Department for Education

Phonics screening check evaluation

Research report

May 2014

Matthew Walker, Shelley Bartlett, Helen Betts, Marian Sainsbury & Jack Worth - National Foundation for Educational Research

Contents

List of tables

List of figures

Executive summary

Introduction

This second interim report sets out the latest 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). The check was introduced for the first time in 2012 and is taken by all children in Year 1, unless their teachers make the judgement to disapply[1] them. It consists of an individual, oral assessment requiring the reading of words and pseudo-words. In 2013, Year 2 pupils who did not meet the expected standard in Year 1 were reassessed.

This report provides an overview of participating schools' phonics teaching practices and highlights any changes in practice since 2012. The report also explores the emerging impacts of the check, including an exploration of how the results of the check are being used by schools, and the extent to which the introduction of the check has led to other new work or activity. It draws on data collected from case-study interviews with staff in 19 primary schools and midpoint surveys of 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers in schools. Data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2013. A final report will be published in Spring 2015.

Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation has two main aims:

1. To explore whether issues raised in the pilot evaluation[2] 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;

---

[1] Children who are working well below the level of the screening check (for example, if they have shown no understanding of letter-sound correspondences), can be disapplied so they do not take part.

[2] 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.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182621/DFE-RR159.pdf

- 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

Interviews were undertaken with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers, Reception teachers and parents and carers in 19 case-study schools. Survey responses were collected from 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers. Where appropriate, comparisons are made to responses collected in Year 1 of the evaluation[3]. Data collection commenced the week beginning 24th June 2013, the week after the administration of the check. An analysis of results from the National Pupil Database (NPD) was undertaken.

Key Findings

Phonics teaching practices

- Teachers were 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 (60 per cent) of schools reported that they taught systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast'[4], although teachers' responses regarding the use of other methods to teach children to decode words were not wholly consistent with this data.

- Most case-study schools reported daily discrete phonics sessions for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, and frequently in Nursery. The majority of schools said they grouped children by ability for phonics sessions (an increasing trend), and more often than not the core programme used was Letters and Sounds.

- Teachers were asked about changes to phonics teaching that had been made as a result of their experiences of the check the previous year. The most frequently reported change by both survey and case-study respondents was the introduction of pseudo words into phonics sessions (of those who said they made changes to

---

[3] The methods used in the first year of the evaluation included 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: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf

[4] This envisages phonics as 'the prime approach to decoding print'.

phonics teaching, more than half reported starting to teach pseudo words in one or more of Reception, Year 1 and Year 2).

Phonics teaching

- In terms of phonics training, the most widely reported learning activities reported in the survey take place in staff or planning meetings, in-school workshops or training, and local authority training. The majority of literacy coordinators (96 per cent) felt that teachers in their school were adequately ('very well' or 'well') prepared to provide effective phonics teaching.

Preparation for the check

- Literacy coordinators reported that a smaller proportion of teachers engaged in activities to prepare for the check this year, compared to 2012. About three-quarters of Year 1 teachers surveyed this year had administered the check in 2012.

- Many Year 1 teachers reported making changes to their practice this year in preparation for the 2013 phonics check. These changes included starting to teach pseudo-words (49 per cent) and carrying out familiarisation or practice sessions with pupils (46 per cent).

Costs associated with the check

- Year 1 teachers spent the most time on activities that supported the introduction of the check (12 hours) followed by Year 2 teachers (5.8 hours). The most time-consuming activities were generally reported to be 'planning and preparation' and 'administration'.

- The mean cost of purchasing 'general phonics resources' was £623 per school, followed by 'general training on phonics' at £228, and 'external supply cover to administer the check' at £188.

- Just under half (44 per cent) of responding literacy coordinators reported that their school had incurred no additional financial costs in 2013 to specifically support the phonics screening check. It is likely that many schools invested in resources and training last year, when the check was first introduced, and that these costs will not need to be renewed every year.

Suitability of the check with different groups of learners

- Commenting on those pupils who did not have additional difficulties which may have affected their performance on the screening check, more Year 1 teachers reported that they felt the standard of the check was 'about right' this year compared to those who responded to this question in 2012 (66 per cent in 2013; 44 per cent in 2012).

Communicating with parents/carers

- When case-study schools reported that they had decided not to tell parents/carers about the check in advance, they did so in order to avoid extra pressure being put on pupils, parental/carer worry, and extra preparation work being undertaken with pupils.

Impacts of the check

- As was the case last year, the results from the screening check were reported to have prompted a lot of discussion between teachers, with the majority of literacy coordinators responding to the survey reporting that the results would be discussed between Year 1 and/ or Year 2 teacher(s) and the literacy coordinator, Headteacher or other senior leader (82 per cent).

- The majority of literacy coordinators (78 per cent) reported that the results would inform the identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics, while 64 per cent (up three percentage points on last year) reported that the results would inform the design of specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics.

- Despite some teachers being more positive about 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.

- Exploratory analysis of National Pupil Database (NPD) data suggests that the check provides additional information on pupils' progress as their literacy skills develop from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage to their outcomes at the end of key stage 1. Scores on the check tend to be consistent with, but not the same as, other measures of literacy development during these first years of school.

- Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check at the end of Year 1, but there is a substantial minority (over a quarter) who have not.

- The multilevel model revealed that positive attitudes and practices towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. Schools that are positive towards systematic synthetic phonics although unconvinced of the value of the check also have higher scores.

- In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school's enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.

Views on the value of the check

- Literacy coordinators' views on the extent to which the check provided valuable information for teachers appeared to be unchanged from last year, with about three in ten 'agreeing' or 'agreeing somewhat' that it was useful for teachers.

- Teachers interviewed as part of the case studies were generally more positive about the usefulness of the findings from the check than they were last year, with most reporting that the outcomes helped inform decisions about the support provided to children. However, teacher assessment was still viewed as the most useful source of information in informing such decisions.

Conclusions

As reported last year, one of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation so far is that many schools believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools revealed that almost all schools are 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. However, the findings indicate that most teachers do not see a commitment to systematic synthetic phonics as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

Overall, teachers were more positive about the check this year, with 72 per cent reporting they agreed at least 'to a small extent' that the check gave teachers useful information and 65 per cent who agreed it gave them new information[5]. More Year 1 teachers reported that they felt the standard of the check was 'about right' this year compared to those who responded to this question in 2012 (66 per cent in 2013; 44 per cent in 2012). The findings could suggest that more teachers had 'accepted' the check than was the case last year.

As was the case last year, 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, and was largely supported by exploratory analysis of NPD data, which suggests that while most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check, there is a substantial minority who have not. Despite this, the phonics screening check was reported to have provoked a great deal of discussion between school staff, although at a lower level than was reported last year. It is worth noting that as more children reached the expected standard this year, one could

---

[5] In response to similar questions reported in the first interim report, only 26 per cent of literacy coordinators agreed at least 'somewhat' with the statement 'The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers'.

reasonably presume that fewer teachers needed to spend time discussing and reviewing the results.

A slightly greater proportion of respondents reported using the results to create teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics (up three percentage points on last year). Moreover, when teachers were asked whether the introduction of the check had led to any new work or activity, just over half of literacy coordinators who participated in the survey reported that they had made general changes this school year to phonics teaching. The year groups most affected by changes to phonics teaching were reported to be Reception and Year 1, with the single biggest change being the introduction of pseudo words. The findings suggest that for many schools this is something new and represents a direct impact of the check on teaching. Notable proportions of literacy coordinators also reported they had introduced grouping for phonics in the past year which reflects the trend indicated by the case-study data towards this kind of differentiated phonics teaching. Other reported changes to teaching practices in 2013 included carrying out familiarisation or practice sessions with pupils in preparation for the check and a greater focus on the assessment of progress in phonics.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This second interim report sets out the latest 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 highlights any changes in practice since 2012, when the check was first introduced. The report also explores the emerging impacts of the check, including an exploration of how the results of the check are being used by schools, and the extent to which the introduction of the check has led to other new work or activity. It draws on data collected from case-study interviews with staff in 19 primary schools and midpoint surveys of 583 literacy coordinators and 625 Year 1 teachers in schools. Data collection commenced the week following the administration of the check in June 2013. A final report will be published in Spring 2015.

1.2 The phonics screening check

A number of research studies, most recently in this country Torgerson et al. (2006)[6], attest to the effectiveness of systematic phonics programmes in early literacy teaching. Similarly, the Ofsted report 'Reading by Six'[7] emphasises 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 guidance[8] 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. 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.

---

[6] 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.

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

[8] http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/phonics/a0010240/criteria-for-assuring-high-quality-phonic-work

Since the 2010 Schools White Paper[9], 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.

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 has been 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. This year, 2013, is the first in which children not reaching the expected standard in Year 1 re-took 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, in this second year, the evaluation aims to explore the following research questions:

---

[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-importance-of-teaching-the-schools-white-paper-2010

1. What will/ has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2?

2. Has the phonics screening check changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum?

3. Will/has the introduction of the phonics screening check have/had an impact on the standard of reading and writing?

This will add to the evidence on the research questions already addressed in the first interim report:

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?

1.4 Methodology

The methods used in the second year of the evaluation include in-depth qualitative research with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, parents and carers and Year 1 and 2 teachers in primary schools, as well as extensive quantitative data collection in the form of midpoint 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 has focused on Aim 2 of the evaluation, as detailed in Section 1.3 above. As such, the emphasis has been on exploring whether there have been any changes in the baseline position in teachers' attitudes and response to the check. Where appropriate, comparisons are made to responses collected in Year 1 of the evaluation[10]. 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. Data collection activities will be undertaken three times throughout the course of the study to

---

[10] The methods used in the first year of the evaluation included 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: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198994/DFE-RR286A.pdf

gather longitudinal data. Surveys and case-studies will be undertaken in the summer term in June-July 2012, June-July 2013 and June-July 2014.

More detail on these different areas of data collection activity is provided below. An outline of the research tasks that will inform the final report is included in Chapter 5.

Midpoint surveys of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers

NFER distributed midpoint surveys to Year 1 teachers and 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) in a nationally representative sample of primary schools in June 2013. Data collection commenced the week beginning 24th June 2013, the week after the administration of the check.

Staff responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire were asked to indicate the role(s) in which they were responding to the questions. The findings are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Profile of staff responding to the literacy coordinator questionnaire

Role	%
Literacy coordinator	68
Key stage/year group coordinator	25
Other senior leader	20
Headteacher	18
Other	7
Missing	2
N=583	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013

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

The majority (68 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.

The literacy coordinator surveys explored such areas as: phonics teaching practices in schools; schools' preparation for the implementation of the screening check; communication with parents and carers; and their views about phonics and literacy teaching in general. The Year 1 teacher survey focused on: their experiences of preparing for and administering the check; the appropriateness of the check for different groups of pupils; any changes in their practice; and their experience, if any, of local authority monitoring. Response rates for both surveys can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Survey response rates

Survey	Surveys Sent (n)	Responses received (n)	Response rate (%)
Year 1 teachers	1065	625	59
Literacy coordinators	1065	583	55

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators and Year 1 teachers, 2013

Analysis of the school characteristics of those Year 1 teachers responding to the survey, such as key stage 1 performance band and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), revealed that the sample of achieved Year 1 teacher respondents[11] were from schools that exhibited broadly similar characteristics to primary schools nationally (see Table 3 below). Given this, the sample sizes achieved are large enough to detect statistically significant differences.

---

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

Table 3: Representation of participating primary schools compared to schools nationally (based on responses to Year 1 teacher survey)

		National population		Achieved Year 1 teacher sample 2013	
		Number	**%**	**Number**	**%**
KS1 English performance band 2010	1 Lowest 20%	3,285	21	132	21
	2 2nd lowest 20%	2,964	19	111	18
	3 Middle 20%	3,005	20	107	17
	4 2nd highest 20%	3,026	20	140	22
	5 Highest 20%	3,144	20	128	21
Standard Primary Bands - % pupils eligible for FSM	1.00 Lowest FSM <= 8%	5,349	35	207	33
	2.00 Low FSM > 8% & <= 20%	5,081	33	214	34
	3.00 Middle FSM > 20% & <= 35%	3,114	20	133	21
	4.00 High FSM >35% & <= 50%	1,470	10	51	8
	5.00 Highest FSM > 50%	410	3	13	2
% of pupils with statements (2009/10)	1 None	3,897	25	180	29
	2 1 - 2%	8,761	57	320	51
	3 3 - 29%	2,392	16	111	18
	4 30% +	367	2	7	1
% pupils with English as an additional language 2010/11	1 None	3,236	21	142	23
	2 1 - 5%	6,845	44	282	45
	3 6 - 49%	4,678	30	170	27
	4 50% +	665	4	24	4
Primary school type	1 Infant/First	2,149	14	112	18
	2 Primary/Combined	12,054	78	469	75
	4 Middle	30	<1	2	<1
	6 Special schools/PRUs	353	2	7	1
	7 Academy	838	5	28	5
Total schools		15,424	100	625	100

School case-studies

In order to gather a more in-depth understanding of the early implementation and impact of the phonics screening check, a series of school case-studies were undertaken between June and July 2013, focussing on the experiences of 19 schools. As reported above, the case-study findings presented in this report are taken from the second of three rounds of visits to schools to build up a longitudinal picture of the impact 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 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.

