Complete Systematic Synthetic Phonics Programmes

Understanding and being able to articulate how phonics develops reading and writing skills is essential to be able to describe the learning journey of a child from being a non-reader in Nursery to being literate in year 6.

This document will explain:

1. Current phonics terminology.
2. How phonics develops reading and writing skills.
3. Current DfE requirements for complete Systematic, Synthetic Phonics Programmes.

Current Phonics terminology

Systematic Synthetic Phonics Programme (SSPP) – The DfE wants every school to use a complete SSPP.

Grapheme-phoneme correspondence (GPC) – this refers a phoneme (sound) and corresponding grapheme (letter).

How phonics develops reading and writing skills

There are three phonics reading skills:

1. Phoneme graphene recognition- a child sees a grapheme and can say the corresponding phoneme.
2. Sound blending (Say-It-Fast), this is purely an auditory skill, where the child hears the phonemes in a word and can blend them to say the word, e.g. /c/ /a/ /t/ - cat.
3. Word level blending (reading), this combines the first two skills. So, the child looks at a word, recognises the graphemes, says the phonemes and blends them to say the word.

In SfA, when children start to read, we teach them very specifically to decode 'green' words using their phonics and we teach them to recognise and say 'red' words. This is clearly modelled during the guided reading on day 1 of each Shared Story, so the process/skills are clear from the beginning and become automatic. As they move up through the school the continued use of phonics for decoding is explicitly taught in clarification Savvy Readers.

There are three phonics writing skills:

1. To write the grapheme for a corresponding phoneme.
2. To break words down into their phonemes, this is purely auditory (Break -it Down).
3. Sound spelling which is where the child combines the first two spelling skills. So, they say the word they want to write, sounding it out to identify the individual phonemes, they then write the corresponding grapheme for each phoneme.

Again, the use of phonics for spelling is clearly taught throughout EYFS and KS1. When children progress to Wings, the SfA Spelling Programme teaches children to use their phonics to spell the regular parts of words, and then learn the spelling patterns that cannot be sounded out.

Current DfE requirements/expectations for a complete SSPP

The DfE is currently asking the providers of all phonics programmes to submit their programme for validation using the following criteria. There are a few key points to note:

1. An SSPP should consist not only of a phonics programme, but also children's reading books that are aligned phonically.
2. They do not like multiple cuing strategies and want children to reply completely on phonics for decoding words. Taken literally this could potentially mean that the use of pictures in text would be unacceptable, as would predicting what the text might be about as they might potentially aid children in guessing what some of the words in the text were, rather than decoding. In SfA's updated programme we will remove readles due to this requirement.
3. They want all the year 1 and 2 Common Exception Words to be taught, which SfA does well. With these, however they expect that teachers will ask children to decode the decodable parts of the word and then they will be taught the GPC that is not commonly used. (Potentially all GPC's could be taught to children but many are so rare as to make this unnecessary, e.g. the /u/ in 'put' is a rare GPC that we don't teach, but it is a valid GPC.) So, SfA teachers should be seen teaching red words in this way before proceeding to teach the spelling using Say-Spell-Say.
4. The teaching of letter formation should not include joins.
5. Comprehension is not mentioned.
6. Quite rightly they include a mention to supporting the lowest 20% of children and the provision of online teaching.
7. They have made it clear that Letters and Sounds is not a complete SSPP and should never be regarded as such. It provides a teaching sequence but will always need to be supported by appropriate phonics and reading resources.
8. They are encouraging a wide range of groups to submit their phonics programmes for validation, including groups of schools that might have developed their own SSPP.

DfE Phonics Validation Criteria

- Present systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print. Phonics is best understood as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabetic system works, and how to apply it in reading and spelling, rather than one of a range of optional 'methods' or 'strategies' for teaching children how to read. A programme should promote the use of phonics as the route to reading unknown words, before any subsequent comprehension strategies are applied. It should not encourage children to guess unknown words from clues such as pictures or context, rather than first applying phonic knowledge and skills. It should not include lists of

high frequency words or any other words for children to learn as whole shapes 'by sight'. The focus should be on phonemes, and not on 'consonant clusters' (/s/+/p/+/l/ not /spl/) or 'onset and rime' (/c/+/a/+/t/ not c-at, m-at, b-at).

- Enable children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills early in reception and provide a structured route for most children to meet or exceed the expected standard in the year one (Y1) Phonics Screening Check and all national curriculum expectations for word reading through decoding by the end of key stage 1.

- Be designed for daily teaching sessions and teach the main grapheme-phoneme correspondences of English (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence.

- Begin by introducing a defined group of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that enable children to read and spell many words early on.

- Progress from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills, cumulatively covering all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences in English.

- Teach children to read printed words by identifying and blending (synthesising) individual phonemes, from left to right all through the word.

