

**Re-engineering national reading policy,  
pedagogy, and professional  
development: The case for a Simple View  
of Meaningful Reading**

Teacher Education Advancement  
Network Journal  
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University of Cumbria  
Vol 10(2) pages 65-79

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**Abstract**

Justifications for the change of model supporting national reading instruction in England reveal the influence of international 'Reading Wars' divisions. Replacement of the 'Searchlights' diagram by an illustration of the 'Simple View of Reading' (SVR) generated an opportunity for the implementation of stable policy and balanced reading instruction in a conflicted environment. However, a one-dimensional emphasis in government policy since that time has not taken full advantage of the SVR's two-dimensional conceptualisation of reading. Measures taken to reinforce national systematic synthetic phonics instruction have ensured that effective instruction is directed to the 'word recognition processes' dimension of the SVR, but equal emphasis on measures supporting the development of the 'language comprehension processes' dimension is not so evident. This inequality risks the successful achievement of the SVR 'reading product' that results from the integration of both knowledge-rich dimensions that the diagram illustrates. A revised version, The Simple View of Meaningful Reading (SVMR), is therefore argued and presented in this paper. This aims to not only clarify and re-illustrate the significance of instructional interactions that incorporate both SVR dimensions in achieving meaningful reading outcomes, but also to afford an instrument for the professional development of teachers that further supports their agency in the alignment of effective reading policy and pedagogy.

**Key words**

Simple View of Reading; national reading policy; systematic synthetic phonics; professional development; teacher agency.

**Reading contexts**

The inability to read has been historically associated with unsuccessful engagement in school curricula that leads to 'unemployment, crime, lack of civic awareness and involvement, poor health maintenance, and other social problems' (SMC 2016). As a consequence, governments internationally have increasingly endeavoured to determine the essential features of successful reading acquisition and pedagogy, and become instrumental in driving policy reforms that steer its implementation. Considerable funding streams, legislative measures and monitoring procedures have supported policy into practice following review in a variety of contexts, including the US (NRP 2000), Canada (CLLRN 2009), England (Rose 2006), Wales (Carr and Morris 2015), New Zealand (LTF 1999), and Australia (Rowe 2005; CESE 2017).

In spite of such long-term and wide-ranging support the cycles leading to revised policy and pedagogy have been influenced by divisive 'Reading Wars' debates (Nicholson 1992; Pearson 2004) that have traditionally argued the most appropriate reading theory to underpin effective reading instruction (e.g. Chall 1996; Tunmer, Greaney, Prochnow 2015). However, the 'unenlightened commitment' of factions to either a top-down context-driven, or bottom-up alphabetic-code emphasis of reading theory and pedagogy has denied opportunities for

**Citation**

Smith, J.E. (2018) 'Re-engineering national reading policy, pedagogy, and professional development: the case for a Simple View of Meaningful Reading,' *TEAN Journal*, 10(2), pp. 65-79.

consistent practice in national policy (Adams 1990:26). The focus of instruction has instead been affected by ‘crudities of pendulum thinking’ (Holdaway 1979:30) that have transferred policy and practice from one to the other with ‘depressing regularity’ (Stanovich 2004:362). A more consistent approach that still maintains successful reading outcomes could be achieved if both top-down and bottom-up elements were included in balanced instruction (Allington 2005; Pressley 2006). For example, pedagogy that includes direct instruction of phonics within a broad programme might more effectively facilitate balanced and meaningful engagements with both print and language elements (Adams 1991).

### Reading policy in England

In England, an opportunity for this to occur was provided when policy and practice that different governments had developed from the top-down margin of the Reading Wars pendulum swing (Beard 2000) was reassessed and redirected by the Rose Review (2006). Part of the redirection involved a change to the diagram of reading that had supported national policy and practice. The ‘Searchlights’ conceptualisation of reading (SL; Figure 1) (DfE 1998; Stannard and Huxford 2007) was replaced by an illustration of the Simple View of Reading (SVR; Figure 2) (Gough and Tunmer 1986; Rose 2006 Appendix 1 by Stuart and Stainthorp).

