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An evaluation of the impact of the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in English Schools (2012-2021).

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Abstract

The Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was introduced in 2012 for Year One pupils in England. Just two years after its introduction, the Government stated that 102,000 more 6-year-old children were "on track to read more effectively" (Gibb, 2015). Such claims suggest that the PSC has been successful in raising standards; however, this increase has not been matched by similar improvements in reading test data in Year Two and Year Six. Opponents of the PSC raise concerns about its impact on pedagogical freedoms, its validity, and the pressure of a high-stakes test. Much research into early reading has focused on the 'reading wars' and the conflict between teaching methods (Flesch, 1955; Dombey, 2010; Buckingham et al., 2013). Other research (Clark, 2014, Walker et al, 2015) has reviewed issues around the initial implementation of the PSC. This thesis accepts that phonics-based instruction is now the accepted method of teaching in English schools and focuses instead on the long-term consequences of a national testing programme.

This study follows a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of pupil test data with semi-structured interviews with both teachers and pupils from three schools. The data are analyzed through a sociocultural lens, with the aim of exploring the impact of a restrictive test of cognitive skills on a wider understanding of reading as a social and cultural practice. The study shows that the correlation between performance in the PSC and later reading tests is significant but is not as statistically strong as might be expected. The data collected show that the PSC has influenced teaching methods. Therefore, as a tool for facilitating widespread pedagogical and policy change, the PSC has achieved success, but as for its aim of developing fluent readers, the evidence is less certain. The study concludes by suggesting that the PSC has had more of a negative impact on teachers than on their pupils.

Declaration

I, Helen Patmore, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Acknowledgements

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List of abbreviations

DEST	Department of Education, Science and Training (Australia, 2001-2007)
DfE	Department for Education
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage (Nursery and Reception classes)
FSM	Free School Meals
KS1	Key Stage 1 (Pupils aged 5-7 in School Years 1-2)
KS2	Key Stage 2 (Pupils aged 7-11 in School Years 3-6)
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NC	National Curriculum
NLS	National Literacy Strategy
NRP	National Reading Panel (USA)
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (for 10-year-olds)
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment (for 15-year-olds)
PSC	Phonics Screening Check
RWI	Read Write Inc
SATs	Standard Assessment Tests – taken by Y2 and Y6 pupils
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SSP	Systematic Synthetic Phonics
STA	Standards and Testing Agency (UK)
Y1	Year One pupils (aged 5-6 years old)
Y2	Year Two pupils (aged 6-7 years old)
Y6	Year Six pupils (aged 10-11 years old)

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An evaluation of the impact of the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in English Schools (2012-2021).

Chapter One – Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the study

> *The phonics test at age six is likely to de-motivate children rather than ensure that they become eager and fluent readers (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education 2011, p4).*

Tackling poor literacy (functional reading and writing ability) has been a longstanding government priority, given the links between literacy and being a successful and functioning member of society (DfE, 2012). Current Government policy to address poor attainment in reading requires all pupils to be taught phonics; this policy has been enforced since 2012 by a compulsory Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds. The Phonics Screening Check (PSC) is a short word reading test, administered to individual children in June, comprising both real and phonically regular pseudowords. At first glance, the improvement in the number of children passing the Phonics Screening Check is impressive: the pass rate has risen from 58% in 2012 to 82% in 2019 (the last year for which national data are available). It has been suggested by the DfE that this improvement in phonics scores shows that increasing numbers of children are on their way to becoming better readers: "163,000 more 6-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers." (DfE, 2018). However, passing the PSC does not appear to be the guarantee of future success in reading that it is purported to be, as similar gains in attainment are not so obvious in further reading tests taken by the same children at age seven and age eleven (Machin et al., 2016).

Whilst proponents of different methods of teaching children to read have been competing for dominance in the so called 'Reading Wars' (Pearson, 2004; Alexander and Fox, 2013, Solity, 2020) for many years, most educators are now of the belief that a certain level of confidence and competence in phonic decoding is necessary for children to become fluent readers (Wyse and Styles, 2007; Snowling and Hulme, 2007; Castles et al, 2018). Morgan, former Secretary of State for Education, claimed that phonics would begin to address the "long tail of

underachievement" and would begin to create a "virtuous circle", whereby "children are more confident, so they read more, so they become even more confident and keep on reading more" (DfE, 2015b). This concurs with an understanding of the "Matthew Effect" in reading (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997; Stanovich, 2000; Snowling and Hulme, 2011) where the gap between the good and weaker readers gets wider, simply because the stronger readers read more and so improve at a faster rate. Morgan was clear that by teaching and testing phonics "no child falls through the cracks and is at risk of being left behind" (DfE, 2015b).

At the core of any government's education policy is the expectation that children must learn to read. Britain's ranking in international performance tables of reading, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA testing) of fifteen-year-olds, suggests that standards had been declining in recent years, with Britain dropping from seventeenth in 2006 to twenty-third in 2012 (DfE, 2013), although there was an improvement back up to nineteenth in 2015 (DfE, 2016) and fourteenth in 2018 (BBC, 2019). Similarly, PIRLS testing (Programme in International Reading Study) for ten-year-olds shows that English pupils, although improving since the 2006 and 2011 test cycles, were still significantly behind the top scoring countries in 2016 (McGrane et al, 2017). This is despite a sustained drive to improve literacy standards in UK schools over the last thirty years, through the introduction of the National Curriculum (DfES, 1988), the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1998) and specific targeted programmes such as Early Literacy Support (DfES, 2001) and Letters and Sounds (DfES, 2007). This was summarised in 2015 by a DfE report:

> This poor performance is the legacy of a decade of stagnation. In the ten years to 2012, our absolute and relative position in the assessments did not improve, despite substantial increases on spending on education over the same period. (DfE 2015a, p8)

As part of this approach, since 2012, all Year One children (aged 5 – 6 years old) in England have taken part in a national testing programme known as the Phonics Screening Check (PSC). This test comprises a list of forty phonically decodable words (a combination of both real and pseudowords) which each child has to read aloud individually to their teacher. A score of thirty-two words read correctly is sufficient to be awarded a pass. (See Appendix 1 for an example of the test materials.) Parents are told whether their children have 'met the required standard' or 'passed this check', and whilst whole school data is not published nationally, results are available for Ofsted when carrying out inspections as part of accountability measures.

Although most educators and reading researchers agree on the value of phonics in the teaching of early reading, having a national testing programme that only values a narrow aspect of reading means that other vital skills run the risk of being overshadowed. It would therefore seem that the relational and affective connections needed for purposeful reading and comprehending are missing from a purely phonics-based approach to teaching. If young children are only being taught that reading is a decoding exercise, with success in the PSC the ultimate goal, then they may not fully engage with the concept of reading for meaning and enjoyment. The importance of a wider 'reading curriculum' is beginning to be debated in schools in response to the recent emphasis on phonics.

The introduction of this test has proved controversial, not just due to the cost and the ethical implications of subjecting such young children to a high stakes national testing regime, but also in the way it reinforces the government's insistence that synthetic phonics, fast and first, is the best way to teach early reading (Clark, 2015; Walker et al, 2015; Bradbury, 2018). Half of the forty words on the test are pseudowords and their inclusion has proved to be a significant problem for many educators. Whilst Stanovich (2000, p207) describes "the incredible potency of pseudoword reading as a predictor of reading difficulties", the concept of testing all children on their ability to read pseudowords such as "vol, teg, clain, scroy and thrand" (STA, 2014) has proved to be one of the more contentious aspect of the phonics screening test. If children are to understand reading as a way of making meaning from text, then the concept of reading pseudowords does not align with this paradigm.

Taken at face value, this dramatic improvement in phonics results between 2012 and 2019 suggests that the PSC, as a national screening programme, has dramatically improved the reading skills of Year One children. The PSC has prompted all schools to evaluate their approaches to the initial teaching of reading. This rise in performance data alone gave rise to the statement that there are now "163,000 more six-year-olds on track to become confident readers thanks to our focus on phonics" (DfE, 2018). This statistic is repeated in numerous government documentations, as a means of justifying their policy approach. The increase in results has led to declarations such as "the evidence is clear that children learn to read best when they are taught using a robust programme of synthetic phonics" (DfE 2015a, p9). The apparent success of the policy has led to interest from other countries: Australian schools, for

example, have borrowed the idea of phonics screening, having seen the apparent impact of the English scheme (Clark, 2017; Wheldall et al 2019).

However, whilst the number of children reaching the pass mark in the screening check has improved significantly between 2012 and 2019, the number of children meeting the required standard a year later in National Curriculum tests has not risen by a comparable amount:

> …. In England there is still no evidence that four years of the check has resulted in other than an increase year on year in the percentage pass on the check, with no discernible improvement on attainment. (Clark, 2017, p23)

The discrepancies in the data between the dramatic improvements at Year One and lack of corresponding progress in older age groups will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Reading scores for children at age seven and eleven have also improved, albeit at a slower pace, but significantly, these scores are following a steady pattern of slight improvement year on year dating back almost twenty years. If the improvement in phonics scores in 2013 and 2014 meant that more children were on track to become fluent readers, then a similar dramatic increase in Year Two reading scores would have been expected in 2014 and 2015. It is also necessary to point out at this stage that phonics, and in particular Systematic Synthetic Phonics[1], should have been taught in schools before 2012. Phonics has been part of

[1] "Phonics is a method of instruction that teaches students correspondences between graphemes in written language and phonemes in spoken language and how to use these correspondences to read and spell words. Phonics instruction is systematic when all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught and they are covered in a clearly defined sequence." (Ehri, 2003, p3)

"Many countries in Europe use a synthetic phonics approach …where children learn very early on how to blend letter sounds in order to decode unfamiliar words. However, where phonics is taught in English speaking countries, it generally starts with an analytic phonics approach, where children initially learn to recognise words by sight, that is, it is a mixed methods approach. Alongside this, children learn to recognise letter sounds at the beginning, the end, and then the middle position of printed words. At this point, usually at the end of the first year at school or at the start of the second, they may then be taught how to decode printed words by blending the letter sounds all through the word." (Johnston, McGeown, Watson, 2012)

government policy since the Rose Review in 2006, which identified the five key competencies that children need to acquire in order to become fluent readers (Rose, 2006).

The rise in scores from 2012 onwards therefore shows that the introduction of the PSC has had a direct impact on phonics teaching as more and more children are passing the test. The fact that now over 80% of six-year-olds pass the test illustrates that the average phonic and decoding attainment in Year One is at a significantly higher level than children were reaching pre-2012, through whatever phonics teaching they were receiving at that point.

One concern about the reliability of the PSC data can be seen when children's scores are compared between different types of tests. In 2013, 69% of six-year-olds passed the screening check, indicating that they had reached the expected standard for decoding. The following summer, the same cohort of children achieved an 81% pass rate at Level 2b (the expected level) for reading comprehension. More children met the required standard for 'reading' than for 'decoding', therefore it could be argued that the phonics test is not a reliable indicator of children's future reading attainment. At the same time, some schools with particularly high success rates with phonics recorded Year Two SATs scores that were lower than their phonics scores, indicating that the passing of the screening check is no guarantee that reading fluency and comprehension are both at the expected standard. The first cohort to take the phonics screening check in 2012 took their KS2 national tests (SATs) at age eleven in 2017. For this cohort, 71% of children met the expected standard in reading in 2017. These were the children who only scored 58% in 2012, again suggesting that the scores at age six are not necessarily indicative of future reading progress. On the other hand, it could also suggest that the 42% of children who did not meet the Year One standard had been clearly identified and targeted with additional support so that the majority of them did catch up and meet the expected level by the time they left primary school.

The DfE, however, still claims that the Phonics Screening Check is a reliable indicator of pupils' future progress in reading: "99% of pupils who did so [passed screening check] in 2013 went on to achieve level 2 or above in reading at the end of key stage 1" (DfE 2015a: 10). This is an impressive statistic when used to justify the introduction of the screening check. However, this is actually 99% of the 69% who passed the screen. It is significant that some of the 31% of that cohort who did not pass the screening check still managed to meet the Level 2

expected standard in 2014. Equally, although achieving Level 2 is generally recognised as one of the indicators of a good standard of reading at age seven; it is Level 2b that would really indicate a child who is on track to succeed with the demands of the KS2 curriculum. (Changes in the way that English primary school national tests are graded took place in 2016, resulting in tougher standards. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.)

