# Teaching early reading: a synthetic phonics approach

Our school is a public primary school in the southern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. It is a large school with around 850 students, ranging from 4 to 12 years old. There are four classes in most year levels, meaning that collaboration among teachers is extremely important to ensure consistency in learning programs. In 2009, after considerable reflection on our students' achievement in reading, we adopted *Phonics International* as the framework for intervention across our early childhood years.

Impetus for change

Analysis of the school's performance in Reading in the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in recent years showed that our average score in Year 5 had been consistently below that of like schools (similar Socio-Economic Index) since 2007, and the gap was widening. The Year 3 results had been declining over the last 3 years, and for the first time the average score was below that of like schools in 2009. It

was a situation that was of concern and motivated a thorough examination of the school's approach to the teaching of reading.
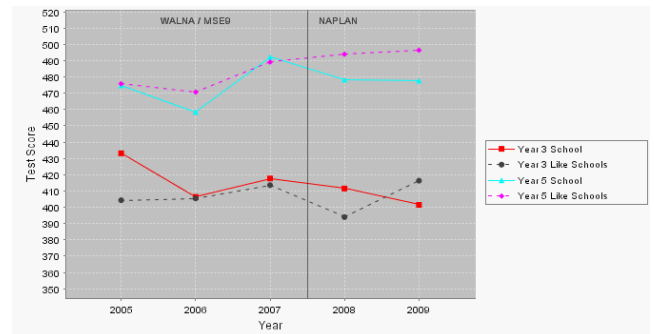
As Deputy Principal, I sourced research on the teaching of beginning reading including a number of significant reports describing research undertaken to determine best practice in reading, especially early reading. Findings of the following key reports are cited in various curriculum documents in Australia and overseas as evidence for the approaches advocated in the teaching of reading:

- Rowe K (2005) "Teaching Reading" *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* DEST Canberra
- Rose J (2006) *Independent review of the Teaching of Early Reading* Department for Education and Skills Nottingham UK
- National Reading Panel (2000) *Teaching Children to Read: An evidence based assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its implications for Reading Instruction* US Department of Education Washington DC
- National Institute for Literacy (2005) *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read Third Edition – Kindergarten through Grade 3* Partnership for Reading Washington DC

A synthesis of the key findings of the above research identified a number of practices considered to be effective in the teaching of early reading. The common element in all reports was the need to provide systematic synthetic phonics instruction to students from the age of 5.

Systematic synthetic phonics instruction

Both the Rowe Report (2005) and the Rose Report (2006) identify the crucial role of systematic phonics instruction in developing effective word recognition skills for success in early reading. Phonics instruction is systematic when all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught directly and they are covered in a clearly defined sequence. Research and classroom findings suggest that the synthetic phonics approach, based on the level of the phoneme and the important skills of blending and segmenting all-through-the-word, is the most effective.

On reflection, our current approach to teaching beginning reading was to build students' knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, however, the focus on blending and segmenting phonemes was not explicit in the early years. I searched the Internet for systematic, synthetic phonics approaches to determine what programs were available and it was here I came across the UK program, '*Phonics International*'. I also read the 'Letters and Sounds' program from the UK Literacy Strategy and found that the approach and sequence described in *Phonics International* (PI) reflected the phases within 'Letters and Sounds'. I read carefully through the PI website and downloaded the free Unit 1 of the program. The three complexities of the alphabetic code are made explicit in the program:

1. *One sound (phoneme) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters eg. k, sh, igh, eigh*
2. *One sound (phoneme) can be represented by different spellings (graphemes) eg. /oa/ can be represented by o, oa, ow, oe, o-e, eau, ough*
3. *One spelling can represent multiple sounds (or various phonemes) eg. 'ough' can be /oa/ th**ough** /or/ th**ough**t /oo/ thr**ough** /ou/ pl**ough** /u/ thor**ough***

What attracted me to using PI was the systematic approach to teaching the phonemes from simple to complex code. All resources needed by teachers to support effective phonics teaching were provided in printable, user-friendly and detailed step-by-step materials. This would save time and ensure a consistent approach between all classes within the Pre-Primary and Year 1 teams. After discussions with the Principal, it was decided to purchase a site licence for *Phonics International* and begin implementation initially with the Pre-Primary and Year 1 students the following year (2010). I made contact via email with Debbie Hepplewhite, the developer of the PI program, to seek her support and advice regarding introducing the program to teachers. Debbie has been a constant source of encouragement throughout our process of implementation.

