

Evidence for the Value of Play-Based Learning within the All Aboard Phonics Curriculum

Purpose of this Document

This evidence brief sets out a **research-informed description of the design, implementation and impact** of play-based learning within the *All Aboard Phonics* systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) curriculum. It combines:

- the **academic and policy evidence base** underpinning play-based and phonics-aligned practice, and
- a **clear account of the curriculum strategies and structures** used within All Aboard Phonics.

The document is intended to support curriculum design justification, inspection discussion, and evaluation of early literacy provision in Nursery, Reception and Year 1 classes.

Curriculum Design Rationale: Play-Based Learning within SSP

Research in early literacy consistently demonstrates that **systematic phonics instruction is most effective when children are given meaningful opportunities to apply decoding skills in authentic contexts** (Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), 2023a). While phonics has a strong evidence base for improving early word reading, broader language development — including vocabulary, oral language and narrative competence — is critical for long-term reading comprehension (EEF, 2023b; Department for Education (DfE), 2021).

All Aboard Phonics is designed to respond to this evidence by combining:

- daily, explicit SSP instruction, and
- structured opportunities for application through guided play and continuous provision.

This approach reflects socio-cultural theories of learning, which emphasise that language and literacy develop through social interaction, shared meaning-making and guided participation (Cremin et al., 2018). Play-based learning within All Aboard Phonics is therefore not positioned as an alternative to phonics teaching, but as a **deliberate curriculum mechanism for consolidation, transfer and language enrichment**.

Guided Play as a Pedagogical Model

The strongest evidence for play-based learning supports **guided play rather than unguided free play** (DfE, 2021). Guided play involves teachers:

- planning learning objectives,
- designing enabling environments, and
- interacting intentionally with children during play.

EEF research indicates that play-based approaches can have positive effects on early literacy outcomes when adults scaffold language and explicitly link play activities to taught content (EEF, 2023a). Within All Aboard Phonics, guided play is used to:

- reinforce phoneme–grapheme correspondences,
- rehearse oral blending and segmenting, and
- support early reading and writing behaviours in low-pressure contexts.

Continuous Provision Aligned to Phonics Content

Evidence highlights that **curriculum coherence** is strengthened when learning environments are intentionally resourced to reflect taught knowledge (DfE, 2021). In All Aboard Phonics, continuous provision is explicitly aligned to the current phonics focus.

Sound Mats and Visual Supports

Phase-appropriate sound mats are available on desks and within independent learning areas. These include:

- taught graphemes and previously learned graphemes, and
- pictophones, which provide a consistent visual prompt for each phoneme.

This supports children's independent application of phonics during play-based writing and mark-making, encouraging phonically plausible spelling. The availability of visual prompts aligns with evidence that scaffolds can support independence when they are directly connected to taught content (EEF, 2023a).

Trainertext and Bespoke Decodable Texts

Teachers use the trainertext creator facility to produce **bespoke, fully decodable texts** matched precisely to:

- the grapheme–phoneme correspondences taught that week, and

- the cumulative knowledge of the class or targeted groups.

This approach reflects research indicating that decodable texts are most effective when they closely align with taught phonics content, supporting successful application and confidence in early reading (EEF, 2023b).

Role-Play and Small-World Provision

Role-play and small-world areas are resourced with phonically controlled captions, labels and prompts. Children are encouraged to read, write and discuss these texts during play. Such environments support peer interaction and rehearsal of language, which is particularly beneficial for children who may be less confident in whole-class phonics sessions (DfE, 2021).

Implementation through Structured Application Activities

The All Aboard Phonics curriculum manual includes a wide range of **application and extension activities** designed to embed play-based learning after explicit teaching. This sequencing reflects evidence that new knowledge should be taught directly before being applied independently (EEF, 2023a).

Examples include:

- **Phrase Draw** activities, combining decoding, comprehension and expressive language.
- **Caption Match and Yes/No games**, requiring children to read, interpret and respond to text.
- **Sorting and 'Spot the Fake' games**, reinforcing phoneme discrimination and blending through playful challenge.
- **Physical and kinaesthetic games** (e.g. Sound Jump, Sound Hunt), supporting engagement and memory.

These activities are reused within continuous provision, enabling spaced practice and independent rehearsal, both of which are associated with stronger retention and transfer of learning (EEF, 2023a).

Communication and Language as a Core Curriculum Driver

Communication and Language (C&L) is a central pillar of the All Aboard Phonics curriculum. Research consistently shows that oral language development underpins later reading comprehension and writing quality (EEF, 2023b; Cremin et al., 2018).

Narrative Competence through Pictophones

Each phoneme is introduced via a pictophone character and an accompanying story. These stories:

- provide a memorable narrative context for new sounds,
- introduce and rehearse vocabulary, and
- support listening, retelling and oral rehearsal.

Narrative competence — the ability to understand, retell and create stories — is strongly linked to later literacy outcomes (Cremin et al., 2018). Children frequently revisit pictophone stories during play, embedding narrative language alongside phonics knowledge.

