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Analysis of the phonics method: contributions to literacy in the early years of Elementary Education

Análise do método fônico: contribuições para a alfabetização nos anos iniciais do Ensino Fundamental

Análisis del método fónico: contribuciones a la alfabetización en los primeros años de la Educación Primaria

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Abstract:
This study analyzes the foundations of the phonics method and its contributions to learning to read and write in the early years of Elementary Education. The discussion addresses phonological and phonemic awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondences, decoding, fluency, and reading comprehension, as well as pedagogical practices and the challenges related to applying this approach. This is a qualitative and exploratory bibliographic study based on books, scientific articles, dissertations, and Brazilian institutional documents. Publications issued between 2021 and 2025 were prioritized and complemented by earlier works considered essential to understanding the subject. The results indicate that explicit and progressive instruction in sound-letter relationships can foster reading accuracy, word writing, and student autonomy. However, phonics instruction should not occur in isolation, because literacy also requires vocabulary expansion, oral language, written production, and contact with different textual genres. It is concluded that the phonics method can contribute to reader development when integrated with contextualized and inclusive practices suited to children's needs.

Keywords:
Literacy. Phonemic awareness. Phonological awareness. Decoding. Phonics method.

Resumo:
Este estudo analisa os fundamentos do método fônico e suas contribuições para a aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita nos anos iniciais do Ensino Fundamental. A discussão contempla a consciência fonológica e fonêmica, as correspondências entre fonemas e grafemas, a decodificação, a fluência e a compreensão leitora, além das práticas pedagógicas e dos desafios relacionados à aplicação dessa proposta. Trata-se de uma pesquisa bibliográfica, qualitativa e exploratória, fundamentada em livros, artigos científicos, dissertações e documentos institucionais nacionais. Foram priorizadas publicações divulgadas entre 2021 e 2025, complementadas por trabalhos anteriores considerados essenciais para a compreensão do tema. Os resultados apontam que o ensino explícito e progressivo das relações entre sons e letras pode favorecer a precisão na leitura, a escrita de palavras e a autonomia do estudante. Contudo, a instrução fônica não deve ocorrer de maneira isolada, pois a alfabetização também requer ampliação do vocabulário, oralidade, produção escrita e contato com diferentes gêneros textuais. Conclui-se que o método fônico pode contribuir para a formação do leitor quando integrado a práticas contextualizadas, inclusivas e adequadas às necessidades das crianças.

Palavras-chave:
Alfabetização. Consciência fonêmica. Consciência fonológica. Decodificação. Método fônico.

Resumen:

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Este estudio analiza los fundamentos del método fónico y sus contribuciones al aprendizaje de la lectura y la escritura en los primeros años de la Educación Primaria. La discusión contempla la conciencia fonológica y fonémica, las correspondencias entre fonemas y grafemas, la decodificación, la fluidez y la comprensión lectora, además de las prácticas pedagógicas y los desafíos relacionados con la aplicación de esta propuesta. Se trata de una investigación bibliográfica, cualitativa y exploratoria, fundamentada en libros, artículos científicos, disertaciones y documentos institucionales brasileños. Se priorizaron publicaciones difundidas entre 2021 y 2025, complementadas por trabajos anteriores considerados esenciales para comprender el tema. Los resultados indican que la enseñanza explícita y progresiva de las relaciones entre sonidos y letras puede favorecer la precisión en la lectura, la escritura de palabras y la autonomía del estudiante. Sin embargo, la instrucción fónica no debe darse de forma aislada, pues la alfabetización también requiere ampliar el vocabulario, la oralidad, la producción escrita y el contacto con diferentes géneros textuales. Se concluye que el método fónico puede contribuir a la formación del lector cuando se integra en prácticas contextualizadas, inclusivas y adecuadas a las necesidades de los niños.

Palabras clave:
Alfabetización. Conciencia fonémica. Conciencia fonológica. Decodificación. Método fónico.

1 Introduction

Literacy occupies a central position in the school trajectory because it enables children to participate in situations in which reading and writing are necessary. This process does not consist merely of recognizing letters or reproducing words presented by the teacher. It involves understanding how the alphabetic writing system works, developing oral language, expanding vocabulary, and being able to assign meaning to what is read. Sargiani (2022) understands reading instruction as an activity that requires planning, explicit presentation of content, and continuous monitoring of learning. Alves and Finger (2023), in turn, relate reader development to the integration of linguistic knowledge, communicative experiences, and meaningful practices involving the use of writing. Thus, teaching literacy means providing students with tools to understand how writing is organized and to use it autonomously.

Among the different approaches to initial reading and writing instruction, the phonics method focuses on the systematic presentation of phoneme–grapheme correspondences. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) argue that children need to learn to identify speech sounds and associate them with the letters or groups of letters that represent them. Costa (2023) adds that this approach is characterized by an organized sequence in which the most regular and frequent relationships are addressed before more complex structures. Children begin to use the knowledge acquired to blend sounds, form syllables, recognize words, and produce written

records. This dynamic promotes the reading of unfamiliar words, because students no longer depend exclusively on visual memorization.

