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Welcome to **ATTACK!** a two-page occasional publication. Most of **ATTACK!** will be concerned with the holistic curriculum which, if acted on, is a fundamental way to undermine the present undemocratic education system. Don't be discouraged if opportunities to teach holistically are limited, do your best, be a guardian, and act as a witness to this culturally significant and inspiring way of teaching and learning. **ATTACK!** is a partner to <https://networkkonnet.wordpress.com>

The phonics debate: it should be game-set-and-match

A newspaper article (*Dominion Post*, 4 July) in 2011 carried details of what appears definitive research findings on the place of phonics in reading.

The newspaper article proceeded along the following lines:

According to research comparing Scottish and New Zealand children, the phonics method of teaching children to read is not necessary past the initial stages of learning, and continuing with it may disadvantage children in the long term.

The results of two studies conducted by Brian Thompson of Victoria University and Claire Fletcher-Flinn of the University of Otago College of Education were reported to the 17th Biennial Australasian Human Development Association Conference in Dunedin.

The first research project found that six-year-old Scottish children taught through phonics read at a much slower speed than comparable children taught through New Zealand's more book-centred approach.

They also performed more poorly in deciding whether words were real or not at ages eight and 11, with non-words such as 'blud' being picked more often as real words.

The researchers also found that Scottish university students who had been taught phonics as children were worse than their New Zealand counterparts at reading new or unfamiliar words that do not follow regular taught letter-sounds.

The researchers said it was becoming clear that explicit phonics instruction left a 'cognitive footprint' resulting in a long-term disadvantage when the reader attempted new words.

'These findings suggest that educators and policymakers need to look beyond any claimed short-term advantages of particular teaching methods, and take into account longer-term effects when considering the merits of different approaches to teaching reading,' said Professor Fletcher-Flinn.

The second study looked at Japanese kindergarten children, Japanese adults learning to read, and New Zealand students taking Japanese in high school as a second language. The researchers found that the same cognitive processes in learning to read words in an alphabet-based system occurred in children learning to read a syllable-based writing system, such as Japanese.

This should be game set-and-match in pedagogical terms to the great phonics' debate. As for me it confirms, a long-held belief that most children learn to read by taking in words, illogicalities and all (I called it 'swallowing' words, Claire Fletcher-Finn calls it 'storing words



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in the brain'), aided by attentive, caring adults.

However, as managerialist ideas continue to dominate education systems, and quantitative researchers depend for their vocations on a complicated approach to reading, the debate in some or other form will no doubt return, but never, surely, with the terrible vehemence of the Tom Nicholson-Bill Tunmer years.



Four years later, Claire Fletcher-Flinn, in the influential journal, *Frontiers in Psychology*, has published an advance on her findings.

Her foundation idea as we have read was that children are geared towards learning to read through storing words in the brain. Claire Fletcher-Flinn has now looked at the stability of this way of learning. Her previous research with colleagues showed that children started out learning to read in this way, but the question now was whether this changes as they become proficient readers is unclear.

She says this is an important question because reading theories that advocate phonics and 'sounding out' (of individual letters in words) claim that children make significant changes over time in how they read new or unfamiliar words, but this has never been directly tested.

She examined the further development of a young reader, named Maxine, whose early development from 3 to 5 years has been extensively described in a series of publications. She found that along with an increase in accuracy and speed, Maxine's pattern of learning new or unfamiliar words was unchanged from reading ages of 8 years to adult levels of performance. Her knowledge of letter sounds was equivalent to New Zealand adults who average about 74 percent correct. She had not learned how to 'sound-out' words so she did not use this method of reading.

In science, even a single case can be important for testing theories. However, Claire Fletcher-Flinn's conclusions do not rest only on Maxine. The results are consistent with her previous research showing that normal-progress children do not need to have the full set of phonics skills associated with 'sounding-out' in order to learn to read.

'In fact, it now appears that "sounding out" is not even necessary. Otherwise, how could Maxine learn to read? If the phonics system is taught, it may even be a disadvantage and contribute to the mispronunciation errors that phonics-taught children (and adults) make when reading new or unfamiliar words that do not follow the usual taught letter-sound correspondences, as occurs so often with English.'

Claire Fletcher-Flinn says it seems clear that storing words in the brain enables a child to begin reading and to make continued progress to adult levels.

'Maxine showed the same fast reading advantage of other New Zealand children who are not exposed to phonics instruction.'

'With the growing emphasis in New Zealand on teaching phonics skills (letter sounds, and sound awareness), teachers should understand that the approach they use for reading has long-lasting effects, resulting in later advantages or disadvantages. Reading becomes stable early and does not change over time, so it is important to get this right.'

With regard to Maxine, what made her such an advanced reader so early? Claire Fletcher-Flinn has one answer – 'lots of reading along with helpful feedback from her teachers and parents about a word's pronunciation and meaning.'

If you refer back to **Attack! 7** and the 'I can read' of that approach; and back to **Attack! 8**, in which the argument for teaching dyslexic readers is the holistic (along with phonic skills in support); and forward to the **Attack! 24 -27** series to come, in which primary teachers fiercely defend the holistic (and not forgetting the little story of the Retiring Principal Effect) – then confirmation for the 'storing in the brain' principle is already there.

