

RESPONSE TO DOMINIC WYSE: PLAYING – THE READING GAME AND PHONICS

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I have read Dominic Wyse's reflections on the new campaign for synthetic phonics with interest and I have thought about it a great deal. (I've also read TACTYC's response to the Rose enquiry into the teaching of phonics.) I do applaud Dominic's scholarly review of the research evidence that has been ignored and his focus on the lack of rigorous scrutiny of the Clackmannanshire project. Like many colleagues I have also been appalled by the unduly biased nature of the evidence heard by the Education Select Committee.

However, none of this can come as a surprise to seasoned early years practitioners whose emphasis is on life chances and individual potential. Sadly, this kind of emancipatory literacy is not under discussion. Politicians, many ambitious individuals, and a great swathe of public opinion, believe that literacy is simple and easy to drill – if only teachers would get on with it! So, perhaps it is unwise and politically naive to cite just one example of a group of young children with a student who were apparently being cut off from word recognition games. And perhaps the mentor felt somewhat 'put on the spot' and was overly defensive. Perhaps the emphasis was, quite rightly, on the tale and not on close encounters with print on that occasion.

As one who writes frequently about exciting encounters with print, I am sad to say that the influence of the National Literacy Strategy has reduced many big book sessions in reception classes to children held captive on the mat while the practitioner/teacher slaughters the story in the interests of identifying every mark – from authorial name to ISBN!

Of course, phonics teaching of the kind that is undoubtedly going to be foisted on the early years (post the Rose consultation) is a threat to learning. (I refuse to distinguish learning from play-based learning as it is my understanding that young children learn by internalising actions and symbolising their thinking in a variety of ways – some highly playful!) It is a major threat to the literature, books and environmental print explorations that make human sense of becoming literate in the early and primary years. It is so because the approach now being steam-rolled through, explicitly avoids books in order to drill – and kill?! For this reason alone, it is a threat to the high expectations we should have for all the children we live with and teach.

As an English (subject) teacher, a linguist and a bit of an expert on the early years, I cannot imagine anything worse for the early years. It may well be that any plans to unite the early years and primary phases will only ensure that the dreary top-down curriculum will settle even more heavily on very young children and their educators. Perhaps the moves to link the Birth-to-Three and Foundation Stage now being explored by Lesley Staggs and her team are the best hope we have for the immediate future.