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To cite this article: Dominic Wyse & Alice Bradbury (2022): The passion, pedagogy and politics of reading, English in Education, DOI: [10.1080/04250494.2022.2091987](https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2022.2091987)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2022.2091987>



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Published online: 06 Jul 2022.



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## The passion, pedagogy and politics of reading

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### ABSTRACT

The teaching of reading has been a source of contentious debate for many years. Margaret Meek Spencer contributed her passion for the importance of specific texts to help children learn to read. In addition to the kinds of texts to be used, important aspects of the debate include the relationship between national curriculum policies and robust research evidence about what works in teaching reading. This paper notes a historical trend in government policy that has included England's Department for Education in England's strengthening its control of the curriculum and pedagogy for teaching reading in ways which run contrary to many of Meek Spencer's arguments. The paper examines the use of statutory assessment, particularly a Phonics Screening Check, its influence on pedagogy and links with the politics of reading. We conclude that policy needs to be reformed to better reflect robust research evidence.

### ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 1 April 2022  
Accepted 15 June 2022

### KEYWORDS

Phonics; reading; assessment

For more than 100 years the methods of how to teach children to read have attracted debate. These debates are sometimes fierce, hence the phrase the *reading wars*, and from time to time are played out in the mainstream media (e.g. Weale 2022). There are several reasons for this attention to reading. Young children rightly attract attention in society because of our desire to nurture and keep them safe. If young children do not succeed in education, this can have lifelong consequences (The Government Office for Science 2008). Without the ability to read, children's access to the whole curriculum is severely restricted. Over the last three decades children's reading has also become a focus for evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of teachers, schools, and even national education systems around the world. So for a series of important reasons many people care passionately about children's progress in reading. But although these are the main reasons for impassioned views, they do not fully account for some characteristics of the politics of reading, politics that include politicians and others in society aligning themselves so strongly with a single educational cause, and even a single teaching approach, for example, *synthetic phonics*.

In this paper we review curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and politics related to the teaching of phonics and reading. In our focus on the teaching of phonics and reading we include some of Margaret Meek Spencer's key themes. The first section of the paper addresses some key moments in the politics of reading. This is followed by an overview

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that presents the most recent robust evidence on effective teaching of phonics and reading. Finally we identify some of the ways in which statutory assessment of reading has intersected with the curriculum and pedagogy for teaching reading.

### Key moments in the politics of reading in England

One of the enduring focuses for the reading wars, particularly in relation to the English language, has been about the use of whole texts vs the component parts of learning to read and particularly the texts that it is hypothesised are most likely to help children to learn to read. In the 1960s, these debates hinged on whether a “bottom-up” approach to teaching reading, one that focuses strongly on children learning phonemes and letters as a means to decode words, is better than a “top-down” approach to reading where the teaching of reading begins with whole texts then includes some analysis of component parts such as words, letters and phonemes (Chall 1983). In the most recent iteration of the reading wars, there are currently three main orientations to the teaching of reading linked with an emphasis on particular kinds of texts and different ways of engaging with those texts: 1. synthetic phonics; 2. contextualised reading teaching; and 3. whole language.

- (1) Synthetic phonics: a focus on teaching children about *phonemes and letters*. At key moments in the teaching programme, phonics teaching is separate from practising reading with whole texts. In the early stages of the approach in particular, children use “decodable” books: reading scheme/basal books with vocabularies controlled to enable repetition of keywords learned during the phonics programme.
- (2) Contextualised reading teaching (also called “balanced instruction”): a focus on the *balance* between teaching based on use of whole texts and systematic teaching about the alphabetic code *and* also other linguistic features. With this approach, the importance of comprehending the meaning of written language is carefully balanced with the acquisition of a range of skills and knowledge. Lessons make explicit links between phonics teaching and other linguistic aspects with whole texts, which are often a combination of real books and reading scheme books with controlled vocabularies.
- (3) Whole language: a focus first and foremost on *whole texts*, “real” books (trade books created by authors as part of standard publication practices), that it is theorised children will enjoy and find motivating. The whole language approach is driven by reading for meaning. Phonics teaching, and other aspects of reading, are taught in a relatively non-systematic way, and carried out through examples related to the real books being read. (Wyse and Bradbury 2022, 3)

