractions linked to meaning, noting that the same word can be spelled and said in different ways, and so on.

In response, I have to accept that ‘word’ has a variety of uses. However, I suggest that my arguments do not ultimately turn on how we ought to employ the word ‘word’. They depend rather on the points that readers often need to look at the meaning of what they are reading before working out how to *say* it, and sometimes to scrutinise the context in order to identify which word is linked to the sound resulting from their blending.

If we had to choose between synthetic and analytic phonics, analytic phonics may be the better approach. This is because with the latter, readers begin with a word, where a word is not to be identified with a sound, but as an element of her language whose meaning she grasps. Then, given how she feels she should pronounce it – such a decision being informed by her particular accent – she can (sometimes) be helped to see why the written letters used to form the word are what they are. Her starting point is now with a word at the level of meaning, and she will normally ‘have in mind’ a speech sound that she associates with the word in question, a speech sound with which she is ‘at home’.

We are told that the ‘model’ of reading assumed by the Rose Report and subsequent policy development is the ‘Simple View of Reading’ (SVR). Gough and Tunmer (1986) described this as the view that reading comprehension is, in some sense the ‘product’ of decoding and listening comprehension. The latter is thought of as the understanding someone has when they hear examples of their own language. Presumably, this ‘understanding’ must be informed by a context. Simply hearing speech that is potentially part of a sentence, or several sentences will often be insufficient for understanding, since the hearer is unable to identify which word she is dealing with.

A supporter of phonics claimed that if someone did not know what a word ‘sounded’ like, then it would not be part of their vocabulary. This

point links to the ‘listening comprehension’ element in the Simple View of Reading. It is, of course, false. Some early readers have a sense of the meaning of a few words that they recognize as text, *even when they do not yet know how to pronounce them*. The claim on the part of the phonics supporter also contentiously puts to one side the possibility that some people who are deaf from birth may be incapable of knowing what a word ‘sounds’ like, and yet there may be important senses in which that word is very definitely part of their vocabulary.

SVR is explicitly a ‘simple’ view rather than a definitive and comprehensive characterisation. Nevertheless, in the light of the earlier explorations of relationships between types of speech sounds, semantics and syntax it is still potentially misleading. It at least hints at the idea that ‘decoding’ can be thought of independently from words with meaning and then ‘combined’ with listener comprehension to supply reading. The arguments above suggest that the relationship between decoding and meaning is more complex and interactive than this. If that conclusion is robust, it appears to favour analytic rather than synthetic phonics.

To sustain the independence of decoding from reading for meaning, the former would need to be understood as simply involving physical sounds. Consider the mere blending of sounds, allegedly associated with letters, as required by the SP reading test, that includes ‘non-words’ such

as ‘nop’. Here, the ‘reader’ must refrain from ascending to the level of meaning, and, instead, merely produce a composite sound from its constituent elements. She is not being allowed, so to speak, to deal with words as such. It is therefore misleading to describe the test as containing twenty

**It is misleading to describe the test as containing twenty words and twenty ‘non-words’. There is a good sense in which it does not contain *any* words**

words and twenty ‘non-words’. There is a good sense in which it does not contain *any* words.

Hepplewhite (2012) observes, defending the phonics check: ‘Reading unknown real words is the equivalent of reading non-words.’ Now, we have to ask what is meant by ‘unknown real words’ here. If we are to suppose that the child has never seen the letter sequence before, *and* has never heard and understood any word in speech that *might* be represented by the said letter sequence, then perhaps she is right. However, surely this is emphatically *not* reading! It is simply blending letter sounds to make a composite sound that *might* be used by speakers to utter words. If Hepplewhite meant by ‘unknown real words’ that the child has never seen the relevant letter sequence but *does* possess some kind of under-

standing or comprehension of words that the blended sound could be employed to represent, then tackling the reading of unknown real words is *not* like reading non-words. The reason for this is to do with the points already rehearsed above. The child may well need to ascend to the level of meaning in order to work out which word she is dealing with, and how to pronounce it. Yet, in the check, she encounters the unknown real word in a context-free list. This means that she cannot operate in terms of meaning on the text with which she is dealing. No doubt the devisors of the check will ensure that heteronyms are excluded. Moreover, they need not worry about whether the result of blending is a sound that can be associated with more than one word, such as is the case with ‘tax’ (‘tacks’ could be blended to make an identical sound). They need have no concerns about this, since the pupil *is not dealing with words as carriers of meaning*.

