

# *Training teachers for phonics and early reading: developing research-informed practice*

Article

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## Training teachers for phonics and early reading: developing research-informed practice

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### Abstract

**Background:** In England, instruction in systematic synthetic phonics is the first approach to teaching children to read words. There is little research exploring what makes successful training for phonics teaching despite evidence teachers' subject knowledge is limited. There is a persisting problem of under-achievement in reading in some regions of England, mirrored in the US and Australia. In 2017-18, the Department for Education (DfE) addressed poor reading outcomes in these regions by funding one-day training events. We report on one training model, developed, and delivered by a team of academics, addressing issues specific to an English context, but contributing internationally relevant insights into phonics teacher training.

**Methods:** Research-informed "phonics roadshows" for training phonics teaching for early reading were devised for fourteen regions of England with weak performance on the Year 1 phonics screening check. 584 practitioners attended from 379 schools. Participants provided feedback in on-the-day written evaluations, and by survey one-year-on (100 responses). Local authority officials who attended were interviewed about impacts of the roadshow one-year-on (9 of 14). Qualitative data were analysed using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach.

**Results:** Quantitative data indicated positive responses to the events. Teachers found the day interesting, helpful, and likely to impact their practice. Qualitative analysis revealed the need for: consistent school-wide approaches to phonics teaching; follow-up training to develop teacher subject knowledge for teaching reading; developing teachers' ability to assess children's progress in developing phonic knowledge and to provide targeted interventions to tackle under-attainment. Local authority officials concurred with teachers' perceptions, with some differences between them and between regions.

**Conclusions:** Research-informed in-service training for phonics teaching can have beneficial impact, but must be closely partnered with local needs, and calibrated to teachers' existing subject knowledge, to ensure professionals feel empowered to make sustainable changes and improvements to practice.

**Keywords:** phonics teaching, professional development, teacher subject knowledge

## **Highlights**

### **What is already known about this topic**

- Phonics teaching impacts positively on word reading development
- Teacher subject knowledge of development of word reading skills is sometimes limited
- Best practice for in-service training for teaching these skills is under-researched

### **What this paper adds**

- Training combining theory and practice of phonics teaching can impact school policies and practices for teaching word reading
- Responses to phonics training vary according to regional, in-school and individual attitudinal differences
- Researcher-practitioner partnerships sensitive to local need can be empowering

### **Implications for theory, policy or practice**

- Research-informed, locally-nuanced, in-service teacher education is valuable in supporting effective practice for teaching phonics
- Theoretical knowledge of reading development must be made tangible for teachers through concrete demonstration of its practical application
- Attitudinal and regional differences might impact teachers' perceived agency to effect improvement and practical change in phonics teaching

## Context

There is a well-established relationship between good teacher subject and professional knowledge, and better pupil outcomes across the curriculum (Cordingley, 2015). This is specifically so for literacy (Piasta et al., 2009). It is therefore concerning that teacher subject knowledge for the teaching of early reading can be inadequate (Cunningham et al., 2004; Stainthorp, 2004). The importance of teaching children word reading skills in the early stages of literacy instruction is explicitly acknowledged in England through adoption of the Simple View of Reading (cf. Rose, 2006) as the conceptual framework within which reading is taught in the National Curriculum for English (DfE, 2013). This approach is mirrored in the US and Australia, yet we share challenges of continuing pupil under-achievement in reading along with limited research into how to train teachers of early reading effectively (Buckingham et al., 2013; Clarke et al., 2018).

The weight of pressure on schools in England to plan explicitly for phonics teaching is evident in policy directives outlining the content of programmes to which schools should adhere (DfE, 2010, 2013), and in the overt focus given to inspection of phonics teaching in schools by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED, 2019). Consequently, one might assume that professional development would have been directed towards the teaching of phonics in schools and teacher training institutions, producing teachers well-versed in delivery of high-quality word-reading instruction, and leading to most seven-year-olds reading successfully at word level. The picture is mixed.

National testing of schoolchildren aged seven and eleven in England shows some improvements over time in reading outcomes (DfE, 2018a, 2018b). Internationally, the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2016) (Mullis et al., 2017) showed a significant increase in average scores for England relative to performance in the previous two PIRLS studies. Also, the gap between the lowest and highest achieving pupils had been considerably reduced, largely attributable to performance improvements of the lowest performing pupils.

There remain some regions in England - identified as 'Opportunity Areas' - where reading attainment is persistently below age-expected levels. Such areas are the focus of government intervention with the core aim of tackling limitations on social mobility, including pupils' underachievement in reading (Easton et al., 2018). One approach taken by the DfE to providing training for teachers working in primary schools in these regions, between 2017 and 2018, was the delivery, outsourced by a process of tender, of targeted professional development days called 'phonics roadshows'.

