Essential considerations for evaluating phonics programmes and provision including: 'the *maths* of the phonics'

To evaluate and compare systematic phonics programmes and practice, various aspects of each programme need to be considered such as: the underpinning teaching principles (do they resemble evidence-based Systematic Synthetic Phonics programmes/practice); the specific teaching and learning practices and routines; the design, content, age-appropriateness and quality of the resources; the rationale and usefulness of any mnemonic systems (aids to memory such as pictures, key words, actions); the practicalities of planning, preparation of resources and class management; how the different needs of the learners are addressed; methods for informing and working in partnership with parents; provision for assessment and recording results; how well the programme's design engages learners; how clearly and easily can progress be tracked/monitored and shared? It is essential to base part of your analysis on the '**maths of the phonics**'. This involves looking at the breadth, scope and detail of:

Content

How many *letter/s-sound correspondences* are introduced in the programme, and at **what pace** (important that pace is neither too fast nor too slow for the context considering learners' age and capabilities)? Is the coverage of the *alphabetic code* (the letter/s-sound correspondences at the level of 'phonemes') sufficiently comprehensive? [Know the difference between various *units of sound*: 1) phonemes, 2) consonant clusters, 3) onset and rime, 4) word families. Don't include *consonant clusters* in your 'count', such as: br, spl, -lt, -nd. Don't include onset and *rime chunks* in your 'count', such as: -at, -op, -en, -ad. Don't include *word families* in your 'count', such as: park, dark, stark, lark.]   See http://alphabeticcodecharts.com/free_charts.html for examples of a comprehensive alphabetic code based mainly on phonemes.

What is the lesson-by-lesson **word-count** of the *cumulative bank of **new words*** for the purposes of routine, *independent* practice of decoding (reading), encoding (spelling) and handwriting activities in any phonics programme? In what *format* (what type of resources) and **how often** is a list of new words provided for each learner to practise blending the words as independently as possible? **How often** (if at all) does the learner *re-visit and repeat-read* the cumulative word banks, sentences and texts? Are *plain sentences and texts* provided (that is, without pictures) for **every** letter/s-sound correspondence introduced for **every** learner to *apply and extend* the phonics skills *independently* and also to enable ample vocabulary enrichment, development of language comprehension and to introduce or reinforce elements of grammar as appropriate?

Time

How often is phonics taught and **practised** - is this daily/weekly; does this include extra, daily 'little and often' practice for learners with short-term memories or various learning difficulties; does the programme provide suggestions, content, resources and routines to practise at 'home' as consolidation for the main phonics provision in school?

How much time is allocated for discrete phonics lessons/activities per day/week - and how is this modified or extended to allow for addressing learners' different needs? How can the same amount of time really provide for learners' differing needs?

Approach for phonics application in the wider curriculum - and for spelling over time

How much, **how** (and with what resources), and **how well** is phonics application continued, sustained and supported in the **wider curriculum** for reading and writing?

How well is discrete phonics continued and sustained from **year to year** as part of a longer-term spelling programme; and **how many spelling word banks' resources** are provided to support the teaching and learning?

Consider the difference in word-count and word-content when the programme's word bank is **restricted** to shorter words of 2 - 3 sounds only:

