

Responding to the Rose Review: schools' approaches to the systematic teaching of phonics

This briefing paper reports the results of a short survey of schools' responses to the Rose Review of the teaching of early reading and the subsequent guidance from the Primary National Strategy on the systematic teaching of phonic knowledge and skills to children in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. The survey aimed to ascertain the extent to which a sample of schools understand and are acting upon the key concept of 'fidelity to the programme', identified in the Rose Review as an essential aspect of successful phonics teaching.

Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 20 schools. Additional information was gathered from a further 43 through an emailed questionnaire, and evidence was also gained from a text search of 2005/07 section 5 inspection reports. Nineteen of the schools visited had responded positively to the Rose Review. For five of them, it had triggered the introduction of a systematic phonics programme for the first time. Those already teaching such a programme welcomed the reiteration of key concepts and affirmation of pedagogy in the review. Schools emphasised that the impact of a systematic approach to teaching phonics had raised their expectations of how quickly and well children could learn to read and write. Importantly, actions taken as a response to the Rose Review prompted schools to question other aspects of their practice – for example the transition from the Foundation Stage to Year 1, the use of tracking data, the grouping of children, the teaching of writing – and also their expectations of how quickly children learn.

Age group: 4–11

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Introduction

The findings of the Rose Review¹ argue strongly for

‘the inclusion of a vigorous programme of phonic work to be securely embedded within a broad and language-rich curriculum... In practice, this means teaching relatively short, discrete sessions, designed to progress from simple elements to the more complex aspects of phonic knowledge, skills and understanding’ (paragraphs 35 and 36 of the report).

The review comments that what the phonics programmes it evaluated had in common was their ‘highly systematic’ approach, their perceived differences being less important than their common elements. They all involved teaching beginner readers:

- grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- to apply the skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word to read it
- to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

The Rose Review emphasises the importance of the consistent, systematic and regular teaching of whichever programme is selected, because ‘experience shows that even high quality phonics programmes founder if they are not applied consistently and regularly’ (paragraph 55). This is referred to as ‘fidelity to the programme’.

This short survey analysed the extent to which a selection of schools had made changes to their teaching of phonics on the basis of the findings of the Rose Review, and had understood and acted upon the key concept of ‘fidelity to the programme’.

The 20 schools visited fell into two groups: 12 had introduced the DCSF-designed structured phonics programme Letters and Sounds, and the remainder said they were teaching systematic phonics using other programmes mentioned on the DCSF phonics website, such as Jolly Phonics or Read Write Inc. The fieldwork explored the confidence of staff and their competence in teaching phonics, particularly when a systematic approach had been newly introduced. The fieldwork also asked questions about:

¹ Jim Rose, *An independent review of the teaching of early reading*, Department for Education and Skills, 2006; available from www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/phonics/rosereview/.

- the amount and quality of training
- how the teaching of phonics was organised to meet the needs of different groups of learners
- how well pupils were responding to any changes.

HMIs held discussions with the headteacher, the literacy leader, class teachers and teaching assistants and observed at least two phonics lessons, one in the Foundation Stage and one at Key Stage 1.

All the other schools contacted were invited to complete an email questionnaire which explored the reasons for adopting or rejecting a systematic approach to teaching phonics, and the implementation and success of the programmes they had selected. Forty-three completed questionnaires were received. A text search of section 5 inspection reports provided additional evidence of the positive impact of systematic phonics teaching.

Key findings

- The Rose Review has been widely read by the schools in the survey and its findings have provided a stimulus for discussion and a lever for change.
- Schools with long-established phonics programmes have reviewed and improved their provision in response to the review, in particular the frequency and pace of their phonics sessions.
- Schools have understood the concept of 'fidelity to the programme'. They are working faithfully within the structure of their chosen programme and teaching phonemes and graphemes in the specified order.
- The relationship between the phase of the Letters and Sounds programme and the age of the children varies from school to school. For example, some older children in the schools which had only recently introduced systematic phonics had gaps in their phonic knowledge and so were working on an early phase. Nevertheless the programme is being followed in the correct order.
- Children are enjoying the regular phonics lessons which they are receiving as part of a systematic programme and are gaining satisfaction from putting their learning into practice in their reading and writing.
- Teachers have been 'surprised by the joy' shown by children as they master phonic skills.
- A 'virtuous circle' has been created: children's increasing command of the skills has led to staff's expectations being raised which, in turn, is improving the pace and demand of teaching and leading to further success.
- The clear structure of Letters and Sounds and the well written handbook have helped staff to feel confident about teaching phonics, even when they are inexperienced.