### **Teaching and testing phonics in England**

The role of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in teaching word reading skills has exercised policy makers in England across the political spectrum for many years (Bowers, 2020; Ellis & Moss, 2014). Publication of the *Independent review of the teaching of early reading* (Rose, 2006) led to a sea-change in schools' approaches to phonics teaching.

There has been concern that explicit focus on word reading - regardless of the teaching approach taken - might lead to narrowing of the reading curriculum, and neglect of other important contributors to reading comprehension such as oral language proficiency (Nation & Snowling, 2004). Some suggest early focus on word reading might detract from pupils' motivation to read for pleasure (Cremin et al., 2008). This further emphasises the importance of teachers having good subject knowledge of the early development of reading, allowing them to avoid these pitfalls. Yet even schools claiming commitment to an SSP approach do not necessarily teach phonics discretely or with fidelity to one programme (Walker et al., 2015) despite this being an evidence-based recommendation for success (NRP & NiCHHD, 2000). Moreover, possible inaccuracies in commercial SSP programmes used in English schools could compound problems with subject knowledge (Brooks et al., 2019).

In England, the 'phonics screening check' (PSC) for six-year olds (DfE, 2011) has raised the bar in terms of identifying whether schools are successful or otherwise in their teaching of early reading. The PSC, set annually by the DfE, requires Year 1 pupils (age 5 – 6) to demonstrate their phonic knowledge by applying it to read twenty decodable words and twenty non-words. An annual average score from data posted across all schools allows the

DfE to assess standards of phonics learning as a proxy measure of effective phonics teaching. Schools are benchmarked by the numbers of pupils meeting or exceeding this standard. Schools in Opportunity Areas are less likely to reach the standard, with other regions faring better (DfE, 2018). The PIRLS 2016 cohort was the first to have sat the PSC. There was a significant moderate correlation of 0.52 between scores on the PSC and the PIRLS assessment four years later, indicating that requiring 4- to 7-year-olds to receive phonics teaching as the first approach to learning to read words might be feeding forward to improvements in performance at the end of primary school.

There is ongoing debate as to the effects of both phonics teaching and the PSC on reading comprehension. While acknowledging its association with pupils' improved phonic knowledge and word reading, one evaluation of the PSC after three years noted it had not impacted on broader literacy outcomes (Walker et al., 2015). Evidence is mixed: PIRLS data collected after this report relate to reading comprehension and do show significant improvement in performance. The correlation between PSC scores and children's later reading as assessed by the PIRLS test cannot indicate a causal link. Nevertheless, these are promising preliminary findings, adding to accumulating evidence of the efficacy of phonics teaching.

There is some concern that national testing of this kind focuses schools and policy-makers too much on the test, rather than on understanding that quality of teaching matters more (Bradbury, 2014) and that resources may be better spent on supporting teachers in on-going monitoring of children's phonic knowledge (Duff et al., 2015). In other words, despite some improvements to professional development for the teaching of early reading, this still has less attention than it requires, and its importance is under-estimated.

### **Teacher subject knowledge and professional development for teaching phonics**

Research investigating models of professional development for phonics instruction is largely from the US and even this empirical basis has limitations, being mostly small scale (Clarke et al., 2018). In the UK, a considerable body of work exploring the effectiveness of phonics

instruction furthers the case for SSP versus other approaches (Johnston & Watson, 2005; Stuart, 2004; Tracey et al., 2014). However, such studies are not designed to advance understanding of how to build confidence and subject knowledge for teachers in delivering phonics teaching.

There is considerable evidence that some teachers have limited metacognition when it comes to phonics teaching; they are unaware of their lack of subject knowledge and skills, or over-estimate what they do know (Cunningham et al., 2004; Cunningham et al., 2009; Stark et al., 2016). A more worrying finding is that some teacher educators with responsibility for pre-service teachers' phonics instruction training have weak subject knowledge, particularly at morpheme and phoneme level (Joshi et al., 2009). Moreover, Joshi et al. found a tendency among teacher educators to blame reading failure on low SES family background, or that learners spoke English as an additional language (EAL), rather than on instructional weaknesses (p. 399).

There is some indication from US research regarding the factors that might best deliver effective professional development for teachers, albeit with the caveat that training teachers does not necessarily result in raised pupil outcomes (Swan, 2003). Studies indicate the value of personalised coaching over time, following some initial workshop-type training, rather than training via standalone events for large groups of teachers (Cunningham et al., 2009; Podhajski et al., 2009; Sailors & Price, 2010). Classroom-based coaching across an academic year gives teachers time and the expert support to put new knowledge into practice (Sailors & Price, 2010). Peer collaboration involving reflection on practice contributes to success where researchers facilitate in-school staff partnerships in literacy training (Swan, 2003). Attention to teachers' local context is also important: Hayes and Robnolt (2006) had success with a data-driven approach to teacher development where pupils' reading needs, identified from school attainment data, defined the content of training. Co-delivery of professional development with local experts, sensitive to local context, also has a sustained and beneficial impact (Cordingley, 2105).