Implementation of Phonics International

I began by meeting with teachers in the Pre-Primary and Year 1 teams and sharing the data on reading achievement in the NAPLAN tests. I discussed the findings of the abovementioned research reports and the need to adopt a systematic, synthetic phonics approach to ensure quality first teaching in beginning reading. I

described the *Phonics International* program to them and how it reflects international research on reading instruction and leading-edge practice. I printed off the PI Guidance booklet and downloaded all twelve units of PI and the Early Years Starter Package from the website, which I then burned to a CD, so that teachers could take the resources home to read and explore. I spoke to each teacher individually about their thoughts or concerns about using PI to gauge how best to support implementation of the program. The response was mixed – some teachers were excited by the program and felt that the rigour of phonics teaching was exactly what was needed, others expressed concerns over trying to cover too much too soon and whether students in Pre-Primary were ready. I encouraged the teachers to keep an open mind and 'give it a go'. We would regularly monitor how the program was going and make adjustments as needed.

We commenced our PI journey at the start of 2010, excited about the opportunity it would provide for students to learn to read. I read through the PI website thoroughly, watching the videos, with the aim of putting together an approach to using the resources that I could share in a professional learning workshop with the teachers. I listed down the 'must-haves' for each phonics lesson as described in the section of the video 'Basic Phonics Lesson':

- Revise previously taught graphemes
- Introduce new grapheme
- Practise blending all-through-the word to read
- Practise segmenting all-through-the-word to spell
- Activity to consolidate learning

This helped me to identify the essential resources needed to begin implementing the program. In the professional learning workshop, I went through the research on which PI was based including the findings of the Rowe and Rose reports. I described the key facets of a basic phonics lesson, including showing the video from the website and which PI resources were essential. I printed and laminated the Alphabetic Code chart, grapheme tiles, frieze posters, picture posters, and word blend cards of Unit 1 to show teachers what they would need to use. We discussed the Sound Activity Sheets and the 'I can read' texts as important activities to use to help students consolidate their learning.

I developed a sequence of teaching the units over each of the four terms. As this was the first year of implementation, I started both Pre-Primary and Year 1 at the beginning of Unit 1. Our goal was to reach the end of Unit 4 by the end of the Pre-Primary year and the end of Unit 6 by the end of Year 1. In sharing the sequence with teachers, I emphasised that it was a

Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Friday
1		s	revise	a	
2	t	revise	i	revise	
3	p	revise	n	revise	
4	c k	revise	ck	revise	
5	e	revise	h	revise	Revision of week's sounds
6	r	revise	m	revise	
7	d	revise	g	revise	
8	o	revise	u	revise	
9	l -ll	revise	f -ff	revise	
10	s -ss	revise	b	revise	

'work in progress' and that we would learn together, sharing our experiences, positive and negative, in weekly team meetings. I assisted teachers by copying resources where needed and modelled phonics lessons in their

classroom. I observed lessons to provide feedback to teachers and to ascertain how students were coping with the program.

The expectation was that teachers taught focused, explicit phonics lessons each day with opportunities for revision throughout the day. The sequence of phonemes was followed in each class within the year level and teachers were encouraged to share resources and ideas they found successful with each other in our weekly team meetings. I was impressed with how teachers found creative tasks to enable focused practice of the learned phonemes that supported the resources within PI. After a few weeks of copying the 'Sounds Activity Sheets', the Year 1 team discussed how we could lessen the amount of photocopying needed but still maintain the integrity of the activity. It was decided to only copy the 'word practice' section of the sheet, as practising writing the grapheme and drawing a picture could all be done in an exercise book. This has proved to be an important modification to the PI resources that works for us. Children also got the opportunity to practise writing the grapheme on dotted third paper to support their learning of correct letter formation. Having students use individual whiteboards – 'show me boards' – to practise segmenting words into individual sounds, like the game 'hangman', was very motivating. Other activities used to consolidate learning included using the 'I can read' texts or 'Sentences' for dictation and creating a 'phonic cloze' where the phonemes taught over the previous couple of weeks were 'clozed' out and students had to choose the appropriate phoneme to complete words correctly.

Pre-Primary teachers produced various activities to consolidate learning of the phonemes. These include a 'placemat' task where children got to learn a rhyme, write the grapheme, find the letter in magazines and draw a picture. Students brainstormed words with the focus sound to produce word lists which also provided teachers with opportunities to discuss alternative spellings of the focus sound. Students were provided with 'I can read' word lists and grapheme tiles to practise making the words and then blending the sounds to 'read' the words.

To practise blending, teachers produced 'Blend Books' for students which consisted of the 'I can read' words' list in each unit. The children were able to take them home each night to practise blending all-through-the-word to read. Teachers also listened to the children blend each day to ensure the sounds were being produced correctly. Teachers would model writing using words from the 'I can read' words' list and other brainstormed words. Children suggested sentences which the teacher then modelled with appropriate punctuation. The students then copied the sentences into their 'Sounds Book'.

Many teachers linked the focus phoneme with a particular big book or picture book containing the sound in the title or content. Classes would plan special days or activities around particular sounds, such as a 'pool party' when looking at the /p/ sound. Using the 'Jolly Phonics' songs and trialling the action rhymes of PI also added variety to the program.

