In what ways does the introduction of a new compulsory phonics scheme affect teachers' attitudes?

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A Research & Development Project

Submitted for the MSc in Learning & Teaching 2022

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Abstract

Phonics is a highly contentious subject between researchers, teachers, and policy makers. This research project aims to explore the perceptions of teachers working at an independent school in the North of England to understand some of the challenges and implications of applying a new systematic synthetic phonics scheme across Pre-Prep and Prep departments. This research project takes the form of a short-term longitudinal practitioner research study and requires a high level of collaboration between the researcher and the participants. The data for this project was collected by informally interviewing five participants before implementing the new scheme, and repeating the interviews again six months into the scheme to identify if their perceptions had changed over time. Additional data was also collected through a series of notes in a reflection journal during training sessions and informal conversations.

The main findings from the interviews were that teachers perceive phonics as an essential method for teaching early reading and believe that the implication of the new scheme has resulted in better cohesion across the classes. Teachers were optimistic about the new scheme improving pupils' reading attainment. However, some of the teachers found the scheme prescriptive and tedious. The amount of phonics training attended historically by teachers was minimal, and as a result, some teachers phonic knowledge was limited. However, they were eager to participate in training that would directly impact their teaching.

The findings indicate that teachers are generally willing to undertake new teaching schemes, which could be in any subject, if they feel supported and provided with adequate training. Teachers may also benefit from time to collaborate with other teachers to better adapt the schemes to suit their pupils' needs.

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Introduction

Throughout the curriculum documentation, phonics is cited frequently, and there are many references to prior phonics teaching that pupils received in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2013). However, independent schools have no legal obligation to follow the National Curriculum. DfE guidance to independent schools states,

> *The [English]curriculum should be designed on the basis of an expectation that children will be able to read, speak and write English with adequate fluency for everyday life in England by the time they reach school leaving age.* (DfE, 2019).

This statement is vague. It does not mandate phonics or any other method of teaching English. In my own teaching experience, I have found phonics delivery in independent schools inconsistent. In conversation with other professionals who also teach at different independent schools, the quality and quantity of phonics teaching varies enormously between schools.

My interest in phonics developed at my previous school, an independent day school for boys. I held the role of Head of Phonics and was responsible for assessing and grouping pupils, staff development, training parents and purchasing resources. Read Write Inc. (RWInc) was well established and taught from Reception to Year 3. Staff development and lesson observations were frequent and reading attainment across the school was high. In previous discussions with the deputy headteacher about why RWInc was implemented, she reported that,

> *Other local independent schools do not appear to have a rigorous approach to teaching phonics. We want to provide the academic edge.*

In passing, another staff member of the phonics department once said,

> *It doesn't look good when pupils from state schools join our school, and they can read better than our pupils who have been here since reception.*

Despite having no obligation to teach phonics, this school believed that phonics was the best way to secure early reading and increase literacy attainment.

My current school is also an independent school and I have been working there for two years. In my first year I taught Year 3 and by this stage I would have expected the pupils' phonic knowledge to be secure. However, it was not an ordinary school year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a whole term of online learning. The pupils also had a very disrupted year previously due to the pandemic. In conversations with the parallel class teacher, we noticed that approximately a third of the class appeared to have significant phonic knowledge gaps when reading and writing. I raised this concern with the Head of Prep School, and our discussion made it apparent that phonics was only taught in the combined Reception and Year 1 class using the Letters and Sounds framework. Working at a previous school with a highly structured phonics programme and equally high pupil reading attainment made me consider whether the lack of a consistent phonic approach resulted in lower reading attainment outcomes across the classes, or whether these phonics gaps were due to inconsistencies during the pandemic.

Although phonics is integral to the National Curriculum in state-funded schools in England, independent schools do not have to teach phonics. Across England, pupils attending independent schools may not access the same level of phonics instruction as their state-school peers. Independent schools have no legal requirement to report how they teach reading or input any pupil data, making it challenging to make parallels between the two sectors. However, it has been proposed that the lack of phonics instruction may not necessarily be detrimental to pupils' reading ability. Bowers (2020) suggests that there is little or no evidence that systematic phonics is better than whole language or balanced literacy approaches in reading development. Phonics is a contentious topic amongst academics, policymakers, and educators who have differing views about the most effective way of teaching children to read (Castles et al., 2018;

Rose, 2006; Wyse & Styles, 2007; Paige et al., 2021), which I intended to discuss in greater depth in the literature review.

Independent schools have greater flexibility when designing their curriculum. Unlike state schools, they can plan and deliver lessons with greater autonomy and are not required to jump through government hoops or regularly submit pupils' assessment data. As a teacher in an independent school, this has significant advantages for designing a curriculum that works best for our pupils. Due to the previously mentioned lack of secure phonic knowledge displayed by some of the pupils in my class, I decided that this research would focus on establishing a consistent phonics approach across the Reception to Year 4 classes. As I have used the RWInc scheme before and found it to be successful, the intervention will include adopting and implementing RWInc across the year groups, training staff, and actively promoting phonics in the school.

Based on these ideas, I will frame my literature review around these key questions:

1. How do children learn to read?
2. Why did the government mandate phonics, and what impact has it had on national literacy attainment?
3. What are the factors that cause educators to oppose phonics?
4. Are educators provided with adequate training to enable them to teach phonics successfully?

Literature review

How do children learn to read?

The importance of reading and the links to success in later life are widely known and accepted (Castles et al., 2018). However, teaching early reading is complex and cannot be simply attributed to one methodology. Researchers and educators have long been searching for the most effective way to provide early reading instruction, and it appears no simple conclusion has been found (Pearson, 2004). By the end of this section, I will establish various viewpoints presented by academics regarding how children learn to read and the role of phonics within this.

Several researchers have suggested a link between children's positive engagement in literature from an early age resulting in higher levels of motivation to read and, ultimately, greater reading success (Cooling, 2011; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Hood et al., 2008). Cooling (2011) claims it is never too soon to start reading with children. They suggest that children who feel good about books and reading will be keen to get to school and learn to read. The more they read, the better readers they will become and the better they will deal with the demands of the school curriculum. Similarly, Hood et al. (2008) found that parent-child reading provided opportunities for language acquisition and vocabulary development. They claim that when parents read with their children, they play an essential role in fostering a child's motivation to read, which has significant consequences for their reading success.

These perspectives suggest that enjoying and sharing books with children from a very young age has benefits concerning motivation and future reading success. The importance of reading for pleasure was highlighted in a report published by the OECD, which revealed that reading for pleasure was the most critical indicator of future success and is believed to be more vital for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002). However, despite their attempts, some children

may be highly motivated to read but do not have the skills to unravel the complex English language. Due to the historical context of the English language, it lacks one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds and is full of irregularities, making reading challenging for many pupils (Hempenstall, 2005). One method for unpicking this complex alphabetic code to read is phonics.

The role of phonics in raising literacy standards in England has been highly debated for many years (Wyse & Styles, 2007; Beard, 2000; Bowey, 2006, Johnston & Watson, 2005). Educators have disagreed on how early reading should be taught, whether phonics or a whole-word approach.

In recent years, phonics has been taught in many English-speaking countries worldwide, with academics in Australia closely following English practice (Bell et al., 2020). Research has shown that the rate of English reading acquisition is lower than in other developed countries with orthographically consistent languages, for example, Greek, Finnish, German, Italian and Spanish (Seymour et al., 2003; Ziegler & Goswami, 2006). Ziegler and Goswami (2006) suggest one reason for this may be because the English writing system has so many inconsistencies concerning common letter patterns that children learning English need to rely on more than just grapheme-phoneme correspondences when learning to read.

It is necessary here to clarify what is meant by ‘phonics’ as there are several different approaches to teaching it, the main two being synthetic and analytic phonics. Synthetic phonics is generally taught before children are introduced to reading or books. It involves learning how to pronounce each letter's sounds (phonemes). Phonemes are taught in isolation, with many schools choosing to teach one phoneme a week until all 26 initial letter sounds have been taught. Once completed, children will learn to blend (synthesise) the sounds to form words (Machin et al., 2018). Analytic phonics, by contrast, teaches children to recognise words by sight and how to recognise letter sounds at the beginning, the end, and then in the middle position of printed words (Johnston et al.,

2011). For example, a teacher may write the letter S on the board, preceded by a few words, sit, stop, or sing. The teacher would then help the children read the words and associate that they all begin with the letter S (Ehri et al., 2001).

To date, only a small number of studies have compared analytic phonics versus synthetic phonics. Of these studies, synthetic phonics has resulted in better word reading, comprehension and spelling than analytic phonics (Johnston & Watson, 2005; Johnston et al., 2012). However, concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of these studies, which will be explored in further detail.

Why did the Government mandate systematic phonics in state schools?

This section aims to review the literature and government policy documents that resulted in Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) being introduced in all state schools in England. Although the government policies are not mandatory in independent schools, some choose to adopt the guidance or parts of it, and others choose to participate in the phonics screening check (DfE, 2020). Figure 1 demonstrates a timeline of important events that led up to the establishment of SSP in English schools.

Year	Event
1986	National curriculum begins
1991	Key Stage Assessments begin (SATs)
1995	Only 49% of pupils achieve level 4 in English at the end of Key Stage tests
1997	National Literacy Strategy is introduced
2006	Independent Review into the Effective Teaching of Early Literacy (Rose Review)
2007	Letters and Sounds is published
2012	Phonics Screening Check is introduced
2014	New National Curriculum is introduced

Figure 1: Timeline of events

In 1991, the first national English and Maths assessments for primary school pupils in England, known as Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) (Sainsbury, 1996). By 1995, the government data indicated that only 49% of pupils nationally attained level 4, the 'expected standard' or above in English (National Strategies, 2011). During this time,

teachers drew from a repertoire of strategies for teaching early reading and exercised a degree of flexibility based on professional practice and judgement about individual children (Davis, 2013).

In 1998, the Labour government radically reformed the curriculum introducing the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). The intention was to bring about 'dramatic improvement in literacy standards' (National Strategies, 2011), which would standardise the teaching of English across all schools. The Government anticipated 80% of 11-year-olds reaching the 'expected standard' of English level 4+ by 2002 (Ofsted, 2002).

Figure 2 shows that although the Government failed to achieve this until 2007, 5 years short of their target, pupils reaching expected standards in English significantly improved between 1998 and 2000. Reading levels also rose sharply from 1998, peaking at 86% at the expected level or above by 2008.

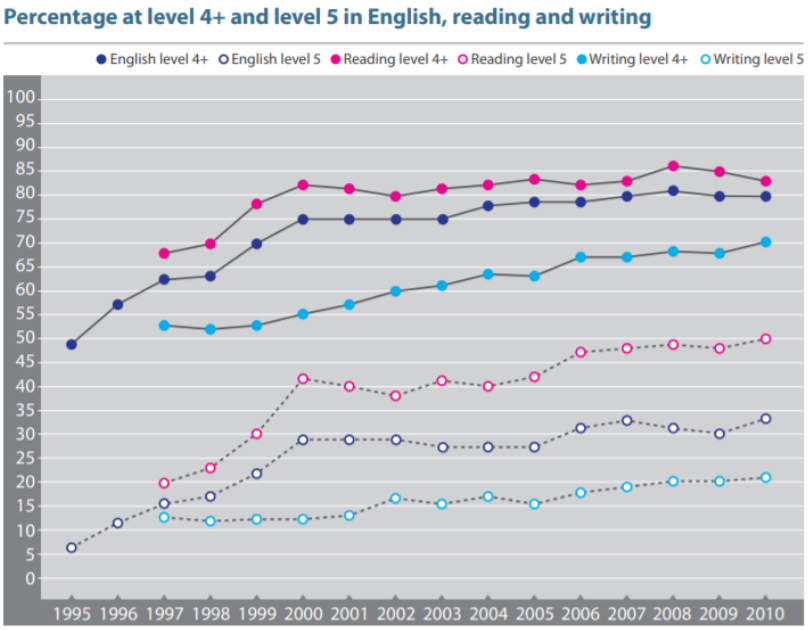

Figure 2. National Strategies, (2011).

