Teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy

Executive summary

1. The aim of this paper is to open a new phase of dialogue on the teaching of phonics in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). Standards of literacy in Key Stages 1 and 2 (ages 5 to 11 years) have risen in England since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998. Improvement in the teaching of phonics would contribute further to better attainment in reading and writing at both key stages. The NLS is committed to early, discrete and systematic teaching of phonics and the application of phonic skills and knowledge to reading and writing. In 1999, it published *Progression in phonics* – a programme to teach phonics systematically. Issues relating to the effective teaching of phonics through the NLS programme centre on its design and on its implementation.

2. The design issues centre on three major aspects:
    * pace;
    * the NLS 'searchlights' model;
    * 'synthetic' versus 'analytic' phonics;
    and those relating to implementation into three more:
    * clarity of message;
    * ideology and teacher knowledge;
    * the delivery chain.

3. It is the contention of this paper that the design of the NLS, is broadly correct and that the issues of improvement are more to do with its implementation than its design. Evidence for this is taken from the significant number of successful schools and teachers who implement the NLS well and achieve high standards for their children.

4. The NLS has measures under way to improve the implementation of the Strategy in respect of phonics:
* clarifying and simplifying the big messages to ensure that all schools, advisers, inspectors and trainers are in no doubt about the fundamentals of good literacy teaching;
* developing, with the National College for School Leadership, a major leadership programme for headteachers, embedding the key messages about phonics alongside other priorities for literacy and numeracy;
* re-focusing the work of literacy consultants and leading teachers on training for and supporting phonics more intensively through the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 and in Years 3 and 4 in Key Stage 2;
* working more intensively with local authority teams in support of underperforming schools;
* developing more effective dissemination and networking between schools;
* developing *Progression in phonics* into a more detailed and fully resourced teaching programme, as well as continuing to support the use of alternative programmes for teaching phonics;
* developing a spelling programme for Years 2, 3 and 4 to follow on from *Progression in phonics;*

- continuing but sharpening the partnership with TTA to support literacy programmes in the initial training of teachers.

Introduction
The aim of this paper is to open a new phase of dialogue on the teaching of phonics in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). The NLS has been in operation for almost five years and during that time has been responsive to informed opinion, research data and classroom experience of the teaching of phonics. The phonics element of the NLS has, in fact, been under continuous review in the press and academic journals (e.g. Solity et al., 1999; Wyse, 2000) and was the subject of an Ofsted seminar in 1999 to which researchers and practitioners were invited. As a result of this seminar, the DfES published *Progression in phonics*, a programme to enable teachers to teach phonics systematically, and funded a training programme for teachers in all schools with Key Stage 1 children.

After significant gains between 1998 and 2000 in test scores at age 11, results have been more stable for two years and it is, therefore, appropriate to review again one of the main planks of the NLS on which expected improvement in literacy was founded. Two fundamental questions must be asked: Is the design of the phonics programme correct? Are the mechanisms for ensuring that phonics is taught well in schools good enough?

It is the contention of this paper that the design of the NLS phonics programme is broadly correct, and that the issues of improvement are related to implementation. Evidence for this is taken from the significant number of successful schools and teachers who implement the NLS well and achieve high standards. This is not to say that an alternative design might not have equal success – clearly it might. However, there can be little doubt, on existing evidence of successful practice, that if all teachers worked effectively with the NLS phonics programme as it is designed, there would be very significant further improvements in attainment.


Why the NLS was introduced
From the 1970s the UK government had been concerned that standards of literacy in England, in comparison to other countries, were not sufficiently high. In 1997, only 63% of children left primary schools at 11 years of age at the expected level of attainment. In their reports, inspectors (HMI) expressed concern at the lack of focus and poor quality of teaching, suggesting that too few schools used a balanced approach to the teaching of reading which included the systematic teaching of phonics (Ofsted, 1996).

In 1997, many schools did not consider phonics appropriate for children in the Reception class because it was seen as a teacher-initiated, 'formal' activity, often associated with worksheets, and therefore unsuitable for such young children. Where phonics was taught in Reception classes, it consisted of the teaching of 'initial letters' generally at the rate of one a week; a letter was taught in association with objects or pictures which began with that letter. However, this was not necessarily accompanied by teaching children to hear (segment) the phoneme at the beginning of the word, so children learned phonic knowledge but not the associated skills.

Background and rationale of the NLS
In order to improve the level of literacy teaching, the NLS was introduced to all primary schools in England in September 1998, following a pilot project in 18 LEAs. Its remit is broad. The NLS is committed to raising literacy standards throughout the primary age range as measured by the National Curriculum tests, to delivering the programmes of study in the National Curriculum for reading and writing, and to making a significant contribution to the development of speaking and listening. The NLS is built upon these statutory requirements and looks to research, as well as inspection and other evidence, to help determine the most effective means of achieving those ends. Much of what is included in the NLS *Framework for teaching* is there because it is judged to be worthwhile, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, for example: the early introduction to a wide range of literature and poetry; the extension of vocabulary; the balance of fiction and non-fiction reading and writing; the importance of enjoying, making sense of and developing personal responses to text. The justification for these ends lies not in empirical research but in the normative criteria that apply to judgements of value which the National Curriculum, and therefore the NLS, are bound to secure.

The rationale for the NLS was built up from the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum. Central to the National Curriculum is the model of reading and writing represented in the Strategy by the 'searchlights' metaphor.
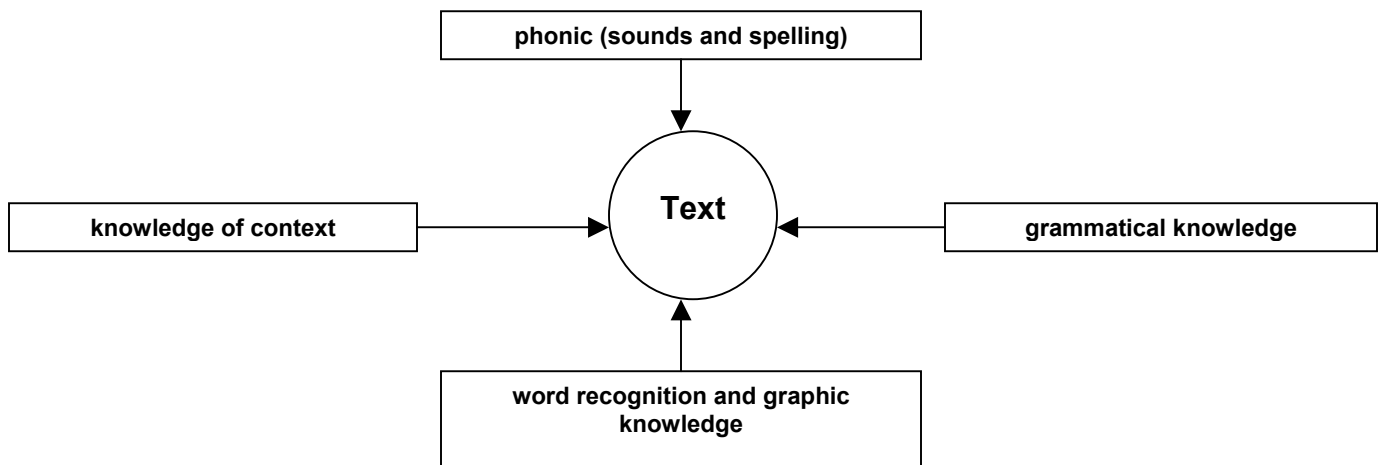
NLS *Framework for teaching,* p. 4

The model characterises reading as the ability to coordinate a variety of strategies for:
- fast automatic phonic decoding (phonic – sounds and spelling);
- the recognition of words and word parts, particularly morphemic segments and boundaries to make sense of and complete phonic blending – graphic knowledge (word recognition and graphic knowledge);
- predictions from knowledge of syntax to make sense of strings of words, identify sense-making syntactic boundaries in sentences, and read with fluency and expression appropriate to the text (grammatical knowledge);
- predictions from context to aid comprehension (knowledge of context).

