



Phonics instruction and early reading: professional views from the classroom

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1. Introduction: Phonics and early reading in the UK

The reading wars have a long history. At least since the publication in 1955 of Rudolph Flesch's controversial book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, there has been intense professional debate on the effectiveness of various methods of introducing young children to reading (Soler & Openshaw 2006:20). In recent years, government in the UK and in some other English-speaking countries has promoted the teaching of "synthetic phonics" as the key to success in training young readers. In this approach (sometimes known also as "systematic phonics"), the pupil learns the correspondences between sounds (phonemes) and letters: for example, pronouncing each phoneme in *shop* /sh/-/o/-/p/ and then blending those phonemes to produce the word (DfE 2011a). The 2006 *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* recommended that synthetic phonics should be taught "discretely" and as the "prime approach" (Rose 2006). A 2010 report by Ofsted (the schools inspection agency) declared that "the best primary schools in England teach virtually every child to read", and claimed that a sample of 12 of these schools demonstrates that their success is based on "a very rigorous and sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, and writing and spelling through systematic phonics" (Ofsted 2010:4). In April 2011, primary schools in the UK were offered government funding to match their own spending (up to £3000) on "materials which meet the Department of Education's criteria for an effective phonics programme" (DfE 2011b). In September of the same year, the government announced that a new, statutory phonics screening check for all children in Year 1 would be introduced immediately, the first being administered later in the 2011-12 academic year. Its purpose would be "to confirm that all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard". Children who have not reached this level "should receive extra support from their school to ensure they can improve their decoding skills, and will then have the opportunity to retake the phonics screening check" (STA 2011).

A Department for Education (DfE) "evidence paper" of late 2011, *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading*, written (according to the properties of the document) by L. Bryant-Smith, gives a rationale for all this effort and expenditure. Synthetic phonics, it claims, is the solution to educational failure and thus to high levels of youth unemployment. The prevalence of poor literacy attainment in children excluded from school is very high. England's performance in the PISA tables of international reading achievement has recently declined. "Reading can change lives," the paper declares, "and we are committed to improving the teaching of reading in reception and year 1 of primary school." The paper cites (but does not reference) in support of its argument the *Report* of the US National Reading Panel (2000a, 2000b); Johnson and Watson's (2005) Clackmannanshire study; the *Final Research Report* (2007) of the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative; and the Australian report

Teaching Reading (2005), as well as the Rose and Ofsted reports outlined above (DfE 2011a).

However, the drive to establish “synthetic phonics” as the primary method of reading instruction in the first year of school has not been widely welcomed by teachers and academics. The phonics check has attracted particular criticism, much of it focused on the inclusion of pseudo-words without referential meaning: the purpose of these is to test children's ability to apply the grapheme-phoneme correspondences that they have learned. According to several respondents to a survey of schools conducted by Sheffield Hallam University on behalf of the United Kingdom Literacy Association, the non-words confuse children who have been taught (in the words of one teacher) “to try to make sense of what they read”. Arguing that “there is more to reading than just phonics”, the UKLA report finds that the phonics check disadvantages successful readers; misidentifies pupils who are beyond this stage of development as readers; undermines pupils’ confidence as readers; and has negative implications for relationships with parents (UKLA 2012).

A study of the phonics check by the Oxford Department of Experimental Psychology (Oxford 2012) found that it was valid but unnecessary. These researchers report that the test does identify school children in year 1 who may be falling behind in learning to read, but is no more informative than teacher assessments already in place. They argue that on-going monitoring of pupils, already in place in the majority of schools, is more beneficial to pupils and teachers. The cost and time involved in administering the test are distinct disadvantages, and the level at which children are deemed to meet the appropriate standard is too high. Most concerning is the lack of funding for helping children who fail to reach the standard. Maggie Snowling, the lead researcher, comments: “Ethically I think it is questionable to offer screening with no prescribed course of action for those who are identified as at risk.”

Preparing their *First Interim Report* in an ongoing evaluation of the phonics screening check, Walker *et al* (2013) conducted baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 904 year 1 teachers, and conducted case-study interviews with staff in 14 primary schools. These researchers found that more than 90 per cent of teachers teach phonics to all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, more often than not using *Letters and Sounds* as their core programme. (This publication was made available to schools in 2007 as part of the National Primary Strategy.) More than half (53%) of teachers say that they use a systematic synthetic phonics programme as the prime approach to decoding print, although the researchers state that these claims are not wholly consistent with other data from the survey. The majority of case-study schools have given staff either external or internal training in teaching phonics.

Walker *et al* (2013) found that teachers are overwhelmingly positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, and about its contribution towards early reading development. However, they say that this is not necessarily an endorsement of the method of teaching phonics recommended by the DfE (2011a), where teachers are enjoined to “[teach] children the simplest sounds first and [progress] all the way through to the most complex combinations of letters”. Nine out of ten of the literacy coordinators surveyed by Walker *et al* feel that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. This, say the authors, suggests that the reported level of agreement with systematic phonics actually represents support of

the more general use of phonics within the primary classroom, and that there is widespread misunderstanding of the term “systematic synthetic phonics” and the highly focused and discrete approach to early reading it is said to represent.

In view of this allegation that many teachers misunderstand the practice of phonics instruction, it is important to note that none of the papers and reports cited above states that “systematic, synthetic phonics” alone are sufficient to establish successful early readers. Rose (2006) recommends that synthetic phonics should be taught “discretely” and as the “prime approach”; but this recommendation is preceded by a call for the priority provision of guidance on “developing children’s speaking and listening skills”; and it is followed by a further recommendation that:

Phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing and enlarging children’s stock of words.

Ofsted’s (2010) accounts of the phonic methods adopted by the 12 exemplary schools also acknowledge the importance of complementary strategies. The reported view of one school is that “children do not become fluent readers by using one skill alone”. This school, we are informed, supplements phonic instruction by guided reading and “real books” to take home. Another provides boxes of books in every class and uses an unusually long lunch period for individual and guided reading. A third (nursery) school places “great emphasis on story time”:

The children enjoy listening to five high-quality books each term from Reception to Year 2 - 15 in the course of a year. Life in the nursery contains a lot of imaginative play, role-play and some practice of phonics.

