

What do changes in policy regarding the teaching of phonics since 1995 disclose about successive UK education policymakers' understanding of early reading skills?

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Abstract

This article explores the underpinning assumptions about the changing definition and parameters of early reading that are contained in successive UK Departments for Education (DfE, DfES, DfEE) documentation since 1995 and in Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) reports and official blogs during the same period. It employs a chronological presentation of key phrases within policy documents and grey literature to identify and track the changing attitudes held by the writers of these documents regarding the skills deemed to be officially important in learning to read. The article acknowledges and explores the contested nature of the field. The exploration of these policy documents demonstrates that although UK National Curricula since 1995, including the current one, have consistently identified that skills of early reading are multifaceted, this contrasts strongly with policy, guidance and inspection frameworks in the same period, which have increasingly sat, and continue to sit, within a view of reading underpinned by rigid and narrow definitions of early reading in which phonics is pre-eminent.

Key words: early reading, education policy, pedagogy, phonics

Introduction

This article was written shortly after the 2024 UK general election, which saw an emphatic change in administration, and a resultant change in personnel of those responsible for education policy. A tracking and evaluation of the impact of successive changes in policy is therefore timely. This article focuses on policy regarding early reading, with a view to positioning policy changes over the last 30 years within a spectrum of

published literature, in order to identify priorities and expose tensions between policy documents and curriculum documents.

For the purposes of this article, the recent history of prescriptive government control over the teaching and learning of reading is explored from 1995. This date was chosen because the UK National Curriculum was updated in that year (DfE, 1995), and it was just 3 years later that the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfES, 1998) was published. Prior to the NLS, there was no formal directive in place in the United Kingdom about how early reading should be taught. The descriptors and coverage requirements of the National Curriculum (DfE, 1995) suggested an understanding of reading to be a suite of diverse skills, attributes, preferences and habits that converged in a plurality of experiences.

Thus, the 1995 National Curriculum (DfE, 1995), like its predecessor (DfEE, 1989), gave official credence to the multifaceted nature of reading. 'Skills in reading ... include the ability to read fluently a range of literary and non-fiction texts and to reflect critically on what is read. (p. 20) ... In reading, pupils should be taught strategies to help them read with understanding, to locate and use information, to follow a process or argument and summarise, and to synthesise and adapt what they learn from their reading' (p. 38). These strategies were fourfold and were overtly identified within the National Curriculum document (DfE, 1995) as 'Phonemic awareness and phonic knowledge; Word recognition and graphic knowledge; Grammatical awareness; and Contextual understanding' (p. 46). This document also separately stated that children should be taught a fifth element 'Reading for Information' (p. 46), which included bibliographic

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skills such as knowledge of book conventions and of organisational features of non-fiction texts. Each of these five aspects of reading was given equal prominence in the 1995 National Curriculum. There was no formal policy in schools identifying how these components were to be taught, but to a greater or lesser degree they would each be present together, or over time. Then, as now, phonics was seen as essential to the teaching of reading, but it was one of five of ways (strategies) to engage with text. The word 'phonics' does not appear in the 1995 National Curriculum, although 'phonic knowledge' does, twice, as a sub-heading, and 'phonic' does once as an example of a reading strategy within Attainment Target 2 (Reading), Level 2, which was an overt pedagogical statement of the need for key stage 1 (age 5–7 years) children to have a range of reading strategies.

Level 2. Pupils' reading of simple texts shows understanding and is generally accurate. They express opinions about major events or ideas in stories, poems and non-fiction. They use more than one strategy, such as phonic, graphic, syntactic and contextual, in reading unfamiliar words and establishing meaning. (DfE, 1995, p. 19. Also DfEE, 1999, p. 5)

In 1995, education policymakers' understanding of reading was clear. Reading was a broad and multifaceted enterprise. It required a plurality of skills, resources, experiences and understandings. There was no indication within the 1995 National Curriculum (or indeed within its post-National Literacy Strategy successor of 1999) of the extent of change that was to come regarding the pre-eminence of phonics as a reading strategy. UK teachers had no idea that the definition of reading would become very narrow, very quickly, and they could not have imagined how the teaching of phonics could be made so rigidly prescriptive, monochrome and pre-eminent.

