

The Phonics Check for all Year 1 children in England: its background, results and possible effects

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Abstract: Over the years claims have been made for one best method of teaching reading, not necessarily the same method. In England the current government insists that the one best method of teaching reading is by synthetic phonics, first, fast and only, with implications for schools, the curriculum and for the training of teachers. In a previous article 'Is there one best method of teaching reading? What is the evidence?' I examined the evidence for this claim (*Education Journal*, 156, 8 March 2013). Here I consider the background to and evidence from the phonics check administered to all Year 1 children in state schools in England for the first time in June 2012.



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Background: In the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* the DfE signalled its intent to introduce a Phonics Screening Check at the end of Year 1 (to five and six year old pupils) in all primary schools in England - designed to be a light touch, summative assessment, including 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo), to be read one-to-one with a teacher.

The claim was that this would "identify pupils with below expected progress in phonic decoding". Such pupils were to receive intervention, and retake the test the following year. A pilot study across 300 schools was commissioned in 2011 (*Process Evaluation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Pilot*, 2012, www.shu.ac.uk/ceir), not to decide whether this would be implemented, only to help plan the administration of the check. It is worth noting that in government documents reference is usually made to six-year-olds, although a number of the children who sat the check were indeed only five years of age at the time.

Note the difference between *systematic* teaching of phonics and the use of either *synthetic* or *analytic* phonics in the teaching. The government documents emphasise synthetic phonics as the method to be used.

Following the Government's announcement in 2010, many experts wrote to DfE stating their concern about the insistence that in all schools the initial approach to teaching reading should be *synthetic phonics* only, and about the proposed phonics check. Following the first nationwide administration of the Check in June 2012, with a pass set at 32 out of 40, claimed to be the age appropriate level, further concerns have been expressed at many aspects:

- the pass/fail decision resulting in many children aged between five and six years of age, and their parents being told they have failed;
- the inclusion of 20 pseudo words in the test;
- the demand that the children who 'failed' retake the test the following year;
- the lack of any diagnostic aspects or suggestion that other methods may be appropriate for at least some children who failed;
- the effects on some successful readers who may yet have failed this test;
- match-funding for schools to purchase commercial phonics materials and training courses for teachers on synthetic phonics (from a limited recommended list) with a monitoring of this by DfE.

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According to a DfE press release (19.1.12), by January 2012 thousands of primary schools had already spent “more than £7.7 million on new phonics products and training from a phonics catalogue of approved products and services”. Furthermore schools could claim up to £3,000 in match-funding to buy such products and training until March 2013. Nick Gibb, then the schools minister, encouraged schools to purchase such materials, which he claimed would “improve their teaching of phonics, the method internationally proven to improve reading, especially in younger children”. He expressed concern “at the number of areas where few schools have yet taken the opportunity”, this in spite of the fact that some schools might well have had adequate supplies of such materials. Recently it was announced that this offer

of funding has been extended to October 2013. I do not have an up to date figure for the cost of this initiative.

The results of the first phonics check

The Statistical First Release of the results of the phonics screening test was published in September 2012. The pass mark indicating that a child had reached what was deemed the “expected standard of phonic decoding” was 32 out of 40. This level was met by only 58% of pupils. Many might question both the basis for such a criterion and the mark chosen as a pass. In the report there is a breakdown for different groups of children, showing wide variation in the pass rate:

- 62% of girls scored 32 or more but only 54% of boys;
- only 44% of those on free meals met this “required standard of phonic decoding”;
- only 24% of children with special educational needs met the required standard;
- a comparison by date of birth reveals striking differences between the oldest and youngest children. The pass rate for the oldest boys was 65% and for the youngest (still only five years of age) was 44%; for girls the two figures were 72% and 51%;
- an even more striking finding is that Travellers of Irish heritage and those of a Gypsy/Roma background are said to be the groups with the lowest percentages achieving the required standard, 16% and 17%.

The teachers were informed in advance that 32 out of 40 was the pass mark, pass or fail being the recorded information. A breakdown by percentages scoring each mark reveals that while only 1% of boys and 2% of girls gained a mark of 31, 7% and 8% were awarded 32, a pattern unlikely to be explained by the structure of the test. It must have been tempting to give 32 rather than 31 when this made the difference between a pass and fail, the only information recorded!

Having now seen the actual test I am even more disturbed. On what research evidence was the decision made to include pseudo words, and in particular why make these the first 12 words in the test (such as pib, vus, yop, elt, desh)? Only the pseudo words are accompanied by coloured illustrations of strange animals, the words said to be their names. There is evidence from the online surveys by UKLA and the teachers’ unions that some of those confused by the pseudo words were children who were already reading. There is also evidence of a great deal of time being devoted to pseudo words in preparation for the test. What message does this give to young children about reading?

The schools were required to inform the parents whether their child had reached the required criterion. Children who failed are required to re-sit the test the following year, having had additional synthetic phonics instruction, with schools encouraged to purchase further materials. One might question whether this is the appropriate action on the basis of these results. Why spend money on developing such a pass/fail test, and why test all Year 1 children (about 600,000) rather than extend the use of diagnostic tests such as Reading Recovery, providing as it does diagnostic information and proven intervention strategies with long term effects (see ‘Reading scheme axed in cuts to school spending’, R. Garner, *The Independent*,

19.9.11)? Why offer £10 million for a literacy catch up programme for disadvantaged pupils who are behind in reading and writing, but only at transition from primary to secondary school (Nick Clegg, press release 10.7.12), while offering only matched funding for more commercial synthetic phonics materials for younger children designated failures by the phonics check? It is conceivable that a different approach might be appropriate for at least some of these children, while some of the younger children who failed might have matured sufficiently to pass the test a year later without the use of further phonics materials.

Currently the results of individual schools are not published as league tables, or available for scrutiny. However, school-level results are recorded on RAISEOnline and made available to Ofsted for use in inspections. It is disturbing to find that the final column within the various subgroups gives a breakdown of national percentages reaching the pass level, while the preceding column provides the percentage in that school reaching that criterion. Such data is misleading, in small schools in particular, as these percentages may be based on only one or two children. Why would anyone familiar with statistics provide such misleading comparisons?

Implications for the training of teachers

The dictates from DfE are not only having a major impact on practice in schools, removing the freedom of practitioners to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children. The recommendations by Ofsted (the inspection body in England) lay emphasis on the importance of checking

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that these edicts are followed not only in all schools but also in training institutions. HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw stated that “Ofsted will sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision – primary, secondary and Further Education. Ofsted will also start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education.” (*Education*, online, No. 461, 16 March 2012). Thus, currently the focus within the literacy programme in training institutions in England is on synthetic phonics, otherwise their training will not be approved, just as this is the required approach in all primary schools.

The National Foundation for Educational Research has been funded by DfE to undertake an evaluation over three years to assess whether the screening check is meeting the objectives set out by the

Government, with the following remit:

1. What has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools
2. Has the check changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum
3. Has the introduction of the check had an impact on the standard of reading?

The research is funded from 2012-15 and interim results were to be available early in 2013. However, these were not yet published when this article was written.

In further articles I will discuss these findings; the results of 2013 testing, again to be administered this year to all Year 1 children and the results for those who failed to reach the criterion in 2012 and are required to sit the test again this year. I also intend to study the impact of this development on children who were already reading with understanding when they were required to sit the phonics check.