

## KELLY AND ROSE HAVE BEEN MISGUIDED SAYS SYNTHETIC PHONICS EXPERT

In Ruth Kelly's letter of thanks to Jim Rose, 30 November, for his interim report on Synthetic Phonics, she writes, "I share your view that it is now time to replace 'Searchlights'. It was right for its time when it was introduced in 1998." However, British Synthetic Phonics expert, Alan Davies, Chartered Educational Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, strongly disagrees and believes that they have been misguided and there is no need to look for a new model of early reading to replace the 'Searchlights' model.

Davies says, "It is madness to believe that you should start the literacy process by first doing only phonics. There is much that can be done before children start school, as I said live on Sky News [11.10 AM 1 Dec], 'The best thing they [parents] can do, if they want to teach their child to be literate in English, is to put a three-year-old child on their knee and turn over the pages of a favourite book to anticipate the story and the pictures'. It is wrong to believe that synthetic phonics is the 'best route to becoming skilled readers', as stated in Jim's report. In my view, Ruth Kelly and Jim Rose have both been misguided and Ruth Kelly has probably made the biggest faux pas, by a Minister of Education, in British Educational history."

Davies believes that the British Government got it 100% right when they wrote in 1998, 'All teachers know that pupils become successful readers by learning to use a range of strategies to get at the meaning of a text.' He believes that the four 'Searchlights', used by children to read the words and sentences in favourite books, are all useful – even in early reading.

He believes that young children should be encouraged, from the outset, to use four main searchlights:

A 'Word Recognition Searchlight' – for words that are recognised by sight (e.g. my, sea, tree).

A 'Phonics Searchlight' - for hypotheses/guesses at the possible sounds for: the one-, two-, three- and four-letter spelling choices of written English (e.g. for the 'g', 'ge', 'dge' and 'eigh' in giant, cage, bridge and eight, respectively); other sequences of letters, such as consonant blends (e.g. the two sounds at the start of bridge, brick and brown); and syllables (e.g. village, cabbage, cottage).

A 'Context Searchlight' - for hypotheses/guesses based on the words, phrases, sentences and stories acquired from essential speaking and listening activities – including the 'pretend reading' of sentences, paragraphs and pages in favourite books (e.g. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and....., he got up at six o'clock.).

A 'Grammar Searchlight' – for hypotheses/guesses, which may be implicit or explicit, about how words combine in a well-formed sentence (e.g. 'he six o'clock got up at', if used above, would be 'ungrammatical').

Davies is the pioneer of the widely used phonics programme THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills), which is used in many schools in the UK, but more extensively in Australia and, over the last two years, Southern Africa. The Botswana Government aim to implement THRASS in all primary and secondary schools and the THRASS two-day training course is a compulsory module for trainee teachers at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and a growing number of other universities in South Africa.

Davies has twice been invited by OFSTED to present papers, relating to his concerns about the teaching of phonics in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). In 1999, he proposed 'A National Strategy To Train Teachers To Accurately Articulate The 44 Phonemes Of Spoken English And To Accurately Identify The Graphemes Of Written English'. In 2003, in 'Why All Teachers Of English Should Be Trained To Use The THRASS Periodic Table Of Phonics' he berated the British Government for promoting a 'Vowel Rap' that taught infant and junior school pupils that there are only five vowel sounds in English (when there are actually 20) and for advising that trainee teachers should be taught to recognise "spellings which omit the weaker elements of consonant blends e.g. omitting 'h' from 'thing'." When, as he put it, "The 't' 'h' is a consonant digraph for the phoneme heard at the start of "thumb". There is no 'weak' element to be omitted."

Davies explained, "The previous NLS training for phonics work was weak and inaccurate but it looks as though the British Government are going to stay true to form with this sort of inaccurate advice. The Interim Report, proof read by Jim Rose's team of five professors and an HMI, states that 'Vowel digraphs comprise two vowels which, together, make one sound e.g. ai, oo, ow.' This is definitely not true. A vowel digraph can be any two letters, which often include 'consonant letters', that represent one of the 20 vowel sounds of English e.g. d-ay, k-ey, teach-er, coll-ar, doct-or, f-er-n, sh-ir-t, w-or-m, f-ur, sn-ow, t-oy, scr-ew, s-aw and c-ow – which, as a group, are to be found in tens of thousands of basic English words."

To support his view that the main problem with the NLS has been the weak and inaccurate training for the 'Phonics Searchlight', Davies has produced a video '20% Is Unacceptably High', with the help of a 'Whistleblower NQT' (Newly Qualified Teacher) and many course evaluations from other NQTs e.g. "I've learnt more from the training in these two days, about phonics, than the three years that I've been at university". Davies is a big fan of Synthetic Phonics but his view is that THRASS is 'The natural approach to synthetic phonics'. He believes that the NLS has been a success. "It is not that 20% of pupils are illiterate, it is that 20% haven't reached the preferred standard for their age – Level 4. This significant improvement is attributable to lots of hard work, by teachers and assistants, with texts, sentences and words but the training for the 44 sounds and 120 key spelling-choices of English has been relatively poor." he stated.

Davies added, "Jim Rose's view that it is a 'futile debate' to fully explore the differences between the two main approaches to Synthetic Phonics, what Ruth Kelly refers to as the 'distracting debates', may appear futile and distracting to them but, I can assure you, the differences have enormous implications for the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in the UK, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of children in Africa."

David Cameron MP, prospective leader of the Conservative Party, has written to Mr Davies to request a meeting with himself and Nick Gibb MP, to clarify the differences between the 'Artificial Synthesis' approach used in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, and the 'Natural Synthesis' approach used in the THRASS programme.

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