



# A Rigorous Approach to the Teaching of Reading? Systematic Synthetic Phonics in Initial Teacher Education

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This paper argues that no single method of teaching children to read is superior to any other. Although research suggests that a systematic approach to phonics produces gains in word reading and spelling, there is no clear evidence that synthetic phonics is the most effective approach for supporting reading development. We highlight the current policy allegiance to synthetic phonics in England. This approach is mandated in the teachers' standards and the inspection framework for initial teacher education in England. This attempt to regulate the way new teachers are prepared to support children's reading development is extremely concerning, given the body of research which demonstrates that no single approach is necessarily more effective than another.

**Keywords:** phonics, synthetic phonics, initial teacher education, reading, literacy

## INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces the key training routes to becoming a qualified teacher in England. It also provides brief information from the census data about trainee numbers. The paper then introduces key policy documents which emphasize the government and Ofsted's commitment to synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching early reading.

This paper uses several acronyms. These include Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Initial Teacher Training (ITT). Both terms are used interchangeably to refer to the training and/or education route which leads to qualification as a teacher in England. Programmes of teacher education/training typically take place within higher education institutions (HEIs), although school-based training programs are available in England. Throughout this paper we refer to pre-service teachers as trainees. Although we recognize that this term may not be used elsewhere, it is used within England to refer to individuals who are enrolled on a programme of initial teacher training or education. Key Stage 1 is used to refer to children in the infant phase of their education (5–7 years). Key Stage 2 is used to refer to children in the junior phase of their primary education (7–11 years). These terms are specifically used in England but may not be used elsewhere. Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) is awarded to trainees upon successful completion of the ITE/ITT programme and this status is a requirement in England for teachers who work in the maintained sector. The

Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is the independent body which is responsible for school and teacher education inspections in England.

Some brief historical information is provided to set the context, but greater emphasis is given to the current policy context in England through reference to the teachers' standards, inspection frameworks for schools and ITE providers and the ITT Core Content Framework.

## TRAINING ROUTES

To become a qualified teacher in England, trainees normally have to complete a programme of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). This programme typically provides access to central training, school-based training and mentoring which support trainees to meet the teachers' standards (Department for Education, 2011).

There are several pathways into teaching. The undergraduate route is the normal route into teaching for trainees who do not have a degree. In England, teaching is a graduate profession. Undergraduate routes typically last for 3 or 4 years and provide trainees with a degree and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). This route is more common for primary trainees than secondary trainees, although some secondary undergraduate courses do exist. Most secondary trainees have already studied a degree prior to undertaking their training and enter teaching via the postgraduate route, typically the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

Postgraduate training routes can be undertaken through a Higher Education Institution (HEI) or via a school-led route. School-led routes include school-centered initial teacher training (SCITT) programmes, the School Direct training programme (salaried and fee-paying routes) and the Teach First Leadership Development programme. Early Years Initial Teacher Training and Assessment Only (AO) routes also exist.

At HEIs the university or college typically delivers the central training programme. This is supported by periods of school-based training which provides trainees with opportunities to develop practical experience of teaching. Most school-led routes also include a PGCE so many school-led partnerships link with HEIs. The HEI provides the academic element of the training.

The regulations state that regardless of training route, all trainees must complete a period of 120 days in a minimum of two schools before QTS can be awarded. This enables them to apply their understanding of theory into practice. For trainees on HEI postgraduate routes this limits the amount of time they can spend in college or university. On these routes, training is often front-loaded at the beginning of the course, although providers may build in opportunities for trainees to return to the HEI in between periods of school-based training. For trainees on Assessment Only routes there is no requirement for them to complete a programme of training. For trainees on School Direct programmes, partnerships have varying levels of involvement with the HEI. In some School Direct-HEI partnerships, trainees study the same programme of central training that trainees on provider-led programmes study. In other partnerships, the

training is completely delivered in schools by school-based trainers. Only the HEI can award QTS, not the School Direct provider, although SCITT providers can award QTS. In university-school partnerships, the HEI undertakes a quality assurance role to monitor the quality of school-led training and school-based mentoring. In SCITT provision typically all training is delivered by non-HEI trainers unless the SCITT provider has opted for trainees to undertake a PGCE as part of the programme.

The census data in 2019 (Department for Education, 2019) shows that there were 29, 580 new entrants to postgraduate ITT courses in 2019–2020 compared with 29, 215 entrants in 2018–2019. This represents a slight increase of 1%. There were also 4, 963 entrants to undergraduate ITT programs, a slight drop of 1% but broadly in line with previous years (Department for Education, 2019). Overall, these statistics demonstrate that recruitment to ITT programmes is neither declining nor increasing, but remains stable.

## WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?

The term “synthetic” is taken from the verb “to synthesize.” Synthetic phonics is concerned with the blending of the sounds that are represented by individual letters or groups of letters and merging these together sequentially for reading. This process is known as decoding or blending. In addition, it also includes the reverse process of separating a word into its constituent phonemes and representing these as graphemes for spelling. This process is known as segmenting.

## CONTEXT

The expectation on ITT providers to embed synthetic phonics into their training programmes emerged after the publication of the Independent Review in the Teaching of Early Reading, written by Sir Jim Rose (Rose, 2006). Since that time the United Kingdom has been led by five Prime Ministers. In 2010 the coalition government, led by David Cameron, rejected most of the education policies that were introduced under the New Labor government (1997–2010). However, the one policy they held firm with was synthetic phonics. This political commitment to synthetic phonics as the prime approach to early reading development has been continued by all successive Prime Ministers, regardless of political allegiance and a succession of Secretaries of State for Education, five in recent years. The Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb, has also firmly supported synthetic phonics for several years. In addition, the government introduced the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) in 2012. This assessment task requires children to use their knowledge of synthetic phonics to read both real and non-words. This assessment, which is undertaken at the end of Year 1 (age 5–6 years) has become a high-stakes accountability tool, which is used by inspectors to support judgments on overall school effectiveness. Year-on-year improvements in scores on this assessment task are used by the government to provide

validation of synthetic phonics as a method which they argue is leading to improvements in reading standards. However, improvements in scores mask practices such as teaching-to-the test which have resulted from the high-stakes nature of the assessment. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that an assessment of children's ability to decode text *per se* is not an assessment of their overall reading ability because arguably reading includes skills in both word recognition and language comprehension. Despite this political allegiance to a single approach, the large tail of underachievement in reading continues to exist.

## THE TEACHERS' STANDARDS

The government's commitment to synthetic phonics is reflected in the teachers' standards (Department for Education, 2011). Trainee teachers are required to meet the teachers' standards (Department for Education, 2011) by the end of their training. If trainees do not meet these standards, they cannot be recommended for Qualified Teacher Status. ITT programmes must be designed to enable trainee teacher to meet these standards. For HEI provision, programmes must be designed in partnership with schools and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnerships must provide clarity in relation to which aspects of training will be taught centrally and which aspects will be delivered by school-based mentoring and school-led training. ITT includes HEI-based and school-based training. Training is delivered across these different contexts. It is not best practice for universities and colleges to deliver all the theoretical content and for schools to address the practical implementation of theory. Developing trainees' understanding of both theory and practice should occur both in the university and in schools.

For trainees on primary programmes, the teachers' standards state that trainees must "demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics" (Department for Education, 2011, p. 11). For over a decade, ITT providers have been required to include synthetic phonics in ITT courses, well before this was mandated in the teachers' standards. For many years, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) have been asked to evaluate the quality of their ITT course specifically in relation to systematic synthetic phonics. This information was subsequently used by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) to RAG-rate providers (into red, amber or green). This information was then used to trigger an Ofsted inspection in cases where NQTs raised concerns. In addition, Ofsted introduced focused monitoring inspections in synthetic phonics. This provided inspectors with an opportunity to monitor the quality of the training in this aspect and also the extent to which trainees were being given adequate opportunities to observe, teach and assess pupils' learning in synthetic phonics. For trainees on 3–7 courses there are generally more opportunities for them to observe, teach and assess synthetic phonics. For trainees on 5–11 courses, providers must ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for them to meet this standard in the school contexts that they are placed in. This might

include ensuring that trainees in Key Stage 2 classes have opportunities to teach children who are still in the early stages of reading development.

## THE EDUCATION INSPECTION FRAMEWORK

The new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (Office for Standards in Education, 2019a) in England was implemented in September 2019. It includes a much stronger focus on the quality of a school's curriculum. There is a greater emphasis on the quality of education in terms of what pupils are actually learning rather than an exclusive emphasis on test and examination results. However, Ofsted's commitment to synthetic phonics is clear. Inspectors will evaluate the extent to which

A rigorous approach to the teaching of reading develops learners' confidence and enjoyment in reading. At the early stages of learning to read, reading materials are closely matched to learners' phonics knowledge.

(Office for Standards in Education, 2019a, p. 10).

There is an emphasis on decodable books in the early years and Key Stage 1. The research document (Office for Standards in Education, 2019b) that underpinned the development of the EIF states that:

... [early years educators] need to know how children develop language and literacy, and how to teach early phonics (p. 11).