The beginnings of prescription regarding the teaching of literacy

It was the 'greater or lesser degree' that prompted the publication of The National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) which contained the searchlights model: the first attempt by a post-war government to standardise the teaching of reading in UK schools (Figure 1). It is a model that did not fit seamlessly with the National Curriculum of the time because although the searchlights model identified the priorities of education policy regarding reading, it did not include the need for children to develop bibliographic understanding. The NLS can be pinpointed as the beginnings of

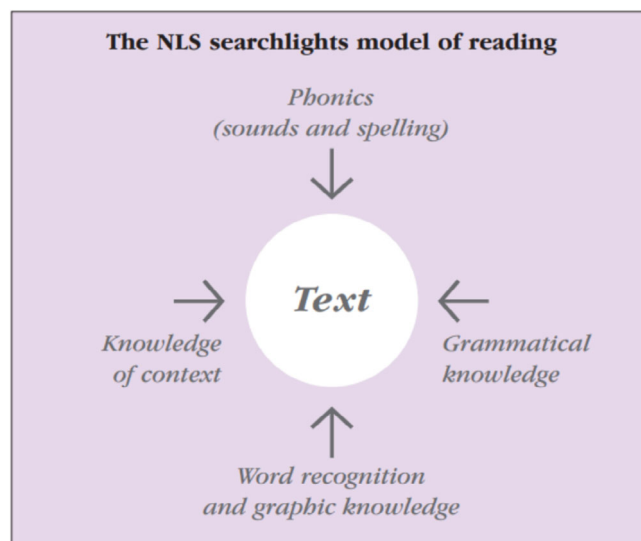


Figure 1: The searchlights model. Source: *Handbook of Teaching Early Reading* (Elborn, 2015, p. 4).

the narrowing of policymakers' understanding of the scope and definition of reading. The bibliographic aspect of reading was, by its omission from the National Literacy Strategy, officially deemed to be redundant, along with the skills and preferences that it engendered. Structural and stylistic differences between (for example) fiction and non-fiction texts; between a newspaper and a birthday card; between a poem and a recipe; between a piece of creative writing and a science report, were not reading skills which were identifiably worthy of a place in the literacy provision of a 1998 UK classroom under the National Literacy Strategy.

The National Literacy Strategy did not survive long of course. Its infamous clock (Figure 2) stood as a symbol of an unbalanced, time-bound and stiflingly prescriptive approach to the teaching and learning of literacy. The strategy was flawed, not least because it operated under a very reductive and binary definition of literacy (reading and writing) but also because it was a one-size-fits-all scheme of work in which there was no place for speaking and listening skills.

The rise of the pre-eminence and dominance of phonics as an early reading strategy

Ofsted (2002), in its review of the first 4 years of the NLS, was very critical of the NLS's approach to reading, not because it was too narrow, but because it was not narrow enough. The report acknowledged the depersonalised nature of the strategy, but openly criticised, in the last phrase of the following extract,

Structure of the Literacy Hour

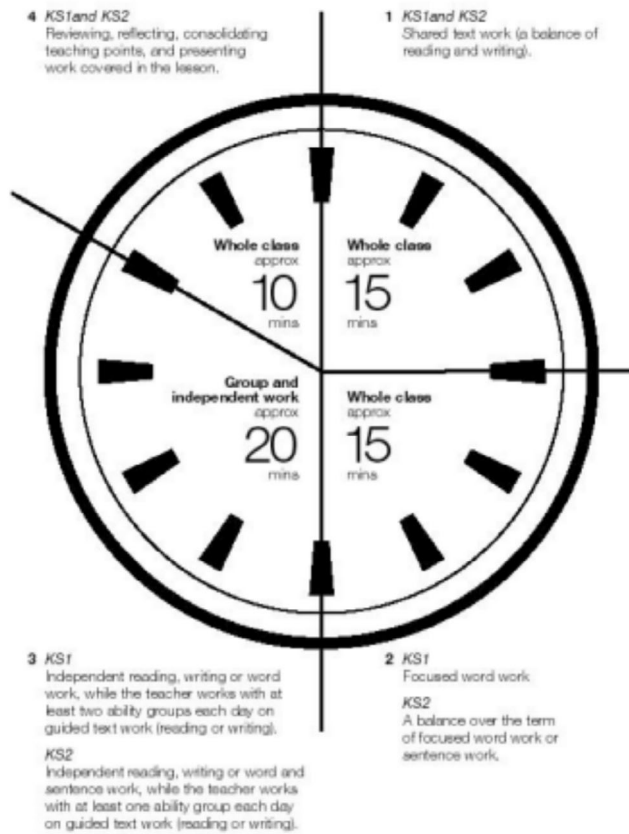


Figure 2: The literacy hour clock (NLS Framework for Teaching DfEE, 1998, p. 8).

the way in which the NLS espoused a plurality of reading approaches. This 2002 Ofsted publication marks the beginnings of the dominance of phonics over all other reading strategies.