Thirteen of the 19 case-studies involved a visit to the school, while six were conducted by telephone. The case-studies consisted of qualitative interviews with senior school leaders, literacy coordinators, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers and parents/carers. Topics covered as part of the visits to schools included: experiences of administering the check; impacts associated with the introduction of the check; and the costs and benefits associated with the check.

The final set of visits will take place in the summer term in June and July 2014.

Table 4: Selected characteristics of the 19 schools involved in the case-study phase of the evaluation

	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 (2012)
1.	Community	3-11	550	4%	25%	91%	74%
2.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	5-11	110	13%	8%	3%	88%
3.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	3-11	230	10%	37%	67%	96%
4.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	4-11	200	8%	9%	19%	100%
5.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	4-11	90	12%	11%	*SUPP	91%
6.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	3-11	464	4%	3%	1%	90%
7.	Voluntary Aided School	3-11	95	3%	*SUPP	*SUPP%	80%
8.	Community School	3-11	515	11%	27%	47%	93%
9.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	4-11	170	5%	9%	3%	82%
10.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	4-11	420	8%	10%	69%	100%
11.	Foundation Special School	3-11	90	100%	47%	7%	0%
12.	Community School	3-11	230	9%	7%	5%	90%
13.	Foundation School	3-11	785	10%	12%	38%	82%
14.	Voluntary Aided School	3-11	250	8%	36%	21%	75%
15.	Academy - Converter Mainstream	3-11	230	9%	41%	*SUPP	96%
16.	Community Special School	2-16	135	68%	45%	*SUPP%	*SUPP
17.	Voluntary Controlled School	4-11	325	5%	15%	6%	65%
18.	Community School	3-11	470	7%	29%	80%	75%
19.	Community School	3-11	360	5%	36%	3%	67%
England – all schools average				8%	19%	18%	79%

Source: NFER evaluation of the phonics screening check, 2013
*SUPP – Information has been suppressed by DfE because the underlying numbers are too small
The data above have 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 and midpoint surveys, supplemented with data gathered from case-study visits to 19 schools, as well as the case-study evidence collected in Year 1 of the evaluation. Changes in respondents' practices or views, as compared to those detailed in the first report, are highlighted throughout. 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 associated with the check, their views on the appropriateness of the check with different groups of learners, and the impacts associated with the check.

Chapter 4 draws on data collected through the National Pupil Database (NPD) and explores pupil attainment and progress in literacy.

The concluding chapter draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation and provides an early assessment of the extent to which the phonics screening check is making an impact on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2. 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 current policy recommendations 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 since the introduction of the check

Key Findings

Phonics teaching practices

- Teachers were 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 (60 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.

- Most case-study schools reported daily discrete phonics sessions for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, and frequently in Nursery. The majority of schools said they grouped children by ability for phonics sessions, and more often than not the core programme used was Letters and Sounds.

- Teachers were asked about changes to phonics teaching that had been made as a result of their experiences of the check the previous year. The most frequently reported change by both survey and case-study respondents was the introduction of pseudo words into phonics sessions (of those who said they made changes to phonics teaching, more than half reported starting to teach pseudo words in one or more of Reception, Year 1 and Year 2).

Phonics training

- In terms of phonics training, the most widely reported learning activities in the survey were staff or planning meetings, in-school workshops or training, and local authority training. The majority of literacy coordinators (96 per cent) felt that teachers in their school were adequately ('very well' or 'quite well') prepared to provide effective phonics teaching.

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 also explores the level of phonics training received by those teachers involved in the evaluation.

2.1 Phonics teaching practices

The evaluation aimed to track the development of teaching practices regarding phonics, including any changes made to teaching as a result of the introduction of and experiences of 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.

Table 5 presents survey data indicating schools' perceptions of their approach to phonics within overall early literacy teaching. More than half (60 per cent) identified themselves as teaching systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast', with 21 per cent reporting that they teach phonics discretely alongside other cueing strategies. This data suggests commitment to phonics-based teaching in some capacity, with only a small minority of schools (seven per cent) describing their overall approach towards phonics as 'always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies'. These figures do not differ greatly from equivalent data collected in 2012, although there has been a slight increase in the proportion of schools reporting a 'first and fast' approach, accompanied by a slight decrease in those schools reporting that they teach phonics alongside other cueing strategies.

Table 5: **Teacher reports of their school's approach to phonics teaching: 2012 and 2013**

	% 2012	% 2013	% change
Systematic synthetic phonics is taught 'first and fast'	53	60	+7
Phonics is taught discretely alongside other cueing strategies	26	21	-5
Phonics is always integrated as one of a range of cueing strategies	5	7	+2
No response	17	12	-5
	N = 844	N = 583	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012 and 2013
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, 87 per cent 'agreed' or 'agreed somewhat' with the contradictory statement 'A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words'.

This contradiction in teacher responses was also apparent in 2012, and reflects a misunderstanding 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, as in 2012, the figure of 60 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 from case-study schools was collated on the frequency of and time spent on phonics teaching. The most frequently described approach was for schools to hold daily, discrete phonics sessions for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (often beginning in Nursery) and key stage 1, mostly lasting between 15 and 20 minutes. Eleven case-study schools reported that they grouped children for phonics sessions, often with children from different year groups within the key stage (sometimes including Reception) mixed according to their phonics ability. This represents a marked difference from case-study responses in 2012, where a smaller number of schools reported ability grouping for phonics whilst one or two said they had plans to introduce such grouping; the same tendency is reflected in the survey findings reported below. One school explained that they have 'Phonics o'clock' – dedicated phonics time which takes place at the same time every day and involves Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 children, grouped according to ability. Teachers and support staff each lead a different ability group, creating a 'real buzz' across the school:

> *I think the phonics o'clock specific sessions have had an impact on the children, it has been very positive and the children actually say "what no phonics today?"*
>
> Year 2 teacher

It was less common for schools to report that phonics sessions were delivered to the whole class, although one school explained that they had tried ability grouping and found children were not benefitting significantly; as a result of this, this year children are taught in their class groups, with those who are struggling taken in small groups, an approach they have found to be more successful.

Four schools reported that they aimed to finish a systematic phonics approach by the end of Year 1, or to reduce the number of discrete phonics sessions each week, so that work in Year 2 can focus on reading comprehension and/or spelling.

At key stage 2, the picture was very similar to that reported in 2012. Twelve schools reported teaching phonics beyond key stage 1 (particularly in Year 3), but tended to say that this was less systematic, more integrated into other work, and was likely to take place in the context of intervention groups to support struggling children or those with special educational needs (SEN). Three teachers felt that if a phonics approach had not been successful for children who had reached key stage 2, an alternative, more age-appropriate strategy or scheme was required (responses referred to Reading Partners, Freshstart and Read Write Inc.).

Both the literacy coordinator survey and case-study schools provided information regarding the resources used to deliver phonics teaching. Responses from the survey indicated that the most widely used 'core' phonics programme was Letters and Sounds;

76 per cent of survey respondents reported using it. This tended to be primarily in Reception and key stage 1; of those who reported using Letters and Sounds, almost all used it in these three year groups. Letters and Sounds was still used, to a lesser extent, at key stage 2 (especially Year 3). Just below 40 per cent of schools who participated in the survey said they used Jolly Phonics as their 'core' programme. The majority of those who used this programme did so in Reception (37 per cent of all schools), with its use becoming less frequent moving through key stage 1 (Year 1, 18 per cent; Year 2, 11 per cent). This programme was used very little beyond key stage 1.

Read Write Inc was also used by almost a quarter (24 per cent) of schools in the survey, again mainly in the Early Years Foundation Stage and key stage 1. Use of this programme, like the others, declined in subsequent years.

The case-study data largely reflects that gathered in the survey; teachers reported that Read Write Inc was used as a whole-school approach rather than being restricted to key stage 1, and nine schools described using Jolly Phonics in the Early Years Foundation Stage and/or in key stage 1. The majority of case-study schools (12 schools) reported using a variety of resources rather than relying on only one. In the survey, 21 per cent of all respondents reported using 'other' core published phonics. Furthermore, two per cent of all respondents said they did not use a core published programme in each of Reception, Year 1 and Year 2; this figure rose slightly in each key stage 2 year group. Two case-study schools reported using non published phonics schemes; one was a tailored programme designed by the school, the other a programme based on Letters and Sounds that had been devised for the school by a literacy consultant.

Literacy coordinators who participated in the survey were asked whether they had made any general changes this school year to phonics teaching, in light of their experience of the phonics check in 2012. Just over half of the sample had done so. Respondents were asked to indicate which year groups these changes applied to (Reception, Year 1, Year 2). The year group most affected by changes to phonics teaching was Year 1; changes here were reported by 52 per cent of respondents, compared with 34 and 40 per cent in Reception and Year 2 respectively. Table 6 shows the key changes reported across the three year groups by those who reported a change in teaching. In Reception and key stage 1, the biggest change was starting to teach pseudo words, suggesting that for many schools this is something new and represents a direct impact of the check on teaching. This effect appears to be most striking in Year 1, a finding which is perhaps not surprising given this is the year in which the check takes place. For the other changes shown in Table 6, the proportions of literacy coordinators who reported these are fairly similar across the three year groups. The notable proportions of teachers who said they introduced grouping for phonics in the past year reflects the trend indicated by the case-study data towards this kind of differentiated phonics teaching.

Table 6: **Percentage of teachers reporting specific changes to phonics teaching during the 2012/2013 school year**

Change	Reception (%)	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (%)
Started to teach pseudo words	52	63	58
Increased assessment of progress in phonics	45	47	48
Introducing grouping/setting for phonics	41	35	43
Increased the time devoted to phonics teaching	42	41	42
	N=197	N=300	N=234

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013

Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

Smaller proportions reported making the other changes offered as options: adopting a new phonics programme or starting to use the existing one more systematically; increasing the length, frequency or number of phonics teaching sessions; and changing to teaching phonics 'first and fast'.

Direct comparisons between the 2012 and 2013 survey data cannot be made concerning changes to phonics teaching, as although the 2012 survey asked about changes to phonics teaching that school year in anticipation of the check, it did not make reference to any particular year group. However, it is interesting to note that in 2012, 34 per cent of schools reported having made changes. This is the same as the proportion in 2013 who reported changes in Reception, but lower than that in Year 1 and 2 (52 and 40 per cent respectively). Just under half (44 per cent) said that they had not made any changes in light of their experience of the phonics check, compared with 65 per cent in 2012 who said they had not made any changes in anticipation of the check. Taken together, these figures indicate that the introduction of the phonics check in Year 1 appears to be having some effect on phonics teaching and classroom practice.

As in 2013, the 2012 survey asked participants about specific changes that had been made, and some of these are comparable to some extent with those in the 2013 findings. Broadly speaking across the two surveys, there were no major differences between the proportions of teachers who reported each specific change to phonics teaching. It is worth noting that the 2012 survey did not ask about changes related to the teaching of pseudo words, which in the 2013 survey appears to be an issue (see Table 6). The reasons why some schools have introduced pseudo words are explored in the sections below.

Responses collected in the case studies provide further evidence of changes made in 2013 as a result of the check, specifically the steps undertaken by schools to prepare children for the check this year. Reports from teachers reflect the survey data in that ten schools said they had either introduced pseudo words into phonics teaching for the first

time or had increased the focus on these words, with several commenting that last year some children had attempted to make the pseudo words into real words and got them wrong as a result. Some teachers clearly felt that this increased focus on pseudo words was necessary in order to enable children to succeed in the check:

The only direct impact that it [the check] *has had is the inclusion of pseudo-words in our teaching. I think that would be a bit unfair on the children otherwise if all of a sudden they were confronted with these words they had no idea about.*

Year 1 teacher

Comments suggested reluctance on the part of some teachers to cover 'nonsense' words, or doubts as to the value of this teaching:

It [the check] *hasn't really impacted on the teaching of phonics. It's just led to more work on the teaching of nonsense words, but I am not sure this will help with their reading and writing skills.*

Year 1 teacher

Would we change the way we're teaching if you removed the test? No. Apart from maybe we wouldn't teach the nonsense words so strongly.

Headteacher

Case-study interviewees gave a clear indication that this year they had prepared children for the check, for example by familiarising them with the format and administration of the check through the use of practice materials, or beginning to recap sounds earlier. Teachers did voice some concern over what they perceived to be 'teaching to the test', a view encapsulated by these teachers:

Before, it was just a case of introducing the sounds earlier than the scheme dictated in order to facilitate the test, which is not ideal …, but you have to also ensure that the children are able to pass the test. So you have to ensure the coverage is there. That's our responsibility.

Literacy coordinator

The test makes no difference whatsoever to what we do other than the fact that we're teaching nonsense words we wouldn't have been teaching ... it's teaching to the test.

Headteacher

In contrast to this, teachers from ten case-study schools commented that phonics teaching had always been a high priority in school, that they were happy with their schools' approaches and therefore felt no need to make changes to teaching or

preparing children for the check in any way. Others said they had made changes such as refreshing phonics resources, but not as a result of the check – this would have happened regardless.