Applied to reading, the model aims to maximise 'redundancy' by optimising the range of cueing sources available, enabling the reader to cross-refer and mutually consolidate each. The more searchlights that are switched on, in other words, the less critical it is if

one of them fails. Each of these elements is also identified as a requirement of the National Curriculum in the programme of study for reading at Key Stage 1.

The searchlights model is also applied inversely to the teaching of writing, where it represents a decision matrix for composing and transcribing text.[1]

The two related aspects of the reading process, decoding and comprehension[2], are represented in the model. They are, and should be, complementary – each aspect continuously informing and consolidating the other. While the ability to decode words remains the first and only direct means of getting meaning from the page, equally important are the knowledge and expectations the reader brings to the text. The disposition to use prior knowledge to make sense of experience is a condition of effective learning. In reading, at every level, therefore, it matters that children learn to bring their expectations and predictions to bear on what they are learning. The NLS is clear that inferential thinking is of the greatest importance at all levels of literacy development. Children should be taught to link their learning to past experience, to make and test generalisations, to look for analogies between the known and the unfamiliar, to predict and make sense of what they are reading and writing, to monitor and self-correct themselves, to build up autonomous, habituated skills that have applications in new and unfamiliar contexts, and to avoid over-burdening short-term memory.

This rationale informs the structure of the NLS *Framework for teaching*, where objectives are set out in three strands: word, sentence and text levels. The parallel structure of the daily literacy hour is designed to embody the related teaching methodologies:
- teaching phonics and spelling[3];
- shared text work: reading and writing;
- guided reading with the teacher;
- independent working including continuous, directed reading and writing, and other related skills tasks based on investigations and problem-solving activities;
- a final plenary – built on the principles of assessment for learning.

Schools have varied this structure to accommodate different pupil groups (e.g. in mixed-age classes) and to increase time and opportunity for aspects (e.g. additional time for guided reading), but the NLS has encouraged teachers to be sure that they understand the elements and ensure they are securely in place before varying the structure. The expectations are that phonics and spelling will receive at least 15 minutes of daily, focused teaching and that children will be taught to apply those skills in shared and guided reading and writing.

The searchlights model was represented in a relatively simple form in the NLS *Framework for teaching* with implications for reading and for writing. The importance of phonics teaching was stressed:

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[1] See the introductions to *Grammar for Writing* and *Developing Early Writing* for further detail on this point: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy.
[2] Often referred to as 'bottom up' and 'top down'.
[3] As the literacy hour has evolved, the sequence of teaching has changed. In the *Framework for teaching*, teachers were recommended to begin with shared reading, followed by a 15-minute phonics session. In practice, the order has been reversed by many teachers, particularly in Key Stage 1. This has often proved to be a more effective pattern.

At Key Stage 1 there should be strong and systematic emphasis on the teaching of phonics and other word-level skills. Pupils should be taught to:
- discriminate between the separate sounds in words
- learn the letters and letter combinations most commonly used to spell those sounds
- read words by sounding out and blending their separate parts
- write words by combining the spelling patterns of their sounds.[4]

The discrete teaching of phonics is justified in at least two ways.
a) The structure of the code is arbitrary and, for most children, undiscoverable. Left to learn by inference alone, children will, at best, learn too slowly and may fail altogether.
b) The features of the code do not occur with sufficient frequency or regularity in most early texts. While there are some high quality texts based on pattern and language play, most of those designed to give high phonic regularity tend to be arid, and very limited in range and quality.[5] Most of the good quality early texts which schools use cannot provide this level of symmetry.

Since the publication of the *Framework for teaching*, the NLS has restated, in the paper presented to the Ofsted phonics seminar in 1999[6], its full commitment to the early, systematic and focused teaching of phonics to all children from the start of schooling in Reception. In that presentation the following principles were identified.
- The NLS is clear that children should be taught as quickly as possible to identify, segment and blend phonemes in speech and writing and that this should be taught to them directly, not left to inference or invention.
- Phonic knowledge and skills should be taught and practised to a level where decoding and spelling using phoneme–grapheme representations become habitual and operate at the level of 'tacit knowledge'.[7]
- Phonics should be taught as a separate set of skills and knowledge within the broader structure of the literacy hour. It should not be taught through texts or text reading but should be applied to the reading and writing of texts in the following ways:
  - through the application of phonic strategies to texts in shared and guided reading;
  - by using texts for reading which exemplify particular phonemic structures, e.g. words containing consonants and vowels in varying combinations (CVC, CCVC, etc.), and vowel digraphs to reinforce and practise phonic learning;
  - through phonic word-building in the context of shared writing, alongside the teaching of other spelling strategies.[8]

At that time, and in response to the evidence of evaluations, it was agreed that a strong case had been made for accelerating the expected rate of progression for phonics, set out in the NLS Framework. Also that there was a need for more detailed guidance and

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[4] NLS *Framework for teaching* (1998), p. 4: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy
[5] It would be helpful to have more quality texts of this kind but, while they make a specific contribution, it would be a mistake to see this kind of resource as a panacea for early reading.
[6] This seminar, hosted by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) took 'the place of phonics teaching in the NLS' as its theme – no proceedings were published.
[7] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (1969)
[8] See NLS *Developing Early Writing*: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy.

training to help teachers implement these learning objectives more effectively. This development was in hand at the time.

Following extensive consultation and a thorough review of research evidence and successful practices, the *Progression in phonics* materials were published, distributed to all schools with a day's funded training for approximately 20,000 teachers in Reception and Year 1. There was wide agreement about the value and appropriateness of these materials which had, and continue to have, the full support of Ofsted.

In addition, a number of other programmes were identified, including *Jolly Phonics*, *POPAT* and *Phono-Graphix*™, which were working along similar lines. Schools were encouraged to adopt either *Progression in phonics* or one of these programmes as a means of securing more effective teaching and more rapid progression. They were also, of course, expected not to abandon other objectives in the NLS Framework, which are linked to the requirements of the National Curriculum.

Progression in phonics
This programme, based on the NLS *Framework for teaching*, consists of a book of teaching materials, a training pack for consultants to use with teachers and a training CD-ROM for teachers to use independently.

In the opening section, the book reiterates the necessity for systematic and direct teaching of phonics.