In the 1980s, Margaret Meek Spencer became linked with the whole language orientation to teaching reading. In perhaps her most well-known publication relevant to the teaching of reading, *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (Meek 1988), she argued passionately and persuasively for the value of what became known as “real books” (though she herself did not like the phrase). Meek Spencer’s argument in *How Texts Teach* was that young children’s engagement with real books, as opposed to scheme books, gives them access to a wide range of profound aspects of learning and literacy. For example, she illustrates the ways in which a seemingly simple picture book for young children, the still popular

*Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins (1968), can help children learn many things: the concepts of author, title, dedicatees, front cover; the establishment of the characters in the book that Meek reminds us is a feature of all good story writing; the careful orientation of single and double pages drawing the reader in to certain features and, in particular, the interplay between texts and pictures that goes way beyond simple literal interpretation of words only; and most of all the relatively complex meanings that the reader must bring to the text including, for example, the intrigue of the fox, a main character in *Rosie's Walk*, who only appears in the pictures not in the words of the text. Meek Spencer's analysis of the merits of high-quality literature for children is very much a literary, socio-cultural, and practical appreciation relevant to teachers and parents.

In one of the relatively small number of academic citations in *How Texts Teach*, Meek notes on the first page of her booklet that: "Frank Smith reclaimed reading for learners, freed teachers from enslavement to pedagogic methodology, and let us rediscover reading as something with language as its core . . ." (Meek 1988, 3). A well-known section in Smith's book *Reading* is called "The fallacy of phonics", and it is here that Meek's views became linked with the debates on phonics and reading.

In the same year that Meek Spencer published *How Texts Teach*, a new law, the Education Reform Act 1988, gave legal power to Secretaries of State for Education to implement a national curriculum and associated statutory assessment system. An important aspect of developments that emerged in the context of the change of law was the recognition that although curriculum was imposed by the state teaching methods would not be: pedagogy was a matter for teachers' professional judgements.

In the 1990s, Martin Turner coined the metaphor "sponsored reading failure" as part of his polemic that a "progressive and capricious . . . hydra headed movement" (Turner 1990, 7) had failed children. Turner said that the movement was led by "hot gospellers, livid with intolerant enthusiasm, who promoted their storybook methods with evangelical zeal, producing bigots, converts, heretics and martyrs all over the humdrum classrooms of the nation" (Turner 1990, 12). Turner identified the problem as the use of the real books approach, inspired by the whole language approach.

In a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Education*, Styles and Drummond (1993) noted the overt party and government politics that were part of the debates about teaching reading, including the somewhat surprising appointment of Turner, given his polemical stance, to what was The School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC). Styles' and Drummonds' editorial made the crucial point that the most serious problems with children's reading were not in the earlier years of primary education where children learn to decode, but in the later years where they must be able to comprehend texts sufficiently for the requirements at that stage, including any statutory assessments that may be in place. Styles and Drummond emphasised the importance of regarding children as agents and as enthusiastic readers. Their repeated citations of a report by Her Majesty's [School] Inspectorate in an academic article are also noteworthy, reflecting a time when the inspectorate was more independent of government, and anecdotal evidence suggests more respected by teachers and academics. The final paper in the same special issue was written by Margaret Meek Spencer. In it she expressed concern that the national curriculum, which by that time had been in place only for five years, would result in an "increased, controlling emphasis on spelling, grammar and phonics" (Meek 1993, 98) within her main argument that children's future lives are profoundly affected by the

kind of primary schooling that they receive, and her long-standing advocacy for the importance of literature as a vital aspect of learning to read. With regard to phonics and grammar, in particular from 2014 onwards (Wyse et al. 2022), Meek's view was prophetic.