“Some practice of phonics” is hardly an endorsement of a monocular approach to early reading. The Department for Education’s (2011a) “evidence paper”, *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading*, itself states: “Phonics teaching must be embedded in a language-rich curriculum”. The US National Reading Panel (2000a, 2000b), the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative *Final Research Report* (2007) and the Australian report *Teaching Reading* (2005) all make similar caveats. Johnston and Watson’s Clackmannanshire study (2005) finds a correlation between children’s word reading and spelling in Primary 7 and the quantity of children’s and adults’ books available in their home.

2. The NATE Survey

Notwithstanding the presence of these caveats in the officially cited research, the instruction to teachers to use synthetic phonics as the core reading method in the first year - and the introduction of the phonics check - has received a strongly critical response from the profession. In order to gauge the extent, reasons for and consequences of this disquiet, in 2012 the Primary Committee of the National Association for the Teaching of English worked with the Association’s Research Officer to construct an on-line survey of teachers’ views and practices in relation to the teaching and assessment of early reading. The survey was accessible from the NATE website during the year April 2012 to April 2013; members were informed of it through newsletters and Twitter postings. 615 individuals started the survey and 445 completed it. Respondents were asked their job title; age range taught; whether their

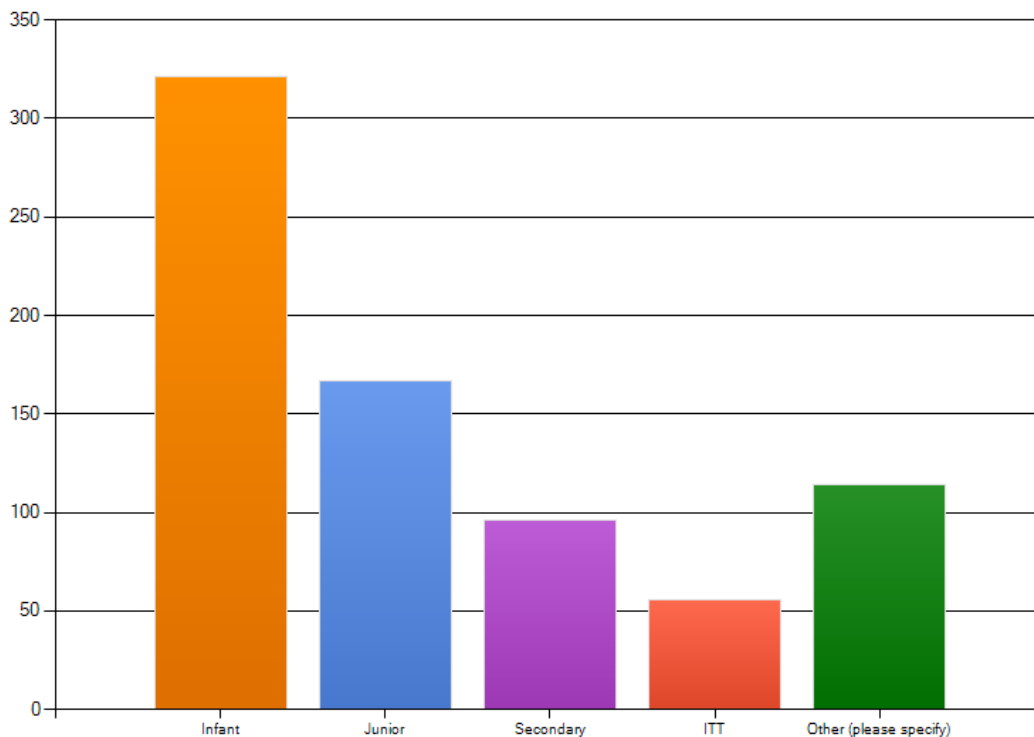
school had used the £3000 match funding grant; the importance and time given to phonics instruction in their school; which scheme/programme (if any) had been adopted by their school; any supplementary materials used; whether their school had recently changed scheme/programme; what training they had received. In relation to their own practice, they were also asked what weight they placed on phonics when assessing overall reading levels; whether the teaching of phonics impacted on the ways they taught reading and writing, and on the teaching of other subjects; and the impact (if any) that the increased focus on the teaching of phonics had had on comprehension, higher order reading skills, writing and spelling. Other questions included the provision of pupil support and the focus of any school inspection recently experienced. Finally - after giving their views on the purposes of the phonics check and on the way the results should be communicated to parents - respondents were offered an opportunity to communicate any further thoughts or concerns about these issues.

2.1 Respondents and their schools

Figure 1 represents the numbers of respondents working with pupils of various ages. More than half teach in infant schools. 56 (9.1%) are involved in initial teacher training. 114 (18.6%) teach in universities or work in other educational-related settings, including local authorities and consultancy services.

Figure 1:

What age groups do you teach?

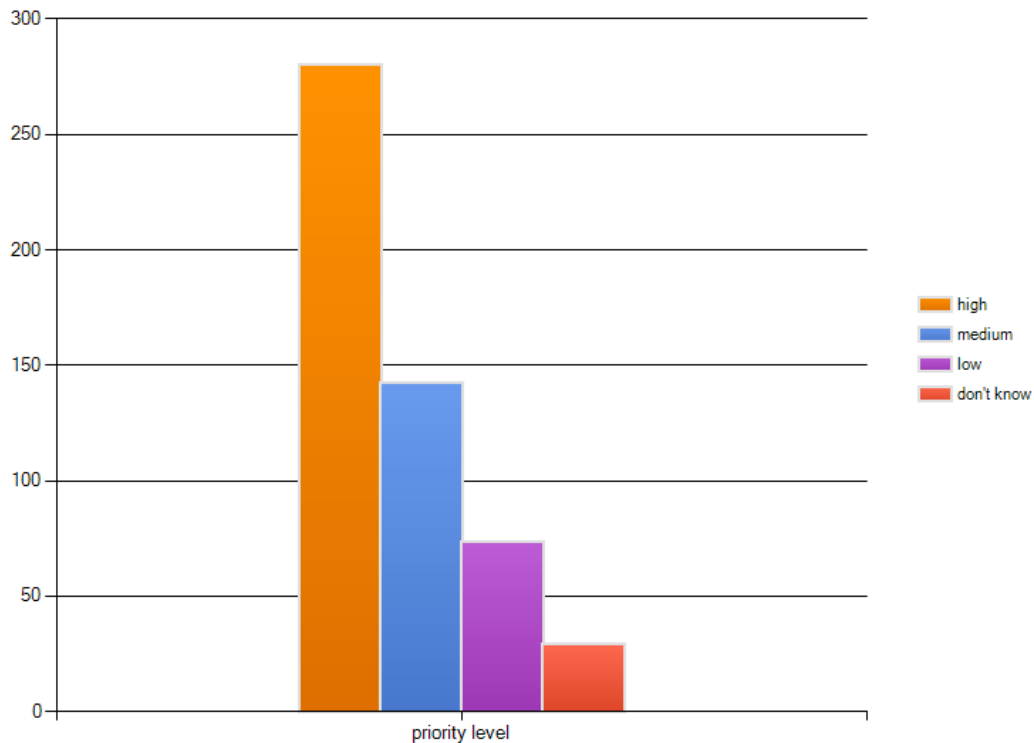


Of the 321 infant teachers, 137 (42.7%) of respondents say that their schools have used the £3,000 match-funding grant for phonics materials, while 71 (22.1%) say that their schools have not; 85 (26.5%) don't know, and 28 (8.7%) say that the question does not apply to them.

2.2 Importance of phonics in the curriculum

Figure 2 summarises respondents' views of the priority given to phonics in their institution.

Figure 2: How high a priority are phonics in your school/ department?



A large majority of infant teachers (203, or 68.4%) say that phonics is a high priority in their school or department, only 4 (1.3%) giving it a low priority. In view of this, it is noteworthy that the similar numbers of teachers (200, or 67.3%) say that their school devotes fewer than five hours a week to the teaching of phonics. 68 (22.9%) say that their school devotes approximately five hours a week, while 7 (2.4%) say that their school devotes more than five hours.

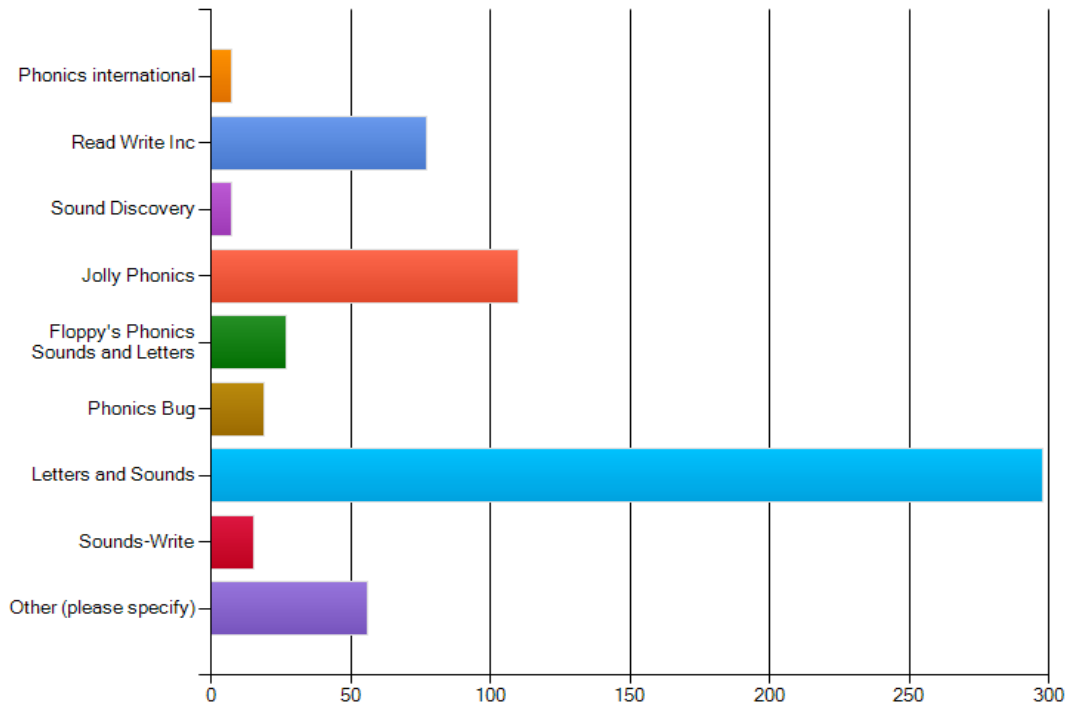
A majority of junior teachers (86, or 57.7%) also say that phonics is a high priority in their school, only 5 (3.4%) giving it a low priority. The relative amount of time devoted by junior teachers to teaching phonics follows a similar pattern to that of the infant teachers. 85 respondents (57%) say that their school devotes fewer than five hours; 34 (22.8%) estimate the time as five hours; and 5 (3.4%) as more than five hours.

Interestingly, 8 secondary teachers (11.3% of secondary respondents) say that phonics is a high priority in their school or department, while 13 secondary teachers (18.3%) give it medium priority. 27 initial training tutors (60%) say that phonics is a high priority in their department, but only 12 (26.7%) devote any class time to teaching phonics, and nearly all (11) say that this totals five hours per week or fewer. 31 (68.9%) say that the question "How much weekly class time is devoted to the teaching of phonics?" does not apply to them. This is perhaps surprising in view of the emphasis currently placed by Ofsted on the quality of the phonics element in initial teacher training (Noble-Rogers 2011).

2.3 Teaching materials

367 (70%) of respondents say that they use a scheme or programme to teach phonics. The great majority of infant teachers (272, or 91.6%) say that they do so. Figure 3 shows the relative popularity of the most commonly used phonics materials:

Figure 3: If you do use a phonics scheme/programme, which do you use (tick all that apply)?



