PHONICS-BASED AND SIGHT-WORD APPROACHES IN EARLY READING DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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Abstract
Early reading instruction remains a central concern in early childhood education, particularly due to persistent debates surrounding the effectiveness of phonics-based and sight-word approaches. This conceptual review synthesises theoretical perspectives, largescale research findings, and classroom-oriented studies to examine how these approaches contribute to decoding, reading fluency, and comprehension. Drawing on influential reviews and cognitive models of reading development, the article argues that systematic phonics instruction provides a foundational and transferable mechanism for early reading acquisition, while sight-word learning plays a complementary role when integrated within a balanced literacy framework. By critically engaging with existing literature, the review clarifies areas of consensus, highlights ongoing debates, and identifies implications for early childhood literacy practice.

Keywords: phonics instruction, sight words, early literacy, decoding, reading fluency, comprehension

1. Introduction

Early reading development is widely recognised as a foundational component of children's academic success and long-term educational outcomes. Research consistently shows that early literacy skills are strong predictors of later achievement across subject areas (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 2006). As a result, the methods used to introduce reading in the early years have been the subject of sustained academic debate, policy intervention, and pedagogical reform.

Among the most contested approaches in early reading instruction are phonics-based instruction and sight-word learning. Phonics instruction emphasises systematic teaching of letter–sound correspondences and decoding skills, enabling learners to read unfamiliar words through phonological processing (Ehri, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000). In contrast, sight-word approaches prioritise the memorisation of frequently occurring words to promote reading fluency, often without explicit attention to sound–symbol relationships (Clay, 2000; Goodman, 1996).

While large-scale studies and meta-analyses have provided substantial evidence supporting systematic phonics instruction, classroom practice—particularly in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) settings—often reflects a blended or unsystematic application of both approaches (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Teachers frequently draw on phonics and sight-word strategies simultaneously, guided by curriculum demands, professional beliefs, and contextual constraints rather than by a coherent instructional framework.

Importantly, much of the existing research on early reading instruction is conducted under controlled or experimental conditions, often focusing on learner outcomes measured through standardised testing (Ehri et al., 2001; Hattie, 2009). While such studies are valuable, they offer limited insight into how reading approaches are interpreted, adapted, and implemented by teachers within real classroom contexts over sustained periods of time. Educational

researchers have increasingly argued for the inclusion of practitioner-led, school-based studies that capture the complexity of everyday teaching practices and decision-making processes (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Biesta, 2017).

In EYFS and KS1 classrooms, teachers play a particularly significant role in shaping early literacy experiences. Their observations, reflections, and instructional choices influence not only how reading approaches are delivered, but also how children engage with text, develop confidence, and acquire strategies for independent reading (Snow et al., 1998; Borg, 2015). Understanding teachers' perspectives on phonics-based and sight-word instruction is therefore essential for bridging the gap between research evidence and classroom practice. This study responds to this need by presenting a school-based investigation into the use of phonics and sight-word approaches as implemented by EYFS and KS1 teachers over one academic term (August–December). Rather than focusing on direct assessment of children, the study draws on teacher-generated data, including systematic observation checklists, reading records, and reflective questionnaires. Such an approach aligns with calls for ethically grounded, context-sensitive research that values teachers as knowledgeable professionals and co-constructors of educational knowledge (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

2. Research Gap

Despite extensive international research supporting phonics instruction, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning how phonics-based and sight-word approaches are experienced, evaluated, and balanced by teachers in real-world EYFS and KS1 classrooms. Much of the existing work prioritises learner performance outcomes, while comparatively fewer studies explore teachers' longitudinal observations of reading development within natural classroom settings (Castles et al., 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Furthermore, practitioner-led studies from school leadership perspectives are underrepresented in early literacy research, particularly in contexts where teachers are required to implement multiple instructional approaches simultaneously. This study seeks to address this gap by contributing empirical, classroom-based evidence drawn directly from EYFS and KS1 teachers' sustained engagement with both phonics and sight-word instruction.

Research Questions

1. How do EYFS and KS1 teachers perceive the effectiveness of phonics-based and sight-word approaches when implemented side by side in classroom practice?
2. What patterns emerge from teachers' observations and reading records over a sustained instructional period?
3. How do teachers evaluate the impact of each approach on decoding, fluency, and reading independence?

Literature Review

2.1 Early Reading Development and the Importance of Instructional Approach
Early reading development has long been recognised as a cornerstone of educational achievement, influencing learners' academic trajectories well beyond the primary years. Research indicates that children who fail to develop strong foundational reading skills in the early grades are at increased risk of ongoing academic difficulties (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 2006). Consequently, the choice of instructional approaches in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) classrooms has attracted sustained scholarly and policy attention.

Reading is a complex cognitive process that requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive skills, including phonological awareness, decoding, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Perfetti, 2007). Theoretical models such as the Simple View of Reading posit that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). From this perspective, instructional approaches that fail to adequately support decoding may limit learners' ability to access meaning from text, regardless of their oral language competence.

Within this framework, debates surrounding phonics-based and sight-word approaches reflect broader disagreements about how early reading skills are best developed. While some approaches emphasise explicit instruction in letter–sound relationships, others prioritise exposure to whole words and meaningful text. Understanding these approaches, and how they are enacted in classrooms, requires careful examination of both theoretical foundations and empirical evidence.

2.2 Phonics-Based Instruction: Theoretical Foundations and Empirical Evidence

Phonics-based instruction refers to the systematic teaching of relationships between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds), enabling learners to decode unfamiliar words through phonological processing (Ehri, 2005). From a cognitive perspective, phonics instruction supports the development of orthographic mapping, a process through which readers form permanent mental representations of written words by linking spellings, pronunciations, and meanings (Ehri, 2014).

A substantial body of research supports the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction, particularly in the early stages of reading development. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves word reading, spelling, and reading comprehension in early readers. Subsequent meta-analyses have reinforced these findings, demonstrating that explicit phonics instruction benefits a wide range of learners, including those at risk of reading difficulties (Ehri et al., 2001; Torgesen, 2006).

Phonics instruction has also been shown to support transferability, allowing learners to apply decoding strategies to unfamiliar words rather than relying on memorisation (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). This capacity for transfer is particularly important in alphabetic languages, where readers encounter an ever-expanding vocabulary as texts increase in complexity. Without decoding skills, learners may become dependent on guessing or contextual cues, strategies that are unreliable and unsustainable over time (Stanovich, 1986).

Despite this evidence, researchers have noted variability in how phonics instruction is implemented in practice. In some classrooms, phonics is taught inconsistently or without sufficient progression, limiting its effectiveness (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). This gap between research evidence and classroom implementation underscores the need for studies that examine phonics instruction as it is enacted by teachers within real educational settings.

2.3 Sight-Word Approaches and Whole-Word Perspectives

Sight-word instruction focuses on the rapid recognition of high-frequency words, often through repetition and visual memorisation. This approach is frequently associated with whole-language or balanced literacy traditions, which emphasise meaning-making, exposure to authentic texts, and learner engagement (Goodman, 1996; Clay, 2000).

Proponents of sight-word learning argue that automatic recognition of common words supports reading fluency and allows learners to focus cognitive resources on comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). In early reading contexts, particularly with predictable texts, sight-word instruction may enable children to experience early success and confidence as readers (Clay, 2000).

However, critics of sight-word approaches caution that memorisation-based strategies do not equip learners with the tools needed to decode unfamiliar words. Research suggests that visual memorisation alone is insufficient for building a robust reading system, as it places heavy demands on memory and does not support generalisation (Ehri, 2005; Castles et al., 2018). Studies have shown that learners who rely primarily on sight-word strategies may struggle when texts become less predictable and vocabulary demands increase (Stanovich, 1986).

