

Response to Sue Vermes's paper - 'What is Synthetic Phonics?'

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I have just read Sue Vermes's article, 'What is Synthetic phonics?' and was very interested in her view of *The Rose Report*. We are quite perturbed by the pendulum swing from 'whole-language' to 'synthetic phonics', which will surely result in 'baby out with the bathwater!'

Here in Belfast, we have developed *Linguistic Phonics* which has been independently researched by Stranmillis College of Education. Our work has developed within the context of a revised curriculum that places a significant emphasis on the development of oral language in the foundation stage.

During the first year at school (4-5 years of age) the emphasis is on developing attention and listening, phonological awareness and oral language. Children are introduced to print through environmental experiences and shared reading of quality texts. Teachers model specific phonetic skills from the beginning, perhaps sounding out some words as they write them, but no explicit teaching of letter-sound relationships begins until children have begun to develop phonemic awareness. The early stages of *Linguistic Phonics* have been jointly developed with speech and language therapists, who work as part of our literacy team. While some would debate the value of developing phonemic awareness before print, there is no debate about its value in terms of oral language development. This is time well spent!

Children also develop comprehension skills through shared book experiences and learn early 'reading behaviour' as they handle books for themselves. If they are ready, they are introduced to sound-letter relationships and the synthetic skills of segmenting, blending and phoneme manipulation more formally before the end of the year – there is, however, no pressure to do so. Initially, we didn't begin to introduce c-v-c correspondence in Year 1. However, teachers felt that many children were ready, following a strong focus on phonological awareness. We therefore built in a gradual introduction. During short, whole-class sessions, teachers draw words out of shared text and help the children to 'work out' how each sound is represented by letters. Some children pick this up easily but others will not be ready until their second year at school. They are simply introduced to the concept that sounds are represented by letters.

In Year 2, (5-6 years), children formally 'crack the print code', discovering how sounds are represented by letters and letter-combinations. A key factor in the methodology is that the starting point is speech. Children listen to the sounds they say and then learn how each of these is represented. In other words, unlike synthetic phonics, children are not taught sounds: they are taught to identify them in their own spoken language. The technique involves investigation more than rote learning. The pace is very fast. By the end of the year, they will have 'discovered' that the same sound can be represented in different ways and that the same spelling may represent different sounds.

Central to the methodology is a firm belief that reading is a problem-solving activity and that children must be thinking about meaning from the beginning. To deal with the complexities of English, a reader needs to be able to make decisions at speed: is the 'ea' in 'break' 'ay' or 'ee' (or something else completely depending on accent)? For this reason, while we agree with the principles of the simplified model of reading in *The Rose Report*, and the fact that the *Searchlights Model* has been inappropriately applied, we have concerns about the definition of 'phonics first' promoted by exponents of synthetic phonics. From a *Linguistic Phonics* perspective, 'phonics first' means that it is the first tool out of the box. The reader establishes a pronunciation of a word by applying the most likely sound-symbol correspondences but immediately re-adjusts this if meaning is not found, applying other phonetic alternatives. The more conscious a reader is of context, the more automatic this process becomes. Over-simplifying the process to simply blending sounds, underestimates the complexities of reading.

The notion that children develop a 'self-teaching' mechanism that allows them to crack the code is certainly true for many readers. We do believe that successful readers are able to infer complex rules, adjusting what they know in light of new 'discoveries'. However, a significant number of children have difficulty in doing so independently. The key lies not in teaching children by rote, but in teaching them how to make connections; how to solve problems when they encounter the unknown, i.e. how to infer complex rules. In *Linguistic Phonics*, rather than teaching children explicit rules about English, we present them with a series of experiences that systematically let them 'discover' them. When they see a pattern emerging and are applying it in their reading and writing, we throw in an 'exception' that makes them re-think. Much of the fun in our approach is in seeking the unexpected and rising to the challenges English presents!

We are strongly opposed to the notion of holding back books until children can read and then only providing what are fashionably being called 'decodable books' – surely any book is decodable if you know the code!! We believe that children should experience a wide-range of texts from the beginning. Before they are able to decode independently they are learning book-handling skills and enjoying

stories with supportive adults. Gradually, as they begin to acquire basic code knowledge, starting with c-v-c words, they are encouraged to decode these in the context of real books. Adult readers share the reading of the text, modelling fluency and expression and encouraging discussion about the story. Yes, some children will begin to identify whole-words in familiar contexts but those that do are already making connections and can use this knowledge to help break the code quicker. They are not actively encouraged to learn whole-words on sight, unless the word is phonetically un-decodable (e.g. 'one' or 'two') but it seems nonsensical to pretend that the logo-graphic stage does not exist! Show me a 3-year old who cannot spot MacDonalds or 'free inside' on a cereal packet!

Our methodology is possibly not as fast as some synthetic approaches in that we do not begin immediately on entry to school – but what is the rush? Children do learn to crack the print code systematically and at speed when they formally begin. They are also focussed on meaning from the beginning and are developing fundamental life-skills of problem-solving and decision-making.

ⁱ Children entering Year 1 in September, must have turned 4 before the 1st of July. This means that while some children may not be 5-years until the end of Year 1, others will be almost 6-years old