

Teaching phonics and reading effectively: 'A balancing act' for teachers, policy makers and researchers

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Abstract

The debates about what are the most effective ways to teach young children to learn to read have been described as 'the reading wars'. In 2022 the research published in a paper by Wyse and Bradbury (2022) stimulated widespread attention including in the media. Wyse and Bradbury concluded on the basis of four major research analyses that although *systematic* phonics teaching was important the approach in England to *synthetic* phonics was too narrow and therefore in need of improvement. In 2023 the paper was the subject of a critique by Greg Brooks (2023). This paper responds to Brooks' critique by providing new information about the nature of the responses to the paper to contextualise Brooks' response. It is concluded that Brooks' response includes too many errors, and is too selective, to be regarded as a robust and reasonable critique. It is argued that the nature of Brooks' approach to criticism only serves to entrench the reading wars, and raises ethical considerations about the nature of the attack on Wyse and Bradbury (2022).

KEYWORDS

balanced instruction, phonics, reading, teaching

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Context and implications

Rationale for this study

This paper responds to Greg Brooks' (2023) criticisms of Wyse and Bradbury (2022).

Why the new findings matter

It is important that the erroneous views expressed in Brooks (2023) are corrected because the debates about reading have important consequences for young children's education.

Implications for practitioners, policy makers, researchers

Understanding the most effective ways to teach reading is important for children's education worldwide. Research is a source of vital knowledge about what are the most effective ways to teach reading. Interpreting research findings accurately and in a balanced way in order to make recommendations about curriculum policies and classroom practice is vital to ensure that any such recommendations are well justified. Imbalanced and erroneous accounts risk non-optimal teaching and educational policies, and hence negative consequences for children's learning.

Teaching children to read is one of the most important goals of early years and primary education worldwide. Given the importance of learning to read and write for children's life chances (The Government Office for Science, 2008) it is also an emotive topic for many people. The emotion that the topic can generate has even resulted in the phrase 'the reading wars' being used to describe the debates about the best methods to teach reading.

The reading wars have often been seen, particularly in the media, as a conflict between those who think that teaching young children to read should be centred on phonics teaching *first and foremost* (systematic teaching about the ways that letters represent phonemes in words), versus those who believe that other ways of teaching phonics and reading should be prioritised, for example *balanced instruction* which integrates phonics teaching with other aspects such as reading comprehension (e.g., Pressley, 2006), or in years gone by the *whole language* approach attributed to Goodman (1969) which centred on whole text experiences with less systematic attention to phonics.

In January 2022, we published a paper titled 'Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading' in the research journal *Review of Education (RoE)* (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).¹ The research reported in the paper was ambitious, including four large components (detailed below); hence the paper was 20,000 words, probably the longest peer-reviewed research paper ever published in relation to the reading debates.

The main focus of this paper is to respond to Brooks' (2023) critical commentary about Wyse and Bradbury (2022). The editors of *RoE* were asked if a response to the Brooks' piece could be submitted because it was felt that it was an attempt to discredit Wyse and Bradbury's paper in a way that contained misinterpretations and errors that needed to be corrected, given that the Brooks' piece had already been published online. In addition to addressing points made by Brooks about research methods we contextualise Brooks' perspective in relation to the responses to the paper overall in order to give a more complete and balanced account.

The Wyse and Bradbury paper, and an open letter addressed to England's Secretary of State for Education of the day, Nadhim Zahawi, with more than 250 signatories including researchers, supported by a related press release, generated a high level of attention. The Minister for Schools at the time, Robin Walker MP, responded to the open letter by saying:

I have concerns about a number of the methods and sources used in your report, many of *which have been detailed by commentators* including teachers and academics. I will therefore here only lay out an explanation of England's approach to reading. (letter from Robin Walker MP, italics added).

At the time of Walker's letter in February 2022 the views of 'commentators' had only been published in blog posts and social media, mainly Twitter. Many academics responded positively and constructively, and since then through citations of the paper: citations already number 25 (UCL Dimensions metric) and the paper was one of the most cited in the journal in its first year of publication (personal communication from Taylor and Francis).