Importantly, contemporary reading research does not dismiss sight-word learning entirely but situates it within a phonics-informed framework. According to Ehri's (2014) model, sight-word recognition develops most effectively when words are learned through phonological decoding rather than visual memorisation. In this sense, sight words are not "memorised wholes" but become automatically recognised through repeated, phonologically grounded exposure.

2.4 Integrating Phonics and Sight Words: Classroom Practice and Tensions In many EYFS and KS1 classrooms, teachers adopt blended instructional approaches, combining phonics instruction with sight-word learning. This integration is often shaped by curriculum frameworks, assessment demands, and professional beliefs rather than by a clearly articulated theoretical rationale (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Research suggests that when phonics and sight-word instruction are integrated systematically, learners may benefit from both decoding skills and improved fluency (Perfetti, 2007; Ehri, 2014). However, when integration lacks coherence such as when sight words are taught as exceptions without phonological explanation confusion may arise, particularly for struggling readers (Castles et al., 2018).

Teachers play a critical role in navigating these tensions. Borg (2015) notes that teachers' instructional decisions are influenced not only by research evidence but also by personal experience, institutional expectations, and perceived learner needs. As a result, classroom practice may diverge significantly from research-based recommendations, highlighting the importance of examining teachers' lived experiences and observations.

2.5 Teacher Beliefs, Observations, and Professional Judgement in Literacy Instruction Teachers are not passive implementers of instructional programmes; rather, they actively interpret and adapt pedagogical approaches based on their professional judgement (Borg, 2015). In early literacy contexts, teachers' beliefs about how children learn to read shape the emphasis placed on phonics, sight words, and meaning-focused activities (Snow et al., 1998). Research indicates that teachers' observational insights provide valuable information about learner engagement, strategy use, and progress over time (Clay, 2000). Informal reading records, classroom observations, and reflective practices are widely recognised as legitimate sources of data in early literacy research, particularly when triangulated across multiple sources (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Practitioner-led research has gained increasing recognition as a means of bridging the gap between theory and practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that teachers generate knowledge through systematic inquiry into their own practice, contributing insights that are often absent from large-scale experimental studies. Such research is particularly relevant in early childhood settings, where learning is context-dependent and developmentally nuanced.

2.6 School-Based and Practitioner Research in Early Literacy

Educational researchers have increasingly called for studies that prioritise ecological validity, capturing teaching and learning as they occur in natural classroom environments (Biesta, 2017). School-based research conducted by practitioners offers a unique perspective on instructional processes, challenges, and adaptations that are often invisible in experimental designs.

Small-scale qualitative and mixed-methods studies are widely accepted within educational research, particularly when the aim is to develop contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018). In early literacy research, such approaches allow for longitudinal observation of instructional practices and their perceived impact over time.

Leadership-based practitioner research further extends this perspective by examining how instructional approaches are implemented, supported, and evaluated at the school level. School leaders play a critical role in shaping curriculum priorities, professional development, and instructional coherence, making their perspectives particularly valuable in studies of early reading instruction (Hattie, 2009).

2.7 Summary and Link to the Present Study

The literature reviewed above highlights strong empirical support for systematic phonics instruction, alongside more limited and context-dependent benefits of sight-word approaches. While existing research provides valuable insights into learner outcomes, fewer studies explore how these approaches are experienced and evaluated by teachers within real EYFS and KS1 classrooms over sustained periods.

This study builds on existing research by adopting a teacher-centred, school-based approach, examining how phonics-based and sight-word instruction are implemented side by side and interpreted through teachers' observations, records, and reflections. By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, the study seeks to contribute contextually grounded evidence to ongoing debates in early reading pedagogy.

3. **Methodology**

 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a school-based, qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to examine teachers' experiences of implementing phonics-based and sight-word approaches in early reading instruction. The primary aim was not statistical generalisation but contextual understanding of instructional practice, drawing on sustained teacher observation and reflection over time. Such designs are widely accepted in educational research where the focus is on pedagogy, professional judgement, and classroom processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Rather than directly sampling children, the study relied on teacher-generated data, including observation checklists, reading records, and reflective questionnaires. Teachercentred research is considered ethically appropriate and methodologically sound in early childhood and primary education contexts, particularly when investigating instructional approaches rather than learner performance outcomes (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Biesta, 2017).

