

UKLA Analysis of Schools' response to the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

Introduction

In July 2012 UKLA commissioned research from Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a survey of KS1 schools and classes to the year 1 Phonics Screening Check. 494 responses were received.

The survey asked a range of questions about the year 1 Phonics Screening Check that took place in schools in England in June 2012, and this generated qualitative and quantitative data. Questions included schools' perceptions about the time commitment involved, pupil preparation undertaken by Year 1 teachers, whether the Phonics Screening Check helped to identify issues not already identified, and whether it was a reflection of children's reading ability- and in particular more successful readers.

Key points

Responses to the survey indicated that teachers and headteachers felt that:

- **The Phonics Screening Check is not fit for purpose**
- **The Phonics Screening Check impedes successful readers and has failed a cohort of the most fluent readers**
- **The Phonics Screening Check misidentifies pupils who are beyond this stage of development as readers and favours less developed/emergent readers**
- **The nonsense words were very confusing for children**
- **The Phonics Screening Check undermines pupils' confidence as readers**
- **There are negative implications for relationships with parents**
- **There are implications for school organisation.**

- 1. Fitness for purpose: Most of the professionals felt that the phonics check was not fit for purpose, as it focused on decoding but there are many more strategies that successful readers use: "there is more to reading than just phonics."**

Schools overwhelmingly felt that the check did not give any information that they did not already know, and it took valuable teaching time. Schools 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.

Many schools stated that the outcome of the phonics check, which is being used as an indicator of reading skills, did not reflect children's reading abilities as there is much more to reading than decoding. Many children who were already achieving level 2 comprehension did not pass the screening check. This included many children with summer birthdays.

One respondent stated: *"I appreciate this was a phonics test not reading test, but it is very difficult to understand why it would be done in isolation as a readiness to read measure. Reading is a much*

more complex issue and although we value the introduction of phonics very highly this appears a crude measure which I hope will be reviewed”.

Another school said, *“We were in the pilot last year and only 22% met the expected level, yet 47% achieved level 3 in the TA and reading SAT test this year! It just proves that phonics is only a very small part of learning to read and has no bearing on being an able reader.”*

It was evident from the data that all schools already teach phonics on a regular basis, and use assessment data to monitor children’s progress in decoding skills. All were firm supporters of phonics as one aspect of learning to read. However, there was criticism of the check and an over-emphasis on phonics teaching: *“I am a firm supporter of a phonics-based approach to reading and spelling and have used Letters and Sounds with reception and year 1 classes for 5 years (Jolly Phonics prior to that) BUT see it as a tool, a way in to reading and writing, and not an end in itself, and also recognise that there are a small number of children for whom a phonics-based approach is not appropriate - and also that there is far more to reading than decoding the words.....”*

2. Fluent and successful readers: Most schools surveyed indicated that the phonics check seriously disadvantaged, and in some cases impeded, successful readers.

Only 17.3% of respondents could report that 100% of good, fluent readers (e.g. on track to achieve to achieve a level 2b or above by the end of Year 1) achieved the required level to ‘pass’. 9.3% of schools said that they did not know, which means that a staggering 73.4% of teachers surveyed found that one or more of their good readers failed to meet the ‘expected standard’.

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 read. 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.

Those children who started school with some strategies for reading did less well as they use a range of strategies to read. Many schools commented that the check, with its focus on decontextualised decoding, goes against everything the children have been taught. *“Many children reading well above their chronological age did not pass the test”*. Children who had no knowledge of reading and had just learnt phonics did better.

“None of my children who failed are unable to read.”

“The more able readers 'failed' as they wanted to convert nonsense words into real words”

“They [more fluent readers]were able to decode the words but the majority read the real words instantly and fluently, but stopped and sounded out the non words.”

Fluent readers did what they had been taught to do, read for meaning: *“The children who "failed" did so because they were trying to make words out of what they were reading - a skill we teach them as it is a tool to help them read. The only children it was helpful for was the phase 4 children.”*

Schools noted that children who are already successful readers, some of whom were cited as already reading a range of fiction and non-fiction texts, do not rely on phonics, and therefore the check is not an accurate indicator of reading ability. Rather it is an indicator of decoding ability alone: *“Our 2c/2b readers are not using phonics as their first strategy. As a result their results are below those of children with lower reading levels. “*

“20% of our readers on target to achieve level 2b or above did not meet this expected standard. Clearly the threshold for the expected standard is wrong! I am confident that, in line with previous years, we will achieve around 50% level 3 reading and around 90% Level 2b+ for this current cohort by the end of Year 2.”

“At the end of KS1 we have 93% of children achieving 2b+ in Reading and 67% 2a+ so above the national average. This is not reflected in our phonics check with only 40% meeting the required standard”.

“One child achieved 16 out of 20 of the real words but only 9 alien words. He is a level 2b reader, and can read most fiction and non-fiction texts the teacher gives him”.

Many schools indicated that the phonics screening check has failed such children, who have now been labelled as failures by the system.

