

## Starting as you mean to go on – Phonics lesson success

For those who teach in Reception and Key Stage One, phonics teaching happens every day, so it's essential that the children and staff leading the sessions feel successful and enjoy the sessions. However, after observing thousands of phonics lessons across a wide range of programs, I tend to observe the following challenges that can often reduce success and make phonics lessons feel more like a chore.



*The top 4 challenges practitioners need to look out for:*

- Children not joining in with activities
- A sense of frustration (child and teacher) about limited progress
- Lost time in lessons that impacts on the pace of learning
- Mixed messages resulting in confusion (child and teacher)

The journey to becoming a reader can be a challenge for lots of children. Also, the craft of teaching early reading through phonics can be a challenge for some practitioners too. Therefore, I wanted to offer some guidance on how to tackle the four challenges above and, more importantly, start the year successfully so they do not arise.

### **Children not joining in with activities**

I will start with this one, as I feel it is the biggest challenge and the most common one I support teachers with. If children do not join in, they do not practise their learning and, more importantly, show us what they can and cannot do. Too often, I see teachers move through the activities in the phonics lesson without considering if the engagement levels at each stage were good. It is essential to set expectations from the start of the year so that children are clear about what you want from them. Then, as the year passes, less time will be spent on reminding them about expectations and more will be spent on the actual learning.

When it comes to children not joining in, it generally comes down to two things: 1. They have chosen not to join in (often through insecurity and not wanting to get it wrong). 2. Prior learning has not been successful enough, so they do not have the knowledge to engage. For example, when asked to read a word on a flashcard, there are multiple grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) they do not know. Due to these separate areas, it is important to deal with them separately.

*Children are opting out, but they have the knowledge.*

The first thing to note here is that practitioners need to be aware of engagement levels. It is very easy to focus on the resources or even those children that always engage. Practitioners need to be confident at holding and using resources whilst scanning the children. In my training sessions, we often go through the steps for this in detail and have lots of practice. It is surprising how many practitioners find this tricky.

Like with all lessons, expectations for engagement will form part of the early work with the class. E.g., why it is important to have a go even if you are unsure. I believe children should be taught about the importance of repetition and why it is essential for mastery. The more challenging step is to follow this through in phonics lessons. For example, in a revisit, the teacher might hold up GPC flashcards and note that 5 children aren't joining in, even though they know them. Instead of singling those children out, the teacher simply needs to let the children know that we need to do it again, as not enough children joined in. This might lengthen the lesson in the early weeks but is essential for future success. As well as repeating the task, we obviously give short positive feedback to those who did join in. The challenge here is to not make this too long, as it will upset the flow of the lesson and result in rushing through the activities to complete them in the timetable slot. In my opinion, phonics lessons are likely to be longer (or split over two sessions) in the first week or so. Time will be needed to show children the expectations, and there will be more teacher talk and modelling of this. It will be time well spent and will help future lessons to drill down into the content instead of dealing with instructions and expectations.

#### *Children opting out due to subject knowledge gaps*

This is a far greater challenge, particularly in Key Stage One, where children can start the year with various levels of understanding about the phonics taught in Reception. When grouping is used, it becomes less of a challenge, as assessment will inform their starting points. However, whole-class approaches need a different plan. As with a group approach, up-to-date and accurate assessment is crucial, as the teacher will need to know what Reception content they need to revisit. They will also use this information to identify any children who might need extra practice (or intervention.) Those children starting Year 1 with large gaps in knowledge will need to start effective extra practice as soon as possible.

Within lessons, there are also simple steps that can be taken. For example, when a child is reading a word, say a particular phoneme for a grapheme they often find tricky. For example, in 'bag', I might know that a child often mixes up b and d and will guess the corresponding /b/ and /d/ phonemes. Point to the b and say /b/ with them or for them, then leave them to say the rest. The same can be done when they find blending tricky. We blend with them; however, we must also ensure the child is getting lots of support and extra practice of this outside of the lesson.

#### **A sense of frustration (child and teacher) about limited progress**

'Phonics isn't working for them. I think they need something different.' If I were given a pound for every time I heard this, I would be a rich man. For me, it indicates that the practitioner has tried everything within their toolkit and the child still is not making sufficient progress. It is not surprising that practitioners start to look for options. It's natural. However, what they need to do is simply think the following: 'I am not getting it right yet. Who can help me?' It's really simple but so crucial in developing as a phonics teacher. It takes the focus away from the child and

phonics and puts it on the practitioner. By doing this, they can then think about any blind spots and further develop their subject knowledge.