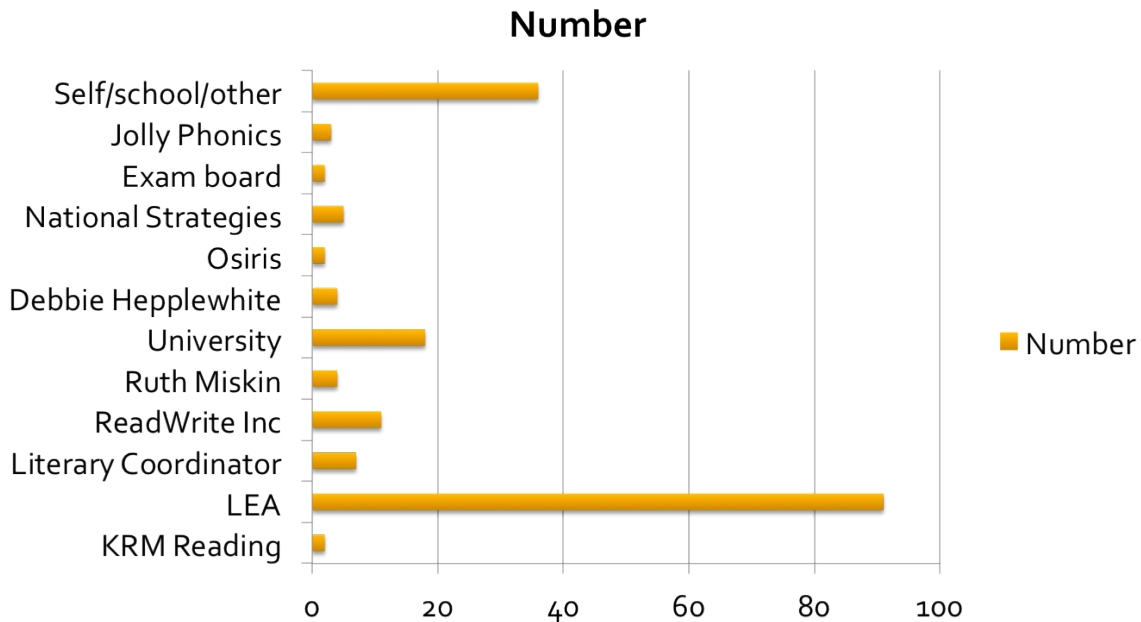
Walker *et al* also found that *Letters and Sounds* has a predominant place in early years phonics teaching, often being used as a basic structure from which adaptations are made according to the needs of a particular cohort. (The original publication was, of course, made available to schools in 2007 as part of the National Primary Strategy.) Their study also found that Jolly Phonics was also frequently used in schools, “particularly for use in Reception or with those children who were struggling with phonics” (2013: 23).

Most respondents have not changed their phonics scheme during the preceding eighteen months, but the 88 (16.8%) who have changed their scheme have done so for a number of reasons: to standardise provision with the feeder or successor school; to align with the expectations of the phonics check; to follow advice from Ofsted; or to gain government funding. A small number of schools previously had no scheme in place. A classroom assistant writes ironically: “I think the reason was to waste more time and money.” She explains: “Phonics should be optional. Year 1 pupils who can read 5 syllable words and understand text to the extent of noticing errors in grammar, or continuity of text, should not have to dragged down - in skills and enthusiasm - by phonics.”

2.4 Training

Most infant teachers (80.4%) and junior teachers (73%) have received training to teach phonics (Figure 4). By far the most common provider is the local education authority, followed by self- or school-generated training and university provision. The most popular commercial provider (cited by 12 respondents) is ReadWrite Inc.

Figure 4: Training providers



2.5 Assessing reading

A large majority of respondents (84%) state that phonic awareness is one of a range of indicators used when assessing children's reading levels. 3.3% think it the most important factor, and 3.7% think it not important. When only infant teachers' responses to this question are considered, 93% think phonics one of a range of indicators, 3.2% think it most important, and 1.8% think it unimportant.

2.6 Impact of phonics on teaching reading and writing

A majority of infant teachers (173, or 60.7%) say that the teaching of phonics has impacted on their teaching of reading and writing more generally, but 91 (31.9%) say that it has not. The balance of responses amongst junior teachers is much more even: 43.8% think their teaching has been affected, and 46.7% think it has not. About 5% of respondents list positive effects they have found. These notes include:

- Children are able to decode - helps spelling.
- Children write more freely.
- I link phonics with spelling and development of reading skills.
- Children are more confident - their phonic knowledge has improved their 'flow' when writing.
- Better writing skills in other subjects.
- Helps children cope with broader curriculum.

On the other hand, 6% of respondents list negative effects:

- Children are more robotic at reading and find inferential and picture clues more difficult to use.

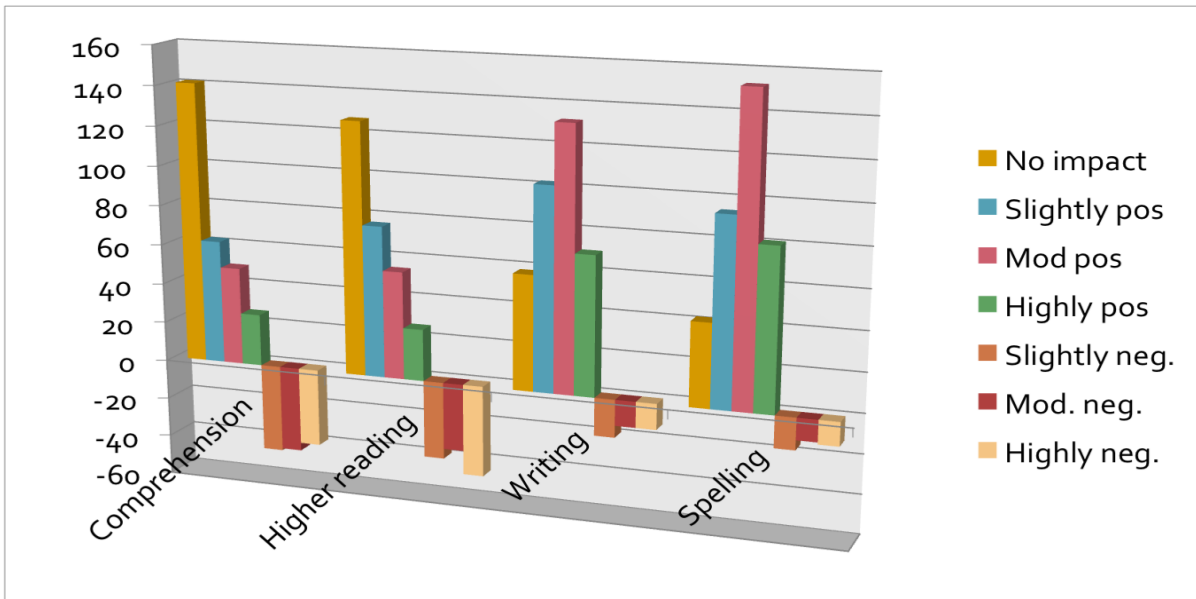
I have to teach reading through phonics books only.
 Over emphasis on phonics has resulted in poor comprehension and spelling in year 3.
 Less time for reading stories, listening to readers.
 Too much teaching to Year 1 phonics test.