The data shown in Figure 2 displays significant improvement in literacy standards between 1995 and 2010. A strong advocate of the NLS was Roger Beard, who wrote extensively about the need for English teaching to be standardised in schools to improve standards (Beard, 2000). He suggested that 'The NLS offers the promise of significantly raising standards and improving the life chances of thousands of children' (Beard, 2000. p433).

The strategy started well, but by 2000 English level 4+ had plateaued. Ofsted conducted a review, The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years (Ofsted, 2002), in which they acknowledged several weaknesses of the NLS. They suggested that the framework did not clarify pupils' phonic knowledge and skills from reception to Year 4. Ofsted also recognised that the 'searchlights' model of reading gave insufficient emphasis in the early stages of phonics teaching.

Critics of the NLS suggested that although the Government's commitment to teaching literacy was welcome, there was a lack of evidence to support the specific teaching approaches of the NLS (Wyse, 2003). Wyse reported that

> *Assertions that gains [had] been made in statutory tests [were] not enough to justify the neglect that better teaching methods could produce higher gains (Wyse, p9. 2003).*

As national results continued to plateau, considerable political pressure was placed on teachers and headteachers to see improvements yearly (Earl et al., 2003). Teachers and schools were accused of teaching to the test as they attempted to overcome the pressure of improving results data. The Education and Skills Committee (2005) and Earl et al. (2003) acknowledged that teachers' teaching to the test' could skew the data, leading some to question the accuracy of the data produced by the national testing. I have experienced the pressure put on teachers to ensure pupils pass the Year 2 SATs. Before working in the independent sector, I spent five years working in two different state schools. Teachers planned and delivered lessons preparing pupils for the SATs in both schools. I remember sitting in planning meetings and my colleagues and I feeling conflicted over our teaching priorities. We knew the pupils needed to be able to write the perfect 'What am I?' riddle for their Year 2 SATs, but we questioned whether this inspired, and enthused pupils with a love of literacy and whether writing a riddle was an essential skill in KS1. It appears this struggle was not unique to our setting. The National Union of Teachers commissioned a report highlighting what they believe to be the

increased pressures of accountability on schools and teachers. They claim that improved test scores did not necessarily represent pupils' overall understanding and knowledge. Instead, teachers focus their teaching very strongly on preparing pupils for the test (Hutchings, 2015).

In 2005, The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee ordered a report entitled, *Teaching Children to Read*. This report stated that the DfES accepted that phonics was an essential method for teaching reading; however, psychologists Professor Rhona Johnston and Dr Joyce Watson criticised the phonics element of the NLS programmes. They suggested that it did not constitute a rigorous form of synthetic phonics and was more akin to analytic phonics. An approach, in their view, is much less effective (Education and Skills Committee, 2005 p18). The report concluded that the Government should undertake an immediate review of Literacy teaching to determine whether the current recommendations were the best methods for teaching reading.

A move towards phonics

Shortly after the *Teaching Children to Read* Report, the English Secretary of State for Education commissioned the *Rose Report* in 2006. The report acknowledged that reading standards had raised minimally between 1989 and 1998, the first nine years of the National Curriculum. However, since the advent of the NLS and more emphasis on teaching phonics, standards have improved (Rose, 2006). The report recommended that:

> *High quality, systematic phonic work should start by the age of five, and the knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high-quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode and encode print.* (Rose, p71. 2006).

The Education and Skills Committee placed considerable weight on the Clackmannanshire study's findings when writing the Rose report's recommendations. The Clackmannanshire study was a 7-year study into the effects of synthetic phonics

teaching on reading and spelling attainment. The study aimed to examine whether children made better progress in reading and spelling when taught by the systematic phonics approach rather than the analytic phonics approach. It was a relatively small-scale study with only 304 children in Scotland. Four classes were taught using the analytic approach, four classes were taught using the analytic and phonological awareness approach, and five classes were taught using the synthetic phonics approach. Each class was taught for 20 minutes a day for 16 weeks. At the end of the 16-week programme, the synthetic phonics classes were reading seven months ahead of the analytic groups and spelling around eight to nine months ahead of the analytic groups. The two analytic groups then carried out the synthetic programme before the end of primary one. These children were monitored until the end of primary school, and by primary seven, they were reading on average, three years and six months ahead of their chronological age (Johnston & Watson, 2005). Nick Gibb, the former Schools Minister, overwhelmingly supported this research and, during a speech at the Centre for Social Justice, said:

> *Evidence from longitudinal studies such as the Clackmannanshire study by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson showed that early systematic synthetic phonics was the most successful method of teaching children to read. At the end of that seven-year period, systematic synthetic phonics had given those children an average word reading age of 14 by the time they were 11.* (Gibb, 2011)

Later in his speech, he discussed the funding available to schools for phonics resources and training and introduced the phonics screening check, which will be discussed in more detail later in the literature review.

Criticisms of the Clackmannanshire study

Not all supported the Clackmannanshire study, and it received criticism from several researchers. Ellis & Moss (2013) argued that the results yielded by the

Clackmannanshire study produced different pictures of reading attainment when viewed through different lenses. They suggested that even if the phonics program successfully resulted in pupils gaining higher-level word decoding skills, there was little evidence to suggest that it translated into successful reading. Analysis of the achievements in reading comprehension from the Clackmannanshire study showed that from Primary 2, the children comprehend what they read seven months ahead of chronological age. However, by Primary 7, this had dropped to a 3.5-month advantage. These results appear to suggest that as children get older, their reading comprehension gains appear to regress (Johnston & Watson, 2005).

Wyse & Styles (2007) also had strong reservations about the research methodologies used in the Clackmannanshire study. They suggested no indication of the teachers' prior experience teaching phonics or methods to evaluate their effectiveness as teachers. They also claim an inadequate assessment of the children's socio-economic background, and very little information was given about the schools and their effectiveness. All of which could have resulted in higher performance by the synthetic groups. Wyse and Goswami (2008) also claim that the Rose Report's conclusion that synthetic phonics instruction should be adopted nationally is not supported by empirical research evidence. Alternatively, they suggest the Clackmannanshire study highlights the importance of systematic phonics instruction and does not support the claim that analytic instruction is inferior to synthetic instruction.

Several researchers have claimed that this study alone provides insufficient evidence that SSP is the most effective method to teach early reading. Torgerson et al. (2006) conducted a similar study to Johnston & Watson (2005). They aimed to establish how the different approaches to phonics teaching compared to each other, including analytic versus synthetic phonics. They found that systematic phonics teaching was linked to better reading accuracy. However, no significant effect was found on reading comprehension. They also concluded that there was no clear advantage of synthetic

over analytic phonics instruction from their study. Other researchers, such as Bowey (2006), can see the benefits of SSP and suggest a strong case for its inclusion in the early reading curriculum. However, they acknowledge that many of the practices adopted by the whole-language advocates are beneficial and strongly advise that phonics should not be taught in isolation from other reading methods.

Despite the concerns raised surrounding the Rose report, the DfE implemented many of the recommendations in the Primary National Strategy, a new, invigorated framework that replaced the NLS. It highlighted that the new framework intended to 'Support schools and settings in implementing the recommendations of the Rose Report through the provision of high-quality teaching of phonics and early reading.' (DfES, 2006 p7).

Letters and Sounds was published shortly after the Primary National Strategy in 2007 by the DfE. The publication was intended as a framework teachers were expected to follow, with suggestions for teaching activities rather than a systematic synthetic phonics programme. Some schools developed internalised teaching programmes based on Letters and Sounds, which my school chose to do, and others bought into schemes that provided resources (Stainthorp, 2020). With the prominent phonics focus in the upcoming 2014 National Curriculum came the accountability measures, and the mandatory Phonics Screening Check was introduced in 2012. Although it is not a statutory requirement for independent schools to complete the Phonics Screening Check, my school opted to participate.

Research that supports the teaching of Systematic Synthetic Phonics

Whilst several researchers questioned some of the elements of the Clackmannanshire study, many advocate the teaching of SSP. Shanahan and Lonigan (2013) argue that phonological awareness is particularly beneficial for preschool-aged children and can predict decoding skills and reading success in later years. In their article, which

summarises the *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel,* they highlight the key information from the report. The panel incorporated data from nearly 300 studies that measured early literacy skills and found that the early development of decoding, reading comprehension, spelling and writing were strong predictors of successful decoding skills in later life.

Ehri (2020) is also a strong advocate of SSP. They argue that pupils must be first be taught to segment and blend words. At that point, they can decode words, enabling the pupils to read unfamiliar words and store spellings of these words in memory. The evidence from their research suggests that words are only read automatically when grapheme-phoneme connections are made. They claim that prereaders will not become more fluent readers through exposure alone, without a focus on teaching them the phonological foundations.

Buckingham (2020) has a similar view to Ehri and argues that systematic phonics has one of the most substantial and consistent bases of evidence in education and that synthetic phonics has been explicitly examined in numerous randomised control trials, not just in the *Clackmannanshire study*. They claim that SSP is strongly aligned with cognitive scientific research and models of reading such as the *Simple View of Reading.* Buckingham advises teachers and early educators to use systematic phonics to teach early reading to pupils, as they claim it currently has the strongest available evidence base. The same cannot be said for the whole language, balanced literacy, and analytic phonics approaches.

What are the factors that cause educators to oppose phonics?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, some do not favour SSP for several reasons despite Michael Gove's bold claim that,

> *Research has consistently and comprehensively shown that systematic, phonics instruction by a teacher is the most effective and successful way of teaching children to read* (Gove, 2013).

There are many critics of SSP as a method for teaching early reading (Davis, 2012; Castles et al., 2018; Wyse and Goswami, 2008 & Clark et al., 2020). In the following paragraphs, I will explore the main arguments against the introduction of SSP, including the suitability, assessment and commercial elements.

Suitability of SSP for teaching reading

The first argument is that phonics does not equip children with the necessary skills to understand or enjoy a text. Davis (2013) claims that phonics teaches children to correlate letter combinations with sounds and blend sounds into sequences. They argue that this is not teaching children to read. They claim that reading is a matter of understanding and taking meaning conveyed by the text. This view is supported by Castles et al. (2018), who also acknowledge the importance of reading comprehension rather than just identifying individual words. They argue that 'Children are not literate if they cannot understand the text' (Castles et al., 2018, p3). That is not to say that Davis and Castles are completely against phonics; instead, they advocate that phonics is taught within the context of reading for understanding and alongside other reading strategies.

Their perspective is similar to those expressed in the *Simple View of Reading* model, which Hoover and Gough designed in 1990. They suggest that word decoding and linguistic comprehension are imperative to becoming a successful reader, as seen in figure 3 below.

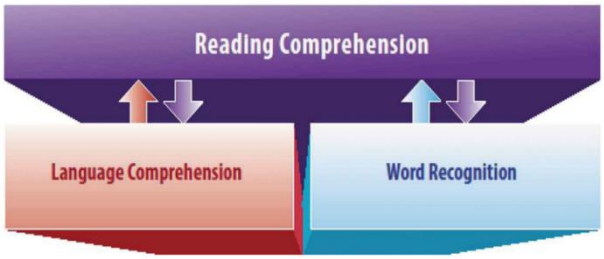

Figure 3. (Tunmer & Hoover, 2019).

Hoover and Gough weigh both parts with equal importance and suggest that individually neither is sufficient. Despite the model being called *The Simple View*, it does not deny that reading is complex, and this model has found a way to separate these complexities into two parts (Hoover and Gough, 1990).