The mixed-methods orientation of the study allowed for the integration of qualitative insights (teacher reflections and observational notes) with descriptive quantitative indicators (frequency patterns from checklists and questionnaire responses). This combination enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings through triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

 3.2 Research Context

The study was conducted in a flagship Early Years and Primary campus offering EYFS and KS1 education. The school follows a play-based curriculum in the early years, supplemented by structured literacy instruction that includes both systematic phonics programmes and sight-word learning. As is common in many school settings, teachers are required to balance

multiple instructional approaches in response to curriculum expectations, assessment demands, and learner diversity (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

The researcher serves as Headmistress of the Early Years section, which enabled sustained access to classrooms, professional dialogue with teachers, and ongoing monitoring of instructional practices. Practitioner research conducted by school leaders has been recognised as a valuable source of insight into curriculum implementation and pedagogical coherence, provided that reflexivity and ethical boundaries are maintained (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hattie, 2009).

3.3 Participants

The participants consisted of six teachers teaching across EYFS and KS1 levels. Three teachers were responsible for EYFS classes (Nursery and Reception), while three taught KS1 classes (Year 1 and Year 2). All participating teachers had experience teaching both phonics-based and sight-word approaches concurrently as part of their routine literacy instruction.

Teaching experience among participants ranged from 4 to 16 years, allowing for the inclusion of both relatively early-career and experienced practitioners. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, as they were directly involved in early reading instruction and were able to provide informed, reflective insights into instructional effectiveness. Purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative educational research to ensure depth, relevance, and contextual richness of data (Patton, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018).

To protect confidentiality, teachers were assigned anonymised identifiers (e.g., EYFS Teacher 1, KS1 Teacher 4), and no identifying information about individual classrooms or learners was recorded.

3.4 Duration of the Study

Data were collected over one academic term (August–December). A term-long timeframe was selected to allow teachers sufficient opportunity to observe patterns in learner response, instructional impact, and progression over time. Longitudinal classroom observation is particularly valuable in early literacy research, as reading development is incremental and influenced by cumulative instructional exposure (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Clay, 2000).

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

To ensure methodological rigour, data were collected using three complementary teacherbased instruments, enabling triangulation across sources.

3.5.1 Teacher Observation Checklists

Teachers maintained structured observation checklists focusing on key aspects of early reading behaviour, including decoding attempts, word recognition strategies, reading fluency, and learner confidence during reading activities. Observation-based tools are widely used in early literacy research to capture authentic classroom behaviour and instructional impact over time (Snow et al., 1998; Cohen et al., 2018).

The checklists were designed collaboratively to ensure clarity and consistency across classrooms while allowing teachers to record qualitative notes alongside categorical observations.

3.5.2 Teacher-Maintained Reading Records

Teachers kept informal reading records documenting learners' responses during guided and independent reading sessions. These records focused on patterns rather than individual assessment outcomes, noting trends related to decoding strategies, reliance on memorisation, and application of phonics knowledge.

Reading records are recognised as a valid and widely used formative assessment tool in early reading instruction, particularly when used to inform instructional decision-making rather than summative evaluation (Clay, 2000; Torgesen, 2006).

3.5.3 Teacher Questionnaire

At the end of the term, a reflective teacher questionnaire was administered to gather participants' perceptions of the relative effectiveness of phonics-based and sight-word approaches. The questionnaire included both closed-ended items (Likert-scale responses) and open-ended questions, allowing teachers to elaborate on their experiences and professional judgements.

Teacher questionnaires are frequently used in educational research to explore instructional beliefs, perceived effectiveness, and classroom decision-making processes (Borg, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data from observation notes, reading records, and open-ended questionnaire responses were analysed thematically, following established procedures for identifying recurring patterns and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding focused on key themes related to decoding, fluency, reading independence, and instructional balance.
Codes were then refined and grouped into broader analytical themes.

