

# The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2022: tracking and tracing changes in government policy

By Margaret M Clark OBE

**T**he phonics screening check introduced in 2012 as a statutory assessment has increasingly come to dominate early years classrooms in England (see Clark, M.M. 2019 'The phonics Screening Check 2012-2019: a critique' *Education Journal* 387: 23-26). The check of 40 words, 20 real and 20 pseudo words, has each year since 2012 been administered in June to Year 1 children aged around 6 years of age.

From 2013 to 2019 any children who failed to achieve the standard expected, a pass mark of 32, were required to re-sit the check in year 2. Over the same period synthetic phonics has been the method required by the Government for teaching all children to read. Ofsted now also requires institutions who wish to be validated for the training of primary teachers to promote synthetic phonics in their literacy courses as the method of teaching early reading. Over these years I have published two research reports, edited books with international contributors and articles critiquing this policy. The two reports, my more recent articles and my reference list can be accessed through a link at Newman University where they can be read and downloaded.

Over the period 2012-2019 the check has become a high stakes test with schools expected each year to raise their percentage pass each year. The School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, has repeatedly used the increase in percentage pass on the check over these years as evidence of the success of the Government's insistence that synthetic phonics should be the way to teach all children to read, and as the measure of a school's success in teaching reading. As recently as 9 June 2021, in answer to a written question in parliament from Emma Hardy (7927) quoted in *Education Parliamentary Monitor* he repeated this claim citing the increase in percentage pass on the check since its introduction in 2012. In December 2020 I published an article questioning whether ideology trumps evidence in the formation of government policy for primary schools and for institutions involved in initial teacher education in England (*Education Journal Review*, Vol. 26 No. 3: 2-17).

## **Cancellation of check for June 2020 (followed by requirement to test year 2 children in the Autumn Term 2020)**

It was decided to cancel the testing on the PSC for June 2020 because of the closing of schools as a consequence of the pandemic. However, the Government later decided to require the schools in the Autumn Term 2020 to administer the check to year 2 children to determine which children should be required to sit the check in June 2021. Only children who failed to achieve a mark of at least 32 were to be tested in June 2021 along with year 1 children. As the papers for 2020 had been shredded the schools were allowed to select the check for 2017, 2018 or 2019 to administer.

In the same issue of *Education Journal Review* (pages 18-22) my article from *Education Journal* issue 435: 23-26, *The administration of the Phonics Screening Check in the autumn term 2020 to Year 2 children in England: why at what cost to teachers and children?* was reprinted. I expressed concern about the requirement that schools test all year 2 children on the check in the Autumn Term 2020, which seemed an imposition on schools at that time with COVID cases among children and staff. Following my article, I sent Freedom of Information Questions to DfE for clarification about anomalies in the instructions to schools. My questions were sent on 22 December, and I received a response on 14 January 2021. No reference was made in the response I received to the fact that DfE by then had decided to postpone the testing on the PSC until June 2022, by which time those Year 2 children who had been tested would no longer be in year 2!

## **Plans to assess years 1 and 2 children in June 2021 confirmed, then cancelled**

In December 2020, the Standards and Testing Agency published a document setting out full details about

*(Continued on page 25.)*

*(Continued from page 24.)*

the proposed testing on the PSC which was to take place in June 2021. However, I learnt that a decision to postpone the testing until June 2022 had been taken before the final date in January by which local authorities were required to send the results of the Autumn term testing to DfE. In GOV.UK *Primary assessments: future dates 2020/21* published on 18 January it was announced that: “The national curriculum assessments due to be held in the summer term 2021, including tests, teacher assessments and the phonics screening check, have been cancelled.”

I approached a number of schools to find out whether they were aware of this change in policy. As I was unable to establish either when or by whom they were informed I submitted a series of further Freedom of Information Questions to DfE on 30 April to which I received a reply on 1 June 2021. The following are my questions and the answers I received:

1. The Standards and Testing Agency was responsible for informing schools and other stakeholders of the cancellation and this information was sent on 7 January and followed by a reminder on 18 January. I was informed that LAs were not responsible for informing schools.
2. I enquired how many local authorities had as required returned the results of the Autumn Term assessment of year 2 pupils and from how many LAs no return had been received. The response was that all 151 local authorities had returned the results to the DfE.
3. I asked from how many schools nationally returns had been received, from how many schools no returns had been received, and what reasons had been given for non-returns. In total 16,397 schools nationally submitted returns and a total of 178 schools did not return the autumn term results. It was stated that DfE “did not have a record of the reasons as to why these schools did not return their results”.
4. It was stated that the Department received returns for 95% of eligible pupils.
5. As schools had the choice of whether to use the tests from 2017, 2018 or 2019 I enquired whether schools had been asked to indicate which tests they had used. The reply I received was that: “The 2017, 2018 and 2019 phonics screening checks are statistically linked, meaning the standard expected to meet the threshold remains the same across all three previous years. Therefore, it was unnecessary for schools to indicate which check they used ...”
6. Finally, I enquired whether it was intended to publish or otherwise use the data from the autumn assessments now that it had been decided to cancel the testing for June 2021. It was stated that as: “The data from the autumn 2020 phonics screening check was intended to only be used to determine which year 2 pupils have not met the expected standard in phonics and who were therefore expected to take the statutory check in June 2021 (alongside year 1 pupils). Given that the June 2021 phonics screening check has been cancelled, the data will no longer be used for this purpose. We do not intend to publish the results from the autumn 2020 phonics screening check or use it for any other purpose.” This response was prepared by the Standards and Testing Agency.

