'I can't read. I don't know all my letters yet'

Why the fixation with systematic synthetic phonics must change

Sue Cox

Abstract

The teaching of reading seems to have always generated heated debate about the methods and approaches that should be used. The degree of imposition on teachers of a narrow, exclusive focus on systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) has reached new heights – or perhaps depths – in recent years. It has resulted in constraints being placed on teachers and children in their engagement with books that, I argue, are potentially damaging to children's development, both as readers and learners. Whether this prescriptive approach has been informed by what is known and understood about child development, and children's agency in their learning, is doubtful. To illustrate my thoughts I draw on informal observations of and conversations with one young child learning to read.

Keywords: learning to read; systematic synthetic phonics; whole language; joy of reading; decoding; meaning-making

Introduction – a polarised debate

The controversy about how young children should be taught to read is nothing new. It has been ongoing over centuries. I once owned a teacher training manual from the 1870s that discussed the merits of 'look and say' approaches over phonics, and prioritised analytic phonics over synthetic phonics. But the pendulum has swung decisively since the 'whole language' process approaches that were paramount in the 1980s and 1990s fell out of favour.[1] Since then, the emphasis has shifted conclusively to the phonics-based approach.[2] The polarisation of the debate is clear; it attracts fierce advocacy and has been cast in terms of a 'war'. The Conservative education minister Nick Gibb (who bears much responsibility for the restricting of methods of teaching reading) referred to it as such in a *Sunday Times* article claiming that the phonics war had been won.[3] Wyse and Bradbury entitled their own article in these terms and trace the development of the 'reading wars' from 1983.[4]

The debate became intensified when the Conservative government decreed that systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) must be taught 'first, fast and only'. The mandate has now shifted slightly to become 'first and foremost', but it is still made very clear to

teachers that the teaching of reading is all about SSP. While phonics has always played a part in the teaching of reading, this development marked a definitive move away from the holistic and mixed methods of the past. For Wyse and Bradbury, the intensification in England of phonics teaching from 2014 was historically significant and makes the country an outlier, internationally speaking.[5] There is no question that the impact on classroom practice has been substantial. Not only was this restriction imposed on schools but also on teachers in training. Emphasis on teaching systematic synthetic phonics remains integrated in the initial teacher training (ITT) core content framework.[6]

Daisy making meaning

I am motivated to write this article by my informal observations of a young child, Daisy, and her personal interaction with books, first as a pre-schooler and later when at school in reception and the start of year 1. These observations, however limited, and my interpretation of them – informed by my understanding of how children learn – have strengthened my belief that the current orthodoxy has to be challenged. I am not by any means the first to call for this – in 2022 an open letter from 250 academics and authors was sent to then education secretary Nadim Zahawi calling on the government to change the policy on reading. But I am keen to add my voice in the interests of children like Daisy. I hope there is every opportunity for change of policy with a new Labour government now in power.

Daisy (not her real name) was born before the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2019. By the time she was three, she was receiving full-time nursery provision. She was benefiting from a prosperous and supportive home life.

In her busy, energetic and unceasing play, Daisy was enacting in exploratory and imaginative ways the sorts of activities that were part of the real-life context of her world. She was interacting with artefacts of all kinds, and with other people, as well as being a devoted fan of 'Fireman Sam' on TV. Talk was rich, both with parents, other family members and their adult friends and her peers. Her environment offered visual and written text of all kinds (such as, for example, text on packages, TV, tablets and phones; as lists, notes, menus; in the street and in shops) and her play included making and using marks of her own for different purposes. As young children do, she was drawing on all the 'multi-modal' resources at her disposal to make sense of what she was encountering in her physical and social environments.[7]

The early interactions I had with Daisy involving books were similar to those she had with her parents: encouraging her to select a book and to hold it; turning pages together; listening to and responding to Daisy as she talked about the book; reading it out loud to her; having conversations about the unfolding story. This was a two-way exchange. I would respond to Daisy's interventions when she reacted, commented and

asked questions about what was happening, about what might happen next, about the pictures, about ways in which the contents of the book related to her own experiences and her existing knowledge.

