

Debbie Hepplewhite's direct response to David Reedy's suggestions expressed in the 'Teach Primary' magazine, April 2013: 'The Great Debate – Is it time to ditch the Y1 Phonics Screening Test?'

"It is apparent that the teaching profession in England does not share a common understanding of the role of phonics in the teaching of reading or assessing reading. I consider that this is such an important issue, I am responding directly to the points raised by David Reedy in his section of the 'debate' in the 'Teach Primary' magazine where both of us contributed a different perspective. My comments are in red below. David Reedy's article is in black below. Prior to the publication of the two pieces, I was not forewarned that my article was going to form part of a 'debate'." *Debbie Hepplewhite May 2013*

You can view the original pieces here: http://www.phonicsinternational.com/screener_debate.pdf

David Reedy is General Secretary at the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA)

David Reedy's article for: 'The Great Debate – Is it time to ditch the Y1 Phonics Screening Test?'

D Reedy: YES: In June 2012, all schools in England administered the phonics test to all children in Year 1. The test consisted of 20 phonically regular words and 20 pseudo words like *mip*, *glimp* and *brunk*. The results of the test have been collated and reported publicly through RAISEonline and Local Authority tables. The results are also being used by Ofsted when they inspect schools.

Debbie: I expect the readers of this article can read *mip*, *glimp* and *brunk* really easily and accurately. There is no reason why young readers cannot be expected to read such words accurately too - for their short-term and long-term needs. If teachers describe children as 'good readers' who cannot, or do not, read such words readily and accurately, then this should raise concern about the professional knowledge and understanding of the teachers.

D Reedy: UKLA has considerable concerns about the imposition of this test. It is narrowly conceived and does not give a clear picture of children's development as readers when they are six years old.

Debbie: The test is not narrowly conceived. It recognises the importance of phonics teaching and learning in the beginning infant stages for life-long skills, and draws upon a history of using word level content including pseudo words for accurate phonics assessment. The DfE also makes the purpose of the check clear, *'Remember that the check is not a reading test. It was designed simply to identify pupils who might not have gained the phonic knowledge and skills they need to make a secure start to decoding'* and *'The phonics screening check is a short, light-touch assessment to confirm whether individual children have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard.'* (DfE)

D Reedy: UKLA is very clear that phonics instruction is an important component of the teaching of early reading – but insufficient in itself to create fluent, motivated readers who read avidly for purpose and pleasure.

Debbie: The UKLA appears quite vociferous in its protestation about a number of issues linked to phonics teaching and assessment and it would not be hard to doubt the UKLA's commitment to phonics and understanding of the role of phonics in early reading and beyond. Children who cannot lift the words off the page easily are far more likely to *skip* (miss out) words and become de-motivated readers who shy away from reading *'for purpose and pleasure'*.

D Reedy: In July 2012, UKLA undertook a research survey of KS1 schools and teachers about the test. The results were collated and analysed by an independent researcher from Sheffield Hallam University. 494 responses were received – a very high number, indicating the level of concern by teachers and schools. These show that experience of the first year of the test has been very worrying.

Debbie: The advent of the UKLA survey is a case in point for questioning the UKLA's claim that *'UKLA is very clear that phonics instruction is an important component of the teaching of early reading...'*. Arguably, the most worrying aspect of the *'first year of the test'* is the level of criticism and undermining of the check by professional bodies such as the UKLA and also the lack of common understanding of the reasoning and results of the check by members of professional bodies and the teaching profession itself.

D Reedy: Schools overwhelmingly felt that the check was unnecessary and not fit for purpose. It did not give any information that was not already known, and it took valuable teaching time. They 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.

Debbie: Some teachers may well have *felt* that *'the check was unnecessary and not fit for purpose'* but this does not provide evidence that the test *was* unnecessary and not fit for purpose. The test clearly *did* give information that was *not* already known as evidenced by the number of teachers who were shocked and dismayed that some children they considered to be better readers fared less well decoding the pseudo words than children considered to be the weaker readers. Further, the national scale and objective nature of the check has provided a clear indication of which schools, and which local authorities, are not teaching phonics as effectively as others in the early years. This should be regarded as very important for teachers' professional development. A check conducted nationally provides teachers with common ground on which to share their conversations and base their further understanding.

D Reedy: Ministers claimed that the test only takes a few minutes. This is contradicted by the evaluation of the 2011 pilot report, which found that the average time for preparation and administration was 15.5 hours and even longer in large schools. Some respondents to the UKLA survey also reported administration taking up to five days. How will six-year-olds benefit if their teacher is otherwise engaged with the check and may also be out of the class for three days or more?

