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**WHAT
COMES BEFORE
PHONICS?**



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Introduction

Becoming literate

Being literate has a powerful impact on children's learning in school and beyond. There is, therefore, a strong emphasis on literacy in children's early schooling. Becoming proficient in phonics has been shown to be an important part of becoming literate, and teaching phonics is now strongly embedded in early literacy teaching in schools and early years settings. Phonics teaching is a well-documented process, and there is a significant body of literature, and many professional development opportunities, to enable teachers and practitioners to become proficient teachers of phonics.

However, despite this focus on phonics in the early years there are, it seems, far fewer opportunities to become knowledgeable about what comes before the formal teaching of phonics. What should we be focusing on in a child's earliest years? What do children need to know and experience to enable them to access phonics teaching with success?

Additionally, in recent years, there has been a persistent pull towards teaching phonics at an increasingly earlier age, using a teacher-led formal approach. We know that this is not appropriate for many young children. However, without an understanding of the ways in which certain knowledge and understanding lead into phonics, it is difficult for early years teachers and practitioners to justify and implement a different approach.

However, before we consider what comes before phonics, it is important to understand why literacy is so important and the role of phonics in becoming literate.

Why is it important to become literate?

Becoming and being literate is usually associated with schooling. It is something that usually happens at school and forms the basis of education. However, being literate is significantly more important than just as a tool for school-based learning: being literate is fundamental to our engagement and enjoyment in life. It is a skill that broadens and deepens our experiences across our lives and, as such, is a vital skill to acquire and develop.

Being literate opens up a world of richness, enjoyment and knowledge. It enables us to go beyond our own experiences and enter the experiences of others. Being literate means that we have access to the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, knowledge and expertise of other people, across time and space. In addition, it enables us to form and maintain relationships, communicate our own thoughts and ideas, express the richness of our imagination and convey our knowledge and understanding, all of which contribute significantly to the quality, enjoyment and engagement in our lives.

Being literate also enables us to participate fully in society. Flewitt (2013) argues that it is a platform for individuals to develop their knowledge and fully participate in society through oral, written, printed and digital media. UNESCO similarly recognises that literacy (defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed materials associated with varying contexts) acts as an instrument of participation and empowerment, essential to social and human development (UNESCO, in Flewitt, 2013).

Literacy also lies at the heart of education (Flewitt, 2013) and therefore has a significant impact on subsequent opportunities in life (National Literacy Trust (NLT), 2012). The NLT reports that one in six people in the United Kingdom lives with poor literacy skills.

Without good reading, writing and communication skills a child won't be able to succeed at school and as a young adult they will be locked out of the job market. They will be unable to reach their full potential or make a valuable contribution to the economic and cultural life of our nation. Their poor literacy skills will also affect them as parents as they will struggle to support their child's learning and generations of families will be locked in poverty and social exclusion.

(National Literacy Trust, 2012, p3)

Becoming literate is therefore vital, and schools have the responsibility to ensure that children become literate. However, this is not a straightforward issue. Despite agreement about the importance of literacy, how schools achieve this is the subject of considerable debate and tension – in particular, how and when phonics should be part of the process of learning to read and spell. These issues are discussed in depth in Chapter 1 but, as a context for understanding what comes before phonics, it is important to understand what phonics is and what we know about the place of phonics in becoming literate.

What is phonics?

Phonics is a way of teaching reading that emphasises the acquisition of letter–sound correspondence as the basis of teaching children to read and spell. The primary focus of phonics is to ensure that, as children move into becoming conventionally literate, they understand how letters (graphemes) are linked to sounds (phonemes), and how to blend phonemes together into words and segment words in phonemes. This enables children to decode text and supports spelling.

In England, the mandated approach is one termed 'systematic synthetic phonics'. It is *systematic* in that the sounds and skills are taught explicitly and directly in a deliberate, planned sequence, and *synthetic* in the requirement that children synthesise (blend) sounds together.

Systematic synthetic phonics

Spoken words and written words

Language is made up of words. Words are made up of sounds (phonemes). When we write, we use written symbols (graphemes) to represent the sounds. These graphemes may be single letters or combinations of letters such as *sh*, *oy* and *igh*. Once we know how these grapheme–phoneme correspondences (GPCs) work, we can encode spoken words in writing for others to read, and we can decode words that others have written.

