

Around the turn of the new millennium, and for the first time in their mutual history, the approach to beginning reading used in the classrooms of the United States (US) and England has parted ways. Through interviews with researchers, policy makers, and publishers, I sought to discover the story behind this divergence.

Influenced by low literacy rates, each government has sought to intervene in literacy education, but its approach and level of success is to some degree determined by governmental structure. The wealthier US provided much of the literacy research, including the meta-analysis of the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), that led to the Rose Report (2006). The Rose Report, eclectic and pragmatic by turns, also considered evidence provided by educators, publishers, policy makers; British research studies in synthetic phonics; and observation of best practice in schools. It concluded that the most effective approach to teaching beginning reading was synthetic phonics. In short order, the English government mandated synthetic phonics be used nationwide from September, 2007.

Meanwhile in the US, based on the findings of the NRP, systematic phonics was supported statutorily by No Child Left Behind (2001) and fiscally by Reading First (2002). However the federal system of state rights to education limited the extent and ease of its implementation, and the US continued with the balanced reading pedagogy previously common to both nations

Which nation is right? This is not an academic issue, for the future livelihood and well-being of all children depend on obtaining the basic right to read.