... A rigorous and sequential approach to the reading curriculum develops pupils' fluency, confidence and enjoyment in reading. At all stages, reading attainment is assessed and gaps are addressed quickly and effectively for all pupils. Reading books connect closely to the phonics knowledge pupils are taught when they are learning to read (p. 20).

... These studies show that explicit and systematic teaching of the manipulation of phonemes (the smallest unit of sound in a language) and phonemic awareness (the ability to identify phonemes in written words) is crucial and should be continued until children can automatically process this information (p. 20)

... However, while important, authentic literature and rich contexts are not a suitable replacement for explicit teaching of phonics decoding skills (p. 20).

In an influential study in Scotland [Clackmannanshire study], Johnston and Watson (2004) compared a group of children taught using synthetic phonics with a group taught using analytic phonics; they found the former to be more effective. A Dutch study reported similar findings (De Graaff et al., 2009). There is also some evidence of long-term effects. A follow-up study in Scotland compared 10-year-old boys and girls who had learned to read using analytic or synthetic phonics methods as part of their early

literacy programmes. The pupils taught using synthetic phonics had better word reading, spelling and reading comprehension (p. 21).

It is clear from these extracts that although inspection teams are not supposed to align themselves with specific pedagogical approaches, there is a clear preference for synthetic phonics and an expectation that this approach should be the only approach used in schools. The research which is cited by Johnston and Watson (2004) had methodological weaknesses, many of which have been documented in previous literature (Wyse and Styles, 2007). The study design was not methodologically robust enough for large-scale policy to be implemented on the back of it (see Glazzard, 2017).

## THE ITT CORE CONTENT FRAMEWORK

The government's commitment to synthetic phonics is reflected in the ITT Core Content Framework (Department for Education and Education Endowment Foundation, 2019). The ITT Core Content Framework was published in 2019 (Department for Education and Education Endowment Foundation, 2019). It is not a curriculum for ITE in itself, but the document sets out the minimum content that trainees must know by the end of their training. ITT providers are required to design a coherent curriculum for trainee teachers that embeds the content in the ITT Core Content Framework as well as additional content which ITE partnerships feel is critical. Providers must also teach any underpinning content which is not in the ITT Core Content Framework but there is pre-requisite knowledge required by trainees in order to understand the knowledge in the Core Content Framework.

There is a clear expectation in the Core Content Framework that providers will provide trainee teachers with a synthetic phonics curriculum:

As the Teachers' Standards make clear, it is important for teachers teaching early reading and early mathematics to have a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics and appropriate maths teaching strategies (p. 6).

[trainees should observe] how expert colleagues demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics, particularly if teaching early reading and spelling, and deconstructing this approach (p. 15).

The Core Content Framework is aligned with the teachers' standards and as identified above, synthetic phonics is embedded within the teachers' standards.

## THE ITE INSPECTION FRAMEWORK

The mandating of synthetic phonics in ITE/ITT programmes is reflected in the latest version of the ITE inspection framework. In line with changes to the school inspection framework outlined above, it is no surprise that Ofsted has recently revised the

inspection framework for ITE provision. Ofsted's commitment to synthetic phonics is very clear in the ITE inspection framework (Office for Standards in Education, 2020). The framework states that:

training ensures that trainees learn to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics, as outlined in the ITT core content framework, and that trainees are not taught to teach competing approaches to early reading.

(Office for Standards in Education, 2020, p. 38).

Inspectors are required to assess whether trainees, through their teaching, "demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics by the end of their training" (p. 55). The leadership and management of initial teacher education courses will be judged to be inadequate if "mentors do not support the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics [or] ... trainees are being poorly prepared to teach systematic synthetic phonics" (p. 53). The quality of education and training will be judged to be inadequate if "[early years] and primary training does not ensure that trainees *only* [our emphasis] learn to teach decoding using systematic synthetic phonics as part of early reading" (p. 44).

The framework therefore mandates the teaching of synthetic phonics in initial teacher education and penalizes providers which introduce trainee teachers to alternative approaches to teaching reading. The problem with this is that this policy mandate is not consistent with the research evidence which this paper has reviewed (Landerl, 2000; Walton et al., 2001; Spencer and Hanley, 2003; Torgerson et al., 2006). In addition, providers will be penalized for developing trainees' skills in critical analysis of research and policy in relation to early reading development. Developing the skills of critical thinking and critical analysis are fundamental skills that students need to develop in higher education. In our view, the role of a university education should be to ensure that trainee teachers have opportunities to critically evaluate the research evidence which supports specific approaches to early reading development. Trainee teachers should analyze the validity of studies which support synthetic phonics and examine the research evidence which supports alternative approaches to reading development. However, this is a risky step for providers to take within a policy context which mandates the teaching of synthetic phonics and which penalizes providers for introducing trainees to different approaches.

