

# Introduction Phonics: the wider picture

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*Maureen Lewis and Sue Ellis*

Learning to read is a vital foundation to becoming a literate, educated person. Reading offers opportunities for enjoyment, for increasing our knowledge of the world and for enhancing our imagination and creativity. It also gives people access to improved life chances – success or failure in becoming a reader is a strong indicator of future progress in school and beyond.

Throughout the developed world therefore governments are giving great priority to literacy and are asking schools to ensure that children reach certain standards of reading achievement. In England, for example, this is manifest in the ever-increasing targets set for the number of children reaching the expected reading level for their age group as measured by national tests. In America the *No child left behind* legislation focuses on literacy teaching and pupil literacy achievement, again measuring children's performance with state-administered tests. In Australia the government has recently concluded a *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (DEST, 2004) and has called for higher standards of literacy through a set of 'National Goals'. In the developing world, ensuring high levels of literacy is a priority and there are ambitious plans to support the developing world in achieving the same goal. The United Nations has made the pledge that by 2015 all the world's children will complete primary schooling and UNESCO has nominated 2003–2012 as the *United Nations' Literacy Decade*. Literacy is recognized not only as important for the personal development and life chances of individuals but, also as vital to the spiritual, cultural and economic wellbeing of nations.

Given the central importance of literacy in our developed and developing world, it is no surprise therefore that we want to know 'How best can children be enabled to learn to read and write?' To try to answer this question there has been an *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (DfES, 2006a) – hereafter called the Rose Review – in England. A similar review has been undertaken in Australia – *Teaching Reading: Report and recommendations* (DEST, 2005) – and in the United States, the National Reading Panel was set up in 1997 to investigate the research about the teaching of reading (NRP, 2000b). We will return to these reports later.

This perennial question – How best can children be enabled to learn to read and write? – has been asked for many decades. It continues to be asked because

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there is no simple answer and because what we know about how children learn to read and write changes over time. In the last decade or so there has been a fairly widespread consensus on the elements of a successful reading programme. This consensus view has recognized the importance of phonics as a reading strategy, but has seen this as one strategy amongst several that a reader might use within the context of a rich and broad literacy curriculum. The Australian reading report, for example, concluded that:

The evidence is clear . . . that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. This approach, coupled with effective support from the child's home, is critical to success. (DEST, 2005: 11)

It went on to recommend that:

. . . teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies. (DEST, 2005: 14, Recommendation 2)

This 'phonics as part of a wider approach' is often expressed as 'phonics is necessary, but not sufficient'. In the first two chapters of this book, Kathy Hall and Morag Stuart explore this view. Hall argues that learning to read is influenced by many different factors, including such things as children's understanding of the pleasures and purposes of reading, the range of skills children need to be taught and employ (including phonics), parental and societal influences and teacher expertise. She goes on to argue that phonics is important in learning to read but it is not the only important element. This chapter reflects the views of the United Kingdom Literacy Association, which held a series of members' meetings during 2005 to discuss the role of phonics in the teaching of reading. In the second chapter, Morag Stuart sharpens the focus to look closely at why phonics is important in learning to read, and argues that not only does it support the beginning of reading but that it offers readers the opportunity to develop independent 'self-teaching' strategies.

That phonics is necessary in learning to read is not therefore at the heart of the current debate about the role of phonics. Rather, over the last few years the debate has centred on:

- whether children are being taught phonics/enough phonics;
- what form of phonics (synthetic or analytic) should be used;
- the systematic teaching of phonics;
- when best to teach phonics; and
- how fast to pace it.

## ARE CHILDREN BEING TAUGHT PHONICS?

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s there was heated debate as to whether phonics should be taught as part of the early reading curriculum. Such disputes about the role of phonics have a long history. Moya Cove's chapter, *Sounds Familiar*, traces the development of phonics teaching and the arguments around this. Cove's 'long view' helps us to see these issues from a wider perspective. The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England in 1998 gave a strong impetus in that country for the explicit teaching of phonics to children from the age of five. The *Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998a) contains 'phonological awareness, phonics and spelling' objectives from reception year (5-year-olds) onwards. The NLS suggests that about 15 minutes of the daily literacy hour is devoted to daily teaching of this 'word level' strand. As part of the introduction of the NLS, all teachers received training and the second (and largest) module of the National Literacy Strategy, & *Literacy Training Pack* (DfEE, 1998b) focused on subject knowledge about phonics. A related issue to the phonics training that practising teachers were offered was debate about the knowledge of phonics that trainee teachers needed. In Scotland and America, it is not specified. In England, the standards for initial teacher training institutions contained an explicit section on the phonic knowledge that trainee teachers had to demonstrate in order to complete their course successfully. The Rose Review continues this approach by recommending a strengthening of the phonics training teachers and trainees receive.