In 1998, England's national curriculum was augmented by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The NLS increased the specification of phonics teaching to a level not previously seen in national curriculum documentation. It was also the first government strategy to determine methods of teaching reading. A "literacy hour" was introduced with strict timings on the nature of the lessons and the requirement to use the re-interpreted strategies of "shared reading" and "guided reading". This led to concerns about the reliance on text extracts rather than complete texts, and a "paucity of books in school" (Meek 2004, 307). While the National Literacy Strategy had an influence on primary teachers' pedagogy, Meek noted that teachers showed initiative in turning the "limitations of the National Literacy Strategy into demonstrations of professional skills in circumventing them" (Meek 2004, 308). However, in 2006, a report led by Sir Jim Rose recommended that there should be even more emphasis on phonics teaching. As a result, the NLS was modified and renamed the Primary National Strategy. This required that "high-quality, systematic phonic work should be taught *discretely*" (DfES, 2006, 7, italics added). One of the developments following the Rose report was the publication of the *Letters and Sounds* programme of phonics teaching (DfES, 2007).

A feature of the policy developments in the teaching of reading in England has been the influence of one politician, Nick Gibb MP. Gibb made the implementation of synthetic phonics one of his main goals, something he pursued both as an MP on the back benches of parliament but also as a Minister for Schools (Gibb 2021). A seminar held in 2011 titled "Initial Teacher Training: How can students be best prepared to teach reading" listed Gibb as the keynote speaker. The seminar was organised by the *Reading Reform Foundation* (RRF), a single-issue organisation promoting synthetic phonics as the main approach to teaching reading in primary schools. The event was sponsored by Oxford University Press, publishers of *Read Write Inc*, an approach to teaching phonics developed by Ruth Miskin, which is still one of the most common commercial schemes in use. And so, in the organisations and people involved in the seminar, the links between a lobbying organisation (RRF), a company with a commercial interest in a reading scheme and its take up in schools (OUP), and a politician who would eventually become the Minister of State for School Reform can be seen. Gibb has had a strong role in government control of reading teaching pedagogy, in schools and in teacher training, including establishing the use of criteria and processes for approval of commercial phonics schemes.

A further intensification of phonics teaching, and another major policy change, occurred in 2012 with the introduction of an additional test to be taken by all Year 1 children (age 5 to 6) in England in state-funded primary schools: the Phonics Screening Check (PSC). The PSC consists of 40 words and pseudo-words (phonetically regular letter combinations represented as plausible words) which children are asked to read out loud as part of a one-to-one assessment with their teacher. Children who do not meet the expected standard in the test have to be retested in Year 2 (age 6 to 7). Further analysis of the assessment of reading follows later in this paper.

A range of measures to ensure compliance to synthetic phonics teaching were implemented by government. The national inspectorate (reconstituted under the title Ofsted) was required to use outcomes in the PSC as one of its means to judge schools' effectiveness as part of school inspections (Ofsted 2019, point 335). The 2019 Inspection Framework also included the requirement that inspectors assess to what extent, "In Reception, staff teach children to read systematically by using synthetic phonics and books that match the children's phonic knowledge" (Ofsted 2019, point 325). Other developments linked to the intensification of synthetic phonics teaching from 2006 onwards included, for the first time, the Department for Education (DfE) reviewing and approving published phonics teaching schemes, a process that allowed further control of teaching by the DfE. The process for approving programmes was updated in 2021 resulting in the *Letters and Sounds* programme (a free resource developed by the Department for Children, Families and Schools during the New Labour government term) being removed from the approved phonics schemes list: the DfE explanation was that the scheme "isn't a full Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) programme" (Department for Education 2021, online). A very clear example of the way that synthetic phonics is dominant, and separate from other aspects such as reading comprehension, is given in the detail of the DfE selection criteria for approval of phonics programmes:

A programme should promote the use of phonics as the route to reading unknown words, before any subsequent comprehension strategies are applied. It should not encourage children to guess unknown words from clues such as pictures or context, rather than first applying phonic knowledge and skills. It should not include lists of high frequency words or any other words for children to learn as whole shapes 'by sight'. The focus should be on phonemes, and not on 'consonant clusters' (/s+/p+/l/ not /spl/) or 'onset and rime' (/c+/a/ +/t/ not c-at, m-at, b-at)." (from "Note 1": DfE, 2022)

The involvement of the DfE in such minutiae of primary education, signalled by the language of "should" and "should not", marks the most extreme level of control of primary pedagogy to date.

