**Getting forensic with phonics: Ofsted’s focus on the early stages of reading**

1. **Is it true that schools need to have fidelity to one phonics scheme? We use more than one resource.**
2. Here, we have unpicked some common themes around the concept of ‘fidelity to one phonics programme’:

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| **What you do need to have** | **What you don’t need to have** |
| Fidelity to one programme, ie. one spine (or order) of the letters and letter-groups that will be taught (so not mixing RWI and L&S, or SoundsWrite and Jolly Phonics, for instance), approaches to teaching, when tricky words are introduced, etc. This constitutes use of one ‘programme’.  | A scheme. This goes further than a programme in that it gives specific lesson plans, medium term plans, etc and is pretty much ‘lift up and go’. It is entirely possible for effective, well-prepared and trained teachers to plan directly from a *programme*. The key here is in the CPD on how to use it, and internal leadership to evaluate efficacy and maximise impact. |
| If your school chooses to use a scheme, i.e. to support your chosen programme, then everyone needs to use the same scheme. It would be a good idea to set this out in your English Policy, and to ensure new staff induction is clear on programme and / or scheme of choice. | The same scheme as every other school. The emphasis here is on the impact on outcomes, so it will all come down to how something is used anyway. As long as your provision – **and programme** - is underpinned by SSP, the rest is up to you[[1]](#footnote-1).  |
| A set order in which graphemes are introduced, so that none are missed out. Ensure absentees are caught up quickly so gaps don’t form due to holes in knowledge. | Many offshoot ‘streams’ for catching children up if they have missed specific coverage. Look to do this in the very short term if at all possible (e.g. next day intervention). |
| Specific assessment criteria at each stage, so that everyone’s idea of ‘secure’ is the same. There should be very clear criteria plus guidance on the range of contexts, degree of independence needed etc by that programme. Teachers need to know why certain chn are being taught certain things at any one point in time, so AfL, differentiation etc is ‘owned’ by teachers including any TA-led interventions. | What you don’t need to have is lots of tick-sheets showing which children know which grapheme – only useful for children you’re not sure about or are concerned about. The majority weighting of phonics assessment should come from *application*, ie text reading and text writing. This is what will tell you what their independent, secure application of phonics is like. If your reading books are properly organised in line with your chosen phonics programme then independent, fluent, reading will tell whether they have ‘mastered’ the associated graphemes and tricky words / common exception words. |
| If using actions, songs and rhymes when introducing the sounds, stick to one set, e.g. not having one person using something else ‘because the children like these’ or ‘I’ve always done this’. | There is nothing saying you have to use actions, songs, rhymes etc as mnemonics but evidence shows that a multi-sensory approach for early phonics can be more inclusive. Again, as long as any chosen resources to aid teaching (such as puppets, phoneme frames, kit boxes of games etc) maintain fidelity to your chosen programme, and do not give conflicting messages, then these may be sourced from differing places. It will fall under the school leaders’ roles to ensure consistency in this. |
| Book stock organised so that it aligns with your school’s chosen phonics programme and matches that progression in graphemes and tricky words. Reading books at the very earliest stages need to contain words that children can use their phonics knowledge on and where they are not forced to ‘guess from the pictures’ etc. This is so that they very much get the message that (for unknown words), the route to decoding comes from blending the sounds, and the children become systematic and fluent at doing this.  | Books devoid of plot or interest. There are some very engaging decodable books available nowadays. However, before replacing, initially you should audit your current book-stock as there is usually a majority that can be used but maybe in a different order/year group/term etc. Diving into your stock and checking alignment is the only way you’ll know… and then you’ll be equipped to match texts to readers very closely, make recommendations and tailor selection to interests as well as decoding attainment-stage etc. |

***N.B.*** *It is possible to create your own bespoke phonics programme for your school, however you would need to ensure that ALL stakeholders are fully aware of the order of sounds, tricky words, mnemonics and songs used etc, and you would need to ensure that your phonics curriculum is underpinned by relevant, recent research. You would also need to ensure the children’s reading books, both for school and home, are very closely aligned with that spine of sounds, order of tricky words introduced etc, so that children would still only be asked to read texts that were very closely matched to their current phonic knowledge.*