- Teach children to apply the skill of segmenting spoken words into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words.

- Provide opportunity for children to practise and apply known phoneme-grapheme correspondences for spelling through dictation of sounds, words and sentences.

- Ensure that children are taught to decode and spell common exception words (sometimes called 'tricky' words), appropriate to their level of progress in the programme (see note.

- Provide resources that support the teaching of lower-case and capital letters correctly, with clear start and finish points. The programme should move children on by teaching them to write words made up of learned GPCs, followed by simple sentences composed from such words as well as any common exception words ('tricky words') learned. At first, children should not be taught to join letters or to start every letter 'on the line' with a 'lead-in', because these practices cause unnecessary difficulty for beginners. Children may be taught to join the letters in digraphs, but this is optional.

- Be built around direct teaching sessions, with extensive teacher-child interaction and involve a multi-sensory approach. The programme should include guidance on how direct teaching sessions can be adapted for online delivery (live or recorded). Direct teaching sessions should involve a routine so that teachers and children get to know what is coming next and minimum time is spent explaining new activities. Teaching and learning activities should be interesting and engaging but firmly focused on intensifying the learning associated with the phonic goal. Where computer-based resources are included, these should support or supplement direct teaching by the teacher, but not replace it

  At each step, children should have sufficient time to practise reading and writing with the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they have been taught, cumulatively. For

this purpose, the programme should provide:

a) words and texts for reading practice

b) teaching activities for writing practice (letter formation and spelling)

Resources provided as part of the programme such as:

• flash cards

• friezes

• word cards

• grapheme wall posters

should match the GPCs and progressions in the programme.

- Provide resources to enable teachers to deliver the programme effectively including sufficient decodable reading material to ensure that, as children move through the early stages of acquiring phonic knowledge and skills, they can practise by reading texts closely matched to their level of phonic attainment, that do not require them to use alternative strategies to read unknown words.

  The texts and books children are asked to read independently should be fully decodable for them at every stage of the programme. This means they must be composed almost entirely of words made up of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that a child has learned up to that point. The only exceptions should be a small number of common exception words (see note 2) that the child has learned as part of the programme up to that point. In the early stages, even these should be kept to a minimum. Practising with such decodable texts will help to make sure children experience success and learn to rely on phonic strategies.

  If a complete programme relies on guidance on the teaching of phonics from one publisher and decodable books from another, the programme publisher must demonstrate:

  a) where matching decodable books can be sourced

  b) how these decodable books match the phonic progression of the programme

  Additionally, the programme publisher must state how they communicate this information to schools. To ensure ongoing validity and currency, programmes should regularly update the recommended sources of decodable books that match their programme (including publisher details) and share this with schools.

- Include guidance and resources to ensure children practise and apply the core phonics they have been taught. A phonics programme should not include teaching and learning activities that are:

  • over-elaborate

  • difficult to manage

  • take children too long to complete

  • will likely make children focus on something other than reading or writing

  For example, it should not include finding letters in sand, because children are likely to focus more on playing with sand than on learning about letters. Teaching and learning activities like this may be valuable for other areas of learning including developing language but are not suitable for core phonics provision.

  A publisher should consider testing and trialling teaching and learning activities to

ensure they are effective for all children, particularly those children with additional learning needs.

- Enable children's progress to be assessed and highlight the ways in which the programme meets the needs of those who are at risk of falling behind, including the lowest attaining 20% of children. Full guidance should include clear expectations for children's progress. If the programme is high quality, systematic and synthetic it will, by design, map incremental progression in phonic knowledge and skills. It should therefore enable teachers to conduct frequent and ongoing assessment to track and record children's progress and to identify those children at, below or above expected levels, so that appropriate support can be provided.

  Children who are at risk of falling behind need extra practice to consolidate and master the content of the programme. Programmes should provide guidance on how to support these children so that they keep up with their peers. Options for support could include 1 to 1 tutoring.

- Provide full guidance for teachers to support the effective delivery of the programme and appropriate, programme-specific training either directly, through appointed agents or remotely; with assurances that there is sufficient capacity to do so and that those delivering this training will have appropriately high levels of expertise and relevant experience (see note 10) Note 10

  High-quality training is an essential element of an SSP programme and is key to ensuring it is effectively implemented with fidelity and consistency within settings. A comprehensive programme of training must ensure continuous professional development of all those leading or delivering phonics teaching, assessing children's progress and supporting children who are at risk of falling behind the expected pace of the programme.

  Programmes should demonstrate how they will ensure those delivering the training are appropriately qualified and that they have the capability, capacity and resources to provide on-going support to those teaching phonics in different settings.

  Programmes should also demonstrate a responsive approach to changing circumstances and an ability to adapt delivery methods when required.