

# Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'

Dominic Wyse and Morag Styles

## Abstract

The Rose Report, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education for England, recommended in March 2006 that early reading instruction must include synthetic phonics. This paper evaluates the extent to which research evidence supports this recommendation. In particular, a review of international research into the teaching of early reading shows that the Rose Report's main recommendation on synthetic phonics contradicts the powerful body of evidence accumulated over the last 30 years. In this paper it is argued that action already taken by the UK government to change the National Curriculum in line with the Rose Report's recommendations represents a change in pedagogy not justified by research.

**Key words:** literacy policy, literacy research, phonics, reading teaching, synthetic phonics

## Background

In 1993 Mary Jane Drummond and Morag Styles edited a special issue of the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, entitled 'The Politics of Reading' (Styles and Drummond, 1993). The issue showed that the teaching of reading had as much to do with politics (in the widest sense of the word) as with pedagogy, and tried to disentangle some of the competing claims about the best ways to teach reading in the early years. At that time, the big debate was about whether to teach reading through published schemes, or by a whole language approach, called the 'real books' or 'apprenticeship' approach (Waterland, 1985). But even then there were strong advocates for synthetic phonics, such as Joyce Morris (1984), who believed this was the only way to teach reading. The American National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) described synthetic phonics programmes as those that emphasise teaching students to convert letters (graphemes) into sounds (phonemes) and then to blend the sounds to form recognisable words. Analytic phonics, on the other hand, is taken to refer to larger-unit phonics programmes, that introduce children to whole words before teaching them to analyse these into their component parts, and emphasise the larger sub-parts

of words (i.e., onsets, rimes, phonogrammes, spelling patterns) as well as phonemes.

During the 1980s and early 1990s in the United Kingdom, influential ideas about English teaching came from intellectual teachers and scholars, whose work had vision as well as professional and academic credibility. These intellectuals included Margaret Meek (1982), Connie Rosen and Harold Rosen (1973), James Britton (1970), Douglas Barnes (1976) and Brian Street (1984). The influence of American socio-cultural theorists such as Shirley Brice Heath (1983) was also strong.

1997 marked the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) *Framework for Teaching* (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998). The Framework was a comprehensive document that specified the detailed objectives of literacy teaching for primary classes in England, together with a set format for lessons. The Canadian team from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, commissioned by the UK government to carry out the evaluation, described the NLS (and the National Numeracy Strategy) as "among the most ambitious large-scale educational reform strategies in the world" (Earl et al., 2000, p. 1). Although the Framework was 'non-statutory' (not obligatory), the pressure brought to bear on teachers through the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspection process meant that the content and methods of the Framework were, effectively, prescribed.

In the period since 1997, there have been many criticisms of the Framework, one strand of which has questioned the lack of research evidence in support of its pedagogy (see Wyse, 2003). An opposing line of criticism has come from those who advocate synthetic phonics.

From 2004, research into a synthetic phonics approach carried out in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, was promoted strongly by the media. This resulted in a recommendation by England's Education Select Committee (a parliamentary committee charged with overseeing educational matters) that there should be a governmental enquiry into the teaching of reading

(House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005). In June 2005 the government duly announced a review of the teaching of early reading, to be headed by the ex-inspector and education consultant, Jim Rose. The interim report was released in December 2005 and the final report was published at the end of March 2006 (Rose, 2006).

## The Rose Report

The final report (hereafter the Rose Report) addressed five concerns:

- “what best practice should be expected in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics” (p. 7);
- “how this relates to the development of the birth to five framework and the development and renewal of the National Literacy Strategy *Framework for teaching*” (p. 7);
- the needs of children with significant literacy difficulties;
- the implications for school leadership and management;
- the value for money of proposed changes.

The Rose Report starts by stressing the importance of including systematic phonics instruction in early reading programmes, a position that is supported by international research. But, in recommending that early reading instruction should include synthetic phonics, it moves to a position that is not supported by research evidence.

The potential impact of the Rose Report on the early years and primary curriculum spreads beyond England. While other anglophone countries have imposed systematic phonics on their education systems (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2005; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), England is the first to impose synthetic phonics on all early years settings, including schools. For this reason an analysis of the international research picture in relation to the Rose Report and a consideration of its likely impact are of interest to those working in other countries.

