

Phonics for fun, for life-chances and for life!

Phonics teaching and learning is great fun – and the phonics adventure often begins at home thanks to child-friendly games and activities available in toy shops and book stores. Parents, grandparents and carers help youngsters to make links between letters and speech sounds when sharing stories, noticing print in the environment during walks, and when writing shopping lists and birthday cards!

There are really fabulous games, visual aids, interactive resources and appealing decodable reading books to teach phonics systematically in schools in England nowadays. Children are provided with reading and writing activities which match the phonics they have been taught so far. More recently in England, the government has provided additional match-funding for schools with infants to buy phonics programmes, reading books, resources and, most importantly, purpose-designed training in the synthetic phonics teaching principles.

The teaching of reading can take many forms and for many years this has been a hotly debated and misunderstood subject!

*Phonics' is generally thought of as a method for teaching infants to read rather than understood as a very important **body of knowledge** (the letter/s-sound correspondences of the *alphabetic code*) and the **skills** (decoding for reading, encoding for spelling) **required and applied by literate adults**.*

Did you know that most adults apply alphabetic code knowledge and phonics skills to **read new words** and to **spell longer and more challenging words** perhaps without even realising it? So 'phonics' is important for adults' literacy and not just a method for teaching infants to get started with reading!

Even if we were not taught the alphabetic code explicitly as children, the chances are that **many of us managed to figure out the code on our own**. We know, however, that not all children manage to work out the alphabetic code for themselves well enough or at all – and this is the case in all English-speaking countries not just in England. Wherever the English language is taught, there is a notoriously high percentage of weak literacy and illiteracy especially notable where phonics teaching has gone out of fashion in the teaching profession and in the design of children's reading book schemes. **How we teach reading and spelling can, and does, damage life-chances as literacy underpins education and lack of literacy can lead to a serious lack of self-worth.**

In recent years, the conclusions from governmental inquiries about reading instruction in the USA, Australia and the UK have led to much greater promotion of **systematic synthetic phonics** teaching. The verb *to synthesise* refers to the *blending* of the sounds when the reader 'sounds out and blends' to discern the word – in effect, translating the printed word into the spoken word. The *synthetic phonics teaching principles*, however, also include teaching that the alphabetic code is *reversible* for spelling purposes – that is, how to identify the sounds (phonemes) all through the spoken word, allotting graphemes (letters and letter groups) for the identified sounds.

Systematic synthetic phonics teaching is really important **for teaching reading and spelling** and serves virtually all children exceptionally well both for the short-term and for *long-term* reading and spelling capacity. If pupils require additional phonics teaching beyond infant age, however, do you think that THEY think they are getting lessons in 'phonics *adult stuff*' or 'phonics *baby stuff*'? Teachers are initially surprised by this question but after some thought they admit that the pupils themselves probably consider that they are receiving phonics *baby stuff*. **This perception that phonics is baby-ish really needs to change** as we get better and better at understanding the role and importance of phonics for reading and spelling – **for the skills of children and adults alike**.

Further, as more teachers find themselves **teaching children or adults with English as a new or second language**, it can only be an advantage for everyone to gain greater phonics expertise – appreciating the range and variety of the individual sounds of different languages and that some languages have more, or far fewer, sounds compared to

around 44 of the smallest sounds (phonemes) identifiable in the English language. Phonics involves the ability to detect (hear) and enunciate (say) the sounds of speech – then link those sounds to the written code (the letters and letter groups). The Spanish language, for example, includes 5 vowel sounds compared to the 20 or so vowel sounds in the English language. In total, the Spanish language has around 24 sounds. A Spanish child, then, will need to develop an ear for hearing the *additional* English sounds and to practise saying them – as well as linking all the sounds to the complex English written code which has many different spelling alternatives for many of the sounds. The sound /ee/, for example, can be spelt in many ways such as eel, eat, me, theme, chief, key, sunny. **Teaching and learning the English alphabetic code is a huge task and yet children as young as three, four or five can soon recognise letter shapes, say their sounds and blend them to read unknown words – and they can split up (segment) spoken words to spell them. It is quite amazing!**

The Alphabetic Code Chart in every classroom and home

All teachers should be knowledgeable about the English *alphabetic code* (the letter/s-sound correspondences) to enable them to support pupils of all ages, in all circumstances, *as required*. Equally, ***all parents should have access to good information about phonics to understand about the teaching in school – and to work in partnership with teachers and the children wherever possible.***

A great starting point to understand about phonics is having an alphabetic code *chart* as a core visual aid. This shows the sounds down the left-hand column and the spelling alternatives which are code for the sounds across the rows. ***Alphabetic Code Charts should be as well known and utilised as ‘The Alphabet’*** which shows the *bank of letter shapes* in *alphabetical order*. An Alphabetic Code Chart can be a *general* chart or designed for the *organisation* and *code content* of a specific systematic synthetic phonics programme. It would be helpful if it becomes common practice for all schools to provide parents with a mini version of an Alphabetic Code Chart. See www.alphabeticcodecharts.com for a range of free alphabetic code charts to view or download.

