

When two tribes go to war ...

**Kevin
Wheldall**



*“When two tribes go to war
A point is all that you can score”*

“Two Tribes”, Frankie Goes to Hollywood (1984)

“Two Tribes” was written in the early ’80s during a particularly tense period of the Cold War when many of us feared for the lives of our children. We forget history at our peril. Today, two different tribes battle it out in the so-called ‘reading wars’ and again our main fear is for the fate of our children. So, who are the two tribes in the reading wars and how do they differ?

In the first tribe stand those aligned with the findings of cognitive science research on reading and related skills; psychologists, speech pathologists, and special educators, in the main. They favour a ‘bottom up’ approach to reading instruction including the learning of letter sound correspondences by overt phonics instruction.

The second tribe comprises mainly regular educators; teachers and educationists in schools, state and federal education departments and (perhaps especially) academics in university teacher education departments. They typically subscribe to a ‘constructivist’ approach to learning and favour a more ‘top down’ approach to teaching reading.

In the popular debate, a shorthand characterisation is frequently employed: phonics versus whole language. This simplistic characterisation does no favours to either tribe. It has never been a matter of either/or.

The so-called Simple View of Reading to which most reading researchers subscribe posits that reading comprehension, the aim of all reading instruction, is the product of decoding and language comprehension.

To understand written text, we need to be able to translate the black squiggles on the page into words and sentences. But this facility would be completely useless if we did not understand the meaning of the words and sentences.

For example, with a small amount of instruction and a little practice in pronunciation, I should be able to read aloud (badly perhaps) simple text written in a phonetically regular language such as Italian. Unfortunately, without a great deal more instruction and practice, I would have no idea what I was saying. Similarly, while I might be able to learn some basic spoken Italian by attempting to use it on holiday in Italy, I would not be able to read or write in Italian without having first learned how the alphabetic code is deployed in written Italian.

A common summary of what reading instruction entails is known as the Five Big Ideas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Putting phonics to one side for the moment, I sincerely doubt whether the two tribes would disagree too much about the importance of the remaining four.

We all agree on the importance of phonemic awareness, the ability to break spoken words up into their component sounds and to blend orally component sounds into words. Similarly, who could possibly disagree with the proposition



that being able to read quickly, accurately and with expression (i.e., fluently) is a long-term goal of reading instruction.

And, of course, no one would dispute the idea that to understand written text properly, a good working vocabulary together with the oral comprehension skills of sentence comprehension and general background knowledge are essential.

So why are the two tribes fighting at all? The essential discord rests on the role of phonics instruction and the form of instruction deployed. This has changed subtly over the last few decades.

Originally, advocates of whole language argued that phonics was unnecessary to learn to read and could even be damaging to children's literacy development. Supporters of the importance of phonics were accused of being obsessed with phonics to the exclusion of anything else.

Over time, as the scientific evidence in favour of the efficacy of phonics instruction became overwhelming, the whole language movement relaunched themselves as being in favour of 'balanced literacy'. All five Big Ideas were important including phonics (which they now claimed was already being taught in most schools), but more as a method of last resort.

Moreover, phonics instruction (where necessary) should occur naturally during 'real' reading activities involving quality children's literature and certainly should not be taught explicitly and systematically.

Why would the whole language/ balanced literacy tribe continue to cling to

To understand written text, we need to be able to translate the black squiggles on the page into words and sentences

this view? One of their arguments is that many children learn to read regardless of the form of instruction they receive. If we know that many children will learn to read without explicit phonics instruction, then why do we need to offer it to all students in their first two years of schooling?

The answer is the same argument as that for universal vaccination of children against measles, mumps and rubella. We know that a sizeable minority of children will need systematic and explicit phonics instruction if they are going to learn to read and spell well, but we simply do not know ahead of time just which ones they will be.

We also know that some children seem to really fly in the early stages of learning to read by initially amassing a large vocabulary of words learned by sight as whole words, only to flounder later on in Years 3 or 4 when the number of words they need to be able to read increases so much that they can no longer cope by using this method. Consequently, it makes good sense, initially, to teach all children using phonics from Day 1 of Kindy.

As Snow and Juel so eloquently put it in 2005: "attention to small units in early reading instruction is helpful for all children, harmful for none, and crucial for some".

*Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM
Joint Editor*