

Literacy makeover: educational research and the public interest on prime time

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Abstract

Background

This study addresses four different theoretical and policy contexts:

1. The long-standing, on-going debate about how best to teach children how to read and, more specifically, the current controversy over synthetic phonics teaching in England.
2. Theories of deliberative democracy, and the particular problems of how the mass media facilitate and/or suppress public discourse, and how academic experts should participate in the public sphere.
3. The affordances and constraints of television news reporting, and in particular the emergence of the makeover reality television genre as a model for current affairs reporting.
4. The “evidence-based policy” movement in educational research.

Questions and purpose

How are educational problems represented in the mass media? How do and should academic researchers participate in public debates about these problems? This article examines a prominent media event – BBC *Newsnight*'s reports on synthetic phonics teaching – in order to reflect upon the relationship between educational research, the media and the treatment of educational problems in the public sphere.

Research Design

This interpretive study is based primarily upon critical analysis of three news reports, which was informed by rhetorical criticism, genre analysis, ethnographic research of the educational programme represented, and theoretical concerns about the interaction of research, the mass media and the public sphere. Key participants in the media event were also interviewed.

Findings

The prestigious news programme has poorly served public debate: by narrowing the problem of educational improvement to a question of teaching method, by promoting a “makeover” approach to school reform, and by casting the issue in the inherited yet inadequate terms of the traditional “reading wars” frame.

The two educational researchers appearing on the programme adopted different rhetorical strategies: one invoked his academic authority and acted as an epistemological gatekeeper. The second, who was deemed to be more successful, addressed viewers as consumers of educational goods and couched her academic concerns in everyday language.

Conclusions

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The case study has implications for the way educational researchers communicate their ideas to the general public. In particular, it raises questions about the desirability and likely effectiveness of the currently popular strategy to maximise research influence through the promotion of “evidence-based” policy.

Literacy makeover: educational research and the public interest on prime time

Adam Lefstein¹

How are educational problems represented in the mass media? How do and should academic researchers participate in public debates about these problems? This article examines a prominent media event – BBC *Newsnight*'s reports on synthetic phonics teaching – in order to reflect upon the relationship between educational research, the media and the treatment of educational problems in the public sphere. I argue that the prestigious news programme has poorly served public debate – by narrowing the problem of educational improvement to a question of teaching method, by promoting a “makeover” approach to school reform, and by casting the issue in the inherited terms of the traditional “reading wars” frame.

Literacy crises come and go. Practitioners and researchers assume the customary positions provided by the on-going debate – traditionalists blaming progressivist pedagogy and vice versa – or lay low until the storm passes. Either way, in the words of *Ecclesiastes*, “what has been is what will be... there is nothing new under the sun.” Thus one is tempted to dismiss this latest flare up in the “reading wars”. Though much of this recent skirmish resembles previous ones, it is precisely this similarity that makes new developments so difficult to detect. In the following exposition I will necessarily cover some familiar ground – e.g. the tendency of

¹ I would like to thank participants in the media event – Henrietta Dombey, Ruth Miskin, Carol Rubra, and Dominic Wyse – for their gracious and helpful responses to earlier drafts of this article. Thanks are also due to Leah Austin, Lyn Corno, Sarah Donetto, Sharon Gewirtz, Sharon Gilad, Joshua Glazer, Walter Heinecke, Jenny Jenkins, Bethan Marshall, Pete Medway, Ben Rampton, Brian Street and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism, and to Caroline Dover, Andy Kuper, Roland Meeks and Mark Reid for their assistance. I alone bear responsibility for the article's content. This study was made possible by an ESRC Fellowship (PTA-026-27-0814).

television to oversimplify complex issues – in order to arrive at what I consider to be most interesting in this case:

- the migration of the makeover genre from entertainment to current affairs programming, and its emergence as a frame for thinking about literacy education and school improvement;
- the persistence – despite their inadequacy – of “phonics” and “whole language” as categories for understanding the current debate; and
- the elevated status in the public sphere of “research evidence”, alongside problematic positioning of actual researchers.

I conclude the article with discussion of the implications of the case study for engagement of educational researchers in the televised public sphere, including questions about the desirability and likely effectiveness of the currently popular strategy to maximise research influence through the promotion of “evidence-based” policy.

The public sphere, television and academic knowledge

Deliberative democracy, in contrast to procedural or formal democracy, is based upon the idea that the people should form and exercise their will through reasoned, informed deliberation in the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1984, 1989; see also Kuper, 2005, for a helpful summary and critique). “Public sphere” is a term developed by Habermas (1984, 1989) to designate

a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. (Nancy Fraser, 1992, pp. 110-111)

While the idea of citizens freely exchanging ideas and reaching consensus through deliberation may be appealing in principle, it encounters a number of practical problems in modern democracies. First, most of the issues on the public agenda involve specialised, technical knowledge, which is not commonly accessible to the lay public. Expert involvement is critical in order for rational policy to be adopted, but political problems cannot be reduced to technical issues, wholly subject to expert judgement and control (i.e. a technocracy). Rather, experts need to engage in the public sphere with lay people, incorporating scientific knowledge with practical experience in debates about value and the common good, thereby assisting the public to reach the most rational decision.

Second, most public debate is not conducted in face-to-face encounters; rather, it is mediated by print and broadcast journalism, which play a critical role in shaping the public agenda, informing debate and giving voice to participants (Page, 1996). How the media perform this role – whether in the service of deliberative democracy or its suppression – depends upon a number of factors, including who has access to and control over the media (Garnham, 1992), and – more subtly – how technology, economics and culture interact to privilege certain messages and/or communicators.²

Television, in particular, has been criticised as a threat to the quality of public discourse. Postman (1986), for example, argues that television is good at entertainment, at telling stories, but bad at logic and analysis. Richards and King (2000) note the medium's tendency to gravitate to, highlight and polarise conflict.

² Some observers have cast this issue in terms of media accuracy and ideological bias; indeed, in recent years there has been a proliferation of accusations from right and left concerning the alleged slants of the right-wing corporate media or the dominant clique of liberal journalists (e.g. Alterman, 2003, and Bozell, 2005). Such critiques of media bias problematically assume that an objective representation of reality is possible and, more importantly, ignore factors which have been found to be far more influential in actual news production: e.g. professional norms, cultural traditions and narrative conventions (Schudson, 2002, 2003). This article concentrates on how these latter considerations combine with technological affordances and constraints to shape television journalism.

For Scheur (1999), the main problem with television is that it is intolerant of complexity:

Television... thrives on action, immediacy, specificity, and certainty. It filters out 1) more abstract and conceptual structures or relationships, including systems (which are relationships that interact over time to produce particular results or to maintain a particular balance); 2) causality, particularly remote causal histories and destinies, evolutionary change, and uncertain or incomplete processes of change; 3) context, which is likewise relational and causative; and 4) ambiguity, i.e. uncertainty of meaning, and ambivalence, or uncertainty of value.