Synthetic phonics

The *synthetic* part of the term ‘synthetic phonics’ comes from the part played by synthesising (blending) in reading as outlined below. Children are taught GPCs and how to use this knowledge to work out words from the beginning, starting at the simplest level.

- For reading, children are taught to look at the letters from left to right, convert them into sounds and blend (synthesise) the sounds to work out the spoken forms of the words. For example, if children see the word ‘hat’, they need to know what sound to say for each grapheme (/h/ - /a/ - /t/) and then to be able to blend those sounds together into a recognisable word. Once words have been read this way often enough (and this can vary from child to child), they become known, and the words can then be read without sounding out and blending.
- For spelling, children are taught to segment spoken words into sounds and write down graphemes for those sounds. For example, if children want to write ‘hat’, then they need to be able to split it into the sounds /h/ - /a/ - /t/ and write the appropriate letters (TDA, 2011).

The place of phonics in becoming literate

The overall consensus is that the systematic teaching of phonics has an essential part to play in children becoming literate. Major studies conclude that phonics is an important aspect of learning to read, but it is insufficient on its own as a way to teach children to read effectively with understanding and enjoyment.

A number of large-scale studies, including national reports and meta-analyses of existing evidence, have drawn this conclusion. Adams (1990) explored the most efficient and effective ways to teach reading and asked the question ‘Why phonics?’ in learning to read, and concluded that *students must appreciate the alphabetic principle to become proficient readers: they must acquire a sense of the correspondences between letters and sounds upon which it is based* (Adams, 1990, p29). However, she cautions that *necessary* is not the same as *sufficient*, and that to become skilful readers, children need more than just an understanding of the alphabetic principle. Similarly, the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2006) in their report *Teaching Children*

to *Read* found from their meta-analysis of research evidence that phonics instruction had significant benefits for children learning to read but warned that while phonics skills are necessary in order to learn to read, they are not sufficient in their own right: that phonics skills must be integrated with the development of phonemic awareness, fluency and text reading comprehension skills. More recently, Torgerson *et al.* (2006) also concluded that there is evidence to suggest that systematic phonics should be a routine part of literacy teaching, and that all teachers should have this in their repertoire of pedagogical skills. However, they also conclude that this should be with a *broad literacy curriculum* (Torgerson *et al.*, 2006, p10). Most recently, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) stated that

Phonics approaches have been consistently found to be effective in supporting younger readers to master the basics of reading. ... Research suggests that phonics is particularly beneficial for younger learners (4–7 year olds) as they begin to read.

(EEF, 2015)

And, in line with other large-scale studies on phonics teaching, they caution that

effective phonics techniques are usually embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

A systematic review of the research literature on the use of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling (Torgerson *et al.*, 2006).

The Universities of York and Sheffield were commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to conduct a systematic review of experimental research on the use of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling. The review entailed a systematic review of existing research. This means that explicit methods were used to identify, select and include studies that fitted pre-specified criteria. This included that the studies were randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Ben Goldacre (2013) described RCTs in education.

We simply take a group of children, or schools; we split them into two groups at random; we give one intervention to one group, and the other intervention to the other group; then we measure how each group is doing, to see if one intervention achieved its supposed outcome any better.

(Goldacre, 2013)

The aims of the review were to investigate and compare the effectiveness of different approaches to the initial teaching of reading and spelling. The review questions were as follows.

(Continued)

WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US? *continued*

- How effective are different approaches to phonics teaching in comparison to each other, including the specific area of *analytic* versus *synthetic* phonics?
- How do different approaches impact on the application of phonics in reading and writing, including beyond the early years?
- Is there a need to differentiate between phonics for reading and phonics for spelling?
- What proportion of literacy teaching should be based on the use of phonics?

The review drew a series of conclusions, which resulted in recommendations for teaching, teacher training and research.

Teaching

- Systematic phonics instruction should be part of every literacy teacher's repertoire and a routine part of literacy teaching.
- Teachers who do not use systematic phonics in their teaching should add it to their routine practices.
- Systematic phonics should be used both with normally developing children and those at risk of failure.