Work with the sound dimension of language is also related to the development of phonological awareness, understood as the ability to recognize and manipulate words, syllables, rhymes, alliterations, and phonemes. Cruz (2021) identified a positive association between phonological skills and children's performance in reading and writing activities. Gregório (2024) considers that reflection on sound structure helps students understand that letters represent parts of speech, even though this relationship is not always simple or entirely regular. Puliezi and Maluf (2012) also associate initial reading acquisition with phonological awareness, working memory, and naming speed. These elements demonstrate that learning to read results from the interaction of different forms of knowledge and cognitive operations, rather than from a single skill.

Despite the potential contributions of the phonics method, its use has prompted debate in the field of education. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) caution that an emphasis on sound correspondences should not reduce literacy to technical training separated from the communicative functions of writing. Morais (2020) found that children taught to read through a phonics approach still experienced difficulties in some phonemic-awareness tasks, especially those requiring them to segment or pronounce phonemes in isolation. Complementarily, Silva and Rodriguez (2022) observed that phonological intervention activities can promote reading and sentence comprehension, particularly among students at risk of learning difficulties. These different contributions show that the discussion should not be limited to defending or rejecting a method, but must consider how it is implemented and connected to the other dimensions of literacy.

The choice of this topic is justified by the need to understand the foundations of the phonics approach and the pedagogical conditions required for its use in the early school years. Some of the difficulties observed during literacy development are related to a lack of knowledge of the correspondences between oral and written language, which can compromise decoding, the development of a word repertoire, and reading fluency. At the same time, merely performing exercises with letters and sounds does not ensure that children understand texts or use writing in real situations. Brasil (2021a) recommends that instruction in the essential components of reading be associated with oral-language, vocabulary, and comprehension activities. Oliveira (2023) adds that phonological awareness contributes to mastery of the alphabetic system but does not, by itself, guarantee literacy. In view of this reality, the following research question is

posed: how can the phonics method contribute to learning to read and write in the early school years without restricting literacy to the mechanical repetition of sounds and letters?

The general objective of this study is to analyze the foundations, characteristics, and contributions of the phonics method to learning to read and write in the early years of elementary school. Its specific objectives are to understand the role of phonological and phonemic awareness in the literacy process; examine the relationship between phonemes and graphemes in the development of decoding; discuss the potential contributions of phonics instruction to fluency and reading comprehension; and identify pedagogical practices and challenges related to the use of this approach in everyday school life. The definition of these objectives reflects the need to examine both the possibilities and the limitations of the method. While Capovilla and Seabra (2021) emphasize the value of explicit instruction in sound –symbol correspondences, Alves and Finger (2023) argue that formal mastery of language must remain integrated with communicative experiences and meaning-making.

The study is characterized as bibliographic research with a qualitative approach and an exploratory purpose. The search for publications was guided by the descriptors “literacy,” “phonics method,” “phonological awareness,” “phonemic awareness,” “phoneme and grapheme,” “decoding,” “reading fluency,” and “reading comprehension.” The terms were searched individually and combined with the Boolean operator AND in Google Scholar, the Scientific Electronic Library Online, the Journal Portal of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, and Brazilian institutional repositories. The inclusion criteria encompassed books, chapters, scientific articles, dissertations, and institutional documents available in full, published primarily between 2021 and 2025, and directly related to the topic. Earlier works were included when they had conceptual relevance to the discussion. Duplicate publications, texts without identifiable authorship or provenance, materials lacking access to bibliographic information, and works that merely mentioned literacy without discussing the skills investigated were excluded. Following selection, the materials were read thematically, their arguments were compared, and the content was organized according to the proposed objectives.

2 Foundations and characteristics of the phonics method in literacy instruction

The phonics method is based on the understanding that alphabetic writing represents sound-related aspects of speech. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) place instruction in phoneme–grapheme correspondences among the foundations of initial learning, whereas Costa (2023)

characterizes this approach by the explicit presentation and progressive organization of content. Along this path, children learn that a letter or group of letters can represent a particular sound and use this knowledge to read and write. Instruction is not contingent upon the spontaneous discovery of writing regularities, because the teacher presents the relationships in a planned manner, provides examples, and guides their application in a variety of words.

Phonemes and graphemes belong to different dimensions of language. The former is a sound unit capable of distinguishing words, while the latter refers to the written representation of that sound. Gregório (2024) associates understanding this relationship with mastery of the alphabetic principle, and Alves and Finger (2023) emphasize that the phonological and orthographic characteristics of the language must be considered in the process. When children realize that “faca” and “vaca” have different meanings because the first sound changes, they begin to understand the distinctive function of phonemes. By associating this difference with the letters “f” and “v,” they establish a connection that can be applied when reading and writing other words.

Sargiani (2022) argues that initial reading instruction needs to follow an organization that makes it possible to introduce, review, and consolidate knowledge. Brasil (2021a) likewise advises that content be presented explicitly and cumulatively. In a sequence of this kind, the most frequent or regular correspondences can be taught first, followed by syllabic structures, digraphs, and more complex orthographic conventions. Progress should not follow only a rigid schedule, because observations of student responses need to guide review and adaptation.

After learning the sounds represented by letters, learners blend the segments to form syllables and words. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) link this blending to the ability to read words that have not yet been memorized, while Puliezi and Maluf (2012) relate initial performance to phonological skills, working memory, and naming speed. During the first attempts, reading may be slow and segmented. As successful experiences increase, the identification of graphic sequences becomes faster and word recognition requires less conscious effort.

