

The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 2: The views of Year 2 teachers and headteachers

HHCP Working Paper No. 1

Dr. Alice Bradbury, Co-Director,
Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11)



Introduction

In the summer of 2020, as part of the government's arrangements for examinations and testing under COVID-19, all statutory assessments in primary schools were cancelled, including the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) in Year 1. In June 2020, the government announced that the PSC would be moved to the autumn term, and made the reporting of results to the Department of Education (DfE) a statutory requirement (STA, 2020). The use of the PSC in the autumn term of Year 2 for the first time was described by a DfE spokesperson as necessary because 'Pupils who may need support should not be overlooked as a result of missing their phonics check' (TES, 2020).

The research reported in this working paper is exploring what impact the use of the PSC in Year 2 in autumn term 2020 had on English teaching in Year 2, and

how Year 2 teachers have reacted to this change. We also wanted to explore how headteachers viewed the use of the PSC in Year 2.

Key Findings

1. The majority of Year 2 teachers do not think they should be doing the PSC.
2. The PSC is seen as a measure of school performance, not as a check which helps identify children who are struggling.
3. An additional test this year adds unwelcome extra pressure.
4. Some teachers see the PSC as affecting pedagogy in Year 2 with a potential impact on progress in reading.

Background

The PSC is a statutory assessment of decoding usually conducted in the summer term of Year 1 in schools in England. In autumn 2020 the PSC was conducted in Year 2 for the first time because the cohort had not taken the test in Year 1 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PSC consists of 20 words and 20 pseudo-words (phonetically plausible words with no meaning) which children have to read aloud. It is conducted one-to-one by the class teacher with a child. The children are regarded as having met the expected standard if children reach a threshold mark, usually a total of 32 words/pseudo-words read in line with guidance on 'acceptable pronunciations' (STA 2019).

The test has been controversial since its introduction in 2012 because it focuses on only one aspect of teaching reading: the ability to use decoding to read words and pseudo-words (Darnell, Solity, & Wall, 2017). It is also controversial because the balance between the use of and emphasis on phonics in relation to other important aspects of the teaching of reading is contested (e.g. Wyse & Goswami, 2008). Research with teachers suggests that the PSC has had a distorting impact on pedagogy and practice in Year 1 and in earlier year groups, and that phonics is now regarded as a separate area of the curriculum to reading (Bradbury, 2018; Carter, 2020).

Project summary

The research reported in this working paper is exploring the views of teachers on using the PSC in Year 2 and how it had affected their teaching. It was conducted

during the period when they were using the test, in the second half of the autumn term of 2020. A survey using Opinio software was distributed to a range of educational organisations and networks with links to the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11) (HHCP), and promoted on social media. In the first tranche of responses, reported in this paper, there were 1246 responses from Year 2 teachers (the numbers of responses to individual questions varied because not all respondents answered every question: A list of the questions is included in Appendix 1). A focus group interview with four headteachers who were recruited through the *More than a Score* group was conducted to find out about headteachers' views and approaches to the PSC in Year 2. A further four individual interviews with headteachers recruited through the HHCP's networks were also conducted. The sample of headteachers is therefore biased towards those with a particular interest in the PSC and statutory testing and the data have been interpreted with this in mind.

[The survey on phonics teaching](#) will remain open to all teachers in Nursery, Reception, Year 1, and Year 2 until the end of the autumn term, and additional responses would be welcomed.

Findings 1: The majority of Year 2 teachers do not think children should be doing the PSC

Among our survey respondents, 72% of Year 2 teachers answered 'No' to the question 'Do you think Year 2 children should be doing the Phonics Screening Check this term?' (n=754 out of 1049 responses to this question). A further 12% (n= 124) answered 'Not sure'. Respondents' comments included that the PSC added pressure for children and staff at an already difficult time, and that it was not necessary to use a statutory assessment to understand children's level in phonics because teachers already assess this. Headteachers commented that it did not make sense to repeat the PSC when other tests missed in 2020 were not repeated.

When asked if they agreed with the statement 'Doing the PSC in the autumn of Year 2 has had a positive impact my teaching this term', 13% of Year 2 teachers agreed or strongly agreed (n=118 out of 967 responses). A majority (58%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (n=564). In response to the statement

¹Full numbers for the statement questions can be found in Appendix 2.

'Doing the Phonics Screening Check in autumn of Year 2 was necessary this term because the cohort missed it in Year 1', 16% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (n=151 out of 967 responses), while 38% strongly disagreed (n=372). As one respondent commented, 'It's getting in the way of what the children need right now'.

Findings 2: The PSC is seen as a measure of school performance, not as a check which helps identify children who are struggling

The PSC in Year 2 is not regarded by the majority of teachers and school leaders as a helpful tool to identify children who are struggling in reading, because they argue that already have this information. Only a quarter of survey respondents agreed that the test has given them helpful information on how well children can read (n=238 out of 967 responses). For example, one teacher commented, 'Our own methods of teaching and regular assessment of phonics are rigorous and are enough to be able to know where our children are up to'. For those who were more positive about using the PSC this term, comments suggested that the benefits lie in establishing pupils' current phonics knowledge; for example, 'It's good to know where the children are'. Some respondents that saw the PSC as providing some useful information argued that this was not detailed enough, as one explained:

It's not comprehensive enough to give you a detailed picture. Plus they are reading words in isolation, which is absolutely not the main event in terms of learning to read.

