



## Editorial - January 2006

Article Author:

[Rosemary Stones](#) [1]

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Editorial

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News and comment from the Editor.

In a major U-turn, Education Secretary Ruth Kelly has ordered that in future all children should start to learn to read with a course in synthetic phonics ? in effect tearing up the literacy strategy implemented after 1997 which incorporated a variety of methods. Many teachers have expressed concern that Kelly is being too prescriptive. Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, commented: ?The last thing teachers want is a massive upheaval as a result of the promotion of a single fashionable technique.?

Ironically, the head of the school that ranked top of the December primary school league tables, Barbara Jones of Combe Church of England Primary School, attributed her success to ?ignoring? most of the Government?s literacy and numeracy strategies\*. She explained: ?We don?t use the literacy or numeracy strategy as prescriptively as we have been asked to. We use a variety of approaches and that?s where I think the Government has got it wrong in that they advocate one way and then a few years later they suggest another way. Phonics is not the only answer. There isn?t one ideal way of teaching reading. Children do not all learn in the same way because we are all different? You have got to use a bit of common sense.? In Combe School, every 11-year-old was found to be at least three years ahead of their age group in last year?s English, maths and science tests.

Bethan Marshall, a lecturer in education at King?s College London, argues that ?part of the appeal of synthetic phonics seems to be that it appears scientific? it suggests that the teaching of reading is something that can be engineered with precision.? She continues: ?The problem is that children are not buildings or bridges. Learning is a messy business? Any decent teacher will tailor their teaching to the child in front of them??

But what is synthetic phonics? In her important article, ?How should we teach children to read?? (p.6 of this issue) Henrietta Dombey, Professor Emeritus of Literacy in Primary Education at the University of Brighton, discusses the reasoning and the drawbacks to the different approaches and asks ?why should it be one or the other?? Meanwhile in Hal?s Reading Diary (p.13), Roger Mills describes how his now nearly five-year-old son is responding to being taught to read.

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quoted in the Independent of 2.12.05



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