

# Rose Tinted Spectacles

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Synthetic Phonics, Research Evidence and the Teaching of Reading

Dr Dominic Wyse

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# Rose's Conclusions

“The case for *systematic* phonic work is therefore overwhelming and much strengthened by the principles underpinning a *synthetic* phonic approach, the key features of which are to teach beginner readers:

- ◆ grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- ◆ to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word, to read it
- ◆ to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- ◆ that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.”

(Rose, 2005: 11)

# Rose's Remit

47. The review's remit requires a consideration of "synthetic" phonics in particular ... through examination of the available evidence and engagement with the teaching profession and education experts. Having followed those directions, and *notwithstanding the uncertainty of research*, there is much convincing evidence to show from the practice observed that ... synthetic phonics ... offers the *vast majority* of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers ... (p. 19) [italics added].

# A Move to Decontextualised Teaching?

“Part 1 of this overview explained that schools and settings should put in place a systematic, discrete programme as the key means for teaching high-quality phonic work. Shared and guided reading sessions should not be used to replace discrete phonics teaching but they can provide opportunities to reinforce children’s developing phonic knowledge and skills, in the context of achieving the ultimate goal of the sessions, which is the development of comprehension.” (guidance to support PNS literacy teaching)

- Shared read clearly separated from phonics teaching

# A Move to Decontextualised Teaching?

If the purpose of the shared session is to encourage children to apply acquired phonic skills, then their attention should be focused on decoding words rather than the use of unreliable strategies such as looking at the illustrations, rereading the sentence, saying the first sound or guessing what might 'fit'. Although these strategies might result in intelligent guesses, none of them is sufficiently reliable and they can hinder the acquisition and application of phonic knowledge and skills, prolonging the word recognition process and lessening children's overall understanding.

# A Move to Decontextualised Teaching

## The first and fourth steps in the government's phonics teaching sequence

- **Introducing grapheme–phoneme correspondences**  
Children should be taught the 26 letters of the alphabet and a sound for each letter. (Strictly speaking, the sounds that we associate with the letters 'q' and 'x' are each two sounds: /kw/ for 'q(u)' and /ks/ or /gz/ (as in 'fox' and 'exam') for 'x'. For the purpose of teaching beginners, however, it is sensible to treat each of these as a single sound.)
- Sounds should be produced quickly in response to letters, and letters should be pointed to or written quickly in response to sounds. The reversible nature of decoding for reading and encoding for spelling should be reinforced from the earliest stages.

# What Do We Mean By Reading?

- Rose offers no definition of reading  
“Reading is the process of *understanding* speech written down. The goal is to gain access to *meaning*.” (Ziegler and Goswami, 2005: 1)



# What is the Evidence?

Inspection Evidence in 1990:

- 120 primary schools.
- “The teaching and learning of reading were observed in 470 classes and over 2,000 children read aloud to HMI ... particular attention was paid to the children’s ability to read fluently, accurately and with understanding.” (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI), 1990, p. 1)
- It was concluded that: “phonic skills were taught almost universally and usually to beneficial effect” (p. 2) and that “Successful teachers of reading and the majority of schools used a mix of methods each reinforcing the other as the children’s reading developed” (p.15).

# Inspection Evidence

Inspection Evidence in 2005:

HMI therefore visited schools representative of best practice in both approaches: 10 proposed by the Primary National Strategy and 10 proposed by experienced advocates of other phonics programmes; almost all of these were commercial programmes. (p. 66)

# Inspection Evidence

During the visits HMI:

- discussed approaches to phonic work with senior staff
- observed the teaching of phonics, mainly in the Foundation Stage and Year 1
- listened to 55 pupils in Year 1 reading individually.

It was concluded that: High quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the review should be taught discretely. The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode (to read) and encode (to write/spell) print. (p. 70)

# Clackmananshire

- Just one study (Four and a half pages in Rose report) - The Clackmannanshire Study  
“Despite some criticisms of its research methodology, very substantial gains in pupils’ learning are evident in this study.” (p23)
- In the only peer-reviewed paper from the study:  
“It is concluded that synthetic phonics was a more effective approach to teaching reading, spelling and phonemic awareness than analytic phonics” (Johnson and Watson, 2004 p351).

# Johnson and Watson (2004)

- Controls for children's levels of prior attainment and development lacked rigour
- The Socioeconomic backgrounds of the children were not adequately assessed
- Very little information was given about the schools: e.g. their effectiveness
- The experience and effectiveness of the people implementing the programmes was not adequately controlled
- The research was not a valid comparison of the teaching methods of synthetic phonics versus analytic phonics because the different groups were taught different amounts. If you teach children more they will learn more

# Johnson and Watson (2004)

Comprehension is a key point

- “On the test of reading comprehension ... there was no significant difference between groups” (Johnson and Watson, 2004: 339 “Experiment 1”). This is not accounted for in final report
- No test for comprehension in experiment 2
- The final Clackmananshire report (Johnson and Watson, 2005). No comparison of the comprehension results for analytic vs. synthetic methods; instead:

“The boys were also 3 months ahead of the girls in reading comprehension in Primary 7, *but this was not statistically significant.*” (p. 67)

# Why only one study?

- Reading is one of the most researched areas of the primary curriculum
- Powerful evidence exists

# International Research Evidence

- Latest, from the DfES

“ ... No statistically significant difference in effectiveness was found between synthetic phonics instruction and analytic phonics instruction.” (Torgerson, Brooks and Hall, 2005: p.8)



# International Research Evidence

- American National Reading Panel (NRP)

“Does systematic phonics instruction help children learn to read more effectively than non systematic phonics instruction or instruction teaching no phonics? ...

