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Evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check: First Interim Report

Research report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This first interim report sets out the emerging findings from an evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check, commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This report provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and the implementation and emerging impacts associated with the phonics screening check. It draws on data collected from case-study interviews with staff in 14 primary schools and baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers in schools. Data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2012. Further interim reports will be produced as the evaluation continues, culminating in a final report in Spring 2015.

Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the pilot evaluation¹ have been addressed, specifically:
 - the confidence of teachers in the administration of the screening check and how schools have prepared for it; and,
 - the appropriateness of the screening check for specific groups of pupils (specifically, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL)).

2. To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning, including:
 - understanding the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools;
 - assessing the impact of the phonics screening check on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum; and,
 - quantifying the impact of the check on the standard of reading and assessing its value for money.

Methods

The methods used in the first year of the evaluation include interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and 2 teachers and reception teachers in 14 case-study schools. Survey responses were collected from 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers. Data

¹ DfE recruited 300 primary schools to take part in piloting the Phonics Screening Check in 2011. The process evaluation report from the pilot can be found at:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR159>

collection commenced the week beginning 25th June 2012 which was the week after the administration of the check. Subsequent years of the evaluation will involve a value for money analysis as well as the collection of parental feedback as part of the case-studies.

Key Findings

Phonics teaching

- Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, and its contribution towards early reading development.
- In the majority of schools, however, other strategies alongside phonics were also supported.
- More than half (53 per cent) of teachers reported that they taught systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast' (i.e. they used a systematic synthetic phonics programme as the prime approach to decoding print), although teachers' responses regarding the use of other methods to teach children to decode words were not wholly consistent with this data.
- More than 90 per cent of teachers taught phonics to all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, more often than not using Letters and Sounds as their core programme.
- Almost half the literacy coordinators surveyed (47 per cent) reported that their staff had attended external training specifically on phonics teaching during the past school year. The majority of case-study schools had undertaken either external or internal training on phonics. Both sets of data indicate that teachers and teaching assistants received this training.

The phonics screening check

Preparation for the check

- Nearly all teachers surveyed prepared for the check by familiarising themselves with the Check Administrators' Guide and many watched the online video *Scoring the year 1 phonics screening check training video*.
- In case-study schools, about half of teachers reported attending external training specifically on the check while about half of teachers reported making no special preparations for the check.

Costs and benefits of introducing the check

- The median additional financial cost incurred by schools in supporting the introduction and administration of the check was £400; there was large variation in this cost between schools.

- Some benefits of the check were acknowledged in a number of case-study schools, including confirming the results of other assessments and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching.

Suitability of the check with different groups of learners

- Year 1 teachers had mixed views on whether the standard of the check was appropriate, with slightly more teachers suggesting it was too difficult.
- Some issues were raised about the suitability of the check for pupils with special educational needs, high ability pupils and those with English as an additional language.

Communicating with parents/carers

- Almost all of the responding literacy coordinators (98 per cent) reported that they had or would communicate the results of the check to parents/carers, with most using (or planning to use) a number of different approaches. For example, two thirds of schools communicated (or planned to communicate) the results as part of the child's individual end of year written reports, while almost four out of ten (37 per cent) communicated (or planned to communicate) the results in a separate letter to parents/carers.
- Many schools appeared to be providing (or planning to provide) additional information to parents/carers. For example, almost three quarters of schools (73 per cent) were providing (or planning to provide) information to parents/carers about how they could support their child and 61 per cent were providing (or planning to provide) information about the type of in-school support planned.

Impacts of the check

- A third of schools reported making changes to phonics teaching in anticipation of the check. These changes included: increased assessment of progress in phonics; increasing the time devoted to phonics teaching; and starting to use a phonics programme more systematically.
- The results from the screening check appear to have prompted a lot of discussion between teachers, with the majority of Year 1 teachers responding to the survey reporting that they planned to discuss the results of the check with Year 2 teachers (61 per cent) and the literacy coordinator (52 per cent).
- The majority of literacy coordinators (80 per cent) reported that the results would inform the identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics while 61 per cent reported that the results would inform the design of specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics.
- However, most of the teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future.

Views on the value of the check

- Literacy coordinators had mixed views on whether the outcomes from the check provided valuable information for teachers, with most leaning towards the view that it did not.
- Case-study interviewees did see some additional benefits to the check, including giving a performance benchmark and focussing their teaching on phonics. However, these were mostly expressed as minor benefits.
- Both of these views on the value of the check somewhat contradict the positive impacts of the check identified above.

Conclusions

One of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation so far is that many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. Evidence from the case-studies and surveys suggests that most teachers are overwhelmingly positive about phonics teaching and its contribution to reading development. However, it is less certain that this is an endorsement of the recommended approach of *systematic synthetic phonics* taught *first and fast*. Whilst nine out of ten literacy coordinators agree, at least to some extent, that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics has value in the primary classroom, a similar proportion, somewhat contradictorily, feel that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words, suggesting there is widespread misunderstanding of the term 'systematic synthetic phonics'. Thus, it appears more likely that the reported level of agreement with the value of systematic synthetic phonics actually represents support of the more general use of phonics within the primary classroom, and that teachers in general have not yet fully adopted the practices recommended in the Department for Education's policy and evidence paper, *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading*.

Against this background, a distinction emerged between attitudes towards the phonics screening check as an assessment of phonic knowledge and understanding, and the position of teachers regarding phonics as an approach within literacy teaching. While the positive views about the latter were widespread, views on the check were more mixed; many were negative and a few were positive, while others regarded the check as broadly acceptable but unnecessary. When asked directly for their opinions, only a quarter of literacy coordinators expressed the view that the check provided useful information for teachers. Most of the teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future. This view appeared to stem from the fact that many thought the outcomes from the check told them nothing new. These views are consistent with the suggestion, discussed in the report, that respondents may not have been fully aware of the rationale behind the introduction of the check.

When teachers were asked about their practices and actions, however, a rather more positive picture of the impact of the check emerged. Literacy coordinators in around one-third of schools reported changes in anticipation of the introduction of the check, and these changes broadly represented a strengthening of practice in phonics teaching. The results of the check were often

reported to be the subject of discussions between literacy coordinators, Year 1 teachers, the teachers of Reception and Year 2 or the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). A large majority of literacy coordinators said they would use the results to help identify children experiencing difficulties with phonics. Some respondents reported that they would make specific teaching plans in the light of the results, and some Year 1 teachers intended to review the way they taught phonics. It is also noteworthy that, in addition to reporting the results of the check to parents/carers, as they were required to do, a majority of schools also gave parents/carers additional information about supporting children in their phonics work.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This first interim report sets out the emerging findings from an evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check, commissioned by the Department for Education and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This report provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and the implementation and emerging impacts associated with the phonics screening check. It draws on data collected from case-study interviews with staff in 14 primary schools and baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers in schools. Data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2012. Further interim reports will be produced as the evaluation continues, culminating in a final report in Spring 2015.

1.2 The Phonics Screening Check

A number of research studies, most recently in this country Torgerson et al. (2006)², attest to the effectiveness of systematic phonics programmes in early literacy teaching. Similarly, the Ofsted report *Reading by Six*³ emphasised the importance of 'diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics' in successful early literacy.

Following the election of the Coalition Government, systematic synthetic phonics has been a central element in policy guidance. This guidance⁴ includes a set of criteria for high quality phonic work, presenting the key features of an effective, systematic, synthetic phonics programme. This envisages phonics as 'the prime approach to decoding print, i.e. a phonics 'first and fast' approach'. Further guidance specifies that children should 'apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling even if a word is not completely phonically regular' and notes that 'children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar, or pictures'. This guidance fits within a context where phonic work is seen not as one of a range of optional methods or strategies for teaching reading but as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabet works which all children should be taught.

Since the 2010 Schools White Paper, there has been a clear commitment to ensure that the teaching of phonics is firmly established in the first years of school. This is supported by the core criteria for phonics programmes and also by a stronger focus in Ofsted inspections. The phonics screening check, which was piloted in 300 schools in the summer of 2011, is now statutory and complements these as a central strand of policy implementation.

² Torgerson, C.J., Brooks, G. and Hall, J. (2006). *A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling*, DfES Research Report 711, London: DfES.

³ Office for Standards in Education (2010). *Reading by Six: How the Best Schools Do It*. London: Ofsted.

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/phonics/a0010240/criteria-for-assuring-high-quality-phonics-work>

The phonics screening check is a short, light-touch assessment, the specified purpose of which is to confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an expected standard. From June 2012, the check is administered annually to all Year 1 pupils in maintained schools, academies and Free Schools. It aims to identify the children who need extra help so that they are given support by their school to improve their decoding skills. These children will then be expected to retake the check at the end of Year 2 so that schools can monitor progress in phonic decoding through to the end of Key Stage 1.

1.3 Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the pilot evaluation have been addressed, specifically:
 - the confidence of teachers in the administration of the screening check and how schools have prepared for it; and,
 - the appropriateness of the screening check for specific groups of pupils (specifically, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL)).

2. To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning, including:
 - understanding the impact of the teaching of phonics in primary schools;
 - assessing the impact of the phonics screening check on teaching of the wider literacy curriculum; and,
 - quantifying the impact of the check on the standard of reading and assessing its value for money.

Specifically, the evaluation aims to explore the following research questions:

Year 1: the national roll-out of the check

1. How suitable is the check for specific groups of pupils?
2. How did teachers identify the children who were disapplied from the check?
3. What use has been made of phonics training and classroom materials for the teaching of phonics?
4. How have schools communicated with parents/carers about the check?

Years 2 and 3 (using baseline data gathered in Year 1): understanding the impact of the check on teaching and learning

5. What will/ has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2?
6. Has the phonics screening check changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum?
7. Will/has the introduction of the phonics screening check have/had an impact on the standard of reading and writing?

1.4 Methodology

The methods used in the first year of the evaluation include in-depth qualitative research with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators and Year 1 and 2 teachers in primary schools, as well as extensive quantitative data collection in the form of baseline surveys with literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers. The synthesis of these different elements will provide the optimum understanding of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and the implementation and emerging impacts associated with the introduction of the phonics screening check.

The research conducted with schools to date has focussed on Aim 1 of the evaluation, as detailed in Section 1.3 above. As such, the emphasis has been on establishing the baseline position and the confidence and experience of teachers in the administration of the screening check. Where information on impacts has been sought, for example as part of the case-studies, this was with the understanding that such impacts were likely to be tentative, or indicative, at this early stage of the national roll-out of the check.

More detail on these different areas of data collection activity is provided below. An outline of the research tasks that will inform subsequent interim reports is included in Chapter 4.

Baseline surveys of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers

NFER distributed baseline surveys to literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers in a nationally representative sample of primary schools in June 2012. Data collection commenced the week beginning 25th June 2012 which was the week after the administration of the check.

The literacy coordinator surveys explored such areas as phonics teaching practices in schools, schools' preparation for the introduction of the screening check, communication with parents and carers, and literacy coordinators' views about phonics and literacy teaching in general. The Year 1 teacher survey focused on their experiences of administering the check, the appropriateness of the check for different groups of pupils, and how they planned to use the results of the check (if they planned to use the results at all). Good response rates were received to both surveys (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 Survey response rates

Survey	Surveys	Responses	Response	Target
	Sent	received	rate	response
	N	N	%	rate
Year 1 teachers	2400	940	39	40
Literacy coordinators	2400	844	35	40

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers, 2012

Analysis of the school characteristics of those Year 1 teachers responding to the survey, across characteristics such as Key Stage 1 performance band and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, revealed that the sample of achieved Year 1 teacher respondents⁵ were from schools that exhibited broadly similar characteristics to primary schools nationally (see Table 2 below). Given this, the sample sizes achieved are large enough to detect statistically significant differences.

⁵ A separate analysis revealed that the literacy coordinator sample was also broadly similar to primary schools nationally.

Table 2 Representation of participating primary schools compared to schools nationally (based on responses to Year 1 teacher survey)

		National population		Achieved Year 1 teacher sample	
		Number	%	Number	%
KS1 English performance band 2010	1 Lowest 20%	3446	22	210	22
	2 2nd lowest 20%	3021	19	173	18
	3 Middle 20%	3022	19	171	18
	4 2nd highest 20%	3032	19	196	21
	5 Highest 20%	3154	20	190	20
Standard Primary Bands - % pupils eligible for FSM	1.00 Lowest FSM <= 8%	5360	34	310	33
	2.00 Low FSM > 8% & <= 20%	5110	33	321	34
	3.00 Middle FSM > 20% & <= 35%	3202	20	200	21
	4.00 High FSM >35% & <= 50%	1554	10	84	9
	5.00 Highest FSM > 50%	449	3	25	3
% of pupils with statements (2009/10)	1 None	3958	25	262	28
	2 1 - 2%	8898	57	493	52
	3 3 - 29%	2441	16	174	19
	4 30% +	371	2	11	1
% pupils with English as an additional language 2010/11	1 None	3254	21	227	24
	2 1 - 5%	6932	44	403	43
	3 6 - 49%	4801	31	271	29
	4 50% +	688	4	39	4
Primary school type	1 Infant/First	2214	14	158	17
	2 Primary/Combined	12554	80	737	78
	4 Middle	30	0	1	0
	6 Special schools/PRUs	357	2	11	1
	7 Academy	520	3	33	4
Total schools		15675	100	940	100

The profile of those in the literacy coordinator role

One of the questionnaires was aimed at those staff 'with responsibility for the school literacy policy affecting the teaching of phonics and the use of the Year 1 phonics screening check' (hereafter referred to as the literacy coordinator questionnaire). Those staff responding to this questionnaire were asked to indicate the role(s) in which they were responding to the questions. The findings are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Profile of staff responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire

Role	%
Literacy coordinator	70
Key stage/year group coordinator	29
Other senior leader	21
Headteacher	17
Other	8
Missing	3
N=844	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

The majority (70 per cent) identified themselves as being the literacy coordinator, while a notable minority were in a Key Stage/year group coordinator, headteacher or other senior leader role.

