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Literacy Learning in the Twenty-first Century: how much have we learnt?

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ABSTRACT Languages differ in the way that speech and meaning are represented in written form: in English, the correspondences are variable. Thus, in learning to read in English there is need for an approach that combines alphabetic decoding and a mastery of sight vocabulary. Teaching children to read should develop from an analysis of the skills and knowledge young children bring to the learning situation. When they start school, some children can already read with understanding, yet frequently their needs are overlooked. England is only one of the countries where evidence from research is being ignored, simplistic tests are driving the curriculum, available resources are being spent on commercial products linked to the tests and schools are being ranked by the percentage of children who pass such tests.

Learning to Be Literate in the Twenty-first Century

Kennedy, in *The Psychology of Reading* (1984), gives a brief history of the development of writing systems, with interesting illustrations from different cultures and through the ages. A study of the development of our alphabetic writing system is helpful in gaining insight into some of the early assumptions of young children as they come to grips with the conventions of written language. Their individual development may mirror in some aspects that development. For example, lower-case letters were a later development than capital letters and early alphabetic writing did not have spaces between words. This is discussed in the final chapter of my recent book, with examples from the young fluent readers I studied, from other young children's early attempts at writing and from the writing of older backward readers (Clark, 2016).

Seymour et al (2003) studied the foundations of literacy in European countries with more or less regular spelling, showing that in the majority of European countries children became accurate and fluent at the foundation level before the end of their first school year. The exceptions were those learning to

read in Portuguese, Danish, and particularly English. These findings did not appear to be related to the age of starting school.

Seymour points out:

> Languages differ in their phonological and morphological structures, and these aspects may influence the way in which literacy is acquired. Equally, the languages have different writing systems (orthographies) that vary in the way in which speech and meaning are represented and, indeed, in the consistency and logic of the relationship. (Seymour, 2013, pp. 441-442)

He cites Chinese and Japanese, Hebrew and Arabic in one group, and alphabetic scripts in which the letters represent the vowel and consonant phonemes in another. These latter he divides into shallow orthographies in which the relationship is coherent and consistent (such as Finnish) and deep orthographies 'in which the correspondences are variable, inconsistent, sometimes arbitrary, and subject to lexical and morphological influences (English, for example)' (p. 442). He argues that in shallow orthographies 'it seems natural to teach reading by synthetic phonic methods 'by which letters are decoded to sounds and then combined to form larger units such as syllables' (p. 442). In deep alphabetic orthographies, such as English, he argues for a 'combined method by which children learn basic alphabetic decoding procedures and at the same time master a "sight vocabulary" of familiar words' (p. 442). Goswami states that it is simpler for children learning to read in consistent orthographies such as Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Greek and German and they seem to acquire reading at a faster rate than children learning to read in inconsistent orthographies such as English (Goswami, 2013).

The issues highlighted by Seymour and Goswami make the level of discussions in England around learning to read appear simplistic when they fail to take account of the complexity of English orthography or of the fact that by 2011, at least half the world's children learn to read in their second language (Deacon & Cain, 2011).

In 2011 the European Commission set up an independent panel of experts from 11 countries to assess how to raise literacy levels. Among the recommendations of the Report of the European Working Party EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy: final report 2012 [1] is the need 'to ensure that all newly qualified teachers obtain a master's degree with competences in, for example, critical evaluation of literacy research', a far cry from current developments in policy in England, the USA, and now Australia.

Learning to Read and Write in English

When they start school, young children growing up in a literate environment are already forming hypotheses about the print around them. They interpret environmental print, watch television, may play computer games and can manipulate a mobile phone. Even in a class where no child can yet read there

will be a wide range of understanding of concepts of print and the critical features of written language. A few children enter school already reading silently and with understanding, while others need support in the form of a variety of experiences, including of print in a range of settings, to enable them to master language in this new and 'disembedded' medium. In *Spell It Out: the singular story of English spelling*, David Crystal (2012) traces the development in English towards the convention of a correct spelling for words, claiming that many of the features of English spelling were shaped because they were recommended by individual writers. Spelling, he claims, is a matter of internalising letter sequences in words, and the more opportunities children have to see these sequences the better.

The English language is not one where there is a one-to-one visual representation of all the sounds we speak. It is a more difficult code for young children to break than languages with a shallow orthography. Children need to appreciate the critical features of letters, words and punctuation. *I* and *a* are letters and words; *L* and *l* represent the same letter; the function of *!* and *?* differs from that of *I*; *2* and *two* are both numbers, but one is also a word. Direction takes on a new significance in writing: *D* and *d* are similar in ways that b, d and p are not. Some words are easy to represent in writing, such as *cat* and *dog*. Some of the commonest words in written English are not phonically regular, and may not be easily represented pictorially as they are not nouns, such as *the* and *said*. Some words are easy to pronounce, while for others the context determines how they are pronounced, such as *read*, *bow* and *wind*.

