



Reviewed work:

Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us about How to Teach Reading (2004). Diane McGuinness. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
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In 1997 the US Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to convene a national panel "to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read." (NICHD, 2000: 1). The result was the National Reading Panel's report, published after lengthy consultations with individuals and organisations and representing a variety of academic and pedagogical interests. The panel was rigorous in its approach to the research - the exercise was largely a meta-analysis using evidence-based methodological standards - and the process screened out thousands of studies that failed to meet "minimum scientific standards". Part of the report's informal agenda was to shed further light on the Reading Wars which had plagued US education for decades.

Diane McGuinness is already well known in the USA as the author of books with alarming titles such as *Why Our Children Can't Read* and *Why Children Can't Read*. She is also a great supporter of the NRP's ruthlessly positivist approach to inadequate research, in which all "junk science" research is discarded. *Early Reading Instruction* is an attempt to pull together some of the report's findings and assess them from a teaching and learning standpoint. In the author's own words, the book is "largely an inductive analysis of the historical evidence and the empirical research on reading instruction." (Introduction, xiv.)

Early Reading Instruction is written mainly from a psychological standpoint – Diane McGuinness is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of South Florida – and she is at pains to demonstrate that the teaching "prototype" she advises is one whose elements are fully endorsed by the NRP findings. For Professor McGuinness the acrimonious reading debate is no longer a question of phonics versus real books. Enough time, indeed far too much in her view, has already been wasted on insubstantial or inconclusive research. The NRP's rigorous selection led to a "harvest of treasures" (p. 317) and the only issue now at stake is how to get the most effective phonics programmes into the classroom as soon as possible. Effective in this sense means a system that teaches the sounds of the language and how these sounds are mapped to letters.

In McGuinness's view, the Panel was right to weed out all the feeble research attempted over the past several decades and concentrate only on scientifically proven results. The claim in the book is that the scientific data speak for themselves and *Early Reading Instruction* is filled with facts from the evidence-based research. Quite a lot of it is impressive, particularly on the failings of US school systems to teach children the basics of reading skills (the reported functional illiteracy rate for American 9-year-olds is 43 percent). There are a few rays of hope: research evidence quoted by McGuinness from the UK, for example, suggests that children at the age of 5 can learn to read and spell 40 phonemes and their common spellings in 10 to 16 weeks.

The book is organised into chapters with titles such as: The Structure of the English Alphabet Code and How to Teach Reading: Modern Research, and it leads the reader through an, at times, complex route of historical examples, failed opportunities and the weakness of non-scientific research. We move through an analysis of the nature of writing systems, via lessons from past reading pedagogy, into more general questions about reading fluency and comprehension. The book is very good on the various phonics approaches and on the need for children to grasp the "basics" of an alphabetic language such as English. The author suggests her own prototype methodology of how a writing system should be taught and she is at great pains to point out the dangers of half-hearted or mixed methodologies: "It is difficult to be neutral about the fact that there is such a vast quantity of poor research clogging the reading-research databases." (p. 244)

The prototype put forward by Professor McGuinness is claimed as "the first set of objective guidelines for reading instruction based on the historical and scientific evidence" (McGuinness is very keen on history, particularly Egyptian and Sumerian writing systems; her book contains numerous references to ancient civilisations). The prototype list comprises a number of sensible guidelines including the need for everyone to understand how a particular writing system works - the somewhat opaque English language in this instance - and how the arbitrary abstract symbols of writing represent a code which must be effectively learned. As in much of the book the emphasis is on the reversibility of codes. The writing system is a code: encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) need to be linked and emphasised at every level of instruction.

Professor McGuinness is, with some justification, gloomy about what has gone before. Particularly despised is the nouvelle eclecticism of the 1990s, described as "individualistic and haphazard" (p. 5). (She quotes an example, presumably referring to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy into UK primary schools, of "suitcases of lesson plans charts and materials sent to every elementary school in the country at a cost to the taxpayer of £56 million" [p. 6]). In the US a similar situation has been allowed to happen. "The sad tale of reading instruction in the twentieth century, in contrast to the brilliant programmes waiting in the wings, is the main message of this book." (Introduction, xvii.)