Descriptive quantitative data from checklists and questionnaire items were summarised using frequencies and percentages to highlight dominant trends across teacher responses. This descriptive approach was appropriate given the small sample size and exploratory nature of the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance trustworthiness, data were triangulated across multiple instruments and participants. Prolonged engagement over one academic term further strengthened the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were addressed by focusing exclusively on teacher-reported data, avoiding direct assessment or identification of individual learners. Participation was voluntary, and teachers were informed of the study's purpose and scope. Practitioner-led research conducted within one's own institution requires heightened reflexivity, which was addressed through transparent documentation and collaborative instrument design (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

4. **Findings**

This section presents the findings derived from teacher observation checklists, reading records, and reflective questionnaires collected over one academic term (August– December). The findings are organised thematically to reflect key aspects of early reading instruction, namely decoding, reading fluency, reading independence, and teacher perceptions of instructional effectiveness. Where relevant, findings are supported by illustrative teacher quotations and interpreted in relation to existing research.

4.1 Teachers' Observations of Decoding and Word Recognition

Across both EYFS and KS1 classrooms, teachers consistently reported that systematic phonics instruction supported learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words. Observation checklists indicated that children were increasingly able to apply letter–sound knowledge rather than relying on guessing or visual memorisation.

Teachers noted that during shared and guided reading sessions, learners exposed to regular phonics routines attempted to blend sounds independently, even when encountering new vocabulary. This pattern was observed across age groups, although KS1 teachers reported more consistent application of decoding strategies over time.

One EYFS teacher commented:

"Children now try to sound out words instead of waiting for help or guessing from pictures." (EYFS Teacher 1)

Similarly, a KS1 teacher observed:

"Phonics gives them a strategy. Even weaker readers attempt words rather than avoiding them." (KS1 Teacher 2)

These findings align with existing research suggesting that phonics instruction equips learners with transferable decoding strategies essential for reading development (Ehri, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000). Teachers' longitudinal observations reinforce claims that decoding skills support independence and reduce reliance on memorisation-based strategies (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018).

Table 1

Teacher-Reported Impact of Instructional Approach on Decoding		
Instructional Focus	**EYFS (n=3)**	**KS1 (n=3)**
Phonics supports decoding unfamiliar words	High	Very High
Sight words support decoding unfamiliar words	Low	Low
Learners rely on guessing strategies	Reduced over term	Minimal

The table highlights a clear pattern across both stages, with teachers reporting stronger decoding outcomes associated with phonics-based instruction. Sight-word learning was not perceived as effective for decoding unfamiliar words, particularly as text complexity increased.

4.2 Reading Fluency and Speed

While phonics instruction was associated with decoding accuracy and independence, teachers reported that sight-word instruction contributed positively to short-term reading fluency, particularly in predictable or repetitive texts. Learners demonstrated increased reading speed and smoother oral reading when familiar high-frequency words were recognised automatically.

A KS1 teacher noted:

"Sight words help children read more smoothly, especially in early books." (KS1 Teacher 1)

Similarly, an EYFS teacher reflected:

"Children feel more confident when they recognise words quickly." (EYFS Teacher 2)

However, teachers emphasised that fluency gains were more sustained when sight-word instruction was integrated with phonics, rather than taught in isolation. Several teachers observed that learners who relied heavily on sight-word memorisation struggled when texts contained unfamiliar words or deviated from predictable patterns.

These observations are consistent with research suggesting that reading fluency is best supported when automatic word recognition is grounded in phonological knowledge rather than visual memorisation alone (Ehri, 2014; Perfetti, 2007).

Table 2

Teacher Perceptions of Fluency Outcomes

Aspect	Phonics	Sight Words
Reading speed	Moderate	High
Accuracy	High	Variable
Transfer to new texts	High	Low–Moderate
Long-term fluency	High	Moderate

The table illustrates that while sight-word instruction was associated with immediate fluency benefits, phonics-based instruction was perceived as more effective for sustaining fluency across diverse reading contexts.