School case-studies

In order to gather a more in-depth understanding of the early implementation of the phonics screening check, a series of school case-studies were undertaken between June and July 2012, focussing on the experiences of 14 schools. The case-studies commenced the week beginning 25th June 2012 which was the week after the administration of the check.

The schools were randomly selected to capture a diverse geographical spread, as well as diversity in terms of size, school type, and the proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals (FSM), with special educational needs (SEN), and who have English as an additional language (EAL). The characteristics of the schools are presented in Table 4.

Nine of the 14 case-studies involved a visit to the school, while five were conducted by telephone. The case-studies consisted of qualitative interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and 2 teachers and reception teachers.

The case-study schools will be visited three times throughout the course of the study in order to gather longitudinal data. These visits will take place in the summer term in June-July 2012, June-July 2013 and June-July 2014.

Table 4 Selected characteristics of the 14 schools involved in the case-study phase of the evaluation

School	School type	Age range	Number on roll	% SEN (with statements or on School Action Plus)	% FSM	% EAL	% achieving Level 4 or above in both English and Mathematics at Key Stage 2 (2011)
1.	Community	3-11	550	4	24	90	69
2.	Voluntary Controlled	4-11	320	4	14	SUPP*	60
3.	Voluntary Controlled	5-11	100	7	6	SUPP*	SUPP*
4.	Academy	3-11	230	10	47	67	70
5.	Voluntary Aided	3-11	450	5	3	21	85
6.	Community	3-7	130	5	7	SUPP*	N/A
7.	Academy	3-11	500	-	30	-	88
8.	Foundation	3-11	760	10	13	36	69
9.	Community	3-11	360	8	32	SUPP*	65
10.	Community Special	2-16	130	68	47	SUPP*	SUPP*
11.	Academy	5-11	240	8	18	13	93
12.	Community	3-11	260	15	39	42	66
13.	Community	3-11	440	7	19	83	85
14.	Community	3-11	230	7	10	6	86
England – all schools average				8	19	18	74

Source: NFER Evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check, 2012

*SUPP – Information has been suppressed by DfE because the underlying numbers are too small.

The data above has been rounded to the nearest whole number

1.5 Analysis and reporting

This report draws on an analysis of the data collected as part of the baseline surveys, supplemented with data gathered from case-study visits to 14 schools. The report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 explores survey and case-study schools' approaches to teaching phonics, their views about phonics and literacy teaching, details of any phonics training that has been undertaken and their self-reported state of preparedness for effective phonics teaching.

Chapter 3 reports on survey and case-study schools' views on the phonics screening check, their experiences of administering the check, the costs of introducing the check, and views on the appropriateness of the check with different groups of learners.

The concluding chapter draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation and provides an initial assessment of the extent to which the phonics screening check is meeting its stated aims. It also outlines the next steps for the evaluation.

Findings from descriptive analysis are reported within the chapters; for further details, please refer to the technical appendix published alongside this report. The main variables discussed throughout relate to the type of respondent. Through statistical modelling known as latent class analysis we have built a typology of teachers' engagement with the phonics agenda which we have related to the phonics screening check and Key Stage 1 outcomes in the sample schools. Further details are provided in Chapter 3.

Key findings are summarised at the beginning of each of the chapters.

2. Phonics teaching

Key Findings

- Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, and its contribution towards early reading development.
- In the majority of schools, however, other strategies alongside phonics were also supported.
- More than half (53 per cent) of schools reported that they taught systematic synthetic phonics ‘first and fast’, although teachers’ responses regarding the use of other methods to teach children to decode words were not wholly consistent with this data.
- More than 90 per cent of schools taught phonics to all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, more often than not using Letters and Sounds as their core programme.
- Almost half the survey schools (47 per cent) reported that staff had attended external training specifically on phonics teaching during the past school year. The majority of case-study schools had undertaken either external or internal training on phonics. Both sets of data indicate that teachers and teaching assistants received this training.

This chapter presents findings from the surveys and case-studies regarding teachers’ views and attitudes towards phonics teaching. It looks at school approaches to teaching phonics, and offers insight into current classroom practice. The chapter explores the level of phonics training received by those teachers involved in the evaluation, and reports on whether this was perceived to be of value.

2.1 Views about phonics and literacy teaching

It was important to be able to distinguish between attitudes towards the phonics screening check as an assessment of phonic knowledge and understanding, and the position of teachers regarding phonics as an approach within literacy teaching. As such, the literacy coordinator questionnaire and the case-study interview schedules contained focused questions designed to establish an understanding of teachers’ views about phonics teaching, independent of their feelings towards the phonics screening check itself. In the survey, those responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements relating to their views about phonics and literacy teaching.

Table 5 Teachers' views about phonics as an approach to teaching reading

Statement	Agree	Agree somewhat	Uncertain or mixed views	Disagree somewhat	Disagree	No response
	%	%	%	%	%	%
A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words	67	22	5	2	3	1
I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching	64	25	6	1	1	2
Phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading	63	23	7	4	2	2
Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy	12	24	17	23	22	3
Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children	7	19	15	26	29	3
N=844						

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Table 5 shows that a large majority of respondents (89 per cent) felt to some extent that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics has value in the primary classroom, with 64 per cent 'agreeing' fully with this statement. However, 89 per cent also 'agreed' or 'agreed somewhat' that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words.

Responses to these two statements in particular may reveal some misunderstanding of the term 'systematic synthetic phonics' as it is understood in current policy. The Department for Education's policy and evidence paper, *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading*⁶ is downloadable from the Phonics Screening Check webpage and defines 'systematic synthetic phonics' as follows:

Children are taught the correspondences between sounds (phonemes) and letters. They identify and blend different letter sounds and letter combinations together ('synthesise' them) to make a word - for example, pronouncing each phoneme in shop /sh/-/o/-/p/ and then blending those phonemes to produce the word....A systematic approach to teaching synthetic phonics means teachers take a planned, thorough approach, teaching children the simplest sounds first and progressing all the way through to the most complex combinations of letters. (p.2).

⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/a00197709/phonics-screening-year-1>

Further policy guidance⁷ includes a set of criteria for high quality phonic work, presenting the key features of an effective, systematic, synthetic phonics programme. This envisages phonics as ‘the prime approach to decoding print, i.e. a phonics ‘first and fast’ approach’. Within the criteria it is specified that children should ‘apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling even if a word is not completely phonically regular’ and it is noted that ‘children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar, or pictures’. This guidance fits within a context where phonic work is seen not as one of a range of optional methods or strategies for teaching reading but as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabet works which all children should be taught.

Against this background, the notion of favouring systematic synthetic phonics, but at the same time arguing that it is not the only way of teaching children to decode, is somewhat contradictory. It is possible that this level of agreement with the value of systematic synthetic phonics actually represents support of the more general use of phonics within the primary classroom. Teachers may tend to see phonics working alongside other strategies, particularly for words that are not phonically regular. These somewhat inconsistent questionnaire responses are explored in more detail in Section 2.2, which focuses on the phonics teaching practices reported by participants in the evaluation.

Evidence from the case-studies supports the survey data in that interviewees were positive about phonics teaching and its contribution to reading development. The following observations typify overall opinion: ‘I think phonics should play an absolutely pivotal and core part in learning to read’ (Headteacher); ‘[Phonics is] vital ... [Without it], children stumble at the first block’ (Reception teacher). Many teachers felt that learning to read using phonics allows children to feel a sense of achievement by building reading skills in small steps, and that it is especially important in a child’s early educational experience. Responses also highlight a real impact of phonics in schools, with several very experienced teachers reporting differences between older children in the school who were taught without phonics compared with those year groups for whom systematic phonics was used at the outset. One literacy coordinator summarised the situation in her school: ‘We see gaps in our current Years 4, 5 and 6 who missed out on phonics teaching in Key Stage 1 and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), especially recognising split digraphs, alternate spellings of sounds and tricky words.’

Also in accordance with responses from the survey was one of the key messages to emerge from the case-studies: that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. This opinion was frequently held even where teachers thought that phonics should be the primary approach to teaching reading, a view encapsulated by this headteacher: ‘[It is] not possible to teach [reading] without phonics but children need a range of skills and strategies’. Teachers in the case-study schools reported encouraging the use of other strategies such as using context cues, visual memory and picture cues. Responses overall also indicated a strong tendency for teachers to consider individual differences in children, arguing that ‘A variety of approaches based on the [needs of the] child is best’ (Headteacher), and ‘I don’t think phonics should be the *only* way; it won’t meet the needs of every single child’ (Headteacher).

⁷ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/phonics/a0010240/criteria-for-assuring-high-quality-phonics-work>

Similarly, in the case study interviews, responses referring specifically to 'systematic synthetic phonics' were uncommon, despite positive reactions generally to 'using phonics to teach reading'. Views such as those of this literacy coordinator, supporting the sole use of phonics, were rare: 'in my experience synthetic phonics is the only way that children learn to read. I completely agree with phonics as a programme and as a method of teaching'. Even in this case, other teachers in the same school, whilst showing extremely positive attitudes towards phonics teaching, referred to the use of other methods of teaching and to other reading strategies.

Further evidence of teacher support for a phonic-based approach to reading is provided by responses to the final statement in Table 5 ('Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children.') Only a minority (seven per cent) agreed, with a further 19 per cent selecting 'somewhat agree'. More than half (56 per cent) disagreed to some extent with the statement, emphasising the fact that phonics is seen as necessary and suitable for most children. Interviewees in case-study schools provided some insight into this matter which are explored in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.

The survey data showed a high proportion of respondents (86 per cent) agreeing that phonics should be taught in the context of meaningful reading. This view was supported by several of those involved in the case-study interviews, who described children who have good phonic decoding skills alongside poor comprehension of what they are reading. One headteacher explained that 'high-quality guided reading is critical to support understanding of text.'

Just over a third of survey respondents (36 per cent) felt in some way that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy, indicating that even among those who value the role of phonics in the primary classroom, there is some concern about the prominence it should have in policy. In contrast, almost half of respondents (46 per cent) disagreed to some extent with this statement, a finding that is more consistent with the generally high levels of support for phonics. Interestingly, this statement relating to education policy generated the highest percentage of reports of 'uncertain' or 'mixed views' (17 per cent), highlighting the discrepancy between what teachers feel comfortable doing in practice, and what they want to see included in policy. Only a small number of teachers involved in the case-studies raised the issue of policy, this comment from a literacy coordinator representing their views: 'The phonics agenda is overly biased towards phonics at the expense of other types of reading ... I think there are very few areas of education where one size fits all...'

The case-study interviews were used to ascertain teachers' views towards the government's match-funding programme, offering schools financial assistance to invest in resources or training for systematic synthetic phonics. **Teachers were, for the most part, welcoming towards the financial support and positive about the content of the catalogue of approved products.** This Year 1 teacher epitomised teachers' views: 'It's been fantastic, it's made our budget go a lot further.' Only one school reported that the catalogue did not contain the specific programme they wanted, and one teacher thought the size of the catalogue could be overwhelming for less-experienced schools. Another school explained that a literacy advisor had provided guidance on particular products to buy, and that this had been greatly appreciated.

The majority (eight of the 14 case-study schools) reported that they had already used their funding, and those who had not were in the process of carefully considering what to buy. In the main, schools used the match-funding to buy supplementary phonics resources rather than core phonics programmes (which they had already): phase-appropriate phonic boxes, flash cards and games were among those referred to, as well as specific books bought primarily for guided reading, e.g. Phonics Bug, Project X, Oxford Reading Tree phonics books and Ruth Miskin guided reading books. Match-funding was used by three schools for external phonics training, and responses from teachers in these schools were particularly enthusiastic: 'We used the match-funding for the training that we all went on, which was brilliant. We spent two days there, all the staff together, and got some brilliant resources' (Year 1 teacher).

2.2 Phonics teaching practices

The evaluation aimed to establish current teaching practices regarding phonics, including any changes made to teaching as a result of introducing the phonics screening check.

Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools revealed that almost all schools have committed to teaching phonics to some degree, and that, within literacy teaching, considerable emphasis is placed on phonics as a method of teaching children to learn to decode. In an extremely high percentage of survey schools, school policy required that (or typical practice was such that) phonics was taught to all pupils in Reception (96 per cent), Year 1 (95 per cent) and Year 2 (93 per cent). Most schools reported that this phonics teaching took place daily, and on average this equated to just over two hours of phonics teaching per week. All the case-study schools also indicated a strong school focus on phonics, with daily phonics sessions for children from Foundation Stage through to at least Year 2 reported by most.

