

# The Reading Wars: Rigid Approach to Teaching Phonics is Failing Children, Experts Warn

*Experts have released robust research to show that phonics should be taught hand-in-hand with reading and writing to encourage true literacy.*

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, May 20, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Experts have released robust research to show that phonics should be taught hand-in-hand with reading and writing to encourage true literacy and a love of reading, not through narrow synthetic phonics.

There is widespread disagreement globally across academic and educational spheres about the best way to teach children to learn to read and write. Despite a growing international trend towards a narrow approach to synthetic phonics, including in the United States, experts suggest there is a 'better way' to teach reading and writing.

Latest research, including a [new paper published today](#) and featuring in upcoming book [The Balancing Act](#), shows that the evidence does not support the efficacy of a narrow approach – and experts are calling for an overhaul of the system to bring 'joy' back into reading.

"We know that being literate not only sets the foundation for better academic and socio-economic outcomes, but also that reading can support personal, social, and emotional development, enabling better mental health and greater capacity for empathy and critical thinking – we must stop letting children down," authors and education experts Dominic Wyse and Charlotte Hacking explain.

The Balancing Act dismantles polarised debates in the so-called 'reading wars' about the teaching of phonics and analyses the latest scientific evidence of what really works. It explores in detail movement towards the science of reading in the U.S., otherwise known as synthetic phonics.

The authors argue that although they agree that phonics teaching is an important part of the teaching of reading, the main problem with the 'science of reading' movement is it does not portray the research evidence, and other important aspects of education, in a balanced or sufficiently accurate way. They explain: "Evidence over long periods of history shows that phonics has nearly always been an important part of primary school teaching, evidence which contrasts with claims that most teachers do not use phonics. The lack of attention to the history of teaching reading, and shaky claims about what teachers do, are tropes in the reading wars that

need to be challenged.”

In 2022 [a landmark research paper](#) by Wyse and Alice Bradbury concluded that a balanced approach to teaching reading was more effective than a narrow synthetic phonics approach. The paper provided some clear evidence-based recommendations about changes to policy and practice, which were not taken up. The Balancing Act goes further, not least by giving a vivid and detailed account of a new approach to teaching.

Hacking and Wyse, who have extensively examined the evidence, are now promoting a ‘balanced approach’, focusing on using beloved children’s texts to systematically teach the key elements that are vital to learn to read and write, including phonics. This approach to teaching is explicitly built on new analyses of the most robust research studies undertaken to determine what are the most effective ways to teach phonics, reading, and writing. They explain: “With this approach, the importance of comprehending and composing the meaning of written language is carefully balanced with the acquisition of a range of skills and knowledge. This enables pupils to see the real purposes for reading and writing. “Instead of focusing narrowly on the sounds that letters represent, this approach also prioritizes the comprehension of text, the grammar of sentences, and teaching writing to help reading. The balanced approach is about understanding the structure of words and language as a whole.” Contrary to a myth that some people have promoted, a balanced approach is not ‘whole language’ teaching in disguise.

This approach is summarised in a new theory and model, called The Double Helix of Teaching Reading and Writing. The underpinning research of the ‘The Double Helix of Reading and Writing’, has been published today in a peer-reviewed research journal. Underpinning this balanced approach is the use of ‘real books’, which are of ‘outstanding quality, inclusive, and diverse in their representations of people and places’.

Under synthetic phonics schemes, children are usually given formulaic ‘decodable’ texts designed to repeat a certain sound to encourage familiarization with the sound and a limited number of simple words. In some stages of the synthetic phonics program, the reading of whole texts may even be discouraged, but Wyse and Hacking believe the emphasis should be much more strongly on comprehending and enjoying real whole texts. “Delighting in real books brings learning to life. This engages children and sustains their motivation to read and write for real purposes and for pleasure,” they explain.

Wyse continues: “Instead of the drive to support money-making from synthetic phonics schemes our approach puts the work of authors of books for children centre stage. Otherwise, children miss out on the art of outstanding illustrators, authors, puns, wordplay, imagination, curiosity, creativity and so much more. Our approach is a far cry from narrow synthetic phonics lessons, which even when taught expertly simply haven’t the same appeal for children.”

“Meaning drives our approach to teaching reading and writing. It is the essence of human language, hence it should be the essence of teaching,” Hacking continues. “Teaching about

sounds is meaningless unless it is contextualized in words, sentences and whole texts.”

The experts argue that motivating children to read and write is foundational to the balanced approach, and it begins with engaging children through high-quality books.

#### Further Information

The Balancing Act: An Evidence-Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading and Writing, by Dominic Wyse, Charlotte Hacking (Routledge 2024)

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#### About the authors

Dominic Wyse FAcSS FRSA is Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at IOE, Faculty of Education and Society, University College London (UCL). He is Founding Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 Years) (HHCP), a research centre devoted to improving young children’s education. He was President of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) from 2019 to 2022. Dominic has made a leading contribution to research on curriculum and pedagogy at national, regional and local levels over more than 25 years. Dominic’s main research is on effective teaching of reading and writing. His book *The Balancing Act: An Evidence-Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading and Writing* (co-authored with Charlotte Hacking. Routledge Publishing) presents ‘The Double Helix of Reading and Writing’ which theorizes a new teaching approach based on analyses of hundreds of robust research studies. The book *Teaching English, Language and Literacy - 5th Edition* (with Helen Bradford and John-Mark Winstanley. Routledge) has been a leading text for teachers and teacher education for more than 20 years. Dominic’s research on writing developed ‘the ear of the writer’ as a metaphor for effective writing across the life course, for novice and expert writers. This multidisciplinary research was published in the book *How Writing Works: From the invention of the alphabet to the rise of social media* (Cambridge University Press).

Charlotte Hacking is Director, Learning and Programmes at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE). Charlotte is an experienced teacher and senior leader who has taught across the primary school age range. Before joining CLPE, she held several leadership posts including Assistant Headteacher, Literacy, Early Years Foundation Stage, more able pupils and Key Stage 2. Charlotte’s special interests lie in Early Years, early reading development, the development of writing and the use of picture books and poetry to raise children’s engagement and attainment. In 2022, Charlotte was awarded the Anna Craft Creativities in Education Prize by BERA.

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#### About the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0 to 11 years) (HHCP):

Founding Director: Dominic Wyse

Co-Director: Alice Bradbury

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#### About the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

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raising the literacy achievement of children by putting quality children's literature at the heart of all learning. It is a charity with a national and international reputation for excellent literacy training, teaching resources and research. The charity was the winner of the 2019 Eleanor Farjeon Award, Southwark Charity of the Year in 2020, Teach Primary Award winners in 2021 and 2022 and London Book Fair Charity of the Year in 2022. CLPE was awarded National Portfolio Organisation status by Arts Council England in 2022 and was nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Award for a fourth time in 2023. [www.clpe.org.uk](http://www.clpe.org.uk) | Follow @CLPE1 (X) | @CLPE (Facebook) | @CLPE (Instagram) | @CLPE (LinkedIn)

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