CATHOLIC EDUCATION MELBOURNE

Phonics in Context: Successful and animated readers and writers

A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF SCHOOLING

Contents

1. Introduction

Catholic Education Melbourne offers school leadership and early years educators this resource, *Phonics in Context*. It is intended that the resource and ongoing professional dialogue will build the capacity of teachers in the early years to develop successful, confident and capable readers and writers. Its aim is to build teacher capacity to teach phonics within a rich social learning environment that supports successful and animated readers and writers.

This resource is informed by, and consistent with, the aims and intentions of *Horizons of Hope – An Education Framework for the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (CEM 2016e) and the Victorian Curriculum: English (VCAA 2015).

Literacy provides students with the capacity to realise their place in the contemporary world. 'At the heart of each Catholic school is a desire for the full flourishing of each student across religious, physical, cognitive, emotional and social domains' (CEM 2016e, p. 5).

Literacy supports the enactment of this 'full flourishing' and equips them for a 'journey of endless possibilities, where students are energised to seek meaning and explore questions about the world around them' (CEM 2016d, p. 9). Literacy empowers students with the skills to access new learning and provides the means for contributing to local and global communities, even in the early years.

This *Phonics in Context* resource supports teachers to implement effective phonics teaching in their classrooms. The context for teaching and learning phonics is reading and writing. When reading and writing, students need to learn how to attend to all the sound units of our language (words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes) and to visually recognise letters and letter patterns used to represent those sounds.

While reading authentic text, the focus is on meaning, and phonic knowledge can be applied to assist word recognition (Flurkey & Xu 2003; Meyer & Whitemore 2011). While writing, phonics knowledge is essential for turning spoken language or thoughts into written words on the page.

2. What is phonics?

Phonics refers to the relationships between the sounds of our language and the patterns of letters used to represent those sounds when reading and writing.

The purpose of phonics is to help students become efficient and effective readers and writers.

Phonics is:

- **one** strategy for word recognition in reading (decoding)
- **one** strategy for spelling in writing (encoding).

In reading, these sources of information are used in an integrated way by the brain to construct the meaning of the author and are essential for comprehension to occur. In writing, these sources of information support the mirror process to reading.

Keeping a focus on meaning

When students are reading, they problem-solve unknown words by using a range of information. They might use some background knowledge, syntactic knowledge and some pictorial cues to make predictions, and letter–sound knowledge to confirm or question these predictions. The brain works quickly when making these decisions but ultimately the reader is seeking to make meaning of the text using letter-sound information to support these decisions.

An example

Consider the word 'tear'. Did you read the word as /teer/ (rhyming with deer) or /tair/ (rhyming with hair)? When you know how the word is being used, and what it means, you can read and pronounce it correctly: I got a <u>tear</u> in my eye when I saw the <u>tear</u> in my new dress.

Consider the word 'row'. Did you read it as a word rhyming with 'throw' or as a word rhyming with 'cow'? If you were reading connected text, you would have the meaning and structure required to read and pronounce the word correctly: I will <u>row</u> the boat across the lake ('row' as a verb). We disagreed about the cricket score and had a <u>row</u> ('row' as a noun).

Semantics (meaning) and syntax (structure) are essential for readers and writers to determine how graphophonic relationships work, therefore phonics knowledge works best when all sources of information are available to the learner. (ALEA 2015; Bowers & Bowers, 2017; Cooke 2016; Clay 1991; Cunningham & Allington 2003; Emmitt, Hornsby & Wilson 2013; Goodman 1993; Hornsby & Wilson 2011; Kirby & Bowers 2012; Weaver 2009).

> **We can only determine how phonics works in a meaningful context.**

More about sounds and letters

Letters and sounds in isolation are abstract symbols with no meaning. With good teaching, students quickly discover that one letter can represent many sounds, and one sound can be represented by many different letter combinations. For example, the letter 'a' can be the short /ă/ sound, the /ar/ sound as in 'pa', the /or/ sound as in 'water', the /ə/ as in 'about', and so on.