> Other word-level objectives can be met in the context of shared and guided reading activities but this is not the case with phonics. Much of this teaching will need to be done away from texts through direct teaching … Although the structure of the phonic code can sometimes be revealed through poems and word-play texts, in most texts phonic patterning occurs too randomly to be discerned. Most focused phonics teaching should therefore be done through play, games and activities and then <u>applied</u> alongside other reading cues to meaningful reading of appropriately matched, good quality texts … [9]

The book outlines the basic principles of the phonemic system and then describes a fairly detailed programme for teaching phonics in seven steps. The progression of these steps is in line with the NLS Framework but in more detail, in that the order of teaching phonemes and letters and the length of time for each step are suggested. A decision was made to limit the explanation for the rationale and structure in *Progression in phonics*. The following elements have been selected for further explanation here:
  a) The phonemic system
  b) Order of teaching
  c) Pace of teaching
  d) Teacher knowledge
  e) High-frequency words
  f) Segmentation and blending

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[9] NLS *Progression in phonics* (1999), p. 7: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy

a) The phonemic system
The *Progression in phonics* materials describe phonics as consisting of two elements – two skills and an area of knowledge:

Phonics is

skills of segmentation and blending	+	**knowledge** of the alphabetic code

Progression in phonics training materials
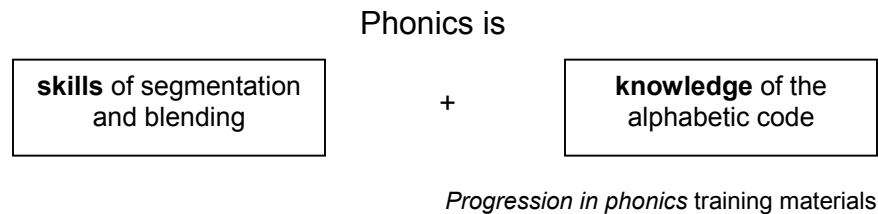
and it sets out the four principles underlying the phonemic system as:
▪ sounds/phonemes are represented by letters;
▪ a phoneme can be represented by one or more letters;
▪ the same phoneme can be represented/spelled in more than one way;
▪ the same spelling may represent more than one sound.

The case is made, on page 3 of *Progression in phonics,* for teaching how graphemes map on to 45 phonemes.[10] The training package used by LEAs and the interactive training CD-ROM provide activities to enable teachers to understand and recall the most common representations (letters and combinations of letters) of each phoneme. Describing the processes of phonemic spelling and reading is simplified by using a phonetic alphabet. Universal use amongst teachers of IPA, the international phonetic alphabet, though helpful, was not considered feasible at the time *Progression in phonics* was produced. Instead, a highly simplified system was adopted in which the most common letter or letter combination (digraph) was adopted to represent the phoneme, e.g. /b/ is the consonant phoneme in 'baby'. It was decided to regularise the 'long' vowel phonemes as in 'make', 'bean', 'light', 'slow' and 'cute' by using the single vowel + 'e' : /ae/, /ee/, /ie/, /oe/ and /ue/. The only one that is novel is /ae/.

b) Order of teaching
The progression in learning the phonics skills of segmentation and blending and acquisition of letter-knowledge follows the same order as in the NLS Framework. However, in *Progression in phonics*, there is a suggested order for teaching the phonemes and the letters that represent them, based on the perceived difficulty of auditory perception and the movements of the letters for handwriting. The table below shows the seven steps in the progression in terms of the level of skill in segmenting and blending phonemes and the knowledge of letters to be learned. A full explanation for each step follows.

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[10] See also McGuinness (1998).

Progression in phonic skills and knowledge

Step	Skill in:	Knowledge of letters:
1	hearing and discriminating general sounds, speech sounds and patterns	
2	hearing phonemes /s/, /m/, /k/, /t/, /g/, /h/ in initial position	s, m, c, t, g, h
3	hearing phonemes /s/, /m/, /k/, /t/, /g/ in final position	ss, ck, l, n, d, k, sh, ch
4	▪ hearing phonemes /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ in medial position; ▪ CVC segmenting and blending, reading and spelling	a, e, i, o, u f, qu, b, r, j, p, th, ng
5	C(C)V(C)C segmenting and blending, reading and spelling	v, w, x, y, z
6	C V C segmenting and blending, reading and spelling	ai, ee, ie, oa, oo, or, ar, ir, oi, ou
7	C V C segmenting and blending, reading and spelling	ay, a-e, ea, igh, y, i-e, ow, o-e, oe, ew, ue, u-e, oy, ow, er, ur, aw, air, ear, oo

Progression in phonics (1999), p. 6

Step 2   Step 2 concentrates on identifying phonemes in the initial position in a word, e.g. /m/ at the beginning of 'man'. The phonemes used were selected against three criteria.
1. They represent a range of difficulty. This group of 6 consonants (/s/, /m/, /k/, /t/, /g/ and /h/) encompasses the range from the easiest to the most difficult of consonant phonemes to identify. Two of the easiest phonemes to hear are /s/ and /m/ (though /s/ is not necessarily the easiest to articulate). The phonemes /k/, /t/ and /g/ can be confused auditorily. The phoneme /h/ cannot occur at the end of a word so can only be learned in initial position and is difficult to hear. If children can identify these phonemes in initial position, it can be claimed that they can identify all phonemes in this position.
2. The letters representing /s/ and /m/ are visually memorable: a snake is a useful mnemonic for 's' as the letter looks like a snake and the phoneme hisses like a snake. The letter 'm' occurs a number of times in 'mum' and 'Mummy' and also is the trademark of MacDonalds.
3. The six letters encompass the range of handwriting movements. The letter 'c' is the basis for the most difficult movement in handwriting – the anti-clockwise curve; 'g' is another in this group and 's' can also be included in this group for convenience. The letter 't' is one of the basic letters in the 'vertical line group'. The letters 'm' and 'h' are in the third main handwriting group – 'retracing up the vertical'. These six consonants allow practice in the three main handwriting groups.

Step 3   In step 3 the same phonemes are used to learn to identify phonemes in the final position in words, on the same basis that if these can be identified in this position, then all can. Two of them – /s/ and /k/ – have slightly different forms

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of representation when in final position – 'ss' and 'ck' – so negating any half-formed hypothesis in the child's mind that there may be a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and letters. Teaching 'sh' and 'ch' at this point is intended to reinforce the one phoneme/two letter pattern. In this step, further consonant letters can be learned while children practise identifying the phonemes in initial and final positions. The inclusion of the letter 'k' with 'ck' in this step enables children to see the relationship between 'c', 'k' and 'ck'. The letters 'l', 'n' and 'd' were added to practise the full range of handwriting movements.

Step 4   Step 4 introduces the five vowel letters in medial position and all but five of the remaining consonant letters and digraphs.

Step 5   In step 5, there is less letter knowledge (five consonants) to concentrate on while learning to segment and blend adjoining consonants.

Steps 6   Steps 6 and 7 concentrate solely on letter-knowledge and require no
and 7   additional skill, as segmenting and blending words containing 'long' vowels are no different and arguably easier than those containing 'short' vowels. The reason two steps were created for 'long' vowels was that even in Reception, children need to be able to write such words. There is a tendency to use capital letters to represent the long vowels as they are the same as the letter name. (e.g. bEn 'been', dA 'day'). Giving them one representation for each of the 'long' vowel phonemes allows them to do this. Step 7 covers the range of options for spelling which children will need from Year 1 onwards.

c) Pace of teaching
The only significant difference between *Progression in phonics* and the NLS Framework is the pace of this learning. There are persuasive arguments for teaching English-speaking children to start learning to read earlier than children who speak other languages[11]. When the NLS Framework was introduced there was widespread doubt that much phonics could or should be taught in the Reception class, although a few schools were successfully teaching phonics at this age. As the NLS Framework was adopted in schools, the amount of phonics teaching increased and evidence from teachers showed that Reception children can learn to segment very quickly through interactive, lively experiences. Teachers recognised that, far from damaging children, phonics was liberating them to read and write. There was also accumulating empirical research to show that, where phonics is taught systematically in Reception, children learn very quickly (Watson and Johnston, 1998; Stuart, 1999).