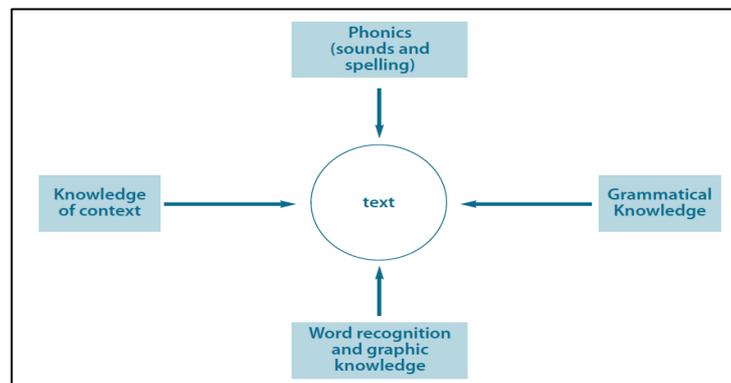


Figure 1. The Searchlights diagram (DfE 1998).

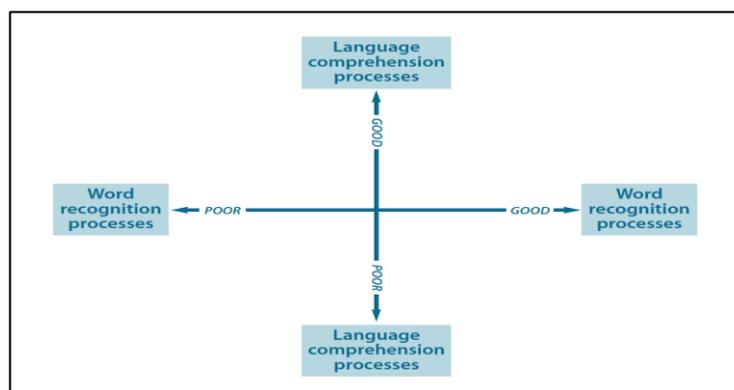


Figure 2. The Simple View of Reading (Rose 2006, Appendix 1 by Stuart and Stainthorp).

The rationale for change in the review was indicative of the Reading Wars’ pendulum swing away from a top-down approach. The Searchlights diagram formalised a previously-theorised problem-solving process positioned at the ‘top-down, context-driven’ limit of the pendulum swing (Stuart, Stainthorp and Snowling, 2009:54 citing Clay and Cazden, 1990:206). It drew on recollections of searchlights seeking out and converging on wartime aircraft in a night sky to illustrate the strategic use of multiple sources of information being focused on text (Stannard

and Huxford 2007:33). This strategic search would increasingly 'light up' sources of information that could be cross-referenced until 'meaning-making' was finally successful.

This conceptualisation had supported government measures addressing national reading professional development and instruction for almost a decade, and was effective enough to achieve change in teacher practice that previous policy had not (Rose 2006:12). However, the diagram's representation of an unprioritised search for sources of information in reading interactions did not correspond with emerging research reports concerning the primacy of phonics in such searches (Johnston and Watson 2005). The Rose Review reinforced this by suggesting that the Searchlights' insufficient illustration of 'where the intensity of each searchlight should fall at the different stages of learning to read' (2006:35) 'diffused' early reading instruction rather than 'concentrating it on phonics' (2006:37). Instead, the Searchlights alignment with a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman 1976:267) meant that linguistic sources of information were used 'first' (Smith and Elley 1996:141) and phonics information was used 'last' (Smith 1979:54). The diagram therefore became less suitable for national guidance in light of this lack of priority on phonics, and in light of the poor performance reported in international reading contexts underpinned by these 'cueing systems' (e.g. Tunmer, Greaney and Prochnow 2015).