This conceptual framework is frequently referred to in the Rose review when they discuss moving away from the previous *searchlights model* for teaching reading. They believe the *Simple View of Reading* is a valuable model that makes it explicit to teachers that different types of teaching are needed to develop word recognition skills, compared to those needed to acquire the comprehension of written and spoken language. They also suggest that this model allows teachers to separately assess word recognition skills and language comprehension (Rose, 2006). Despite the appreciation in the Rose Report that comprehension is an integral part of learning to read, the nature of the phonics screening check, which only assesses word decoding skills, implies that word recognition has greater significance. I will use the *Simple View of Reading* framework in my own study when implementing the new RWInc phonics programme. The RWInc program has an equal emphasis on word decoding and language comprehension and so has the assessment framework.

Phonics Screening check

Many of the critics of phonics do not criticise phonics as a teaching method; they are more concerned by the phonics screening check conducted at the end of Year One. The Conservative Government described the phonics screening check as a 'simple reading test' to assess children's phonemic awareness. Children are given 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words, phonetically plausible words without meaning, for example, 'stromp' or 'terg'. The words are given out of context, and the children need to decode them accurately. (Standards & Testing agency, 2017). To date, numerous studies suggest that this form of assessment is not fit for purpose (Bradbury, 2018; Carter, 2020; Gibson &

England, 2016). Carter (2020) discusses the challenges teachers face by adapting the curriculum so that children pass the test. They claim that many teachers must slow the pace of teaching reading to the higher-attainers and quicken the pace for the lower-attainers to get children through the assessment. Gibson & England (2016) found similar results from their research. They suggest that teachers often found that emergent readers outperformed fluent readers as they searched for actual words and attempted to read for meaning. Several high-profile children's authors, such as Michael Morpurgo and Michael Rosen, have also expressed their opposition to the phonics policy. They claim it threatens reading for pleasure in primary schools, and when children fail the phonics screening check in Year 1, it can put them off reading for life (Morpurgo, 2013).

The validity and necessity of the Phonics Screening check have also been in question by teachers and researchers. The main English teaching unions surveyed their members, asking primary school teachers and headteachers their views of the phonics screening check. They found that 91% of respondents felt that the check did not tell them anything they did not know about their pupils' reading ability, and many reported that they needed at least two days of supply cover to enable them to conduct the test (ATL/NAHT/NUT 2012). Data from a study conducted by Duff et al. (2015) reported similar findings. They claim that although the Phonics Screening check is a valid measure of phonic skills and can identify children at risk of reading difficulties, they also found that the teachers' assessment and judgement of pupils' ability were as reliable at the test. However, it could also be argued that the Phonics Screening check was never intended to assess children's reading levels. The *Assessment framework for the development of the Year 1 phonics screening check* document states,

> *The purpose of the phonics screening check will be to confirm that all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard.* (Standards & Testing agency, 2017).

This quote implies that the screening check monitors what teachers have taught rather than checking pupils' knowledge. Pressure on teachers is at a record high, and

according to a recent survey by NEU, 80% of teachers have said they have considered leaving the profession due to an increased workload (NEU, 2018). The Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union said:

> *The continual long hours spent on unnecessary work such as data collection for arbitrary Government targets is not only demoralising but is unsustainable mentally and physically.* (Courtney, 2018).

Whether the targets are arbitrary or not, if the screening results are not valuable for teachers, it may cause some demoralisation within the profession.

Suitability of commercial phonics schemes

Much of the available literature regarding teaching early reading deals with the suitability of SSP. However, Brooks et al. (2021) are more concerned with the commercial phonics teaching schemes and materials available for teachers. Their study found that about half the phonics schemes commercially available in 2007-2013 contained one or several errors. These errors could be attributed to a lack of phonics accuracy, for example, the relationship between the phoneme /kw/ and the grapheme 'qu' or errors in teaching methods such as expecting children to know things they had not yet been taught. These findings are concerning, mainly when there is evidence that teachers lack subject-specific phonics understanding (Rose, 2006: Flynn et al., 2021). The study's authors suggest that early reading teachers would be better equipped to spot errors in these schemes if they were more familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet. Teachers need specialist knowledge available to them through initial teacher training. (Brooks et al. 2021). This section has attempted to briefly summarise the literature relating to some opposition to SSP in schools. The following section examines teachers' subject knowledge and the complexities of teacher training in more depth.

What are teachers' perceptions of phonics?

It would be helpful to consider how teachers feel about teaching phonics at this stage. Teachers' perceptions about phonics have yet to be extensively studied, despite it being a controversial teaching method of early reading. Very few teachers would have been taught to read using phonics because, for many, they would have been pupils before the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989. Even if teachers had been in the profession for some years, the first edition of the National Curriculum only mentioned phonics once. It was not high on the agenda and appeared to give phonics the same importance as pictures and other cues. It stated:

> *Pupils should be able to use picture and context cues, words recognised on sight and phonic cues in reading* (DES, 1989: 7).

Although the teaching profession consists of literate adults, many will have had minimal experience with the phonemic structure of words; the terminology would have been new to the majority, resulting in a lack of confidence when teaching phonics to pupils (Stainthorp, 2004).

There is minimal research surrounding educators' perceptions of phonics in England. However, Campbell (2015) conducted a study with 115 early childhood educators in Australia to explore their views about teaching phonics to children under five. They reported that the educators highly valued phonics for promoting literacy development, although they had conflicting views over how it should be taught. Almost all their respondents reported the theory that phonics should be taught through child-centred, play-based experiences, including singing, rhymes and shared picture book reading and that the experiences should be 'fun' for children. They also reported that they often felt conflicted as the commercial schemes often required the phonemes and graphemes to be taught in large groups, in a fixed sequence and in isolation from a child's everyday experiences. As a result, making it challenging to adopt a child-centred, play-based

experience when teaching phonics skills. Despite the experiences expressed by the early educators, Ehri (2020) challenges the claims that SSP schemes promote 'skill and drill' methods of teaching. They argue that there is scope for teachers and educators to use exciting materials and interactive games to teach letter-sound associations which would add an element of 'fun' into the lessons.

The current National Curriculum in England mandates that children in reception and KS1 must be taught using a SSP scheme. It states that children should be taught to:

> *Read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words.* (DfE, 2013).

In recent years, there has clearly been a significant shift in the Government's emphasis on phonics teaching, from phonics being used with other methods of teaching to phonics being the primary source of teaching reading. Determining the impact of teachers' perceptions of phonics may play a fundamental role in teaching phonics. As a part of the *Phonics Screening Check Evaluation Report* published by the Government, 573 Literacy coordinators were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with several statements relating to their views about phonics and literacy teaching, which can be seen in figure 4 below (DfE, 2015).

Table 14: Teachers' views about phonics as an approach to teaching reading

Statement	Agree (%)	Agree somewhat (%)	Uncertain or mixed views (%)	Disagree somewhat (%)	Disagree (%)	No response (%)
I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching	58	31	7	2	1	1
Phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading	64	25	5	3	2	2
Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy	10	20	18	29	20	2
A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words	64	23	6	3	3	1
Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children	9	19	17	30	23	3
N= 573						

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2014
Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Figure 4

Overall, the interviewees were positive about phonics being a successful approach to teaching reading, with 58% of teachers agreeing that they are convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching.

However, an overwhelming majority of 87% of respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed that *various* methods should be used to teach children to decode words. These results suggest that teaching various other strategies alongside phonics was favoured by teachers. Davis (2013) echoes these findings and raises concerns that phonics is taught out of the context of learning to read for meaning, and pupils are not allowed to look at illustrations in books for context. These findings from the *Phonics Screening Check Evaluation Report* demonstrate that how teachers want to teach reading is distinctly at odds with how the Government currently requires reading to be taught.

Clark & Glazzard (2018) conducted a further independent inquiry into the phonics screening check. Teachers were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement on government policy:

> *In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read.* (Clark & Glazzard, 2018)

Technically all respondents should have agreed with this statement, as synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read as the National Curriculum states children should be taught to:

> *Apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words* (DfE, 2013).

and,

> *Read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words* (DfE, 2013).

There is no mention anywhere in the curriculum that children can be taught to read using any methods other than phonics.

Despite this, of the 1108 participants in Clark and Glazzard's (2018) survey, 47.47% disagreed with the statement, and 42.24% agreed somewhat. Potentially, a different response may have been found if the question had been worded more accurately. For example, they could have asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, should phonics be mandated as the only method for teaching children to read?

That said, the responses were mixed, and most comments emphasised the need for various strategies when teaching reading. One teacher responded,

> *Synthetic phonics does not work for all. Children need to be exposed to a variety of different methods.*

another commented,

> *We have a nation of children who bark sounds at a page. It discourages reading for meaning and pleasure.*

This teacher replied,

> *Phonics is an amazing teaching tool and enables most children to access text successfully from an early age; however, it does not encompass the full range of reading skills that exist…*

These teachers may have felt that they knew what the children in their class needed to succeed with reading from their past teaching experiences, and in their experience, this was not simply by phonics alone. Historically, teachers would have drawn on many strategies when teaching reading. In more recent times, Paige et al. (2021) argue that the art of teaching acknowledges teachers' judgments and their role in selecting and delivering reading activities for their pupils. They propose that teachers can, and should, decide what is appropriate for their students regarding the selection, differentiation, and delivery of engaging pupils and providing successful reading instruction. However, the Government's focus is very much on synthetic phonics only. In their publication,

Reading: the next steps, the message is unambiguous that they believe children learn to read best when taught using a robust programme of systematic synthetic phonics (DfE, 2015).

Are educators provided with adequate training to enable them to teach phonics successfully?

The pressure on schools to provide comprehensive lesson plans, daily phonics teaching, and the focus on the inspection of phonics has become more significant in recent years. Ofsted's most recent school inspection handbook states that for an Early Years provision to be rated 'good', they should observe 'staff [that] are experts in teaching systematic, synthetic phonics' (Ofsted, 2021). Despite this, evidence suggests that some teachers do not have a core understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, and some are unaware of their lack of subject knowledge (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2009 & Flynn, 2021).

The varying level of teachers' phonic subject knowledge also recurred throughout many Ofsted and government documents. The *Teaching children to read* report highlighted that many teachers had a limited understanding of the psychological and developmental aspects of the reading process and how children learn to read (Education and Skills Committee, 2005). They suggest that teachers would be unable to adapt their teaching to suit their pupils without the proper training. As phonics is mandated as the only way of teaching children to read, teacher training is paramount.

Several studies have indicated that many teachers' phonemic awareness is weak. Cunningham (2009) surveyed preschool teachers and asked them to complete phoneme manipulation tasks. They found that more than half of the teachers sampled could only accurately respond to zero or one of the seven questions that required them to identify the number of phonemes in words (e.g., sun, grass). This lack of knowledge is concerning, as identifying phonemes in words is a critical skill and is at the centre of all

phonics teaching. They also asked the participants how many questions they felt answered correctly, and many overestimated their subject knowledge compared to how they scored in the actual assessment. The findings from this study are alarming but not unique. In a more recent study of Australian teachers by Stark et al. (2016), very similar results were found. Teachers were asked multiple-choice questions about teacher subject knowledge, self-related ability and associated beliefs and confidence. Like Cunningham, Stark et al. also found that teachers overestimate their phonic-related knowledge. Many teachers thought their subject knowledge improved with experience, but in reality, that was not what the study results found. In this case, teachers were not aware of their shortcomings. Again, this is concerning as teachers may feel there is no need to participate in phonic professional development. The findings of both studies are relevant to practitioners and policymakers as they indicate the need for teachers to attend proactively and for policymakers to provide comprehensive professional development for teachers.