Progression in phonics maintains the order for teaching phonics as outlined in the NLS *Framework for teaching* but accelerates the pace by suggesting a shorter timescale than that in the NLS Framework. Traditionally, learning to segment the medial vowel has taken a long time. Medial vowels are hard to hear because they are co-articulated with consonants (Liberman et al., 1967; Bondarko, 1969). In the NLS distance learning

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[11] See D. McGuinness, 'A prototype for teaching the English alphabet code', in Reading Reform Foundation newsletter 49, autumn term 2002: www.rrf.org.uk.

materials (1998)[12], teachers were encouraged to lengthen the vowel to make it more obvious and it was found that children could learn to hear the vowel more quickly. Once children can segment and blend vowel phonemes, they can spell and read simple CVC words. From the point at which children can hear/identify the phoneme in initial position, to the point they begin to learn to segment/spell and blend/read VC and CVC words, is considered to be three to four weeks (Step 2 to early Step 4). During this time they will have learned thirteen consonants/consonant digraphs and perhaps two of the vowels. Through steps 2 and 3, children use their ability to hear the phonemes in initial and then final positions and their knowledge of letters in their day-to-day writing.

In parallel with the increased pace in *Progression in phonics* was the publication of the Foundation Stage Early Learning Goals. The goals for phonics and spelling raise expectations beyond the NLS Framework objectives for the Reception year: 'Hear and say initial and final sounds in words and short vowel sounds within words; … use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words,' (QCA, 1999). *Progression in phonics* outlines the expected time for each element (step) to take with a class of Reception children. Page 9 suggests that most children should be hearing the sound in initial position and know a handful of letters at least by the end of the autumn term in Reception (or alternative setting). Pages 14 and 15 suggest that hearing the sound in final position and another handful of letters should take no more than 3 weeks; learning to read and spell CVC words should take no more than another 6 weeks; learning to spell and read words containing consonant clusters and one representation of each vowel phoneme should take another 8 weeks. On this timescale, much of the phonic work could be achieved by the end of Reception.

An important contribution of *Progression in phonics* is the lively games and activities through which teachers of such young children can teach phonics. The training video shows the games being played by whole classes of children and demonstrates the active nature of the games, the obvious enjoyment of the children and the speed with which they learn the skills. This approach to phonics teaching has allayed the fears of some teachers who had reservations about teaching phonics to children in this age group.

d) Teacher knowledge
Progression in phonics posits a very simple view of phonics teaching. There are no complicated skills, such as phoneme deletion, that appear in many programmes. The only skills are phonemic segmentation and blending. The knowledge to be acquired consists of 45 phonemes and their most common representations (26 letters and about 50 letter combinations, e.g. 'er', 'igh', 'ch'). The programme breaks with traditional phonic teaching that consonant clusters have to be taught – it takes the position that single consonants are blended for reading and adjacent consonants segmented for spelling. There is no body of knowledge on 'clusters' which has to be programmed into a series of additional weeks. Likewise, the programme is sparing with rules such as modifying or 'magic' 'e'. The training video illustrates children deducing the concept of the split digraph based on their understanding of the principle that words are constructed of phonemes represented by letters and letter combinations. Equally, the knowledge base presented in the training for teachers is minimal. It could be argued that teachers with a

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[12] Accompanying the NLS Framework was a box of distance learning materials for teachers to use in school staff meetings through the year.

basic understanding of the phonemic system will build their own knowledge in the course of teaching, e.g. that the letter 'x' represents two phonemes, /k/ followed by /s/. However, for teachers to understand the debate around the teaching of phonics (e.g. synthetic versus analytic phonics) and make judgements about the level of phonic teaching necessary for the children in their charge, it could be argued that they need much more than is contained in the NLS materials.

e) High-frequency words
Half of most non-technical texts comprise a relatively small number of words – about a hundred. Because these words occur so frequently in text, teachers aim to ensure that children can recognise them easily when reading – i.e. read them rapidly 'on sight' and spell them correctly. The adoption of the term 'sight words' for this set of frequently-occurring or 'high-frequency words' (e.g. 'up', 'get', 'they', 'you', 'from', 'was', 'said', 'made') has resulted in children in some schools being taught to memorise them all visually when many of them conform to 'regular' phonemic analysis. *Progression in phonics* recommends that the high-frequency words which are not phonemically regular be taught in the context of texts during shared and guided reading and not in the space of time allocated for word level work which is required for the daily systematic teaching of phonics.

f) Segmentation and blending
The games and activities in *Progression in phonics* are designed to teach children to:
▪ **segment** words into phonemes and represent those phonemes by letters (spelling);
▪ recognise letters in order, say the phonemes for letters and **blend** the phonemes into words (reading).
In the programme, learning letters and learning to segment are linked; spelling words for writing provides the purpose for learning letters. (Although a suggested order for learning letters is included, there are no mnemonics in *Progression in phonics* for enabling children to become familiar with the shapes of letters, as there are many schemes on the market for this purpose.) In line with a considerable body of developmental research on this subject, children are taught to segment the phoneme at the initial position of a word, e.g. /b/ in 'bat', then the phoneme in final position, e.g. /t/ in 'bat', and then the medial vowel, e.g. /a/ in 'bat' (Clay, 1975; Henderson and Beers, 1980; Gentry, 1982; Read, 1986; Cataldo and Ellis, 1988). The cognitive milestone for children is the ability to segment the phoneme in initial position. Once this ability is secure, children generally take very few weeks to be able to segment phonemes in other positions and during this period they are learning the letters which represent those phonemes. Not only is there the motivational reason for learning letters with the purpose of spelling but there is cumulative research and practitioner evidence throughout the last century to suggest that the ability to segment words strongly assists children in learning to blend (Montessori, 1912, 1964; Chomsky, 1971; Pigeon, 1976; Bradley and Bryant, 1979; Read, 1986; Cataldo and Ellis, 1988; Gough, Juel and Griffith, 1992).

The approach taken to introduce blending in *Progression in phonics* is that of modelling the process by going from a segmented word back to the blended word. (For example, children are asked to segment the word 'ran', they respond with /r/-/a/-/n/, and place the correct letters together to make the word; they are then asked to say the letters in order again and blend them into the word and they respond with /r/-/a/-/n/, 'ran'.) Some children do not need this step in order to blend phonemes but *Progression in phonics* was designed as an inclusive programme to meet the needs of the majority.

What has been achieved?

The beneficial impact of the NLS on the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools has been widely acknowledged by the profession and by Ofsted.[13] Substantial numbers of teachers and teaching assistants have received training through LEAs on phonics. There is a shared language for the teaching of phonics which is gradually being adopted throughout Foundation Stage settings and schools. Trainees in teacher education are expected to be trained in phonics.

For the past three years, at least four out of five 11-year-olds have reached or exceeded the expected standard in reading, which is in line with the national 2002 target declared in 1998[14], despite some significant areas of weakness in the teaching of phonics experienced by these cohorts of children who passed through Key Stage 1 before the introduction of the NLS at the start of 1998/99.

