
Process evaluation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Pilot

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) at Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a process evaluation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Pilot. The evaluation was undertaken between March and September 2011.

This research brief presents the findings of the process evaluation of the Pilot.

Key Findings

Purpose and administration of the Phonics Screening Check

- Most teachers and pupils taking part in case studies understood the purpose of the Check correctly.
- Monitoring visits showed that the administration of the Check was conducted consistently and appropriately by most schools visited.
- On average the Check took 4-9 minutes to complete per pupil, although this varied depending on pupil knowledge and educational need. Just over half (54%) of schools felt that a longer window of time was needed to carry out the Check.
- The majority (65%) of pilot schools reported that the time commitment required to administer the Check was generally 'straightforward' or 'very straightforward' to manage, while a fifth found it difficult. The average time spent preparing for the Check was approximately three hours and it took an average of 12.5 hours to administer, although it took more time in larger schools.
- Schools reported that the DfE administration guidance was clear and straightforward. The vast majority (89%) of pilot schools felt the guidance was 'useful' or 'very useful'. The practice marking workshop at the regional training events was felt to be particularly useful. Almost two-thirds of case study schools suggested that something similar be provided in audio/visual format for national roll out.

The content, suitability and impact of the Phonics Screening Check

- The vast majority of schools (90% or more) said that the content of the Check was suitable for pupils working at the expected standard of phonics across most aspects of the Check's content. Lower proportions of pilot schools felt the Check was suitable in relation to the number of words (83%), the type of vocabulary used in real words (80%) and the use of pseudowords (74%).

- Most pupils felt that the use of pseudowords on the Check was a 'fun', novel aspect. However the majority (60%) of pilot schools said that pseudowords caused confusion for some pupils, while 12% said they caused confusion for most pupils.
- Three quarters of schools felt that the Check assessed phonic decoding ability accurately overall for their pupils. However, less than half of teachers were confident in the accuracy of the Check's assessment for lower ability pupils and pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), English as an Additional Language (EAL) and language difficulties.
- The Check helped almost half (43%) of pilot schools to identify pupils with phonic decoding issues that they were not already aware of, although over half felt it did not help in this way. It was intended to be used by case study schools to plan phonics delivery, support pupils and inform teaching. Schools supported the DfE position that results should not be made publicly available.
- Pilot schools would like detailed results of the Phonics Screening Check. Almost all (97%) schools would like pupil-level results, nine tenths would like benchmarking data, and 88% would like commentary on national-level results.
- The experience of the Phonics Screening Check was perceived to be positive for most pupils. Sixty-two percent of pilot schools felt the experience had been positive for all pupils, and just under a third (31%) said it was neither positive nor negative. Between 23% and 29% of surveyed schools felt the experience was negative for pupils with speech and language difficulties, other SEN and weak phonics skills.

Communication relating to the Phonics Screening Check

- Most schools communicated the purpose of the Check to pupils in a low key way, commonly as a game or a one-to-one reading session. Most had not informed parents/carers of their child's involvement in the Check. Parents/carers responding to the parent/carers survey (in 17 schools) most frequently wanted to receive information on their child's performance on the Check (99%), how the school intends to respond to their child's performance (97%) and information about what they could do to support their child's phonic ability (96%). Most case study schools wished to report findings to parents/carers themselves, in a form that could enable them to support their child's learning, and in a sensitive, appropriate way.

Background

In the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* the DfE signalled its intent to introduce a Phonics Screening Check at the end of Year 1 (to five and six year old pupils). The Phonics Screening Check is designed to be a light touch, summative assessment of phonics ability. It includes a list of 40 words - half real, half pseudo - which each pupil reads one-to-one with a teacher. By introducing the Check the Government hopes to identify pupils with below expected progress in phonic decoding. These pupils will receive additional intervention and then retake the Check to assess the extent to which their phonics ability has improved, relative to the expected level.

