

# The impact of an IMPACT pamphlet: on decoding synthetic phonics

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## Background

IMPACT pamphlets written by philosophers, some on controversial aspects of current education policy, were started in 1999. Number 20, by Andrew Davis, entitled, 'To read or not to read: decoding synthetic phonics', was launched at a symposium in The Institute of Education in London on 29 January 2014. Draft copies were distributed in advance, and the pamphlet was an extended version of an article in the Journal of Philosophy of Education in 2012 with the title, 'A monstrous regimen of synthetic phonics: fantasies of research-based teaching 'methods' versus real teaching'. Thus it was not surprising that even before the launch it had provoked controversy with several radio interviews where Davis faced up to criticism from the advocates of synthetic phonics, and with eye catching headlines in some papers.

## The pamphlet

In his introduction to the pamphlet, the editor of the series, Michael Hand, quotes a claim from Michael Gove for synthetic phonics as the most effective way of teaching reading, but Hand states that: 'the available empirical research appears to show no such thing' (p. 3). He further states that, 'teaching children to correlate letter combinations with sounds, and to blend sounds into sequences, is not teaching them to read' (p.3), and on page 4 he refers to 'the zeal with which synthetic phonics is championed by its advocates'.

***'teaching children to correlate letter combinations with sounds, and to blend sounds into sequences, is not teaching them to read'***

There is not space here to give more than a flavour of the pamphlet; indeed, many of the points Davis makes have been made by others, not least by this author in a series of articles in *The Education Journal*. However, he argues his points powerfully, backed with a number of quotations and illustrations, adds others not discussed so far, and has caught the attention of the media in a way that others have failed to do. He states that there is no justification for the universal imposition of any one teaching method, and of synthetic phonics in particular. He insists that he is not opposed to phonics as such and that teachers should ensure that children learn the conventional

letter sounds correspondence and that as and when appropriate they use such knowledge in early reading. However, he argues, as have many others, that it should be, 'suitably embedded in the context of reading for meaning' (p. 6), and on page 7 goes on to argue that if we sought to favour phonics at all we should support analytic phonics. I was interested in his claim that a well-established and apparently well-regarded reading programme THRASS was deemed by the DfE 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' (p. 11). He expresses particular concern

about the effect of this policy and the phonics check required of all 5 and 6- year-old children in England on children who can already read referring to it 'as an abuse'. He deplores the restriction on the type of reading material by which children may now be taught in the early stages.

Davis argues on page 14 that synthetic phonics, with its accompanying phonics check, at least in its pure form fails to take account of the true character of reading and of the gulf between reading and mere decoding. He also claims, as have others, that there will inevitably be some teaching to the test with its high stakes, even that some supporters of synthetic phonics would be perfectly happy about that. According to Davis, blending individual letters does not immediately result in words as such. He cites a number of heteronyms in English such as: 'I want to tear the book. She shed a tear', where the reader has to know the context to be able to pronounce the word. For this reason, he claims, decoding should not be thought of independently from words with meaning.

## **The symposium**

As with previous pamphlets this one was launched at a symposium. The symposium was chaired by Michael Hand, whose introduction was similar to his comments in the pamphlet. Andrew Davis himself then gave a brief overview of his arguments, citing a number of disturbing individual cases to illustrate his points. Two other members of the panel were Bethan Marshall, Chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English and Nansi Ellis, Head of Education Policy and Research at ATL. Each drew attention to the concerns of their members at the imposition of synthetic phonics on all teachers and in particular the phonics check which it was claimed had told teachers nothing they did not already know, providing no new diagnostic information. Nansi Ellis was worried that the limited written language to which many young children were now having access was adversely affecting their understanding of mathematical concepts. Concern was expressed that decoding was being split from meaning and that a gulf was developing between home reading and school reading. The final member of the panel was Professor Sir Tim Brighouse who had endorsed the pamphlet on the cover as follows:

Here's a book which every primary school should have for its teachers...and if they take its lessons to heart, they will have the moral courage and the knowledge to back their own professional judgement and do what they know is right – which will not be to do as the government suggests`.

Professor Brighouse widened the discussion to deplore the fact that now not only could The Secretary of State for Education tell teachers in England what to teach but how to teach. He worried at the prospect should a medical consultant be expected to adopt a similar stance!

### **The discussion**

The chairman said that advocates of synthetic phonics had been invited to join the panel, but had declined. From the tenor of the discussion it was apparent that most of the audience shared the concerns of the panel. Someone, speaking she said as a parent, described the lengths to which she had to go because she was not willing to have her child take the phonics check, indeed beyond the school to the LEA. Another member of the audience expressed concern at the cost of the programme, but the speakers declined to name those who had profited. Other aspects commented upon were the pass/fail scoring of the phonics check, the wide age range sitting the test and the peak at the known pass mark of 32 out of 40. There was one dissenting voice among the audience who expressed her concern at the negativity of the discussion and argued that government policy does stress the need for reading with understanding. One questioner challenged Andrew Davis as to whether he was narrowing his influence by focusing on the damage to children who could already read, thereby drawing attention to the negative effect only on `the privileged few`. The argument should be broader, as the negative effect could be at least as profound on those who could not yet read.

The members of the panel were given an opportunity for final remarks. These can be summed up by the questions posed by Professor Brighouse: How will we help all children? How can we increase confidence in teachers?

How can we guide teachers towards doing what they do better, rather than imposing `teacher proof` policies?

The pamphlet can be downloaded free from Wiley Online Library at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/ISSN12048-416X>

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