

Getting off to a Good Start: Frequently Asked Questions about Structured Synthetic Phonics Programs (SSPPs)

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Throughout the year DSF staff members present workshops on a variety of Structured Synthetic Phonics Programs (SSPPs) - such as *Letters and Sounds*, *Sounds-Write* and *Jolly Phonics*. The selection of material is based on the available high-quality academic and practice-based research evidence underpinning these programs. The most successful intervention programs, such as *Multi-Lit* and *Alpha to Omega*, have been developed on a structured synthetic phonics model. During workshops, we are frequently asked questions about the logistics and practicalities of implementing a SSPP in classrooms, schools or as an intervention. We have compiled a list of our most frequently asked questions, along with some answers:

What does the term **Synthetic Phonics** mean?

Phonics simply refers to the predictable relationships linking speech sounds with written letters. It is a body of knowledge rather than a teaching 'method'. Written English is an alphabetic language, which by definition means that the 44 sounds of English (phonemes) are represented by alphabet letters, either individually or in combination (graphemes). Phonics can be taught to students using a synthetic, analytic, or embedded approach.

Synthetic Phonics has been identified both here and overseas as the most successful approach to the teaching of reading and spelling. The 'synthetic' component reflects the practice of 'synthesising', or blending together. The 'phonic' part reflects the process of linking individual speech sounds (phonemes) to written symbols (graphemes). Essentially, when a child learns to read using Synthetic Phonics they learn to link letters to speech sounds and then blend these sounds together to read words. They also learn to separate (segment) words into their constituent sounds and link these sounds to letters in order to spell them.

We already have several synthetic phonic programs running in our school. Which one should our school use?

There are similarities across SSPPs so choosing the one for your school will depend on the teachers and students in your school community. Following the criteria for high quality phonic work listed below, and carefully considering your school context, are the keys to successfully implementing a SSPP across the school:

- The content of the program should be **systematic** and follow a carefully planned structure which introduces the 44 sounds of English and their corresponding letters in a clear logical **sequence**, which is carried over from one year to the next.
- A synthetic phonics program is **cumulative** and builds on students' previous learning to ensure

progress and intentionally moves from teaching simple to more complex content.

- **Blending** and **segmenting** are explicitly taught as the key skills used to decode when reading and encode when spelling words.
- Each lesson should include **multisensory** activities to optimise learning.
- Both **reading** and **spelling** should be targeted and students should be given the opportunity to apply their knowledge – writing simple sentences and reading decodable material.

It is critical that you:

- a) use just one program,
- b) deliver it systematically, as per the program's guidelines, and
- c) select a sequence and follow it with fidelity.

Effective teachers select and use one program rather than using components of two or three different programs. Cherry picking from a range of resources is likely to hinder the students' progress and create gaps in knowledge. Additional resources, both commercial and teacher-made, can certainly be introduced but it is important to adhere to one particular structure and sequence.

When should our school start using and implementing a SSPP? What's the best way to do this?

It is generally suggested that the introduction of a phonics sequence should occur in Foundation. Children turning 5 years of age have the capacity to begin learning the letter-sound relationships that underpin English spelling and reading. Children begin with the initial code – single letter-sound relationships - and then move on to digraphs and more complex letter-sound relationships, such as /ch/, /sh/ and /igh/. In the case of the *Letters and Sounds* program, it is advisable to commence Phase One in Kindergarten as it focuses entirely on oral language activities. The activities from Phase One can also be used as warm-ups or introductions to lessons in Foundation and throughout the primary years. Phase Two of *Letters and Sounds*,

which introduces the initial phoneme-grapheme relationships, can be started in term 1 of Foundation as can the sequences in programs such as *Jolly Phonics* and *Sounds~Write*.

The most effective way for a school to implement a whole school SSPP is to plan across the junior years, from Kindergarten through to year 3. Identify who will teach each part of the program and in which years this will occur. The school's administration staff or literacy leaders are probably best placed to do this. It is also suggested that SSPPs be used in the middle to upper primary (and even lower secondary) years as an intervention program for small groups of students who have fallen behind. It is essential that a SSPP forms part of the whole school's literacy policy or curriculum (see diagram on following page).

Is it OK to change the specified sequence of letters within a particular program?

All SSPPs introduce letters in a sequence starting with the most commonly used sounds in English and include letters that can easily be combined into VC and CVC words (eg. 'at' and 'sit'). As a consequence, many of the sequences 'look' similar, frequently starting with the letters 's' 'i' 't' 'm' 'a' and 'p' or 's' 'a' 't' 'p' 'i' and 'n'. The research evidence suggests that there is no specific sequence that can be considered 'the best', rather that once a sequence is selected, it should be adhered to with fidelity.

Given that it is essential that students be given the opportunity to apply their knowledge of phonics in both reading and writing, many schools adapt an existing program to reflect the sequence in the decodable readers they have access to (for example the sequence in the *Dandelion Readers* by PhonicBooksUK). Some SSPPs have an associated set of reading books and activity books and this means there is no need to alter the sequence. In other cases, some changes to the sequence are necessary to ensure that children are reading material that includes only the phoneme-grapheme relationships that have been taught.

Where do I start my class using a SSPP?

Most SSPPs have placement tests or screening tools that identify at which point a program should be started. The capacity to orally blend and segment are important pre-literacy skills and these are often included in a program's screening tool (e.g. *Letters and Sounds – Progression in Phonics Screen*). Analysis of whole class data on placements tests also assists in planning for differentiation and catering for the diverse needs of every class. Small literacy groups can be an effective way to focus on students who may have different starting points.

