

# A Journey to the Dark Side: from Phonics Phobic to Phonics Fanatic



Enjoy reading **Anne Glennie's** account of her transition from an intense dislike of teaching reading through phonics to the method's biggest fan.

I don't remember how I learned to read, probably because I didn't struggle with it. I was lucky. I grew up on a council housing estate – or scheme, as we prefer to refer to it in Scotland, but I had everything that we would now consider to be the ideal 'pre-five home learning environment'. My many memories include tent building in the living room, making mud pies and petal perfume, digging up worms, and swinging endlessly on my blue swing in the garden. I spent a lot of time outside, with friends, or with my two imaginary dogs – Toby and Sheba. But I also remember books. I had my very own bookcase which housed my Ladybird library, in my own playroom. I would spend hours reading them, sometimes even in the middle of the night, by the landing light.

My mum read to me too. *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* became an instant favourite, but so did another less well-known story: *A Brother for Momoko*. I was four when my mum read this to me (preparing me for the fact that I was no longer going to be an only child). I remember the story, the pictures, and my mum's voice – her intonation when she read to me. When the baby comes home from the hospital, he is 'tiny, soft and warm.' And so was my brother. He moved into my playroom, and despite a vigorous campaign, my parents called him Brian, instead of my choice: Toby.

My love of books and reading was nurtured at school in every class. But my favourite teacher, Mrs Clarke, is the one that introduced me to *Charlotte's Web* and *A Gift from Winklesea*. It was these shared reading experiences that propelled me into teaching. I wanted to recreate those magical, memorable moments and share the power of words and stories with every child in my class.

This romantic notion was quickly quashed. When I started teaching, the curriculum at the time in Scotland was the now abandoned 5–14. Strict timetables dictated how many minutes were to be devoted to each subject area per week. I remember asking a colleague

'But when do we get to do the class novel?' Only to be told. 'We don't do that anymore.' Undeterred, I simply used the ten 'extra' minutes per day for this purpose. I think I've read *A Gift from Winklesea* to every class I've ever had, regardless of age or stage; it's a great story. We should never underestimate the power we have as teachers, to influence not just learning, but entire lives. Thank you, Mrs Clarke.

Today, I'm no longer in the classroom, but I still get to share my passion for reading through my work as a consultant. I developed *Reflective Reading*, a methodology that focuses on comprehension, higher order thinking skills and reading for pleasure, with practical ideas and materials that teachers can use in the classroom. However, I began to realise that although I could talk forever about engagement, enjoyment and 'getting under the skin' of a text, I lacked real knowledge and expertise in the fundamentals of reading acquisition. If someone was to ask me 'How should we teach children to read?' I'd be lost. I didn't know the 'right' answer.

As a teacher, there can be nothing more shameful than admitting that you don't know how to teach a child to read. While in the classroom, it was an area I'd managed to avoid – I was a self-styled 'upper stages' teacher. Partly because I love those stages and the opportunity for in-depth learning and reading, but partly because I was afraid of the huge responsibility of teaching a class of younger children to read. How had I managed to qualify as a primary teacher without this essential knowledge? For a while, I kept my shameful secret to myself, believing that I must have slept in the day 'Teaching Reading' was covered in lectures. I couldn't ignore though, the fact that I had just identified a major personal, professional development need. If I was training teachers, I needed to be sure that whatever I was telling them, whatever questions were being asked, that I was providing the correct answers.

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Three years ago, as part of my quest to find out how to do my job, I read another book that changed my life: *Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us About How to Teach Reading* by Diane McGuinness. I found out about it, quite by chance, online. I'm a keen Twitter user; it keeps me up to date with education news, motivational quotes and cat videos. It's also brilliant for pedagogical debate; night or day the fires of 'the reading wars' are being fanned, as someone somewhere will be arguing about phonics.

Phonics wasn't something I had previously thought a lot about. It wasn't necessary to my practice in Primary 6 or 7 (Year 5 or 6) – or so I believed. The few opinions I had about phonics, had mostly been absorbed through listening to wiser colleagues and teachers, staffroom discussion, and Michael Rosen. Type 'phonics' into the search engine of my brain, and the result would be phrases such as 'barking at print', 'first, fast and only', 'one size doesn't fit all', 'there's more to reading than phonics' and 'drill and kill'. I certainly didn't want to have anything to do with a pedagogy that would destroy the very thing I was trying to achieve – a love of reading.

But when I read Diane McGuinness's book, the scales fell from my eyes. This was a game-changer. Here was undeniable, compelling, unequivocal scientific proof that systematic phonics was the most effective way to teach all children to read. Indeed, I was late to the party; three major international enquiries into reading had already established this conclusion – one of them being The Rose Review (*Independent review of the teaching of early reading, Final Report, Jim Rose, March 2006*).