Teacher training

- The evidence implies that learning to use systematic phonics in a judicious balance with other elements should form a part of every literacy teacher's training. However:
 - There was no strong RCT evidence that one system of systematic phonics was more effective than another.
 - There was no strong RCT evidence on how much systematic phonics is needed.
 - Evidence was insufficient as to whether or not phonics teaching boosts comprehension, and whether or not phonics should be used to teach spelling.

Research

A large-scale UK-based cluster-randomised controlled trial would enable further investigation of the relative effectiveness of different types of phonics instruction for children with different learning characteristics.

Phonics and children who have English as an additional language (EAL)

Becoming literate, and having access to all the delights, enjoyment and engagement in education and society it brings is vital for all children, including those who have English as an additional language (EAL). In the United Kingdom, the number of children who

speak one or more languages in addition to English has increased significantly over the past few years. The 2013 school census showed that there are more than a million children between the ages of 5 and 16 years in UK schools who speak in excess of 360 languages between them in addition to English (NALDIC, 2015; Strand *et al.*, 2015).

Being bilingual or multilingual has significant advantages (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). Living in more than one language offers children first-hand experience and understanding about language, and about societies and cultures. Being bilingual extends language capacity, both language for communication and language for thinking. To be able to use different languages brings a wider capacity for understanding and expressing thoughts and ideas, the potential for a more nuanced vocabulary, and it enables different ways of interacting and communicating across societies and cultures. Being bilingual has been shown to enhance metalinguistic awareness: an awareness of, and knowledge about, language (Bialystok, 1978) (see Chapter 5), and phonological processing (Monaghan, 2014) (see Chapter 8).

Phonics has been shown to be *necessary but not sufficient* for children with EAL becoming literate in English. To read and understand a text requires children to both decode words and comprehend the meaning of the text. Phonics only enables decoding; it doesn't enable comprehension of a text, and it is this aspect of reading that it is suggested has an impact on the reading ability of children with EAL (Stuart, 2004). Stuart (2004) suggests that possibly the underdeveloped oral language abilities of children with EAL delays development of their ability to read and understand continuous text. Therefore, a focus on oral language development and comprehension, and reading comprehension as well as phonics, is likely to offer children the best chance of success.

We can, therefore, conclude that current evidence about the place of phonics in becoming literate, both for children with English as a first language and those who have English as an additional language, is that it is *necessary but not sufficient*. Children need other knowledge, skills and experiences if they are going to be able to read with understanding and enjoyment. The debates about the balance between phonics and the development of other knowledge, skills and experience in teaching children to read are significant and ongoing (for example, see the poet Michael Rosen's blog). In addition, there are also significant ongoing debates within phonics teaching about what the approach should be. Unresolved questions and issues include the following.

- What is an appropriate balance between a focus on decoding (phonics) and a focus on comprehension?
- Which phonics approach is most beneficial to the majority of children?
- Which group of children benefits from which approach?
- Whose learning is limited by particular approaches?
- At what age and/or stage should phonics teaching take place?
- What age- and stage-related expectations are appropriate for stated curriculum aims?

- How should we assess children’s phonics learning?
- What should the content of teacher training and early years practitioner training be to ensure that they are equipped to meet all children’s literacy needs?
- What is the role of policy and political rhetoric in teaching reading?
- Which research approach is best placed to inform our understanding of phonics teaching in schools?
- How do we translate research evidence into effective school-based practice?

DEVELOP YOUR UNDERSTANDING

The questions and issues listed above show areas of contention and debate, and there is considerable material documenting the different views and approaches. Develop your understanding of these debates by considering these different views.

A good starting point is the parliamentary education committee web forum. Views on the strength of evidence for the current government policy on phonics were requested, and a range of views, many supported by research evidence, were submitted.

www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/dfe-evidence-check-forum/phonics/

Other websites and blogs that express different views about the place of phonics in literacy teaching and learning that you could explore are:

- Too Much, Too Soon;
- Reading Reform Foundation;
- United Kingdom Literacy Association.

