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The Dominance of Synthetic Phonics in Reading Policy in England

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Abstract: While the Science of Reading (SoR) has not been a commonly used term in the United Kingdom, many of the tropes of the ‘reading wars’ in the United States are also present in the debates in England and in other jurisdictions. Since the late 2000s, successive government policies in England have fundamentally altered what were, historically, accepted practices of teaching reading that could be described as a balanced approach. From 2008 to 2024, the Department for Education in England increasingly strengthened the idea that synthetic phonics is the only way to teach early reading and rejected arguments for a different approach, despite debate over the merits and outcomes of this policy. In this paper, we focus on the narrowing of what are regarded as accepted ways of teaching reading, drawing on analysis of policy texts as well as previously published empirical work in schools in England. We examine the network of actors, including commercial companies, implicated in producing

and maintaining this orthodoxy. In conclusion, we comment on England's course of action compared to that of other nations, which should be seen as a cautionary tale.

Keywords: reading policy; phonics; science of reading

El dominio de la fonética sintética en la política de lectura en Inglaterra

Resumen: Aunque el término Ciencia de la Lectura no se ha utilizado comúnmente en el Reino Unido, muchos de los elementos del debate conocido como las “guerras de la lectura” en Estados Unidos también están presentes en las discusiones en Inglaterra y en otras jurisdicciones. Desde finales de la década de 2000, las políticas gubernamentales sucesivas en Inglaterra han modificado fundamentalmente las prácticas tradicionalmente aceptadas para la enseñanza de la lectura, que podrían describirse como un enfoque equilibrado. Entre 2008 y 2024, el Departamento de Educación de Inglaterra ha reforzado cada vez más la idea de que la fonética sintética es la única forma válida de enseñar la lectura inicial, rechazando argumentos a favor de otros enfoques, a pesar de los debates sobre los méritos y resultados de dicha política. En este artículo nos enfocamos en el proceso de reducción de los métodos aceptados para la enseñanza de la lectura, a partir del análisis de textos de políticas públicas, así como de investigaciones empíricas previamente publicadas en escuelas de Inglaterra. Examinamos la red de actores implicados—incluidas empresas comerciales—en la producción y el sostenimiento de esta ortodoxia. En la conclusión, comentamos el rumbo que ha tomado Inglaterra en comparación con otros países, proponiendo que debe considerarse una advertencia.

Palabras clave: política de lectura; fonética; ciencia de la lectura

O domínio da fonética sintética na política de leitura na Inglaterra

Resumo: Embora o termo Ciência da Leitura não seja comumente utilizado no Reino Unido, muitos dos elementos presentes nas chamadas “guerras da leitura” nos Estados Unidos também aparecem nos debates travados na Inglaterra e em outras jurisdições. Desde o final dos anos 2000, políticas governamentais sucessivas na Inglaterra alteraram de forma fundamental as práticas tradicionalmente aceitas de ensino da leitura, que antes poderiam ser descritas como uma abordagem equilibrada. De 2008 a 2024, o Departamento de Educação da Inglaterra fortaleceu progressivamente a ideia de que a fonética sintética é a única forma adequada de ensinar a leitura nos anos iniciais, rejeitando argumentos a favor de outras abordagens, apesar dos debates sobre os méritos e resultados dessa política. Neste artigo, focamos na restrição das formas consideradas válidas de ensino da leitura, por meio da análise de textos de políticas públicas e de estudos empíricos já publicados em escolas da Inglaterra. Examinamos a rede de atores—incluindo empresas comerciais—envolvidos na produção e sustentação dessa ortodoxia. Concluímos com uma reflexão sobre o caminho adotado pela Inglaterra em comparação com o de outros países, sugerindo que ele deve ser encarado como um alerta.

Palavras-chave: política de leitura; fonética; ciência da leitura

The Dominance of Synthetic Phonics in Reading Policy in England

Government policy on how children should be taught to read is a contentious topic around the world and particularly in the United States, where the ‘reading wars’ have been waged for decades between proponents of different strategies (Kim et al., 2024; Ward et al., 2022). While the Science of Reading (SoR) has been a powerful driver in the U.S. debates, in England and the rest of the United Kingdom, the discussion centres on the use of synthetic phonics to teach children to read (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022b; Wyse & Goswami, 2008). In this paper, we take a policy sociology

approach to explore how the agenda in England is dominated by synthetic phonics as a solution to reading attainment (Bradbury, 2014), how certain actors work to preserve this dominance, and how the interactions within the debate are regulated by discourses which position some research and some researchers as reliable and others as ideologically driven. We begin from a position that policy produces solutions to particular problems, as constructed by politicians and networks of think tanks and key influencers (Ball, 2023); these problems and their attendant solutions are thus neither universal nor inevitable. This allows us to explore how synthetic phonics came to be the dominant approach to teaching children to read in policy and practice in England and how this dominance is maintained.

The case of England¹ is interesting internationally because, until the late 2000s, accepted practices of teaching reading that could be described as a ‘balanced approach’ (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022b) were used in schools, involving some teaching of phonics linked with comprehension of and engagement with texts alongside whole word recognition. However, since then, successive governments have mandated discrete synthetic phonics teaching and encouraged the use of what is often called a ‘phonics first and fast’ approach in England’s schools through various means. This includes prescriptions for synthetic phonics in the mandated standards for training new teachers and in inspection requirements, and through government accreditation of synthetic phonics schemes to the exclusion of other approaches. This paper examines the narrowing of accepted ways of teaching reading and the debates surrounding this shift by drawing on a range of policy sources implicated in producing and maintaining this orthodoxy. Dominance is achieved and maintained, we argue, through the characterisation of critics as ‘lowering standards’, the vehemence of attacks on those who question synthetic phonics, and the use of ‘cherry-picked’ research to defend reading policy. In turn, policy has shaped the possibilities of acceptable practice in relation to teaching reading, in conjunction with this network of synthetic phonics proponents.