We are told that if, in the check, a child is unable to form the sound /th/ and pronounces this as the sound /f/, then this pronunciation would be scored correctly in the screening. Presumably this might happen, for instance if the child comes from some parts of London. This does seem odd, though of course well-intentioned. I know plenty of ‘Cockneys’ who are perfectly able to make a /th/ sound, but their *accent* means that they continue to use /f/, as in: ‘I’ve got free houses’, rather than the correct ‘I’ve got three houses’. Part of the curious nature of this example is the murky conceptualisation of ‘reading’ and of ‘word’ behind the check. On the one hand, ‘reading’ is blending sounds, yet on the other hand there is a tacit reference to the pronunciation of real words.

Incidentally, the phonics check must also attempt to exclude from the ‘real word’ category cases such as the following: a letter sequence that could, in theory be blended legitimately to produce several sounds, one or more of which are *never* associated with real words. Thus ‘bass’ should never feature, since a child with a southern accent might blend it to produce a sound that rhymes with ‘pass’. ‘Rind’, kind, ‘hind’ and related words should never be used, since a child might blend their letters to realise a sound rhyming with the ‘wind’ of interest to weather forecasters. Such blends are not associated with any words in English.

If such examples are not excluded and, for instance, ‘bass’ rhyming with ‘pass’ with a southern accent is marked incorrect, the validity of the test item is undermined. It becomes a test of the extent of the child’s listening comprehension vocabulary rather than her capacity to recognise sounds and to blend them. If, instead, these examples are retained and ‘bass’ rhyming with ‘pass’ as spoken by a southerner is allowed, we have a vivid illustration of the fact that this test does not involve reading. Indeed, all these necessary restrictions to make the phonics check ‘work’

only serve to remind us of how distant the processes on which the phonics check focuses are from true reading.

Anecdotally, some SP supporters have suggested that reading the pseudo-words in the 'check' resembles reading nonsense words of the kind to be found in Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' or Edward Lear's poems. This thought is supposed to disarm the criticism of 'pseudo-words' in the phonics check. However, there are some obvious differences between nonsense and pseudo-words. Carroll's and Lear's poems provide a context. This often combines grammatical clues with information from other words that are *not* nonsense. 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves' contains three 'proper' words, and it is clear, for instance, that 'slithy' has some kind of adjectival role. We also need to distinguish between the position where the nonsense poem has just been written and our contemporary perspective on literature of this kind. This literature is part of our culture, and the conventional ways in which the nonsense words are pronounced are well-established.

## 5. Opposing the universal imposition of Synthetic Phonics

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One particular aspect of the objectionable imposition of SP on all teachers and pupils relates to early readers. SP is an element in an alleged technology of effective teaching that is supposed to be, so to speak, pupil-proof. That is to say, as we saw above, it comprises an approach insulated from information concerning the initial cognitive and motivational states of its pupil victims.

A small minority begin their schooling as readers. I do not mean that they can merely decode simple texts, but that they can read for meaning. A larger number are not quite at this stage, but, nevertheless, have made significant progress. Even if they cannot recognise many words, they know some, and have begun to grasp that written text can be transformed into meaning. To subject either the fully-fledged readers, or those who are well on their way, to a rigid diet of intensive phonics is an affront to their emerging identities as persons. To require this of students who have already gained some maturity in the rich and nourishing human activity of reading is almost a form of abuse. Is this overstated? I can only appeal to teachers and parents close to pupils who come early to reading. Some of the latter are already passionately engaged with this wonderful aspect of our culture, and reading can play a crucial role in the development of parent-child relationships. Some families attach great importance to sharing books with their children, particularly when this involves delight in stories.

Michael Oakeshott once wrote:

*As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves.* (Oakeshott, 1962 p.196)

Even quite young children, if already reading for meaning, are entering into this conversation, and into the exciting worlds of story and poetry. The vast majority of teachers, if allowed, take account of this and will exercise appropriate flexibility to cater for the presence of one or two ‘real readers’ in their classes.

## **Delivering a phonics ‘skill’ in isolation resembles teaching a would-be actor how to represent sadness by showing him how to turn his mouth down**

Be that as it may, let us just imagine for a moment that it really is possible to identify a skill called Synthetic Phonics and to demonstrate that it is an integral part of reading. In such a circumstance, why not teach it directly and independently from the rest of reading, *at least to some pupils?*

Would the situation be comparable, for instance, with teaching the skill of bowling in cricket? For it might be perfectly sensible for the latter to be taught directly. A would-be cricketer could be trained to bowl before applying that skill intelligently in real cricket matches. This is surely so, despite the fact that it is the latter that gives bowling real meaning and purpose.