In the 100 most frequently used words, the common sound of the letter 'a' is /ŏ/ (as in was, want, what). Also, the /ee/ sound can be represented by different letter combinations, such as 'e', 'ee', 'ea', '-y', and so on.

Students must learn how meaning determines graphophonic relationships. They can only learn phonics well if teachers start with meaningful text rather than isolated letters or sounds.

> 'Once you remove phonemes and graphemes from a meaningful context, they're no longer phonemes or graphemes … English orthographic phonology is delimited and constrained by meaning, structure and history …' (Cooke 2016, p. 1).

There are many explicit teaching methodologies that support the teaching of phonics, for example, shared reading, shared writing, guided reading, interactive writing and language experience.

Writing

Teachers may use a short, simple sentence written after a shared experience, e.g. *We ate baked beans*. This shared writing experience provides a strong context for helping young learners identify and focus on the initial /b/ sound and to see that the letter 'b' represents that sound in those two words.

Reading

With consideration of learner needs the teacher intentionally selects texts that offer appropriate teaching opportunities. A familiar book such as *I Went Walking* (Williams 1991) provides the teacher with a range of teaching opportunities about letters and sounds within words including:
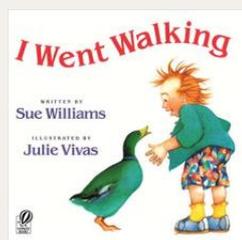
- highlighting the initial letter–sound relationship ('w'-/w/ in walking)
- highlighting onset and rime patterns (going from 'w-ent'
  to a known word such as 's-ent')
- highlighting morphemes within words from the text ('walk', 'walk-ing', 'walk-s') (Bowers & Bowers 2017; Carlisle 2010; Nunes & Bryant 2006).

Teachers make intentional decisions about what to teach based on their students' current phonics knowledge (Moustafa & Maldonado-Colon 1999). Relevant and timely assessment is central to these teaching decisions as well as identifying any students requiring different kinds of intervention (see CEM 2016a).

The focus is always meaning-making. When teachers use texts which provide a rich context for learning graphophonic relationships, there is greater transfer of graphophonic knowledge to all aspects of their literate behaviour (Arya et al. 2005; Cantrell 1999). Children learning phonics in the context of meaningful reading and writing events develop greater ability to use phonics knowledge effectively than children in more traditional classrooms where skills are practiced in isolation (Smith & Elley 1997).

More about phonological awareness

Phonological awareness refers to awareness of the sound units in our language (words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes). Young children may not even know where the word boundaries are.

It's evident when they write things like Wunsa ponna for 'once upon a' or apastate for 'half past eight'.

Indeed, for some students it is not until they see written words, while involved in learning to read and write, that the concept of 'word' develops. They don't know where the word boundaries are and have more difficulty perceiving the individual sounds in words. Their phonological awareness (and therefore their phonemic awareness) develops as they learn to read and write (Goswami 1996; Moustafa 1997).

More about graphological awareness

Graphological awareness refers to awareness of the different units of print, such as words, printed syllables, onset and rimes, and letters. This awareness is closely related to the concepts about print (directionality and concepts such as first letter, last letter, first word, last word). Automatic recognition of letters and letter clusters supports efficient reading and writing.

3. Phonics in context: Reading

As already identified, reading to comprehend text requires the combination or integration of three sources of information constantly operating interdependently, including semantic, syntactic and graphophonic information.

An example

Consider the following sentence: The frog hopped across the …

(i) If readers don't know the last word, they need a strategy that helps them to complete the sentence so that it makes sense grammatically. The word before the unknown word is 'the', so it only makes sense to complete the sentence with a noun. Here, the reader is using **syntactic knowledge**.

(ii) Readers need a strategy that uses background knowledge and the developing meaning of the text. They may think about the kinds of things frogs could hop across. They might predict words like *road, footpath, track, grass, room, hall, driveway* or any number of other words that would fit the meaning and the syntax of the sentence. Now the reader is using **semantic knowledge** as well.

(iii) Finally, readers need a strategy that helps them to use their knowledge of letters and sounds and how they are related. If they see that the word starts with the letters 'gr' they're very likely to predict that the word is 'grass'. A quick check of the other letters in the word will confirm that the word is 'grass', so they have now used **graphophonic knowledge** as well.