The Rose Report highlighted the importance of quality phonics training during Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and suggested that ITT providers recognise phonics' priority in their new standards (Rose, 2006). Subsequently, phonics was included in ITT courses. The teacher's standards were updated in 2011 and state that trainees on the primary course must 'Demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (DfE, 2011, p. 11). ITT providers were also required to allow trainees to observe, teach and assess synthetic phonics on their placements. Universities have been instructed to spend a minimum of 90 hours teaching the government-mandated approach to phonics. Providers that introduce trainee teachers to other techniques have received letters from the Department for Education reminding them of government policy (Ellis & Moss, 2014). With so many trainee teachers completing their ITT in One-year graduate schemes, more time has been spent teaching trainees phonics, and less time is spent teaching other reading strategies. Clark et al. (2020) argue that the next generation of primary

teachers may complete their training and believe that phonics is at the centre of teaching early reading and therefore have no knowledge of other reading strategies. Although this may be the Government's intention, many would argue that phonics does not work for all children; therefore, different techniques should be recognised (Wyse & Styles, 2007; Stuebing et al., 2008 & Davis, 2012). Stainthorp (2004) would argue that even with the increased training provided by ITT courses, this is not sufficient for teachers to be confident and well-practised to teach phonics as training should be continual, and skills and techniques should be revisited frequently.

Some researchers have expressed concerns about the limitations of subject knowledge by teacher educators at ITT providers. A study by Joshi et al. (2009) on ITT providers found that instructors at many teacher training institutions may not be knowledgeable enough about the phonological awareness needed for early reading. As a result, trainee teachers may not have received adequate instruction to teach their pupils effectively.

As mentioned previously, many in-service teachers will not have been taught to read using phonics, and phonics will not have been on the syllabus during their ITT. The Rose Report highlighted the importance of investing in training for in-service teachers and claims that 75,000 days were provided between 2004 and 2005, including one day's training in reading and phonics for two teachers from every school (Rose, 2006). While this sounds like a large-scale investment in training, most teachers did not access the training first-hand. The training was fed back to them by the school representatives. Stainthorp (2004) argues that teachers need substantial explicit training and time to rehearse the sound structure in words to be able to teach phonics with fluency. They claim that a one-day training course is insufficient for teachers to execute phonics confidently.

After introducing the Phonics Screening Check, the Department for Education funded further one-day phonics training roadshows in targeted regions with poor reading outcomes. Flynn et al. (2021) evaluated the training provided by the phonic roadshows.

They found that many regional leads who attended the course were surprised at how little some of their schools understood early reading and their lack of subject knowledge. Other regional leads reported that some teachers appeared to be less concerned with the theoretical aspects of the training and were more concerned with the 'quick wins' and the practicalities of implementing phonics in the classroom. This is where tensions arise between the teachers' views of good practice and the academics. In earlier work by Flynn (2019), they studied the relationships between research and practice when teachers and academics worked together. They found a constant tension between the researchers' desire to impart empirical findings and understanding the 'why' of what they are doing against the teachers' desire to have practical solutions. In a profession where time is often required to be carefully managed, it could be argued that teachers feel they do not have time to learn about the 'why' and need to focus on 'how'.

Research related to teachers' attitudes towards becoming evidence-based practitioners by McNamara (2002) found that despite teachers' apparent current lack of the use of research, fifty per cent of teachers claimed that research increased teacher knowledge and effectiveness. These responses indicate that many teachers perceive the potential impact of educational research as beneficial to their educational practice. McNamara (2002) also recognises that time, financial implications, and accessibility of research can be serious obstacles for teachers wanting to become evidence-based practitioners.

Although my current school is not required to teach daily phonics sessions, the importance of educator training regarding pupil reading remains. Some may argue that there is more scope for independent schools to promote teachers to become evidence-based practitioners when making important curriculum decisions, as there are fewer curriculum constraints.

From my extensive research whilst conducting the literature review, it soon became apparent how controversial phonics is as a teaching method in schools. In the first section of this literature review, I explored the complexities of teaching children to read

English due to the unorthodox configuration of the English language, which has been a longstanding challenge for teachers. I went on to look at the Government's reasons for the phonics implementation and the national literacy picture in England. This helped me to recognise why the Government mandated phonics in an attempt to raise national literacy standards. However, I now have a much greater appreciation of why so many opposed phonics due to the seemingly minimal empirical research to support the curriculum overhaul. In the third section, I aimed to discover educators' perceptions of phonics. Although there is not a substantial amount of directly related literature, I found that educators are not overwhelmingly for or against it. One evident theme is that educators appear to favour a mixed-method approach to teaching reading (Stuebing et al., 2008; Castles et al., 2018 & Davis, 2013). This is a theme that I wish to explore further with the educators in my own setting. In the final section, I explored the provision for phonics training for educators. All the research I found indicated that teacher subject knowledge was limited, affecting the successful teaching of phonics. From previous discussions with the educators in my setting, phonics training and development appears to have been limited. Furthermore, this is an area I intend to develop further.

In light of the literature review, I have decided to explore the following research questions:

1. How do educators perceive phonics teaching in school?
2. What are educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RWInc program on pupils' reading attainment?
3. In what ways do teachers think early reading should be taught?
4. How do educators feel about their own phonics teaching practice, and how does training impact teacher confidence when teaching phonics?

Methodology

The current study is a qualitative evaluation of teachers' perceptions regarding establishing the RWInc phonics scheme. This section describes the specific research methods used and how the data analysis will be conducted. I will discuss the collaborative nature of the research, provide a summary of the intervention, indicate how the participants were chosen, explain the research instruments, examine the data analysis methods, and highlight the ethical considerations.

Context of the study and collaboration

Collaboration was integral to this study, and there were two layers of collaboration which I will discuss in this section. The first collaboration was with Louise, a senior leader at the school.

Towards the end of the last academic year, I had numerous meetings with Louise to discuss the development of English. The assessment data had shown that reading ability had plateaued and, in some cases, fallen, and the number of pupils requiring extra support rose. Although the data was not overwhelmingly positive, we acknowledged that numerous lockdowns and weeks of home learning during the previous academic year could have contributed to this. Tomasik & Helbling et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between school closures and pupil progress. Their study found that the learning gains in primary-aged pupils not only slowed down during school closures but for some pupils, their performance markedly deteriorated within a brief timeframe. To raise the English standards in the Prep School, we decided that from September, a new systematic synthetic phonics programme would be implemented from Reception to Year 4.

RWInc was suggested as the preferred programme because I have used RWInc successfully at previous schools and understand how to lead it with a team. RWInc encapsulates word recognition, language comprehension and overall reading

comprehension, as seen in the *Simple View of Reading* (Hoover and Gough, 1990). After meeting the RWInc representative, the school finance manager, and the Senior Leadership Team, it was decided that RWInc would be adopted. The teaching resources arrived during the summer; however, the official RWInc training was unavailable until the last two days before the Christmas holidays. This news slightly changed the course of the desired research methodology.

The second tier of collaboration was with the teachers implementing the RWInc phonics scheme across the Pre-Prep and Prep school. From previous discussions with these staff members, informally and in staff meetings, I understood that many did not explicitly teach phonics; therefore, a program of training and development would be required.

Summary of the intervention

Detailed below are my four research questions for developing an understanding of how the introduction of a new compulsory Phonics scheme may affect teachers' attitudes:

1. How do teachers perceive phonics teaching in school?
2. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RWInc programme on pupils' reading attainment?
3. In what ways do teachers think early reading should be taught?
4. How do teachers feel about their phonics teaching practice, and how does training impact teacher confidence when teaching phonics?

Since the teachers' perceptions are at the heart of these questions, I decided a short-term longitudinal practitioner research study would be the most appropriate way to collect data. Practitioner research attempts to connect academic educational research and the practice within a school or classroom environment (Menter et al., 2011). I decided to use a small sample of five participants surveyed over time to examine

changing attitudes (Edwards & Talbot, 1999). There are five teachers in the phonics department, including myself, so I intended to interview the four remaining phonics teachers. This method would allow me to understand how teachers' felt about phonics before implementing the programme and after six months of teaching. Studies of this type are often used in education as they have considerable potential to present rich data that monitor changes over time. However, they do also provide particular challenges. The main being that they can suffer from participant attrition, which could be an issue in all research areas. Nevertheless, I would still have a small sample if one or two participants dropped out. I also intended to formally interview Louise, who would be my fifth participant, after the intervention and make notes of our conversations in my reflection journal.

Figure 5 sets out a summary of the intervention.

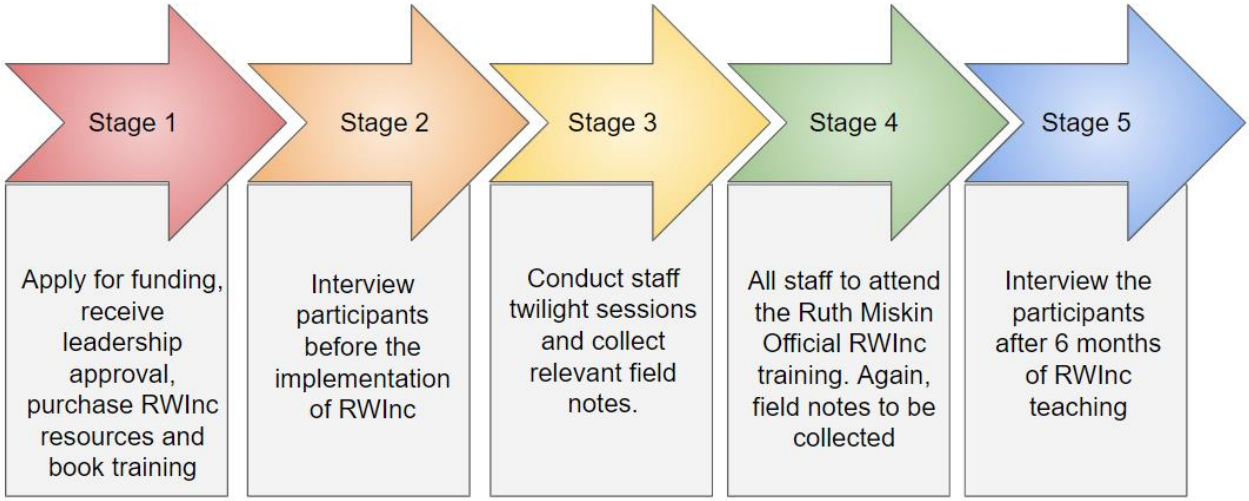

Figure 5

Initially, Louise and I hoped all staff would attend the official RWInc training to commence phonic teaching immediately at the beginning of the school year. Unfortunately, none was unavailable until the last two days of the first term, so teachers were required to deliver phonics for a term without the official training. I provided a one-

hour training session at the beginning of the term, which I planned based on my experience of using the programme. The aim was to give an overview of the resources and structure of the lessons. This was not an ideal solution, as the timing for this training was the last session at the end of two days of INSET training. The teachers appeared tired and less than enthusiastic about participating in more training. Despite this, RWInc commenced the following week, and many informal conversations about phonics began. After the October half term, a phonics team meeting was conducted to appreciate how the teaching staff felt about the scheme and discuss their experiences and approaches. Teaching strategies, thoughts, and ideas were shared during this meeting, and the phonics conversation continued.

At the end of the first term, five teachers attended the official RWInc training in December, a two-day online course. The advantage of all five teachers attending on the same date was financially beneficial for the school as it lowered the price due to a special offer. I anticipated that it would also provide a cohesive element as all the teachers will have received the same training by the same trainer, reducing ambiguity. The drawbacks of this were that the Teaching Assistants could not participate in this course, partly due to a lack of funding and mainly because they were required to provide lessons for the pupils while the teachers were on the training course. I conducted a two-hour training session, again using my own experience of the programme, with two Teaching Assistants in January. It was agreed that they would go on further CPD training as it became available later in the academic year. With support from Louise, I conducted two additional twilight sessions, and observed and team-taught lessons as the term progressed. I will continue to provide further sessions into the next academic year.