Percentage of 11-year-olds attaining level 4 or above in KS2 Tests

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Reading	67	71	78	83	82	80
Writing	53	53	54	55	57	60

This is nothing about which to be complacent, not least because there has been some slippage from the earlier level 4 gains in reading. However, it is a fact to be borne in mind in relation to the issues about the effective teaching of phonics in the early stages of learning to read and write.

At Key Stage 1, significant gains have also been made since the National Literacy Strategy was introduced by most schools in the autumn term of 1998.

Attainment of 7-year-olds in KS1 Tests

	Level	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Reading	2+	80	80	82	83	84	84
	2B+	62	62	66	68	69	69
Writing	2+	80	81	83	84	86	86
	2B+	47	48	53	57	59	60
Spelling	2+	62	66	71	72	75	78

In all three elements, as well as the overall improvement in results, the gap in attainment between boys and girls has narrowed since 1998. In reading and writing at level 2+, boys have risen by 6 percentage points compared to 4 for girls, and in spelling, boys have risen by 13 points at level 2+ compared to 11 for girls.

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[13] The Office for Standards in Education, Ofsted, is the government department with statutory responsibility for inspecting and reporting on the standards and quality of education in schools in England. Ref: *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 – 2002*; www.ofsted.gov.uk.
[14] In 1998 the Government set a national target of 80% level 4 or above in the National Curriculum tests for 11-year-olds in English (reading and writing) by 2002. Reading attainment has been at or above 80% over the past 3 years. Attainment in writing, though now improving, has remained significantly lower, resulting in an aggregated total of 75% for English, i.e. five points off the overall target in 2002.

There is no doubt, however, that attainment in reading and writing could, and should, be significantly better by the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7), or of the important part that teaching and learning phonics has to play in improving standards for 11-year-olds.

Issues in design and implementation
The two questions posed on page 2 relate to the effectiveness of the phonics element of the NLS in terms of design and implementation. The distinction between design and implementation is not sharp. They are not two logically distinct phases or aspects of the NLS. It would be naïve to think that one could simply design a methodology without equally serious consideration about how effectively it would work. Thus, the conceptual and practical have interacted throughout the lifetime of the NLS, with the overall design of the Framework and associated methodologies being influenced by the constraints of delivery. In practice, these constraints are at least as important as the conceptual fidelity of the model itself. Levels of complexity and prescription, targets and expectations, distance from prevailing and often asymmetrical ideologies and practices, and the scale and speed of implementation have all impacted on the design as well as the delivery structure.[15]

Notwithstanding this interrelatedness, the issues relating to design fall into three areas:
- pace;
- the NLS 'searchlights' model;
- 'synthetic' versus 'analytic' phonics;
and those relating to implementation into three more:
- clarity of message;
- ideology and teacher knowledge;
- the delivery chain.

Pace
There is a significant and active lobby which argues that formal teaching, including the teaching of phonics, would be better deferred until the age of six in order to allow time for children to consolidate their social and intellectual skills, particularly speaking and listening, first. Their views, influential among some teachers, teacher educators and local authority advisers, are to a certain extent based on a misunderstanding of phonics as defined in the NLS. They observe 'formal' phonics teaching in a number of early years settings often promoted by misguided and hardpressed headteachers and assume that this is what the NLS defines as phonics – which it isn't. The approach taken in *Progression in phonics* is active, interactive, lively and fun.

The NLS 'searchlights' model
Criticism of the searchlights model arises from two perspectives. First, that the teaching implications derived from the model have not been sufficiently robust about the importance of direct and discrete phonics teaching in the early stages, and second that the model itself is considered to be an incorrect representation of the reading process.

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[15] For example, the original scale and size of the *Progression in phonics* guidance was reduced and streamlined to make it manageable at a time when sensitivities about teachers' workloads were running high.

The first issue, raised in the 2002 Ofsted report[16], is less with the searchlights model *per se* than with the opportunity it may provide for teachers to ignore or underplay the phonics element. This is partly a design issue, as the NLS Framework and 1998 training materials were not sufficiently clear, and partly a failure of implementation, as the place of phonics in relation to other word level objectives was stated very succinctly in *Progression in phonics.* There are two 'word level' searchlights and four categories of word level objectives: phonics, word recognition, vocabulary and handwriting. From the earliest stages of the Strategy, teachers have recognised that handwriting practice should take place outside the literacy hour. But many teachers have been teaching children to read and spell high-frequency words and new vocabulary during the 15-minute word level part of the lesson. *Progression in phonics* and *Developing Early Writing* point out that all of the word level session is needed every day for teaching phonics.

However, even where the NLS or another phonics programme is in place, too many teachers under-emphasise the application of phonics in the teaching of continuous reading. This has two important consequences. Firstly, it fails to consolidate and practise phonic learning; secondly, it tends to teach children to be over-reliant on non-phonic strategies. This inhibits fluency and thus progress.

This is a significant issue for the NLS. As well as weaknesses in the direct teaching of phonics, a number of teachers have failed to grasp the importance of applying it effectively in shared and guided reading. There is a tendency for some teachers to direct children away from the phonic searchlight in the first instance and only to use it as a last resort. Furthermore, when the word has been successfully figured out by the child, they do not use the child's graphic, syntactic and contextual inferences to take them back to the phonic and orthographic structures of the words on the page. There is no case for discouraging inferences about words children find difficult to read, but this must not happen at the expense of phonics. On the contrary, children should be explicitly taught to use inferences (e.g. from syntax or the graphic/analogical features of words) to reinforce their decoding skills. But this tends to run counter to teachers' instincts. They are often satisfied if a child gets a word right, and see no point in tracking back to deconstruct a problem that has already been solved. Too often, they fail to appreciate the significance of teaching children to 'loop' back to the phonic and orthographic features of new words. Here, paradoxically, inference, generalisation and hypothesis-testing are the very tools children need to extend and consolidate their decoding and spelling skills. It is an issue on which the NLS needs to be clearer in its guidance. It also requires more sophisticated levels of understanding and methodology by many teachers.

In summary, the NLS recommends the daily, focused and discrete teaching of phonics throughout Reception and Key Stage 1 (age 4–7 years) based on the guidance set out in *Progression in phonics*, or through commercially produced programmes which meet the same objectives. This teaching should normally begin the literacy lesson and be brisk, direct, active and enjoyable for children. Phonics, like many other skills, must be taught explicitly through demonstration, imitation, practice and application, and be over-learned until it becomes fast and habitual. Teachers need to get children's phonic skills securely

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[16] Ofsted, *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 –2002*; www.ofsted.gov.uk. In the conclusions they comment: '… the 'searchlights' model of reading took a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and therefore placed too much emphasis, at the earliest stages of learning to read, on the use of a broad range of decoding strategies and not enough on phonics.'

'underground' as soon as possible, to increase their capacity to focus on comprehension, purpose and response in reading and writing.

Shared, guided and independent reading and writing are also key features of the methodology covered by the literacy hour. They represent structured levels of support leading to independence. Children should be taught to apply and coordinate a range of reading strategies in a connected way such that each reinforces the other and all contribute to the development of fast early fluency and comprehension.

There are significant challenges in getting these messages across and, despite some progress, we remain concerned that they have not yet taken root in classrooms at the level needed to impact significantly on standards.