One teacher reports: “I remind the children of the phonemes in words when teaching writing across the curriculum.” Another says that it is now increasingly important to focus children on all other available cues, to avoid their “barking at print”.

2.7 Impact of phonics on reading and writing skills

Asked specifically about reading and writing skills, 61.3% of infant teachers say that there has been no impact or negative impact on pupils’ comprehension, while 33.7% think the effect on comprehension has been slightly, moderately or highly positive. A similar proportion (54.6%) of infant teachers think that higher order reading has shown no change or has been negatively affected, while 40% report positive effects. 56.7% of junior teachers report no effect or negative affect on comprehension and 51.8% report no effect or negative effect on higher order reading; positive assessments by junior teachers of pupils’ improvement in comprehension and higher reading total 35.3% and 40.2% respectively. There is a significantly more positive assessment by both groups of teachers of the effect of phonics on pupils’ writing and spelling. 80.3% of infant teachers and 74.5% of junior teachers think that writing has been positively affected, while 82.1% of infant teachers and 84.7% of junior teachers register improvements in spelling. These results are presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Impact on reading and writing skills



2.8 Pupils’ progress and support

Respondents were asked whether pupils whose phonic skills appear weaker than their understanding are held back in reading programmes. 30% of infant teachers and 33.6% of junior teachers think this is the case, while 57.4% of infant teachers and 49.3% of junior teachers think this does not occur. 85.2% of infant teachers and 85.8% of junior

teachers say that interventions are in place to support children who need help with phonics.

2.9 School inspections

40 infant teachers (14.4% of respondents) report that a recent school inspection has focused specifically on phonics. 19 junior teachers (14.2%) make a similar report. Only 7.1% of respondents report that recent single subject inspections have made reference to phonics. There is a majority of “not applicable” responses to these questions.

2.10 Purpose of the test; communication to parents

Asked for what purposes the test should be used, a majority of respondents (298, or 64.5%) say that it should not be used. 119 (25.8%) say that it should be used to assess individual children’s attainment, while 19 (4.1%) think it should be used to assess overall school attainment. 183 (39.6%) of respondents say that the results should be used internally and not communicated to parents; 177 (38.3%) say that the results could be communicated verbally (in meetings with parents) and 65 (14.1%) say they should be communicated in writing. A large majority (396, or 85.7%) agree that the results should not be published.

3. Thoughts and concerns

253 out of 615 respondents accepted the invitation to elaborate their thoughts and concerns about these issues. These responses (some of which are several hundred words in length) were thematically analysed by the Research Officer and by a research psychologist. The two researchers conferred only after each had made their own analysis. This process produced an inter-rater reliability of 80% and agreement on two overall themes, each subsuming a number of agreed sub-themes (Sections 3.1 and 3.2). A number of issues raised could not be included in either theme and are reported separately (Section 3.3).

3.1 Theme 1: Reading

Many respondents consider the issues in the light of their professional understanding of the process of learning to read. Their views have been analysed under the following six sub-themes.

3.1.1 Positive support for phonics

More than 7% of respondents express strong support for the teaching of phonics on the grounds that it gives children basic skills upon which their later learning will depend. “Early phonics are key to listening skills and learning the concept of reading,” writes a pre-school nursery manager. “Without this skill,” declares a phase leader in an infant school, “children will not be able to have opinions about text, deduce information or relate their lives to aspects of written stories.” An infant class teacher believes that an emphasis on phonics instruction will correct the errors of the past: “Too many children have been let down ... and their failure has been ... blamed on things like learning difficulties and poverty when actually ... ineffective methods have been the main problems.” A special learning difficulties tutor writes:

I come across many children who are not able to work out unfamiliar words because of a lack of phonic skills. These children can be missed as they use guessing and context, and it is not until later that they are picked up as having difficulties.

An early years literacy consultant reports: “The greater emphasis on phonics is ensuring that children can decode well in the early stages of reading.” Anticipating a familiar criticism of the method, s/he adds: “Comprehension can be well taught alongside phonics.”

3.1.2 Phonics is only part of reading

Not one respondent doubts that phonic awareness matters in reading, but more than 66% express the view that it is only part of the process. Many highlight the importance of contextual knowledge and of pleasurable activity. In the words of an ITT subject leader:

Children need to be introduced to language in context and be introduced to activities which encourage them to want to read and write and to enjoy reading and writing. Phonics in isolation is a sterile exercise.

Several describe phonics as one of many useful reading strategies. A secondary class teacher writes:

Good readers use grapho-phonics, syntactic and semantic cues. Poor readers use only grapho-phonics. Focusing on one cue system can't but harm student progress.

3.1.3 Importance of meaning

More than 25% of respondents emphasise the importance of reading for meaning. A researcher writes:

Readers construct meaning from text by employing several cuing systems. When phonics becomes the centre of reading instruction, those other cuing systems are often neglected.

This view is supported by a Reading Recovery Teacher Leader who says that he works with children who are “chronically confused about it all and read as if they are decoding phonemes and that makes sense”.

3.1.4 Research and evidence

More than 5% of respondents query the reliability and completeness of the evidence presented in favour of systematic synthetic phonics. A university teacher of English as a Second Language expresses doubts about the Clackmannanshire experiment in terms of the Hawthorne effect (Mayo 1949): “Any programme (such as the Clackmannanshire one on phonics) that has a strong bond between adult (teacher) and child when reading will give greater progress than when this is not undertaken!” A Primary head teacher is worried that a change in practice is being forced on schools “when there is no empirical evidence that it actually works”.