4.3 Reading Independence and Learner Confidence

One of the most frequently reported themes across teacher data was reading independence. Teachers consistently observed that learners receiving systematic phonics instruction demonstrated increased willingness to attempt reading tasks independently.

An EYFS teacher stated:

"Children don't wait for the teacher anymore. They try on their own." (EYFS Teacher 3) A KS1 teacher similarly noted:

"Phonics gives children confidence. They feel they have a way forward." (KS1 Teacher 3) Teachers contrasted this with learners who relied primarily on sight-word memorisation, noting that such learners often hesitated when encountering unfamiliar words and sought adult assistance more frequently.

These findings resonate with the Simple View of Reading, which emphasises decoding as a foundational component of reading comprehension and independence (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). Teachers' observations suggest that decoding competence supports not only technical reading skills but also learner self-efficacy and engagement.

4.4 Teacher Reflections on Instructional Balance

Reflective questionnaires revealed a strong consensus among teachers regarding the complementary but unequal roles of phonics-based and sight-word instruction. All six teachers agreed that phonics should form the foundation of early reading instruction, while sight-word learning should serve a supportive role.

One teacher reflected:

"Sight words help at first, but phonics helps children read independently." (KS1 Teacher 4) Another commented:

"We need both, but phonics gives the structure." (EYFS Teacher 1)

Teachers reported that over the course of the term, they adjusted their instructional practices to prioritise systematic phonics routines while integrating sight-word learning more strategically. This shift reflects growing professional awareness of the limitations of memorisation-based approaches when used in isolation.

Research on teacher cognition suggests that such reflective adjustments are common when teachers engage in sustained observation and inquiry into their own practice (Borg, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Table 3

Summary of Teacher Questionnaire Responses (n=6)

Questionnaire Item	Agree / Strongly Agree
Phonics supports decoding 6/6 Sight words support fluency	6/6

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Phonics supports reading independence   5/6   Sight   words   alone   are   sufficient 0/6
Balanced but phonics-led approach preferred 6/6

The questionnaire data reinforce observational findings, demonstrating a high level of agreement among teachers regarding the foundational role of phonics instruction.

4.5 EYFS and KS1 Comparisons

While findings were broadly consistent across EYFS and KS1 classrooms, some stagespecific patterns emerged. EYFS teachers emphasised the role of phonics in building early confidence and sound awareness, while KS1 teachers highlighted its importance in supporting transition to more complex texts.

KS1 teachers also reported greater challenges when learners entered Year 1 with limited phonics knowledge, reinforcing concerns raised in existing research about early instructional gaps (Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 2006).

4.6 Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that:

- Phonics-based instruction was consistently associated with improved decoding, independence, and transferability.
- Sight-word instruction supported short-term fluency but was insufficient as a standalone approach.
- Teachers valued a balanced approach, with phonics serving as the instructional foundation.
- Sustained observation over one academic term enabled teachers to refine instructional practices and professional judgement.

These findings provide school-based empirical support for existing research advocating systematic phonics instruction, while also highlighting the role of teacher insight in shaping effective early literacy pedagogy.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Interpreting the Findings in Relation to Early Reading Theory

The findings of the present study strongly support existing research that positions systematic phonics instruction as foundational to early reading development. Teachers' sustained observations across EYFS and KS1 classrooms revealed consistent improvements in learners' decoding ability, reading independence, and confidence when phonics instruction was implemented in a structured and explicit manner. These findings align closely with the Simple View of Reading, which conceptualises reading comprehension as the interaction between decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019).

Teachers' reports that learners increasingly attempted unfamiliar words independently suggest that phonics instruction facilitated the development of transferable decoding strategies. This supports Ehri's (2005, 2014) theory of orthographic mapping, which argues that skilled word recognition emerges from phonologically grounded decoding rather than visual memorisation. The present findings add classroom-based, longitudinal evidence to this theoretical claim, demonstrating how orthographic mapping processes are observed and interpreted by teachers in real instructional contexts.

