Phonics, Reading, Common Sense and The Dangers of "Read-i-cide"

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After more than 50 years of teaching reading, I'm hearing more comments along the lines of *Dick and/or Jane can read fluently at high level but don't have a clue about what they just read".* Statements like this ring alarm bells for me. They suggest reading is merely decoding-to-sound. They imply comprehension is secondary to decoding. Such views can alienate students from deep engagement in life-long reading.
Let me explain .

An alphabetic writing system gives the illusion that reading is translating visual symbols into their phonetic equivalents. You decode the graphic symbols into the sounds they represent, blend them, and then hear words inside your head to which you attach meanings. This is "comprehension". Given this illusion it's common sense that you must first learn to decode. This means mastering phonics before you can comprehend.

Unfortunately, illusions can acquire the status of irrefutable truths. Our perceptual system creates the illusion that the earth is flat. For thousands of years a "flat earth" assumption was basic to any theory of navigation. If you sailed too far from land you'd fall off the edge of the earth.

Just as the flat-earth illusion affected how the sailing fraternity conducted navigation, the illusion that readers cannot comprehend an alphabetic text until they have ***first*** decoded it to sound has had a strong impact on reading education. It too has acquired the status of an absolute truth around which a set of self-affirming theoretical principles has also developed.

This intrigues me because a definitive experiment, which proves the illusion, has never been done. Nowhere in the literature can I find an experiment which conclusively proves that comprehending alphabetic print demands readers must first convert visual symbols to sound. Nowhere.

On the other hand evidence which challenges the illusion is continually emerging.

Pre-lingually deaf humans provide one such example. By definition they have no access to sound. In theory they can't decode to sound. But they learn to read. How?

Then there's homonyms like *rite* and *right*, *meat* and *meet*. Decoding these produces identical sounds, yet we can still work out what they mean. How? Are there lexical and grammatical cues embedded in the visual shape which take precedence over sound?

Homographs (words that are spelt the same but pronounced differently) provide yet another example. In a sentence like "He ***wound*** *the bandage* around the ***wound"*** it is impossible to pronounce either homograph correctly until AFTER the meaning has been accessed. Perhaps decoding to sound works for all words except homonyms and homographs? That doesn't make sense.

People can also learn to read non-alphabetic writing systems with the same degrees of

efficiency and effectiveness as readers of alphabetic scripts. This means that humans have evolved with nervous systems which can go from visual symbol to meaning without first going through sound. Perhaps the alphabetic symbols C-A-T could also be read as a visual sign which means "cat" , just as readers of Chinese must do?

Some commentators argue that an alphabetic system evolved to make reading both easier to do and easier to learn. This claim has no support. The evidence is that the alphabet evolved to support writing ***not*** reading.

An alphabetic system like English enables people to make marks in a simple and consistent matter. In essence, alphabets are writers' (not readers') "tool kits" for putting words together. From a stock of just 26 basic shapes all the words of the English language can be represented. Moreover these 26 letters have names which define their shape. This means that novice writers can be told to write "d" "o" "double l" (doll) instead of "First do a ball and put a stick on its right hand side, then another ball and then two sticks next to each other." This is a much more cost-effective way of constructing and transcribing meaning than logographic systems such as Chinese, ancient cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphics. In essence the invention of the alphabet made writing and transcribing much easier for scribes. The invention of paper and the printing press made the scribing process more accessible to more people. While this in turn made reading more accessible, there is no evidence it had any significant effect on the reading process.

The ecological research I've completed in schools has convinced me that a "reading-is-decoding" definition of reading unintentionally creates teaching practices which alienate many less advantaged children from deep engagement in life-long reading. An American teacher has identified this phenomenon as "Read-i-cide" defined thus: *"The systematic killing of love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools".*

Some approaches to decoding demand hours of intensive drill and practice on small "bits" of language which are devoid of meaning, before meaningful texts can be read. Meaning-making is put on hold until decoding skills are developed. This makes it very difficult for learners to do what evolution designed them to do -- namely go straight to meaning from visual symbol using linguistic clues other than sound, clues like spelling, syntax, background knowledge.

A decoding-first theory assumes that comprehension can be fixed up after decoding has been mastered. Evolution theory suggests that meaning is paramount from the beginning. It's not something which can be added later. The examples above indicate that it ***is*** possible to access meaning without first accessing sound.

Does this mean that I'm advocating a "zero-phonics" approach for literacy education? No. I'm asking that we teach phonics mindfully not mindlessly.

I believe it makes much more sense to teach the phonic knowledge which the "decode-to-sound-first" theorists think is essential in the context of learning to ***write***, rather than in the context of learning to ***read.***

Why do they feel so threatened by such a suggestion?