This difference between the rate of improvements in phonics data and the rate of improvements in pupils' wider literacy attainment has also been identified by Walker et al. (2015, p27): "This analysis is inconclusive and is unable to offer any clear evidence of improvements in literacy performance, or in progress, directly attributable to the impact of the PSC." The same report also concludes that "there is no clear evidence of any particular impact of the introduction of the PSC on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment" (Walker et al., 2015, p 30).

Another criticism of the screening check itself is that it only tests for accuracy, rather than fluency. The current guidance for administrators of the Phonics Screening Check (STA, 2019, p14) states that children will typically need between four and nine minutes to complete the test, although there is no strict time limit. Children can have as long as necessary on every word, "although in most cases ten seconds should be enough" (STA 2019, p11). Given that the pupils are only required to read 40 words, this is a very clear indication that fluency is not valued at this stage. Children can sound out all the phonemes in a word prior to blending them together; they can even have a pen to mark out the 'sound buttons' to aid their reading if that is a strategy that they would normally adopt. Therefore children who are only reading around four words a minute can meet the required standard. Rest breaks are allowed for children who do not have the stamina or the concentration needed to read all forty words in one sitting. The jump from this to the fluency and comprehension required eleven months later for the Year Two Reading SATs is immense. If children are taught to decode mechanically, but do not develop the fluency needed to aid comprehension, reading difficulties will persist as they progress through school (Ferrer et al., 2015). Reading fluency is recognised as a "bridge between decoding and reading comprehension" (Pikulski and Chard, 2005, p512)

Although the importance of phonics is recognised by both researchers and practitioners, there have been concerns about the value of the PSC (Duff et al., 2015). A study into the consequences of the national PSC programme and its impact on a child's progress and overall

reading identity could prove useful in recommending teaching approaches in Early Years and Key Stage One classrooms.

1.2 Background to the Study

As a Literacy Co-ordinator in a primary school, I have had a particular interest in the teaching of reading for many years. Although my class teaching has been focused on the upper age range, I have had responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the teaching of reading across the whole school. My interest in this particular research project stems from the following observations:

- In my role as a teacher of nine-to-eleven-year-olds, I have been concerned that children who can decode perfectly, and indeed can read aloud with reasonable expression and fluency, still have considerable problems with comprehending what they have read. What has led to this disconnect between decoding and comprehension and what can be done lower down in the school to begin to remedy this? Are the teaching strategies currently employed by early years teachers as part of their preparation for the PSC causing a separation of the skills of decoding and the skills of comprehension? As an early hypothesis, it would seem that the focus on phonics in order to pass the PSC is affecting children's wider connections with texts. The fact that results at age eleven have not significantly improved when compared to increases in PSC data suggests that these early gains have not had the long-term impact that might have been expected.
- Having been involved with the DfE's Phonics Partnership Schools programme in the academic years 2015-2017 and the English Hub programme from 2018 onwards, I have been privileged to be allowed to visit several different schools in my Local Authority with the role of offering guidance on how to improve their below average phonics scores. What became apparent as part of this work is the fact that some of these schools may not have had outstanding phonics scores but their pupils were achieving highly, or were at the very least matching national averages in the National Curriculum tests at aged seven and eleven. It was these schools that interested me in particularly. They were already demonstrating that they had effective reading programmes within school but they were being 'caught out' by the new Phonics Screening Check because their Year One pupils could not read nonsense words such as 'strom', 'chab', 'queep', 'thend' and 'splaw' out of context.

- Whilst advocating a phonics approach to the teaching of reading myself, it seemed to me that an emphasis on preparing for Phonics Screening Check may be hampering the reading development of some pupils who were already able to read fluently. It seemed possible that the screening check was becoming an irrelevant hoop through which some pupils and teachers were being forced to jump. In some schools, the requirement to prepare children to pass the PSC could be seen as disrupting what was already a highly effective reading curriculum, based on reading widely for enjoyment and meaning. I could see that the screening check was putting additional pressure on schools that were already achieving well on other national reading tests. The screening check seemed to be putting more emphasis on a narrow skills base which could be masking both deficiencies and strengths of an individual school's reading programme.

Although the majority of children pass both the screening check in Year One and the National Curriculum Reading test in Year Two, there is a significant group of pupils who pass one but not the other. Some children decode to the expected standard at age six but fail to convert those early phonemic skills into a pass in other tests of reading. There is another set of children who do not achieve the standard in phonics in Year One but are perfectly capable of reading well enough to pass national tests a year later, when they are being asked to read whole texts and answer comprehension questions about them, which surely demands a higher cognitive skill (Nation et al, 2010; Solity, 2020)

Therefore, the focus of this research is not the importance of phonics teaching but rather to illuminate whether the introduction of the PSC has had a discernible impact on how children are being taught to read and to investigate both the positive and negative long-term consequences of a high-stakes phonics testing regime.

1.3 Claim to Knowledge

"An assessment is never a neutral event – it always carries consequences."

(Stobart, 2008, p103).

This thesis explores the relationship between the Phonics Screening Check scores and later reading achievement at age seven and eleven. In addition, children's perceptions of reading and its relationship to phonics were investigated through interviews with pupils in the term after they had taken the PSC. Their views were explored alongside the views of their Year One teachers. The work presented in this thesis provides an important extension to the extant literature. In contrast to previous work, a mixed methods approach was employed. This enabled links between quantitative and qualitative data which to ensure that my research considered the issue of phonics from a different perspective.

I approached this study with an insider's perspective. In recent years, working in a primary school, I have observed the impact that all high stakes testing has had on teachers and school leaders. Whilst I am not involved in the day-to-day teaching of phonics, my current role as Literacy Co-ordinator in a large primary school means that I am regularly involved in the monitoring and evaluating of the approaches to the teaching of all aspects of reading.

I have been an advocate of a structured approach to the teaching of phonics for many years and before the introduction of the PSC, I introduced synthetic phonics teaching programmes into two primary schools in which I have worked with the aim of improving pupils' decoding skills. However, more recently, have become concerned about the government promotion of synthetic phonics as the best and most appropriate method of teaching early reading to *all* children. The introduction of the Phonics Screening Check appears to have privileged a mechanical bottom-up view of learning to read at the expense of developing reading for pleasure, reading for meaning, and other higher level comprehension skills. It has also negated the value of other methods of teaching reading, such as 'real books' and 'look-and-say' (Davis, 2012,2014; Grundin, 2018). The starting point for this research project has been shaped by my position as a teacher and as a school leader, therefore my positionality will play a significant factor in the way that I approach the data collection.

Whilst there have been many studies into the impact and importance of phonics teaching (Clark, 2007; Meyer 2010; Davis 2012, 2014; Bowers 2020), there are fewer available studies into the effects of the PSC itself (Glazzard, 2017a; Carter, 2017; Bradbury, 2018; Wheldall et al, 2019, Carter, 2020).

Previous qualitative studies on children's early reading in school have been published. For example, Levy (2011) collected information via pupil interviews about young children's understanding of reading and found that as Year One progressed, pupils were drawn to explain that 'reading' was to do with how far through the banded books they could read, rather than enjoyment, comprehension or the sense of reading being a shared social practice. However, Levy's study took place prior to the introduction of the screening check and the affordances given to pseudowords as a measure of reading ability. Very little research has explored children's perceptions of reading since the introduction of the phonics check. It would therefore be interesting to consider whether young children's views on reading have changed since 2012. In another example, Papen (2016) spent a year carrying out an ethnographic study on Year One children's reading in an outstanding, high achieving school in the North of England. She focused on the progress of a cohort of five-to-six-year olds as they were taught phonics and prepared for the screening check. It was found that the pupils were indeed making rapid progress in their decoding as a result of their structured phonics sessions, but she also found that their literacy skills were being developed in so many complementary ways, e.g., through singing, cross-curricular work, RE and class assemblies. She noted that the pupils studied generally enjoyed their phonics sessions and were benefiting from the drilling and repetition and could recognise that they were improving, although at times she could see "anxiety and boredom" (Papen, 2016, p119). She also noted the amount of time the pupils spent practising for the screening check. However, this research did not track the children's reading progression in subsequent years, or explore children's experiences of this approach to reading instruction.

Other researchers, such as Davis, (2012), Machin et al. (2016), Machin et al, (2018) have considered the value of structured phonics teaching programmes from a cognitive perspective. Machin et al (2016) found that phonics had had an impact on the early reading progress of lower ability children, although overall, effects at eleven were less discernible. However, this report refers to cohorts that were being taught phonics prior to the introduction of the screening

check. McGeown and Medford (2014) called for more longitudinal studies to evaluate the impact of synthetic phonics teaching on pupils' later reading performance.

This study considered whether high quality phonics teaching, as measured by the PSC, is enough to develop good, confident readers. Teacher interviews focused on whether test preparation has replaced quality first teaching; pupil focus groups explored children's perceptions of learning to read through a strictly phonics approach. Therefore, I believe that my thesis, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a mixed methods approach, has examined the links between the PSC and pedagogical choices made by teachers and headteachers, which have a long-term impact, either positive or negative, on children's further progress in reading fluency, accuracy and comprehension.

1.4 Core Research Question and Supplementary Questions

The central focus for this thesis was to explore the impact of a mandated Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds in England. This impact was studied from different perspectives: performance data, the teachers' viewpoint and also the children's experiences of preparation for the test. The introduction of the test has been associated with a rise in standards, (DfE, 2018) but it has also resulted in pedagogical change and increased accountability.

> *"Unsurprisingly, the introduction of the test, buttressing the government's insistence on synthetic phonics as the one legitimate route into reading has had a marked effect in classrooms in England." (Dombey 2014, p68).*

The UK Government's current emphasis on synthetic phonics as the primary method for the teaching of early reading, with standards being monitored through the PSC, has had a significant impact on pedagogy in English schools. PSC has been positioned as the main lever for this policy:

> But there will be no hiding place for those schools whose children fail to learn to read. We will have a national reading test after two years of school to see if children are decoding fluently. Those schools which have failed to get their pupils reading will have to account to parents for this failure. And parents will want to know, as I will, why children have been failed, because if they have not learned to read they cannot read to learn. (Gove, 2009)

This thesis will therefore examine the impact that the introduction of a compulsory test in phonics has had on pupils, teachers and performance data. The following supplementary questions will guide the research process:

1. Is the PSC a reliable and useful indicator of pupil attainment at age six?

As a mandatory assessment, the PSC should be both useful and accurate. It should identify those children who have failed to make acceptable progress in early reading and who would benefit from additional support to get them back on track. It should provide meaningful data for teachers that will help them plan their pupils' next steps (Duff et al., 2015). Of particular interest here are the children who just scrape through the PSC and are therefore deemed to be 'on track'. Do these children continue to make acceptable progress in reading? What are the risks of children receiving 'false positive' and 'false negative' results? (Gilchrist and Snowling, 2018). If the test is designed to identify those that need further phonic intervention, then pupils should be accurately assessed. If the PSC is not reliable enough, then modifications to the testing process may be necessary.

2. How has the pedagogy of teaching reading changed since the introduction of the PSC?

The PSC has become another high-stakes test and schools are under pressure to ensure that their phonics data is 'good enough'. Teachers in Year One, and also teachers in Reception classes, are mindful that they must prepare their pupils for this test. Consequently, this thesis will examine to what extent decisions relating to teaching programmes, resources and classroom organisation are directly influenced by the need to increase phonics performance data. Possible tensions between preparing children for a decoding test and teaching children to be 'readers' will be illuminated through teacher discussions.

3. Has the PSC affected children's understanding of what it means to be a reader?

Phonics policy and the PSC privilege decoding above any other reading skill. If early reading experiences are dominated by the reading of decontextualised words and the limited language patterns of fully decodable books, then children's understanding of what reading is may be being subtly altered. Reading for pleasure and reading for meaning may be lost amid preparation for the PSC. If this is the case, the long-term impact of preparing for the PSC many be more significant than is currently appreciated by practitioners.

Therefore, this thesis will explore the impact of the Phonics Screening Check from multiple perspectives: its impact on attainment; its usefulness as an indicator of future performance; its role in changing and shaping classroom pedagogy; and the effect it has on the classroom experiences of both teachers and pupils.