The paper begins with our theoretical approach, which draws on policy sociology, before we outline the debate on reading in England and how this relates to international debates. We then describe our sources for this paper and approach. We begin our main findings section with a discussion of the means by which synthetic phonics has come to be the only acceptable way to teach children to read in England, focusing first on policy. Then we consider the maintenance of this dominance through a highly polarised debate on this topic (the ‘Phonics Wars’), before drawing some conclusions in relation to international policy on reading.

Before these sections, it is important to note our own role in the debates in England, as authors of a study on reading policy which has had a role in these debates (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022a, 2022b). We want to be clear and upfront about our position on this matter, which has been that a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading is needed (Wyse & Bradbury, 2023a). In this paper, we consider the issue at the level of analysing policy rather than discussing practice or reviewing the existing evidence; our aim here is not to argue in favour of a particular approach but to consider how the debate has evolved and how some possibilities have been foreclosed. Our own position remains important, we acknowledge, in understanding how we approach this analysis.

Theoretical Framing: Policy Sociology

Our analysis takes an approach based on policy sociology, which sees policy as a process rather than a product, and as something contested at every stage of production and enactment (Ball, 1993; Braun et al., 2012). We are interested in how education policy is discussed and debated, as well

¹ Note that education policy is devolved to the four nations of the United Kingdom and thus policy and practice differ in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

as what it demands of schools and teachers, and how these discussions can combine with policy to produce frames of possibility in particular fields. In this way, we are focused on how the boundaries of possibility or acceptability are created through policy and related debate, in ways that ultimately affect how teachers teach and how children learn. The case of England, we argue, is one where a particular ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) operates, where synthetic phonics is presented as the only possible policy solution to the issue of learning to read.

We view policy as representing constructed solutions to particular problems, produced and reinforced by politicians and networks of think tanks and key influencers (Ball, 2023); unpicking these solutions and problems is central to the work of policy sociology. Taking a step back from the construction of the problem of how children learn to read² thus allows us to explore what Gale refers to as the key questions of policy archaeology, which ask, ‘Why are some items on the policy agenda (and not others)?; Why are some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others)? And what are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved?’ (Gale, 2007, pp. 387–388). This leads us into discussion of how issues come to be on the agenda, and the political levers by which governments can shift practices in schools. We also consider how key actors in the debates work to regulate acceptable discourses by, for example, positioning some research as reliable and others as ideologically driven. This leads to a wider discussion of how some issues, such as reading policy, become totemic within wider discourses and what have been called ‘culture wars’ (Amass, 2022)—in this case, debates over standards and high expectations, leading to wider division within the sector and limitations on acceptable discussion. Overall, we are interested in the production of ‘knowledge’ within policy-making, understood as

articulated sets of concepts and ‘facts’, typically originating (or seemingly originating) in named fields of academic work, and that are circulated in contexts of policy influence and policy production (Ball 2006a, 51; Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992) by means of networked think tank researchers and academic gurus, and highly consumable reports, books, speeches and so on. (McGimpsey et al., 2017, 909)

While this quote refers to ‘new’ knowledges in policymaking, we see this articulation as useful in understanding how academic work, key actors, and networks can combine to create a context where one perspective can come to dominate a field of debate.

Context: The Debates over Reading in England

Debates about how children can best be taught to read and write in the English language have a very long history that can be traced back to the 17th century (Wyse et al., 2023). In the 20th century, these debates hinged on the use of whole texts or a focus on the component parts of learning to read. In the 1960s, this was a debate over 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 preferable to 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, 1967). Importantly, these debates were linked to broader ideological positions in relation to pedagogy, between traditionalists and progressives.

In England, the reading debates evolved to include synthetic phonics as an approach in the late 1990s and 2000s, when phonics was included as part of the mandated National Literacy Strategy

² We acknowledge here that we as researchers are part of this construction, especially as we have been active in combatting the dominance of phonics teaching in the public domain.

(NLS; from 1998); the pedagogy of the NLS evolved from a balanced approach to teaching reading into a more prescriptive focus on the teaching of phonemes and letters, known as synthetic phonics teaching (Wyse et al., 2023). A major turning point was the government-commissioned Rose Report (Rose, 2006), which recommended that ‘High quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the review should be taught discretely’, and that phonics should be the ‘prime approach in learning to decode (to read) and encode (to write/spell) print’ (Rose, 2006, p. 70). This paved the way for statutory requirements for teaching to adopt the pedagogy of synthetic phonics; however, critics argued that the report failed to reflect the research evidence sufficiently robustly when it concluded that synthetic phonics teaching should be taught discretely (Wyse & Goswami, 2008). A later iteration of the NLS subsequently required that phonics should be taught discretely, and the government published a programme of phonics teaching called Letters and Sounds (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007).

Nonetheless, phonics remained part of a range of approaches to the teaching of reading, we would argue, until the 2010s, when the policy of Conservative-led governments established synthetic phonics as the only acceptable method of teaching reading³. This was part of the agenda of the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who advocated that cognitive science should replace what he saw as the negative influence of researchers in university education departments, while the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, had long had a self-declared ‘obsession’ with synthetic phonics (Wyse & Hacking, 2024). Together, Gove and Gibb presided over an era when a series of political levers were established that moved the debate firmly in the direction of synthetic phonics: the introduction of a statutory assessment (the Phonics Screening Check); funding to promote synthetic phonics schemes in schools; inclusion of phonics in the standards required by new teachers; and recommendations from the school inspectorate, Ofsted.