See also:

Goouch, K and Lambrith, A (2016) *Teaching Early Reading and Phonics: Creative Approaches to Early Literacy* (2nd Ed). London: SAGE.

Johnson, R and Watson, J (2014) *Teaching Synthetic Phonics in Primary School* (2nd edn). London: SAGE.

What comes before phonics?

Phonics is therefore one part of becoming conventionally literate – necessary, but not sufficient. It is, therefore, important that all children come to phonics learning with a good chance of succeeding *and* with a range of other knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to move into becoming literate with relative ease and with enjoyment.

This book looks in detail at the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that children need to come to phonics teaching – ready to learn and with a high chance of success. The focus of the book is young children who do not have learning difficulties, including the specific learning difficulty, dyslexia. These are more specialist areas, and although some of the content of the book may be relevant, the more individual needs of these children will require additional consideration. There is a significant body of literature and organisations and services that can support you in meeting these children’s needs as they move into becoming literate.

This book discusses the knowledge, skills and understandings necessary for what comes *before* phonics. It creates a framework for developing appropriate provision for children in the earliest stages of becoming literate. This is important. Becoming literate is a fluid and dynamic process, not a strict linear, hierarchical process. The ideas in this book are drawn from a range of fields and bring together what is known about early experiences that enable children to access phonics teaching successfully. It is not a curriculum for early literacy, nor a prescribed set of outcomes to be listed and ‘ticked off’. In writing the book, I began with the premise that it is important to understand *why* children need this range of knowledge and skills, not just *what* they need. Therefore, the book draws on, and outlines, evidence that informs our understanding of effective provision and practice for what comes before phonics. The aim is for students and people working in early years to recognise aspects of early years practice that anticipate phonics teaching, and to label them as such within their professional knowledge and in their planning for continuous and enhanced provision. My best hope is that this knowledge and understanding will enable early years staff to develop practice in early years that resists the current ‘push down’ of formal teaching: that practitioners’ enhanced professional understanding will lead to effective provision that reflects what we know about how young children learn and what comes before phonics.

Chapter 1 outlines the current context of early literacy teaching. It considers the current approach to teaching reading at Foundation Stage and Key Stage One. The chapter outlines what we know about how very young children learn and identifies tensions between a formal approach to phonics teaching and young children’s learning, including the current debates around school readiness.

Chapter 2 explores the early interactions and experiences that lead into literacy. It considers the role of adults in facilitating these experiences and interactions at home and in early years settings. The chapter looks at effective pre-school provision to support literacy.

Chapters 3–8 each consider one aspect of what comes before phonics. It is important to be aware that the knowledge, skills, understandings and experiences outlined happen as part of young children’s active integrated learning, not separately as they are described in the book. They are described in this discrete way for ease of understanding, but need to be applied to what we know about how young children learn.

Chapter 3 considers the basis of all learning: speaking and listening. It explains how children acquire and develop language. Language learning for children growing up learning

more than one language is also considered. The chapter outlines the role of adults in supporting children's language acquisition and development, including the importance of engaging children with books, songs, rhymes, poems and language play. Ways to support and encourage parents to talk and read with their children are discussed.

Chapter 4 looks at the importance of physical activity that supports sensory awareness and integration, with a particular focus on literacy learning. The most important messages in this chapter are that children's physical development is integral to learning, and that young children do not learn to sit still by sitting still.

Chapter 5 discusses the importance of meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic awareness. It considers why this is important for literacy learning, including phonics.

Chapter 6 discusses print awareness. It considers what we mean by forms and functions of print and how children learn about these in a meaningful way. The importance of these understandings to literacy learning is discussed.

Chapter 7 discusses the role of symbolising and representation in becoming literate, and how this leads into phonics. It considers how children learn to symbolise.

Chapter 8 considers phonological awareness. It explains what is meant by phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness, and how this leads into phonics.

Finally, throughout this book it will be stressed that orally sounding out phonemes, identifying phoneme–grapheme correspondence and modelling how to blend and segment words in context and as appropriate, is an important aspect of what comes before phonics. Children whose early experiences include an awareness of these building blocks of phonics are likely to come to the later formal phonics teaching with a high chance of success.

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