... specific systematic phonics programs are all significantly more effective than non-phonics programs; however, they do not appear to differ significantly from each other in their effectiveness although more evidence is needed to verify the reliability of effect sizes for each program.” (NRP, 2-93)

# What does research tell us?

- 43 experimental and quasi experimental studies
- Systematic phonics leads to gains in word reading

# What does research tell us?

- a) Discrete phonics work was effective;
- b) Phonics instruction integrated with a broader literacy curriculum including text-level work such as reading of connected text was effective (Reading Recovery and modified Reading Recovery type programs were included in this group).
- c) Whole language teaching, including literature teaching, was effective;
- d) Whole word teaching was effective;
- e) A broader pedagogical and/or curriculum focus was effective;
- f) No significant overall gains were shown between experimental groups taught with phonics and control groups.

# What does research tell us?

- The vast majority of phonics approaches that were effective featured carefully integrated phonics teaching with text-level and other language work

# Two examples from the 43 studies

Berninger *et al.* (2003)

- Second-grade teachers in eight schools serving diverse student populations were asked to refer their poorest readers.
- A test battery covering vocabulary, word identification and word attack was then administered by project personnel in order to determine the final sample.
- Forty eight pairs of children were randomly assigned to four conditions: a) explicit and reflective word recognition; b) explicit and reflective reading comprehension; c) combined explicit word recognition and explicit reading comprehension, or d) treated control that only practised reading skills without any instruction.

# Berninger *et al.* (2003)

- Berninger et al. reported that c), the **combined** word recognition and reading comprehension treatment, was the most effective in increasing word decoding.
- Explicit instruction in the alphabetic principle in and out of word context and explicit language cueing at the word, sentence and text level to stimulate the text-based component of reading comprehension.
- The reading comprehension training used “highly engaging texts” and reflective discussion, including inferential thinking that went beyond what was stated in the text, drawing on background knowledge to achieve construction of meaning in a social context.

# Berninger *et al.* (2003)

“It is intriguing to consider why explicit comprehension instruction might facilitate learning to decode written words - the skill on which at-risk readers have the most difficulty. One explanation for the transfer from comprehension training to phonological decoding may be that explicit instruction in reading comprehension develops broad-based metalinguistic awareness (Mattingly, 1972) that may generalize across levels of language in the functional reading system.” (p. 112)

# Two examples from the 43 studies

## Freppon (1991)

- The study investigated the effect of teachers' theoretical orientations on the instructional settings that they provided in the classroom and any consequent effects on the reading development of their pupils.
- 24 first graders randomly selected from two skill-based and two literature-based classrooms in a middle class mid-western metropolitan area of moderate size.



# Freppon (1991)

- The skills-based teachers used round robin oral reading, with emphasis on reading correctly. They emphasized drill and practice of discrete skills and used a basal series of books. The program followed a traditional, systematic and sequenced curriculum in teaching phonics and vocabulary.
- The Literature-based teachers modeled reading, and related books to events in real life. They promoted children's approximations and emphasized reading for meaning.

# Freppon (1991)

The literature group differed from the skill group in their heightened metacognitive understandings, their knowledge and use of varied reading strategies, and their view of reading as a meaning-making, language-like process. Statistically significant differences were also found for the literature group in their more frequent rejection of passages of incomprehensible print ... Additionally, although the literature group attempted to sound out words less often, they achieved a success rate of correctly sounding out words of 53% compared to 32% by the skill group.” (p. 139)

# Changing the National Curriculum?

- Dearing 1993
- Rewrite 1999
- Phonics and Rose

# Changing the National Curriculum?

## Implications of the review

The Secretary of State has decided that the findings of the review should be secured through the revised framework for teaching literacy, which is being developed by the Primary National Strategy, and through changes to:

- the key stage 1 English programme of study for reading
- an early learning goal. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006, p.1)

# A Symbolic Change

Replace the following:

Reading strategies

1. To read with fluency, accuracy, understanding and enjoyment, pupils should be taught *to use a range of strategies to make sense of what they read*. (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1999, p.46) [italics added]

with this:

Reading Strategies

1. Pupils should be taught to read with fluency, accuracy, understanding and enjoyment. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006, p.2)

# Outcome of the Consultation

- 12 weeks from 8 May to 31 July
- Consultation leaflet sent to “Key Stage 1 Schools, foundation stage settings, and other key partners and stakeholders”
- 568 respondents (372 answered Q1; 362 answered Q2)
- 33 responses from foundation stage setting; 116 from school/setting with children aged 3-7
- 72% (261) (only 19 foundation stage settings) agreed with change to early learning goal
- More than 10% of all respondents expressed the need for contextualised teaching - contradictory?
- Is this a legitimate way to change a statutory document?

# Conclusions

- The teaching of reading has once again become inappropriately politicised
- The Rose Report's main conclusion is not supported by evidence and is wrong.
- An inadequate consultation process has been used to legitimate change
- Phonics resources are to be 'approved' by government
- Work politically and professionally to change this direction in policy



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