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Synthetic phonics is not enough:
teaching young children to read and
write in English

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Synthetic phonics is not enough: teaching young children to read and write in English

- England's *Phonics Screening Check*
- Evidence from studies of effective literacy teaching
- What successful readers actually do
- Does the type of early teaching make a qualitative difference?
- Evidence about the teaching of writing

England's *Phonics Screening Check* – what is it?

- The *Phonics Screening Check* is a short, light-touch assessment to confirm whether individual children have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard.
- It will identify the children who need extra help so they are given support by their school to improve their reading skills. They will then be able to retake the check so that schools can track children until they are able to decode.

Department for Education 2013

(accessed at www.education.gov.uk on 20.7.13)

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- The purpose of the phonics screening check will be to confirm that all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard.

Department for Education, March 2013

- Academic research has found that the best way of teaching early reading is to teach systematic [synthetic] phonics. This is the most appropriate way of preparing children for the screening check.

Department for Education, March 2013

- **Screening check: Answer sheet**
- **Screening check responses:** Please tick the appropriate box for each word. The use of the comment box is optional.

Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
tox			
bim			
vap			
ulf			

Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
shin			
gang			
week			
chill			

- The test gets harder:

Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
snemp			
blurst			
spron			
stroft			

Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
rusty			
finger			
dentist			
starling			

- In 2012 58% of England's Year 1 children reached the passmark of 32 correct responses out of 40 items.

UKLA's 2012 survey of teachers' views about the *Phonics Screening Check*

Commissioned by UKLA, carried out and analysed by research staff at Sheffield Hallam University (UKLA, 2012)

- 494 responses received.
- Schools were asked about:
 - the time commitment involved
 - pupil preparation undertaken
 - whether the Check helped them to identify issues not already identified
 - whether the results were an accurate reflection of children's reading performance – in particular for more successful readers.

- Responses indicated that a significant majority of teachers and headteachers considered that:
- the nonsense words were very confusing for children;
- undergoing the *Phonics Screening Check*:
 - undermines pupils' confidence as readers;
 - impedes successful readers and has failed a cohort of the most fluent readers;
 - misidentifies pupils who are beyond this stage of development as readers and favours less developed/emergent readers;
 - has negative implications for relationships with parents;
 - has negative implications for school organisation;
- the *Phonics Screening Check* is not fit for purpose.

- But were UKLA's 494 respondents typical of England's primary schools?

Findings of the survey commissioned by the Department for Education

- In 2012 the Department for Education commissioned England's National Foundation for Educational Research to research the impact of the *Phonics Screening Check* on:
 - the teaching of reading in England's primary schools,
 - the wider literacy curriculum,
 - the standard of reading.
- Its first report was published in May 2013, reports on findings from 14 case study schools, baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers in schools.
- It has difficulty in showing support for the government's view that the PSC is having a beneficial effect on the teaching of reading.

- When asked directly, only two case-study schools (out of the 14 involved) said they could see some benefit to the check.
- The majority of schools felt that there were no benefits to the check at all” (Walker et al., 2013, p. 32)
- Most teachers felt the PSC was not suitable for children with speech or language needs, or children with other learning difficulties.
- Problems with the pseudo words were mentioned for these children and for those who speak another language at home.
- 40% regarded the PSC as unsuitable for independent and fluent readers with 22% seeing it as very unsuitable.

- As to the pseudo words, many reported good readers experiencing difficulties:
 - “They tried to make the pseudo words fit something they knew, for example by changing ‘proom’ to ‘groom’.”
(Walker et al. p.39)
- In one case-study school there was evidence to suggest that the most able readers were only just reaching the threshold, while the slightly less able, but still above average, pupils were more frequently surpassing the threshold with much higher scores:

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- Many interviewees reported no substantial changes to teaching but those who did mention changes indicated:
 - a greater focus on pseudo words
 - more phonetic spelling tests rather than high frequency words
 - parental workshops on phonics
 - revision sessions in preparation for the check
 - an increase in the number of phonics sessions.

- Among the key messages at the end of the report are the following:
 - Most teachers are positive about the importance of phonics teaching.
 - Many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods.
 - It is less certain that this is an endorsement of the recommended approach of systematic synthetic phonics taught first and fast.

Is learning to read and write just about phonics?

Learning to read means learning to make sense of text

- Reading is not just pronouncing written words.
- Children who become avid and accomplished readers focus on making sense from the start.
- They develop a habit of mind that expects the words they decode to make sense.
- This allows them to monitor their own performance from an early and to make corrections when they misread.

Assessment of children's reading needs to involve making sense of text.



Learning to write means learning to make sense through text.

- Writing is about more than spelling and handwriting.
- It is about constructing and encoding meaning.
- It is a more complex and demanding process than reading and consequently harder to learn.

Evidence from studies of effective teaching of reading

Studies of schools and classrooms where children are taught to read most effectively, where they actually like reading and do plenty of it, show consistently that high achieving classes are characterized by:

- a *balanced approach* with attention to word recognition matched by attention to comprehension.
- *attention to individual children as literacy learners;*
- high levels of *engagement* in reading.