To provide students with guided practice in reading, teachers used the PI decodable cumulative texts, however, felt they were not attractive for young students, lacked illustrations and did not have the feel of a 'real' book. I went in search of published decodable texts that were organised around particular phonemes. I purchased "Dandelion Readers", which are available through Dyslexia-Speld Foundation, in three levels: Launchers, Initial Phonic Code and Extended Phonic Code. The readers were excellent as they moved from si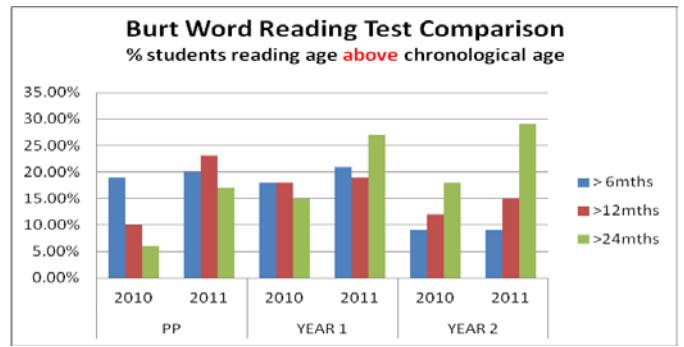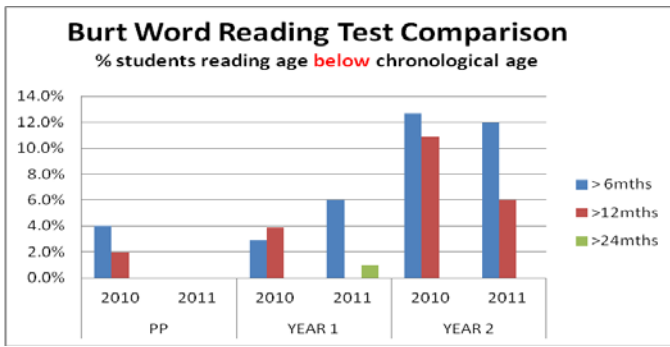mple to complex alphabetic code. I have recently purchased the 'Floppy Phonics' texts published by Oxford as they follow the PI phoneme sequence. As their confidence and skills developed, students were keen to read these texts to their parents when they came into class before school started. Feedback from parents was very positive as they had noticed how their child was beginning to 'read' through blending sounds they knew.
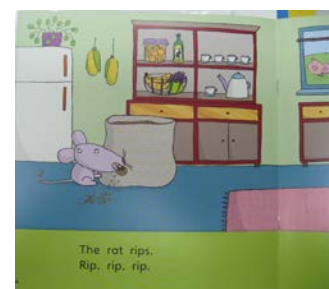
Assessment

It was important to monitor and assess how successful the program was in developing students' ability to read. After researching various instruments that could be used with young children, it was decided to use the Burt Word Reading Test to measure students' word recognition skills. The test gives an indication of a child's reading age within a 6 months margin of error. All teachers administer the test at the end of Term 2 and 4 to monitor student progress across the year. Results for our first two years of implementation are shown in the graphs below.

Burt Word Reading Test Comparison
% students reading age below chronological age

Burt Word Reading Test Comparison
% students reading age above chronological age

As can be seen, the results from 2010 to 2011 in each year level show a decrease in the percentage of students with a reading age *below* chronological age at every range. What is especially pleasing is the impact of PI in Pre-Primary as there are no students that are below their chronological age in reading in 2011. The significance of the PI approach can be seen when examining the percentage of students with a reading age *above* their chronological age since the program's implementation. Within every year level, there is a marked increase between 2010 and 2011 in the percentage of students whose reading age is more than 12 months above their chronological age. In particular, nearly a third of the 98 Year 2 students are more than two years ahead of their chronological age in reading. This is double the number of students that were this far ahead as Year 1s in 2010.

Samples of students' writing was collected and shared during year level team meetings. Teachers noticed the improvement in spelling skills demonstrated by students as a result of an increased focus on phonemes. Children were making phonetic choices for sounds they heard in words including trickier long vowel sounds. The difference in writing was particularly noticeable in Pre-primary. Teachers commented on the willingness of students to have a go at writing unfamiliar words and their confidence in taking risks in writing.

Typical Pre-Primary Writing December 2006

Typical Pre-Primary Writing December 2011

Reflection

Overall, the introduction of PI in Pre-Primary and Year 1 classrooms has been a resounding success. The consistency and clarity it has afforded in phonics teaching in early childhood has been worth the time and effort. Young children are capable and ready for explicit teaching of phonics and are highly motivated by their success in reading 'real' words.

