

GOVE'S GREATEST CONTRIBUTION?

*Timothy Mills**

ABSTRACT

By taking sides in the long-running 'Reading Wars' and terminating the existing model of early reading instruction with extreme prejudice, Michael Gove took one of the boldest, most contentious, unpopular and far-reaching decisions of his tenure as Education Secretary. This paper investigates the history, the battle lines, the weaponry and, if, indeed, he won the war, whether it resulted in more children in England being able to read. The results suggest that this, rather than his changes to curriculum and assessment, may be his greatest legacy.

INTRODUCTION

'The Reading Wars' (Connor, Morrison and Katch, 2004), have raged for nearly two centuries. In essence they have been fought across the battle lines of the pedagogy of the early reading instruction of English, with the complexity of the encoding of the English alphabetic code creating the schisms in beliefs. Much of the complexity is the result of the evolution of English into a morpho-phonemic language whereby letters indicate morphological as well as phonological information, with letters representing sounds but spelling also being dependent on a word's morphology (Perfetti, 2003). Add to this, 26 letters representing 45 sounds spelled in nearly 200 different combinations of letters and the result is the most complex alphabetic code in existence (Goswami, Ziegler and Richardson, 2005). This complexity makes the sequence of reading instruction far more complicated for such an opaque writing system (Rayner et al., 2012).

On one side of the battle lines lie the army of academics and pedagogues who claim that English is so complex that it can no longer be regarded as a phonic language (Gates, 1928; Smith, 1971; Goodman, 1970; Clay, 1991; Adoniou, 2017) and cannot therefore be taught using instruction that exclusively teaches sound to letter pattern correspondence. On the other side are massed the ranks who hold to the principle that letters in an alphabetic code represent speech and English thus

* Timothy Mills MA, BA (Hons)

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obeys the rules for a productive alphabetic writing system (Perfetti, 1985) whereby an infinitely large number of words can be created from a small set of reusable letters that represent the sounds. As a result, they argue, initial reading instruction requires the exclusive teaching of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence rules for words to be decoded and read.

The conflict is often characterised as phonics versus non-phonics, but this is misleading. Phonics has been used on both sides of the debate for over one hundred years, often as an incidental technique to analyse an unknown word *after* identification by a teacher. It is the exclusive, systematic teaching of the English alphabetic code – Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) - as the *only* technique for initial instruction for decoding of words that is so intensely disputed.

The principle behind SSP instruction is that the letter-sound correspondences are taught methodically starting from simple one-to-one correspondences through to more complex letter pattern correspondences. The approach explicitly teaches the connection between graphemes and phonemes and is fundamentally a bottom-up information processing system (Williams, 1979). By mastering the coding of sound to letter correspondence of the English alphabetic code, emergent readers, it is claimed, can apply that code knowledge to decipher any word by enacting a letter to sound to word process in tandem with a lexical route (Dehaene, 2015) to achieve meaning.

In contrast, language-based approaches to initial reading instruction, like those developed by Goodman (1970), Smith (1975) and Clay (1991), are based on the refutation of reading as a precise process that involves, according to Goodman (1970), 'exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and large language units...' (1970:33), but that it is a selective process that involves the partial use of available language cues based on 'readers' expectations' (1970:33). The reader, it maintains, guesses words based on semantic and contextual expectations and then confirms, rejects and refines these guesses in 'an interaction between thought and language...' (1970:34). Inaccuracies, or miscues, as Goodman (1982) calls these errors, are inherent and vital to this process of psycholinguistic guesswork. The theory is linked to Chomsky's (1965) model of oral sentence production which results in precise encoding of speech being sampled and approximated when the message is decoded and follows a top-down model of information processing. Thus, Goodman (1982) maintains, the oral output of the reader may not be directly related to the graphic stimulus of the text and may involve 'transformation in vocabulary and syntax' (1982: 38) even if meaning is retained. The implication is that the reader is reading for meaning not for accuracy and it is semantics and context that drive the reading process not alphabetic decoding.