Everything I'd previously believed about phonics was wrong. Of course 'there is more to reading than phonics'; advocates of the approach not only want children to be able to read, for pleasure and for learning, but phonics was a means to an end – a way of ensuring that all children could access text. Comprehension is the ultimate goal, why else do we read, if not to understand the writer's message? But to understand the message, first you have to be able to read it. I now believe that it takes three things to build a reader: motivation, meaning, and mechanics; none is sufficient on its own. It doesn't matter how many wonderful books you surround children with, or how engaging and exciting you make reading – if they can't decode the words on the page, then they will fail. No one can read for pleasure if they can't read.

The sad reality is that phonics has a massive PR problem, perpetuated by people who are no doubt well-meaning, but misinformed. When these people are high profile academics, authors, and journalists who are openly anti-phonics, their influence can be difficult to overcome. In Scotland, despite constant talk of how teaching should be 'research-informed', our own curriculum does not take this onboard. With regards to beginning reading instruction, Scotland is firmly in the mixed methods camp. We do teach phonics... alongside sight words, letter names and a myriad of unhelpful multi-cueing strategies and a cupboard full of 'look and say' books. Whole language rhetoric is alive and well, with children being encouraged to 'look at the first letter', 'look at the last letter' (yes, really!) and 'look at the picture and guess'. (Pictures and context of course must be used for comprehension – just not for reading or guessing individual words.) The most helpful advice of all 'sound it out' appears only towards the end of a long list. Reading is not about memorisation, nor is it about guessing.

Simply teaching children about our language, the alphabetic code and how it works, means that all the clues required for reading are right there, in the words on the page. Knowledge of letters and sounds, coupled with the skills of sounding out and blending – or phonics – is the only strategy beginning readers need to get the words off the page. It's the one we use as adults too, when we're faced with a word we don't know. (Try reading this if you don't believe me: *atelerix albiventris* – which is the Latin name for an African pygmy hedgehog, in case you were wondering) And as if that wasn't enough, that same letter/sound knowledge is what we need for spelling too; systematic synthetic phonics delivers for both reading and spelling – it's a win-win.

The real irony though, is that one of the main studies into the effectiveness of systematic synthetic phonics was carried out here in Clackmannanshire, by Johnston and Watson. This study has gained international interest and acclaim, it features in Diane McGuinness's book, and six pages of the Rose Review cover what Sir Jim Rose and his team discovered when they visited Scotland. We do not appear to be learning the lessons, even from our own research.

I also discovered that I wasn't the only one who had missed out on instruction in the nuts and bolts of reading instruction. I regularly ask teachers on my courses if they were taught how to teach reading during their teacher training. Shockingly, the majority of teachers in Scotland have had no input on the subject of beginning reading instruction or phonics. To be clear, this is not the fault of teachers, for me, the blame lies with teacher training institutions, Education Scotland and the Scottish Government.



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I have written to my MSP, our previous Education Secretary and the GTCS (General Teaching Council for Scotland) about this matter, to no avail.

My new passion for phonics has left some of my colleagues puzzled. Some have chosen to distance themselves from me, uncomfortable with my ‘controversial’ approach to teaching reading. Working outside the Scottish education system, as an independent consultant, means I am free to challenge Education Scotland and our approaches to literacy teaching and assessment. This is not a method I’d recommend if you’re looking to make friends, rather than enemies. Nevertheless, I do believe that, however difficult, the path I have chosen is the correct one.

Yes, I am a phonics fanatic. I have become evangelical. I can’t help it. People say that there are no silver bullets in education, but I think systematic synthetic phonics comes pretty close. A method of teaching reading that has scientific backing and is proven to be effective for all children – especially those who are disadvantaged because of socio-economic factors, have English as a second language, or struggle with dyslexic-type difficulties – is one worth fighting for.

Knowing that the research is on my side gives me confidence. Believing that no child should have to experience reading failure, and all that entails for their future life chances, is what gives me the courage to keep going. I may have crossed over to what many view as ‘the dark side’, but for the first time in my teaching career, I feel truly enlightened. My only wish is that I converted years ago.

#### Further Reading:

- Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us About How to Teach Reading* by Diane McGuinness.
- Why Our Children Can’t Read: And What We Can Do About It* by Diane McGuinness
- Phonics and the Resistance to Reading* by Mike Lloyd-Jones

For easy access to research and summaries on these topics see:

- [www.thelearningzoo.co.uk](http://www.thelearningzoo.co.uk) Anne’s blog and website
- [www.iferi.org](http://www.iferi.org) The International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction
- [www.rrf.org.uk](http://www.rrf.org.uk) The Reading Reform Foundation UK
- [www.dyslexics.org.uk](http://www.dyslexics.org.uk) Susan Goddard’s informative, no nonsense website

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