Thus, themes arising from existing literature are: teachers' subject knowledge for teaching phonics is crucial; teachers are sometimes unaware of what they do and do not know; training is probably best contextualised to local need, and coaching over time might be more successful than standalone events in ensuring sustained impact of training. Finally,



there is a perception in both the UK and the US that the need for children to succeed at tests of word reading might obscure the equally pressing need for teachers to understand how to teach early reading as part of a rich literacy curriculum.

In addressing this training need, the present study was designed with the following research aim and questions:

**Research Aim:** To examine the impact on professional development of a one-day model of phonics training for teachers in regions with low-performance outcomes in the PSC.

**Research Questions:**

1. What did teachers deem valuable in a one-day training event for teaching phonics and early reading?
2. To what extent was impact from the training sustained over time: at a) school and b) regional level?

## **Methods**

### **Training Design**

Following successful tender to the DfE, 'Phonics Roadshows' were delivered to 584 participants from 379 schools in fourteen different regions in south east, south west, midlands and eastern counties of England<sup>1</sup>. The project was unusual in the scale, breadth and depth of data from which we were able to make judgements about the impact of the training, and thus provides a powerful contribution to understanding how phonics training might be designed in other English-speaking jurisdictions.

The team designing and delivering the phonics roadshows, and authors of this article, were experienced researchers of literacy with extensive experience in teacher education and teaching early reading. They designed training that developed teacher subject knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Tenders were invited for either one or two sets of Phonics Roadshows; we successfully tendered for the regions described here. Another set of Roadshows took place, completely independently of ours, across the North of England.

the research-informed basis for phonics instruction, while ensuring that content was meaningful, relatable, and practically applicable for classroom teachers (Flynn, 2019).

Programme design took careful account of research evidence about the ways to effect change when academics work with practitioners (Dagenais et al., 2012; Flynn, 2019): training must be relevant and relatable to teachers' everyday classroom experiences. It should be data driven and locally relatable (Hayes & Robnolt, 2006). Working in partnership with local advisory teams meant that some 'knowledge calibration' took place before the events (Cunningham et al., 2004) and that there were possibilities for follow-up training to mitigate the recognised shortcomings of stand-alone events (Podhajski et al., 2009; Sailors & Price, 2010).

The team had a series of key messages they wanted the events to deliver: the necessity of staff training in phonics programme delivery; the importance of consistency of practice across the school; regular monitoring of teachers' practice; enhancement of teacher subject knowledge; regular assessment of pupil progress in acquiring phonic knowledge for use in reading and spelling; and use of decodable reading books closely linked to children's developing phonic knowledge and skills.

The first session, a practitioner-friendly introduction to subject knowledge of early reading development, was always delivered by one of the academic team. In the second session participants discussed how their schools' practice for teaching phonics matched key findings from research and DfE criteria for effective phonics programmes (DfE, 2010); they also shared their schools' data related to pupils at risk of reading failure. The afternoon started with practical demonstrations from local expert teachers – nicknamed 'phonics champions' – working in schools where PSC outcomes exceeded the national average. The final session examined how the event might impact future practice for phonics teaching in the participants' schools. Thus, training was engineered towards fostering sustainable practitioner partnerships at school and regional level.

One complexity met at the outset was role variation among our 'local expert' partners. In some regions, partners had a specific brief to support literacy teaching, but in others partners' job descriptions covered a much wider remit. Another was that in England, 20% of primary schools have become Academies: state schools operating independently of any

regional leadership team and managed by private trusts which often keep professional development in-house. Thus, although priority for attendance was given to schools with a consistently low score in the PSC in the years preceding 2017, not all those schools identified by local leads as needing to attend took up the offer.

### **Data collection:**

Data, both qualitative and quantitative, were collected on the day of training and one year on. Evaluation forms<sup>\*2</sup> were distributed and collected at the end of each session, with participants asked to evaluate the session on four scales: 1) This session was interesting; 2) This session was helpful; 3) This session has changed my thinking; 4) This session will have an impact on my practice. Ratings were on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 and 2 = “not at all”; 3 and 4 = “somewhat”; through to 5 and 6 = “very much so”. Participants were also invited to give qualitative comments, and to identify and commit to three changes in practice resulting from the day\*. Contact details were taken from those willing for us to follow up post-event.

One year later participants were sent a follow-up survey\* inviting quantitative responses on a Likert Scale to items asking them to reflect on changes since the roadshow, and further qualitative answers to some items. Additionally, thirty-minute semi-structured telephone interviews\*. were conducted with nine of the fourteen regional leads involved in planning of their event (appended). Interview questions were designed to elicit information about how regional leads felt schools and teachers had responded to the roadshow and what sorts of activity had taken place since the event. Questions were tailored to take account of what the roadshow evaluations had indicated, to match the one-year-on survey questions where practicable, and to allow regional leads the opportunity to share with us any of their work they felt was related. For example, several regions’ phonics leads had been involved in a pre-school oracy project: thus, projects other than ours will have affected regional activity.