A replacement diagram, illustrating Gough and Tunmer's earlier conceptualisation of a 'Simple View of Reading' (Figure 2; Gough and Tunmer 1986) was therefore recommended in a national review of reading (Rose 2006:40/73, Appendix 1 by Stuart and Stainthorp 2006). This 'adaptation' of the SVR (Wyse and Goswami 2008:691) was considered more effective at 'explicitly distinguishing between word recognition processes and language comprehension processes' that had been confusingly delineated and attributed in the Searchlights diagram, and therefore better at strengthening instruction that addressed both these dimensions (Rose 2006, Appendix 1 by Stuart and Stainthorp:74/75). This conceptualisation of reading has proved valuable in many and varied contexts over time (see for example Savage 2001; Savage et al 2015; Paige, Frazier and Smith 2017; Bonifacci and Tobia 2017).

The simplicity of two intersecting dimensions, however, belies the complexity of pedagogy that is required to address the underpinning mathematical notion of a reading 'product' being formed by accessing and combining knowledge from both dimensions. The diagram's deeper implications may not have been fully realised in national policy and practice in England in spite of this wide research base, and in spite of the considerable influence the Rose review has had (DFES 2006; Wyse and Styles 2007; Ofsted 2008; Clark 2006). Rose recently noted, for example, that though the SVR was a 'seminal insight' and a 'key feature' of his influential 2006 review it was uncertain how well this has 'since been promoted in teacher training, and in framing school and national policies for teaching reading' (Rose 2017:1). These recent comments echo concerns Rose had in previous Parliamentary Select Committee hearings where he acknowledged that his review had often been interpreted as a 'one winged bird' on phonics research (CSFC 2009 Q327), and that his other recommendations had been less influential. For example, though his review suggests an emphasis on phonics, there is also specific direction to 'foster language comprehension' (2006:39) using 'imaginative and engaging literacy teaching that included phonics' (2006:5) in a 'broad and language-rich curriculum' (2006:16/38).

### **One dimension**

This lack of influence and interpretation in policy and practice does seem to have some supporting evidence. Government policy has reductively promoted the systematic teaching of synthetic phonics as 'the best way to teach literacy to all children' (DfE, 2011a:1), especially

for ‘younger pupils’ and those ‘struggling with reading’ (DfE 2015:4). A number of measures have reinforced this approach including for example:

- the introduction and development of a statutory screening check of all six-year old children’s phonic knowledge (DfE 2016a);
- the inspection of reading and phonics teaching in schools and teacher training departments (Ofsted 2015);
- the inclusion of the need for a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics in Teachers’ Standards (DfE 2011b; DfE 2016b);
- the provision of funding linked to government-approved phonics materials and training (DfE 2014);
- and National Curriculum documents that have set targets for early reading requiring the use of phonics knowledge rather than ‘other strategies to work out words’ (DfE 2013:20; DfE/NFER 2015:12).

The results of a wide range of international reviews noted above clearly indicate that phonics is a crucial element of reading instruction (e.g. NRP 2000). However, the full potential of the SVR remains unrealised if its original two-dimensional conceptualisation of reading comprehension is weakened by any one-dimensional focus (Gough and Tunmer 1986). On one hand an emphasis on instruction focused on the language comprehension processes dimension of the SVR may support a ‘reading for meaning’ approach that does not access print sufficiently or effectively. On the other hand, policy imbalanced towards the word recognition dimension of the SVR risks readers saying ‘what is on the page without understanding the meaning of the page’ (Huey 1908:349). Rose specifically highlighted this risk in his national review when noting that Milton’s daughters circumvented their father’s blindness by phonologically decoding text they did not comprehend in order to allow him to hear and understand (Rose 2006:76). However, Stanovich warned that such ‘word calling’ should not be linked to the teaching of decoding strategies unless it could be shown that the target word was in the *‘listening comprehension abilities of the child’* (2004:395 his italics). It seems important therefore to ensure instruction that focuses on the language comprehension processes dimension of the SVR becomes equally balanced with a focus on the word recognition processes dimension.

