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# Decoding phonics: a primer on teaching literacy in Northern Ireland

**NIAR 188-25**

This Research Paper provides an overview of phonics as a method for teaching literacy, examining its various forms and comparing it with alternative approaches such as whole language and balanced literacy. It explores the research landscape surrounding phonics, considers its role within the Northern Ireland curriculum and offers comparisons from across the UK and the Republic of Ireland

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## Key Points

- Phonics is a method of teaching literacy that focuses on associating sounds (phonemes) with letters or groups of letters (graphemes)
- The most common form is systematic synthetic phonics, where children are explicitly taught to pronounce phonemes in isolation and then blend (or 'synthesise') them to form words. For example, the word *cat* is decoded into the graphemes *c*, *a* and *t*, which correspond to the phonemes /k/, /æ/ and /t/, and are blended to correctly form the word
- The main alternative to phonics is the whole language approach, which contrasts with phonics by emphasising meaning over decoding. While phonics focuses on translating written symbols into sounds, whole language encourages children to derive meaning directly from text using context, sentence structure and visual cues
- There is a strong body of research that systematic phonics is more effective than other approaches and should be emphasised for early literacy development, though this evidence has been challenged
- The Northern Ireland Curriculum does not currently mandate systematic phonics, though it does state that children at the Foundation Stage should understand that spoken words are made up of sounds represented by letters (phoneme/grapheme awareness). This lack of a mandate is seen as part of a deliberate approach to give schools autonomy and flexibility in their teaching approaches
- In March 2025 the TransformedED NI strategy was published, which included an explicit call for teaching systematic phonics in all schools in Northern Ireland. In May 2025 Education Minister Paul Givan clarified that systematic synthetic phonics would not be mandated as the sole method of teaching literacy
- England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland all promote a phonics approach in early literacy, though there are varying degrees of how it should be implemented with only England strictly mandating a specific method (systematic synthetic phonics).

# Contents

Key Points	1
1 Introduction	3
2 Understanding phonics	4
2.1 Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP)	4
2.2 Analytic phonics	6
3 Other approaches to teaching reading and language	7
3.1 Whole language	7
3.2 Balanced literacy	8
3.3 Cueing systems	8
4 Phonics research landscape	9
4.1 Evidence supporting phonics	9
4.2 Evidence challenging phonics	12
5 Context in Northern Ireland	15
5.1 Current approach	15
5.2 TransformED NI	17
5.3 Reading with AI Research Project	19
6 Comparative perspectives in the UK and Ireland	19
6.1 England	20
6.2 Wales	20
6.3 Scotland	21
6.4 Ireland	22
7 Conclusion	23

# 1 Introduction

This paper was requested by the Committee for Education to provide a primer on, and context to, the phonics method of teaching literacy after its specific inclusion in the TransformED NI strategy. The paper will introduce systematic synthetic phonics as the most prevalent method of teaching phonics, and then consider selected other approaches to teaching reading and language. The research landscape of phonics will be considered, followed by the context in Northern Ireland and the comparative approaches taken in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland (hereafter 'Ireland').

Given the crucial importance of teaching children literacy, it is understandable that this particular branch of pedagogy (that is, the method and practice of teaching) has become densely layered, with debates among academics and practitioners dating back to the late 1700s.<sup>1</sup> At the core of these 'reading wars' are three main approaches: phonics, whole language and balanced literacy.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Each of these will be addressed in more detail in this paper, but as an introduction they can be broadly positioned along a spectrum as shown in Figure 1 below. At one end is phonics, which focuses on breaking down words into their component sounds and symbols, enabling children to decode unfamiliar words. At the other end is whole language, an approach that emphasises immersion in rich, meaningful texts and encourages children to infer word meaning and pronunciation through context, syntax, visual clues and prior knowledge, rather than explicit phonics instruction. Positioned between these two is balanced literacy (sometimes referred to as 'balanced instruction'), which, as the name suggests, aims to combine elements of both approaches.

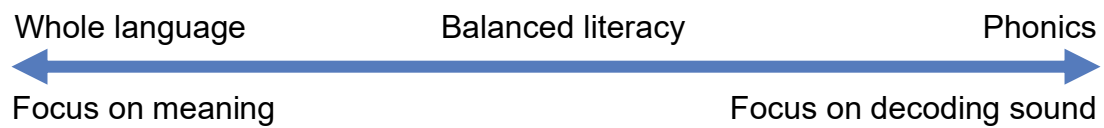
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<sup>1</sup> B Cambourne, ['A Brief History of 'The Reading Wars''](#) (2021)

<sup>2</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, ['Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading'](#), *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10(1)

<sup>3</sup> J Bowers and P Bowers, ['The Reading Wars'](#) (2019)

<sup>4</sup> B Cambourne, ['A Brief History of 'The Reading Wars''](#) (2021)

**Figure 1** Approaches to teaching literacy

Scientific research indicates that phonics, and in particular systematic synthetic phonics, is the most effective method of teaching literacy (see s4.1). This evidence has led to policy promoting phonics in early literacy to varying degrees across the UK and Ireland. While there is general consensus to this evidence in the research community, it is not uniform agreement and there are critics of the research who have had impact on phonics implementation (for example in Ireland as will be discussed). It should be noted that these critics are not united in what the alternative should be, nor are they stating that systematic phonics teaching is ineffective (rather that is not the most effective approach, nor should it be taught to the detriment of other approaches).