Evaluative data were collected in line with University of Reading ethical approval: individuals, schools and regions were promised full anonymity and informed of their right to withdraw consent at any time.

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<sup>2</sup> Research instruments marked \* are available at <https://osf.io/rbswz/> . Research data are not shared.

## **Data analysis:**

We focus mostly on outcomes from qualitative data analysis: these provided the clearest insights into whether and/or how the phonics roadshows had effected change. However, we also report generalised summative data in relation to the responses given to quantitative evaluations on-the-day.

A Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach was used in qualitative data analysis because this is valuable when collecting data sets over time (Charmaz, 2014). CGT focuses on the discourses of participants and this was common to all data sets. It also mandates that data collection and analysis happen concurrently (p.15) and this was vital to the success of our project's design. Moreover, the researcher reflexivity required by CGT demanded that we explicitly acknowledged and challenged our researcher subjectivity as the designers and deliverers of the roadshows.

Immediate post-event analysis of evaluative comments from the day's training, by two of the research team, generated one set of codes and provided insights into what teachers perceived as necessary changes they hoped to make in their schools (Tables 1 & 2). These same themes were tested and developed by a new round of coding, one-year-on, when they were applied to survey responses and interviews.

To establish reliability in the coding process, interviews were initially analysed by a research assistant coding with NVivo (QSR, 2018). Early descriptive codes were further refined by the lead author re-reading and cross-referencing the data. The final project codes were shared with one other researcher and discussion ensured there was agreement about the suitability of the code names for the identified themes.

As leaders of the Roadshow content we clearly had some control over what participants were likely to refer to in feedback and this was reflected in some of the code names. However, codes emerged which we had not predicted, and which demonstrated the differences between academics' and practitioners' priorities. For example, we had intended that attendees retain the importance of teaching spelling at Key stage 2, but more important for the participants were finding opportunities for reflective practice ( post-event) and the practical changes they made to their systems for planning (one-year-on).

## Findings

### 1. What teachers valued in a one-day training event for phonics and early reading

#### Quantitative outcomes

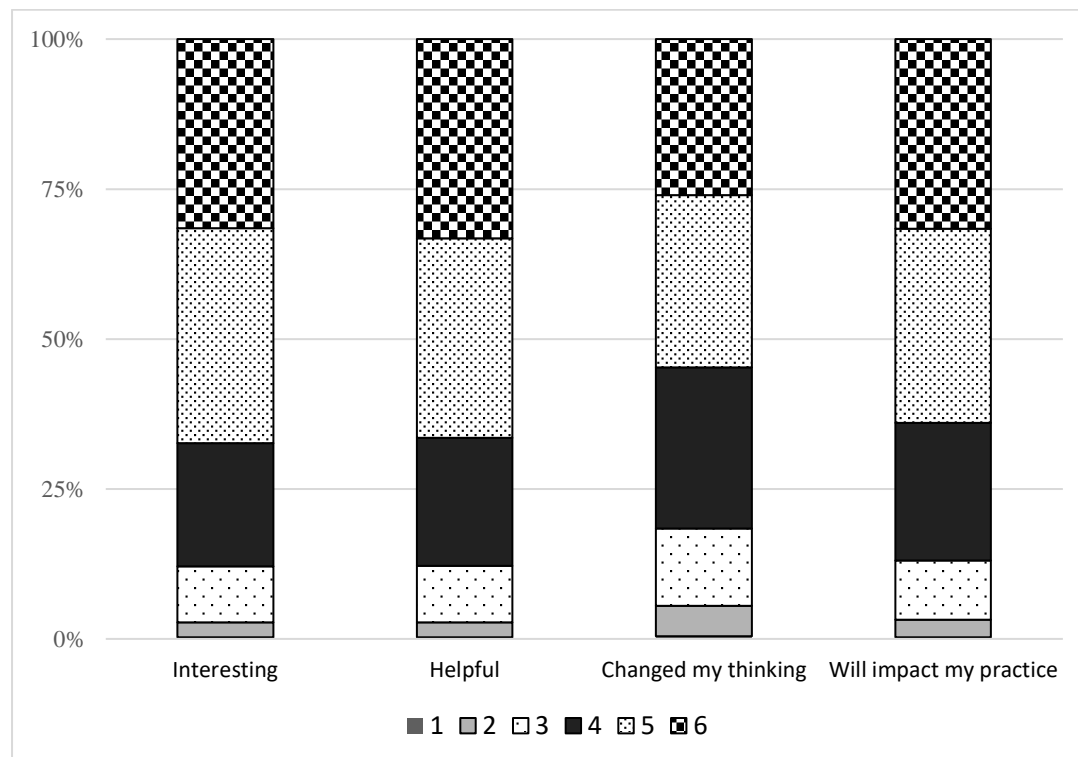


Figure 1: Participants' overall rating of training

Roadshow ratings were overwhelmingly positive in all aspects. There were insufficient “1” responses (<1% for each category) to show on the chart. Sixty-six percent gave a rating of 5 or 6 “very much so” for the day being interesting; 64% for it being helpful; 53% for it having changed their thinking; and 62% for it impacting on their practice. Thus, participants perceived training as successful, at least in the short term. Qualitative analysis next explored whether any effects of training might be sustained beyond the event itself.

