

Sound Progress

The Phonemic Approach to Basic Literacy

Introductory Guide for Parents

Background

The main method by which people communicate with each other is through conversation. There are other ways of communicating such as gesture or posture but conversation is found to be the best way of getting and giving information or conveying opinions or feelings. The problem with conversation is that we never really remember exactly what was said on all occasions even if we are convinced we are certain. We needed in the first place to record accurately what was said for laws and records. Later this expanded into the immense fields of literature in all its forms. Until the invention of the tape recorder there were only two ways of recording things: writing things down or learning things off by heart to such an excessive extent so there was little chance of error. In a way writing came before reading. We wrote things down and at some later time we read them back. Writing gives us a much more permanent account of things than do our memories.

Code Cracking

In large parts of the world including Europe what people did was to find a way of writing signs to stand for the sounds which make up each word. Gaps were left between words. Writing systems which are based on this method are using a code, an alphabetic code. What the reader has to do is crack the code while the writer has to put the code back together. Each word is made up of individual sounds which can either be decoded when we read or encoded when we write. Later when we have mastered a word we take short cuts because we recognise the word by sight but as soon as we find a problem with a word we resort to our decoding skills to solve the problem. When writing we use our knowledge of sounds to construct the word we want. However we need to know what the alternative spellings for any sounds are and we need to have enough word knowledge to be able to choose the accepted spelling.

Phonological Awareness

One very important reason for choosing an approach based on sounds is that we have known for the last ten years or so that the big difference between those who have good literacy skills and those who do not is the ability to be able to distinguish patterns of sound. This is known as phonological

awareness. Some children have a weakness in this area of skill while others have had not enough practice because they have preferred to use other skills such as looking or physical interaction instead. Those who have a pronounced difficulty in handling sounds are often those who are regarded as dyslexic. Even this group can be helped to a considerable extent if help is early enough, is of the right type and regularly and consistently applied.

Phonemes and the Phonemic Approach

A phoneme is another word for one of the individual sounds which make up a word such as the sound that begins the word “dog”. The phonemic approach is a teaching approach which uses the individual sounds as building blocks for teaching the basic skills of reading and writing. The approach has been incorporated within the National Literacy Strategy known as “Progression in Phonics”.

Phonemes in English

There are 43 phonemes or sounds that are used in English and all words are made up of various combinations. There are two main types of phoneme known as consonants or vowels. There are sixteen vowels in English, the rest being consonants. Vowels are usually found in the middle of words.

The General Teaching Approach

There are 22 sounds that are represented mainly by one letter. These are taught first. Children have to master three skills from the outset. Children are taught three phonological skills: segmentation, blending, and auditory processing. Segmentation is the ability to decode a word into its individual sounds while blending is the converse process, melding sounds together to encode a word. Auditory processing is the ability to manipulate sounds by either reordering them or replacing them with others. This skill is important in developing accurate spelling. Teaching is done from sound to letter and not the reverse

Sound Progress

Sound Progress is a programme for Literacy developed by Kent Psychology Service that has been introduced to help teachers introduce greater accuracy in helping all children not just those with a problem. It is a system which uses precise measures to get to the heart of a problem and seeks to provide the most accurate course for a solution. If a school uses the same approach for all children then those who have difficulties are less likely to feel excluded. Writing, reading and spelling are taught at the same time. The teachers can use any text but it is important to work with the sounds before exposing the

children to text. One should only ask children to read or write words that are made from the sounds they have already mastered. Other words should be given freely until the correct stage in skill development has been reached.

The Alphabet

The alphabetic order (i.e. a,b,c...x,y,z) is not important in the early stages. There is a danger that insistence on learning it could be counter-productive for some children. It is usually required for dictionaries or directories so until a child has mastered some basic decoding skills it is not required.

Teaching Principles and Learning

Sound Progress uses the principles of 'Precision Teaching' to help children develop fluent and accurate sound skills. The approach is based on a number of good teaching principles. Children should be taught things that they have a good chance of mastering. This means that the work should neither be too hard or too difficult if good learning is to take place. New work should have well-mastered work as its foundation. Children should feel confident that they can achieve based on skills that are reliable. Once they have learnt to handle the most common sound combinations then they have the skills to cope with the more difficult spellings. The variation of skills within and between the children needs to be taken into account.

A note for professionals using Sound Progress.

Guidance on the use of Sound Progress in Schools for Educational Psychologists and Specialist Teachers from the Cognition and Learning Service.

A school using Sound Progress will have raised literacy as an issue for discussion at a School Based Review. Literacy is likely to also feature in the schools current development plan. During this discussion and planning the following two points will have been considered;

- A school using Sound Progress will need to be developing a coherent and planned approach to teaching literacy using the Phonemic approach. Whilst not excluding other strategies for reading and spelling this does mean that children should not be exposed to confusing or contradictory teaching at key times in skill acquisition.
- Staff using Sound Progress need to have a good understanding of Precision Teaching and how it can be applied with individual pupils and

Once a colleague in either service is aware that a school is working towards this description the school will be able to order copies of Sound Progress from the Psychology Service. If a school requests Sound Progress without having considered these points it will be suggested that the school raises it for discussion at the next SBR.

A training folder will be available to Districts so that EPS and CLS colleagues can provide training to help a school move towards the points listed above. Many colleagues will be working in schools who have already looked at a Phonemic approach to literacy in detail, or may have a good knowledge of Precision Teaching, in which case the additional training needed may be small. Colleagues may also have their own training packages which could be used to achieve the same outcomes.

A number of copies of Sound Progress are available to District teams for demonstration, introduction and training in schools, but these are not for sale to schools. Copies for schools are available from Kent Psychology Service and are priced at £50. Any additional costs for training is by negotiation with Pupil Services. Please contact Mid Kent Shepway (01303 224392) or Ashford (01233 898653) Offices for more information.