

WHEN PHONICS ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH: THE HRP

READING
FOR
SUCCESS

Key messages for teachers from a mainstream school
case study

The central message

Some children who make little or no progress through systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) may need reading skills to be taught in a more interconnected way - combining phonics with orthographic, semantic and syntactic knowledge, and working within the child's memory capacity.

What the case study found

- A mainstream primary school identified a recurring group of children who were not learning to read despite faithful, expert delivery of SSP.
- In September 2014, 19 children aged 5-6 in a year group of 99 were selected for the Harberton Reading Programme (HRP).
- The programme was designed to establish all of the foundational literacy skills needed for reading fluency from the beginning.
- Children progressed at an individual pace; the programme was normally completed over approximately six months to two years.

Why an alternative was needed

- Some children showed difficulties with auditory discrimination, pattern recognition, working memory difficulties and left-to-right sequencing.
- The paper argues that English word recognition places varied demands on learners and that over-reliance on phoneme-by-phoneme decoding does not enable the development of all of the cognitive skills necessary for reading success and therefore, cannot meet every child's needs.
- For this group, the development of sight words using orthographic, semantic and syntactic activities provided anchors in memory for later phoneme-to-grapheme learning. A phonics strategy is important for continued reading development.

Four strands taught together

1

Sight word recognition

Build a small, automatic reading vocabulary.

2

Phonic knowledge

Develop sound-symbol knowledge gradually and meaningfully.

3

Orthographic knowledge

Attend to letter order, patterns and sequences in words.

4

Meaning + syntax

Link words with meaning and use sentence structure to support reading.

A practical principle from the HRP

**Teach the vocabulary and supporting skills first.
Then use the reading book as a celebration of success - not as the teaching tool.**

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE

The activities described in the article deliberately connect visual word knowledge, sound, meaning and sentence structure.

Build automatic word recognition

- Teach a very small number of words in advance of the first book.
- Use matching, selecting and saying activities to strengthen recall.
- Draw attention to the exact sequence, size and orientation of letters in a word using a range of activities.

Develop sentence knowledge

- **Develop syntactic knowledge:** Sequence words to make meaningful sentences using the sight words being learned in advance of the reading book.
- **Develop semantic knowledge:** Sequence a number of sentences in the correct order demonstrating understanding.

Connect words with meaning

- Make sure the child understands the word being learned.
- Simple cloze procedures demonstrate understanding.
- Keep early language and vocabulary load manageable.

Introduce phonics at a compatible pace

- Use known words as memory anchors for initial consonant sounds.
- Do not rush correspondences that are easily confused or forgotten.
- Avoid allowing one strategy - such as phoneme-by-phoneme decoding - to dominate.

What happened to the children?

ALL

children using HRP met or exceeded the targets expected for them, according to the SENCo.

CONFIDENCE

Parents, staff and pupil interviews reported gains in confidence, independence and willingness to try.

EARLY

The SENCo highlighted early intervention - before standardised assessment was possible - as a major benefit.

Important: what the paper is - and is not - saying

It IS saying

- Phonics is important, but a phoneme-level strategy alone did not meet the needs of the children in this study.
- For some struggling readers, orthographic, semantic and syntactic knowledge needs to be explicitly taught alongside phonics.
- Teaching should be paced within the child's memory capacity and build connected knowledge.

It is NOT saying

- That schools should abandon phonics or return to a whole-language approach.
- That one alternative programme will automatically suit every struggling reader.
- That a case study alone proves the approach will produce the same outcomes in every setting.

Questions for teachers to consider

- Is this child building an automatic bank of known words - or repeatedly re-decoding the same words?
- Can the child attend to letter order and recurring spelling patterns as well as individual phonemes?
- Does the child understand the vocabulary and sentence structures in the text?
- Is the pace and amount of new learning manageable within the child's memory capacity?
- Are we explicitly connecting sound, spelling pattern, meaning and syntax rather than teaching each in isolation?