#### Qualitative outcomes:

We collated participants' responses to the evaluation question ‘*which one aspect will be most useful for you in your practice?*’, written after every session. Analysis included participants' three ‘commitments to change’ requested within the evaluations; we wanted

to know in practical terms how teachers might put into action the aspects of training they valued most.

In all sessions, themes emerging from coding were identified as relevant if a minimum of 5 respondents made the same or similar comments.

*Table 1: Aspects of practice reported as important and likely to be actioned in school, across all four sessions of the day*

Emergent themes	Percentage reporting theme
Training and monitoring	25
Consistency	22
Subject knowledge	22
Assessment	20
Spelling and Key Stage 2	7
Decodable texts	5

Table 1 illustrates the themes consistently prevalent in participants' comments across all four sessions, designating the most powerful messages taken from training. Participants indicated they were most likely to take back: the importance of staff training and of monitoring practice following training (training and monitoring); the need for practice to be consistent (consistency); the need to enhance staff subject knowledge (subject knowledge) and the need to more regularly assess pupil progress in acquiring phonic knowledge (assessment). Less important, but still mentioned in feedback for all sessions, were participants' realisation of the need to use pupils' phonic knowledge in teaching spelling at Key Stage 2 (spelling at KS 2) (7 – 11 year olds) and the value of using decodable reading books as part of phonics teaching (decodable texts). Thus, there was some indication that our intended key messages had found their way into participants' post-training priorities for their schools.

In order not to miss nuances of response by reporting only these six themes from on-the-day data, themes appearing in participants' evaluations of at least three sessions were also identified (Table 2).

*Table 2: Aspects of practice reported as important, and likely to be actioned in school, from three out of the four sessions of the day.*

Emergent themes	Percentage reporting theme
Sharing practice	44
Reflective practice	29
Interventions	18
Early stages	9

Notable is the heavy reference to both sharing good practice (sharing practice) and to reflective practice (reflective practice). These were coded separately because participants mostly considered that sharing of good practice could take place with other schools, while reflective practice was more likely to be individual, team-based or at whole school level. Participants also saw the value of thinking more about the design and timing of any phonics interventions they might use (interventions). Finally, some participants commented they had not realised the importance of the earliest stage of most SSP programmes, which focus on building phonological awareness, and wanted to take this back to school as a focus for development (early stages).

## **2. To what extent was training impact sustained over time at a) school and b) regional level?**

### **2. a) Survey responses**

Of the 584 original participants 379 had opted into further contact: 100 of these responded to the survey. Although there are limitations on what can be claimed based on 26% of the potential survey participants, responses gave valuable insights into whether and how teachers had been able to implement changes based on the key messages from training.

In terms of transference of training to school in the weeks after Road Show attendance, 78 teachers had reported back to their school's senior managers and 46 had presented whole staff training. 70 had also made explicit the three commitments they had made as part of

their on-the-day feedback, and, of these, 57 said that they had been able to implement the changes intended. Thus, training possibly had some success, perhaps due to directing teachers to explicitly commit to changes.

Participants were asked to identify how they had implemented changes. Responses were coded using themes generated from the original event feedback to gauge whether perceptions of what was valuable on the day of training had found their way into practice over time. It was possible to code all the responses, which in most cases were precisely descriptive and matched the very practical wording of the commitments. For example, one respondent listed *'Whole school training. Redistribution of staff for teaching phonics. Half termly assessments for teaching phonics'* and another described their school's changes thus – *'Closely monitored half termly progress. Streamed children to enable children to access gaps. Interventions implemented.'* One new and significant theme emerged which we named 'planning for phonics'. This indicated changes such as the time of day when phonics was taught, changing the scheme/resources, or changing to whole-school ability-related streaming for teaching phonics.

Analysis indicated the weighting of coding was similar to that found in post-event evaluations, but with a shift in emphasis away from the notion of 'subject knowledge' to the more practical 'planning for phonics' and 'interventions' (Table 3).

*Table 3: Ways in which participants described changes to practice one year on.*

Emergent themes	Percentage reporting theme
Training and monitoring	22
Planning for phonics	19
Consistency	17
Assessment	15
Interventions	12
Sharing good practice	5
Early stages	5
Subject knowledge	4
Decodable texts	2
Home-school links	1



Notably absent from the follow-up data were references to 'reflective practice', and to 'spelling and KS 2'. Significantly, the elements of 'training and monitoring', 'consistency' and 'assessment' persisted, and this potentially indicates some success in generating sustained change over time.