The second criticism, that the searchlights model is incorrect, does not appear to have substance in the research literature over the last thirty years right up to the present day. The arguments against the model extrapolate from the powerful, empirical case for early and systematic phonics teaching, which the NLS fully endorses, to a more ideological argument for exclusive concentration on phonics first – indeed not simply phonics first but phonics only first. Thus, it challenges the NLS rationale directly, arguing that the strategies promoted in the searchlights rationale are mutually contradictory and will confuse rather than assist young readers. For example, the Reading Reform Foundation offers the following editorial comment:

> There are many professionals who know the Reading Searchlights model to be a flawed model for learning to read. Such an eclectic approach has already failed this and other English-speaking countries for the best part of this century leading to the current high rates of illiteracy. Surely professionals should promote what they promote in schools because it is based on research and not because they are under duress to follow national directives. The look-and-say, whole language and real books philosophies were never supported by scientific evidence and yet were readily adopted by training colleges and subsequently delivered in schools by teachers. It is time we learned from the mistakes of the past … we all need to ensure that the National Literacy Strategy does not serve to suppress this alternative method which is increasingly supported by reputable scientific research. [17]

Proponents of a 'phonics only' approach begin with the assumption that the learning of skills in general, and reading and writing in particular, is a simple hierarchical process that moves seamlessly from the learning of atomic parts and, by accretion, grows into integrated and complex skills. The tendency is to promote the teaching of phonic decoding skills to the exclusion of everything else on the assumption that this will lead children, through the application of the phonic algorithm, automatically to the meaning and comprehension of texts. This exclusive approach precludes teaching any kind of hypothesising, problem-solving, predicting or inferring, which are pejoratively dismissed as 'guessing', on the grounds that they interfere with the proper business of reading. Reading is, they suggest, sequential letter-by-letter decoding to reach words, then sentences, then comprehension.

The NLS characterises reading as a more sophisticated skill in which a range of strategies linked to decoding and comprehension interact and mutually support each other in the process of getting to the meaning of a text. Far from being mutually

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[17] See Reading Reform Foundation newsletter 45, February 2001: www.rrf.org.uk.

contradictory, these strategies are complementary and necessary. In its original appraisal of research, the NLS paid attention to Adams' comprehensive investigation into the effectiveness of reading instruction programmes. In reviewing the most effective of these programmes, Adams has this to say:

> … none of these programmes embodies the misguided hypothesis that reading skills are best developed from the bottom up. In the reading situation, as in any effective communication situation, the message or text provides but one of the critical sources of information, the rest must come from the reader's own prior knowledge. Further, in the reading situation, as in any other learning situation, the learnability of a pattern depends critically on the prior knowledge and higher order relationships that it evokes. In both fluent reading and its acquisition, the reader's knowledge must be aroused interactively and in parallel. Neither understanding, nor learning can proceed hierarchically, from the bottom up. Phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relations and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing, and with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions and meanings of texts.[18]

Because the model is relatively sophisticated, it is open to misinterpretation, and that is a danger. Adams herself is quick to point out that the interaction between different layers or levels in the model will not simply occur. It has to be taught. For example, if children infer a word from syntax or context, they need to be led back to its orthographic features and learn how it is spelled. Similarly, if children are blending and decoding words they do not understand, they should be led to an investigation of the meaning so that reading actively expands their vocabulary.[19] She is also very clear about the priority of phonics teaching in the early stages and the need for this to be discretely and systematically taught. Claims that the differing layers or levels 'contradict' one another, or confuse children, are based more on an ideological preference for a 'bottom up' approach to the teaching of reading than on evidence. Recent developments in our understanding of phonics have rendered it a particularly powerful and effective system. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, in the learning and over-learning of phonics so necessary for fluency, readers create connections, infer rules, generalise and modify hypotheses continually in the light of experience. Indeed, what makes the system so powerful is its capacity to enable this kind of inferential learning from a limited set of concepts and skills.

Thus, the NLS rationale seeks to promote literacy – not just reading and certainly not just de-coding – at a variety of connected levels, and at every stage of reading development through the primary school. These levels are expected to be mutually supportive in the way described above and are represented in the *Framework for teaching* as strands of word, sentence and text level objectives. They are mirrored in the structure of the literacy hour [20] as a system of connected methodologies for teaching the reading and writing of texts.

'Synthetic' versus 'analytic' phonics
Much of the written debate about the different approaches to the teaching of phonics centres around the distinction between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' phonics. Bielby (2002, p. 7) suggests that *Progression in phonics* 'promotes an enlightened version of "synthetic phonics" at the expense of "analytic phonics".' On the other hand, Chew defines the NLS approach to phonics as analytic and suggests that teachers should be teaching synthetic

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[18] M.J. Adams, *Beginning to Read* (1990), p. 422
[19] This assertion has been supported in subsequent research by, amongst others, David Share's 'self-teach' approach (Share, 1995; Cunningham et al., 2002) and a theoretical paper by Snowling (2002).
[20] See NLS *Framework for teaching (*1998); www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy.

phonics instead[21] There are subtly different interpretations of the terms 'synthetic' and 'analytic' phonics in the literature but broadly the terms are aligned with two general approaches to teaching and learning, i.e. direct/explicit and indirect/implicit/constructivist, respectively. Thus, synthetic phonics is direct instruction in which children learn to combine letters to read words. Analytic phonics is an indirect teaching approach in which children are expected to infer information about letters and how they combine to form words.

> … many theoretical treatments of decoding-oriented instruction imply an 'analytic' (whole words are taught first, and letter-sound correspondences are inferred from them) approach. However recent studies seem to indicate that children exposed to synthetic (phoneme-grapheme correspondences are taught directly and combined to form words) or as Chall (1983) calls it 'direct-synthetic' teaching, tend to do better than children who learned with 'indirect-analytic' phonic programs (p.16).
>
> Feitelson (1988), p. 119

> Synthetic phonics programs teach children to convert letters into sounds or phonemes and then blend the sounds to form recognisable words. Analytic phonics avoids having children pronounce in isolation to figure out words. Rather children are taught to analyse letter-sound relations once the word is identified.
>
> National Reading Panel (2000), pp. 2, 99

The approach taken by the NLS is direct teaching and clearly advocates the recognition of letters, and the blending of them to form words. It is, therefore, a synthetic phonics approach. It does not, however, rule out the possibility that children will supplement their knowledge and deepen their understanding of the writing system by inference in the course of reading and writing or that teachers will point out connections. Some salient comments from a group of 4-year-olds:

> Philip: "Me and Francis sound the same at the beginning but we look different on our name cards, don't we?"

> "Do you really need two 't's in your name, Mrs Betts?"

> "You've spelled dancing wrong, Mrs Betts – didn't you hear the 's'?"

These children's comments demonstrate their natural and, one would hope, highly valued inquisitiveness about the world (in this case the world of written language) around them. To put it simply, they are thinking and should be actively encouraged to do so.[22] The approach taken by the NLS to phonics, therefore, is also analytical but this is less explicit in *Progression in phonics* than in the earlier 1998 training materials.[23]

The terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic' primarily refer to phonics for reading. Even the following definition which uses the term 'segment' (normally associated with spelling) is referring to the process of reading.

