

The Dominance of Synthetic Phonics in Reading Policy in England

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Since 2010, England's government has moved from encouraging phonics as *part* of the teaching of reading to making systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) the *sole* approach. This leaflet summarises the key points from Bradbury & Wyse's 2025 analysis of this policy shift. To ensure understanding of the issues the authors raise, it is important to read the open access article in full. This can be downloaded from <https://epaa.asu.edu/index.php/epaa/article/view/8942>

How this was enforced in schools

- **Phonics Screening Check (2012):** a high-stakes test that reshaped classroom practice — teachers reported drilling "nonsense words" purely to boost scores, and children were grouped by phonics attainment. (p. 6)
- **Teacher training standards** now require new teachers to understand SSP specifically, and Initial Teacher Education providers are inspected on ensuring trainees are *not* taught alternative approaches. (pp. 8–9)
- **Ofsted and the Reading Framework** went further still, dictating classroom detail — even warning that phonics games, water-tray letter hunts, and "overly elaborate" reading displays could hinder learning. (pp. 9–10)
- **Funding tied to compliance:** schools received up to £9,000, spendable only on DfE-approved phonics schemes. (p. 7)

"The evidence is conclusive" is itself one of the paper's identified phonics myths — a claim that circulates and gains authority through repetition, not through settled scientific consensus.

The evidence problem

Government messaging repeatedly presented the evidence as settled in favour of SSP. The authors argue this relied on **cherry-picked research**:

- Favourable studies were cited while inconvenient conclusions from the same studies were omitted.
- PIRLS international ranking data were used selectively — for example, claiming success in 2023 despite England's actual reading score barely changing (558 vs 559).
- Politicians' campaign claims ("best readers in the world") were later shown by fact-checkers to rely on excluding higher-scoring countries.

(pp. 11–13)

THE EEF TRIAL TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

A major Education Endowment Foundation randomised controlled trial of Read Write Inc. (2022) found **no statistically significant benefit** from RWI, and its catch-up scheme **Fresh Start** showed **negative effects** on five of six measures. The study was largely absent from subsequent policy documents. (p. 13)

Key Points, continued

The "Phonics Wars," commercial interests, and the bottom line

The "Phonics Wars" — why criticism is hard

Academics questioning the phonics-only approach have faced public derision, including being accused of wanting "lower standards," or having their work dismissed as "rubbish" or "denialism" by influential figures. (pp. 13–15)

Bradbury and Wyse — who argue for a more balanced approach themselves — note this created a **chilling effect**: some teachers told researchers they wouldn't discuss phonics publicly because the debate had become too "fractious." (p. 11)

Commercial interests

The authors point out that Ruth Miskin, creator of the Read Write Inc. (RWI) scheme, held direct government advisory roles (the Bew Inquiry and the National Curriculum Review) whilst having a commercial interest in the promotion of SSP. (p. 15)

Why it matters beyond England

The authors frame England's experience as a **cautionary tale** for other countries now considering similar mandates. *'In conclusion to this section exploring the maintenance of the synthetic phonics orthodoxy in policy debates through the selective use of research, the derision of critical research, and the operation of key actors, we would argue that together and in interconnected ways, these strands establish as a regime of truth the idea that the science on the teaching of reading is settled, and decided once and for all.'*

'We would argue that the idea that the evidence is conclusive is one of the phonics myths' (p. 16)

Bottom line for teachers

England's "phonics first and fast" mandate narrowed what counts as acceptable classroom practice — not because the evidence is conclusive, but through a combination of:

- assessment pressure (the PSC)
- funding incentives tied to approved commercial schemes
- inspection criteria (Ofsted, ITE accreditation)
- the marginalising of dissenting research and researchers (pp. 16–17)