1. **How might we begin to explore the statement *“There’s no more important intervention and assessment in the early years foundation stage than checking that children are making the right progress with reading.”*** **(Bradley Simmons, HMI, December 2018)?**
2. Here are seven possible starting-point steps:
3. Ensure all colleagues have recent, thorough, high quality training on the principles and practices of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in the context of your school’s chosen phonics programme. This includes knowing what is ‘age-appropriate’ for their year-group not only at the end-of-year stage but also incrementally throughout that year. This is so that the very earliest signs of *“falling behind the programme’s pace”* (Ofsted inspection handbook, p88, section 293) can be picked up, acted upon, gaps closed and monitored.
4. Develop a robust approach to the assessment of phonics, with everybody looking for consistent, independent, broad, wide application of skills before assessing something as secure (e.g. in reading and writing of continuous text).
5. Ensure subject leaders are the experts in your school on the teaching of reading, especially early reading, and are highly effective in their leadership and change-management with confidence to challenge, support and evidence impact.
6. Use a phonics (and spelling) tracker, all through the school, that shows where children are ‘secure’ in their learning and where children are falling behind, including showing where accelerated progress is being made to catch up peers. Remember, this is not about excessive tracking or tick-lists but about keeping it appropriately proportionate – who do you need to particularly watch out for and evaluate impact upon? How often will this tracking need to be updated for (a) all pupils and (b) some / a few pupils?

*291. “In reaching an evaluation against the ‘quality of education’ judgement, inspectors will consider whether:*

*the school’s phonics programme matches or exceeds the expectations of the national curriculum and the early learning goals. The school has clear expectations of pupils’ phonics progress term-by-term, from Reception to Year 2”* (Ofsted EIF p87, section 293)

1. Ensure subject leaders provide CPD on assessment of phonics. It is integral to decoding in reading and spelling in writing. Yes, there are other strategies and skills that children need in addition too – not least those that support comprehension of course. However, they will need to learn how to decode new words using the basic and the complex phonic code, and watching closely for children starting to fall behind is key. A deep understanding of the progression in your chosen phonics programme is essential.
2. Use pupil progress meetings as a forum for discussing and evaluating precisely how and when class teachers are supporting at-risk readers to catch up, and (together with other professionals) how the lowest-attaining 20% are being supported to make accelerated progress towards end of key stage expectations.
3. Closely monitor any ‘official’ interventions and their impact – before ditching any as ‘ineffective’, check that:
* the training came from a qualified trainer, i.e. the source;
* there has been ongoing monitoring and feedback (e.g. from the Inco/trainer);
* there has been sufficient time for planning and preparation of intervention sessions; there has been sufficient teacher-TA conversation;
* it is used in addition to, not instead of, quality first teaching;
* the child has not been repeatedly withdrawn from favourite lessons such as PE or Science;
* there has been sufficient in-school attendance;
* the child and their parents/carers have been involved (and hearts and minds won).
1. **Isn’t it true that some children don’t learn to read through phonics?**
2. Evidence shows that Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) is effective for all children, apart from a tiny percentage who may be neuro-diverse.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*“Broadly speaking, it will only be those with severe cognitive difficulties that cannot be taught the phonic code.”* (Bradley Simmons, HMI)

Therefore, Ofsted will look into how *“reading, including the teaching of systematic, synthetic phonics, is taught from the beginning of Reception”* (Ofsted EIF, p87). Prevention, through high quality first teaching (including differentiation) is always the first port of call, and this is why this diet should be scrutinised. If some children are struggling more than others, we all want to find out why and do something about it.

Further information on dyslexia, including a helpful definition from Sir Jim Rose (2009), can be found [here](http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/4/resources/311/definition-of-dyslexia/) on the government-funded (free) Dyslexia-SpLD Trust website. This can support schools in ensuring that

*“all pupils, including the weakest readers, make sufficient progress to meet or exceed age-related expectations”* (Ofsted inspection handbook, p87, section 293).