In other words, television's communicative structure, converging with its commercial imperatives, systematically rewards what is simpler and punishes what is more complex. (1999, pp. 121-122)

If we accept Scheur's description of the current state of affairs (but not necessarily the technological determinism implied in his argument), then the mediation of the public sphere by television further confounds the issue of expert political participation highlighted above. How can experts, who are typically attuned to the complexity, multiple contexts, history and ambivalence of their professional domains, effectively participate in a medium that "punishes" what they have to say? Moreover, a number of additional structural features militate against academics successfully engaging with television journalism. Bourdieu (1998) emphasises the importance of being a "good guest" – a fast-thinker who adopts the role allotted to him/her and obeys the rules of the game. Bethan Marshall, an educational researcher who frequently appears in the media, explains that producers typically position academic commentators as advocates for one side or the other, rather than in the role of impartial analyst, for which most academics have been socialised.³

These concerns frame the case study discussed below: How did *Newsnight* contribute to and shape public debate over synthetic phonics teaching? And how did education scientists and practitioners engage with the television medium?

³ Comments made at a research seminar at King's College London on January 17, 2006. An article by Marshall on this subject is forthcoming in *Cambridge Journal of Education*.

Case study context

Placing the case study in immediate historical context requires a brief outline of current English literacy policy and associated controversies.⁴ Thinking about literacy instruction (but not necessarily classroom practice⁵) in English schools has been dominated since the 1960s by progressivist whole language or “real books” philosophy. This general consensus was eroded by a conservative reaction, which included a series of reports on allegedly falling standards (e.g. Turner’s *Sponsored Reading Failure* of 1990), which were attributed to a perceived lack of phonics teaching. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) *Framework for teaching* (DfEE, 1998) echoed some of these concerns in its explanation of reading:

Most teachers know about all these [range of strategies for reading], but have often been over-cautious about the teaching of phonics – sounds and spelling. It is vital that pupils are taught to use these word level strategies effectively. Research evidence shows that pupils do not learn to distinguish between the different sounds of words simply by being exposed to books. They need to be taught to do this... At Key Stage 1, there should be a strong and systematic emphasis on the teaching of phonics and other word level skills.

While whole language advocates criticised the NLS for narrowly defining literacy and overemphasising phonics (e.g. Ashley et. al., 2005), proponents of phonics argued that the NLS had not gone far enough – that by mixing phonetic decoding with other “searchlights” the Strategy distracts and confuses children.

Initial improvements achieved by the National Literacy Strategy, as reflected in national standardised tests, were encouraging, but progress appeared to have stalled after the Strategy’s third year (see Earl et. al., 2003, for an evaluation of the NLS, and Adey, 2003, and Tymms, 2004, for sceptical interpretations). Motivated by an

⁴ My story is in many ways very English, e.g. it involves New Labour and Conservative party politics, the National Literacy Strategy and the British Broadcasting Company. However, global political, educational and media trends are such that much of the case will be recognizable to readers from around the world, and its lessons bear upon the work of educational researchers internationally.

⁵ The ascendance of progressivist discourse was evidently not matched by a similar transformation of practice (Darling, 1994); for evidence regarding the teaching of phonics see Cox (1995, pp. 49-50).

“unacceptably high” rate of failure, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills conducted a series of hearings between November 2004 and February 2005 on competing methods for teaching reading. The Committee’s conclusions, published in March 2005, included a call for immediate review of the place of synthetic phonics in the National Literacy Strategy and a study comparing the current, mixed approach with a “phonics fast, first and only” model. Synthetic phonics was also championed by the opposition Conservative party in their campaign prior to the May 6 elections.

These political developments were accompanied by growing media interest in the issue. In the most comprehensive and in-depth coverage, *Newsnight*, the BBC’s flagship television news programme, investigated the implementation of a synthetic phonics intervention in an East London school with “some of the worst national curriculum results in the country”. The producers gave Ruth Miskin, charismatic developer of *Read, Write Inc.* and a former Headteacher, 16 weeks to “turn the school around”. Miskin coached staff at the school in implementing *Read, Write Inc.*, a commercial synthetic phonics programme with a comprehensive approach to school improvement, which includes curricular materials, teacher training, a pedagogical model, ongoing assessment, grouping arrangements, and organisational components.⁶ A film crew visited the school periodically, and *Newsnight* broadcast three in-depth reports on the “experiment” (on May 26, June 20, and July 20, 2005).⁷ These reports were accompanied by panel discussions in the studio with prominent educational researchers and politicians as guests.

⁶ See the programme’s website at <http://www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com/>. More aspects of the programme are discussed below.

⁷ Two additional programmes (on June 7 and December 1) discussed the synthetic phonics intervention in the context of other reports. The reports can currently be viewed on-line at the BBC website, which also includes a brief textual summary of the series: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/4584491.stm>, and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/4700537.stm>.

This media event presents an excellent opportunity to study the way educational research, policy and practice are represented in the public sphere, and how the issues involved are moulded in public debate, for a number of reasons. First, the issue of emergent literacy instruction is one of the most researched and discussed topics in education, yielding, for example, a series of recent systematic reviews (Snow, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000), which also aroused numerous critical responses (e.g. Allington, 2002; Cunningham, 2001; Larson, 2001). Second, “what the research says” was a major issue in the *Newsnight* reports, and leading English educational researchers were given opportunities to contribute to the debate.

Third, *Newsnight* enjoys an international reputation as a television news programme of the highest standards. In 2005 it won Media Tenor’s “Global TV award” based on objectivity, diversity, range of issues and balance. *Newsnight*’s self-description directly defies the characterisations of television discussed above. Its current Editor explains *Newsnight*’s mission:

Television news has a lot to be said for it, but *Newsnight* has always lived on the edge of that world. In news, nuances tend to be ironed out, blemishes covered up, stories packaged. On *Newsnight* we aim to keep the rough edges, explain the awkward details. (Barron, 2006)

The show’s aims include “to give you the best daily analysis of news and current affairs on television”, “to help make sense of it all” and “to break original stories, analyse developments in depth and put it all in perspective”. Moreover, since it is run by the BBC, it is not subject to the same commercial pressures as corporate media outlets. In short, if any television news programme can be expected to break the *Sound-bite Society* mould, it should be *Newsnight*.

Fourth, I have previously conducted ethnographic research on the implementation of *Read, Write Inc.* and the National Literacy Strategy in other

schools, thereby giving me a good vantage point from which to comment on the way these programmes have been represented.

Finally, the news reports played a prominent role in a public debate that ultimately led to a policy shift. Then Secretary of State for Education Ruth Kelly appointed a Commission to review the model of teaching reading used in the National Literacy Strategy shortly after the first programme was aired. In December, 2005, the Commission announced its interim findings, including the recommendation that “pupils should be taught to use the knowledge and skills that define synthetic phonic work as their first strategy in decoding and encoding print” (Rose, 2005, p. 26).

Method

This interpretive study is based primarily upon critical analysis of three news reports. These reports were video-taped, viewed repeatedly and transcribed (including, in some cases, shot-by-shot annotation of setting, camera angle, action and audio track). My interpretation of this video data was informed by previous ethnographic research I conducted on the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy and the *Read, Write, Inc.* programme,⁸ rhetorical criticism (e.g. Bitzer, 1968), genre analysis (e.g. Briggs & Bauman, 1992), and the theoretical concerns introduced above. I interrogated the programmes with regard to the ways in which key concepts and actors were framed: the “problem” and “solution”, reading and its instruction, literacy and its consequences, educational change, teachers, pupils, parents, reformers and researchers. I was especially attuned to what Agar (1996) calls “rich points” – dissonances between my own understandings about educational improvement, literacy

⁸ My research on the NLS included participant-observation in lessons and staff activities, interviews with teachers, and audio-recording of lessons in one school over the course of the 2003-4 school year. My study of the *Read, Write, Inc.* programme includes participant-observation in lessons and staff activities, interviews with teachers, and audio-recording of lessons in one school for 10 weeks in Spring 2003; participant observation in two training sessions; and a number of interviews with its Director, Ruth Miskin.

and *Read, Write, Inc.* and the way these topics were represented by *Newsnight*. Initial ideas that emerged from one segment of the video data were systematically checked against the rest of the corpus. I shared my analysis with and interviewed key participants in the media event,⁹ which led to revision of some of my conclusions and, in some cases, incorporation of rival perspectives into this article.