It is not difficult to see why SSP could be represented as Govian: highly technical, complex and requiring specific training, practice and repetition, children have to work hard to decode, gaining it a reputation for 'drill and kill'. Whole language methods, on the other hand, with the emphasis on guessing, constructivism and intuitive learning could be represented as far more progressive by enabling and encouraging teachers to concentrate on the far more intuitively attractive and enticing elements of literacy: meaning, language and a love of reading (Kim, 2008).

'A CURSE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES'

Confusion between phonics instruction and whole language instruction resulted in what appeared to be, if not a ceasefire, then a compromise in the form of mixed methods of instruction. This method implies that the correct method is the one most appropriate at the time. Children are encouraged to remember some words by shape, use picture, contextual and semantic cues as well as phonic elements. This gained traction in England in the 1960s with The Plowden Report (Blackstone, 1967) concluding that, 'Children are helped to read by memorising the look of words, often with the help of pictures, by guessing from a context...and by phonics, beginning with the initial sounds. They are encouraged to try all the methods available to them and not depend on only one method...' (1967:212).

In 1997 this approach was embedded in England's National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998). The strategy was explicit in its expectation that the teaching of reading should employ mixed methods through its articulation of the 'searchlight' model whereby unknown words were identified using a cocktail of a child's phonic knowledge, contextual knowledge, syntactic and semantic knowledge. A child encountering an unknown word could identify it by using phonic cues, or guess it from the context, the pictures, semantics or syntax. One issue with the approach was that children often became reliant on one searchlight and often the most inefficient in line with Pressley's (2006) suggestion that '...teaching children to decode by giving primacy to semantic-contextual and syntactic-contextual cues over graphemic-phonemic cues is equivalent to teaching them to read the way weak readers read!' (2006:164). Another issue, and one that has haunted analytic, post-hoc, phonics strategies, is that phonics became the strategy of last resort often as a result of insufficient teacher subject knowledge (McCullough, 1955). Reading outcomes in England did, however, rise initially but after three years flattened, plateaued and by 2010 were falling with nearly 20% of children not achieving the expected level 4 in reading (DfE, 2011).

THE CLACKMANNANSHIRE STUDY AND ITS INFLUENCE

SSP gained momentum with the publication of a seven-year study in Scotland. Johnston and Watson's (2004) research into 304 primary-school-aged children taught reading through synthetic phonics and analytic phonics across thirteen classes for sixteen weeks found that those taught by SSP were seven months ahead of their chronological reading age, seven months ahead of the other children in the study and eight months ahead in terms of their spelling.

Classes being taught by SSP were from the most socially deprived backgrounds of all study participants. These children were followed to the end of their primary school careers, by which time they were three and half years ahead of their chronological reading age and significantly ahead of age expectations in their reading comprehension and spelling (Johnston, McGeown and Watson, 2011). Although criticised for a research design that conflated the phonic elements with other potential contributing factors (Ellis and Moss, 2013, Wyse and Goswami, 2008) and the differing amount of teaching (Wyse and Styles, 2007), the dramatic contrast in outcomes gave the research significant leverage.

Brooks (2003), in his study commissioned by the DfES, criticised the phonics element of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), recognising that the format of instruction within the NLS was different to that used in the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston and Watson, 2004). The major difference hinged on whether the target word was known in advance by articulation by the teacher or whether, as was the case in the Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson, 2004), children worked the word out for themselves by using their phonic knowledge. Brooks (2003) recommended that a resolution to the differences of the two positions be reached through discussion but concluded that phonics teaching within the NLS was synthetic. As a result, a resolution was not forthcoming and when, in 2004, 'Playing with Sounds' (DfES, 2004) was introduced to supplement 'Progression in Phonics' (DfES, 1999), the programme embedded unscaffolded blending into the approach. Brooks (2017) later recognised this as an approach that lacked coherence (as the majority of words encountered by emergent readers are unfamiliar) and was contrary to the findings of Johnston and Watson (2004) that phonics be 'fast and first'.