Participants who felt unable to implement changes were asked to identify the barriers to this. These responses (limited in number) did not lend themselves to coding against the themes common to the other data sets. Responses tended towards generalised answers such as 'no time', 'not a school priority this year' and 'money unavailable'. Given that schools attended the training because of under-attainment in phonics, it is surprising they had felt unable to prioritise phonics when planning. This suggests that to some extent any improvement initiative is always dependent on the buy-in of staff with whom a training team are working, and that some barriers are perhaps attitudinal rather than practical. One respondent expressed frustration with attitudes thus: *"The barriers tend to be individuals who find it hard to positively view changes and feel that everything is fine."* Conscious recognition of the need for change is a key element of successful teacher development (Cordingley, 2015; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) and its absence is clearly a barrier.

We asked respondents if their school's PSC outcomes had risen, albeit aware that a rise in scores could not solely relate to the impact of one day's training. Most respondents felt unable or unwilling to share their schools' PSC data with us but were able to articulate why results might have improved or declined. These responses were coded using the pre-identified themes from the on-the-day data sets, and teachers attributed improvement to the elements of practice identified in Table 4.

Table 4: *Reasons articulated by participants for improvement in phonics screening check scores*

Emergent themes	Percentage reporting theme
Interventions	23
Planning for phonics	18
Training and monitoring	16
Consistency	12
Cohort characteristics	12
Assessment	8
Home-School links	4

These responses suggest improvements were related to the successful implementation of the key messages from the roadshows, with targeted interventions, changes to planning for phonics, and enhanced training and monitoring being the most important drivers for change. It was heartening to see the continuation of the theme ‘consistency’ and an emerging mention of better ‘Home-School links’.

Something that emerged as new were references to the PSC results being affected by the nature of the 2018 pupil cohort in Year 1 (cohort characteristics). This was mentioned by a small number of participants (12%) as a reason for improved outcomes, but the theme was even more prevalent in responses reporting a decline in PSC outcomes. Thus, some teachers blamed a reduction in PSC scores chiefly on pupil characteristics. Written responses were too limited to draw firm conclusions, but reasons given for lower scores included: a greater number of children with special educational needs (SEN); a rise in the number of children with English as an additional language (EAL); and a cohort being ‘boy heavy’. This finding - whereby teachers blame pupils for under-performance - mirrors that reported by Joshi et al. (2008). Some support for the view that a rise in children with SEN, and a boy-heavy cohort, might underlie a decline in scores is present in subgroup data analyses (DfE, 2019), in that children with SEN and boys tend to do much worse on the PSC. However, EAL children do as well as non-EAL. In two instances the reason given was ‘poor teaching’, either because children had been taught by ‘a succession of supply teachers’ or because the respondent felt the school had not yet had time to establish consistency through training in the teaching

of phonics. These last two observations are less related to blame than to the sort of individual differences experienced by schools in general, and they further evidence the need for bespoke training in the first instance.

## **2. b) Interviews with regional leads**

The interviews with nine of the fourteen regional leads were undertaken to explore if and how the phonics roadshows had impacted on decisions taken at regional level in relation to training for phonics teaching and the teaching of early reading. Given the widely varying responsibilities held by the professionals with whom we had worked closely to deliver training, we did not expect commonality in responses. This was reflected in the analysis which indicated considerable variation in reactions to the events and necessitated the addition of new themes to the set that had remained otherwise consistent across the other data. For example, 4 of the 9 regions had engaged in the pre-school oracy project mentioned above and this led to an 'early years' code. In others (2 of 9) the timing of the roadshows, during the latter part of the summer term, was perceived as negatively impacting their potential to effect change. It is therefore difficult to generalise how the regional leads responded to the roadshows, but here we report on key themes discernible in the majority (at least 5) of the interviews. These are *roadshow follow-on effects*, *subject knowledge*, and *region-specific challenges*. Discussion demonstrates that responses within these themes also varied, indicating that regional needs and priorities will always be nuanced and context specific.

### **Roadshow follow - on effects**

All interviewees had used the impetus of the roadshow to develop new phonics training opportunities for schools. In some cases, this had been a useful way of targeting schools who had not attended roadshows, to ensure some consistency in knowledge sharing across the region. In other cases, LA leads were explicitly invited by individual schools to present follow-on training because these schools now recognised their own training needs. Furthermore, several described how take-up for their local training had been much better since the roadshow, with schools realising the importance of raising their game in terms of developing consistent, high-quality practice across their staff.

One area lead stated *'this was the start of training, not a one-off'*, indicating their understanding of our intention that the roadshows generate sustainable change. Another responded:

*'The roadshow gave a vehicle for finding that information of quality, and then you could go back and implement, and ... that's usually the healthiest triangulation isn't it?'*

Their comments suggest that our intention to establish the importance of evidence-based practice for teaching early reading had lasted for them and their regional schools. The use of expert phonics teachers in the third session of our training events had also impacted regionally with three participants explaining they were using their 'phonics champions' to deliver training across schools and to demonstrate excellent practice.

