

Open Letters – IFERI

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Open letter to Nicky Morgan: 'Why the Year 1 phonics check must stay'

Tes Opinion

30th July 2014

A group of leading teachers, educationalists and campaigners, including the Reading Reform Committee, writes:

Dear secretary of state:

The recent open letter from "[a coalition of leading educationalists](#)" calls for the Year 1 phonics screening check to be abolished. We strongly disagree.

We believe the check is helping to remedy a situation which is longstanding and unsatisfactory. Too many children struggle with reading and writing because phonics has been under-emphasised. They have been led to believe that they should learn many words as unanalysed wholes or guess them using cues from pictures or context – strategies which fail as texts become harder.

We agree that readers sometimes need context in order to know, for example, whether “row” rhymes with “cow” or with “crow”, but such words are infrequent in normal text and good readers use context to supplement letter-sound knowledge, not as a substitute for it. If “row”-type words occurred in the check, either pronunciation would surely be accepted. But have many occurred so far?

Surveys conducted by the United Kingdom Literacy Association and the National Association for the Teaching of English may suggest that the check is undermining the confidence of good readers, but experienced teachers of decoding do not find this, or that their pupils often turn pseudowords into real words, such as “proom” into “groom”.

The “leading educationalists” are also concerned about evidence from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) that many schools are now giving children practice in reading pseudowords. The NFER report does not say that this is happening at the expense of practice in decoding real unfamiliar words, however.

We agree that teachers should not spend a lot of time on pseudowords, but some limited practice can help children to be confident about tackling unfamiliar words in their reading of texts. Moreover, researchers recognise the value of pseudowords for assessment purposes, and the check is an assessment tool.

It is claimed the phonics check “is negatively impacting on how reading is taught”. Since it was introduced in 2012, however, results have improved not only in the check itself but also in the national key stage 1 assessment of comprehension and writing (not isolated word reading) completed a year later. This does not seem like evidence of a negative impact.

It is claimed, too, that “teachers of early reading can assess whether 6-year-olds can ‘decode’ in a few seconds, at no extra cost, by listening to them read aloud from an appropriate text”. This kind of assessment is also important, but it surely takes more than a few seconds and there are no agreed criteria for what is appropriate in terms of unfamiliarity and difficulty.

We support the Year 1 phonics check, the provision of extra help for children who do not reach the threshold and the re-check for those children in Year 2.

Yours faithfully,

Jennifer Chew, OBE, retired Secondary English teacher and now a voluntary helper with reading at two primary schools;
Reading Reform Foundation Committee;

Jan Hilary, headteacher, St George's Church of England Primary School, Battersea;

Nikki Evans, headteacher and Sally Newman, Deputy Headteacher at Moseley Primary School;

Jackie Day, SENCO Ridge Junior School, Bristol;

Marj Newbury, language tutor, primary English at University College Bradford;

Gordon Askew, retired phonics adviser to the DfE;

John Walker, Director of Sounds-Write;

Carol Lloyd-Jones, author of Sounds Together, former regional adviser for the National Strategies;

Mike Lloyd-Jones, author and former regional director for the National Strategies;

Philippa Wroe, specialist dyslexia teacher and independent educational consultant;

Rachel Hornsey, primary teacher, literacy coordinator and consultant;

Dianne Murphy, director of Thinking Reading;

James Murphy, director of Thinking Reading and assistant principal of inclusion at a London Academy;

Wendy Tweedie, BA PGCE RSA Dip SpLD AMBDA, director of Phonic Books Ltd;

Naomi Foxcroft, Literacy Trainer, co-founder of Stepping Stones Nigeria and technical director at Universal Learning Solutions;

Joanna Jeffery MBE, MA(Ed), AMBDA;

Marion Stokes, early years teacher;
Jane Orr, head of the Bloomfield Learning Centre;
David Didau, secondary teacher, author and blogger;
Tom Bennett, secondary teacher, director of Research ED, author and blogger;
Robert Peal, education research fellow at Civitas;
Andrew Old, secondary teacher and education blogger;
Heather Fearn, secondary teacher and parent.

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