At Key Stage 2, as would be expected, a different picture emerged in the survey data: phonics was typically taught to **all** pupils in Year 3 by 36 per cent of schools, in Year 4 by 24 per cent of schools and in Year 5/6 by only 15 per cent of schools – considerably lower proportions than throughout the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. However, in cases where phonics was not taught to all pupils, it was still used by many schools as a teaching approach for **some** pupils in Years 3-6, and almost half of schools (45 per cent) reported still having dedicated phonics sessions at Year 3. This finding is supported by information from the case-studies, in which some teachers described continued use of phonics into Key Stage 2 as necessary, particularly for those still having difficulties with spelling.

Table 6 presents survey data indicating schools' perceptions of their approach to phonics within overall early literacy teaching. It shows that just over half (53 per cent) identified themselves as teaching phonics 'first and fast', and just over a quarter (26 per cent) reported teaching phonics discretely alongside other cueing strategies. This data suggests commitment to phonics-based teaching in some capacity, and is further confirmed by reports from around 90 per cent of schools that discrete phonics sessions are taught in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2. For each of these three year groups, just under 60 per cent of survey respondents reported that phonics teaching was integrated into other work – clearly for many schools this is in addition to the discrete phonics

sessions referred to above, although for some it is likely to be a description of the school’s overall approach to teaching reading. As Table 6 shows, a small minority of schools (five per cent) described their overall approach towards phonics as ‘always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies’.

Table 6 Teacher reports of their school’s approach to phonics teaching

	%
Systematic synthetic phonics is taught ‘first and fast’	53
Phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies	26
Phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies	5
No response	17
N=844	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The findings described above indicate that the majority of those teaching phonics do so in the context of focused sessions. However, some confusion was evident among those who identified themselves as teaching phonics using a ‘first and fast’ approach. Of these schools, 85 per cent ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed somewhat’ with the contradictory statement ‘A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words’, as discussed in Section 2.1.

This contradiction in teacher responses reflects the misunderstanding described in Section 2.1 regarding what ‘systematic synthetic phonics’ means, and what ‘first and fast’ in this context implies. The guidance makes it clear that phonics alone should be taught initially, and that teaching other strategies alongside phonics is not recommended. It would seem that the figure of 53 per cent of schools who claim to be teaching systematic synthetic phonics ‘first and fast’ is potentially misleading, and does not provide an accurate representation of actual practice in phonics teaching. **A high proportion of schools are clearly teaching phonics, but not necessarily in the way a systematic synthetic approach would prescribe.**

In order to provide a fuller picture of how schools teach phonics, information was collected regarding the resources used to deliver phonics teaching. The most frequently used ‘core’ phonics programme was Letters and Sounds, both by survey participants and case-study schools (reports from the latter were that this was typically used in Reception, Year 1 and 2). Case-study schools frequently described using Letters and Sounds as a basic structure from which adaptations would be made according to the needs of a particular cohort. Jolly Phonics was also identified by a considerable number of schools, particularly for use in Reception or with those children who were struggling with phonics.

Table 7 Schools' use of published phonics resources (in addition to 'core' programmes)

Percentage ticking resource	
Supplementary phonics programmes or resources	70
Decodable readers	71
Catch-up resources	52
None ticked	9
N=844	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

Table 7 shows the proportions of survey schools who reported making regular use of other kinds of published phonics resources in school, in addition to any 'core' programme(s). The data suggests that teachers are making considerable use of phonics resources, with additional analysis revealing that around two thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said they used at least two kinds of these additional resources. In the case-study schools, the majority of interviewees made reference to one or more additional resources, including those they had bought using match-funding (see Section 2.3).

The case-studies provided further insight into how schools organise phonics teaching within the overall literacy curriculum. Whilst many children were taught phonics in their class groups, a small number of teachers reported that children were taught in ability groups for general literacy, discrete phonic sessions, or both. Two schools also reported that they had plans to introduce differentiated phonics teaching in this way in the future, perhaps indicating a shift in schools towards an increased focus on phonics, and changing attitudes regarding its importance.

2.3 Phonics training

Survey participants were asked whether teachers in their school had received externally provided training specifically focused on the teaching of phonics during the school year 2011/2012. Almost half (47 per cent) responded 'yes' to this question, indicating a steer towards this method of teaching reading, and again reflecting current policy priorities. Further details given by respondents show that Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers were most likely to have received such training, and in several schools, both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 teachers attended. The data shows some schools sent teaching assistants on training, but fewer than those who sent teachers. In the majority of cases, training was supplied by local authorities, with some more commercial training-providers also mentioned, the most frequent being Read, Write, Inc.

Responses from the literacy coordinators involved in the case-studies suggest that staff (including some Key Stage 2 teachers) in many of these schools also attended external training relating to phonics teaching, and that this was often very welcome: 'All the training of all the staff has had a

massive impact on phonics, which has had a massive impact on reading and writing' (Year 1 teacher). Some of the training attended by teachers was more recent; in other cases it had taken place during a previous school year, depending on when the school had implemented phonics teaching across the school. The importance of ensuring teaching assistants received such training and subsequently felt confident in supporting phonics learning was emphasised by several teachers, including this headteacher: 'I think the training had a huge impact on the confidence of TAs in particular...' Some schools also made reference to holding or organising in-house training to make sure all applicable staff felt secure in the area of phonics.

The survey data shows that, as well as external training, teachers learned about phonics teaching in a variety of ways during the 2011/2012 school year. Table 8 lists the percentages selecting each way. Staff meetings, in-school workshops or training, and Key Stage or year group planning meetings were each identified by around half of respondents as having helped teachers learn about phonics, and teachers also undertook private study. 'Other' ways, reported by a minority of respondents, included observations, peer-working, training courses and local authority updates. These responses indicate that a considerable number of schools are placing emphasis on phonics teaching, and are using in-school opportunities to enhance staff knowledge and understanding, as well as organising internal training specific to this area.

Table 8 Other ways of learning about phonics (apart from training)

Percentage ticking each way	
Staff meeting	56
Key Stage or year group planning meeting	50
In-school workshop or training	49
Individual reading / private study	39
Other	5
None ticked	13
N=844	

Source: NFER survey of Literacy Coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

Among case-study interviewees, there was also a clear message from several schools that a collegiate approach to sharing knowledge, understanding and practice was an effective way of increasing confidence and expertise in the area of phonics. One literacy coordinator reported that she had undertaken a lot of phonics training in a previous role, and was now capitalising on this to support others across the school. A Year 1 teacher described her role as the school's 'phonics lead', which involved holding workshops with teaching assistants, observing phonics teaching in other schools with the aim of improving teaching in her current school, and organising phonics resources to ensure they were used to full effect.

Given the level of external and in-house training focusing specifically on phonics, it is not surprising that most survey respondents (90 per cent) thought teachers in their school were adequately ('very well' or 'quite well') prepared to provide effective phonics teaching. There were no reports of teachers being 'poorly' prepared in this respect.

3. The phonics screening check

Key findings

Preparation for the check

- Nearly all teachers surveyed prepared for the check by familiarising themselves with the Check Administrators' Guide and many watched the online video *Scoring the year 1 phonics screening check training video*.
- In case-study schools, about half of teachers reported making no special preparations for the check, while about half reported attending external training specifically on the check.

Costs and benefits of introducing the check

- The median additional financial cost incurred by schools in supporting the introduction and administration of the check was £400; there was large variation in this cost between schools.
- Some benefits of the check were acknowledged in a number of case-study schools, including confirming the results of other assessments and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching.

Suitability of the check with different groups of learners

- Year 1 teachers had mixed views on whether the standard of the check was appropriate, with slightly more teachers suggesting it was too difficult.
- Some issues were raised about the suitability of the check for pupils with special educational needs, high ability pupils and those with English as an additional language.

Communicating with parents/carers

- Almost all of the responding literacy coordinators (98 per cent) reported that they had or would communicate the results of the check to parents/carers, with most using (or planning to use) a number of different approaches. For example, two thirds of schools communicated (or planned to communicate) the results as part of the child's individual end of year written reports, while almost four out of ten (37 per cent) communicated (or planned to communicate) the results in a separate letter to parents/carers.
- As recommended in the Check Administrators Guidance, many schools appeared to be providing (or planning to provide) additional information to parents/carers. For example, almost three quarters of schools (73 per cent) were providing (or planning to provide) information to parents/carers about how they could support their child and 61 per cent were providing (or planning to provide) information about the type of in-school support planned.

Impacts of the check

- Most of the teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future.

- However, a third of schools reported making changes to phonics teaching in anticipation of the check. These changes included: increased assessment of progress in phonics; increasing the time devoted to phonics teaching; and starting to use a phonics programme more systematically.
- The check also appears to have prompted discussion between teachers with the majority of Year 1 teachers responding to the survey reporting that they planned to discuss the results of the check with Year 2 teachers (61 per cent) and the literacy coordinator (52 per cent).
- The majority of literacy coordinators (80 per cent) reported that the results would inform the identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics while 61 per cent reported that the results would inform the design of specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics.

Views on the value of the check

- Literacy coordinators had mixed views on whether the outcomes from the check provided valuable information for teachers, with most leaning towards the view that it did not.
- Case-study interviewees did see some additional benefits to the check, including giving a performance benchmark and focussing their teaching on phonics. However, these were mostly expressed as minor benefits.

This chapter explores teachers' preparation for the phonics screening check and their experience of administering it, including the extent to which they had to disapply children from the check. The chapter also explores the costs incurred by schools in administering the screening check and teachers' views on the suitability of the check with different groups of learners. Finally, it presents findings from the surveys and case-studies regarding teachers' views and attitudes towards the check.

3.1 Preparation for the check

Nearly all surveyed teachers reported preparing for the check via reading the *Check Administrators' Guide*, and most had watched the online video *Scoring the year 1 phonics screening check training video*. In case-study schools, about half of teachers reported attending external training specifically on the screening check, while about half reported making no special preparations for the check. Year 1 teachers in nearly all schools surveyed (97 per cent) prepared for the check by reading the *Check Administrators' Guide*⁸. Watching the online video *Scoring the year 1 phonics screening check training video*⁹ was also commonly used

⁸ The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012 gave guidance on the administration of the check. It was available from <http://www.education.gov.uk/ks1> and was sent to schools prior to the check administration.

⁹ Scoring the Year 1 phonics screening check training video gave examples of the check questions, format and marking. It was available online from 13th April, 2012 and could be accessed via the Department for Education's

as a form of preparation (in 82 per cent of schools) and 61 per cent of teachers reported preparing for the check via a discussion with the literacy coordinator. A similar proportion of teachers prepared by year group or Key Stage meetings (56 per cent) as those who prepared by attending externally provided training specifically focused on the phonics screening check (54 per cent). Mostly this training was provided by the local authority (LA).

About half of the case-study schools either reported that they had not been on any training related specifically to the administration of the check, had done their own research, or had been on only general phonics assessment training not related to the check itself. Comments of this type included:

We've had some external training on assessment of phonics for both teachers and TAs, but nothing specific on the phonics check itself. I did my own research around this.

Literacy coordinator

No training was undertaken by staff, the test isn't hard. We're all educated people.

Headteacher

However, in about half of case-study schools, at least one member of staff had been on some form of external training specifically on the check, usually given by the LA. This training was mostly brief and frequently involved watching video clips of the check being administered, although it was unclear if this was the DfE video *Scoring the Year 1 phonics screening check training video*. For example, one literacy coordinator said '[Staff went to] an evening meeting organised by the LA where they were shown example video clips of children taking the check.' In these schools, various staff were reported to have attended the training and they gave mixed views on its usefulness. There did not appear to be any relation between preparation for the check and school engagement with it, although the number of schools involved is small.

3.2 Administration of the check

Of Year 1 teachers who completed the survey, 61 per cent of their pupils met the required standard, close to the 58 per cent of pupils nationally who met the standard.

Pupils could be *disapplied* from the phonics screening check prior to its administration, meaning they did not have to undertake the check because it was deemed to be an inappropriate assessment for them. Of the surveyed teachers, 40 per cent did not disapply any children from the check. Of those who did, most did not disapply many pupils. Out of all the responding Year 1 teachers, 33 per cent disapplied one pupil, 20 per cent disapplied two or three pupils, and only six

per cent disapplying four or more pupils. Where a child was disapplying from the check, the Year 1 teacher and the headteacher have been most frequently involved in this decision (in 91 per cent and 72 per cent of cases respectively).

In the case-study schools, the majority of teachers said they did not disapply any pupils. This was mostly because it was felt to disapply pupils would be detrimental to them: 'We might damage children's confidence, etcetera, if they were singled out' (literacy coordinator). However, a few did note that, with hindsight, there were children who they wished they had disapplying, or that disapplication would be approached differently in the future:

Looking back I wish I hadn't put the one very low ability child through it because I knew he wasn't going to achieve it.

Year 1 teacher

We wanted to know where all the children were ... In the future, the decision may be different.

Literacy coordinator

Where teachers had been involved in disapplying children, most reported that the lack of grapheme-phoneme correspondence was the major reason for disapplication, but judgement as to what this was varied. As seen in Table 9, the single most frequent reason for disapplying a child seen in the survey data was the child showing a lack of understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (43 percent of teachers). In a small number of cases disapplications were made due to the child having selective mutism (5 per cent) or the child using British Sign Language or other sign supported communication (4 per cent). Twenty-seven per cent of Year 1 teachers reported that children were disapplying for 'other' reasons. Of these, the most frequently cited reason was that a child had an SEN registered learning difficulty (31 per cent) followed by 24 per cent who reported the child did not speak English. For the full range of 'other' reasons given for disapplication please see the technical appendices.

