

Literacy teaching and the phonics check: from government policy to classroom practice in England

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Abstract: Over the year 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 three articles in *The Education Journal* in March, April and June 2013 I considered the lack of research evidence for this claim, the results of the first check administered in June 2012 and the interim results of the NFER research commissioned by DfE. All three articles are online on the TACTYC website.

Synthetic phonics, the approach required by the government, has as its focus the relationship between letters and sounds and differs from analytic phonics in that these features are taught in isolation rather than inferring sound-symbol relationships from sets of words. In June 2012 a phonics check was administered to all Year 1 children in state schools in England for the first time. In June 2013 a similar test was administered to all Year 1 children and to those who had failed to achieve the pass mark of 32 out of 40 the previous year. The results for this year have just been published together with a comparison with last year's results.

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), to help plan the administration of the check, not to decide whether it would be implemented.

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 were expressed:

- 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 matched funding for schools to purchase commercial phonics materials and training courses for teachers on synthetic phonics (from a recommended list) with a monitoring of this by DfE;
- The lack of any diagnostic aspects or suggestion that other methods may be appropriate for some children who have failed;

- The effects on some successful readers who may yet have failed this test.
- The structure of the test, as the first twelve words are all pseudo words, starting with pib, vus, yop, elt, desh.

What message does this give to children about reading, and in particular to children who are already reading with understanding, but may have `failed` the phonics check, some possibly confused by the pseudo words?

According to a DfE press release, by January 2012 thousands of 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 £3000 to buy such products and training until March 2013, subsequently extended to October 2013. To quote Nick Gibb, the schools minister, these would `improve the way they teach systematic synthetic phonics - the tried and tested method of improving the reading of our children, especially the weakest`.

The results of the first phonics check

The Statistical First Release of the results of the phonics screening test was published in September 2012. What was claimed as the `expected standard of phonic decoding`, namely 32 out of 40, was met by only 58% of pupils (62% of girls and 54% of boys). One must question the authority for this pass mark. The following shows the wide variation in pass rate for different groups of children:

- 62% of girls scored 32 or more but only 54% of boys
- only 44% of those on free meals met this `required standard`
- 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 were the groups with the lowest percentages achieving the required standard in phonics, 16 and 17 per cent respectively.
- teachers were informed in advance that 32 out of 40 was the pass mark, pass or fail being the only recorded information. A breakdown by percentages scoring each mark reveals that while only 2% of pupils gained a mark of 31, 7% were awarded 32, a pattern unlikely to be explained by the structure of the test (see below comment from NFER research).

Schools were required to inform parents of the results, that is whether their children passed or failed, and those who `failed` have been required to retake a similar test this year, presumably with further synthetic phonics instruction, with the schools `encouraged` to purchase commercial programmes. 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.

Effects on schools, training institutions and the curriculum

On schools: UKLA and teachers' unions (ATL/NAHT/NUT) investigated the views of teachers' on the phonics check. Nine in ten Year 1 teachers said the phonics checks did not tell them anything new about the reading ability of their pupils; 86% said they should not continue. Nine in ten had practised reading made-up (pseudo) words and many felt under pressure to teach synthetic phonics immediately prior to the test. Some good readers who did not meet the criterion may have their reading materials limited on the basis of DfE recommendations and are required to re-sit the check.

On training: The recommendations by Ofsted (the inspection body in England), is 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). While the results for individual schools are not widely available, they are online for Ofsted to consult. The detailed analysis for individual schools gives percentages compared with national figures based in many instances on very small numbers.

On the curriculum: The United Kingdom Literacy Association responded to the publication of the new National Curriculum for English with positive comments on some recommendations, but expressed concern at the focus on phonics, not just as one of a range of strategies; the recommendation that the early reading will be from 'phonetically plausible texts'; the effects on fluent readers; no reference to home literacy practices or to critical literacy or technologies. To quote: 'the soul has been taken out of the subject'.

