

in brief...

Children's reading: evaluating a new teaching method

Teaching reading through 'synthetic phonics' is the current favoured method among education policy-makers in England. **Sandra McNally** and colleagues evaluate its effectiveness in improving children's literacy.

Learning to read and write is an essential skill for modern life, yet about 15% of the adult population in OECD countries have not mastered the basics – for example, they are not able to understand the instructions on a bottle of aspirin. These literacy problems are especially serious in England where younger adults perform no better than older ones. Poor literacy skills lead to lower earnings and a lower probability of finding a job.

Despite these longstanding problems, it remains unclear which teaching strategies are most useful for rectifying literacy deficiencies. Perhaps because of the complexity of the English language (with words often not written as they sound), there has been much disagreement about how to teach literacy. But following an independent review led by former schools inspector Jim Rose in 2006, education policy-makers in England decided to emphasise a method known as 'synthetic phonics'.

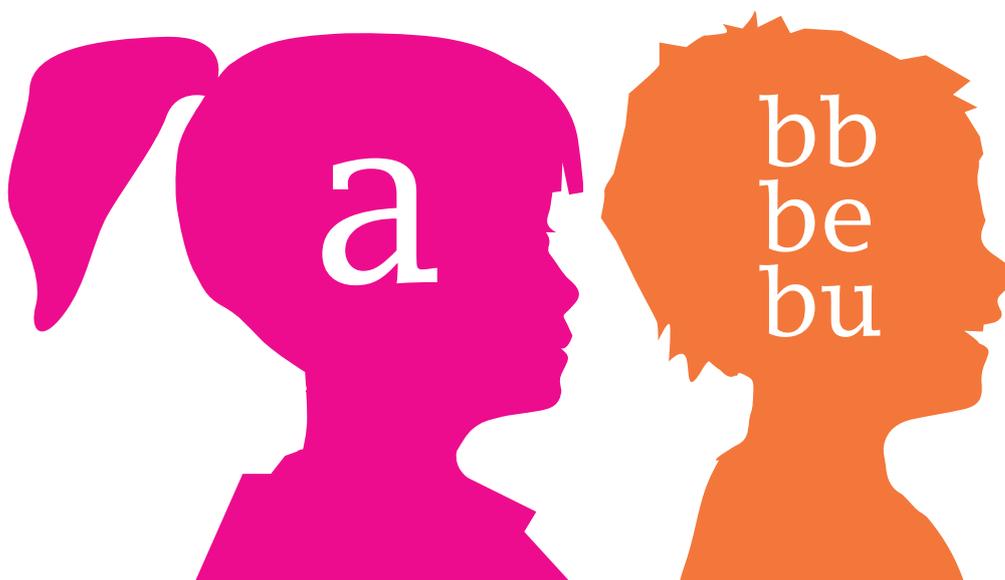
Synthetic phonics involves learning to pronounce the sounds (phonemes) associated with letters 'in isolation'.

Once learned, these individual sounds are then blended together (synthesised) to form words. The method is controversial among educationalists because it is not the only phonics-based method of teaching literacy, and its advocates insist that it not be taught alongside other methods.

While the 'Rose review' was taking place and before it was published, there was a pilot in 172 schools and nurseries, which gave intensive training to teachers in the use of synthetic phonics in early years education. After the Rose review, training was rolled out to different local authorities, which received funding for a literacy co-ordinator to work intensively in about 10 schools per year, but also to disseminate best practice throughout the local authority by offering courses.

The programme only reached all local authorities by the school year 2009/10. Thus, it was not anticipated that all schools would update their early years teaching overnight, even though the government guidelines had changed. Our

Children at risk of struggling with their reading get long-term benefits from 'synthetic phonics'



empirical analysis of the impact of synthetic phonics makes use of the differential timing of the phasing-in of intensive support to schools as a 'natural experiment' to identify the effect of teacher training in the new method.

We use two 'treatment' groups of schools where teachers were trained to deliver phonics teaching: first, the initial schools in the pilot set up to inform the Rose review; and second, schools in the first wave of local authorities that were exposed to intensive support to implement the findings of the Rose review. The control group consists of schools that were selected for intensive support as soon as their local authorities were enrolled in the programme.

We use the National Pupil Database to follow all pupils in the treatment and control schools as they progress through their education at the ages of 5, 7 and 11. Thus, we can establish the effect of the intensive training on pupils as they get older. This is an early years programme (ages 5-7), so we are exploring whether there are immediate effects at those ages and lasting effects at age 11.

Our results show large average effects at the ages of 5 and 7, but these disappear by the age of 11, probably because most children learn to read eventually regardless of the teaching method. But those who are at risk of struggling with their reading – those who come from poor family backgrounds or who do not speak English as a first language – receive significant long-term benefits.

Without a doubt, these effects alone are high enough to justify the fixed cost of a year's intensive training support to teachers. Furthermore, the teaching method contributes

to closing educational gaps based on disadvantage and initial language proficiency by family background.

The fact that a relatively inexpensive policy introduced to primary schools administered by local authorities reduced literacy inequalities in such a way takes on an added significance given the radical and far-reaching schools policies underway in England. The government aspires for all schools eventually to become academies, operating entirely outside the control of local authorities.

It is still unclear what future role local authorities may play in education, but it will certainly be massively diminished, and perhaps non-existent, once full 'academisation' has happened. Thus, the kind of policy we have studied will not be feasible once this has taken place. Of course, this has wider ramifications and relevance for other countries that may be planning to decentralise education in similar ways.

The benefits for disadvantaged pupils justify the fixed cost of a year's intensive training support to teachers



This article summarises "Teaching to Teach Literacy" by Stephen Machin, Sandra McNally and Martina Viarengo, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1425 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1425.pdf>).

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