In this paper we focus on the evidence for the following key paragraph in the Rose Report:

*“51. Having considered a wide range of evidence, the review has concluded that the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming and much strengthened by a synthetic approach”* (Rose, 2006, p. 20).

Before we address the research base for the Rose Report, it is interesting to make the following comparison. In 1990 a report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI, the predecessor of OfSTED) on the teaching of reading was published, to very little

press or government interest. It drew on evidence from visits to 120 primary schools. “The teaching and learning of reading were observed in 470 classes and over 2,000 children read aloud to HMI . . . particular attention was paid to the children’s ability to read fluently, accurately and with understanding” (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI), 1990, p. 1). It was concluded that “phonic skills were taught almost universally and usually to beneficial effect” (p. 2) and that “Successful teachers of reading and the majority of schools used a mix of methods each reinforcing the other as the children’s reading developed” (p. 15). Indeed, in the United Kingdom, phonics has always been widely regarded as a necessary skill for learning to read, write and spell, but not necessarily the prime skill or the one that must be acquired “first and fast”. As Dombey (2006, p. 6) accurately observes:

*“The most successful schools and teachers focus both on phonics and on the process of making sense of text. Best practice brings these two key components together, in teaching that gives children a sense of the pleasures reading can bring, supports them in making personal sense of the texts they encounter and also shows them how to lift the words off the page”.*

In contrast, as part of the Rose enquiry, HMI found it necessary to visit only 10 schools (pre-judged as “representative of best practice in the teaching of phonics work” (Rose, 2006, p. 21)) in constructing an evidence base to legitimise marked changes in reading pedagogy.

## Research evidence and systematic phonics

One of the most significant contributions to debates about research evidence and the teaching of reading was the report of the US National Reading Panel (NRP) on reading instruction, carried out by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000). This extensive meta-analysis addressed a number of questions including: “Does systematic phonics instruction help children learn to read more effectively than non-systematic phonics instruction or instruction teaching no phonics?” (chapter 1, p. 3). As far as differences between analytic and synthetic phonics are concerned, the NRP concluded that “specific systematic phonics programs are all significantly more effective than non-phonics programs; however, they do not appear to differ significantly from each other in their effectiveness although more evidence is needed to verify the reliability of effect sizes for each program” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, chapter 2, p. 93). The point about systematic phonics, as opposed to synthetic phonics, is contrary to the Rose enquiry’s conclusion that the case for systematic phonics is much strengthened by a synthetic phonics approach.

More recently England's Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a systematic review of approaches to the teaching of reading. The methodology of the NRP was refined to produce a meta-analysis that included only randomised controlled trials (RCTs). On the basis of their work, Torgerson et al. conclude, once again in direct contrast to the Rose enquiry, that "There is currently no strong RCT evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other" (2006, p. 49). This finding supports their pedagogical recommendation that "Since there is evidence that systematic phonics teaching benefits children's reading accuracy, it should be part of every literacy teacher's repertoire and a routine part of literacy teaching, *in a judicious balance with other elements*" (p. 49, emphasis added). One of the difficulties of forming policy recommendations for reading pedagogy is that this judicious balance can easily be disrupted by policy thrusts that lack a sufficient evidence base.

This work in the United States and England has been complemented by an Australian government report recommending that:

*"teachers [should] provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers [should] provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies"* (Australian Government. Department of Education Science and Training, 2005, p. 14).

The Australian report also appropriately cautioned that:

*"While the evidence indicates that some teaching strategies are more effective than others, no one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties. An integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when and why to apply them"* (Australian Government. Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 14).