Ultimately, given the subjective nature of all interpretation, and especially in light of the article's ambition to comment on cultural trends that transcend the specifics of this particular case, readers are encouraged to engage critically with my analysis and develop their own judgements. To this end, the article includes long sequences of data transcriptions and the address for viewing the reports on-line.

***Newsnight's* synthetic phonics reports**

The first episode introduces the pupils, teachers and school, and a challenge: Can Ruth Miskin get every child in this failing school to read within 16 weeks? The second instalment reports that the school has made encouraging progress, but that it is battling discipline and attendance problems. The third and final report proclaims the experiment an unmitigated success, details the progress attained and discusses the possibility of replicating the achievements in all English schools. Each episode is followed by a studio debate or interview: with Miskin and Dominic Wyse (Lecturer in Primary Education at Cambridge University) following the first episode, with David Cameron (opposition party Shadow Education Secretary) after the second, and with Henrietta Dombey (Professor of Literacy at Brighton University) and Nick Gibb (opposition party Education spokesman) after the third episode. The reports recount the intervention to transform the teaching of reading in one school, while the studio

⁹ I corresponded with the academic experts appearing on the first and third shows, and interviewed Ruth Miskin and *BBC* producer Carol Rubra.

debates examine its wider implications: How generalisable is this “experiment”?

Should synthetic phonics replace the NLS model? In the following section I describe and analyse the reports; in the next section I examine the studio debates.

The first episode: Introducing the problem and solution

Newsnight presenter Kirsty Wark introduces the first report thus:

One in five children in England and Wales leave primary school unable to read or write properly. Following some startling research from primary schools in Clackmannanshire which found that teaching reading through synthetic phonics resulted in children achieving a reading age three and a half years ahead of their actual age, the Select Committee on Education has strongly recommended an immediate review of the way we teach children to read. We’ve learned that the Government is planning to look again at its National Literacy Strategy. And in the wake of that, *Newsnight* has gained exclusive access to a struggling Primary school in London, where the Headteacher has brought in a phonics expert to try to emulate Clackmannanshire’s success. We’ll be following their progress over the next few weeks. Here’s Jackie Long’s first report.

Jackie Long announces that “Britannia Village primary school is in the grip of a revolution: a radical plan to teach the children to read.” The school, which is located “in a deprived area of East London”, has “some of the worst National Curriculum results in the country... in the league tables, out of around 13,500 primary schools, it sits in the bottom 200”. To demonstrate just how poorly Britannia Village pupils read, three further sources of evidence are provided. First, we are introduced to two pupils, Marie-Paul Lukun and Eddie Jackson-Cash, who are 9 and 8 years-old respectively, but whose reading levels are well below the norms for their ages. The camera focuses on Marie-Paul’s face as she struggles to sound out the word “drank”. Eddie has an easier time of it, but is reading “My Dog Ned”, a rudimentary book with sentences of monosyllabic words (e.g. “Sniff, sniff, rub, rub. ‘Get up Ned,’ said the vet”). He seems oblivious to his underachievement, appearing pleased that he knew all the words.

Second, *Newsnight* arranges a photogenic “test” of children’s word recognition: the words “Thank”, “Rubbed”, “Bright” and “Mine” are written on a pane of glass. One by one, children run across the room, stop in front of the pane, try to read the words and then run off. By positioning the camera in back of the glass, the programme captures their expressions of bewilderment. Their exuberant running to and from the test provides a striking contrast to their dumbfounded responses of “dunno” to most of the words.

Third, Long quotes statistics about the scope of the problem at the school:

Three quarters of 6-7 year olds are failing to reach even the national average for reading. A third of 7-8 year olds have only just begun to read at all. And by year 4, that’s 8-9 year olds, there’s been no improvement. 70% are two or more years behind where they should be.

What are the ramifications of this literacy problem? Headteacher Linda-May Bingham explains that poor reading abilities prevent pupils from accessing the rest of the curriculum. Later we meet Geraldine Jackson-Cash, Eddie’s mother, who attributes Eddie’s behavioural problems to his poor reading skills, and expresses fear that her 8-year-old son may “go down that road” into crime. Six months ago she phoned the local education authority to “beg for help”:

If something isn’t done quickly with, you know, his school environment, with the school itself – if somebody doesn’t step in, and start pulling the school the right way, then my son is going to end up being one of these children that you don’t notice until you hear on the TV that he’s just killed someone.

This startling prediction resonates with a widespread view of literacy as the key factor in a “great divide” separating civilised and primitive societies (see Street, 1984, for critical review). Literacy is thus linked not only to cognitive and economic consequences, but to the moral and social order.

Jackson-Cash appeals for external help, for someone to “step in”; this outside intervention is precisely what *Newsnight* documents. Headteacher Bingham turns to

Ruth Miskin, developer of *Read, Write, Inc.*, to help the school tackle its literacy problem. *Newsnight* glosses Miskin's synthetic phonics method as follows (in Long's recapitulation at the beginning of the second episode):

First you teach the children the individual letter sounds. [Seven pupils hold up letter cards and pronounce the phonemes: "p", "rrr", "oh", "g", "rrr", "eh", "sss".] Then they learn to blend the sounds together. [The pupils say in unison, "proh", "gress".] So instead of guessing, children are able to sound out the words they don't know. [Pupils: "progress!"]

The viewer receives only momentary glimpses of this method in action: a number of scenes from the teacher training sessions, in which Miskin demonstrates and the teachers practice pronouncing, "rrr", "mmm", "zzz"; a teacher pointing to a chart of graphemes and prompting the pupils to say the appropriate phoneme; pupils reciting sounds and making hand motions; a teacher and her pupils repeating, "mmm, mountain, mmm, mountain". Outside of the context of a coherent lesson, these fragments are all rather baffling. I showed a colleague one segment and asked her what she thought was going on. "Voodoo?" she guessed. Thus synthetic phonics teaching is presented to the uninitiated: a set of secret incantations that magically transform pupils into skilled readers. Miskin imparts this knowledge to the teachers, who in turn pass it on to their pupils.

This characterisation is of course tongue-in-cheek, but not entirely so: by isolating phonics from the rest of the reading process, and by isolating teaching method from other aspects of schooling, the reports mystify literacy education and its improvement. Consider the reports' omissions. First, the show ignores a host of problems with the "teach the individual letter sounds... and blend the sounds together" approach: reading is more than merely sounding out words (it is principally about meaning), pronunciations vary with accent, and English orthography is not transparent – i.e. one letter refers to more than one sound, and many spellings are

irregular. Although these issues are central to the phonics-whole language debate, and are thoughtfully addressed by Miskin in her training sessions, they are conspicuously absent from the *Newsnight* reports.

