

Early Childhood Forum response to the phonics screening consultation

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a coalition of 61 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the well-being, learning and development of young children from birth to eight, their families, and the practitioners who work with them. ECF aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to promote inclusion and challenge inequalities, and to champion quality experiences for all young children and families. It is hosted by NCB.

The Early Childhood Forum strongly believes that children should not be asked to take part in a phonics screening check at the age of six. Consequently, we have not completed the consultation response form; instead outlining our reason for this decision below.

Children need to develop their spoken language before they learn to read. Enjoying and understanding books is far more important than being able to read individual words out of context. Teaching phonics as a one size fits all programme is totally inappropriate, especially as English is not a phonetical language.

Usha Goswami¹, Professor of English at Cambridge, states that “*English is the most inconsistent language in the world in terms of the consistency of letter-sound correspondences*”. This surely supports the practice of providing a range of teaching strategies to support the learning of reading.

Both this method of teaching and screening is likely to put children off reading for good. Reading is not a mechanical exercise; most children are not ready to read before they are six or seven and then learn very quickly and are successful. Some children will of course read earlier, but a differentiated approach is essential to meet the needs of different children.

1) Overemphasis on phonics in the context of the development of children who are confident, fluent readers

ECF supports the UK Literacy Association in asking for an evidence-based and informed approach to the teaching of reading. In their recent report, ‘Teaching Reading: What the evidence says’², the UKLA stated the following five reasons why focusing on teaching reading through phonics is inappropriate and unwise.

- 1. English is not written in a consistently 'phonic' way, so learning to read phonically will never teach a child how to read everything.*
- 2. Reading phonically, is not the same as reading. That's to say, we read because it either gives us pleasure or because there is something we want to know. In other words we read for the meaning.*
- 3. The question of whether phonics works as a teaching tool cannot be proved if research methods are faulty or inadequate.*
- 4. There is a huge body of experience and research which tells us that children are very diverse in terms of personality and in terms of what kinds of linguistic and*

¹http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/neuroscience/publications/ug/Goswami_2005_EPIP_21_273-282.pdf

² United Kingdom Literacy Association. Teaching Reading: What the evidence says. University of Leicester: UKLA.

emotional expertise they bring to the classroom where they are learning how to read. They cannot be given a one-size suits-all approach.

5. There is a huge body of experience and research that shows us that if we want long term, long lasting results from teaching children how to read, we have to consider many varied kinds of activities in relation to the written language.

The language sounds that children are exposed to which influences their understanding of phonics are founded on the sounds of standard English. For children who grow up in areas where strong dialects are spoken, or who are learning English as an additional language, differentiating phonemes at four must be arduous and probably irrelevant for them.

One of our members cites her own experience of learning to read: *“ I speak Welsh, a phonetic language, and learnt to read at six years of age, transferring the basic mechanical skills to English, but, as a consequence, I have had difficulty in English spelling, as do many of the children whom I help, voluntarily, to read in Welsh-medium infant schools. I suspect that many adults, who initially learn to read phonetically, have the same problems with English spelling. English is NOT a phonetic language, and we remember the subsequent problems for children, who were initially taught using the Initial Teaching Alphabet!”*

Reading is a skill involving many processes, which are as much about responding to meaning as unravelling a written text. Individuals who have difficulty reading are often those who attempt to read word by word; those who are successful respond to context and meaning before analysing individual words and letters.

The teaching of reading always provokes much discussion. The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading placed an emphasis on synthetic phonics, but its recommendations were broader and it recommended that:

“phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing and enlarging children’s stock of words....Phonic work for young children should be multisensory in order to capture their interest, sustain motivation, and reinforce learning in imaginative and exciting ways.”³

The whole process of learning to read should be set within the child's own context, starting with the child's interests and needs. Starting too early or too formally, with an over emphasis on the mechanics of reading, is likely to ‘turn off’ young readers. The foundation for developing early literacy skills is the rich communication and language experiences provided by everyday social interaction. Many children come into nurseries and school with very little vocabulary - until they have developed a strong vocabulary they cannot be expected to read as it is a meaningless exercise.

Phonics on its own will not produce fluent readers. Phonics is only one among a number of cueing systems which contribute to word identification. Becoming a fluent and accurate reader means learning to make effective and coherent use of all of the cueing systems – the grapho-phonetic, the syntactic, the semantic, the bibliographic and the pictorial. It also means learning to put the information together meaningfully.

³ The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading 2006. pg 70
<http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-0201-2006>

2) The effect that the introduction of this screening check will have on narrowing the curriculum

We are concerned that the introduction of the screening check will have an effect on the broad curriculum promoted in the Early Years Foundation Stage. We could then see the narrowing of the curriculum in reception classes, just as SATS have narrowed the curriculum experiences for Year 5 and 6 pupils in primary schools.