Table 9 Reasons given by surveyed Year 1 teachers for disapplication of children

Reason given for disapplication	%
Lack of grapheme-phoneme correspondence	43
Child had selective mutism	5
Child used British Sign Language or other sign supported communication	4
Other reasons for disapplication, of which:	27
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child had an SEN registered learning difficulty • Child did not speak English • Child had speech and language needs • Other reason given by less than 10 per cent of respondents 	<p>31</p> <p>24</p> <p>13</p> <p>57</p>
N= 457	

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

N.B. – figures indicate percentages of those who earlier indicated that they had disappplied one or more pupils

N.B. – figures exclude missing responses.

The Year 1 teachers surveyed were asked what criterion they had applied in making a judgement of a child having no grapheme-phoneme correspondence. This question was applicable to 379 teachers, of which, 22 per cent said the criterion they used was that ‘the child had not yet developed letter sound recognition’. This was followed by 15 per cent who said the criterion they used was ‘the child had basic letter sound recognition but was unable to fully blend’.

Teachers stopped the check early for a small number of pupils but reported that they found it easy to judge if and when to do so. On average, each teacher stopped the check early with one or two pupils. Just over half of all teachers surveyed (52 per cent) reported it was ‘quite easy’ (30 per cent) or ‘very easy’ (23 per cent) to judge if and when to stop the check early due to a child struggling. Only 5 per cent of teachers found this ‘quite hard’ (3 per cent) or ‘very hard’ (2 per cent). For one in three teachers (33 per cent) the issue did not occur at all.

The most common reason given for stopping the check early was the child beginning to struggle, which was cited by 59 per cent of Year 1 teachers. Just under half of the Year 1 teachers surveyed said they stopped the check early due to it becoming obvious that the child would not reach the threshold (47 per cent) and the child getting several questions in a row incorrect (46 per cent). The child becoming tired or distracted was also a common reason for stopping the check early, cited by 40 per cent of teachers. The child taking a long time either to answer an item or to complete the check were given as reasons much less frequently (12 per cent and 8 per cent respectively). A similar proportion of teachers gave an ‘other’ reason for stopping the check early (12 per cent). Of these, the most common reason given was the child becoming

distressed (36 per cent of teachers giving an 'other' reason). Four additional reasons relating to child unhappiness were mentioned, but relatively infrequently (range 1 per cent to 8 per cent of teachers who ticked 'other').

Few pupils from the case-study schools had the check stopped early or took a break during the check, which corroborates the findings from the survey data. The majority of those who were given breaks or had the check stopped early were SEN pupils. One school reported SEN pupils had the check stopped early due to it having an adverse emotional effect on them: 'It was stressful for them [SEN pupils] and 'pointless' to carry on as it wasn't going to get any easier. They weren't upset, but they were disheartened' (Year 1 teacher), but breaks were mostly given for more intrinsic reasons: 'It was a concentration thing for them [SEN pupils]. It felt natural for them to have a break' (Year 1 teacher).

3.3 Costs and benefits of introducing the check

Literacy coordinators were asked in the survey what additional financial costs, if any, their school had incurred in supporting the introduction and administration of the check (this might, for example include the costs of training staff in the check administration or providing supply cover while administering the check). **The median costs reported by schools was £400¹⁰**. The costs incurred for the administration of the check ranged from zero to over £5,000 for supply cover. Some higher costs were recorded, but these appeared to be for phonics teaching resources, so were not included in this range. However, it is noted they are included in the median cost reported above.

Case-study schools reflected the range in financial costs seen in the survey data; varying between several hundred pounds and no financial costs at all, for example:

We had [as a cost] training by the LA, and four day's supply cover at £180 a day.

Headteacher

There's no financial costs really.

Headteacher

Literacy coordinators were also asked in the surveys what additional time costs, if any, their school had incurred in supporting the introduction and administration of the check. **The median additional time costs were reported to be 6 hours¹¹**. Responses ranged from zero hours to over 40 hours of Year 1 teacher time and over 10 hours of senior leader time.

¹⁰ The median value has been given here due to the large variation in responses.

¹¹ The median value has been given here due to the large variation in responses.

Most case-study schools echoed the findings from the survey data, stating the main time cost was between one and four days' supply cover. Some schools found this easier to manage than others:

We just shuffled people around and we covered it so that was fine.

Headteacher

It involves a huge amount of manpower and covering people who should be doing other things. For a school this size with 120 Year 1 pupils, it is almost an unmanageable task. We have made it manageable but a huge amount of time, energy and resources of internal teachers have been invested.

Headteacher

Costs and benefits from the check: What the case-studies showed

When asked directly, only two case-study schools said they could see some benefit to the check. The majority of schools felt that there were no benefits to the check at all, often because any potential benefits were negated as they were advantages already gained from elsewhere, as explored below in Section 3.7. For example: 'I can't think of any pupil benefit to be honest ... you should reflect on your practice anyway, not as a result of the phonics screening test' (Headteacher); '[the check] confirms we know where our children are at, but that would be the only one [benefit] (Headteacher).

A frequently mentioned disadvantage of the check was the extra pressure placed on teachers, in terms of 'time and energy' (Headteacher), 'worry about how parents will perceive the school' (Headteacher) and demoralisation ('them [the children] not achieving a certain score on a check, it's demoralising when you already know' – Headteacher). The main other disadvantage mentioned was a possible negative effect on children's self esteem. Further to this, one Headteacher mentioned a distrust of the DfE, as seen again later in Section 3.7.

Some schools did cite positive messages when asked for benefits of the check, commenting that the check 'confirms we know where our children are at' (Headteacher), places 'an emphasis on phonics' (Year 1 teacher) and 'flags up any issues that parents need to be made aware of' (Literacy coordinator). Over and above these benefits already noted, one school saw a further benefit of the check outside its intended use, in using it with younger children, to 'give us an idea of their levels' (Headteacher).

3.4 Suitability of the check with different groups of learners

The survey revealed that overall, participating Year 1 teachers had mixed views on whether the standard of the check was appropriate, with slightly more teachers suggesting it was too difficult. Similar numbers of teachers said the standard was 'about right' (44 per cent) as those who said it

was 'slightly too difficult' (40 per cent); however, an additional 11 per cent said the standard of the check was 'much too difficult'. In contrast, one per cent of Year 1 teachers said the standard was 'slightly too easy', and no teachers said the check was 'much too easy'.

The views of case-study participants echoed those of teachers responding to the survey, with slightly more teachers suggesting the check was too difficult. Teachers in the case-study schools, however, focussed more on the appropriateness of the words used, rather than the correct level for the standard. The following quotes illustrate the range of comments given:

The test was too hard. The standard was too high. Some words were really tricky.

Year 1 teacher

[The] check seemed to cater for the whole range of ability within the class.

Year 1 teacher

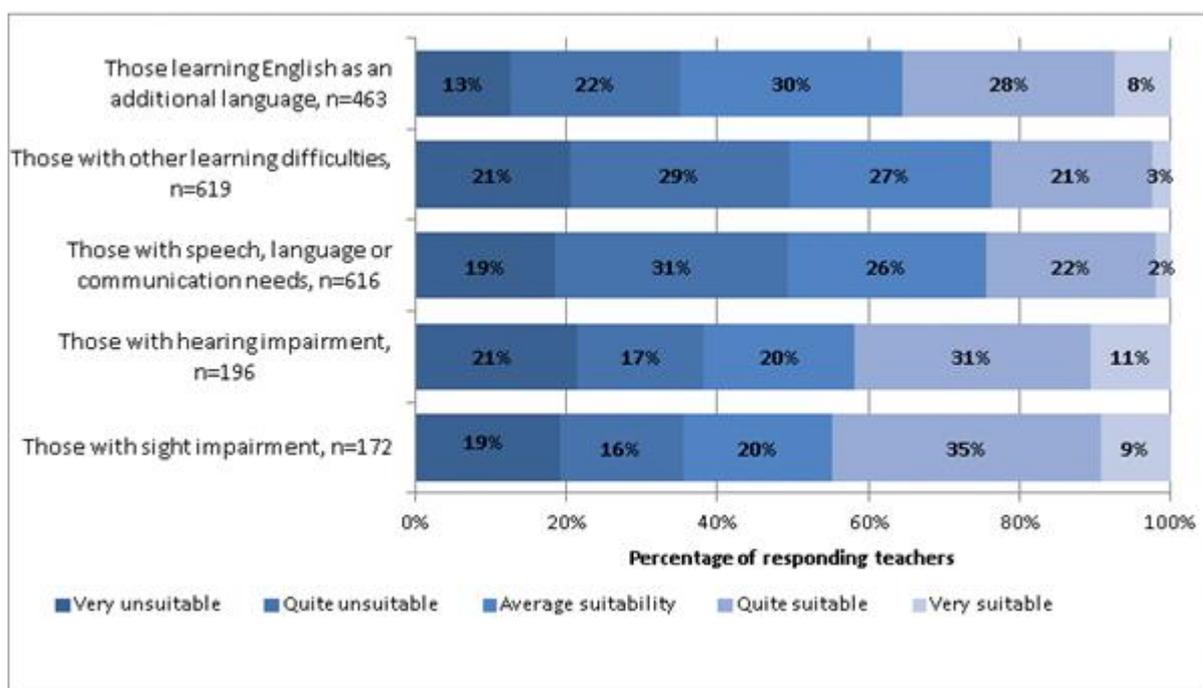
It didn't incorporate enough of Phase 5; it seemed quite easy for a lot of the children.

Year 1 teacher

Year 1 teachers were also asked in the survey for their views on the suitability of the check with specific groups of children. Teachers were asked in the survey instruments to respond regarding only those children who were working at the expected level. Case-study participants were asked their views only in regard to those with whom they administered the check. It is assumed, therefore, that the views expressed by teachers presently are in relation to those pupils who are working at the appropriate level.

Figure 1 shows the reactions of Year 1 teachers who reported they had experience of administering the check with pupils who had: sight impairments; hearing impairments; English as an additional language; other learning difficulties; and those who had speech, language or communication needs. It is of note that the number of respondents with experience of administering the check with these groups of pupils is substantially lower than the total number of respondents surveyed, and the number who elaborated on their reasoning for their rating was substantially lower again. Due to the low response rate, percentages quoted subsequently in this section are based on the proportion of those who indicated the question was relevant, rather than as a percentage of the total number of teachers surveyed.

Figure 1 Reactions of teachers with experience of administering the check with the relevant group of pupils



Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

N.B. Only those who indicated they had experience of administering the check with the relevant group of pupils are included

For further details of the number of respondents with the relevant experience of each pupil group please see the technical appendices.

Most teachers felt that the check was not suitable for children with speech, language or communication needs and children with other learning difficulties. However, more mixed views were reported regarding the appropriateness of the check for EAL pupils and for pupils with sight or hearing impairments.

Two thirds of Year 1 teachers (66 per cent) reported they had experience of administering the check with **pupils who had speech, language or communication needs**. Of these responses, 49 per cent thought the check was unsuitable for this group of pupils (19 per cent said it was ‘very unsuitable’, 31 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’), and 26 per cent thought it was of average suitability (the neutral response). The main issue cited for why the check was unsuitable for this group of learners was that the children struggled to clearly communicate their answers.

Only two case-study schools mentioned the check in relation to a child with speech, language or communication needs. One child was disapplied from the check, and for the other child two teachers were present during the check and discussed the child’s responses after its administration to ensure accuracy; this teacher appeared happy with this solution to the issues presented by pupils with speech, language or communication needs during the check.

Two thirds of Year 1 teachers (66 per cent) had experience of administering the check to **pupils with other learning difficulties**. Of these, 49 per cent felt the check was unsuitable for this group of learners (21 per cent reported it was ‘very unsuitable’, 29 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’) while only 24 per cent felt the check was suitable (3 per cent reported it was ‘very suitable’, 21 per cent ‘quite

suitable'). The main reasons given for the check not being suitable for pupils with other learning difficulties were that the pupils were 'distracted' and got confused by the pseudo words.

Many case-study interviewees made comments on the suitability of the check with pupils with SEN generally. On the whole these comments were mixed and thus reflected the survey data regarding pupils with other learning difficulties, for example:

They [pupils with SEN] enjoyed doing it. Being taken out of the classroom with the teacher made them feel 'special and grown up'.

Year 1 teacher

With SEN children ... it was difficult to ask them to keep going and you can't give them any indication of how they're doing. If they struggled with the first few they had more difficulties going on and it was a lot to ask of those children.

Literacy coordinator¹²

There was additionally some limited evidence of comments regarding the unsuitability of the check for those with more severe needs, such as severe autism¹³, in terms of phonics itself and the procedure of the check:

The check approach, and indeed the whole notion of decoding unfamiliar words, is not well suited to children with autism. They need routine and familiarity, and word recognition is a more natural strategy for them than phonic decoding.

Literacy coordinator

[The severely autistic pupil] would have been distracted if his teacher was recording at the same time as he was reading.

Literacy coordinator

About half of Year 1 teachers (49 per cent) who completed the survey had experienced administering the check with **pupils learning English as an additional language**. The views of these teachers were mixed; with 35 per cent reporting the check was unsuitable for EAL pupils (13 per cent reported it was 'very unsuitable', 22 per cent 'quite unsuitable') and 36 per cent thinking it was suitable (8 per cent reported it was 'very suitable', 28 per cent 'quite suitable'). The main issues cited for this group of pupils were difficulties understanding pseudo words and a lack of sufficient English.