### Contemporary research evidence on the teaching of phonics and reading

The evidence for the conclusion of the Rose Report in 2006 that phonics should be taught discretely, and that the approach to teaching should be synthetic phonics, was based mainly on just one study, carried out in Scotland (Ellis 2007). The study had many limitations in relation to its use as evidence for reading policy in England (see Wyse and Styles 2007; Wyse and Goswami 2008; Ellis and Moss 2013). Irrespective of the limitations of the study carried out in Scotland, the emphasis on just one research study is not an appropriate way to use research to inform policy and practice. Since Wyse and Goswami's review of 2008 the number of research journal papers that systematically analyse multiple research studies to address key questions in education has grown. The increased number of experimental trials relevant to the teaching of reading has now been included not only in *systematic reviews* (SRs) and *meta-analyses* (MAs) but also in *tertiary reviews* which summarise evidence from multiple systematic reviews. Taking into account multiple studies allows the complexities of

a topic, such as teaching reading, to be addressed: to contest the view that one study can be the “holy grail” which once and for all finds the answer to the teaching of reading (see Nick Gibb’s views as an example: TES Magazine 2019).

It is shocking to compare the main findings from these reviews of the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching phonics and reading with policy in England that requires synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching early reading. On the basis of their review of SRs and MAs relevant to phonics teaching, Torgerson et al. (2019) concluded that although there was evidence that phonics teaching was beneficial for young readers the evidence did not support a “phonics only” teaching policy because “many studies have *added* phonics to *whole language* approaches, balanced instruction is indicated”. (Torgerson et al. 2019, 27. Italics in original.)

Bowers’ (2020) tertiary review concluded that “the above research provides little or no evidence that systematic phonics is better than standard alternative methods used in schools ... the findings undermine the claim that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods including unsystematic phonics (such as whole language)” (Bowers 2020, 16). The explicit mentions of “whole language” as a relevant consideration, on the basis of multiple SRs, MAs, and RCTs, in both the Torgerson et al. (2019) and Bowers’ reviews of research (2020) are notable given the trend over time towards greater emphasis on, and attention to, synthetic phonics and the parallel denigration of the whole language approach.

The first SR and MA post 2008, by Adescope et al. (2011), focused on effective teaching of reading and writing for pupils who had acquired English as a second language. Two outcomes from the study were of particular importance: 1. peer interaction to negotiate a shared understanding of the meaning of texts produced larger effects for increased competence in reading, and writing, than systematic phonics instruction; 2. it was recommended that policymakers take into account contextual factors, such as particular contexts for schools, when making decisions about optimal pedagogies.

McArthur et al. (2018) was an update of a review first carried out in 2012. This Cochrane Library Intervention Review focused on phonics training for “English-speaking poor readers” (p. iii. We prefer the term “at-risk readers”). The review concluded that phonics training may have improved at-risk readers’ accuracy for reading phonetically regular real and pseudo words, and only slightly improved reading comprehension, but the evidence for both these findings was “low-quality”. Overall, it was concluded that more studies are needed to improve the precision of outcomes including in relation to reading comprehension and reading fluency.

Galuschka et al. (2014) found that phonics instruction was the most effective method for the reading and spelling performance of “reading disabled children and adolescents” (p. 9). However, the description of phonics instruction, or teaching, in this SR included reading fluency, described as “repeated word or text reading practice”, so the phonics instruction was not completely decontextualised from whole texts.

A SR and MA published in 2016 were particularly important because they were the only ones to focus explicitly on the long-term effects of reading interventions. This longitudinal dimension is important because the true test of any teaching approach is whether children’s progress is sustained years after they received the intervention, particularly progress in reading comprehension which is the fundamental aspect of reading. The individual experimental trials that were included in Suggate’s (2016) SR had to include

post-intervention testing of reading at a minimum of 11 months after the intervention had ended. The overall findings from Suggate (2016) were that phonemic awareness training was more effective than phonics interventions and that “the greatest effect sizes at follow-up appeared to result from interventions with a comprehension component” (p. 87).