Instead, the PSC was seen by respondents as motivated by a need to hold schools to account – and was described as a 'stick to beat teachers with' by one headteacher, and 'another finger-pointing exercise' by another head. The test was described by respondents as 'pointless', 'unnecessary' and 'irrelevant' in survey comments, often because it failed to provide the teachers with useful information.

Findings 3: An additional test this year adds unwelcome extra pressure

Respondents commented on the problem of trying to prepare children who had missed months of schooling for the PSC. The uneven experiences of children during the lockdown period were cited as a reason why the test would be unfair:

Children are not on an even playing field - some continued to work on phonics during lockdown/school closure; some children didn't; some [were children of] key workers/vulnerable and were at learning hubs.

These differences in experiences mean that data produced through standardised testing will not allow for a fair comparison of children's progress or schools' effectiveness because the outcomes of the test will reflect children's attendance, lockdown experiences and ability to cope with school, not only their ability to decode (see also ILC, 2020).

Views from the survey on whether the PSC caused additional stress for children were mixed: 43% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (n=413 of 967 responses), while 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed (n=313). One survey respondent wrote, 'Year 2 should be a fun year filled with learning and laughter. It should not be a year filled with first phonics tests and then SATs'. Interview data indicated that schools engage in various approaches to minimise the impact on children including doing practice tests, which may account for this range of views. For some headteachers, the potential emotional impact of a test for children who were struggling with phonics was a major concern – one headteacher commented, 'But the thing is for children who sit there and really can't read, and to do that to them is just not a beneficial, productive experience. It's a really negative experience actually'.

Survey results showed that a high proportion of Year 2 teachers (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that the PSC has caused teachers additional stress (n=794 of 967 responses). For some respondents, the test was a disruption to the process of reconnecting with children after lockdown; as one teacher commented, 'Depressing that I've been forced to put Year 2 through the wringer, when they've had such a terrible year and we're so pleased to be back'. The presence of an extra test in Year 2 was seen as particularly stressful because they are already subject to statutory testing in the summer term; as one said, 'We have SATS stress and Phonics stress AND 6 months of catching up stress'.

Finally, there were concerns raised by the headteachers around the logistics of doing the PSC within COVID-19 regulations and with staff absent due to self-isolation: as one said, 'Logistically, how can I have somebody out of the classroom assessing phonics when I'm already seven people down?'. For some schools struggling with the impact of the pandemic, the additional pressure of the PSC has compounded the pressure felt by teachers and school leaders.

Findings 4: Some teachers see the PSC as affecting pedagogy in Year 2 with a potential impact on progress in reading

Over a third (37%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that having the test has helped children to catch up with their phonics (n=363 out of 967 responses). Positive comments about using the check in Year 2 include that it has helped to identify gaps in learning and to highlight children who need additional support.

In preparation for the PSC, teachers have engaged in a range of strategies, including practising phoneme recognition; identifying nonsense words; practice tests; and doing additional phonics for children with lower attainment. Many commented that they would usually do some of these activities (except practice tests) but they were either doing them more often or spending more time on them this year. While they would normally be teaching phonics in Year 2, how this has been done has been affected by the PSC, in many cases.

In terms of a wider impact on the curriculum, 68% agreed or strongly agreed that the test has reduced the time spent on other literacy activities (n=660 out of 967 responses). There were concerns about the prioritisation of phonics within the teaching of reading through the test: as one commented, 'Testing a list of 40 words, half of which are nonsense words, has never been a good indicator of reading ability'. Teachers also mentioned increases in interventions for phonics, and delays to moving onto spelling strategies usually taught this term. The focus on phonics was unwelcome for some:

Too much time spent on learning phonics and phonemes in a way that has little relevance to context. Time is taken away from real learning in order to develop technical skills which have little practical use.

This concern raised by a small number of respondents about having to adapt the curriculum requires further investigation. In the case of fluent readers, the need to return to phonic decoding for the purposes of the test, rather than have teaching better matched to their developmental level in reading, would be a step backwards.

The teaching of pseudo-words in Year 2 was highlighted by some as a new practice linked to the test: as one teacher commented, '[We] would not be reading nonsense words in year 2 normally. Nonsensical to be helping 7-year-olds to read made up words'. When asked specifically about fluent readers in the survey, many Year 2 teachers responded that they were approaching the test with them in the same way as other children, however, some comments suggested there was a focus on re-learning to segment words and use phonics rather than attempting to read the word in the context of sentences and whole texts. This focus – described by one

respondent as ‘delaying the children’s learning’ – was seen as problematic given the lack of useful information provided by the PSC. The data from this research raises the possibility that conducting the PSC in autumn 2020 may be detrimental to some children’s reading development, however this issue requires further investigation.