The guidance from the NLS on how to teach phonics was not helpful enough in enabling teachers to teach phonic knowledge and skills systematically and speedily from Year R onwards. The teaching of phonics got off to a poor start and it has still not had enough impact on Years 3 and 4. The 'searchlights' model of reading took a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and therefore placed too much emphasis, at the earliest stages of learning to read, on the use of a broad range of decoding strategies and not enough on phonics. Source Ofsted (2002, p. 35) The NLS: the first 4 years

The searchlights model was succeeded in 2007 with the publication of Letters and Sounds (DFES, 2007), which contained the simple view of reading (first designed by Gough and Tunmer, 1986) (Figure 3). This

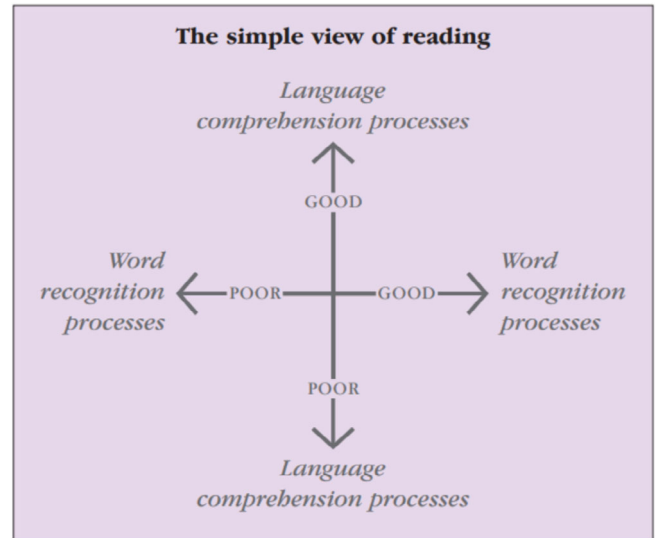


Figure 3: Simple view of reading. Source: Handbook of Teaching Early Reading (Elborn, 2015, p. 4).

model was used to further simplify the previous searchlights model: syntactic and semantic aspects of reading conflated into generic language-comprehension processes, and letter- and word-level phonics into word-recognition processes. The model served as a useful assessment tool, in that, for example, a child who has strong word recognition skills but weak language comprehension skills (the child who 'barks at print') might be identified within the bottom right-hand quadrant, whereas the child with strong language comprehension processes but weak phonics skills might be identified within the top left quadrant. This recognition of diverse reading competences within a cohort of children at least recognised and allowed an aspect of personalised learning. The one-size-fits-all approach of the NLS (DfES, 1998) was gone, but there remained no place for bibliographic skills.

The same was true of *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2008) statutory framework, which was first published the year after *Letters and Sounds*. The most recent version of it was effective from January 2024 (DfE, 2023a). Each of these versions identify that 'Reading consists of two dimensions: language comprehension and word reading' (EYFS, DfE, 2023a, p. 11). Again, the word 'phonics' does not appear in either document, although 'phonic' does twice in each, so the EYFS is not a document which overtly identifies the pre-eminent place of phonics.

By contrast, *The Importance of Teaching—The Schools White Paper* (DfE, 2010a) was unambiguous, revealing quite unequivocally policymakers' understanding of priorities in reading acquisition. This document was not exclusively focused on phonics (it covered a wide range of curriculum subjects), but phonics was a

significant feature. The paper was intended as an intervention which policymakers considered to be needed in England (and, it seems, only England) because ‘England has slipped down international league tables which measure ability in academic subjects’ (DfE, 2010b, p. 1). This white paper was a herald for a new National Curriculum which would be published in 2013 (DfE, 2013). The rhetoric contained in the white paper was interesting and specific.

- [The DfE will] ... ensure that there is support available to every school for the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, as the best method for teaching reading. (p. 11)
- New teachers report that they are not always confident about ... the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics as the proven best way to teach early reading. (pp. 22–23)
- The evidence is clear that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics is the most effective way of teaching young children to read. (p. 43)Source: DfE (2010a).