> *Synthetic phonics* refers to an approach in which the sounds identified with letters are learned in isolation and blended together. Children are taught to segment a single syllable word such as *cat* into three parts /c/a/t/ and to blend the parts together to form a word …

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[21] e.g. Jennifer Chew in Reading Reform Foundation newsletter 45, February 2001, p. 8.
[22] Cf. discussion of the 'searchlights' model above.
[23] Distance learning materials accompanied the launch of the NLS in 1998.

> *Analytic phonics* refers to an approach in which the sounds associated with letters are not pronounced in isolation. Children identify the phonic element from a set of words in which each word contains the particular element under study. For example, teacher and students discuss how the following words are alike: *pat, park, push* and *pen.*
>
> Strickland (1998), p. 31

'Segment' in this context describes the visual recognition of letters in order that they may be blended to read a word. This process is generally referred to in the literature and phonics programmes as 'sounding out'.[24]

The NLS places as much importance on phonics for spelling as it does for reading. An interpretation of the work of Margaret Peters (1970) generated an approach to teaching and learning spelling which downplayed and sometimes ignored the crucial phonic element.[25] Although not producing the same level of debate as the 'reading wars', teaching spelling has its 'phonic' and 'visual' advocates. In the NLS Framework, the emphasis in spelling is on phonics at Key Stage 1, moving into a range of other strategies in Key Stage 2. Phonics teaching is therefore aimed at both a reading and a spelling outcome. Discussion of phonics teaching as illustrated by the synthetic/analytic debate tends to concentrate on reading. One of the fundamental principles underpinning the NLS is the reciprocity of the processes of reading and writing throughout the primary years and this occurs in the early stages with phonics.

In spelling, children must be very familiar with the various choices for each vowel phoneme but must also be aware of the limits of those choices and ultimately to be confident they are using the correct spelling. NLS Framework objectives occur in each term in Years 3 and 4 to ensure that phonics is revised. Recently produced web-based planning exemplification for Years 3 and 4 illustrates using these objectives to ensure spelling principles are understood and specific spellings are learned.[26] In addition, in Years 3 and 4 spelling, there begins a change in focus from mainly phonics to the learning of:

- the morphemic structures of words, particularly roots and affixes;
- common spelling conventions, rules and exceptions;
- some irregular but common sight words;
- a range of active strategies for spelling unfamiliar words. [27]

During the past four years, the NLS has been working to change the professional culture of some 200,000 teachers. This has led to '… a marked shift in teachers' understanding of and attitudes towards the place of phonics in teaching reading and spelling.'[28] Nevertheless, the process of change has proved slower than anticipated by the ambitious targets set in 1998. We have stated above that there is sufficient evidence, in

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[24] Greg Brooks explains the dual uses of the term 'segmentation' in a chapter in M. Cook (ed.), *Perspectives on the teaching and learning of phonics* (2002).

[25] e.g. Cripps (1978).

[26] www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy

[27] These are set out in some detail in the NLS Framework – see word level objectives Years 3 to 6 and the NLS guidance in *The Spelling Bank*; www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy.

[28] Ref. Ofsted, *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years 1998 –2002*; www.ofsted.gov.uk. See also *The Teaching of Phonics*, a paper by HMI, published 19 October 2001: www.ofsted.gov.uk:
'… Despite *Progression in Phonics* and the subsequent publication of *Developing Early Writing* as well as the provision of training to go with them, this approach to word level work has not been understood fully by enough teachers.'

our view, to justify the assumption that the design of the NLS is sufficiently robust to deliver high standards of reading and writing in primary schools. There remain too many schools, as inspection evidence amply demonstrates, which are under-performing. However, those that have been particularly successful have:

> … embraced the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies strongly [and recognised] that these initiatives would be the key to achieving the highest standards in English and mathematics and that they could also have a positive impact on the rest of the curriculum.[29]

The fact that this has not happened to the intended extent in too many schools therefore bears more on the effectiveness of the NLS delivery than its design. The Strategy has been responsive to the disciplines of implementation, of necessity, but also because the 'learn as you go' principle was central to its development and success.

> The NLNS are well-defined, coherent and comprehensive constellations of policies that have been centrally established and driven. The regional directors and SEU are particularly sensitive to feedback from the field and make it their business to refine and adapt as necessary.[30]

> One of the most striking features of the NLS and NNS is the way in which the Strategy leaders have modified elements of the Strategies (or messages about these elements) in response to information about progress and challenges. [31]

Some of the implementation issues which particularly affect the improvement of phonics teaching are outlined below.

Clarity of message
As already stated, the NLS is clear about the centrality of explicit phonics teaching in the early stages of learning to read and write. This message has been further strengthened in relation to the teaching of reading and spelling and reinforced persistently to schools by the NLS. The *Progression in phonics* programme has been made available through funded training to teachers from every school in England. The Strategy has also supported the use of other reputable and proven programmes. The messages have been strongly articulated in a national programme of conferences for headteachers, in Ofsted's guidance to school inspectors[32], in NLS training for local authority advisers, and they are included in the National Curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage.[33] These messages could certainly be sharpened and will need to be communicated with more persistence and consistency at every level if they are to make more of a difference.

Ideology and teacher knowledge
At the time when the NLS was introduced, practices in the teaching of literacy were idiosyncratic and often based more on tradition and ideology than any prevailing rationale. There had been a strong 'language experience'-based approach in initial teacher training and continuing professional development but even this was not well

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[29] Ofsted, *The Curriculum In Successful Primary Schools,* October 2003: www.ofsted.gov.uk
[30] Earl, et al. (2000)
[31] Earl, et al. (2003)
[32] Ofsted's advice, written by NLS to school inspectors in *Update 35*, April 2001. The 10 key messages here included 'Progression in Phonics or equivalent (should be) in use throughout YR and Y1 with continuous reinforcement through Year 2': www.ofsted.gov.uk.
[33] QCA, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000)

understood by great numbers of teachers. The teaching of phonics was not consistent in the curriculum of the majority of classes. Phonics acquired a bad reputation because it was undeveloped and poorly understood. Research was improving our knowledge but disagreement between experts was also rife. The introduction of the NLS in 1998 was greeted positively by the majority of schools, who saw its clarity and consistency as a welcome relief from previous uncertainties.

However, there are still serious issues about the level and quality of teacher, and headteacher, knowledge. Despite an extensive round of phonics training for some 20,000 teachers in 1999, many teachers' understanding remains limited and too many still fall back on inadequate methods, teaching phonics inconsistently or omitting it altogether. Other commercial programmes, particularly *Jolly Phonics* are also in widespread use and suffer similar 'abuses'. The first round of training laid solid foundations. Particular groups of teachers need to be targeted with continuing support and training over the next phase of the NLS. These include:

- headteachers, whose leadership in this area is insufficiently strong. Often this is related to their own backgrounds in which their experience and credibility is more secure with older children;
- early years teachers, who are often confused by mixed messages about how and what they should be teaching in literacy. Despite the efforts of the NLS to embed these objectives in the Foundation Stage curriculum[34], there remains widespread resistance to the formal introduction of phonics teaching in the first year of schooling by a significant number of early years advisers, trainers and teachers. As a result, systematic phonics teaching too often goes by default in these critical early stages;
- Key Stage 1 teachers, the majority of whom are signed up in principle to the teaching of phonics, but whose understanding of the code and pedagogy is too limited;
- Year 3 and 4 teachers, whose knowledge of phonics is often more limited. The goal of the NLS is that almost all children should have acquired the necessary phonic skills and knowledge for reading and writing by the end of Key Stage 1. However, at present there is still a significant body of children leaving Key Stage 1 on National Curriculum level 1 or 2c with insecure phonic skills and limited knowledge. Therefore, teachers in Years 3 and 4 may well be required to teach the phonics skills of segmentation and blending as well as letter knowledge competently. Even those children who are competent in phonics at the end of Key Stage 1 need to continue to exercise their skills of segmentation and blending on more complex vocabulary and learn the vowel digraphs so they are automatic. These expectations are set out in the NLS Framework*;*
- students in initial teacher training: the NLS messages have been persistently reinforced by the TTA[35] with initial teacher training providers and need to continue. Still, too many teachers are emerging from their training with insufficient understanding about phonics to be able to teach it adequately;
- teachers in their first three years of teaching who are likely to need consolidation of their subject knowledge and practice in this area.