2.2 Views about phonics and literacy teaching

To complement the information about practice, 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 7: **Teachers' views about phonics as an approach to teaching reading**

Statement	Agree (%)	Agree somewhat (%)	Uncertain or mixed views (%)	Disagree somewhat (%)	Disagree (%)	No response (%)
I am convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching	64	26	7	2	1	2
Phonics should always be taught in the context of meaningful reading	66	24	6	2	1	2
Phonics has too high a priority in current education policy	11	22	15	28	22	2
A variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words	66	24	5	2	2	1
Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children	6	18	19	28	28	2
N=583						

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013
Due to percentages being rounded to the nearest integer, they may not sum to 100

Table 7 shows that the large majority of respondents (89 per cent[12]) 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, 90 per cent also 'agreed' or 'agreed somewhat' with the statement that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. These percentages mirror almost exactly last year's findings, and indicate that most teachers do not see a commitment to systematic synthetic phonics as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

---

[12] This figure differs from the figures in the technical appendices and Table 7 due to rounding.

Evidence from the case studies supports the survey data in that interviewees were extremely positive about phonics teaching and its contribution to reading development. Phonics as an approach to teaching reading was described as 'fundamental and central' and 'essential' by headteachers in two different schools, and by this Year 2 teacher as 'the prime approach to reading, it's the best way of teaching our children to read.' Some teachers highlighted a real impact of phonics in their school: 'I'm a firm believer in phonics. When we introduced Letters and Sounds we saw real improvements in children's reading.' (Year 2 teacher); 'The reading attainment in this school since there's been a more structured, extended approach to phonics speaks for itself and does have an impact.' (Year 2 teacher). This literacy coordinator also emphasised the way in which phonics can build confidence:

> [Phonics] *is crucial in giving children the skills to be able to decode ... that means a child can succeed quite quickly with their reading and I think that's quite crucial as well ... they can feel like they're achieving something.*

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. Even amongst those who were strongly supportive of phonics was a firm conviction that other strategies were of equal value and that phonics as a method of teaching reading was most successful when used in conjunction with other techniques. The following observation typifies overall opinion:

> *I think it's a significant element but it should be seen as one of a few different strategies to be used with reading ... I think that's crucial for all children that they have a variety of strategies. If they're just dependant on decoding all the time it stops the fluency.*

Literacy coordinator

Consistent with this view of phonics as one of a bank of strategies for reading was the fact that case-study 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, indicating an interpretation of 'synthetic' phonics in common with policy guidance, were rare: 'There are so many teachers who will say that not one method suits everybody... but I think the moment you start to use other methods you actually aren't doing synthetic phonics anymore.'

Respondents in nine case-study schools highlighted the importance of phonics being taught in the context of meaningful reading, a view with which 89 per cent[13] of survey respondents also agreed to some extent. The following comments reflect the views of these case-study teachers:

---

[13] This figure differs from the figure in the technical appendices and Table 7 due to rounding.

I don't think that you could argue that it's [phonics is] *not helpful, but equally it's got to run alongside a programme of teaching of reading and it's also got to run alongside using quality texts as part of your literacy lesson*

Literacy coordinator

To read and decode words I think it is a fantastic tool, to comprehend that is a whole different ball game ... Comprehension needs to be taught also and that is all about word meaning and understanding the context, thinking about sentence structures.

Year 2 teacher

Further evidence of teacher support for a phonic-based approach to reading is provided by responses to the final statement in Table 7 ('Systematic phonics teaching is necessary only for some children.') Just under a quarter of those who took part in the literacy coordinator survey agreed to some extent with the statement, whereas more than half disagreed to some extent, reflecting the common opinion of phonics as necessary and suitable for most children. This data however should be considered alongside the views of several teachers involved in the case studies who were advocates of phonics, but who emphasised a need to be aware of individual differences in children:

Since introducing it [phonics], *I can see it improved spelling and writing in the school, but I can also see it's not for every child; other methods work very well for some pupils.*

Headteacher

I do think it [phonics] *needs to be an integral part of the daily learning routine ... as long as we are able to work on the other strategies as well so we are not disadvantaging the children who find it difficult to learn to read phonetically*

Literacy coordinator

Half of respondents (50 per cent) disagreed to some extent with the statement that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and teachers in only four of the case-study schools specifically commented on the emphasis on phonics in policy. This remark from a literacy coordinator summarises their views:

I think ... the current government is putting far too much emphasis on phonics being the only way that children learn to read ... there's a danger if we become over-reliant on phonics we end up with huge amounts of children who are great at decoding text, but they have no understanding of what they're reading.

However, although only a small number referred specifically to policy, there was a feeling of unease amongst other case-study teachers that the current intense focus on phonics

is rather at odds with what they feel they should be doing in terms of teaching children to read. This comment gives an insight into these concerns:

We do value phonics and the impact that it has had on writing in particular is evident but we are also very keen on prompting reading for enjoyment and pleasure and encouraging children to use all their skills when they are reading and it does feel that this screening has put the limelight on phonics and everything else has just been forgotten ... because that is what we are here for, to teach them to read not to teach them phonics.

<div align="right">Year 1 teacher</div>

Some teachers clearly regarded learning phonics as somewhat separate from learning to read, and were not entirely sure what the implications of phonics are for reading overall. This uncertainty is perhaps reflected in the survey data for the statement (discussed above) that 'phonics has too high a priority in current education policy'; a third (33 per cent) agreed with this to some extent and a further 15 per cent reported uncertain or mixed views, illustrating the complexity of this issue for teachers and 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.

Overall, in terms of views about phonics' place within literacy teaching, both the survey data and case-study responses indicate broadly similar views as those found in 2012. However, in 2012, phonics was regarded by the majority as contributing positively towards spelling development; this was mostly the case again in 2013, although four teachers expressed concerns about a phonics focus having a detrimental effect on spelling. The following comments reflect the concerns voiced:

… phonics can actually sometimes have a negative impact on spelling.

<div align="right">Year 2 teacher</div>

There are a lot of teachers who are feeling a bit uncomfortable and worried that we are going to teach a generation of bad spellers.

<div align="right">Reception teacher</div>

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. On the whole, teachers were very welcoming towards the financial support and positive about the products they had bought. Teachers seemed to appreciate in particular the fact that it had enabled them to buy resources to supplement their existing phonics programme, e.g. phoneme fans, phoneme whiteboards, phonics games and phonics readers (e.g. Floppy's Phonics). One literacy coordinator said: 'It has enabled us to have more resources to support the children' and a Year 2 teacher commented that: 'I'm not sure we would have been able to

purchase as many materials without the match-funding.' One school reported that they had used the funding for external phonics training, and emphasised the value of this for all involved, particularly teaching assistants. There were very few negative comments regarding match-funding; one teacher felt it was inappropriate to identify specific schemes and programmes, and that schools should have complete freedom to buy their chosen resources using ring-fenced funding. A few teachers did not know much about the funding but felt that in principle anything which allowed the school to buy new resources was a good idea. One literacy coordinator commented that the match-funding was not publicised particularly widely, and that she was only alerted to it 'through people obviously wanting you to buy their resources'.

2.3 Phonics training

As part of the survey, literacy coordinators were asked to indicate how many staff in different roles had undertaken various learning activities specifically focused on the teaching of phonics (not the phonics check) during the school year 2012-2013. For Year 1 teachers, the most widely reported activities seen in schools were staff or planning meetings (in 46 per cent of schools), in-school workshops or training (in 38 per cent of schools), and local authority training (in 27 per cent of schools); however these activities were seen to varying extent within these schools. These activities were also the most frequently undertaken, and undertaken in similar proportions, by Reception teachers. Similarly, Year 2 teachers and support staff were most likely to prepare in the above ways with the exception of attending local authority training, which was not seen to the same extent within Year 2 (19 per cent) and support staff (17 per cent) groups as with Reception and Year 1 staff. Across all staff groups, staff were least likely to have undertaken 'other' learning activities or training from some other provider. Support staff were also unlikely to have undertaken individual or private study on the teaching of phonics.

Across all staff groups, it was normally only one or two staff who had undertaken the learning activity in question. This is true in all cases except in the case of school workshops or training, where it was much rarer (one per cent) for one single member of support staff to undertake this form of learning, and more likely that if it was undertaken it would be undertaken by two or more support staff.

In each staff group one per cent of survey participants reported 'other' learning activities had been undertaken – these included phonics workshops for parents/carers, meetings or workshops to reflect on phonics teaching and to discuss how to improve it, additional support in class to deliver phonics, and team teaching with the literacy coordinator.

Responses from case-study interviewees also suggest that training related to phonics remains a high priority for some schools, although for others this took place during previous years and has not necessarily been repeated. One school said they receive phonics training on a yearly basis and another described how the local authority has

provided support to upskill staff, particularly those who teach beyond Year 2. Two schools reported fairly wide-scale phonics training involving a substantial number of teachers and support staff across the school, and another reflected that teachers had discussed the need for additional training and support throughout the school. A number of literacy coordinators said that one aspect of their role was to monitor phonics teaching in school and identify training or support needs.

The majority of survey respondents (96 per cent) felt that teachers in their school were adequately ('very well' or 'quite well') prepared to provide effective phonics teaching, with three-quarters saying they were 'very well' prepared. This figure of 96 per cent is slightly higher than the 90 per cent in 2012 who thought teachers were adequately prepared, and perhaps reflects teachers' growing confidence and skill in teaching phonics. As was the case last year, there were no reports of teachers being 'poorly' prepared in this respect.

3. The phonics screening check

Key Findings

Preparation for the check

- Many Year 1 teachers reported making changes to their practice this year in preparation for the 2013 phonics check. These changes included starting to teach pseudo-words (49 per cent) and carrying out familiarisation or practice sessions with pupils (46 per cent).

- Year 1 teachers spent the most time on activities that supported the introduction of the check (12 hours) followed by Year 2 teachers (5.8 hours). The most time-consuming activities were generally reported to be 'planning and preparation' and 'administration'.

Costs associated with the check

- Year 1 teachers spent the most time on activities that supported the introduction of the check (12 hours) followed by Year 2 teachers (5.8 hours). The most time-consuming activities were generally reported to be 'planning and preparation' and 'administration'.

- The mean cost of purchasing 'general phonics resources' was £623 per school, followed by 'general training on phonics' at £228, and 'external supply cover to administer the check' at £188.

- Just under half (44 per cent) of responding literacy coordinators reported that their school had incurred no additional financial costs in 2013 to specifically support the phonics screening check. It is likely that many schools invested in resources and training last year, when the check was first introduced, and that these costs will not need to be renewed every year.

Suitability of the check with different groups of learners

- Commenting on those pupils who did not have additional difficulties which may have affected their performance on the screening check, more Year 1 teachers reported that they felt the standard of the check was 'about right' this year compared to those who responded to this question in 2012 (66 per cent in 2013; 44 per cent in 2012).

Communicating with parents/carers

- When case-study schools reported that they had decided not to tell parents/carers about the check in advance, they did so in order to avoid extra pressure being put on pupils, parental/carer worry, and extra preparation work being undertaken with pupils.

Impacts of the check

- As was the case last year, the results from the screening check were reported to have prompted a lot of discussion between teachers, with the majority of literacy coordinators responding to the survey reporting that the results would be discussed between Year 1 and/ or Year 2 teacher(s) and the literacy coordinator, Headteacher or other senior leader (82 per cent).

- The majority of literacy coordinators (78 per cent) reported that the results would inform the identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics, while 64 per cent (up three percentage points on last year) reported that the results would inform the design of specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics.

- Despite some teachers being more positive about 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.

Pupil attainment and progress in literacy

- Exploratory analysis of National Pupil Database (NPD) data suggests that the check provides additional information on pupils' progress as their literacy skills develop from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage to their outcomes at the end of key stage 1. Scores on the check tend to be consistent with, but not the same as, other measures of literacy development during these first years of school.

- Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check at the end of Year 1, but there is a substantial minority (over a quarter) who have not.

- The multilevel model revealed that positive attitudes and practices towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. Schools that are positive towards systematic synthetic phonics although unconvinced of the value of the check also have higher scores.

- In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school's enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.

Views on the value of the check

- Literacy coordinators' views on the extent to which the check provided valuable information for teachers appeared to be unchanged from last year, with about three in ten 'agreeing' or 'agreeing somewhat' that it was useful for teachers.

> • Teachers interviewed as part of the case studies were generally more positive about the usefulness of the findings from the check than they were last year, with most reporting that the outcomes helped inform decisions about the support provided to children. However, teacher assessment was still viewed as the most useful source of information in informing such decisions.

This chapter explores teachers' preparation for the phonics screening check and their experience of administering it, and compares these to the experiences of teachers in 2012. It considers teachers' views on the costs of implementing the check and the suitability of the check for different groups of learners. The communication which occurred with parents and carers this year and last year is compared and the impact of the check this year is considered in relation to the impact seen last year. Teachers' views on the value of the check are summarised, and again compared to their thoughts last year, before NFER's typology of schools is revisited.