The differing emphases of the SRs, and the methodological limitations, underline the complexity of the debate but also the need for analyses which not only take account of the statistical outcomes of SRs and MAs but go beyond these to systematically examine the contextual details of studies relevant to teaching and reading policies in particular regions of the world and locate these in a wider historical and political context for the debate. This was the approach we took for our research that included a Systematic Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of the 55 experimental trials included in Suggate’s SR (Wyse and Bradbury 2022), and which was described by The Guardian as a “landmark study” (Weale 2022). The outcome of our synthesis revealed that the prioritisation of synthetic phonics above other approaches to phonics and reading was not supported by the most robust research evidence. We concluded that a contextualised approach to teaching phonics and reading was most likely to be effective; however, there was a lack of high quality randomised controlled trials at large scale carried out in England with typically developing readers.

### Assessment of reading in schools

The assessment of reading in England is part of the extensive statutory framework of assessment for accountability in primary schools. Children are currently subject to statutory assessments in all but two of the primary school years. The results of assessments are used to judge the quality of schools although not all assessment results are made public. Reading forms a key part of the statutory assessments, commonly known as “SATs”, in Year 2 and Year 6 (age 6/7 and 10/11) including formal written tests of comprehension. Early reading skills are also assessed twice in Reception (age 4/5): first when a child starts in the Reception class, and then for the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* which includes an *Early Learning Goal* (ELG) for Word Reading, introduced in 2021. Children are expected to be able to do the following by the end of their first year of school:

- Say a sound for each letter in the alphabet and at least 10 digraphs;
- Read words consistent with their phonic knowledge by sound-blending;
- Read aloud simple sentences and books that are consistent with their phonic knowledge, including some common exception words. (DfE 2021, online)

The Word Reading ELG is accompanied by an ELG for Comprehension which includes the requirement that children should “Demonstrate understanding of what has been read to them by retelling stories and narratives using their own words and recently introduced vocabulary”.

Most significant, in terms of impact on curriculum and pedagogy, is the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) in Year 1 (age 5/6) which is repeated in Year 2 for those children deemed to be not meeting the PSC standard. This test, in place since 2012, differs from the other assessments of reading in its focus on one specific component, decoding words and



pseudo-words, separate from the other components used during reading (e.g. taking cues from pictures, understanding meaning of words) (Darnell, Solity, and Wall 2017). The “pure” form of decoding required by the PSC is demonstrated most clearly by the pseudo-words or “nonsense words”, which are a particularly controversial part of the assessment. These words test whether children can say the words in the test by using the correct phonemes but without the context of a real word’s meaning. For example, a child can read out the word “vap” as long as they know the three phonemes and can blend them, but “vap” has no meaning (confirmed by a check of the Oxford English Dictionary). Teachers often prepare children for the test by regular practice in reading these nonsense words, and there is some evidence to suggest high-attaining fluent readers find nonsense words particularly confusing because they always seek the meanings of words and may self-correct nonsense words (Bradbury 2020).

Statutory assessment now has a dominant effect on the pedagogy for teaching reading in a way not seen prior to the introduction of the PSC (Wyse and Bradbury 2022). In our survey of teachers in early years and Year 1 at the end of 2020, we found that “synthetic phonics first and foremost” was the main approach to the teaching of phonics and reading for two-thirds of respondents (420 out of 634 responses. Op. cit. p.37). The impact of the PSC on classroom practice was also clear in responses from Year 2 teachers who were conducting the PSC with their classes after delays caused by Covid-19. When asked “To what extent does the Phonics Screening Check affect your practice in relation to phonics?”, 71% of respondents noted that their teaching was affected by the PSC (28% responded “To a significant extent” and 43% “To some extent”). This impact on pedagogy included teachers both basing the curriculum on preparation for tests (Carter 2020) and basing decisions on how to group children in reading lessons on PSC scores (Bradbury 2018).

