

Debbie Hepplewhite's response to talks and discussions held on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2012 at the *Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar: Testing and assessment in primary schools*

with reference in particular to the section:

### **The way forward for the Year 1 Phonics Screening Checks**

[Original questions listed on the papers for the seminar's agenda shown in 'bold red']

**Do the results of the first year of the test suggest that the standards of the test are too challenging for pupils, and what has been the impact on the pupils and teachers?**

DH: In the first year of the test, a national average of 58% of pupils achieved the official standard. In some schools, 85% to 100% of the pupils reached or surpassed the benchmark. This suggests that the check is not necessarily '*too challenging for pupils*' when they are taught effectively. The '*impact*' of the check indicates that at least some teachers are being more mindful about their phonics teaching as average results are higher than the pilot project conducted in 2011 (32% achieved the benchmark in the pilot). It is good that teachers' professional understanding is being informed by the results of the check.

Teachers' responses to the check are varied with many teachers describing they feel pressurised and they appear angry and indignant – but other teachers are excited and curious to see how well they are teaching their pupils and they describe positive experiences shared with their pupils during the check itself.

**Is it essential for Year 1 pupils to have a high standard of phonic decoding skills or are there more effective alternative methods for teaching reading?**

DH: *Phonics* is actually the knowledge and skills used by the vast majority of *literate adults* when reading and spelling – particularly longer, new and more challenging words. There are no '*more effective alternative methods*' for teaching reading although there are a number of other methods that have been used over the decades. These *alternative methods*, however, failed to serve all pupils well – and they completely failed many pupils.

If it is decided that Year 1 is too early to aim for checking good decoding skills, then the requirement to assess Year 2 children on their reading comprehension and genre writing skills is arguably too early. It is sensible that the technical skill of being able to apply known alphabetic code to blend both known and unknown words should precede formal national assessment on *higher-order* reading and writing skills.

**How can schools maintain a balance between ensuring pupils meet the standards expected in the Phonics test and encouraging a wider enjoyment of reading?**

DH: Children are more likely to enjoy reading if they can read the words on the pages. This should not be an either/or scenario.

**Are concerns around the teaching of ‘pseudo-words’, as part of preparation for the test, justified?**

DH: Concerns may be justified if teachers devote too much time to activities using pseudo-words including when these consist of *illegal* spellings (*letter patterns not generally found in real words*).

Readers encounter many words in literature which are not in their oral vocabulary – which is the equivalent of decoding pseudo-words.

**To what extent does the introduction of the new test contribute to bureaucracy for teachers and impact on teaching time?**

DH: Figures for ‘*bureaucracy*’ do not outweigh the importance of teachers being focused upon the phonics learning of their individual pupils, and how their teaching effectiveness compares with other teachers in similar contexts and across the country. This is a *life-chance* issue for the pupils and an essential *professional development* issue for the teaching profession.

**What can be done for pupils who continue to have phonic decoding skills below the level expected even after Year 2 re-take?**

DH: If Year 2 pupils do not reach the benchmark, continue the phonics teaching but investigate the content and quality of the teaching to date and any specific circumstances of the individual pupil.

**What is the effect of the phonics test on pupils who struggle with reading, such as pupils with SEN or English as a second language?**

DH: Assessment guidance is provided for special circumstances. The phonics check contributes to teachers’ professional development in reading instruction and this can only be of benefit to pupils with SEN and for those with English as a second language.

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**Attended the seminar on behalf of the UK Reading Reform Foundation**

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