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TEACHING EARLY READING & PHONICS

Creative Approaches to Early Literacy

2ND EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

Sensible approaches
to teaching and reading

In this chapter, we aim to:

- provide the context for the development of teaching early reading and phonics in the UK

- draw together research and practice in the teaching of reading

- introduce reading as a complex, social and cultural activity

- claim that a broad and diverse range of children's early experiences must be acknowledged, celebrated and used as a foundation for learning and reading

> In today's debates about teaching children to read can 'wisdom prevail over nonsense, truth over falsehood'? (Goodman, 2014: 35)

In England, and for at least half a century, politics has wielded an inordinately heavy influence on the details of the policy and practice of the teaching of English in all its forms (Hall, 2004). More, politicians have consistently colonised the teaching of reading, infusing the discourse with reference to 'common sense' (Chew, 2006: 119), succumbing to powerful lobby groups (Wray, 2006; Barrs and Meek Spencer, 2007; Clark, 2014b) and excluding reference to rigorous research evidence (Wyse and Styles, 2007; Ellis and Moss, 2014). This has resulted in a very detailed statutory requirement that children's attention should be focused on phonics instruction in the early years, and that fidelity to a systematic, synthetics phonics approach, 'first, fast and only', should persist (Rose, 2006; Ofsted, 2010, 2015). To determine that practice does not sway from this single focus, synthetic phonics is now embedded in statutory documentation (DfE, 2014) and is a major focus of the regulatory body, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), in inspections. Additionally, a new phonics screening check, based on this approach and including 'non-words', was introduced in 2012 for all children at the end of Year 1, their first year in the primary sector. In 2015, Nick Gibb, the Minister for Schools, made a substantial claim in relation to the impact of this phonics screening check:

In 2012, 58% of pupils taking the check met the national standard. In 2013, it was 69% and by 2014, the proportion of pupils meeting the standard had risen to 74%: equivalent to 102,000 more 6-year-old children on track to read more effectively.

One hundred and twenty thousand more children are now on track to become excellent readers as a result of the government's focus on phonics, vindicating reforms to transform the way young people learn to read.

For too long, thousands of young people have been allowed to fall behind in reading. This government's drive to eliminate illiteracy is putting a stop to that. (Gibb, 2015)

Various critical responses have been made to the very many claims of this kind from the DfE, including, for example, that: the early test results were characterised by children attempting to make words out of 'non-words' and therefore failing; teachers are now able to train children not to attempt to make sense of individual words; it is possible (for parents and teachers) to train children to pass a test requiring the recitation of a list of words; reciting words is not reading; there is no evidence of children sustaining this and translating it into reading connected text as claimed (see, for example: NCB, 2011; Ellis and Moss, 2014; Goodman, 2014).

In public statements, media outputs and conference presentations, government ministers' statements are prone either to conflate reading with decoding using synthetic phonics or to assume, without citing reliable evidence, that if children are trained to become proficient decoders of print, then other skills involved in learning to read will automatically follow, claiming for example that: 'with success in the basics of decoding words, pupils will be able to move on to reading with increased fluency and speed, which will enable them to develop a love of reading for pleasure and the habit of reading for pleasure' (Gibb, 2015).

In order to further ensure that the government's phonics agenda is put into practice, no-notice Ofsted inspections for Faculties of Education in Universities have also been introduced, with inspectors required to evaluate the extent to which teacher trainees are able to: 'teach early reading and demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics, communication and language development' (Ofsted 2014:32).

Failure to meet these requirements can have draconian consequences and, as Ellis and Moss have discovered, 'may ultimately result in course funding being withdrawn' (2014: 242). They claim that all universities now have to provide: 'a minimum of 90 hours teaching the government-mandated approach to phonics and faculties who introduce student teachers to other approaches have received letters from the Department of Education reminding them of government policy' (ibid.). It seems that, in England, Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in university faculties, local authorities, schools and individual teachers are all being assessed and held accountable for the ability of children who are six years old to decode a particular set of words and non-words when tested. The single-minded commitment to this approach has been further evidenced by the spending

incurred by the government in support of the implementation of synthetic phonics programmes in schools, with apparently over £22 million spent by the government on materials and £1.3 million on training – funding which was supplied to schools as match funding and so doubling the amount spent specifically on establishing this model of phonics – between 2011 and 2013 (Clark, 2014b).