3.1 Preparation for the 2013 check

Almost three-quarters of Year 1 teachers reported that they had administered the check last year, which could account for the decrease in the use of external resources and training seen this year. Literacy coordinators most frequently reported that teachers in their school prepared for the phonics screening check by individual familiarisation with the Check Administrators' Guide (89 per cent); this is an eight percentage point decrease on last year. Other commonly reported methods of preparing for the check included: watching the online video *Scoring the phonics screening check training* (2013: 69 per cent, 2012: 82 per cent); a year group, key stage, or other type of staff discussion (2013: 60 per cent, 2012: 56 per cent[14]); and discussion with the literacy coordinator themselves (2013: 57 per cent, 2012: 57 per cent). Teachers in just under one in four schools (2013: 24 per cent, 2012: 50 per cent[15]) prepared by attending external training provided by the local authority. With the exception of the decrease in the number of teachers preparing using the resources provided by the DfE and the local authority, these figures are largely in line with the results seen last year.

In terms of changes in teaching practice in preparation for the 2013 phonics check, over 40 per cent of Year 1 teachers reported they started to teach pseudo-words (49 per cent), carried out familiarisation or practice sessions with pupils (46 per cent) or made general changes to phonics teaching in Year 1 (40 per cent). Just under one third of teachers (30 per cent) reported they also increased their assessment of progress in

---

[14] It should be noted that in 2012 this option was worded as *Year group or key stage meeting* only, and thus comparisons should be viewed with caution.

[15] It should be noted that in 2012 this question was asked in a different manner and thus comparisons should be viewed with caution.

phonics this year, whilst 21 per cent of Year 1 teachers reported making no changes in teaching practice in preparation for the check; it is unclear if these teachers felt changes were unnecessary or if they felt they had already made sufficient changes in preparation for the 2012 check. These findings are broadly in line with the literacy coordinator responses reported above.

In order to prepare for the check, over half of Year 1 teachers (56 per cent) reported using the teacher practice sheet from the DfE website in order to familiarise pupils with the check or the layout close to the check administration. One in four teachers also used the practice sheet throughout the year in preparatory work with pupils (27 per cent) and as a template for making additional practice sheets (24 per cent). A similar proportion (25 per cent) did not indicate a method by which they made use of the practice sheet.

In the case studies, little mention was made of preparation specifically for the 2013 phonics screening check over and above general changes to teaching practice. One form of preparation which did come through from three case-study interviewees was the use of practice checks or practice sheets specifically to either familiarise pupils with the check situation or as a means of deciding upon disapplication.

> *If they didn't score at least six out of the eight on the practice sheet… I went to the head and said "I don't think it is appropriate for these children as I don't think they are ready yet"*
>
> Senior leader

In just over half (55 per cent) of cases, Year 1 teachers reported that a decision regarding the disapplication of pupils had not been made because no pupils had needed to be disapplied. This 'not applicable' category was not an option in the 2012 survey and so a comparison cannot be made. The people most frequently reported as being involved in the disapplication process this year were the Year 1 teacher themselves (39 per cent) and the headteacher (36 per cent); in 2012, staff in these roles were also reported to be most frequently involved in the decision to disapply (Year 1 teacher: 91 per cent, headteacher: 72 per cent), although they were involved to a greater extent in 2012 than in 2013.

In the 2013 survey, Year 1 teachers were given four possible reasons for disapplication, along with an "other" option; these options were the same as the three given in 2012 with the addition of the option "The child does not speak sufficient English". All of the disapplication reasons present in both years of the survey received lower proportions of responses in 2013 compared to 2012. However, the majority of teachers (65 per cent) did not record their reasons for disapplication in 2013; this number has increased upon last year, where 43 per cent of teachers did not record a reason for disapplication. This year, Year 1 teachers most frequently disapplied pupils when they showed a lack of understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (2013: 23 per cent, 2012: 43 per cent). Slightly more than one in ten teachers reported disapplication due to each of insufficient English (2013: 11 per cent, 2012: NA) and 'other' reasons (2013: 11 per cent,

2012: 27 per cent); the lower rate of 'other' reasons this year may be accounted for by the addition of an 'insufficient English' category . Of those 11 per cent indicating other reasons for disapplication, about two thirds reported disapplication was due to generic special educational needs status, or a specific learning disorder, such as autism or Down's syndrome.

Teachers were asked their criterion for applying a judgement of a child having no phoneme-grapheme correspondence only if it were applicable; a total of 201 teachers responded (32 per cent of the teachers surveyed). Responses were split roughly equally between having no letter sound recognition, being unable to blend at all, and being unable to fully blend.

Around half of case-study schools said they did not disapply any pupils from the check. When pupils were disapplied, there were normally several members of staff involved in the discussion:

> *I spoke with the SENCO[16] and discussed with the class teachers as well and with the assistant head*
>
> Literacy coordinator

However, in three case-study interviews the effect disapplied pupils would have on the school's mean score was questioned, and it appears this uncertainty may have influenced some schools' decision-making processes.

> *We did enter him eventually… We didn't know if we disapplied a child whether he would just go down as a no score.*
>
> Headteacher

3.2 Administration of the 2013 check

There was large variation in the number of pupils with whom Year 1 teachers conducted the check this year. As seen in Figure 1, the mean number of checks conducted by individual teachers was 38 pupils and the median was 30. With a little over two thirds of pupils reaching the expected standard, these figures are similar to the national picture where 69 per cent of children reached the expected standard. It seemed to be fairly common for the performance of a few pupils not to meet teacher expectations, but this was equally likely of those expected and not expected to reach the standard.

---

[16] Special Educational Needs Coordinator

Figure 1: **The average number of pupils in the survey sample who were assessed using the phonics screening check, who reached or did not reach the required standard, and were expected or were not expected to reach the standard**

In total, how many children did you assess using the phonics screening check?

Mean = 38, Median = 30

Of those you assessed, how many *did not* reach the required standard?

Mean = 11, Median = 8

Of those you assessed, how many *did* reach the required standard?

Mean = 27, Median = 23

Of these, how many did you expect *to* reach the required standard?

Mean = 3, Median = 1

Of these, how many did you expect *not to* reach the required standard?

Mean = 3, Median = 1

Of the Year 1 teachers who returned a questionnaire in 2013, the majority (73 per cent) had conducted the check with Year 1 pupils in 2012. Two thirds (66 per cent) of Year 1 teachers responding this year conducted the repeat check with Year 2 pupils.

This was explored further in case-study schools, where most schools sought cover for the check internally, using a range of staff within the school. Other than individual class teachers conducting the check, there were cases of Year 1 teachers conducting checks with both Year 1 and Year 2 pupils, as well as headteachers and literacy specialists doing so.

Often, in cases where a teacher may have administered the check with a child with whom they were less familiar and a specific issue, such as speech impairment, was present, then a teacher who knew the pupil well would watch the check administration to ensure accuracy. Conversely, the possibility of a pupil being unfamiliar with the check administrator was often not considered an issue:

> [I'm familiar to the Year 2s] *because I have been doing reading recovery… they have known me from previous years.*

> Literacy coordinator

Although, in one school potential pupil unfamiliarity with the administrator was noted by staff who were more familiar with some of the pupils sitting the check:

> *Although* [teacher administering the check] *isn't new, the children aren't used to being with her. I know some of the children will have clammed up doing the test with someone new.*

<div align="right">Year 1 teacher</div>

Nevertheless, even when the class teacher conducted the check, the issue of unfamiliarity and potential unsettling of pupils was raised as an issue because the class teacher was not necessarily the pupil's phonics teacher. Moreover, where one staff member was conducting both Year 1 and Year 2 checks, it was noted on a few occasions that this led to time pressures and other difficulties:

> *We had the teachers who administered it last year in Year 1 do it* [with the Year 2s]… *There were over 90 pupils to do, 60 in Year 1 and 30 doing the recheck. Managing the manpower was the hardest thing.*

<div align="right">Literacy coordinator</div>

> *Having to re-administer the checks with the Year 2s was quite difficult - I felt like I was pestering the Year 2 teacher all the time - "Can I have so-and-so now?*

<div align="right">Year 1 teacher</div>

One pertinent comment about the actual experience of administering the check was the relatively relaxed attitude of both pupils and teachers in comparison to the check last year, as illustrated by the following quotes: 'Children in both Year 1 and Year 2 were much more relaxed this year' (Deputy Headteacher). 'It was easier this year, not for Year 2 staff and pupils, but in Year 1 the teachers knew what was coming' (Headteacher).

Eleven per cent of Year 1 teachers reported they had a local authority monitoring visit during the week of the check; as at least ten per cent of schools are supposed to be monitored during the check[17], the sample is nationally representative in this respect. On average, these monitoring visits observed two check administrations per school visit. Of the Year 1 teachers who reported a monitoring visit, the most frequently reported method for choosing observations was the Year 1 teacher themselves deciding (29 per cent), however, a similar proportion of respondents (28 per cent) did not indicate the method by which observations were chosen.

This year, around half of Year 1 teachers (46 per cent) reported they had stopped the check early on at least one occasion due to a pupil struggling. Of those who reported that they had stopped the check early, the vast majority found it very easy (44 per cent) or

---

[17] See:
http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/17650/1/2013_ks1_monitoring%20visits%20guidance%20for%20local%20authorities_phonics_screening_check.pdf

quite easy (40 per cent) to judge when to do so. Only three[18] per cent of teachers found this a quite hard or very hard judgement to make.

All Year 1 teachers were asked what factors would influence their judgement about if and when to stop the check. Nearly four out of five teachers (79 per cent) reported they would stop the check early if a pupil started to become distressed during the check. Just under half of teachers also said they would stop the check early if the child was becoming tired or distracted (46 per cent) or if they were struggling or got several words in a row incorrect (46 per cent). The other frequently given factor influencing judgement as to if and when to stop the check early was if it became obvious the child was not going to reach the threshold, given in 37 per cent of cases. However, 13 per cent of teachers also said they would stop the check early if a child was taking a long time to complete the check.

3.3 Costs associated with the check

3.3.1 Additional costs of introducing the check

Literacy coordinators responding to the survey were asked what additional costs, both in terms of staff time and financial costs, their school had incurred in supporting the introduction and administration of the phonics screening check. The mean number of hours spent by different staff on planning and preparation, administration, training and reviewing the results, is presented below.

---

[18] This figure differs from the figure in the technical appendices due to rounding.

Table 8:   **Mean number of hours spent by staff in support of the phonics screening check**

	Hours spent by staff				
	Year 1 teacher(s)	Year 2 teacher(s)	Support staff	Headteacher / senior leader	Admin staff
Planning and preparation	3	2	1	1	<1
Administration	6	2	1	1	1
Training	1	1	1	<1	<1
Reviewing results	1	1	<1	1	<1
Other	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Overall average	**12**	**6**	**3**	**4**	**1**

Note: all respondents in this table gave a response to at least one amount of additional time: missing data has been assumed to imply no additional time. Those respondents with missing responses for all parts of the question have been excluded from this analysis.
Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.
Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013

Table 8 shows that:

- Year 1 teachers spent the most time on activities that supported the introduction of the check (12 hours), followed by Year 2 teachers (6 hours)

- a notable amount of time was also spent by support staff (e.g. teaching assistants) and school senior leaders

- the most time-consuming activities were generally reported to be 'planning and preparation' and 'administration'[19].

In addition, literacy coordinators were asked what additional financial costs, if any, had been incurred by their school specifically to support the introduction of the phonics screening check. The mean costs are presented below.

---

[19] It should be noted that while the 'administration' option in the literacy coordinator questionnaire was designed to capture the number of hours spent by staff administering the check to pupils, it may also have been interpreted as involving paperwork, which may have resulted in an inflated response.

Table 9:   Additional financial costs incurred by schools

	Mean cost, all respondents (£)	Proportion reporting no cost
RESOURCES		
General phonics resources	623	58%
Phonics-check specific resources	40	88%
TRAINING		
General training on phonics	228	72%
Specific training on the check	15	91%
SUPPLY COVER		
External supply to cover to attend general phonics training	55	83%
External supply cover to attend training on check	26	89%
External supply cover to administer the check	186	56%
	N=472	N=472

Note: all respondents in this table reported at least one of the costs: missing data has been assumed to imply no cost. Those respondents with missing responses for all parts of the question have been excluded from this analysis.

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013

The findings suggest that the biggest costs reported by schools relate to resources and training for phonics teaching in general. Just under half (44 per cent) of responding literacy coordinators reported that their school had incurred no additional financial costs in 2013 to specifically support the introduction of the phonics screening check. It is likely that many schools invested in resources and training last year, when the check was first introduced, and that these costs will not need to be renewed every year.

Among those that did report a cost there was a large range of responses: as much as £5,000 was spent on phonics check specific resources and as much as £3,000 spent on supply cover to administer the phonics screening check. 'Phonics check specific resources', 'specific training on the check', 'external supply cover to attend training on the check' and 'external supply cover to administer the check' are taken as costs directly relating to the check.

The mean financial cost associated with the screening check incurred by schools is £267.58 per school. When applied to the 16,128 schools that had at least one pupil take the check this represents a national cost of £4.3 million, or £4.99 per pupil[20]. A wider analysis of cost would also include the costs incurred by the Department for Education in developing the check. This will be undertaken for the final report.

3.3.2 Survey evidence on additional time spent

The data provided in the questionnaire by literacy coordinators is their assessment of the total amount of additional time spent by staff members in the school. Table 8 shows the simple average of literacy coordinators' responses; this subsection presents a more detailed analysis of the additional time data that takes school size into account.