All her playful activity, including her encounters with books and stories, reflected Daisy's ongoing search for meaning as a learner.[8] She was making use of the material and social environments and all the representational practices they offer to build concepts and become 'literate' in multifarious ways. These are what Vygotsky referred to as the 'tools' or the 'mediational means' that underpin all aspects of her development and that of all young children.[9] There is a very strong case to be made for learning as joining in: the active quest for making sense of the world around her through engaging in and exploring the activities and discourses of the culture.

For Daisy, books were plentiful. She was encountering the book itself as a cultural artefact. In sharing books with the adults around her, she was also participating in the cultural practice of reading the words and pictures they contained. As part of the everyday context of her learning, books specifically afforded her the opportunity to become aware that meaning could be made with the marks on the pages, with both words and with images. This developing awareness was evident to me not only in her focus on the written and visual texts, but in her questions such as 'what does it say?' and in pointing to and talking about the pictures.

The controversy

The point I wish to make through this very brief and general introduction is that 'reading' features in children's development and learning in a much broader way than the specific acquisition of accurate word reading skills. This is contrary to the views of some cognitive scientists who have insisted that accuracy in word reading is paramount, claiming that early acquisition of it leads to more skilled readers in the long run. For them, phonic knowledge – knowledge of the links between letters and sounds, or graphemes and phonemes – is key to ensuring the necessary decoding skills for word reading, and decoding, for them, is the central precept of reading.

From this perspective, the sorts of 'cueing strategies' advocated by proponents of the 'whole language' approach act as impediments to the development of advanced reading skills. On the other hand, teachers who see reading from the whole language perspective prioritise comprehension and meaning and the enjoyment of books, which are seen as interrelated. This holistic approach encourages children to work with authentic texts ('real books'), and to see the text as a whole, drawing on the full range of clues on the page that would help them make sense of it, including, importantly, any pictures. By using the clues from the contexts of the text –syntactic (what would sound right?) and semantic (does this make sense?) – as well as what is presented visually, the

child can hypothesise about what the text means and what it says. When reading is a shared experience they can test out these hypotheses in the company of skilled readers, and build their knowledge and develop skills as a participant in this cultural practice. Phonological awareness and knowledge of the links between sounds and letters add a further strategy. But such knowledge and the ability to call out words accurately is not the central aim.

Adherents to 'word reading' and decoding would see such 'cueing' strategies as guessing. They deem guessing to be a process that inhibits the development of understanding of the link between sounds and letters that is the hallmark of their definition of reading and is crucial, in their eyes, to being able to read. To refer to such activities as guessing, however, suggests that they are random responses. On the other hand, to see them as hypothesising, which is an alternative way of describing what is going on, is much more than that. It requires using all the tools that are available to a particular child to work things out. It is reasoning in ways that cohere with their existing knowledge. In other words, it is consistent with learning as I have presented it: actively trying things out in the company of others to make meaning and build their understanding in a complex world. The concept of 'guided participation' developed by Barbara Rogoff is helpful here.[10]

It is interesting that Ken Goodman, a central figure in the 'whole language' approach, was tracked down and interviewed by people who disagreed with his thinking and methods. Fifty years on from the publication of his seminal paper in 1967 at the age of 91, in the face of their opposition, he reiterated his original position. Addressing the misunderstanding that the approach is over-reliant on word recognition – memorising whole words – he is quoted as saying: 'I don't teach word recognition, I teach people to make sense of language. And learning the words is incidental to that'.[11]

This approach recognises that the ways that children are inducted into the worlds of language and of literature and the worlds around them and beyond, through texts of all kinds (including the visual), are rich indeed. As Margaret Meek says: 'What texts teach is a process of discovery for readers, not a programme of instruction for teachers'.[12] That pictures offer so much more than simply helpful clues to reading words, going well beyond what the words say, has been explored in further depth by David Lewis.[13] Such researchers show the complexity of texts and meanings. The full force of Frank Smith's adage that children learn to read by reading[14] makes sense if reading is given this wider context and meaning; if learners are seen to be joining a community or network (as Meek describes it) of readers, bringing to bear in the interpretation of text and pictures both their existing knowledge of how texts work and their understandings of the wider world. Meek wrote that the reading scheme 'offers words to be read only in order to reinforce lessons that are taught *about* reading, not *by* reading'.[15] (My emphasis.)