This privileging of the development of phonic skills, and specifically training in synthetic phonics, above other decoding and reading skills, is troubling in view of the range of research which challenges this approach (see, for example: Goswami and Bryant 1990; Hall, 2003, 2006; Ziegler and Goswami, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Shannon, 2007; Strauss and Altwerger, 2007; Wyse and Styles, 2007; Dombey, 2010; Goodman, 2014; Teale et al., 2014). Also troubling is the amount of money and resources that recent governments seem to have been prepared to invest, while consulting only with an elite, domain-specific group of academics (Hall et al, 2014) and without the support of rigorous and trustworthy research. Perhaps most worrying of all is that discussion, debate and dissent appears to be forbidden in this new politics of early education, within universities and schools, as successive governments in England, and elsewhere, are putting 'all our literacy eggs into the phonics basket' (Rosen, 2010: 2).

A sensible review of how children become literate

It is, of course, teachers in their everyday practice who are confronted with the real dilemmas created by political statements and Ofsted inspections and reports. One classic example of this is the following statement in the DfE's argument for systematic, synthetic phonics as they make their additional supporting case for the use of simple decodable texts and resources:

> When children are at the initial stage of mastering decoding, it is vital that they practise their decoding through the use of reading books which are consistent with their phonic knowledge. A child who has yet to study the digraph 'ph' should not be asked to read a book about an 'elephant' – they are likely to find this confusing and frustrating. (DfE, 2015: 19)

In the above example, there is an authoritative statement that mastery of decoding is an essential prerequisite for a child to recognise and make meaning from a complex word such as 'elephant', a confident assertion frequently made and so quickly assumed into policy, and public, discourse. At first glance, this seems to be incontestable – common sense. However, the term 'decoding' is often mistakenly used synonymously with phonemic deconstruction of text, where individual words are broken down into single phonemic units of sound. But 'decoding' may be associated with a range of interpretative skills and children frequently 'decode' a text through the use of many strategies – including semantic and syntactic cues, as well as by using other bibliographic prompts. Such strategies, though, are 'forbidden' in Ofsted criteria as 'children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar or pictures' (Ofsted, 2010: 43), and

so the use of the term 'decoding' is somewhat misleading. It is commonly accepted that the English language is complex and irregular (for clear and rigorous explanations, see the detailed work of: Goswami 2002, 2005, 2007; and Dombey, 2011) and over-dependence on phonemic recognition alone will confuse children who are used to learning in an eclectic way, using all of their senses and the resources available to them. Of course, anecdotally, we could all cite examples of very young children who not only can recognise the print word 'elephant' in a recognisable context but can also distinguish and articulate the complex and phonically highly irregular names of dinosaurs – because they are interesting.

However, in order to further question this claim by Ofsted that children should not be given a book about elephants before mastering the digraph 'ph', this introduction and book moves away from the well-trodden path of critiquing the Clackmannanshire study, which the government has wholeheartedly endorsed, frequently quoted and used without question to support their agenda, and which has been rigorously analysed and robustly challenged by many (see, for example: Goswami, 2007; Wyse and Goswami, 2008; Ellis and Moss, 2014). Instead, the importance of children's early literacy induction, pre-school learning and early literacy learning needs to be robustly acknowledged and offered in support of how children can best be taught in their early years at school and how they can be motivated to become volitional readers, rather than functional decoders of print. Specifically, significant focus needs to be on the importance of naturally occurring, affective, sometimes informal conversational opportunities in order to develop language, increase vocabulary and support meaning-making; the importance of developing relationships with significant 'others' as they develop semiotic knowledge and symbolic understanding; and the part that environment and resources, including books, plays in early reading development. In this book, we stress the importance of teachers' knowledge about children, research and literacy development; the importance of talk and conversation; and the importance of places, environments and resources.

In the first two years of language acquisition, children progress rapidly from learning about one new word every week, to one a day and then to one word every one to two waking hours (Tomasello, 2003: 50). Tomasello also points out that there are frequently accelerations of word acquisition and these may occur when children are involved in a kind of oral close procedure – as they become familiar with more vocabulary, they are able to identify more new words in the flow of speech that they hear, which combines with their developing knowledge of the functions of language in communicative events. Thus, a social induction to language occurs, in the company of familiar contexts, resources and, importantly, significant adults. However, over-simplistic political reference to the number of words known by children as they begin school denies the potential richness of vocabulary and experience that children may have experienced and on which effective school literacy practices may effectively be constructed.

And elephants?

What can be learned from these early literacy learning experiences that will support and motivate children to learn to read and to read for pleasure? Who are the wise

'experts' in relation to how children learn to read? What counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts?