3.1.5 Learning and individual differences

A significant number of respondents - more than 16% - are concerned that exclusive early years instruction in systematic synthetic phonics disregards the different aptitudes and capacities of individual children. “All children do not learn to read via phonics. It is setting children up to FAIL before they have really begun their

education,” declares the Chair of Governors of a Junior School. A former teacher of the deaf (as she describes herself), now a senior leader in a primary school, reports that she has had years of experience teaching deaf children to become good readers - “despite the fact that they cannot hear many of the phonemes they are reading.” A private tutor writes: “There is so much more to learn than phonics for an autistic student.” “I have spent an inordinate amount of time this year,” writes a senior infant teacher, “on phonics as opposed to providing for the wide ranging needs of my Reception and Year 1 Class.”

3.1.6 Respondents’ own children

The views of more than one per cent of respondents are affected by their own child’s school experience of phonics instruction. “I was teaching phonics as requested by my school without giving it too much thought,” writes an infant teacher, “until my own daughter began in reception this year! ... I have taught her to read at home in the good old fashioned way as she does not understand the phonics.” A secondary head of department is dismayed that her daughter, who has “excellent visual memory skills”, is “being forced to use another system of reading INSTEAD of supplementing her preferred technique”. An advisory teacher writes simply: “My eldest son (level 5 in year 5) was bored rigid by phonics.”

3.2 Theme 2: the Phonics Check

As would be expected, the phonics check is the focus of many responses. These too have been analysed under a number of sub-themes.

3.2.1 Nonsense words and high achievers

More than 10% of respondents are concerned about the effect of the nonsense words on more proficient readers: many feel that the test disadvantages such readers, who try to make sense of the words by relating them to previous knowledge other than phonic decoding. Some find that (in the words of an infant teacher) “most of my good readers actually failed because of the nonsense words”. A head teacher reports: “The only child not to reach the ‘standard’ is an able reader who clearly does not use phonics!” An infant teacher finds: “Children fail who are fluent readers and assessed at NC level 2C - because they use other strategies such as contextual cues.”

3.2.3 Nonsense words and low achievers

More than 8% of respondents are concerned at the effect of the test on low achievers. Some report working with non-reading pupils who can decode letter-sound correspondences well enough to gain a good mark in the test. Others feel that the made-up words merely make the task of the less able more daunting. One head teacher decided, as a result of his less able pupils’ performance on the test, that they hadn’t developed the wealth of reading skills needed. “Next year,” he writes, “we are going to have a major drive on stories and vocabulary!”

3.2.4 Nonsense words and bilingual children

A cross-phase consultant speaks for more than 5% of respondents when he points out: “[Phonics] can be particularly inappropriate for bilingual learners who can have different phonic systems and need to develop vocabulary and understanding of what they read.” A focus on decoding, writes an English as an Additional Language (EAL) leader, “is harmful to EAL because it detracts from comprehension.” An infant teacher

writes in similar terms: “Using non words in the phonics test is very confusing for [EAL] children ... they try to make the words make sense, so ‘fail’.”

3.2.5 “Too young”

More than 14% of respondents comment on the age of the children taking the test. Some compare the experience of other countries where children of similar age are not given formal schooling and assessment. “I feel that formal phonics testing will affect the quality of Early Education - stopping it being play based,” says a senior infant teacher. Several respondents are concerned about what one calls the “incredibly high” pass rate of 32/40. Failure at such an early age will, they fear, have insidious effects. “Those who don’t hit the required standard will become failures at an early age and this result will be communicated to parents, despite the fact that they may be making steady reading progress,” says an infant teacher.

3.2.6 Time and expense

More than 17% of respondents write negatively about the amount of time devoted to preparing for and administering the phonics check. “So much time is spent on this,” writes an EAL support teacher, “to the detriment of experiential learning which can build both vocabulary and concepts.” An infant teacher and subject leader asks: “Is the same amount of time spent on reading aloud to children so they develop a love of stories, and an ear for the rhythm of language?” “[The check] took three days and we learned nothing new from this”, says an infant teacher. “It seemed a waste of our time and resources.” More than 5% of respondents criticise the cost of preparing and running the check. “The money ... should have been spent so much more wisely on teaching,” says an Infant teacher. A director of collaborative learning claims: “Money spent on phonics material is preventing schools from buying books.” A local authority adviser does not believe that the time and money invested in the test is well spent, or the best way to raise standards in reading and writing.

3.2.7 “It tells me nothing that I don’t already know”

More than 13% of respondents say that the test tells them nothing that they don’t already know. Several teachers claim that they know “where a child is” in phonic awareness through continuous teacher assessment. One infant teacher points out that the narrow focus of the test renders it unhelpful: “It certainly doesn’t relate to reading skills and reading is about comprehension and understanding.” Several respondents feel that the test demonstrates a lack of belief in their professional expertise. “It has been an utter waste of time,” states an infant subject leader. “The results only confirmed what we already knew and in some cases the children under-achieved by a considerable amount. Would the government please accept our professional expertise?” This call for recognition of teachers’ capability to make assessments of their pupils’ attainment is supported by the findings of the Oxford researchers (Oxford 2012).

3.3 Other issues

3.3.1 Phonics in secondary education

More than 3% of respondents comment on the relevance of phonics instruction to secondary education. Some anticipate (in the words of a secondary senior leader) “more teaching of phonics by secondary schools for those students that have not ‘got it’ in primary school”. A secondary teacher comments that this would require relevant

staff training - and that it should be “a whole school issue, not just an English issue”. A secondary PGCE tutor warns: “The current compulsory focus [in initial teacher training] on teaching phonics even as part of the secondary PGCE programme risks closing down the academic debate about the pedagogy of early reading.” In general, secondary teachers see little gain in training secondary teachers in synthetic phonics. “Surely at this point,” says a secondary teacher, “phonic intervention does not work.” “[It is more important to] develop pupils' language skills across the curriculum,” says a secondary PGCE co-ordinator.

3.3.2 Teacher education

More than 4% of respondents comment on teacher education. A minority think that better training in phonics is needed. “I think that the new emphasis on phonics is very helpful but has not been backed up with training for teachers,” writes an infant teacher. “Other teachers in my school are not so positive as me about phonics but I think they are stuck in their ineffective ways.” Others are more critical of the pressure placed on university departments of education by the inspection authority. An ITT tutor comments: “It is worrying that university departments are held to account for their teaching of phonics without an appreciation that any university should, in fact, be looking laterally and objectively at areas of study.” A head teacher criticises the presentation in a government training film of a phoneme /y/ -/e/-/d/ that, he says, does not exist in any English word: in his view, the grapheme examples given (played, eyed) “indicate the nonsense of pure phonics instruction”. “The video training materials,” says a local authority manager, “are ludicrous. [...] Clearly the real purpose of the entire exercise is to do even more monitoring of schools.”