The assessment of reading is a key element of the debates about reading. Through assessment, reading is brought into the wider debates about accountability and “standards”. The DfE’s response (Weale 2022) to our open letter to the Secretary of State for Education based on our paper (Wyse and Bradbury 2022) was to argue that scores in the PSC had improved over time, ignoring our point that we do not see this as evidence that children’s *reading* is improving, only that schools are getting better at preparing for the test.

The PSC is the latest stage in a 15-year campaign by senior Conservative politicians to associate phonics teaching with a discourse of high standards. When the idea of a “reading test” was first suggested, Michael Gove, then Shadow Secretary of State for Education, commented that “The biggest failure of our education system is the failure to teach children the most important skill of all – the ability to read’ (Gove 2009b). The role the test was to play in judging schools was also apparent in Gove’s warning “There will be no hiding place for those schools whose children fail to learn to read” (Gove 2009a).

The role of individual politicians in determining not just curriculum but also pedagogy, for example, through the promotion of phonics through statutory assessments, and more generally in using a range of mechanisms to enforce synthetic phonics, is of great concern. The roles of Gove and the Schools Minister Nick Gibb are reasonably well understood as a major influence in the dominance of synthetic phonics, but the parts played by key advisers from assessment organisations and companies that sell phonics resources are more opaque. Most notably, the dual roles of Ruth Miskin as an adviser to government commissioned inquiries and reviews<sup>1</sup> and owner of one of the popular

phonics schemes, *Read Write Inc.*, have been questioned (see Mansell 2012, and Innes and Mills in this special issue as well as a critical account of Miskin's career in Gunter and Mills 2017 for fuller discussions of the connections between phonics, commercialisation and the commodification of literacy policy).

Despite the departure of both Gove and Gibb from ministerial posts in education, the response to our work on phonics and reading continued to demonstrate the unbalanced promotion of synthetic phonics that was characteristic of their years in office. For example, a government adviser was quick to dismiss our 2022 paper without providing reasons, and there were attacks from a number of commentators, as well as a high-profile opinion piece by Nick Gibb in *The Telegraph* (Gibb 2022) describing our work as a “counter attack”. Views published online in social media were used by Schools Minister Robin Walker to justify the dismissal of our paper in his response to our open letter, suggesting a continued adherence to synthetic phonics among senior Conservatives.

The 2022 Education White Paper reflected yet another tightening of DfE control over schools and teacher training. Those pupils who fail to progress satisfactorily towards what was a new 90% target of pupils at “expected standard” are likely to be given a “phonics catch-up programme” (HM Government 2022, 35). Initial Teacher Training “will always include a focused review on early reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, as the best way to teach children to read” (p. 22). Consistent with many DfE documents, the evidence cited in support of its proposals is very partial. For example, survey data is cited in support of a claim that teachers struggle with curriculum design so that too many teachers “reinvent the wheel and design new lessons” (p. 26). Yet that same survey reports that “All things considered, *over half of KS1 teachers think that the phonics check should be scrapped*. A further 25% of KS1 teachers want at least significant changes to the check” (n = 478 Teacher Tapp 2022, online, italics added), a point not referred to in the White Paper. This negative view of the phonics screening check was consistent with the survey outcomes in Wyse and Bradbury (2022). In another example, a study is cited in the White Paper to support the point that the increase in PSC results over time is correlated with the KS 2 reading test results, yet a key conclusion of the cited study is not mentioned: “It is therefore important that teachers incorporate any additional phonics teaching *within reading instruction for students with phonics deficits, rather than focusing on phonics in an isolated manner*” (Double et al. 2019, 1232, italics added). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Ofsted inspectors were starting to vet university teacher training academic reading lists to make sure that they conformed with DfE recommended readings, something which would breach universities’ historic rights to academic freedom over their curricula.

It is clear that assessment is a key part in the armoury of those who wish to maintain the dominance of synthetic phonics: the PSC has come to determine pedagogy and be the main basis for “evidence” of improvement. While reading assessment continues to be part of the accountability framework for schools, the contents of assessments will affect how teachers teach children to read.

