

## **The government's proposed decoding test for 6-year-olds**

*Greg Brooks, 3/12/10*

No test which is to be applied annually to all 600,000 children in a cohort can possibly be 'light-touch'. It will inevitably become high-stakes, with all the educational deformations that are known to attend high-stakes tests, including:

- teaching to the test
- reducing attention to other facets of reading
- pressure on schools through league tables and being labelled as 'failing' if some arbitrary percentage of their pupils 'fail' the test
- anxiety for parents
- anxiety for children.

Because it will be high-stakes, and therefore require a new test each year (as the consultation document itself acknowledges), the entire paraphernalia and procedure of national tests will have to be reproduced, including:

- piloting at least two versions of each year's test a year in advance
- keeping both versions secure
- choosing which is to go live only at the last practicable moment in case of leaks
- calculating 'standards' and 'pass marks' on the basis of the piloting
- using the pilot tests to attempt to equate the standards of tests from one year to the next, so that the 'standards' are (allegedly) the same from year to year, despite it being well known and now established by research that standards of such tests drift over time
- awarding contracts to one or more test development organisations to devise the tests
- awarding contracts to one or more organisations, separate from those developing the tests, to despatch and receive them, process the results and declare the findings
- strict requirements on schools over test security, timetabling and administration, with checks for compliance and penalties for non-compliance
- serious expenditure, which would be wasted even at a time of plenty, let alone in a time of austerity.

No such test can fulfil the avowed purpose of 'a progress check' 'telling parents what they want to know, namely how their children are reading' because

- decoding is only one part of learning to read, and is not reading itself
- there is no evidence that parents want such a test
- measuring progress requires at least two tests separated by a suitable interval.

The proposed test commit what has been appropriately called 'the fallacy of the unique methodological solution', that is, succumbing to the belief that 'if only we can fix this aspect and make all teachers do this particular thing, all (educational, literacy, ...) problems will be solved.'

Much better than the system outlined in the consultation document would be one in which, in the middle of Year 1:

- teachers were required, on the basis of their professional skills, specific training they had received, and their personal knowledge of their pupils, to identify which of their pupils have not yet made a satisfactory start on learning to read, write and spell
- resources were immediately made available to assess those children's difficulties and then to help them catch up.

Such a system would avoid needless anxiety for children who are making satisfactory progress, and for their parents, place proper professional reliance on teachers, and above all reassure the parents of children who are not making satisfactory progress that their children's needs are being met.

It would also put the money involved in creating these needless tests to far more productive use.