With the publication of the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston and Watson, 2004) the parliamentary Education and Skills committee established a review of the teaching of reading. Conducted by Rose (2006), it acknowledged the conceptual rationality of children utilising letter-sound knowledge to decode unknown words and recommended SSP as the future of reading instruction. As a result, 'Playing with Sounds' (DfES, 2004) was replaced by a government developed SSP programme, 'Letters and Sounds' (DfES, 2007) which explicitly warned against the utilisation of alternative cueing strategies.

TAKING SIDES

The Rose Review (2006) and the recommendations for a revised curriculum that expressly included SSP all developed under New Labour and was stillborn with the election of the coalition government in 2010. SSP, however, had been championed by the Rt Hon. Nick Gibb MP whilst in opposition when questioning the then government's education policy. Gibb had been influenced by Rudolph Flesch's 'Why Jonny Can't Read' (1955), a vitriolic attack on the whole word method of reading instruction in the USA. Flesch's book sold well in the US but gained little influence in the teaching world having been rounded on by the academic community, particularly Harvard University's Carroll (1956). Little did Flesch realise the influence he would have fifty years later and 3,500 miles away. It was Gibb, as Gove's School Standards Minister, who took the fight to the whole language, mixed methods battalions.

Gibb and Gove used a phalanx of weapons. The first, and probably most controversial, was the classic Govian tactic of deploying statutory testing to drive change with the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) (DfE, 2019) which assessed the basic phonic knowledge of English five and six-year-olds in Year One. The pilot study carried out in 2010 revealed that only 31.8% (DfE, 2011) of those sampled achieved the threshold score. This resulted in the PSC becoming compulsory from 2012 with outcomes being published and analysed in individual school data accessible to OFSTED. A core-criteria for phonics teaching materials (DfE, 2010) was introduced against which schools could assess their programmes followed by officially approved phonics programmes in 2013 (DfE, 2014) and match funding for training and resources. The second lever of influence was the inclusion of SSP in the Teacher Standards which specifically stated that when teaching early reading, teachers should be able to, 'demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (DfE, 2011:1). This had the added influence of obliging teacher training institutions to ensure that trainees had knowledge of, and training, in SSP.

The new National Curriculum for England introduced by Gove in 2014 stated that, '...phonics should be emphasised in early teaching of reading to beginners (i.e. unskilled readers)' (DfE, 2014:14). The final weapon in the armoury was the inclusion of SSP expectations in the inspection framework. OFSTED inspectors had to attend compulsory phonics training and inspectors were required to comment on the quality of phonics teaching (OFSTED, 2015). This was updated in 2019 to include expectations that younger children gain phonics knowledge, that reading books closely connect to that knowledge and that assessments be made by inspectors as to how well staff teach children to read systematically using synthetic phonics and how well they assess children's progress in gaining phonic knowledge (OFSTED, 2019).

THE FIGHTBACK

It was not plain sailing for Gove and Gibb.

In 2012 the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the second-largest teaching union representing in excess of three hundred thousand teachers, denounced the introduction of systematic synthetic phonics as the promotion of a single fashionable technique with one NUT executive stating, 'Most adults do not read phonically. They read by visual memory or they use context cueing to predict what the sentence might be...' (Mulholland, 2014: 13). The union was emphatic that phonics alone would not produce fluent readers and that mixed methods were essential. The largest teaching union, the NAS/UWT, asserted that children, '... need to use a combination of cues such as initial letter sounds and illustrations to make meaning from text...' (politics.co.uk, 2013:3).