¹² It is noted that disapplication is advised if a child is struggling, as detailed in The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012.

¹³ It is noted that depending on the pupil's location on the autistic spectrum, disapplication may be more appropriate for these children, as detailed in The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012.

The results from the case-studies reflect these mixed views. Some teachers thought that EAL pupils were at a disadvantage when completing the check, for various reasons:

Lots of EAL children look for something familiar in a word... a root word.

Literacy coordinator¹⁴

The alien distracted the children, ... teachers ... covered the pictures up. Children's first language is Bangla, and they tend to read right to left so they went straight to the alien first and then got confused.

Year 1 teacher¹⁵

I see the value but I also saw the problems during the test especially EAL children who got confused and didn't want to say the words.

Year 1 teacher

A lot of children ... said the 'alien' words were real words, like 'desh' - so we don't know whether in their own language that is a real word or the pronunciation is a real word and this confused those children.

Year 1 teacher¹⁶

In addition to the issues reported above, there was also concern raised by one school over the effect on marking that EAL status might bring:

Some [EAL] children know the 'the' sound but say it in a different way ... we awarded the mark. But there is contention over that. The child is learning English and there is a way to say the sound and 'thee' is also another accepted pronunciation of other words we have.

Year 1 teacher¹⁷

It should be noted that the anxieties expressed by teachers about their EAL pupils' reactions to the check were not always borne out in practice, with the overall proportion of EAL pupils meeting the standard being the same as for the population in general (58 per cent), based on the national data. Indeed, some teachers thought a child's EAL status had no effect on their ability to complete the check, while a minority thought that EAL status aided children in completing the check:

¹⁴ It should be noted that the screening check is specifically assessing phonic decoding skills. Pupils should be discouraged from sight-reading in this way when teaching phonic decoding.

¹⁵ It should be noted that teachers are free to modify the check materials, including removing the creatures from pupil materials, as detailed in The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012.

¹⁶ It should be noted that the pseudo-words used in the check have been cross referenced against the most common EAL languages in the country to minimise this as far as possible.

¹⁷ It should be noted that guidance for accents is detailed in The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012.

Some of the EAL children did better, because straight forward decoding is quite a skill, and actually some of them wouldn't recognise the difference between a word and a non-word at the moment, and for them there is very much a focus on purely decoding. Some of our children did cope, because of their EAL.

Literacy coordinator

From the survey data, fewer teachers reported administering the check with pupils who had hearing or sight impairments than the other pupil groups reported above (21 per cent and 18 per cent respectively). Those who did gave mixed views on the suitability of the check for these groups. Of those teachers who had administered the check, 42 per cent thought the check 'very suitable' or 'quite suitable' with regards to those with hearing impairments while 38 per cent thought the check was 'very unsuitable' or 'quite unsuitable' for this pupil group. Similarly, 44 per cent thought the check 'very suitable' or 'quite suitable' with regards to those with sight impairments, while 35 per cent thought the check was 'very unsuitable' or 'quite unsuitable' for this pupil group. The main reasons given for the unsuitability of the check with pupils with hearing or sight impairments, respectively, were difficulties with pronunciation of sounds due to difficulties hearing sounds and the test being too hard.

The findings from the case-studies supported those from the surveys, with only a small minority of teachers reporting they had administered the check with children with sight or hearing impairments. Of those who had, some were positive about the suitability of the bold print used in the check, but voiced concerns regarding the spacing of the letters and the font used in the check:

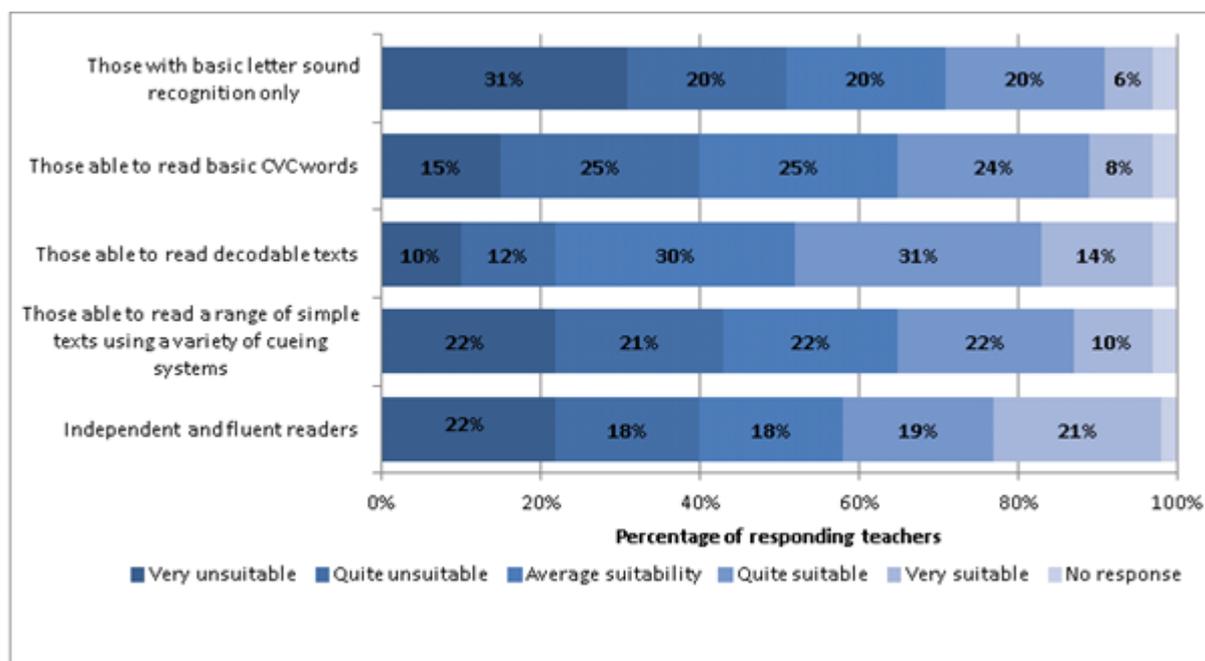
The font was difficult for some children - the "k" looked like a capital "r" and the spacing of the individual letters were quite close, so some with glasses found it hard to find a suitable reading distance. An enlarged version would have been helpful for them.

Year 1 teacher¹⁸

Year 1 teachers were asked how suitable the check was to accurately identify whether children from five different groups were, or were not, working at the expected standard. The groups were: those with basic letter sound recognition only; those able to read basic consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words; those able to read decodable texts; those able to read a range of simple texts using a variety of cueing systems; and independent and fluent readers. The results can be found in Figure 2 below.

¹⁸ It should be noted that teachers were encouraged to print larger text versions of the material if required, as detailed in The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012.

Figure 2 Reactions of teachers with experience administering the check with the relevant group of pupils



N=940

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Half of the teachers (51 per cent) felt that the check was unsuitable for those with basic letter sound recognition (31 per cent reported it was ‘very unsuitable’, 20 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’). Conversely, 20 per cent reported the check was ‘quite suitable’ for this group of pupils and 6 per cent reported the check was ‘very suitable’ in this regard. One in five Year 1 teachers felt the check was of ‘average suitability’ (the neutral response) for pupils with basic letter sound recognition.

Teachers were slightly more likely to rate the check as ‘unsuitable’ than ‘suitable’ for pupils able to read basic CVC words. One in four teachers (25 per cent) thought that the check was of ‘average suitability’ for this group of pupils, this being the neutral response. Just under one in three (32 per cent) felt the check was suitable to some degree for pupils able to read basic CVC words (8 per cent ‘very suitable, 24 per cent ‘quite suitable’), however 40 per cent felt the check was unsuitable to some degree (15 per ‘very unsuitable’, 25 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’).

There was little reference in the case-studies to the suitability of the check for those very low ability readers, but of those respondents who did, results appear to reflect those seen in the surveys. An example of the views given is shown below:

The check is a poor fit with the approach to literacy teaching for those few Key Stage 1 children who are able to begin to learn to read. Because of the nature of their special needs, the concept of decoding as an approach to unfamiliar words is not natural for them.

Literacy coordinator

Of all the pupil groups captured above, the check was rated as most suitable for pupils who were able to read decodable texts (14 per cent reported it was ‘very suitable’, 31 per cent ‘quite suitable’). Most other teachers rated the check to be of ‘average suitability’, (the neutral response), for pupils able to read decodable texts (30 per cent). Of the 22 per cent who felt the check was unsuitable for this group of pupils, only 10 per cent felt the check was ‘very unsuitable’.

Regarding those pupils who were able to read a range of simple texts using a variety of cueing systems, Year 1 teachers more frequently rated the check as unsuitable (22 per cent reported it was ‘very unsuitable’, 21 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’). Just over one in five teachers (22 per cent) reported the check was of ‘average suitability’, (the neutral response), for this group of pupils, and 32 per cent said the check was suitable (10 per cent ‘very suitable,’ 22 per cent ‘quite suitable’) for this pupil group.

The survey found Year 1 teachers held mixed views regarding the suitability of the check for independent and fluent readers. While 40 per cent of teachers felt the check was not suitable for independent and fluent readers (22 per cent reported it was ‘very unsuitable’, 18 per cent ‘quite unsuitable’), 39 per cent of Year 1 teachers thought the check was ‘quite suitable’ (19 per cent) or ‘very suitable’ (21 per cent). Eighteen per cent of Year 1 teachers felt the check was of average suitability, (the neutral response), for this group of learners.

While the case-studies did support the survey findings of a mixed view to some extent, the majority of teachers were negative about the suitability of the check for able readers. They suggested able readers had gained lower marks for several reasons, including: they had moved beyond blending, attempted to make sense of pseudo words and had read too quickly for the task:

We have level 2 readers ... and it was as though they were so far beyond blending and segmenting ... they didn’t do it because they did it last year.

Year 1 teacher

They tried to make the pseudo words fit something they knew, for example by changing ‘proom’ to ‘groom’.

Year 1 teacher¹⁹

The better readers were very quick and made some silly errors, possibly due to the speed of reading words.

Year 1 teacher

In one case-study school there was evidence to suggest that the most able readers were only just reaching the threshold, while the slightly less able, but still above average, pupils were more frequently surpassing the threshold with much higher scores: ‘The middle ability were getting 38 to

¹⁹ It should be noted that the screening check is specifically assessing phonic decoding skills. Pupils should be discouraged from sight-reading in this way when teaching phonic decoding.

40, but some of the higher ability got 33, 34. These include some of the most fluent readers, who would recognise a wide range of high frequency words on sight' (Year 1 teacher)²⁰.

Taken as a whole, the findings reported above reveal that notable proportions of teachers reported reservations about the suitability of the check, both for pupils in general as well as for specific groups of children.

3.5 Communicating with parents/carers

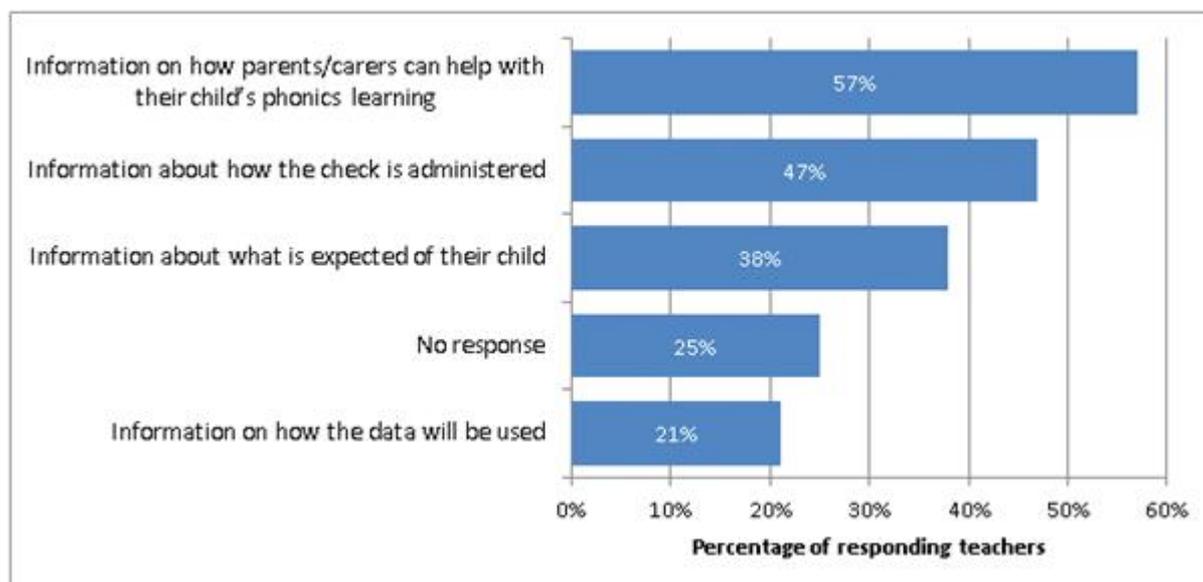
After the administration of the check schools are expected to inform parents/carers about their child's progress in phonics and how he or she has done in the screening check in the last half-term of Year 1. If a parent's/carer's child has found the check difficult, the child's school should also tell them what support they have put in place to help him or her improve. This section explores what, if any, information schools provided to parents/carers prior to the check, the methods by which schools communicated the outcomes of the check to parents/carers, and any additional information that schools provided to the parents/carers of children found to require extra support.