Notice the vocabulary here. Consistently, when phonics is mentioned in the white paper, it is accompanied by corollary statements of it being ‘the best method ... the proven best way ... the most effective way’ of teaching reading. Here, phonics is no longer one of five, or even one of two ways of engaging with text. Despite the National Curriculum’s (DfE, 1995) continuing commitment to plurality of reading strategies, in 2010, as a government policy, phonics became the best way to teach reading: the first in a field of one.

The DfE’s (2010a) definition of what it is to read was made clear by this document. In 2010, the understanding of what it is to read demonstrated by the writers and makers of education policy was overtly underpinned by a very narrow definition of reading, which was confined to those aspects of reading that phonics can enable a child to do. ‘Systematic Synthetic Phonics is the best method for teaching reading’ (DfE, 2010a, p. 11). So if a 4-year-old who, as yet, lacks the ability to decode text, picks up the picture book that the teacher has just read to them and ‘reads’ it to other children or to a set of purposely-assembled teddy bears, this activity, by the white paper’s definition, is not reading. It is (presumably) merely role play, not proper or even developmental reading. It mattered not to the DfE (2010a) whether the plot and characters in the book were faithfully re-presented by the child; it was unimportant to the DfE (2010a) that the sequence of events in the story line was accurately adhered to by the child using visual clues contained in the picture book. None of this was relevant to the DfE’s (2010a) definition. None of this was reading. By the definition of reading contained in the schools white paper

(DfE, 2010a), until children were decoding using phonics, they were not reading. This is a stark demonstration of how far policy had changed in only 11 years from an understanding and requirement that children should ‘use more than one strategy, such as phonic, graphic, syntactic and contextual, in reading unfamiliar words and establishing meaning’ (DfEE, 1999, p. 5).

This 2010 white paper also heralded the phonics screening check, a further layer of accountability for schools to demonstrate their effectiveness in, and commitment to, teaching phonics as a measure of reading.

Pupils who are struggling to learn to read must be identified as early as possible so that they can be given extra help. We will therefore introduce a new age six reading check. This screening exercise will be designed to check that children are on track and to help schools to identify those who need more support. Schools’ results will be reported through the RAISE Online database, which will allow teachers to analyse and improve their teaching practices. (DfE, 2010a, pp. 43–44)

Six years later, in a subsequent white paper (DfE, 2016, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*) the vocabulary had changed.

- Since the introduction of the phonics reading check in 2012, 120,000 more children are now on track to become excellent readers (p. 5)
- Despite decades of research showing its positive effects, systematic synthetic phonics had been disregarded by many schools, local authorities, and university education faculties. (p. 38)
- In 2012, we introduced the phonics reading check at the end of Year 1 and three years on, the proportion of 6-year-olds achieving the expected standard in the check has risen by 19 percentage points to 77%, equivalent to 120,000 more children on track to become excellent readers. (p. 38)

In this 2016 document, there was no longer a perceived need on the part of policymakers to validate the pre-eminent place of phonics in the teaching of reading using constant claims of it being ‘the best’ way. The 2016 white paper was presented as an overt celebration of how phonics had improved the reading skills of learning readers, in spite of policymakers’ overtly stated perceptions that schools, local authorities and university education faculties had been disregarding systematic synthetic phonics, presumably wilfully. The vocabulary was combative. The 2016 white paper was a demonstration of top-down policy administration that championed the narrowest definition and understanding of what it is to read. In this document, to read is to decode. Schools, local authorities, and university education faculties had

previously at best promoted multiple, unhelpful and insufficiently focused practices, and at worst had been intentionally non-compliant. The white paper was pleased to report that these institutions had been brought into line.

An additional feature of the white paper (DfE, 2016) was a change in the vocabulary surrounding the screening check. In 2010, the check was for the identification of 'those who need more support' (DfE, 2010a, p. 42). In 2016, this had become a measurement of 'expected standards' (DfE, 2016; p. 38).

Tension between emerging policy and curriculum documents

This overt prescription was undertaken against the backdrop of *The national curriculum* (sic) (DfE, 2013). In this document, the scope of what it is to read continued to be informed by the simple view of reading (Figure 3) contained in *Letters and Sounds* (DFES, 2007).

ReadingThe programmes of study for reading at key stages 1 and 2 consist of two dimensions:

- word reading
- comprehension (both listening and reading). 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. Good comprehension draws from linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) and on knowledge of the world. (DfE, 2013, p. 15)

There is a tension here. Although *The national curriculum* (DfE, 2013) omitted bibliographic skills from its list of 'desirable literacies' (Marsh and Hallett, 2008), it did at least acknowledge that there was more to reading than decoding. By contrast, the 2010 and 2016 white papers demonstrated a tightening and narrowing of policymakers' understanding of what it is to read and how reading should be taught and measured.

