



UKLA's response to the DfE statement (2014)

(<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Education/evidence-check-forum/phonics.pdf>) on the evidence supporting the governmental position on phonics teaching

Overview

UKLA is most concerned about the shaky basis in research of the approach to the teaching and testing of reading by the Department for Education. In this short paper we:

- demonstrate that research into effective teaching of reading presents it as much broader process;
- respond in detail to the DfE claims about the superiority of Systematic Synthetic Phonics teaching;
- present research evidence on other approaches to word identification in English used by successful young readers;
- draw attention to the key finding of the most recent official evaluation of the Phonics Check;
- conclude on the dangers of imposing a narrow approach to the teaching and testing of reading, based on incomplete and insubstantial evidence.

Research into effective teaching of reading

The most substantial surveys of successful schools and classrooms in the United States and the UK show that the most successful primary schools:

- use a balance of phonics and meaning-focused approaches to teach children to read (Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor and Pearson, 2002, Hall, 2013);
- give children plenty of experience of putting texts to use “with the consistent message that understanding and effective communication – not just word recognition – are what literacy is about” (Taylor and Pearson, 2002, p. 365);
- attend to individual children’s literacy skills, experiences and interests (Medwell et al., 1998; Pressley et al., 2001; Hall, 2013);
- create high levels of engagement and pleasure in reading (Guthrie et al., 1996; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Hall, 2013).

This adds up to much more than phonics “in a language-rich curriculum “ (DfE, 2014).

Response in detail to the DfE statement (2014)

Paragraphs 6 to 9 open with the statement:

“UK and international research shows overwhelmingly that systematic phonics teaching, in a language-rich curriculum, is the most effective way of teaching reading to children of all abilities and educational backgrounds (DfE, 2011).”

This statement is open to challenge. The DfE paper it cites ignores independent studies of effective teaching, focusing instead largely on evidence from Random Control Trials (RCTs). By their very nature, RCTs exclude any attempt to identify the complex interplay of knowledge, understanding, belief and interpersonal skill used by successful teachers in real classrooms. They can show whether one particular feature is associated with progress, but not the complex array of features associated with the most successful learning.

This 2011 paper invokes:

1. *the findings of the US National Reading Panel (NRP)*. This reported in 2000, but hardly provides a justification for a SSP approach, since it:

a) does not unequivocally support synthetic over analytic phonics;

b) led to the passing of the 'No Child Left Behind' Act in 2001, which included the hugely costly *Reading First* programme, which mandated a 5 skills approach (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension) in schools with a history of reading failure. After the official evaluation of *Reading First* subsequently made it clear that its adoption had brought no significant improvement to children's comprehension, Congress cut short its funding (Gamse et al., 2008). Meanwhile the UK is has used this report to embark on a similarly reductive path.

2. *the Clackmannanshire study of Johnson and Watson*. This study, in which SSP was used with the whole age cohort of one small Scottish Local Authority, yielded large gains in word recognition, and more modest gains in comprehension tests (Johnston and Watson, 2005). What is not foregrounded in their account of the study is that numerous other initiatives involving the provision of books, improving relations with parents and the introduction of thinking into the curriculum accompanied the adoption of SSP. 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). To date Clackmannanshire is scoring in the bottom third of Scottish LAs in terms of reading. Unsurprisingly, Scotland has not recommended this approach to other authorities.

3. *The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative* Like the Clackmannanshire study, the report for this initiative was written by the project leader, with, like the authors of the Clackmannanshire study, a vested interest in a positive result. There appears to be no clear independent account of the intervention, which may similarly have been accompanied by other approaches to the teaching of reading. What is clear is that the modest criterion of success was reaching a reading age of 9.5 at the end of primary school (which means 12 years old in Scotland).

4. *Torgerson et al., 2006* – This paper, confined to a study of RCTs, clearly states "No statistically significant difference in effectiveness was found between synthetic phonics instruction and analytic phonics instruction." (Torgerson et al., 2006 p.8).

5. *Rose 2006*. This is a partisan report, which cannot claim to be a systematic research review, and which similarly neglects to take full account of studies of successful reading teaching.

6. *Ofsted 2010 Reading By Six* Produced after the Rose report, this Ofsted survey set out to find effective teaching of reading. From its database of inspection reports, it identified 12 schools regarded as outstanding, with a wide geographical distribution, varied socio-economic catchment areas and above average results in reading at KS1 and English at KS2. While the authors conclude that skilled teaching of SSP is central to all the schools surveyed, they do not claim that SSP should frame all teaching of reading. Close reading of the report indicates that the children are experiencing much more than phonics teaching "in a language-rich curriculum". For example, the children in Bourne Abbey Primary School are not restricted to phonically decodable texts and are even encouraged to take homes 'real books' (books written for children's pleasure and information) suitably banded in levels of difficulty.

An earlier attempt by the DfE to provide evidence in support of SSP as the "proven best way to teach early reading" is equally flawed. *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper* (2010) cites, at endnote 56, three publications: Camilli et al., (2003); Torgerson and Brooks, (2005); Torgerson et al., (2006). These are unfortunate choices. As shown above, Torgerson et al. (2006) does not provide clear evidence for SSP. The second reference is an even less fortunate choice: Camilli states clearly "phonics, as one aspect of the complex reading process,

should not be over-emphasized.” (Camilli et al., 2003 p. 2). Meanwhile Torgerson and Brooks does not exist.

Other approaches to word identification used by successful young readers

As well as being based on evidence about successful schools, UKLA’s concern with the imposition of SSP as the one approved route into reading springs from research into what successful young readers of English actually do. 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, successful 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.

Evidence relating to the imposition of the Phonics Check on Year 1 children

The second interim report carried out by NFER, published in May this year, shows that teachers were positive about teaching phonics, but in most schools teachers were also using other approaches (Walker et al., 2014). Only some three in ten of the literacy coordinators consulted saw any value to teachers in the Phonics Check. They make the damning statement “In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school’s enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.” (Walker et al., 2014, p. 10)

Conclusion

The policy to enforce the adoption of Systematic Synthetic Phonics as the sole approach to the teaching of reading is not based on sound evidence. It flies in the face of what is known about the schools that are most successful in teaching children to read. It conflicts with what we know about how successful young readers approach texts. Like the US *Reading First* programme in the US, it will not succeed in raising the standard of reading in England’s schools. The errors of this approach are compounded by the introduction of the Phonics Check, which has distorted the teaching of reading in many schools

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