

Department for Education
‘Evidence check’ memorandum
Phonics policy

Background

1. We are committed to ensuring high-quality teaching of phonics in primary schools, to make sure children acquire early on the word reading skills that are the foundation of effective and enjoyable reading. In order to enjoy reading independently, children need to be able both to decode the written symbols on the page (word reading), and understand the meaning of the words. Systematic phonics teaching is the most effective way for children to learn word reading.
2. The new national curriculum requires schools to teach children to apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words. We do not tell schools which phonics programme to teach. To help schools choose, we publish core criteria that define the key features of an effective phonics teaching programme. Publishers have been able to assess their products against the core criteria, and their self-assessments are available online for schools to consult.
3. To boost the quality of phonics teaching, we also provided match-funding for systematic synthetic phonics products and training between September 2011 and October 2013. This enabled schools with key stage 1 pupils to embed and refine their teaching of phonics, and supported catch-up work for key stage 2 pupils. Over 14,000 schools benefited from £23.7 million in match funding.
4. To help schools measure progress, we introduced a statutory phonics screening check in 2012 for pupils at the end of Year 1, following a pilot in 2011. This helps teachers identify pupils who need extra help, and enables schools to benchmark their pupils’ performance against national standards. In the pilot, 32% of pupils in the 298 schools which took part reached the expected standard. In 2012, 58% of pupils nationally reached the expected standard, rising to 69% in 2013. By the end of year 2, in 2013, 85% of pupils nationally had achieved the expected standard (this includes the proportion who reached the standard in 2012 while in year 1) (DfE, 2013).
5. The independent evaluation of the introduction of the screening check (DfE, 2014) has thus far highlighted that teachers were positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, and its contribution towards early reading development.

The evidence for phonics

6. UK and international research shows overwhelmingly that systematic phonics teaching, in a language-rich curriculum, is the most effective way of teaching reading to children of all abilities and educational backgrounds (DfE, 2011).
7. To summarise, there is:
 - sound evidence from reviews of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that systematic phonics instruction has a statistically significant positive effect on reading accuracy (Torgerson et al, 2006).
 - sound evidence that systematic phonics programmes are more effective to teach pupils to read than non-systematic phonics programmes, or teaching that doesn’t include phonics. The US National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000a; 2000b) assessed the effectiveness of the different approaches used to teach children to read. It was the most comprehensive and detailed survey of this topic ever produced. The panel concluded that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for pupils in

pre-school all the way until the end of primary school, and for pupils having difficulty learning to read (National Reading Panel, 2000a; 2000b). The 'Clackmannanshire study' (Johnston and Watson, 2005) studied the effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment. It concluded that using systematic synthetic phonics instruction enabled the children to read and spell better than those taught by alternative approaches (including analytic phonics).

- a considerable amount of evidence on the positive effect of systematic synthetic phonics, although much less evidence on systematic analytic phonics (National Reading Panel, 2000a and 2000b; Torgerson et al, 2006);
- sound evidence that systematic synthetic phonics programmes produce greater growth in reading than other reading programmes, and this is especially effective for younger, at-risk readers (National Reading Panel, 2000b); and
- evidence that the teaching of phonics is most effective when combined with a language-rich curriculum to develop children's positive attitudes towards literacy (Torgerson et al, 2006; Rose, 2006; Ofsted, 2010).

8. A study by Ofsted of twelve primary schools judged to be very effective in teaching reading suggests that the concentrated and systematic use of phonics was vital to their success (Ofsted, 2010).

9. The independent Rose Review (2006) concluded that high-quality systematic phonics offers the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers. It noted that evidence submitted to the review suggested that, for almost all children, diluting the approach by using a mix of approaches can hinder a child's progress.

References

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