Following the introduction of the NLS, *Progression in Phonics* (DfEE, 1999a) was published to give teachers a practical and systematic phonics teaching programme. This was sent to all English primary schools. The thrust of government policy was clear: phonics should be taught and teachers needed specific subject knowledge to do this. As a measure of this policy, three years later in *Teaching of Phonics: A paper by HMI*, Ofsted reported that:

Phonics teaching has increased significantly since the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy. The debate is no longer about whether phonic knowledge and skills should be taught, but how best to teach them. (Ofsted, 2001: 2)

By 2005, Ofsted were more detailed in their comments about 'how best to teach them':

... inspection evidence continues to show significant variation in the effectiveness with which pupils are taught the phonic knowledge they need to decode text. In the schools with high standards phonics was *taught early, systematically and rapidly* so that pupils quickly gained the ability to decode text (and begin to write too), associating letters with sounds. Where standards were lower, expectations as to the speed at which pupils could acquire phonic knowledge were insufficient and the phonics teaching lacked systematic or full coverage of sounds and their combinations. (Ofsted 2005b: para. 42, our italics)

This statement was part of a growing pressure to look more closely at exactly *how* phonics was taught, and mirrored similar questions raised in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. In Australia, for example, an open letter to the

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government signed by 26 Australian psychologists and reading researchers raised such issues (DEST, 2005: 2). Chapter 10, *Responses to Rose* considers this 'growing pressure' in England and gives commentators with different stances on the role of phonics in reading an opportunity to comment on the Rose Review.

### DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO PHONICS TEACHING – SYNTHETIC AND ANALYTIC PHONICS

In the debate on the role and teaching of phonics, advocates of a 'synthetic phonics only' approach (see, for example, Chew, 1997; Miskin, 2003 ) argued that the results obtained by such programmes are far in advance of those obtained by children using a mixed phonics programmes (synthetic and analytic) or a mixed strategy approach (phonics as one of several reading 'searchlights'). We will examine these claim, but first we must define the differences between synthetic and analytic phonics.

In synthetic phonics programmes, children are systematically taught the phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters). Children begin from hearing the phonemes in a spoken word and blending phonemes orally. In reading, individual phonemes are recognized from the grapheme, pronounced and blended together (synthesized) to create the word. For example, when encountering an unknown single-syllable word such as *h/e/n*, the child would sound out its three phonemes and then blend them together to form *hen*. Blending is seen as a very important skill. The skill of segmenting words into phonemes for spelling is also taught, and blending and segmenting are introduced as reversible processes. The order in which new phonemes are introduced and the speed at which this is undertaken are important (see following section). Synthetic phonics programmes emphasize decodable words and do not favour teaching other reading strategies or an initial sight vocabulary of high-frequency non-phonically regular words in the early stages of beginning a synthetic phonics programme.

In analytic phonics, children identify phonemes in whole words and are encouraged to segment the words into phonemes. They also analyse similar characteristics in other words (for example, *hen*, *house*, *hill* all begin with the same sound; *tin*, *sin*, *win*, *pin* all share the same media (i) and end phonemes (n) or the same rime 'in'). Recognizing word families and patterns helps children develop inferential self-teaching strategies. If they can read 'cake', they can work out and read 'lake' without blending all the individual phonemes.

Most teachers use both synthetic and analytic phonics, but advocates of a 'synthetics first and fast' approach claim that it is more effective in teaching children to read than mixed reading strategy approaches. They also claim that it is more effective than other kinds of phonics programmes. A recent longitudinal study in Scotland on the effectiveness of a synthetic phonics programmes compared with an analytical and an analytical plus phonemic awareness programme (involving 300 children over seven years) concluded that 'the synthetic phonics approach, as part of the reading curriculum, is more effective than the analytic