Some things we have learned following the first year of implementation of PI:

- Learning two new phonemes a week provides plenty of opportunity for revision
- Daily explicit focused teaching of phonemes with opportunities for practice and revision is critical to student achievement
- Using only the essential resources of PI (grapheme tiles, frieze posters, picture posters, word blend cards, grapheme flash cards, my words and sounds activity sheets) initially is important as teachers gain confidence and familiarity with explicit phonics teaching
- Completing the program to the end of Unit 5 in Pre-Primary is a realistic goal
- Spending time revising the first five units at the start of Year 1, at a faster pace, makes sense to allow opportunities for at-risk students to consolidate simple alphabetic code
- Reaching the end of Unit 6 by the end of Year 1 is achievable, providing time for consolidation
- Listening to children blend all-through-the-word each day is vital to ensure each sound is produced correctly and children develop the skill of blending
- Reading cumulative decodable texts allows children to put into practise their developing reading skills with 'real' books – success breeds success
- Weekly meetings with all year level teachers fosters collaboration and sharing of good ideas and resources
- Using a 'Have A Go' pad to try out spelling unfamiliar words is useful for drawing upon students' growing knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences

In 2011, *Phonics International* was adopted as a whole school approach to the explicit teaching of phonics. A sequence for teaching the phonemes within Units 1 to 12 across Pre-Primary to Year 6 was constructed to ensure that students had the opportunity to learn all 44 phonemes and spelling alternatives in a systematic way. Teachers in Year 2 and above incorporate the explicit teaching of the focus phonemes for their year level into their existing spelling program, which is based around spelling journals. All teachers have access to the PI resources on the school's network. My role continues to be one of mentor where I participate in weekly team meetings with the Pre-Primary to Year 2 teachers and model and observe lessons as needed. Teachers have allowed me to video their phonics lessons so that we can use it to model for other teachers how to plan and present effective phonics lessons using the PI resources.
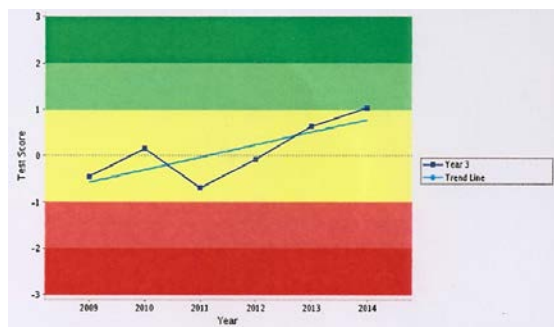
Impact on results

Our Year 3, 2013 and 2014 NAPLAN results in Reading reflect the first two cohorts of students taught to read using the PI program from Pre-Primary onwards. As the graph shows, our Year 3 average score in reading is

now above like schools by 15 points in 2013 and 25 points in 2014. This is a very different scenario to 2009 when we were below our like schools. Our students are now performing better than like schools, and the gap is widening!
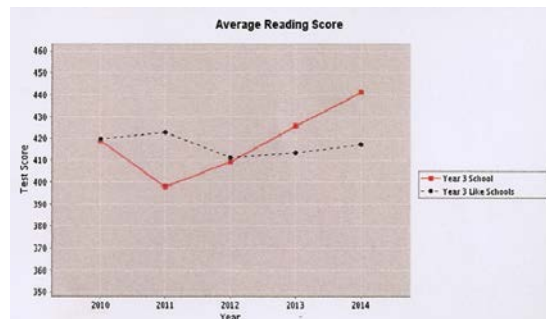
The graph below compares our school's reading performance to expected performance, as determined by our school's demographic and previous results, over the past few years. The zero line is the 'expected performance'. The colour scale indicates standard deviations away from expected performance. The yellow band is within the expected range, the red bands indicate the school is performing worse than expected, and the green band shows better than expected performance. The light blue line indicates the trend of the data over time. As can be seen, the reading results are on an upward trajectory and in the 'green'.

When we compared the distribution of our 2014 Year 3 students' results within the different bands in reading, it was rewarding to see that 64% of the cohort were in the top two bands, compared with 40% in all WA schools. This is an outstanding achievement! Our results are certainly worth celebrating and are evidence that the explicit, systematic teaching of phonics is having a significant impact on students' reading performance.

Conclusion

The implementation of PI has certainly been a learning journey for all involved. It has inspired many conversations around effective pedagogy and creative learning tasks. Teachers have had the opportunity to refine their understanding of teaching phonics in a systematic way. Some have reflected on their expectations of what young students are capable of learning and modified their beliefs about what is possible. As a curriculum leader, I am delighted with the results that PI has produced in developing beginning reading, spelling and writing skills.

The PI approach has added immense value to the achievement of early childhood students which has been noticed and appreciated by parents as well as teachers. Leaders and Early Childhood teachers from several other primary schools have visited our school to observe how PI is implemented in classrooms and to learn from our experiences.

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