

News Release

Phonics teaching needs more structure to aid early reading skills

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Schools should ensure that children who are learning to read are taught phonics in a structured way, says a report published by Estyn today. Differences in teaching practices and the pace of lessons can impact on pupils' progress.

Although good practice already exists in many schools, the challenge is to spread this more widely and consistently across Wales. Estyn recommends that schools speed up the teaching of phonics in line with the good practice described in the report, whilst making sure that programmes are delivered in a consistent and structured way.

Inspection evidence does not show conclusively that one approach to learning phonics is better than another. Improving the quality and consistency of work on early reading skills in line with the effective practice described in Estyn's report is more likely to raise standards, than to focus on only either synthetic or analytic phonic instruction.

“Helping to strengthen children's reading skills at an early age gives them more opportunities for success in later life. In comparison with many other industrialised countries, Wales performs poorly, with around half a million adults having very real

difficulties with reading. Making sure that children are successful in gaining reading skills at an early age is critical to their employment prospects and to the future of Wales”, says Susan Lewis, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales.

Evidence also suggests that developing children’s awareness about how words and letters sound is most effective when it is part of a balanced approach that looks at all aspects of language and literacy. Pupils usually do better at learning to read when schools ensure that listening, speaking, reading and writing reinforce each other. Estyn recommends that schools place greater emphasis on developing listening and speaking skills to provide pupils with stronger foundations for learning about language and literacy.

Assessment plays a key role in supporting the development of early reading skills. This can help identify strengths and weaknesses in pupils’ progress. Teachers can use this information to intervene and help pupils make better and faster progress. Estyn recommends that schools regularly assess pupils’ reading skills.

Over the past five years, inspection evidence shows that more and more pupils begin school with difficulties in speaking and listening. Often, these pupils have had little home experience of nursery rhymes, sharing stories or songs, with few opportunities to develop their language skills. In the many schools where partnerships with parents have been set up, pupils receive valuable support beyond the classroom.

Although achievements in reading have improved steadily over the last decade, there are still a significant numbers of pupils who progress too slowly. Boys do not do as well as girls and the gap in achievement between them is widening. In particular, boys struggle more with fluency and often prefer more energetic and physically active pursuits. Estyn recommends that schools ensure their teaching methods engage boys’ interest in reading from an early age.

Inspectors found that schools give variable attention to phonics when teaching Welsh as a second language. Often, there is a greater emphasis on other ways of learning to read, which is surprising, since Welsh is a phonically regular language. Learning this way may help pupils read and write more quickly because they can gain the skills they need to help them make better progress. Estyn recommends that schools should monitor and evaluate learning and teach phonics in Welsh as a second language to help pupils learn to read in Welsh.

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Notes to Editors:

- Estyn’s report “Improving the learning and teaching of early reading skills” was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government and is published at www.estyn.gov.uk .
- This work was undertaken as part of the remit Estyn received from the Welsh Assembly Government in March 2006. The report is intended mainly for practitioners and may also be of use to parents.
- The findings in the report are based on:
 - Analysis of inspection outcomes of over 250 primary schools since 2004;
 - observations of the teaching of reading in 22 Welsh-medium and English-medium primary schools;
 - interviews with staff in Welsh-medium and English-medium primary schools;
 - interviews with literacy advisers from ten LEAs;
 - scrutiny of documentation provided by schools and LEAs; and
 - a literature review conducted by the National Centre for Language and Literacy, The University of Reading.
 - Visits to schools in England and Scotland.

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