The Rose Report claims that "there is ample evidence to support the recommendation of the interim report that, for *most* children, it is highly worthwhile and appropriate to *begin* a systematic programme of phonic work by the age of five, if not before for some children, the way having been paved by related activities designed, for example, to build phonological awareness" (p. 29, italics as in original, underlining added). Early years educators have been particularly concerned about the dangers of an inappropriate curriculum being imposed on young children. The research evidence on this matter is quite clear and once again contradicts the report. The majority of evidence in

favour of systematic phonics teaching refers to children age 6 and older. Twenty out of the 43 studies covered in the Torgerson et al. (2006) and NRP meta-analyses were carried out with children aged 6–7. Only nine studies were carried out with children aged 5–6. No studies were carried out with 4-year-olds. The idea that children younger than five will benefit from a systematic phonics programme is not supported by evidence and is arguably one of the most controversial recommendations of the Rose Report.

*The importance of an appropriate reading context.* The extent to which reading teaching should contextualise the material to be taught has been at the heart of arguments about reading pedagogy. There is continuing disagreement about the best ways to balance work on whole texts with sub-word-level work. Although the Rose Report says that phonics teaching should be "securely embedded within a broad and language-rich curriculum" (p. 16), its advocacy of synthetic phonics contradicts this aim. The report adopts Torgerson et al.'s (2006, p. 15) definition of synthetic phonics as "an approach to the teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are pronounced in *isolation* and blended together (synthesized)" (emphasis added). As far as teaching synthetic phonics is concerned it is argued that, "From work considered by this review, the balance of advantage favors teaching it *discretely* as the prime approach to establishing word recognition" (p. 20, emphasis added). Therefore, "In practice, this means teaching relatively short, *discrete* daily sessions, designed to progress from simple elements to the more complex aspects of phonic knowledge, skills and understanding" (p. 16, emphasis added). Whereas the Rose Report provides considerable detail about the ways phonics is to be taught, there is very little detail about other important aspects of reading teaching such as how reading comprehension can be enhanced and what the report means by a "language-rich curriculum".

One way to embed phonics teaching securely in a meaningful context is to link it directly to children's books and other whole texts. But the synthetic phonics method advocated by the report does not support this. An example of synthetic phonics teaching praised by the report denied children books during the programme: "This is a very accelerated form of phonics that does not begin by establishing an initial sight vocabulary. With this approach, before children are introduced to books, they are taught letter sounds" (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005, p. Ev 61). One of the most popular commercial synthetic phonics schemes in England, *Jolly Phonics*, also withholds books from children: "During the first 8–9 weeks the aim is to prepare the children for reading books. Stories and poems are read to them, but the children are not expected to try and read books for themselves ... Teachers and parents may find it difficult not to give children books to read in the first few weeks" (Lloyd, 1998, pp. 25–26). The teaching of

reading through synthetic phonics strongly emphasises discrete teaching of phonemes and graphemes decontextualised from sentences or whole texts.

Yet the 43 studies in the NRP and Torgerson et al. (2006) meta-analyses reported gains where phonics instruction was integrated with text-level learning, often as part of the classroom literacy or language arts curriculum. The study by Berninger et al. (2003) is one of the most recent and is indicative of the majority. In this study, second-grade teachers in eight schools serving diverse student populations were asked to refer their 'poorest readers'. These children were then tested by project staff, to check whether children met the inclusion criteria. Forty-eight pairs of children were randomly assigned to four teaching conditions: (a) explicit and reflective word recognition; (b) explicit and reflective reading comprehension; (c) combined explicit word recognition and explicit reading comprehension; or (d) a control group, given practice in reading skills without any instruction. The most effective condition featured phonics teaching carefully integrated with reading comprehension training, using "highly engaging texts".

*"It is intriguing to consider why explicit comprehension instruction might facilitate learning to decode written words – the skill on which at-risk readers have the most difficulty. One explanation for the transfer from comprehension training to phonological decoding may be that explicit instruction in reading comprehension develops broad-based metalinguistic awareness (Mattingly, 1972) that may generalize across levels of language in the functional reading system" (Berninger et al., 2003, p. 112).*

Another study that featured careful integration of phonics teaching and whole text work was carried out by Umbach et al. (1989). Thirty-one first graders from a low-income rural area were assigned to two instructional groups: a traditional basal (reading scheme) approach and a more structured direct instruction approach that included phonics. They attributed gains in reading competence in the experimental group in part to the phonics instruction they had received; but they also saw that contextualising this instruction in meaningful experiences of connected print had played a contributory role:

*"The differences in Passage Comprehension scores which favored the students taught in the Reading Mastery Program are important and warrant comment. Although the Reading Mastery Program has decoding as its primary emphasis, this program provides students with systematic instruction in language development training (e.g., vocabulary development) in addition to story comprehension activities. For example, throughout the oral reading of stories, students were frequently asked comprehension questions to ensure that all children in the group comprehended the passage" (Umbach et al., 1989, p. 119).*

In contrast to the recommendations of the Rose Report, the reading instruction studies included in the two meta-analyses show the particular benefits of different types of phonics instruction when carefully integrated with whole text work making use of a range of teaching strategies.

