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What is This?
Putting a spin on reading: 
The language of the Rose Review

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Abstract  The Rose Review, a so-called Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, was published by the British Government’s Department for Education and Skills in March 2006, as a result of criticism from Members of Parliament and others, and dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the National Literacy Strategy in England. For reasons that are unclear, the remedy that the Review proposed, now adopted by Government, was the wholesale imposition on teachers of a narrow and reductionist approach to reading called ‘synthetic phonics’. Knowing the controversial nature of this approach, which has very dubious research backing, and faced with almost universal opposition to it, the Review needed to argue its case very persuasively indeed. This it did by making considerable use of the readily available and politically-inspired techniques of spin doctoring. In this article I analyse the language of the Review in an endeavour to illustrate how this was done.

Keywords  Rose Review; spin doctoring; synthetic phonics

Spin doctoring

Commenting recently on the Rose Review, Professor David Wray had this to say:

So, what is going on here? . . . Government ministers, and Rose himself, try to dress the report’s recommendations as based on a consensus derived from research. This is actually nonsense (although establishing that would take much more space than I currently have available). What has actually happened is that pressure groups with axes to grind (and, usually, teaching programmes to sell) have caught the ear of politicians and the Rose Review was never going to be a balanced interpretation of the evidence. So, whatever the ‘wise’ statements that Mr Rose makes, his report will be remembered for the imposition on our children of a uni-dimensional approach to the teaching of a multi-dimensional
process. And when this fails, as it inevitably will, Mr Rose will bear a large share of the blame. (Wray 2006: 127)

In response to Wray’s opening question, I would say that there is probably a good deal that ‘is going on here’, not only what he suggests but more perhaps than we are in a position to appreciate. I believe, however, that if we look closely at the language of the Rose Review, there is one thing we can be sure about. What is going on here is a rather accomplished piece of spin doctoring.

The concept of spin doctoring is not new, although the term itself is probably of comparatively recent origin. From Machiavelli to Mandelson the world of politics in particular has frequently been dominated by spin doctoring and has regularly produced notable exponents of the art. In the 17th century King James II was by turns pleased and irritated by the writings of one Henry Care who denounced various aspects of religion and politics and then later, in the characteristic manner of the accomplished spin doctor, ‘defended with the same rhetorical skills and literary flourish the things he had earlier decried’ (Schwoerer, 2001: xvi). Henry Care is little known now and even in his own lifetime he found himself ultimately deserted by his once considerable following. In fact it is not uncommon for spin doctors eventually to fall from grace – doubtless a consequence of infuriating so many people – and some, like the devious Rasputin and the manipulative Trotsky, suffer an even worse fate.

There is no doubt, however, that although spin doctoring may have been practised for centuries, it has had a spectacularly new lease of life in Britain under New Labour. From the moment that the party swept to power in May 1997, with a landslide Commons majority of 179, it took spin doctoring very seriously. Alistair Campbell, the party’s chief spin doctor, strengthened his office by appointing Lance Price, hitherto an impartial BBC political correspondent, as his second-in-command. As the Daily Mail put it, ‘Conservatives voiced alarm at the resignation of BBC political correspondent Lance Price to become a full-time spin-doctor for Tony Blair’ (Sparrow, 1998). The official term was actually ‘special adviser’, but Price had no illusions about his role:

My job had switched dramatically from balancing all opinions to pushing just one and selling it as hard as I could... As I pondered the huge change that was about to take place in my life I thought a lot about the truth. Would I have the same relationship with it that I had enjoyed while I was employed by the BBC? I had seen the Labour spin doctors at work close up so it seemed unlikely. Not that they were habitual liars. They weren’t. Get caught out lying as a spin doctor and your reputation is dead in the water. But most spin doctors would stand
uneasily in the dock with a Bible in their hands. They might just about manage ‘the truth and nothing but the truth’. The bit about ‘the whole truth’ would be more of a problem. (Price, 2005: xii–xiii)

The metaphorical use of the word ‘spin’ in the context of spin doctoring may well derive from ball games like tennis or cricket where spin is imparted to the ball so that instead of behaving normally (‘truthfully’, one might say) it swerves in the air or bounces in an unexpected manner, so deceiving an opponent. Equally, and perhaps more persuasively, the term may derive from the spinning of fibre, which has certainly given us the 200-year old metaphorical expression ‘spinning a yarn’. The Oxford English Dictionary dates this usage from the early 19th century, and explains it as ‘telling a tale of a marvellous or incredible kind’. Both origins may have contributed to the present-day political meaning of ‘spin’.