Early learning (from at least birth) really does matter and it seems more than ever important to acknowledge the huge amount of learning already undertaken by children in the first 48 months of their life, much of which is relevant to beginning reading. This includes: meaning construction; hearing, identifying, remembering and repeating patterned language; participating in the semiotic world; knowledge of symbolic referencing and an interest and enjoyment in books and stories, images and print text; and developing knowledge of the alphabetic symbols and some associated sounds. However, in order to give significance to this early learning, teachers, managers, policy-makers and politicians need to understand the complexity that is reading and the early development, learning and behaviours that contribute to children becoming readers – as:

> an excessive zealotry for one version of phonics ignores a fundamental truth about reading: that it is essentially to do with the construction of meaning in the reader's mind, on the basis of the evidence provided by marks on a page or a screen. (Richmond et al., 2015:7)

All of us who are involved directly or indirectly in children's experiences of learning to become readers need to acknowledge 'the hypothesis-forming, rule-testing, rule-adapting, memory-employing, meaning-making complex activity which is reading' (ibid.) and these skills are developing in children, and are learned in homes and families, from birth.

The importance of affect in relation to all learning and reading needs to be loudly acknowledged. This includes developing relationships with other readers (adults and peers); relationships with texts that matter; and the importance of positive interactions between companionable 'others', texts, the lived world and young developing readers. There is a mistaken belief that reading is an activity that must be undertaken individually, and tested individually. However, activities that involve 'communities of readers' (see, for example, Cremin et al., 2014) are engaging, affecting and frequently joyful, rather than silent and solitary, and for young developing readers this kind of ethos will be rewarding and will perpetuate reading as an enjoyable event, rather than as a school task to be overcome. Enjoyment of books, stories, texts of all kinds, needs to be a central part of the reading day for children from the beginning of their school lives, not a reward for overcoming phonic challenges in the early years.

Young children are already reading the word and the world before starting school. Young developing readers are encoding and decoding words and experiencing their effect (see for example, Grainger and Goouch, 1999; Price, 2000) as they hear how words sound and how they feel on their lips as they first learn to speak and then to read print texts. Acknowledgment that in the first four years of life babies and young children are absorbing and actively employing a number of complex messages about the world and about words – including how they are spoken and interpreted – seems essential in order to build on early literacy learning.

Children are also learning about their place in the world through each event, either as active and responsive meaning-makers or as passive recipients of fragmentary learning opportunities. Supporting very young children in drawing together words and worlds is embedded in the role of parents, caring adults and then their teachers, who need to know the children in their care. Without doubt, 'children are more likely to want to read material which connects to their personal interests, and may as a result discover what reading can offer them as individuals' (Cremin et al., 2014). They might be interested in elephants.

The importance of quality texts simply cannot be overestimated. The word 'elephant' may matter to a developing reader more than more functional and easy decodable printed words and may have a meaning beyond the image of the word in a book. We know that '[children] learn when it's inconvenient not to' ('Janette' in Lambirth, 2007a: 80). Although the government has been informed through its commissioned review that the 'language of written texts is accessed via the eyes rather than the ears' (Rose, 2006: appendix, n62), the work of neuroscience offers different explanations and offers clear information that is relevant to reading experiences, at all ages. For example, 'it is now well established that visual signals are not just relayed passively into the deep recesses of the brain and up into the cortex' (Greenfield, 2000:65). This seems to challenge any idea that there is a simple route from the printed word to a memory bank of words. It seems that our brains work in rather more complex ways and:

> instead there are also other connections that intercept this incoming stream of information, projecting it back down in the opposite direction to modify the way the incoming signal is relayed and thus how the world is perceived. We see the world in terms of what we have seen already. (ibid.: 65)

Thus, verbal and physical experience of the world – and words – matter in children's development as readers and semantic information, time for affective responses, evaluative opportunities and space for personal review have more impact on a child's reading than is acknowledged in contemporary policy (see, for example, Teale et al., 2014).

Reliance on a simplistic approach to reading phonically regular words, rather than creating opportunities for affective engagement with the processes of learning to read, may create disaffection with the whole process of reading. Teachers know that children learn at different paces, at different stages and through the use of different resources. One such colleague whooped with joy as she came into the staffroom at lunchtime, full of joy at the fact that one child had 'cracked it' – not with phonic programmes, nor with phonic games, nor with phonically regular texts but with *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* (Aardema, 1986). This is a story based on an African legend with strong rhyme and a strong pattern to help developing readers. Listen to just one part of this engaging text:

> These are the cows, all hungry and dry,
>
> Who mooed for the rain to fall from the sky;

> To green-up the grass, all brown and dead,
>
> That needed the rain from the cloud overhead –
>
> The big black cloud, all heavy with rain,
>
> That shadowed the ground on Kapiti Plain. (ibid.)

