

Children Need More than Systematic Synthetic Phonics

Response to the Guardian's report (26.9.14) on England's 2014 'Phonics Check' results

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The use of phonics for the purpose of teaching children to read has not "met with resistance" from England's primary teachers as the Guardian claims (Rise in school literacy attributed to phonics Guardian, 26.9.14). Very few primary teachers in England would deny that phonics has an important part to play in the teaching of reading. The vast majority recognise that an alphabetic writing system demands some knowledge of how phonemes (speech sounds) map onto letters. However, this mapping is particularly complex for English spelling. And learning to read means more than pronouncing the words on the page: it means learning to make meaning from text.

The 'dividends' the Guardian reports as being paid by the exclusive use of Systematic Synthetic Phonics may be more illusory than it recognises. It is true that scores on the Phonics Check, taken in Year 1, have risen. This is a test of children's ability to pronounce items on a list of 20 regularly-spelled words and 20 non-words. The rising results show that teachers are well aware that this is a 'high stakes' test: they know that its results are reported in RAISEOnline and available to Ofsted inspectors. So they have worked hard to get their children through it and, unsurprisingly, have been more successful in this third year of the test than they were when it was first introduced. Links with the rather more valid KS1 reading SAT, taken a year later, are less clear than you claim. Results are not yet available for the children who took the KS1 reading SAT this year. We will have to wait until November 2015 for the KS1 reading results for this year's Phonics Check testees.

Meanwhile there are very real concerns in England's primary classrooms. Many teachers of young children are concerned that a diet restricted to Systematic Synthetic Phonics will not, on its own, teach a child to become a reader. Undue emphasis on such an approach may inhibit the development of the skilled activity that is fluent reading of connected text. Research with successful young readers of English shows us that to identify new words, they make use of different levels of phonic knowledge – about syllables and rhyme units, as well as individual phonemes (Bradley and Bryant, 1983; Brown and Deavers, 1999; Goswami, 2010). And they make use of analogy (Goswami, 1988). For example, once they are familiar with words such as 'cold' and 'ball' they can recognise words such as 'bold', 'fold', 'tall' and 'call', which do not readily yield to a phoneme-by-phoneme approach.

Other research shows us that when it comes to recognising words in running text, young readers draw on other resources too, which they use in conjunction with their multi-level phonic knowledge (Bussis et al, 1985; Paulson and Goodman, 1999). They choose words that fit with the semantic and syntactic patterning of the text and are guided also by the context of the text and any pictures it may have. Only such information will lead to the right pronunciation of words such as 'read', 'sow' or 'lead'. Young readers approach printed texts with the same complex intelligence they use to make sense of other phenomena in the world.

The current Coalition government and its Labour predecessor have outlawed the use of these other cues to word identification, insisting that only Systematic Synthetic Phonics will supply the necessary solid foundation for literacy learning. The new National Curriculum that has just come into effect makes it a statutory requirement that 5 and 6 year old pupils “ should be taught to read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and do not require them to use other strategies to work out words” (DfE, 2013, p.10).

Proponents of SSP claim that irrefutable research evidence dictates this one-string approach. However, the study most often cited to support this position, in Sir Jim Rose’s review of early literacy teaching and elsewhere, is seriously flawed. This Clackmannanshire study, in which SSP was used with the whole age cohort of one small Scottish Education Authority, yielded large gains in word recognition, and more modest gains in comprehension tests (Johnston and Watson, 2005). But in Scotland’s National Tests of reading, taken at the end of primary school, this experimental cohort did not score significantly better than its predecessors (Ellis and Moss, 2014). Devastatingly, after the conclusion of the study, the Scottish HMI observed that performance in reading in Clackmannanshire was “below the average for comparator authorities” (HMIE, 2006, p. 4). Scotland has not imposed this approach on other authorities.

There is, however, a mass of research on both sides of the Atlantic, disregarded by both the Rose report and successive governments, into the approaches used in classrooms and schools where children learn to read most effectively (e.g. Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Medwell et al., 1998; Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor and Pearson, 2002; Hall, 2013). Such studies show consistently that high achieving classes are characterised by:

- a balanced and integrated approach in which attention to word recognition skills is matched by attention to comprehension with the consistent message that understanding and effective communication , not just word recognition is what literacy is about;
- attention to individual children’s literacy skills, experiences and interests through high quality interaction and close monitoring of individual progress;
- high levels of engagement in reading.

Many children may supplement the government’s thin SSP diet with rich experiences of text at home – on paper and screen. But while their school diet remains thin, those whose parents have less time, money, energy and confidence to devote to initiating their children into the pleasures of the written word will continue to lag behind their more fortunate classmates.

Until we treat our primary children as intelligent beings who bring important skills and resources to the complex process of learning to read and need to experience from the start the delights and usefulness of the written word, we are unlikely to make any lasting advance in our children’s literacy learning.

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