Young children need a rich curriculum of learning through play: creative, constructive and imaginative. The early life experiences and enriching interaction with other children in indoor and outdoor contexts and supportive adults are crucial to developing a rich spoken language - a pre-requisite to starting to read.

Members of ECF have spent time in Finland, visiting various pre-school settings. They provide most enriching experiences in playing as individuals, pairs and small and large groups - discussing, planning, making and appraising their own play. Children attend these 'children's centres' from babyhood until they are seven, when they start school. In 2004, children in Finland at eleven years of age had the highest reading standards in the world.⁴ Parents have real choices as to how much time their children spend in pre-school settings and at home. A hidden factor is the important influence of grandparents.

Likewise, in Cuba, 99.5% of four year olds have some form of pre-school experience. The emphasis is on enriching children lives, through play, games and much talk within the extended family and community. Children start school at seven and the overall literacy rate for Cuba is 99%⁵.

3) The effect of the introduction of the phonics screening check on children who develop at different rates

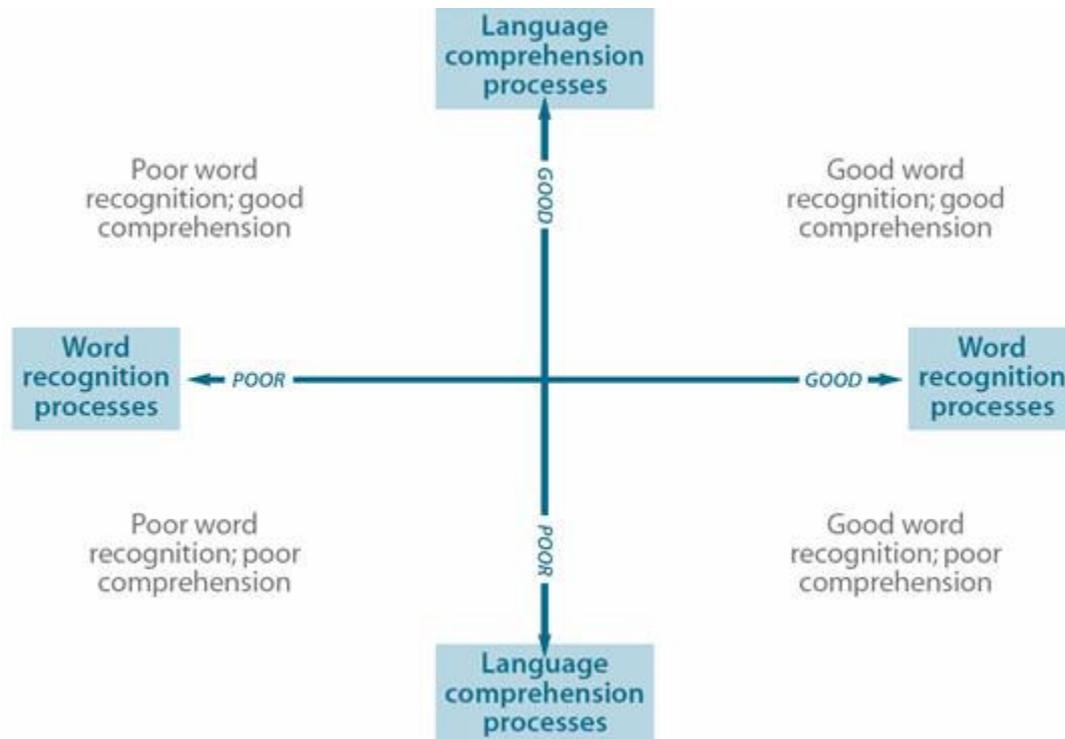
The Early Years Foundation Stage states that children learn at different rates. It is important to recognise that children will be at different points in their development in relation to literacy and to speaking and listening and that a one size fits all approach can clearly **not** be appropriate. Children need rich and varied exposure to literacy related experiences and the support of skilled and knowledgeable adults. The effect on groups of children for example those with particular special needs, boys and children with English as an additional language will be devastating if they feel they have failed compared to their peers. This will be reinforced if they have to go through the check again at the beginning of Year 2. The response of the Special Educational Consortium recommends differentiation of the phonics check to recognise different rates of learning and to mitigate the potential impact of a 'pass'/'fail' approach.

Although the ability to decode is essential in learning to read it is not sufficient. Both CLLD and the Ofsted reports identify the importance of situating phonics teaching in the context of a broad and rich curriculum which fosters the other aspects of literacy – speaking, listening and writing as well as reading. Alongside phonic knowledge and the alphabetic code, the components of effective reading include spoken language skills, vocabulary, self monitoring, grammatical knowledge, inference and knowledge of the world and texts. It is impossible, and indeed undesirable, to rely totally on decoding in learning to read.