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[34] QCA, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (2000)
[35] The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) is the national funding body for providers of initial teacher training (ITT). They have a quality assurance responsibility which is tied to the funding of programmes. In 2000 the ITT National Curriculum (circular 4/98) was replaced by ITT standards with associated guidance and incorporated a requirement for students to be able to teach to the expectations of the NLS. The teaching of phonics is an explicit part of these expectations.

The delivery chain

The implementation of the NLS has relied heavily on a cascade approach to training and support, through a team of regional directors assisting with the training and managing of 350 literacy consultants. The consultants, funded centrally but employed by local authorities, work directly with schools and teachers. They deliver training which is designed and resourced centrally. Additionally, the NLS has identified leading or expert teachers in schools who work with consultants to disseminate, first-hand, successful practice. We have also worked with local authority school improvement teams in an effort to ensure that the phonics messages are clear and, in the autumn of 1999, held a national round of headteacher conferences through which these messages were again very strongly reinforced. There are two particularly vulnerable links in the delivery chain:

- The local authority/school interface – school improvement advisers are the teams through which local education authorities exercise their statutory school improvement duties to 'intervene in inverse proportion to success'. These advisory teams are generally responsible for agreeing school targets, translating these into priorities and objectives with schools and determining the levels of subsequent support to be assigned by literacy consultants and others. These advisers, while being very influential, are often not effective in promoting key aspects of the NLS. They take account of recent school inspection findings[36], on which schools are bound to act, and numerous other local and national priorities which they agree with the headteacher and governors. These advisers have heavy and competing school improvement agendas and are often poorly informed about the NLS, despite the training opportunities that have been offered.

- 'In-school' dissemination – teachers who have received training are often not influential with their colleagues and easily slip back into traditional and less effective practices. Most important, however, is the part played by the headteacher in understanding, leading and monitoring the strategy in schools and in actively encouraging staff to benefit from further training and to implement new approaches in their classrooms. The evidence which demonstrates this is now overwhelming.[37]

Future direction of phonics in the NLS

More needs to be done in terms of training, support, dissemination and networking. The NLS is working to improve its delivery in the following ways:

- Clarifying and simplifying the big messages to ensure that all schools, advisers, inspectors and trainers are in no doubt about the fundamentals of good literacy teaching.
  - Medium-term planning for Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 2 was published in January 2003 in a 24-page booklet and sent to every school. A version with all the Foundation Stage 'stepping stones' and Early Learning Goals and the NLS objectives presented in full was placed on the DfES Standards website.[38] These plans clearly state that attainment represented by *Progression in phonics* Step 4 is the expected level for the end of Foundation Stage (Reception year) as indicated by the Early Learning Goals, but that Steps 5 and 6

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[36] Since the introduction of the NLS, every primary school has been inspected by Ofsted. In practice, however, the main findings and key issues identified for schools to address seldom make any reference to the teaching of phonics. This partly reflects a lack of training for the inspectors themselves and frequently results in phonics being pushed out of the school improvement agenda.

[37] Ofsted, *The Curriculum In Successful Primary Schools*, October 2003, www.ofsted.gov.uk; Earl, et al. (2003)

[38] An example of National Literacy Strategy medium-term planning, ref. DfES 0078/2003: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy.

are attainable by many children. The plans place phonics at the core of daily teaching in 'Communication, language and literacy'.

- Exemplification of one of the focuses in the later Foundation Stage planning will be published in June.

- Continuing to develop leadership programmes for headteachers, deputies and coordinators with the National College for School Leadership, embedding the key messages about phonics alongside other priorities for literacy and numeracy.
  - In 2002, funding was provided to release coordinators for training in every school. As well as developing coordinators' subject knowledge, this training was designed to skill them up to support their colleagues in developing their own subject knowledge and teaching expertise. Most LEAs now hold termly meetings for coordinators and the Strategies will continue to contribute material to be used in these meetings. National funding for coordinators to be released to work with colleagues within the school has been provided for 2003/04.
  - A leadership programme has been developed for use with headteachers, deputies and coordinators in approximately a quarter of schools beginning in the autumn of 2003. The aim of this programme is to realise the potential of the leadership to improve the teaching of literacy and mathematics within the school.

- Re-focusing the work of literacy consultants and leading teachers on training for and supporting phonics more intensively through Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and in Years 3 and 4 in Key Stage 2.
  - Training will take place for Year 2 and Year 3 teachers from all schools in June 2003. This training will focus strongly on the application of phonics in reading.
  - Training for Year 3 teachers will take place in autumn 2003 and will include an emphasis on phonics for spelling.

- Working more intensively with local authority teams.
  - Various mechanisms for creating closer liaison between school improvement teams and Strategy teams within LEAs have been tried in the Intensifying Support Pilot. Lessons learned from this pilot have been adopted in the Leadership Programme (see above) and will be disseminated through the newly formed Primary Strategy Manager network.
  - All LEAs have identified their 'underperforming' schools and have targeted additional support.

- Developing more effective dissemination and networking between schools.
  - Case studies of good practice in schools are on the Standards website. A communications initiative to accelerate the dissemination of good practice is one of the priorities of the new Primary Strategy.

- Developing *Progression in phonics* into a more detailed and fully resourced teaching programme, as well as continuing to support the use of alternative programmes for teaching phonics.

- Developing a spelling programme for Years 2, 3 and 4 to follow on from *Progression in phonics.*

- Continuing but sharpening the partnership with TTA to support literacy programmes in the initial training of teachers.
  - From 2002, the ability to teach the components of the National Strategies is statutory in order to obtain Qualified Teacher Status.
  - English-specific school-based tutor modules, produced by the NLS, are being used by ITT providers in their partnership schools.

This paper has argued that the major challenge in improving the quality of phonics teaching under the auspices of the NLS relates more to the implementation of the Strategy than to its design. Much has been achieved since the NLS was introduced in 1998 but it is clear that a great deal still remains to be done both in terms of clarity and permeation of the key messages and in ensuring that practice is further improved in the classroom through continuing training and support. Some immediate priorities have been listed where we will work closely with our partners to bring about higher attainment for more children. There is a much less convincing case for fundamental changes to the design of the Strategy; however well intended, these could increase rather than reduce uncertainty and provide a rationalisation for the uncommitted to distance themselves even further. The National Literacy Strategy remains committed to system-wide reform and improvements to teaching and learning on a national scale. It is a challenge the NLS can meet only in partnership with all stakeholders and particularly, as Michael Fullan's evaluation team has pointed out, its critics.[39]

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[39] Earl, et al. (2000), p. 41

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