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 forced 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 whiteboards in use’. A typical dominant activity is a sound-to-print spelling routine with children usually still sitting 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.

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The very best resource for phonics and foundational literacy is content-rich, practice-rich, 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 whatever.

What about spelling?

Whilst the heart 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 sounds (14+1) and formation of 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 spelled 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 approach to spelling.

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.

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.

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.

Debbie Hepplewhite

MBE

Debbie has been in primary teaching for many years including special needs teaching and leadership. She now specialises in phonics teacher-training and consultancy. In 2007, Debbie wrote a systematic synthetic phonics programme available online, Phonics International, for all ages. She was subsequently invited to be the phonics consultant and trainer for the Oxford Reading Tree Flypads Phonics Sounds and Letters programme. In 2012, Debbie was awarded an MBE in the Queen’s New Year Honours List for services to education.

For free Alphabetic Code Charts, see: www.alphabeticcodecharts.com

For free Alphabet and Handwriting resources, see: www.debhepplewhitehandwriting.com