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What Could Replace the Phonics Screening Check during the Early Years of Reading Development?

JONATHAN GLAZZARD

ABSTRACT This article argues that the phonics screening check, introduced in England in 2012, is not fit for purpose. It is a test of children's ability to decode words rather than an assessment of their reading skills. Whilst this assessment may, to some extent, support the needs of children who rely on phonemic decoding as a route to word recognition, it does not support the needs of more advanced readers who have automatic word recognition. In addition, for children who struggle with phonemic decoding, the phonics screening check does not assess the skills which contribute to the development of both phonological and phonemic awareness. These skills include compound word, syllable and onset and rime blending and segmenting as well as phoneme addition, phoneme deletion and phoneme substitution. This article argues that existing models of reading development are inadequate for assessment purposes and that a battery of assessments is needed to support children at different stages of their reading development.

Diagnostic assessment can be a very important tool at a stage when development of skills is still insecure and incomplete. There is a clear role for it, for example, around Year 1 for many children at a particular stage in literacy acquisition. However, the assessment needs to be attuned to the needs of the learner. This article questions the universal requirement of a phonics screening check at the end of Year 1, and discusses more flexible alternatives.

The synthetic phonics approach introduces beginning readers to the smallest units of sound in words. Pupils learn to read words by enunciating each of the phonemes in sequence throughout a word to read the target word. This approach is often referred to as 'blending' or 'decoding'. Beginning readers are thus able to decode print regardless of whether they understand the words they are reading.

Such an emphasis on decoding is demonstrated through the introduction of the phonics screening 'check' for all pupils in Year 1 at the age of 5-6. This is an assessment of decoding rather than comprehension, and in order to ensure that pupils are not reading words from memory, many of the words that are presented to children are pseudo 'non-words'. This means that the only way of identifying the target word is through enunciating the phonemes in sequence throughout the word and blending them together to identify the word.

Its imposition relates to the obsession of a government minister, Nick Gibb, with the synthetic phonics approach. It was designed to ensure that teachers all teach in an officially approved way. It is too inflexible to serve as a diagnostic tool to identify the learning needs of all young children.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA, 2012) recommended that the 'check' should only be used to identify development needs for individual children rather than being used with all children, on account of its holding back more able readers and potentially undermining their confidence as readers.

It does not take account of the different ways in which children acquire literacy. Although blending separate phonemes is a prime skill through which many children learn to read (Ehri, 2005), many nevertheless learn to read through visual approaches (Frith, 1985, 1986; Ehri, 2005), and some use contextual cues as a basis for word recognition rather than relying on the skill of blending (Goodman, 1976). This might involve missing a word out and reading ahead to the end of a sentence before going back to identify the target word. Some children are fluent in reading by the time they take the 'check' (UKLA, 2012), raising further questions about the relevance of the phonics check.

Its main feature is that it separates decoding from making sense of a text. This is a strength if used on particular children at certain points in time, but it is also a major weakness.

The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) was developed by Gough and Tunmer more than thirty years ago (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). The model proposes that reading ability or reading comprehension (R) is the product of two components, decoding (D) and linguistic comprehension (C). The model suggests that the two components are independent of each other and that each is necessary for successful reading (Gustafson et al, 2013). Thus, neither decoding nor language comprehension is sufficient in itself to produce skilled and effective reading.

However, the extent to which decoding and comprehension predict reading ability is dependent upon the level of reading skills. For children who are struggling readers, decoding is a better predictor of reading ability; but comprehension is a better predictor to explain variance in reading ability among skilled readers (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Thus, for struggling readers, the phonics screening check may be useful as a predictor of their development in

the skill of word recognition (decoding). However, for children who are already fluent readers, the check is not appropriate because they have already mastered the skill of word recognition. For these readers, we need to know more about their comprehension skills in order to support their subsequent reading development.

Although the SVR recognises only two components of reading development (i.e. word recognition and linguistic comprehension), the skills of decoding and comprehension are complex and underpinned by other skills which may need to be mastered first. Thus, the model risks over-simplifying the component skills of reading development.

As word recognition develops, there is a gradual shift from phonological processing to orthographic processing (e.g. retrieving whole-word shapes from their store in the visual memory) (Gustafson et al, 2013), and skilled readers tend to use orthographic strategies rather than phonological strategies, which rely on grapheme-phoneme conversion (Ehri & Wilce, 1987). Additionally, Kirby and Savage (2008) argue that fluency is as important as accuracy in decoding, so this skill also needs to be developed.

Ehri's Model

Ehri's theory of reading development (Ehri, 1992, 1995) proposes four phases in the development of automatic word reading. These phases are termed: pre-alphabetic; partial alphabetic; full alphabetic; and consolidated alphabetic.

In the pre-alphabetic phase, children have not yet understood the relationship between phonemes and graphemes. At this phase their reading is dependent upon visual memory (Stuart et al, 2008). They may be able to read environmental print, especially if it appears with salient visual cues such as logos which use specific colours and fonts (Johnston and Watson 2007).

In the partial alphabetic phase, beginning readers are able to identify the initial and final phonemes in spoken words and make some connections between graphemes and their corresponding phonemes (Stuart et al, 2008). Their attempts at decoding are not always accurate in this phase but they are no longer arbitrary.

