# Phonics in Context

# Reading, writing and phonics

It seems that controversy about the place of phonics in a literacy program is perennial. Various claims and counterclaims are given prominence in the mass media. No wonder some teachers and parents are confused. We agree with the words of Dorothy Strickland (1995), who says:

> *Don't waste time debating whether or not to teach phonics, spelling, grammar, and other 'skills' of literacy. Obviously, young children cannot read or write without encountering the use of phonics, grammar, spelling and other conventions of written language. Do spend time discussing how to teach them in a way that contributes to the learner's self-improvement. Keep in mind that these conventions and enablers to reading and writing are not reading and writing nor are they precursors to involvement in reading and writing as meaningful acts.*
>
> *Teach these skills through meaningful use. Anything less is not only misleading, it contributes to the kind of educational fraud that results in children and their parents believing that phonics is reading and in young adults graduating from high school having completed thousands of worksheets yet unable to read and write.*

The intention of this book is to help teachers teach phonics well. Our purpose is to provide a practical book, recommending effective teaching procedures. However, it also includes the necessary theory and references to research that support such teaching. What we recommend is in line with the thinking of the major literacy associations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the Australian Literacy Educators Association, and e:Lit (formerly known as the Primary English Teaching Association).

Good phonics teaching in classrooms happens when children have access to compelling texts and well-stocked libraries, where each day they read and write intentionally and meaningfully.

## What is phonics?

When children can hear sounds, they can then connect them to the graphic symbols we call letters. That process is called phonics (Pinnell & Fountas, 1998, p. 91).

> *Phonics is the set of relationships between the sound system of oral language and the letter system of written language.*
>
> **Goodman, 2005, p. 39**

The relationships between sounds and letters are often very complex. English has about 44–45 sounds (depending on dialect) but only 26 letters, so there can be no simple set of sound-letter relationships. One letter can represent different sounds;

one sound can be represented by different letters. For this reason, Goodman (1993) writes:

> *My view defines phonics … as the patterns of relationships between the patterns of speech and the patterns of writing.*

In other words, phonics involves complex relationships between sounds and letters. For example, there isn't one spelling for the /ī/ sound:

tiger   mice   tie   sky   high   island   rye   buy   aisle   height

In addition, there isn't one sound for a letter. Consider the different sounds for the letter 'a' in these words:

cat   baby   cake   was   after   apron   zebra   ball   banana

One of the factors responsible for this complexity can be stated as:

> *English tends to have such complexities because of the multiple language roots that contributed to the language. The letter N seems to be a stable spelling of the last sound in man. But from our Danish roots we get kn as in know, knew, knee, knight, knife, etc. From our Greek roots we get gnaw, gnat, gneiss. We also get the pn spelling in pneumonia and pneumatic. A variant of the n sound can be spelled gn at the ends of words, as in campaign, reign and sign/resign/design. That comes from our French roots.*
> **Phonics Phacts—What is Phonics?, Center for Expansion of Language and Thinking, 1980**

## Different speakers of English have different phonics

Different speakers of English pronounce words differently. Since phonics is based on pronunciation of words read, speakers who pronounce words differently will use different phonics.

Another way of saying this is that spellings are constant or 'set', but the way we pronounce words varies. Therefore, the phonics varies.

We, the authors, say /kăt/, but in Oklahoma, people say something that sounds to us like /kay-ət/ with two syllables. We pronounce the word with an /ă/ sound; their Southern pronunciation gives it a diphthong (one vowel sound glides into another). Nevertheless, we're all talking about a 🐱.

> *Phonics is not one thing!*
> *Phonics varies with the speaker.*
> *… no language has a pure set of one-to-one correspondences. Phonics doesn't work that way. And though complex, English phonics isn't random or capricious as it's sometimes represented. There are rules; the trouble is they aren't simple and they vary from one dialect of English to another.*
>
> **Goodman, 1993, p. 9**

Across the United States there are wide differences in dialect. Even within Australia, people from different states and regions have different phonics. Consider the different pronunciations of the word 'mall' (/măl/ or /mawl/). It is not a matter of which pronunciation is correct, or which is the right sound for the letter 'a' in 'mall'. It's a fact of life that there are regional and dialect differences in spoken language, and that means different phonics in different regions!

Goodman (1993), reminds us that, 'If each letter represented a sound, then the spelling of each dialect group would have to be unique'. In the example above, we would need two spellings: 'mal' (rhyming with pal and gal) and 'mall' (rhyming with fall, wall and ball). Another example: some children may pronounce 'again' as /ə'gen/ and some may pronounce it /ə'gain/.

Despite different pronunciations in different dialects, the spelling of the words remains constant.

> *Each of us develops phonics rules that fit the speech sounds of our own dialects. That doesn't have to be a problem unless the school insists there is a single set of phonics rules for all…*
>
> **Phonics and Dialects of English,**
> **Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking, 2008, p. 2**

In classrooms where there are children who learnt to speak English in other nations, the context for learning phonics is rich. Different pronunciations of the one word provide an excellent opportunity to focus on the sound-letter patterns within the word, and to understand that phonics in English is not the same for every speaker of the language.

When children group words according to a common sound or sound-letter pattern, they should be given an opportunity to justify their groupings according to their accents or pronunciations. Scottish children, for example, may group 'put' with 'room'. This is not wrong! It is the pronunciation in the child's dialect.

> *Too much emphasis on isolated phonics can discriminate against students whose first language is not English. Phonics is based on pronunciation. And pronunciation is not standard. It varies from person to person and from region to region.*
>
> **Garan, 2007, p. 69**

## Phonics in context

There is a need for explicit teaching of phonics. However, in a literacy program, the reading and writing of connected text takes priority. The children read, write, think, talk, analyse, reflect and negotiate their way through text. *The teaching of phonics or any other skills is always contained within, and subordinate to, genuine literacy events.* Importantly, the children spend much, much more time reading and writing—where they apply their phonic knowledge—than they do in the actual study of sound-letter relationships.