Here are a couple of ways I help practitioners meet this challenge:

- Reassess the child and pay particular attention to any GPCs they do not know or are slow to recognise. Often, children have GPCs missing at the early part of the progression, which means they struggle to access various words and embed them.
- Obviously, practitioners need to consider if the child can blend but then take this further. Can they blend a CVC word? Can they do this when an 's' is added? What about words that are more than one syllable? Can they read CCVC words like 'cross'? What about CVCC words like 'fist'? Maybe it is CCVCC words like 'blast' that are a challenge. Practitioners need to look at blending but then delve deeper into the types of words they can or cannot blend. Obviously, they need to note any GPCs that are weak. Slow recognition can impact how well a child blends a word, as I find that the slower they say the phonemes, the harder it is for them to discern the word.

The key step practitioners need to take is to reach out for support and expertise. This might come from the reading lead or someone like myself. The reading lead should be able to teach alongside the practitioner and ensure the lessons show rigour and fidelity. They might also have the expertise to look at children closely and zoom into the specific challenges they face and what can be done about it. If not, that is when an early literacy/reading expert might be called. Alternatively, the reading lead might liaise with the SEND lead and consider any additional barriers that might need to be supported or addressed.

### **Lost time in lessons, which impacts the pace of learning**

I often see practitioners become frustrated when they do not complete all activities in a particular phonics lesson. Essentially, the time allotted by the program has ended, but the lesson itself has not. This tends to happen for various reasons. Primarily, due to too much teacher talk and the teacher working harder than the children. When phonics lessons are taught well, no matter what program is used, the teacher input is short and sharp, and the teacher models exactly what the children need to do. This support is then gradually reduced so the children have to work hard independently. This plays a huge part in my program Pearl Phonics. The lesson structure is very detailed and shows practitioners how to move from modelling to gradually handing over to the children. Importantly, children are then expected to work independently on a paper-based activity.

As well as effective modelling and limited teacher talk, practitioners need to be suitably prepared for lessons. Given the demands on teachers, it is not surprising that they might spend less time preparing phonics due to the nature of the materials available. However, this preparation time is crucial if lessons are to run smoothly and successfully. Practitioners should read through the current unit and note the types of words children will be expected to read. By doing this, they can then map out effective opportunities to link to this in other subjects. They can also note prior learning and key learning that will be required in following lessons. Essentially, it will give them an understanding of the bigger picture and where the learning is going. It is very easy to just focus on a lesson-by-lesson approach.

As well as thinking about the content and connections with the children's prior knowledge, resources will also need to be prepared. Flashcards need to be ready and ordered well; up-to-date displays and materials need to be readily available to the children too. If the environment is up to date, it is more likely to support children's independence.

Finally, a key step is to ensure the practitioner is confident in their own subject knowledge to deliver the lesson well. This primarily involves the knowledge and confidence to deliver the lesson well and in line with the program expectations. As well as training on the program, this will require 'practise the practice' sessions. Essentially, they are sessions where teachers come together to work on a specific part of the phonics lesson. Within Pearl Phonics, these are mapped out and prepared for schools so they can develop confidence in the key activities (e.g., how to do the modelling steps for reading new words.) As well as confidence in the approach, practitioners need confidence in the content. For example, they need to know how to pronounce the phonemes accurately and clearly. For this I always recommend consulting your program materials or going to 'Mr Thorn does phonics' on YouTube.

### **Mixed messages resulting in confusion (child and teacher)**

This section connects well with the last one. If preparation is good and practitioners are confidently delivering lessons with rigour and fidelity, children will soon settle into the routines and expectations. Where I see this go wrong is when practitioners start to deliver phonics lessons incorrectly. For example, activities do not follow the steps set out in the program content, or certain parts of the lesson are missed. It is likely that this will be picked up by the reading lead and will be developed; however, this lengthens the time that children will need to learn routines, etc. They have a few weeks of one approach, then things are changed, and they have to learn another way. For children who find learning to read a big challenge, this adds further complexity.

If practitioners are not confident in delivering phonics lessons with the required rigour, then I recommend the following steps:

1. Observe effective practitioners live or on video footage.
2. Talk lessons through step by step with a confident partner teacher or the reading lead.
3. Record yourself doing the activities (e.g., flashcards) and compare this to the videos that are available from the program
4. Ask the reading lead to deliver a 'practise the practice' session on a particular part of the lesson that you are unsure about.
5. Keep handbooks, lesson structure sheets, etc., with you in the first few weeks. Let the children you are working with get this right from the start, so you might need to check your notes from time to time. Yes, this upsets the flow of lessons initially, but I believe it is time well spent.

If lessons are delivered as set out by the program, messaging will be clear and there will be greater clarity amongst the class. Furthermore, teachers will feel that there is a consistent message and not a need to bend and flex to what various other practitioners have said. Once things are open to interpretation, tiny inconsistencies are likely to arise.

In summary, the most effective phonics teachers sweat the small stuff as early as possible. They focus on putting the time in early to reap the rewards later on, because they know that children thrive from routines and success. I am sure there are plenty of practitioners out there that do too!

Thank you for taking the time to read my thoughts. If you would like to share any reflections, or require additional support, please get in touch via [info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk](mailto:info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk).