

Response to Dr. Dominic Wyse's paper: 'Playing – the Reading Game and Phonics'

I have been teaching in the early years since 1969 and have worked through the introduction of many different theories on the teaching of reading from the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA) to the National Literacy Strategy. Whenever a new idea is developed educational consultants assure us that it is the definitive method and will result in success for all children.

In my experience children learn in a variety of ways. Some children are natural readers and they would be frustrated by the continual emphasis on the phonic structure of the word. Some children learn in the 'look and say' style and can read simple texts with some competence before they can distinguish the separate phonic elements. Some children can quickly learn phonics and use them effectively to support their reading but they also need to use contextual clues for sense of meaning because our language is not a phonetically consistent language.

Of one thing I am sure however: pushing children to learn to read before the pathways in the brain are established only results in them 'learning to fail'. They are unable to make sense of the text and so they learn that reading is beyond their understanding and a barrier against future learning is built. Children need confidence in their abilities before they can progress and become fluent readers.

It is my understanding of Synthetic Phonics that it has most impact for the least able 20% so it may be that it allows those children to develop the required confidence. However, it would require the provision of phonetically consistent texts to achieve this and such texts are rarely exciting to read. To me the most important part of NLS was the introduction of shared reading, which enables the teacher to engage the children in how to approach a text to develop an enthusiasm for reading. Wanting to read is also an important part in the development of competent readers. I do not dismiss Synthetic Phonics. It probably does have a place but I feel it needs to be a part of a teacher's practice and not the only strategy. It could also be used as an intervention strategy for those children who need extra support.

I watched a television programme about a school that had introduced Synthetic Phonics and it was presented in an impressive way. The school had brought in consultants to teach the children in the initial stages. These were highly dedicated young people with lots of energy who had no other areas of the curriculum to cover. They engaged the children in a very theatrical and energetic way. They were in fact like a show that had been brought in to supply an educational entertainment. I wonder if a teacher could sustain that level of commitment day after day, year in, year out. I also wonder if it would be appropriate for all teachers. We are now asked to consider the different learning styles of children but teachers have different personalities and teaching styles also. Following this initial phase at the featured school the consultants taught the teachers how to deliver the phonics programme. I would like to see the school one or more years on to see if the level of commitment was still as high and the progress of the children still improving.

The television programme depicted the ideal scenario. Synthetic Phonics exploded into that school and caught the children's attention. That could not be replicated across the country. Schools could not afford it and there are not enough consultants to make it a reality. Consequently it will filter into schools and I doubt that the impact will be great in those circumstances.

I am concerned that Educational Policy is again being dictated by a knee jerk reaction to a media presentation. Education is an easy target for politicians because most voters have some school age relative. David Cameron used the introduction of Synthetic Phonics into all schools as an election tool in his recent campaign for the Conservative Leadership. Tony Blair

has reacted by instructing Ruth Kelly to make her recent announcement. School children have suffered from the introduction of many initiatives that have not been properly piloted.

The NLS was innovative when it was introduced and gave structure to the teaching of reading and writing. Improvements in attainment followed but that improvement has now reached a plateau and may be showing signs of decline. This may be because children have now reached their academic level and cannot improve further. (In spite of the present Government abandoning 'average' in favour of 'expected standard' it is not possible for all children to reach that standard at age 11.) However another reason may be that the children have become bored with the formulaic structure of the lessons. We are now seeing children who have been taught only by this method leaving the primary school. Children respond well to new and exciting teaching. I believe that is why many initiatives succeed well during pilots and in the first few years of introduction. But once they become the norm the children lose interest and enthusiasm. Creative teachers also enjoy trying new methods but they too can become stale when teaching the same lessons in the same way over and over.

For all the above reasons I hope that the introduction of synthetic phonics will proceed slowly and quietly. Let us assess it and assimilate it thoroughly before proclaiming it as the cure-all for every reading failure. Let us keep it out of the media spotlight until we know what impact it will really have. Let us not ignore the individuality of children and teachers. Let us behave in an open minded and professional manner but let us use our professional judgement and not be dictated to once again.

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