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**Flippin' Phonics – principles and practice with profoundly deaf pupils**  
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**The current situation**

Since the publication of the Rose review in 2006, phonics has taken a more prominent place in the teaching of reading. The recommended approach has been to use synthetic phonics. However, identifying sounds in words in the order in which they occur (analytic phonics) is also incorporated into synthetic phonics – the two are not mutually exclusive and teachers will use their professional judgement in deciding how to teach the skills – especially now that the Literacy strategy is no longer required in schools.

As a result of the revised Literacy strategy published in 2006,

- There is more emphasis on discreet phonics work within literacy teaching.
- The order in which sounds are taught has been reviewed and there is a faster pace and earlier, systematic work on blending.
- The “search lights” model has been replaced by the “Simple” model of reading containing just two components – word recognition and language comprehension

This is likely to remain the approach, at least for the foreseeable future.

The scope of the Rose Review precluded detailed attention to the specialist requirements of those with severe auditory impairment but stated that “some modifications to the phonic programme may be beneficial” and that “a wide range of expert help is available to help settings and schools match provision to need”. Furthermore, “the introduction of phonic work should always be a matter for professional judgment”. It is clear, therefore, that teachers of the deaf, should ensure that phonics teaching matches the needs of deaf pupils and that we have the expertise to provide high quality, clearly focussed advice and teaching that is based on assessed levels of functioning and is regularly reviewed and evaluated.  
**Guidance on this is now available from the NDCS.**

So, given that decoding skills are seen as essential, though not sufficient, for fluent reading with understanding,

## What do we need to consider in order to implement an effective approach to developing phonic skills with profoundly deaf pupils?

Remember that profoundly deaf pupils need to develop the same knowledge, skills and understanding as hearing pupils and there is evidence that they will follow the same sequence as hearing pupils (James 2005)

They need:

- To know the correspondences between English phonemes and graphemes
- To identify sounds in words in the order in which they occur and to be able to manipulate them
- To be able to blend sounds to read and segment words to spell
- To combine these skills along with other strategies to read with comprehension.

### To achieve this we must take account of:

#### **Audiological factors**

- Deaf children may have limited access to speech sounds. However prescriptive hearing aid fitting and the increased use of Cochlear Implants makes effective access to most of the speech spectrum a reality for most deaf children. Nevertheless deaf children may have less experience of listening to a wide range of sounds, so their **phonic development may take longer than for hearing pupils**
- Listening skills may be delayed. Phase One of Letters and Sounds focuses on the development of early listening skills and phonological awareness. These early skills provide the foundation for later phonic skills to be built on – **a firm foundation is essential to later proficiency**. Whilst the NHSP may mean that fewer deaf children have considerable delay in these areas, ToDs must always take account of the pupil's current stage of development. (James 2005)

What will characterise a learning environment that takes account of the needs that arise from this?

- Strong audiological support to facilitate **consistent effective amplification** and hence optimum use of residual hearing . The use of Auditory Training Units (hard-wire amplification devices) should also be considered when necessary
- A clear **expectation** that as well as learning to listen pupils can listen to learn.
- **Proactive support** for listening skills
- Additional opportunities for listening in **good acoustic conditions**
- Focussed as well as incidental **listening experiences**

For most hearing children Phase 1 of Letters and Sounds will be undertaken during the Foundation Stage; however, **it is essential to build on what the**

**child knows and progress from where they are.** So, this stage may take longer for some deaf children.

Assessment is critical:

- Children should have been carefully assessed against the stages of progression outlined by the phonics programme selected by the school/setting, including exploring the boundaries of their knowledge.
- Assessments should be used to plan the next steps in learning, in accordance with the principles of effective Assessment for Learning.
- The sessions should be pitched at the appropriate step so learning is 'incremental'.
- The sessions should reinforce and build on recent learning.

(<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/20648>)

Pupils will need experience of listening to a wide range of sounds, learning to recognise syllables and rhyme and then to identify what it is that is similar or different between words. For this, they need strong support from an adult who can scaffold their learning by:

- A clear explanation of the task required
- Sensitive modelling to demonstrate what is needed
- Discussion to provide the required vocabulary
- Appropriate feedback on the pupil's contributions to enable learning
- Participating rather than supervising games and activities

Supporting early listening skills will involve adults who help to foster an interest in sounds, helping children to identify and sometimes to record them e.g. through listening walks and producing books such as "Sounds I can hear" "Voices I can recognise" to share with others. Discussion will provide the vocabulary needed for describing sounds. Families should continue to receive support so that they can continue to contribute to this development.