Our Sources

In this paper, we use a range of sources to explore the key question of how the debates over the teaching of reading have evolved in England. The strategy for selecting sources was underpinned by approaches from policy sociology that consider the key influences at each stage of the policy cycle (Bowe et al., 1992)—namely, the contexts of influence, text production, and practice. For the context of influence, we examined key speeches, manifesto commitments, and publications from policy-influencing organisations such as think tanks. This allows us to analyse the policy positions of key actors and their role in the debate. In relation to the context of text production, we considered policy documents and guidance—such as those relating to phonics schemes, teacher education, and inspection frameworks—to explore official directives. As we are not exploring how the policy is enacted in schools here (a topic covered in Wyse and Bradbury, 2022b), we did not amass a range of sources related to the context of practice. We refer to existing research in this field as evidence of the impact on pedagogy. Instead, we decided to look at the continuing maintenance of the synthetic phonics orthodoxy within public and academic debate through analysis of published articles in newspapers and online as well as quotes and social media posts.

Some of this material has been collected and collated through many years of studying this debate, while other data has been newly collected. We acknowledge that this approach, while

³ It is important to note that this deviated from the research evidence that showed that systematic phonics teaching was one important component of effective teaching of reading but not the narrow synthetic phonics that increasingly has come to dominate pedagogy in England (Torgerson et al., 2019).

systematic in nature, is still subjective and influenced by our positionality embedded within the debates we discuss.

Findings 1: The Establishment of Synthetic Phonics through Policy

In this first findings section, we begin by considering how the ideological commitment to synthetic phonics expressed by the Conservative Party while in opposition evolved while they were in power into the current policy framework. Ideologically, the Conservative Party in England were committed to the issue of improving the teaching of reading through statutory testing even before they came to power in 2010 in a coalition with the smaller Liberal Democrat Party (Bradbury, 2014). In a speech in 2009, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, said, ‘The biggest failure of our education system is the failure to teach children the most important skill of all—the ability to read’, and presented the solution as ‘a simple reading test for children after two years at primary school to make sure they are reading fluently’ (Gove, 2009). This idea was listed alongside a commitment to ‘promote the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics’ in the Conservatives’ election manifesto in 2010, though the test was still described as a ‘reading test’ rather than a phonics test. This commitment was part of a wider return to ‘traditional’ teaching in England’s schools, with a focus on exams, a knowledge-based curriculum, and rote learning as part of a neoconservative agenda (Ball, 2021). Statutory testing was seen as a way to ensure teachers adopted a particular approach, framed by a general mistrust of the profession (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Policy Foundations

After the Conservatives came to power in 2010, they enacted two major policies that provided the foundations for the dominance of synthetic phonics, relating to assessment and the curriculum. In 2012, they introduced the statutory Phonics Screening Check (PSC), which is a high-stakes test of ‘pseudo’ words and real words that children are required to decode. The ‘reading test’ in the manifesto became ‘a short, light-touch assessment to confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard’ (Department for Education, or DfE, 2012), useful to teachers to identify children who were falling behind. The narrowing of the definition of ‘reading’ to phonic decoding implicit in this move was significant in establishing the dominance of synthetic phonics as the only way to teach reading, although later assessments of reading at age 7 continued to include comprehension until their abolition in 2023. Currently, data from the PSC are reported to the DfE and are used to hold schools to account for their synthetic phonics teaching.

The second major policy move related to revisions made to the National Curriculum from 2014. The National Curriculum states:

Skilled word reading involves both the speedy working out of the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) and the speedy recognition of familiar printed words. Underpinning both is the understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words. This is why phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners (i.e. unskilled readers) when they start school. (DfE, 2015, p. 14)

The impact of these policies on practice is evidenced in research with schools, revealing the changes in the pedagogy for teaching reading not seen prior to 2010. The response of schools to the introduction of the PSC was, inevitably, to shift teaching towards synthetic phonics and preparation for the test (Bradbury, 2018; Carter, 2020; Darnell et al., 2017). Research in the 2010s suggested that phonics had become a discrete subject within the school timetable, distinct

from Reading or English (Bradbury, 2018; Carter, 2020) and that the prioritisation of test results meant children were grouped by their attainment in phonics (Bradbury, 2018)—a process described as a ‘necessary evil’ by teachers. The influence of the test was seen particularly in the teaching of phonically plausible pseudo words (known colloquially as ‘nonsense words’), because these are included in the PSC (Flewitt & Roberts-Holmes, 2015); learning to decode these serves only the purpose of improving scores in the test. In our survey of teachers of children aged 3–7 years 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; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022b, p. 37). The impact of the PSC on classroom practice was also clear in responses from Year 2 (age 6–7) 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’. In line with wider research which suggests the power of high-stakes assessments to alter pedagogy (Stobart, 2008), the PSC was a major driving force in shaping the boundaries of acceptable ways of teaching children to read, reinforced by the statutory National Curriculum, which forms the basis for all teaching.

Influencing Pedagogy through Funding Incentives

Further to the statutory requirements to teach children to read using synthetic phonics, a major financial incentive to take this approach was provided by government funding for schools to buy synthetic phonics schemes, which the DfE had approved. These schemes, which included teaching plans, resources such as flash cards and phonically decodable books at a range of levels, had to be validated by the DfE for a school to spend this funding. If they did not spend the money allocated to them (up to £3,000 per school in 2012, and now up to £9,000 in 2023) on these schemes, they would lose it. Thus, private companies that produced validated schemes were funded by the government, via schools, to provide materials that aligned with the government’s perspective. This intervention in pedagogy enabled commercial companies to make significant sums of money out of primary schools, not least because, in time, a requirement for schools to pay for consultancies from any company they selected to supply their synthetic phonics teaching resources was also required. This policy is a departure from the norm in England, in contrast to other jurisdictions, but as Woulfin and Gabriel (2022) write in relation to the United States, ‘Money certainly matters for the implementation of reading policies’ because resources shape pedagogy (p. 331).

