

Research title:

'How did the Year 1 phonic screening test impact upon the teaching of phonics in two primary schools?'

Researcher:

Natalie Rogers, St. Mary's CE Primary School

Context:

This research looked at the impact of Year 1 phonics screening/tests on teaching methods across a partnership of two schools. The rationale for this was firstly, this screening test is a current initiative in the drive to improve phonics, secondly, the importance of phonics within the national agenda and thirdly, the school I teach in has a high level of EAL and high social deprivation which has an impact on children's phonics understanding and knowledge when they start school.

The aim was to see how teaching is affected and, over an 18 month period, which modifications, made to the teaching of phonics, are the most effective, both in the short term and long term. I interviewed current Year 1 teachers across a partnership of two schools (post screening test) and then focused in September 2012 on Foundation and Year 1 teaching. During the academic year that followed (2012 -2013) I focused my research on what works and doesn't work when teaching phonics within the classroom; considering the need for a 70% pass rate.

Methodology

The data was gathered through teacher questionnaires, semi-structured individual interviews and group semi-structured interviews. The analysis of Raise of Line was also used to measure progress. I was also actively involved in delivering 'mock' phonics tests and observing phonics sessions. Informal evidence through numerous discussions with teachers and TAs was also used.

Key Findings

'It was a huge learning curve for me and one that was hugely succesful. Because of the hardwork and the benefits it presented, it sounds silly, but phonics now has a very special place in my heart.'

- Year 1 teacher

'In seven years of teaching I have never seen children read and write as well as Year 1 do now' –

Year 1 teacher

How teaching changed:

- There was an even greater emphasis on phonics as the key focus for Year 1 teaching. This emphasis also led to a greater focus in Year R and Year 2.
- The frequency of teaching phonics increased; 15 minute lessons, repetition and then applying skills.
- The government target of 70% pass rate led to higher expectations.
- There was a definite initial over emphasis on the teaching of phonics at the expense of wider reading. This was later re-addressed and included the teaching of high frequency words.
- There were initial concerns over the use of real and pseudo words, this lessened during the year.
- Children who did not pass were then tracked in booster sessions.
- The use of Mock testing provided the teacher with evidence to target certain groups or individual children.
- Attitudes to phonics changes across both schools.

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

	1	2	3	4	5
The screening is a positive development	2	6	1	1	0
My teaching has changed significantly due to the screening	6	2	1	1	0
The pupils will be better prepared for the screening this year	8	1	0	1	0

The positives:

- *'There is a noticable whole school approach: Teacher subject knowledge has been raised, support and training (including coaching) has made both schools raise their game with phonics teaching and made it a key focus for review and development this year'* KS1 Phase leader.
- Common gaps in phonic knowledge has highlighted awareness Results of the test has led to booster support where needed.
- Improvement in writing; Children's use of sounds within their writing.

The negatives:

- Teachers did not want to report to parents a fail mark as they felt this would be detrimental.
- To include more formal tests, at such a young age, where the child could feel they have failed and be labelled so.
- Success at phonics does not always mean being a strong reader especially with EAL comprehension. (2013 School B pass results: EAL 90% non EAL 78%)
Does this imply that children who are EAL have merely been taught by rote?
- The need for phonics screening is not denied however there are still concerns over the 'high stakes' nature of the test for all children.

Impact:

- Notably higher levels has been achieved across both schools.

	2012 % passed	National % pass rate 2012	2013 % passed	National % pass rate 2013
St Marys School	34 %	58 %	86 %	68 %
Portswood Primary	52 %	58%	86%	68%

- In Yr R they are introducing the children to pseudo words and enabling them to be comfortable with these before they enter Year 1.
- Sounds are firmly embedded through Reception and Key Stage 1.

Analysis of Findings

The vast majority of respondents were positive about the development and adapted their teaching significantly, this led to pupils being better prepared for the tests.

The attitudes of the teachers towards the phonics work was positive and this included; recognising the need to be accountable. Teachers accepted that if the government were eager to raise standards in phonics then the weight of a test was likely to do this, even though it did not mean great changes to the way phonics was being taught at the two schools.

Teachers were not concerned about loss of time in other curriculum areas because they felt that the teaching of phonics was key to learning development and being able to access the entire curriculum. Teachers also became more adept at using time efficiently including 5 to 15 minute re-capping sessions (for example within register time and lining up for PE.)

The initial concerns over turbulence were not realised in the final results, as were the initial concerns about EAL, which was not borne out by final data.

In conclusion, the initial apprehension relating to the introduction of the phonics tests have not been borne out. Teaching has been adapted, though has not fundamentally changed. The greater emphasis on how phonics is now taught has led to significant attainment in this area, 58% at St Mary's and 34% and Portswood Primary.

Next Steps

- The implications of the governmental threshold change may alter teaching again in 2014.
- Both schools feel very secure about the systems and methods that are now in place in Year R and Key Stage 1. The focus is now on implications for pupils as they move through the school, especially those who then fail the phonics screening test in Year 2.
- There is a continual need for explicit phonics training for all staff new to Year 1, Year R and Year 2.

Appendices

1. Questionnaires on the impact of Year 1 Phonics screening test.
2. Raise on Line data for St Marys Primary School