DfE commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research between 2012-2015 to undertake an evaluation to assess whether the screening check is meeting the objectives set out by the Government, to consider the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools, on the wider literacy curriculum and the standard of reading. The first report was published by DfE in May 2013, *Evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check: first interim report* (M. Walker, S. Bartlett, H. Betts, M. Sainsbury and P. Mehta). Clearly at this stage only some aspects of the remit could be considered. I will outline the findings so far and identify issues not yet considered in the available research.

The National Foundation for Educational Research interim report

Background: The interim report provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and the emerging impact of the check. The evidence is based on case study interviews in 14 primary schools in June and July 2012, baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers in schools. The ways that teachers were prepared to administer the check and their confidence in administering it, the appropriateness of the check for specific groups of pupils, and ways in which the mandatory check influenced the teaching of phonics in the schools are all discussed in the report.

The Executive Summary: 1. Most teachers prepared themselves for the administration of the check, and many watched the online video on scoring. About half the teachers also attended external training specifically on the check.

2. The median additional time reported in supporting the introduction and administration of the check was 6 hours (with a range from zero to 40 hours and over ten hours of senior leader time). Here also one must wonder if these questions were differently interpreted by respondents.
3. Some benefits are acknowledged, 'including confirming the results of other assessments and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching'.
4. Year 1 teachers had mixed views on the standard of the check with slightly more suggesting it was too difficult.
5. Issues are raised about the suitability of the check for certain groups of pupils. This included not only pupils with special educational needs but also high ability pupils and those with English as an additional language.
6. This information was collected very shortly after the administration of the check, thus in most cases the respondents were only reporting how they intended to communicate the results to parents/carers rather than what they had actually done.
7. A third of the schools reported making changes to phonics teaching in anticipation of the check. *'However, most teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future'*. (p.7 italics not in original).
8. Views on the value of the check seemed contradictory depending on the way questions were framed, since one of the key messages to emerge was that: 'Many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods.' 'However, it is less certain that this is an endorsement of the recommended approach of *systematic synthetic phonics taught first and fast*'. It is open to debate why the staff interviewed have not fully endorsed the government's approach, whether from confusion or from conviction! (See also pages 19-20 and 23). It is commented that a third of survey respondents felt in some way that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy.
9. When questions were asked specifically about the check, rather than the value of phonics in the teaching of reading, attitudes were more varied. The researchers query whether respondents may not have been fully aware of the rationale behind the introduction of the check. However, this does not appear to have been explored further.

Phonics teaching practices: This section explores current practices and changes made because of the phonics check. Most Year 1 and Year 2 teachers reported that phonics teaching took place daily and on average two hours per week. All case study schools also indicated a strong school focus on phonics, with daily phonics sessions for children from Foundation Stage through to at least Year 2 by most. The indication was that around 90 per cent of schools taught in discrete phonics sessions in Reception, Years 1 and 2, while for some it was integrated in other work. Given the level of training, external and in-house it is not surprising that most respondents thought their teachers were well prepared for effective phonics training.

Results: The results in the schools where the Year 1 teachers completed the survey were comparable to the national average. Few pupils were disapplied (usually at most one pupil), meaning they did not sit the check. In a few cases the testing was stopped when a child was beginning to struggle or becoming distressed.

Conclusions: When asked directly, only two case-study schools said they could see some benefit to the check. The teachers had mixed views on the level of difficulty of the check and most teachers felt the check was not suitable for children with speech, language or communication needs and children with other learning difficulties. Reference was made by some to problems with pseudo words which distracted some of these children. In some cases

the children struggled to clearly communicate their answers. The survey found Year 1 teachers held mixed views concerning the suitability of the check for independent and fluent readers. In only seven of fourteen case study schools had the parents/carers been notified in advance of the administration of the check. Further information will be required as to exactly in what form and in how much detail parents/carers were informed of the results as this had not necessarily taken place. Some teachers expressed concern at branding some children as failures.