Semantic and syntactic knowledge are very powerful for making predictions, but graphophonic knowledge is essential for confirming, modifying or rejecting those predictions. All three sources of information are most effectively learned when they are operating interdependently or in concert (Braunger & Lewis 1998; Hornsby 2000; Freebody & Luke 2003; Moustafa 1999; Rhodes & Dudley-Marling 1996; Smith 1988; Weaver 2009).

Literature provides an ideal context for teaching graphophonic knowledge and assists teachers to make decisions about the design of the students' learning.

An example

Consider *There's a Bear On My Chair* (Collins 2015). With this engaging text, teachers have opportunities to help students make discoveries about many different letter–sound relationships.
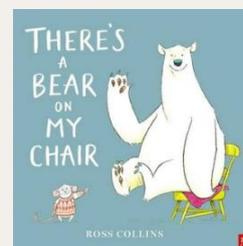
After the text has been read for both enjoyment and reader response (possibly over several days) the teacher may ask, 'What do you notice about the title? Which words sound alike?'

The text provides opportunities for specific teaching of many different letter–sound relationships. The teacher makes decisions about what is appropriate according to the students' needs. The teacher might select:

there   bear   chair

– and highlight the /air/ sound.

The students might then be asked to listen for other rhyming words from the story, so the focus is on sound (rhyming). The teacher and the students might then work together to group the words by visual letter pattern using other known words:

there	bear	chair	share
where	pear	stair	spare
	swear	hair	glare
	wear	pair	scare
		fair	aware

Effective classrooms are places where students know that learning is collaborative and they willingly and frequently bring their own insights to the lesson. They also make their own discoveries, not just the 'guided discoveries' led by the teacher. Their learning is not constrained or limited by a set sequence of skills. Each student requires deliberate teaching based on evidence of student progress.

Engaging texts also help teachers meet the aims and aspirations of *Horizons of Hope* because they:

• provide multiple entry points for learners (CEM 2016c, p. 6)
• prepare learners to be collaborative problem solvers (CEM 2016d, p. 3)
• help to provide a rich intellectual space … (that) sees the nature of learning as connected, rather than as discrete, isolated elements (CEM 2016e, p. 7).

4. Phonics in context: Writing

Graphophonic knowledge is essential when early writers start attempting to put words down on paper. Emerging writers listen carefully to the words they want to write, try to identify the sounds they hear, and then write letters or letter clusters to represent those sounds. It is recognised that phonic knowledge is of greater significance in writing than in reading and that learning about the sound–letter relationship is best taught in the context of learning to write (Chomsky 1971; Clay 1991; Emmitt, Hornsby, & Wilson 2013).

Foundation students entering school benefit enormously from their wealth of oral language experience that can support their learning about the sounds of the language. One of the earliest stages of learning about the relationship between sound and letters is to become aware of the sounds of the language they speak. Becoming aware of all the units of sound in the language (including words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes) can assist students to begin the process of learning to make connections to letters and letter clusters. Phonological awareness can be explicitly taught in the context of writing authentic and connected messages.

Young writers must learn that:

- A single sound can be represented by different letters or letter clusters, e.g. spellings of the longer /ee/ sound include 'e' as in *me*, 'ee' as in *bee*, 'ea' as in *sea*, '-y' as in *baby*.
- A single letter can represent various sounds. Sounds are only associated with letters in written text, e.g. the letter 'o' can represent the longer /ō/ sound in *no*, *go*, *hello*; the shorter /ŏ/ sound in *hot*, *boss*, *odd*; the /ə/ sound (schwa) in *other*, *riot*, *pilot*.
- Quite often, letters don't represent sounds at all. This is true of the so-called *silent letters* and letters which only have a morphological function rather than a phonological function.

In their earliest attempts to write words down, emerging writers largely depend upon the sounds they hear in the words they want to write. They also learn visually and begin to write some high frequency words with ease. Many of the high frequency words are not phonetically regular and they are more effectively learned visually.