#### *The Clackmannanshire studies*

When research is cited in the Rose Report there is a bias towards work that advocates synthetic phonics. This is clearly evident in the four-and-a-half pages of the main report that are devoted to just one document, a report of some research carried out in Clackmannanshire, a very small authority in Scotland (Johnston and Watson, 2005). The title of the document claims a "7-year longitudinal study", however, the research actually consisted of two experiments that had been previously reported, followed by several years of further testing of the children. Experiments 1 and 2 had already been reported in a peer-reviewed journal article in 2004 (Johnston and Watson, 2004) but the new data, from the further testing of children after that date (Johnston and Watson, 2005) is only available online and has not been peer reviewed.

Experiments 1 and 2 were designed to compare the effectiveness of analytic and synthetic phonics teaching for early readers. The authors recognised a fault with the design of experiment 1, where the analytic phonics groups were taught fewer letters than the synthetic phonics group, so they attempted to correct this by carrying out experiment 2. Experiment 2 compared three groups taken from primary one (aged 5) classes in Clackmannanshire. The groups were described as follows: (a) "no letter-training group"; (b) "accelerated letter training group"; and (c) "synthetic phonics group".

The Rose enquiry accepted that the methodology of the Clackmannanshire studies had "received some criticism by researchers" (p. 61) but defended the use of the work by focusing on the classroom practice that was a feature of the synthetic phonics approach. "Focusing on the practice observed in the classroom and its supportive context, rather than debating the research, is therefore not without significance for this review" (p. 62, emphasis added). The profound influence that the Clackmannanshire research has had, and is likely to have, means that it is necessary to offer a substantial critique.

The final report of the Clackmannanshire research (Johnston and Watson, 2005) concluded that "the synthetic phonics approach, as part of the reading curriculum, is more effective than the analytic phonics approach" (Johnston and Watson, 2005, p. 9). Johnston and Watson were not the first to compare synthetic and analytic phonics within one research project. Foorman et al. (1997) carried out such a comparison, concluding that "synthetic phonics facilitates skill in phonological analysis relative to analytic phonics and sight-word

methods, but this facilitation does not appear to transfer to gains in word reading" (p. 272). It is useful to compare the two studies in order to reflect on the appropriateness of the methodology.

Foorman et al. worked with children with 'reading disabilities', whereas Johnston and Watson worked with children with a range of reading competence, selected from schools in Clackmannanshire. Foorman et al.'s attention to the selection of participants included a number of measures for ensuring an appropriate sample. These included a review of eligibility testing results for students with reading disabilities in the area. Measures included the individually administered achievement-test scores, intelligence tests scores, Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. By contrast, Johnston and Watson relied on the British Picture Vocabulary Scale. This is insufficiently robust to control for children's general capability before the interventions. Foorman et al. used a parental questionnaire based on previous theory to identify ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. Johnston and Watson used the Clackmannanshire Council School Deprivation Index, which does not assess individual families' circumstances. Specific details about the populations in the Johnston and Watson (2004) experiments are minimal.

Although they gave no indication of the teachers' prior experience, or any measures used to evaluate their effectiveness as teachers, Foorman et al. assessed compliance with the programmes through weekly visits, monitoring checklists and review of teacher journals. Johnston and Watson include no information about compliance or teacher effectiveness in experiment 1. In experiment 2, the programmes were implemented by "one of the authors" although it is not clear which author this was. It is of course possible that *a priori* views about synthetic phonics could have had a beneficial impact on the delivery of synthetic phonics and/or a negative impact on the delivery of analytic phonics.