## SYNTHESIS OF THE PHONICS DEBATE

According to Torgerson et al. (2006, p. 49), "There is currently no strong randomized controlled trial evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other", i.e., synthetic or analytic. The available evidence is insufficient to allow for reliable judgments to be made about the efficiency of different approaches to phonics instruction (Stuart, 2006). In countries where there are consistent one-to-one mappings between graphemes and phonemes (such as in Finland, Greece, Italy, and Spain), evidence suggests that synthetic phonics is

effective (Landerl, 2000). However, the English language is not orthographically consistent. This means that there is a need for direct instruction at varying grain sizes in order to develop accurate and automatic word recognition (Goswami, 2005; Wyse and Goswami, 2008). The irregularities of the English language inhibit the effectiveness of synthetic phonics as a sole method of teaching reading because grapheme-phoneme correspondences are inconsistent (Seymour et al., 2003). A range of research has emphasized the need for a broad range of approaches to support reading development (Clark, 2014, 2015; Solar, 2016; Torgerson et al., 2019) and the negative impact of phonics (Price-Mohr and Price, 2017, 2018, 2019) as an approach to teaching reading.

Research suggests that children “code switch” from small to large grain sizes when they are reading (Brown and Deavers, 1999; Goswami et al., 2003). Some words must be learned as wholes because they are phonically irregular. Some words include rimes which are generally more consistent than phonemes. Some words can be broken down into phonemes. Teaching a range of grain sizes rather than focusing solely on the level of the phoneme will therefore support more accurate word recognition.

We therefore argue that one single approach to teaching reading, and specifically the teaching of phonics, is not appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, the irregularity of the English language means that grapheme-phoneme correspondences are not consistent, which can result in confusion. Secondly, if children code-switch from small to large grain sizes, it could be reasonably argued that children need to learn a combination of small and large grain sizes, including phonemes and rimes, thus suggesting that different approaches to phonics may be more suitable rather than one single approach. Thirdly, although synthetic phonics enables most children to successfully master the skill of word recognition, it does not enable all children to do so. If it did, there would be no tail of under-achievement in reading. Alternative approaches to phonics and reading may therefore be required for children who are still operating in the early stages of reading development at a later stage in their primary education.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Evidence suggests that no single method of teaching children to read is superior to any other (Landerl, 2000; Walton et al., 2001; Spencer and Hanley, 2003; Torgerson et al., 2006). There is no empirical evidence to justify Rose’s recommendation that the teaching of reading in England should rely on synthetic phonics, given the methodological weaknesses that have been identified in relation to the Clackmannanshire study (Wyse and Styles, 2007; Wyse and Goswami, 2008). However, there is clear evidence that a systematic approach to phonics produces gains in word reading and spelling

(Torgerson et al., 2006) irrespective of the types of phonics that is taught. Evidence suggests that as long as reading instruction is systematic, this leads to similar gains in word reading (Landerl, 2000; Walton et al., 2001; Spencer and Hanley, 2003; Torgerson et al., 2006), regardless of the type of phonics being taught.

## ACTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence cited in this paper, providers of initial teacher education should:

- Introduce trainees to different approaches to teaching phonics;
- Ensure that trainee teachers engage critically with the research evidence which supports synthetic phonics;
- Ensure that trainee teachers know approaches for teaching reading other than phonics, including whole word recognition;
- Ensure that trainee teachers understand the role that vocabulary and language play in early reading development.

## CONCLUSION

The documentation cited in this paper demonstrates that there is a clear policy agenda which is mandating the teaching of synthetic phonics both in schools and in initial teacher education provision in England. It is deeply worrying that despite the methodological weaknesses of the research into synthetic phonics, this approach is being heralded as the best approach for promoting early reading development. It is also worrying that educational policy decisions in relation to phonics do not reflect research findings which demonstrate that there is no conclusive evidence that one approach to teaching phonics is better than another. The mandate in the ITE inspection framework will penalize ITT providers which choose to introduce trainee teachers to other approaches to teaching early reading. However, the approach does not work for all children. If it did, there would not be a tail of underachievement in reading in England. It is worrying that by limiting trainees’ knowledge of a repertoire of strategies to promote reading development, their capacity to support reading development in all children will be severely restricted.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SS summarized existing policy in relation to the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics. JG summarised the policy context and research findings in relation to systematic synthetic phonics. SS addressed the implications of the research and edited the text. JG situated this policy within the current context and in doing so identified implications, recommendations, and conclusions. SS and JG edited and proofread. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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