



Matched Funding for Teaching Phonics - Opportunity or Straightjacket?

Summary: From September 2011, Primary Schools in England will be able to claim up to £3000, if they match that funding, to teach systematic synthetic phonics. Is this a brilliant opportunity to drive up reading standards or will it “switch off” children from a love of reading? This article reports on research with Reception children using one of the government approved synthetic phonics programmes. The article also follows children through to the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. All the Reception children, about 700, were successful at learning to read and spell, including vulnerable groups like boys and children with summer birthdays, free school meals, English as an additional language, travellers, and those in catch-up interventions. The children read with confidence and enthusiasm, and the children in the catch-up group “caught up” and closed the gap in their achievements. At Key Stage 1, boys and girls were reading equally as well and significantly large numbers achieved above national expectations. At Key Stage 2, the percentage of children achieving national expectations was significantly above the national average, a third of the boys achieved Level 5 writing, Level 3B was the lowest level for English, there were no severe literacy difficulties and it could be said that dyslexia was eliminated. Use of this systematic synthetic phonics programme was shown to give children a flying start with their reading and spelling, it was effective for catch-up, it reduced special educational needs across the school and enabled higher numbers of children to transfer to Secondary school equipped to access the curriculum. Children were reading more fluently which encouraged a love of books.

Background of government initiatives

The independent reviews of the teaching of early reading conducted by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005) (1) and by Jim Rose (2006) (2) confirmed that ‘high quality phonic work’ should be the prime means for teaching children how to read and spell words. The Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb’s view is that the systematic teaching of synthetic phonics is the best way to teach basic reading skills, especially to those aged five to seven.

In 2011, the Department for Education published a new list of publishers and products which meet the Department’s revised core criteria, and whose self-assessments have been scrutinised by independent evaluators. The systematic synthetic phonics programme used in the present studies is *Sound Discovery*®, one of the full programmes on this DfE list (3). A key feature of this programme is the Snappy Lesson®, which teaches all the phonic skills needed for literacy in a fast paced, interactive way.

In a separate assessment process, publishers were required to submit programmes again. The aim was to produce a catalogue of approved resources which meet the revised core criteria. In September 2011 the catalogue will be circulated to every Primary School in England which has Key Stage 1 pupils. *Sound Discovery*® is one of the approved full programmes in this catalogue.

In 2012 the government will introduce a year 1 phonics screening check to confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonics decoding to an appropriate standard. Pupils who have not reached this standard at the end of Year 1 should receive appropriate support from their school to ensure they can improve their phonic decoding skills, and will then have the opportunity to retake the screening check. The Secretary for State for Education, Michael Gove, has said that, “Parents want to know how their

children are reading and this will tell them". Critics say it will not, because phonic recognition, though important, is only a part of learning to read.

Research in Reception 2010-2011

A Catholic Primary School designated for travellers of Irish origin, used the systematic, synthetic phonics programme *Sound Discovery*® to teach literacy to their whole Reception class, from September 2010. A key feature of this programme is the *Snappy Lesson*® which teaches all the phonic skills needed for literacy in a fast paced, interactive way, so that even boys with the shortest attention spans and children with concentration difficulties can be kept on task. Also, the constant review of prior learning within the *Snappy Lesson*® supports the learning of children with weak memories.

The school has quite a high level of social and special educational need. There were 30 pupils in the Reception cohort, 18 boys and 12 girls. There were the usual vulnerable groups often believed to experience barriers to learning: boys, free school meals (FSM), summer birthdays, English as an additional language (EAL) and travellers. The school identified a slow-to-learn group who received catch-up teaching delivered as an intervention in a small group with their class teacher or class Teaching Assistant using *Sound Discovery*®. This was little and often teaching, to reinforce learning.

In September 2010, the Reception teacher assessed all the children on school entry. None of them knew any sounds and none could do any reading or spelling.

By Christmas 2010, the Reception teacher was reporting, "a huge increase in the number of children being able to read and write". The children learned quickly. In September 2010, 0% were working at alphabet CVC level or above. By October 2010, 63% were reading at alphabet CVC level or above, by December 2010 73% were reading at CVC level or above and by February 2011 97% were both reading and spelling at CVC level or above with 50% reading at CVCC level and above. Between 30% and 10% were reading at alphabet CVCC, CCVCC, consonant digraph and "long" vowel digraph levels.

At first some little fingers were unable to form their letters but they could still make and break up words using phoneme cards. So, in addition to learning letter/sound matches all the children were able to apply this knowledge to reading and spelling from the beginning. They were also given decodable texts from an early stage which contained only the sounds they had been taught, and a controlled number of high frequency "tricky" words.

The composition of the catch-up group was interesting. There were three boys and 2 girls. Two of the boys had summer birthdays. One was also a traveller on free school meals and the other had significant behaviour difficulties with non-compliance. Both girls and the third boy were not in any other vulnerable group and were probably low ability.

Results in 2011

In July 2011 all 30 Reception children were assessed on the British Ability Scales II Word Reading and Spelling achievement scales. The results for the whole class and for individual groups are presented below in Table 1.