Teachers often associate phonics only with learning to read. However, young writers depend more on sound-letter knowledge in the early stages of learning to write than in the early stages of learning to read. When writing the words they want, they need to listen for the sounds in the words and then put letters down on paper.

There is much research to show that skills taught in context are learnt more permanently and applied more effectively than skills learnt out of context.

> *… skills were taught within the context of meaningful reading and writing activities to maximise children's application of phonics concepts as they read and wrote. In addition the list of phonics strategies taught in these classrooms helped children develop cognitive processes to apply phonics skills while reading and writing new words.*
>
> **Dahl, Scharer, Lawson & Grogan, 1999, pp. 312–41**

Other studies, Cantrell (1999) and Mullis, Campbell and Farstrup (1993), showed that children from classrooms that emphasised meaning-centred reading outscored children who were taught skills out of context.

> Further research supporting holistic approaches for teaching skills is summarised in Appendix A.

## Teaching phonics in context: The role of the teacher

To teach phonics in context, you must know about how children learn language and how they learn to read and write. More specifically, you need to know about letters, sounds and sound-letter relationships, and the role they play in reading and writing.

It is essential that you observe and interact with your children as they read and write so that you identify *teachable* moments. Teaching phonics in context involves the meshing of teacher knowledge about language and literacy acquisition with the children's current knowledge about reading, writing, sounds, letters and sound-letter relationships, and having effective teaching strategies to advance student learning.

Teaching phonics in context begins with what children already know. Published programs with sequential lists of sounds or letters or words cannot be used. As children in any one classroom have many different understandings, so too the teaching they experience differs. All children do not engage with the same phonic teaching.

It is only when children can recognise and *say* (pronounce) words that they can start investigating the phonics involved. For example, when they can read words such as 'cat', 'was', and 'after', in authentic texts, they can then analyse the relationships between the letters seen and the sounds heard. They can discover that the letter 'a' represents /ă/ as in 'cat', /ŏ/ in 'was', and /ar/ in 'after'.

To make this easier for young learners, we start with meaningful, familiar text. We take words from that text, and then look at the sound-letter relationships within the words. We can do this in many different ways. For example, through *shared reading*

(Chapter 7), through *rhymes* (Chapter 8) and through *investigations into how words work* (Chapter 9). Indeed, any time we are using authentic text for real-life purposes, there are opportunities to help children learn phonics.

As well, we can encourage children to write meaningful texts from their very first days in school. Some of their writing will not be conventional. Some early writing may be scribbled lines or strings of personal symbols. However, when these young writers come to understand that written words are made up of letters of the alphabet, and the letters generally represent sounds heard in spoken words, excellent opportunities arise for teaching phonics (Chapter 6).

Many commercial phonics programs teach children a single sound for a letter. If the children are taught, letter 'a' is short /ă/, what are they meant to think when they meet words such as 'was', 'after' or 'apron'? The study of sound-letter patterns in English only makes sense for learners when the patterns are discussed in words they know, (i.e. words they can recognise and pronounce). So the study of sound-letter relationships is easier for learners when they study these relationships in the context of words they are writing and reading. Understanding the meaning of a word and knowing how to pronounce it allows the reader to work out the phonics. For example: There was a *war* in another country. (If a child does not know the word *war*, sounding out will more likely lead to pronouncing the word as /w + ah/. There is no way they would pronounce it as /w + or/.)

She had a *tear* (/t + ear/) in her eye.

The paper will *tear* (/t + air/) if you pull it.

Don't stand too *close* (/k + l + ō + s/) to the edge.

Please *close* (/k + l + ō + z/ the door.

Clearly, if you don't know the meaning of the italicised words above, you simply can't use phonics to work them out! Phonics alone rarely works. However, **meaning *allows* phonics to work**.

## Commercial phonics programs

In our classrooms, whose phonics are we teaching? Importing foreign commercial phonics programs may be importing phonics lessons that are inappropriate for the children destined to be the consumers of the program.

If you use commercial phonics programs, you will be using the 'mythical standard phonics' promoted by that program. The phonics lessons will often be inappropriate for the children in your classroom, as the examples below indicate.

In Australia, commercial phonics programs usually include the word *her* with *mother*, *father*, *sister* and *farmer* to teach the letters 'er' representing the /er/ sound. While some American speakers use the same sound at the end of *her* and *father*, Australian speakers do not. Rather, Australians use the schwa (the very short, unaccented vowel) in the unstressed second syllable of the two-syllable words

# 4

# Learning about letters

In Chapter 1, we described classrooms that have rich environments for phonics teaching and learning. In Chapter 2, we set out our theoretical position. In Chapter 3, we discussed phonological awareness, and the ways in which young children learn about the sounds of their language—words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes. So now, in Chapter 4, we consider how children learn about printed words and letters.

## Learning starts before school

For many children, learning about printed words and letters begins before they start school. They demonstrate, in different ways, how they are reading icons, signs, symbols and printed text in their world. This can be shown when:

➤ they want you to stop at the building with the big yellow arches

➤ they comment when dad doesn't stop at the 'STOP' sign

➤ they recognise, in different contexts, the letter that starts their name

➤ they may be able to name some other letters

➤ they may believe a letter is a word (when asked to finger point as they read a familiar text, they point to individual letters, but say words)

➤ they ask questions such as, '*What does that word say?*'

➤ they make comments like, '*This word looks like that one.*'

➤ they may even recognise whole words that have been frequently associated with common experiences such as visiting the shopping centre. (For example, three-year-old Rebecca said, '*I didn't know there was a Woolworths here*'.)