Participants

The participants I approached were selected by criterion sampling (Cohen et al., 2018). The four teachers I approached met particular criteria for their selection. They taught

Reception to Year 4 classes and were timetabled to teach phonics groups from September. These teachers would be required to participate in two interviews and phonics training. All participants were informed about the study during the September INSET day (see appendix 1 for the presentation made to staff). They were given time to ask questions and the option to participate. Subsequently, all participants gave written consent to participate in the research (see appendix 2).

Three teaching assistants were also approached to participate. I decided not to conduct interviews with them as I felt it would be challenging to find a time to complete them. The interviews would mainly take place in teacher's free lessons or during lunchtime, and as TA's work during lunchtime and have fewer free lessons, this would be challenging. However, they would join in some training, and I had informal discussions with them regarding phonics. Louise, who would not be teaching phonics, nor receive the training, was a final participant. We worked collaboratively to apply for the funding for resources and organised opportunities for staff training. The participants' teaching experiences range enormously in terms of the number of years of teaching experience ranging from fairly newly qualified to teachers who have been teaching for over 20 years. The teachers' ages range from their early twenties to early fifties. The participants have all worked in various educational establishments, some have recently worked in state schools, and others have worked at independent schools for more than 15 years. Male and female teachers were asked to participate in the study, so the research should satisfy considerations for relevant sample selection (Cottrell, 2017).

Research instruments

The following briefly describes the qualitative methods I used to collect my data. As I intended to investigate teachers' perceptions and understand their ideas and beliefs about phonics, I decided that semi-structured interviews would be the most beneficial

way of gaining the information I needed (Menter et al., 2011). The second part describes how a reflection journal would provide additional information.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The main aim of the preliminary interviews was to explore the teachers' phonics knowledge, their perceptions of phonics, the training and support they had previously received, and other related topics. I was unsure how the participants would respond, so I intended to keep the interview informal by addressing particular topics rather than answering structured questions (Menter et al., 2011). The main advantage of semi-structured interviews was their adaptability, which allowed me or the participant to ask questions or clarify meanings during the interview. The interviews were conversational. The questions flowed depending on how they were answered, meaning that the order in which the questions were asked changed between participants. I also picked up on the tone of voice and hesitations, which made it easier to understand the participant's thought processes, which would not be possible with a questionnaire (Bell, 2005). These elements would be crucial to understanding how teachers feel.

To ensure the validity of the questions, I conducted a pilot interview with a teacher in a different school. I adapted and reworded some of the questions before interviewing my participants. For a complete list of the interview questions, see appendix 4. The preliminary interviews were conducted individually and took around 25 minutes each in the first week of term before the RWInc programme began. The final interviews were again around 25 minutes and undertaken in the last week of term two, six months after starting the RWInc programme.

I also interviewed Louise, a senior leader, six months after the implementation of RWInc. I asked several questions that led to a further discussion about the future of phonics and the implications for the wider school community. We also discussed the current reading and writing data in this meeting, looking for trends and patterns.

Reflection journal

Since my study relied heavily on semi-structured interviews, I was concerned that my research might be one-dimensional. Throughout the study, I made a log of other informal conversations with colleagues, which would help me reflect on the thoughts and ideas surrounding phonics as a bigger picture. These notes were collected during the staff twilight sessions, before and after interviews, and in staff meetings. I am unsure whether these thoughts reflect the participants' views entirely. I may still create an element of bias (Cohen et al., 2018); however, they will provide an additional layer of data.

Limitations

Interviews do have their limitations. The foremost is that I may create a bias by conducting the interviews as the participants may have answered to please me rather than being completely honest (White, 2000). I did consider asking a fellow teacher to conduct the interviews. However, due to the time constraints of myself and the participants, it was impossible to have an impartial interviewer. Ruspini (2002) also suggests that participants may be 'conditioned' by the interviewer. The first interview may set up a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that re-emerges in the second interview. Therefore, I was aware to position myself carefully during the interview and ensured my wording was carefully constructed to avoid this as much as possible. Edwards & Talbot (1999) also suggest that semi-structured interviews are time-consuming, mainly when writing transcripts. To counteract this, I audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The recordings allowed me to listen to the participants' intonations and focus on the interview rather than taking notes. I did not find this too time-consuming due to my small sample size. Despite these challenges, I still believe that interviews were the most effective way of collecting the data needed.

Data analysis

I used a thematic analysis approach to my data analysis and followed Lochmiller and Lester's (2017) seven-phase approach to qualitative data research. An overview of this approach and how it relates to my study is detailed below:

1. *Preparing and organising the data*, which I did by chronologically compiling paper and digital files. I did this promptly, rather than waiting until the end of the data collection process, as I wanted the data to inform the next part of the research.
2. *Transcribing the interviews,* I did this using the password-protected software Otter ai.
3. *Becoming familiar with the data*. I read and re-read the transcripts to pick out initial themes.
4. *Memoing the data*. I wrote notes and reflections on the transcripts highlighting tone of voice and gestures, which might give further insight into thoughts and feelings.
5. *Coding the data.* I colour-highlighted similar and relevant responses in each interview.
6. *Developing codes to themes.* I searched for themes and relationships across categories through the colour codes.
7. *Making the analytic process transparent.* To ensure that my coding and theming are transparent and verifiable, I included an image to document how I coded the data in appendix 5.

I used the research questions highlighted in the earlier section to form 4 general categories to group the data I collected. This gave me the subheadings in my data analysis section, then broken down into pre- and post-intervention themes.

Ethical considerations

I used the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* implemented by the British Educational Research Association (2018) to ensure that I maintained high standards of ethical consideration throughout my research. To further aid my understanding of these guidelines, I referred to the work of Cohen et al. (2018), focusing on educational and social research ethics in research design. Before partaking in this research, I sent a letter to the Headteacher outlining the project's aims (see appendix 5) and requested consent to undertake the study. Approval was granted, and I obtained ethical clearance from CUREC. All staff involved were informed of the project's aims in a presentation on 07/09/21 (see appendix 1). They were given time to think about and discuss the project's aims before providing informed written consent, which included an audio recording of the interviews (see appendix 2). All staff invited to participate gave their consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw before the agreed date.

Ethical considerations of the Research instruments

Before commencing the interviews, several ethical considerations were made. The first was the possible power imbalance between the researcher and the participant (Cohen et al., 2018). Cohen et al. (2018) propose that this is often present in school research and makes participants feel uneasy. They suggest one way to overcome this was to build rapport and trust. I already have a good rapport with and work closely with these staff members. I am not on the Senior Leadership Team, nor are the teachers in the phonics department, so there was no obvious imbalance of power. I felt that all the participants spoke freely and honestly when conducting the interviews.

Another consideration was that when exploring teachers' perceptions, there was a possibility that the outcome was not welcomed by Senior Leadership, particularly when

substantial amounts of time and money have been invested into the development of phonics. Therefore, the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data was crucial. When storing the data, pseudonyms were used, and the audio recordings were kept securely using a password-protected website until they were transcribed. Once transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted (BERA, 2018). Pseudonyms were used at all points in the research project for participants' and pupils' names.

Responsibility to the community of educational researchers

I conducted my research to the highest standards throughout the research process. I am unaware of any other teacher-researchers in my school, and I do not believe that research is currently an area that thrives amongst staff. Due to this, it was pertinent to protect educational research's reputation and integrity by ensuring that all my findings were reported honestly and that I conducted myself, as a researcher, in a professional manner.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I used the data collected from pre- and post-intervention interviews and from the meetings and informal conversations recorded in my reflection journal. The coded data were then grouped into the following themes:

- How do teachers perceive phonics teaching in school?
- What are teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RWInc programme on pupils' reading attainment?
- In what ways do teachers think early reading should be taught?
- How do teachers feel about their phonics teaching practice, and how does training impact teacher confidence when teaching phonics?

These themes form the subheadings in the following findings and discussion section.

How do educators perceive phonics teaching in school?

Before the intervention commenced, I had many informal conversations with the staff about teaching reading and phonics. The overwhelming consensus appeared that phonics is taught in nursery and reception. The pre-intervention interviews confirmed that only one teacher of the four interviewed explicitly taught phonics, and this teacher taught the reception class. The other teachers all gave responses that indicated their awareness of phonics as an element of teaching pupils to read. Two directly reference phonics taught by the reception class teacher.

Despite the lack of current explicit phonic teaching, I thought it was necessary to understand what teachers thought about phonics as a teaching strategy. The participants were asked for their thoughts about the quote below by Michael Gove:

> *Research has consistently and comprehensively shown that systematic phonics instruction by teachers is the most effective and successful way of teaching reading.* (Gove, 2013).

Henry and Rachel acknowledged that they perceive phonics as an important element in teaching children to read, as seen in the quote below:

> ***Henry:*** *I think for most children. If you really drill the phonics until they just don't really want to know about phonics anymore, then they learn to read, and they learn quite quickly. But there's obviously children like Ella. We did loads of extra one-to-one, and she probably still would recognise the sound if I held up the flashcard. But it wouldn't help her read. So, for some children, well for most children, it's brilliant. The rest of them? It doesn't work.*

Henry highlights the efficiency of phonics for the majority, but I found the choice of phrase, 'Drill the phonics until they don't want to know phonics anymore', interesting. It implies that phonics is tedious for the children and possibly the teacher. This theme will be explored in further detail in a later section. They also suggest that phonics is not a practical approach for children with additional needs. Rachel was reasonably optimistic about the quote, but they showed some hesitancy, possibly due to their phonics inexperience:

> ***Rachel:*** *I mean I do think phonics underpins reading and the ability to decode and access texts, but I don't think I've been exposed to enough ways of teaching children to read in order to say I wholeheartedly agree, I would say, even with only doing phonics for a week and a half I've noticed a huge difference in their confidence with reading. And like I said, just that pace and actually decoding. So, I would say it's proven to be effective, but* ***most*** *effective is quite a big statement.*

However, Sarah was much more sceptical about Gove's viewpoint:

> ***Sarah:*** *Well, we can't really say that because you haven't tried all the methods, have you? So, I don't know if it's a fair comment until you have tried all the methods. You know, at what point do you say you've covered all methods? He can say it's* ***an*** *effective method, I don't think you can say it's* ***the*** *most effective as there might be methods that people haven't thought of yet!*

The teachers responded using their personal experiences as their guide, and none asked which research Gove referred to in that statement. Sarah possibly implied that more research into early reading needs to be completed before any definitive methods can be approved. In further conversations with staff, only one participant had heard of the *Rose Report* or the *Clackmannanshire study* that Gove (2013) referenced. This participant had worked in one of the Clackmannanshire study schools, although they had not been a part of the research process.

Even though Rachel and Henry somewhat agreed with Michael Gove's quote, neither explicitly taught phonics in their lessons. Although they did not discuss why they do not teach phonics, it could be due to several reasons such as timetabling, teacher knowledge and experience, teachers not valuing phonics as a necessary teaching tool or other reasons.

In the interviews, all the participants referred to the pupils' reading confidence potentially being more significant than their state school peers on entry into the class. Their reasons were linked to smaller classes with substantial adult support, good online provision during the Covid pandemic and educationally supportive parents. These suggestions by the teachers would support the work of Cooling (2011) and Clark & Rumbold (2006). They suggest a link between children’s positive engagement in literature from an early

age resulting in higher levels of motivation to read and, ultimately, greater reading success. In further informal conversations with staff, it was suggested that the highest attaining readers were the ones that read most at home and had high levels of adult support. One teacher commented, 'Many pupils learn to read at home with their parents and nannies before entering school'. Hood et al. (2008) observed similar findings in their study, suggesting that early parent-child reading provided language acquisition and vocabulary development opportunities. They claim that when parents read with their children, they play an essential role in fostering a child's motivation to read, which has significant consequences for their reading success. It is possible that teachers may assume that explicit word decoding and phonics skills are not required to be taught in school if they believe that pupils are already entering school with the ability to read. Overall, the responses indicate that although phonics is taught in the reception class, there are no coherent methods for the continuity of phonics provision in the latter year groups.

