

Footnote: I submitted the following as a comment to the Education Select Committee's online enquiry on 14th December 2014 as evidence on phonics

The phonics check was cited by Sir Michael Wilshaw HMCI in his speech launching his Annual Report on 10 December 2014. To quote:

Just as importantly, primary schools are making great efforts to get learning right early on. The introduction of the phonics screening check has helped.....Primary head teachers understand that the sooner they can shape a child's education, particularly when the child is from a disadvantaged background the greater the chance of later school success.

1. It is no surprise that there has been an increase in the percentage of children passing the check in year 1 and those in year 2 who have been required to re-sit it. This is not evidence that there is benefit beyond achievement in what has become a high stakes pass/fail test., not only for all children aged five and a half to six and a half years of age who are required to take the check but also for their schools and individual teachers. The pass mark has been the same each year, and for the first two years was known in advance to the teachers. There is evidence of practice for the check (including the pseudo words that form half the test). Furthermore, concerns have been expressed at the validity of the check (see Clark 2014 chapters 4 and 5).
2. There has each year been a large gap in percentage pass between the oldest and youngest children sitting the check, not noted in government reports, with 36% of the youngest boys and 29% of the youngest girls required to re-sit the check in 2015. Schools are expected to inform the parents of the results, thus a failure is recorded for many young children early in their school career, including not only many of the youngest children but also some children already reading with understanding who is has been reported may also fail the test. The check may also be `shaping young children`s education` in literacy, but in limiting ways, particularly for those children who fail and are required to re-sit the test.
3. NFER has been commissioned to undertake a three year research on the government phonics policy and two interim reports have been published. These identify concerns of many teachers about many aspects of the phonics check, but do not provide evidence of the effect of the check on standards of literacy (see Clark, 2014 chapter 7).
4. If Sir Michael`s comments are based on inspections by Ofsted such assessments of some schools may have been influenced by the pass on the phonics check which for each school is available online to inspectors, or their judgement as to the extent to which the school has accepted the government`s policy on synthetic phonics.

It is to be hoped that the final NFER report in May 2015 will provide evidence on the effect of the phonics check on standards of literacy, on the wider literacy experience of young children during their early years in primary school and these children`s understanding of the key features of written English. [The references in my article are also cited here].