

Phonics check is a valid but unnecessary test

June 5 2013



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The phonics screening check introduced by the coalition government last year does identify school children in Year 1 who may be falling behind in learning to read, but is not really more informative than teacher assessments already in place.

Those are the conclusions of the first study to evaluate the validity of the new phonics screening check. The study was led by Oxford University

[psychologists](#) in collaboration with the University of York and the City of York local authority.

The Oxford researchers question whether the new phonics screening check, while valid, is needed as a statutory assessment.

'The phonics screening check is based on sound principles, but I don't think it's necessarily the best way to check on progress,' says senior author Professor Maggie Snowling of the Department of [Experimental Psychology](#) at Oxford University and President of St John's College, Oxford.

Later in June, the phonics screening check will be used again for this year's six-year-olds in Year 1 at primary school.

The researchers argue that ongoing monitoring of [pupils](#) as they learn phonics during early development of [literacy skills](#) – which was already in place in many if not all schools – seems more beneficial to pupils and teachers.

As well as demonstrating the phonics screening check doesn't offer sufficiently more information, the team concurs with others that the costs and time involved in administering the one-off assessment as well as the 'teaching to test' it can engender are distinct disadvantages.

They also suggest the cut-off for distinguishing children meeting the appropriate standard is too high.

The phonics screening check was introduced as a statutory assessment in English schools in 2012, and it has been controversial from the start.

As a result, the researchers set out to evaluate the validity, sensitivity and necessity of the new screening check the week after it was first used in

2012. Almost 300 children from a representative set of eight primary schools in York took part in the study. The researchers compared pupils' scores in the phonics screening check against teachers' assessments and other validated tests of reading and related skills.

They found that the scores in the phonics screening check correlated well with other tests of reading skill and the teacher assessments. That is, the new screening check achieves what it sets out to do: it is a valid measure of phonic decoding skills and identifies children at risk of reading difficulties.

However, the check does not provide more information than the assessments of teachers who are already monitoring their pupils' literacy progress by phonic phase levelling which was in place in York schools.

While the check is sensitive for identifying young children at risk of word-level reading difficulties, the researchers also found the test may over-identify the number who are truly at risk. They suggest the required standard of decoding 32 out of the 40 words in the phonics screening check may be too high.

Professor Snowling of Oxford University says: 'The new phonics check raises issues about costs and benefits of testing versus teachers being well trained to monitor children's progress.'

She adds: 'The new phonics screening check is successful in helping teachers identify children who need extra help in learning to read. But there is faulty logic here it seems to me. This 'reaches' or 'fails to reach' the standard in a one-off test gives no sense of why the child has difficulties or what should happen next.

'What do you do with kids who are identified as failing? While there is guidance for schools there is no specific funding which follows the

identification of children failing to reach the standard in their phonics skills. Ethically I think it is questionable to offer screening with no prescribed course of action for those who are identified as at risk.'

The authors have submitted a paper reporting the findings to a journal, but the paper has not been peer-reviewed or accepted as yet.

Two of the authors, Dr Alison Bailey and Professor Snowling, have carried out advisory work for the Department of Education in the design of the phonics screening check.

More information: [Phonics screening check FAQ](#)

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: Phonics check is a valid but unnecessary test (2013, June 5) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-phonics-valid-unnecessary.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--