



## Phonics Teaching – is it ‘fit for purpose’?

In this thought-provoking and sometimes controversial article, **Debbie Hepplewhite MBE** questions many of the methods we have come to accept as good phonics teaching.

The range of resources to support teaching and learning has changed dramatically in the past few decades. As a new young teacher, I really struggled to work the Banda machine and its chemical ‘spirit’ smell made me feel positively ill. So, of course, I tried to manage without the Banda in my first years of teaching – or roped in some willing colleague to ‘help’ me (i.e. work the Banda machine for me).

*Agh, the smell of the spirit, the beating click click click of the drum as you turned it, the remnant of wax on your fingers ... I come to pay homage to the old Banda machine (as we called it in England). Invented in 1923 and basically not developing much since, destined to be put out to pasture courtesy of the photocopier machine, the good old rollo (as it was called in Australia?) or “ditto” (US) was a feature of pre-1990s schools, churches and*

*libraries, where earnest professionals copied off class room lots of purple typefaced handouts.”*

(Lost Technology: The Banda Machine, Charlie Gunningham, Business News CEO and online entrepreneur, 2012)

So, my longevity in the teaching profession means I’ve seen many changes over the years. Photocopiers, computers, software applications, printers, laminating and binding machines – equipment and technology that empower teachers to enrich their lessons. Not only is this modern technology in our educational establishments, it is also in our homes. We are hugely liberated with regard to the range of resources we can create and call upon as parents, teachers, publishers and manufacturers. Amazing!

The downside to this increased technology in the education profession, however, amounts to a generation of teachers needing to be dramatically up-skilled when computers became accessible to schools, leading to teachers (or some of them) feeling enforced to use technology in their classrooms for teaching and learning across the curriculum. There was, and continues to be, a huge financial cost to equip schools and to keep up to date with the scope of the technology and the equipment itself.

Nevertheless, certainly in England, teachers are expected to provide all-singing, all-dancing, entertaining lessons and to make the most of modern technology to deliver their lessons. But, resorting to an over-used cliché, has the baby been thrown out with the bathwater? We shall see.

Education is prone to fads and changes not only in practical matters but also in philosophy – and nowhere is this more evident than in resource-rich countries including England. Anyone who follows debate in the national domain should be well aware of current hot topics such as ‘progressive versus traditional education’, promoting or decrying notions of ‘learning styles’, ‘assessment versus testing’, ‘learning to mastery’ and so many more.

### Systematic Synthetic Phonics

The government promotion (by successive governments, it has to be said) of *Systematic Synthetic Phonics* continues to be one of the most hotly contested topics nationally. So unpopular and generally misunderstood has phonics been for decades prior to its statutory status, many people in advisory positions had to fight a corner to point out that phonics provision for infant beginners can be *engaging, child-friendly, multi-sensory and age-appropriate*.

In 2016, we need to fully understand how these descriptions are manifested in Early Years and infant classrooms. I suggest we are still on a professional development journey and we are not yet delivering on *all* children ‘reaching their full potential’.

Whilst Sir Jim Rose promoted phonics as *multi-sensory* and *engaging* in his 2006 national review, he also warned against ‘*extraneous*’ activities. Sadly, typical phonics lessons in England are often extraneous as can be seen by taking a close look at the actual learning involved with the plethora of phonics ‘*fun games and activities*’. These activities invariably take up too much time compared to gains and may facilitate only shallow, or limited, phonics practice and language content.

Other popular phonics practice consists of ‘*mini whiteboard*’ use. A typical dominant activity is a *sound-to-print* spelling routine with children usually still sitting on the carpet. All their work is wiped off at the end of very short content-poor sessions. Word and text input for reading may be non-existent or negligible at best.

Phonics lesson introductions may include some interactive whiteboard work, some grapheme flash card practice, the teacher or supporting adult introducing the next or focus letter/s-sound correspondence – often then asking the children themselves to come up with some word examples which inevitably take a lot of sifting and sorting if the words have the ‘*wrong*’ grapheme for the day. The teachers of the youngest children may call upon a bag of items beginning with the focus sound and letter. Another common activity amounts to variations

of the ‘*Treasure Chest*’ game which involves decoding real and pseudo-words and deciding which is which.

