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The Psychology of Education Review

Open Dialogue Peer Review: A Response to Morag Stuart.

Sue Ellis, University of Strathclyde.

Morag Stuart is right that how best to teach reading has been debated for years and we need clarity about what reading involves and how this develops in beginning readers. I also like her emphasis on teaching and on the importance of teaching phonics early and in a systematic way.

The history of ‘reading wars’ has been unhelpful for researchers, policy-makers, teachers and, most importantly, children. We need to ensure that the debates this time around are more complex and measured. This means that, first, it is important to recognise the socio-cultural basis of literacy. Second, I prefer not to talk in terms of convincing anyone of the ‘sense’ of one view, but in terms of exploring how different views shed light on the actual task to be achieved – children who can, and do, read.

My interest in the phonics debate is mainly in the issues that arise for teachers and policy-makers. A key difficulty, illustrated by Stuart’s paper, is that phonics researchers often focus on children’s ability to read words. As Stuart points out, this is an essential but small part of learning to read. Studies which report large gains in individual word reading (often years ahead of chronological age) do not produce equally strong gains in comprehension and engagement, which are the ultimate outcomes required by policy-makers and teachers.

Stuart presents strong evidence that teaching phonics early and systematically is generally a good thing. I know from working with teachers that they welcome the specific information psychological studies provide about what a systematic approach to phonics might look like. Although interested in theories such as Share’s self-teaching hypothesis, teachers most appreciate opportunities to develop their own knowledge and understanding of phonics teaching and how it links to the wider literacy curriculum. In my experience they are less exercised about the analytic/synthetic debate; good teachers respond to the patterns and possibilities children notice, and in practice the distinction is rarely as clear-cut as theorists would believe.

One issue that teachers inevitably raise, is that teaching phonics ‘early’ is not the same as teaching it ‘first and fast’. Stuart begins by using the former term but ends with the latter. It is counter-intuitive *not* to focus on reading for meaning because this gives reading its purpose; a clearer distinction between the nature and strength of evidence for ‘early and structured’, ‘first and fast’ and ‘first, fast and only’ is necessary. Teachers would welcome clear descriptions of the evidence about how much phonics instruction children actually need, how much is required before phonic knowledge becomes self-sustaining, and what happens with children who have difficulties. Do they simply get more of the same, and does this impact adversely on their confidence and enjoyment of school?

I cannot agree with Stuart’s view of the Rose report. Rose may have concluded that ‘systematic, structured phonics teaching is synonymous with a synthetic approach’,

but these terms are not, in fact, synonymous and Rose's conclusion ultimately was not based on anything approaching a systematic, structured review of the evidence. Faced with the equivocal evidence reported by Torgeson et al. (2006), Rose chose to visit successful synthetic phonics programmes in action. He did not observe phonics taught in other ways nor did he seek counter-examples in the form of unsuccessful synthetic phonics initiatives. On this rather unscientific basis he recommended synthetic phonics for all children in England.

Mr Rose's decision committed both main political parties to synthetic phonics, which prevented the Conservatives from making further political capital from the issue. However, all stakeholders should recognise the reality of the decision-making process: that anecdotal and partial evidence was treated on a par with systematic review evidence. This is not good science, and doesn't exemplify the evidenced-based practice to which this government says it is committed.

I would have liked greater recognition in Stuart's paper of the problems translating quasi-experimental studies into practice: A programme may be successful with an experimental cohort but not with further cohorts (remember ITA in the 1960s?) and even randomised-controlled trials may not capture the difficulties entailed in a wider roll-out. Having found an effect on an experimental population, field trials should ask 'does it work in practice'? Unexpected differences in the wider population or context can impact on compliance or uptake, negating promising experimental effects. Also, the context of implementation affects the depth, sustainability, spread and effectiveness, including the cost-effectiveness, of programmes (Datnow, 2002; Munn & Ellis, 2005). All are important issues for policy-makers and require independent investigation. It is unwise to base policy change solely on experimental results. Finally, experiments that focus only on the content and design features of instructional programmes omit half the story. Literacy learning is affective and social as well as individual and cognitive. Teachers make the biggest impact on successful learning and it would be nice to see some experimental studies that acknowledged the effect of teacher characteristics. Hall (2003) provides a good review of the research on effective teacher behaviours.

Maybe this is the crux of Mr. Rose's problem and the root of the 'reading wars'. Whereas education researchers and educators often go straight to applications and describe 'what seems to work in practice', psychology researchers often stop at efficacy studies which don't report contextual factors. The current debate shows that neither approach is enough.

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