

Bridging the gap: ensuring synthetic phonics continues from kindergarten into primary school in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study investigates the continuity of phonics instruction from kindergarten to primary school in Hong Kong. A mixed-methods approach was employed, comprising a survey of 114 teachers and parents, supplemented by qualitative open-ended responses. Quantitative results indicate a significant perceived disconnect: 46.2% of respondents believe children retain only some phonics knowledge, and 42.9% report phonics is not taught systematically in primary school. Key challenges include a busy primary curriculum (64.8%) and differing teaching approaches (57.1%). Qualitative analysis reveals two primary enablers for continuity: enhanced teacher training and the implementation of a clear, cross-level phonics curriculum. The findings suggest that without structured policy and collaborative planning, the benefits of early phonics instruction are diluted, hindering literacy development in the critical early primary years.

Keywords: phonics continuity, teacher training, curriculum alignment

Introduction

Phonics, a method for teaching reading and spelling by correlating sounds with letters or letter groups, is a cornerstone of early literacy instruction in many English-speaking contexts (Harris & Hodges, 1995). This study focuses specifically on Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP), an approach where learners are directly taught the relationship between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence. The efficacy of SSP is well-documented, with studies showing that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves reading outcomes and phonemic awareness compared to non-phonics approaches (Connelly, Johnston & Thompson, 2001; Mann & Wimmer, 2002).

In Hong Kong, the educational landscape is unique, promoting biliteracy and trilingualism. Historically, English instruction relied on “Look and Say” or whole-word methods, which led to lower phonological awareness among learners compared to their peers from alphabetic L1 backgrounds (Holm & Dodd, 1996; Jackson et al., 1999). While phonics has gained popularity in local kindergartens

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and learning centres since the 2000s, often as a promotional tool, its adoption is not mandated by the Education Bureau (EDB). This raises a critical question: what happens to children who receive phonics instruction in kindergarten when they transition to primary school? This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the perceptions of teachers and parents on the continuity of phonics instruction and identifying the key barriers and enablers in the Hong Kong context.

Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Participants and Procedure

An online survey was distributed via Google Forms to approximately 1,000 former participants of a “Teaching Phonics to Young Learners” course offered at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University with over 16 cohorts of students, from July 14 to August 15 2025. 114 responses were received. The primary inclusion criterion was being a teacher, tutor, or parent of a child who learned phonics in kindergarten and is now in Primary 1-3; 91 respondents (79.8%) met this criterion, and their data forms the core of this analysis.

Results

Quantitative findings: a picture of disconnect

A majority of respondents (85.7%) were actively involved in phonics support. However, perceptions of phonics continuity are concerning. Nearly half (46.2%) reported that children's phonics knowledge erodes after kindergarten, and a combined 63.8% indicated that phonics is either not taught systematically or has effectively ceased in Primary 1-2. The challenges most frequently cited are not isolated but point to deep-seated, systemic issues. The overwhelming concern of a “Busy primary curriculum” (64.8%) highlights a fundamental issue of curricular prioritization, where phonics is seemingly squeezed out by other competing demands. This is compounded by a significant pedagogical misalignment, as over half of the respondents (57.1%) noted stark “Differences in teaching approaches” between kindergarten and primary levels, suggesting that the play-based, multi-sensory methods of kindergarten are not bridged to the more formal, text-focused primary environment. Underpinning these problems is a potential gap in teacher preparedness, with 53.8% identifying that “Primary teachers may not have received focused phonics training.” This trifecta of challenges is both reflected in and exacerbated by the finding that over a third of settings (37.3%) use “No set programme,” meaning there is no mandated, school-wide systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) scheme such as *Jolly Phonics* or

Letterland. Instead, instruction is likely ad-hoc, dependent on individual teacher initiative or relegated to incidental inclusion within broader textbook units. This underscores a widespread lack of a coherent, structured approach to phonics instruction across this critical educational transition.

Qualitative findings: enablers for continuity

Analysis of the open-ended responses revealed two overarching solutions to the disconnect, richly illustrated by participant suggestions.

Teacher training & teacher practice

The most frequent suggestion (20 responses) centered on the critical need for professional development. Respondents universally emphasized that “Primary teachers need to be trained to use phonics consistently to support their students in reading and spelling,” highlighting a perceived skills gap. The core objective of such training, as one respondent noted, should be to ensure “Primary Teachers know where to pick up and start when the young learners begin P1.” Participants advocated for “Adaptations of primary teaching materials to align with the phonics approach in kindergarten”. The overarching call was for pedagogical shifts, making instruction more interactive, with one respondent succinctly recommending to “make phonics more interactive and fun for kids.”

Planning a clear phonics curriculum

The second theme (13 responses) stressed the necessity for systemic, top-down structural change. The predominant view was that a systematic phonics program should “continue to Primary years,” ensuring continuity. Respondents explicitly called for “a structured way Phonics is taught and reviewed in Primary school.” To operationalize this, they proposed concrete strategies such as including Phonics as a core component of the English syllabus with allocated time and resources, on par with areas like grammar or reading comprehension. Another key proposal was conducting “an initial screening test at the beginning of the year for P1” to identify the diverse skill levels of incoming students. This would allow teachers to effectively move from fundamental knowledge of Letter-Sound Correspondences to blending and segmenting. The ultimate goal, as summarized by one participant, is that “primary school phonics teaching should be systematically designed to allow students to learn step by step,” following a clear developmental sequence from simple to complex phonetic patterns, “not just solely based on textbook materials,” which often represents an “ad-hoc instruction” approach where phonics is only addressed reactively when it appears in a reading passage or spelling list, rather than being proactively and systematically taught.

Discussion

The findings paint a consistent picture of a significant gap in phonics instruction during the kindergarten-to-primary transition in Hong Kong. The quantitative data confirms a widespread perception that systematic phonics instruction often ceases or becomes fragmented after kindergarten, leading to a regression in children's skills. This echoes historical concerns raised by Holm & Dodd (1996) about the lack of a strong alphabetic foundation in Hong Kong students. The identified challenges—curricular pressure, pedagogical misalignment, and insufficient teacher training—constitute a complex barrier that undermines the investment in early phonics. The qualitative data provides a clear path forward. The strong emphasis on the need for **Teacher Training** suggests that equipping primary teachers with the skills and knowledge to continue phonics instruction is paramount. Simultaneously, the call for a **Clear Phonics Curriculum** highlights the need for systemic, top-down solutions, including cross-level curriculum planning and policy support, to ensure coherence and consistency.

This study has limitations, including a modest sample size and reliance on self-reported perceptions. Future research should involve direct assessment of children's phonics skills and observational studies of classroom practices.

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