Also useful are the Education Endowment Foundation resources, and the Research Schools network, e.g. this blog [here](https://researchschool.org.uk/bradford/blog/literacy-interventions-part-1-choosing-interventions) by Bradford Research School outlines further useful thoughts and links.

1. **Surely we can’t all be expected to be early reading experts, can we?**
2. No. Nonetheless, Subject Leaders, or subject leadership teams in larger schools, have a role to play in ensuring that class teachers, teaching assistants, and any others helping children with reading are fully up-to-speed with the current approaches to teaching early reading, so there is definitely a certain kind of expertise in teaching reading needed by all primary and early years practitioners. (After all, we know that children have such limited access to the wider curriculum offer, new vocabulary etc if they are struggling with reading.) This includes subject leaders having an overview of Reception to Year 6 and being knowledgeable and confident enough to challenge and support where needed. The monitoring and evaluation role is crucial, action-planning skills integral and practical hands-on approaches tailored to colleagues’ needs are fundamental. Some examples of questions that SLs may want to ask themselves include:

Fine detail:

* Can all teachers and leaders, including head teachers, articulate the school’s approach to systematic phonics teaching, with precision and clarity?
* Do all teachers demonstrate understanding, precision and clarity in terms of why something is being taught at a particular point and what the intended learning is?
* Can teachers articulate exactly why a child is given a certain independent reading activity during guided / group reading? Why that and why then?
* Is there precision and clarity in terms of the actual *delivery* of phonics and guided reading?
* Is articulation precise and clear, from all practitioners?

Bigger picture:

* Can staff answer questions about the reading curriculum sequence and planning such as “Why that?, Why then?” meaning why is that planned into the curriculum and why at that point/year/key stage etc.
* They will also need to answer “how?” and “so what?” – with the ‘so what’ question meaning ‘What’s the impact?’
* In terms of phonics, can staff articulate why children are at a particular phase etc?

What next?

In response to requests and feedback from schools, we are pleased to announce a comprehensive programme of CPD on reading coming up in the academic year 2019-20. Further information will be released shortly in the form of a digestible brochure aligned with the academic year. In the meantime, do browse our Hub booking pages and have a look at our transformative projects which help address the above areas, on these project pages: [Reception Early Reading Project](https://www.hertsforlearning.co.uk/teaching-and-learning/research-projects/english-research-projects/reception-early-reading-project) (Primary English with Early Years) and [Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Project](https://www.hertsforlearning.co.uk/teaching-and-learning/research-projects/english-research-projects/year-1-phonics-screening-check) (Primary English).

**Further training and resource opportunities**

Supersonic phonics and related training (see HfL website)

**Useful weblinks / further reading:**

Core criteria for effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/298420/phonics_core_criteria_and_the_self-assessment_process.pdf>

…and how a range of programmes meet these criteria:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/phonics-choosing-a-programme>

One HT’s reflections on his pilot inspection experience:

<http://reflectiveawesome.blogspot.com/2019/04/ofsted-new-framework-2019-reflections.html?m=1>

Full Ofsted Inspection Handbook (EIF), May 2019 (see reading on pp87-88)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif>

Ofsted Early Reading video (Bradley Simmons, HMI) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWQipfbc7fg> (uploaded December 2018)

Also see the FAQs in the front of the HfL YR-KS1 Guided Reading Booklet, on HfL’s PA+ website or in the shop [here](https://www.hertsforlearning.co.uk/resources/ks1-guided-reading-booklet), and the pages of teaching records which align the book bands with the Letters and Sounds programme.

1. *To check whether your adopted programme has been deemed by DfE to be of sufficiently high-quality, see the link to ‘Core criteria for effective systematic synthetic phonics teaching programmes’ in the ‘Useful weblinks / further reading’ section at the end of this article.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *E.g. people with autism, ADHD or Down’s Syndrome* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)