Moreover, the *Read, Write Inc.* programme tackles school improvement with a comprehensive approach that includes much more than the transmission of a phonetic decoding strategy. The programme features the following innovations to teaching, learning and school organisation:

- Teaching manner: participation, positive teaching, pace, purpose and passion
- Cooperative learning
- Classroom management rituals and techniques
- Homogeneous grouping by ability (rather than age)
- Regular diagnostic assessment and regrouping of pupils
- Employment of teaching assistants in teaching groups
- Ongoing monitoring of and support for teachers
- “Ten minute tutoring” for pupils falling behind
- Appointment of programme manager

Each of these elements are emphasised by Miskin in her training sessions and in interviews with me as being critical to the programme’s success, but were either omitted or barely mentioned in the *Newsnight* reports.¹⁰ The complexity of teaching reading and changing schools is reduced to “learning their sounds”.¹¹

¹⁰ Once the reporter alludes to “partner work” being an important part of the scheme, occasionally mentions streaming, and notes the use of teaching assistants as controversial policy, but does not elaborate on these facets, nor discuss their importance to the programme. In the third episode, Jackie Long wonders whether any other programme using streaming and smaller classes would have succeeded just as well, thereby acknowledging the importance of these elements to the success of *Read, Write, Inc.*, but at the same time suggesting that it is possible to isolate *the one key ingredient* in successful literacy teaching (i.e. streaming and smaller classes instead of synthetic phonics).

¹¹ The programme producer disagrees with my analysis here. I discuss her perspective at the end of this section.

I want to signal here another issue, to which I shall return later. Miskin's approach to the teaching of reading doesn't fit neatly into the stereotypical reading wars categories. On the one hand, structured phonics knowledge is the content of instruction, as expected from a traditional phonics position. On the other hand, the means of teaching and learning – especially the abundant use of cooperative learning – are more typical of progressivist, whole language pedagogy.

The second episode: Complications and adversity

A key theme of this episode is progress. Seven pupils pronounce the word, phoneme by phoneme, at the beginning and end of the report, and it is also repeatedly invoked throughout to describe what's happening in the school. The episode starts with a recapitulation of the problem and solution as described in the first report, including many shots of energetic teachers conducting phonics lessons. In her gloss of these shots, Long reports, "it's hard work, but the early signs are encouraging". Headteacher Bingham explains the achievements in each of the various pupil groups, summarising, "everywhere we are seeing progress".

However, immediately afterwards (3:45 into the episode) the report cuts to a scene of two adults wrestling with an out-of-control child. "But not everything is going quite so well," Long explains. "Staff have been forced to restrain a pupil". The pupil, whose face is blurred to conceal her identity, screams, "Let go of me". The two adults drag her, feet trailing lifelessly, out of frame. The music turns ominous as Long explains that while this is now a rare occurrence, it used to happen on a daily basis at the school, which was engaged in an "all-consuming battle to maintain order". The topic of pupil discipline is then explored in the rest of the episode: in an interview with two veteran teachers, in an update on Eddie's positive progress (including vis-à-

vis his behaviour), in a scene of a teacher disciplining a disruptive child, and in a discussion of attendance problems. Finally, Long interviews June Turner, “a behaviour specialist who has worked in education for 23 years”, whom *Read, Write, Inc.* has made “optimistic about the children’s future in a way she never thought possible”.

At the end of the episode viewers meet again with Miskin, who is “very confident that... we’re going to see fantastic progress at the end of this term”. Long summarises the report thus:

Success is what this school badly needs. The staff have worked hard to combat the problems which have held the school back in the past. It is moving forward, but can synthetic phonics take the children far enough, fast enough to ever really catch up?

Note the shift in agency. The *staff* have worked hard in past, but responsibility for present and future progress lies with *synthetic phonics*. (I return to this issue below.)

The third episode: Success!

In his introduction to the third and final report, *Newsnight* presenter Eddie Mair summarises its message thus:

Full marks for a learning method that helped the unteachable read. [Cut to children decoding words: “said”, “chip”, “quick”, “want”]. Three months ago these words were beyond these children. Should everyone get the chance to try synthetic phonics?

The episode is structured around a series of before and after shots. We see Marie-Paul Lukun struggling before the *Read, Write, Inc.* intervention, but reading the same text with ease 16 weeks later. Pupils who responded to the sprint-stop-decode-sprint test with shrugs of “dunno” before, now confidently and successfully read all the words. Jackie Long says about this test: “not hugely scientific perhaps, but an illustration of the progress now surging through the school.” The illustration is

further grounded by a battery of impressive statistics: from April to July Year 1 pupils' reading levels improved by an average of one year, Year 2 pupils by an average of four terms, and Years 3 and 4 by five terms or more.

These improvements are shown to be having a positive effect on pupil confidence, participation in and access to other curricular areas. The experience has also had a significant impact on teaching assistant Jane Harris, who has decided that “through the successes that I’ve seen I’m actually going to go on to do a teaching degree. So, yes, it has meant a lot to me”. Finally, Geraldine Jackson-Cash, who feared her son Eddie would “fall into a life of crime and violence” before, now proudly hugs him and says, “I can only see things now going from better to better”.

“Britannia Village Primary has clearly been won over by synthetic phonics”, concludes Long. “Will the reading review panel be as convinced?” She directs this question to Headteacher Bingham, who responds, “Look at my figures.” And given the experiment’s dramatic achievements, how could anyone disagree? The report raises only one objection, which is worthy of being quoted in full.

JACKIE LONG [interviewing three teachers in a classroom]: One of the criticisms is that it’s very prescriptive. It tells you very literally what to do at every stage. Is that a problem for you as teachers? Has that been annoying?

STEPHANIE THOMAS: Yes.

GEORGINA HARRIS: Has it for you?

STEPHANIE THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. Completely. Yeah, it’s – the first week it was nice to have that, you know, level of guidance, and I found it reassuring, but you know after that when you’re doing the same thing every day I get bored, the children get bored, I think it loses its effect to an extent so you know I’ve been happy to bring in some (foreign) ideas to make it the sessions more pacy.

[cut to] JACKIE LONG [monologue on playground]: While most of the teachers in the school say it’s a price worth paying, outside some of the teaching unions remain unconvinced. They’re worried the ongoing reading review will recommend more structured phonics programmes, which they say will undermine the skill of individual teachers. Ruth Miskin is unimpressed.

[cut to] RUTH MISKIN: First of all, when your children are learning their sounds, we are there for them, aren’t we? Not to amuse the teachers. But if that sounds awful, but I mean, the children have just got to know those sounds. And if they

haven't got those sounds they're going absolutely nowhere. So my sympathy is more with the children there.

The reports have juxtaposed three different arguments, which initially appear to be responding to one another, but on closer inspection actually fail to connect. First, teacher Stephanie Thomas is asked whether the prescriptive nature of *Read, Write, Inc.* was a problem and/or annoying. Her response speaks to three issues: the advantage of detailed prescription (reassuring at first), the disadvantage of repetitive structure (teacher boredom, which leads to pupil boredom) and a solution (introducing other ideas to liven up the lessons¹²).