3.3.3 Professionalism and the political dimension

More than 12% of respondents comment on the political dimension of the phonics debate. More than 9% mention professionalism, usually in the context of government intervention. “It would be encouraging,” says a primary head, “if the politicians would leave us alone to do the job we love and are trained for.” “It’s simply wrong,” says a senior lecturer in ITT, “that government should be promoting a single approach to the teaching of reading, especially a commercial package, with only very selected research evidence to support its effectiveness.” “Phonics instruction,” writes an HE lecturer, “is one of many possible classroom teaching techniques that a classroom teacher might employ, depending on his or her professional judgment about individual students' needs. It should not be mandated for everyone, nor tested.” A local authority manager writes with wry humour: “If they are still in power in another 6 years, they can witness SATs results plummet ... Then they can p-a-t each other on the b-a-ck and congratulate themselves on yet another ruined generation.”

The many responses on the themes of professionalism and political interference reflect a strong feeling of professional pride. “The government is contemptuous,” writes an ITT subject leader, “of the understanding of teachers and academics.” “Would the government please accept our professional expertise,” asks an infant teacher, “and see our teacher assessments as accurate in order to save the extra stress on all concerned!” Some respondents point to an ideological basis of the phonics programme. In the words of a secondary teacher: “Phonics is not a cure for social inequality, particularly in relation to exposure to and interaction with language.” An ITT subject leader picks up the theme of inequality and turns it back on its proponents. He declares: “Phonics is the latest policy fad that [politicians] have fixed

on as the magic bullet to deal with the achievement 'levels' of other people's children.”

4. Discussion

No respondent to the survey regards phonics instruction in early years education as unnecessary, and there is significant support for the view that phonics should be the prime focus of teaching beginning readers. Several people agree with the assertion of the DfE evidence paper (DfE 2011a) that the ability to decode grapheme/phoneme correspondences is the first requirement for success in reading. Some respondents who work with children with special learning difficulties believe that early phonic instruction is particularly important for the progress of such children. A large majority of both infant and junior teachers report positive effects on their pupils' writing and spelling, and about a third of each group report positive effects on pupils' comprehension and higher reading skills. But the view of more than two-thirds of respondents is that, while phonic decoding is an important part of learning to read, other strategies are also vital. More than a quarter of respondents emphasise the importance of reading for meaning, and there is much concern that an overemphasis on phonics leads to an unbalanced reading curriculum in which other reading skills such as prediction and contextual information are not taken into account. In the view of many, a phonics approach leads to less able children "barking at print" while good readers lose motivation and fail to achieve appropriate assessment results. Some children, it is alleged, develop a style of "reading" that consists merely of phonic decoding. There is less time for reading stories and for listening to young readers, and more time is taken up by "teaching to the test". In such classrooms, respondents argue, the overall quality of pupils' literacy experience declines.

More than a quarter of respondents are concerned that an over-emphasis on phonics teaching and testing fails to take into account the needs and capacities of particular children. Children for whom English is a second language require an emphasis on textual understanding; phonics approaches fail to provide visual scaffolding to support their learning and these children find it hard to progress under a regime that, because of the imperative of the test, occupies the greater amount of classroom time. Many respondents express concerns that systematic phonics instruction creates more problems for struggling readers, as their cognitive energies are spent trying to sound out words: they therefore miss the meaning of the text. Several commentators believe that such children need a variety of different strategies in order to progress. Many teachers observe that children of all abilities are less motivated by reading schemes than by real books, as these encourage reading for interest and enjoyment. A teacher of deaf children points out that her pupils cannot hear phonemes; yet they go on to become fluent readers.

Several respondents say that the phonics check is particularly discouraging for more able readers who try to make sense of the nonsense words and sometimes fail the test. In some cases, able readers achieve lower scores than low ability readers who have learned to "sound out" words. Parents of fluent readers report their children's worry and upset at not being able to understand the nonsense words. There is general agreement that the "check" is a waste of time and does not inform teachers of anything that they do not already know. There is also considerable concern about the effect of her pass/fail test on such young children and, indeed, on their parents; the

overwhelming view is that any communication with parents about their children's scores should be informal and that the results of the test should not be published. Many early years teachers and others believe that the effect of the "check" will be to label young children as failures and to discourage them from reading. As ever, assessment procedures affect teaching and learning practices; some respondents are concerned that the play-based quality of early years education will be affected.

Speaking from professional knowledge and experience of the daily work of teaching young children to read, of assessing their progress, and of making strategic interventions where required, many respondents resent that their judgment and knowledge are not recognised. They question the Department for Education's evidence for its insistence on an exclusively phonic approach to early reading. As this paper has shown, research cited by the DfE does not in fact recommend a focus on "systematic synthetic phonics" to the exclusion of all other modes of textual response. They also resent the imposition of an expensive, time-consuming and disruptive "phonics check" on year one pupils. This implies a lack of trust in their professional judgement and in school-based assessment procedures that, as the Oxford researchers (Oxford 2012) noted, are widely established.

Respondents are divided as to the role and effectiveness of teacher education with respect to phonics. A few hold a view that their fellow teachers lack knowledge of the principle and practice of synthetic phonics, and that more training is needed. Others, however, are concerned that ITT has become compromised by pressure from the Inspectorate and that university tutors are no longer in a position to look objectively at approaches to the teaching of reading. A small number of respondents from the secondary sector are concerned that secondary schools will need to develop capacity to teach phonics and that adequate training will be needed; while a similar number believe that to reprise phonics training in the secondary school would be counter-productive.

Many teachers are concerned with the political dimension of these issues. They resent the imposition of a single approach to the teaching of reading that has commercial advantages for publishers who follow the official line. Some point out that phonics instruction is not an answer to all social ills, and that those in power see it as a remedy for the deficiencies of other people's children.