## At the start of school

> *We ask kindergarteners, 'What is the sound of the letter at the end of the word?', forgetting that many of them are unclear about the concepts letter, word, sound (as it applies to speech), and end (which requires knowing that letters are ordered from left to right), and do not know that letters bear a complex relationship to speech sounds.*
>
> **Clay 1991, in Johnston 2004, p. 7**
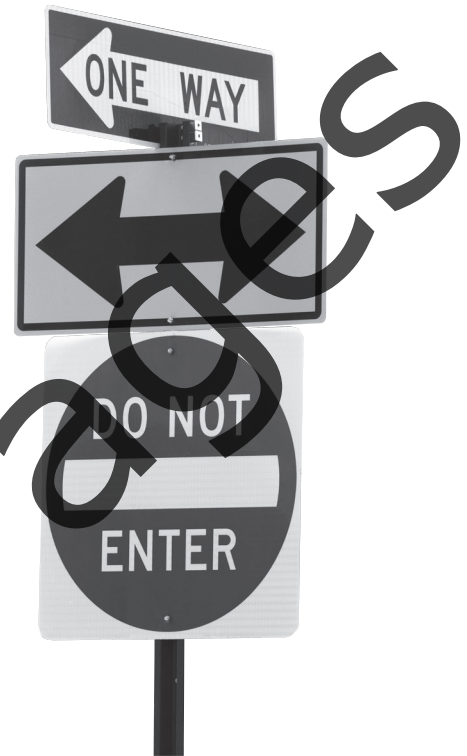
Young children starting school will have a different understanding and awareness of printed words and letters. Some children, but not all, will understand the concept of a letter, and know the names of some letters. Others will not. Some think that numerals are the same as letters and scatter them throughout their early writing. Some think a letter is a word. Some may even think a letter is only something delivered to the letterbox.

Our experience has taught us that young children generally comment much more frequently about individual letters or *shapes* they see in written text than they ever voluntarily do about *sounds* heard in language.

## Graphological awareness

Awareness of the written and printed symbols of the writing system is referred to as *graphological awareness*. It includes awareness of individual letters, punctuation marks, numerals, and any other symbols or icons used by writing systems.

In English, a phoneme can be represented by:

> a single grapheme /f/ = 'f'
>
> a digraph (two graphemes for a single phoneme) /f/ = 'ph'
>
> a trigraph (three graphemes for a single phoneme) /i/ = 'igh'

## Graphemes and letters

A grapheme is not one letter; it is a set of letters including lower and upper case forms, Roman, bold and italic forms, and all the different fonts that children now see when they are working on computers.

> The grapheme 'a' = { A **A** A A *A* ɑ a **a** ɑ }
>
> The grapheme 't' = { **T** T *T* T **T** **t** t t t **t** }

What's remarkable is that most children have no difficulty learning that all the different forms of a letter are variants of the one letter; all the forms of 'a' above are called 'ay' and all the different forms of 't' above are called 'tee'.

## The alphabet

There are twenty-six letters in the English alphabet. Each has a name (and only one name) that remains constant. For example:

> a = 'ay'    b = 'bee'
>
> c = 'see'    d = 'dee'

There are approximately 43 to 45 single sounds in spoken English so there is no regular one-to-one relationship between a letter and a sound.

Importantly we *see* letters, and we *hear* sounds. We can write a letter but we cannot write a sound. Rather, in written English, letters represent the sounds heard in spoken English. (Letters cannot *make* sounds.) Phonics is learning about how letters represent the sounds of speech, in written language. As teachers, we speak of *writing* letters and of *hearing* sounds.

## Vowel letters and consonant letters

The twenty-six letters of the alphabet can be classified into two groups, vowels and consonants. The six *primary* single-letter vowels are a, e, i, o, u and y (Smith, 1971). The letter 'y,' by itself, represents a vowel sound quite often—as in *happy* and *fly*.

When children begin trying to write letters to represent sounds heard in syllables, it is useful for them to know which are the primary vowel letters.

## Developing print concepts

Before children can begin to learn the names of the letters, they need to know what letters are. When revisiting a text that children have listened to on previous occasions, take the opportunity to focus on the development of print concepts, such as sentence, word, letter and directional features of written English. Say to the children:

'*Point to the top of the page.*'

'*Touch the writing.*'

'*Touch the picture.*'

'*Show me where I will start reading.*'

'*Here is the title. Let's read the title together.*'

'*Cover a word in the title.*'

'*Touch a letter in the word.*'

'*How many words are there in the title?*'

'*Touch the first word in the title.*'

'*Touch the last word in the title?*'

'*Touch the first letter in this word.*'

'*Touch the last letter in this word.*'

'*How many letters are there in this word?*'

'*Find two words in the title, that are the same.*'

'*On this page, can you touch two words that are the same?*'

'*Who can show where this sentence begins? Show me where it ends. How did you know?*'

## Introducing letter names

When the children understand the concept of a letter, the names of the letters are introduced. Letter names are used in contexts that are meaningful to the children, such as individual children's names, known reading texts and familiar environmental print.

➤ Listen for comments from students that indicate they are noticing individual letters in written text. When looking at a text, young children will often say, *'That shape is in my name,'* or *'That's in my name.'*

➤ Grab the moment. Ask the child to point to what he has noticed. If he points to a letter, say, *'That's a letter. That is the letter "b".'*
Then refer to the child's name. Say, *'Can you touch letter "b" in your name?'* Ask, *'Girls and boys, can you see letter "b" anywhere else around the classroom?'* The children walk around the classroom searching for letter 'b'. That is, they do a print search.
Start a list of words containing the letter 'b'. Accept all words that have the letter 'b' whether at the beginning, middle or end of a word.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bob | Bailey | baby |
| Bendigo | Robert | bed |

➤ Seize upon children's discoveries as described in the point above. Rather than the teacher determining the particular letter she will introduce before a lesson begins, she encourages the children to look carefully at the text, to observe what they know, and to share new discoveries. Because the teacher attends closely to what the children observe, and she shows excitement at their discoveries, they come to know that learning begins with them. Because they know their contributions are valued, they are ever alert to making new discoveries and to learning new things.
It's important for the teacher's language to invite exploration and discovery. Say, *'Girls and boys, look carefully at the print on this page. Tell me what you know, are there words you know? Are there letters you know?'* *'Look at the title. Tell me something you know.'* *'Does anyone have a question about the print on this page?'* *'Does anyone see a new letter pattern?'*

➤ Parallel to following up the children's discoveries, we help children know what to look for. We draw children's attention to different patterns in texts and in words that they may not have noticed. We teach them ways of using these patterns. We cannot show them every pattern or feature, and even if we could, we might not want to because we want them to become adept at noticing for themselves. Say, *'Look at this page in our Big Book. Remember this is about the fish jumping out of the dish.'* *'Who can find the words "fish" and "dish"? Thank you.'* *'Who can see a letter pattern that is the same in each word?'* *'Yes, each of these words has "sh".'* *'Does anyone know other words with the letters "sh" together?'*
A list of words the children know that contain 'sh' might be started. Depending on the children's understanding the teacher might proceed to help children learn the relationship of the letters 'sh' to the /sh/ sound.