Yet I would argue that the skills involved in reading are very different. We have seen that they are inherently interrelated with grasping the meanings of texts and linking those meanings to readers’ existing knowledge and understanding. Sounding out ‘A rat ran at a ham’, outside the context of some kind of narrative that might give it sense, is not a truly meaningful human activity. Delivering a phonics ‘skill’ in isolation resembles teaching a would-be actor how to represent sadness by showing him how to turn his mouth down. For lip shapes have no significance outside the intricate detail of human interactions.

The original version of the academic paper behind this IMPACT publication was targeted by the ‘Reading Reform Foundation’ (an organisation explicitly supporting SP), and received some less than friendly comments. These included the following, from an anonymous poster:

*Do you think there is someone somewhere philosophising, at public expense, about whether or not the Early Years framework should recommend that children are taught to recognise numerals and count outside the context of carrying out numerical calculations or solving algebraic equations?*

Now, recognising numerals – if that means that a child can say ‘two’ on encountering the relevant numeral – seems very similar to demonstrating letter recognition by saying its name, or uttering a sound conventionally associated with it. As such, this seems useful, or even essential, and nowhere have I argued against it. My critic also attempts to set up an analogy between counting outside the context of calculations or solving equations on the one hand, and learning letter sounds and blending them outside the context of reading on the other. Yet counting is a purposeful activity in itself. Young children often enjoy discovering how many bricks or sweets there are. Counting can have ‘meaning’ *per se*. So there is no problem about the coherence and meaningfulness of counting activities that are carried out independently from calculations or equations. Blending sounds, unlike counting, has no meaning in itself. We have seen in great detail the distance to be travelled from mere blending to operating with text at the level of meaning.

Incidentally, the possibility of a kind of corruption is inherent in the universal imposition of SP. A child may acquire from SP teachers, however well-intentioned they may be, the illusion that ‘proper’ reading is mere decoding and blending. The more motivating and carefully designed are the phonics materials, the more seductive this illusion may prove. Of course, such confusion in a child’s mind will almost certainly be temporary, but surely it is entirely unnecessary in the first place.

## 6. Conclusion

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I have learned from endless arguments about this topic that certain things cannot be repeated too often. This little book does *not* oppose the teaching of letter-sound correspondences, blending, and other vital skills associated with phonics in the broadest sense, so long as this is offered in the context of reading for meaning. It *does* attack the universal imposition of SP, and offers plenty of evidence that some of its zealous adherents, including elements of the present government, would like to see it in all schools for a period in a discrete and systematic form, furnished in a 'pure' fashion that explicitly excludes all other reading strategies. The phonics check, with its battery of pseudo-words, is part of their weaponry. I attack the very idea that there are, or should be, specifiable effective teaching 'methods' whose efficacy could possibly be researched using approaches in any way analogous to drug trials. I urge that SP really does represent itself as such a researchable strategy. I argue that to think that there is such a method is a fantasy. Such fantasies threaten the appropriate professional autonomy of teachers in schools.

My treatment explores some of the familiar differences between decoding and reading for meaning. It contends that the inappropriate use of certain technical terms such as 'phoneme' lends too much plausibility to the central claims of SP enthusiasts. They treat phonemes as sounds, even though phonemes actually straddle the gap between sounds, thought of simply as something that can be heard, on the one hand, and abstract ideas of meaning on the other. All this serves to mask the weakness at the heart of the thought that blending *per se* is reading in any real sense.

The arguments developed in this book have general implications for the teaching of reading in primary schools. In addition to my treatment of these issues I have also made some specific points about the imposition of SP on early readers. I have sought to show that such an imposition has the potential to threaten these pupils both personally and educationally.

## Notes

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I owe many debts to the contributors to the TES online threads ‘A monstrous regimen of synthetic phonics’ (<http://community.tes.co.uk/forums/t/629773.aspx>) and ‘A monstrous regimen of synthetic phonics Part 2’ (<http://community.tes.co.uk/forums/t/642283.aspx>). At the time of writing, the exchanges amount in total to around 3000 postings. The threads were started by ‘Moonpenny’, who instigated them by quoting passages from the original conference paper I wrote on this topic. A much-improved version of that paper appeared in a special issue of *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Davis, 2012). Some contributors to the forum, especially ‘thumbie’, helped me to understand key aspects of the debates much better, and others enabled me to shape my arguments more effectively (or so I would like to think) by their energetic opposition to all things non-SP.

Were this short book to have been an academic paper I would have referred to many more academic sources. Some readers may be interested in recent academic research in linguistics that raises questions about ‘phonemes’. Note especially, for instance, work by Robert Port.

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