Next, Long represents teaching unions who are unconvinced that the disadvantages of prescriptiveness are a price worth paying.¹³ According to Long, they are concerned that more structured phonics programmes “will undermine the skill of individual teachers”. A plausible argument can be made for such a relationship between government prescription and teacher skill (e.g. Apple, 1981), but it involves a complex line of reasoning, and makes little sense as presented here without elaboration. Moreover, Long misleadingly speaks about the skill of *individual* teachers, rather than the authority and status of the teaching *profession* as a whole.

Newsnight then cuts to Miskin, who is “unimpressed” with this argument. But Miskin does not respond to the deskilling problem, but to some version – we don't hear the exact question – of Thomas' concerns regarding teacher boredom. But whereas Thomas tied her own boredom to pupil engagement and learning, and was

¹² Incidentally, many of the very lively teaching activities witnessed in the programme are not part of the *Read, Write, Inc.* “script” (though not antithetical to its principles): e.g. Jane Harris dancing with her pupils to a sentence in order for them to remember it, the teacher's dramatic performance of a sentence at the beginning of the third episode.

¹³ Long does not specify with whom she has spoken. In their responses to the appointment of the Rose Review, three of England's four teaching unions raised concerns that prescription might interfere with teachers' professional judgement (see Unions' web sites, or <http://www.epolitix.com/EN/ForumBriefs/200506/b28fa140-5f6a-465d-93b5-d077da6410e3.htm> for a summary of responses).

proactive in suggesting a solution, Miskin sets up a stark choice: we must choose between serving the children or “amusing” the teachers.

I have paused to examine this sequence in depth for two reasons. First, it calls to mind Postman’s argument that television is ill-suited to logical argumentation. While this example does not necessarily support such a sweeping claim, it does illustrate how easily and seamlessly arguments can become mangled in the medium. Second, it is noteworthy how the teachers are positioned in this segment. They are not interviewed as experts in their field – addressing, for example, the relative strengths of the scheme in relation to other methods they have used; rather, the teachers are questioned about their personal feelings (i.e. “Has that been annoying?”). Thomas’s answer serves to redirect the question to professional concerns, but the subsequent treatment of her comments presents her as frivolous and self-centred – seeking amusement at the expense of her pupils’ welfare. This representation is especially significant inasmuch as Thomas’s comments are a rare occasion in which one of the teachers appears to be exercising agency.

The reports’ producer, Carol Rubra, graciously responded to and discussed with me an earlier draft of this article; her perspective is instructive. She rejected criticisms regarding the reports’ omissions by noting that “a report for *Newsnight* can rarely compete in 10-15 minutes with the space available in a piece of academic research”. It would certainly be a frivolous and futile exercise to judge television journalism according to the criteria of an academic journal article (or vice-versa, see Hammersley, 2003). The critical issue is not how exhaustive the reports have been in their description of Miskin’s programme, but how the television medium constrains the scope and complexity of news exposition. Likewise, in responding to my analysis of the way the third report juxtaposed Thomas, the unions and Miskin’s responses to

the prescriptiveness issue, Rubra discussed the “conventions of current affairs reporting” and the need to distil a large amount of information into a coherent narrative. The key point here is that a more complex and nuanced exposition would have yielded a less engaging story.

Rubra’s most vigorous disagreement relates to my interpretation of how *Newsnight* positioned the teachers. Indeed, she seemed genuinely distressed by the possibility that the reports may have presented the teachers as anything but “professional agents in control of a very difficult situation”. I don’t doubt her intentions, yet those intentions are severely constrained by the reports’ genre, to which I now turn.

News as reality makeover television

All texts resonate with the voices of other texts that have preceded them. By evoking, imitating, building upon and/or arguing with these inter-textual models and resources, authors and readers make meaning. Analysis of genre offers insight into the frames through which the text is understood, the themes and experiences to which it points, and the people, places and aims caught up in it. The synthetic phonics reports draw upon and weave together resources from a number of different genres. First, they are documentary news, broadcast as part of the prestigious *Newsnight* programme, a framing that lends the reports considerable gravity and credibility. However, they also contain echoes of other forms. The beginning of the third episode recalls a before-and-after advertisement (cf. Postman, 1982, on “The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar”). The reports’ narrative structure resembles that of a heroic fairy tale: a damsel in distress (the school), is rescued by a brave heroine (Miskin)

wielding a magic weapon (synthetic phonics). Most significantly, the reports draw upon the emerging genre of social makeover television.

Makeover television shows, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Changing rooms*, and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, have recently come to dominate prime time television in the U.K., U.S. and elsewhere (Moseley, 2000; Dover & Hill, in press). Most makeover programmes include the following components: a likable, ordinary subject who unfortunately suffers from some lack, e.g. of style, beauty or charm; an expert or experts to “makeover” the subject, transforming her or his person or home, thereby making it stylish, beautiful and/or charming; a description of the makeover process, including further discoveries about the abominable state of the subject’s taste/house/lifestyle/situation; a startling revelation, in which the subject meets her/his new face/home for the first time; and reflection on the makeover’s success, on how much better life has or will become in its wake.

An important element of these programmes, which grants them much of their entertainment value, is the relationship between the subject and expert(s). The former appear hopelessly ignorant, tasteless and incompetent next to the glamorous designer-experts (Philips, 2005). The latter vary: some are gracious and caring (e.g. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*), others playful and sarcastic (e.g. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), and still others firm and brutally honest (e.g. *Supernanny*). Invariably, the expert knows what is best for the subject, and the subject gladly entrusts his/her fate to the expert’s wise judgement, and relinquishes all agency in the face of the latter’s seeming omnipotence. Unlike traditional gardening or home improvement shows, in which the camera focused on the craftsperson’s hands as s/he demonstrated techniques, in makeover programmes the subjects’ and experts’ emotions are the

primary object of interest, and the close-up of the subject's face during the revelation is the climactic moment (Moseley, 2000). Finally, it is important to note the overlapping functions of makeover television programmes as entertainment, information and advertising (Lowrey et. al., 2005). The audience is provided not only with the spectacle of another's transformation, but with details of the products used and, often, information about how to acquire them. The designer's expertise and good taste are thus commodified; by purchasing the strategically placed products, the audience can imitate the makeover in their own lives and thereby participate in the subject's good fortune.

Newsnight employs many aspects of the makeover model. In particular, the reports tell the story of a confident and omnipotent external expert who arrives at the school in order to sort it out. And, with Miskin in the role of the makeover artist, the teachers are naturally positioned in the role of the trusting subjects. Although not a tear-jerker like e.g. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the synthetic phonics reports do expose viewers to the hopes and fears of the show's subjects. Indeed, Long focuses more on the teachers' emotional lives than their approaches to teaching reading. Thus, in an interview at the beginning of the first programme, *Newsnight* uncovers teacher Georgina Harris's fragility and despair. First, Harris expresses confidence that the school is poised to improve with the new programme.

Long asks, "But if it doesn't work?"

"Then maybe I should train to be something else," Harris responds, laughs nervously and looks away. She shrugs her shoulders and looks back at the camera, serious: "I don't know. We don't know where you go from that. And – but we don't think it will fail". And, of course, it does not fail, and in the third episode the

audience is given the opportunity to bask in the warmth of the teachers' pride, the pupils' pleasure and parent Geraldine Jackson-Cash's new-found optimism.