It is essential that students come to realise that spellings are tied to morphemes, the smallest units of meaning. In the words do, does, done and doing the common morphemic base is 'do'. The 'do' remains consistent despite the change in the sound of the letter 'o':

| do | /d + oo/ |
does	/ d + ŭ + z/
done	/ d + ŭ + n/
doing	/d + oo + ĭ + ŋ/ (ŋ = ng)

Teaching students about morphemes actually helps them to understand the nature of our spelling. In the example above, students can see the letter 'o' is part of the morpheme 'do' and does not change despite the sound change.

So there are several essential strategies in the early years for spelling words while writing: sound strategies, visual strategies and morphemic strategies. Paying attention to sound is always a helpful strategy, but as students learn more visual patterns (including more high frequency sight words) and more meaning patterns (morphemes) they rely less on sound.

Young students also benefit from considering the 'story' or the history of words (etymology).

An example

After reading *Centipede's 100 Shoes* (Ross 2003) the students are fascinated by the story of the word 'centipede'. The teacher could help the children make connections between the word 'centipede' and other words containing 'cent', helping them to understand that 'cent' means one hundred.
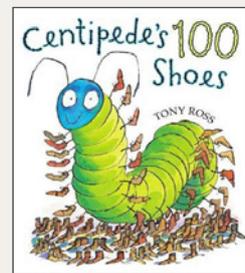
Teachers could utilise the word (centipede) in different ways:

- clap the syllables (phonological awareness)
- list other words where the letter 'c' represents the /s/ sound (phonics)
- list other words (centimetre, century) containing 'cent' as a unit of meaning (morphemic awareness and etymology).

'…English spellings are organised around the interrelation of morphology, etymology, and phonology and it is not possible to accurately characterise grapheme phoneme correspondence in isolation of these other sublexical contraints' (Bowers & Bowers 2017).

5. Focusing on growth and progress

Monitoring student growth and progress in reading and writing is essential.

> Curriculum design in a Catholic school embraces multiple entry points for learners, which enable them to work through the progression of learning at their own pace (CEM 2016c, p. 6).

Individual students will be at different points in their learning, therefore, teachers need to make judgments based on evidence to ensure that progress continues to be made over time. It is also essential for teachers to continually monitor the progress of each student in order to determine what they need to learn next.

For educators to design learning and teaching that is meaningful and differentiated they must consider where their learners are at a particular point in time (CEM 2016b, p. 5).

Learning is supported by:

- ongoing assessment and close observation of all students
- a thorough knowledge of the Victorian Curriculum
- a deep understanding of the principles of learning
- research and evidence-based pedagogy.

6. The broader context

Today, learning is understood to be shaped by the context in which it is 'situated and is actively constructed through social negotiation with others' (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides 2010, p. 3). Teachers build learning environments where:

- constructive, self-regulated learning is fostered
- learning is sensitive to context
- collaboration is prioritised.

Teachers in the early years create learning environments that develop a culture of curiosity about how words work. These learning environments are informed by *Horizons of Hope*, where each student is at the centre of pedagogical decision-making. 'Pedagogical choices in a Catholic school are sensitive to the entitlement, the context and the narrative of each learner' (CEM 2016e, p. 7).

The VCAA states in the English curriculum that:

> Texts are chosen because they are judged to have potential for enriching the lives of students, expanding the scope of their experience, and because they represent effective and interesting features of form and style. Learning to appreciate literary texts and to create their own literary texts enriches students' understanding of human experiences and the capacity for language to deepen those experiences (VCAA, p. 10).

If teachers start with connected, authentic text when teaching phonics, they start not only with meaning but with students who are enlivened through engagement with the text. This is important because learning is affective as well as cognitive. In other words, learning involves the heart as well as the head.

