THE GREAT

IS IT TIME TO DITCH THE VI PHONICS SCREENING TEST?

NO: Debbie Hepplewhite MBE FRSA

The statutory phonics screening check taken by pupils at the end of Y1 for the first time in 2011 did prompt a backlash from some children’s authors, union leaders and others – reactions apparently fuelled by the inclusion of 20 pseudo-words alongside the 40 real words to be presented for the youngsters to decode. But reading is a life chance issue. Foundational literacy skills are so fundamentally important that they affect not only academic potential and future livelihood but also the very core of well being and health. In a room for political antagonism, personal belief systems or romantic illusions about an objective look at the effectiveness of our phonics teaching.

Following the rollout of the check in June, the TES online primary forum revealed great diversity in the attitudes and arguments, and understanding of teachers involved. Reactions ranged from reports of upsets and fears to success stories and reassurances, with class advice on the 22 out of 40 benchmark score.

One common surprise for many teachers was the number of children described as “good readers” who did not decode the pseudo-words accurately. Some suggested this was because children were “trying to make sense” of the words whilst others commented that this was not the explanation, as all had been told that the words were not real and pictures of little creatures had been carefully included to reinforce this point.

Teachers need to consider that full implications of reading habits reliant on common-sense context guessing of words over the long term. When presented separately, vocabulary and context become more challenging. It is phonics knowledge and decoding that enable us to lift new words from the page. When making sense of the words inside is to learn them accurately reading is not the desirable reading reflex for a life-long, life-long, life chance skill.

Some teachers argue that the outset of the check will slow the language and literacy diet that children receive in favour of phonics and at the expense of rich language and literature. Then it is up to every teacher to make sure that this is not the case. It is that simple.

However one looks at the various responses to the check and the nature of the check, it is now apparent that the teaching profession has yet to share a common understanding of teaching reading. A full grasp of the desirable processes required for long-term reading – or indeed, an awareness of the importance of national objective testing in something as ordinary as reading a list of words. This has been alarmingly when historically the teaching profession has been subject to a plethora of contradictory approaches and philosophies for bringing up literacy – the point that in English-speaking countries this conception of ideas and practices has actually failed so many. What muddies the waters, however, is that many teachers themselves are perfectly literate through what probably amounts to a book-by-book vocabulary and context guessing of the prevailing methodology or philosophy. It is extremely rare to find a teacher who can recall having had a diet of systematic synthetic phonics as a child.

It was the statistics of large-scale standardized testing, however, that helped to use the data on pseudo words in teaching methods. It is large-scale testing, now, that is informing our understanding and practices for moving forwards. Teachers should be pleased to be made aware that some teachers have indeed honed their understanding of how to teach children more effectively. It was teachers who set the original benchmarks for the Y1 screening check and already we now have literature and resources to move forward.

It is large-scale testing, now, that is informing our understanding and practices for moving forwards.

YES: David Reedy, United Kingdom Literacy Association

In June 2012 all schools in England administered the phonics test to all children in Year 1. The test consisted of 20 phonetically regular words and 20 pseudo-words shorter than 5 syllables.

The results are also being used by Ofsted when they inspect schools.

UKLA has considerable concerns about the imposition of this test. It is narrowly conceived and does not give a clear picture of a child’s development as it occurs. We are nine years old. UKLA is very clear that phonics instruction is an important component of the teaching of reading – but how efficient in itself to create fluent, motivated readers who read avidly for purpose and pleasure.

In July 2012, UKLA undertook a research survey of 4,500 schools and teachers about the test. The results were collated and analysed by an independent team from Sheffield Hallam University. 694 responses were received – a very high number, indicating the level of concern by teachers and schools. These showed that the first year of the test has been very worrying.

Schools were 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 a 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 to inform teaching about children's progress.

Ministers claimed that the test only takes a few minutes. This is contradicted by the overwhelming results of the 2012 pilot report, which found that the average time for preparation and administration was 15-30 hours and more, longer in large schools. Some respondents to the UKLA survey also reported taking up to a day. No school worry, even in a successful, a child who had missed the check?

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 phonics tests, and that these could burden more fluent readers, who had been taught to read for meaning, and therefore tried hard 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 rounded out the phonemes correctly, but blended incorrectly. One teacher commented: “Many children reading really 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, ‘them’ read as the end.”

Several schools said that above average readers (e.g. those achieving 20 and above) scored even lower than those at 10, 10 and 10.

The check also identifies pupils who are beyond the stage of phonetic decoding as already successful readers did less well in the check than some miss readers.

Teachers also commented that the check was worrying for children.

Many schools had serious concerns about having to label a child as a failure, especially when a significant number of ‘fail’ were actually successful, fluent readers. They also expressed concern about having to notify parents of the results.

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 children, but used judiciously where a teacher thinks it would help identify specific needs in a particular child. In schools’ experience the results have labeled some successful readers as failures. The check does not differentiate at the top and is not identified by high experience readers but in 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 developmental needs in particular pupils for whom it is appropriate.

David Reedy is general secretary at the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). For more information, visit ukla.org