The importance a balanced approach to reading and writing

- Taylor and Pearson have shown in extensive surveys that balanced literacy teaching is more successful than phonics alone.

In balanced classes, “the consistent message [is] that understanding and effective communication – not just word recognition – are what literacy is about (Taylor and Pearson 2002, p. 365).



A balanced approach means that:

- In addition to learning how to identify words, children taught literacy effectively are encouraged and supported to:
 - focus on making sense of written text;
 - see its uses in ordering, enlarging, enjoying and making sense of their lives.
- Their classrooms are filled with interesting written texts – on screen as well as on paper.
- Children are given rich experiences of putting these texts to use.

The need to attend to children as individual children as literacy learners

Effective teachers:

- recruit children's skills, experiences and interests through high quality interaction and close monitoring of individuals;
- construct and interpret programmes of work to allow quicker learners to move ahead and slower learners to address their problems;
- maximize children's learning potential through responding to their interests and experiences;
- recognize and value the language and literacy that children bring to school, even where these differ markedly from the teachers' own experiences.

Sources: Medwell et al., 1998; Pressley et al., 2001

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- A ‘one size fits all’ approach does not address the wider challenges of increasing diversity in children’s lives beyond school.

Sources: Luke, 1993; Comber and Kamler, 2004

the centrality of engagement in reading

- Engagement is increasingly seen by researchers as central to progress in reading.
- After parental background, engagement has the biggest effect on progress in reading.
- Children who are engaged learn more from their classroom lessons.
- They also read more, inside and outside school.
- As they read more, they become better readers – better at recognizing the words and better at making sense of them.
- Sources: Anderson et al., 1988; Guthrie et al., 1996; Cunningham and Stanovoch, 1998

What successful readers actually do

How children use phonics

Young readers of English don't process every new word one letter at a time. They move between different sizes of unit.

- Sometimes they work words out letter by letter,
 - sometimes they look at familiar groups of letters, such as 'all',
 - sometimes they look at whole word patterns, such as 'little' or 'bottle'.
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- Brown and Deavers, 1999; Goswami, 2010

Other sources of information readers use

- ‘Kidwatching’, in particular the procedures of ‘miscue analysis’, pioneered and developed, by Ken and Yetta Goodman, have given us a window on the reading process.
- Careful documentation and analysis of what children and adults actually do when they read has shown us that neither young readers nor proficient readers proceed in a straightforwardly linear or inductive way from letter perception, through word and phrase perception, to meaning.
- The knowledge of other texts, language and the world shape how readers proceed and the meaning they construct from text.

(Goodman and Goodman, 1994)

Does the type of early teaching make a qualitative difference?

- Different approaches to early reading appear leave an enduring 'cognitive footprint'.
- When confronted with unusual or invented 'words' fitting more complex English spelling patterns, adults taught to read through synthetic phonics tend to use a limited grapheme-phoneme rule set.
- Adults taught with a mainly textual approach are more likely to connect stimulus words such as 'thild' to words they already know,, such as 'mild' or 'child'.
- Source: Thompson et al., 2009

Evidence about the teaching of writing is similar

Studies of the most effective schools have shown us that the most effective teachers of writing:

- **balance** the technical and compositional aspects of learning to write (Wilkinson and Townsend, 2000; Pressley et al., 2001; Block et al., 2002)
- **integrate** these complementary aspects of learning to write (Knapp et al., 1995; Medwell et al., 1998; Wilkinson and Townsend, 2000; Loudén et al., 2005)
- **emphasise** attention, engagement, metalinguistics and challenge (Louden et al., 2005)
- **prioritise** a richly conceived literacy (Knapp et al., 1995; Medwell et al., 1998; Parr and Limbrick, 2010).

The most effective teachers of writing also...

- **devote** more time to small group teaching (Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000; Parr and Limbrick, 2010)
- **know** what their pupils can do and what they need (Medwell et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000)
- **create** classroom atmospheres that are more discursive, conversational and dialogic (Knapp et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000; Alexander, 2001)
- **build** explicitly on children's personal and cultural backgrounds (Block and Pressley, 2000; Parr and Limbrick, 2010)



And they...

- **share** the purposes for writing and the criteria of success with learners (Knapp et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2000; Louden et al., 2005)
- **believe** that meaning, purpose and function are of prime importance and that all children can learn to write effectively (Wharton-McDonald, 1998; Block and Pressley, 2000; Taylor et al., 2000; Block et al., 2002; Au et al., 2005; Parr and Limbrick, 2010).

Such approaches, dispositions and beliefs appear to be more important than curricular content.

Key classroom practices that promote development in writing

- A number of specific classroom activities appear to be highly productive for literacy teaching in general and writing in particular.
- Children tend to make a good start in learning to write where their teachers:
 - model and share the process of writing (Geekie et al., 1999; Fisher, 2002; Laycock, 2011)
 - invite the exchange of written messages, including texting and message boards for Year 2 (Nixon and Topping, 2001; Waller, 2010; Marsh, 2012)
 - encourage invented spelling (Read, 1971; Gentry, 1982; Temple et al., 1993)

Conclusion

- We need to think about much more than phonics if we are to help our children become effective and committed readers and writers.
- The demands of a phonics check should not distract us from this purpose.

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