The whole class, the summer birthday children, the boys and the traveller achieved above average reading and spelling. The girls and the FSM children achieved above average reading and average spelling. The EAL and catch-up groups achieved average reading and spelling.

Table 1: Reception Results 2011, for whole class and individual groups of children, using BAS II Word Reading and Spelling

Group	CA Av	R Av SS	R Av P	R Av RA	R +mnts	Sp Av SS	Sp Av P	Sp Av SA	Sp +mnts
Whole Class (N=30)	5:05	AAv	AAv	6:07	+14	AAv	AAv	6:05	+12
Summer Birthdays (N=10)	5:01	AAv	AAv	6:07	+18	AAv	AAv	6:05	+16
Boys (N=18)	5:05	AAv	AAv	6:08	+15	AAv	AAv	6:06	+13
Travellers (N=1)	5:02	AAv	AAv	6:01	+11	AAv	AAv	5:10	+8
Girls (N=12)	5:04	AAv	AAv	6:05	+13	Av	Av	6:02	+10
FSM (N=3)	5:07	AAv	AAv	6:05	+10	Av	Av	6:02	+7
EAL (N=4)	5:04	Av	Av	6:01	+9	Av	Av	5:08	+4
Catch-Up (N=5)	5:04	Av	Av	5:11	+7	Av	Av	6:00	+8

Key:

CA: chronological age

Av: Average

R: Reading

SS: Standard Score of the BAS II Achievement Scales has a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15

P: Percentile; 50th percentile is average; a Percentile of 99.8 means that 99.8% of children of that age would score the same or below

RA: Reading Age

+ mnts: the number of months that average reading or spelling age is above average chronological age

Sp: Spelling

SA: Spelling Age

FSM: free school meals

EAL: English as an additional language

AAv: above average scores: Standard Scores in 110-119 range; Percentiles in the 75-90 range

Av: average scores: Standard Scores in 90-109 range; Percentiles in the 25-74 range.

The most successful child was a boy with a summer birthday who was 5 years 1 month old. He was completely fluent at reading and his spelling was as good as his reading, both at 8 years 3 months. He achieved very high Standardised Scores of 143 and Percentiles of 99.8, for both reading and spelling.

The lowest child was a boy in the catch-up group, aged 5 years 10 months. However, his reading and spelling were both in the average range. For reading: his Standardised Score was 98, Percentile was 45 and reading age was 5 years 7 months. For spelling: his Standardised Score was 99, Percentile was 47 and spelling age was 5 years 10 months. He was not in any of the other vulnerable groups except for being a boy and being identified for the catch-up group.

There was one boy with significant behaviour difficulties, including non-compliance. He was in the catch-up group and had a summer birthday, aged 5 years 3 months. He refused to do any reading at first and put his head on the table. However he liked doing spelling and agreed to the reading assessment when he saw how many "ticks" he was getting for spelling. It is a tribute to his teaching that he had acquired literacy. For reading: his Standardised Score was 109, Percentile was 73 and reading age was 5 years 10 months (average). For spelling: his Standardised Score was 113, Percentile was 81 and spelling age was 6 years 4 months (above average). Self-esteem was key for this boy and he was motivated by success. He said how much he liked to practise his sounds at home.

Several of the children had attention difficulties but they were all able to focus on their reading and spelling and they were confident. All of them were using phonemic strategies for reading (sounding out and blending) and for spelling (saying the sounds as they were writing down the letters).

The boys and the summer birthday group were impressive. The summer birthday group were the highest achievers (for reading: Standardised Score of 121, Percentile 87.7, +18 months; for spelling: Standardised Score of 117.2, Percentile 83, +16 months).

The boys were the next highest achieving group (for reading: Standardised Score of 118.1, Percentile 83.5, +15 months; for spelling: Standardised Score of 115.6, Percentile 79.1, +13 months).

Relatively, the EAL and catch-up groups were the lowest achieving but all children were reading and spelling in the average range for their age, they were confident and were using phonemic strategies for reading and spelling.

This study shows that all children can learn to read and spell if they are taught explicitly and systematically with high quality synthetic phonics teaching. Teaching appears to be more powerful than the usual barriers to learning. Children who are slow-to-learn can be identified very quickly and they are responsive to catch-up intervention in small groups using little and often teaching with the teaching materials already in use in their classroom.

Research in Reception from 1997 to 2004 (4)

Sound Discovery® was used whole school in a large Primary School for eight years, where children were very low for language and social skills on school entry. Nearly 700 children were assessed at the end of their Reception years. Averaged over the eight years, the Reception children were about 15 months ahead of chronological age for both reading and spelling at the end of the year, children in catch-up intervention groups caught up and again there was no gender gap, summer birthday gap, social class effect and no EAL effect. The results for whole class groups, with no child omitted, are summarised below in Table 2. Note the extra gain of 5 months in average reading age between 1998 and 1999 when the first set of decodable reading books was introduced, other teaching variables remaining the same. Decodable reading books closed the gap between reading and spelling and in subsequent years both reading and spelling were very similar.