The research reported in the Wyse and Bradbury paper generated high levels of attention in the media in the UK and other countries. Some evidence of the attention to the work includes the *Altmetric* score for the paper which in August 2023 was 439, measuring the paper as 'in the top 5% of all research outputs ever tracked by Altmetric [in any discipline] ... Altmetric has tracked 23,987,854 research outputs across all sources so far. Compared to these this one has done particularly well and is in the 99th percentile.' (Altmetric/UCL Dimensions metric). As part of an invitation to be featured as a case study for a research project focused on how research is mobilised through media (funded by the ESRC) the Principal Investigator of that research noted that Wyse and Bradbury was 'one of the only examples of a research article to be mentioned by any of the teachers involved in the project so far' (personal communication). The research was also selected through peer-review at the Institute of Education at UCL as one of several with particularly high impact.

Media engagement with the research included most mainstream and specialist education newspapers in the UK (for a list of titles from near the publication date see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2022/jan/teaching-reading-called-question>). The *Guardian* newspaper article reporting the study was number one story of the day²: it described the research as 'a landmark study'. International coverage was—and continues to be—wide, with one of the most recent examples being the US-based piece published in the *New Scientist* (Baras, 2023), citing the work and quoting its authors.

In addition, there were comments and correspondence from thousands of people including through social media (Twitter analytics reported up to early July 2023, 379 tweets from 294 organisations/people, with combined 1,283,243 followers). The paper attracted a great deal of commentary that was constructive and positive, and a minority of negative reactions including an offensive response from an advisor to England's Department for Education (see <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-politics-of-scientificallly-based-teaching-phonics-for-reading-and-grammar-for-writing>).

To date there have been three negative more extended responses from researchers that we are aware of—only one of these was peer-reviewed and published in an academic journal: the approximately 1000-word commentary of Wyse and Bradbury published by Greg Brooks in *RoE* (Brooks, 2023),³ which also critiqued a paper by Bowers (2020).

Errors in summarising Wyse and Bradbury

One of the requirements for a response to any research paper is to accurately and fairly portray the main purposes of the target paper, and the research it reports, including the

research questions that guided the work. Accurate summarisation of the original work is a necessary part of a fair and balanced critique of any research. More basically there should not be errors in a response.

Brooks' piece summarises the main focuses of the Wyse and Bradbury paper in four different assertions (these assertions cover both papers that are the subject of Brooks' piece, including Bowers, 2020) as follows:

- a. The title of Brooks' piece suggests that Wyse and Bradbury's paper 'reject[s] the evidence in favour of systematic phonics instruction'

Wyse and Bradbury did not reject the evidence in favour of systematic phonics instruction. A large part of the paper addresses such evidence directly and concluded that systematic phonics as part of balanced instruction is most likely to be effective.

- b. The abstract to Brooks' piece says that Wyse and Bradbury's paper attempted to 'show that the evidence in favour of systematic phonics in initial literacy instruction is weak' (p. 1)

Wyse and Bradbury did not attempt to show that evidence in relation to systematic phonics is weak. The paper argued that a great deal of the evidence in favour of systematic phonics was *strong* but also that it does not support the particular narrow approach to synthetic phonics that has been mandated in England.

- c. In Brooks' opening remarks about Wyse and Bradbury, he says that we suggested that our analyses 'undermine the case for systematic phonics teaching' (p. 6)

Wyse and Bradbury did not suggest that the analyses undermined the case for *systematic* phonics teaching. The analyses undermine the case for England's particular approach to *synthetic* phonics, and also noted a caveat about the lack of a large-scale RCT in England. The paper concluded that systematic phonics is one important component of reading but that this should be part of the balanced approach to teaching reading.

- d. In the paragraph outlining Brooks' rationale for his piece it says that Wyse and Bradbury 'disputed whether the evidence on the effectiveness of systematic phonics is reliable' (p. 2).

Wyse and Bradbury did not dispute whether the evidence is reliable. The commentary argued that the evidence supported a balanced approach to teaching reading, that included systematic phonics, which is different from England's narrow approach to synthetic phonics.

Not only are each of Brooks' four assertions about the focuses of the Wyse and Bradbury paper each making somewhat different claims, and therefore inconsistent, they are also incorrect. Wyse and Bradbury clearly summarised the purpose of the research and the paper, for example in this section:

This aims of this paper are: (a) to provide a new critical examination of research evidence relevant to effective teaching of phonics and reading in the context of national curricula internationally; (b) to report new empirical findings relating to phonics teaching in England; and (c) to examine some implications for policy and practice. The original contribution to knowledge made by the paper is through new findings in each of the following four areas: (1) analyses of approaches to teaching reading in national curriculum models in relation to international and national pupil

assessment data; (2) an evidence-based account of effective teaching of phonics and reading based on a systematic critical synthesis of the most relevant and methodologically robust systematic reviews, meta analyses and experimental trials; (3) an account of teachers' views about approaches to teaching reading and to assessment of reading, based on a recent survey of teachers in England; (4) insights into how the teaching of reading could be optimised, including through curriculum and assessment policies. (Wyse and Bradbury, p. 4)