The key principle of all spin doctoring is economy with the truth. It means presenting your case in the best possible light, while avoiding mention of any evidence or opinion that might contradict or challenge your argument. You do not, as Lance Price makes clear above, ever tell actual lies, but you make considerable use of half truths, ‘white’ lies and, most important of all, careful omission of what counts against you, sometimes called ‘lying by omission’. It means that you will selectively present facts or evidence that support your position, or use skilful linguistic confidence tricks, such as persuasive rhetoric or ambiguous words, to make an argument appear convincing when it is really a piece of cunning deception.

Undoubtedly, spin doctoring has tended to flourish most in areas like politics, where there are opponents to beat and voters to be won over. However, since education is an intensely political forum, especially after Mr Blair declared his three priorities to be ‘education, education and education’, it too has not been free from spin doctoring. To begin with, under New Labour, it was mainly used to persuade the public to accept changes in the organization of education, for example, new types of schools, university fees, league tables, and the like. Since these were ultimately political matters, we were perhaps not surprised when the techniques of spin became involved. We were familiar with exchanges like ‘Will Labour introduce tuition fees for higher education?’ and Tony Blair’s reply: ‘Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education’ (Blair, 1997). No plans does not mean no tuition fees. This is an example of ‘non-denial denial’, or something made to sound like a denial without actually being one. It is basically a deception. It is popular with spin doctors.

However, the political organization of education is one thing, but how teachers individually choose to teach in school would seem to be quite
another – indeed, a matter for every teacher’s own professional judgment. We would not expect academic debate about curriculum pedagogy to need to resort to the duplicities of spin doctoring. We would expect academic debate to be academic, that is, to take as far as possible a disinterested view based on credible research. But spin doctoring is like a cancer; it does not know where to stop. From early on, with the coming of the National Curriculum and the steady growth over the last few decades of more political control in curriculum matters, we witnessed a growing number of documents that had about them more than a whiff of spin doctoring, even when claiming respectable academic or research backing for their proposals. Early documents for the National Literacy Strategy, for example, including the Framework for Teaching itself (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998), included a good deal of controversial and unsupported material about how teachers should conduct themselves professionally. Professor (now Sir) Michael Barber, then leader of New Labour’s Literacy Task Force, asserted in his finest spin doctoring mode that it was all based on ‘internationally proven best practice’, without mentioning what this might be (Barber, 1998). Teachers demanded the research evidence, but it was more than a year before this appeared in a somewhat diffuse document, which included all the international research that could be found to support the Framework, but which carefully omitted any other significant research that contradicted it (Beard, 1999). The cancer had taken hold.

This little matter of research evidence is the main problem for educational spin doctors. It is extremely difficult in educational matters to find any research that proves anything for certain or, to put it another way, any research that seems to offer conclusive proof can usually be refuted by other research that offers equally conclusive proof. In a famous lecture to the Teacher Training Agency in 1996, Professor David Hargreaves, criticizing the pointlessness of much educational research, suggested that what we need is:

| evidence-based [research which] demonstrates conclusively that if teachers change their practice from x to y there will be a significant and enduring improvement in teaching and learning. (Hargreaves, 1996: 5) |

But other academics were very dubious about this. Can educational research ever be so scientifically quantitative in this way? Michael Bassey, for example, a past president of the British Educational Research Association, believes such research to be impossible:

| Teaching situations are so varied that it is rarely, if ever, possible to say with certainty ‘Do y instead of x and your pupils will learn more’ ... Teaching is such a complex activity that such simple statements just do not exist. (Bassey, 1999: 48) |

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So how can anyone argue the case for anything in education if educational research cannot be relied on? How can governments justify telling teachers how they must teach? There really can only be one way to go about it. If you do not have very convincing evidence to support you, you must find other ways to convince people about what they must do.