Table 2: Reception Results 1997-2004, for whole class groups using Burt Individual Word Reading Test and Schonell Test for spelling

Reception	Pupil Numbers	Reading + months	Spelling +months
Summer 1997	66	+6	+6
Summer 1998	90	+12	+17
Summer 1999	85	+17	+18
Summer 2000	86	+16	+18
Summer 2001	84	+16	+18
Summer 2002	89	+15	+16
Summer 2003	88	+15	+15
Summer 2004	86	+15	+15

Longitudinal Research to Key Stage 1 SATs and Key Stage 2 SATs in 2003 and 2004 (4)

The children who started with the systematic, synthetic phonics programme *Sound Discovery*® in Reception were followed up to the end of Key Stage 1 and to the end of their primary education. The results are summarised below in Tables 3, 4 and 5. No child was disapplied from the tests or results.

2003: For Key Stage 1, Level 2+ results of 95% for reading and writing were significantly high nationally. 40% Level 3 reading was significantly high and note that both boys and girls were reading equally as well. 24% Level 3 boys' writing was significantly high, and note the comparison with 8% boys' writing for the Local Authority. These results are summarised in Table 3. Figures in bold with an asterisk are statistically significant.

Table 3: Research SATs results Key Stage 1, 2003 for large primary school

Key Stage 1							
Reading	Level 2+	95%**			Local Authority		
	Level 2B+	88%					
	Level 3	40%**	Girls 40%**	Boys 39%**			
Writing	Level 2+	95%**					
	Level 2B+	88%					
	Level 3	31%	Girls 35%	Boys 24%**		Girls 20%	Boys 8%

2003: For Key Stage 2, a third of the boys achieved Level 5 writing which was very significantly high nationally, and note the comparison with 9.5% boys' writing for the Local Authority. These results are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Research SATs results Key Stage 2, 2003 for large primary school

Key Stage 2						
English	Level 4+	89.4%	Girls	Boys	Local Authority	
			90.9%	87.9%		
	Level 5 Writing	27.3%	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
			21.2%	33.3%**	19.4%	<u>9.5%</u>

2004: For Key Stage 2, Level 4+ (94%) and Level 5+ (65%) results for English were statistically above national averages. It was perhaps even more exciting that there was no score below Level 3B and no severe difficulties with literacy, which was also significant statistically. All the children were able to transfer to their Secondary schools equipped to access the curriculum. There was no dyslexia (as defined by the British Psychological Society whose working definition focuses on literacy learning at the 'word level' and states that "*dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty*"). These results are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Research SATs results Key Stage 2 for English, 2004 for large primary school

	Level 4+	Level 5+	Level 3	Below Level 3B	Level 2 and below
Study School	94%**	65%**	6%	0%**	0%
Local Authority	82%	29%			
Similar Schools	80%	28%			
England	77%	26%	15%		7%

Conclusions

These studies with Reception children demonstrate that teaching with a government approved systematic, synthetic phonics programme can be a brilliant opportunity to drive up reading standards. There is no evidence to indicate that such phonics teaching is a "straightjacket" or that it will "switch off" children from a love of reading books.

On the contrary, children taught in this way pick up reading quickly. They become enthusiastic and confident in their reading and are more able and willing to engage in the world of reading around them. Teaching in this way also appears to be more powerful than potential barriers to learning experienced by vulnerable groups such as boys, children with summer birthdays, children entitled to free school meals, travellers and children with English as an additional language. Children who are slow-to-start, for a

variety of possible reasons, can be identified early and are responsive to catch-up intervention in small groups, also using synthetic phonics teaching. These early strugglers were shown to close the gap with both reading and spelling.

Longitudinal studies also showed that children do not lose their early advantage but go on to achieve above national expectations for reading and writing throughout their primary schooling, equipping them for a more successful Secondary transfer. Boys' writing was found to be particularly successful.

Phonics teaching is not an end in itself. It is the key that unlocks the literacy engine so that children are more able to access a wide range of texts thus contributing to their educational achievement.

Some critics of synthetic phonics point to the complexity of written English saying that children have to go further than being able to sound out words phonetically. But good synthetic phonics programmes, such as those approved by the government, take the complexity of the English written code seriously. They systematically and explicitly teach both the advanced as well as the basic alphabetic code.

Likewise some critics of synthetic phonics point out that phonic recognition, although important, is only a part of learning to read English. But again good synthetic phonics programmes will include strands that develop vocabulary and reading comprehension and they will provide structured decodable texts and structured writing practice.

The other government initiative, the Year 1 phonics screening check (5), should assist in the process of raising standards. It will focus schools' efforts on teaching children to read early in their schooling when they are most receptive. The phonics screening check will assist in the identification of children who are struggling, so that they can receive extra help to catch up. As Nick Gibb has said, this will enable every child "to go on to enjoy a lifetime's love of reading rather than a lifelong struggle."

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