Importantly, teachers' observations that reliance on sight-word memorisation led to hesitation and dependency when encountering unfamiliar text echo longstanding concerns in the literature regarding guessing strategies and limited transfer (Stanovich, 1986; Castles, Rastle,

& Nation, 2018). While sight-word recognition contributed to surface-level fluency, it did not consistently support deeper reading competence or independence.

5.2 Sight Words, Fluency, and the Limits of Memorisation

The study's findings do not dismiss the value of sight-word instruction but instead situate it within a phonics-informed instructional framework. Teachers consistently acknowledged that sight-word learning supported short-term reading fluency, particularly in predictable and repetitive texts. This observation aligns with fluency theories that emphasise the role of automaticity in reducing cognitive load during reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Perfetti, 2007).

However, the teachers' collective view that sight-word instruction was insufficient as a standalone approach reinforces contemporary research arguing against visual memorisation models of reading (Ehri, 2014; Castles et al., 2018). The limited transferability reported by teachers when learners encountered unfamiliar words suggests that memorisation without phonological grounding does not support long-term reading development.

These findings contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding "balanced literacy" by offering practitioner evidence that balance without structure may obscure instructional priorities. As Wyse and Bradbury (2022) argue, the term "balance" often lacks pedagogical clarity, leading to inconsistent classroom practices. The present study supports a model in which phonics provides the structural foundation, while sight-word learning plays a complementary role in building fluency.

5.3 Teacher Cognition and Professional Judgement

A significant contribution of this study lies in its focus on teacher cognition and professional judgement. Teachers did not simply implement prescribed approaches; rather, they actively evaluated instructional impact through observation, reflection, and adjustment over time. This finding aligns with Borg's (2015) research on teacher beliefs, which emphasises that instructional practices are shaped by teachers' experiences, contextual constraints, and evolving professional knowledge.

Over the course of the term, teachers reported shifting their instructional emphasis toward more systematic phonics routines, reflecting a process of professional learning through inquiry. Such reflective adaptation exemplifies the principles of practitioner research, in which teachers generate knowledge through engagement with their own practice (CochranSmith & Lytle, 2009).

By foregrounding teacher voice, this study addresses a notable gap in early literacy research, which often privileges learner outcome measures while marginalising practitioner insight. The findings suggest that teachers' sustained, context-sensitive observations offer valuable evidence for evaluating instructional effectiveness, particularly in early childhood settings where learning trajectories are developmental and non-linear (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

5.4 EYFS and KS1 Continuity in Early Reading Instruction

The comparison between EYFS and KS1 classrooms highlights the importance of instructional continuity in early reading development. While EYFS teachers emphasised phonics as a means of building early confidence and sound awareness, KS1 teachers reported its critical role in supporting transition to more complex texts.

Concerns raised by KS1 teachers regarding learners entering Year 1 with limited phonics knowledge echo findings in longitudinal research that early instructional gaps can have enduring consequences (Torgesen, 2006; Snow et al., 1998). The present study underscores

the need for coherent phonics progression across EYFS and KS1, rather than fragmented or inconsistent implementation.

From a curriculum perspective, these findings reinforce the argument that early reading instruction should be viewed as a continuum, with shared pedagogical principles across stages. Such alignment is particularly important in schools where multiple instructional approaches coexist without a clearly articulated literacy framework.

5.5 Implications for Classroom Practice

The findings of this study carry several important implications for classroom practice in EYFS and KS1 settings. First, they suggest that systematic phonics instruction should be prioritised as the core component of early reading programmes. While sight-word learning may support fluency and confidence, it should be integrated in a manner that reinforces, rather than replaces, phonological decoding.

Second, the study highlights the value of ongoing teacher observation and reflection in evaluating instructional effectiveness. Rather than relying solely on standardised assessments, teachers' formative insights can inform instructional adjustments that respond to learners' needs in real time (Clay, 2000; Borg, 2015).