➤ Observe a young child's early writing. Note whether they are scribbling, using personal squiggles, using letter-like shapes or letters from the alphabet. Their writing tells much of their understanding about letters of the alphabet.

➤ As you point to letters used by children in their writing ask, '*What is the name of this letter?*' Usually the letters young children learn first are those in their names. In their early writing, you will see the letters from their names used liberally. The young writer understands that the written form of his name consists of letters and these letters can be used in writing other words.

➤ Use the first letters of the children's names for organising simple routines.

See Chapter 9 for further work using children's names.

➤ Say, '*Stand up if your name begins with the letter "M". You can go to the line first.*' or '*If your name starts with the letter "R", get your play lunch from your locker.*'

➤ Play 'I spy'. Say, '*I spy with my little eye someone whose name starts with the letter "C".*' (The children are sitting in a circle; they are all holding their own name cards.)

➤ Construct a bar graph showing the children's names grouped according to the first letter. Ask, '*How many names begin with letter "T"?*' '*Which group is biggest?*' '*Which letter do the names in this column begin with?*'



➤ How many letters in your name? The children work in pairs with a list of children's names. They find how many names have two letters, three letters, four letters, etc.

➤ Which letter occurs most frequently in our names? In Kim Simmons' Grade 1/2, the children helped construct a large bar graph where their names were grouped according to the number of letters. For example, Jacob, Ellie and Angus were all



situated in the same column of the graph with five letters. Then the children were challenged to work out which letter occurred most often in their names. Working in pairs, they devised their own ways of discovering the letter that occurred most frequently, and then their own ways of representing this information.
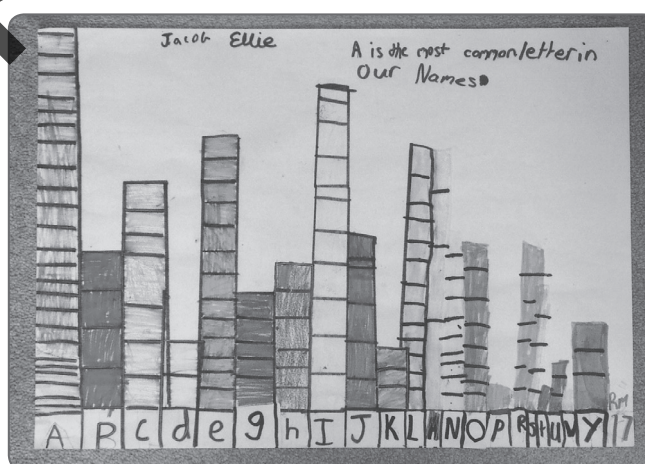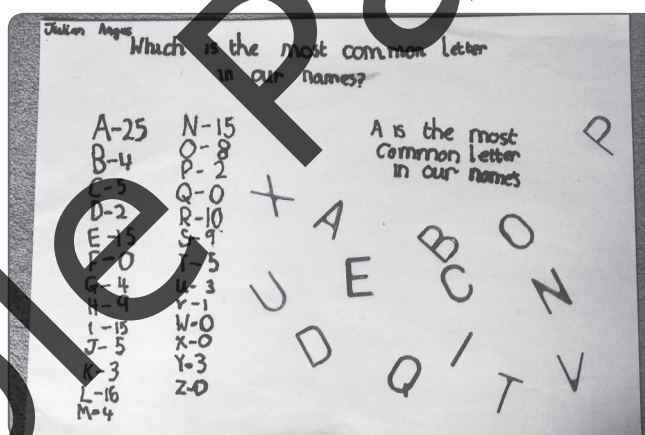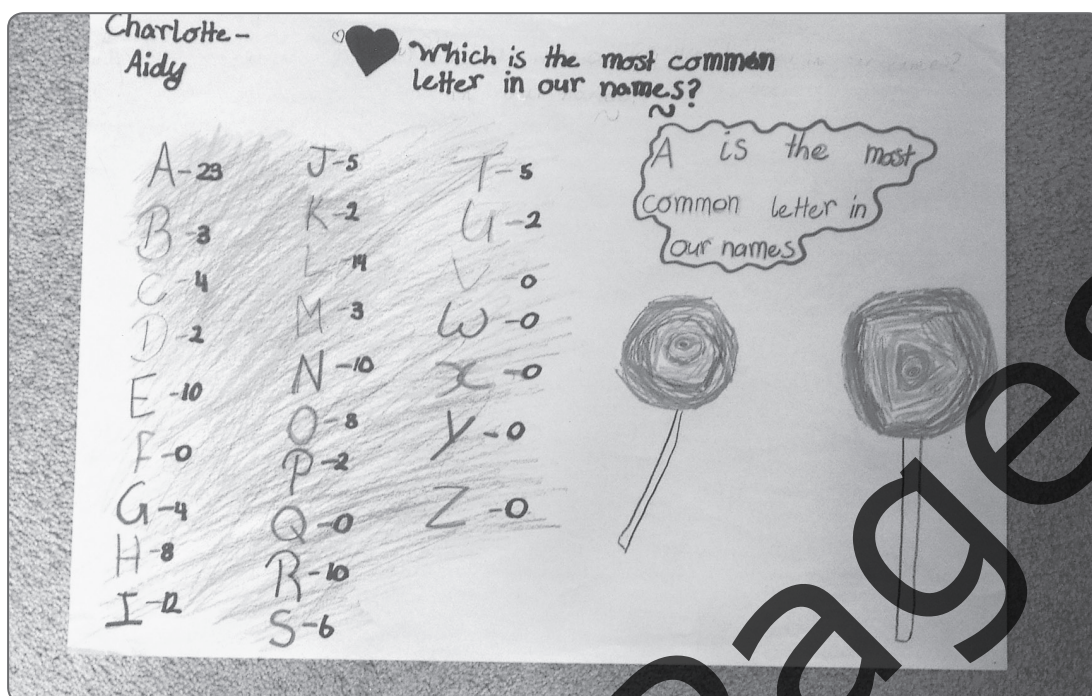
➤ Working with children's names and the use of capital or uppercase letters, say, '*What do you notice about the first letter in each of our names?*' '*Why do the words in our name list all begin with uppercase or capital letters?*'