1.5 Thesis Structure

- Chapter Two - Literature Review

In this chapter I will firstly consider the key questions within the context of national policy documentation and how that policy aligns with the approaches of other English-speaking countries, namely the USA and Australia. I review the research around the value and effectiveness of high stakes testing. Finally, I also consider the literature surrounding key themes arising from the teacher interviews, in particular, grouping by ability and the use of commercial schemes.

- Chapter Three - Phonics and Theories of Reading

The importance of early phonics teaching will be situated within current models of reading. The opposing paradigms of the "reading wars" will be discussed, leading to an understanding of how methods of reading instruction reflect beliefs about the very nature of reading. This will help to establish where the PSC fits within certain theories about reading development.

- Chapter Four - Theoretical Framework

I will review the literature relating to socio-cultural learning theory and its relationship with reading development. The role of Vygotskian theories of development, cultural-historical activity theories and other socio-cultural models will be considered, with a view to situating the PSC within a framework of literacy as having cultural, cognitive and social domains.

- Chapter Five – Methodology

This chapter will discuss the methodological decisions taken, with a focus on the ethical considerations around working with young children and issues surrounding my undertaking of

research within my own place of work. I will explore the value of a mixed methods approach and review the different methods used for data analysis.

- Chapter Six – Performance Data Analysis

National data for the PSC will be reviewed. A longitudinal analysis will include identifying correlations between performance in phonics at age six and then on later national reading comprehension tests at age seven and eleven. Performance data from the three sample schools will also be considered and key issues relating to pupil progress in reading will be considered.

- Chapter Seven – The Children's Voices

The voices of children who have recently taken the PSC will allow the impact of the PSC to be explored in further detail. Both positive and negative impacts will be considered as the children recollect their experiences of phonics and literacy learning in Year One.

- Chapter Eight - The Teachers' Voices

The final aspect of the mixed methods study covers the teachers' experiences. The discussions with the teachers reveal their experiences of the preparing for and administrating the PSC; their views on the importance of both phonics and reading comprehension; the role of the PSC in their pedagogy of reading; and their thoughts on how their pupils are affected by the PSC.

- Chapter Nine – Triangulation of and Discussion of the Data

In the final section, I attempt to integrate the three areas mentioned above. In choosing to adopt a mixed methods approach, there must be an evaluation of the links between the different aspects on the study, in order to reach a considered conclusion.

- Chapter Ten – Conclusion

To conclude, I will review the main findings, discuss the limitations of this research and explore the implications for any future studies. I will also consider the contribution to knowledge that this study has raised.

Chapter Two Literature Review

In this section, I summarise the main approaches to the field which will help to situate my research project within a theory-praxis model. The Literature Review will cover four main strands:

- An introduction to the 'Reading Wars' and a historical overview of how the status of phonics within reading instruction has changed.
- Current and recent policy documents regarding the teaching of phonics and reading, published by the UK Government. This section will aim to position the research within a school-based, context-driven setting. Research papers citing evidence both for and against phonics and other methods of teaching reading will be considered alongside the policy analysis.
- Corresponding international documents about approaches to phonics in other English-speaking countries.
- Current theory about pedagogical issues linked to the introduction of the PSC, including the grouping, testing and assessment of young children and the increasing use of phonically decodable texts.

2.1 Introduction to the "reading wars"

Imagine two Year One classrooms. It is early June and English/Literacy sessions have just started. In the first room, children are beginning their daily phonics sessions. Their phonic knowledge has been assessed continually for almost two years and they are now working in ability groups, learning and reviewing letter sounds and phonemes. The teacher is modelling how to blend these sounds into words – real or 'pseudowords'. Pupils are chanting back words such as 'vog', 'strom' etc. The children respond to flashcards and mnemonics before applying their phonics knowledge to phonically decodable texts. Each afternoon, they are sent home with decodable reading books, (e.g. *The Big Net* or *Dig It Up,* Oxford University Press, 2019). Every day, their lessons follow a similar pattern: the teacher will deliver the lesson as scripted by the writer of a well-known commercial scheme, e.g., *Read, Write, Inc* (OUP). Eventually, sufficient sounds will have been learnt and each child can now 'read'. These six-year-olds are

about to be taking the Phonics Screening Check and every spare minute of the day, groups of children are being prepared for the test with a battery of phoneme charts and flashcards.

In contrast, the pupils in the other classroom are sharing a well written, high quality children's text. Lessons involve role play and language games and pupils absorb story language; discussions focus on characters and plot as children make predictions and comparisons. As the children immerse themselves in the story, they begin to recognise and read new words, taking their cues from the illustrations. The children join in with the teacher's reading of the story. In their book bags are engaging and exciting texts, both fiction and non-fiction, to share with their adults at home. Their teacher is monitoring their talk and prompting them to engage in story-related play.

In another five years' time, both groups of children will be required to sit National Curriculum reading tests, which will require the ability to read a range of different text types at speed, whilst making inferences, summarising, and commenting on the authors' intentions and style. Would there be a discernible difference in the scores between these two groups of children? Which group of pupils would perform best? This chapter aims to review the theory and evidence for mandating that schools align themselves to the first of these two models, moving away from the whole language/real books approach of the second scene.

The above vignettes highlight two opposing theoretical frameworks at the heart of the so-called 'Reading Wars' (Rothman, 1990). Should reading be taught through phonics and the blending of units of sound or should children be immersed in language and a whole word approach? Government reading policy is currently heavily prescriptive. Whilst it has stopped short of dictating exactly which phonics scheme should be followed, it has firmly emphasised that children must be taught phonics, and in particular, systematic synthetic phonics, i.e., through the teaching of a strict programme of letter sounds and blending. The vision of reading in UK infant classrooms is currently supposed to be aligned to the first of the two scenarios described above. Government policy on the teaching of phonics has been strengthened by the introduction in 2012 of a compulsory Phonics Screening Check for Year One children (six-year-olds) in England (STA, 2012). This has raised the profile of phonics by adding it to the list of high stakes tests already facing primary school pupils. Government funding has also been allocated through a match-funding scheme for the purchase of resources to facilitate the teaching of reading in the style described in the first vignette, along with further funding for Phonics Partnerships and the network of English Hubs.

However, a push towards mandated phonic-based teaching programmes, whilst improving children's basic decoding, may be causing other problems, both cognitive and behavioural. For example, Meyer et al. (2002) describes the changes he noticed when observing alterations in the teaching style of an American teacher, forced by her local education board to deliver a heavily prescriptive programme of phonics. He recalls how pupil engagement had plummeted and regretted the loss of interest that the children in her classes used to show in reading for meaning and pleasure. Her pupils used to share a purpose for reading which has been replaced with an almost mechanical trudge through a predetermined list of sounds. The children seem perplexed by being asked to read pseudowords and seem to want to make meaning from them. He also observes the children's responses and behaviours. He describes 'procedural display participation' – children who seem to simply echo the answers, a split second after the quicker children have responded. He also noted a third group who replied with random answers or who simply did not join in with the required responses. He questions whether the children in these two groups were learning at all. Being in the privileged position of being able to sample class activities both before and after the implementation of a strict phonics programme affords Meyer a view of the unintended consequences of a mandated phonics scheme: he regrets the loss of the spark and spontaneity of the teacher and the loss of the opportunities for more personalized and creative approaches.

Current UK policy no longer recognises that different methods may be more suited to different children and teachers no longer have the option of choosing an alternative approach. Meyer's observations in America led him to view phonics as "cognitively and affectively barren" (Meyer et al, 2002, p458). It would seem that the children in the classroom that he visited were "… being taught the skills and are not aware of the joys and uses of literacy and consequently many of them do not see the point of becoming readers and writers." (Hall 2003, p28).

The central question of this research project stems from the apparent tension between 'reading' and 'decoding', i.e., does the heavily weighted phonics curriculum, backed up by the high-stakes PSC, create good 'readers' or good 'decoders'? Dombey (2010) posits that restricting children to phonics will have a detrimental effect:

> If we want England's children to get better at reading and to do more of it, we have to give them a diet that is attractive, nutritious and satisfying. Restricting them to an unbalanced diet, the thin gruel of a phonics-

> dominated approach, is a recipe for lowering standards and turning children against the written word. (Dombey 2010:12)

If reading is to be seen as a way of making meaning from printed text (Cunningham and Stanovich, 2002; Goodman et al, 2016), then the aims of any reading curriculum should be about developing comprehension skills. Those opposed to the PSC cite the fact that the nature of reading is being confused with an ability to decode and suggest that "talking of blending phonemes affords an inappropriate plausibility to the idea that blending is actually reading" (Davis, 2014).

The 'reading wars' have been raging for many years in both the UK and in other English-speaking nations. Whilst the ability to decode unfamiliar words is essential for being able to read competently, how to achieve this skill is still an area for debate. A historical overview of methods of teaching reading reveals a "pendulum-swing view" (Pearson, 2004, p245). Trends have swung between a 'whole language' or real books approach (Goodman, 1967; Waterland, 1988) and other strictly phonics-based instruction (Flesch, 1955). Even supporters of phonics can disagree about methodology: synthetic and analytic phonics being two different approaches. It has also been noted that early instructional methods can have a long term impact on later reading strategies (McGeown et al., 2014). The privileging of a single method of teaching can also cause difficulties: "Sounding out can be problematic as it silences alternative word-solving strategies and is the only available reading strategy available to students" (Compton-Lily, 2008, p2). If it is acknowledged that readers need to be able to draw on a range of skills, such as self-monitoring of comprehension, re-reading and self-correcting, then being taught to read through controlled exposure to isolated decontextualized words and pseudowords in preparation for a compulsory skills test cannot be helpful in the long term. There is a need to develop language comprehension alongside word recognition skills:

> Skilled readers are good comprehenders. They differ from unskilled readers in their use of general world knowledge to comprehend text literally as well as to draw valid inferences from texts, in the comprehension of words and in their use of comprehension monitoring and repair strategies. (Snow et al., 1998, p62)

If children are taught to decode mechanically, but do not develop fluency, which is crucial in aiding comprehension, then reading difficulties will persist as the child progresses through school (Ferrer et al., 2015).

A competent reader should be proficient in the following skills: code breaking (decoding the symbols on the page), and comprehension (meaning making, using texts, and reading texts critically). (Freebody and Luke, 1990). As passing the PSC continues to be the main driver in Year One, teaching programmes are at risk of placing much less emphasis on the value of critical or pragmatic competences.

Up until the introduction of the PSC in 2012, most teachers of early reading had been taking a holistic approach: they combined a range of techniques and strategies, of which phonics instruction was often one, with the aim of teaching all children to read with fluency and confidence. Support for this approach has been repeatedly recognised. Forty years before the PSC, The Bullock Report (DES, 1975) reported that "there is no one method, medium, approach, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read." Gee (2015, p24) noted that "about 80 percent of children learn to read regardless of the method of instruction used as long as it is one of the several different methods that work well." Snow et al. (1988, p2) recognised that "effective teachers are able to craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child they work with." It is also necessary to note that the method of instruction is just one element in the process of learning to read: both pre-school literacy experiences (Ehri, 2005; Dickinson and Porche 2011; O'Sullivan, 2021) and the role of motivation (Becker, 2010; Mcgeown et al, 2015) are also significant. Yet, once the PSC was introduced, many successful schools were forced to alter their policies to conform with the new Government expectations; the balanced approach appeared to disappear. The Government has dictated that only one method - synthetic phonics - should be used to teach early reading and the national Phonics Screening Check was introduced to monitor the implementation of this policy.

2.2. English Government Policy

> *"The silent actor in the picture of the child, the teacher and the skill of reading is policy." (Scherer 2016, p403)*

The premise for this thesis has been predominantly influenced by the current English government policy for the teaching of reading.

> The pragmatic policy task is to design and implement a literacy curriculum that creates readers who are significantly better at reading for meaning; people who can visualize as they read, infer meaning, recognize key ideas, new knowledge and contradictions and who are able to use and apply what they read to real life situations.
> (Ellis, 2007, p291)

Ellis summarises the problems inherent in designing a policy for reading. The end goal is to create confident and accurate comprehenders but the steps needed to create such readers are mired in controversy and debate.