This resistance from educational institutional leadership reflected the attitudes of their members. According to a National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2012) survey the majority of teachers specifically mentioned the use of picture cues as a reading technique along with the visual memorisation of word shapes and the sight learning of words. Further research by the NFER (Walker and Bartlett, 2013) found that 67% of teachers believed that a mixed methods approach to the teaching of reading was the most effective. A survey by the NAS/UWT in 2013 (politics.co.uk, 2013) showed that 89% of teachers believed that children needed to use a variety of cues to extract meaning from text confirming the results of Sheffield Hallam University's research two years earlier that revealed that 74% of primary school teachers encouraged pupils to use a range of cueing systems that included picture clues (Lloyd-Jones, 2013).

A significant number of high-profile academics were also unconvinced about the efficacy of SSP. Glazzard (2017) argued that many younger children were not able to deal with the smallest unit of sound, the phoneme, but must begin with larger units and recommended onset and rimes maintaining that reading instruction was not a 'one size fits all' (2017:53) model. Clark (2017) was similarly unconvinced, stating that there was no significant research that suggested that the method was more effective than analytic phonics or whole language instruction and that a psycholinguistic guessing approach could be effective concluding that there was, 'no evidence to support phonics in isolation as the one best method...' (2017:97). Clark (2017) also questioned the wisdom of introducing children to reading long before this takes place in other countries and recommended delaying the teaching of reading. Dombey (2017) also supported a mixed approach which combines enjoyment, syntactic analysis and

phonetic examination in equal measure as more efficacious than phonics instruction alone.

Much of the academic criticism of SSP instruction took a socio-political perspective. Gardner (2017) likened the PSC to a ‘virus’ (2017:113) undermining the art of pedagogy and saw the insistence on the adoption of SSP as a reductionist model of teaching by direct instruction which viewed literacy as a systematic process leading to standardised accountability and a statutory check as a right-wing political policing imperative. Gardner (2017) cited the mandatory inclusion of systematic synthetic phonics teaching within the English Teacher Standards (DfE, 2011) as evidence of this ‘policing’ (2017:114).

Wrigley (2017) concurred with Gardner’s (2017) view that phonics teaching and screening were the result of ministerial power being ‘increasingly exercised and abused,’ (2017:213) and policing by ‘the privatized Ofsted system of England’ (2017: 214). He suggested that the teaching of SSP fitted the right-wing political preference of explicit instruction. Cox (2017) also questioned the political imperatives behind systematic synthetic phonics and urged restraint over the speed of implementation of a phonics screening check in Australia, questioning whose expertise and whose knowledge was taking precedence. He, like Gardner (2017), cited Robinson’s (2015) claim that the commercialisation and politicisation of education was damaging the prospects of young people. Robinson’s (2015) promotion of creativity over knowledge and attacks on direct instruction models of teaching were, by implication, attacks on systematic synthetic phonics instruction.

Dombey (2017) proposed that reading was more about making sense of text than the privileging of the identification of words and cited Taylor and Pearson’s (2002) study which, she suggested, indicated that an approach which combines enjoyment, syntactic analysis and phonetic examination in equal measure was more efficacious than phonics instruction alone.

All of these academics acknowledge the importance of phonetic approaches to word decoding for emergent readers, and the majority recognise synthetic phonics as the most effective strategy for the teaching of the decoding of unfamiliar words. What they suggest, however, is that SSP instruction is not empirically superior to analytic phonics for the teaching of reading.

Despite the resistance, the only successful reversal of policy was the abandonment of the proposed Year 3 phonics screening check after pressure from the unions (naht.org.uk, 2017). All other policies and strategies remained, with Nick Gibb declaring in 2019, ‘The question for teachers is no longer “look and say” or phonics. Instead, the question is which phonics programmes are most effective?’ (Hazell, 2019:1).

A POLITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PARADOX

The result was the paradoxical position of Conservative Education Ministers aligning themselves with the philosophy of the critical theorists, including the socialist Paulo Freire (1996), against unions, liberal academics and teachers for the purpose and motivation of attempting to ensure all children had the best chance of being able to read. For where Gove and Gibb had the moral high ground was upon the overwhelming mountain of evidence that indicated that systematic code-based instruction in early reading was by far the most effective instructional approach.