- The skills of staff are developing well, although occasionally there is a lack of accuracy in enunciating phonemes, some uncertainty in the use of terminology, and some insecurity about assessment.
- Local authorities have provided some training and support but most training has been provided 'in house', led by teachers with expertise in systematic phonics teaching, or based on the Letters and Sounds handbook.

Recommendations

- Local authorities, with DCSF support, should ensure that regular, high-quality training is offered to schools that have recently adopted a systematic approach to teaching phonics, such as the Letters and Sounds programme, to ensure that staff's skills, knowledge and understanding continue to be developed and that positive initial developments are maintained.
- The DCSF should develop materials and resources in an accessible format to help schools to inform parents about how their children are learning phonics through Letters and Sounds, and to involve them where possible.
- The DCSF should refine and add to the assessment materials to help schools to be clear about indicators of children's command of phonics skills and provide schools with individual pupil tracking sheets.

Answers to key questions

1. Of the 20 schools visited, all but one were faithfully teaching a systematic phonics programme. Twelve were teaching Letters and Sounds; of these, five had not previously taught a systematic phonics programme. Seven schools were teaching another systematic programme and all had been influenced to some extent by the findings of the Rose Review. The 20th school had been teaching some phonics for many years, but this was not systematic and there was no understanding of 'fidelity to the programme'. This school is not referred to in the findings below.

Why had 12 of the schools chosen to introduce Letters and Sounds?

Fertile ground

2. In seven of the schools, some degree of systematic phonics teaching was already part of the school's literacy strategy. In these schools, Letters and Sounds was seen as part of a natural extension or adaptation of what was already happening. In two of these schools, there was a concerted drive to raise standards, and the structure and rigour of the programme were viewed by the headteachers as being appropriate to the school's needs. All welcomed the programme's clear structure and believed that it would assist planning and consistency.

Radical change

3. Four schools had had no systematic phonics programme across the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. Phonics teaching was subsumed in the general teaching of literacy in most classes or varied from class to class. For example, one school used the Jolly Phonics programme in the Reception year, then stopped in Year 1. The schools' wholehearted adoption of Letters and Sounds in September 2007, teaching it daily from Nursery to Year 2, represented a radical change to their practice. Two had new headteachers, both of whom firmly believed in systematic phonics teaching and viewed Letters and Sounds as an excellent opportunity. In the third school, the new literacy leader had been inspired and informed by the Rose Review and was supported well by the headteacher to introduce Letters and Sounds. The fourth school felt compelled to introduce the programme, but nonetheless had implemented it thoroughly.

A lone voice

4. In the 12th school, Letters and Sounds was being taught in the Foundation Stage only. The pilot programme had been introduced in the nursery the previous year by a newly qualified teacher who was aware of the findings of the Rose Review and believed in systematic phonics teaching from the nursery onwards. When children moved to the Reception class, parents complained about the lack of systematic phonics teaching and Letters and Sounds was introduced. The newly qualified teacher was gradually persuading colleagues, some of whom were committed to long-held beliefs about phonics, that the programme should be introduced throughout this infant school.

How often are phonics sessions taking place and for whom?

5. Sixteen of the 19 schools taught discrete phonics sessions daily as advocated by the Rose Review. The other three taught discrete sessions only three times a week. Fifteen schools taught sessions of at least 20 minutes. The others taught for 10 to 20 minutes depending on the age of the children. All schools taught systematic phonics to children in the Foundation Stage, including the nursery where present.

How do the schools group pupils for phonics teaching?