Before diving into the research landscape, it is first worth providing more explanation on the various methodologies for teaching literacy, beginning with phonics itself.

## 2 Understanding phonics

The word 'phonic' means 'relating to sound', and this is the key concept behind phonics as a method of teaching literacy: it focuses on the relationship between sounds (referred to as 'phonemes') and letters or groups of letters ('graphemes'). The most widely used form of teaching phonics is systematic synthetic phonics, and this is the method currently mandated by the Department for Education in England.

### 2.1 Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP)

In phonics each word is treated as a code to be deciphered. The 'synthetic' part of SSP explains the particular method of 'decoding' unknown words, which is done by breaking them down into graphemes, pronouncing the corresponding

phonemes and then blending (or ‘synthesising’) them together to form the word. For example, the word *cat* would be broken down to the graphemes *c*, *a* and *t* with corresponding phonemes of /k/, /æ/ and /t/, and then blended together to pronounce the word correctly. It can be thought of as a ‘part to whole’ method, as children start from the individual sounds and build to the whole word.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘systematic’ part of SSP relates to the method of teaching instruction. As the name would suggest this involves systematically and explicitly teaching phonics, that is to say the link between phonemes and graphemes is made specific and taught in a clearly defined sequence (for example programs usually start with the letters *s*, *a*, *t*, *p*, *i* and *n* as these letters can be used to spell more words than any other set of six letters).<sup>6,7,8</sup> By comparison, non-systematic phonics is more implicit and opportunistic in its approach, and phonics would be taught as it is needed, usually in the wider context of literature, rather than through a structured and explicit teaching program.<sup>9,10</sup>

An understanding of SSP should also include distinguishing it from what it is not. This paper will go into more detail on other approaches to teaching literacy, but it is worth briefly highlighting a key difference here: SSP focuses on the relationship between sounds and letters, with little to no emphasis on word meaning or wider text comprehension. In a phonics approach this understanding of meaning is derived either from a pre-existing knowledge base (for example, after correctly pronouncing the word *cat* the child understands

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<sup>5</sup> L Diaz, ‘[Analytic vs. Synthetic Phonics - What is the difference? Which one is better for your child?](#)’ (2022)

<sup>6</sup> S McMurray, ‘[The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy](#)’ (2020)

<sup>7</sup> E Sohn, ‘[It’s time to stop debating how to teach kids to read and follow the evidence](#)’ (2020)

<sup>8</sup> L Ehri, ‘[Systematic Phonics Instruction: Findings of the National Reading Panel](#)’ (2001)

<sup>9</sup> National Literacy Trust, ‘[What Is Phonics?](#)’ (2019)

<sup>10</sup> B Armbruster et al., ‘[Put Reading First](#)’ (2006)

what this means as they are aware of the animal) or picked up implicitly through the reading experience.<sup>11</sup>

Confusingly the terms ‘systematic phonics’ and ‘synthetic phonics’ are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the other.<sup>12,13,14</sup> It is important to note that they are different as per much of the research, and while all synthetic phonics programs are by definition systematic, systematic phonics programs can also be analytic (see below).

## 2.2 Analytic phonics

The primary phonics alternative to SSP is analytic phonics. While SSP works from individual sounds and builds to words, analytic phonics conversely begins at the word level. Children are presented with whole words and then encouraged to analyse them to identify common phonemes.<sup>15</sup> For example, the words *pat*, *park*, *push* and *pen* could be used to help identify the common phoneme /p/. Notably the grapheme *p* and phoneme /p/ are not pronounced or taught in isolation as they would be in synthetic phonics, instead the whole words are pronounced and children are expected to deduce the relationship between phonemes and graphemes.<sup>16</sup> This deduction can be aided with the use of analogies, where children begin with a word they know (for example *cake*), identifying the rime (the vowel and subsequent letters, in this example *ake*) and then recognising that rime in other words (for example *bake* and *make*). This

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<sup>11</sup> S McMurray, ‘[The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy](#)’ (2020)

<sup>12</sup> L Fyke, ‘[What is the Difference Between Systematic and Analytic Phonics?](#)’ (2021)

<sup>13</sup> T Shanahan, ‘[Synthetic Phonics or Systematic Phonics? What Does Research Really Say?](#)’ (2018)

<sup>14</sup> Ofsted, ‘[Reading by six: How the best schools do it](#)’ (2010)

<sup>15</sup> S Pureway, ‘[Synthetic Phonics and the Literacy Development of Second Language Young Learners: A Literature Review of Literacy Ideologies, Policies and Research](#)’ (2008)

<sup>16</sup> J Rose, ‘[Independent review of the teaching of early reading](#)’ (2006)

particular branch of analytic phonics is known as analogy phonics, and is also referred to as ‘onset and rime’.<sup>17,18</sup>

### 3 Other approaches to teaching reading and language

The following section provides an overview of the two other main approaches to literacy, whole language and balanced literacy, alongside the ‘cueing system’ which received recent media attention for its use in Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.<sup>19</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of teaching methods, but rather a focus on the most influential and widely debated approaches, as well as one that has re-entered public discourse. A comprehensive review of all literacy instruction models would be beyond the scope of this paper.