Recommendations:

1. The repeat of the PSC in summer term 2021 for Year 2 children not reaching the threshold mark should be voluntary. Teachers are clear that they do not need the test to establish who is struggling in phonics and the PSC adds extra pressure at a difficult time.
2. Decisions about other statutory tests in 2021 should take into account the potential risks that have been highlighted by these findings on the first statutory tests to take place since the pandemic began: comparisons between schools will be unfair given the different experiences of schools; and teachers and school leaders resent the additional pressure at a time of great disruption and continued uncertainty.
3. Future discussion about the purpose of the PSC should consider the continued criticism of the test from the teachers who conduct it, particularly the lack of useful information provided, and the potential for negative impacts on children who are struggling.

References

Bradbury, A. (2018). The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability: A ‘necessary evil’ amid the policy storm. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(4), 539-556.

Carter, J. (2020). The assessment has become the curriculum: Teachers’ views on the Phonics Screening Check in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 593-609.

Darnell, C. A., Solity, J. E., & Wall, H. (2017). Decoding the phonics screening check. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(3), 505-527.

International Literacy Centre (ILC) (2020) Responding to COVID-19, Briefing Note 1: Primary Assessment and COVID. London: UCL Institute of Education.

Standards and Testing Agency (STA) (2019) 2019 Phonics Screening Check:

Scoring Guidance, Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-2019-materials> [Access date 19 November 2020]

Standards and Testing Agency (STA) (2020) Administering the phonics screening check to year 2 pupils in the 2020 autumn term. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/914784/Administering_the_phonics_screening_check_to_year_2_pupils_in_the_2020_autumn_term_PDFA.pdf [Access date 19 November 2020]

TES (2020) 'Pupils to catch up on phonics test 'in autumn term' Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-pupils-catch-phonics-test-autumn-term> [Access date 19 November 2020]

Wyse, D., & Goswami, U. (2008). Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading. *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(6), 691-710.

To cite this paper:

Bradbury, A. (2020) The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 2: 'It's getting in the way of what the children need right now', HHCP Working Paper 1. London: UCL Institute of Education

Appendix 1

List of questions for Year 2 teachers

Question 1: Which of these best describes your school?

Question 2: Are you involved in teaching in Year 2?

Question 3: Will you or your colleagues be conducting the Phonics Screening Check this term?

Question 4: Do you think Year 2 children should be doing the Phonics Screening Check this term?

Question 5: What are the main ways which doing the Phonics Screening Check has affected your teaching?

Question 6: Have you included any of the following in your teaching this term?

Question 7: How much time have you spent, per week, on activities related to the Phonics Screening Check?

Question 8: Has doing the Phonics Screening Check this term helped you to identify those children struggling with phonics?

Question 9: How have you approached the test with children who are already fluent readers?

Question 10: Finally, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Doing the Phonics Screening Check in autumn of Year 2...has reduced the time spent on other literacy activities.

Question 11: ...has had a positive impact on my teaching this term

Question 12: ...has helped children catch up with their phonics

Question 13: ...has given me helpful information on how well children can read

Question 14: ...has caused the teachers additional stress

Question 15: ...has caused the children additional stress

Question 16: ...is necessary because this cohort missed the test in Year

Appendix 2

Totals for statement questions

Percentages rounded to nearest 1%.

Doing the Phonics Screening Check in autumn of Year 2...	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	NA	No. who answered
has reduced the time spent on other literacy activities	290	370	113	141	46	7	967
%	30	38	12	15	5	1	
has had a positive impact on my teaching this term	17	111	268	368	196	7	967
%	2	11	28	38	20	1	
has helped children catch up with their phonics	59	304	215	259	125	5	967
%	6	31	22	27	13	1	
has given me helpful information on how well children can read	30	208	177	313	234	5	967
%	3	22	18	32	24	1	
has caused the teachers additional stress	436	358	84	64	22	3	967
%	45	37	9	7	2	0	
has caused the children additional stress	131	282	235	245	68	6	967
%	14	29	24	25	7	1	
is necessary because this cohort missed the test in Year 1	36	115	140	301	372	3	967
%	4	12	14	31	38	0	

Disclaimer

Any opinions expressed here are those of the author and not those of the UCL Institute of Education. HHCP Working Papers may include views on policy, but the institute itself takes no institutional policy positions.

HHCP Working Papers are preliminary work and are published to encourage discussion on preliminary findings and to receive feedback. Research is ongoing and any citation of this paper should account for this. Future peer-reviewed publications may be available from the author upon request.

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11)

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (HHCP) is a research centre founded in 2018 at the UCL Institute of Education. Our focus is children aged from birth to 11 years, particularly those living with disadvantage. The HHCP builds on the long-established work of the UCL Institute of Education and the Helen Hamlyn Trust.

The centre is funded by the Helen Hamlyn Trust, an independent grant-making trust funding innovative projects aiming to effect lasting change and improve quality of life.

For more details please see the HHCP website: ucl.ac.uk/ioe-hhcp