Restrictive approaches and the implicit model of 'learning'

It is the narrow kind of thinking of the cognitive scientists that is reflected in the English national curriculum. The opposition to the use of 'other strategies' (i.e. strategies other than 'systematic synthetic phonics') is clear. For example, it is required that: 'pupils should read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words'.[16] This conveys in no uncertain terms a very strong message that the goal is for children not to use contextual cues. It implicitly discourages them from reading texts that may go beyond their phonic knowledge, implying that the books that children will be given to read will inevitably be those with limited vocabulary.

Teachers are left in no doubt by the Ofsted inspection regime that they are not allowed to deviate from the phonics-based approach. As Suzanne O'Connell explains:

> During the January 2022 inspection of Monega Primary School in east London, headteacher Elizabeth Harris reported that inspectors were keen to ensure that the band level the children were reading was the correct one for them: 'It was very important for inspectors that children knew what band they were on and what their target band was', she said. 'They wanted to see that the children were accurately matched to the book and listened to the children read with their banded book. They wanted to see that we had banded them correctly'.[17]

The word 'fidelity' is used to reinforce adherence to a school's phonics programme. A government blog post claims: 'Successful leaders choose a phonics programme that can achieve consistency across the school. Fidelity to the sequence of the school's phonics programme is essential. Each programme introduces grapheme-phoneme correspondences and common exception words in a specific order. Following the sequence builds effectively and cumulatively on what has been taught before. It's not possible to take short cuts'.[18]

This passage is revealing. Apart from seemingly prescribing, in very direct terms, what teachers should do (and, note, prescribing teachers' methods rather than the content of the curriculum remains against the law), it further exposes the underlying mindset and view of children's learning that is implicit in the national curriculum. The phrase 'What has been taught before' is significant here. The emphasis is being placed on what is taught, rather than what is learned. This is a flawed starting point. Any assumption that the *logical* sequencing of the subject matter can be prioritised over how the child makes sense of it (the *psychological*) can be challenged on the grounds that what is taught does not equate with what is learned in a straightforwardly symmetrical way. (This is subject to the same sort of difficulties of the much-critiqued notion of teaching as 'transmission'.) The focus must be on what the child is learning. Given a view of learning

where the child's agency is central and making meaning is key, learning is not limited to what has been taught.[19] It will include what the child is learning beyond the context of the phonics lesson and beyond the school. That will not be the same for all individual children as each child's experience and learning pathway differs. Indeed, children may well make their own shortcuts, or take interesting circuitous routes that lead elsewhere. The representation of learning in a simplistic, linear and decontextualised way suggests that the teacher and the 'programme' dictate progression, whereas, in reality, the child does. It is clear that a linear model of learning informs government policy. The ITT core content curriculum presents only one view of learning – a contentious and very narrow view centred around memory and memorising, and a simple model of progression.

The disconnection between word reading and meaning making

The sidelining of meaning making has led to the bizarre idea that accurate word reading should come *before* comprehension. The national curriculum states that 'once pupils have already decoded words successfully, the meaning of those words that are new to them can be discussed'.[20] Teachers working with real children in real classrooms will (at their peril?) point out the flaws in such thinking. An apt illustration is provided by early years teacher and literacy consultant Claire Scott: 'after reading "She shed a tear" (as in "fear") as "She shed a tear" (as in "bear"), teachers would point out the obvious context being missed. Surely these cues could help a child when he or she approached a word, rather than afterwards'.[21]

This misconception that comprehension – engaging with content – comes *after* word reading has been mastered is again illustrated in the DfE's *Reading Framework*: 'For beginning readers and pupils with very low proficiency in reading, teaching will focus on word reading, and especially systematic synthetic phonics. For more proficient readers, it will focus on fluency, comprehension and engagement with texts'.[22]

My heart sinks at the idea that 'engagement with texts' is only a priority for the 'proficient reader'. For me, this betrays all that is wrong with the current approach. It is true that reading for pleasure is promoted in the national curriculum, but this seems to be divorced from learning to read. In their wisdom, many schools and teachers are at pains to establish a love of reading. But they are up against a system that concentrates on phonic decoding and accurate 'word reading'; the joy of reading is secondary and something that is very separate. The inherent contradiction in withholding books from the young reader to ensure that they do not stray beyond their 'level' while trying to promote pleasure in reading seems obvious. It is hardly surprising, and yet very revealing, that the *Reading Framework* states that 'The data shows, however, that work still remains to nurture all pupils' love of reading'.[23]