The aim of the Pilot was to assess how pupils and teachers responded to different versions of the Check and its administration. The DfE recruited 300 schools to take part in the Pilot. All 300 schools administered the Check with Year 1 pupils during, or shortly after, the week of 13th June 2011. Across the 300 schools, the Pilot trialled a total of 360 words (each read by around 1,000 pupils).

Evaluation aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- assess how the phonics screening check pilot is perceived by schools, parents/carers and pupils;
- evaluate the effectiveness of its administration; and
- carry out a series of monitoring visits to schools to assess the extent to which the administration of the phonics screening check pilot is standardised.

The objectives of the evaluation included:

- to gather school, parent/carer and pupil perceptions of the phonics screening check pilot;
- to identify what (if any) information parents/carers would like on the phonics screening check pilot and how they would like this communicated;
- to monitor and gather perceptions of the phonics screening check pilot administration process and corresponding guidance; and
- to identify which phonics programmes are currently taught in schools participating in the pilot and how these are delivered.

Methodology

The following research methods were used to address the evaluation objectives:

- two surveys (using combined online and postal methods) conducted with lead teachers for the Phonics Screening Check in all 300 pilot schools, with response rates of 97% (first survey) and 90% (second survey). The first survey focussed on how phonics teaching is currently delivered in pilot schools, and took place a few weeks before the Check took place. The second focussed on the administration and content of the Check, and was administered shortly after the Check took place;
- case studies carried out in 20 schools, which included interviews with a senior leader, the Phonics Screening Check lead teacher (where the two were different) and small groups of pupils, addressing similar issues to the second survey but asking for more detailed explanations from a wider group of respondents;
- monitoring visits to a further 20 schools; and
- a survey of parents/carers, with a response rate of 26% from participating schools.

Findings

Phonics delivery

- Almost three quarters of respondents to the first school survey stated that, prior to piloting the Phonics Screening Check, they encouraged pupils to use a range of cueing systems as well as phonics. About two thirds taught phonics in discrete sessions and sometimes integrated phonics into other work, whilst just under a third always taught phonics in discrete sessions. The majority (61%) of respondents taught discrete phonics sessions 5 times per week whilst 27% taught discrete sessions 4 times per week to Year 1 pupils.

- The most commonly used approaches to delivering phonics teaching in Year 1 were whole class and small group teaching, being used as a main approach by around half of respondents in each case. Nearly 90% of respondents used teacher observation as their method of phonics assessment. Just under half used formally recorded targeted assessment whilst just under a third used this method including the use of pseudowords. About three quarters of respondents used ability grouping either across Key Stage 1 (KS1) or across Year 1 classes, whereas 15% used whole class teaching without ability grouping.
- Letters and Sounds was by far the most frequently used programme, used by 80% of schools as their main programme. Jolly Phonics was used to some extent by 65% of respondents. Other programmes were used by lower proportions of schools. Of those that used more than one main phonics programme or additional materials, two thirds indicated that this was to support pupils with particular needs whilst 40% stated that this was to deal with gaps/weaknesses in their main programme. Respondents were almost evenly split as to whether they delivered the programme systematically or whether they delivered some parts systematically and deviated from the suggested approach to delivery for other parts.
- Overall, respondents were positive about their school's current approach to phonics, in particular with regards to having a clear focus on phonological awareness where 60% of respondents strongly agreed that their approach achieved this. The majority of respondents (70%) stated that all KS1 staff received training for the delivery of phonics whilst 40% indicated that their Teaching Assistants received training.

The purpose of the Phonics Screening Check

- The purpose of the Check - as stated by the DfE - was to confirm that Year 1 pupils had learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard. Some teachers were unclear about this purpose, but in the main they understood it, with most teachers in case study schools stating that the Check's purpose was one of assessing the pupils' phonics ability.
- Additionally, about a quarter felt that the Check was to identify whole class or individual learning requirements; to be used formatively to inform teaching and planning as well as summatively. This issue of ensuring the Check is designed to support teaching as well as providing a summative judgment was a key recurrent issue in the data, highlighted particularly during case study visits.