There are many purposes for which written language is the medium of communication. Stories have a continuous theme, an introduction, implicit rather than explicit connectedness, and resolution or ending. Non-fiction has a very different format from narrative text, requiring additional skills if children are to appreciate the implications of the layout – for example, columns, different sizes of font and diagrams contributing to the meaning. Each type of written language requires its own strategies and insights.

Insights from Research: why do politicians ignore the evidence?

In 2016 a revised edition of my book *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* was published. Most chapters were based on edited versions of previously published material, selected because of its continuing relevance, or because insights from the research had been ignored by policy-makers. For example, research such as *Young Fluent Readers*, my 1976 study of children who already read silently with understanding when they started school at five years of age, should lead us to challenge some statements made about the requirements for learning to read. Some problems faced by young children may indeed be because of the age at which they start to learn, and should not be generalised (see Clark, 2016, ch. 5). The impact of *politics* on literacy policy is the focus in Part IV of the book *Learning to Be Literate*, initially in England,

where in what has been claimed to be an 'evidence-based' policy in the years since 2006, synthetic phonics has become the required method of teaching reading, and a high-stakes phonics check introduced in 2012 has to be taken by all children in Year 1 (around 6 years of age) and retaken the following year by those who fail to reach the pass mark of 32 out of 40. I feel that rather than being, as claimed, an evidence-based policy it is a policy which has sought evidence to support it. The evidence I present is of more than local interest as in 2016 the federal government in Australia announced its intention to import the Phonics Screening Check from England, and already in New South Wales synthetic phonics is being adopted as the method of teaching reading (Clark, 2017a). The discussion is widened in chapter 18 to a consideration of 'Whose knowledge counts in government literacy policies and at what cost?', with evidence from two books critiquing government policies in the United States. The first, by R.L. Allington (2002), evaluates the evidence base for the National Reading Panel, one of the reports cited by the Department for Education in England as supporting its policy. The second, by K.S. Goodman, R.C. Calfee and Y.M. Goodman (2014), critiques developments not only in the United States, but also in England, Scotland, France and Germany. A disquieting picture is painted of the power wielded by large commercial organisations to influence government literacy policies, including in many developing countries, often falsely claiming a research basis for the policy.

The dangers of modifying a country's literacy policy following international surveys, even those as large scale and well planned as PIRLS and PISA, are considered in chapter 19 of *Learning to be Literate* (Clark, 2016), as politicians either preen themselves or impetuously make major changes in policy should their country's ranking appear to be falling. My focus in that chapter is on sampling issues rather than on the results of any particular survey. Clearly the concerns I expressed are not confined to PIRLS or to the interpretation of the results for the United Kingdom. Glass in 2008 analysed the claims of a crisis in American public education by politicians based on internal tests and international surveys. He claims that when fluctuations in scores from one international survey to the next are examined they reveal that the source of the inconsistencies arise from vagaries of how the tests were administered, the samples selected, non-response rates, the selection of replacement schools or other variables unrelated to the levels of attainment in the respective nations. In two recent articles, I have contrasted the responses in Scotland and Australia to concerns about the standard of literacy shown in international studies, which are so often used by opposition politicians to attack the government (Clark, 2017a,b).

Does it matter if some children cannot read at seven? Are they not reading because of a conscious policy to delay reading instruction and extend the period of oral communication, or are they failing in spite of intensive tuition? There is a place, and an important place, for assessment in the teaching of reading, provided it is diagnostic and leads to monitoring of progress and appropriate action. In a study by Suggate and others, the progress of children who started

to learn to read at five years of age was compared with others who started at seven and it was found that any difference had disappeared by the age 11 (Suggate et al, 2013).

Children and Beginning to Read

We seem in danger of failing to appreciate the characteristics which the child brings to the reading task. Readiness of the school for the child should be given as much attention as readiness of the child for the school. In my study of children who were already fluent readers when they started school, I was impressed by the approach to reading of these young children that might not have occurred to me had I confined my attention only to children who had learned to read in the school group situation. We are also in danger of undervaluing the role of the parents in young children's literacy development, something that was so evident in the way that the parents of the young fluent readers I studied interacted with their young children. I was concerned at the parents' embarrassment that they had sent their child to school able to read, at the diffidence they even showed at mentioning this, and also at the disbelief that some met with if they did. Why should we make parents feel guilty if their child comes to school able to read, and ashamed if they come not ready to read? Not all children in my study were highly intelligent when assessed on intelligence tests; not all their parents were professionals. Indeed, not all had a range of interesting and stimulating children's books for their first experiences of printed material and certainly few had any structured reading scheme. Unlikely materials like car numbers, the daily newspaper, the *Radio Times*, an old pack of lexicon cards and even television advertisements acted as a stimulus to these children, and could do to other children. One important common factor for these children seems to have been an interested adult. One characteristic of these children was their awareness of what they could and could not do. This study was originally published as *Young Fluent Readers: what can they teach us?* (Clark, 1976).