⁴ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD PISA (Program for Student Assessment) 2003 database.

⁵ <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=210>

The simple view of reading⁶ summarises the processes involved in learning to read as language comprehension processes and word recognition processes and recognises that both are essential. The representation of the interplay between the dimensions is a useful guide for observing four different patterns of performance.



Children who demonstrate the patterns of performance in the right hand quadrants are more likely to do well on a phonics check. However those children in the top right hand quadrant with good word recognition coupled with good comprehension will not need a phonics check. By the age of six they will be reading well. They will be able to handle the check and will score well. This does not mean that they cannot have their reading skills further developed, but the phonics element will be secure. The children in the bottom right hand quadrant will also do well although they will not understand what they are reading. The phonics check will not distinguish between these two very different levels of reading development. This is dangerous as teaching to the test will not encourage support for those who need a lot of support with comprehension. Children in the two left hand quadrants are often those with significant delay or disorder. Dyslexic children, for instance, often have good word comprehension and poor recognition. Those in the bottom left are struggling with the whole reading and language development process – subjecting them to a phonics check is unnecessary and unkind.

The intention may be not to ‘place any undue stress’ on young children but this will place undue stress on teachers and therefore young children will find it stressful. Vulnerable children such as those learning English as an additional language and those with additional needs are not going to do well on this check.

4) The specific proposals for the phonics screening check

⁶ The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading. Pg 81.
<http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DFES-0201-2006>

With regard to the specific proposals of a phonics screening check, we wish to state that:

- 1) There is no need for a phonics screening check, as a well trained and qualified class teacher will be able to identify children who are not reading at the appropriate level for their age and stage through ongoing observation and monitoring, and then provide additional support. We believe that young children need to have highly trained teachers with an understanding of child development. Jane Medwell⁷ in her study of very effective literacy teachers was very clear that the pedagogical expertise of the teacher was one of the most important strands and this included various aspects of knowledge, practical skills and the ability to reflect on their practice
- 2) Reading should be enjoyable. Teachers should engage with parents to find out what children enjoy reading at home, and to provide books that are fun and stimulating. This will encourage a life long enjoyment of reading.
- 3) Children should only start learning to read when they are developmentally ready. At age 6, when the screening is proposed, many children are at an early stage of development. Asking them to take this test would be stressful and could negatively impact on their self-esteem. This could particularly be relevant to boys.
- 4) Children look for meaning as they read, as reading for sense helps children towards fluency. It is inappropriate to ask them to read non-words or whole words in isolation.
- 5) Phonics plays a crucial part in reading but on its own is not enough for readers of any age to identify ambiguous words, words with unusual spelling patterns or the very many irregular spelled words in the English language.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

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Early Childhood Forum Members

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Action for Children

Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)

Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts (ASPECT)

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)

Black Voices Network

British Association of Community Child Health (BACCH)

British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)

Campaign for Advancement of State Education (CASE)

Children in Scotland (CiS)

Children in Wales (CiW)

Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)

Council for Disabled Children (CDC)

⁷ Medwell, J et al., (1998) *Effective Teachers of Literacy*. Exeter: The Teacher Training Agency.

Unite / Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association (CPHVA)
Daycare Trust (DCT)
Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network
Early Education
Early Years (formally NIPPA)
Early Years Equality (EYE)
Fatherhood Institute
Forum for Maintained Nursery Schools
Full Time Mothers
High/Scope UK
ICAN
KIDS
Learning Through Landscapes (LTL)
Local Authority Early Years Network (LAEYN)
Mencap
Montessori Education UK
National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)
National Association of Nurseries in Colleges & Universities (NANCU)
National Autistic Society (NAS)
National Children's Bureau (NCB)
National Campaign for Nursery Education (NCNE)
National Childminding Association (NCMA)
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)
National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
National Literacy Trust (NLT)
National Network Of Family Information Services (NAFIS)
National Portage Association (NPA)
National Union Teachers (NUT)
Out for Our Children
Parenting UK
Parents for Inclusion
Play England
Preschool Learning Alliance (PLA)
REU (formerly Race Equality Unit)
Refugee Council
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
Save the Children (SCF)
Scope
Special Educational Consortium (SEC)
Special Educational Needs Joint Initiative for Training (SENJIT)
Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF)
Trade Union Congress (TUC)
Training, Advancement & Co-operation in Teaching Young Children (TACTYC)
UNISON
Voice - Union for Education Professionals
What About the Children (WATCH)
World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)

