

DEBATE

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The statutory phonics screening check taken by pupils at the end of Y1 for the first time in 2012 prompted a backlash from some children's authors, union leaders and others – reactions apparently fuelled by the inclusion of 20 pseudo-words alongside the 20 real words to be presented for the youngsters to decode.

But reading is a 'life chance' issue. Foundational literacy skills are so fundamentally important that they affect not only academic potential and future livelihood but also the very core of well being and health. Is there room for political antagonism, personal belief systems or romantic illusions about an objective look at the effectiveness of our phonics teaching?

Following the rollout of the check in June, the TES online primary forum revealed great diversity in the attitudes, experiences and understanding of teachers involved. Responses ranged from reports of upsets and tears to success stories of whole classes achieving at or above the 32 out of 40 benchmark score.

One common surprise for many teachers was the number of children described as 'good readers' who did not decode the pseudo-words accurately. Some suggested this was because children were 'trying to make sense' of the words, whilst others commented that this was not the explanation, as all had been told that the words were not real and pictures of little creatures had been carefully included to reinforce this point.

Teachers need to consider the full implications of reading habits reliant on

common-sense context guessing of words over the long term. When pictures disappear and vocabulary and content become more challenging, it is phonics knowledge and decoding that enable us to lift new words from the page. When 'making sense of the words' leads to less than accurate reading, this is not the desirable reading reflex for a life-long, life-chance skill.

Some detractors argue that the advent of the check will skew the language and literacy diet that children receive in favour of phonics and at the expense of rich language and literature. Then it is up to every teacher to make sure that this is not the case; it's that simple.

However one looks at the various responses to the advent and the nature of the check, it is most apparent that the teaching profession has yet to share a common understanding of teaching reading, a full grasp of the desirable processes required for long term reading – or, indeed, an awareness of the importance of national objective testing in something as ordinary as reading a list of words. This is hardly surprising when historically the teaching profession has been subject to a plethora of contradictory approaches and philosophies for bringing about literacy – the point being that in English-speaking countries, this concoction of ideas and practices has actually failed so many. What muddies the waters, however, is

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that many teachers themselves are perfectly literate through what probably amounts to a book-by-book experience, regardless of the prevailing methodology or philosophy. It is extremely rare to find a teacher who can recall having had a diet of systematic synthetic phonics as a child.

It was the statistics of large-scale standardised testing, however, that helped to alert us to reading results linked to teaching methods. It is large-scale testing, now, that is informing our understanding and practices for moving forwards. Teachers should be pleased to be made aware that some teachers have honed their understanding of how to teach more children more effectively.

It was teachers who set the original benchmark for the Y1 screening check and already we have seen improvements since the pilot, with results of 32 per cent rising to 58 per cent as a national average. What should really sharpen teachers' minds is the fact that schools in various contexts achieved 90 per cent to 100 per cent of their six-year-olds reaching the benchmark. So what did those teachers do differently?

Most importantly, it is the children themselves who ultimately benefit from the advent of objective assessment. It is not a small issue for six-year-olds to be able to decode accurately all through any word – be it 'real' or 'nonsense'. Children in Y1 routinely, daily, decode new words. All we need is the kind of relationship with them to ensure that a few minutes of one to one time to read a list of words – some alongside funny little creatures – is a positive and enjoyable experience. And why wouldn't it be?

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In June 2012, all schools in England administered the phonics test to all children in Year 1. The test consisted of 20 phonically regular words and 20 pseudo words like *mip*, *glimp* and *brunk*. The results of the test have been collated and reported publicly through RAISEonline and Local Authority tables. The results are also being used by Ofsted when they inspect schools.

UKLA has considerable concerns about the imposition of this test. It is narrowly conceived and does not give a clear picture of children's development as readers when they are six years old. UKLA is very clear that phonics instruction is an important component of the teaching of early reading – but insufficient in itself to create fluent, motivated readers who read avidly for purpose and pleasure.

In July 2012, UKLA undertook a research survey of KS1 schools and teachers about the test. The results were collated and analysed by an independent researcher from Sheffield Hallam University. 494 responses were received – a very high number, indicating the level of concern by teachers and schools. These show that experience of the first year of the test has been very worrying.

Schools overwhelmingly felt that the check was unnecessary and not fit for purpose. It did not give any information that was not already known, and it took valuable teaching time. They commented that they already do extensive phonics testing and assessment, and the unreliability of the phonics screening check results means that

this data will not be used in school to inform teachers about children's progress.

Ministers claimed that the test only takes a few minutes. This is contradicted by the evaluation of the 2011 pilot report, which found that the average time for preparation and administration was 15.5 hours and even longer in large schools. Some respondents to the UKLA survey also reported administration taking up to five days. How will six-year-olds benefit if their teacher is otherwise engaged with the check and may also be out of class for three days or more?

The most worrying aspect of the survey findings was that most schools indicated that the phonics check seriously disadvantaged, and in some cases impeded, successful readers. Schools overwhelmingly stated that they felt that there were far too many nonsense words, and that these confused more fluent readers, who had been taught to read for meaning, and therefore tried hard to make sense of the 'alien words' they encountered. This not only slowed down the pupils' reading and made it less fluent, but also resulted in errors as many able readers sounded out the phonemes correctly, but blended incorrectly. One teacher commented: "Many children reading well above their chronological age did not pass the test" and another explained: "The better readers stumbled over nonsense words as they expect words to follow certain rules. For

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example, 'thend' read as 'the end'."

Several schools stated that above average readers (e.g. those achieving 2c and above) scored lower than those at 1c, 1b and 1a.

Thus the check misidentifies pupils who are beyond the stage of phonetic decoding as readers; in several cases successful, fluent readers did less well in the check than emergent readers.

Teachers also commented that the check was very stressful for children.

Many schools had serious worries about having to label a child of six as a failure, especially when a significant number of 'fails' were actually successful, fluent readers. They also expressed concern with having to notify parents of the results and in many cases they felt that this undermined the school's relationship with parents.

The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that in teachers' and headteachers' professional judgement, the phonics screening check for six-year-olds has been time-consuming and unnecessary. They feel that checks like this should not be imposed on all children, but used judiciously where a teacher thinks it would help to identify specific needs in a particular child. In schools' experience the results have labelled some successful and fluent readers as failures. The check does not differentiate at the top end. It does not identify high experience readers but is potentially holding them back and undermining their assurance as readers.

All this makes it clear that the phonics screening check should not be used in subsequent years for all children in year 1, but implemented at teachers' discretion to identify specific developmental needs in particular pupils for whom it is appropriate.

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