Whilst debates over the most effective methods to teach early reading have continued for decades and are frequently rehearsed, it is only relatively recently that teaching methods have been dictated in a top-down government intervention, reaching every school. The most recent National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2014) is unambiguous in its promotion of phonics teaching. Previous curriculum models and guidance had favoured what has become known as the 'Searchlights Model' of reading, (DfES, 1998, see Appendix 2) which acknowledged the role of grammatical and syntactic understanding, and contextual cues in the decoding of text. Although the introduction to the 2014 National Curriculum states that reading consists of two complementary and interdependent elements: word reading and language comprehension, in accordance with The Simple View of Reading model (Gough and Tunmer, 1986; Hoover and Gough, 1990, see Appendix 3), the teaching of phonics as a means to achieving fluency in word reading has been given a higher priority due to the need to prepare children to take the PSC.

> Skilled word reading involves both the speedy working out of the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) and the speedy recognition of familiar printed words. Underpinning both is the understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words. This is why phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners (i.e., unskilled readers) when they start school.
> (DfE 2014: 4)

The same document continues to refer to other aspects of reading: reading for pleasure; reading widely across both fiction and non-fiction; and reading fluently and confidently. However, it is significant that six of the nine statutory requirements for the teaching of reading to Year One pupils refer directly to phonic knowledge, including one statement requiring children to: "read aloud accurately books that are consistent with the developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words" (DfE 2014, p10). The fact that children should be actively discouraged from using alternative strategies,

e.g., the use of illustrations, reading on for meaning, the use of semantic cueing, etc., has had an important role to play in the changing of teaching approaches in Early Years classrooms. In fact, Ofsted inspectors are now routinely questioning children and examining school reading records for evidence that phonics is the first and only strategy for reading that is being taught (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017b; Ofsted, 2019).

This privileging of phonics for the teaching of early reading, although already in evidence in some previous DfE publications and resource materials, gained impetus after the publication of the Rose Report (Rose, 2006), which called for "high quality systematic phonic work" (Rose, 2006, p3) and stated that:

> It is no surprise to find that the main ingredients for success in the teaching of beginner readers are: a well-trained teaching force; well designed, systematic programmes of work that are implemented thoroughly; incisive assessment of teaching and learning, and strong, supportive leadership (Rose 2006, p2).

This momentum continued through the 2009 Primary Curriculum Review:

> Primary schools should continue to build on the commendable progress many have made in teaching decoding and encoding skills for reading and spelling through high-quality systematic phonic work….
>
> (Rose 2009, p21)

It is interesting to note that both these key documents refer to 'systematic' phonics, rather than 'synthetic phonics' which is a key difference which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Starting with the latest National Curriculum documentation, it is clear that the overall policy aims are to encourage children to: "read easily, fluently and with good understanding", and to read: "widely and often, for both pleasure and information" (DfE, 2014, p3). This document then endorses the previous curriculum's approach of 'The Simple View of Reading': the programmes of study should comprise both language comprehension and word reading/decoding. The introductory section of the 2014 curriculum includes this key statement: "It is essential that teaching focuses on developing pupils' competence in both dimensions; different kinds of teaching are needed for each" (DfE, 2014, p4). However, the balance between phonics and comprehension has never been clearly defined. Several policy documents have gone on to state how to teach the decoding aspect of reading, reading comprehension has not received the same level of focus. It is phonics that has stolen the headlines.

The DfE 2014 documentation states that phonics should be 'emphasised' (DfE, 2014, p4). This suggests an element of interpretation here; it does not suggest that phonics should be exclusive, with no time allocated to comprehension strategies. The document continues with the expectations for teaching programmes: Year One pupils should be taught to "apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words" (DfE, 2014, p10). In Year Two, pupils should "continue to apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words until automatic decoding has become embedded and reading is fluent" (2014, p7).

Previously, schools had been able to select their own approach to the teaching of reading, resulting in many schools opting for a mixed-methods approach, covering different learning styles to ensure that the maximum number of pupils become fluent and confident readers. For national policy to unequivocally favour one teaching method, disregarding any other approaches, is a radically new departure in school governance and as yet, has not been replicated in other subject areas.

Nevertheless, whilst clearly dictating that early readers should be taught phonics, the current National Curriculum documentation does not appear to restrict children to a diet of phonics at the expense of a wider and more balanced approach to teaching pupils to enjoy reading. Experts would agree with this standpoint, for example, Dombey (1999) suggests that whilst phonics instruction is crucial, synthetic phonics has its limitations due to the complexity of the English orthographic system.

However, it should also be noted that policy analysis cannot only involve the study of curriculum documents. Currently, policy debates are carried out through the media with press releases, speeches, and through other agencies such as Ofsted, alongside publicity from publishers and also social media contributions from various interested parties. A focus on policy now requires reflecting on a "process, involving the production, reification and implementation of policy", rather than a straightforward analysis of policy documents (Hyatt 2013, p836). Consequently, it is necessary to look at more documentation than just the current curriculum regulations.

The 2010 Government White Paper was more emphatic in its focus on phonics, stating that the government will: "ensure that there is support available to every school for the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, as the best method for teaching reading" (DfE 2010, p11). This document continues by revealing that "despite the efforts of dedicated teachers, one in five 11-

year-olds still leaves primary school struggling to read and write at the standard expected of them." (DfE 2010, p43). The implication is that this problem is not the fault of the 'dedicated' teachers; it must therefore be the consequence of a lack of structured phonics teaching. The government's mandate is qualified by this next statement. "The evidence is clear that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics is the most effective way of teaching young children to read" (DfE 2010, 43). This statement will be discussed in more detail later, as according to some researchers (Davies, 2012; Clark, 2014, 2018b), the evidence is not 'clear' and only appears to support systematic phonics teaching, rather than synthetic phonics. There is also evidence to suggest that teaching High Frequency Words alongside phonics would increase reading progress (Watts and Gardner, 2013) but this is not mentioned in the DfE guidance (DfE, 2010).

It is clear that decisions about phonics teaching are no longer left to schools; government intervention has forced schools to follow a phonics-based reading curriculum. "As this is an area of such fundamental importance, we will go further than in any other area in actively supporting best practice" (DfE, 2010, p43). This will involve requiring Ofsted to monitor the teaching of phonics, and reforming initial teacher training to make sure that new recruits to the profession "have the confidence to teach systematic synthetic phonics." (DfE 2010, p 43). This announcement was followed by a significant amount of funding (over £23 million) being allocated for the delivery of this policy in the form of grants for schools to purchase teaching resources and/or training that directly concurred with the government's policy. Following this initial injection of funding, a national testing programme (Year One Phonics Screening Check) was introduced in 2012 to review the effectiveness of this policy in driving up standards. The PSC has therefore been afforded an accountability warrant. It is the impact of this testing programme that has been the main driver for this thesis, rather than the importance of teaching children to read by using a purely phonics-based approach. More recently, additional funding was allocated to set up Phonics Partnership Programmes (2015-2017) and English Hubs (2018 onwards), whereby those schools that are deemed to be most successful at teaching phonics are being asked to support and coach those that have been less successful with their PSC data. Having below average phonics data is one of the main criteria for identifying those schools that might qualify for this additional government funding.

Significantly, in the Autumn term of 2020, all pupils who missed the PSC earlier in the year due to COVID-19 school closures had to take the test. All national testing for the academic year 2019-2020 was cancelled in March 2020. Teacher assessment data were not collected as

an alternative to end of Key Stage tests at Year Two and Year Six; A Level and GCSE grades were awarded without formal testing. Children who missed their Year Two SATs reading test have not been forced to sit it at the start of Year Three. The PSC is the only formal test to have been reinstated after schools were re-opened. Again, this request for schools to test these pupils was said by the DfE to be in the interests of pupils so that struggling children can be identified and given extra support to help them catch up: "Pupils who may need support should not be overlooked as a result of missing their phonics check" (Gibbons, 2020). Whilst it could be said that refusing to cancel the PSC was due to its importance as a specific diagnostic tool, the children's scores are still being used as an accountability measure in school inspections. This shows just how highly regarded the phonics data is by the Government, when this test was the only missed test from the disrupted 2019-2020 academic year that was rescheduled.

2.3 The evidence behind the policy

> *"Research is often used in a selective, uneven, and opportunistic manner by policy makers." (Pearson 2004, p240).*

A review of the available evidence suggests that uneven selection of research was indeed the case by those responsible for the current UK phonics policy. Torgerson et al. (2006) and Torgerson et al. (2019) analysed phonics and early reading research found that the evidence for synthetic phonics was inconclusive. In their reviews of various RCTs and other studies, they concluded that:

> It would seem sensible for teaching to include systematic phonics instruction for younger readers – but the evidence is not clear enough to decide which phonics approach is best. Also, in our view there remains insufficient evidence to justify a 'phonics only' teaching policy; indeed, since many studies have added phonics to whole language approaches, balanced instruction is indicated.
>
> (Torgerson et al, 2019 p234)

Whilst recognising the value and importance of phonics instruction, Torgerson et al. (2019) have repeatedly called for further larger scale research projects to establish whether the preference for synthetic phonics is justified.

Much of the recent evidence in favour of phonics is based on research belonging to the psychology of reading, carried out by psychologists interested in investigating the processing skills of individual pupils rather than research from the fields of pedagogy and education. Not

only does the UK policy cite evidence for synthetic phonics that *does not* actually claim that synthetic phonics is the best way to teach early reading, but it also frequently cites evidence to support its phonics programme from research that has since been subject to criticism e.g. the Clackmannanshire project (Johnston and Watson, 2005; Johnston et al., 2012). Critics of the Clackmannanshire project (e.g., Ellis, 2009) state that the long term effects of synthetic phonics teaching were not significant and that the research itself was not robust enough. One of the Clackmannanshire projects involved teaching a 16-week programme of phonics to different groups of beginner readers. The three approaches tested were synthetic phonics; phonemic awareness and analytic phonics; and analytic phonics. After sixteen weeks, the synthetic phonics group was ahead of the other two groups with regards to their reading age. However, doubts over this research focused on three main areas: the way in which children were allocated to the groups; the fact that the different groups were not all covering the same content at the same pace; and the overall methodology of the study (Wyse and Goswami, 2008; Ellis and Moss, 2014). As a longitudinal study, the same pupils were tested again seven years later to ascertain whether these early gains had been sustained. While purporting to be a Randomised Controlled Trial, there were too many factors, such as parental influence, time allocated to the teaching of phonics, resources and teacher effectiveness, that could not be effectively controlled. Whilst some of this criticism may be unfair (Johnson and Watson, 2016), the Clackmannanshire study's findings strongly favoured a synthetic approach and cited data to prove that children following a synthetic phonics programme made rapid gains in word reading (7-8 months more progress that their peers following an analytical phonics approach). Supporters of SSP seized upon these results and the Clackmannanshire study was given a privileged position in the government's argument for synthetic phonics.

Other researchers approach reading from a different paradigm, paying more attention to other factors such as school, pupil and teacher (Guthrie et al, 2006; Compton-Lily, 2008; Scherer, 2016; Peuro et al, 2019). They may use more qualitative or ethnographic methods rather than purely quantitative data collection. Current government policies owe more to psychologists than they do to educationalists, or to constructivist thinking, which has led to calls for more research that would "bridge the divide between the fields of psychology and education" (Ellis and Moss, 2014, p251). The focus on phonics places reading in a cognitive framework rather than a sociocultural or environmental one.

Goodman posits that "political agendas have taken over government literacy policies while a strong base of knowledge about literacy is being ignored" (Goodman, Calfee and Goodman, 2014, p201). Research and theory are "less valued than the concepts of literacy that serve the political and economic purposes of those who have the power to control the decision making of federal, state and local politicians." (Goodman, Calfee and Goodman, 2014, p22).

Government policy documents have frequently cited that international research and evidence support a synthetic phonics approach. (DfE 2011b, 2012, 2015a, 2015c). Yet reviews of the evidence referenced by the government have revealed flaws and inconsistencies. Policy change in favour of phonics is claimed to be research-driven (Rose, 2006); however there are those that question the impartiality and scope of the reading evidence used (Torgesen et al., 2006; Clark,2007, 2014; Torgesen et al., 2019; Bowers, 2020). At a time when ideas about literacy have altered from a list of cognitive skills to be acquired towards a view of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1995; Gee, 2004), current policy has focused on the easily measurable ability to decode words. The phonics approach has allowed the government to therefore celebrate a quick fix solution to the problem of standards, due to the increase in the pass rate of the screening check.

