

The phonics check for Year 1 children in England: unresolved issues of its value and validity after two years

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Background: In the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* the Department for Education 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.

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. Many experts wrote to the DfE expressing 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.

In three articles in *Education Journal* in 2013 I considered aspects of this policy; the lack of research evidence for the claim that synthetic phonics is the one best method of teaching reading (Issue 156); the results of the first check administered in June 2012 (Issue 160) and the interim results of the NFER research commissioned by the DfE (Issue 168). The results of the second administration of the check in June 2013 have just been released. Here I compare this year's results with 2012 and analyse the issues surrounding this check, its format, the scoring and its implications for practice.

In June 2012 the phonics check was administered to all Year 1 children in state funded schools in England for the first time. In June 2013 a similar test was administered to all Year 1 children and to those in Year 2 who had failed to achieve the pass mark of 32 out of 40 the previous year or to whom it had not been administered. Following the first nationwide administration of the Check in June 2012, with a pass set in advance at 32 out of 40, claimed to be the age appropriate level, concerns were expressed:

- The pass/fail decision resulted in many children aged between five and six years of age and their parents being told they had failed.
- The inclusion of 20 pseudo words in the test.
- The structure of the test, with the first twelve words all pseudo words.
- Coloured illustrations for the pseudo words as the explanation for their presence.
- The lack of any diagnostic aspects.
- The fact that the pass mark was known in advance by teachers.
- The demand that the children who "failed" retake the test the following year.
- The effects on some successful readers who may yet have failed this test.



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Matched funding for schools has been available since January 2012 until October 2013 to purchase commercial phonics materials and training courses for teachers on synthetic phonics (from a limited recommended list).

A comparison of the results of the phonics checks in 2012 and 2013

Results for 2012

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. However, there was wide variation in the percentages passing within different groups of children (62% of girls scored 32 or more but only 54% of boys) and only 44% of those on free meals met this “required standard”. Although there was a year’s difference between the youngest and oldest children tested no information was provided on any difference in pass rate between the youngest and oldest. When I obtained this information I found there was a wide discrepancy, with the pass rate for the oldest boys 65% and for the youngest (still only five years of age) 44%; for girls the two figures were 72% and 51%. An even more disturbing feature was that a breakdown by percentages scoring each mark revealed 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. In my article in April 2013 I drew attention to this anomaly, commenting that this pass mark was known in advance to the teachers, that the structure of the actual test could not have explained this and that it must have been tempting to give 32 rather than 31 when this made the difference between a pass and a fail.

Schools were required to inform parents of the results, that is whether their children passed or failed. Those who “failed” have been required to retake a similar test this year, presumably after further synthetic phonics instruction over the ensuing year, with the schools “encouraged” to purchase more commercial programmes. It is also likely that these children will have practised similar tests, including pseudo words.

Results for 2013

The test for 2013 is similar to last year’s check, again with the first twelve words pseudo words (with coloured illustrations). The pass mark again is 32 out of 40 and again the teachers were informed in advance that 32 is the pass mark. 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.

The results for this year’s check have just been released (www.gov.uk/government/statistics-key-stage-1). The pattern is similar to 2012, but with 69% meeting the expected standard, an increase of 11% since 2012; as previously girls outperformed boys. The results for Year 2 are presented nationally by pupil characteristics and include an LA summary. By the end of Year 2 in 2013 85% of pupils (typically aged 7) met the expected standard. This includes those who passed in Year 1 in 2012, those retaking the check in 2013 and any taking the test for the first time in 2013. This is claimed to represent an increase of 27 percentage points from 58%!

This year I again requested information by date of birth. The relevant figures for Year 1 children in 2013 are 75% for the oldest boys and 55% for the youngest, and 81% and 64% for the girls. Again one might question whether the younger children might by the following year have matured sufficiently to pass the test without further synthetic phonics! No reference has been made to this in DfE statements so far.

Yet again there is a “spike” at mark 32, known in advance to be the pass mark, with one per cent of children scoring 31 and 7% scoring 32. As mentioned above I drew attention to this anomaly in last year’s results. The findings from the first interim report from the NFER research commissioned by DfE were analysed in my article in *Education Journal* in June 2013. I omitted to note, however, a significant comment by NFER based on the 2012 results in *Topic Note: 2012 Phonics Screening Check: research report May 2013*, L. Townley and D. Cotts who are more specific in their interpretation of these results, referring to “a spike at the threshold of meeting the expected standard, suggesting that pupils on the borderline may have been marked up”. (my italics). “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”

(p.28). [That is instead of 58%].

Since the administration of the check was similar in 2013, with the pass mark known in advance, it seems likely that yet again the numbers of pupils passing the check have been over estimated. There may also be differences between schools, or markers, in the extent to which borderline pupils have been marked up. This makes the whole exercise even more questionable. Were the pass mark not to be divulged in advance this effect might be minimised; however, it would no longer be possible to compare results from one year to the next.

Value and validity of the check

The NFER research interim report has already raised 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 mark known to the teachers in advance, 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 identified needs of individual children that follows the identification of children who are struggling.

1. No clear rationale has been provided for identifying 32 as meeting the expected standard.
2. No clear explanation has been given for the inclusion of pseudo words in the test.
3. No analysis has been undertaken of the contribution of the pseudo words to the final scores, yet more latitude is permitted in pronunciation of pseudo words than the real words.
4. 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.
5. The implications of a large difference in pass rate between the youngest and oldest children needs to be considered.
6. The needs of those who failed to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this test may not be met by a focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems.

It is disturbing how much money and time has been devoted to a detailed analysis of the results of this test which by most standards of test construction seems flawed, including a breakdown by types of schools and by local authorities. Furthermore detailed results for individual schools are available at RAISEonline, accessible to Ofsted as evidence for inspections, including percentages within the various categories (often based on very small numbers) then compared with national percentages.

We have yet to establish just what effect this policy has had on the literacy experiences of young children in state schools in England. We need among other things to talk with the young children themselves, those who are failing and those who were already well on the way to becoming successful readers, to examine their opinions of the experience of the check and the extent to which it is colouring their views on literacy.

One final aspect still to be explored is the cost of the commercial phonics programmes and training courses for teachers that schools have been encouraged to purchase with additional funding by DfE between January 2012 and October 2013. Only a limited number of commercial programmes and courses for training teachers in synthetic phonics were eligible for this funding. Under the Freedom of Information Act I am therefore requesting details of the cost of this aspect and a breakdown of the particular programmes that have been purchased.

A relevant publication will appear shortly with chapters by Henrietta Dombey on England and Sue Ellis on Scotland: 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. This will be reviewed in *Education Journal*.