Another theme that became apparent in the pre-intervention interviews was that RWInc is possibly perceived as tedious and repetitive. Participants were asked about their current knowledge of RWInc and their previous experiences in one of the interview questions. Below are some of their responses:

> ***Rachel:*** *Yeah, I taught it a bit at my old school, so I knew the script. I knew it was very prescriptive. Yeah, but I also knew the children knew exactly what they were getting in that lesson, and it was a short lesson… I would have said I thought they got bored, but I actually think, kind of continuity, and that routine is really good for children.*
>
> ***Sarah:*** *I'm only going on what I've seen. I would say it is very... it's reliant on the teachers' skills a lot, which I would say is a good thing. I don't mind that at all. I'm confident in my own ability, but I think… if you get the wrong teacher… I think that it could be as dull as dishwater. With the right teacher and the right methods, I think it will be fine. I think you'd have to be careful if you plonk it in front of a TA who was not used to providing all the skills and ideas, then the kids will get bored with it. But then it might improve? You know? It might still be improving the reading.*

Both participants suggested that there might be an element of monotony due to the prescriptive nature of the scheme. However, they also noted that the uniformity of the lessons might not necessarily be an indicator of poor academic performance, and pupils may still progress regardless.

After teaching phonics for six months, I was eager to discover if teachers had the same opinion. Therefore, in the post-intervention interviews, participants were asked their thoughts on the scheme and if they thought the pupils had found the lessons tedious:

> ***Rachel:*** *I can see why people think that [it is tedious], but ultimately, I think children like structure, and I think they get it with those lessons, and there's a clear progression. They know what the book set is going to contain. It's going to be decoding the words, reading a couple of times, and then writing afterwards. And they know exactly what they're getting.*
>
> ***Sarah:*** *I think it is boring for the teachers to teach. I don't find elements of it exciting for me. Yeah. And I do tend to drift. So, then I take a writing task to almost make up for what has come before. But they've never said to me, "Oh no, not again", or "Do we have to? We did this last time?" They go with it. Maybe that's just the kids we have. I don't know…*
>
> ***Henry:*** *I think it's more boring for me. Yeah, to be honest, I think they don't mind, they know what's coming. They know that they need to do this, this, this and this. When they've done this, this, this and this it's done, and they move on. So, I think they don't actually mind. I think it's me worrying that it's really boring and that it should be full of awe and wonder.*

Post-intervention, the participants all made explicit references to phonics lessons being more tedious for the teachers to deliver. They believed they were required to make it more exciting and engaging for the pupils. Despite this, most teachers suggested that their pupils have responded well to the repetitive nature of the scheme. Phonics lessons being perceived as tedious was not a theme that appeared during the review of available literature. However, one link that can be made is that phonics does not necessarily instil a love of reading, which will be discussed further in the next section.

In what ways do teachers think early reading should be taught?

When asked in the pre-intervention interviews about how early reading should be taught in an ideal world, the participants were unanimous that a mixed-method approach would be the most effective method for teaching reading for most pupils. All participants commented on reading for pleasure and made references to pupils listening to parents and adults read to develop a love of reading. They also mentioned accessing the pictures as part of enjoying books. These themes are also consistent with the findings of Hood et al. (2008), Cooling (2011) and Clark & Rumbold (2006), who all advocate positive reading and book-sharing experiences with adults from a young age to promote higher levels of reading motivation and, ultimately, greater reading success. Rachel and Sarah both emphasise the need for incorporating teaching reading whilst also aiming to instil a love of reading.

> ***Rachel:*** *I think a kind of a multi-tiered approach would be best in terms of still getting in that reading for pleasure and them just enjoying books that they wouldn't be able to access on their own. Either being read to, or listening to audiobooks, or just looking at pictures, but then that combined with books they can read and they can decode.*
>
> ***Sarah:*** *Phonics should be taught hand in hand with the love of books… [it is] not just the be-all and end-all.*

Sarah and Rachel allude to the reading for pleasure approach, a complex notion to 'teach'. It is more of a holistic approach that teachers may adopt in their learning environments. Promoting positive reading experiences within a classroom could be by developing in several ways, such as creating enticing reading corners where pupils want to sit, purchasing good quality children's literature, creating audiobook stations, and promoting events and activities that encourage a love of reading.

Henry also suggests that a greater depth of texts for pupils to access is important. Their views complement those of Paige et al. (2021). They suggest that the art of teaching acknowledges teachers' judgments and their role in selecting and delivering reading activities for their pupils. They propose that teachers can, and should, decide what is

appropriate for their students regarding the selection, differentiation, and delivery of engaging pupils and providing successful reading instruction.

> ***Henry:*** *I would start with the phonics first, but also lots of reading to the children and not just the current phonics thing where you can only let them read books they can phonetically decode as they are really boring. So I would let them have access to a greater number of books and just tell them the words they didn't know. And then those other children who don't get phonics, so for them, they like the actions of looking at a book and learning through sight.*

These responses appear consistent with those found in the *Phonics Screening Check Evaluation Report,* as seen in Figure 4 (DfE, 2015). As mentioned previously, this report demonstrates an overwhelming majority of 87% of respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed that various methods should be used to teach children to decode words. These results suggest that teachers believe teaching various other strategies alongside phonics is favoured to teach early reading. There are similarities between the attitudes expressed by the participants in my study and those described by Clark and Glazzard's (2018) survey of teachers. Their study found that most comments from teachers emphasised the need for a range of strategies when teaching reading, which is a view also supported by other researchers (Stuebing et al., 2008; Castles et al., 2018 & Davis, 2013).

Simple View of Reading

One of the fundamental prerequisites for choosing a suitable phonics scheme was that it fulfilled the requirement to support Hoover and Gough's (1990) *Simple View of Reading* framework. Unlike the Phonics Screening assessments, the RWInc programme and assessment framework emphasises word decoding and language comprehension.

Before commencing RWInc, three out of four teachers were vague when explaining how they currently teach reading. They mentioned that they helped pupils ‘sound out’ words when reading in their English lessons and made no specific references to explicitly

teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences. However, the participants all spoke widely about explicitly teaching comprehension skills. These responses could indicate that the language comprehension element is currently considered more important than the word decoding element. Interestingly, language comprehension is the main element that Davis (2013) and Castles et al. (2018) argue is missing from the SSP programs, which they claim is essential for becoming a fluent reader.

The *Simple View of Reading* framework demonstrates that word decoding and language comprehension are required for successful reading comprehension. I was interested to discover whether, having implemented RWInc, teachers found they were now teaching equal amounts of word decoding and language comprehension skills rather than having more focus on comprehension as they had done previously. In discussion with the teachers and TA's, all except the advanced group reported completing the set 1 or 2 sound activities daily. This type of activity was not executed before the implementation of RWInc. One TA said:

> *It's great because when we are in other lessons, and the girls ask us how to spell something, we can point to the speed sounds on the wall, and they can make a good choice about which is the best spelling for that sound.*

There was always the risk that RWInc may have pushed the focus away from language comprehension skills altogether and more towards decoding, which was a concern raised in studies by Castles et al. (2018) and Davis (2013). However, this does not appear to be the case, as the comment below illustrates:

> ***Rachel:*** *With RWInc we do the predictions before we begin, we look then at the pictures from the book and kind of do the voice choice. I think the pictures are quite heavily involved in the RWInc scheme. I mean they're not the most inspiring books but because they've read them so many times and they can, by that third read, they can add expression. They've got the fluency they can decode. There's a joy in hearing them read fluently.*

In this first section, I began by describing how teachers would choose to teach early reading without the restrictions of the school curriculum. I went on to explore if, by

following the RWInc scheme, a balance has been achieved between word decoding and language comprehension. The following section will discuss whether teachers believe this has increased pupil attainment.

What are educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RWInc programme on pupils' attainment?

At the beginning of the term, before RWInc had been implemented, the participants were asked, 'Do you think RWInc will affect pupil literacy outcomes this year?' The responses are detailed below:

> ***Sarah**: I think I would expect to see an improvement in both reading and spelling. How it will relate to writing, I don't know.*
>
> ***Rachel**: Yeah, definitely. I think it will, and I don't think it will be just reading, but spelling as well. Even if it is teaching the children strategies so they can decode themselves, so they aren't reliant on somebody else to do it for them because I think some of the girls are not very independent learners.*
>
> ***Henry**: I don't really know enough about it, to be honest. I don't know; it's probably a good thing that we are all doing the same thing.*
>
> ***Tom**: I'm really hoping so, yeah, cuz it's a shame to put in all that time and effort and, you know, work into it if it doesn't.*

Sarah and Rachel appeared to be optimistic about the scheme and how it would positively affect pupils' literacy attainment. Henry also seemed to be hopeful yet more hesitant. I thought Tom's response was interesting as they seemed more concerned about the implications for myself as the researcher rather than pupil outcomes. This could indicate that Tom's responses were influenced by interviewer bias.

After teaching RWInc for six months, participants were asked if they thought the pupils' literacy skills had improved. All participants claim that there has been an improvement in literacy skills, with Henry and Rachel specifically identifying phonics as the causal factor, as seen in the comments below:

> ***Henry:** The writing has been quite good this year, probably better. So maybe that's because we have a focus on writing in the phonics, that's a good thing*

that I hadn't been doing. You can see the progress because I used to do it [writing] on a whiteboard in phonics. I quite like that you can see that they could only write a letter, and now they can write a sentence. But still, I just don't really like teaching it [phonics] particularly.

Rachel: *With the appropriate level book? Yes, I would say they're more confident than they were. I think it's taught them strategies when they come across tricky words and even with their spelling as well, to use phonics. With the partner work as well because they have to stop and correct their friend if they get a word wrong. They go, they point at it, and the friend then has to reset, and I think it's actually kind of impressing the importance of when they get a word wrong to go back and read the whole sentence and try and work it out. So, it's subtle skills like that.*

Sarah was more sceptical and rightly questioned other external factors that may have also influenced the formative GL literacy data results. They commented:

Sarah: *When I looked at the results that came through from the GL tests, there's improvement in everyone. How much of that is down to the interventions? There's been loads of interventions, haven't there? How much is down to phonics? How much is down to small classes and natural progression? It's… it's hard to influence what impact that has on everything else. I think time will tell. I think we can't tell yet. But I think maybe in a year's time, I would hope there will be significant improvements in their spelling and their reading test. If there isn't, either it's not working, or we're not teaching it correctly… one or the other.*

I would certainly agree with Sarah that more time is required to discover the long-term impact of an intervention of this scale. In a final interview with Louise, we discussed the data generated by the formative GL assessments and the progress made since the beginning of the intervention.

Louise: *in terms of the data, it hadn't shown a lot of impact on spelling results. Obviously, we did the first round of data capture in October, and we only started the intervention in September. So, we are doing a data capture later in the year that we hope will show the impact.*

It is yet to be seen whether the assessment data will show gains in reading or spelling for pupils; however, Louise and I have both observed phonics lessons, and she commented:

Louise: *I saw a lesson this week actually, and it was really good. I can see that all the teachers are talking the phonics language, and the children are talking the language as well. So, they're talking about diagraphs, and you know, they're using that vocabulary.*

Post-intervention, the participants were asked if, looking back, they felt there was a need to implement RWInc at the school. All the responses indicated that they did perceive a need for the phonics programme, mainly to provide a consistent approach throughout the department. The responses highlighted an absence of continuity and lack of awareness of how reading is taught in each class. Henry commented that any phonics programme could have been chosen and referred to how the government has made the phonics schemes so prescriptive, and there is no longer much difference between them. The participants highlighted the requirement for phonics to be taught systematically, a theory that broadly supports Wyse and Goswami's work (2008) and Torgerson et al. (2006). Both researchers suggest that *systematic* phonics instruction should be adopted, and the choice between analytic or synthetic phonics is negligible.