Many interviewees reported no substantial changes to teaching, those who did mention changes indicated:

- A greater focus on pseudo words
- More phonetic spelling tests rather than high frequency words
- Parental workshops on phonics
- Revision sessions in preparation for the check
- An increase in the number of phonics sessions.

Among the key messages at the end of the report are the following:

- Many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods:
- Most teachers are positive about the importance of phonics teaching.
- It is less certain that this is an endorsement of the recommended approach of *systematic synthetic phonics* taught *first and fast*. While the researchers raise the possibility that there is widespread misunderstanding of the term, this is only one possible explanation!

There seems to have been no discussion with the teachers of analytic versus the recommended synthetic phonics. There is surprisingly little reference to the age of the children, though some respondents did mention the younger children still only five years of age. Also surprisingly little reference is made to the inclusion of pseudo words in the check. It is to be hoped that issues such as these will be explored further in subsequent reports, the next of which is not due until 2014.

The following is an important comment by the researchers in Topic Note: 2012 *Phonics Screening Check, Research Report May 2013* L. Townley and D. Cotts. They refer to the distribution of scores and the fact that the teachers were informed in advance of the pass mark of 32. They refer to *`a spike at the threshold of meeting the expected standard, suggesting that pupils on the borderline may have been marked up`* (italics mine).

By removing pupils scores around the spike and using regression techniques, it is estimated that 46% of pupils would meet the expected standard if there was not a spike at the borderline` (page 28).

Results of phonics check for 2013

The results for this year`s check have just been released (www.gov.uk/government/statistics-key-stage-1). The pattern in the tables is similar to those cited above for 2012, and the pass mark is again 32 out of 40 correct, but with increased percentages passing within the various categories. It is claimed that of Year 1 pupils (referred to as typically aged 6) 69% met the

expected standard, an increase of 11% since 2012 and as previously girls outperformed boys. By the end of Year 2 in 2013 85% of pupils (typically aged 7) met the expected standard in Year 1 in 2012 and those rechecked or taking the test for the first time in 2013; stated as an increase of 27 percentage points from 58%!

However it should be noted that, to quote:

This mark was communicated to schools in advance of the screening check being administered so that schools could immediately put in place extra support for pupils who had not met the required standard.

Again in 2013 as shown on Table 4 of the statistical tables released by DfE, there was a spike in scores with one per cent scoring 31 and 7% scoring 32.

Issues for discussion

The NFER research raises issues about the costs and benefits of a one off test versus teachers being well trained to monitor children`s progress. There may be a faulty logic in a one-off pass/fail test, where the child reaches or fails to reach an arbitrary prescribed standard, a test that is vastly expensive to develop and administer, which may over-estimate those at-risk, is not diagnostic and where there is no specific funding linked to the needs of individual children which follows the identification of children who are struggling. The evidence of a spike in percentage of children gaining a mark of 32 rather than 31 in both years of administration of the test, a pass mark known to the teachers in advance raises serious questions about the validity of this test. Finally, there is no evidence that the needs of those who failed to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this test will be met by a continued focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems.

The children`s voices

Lacking so far is any assessment of the effects of these developments on young children`s experiences of, and attitudes towards literacy. How will this greater emphasis on phonics in the early stages, the isolated nature of much of their tuition in phonics, the new emphasis on pseudo words and the phonics check itself influence their understanding of the nature of literacy and attitude to reading. We need to interview the children and gain an insight into their views, including those who passed the check, any who could read but failed the check and those who were required to re-sit this year. Finally, what messages are we giving parents on how to help their young children to become literate and to value the written word?

See chapters by Henrietta Dombey (on England) and Sue Ellis (on Scotland) in the forthcoming book:

Goodman, K.S., Calfee, R. C. and Goodman, Y.M eds (2014) *Whose Knowledge Counts in Government Literacy Policies? Why expertise matters*. New York: Routledge.