New directives, guidance and policy statements concerning early reading were not published between 2016 and 2023, perhaps because the Covid crisis focused the attention of policymakers on more physical aspects of education, but *The reading framework* (sic) (DfE, 2023b) reaffirmed the 2013 national curriculum's values (plural) in the teaching and learning of reading.

The national curriculum programmes of study for reading reflect the [Simple View of Reading] model, presented as two dimensions: 'word reading' and 'language comprehension'. Comprehension does not refer to reading itself but, rather, to the way in which we make sense of

words, sentences and the wider language we hear or read (DfE, 2023b, p. 16).

As with *The national curriculum* (DfE, 2013), there is none of the combative and one-dimensional insistence on the teaching and measuring of systematic synthetic phonics in this reading framework document. Whenever the phrase 'reading skills' appears within the framework (DfE, 2023b), on each occasion, examples are given of broad aspects of reading, such as 'careful pre-teaching of key vocabulary or background knowledge' (p. 110) and 'predicting, retrieving information, making inferences etc.' (p. 117). Teachers are urged not to teach to the key stage 2 reading tests. The document celebrates the OECD's (2002) report that described the 'entangled relationship' between 'cognition and motivation, proficiency and engagement in reading' (in DfE, 2023b, p. 14).

It is true that *The reading framework* (DfE, 2023b) uses the terms 'decoding' and 'word reading' interchangeably, but the document draws on and acknowledges Gough and Tunmer's (1986) description of reading as being the product of decoding and comprehension. There is an acknowledgement here that reading is more than that which an isolated perusal of the white papers of 2010 and 2016 might suggest.

The influence of Ofsted inspection on policies regarding early reading

But in spite of *The national curriculum's* (DfE, 2013) identification of multiple aspects of reading, significant drivers of education policy continued to emphasise the pre-eminence of phonics. Gill Jones, Deputy Director of Ofsted in 2019, set out the criteria for early reading deep dives, which inspected 'the extent to which direct, focused phonics is taught every day in Reception and key stage 1 [and] children read from books with the sounds they know, while they are learning to read' (Ofsted, 2019, online blog). Jones does advocate a 'language-rich teaching environment', but this recommendation is not specific to reading. For Ofsted in 2019, reading was decoding, requiring deep dives to ensure daily phonics teaching. No other aspect of reading is specifically mentioned by Jones. No other aspect of reading other than phonics is identified as worthy of deep dive inspection.

Ofsted publications and guidance continued to conflate the words 'reading' and 'phonics'. For example, Lee Owston, Ofsted's National Director of Education wrote in 2023 'Being able to read accurately by age 6 has a strong correlation with future academic success. So, getting phonics teaching right is essential. That's why our education inspection framework (EIF) places

a strong emphasis on how well schools teach all pupils to read ... Phonics is the only way to accurately read an unfamiliar word.' (Ofsted, 2023, online blog).

There it is again. 'Phonics is the only way to read an unfamiliar word' (Ofsted, 2023). No other strategy can do it. If a child suggests a word that would make sense within the sentence by contextualisation, that is not reading. Ofsted's, 2023 definition of what it is to read is strictly confined to those skills that decoding can afford.

Owston's blog (Ofsted, 2023) also refers to the importance of schools demonstrating 'fidelity to a phonics programme' as a key characteristic of schools which teach early reading successfully. No other aspect of reading is specifically mentioned by Owston. No other aspect of reading other than phonics is identified as worthy of fidelity to a programme.

Tension and synergy between emerging policy and contested theoretical models of reading development

Through the scrutiny of key words and phrases in official documents and publications, this article is attempting to identify where policymakers' understandings about the learning and teaching of reading sit within what must be acknowledged to be a highly contested field.