The phonics screening check assesses children's skills against the full alphabetic stage rather than assessing whether beginning readers are operating in the pre-, partial or full alphabetic phases. Thus, it fails to assess reading against a developmental framework. It therefore ignores some of the earlier phases in reading development, which does not help teachers to determine appropriate forms of intervention for children whose decoding skills are not secure.

However, Ehri's model falls somewhat short in neglecting the significant role that oral language comprehension plays in reading development. The SVR, on the other hand, explicitly acknowledges that word recognition alone is insufficient to produce good readers. It has been argued that:

> [v]ocabulary is one of the most consistent predictors of reading comprehension: children with good vocabularies understand texts better, and the predictive relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension increases through the primary grades. (Stuart et al, 2008, p. 64)

Research suggests that although developing the skill of decoding makes the most significant contribution for children with reading difficulties (Gustafson et al, 2013), language comprehension is the most important predictor of reading comprehension for children with typical reading development (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Gustafson et al, 2013).

Despite the contribution that these models make to our understanding of reading development, the SVR fails to identify the pre-reading skills which children need for word recognition, and Ehri's model neglects the role of linguistic comprehension in reading development. Despite their limitations, both the SVR and Ehri's model of reading development provide the basis for more effective models of assessment than the phonics screening check.

In the case of poor readers with under-developed skills in decoding, assessing the skill of decoding (which is what the phonics screening check does) is insufficient because skilled teachers will already be aware that the skill of blending has not been mastered. Other means are needed of assessing whether children have an appreciation of rhyme or alliteration, whether they can substitute different initial letters while leaving the rest of the word the same, and so on. Some of these judgements can best be made informally or in playful interactions with individual children. Additionally, blending at the level of the phoneme (which is required in the phonics screening check) is an advanced skill. The check informs teachers whether children can or cannot do this, but teachers will already know this through their ongoing formative assessments. Once we know that a child is unable to blend at the level of the phoneme the check does not help teachers to identify what they need to do next to support the child.

From a developmental perspective it is easier for children to process larger units of sound than smaller units. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound within a word. Instead, by adopting a developmental approach, blending and segmenting at the level of the whole word is a logical place to start developing this skill. Children can be asked to blend and segment compound words (*tooth-brush/toothbrush*). Once this skill has been mastered they can progress to blending and segmenting *syllables*. They can then progress to blending and segmenting at the level of the onset and rime (*c-at / d-og / s-it / c-oat*) before progressing to blending at the level of the phoneme. Teachers can use this developmental framework to assess what stage children are operating at within the skills of blending and segmenting and, more importantly, the stage of development informs them how to support the child. Teachers also need to assess the skills of phoneme addition, deletion and substitution as well as awareness of rhyme and alliteration.

Given the frequency of irregular words in the most basic sentences in English, immediate recognition of words such as *the*, *there*, *said*, *was* and so on is very important. It is these words which hold sentences together, which carry the grammar without which meaningful literacy is impossible. Unless they are easily recognised on sight, partly by perceiving the shape of the word as a whole, fluency will be impeded. Assessing such key words cannot be done through a phonics check. If children do not have a good sight vocabulary, teachers can adopt a developmental approach by assessing the sub-component skills which contribute to this. These skills include visual attention, visual discrimination, visual memory and visual sequential memory. If these skills are not secure then this could impede the development of sight vocabulary.

Teachers also need to assess children's linguistic knowledge. This is underpinned by vocabulary knowledge and grammatical knowledge. Children's reading development is influenced by exposure to spoken language and access to a rich language curriculum.

The phonics screening check therefore serves little purpose, apart from acting as an accountability tool for teachers and as a mechanism for labelling children. More importantly, it can have a detrimental impact on those children who 'fail' the check and are required to re-take it the following year.

Conclusion

The phonics screening check is unhelpful in terms of informing intervention for the weakest readers and could have a detrimental impact on the progress of the most able readers who need to develop their skills in reading comprehension. As a starting point for assessment during Year 1, teachers should use the SVR as the basis for thinking about children's skills in both word recognition and linguistic comprehension. This will broadly inform the type of intervention that is required to support a child's reading development. Those children with poor word recognition skills can then subsequently be assessed against Ehri's developmental framework to identify which phase they are working within.

For children who are working at the pre- or partial alphabetic phases, a more detailed assessment tool may be required and should include skills such as compound word blending, syllable blending, onset and rime blending, phoneme addition, phoneme deletion and phoneme substitution. As reading is also a visual process, poorer readers should also be assessed against a framework for visual skills development which includes visual attention, visual discrimination, visual memory and visual sequential memory.

For those children who can read aloud quite fluently, using a combination of phonic decoding and recognising frequent irregular words, the teacher's attention will need to be on a growing ability to make sense of texts in a variety of genres, as well as on the range of vocabulary. Assessment might be aided by informal questions about the meaning of texts and more difficult words.

The phonics screening check fails to capture the complexity of reading development. A more detailed framework for assessment, loosely based on

theoretical models of reading development, would be more appropriate. Rather than being constrained by a single compulsory test, the 'phonics check', teachers need to be given professional autonomy to make choices from a battery of assessment tools. Skills in reading development vary across groups of children and individuals and the choice of assessment tool should be appropriate to the stage of reading development that the child has reached.

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JONATHAN GLAZZARD is Professor of Teacher Education at Leeds Beckett. His research focuses on inclusion, disability, special educational needs and early reading development. *Correspondence*: j.glazzard@leedsbeckett.ac.uk