In writing, children need to attend to the spoken word, identify its components, and choose letters to represent them. Cruz (2021) found a positive relationship between phonological awareness and reading and writing performance, while Oliveira (2023) considers reflection on sounds important for mastering the properties of the alphabetic system. Children's written productions provide clues as to what has already been understood. An incomplete spelling may show that the student has recognized some segments, although they have not yet mastered all the necessary correspondences. Teacher intervention should be based on this evidence rather than being limited to classifying the response as right or wrong.

Phonemic awareness is important in this dynamic, but it should not be confused with phonological awareness as a whole. Oliveira (2023) distinguishes activities related to words, syllables, rhymes, and phonemes, showing that they require different cognitive operations. Morais (2020) found that some phonemic tasks remain complex even for children who can already read and write. Segmenting a word into all of its phonemes, for example, may be more difficult than recognizing its initial syllable. For this reason, pedagogical approaches need to respect a coherent progression and avoid treating artificial tasks as the sole indicator of learning.

Costa (2023) demonstrates that literacy teachers' conceptual understanding influences how the method is implemented. Gregório (2024) reinforces the need for mediation capable of connecting reflection, reading, and writing. Teachers are responsible for selecting appropriate words, modeling procedures, formulating questions, analyzing errors, and offering new learning opportunities. They also need to understand the particularities of Brazilian Portuguese, because the same letter can represent different sounds and the same phoneme can be represented by different graphemes.

Alves and Finger (2023) note that children's linguistic experiences influence the literacy process, especially in contexts marked by regional diversity or bilingualism. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) advocate a critical use of the method without disregarding the social aspects of language. Teaching conventional writing does not authorize schools to devalue accents, regional varieties, or family modes of expression. Teachers should explain that speech varies across groups and contexts, whereas writing follows conventions necessary for communication in different settings.

Brasil (2021b) recognizes the importance of components related to the alphabetic principle, but also includes vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension among the dimensions of learning. Alves and Finger (2023) maintain that the development of proficient readers requires formal knowledge without being limited to it. Thus, sound-blending exercises can coexist with the reading of stories, poems, notes, lists, and informational texts. The words addressed can be drawn from texts that spark interest and revisited in the text after analysis.

Sargiani (2022) associates organized review with stronger learning, and Capovilla and Seabra (2021) advocate frequent opportunities to apply knowledge. Repetition, in this case, does not mean reproducing the same worksheet indefinitely. A phoneme–grapheme relationship can reappear in games, word reading, sentence formation, spontaneous writing, and word comparison. Variation maintains the instructional objective and allows students to use the content in new situations.

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Although the phonics method offers a path to decoding, it cannot be presented as the sole solution to every difficulty. Morais (2020) questions the priority given to isolated phoneme practice when it takes the place of reading and text comprehension. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) also point to the risks of turning a methodological approach into a single answer to a complex process. Learning depends on the interaction among oral language, memory, vocabulary, prior knowledge, reading opportunities, teaching conditions, and individual characteristics.

3 Phonological awareness and phonemic awareness in learning to read and write

Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously perceive, analyze, and manipulate the sound components of language. This skill involves different units, such as words, syllables, rhymes, alliterations, and phonemes, and therefore should not be understood as a single, homogeneous competence. Cruz (2021) identifies a positive relationship between the development of phonological perception and children's performance in reading and writing activities. Oliveira (2023) adds that the different levels of this skill have their own degrees of complexity and require varied cognitive operations. Thus, recognizing that two words rhyme is not equivalent to being able to segment them into all of their phonemes, although both tasks involve attention to the sound dimension of language.

The earliest manifestations of this awareness may appear before formal writing instruction. Through songs, nursery rhymes, poems, riddles, and games, children recognize repetition, sound similarities, and different speech rhythms. Alves and Finger (2023) relate these linguistic experiences to the development of knowledge that later plays a role in literacy. Gregório (2024) considers that oral-language activities can prepare students for more precise reflection on how the alphabetic system works. Schools can draw on this repertoire, valuing family and cultural practices without prematurely introducing formal exercises that are inappropriate for the age group.

Within this broader set lies phonemic awareness, which refers to the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes. These minimal sound units make it possible to distinguish words, as occurs with “pato” and “gato,” whose difference in meaning results from replacing the initial sound. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) link phoneme identification to learning the correspondences between sounds and letters. Costa (2023) likewise considers that attention to sound segments helps children understand the alphabetic principle. By associating a sound with

a particular graphic representation, learners acquire a strategy that can be used both to read and to write new words.

Phonological awareness and learning to write have a reciprocal relationship. Cruz (2021) observes that children who perform better on phonological tasks also achieve more favorable results in reading and written production. Alves and Finger (2023) explain that contact with letters makes certain characteristics of speech more perceptible. Children may recognize rhymes before learning to read, but understanding the alphabetic system supports increasingly specific sound analyses. Therefore, it is not merely a matter of developing phonological skills before literacy instruction; learning to write itself expands the ability to reflect on the sound structure of words.

Puliezi and Maluf (2012) demonstrate that initial reading acquisition is related not only to phonological awareness but also to working memory and naming speed. Sargiani (2022) similarly understands literacy as the result of interaction among different forms of knowledge and cognitive processes. While reading a word, children need to observe the graphemes, retrieve the corresponding sounds, temporarily retain this information, and blend it until they recognize a familiar linguistic form. If one of these operations requires excessive effort, reading may become slow and subject to interruptions.