#### 3.1 Whole language

Whole language sits on the opposite end of the literacy spectrum from phonics. Where phonics focuses on the micro (breaking down words and understanding the relationship between the letters and sounds), whole language takes a macro approach, focusing on reading whole texts and immersing children in rich literature that they will enjoy and be motivated by.<sup>20</sup> Emphasis is placed on meaning and comprehension, and children are encouraged to use critical thinking to infer the meaning of unknown words from visual clues and context rather than by accessing sound.<sup>21,22</sup> Phonics may be taught as part of whole

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<sup>17</sup> National Literacy Trust, [‘What Is Phonics?’](#) (2019)

<sup>18</sup> R Johnston and J Watson, [‘Analytic v synthetic phonics’](#) (2007)

<sup>19</sup> [‘Northern Ireland reviews controversial teaching method after failings in Wales and Scotland’](#). *ITV News*, 2 March 2025

<sup>20</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, [‘Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers’ practices for teaching phonics and reading’](#), *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10(1)

<sup>21</sup> B Cambourne, [‘A Brief History of ‘The Reading Wars’](#) (2021)

<sup>22</sup> J Bowers and P Bowers, [‘The Reading Wars’](#) (2019)

language but this will be non-systematic (that is, incidentally and only when needed).<sup>23</sup>

Due to the wide body of research evidencing the effectiveness systematic phonics (detailed in s4.1 below), some commentators state that whole language has been disproven as an effective method of teaching literacy, and that the ‘reading wars’ are over.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 Balanced literacy

Balanced literacy combines the whole language and phonics approaches.<sup>25</sup> It places importance on understanding meaning from rich texts of literature, and balances this with the acquisition of phonic skills.<sup>26</sup> It has been noted however that the teaching of phonics under a balanced literacy approach tends to be non-systematic, and in this way has been accused of effectively being another form of whole language.<sup>27,28</sup>

### 3.3 Cueing systems

The ‘cueing’ or ‘three-cueing’ system, a branch of the whole language approach, involves asking children to decode unknown words through three types of cues:

- Semantic: meaning from context (does it make sense?)
- Syntactic: meaning from grammar/structure (does it sound right?)

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<sup>23</sup> J Bowers, ‘[Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction](#)’, *Educational Psychology Review* (2020) Vol. 32

<sup>24</sup> L Moats, ‘[Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of Balanced Reading Instruction](#)’ (2000)

<sup>25</sup> *TES Magazine*, ‘[What is balanced literacy?](#)’ (2022)

<sup>26</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, ‘[Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading](#)’, *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10(1)

<sup>27</sup> J Sager, ‘[What the Balanced Literacy Approach Gets Wrong About Teaching Kids to Read](#)’ (2024)

<sup>28</sup> L Moats, ‘[Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of Balanced Reading Instruction](#)’ (2000)

- Grapho-phonetic: meaning from spelling (does it look right?).<sup>29,30</sup>

A key feature of the cueing system is that children do not need to decode or understand every word in a sentence (or every letter in a word) as they are encouraged use prediction and context clues (for example through pictures) to effectively guess the meaning.

The cueing system has been strongly criticised, for example it does not teach children how to decode words<sup>31</sup>, its use of using pictures to aid word recognition takes focus away from the words themselves lowering the chance they will be recognised in the future<sup>32</sup> and overly relying on the pictures can lead to accepting errors (for example guessing *bunny* instead of *rabbit*).<sup>33</sup> It has been described as “*predicated upon notions of reading development that have been demonstrated to be false*”<sup>34</sup> and “*a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists*”.<sup>35</sup> Its continued use in Wales and Scotland was the cause of national news stories in 2024 and 2025.<sup>36,37</sup>

## 4 Phonics research landscape

### 4.1 Evidence supporting phonics

There is a substantial body of research, including longitudinal studies, scientific trials and meta-analyses, that support the effectiveness of systematic phonics

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<sup>29</sup> J Sager, [‘What the Balanced Literacy Approach Gets Wrong About Teaching Kids to Read’](#) (2024)

<sup>30</sup> *Five from five*, [‘The three-cueing system’](#) (2023)

<sup>31</sup> *Oxford Learning*, [‘Why the ‘Three Cueing’ Method Fails New Readers’](#) (2025)

<sup>32</sup> S Schwartz, [‘Is This the End of ‘Three Cueing’?’](#) (2020)

<sup>33</sup> *Lexia*, [‘The Literacy Transition From Three Cueing to Science-Based Reading’](#) (2025)

<sup>34</sup> K Hempenstall, [‘The three-cueing system: Trojan horse?’](#), *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities* (2009) Vol. 8(2)

<sup>35</sup> E Hanford, [‘How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers’](#) (2019)