One might expect more time to be taken to carry out the check if a school has many pupils (e.g. administering the check to 30 pupils would take longer than administering it to 10 pupils). One might also expect that there would be some fixed amount of time that is necessary regardless of the number of pupils (e.g. time for planning, preparation). The analysis estimated the average of the two components: the fixed time needed to carry out the check and the additional time needed for each pupil. The average amount of time for a particular school is the fixed time plus the number of pupils multiplied by the time per pupil.

The components were estimated using a linear regression model. Five models separately estimated the average time spent by Year 1 teachers, Year 2 teachers, teaching assistants, senior leaders and administrative staff, with the number of Year 1 and Year 2 pupils that took the check in 2013 as the 'cost driver'. Estimated hours per pupil were statistically greater than zero in all of the models. The results are displayed in the first two columns of Table 10.

The average (median) primary school in England in 2013 had 30 Year 1 pupils and 12 Year 2 pupils that took the check.[21] The implied average hours of additional time as a result of the check in a typical school is a total of 22 hours. A greater amount of staff time would be predicted for a school with more pupils taking the check.

---

[20] The number of pupils that took the check in 2013 was 864,840.

[21] Note that pupils only take the check in Year 2 if they did not meet the required standard in Year 1.

Table 10:   **Average hours of additional time associated with the screening check**

	Fixed hours	Hours per pupil	Total hours for median school[1]
Year 1 teacher	5.95	0.11	10.6
Year 2 teacher	1.98	0.07	4.9
Teaching assistant	1.43	0.03	2.7
Headteacher/ senior leader	0.89	0.05	3.0
Admin staff	0.40	0.01	0.7
Total	**10.64**	**0.27**	**22.0**

[1] The median school consists of 30 Year 1 pupils and 12 Year 2 pupils that take the check.
Note: multiplication of figures may not exactly match due to rounding.

We calculated the average hour wage of staff in order to value the additional hours of staff time associated with the check. Data on average annual salaries, average working hours and the number of working weeks have been combined to derive a measure of hourly wage for different staff types. The assumptions made to derive hourly wages are displayed in Table 11.

Table 11:   **Hourly wages of staff associated with the screening check**

	Headteacher or other senior leader	Classroom teacher	Teaching assistant[6]	Admin staff
Annual salary (£)	51,900[1]	32,200[1]	15,000[2]	17,000[2]
Hours per week	50.2[3]	53.5[3]	40[4]	40[4]
Weeks per year	39[5]	39[5]	39[5]	39[5]
Hourly wage (£)	**25.11**	**16.45**	**9.62**	**10.90**

[1] DfE (2013) 'School Workforce in England: November 2012', Tables 9a and 9b. The figures are assumed to still apply in 2013, given the public sector pay freeze.

[2] Guardian Jobs salary tracker (median salary of 'teaching assistant' and 'school administrator') http://salary-track.jobs.theguardian.com/, accessed 10th December 2013.

[3] DfE (2010) 'Teacher's workload diary survey 2010', Table 2. 'Headteacher or other senior leader' figure is an average of headteacher and deputy headteacher.

[4] Assumed, https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/planning/jobprofiles/Pages/teachingassistant.aspx.

[5] DfE (2013) School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document 2013 and Guidance on School Teachers' Pay and Conditions, para. 51.18.

[6] The label in the questionnaire actually read 'support staff' which will include teaching assistants but may include staff in other roles.

Combining the average additional hours from Table 10 with the average wage from Table 11 yields the average value of the additional time. For an average school of 30 Year 1 pupils and 12 Year 2 pupils taking the check, the average cost of additional time is estimated to be £365.72. The estimated value for schools with more pupils is higher: for example, the average value of additional time for a two-form entry school of 60 Year 1 pupils and 24 Year 2 pupils taking the check is estimated to be £560.72.

Table 12: **Average value of additional time associated with the phonics screening check**

	Year 1 teacher	Year 2 teacher	Teaching assistant	Headteacher/ senior leader	Admin staff
Assumed hourly wage (£)	16.45	16.45	9.62	25.11	10.90
Additional hours (median school)	10.6	4.9	2.7	3.0	0.7
Total value of additional time (£)	**174.45**	**80.89**	**26.26**	**76.08**	**8.04**

Note: multiplication of figures may not exactly match due to rounding.

Using the number of Year 1 and Year 2 pupils and schools that took the check in 2013 from the National Pupil Database, it is estimated that the total value of the additional time associated with the check is £6.8 million, equivalent to £7.83 per pupil[22]. However, it is unclear what the additional time spent on the check came at the expense of and how to value that in terms of cost to the Department for Education, or to other stakeholders.

In a value for money analysis it is important to ensure that costs and benefits are measured on the same terms. The phonics screening check may be displacing phonics assessment that would have been done otherwise. In that case, the benefit to a school of making assessment statutory would be expected to be limited, so counting the additional staff time as a cost would be inappropriate.

The additional time spent on the check may be displacing other activities that would have been carried out by staff, but it is difficult to make a judgement about the relative value of those activities without knowing what they are.

Another possibility is that staff work extra hours to complete the additional work. As school staff are salaried, in this case it is staff that are bearing the additional cost of the screening check. The additional time would only be a direct cost to the Department of Education if schools were employing extra staff to cover the additional workload, but it seems unlikely that a school would (the cost of supply cover is analysed separately).

---

[22] The number of pupils that took the check in 2013 was 864,840.

Given these caveats to interpreting the additional time data, monetary estimates of additional staff time should be seen as measuring the *value* of the additional staff time, rather than the *cost*.

3.4 Views on the suitability of the check with different groups of learners

Concerns were expressed in the case-study schools about the suitability of the check for higher ability pupils, the most frequent being that they have moved past the phonic stage of reading and that they 'understand the purpose of reading [is comprehension] and they are looking to make words that they recognise' (Year 1 teacher), with some concern that a phonetic focus in lessons was therefore 'going backwards having to return to decoding skills' (Year 1 teacher).

Teachers in case-study schools also expressed concerns regarding the check with low ability pupils, but concerns here varied and no themes appeared common across schools except for a few comments related to the lack of acknowledgement that progress has been made if the standard has not been met:

> *It doesn't tell you anything what they can do at phase two or three for that learner who has come in at a really low baseline and still is making really good progress but the score just says fail.*
>
> Literacy coordinator

However, one teacher did comment that the check was unsuitable for low ability pupils as they can meet the threshold, but still need intervention work. This was specifically noted as occurring with Year 2 pupils.

Comments were also made by those in case-study schools regarding the suitability of the check for pupils with SEN on several occasions, but again, no common themes emerged in these comments. The comments ranged from confusion caused by the non-words and the order of their presentation:

> *One of the difficulties… is the fact that you start with some of the nonsense words and sometimes we have lost our* [SEN] *children by the time you get on to the real words*
>
> Literacy coordinator

to SEN pupils being 'distracted by the pictures of the aliens' (Year 1 teacher) to the fact that 'SEN children enjoyed the check and wanted to do it' (Year 1 teacher). One teacher did note that the suitability of the check for this group of pupils is 'very much based on the individual; you can't say that all of them shouldn't or that it's not appropriate for all with SEN' (literacy coordinator) and this may account for some of the variation in responses.

The suitability of the check for pupils with specific individual needs was often not mentioned. Autism, as the most frequently mentioned specific need, was mentioned on three occasions; interviewees reported pupils with autism found it 'an upsetting experience… because of its unfamiliarity' (literacy coordinator). Although it is mentioned in the *Check Administrator's Guide* that pronunciation difficulties should be taken into account, one teacher did comment that it was not suitable for those with speech difficulties as these pupils are unable to score on sounds with which they struggle:

> *The child with a speech difficulty couldn't enunciate the particular phonetic sounds, he had a problem with 'jah'… 'sh' 'th' which again meant that he couldn't score on that particular sound.*
>
> Year 2 teacher

The most consistently mentioned concern regarding the check for any group of pupils was the potential confusion non-words may cause for pupils with EAL. This was linked to another consistently mentioned theme regarding EAL pupils' limited vocabulary for real words:

> *Those that have EAL they don't really understand the real words so just because it has an alien next to it doesn't help them to understand that these aren't real words because they haven't got the vocabulary*
>
> Literacy coordinator

> *It was confusing for them* [EAL pupils]. *They don't know they are not real words.*
>
> Year 1 teacher

> *She* [the EAL pupil] *found it very challenging because of her lack of English vocabulary.*
>
> Year 2 teacher

Despite these teacher concerns, it is noted that the percentage of pupils with EAL who met the standard in the check was equal to the percentage of pupils without EAL who met the standard.[23]

Comparisons were made between Year 1 teachers' views of the difficulty of the check in 2012 and 2013. As seen in Table 13, in 2013 compared to 2012 there appears to be a reduction in the number of teachers who felt the check was either slightly (27 per cent in 2013; 40 per cent in 2012) or much (3 per cent in 2013; 11 per cent in 2012) too difficult; no more teachers in 2013 than in 2012 think the check is too easy, but there has been a large increase in the number of Year 1 teachers who this year think the standard of the check is about right (66 per cent in 2013; 44 per cent in 2012).

---

[23] Data from: Phonics screening check and national curriculum assessments at key stage 1 in England: 2013 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/245813/SFR37-2013_Text.pdf

Statistical tests show these changes between the years are not likely to be due to chance[24]. This may reflect the increased percentage of pupils meeting the standard this year (69 per cent compared to 58 per cent last year) or teachers' greater familiarity with the check that has been apparent throughout this year's findings.

Table 13: Year 1 teacher views of the standard of the check in 2012 and 2013

	2012 per cent of cases	2013 per cent of cases	Percentage point change
Much too easy	0	0	0
Slightly too easy	1	1	0
It is about right	44	66	+22
Slightly too difficult	40	27	-13
Much too difficult	11	3	-8
None ticked	4	3	-1
	N=940	N=625	NA

Source: NFER survey of Year 1 teachers, 2012 and 2013

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

3.5 Communicating with parents and carers

Comparisons were made between the responses of literacy coordinators in 2012 and 2013 about the information to be provided to the parents and carers of pupils who were shown to require extra support. Literacy coordinators reported that less information was given to parents/carers in 2013, both in terms of details of the in-school support planned (50 per cent in 2013; 61 per cent in 2012[25]), and in terms of information regarding how parents/carers can support their child (59 per cent in 2013; 73 per cent in 2012[26]). Statistical tests show this change between years is not likely to be due to chance. This year, literacy coordinators could also respond that *No extra information in addition to the results*; 29 per cent of literacy coordinators responded in this way.

When the check results were relayed to parents/carers, nearly all case study schools reported the vast majority of parents/carers gave little or no reaction, either positive or negative, to the check results. A general feeling of parent/carer nonchalance and disregard came through from several case studies:

---

[24] $\chi^2[1, 1565] = 91.43$, p<0.001
[25] $\chi^2[1, 1427] = 16.11$, p<0.001
[26] $\chi^2[1, 1427] = 33.38$, p<0.001

It wouldn't bother me if she has failed because she is flying.

<div align="right">Parent/carer</div>

Isn't the test actually for the teacher's benefit so that they can track how well the kids are doing?

<div align="right">Parent/carer</div>

In four schools the lack of parent/carer interest in the results was interpreted as being because parents/carers of children who were struggling 'already knew because we have these regular updates' (headteacher).

However, one school did report they hoped the check would aid in getting unheard messages through to unresponsive parents/carers:

The parent of the child who failed last year does seem to think that everything is fine despite us telling her that her child is behind [with phonics], *so perhaps the feedback on the check will be a wakeup call that she can do more to help.*

<div align="right">Literacy coordinator</div>

Some schools gave extra information to parents/carers with the check results, which may have also affected their reaction, such as giving a child's score 'compared to where they were at the start of the year [to show] they've done really well' (literacy coordinator) or information on 'what they [parents/carers] can do to help' (headteacher).

In the interviews conducted with parents/carers, nearly all interviewees seemed to know little about the check, if anything;

I was told there would be a test and it would be made up of words and non-words and that was pretty much it

<div align="right">Parent/carer</div>

and many parents/carers knew very little about phonics at all;

[I don't know] *a great deal because it seems a very different way of learning to when I learnt*

<div align="right">Parent/carer</div>

As a parent I do actually think that I need to go back to school to learn a new way [of reading]

<div align="right">Parent/carer</div>

Some of this unawareness of the check, and of phonics generally, shown by parents/carers may be explained by the decision of some schools not to tell them about the check in advance. This was done to avoid extra pressure being put on pupils from parents/carers, parental/carer worry, and extra preparation work being carried out with pupils. In those schools where they did inform parents/carers beforehand, there seemed

to be little reaction from parents/carers; reportedly because 'our parents often think that reading is the school's job' (Headteacher), and 'they trust us to get on with schooling their children' (literacy coordinator) or because 'they are more interested in what book they are bringing home in their bag because that is what they understand' (literacy coordinator).

Those schools which informed parents/carers in advance said they did so for reasons such as 'we didn't want them to be worried when the children came home and said they had to read pretend words, etcetera' (literacy coordinator). Indeed, parent/carer reactions included confusion: 'They [parents/carers] were asking us "What's the point of learning alien words?"' (Year 1 teacher); upset at the perception it is 'quite a lot of pressure for the age of a six year old' (parent/carer); and, concerns regarding what the check would entail 'I had a few parents come in and say "Can you just show me what it'll look like?"' (Year 1 teacher). However, some schools did report that 'lots of parents were pleased to receive some information on it' (headteacher).