The meteoric rise of the pedagogic status of phonics in the teaching of reading occurred against a continuing backdrop of ongoing academic and theoretical peer-reviewed published debate. Battle lines for what has come to be known as 'reading wars' (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022; Castles et al., 2018) began even before the 2010 white paper (DfE, 2010a). One remembers in previous editions of this journal an animated discussion between Brooks (2007) and Wyse and Styles (2007a, 2007b), who differed in their view as to whether there was sufficient evidence of benefit to warrant the rolling out of a national systematic phonics programme for young children. It was a dialogue indicative and representative of an impassioned, entrenched and informed debate, and one which still continues animatedly, with new and existing champions on both sides. On the one hand are those who value and promote the science of reading pedagogy (e.g., Brooks, 2023, 2022, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2021; Torgerson et al., 2018). Here, reading is held to be so fundamental to children's education that reading skills need to be discreetly taught, systematically planned and measurably assessed. On the other hand, there are those who value and promote reading as a creative and immersive experience (e.g., Wyse and Hacking, 2024; Wyse and Bradbury, 2023; Bowers, 2023, 2021, 2020; Bradbury, 2018). Here,

reading is held to be so fundamental to children's education that it should not be reduced to what Grainger (1999, p. 49) referred to as a 'hermetically sealed English curriculum, delivered in regularised chunks of scribalism by disempowered conformists'.

On the first hand, reading is taught systematically: first alphabet skills, then word recognition, leading to text comprehension, a route which enables tracking, support and intervention for those identified as needing additional help. Critics consider this to be a mechanical mode of reading, a single reading strategy which must engage with a multiplicity of text types, and unhelpful when first faced with 'common exception words' (*The national curriculum*, DfE, 2013, p. 19) such as 'through', 'though' or 'tough'. On the second hand, reading is taught using a whole-book approach (Dowd Lambert, 2020) in which meaning-making and co-construction of text coexist as equal partners with phonics. Critics consider this to be an approach that lacks rigour and accountability, leaving struggling readers vulnerable to delayed support.

The argument has expanded to include definitions and a consideration of the extent to which the phrase 'reading wars' (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022; Castles et al., 2018) is symptomatic of a falsely portrayed simplistic binary choice between phonics-first versus meaning-first, as if the two sides of the argument are mutually incompatible. But the combative vocabulary commonly found in articles within this field, where each side appears to be seeking the high ground over the other, does give that impression. There are accusations of 'mistakes, mischaracterizations and omissions' (Bowers, 2021, p. 1965) and 'not asking the correct question, ... [making] unwarranted definitional assumptions' (Fletcher et al., 2021, p. 1250). It is a highly contested and animated field.

It is not the case, therefore, that in favouring a narrow view of reading, policymakers have gone against a unified academic, pedagogic and theoretical consensus. There is no agreed position, whose adherents are shouting with one voice that the current pre-eminent place of phonics is either unbalanced and unjustified, or helpful and necessary, because there is no such consensus for policymakers to reject or to embrace. However, this article has demonstrated that since 1995, policymakers' understanding of what it is to learn to read has sat increasingly (and since 2010, emphatically) within the camp of those who subscribe to a prescriptive, systematic and accountable approach to the learning and teaching of reading.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the evolution of UK education policy regarding early reading since 1995.

This period has seen policy changes that progressively narrowed the definition of what early reading is and how it should be taught, and the evolution continued irrespective of the political colours of the policymakers. *The national curriculum* (DfE, 2013) continues to identify a broader understanding of early reading than that evidenced in current guidance, policy, inspection and practise in schools and early years settings. The narrative contained in successive government and Ofsted publications and statements strongly indicates that current UK education policymakers and inspectors continue to consider the teaching and inspection of early reading to be encapsulated by, and limited to, the teaching of phonics.

In the 30 years since 1995, there have been nineteen Secretaries of State for Education (nine between 2016 and 2022 alone) and nine Her/His Majesty's Chief Inspectors in the United Kingdom. Such regular change of leadership tends to engender consistent loss of political and institutional memory. Our education policymakers in that time have rarely remained in post for many years, and so most were standing on the shoulders of, well, other short-term policymakers. The writing of this article was undertaken during the first eight months after the 2024 UK general election, which emphatically brought with it a change of administration, and installed another new Secretary of State for Education. Previous policymakers may have been so politically and historically detached from their distant predecessors of 1995 (Gillian Shepherd and Chris Woodhead) as to be unaware that once it was understood by teachers and policymakers alike that early reading was a multifaceted experience, and plurality of reading strategies was known to be essential. It will be interesting to see the extent to which the current labour administration in the UK shares with its outgoing predecessor (and with its historically distant previous labour government) a continuing commitment to the pre-eminent place of systematic synthetic phonics as a policy for the teaching of early reading.

Conflict of interest statement

There are no conflicts of interest.

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