phonics approach' (Johnston and Watson, 2005: 9). However, in a systematic review of the research literature on the use of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling (Torgerson et al., 2006) found that the weight of evidence was weak on whether synthetic approaches were more effective than analytical approaches. They found only three randomized controlled trials on this matter (including an earlier and much smaller Scottish study of just 30 children but not including the large longitudinal Scottish study mentioned above – the experimental design used for this study did not satisfy the criteria for inclusion). They concluded that in these, no statistically significant difference in effectiveness was found between synthetic phonics instruction and analytic phonics instruction. This review confirmed the findings of Stahl et al. (1988), who also reviewed the research on phonics instruction and concluded that there are several types of good phonics instruction and that there is no research base to support the superiority of one particular type. While the Torgerson review has itself come under attack from supporters of a synthetic phonics approach (McGuinness, 2006), for the disinterested observer it would seem that currently there is not enough evidence to support the comparative claims made for synthetic versus analytic phonics. Nevertheless, the Rose Review took a pragmatic view, deciding that:

schools and settings cannot always wait for the results of long term research studies. They must take decisions based on as much firm evidence as is available. (DfES, 2006: para. 31)

Policy decisions in England to promote synthetic phonic are not therefore based on research evidence.

## **PHONICS AS PART OF A WIDER LITERACY PROGRAMME**

The Torgerson review did, however, confirm that '*systematic* phonics instruction within a *broad* literacy curriculum was found to have a *statistically significant positive effect* on reading accuracy' (2006: 9, our italics). The Australian Reading Review and the National Reading Panel in America came to the same conclusion. These findings illuminate another area of debate – whether phonics should be a 'fast and first and only' strategy or part of a broader programme.

Some advocates of synthetic phonics programmes believe that beginning readers should only encounter phonemically decodable text in order to practice their reading skills and that there should be no 'guessing' words from picture, context or initial letter cues (see, for example, Reading Reform Foundation, 2006). They argue that using a range of cues has the potential to confuse children and that encouraging children to use information from a picture may lead to them not understanding that they must focus on the printed word (see the Rose Review, DfES, 2006a: 117). Such a view sees reading as being a stepped process of acquiring separate reading skills. Hall's Chapter 1, this book, discusses different views of the reading process and the impact this is reading process and the impact this has on people's views on phonics teaching. John

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Stannard's *Response to Rose* piece in Chapter 10 looks at the model of early reading suggested in the Appendix of the Rose Review, and argues for the values of a multi-cueing system approach to reading with phonics as one (important) cue among several. Advocates of a mixed strategy approach argue that using pictures, context and syntax cues is not encouraging children to 'guess' but rather to use language knowledge, logical deduction and prior/world knowledge to make sense of a word/sentence. They would also argue that a broad literacy curriculum includes reading and being read to from a wide range of books, not just decodable texts. The Rose Review, along with the Australia and US reviews, emphasizes the importance of this.

### SYSTEMATIC PHONICS: STRUCTURE AND PACE

Studies have been done comparing systematic phonics instruction with 'hit or miss' phonic instruction and these show that 'any kind of well organized and efficient phonics instruction is better than little or no phonic instruction that leaves phonics to chance' (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2002: 91). Systematic phonic programmes introduce phonemes in a series of steps. These usually beginning with learning letter sounds, distinguishing between vowels and consonants, recognizing initial and final phonemes in regular consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words and introducing medial vowels. From this, simple CVC and CCVC words can be segmented and blended. Long vowels are then introduced. Different programmes may introduce consonant and vowel phonemes in different ways, but the 41- plus phonemes are introduced systematically. Fourmer, Ellis and Smith's chapter on *Teaching Phonics: The Basics*, discusses the knowledge and the practical issues that need consideration when teaching a systematic phonics programmes.

Although the heart of a phonics programme is the systematic introduction of phonemes in a planned sequence, teachers also use the many planned (and unplanned) opportunities to teach and apply phonic lessons that occur throughout a broad literacy curriculum. In Chapter 4, *Inside the Classroom*, Prue Goodwin and Margaret Perkins describe how, far from being 'hit and miss', a planned approach based on play and reading 'real books' can offer the opportunity to build complex phonic knowledge. We must also consider that, no matter how systematic the programme, there are many words in the English language that are just not decodable. Henrietta Domeby's chapter on English orthography (Chapter 8) helps us to see the strengths and limits of a systematic phonics programmes.