The administration of the Phonics Screening Check

Guidance

- Both the survey and case study aspects of the study provide evidence that the Check guidance was largely useful, clear and straightforward. The vast majority of survey respondents felt the guidance was useful, whilst head teachers in case study schools who had read the guidance reported that they had found it to be clear and straightforward. Case study teacher comments about the training events were highly positive. In particular, the practice marking workshop was seen as essential in giving teachers confidence in administering the Check. About two thirds of teachers in case study schools (and several open comments in the survey) suggested that having similar training resources online, or as an audio/visual package for the roll out would be very helpful for staff.
- Additional information was requested by teachers in case study schools around items such as who should be conducting the Check, making comments on the marksheet and borderline disapplications. Case study head teachers asked for early guidance on when the Check would take place and what it would involve, as well as information around data reporting and publication.

Administration of the Check

- Year 1 teachers were more likely to be the lead for administering the Check than other members of staff and respondents felt teachers to be best placed to be carrying out the Check. The majority of head teachers in case study schools took a more supervisory role and had little involvement in the

Check once preliminary discussions had taken place.

- All lead teachers in case study schools felt confident in delivering the Check, and this was linked to training, preparation and previous knowledge/experience of phonics. Concerns were raised by a small number of schools around the consistency of judgement when more than one person was administering the Check.
- The majority of teachers in case study schools had faced difficulties in judging whether a word had been read correctly or not with some of their pupils. Where problems had arisen, these were in relation to pseudowords, quieter pupils, more able pupils who rushed through the Check, and pupils who were good readers but had speech difficulties. The importance of using a member of staff who knew the pupils well and the need for a relaxed situation was noted in terms of making judgements of words.
- Just over half (54%) of survey respondents felt a longer window of time to carry out the Check was needed. Open comments from the survey and teachers from five case study schools suggested that the Check should be administered slightly earlier in the year, as mid to late spring is typically a very busy time for schools. This related to being able to use the Check to inform teaching. These schools felt that earlier access to the results would enable them to use the Check as an additional planning tool. The benefits of a tick box on the pupil list and a note-making area on the mark sheet were suggested by teachers in both case studies and open survey comments as a way of logging additional data and noting comments around individual pupils linking - again - to making the Check as useful as possible for supporting teaching and planning.

Resources used by schools to administer the Check

- The survey showed that just under two thirds (65%) of schools had found the time commitment required to administer the Check generally 'straightforward' or 'very straightforward' to manage, with just under a fifth finding it difficult to manage. The average time spent preparing for the Check was around three hours, and administering the Check was about 12.5 hours. The amount of time taken to administer the Check varied considerably between schools, with larger schools being more likely to find it took longer than smaller schools.
- According to teachers surveyed, the Check itself had taken between 4 and 9 minutes on average per pupil, dependent on the skills and ability of the pupils. The overall time taken to administer the Check was more resource intensive and took longer in larger schools, but was reduced in schools where pupils were asked to wait outside the room before it was their turn to take part.
- Qualitative evidence revealed that staff cover was the main resource issue. Some schools dealt with cover internally whilst others bought in supply teachers. A minority of schools during the case study visits suggested that after national roll out the Check may need to be administered by Teaching Assistants or within the classroom due to resource constraints, since ring-fenced funding is not likely to be provided for administration of the Check¹.

The content of the Phonics Screening Check

- Survey schools were asked about the suitability of the Check in relation to a number of aspects of its content for pupils working at the expected standard of phonics. For the majority of these more than 90% of respondents felt they were suitable. Lower proportions of pilot schools felt the Check was suitable in relation to the number of words (83%), the type of vocabulary used in real words (80%) and the use of pseudowords (74%). Eighty-three percent thought the number of words was suitable for pupils working at the expected standard; teachers who thought it was unsuitable were more likely to be from larger schools and those using whole class teaching. Case study data

¹ Schools involved in the Pilot received £250 pounds each towards the costs of preparation and administration time.

indicated that teachers in six schools felt there were too many words for less able pupils. Whilst 80% of respondents felt that the vocabulary used in the real words was suitable for pupils at the expected standard, 20% did not, and some case study schools argued that the use of unfamiliar 'real' words was problematic.