6. Twelve of the schools grouped pupils to some extent by 'phonic ability' for the taught sessions; 10 of these were Letters and Sounds schools. For the schools new to systematic phonics teaching, the clear phases of development identified in Letters and Sounds greatly assisted them in understanding progression in phonics and gave them the confidence to group pupils according to their stage of learning. This was a new departure for these schools, most of whom had previously taught phonic work as part of literacy lessons to a whole class. Some of the schools with a longer history of teaching systematic phonics created 'phonics ability' groups by combining different year groups just for the phonics sessions.

What training have staff received?

7. Local authorities had generally provided the opportunity for a literacy leader or other teacher to attend a small amount of training in teaching a systematic phonics programme at some point since the Rose Review. Five schools commented negatively on the lack of training offered by the local authority.
8. With the exception of one school which had received a good amount of high-quality training from the local authority, training for teaching Letters and Sounds had largely been driven by the schools. Most literacy leaders had attended a small amount of local authority training, usually one session after school, and had then led training for various staff in school, usually Key Stage 1 and Foundation Stage teaching assistants and teachers. Again, this tended to be no more than an hour and a half after school. Literacy leaders then provided support for colleagues through informal discussions about resources and planning, and meetings which they organised themselves. The enthusiasm about the programme often generated ongoing discussions between staff, which helped to ensure that they felt supported. In one school (the 'lone voice' referred to above), progress in introducing Letters and Sounds was hampered by a lack of expertise in the school.
9. Longer-established programmes were still being supported by local authorities, although some schools expressed frustration with the limited provision of phonics training: some schools said that they were still waiting for their 'turn' for training during this academic year.
10. Several literacy leaders commented that they were able to seek support from the local authority when they needed it. For example, one was in constant email contact with an advisory teacher for ideas and advice.
11. There was no evidence of local authorities offering training to hone the skills of staff after the initial introduction of any of the programmes. Schools commented that successful implementation of Letters and Sounds had been made possible because of the clear and well-written handbook. Longer-established programmes also had the benefit of clear support material. Several schools included their Key Stage 2 teachers in training to assist continuity for pupils, and schools in which systematic phonics was newly introduced commented on their intention to extend training to Key Stage 2 staff in due course.
12. Infant schools expressed some concern that much of the good work they felt they did in the systematic teaching of phonic skills and knowledge was undermined when children transferred to their junior schools because methods changed and there was no systematic phonics teaching for those children who still needed it. The same view was expressed by some primary schools about secondary transfer.

What has been the impact so far of a systematic programme of phonics teaching?

13. In those schools that have introduced Letters and Sounds, a clearly structured programme with an emphasis on progression and a well written handbook have assisted them in improving the consistency of their phonics teaching. For all the schools, teaching a systematic phonics programme had resulted in an improvement in staff's confidence and understanding, increased teamwork, improvements in the pace of phonics teaching, a heightening of children's enjoyment and the raising of staff's expectations.
14. Schools commented that introducing a systematic programme had led to 'teachers and teaching assistants all speaking the same language'. A common structure had led to greater consistency in planning and in teaching methods. This had also led to improved consistency in the teaching of phonics between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, and better understanding between staff of the need to build in careful progression from one key stage to another. Teaching pupils outside their usual class group was a new departure for most schools and necessitated the staff working closely together. This had improved teamwork and created a sense of shared purpose.
15. Schools were unanimous in their belief that children were enjoying their phonics lessons because they were recognising their own achievement. This was corroborated by HMIs' observations in which pupils' enjoyment and sometimes delight at being able to put letters and sounds together in a meaningful way were evident. Three schools in particular were noticing a marked improvement in boys' enjoyment at learning to read. Six other schools noted that children were learning to read 'better and faster'; this was consistent with their assessment data. Schools also believed that the programme was effective in helping children to apply phonic knowledge and skills in their writing, something which was again noted by HMIs during lesson observations. The progress which staff could see children making had raised their expectations of how quickly and well they could learn to read and write.
16. Staff felt reasonably confident about teaching the systematic programme while recognising their need to have further training and support over time. Some staff who were teaching Letters and Sounds said that they felt confident for the first time about teaching phonics. Several commented that the handbook assisted them if they felt unsure. All enjoyed teaching the programme. Importantly, teaching a systematic phonics programme had acted as a catalyst for the schools to question other aspects of their practice, such as the transition from the Foundation Stage to Year 1, the use of tracking data, grouping of children, the teaching of writing, and their expectations of how quickly children learn.