## Discussion and conclusions

The practices of teaching reading in England’s primary schools have significantly changed for the first time in more than 100 years: this change is radical in comparison to the prior decades of relative continuity of practice in classrooms in spite of policy changes (Wyse

and Bradbury 2022). Synthetic phonics has become the dominant approach to teaching early reading. Consequently, children's time for engagement with real books in school, from the start of their education onwards, has been limited. The requirement to use decodable books and the requirement to separate synthetic phonics teaching from wider aspects of reading including comprehension, is part of this new frontier for policy in primary education.

An appreciation of the history of policy changes, and their impacts, reveals both some common political strategies and positions and some of the unique features of education in 2022 (see the multiple editions of *Teaching English, Language and Literacy* by Wyse and Jones et al., 2001, 2008, 2013, 2018 and forthcoming 2023 for a record of political changes in language and literacy policies). The short political cycles of about five years per government term, and the shorter terms of education ministers, are part of the problem with curriculum development; however, some developments span governments across different political parties. One aspect we trace in our history of policy is the arc of gradual intensification of synthetic phonics that emerged at the time of the New Labour government and that continues and has been further intensified by the Conservative government of the present day.

A particularly worrying trend has been the increasing influence of governments on *pedagogy*, including through the influence of single politicians (see Gibb 2022 for a robust defence of his work on phonics over many years). It cannot be appropriate that decisions about areas of education of such importance for children's life chances are dominated so strongly by the views of individual politicians. This is particularly worrying when their decisions are based more on ideology and party politics rather than robust research evidence (James 2012). This dominance blocks democratic involvement in aspects of policy for professionals and others with expertise and interest in education, and fails to make use of robust research evidence from multiple researchers, much of which is funded by the state.

Statutory assessment in England was controversial from its inception as part of the Education Reform Act in 1988, but it has become a strong weapon in defence of ideologically based positions often described as promoting "high standards". The Phonics Screening Check is the most pernicious of the statutory assessments because it is used with such young children, and because of its effects on curriculum and pedagogy.

While the political trend has intensified the emphasis on synthetic phonics, the trend in robust research suggests a very different approach is likely to be more beneficial. Not only does the evidence strongly suggest the need for a more balanced approach to teaching phonics and reading, but our analysis of the pedagogy of the most robust studies suggests a range of other practical possibilities that are likely to be more beneficial (Wyse and Bradbury 2022).

Perhaps, the only comfort that Margaret Meek Spencer would draw from her accurate premonitions about the current approach to reading teaching in England is that there are still inspirational head teachers and teachers who maintain a strong focus on engaging children with real texts. This remarkable resistance happens in spite of the pressure to conform to using "decodable books" and to exclude real texts from separate phonics lessons.

It is hard for anyone whose life has been enriched by books to exclude the young from this source of pleasure and serious reflection. What we have to realize is that the young have powerful allies in a host of gifted artists and writers to help them to subvert the world of their elders. (Meek 1988, 40)

These schools and teachers continue to emphasise that the main purposes of reading are to comprehend meanings, to make meanings and to enjoy interpreting multimodal messages from authors. The component parts, including phonics, are important but subservient to these main purposes for reading. This balance between phonics and other important aspects of reading should be robustly reflected in national curriculum policy texts and relevant guidance from the DfE. In England’s national curriculum of 2014 this is not the case, and hence, it should be reviewed.

Writing in the 1990s, Margaret Meek Spencer commented “Our society (or more particularly, those who oversee its functioning) now displaces onto the teaching of reading in school some of its deepest concerns about its nature and its future” (Meek 1997, 259). The intensity of debates about phonics shows that reading’s position as a touchstone issue, symbolic of wider tensions within education and described by some as an “education culture war” (Amass 2022), remains the case in the 2020s. Once again, our call is to replace “war” with “reconciliation” in the best interests of children’s progress in education.

## Note

1. Miskin was part of the 2011 New Inquiry into primary assessment and the 2011–12 National Curriculum Review.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Helen Hamlyn Trust.

## Notes on contributors

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