### Are materials fit for purpose?

None of this so-called *interactivity* is really that exciting, although children everywhere appear generally engaged and one might innocently consider the resources to be child-friendly and age-appropriate.

But are they really *sufficiently* fit-for-purpose?

Do too many teachers *pre-judge* what young children will and won’t enjoy without really knowing the reality?

Do teachers *really* provide guaranteed and embedded teaching and learning of the many letter/s-sound correspondences of the very complex English alphabetic code? Does each and every child really get sufficient *content-rich* practice of the three core phonics skills (blending/decoding for reading, oral segmenting and allotting graphemes for spelling and handwriting) and their *sub-skills* to guarantee keeping up? Do phonics lessons routinely provide *ample* cumulative new words to blend and words to spell with accompanying vocabulary enrichment? Does ‘*apply and extend*’ involve *each and every child* reading new cumulative plain texts which belong to them, and which can be repeated to increase reading fluency and confidence, to develop language comprehension and for writing, spelling and building up knowledge of spelling word banks?

If this was typical phonics provision, then virtually *all* the Year 1 children in England would reach or exceed the benchmark in the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (which is the case in only 753 schools) and they would all be able to form the alphabet letters correctly on writing lines and write a page or two – and spell well in the process.

You see, much of phonics provision nowadays in England is about games and activities – not about maximising individual learning. Games and activities are packed up and put away at the end of short sessions. The Interactive Whiteboard is switched off. The grubby and messy, horrible mini-whiteboards are wiped and do little or nothing for handwriting or monitoring handwriting.



“Sir Jim Rose warned against ‘extraneous’ activities.”

“Is the technology now at our disposal really helping?”



Where are the rich word and text *resources* that *belong permanently* to each learner, that can be shared for teaching and learning points, that can be recognised and rewarded, that can be annotated for tracking and monitoring? Where are the examples of learning that can be shared with any supporting adults for more practice if required, that can be looked at over and again to embed learning, that can go backwards and forwards to inform parents and carers as a minimum and to ‘*work in partnership*’ as an aspiration? Where is the *tangible* body of work, *per child*, that accounts for all the time and effort put into the teaching and learning – and which is foundational to lifelong learning?

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The very best resource for phonics and foundational literacy is *content-rich, practice-rich paper* – a well-designed worksheet or workbook – yes – the type of resource that many teachers, headteachers and advisers routinely decry and reject out of hand.

And the very best place for children to practise with their own paper-based resources is sitting at desks, preferably facing towards the teacher and main boards and displays, and learning how to hold a pencil with the tripod grip and learning how to write letters on writing lines. Our youngest children may not have fully developed their left-rightness and their spatial awareness. Sitting in circles or around grouped tables resulting in skewed angles to watch the teacher or look at writing examples is not sensible, not efficient and not fair.

Teachers should also be able to evaluate the value and the content of paper-based worksheets or workbooks – not just disregard them without due consideration. This also leads to the notion of children’s enjoyment and engagement. My experience is that far too many teachers have pre-conceived ideas of what ‘*engages*’ children, and what doesn’t. They undervalue children’s intrinsic satisfaction with their own work, on paper, and an understanding of their own practice, their own knowledge and their own progress. This can be so well facilitated via paper-based resources, provided per child, where the pack-away-the-game resources and the wipe-off-your-work on the mini whiteboard have little or no intrinsic value or sense of progress for the children as individuals whatsoever.

#### What about spelling?

Whilst the heat has been on the phonics for *decoding results*, what about spelling? The current formula for phonics provision tends to be the systematic introduction of all the sounds (44+) and mainly one spelling for each sound (a simple or transparent version of the alphabetic code), and an acceptance of plausible spellings or invented spellings at first. Is there **too much** acceptance of plausible spelling without an introduction at the outset of systematic phonics teaching to the rationale that English words are spelt with *many* spelling alternatives – meaning that the teacher needs to *teach and support* the children with their spelling *for many years*.

