

Sound Sense

How learning to love Synthetic Phonics could revolutionise teachers' working lives...to say nothing of the children's!

Teaching little children to read is as easy as c-a-t, if you know what you're doing. Trying to convince teachers though, that synthetic phonics is "simply, the best" is an almost impossible undertaking. The subject arouses such passion. In the face of overwhelming evidence that pedagogical practice over the past 50 years has actively harmed thousands of children, trying to get people to let go of deeply held beliefs is asking too much.

In this article, I want to examine these deeply held beliefs. I want to challenge them and all the current misconceptions around teaching young children to read. I want to break through the perceptions that many teachers have about what is possible. And I want to do this without sounding like a Daily Mail editorial. No small task!

Actually, this leads into a very large problem with regard to phonics, synthetic or otherwise. In many teachers' minds, phonics equals right-wing, traditional, drill and skill, boring, anti-child-centred Gradgrind education. This seemed to be confirmed by the Conservatives appearing to leap aboard the synthetic phonics bandwagon in the recent wave of press coverage following the Rose Interim report.

Over in the United States, phonics is portrayed as being closely aligned to the Christian fundamentalist right. The "No child left behind" act mandated phonics. Hell, Dubya loves phonics, so it follows that all right-minded progressive folks need to be against them.

This association is false, and is holding us back. Maybe old-style phonics teaching in earlier times was not as "fun and multi-sensory," (key buzz words!) as it is today, and therefore gained its rather worthy and lack-lustre reputation among post-war trained teachers. The new synthetic phonics programmes are far from this, but they cannot win in the eyes of the anti-phon.

The Conservatives' support for synthetic phonics pre-dates Rose and the current publicity surrounding it, and is directly due to the interest of their ex-shadow education spokesman Nick Gibb who, rarely for a politician, listened to the arguments, visited schools to see it in action, read up on the research and helped push for the parliamentary select skills committee inquiry on the teaching of reading.

The anti-phon speak darkly of "vested commercial interests", "slick, snake-oil merchants" and purveyors of "magic bullets." They exploit the huge weariness and wariness of most teachers, who having had initiative after initiative thrust upon them, simply cannot believe or accept that something as simple as "fast phonics, first and only" is anything other than more of what has already failed them and their children.

Even the name, "synthetic phonics" brings forth the anti-phon scorn with its connotations of being not genuine, or plastic, or chemical or false. They latch onto

this as proof that this stuff can't be good and wholesome for little kiddies. Synthetic, in this context, means to blend sounds together to make words. As I said earlier, c-a-t = cat. Simple stuff.

The main commercial programmes available today have been developed **by practising teachers in their own schools**. The two best-known, (there are others) are Jolly Phonics, written by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham and used very successfully at Woods Loke Primary School in Lowestoft and RML, Ruth Miskin Literacy, (now Read Write Inc) developed by Ruth Miskin at Kobi Nazrul Primary in Whitechapel. To call any of these women "snake-oil merchants" is laughable. The programmes they developed grew out of their desire to teach all the children in their schools how to read.

Sue Lloyd describes how her school had to swim against the "look and say" and whole language tide prevalent in the late 1970s, early 1980s. Following introduction of their programme, nearly every child at their school was a year ahead on standardised tests of reading, yet no-one from the Local Education Authority wanted to know.

<http://www.jollylearning.co.uk/> Go to Background, the Authors for more details.

There is also a series of articles in the Reading Reform Foundation's newsletters about the development of Jolly Phonics. See nos. 45 to 49.

<http://www.rrf.org.uk/Newsletters.htm>

Many Primary teachers make use of the Jolly Phonics handbook. Due to the juggernaut training of the NLS they don't use it as it was intended to be used, but dilute its effect in the mixed methods/balanced approach of the Searchlights model.

Ruth's programme was developed during her time as Head Teacher at Kobi Nazrul Primary where all her children were sylheti speakers from the Bengali community and all of them learned to read and sailed through their SATs in KS1.

Kobi Nazrul became a beacon school. Far from wanting to go and visit the school and learn from what was being done there, the educational establishment stood back and sneered. Ruth left the school to go round the country training teachers in how to use her programme and inform them about synthetic phonics principles.

Of necessity, this means challenging the established wisdom about mixed methods embodied by the searchlights model. The mantra of "no one way to teach children to read" is trotted out at every available opportunity. "All children are different," and "we must cater for all their differing learning styles."

The NLS searchlight was a political compromise to get whole language supporters on board when the original framework was drawn up. It seems so reasonable on the surface, a bit of phonics, a bit of look and say, a bit of whole word guessing, who could argue with that?

Well, if you go on doing what you've always done, you'll go on getting what you've always got, in this case 25 to 30% of the children in your school unable to read properly. The long tail of underachievement in England is recognised in international studies. It was there before the NLS. The NLS was supposed to get rid of it. It's still there, complete with gender gap and underachieving boys spawning a whole new cottage industry for advisors and publishers.

<http://www.rrf.org.uk/51%20Illiterate%20Boys.htm>

In synthetic phonics schools there is no long tail of underachievement. There is no gender gap. Boys do not underachieve. Same kids – different teaching methodology.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/ins17-00.asp>

The longitudinal research on this from Clackmannanshire was widely reported, yet the educational establishment didn't want to know, because it went directly against their belief system.

Instead we got side-lined into a debate about phonics versus comprehension. The fact that children from very deprived backgrounds were years ahead on standardised reading tests was not good enough because they were only 3 months ahead of national norms on comprehension. Ha! They can bark at print, but can they comprehend what they read? Many teachers of children in deprived areas would give their right arm to be able to get their kids three months ahead of national norms for comprehension!

