

Phonics: a guide to teaching reading in schools

The following information is relevant to members in England working with primary schools or groups of schools including primaries.

The guidance paper will assist school leaders to ask informed questions about how reading is taught in their schools.

Introduction

Few people with an interest in early reading sit on the fence when it comes to phonics. It arouses passionate support and vehement criticism in equal measure and has, as a result of sustained government intervention, become the principal method by which children in England are currently taught to read.

1 Background

Phonics is a method of teaching children how to read and write from the 'bottom up'. The version of phonics used in most English schools, synthetic phonics, is based on the division of the English language into 44 sounds (known as 'phonemes').

These are put together to form words and are represented by letters (or 'graphemes'). Some sounds are represented by one letter (for example 'b') and others by two or more letters (such as 'sh' in 'ship' or 'eer' in 'deer').

Children are taught the sounds first, then how to match them to letters and finally how to 'decode' or 'segment' words by breaking them down into their constituent phonemes (when reading), and how to 'encode' or 'blend' words by building them up again (for writing).

Phonics-based reading programmes gradually and systematically introduce books which consist only (or mainly) of words that children can decode, using the phonemes to which they have already been introduced.

There is no set order for introducing the 44 phonemes, but most phonics-based reading programmes used in English schools follow a similar order to that in the DfE publication *Letters and Sounds* (known as 'satpin', after the first six phonemes introduced). So, very early phonics consists of stories made up entirely from the letters s, a, t, p, i and n, with more phonemes introduced as children progress through the programme.

2 Alternative methods

Phonics is traditionally pitted against whole language instruction (also known as 'look and say').

Whole language takes a 'top down' approach, introducing children to common words and sentences to encourage them to connect words and their meaning from the start. Children are encouraged to look at the context of a word, perhaps its first letter, and maybe an accompanying picture to help them work out what it means.



Whole language-based reading programmes start with the most frequently used words in English, repeating them regularly to encourage children to gain confidence in their reading (“Here is Peter. Here is Jane. Peter likes the dog. Jane likes the dog.”). More words are gradually introduced as the programme progresses.

3 Government policy

Experts on both sides of the Atlantic have argued for decades about which approach is better. The dominance of the whole language approach for most of the 20th century has recently been called into question by an increasing body of research suggesting that, although many children will pick up reading however they are taught, phonics-based instruction is more effective in ensuring the vast majority of children become fluent readers.

John Hattie’s *Visible Learning*, which synthesises the results of over 50,000 pieces of research into what works in schools to improve learning, found that phonics instruction had a strong beneficial impact on the process of learning to read, while the whole language approach had negligible effect and was particularly ineffective for children who were struggling to read.

Both the Labour and coalition governments of recent years have responded to this research by seeking to increase the focus on phonics in English primary schools. In a 2006 Labour-commissioned report, Sir Jim Rose recommended that phonics should be ‘the prime approach’ to teaching reading, advising a move away from the ‘searchlights model’ – a method of teaching reading that combined phonics and whole language instruction and which was recommended in the government’s National Literacy Strategy at the time.

The coalition government, and in particular Schools Minister Nick Gibb, introduced a number of measures to encourage schools to introduce and embed phonics as their principal means of teaching reading. These include:

- the phonics screening check: a short test, taken at the end of Year 1 (and again at the end of Year 2 for children who don’t meet the required standard) to check children’s ability to decode words
- children asked to read 40 words out loud to their teacher or teaching assistant. Half the words are real words, the other half are ‘non-words’ – phonically-regular, made-up words designed to ensure children are really able to decode, rather than simply recognising words they already know
- an increased focus on phonics in the revised *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework* (which requires children to “use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and ... to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds”)

Additionally, the new National Curriculum (which makes it clear that “phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners”), requires schools to ‘urgently’ implement a “rigorous and systematic phonics programme” for any children still struggling to decode and spell in Year 1, and advocates the use of books “that are consistent with [children’s] developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words”.

4 Issues for schools

There are many schools in which reading is taught extremely well, with high quality systematic phonics instruction forming part of a broad and inspiring English curriculum. Phonics is not, however, a silver bullet, and there are a number of challenges with the teaching of reading in some schools.

One of the main criticisms of phonics-based instruction is that it is dry and mechanical, and risks turning children off reading. Phonics supporters counter that nothing turns children off reading more than not being able to read, and that phonics-based instruction is the best way to ensure that doesn't happen. While phonics may be the principal means by which children learn the mechanics of reading, this should be as part of a rich language environment which also values comprehension and reading for pleasure and where children have great books read to them, learn rhymes, sing songs, visit the library and related activities.

The teaching of reading is complex and most initial teacher education barely scratches the surface. Most primary teachers will benefit hugely from ongoing professional development and support in this area.

Children start primary school at very different stages of reading development. Some may barely have seen a book; others may already be able to read simple sentences. Many schools group children for phonics teaching, often across year groups, to ensure they receive appropriate support and stretch.

Phonics isn't always easy for parents to grasp – and it's likely that most of them will have been taught to read in a very different way. Beginner readers benefit hugely from a consistent approach at home and at school, so taking the time to explain to parents how phonics works, and how they can support their children with their reading at home, is important.

Finally, most ways of teaching children to read require large numbers of finely graded books for children to progress through and phonics is no exception. Reading programmes aren't cheap and few schools can afford to throw out all their old, non-decodable books in one go when moving over to a phonics-based approach. As a result, many children are given books to take home and read which don't align well with the stage they've reached on the phonics programme. The phonics matched-funding initiative was intended to help with this problem, but it remains an issue in many schools. Schools may need to continue to commit budget to replacing reading books for some time to come.

5 Further action

Most primary schools in England are now using phonics as their principal means of teaching reading. However, it will still be relatively new to many teachers so, particularly given the central importance of ensuring all children can read well, it's an area to which school and system leaders may want to remain close.

Useful things to explore with Reception and Key Stage 1 teachers and literacy coordinators include:

- How confident are they in their own knowledge of phonics, and their ability to teach it well? Would they benefit from professional development, or working closely with a more experienced colleague?
- How well do children do in the phonics screening check? Do any groups of children struggle with it? How are teachers tackling that?
- How well do parents understand phonics, and how to support their children as they learn to read? Could the school do more to help with this?



- Does the school have enough phonically-decodable reading books to effectively scaffold children's developing reading skills?
- Is there a vibrant reading culture across the school? Do teachers have a good knowledge of children's literature? Is the school library used effectively?

6 Additional information

DfE *Letters and Sounds*

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190599/Letters_and_Sounds_-_DFES-00281-2007.pdf

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