It seems to me logical that if research itself cannot ‘demonstrate conclusively’ then the answer can only lie in skilful spin doctoring. This is not for the inexperienced. You need to know what you are doing. The would-be educational spin doctor has to be particularly watchful and stick closely to the spin doctor’s rule book. In many ways these rules are the opposite of what would be expected from an academic researcher. For example, the genuine researcher would, to be credible, set out to consider all sides of an investigation, including those that might prove problematic, and would take care to use ‘reflexivity to identify areas of potential researcher bias’ (Robson, 2002: 173). But if you were an educational spin doctor, you would be biased from the start, and would take care to cite or draw attention only to the researches that support the case you are arguing. You would of course sound authoritative, but as far as possible would find it best to be relatively unspecific about the researches that support you (in case anyone is tempted to examine them too closely), and where possible you would aim to get away with vague phrases about ‘proven best practice’ or ‘research shows us that . . .’, in the manner of Michael Barber earlier, without actually referring to any research directly. And in those instances where you cannot avoid referring to the specific researches that support you, then your referencing needs to be kept to a minimum. You would be particularly careful never to hint at any weaknesses in the researches you cite, even if you were fully aware of them. And of course you would never refer to any research that opposes or contradicts your argument. You would omit this completely.

At this point it might be thought that I am beginning to exaggerate or even verge on the ludicrous. Surely, I can hear my reader saying, this is going too far. It would not be possible to find, in our fair-minded and democratic country, such a cynical piece of educational spin doctoring. In fact, we were presented with one in March 2006. The Rose Review is a particularly fine example.

**The Rose Review**

The Rose Review (Rose, 2006) is a cunningly worded, politically motivated, dogmatic and dictatorial document. It purports to be, as witness its title, an independent review of the teaching of early reading, but it is not independent and it is not a review. It is very obviously biased towards one particular
'phonic' method known as 'synthetic phonics' – a method regarded as narrow and limited by most eminent authorities in the field (see for example the brilliant exposés by Taylor [1998] and Meyer [2002]). So, to allay any fears about narrowness, the Review indicates, early on, that although the ‘high quality phonic work’ should be taught ‘discretely’ (Rose, 2006: §53), it must be ‘embedded within a broad and language-rich curriculum’ (Rose, 2006: §35). How something discrete can also be embedded is never explained. It is in fact a piece of verbal prestidigitation, and so to distract from this trick the ‘broad and language-rich curriculum’ is described fulsomely but left wonderfully vague. It is, apparently:

a curriculum that generates purposeful discussion, interest, application, enjoyment and high achievement across all the areas of learning and experience in the early years and progressively throughout the key stages which follow. (Rose, 2006: §35)

This is the only explanation we have of it anywhere in the Review and of course it is made to sound highly attractive. We could hardly disagree with a curriculum so ideal. It appears to encompass everything that is educationally desirable for children’s whole time in school. If this it what ‘discretely embedded high quality phonic work’ means then we will surely all welcome it.

But there is of course no such curriculum. This is a standard piece of spin doctoring. The terms used are deliberately general and all-encompassing because it is a deception; spin doctors must not be too specific. The fact that the Clackmannanshire research influencing this Review is rather more specific about the ‘language-rich curriculum’ is not going to be mentioned. Clackmannanshire is quite clear that ‘before children are introduced to books, they are taught letter sounds’, and this will take ‘a few months’ (Johnston and Watson, 2005: §1.7). The Rose Review, aware that it is promoting a contentious programme, is careful not to draw attention to anything that might appear contentious. So it avoids telling us that this particular ‘language-rich curriculum’ is not as rich as it might sound. It does not include one of the most important components of a ‘language-rich curriculum’; to wit, books. This is typical spin doctoring.