A House of Commons Select Committee in 2005 reported that:

> Further large-scale, comparative research on the best ways of teaching children to read, comparing synthetic phonics 'fast and first' with other methods (for example analytical phonics and the searchlights model promoted in the NLS) is necessary to determine which methods of teaching are most effective for which children. It may be that some methods of teaching (such as phonics) are more effective for children in danger of being left behind. This research should be commissioned by the DfES.
>
> (House of Commons, 2005)

To date, this research has not been carried out; consequently, the government drive for phonics has not been fully mandated by peer reviewed investigations or research.

The Rose Review also commented that the available research into reading could be "sometimes contradictory or inconclusive," (Rose, 2006, p15) and commented that further research was needed. However, it advocated that direct action in schools was necessary immediately to improve the quality of reading lessons.

There is much research that suggests that a regulated diet of phonics does not create good 'readers':

> Fluent reading is not a matter of efficient bottom-up processing, but rather a complex, multi-level, interactive process, involving the construction, amendment, refinement and confirmation of expectations set up by the preceding text and the context in which the reading takes place.
>
> (Dombey, 2014, p70)

Phonics may well serve as a vital tool within this whole cognitive process, but cannot work as a standalone model. Bottom-up processing in isolation cannot lead to effective comprehension of a text. In addition, Gibson and England (2015) also describe how some SEN children with working memory issues can struggle with the pseudoword aspect of the PSC, suggesting that current phonics policy is not suitable for all groups of children and that other approaches would be more appropriate in certain circumstances. The fact that schools can no longer adapt their pedagogy of reading to cater for differences in learning styles and cognitive abilities is perhaps a flaw in the policy of a mandated single approach to the teaching of reading.

2.4 International approaches to phonics

Although the scope of this research project is primarily concerned with the role of the PSC in English schools, it is important to consider international documentation relating to the profile of phonics in other English-speaking countries. Certain parallels are evident with regards to issues of accountability, political power and standards. Other countries have taken similar moves in highlighting the importance of phonics e.g., the USA (US Department for Education, 2002) and Australia (DEST, 2005).

In America, there had been a move away from phonics teaching towards a whole-word approach in the 1950s/1960s (Goodman, 1965), whereas phonics has now returned to the spotlight. Yet at the same time, Flesch (1955) was adamant that children could be taught to read in as little as six weeks through a strict phonics programme. The phonics arguments continued in America, with the 'No Child Left Behind' programme (US Department for Education, 2001) declaring that phonics should be taught. The DIBELS test (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills) was introduced in America, which included pseudowords

as a check on reading ability. Parallels are obvious here with England's screening check. A narrow set of skills or reading competencies are tested; children are retested until they meet the required standard. Kenneth Goodman writes, "There is widespread agreement among reading authorities and psychometricians that this is a very bad test….But it is more than a test. It becomes the whole curriculum" (Goodman, 2014, p29). The same criticisms have been applied to the UK screening check, with preparations for the PSC narrowing the curriculum, and requiring that time be taken from other subjects. In particular, those needing extra intervention are likely to be withdrawn from other subjects that they enjoy or in which they are more successful.

American policy, in a similar way to English documentation, has focused on the benefits of a structured phonics programme, despite this being not wholly justified by the research. There have been criticisms of the American Reading First initiative: "…the rigid use of a commercial reading program may crowd out silent reading, literature, writing and discussion from the curriculum, with harmful effects on children's literacy development" (Yatvin et al, 2003, p30). This concurs with Meyer's findings when observing reading lessons (Meyer, 2010, 2013). The National Reading Panel (2000) also found that teaching a small amount of phonics seemed to be more beneficial for pupils than a lot of phonics, suggesting that having a variety of decoding strategies can still be valuable and that a greater emphasis should be placed on the importance of a range of texts and literacy experiences. Additionally, the NRP also recommended that comprehension skills be assessed and that proficiency in phonics should not be allowed to dictate a child's progress and access to other literacy activities (National Reading Panel, 2000).

However, it is significant that in America, phonics was expected to be "integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading programme" (National Reading Panel, 2000, p136). This caveat of integrating phonics within a wider approach to reading instruction was controversially ignored by the UK Government, who used this American report as evidence as one of their justifications for their approach to synthetic phonics as the prime strategy for word recognition. There are also doubts, as Seymour et al (2003) noted, as to whether synthetic phonics is really the best method for learning to read in a language with a deep orthography as opposed to a shallow orthography, such as German. An Australian version of the PSC was introduced in 2018 (Hordacre et al., 2017: DESE, 2018). Buckingham (2016) quotes

performance data from UK PSC results as a justification for introducing phonics assessments in Australia.

The UK government cited as evidence the significance of phonics within US and Australian literacy programmes. However, when these policies are examined, their claims for phonics are not as clear as might have been expected. In Australia, government policy states that:

> …all children learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension…. Direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. (DEST 2005, p11)

However, the Australian policy is advocating *systematic* phonics, not necessarily *synthetic* phonics – a distinction that has become blurred in English policy.

The US National Reading Panel (NRP) declared that phonics should be the preferred method of reading instruction, but added the following qualification:

> Programs that focus too much on the teaching of letter-sound relations and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be very effective. In implementing systematic phonics instruction, educationalists must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds and are able to apply their skills in their daily reading and writing activities.
>
> (NRP 2000, p 96)

The US Panel concluded that systematic phonics was better than no phonics at all, but that there didn't appear to be a significant difference in the effectiveness of analytic or synthetic approaches. However, this NRP report has been used by UK policy makers to support their insistence on purely synthetic phonics programmes. (Synthetic phonics uses blending in a 'part-to-whole' approach to reading words, whereas analytic phonics favours a 'whole-to-part' approach, for example, looking at sounds using patterns, such as onset and rime.) Torgersen et al. (2006) also found in their comprehensive review of research into phonics teaching that there was no discernible evidence to favour synthetic over analytic phonic programmes. Whilst the importance of phonics is evident in other countries' reading programmes, the role of SSP has perhaps been misrepresented in UK documentation. It would still be possible for children to approach the PSC having been taught analytic phonics. However, policy documentation suggests that the PSC will identify those children who have not yet mastered synthetic phonics.

2.5 Phonics: Pedagogy and Practice - Pedagogical issues related to the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check

The demands of the PSC have changed the emphasis on reading in many Early Years classrooms. Teaching styles, the organisation of children and even the resources found in the classroom have altered to suit the demands of preparing children for the test. In this section, I will review research based on four key pedagogical issues directly related to how children are being prepared for the PSC: setting children by ability for the teaching of phonics; the role of phonically decodable texts; the use of pseudowords; and issues around formal assessment of young children.

2.5.i The increase in setting/grouping for phonics teaching

> *"Grouping is seen as expected practice, encouraged by Senior Leadership Teams, and as a 'necessary evil' in preparation for high-stakes test such as the Phonics Screening Check and KS1 SATs".*
>
> *(Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a, p5)*

It has become apparent, both from national research data and from my own study, that the practice of grouping or setting children for phonics has increased since the introduction of the PSC. Research in 2017 found that 81% of Reception teachers, 58% of Nursery teachers and 72% of Year 2 teachers surveyed reported that they grouped children by ability for phonics. (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a) They also found that children were more likely to be grouped for phonics (76%), than for maths (62%), reading (57%) or literacy (54%). Whilst this could be attributed to the need to raise standards and the punitive fear of accountability amongst teachers and headteachers with regards to their school's PSC performance data at Year One, it can also be linked to the DfE's phonics approach, 'Letters and Sounds' (2007), which is planned in a series of phases, taking the children through a sequential sequence of phonic knowledge. Pedagogical decisions have been made to group by ability, so that children on 'Phase Three' would receive a different programme of instruction from those on 'Phase Five'.

Phonics is also now regarded by many schools and educational professionals as a distinct and separate subject, which requires specific teaching and pedagogic practices. It is seen as discrete

from the academic subject of English. The concept of datafication, or "practices which prioritise actions based on data and the production of data to show progress," (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a, p32) has encouraged schools to make decisions about how to structure their teaching to produce the best possible data, even if pedagogically, these teachers fear that grouping may not be best socially, emotionally and even educationally for their pupils. Much research has been carried out, mainly with older children into the impact of setting by ability and much has been made of the role of 'educational triage' (Gillbourn and Youdell, 2000) and the 'bubble children' (Booher-Jennings, 2005), who receive proportionally more support and resources, just because they are within touching distance of reaching a critical boundary on a school's performance data. Booher-Jennings questions why some teachers believe that some pupils should be actively privileged over others. Borderline pupils are seen to be prioritized both in terms of spaces and quality of teaching staff (Dunne et al., 2011). Such policies, in terms of social equality, inclusion and equity of provision, are seen to have long term negative effects.

This fear of needing to make sure that the 'correct' number of children pass a certain threshold appears to be contradictory to the 'Great Meritocracy' announced by May, the UK Prime Minister (2016). Boaler (2005, p135) noted that 88% of children who were grouped into sets or streams at the age of four remained in the same grouping until they left school, trapped in a 'psychological prison'. The children's positions with setting become 'sedimented' (Scherer, 2016). This physical segregation of children was also reported by Roberts-Holmes and Kitto (2019):

> Through regular daily institutional practices of phonics phases, groups and abilities, ability grouping served to routinise and control children's expectations and limitations of themselves. This division of children into their ability groups not only involved a daily memorization and internalization of their status within the hierarchy but was physically reinforced through a thorough daily division of different ability children between and across classes, year groups into the school's different physical spaces. (Roberts-Holmes and Kitto 2019, p859).

They agree that more research is necessary into the impact of grouping very young children but they note that grouping seems to generate a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' and is responsible for 'perpetuating inequity'. (Roberts-Holmes and Kitto 2019, p860). They noted that fewer demands were placed on the children in the lower groups: their learning behaviours were based around conformity, following direct instructions and passivity; the middle and higher groups were given tasks requiring higher level articulation, reasoning and self-regulation. As a result,

the lower ability children were denied the opportunity to develop some of the learning behaviours that may have helped close the achievement gap (Campbell, 2014). Pupils' performance data is now being tracked back in a direct line from Year 6 to Reception classes. This 'reification of progress' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017b) is causing more schools to look towards formal setting in a bid to improve pupil performance. This datafication of Early Years education is a concern for many professionals:

> Moreover, this accountability regime has the tendency to subvert the early years from being a unique child-centred and play-based educational stage in its own right, to that of subserviently preparing children for school and subsequently as 'human capital' for employment.
>
> (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016, p120).

Forty-five percent of the teachers surveyed by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017a) suggested that their children were aware of how they had been grouped; forty-five percent also agreed that ability grouping damages some children's self-esteem. Taylor et al. (2016, p328) suggest: "It is well established that attainment-based grouping has little if any overall benefit in terms of student outcomes." The practice of grouping children for phonics lessons sets children up on a given trajectory: disadvantaged children are more likely to be in the lower sets, where their access to particular books may be restricted. A 'ceiling of expectation' may exist for these lower ability groups and a cycle of negative learner identity may be generated. Jarvis (2016, p15) blames setting for the current "tsunami of mental health problems". The children in the lower groups receive additional intervention sessions, which limits their access to the full broad and balanced curriculum; they spend their time in corridors and less appealing spaces, rather than in their classrooms with their peers. Scherer (2016) noted that school authorities, teachers and policy assessment frameworks all validated reading as a skill involving accurate and quick decoding. Groups were organized by decoding ability rather than by judging the children's ability to give transactional or affective responses or their ability to make meaning from text. She talks about children's awareness of a 'hierarchy of readers' in the classroom. She describes how the various classroom practices make the 'stratifications very clear to the children' (Scherer, 2016, p 396).