### **We must also take account of:**

#### **Acoustic phonetics and developmental phonology**

- Deaf pupils may not have access to the total speech spectrum and their discrimination ability may be limited
- Deaf pupils may have delayed phonological awareness and production

To ensure that strategies and activities are appropriate teachers of the deaf should have:

- A clear understanding of pupil's sound discrimination and their phonological awareness. **Pupils cannot be expected to segment words and identify phonemes they cannot yet discriminate**
- A clear picture of the pupils phonological production and how that fits into a normal developmental sequence; Teachers may find it useful to use The Monitoring Protocol along with the Level 2 Materials. **Pupils**

**cannot be expected to blend sounds they are not yet able to produce.**

- A **thorough understanding of acoustic phonetics**. This will inform the sequence and the way in which sounds are learnt. Once pupils start to identify individual phonemes in words, the sequence of sounds used initially may differ from that in Letters and Sounds. Sounds chosen should be those that are more easily discriminated. It might also be useful to start with sounds that can be lipread to further support the skill acquisition. Hence /m/ is suitable as it contains frequencies from 250 Hz to 3 KHz, is one of the most intense sounds in English and is lipreadable. It is also one of the earliest sounds to be produced.

If precise, accurate advice is to be given and individual learning programmes developed, teachers of the deaf may need to further extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding in these areas

**Finally, we must take account of:**  
**Language Development**

The Rose Report states clearly that “phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum”. Reading comprehension, i.e. language comprehension, is the aim and phonics is a means to an end. (Brooks 2003; Stuart 2003; Ehri 2003)

However, deaf children may have delayed language comprehension

- This will have significant implications for reading comprehension and also the balance of skills which contribute to fluent reading (James 2005)
- Being able to blend sounds to read a word will not necessarily mean that it is understood (as would generally be the case for hearing pupils)
- Limited vocabulary may mean difficulties in choosing suitable words to practise skills

Teachers of the Deaf must ensure that:

- **There is a suitable balance between phonics development and other reading activities so that spoken language can be developed as well as the skills necessary for comprehension** e.g. inferencing, using background knowledge and linking it to new information, establishing causal links and knowledge of story structure
- When developing phonological awareness, **words are chosen which are within the pupil’s vocabulary**. This may also affect the sounds which are initially used to establish the skill of identifying individual phonemes in words; e.g. /m/ - which is suitable acoustically and phonologically - is the initial sound in many commonly known words e.g. “man; mouse; milk”; /b/ is another example which has similar attributes and is the initial sound for “baby; ball; bike; book; boy” – words which are likely to be known by a deaf pupil with delayed language development

**Improving the language level of the deaf pupils is vital to improving levels of reading ability and this should remain a key target as long as necessary.**

The additional time afforded to phonics teaching as well as an increased emphasis on speaking and listening may enable teachers of the deaf to take some additional time to support all aspects of listening and language development.

### **Critical factors in the Learning Environment**

- High expectations and challenging but realistic targets
- Effective consistent amplification and good listening conditions (BB93) ensuring optimum use of residual hearing
- Proactive development of listening skills
- Careful assessment of the pupil's level of phonological awareness and production
- A clear understanding of the different approaches to the development of phonic skills and an ability to choose between them on the basis of pupil need; "Leading edge practice bears no resemblance to a "one size fits all" model of teaching and learning"(Rose 2006)
- Planning that takes account of the pupil's phonological development and language development
- Thorough review of actual learning and evaluation of the suitability of intervention programmes (in the broadest sense)
- Activities that engage and sustain interest, using other senses appropriately to reinforce listening and phonic skills
- An attitude that sees pupils as active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge
- Integration of listening and phonic skills learned in intervention programmes into mainstream learning
- Adults who provide knowledgeable, sensitive support

**The Ewing Foundation's consultants** (teachers of the deaf with additional qualifications including educational audiology and Ofsted) work with teachers of the deaf/ Learning Support Assistants and other professionals to improve the achievements of deaf pupils through listening and speaking. The consultants are available to help teachers to translate the above principles into practice with individual or groups of pupils. They can also provide training for groups of teachers. Topics include audiological issues, inclusion, language acquisition and literacy development. If you would like to receive further advice then please **GET IN TOUCH!**

You might also find "**Pathways to Literacy**" – a training video with extensive supporting notes – a useful resource to have when providing training and advice to mainstream teachers and planning intervention.

## References

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