The research evidence

I will consider more of the linguistic trickery of the Review in a moment, but at this point I need to focus on the Review’s use of research evidence. The Review is, of course, for reasons other than educational, trying to sell us something that it knows is educationally contentious, so it must sound
authoritative throughout. One way of sounding authoritative is to demonstrate a command of convincing detail. The following is a typical example. It appears under the sub-heading ‘Synthetic Phonics’:

Because our writing system is alphabetic, beginner readers must be taught how the letters of the alphabet, singly or in combination, represent the sounds of spoken language (letter-sound correspondences) and how to blend (synthesise) the sounds to read words, and break up (segment) the sounds in words to spell. They must learn to process all the letters in words and ‘read words in and out of text’. Phonic work should teach these skills and knowledge in a well defined sequence. (Rose, 2006: §45)

On the face of it this seems logical enough, but there is a simplistic fallacy in the first sentence, known in logic as a non-sequitur. (Non-sequiturs never worry spin doctors.) Not only does the conclusion (that the reader must be taught how letters represent sounds) not follow from the premise (that our writing system is alphabetic), the premise itself is suspect. Our writing system is not simply alphabetic. It is also morphophonemic; that is, sometimes letters represent sounds, but crucially letter combinations frequently represent meaning, not sound. However, the confident argument as here presented in the Review, suspect though it may be, will be more than enough to impress those, like government ministers, who have only limited notions about literacy learning.

But there are far more serious objections to the Review and the research by which it was influenced. As is well known, it is based largely on a seven-year longitudinal study undertaken in Clackmannanshire, Scotland (Johnston and Watson, 2005). The fact that this study has received substantial criticism is naturally played down in the Review (the only references to it appear to be ‘contributors . . . challenged some aspects’ [§204], and it ‘received some criticism’ [§207]). The research is otherwise highly praised for its ‘first-hand evidence of very effective teaching and learning of phonic knowledge and skills’ (Rose, 2006: §207). Yet there is a fundamental flaw in the research methodology that the Review never mentions, even to debate or defend, because of course no spin doctor would ever be so foolish as to raise any doubts. Michael Rosen goes to the heart of the matter:

The conclusions drawn from the research that claims to prove the effectiveness of synthetic phonics cannot be sustained. They (the researchers) commit the cardinal sin of all conclusions from experiments: they fail to compare like with like. That is to say, the conditions under which the children were taught using synthetic phonics were not held constant and identical with the conditions of children learning how to read by other methods . . . Before drawing conclusions from a piece of research, the question that has to be asked is: Can
it be replicated? And we have a definitive answer: We don’t know. (Rosen, 2006: 123)

In her book, Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science, Denny Taylor analyses with methodical and painstaking thoroughness the repeated attempts by influential American educationists to impose a reductionist phonics regime on that country’s literacy teachers (Taylor, 1998). Taking her cue from Grossen, Taylor repeatedly points out the weaknesses of the research on which these attempts are based:

In a true scientific paradigm, theories are tested by doing everything to try to prove the theory incorrect. (Grossen, 1997 cited in Taylor, 1998: 5)

Taylor shows that few theories of literacy are tested in this way, and sets out a formidable catechism for literacy researchers:

Is the research responsive to the social, cultural, and intellectual lives of children? How was the research conducted? What are the ethical issues? Were the scientific procedures rigorous? Were the tests and measurements relevant to the stated objectives of the studies? Were the hypotheses properly tested? Were the theories proven? What does the research really indicate? Correlation or causation? Are there alternative explanations for the results? What is the impact of the research on the lives of children and their families? (Taylor 1998: 6)

And, Taylor continues, if the research is defective in any of these matters, if there are unsubstantiated assumptions that are essentially just ‘spin’:

then we must ask ourselves, what are the consequences for children of the widespread use of these studies in determining how they should be taught to read? (Taylor 1998: 7)

But of course the research that the Rose Review has chosen to follow so assiduously is never subjected to any serious examination of this kind, even though this should have been regarded as absolutely vital. Spin doctors never discuss any problems, methodological or otherwise, and never get involved with criticisms.

