



Strathprints Institutional Repository

Ellis, S. (2007) *Early reading instruction: what science really tells us about how to teach reading*. [Review]

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/>) and the content of this paper for research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to Strathprints administrator: <mailto:strathprints@strath.ac.uk>

Ellis, Sue Book review: Early reading instruction: what science really tells us about how to teach reading.
[Review]

<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/27428/>

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk>) and the content of this paper for research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. You may freely distribute the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk>) of the Strathprints website.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to The Strathprints Administrator: eprints@cis.strath.ac.uk

Author: Sue Ellis

Type: book review

Published in : Educational Review, 59 (4). pp. 522-523. ISSN 0013-1911

Diane McGuinness is the Emeritus professor of psychology at the University of South Florida. She is highly vocal in the phonics debate in America and was quoted as an authority in evidence submitted to the Westminster Select Committee on Education's inquiry into teaching reading.

Reading *Early reading instruction: what science really tells us about how to teach reading* took me back to the 1980s and the 'reading wars' in England. McGuinness polarises the phonics debate and argues that reading should be taught using a phonics 'first, fast and only' approach. The tone of the book is also reminiscent of the 1980s. With chapter headings such as "Why English speaking children can't read" and appendices headed 'How nations cheat on international literacy studies', McGuinness dispenses with the measured and nuanced language of academic, professional or scientific writing, slipping easily and frequently into the style of a headline writer for the popular press.

The bulk of the book, Chapters 1-6, present McGuinness's views on teaching phonics: that phonics is the only way to teach children to read and that activities such as reading stories to children do not impact on decoding skills and, by implication, contribute little to the reading curriculum. She is firmly in the synthetic phonics camp, and is one of its more extreme proponents: She is vehemently against children being taught letter names, or being taught to read whole words on sight, except for a few high frequency words with rare spellings. She also believes that allowing invented spellings confuses children and creates poor spellers, and she disapproves of any early literacy activities that could detract from the attention children might pay to the alphabetic code.

Her most interesting argument, one that is also developed in her earlier book, is that traditional phonics teaching starts at the wrong point. Rather than teaching alphabetic letters and explaining the sounds they make, teachers should teach children to identify a sound and then show them all the ways that this can be represented as a 'sound picture' by letters or groups of letters. To support this argument she cites the development of alphabetic writing systems from pictographs representing whole words to the use of letters as graphic images representing sounds.

McGuinness defines her purpose as 'adjudicating for the reader between reliable and unreliable studies'. She doesn't really achieve this because she does not adopt a clear or consistent definition of what makes a study reliable. She makes long and detailed methodological criticisms of some fairly minor studies but in Chapter 6, dismisses the weight of evidence for

both developmental theories of phonological awareness and the research on articulatory phonetics in a few paragraphs. Her arguments against phoneme-awareness training do not discriminate between different populations, something that a detailed examination of the research evidence might indicate important for instruction.

The chapters of the book that look beyond phonics are disappointing. In chapter 8 'Vocabulary and comprehension instruction', she presents a rather unhelpful list of the aspects of narrative structure that young children fail to produce but makes no mention of the research on how understanding of narrative structure develops. Her explanation of syntax is rudimentary, with no acknowledgement or exploration of the syntactic differences between spoken and written language or of the implications of this for early reading instruction. Her summary of the research on comprehension relies heavily on the work of the US *National Reading Panel*.

McGuinness ignores the socio-cultural evidence about learning to read; 'science' obviously refers only to psychological studies. She seems to see no gap between the questions and issues facing researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, making no mention of the research on rolling out school reform or field trials of reading programmes.

It is difficult to know who this book has been written for. It is published by an academic press, but the tone and balance are uncharacteristic of academic writing and its purpose seems to be about arguing for absolute answers in the face of equivocal evidence rather than acknowledging and exploring complexity. The frequent digressions to explain very basic terminology and statistical methods imply that she doesn't expect her readers to bring any knowledge of experimental design or reading research. If the book isn't aimed at the research community, perhaps it is aimed at practitioners, policy makers or administrators. Yet the narrow focus on psychology studies and the dogmatic tone make the book unlikely to help these folk, who know that education is ill-served by dogmatism and who must operate in a world where children also have social and cultural expectations about reading which need to be addressed alongside cognitive ones. Teachers especially know that we need to have a conversation about phonics rather than the hectoring argument that this book represents.