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Teacher resource – Glossary

Term	Definition	Example
Authentic text	Authentic text refers to texts that have been written for real-life purposes (for example, stories, letters, reports, emails, explanations).	A story or narrative. A letter to a friend. A non-fiction book.
Blend	A blend is a combination of two or three consonants pronounced so that each sound keeps its own identity	**bl**ot, **dr**essed, **scr**ap
Constructive learning	Constructive learning is a term that refers to a student constructing and taking ownership of their own learning.	A student developed learning goal can support constructive learning.
Diagraph	A diagraph is two letters representing a single sound.	'th', 'ph', 'ng', 'ee', 'ea'
Explicit teaching	Explicit teaching uses high impact strategies where the learning is clearly identified for students.	Modelled writing of a narrative.
Grapheme	A grapheme is a letter or letter cluster that represents a single phoneme. A grapheme can be 1, 2, 3 or 4 letters.	**b**-at **ch**-ip r-**igh**-t w-**eigh**-t
Graphophonic information	In linguistic terms it refers to knowledge of the relationship between letters and sounds.	Knowledge that the letter 'b' represents the /b/ phoneme.
Guided reading	Guided reading is a small group instructional strategy that provides students with high level of support to read texts. It is generally the first reading of an unseen text.	
Interactive writing	Interactive writing is an instructional strategy where the teacher and students co-create a text. The teacher shares 'in-the-head' strategies. The students are invited to contribute to the composing of the text and to the spelling of words via a 'share-the-pen' technique.	A recount of a shared experience. A response to a school event. A letter to the school principal.
Language experience	Language experience is an instructional strategy that uses the oral language generated through shared experience to create a shared text. This supports both reading and writing. The progression is from shared experience, to oral language, to writing and then to reading.	A student writes (or a teacher scribes) a personal recount of an experience. The text is then used as a text to be read by that student.

Term	Definition	Example
Literacy	Literacy is the ability to speak, listen, view, read and write. It is the ability to use language for multiple purposes in a range of contexts.	
Morpheme	A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a language.	un-able (2 morphemes) dis-agree-able (3 morphemes)
Multi-modal text	Multimodal text combines two or more modes of communication, including an image, print, spoken text, computer presentations or film.	An information flyer that includes a large heading, photograph, narrative, date, venue information and a map.
Onset	An onset is part of a syllable that precedes the vowel.	b in b-at str in str-ain dr in dr-ive
Oral language	Oral language is a system through which spoken words are used to express ourselves.	
Pedagogy	Pedagogy is the art and science of how students will be taught and supported to learn (CEM 2016d, p. 2).	
Phoneme	A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in speech that distinguishes one word from another. Standard Australian English has 44 phonemes.	The word 'hat' has three phonemes /h-a-t/
Phonemic awareness	Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness (see below). It is the awareness of the individual phonemes in a spoken word.	Awareness of individual sounds in a word: cat /k - a - t/
Phonics	Phonics is the the relationship between the sounds of our language and the patterns of letters used to represent those sounds when reading and writing.	
Phonology	Phonology is the study of the set of distinctive sounds in a language.	
Phonological awareness	Phonological awareness is the understanding or awareness that speech can be broken into smaller parts such as words, syllables, rhymes and phonemes.	

Term	Definition	Example
Rime	A rime is part of a syllable. It is the vowel and any consonants attached.	The –at in cat. The –ight in night.
Self-regulation	Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and control personal behavior, emotions or thoughts, altering them in accordance with the demands of the situation.	Students who self-regulate their own learning can easily identify their own learning goals, what they need to learn and how they can best learn.
Semantic information	Semantic information is the knowledge system the reader draws on as they read text, including world knowledge, prior language experiences and knowledge of the story context.	
Shared reading	Shared reading is an instructional strategy where the reading of a text is shared between students and teacher.	
Syllable	A syllable is each part of a word containing a vowel at its centre. A single syllable word has one vowel sound, a two-syllable word has two vowel sounds, and so on.	ma/gic be/come Jo/seph
Syntactic information	Syntax refers to the structure of texts, sentences, clauses, phrases and words. It is a description of how our language works (not a prescription). It includes whole text structure, sentence structure, grammar, morphology.	The reader reads, *The frog jumping/jumps (s/c) over the rock.* The reader recognises that 'jumping' is grammatically incorrect and self-corrects with 'jumps'.
Visual discrimination	Visual discrimination is a perceptual process that involves the ability to detect visual differences and details in print.	The difference between: 'b' and 'd' '6' and '9' 'was' and 'saw'