However, it is a relatively ‘easier task’ to develop a logical progression of discrete word recognition processes represented by that dimension of the SVR than it is to successfully address the complexity of linguistic or language comprehension elements represented by its other dimension (Gough 1975:15). The development of language comprehension instruction has habitually been poorly addressed in spite of research consistently reporting its influence on reading comprehension (e.g. Vandergrift 1997; Lervag, Hulme, and Melby-Lervag, 2017). Coverage in the recent Common Core State Standards in the US, for example, was described as ‘inadequate at best’ (CCS 2015; Spear-Swearling 2016:14), while learning outcomes for reading and language comprehension outlined in National Curriculum documents in England seem unhelpfully reductive (e.g. DfE 2013:14/20). The powerful effect of lobbyists effectively arguing for an emphasis on systematic synthetic phonics instruction may have negatively influenced the development of appropriately balanced national policy and practice (Wyse et al 2013:134; Young and Wang 2016).

In light of this it seems increasingly important to re-consider ‘successful’ reading instruction in order to develop the full potential of the SVR illustration in national policy and practice. Practitioners might consider, for example, if national assessments, policy emphases, and effective classroom practice fully accord with the SVR conceptualisation, and if its

interpretation in national policy and practice might be modified in light of Rose's initial recommendations and recent unease (2006; 2017).

### **Teaching and learning**

However, in a high-stakes education environment it is problematic for practitioners to question policy, or provide sufficiently rigorous and persuasive evidence to indicate new alternatives or change entrenched positions (Wise 2007; Rooney 2015). Instead, practitioner influence and consistency in international reading direction has been often deflected by ephemeral political agenda (Ellis 2009), circuitous use of best-evidence research (Camilli, Vargas and Yurecko 2003), and transitory commercial opportunism (Clark 2017). This context creates a barrier to the inclusion of other voices, or other 'evidence' that might be available in decision-making, such as discussions of classroom practice that appear in differing media formats, or the results of intensive practitioner inquiry (e.g. Lyle 2014; Mercado and Cole 2014). Practitioner voice simply appears 'anecdotal' compared to the gold standard of 'scientific research' that is referenced when reinforcing government funding, legislation, and accountability measures, or creating adherence to precise delivery of policy and approved programmes (Shanahan 2014; Moss 2017; Gardner 2017). Ministerial statements further dissuade practitioner voice when couched as 'those opposed to the use of systematic synthetic phonics are standing between pupils and the education they deserve' (Gibb 2017:1).

### **Adherence**

It is clear that enforcing adherence to the curricular implications of national reading policy is necessary. The pressure of such top-down management is clearly justified, for example, if it is in response to falling national literacy standards or emerging research findings (e.g. Callaghan 1976; Shannon 1988). This process can effectively manage any dissipating effects of school or teacher variance, and effectively drive the implementation of a closely monitored 'specific-reading-factors' approach which primes the delivery of narrowly prescriptive reading programmes (Cobb 2006; Timberlake, Thomas, and Barrett 2017). However, such top-down prescription can become a 'blunt instrument' that obliges teachers not to be the drivers of reform 'but the driven' (Kintz et al 2015:132; Shirley and Hargreaves 2006:2). Further, when policy consistently ebbs and flows as it has done in Reading Wars contexts, practitioners feel that they are at the mercy of 'rows of back seat drivers pointing in different directions' (Rose 2006:15).

If learning environments become disturbed by inconsistent guidance, or limited by practice that is 'teacher-centred, strictly paced, and directed by basal scripts' (Gelfuso 2017:33) then the definition of 'expertise' may become unhelpfully restricted to the successful implementation of narrowly confined policy directives. Practitioners may, as a result, become distanced from instructional moves that enable the combination of well-researched policy with their own evidence of effective pedagogical content knowledge. The implementation of policy might therefore be more effective if it were augmented by drawing on the significant effect that teachers can have on student learning in general (Hattie 2017), and on reading instruction in particular (e.g. Duke et al 2011).