In this, there are few phonically regular worlds (e.g., 'big') but having heard the story, enjoyed it, shared it with others, drawn pictures about it, enjoyed role play from it, played with it – on this day, this five-year-old boy read it with accuracy, fluency, understanding, enjoyment and pride. What must he be learning from his persistence with this text in relation to the content, the richness of the vocabulary, the tune on the page, as well as the absolute sense of achievement in orchestrating the decoding of print and clear comprehension of the content? This text, like all good books, opened another world to him and motivated him towards new reading experiences and other worlds. This child's teacher was able to open a world to him, whether or not he had met the requisite phonemic instruction. Compare this with:

> The sheep is shut in the pen.
>
> The grass is green. The sun shines.
>
> We will let the sheep out now.
>
> We will grow if the sun shines.
>
> The sun is hot today. (SND, *c.* 1920)

It is on this kind of antiquated meaningless text that new 'decodable' books are being modelled (see, for example, *Floppy's Phonics* from the Oxford Reading Tree (Hunt, 2011) and *Bob Bug* from the Songbirds phonics titles from ORT (Donaldson, 2012)). Such texts are a far cry from the meaning-packed *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, with all its subdued references and the possibility of connections to be made and considered. The tune of its text, of course, will be familiar to young children from timeless nursery rhymes and the memorable, 'This is the House that Jack Built'. The teaching world is packed full of such anecdotes about the texts that seemed to provide just the hook that children needed. Margaret Meek, of course, constructed the seminal work *How Texts Teach what Readers Learn* (1988) decades ago in the knowledge that it is not teachers alone or programmes that make a difference but the human connection between reader and text and teacher that consistently provides the reading lesson.

The relationship between early reading and phonics

What seems to be important to remember is that phonics is not an end in itself, whether synthetic or any other kind of phonics. Further, reading is also not always an end in itself but often a beginning, a pathway to other worlds, other learning and affirmation or challenge to our own worlds. Neither can phonics be allowed to

be the beginning of learning to read. Many children receive reading lessons long before starting school in the form of shared texts that are written, told or read, and it has been estimated that some children may have received 6,000 stories before starting school (Barton, 1994). Thankfully, legislation cannot impinge on these reading lessons. These children will have a head start when they begin school with their knowledge of how stories work, patterns and tunes in stories, the relationship between illustration and print as well as some clear information about print drawn from reading and rereading favourite tales. The children with this kind of rich early literacy experience (Goouch, 2007) will mostly be able to withstand reductionist reading tuition when they start school, although some may become disaffected. Those children, however, who have not had the benefit of mediated early experiences in a range of literacy and reading practices before they start school in this current era of prescriptive practice will find their first reading lessons to be the recounting of sounds, rather than the joy of tuning into meaning in encounters with high-quality books and stories.

It is easy to make young children recount sounds, to chant together, to take part in phonics games, to copy letters on 'sound' worksheets. Young children are mostly compliant and eager to please. We are, though, as their reading teachers, completely unable to make children form connections, to make them understand, to make them learn to read. As Hall makes clear, 'accomplished reading teachers … see their learners as intentional beings and … see learning itself as a volitional process' (2006: 20). We cannot make children learn to read. We can, however, entice them, make reading a pleasurable experience, invite them into story worlds, create affective opportunities for children to participate in reading, provide space and resources for children to play with stories, join in with them in playing with the sounds of the stories, help them to find tunes and patterns in print, immerse them in the pleasurable sounds of our language – delicious onomatopoeic and alliterative examples are frequently found in good picture fiction (see, for example, the classic texts, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen and Oxenbury, 1993) and *Mr Gumpy's Motor Car* (Burningham, 1973), although there are also now many, many more). And within these writing, talking, listening and reading experiences, we can also help children to make sense of the alphabetic code.

Using phonics as a core method to teach reading is seductive as it appears simple and efficient, with letters and sounds to be ticked off by teachers when they have been memorised. In reality, reading is not simple and neither is learning sounds in our language (Goswami and Bryant, 1990; Goswami, 2007), and our preoccupation with efficiency and quick wins in reading is in contrast with the efficacy of the teaching in other nations and cultures where children at the age of four and five are not at school receiving reading instruction but are playing at home or in kindergartens. The results of this sound beginning to learning are clearly evident in international statistics (see Mullins et al., 2007).

Quick wins and efficiency, systematic approaches and incremental learning belong to the language of politics where short-term goals are important and easily measurable outcomes are the basis of popular headlines and sound bites. In classrooms, children make life slightly more complex as their learning progress is

often messy rather than systematically secure and learning happens over time, rather than as a single event – as children make connections with prior learning, often outside of school, and across contexts and subject barriers.