A university researcher takes the opportunity presented by the survey to set out a summary case against an exclusively phonic approach to early reading:

English is not a phonetically regular language. It does not have a single letter/sound correlation. The teaching of phonics in a systematic way often, therefore, creates more problems for struggling readers. Much of their cognitive energies are spent trying to sound out words, apply phonics rules that are not applicable, and generally misdirect their focus from the true act of reading - constructing meaning. Readers construct meaning from text by employing several cuing systems. When phonics becomes the centre of reading instruction, those other cuing systems are often neglected. Children learn to read by engaging in texts that are read aloud to them, that they can read on their own and with the help of others. Over-complicating the act of reading and reading instruction fails to work. Assessments of phonemic awareness and phonics eat time, misplace instruction, and set fragile readers further behind.

As has been pointed out in Section 1 above, all the research evidence cited by the DfE to support the phonics programme is careful to insist that phonics instruction must be embedded within a language-rich curriculum that includes ‘real’ texts and allows children to read for pleasure and understanding. It is also evident, from the responses to the NATE survey, that virtually no early years teacher regards phonics instruction as intrinsically worthless. Given what appears to be a measure of professional agreement on the place of phonics in early years instruction, the strength of feeling revealed by the NATE survey requires explanation.

It is clear from the responses to the survey that the profession is outraged by the simplistic concept of literacy (and the relation of literacy to wider society) rationalised by such documents as the DfE’s evidence paper *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading* (DfE 2011a). This outrage derives not only from the simple-minded analysis of early reading offered but also by the way in which a limited pedagogical practice is then inscribed in the school curriculum, backed by the authority of the school inspectorate, and made subject to nationally imposed testing.

The DfE document (DfE 2011a) starts by outlining an alleged decline in reading standards over recent years. This claim does not square with the evidence provided by the numbers of pupils reaching level four in national tests for English, which show that at Key Stage 2 (age eleven) the percentage of young people achieving the expected levels for reading increased by 8 percentage points over ten years, from 78% in 1999 to 86% in 2009. In 2010, there was a slight drop of 2 percentage points. Overall levels remained the same in 2011 (Jama & Dugdale 2012). A drop of two percentage points after a steady improvement over a number of years cannot be read as evidence of consistent decline.

The main thrust of the first paragraph of the DfE document, however, is to highlight “how far England has slipped behind other nations in reading”. No evidence is offered that the relative success of other nations and jurisdictions (Shanghai, Korea and Finland) derives from an exclusively phonics approach to reading in the early years: given the different pedagogical traditions of each territory (not to mention the disparate natures of the languages involved), this would be a bold claim. Instead, the document moves in the second paragraph to assert a parallel decline in the skills of England’s workforce: “Employers report that young entrants to the labour market often lack the basic literacy skills to work effectively (DfE 2011a).” There is no recognition that, as the Newbolt Report (1921) illustrates, employers have made this complaint for a century or more. The document moves rather to assert that the absence of these valued skills “appears to have a direct impact on the high levels of youth unemployment”. The evidence cited is a Centre for Cities Policy Institute report of 2011 that notes a correlation in certain cities between high youth unemployment and lower attainment in GCSE Maths and English. A “direct impact” is in fact merely a correlation: there is no reference to the history that has produced this social and economic depression.

As Street (1995) suggests, literacy is frequently seen as a symbolic key to society’s greatest problems. The DfE evidence paper suggests that not only unemployment but also “challenging behaviour” results from the incapacity to read. It aims not only to rectify this situation to also “to encourage children to experience the rewards of reading and develop a lifelong love of books”. This transformation will occur when all

early years educators recognise the importance “of being able to decode any word, leading to fluency, comprehension and reading for pleasure”.

Walker *et al* (2013) conclude that teachers in general have not yet fully adopted the practices recommended by the DfE (2011a) and that there is widespread misunderstanding of the term “systematic synthetic phonics” and the approach to early reading it represents. “Skilled readers,” the DfE evidence paper asserts, “are able to identify a word just from the combination of letters written on the page, regardless of context” (DfE 2011a). It cites the US National Reading Panel’s (2000) argument that “reading fluency helps enable reading comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for interpretation”.

However, this formulation does not explain how fluency is achieved. It is worth repeating that none of the evidence cited by the DfE in their evidence paper (DfE 2011a), nor any other research known to the writers of the present paper, supports a practice of “first and fast” (DfE 2012; Walker *et al* 2013) phonic instruction that disregards other forms of text processing. It is naïve, and indeed patronising, to suggest that generations of teachers have simply failed to understand the basis of reading fluency, and that a panacea for difficulty in early reading has now been found in “systematic synthetic phonics”. As the university researcher cited above (p.15) suggests, English is not a phonetically regular language and does not have a single letter/sound correlation. Moreover, even where phonetic regularity subsists, reading is always a more complex matter than linking together sequential grapheme/phoneme correspondences “all through a word to read it” (DfE 2011a). Kidd (2013) cites a video posted by a US teacher of himself working with Hobie, a first grade (5 year old) pupil (Myers 2013). Kidd comments:

[Hobie] comes across a word - ‘going’ - and his phonics knowledge initially tells him that the word is /g/oi/ng/ - like boing. There is some debate about whether or not the /ng/ is a single sound, but let’s leave that for now. The point is he hesitates - he has pre-existing knowledge of vocabulary and he self corrects - going. This is not a decoding skill, it is a vocabulary skill. He goes a step further - writing the word down, he recognises a morphemic pattern - a base and a suffix and draws a line between the two. This is a whole lot more sophisticated than implementing a decoding skill. Phonics alone would not have got him to the correct pronunciation of the word.

One might add that Hobie’s pre-existing knowledge of vocabulary has a contextual element: his recognition of the word “going” strongly suggests that he knows what it means.

Reading at any level is a complex set of skills of which phonic awareness is one important element. The responses to the NATE survey demonstrate that most teachers of reading know this, and reject the specious argument that “systematic synthetic phonics” offers a panacea. It would indeed be wonderful, but deluded, to think that this approach to reading instruction can itself enable “the one in six children who were once destined to struggle reading essential text [to] fully participate in their studies and the world of literature” (DfE 2011a). Respondents to the NATE survey look forward to a future not where every child can read at or above the level of their chronological age (a mathematical absurdity) but where they and their pupils are regarded as rational beings who can be trusted to find their way through text without simplistic prescriptions as to reading method.

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