Two variations on the makeover genre are particularly salient to the *Newsnight* reports: *Supernanny* and *Jamie's School Dinners*. *Supernanny* makes over undisciplined children and dysfunctional families. In each episode, viewers meet an unruly child or children and their ineffective and unhappy parent(s). Jo Frost, the "Supernanny", analyses the situation and presents the parents with a plan of action to regain control over their children and restore sanity and happiness to their family life. She typically demonstrates some trick or technique, and then coaches the parents in employing it. Change is not easy for the parents, but eventually they are successful, and all are enormously grateful to Frost and the show.

Supernanny appeals to widespread concerns about anti-social behaviour and the perceived disintegration of the traditional social order.¹⁴ In its treatment, parenting is not appreciably different from interior decorating or gardening, and a few tricks of the trade readily "fix" most problem children. *Newsnight's* reports echo some of the same problems and themes dealt with by *Supernanny*: the fear of uncontrollable children wreaking havoc on society, the objectification of children as problems to be solved (rather than people with whom one develops relationships), and the quick fix solution provided by external experts.

However, unlike *Supernanny* or the other makeover programmes mentioned, *Newsnight's* goals go beyond transforming one person, family or school, entertaining the audience or advertising commodities. As such, *Newsnight* is travelling down a path blazed by Jamie Oliver in his *School Dinners* series. Oliver set out to use his

¹⁴ Indeed, MP Peter Luff said the following about the programme: "...Supernanny, whose wonderful combination of old-fashioned discipline in a modern context every Wednesday on Channel 4 is doing more to be tough on the causes of antisocial behaviour in families up and down the land than the Government have done in seven years" (on the "reviews" section on the show's web-site: <http://www.supernanny.net/about/reviews.asp>).

show to reveal the appalling state of nutrition in British schools and, by making over one Borough, to demonstrate what could be done in all English schools. At the end of the show, Oliver initiated a “Feed me better” campaign and successfully petitioned the government to increase spending on school meals.¹⁵ The success of the campaign has turned its star into the icon of a new “social makeover” genre. Thus, a group of children’s book authors entitled a recent collection of essays decrying the ills of the National Literacy Strategy: “Waiting for a Jamie Oliver” (Ashley et. al., 2005). *Newsnight*’s attempt to “do a Jamie Oliver” used the traditional tools at their disposal: rather than initiating and delivering a petition to the government, they provided opposition spokesmen a convenient platform from which to advance the synthetic phonics agenda.

In concluding this section I would like to pause and reflect upon the proliferation of the makeover genre on and off television. Above I described the expansion of the makeover genre – in topics (from fashion and interior design to parenting), scope (from the makeover of an individual person, home or family to institutions such as school dinners), and setting (from entertainment to news programmes). Is it possible that the logic of the makeover has begun to infiltrate thinking about social policy? Recent English educational policy, such as the National Literacy Strategy, reflects the genre’s assumptions about expert authority, confidence in “what works”, ease of change, the “transferability” of “best practice”, and the limited role of teacher agency. Previously I have criticised this policy as a form of instrumental rationality (Lefstein, 2005), but perhaps it would have been more fitting to have characterised it as the “Supernanny State”: the government assumes the role of Jo Frost, issuing teachers with “best practice” quick fixes that are guaranteed to raise scores (and restore discipline). Moreover, many teachers internalise the role of

¹⁵ See <http://www.feedmebetter.com/>.

passive, agent-less subjects, who put their faith in the wisdom of central management (or at least pretend to do so in order to avoid censure). As such, perhaps the most problematic aspect of the *Newsnight* reports is the way in which they perpetuate and disseminate those teacher subject positions. However, from this perspective, *Newsnight*'s choice of the makeover genre is only fitting: the reports were well-aligned with the way policy is being conducted, and the questions they posed (and omitted) mirror current policy debates more generally.

Educational researchers engaging in (studio) debate

In the preceding section I showed that *Newsnight*'s synthetic phonics reports cast literacy education and its improvement as objects of a makeover, and argued that this genre is a problematic frame for thinking about educational policy. In particular, such a literacy makeover reduces the complexities of school improvement to the question of teaching method and positions teachers as passive subjects dependent upon government expertise and instruction. In this section I examine the role of educational research and researchers in the debate.

One might expect research to play a central role in social makeovers, as a source of would-be makeover artists' expertise or at least legitimacy. And, indeed, the current wave of interest in synthetic phonics was sparked by "some startling research from primary schools in Clackmannanshire", as *Newsnight* broadcaster Kirsty Wark noted in introducing the first report. The validity of this Clackmannanshire study (Johnston & Watson, 2005; see Ellis, 2006, for brief criticism), and similarly of *Newsnight*'s "experiment", were major topics in the studio debates conducted after the first and third reports. Prominent academic experts, both

of whom have written about phonics teaching and the National Literacy Strategy (Dombey, 1999; Wyse, 2000), appeared on the programme opposite synthetic phonics advocates. How did the academic researchers use this opportunity to inform and influence public debate? And how did *Newsnight* position them, educational research and the academic educational establishment they represent?

These questions of course relate to the issue of expert engagement in the television-mediated public sphere elaborated above. Moreover, they speak to the recent movement to increase the policy relevance and influence of educational research by adopting more rigorous, “scientific” research methods, notably random-controlled experimental trials and systematic reviews of research evidence.¹⁶ Advocates of this movement expect that policy-makers will heed (and be disposed to fund) research that can provide definitive answers to questions about “what works” in educational interventions. Critics have raised a number of objections to this approach, especially with regard to the privileging of experimental methodologies, and the practical usefulness of such research findings. Both proponents and critics have largely ignored the role of the public in the formation of policy, assuming a policy arena populated by policy-makers, researchers and (in some cases) practitioners.¹⁷ However, policy involves politics, and policy formation regarding many educational issues is at least partially shaped by public deliberation. This case study contributes to this on-going debate by raising questions about the political effectiveness and desirability of positions associated with the “evidence-based policy” movement.

Generally speaking, in their studio appearances the two researchers criticised the research evidence for synthetic phonics but employed different rhetorical

¹⁶ See, for example, Hargreaves, 1996, 1997; Oakley, 2002; and Slavin, 2002. For critical responses see Berliner, 2002; Hammersley, 1997, 2001; and Lather, 2004. See also the special issue of the journal discussing the *Scientific Research in Education* report (Volume 107, Number 1, January 2005).

¹⁷ An exception is Hammersley (1997), who argues that the main function of educational research is to “inform public debates about educational issues” (p. 149); see also Gewirtz (2004) for an elaboration on the “enlightenment model”.

strategies. Dominic Wyse relied upon his academic authority, invoked through the use of technical language, to act as an “epistemological gatekeeper”, distinguishing between trustworthy and unreliable evidence. As such, his appearance seems well-aligned with the evidence-based policy rhetoric, and he argued for positions dear to the movement. Henrietta Dombey eschewed such academic concerns, instead addressing viewers as consumers in the educational market-place. After describing and contrasting the two approaches, I will argue that the latter strategy is both more effective and more appropriate for the television-mediated public sphere. A final note before undertaking this analysis: *Newsnight* is notorious for making interviewees life difficult, and I admire both Wyse and Dombey for having braved its often hostile environment. Wyse, in particular, faced a difficult constellation with Wark as moderator and Miskin as adversary.