Oral Language within Lesson Design

Daily phonics lessons include structured opportunities for oral language, including:

- choral response and call-and-response routines,
- oral blending and segmenting,
- partner talk and shared problem-solving.

During play-based follow-up activities, adults model and extend language through questioning and feedback. Evidence suggests that such high-quality adult–child interaction is more predictive of outcomes than the quantity of activities alone (EEF, 2023a; Early Education, 2021).

Curriculum Impact and Inspection Alignment

The EYFS statutory framework emphasises learning through play, the primacy of communication and language, and the importance of skilled adult interaction. The All Aboard Phonics curriculum demonstrates strong alignment with these principles, while maintaining fidelity to SSP requirements (DfE, 2021).

Ofsted guidance highlights the importance of curriculum coherence, progression and children's ability to apply learning independently. Evidence of impact within this curriculum includes:

- independent application of phonics during play-based reading and writing,
- increasing accuracy in phonically plausible spelling,
- confident oral rehearsal and discussion of sounds, words and stories.

Such outcomes indicate that play-based learning, when intentionally designed and evidence-informed, enhances both engagement and attainment (Ofsted, 2023).

Theory of Change: How Play-Based Learning within All Aboard Phonics Leads to Impact

The design of the All Aboard Phonics curriculum is underpinned by a clear **theory of change**, setting out how evidence-informed inputs and processes lead to improved early literacy outcomes. This makes explicit the causal links between curriculum intent, implementation and impact.

Inputs (Curriculum Design)

The curriculum is intentionally designed with the following inputs:

- A **validated systematic synthetic phonics programme**, taught daily and cumulatively.
- Explicit integration of **guided play and continuous provision** aligned to taught phonics content.
- Narrative-rich **pictophones and stories** to anchor phoneme learning in meaningful language contexts.
- High-quality **decodable texts**, including bespoke trainertext, matched precisely to taught GPCs.
- A strong emphasis on **adult-child interaction**, oral language and shared thinking.

These inputs reflect robust evidence on effective early literacy instruction and language development (DfE, 2021; EEF, 2023a; EEF, 2023b).

Processes (Curriculum Implementation)

These inputs are enacted through the following processes:

- **Explicit teaching first**: new phonics knowledge is introduced and practised within daily lessons.
- **Guided play**: adults scaffold children's application of phonics during play through modelling, questioning and feedback.
- **Aligned continuous provision**: environments are resourced with sound mats, pictophones, captions and decodable texts that reflect current learning.
- **Repetition and rehearsal**: children revisit sounds, words and stories across the day through play-based activities.
- **Language-rich interaction**: children engage in oral blending, storytelling, partner talk and narrative retelling.

Research indicates that such processes support consolidation, independence and transfer of learning when tightly aligned to curriculum content (Cremin et al., 2018; EEF, 2023a; Early Education, 2021).

Short-Term Outcomes

As a result of these processes, children demonstrate:

- Secure phoneme–grapheme knowledge and accurate oral blending and segmenting.
- Increased confidence in early reading using fully decodable texts.
- Phonically plausible spelling in independent writing and play-based mark-making.
- Expanded vocabulary and improved oral language fluency.

These outcomes are consistent with evidence that phonics instruction and oral language development are mutually reinforcing in the early years (EEF, 2023b; DfE, 2021).

Medium-Term Outcomes

Over time, children show:

- Independent application of phonics skills across contexts.
- Growing narrative competence, including retelling and creating simple stories.
- Increased reading stamina, motivation and engagement.
- Greater readiness for the demands of Key Stage 1 literacy.

Such outcomes align with research linking narrative competence and early decoding success to later reading comprehension (Cremin et al., 2018).

Long-Term Impact

The long-term impact of this theory of change is that children:

- Become confident, motivated readers with secure decoding skills.
- Possess strong foundations in oral language and comprehension.
- Are better equipped to access the wider curriculum and succeed academically.

This theory of change demonstrates how **play-based learning, when deliberately designed within an SSP curriculum, enhances both attainment and engagement**, supporting sustainable reading success (EEF, 2023a; Ofsted, 2023).

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence base supports the design of All Aboard Phonics as a curriculum in which **systematic synthetic phonics and play-based learning operate in synergy**. Academic research, national guidance and curriculum-specific practice all point to the effectiveness of:

- explicit instruction,
- guided play,
- intentional continuous provision, and
- strong emphasis on oral language and narrative competence.

This integrated approach ensures that children not only learn to decode, but also develop the language, confidence and motivation required for long-term reading success.

References

Cremin, T., Flewitt, R., Mardell, B. and Swann, J. (2018) *Storytelling in Early Childhood: Enriching Language, Literacy and Classroom Culture*. London: Routledge.

Department for Education (DfE) (2021) *Best Start in Life: A Research Review for Early Years*. London: DfE.

Early Education (2021) *Getting It Right in the EYFS: A Review of the Evidence*. London: Early Education.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2023a) *Early Years Toolkit: Play-based Learning*. London: EEF.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2023b) *Early Literacy Toolkit*. London: EEF.

Ofsted (2023) *Early Years Inspection Handbook*. Manchester: Ofsted.