➤ Lower and upper case letters: letters may be written in either lower or upper case form. While some letters look much the same in either form (for example, *O o, Z z*), others look quite different (for example, *E e, A a*). Contextual reference to upper case or capital letters and lower case letters, may be built into those activities above, when children are learning the names of the letters. For example, when writing words with capital letters, teachers explain why they are using a capital or upper case letter and why they use that terminology.
Say, '*I am starting with capital "L" because Lorraine is my name and people's names always start with a capital letter.*'
When referring to a list of children's names, or a list of local street names, or the days of the week, once again discuss the use and purpose of the *capital letter*.
Some children's names include both the upper and lower case form of the one letter. When children are talking about the letters in their names, discuss why the one letter may look somewhat different, as with letter 'b' in 'Bobby' and letter 'a' in 'Alana'.
When reading a big book, ask the children to find the capital letters in the title. Discuss why they are there.
When technical terms such as 'capital letter' and 'lower case letters' are used in context, they are not difficult to understand.

# Phonics in Context

## Learning how letters and sounds are related

**5**

In Chapter 3, we discussed how children learn about the different units of sound in spoken English. We discussed the concept of phonological awareness, which includes phonemic awareness. In Chapter 4, we discussed the concept of graphological awareness and how children learn about printed words and letters.

In this chapter, we link Chapter 3 (sounds) with Chapter 4 (letters) to discuss the nature of the relationships between sounds and letters. We also describe teaching strategies to help children learn about the important links between the *patterns of letters* they see and the *sounds* they represent.

When using phonics in reading, children are going from letters seen to possible sounds. They are working on letter-sound relationships. When writing however, young writers are first saying the sounds they hear in the words they want to write and thinking about the letters they can choose to represent those sounds. In other words, they are working on sound-letter relationships.

## Phonics rules

There are many phonics rules that claim to help readers turn letters into sounds, but most of them are extremely complex and very unreliable. Consider this rule, (Johnson, 2001):

> *The 'a-e' combination is pronounced with the long vowel and the final 'e' is silent (except when the final syllable is unaccented—then the vowel is pronounced with a short 'i' sound, as in 'palace,' or the combination in 'are', with words such as 'have' and 'dance' as exceptions).*

Many phonics rules are too hard, or useless, or both! They are hard because they are complex and impossible to remember; they are useless because they have low utility.

> *… if they're accurate, they're likely not to apply to many words, and if they apply to a larger number of words, they're often wrong more than they're right!*
>
> **Wilde, 1997, p. 30**

Enough said. So letters don't represent sounds in a simple, straightforward manner at all. Summary statements from the following researchers, representing a broad range of viewpoints, support the truth of this.

| Adams, M 1990, *Beginning to read: thinking and learning about print*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. | Both the phonemic significance of a letter and the graphic representation of a phoneme depend on context. They depend on the letters or sounds that surround them and even on the words in which they occur. (p. 256) The generality of most of the (phonic) generalizations is disturbingly low. Those that work reliably often pertain to relatively infrequent spelling patterns. Those that pertain to the most frequent spelling patterns are often relatively unreliable. Many generalizations that are commonly taught are of limited value. (p. 258) |
|---|---|
| Moustafa, M 1997, *Beyond Traditional Phonics: research discoveries and reading instruction*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH. | Letter-phoneme correspondences are a complex, mind-boggling web of correspondences. (p. 10) |
| Strauss, S 2005, *The Linguistics, Neurology and Politics of Phonics: silent 'e' speaks out!* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, NJ. | The various commercial phonics programs … bear little resemblance to phonics as an abstract system and are more accurately called *pseudophonics* … the actual system of phonics is profoundly more complex than what (commercial) programs express in their materials. (p. 141) A scientific study of phonics … is based on an empirical investigation of the patterns of sound-letter connections, *as they actually exist in the language*, not as they exist in unscientific, pragmatically inspired commercial primers. (p. 145) |
| Clymer, T 1996, 'The utility of phonics generalizations in the primary grades,' in *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 3, pp. 182–187, IRA (Originally published in 1963. Republished as a classic.) | … many (phonic) generalizations that are commonly taught are of limited value. (p. 187) |

Many other researchers add to the weight of the evidence provided by those above. Clearly, the programs that focus on looking at letters, sounding them out and blending the sounds until you pronounce a word, do not understand the complexity of the very thing they promote—letter-sound relationships.

# Guidelines for teaching phonics

## 1. Teach phonics explicitly

There is a need for explicit teaching of phonics for some children more than others. However, *the reading and writing of connected text takes priority*. The children read, write, think, talk, analyse, reflect and negotiate their way through text. The teaching of phonics or any other skills is always contained within, and subordinate to, genuine literacy events. For example, if the children have had an opportunity to see some new-born kittens, and they have co-authored a classroom text, then you have an ideal springboard for focusing on initial letter 'k' and the /k/ sound.