Not only, it appears, should any reading material be matched with the specific

phonic knowledge that is being taught, but there is implied incursion into what and how children read at *home*. This is hardly likely to promote an unfettered love of books. The Ofsted *School Inspection Handbook* states that inspectors will check that: 'Teachers give pupils sufficient practice in reading and re-reading books that match the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they know, both at school and at home'.[24]

This reference to 'home' is particularly concerning. The 'policing' of children's reading is borne out by a headteacher of a primary school in Harrogate following an Ofsted inspection in October 2021, again reported in Suzanne O'Connell's blog post:

> In addition to phonics-based reading books, matched to the phases they are on, all children take home a 'library book' of their choice to read with their families. This was questioned by Ofsted because the children couldn't read the books themselves. We had to really fight to make them understand it was a book for parents to read to them, a reading for pleasure book that would not set back their progress.[25]

It would appear that the level of prescription in adhering to the phonics scheme (the requirement of 'fidelity' to it) is not only restricting the strategies children can use to learn to read, but is also curtailing the range of books they are 'allowed' to read. Inevitably, the reading environment becomes arid and impoverished. It is telling, once again, that this level of control over what children read and how comes up against the better instincts of teachers in classrooms. It has also offended Michael Rosen, who in his inimitable way posted the following on his blog: 'Fave Gibb moment: sitting with him on a panel in front of parents. He tells them that if they gave their young children books that included words that were NOT phonically regular, it would "confuse" them. I went home and threw away our picture books immediately. Not'.[26]

High-stakes testing

Children's early introduction to books, then, presents 'reading' – that is, accurate word decoding – as if it is an end in itself, detached from meaning, as if there can be some point to it as an activity *other* than engagement with real texts; with making meaning. But I am forgetting that, of course, there is another point to it – the extrinsic one of passing tests and increasing scores. The phonics check at the end of year 1 carries decoding as an end-in-itself to its logical, but counter-productive and ultimately damaging extreme. To ensure that children are demonstrating their knowledge of phonics and decoding only, as distinct from what they might have learned to read by other routes, children are asked to decode 'pseudo words' ('words' that are phonetically regular but have no meaning). This, of course has the potential to undermine everything in their everyday experience that tells them that reading is about meaning. Over the years since the check was introduced in 2012, I have heard many teachers complain that their most

competent readers are made anxious, or even fail the test altogether, as they attempt to make the nonsense words into meaningful ones. Research carried out by Margaret Clark, for instance, demonstrates the negative effects on children's learning:

> The check had over the years since 2012 changed from, as it was initially claimed to be, a 'light touch diagnostic assessment', to a high stakes test in the accountability programme, with schools required by DfE and Ofsted to increase their percentage pass each year on the check whether or not their children scored high on other assessments of literacy. Thus, it has come to dominate the early years literacy experiences of young children, with many hours devoted to preparing for the check, in particular the alien (pseudo) words which account for twenty of the forty words in the check.[27]

Daisy – at school

So, how has Daisy fared in this environment? Daisy started school at five years old. Towards the end of her reception year, I sat down with her again, expecting that she would be keen to enjoy a story together. It was surprising to me that while she picked up a book it was without much enthusiasm. I attempted to engage her in the book she had selected, suggesting that she looked at the pages with me. Her attention wandered. While there may have been many explanations – perhaps this was not what she wanted to do at that time, or she was distracted, or she preferred not to spend time with me – I sensed a level of rejection of the activity.

I asked her directly.

Me: 'You always liked reading a story together. Do you not want to today?'.

Daisy: 'No. I can't read'.

Me: 'What makes you say that, Daisy?'.

Daisy: 'I don't know all my letters yet'.

It is clear from this exchange that Daisy sees knowing all her letters as a prerequisite for reading. It suggests that her interpretation of 'reading' is now the reductive one imposed by the school's programme of word reading. Because she doesn't 'know all her letters' she has a deficit view of her own learning. What she already knows about books and reading and text seems not to count. I find myself wondering if she has lost both confidence and motivation.

