

Reading test will add to decline

The government's desire to impose a standalone, context-free reading test in Year 1 goes against the advice of much of the sector, and threatens to undermine pedagogical diversity and creativity.



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THE SINGLE biggest change that the last government brought to early years education was the imposition of a statutory *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) framework for early years settings. They did this despite the fact that there were pedagogies that were highly regarded elsewhere in the world, such as Montessori and Steiner, whose philosophies would undoubtedly be compromised by the rigidity of such a framework. Dame Tickell's recommendation that more schools should be offered exemption from the framework is, therefore, very welcome, but we should continue to be concerned for children remaining within the system.

The coalition government is now proposing a statutory reading test for children in Year 1 that also comes with a 'government knows best' tag. This is currently being contested by a number of leading bodies, including the NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers), the NUT, The United Kingdom Literacy Association and TACTYC.

These highlight the fact that reading arises from the need to make sense of the world, and to understand and communicate with others, and that it is a much more holistic process than the simple decoding of text. They also challenge the basis for such an imposition. As TACTYC says, such a test is 'neither supported by research evidence nor by teachers' experience.'

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Despite enormous investment over the past few years England's performance in reading attainment has been steadily declining. The 2007 PIRLS Study (*Progress in International Reading Literacy*) showed us dropping from 3rd to 19th, and reported that children in England read for pleasure much less frequently than their peers in other countries. There had been significant increases in the proportion of English 10-year-olds with the 'least positive' attitudes to reading, who said they very seldom read stories or novels outside of school.

The report stated: 'On average, children in England reported less frequent reading for pleasure outside school than children in many other countries – just a third of children reported reading for fun on a daily basis... Of particular concern is the 15 percent of children in the sample for England who had the least

positive attitudes, a significant increase from 2001. This is one of the highest proportions in all the 2006 participating countries.' An over-emphasis on early attainment, at the expense of social, communicative and life-skills, may be at the core of this finding and is something that we surely cannot afford to ignore.

The phonics debate has raged for decades and for every piece of research that argues one way, another that comes to a different conclusion. Most expert bodies agree that there is no 'one way' to teach reading and that synthetic phonics is just one approach that should be considered amid a variety of others, tailored to meet each child's individual needs. They also agree that what matters most is that children see learning as interesting, challenging and fun, and most importantly of all, do not suddenly start to see themselves as suddenly 'failing' the adults in their world.

The NUT's biggest concern about the reading test is the government's claim that it will be supportive in nature. 'Its inherent injustice is highlighted by the proposal that, should a child fail to meet the standard required at the end of Year 1, they will be required to retake the test in the autumn term.

'Does the government intend that those children who experience most difficulty learning to read would have to keep taking the test until they pass it, or leave school? What purpose would such repeated testing have, other than to cement the impression that the child is a failure? In this context, the young age that children would take this test has to be kept in mind – as a self-perception that one is not "good" at reading could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which could damage the child's future educational prospects.'

Whatever approach is used, the real debate should be about whether governments are undermining pedagogical diversity and what that says about the nurturing of creativity and a true love of learning.

The recent White Paper talks of the 'freeing up' of schools, but the imposition of statutory requirements certainly does not support this, nor does the continued use of rigid and outcome-based frameworks rather than more holistic, integrated and flexible approaches.

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Useful resources

- To read more about the government's proposals for the Year 1 reading test, please visit: www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/a0075951/year1phonicsresponse