- Just less than three quarters of schools surveyed felt that pseudowords were suitable for pupils working at the expected standard of phonics, and some teachers and many pupils in the case study schools reported that pseudowords were a 'fun', novel aspect of the Check. However, the majority (60%) of schools surveyed felt that pseudowords caused confusion for at least some pupils, with an additional 12% feeling that they caused confusion for most pupils. In case study schools where pupils were less familiar with pseudowords, confusion was also noted by both teachers and pupils. Pupils in the case study schools generally understood the difference between real and pseudowords.
- The most common issue in the qualitative data in relation to pseudowords was the confusion caused by not having pictures alongside all pseudowords. In survey responses and during case study visits, schools suggested that the pseudowords should be placed in a separate section of the Check. Taken together, these findings indicate that how pseudowords are labelled or presented is important for the DfE to consider in relation to the roll out of the Check.
- According to the case studies, pseudowords had caused problems for some higher ability pupils (when trying to make sense of the word) and with less able pupils (using the alien pictures as a clue) - both of which relate to reading ability more widely, rather than phonic decoding. EAL pupils were felt by their teachers to be dealing better than expected with pseudowords.

The suitability of the Phonics Screening Check

- Three quarters of those surveyed felt that the Check accurately assessed phonic decoding ability overall for their pupils. Agreement was highest (84%) for pupils with strong phonics skills, but lower for pupils with weaker decoding skills (61%). Less than half of respondents agreed that the Check accurately assessed the decoding ability of pupils with EAL (46%), with speech difficulties (35%), with SEN (33%) and with language difficulties (28%). That said, around a third of respondents held neutral views around whether the Check was a good way of measuring the capabilities of Year 1 pupils in these groups. These issues were mirrored in case study findings and, in addition, about a quarter of case study interviewees mentioned that they felt the Check was not age appropriate as the standard may be set too high for some of the younger or lower ability pupils.

The impact of the Phonics Screening Check

- Almost half of schools (43%) indicated that the Check had helped them to identify pupils with phonic decoding issues that they were not previously aware of. Just over half (55%) of schools surveyed and many teachers from case study schools felt that the Check had not helped them to identify these issues. This was particularly the case with smaller schools. There was a similar split in case study schools. This is linked to the issue identified earlier: schools would like to use the Check to inform teaching and planning but felt that the Check needed to be designed in such a way that they can do so.
- There were mixed views on the use that might be made from the Check results. Almost all the lead teachers from the case study schools wished to use the results to inform school planning, and five felt that the results would be needed earlier in the year to help planning for Year 2 pupils. Six wanted to use the individualised results to inform class teaching and to support individuals or particular groups of pupils. In contrast, five head teachers in the case studies did not plan to take any action to change teaching in response to the Check (due to concerns about suitability and feeling it would not add to their current knowledge), and five said they reviewed phonics teaching regardless of the Check. Five also said they would be making changes in light of the Check, and the rest said they may make changes, but felt it necessary to wait for the results of the Check before making any firm decisions.

Communication and reporting processes relating to the Phonics Screening Check

Communication with parents/carers

- Less than twenty percent of schools surveyed had informed parents/carers about the Check. Of the 36 schools that had done so, over three quarters had provided information on the Check's purpose and when it would take place, and two thirds provided an opportunity to ask questions. A letter was by far the most common form of communication.
- The most common reason given by case study schools for not informing parents/carers was to prevent them from becoming worried about the Check, and in turn increasing anxiety amongst pupils. Other reasons given included that it was a pilot, and that it was part of the routine assessment of schools. Although very few pupils (less than 10%) had told their parents/carers about the Check, all but three of those who mentioned it to their parents/carers reported the events in positive terms.