It does now appear that at a time when schools were under so many other pressures the decision to require them to administer the check to year 2 pupils was an added but unnecessary pressure. Furthermore, there is now a large amount of stored data which is no longer relevant.

#### **Decision to require schools to assess year 2 children on the check in the Autumn Term 2021**

On 16 June there has been yet another change of policy, the announcement merely embedded in a speech by the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, at the Festival of Education. He stated that schools would be required not only to test reception class children on the baseline assessment in the

*(Continued on page 26.)*

*(Continued from page 25.)*

Autumn Term 2021 but also to test year 2 children on the phonics screening check. No explanation was given for this latest change of policy.

In a press release that day Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, said: “The last thing children need after COVID-19 is another test which won’t tell teachers anything new or helpful about their pupils and will simply put them under more pressure. Children who ‘fail’ the test will be required to re-sit the test in the summer term. This is no message to give to pupils who have just experienced huge disruption to their education due to the pandemic.”

In our research report in 2018 we revealed that many teachers and parents found that the phonics screening check did not tell them anything they did not already know and yet no consultation with either teachers or parents has taken place to establish whether the check should remain a statutory assessment, dominating as it does the early years curriculum in many classrooms. In his latest written answer in Parliament on 9 June 2021 Nick Gibb’s comments are slightly more constrained than on previous occasions. While still claiming that “There is sound evidence that systematic phonics is a highly effective method for teaching early reading”, he has here omitted the word ‘synthetic’ before phonics in this latest statement and added: “The evidence indicates that the teaching of phonics is most effective when combined with a language-rich curriculum.” These are two qualifications not found in his many previous statements! (Note: In a Special Issue in July 2019 *Education Journal* 379: 1-39, entitled: ‘*Literacy policy, synthetic phonics and the phonics screening check*’, a number of my relevant articles were reprinted.)

In view of the time and money still being spent on the phonics screening check it is worth reminding readers of four points I made there in my summary (see pages 37-9). Further evidence is to be found in my numerous publications and in those of others whom I cite.

1. Many of the teachers and parents responding to an independent survey in May 2018 expressed the view that the phonics screening check should be discontinued and certainly should not remain a statutory assessment. Singled out for particular criticism were the pseudo words and the fact that the check was not diagnostic but merely identified children as passing or failing depending on whether or not they gained a mark of 32.
2. There is evidence of the unreliability of the check, also the high percentage of younger children, particularly boys, among those failing the check and no corrections is made for age.
3. The two researches cited by the government for their claim that their policy is evidence based and that all children should learn to read using synthetic phonics have been widely criticised.
4. The improved results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS 2016 for England have been attributed by the Government to its phonics policy and the screening check. This is a questionable claim. It should also be noted that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with very different policies, and where collaboration with the teaching profession features extensively, both ranked statistically higher than England, yet no lessons in England seem to be learnt from these other countries.

Surely it is time for the teachers in England to be consulted and for the Government to stop issuing contradictory edicts to the profession and expecting them to conform!

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**Primary Education: Literacy**

**Stuart Anderson:** [11671] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to improve literacy rates among primary school-aged children.

**Nick Gibb:** The Government continues to drive improvements in literacy levels by ensuring high quality systematic synthetic phonics teaching in all our schools to give all children the firm foundation on which to progress through school, and to help them develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information.

England achieved its highest ever score in reading in 2016, moving from joint 10th to joint 8th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings. This improvement is largely attributable to increases in the average performance of lower performing pupils and boys. These are the first international assessment results from the cohort of pupils who benefited from the changes in primary curriculum and assessment introduced since the 2010 election. In 2019, 82% of pupils in Year 1 met the expected standard in the phonics screening check, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012. For disadvantaged pupils, this has gone from 45% in 2012 to 71% in 2019. Furthermore, 2019 results showed that by the end of Year 2, 91% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check. In 2018, the Department launched a £26.3 million English Hubs Programme to improve the teaching of reading. This focuses on supporting children making the slowest progress in reading, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and is providing intensive support to over 875 partner schools. We have since provided a further £17 million in this school-to-school improvement programme, which focusses on systematic synthetic phonics, early language, and reading for pleasure.

Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, the English Hubs programme has continued to offer support

and training to schools across the country by bringing much of their offer online. This has involved opening virtual training and professional development events to a wider pool of schools and distributing materials targeted specifically at remote education and recovery. The English Hubs have adapted to providing intensive support remotely and have delivered more than 1,400 days of specialist phonics training to over 875 partner schools this academic year.

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