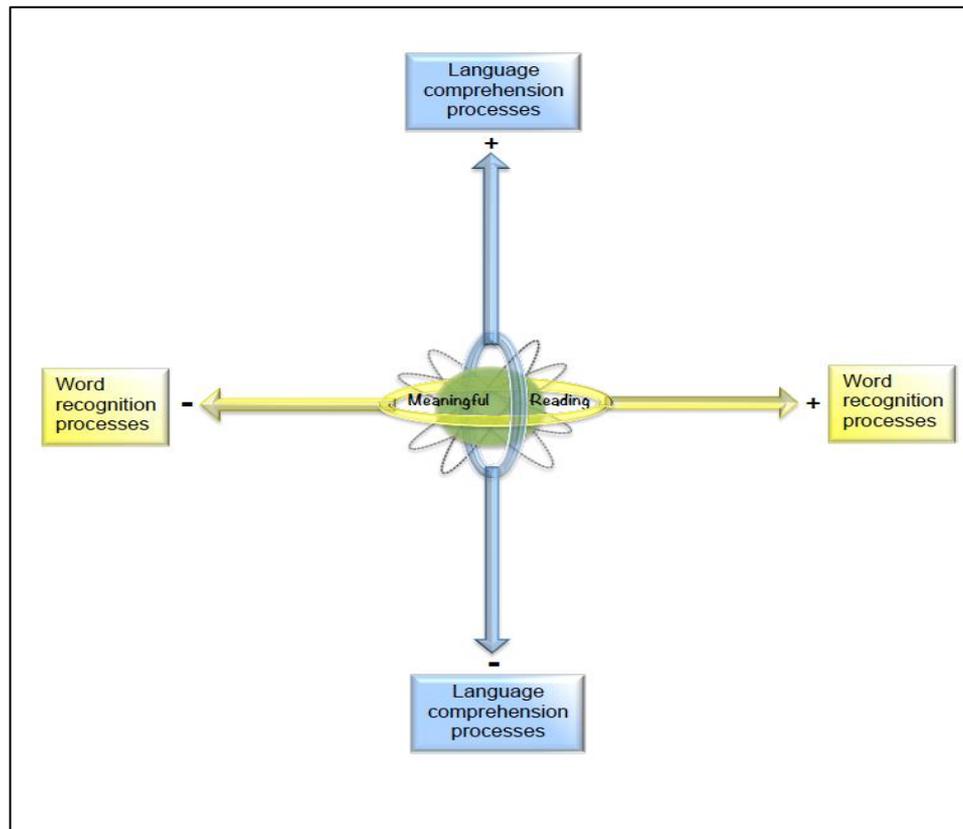
Practitioners' effective implementation of reading theory and instruction might therefore be better achieved by including aspects of professional development that run alongside top-down management, but enrich the limitations of the 'training' notion (e.g. Boylan et al 2018). For example, Reading Wars debates, reading research, national performance data and policy directives would provide a rich context for examination in learning communities that aim to develop effective pedagogical interactions through perspective-changing and transformational professional development (see for example Timperley and Robinson 2001).

In particular, the structured observation and analysis of reading instruction may provide rich opportunities that could be exploited to develop more responsive pedagogy (Gaffney and Anderson 1991; Gelfuso 2017). Such a process may purposefully utilise the sense-making distortions that occur as personal theory is aligned with policy intent (Bingham and Hall-Kenyon 2011). These ‘critical incidents’ might test teachers’ espoused theory in light of new evidence; develop more informed, reflective, and contingent pedagogy; and better facilitate the reciprocal and appropriate alignment of effective policy in practice (Tripp 1993; Owen 2015; Rigby, Woulfin, and Marz 2016).

This agentic process could then further enable teachers to become ‘effective, principled policy implementers, interpreters, and negotiators’ (Heineke, Ryan, and Tocci, 2015:383) rather than ‘technicians’ (Cloud-Silva and Sadoski 1987:15) who remain somewhat ‘distanced’ from policy debate and its implementation (Baumann et al 1998:649).

### **Ways forward**

Implementation of the two conceptualisations of reading process that were previously utilised in England to guide delivery of national reading pedagogy (DfE 1998; Rose 2006) did not include such complex aspects that could shape such professional discussion, structure understanding, and further develop policy and practice. A revised diagram, an amalgam of the influential SVR and SL conceptualisations, is therefore proposed with two purposes. The Simple View of Meaningful Reading (SVMR; Figure 3) I propose aims to not only be instrumental in reinforcing the balanced underpinnings of the SVR conceptualisation and refreshing subsequently underused elements of the Rose Review, but also in instigating teacher agency in transformational professional learning communities, and establishing more consistency and stability in divisive Reading Wars contexts. This dual purpose is attempted through a revision of the structure of the SVR, and through the inclusion of Searchlights-inspired elements into the revised diagram in order to stimulate discussion that determines future direction.