Wyse and Bradbury's finding that policy in England was not sufficiently underpinned by research evidence is completely different from Brooks' assertion that we 'rejected the evidence in favour of systematic phonics instruction' (p. 1). Quite the opposite; for example, in the section of the paper addressing the theories underpinning three key approaches to teaching reading we said:

Since Goodman published his theory multiple research studies have confirmed *the beneficial effect of teaching* children in the early stages of learning to read *about letters and the speech sounds that they represent*, as the SQMS later in this paper shows. (p. 6, emphasis added)

Summarising the findings of the SQMS we said:

...our interpretation of the most robust research evidence from tertiary reviews, from SRS and MAs, and from our SQMS of longitudinal studies of most relevance suggests that *phonics teaching is likely to be effective* if it is:

1. implemented with children aged five to six (in England in Year 1);
2. carefully connected with the reading of whole texts, both decodable and real books, including a focus on reading for meaning, in all lessons;
3. undertaken during the course of not more than one whole school year featuring several lessons per week between 36 hours and 60 hours in total teaching time. (p. 36, emphasis added)

And at the end of the paper we concluded that:

Our findings do not support a *synthetic* phonics orientation to the teaching of reading: they suggest that a balanced instruction approach is most likely to be successful. ... Although *there remains no doubt that phonics teaching in general is one important component in the teaching of reading*, the research certainly does not suggest the complete exclusion of whole language teaching. (p. 41, emphasis added)

The Wyse and Bradbury paper made clear that the single focus on one type of phonics teaching, *synthetic* phonics, to the exclusion of other approaches to *systematic* phonics was not underpinned by research. Brooks chose not to address this point. A systematic review for which Brooks was one of the authors, that we included in our systematic qualitative meta-synthesis (SQMS), concluded that although there was evidence that phonics teaching was beneficial for young readers the evidence did not support a 'phonics only' teaching policy because 'many studies have added phonics to whole language approaches, balanced instruction is indicated' (Torgerson et al., 2018, p. 27, italics in original, underline added). Given Brooks' findings in his own previously published systematic review it is difficult to understand the motivation and logic behind his contradictions of his own work that he made in order to sustain the criticisms of Wyse and Bradbury.

The italicised word 'synthetic' in the quote above is a part of the recent history of this debate in England, as is the distinction between 'synthetic phonics' (one approach to phonics teaching) and 'systematic phonics' (a range of approaches to phonics teaching). As far as we can tell, the DfE started using the phrase 'systematic synthetic phonics' as opposed to 'systematic phonics' shortly after a paper by Wyse and Goswami (2008) was published.

A selective focus on the methods of the survey

Brooks acknowledged that there were four analyses in Wyse and Bradbury but he chose to focus on only two of these. The problem with this selective approach is that it fails to treat the paper on its own merits, by addressing its arguments in full, preferring instead to cherry pick some parts of the paper but not others. The Wyse and Bradbury paper was explicit about the overall approach to the research that was reported:

To determine what is effective teaching of reading, and hence to be reflected in education policy, requires consideration of a range of evidence in order to identify the most robust sources. It also requires understanding of the historical context of debates; identification of relevant theories of reading and their appropriateness as models for teaching and policy; and a clear practical understanding of how robust research might be adapted at large scale in schools and classrooms. (Wyse and Bradbury, p. 4)

Even on the two elements that Brooks selected, his critique is neither balanced or accurate as we will show.

One of the strands of evidence in Wyse and Bradbury that Brooks does not take account of is the historical context for the debates about reading, including some analysis of political and media representations. This history is important, and inseparable from the overall argument of the paper, because it enabled Wyse and Bradbury to contextualise one of the major findings of the research that phonics teaching in schools in England was dominated by synthetic phonics taught separately from other aspects of reading, and that this was a relatively dramatic change when considered in the context of the last 100 years of education in England. The historical and geographical context was also part of the evidence to show that England was an outlier internationally.

Brooks quotes Wyse and Bradbury's statement that they could not in the end draw definitive conclusions from the analyses of national and international assessment data and the national curricula in different countries, one of the four major analyses in the paper. Wyse and Bradbury argued that the evidence from experimental trials was more decisive than the data from England's SATs and the data from PIRLS and PISA, but this did not mean that the analyses of assessment data and national curriculum texts should be excluded from consideration, because the paper did provide important new findings. For example, the analyses enabled Wyse and Bradbury to show that it is possible for a country or region to have a balanced approach to literacy and achieve high scores in pupil tests of reading.