3.6 Impacts of the check

This section explores how teachers have used the results of the 2012 check, and how they plan to use the results from the 2013 check. It also explores the types of evidence that have been used by teachers to help them to decide if extra support should be provided to a child and the nature of that support.

3.6.1 Use of the results from the 2012 check

Literacy coordinators were asked how Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers in their schools had used the results of last year's phonics screening check. In each year group teachers were most frequently reported to have used the results of last year's check to review and/or revise their phonics teaching plans, both in general, and for individuals or groups of pupils. This was particularly the case for Year 1 and Year 2 teachers, where half or more were reported to have reviewed and/or revised their teaching plans using the results from the 2012 check.

Literacy coordinators were also asked what type of support had been given to Year 2 pupils who, during the check last year, had either: had difficulty completing section 1 of the check; could complete section 1, but had had difficulties in section 2; or scored close to, but under, the threshold score. The findings are presented below.

Table 14: **Support offered to Year 2 pupils who undertook the check in 2012**

Children who last year…	Continued with systematic phonics teaching (%)	Intensive learning in small groups (%)	Extra one-to-one time with teacher/ classroom support (%)	Diagnostic assessment in phonics (%)	Additional classroom support (%)	None ticked (%)
had difficulty completing section 1 of the check	72	66	47	25	45	15
could compete section 1, but had difficulties in section 2	73	61	31	22	37	13
scored close to, but under, the threshold	78	45	21	20	27	12

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013

Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

Table 14 shows that:

- additional support was most intensive for those pupils whose performance on the check revealed most difficulties

- across all three categories children most frequently 'continued with systematic phonics teaching'

- 'intensive learning in small groups' was also a key feature of the support provided, particularly for those children who had difficulty completing section 1 of the check or could compete section 1, but had difficulties in section 2

- 'extra one-to-one time' was provided by a notable proportion of schools, including nearly half for those children who had difficulty completing section 1 of the check.

Year 1 pupils who do not meet the standard retake the check at the same time (during the summer term) in Year 2. Literacy coordinators were asked at what point in Year 2 they felt that most of these pupils had reached the expected standard for the check. Most respondents reported that the majority of their pupils reached the expected standard in the spring term 2013 (55 per cent), followed by about a quarter (25 per cent) who reported that most of their pupils reached the expected standard in the summer term 2013. Eight per cent of teachers reported that most of their pupils had reached the expected standard in the autumn term 2012. While the case-study visits to schools revealed no suggestion that children who had retaken the check in Year 2 had been 'held back' in any way by having to do so, the survey findings suggest that most teachers felt that those children who did not reach the expected standard at the end of Year 1 would be ready to retake the check by the following spring term or earlier.

3.6.2 Use of the results from the 2013 check

Literacy coordinators were asked what, if any, actions would be taken following the 2013 phonics screening check to use the results within their schools. The findings are presented below, together with the findings from the same questions from last year's survey, where applicable.

Table 15: **The actions taken to use the results of the phonics screening check**

	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	% change
Review of results by individual Year 1 teacher	81	74	-7
Review of results by individual Year 2 teacher		70	
Discussion amongst class teachers		74	
Discussion between Year 1 and/ or Year 2 teacher(s) and literacy coordinator, Headteacher or other senior leader	88	82	-6
Identification of children experiencing difficulties with phonics	80	78	-2
Specific teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics	61	64	+3
Discussion between Year 1 and Year 2 teachers	79	72	-7
Discussion between Year 2 and Year 3 teachers		58	
No action		3	
Other	8	4	-4
	n=844	n=583	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012 and 2013
Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

The findings reveal that, as with last year, the phonics screening check has provoked a great deal of discussion between school staff. However, this year, there appeared to be slightly fewer:

- Year 1 teachers reviewing the results

- Year 1 and Year 2 teachers discussing the findings

- Year 1 and/Year 2 teachers discussing the findings with the literacy coordinator, Headteacher or other senior leader.

These changes could be explained by the fact that this year more children reached the expected standard. This means that a smaller proportion of children would have been identified as needing extra help, which could reasonably have resulted in teachers spending less time discussing and reviewing the results. It is also possible that where teachers had already devised interventions in 2012, there would be less need for discussion as they had existing plans ready to put in place. The findings also suggest

that a slightly greater proportion of respondents reported using the results to create teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics (up three percentage points). This could indicate that teachers felt more confident with understanding, interpreting and planning to use the findings, and therefore felt they didn't need to discuss as much as in the previous year.

A small number of respondents (n=25) identified additional actions that would be taken. These included discussions with the SENCO, using the check with Year 3 and 4 pupils as a minimum competency measure, and producing a report for the governing body.

Year 1 teachers responding to the survey were asked to what extent the results of the 2013 phonics check gave them 'useful' or 'new' information in terms of planning teaching and learning. Overall, teachers were slightly more positive about the usefulness of the results of the check compared to their views on whether it provided new information, with 72 per cent reporting they agreed at least 'to a small extent' that the check gave teachers useful information compared to 65 per cent who agreed it gave them new information.

Literacy coordinators were also asked what evidence they would use to help them decide, if, and what type of extra support should be provided to children in Years 1 and 2. The findings are presented below.

Table 16: **Evidence used to decide if and/or what type of extra support should be provided to a child**

	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (%)
Teachers' own records of progress	91	84
The results of other assessments	83	76
The phonics screening check results	71	64
Discussion with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)	67	63
Other	3	3

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2013 (n=583)

Multiple response – percentages may not sum to 100

The findings reveal that most literacy coordinators favoured teachers' own records of progress followed by the results of other assessments to help them decide, if, and what type of extra support should be provided to children in Years 1 and 2. In the majority of cases, the results from the phonics screening check were also reported to inform such decisions, with about seven out of ten literacy coordinators (71 per cent) reporting the data would be used to support such decisions for Year 1 pupils and six out of ten (64 per cent) using the data to support such decisions for Year 2 pupils.

3.6.3 Other impacts of the check

In addition to the survey findings reported above, the case studies also explored teachers' views on the impacts of the check. Most interviewees reported that the check had had minimal, if any, impact on their school, and most anticipated it would not 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. As was reported last year, 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.

However, when exploring teaching and learning practices in more detail, it becomes clear that the introduction of the check has led to new work and/or activity in some schools. The single most notable change has been the introduction of pseudo words into phonics sessions, particularly for those in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, as reported in Chapter 2. Despite the change, many teachers said they were unsure whether such activity would lead to wider positive benefits, and had introduced it solely because they thought it would help better prepare their children for the check.

> *There has been a slight shift I think away from the pure teaching of phonics to the teaching of how to do that test technique, but the jury is out on whether these changes will positively impact on children's literacy skills.*
>
> Headteacher

Many teachers regarded the introduction of pseudo words as 'exam technique', and a necessary part of preparing children for the check: 'I talked to my children a lot about exam technique. It is a test, and you need to know the practicalities of doing a test' (Year 2 teacher). The same teacher explained that such preparation was necessary in order to boost children's confidence:

> *If anything, they weren't going to fall down because they couldn't do it, they were going to fall down because they were nervous or they were confronted with something unfamiliar and they are young.*
>
> Year 2 teacher

More broadly, most case-study interviewees' reported that the introduction of the check had focussed teachers' minds on the importance of phonics:

> *Because of the screening check, phonics has become even more important. Whereas before, if something else came up it might slip, now it doesn't'.*
>
> Literacy coordinator

Similarly, some teachers reported that the introduction of the check had raised teachers' expectations of the standard children should be working at in Reception and Year 1, as one Reception teacher explained:

> *Before* [the introduction of the check] *I thought that if the pupils were confident in phase 2 and were just going through phase 3 they would be OK, but now you need to get through phase 3 and phase 4 so it* [the check] *has pushed things along.*

However, some teachers reported that they did not think that phonics was any more important now than they did before the check was introduced:

> *We do think that phonics is important for reading and writing but I wouldn't say that the screening check has made us think that it is more important or any more important than we already thought. It makes us think that the Government thinks it is more important than we do.*
>
> Literacy coordinator

In at least two case-study schools the introduction of the check appears to have had a greater effect, with the results of the 2012 check revealing pockets of underachievement that had previously gone undetected, as a Deputy Headteacher explained:

> *Last year we were very disappointed with our results and we got a rude awakening as we thought the children were doing much better. We learnt a lot from that and we are now honing in on individual assessment a lot more. This hard work is already paying off and pass rates were up 20 per cent this year.*

For these schools the check had served to help identify those children who needed extra support, and had acted as a catalyst for change, both in terms of schools' follow up work with these children and in reforming their approaches to teaching phonics in general, as the following Headteacher explained:

> *We realised last year that we had to change things. Up until that point we had streamed, but we found that teachers didn't take responsibility for their class. Now everybody teaches their own class and knows exactly where their children are. Last year was a big learning curve.*

Teachers were generally more positive about the usefulness of the findings from the check than they were last year, with most reporting that the outcomes helped inform decisions about the support provided to children. However, teacher assessment was still viewed as the most useful source of information in informing such decisions.

> *While the check helps inform our decisions about the extra support children need, these decisions are being led by teacher assessment which is more comprehensive and undertaken more frequently.*
>
> Deputy Headteacher

Similarly, others felt that waiting until the end of Year 1 to find out how well a child was progressing with their phonics was too late, which was another reason why teachers relied on ongoing teacher assessment to inform pupil groupings and any intervention work with children.

A small number of case-study interviewees reported that the enhanced focus on phonics had had a detrimental effect on the quality of pupils' writing, with some schools now monitoring this closely.

> *We'll teach most of the long vowel sounds but we have taught the A and I and E earlier. They* [the pupils] *are writing 'made' as 'mAId' and there is a danger that that becomes a bit of a habit and so we are still working on that.*
>
> Year 1 teacher

3.7 Views on the value of the check

Comparisons were made between literacy coordinators' views in 2012 and 2013 of the value of the information provided by the check for both teachers and parents/carers.

As can be seen in Table 17, literacy coordinators agreement with the statement *The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers* was broadly similar across the two years. The number of literacy coordinators in each of the levels of agreement varied from last year by only a few percentage points (the largest variation being a decrease of 3 percentage points in those disagreeing with this statement). The most common view this year was 'Disagree' (29 per cent), and the most infrequent was 'Agree' (10 per cent); the other opinions were each shared by around 20 per cent of literacy coordinators.

Table 17: **The agreement of literacy coordinators with the statement: '*The phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers*'**

	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	Percentage point change
Agree	8	10	+1
Agree somewhat	18	19	+1
Uncertain or mixed views	21	22	+1
Disagree somewhat	20	20	0
Disagree	32	29	-3
None ticked	1	0	-1
	N=844	N=583	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012 and 2013

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

As can be seen in Table 18 there appears to be little difference in literacy coordinators' levels of agreement between the two years with the statement *The phonics screening check provides valuable information for parents/carers*; the responses to the 2013 survey differed from the 2012 responses by under five percentage points. The most common response in 2013 was disagreement with this statement (33 per cent), and the most uncommon view was agreement (5 per cent); slightly over one in five literacy coordinators disagreed somewhat (21 per cent) or held uncertain or mixed views (24 per cent).

Table 18: **The agreement of literacy coordinators with the statement: '*The phonics screening check provides valuable information for parents/carers'***

	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	Percentage point change
Agree	4	5	+1
Agree somewhat	12	17	+5
Uncertain or mixed views	24	24	0
Disagree somewhat	22	21	-1
Disagree	36	33	-3
None ticked	1	1	0
	N=844	N=583	

Source: NFER survey of literacy coordinators, 2012 and 2013

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

While staff interviewed as part of the case-study visits to schools were generally supportive of phonics, their views on the check were less favourable. The most frequently occurring concerns surrounded a desire to avoid teaching to the test, and the lack of new information gained due to the fact that many teachers already kept thorough records of the progress made by their pupils in phonics. Losing sight of other aspects of reading, such as comprehension, was also frequently mentioned:

> *Self monitoring, self correcting, prompting for children to self correct in their reading, reading with expression, reading for comprehension - all those aspects that need to be in place with the phonics… if everyone just does phonics and the other things aren't happening it* [phonics] *wouldn't work as well*
>
> <div align="right">Literacy coordinator</div>

> *In Year 2 and Year 3 if the children are focusing on phonics all the time because of the screening it means that they are going to end up not making the progress in comprehension that they could have made if the focus was on comprehension*
>
> <div align="right">Year 1 teacher</div>

Themes which occurred less frequently, although did arise in a number of case studies, included concerns regarding the formality of the check, a resentment of having 'another thing to try to slot in' (literacy coordinator) and the lack of trust and autonomy which teachers felt the check represented. In addition, some teachers did comment that the check is not an accurate reflection of pupils' true phonic abilities and there was further concern regarding the nature of reporting to parents/carers:

> *Parents seeing that statement "Has passed, has not passed" is decisive I think*
>
> Literacy coordinator

Most teachers did note the focus that was given to phonics as a positive result of the check, although this was sometimes at the expense of other areas of the curriculum:

> *I think numeracy sometimes goes on the back burner because phonics is a hot topic, but ultimately numeracy is a key skill as well*
>
> Literacy coordinator

The other frequently mentioned benefit of the check was encouraging a reflection on one's teaching:

> *For the teachers at class level… it perhaps just makes them think a little bit more. To evaluate their teaching previously*
>
> Headteacher

Other positive aspects of the check were mentioned, albeit by fewer respondents. Two teachers reported that pupils enjoyed completing the check and saw it as a pleasant experience. Other themes which occurred in a small minority of schools included the usefulness of having a national average by which to benchmark, the check being helpful for highlighting issues, and the ability to use the check to encourage staff to be more phonetically based:

> *It has enabled me to say "We have got to do something, let's try this [systematic synthetic phonics]"*
>
> Literacy coordinator

Some teachers said the check was not helpful to individual teachers, but could either see benefits for the Government or suggested ways it could be made useful to individual teachers, such as giving suggestions for following up common mistakes.