<sup>36</sup> [‘Inside the reading crisis leaving thousands of children in Wales unable to read’](#), *ITV News*, 25 September 2024

<sup>37</sup> [‘Northern Ireland reviews controversial teaching method after failings in Wales and Scotland’](#). *ITV News*, 2 March 2025

instruction in teaching children to read. Within this, SSP has emerged as the most consistently endorsed approach, particularly in English education policy. An overview of this body of evidence is presented here:

- In 2000 the US National Reading Panel published the findings of its meta-analysis of 38 studies relevant to phonics instruction, concluding that “*systematic phonics instruction enhances children's success in learning to read and that systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than instruction that teaches little or no phonics*”. They also stated that SSP in particular had a positive and significant effect on children with learning disabilities, students who are struggling and children from a low socioeconomic background<sup>38</sup>
- In 2006, research commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills reviewed experimental research on the use of phonics in literacy across 12 trials, finding that “*Systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum appears to have a greater effect on children's progress in reading than whole language*”<sup>39</sup>
- The 2006 Rose Report (which would lead to SSP becoming compulsory in England<sup>40</sup>), a Reading Review commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills, looked at research from England, USA and Australia regarding phonics, stating “*Having considered a wide range of evidence, the review has concluded that the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming and much strengthened by a synthetic approach*”<sup>41</sup>
- In 2014 a three year study published in England at a Catholic Primary School designated for Irish Travelers found that children who start SSP in Reception class achieved above average national expectations for reading and writing at the end of Key Stage 1. SSP also “*appears to be*

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<sup>38</sup> National Reading Panel, [Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction](#) (2000)

<sup>39</sup> C J Torgerson et al., ‘[A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling](#)’ (2006)

<sup>40</sup> S McMurray, ‘[The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy](#)’ (2020)

<sup>41</sup> J Rose, ‘[Independent review of the teaching of early reading](#)’ (2006)

*more powerful than potential barriers to learning experienced by vulnerable groups such as boys, children eligible for Pupil Premium and for free school meals, children whose ethnicity is non-white British, children whose first language is not English, children with special educational needs, children with summer birthdays and children with challenging behaviour”<sup>42</sup>*

- Research from The University of Sheffield in 2022 looked at various studies, summarising that *“Analysis of the most rigorous evidence from research reviews and meta-analyses suggests that systematic phonics teaching is effective for teaching children to read and spell in English”<sup>43</sup>*
- A 2005 inquiry into the teaching of literacy in Australia found that *“The evidence is clear, whether from research, good practice observed in schools, advice from submissions to the Inquiry, consultations, or from Committee members’ own individual experiences, that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read”<sup>44</sup>*
- A 2010 Ofsted report sampling 12 ‘outstanding’ schools in England to identify what works when teaching literacy found that *“their success is based on a determination that every child will learn to read, together with a very rigorous and sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics”<sup>45</sup>*
- Meta analysis supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and published in 2019 examined the effects of teaching phonics to students with intellectual disabilities (ID), looking at 14 studies and concluding

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<sup>42</sup> M Grant, [‘Longitudinal Studies with Synthetic Phonics from Reception to Year 2 and to Year 6’](#) (2014)

<sup>43</sup> G Brooks, [‘Current Debates over the Teaching of Phonics’](#) (2022)

<sup>44</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, [‘Teaching and Reading - Report and Recommendations’](#) (2005)

<sup>45</sup> Ofsted, [‘Reading by six: How the best schools do it’](#) (2010)

*“Systematic phonics instruction is effective to teach decoding skills to students with ID, as it is for typically developing children”*<sup>46</sup>

- In 2005 a seven year longitudinal study in Scotland looked at the effectiveness of synthetic and analytic phonics programs, stating *“Overall we conclude that the synthetic phonics approach, as part of the reading curriculum, is more effective than the analytic phonics approach”*<sup>47</sup>
- The annual phonics screening check in England has shown improvements following the requirement for schools to teach reading using phonics. In 2011/12, when the screening check was first introduced, 58% of year 1 students met the expected standard in phonic decoding, which rose to 82% in 2018/2019\*.<sup>48</sup>

The weight of this evidence has led commentators to state that there is *“strong scientific consensus”*<sup>49</sup> and *“widespread consensus”*<sup>50</sup> within the research community that systematic phonics should be emphasised in early teaching of literacy. However, this consensus has been called into question.

## 4.2 Evidence challenging phonics

Criticisms of the phonics approach, and in particular SSP, can be broadly dissected into two main strands: those aimed at the method itself, and those aimed at the body of evidence supporting phonics.

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<sup>46</sup> R S Desseimontet et al., [‘A meta-analysis on the effectiveness of phonics instruction for teaching decoding skills to students with intellectual disability’](#), *Educational Research Review* (2019) Vol. 26

<sup>47</sup> R Johnston and J Watson, [‘The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment’](#) (2005)

\* The screening check was then paused for two years due to the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. When it returned in 2021/22 attainment had dropped to 75%, which has since risen to 80% in 2024/25.