Another unexpected benefit was that the roadshows fostered some inter-regional networking that had continued well after the training event and gave regional leads an opportunity for networking with each other they might not otherwise have had. For example, in one case, training was delivered by two regions that were geographical neighbours, and resulted in cross-border planning:

*.... the other thing that's a result of the roadshow was we're working more closely with [adjoining region] than we were. It was a joint roadshow, so we liaised... it opened a door to liaising more closely.*

There were some negative responses in terms of regional leads' frustration that the event was only one day. One participant felt the messages from the day had not been sustained because this was not possible with a one-off event. Rather, they felt, *'... not following it up with anything afterwards probably prevented any embedding of messages... they need an ongoing relationship, mentoring...to really embed in the practice'*. This response reflects findings from other research that combining training with bespoke follow-up coaching has more chance of success (Sailors & Price, 2010). That said, some regions had felt empowered to do this for themselves following the roadshows and perhaps this indicates that attitudes play a significant role in enabling or disabling practitioners' sense of agency to effect change.

## Subject knowledge

Eight of the regional leads referred positively to the first training session focused on subject knowledge and most leads appreciated its inclusion, not least because they were surprised at how little some of their schools understood about the teaching of early reading. Only 4% of teachers' survey responses mentioned work on enhancing subject knowledge in the year after the roadshows, but regional leads recognised its value. This reflection -

*I think the session on research, whilst that wasn't probably one of the most popular sessions of the day, it did reinforce for me to be aware that what you're doing needs to be research-based. I think sometimes that gets lost in the rush of buying a scheme and thinking that's going to do it for them rather than ... the research base.*

- acknowledged that schools and teachers tend towards looking at the practicalities of a scheme and its delivery, rather than how far their own subject knowledge empowers them to use any programme successfully (Brooks et al., 2019).

Another respondent reported schools attending the roadshow had developed more awareness of what they did not know. This desire to address newly recognised gaps in their subject knowledge led to better attendance at local phonics training sessions – a benefit recorded by several other regional leads in the discussion related to follow-on effects.

However, some regional leads were less enamoured of the theoretical aspects of training in the roadshow and said their teachers wanted to see more about how theory translates into practice:

*I know it is good to understand the theory behind it before you do it, but our teachers almost want to go in there with quick wins: you know, 'what is it that I can do in my classroom tomorrow and make a direct input?'*

This tension between academics' view that good practice depends on teachers understanding the 'why' of what they are doing is frequently at odds with teachers' view that they only have time to engage with 'what' they can do (Flynn, 2019). Thus, the leads' comments reflected and reinforced the emergence of the practical theme 'planning for phonics' which figured significantly in the teacher survey responses.

## Region-specific issues

Region-specific issues featured widely in interview responses. Some regional leads were Local Authority employees with histories of supporting their schools with literacy training, others worked for Opportunity Areas, and others in regions where most schools were academies. This variation reveals the problems inherent in a 'national' approach.

Three regions noted difficulties in following up on roadshow training because of the large number of academies in their regions with whom they had very little contact. They also noted that some schools might prefer to go to private trainers, or that they had to take a lead from the academies' governing bodies rather than drive improvement themselves.

*.... we have to do what the academy chain suggests, so we have got less influence and leverage than we had. Lots of our lowest achieving schools inevitably are the academies because they are the schools that had to be taken over because they are the lowest achieving, (but) we have less direct impact on those schools.*

This tension between different management systems within one region was illustrated very clearly by one lead from an Opportunity Area who explained that, although she was the advisor for the teaching of English, the person leading on phonics teaching was the CEO of a multi-academy trust. In short, the picture emerging from most of the regions was that policy changes in the management of schools over the past decade or more have inhibited the capacity of a region to tackle the root causes of reading failure within a fractured education system.

Regional leads were also keen to emphasise differences between their pupil cohorts and those of other regions, as well as in-region cohort differences between year groups. They felt that nuances of difference between their situations and those of other regions were not considered when it came to scrutiny from the DfE for under-attainment in reading. This was sometimes expressed in general terms:

*The teachers work hard, but we do have some tricky groups. Lots of low aspirational white British and lots of EAL who are not low aspirational (but) that take quite a lot of time to catch up on the vocab.*

In other cases, this challenge was very specific -

*[Name] has the second highest rate of pupil mobility because of limited numbers of places in schools. We frequently have three or four siblings placed in two or three different schools for short periods of time until a place becomes available. So (we have) quite a high proportion of children who haven't been at school for five terms ... and if they have, they've been in three different schools.*

- and this challenge put considerable pressure on the region:

*The DfE are scrutinising us very closely. What are you doing about it? Why is it low? There's a complete... can't say it's an excuse, the reason is only partial, (but) it's our White British children not succeeding in Year 2 (yet) we're judged on our Year 1 results where a high proportion of those are EAL.*

This last comment implies the DfE are wrong to focus on the PSC as the sole benchmark for success in reading. Several respondents felt that use of the PSC as the tool for judging success or failure was inappropriate because it did not acknowledge that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and those who have EAL, will take longer than the six terms they have been in school to perform well in a test that treats reading success as related only to word reading. That said, DfE subgroup analyses show EAL children performing as well as non-EAL in the PSC, but socially disadvantaged children performing worse.