Phonological skills follow a progression that needs to be considered in pedagogical planning. Oliveira (2023) found a greater presence of syllable-related activities in a teaching collection intended for early childhood education, as well as less variety in operations involving other levels. Gregório (2024) advocates mediation that gradually moves from more perceptible sound units to smaller and more complex analyses. Children generally recognize or separate syllables more easily because syllables can be pronounced naturally in isolation. Phonemes, by contrast, are abstract units and cannot always be articulated without the support of other sounds.

However, this progression should not be turned into a rigid sequence that is identical for everyone. Morais (2020) found that children taught to read using a phonics method, although already able to read and write words, experienced difficulties in phoneme segmentation, counting, and blending tasks. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) also caution that phonemic work cannot become a mechanical activity removed from the social uses of writing. Insufficient performance on an isolated-pronunciation task does not automatically mean that students do not understand the alphabetic principle or are unable to use phonographic correspondences while reading.

In written production, phonemic awareness helps children analyze the spoken word and select graphemes to represent it. Gregório (2024) associates this process with the understanding

that writing records speech segments, while Capovilla and Seabra (2021) relate sound analysis to encoding. When students write only some of the letters in a word, their production may indicate which sound segments they have already perceived. Rather than considering the record solely as an error, teachers can use it to identify the knowledge developed and the aspects that still require intervention.

In reading, phoneme awareness assists in transforming the graphic sequence into a recognizable sound form. Costa (2023) explains that explicit phonics instruction provides procedures for reading words that have not yet been memorized. Puliezi and Maluf (2012) show, however, that the quality of this reading depends on the combination of sound awareness, memory, and speed of access to linguistic information. Students may initially pronounce each component separately; after repeated, successful encounters with the word, recognition tends to become faster.

Pedagogical intervention can explore different operations, such as identifying, comparing, blending, segmenting, adding, deleting, and substituting sounds. Brasil (2021a) proposes that these activities be organized explicitly and progressively and connected to alphabetic correspondences. Oliveira (2023) emphasizes that a diversity of operations is important to avoid work limited to syllable separation. Teachers can ask the class to identify words with the same initial sound, form new words by replacing a phoneme, or compare different written forms. Movable letters and picture cards can support reflection, provided that the linguistic objective remains clear.

Intervention based on phonological skills can also support children at risk of reading difficulties. Silva and Rodriguez (2022) identified improved sentence comprehension among students who participated in activities involving alphabet recognition, rhyme, alliteration, segmentation, and phonemic discrimination. Cruz (2021) reinforces the contribution of these competencies to performance in the second year of elementary school. However, a persistent difficulty needs to be examined broadly, because linguistic, cognitive, pedagogical, social, or sensory factors may affect learning.

Monitoring should consider individual progress and avoid embarrassing comparisons. Brasil (2021b) advocates monitoring the components of literacy, while Sargiani (2022) associates assessment with pedagogical decision-making. Observation can include word reading, written production, rhyme recognition, sound identification, and comprehension of short texts. The results serve to reorganize interventions, form temporary groups, and offer supplementary activities. Assessment loses its educational meaning when it functions solely to classify or blame the child.

Phonological awareness also needs to be related to comprehension and the meaningful use of language. Alves and Finger (2023) advocate integrating the formal and communicative aspects of literacy. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) note that knowledge of sound relationships does not replace contact with texts or participation in social practices of reading and writing. A story can provide a context for exploring rhymes, comparing words, and identifying sounds without neglecting characters, events, and meanings. In this way, phonological reflection becomes part of a complete language experience.

Silva and Rodriguez (2022) associate phonological stimulation with potential advances in reading and sentence comprehension, while Puliezi and Maluf (2014) relate the automatic recognition of words to fluency and comprehension. Sound-based skills support decoding, but meaning depends on vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, inferences, and prior experiences. Children may pronounce a word correctly without understanding what it means. For this reason, every reading activity needs to make room for conversations about content, explanations of vocabulary, and connections with other knowledge.

4 Phoneme-grapheme relationships in the development of decoding

Understanding the relationships between phonemes and graphemes constitutes an important stage in learning to read because it allows children to recognize how the sound elements of speech are represented graphically. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) explain that a phoneme is a sound unit, while a grapheme refers to the letter or group of letters that can represent it in writing. Gregório (2024) adds that mastery of the alphabetic principle occurs when learners realize that the marks recorded on paper do not directly represent objects but rather sound segments of spoken words. This discovery enables reading to cease depending solely on visual memorization.

The relationship between sound and letter is not entirely regular in Brazilian Portuguese. Alves and Finger (2023) show that the phonological and orthographic characteristics of the language need to be considered during literacy instruction. Sargiani (2022) likewise argues that instruction should be organized according to the frequency, regularity, and complexity of correspondences. In some cases, a letter represents a highly predictable sound; in others, its value depends on its position in the word or on the letters that surround it. The grapheme “s,” for example, can represent different sounds in “sapo,” “casa,” and “pasta.” This diversity requires an instructional progression that avoids presenting many exceptions simultaneously.