A whole bag of tricks

The authors of the Review know full well that there are widely held alternative views about the teaching of literacy because these were set out in the many cogently expressed submissions that the Review team received. But in various crafty ways these are regularly brushed aside. For example, in the introductory ‘letter’ to the Secretary of State prefacing the Review, dissent is cleverly turned into agreement:

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Given the nature of the task, it is hardly surprising that genuinely held views differed, sometimes widely, about aspects of the remit. However, all respondents united around the aim of securing reading as an entitlement for every child. I hope that the findings and outcomes of the Review will inform the means to that end. (Rose, 2006: 2)

This is a duplicitous piece of spin. It sounds as if those holding genuine but differing views have (somehow) agreed to put them aside and join forces for the greater good. While we nod approvingly at the indisputable fact that reading is every child’s entitlement, our attention is distracted from the real situation. Of course, everyone agrees about the entitlement. What is glossed over here is that there is considerable disagreement about how that entitlement is to be delivered.

At every turn the Review’s attitude to conflicting evidence provides us with examples of adroit spin doctoring:

Findings from different research programmes are sometimes contradictory or inconclusive, and often call for further studies to test tentative findings. While robust research findings must not be ignored, developers of national strategies . . . cannot always wait for the results of long-term research studies. They must take decisions, based on as much firm evidence as is available from a range of sources at the time . . . (Rose, 2006: §31)

On the surface this seems plausible, but a moment’s reflection reveals that what the Review is really saying here amounts to a cynical caricature of the real situation. The Review’s sub-text might read: ‘As we are intending at all costs to go ahead with our proposals for synthetic phonics, we will suggest that opposition research findings are either inconclusive, or are taking too long. This should be enough to distract anyone from remembering that there is in fact already in existence a massive amount of “robust” research that disagrees with just about everything we are proposing. Hopefully we have side-stepped this difficulty with a neat bit of spinning.’

A little later in the Review, when with any luck the reader will have forgotten this denunciation of research programmes in general, these same programmes are ambiguously returned to, this time seeming to support the Review’s proposals:

. . . notwithstanding the uncertainties of research, there is much convincing evidence to show from the practice observed that as generally understood, ‘synthetic’ phonics is the form of systematic phonic work that offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers. Among other strengths, this is because it teaches children directly what they need to know . . . whereas other approaches, such as ‘analytic’ phonics, expect children to deduce them. (Rose, 2006: §47)
This is a really smart trick, and ‘research’ has a different purpose here. The sentence is constructed to lodge the idea that research, notwithstanding its uncertainties, does provide evidence to support synthetic phonics. (It would obviously be better for the credibility of the Review if it were supported by research.) For this reason the meaning is made opaque. The tortuousness of the language and the vagueness are spin doctoring techniques to cover up the fact that the ‘convincing evidence’ is actually based on ‘practice observed’, and not on research at all. This is the first mention of ‘practice observed’ in the Review, and refers to the fact that some of the Review team went to observe lessons taught by phonics fundamentalists in Scotland. Since ‘practice observed’ is notoriously subjective, and does not provide very trustworthy or acceptable evidence, it would better if it could be mentioned in a sentence where it could be associated with a more respectable word like ‘research’. The eventual effect is to make it sound as if there is much convincing research evidence to support synthetic phonics, even though the Review is well aware that this is not the case. There is a further cryptic reference to this distinction between ‘practice’ and ‘research’ later in the Review that hardly clarifies the matter:

Focusing on the practice observed in the classroom and its supportive context, rather than debating the research, is therefore not without significance for this review. (Rose, 2006: §207)

**Of course we all agree**

Spin doctors are deft at turning disagreement into agreement, and whenever the possibility arises, the Review produces ingenious linguistic manipulations to achieve this. The following example, one of many such, is a particularly important one to examine critically because it enshrines the central tenet of the Rose Review, the one most widely opposed, that there is one ‘best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers’ (Rose, 2006: 4). In the section cannily subtitled, ‘Different programmes – similar principles’, this is the first sentence:

A number of contributors to the review claimed to have developed exemplary but differing approaches to teaching reading in general, and phonic work in particular. (Rose, 2006: §54)