Daisy's learning to read was initially framed by the 'everyday' context of sharing books, stories and conversation with other readers in the home. But she is now caught up in her 'schooling'. I can only presume, given her comment about not knowing her letters, that she is being exposed to an intensive programme of teaching about phonics,

as required by the national curriculum.

On a later visit, in her first term in year 1, she suggested to me that we visit the library. It was still a favourite place. Here, I again observed how her approach to books and reading had changed.

She collected a number of books and sat down with me. She opened one of the books. There was none of our earlier talk about what it might be about; my comments were largely ignored. She put her finger on the very first word. She began sounding out each letter and attempted to blend them. Her determination showed in her facial expression. She got stuck and I read the word for her. She pointed to the word 'are'. Here she struggled to make a word from sounding out and blending, one letter at a time, as of course this is an irregular word. (It is a common basis of criticism of focusing on phonics that the English language is full of irregular words – words that don't conform to the rules or graphemes that can be read in many different ways. Consider 'ough' in through, though, rough, cough, bough and thorough.) Her limited phonic knowledge did not help her and clearly, if we apply the (flawed) linear model of learning, she had not yet 'been taught' this word as a common exception word, as she did not know it.

She put the book down and picked up another. Once more, she did not get beyond the first words. I began to talk about the pictures to get her interested in the story and suggested I read it to her, and she could join in if she wanted to and where she could. I left gaps and invited her to use a range of 'other strategies', but she did not respond to that. I sensed that Daisy had learned that text must be approached in isolation from story and pictures, word by word. Again, she lost interest part-way through and shuffled through her pile of books.

I surmised that she was hoping for one that was at the 'right' decodable level for her, but she didn't find any. Fortunately, libraries are still concerned to stock books that are engaging and meaningful! She made another choice. Interestingly, this book had a Braille translation which attracted her interest. I explained about Braille and we talked about the school for deaf children that we had passed the day before. She had been curious then about how children who are deaf would learn in school. Now she was asking questions about children who are blind. She ran her fingers along the Braille text pretending to read it. The written text alongside the Braille was short and very simple, but she was not able to decode it. I worked hard to interest her in the pictures and the story, and she enjoyed the repetitions. She had sufficient interest to get to the end of the book, but the spontaneous book-related talk of her pre-school self seemed to have dissipated. (This was particularly remarkable for a normally very chatty and articulate child.) I wondered if she responded slightly more positively to this book, not only because she was linking it with new questions and knowledge from the day before, but also because she had no expectation that she would be able to decode the Braille text. There was no potential for failure.

Daisy knows what she is meant to do. She appears to be a compliant pupil. She has some understanding of letter/sound correspondence and the process of blending sounds together. But she was defeated. Is she losing the joy of reading? Might she be confused now about how to approach books? Do they now present a challenge which she feels she cannot yet meet, rather than a rich world of stories and information.

I may be reading (yes, 'reading') too much into this, but I wondered if Daisy's possible loss of confidence was carrying over into, or was influenced by, other school activities. Daisy has a lovely singing voice. I asked her if she was in her school choir. No, she said, because she doesn't like singing with people looking at her. Is it possible that the school focus on the performance element of reading, as of singing in the choir, might affect her zest for learning?

Concluding comments

Daisy's experience provides just one example of what might be wrong with the current fixation on phonics. But, along with the stipulations of the national curriculum and of Ofsted, it indicates how the excitement of playfully having a go in the endlessly fascinating and rewarding world of books and meaning is reduced to a mechanical chore. The joy of books and of reading, instead of being nurtured through the child's own full, meaningful engagement from the start is reserved for later, or is presented as something aside from 'learning to read'. While Nick Gibb was claiming that the phonics war had been won, Wyse and Bradbury were presenting evidence from their comprehensive research that an exclusive focus on phonics is *not* the answer.[28] Their conclusion that 'contextualised teaching of reading' that connects the reading of whole texts with the teaching of phonics, and their argument for practice to be grounded in such evidence, might, perhaps, have an impact that is arguably long overdue. For me, the controversy over the teaching of reading must be settled urgently, in favour of children as agents of their own learning.

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Notes

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