

# What next for phonics?

The Government's plan to issue a reading test for six-year-olds has drawn criticism, but Y2 teacher **Victoria Bernard**, whose school has been involved in the pre-pilot trial, believes it could inform good teaching...

**W**hen Brookside Community Primary School was offered the chance to take part in the pilot testing for the new Y1 Phonics Screening Check, we leapt at the opportunity to experience the proposed changes at an early stage and, perhaps, make a positive contribution to the final outcome. Although the pilot study itself has only just begun, our involvement in the pre-pilot trial - which took place at the end of last year - left us pleasantly surprised. From what I've seen so far I would say the Phonics Screening Check is not something to be scared of, but rather another assessment tool to inform good teaching.

## Trialling the test

In our experience at Brookside Community Primary the children did not find the test intimidating nor disheartening. On the whole they found it fun, especially the non-words under the theme of an alien language. Few children thought these were difficult; instead they found the context rather novel and enjoyed the pictures. Non-words are important as part of a pure phonics check because they exclude reading using visual memory.

It was decided not to construct the test entirely from non-words to give it credibility to parents and teachers. Non-words are a really

good test of whether a child can apply all the sounds and patterns they have learnt to unknown words, which is exactly how they will encounter new words in their reading.

The administration elements of the check are being carefully considered. There will be lots of guidance provided to teachers to outline the support they can give children, including encouragement between test items, how to support a child who is struggling and guidance about whether self-corrections are valid. The teacher administering the test will be familiar to the children, preferably the children's class teacher, although schools with multiple form entry will have to carefully consider the best way forward to ensure fairness and accuracy across classes.

## Pass or fail?

It needs to be stressed that the Phonics Screening Check is not the end point, it is part of the journey to the end of KS1. It is important to understand that a child does not pass the test. Instead, the check identifies those children who are progressing at a satisfactory rate and, more importantly, identifies those children to whom schools must give an extra boost. Those children who do 'pass' have only made sufficient progress with their phonic decoding to be on track during Y2 to meet their end of Key Stage targets.

Any test needs to be useful to those people who can make a difference to the outcome, in this case the teachers. For some schools with robust phonics teaching and assessment, this test will be merely a confirmation of what they already know. For others schools, it should highlight those children that are struggling with reading and phonics decoding, as well as phonic gaps across the class and, in a few cases, an ineffective phonics programme. It is not



designed to identify those who are excelling, and will not sufficiently stretch high achievers. Instead it will give schools a good idea about which children need to be specifically targeted to improve their decoding skills.

Taking part in the trial has already had an impact on our phonics teaching. We have adopted Pearson's Phonics Bug programme to enliven our lessons and we now use the non-words provided within this confidently and effectively. We have built in more informal phonics checks to make sure we are on track for the end-of-year targets, and we have restructured our Y2 phonics programme to ensure there is enough consolidation of key skills and sounds, as well as scope to push on higher performing children.

### Funding new resources

Matched-funding will give all schools a boost (*As of June 2011, the Government has provided £3000 of match-funding for all schools with KS1 pupils, so they can buy systematic synthetic phonics products and training for their staff and pupils – Ed*). Schools will be able to entirely change their phonics programme, or buy extra materials to support their current programme. The provision of some of the funding from June 2011 will give lots of schools an opportunity to invest the money in staff training ready for September. This will also present an opportunity to buy different materials for those children who have not reached the sufficient level in reading, either changing the approach to teaching, or providing high interest materials for reluctant readers or other struggling pupils.

For those children who are shown not to be at the required standard following the initial test, the way in which they are re-evaluated is going to prove as important as the structure of the initial test. It would be difficult for those children to resit the same test without feeling demoralised or disheartened. Hopefully, a recheck can be performed in an entirely new format, perhaps in an on screen or flash card layout, instead of the current list of words.

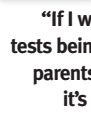
There is extensive debate about the value of phonics in the

## What's your view?

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"I think it's a controversial issue because any school worth its salt already has systematic phonics screening in place. It's therefore perceived as yet another example of the Government's lack of faith in teachers' ability to assess and plan for their children."  
**Jonathan Lear, AST at St Catherine's Catholic Primary School, Sheffield**



"If I was a betting man, I'd stake my soon to be trebled pension contributions on the new tests being deeply unpopular, but for no good reason: children are assessed all the time and parents are quite happy when it's Miss Honey or her school behind the idea, less so when it's Michael Gove."  
**Kevin Harcombe, headteacher, Redlands Primary School, Fareham.**



"I have a boy who is in the early stages of Jolly Phonics and he remembers words from their position on the page and the corresponding pictures. He will tell me, 'Apple was the top word, then it was ants and then angry.' If the words are in a different order he will still say 'apple, ants, angry'. Non-words are useful because there is no picture clue to go with them."  
**Dave Lewis, Head of Junior Dept, EPEC School, Emba, Paphos**

"Phonics has been and will always be widely debated. Personally, I think the screening initiative is an excellent one because it has children's best interests at heart."  
**John Dabell, teacher and education author**



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teaching of reading. However, nobody is saying that phonics is the only way – it needs to be part of an integrated approach – but a good grasp of sounds and sound recognition is one of the fundamental building blocks of learning to read. There are still questions to be answered about how the test is

administered and how effective the results will be to teachers. What isn't being questioned is that our children are being given a funded opportunity to improve their phonics skills. This funding could have a significant and positive impact on their futures.