When Chall (1967) conducted a three-year analysis of all previous research regarding early reading instruction in the United States her conclusions were unequivocal:

'Most children ... are taught to read by...a meaning emphasis method. Yet the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method – ie. one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language – produces better results...' (1967: 307).

In terms of word recognition, spelling, vocabulary and comprehension, children taught using systematic phonics outperformed those being taught using intrinsic phonics. Only in reading rate did those utilising an intrinsic phonics approach gain an advantage and this advantage was nullified and surpassed by grade 4.

These results were supported by Bond and Dykstra's (1967) largescale study, Gough and Tunmer's (1986) research that resulted in the seminal 'Simple View of Reading' (now referenced in OFSTED training), the USA's National Reading Panel Report (2000) followed by Ehri et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis, Camilli et al.' (2003) reanalysis and Johnston and Watson's (2004) Clackmannanshire study which was supported by Torgenson et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis.

Mixed methods, in contrast, were undermined by the failure of the National Literacy Strategy's searchlight model to improve reading outcomes. Goodman's (1972) whole language approach was adopted by the state of California for seven years. At the end of those seven years 60% of Californian nine and ten-year-olds were unable to gain an even superficial understanding of their books and California slumped from fifth position to the bottom of the United States reading league tables (Turner and Burkard, 1996).

It would appear, counterintuitively, that Gove and Gibb were in agreement with Marx (Bowles and Gintis, 1977), that in a capitalist society education was a

superstructure serving the base economic structure and if the economy required a quarter of eleven-year-olds to be unable to read then that would be exactly what the education system would deliver (Bowles and Gintis, 1977). This aligned with Bordieu's (Silva and Ward, 2010) view that education was the most effective way of perpetuating social patterns because not only did it provide a justification for the inequalities, it treated the ruling cultural heritage as a natural state rather than a social gift. A Conservative Secretary of State for Education, it appeared, wanted to undermine the maintenance of Gramsci's (Gramsci et al., 1994) hegemony, and the crucial role education played in maintaining it (Althusser, 2010), that enabled contradictory principles to flourish through the appearance of reciprocity (Williams, 1977). His efforts to ensure that all children were taught how to read by the most effective method was being attacked by the very people and institutions whose vocation and training implied they wanted the same thing.

Isn't it ironic?

SO, DID IT WORK? CAN ALL CHILDREN NOW READ?

The evidence of the effect on reading of the compulsory teaching of SSP is nuanced and at first glance disappointing. In terms of the Phonics Screening Check there have been unequivocal improvements. From 58% of children achieving the threshold score in the first check in 2012 (DfE, 2019), the figures in 2019 have risen to 82% (DfE, 2019). For Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) outcomes the picture is complicated by the change in 2016 to a more demanding assessment framework making comparison difficult. Since 2016 the percentage of children attaining the teacher-assessed expected standard of reading at KS1 has hovered at around 75% (DfE, 2019). At KS2, pupils achieving the expected standard in an externally marked assessment has risen from 66% in 2016 to 73% in 2019 (DfE, 2019).

Internationally, in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (DfE, 2017) England has risen from 11th to 8th from 2012 to 2016 with this rise adding support, according to the Department for Education (2016), to the case for the 'efficacy of phonics approaches' (2016:2). However, Solity (2018) has suggested that the sample was flawed and once adjusted for the inclusion of independent school children, England returns to 11th place. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) outcomes in 2018, the first English cohort to have been assessed at the PISA, and who had therefore been exposed to SSP instruction, were included in the results. Although England's mean reading score improved from 495 in 2009 to 505 in 2018 the improvements were not statistically significant (DfE, 2019), and it performed similarly to English-speaking countries that have

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not adopted SSP as a fundament of early reading instruction. Buckingham (2020) notes, however, that this cohort would have been exposed to variable phonics instruction.