The first of Brooks' two selective main criticisms targeted the methods of the questionnaire survey. He suggested that Wyse and Bradbury's conclusion about the lack of emphasis on many other aspects of reading (apart from synthetic phonics) as a result of England's approach was *only* based on the survey's open comments responses to one of the survey questions. Brooks' criticism is inaccurate because Wyse and Bradbury used both quantified *and* qualitative responses to arrive at their conclusion. The relevant quantitative data showed that only 27% of respondents said, 'My phonics teaching *is systematically combined with other emphases including reading comprehension*' (p. 37, emphasis added). The majority of

respondents (73%) did *not* systematically combine other aspects of reading in their phonics teaching, and hence support for the finding about synthetic phonics teaching being separate from other reading teaching.

As in any robust mixed methods approach the qualitative data from the open question was additionally important because it provided considerable detail about the nature of the synthetic phonics teaching happening in classrooms. It also enabled more reflection on the nature of the quantitative outcomes. By combining the quantitative and qualitative responses from the two questions we concluded that phonics lessons in England more often than not appeared to be separate from other lessons that involved the teaching of reading.

Having engaged with some of Wyse and Bradbury's findings from the survey data Brooks then attempted to dismiss the survey findings on the basis of the methods used. Brooks does not make a sufficient argument to claim that the approach to the survey was 'ad hoc' (it would not have got through peer-review processes or ethics if it had been ad hoc), or the conclusions 'weak'. We agree with Brooks' point that had we been able to do a survey with a probability sample then generalisation would have been more reliable. However, a prime reason for selecting the method of a convenience sample was the Covid pandemic, as is made clear in the paper. Covid resulted in the decision not to implement the Year 1 (pupils aged five to six) national phonics screening check (PSC) in 2020 in England. This offered a unique moment in time to survey teachers' opinions about the effects on teaching of not having the PSC, that was only applicable in 2020 so there was not time to bid for funding for a probability survey.

The decision to use a convenience sample for the survey was also an important one methodologically. It is now well recognised that in social and other sciences non-probability surveys are receiving increasing attention, indeed one study found that 92.5% of studies published in a selection of developmental science journals over a four-year period were 'convenience samples' (Jager et al., 2017). Some of the reasons for this attention are as follows: probability based surveys are expensive and time consuming; there have been declines in response rates to probability surveys; the need for timely data about some phenomena; and the growth of non-probability surveys through online and social media. The homogenous nature of the respondents to the survey (teachers and school leaders) is a factor that can reduce bias in convenience samples (op. cit.). And non-probability samples are used regularly by governments as part of consultations about education. For example, the consultation on what was England's proposed national curriculum implemented from 2014 onwards that included a much stronger focus on synthetic phonics, and the very dubious government response to the thousands of respondents (Wyse, 2013).

The most important aspect of the Wyse and Bradbury survey remains whether the survey data and analyses were accurately describing teachers' classroom practices. In February 2022 a *Teachertapp* survey replicated a couple of the issues from Wyse and Bradbury. The *Teachertapp* survey found that 47% of respondents said that England's Phonics Screening Check (PSC) led to teachers neglecting other curriculum areas either due to test practice or to time. Of the 1421 respondents to the *Teachertapp* survey, 52% said the PSC should be 'scrapped'; 25% said it should be changed significantly (*Teachertapp*, 2022, online). In the Wyse and Bradbury survey, 28% of respondents said that the PSC affected their practice in relation to phonics to a significant extent; 43% said to some extent. Although the surveys had different wording for their questions it is clear from both that teachers were not content with a major feature of phonics teaching, the PSC, which is perhaps the strongest driver of the intensification of synthetic phonics teaching in England (Bradbury, 2018) and also used in Australia—although crucially in Australia the PSC is 'voluntary' (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023, online) compared with the statutory use in England.

Brooks' decision not to make any comment about the significant focus on the PSC in our paper was curious, given his views expressed when the phonics test in England was first proposed. He said that the proposed phonics test was likely to result in teaching to the test and 'reducing attention to other facets of reading' (Brooks, 2010, p. 1), very similar to what was reported in Wyse and Bradbury.