## **Discussion:**

This project explored what teachers valued, and what they found difficult, in a one-day phonics training event, to extend understanding of their perceived professional needs, and find out whether impact of training was sustainable at school and regional level. The data suggest there were successes both in translating the trainers' research-related messages into a palatable form for busy teachers, and that, in some regions and some schools, sustained change was generated with the potential to improve children's early reading outcomes. The data sets, while too small in the one-year-on data to be generalisable, shed light on which elements of training might transform practice, and that this plays out

differently according to regional and school-level perceived priorities. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the likelihood of success hinges on the recipients' confidence and agency to act towards improvement. In a UK context at least, these observations enhance what is known about effective training for phonics teaching.

Localising training to specific regions supported the positive impact of the roadshows. Teachers worked with their own data, led by local experts who could follow-up after the event, and observed fellow teachers working in schools sharing the same regional variations in pupil demographic. There were opportunities for self-sustaining training partnerships which might otherwise have remained hidden: phonics champions were used for in-school training after the events and regional leads made effective working relationships across county boundaries. The Roadshows enhanced understanding of why working locally is likely to pay dividends (Hayes & Robnolt, 2006), and why some knowledge calibration is important in designing regional training events (Cunningham et al., 2004). Importantly, follow-up training was generally small-group, school-by-school bespoke, reflecting the important role of on-going coaching following training events (Podhajski et al., 2009; Sailors & Price, 2010)

Participants' interpretation of key messages was very practical in nature, and this is what fed into changes in practice. However, discussions with regional leads revealed a substantial role for subject knowledge follow-up effects: increased take up of both school-based training and attendance at regional phonics training because schools were more alert to what they did not know (Cunningham et al., 2004). There is an important caveat here: some teachers hankered after 'quick wins' which might come at the expense of deep subject knowledge. While earlier studies have frequently pointed to the shortcomings of initial teacher training in preparing teachers for phonics teaching, the level of subject knowledge required is perhaps much better fostered and retained through high-quality training for in-service teachers as part of a systematic effort to support regional professional development.

Respondents from schools where PSC results had fallen provided fewer written explanations for changes, compared with those in schools with improved results, suggesting a lack of meta-knowledge. Professional training must reach schools who do not know what they do not know: the problems associated with limited meta-knowledge in weaker schools are well documented (OfSTED, 2012). The thinking that pupil characteristics can of themselves be blamed for poor outcomes may well have been related to teachers' own false confidence in



their limited subject knowledge (Cohen et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2009; Stark et al., 2016) and this suggests a persisting problem, albeit with a minority of practitioners. Moreover, lack of any reference to teaching phonics in KS2 in the follow-up data demonstrates there is still a need to upskill *all* primary school professionals in the teaching of phonics.

Limitations in the design related to a reliance on self-report which was determined by the DfE's wishes for evaluation of the roadshows. We planned to follow up and analyse related phonics screening check data in 2020 but this was cancelled due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Limitations on the success of the phonics training model were related mostly to regional and policy-fostered differences. In some cases, the leads did not have a specific brief for literacy, limiting their capacity for follow-up support. Where there was only one person responsible for everything, their capacity to move beyond firefighting schools with low results was very limited. That said, some regions had felt better able to take the roadshow messages forward with further training and this, like the differences found in the teachers' responses to the survey, suggests that attitudinal differences might reduce perceived agency to effect improvement and practical change some of the time.

### **Final thoughts**

At the time of writing, the DfE had designated 35 schools, recognised as successful in phonics teaching, as training hubs to further tackle professional development for the teaching of English, with a substantial focus on phonics in the first year of activity. The choice of a regionally embedded model, with hubs serving specific geographical areas, is a step in the right direction because training will be delivered by practitioners sensitive to local need. However, reference to research-informed criteria governing training content is missing. Our study suggests that this fractured approach to professional development might not produce confident teachers who can tackle reading failure. This is crucial if schools are to subvert loss of progress in reading after school closure for the COVID -19 pandemic and respond confidently to the sharpened focus on phonics teaching in school inspections (OfSTED, 2019). More studies are needed exploring how and whether research-based teacher training fosters sustainable improvements in children's reading performance. This should provide professionally relatable insights into how research-informed teaching for early reading can empower teachers to make the difference for children otherwise at risk from reading failure.

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