

Phonics and Early Reading at Downs View

Introduction:

At Downs View we place very high priority on early reading, including the teaching of phonics. All pupils engage in a robust and highly structured reading programme so that they can achieve their potential.

In phonics instruction pupils are taught the relationships between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. Phonemic awareness is defined as the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. We use both approaches to teach phonics and early reading.

The National Literacy Trust explains that: 'Introducing young children to the joy and wonder of books requires a systematic teaching of phonics'. Synthetic phonics is the most widely used, and well researched approach to teach reading in which phonemes (sounds) associated with graphemes (letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended (synthesised). There is a strong focus on teaching phonemes and letters separately from practising reading whole texts. Decodable books (reading schemes) are used in the early stages with very controlled vocabulary.

Phonics and Early reading at Downs View

All pupils at Downs View are taught to read using the Twinkl phonics scheme (DfE Validated in 2021). We teach phonics regardless of age and stage, until pupils have reached reading fluency. The way this is taught is adapted to each pupil, maintaining fidelity to the levelled approach in the phonics scheme.

Our decodable books are the Twinkl Rhino Readers phonics books, which are sometimes enhanced and supplemented by additional books banded to the correct levels of the scheme. This is essential because some of our pupils will remain on the same phonics level for a significant period of time and require lateral progression within that level, this is not provided by the relatively small number of Rhino Reader books per level.

At Downs View, many of our students are not yet able to use verbal speech at a level that meets their communication requirements and rely on the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication technology to communicate and access all curriculum areas. We know that students learning to communicate with AAC require systematic phonics too. Spelling is what enables students to eventually communicate any word that they want to, or that they do not have a symbol for, therefore becoming autonomous communicators. Learning to read using phonics is taught alongside learning to decode symbols including whole words on AAC devices. This is not in competition; it is two skills developing alongside each other.

Some of our pupils access programme such as Cued Articulation. These focus on different sounds to phonics, in a different order. This is not confusing for our pupils since the programmes have different functions and it is possible to learn both for each purpose.

Wherever possible, we use the gesture in the Twinkl songs to reinforce the Twinkl phonics, however, where we know a pupil will not respond well to this we use the Makaton sign. The aim is to reinforce understanding in a personalised way, so decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, whilst maintaining fidelity to the scheme.

We work closely with our SALT team to ensure where possible we combine and enhance approaches, rather than confusing and diluting them, knowing that the pupil is at the centre of the approaches taken and functional communication will be enhanced by phonetic knowledge.

Due to the nature of our pupils' complex learning differences, we do not stream our pupils for phonics sessions as the transition out of their class group would often create anxiety and dilute the effectiveness of the phonics teaching. Instead, we teach in small groups or individually across the week: it's usual to have pupils working over several levels in the same class. Due to this, we ensure our support staff are skilled in delivering the sessions and ensure that the teacher teaches all the pupils over the week, keeping an overview for accurate assessment purposes.

Our pupils follow 3 different pathways during their time at Downs View. Early developmental stages (EDS) Mid Learning route (MLR) and then Extended Learning Route (ELR). Due to the complexities of some of our pupils, it's essential that we model the application of the alphabetic code through phonics in shared reading and writing, both inside and outside of the phonics lessons, and across the curriculum. We also have a strong focus on language development for our children because we know that skills in communication are crucial for reading and writing in all subjects, also enable advocacy, and for our pupils to be contributing members of society in life beyond Downs View.

We know the difference and the importance of "reading with" and "reading to" our pupils and we want all our pupils to have access to books that they can read independently, whatever level they are working at. Pupils working at on EDS are given access to age and stage appropriate books that are of interest to them. The books may be read to them with structured opportunities for engagement, or they may need to be made independently accessible through technology (such as eye gaze and touch screens). Sometimes we laminate a book to make it more robust, we also use teacher led Sensory Stories and Big Books so that pupils can learn the conventions of using a book in a way that supports engagement and attention. Alongside these more traditional reading opportunities, we also focus on reading as part of learning to use AAC for all pupils following the EDS pathway.

For pupils working on MLR pathway, independent and adult supported reading opportunities develop reading fluency through reading books at the correct comprehension and fluency level. Through daily reading (using books, text on the whiteboard, AAC, printed materials) pupils develop the skills required to read fluently, to decode print in their environment, also developing a love of reading for leisure. Many pupils on the MLR pathway also develop reading skills as they access their personalised method of AAC. We develop a love of reading through a careful choice of interesting books in the classrooms, structured use of the library, group reading of a shared story, including a sensory aspect if appropriate and drama techniques to enhance engagement and confidence.

Pupils on the ELR pathway can often read fluently. For these pupils we concentrate on extending their vocabulary, including subject specific technical terms, to build their schema of understanding of the world around them. We also develop a love of reading and confidence to read widely and often at home and at school. We celebrate all forms of reading, both on and offline, and encourage our pupils to follow their interests in choosing materials so that they develop and skill and interest in reading for life after Downs View.

Assessment

Assessment is used to monitor progress and to identify any student needing additional support as soon as they need it. Assessment for learning is used daily in class to identify any students requiring additional support and weekly to assess and address gaps, and secure fluency of graphemes, phonemes, words, and spelling.

Summative assessment (including updating the phonics passport) is used termly to assess progress, to identify gaps in learning that need to be addressed so that the next level can be mastered. Subject leader monitoring of the passports can also identify any additional support needs for staff.

Pupils' progress in reading is assessed formally each term and the results are entered into their individualised Phonics Passport. This passport stays with the pupil as they move through the school so that each member of staff knows exactly what levels the pupil has mastered, and which gaps need to be addressed. In this way, no information is lost in transition to a new class or key stage.

Although pupils are assessed formally each term, pupils can move up to the next level whenever they have mastered the previous level. All teachers know exactly which levels their pupils are on and provide both individualised and small group sessions of direct instruction to maximise learning opportunities.

It has been an interesting exercise to review past performance of our older pupils who would have learnt to read using a range of methods. Some of them have reached level 6 and are termed fluent readers, but still have gaps in their phonics knowledge. We decide on a case-by-case basis whether to revisit the phonic gaps or not.

Research sources used to inform this strategy.

Sullivan, A. (2023) Access to Phonics; Practical Access Strategies to Teach Children with Complex Needs of All Ages.

[Phonics, spelling, and keyboards for children who cannot speak - AssistiveWare](#)

[The reading framework: teaching the foundations of literacy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)