<sup>48</sup> UK Government Department for Education, [‘Phonics screening check attainment, Academic year 2024/25’](#) (2025)

<sup>49</sup> A Castles et al., [‘Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert’](#), *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (2018) Vol. 19(1)

<sup>50</sup> J Bowers, [‘Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction’](#), *Educational Psychology Review* (2020) Vol. 32

One critic of the method itself claims that children who have special education needs (SEN) that affect their processing difficulties will be negatively impacted by a phonics teaching method. Children who have a poor working memory will struggle to blend more than two phonemes together, making longer words (for example *strand*) impossible to say, and they may also have difficulty remembering which phonemes are linked to which graphemes. Children who have difficulty hearing differences between similar sounding phonemes, for example *f* and *v*, will also struggle to blend words.<sup>51</sup>

It has also been claimed that phonics does not support comprehension of text, that the mechanical approach to reading could be considered boring, that it will not create a love of reading in children and may create a dependency on the phonics method to the detriment of the child's learning when it comes to irregular words (for example phonic instruction would struggle with the word *yacht*).<sup>52,53</sup> Proponents of phonics dispute these claims.<sup>54,55</sup>

Turning to the second strand of criticism which focuses more on the evidence base for phonics, research looking at 12 meta-analyses that assessed phonics instruction (most of which supported systematic phonics as an essential component of literacy) found that “*Despite the widespread support for systematic phonics within the research literature, there is little or no evidence that this approach is more effective than many of the most common alternative methods used in school, including whole language*”. This research does not posit an alternative, though it does state “*The failure to obtain evidence in*

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<sup>51</sup> S McMurray, ‘[The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy](#)’ (2020)

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> E Sohn, ‘[It’s time to stop debating how to teach kids to read and follow the evidence](#)’ (2020)

<sup>54</sup> A Castles et al., ‘[Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert](#)’, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (2018) Vol. 19(1)

<sup>55</sup> M Grant, ‘[Longitudinal Studies with Synthetic Phonics from Reception to Year 2 and to Year 6](#)’ (2014)

*support of systematic phonics should not be taken as an argument in support of whole language and related methods”.*<sup>56</sup>

Similar meta-analysis research of 55 experimental and survey of 2,205 teachers claimed that *“The most robust research evidence, from randomised control trials with longitudinal designs, shows that the approach to phonics and reading teaching in England is not sufficiently underpinned by research evidence”*. Unlike the earlier study, this did posit that a balanced instruction approach (combining phonics and whole language) was most effective.<sup>57</sup>

An advocate for phonics responded to these studies, claiming that the analysis presented was flawed, the conclusions could not be accepted and ultimately *“the evidence in favour of systematic phonics instruction seems robust”*.<sup>58</sup> The authors of these studies then provided separate counters to this disputation, stating that it used selective elements from the original studies to make the research appear as if it lacked robustness and validity. While agreeing that systematic phonics is an important component of teaching literacy, one concluded that England’s *“approach to teaching synthetic phonics and reading is too narrow, too dominant, and insufficiently reflects robust research evidence, ...many children will not be experiencing optimal teaching based on evidence”*.<sup>59</sup> The other reiterated that *“the field has seriously mischaracterised the strength of evidence for systematic phonics”*.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> J Bowers, [‘Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction’](#), *Educational Psychology Review* (2020) Vol. 32

<sup>57</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, [‘Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers’ practices for teaching phonics and reading’](#), *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10(1)

<sup>58</sup> G Brooks, [‘Disputing recent attempts to reject the evidence in favour of systematic phonics instruction’](#), *Review of Education* (2023) Vol. 11(2)

<sup>59</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, [‘Teaching phonics and reading effectively: ‘A balancing act’ for teachers, policy makers and researchers’](#), *Review of Education* (2023) Vol. 11(3)

<sup>60</sup> J Bowers, [‘There is still little or no evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than common alternative methods of reading instruction: Response to Brooks \(2023\)’](#), *Review of Education* (2023) Vol. 11(3)

## 5 Context in Northern Ireland

### 5.1 Current approach

The Northern Ireland Curriculum at the Primary Foundation stage states that teachers should enable children to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in phonological knowledge through *“responding to a steady beat; identifying words in phrases and sentences; identifying syllables; identifying and generating rhymes; identifying and manipulating phonemes”*. It goes on to state that as pupils progress through the Foundation Stage they should be enabled to *“understand that words are made up of sounds and syllables and that sounds are represented by letters (phoneme/grapheme awareness)”*.<sup>61</sup>

There is no specific reference to a systematic method of phonics instruction, or a specific approach like SSP. This absence should not be interpreted as unfamiliarity with such methods, as the Department of Education’s 2011 *Count, Read: Succeed* strategy stated that to support the development of literacy primary schools must ensure that *“there is a systematic programme of high-quality phonics”*.<sup>62</sup> The 2023 *Investing in a Better Future: Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland* stated that *“It [phonics] is embedded in practice in Northern Ireland”*, though this was caveated that *“it is important that schools use a balanced approach bearing in mind the relative strengths of different methods and their appropriateness for the individual learner”*.<sup>63</sup>