For the largest of these companies, Ruth Miskin Training, which produces the highly popular Read Write Inc. (RWI) scheme, government funding contributed to significant profits (Mansell, 2024). The RWI scheme is prescriptive in how sounds are taught and in what order, with guidance on how teachers should show classes their flashcards (which show one phoneme, such as ‘m’ or ‘oo’, on one side and the sound with an illustration on the other). This level of prescription has contributed to a concern with ‘fidelity’ to the scheme, where schools are encouraged to wholeheartedly adopt the scheme and all its components (handwriting guidance, homework books for parents, etc.) for it to be effective. Training is provided by Ruth Miskin Training to schools at additional cost, and there are strict rules on photocopying of resources so that everyone needs to buy the proper RWI books and teacher guides.

Altogether, these schemes add to a sense of there being one true way to teach children to read, with long-established and previously effective techniques—for example, those based on songs, actions, and real books—deprioritised in favour of strict adherence to the synthetic phonics scheme.

The presence in schools of schemes builds into a culture, we would argue, of seeing synthetic phonics as the only valid method of teaching reading.

The policy of providing specific funding for synthetic phonics resources was developed further in 2021 with the revision of the list of validated schemes that could be bought. Significantly, the *Letters and Sounds* programme, which was a free resource developed by the previous government, was removed from the approved synthetic phonics schemes list. The DfE explanation was that the scheme ‘isn’t a full Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) programme’ (DfE, 2021). Thus, as well as promoting the use of synthetic phonics over a more balanced approach, the government promoted a specific form of phonics teaching, which it describes as *systematic* synthetic phonics. The detail given for the DfE selection criteria for approval of phonics programmes reads:

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 DfE, 2023c, Note 1)

This level of detail demonstrates a high level of control over pedagogy via the phonics programmes. Although it is not mandatory for schools to use an approved scheme, the provision of funding for these schemes only strongly suggests that schools should be using one of them and taking advantage of the additional funding. Indeed, the guidance from the DfE states:

There is no statutory requirement for schools to choose one of the SSP programmes on the validated list. Ofsted does not have a preferred programme or approach. What’s important is that schools take an approach that is rigorous, systematic and used with fidelity (any resources used should exactly match the Grapheme Phoneme Correspondence (GPC) progression of their chosen SSP approach), and that achieves strong results for all pupils, including the most disadvantaged. (DfE, 2023a)

Again, this statement reads as strong encouragement to use a validated scheme, particularly in the point that what is important is that schools take an approach which is ‘rigorous, systematic and used with fidelity’, given that this is what commercially produced schemes provide and encourage. Combined with the pressure of the PSC as a new and untested assessment, the funding for phonics schemes powerfully drove schools to adopt approaches dominated by synthetic phonics.

Entrenchment via Teaching Standards and Teacher Education Content

The hegemony of synthetic phonics was further entrenched through a number of other policy moves that further narrowed the range of acceptable ways to approach the teaching of reading. Of long-term significance was the inclusion of synthetic phonics within the government’s teaching standards, which all new qualified teachers have to meet. Under the heading of ‘A teacher must: Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge’, one bullet point reads: ‘If teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics’ (DfE, 2021). This specificity contrasts with the following bullet point, ‘If teaching early mathematics, demonstrate a clear understanding of appropriate teaching strategies’. Alternative knowledge on how early reading

might be taught is omitted, whereas teachers appear to be trusted to select ‘appropriate teaching strategies’ for mathematics.

Synthetic phonics is also present in the current Core Content Framework, introduced in 2019, which prescribes what must be included in initial teacher education (ITE) courses. The Core Content Framework also forms the basis for the inspection of ITE programmes by Ofsted, the government inspectorate, and was a key part of a process of re-accreditation of ITE programmes that took place in 2022 (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, 2024). The inspection framework for ITE explains that programmes ‘will always include a focused review on early reading, including systematic synthetic phonics’, and that to achieve a ‘good’ rating, ITE providers must show that ‘training ensures that trainees learn to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics, as outlined in the ITT core content framework, and that trainees are *not taught to teach competing approaches* [emphasis added] to early reading’ (DfE, 2024). While overall ITE in England has been described as ‘the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of ITE anywhere in the world’ (Ellis & Childs, 2023, p. 2), the content in the Framework on the teaching of reading is again very specific about the methods to be taught to new teachers, especially given that ITE providers are inspected on their “‘fidelity” to what is now a much more prescriptive framework’ (Mutton & Burn, 2024, p. 220). In combination, the teachers’ standards and the ITE Core Content Framework ensure the newest generations of teachers have access only to viewpoints that establish synthetic phonics as the most effective method, allowing them to act as further proponents of this approach within schools.

Maintenance Through Inspection and Guidance

Once these policy levers had established synthetic phonics as the dominant approach in schools, the work of the national schools inspectorate for England, Ofsted, effectively monitored and maintained this approach. As well as using outcomes from the PSC as one of its means to judge schools’ effectiveness (Ofsted, 2019, point 335), Ofsted’s 2019 Education Inspection Framework 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’ (point 325). Given the high stakes of Ofsted inspections for schools (Perryman et al., 2024), this criterion further entrenched synthetic phonics as the dominant approach. This went further with the publication of a key document, the Reading Framework, in 2021 (updated in 2023).

The Reading Framework (DfE, 2023b) was described by the DfE as helping schools to ‘meet existing expectations for teaching early reading’ as set out in the national curriculum and Ofsted’s Education Inspection Framework, and promised to set out ‘the research underpinning the importance of talk, stories and systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in classes of four-year-old and five-year-old children (known as Reception class), the importance of fidelity in synthetic phonics teaching, and DfE’s evidence-informed position on the best way to teach reading’ (DfE, 2023b). Thus, it became immediately linked with Ofsted and seen as an essential part of preparing for the inspection of reading in primary schools. The document itself also notes that the Framework is useful for ITE providers: ‘ITT partnerships may wish to consider using the guidance with primary and secondary teachers to develop their understanding of teaching reading’ (p. 5).