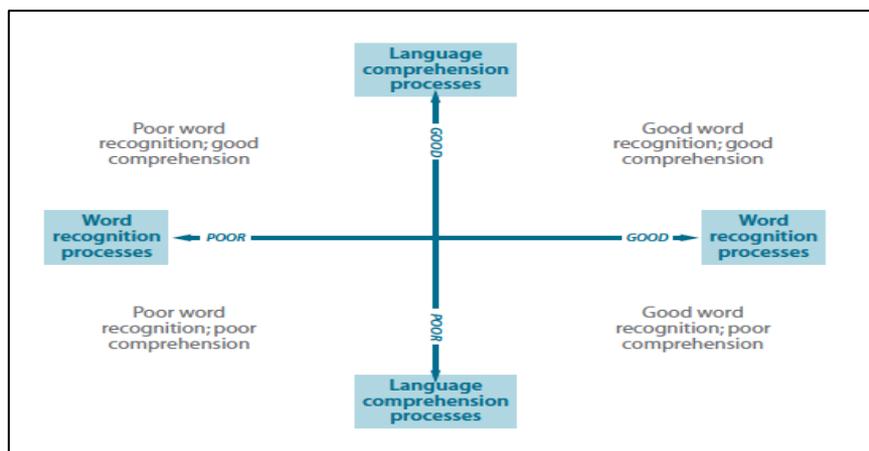
**Figure 3.** My proposed version of the Simple View of Meaningful Reading (SVMR).

The SVMR diagram is framed visually, and underpinned theoretically, by the SVR's previous illustration of two intersecting dimensions (Figure 2; Rose 2006, Appendix 1 by Stuart and Stainthorp). However, the new diagram embeds Searchlights diagram's conceptualisation of an active search for information into a central 'third space' at the heart of the diagram, constructed by splitting and diverting each dimension at their intersection (Figure 3). This search is represented by dotted lines as an evocation of atom-like vibration signifying the 'cryptanalytic intent' that necessarily underpins effective reading actions (Gough and Hillinger 1980). The addition of colour to the diagram is a further attempt to strengthen this conceptualisation. It hopes to indicate that the green reading comprehension product at the heart of the diagram can only be formed as a result of the integration of information drawn from each of the two dimensions, one blue, one yellow. This builds on the original SVR conceptualisation because it further alerts practitioners to the importance of instruction that would not only add new knowledge into each dimension but also the necessity of facilitating ways to use this information in order to construct the reading comprehension product. This central image therefore intends to facilitate and reinforce an 'active action in learning' notion (Israel and Duffy 2009 p.669). This activity involves successfully embedding, accessing, and integrating knowledge from both dimensions to form the reading comprehension product, since a 'zero performance' on either of the SVR dimensions would result mathematically in unsuccessful reading comprehension (Hoover and Gough 1990:128).

### Assessment

The Searchlights conceptualisation that is used to illustrate this activity is inserted at the heart of the diagram, but the labels that confusingly represented sources of information and helped to make that diagram 'conceptually incoherent' (Brooks 2007:173) have been removed. Instead 'word recognition processes' and 'language comprehension processes' labels remain