Units of sound: phoneme/s	Spelling alternatives: graphemes	Cumulative bank of shorter words for decoding/encoding/writing	Cumulative bank of longer words for decoding/encoding/writing	Teaching points: Even in the early stages of the phonics programme, include…
In the main these are 'phonemes' but some units of sound are combined phonemes such as /k+s/ for 'x'.	Teach that capital letters are code for the same sounds as their lower case letters. Include teaching about the alphabet. Are letter shapes shown on writing lines?	Note that practice is *very limited* when mainly short two and three sound words are provided in the phonics programme. This does not enable sufficient skills practice of blending (decoding) or oral segmenting (encoding) nor does it cater for quicker or older learners who need more varied and challenging content.	By including longer words in the word bank, there are *far more words* to practise blending, oral segmenting (for spelling) and handwriting - and to enrich vocabulary. These words often include 'consonant clusters' or 'blends' in their structure. Consonant clusters do *not* need to be introduced *discretely* on flash cards as specific units of sound (e.g. st, cr, spr, lk). What matters is that learners get *plenty of skills practice* from the outset of the programme – blending, oral segmenting and writing words which include various consonant clusters in their structure. Avoid over-modelling. Allow learners to attempt to sound out and blend all the cumulative words *independently* at first. Having blended (decoded) each word, the learner then considers what it means. Include plenty of speaking opportunities to provide definitions of the words and to say them in spoken sentences. Note: When English is a new or additional language, the cumulative banks of words provide plenty of skills practice and the learner does not need to 'know' the meaning of every word. Teachers can select a few useful words to expand on their meaning.	Additional teaching can, and should, be included as part of a phonics programme. This may well not be specified in the programme's guidance, but teachers can provide sensible 'enrichment' age-appropriately and as the opportunities arise (historic information, grammar, punctuation, aspects of the English language and spelling system, vocabulary enrichment, language comprehension). These teaching points can be repeated many times – engage the learners to recall and repeat them.
/s/	s			1. **its it's**: Introduce grammar and punctuation.
/a/	a			2. i**s** a**s** hi**s** ha**s**: *Modify* the pronunciation of /s/ to /z/ which is a frequently required process after blending ("iss" to "iz").
/t/	t	at sat tat		
/i/	i	it sit **its it's** is a**s**	a**ss**ist	
/p/	p	pit pat pip tip **tap** sip sap **P**at p**ass**	**P**ipp**a** pitt**a** pits pats pips tips tap**s** sips p**a**st past**a**	3. **tap**: Point out that the same word can have different meanings such as 'a/the tap' and 'I tap' (homonyms).
/n/	n	in an pan nap nit tin tan ant **N**an **A**nn **A**nna	nits tins snips snaps pants tints stint satin spans spins pans snip snap ants pant tint span spin assistant **N**anna	4. tap tap**s**: Talk about singular and plural words.
/k/	c	cat cap act can	cats caps acts cans scan spic scat picnic napkin attic attack panic antics static statistics	5. **ss**: Sound out double consonant letters only once /s/ not /s/ /s/.
	k	kit kin **a**sk kip kiss	**a**sks kits skin skins skip skips t**a**sk t**a**sks risk risks	6. **P N A H**: Capital letters are code for the same sounds as their lower case equivalent letters. Mention that when capital 'I' is on its own, however, it is code for the *word* "I". Teach when we use capital letters.
	-ck	sack sick tack tick pick pack nick kick **N**ick	sacks tacks ticks stick stack stacks picks packs snack snacks	
/e/	e	set pet pen net ten neck	sets pets pens nets tens pecks step steps nest sent nests pest pests test tests tent tents trek kept spent ticket insect insects speck specks arrest arrests ecstatic picket packet packets tennis kitten kittens antiseptic antenna	7. p**a**ss, p**a**st, **a**sk, **a**sks, t**a**sk, t**a**sks: Modify the pronunciation of /a/ to /ar/ after blending if regional accent requires it.
/h/	h	hat hip hen hit hiss hi**s** ha**s** hack	hats hips hens hacks hits hisses hint hints hectic happen happens **H**anna	8. Pipp**a**, pitt**a**, past**a**: Introduce the notion of the 'schwa' which sounds close to "uh" (unstressed syllable – or 'reflecting the way people speak'). This is more of a problem for spelling than reading as the identified sounds, for example, would be /p//i//p//**u**/.
/r/	r	rat rip rap (**64** **shorter words**)	rats rips rent trek trick track trip trips strip strips trap traps raps crack cracks crisp crisps crest crests crept rest rests arrest arrests actress actresses tricks tracks print prints prick pricks racket rackets rant rants press cress stress risk risks spirit spirits attract cricket crickets crick rat-a-tat parapet crick neck resist respect rasp sprint scrap scraps strict resent resents trespass present presents transparent **P**atrick (**178** **longer words:** 64 + 178 = **242** **words in total**)	

'In the shoes of each learner'

Consider the range of learners and their needs in your context:

Track what the programme's content, provision and practice 'look like' from the perspective of every possible profile of learner.

Does the programme, the approach, the provision and the scope of the practice address the needs and differences of every learner?

Note any concerns you have about the learners and their context, and consider the scope of the programme, the practice and the resources to address the circumstances.

To support you with your reflections, remember always to think about the **maths** of the phonics for each learner. Does each learner, for example, have **ample provision** of personal, paper-based **resources** to enable full engagement and revision of **independent practice** including 'extension options' at code, word, sentence and text level?

The Teaching and Learning Cycle   See: http://www.phonicsinternational.com/Reflecting%20on%20the%20Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Cycle.pdf

This is an important feature of phonics provision. The typical phonics teaching and learning cycle includes: 1) **revisit and review** alphabetic code knowledge (the letter/s-sound correspondences and skills) to date; 2) **teacher-led introduce** the focus letter/s-sound correspondence and **model** the three core phonics skills for blending (decoding) with printed words, oral segmenting (encoding) with spoken words, and handwriting, of a few word examples with the focus code; 3) **learner-practice** as *individually and independently as possible* in order to learn or revise the focus code at word level; followed by 4) learners **apply and extend** their practice to cumulative sentences and texts (text-level includes the use of cumulative, **decodable reading books** as part of the phonics programme or to complement the phonics programme). Ultimately, learners are: 5) building-up knowledge of common words which are trickier to spell (e.g. one, once; to, two, too; their, there; said, again; would, could, should); and 6) building-up knowledge of spelling word banks where words are spelt with the same letter/s-sound correspondences (e.g. bird, first, thirst, birth, shirt, skirt, dirty, firm).

As part of the phonics provision and practice, what **paper-based resources** do learners use (at code, word, sentence and text level plus additional *alphabet* work and handwriting): to engage with; **to own**; to share the use of with teachers and parents (as a constant); to take a pride in; to monitor, mark, track, reward and evidence progress?

Professional knowledge and the maths of the phonics to maximise teaching and learning effectiveness

In order to evaluate and compare the content, guidance and provision of phonics programmes and practices, a full **understanding** of the nature of teaching and learning **guidance** and **resources** provided in the programme is very important – plus a **count** of the content, practice and **use of the material per learner** is essential to support the making of informed decisions for both choosing a specific phonics programme and understanding how to maximise **teaching and learning effectiveness**.

Teacher autonomy

It is recognised that a programme's effectiveness may rely heavily on the **delivery** of the programme by skilled adults. Consider the possible dangers of teachers making 'professional decisions' which intentionally or inadvertently stray away from the underlying *teaching principles*, original *design*, and *guidance* of the phonics programme.