The Framework, updated in 2023, is unequivocal about the need for synthetic phonics: it sets out how the research organisation the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)⁴ ‘considers synthetic phonics to be one of the most secure and best evidenced areas of pedagogy and recommends all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it’ (p. 6) and cites the EEF-approved

⁴ The EEF is a charity with the aim of ‘supporting schools, colleges, and early years settings to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence’ (EEF, n.d.). The Foundation was founded in 2011 with a £125 million grant from DfE.

early career framework as further evidence that synthetic phonics is best. It concludes that ‘schools should therefore be confident in the rationale for teaching SSP as part of their teaching of reading’ (p. 6), immediately closing down any possibility of ambiguity or debate. An audit is provided for schools to assess their own phonics teaching, where the first criterion is ‘the school has adopted a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme for all pupils who are learning to read’ (p. 57).

As well as prescribing an SSP approach overall, the Framework makes recommendations about specific reading pedagogy at a very detailed level. There is a section on Reception classroom reading corners, with guidance on how to display books, for example. The Framework recommends daily synthetic phonics lessons from the start of Reception, beginning with shorter sessions of 10 minutes, but building up to an hour a day by the end of Reception (which may be split into shorter sessions). Fidelity to the chosen synthetic phonics scheme is encouraged through instructions such as ‘Letter cards, friezes and posters showing GPCs should match the phonics programme the school has chosen.’ (p. 54). A list of activities that ‘hinder learning’ is provided, framed to the statement that ‘Activities must be high quality, practical, efficient and focused on the main goal – reading and spelling using phonics’ (p. 55). These activities that hinder learning include ‘fishing’ for letters in a water tray (which does not include enough opportunities for word reading), playing phonics games (as time is wasted between turns), and using mini-whiteboards (which is not like writing at a table and provides no record of learning). Teachers are warned that children will not learn as well if ‘displays about reading and writing are overly elaborate’ and ‘posters and charts other than from the school’s selected synthetic phonics programme are used to decorate the classroom’ (p. 56). We might counter that these rules suggest that the children exist in a world without print, where the only letters they encounter are those provided; in contrast, a child’s life is full of print and handwritten letters, which they need to engage with and decipher based on the context (Cremin et al., 2022).

The Framework also reinforces the importance of the phonics schemes discussed above: alongside sections on reading for pleasure and talk, the Reading Framework section on phonics explains the importance of using decodable books, with reference to the National Curriculum stipulation that children should be taught to read books that are ‘consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words’ (p. 49). It continues,

This is why schools should invest in books that have been carefully structured in cumulative steps for pupils learning to read, so that they can decode every word as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases. (DfE, 2023b, p. 48)

Thus, we see how even in a document that expands on the joys of a well-stocked and inviting reading corner, schools are also encouraged to buy the validated synthetic phonics schemes.

As we have seen through this section on government policy on synthetic phonics, a range of policy levers work together to construct synthetic phonics as the only feasible method of teaching children to read within schools if they want to be regarded as effective and their children as high-attaining. Within an education system that is dominated by systems of accountability built on assessment and inspection, these policies and guidance have a significant impact on pedagogy and practice in classrooms. The ‘playbook’ for dominance is clear—using the major policy levers available, governments since 2010 have used assessment, curriculum, funding, teacher education, official guidance, and inspection to establish and maintain a specific approach to teaching children to read.

Findings 2: Influencing the Debate Through the Phonics Wars

In this second section, we turn to a discussion of the wider debate around synthetic phonics and reading beyond official policy to consider how key actors and particular discourses reinforce this dominance. We characterise this wider debate as the ‘Phonics Wars’, in recognition of the dominance of this approach, which is a more recent iteration of the decades-old ‘Reading Wars’. In this debate, the default position is that synthetic phonics is a positive force, and alternative viewpoints are maligned, creating a binary between synthetic phonics and anti-phonics advocates that hugely oversimplifies the position of both sides. For example, those criticising synthetic phonics are derided as wanting to remove it entirely rather than having a more balanced approach, which includes some phonics. In her examination of the debates, education journalist Helen Amass noted that ‘several teachers told me they wouldn’t comment publicly on phonics because the debates surrounding it have become, as one teacher put it, too “fractious”’ (Amass, 2022).

Here we explore three ways in which the debate has been shaped: how research has been used to enforce the dominance of synthetic phonics, how research that questions phonics is derided and dismissed, and how various actors have become significant in influencing policy.

Presenting Phonics as Evidence-Based

Research is important because it provides legitimacy and authority to government statements; its selective use thus matters because it has real power to change the shape of the debate and thus how schools teach reading. Throughout the 2010s, synthetic phonics policies were presented as based on established research that proved synthetic phonics to be the most effective approach. For example, Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister, launched the funding for the phonics schemes by describing synthetic phonics as ‘the tried and tested method of improving the reading of all our children’, and the accompanying press release stated, ‘Research shows that when phonics is taught in a structured way - starting with the easiest sounds, progressing through to the most complex - that it is the most effective way of teaching young children to read’ (DfE & The Rt Hon Nick Gibb, 2012). A further section of the press release titled ‘Research Evidence’ lists three studies: the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston & Watson, 2005); Australia’s 2005 Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy report, *Teaching Reading* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005); and the U.S. National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The former is a frequently cited study from Scotland that found evidence of the benefits of synthetic phonics, which has been given significant prominence over other studies of reading (Wyse & Styles, 2007a, 2007b). These three sources in the press release are mentioned (without citations) as evidence of how the research agrees, although there were a number of studies at the time which questioned the findings and the interpretation of these documents as aligned exclusively with phonics first and fast, as shown in later systematic reviews of the evidence (Bowers, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2019).