How do the schools assess pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding?

17. Fourteen of the schools were assessing pupils' phonic knowledge and skills individually with a reasonable degree of rigour. This practice was more securely embedded in the schools which had been teaching a systematic phonics programme for some time. The less experienced schools (those for which Letters and Sounds represented their first attempt at systematic phonics teaching) were primarily assessing the progress of the class or group, but were also beginning to introduce individual assessment. All schools found it difficult to make a decision about when a skill had been fully and confidently learned – 'How do we know if they've cracked it?' – and those teaching Letters and Sounds would have liked more guidance and support about this. The questions that arose were: at what point can you decide that a child 'knows' a phoneme? Is it in isolation? Or in a word? Or in writing the related grapheme by itself? Or in writing a word (the related graphemes in context)? This is an indicator of the growing but not yet secure knowledge of some of the staff teaching and leading the programmes.

How well are parents involved?

18. Several schools have tried to inform parents about the phonics programme by inviting them to workshops but have found that these have not been well attended. Others have sent home leaflets or letters. However, all commented on the difficulty of conveying the subtleties of the programme, such as the emphasis on 'pure' sounds, to parents without face-to-face contact, and the consequent danger that parents will contradict what is being taught in school. In schools that have been teaching systematic phonics programmes for a longer period of time, some parents have purchased commercial materials to use at home which have been incompatible with school-based materials, resulting in some confusion for their children and an undermining of the notion of 'fidelity to the programme' which the Rose Review advocated. Schools commented that they would welcome support in the form of accessible advice for parents, particularly in helping parents to be consistent in 'sounding out'.

Introducing Letters and Sounds: two examples of schools' journeys

Journey One

'We've started the journey but we're nowhere near the end.'

The school chose to begin Letters and Sounds not because it felt under pressure to do so but because it 'seemed right' for the children. The advent of Letters and Sounds in September 2007 coincided with the appointment of a new headteacher. She believed that for these pupils, who came from an area of high deprivation and often had impoverished language skills, there had to be a continual emphasis on the importance of

speaking and listening, and learning to read and write: 'Language and reading are about access and equality.' Previously, the school's approach to teaching phonics had been fragmented, with different schemes and approaches used in different year groups. Letters and Sounds is now being taught for 20 minutes each day from the Nursery Year to Year 2, and the school has plans to extend this into Years 3 and 4 because children have gaps in their phonic knowledge and skills. The literacy coordinator believes that the scheme meets their children's needs: 'What's great about Letters and Sounds is that it does actually fit our children.' The staff are enthusiastic about all aspects of the scheme and their confidence is developing well. Although as yet there is no rigorous tracking of individuals' progress, staff can give examples of the ways in which children are progressing and can see how children are beginning to apply their phonic knowledge across the curriculum.

Journey Two

'The biggest impact of the Rose Review has been on our expectations – these have been raised considerably.'

While the school felt that it had been following guidance from the Primary National Strategy, nevertheless it said that its previous approach to teaching phonics was 'too piecemeal'. Jolly Phonics played a part but phonics teaching was mainly subsumed into literacy lessons. A strong, well motivated literacy coordinator who had been in post for around two years fully understood the concept of 'fidelity to the programme' and welcomed Letters and Sounds as a way to achieve this principle. Above all, she believed that the introduction of the programme from the Nursery Year to Year 2 had raised staff's expectations of what the children could achieve: 'Letters and Sounds has had the most impact of any materials – it has raised our expectations and given a proper structure to the teaching of phonics in our school.' Staff understand far better than previously the links between reading and writing and the phonic knowledge that children need to become competent readers and writers. While adopting the programme in full, the school has found it necessary to start with different phases than might be expected for the year group, particularly in Year 2, because children have gaps in their knowledge. Joint planning and greater collaboration between staff have been a welcome benefit of introducing the scheme. Staff are using vertical grouping as a way of ensuring that children are working at the right level, and this is also promoting teamwork among teachers and teaching assistants. Assessment is at an early stage but developing steadily.