Additionally, the practice of grouping by ability is encouraged by commercial schemes which many schools rely on as a means to improve their phonics teaching:

> We see here an interesting example of how policy interacts with private companies, as they find solutions to schools' (and Local Authorities') apprehension and fears around achieving the correct data, and this in turn has an impact on grouping practices.
>
> (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a, p39)

The commercialization of phonics teaching has become a lucrative market: "Phonics is big business with financial rewards for anyone who invents 'the best' scheme or programme for teaching it." (Lewis and Ellis, 2006, p20). However, it is not just the resources and teaching programmes that the big publishers are selling but also their pedagogical approaches. Selecting a commercial scheme means adhering to its teaching methodology. The message of fidelity to a chosen scheme is one which is heavily promoted by the English Hubs programme.

The ubiquitous nature of setting young children for phonics, however much teachers profess that there is fluidity between groups, risks perpetuating social inequalities, as disadvantaged children are more likely to find themselves in the lower ability sets (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a). It is not just social inequalities that are reflected in the setting of pupils: children with summer birthdays are also more likely to be placed in lower groups (Campbell, 2013).

Finally, the growth in grouping also reflects the ideological standpoint that ability is fixed and determined. (Ball, 2013; Scherer, 2016). Pupils may find themselves facing a ceiling on their learning, with fewer opportunities for showing their abilities in other curricular areas.

2.5.ii The Growth of Decodable Books

"To immerse children in a print environment without instruction in letter-sound correspondences and practice in decodable text is to doom a large percentage of children to reading failure."

(Foorman et al., 1997, p16)

Learning phonics without having the opportunity to practise those skills when reading meaningful texts is unlikely to encourage children to see themselves as readers. Consequently, there is a role for decodable texts in early years classrooms. However, children's early literacy experiences are predicated in environmental print: many children begin to 'read' using logographic (Neumann, 2012) or pre-alphabetic skills (Ehri, 2005). Classroom reading corners are filled with childhood favourites, which the children recognise and can enjoy. It is indeed possible to use children's growing phonic skills when sharing familiar stories (Solity, 2020).

It would seem that a balance of texts and a range of reading experiences are needed; however, the current focus in schools is on preparing pupils for the PSC means that many children are being restricted to decodable books, as opposed to being offered a diet of 'real books'. The term 'real books' is commonly used to describe any books "written by a variety of authors where no attempt is made to restrict the content in terms of vocabulary, word frequency or phonic regularity or sequence of books in order of perceived difficult" (Solity, 2020, p123). Real books offer children valuable exposure to new vicarious experiences, new vocabulary and an insight into literacy heritage (Waterland, 1989). As the availability of decodable books is something that Ofsted inspectors are also monitoring, the current promotion of decodable texts cannot be wholly attributed to the PSC, but it is a definite change in the approach used in many schools. Whilst the term 'fully decodable' is used by various commercial publishers when promoting their new schemes, the idea of a totally decodable book is something of a misnomer as it is impossible to write without using irregular words such as 'the' and 'said'. However, there has also been much criticism of such texts:

> Therefore, in our view, once children move beyond the very early stages of reading, the benefits of decodable readers are likely to be outweighed by their limitations. (Castles et al., 2018, p16)

If the purpose of reading instruction is to facilitate children's construction of meaning from print, then phonically decodable books lack the complexity and vocabulary to encourage the linguistic and cognitive process required to develop reading comprehension (Price-Mohr and Price, 2018). To fully comprehend written text, children need to develop several skills concurrently: they need to understand causal connections; they need to untangle anaphoric references; they need to activate their background knowledge; and they need to strengthen their working memory.

If lower achievers are restricted to decodable scheme books, then this lack of choice can lead to a drop in motivation. It has also been suggested that such a restricted diet can lead to children having a skewed interpretation of what being a reader means:

> The emphasis on teaching sight vocabulary and phonics skills is seen to be potentially seriously damaging for children by changing the nature of reading, from understanding, appreciating, and evaluating what is read, to memorizing phonic rules and decoding."
>
> (Solity and Vousden, 2009,p471)

It is also likely that the children most at risk of being restricted by decodable books are the ones that are making slower progress with reading and are less likely to have access to a greater range of books outside the classroom.

On the other hand, decodable texts are seen as valuable in that they teach children to pay attention to all the letters in a word; they offer the opportunity for children to practice specific grapho-phonemic connections, which in turn encourages the development of some sight vocabulary; and they can be a motivating factor as children who may otherwise struggle with reading are enabled to achieve success.

Two research projects (Jenkins et al., 2004; Juel and Roper-Schneider, 1985) aimed to investigate the value of decodable texts. Both came to similar findings that there was not a long-term gain in reading progress for those children who read decodable texts. Whilst they may have been better decoders, their overall wider reading assessments were broadly similar to those that read more widely.

Solity (2020) considers the possibility of teaching SSP through the use of real books so that children have the chance to meet unfamiliar words and can apply their semantic knowledge and understanding of the world to their reading. He posits that: " teaching synthetic phonics through real books, rather than phonically decodable texts..[offers]… a potential resolution to the reading wars" (Solity, 2020, p124).

In addition real books offer children a greater range of semantic and contextual diversity. Campbell (2021) considers the value of shared picture book reading in early years classrooms in engaging children in the enjoyment of reading and a shared understanding of the purpose of reading. Teachers in England are currently following a prescribed teaching list of graphemes, all of which could appear in the PSC. However, there are recognized disadvantages in teaching Grapheme Phoneme Correspondences that have a low frequency in everyday text. It may be more effective to teach children to use vocabulary to aid with decoding rather than more graphemes that may have alternative pronunciations (Darnell et al., 2017). Indeed, there are examples of real words used in the PSC that can only be read accurately by relying on prior vocabulary knowledge, for example, the PSC in 2018 included the word *gloom.* To be awarded the mark, the correct pronunciation of the word with a long vowel sound was required. Without prior knowledge, the word could be plausibly pronounced with a short vowel, such as is the case in *hood, took, good*, etc.

It would therefore seem that decodable books may serve a very time-limited purpose with very early readers. However, being limited to decodable books for too long may not help children in the long term as they are not being exposed to other high-quality stories and benefiting from the affective nature of reading. Some commercial schemes, bought by schools to help raise attainment in the PSC, promote the use of phonically decodable books for longer than is perhaps necessary. Consequently, children are not being allowed the opportunity to integrate their phonic knowledge with cognitive and comprehension skills (Week and Vol, 2020).

2.5.iii The role of pseudowords in teaching and assessing reading

Prior to the implementation of the PSC, pseudowords were not regularly used as a teaching strategy. They were used, when necessary, as a diagnostic assessment tool, for identifying small groups of children with phonological difficulties, mainly in the field of SEND assessments. Pseudowords serve as a means of testing a child's ability to decode phonically by blending phonemes. Many studies have looked at pseudoword reading alongside other assessments of phonological ability and have acknowledged the role the pseudowords can play as part of a wider psychological assessment of a child's reading attainment (Stanovich, 2000; Siegel, 2008; Caravolas, 2018, Castles et al., 2018b).

One of the most obvious changes in classrooms since the introduction of the PSC in 2012 has been that teachers are now actively teaching phonics to children through the use of pseudowords and a significant amount of time is spent on practising reading pseudowords as part of the PSC preparation (Clark, 2014). All children are tested on pseudowords, even those who have already passed through the phonetic stage of reading or who are reading confidently, having learnt through different methods.

> There is evidence from the online surveys by UKLA and the teachers' unions that some of those confused by the pseudowords were children who were already reading. There is also evidence of a great deal of time being devoted to pseudowords in preparation for the test. What message does this give to young children about reading? (Clark, 2013a, p7)

The evidence for the inclusion of pseudowords is strong. Siegel (2008) and Lloyd-Jones (2012, 2013) describe how important the ability to decode phonetically is. Stanovich suggests that "the speed of naming pronounceable nonwords is one of the tasks that most clearly differentiates good from poor readers." (Stanovich, 2000, p40). Testing children on

pseudowords provides insight into whether children really have mastered phonic decoding or whether they are using other strategies or visual memory. Even if children are being taught to read with a phonics-based method, they soon begin to read some words from memory after multiple exposure to them, therefore the inclusion of pseudowords in the test allows pure decoding skills to be assessed. Children who build up a sight vocabulary quickly then have fewer opportunities for developing pure decoding skills. Even if words are phonically regular, children who have developed automaticity and fluency can read them without needing to sound them out (LaBerge and Samuels, 1976; Beech, 2005; Castles et. al, 2018a). Reading pseudowords forces children to continue practising their phonic strategies. Without this constant reinforcement of blending skills, children may find that as they get older, they do not have the strategies to tackle unfamiliar words. As reading material gets more complex, without competency in decoding new words, children will very soon struggle and find themselves failing.

However, the inclusion of pseudowords has also been criticized (Gibson and England, 2016). There are issues regarding the orthography of English. In cross-language studies, when English children are compared to German children with regards their reading of pseudowords, the German readers perform significantly better due to the more transparent German orthography (Frith et al, 1998; Landerl 2000) suggesting that the value of pseudowords is less helpful for readers of English due to inconsistencies with grapheme-phoneme correspondences.

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA), which is responsible for the publication and administration of the phonics testing materials, does allow alternative plausible pronunciations of pseudowords; however, alternatives are not allowed for real words, meaning that the child has to be able to identify the correct grapheme phoneme to blend a real word. If the child has not heard a particular real word before, or is a child speaking English as a second language, plausible but incorrect choices may be made when decoding real words. These responses would not be marked as correct. For a child with a very limited vocabulary, many real words may appear to be pseudowords. For pseudowords, for example, readers may use analogies with real words. For example, should ‘jound’ rhyme with ‘sound’ or ‘wound’ [injury]? Smith (1985) suggests that the traditional ‘left-to-rightism’ of phonic codes is insufficient to tackle alternative pronunciations that depend on the other letters in the word for clues. Similarly, homographs also rely on context to ascertain pronunciation. If children are forced to only blend using left-to-right skills, they will not appreciate the complexities of the English orthography.

Regardless of whether pseudowords provide a useful tool for diagnosing phonic deficits in children, the fact remains that they are no longer just used purely for assessment purposes, but have influenced the construction of reading programmes. This can only be attributed to the need to prepare children for the PSC. Pseudowords have become an integral part of daily phonic sessions for many children. Some commercial schemes updated their resources to add practice materials for reading pseudowords. Children's perceptions of reading success may also have been altered as accuracy in decoding pseudowords affects the children's understanding of the purpose of reading for meaning.

2.5.iv The Use of Formal Assessment

One of the principal aims of this thesis was to establish the impact of the PSC itself, rather than the impact of phonics instruction. The fact that the PSC has taken its place in the arena of high-stakes testing has privileged phonics as the main method of instruction. Phonics has become the reading curriculum in many schools and test preparation dominates lessons. "In a high-stakes environment, narrow assessment tools can create a compliance mentality that distorts the curriculum and the experience of learners" (Ellis and Smith, 2017, p85).

The role of formal testing in monitoring standards has been questioned. It is generally expected that scores in a new test will increase in the first few years of its implementation; however results will then tend to plateau (Linn, 2000). This improvement in results may happen "with or without real improvement in the broader achievement constructs that tests and assessments are intended to measure" (Linn, 2000, p4).

Testing is also seen as a quicker and cheaper method of transmitting policy.

> What is tested, especially if it carries important consequences, will determine what is taught and how it is taught. So this is a more direct route than patiently developing the curriculum and pedagogy – and it produces clear outcomes relatively cheaply. The model also fits the economist's need for simple indicators which can be read to see if the investment is paying off.
>
> (Stobart, 2008, p118)

The PSC was designed to check that phonics was being taught according to curriculum directives. It gives a clear indication of the extent to which children have mastered one very narrow skill. The increase in results in the first few years since its implementation suggests that

the test is serving its purpose in that the number of pupils now passing the test and therefore reaching the required level of competence in phonics has increased.

If we are to accept that there has always been a triangular relationship between pedagogy, curriculum content and assessment (Harlen, 2014), then the impact of the PSC on children's daily life in school should be not be discernible; it should be a tool to be used naturally as part of the teaching process. However, the fact that the check has become known as a high-stakes assessment has led to the assessment being given dominance over pedagogical choices and curriculum content.

When describing the impact that formal writing assessments have had on primary schools, Barrs (2019) notes various negative consequences. She observes:

> … a set-up that positively encourages, even directs, teachers to teach to the test, resulting in an even more impoverished curriculum and a system that deskills teachers, making of them mechanical operatives rather than professionals. (Barrs, 2019, p24).