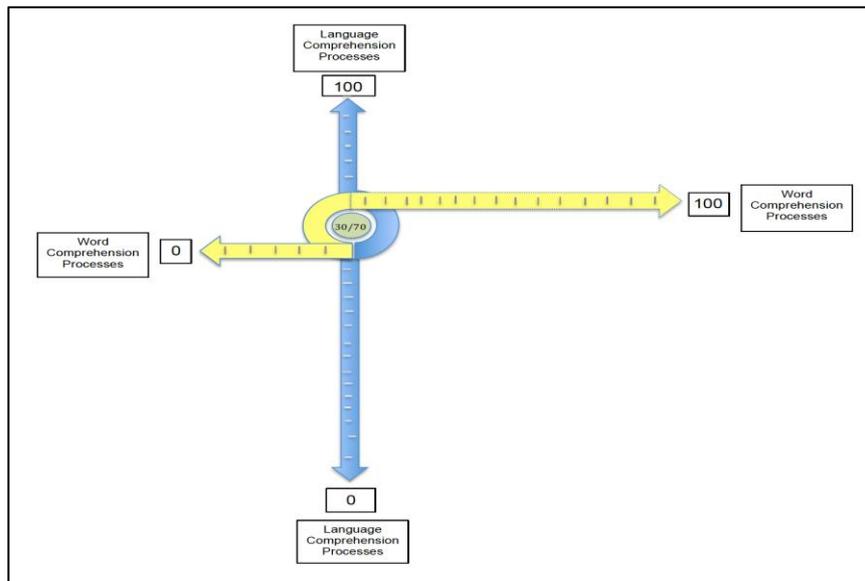
in order to support a more specific focus on the elements embedded in each SVR dimension. The 'good' and 'poor' labels that appeared in the SVR illustration (Rose 2006:77) have been removed, and replaced with positive and negative signs. This builds on the capacity of the SVR conceptualisation because it further alerts teachers to assessment opportunities that might measure word recognition processes and language comprehension processes and inform appropriately contingent instruction. The previous illustration simply characterised patterns of performance in each of four quadrants (Rose 2006:81). In that diagram (see Figure 4) there was little opportunity therefore to calibrate performance more exactly. Instead, a 2D



**Figure 4.** The simple view of 'patterns of performance' (p.81) in each reading quadrants (see in particular the quadrant '*good language comprehension, poor word recognition*').

version of the SVMR (see Figure 5) develops this aspect further. It allows practitioners to assess a variety of elements embedded in each dimension (such as word reading, phonics, vocabulary, or syntax) and then more accurately scale the results onto the respective dimensions.

Therefore, though the SVMR's sphere of activity is initially illustrated at the centre of the dimension intersection (to underpin the main theoretical position) it would also be repositioned according to the results of specific assessments. This 2D image might then reveal a more exact interpretation of a reader's performance and particular instructional requirements than was achieved by the SVR quadrants.



**Figure 5.** Assessment opportunities of the SVMR: an individual's word recognition test result (30) compared with a vocabulary test (70) - reporting more effectively on the 'good language comprehension, poor word recognition' quadrant of the SVR (Figure 4).

For example, an assessment score of '30' scaled onto the word recognition dimension, and a score of '70' scaled to the language comprehension dimension would move the centre of the diagram, and provide a visual representation of performance that is similar to that of the SVR, but more precise. This would provide practitioners with a visual representation of performance, and alert them to the benefit of instruction contingent on formative information (e.g. Black and Wiliam 2009).

### Acceptance

When Gough and Tunmer discussed such elements of the 'simple view' they noted that their suggestions would be seen as 'preposterous' because of the contemporary Reading Wars emphasis (1986:9). In the current climate in England my proposed SVMR might incur similar criticism of its search for a construct that provides 'points of agreement between opposing positions' (Stanovich 1986:398).

The inclusion of SVR elements in the SVMR is likely to be accepted in light of the theoretical underpinnings and robust research base. The conceptualisation of reading activity embedded in the central space of the SVMR would be less acceptable because of its link to the Searchlights illustration. The use of the Searchlights conceptualisation of activity in the SVMR illustration, however, does not signify a return to a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman 1976) because the SVMR does not align with 'guessing as the most efficient manner in which to learn to read' (Smith 1979:67). Nor does it propose a reliance on indirect instruction or reading through a process of osmosis resulting from a 'natural predisposition towards written language acquisition' (Adams 1990:413). Research and review have too evidentially shown the need for direct instruction, and the successful use of alphabetic code to avoid the learner guessing or 'fractionating meaning out of context' (Stanovich 1994:282). The Searchlights-inspired central activities of the diagram that illustrate the activity involved in accessing and integrating the two knowledge-rich SVR dimensions to form the reading comprehension 'product' are therefore more adequately described as 'reading as reasoning' (Thorndike 1917) than reading as 'guessing'.