In the phonics method, teachers directly teach certain correspondences and demonstrate how they can be blended. Costa (2023) relates this practice to the development of encoding and decoding procedures, while Capovilla and Seabra (2021) emphasize that knowledge of sounds makes it possible to read words that have not yet been memorized. Explicit presentation gives children a strategy applicable to new words, because they can observe the letters, retrieve their sound values, and blend them until they recognize the word. This procedure promotes autonomy and reduces dependence on guesses based solely on illustrations or context.

Regarding the progression promoted by the phonics method, Costa states:

> This method proposes the progression of reading and writing in the early years of literacy instruction, producing efficient encoding and decoding processes (Costa, 2023, p. 6).

The passage demonstrates that encoding and decoding constitute complementary movements. In reading, students begin with graphemes and retrieve the corresponding sounds; in writing, they attend to the spoken word, identify its components, and select the letters that can represent them. Gregório (2024) associates this reciprocity with a broader understanding of the alphabetic system. Cruz (2021) also identifies links among phonological awareness, reading, and written production, showing that activities focused on sound analysis can affect both forms of learning.

Puliezi and Maluf (2012) relate its development to phonological awareness, working memory, and naming speed. Pinto and Rodrigues (2022) add that learning to read involves the integration of perceptual, linguistic, cognitive, and mnemonic processes. When reading an unfamiliar word, children need to recognize the letters, retrieve the sounds, provisionally retain this information, and combine it into a sequence. When one of these operations has not yet been consolidated, pauses, substitutions, omissions, or incomplete attempts arise.

These difficulties should not immediately be interpreted as a lack of ability. Cruz (2021) shows that mastery of reading and writing develops gradually, while Brasil (2021a) recommends interventions compatible with the knowledge demonstrated by students. Segmented reading may indicate that the child already knows the correspondences, although they still need time to blend them. In this situation, mediation should value the procedure used, provide respectful correction, and offer new opportunities for application.

After recognizing the sounds, learners need to blend them until they arrive at the spoken form of the word. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) advocate explicit blending activities, while Costa (2023) links this practice to reading progression. The teacher can initially model the process by prolonging certain sounds and demonstrating how they blend together. Next, the child performs the blending with support and, later, independently. The activity needs to

conclude with recognition of the word and discussion of its meaning so that reading is not limited to pronunciation.

Sargiani (2022) recommends organizing tasks according to content already taught. Brasil (2021b) highlights the importance of a progression that allows for practice, review, and consolidation. Words composed of familiar correspondences help children apply the alphabetic principle with greater confidence. Introducing too many irregularities too early may cause confusion and lead learners to abandon the decoding strategy. More complex words can gradually be incorporated, accompanied by explanations of their particular features.

Oliveira (2023) links phonological awareness activities to the appropriation of the properties of the writing system, while Gregório (2024) emphasizes the value of reflecting on how words are organized. By assembling, disassembling, and comparing words, children realize that removing, adding, or replacing a letter can change pronunciation and meaning. Hands-on manipulation does not replace handwriting, but it can temporarily reduce motor demands and direct attention toward sound and graphic structure.

Alves and Finger (2023) value explicit reflection on the formal aspects of language, and Capovilla and Seabra (2021) use comparison to support sound discrimination. Words such as "pato" and "gato," "faca" and "vaca," or "mala" and "sala" make it possible to observe that changing one element alters the reading. The teacher can ask what remained the same, which sound changed, and which letter represented that change. The answer should not be provided before the child has had an opportunity to formulate a hypothesis.

Alves and Finger (2023) observe that pronunciation varies according to linguistic, regional, and social context. Costa (2023) emphasizes that teachers need training to interpret these variations without mistaking them for literacy difficulties. In many regions of Brazil, identically spelled words may display slight differences in pronunciation. Schools should teach orthographic conventions without classifying a student's way of speaking as wrong or inferior. The explanation needs to show that spoken language allows variation, whereas writing uses socially shared forms.

Morais (2020) challenges the idea that the isolated pronunciation of every phoneme is an absolute prerequisite for reading. Children who already understood the alphabetic principle showed difficulty in certain phonemic segmentation tasks. Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) likewise warn of the limitations of literacy instruction centered on technical exercises. This finding does not eliminate the contribution of phonics instruction, but it prevents a specific task from being used as the sole measure of learning. Children may apply sound relationships while reading even if they cannot verbalize each phoneme separately.

Puliezi and Maluf (2014) relate the automatization of word recognition to the development of fluency. Silva and Rodriguez (2022) indicate that strengthening phonological skills can contribute to performance in reading and sentence comprehension. Initially, learners need to analyze each element; after repeated encounters, some words begin to be identified quickly. Automatization does not result from the rote memorization of lists, but from the repeated application of correspondences in varied activities.

5 Contributions of the phonics method to reading fluency and comprehension

Reading fluency is the ability to read accurately, at an appropriate pace, and with expression, so that word recognition does not hinder meaning construction. Puliezi and Maluf (2014) understand this skill as a link between decoding and comprehension, while Capovilla and Seabra (2021) associate mastery of letter-sound correspondences with progressively more confident reading. During initial encounters with a word, the child may need to analyze each grapheme and retrieve its sound value. With practice, this procedure requires less effort, allowing attention to be directed toward the information presented in the text.