The first interview begins thus:

Newsnight Moderator KIRSTY WARK: ...Dr. Wyse, you've seen the film, you know the Clackman study – if re-reading is the key to everything and this works, then surely everyone should be following this example and teaching pure phonics?

DOMINIC WYSE: I think the key word there is evidence, and so far there isn't, you know, absolute evidence that this is the best way to teach children to read. It's one useful method that needs more evaluation and most of all what it needs is a proper research base.

WARK: But, we have a study in Clackmannanshire where there was different kinds of phonics being used, and there were three different groups, and the pure phonics group were ahead by over three years from their reading age.

WYSE: Yeah, I think what you have to say about the Clackmannanshire study is that it's not been published in a peer-review journal yet, and that's the gold standard for any piece of research.

WARK: But if these kids do much better after 16 weeks – in a sense is that not the anecdotal evidence which is every bit as valuable?

WYSE: Well, of course I don't work on anecdotal evidence, I work on the basis of research evidence. I think one of the key problems with Government policy in recent years is it doesn't appear to have been strongly based on research evidence...

Wark's opening question is what the lawyers would call a leading question: by phrasing it as a statement, and adding the confident "surely", Wark suggests that the only reasonable answer is yes, if this works, then everyone should follow its example. Wyse, however, rejects this apparent common sense, and instead talks about the importance of research evidence and a "proper research base". Wark seems impatient – she wants action, not more research – and raises the Clackmannanshire study as proof of the desirability of the method. But Wyse also rejects this study because it hasn't "been published in a peer-review journal yet". Finally, Wark tries another angle, suggesting that anecdotal evidence is "every bit as valuable", but Wyse remains insistent: the only evidence worth considering is rigorous "scientific" evidence.

This interaction portrays Wark and Wyse as inhabiting two different worlds. Wark moves in the realm of common sense, practical experience and action. Wyse, on the other hand, occupies the high ground of "absolute evidence", "peer review", "gold standards" and "proper research bases". Neither appears willing to engage the other's concerns, and their discussion isn't going anywhere. Next, Wark turns to Ruth Miskin and questions whether any programme with a heavy focus on literacy would succeed just as well as hers. Miskin claims that research evidence and her own "experience of teaching for 25 years" have shown that synthetic phonics is the most effective method. Wark invites Wyse to comment:

WYSE: I think the – the research picture – there's a very good American Reading Panel report which surveyed hundreds of studies on phonics and concluded that statistically there was no great advantage of synthetic phonics, which is what we're talking about, over analytic phonics. And –

WARK: Wait – in laymen's terms analytic phonics is?

WYSE: Well, that's a good question actually [chuckles]. Analytic phonics is basically about taking larger chunks of words, analysing them –

WARK [interrupting]: Look and see.

WYSE: Uh, well, yes.

WARK: But is it – do you think that the way that children learn is about the mix of the way they’re taught, what is on the page, and about how to approach the page rather than the pure sounds?

WYSE: I think the big point about learning to read is there is no simple answer, and anybody [who says

WARK: [Ruth?

WYSE: that one method is the right way, although they might be very talented, they might have a very interesting method, that’s not necessarily the answer.

MISKIN: I don’t go for interesting methods, I go for effective methods. And I’ve taught for years now, we’re talking about 25 years, and over the years we’ve used so many different ways to teach children to read. And it’s only when I was teaching in London and we started to use () synthetic model of teaching reading that we started getting [WARK tries to interject] every single child to learn to read.

At the beginning of this exchange Wyse addresses the issue academically, explaining that “statistically there [is] no great advantage of synthetic phonics... over analytic phonics”. Wark asks him to explain the two methods but to communicate “in laymen’s terms”. Wyse chuckles, as if to say that this topic may be too complicated for the current discussion, and launches into a definition of analytic phonics. Wark, again impatient, interrupts him to summarise his definition as “look and see [sic]”. This is a strange gloss, since Wyse hadn’t said anything to suggest such a characterisation, which indeed is erroneous. Wyse chooses not to contest Wark’s misrepresentation, in part because that would further complicate the definition (itself unstable) and perhaps also on account of being bullied.¹⁸ Next, Wark attempts a different line of inquiry, presenting her understanding of her interviewee’s position on what matters in learning to read, i.e. what she assumes him to be offering instead of “the pure sounds”. Note that Wark’s interventions here reflect an attempt to place the debate into the customary reading wars frame (e.g. invoking the so-called “look and say” method), including positioning Wyse as an advocate of whole language. Wyse

¹⁸ “Look and say” is the teaching of whole words without attending to the individual letters. For a concise explanation of the differences between this approach and the various phonics methods (analytic, synthetic and others), see the National Reading Panel (2000) report, pp. 2-101-5.

declines this position, instead rejecting “simple answers” and the very search for one best method.

In her response, Miskin pounces upon Wyse’s reference (presumably to her work) about “a very interesting method” and starkly contrasts her and Wyse’s different worlds: he takes an “academic interest” in the topic; I’m trying to get results. Also, her repeated emphasis on 25+ years of experience underscores Wyse’s relatively youthful appearance.

In summary, Wark, Miskin and Wyse jointly construct an impression of educational research and practice as belonging to divergent worlds. Miskin’s practical world involves lengthy experience, common sense, a concern with effectiveness, action and answers. Wyse’s academic world is portrayed as research-based, highly specialised, detached and critical. Throughout the exchange Wyse assumes the role of the epistemological gatekeeper, negating all potential knowledge claims as insufficiently rigorous: there’s no absolute evidence, no great advantage, no simple answer, etc. As such, his stance is primarily negative; his only positive recommendation is for more research. Paradoxically, Wark gave considerable attention to the topic of “research evidence”, but antagonised and marginalised the researcher brought in to address that topic.

Brighton University Professor of Literacy Henrietta Dombey’s participation in the studio debate after the third episode provides an example of a different media-researcher encounter. Dombey communicates in simple, straightforward terms, uses concrete examples, and presents a positive alternative to *Newsnight*’s one best method of synthetic phonics. She appears opposite Nick Gibb, Conservative party Education spokesman, who served on the Select Committee for Education that recommended reviewing the National Literacy Strategy.

Newsnight presenter EDDIE MAIR: Professor Dombey, many parents may well have looked at that report and thought, “Wow, I’d like that for my children.”

HENRIETTA DOMBEY: Yes, I think they would. And to have such a wonderful package, to have the attention of the world on the school, to have a charismatic individual come in, with her programme, to have the headteacher so enthused, a new headteacher, who has brought order to the school, and who has enthused all her staff, to have smaller classes, to have all that, yes, parents would want that. But I think most parents would also want their children to be able to understand what they read, and that was not shown in the tests we saw there. And they’d also want their children really to like reading, and again that wasn’t shown. It may be the case there, I don’t know. But the whole package certainly worked. It wasn’t just synthetic phonics that was being tested, it was a whole package.

MAIR: But if the other traditional methods had been tried before and were seen to have failed, surely the presence of the cameras and new discipline at the school would not have the results the headteacher found where every single pupil’s reading improved, some by as much as two years?

DOMBEY: Well this has been shown, actually, in studies carried out by OFSTED, who have compared highly effective schools with much less effective schools in very similar social situations. They have shown that there’s a whole package of things that makes the difference. Yes, phonics teaching – it doesn’t have to be synthetic – in fact actually the most successful schools teach a variety of approaches to word recognition, of which phonics is an essential part. But they also have effective head teachers, they have good home-school relations, where parents are actively involved in helping their children read, and they have an enthusiastic staff who are keen to do the very best by their children and have high expectations. They don’t necessarily follow synthetic phonics.