Third, the findings suggest that professional development should focus not only on instructional techniques but also on deepening teachers' theoretical understanding of how children learn to read. Research indicates that teacher knowledge of reading theory is a key determinant of effective literacy instruction (Snow et al., 1998; Torgesen, 2006).

5.6 Leadership and School-Level Implications

From a school leadership perspective, the study underscores the role of leadership in promoting instructional coherence. School leaders are uniquely positioned to ensure that phonics instruction is implemented systematically across classrooms, supported by shared expectations, resources, and professional dialogue (Hattie, 2009).

Leadership-led practitioner research, such as the present study, also demonstrates the potential for schools to become sites of knowledge production, rather than mere consumers of external research. By fostering a culture of inquiry, school leaders can support teachers in critically engaging with research evidence and aligning it with contextual realities (Biesta, 2017; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

5.7 Summary of Discussion

In summary, the findings of this study reinforce the theoretical and empirical case for systematic phonics instruction as the foundation of early reading development, while recognising the limited but supportive role of sight-word learning. By drawing on teachergenerated, longitudinal data from EYFS and KS1 classrooms, the study contributes contextually grounded evidence to ongoing debates in early literacy pedagogy. Crucially, the study highlights the central role of teachers and school leadership in interpreting, implementing, and refining instructional approaches. In doing so, it advances the case for practitioner-led research as a legitimate and valuable contribution to educational scholarship.

6. Limitations of the Study

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights into early reading instruction in EYFS and KS1 classrooms, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single school context and involved a small sample of six teachers. As a result, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. However, small-scale,

context-specific studies are widely recognised as appropriate in educational research where the goal is to develop situated understanding rather than broad generalisation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Second, the study relied on teacher-reported data, including observation checklists, reading records, and reflective questionnaires. While teacher perceptions are inherently subjective, they represent a legitimate and valuable source of professional knowledge, particularly when data are collected longitudinally and triangulated across multiple instruments (Borg, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The extended duration of data collection (August–December) helped to mitigate the limitations of self-report by allowing teachers to base reflections on sustained observation rather than isolated impressions.

Third, the researcher's dual role as school leader and practitioner-researcher may raise concerns regarding positional bias. However, practitioner research conducted within one's own institution is increasingly recognised as a valid research paradigm, provided that reflexivity, transparency, and ethical boundaries are maintained (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Biesta, 2017). In the present study, this role enabled prolonged engagement, collaborative instrument design, and access to authentic classroom practices, thereby enhancing ecological validity.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the implementation and perceived effectiveness of phonicsbased and sight-word approaches in early reading instruction from the perspective of EYFS and KS1 teachers. Drawing on teacher-generated data collected over one academic term, the study provides contextually grounded, practitioner-based evidence that contributes to ongoing debates in early literacy pedagogy.

The findings indicate that systematic phonics instruction plays a foundational role in supporting decoding, reading independence, and transferability across texts. While sightword instruction was found to contribute positively to short-term fluency and learner confidence, it was consistently viewed by teachers as insufficient when used in isolation. These findings align with established theoretical models of reading development, including the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019) and orthographic mapping theory (Ehri, 2014), while extending them through longitudinal classroom-based observation.

A key contribution of this study lies in its foregrounding of teacher voice and professional judgement. Teachers were not passive implementers of instructional approaches but active evaluators who refined their practices through observation and reflection. This supports existing research highlighting the importance of teacher cognition in shaping effective literacy instruction (Borg, 2015; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

From a leadership perspective, the study underscores the importance of instructional coherence across EYFS and KS1, particularly in ensuring consistent phonics progression. School leaders play a critical role in aligning curriculum expectations, supporting professional learning, and fostering reflective practice. Practitioner-led inquiry, as demonstrated in this study, offers a powerful means of bridging research evidence and classroom realities.

In conclusion, this study affirms that early reading instruction is most effective when phonics-based approaches are implemented systematically and supported—rather than replaced—by sight-word learning. By contributing school-based empirical evidence, the study highlights the value of practitioner research in informing early literacy policy, pedagogy, and leadership.

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