Another key element of the arguments in favour of a synthetic phonics-dominant approach is the use of statistics on reading attainment as ‘proof’ of effectiveness. For instance, the Reading Framework discussed above includes the statement:

Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLs) in 2016 showed a significant improvement in the reading performance of boys in England (reducing the gap between boys and girls by 11 points since 2011), a finding that could be attributed to the roll out of systematic phonics programmes in England since 2010. (DfE, 2023b, p. 7)

This idea that reading scores from PIRLS justify the synthetic phonics approach continued with the publication of PIRLS results in 2023, when an improved ranking was used to justify this policy. The Schools Minister at the time, Nick Gibb, claimed in a national newspaper that ‘our “obsession” with phonics has worked’ (Gibb, 2023), based on the PIRLS data that showed ‘England was fourth out of 43 comparable countries’. However, the data also showed that England’s average scale score in PIRLS in 2021 was 558, compared to a score in PIRLS 2016 of 559, although its ranking had improved. This is an argument based as much on the position of other countries as on the performance of children in England. It is also important to note that other high-ranking countries, if we are to use that measure, do not have a narrow approach to the teaching of reading, including Ireland (relevant as another English-speaking nation), which had an average scale score of 577 in 2021 (Delaney et al., 2023). There were also less positive data from PIRLS 2021: when asked if they liked reading, 24% of England’s pupils said that they do not like reading, 48% said they somewhat like reading, and only 29% said they very much like reading. The data also show a link between pupils not liking reading and lower attainment in reading.

Nonetheless, these issues did not stop the use of the political interpretation of the PIRLS data during the 2024 general election campaign by Conservative politicians keen to emphasise their government’s effectiveness in education. During a high-profile interview with the *BBC*, the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak chose to respond to general questions about why his government should be re-elected with the claim that England is ‘the best in the West’ at reading (Political TV, 2024). This evolved into the claim that England’s children are the ‘best readers in the world’ from a Conservative Minister, Mark Harper, on *Sky News*, even though—as a fact-checking service pointed out—England was actually fourth behind Singapore, Hong Kong, and Russia (Grimond, 2024). If we take ‘the West’ as Europe and North America, then the claim is correct, but as pointed out, there are some caveats to these comparative data. Notably, during the campaign, the Labour Party, which would go on to win the election with a landslide, did not challenge the government on this claim and, in fact, referred to building on the success of synthetic phonics with similar approaches to mathematics (Labour Party, 2024).

This use of selective statistics in media appearances has to be placed within the wider context of policy-making, where research is often used selectively and ambiguously. Phonics has always been a subject where evidence is cherry-picked to support an argument, beginning with the over-use of the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston & Watson, 2005) to justify synthetic phonics (Wyse & Goswami, 2008). In recent years, the use of research within policy documents like the Core Content Framework and the Reading Framework discussed above has been a powerful force in reinforcing these documents’ core message that synthetic phonics is best. The studies included within footnotes in these reports create an impression of overwhelming evidence in one direction. However, analysis of the Core Content Framework has shown that what it claims as the ‘best available educational research’ is overwhelmingly research influenced by a ‘scientistic model of educational knowledge’, to the exclusion of other traditions of knowledge (Hordern & Brooks, 2023). This ‘new science’ of education ‘(i) marginalises longstanding traditions of educational thought, and (ii) technicises and instrumentalises teaching practice’ (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, p. 800). In this body of thought, teaching is the transmission of knowledge within narrow objectives, not a socially contextualised practice. This narrowing of the research on teaching more widely aligns with the synthetic phonics approach, which is systematic, and makes use of interventions where children ‘fall behind’ a prescribed path of progress.

However, the selective use of research is evident not only in what studies are chosen as citations or core reading for new teachers but also in which parts of this research are presented. For example, a study is cited in the 2022 Education White Paper (a government document that sets out future policy) to support the point that the increase in PSC results over time is correlated with the

Key Stage 2 reading test results. Yet, a key conclusion of the cited study from Double et al. (2019) is not mentioned, even though they conclude, '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, p. 1232; emphasis added). Later in the White Paper, survey results are selectively presented 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). The same survey reports that 'all things considered, *over half of KS1 teachers think that the phonics check should be scrapped* [emphasis added]. A further 25% of KS1 teachers want at least significant changes to the check' ($n = 478$; TeacherTapp, 2022), a point not referred to in the White Paper. This selective use of research only when it aligns with the government argument is perhaps to be expected in terms of political communications, but it matters because it bleeds into policy documents that determine what schools do, as we have seen above.

Alongside the selection of research that aligns with the government's argument, there is also the dismissal or downplaying of research that questions the synthetic phonics orthodoxy. A major study into the effectiveness of the most popular synthetic phonics scheme, RWI, conducted by the EEF and published after some delays in 2022 (Molotsky et al., 2022), seems to have been largely ignored in policy documentation. This randomised control trial involved both RWI, which is aimed at ages 4–9, and a related catch-up programme called Fresh Start, which is aimed at ages 9–13. The results showed that in five out of six measures, the effects of Fresh Start were negative for the pupils, meaning that pupils made less progress than the control group if they were given this scheme. For RWI, pupils made one month's additional progress. The effect size for RWI was 0.05, a small positive effect estimated as one month of additional progress compared to the control group, but this did not reach statistical significance. The confidence interval for the effect size was estimated to be between -0.02 and 0.12 (see discussion in Wyse & Hacking, 2024). The Fresh Start intervention showed minus 3 months or minus 2 months estimated progress for pupils' reading. Because of some issues with the operation of the trial, the RWI element was not deemed to be of the 'highest quality' by the EEF, but they did publish it. As Wyse and Hacking (2024) argue, this study, despite its limitations, should have at least caused DfE to pause and reconsider its promotion of synthetic phonics, but there was no public response.

Derision of Research that Disagrees

Relatedly, alongside the selective use of research relating to a synthetic phonics-based approach, there has been widespread derision of research that challenges this position. We say this, as researchers who have experienced this ourselves, not in defence of our own position (which we come to in the following section) but through the lens of analysing policy debate. It is unhealthy, we would argue, for academics to be derided publicly for publishing research that questions government policy in peer-reviewed and independent academic journals. It is a matter of academic freedom that researchers ought to be able to raise concerns about policy without fear of public reprisals. Rigorous debate is to be expected, but personal attacks on social media are unacceptable.