The central idea in this statement is the reference to ‘differing approaches to teaching reading’, which ‘a number’ of contributors have ‘claimed’ to have ‘developed’. The words are all loaded, as is the subtitle itself. The Review is wanting to lodge the idea that ‘differing approaches’ (not just ‘programmes’ – a more limited notion in reading research) submitted to the Review were
all based on ‘similar principles’ anyway, so everyone agrees and there is no problem. The change of word from ‘programmes’ in the subtitle to ‘approaches’ in the text immediately following, begins this subtle deception. In fact, of course, the ‘differing approaches’ submitted to the Review were not based on ‘similar principles’ at all. It is arrant nonsense to suggest it but this is carefully disguised. Some submitted approaches were, in fact, based on quite dissimilar principles (for example United Kingdom Literacy Association [UKLA], 2005).

But the skilful persuasion continues relentlessly. The words ‘a number’ are chosen to gloss negatively in the reader’s mind as perhaps a small and relatively unimportant number, while ‘claimed’ carries the sub-text of ‘just claimed, with little or no evidence’. Had the purpose of these words been to celebrate or approve of differing approaches, the Review could, in spin doctoral fashion, have quite reasonably reported from the same submitted evidence and said virtually the opposite: ‘A sizeable proportion of the contributors to the Review drew our attention to well researched and widely accepted evidence of the success of quite different approaches’. But of course this was not at all the impression the Review wanted to convey.

There is even more linguistic trickery in the second half of this short sentence. The words ‘in general’ are added to ‘teaching reading’, and then the next words in the sentence are ‘and phonic work in particular’, indicating that ‘phonic work’ is also included in the ‘differing approaches’. This conceptually divides ‘teaching reading’ into two, albeit unequal, categories, viz. (1) what might be included in the teaching of reading as a whole, and (2) the part to be played by phonics within this whole. But in the subsequent discussion in the rest of §54 following this opening sentence, number (1), ‘the whole’, is not further considered. The whole discussion is entirely about (2) ‘the part’, and it consists of the differing claims of commercially produced phonic programmes. The Review argues that one phonic programme could not be shown to be any better than another ‘since a wide array of different tests was used’ and that claims about radical differences between the programmes amount to very little, since in their essentials the apparently differing programmes are, ultimately, all very similar. The ‘common elements’ of the programmes that ‘really make a difference as to how well beginners are taught . . . are few in number’. The Review then suggests that in fact there are only two such ‘elements’: (a) the programmes are phonic, and (b) they are all highly systematic (§54). The paragraph is thus able to end with the feeling that there is really no fundamental disagreement. In this, again tortuous, discussion about competing phonic programmes, the uncritical reader will have been easily distracted from the fact that there has been no attempt at all to discuss (1) above, the ‘differing
approaches to teaching reading in general’. In a quite involved paragraph about the resolution of competing claims about reading (just about phonics, of course), it is easy to assume that the differing approaches to teaching reading as a whole have also been resolved, without appreciating that the question has not been discussed at all.

Final consensus achieved!

The resultant and intended impression is that ‘there is no fundamental disagreement about the teaching of reading’. This is just what the Government, keen to show its understanding of the need, and ever eager to demonstrate decisive action (and thereby gain more votes), wants to hear:

We will provide a programme of training through the National Strategies over the next school year, and we will work with Initial Teacher Training providers over the next two years to ensure that newly qualified teachers can teach phonics well and within two years every new teacher will be taught in this way. (Kelly, 2006)

Even though this decision is based on the calculated verbal manipulation of controversial evidence – the Rose Review is without doubt a first-rate piece of spin doctoring – it means that ‘every new teacher’ will be mandated to teach ‘in this way’. This will of course not actually be every teacher, but only those in England, the other three parts of the UK having wisely gone their separate educational ways. But, if only for the sake of the teachers and young children in 150 English Local Education Authorities, I conclude with this question: is it really right for the wholesale introduction of a national reading programme to be influenced by the duplicities of the spin doctor?

I don’t think so.

References

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