With a slight increase in Key Stage 2 reading outcomes and no significant rise in England's position in reading league tables internationally, the only meaningful improvement, after ten years of compulsory phonics instruction, appears to be in phonics. Perhaps as Bowers (2020) concludes, 'there is little or no evidence that this approach is more effective than many of the most common alternative methods used in school, including whole language...' (2020:682).

Were Gove and Gibb guilty of engaging in a wild goose chase?

It is worth returning to the research, the vast majority of which supports code-based approaches to early reading instruction and the conclusion drawn by reading psychologists Rayner et al. (2012), who have no pedagogical or political axe to grind, that, 'while many may discover some letter-sound correspondences without phonics instruction, teaching methods that make the alphabetic principle explicit provide a key to our writing system that produces better readers overall' (2012:341). Their conclusion is supported by neuroimaging studies that track the brain's reading circuitry and suggest that early phonics instruction is neurodevelopmentally appropriate for beginning readers with the dorsal and anterior systems involved in the orthographic-phonological processing most active in beginning readers (Frost et al., 2009). This may be the key for explaining the disappointing statistics.

Systematic instruction in the English alphabetic code appears to be the most efficacious way of ensuring that the English alphabetic code is mastered by emergent readers. Seidenberg (2017) claimed, 'For reading scientists the evidence that the phonological pathway is used in reading and especially important in beginning reading is about as close to conclusive as research on complex human behavior can get' (2017:124). Rayner et al. (2012) assert that mastery of that code enables effective decoding but is, however, not sufficient, of itself, for fluent reading and effective reading comprehension. Young readers, they assert, start with stronger oral comprehension skills than those related to reading comprehension. As Curtis (1980) maintains, the initial roadblock to understanding text is the difficulty encountered translating words on the page into their spoken forms. Mastery of letter-sound correspondences supports accurate and fast word recognition eventually through repeated fixation on words and letter patterns (Share, 2004) that trigger the word superiority effect (Reicher, 1969) that facilitates instant word recognition. To use Beck's (1998) analogy, automatic decoding is equivalent to the fundamental skill of dribbling a basketball. Dribbling is not sufficient to score points but is necessary to play the game. Mastering dribbling will not make a star player, but a weak dribble will be a barrier to becoming a star

player. Thus, the mastering of decoding skills provides the foundations for automatic word recognition that frees children to focus on the meaning of the text.

This liberation of cognitive load (Sweller et al. 2011) may lie at the heart of the discouraging improvements in reading outcomes. KS2 reading tests, PIRLS and PISA assessments are all reading comprehension tests and although decoding mastery is necessary for the emergence of reading fluency and the extraction of meaning from text, it is not sufficient. As Beck et al. (1999) observed, the impression is often given in reading development that reading comprehension is the final stage in a hierarchical structure. This, they suggest, results in the assessment of reading comprehension being accepted as the most accurate assessment of reading. However, if as Cervetti et al. (2016) suggest, 'Reading comprehension and knowledge have a reciprocal relationship in which knowledge supports comprehension and comprehension builds new knowledge...' (2016:763), or as Pearson (2006) put it, 'knowledge begets comprehension begets knowledge' (2006:6), then reading comprehension is more dependent upon the acquisition of knowledge rather than the development of word recognition. SSP can improve word recognition and enhance the development of reading fluency. However, to evaluate its efficacy on an assessment that is also dependent on the development of cognitive maturation and global, cultural and discrete knowledge may be a conflation. It is perhaps the equivalent of blaming a basketball team's poor showing on the players' infant schools' dribbling coach. Lack of progress in reading comprehension scores may be a greater assessment of the curriculum that generates the knowledge to understand the text rather than the programmes and policies that enable decoding of that text.