Debbie: Six year olds will benefit hugely if the teaching profession raises its level of understanding of the role of phonics teaching and learning as a result of the check and subsequent conversations. Teachers will also become more knowledgeable and adept at organising and administering the check over time. Six year olds in England often have more than one adult carer in the classroom therefore some time without their teacher is not unusual.

D Reedy: The most worrying aspect of the survey findings was that most schools indicated that the phonics check seriously disadvantaged, and in some cases impeded, successful readers. 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 to make sense of the 'alien words' they encountered. 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. One teacher commented: *"Many children reading well above their chronological age did not pass the test"* and another explained: *"The better readers stumbled over nonsense words as they expect words to follow certain rules. For example; 'thend' read as 'the end'."*

Debbie: This is a perfect example to show that teachers do not share a common understanding about the role of phonics decoding for reading – including how to analyse the errors. There is no reason why *'successful readers'* should not have been able to decode or discern the pseudo words accurately, compared to children considered to be less fluent readers. All the children were told which were the pseudo words and a picture of a little creature was provided alongside each pseudo word for extra clarity. Children encouraged to focus on meaning-making to make a quick stab (guess) at words at the expense of accurate and proficient decoding are not well-served. The apparent logic described above is arguably not acceptable to excuse or explain inaccurate decoding and weak blending. Children encounter a high percentage of *new* words in their literature which are not in their oral vocabularies and therefore they are the *equivalent of pseudo words*. Children should be able to decode these new words accurately and 'fluent' reading is simply not a substitute for accurate reading - nor more desirable than accurate reading.

D Reedy: Several schools stated that above average readers (e.g. those achieving 2c and above) scored lower than those at 1c, 1b and 1a.

Thus the check misidentifies 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.

Debbie: One does not grow *'beyond the stage of phonetic decoding'* as this skill continues to be required for new, longer and more challenging words even for proficient adult readers. What the check has identified is children who appear to have a tendency to take a quick stab at reading words reaching an *approximate real word* rather than applying alphabetic code knowledge to sound out and being able to *blend the sounds accurately*. The meaning-making is either skewing the children's capacity to discern the word; or the meaning-making approach is perhaps diminishing the amount of practice that children undertake to become truly proficient at sounding out and blending the sounds to discern the target word.

This outcome raises various possibilities, one being that children are routinely required to read reading books which may be beyond their decoding ability but within their oral comprehension so that they are continuing to use a range of *multi-cueing strategies* to reach the words on the page in preference to applying alphabetic code knowledge and developing a competent blending skill. Sheffield Hallam University also conducted a review of the 2011 phonics check pilot and discovered that almost three-quarters of the teachers taking part still used the *searchlights multi-cueing reading strategies* which were officially replaced by the *Simple View of Reading* following the Rose review in 2005/6. This commonly favoured *multi-cueing and eclectic approach* to teaching early reading may well be reflected in the attitudes and responses reported in the UKLA survey and in the results of the children themselves.

These are serious issues that need to be discussed and understood fully by the teaching profession.

D Reedy: Teachers also commented that the check was very stressful for children.

Many schools had serious worries 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 and in many cases they felt that this undermined the school's relationship with parents.

Debbie: In contrast to the experiences above, there have also been reports of children thoroughly enjoying their one to one time with their class teacher and requests to *'do it again'* the following day. When teachers report that children are stressed, being labelled as *'a failure'* and that reporting results has *'undermined the school's relationship with parents'* then this raises questions about the professional *people-skills* of the teachers themselves. There is no reason why a word-reading check with the class teacher should be a stressful experience for children as Year One children should be decoding words routinely and daily. No children should have been labelled as *'a failure'* by anyone – within schools or in the home – and reporting to parents should have been a straightforward explanation about the importance of phonics knowledge and decoding delivered in a helpful way and not a damaging way.

D Reedy: The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that in teachers' and headteachers' professional judgement, the phonics screening check for six-year-olds has been 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 schools' experience the results have labelled some successful and fluent readers as failures. The check does not differentiate at the top end. It does not identify high experience readers but is potentially holding them back and undermining their assurance as readers.

All this makes it clear that the phonics screening check should not be used in subsequent years for all children in year 1, but implemented at teachers' discretion to identify specific development needs in particular pupils for whom it is appropriate.

Debbie: All this makes it clear that there is a massive job still to be done for teacher-training and professional development. Whilst we have come a long way as a country to recognise officially the importance of phonics teaching for reading and for spelling, it is clear that we are merely on a slow journey and not at the journey's end.

Debbie is a phonics teacher-trainer and the author of *Phonics International* at www.phonicsinternational.com (Phonics International Ltd), and the phonics consultant for the *Oxford Reading Tree Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters programme* (Oxford University Press).