One of the most significant problems with the Clackmannanshire work is that the research design did not allow for a valid comparison of teaching methods, even where experiment 2 had corrected the error in the design of experiment 1. This is because in both experiments 1 and 2, the different groups were given different amounts of teaching. (The differing numbers of activities between groups is a problem with the Foorman et al. study as well.) In experiment 2, reported in the 2004 paper, only the synthetic phonics groups were taught sounding out, blending and reading of the words in the target list.

The discussion section of the Foorman et al. study is reflective and appropriately cautious. For example they explain that "Demographic variables were clearly

confounded with treatment-group differences. Differences in outcomes between treatment groups were evidenced, but these cannot unambiguously be attributed to the treatments themselves" (p. 272). By contrast, Johnston and Watson are certain about their findings: "It is concluded that synthetic phonics was a more effective approach to teaching reading, spelling and phonemic awareness than analytic phonics" (p. 351).

To claim an advantage for one approach to the teaching of reading over another, it is important that gains are shown for comprehension, not just for decoding and related skills. The comprehension findings reported in the Clackmannanshire research are somewhat unclear. In experiment 1, at the first post-test, comprehension test outcomes are not reported. At the second post-test in experiment 1 it is reported that, "On the test of reading comprehension (Primary Reading Test, France, 1981), there was no significant difference between groups" (Johnston and Watson, 2004, p. 339). Experiment 2 was the more important because the authors corrected the problem they had recognised with experiment 1, in which letters had not been taught at the same rate to the different groups. But in experiment 2, no test for comprehension is reported. The 2005 report repeats much of this information, but adds an analysis of outcomes from primary 2 to primary 7. It is claimed that "In Primary 2 the children were comprehending what they read 7 months ahead of their chronological age, but by primary 7 this had dropped to a 3.5 months advantage" (p. 66).

Given that comprehension scores were not reported for experiment 2, these gains cannot be attributed to the influence of the synthetic phonics approach. The claims made for comprehension are further complicated by the fact that the "Primary Reading Test (France, 1981)" was used to test the children in primary 2 and primary 3 but this was changed to the "Group Reading Test (Macmillan Unit, 2000)" to test children in primary 4 to primary 7. Although it is claimed that there was a 3.5 months advantage for the experimental group on comprehension, there was, by this stage, no control group: comparison was made against the norm for chronological age. So it is not clear whether the children's experience of synthetic phonics improved their comprehension.

In summary, although the Clackmannanshire research raises some interesting questions about the rate of phonics teaching, it has some significant limitations:

- Controls for children's levels of prior attainment and development lacked rigour.
- The socio-economic backgrounds of the children were not adequately assessed.
- Very little information was given about the schools: for example, their effectiveness.

- The experience and effectiveness of the people implementing the programmes was not adequately controlled.
- Experiments 1 and 2 were not valid comparisons of the synthetic phonics teaching method versus the analytic phonics teaching method because the different groups were taught different amounts.
- Reading comprehension was not significantly improved by the synthetic phonics approach.

In view of these limitations it is very difficult to see why this study, as opposed to any of the other studies covered in the two meta-analyses, was singled out by the Rose review other than because of its high media profile and because it was politically expedient to do so.

## Conclusion

The Rose Report's conclusion that synthetic phonics should be adopted nationally as the preferred method for the teaching of early reading is not supported by research evidence. The available research evidence supports systematic tuition in phonics at a variety of levels (e.g. phoneme, onset-rime) combined with meaningful experiences with print. The Rose Report's conclusions are based on assertion rather than rigorous analysis of appropriate evidence, as the following extract indicates:

*"Having followed those directions, and notwithstanding the uncertainties of research, there is much convincing evidence to show from the practice observed that, as generally understood, 'synthetic' phonics is the form of systematic phonic work that offers the best route to becoming skilled readers"* (Rose, 2006, p. 19).

The ambiguous notion of "leading edge practice" is used as a rationale for the opinions in the report. The lack of attention to research evidence seriously calls into question the extent to which the remit for a "thorough examination of the available evidence and engagement with the teaching profession and education experts" (p. 19) has been met.

