

# Children's reading and spelling of irregular words

## A summary for teachers

Contact: s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk

**Background:** There is considerable interest in identifying the most effective ways to teach children to read; the nature of the English writing system (i.e., irregular words) poses difficulties for children as they learn to read and spell. Some believe that irregular words cannot be read using letter-sound rules (i.e., phonics: p-i-n-t) as this leads to an inaccurate pronunciation. However, others believe that even irregular words contain sufficient regularity to provide a cue to pronunciation (e.g., in 'pint', only the 'i' is irregular). This is described as quasi-regularity. However, irregular words differ substantially in the extent to which they contain regular elements (e.g., 'pint' vs 'yacht').

**Aim:** The present study examined the extent to which a range of reading related and cognitive abilities predicted children's irregular word reading and spelling, to examine the theory of quasi-regularity.

**Participants:** 180 children (aged 6 – 8) completed the following assessments:

Vocabulary knowledge: Knowledge of word meanings

Reading frequency: Amount of print exposure

Decoding skill: Nonword reading (e.g., kisp, tegwop)

Orthographic processing skill: Identify correct spelling (e.g., yot-yacht, blud-blood, wond-wand)

20 item irregular word reading and 20 item irregular word spelling test, e.g., knot, square, worm, knife, tuna, sour, lamb, bald, yacht, wart, gnaw

Standardised tests of word reading and spelling; includes regular and irregular words of increasing difficulty.

**Results:** Direct measures of reading skill (orthographic processing and decoding) were much stronger predictors of reading and spelling than indirect measures (vocabulary and reading frequency).

### Definitions

**Regular words:** Consistent letter-sound correspondences, e.g. hand, mint

**Irregular words:** Inconsistent letter-sound correspondences, e.g., pint, yacht

### Discussion and implications for education:

Decoding skill and orthographic processing skill were stronger predictors of word reading and spelling (on both irregular and standardised tests) than vocabulary and reading frequency. This suggests that direct training on these skills is likely to be more effective at developing reading and spelling skills than simply providing a language rich environment and access to books.

Decoding skill was a strong predictor of irregular word reading after taking into account all other abilities; supporting the view that the English writing system is quasi-regular and that, for reading, even irregular words contain regular elements that may provide a clue to pronunciation. For spelling, children were found to rely more upon their orthographic processing skills, suggesting spelling requires better formed visual representations of words.

**Academic paper:** McGeown, S., Johnston, R., & Moxon, G. (2011). Towards an understanding of how children read and spell irregular words: the role of nonword and orthographic processing skills. *Journal of Research in Reading*, DOI:10.1111/jrir.12007