3.5.1 Information provided prior to the check

Literacy coordinators responding to the survey were asked to tick up to four options pertaining to the information they provided to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check. The findings are presented in the figure below.

²⁰ It should be noted that the screening check is specifically assessing phonic decoding skills only. If pupils rely on other methods of decoding words they may perform less well than their phonically decoding peers.

Figure 3 Information provided to parents/carers prior to the check



N=844

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100.

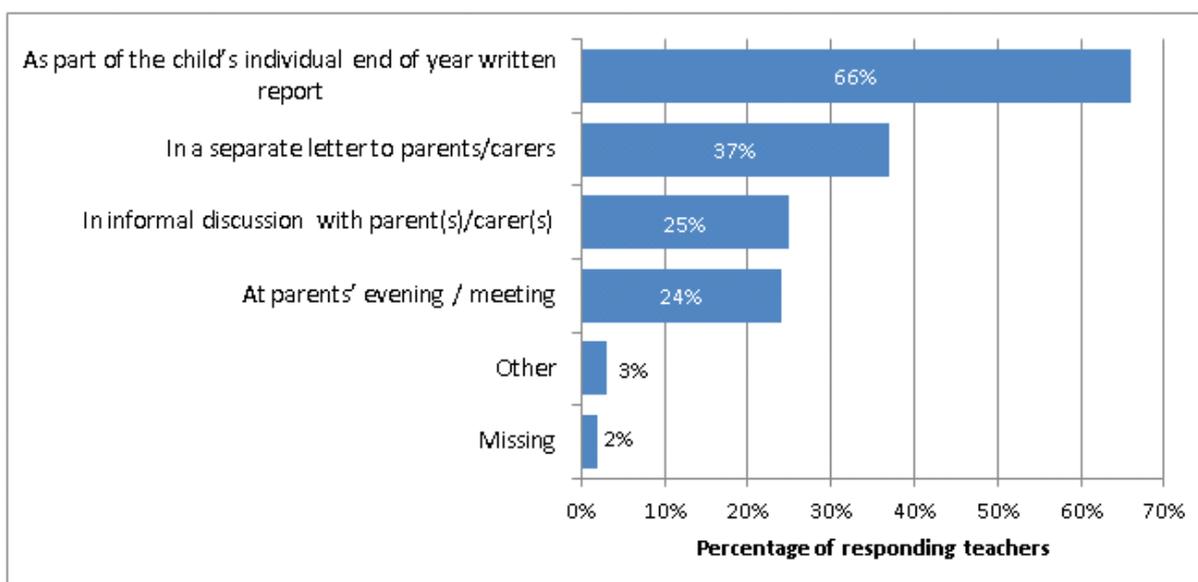
The findings suggest that most schools provided some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check, with 57 per cent reporting they sent information to parents/carers on how they could help with their child's phonics learning. This was followed by almost half (47 per cent) who reported sending information to parents/carers on how the check was to be administered. A quarter of respondents declined to answer the question, which suggests that they did not provide any of the information listed above, and possibly any information at all, to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check.

The findings from the case-studies largely supported the findings from the surveys, with seven of the fourteen schools reporting they had notified parents/carers about the check in advance of its administration, either during a parents'/carers' evening, through a letter to parents/carers, and/or through an article in the school newsletter. Where a letter was sent to parents/carers, some schools reported sending or amending the guidance 'Learning to read through phonics – information for parents/carers' which has been produced by the DfE and is available online.

3.5.2 How the results of the check were communicated

Literacy coordinators responding to the survey were asked to tick up to five options pertaining to how they had communicated or planned to communicate the results of the check to parents/carers. The findings are presented in the figure below.

Figure 4 How the results of the check were communicated



N=844

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100.

The findings suggest that two thirds of schools (66 per cent) communicated the results to parents/carers as part of the child's individual end of year written reports. This was followed by almost four out of ten (37 per cent) who reported the results in a separate letter to parents/carers. A small minority (three per cent) reported using 'other' methods of communication. Additional analysis revealed that of these other methods, the single most popular activity was one-to-one meetings with the teacher. Two per cent of literacy coordinators declined to comment, suggesting that the vast majority of schools were fulfilling their obligations of informing parents/carers of how their children had done in the screening check.

Again, the findings from the case-studies largely supported those reported from the surveys, with most schools reporting that they communicated the findings through end of year reports and a slightly smaller proportion reporting they communicated the findings to parents/carers in a separate letter. In addition, one school opted to communicate the results of the check at a parents'/carers' evening, while another communicated the outcomes to parents/carers with special needs through informal communication.

The case-study interviews revealed that teachers wanted to avoid branding children as failures, which many teachers feared would happen to those children identified as not meeting the expected standard. Moreover, there was a general feeling that it would be unhelpful if the parents/carers of these children responded by trying to teach their children to decode phonetically at home, preferring them instead to continue to read to their children, as illustrated by the following quote from a literacy coordinator:

I am worried that parents will want to...cram their children [with phonics] from an even earlier age, like they do for the Key Stage 1 tests and the 11 plus. I want parents to read with their child, books and bedtime reading, but not to sit down with a practice paper every night.

There were mixed views about whether it was appropriate to communicate whether a child had reached the expected standard or not on the check on its own, or whether the actual score also needed to be presented. Given the sensitivities around the outcomes of the check, it is perhaps not surprising that many schools appeared to have taken the time to carefully draft what they deemed to be an appropriate response to parents/carers, as illustrated by this quote from a literacy coordinator: 'I'm not prepared to tell parents that their children have failed. We've made a cleverly worded letter which avoids using this terminology but still communicates scores to parents'.

However, even after drafting such carefully worded feedback, some teachers expressed concern that informing a parent/carer that their child had not met the expected standard could potentially have a negative effect on parent/carer-school relationships. Many teachers held the belief that even though the word 'failed' was not being used when reporting the results to the parents/carers of those children who scored less than 32, many parents/carers would interpret the results as a failure. **However, teachers reported that most parents/carers have given little or no reaction to the introduction of the check or to the results.** Some case-study interviewees attributed this to the fact that they had effectively communicated information about the check in advance. However, it should also be borne in mind that the case-studies were conducted shortly after the administration of the check. As a result, it is possible that many parents/carers had not yet seen their child's results and/or that they had not yet had an opportunity to convey their thoughts and reactions to the school.

3.5.3 Additional information provided

Literacy coordinators responding to the survey were asked what additional information, if any, they provided to parents/carers whose children were found to require extra support. The findings revealed that almost three quarters of schools (73 per cent) were providing information to parents/carers about how they could support their child and 61 per cent were providing information about the type of in-school support planned. A notable minority (19 per cent) declined to comment.

3.6 Impacts of the check

One of the aims of the evaluation is to understand what impact, if any, the introduction of the check is having on teaching and learning. This will be a greater focus for the evaluation in years 2 and 3, but even at this early stage of the research it is possible to explore what impact the check is having on schools, how the results of the check are being used and what additional support, if any, is being provided to children who do not meet the expected standard.

Most of the teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future. This view appeared to stem from the fact that many thought the outcomes from the check told them nothing new. In addition, most of the schools felt they already had

rigorous processes in place to ensure their children learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard, that those children who fell short of this standard were already being identified, and that appropriate additional support was already in place for those children identified as needing extra help. There were mixed views as to whether the outcomes from the check were in line with teachers' expectations, but even where the outcomes were reported to largely confirm what teachers expected, this did not appear to be a valued outcome in its own right.

There were, however, a small number of case-study interviewees who reported that the introduction of the check, and the resulting outcomes, had been useful and would or already had impacted positively on teaching and learning practices. These included impacts at the school and individual teacher level, as explored through the survey and case-study evidence below.

3.6.1 Impacts at school level

Responses from survey participants showed that **a third of schools (34 per cent) made changes to phonics teaching in anticipation of the check.** Table 10 shows the main changes that were reported.

Table 10 Teacher reports of changes to practice in anticipation of the phonics screening check

	%
Increased assessment of progress in phonics	48
Increased the time devoted to phonics teaching	46
Started to use phonics programme more systematically	39
Increased the frequency of phonics teaching	34
Adopted a new mainstream phonics programme	26
Increased the number or length of discrete phonics sessions	26
Changed to teaching phonics 'first and fast'	16
Other	26
N=292	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

N.B. – figures indicate percentages of those who responded 'yes' to making some kind of change to teaching practice.

The main changes, reported by at least a third of all those who made changes, were increased assessment of progress in phonics, increasing the time devoted to phonics teaching and starting to use a phonics programme more systematically. Almost half the schools who reported making 'other changes' said that they had introduced nonsense words into phonics teaching in preparation for the check, indicating this was a new area of work for many. The extent of changes made to teaching practice by survey respondents suggests that the content and structure of the phonics screening check did not necessarily fit with current teaching practice –

this represents a clear example of assessment driving practice. Overall, teachers felt that children in Year 1 were most likely to have been affected by these changes to teaching, and the vast majority of respondents reported that any changes were made during the Autumn or Spring term.

As reported above, there was a tendency among case-study interviewees to report that no substantial changes to teaching had been made in response to the introduction of the check. However, a small number of schools (three) reported that they had made whole-school changes, although some attributed these changes to other factors such as local authority targets or the revised Ofsted framework. These changes included:

- A greater focus on the teaching of pseudo words
- A move towards the use of phonetic spelling tests rather than high frequency words
- The creation of parental workshops in phonics
- An increase in the number of phonics sessions taught each week
- The introduction of revision sessions in preparation for the check
- An acceleration of the pace of phonics teaching, with some schools expecting more from their children as a result of the standard established by the check.

Several schools said that pseudo words were a completely new concept to children, and that they had explicitly introduced them in preparation for the check. This Year 1 teacher explained that: 'Generally it [the check] fits very comfortably with our previous practice, but we immediately started introducing made-up words in Year 1...'

Other impacts included **bringing-forward activities that were reported to be already planned**, such as training for staff on phonics and encouraging parents/carers to read more with their children.

3.6.2 Impacts at teacher level

The following quote typifies the position held by most teachers interviewed as part of the case-study visits: 'The check had no impact on me personally. I know exactly where the children are anyway. There were no surprises in the data and [it revealed] nothing we didn't already know' (literacy coordinator).

A small minority of teachers argued that they do not 'teach to the tests', suggesting that for some, the check conflicts with their existing approach to teaching reading: '...it would be really wrong if ... we let preparing for a phonics screen actually dictate the way we manage literacy in the school' (Headteacher).

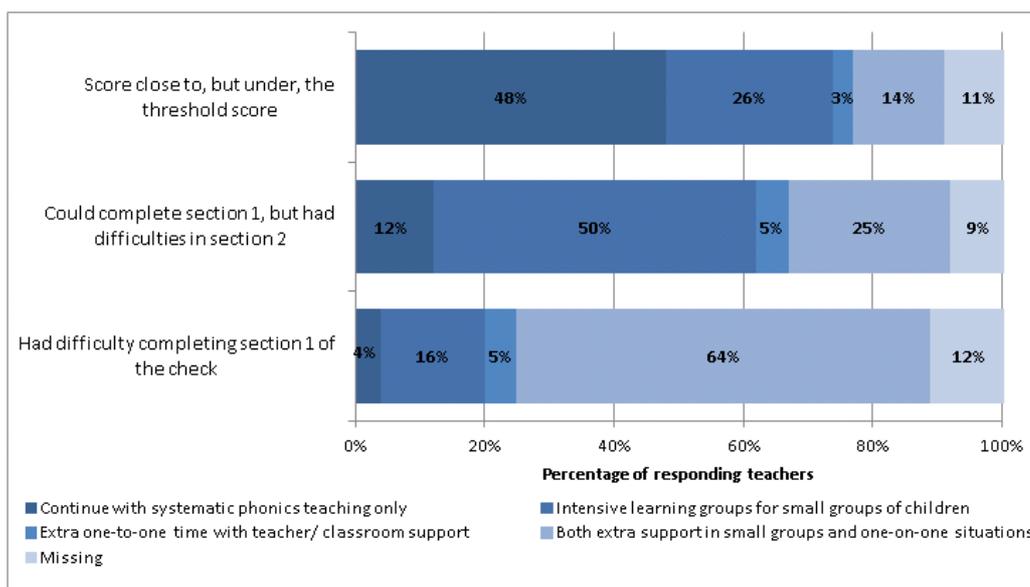
However, a minority of teachers (five) were able to identify positive impacts of a personal kind, specifically:

- Greater reflection on their own teaching practices and in some cases a variation in teaching (e.g. a greater focus on teaching pseudo words)
- Improved confidence in phonics teaching, mainly as a result of new training that had been brought in or brought forward as a result of the introduction of the check
- Better awareness of the level of phonics decoding skills expected of Year 1 children (particularly amongst Reception teachers).

3.6.3 Support children will receive

Year 1 teachers responding to the survey were asked what type of support they envisaged children in three different categories would receive. The three categories were: children who had difficulty completing section 1 of the check; children who could complete section 1, but had difficulties in section 2; and children who scored close to, but under, the threshold score²¹. The findings are presented in the figure below.