Annex A: selecting the schools for the survey

One hundred schools were selected, representing a variety of geographical regions, proportions of pupils claiming free school meals and proportions from different ethnic groups. All schools' 2007 Key Stage 2 reading scores had changed significantly, either positively or negatively, compared with the previous year. Ninety-nine schools were initially contacted, of which 88 said they were teaching a systematic phonics programme. The survey in Annex B was sent by email to the 79 schools which were not visited. Forty-three completed the survey, revealing 26 teaching Letters and Sounds. A text search of 394 section 5 inspection reports published between 2005 and 2007 provided some additional evidence of the positive impact of the teaching of phonics.

Annex B: survey sent to schools

Some multiple response questions may have more than one answer. Tick the box, or add a 'yes' next to it, or replace it with a 'yes'! The box is a Wingdings letter r, in case you find your text going a bit strange!

If responses vary depending upon the class or stage then please use a separate sheet for each class, indicating the year group here _____

1. What is the name of your phonics programme? _____

2. This programme has been running since

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 2005 or earlier | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2006 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2007 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2008 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

3. The frequency of designated phonics sessions is best described as

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| daily | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| three or four days a week | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| once or twice a week | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| occasionally | <input type="checkbox"/> |

4. The length of these sessions is best described as

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 5 minutes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 minutes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15 minutes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20 minutes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| more than 20 minutes (please specify _____) | |

5. Provision is generally

- class based
- group based
- for individual pupils
- a mixture of these

6. Grouping for phonics sessions is by

- mixed general ability
- mixed phonics ability
- general ability
- phonics ability

7. Assessment of progression in phonics is generally by

- whole class
- groups within the class
- individual pupil

8. Frequency of assessment of pupil progress in phonics is generally

- daily
- weekly
- monthly
- termly
- annually

9. Please assess the impact that the Rose Review, or at least its message regarding a systematic approach to teaching phonics, has made on your provision of

	Considerable	Some change	Minor change	No impact
teaching of reading				
teaching of writing				
the amount of group reading by pupils				
the amount of individual reading by pupils				

10. Phonics training has been provided by

- local authority staff
- commercial providers
- school-sourced consultants
- in-house expertise

11 The following teaching staff have received training

- all teaching staff in all years
- staff who teach phonics programmes
- the lead teacher for literacy/phonics
- no school-based training as yet

12 Teaching assistant training has been given to

- all TAs in all years
- TAs in classes where phonics is taught
- lead TA/ HTLA
- no school based training for TAs yet

13 Resource implications of delivering the phonics programme have been

- too high and a barrier to implementation
- high, requiring re-prioritising of budget
- manageable within existing budget
- low and not an issue

14 The following best describes your recent approach to early reading materials

- reviewed and re-purchased appropriate to phonics programme
- reviewed and made no changes
- not yet reviewed

15 Staff confidence in teaching systematic phonics is

- high
- adequate
- unsure

In 200 words or so, please summarise the 'story' behind your school's response to the Rose Review. This should be very brief and help give us a flavour of the journey, if any, you have taken from 'before' to 'after'. You should say whether the programme you are running was already in place, or chosen as a result of your own selection, or by the local authority or the DCSF towards a particular programme. If you have evidence of impact on the quality of pupils' reading as a result of these developments, please summarise.

Annex C

Responses to the survey

Forty-three schools returned the questionnaire, just over half the number that had agreed to respond.

- About half of these schools were already teaching systematic phonics prior to September 2007.
- Almost all run daily discrete sessions that are longer than 15 minutes.
- Most schools group pupils separately from class groupings, based on their phonics abilities.
- All schools say that they are assessing individual pupils' phonics abilities regularly.
- Most schools have made changes to their reading programmes as a result of the Rose Review. The majority had also adjusted their writing and group reading plans.
- Local authorities were providing training to all schools, and about half of the schools also had in-house expertise to draw upon.
- About half the schools had trained all of their teachers, and all teachers of phonics had been trained to some extent.
- Most teaching assistants had received some training.
- Resources had been managed within existing budgets; most schools had made changes to reading resources.
- Schools judged that staff confidence in teaching phonics was high or adequate in all but three schools.