This caveat reveals a key factor in the Northern Irish approach to teaching literacy, as the curriculum itself proposes that *“Teachers have considerable flexibility to select from within the learning areas those aspects they consider*

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<sup>61</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, [‘The Northern Ireland Curriculum: Primary’](#) (2007)

<sup>62</sup> Department of Education, [‘Count Read: Succeed - A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy’](#) (2011)

<sup>63</sup> K Bloomer et al., [‘Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland - Volume 2’](#) (2023)

*appropriate to the ability and interests of their pupils”.*<sup>64</sup> A 2021 review of the curriculum described how it was designed to be accessible and “*Deliberately content-light, it allowed schools and teachers to focus on the development of skills which crossed curricular boundaries and which were designed to meet the needs of learners as individuals, as contributors to society, the economy and the environment*”.<sup>65</sup>

A later review of the Northern Ireland curriculum published in June 2025 flagged how this autonomy for schools and teachers could be a problem, stating “*In schools where individual teachers are primarily responsible for deciding the skills, knowledge and topics in the curriculum... there is a risk of inconsistent educational experiences across classrooms, schools and regions. Pupils in different classes or schools may be taught vastly different skills, knowledge, or topics, leading to disparities in learning outcomes*”.<sup>66</sup>

This risk of inconsistent education experiences was highlighted in a 2025 news story about the cueing system.<sup>67</sup> The investigation revealed that cueing is still prevalent in Northern Ireland, and in response the Education Minister said that “*Our literacy framework in Northern Ireland has been based around phonics and systematic synthetic phonics is the approach which is the most fundamental aspect to it. But there obviously was implied reference to cueing as also being an approach. So even though phonics is the core, I felt that there were mixed messages around that [cueing] and that has now been withdrawn*”. The Minister also said he would be leading a new approach to literacy.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, ‘[The Northern Ireland Curriculum: Primary](#)’ (2007)

<sup>65</sup> S Roulston et al., ‘[Independent Review of Education: Literature Review](#)’ (2021)

<sup>66</sup> L Crehan, ‘[A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum](#)’ (2025)

<sup>67</sup> ‘[Northern Ireland reviews controversial teaching method after failings in Wales and Scotland](#)’. *ITV News*, 2 March 2025

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5.2 TransformED NI

In March 2025 the Department of Education in Northern Ireland published a new approach: *TransformED NI: Transforming teaching and learning: a strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland*. The strategy outlines a comprehensive strategy for the transformation of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland, focusing on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage.<sup>69</sup>

Phonics is mentioned explicitly in the ‘What makes high-performing systems different?’ section in the strategy:

*“There is a critical need for revised literacy and numeracy strategies which take account of recent international research in these key areas and set out the support and resources that will be available to teachers.*

*Notably, the evidence for phonics is extremely strong and the theoretical assumptions and evidence for competing models of ‘balanced reading’ are weak. There is excellent evidence on approaches to reading acquisition and we need to set out clear expectations for teaching reading in our schools. **It is vital that the teaching of phonics should be explicit and systematic across all schools to support children in learning to read.**”<sup>70</sup> [emphasis added]*

The Education Minister has made comments that he sees the literacy specialist hubs in England as being “*transformative...That is something I want to look at here in Northern Ireland*”.<sup>71</sup> These hubs provide, amongst other support, funding

<sup>69</sup> Department of Education, [TransformED NI: Transforming teaching and learning: a strategy for Educational Excellence in Northern Ireland](#) (2025)

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> ‘[Northern Ireland reviews controversial teaching method after failings in Wales and Scotland](#)’. *ITV News*, 2 March 2025

to purchase a validated SSP programme and the training and resources required to implement it successfully.<sup>72</sup> This may perhaps have indicated the potential direction of phonics in Northern Ireland, however in May 2025 the Minister was asked in the Chamber by MLA Peter Martin if the TransformED strategy would make SSP the sole mandatory method for teaching literacy, replying:

*“The TransformED strategy emphasises the importance of phonics instruction but **does not mandate systematic synthetic phonics as the sole method for teaching children to read.***

*TransformED sets out plans to develop a new Literacy Strategy, which will consider all relevant evidence and research. The Strategy will be informed by best practice both locally and internationally and will aim to provide teachers with clear guidelines and appropriate resources and training to deliver effective literacy teaching.”<sup>73</sup> [emphasis added]*

The TransformED NI Delivery Plan, as part of its Indicative Timescale, states that a “*literacy circular will be published during summer term 2025 to provide advice and guidance for the 2025-26 academic year*”.<sup>74</sup> This circular has not yet been made available.

