

# Requiem for a straw man

“... and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though performed at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.” – Hamlet

There is a common refrain in the discourse about teaching reading that almost immediately derails the debate, and which ensures that people are talking at cross-purposes. This does nothing to advance the cause of improved reading teaching, which is the cornerstone of a good education.

The misunderstanding is apparent every time someone proclaims that “there is more to reading than just the words on the page”. Surely this must be one of the most trite statements possible with regard to teaching reading. Of course there is more to it than that – otherwise why would anyone bother to read? The obvious facility of this position tends to suggest that the speaker is avoiding the issues – or else holds a prejudiced, and uninformed, view of what proponents of effective decoding teaching are actually advocating.

Those who propound good phonics instruction do so because it is a means to several related ends, ends with which almost every teacher would whole-heartedly concur: improved comprehension, access to background knowledge, development of imagination and empathy, and a love of literature. It is essential for us all to acknowledge that these are important points of agreement in an often conflicted and highly emotive field. Those who advocate phonics do so because they believe its effective inclusion in the curriculum will achieve these goals better than it if was left out.

Equally, those who propound phonics do not do so because they are in favour of rote, drill-and-kill, or some linguistic form of Pavlovian conditioning. They do so because they know that phonics is what children need to know, and decoding accurately and fluently is what they need to do, in order to support those longer-term aims.

It is important to stress the *what* in that last sentence. Phonics (i.e., knowledge of sound-spelling relationships) is a body of knowledge which students will need to recall automatically and effortlessly for the rest of their lives. As such, it needs to have a systematic organisation within the curriculum, and, just as importantly, in the teacher’s mind. For many teachers, this is commonplace; they simply see phonics as an aspect of curriculum and try to ensure that it is taught well, both in its discrete components and how it is integrated with the wider curriculum.

For others, though, a systematised body of knowledge seems too didactic. This is particularly so where theories of child development with discovery as the main focus of learning hold sway. In this view, children should find things out for themselves, and so the environment is arranged in ways that are intended to stimulate their imagination and creativity. Children encounter books and print, they talk about them, they make links between words and pictures, and they are encouraged to think from the ‘top down’, to infer what



**James  
Murphy**



the text says from a general sense of what the story is about. While all this is often stimulating, it does not work well as a comprehensive system for teaching children to read.

The biggest problem with this approach is that it actually works for some children. Most children can actually intuit much of the English alphabetic code, given time and opportunity. Why is this a problem? Because for teachers it leads to what one researcher called “intermittent reinforcement” – just enough reward to harden our behaviour into a habit. Cognitivists might call it ‘confirmation bias’ – we attend to those success stories that confirm our preferred ways of doing things. So when some children pick up reading anyway, we can say, “See, Samantha learned to read this way. But Simon didn’t, so there must be something about Simon that’s causing the problem.” As a result, all children learn to read more slowly than they might, and some do not learn very much at all.

What is puzzling is that those who contest phonics do so in the face of overwhelming evidence that teaching this body of knowledge systematically is of great benefit to children’s emotional and cognitive development. Conversely, failure to learn reading – something that seems to afflict about 20% of children not taught systematically – has ongoing and debilitating effects on achievement, self-esteem, mental

health and behaviour. And that’s just during the school years. The effects of low literacy beyond that are enduring and pervasive.

So why oppose something that massively reduces the incidence of illiteracy, and greatly enhances children’s life chances? Writing off phonics teaching as a ‘one-trick pony’ or ‘barking at print’ won’t cut it. There is indeed a lot more to reading than just phonics. In the same way, there is a lot more to being an athlete than just fitness, but you won’t get far without it.

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*James Murphy has worked in secondary schools in New Zealand and the UK for 30 years, as an English teacher, Head of English and senior leader. He holds a Master’s degree in Education with Distinction from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and a post-graduate diploma in special teaching needs. Since 2016 he has been working full-time with Thinking Reading to develop robust systems for implementation and evaluation. He is a regular speaker at researchED conferences, an occasional media contributor, and blogger.  
Twitter: @HoratioSpeaks  
Email: jmurphy@thinkingreading.net  
Blogs: <https://thinkingreadingwritings.wordpress.com> and <https://horatiospeaks.wordpress.com>  
Web: [www.thinkingreading.net](http://www.thinkingreading.net)*