Early Reading Instruction has a valid point to make even if at times the point is somewhat laboured. Whole language instruction heralded falling literacy rates, especially in California at the end of the 1980s before the switch to phonics. McGuinness quotes some frightening statistics: for example, during the 1990s the level of functional illiteracy amongst 16-25 year-olds in the United States was estimated at 23.5 percent. On the other hand some of the acrimony of the Reading Wars seems to have rubbed off on the author: "There is no question that the high functional illiteracy rate in English-speaking countries is largely a product of our formidable

spelling code and the way it is (or is not) taught." (p. 41). *Early Reading Instruction* has no time for biological definitions of dyslexia: "reading is not a natural aptitude and children who learn to fail to read do so mainly because of environmental causes" (Introduction, xvi). The author also appears at one point to blame the expansion of universal education for falling literacy standards: "Innovations..." (phonics-type programmes) "... were soon to be eclipsed by the expansion of universal education in the early twentieth century. Reading instruction was hijacked by newly minted education gurus in collaboration with the fledgling educational publishing houses." (p 77).

At times the book is a curiously annoying mixture of the scientific and the popular. The ambitious subtitle of the book and chapters entitled, "Why English-Speaking Children Can't Read" and "How Nations Cheat on International Literacy Studies" sit alongside whole sections where statistical methodology and quantitative research is discussed in some detail. While she covers a lot of ground, it is hard to see how a parent or a general interest reader without some background in research and reading theory would cope with much of the book. Images of disappointed readers kept coming to mind; dissatisfied parents who want to know why their child hasn't learned to read fluently, hoping that here would lie some simple answers to difficult questions. It was also puzzling initially to open the book at a contents page which comes at the end of the preface. In fact there are two contents pages – the one I was looking at turned out to be for Professor McGuinness's next, much-mentioned publication: *Language Development and Learning to Read*.

There are some quibbles over detail. The lack of a chart presenting phonetic symbols is unhelpful in a book which spends so much time talking about phonemes. The reasons given for not using the International Phonetic Alphabet – that it is confusing – are in themselves confused. The claim that adult English speakers use over 50,000 words in ordinary conversations seems rather exaggerated. And while this is a very well-researched book, it is also at times a very irritating read, not only in the lack of interest in any other research into reading (the NRP itself was dismissive of longitudinal studies on whole language approaches to reading) but also in the constant references to the author's own scholarship and publications. It's tempting to level the criticism at McGuinness that her readership, if indeed it is a general one, might benefit from a rather more balanced view of educational research (e.g., Pring, 2004). The positivist view that scientific enquiry is the only real and meaningful way to undertake research is not entirely convincing, especially in an area as complex and diverse as reading. In the early reading classroom, phonics based on "reversible mapping systems" (p. 12) is doubtless a good place to start, and McGuinness argues the case convincingly. There is, however, little mention of what becoming a *reader* means in addition to mastering the phonics. By the end of *Early Reading Instruction* I felt the need to retreat back to Grabe to be reminded that learning to read is an exercise in developing psycholinguistic fluency as much as anything else. It is also interesting to compare the L2 discussions of basic morphophonemic issues in Birch. (2002) with McGuinness's occasional rantings. To be fair, the National Reading Panel did not address L2 reading issues, and these are therefore not highlighted in the book, although given the diversity of language use within the US population this might be seen as an omission.

There is little discussion in *Early Reading Instruction* of the role of political interference, the importance of teacher education or the possible limitations of obsessions with evidence-based

instructional practices (the dangers of the last of these are interestingly described by the International Reading Association [2004]). It would be worrying if one of the main messages of Professor McGuinness's book – that it makes no sense to continue qualitative, "non-scientific" reading studies - were to become the establishment mantra. Other sources (e.g., Ofsted, 2004) suggest that the reading debate may be very far from over in English-speaking countries and, as the IRA points out, there also lurks the existence of political and commercial vested interests. At times the distinct impression from *Early Reading Instruction* is that we need to be left only with phonics instruction of a very particular sort, preferably the one exemplified by Diane McGuinness. Unsurprisingly perhaps, not everyone agrees with Professor McGuinness and the Panel's report sparked a whole new debate (see Anderson, 2000 for a summary of the criticisms).

If nothing else, Diane McGuinness's book is an interesting and energetic read for anyone with a concern over how best to teach children to read. The overall conclusion one reaches is that the book is basically about research, or rather one particular interpretation of it, that endorsed by the National Reading Panel. In general McGuinness is probably right on the need for clarity over classroom approaches and she is a formidable proponent of identified and successful phonics teaching that start from the sounds of the language. It may be an excellent beginning to the story but it certainly isn't the whole one.

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