

Details of concerns about the films on the Ofsted website with the title, “Literacy: a non-negotiable”

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/literacy-non-negotiable-introduction> and <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/literacy-non-negotiable-learning-through-play-and-establishing-foundations>

by Elizabeth Nonweiler, updated May 2013

The lessons in these films are promoted on the Ofsted website as though they should be imitated by teachers. In fact, they show lessons which include peripheral activities and some of the results of good teaching. They do not show the sort of phonics lessons with core activities that teachers should aim to provide regularly in order to achieve good results.

The lessons included some examples of good practice, and some of the details that follow may seem trivial enough to be ignored. However, they are important and should not be ignored, because the films will be watched by teachers who assume they illustrate best practice. Although some synthetic phonics experts might dispute a few of the points I have made, I know they would agree with nearly all of them.

A well-structured routine phonics lesson includes the following core activities:

- revision
- learning letter-sound correspondences
- reading
- spelling
- and handwriting

It is fast-paced, because both teachers and children are familiar with the routine, so no time is wasted on remembering or explaining what to do next. Children love routine and are able to learn more, when they are not distracted by peripheral activities and trying to understand what is wanted. Not only are new activities usually slower, but they take too much time to prepare; it would be unreasonable to expect teachers to prepare lessons like the ones on the films on a daily basis.

The films all begin with the title, “Literacy: a non-negotiable”, but they show many activities that *are* negotiable and are likely to take time away from activities that are essential.

I liked the way the nursery children knew simple letter-sound correspondences and read words, but the film did not show how they were taught to do this. The children were out of doors, but phonics lessons should normally take place indoors, where we normally read and write. When children are outside, they should usually be involved in activities such as independent play, physical education and observing nature.

A lesson with a parachute in the playground was described as “a discrete phonics lesson”, but it was neither an exemplary discrete phonics lesson nor an exemplary parachute lesson. For a lot of the time, the children appeared to be concentrating on holding down the parachute and waiting for their turn to choose a toy or card, one at a time. They were not all taking part in core activities for learning phonics all the time. The teacher had to raise her voice to get above the noise of the wind and the rustling parachute. It would have been better if the phonics lesson had been indoors, routine and interactive, with every child responding to the teacher most of the time. On the other hand, parachute games are valuable and fun for teaching co-operation and providing physical education, without the distraction of phonics.

In another lesson, the children were asked to find toys, when the aim of the lesson was to learn to spell words with "oa". Spelling is based on sounds. All the children needed was to hear the sound of the word before spelling it. Finding toys is a distraction, and naming a toy might result in a correct but unwanted response. For example, when a child found a toy boat, he might have described it as "a toy" or "a canoe" or "a ship", when the teacher wanted him to say "boat".

Right at the beginning in the title, we see plastic letters in many, apparently random, colours. This is distracting; schools should use letters in only one colour.

The nursery teacher asked children to use "phonics fingers" after seeing and reading a word. She said, "We use our phonics fingers to blend the sounds." This is not good practice, because the aim of using "phonics fingers" is to identify the sounds in unseen spoken words before spelling them.

A teaching assistant was shown working with a lower ability group. This is common practice and sometimes works well. However, it needs challenging. In a film to show good practice, the adult with the most training should work with the lower ability group. The one with the most training is usually the teacher, and not the teaching assistant.

Teachers asked children to think of words with specific phonemes or graphemes. This is not good practice. If the aim is to teach reading and spelling, teachers should provide words for children to read and spell and not ask children to think of them. It is difficult and time-consuming to think of words in this way. However, if the aim is for children to compose a sentence, the children should be asked to compose something related to their experiences or a topic or a story and not something with a specific phoneme or grapheme in it. It is not a good idea to mix teaching of phonics with teaching of composition in this way.

The films showed children sitting on the carpet and standing to write. This is okay occasionally, but as a film to promote good practice, children should be seen only sitting on chairs at tables for writing.

There was no straightforward dictation, although dictation is important.

With the Year 2 class, there was some good analysis of a text for comprehension, but I found the lesson rather laboured. Some of the children were still struggling too much with reading the words to be asked to analyse the meaning of the text in such detail. On the other hand, able children were probably frustrated by waiting for slower children to read words. Comprehension and word reading should not be mixed in this way for children who struggle to read the words. If the aim is comprehension, the text should be read to these children. Once children can read the words in a text easily, word reading and comprehension can be combined as reading comprehension. This is an activity where I would support more differentiation, either in differentiated ability groups, or with targeted activities and questions that individual children could respond to faster and more successfully in a whole class situation.

I tell teachers never to model a word with the wrong spelling, because some of the children are likely to have good visual memories and may reproduce the wrong spelling later, because they have a picture of it in their minds. It may be that it was all right in the film, because of the way the teacher immediately corrected the spelling ("snoa" for "snow"). However, teachers watching the film may be misled into thinking this is good practice generally.

One teacher said, "The key is to tap into exactly what the children like, what makes them tap into the lesson." This is true sometimes, but a phonics lesson should be teacher-led, and

then the teacher should make it interesting for the children. Children love a sense of achievement and the result of a well-taught teacher-led phonics lesson is children who are inspired because they can decode and write words.

I am also concerned about several incidents where language was used wrongly:

- Two of the teachers used phonemes to name letters, confusing phonemes, graphemes and letter names. From my experience with muddled older children, this really matters. The reception teacher said of “have”, “It’s got an /e/ at the end,” using the sound. To be correct, she should have said either, “It’s got an ‘e’ at the end”, using the letter name, or, “In this word, we write /v/ with these letters,” pointing at “ve”. The Year 1 teacher said, “/k/ and /h/ together makes /ch/”, using sounds. This is wrong because “c”, “h” (letter names) in /ch/ is not /k/, /h/ (separate sounds); it is either /ch/ (sound) or it is “c”, “h” (letter names for grapheme). Later /oe/, spelt with a split digraph, was described as /o/ and /e/ (two sounds).
- The inspector said, “Every time a child’s encountered an unfamiliar word, they’ve got really clear strategies”, but by using the plural word, “strategies”, he suggested that the children used more than one strategy. With synthetic phonics, we teach young children to use only one strategy to read words, that is saying the sounds and blending them. In contrast, the old literacy strategy promoted a range of strategies for reading words (context, graphics, syntax, phonics) and these usually amounted to guessing strategies. It is important to make it clear to teachers that they should not encourage a range of strategies.
- The inspector said, “She broke down a sound”. With synthetic phonics, children are taught to identify the separate sounds in words for spelling, which could be described as breaking down words, but not as breaking down sounds.

The schools where the films were made are described in the introduction on the Ofsted website as “outstanding”. Teachers will deduce that Ofsted considers the lessons shown in the films to be “outstanding” and would like other schools to provide similar lessons. But the lessons shown in the films are not the sort of lessons that synthetic phonic experts, whose training has been approved by the DfE, recommend. Sir Jim Rose warned about the dangers of “extraneous activities” in his independent review of the teaching of early reading (p. 66). The Ofsted films are very misleading.