A selective focus on the systematic qualitative meta synthesis

The second of Brooks' selective main criticisms was about the SQMS. Brooks' claim was that the synthesis was 'unnecessarily restrictive' in its selection criteria. In a gross misinterpretation Brooks erroneously suggested that Wyse and Bradbury's view was that 'experiments carried out in other English-speaking countries cannot inform practice [in England]' (p. 5). The paper as a whole included multiple analyses and comparisons of studies in many different countries. There is also detailed commentary about teaching methods used in eight robust studies that were part of the final selection of studies for the SQMS: not one of these studies was carried out in England. Brooks also does not account for Wyse and Bradbury's view that analysing multiple data sources and studies is essential for a balanced debate, preferring to cite one study in Scotland (see Wyse & Goswami, 2008 for an account of this study and its limitations) to back up his erroneous point about Wyse and Bradbury's approach to studies not done in England, and to cite one of his own recent publications.

Brooks also implied that we 'excluded all studies' that did not include reading tests at least 11 months after the end of the reading teaching intervention. Contrary to Brooks' interpretation, the first part of the synthesis reported the conclusions from four meta analyses and two tertiary reviews, all of which included experimental trials with 'immediate post-test results', the kind of studies that Brooks claimed we did not take account of. The two phases of the SQMS were integrated and have to be considered as a whole.

Brooks also asserted that 'the exclusion of studies on children with poorer literacy' was too restrictive. If one is to generalise about the most effective methods for teaching 'typically developing readers', which was the whole point of the Wyse and Bradbury paper, then of course it is important to locate studies that include samples from this population of children. Word count for the paper precluded reporting the analyses that had been done on studies with children with reading difficulties but the findings from these analyses will be published in Wyse and Hacking (2024). In this analysis of studies with children with reading difficulties there were two studies that met all but one of the criteria (the criterion of typically developing readers), and that had been undertaken in England (*ibid.*).

Another aspect of Brooks' claim that the selection was too restrictive was the decision to focus on research published after 2008. The decision to focus the SQMS on studies published after 2008 was made because a similar analysis covering studies pre-2009 had already been published (Wyse & Goswami, 2008) as was stated in Wyse and Bradbury. Brooks was well aware of the work carried out in 2008 because he published criticisms of a related paper in rather the same approach to criticism that he used in *RoE* (see the response to Brooks: Wyse & Styles, 2007). The targeting of a single researcher twice with negative articles does raise ethical considerations, and questions about motives.

CONCLUSION

Brooks' final conclusion, made on the basis of his series of mainly erroneous points, is that our paper 'fails'. The idea of outright failure is a caricature of how research knowledge is accumulated, but is part of the approach taken to criticise the work by Wyse and Bradbury. All

research has its limitations, and consistent with good research methods practice Wyse and Bradbury reported the limitations of the methods of the research. Brooks' use of very selective elements of Wyse and Bradbury to make his criticisms lacks credibility and robustness, and is the kind of approach that will only serve to prolong the reading wars. The phrase 'reading reconciliation' in the title of the Wyse and Bradbury paper reflected one of the purposes of the work, which was to try and bring more balance—to the debate, to teaching and to policy—through close attention to evidence, and on the basis of this to suggest some improvements in policy and practice. The extreme reaction by a minority of commentators is a particular troubling part of the debate which surely can only serve to distract attention to what really matters in improving the teaching of phonics and reading, and to entrench the reading wars.

Brooks concludes his piece with the unoriginal statement 'systematic phonics instruction should remain an essential element within [teachers'] repertoire' (p. 2). We agree with Brooks that systematic phonics teaching is one important component of teaching early reading. However, if we are correct that England's (and increasingly some other regions'), approach to teaching synthetic phonics and reading is too narrow, too dominant, and insufficiently reflects robust research evidence, then many children will not be experiencing optimal teaching based on evidence. This should concern all people in society, given the effects of not learning to read on children's life chances. Genuinely balanced appraisals of all research, by researchers, policy makers and practitioners, including research that is critical of orthodoxies and government policies, is needed if reconciliation is to be a reality.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The original research was approved by the UCL Institute of Education ethics approval processes. This response paper did not require ethical approval.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ From this point on we will refer to Wyse and Bradbury (2022) without the year of publication.
- ² *The Guardian* piece about the Wyse and Bradbury research was number one on the digital edition of *The Guardian* until a piece about the House of Commons Prime Ministers' Questions on the day when Prime Minister Boris Johnson had to answer questions about the Covid pandemic 'partygate' affair.
- ³ From this point on we refer to Brooks (2023) without the year of publication.

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