A far more valid assessment of the introduction of SSP within the curriculum would be a word recognition test or a reading fluency test. There is, however, no national or international assessment programme of this and therefore no benchmark or comparative data. If SSP failed to improve word recognition scores and words-read-per-minute there would be valid reasons for the analytic phonics, whole word, balanced literacy, whole language advocates to call for its demise.

There are other issues with the introduction of SSP that may have undermined the efficacy of the instruction and its impact on reading outcomes. Firstly, the inertia from teachers, particularly those trained under the National Literacy Strategy 'searchlight' mixed methods model, may have undermined some of the instruction and resulted in mixed methods by proxy. This may have been exacerbated by a lack of compulsory code training for teachers in KS2 who then encouraged compensatory guessing strategies (Ehri, 2004) for older readers when faced with unknown words. The inspection framework may also have been undermined as many of inspectors, although they received training, would have taught utilising the 'searchlights' model and may have brought with them unconscious bias and

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insecure subject knowledge. Furthermore, the failure of government to identify a single phonics programme resulted in a number of DfE approved programmes, most of which are associated with a financial investment for schools. Schools may have selected the lowest cost option or more usually the most ubiquitous programme in the hope that its very ubiquity indicated efficacy. Very few programmes attach any detailed research data to their marketing literature or are required to and there exists a paucity of research into them.

However, paradoxically, the greatest flaw lay in the most instrumental lever: The Phonics Screening Check. The assessment requires Year One children to read forty words. The forty words consist of a mixture of actual words and pseudowords (alien words). Pseudowords are invented words that portray no meaning but follow legitimate phonic patterns of the English alphabetic code. The rationale for using pseudoword deciphering as a measure of decoding skill has an extensive research base in the assessment of alphabetic writing systems, is considered a reliable assessment of decoding proficiency (Gough, 1983) and is widely used in the measurement of decoding (Ehri et al., 2007; Pullen et al., 2005; Shankweiler et al. 1999; Snowling, 1981; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993).

The skills that are necessary for decoding are isolated from the ability to read words by sight during pseudoword reading because the reader cannot rely on past experience with a pseudoword and is unable to guess the word or rely upon word shape memorisation (Good, Baker, and Peyton, 2008). The reader is entirely reliant upon their understanding of the letter-sound relationships (the alphabetic principle) and the precepts that govern those relationships. The inclusion, therefore, of real words in the check is counterintuitive and undermines its validity (Darnell et al., 2017). The check should consist entirely of pseudowords.

More worrying, according to Darnell et al. (2017) is the restricted content of the test which enables many children to reach the threshold by exhibiting only partial code knowledge. This, of itself, would not be an issue, but with many schools ceasing phonics instruction after children have reached the threshold, the prospect of code mastery becomes uncertain. With only partial code knowledge the associated spectres of poor instant word recognition and retarded development of reading fluency start to materialise, particularly for pupils unable to crack the code for themselves (McGuinness, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The championing of SSP under Gove was a bold policy that courted unpopularity and resistance but was supported by substantial research. That so much progress was made in its implementation and embedding by a coalition government with a shallow majority is testament to an unflinching, some would say dogmatic, belief

in its righteousness and perhaps also in a genuine desire to turn the tide of reading failure in England particularly among the less privileged. That the policy has not resulted yet in evidence of universal literacy and England sitting atop the world reading tables may be more a result of inappropriate assessment and a failure of the system to ensure code mastery along with a hope that addressing one part of the phases of reading instruction would right the other parts.

Those faults do not condemn the policy to failure. There seems much to build on. A Phonics Screening Check at Year Three that assesses the entire code would go some way to militating against phonic deficits debilitating pupils in later years along with opportunity for and assessment of rapid word recognition for children in lower KS2. Furthermore, an understanding that reading fluency is not a proxy for reading comprehension may help schools prepare pupils more effectively for the demands of secondary school. With a few apposite developments and by entering the fray one more time, Gove and Gibb could arguably have done more for reading in England than any past ministerial team. It might even be their finest hour.

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