How do educators feel about their phonics teaching practice, and how does training impact teacher confidence when teaching phonics?

Before introducing RWInc, I felt the participants were not particularly open to talking about their phonics teaching. When asked how they would rate their current phonic knowledge on a scale of 1-10, only one gave a number, 'four or five' the others commented, 'I could do with a bit more training' and 'I thought I was OK until I tried RWInc!' The low scores could be because they did not teach it explicitly, resulting in their confidence in the subject being reasonably low.

While delivering the initial phonics training, it soon became apparent that some participants had misconceptions about the pronunciation of specific phonemes, particularly /ure/, /are/ and /ire/, and some could not correctly identify the graphemes in words. When attempting to address these misconceptions, it became clear that the participants were unaware they had made errors. This finding is consistent with Cunningham (2009) and Stark et al. (2016). They found that many teachers lacked the

phonemic knowledge necessary for teaching phonics effectively and often did not realise their shortcomings.

In a later discussion with the participants, it became evident that only one teacher had completed phonics training at university because they were early career teachers. Two other participants reported little or no specific internal or external phonics training in their careers. This finding is concerning, as the participants all work with pupils in the early stages of reading and writing. The *Rose Report* highlighted the importance of investing in training for in-service teachers and claimed that 75,000 days were provided for two teachers from every school (Rose, 2006). The participants in the current study were seemingly unaware of this training and did not appear to know anyone who had participated in it. It is possible that the training was unavailable for independent schools. However, most participants were teaching in the state sector during 2005-2006 and therefore would have qualified for training. With this training being several years ago and only a one-day course, the participants may have even done the course and since forgotten.

The participants were then asked if they actively sought academic research to inform their teaching practice. All three responses indicate that accessing academic research is an area of interest, reflecting McNamara's results (2002). They suggested that fifty per cent of teachers claimed research increased teacher knowledge and effectiveness, indicating that many teachers perceive the potential impact of educational research as beneficial to their educational practice. Below are the responses:

> ***Sarah:*** *It's not something I have a lot of time for, but I like to read the research, [...] A little bit of research, in my point of view, would help me explain things to the children. It might give me a different way of explaining, you know, why that /oi/ sound doesn't go at the end and why that /oi/ sound is a middle sound and why you never get that at the end.*
>
> ***Henry:*** *I don't really have a lot of time to look at it really. When we do new schemes and things I would at least like to go on a training course. Because generally, we're told to teach, and I have absolutely no idea. Then you kind of go and have a look on Google and see what you meant to be doing for*

> *White Rose maths or whatever it is. But, without the training, it's quite hard to know. So yeah, if I had the time, I would like to know which is the best way…*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *Yeah, I would say I definitely don't spend much time with current research, but it's largely due to time restraints. I would like to kind of keep up with contemporary literature. I signed up for that RWInc newsletter they sometimes put a bit of research on there.*

An overriding theme from these responses was that a lack of time was a seriously limiting factor for teachers accessing research. This theme was also indicated in McNamara's (2002) study. They identified that time, financial implications, and accessibility of research can be serious obstacles for teachers wanting to become evidence-based practitioners.

After completing the official RWInc training and several in-school training sessions, I was interested to learn how the participants perceived their phonic knowledge using a scale of 1-10. Their responses were slightly higher than those in the pre-intervention interviews yet remained relatively low. Very few were willing to suggest a number using the scale, and many of the responses remained underconfident, as demonstrated in the response below:

> *My phonics knowledge is fine. My RWInc knowledge is probably not quite as good. I've done lots of phonics courses. My phonics is probably about eight or nine, but not sure if RWInc would agree!*

Stainthorp (2004) also reported a similar finding, arguing that teachers need substantial explicit training and time to rehearse their teaching in order to deliver phonics fluently. They claim that a one-day training course is not enough for teachers to execute phonics confidently.

One TA had systematic RWInc training at a previous school and was extremely confident with the phonics terminology and application in lessons. In a conversation with this participant, they said that their previous school's phonics teaching was very formulaic. Teachers and TA's undertook frequent training, observed lessons, and

regularly shared good practices. In their opinion, constant training and focus on phonics improved staff's confidence.

The timing of the training course should also be considered. The course that the participants attended was a two-day online course that was organised for the last couple of days of term one. While this was the best option for the school, as these days were relatively straightforward to cover lessons, it potentially was not the more suitable timing for staff development. One participant commented:

> *It is a shame that the training was just before Christmas because we went on holiday for three weeks and by the time we came back I felt like I had forgotten it all!*

I had intended to have a meeting to discuss the training on the INSET day before returning to school for term two. However, other meetings overran, and alternative subjects were prioritised, resulting in the meeting being postponed for a further two weeks. Therefore, it was five weeks before the team could sit down and discuss the training course together. On the whole, the participants seemed pleased with the training programme. The participants commented:

> ***Rachel:*** *I really enjoyed the two-day training, and I would definitely say my practice altered a lot from it. I think maybe kind of continuing some training afterwards would be good. So, just kind of the opportunity to go and see what other people are doing. So you know you are doing the right thing.*
>
> ***Henry:*** *I thought it was quite good at the time. So only really because all the training that we've had through school has never been based at reception or Key Stage One. It is normally like how to improve your GCSE science. So yeah, I thought it was quite good. I really liked it.*

Henry's response was interesting as, on the one hand, they were positive, saying they liked the CPD. On the other hand, there was no reference to the specifics of the course. Henry suggests that the nature of the training was beneficial and appropriate to their teaching and implies that that is not always necessarily the case. Hardy and Melville (2011) conducted a study into teacher motivations to engage in CPD. They suggest that schools should reject compulsory 'one-size-fits-all' CPD and focus their efforts on

tailoring CPD and promoting teachers' personal choices when choosing courses. Our school setting is for pupils aged three to sixteen, and the CPD often appears to be more tailored to the senior school section. Potentially, further research could be conducted in this area to ensure CPD is appropriate for teaching staff.

I was surprised that no one mentioned the online delivery method. I predicted this could present a challenge as, during informal conversations, some participants had previously mentioned how draining online teaching had been due to staring at a screen all day. I expected some participants would have responded by saying they preferred to attend the training in person. Research by McConnell et al. (2013) into teacher perceptions of virtual CPD found that teachers prefer face-to-face meetings and that accessing sessions from home encountered distractions such as pets, family members, and telephones.

I have been unable to find any literature related to the skill acquisition of teachers attending CPD online versus in-person. However, research by Callister & Love (2016) compared the learning outcomes of university students studying online versus students studying in more traditional face-to-face courses. They suggest that students accessing the online delivery method mastered the content at essentially the same rate as students in the face-to-face class. Therefore, despite the challenges of the CPD timing and the virtual delivery format, the teachers have hopefully acquired new phonics skills.

In my final interview with Louise, I was interested to find out from a senior leadership position how they felt the introduction of the phonics program had developed over the six months. She commented,

> *It led to a lot of professional conversation because you've kind of gone on the journey together. Obviously, you have the knowledge and you've led it really well and the journey for the rest of them has been easier because you've worked collaboratively together, rather than just saying here's what we're doing get on with it. There's been the training, peer observation and collaborative work as well. Teamwork has been really important in the department.*

The phonics department has generally shown a willingness to attend training, ask for advice, and question teaching methods. I would certainly agree that the intervention has created opportunities for professional conversations.

Limitations, Conclusions, and Implications

Limitations

As mentioned in the methodology section, one of the limitations of conducting interviews was that I might create an interviewer bias. White (2000) suggested that participants may answer the questions in a way that they think will please the interviewer, rather than being completely honest. I felt that Tom's responses in the pre-intervention interviews very much reflected what they thought I wanted to hear for the purposes of my research. When having informal discussions with Tom, they voiced very different opinions from those expressed in the interviews. Once the phonics groups had been timetabled and assigned, Tom's group consisted of pupils who needed a language and comprehension focus rather than phonics. Therefore, despite Tom completing the RWInc training, I felt there was no longer a requirement to interview Tom post-intervention. I did not think the responses would provide a genuine insight into that participant's perspectives.

Another limitation of this study is that a very small sample of five participants was used. It has prevented me from making generalised conclusions as the participant group is too small to widely represent phonics teachers as a whole. In this particular study, I could not include more participants as there simply were no more phonics teachers in the school.

Conclusions and Implications

My initial intention for this research was to explore ways in which we, as a school, could improve reading and writing outcomes for the pupils. Instrumental to my research was implementing a new SSP scheme. The aim was to provide structure and continuity within the department, as it had been highlighted as an area for development. A new spelling scheme commenced at the same time as the phonics, as did a new programme of support for learning interventions, including activities akin to analytic phonics instruction for targeted children. Therefore, it would have been challenging to precisely define what impact the phonics scheme had on pupil achievement as there could have been influences from multiple factors.

Whilst I knew that phonics was a controversial teaching method, I had always been under the impression that it was a secure way of teaching reading and, as it is included in the National Curriculum, must be backed-up by significant research. Once I began reading the literature, I was unaware how many different levels of complexity there were from academics, policymakers, teachers, and training providers. I suddenly felt rather unsure about implementing a new phonics scheme and started to doubt whether this was the best course of action. However, one of the main aims of the research was the provide a consistent approach between teachers, and continuity for the pupils and I believed there was enough positive research to suggest that phonics is a beneficial method of teaching reading.

At the beginning of the research process, I had only been at the school one year. I was unsure how the participants would react to being asked to implement a new teaching scheme, especially as some of the teachers had been teaching in their year group for several years and could have been resistant to change. Therefore, the focus of my

research developed into how introducing a new compulsory phonics scheme may affect teachers' attitudes.

At the beginning of the intervention, it soon became clear that the participants undoubtedly had an in-depth understanding of their pupils, their learning needs, and how to adapt their teaching to ensure pupils achieve accordingly. The participants unanimously reported that they strongly believe early reading should be taught using a mixed-method approach. The participants all acknowledged the important role that phonics plays in teaching early reading. However, they believe that the individual teacher's judgement about their pupils best informs their teaching methods. These views have also been echoed by teachers in other studies (DfE, 2015; Clark and Glazzard, 2018 & Paige et al., 2021). Despite the government disapproving of the mixed-method approach to reading, my research suggests that teachers would prefer to use their professional expertise to decide how best to teach their pupils. One reason for this may be because the class sizes are very small at independent schools, so teachers have the scope to tailor their teaching to the pupil's individual needs.

However, all the teachers felt that implementing the phonics scheme was beneficial as it provided continuity across classes and a shared vocabulary across the department.

The main concern raised by the participants was that the scheme was unexciting. Although most of the teachers did not think the pupils found the scheme monotonous, some teachers themselves reported that they found teaching the lessons dull. This theme was also noted in the work of Clark and Glazzard (2018) when surveying their teachers. Therefore, it will be essential that the phonics team continue to meet regularly to discuss how the scheme can be developed further and use this time as an opportunity to share good practices and continue professional conversations about teaching pedagogy. Independent schools have more flexibility than state schools to adapt and refine the curriculum for their pupils. Although the school has adopted a SSP scheme which does comply with the government requirements, in my opinion, the scheme can

and should be adapted by the teachers to make it work more effectively for the current pupils. If the teachers play a part in adapting the SSP scheme, they may feel more invested in it and be more likely to feel ownership of it.

There was also a strong focus on promoting a love of reading in the interview responses. As a school, this is an area that we could continue to develop by promoting reading by providing high-quality literature and reading areas and raising the profile of reading throughout the school. An initiative such as this could easily run alongside and complement the phonics teaching in classes.