## 2. Discover the sound-letter relationships children know

### ■ Through personal writing

By watching the children's personal writing closely, we see which sound-letter relationships are commonly known. We then focus on those during whole-class shared reading, including shared reading of language-experience texts, or small group work. A review of the known relationships is important as the children need to be aware of what they know and they need to be able to express it. Their knowledge becomes conscious knowledge that they can articulate; they feel successful, and they gain the confidence or the 'have a go' spirit required to tackle further learning.
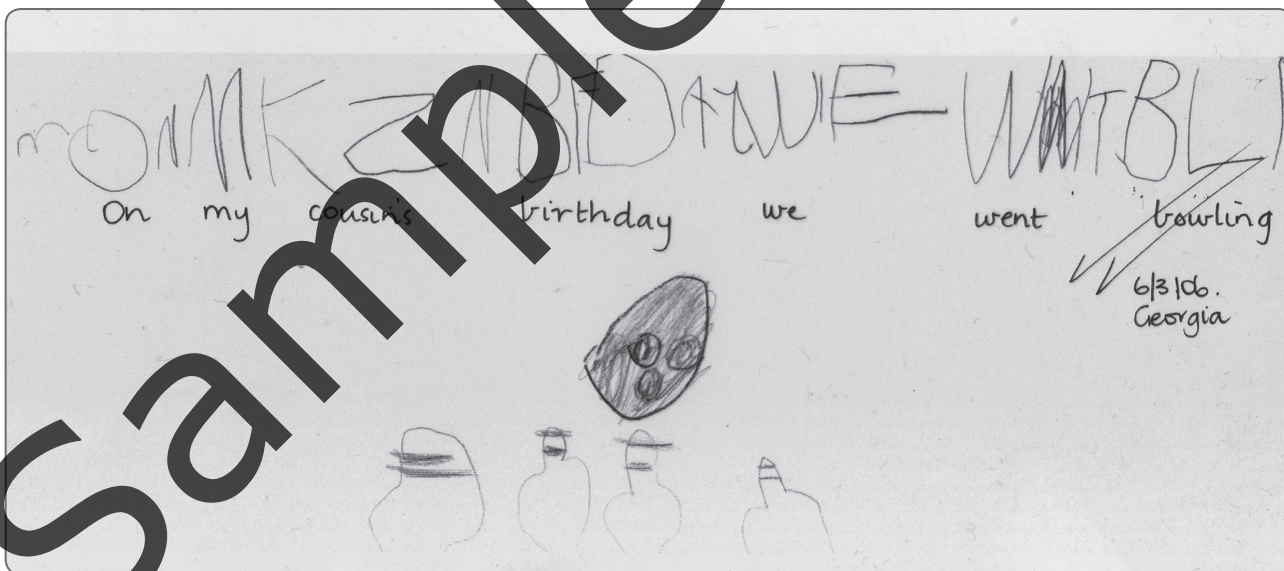


This sample of writing, from a child in the third month of her first year at school, showed that she already knew the following sounds and correct spellings:

| sound she heard | spelling she chose | tally of correct spellings |
|---|---|---|
| short /ŏ/ in 'on' | 'o' | 1 |
| /n/ in 'on' | 'n' | 2 |
| /m/ in 'my' | 'm' | 3 |
| /k/ in 'cousin' | 'k' | good choice (but not conventionally correct) |
| /z/ in 'cousin' | 'z' | as above |
| /b/ in 'birthday' | 'b' | 4 |
| /f/ in 'birfday' | 'f' | spelling shows how she hears or says the word |
| /d/ in 'birthday' | 'd' | 5 |
| long /ā/ in 'birthday' | 'a' | good choice (but not conventionally correct) |
| /w/ in 'we' | 'w' | 6 |
| long /ē/ in 'we' | 'e' | 7 |
| /w/ in 'went' | 'w' | already demonstrated |
| /t/ in 'went' | 't' | 8 |
| /b/ in 'bowling' | 'b' | already demonstrated |
| /l/ in 'bowling' | 'l' | 9 |
| /i/ in 'bowling' | 'i' | 10 |

So in her third month at school this child demonstrated, in ten or fifteen minutes of writing, that she already knew ten sound-letter relationships! The next day, she might demonstrate her knowledge of others. (We obviously have to re-think the traditional practice of *doing* one sound a week when young writers constantly demonstrate that they can handle many more when they're writing.)

Close monitoring of samples of children's personal writing will tell you more about their sound-letter knowledge than any other form of assessment.

### ■ Through reading

Many of the daily reading events in your classroom also provide opportunities for you to observe which sound-letter relationships the children know. When you're listening to children read orally, including the time when you're doing running records, you will see evidence of which sound-letter relationships they know; you will also see evidence of which letters are causing confusion.

It doesn't make sense to follow the traditional *one letter or one sound a week* routine. If the children show you that they know a certain sound-letter relationship, review it by all means, but don't spend the traditional week doing it to death!

While monitoring their writing and their reading, you will discover children who have little or no knowledge of sound-letter relationships. Don't assume that no learning is occurring! Look back through dated samples of writing in their portfolios to determine the progress that has been made and the needs they have right now.

## 3. Develop a positive attitude

Reviewing the sound-letter relationships the children know builds their confidence and helps them to talk about what they know. They develop a *we can do this* attitude. Self-belief develops successful learners!

## 4. There is no set sequence to follow

When planning to teach new sound-letter relationships, there is no fixed or set sequence to follow. If there were, we'd all know about it, and all commercial phonics programs and materials would have the same sequence. Clearly, that's not the case.

## 5. Three essential steps

When teaching a new sound-letter relationship, there are three things that need to be established:

    i   identify the common sound heard in the words selected

    ii   identify the common letter(s) seen in the words

    iii   relate the common sound heard to the common letter(s) seen.

## 6. Be clear about what we see and what we hear

We *hear* sounds. We cannot write a sound or ask children to point to a sound. We *see* letters. A letter on its own has no sound; letters represent sounds only in the context of words.

## 7. Help children become aware of patterns

Children learn pattern-by-pattern, not rule-by-rule or skill-by-skill. They learn visual patterns, sound patterns and meaning patterns. When we are using authentic text, we have plenty of patterns to discover! Together, teachers and children develop lists of words that highlight these patterns; we do not need commercial lists.

## 8. Be informed about the nature of our graphophonic system

To teach phonics effectively, you must understand phonology (see Chapter 3), and the sound-letter relationships in our language. The last section of this chapter provides some of the professional knowledge required for effective phonics teaching. You might like to refer to some other very useful teacher reference texts such as:

Emmitt, Pollock & Komesaroff 2007, *Language and Learning: An introduction for teaching*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Wilde 1997, *What's a Schwa Sound Anyway? A holistic guide to phonetics, phonics, and spelling*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

## Essential teacher knowledge: Consonants

Can you read this?

