

Playing - the Reading Game and Phonics

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Introduction

I recently visited a student on placement in a well-regarded nursery school. The outdoor spaces were inspiring, with pragmatic use of materials like astro-turf combining with creative touches like the herb garden or objects buried in the concrete of the maze-like footpaths: a bicycle wheel, a fossil and many more. The expertise in provision for children with special needs was enhanced with multi-sensory resources such as cradles, ball pools, and a stimulating light-effect room. The activity that the student had planned was based on the reading of a traditional story with a group of 6 children. Puppets and props were used to good affect. But as I was watching I began to wonder whether the student would draw the children's attention to the print in addition to the beneficial interaction that she was encouraging through the pictures.

Once the activity was finished I asked if I could try something. I felt sure that some of the children might respond to encouragement to look at the print but I was aware that this might be difficult with a group of children who I had never met before. I asked them if they could read the word 'Goldilocks'. They were a little unsure so I pointed it out on the front cover. Then I asked them if they could find the word on the other pages. Some had a try by guessing, but one boy was able to recognise the word each time that it appeared.

What are the issues?

In conversation with the student's mentor I described this experience and what I was trying to achieve but encountered some resistance to the merits of focusing on print. The mentor hinted that it was questionable to encourage formal teaching like this because developmentally the children needed other experiences. Her philosophy was that child-initiated play within a stimulating teacher-structured environment was the most effective way for the children to learn. While I agree that there is great value in such play, I also

believe that a practical manifestation of any teacher's high expectations is reflected in them frequently challenging learners to the point at which they intimate that they have reached the true limit of their current understanding. It is only at that point that one really knows the extent of possible learning and teaching.

Discussion

I describe this anecdote because it usefully encapsulates various issues in relation to the early years that have occupied my mind. We are currently witnessing the latest manifestation of the phonics wars. The recent report from the Education Select Committee has led to a flurry of interest in synthetic phonics. Unfortunately the Committee was unduly influenced by people who were already committed to synthetic phonics. For example on the 15th November, 2004, the Reading Reform Foundation gave evidence. Then on 7th February, 2005, Sue Lloyd (the author of *Jolly Phonics*) Ruth Miskin (the headteacher who featured in an OfSTED NLS video – and advocate of another synthetic phonics programme), and Rhona Johnston (one of the authors of a Clackmannanshire study which looked at synthetic phonics teaching) gave evidence. The first question to be asked is why were these people invited to give evidence and not others with a more critical view of phonics teaching? What about authors of reading programmes that have been just as successful as Jolly Phonics or the thousands of other headteachers who have been successful with the teaching of reading without systematic phonics. Why wasn't a single academic with a main specialism in education and the teaching of English, rather than in psychology, invited to contribute, particularly in view of the fact that the issue at hand is about teaching and learning? The result was an absolute lack of proper critical attention to this important issue.

Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson have recently published a report of some research that they did in Clackmannanshire which the committee was 'extremely interested to see'. Johnson and Watson claim that 'the synthetic phonics approach, as part of the reading curriculum, is more effective than the analytic phonics approach' (p.9). Synthetic phonics usually involves teaching pupils to convert letters (graphemes) into sounds (phonemes) and then to blend the sounds to form recognizable words. Analytic phonics

usually involves analysing larger units as well as the letters in known words in order to understand how the phonemes are represented. The children are taught to use this knowledge to read other words. The main problem is that Johnston and Watson's study has not, as yet, been published in a peer-reviewed research journal. This means that it has not been scrutinised by leaders in the field to determine whether the methods are sound and the findings valid. If it had, then the referees would probably have questioned why the review of other research, in the report's introduction, is rather superficial, and why it is inaccurate in its claims about the impact of child-centred education.

When I read Johnston's and Watson's report, I was struck by a number of variables that did not seem to be adequately controlled and/or explained, any of which might invalidate the conclusions. The natural abilities of the children; the experience and effectiveness of the different teachers delivering the programmes; the class sizes; the children's individual socio-economic backgrounds; the lack of specific details about the different programmes; the lack of assessment of the children's ability to understand text in normal situations as a result of the intervention; how the children's motivation for reading changed throughout the research not just at the end. These and other issues might have been raised if other researchers had been invited to critique the evidence.

The Committee concluded that we need more research to look at the effectiveness of synthetic phonics and analytic phonics. Perhaps it would be better if the evidence that has already been published was properly scrutinised. Dr Morag Stuart, giving evidence as another witness to the Committee, mentioned the American Reading Panel report. What she didn't emphasise was that having reviewed hundreds of studies, the American Reading Panel found that synthetic phonics was no better than other phonics approaches. Rather more significantly, in a recent article Dr. Stuart comments that 'after more than thirty years of research effort, no adequate test has yet been made of the hypothesis that phoneme awareness actually does influence the development of reading'. This is an accurate view but one that did not feature in the Select Committee report.

My observations about synthetic phonics could be interpreted as a rationale for resistance to the introduction of formal reading programmes in the early years. If so, this view might resonate with the views of the mentor that I described at the beginning of the article. However, I want to complicate things a little further. In the 1970s, Margaret Clarke carried out her seminal research documenting children who learned to read before they started school. Nearly 20 years later Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) carried out a similar study. Although Stainthorp and Hughes chose to emphasise phonological knowledge in their discussion, both studies revealed that the children benefited from richly literate home environments and were not given systematic phonics programmes. Many teachers have experienced children in nursery and reception classes who are able to demonstrate one-to-one correspondence between spoken and printed words when reading simple texts. My main point is that many children *are* ready for a focus on print and text and we do them a disservice if we resist this on the basis that this could be construed as too formal and/or not play-based learning. It also means that the automatic drilling of all children on any kind of phonics programme is inappropriate. Children who can already read do not need a phonics programme; their reading should be developed in other ways. This necessitates a differentiated approach in early years classrooms where all children will benefit from an emphasis on the sharing of high quality texts but some will be ready for a more direct focus on print and text as soon as they enter the setting.

Conclusion

Although there are continuing disagreements about specific ways to support children's literacy, there is one area where there is pretty much universal agreement, even between synthetic phonics advocates on one side and critics of phonics approaches on the other. The NLS Framework for Teaching is inadequate and therefore, I would argue, must be abolished. I have argued for critical scrutiny of the NLS since 2000 (Wyse and Jones 2001; Wyse 2000; 2001; and particularly in Wyse 2003); Stainthorp and Hughes questioned the benefits in 1999; the synthetic phonics researchers suggest that the NLS does not represent best practice; even OfSTED and the Select Committee have finally argued for a critical review. When will we see evidence of real progress towards more appropriate curricula for the early and primary years?

Questions to set you thinking – and responding!

1. Is phonics teaching a threat to play-based learning?
2. Are expectations about the capabilities of early years children high enough?
3. When will there be a curriculum for the early and primary years that unites both phases?
4. When will we see the end of the NLS?

Why not have YOUR say on synthetic phonics now? Please send your responses urgently to j.moyles@ntlworld.com

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