It is interesting to speculate as to why story reading to a child, presenting as it does written language in oral form to the child in an interactional setting, should provide such a valuable stimulus to reading and the production of meaningful, interesting written language by the child. A study of the text of the most effective and popular writers for children gives some insight into the contribution of such experiences to children's written language development. Anything more than a superficial glance reveals that such stories are not only a rich source of language, but also present subtle, continuous themes with much implicit as well as explicit meaning, with humour, and play on words. Much of importance is either not stated, or understated, and there is often rich direct speech as the characters interact with each other (see chapters 6 and 10 in Clark, 2016).

Reading and Writing, a Reciprocal Relationship

Just as purpose, and purpose seen by the child, is important as a motivating force in learning to read, so purpose is important in written communication. This gives point to the teaching of handwriting and spelling as aspects of written communication, as tools. Though spelling can be caught by some, it can also be taught to the others. This is most effective when the instruction is systematically organised, taking into account the linguistic probabilities of the English language, and the child's needs within their written communication for the words being taught.

If one approaches the teaching of reading from an analysis of the skills and knowledge the children have already acquired when they begin learning to read, as well as of the additional knowledge and skills required for fluent reading, one may be led to the conclusion that some approaches to the teaching of reading miss crucial features required for the development of such a skill. Too great an emphasis may be placed on training skills such as precise visual scanning of letters or words, while the important features may indeed be discrimination and anticipation rather than identification. In a recent publication, *Reading – The Grand Illusion*, by an interdisciplinary team comprised of a reading researcher, a linguist and a neurologist (Goodman, Fries and Strauss), the authors show how much more complex is the comprehension of written language than those supporting synthetic phonics would have us believe:

> In this book we take on the formidable misconception: that reading involves the accurate sequential recognition of words and that accurate word recognition is necessary for comprehension.
> (Goodman et al, 2016, p. xx)

While considerable emphasis may have been placed by both teachers and parents on the value of reading aloud to young children as an early reading experience, the focus has often been on its motivational value, rather than on its important role in sensitising children to the features of written language through an oral medium. In England at present, the focus on synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and the importance of a high and increasing percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check have meant that more and more time in classrooms is being spent practising for the check, including pseudo or alien words, which form half the 40 words in the check (see Walker et al, 2015). Furthermore, the written language encountered by the children in their reading books may be limited and there may be little time left for story reading as a way of giving them experience of the complexities of written language.

Contributions of the Home

In my research on fluent readers the embarrassment of a number of the parents at sending their child to school already reading fluently was distressing, as we

have already seen. The evidence that the young fluent readers appeared to read silently even in the early stages should serve as a challenge to the function of reading aloud by children. Can we any longer assume that the natural progression is from reading aloud to reading softly, then only later, silently? Oral reading by the child may give sensitive teachers insights into children's development of self-correction strategies, provided the adult listens to the children and encourages them to predict, using all the cues at their disposal. These young fluent readers' developing competence in spelling also has lessons for us. They were beginning to show a competence in spelling, also an ability to attempt words using a plausible substitute spelling, how the word might have been spelt in English. Equally important, they knew what they did not know. Again, the fact that spelling was being caught by these children does not mean that other children may not need to be taught to spell. Spelling is an eminently teachable subject approached through the route of plausible alternatives in the language being studied. Many poor spellers do not even know when they are right!

An important reason for reminding readers of findings such as these is that sadly current government policy, in England at least, seems to ignore the needs and even the existence of children such as the 'young fluent readers' who enter school already reading silently with understanding.

High-frequency Words: their contribution to reading

There are reasons why we should spend time encouraging young children to recognise the commonest words in English in a variety of meaningful contexts:

- the relationship of words to spoken language is much easier for young children to grasp than the abstract concept of letters;
- relatively few words account for a high proportion of the total words in written as well as spoken English;
- some of the common words are not phonically regular;
- few of the most frequent words have meaning in isolation – most take their meaning from the words around them;
- these are not easily represented pictorially, as few are either nouns or verbs;
- these are likely to be influenced by the context.