Despite these serious omissions, the Rose Report has already begun to have a direct impact on national educational policy in the United Kingdom. This can be seen in the consultation that was initiated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority:

### *"Review of early reading"*

*In June 2005 Jim Rose led an independent review on best practice in teaching early reading. The final review was published in March 2006. It recommends that:*

- *'High quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the review should be taught discretely. The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in*

*learning to decode (to read) and encode (to write/spell) print'.*

- *'For most children, high quality, systematic phonic work should start by the age of five, taking full account of professional judgements of children's developing abilities and the need to embed this work within a broad and rich curriculum'.*

### *Implications of the review*

*The Secretary of State for Education has decided that the findings of the review should be secured through the revised framework for teaching literacy, currently being developed by the Primary National Strategy, and through changes to:*

- *the key stage 1 English programme of study for reading*
- *an early learning goal"* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006b, p. 1).

Particularly worrying for the future of children going to school in England was the proposal to make changes to the programmes of study in the National Curriculum, which unlike the Primary National Strategy literacy Framework, are a legal requirement. The main proposal was to replace the following wording:

### *"Reading strategies"*

*1 To read with fluency, accuracy, understanding and enjoyment, pupils should be taught to use a range of strategies to make sense of what they read"* (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1999, p. 46, emphasis added).

with this:

### *"Reading Strategies"*

*1. Pupils should be taught to read with fluency, accuracy, understanding and enjoyment"* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006b, p. 2).

The consultation ran for 12 weeks from 8 May to 31 July 2006. It is claimed that a leaflet raising awareness of the consultation was sent to Key Stage 1 schools, foundation-stage settings and other key partners and stakeholders. During a keynote speech that one of the authors of this paper gave to a national early years conference, the audience was asked if anyone had seen the consultation leaflet. Not one of the delegates, a mixture of early years practitioners, local authority workers and academics, indicated that they had seen it.

However, the report of the consultation shows that there were 568 respondents, 372 of whom answered question 1 about the National Curriculum, a question which required a yes or no response. Of these, 286 agreed with the change, which resulted in deletion from the National Curriculum of the explicit mention of use of a range of strategies to make sense of what is being read. Yet somewhat contradictorily, in the 'further comments' space on the consultation form,

“The most common comment, cited by a third (32 per cent) of respondents, [was] that a variety of teaching/learning methods needs to be used alongside phonics, including contextual understanding” (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2006a, p. 13). In our opinion, the lack of publicity about the consultation and the very small number of respondents means that the statutory change to England’s National Curriculum cannot be regarded as legitimate.

The Rose Report concludes with the signal of stronger state intervention in the training of teachers: “effective monitoring of the teaching and learning of phonic work by those in positions of leadership” will be required and this “priority must be reflected in the effective training of the teaching force” (Rose, 2006, p. 21). In view of the way that the NLS Framework for Teaching was enforced by OfSTED in schools and teacher-training institutions, and the growing realisation of the problems caused by its inadequacies, the Rose Report’s recommendations make worrying reading. Furthermore, in our view, the Rose Report provides the most prescriptive, rigid and limited view of what it means to teach early reading to have appeared in England. The United Kingdom Literacy Association’s response to Rose’s interim report reminds us of a more appropriate reading curriculum:

*“Best practice in the teaching of early reading brings together two key components: the acquisition of the alphabetic principle and comprehension. These components should not be developed in isolation. Best practice integrates skills teaching with more authentic, contextually-grounded literacy activities, responding to the interests of the learner and the literacy contexts of their homes and communities”* (United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA), 2005, p. 3).

The conclusion of the Rose Report, that teachers and trainee teachers should be required to teach reading through synthetic phonics, “first and fast” is, in our view, wrong. In the light of this, there is a pressing need for the government’s requirements and guidelines for early reading to be subject to further critical scrutiny in the hope that a more balanced approach to reading may once more prevail.

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**CONTACT THE AUTHORS:**  
 Dominic Wyse and Morag Styles, Faculty  
 of Education, University of Cambridge,  
 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 2PQ, UK.  
 e-mails: bdw28@cam.ac.uk and  
 ms104@cam.ac.uk

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