It is not yet clear then what form the explicit and systematic teaching of phonics in Northern Ireland will take. In September 2025 the Minister opened applications for local educators to join the Curriculum Taskforce Working Groups to help shape and draft curriculum content. The full framework for

<sup>72</sup> English Hubs, ‘[English Hubs](#)’ (2021)

<sup>73</sup> [AQW 27075/22-27](#)

<sup>74</sup> Department of Education, ‘[TransformED NI Delivery Plan](#)’ (2025)

consultation is scheduled for March 2026, with the publication of a new ten year strategy for literacy in June 2026.<sup>75,76</sup>

### 5.3 Reading with AI Research Project

The RAISE's Programme's Reading with AI Research Project is a new research study that will provide schools with an opportunity to see how AI tools can support literacy. The study is led by Oxford Brookes University, using Amira Learning\*, a reading support tool, aligned with research-informed approaches to early literacy and powered by AI. 15,000 pupils across Northern Ireland from Years 3, 5, 7 and 8 will engage with Amira Learning for frequent sessions across six months.<sup>77</sup> Initial benchmarking will take place in early October and the project is expected to be completed by the end of the 2025/26 academic year.<sup>78</sup>

This brief mention has been included in the paper as, while the study is in its infancy, it may be worth considering what impact Amira Learning or other similar AI tools will have on Northern Ireland's approach to teaching phonics and literacy in the future.

## 6 Comparative perspectives in the UK and Ireland

It will now be shown that while England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland all promote a systematic phonics approach, there are varying degrees of how it should be implemented, with only England strictly mandating a specific approach (SSP). Both Wales and Scotland have recently re-emphasised the importance of systematic phonics and combining phonemes to make words. Ireland appears to promote both synthetic and analytic onset and rime phonics,

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<sup>75</sup> Department of Education, '[Givan: Help shape Northern Ireland's future curriculum](#)' (2025)

<sup>76</sup> Department of Education, '[TransformED NI Delivery Plan](#)' (2025)

\* For more information on Amira, see [Amira: AI for Teachers and Educators](#)

<sup>77</sup> Department of Education, '[Reading with AI Research Project](#)' (2025)

<sup>78</sup> [AQW 31232/22-27](#)

while also advocating other non-phonics methods as part of a balanced approach.

## 6.1 England

SSP is mandated in England as a result of the 2006 Rose Report (mentioned above)\*.<sup>79,80,81</sup> The Department for Education's Early Career Framework sets out the expectation that all early career teachers learn about SSP, and states that "*systematic synthetic phonics is the most effective approach for teaching pupils to decode*".<sup>82</sup> The Department for Education has also produced a list of validated SSP providers<sup>83</sup> and the criteria for how they were validated.<sup>84</sup>

## 6.2 Wales

In 2024 a national news story revealed that "*tens of thousands*" of children in Wales were leaving school functionally illiterate due to the use of the cueing system in schools. The report did note that the Welsh Government "*insists its curriculum does include the systematic teaching of phonics*".<sup>85</sup> As a direct result of the story the Welsh Government launched a consultation into revised

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\* For an overview of phonics teaching in England since 1995 see M Betteney, '[What do changes in policy regarding the teaching of phonics since 1995 disclose about successive UK education policymakers' understanding of early reading skills?](#)', *Literacy* (2025) Vol. 59(2)

<sup>79</sup> UK Government Department for Education, '[The reading framework](#)' (2023)

<sup>80</sup> S McMurray, '[The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy](#)' (2020)

<sup>81</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, '[Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading](#)', *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10

<sup>82</sup> UK Government Department for Education, '[Early Career Framework](#)' (2019)

<sup>83</sup> UK Government Department for Education, '[Validated systematic synthetic phonics programme providers: contact details](#)' (2025)

<sup>84</sup> UK Government Department for Education, '[Validation of systematic synthetic phonics programmes: supporting documentation](#)' (2023)

<sup>85</sup> '[Inside the reading crisis leaving thousands of children in Wales unable to read](#)'. *ITV News*, 25 September 2024

guidance on teaching reading in the early years<sup>86</sup> which proposed amendments to the Language, Literacy and Communication section of their Curriculum for Wales framework guidance “*to reinforce the importance of phonics when teaching learners*”<sup>87</sup>. Following the consultation, in January 2025 the Welsh Government announced it would make minor changes to the framework guidance, stating that the statutory guidance is “*clear that the systematic and consistent teaching of phonics must be a key part of schools’ approach to reading*”, adding that “*We have updated this section of guidance to further clarify the role of systematic and consistent phonics teaching in helping learners to decode words*”. It also clarified that when pictures are shown they are to be used as an aid to comprehension, not as a decoding tool (differentiating the approach from the cueing system).<sup>88</sup>

The current Language, Literacy and Communication section states that as a progression step children “*can use grapheme-phoneme correspondences when reading, including combining these to decode words*”, which infers the specific SSP approach, though this is not explicitly stated as it is in England.<sup>89</sup>

### 6.3 Scotland

The 2010\* Scottish Curriculum for Excellence: Literacy and English refers to phonics as one of its outcomes: “*I can use my knowledge of sight vocabulary, phonics, context clues, punctuation and grammar to read with understanding and expression*”.<sup>90</sup> In 2024 Education Scotland produced new guidance for teachers on the subject of early reading, which stated that “*the effective*

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<sup>86</sup> Impact, ‘[Reading consultation in Wales - Have your say](#)’ (2024)

<sup>87</sup> Welsh Government, ‘[Consultation Document: Updated sections of Curriculum for Wales Framework guidance](#)’ (2024)

<sup>88</sup> Welsh Government, ‘[2025 Updates to the Curriculum for Wales Framework Guidance](#)’ (2025)

<sup>89</sup> Welsh Government, ‘[Curriculum for Wales: Languages, Literacy and Communication - 4. Descriptions of learning](#)’ (2023)

\* Published in 2004 and implemented in 2010

<sup>90</sup> Scottish Government, ‘[Curriculum for excellence: Literacy and English - Experiences and outcomes](#)’ (2024)

*implementation of explicit and systematic teaching of phonics will be a key part of the overall approach to teaching reading”, and that “Phonics instruction should provide opportunities to blend, segment and manipulate sounds using children's current level of skill”.*<sup>91</sup> As in Wales, this is a systematic approach that is very similar to, but does not explicitly claim to be, SSP.