While high-frequency words account for about half the *total* words, it is essential to be able to recognise speedily also the words that appear much less frequently; these words account for over 90 per cent of the *different* words in written language. Children, if they are to read with understanding, need to develop strategies for speedy recognition of words they have not met before. It is with this latter aspect that a grasp of phonics will assist them. However, there is evidence that this is better practised in context, not in isolation or as a part of commercial programmes, as currently advocated in England. Time spent in some schools on practising pseudo words in anticipation of the phonics check, as is happening in England, could surely be better spent studying the features of real

written English, especially as the home language of many children is different from that used in school.

Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning: government policy in England 2006 to 2017

The powerful place of commercial interests in determining governments' choice of policies, the materials recommended, and even the funding for the teaching of reading is disturbing. The government in England, and Ofsted, have since 2010 stressed that *the* method of teaching reading should be phonics, and synthetic phonics, rather than analytic phonics, claiming this is backed by research evidence. Following a careful analysis of existing evidence, the following seem legitimate claims:

- There is benefit from the inclusion of phonics within the early instruction in learning to read in English, within a broad programme.
- There is *not* evidence to support phonics in isolation as the one best method.
- There is *not* evidence for synthetic phonics as the required approach rather than analytic phonics.

The Phonics Screening Check and its effects are considered in detail in Clark (2016, 2017c).[2] Here, attention will be drawn to two key aspects that have been ignored by the Department for Education (DfE):

1. the wide difference in pass rate between the oldest and the youngest children, a similar pattern continuing each year as the percentage pass has increased; and
2. the inclusion of pseudo words – not only their inclusion, but the fact that each year the first twelve words have been pseudo words. There is evidence that some of those confused by the pseudo words are children who are already reading, while others are unwilling to attempt the pseudo words, or attempt to make these into real words.

The dictates from the DfE are having a major impact on practice in schools in England, removing the freedom of practitioners to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children. Yet, the final report from the National Foundation for Educational Research, funded by the DfE from 2012 to 2015 (Walker et al, 2015), states on page 67:

> there were no improvements in attainment or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check, nor any identifiable impact on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment.

The most frequently reported change in 2014 was an increase in the pace of phonics teaching and an increased focus on pseudo words. A strong enthusiasm for synthetic phonics and for the check among teachers tended to be associated with higher phonics attainment as measured by the check *but not with an*

improved performance in reading and writing assessment at the end of KS1. Two articles have come to my attention recently, raising questions even about the content of the actual phonics check. One, by Darnell et al (2017), questions whether the check even fulfils the criteria set out for its construction. The other, by Gibson and England (2015), makes a powerful case against the inclusion of pseudo words, which it is clear now dominate much of the time in many early years classrooms. Both articles are backed by extensive research.

I have commented on the lack of evidence from the children themselves as to how the current focus on sounding out words in isolation and on 'alien' words is influencing their perception as to what it is to be a reader. I have argued that we need to interview the children and gain insight into their views, including those children who passed the check, any who could read but failed the check and those who were required to re-sit the following year. I attended a presentation at the recent UKLA International Conference at Strathclyde University given by Jane Carter, who has been recording dialogue with children who have just sat the phonics check. Her clever methodology put the children in the position of experts as they tried to explain the role of phonics – and in particular, pseudo words – in learning to read to Beegu, a soft toy, who didn't understand about learning to read. Many of the children revealed a disconnection between their phonics lessons and reading. Jane Carter also showed a list of comments made by the teachers she interviewed, which make disturbing reading (see Clark, 2017c, pp. 92-93 for some examples from Jane Carter's UKLA presentation). I look forward to the publication of this powerful research.

Final Comment

As may be seen, England is not the only country where evidence from research is being ignored, where simplistic tests are driving the curriculum, where available resources for schools are being spent on commercial products linked to the tests and where schools are being ranked by the percentage of children who pass such tests. It is valuable to be aware of the outlook and the problems of those from other countries, otherwise we are in danger of failing to appreciate the extensive educational possibilities which our own school system denies us. In Britain, we assume children should begin school at five years of age and that all our children will be reading by the age of seven. To what extent is any disadvantage merely the result of our school system and approach to education, or our failure to cater for children's varied needs and individual rates of development?

Notes

[1] The report can be downloaded from www.ec.europa.eu/education/literacy/resources/finalreport

[2] In October 2017 I self-published a new book in the UK and Australia with updated information on synthetic phonics and the phonics check, *Reading the Evidence: synthetic phonics and literacy learning.* There are seven contributors. I wrote five of the chapters; three of the other contributors are from the UK and three from Australia (two of whom had previously worked in England).

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