The phonics method contributes to accuracy by teaching a strategy that can be applied to unfamiliar words. Costa (2023) associates explicit instruction in phonographic correspondences with the development of encoding and decoding. Sargiani (2022), in turn, argues that initial reading instruction needs to present content that is organized, cumulative, and compatible with students' progress. When observing a sequence of letters, learners cease to depend exclusively on memorization or images and begin using sounds to arrive at the word. This possibility expands autonomy and reduces guesses that fail to consider all the graphic information.

Puliezi and Maluf (2014) explain that fluency involves correctly recognizing words at a speed that supports comprehension. Alves and Finger (2023) add that reader development requires integration between linguistic knowledge and meaningful experiences with writing. When children take too long to identify each element, they may forget the beginning of the sentence before reaching the end. Thus, even if they pronounce every word correctly, they will have difficulty establishing relationships among them and understanding the content.

Guided repetition promotes automatization, provided that it does not become a meaningless exercise. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) emphasize the importance of practicing correspondences that have already been taught, while Brasil (2021a) proposes revisiting content in ways that allow the skills addressed to be consolidated. Children need to encounter the same

relationships in a variety of words, sentences, and texts. Repeated reading of a short story, for example, can help them recognize words more quickly, adjust their pauses, and notice punctuation. However, rereading should have an understandable purpose and should not be used as punishment for errors.

Puliezi and Maluf (2014) associate rapid recognition with freeing cognitive resources for more complex operations. Pinto and Rodrigues (2022) consider learning to read to involve the integration of perception, memory, language, and meaning attribution. When decoding becomes efficient, readers can devote greater attention to ideas, relationships between sentences, and implicit information. Therefore, speed has pedagogical value only when it contributes to comprehension and maintains accuracy.

Alves and Finger (2023) emphasize that reading involves linguistic knowledge that extends beyond the isolated recognition of words. Puliezi and Maluf (2014) include rhythm, intonation, and appropriate phrasing among the aspects that bring oral reading closer to expressive speech. A student who observes punctuation, changes their voice according to a character's intention, and pauses coherently demonstrates that they are organizing the content into units of meaning. Prosody can therefore provide the teacher with evidence of the level of comprehension achieved.

Brasil (2021a) recommends shared and modeled reading practices, while Sargiani (2022) values explicit, guided interventions. During reading aloud, the educator can demonstrate how punctuation guides pauses, how intonation helps distinguish questions from statements, and how certain words receive emphasis. Students can then reread short passages, experiment with different interpretations, and discuss the changes in meaning produced by the voice.

Silva and Rodriguez (2022) associate lexical access with sentence comprehension, while Alves and Finger (2023) identify oral language as an important foundation for literacy. A child may correctly decode a given word and still not understand its meaning. For this reason, phonics activities need to explore word meanings, use words in sentences, and relate them to context. Explaining a new word should not be limited to a definition; examples, images, comparisons, and usage situations help integrate it into the student's repertoire.

Brasil (2021b) includes oral and reading comprehension among the components that should receive attention during literacy instruction. Gregório (2024) advocates practices that connect mastery of the alphabetic system to concrete reading experiences. Before presenting a text, the teacher can discuss the topic, explore the title, and retrieve what the class already knows. After reading, questions, inferences, and revisiting passages make it possible to

determine whether the information was connected and understood, instead of assessing only the pronunciation of words.

This awareness contributes to fluency by supporting decoding, but it does not by itself explain reading development. Puliezi and Maluf (2012) demonstrate that working memory and naming speed also play a role in initial acquisition. Cruz (2021) identifies relationships between sound perception and reading and writing performance. These contributions indicate that children exposed to the same activities may progress at different rates. Some learn the correspondences quickly, while others need additional examples, visual support, small-group practice, or individual guidance.

Silva and Rodriguez (2022) observed that an intervention based on phonological awareness improved schoolchildren's performance in sentence comprehension activities. Morais (2020), however, demonstrates that successful reading does not depend on perfect mastery of every phonemic task. Interpreting these results requires balance. Working with sounds can strengthen decoding and facilitate access to words, but children should not spend long periods completing oral segmentation exercises without contact with texts. The phonics component needs to lead to reading and meaning-making.

Comprehension should be fostered from the beginning of schooling, including when children cannot yet read independently. Brasil (2021a) values teacher-led reading as a means of expanding language, repertoire, and world knowledge. Alves and Finger (2023) advocate the presence of meaningful texts throughout the process. Listening to stories, anticipating events, commenting on characters, and formulating questions develop abilities that will later be used in independent reading. Thus, it is not necessary to wait until decoding is fully consolidated before beginning comprehension instruction.

Texts intended for decoding practice need to present a level of difficulty compatible with the knowledge already developed. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) advocate materials that allow students to apply the correspondences taught, while Sargiani (2022) recommends planned progression and review. If a text contains many relationships that are still unfamiliar, students may depend on constant assistance and lose sight of the meaning of what they read. Conversely, overly simple materials cease to offer challenges. An appropriate selection makes it possible to practice accuracy and fluency without sacrificing coherence and content quality.

Puliezi and Maluf (2014) address speed as one element of fluent reading, and Silva and Rodriguez (2022) show that comprehension needs to be integrated into performance analysis. The teacher should observe substitutions, omissions, self-corrections, pauses, intonation, and understanding of information. A numerical measure can assist monitoring, but it does not

represent reading quality on its own. Public comparisons that cause embarrassment or encourage speed without comprehension should also be avoided.