Communication with pupils

- Nearly all teachers in case study schools reported that pupils had coped well with the Check and had understood the instructions and what was required of them. Most lead teachers in case study schools had minimised possible pupil anxieties by introducing the Check in a very low key way, with it commonly being described to pupils as being a game, fun, or just another individual reading-based assessment. In at least four case study schools, teachers had prepared pupils for the Check by introducing additional pseudoword activities as pupils were not familiar with them.
- Most pupils indicated that the Check had been a positive experience, and they had generally understood what was required of them, including the inclusion of pseudowords. Most pupils could not recall in detail what they had been told about the Check in advance, but those that did had a clear and simple explanation of the task.

Reporting results

- Almost all schools surveyed wanted detailed results at pupil-level for their school (97%), around 90% would like benchmarking data, and a similar proportion would like commentary on national level results (88%). Case study schools' responses were broadly in line with the survey responses, although six noted the need for contextualised benchmarking.
- Parents/carers responding to the parent/carer survey (carried out in 17 schools) most frequently wanted to receive information on their child's performance on the Check (99%), how the school intends to respond to their child's performance (97%) and information about what they could do to support their child's phonic ability (96%). The majority of case study schools wished themselves to report findings to parents/carers, mostly in a form that could enable parents/carers to support their child's learning, and in a sensitive, appropriate way.
- The DfE has stated that there will be no publication of school-level results from the Check, but there appeared to be insufficient communication around this issue with schools themselves, with all the case study schools stating that they would be opposed to publicly available results such as league tables, and appeared to be unaware of the DfE's intentions. The reasons cited included that the Check is a single, isolated measure, which needed to be seen in the context of wider phonics/literacy assessment over a period of time, and that publication would place unwanted pressures on pupils.

Pupil experiences of the Phonics Screening Check

- Evidence from the survey and teacher and pupil interviews suggests that for most pupils overall, the experience of the Check was generally positive, with those pupils with stronger phonic decoding ability finding it most enjoyable. From the case studies, those who found the Check easier tended to be more positive about it; pupils who found it hard overall were more likely to be negative about the experience. Pupil anxieties were minimised in most case study schools by teachers attempting to make the Check fun and relaxed.
- Between 23% and 29% of surveyed schools felt the experience was negative for pupils with speech or language difficulties, other SEN and weak phonics skills, mirroring the findings in relation to the accuracy of the Check for assessing phonics ability. Those with weaker phonic skills, speech difficulties, SEN - and to a lesser extent EAL - were less likely to have found the Check a positive experience. Pupils who had been told it was a 'test' expressed the most anxiety overall. The location of the Check was a negative factor for pupils in two schools, where noise and pupils in adjoining classrooms were an issue.

Outcomes of the Phonics Screening Check pilot monitoring visits

- Overall the administration of the pilot phonics screening check worked effectively in the 20 monitoring visit schools, and most teachers had been able to administer the Check in an appropriate room. A minority, however, experienced difficulties. Problems arose around the storage of materials, and a lack of discussion with parents/carers of disapplied pupils. There was also confusion around the lack of a tick box on the pupil list and difficulties around running the Check and filling in the marksheet at the same time.

Discussion

For the majority of schools and – as far as this can be judged – pupils, involvement in the Check pilot was a broadly positive experience. Case study schools were able to give a range of areas where they could see that the results of the Check would be useful in relation to planning, teaching and support for particular pupils. There were, however, some areas that were less positive, and others where the experiences were more variable. Firstly, a number of schools identified that - in their view - the Check should be designed in such a way as to support planning and teaching. This related to using the Check as part of a wider set of tools to assess pupil reading over time; being able to use detailed notes on responses to support changes to teaching; not sharing results publicly (in line with DfE intentions); and having access to individualised results and benchmarked results at a school-level. Second, there is a theme relating to the Check's suitability for some groups of pupils, which has implications in relation to additional guidance on disapplication from and discontinuation of the Check for particular pupils. Thirdly, there are some specific points in relation to other aspects of content, particularly in relation to labelling of pseudowords and ordering. Finally, there were other points relating to administration, including the need for audio/visual practice examples, and guidance and support to minimise resource costs in roll out.

Additional Information

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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