Mair’s initial question situates the discussion in a very particular context – what parents are probably thinking in the wake of the report – and Dombey directs her response to that audience. In terms of the two worlds metaphor introduced above, Dombey firmly plants herself in the world of lay parents and practice. She agrees with Mair and praises this “wonderful package”, but by highlighting the *package* she introduces her main criticism of *Newsnight*’s experiment: “It wasn’t just synthetic phonics that was being tested, it was a whole package”. Note that she is referring here to a methodological problem – i.e. experimental controls and validity – but altogether avoids academic terminology. Her repeated emphasis on the *package* evokes a familiar world of commercial consumption: don’t let them sell you synthetic phonics, she warns parents, without giving you the rest of the package. Through clever

manipulation of the theme of what parents (should) want, she also introduces two reservations about synthetic phonics teaching: does it advance motivation and comprehension? Again, she could have discussed the research evidence regarding these points, but instead chose to couch them in the concrete terms of what parents want.

But, Mair objects, traditional methods have failed. In this way Mair sets up a (false) dichotomy: one must choose either synthetic phonics or the unsuccessful status quo. Dombey avoids this trap by talking – positively – about what makes schools effective. She appeals to research here, but not academic research and not in any detail: the emphasis is on the world of successful schools and effective headteachers, not the research methods or where they were published.

After this segment, Mair turns to Nick Gibb, whom he characterises as a “huge fan of synthetic phonics”. Gibb responds to Dombey by saying that “you can have all those things [that Dombey mentioned] and the school still not achieve 100% of their children reaching the required level of reading”. The best way to achieve 100%, he claims, is to teach synthetic phonics, as proven by the Clackmannanshire study’s “staggering improvements”.

MAIR: Professor, you’ve got your doubts about this much-ballyhooed Clackmannanshire study, which is often cited by fans of phonics.

DOMBEY: Yes. For a start, the children did not make such dramatic improvements in their comprehension. Three and a half months ahead of the norm. And there was no – there was no control group. There was no group that had the same other effects but not - just not the synthetic phonics. They were three and a half months ahead of a notional norm at a time when standards were generally rising. That’s in terms of comprehension. In word recognition, yes, they were three and a half years ahead. But not in comprehension, it doesn’t automatically follow. But --

NICK GIBB: Yes, that’s because in the Clackmannanshire study...

DOMBEY: If you’ll excuse me [pauses] Clackmannanshire had a lot of other interventions going on at the same time that are not normally mentioned. A huge amount of money was poured into the teaching of early reading by the Scottish office successively from the late 90s into early 2000.

MAIR: But whatever the flaws in the Clackmannanshire study, and whatever the flaws with synthetic phonics, again, we come back to my original point. Given that many children leave primary school with difficulties in reading and writing. Shouldn't we give this a go?

DOMBEY: Well they have in many other authorities in Scotland and not been too enthusiastic about it. Stirling took over the Clackmannanshire programme, and actually didn't roll it out into all its schools. It isn't a wondrous, miraculous cure-all because not everybody gets Ruth Miskin with her enthusiasm, and the teachers engaged in that way. And many teachers tire, as one of those we saw, of a highly programmatic approach.

Here Dombey does introduce some academic language – control groups, notional norm, word recognition and comprehension – but her criticisms of the Clackmannanshire study are also very concrete. For those outside the academic research world, criticising experimental design may seem overly pedantic; by illustrating what wasn't controlled for – i.e. the huge amount of money that was poured into Scottish schools – Dombey makes these concerns both comprehensible and real. (She also raises another issue that had heretofore not been mentioned: how much will it cost?) Finally, by noting how other Scottish authorities reacted to the Clackmannanshire programme, she moves the issue from the University to the classroom. The audience can more readily identify with the lack of enthusiasm among teachers and parents in Stirling than with the seemingly technical concerns voiced by University researchers.

Conclusion

I opened this article with a brief discussion of deliberative democracy, noting in particular the threat to the public sphere posed by television and the challenges of expert participation in public debate. I examined these theoretical issues in a case study of *Newsnight's* synthetic phonics reports. This highly regarded television news programme was found to simplify complex issues, in particular by narrowing the

problem of educational improvement to a question of teaching method. The programme cast Miskin's intervention and the debate surrounding it in the inherited terms of the "reading wars". The inadequacy of this traditional frame was especially apparent in the studio debate between Miskin, who was positioned as a Traditionalist despite the many Progressivist principles embedded in her programme, and Wyse, into whose mouth Wark attempted to insert whole language philosophy. Furthermore, the programme borrowed many elements from the makeover television genre, which I argued is a harmful way of thinking about literacy education and instructional improvement.

I then analysed the participation of educational researchers in the debates conducted on the programme. I contrasted two researchers' rhetorical strategies in the studio debate, arguing that the discourse and concerns of the evidence-based policy movement were not necessarily appropriate for participation in the television-mediated public sphere. Such a discourse contributed to the construction of an image of a research establishment that is detached, inactive and inaccessible.

This outcome should raise questions for proponents of evidence-based policy. One of the major justifications for this movement was strategic: it was hoped that by enhancing the scientific rigour of educational research, its status in public and political arenas would be raised, and its funding would be dramatically increased (see especially Slavin, 2002). The movement might take comfort in the fact that educational research received considerable attention on *Newsnight*. However, while "research" was elevated, the researcher who assumed the role of scientific gatekeeper was marginalised. Paradoxically, the case study suggests that "what works" in the public sphere may be a less "scientific" approach.¹⁹ Moreover, note that my

¹⁹ It is telling that the Department for Education and Skills appointed two reviews of the phonics issue: the high profile Rose Review mentioned above, and an academic systematic review (Torgerson et. al., 2006). The Rose Review, which recommended the adoption of synthetic phonics, cited the latter

discussion has focussed on the *rhetorical effectiveness* of the evidence-based policy discourse in the public sphere. Even if it were effective, the approach is problematic from a deliberative democracy perspective because it threatens to shut down public debate about values and interests.

This case study has examined one media event, which I have argued is a telling case of the limitations of television in representing educational issues and the possibilities for academic engagement in the public sphere. To what extent are the findings relevant to other cases and contexts? I speculated about the migration of the makeover genre into multiple areas of social policy – How widespread is its proliferation? I have argued that in this case, the evidence-based policy discourse was ineffective – How applicable is this analysis to the many contexts of other issues, media, news programmes, and even interviewers and researchers? And what are the potential challenges and trade-offs of employing the strategy used by Dombey? I hope that this article has opened up interesting and fruitful paths for investigation of media representations of educational problems and the interactions of researchers, practitioners, media, the public and policy. I also hope my analysis will benefit researchers and practitioners in their casual viewing of educational reporting and in their active participation in the public sphere.

review in a discussion of the research evidence in its final report: “Research, inspection and leading edge work of settings and schools may inform best practice. However, findings from different research programmes are sometimes contradictory or inconclusive, and often call for further studies to test tentative findings. While robust research findings must not be ignored, developers of national strategies, much less schools and settings, cannot always wait for the results of long-term research studies” (Rose, 2006, p. 15).

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