The Year One Phonics Screening Check

In England, a national *Year One phonics screening check* has been introduced for children to undertake at the end of Year One (for six year olds). The purpose of the check is to confirm that children have learned phonic *decoding* to an age-appropriate standard. The check includes 40 words for children to read consisting of letters and letter groups that are most likely to have been introduced prior to the check. The list of words includes 20 *real* words and 20 *non-words*. The non-words are accompanied by pictures of little monsters to distinguish them from the real words. ***Using non-words is a well-established way of assessing if children can apply code knowledge accurately to blend new and unknown words.*** The results should inform the bigger picture of teaching effectiveness for decoding and particularly help to inform infant teachers in Reception, Year One and Year Two. See the information on the DfE website:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/a00198207/faqs-year-1-phonics-screening-check>

Use of the data

Individual children’s results should be made available to individual parents to inform them about their child’s progress in word reading skills. School-level results are made available to *Ofsted* for use in inspections but will not be published in performance tables. National and local authority results are reported to allow schools to benchmark the performance of their own pupils. ***National results will enable standards to be tracked over time which is very important for understanding the effects of the teaching.***

*The teaching profession has been showered with so many different methods and philosophies for teaching children to read over the decades so it is essential that we take this matter seriously. **It is large-scale testing which alerted us to the decline in reading standards over time relative to various prevailing teaching methods.***

The Year One phonics screening check was rolled out in June 2012 for the first time across England resulting in a wide variety of responses to the advent of this check.

Critics of the Year One Phonics Screening Check have expressed a number of concerns such as:

- Teachers might be inclined to over-emphasise their phonics teaching at the expense of spending time on comprehension activities such as ‘talk’ and promoting the ‘love of books’.
- Some people think that as children are unique individuals with ‘different learning styles’, they therefore do not all need phonics teaching as they can learn to read through different routes.
- Some people think that it is too early to begin systematic phonics teaching from the ages of four to five and that the check encourages teachers *to begin explicit phonics teaching too soon.*

Following a House of Commons inquiry, Sir Jim Rose and a team of inspectors conducted an independent national review of teaching children to read and their recommendations were accepted by government (*Final Report*, March 2006). Rose pointed out that whatever the *learning styles* of the children, it is the *same* alphabetic code knowledge and skills that they need to learn and that, **“It cannot be left to chance, or for children to ferret out, on their own, how the alphabetic code works”.**

The *Simple View of Reading* model (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) was recommended by Rose as a *useful conceptual framework* to illustrate the two main processes involved in reading: 1) **word decoding** and, 2) **language comprehension** (understanding at the level of *spoken* language). *Teachers are well aware that reading involves far more than decoding the words on the page and should not allow the screening check to alter their provision for **developing language comprehension and promoting a love of books.***

Masses of chatter in the home and **access to plenty of books** really helps with developing reading skills – also **contributing to knowledge and understanding of the world** so essential for life-long educational chances. See this link for the diagram of the Simple View of Reading:

http://www.phonicsinternational.com/The_Simple_View_of_Reading_model.pdf

Do we really need a national phonics screening check?

Some teachers argue that they don’t need a national assessment to know their pupils’ reading levels but there *were* some surprises when children considered to be good readers made unexpected errors with the non-words. It is important that children can read words accurately whether in *books* or in *word lists*, however, as they are constantly **faced with new words to read which are not necessarily in their spoken vocabularies.** Reading *unknown* real words is the *equivalent* of reading non-words and children need to be able to read words they know and new words that they don’t know **to enrich their spoken language and to access new literature increasingly independently.**

The big issues:

1. **Weak literacy in English-speaking countries:** It is right for governments to take the findings of research and leading-edge teaching very seriously and to pass on the findings of national inquiries to the teaching profession.
2. **Accountability:** If a government actively promotes a specific teaching approach based on the overarching research findings, it is only right that the government then tries to *discover* and *understand* the consequences of the method and material promoted – as the government is *accountable* for what it promotes.
3. **Continuing Professional Development:** Teachers should benefit professionally from noting and understanding results obtained as a national snapshot with objective conditions (*same test, same time, same delivery*) to guard against under-achievement in some settings and to examine results *over time*. Comparisons from year to year and between similar schools should help to inform teachers of just what is possible with the most effective teaching and learning practices.

Concerns about the Year One phonics screening check were raised at a *Westminster Education Forum* seminar (Nov 2012) and attendees were invited to submit short responses for publication with the transcript of the event. See this link for Debbie Hepplewhite's written response to the specific questions raised about the check:

http://www.phonicsinternational.com/Westminster_Education_Forum_Debbie%20Hepplewhite%20.pdf

Exciting times!

These are very exciting times as we know more now about teaching reading and spelling than ever before. We are using the internet for sharing phonics information and to provide interactive and printable resources electronically - and internationally - to support teachers, learners and their parents. Publishers and manufacturers design ever-better books and resources to support our systematic and incidental phonics teaching in school and at home.

What could be more F-a-n-t-a-s-t-i-c!

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For free Alphabetic Code Charts and many other phonics resources: www.phonicsinternational.com

For free Alphabet and handwriting resources: www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com

A site for the promotion of Alphabetic Code Charts (many free charts): www.alphabeticcodecharts.com

A site for pre-schoolers (of interest to parents and practitioners): www.phonicsinternationalpreschool.com

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