Figure 5 Support different children will receive



N=940

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

The findings suggest that, as might be expected, those children who struggled most with the check (i.e. those children who had difficulty completing section 1 of the check) were scheduled to receive more support (e.g. both extra support in small groups and in one on one situations) than those in the other two groups. By the same token, those that struggled least with the check (i.e. those who scored close to, but under the threshold) were most likely to continue with systematic phonics teaching and not to receive any additional support. However, it is unclear from the survey whether

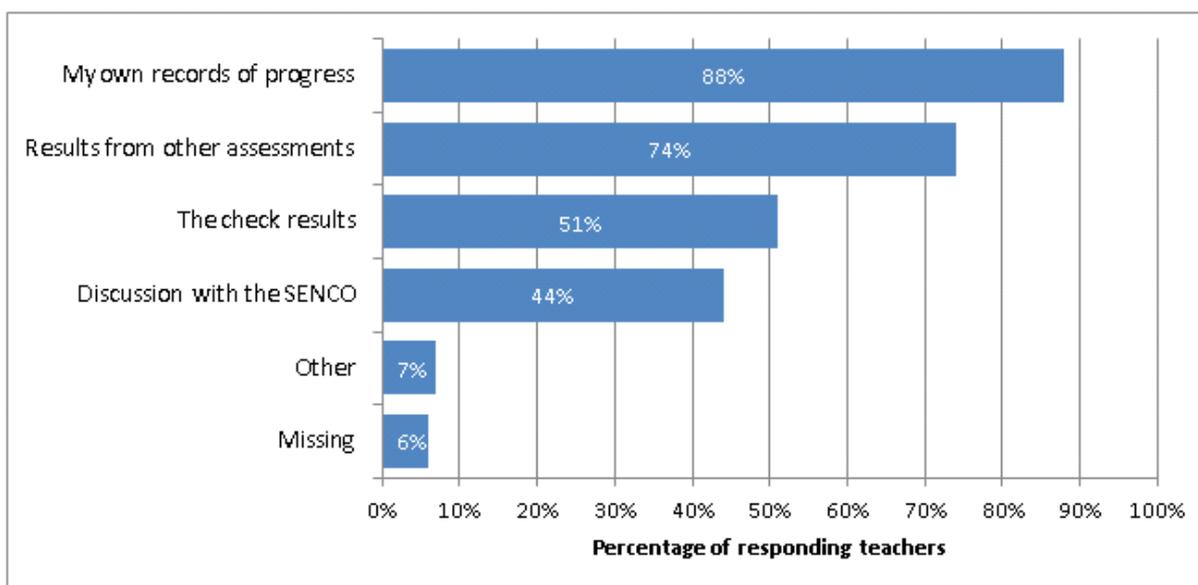
²¹ The words gradually get harder through the check as the combinations of letters become more complicated and so section 2 of the screening check is more challenging than section 1.

the support arrangements identified above have changed as a result of the introduction of the check. The findings from the case-studies suggest that few, if any changes have been made to the support arrangements for children.

Over half of the Year 1 teachers responding to the survey (53 per cent) reported that they planned to make use of published resources specifically designed for the purposes of phonics 'catch-up'. Almost four out of ten respondents (39 per cent) said they did not plan to make use of such resources while 8 per cent declined to comment. No information about the specific resources teachers planned to use was collected.

Year 1 teachers responding to the survey were asked what evidence they had used to help them decide if, and/or what, type of additional support should be provided to a child. The findings are presented in the figure below.

Figure 6 Evidence used to inform support provided



N=940

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100.

The findings reveal that when it comes to informing decisions about the support provided to children, more teachers' rely on their own records of progress than in the outcomes from the screening check. Teachers' own records were most frequently used (88 per cent) followed by the results of other assessments (74 per cent). About half the responding teachers (51 per cent) reported they had used the results of the screening check to inform if, and/or what, type of extra support should be provided while 44 per cent reported that discussions with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) informed such decisions. Of the small proportion of teachers (seven per cent) that identified 'other' sources of evidence that informed such judgements, these were joint teacher discussion and/or from a combination of different assessments.

3.6.4 Use of the results in teachers' general teaching

Year 1 teachers responding to the survey were asked how they planned to use the results from the screening check in their general teaching. The findings are presented below.

Table 11 Use of the results in teachers' general teaching

Response	%
I will discuss the results with the Year 2 teacher(s)	61
I will discuss the results with the literacy coordinator	52
I will discuss the results with the other Year 1 teacher(s)	43
I will discuss the results with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)	43
I will create specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics	38
I will review the way in which I teach phonics	27
I will ask for more support / more trained classroom support	11
Other	11
Missing	10
N=940	

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100.

The results from the screening check appear to have prompted a lot of discussion between teachers, with the majority of Year 1 teachers responding to the survey reporting that they planned to discuss the results of the check with Year 2 teachers (61 per cent) and the literacy coordinator (52 per cent). This was followed by similar proportions reporting that they planned to discuss the findings with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and other Year 1 teachers (43 per cent respectively).

In addition to prompting discussions with other members of staff, there was evidence that the results of the check were leading to other knock-on activities. For example, 38 per cent of teachers reported that they will use the results of the check to create specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics, while 27 per cent reported they will use the results of the check to ask for more support/more trained classroom support. A small proportion of teachers, 11 per cent, reported they would use the results of the check in other ways such as: reviewing how to teach phonics; discussing the results at pupil progress meetings; and encouraging children to become more familiar with nonsense words.

The literacy coordinators responding to the survey were also asked what actions would be taken to use the results within their school. The findings are presented in Table 12 below.

Table 12 Actions taken following the administration of the phonics screening check

Response	%
Discussion between Year 1 teacher(s) and Literacy Coordinator, headteacher or other senior leader	88
Review of results by individual Year 1 teacher	81
Identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics	80
Discussion between Year 1 and Year 2 teachers	79
Discussion between Year 1 and Reception teachers	62
Specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics	61
Discussion amongst Year 1 teachers	54
Review/revision of teaching plans by individual Year 1 teacher	48
Review/revision of teaching plans by Year 2 teacher(s)	48
Other	8
Missing	2
N=844	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

More than one answer could be given so percentages may sum to more than 100

The findings suggest that literacy coordinators were somewhat more positive about the impacts of the check than the Year 1 teachers. For example, the majority of responding literacy coordinators reported that the results would be discussed with and/or between other staff, including Year 1 and 2 teachers and senior leaders. Notably, about nine out of ten literacy coordinators (88 per cent) reported that following the screening check discussions had or would take place between the Year 1 teacher(s), literacy coordinator, headteacher or other senior leader. In addition, more than half suggested the results would inform subsequent action within the school, with:

- 80 per cent reporting the results would inform the identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics
- 61 per cent reporting the results would inform the design of specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics.

About half also reported that the results would inform the review and/or revision of teaching plans by Year 1 and 2 teachers (48 per cent respectively). These views are somewhat more positive about the impacts of the check than those expressed by the Year 1 teachers responding to the survey or the staff interviewed as part of the case-studies, many of whom felt strongly that the results would not inform teaching and learning practices within their school.

3.7 Views on the value of the check

The survey revealed that participating literacy coordinators had mixed views on whether the outcomes from the check provided valuable information for teachers, with most leaning towards the view that it did not. As seen in Table 13, while 8 per cent of literacy coordinators ‘agreed’ and 18 per cent ‘agreed somewhat’ that the phonics screening check gave valuable information for teachers, one in five (21 per cent) reported ‘uncertain or mixed views’. However, the majority (52 per cent) ‘disagreed’ (32 per cent) or ‘disagreed somewhat’ (20 per cent) that the check provided valuable information.

Table 13 Degree of literacy coordinator agreement with the statement: ‘The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers’.

Response	%
Agree	8
Agree somewhat	18
Uncertain or mixed views	21
Disagree somewhat	20
Disagree	32
N = 833	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012

Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

The responses from the case-studies largely reflected those collected through the surveys in that the check did not give useful information to teachers. However the case-studies gave the added insight that it was not that the check did not give useful information itself, but more that it gave no new information which teachers found useful; the data it gave was data they already had, and this support and validation of teachers’ assessment was not widely recognised as being useful information. This was noted in various sections above, and is illustrated succinctly by this literacy coordinator: ‘For us, it [the check] was not needed. It told us nothing new’.

Most literacy coordinators perceived there to be even less value in the outcomes of the check for parents/carers. Of those surveyed, only 17 per cent of literacy coordinators agreed to some extent (four per cent 'agreed' and 12 per cent 'agreed somewhat') that the check gave valuable information to parents/carers, with 24 per cent having 'uncertain or mixed views' in this regard. Again, the majority (58 per cent) 'disagreed' (36 per cent) or 'disagreed somewhat' (22 per cent). This information is supported by the findings from the case-studies, where several teachers played down the results of the check or reluctantly reported it to parents/carers: 'Their score has been added to their reports, but because it is only a small part of a child's reading ability we didn't want to draw attention to it' (literacy coordinator).

There were, however, a minority of schools who thought the check results were a valuable message parents/carers needed to hear:

It allows the opportunity for those parents whose children may have not achieved to realise 'oh, my child has not got there' and spurred them on to work with them at home.

Literacy coordinator

One small section of the [children's school] report referred to how well children did on the check (not the score) - parents then know if the child will need extra support in school and they can hopefully help at home.

Year 1 teacher

Views on the check: What the case-studies showed

Data from the case-studies gave extra insight into teachers' views regarding the check. The case-studies highlighted some teachers' reservations about the check, including concerns about the formality of the check and about testing children at such a young age: 'It's not appropriate to test children in their first year of formal teaching' (Headteacher), especially considering the fast development which takes place in the early years with no age standardisation for the check scores:

I think the results will be linked to the birthdays; I know I have some younger high flyers, but I bet there will be a link

Year 1 teacher

He's not even 6 yet this child, he won't be 6 until August ... He hasn't got special needs, he's doing really well, he's exactly where he ought to be [for his age] and he'll be fine

Headteacher

For some of the children, it's not that they've got any problems, they just haven't reached that stage - it's just immaturity

Year 1 teacher

There was also some evidence of scepticism over the reliability of the check. This included the outcomes it generates; 'I think teacher assessment is more reliable to do that [help identify those who need extra support] because this test just basically says that they are not up to Phase 5' (Year 1 teacher) and the technical aspects of the check itself: 'It is not a pure phonics test. If it was a pure phonics test, even the real words could be said, or potentially be said, a number of phonically plausible ways.... It's not comparing like for like... that's an inconsistency of the test.' (Literacy coordinator).

Case-studies also showed concern relating to the introduction of the check and the worry or disappointment regarding the reasoning for it. Headteachers' concerns surrounded the use of the results at school level; '[I'm] waiting to see how the Government will use the test ... if they use it as a measure of how good we are as a school', while literacy coordinators' concerns surround the Government having a hidden agenda behind the check:

I think the check is just to take a snapshot of now and show how terrible phonics is, and then the Government, or whoever, is going to wave a magic wand and the teaching of phonics will be better. But I think actually all that's going to happen is that teachers are going to teach to the test. So the results will get better, but that doesn't mean the teaching of phonics is any better.

Literacy coordinator

I am saddened by the way it was presented to schools and the political agenda behind it

Literacy coordinator

As well as expressions of distrust over the agenda relating to the check, it appears some teachers are interpreting its introduction as an insult in itself, as this comment shows: 'We're already doing it [teaching and assessing phonics]. Why can't they trust us? (Literacy coordinator)'.

Despite several interviewees recounting they had previously held concerns about the check, some acknowledged that once they had experienced the check it had been useful, at least to some degree. Benefits included giving teachers a benchmark of a child's performance, informing their planning, focussing their teaching and putting an emphasis on phonics. However, these were mostly expressed as minor benefits, in light of the view that the check, and the impetus it gave to phonics, did not offer anything new to the school. For example:

We were wary [about the check], but I can see it's better than we thought now that we're doing it... it's had an effect on the teaching of reading in the school, but I had a good understanding of who would score what anyway, so it wasn't a massive effect.

Year 1 teacher

It was 'fresh' for the teachers and [good for] finding any weaknesses and addressing them. But we knew which children were going to pass or not.

Literacy coordinator

I suppose while we might have done that [attended phonics training] anyway it was the looming check that focused the mind and made us think ‘Let’s do this now’ instead of the autumn term.

Headteacher

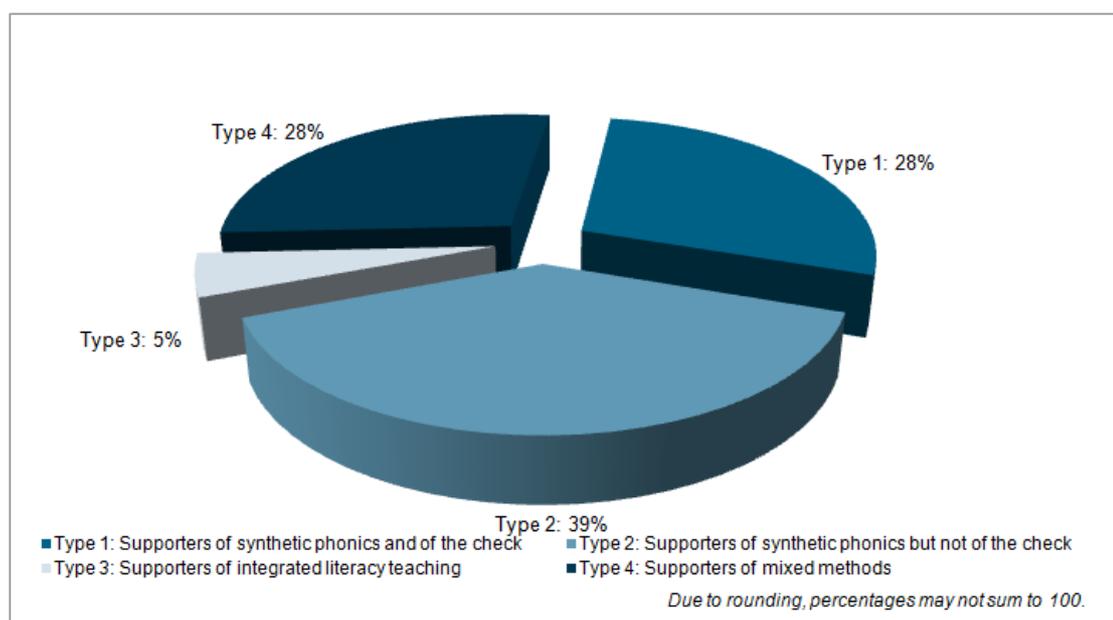
I’ll be honest, before the check [I felt] negative, ambivalent, ‘Ugh! Do we really have to do this?’ afterwards ... it has shown us something that needs addressing and compared children in a way we haven’t compared them before [for phonics ability, as opposed to reading ability].