### PACE AND WHEN TO START

If one accepts that systematic phonics teaching is necessary to beginning reader, there are strong arguments for a quick-paced programme which ensures

that children have the necessary knowledge they need to decode texts as rapidly as possible (Stahl, 1992; Wyse, 2000). The caricature of the young child plodding through an initial sound a week so that it takes almost a school year to learn 26 letter sounds is now seen as unnecessarily slow, and it is recognized that phonic programmes can be undertaken in weeks rather months by many children. Such slowly placed practices also make the assumption that children enter school with little in the way of phonemic awareness and letter knowledge. Children begin to learn about language from the moment they are born, and both Jackie Marsh's chapter on *Involving Parents and Carers* (Chapter 5) and Elspeth McCartney's chapter on *Developmental Issues* (Chapter 6) remind us of the wealth of knowledge children acquire before they begin formal education. Skilled early years' practitioners build on and extend children's pre-school language and speaking and listening experiences. They do not confuse a systematic approach with a formal approach. In the best early years setting, phonics is taught through active, multi-sensory strategies (language games, music and so on) embedded in a rich literacy curriculum (see, for example, Palmer and Bayley, 2004). Such phonics teaching may often be in small group contexts to allow for different developmental needs. In Chapter 4, *Inside the Classroom*, teachers Lyndsay Macnair, who uses a synthetic phonics approach, and Sally Evans, who uses a mixed synthetic and analytic approach, both show the importance of active, multi sensory approaches in their phonics teaching.

## PHONICS AND SPELLING

One of the interesting aspects about the phonics debate is how dominated it is by discussion of the relationship between phonics and reading and, consequently, how little attention is paid to the relationship between phonemic knowledge and writing. Elspeth McCartney addresses this issue (chapter 6) when she argues that spelling errors commonly assumed to be the child making visual confusions may actually reflect errors of phonemic perception. She urges teachers to consider this possibility when looking at children's work because, clearly, the two errors need different types of support. In Chapter 7, Laura Huxford explores this further by describing the strong relationship between young writers' developmental spellings and the phonics curriculum. Her examples show how phonics within a broad and coherent literacy programme can empower children as writers. Henrietta Dombey, in Chapter 8, strikes a cautionary note, however, pointing to evidence that challenges the wisdom of total reliance on phonics. She reminds us that the opaque orthography of English means that teachers must be able to explain how the spelling of word families is deeply connected to their shared history; understanding the basis of visual and morphological patterns may be more powerful in the long term.

## WHAT NEXT?

The ‘phonics debate’ has played differently in different educational systems. In Scotland, where the literacy curriculum is less centrally controlled, phonics has not become so politically charged as it has in England, Australia and the United States. Phonics research has been publicized by the Scottish Office, but decisions about how to respond to it have been left in the hands of local authorities, schools and teachers. In England the response has been different. The House of Commons Select Committee on Education set up the Rose Review to consider ‘What best practice should be expected in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics’ (DfES, 2005a: 1) in part to inform the revision of the NLS framework as well as to give clear advice on what schools should do about the teaching of phonics.

In its final report, the Review has concluded that ‘synthetic phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled reader and writers’ (DfES, 2006a: 4) and has made a strong recommendation for further phonic training for teachers, teaching assistants and student teachers. At the same time, the NLS has been piloting an early reading programme, with increased phonics teaching in the foundation stage, to be offered to all schools. In England teachers are being given a very strong steer on how to teach phonics.

So where does this debate leave teachers who are wondering whether to alter their approach to teaching phonics in the light of new ideas and new recommendations? As a professional you will want to make a considered decision on this. Rather than focus on the technical differences between competing programmes, you may find it more helpful to consider the principle of good phonics teaching and how these apply to your existing practice. You will weigh the evidence, look at existing practice and its outcomes as well as new ideas and their possible outcomes; you will consider your own knowledge and understanding and think of the context of your school and the needs of your pupils. You will want to discuss phonics practice with colleagues in your school and if possible from a wider network of schools. At the end of each chapter in this book are suggestions to help you consider what you are already doing and what else you might do. Chapter 11 suggests how you might use this book to initiate and support professional dialogue about phonics. There is also a Glossary which explains any technical vocabulary that might be unfamiliar to you.

There is an old story about a man who goes to his lawyer with a legal problem. The lawyer agrees his fee with the client and then reaches for a book. He opens it and reads out the answer to the man’s question. The man is furious. ‘It’s disgraceful: I’ve just paid you a fortune to read a paragraph from a book. How can you possibly justify that?’ ‘You’ve got it wrong,’ said the lawyer. ‘I wasn’t paid to read the paragraph. What you paid for was my knowledge about which paragraph, and which book. The reading was free.’

Like that lawyer, teachers are not paid just for ‘doing’ a set curriculum; they are paid to make professional decisions about the needs of the children they teach, and for the knowledge that underpins these decisions. We hope the contributions in this book will add to that store of professional knowledge and enable teachers to make wise decisions.