The training provided by RWInc was designed for teachers in state schools. There were many references to the phonics screening check, the mandatory reading schemes, and Ofsted requirements. Whilst independent schools do not have to adhere to these obligations; it is beneficial to stay informed of the state school requirements to adopt best practices. Continuing into the next academic year, I believe it would be helpful to continue frequent in-school training to develop educators' subject knowledge, improve confidence and encourage professional conversations as the interviews demonstrated that teacher subject knowledge was sometimes questionable. However, from leading this intervention, I found that it became increasingly challenging to coordinate a time to deliver training to the teachers and TA's. For the training to be productive and beneficial, a greater emphasis should be placed on CPD to promote staff development.

Working at an independent school offers many opportunities to build a curriculum appropriate for its pupils. Without the tight National Curriculum constraints, educators and leaders have much greater scope to make informed decisions based on academic research. One of the main barriers to this is teacher's time. The participants in this research were willing and able to create and adapt a curriculum that best suited their pupils with the little time they had. More time allocated to teachers to develop and professionally discuss teaching delivery, could potentially result in higher-quality curriculum delivery.

Although the focus of this research was the development of phonics, it soon became clear that the teachers were happy to undertake a new teaching scheme, which could have been in any subject, if they felt that they were supported and provided with adequate training. Therefore, prioritising professional development and giving teachers the support needed, whether that be time to discuss and plan with colleagues, or timetabled meeting times, could positively contribute to how teachers approach the adoption of new teaching schemes. In the final interview, Rachel commented,

> *I think possibly teaching reading and phonics are some of my favourite lessons [...] I really enjoy teaching it!*

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Appendices

Appendix 1

A copy of the presentation made to staff on the INSET day in September.

Appendix 2

Lesley Nelson-Addy: DPhil Candidate - Education
Oxford University e-mail: lesley.nelson-addy@education.ox.ac.uk

Anna Whitham: MSc student- Education
Oxford University e-mail: educ0929@ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in: Teacher Perceptions: In what ways does the introduction of a new compulsory Phonics scheme affect student outcomes in reading?

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **CIA-22-002**

Purpose of Study: To discover teacher perceptions of Phonics teaching in relation to the writing produced by Reception to Year 3 aged pupils.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I understood the information presented in the department meeting on 05/09/2021 for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until 01/11/21, without giving any reason.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications, reports for school purposes, or presentations.	
I consent to being audio recorded.	
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
I agree to take part.	

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[1]	Signature

[1] *To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 3

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Director Professor Jo-Anne Baird

Mrs X
X's School
XX
XX

Dear Mrs X,

I am writing to enquire about conducting research in school this academic year. As you know, I am studying for the Master's in Learning and Teaching at Oxford University, supervised by X. In my final research project "Teacher perceptions: In what ways does the introduction of a new compulsory Phonics scheme affect student outcomes in reading?" I will explore how the introduction and delivery of a systematic Phonics scheme in the Reception to Year 3 classes impacts on pupils reading.

The research will take place in the Junior School department with the Reception/Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 teachers and Teaching Assistants. I aim to discover current staff perceptions of both Phonics and pupils reading and collaborate with the team to develop the teaching of Phonics. X has agreed to collaborate with me on this project.

By participating in the research, the school would be contributing to a project that will deepen our understanding of Phonics learning for pupils in the Junior school, and so contribute towards developing ways of improving reading attainment for pupils at X school in the future.

I hope to conduct this research between September 2021 and September 2022. I would interview and audio-record staff members engaged in the project and photocopy some students' written work.

Oxford University has strict ethical procedures on conducting ethical research, consistent with current British Educational Research Association guidelines. The University also recognises, however, that my study is a piece of practitioner research, and that schools already operate with the highest ethical standards. Therefore, only your formal consent as headteacher is necessary, and not that of individual parents or staff. However, throughout the research, students and other teachers will be able to refuse to participate in any research activities at any time.

All participants, including students, teachers and the school, would be made anonymous in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to my supervisor X [XX @education.ox.ac.uk] and me, and only used for academic purposes. It will be kept for as long as it has academic value.

If you are happy for me to proceed with this study, please confirm that using the attached reply form. If you have any concerns or need more information about what is involved, please contact me or my supervisor. Further, if you have any questions about this ethics process at any time, please contact the chair of the department's research ethics committee, though: research.office@education.ox.ac.uk

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 4

Preliminary interview questions:

- When the new children entered your class this year, how confident do they appear to be with reading?
- How do you think this compares with schools nationally?
- Do you have any thoughts on why this might be?
- Generally, how do the children in your class feel about reading?
- How do you teach children to read in your class?
- Thinking about the children in your class, what might they do when they reach an unknown word when reading?
- 'Research has consistently and comprehensively shown', says Michael Gove, 'that systematic, phonic instruction by a teacher is the most effective and successful way of teaching children to read' (Gove, 2013). What are your thoughts about this statement?
- How do you currently teach Phonics?
- What experience do you have of the RWInc scheme?
- How do you feel about it?
- Do you think the implementation of RWInc this academic year will affect pupil outcomes in reading?
- What are your opinions of the national Phonics screening?
- What Phonics training have you had in your career?
- How would you rate your current phonics subject knowledge on a scale of 1-10? 10 being extremely competent, 1 having no subject knowledge.

Interview questions after 6 months

How do educators' perceive phonics teaching in school?

- Do you think it is important that phonics is taught in school?
- Do you think there was a need to introduce RWInc?
- How do you feel about phonics now you have been teaching for 6 months? Have your attitudes or ideas changed?
- Do you think phonics is an effective method for teaching all children? Do you think it benefits some more than others?
- How do you think children should be taught to read? If you could decide, what do you think the most effective methods would be?

What are educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RWInc program on pupils' reading attainment?

- How confident do the pupils in your class appear to be with reading?
- Do you think the Phonics scheme has made a difference to their reading ability?
- Have you noticed any other changes in your pupils since beginning the Phonics scheme?
- Generally, how do the children in your class feel about reading? Has this changed since RWInc?
- What do you think of the phonics grouping system?

- In the initial interviews, some teachers thought the repetitive nature of RWInc might be boring for some children. What are your thoughts on this now?

How do educators' feel about their own phonics teaching practice?

- Do you think the RWInc scheme has changed the way you teach children how to read in your class? If so, how?
- How do you feel about the RWInc scheme now you have experienced teaching it for 2 terms?
- Do you actively look for academic research to inform your teaching practice? What are your reasons for this? Do you think academic research enhances a teacher's knowledge?
- Have you heard of the Rose review or the Clackmannanshire study?

How does training impact teacher confidence when teaching phonics, and what is the most effective form of training?

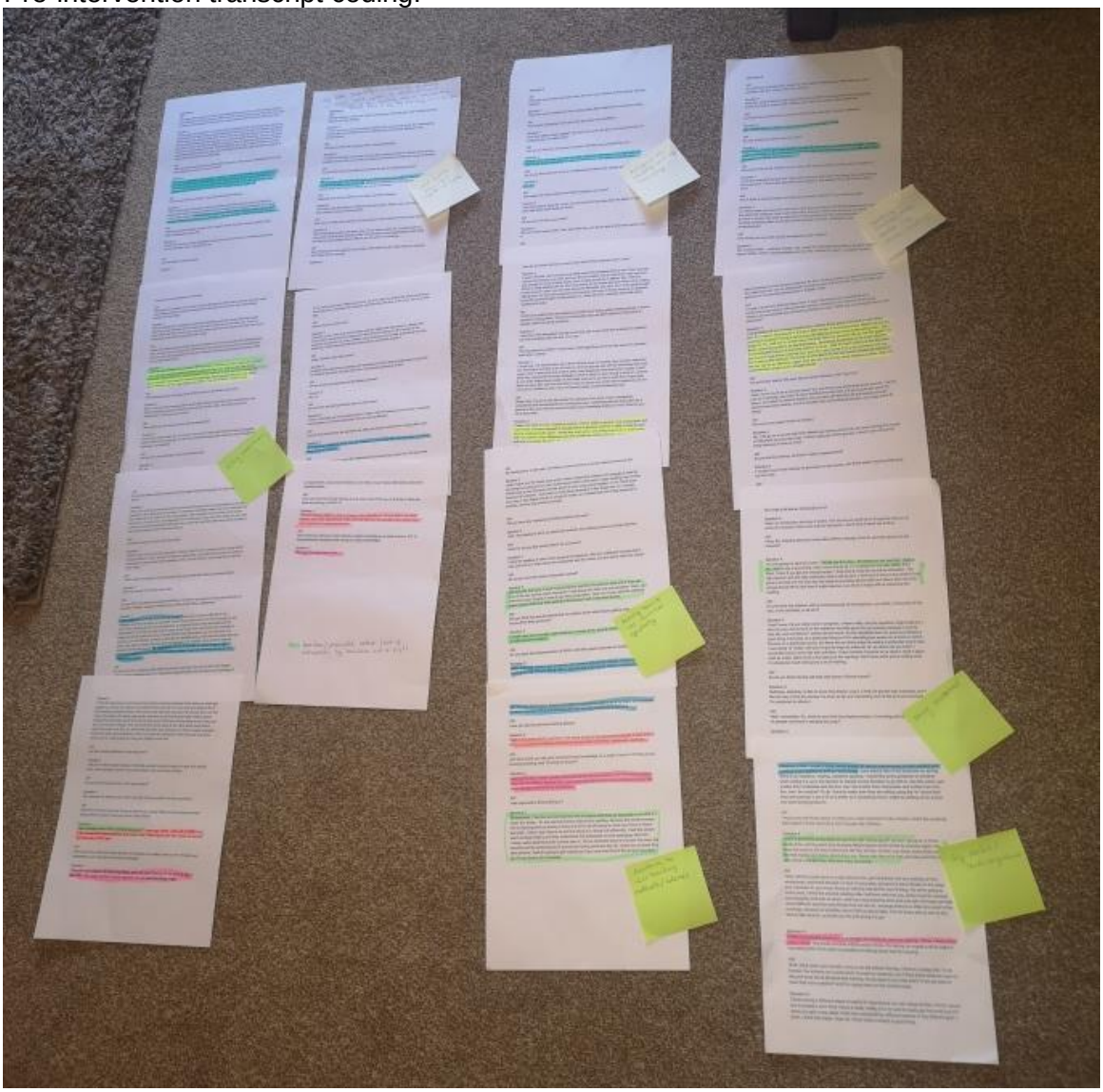
- Can you briefly describe what is meant by the term 'phoneme,' 'grapheme' and 'digraph?'
- Thinking about the RWInc training, do you think this was beneficial to your teaching? Did it improve your subject knowledge?
- Do you think the training you received was adequate for you to be able to deliver the scheme?
- Research suggests that regular training is needed for teachers to feel confident with phonics, what do you think about this?
- What further training would be beneficial?
- How would you rate your current phonics subject knowledge on a scale of 1-10? 10 being extremely competent, 1 having no subject knowledge.

Interview questions for Louise after 6 months:

- Can you describe how early reading was taught before September 2021?
- 'Research has consistently and comprehensively shown', says Michael Gove, 'that systematic, phonic instruction by a teacher is the most effective and successful way of teaching children to read' (Gove, 2013). What are your thoughts about this statement?
- Independent schools do not have to teach phonics, why did you agree to implement RWInc at our school?
- Did you think there would be any staff resistance to beginning a new phonics scheme of work? Have you experienced this before?
- Do you think teachers' attitudes to phonics have changed over the course of the year?
- How do you think training has impacted on teacher confidence when teaching phonics?
- What do you think is the most effective form of training?
- Do you think phonics has made an impact at our school?

Appendix 5

Pre-intervention transcript coding.



Post-intervention transcript coding