The proposed SVMR diagram does not deny the primacy of phonics information when 'extracting and constructing meaning from text' (Tunmer and Chapman 2012:454), but does indicate the possible benefits of utilising other sources of information 'sequentially, alternatively, or integratively' (Clay 1991:30). This is a more nuanced view reading that draws practitioners attention to the benefit of rapid or simultaneous co-ordination of the phonological, semantic and linguistic processes embedded in each dimension (Kintsch 2004; Cartwright et al 2010).

The SVMR diagram might in this way stimulate 'better and more inventive teaching' (Thorndike 1973:147) that more effectively 'bootstraps' exponential growth in reading performance (Stanovich 1986:364; Share 1995) at all points during reading development rather than waiting until 'decoding skills have been acquired' (Rose 2006).

### **Conclusion**

No one framework can adequately capture or reveal the complexity of reading processes (Lueers 1983:80). However, it is critical to develop a visual representation that will halt the influence of a Reading Wars pendulum swing on national reading policies, and instead foster consistent reading pedagogy.

This paper attempts this by arguing a new diagram, the 'Simple View of Meaningful Reading', as a revision of two conceptualisations of reading that have supported national policy in England over the last two decades, the 'Searchlights', and the 'Simple View of Reading'.

The proposed SVMR, as an amalgam of the SL and SVR elements, attempts to specifically exploit and advance the accomplishments of two conceptualisations that previously supported national reading policy and practice. The refreshment is, however, a specific response to recent government policy in England, where an increasingly one-dimensional focus on systematic synthetic phonics instruction has risked realisation of the full potential of the SVR's two-dimensional conceptualisation of reading. Though policy has effectively focused instruction on the 'word recognition processes' dimension it has less effectively addressed the other dimension, 'language comprehension processes'. This imbalance risks the SVR conceptualisation because any 'one-dimensional view of a multidimensional process', with either bottom-up or top-down focus, will fail to achieve a successful reading comprehension product (Hoover 1997:102).

The Simple View of Meaningful Reading illustration therefore reinforces the necessary integration of two knowledge-rich dimensions that the SVR described, and opens up a central space which adds Searchlights-inspired detail at the intersection of the two dimensions 'where the devil is' (Kirby and Savage 2008:75). In this way the SVMR is designed as an instrument to encapsulate the mechanics of reading (Gough 1972) but also provide a way to 'engineer' the future direction of consistent reading policy and pedagogy (Calfée 2009:xii).

Though this revised illustration and presentation of argument is driven by Reading Wars influences on reading policy and practice in England it is not limited by such focus, as the wider effects of such influence are clear (e.g. Tunmer Greaney and Prochnow 2015). Similarly, the justifications for the SVMR that have been presented in this paper become increasingly relevant when an emphasis on systematic synthetic phonics in England is cited as 'best practice' that should support future implementation in other contexts (e.g. Buckingham 2016; Balogh 2017).

Considering the arguments put forward for the SVMR may therefore require more of the 'spirit of charity' that accompanies any attempt to find neutral ground in a Reading Wars environment (Stanovich 2004:398). The possibility of Reading Wars camps debating and agreeing on policy alternatives that might achieve balance and stability in reading policy and practice is questionable, but offers opportunities for transformation if achieved (Miskel and Song 2004:107). Tunmer and Nicholson wondered why teachers had not already stopped the pendulum swing by 'discovering themselves the most effective approach and leaving academics to explain it' (2011:405). The SVMR I propose hopes to effectively respond to both issues by reaching a 'point on the pendular cycle' (Wolfe and Poyner 2001:19) that sufficiently illustrates a view on reading processes that is both acceptable for policy makers, and agentic for practitioners. The resultant inclusivity may better support more complex approaches that are directed at 'instilling' future reading policy and practice rather than 'installing' it (Gough 1996:11), and respond to practitioners' desire for 'consistent guidance that offers them structure, simplicity and some flexibility' (Rose 2006:15).

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