The vehemence of some responses to our 2022 paper (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022b), which proposed 'reading reconciliation' through a more balanced approach based on existing research and new empirical work, was surprising and indicates the toxicity of the Phonics Wars in England; those who supported our approach were also subject to criticism. We give these examples below to illustrate the ways in which debate can be shut down, as research is dismissed. On publication, we received widespread publicity in the U.K. press and many messages of support beyond the United Kingdom. There were also some negative comments that focused on methods, an area we have focused on in an academic journal paper (Wyse & Bradbury, 2023a). These academic disagreements

can be seen as part of normal academic debate over methodology and interpretation, although academics also have their biases. However, there were also critical comments on social media that simply derided the paper (and implicitly, the studies we systematically reviewed). For example, the government's advisor on school behaviour, Tom Bennett, described the paper as 'rubbish' on social media (Wyse & Bradbury, 2023b). While we might dismiss these comments as social media extremism, the status of some of the authors meant that they had wider significance: a government response to the paper stated that they would not respond due to 'concerns' raised by 'commentators, including teachers and academics' online (R. Walker, personal communication, 2022). Thus, the social media criticism provided a justification for a refusal to engage with an academic publication that questioned the synthetic phonics orthodoxy.

Moreover, we were subject to *ad hominem* attacks: for example, a commentator argued in a national education publication that 'the authors lack the ability to conduct a critical examination of policy and are out of touch and out of date' (Gill, 2022). We were allowed a response, which allowed us to emphasise the divisive nature of the debate (Bradbury & Wyse, 2022) and encourage readers to read our research paper for the correct information. In contrast, when the former Schools Minister Nick Gibb (2022) stated incorrectly in a national newspaper that our paper argued for a 'whole language' approach to replace synthetic phonics, our letter clarifying our position was not published.

The politics of research in debates about the teaching of reading are revealed in a tendency to dismiss academics who question the synthetic phonics orthodoxy as old-fashioned, stuck in the past, and out of touch—as progressives in ivory towers distant from the realities of schools. Nick Gibb, for example, demands that educationalists 'embrace ... evidence rather than the comfort of prevailing orthodoxies' (Gibb, 2017, as cited in Hordern & Brooks, 2023). He describes education academics as driven by 'progressive teaching methods' who have been wrong to suggest that England's narrow synthetic phonics could 'kill children's joy of reading' (Gibb, 2023). This perspective aligns with the infamous comment from Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, that people 'have had enough of experts', during the Brexit referendum campaign, indicative of a wider distrust of academics whom he derided as 'the Blob' (Robinson, 2014).

A major theme of the criticism of alternative viewpoints is the accusation that researchers want 'lower standards'. This is powerful in a context where standards and attainment are all-important; it presents critics as distractions from the core mission of education, which is in itself hegemonically positioned (Ball, 2021). Talk of children's enjoyment of books, for instance, is easily dismissed as a romantic notion unrelated to the measurable progress children make in decoding words. This relates, we would argue, to wider regimes of truth about what matters in education, evident in processes of datafication and the dominance of statutory assessments (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). We return to this issue in the Discussion section below. Positioning those who question synthetic phonics as not engaged in the collective project of progress for children makes them appear irrelevant and potentially damaging.

Key Actors Within Powerful Networks

Finally, in this section, we turn now to a discussion of key actors within the Phonics Wars who have an outsized significance in shaping the debate. As well as the national politicians who have been forceful advocates for synthetic phonics already mentioned (namely Gove and Gibb), there are a number of other actors within the networks who influence policy towards synthetic phonics. We are interested here in how key actors or 'gurus' can come to 'embody' a particular 'knowledge' (McGimpsey et al., 2017), and the role they play in maintaining the boundaries of acceptability within policy debate.

The owner of the RWI phonics scheme, Ruth Miskin, is one such powerful actor and influencer. She is a former headteacher who, in her own words, found the time to ‘research and trial the most effective methods’ and create the RWI scheme (Miskin, n.d.), which is now used extensively by schools in England. She was also a government advisor, however: Miskin was part of the 2011 Bew Inquiry into primary assessment and the 2011–12 National Curriculum Review in England⁵. Miskin is clearly a powerful advocate for synthetic phonics and remained aligned with the Conservatives’ position on its effectiveness, although, as discussed above, the results of the EEF randomised control trial on the programme were not conclusive. Like Gibb, she positions those who question synthetic phonics as damaging to the project of high standards (Miskin, n.d.). She writes on the RWI website, ‘Every school needs a head and teachers who are passionate about getting children to read – teachers who will take up the challenge of making sure every child succeeds’ (Miskin, n.d.). This, she implies, involves using the RWI phonics scheme, which involves passionate fidelity to the scheme; she explains, ‘As a head, I needed all the teachers to feel the same as I did. Children feel our passion for them – they know when we’re on their side’ (Miskin, n.d.). Using synthetic phonics means being on the side of children, and being a teacher who is prepared to take on the challenge of ensuring every child reads; not using synthetic phonics, in contrast, means not being on the side of children and not caring about every one of them. Miskin is a key figure because she is both a powerful advocate and a former key advisor to the government, able to influence the course of policy. As one teacher involved in the discussions explained, ‘Ministers have their ideology and have listened to a coterie of people who are in line with that ideology’ (McNeilly, as cited in Mansell, 2012).