The matched funding was universally appreciated by interviewees, although a few case-study participants did note negative aspects of it, for example, over the choice of resources:

> *I'm very grateful for the matched funding… but the books that I prefer weren't available*
>
> Literacy coordinator

Therefore mixed views were seen in both the case studies and surveys. In the surveys, the prevalent thought was that the check did not provide useful information to teachers or parents/carers, although there was some evidence of opinions to the contrary. The case studies were able to explore these mixed opinions in more depth and although negative views of the check were expressed more frequently than positive ones, some key benefits did emerge. These included providing an 'excuse' to use more synthetic phonics in the classroom and being a useful tool for teacher self-reflection.

3.8   Revisiting NFER's typology of schools

In the report on the first year of the evaluation, some exploratory analyses was undertaken to identify a typology of schools. The aim here was to find out more about systematic differences between schools in their practices and attitudes towards phonics. Some overall patterns emerged from the initial analysis which allowed the classification of each school according to its stance towards phonics teaching and towards the phonics screening check.

For this second interim report, the analysis was repeated. The overall stance of the school was derived from key questionnaire responses by the literacy coordinator. The literacy coordinator questionnaire was adjusted slightly for 2013, including the omission of one question. A latent class analysis sought out patterns of response that allowed a grouping of respondents. The results this time were highly consistent with the typology identified in the first interim report, but because of the slight change in the questionnaire, three types of school emerged from the analysis, rather than the four that emerged in 2012. These have been labelled 'Type 1: Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check', 'Type 2: Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check' and 'Type 3: Supporters of mixed methods'. Around a third of the sample fell into each of these types.

Figure 2: Types of school
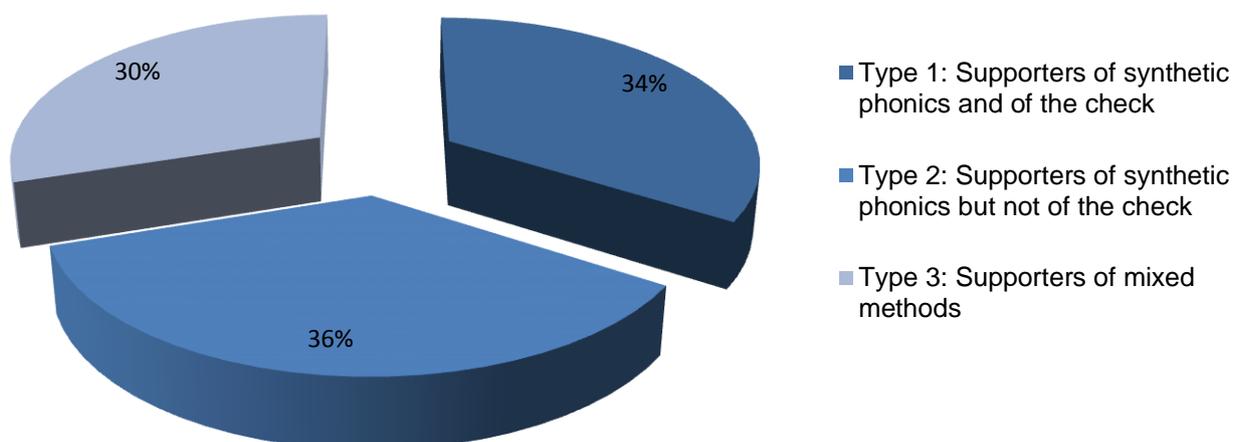
A key characteristic distinguishing these types is their response to an item offering three overall approaches to phonics teaching. Types 1 and 2 are highly likely to identify themselves as teaching systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast' (85 and 86 per cent, respectively). In contrast, 94 per cent of Type 3 respondents did not select this option, instead teaching phonics together with other cueing strategies, either discretely or in a fully integrated way.

In the discussion below, the percentages refer to the proportion of literacy coordinators selecting either 'agree' or 'agree somewhat' in response to a variety of statements expressing views about phonics teaching and the phonics check.

Type 1: Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check (34 per cent of sample)
Together with their adherence to the 'first and fast' teaching of synthetic phonics, this group of respondents are highly convinced of the value of systematic synthetic phonics teaching (96 per cent). They are slightly less likely than the other groups to support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading (86 per cent) and the teaching of a variety of methods of decoding (80 per cent). They are the group least likely to believe that systematic synthetic phonics is necessary only for some children (18 per cent) or that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy (20 per cent). Overall, this can be seen as the type most favourably disposed towards systematic synthetic phonics as embodied in current policy recommendations. Moreover, in contrast to the other two groups, a majority of these respondents (56 per cent) agree that the phonics screening check provides valuable information for teachers, and just under half (49 per cent) agree that it provides valuable information for parents/carers.

Type 2: Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check (36 per cent of sample) This group share many characteristics with Type 1 and are overall almost equally positive towards systematic synthetic phonics. As well as embracing its teaching 'first and fast', they are highly convinced of its value (92 per cent). Alongside this, they are very likely, and more likely than Type 1, to support a variety of methods of decoding (93 per cent) and 91 per cent support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading. About a third of this group believe that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and a quarter of them think that systematic phonics teaching is necessary for only some children. In strong contrast to Type 1, this group do not support the phonics screening check, with only seven per cent believing that it provides valuable information for teachers and none viewing it as providing valuable information for parents/carers.

Type 3: Supporters of mixed methods (30 per cent of sample) This group is distinguished by their practice of teaching phonics alongside other cueing strategies, rather than 'first and fast'. Seventy per cent report teaching phonics discretely alongside other cueing strategies, with 24 per cent saying that phonics is 'always integrated as one of a number of cueing strategies'. Their level of support for systematic synthetic phonics teaching is lower than the other two types, at 77 per cent, but this is nevertheless a

substantial positive rating. Almost all of this group, 97 per cent, think that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. A similar percentage to the other two groups, 90 per cent, support the teaching of phonics in the context of meaningful reading. Almost half of Type 3 teachers, 46 per cent, think that phonics has too high a priority in current education policy and 29 per cent think that systematic phonics is necessary for only some children. These teachers are slightly more positive towards the phonics screening check than Type 2, with 23 per cent believing it gives valuable information to teachers and 17 per cent to parents/carers. Thus, some of these teachers seem to see the check as a useful ingredient within their overall mixed approach.

Type 3 schools correspond to two groups in the previous report, labelled there as Types 3 and 4, 'supporters of integrated teaching' and 'supporters of mixed methods', respectively. Only five per cent of schools fell into the previous Type 3, so the amalgamation of the two groups in this round of analysis leads to a more even spread of schools.

When compared with the proportions of schools in the 2012 analysis, the percentage of Type 1 schools, supporting systematic synthetic phonics and the check, has increased from 28 to 34 per cent. The Type 2 proportion has reduced slightly, from 39 to 36 per cent, while Type 3, consisting of 30 per cent of schools, is slightly smaller than the 33 per cent falling into Types 3 and 4 in the previous analysis.

However, the sample of schools responding this time is not identical with 2012, so further analysis explored whether the schools responding on both occasions had changed their classification. This revealed a relatively high degree of movement between types, with only around half of schools falling into the same category in both years. Movements were in all directions, without any clear trend. In some cases, these changes seem to be the result of a change of literacy coordinator, but in others there seem to have been slight shifts in response from year to year, without any clear pattern. This relative instability of the latent classes means that any further analyses based on them must be interpreted with some caution. Within the overall shifting pattern, however, a slight trend in favour of Type 1 can still be detected.

This typology of schools provides a classification of the broad stance towards the teaching and assessment of systematic synthetic phonics which may be useful in analysing other findings. It is noteworthy that all three types strongly endorse the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, but differ in their views of the extent to which this should be accompanied by other cueing strategies and their views of the phonics screening check. The stance of the school may be associated with pupils' attainment and progress, and the typology will be used as part of the multilevel model analysis reported in a later chapter.

4. Pupil attainment and progress in literacy

<div style="border: 1px solid #000; background-color: #d6e0e8; padding: 10px;">

Key Findings

- Exploratory analysis of National Pupil Database (NPD) data suggests that the check provides additional information on pupils' progress as their literacy skills develop from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage to their outcomes at the end of key stage 1. Scores on the check tend to be consistent with, but not the same as, other measures of literacy development during these first years of school.

- Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check at the end of Year 1, but there is a substantial minority (over a quarter) who have not.

- The multilevel model revealed that positive attitudes and practices towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. Schools that are positive towards systematic synthetic phonics although unconvinced of the value of the check also have higher scores.

- In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school's enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.

</div>

This chapter reviews the emerging evidence on pupil attainment and progress in the first years of literacy learning, drawing on the information available from the National Pupil Database (NPD). It describes how the phonics screening check (PSC) fits with the other national assessments for children in the 5-7 age range.

4.1 Attainment scores from National Pupil Database

This section sets out the technical characteristics of the scores available for analysis. The pupils who took the check in its first year, 2012, reached the end of key stage 1 (KS1) in the summer of 2013. At this point, they were assessed by their teachers in both reading and writing against national curriculum levels. The same pupils had been assessed according to the scales of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at the age of five, a year before they took the check. This first cohort of pupils therefore has scores from three annual time points. The scores are on different scales but can be standardised in order to allow comparisons and measure progress. For those pupils who took the check in 2013, there are two scores, from the EYFSP scales and from the check.

The following score data was used to contribute to the evaluation of the phonics screening check.

EYFSP

- The total score for the scales for Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL); four scales make up this area of learning, between them covering the skills and knowledge needed for early progress in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Each scale has nine points, so the total score for CLL is on a scale from 0-36.

- The score for the scale Linking Sounds and Letters (LSL) within CLL. This scale consists of a number of points relating to a range of aspects of phonics, including blending, and its scores range from 0-9.

PSC

- The total score for the PSC, on a scale of 0-40, with a score of 32 representing the expected standard.

KS1 national curriculum levels are calculated as:

- Reading points, which score the levels: 3= below level 1, 9= level 1, 13= level 2c, 15= level 2b, 17= level 2a, 21= level 3, 27=level 4.

- Writing points, scored as above.

- Reading and Writing points: the simple average of the above two scores. This is the preferred measure. If 2c is taken as the expected level for the end of KS1, this is the equivalent of 13 points on this scale.

These analyses included PSC scores for only those pupils who took the check in Year 1, not those who re-took it in Year 2.

An initial analysis explored the correlations between these different measures and these are presented in Table 19. The correlation coefficient is a statistic with a range of 0 to 1, which can be positive or negative. It indicates the extent to which two measures are related, so that variation in one is associated with similar variation in the other. In educational studies, correlations of up to 0.2 may be considered modest, between 0.2 and 0.5 moderate, and above 0.5 strong. The correlations give some indication of how far the scores are measuring the same construct, and in the present context, to some extent, show how far the EYFSP and PSC scores are antecedents of attainment at the end of KS1 in literacy. It would be expected that there would be a relationship between LSL and PSC, as the former measures phonic skill. It would also be expected that there would be an association between CLL and KS1, and as word reading is essential for reading comprehension, there should also be an association between PSC and KS1. There are differences in modes of assessment for these tests, since both EYFSP and KS1 are based on ongoing observations by teachers, whereas PSC is a one-off test. Finally, there is a one-year gap between EYFSP and PSC and between PSC and KS1, but a two-year gap between EYFSP and KS1.

Table 19:   **Correlations between scores**

	EYFSP – CLL	EYFSP – LSL	Phonics screening check	KS1 reading-writing
EYFSP - CLL	1			
EYFSP - LSL	0.930	1		
PSC	0.643	0.643	1	
KS1 reading-writing	0.749	0.714	0.754	1

Source: NFER analysis of NPD score data, 2013

Due to missing data, the number of pupils involved in the analyses above ranged from 568,960 to 584,007

Table 19 shows some interesting patterns, not entirely in conformity with what might be expected from the nature of the assessments. The differences between the correlations in this table are all statistically significant, apart from the two which have the same value; this is partly a result of the very large numbers in the analysis.

The very high correlation between the CLL total and the LSL scale score is to be expected, as LSL is one of the four components of CLL.

In terms of the relationship between the EYFSP and the phonics screening check, the scale Linking Sounds and Letters (LSL) is significantly correlated with scores on the check, but no better correlated than scores for language and literacy overall (CLL), of which LSL is a component. A correlation of 0.643 is significant and positive, but there is an element of 'general ability' in attainment measures: for example, there is a correlation in excess of 0.6 between the PSC and mathematics at KS1.