If I am introducing new sounds and letters at which point do I introduce letter names?

Knowledge of letter names is a significant predictor of reading and spelling success. Developing a strong awareness of both the letter names, and the sounds they represent, is an important step towards strong literacy skills. Many children begin learning letter names before they arrive at school and it is appropriate to recognise and encourage this knowledge. It is, however, important to point out to children that letter names do not really tell us about the 'job' that letters do, that is, letter names do not tell us the function of letters in words. Ideally, children should know all their letter names by the end of Foundation so playing 'alphabet' games and learning alphabet songs and stories is important. At the same time there should be a strong emphasis on the sounds we make when we speak, beginning with the initial sounds in words and then moving on to the capacity to orally blend and segment all the sounds in simple words. In the early stages of a SSPP the focus is very much on the sounds, rather than the letter names, but once digraphs are introduced it is essential that children can use letter names in the descriptions of letter combinations. For example, we combine the letter 's' and the letter 'h' to create the /sh/ sound – not the sound /s/ and the sound /h/.

I have a diverse class of students and I'm not sure if they would cope with such a fast rate of introduction of sounds and letters. What could I do?

SSPPs introduce sounds and letters at a brisk pace and generally students learn, on average, about 3 or 4 graphemes per week. The benefit of this is that it allows children to practise using their newly learned phoneme-grapheme correspondences, and to apply their developing skills of blending and segmenting to reading and spelling almost immediately. This fast paced introduction often causes teachers concern, especially for those who have high cohorts of students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) and for those who experience high absentee rates among their students. To address this, after four days of lessons (Monday – Thursday), build in one lesson a week for review and revision. Ideally this would be a Friday. In your longer term planning, intentionally add in one full week of revision and review every two to three weeks. This gives the teacher ample opportunity to spend extra time with the students who need it most and allows for extra practice and further opportunity for application of new knowledge and skills to reading and writing tasks for other students.

If I am teaching phonics every day how do I teach phonics within my literacy session?

An explicit phonics lesson should consist of approximately 20 - 30 minutes per day and should be taught discretely as a separate lesson with opportunities for children to practise and apply their new knowledge. Both reading and spelling skills should be taught as new phonic knowledge is introduced. The *Letters and Sounds* program follows a *Review → Teach → Practise → Apply → Review* format for each lesson as shown in the table below. Equally important is that any SSPP is part of a broad, rich literacy curriculum that includes high quality literature (see diagram on page 11). In

addition, the inclusion of multi-sensory activities where children can blend and segment using magnetic letters and tiles on small whiteboards is an excellent way to engage multiple senses and make learning to read and spell fun.

Review	Activate prior knowledge / review previously taught phoneme-grapheme relationships	
Teach	Teacher demonstrates and models the new knowledge or skill	I do
Practise	Teacher and students work together where you provide scaffolding and guidance (this may take multiple lessons)	We do
Apply	Students complete tasks and activities independently	You do
Review	Teacher checks for understanding to ensure teaching goal has been achieved	

References

Department for Education and Skills. (2006). *Phonics and early reading: an overview for head teachers, literacy leaders and teachers in schools, and managers and practitioners in Early Years Settings*. Primary National Strategy, UK Crown.
 Department for Education and Skills. (2007). *Letters and Sounds: Principles of high quality phonics*. Primary National Strategy, UK Crown.
 Synthetic Sounds~Write: Jolly Phonics: MultiLit: Alpha to Omega
 Beck, I., and Beck, M., (2013) *Making Sense of Phonics – Second Edition*. Guildford Press, New York.

Introducing Sounds~Write

Sounds-Write is an evidence-based, structured, synthetic phonics program utilising an explicit and highly successful approach to the teaching of reading, spelling and writing. *Sounds~Write* provides an instructional method that is structured, cumulative, sequential and explicit, and which is highly recommended for teaching all children, and also adults, to read and spell. The program teaches the concepts, skills and knowledge necessary for effective literacy acquisition. It places emphasis on practise that is grounded in physical, concrete experience of the ideas and conceptual understanding the students need to acquire. *Sounds-Write* is developmentally appropriate for beginning readers in Foundation, Year 1 and Year 2, and also offers a fast and highly effective intervention for children at all levels who have fallen behind in their reading and spelling.

The Dandelion Readers (as well as other PhonicBooksUK series – such as Alba and Magic Belt) have been developed to follow the *Sounds~Write* phonic sequence. This makes them ideal companion resources.

An additional resource -the recently completed Sounds~Write Initial Code App - offers a variety of activities in line with the Sounds~Write lessons that will help develop the skills of: blending and segmenting; sound spelling correspondence; word reading and writing; and, some sentence reading and writing. It has been designed to introduce the sound-spelling correspondences children need to put them well on their way to learning to read and write using effective strategies.

SPELD SA began to offer the 4-day Sounds~Write training workshops in Adelaide from January 2018, in collaboration with John Walker from the UK, Mary Gladstone from NSW and DSF in WA. To date, 25 participants have attended the training - including teachers, psychologists, speech pathologists, education assistants, tutors and SPELD SA professional staff. The feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive. In Perth the training has been provided since mid-2013, with attendees reporting amazing improvements in their classrooms. For more information about registering for Sounds~Write training see the flyer in this newsletter or email info@speld-sa.org.au for future dates.