

# Phonics debate sorts friends from the literally deluded

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One of the first friends I made when I moved to Melbourne was heavily involved in student politics. Although I knew nothing about it, I was intrigued by her world of deals, alliances and factions, so complex and arcane. To make it easier for me to understand, my friend would divide her milieu into ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’. Like Glinda asking Dorothy, “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?”, this simple distinction stripped things right back, allowing me to instantly distinguish who was on the side of righteousness, and who was not.

With my university days long gone, and small children looming large instead, my focus has moved to the other end of the educational spectrum. Consequently, I’ve been updating my goodies and baddies list. And instead of dividing people based on how they spell “womyn’s room”, I find myself drawing a line on the grounds of their attitude to the teaching of literacy. For me, the goodies are those who embrace what’s known as explicit systematic phonics, while the baddies are the proponents of what’s generally referred to as the “balanced literacy” approach. For those who aren’t teachers, don’t have children, and don’t remember their own primary school years, a phonics approach involves instructing beginners to focus on the structure of a word. Young children are taught to identify the sounds represented by individual letters and their combinations, and to sound words out, in order to decode them. So, a new reader will learn to read the word “cat” by sounding out “c-a-t”.

By contrast, balanced literacy teaching draws upon a variety of techniques, but most of them come from the non-evidence-based “whole language” approach. This encourages beginners to guess words, based on accompanying pictures, sentence structure, first letters and other cues, only sounding out words as a last resort.

In recent decades, arguments about how best to teach reading and writing have blown up into a fully fledged literacy war, with feelings on both sides running high. Yet the objective evidence is incontrovertible. Explicit systematic phonics (where phonics is taught explicitly as a distinct strand of the curriculum) has been shown to be far more effective than its rivals, achieving the best outcomes for the greatest number of beginners.

In response to the overwhelming evidence, the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL) made the recommendation that “teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency”. Yet the majority of our primary schools are still a long way from implementing these recommendations, instead treating phonics as a small part of the literacy program, teaching it in a way that is at best ad hoc and inconsistent.

A fundamental problem is that a generation of teachers, through no fault of their own, were never trained or equipped to teach systematic phonics. Instead, the faddish whole language approach was embraced



at an institutional level. And, as it is with institutional fads, once this commitment was made, it became very difficult to change course.

What often muddies the debate is the fact that many children will learn to read proficiently using a balanced literacy approach. But crucially, a significant minority of kids will not. Some of these children will bumble through eventually, probably with their self-confidence and their attitude to reading permanently damaged. But some kids never will. And they are the real victims, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, with parents unable to access, or afford, effective remedial interventions.

Many will argue that my goodies-verses-baddies analysis is too simplistic. Things are rarely so clear-cut, and we should look for the nuance in any debate. After all, isn't it just a matter of opinion? Well, no. That's the point. Some beliefs are not mere opinion, and to treat them as such is intellectual cowardice.

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isn't does everyone a disservice. How we should teach literacy is similarly unambiguous.

Back at university, it seemed to me as if my friend and her fellows were playing at being politicians, practising for real world politics, in the relatively safe space of the campus. Sadly, the question of how we should teach literacy is not similarly safe, nor is it consequence-free. Because learning to read and write is a threshold skill. All other learning suffers if a child hasn't mastered it. And ensuring that every child has the best possible chance is something that should matter to us all.

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