The government's phonics agenda not only denies the delicious possibility of encountering elephants in children's early reading experiences, but it may also be damaging to children's development with the increased likelihood of children becoming 'blinded by phonics' or disaffected, and then to assume that reading is not for them. Of course, crucially, how teachers are constructed in contemporary society in England is fundamental, whether as palimpsests (Bryan, 2004) to be inscribed and re-inscribed by successive governments or as trusted intellectual interpreters and creative mediators of political agendas and policy texts. If we are to consider what exactly we are affording children at school, then the question of who are their wise reading tutors and guides also needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced the context for this new edition of our book in a number of ways. We stated our aim, which is to provide a research-informed text for teachers that will also include ideas to connect theory with their practice. We made clear our view that the politics and policy context for the move towards synthetic phonics only practice is in danger of leading towards a damaging reductionist approach to the teaching of reading – described by Meek as 'a thinner gruel of educational nourishment' (1987: viii) – in its attempts to construct reading as simply being able 'to come to terms with the alphabetic principles if they are to learn to read and write' (Rose, 2006: 16).

We began to construct reading in this chapter as a complex, social and cultural activity, with lessons often learned in the first instance in multidimensional family and outside-school contexts and from a range of texts, including print texts. We also began in this chapter to construct learning as being a broader and more sophisticated activity than simply listening to instruction, and learners as volitional and sophisticated themselves in their abilities to draw information from a range of sources in a relatively short space of time and from a range of places in order to become readers at varying developmental stages by the time they have their first school encounters with literacy. We believe that schools can, and sometimes do, offer transformational education practices – through contact with elephants, tyrannosaurus or the rain on Kapiti Plain. In this chapter, 'elephants' can be seen as a metaphor for richness of literacy experience, following the interests of children, enabling diverse paths and sophisticated monitoring systems – rich food, rather than thin gruel!

In this book, we are writing for teachers who are not satisfied with, as Stannard describes it, 'the Stainthorpe and Stuart' model (2006: 121), but are looking instead for alternatives. Teachers generally are very compliant public servants, but above all, teachers work hard as they seek to help children to learn, and hopefully this book will help them to achieve this objective. Chapter 2, 'Beginning with babies', is new and is intended to provide a backdrop to school experience as it explores early

literacy beginnings. In Chapter 3, 'Critical contexts', the theoretical background to this book is fully and critically reviewed and includes an examination of contemporary policy texts. Chapter 4 is a discussion of 'The role of the teacher'. In this chapter, knowledge of teaching and the theoretical arguments relating to how teachers teach is illustrated by practical suggestions on how connections can be forged between theory and practice in principled classroom activities. In Chapter 5, 'Knowledge for reading', the knowledge required by children to ensure their development as readers is outlined and discussed. In this chapter, what children need to know, experience and understand is carefully presented with ways to embed important alphabetic information into real and meaningful activities and texts. An effective environment for reading is proposed in Chapter 6, 'Environments for reading', with ideas about what a print-rich environment could actually look like when presented in practical terms.

To follow this, in Chapter 7, 'Resources for reading', the kinds of resources that children need in order to experience a rich literacy curriculum and the kinds of high-quality texts required are described with the emphasis clearly on children's literature. 'Reading routines' is the focus of Chapter 8, in which we argue that there are a range of regular activities that are absolutely essential to support children's reading development. 'Talk, reading and writing', in Chapter 9, makes links between classroom activities involving talk, reading and writing and we suggest that the three modes of language are closely interconnected in effective literacy classrooms. In Chapter 10, 'Assessment of reading', we draw together ideas for creative and critical pedagogy and also address the important issue of assessment and how children's reading can most usefully be described and recorded. A summary is offered in Chapter 11, 'Conclusions: Principles and practice', and here we present what we believe to be non-negotiable principles of high quality practice in literacy education in primary schools. We claim in this final chapter that the approaches recommended and illustrated in this book will lift children's experience of learning to read and to be literate beyond contemporary politically and commercially motivated emphases, which threaten to limit professional creativity and integrity.

Further reading

David, T. (2007) 'What is early childhood for?', in K. Goouch and A. Lambirth (eds), *Understanding Phonics and the Teaching of Reading: Critical Perspectives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill.

Goodman, Y.M. (2014) 'Comments: Nu! … So! … Where do we go from here?', in K.S. Goodman, R.C. Calfee and Y.M. Goodman (eds), *Whose Knowledge Counts in Government Literacy Policies? Why Expertise Matters*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Hall, K. (2009) 'Literacy policy and policy literacy: A tale of phonics in early reading in England', in J. Soler, F. Fletcher-Campbell and G. Reid (eds), *Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development: Issues and Concepts*. London: Sage.