    _ e   a _ e   _ _ i _ i _ _   a   _ o o _   a _ o u _   _ _ o _ i _ _.

Presumably, you had some trouble. Now read the same sentence with the consonants in place.

    W _   _ r _   w r _ t _ n g   a   b _ _ k   _ b _ _ t   p h _ n _ _ c s.

Clearly, consonants provide more clues about a word's identity (when reading) than vowels do. At the beginning of their first year at school, teachers should plan to help children learn those sound-letter relationships that are going to provide the most help—the consonants.

There are good reasons for focusing on consonants first.

➤ As seen above, consonants provide more information than vowels.

➤ Back in 1964, Heilman showed that 80 percent of the words typically met by beginning readers began with consonants, so it helps young readers if they know the sounds generally represented by initial consonants.

➤ Most readers examine the beginning of a word first, so this is a compelling argument for starting with initial consonants.

➤ Consonant letters are more likely to represent a common sound, whereas vowel letters represent many sounds.

➤ Young children's writing shows that they have more control of the consonants than the vowels. (Bissex, 1984; Gentry & Gillet, 1993; Snowball & Bolton, 1999)

*We find this to be true for spelling acquisition in the greater regularity and stability of consonant sound-letter correspondences than of vowel sound-letter correspondences. It is the consonant representations that pre-school inventive spellers master first: the vowels remain a problem for many of us into adulthood.*

**Bissex, 1984, p. 100**

# Reading

Children need to be immersed in classrooms full of books—books of high quality, and wide variety, very easy books to read and challenging books. The books must be readily accessible and displayed in ways that invite the children to pick them up. Research tells us:

> *… when books are readily available, when the print environment is rich, more reading is done.*
>
> **Krashen, 1993, p. 33**

The variety is as important as the quality. Classrooms texts include picture storybooks, poetry cards and anthologies, song charts, rhyme charts, community posters, non-fiction reference books, children's magazines, advertising brochures, television programs and instruction booklets. As long as there is printed text, you have opportunities to teach phonics.
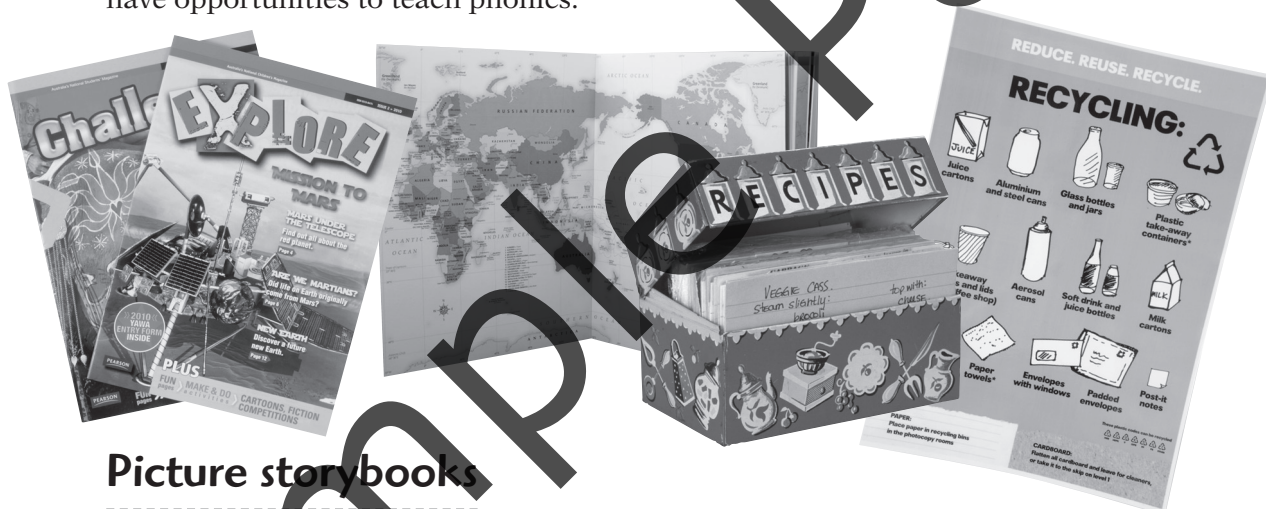
## Picture storybooks

We are focusing on picture storybooks in this chapter, but a wide range of texts should be used for reading. While picture storybooks and other authentic texts provide a wonderful springboard for teaching phonics, we need to remember that they weren't written for this purpose. They were written to entertain, to inform, to delight, to surprise, to question, to develop felt thoughts. So we implore you …

<center>

**Honour the author and the illustrator first and foremost!**
**Use picture storybooks for their varied and intended purposes.**
**Make the books come alive!**

</center>

Honour the children too. Provide them with an experience of the whole book, not bits and pieces of it! It is through the full experience of the whole book that engagement and wonder will appear. Faces will smile, voices will sing, hands will clap, bodies will move, minds will stir and hearts will swell. You then help the children to learn many things—including phonics! The book provides the vehicle we need to make learning easy and enjoyable.

Shared-reading sessions will include texts that are easy for the children, as these easy texts provide maximum opportunities for the children to apply their growing phonic knowledge without getting bogged down in more challenging texts. However, you should read texts to children that they can't yet read for themselves, as that provides a lot of other opportunities to learn about reading. Research tells us that reading texts to children that are beyond what they can read for themselves increases their vocabulary substantially and gives them a greater awareness of how our language works, i.e. grammar. Of course, reading to children always involves you and the children in sharing. It naturally leads into the kind of shared reading that is typical in classrooms and requires the children to gradually take more responsibility for reading the text themselves.

## Who Sank the Boat?

*Who Sank the Boat* by Pamela Allen, tells the story of a cow, a donkey, a sheep, a pig and a tiny little mouse who decide to go for a row in the bay. One by one, the friends get into the boat. Page by page, the readers are asked, 'Do you know who sank the boat?'