Correlations from all three of the other measures to KS1 are stronger, all of them in excess of 0.7. Of these, the strongest by a small margin is between KS1 and the phonics screening check. Since the constructs and modes of assessment are different, it seems most likely that this high correlation mainly reflects the fact that there is only one year of teaching and learning between the two measures, as against two years between EYFSP and KS1. The CLL score of the EYFSP also has a strong relationship with KS1, and this is more easily explained by similarity in the constructs assessed and also the mode of assessment. The narrower LSL score has a rather less strong relationship to KS1.

To investigate these relationships further, a series of equating analyses was performed, resulting in an estimate of the extent to which levels of attainment at KS1 are 'explained' statistically by attainment on EYFSP and PSC. This analysis shows that the link from the PSC to KS1 is stronger than that from EYFSP to KS1. The greatest explanatory power, however, is gained by including both EYFSP and PSC in the calculation, indicating that both measures are capturing (to some extent different) things that are related to KS1 literacy. Further analysis confirmed that the PSC score provides additional explanatory power when considering progress from EYFSP to KS1.

One further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the check and KS1 outcomes: an examination of the proportions of pupils meeting the expected standard in the two assessments. The results are shown in Table 20. This shows how the total sample of pupils is distributed in terms of meeting the expected standard in either or both assessments.

Table 20:   Percentage of sample meeting and not meeting the expected standard

	Did not achieve standard in KS1 R & W average	Achieved expected standard in KS1 R & W average
Did not achieve phonics standard	13.0%	27.8%
Achieved phonics standard	0.9%	58.3%

Source: NFER analysis of NPD score data, 2013
Expected standards: 32 marks on PSC and level 2c at KS1
Based on 572,792 pupils nationally who took both assessments

Table 20 shows that over 70 per cent of pupils had 'consistent' outcomes, either achieving or not achieving the expected standard in both assessments. It was very rare for a pupil who achieved the phonics standard to fail to achieve level 2 at KS1. In contrast, over a quarter of pupils who did not meet the standard in the phonics check nevertheless achieved level 2 in reading and writing at KS1 a year later. This tends to reinforce the findings discussed above, indicating that scores on the PSC are related to performance at KS1 but are not measuring exactly the same thing and are only partial predictors of KS1 literacy attainment.

In summary, this exploratory analysis of NPD data suggests that the check provides additional information on pupils' progress as their literacy skills develop from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage to their outcomes at the end of key stage 1. Scores on the check tend to be consistent with, but not the same as, other measures of literacy development during these first years of school. Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check at the end of Year 1, but there is a substantial minority who have not.

4.2 Multilevel modelling

Analysis by multilevel modelling set out to identify the background factors associated with higher or lower scores on the PSC and with literacy levels at KS1.

Multilevel modelling works by jointly examining the relationship between an outcome of interest and many potentially influential background characteristics including prior attainment. It has a number of distinct advantages over other estimation procedures. First, it allows comparison on a like-with-like basis. It is important that any analysis technique used takes account of the differences in the circumstances in which different pupils and schools are situated.

The other major advantage of multilevel modelling, which is particularly important in the analysis of educational data, is that it takes account of the fact that there is often more similarity between individuals in the same school than between individuals in different schools. By recognising the hierarchical structure of the data, multilevel modelling allows the most accurate estimation of the statistical significance of any effects of the programme.

Two multilevel analyses of pupil performance were conducted, based on the NPD data described above. The first took as its outcome the score on the phonics screening check, while the second was based on reading and writing outcomes at key stage 1.

Background variables included in the model were:

- pupil characteristics: gender, age, ethnicity, special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language (EAL)

- pupil prior attainment: score on the EYFSP

- pupil-level indicators of socio-economic status: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

- school characteristics: type, size, region, key stage 1 attainment band; proportion of pupils eligible for FSM; proportion of pupils with SEN; proportion of pupils with EAL

- school type, following the typology described in section 3.8 of this report.

A multilevel model takes into account all of these background factors then seeks out the significant differences that remain. That is, the statistical method measures the differences between different groups and controls for them in making the comparison. The resulting findings isolate the differences due to each individual factor, once all the other factors have been taken into account.

The analysis was based on a sample of 39,024 pupils in the evaluation schools who took the check in 2012 and 26,720 pupils who took it in 2013. This sample was a good representation of national figures; further details are given in the separate technical appendices document. The actual analysis samples were smaller because they did not include schools that only returned a teacher questionnaire.

Table 21 presents the factors that emerged as significant, positively or negatively, in the two models, presented side by side for comparison. Additional details are given in the separate technical appendices document.

Table 21:   Factors associated with score on the phonics check and level at KS1

	Phonics screening check score	KS1 level
Prior attainment		
Score on the EYFSP	strongly related	strongly related
Pupil level variables		
Girls	non-significant	positive
Eligible for FSM	Negative	negative
IDACI	Negative	negative
EAL	Positive	positive
SEN	Negative	negative
Ethnic group Gypsy/Roma/ Traveller	Negative	negative
Ethnic groups Asian, Black, Mixed and Other	Positive	positive
Ethnic group Chinese	non-significant	positive
School level variables		
Infant school	non-significant	positive
30%+ SEN	non-significant	negative
North of England	Positive	negative
Second highest FSM band	Positive	non-significant
Small school	positive	non-significant
School typology		
Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check	positive	non-significant
Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check	positive	non-significant

Source: NFER analysis of NPD score data, 2013
PSC score model based on 21,398 pupils; KS1 level analysis based on 29,955 pupils

The prior attainment measure, the score on the EYFSP, proved to be highly related to the outcome measures, as would be expected. For these models, the LSL score was included in the PSC outcome model, while the CLL score was included in the KS1 model. Since prior attainment is taken into account in this way, the remaining significant factors can be seen as affecting pupils' progress from EYFSP to the outcome measure, over and above what is expected.

Pupil level variables in the model largely reflect expected patterns. Lower socio-economic status, as measured by IDACI and FSM eligibility, is associated with lower scores, as is having a SEN. The Gypsy/Roma/Traveller ethnic group performs significantly less well than White British children, who in turn perform less well than the Asian, Black, Mixed and Other groups.

Pupils with EAL perform significantly better in both assessments than their native English speaking counterparts, and the coefficients indicate that this is particularly the case for

the phonics screening check. This pattern could be seen as consistent with the overall performance of pupils with EAL on the check, which equals that of their non-EAL counterparts. It could be a reflection of the speed with which children new to English make progress in their language acquisition over the first years of school.

The principal pupil-level difference between the two outcomes lies in boy/girl differences, which are significant at KS1 but non-significant in terms of the phonics score. It is a well established pattern, both nationally and internationally, for girls to perform better in many literacy assessments, particularly those involving reading comprehension, so the KS1 finding conforms to expectations, while the phonics outcome differs from this. This could perhaps be seen as a reflection of the type of skills required for the check, which are specific and clearly defined when compared to reading comprehension and writing composition.

The school level variables present few meaningful patterns, and are best viewed as a reflection of chance factors.

The school typology, however, proves to make a distinct contribution to the evaluation of the phonics screening check. The derivation of the typology was set out in section 3.8 above. In brief, the attitudes and practices of the school towards phonics teaching and the phonics screening check were analysed on the basis of the responses of the literacy coordinator.

The multilevel model revealed that positive attitudes and practices towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. Schools that are positive towards systematic synthetic phonics although unconvinced of the value of the check also have higher scores. A similar model sought out this pattern in the second cohort of pupils in the evaluation, who took the check in 2013 and the EYFSP in 2012, but who did not yet have KS1 results. This model confirmed the association between the Type 1 'Supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check' group and higher scores on the check, suggesting a high degree of stability of this pattern. The Type 2 'Supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check' group, however, did not emerge as significantly different in this second cohort.

In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school's enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.

5.   Conclusions

The final chapter of this report draws together the key messages from the different strands of the evaluation and provides an early assessment of the extent to which the phonics screening check is making an impact on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2. The chapter presents evidence from the midpoint surveys and case-study visits to schools to address each of the evaluation's three underpinning research questions for years two and three of the evaluation, as set out in section 1.2. The report concludes by outlining the next steps for the evaluation.

5.1   Phonics teaching and the phonics screening check

As reported last year, one of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation so far is that many schools believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools revealed that almost all schools are 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. However, the findings indicate that most teachers do not see a commitment to systematic synthetic phonics as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

Overall, teachers were slightly more positive about the check this year, with 72 per cent reporting they agreed at least 'to a small extent' that the check gave teachers useful information and 65 per cent who agreed it gave them new information. More Year 1 teachers reported that they felt the standard of the check was 'about right' this year compared to those who responded to this question in 2012. The findings could suggest that more teachers had 'accepted' the check than was the case last year.

Literacy coordinators reported that a smaller proportion of teachers engaged in activities to prepare for the check this year, compared to 2012, which could suggest that teachers were more comfortable with and better prepared for the check this year, following investment in training in the previous year. Almost three-quarters of Year 1 teachers reported that they had administered the check last year.

Year 1 teachers were reported to have spent the most time on activities that supported the introduction of the check (12 hours on average), followed by Year 2 teachers (5.8 hours). A notable amount of time was also spent by support staff (e.g. teaching assistants) and school senior leaders. The most time-consuming activities were generally reported to be those related to 'planning and preparation' and 'administration'. The biggest costs reported by schools related to resources and training for phonics teaching in general, although interestingly, more than half of responding literacy coordinators reported that their school had incurred no additional financial costs in 2013 to specifically support the introduction of the phonics screening check. It is likely that many schools

invested in resources and training last year, when the check was first introduced, and that these costs will not need to be renewed every year.

As was the case last year, 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, and was largely supported by exploratory analysis of NPD data which suggests that while most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check, there is a substantial minority who have not. Despite this, the phonics screening check was reported to have provoked a great deal of discussion between school staff, although at a lower level than was reported last year. It is worth noting that as more children reached the expected standard this year, one could reasonably presume that fewer teachers needed to spend time discussing and reviewing the results.

A slightly greater proportion of respondents reported using the results of the check to create teaching plans for children experiencing difficulties with phonics (up two percentage points). Moreover, when teachers were asked whether the introduction of the check had led to any new work or activity, just over half of literacy coordinators who participated in the survey reported that they had made general changes this school year to phonics teaching. The year groups most affected by changes to phonics teaching were reported to be Reception and Year 1, with the single biggest change being the introduction of pseudo words. The findings suggest that for many schools this is something new and represents a direct impact of the check on teaching. Notable proportions of literacy coordinators also reported they had introduced grouping for phonics in the past year which reflects the trend indicated by the case-study data towards this kind of differentiated phonics teaching. Other reported changes to teaching practices in 2013 included carrying out familiarisation or practice sessions with pupils in preparation for the check and a greater focus on the assessment of progress in phonics.

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. For these schools the check had served to help identify those children who needed extra support, and had acted as a catalyst for change, both in terms of schools' follow up work with these children and in reforming their approaches to teaching phonics in general. Other impacts included 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 pupils as a result of the standard established by the check.

Analysis suggested that, taken overall, schools' fall into three broad groups in terms of their 'stance' towards phonics and the check, roughly equal in size: supporters of synthetic phonics and of the check; supporters of synthetic phonics but not of the check;

and supporters of mixed methods. Schools in the first two of these groups tend to have slightly higher performance on the check, but the school's stance towards phonics does not appear to impact on literacy attainment at the end of key stage 1.

5.2 Summary of findings on the Year 2 evaluation questions (interim judgements)

1. **What will/ has been the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools during Reception and Years 1 and 2?**
   The introduction of the check has led to changes in teaching practice in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, with the most notable changes including: the introduction of pseudo words; more differentiated phonics teaching; and a greater focus on the assessment of progress in phonics.

2. **Has the phonics screening check changed the teaching of the wider literacy curriculum?**
   Responses from teachers in both the survey and case-study schools revealed that almost all schools are 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. Many schools, however, appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods. In this sense, the check does not appear to have changed teachers' views on and approaches to the teaching of phonics in the wider literacy curriculum.

3. **Will/has the introduction of the phonics screening check have/had an impact on the standard of reading and writing?**
   Exploratory analysis of NPD data suggests that the check provides additional information on pupils' progress as their literacy skills develop from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage to their outcomes at the end of key stage 1. Scores on the check tend to be consistent with, but not the same as, other measures of literacy development during these first years of school. Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at key stage 1 have previously met the expected standard on the check, but there is a substantial minority who have not. In addition, initial analysis by multilevel modelling revealed that positive attitudes and practices towards the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and the value of the check are reflected in higher scores on the check for pupils. In contrast to the phonics scores, there were no significant associations with school typology on the results for children at the end of key stage 1. Thus attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the school's enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the check, and by their approach to the teaching of phonics.

5.3 Next steps

This chapter concludes by outlining the next steps in the evaluation, including the completion of endpoint surveys and case-studies, analysis of NPD data and the final value for money assessment.

Endpoint 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 2014. Additional schools will be recruited to top-up the samples as required.

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. This analysis will be undertaken 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

Year 3 of the study will see further development of the assessment of Value for Money (VfM). 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.