Too often I hear teachers complain that children aren’t transferring their knowledge of spelling from their within-school spelling tests to their wider writing, but this suggests that teachers really don’t understand how very, very complex the English alphabetic code really is for the learner, and how hard we, as teachers, need to keep teaching spelling and supporting with spelling as a continuum.

There are thousands of words in our language, and I see that classrooms are usually very word-rich when you look around at classroom displays.

But classrooms may be very phonics-poor in terms of the displays and their organisation.

I suggest that every classroom should be equipped with a large-scale Alphabetic Code Chart showing all the sounds and a comprehensive range of spelling alternatives for the sounds – including a word example for each spelling alternative. Such a chart should be as fundamentally important as a periodic table is for science and a times table chart is for maths.

There should also be in every infant class, a clear Alphabet Poster showing letter formation and letters sitting on writing lines, and an Alphabet Poster showing lower case joined writing examples from Year 2 onwards.

I agree that there have been times, more in some schools than others, when children have faced perhaps a worryingly monotonous reliance on worksheets or workbooks at the expense of a variety of activities throughout the day, week and term. Such a set of circumstances is not warranted considering the range of subjects that children should be taught in our infant and primary schools enabling a wide range of types of activities.

“I am urging teachers to reflect on their current provision for phonics for reading and spelling.”

But activities and materials should be *fit-for-purpose*. So what do teachers suppose are the most fit-for-purpose materials and resources for learning and practising reading, spelling and handwriting? Not a plethora of ‘*fun games and activities*’ or repetitive ‘*mini whiteboard work*’ – that’s for sure! Such activities may be ideal for continuous provision and choosing activities but they are rarely fit-for-purpose for core phonics content and provision.

#### Current provision

I am urging teachers to reflect on their current provision for phonics for reading and spelling, and for applying phonics to wider reading and writing in the curriculum. Spelling in particular is supported by the continuance of *oral segmenting* all-through-the-spoken-word and ready-reference to the main Alphabetic Code Chart, and constant reference to a board of plain common words with tricky parts, and to *spelling word banks* where words spelt with the same letter/s-sound correspondences can be associated together.

This *building-up of spelling word banks* is possibly where there might be insufficient attention in spelling practices throughout Key Stage 2. Time and attention needs to be paid to raise awareness of words spelt the same way, by activities such as spelling stories, listing words, acting out, drawing, partner work to recall how many words are in a particular word banks. Too often I visit schools where Key Stage 2 children are playing games of rolling dice to get to a word to spell it. This is an unnecessary step to attend to learning spellings – a detraction – and a reflection of the mindset that children will not enjoy spelling and vocabulary work for its own sake – and therefore it needs to be sweetened as if taking medicine.

‘*Letters and Sounds*’ and the listing of nearly all the letter/s-sound correspondences of a comprehensive alphabetic code in the Year 1 and Year 2 spelling appendix of the National Curriculum for English have in some ways done teachers and children a disservice. The job of teaching and applying the English alphabetic code for spelling is *not* done by the end of the infants – it is just the beginning of a long-term need to be attentive, and to get to grips with, English spelling as an ongoing part of reading and writing. Even as literate adults,



many of us still have to turn to the spellchecker, or a colleague, or the dictionary, to spell at least some words – even common ones.

There is no transition from phonics to spelling – whether people realise it or not, phonics is needed for lifelong literacy.

#### The Best of Both Worlds

To end on a positive note, I would like to suggest the best of both worlds. A huge amount of money, time, planning and effort has already been invested in existing phonics games, activities and materials. These can be redeployed to provide phonics *continuous provision*, choosing games, wet play games, after school club activities – and so on. Instead of *extraneous* activities, they can become the *extra* activities – whilst teachers adopt the use of *core* paper-based phonics provision with ample code, word, text, book content to support both teaching and learning in such essential foundational literacy and language skills.

Schools that have followed this route achieve rapid improvements in literacy – and the teachers always express their surprise at how much the children actually LOVE their *paper-based* phonics and literacy routines – for which *they* are the illustrators.

Now, fancy that.

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For free Alphabetic Code Charts, see: [www.alphabeticcodecharts.com](http://www.alphabeticcodecharts.com)

For free Alphabet and Handwriting resources, see: [www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com](http://www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com)