The definition of what reading actually is was hi-jacked by the whole language movement to fit in with their world view. Reading was to be reading for meaning, comprehension came from making meaning from the text. Quite how you were supposed to do this without being able to actually decode the letters on the page is how we arrived at the searchlights model....by guessing, and by memorising, also known as “a range of strategies.”

Synthetic phonics is based on the principle that you teach children to decode effortlessly to the point of automaticity, early and systematically in their first year at school, using the skills of blending and segmenting, and practising those skills using little decodable readers containing only words they can work out from the sound-symbol correspondences they have been taught to that point. They do not have to memorise. They do not have to guess. They can expend all available mental energy on comprehending what they are reading.

How liberating for the children is that? Really reading at 5, instead of mumbling and stumbling at 9. Phonics and comprehension are not two mutually exclusive entities. Ruth Miskin describes the confusion surrounding reading for meaning in this article.

<http://www.rrf.org.uk/54%20Comprehending%20Decoding.htm>

“A child who finds reading difficult does not ask, “What does this word mean?” He asks, “What is this word?”

The sad fact is that even though all the research points in one direction, that the teaching of reading should be sound based not meaning based for beginner readers, the powers-that-be will not shift from their position. It is an ingrained belief system. Phonics must be just part of a balanced approach. Those who advocate phonics first and fast are extremist phonics phundamentalists. This view holds sway in all the main university education departments, the vast majority of Initial Teacher Training institutions, the education media, organisations such as the UKLA, United Kingdom Literacy Association, NATE, the National Association for the Teaching of English, the DfES, the hierarchy of the PNS, Primary National Strategy and sadly the executives of all the main teacher unions.

This stance has nothing to do with logic or reason. In most cases it is everything to do with a view of how children should be educated, by the discovery/constructivist approach, facilitating, not teaching. Children must be allowed to develop at their own pace, to develop a love of books, to make/create their own meaning from the text, and because all children are different, there can be no one method which suits all children, so teachers must mix and match strategies to suit the child.

The searchlights and learning styles, a marriage made in VAK heaven! (that's visual, auditory, kinaesthetic to the uninitiated!) It is a belief system that is impossible to shake. Unless, that is, as a teacher, you get to go and actually visit a school where a synthetic phonics programme is being used systematically, led by the HT with the whole school behind it. When that teacher has finished a morning of seeing every child succeeding with learning to read, and enjoying doing so, there is no going back.

Synthetic phonics schools are a grass roots phenomenon. They ignore the powers that be, and get on with the job of teaching little children to read; boys and girls, EAL and monolingual, "dyslexic" and deprived. They do so in spite of all the vitriol hurled in their direction.

Currently, the most vehement opponents of synthetic phonics are the Early Years lobbyists. Their belief system has it that teaching 5 year olds to read is detrimental to their physical and mental well-being. They quote Finland where children do not begin "formal teaching" until much later and learn to read easily to bolster their case. Any visitor to the TES Early Years message board will find complete confusion as to what should be being taught and when. Overlay that with 117 tick boxes for assessment and you can see why teachers have had enough and don't know who to trust.

But there is nothing "formal" about synthetic phonics teaching. It is multi-sensory and fun and can be achieved in 30 minutes a day, leaving several hours to be filled by child-initiated play, sand, water, painting, outdoor play, you name it.

And our alphabetic system is not transparent as it is in Finland, where there is only one way to spell each sound in the main. Our code needs to be introduced carefully from the simple to the more complex by teachers who understand it themselves. Left until 6, our children will already have developed look and stare strategies, along with guessing and be well on the way to making a dog's dinner of understanding the code.

By the time this article appears, the final version of the Rose Report will be with us. Synthetic phonics fast and first will feature. The backlash will be in full swing. The arguments will be very familiar. Teachers will continue to be weary and wary.

Steve Sinnott says “above all teachers must be involved in the debate on what works in the teaching of reading.” Yet he set the parameters for that debate by aligning himself and the biggest teachers’ union with the mixed methods status quo and the current belief system.

“The last thing teachers want is a massive upheaval as a result of the promotion of a single fashionable technique. They know that to teach reading effectively there must be a range of strategies to hand.”

We are currently failing 25 to 30% of our children by adhering to the status quo and the current belief system. We are currently failing the teaching profession by failing to hold a proper debate, failing to pay attention to decades of research, and failing to go and look at what is possible when the correct teaching methodology is used. We are in denial.

The next big thing where tons of government dosh is about to be expended is “personalised learning.” This will enable schools to identify children with particular needs and put in place programmes to support them. Millions will be spent.

What if, just for once, the money and the training went on something really worthwhile? Training all teachers to understand the nature of our alphabetic code and how to teach this to little children, and in the case of remedial departments in secondary schools, big children.

How transformed would teachers lives be by the fact that all the kids in their class can read. Differentiation? Piece of cake! IEPs? History! The creative curriculum? A distinct possibility! Children with severe behaviour problems caused by low self-esteem following reading failure? Nowhere to be found!

OK, I’m hamming it up a bit! What I hope is that teachers who read this article DO follow up the references and really get into the debate surrounding synthetic phonics. If you get the chance, go and visit a synthetic phonics school. Look at the materials. Visit the websites. Question the status quo.

<http://www.syntheticphonics.com>

<http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com>

<http://www.jollylearning.co.uk>

<http://www.rtf.org.uk>

<http://www.dyslexics.org.uk>

It’s not trendy, not a magic bullet, not cruelty to young children, not formal, not right-wing. Once you’re trained in it, it’s not difficult to teach.

We can, as a profession, teach all our children to read. It is shameful that the belief system of the powers-that-be is unshakeable and is preventing this from happening. We must inform ourselves, go round them and develop a truly grassroots revolution in our primary schools. Sound sense indeed.