Cruz (2021) associates the assessment of phonological skills with identifying aspects that still require support. Gregório (2024) considers pedagogical mediation essential for transforming difficulties into opportunities for reflection. When children substitute a letter, omit a syllable, or try to guess a word, the teacher can analyze the strategy used and select specific guidance. Correction needs to direct attention to the written form without immediately providing the answer or exposing the student before the class.

Shared reading is one way to integrate phonics instruction, fluency, and comprehension. Brasil (2021b) advocates coordinating the different components of literacy instruction, while Alves and Finger (2023) emphasize the need to associate form and meaning. The teacher can select a text, explore its topic, read it expressively, and then revisit words containing the correspondences being studied. After the analysis, the class returns to the text to reread passages and discuss the content. This structure prevents sounds from appearing separately from the communicative functions of language.

Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) warn that literacy instruction cannot be reduced to the application of a single method. Morais (2020) also questions approaches in which phonemic training occupies a large portion of the time allocated to reading and writing. The contribution of the phonics approach becomes more consistent when it is integrated with vocabulary, oral language, writing, and comprehension. Students need to master decoding procedures, but they should also recognize reading as a source of information, imagination, cultural participation, and communication.

6 Pedagogical practices and challenges in applying the phonics method in the early years

Applying the phonics method in the early years requires planning that considers the knowledge children have already developed and the skills they still need to acquire. Capovilla and Seabra (2021) argue that relationships between phonemes and graphemes should be taught explicitly, systematically, and progressively. Costa (2023) adds that teachers' conceptual mastery directly affects the quality of this application. Before beginning an instructional sequence, it is necessary to identify which letters students recognize, which sounds they can discriminate, how they read words, and which strategies they use in their written work. This diagnosis helps prevent activities that are incompatible with the class's level.

Sargiani (2022) links learning to read with the ordered and cumulative presentation of phonographic correspondences, while Brasil (2021a) recommends frequently reviewing taught skills. Instruction can begin with the most regular and frequent relationships and advance to syllable structures, digraphs, and more complex orthographic conventions. However, this sequence should not function as an inflexible script. Students' performance needs to guide the pace of lessons, the revisiting of content, and the selection of examples.

It can be developed through activities involving words, syllables, rhymes, alliteration, and phonemes. Oliveira (2023) draws attention to the diversity of these units and the need to vary the proposed operations. Gregório (2024) associates reflection on sounds with understanding the alphabetic principle, especially when children relate what they hear to the letters used in writing. Songs, traditional rhymes, riddles, poems, name games, and word comparisons make it possible to develop this perception without distancing students from meaningful language practices.

Frequent stimulation of the development of phonological awareness skills is important so that the process of acquiring certain properties of the alphabetic system can occur... (Oliveira, 2023, p. 3).

This statement needs to be interpreted without turning phonological awareness into the sole condition for literacy acquisition. Cruz (2021) identifies a positive relationship between this skill and reading and writing performance, but Alves and Finger (2023) show that reader development also depends on linguistic experiences, vocabulary, and contact with texts. The frequent practice mentioned by Oliveira (2023) becomes more meaningful when sound-based activities help children read, write, and understand words used in communicative situations.

Capovilla and Seabra (2021) value analysis and synthesis activities, while Gregório (2024) emphasizes the need to make the sound and graphic organization of words perceptible. The teacher can pronounce a word and ask students to select the letters needed to represent it. The class can then compare different arrangements, observe missing letters, and verify how replacing one grapheme changes the word. This resource temporarily reduces the motor demands of writing and focuses attention on alphabetic structure.

Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) warn that an exclusively technical approach can separate mastery of the code from literacy practices. Alves and Finger (2023) likewise advocate integrating the formal aspects of language with communicative experiences. A sequence can begin with reading a story, explore certain words containing the phonographic relationship under study, and return to the text to discuss characters, events, and meanings. In this way, the analysis of sounds and letters does not lose its social purpose.

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Brasil (2021a) values teacher-led reading as a model for the development of vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Puliezi and Maluf (2014) associate fluent reading with freeing cognitive resources for meaning construction. During this practice, the teacher can model rhythm, intonation, and pauses, as well as invite the class to locate familiar words. At another point, children can reread short passages with support or in pairs.

Games can also be incorporated into planning, provided that they have a clear pedagogical purpose. Oliveira (2023) observes that phonological awareness activities should encompass different levels and operations. Sargiani (2022) argues that resources should be selected according to the skill to be developed. Memory games matching pictures and initial letters, rhyme dominoes, grouping words by initial sound, and forming new words by substituting phonemes are some possibilities. At the end, it is important to discuss the strategies used, allowing students to explain how they arrived at their answers.