Another key proponent of synthetic phonics is the Conservative government’s behaviour advisor, Tom Bennett, mentioned earlier. Although his background is in secondary education, Bennett has been active in promoting synthetic phonics via the ResearchED organisation, which aims to ‘bridge the gap between research and practice in education’ (ResearchED, n.d.). ResearchED also aims to ‘raise the research literacy of educators, in order for them to possess the critical skills necessary to challenge and understand the quality of research they encounter’, which suggests a level of scepticism about the quality of research they access (ResearchED, n.d.). Bennett’s role in questioning education research overall—indicated by his 2013 book *Teacher Proof: Why Research in Education Doesn’t Always Mean What It Claims, and What You Can Do About It* (Bennett, 2013)—means that he has a role in downplaying research that questions synthetic phonics. Via ResearchED, Bennett has some control over what research is disseminated to teachers, such as through their conferences. His derision of those who question synthetic phonics is clear from his social media output, in which he refers to ‘Bonkers phonics denialism’ and describes alternative approaches as ‘whole-word guessing etc that’s toxic’ (Bennett, 2022a). He was quoted as responding to our 2022 paper with ‘Such approaches risk leaving children illiterate. Let’s not do that. Evidence matters, not dogma’ (Bennett, as cited in Whittaker, 2022). With a large social media presence, a government role, and the ResearchED network, key actors such as Bennett have been able to establish an argument that there is, in his words, ‘still a strong anti-evidence instinct in many educationalists’ (Bennett, as cited in Whittaker, 2022). This creates a context where, at the same time, research is both ‘evidence’, when it fits with a particular perspective, and ‘dogma’, when it questions this perspective.

⁵ It is worth noting that the use of advisors within the National Curriculum Review was subject to criticism, given the business interests of individuals such as Miskin, who stood to gain from the government funding of phonics schemes as the sole shareholder of RWI (Gunter & Mills, 2017). Journalists found the draft version of the new curriculum for English was a document in which Ruth Miskin was tagged in the Document Properties as the author, though she denied writing it (Mansell, 2012).

In conclusion to this section exploring the maintenance of the synthetic phonics orthodoxy in policy debates through the selective use of research, the derision of critical research, and the operation of key actors, we would argue that together and in interconnected ways, these strands establish as a regime of truth the idea that the science on the teaching of reading is settled, and decided once and for all. For example, Tom Bennett has stated ‘phonics is not a ‘strong opinions on both sides’ topic. It’s one of the best evidenced articles in education’ (Bennett, 2022b). This establishes clear boundaries about what is debatable and what is decided. We would argue that the idea that the evidence is conclusive is one of the *phonics myths*, a ‘fact’ about synthetic phonics which, like ‘neuromyths’, a term used by the OECD to describe findings from neuroscience which have mutated into ‘facts’ despite not being agreed upon by neuroscientists (OECD, 2007), has a power way beyond its legitimacy. These myths have a power of their own, as they circulate and become established through repetition (Aydarova, 2023). Like neuromyths, phonics myths draw legitimacy from claims about ‘science’ to which the average teacher does not have easy access. In this way, analysis of policy has to be cognisant of the power of what are constructed as ‘new knowledges’ to shut out other possibilities (McGimpsey et al., 2017).

Discussion: Why Synthetic Phonics?

In this paper, we have argued that within policy on the teaching of reading in England, long-established alternative approaches to the teaching of reading, including a more balanced approach, have been marginalised; we have argued elsewhere that, as a result, teaching has become more prescribed and rigid (Bradbury, 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022b). Our view of the logic behind this dominance is that the prioritisation of decoding above other aspects, such as comprehension and motivation for reading, reflects a more technical approach to learning and teaching, apparent in wider policy in England, including teacher education. This approach de-emphasises the human interaction and communication inherent in sharing a book, for example, and elevates the more measurable skill of accurate decoding above all others. Synthetic phonics approaches involve learning particular sets of phonemes, which can be tested; children can show progress at regular intervals, as well as be tested through the national statutory assessment. In this way, the broader policy context of England’s education system, which has shifted towards ever more assessment and measurement in a process of datafication (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017), has been conducive to the dominance of synthetic phonics.

Disagreements over reading are often the focus for wider educational debates, described as the ‘touchstone for a wider debate about a philosophy of education’ (Rastles, as cited in Amass, 2022). The promotion of synthetic phonics as an approach also aligns with long-standing ideological positions within the Conservative Party in England, which view ‘progressive’ teaching methods as lowering standards and teachers as needing schemes to ensure high-quality teaching (Horden & Brooks, 2023). Teachers need to be pushed beyond the ‘comfort of prevailing orthodoxies’, to quote Nick Gibb, trained in particular skills and given standardised schemes to ensure high-quality teaching. Synthetic phonics offers an attractive certainty within the complicated world of learning to read, which we can then measure to provide further evidence of its success.

Conclusion

While the Phonics Wars rage in England, policy in the rest of the United Kingdom differs in its emphasis on synthetic phonics. Internationally, however, the case of England has had some influence on reading policy, for example, in Australia, the United States, and in Ontario, Canada (Wyse & Hacking, 2024). The Australian ‘phonics health check’ proposed in the late 2010s and made

compulsory in New South Wales and South Australia owes much to England's PSC, for instance. Proponents of synthetic phonics give talks internationally based on the 'success' of England's policy for the teaching of reading. Thus, the importance of the shape of this debate goes well beyond England.

As we have discussed here, the case of England is a cautionary tale for the rest of the world in terms of how divisive the debate can become, and how education research can become embroiled in highly politicised discussions. Taking a sociological policy analysis approach, we have explored how the dominance of one set of ideas is produced and maintained through multiple policy technologies (especially curriculum and assessment legislation) alongside a public debate where research is used selectively. Those who question the orthodoxy have been characterised as having low standards and as being in denial of the truth. A binary is created where those who call for more balance are seen as 'denialists', and this becomes an unproductive 'all or nothing' debate. Altogether, this creates an unhealthy context where the important skill of reading has become subject to politicisation, rather than thoughtful discussion. Other countries offer a similarly fertile ground for the dominance of a single approach as we have seen in debates in Canada, the United States, and Australia (Wyse & Hacking, 2024)—whether this be in reading or other aspects of pedagogy. Understanding the ways in which acceptable viewpoints can be narrowed and the use of research within this remains vital in the current political context. Debate over how best to teach children to read should be a positive force that helps teachers improve their pedagogy, drawing on a range of evidence and real-life experiences; England, in this regard, is not an example for other countries to follow.

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