3. The Phonics Screening Check misidentifies pupils who are beyond this stage of development as readers and favours less developed/emergent readers

The check misidentified 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. To this end, schools feel that the check has failed a cohort of the most fluent readers.

Schools indicated that the check favoured emergent readers, who rely overly on sounding out and blending: *“Good readers are not necessarily good when relying solely on phonics”.* Several schools noted that above average readers (e.g. those achieving 2c and above) scored lower than those at 1c, 1b and 1a.

“Children scored 40 who cannot read fluently with expression. “

“One child who is on the autistic spectrum and is unable to read in any real sense scored almost full marks while a girl who is already reading at Level 2 scored 32”.

“85% of children in Y1 are already reading at L2 (moderated teacher assessment) but only 38% passed the phonics test. All children in the cohort assessed on an NFER reading progress test have a reading age above their chronological age. About half have a reading age more than 12 months above their chronological age. A child of 6y 5m with an assessed reading age of 8 years failed the test.”

4. The nonsense words were very confusing for children

The vast majority of schools identified that the non-words confused children, who are taught to try to make sense of what they read: *“The better readers stumble over nonsense words as they expect words to follow certain rules.”* For example: *“thend” read as the end”*.

Many children found this aspect of the check confusing. Some schools cited children asking why they had to read words that aren’t real. Children for whom English is an additional language (EAL) did less well, particularly with the non-words.

Comments include: *“The test took longer for some able readers who read for meaning. I felt that words very close to real words were unfair - e.g. 'strom”*. And: *“Almost all children, regardless of ability said 'storm”*. Interestingly, thirty three schools specifically cited children’s confusion with the word strom. One school stated that: *“Many sounded out correctly but then in blending it said the incorrect word”*.

Many schools felt that a better balance between real and ‘alien’ words is needed, and as one school noted: *“after all we are teaching children to read real words”*.

“The failures in the test were entirely due to the nonsense words. Most children could read all the real words using both phonics and other strategies. The children had had practice in nonsense words but most tried to turn the nonsense words into sense (storm for strom etc.) Several commented that the words couldn't be names as they didn't have capital letters. The most able children who did manage the nonsense words slowed right down from being fluent expressive readers to sounding out every word phoneme by phoneme, even words they knew.”

Data included reports of some children subsequently losing reading for meaning now in texts, “and skipping unknown words, dismissing them as ‘alien’ words”.

5. The Phonics Screening Check is undermining pupils’ confidence as readers

Many teachers commented that the check was very stressful for children, despite being played down, and that:

“Several children [fluent readers] were upset by the check and have lost confidence in their reading.”

“This phonics check has in no way supported them to learn to read and has in some cases affected their confidence in themselves as readers.”

“The idea of passing (and therefore failing) at this age is counter to the school's ethos and, I believe, counterproductive to children's learning and self-esteem.”

6. There are negative implications for relationships with parents

Many schools stated serious concerns 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, particularly when the pupil had ‘failed’, and in many cases they felt that this undermined the school’s relationship with parents.

“Some children who are good/average readers scored lower than 32 and I have had to explain to parents that the score is not a reflection of their reading ability and that many children cross-check different kinds of information when reading”.

“In order to re-assure parents that their child's reading skills are on-track, I sent a very strongly worded letter home to them, with their child's annual report, giving my professional view that the check is a waste of time and money, and that they should take little heed to the results of the check”.

“I have had to tell a large number of parents that their children who are reading at or above the level expected for their age are 'failures' and have had to spend a lot of time explaining why this test is not really important in terms of their child's development.”

“The results told us nothing that we haven't heard before and in fact has been detrimental to our communication about reading with parents.”

“...a lot of parents were upset and thought their child had failed.”

“Parents of children who were 'working towards' the 'pass mark' were inevitably upset and despite what anyone said, regarded it as a 'fail'.”

7. There are implications for school organisation

88.4% of respondents said that the check took two days or more to complete. 30.1% stated that it took two days, but remarkably, 10% said that it took five days or more.

41.4% of schools found the process straightforward to manage. Several schools said that they had been able to undertake the check relatively easily as they had a student/trainee teacher in their class at the time, who supported the process. These schools expressed a concern about how this process would be managed next year, if they did not have a student in the class.

73.8% of the respondents had prepared their pupils for the check, with practice activities. Some schools acknowledged that this was to relieve the stress on children, to make them familiar with the procedure, and to give pupils the best chance of “passing” the Phonics Screening Check, as it was a pass/fail ‘test’.

Conclusion

The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that in teachers’ and Headteachers’ professional judgement, the Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds has been costly, 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 a very large number of schools in the survey, the results of this check have labelled some successful and fluent readers as failures. This check does not differentiate at the top end. It does not identify high experience readers but it is potentially holding them back and undermining their assurance as readers. Professional judgement indicates that the Phonics Screening Check is not an appropriate measure for *all* children.

UKLA recommends that the Phonics Screening Check is not used in subsequent years for all children in year 1, but is implemented at teachers’ discretion to identify specific developmental needs in particular children for whom it is appropriate.