

Outline and summary of the report on an independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check

The preliminary report of this survey was published online on 6 July 2018. This has now been replaced by the final report: *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018*. Editors Margaret M. Clark OBE, Newman University and Jonathan Glazzard, Leeds Beckett University. This can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.

In addition to Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard the other members of the research team are Susan Atkinson of Leeds Beckett University, and John Bayley and Sue Reid of Newman University.

Outline

This was an independent survey and the results are anonymous. The aim of the survey was to enable government policy to be informed by the views of teachers and parents as to the effect of current policy on the literacy experiences of young children in primary schools in England. It was advertised nationally in England during May 2018 with links to the three survey forms, for Head Teachers who worked in schools with Year 1 classes, teachers who had assessed children, and parents whose children had been assessed on the check. Where a parent had more than one child assessed they were asked to complete the survey for the child assessed most recently.

Survey forms were returned by 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents. While not all questions were answered by all respondents, any percentages quoted here are based on responses by at least 180 Head Teachers, 1,108 teachers and 295 parents. We had responses from all regions of England and from teachers with a wide range of experience. Most of the teachers had assessed at least 40 children on the check and 56% of the Head Teachers had themselves assessed children on the check. Unfortunately, in spite of our attempts, the responses from parents were nearly all from parents whose mother tongue is English. However, many of those parents who did respond expressed concern at the effect of the check on the literacy experiences of their children., including those whose child had passed the check.

Since 6 July, when we released our preliminary report, we have studied several other researches which reveal further evidence on the effect of current policy on children's literacy experiences, as reported by their teachers, now also by children. In our final report these findings are summarised in a new chapter 2. The findings of our survey are reported in chapters 4 to 7 and the questions and answers in Appendices V to VII. We have added to the appendices a summary of the additional data from the more complex analyses we have now undertaken. Appendix I reveals evidence that teachers have not been consulted on the future of the check. In Appendix II we indicate how much money has been spent by DfE on the check, on commercial synthetic phonics materials and training courses. We know from our survey that many primary schools have also devoted funds to commercial materials to ensure they raise their percentage pass on the check, but there is no evidence as to how much. Appendix III reports on recent developments in Australia where it appears the Phonics Screening Check may soon be introduced in some states. In chapter 3 details of the survey are reported and Appendix IV shows the information on the survey that was circulated.

Summary of the views of Head Teachers and teachers (see chapters 4, 5 and Appendices V and VI)

The percentages of Head Teachers and teachers who answered these key questions are based on at least 180 Head Teachers and 1108 teachers, those who answered these policy related questions.

1. *Do you think the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?* No HT 89% T 94%.
2. *Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check?* No HT 71% T 75%.

3. *Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?* No HT 64% T 74% *Do you think it is useful to have pseudo/alien words in the check?* No HT 80% T 80%.
4. *Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school?* HT Yes 46% (62 made comments). 48% of teachers used commercial materials and 215 made comments.
5. *Do you think the phonics check should remain statutory?* Yes HT 16% T 12% NB There were significant differences between the views of more and less experienced teachers (see Appendices).
6. *To what extent do you agree with the government policy that the method of teaching reading in England to all children should be by synthetic phonics only?* Agree HT 6% T 10% Disagree HT 62% (73 comments) T 47% (429 comments). There were significant differences with more experienced teachers more likely not to agree.

Summary of views of parents (mainly based on 304 parents, see chapter 6 and Appendix VII)

1. Many of the parents had more than one child assessed.
2. Nearly half the parents who responded had a child assessed in 2017 by which time the percentage pass was high.
3. The check was passed by 75% of these children.
4. Eighty percent of the parents stated that their child had passed the check.
5. Of the parents who responded 80% stated that their child could already read with understanding when they sat the check and 85% that their child could already write recognisable words.
6. Many parents made comments in response to the questions, many expressing concern at the effect of the check, including those whose child had passed the check see chapter 6 and Appendix VII).

Many of these parents whose child was reading well at the time of the check or who passed the check still expressed negative attitudes to the check and the government policy. It would be valuable to have the views of a wider range of parents whose children have sat the check, including children who have speech, language and communication needs or other special educational needs and children who are new to English.

Implications

1. The views expressed by the teachers indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the check or at least making it voluntary.
2. *Most teachers do not agree with the pass/fail scoring on the check or the requirement that children who fail should re-sit the check.
3. *Most teachers (and many parents) do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo/ alien words in the check. This is apparent not only in their answers but also in their comments where they gave their reasons.
4. *The responses to this survey by the teachers and parents, in their answers and in the comments made to the key questions, suggests a degree of concern about current government literacy policy of which the government should now be aware.
5. *Concern was expressed both about the high stakes pass/fail Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement in England that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children.

*Many Head Teachers and teachers expressed negative views on both the check and current government policy. There was a significant difference when teachers were grouped by length of service with a higher percentage of the more experienced teachers likely to express negative views. Many recently qualified teachers in England may not have been alerted to the controversial nature of some of the evidence cited by the government as Teacher Education programmes may be dominated by a focus on synthetic phonics to enable them to meet Ofsted requirements (see chapter 2). This is an area for further research.