A similar effect can be identified in Year One classrooms: teaching to the test is seen as the best way to improve test scores and so escape the scrutiny of increased accountability. The importance of getting the required results can be seen to be more important than the long-term learning for the child. "It is the result that counts - the quality of learning is irrelevant" (Stobart 2008, p116).

The impact of the PSC is directly related to its validity. "We cannot say an assessment is valid without knowing what the intention was in using it and how well this intention was met" (J. Gardner, 2012, p233). The original intention of the PSC was to help teachers identify the pupils that might need additional support (DfE, 2012b, Gibb, 2015). It was therefore designed to have more of a formative outcome; however this seems to have been lost in the face of the standards and accountability agenda. If an assessment is to be judged on its validity and reliability, then it needs to stand up to scrutiny from several aspects. In terms of consequential validity, one of the issues with the PSC is that "validity is reduced if the inferences drawn on the basis of the results are not justified" (Harlen 2014, p9). It is questionable whether the results of the screening check, a purely phonic assessment based on reading words and non-words out of context can be used as a reliable indicator of reading attainment in later years. Yet, national performance data are being used in this way, as Gibb, the School Standards Minister, states

that "102,000 more 6-year-old children [are] on track to read more effectively" (Gibb, 2015, Parliamentary speech).

In terms of its content validity, the PSC could be seen to fail to fully test all the phonemes that the children should have learnt. As there are only 40 words in the test, then each year, some sounds will have been omitted. The choice of which ones are missing could have an impact on a child's score. A score of thirty-one has very different consequences, for both the child and the school, than a score of thirty-two. A child scoring thirty-one on one test could quite possibly have scored higher if a different combination of phonemes had been selected for assessment. Similarly, a child with a score of thirty-two may have scraped a pass due to a favourable selection of phonemes appearing on the test.

In reviewing the test's construct validity, there are questions over its appropriateness. Although it does claim to be a phonics check, rather than a 'reading' check, there are concerns about a test that focuses on and privileges such a narrow aspect of the whole domain of reading. Rosen (2010, quoted in Dombey, 2010, p1) calls for the testing of reading to be "as multidimensional as possible and not restricted to one simple quantitative test of one aspect of the skill concerned."

In addition, any testing with very young children is bound to raise questions over its reliability (Clark, 2013b). Some of the children taking the test are still only five-years-old and so many factors can affect their performance on any one day.

The role of formative assessment in KS1 classrooms has always been important and within phonics teaching, teachers have stated that they have always used formative assessment, meaning that the results of the PSC do not tell them anything that they didn't already know about the attainment of their pupils (Walker et al, 2015). Stobart (2008, p103) speaks of the "negative backwash effects of much testing" and the inevitability of teaching to the test. The question of whether the PSC is positioned as formative or summative is explored further by Gardner:

> This can take the form of claiming that regular test practice and monitoring of scores is formative. This often masks a confusion, since it is described as formative…. when the function is really summative…. Much of this type of assessment would be accurately classified as *frequent summative* or *mini-summative.* It is what is done with this information which will determine

> whether it *becomes* formative – does it lead to further learning? So the difference is about purpose rather than timing. (J. Gardner, 2012, p239)

Another of the consequences of the introduction of the screening check has been the narrowing of the curriculum, whether that be the literacy curriculum or pupils' wider curriculum entitlement (Bradbury, 2017) This has been caused by the pressures of preparing children for the PSC. Those at risk of failing spend more time in intervention sessions, having further decoding practice, which may be at the expense of their entitlement to art or music lessons (Gillbourn and Youdell, 2000). The limited diet of phonics and then more phonics is also more common for those weaker, borderline children. (Booher-Jennings, 2005).

> If we want England's children to get better at reading and to do more of it, we have to give them a diet that is attractive, nutritious and satisfying. Restricting them to an unbalanced diet, the thin gruel of a phonics-dominated approach, is a recipe for lowering standards and turning children against the written word. (Dombey 2010, p12)

The current testing of young children, involving not just the PSC but also other statutory EYFS assessments, can be said to be damaging the nature of early childhood education. The role of play and purposeful engagement with learning has been reduced by the need to meet targets and collect data showing that children are making 'progress':

> Neoliberalism has a devastating impact on the early childhood sector with its focus on standardization, push-down curriculum and its positioning of children as investments for future economic productivity. (Sims, p1)

This suggests that there may be further long-term effects of the PSC on children's future wellbeing and development. Boardman (2020) has already noted that for many practitioners, early reading is seen as phonics-based instruction. Phonics has become the dominant discourse around reading, with some settings even beginning to involve the nursery children in phonics teaching Bradbury, 2018). The idea of getting children interested in reading and stories and of assessing 'reading readiness' has been replaced with targets, assessments and a 'push-down curriculum' (Sims, p2017).

Many teachers have articulated how they were increasingly subjected to the demands of data production; they were aware of the pitfalls, cynical about the purposes of data and yet, in an intensified form of the findings of previous research (Bradbury, 2012), found their working lives constrained by exhaustive demands for the production and analysis of data:

> The collection and analysing of data is just too overwhelming. It makes you constantly think of how to improve it and what to do with this group and how to plug this hole and that one. I fill in trackers frequently and I feel a personal pressure to make them progress. (Reception teacher, primary school) Rather than challenging or subverting such regulation, this teacher self-governed by intensifying her workload to demonstrate constant and uninterrupted progress and development for all children at all times. Every child must be 'tracked' to ensure they are moving forwards. This required ever more detailed data to show their incremental progress. (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016, p121)

Some of the negative effects of test-based accountability include cheating (Zhao, 2017). There has always been a suspicion over the unnatural spike in scores at pass mark of thirty-two. The distribution of scores showing a significant jump between the number of children scoring thirty-one and thirty-two can be seen in Appendix 6. Whilst not necessarily suggesting maladministration, there may be an element of giving borderline children the benefit of the doubt over certain words, leading to a generous awarding of 32/40 (Townley and Gott, 2013; Clark, 2014: Adams, 2014).

The pedagogical beliefs of teaching can be distorted by test preparation, which in turn can undermine the reliability of the test scores (Walker et al, 2015). The PSC and the way that it appears to have led to significant pedagogical changes aligns with the view that "assessment is a value-laden social activity, and there is no such thing as a 'culture-free' assessment." (Stobart, 2008, p103). Finally, high-stakes accountability can have the effect of demoralizing students and their teachers (Booher-Jennings, 2005; West, 2010; Bradbury, 2018).

2.6 Summary

The Literature Review has highlighted similarities between the UK and other English-speaking nations with regards to their approaches to the teaching and assessment of phonics. Policy documentation has illustrated how systematic phonics and the PSC are seen to be the answer to the country's comparatively lower performance in literacy skills tests. However, the Literature Review has also revealed tensions surrounding the approaches to the teaching of reading. Whilst it is now widely accepted that phonics plays an important part in the teaching of children to read, the focus has now moved towards debate about the exclusive use of phonics when teaching reading (Braun and Maguire, 2020, Schartz, 2020). Educational research also suggests that the introduction of the PSC has drawn attention to other critical areas of

pedagogical importance: high-stakes testing, grouping by ability and the influence of commercial programmes on classroom resources and management.

Chapter Three

Phonics and theories of reading

3.1 To what extent do definitions of reading influence the development of reading models and vice versa?

It would be useful to consider exactly what reading is perceived to be by different researchers. Is reading simply an exercise in code breaking, turning the scribbles on a page to oral language? Or is reading an act of comprehending and meaning making? The impact of the PSC depends on how the concept of reading is understood.

The primary purpose of reading is communication and understanding.

> Reading is information-processing: transforming print to speech, or print to meaning. Anyone who has successfully learnt to read has acquired a mental information-processing system that can accomplish such transformations. (Colheart, 2005, p6).

Likewise, Joseph believes that comprehension is at the heart of the reading process and that reading is something that happens in the mind: "… reading is about reading connected text silently, not pronouncing words out loud" (Joseph et al., 2013, p208). On the other hand, the act of reading can have multiple interpretations. "Reading varies as a function of who is reading, what they are reading, and why they are reading it" (Just and Carpenter, 1980, p350). Readers always have certain 'goals' when reading, be they entertainment, to search for facts or to scan a text quickly. It would seem, therefore, that the majority of researchers would agree that the act of 'reading' cannot be divorced from comprehension. According to Perfetti and Stafura's Reading Systems Framework (2014), becoming a successful reader demands three complementary constructs: knowledge (orthographic, linguistic and general knowledge), processes (decoding, comprehension, inference) and general cognitive resources (working memory). However, some national testing of 'early reading' in both the UK and the USA takes the very narrow view that reading *is* decoding, and that phonic decoding of words out of context and of pseudowords is a valid test of reading attainment. This interpretation has developed from a very specific bottom-up or part-to-whole model of reading.

Snow and Juel (2005) discuss whether the act of reading is a learner dependent or an environment dependent process. If reading is seen as learner dependent, then the priority for the reader is for taking in large meaningful units of text and consequently, making sense of

what is being read. Therefore, comprehension is positioned at the heart of the reading transaction. Environment dependent processes rely on small, analytic, meaningless units of text, requiring the reader to be supported by the teacher or other skilled reader, with the focus on words and decoding. The decoding therefore becomes the aim of the reading, rather than the understanding of a text for meaning. These different interpretations of the reading process lend themselves to different teaching and assessment foci.

It would therefore seem that there is a reciprocal relationship between definitions of reading and the construction of different reading models or frameworks for reading instruction. For some, reading is a linear process, requiring a gradual build-up of a set of cognitive skills involving phonemic knowledge (Flesch, 1955; Chall, 1983). For others, reading is more of a meaning-making process, involving problem solving skills (Foorman et al., 1997; Cunningham and Stanovich, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2008, 2009: Compton et al, 2014; Castles et al., 2018a). Since there is so much debate about the nature of reading, it would seem important that all teachers should be aware of these different frameworks and models:

> "As a psychologist, what I believe is that teachers in training ought to be taught the psychology of reading and the psychology of reading development, so that they understand what reading is and how children learn to do it."
>
> (House of Commons Report, 2005, [Stuart, M.] p26)

3.2 A brief overview of models and processes of reading

3.2.i "The Reading Wars" – 'whole-to-part' models versus 'part-to-whole' models

Firstly, the two extremes of the "reading wars" align with opposing theoretical models. These two types of theoretical model generally reflect the extremes of the 'reading wars'. Top-down models or 'whole to part' models, e.g., those developed by Goodman (1967) and Smith (1973) are based on the theory that reading is meaning driven: grapho-phonic, syntactic and semantic cues are used to construct meaning. Pedagogically, these models align themselves to a 'whole language/ real books' approach to the teaching of reading. Such approaches can be found in the work of Meek (1986) and Waterland (1988). These models fit within a more child-centred, constructivist learning theory (Huang, 2014) and attribute learning to read as a social or

behavioural process, in the same way that children begin to recognise environmental print as a natural stage in their early development.

Models in this whole-to-part category were generally developed by psycholinguists. In models of this type, reading can be seen as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967). Goodman believed that all children would come to understand written language through exposure to meaningful texts in relevant contexts, in much the same way that children learn to speak as a natural process. The construction of meaning comes from the reader's ability to make predictions about the words in a text, using semantic and grammatical knowledge about the subject:

As a model, its weaknesses are that it relies on a reader's knowledge of language and does not explain how readers can read and understand texts for which they have no contextual background or understanding. Current UK Government policy, with its emphasis on the direct teaching and testing of phonics, completely disregards any models within this category. The National Curriculum even restricts reading material to only those texts containing the phonemes that the children have already been taught; they should "read books aloud, accurately, that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words" (DfE, 2014, p10).

Smith states that reading is not the outcome of phonic and word level instruction:

> Learning to read doesn't require the memorization of letter names, or phonic generalizations, or a large vocabulary, all of which are taken care of in the course of learning to read, and little of which will make sense to a child without experience of reading. Nor is learning to read a matter of application to all manner of exercises and drills, which can only distract and even discourage a child from the business of learning to read. And finally, learning to read is not a matter of relying on instruction, because the underlying skills of reading – namely the efficient uses of nonvisual information – can't be explicitly taught. But they can be learned by experience." (Smith, 2012, p213).