Shared reading occurs over time. A cycle may be completed in a few days, in a week or even longer. You will not complete all the activities listed here— they are described only so that you can see the wide range of opportunities that shared reading provides for you to teach skills in context.

### Tuning in

➤ Re-read favourite texts. Include *Mr Archimedes' Bath* also by Pamela Allen, if it's a familiar book.

➤ Floating and sinking.
**Preparation and equipment needed:** clear plastic container of water, various objects of different weights and shapes.
**Steps:** Ask children which objects they think will sink and which will float. Record on a two-column chart. Now test each object and amend the chart if necessary. Discuss why objects floated or sank.

### Discovery/enjoyment

➤ Discuss the illustration on the front cover (donkey and cow in a boat).

➤ Read the book title, and ask children to predict, 'Who sank the boat?'

➤ Read the text to the children. Have them continue to make predictions about who sank the boat (after each question in the text).

➤ Discuss the illustrations on the last three pages (without text).

➤ Encourage discussion about the story and invite children's own responses. If necessary, ask questions such as, '*Did the mouse really sink the boat?*' Expect children to explain their answers.

➤ Re-read straight through; allow children to join in as they can.

➤ Compare with *Mr Archimedes' Bath*. It would be appropriate to review earlier floating/sinking experiments. You could extend their understanding by using an aluminium foil 'boat' and adding objects until it sinks.

➤ Provide copies of the small book version for children to borrow.

## Exploration

➤ Re-read the text, encouraging student participation. Interpret the illustrations as you go.

➤ Have five children act out the story as you and the rest of the children re-read it. (Repeat each day until all children have taken part.)

➤ Ask what would have happened if the mouse had gone in first.

➤ Ask what Pamela Allen had to know to write the story, e.g. '*What did she have to know about the animals?*' '*Why do you think she had the sheep doing some knitting?*'

➤ Ask, '*What did Pamela Allen want us to feel about what happened?*' Referring to the double-page illustration (pp. 26–27), ask the children to talk about the animals and how they feel. Ask the children how they know.

➤ Place an audiotape of the story in the listening centre, along with any small copies of the book you may have.

## Extension (select from these possibilities)

➤ Matching.
For example, names of animals with pictures on page 3.

➤ Sequencing.
Copy and reduce the illustrations on pages 7, 13, 17, 21 and 25. Place them randomly on one page. Children cut them out and place them in sequence.

➤ Children match text, provided in boxes, with the sequenced illustrations.

➤ Text feature: question/answer format.
For example, '*Was it the sheep who knew where to sit to level the boat so that she could knit?*' '*No, it wasn't the sheep.*'

➤ Ask children to listen for rhyming words as you re-read the text. You could use Wikki Stix or highlighter tape to highlight them. List the rhyming-word pairs vertically on the board: in/din, weight/late, butter/flutter, sit/knit. Add other rhyming words to each list.

➤ Read the title, and ask the children what other words rhyme with 'boat'. They have already used the word 'float'. Other words could include 'coat', 'goat' and 'throat'. Five rhyming words are sufficient to hear the rhyme and to see the spelling pattern '-oat'.

➤ Make other lists of rhyming words (e.g. words that rhyme with 'sank', or words that rhyme with 'who').

➤ Ask the children to listen for any words in the story that rhyme with 'cow' ('bow'). List the words vertically, and add any others the children know. Now it is possible for the children to understand the link between what they hear, and the written pattern they see:

> cow
> bow
> now

If children give you any other words ending in '-ow', such as 'row', 'know', 'show', 'snow', 'flow', write them in a separate list. Discuss the two different pronunciations of 'ow' in these lists.

➤ Contractions (wasn't, I'll, it's).

➤ Past tense verbs (lived, decided, tilted, balanced, yelled, stepped, caused).

➤ Provide some simple science books on floating and sinking.

### Independence

➤ Children are encouraged to read their own copies of the text, or to read along with the audiotape.

➤ Children write about their favourite animal, or about the animals on pages 26 and 27, or what the animals could have done to go for a row without sinking the boat!

➤ One child may act as 'teacher' and guide others through the book.

➤ Allow children to take a small book home to read to their parents.

Clearly, shared reading is powerful for achieving many of the goals of our reading program: love of literature, understanding of different text types, development of different forms of expression (dramatic, artistic, musical), development of vocabulary, development of print concepts—it's not just for phonics.

## A typical approach to shared reading in the first few years of school

There is no fixed procedure to follow for shared reading. However, the following stages are typical over the period of a shared-reading cycle (typically one week).

## Tuning in

Read and re-read favourite texts: big books, charts, overhead transparencies, posters and texts shown with data projectors or on electronic whiteboards. Utilise a wide range of genre and forms (including songs, poems, recipes, letters, own language experience stories, etc.)

Sometimes activities, hands-on experiences or demonstrations might help to develop some background knowledge necessary for understanding the text to be introduced.

## Discovery/enjoyment

Major purposes: Reading for enjoyment and/or information.

➤ Discuss title and front cover, possibly also the first page or two; 'stir up' prior knowledge and make predictions.

➤ Read the text to the children. Some discussion and problem solving will be appropriate throughout the reading, but only if the reading continues at a lively pace and attention is high. (This will include attention to illustrations and other visual elements.)

## Exploration of the text

Re-reading and joining in, learning from the text (explicit mini-lessons).

➤ demonstration and teaching of reading strategies and behaviours (often unplanned, but based on needs/interests, so your planned lesson can wait)

➤ deepening involvement with the text; discussion to extend comprehension

➤ interrogation of the text (critical literacy)

➤ discussion of text structure

➤ exploration of conventions and their use.

## Extension

➤ word matching; word masking

➤ phonics (letters and letter clusters; recurring word endings)

➤ spelling patterns

➤ discussion of language features (including noun groups, verb groups, adjectivals, metaphors, similes, and so on)

➤ vocabulary, word study

➤ reading similar books

  i   fiction (series, books with same characters or similar events)

  ii  non-fiction (related subject, same text structure).