Table 1 – Pedagogical practices related to the phonics method

Pedagogical practice	**Main objective**	**Example of application**	**Necessary precautions**
Identification of initial sounds	Develop attention to phonemes	Select pictures whose names begin with the same sound	Pronounce words naturally and respect linguistic varieties
Word comparison	Perceive sound and graphic similarities and differences	Compare “pato,” “gato,” “mato,” and “rato”	Also discuss the meanings of the words
Phonemic blending	Blend sounds to form words	Present the sounds separately and ask students to form the word	Begin with short words and familiar correspondences
Word segmentation	Identify sound components	Separate words into syllables and, gradually, into phonemes	Do not treat perfect phonemic segmentation as the sole indicator of literacy
Movable letters	Relate sounds to graphic representations	Assemble words dictated by the teacher	Ask the child to read and explain their choice
Shared reading	Integrate decoding, fluency, and comprehension	Read stories and locate words containing the correspondences addressed	Do not interrupt reading excessively to analyze sounds
Writing words and sentences	Develop encoding and orthographic knowledge	Produce lists, captions, notes, and short sentences	Analyze errors as evidence of learning
Repeated reading	Improve accuracy, pace, and expressiveness	Reread short texts or dialogues	Avoid competition, exposure, and purposeless repetition
Rhyme and alliteration games	Expand phonological awareness	Find words that rhyme or begin with similar sounds	Connect the game to reading and writing
Diagnostic assessment	Identify progress and difficulties	Observe reading, writing, phonological awareness, and comprehension	Use the results to plan interventions, not to label students

Source: prepared by the authors based on Brasil (2021a), Capovilla and Seabra (2021), Oliveira (2023), and Sargiani (2022).

Activities should not be limited to the oral repetition of phonemes. Brasil (2021b) proposes an integrated approach to different components of literacy instruction, and Marinho and Bochembuzio (2022) advocate a critical reading of methodological proposals. Identifying sounds, blending segments, and assembling words are relevant actions, but they need to lead to

reading and writing. When the exercise ends with isolated pronunciation, children may perform a task without understanding its relationship to the alphabetic system.

Costa (2023) found discrepancies between the knowledge literacy teachers claimed to possess and the understanding they demonstrated regarding theories and methods. Gregório (2024) reinforces that appropriate mediation requires knowledge of language structure, child development, and the characteristics of alphabetic writing. Teachers need to understand the difference between phoneme, sound, letter, syllable, and grapheme, as well as recognize the orthographic particularities of Portuguese. Without this foundation, an activity may present inaccurate explanations and raise new questions.

Cruz (2021) shows that children at the same stage of schooling may perform differently in phonological awareness, reading, and writing. Puliezi and Maluf (2012) indicate that working memory and naming speed also influence initial learning. For this reason, a single activity conducted at the same pace for everyone is unlikely to meet existing needs. Planning can include whole-class moments, small-group interventions, and individual guidance, without setting lower expectations for those who need more time.

Alves and Finger (2023) address literacy instruction in monolingual and bilingual contexts, showing that prior experiences influence the perception and production of sounds. Costa (2023) recognizes that teacher education needs to prepare teachers to interpret these particularities. Regional variation in speech should not be presented as a defect. Schools are responsible for teaching conventional orthographic forms and explaining that spoken language varies according to territory, social group, and communicative situation.

Morais (2020) demonstrates that children who can read and write may have difficulty with tasks that require the isolated pronunciation of phonemes. Oliveira (2023) likewise distinguishes among the levels and operations that comprise phonological awareness. These elements show that teachers should not assess all learning through a single task. It is necessary to observe letter recognition, word reading, written production, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and the ability to apply correspondences in varied situations.

Early identification of difficulties makes it possible to organize interventions before students accumulate learning gaps. Silva and Rodriguez (2022) found improvement in sentence comprehension following a phonological intervention with schoolchildren in the initial stage of literacy acquisition. Cruz (2021) reinforces the contribution of monitoring metalinguistic skills. However, a persistent difficulty does not justify hasty diagnoses. Language, hearing, attention, access to schooling, or emotional issues may also affect performance and require careful analysis.

Family participation can strengthen learning when it occurs without transferring pedagogical responsibility. Brasil (2021a) suggests practices that expand children's contact with reading, while Alves and Finger (2023) value linguistic experiences in different settings. Schools can encourage parents and guardians to read stories, discuss words, and value children's attempts at writing. It is not appropriate to require families to reproduce formal lessons or correct every instance of children's oral expression, as this may generate tension and demotivation.

7 Final considerations

The development of this study made it possible to understand that the phonics method can contribute to literacy acquisition by making explicit the relationships between speech sounds and their graphic representations. The progressive organization of these correspondences provides children with a strategy for reading and writing words, reducing their dependence on visual memorization or attempts based solely on images. Phonological awareness and phonemic awareness participate in this process, but they involve different levels of complexity and do not develop in the same way among all students.

It was also found that decoding is necessary but insufficient to develop an autonomous reader. Accurate word recognition promotes fluency and allows attention to be directed toward comprehension; however, understanding texts also depends on vocabulary, prior knowledge, inferences, linguistic proficiency, and social reading experiences. Therefore, phonics instruction needs to be connected to literature, oral language, written production, and contact with different textual genres. Mechanical repetition of phonemes, disconnected from communicative situations, narrows the scope of literacy instruction.

It is concluded that the quality of the method's application depends primarily on teacher education, planning, diagnostic assessment, and respect for children's individual and linguistic characteristics. No single procedure can address every difficulty encountered in everyday school life. The phonics approach offers relevant possibilities when used critically, inclusively, and contextually. In this sense, it should be understood as part of a broader pedagogical proposal intended to provide mastery of the alphabetic system while simultaneously fostering conscious participation in the social practices of reading and writing.

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