Also similarly to Wales, Scotland recently drew national attention for its use of cueing. A news story presented that common teaching programmes associated with cueing (such as Reading Recovery and Active Literacy) were still in use in Scotland leading to between 11% and 20% of students leaving primary school functionally illiterate. The article highlighted that SSP was being used in some schools (to great effect), and quoted a spokesperson for Education Scotland stating that phonics is a key part of the overall approach to reading, it was just one approach and that it was up to the individual school to decide how to teach reading.<sup>92</sup>

## 6.4 Ireland

The 2023 review report commissioned by the Department for Education, *Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy: A Review of the Literature*, recommended that teachers adopt a systematic approach to phonics which should be part of a total reading program.<sup>93</sup> The report makes specific reference to SSP and how it is mandated in England, but cites one of the dissenting critics mentioned above<sup>94</sup> and states that phonics should be balanced with aspects of reading for meaning.

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<sup>91</sup> Education Scotland, '[Learning to Read in the Early Years Professional Support Overview](#)' (2024)

<sup>92</sup> '[Northern Ireland reviews controversial teaching method after failings in Wales and Scotland](#)'. *ITV News*, 2 March 2025

<sup>93</sup> E Kennedy et al., '[Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy - A Review of the Literature](#)' (2023)

<sup>94</sup> D Wyse and A Bradbury, '[Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading](#)', *Review of Education* (2022) Vol. 10

The current Primary Language Curriculum has two sections in its Reading strand that relate to phonics, ‘phonological and phonemic awareness’ and ‘phonics, word recognition and study’. The former makes reference to an onset and rime analytic phonics approach, stating that children should *“Play with, recognise and manipulate sounds such as syllables, rhyme, onset-rime and phonemes in spoken words”*. The latter makes reference to a synthetic phonics approach, stating that a child *“recognises, names and sounds some lower-case and upper-case letters and begins to blend phonemes”*, though this is alongside other techniques such as using *“pictorial cues to read some words”*.<sup>95</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

It can be seen that, as per TransformED NI’s assertion, the evidence for the systematic teaching of phonics is ‘extremely strong’ and this has led to SSP being mandated in England. It is however still a contentious issue, as shown by the dissenting critics whose work influenced how phonics was implemented in Ireland. As one commentator pointed out when looking at the approach taken in England:

*“It is not the case, therefore, that in favouring a narrow view of reading, policymakers have gone against a unified academic, pedagogic and theoretical consensus. There is no agreed position, whose adherents are shouting with one voice that the current pre-eminent place of phonics is either unbalanced and unjustified, or helpful and necessary, because there is no such consensus for policymakers to reject or to embrace.”*<sup>96</sup>

This ‘narrow view’ of teaching literacy, whether relying strongly on phonics or whole language, has drawn criticism for failing to address the requirements for

<sup>95</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [Curriculum Online - Primary - Reading](#) (2019)

<sup>96</sup> M Betteney, [‘What do changes in policy regarding the teaching of phonics since 1995 disclose about successive UK education policymakers’ understanding of early reading skills?’](#), *Literacy* (2025) Vol. 59(2)

children with SEN. In a paper hosted by the Department of Education as a resource for schools to support children who have or may have SEN, one academic refers to the “significant minority” of children who are failed by either approach, recommending *“For all children to progress and to avoid potential disadvantage for some, differences in children's learning profiles should be accommodated”*.<sup>97</sup>

It is clear from the ongoing debate in the research community that while systematic phonics (and in particular SSP) has a body of strong evidence to support it, it is not a ‘one size fits all’ solution.

The following may be of use to the Committee as potential considerations:

- Will there be a validated list of phonics programmes in Northern Ireland? If so, how will they decide on the criteria for validation?
- How will the requirement that phonics be taught explicitly and systematically align with the current autonomy given to schools and teachers in their approach to teaching?
- Will phonics be taught as part of a balanced approach alongside other methods, or used as the sole method?
- Will a phonics screen check, similar to the one used in England, be implemented in Northern Ireland? If not, how will schools be held accountable for implementing phonics?
- What professional development will be provided to ensure teachers are equipped to deliver phonics instruction effectively?
- If the Reading with AI Research Project is seen as successful, what impact does the Department of Education see AI based reading tools having on the teaching of literacy?

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<sup>97</sup> S McMurray, [‘The importance of ensuring that all children can develop an effective phonics strategy’](#) (2020)