Literacy coordinator

3.8 Towards a typology of schools

One aim of this evaluation is to investigate the stance towards phonics overall in the participating schools, to attempt to delineate a typology of approaches. Latent class analysis was used with a focus on key questions from the literacy coordinator questionnaire concerning phonics teaching practices and attitudes, together with opinions of the usefulness of the check. The latent class analysis seeks out patterns of response that allow a grouping of respondents. The analysis gave rise to four types, unevenly distributed.

Figure 7 Typology of schools



Source: NFER Evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check, 2012

In the descriptions that follow, the patterns of literacy coordinator responses will be taken as evidence of the policies, practices and attitudes at work in the school.

Type 1 schools (28 per cent). These schools identify themselves as teaching phonics with a 'first and fast' approach and express a very high level of conviction about the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching (79 per cent agree). Consistently with this, they are less likely than other types to agree that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. However, the apparent confusion identified across the literacy coordinator responses persists here, as around half the respondents still agree with the use of a variety of methods, with a further third who 'agree somewhat' with a varied approach. Respondents in schools of this type are least likely to agree with the assertion that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy (although a quarter still have some sympathy with this view). This is the only one of the four groups where a majority of respondents tend to agree that the phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers (21 per cent agree, 44 per cent agree somewhat). Type 1 schools could therefore be described as **'Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check'**.

Type 2 schools (39 per cent). These schools are similar to type 1 in almost all respects. They identify themselves as teaching phonics 'first and fast' and express a high level of conviction about the value of systematic synthetic phonics (67 per cent agree). Like type 1, they may also support the use of a range of methods, but are less likely to do so than types 3 and 4. Unlike type 1, however, these schools do not believe that the phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers or parents. Almost 88 per cent of respondents in this group disagree with these statements, with the rest expressing uncertainty or mixed views. Type 2 schools can therefore be described as **'Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check'**.

Type 3 schools (5 per cent). The small group of schools of this type are characterised by their practice of always teaching phonics integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies. Consistently with this, they are the group least likely to be convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching (although 44 per cent still agree with this statement). Type 3 respondents are most likely of all the groups to agree that phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading (93 per cent agree or agree somewhat), that a variety of methods should be taught (98 per cent) and that phonics teaching is necessary only for some children (44 per cent). Type 3 schools can be described as **'Supporters of integrated literacy teaching'**.

Type 4 schools (28 per cent). In type 4 schools, phonics is taught discretely, alongside other cueing strategies. Apart from this, their stance is very similar to type 3. They are less likely to be convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching than types 1 and 2 (50 per cent agree). A large majority agree that phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading (89 per cent agree or agree somewhat) and that a variety of methods should be taught (95 per cent). They are less likely than type 3 to believe that phonics teaching is necessary only for some children (32 per cent). Type 4 schools can be described as **'Supporters of mixed methods'**. Both type 3 and type 4 schools are unlikely to view the phonics screening check as providing valuable information for teachers or for parents. They are also more likely than types 1 and 2 to believe that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy.

The four types will be used again as background variables in further analyses in years 2 and 3 of the evaluation to ascertain whether patterns of differential progress are confirmed when the pupils progress to the end of Key Stage 1. Questionnaire responses will also be analysed in future years on the basis of this typology, to find out whether attitudes shift and whether the distinction between the four types emerges more clearly.

4. Conclusions

The final chapter of this report draws together the key messages from the survey and case-study data and provides an initial assessment of the extent to which the phonics screening check is meeting its stated aims. The chapter then presents evidence from the baseline surveys and case-study visits to schools to address each of the evaluation's first four underpinning research questions as set out in Section 1.2. The report concludes by outlining the next steps for the evaluation.

4.1 Phonics teaching and the phonics screening check

The evaluation findings have provided evidence about the current teaching of phonics in schools and attitudes towards phonics. They also suggest some current or potential impacts of the introduction of the phonics screening check.

One of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation so far is that many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. Evidence from the case-studies and surveys suggests that most teachers are overwhelmingly positive about phonics teaching and its contribution to reading development. However, it is less certain that this is an endorsement of the recommended approach of *systematic synthetic phonics* taught *first and fast*. Whilst nine out of ten literacy coordinators agree, at least to some extent, that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics has value in the primary classroom, a similar proportion, somewhat contradictorily, feel that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words, suggesting there is widespread misunderstanding of the term 'systematic synthetic phonics'.

Given the apparent confusion described above it is notable that, even when asked specifically about the methods used to teach phonics, case-study responses referring specifically to 'systematic synthetic phonics' were uncommon, despite positive reactions generally to 'using phonics to teach reading'. In addition, mention of synthetic phonics occurred in schools where, despite all staff showing extremely positive attitudes towards phonics teaching, reference was made to other methods of teaching and to other reading strategies. Thus, it appears more likely that the reported level of agreement with the value of systematic synthetic phonics actually represents support of the more general use of phonics within the primary classroom, and that teachers in general have not yet fully adopted the practices recommended in the Department for Education's policy and evidence paper, *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading*.

Against this background, a distinction emerged between attitudes towards the phonics screening check as an assessment of phonic knowledge and understanding, and the position of teachers regarding phonics as an approach within literacy teaching. While the positive views about the latter were widespread, views on the check were more mixed; many were negative and a few were positive, while others regarded the check as broadly acceptable but unnecessary. When asked directly for their opinions, only a quarter of literacy coordinators expressed the view that the check provided useful information for teachers. Most of the teachers interviewed as part of the case-

study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future. This view appeared to stem from the fact that many thought the outcomes from the check told them nothing new. Most of the schools felt they already had rigorous processes in place to ensure their children learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard, that those children who fell short of this standard were already being identified, and that appropriate additional support was already in place for those children identified as needing extra help. There were mixed views as to whether the outcomes from the check were in line with teachers' expectations, but even where the outcomes were reported to largely confirm what teachers expected, this did not appear to be a valued outcome in its own right. These views are consistent with the suggestion, discussed in the report, that respondents may not have been fully aware of the rationale behind the introduction of the check.

When teachers were asked about their practices and actions, however, a rather more positive picture of the impact of the check emerged. Literacy coordinators in around one-third of schools reported changes in anticipation of the introduction of the check, and these changes broadly represented a strengthening of practice in phonics teaching. The results of the check were often reported to be the subject of discussions between literacy coordinators, Year 1 teachers, the teachers of Reception and Year 2 or the SEN coordinator. A large majority of literacy coordinators said they would use the results to help identify children experiencing difficulties with phonics. Some respondents reported that they would make specific teaching plans in the light of the results, and some Year 1 teachers intended to review the way they taught phonics. It is also noteworthy that, in addition to reporting the results of the check to parents/carers, as they were required to do, a majority of schools also gave parents/carers additional information about supporting children in their phonics work.

There were a small number of case-study interviewees who reported that the introduction of the check, and the resulting outcomes, had been useful and would or already had impacted positively on teaching and learning practices. These impacts included: increasing the time devoted to phonics teaching and starting to use a phonics programme more systematically; a greater focus on the teaching of pseudo words; and an acceleration of the pace of phonics teaching, with some schools expecting more from their children as a result of the standard established by the check.

4.2 Summary of findings on the Year 1 evaluation questions

1. How suitable is the check for specific groups of pupils?

Teachers' views were mixed about the suitability of the check for different groups of pupils, with almost half of the Year 1 teachers responding to the survey reporting that the standard of the check was 'about right'. Some issues were raised about the suitability of the check for pupils with SEN, high ability and EAL pupils. These issues included children finding the monster pictures distracting and getting confused by the pseudo words, with some struggling with the lack of context, preferring instead to read from a book.

2. How did teachers identify the children who were disapplied from the check?

Two fifths (40 percent) of teachers did not disapply any children from the screening check. Of the majority who did, 33 per cent disapplied one pupil, 20 per cent disapplied two or three pupils, and only six per cent disapplied four or more pupils. Where teachers had been involved in disapplying children, most reported that the lack of grapheme-phoneme correspondence was the major reason for disapplication. For some children this was judged as having no letter-sound recognition, while for others it was judged as being unable to blend phonemes. Where a child was disapplied from the check, the Year 1 teacher and the headteacher were most frequently involved in this decision.

3. What use has been made of phonics training and classroom materials for the teaching of phonics?

About half of the teachers responding to the literacy coordinator survey reported that their school had undertaken training on phonics over the school year 2011/2012, with a similar proportion reporting that teachers in their schools had attended external training specifically on the check. Teachers in nearly all schools surveyed prepared for the check by reading the *Check Administrators' Guide*²² and watching the online video *Scoring the year 1 phonics screening check training video*²³. Some schools used match-funding to pay for training and associated resources and materials.

4. How have schools communicated with parents/carers about the check?

The findings from the surveys suggest that most schools provided some sort of information to parents/carers prior to the administration of the check, with almost six out of ten schools reporting they sent information to parents/carers on how they could help with their child's phonics learning. About two thirds reported they had communicated the outcomes of the check to parents/carers via end-of year pupil reports, with about four in ten preferring to communicate them via a separate letter. Teachers reported that most parents/carers had given little or no reaction to the introduction of the check or to the results. Some case-study interviewees attributed this to the fact that they had effectively communicated information about the check in advance. However, as the case-studies and surveys were conducted shortly after the administration of the check it is possible that many parents/carers had not yet seen their child's results and/or that they have not yet had an opportunity to convey their thoughts and reactions to their child's school.

²² The National Curriculum assessments, Check Administrators Guide, Year 1 phonics screening check 2012 gave guidance on the administration of the check. It was available from <http://www.education.gov.uk/ks1> and was sent to schools prior to the check administration.

²³ Scoring the Year 1 phonics screening check training video gave examples of the check questions, format and marking. It was available online from 13th April, 2012 and could be accessed via the Department for Education's website at www.education.gov.uk/ks1 and in the phonics section of the NCA tools website at www.ncatools.education.gov.uk.

4.3 Next steps

This chapter concludes by outlining the next steps in the evaluation, including the completion of midpoint surveys and case-studies, analysis of National Pupil Database (NPD) data and the piloting of the value for money assessment.

Midpoint surveys and case-studies

The case-studies and surveys of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers will be repeated with the same respondents in summer 2013. Additional schools will be recruited to top-up the samples as required. As part of the case-studies parents/carers of up to two children in Years 1 and 2 will be interviewed. These will take place in both 2013 and 2014. Parents/carers will be asked about their perceptions around phonics teaching and the check and the extent to which they have been informed about the approach and their child's progress in reading. Literacy coordinators will be asked to complete a one-page proforma to collect data on the frequency of and approach to phonics teaching.

Analysis of National Pupil Database data

The primary objective of analysing NPD data is to explore the impact of the introduction of the check on Key Stage 1 reading scores. The approach to exploring the impact of the check on outcomes consists of two main components:

- **Absolute impact:** Analysis of progress made between early years foundation stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 reading scores by successive cohorts of pupils, to identify whether a step-change improvement does occur following the introduction of the check.
- **Relative impact:** Analysis of relative progress made by pupils at schools adopting different approaches in preparation for and in response to the check. This will test hypothesised mechanisms by which the check is intended to effect change, which in combination with qualitative evidence will provide insights into effective practice and provide greater confidence in the findings from part 1.

This analysis will be undertaken once in autumn 2014, modelling for each school the progress to Key Stage 1 for successive cohorts of pupils up to those who complete Key Stage 1 in 2013/14. If the check has had a positive impact, a step-change improvement in progress for the final two years of Key Stage 1 outcomes, i.e. for 2012/13 and 2013/14, is expected.

Value for money analysis

A critical component of the overall evaluation will be an assessment of Value for Money (VfM). An interim VfM assessment will be undertaken in the second year of the evaluation based on the first two years of survey and NPD analysis. This will provide early findings, and provide an opportunity for comment and refinement of the approach going into year 3. Analysis of VfM will draw on cost-effectiveness analysis and cost-benefit analysis. Through questions included in the teacher surveys, relative cost and time implications of different approaches adopted by schools and the

numbers of pupils engaged in additional support will be explored. In combination with NPD analysis of relative impact, this will enable cost effectiveness comparisons to be made.



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