The Phonics Screening test in the UK for six-year-olds, in which children are asked to read a list of forty real and pseudowords, has led to pupils being taught through 'drills and exercises' which in Smith's opinion, could even be detrimental to the child's understanding of the purpose of reading.

Alongside these models are those that are derived from a bottom-up or 'part-to-whole' understanding of the reading process. Researchers such as Flesch (1955), Gough (1976) and LaBerge and Samuels (1976) have focused on the decoding and word recognition aspects of reading, seeing reading as a linear process, whereby meaning is built up in stages from letters to phonemes to words.

Whether decoding happens as a result of phonic decoding or whole word recognition, each word is read and then converted to meaning, only in that order. The inference with bottom-up models is that all higher-level processes only happen after the completion of the lower ones i.e., comprehension is only activated once word recognition has been completed and does not or cannot act as a tool to help speed up or activate word recognition. Critics of this type of model include Stanovich, who suggests that "… a reader with poor word recognition skills may actually be prone to a greater reliance on contextual factors because these provide additional sources of information" (Stanovich 1980, p36). Therefore, processing of contextual information can clearly happen without the ability to decode the printed text in its entirety. Stanovich (1980) also cites studies that oppose the simplicity of the top-up or bottom-down models by comparing and contrasting the differences between good and poor readers.

Ehri's Model of Phases of Learning to Read (Beech, 2005) offers a flexible framework for analysing children's reading development that is most similar to that seen in many classrooms. It fits the 'Simple Model of Reading' and part-to-whole models in which the ability to decode is a fundamental aspect of being able to read. In her model, children move through four stages until they reach the point of automaticity: pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic and consolidated alphabetic. In Ehri's model, "...knowledge of these graphophonemic relations must be learned through explicit instruction or implicit learning and practice before bonding can take place" (Ehri, 2005:172). This automaticity is necessary because, according to Ehri, comprehension cannot take place if attention is focused on decoding:

> If readers know words by sight and can recognize them automatically as they read text, then word reading operates unconsciously. In contrast, each of the other ways of reading words requires conscious attention. If readers attempt to decode words, to analogize, or to predict words, their attention is shifted from the word itself to identify it, and this disrupts comprehension, at least momentarily. It is clear that being able to read words automatically from memory is the most efficient, unobtrusive way to read words in text. Hence, building a sight vocabulary is essential for achieving text-reading skill. (Ehri 2005, p170)

Goswami (2005, 2010) talks of "psycholinguistic grain size theory" as a means to compare reading development in children learning to read in different languages. For example, differences in orthography between German and English results in German children using small grain sizes with a greater degree of efficiency than do English speaking children. She also noted that the orthography of the mother tongue affected a child's ability to deal with pseudohomophones e.g. *faik* accurately, with English speaking children generally performing better in this, reflecting their greater reliance on whole word phonology. However, she also notes that the effects of psycholinguistic grain size theory are generally time-limited and by the age of nine or ten, reading fluency will have developed regardless of the orthography of the language of instruction. Grain size theory is further evidence for supporting bottom-up models of reading, as children are seen to be using phonic cues to generate meaning rather than contextual or semantic cues.

By introducing the PSC to monitor schools' teaching of SSP, Government policy has privileged the role of bottom-up or part-to-whole methods, where comprehension in Year One is secondary to decoding words in isolation. Therefore, an unintended consequence of the PSC could be that parental, public and teacher foci are targeted towards phonics at the expense of attention to wider reading instruction.

3.2.ii Interactive Theories and Models

An alternative group of reading models belong to the interactive theories of reading. Rumelhart (2013) and Stanovich (1980), concentrated on the interactive and simultaneous use of both perceptual (graphic and phonic cues) and cognitive processes. For example, in an interactive model, orthographic, lexical, syntactic and semantic processes work simultaneously and if one aspect fails, the other processes can take over and compensate for a momentary difficulty in one area. This model reflects that when reading, there can be a synthesis of both the higher and lower level processes, which facilitates comprehension, rather than models that require a sequence of stages from whole-to-part or part-to-whole. For beginner readers, the decoding elements take attention, thus restricting the capacity available for comprehension. For a good reader, whose decoding and word recognition skills are effortless, more capacity can be devoted to comprehension. Early readers have to 'attention switch' between decoding and

comprehension which can be slow and laborious, however, once automaticity is developed, with decoding being completed automatically using word recognition, readers have enough attention capacity available to facilitate smooth and efficient comprehension:

> In short, a good reader identifies words automatically and rapidly, whether by direct visual recognition or phonological recoding. The existence of this rapid context-free recognition ability means that the word recognition of good readers is less reliant on conscious expectancies generated from the prior sentence context. The result is that more attentional capacity is left over for integrative comprehension processes. (Stanovich, 1980, p64)

The relevance of interactive models to classroom practice can be seen in teaching programmes where the phonics teaching is efficient and effective, so that children have the basic decoding skills to attempt unfamiliar text, but they also have the opportunity to practise their reading in texts that combine mainly phonically decodable words, but that also feature elements of familiarity in the topics and contexts, so that children can develop skills using top-down information sources. Therefore, schools that focus purely on the word-reading competencies needed to pass the PSC are denying their pupils the chance to develop the complementary skills which are needed for comprehension, according to proponents of interactive theories of reading.

Standing slightly apart from these three main categories of reading models come those that see readers and writers as dual composers in the act of reading, such as Pearson and Tierney's Composing Model of Reading (1983) in which the reader and writer have a symbiotic relationship and the reader takes responsibility for planning their own reading, by activating 'goal-setting' and 'knowledge mobilization' strategies. Another aspect of reading theory relates to motivation, such as Mathewson's Model of Attitude Influence (1994). The role of the reader's intrinsic motivation is significant in this model: the reader's feelings about reading, their readiness for reading and their evaluative beliefs about reading affect the cognitive strategies to be engaged in their reading. Such models have a place in the classroom as ethnographic researchers such as Cole (2002), Anderson (2009) and Hall (2016) have found, with children's reading identities being shaped early on in their school careers. Pupils' perceptions of themselves as good or weak readers persist and have an effect on their future reading development. It is clear that being grouped by attainment in phonics may have a long-term impact on a child's reading identity and therefore their motivation for developing their reading.

3.2.iii Socio-linguistic theory and New Literacy Studies

Another area of reading development to be considered is that of socio-linguistic theory and New Literacy Studies. Whilst not providing a specific 'theoretical model of reading', researchers such as Gee, (2001, 2015) and Heath, (1983) offer another dimension to views on early reading. Their approaches owe more to a naturalistic or top-down view that reading will come about as a natural process, given the right conditions, in a similar way that spoken language develops. The impact of New Literacy Studies on schools had encouraged teachers to value and incorporate children's home literacy practices; cultural models and social practices were incorporated into early years settings to help assimilate children to specific Discourses of school literacy (McCarthy, 1997; Wetzel et al., 2019). Gee (2015) describes how reading development is not only shaped by mental ability, but is affected by cultural backgrounds. The child begins to develop an understanding of reader Discourse which will hopefully match the school-based Discourses (Gee, 2001). Heath (1983), through extensive ethnographic work, considered how patterns of language developed in working class communities. Therefore, models of reading, focusing on specific hierarchical cognitive skills, such as a very strict adherence to a programme of SSP, are at risk of disregarding the significance of socio-cultural influences. Socio-cultural theories fit best with models of reading that recognise that children's contextual and prior knowledge has a significant impact on their comprehension skills and therefore their overall reading attainment. Learning to read through practising pseudowords in preparation for the PSC does not complement this approach to literacy teaching and therefore does not help to bridge the gap between home and school literacies.

3.2.iv Transactional Theory

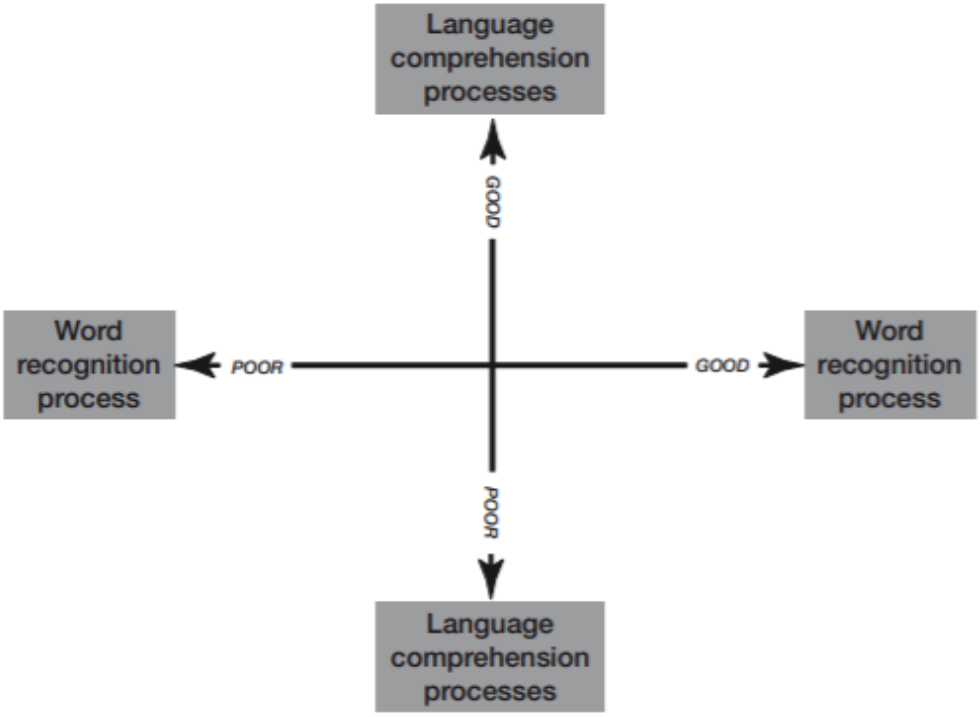
Although this is not a model explaining decoding, another theory of reading is Transactional Theory. This theory posits that comprehension and meaning are constructed through a reader's personal response. The reader constructs meaning through a combination of their own individual background knowledge, alongside a more traditional view of cognitive processing. "In the transactional model, efferent and aesthetic reading are parallel and co-ordinate modes" (Rosenblatt 1980, p388). The efferent stance is about the construction of facts and information from what is read; the aesthetic stance relates to the nature of a 'reading event', with the reader undergoing an experience as part of the reading process. Too much emphasis on phonics at an early stage at the expense of comprehension may limit children's ability to construct

meaning in this way and to see reading as a transactional experience, requiring a response as well as a cognitive skill.

3.3 Current Policy – The Simple View of Reading

The current model favoured in the UK is that of the Simple View of Reading (Figure 1), whereby children need to acquire skills in both word recognition and language comprehension (Gough and Tunmer, 1986; Hoover and Gough, 1990).

Figure 1 Simple View of Reading (DfES, 2006, p12)



The 2006 Government documentation highlighted that phonics and word recognition should be time-limited whereas developing comprehension was a 'lifelong activity' (PNS, 2006:12). This framework for reading was commonly acknowledged in schools before the introduction of the PSC in 2012 and teachers of early reading were aware of the need to develop both decoding and language comprehension. The model is still a key aspect of the 2014 updated National Curriculum. A question for this thesis is whether the PSC has allowed word recognition to dominate teaching programmes at the expense of early language comprehension.

This framework also reflects elements of the interactive models of reading promoted by Stanovich (1980), Coltheart (2005) and Rumelhart (2013) whereby comprehension and decoding are complementary and interdependent processes.

Summary

From this brief overview of theoretical models of reading, it is clear that there is not a consensus on what *reading* is and what *learning to read* entails. "There is no theory of reading, because reading has too many components for a single theory" (Perfetti and Stafura, 2014, p22). The mandatory teaching of phonics first, through sounds, decontextualised words and decodable texts, does not allow for exploration of other reading theories which posit the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to reading. An overview of recent research suggests that psychologists have found that bottom-up or part-to-whole approaches have been superseded by a greater understanding of cognitive function and the role that other visual, semantic and prior knowledge cues play in the reading process. Current psychological science therefore suggests that the "reading wars" should be over: decoding (and therefore phonics) is important, but as one aspect of high quality reading instruction which must include access to a wide and meaningful range of texts (Castles et al., 2018). Consequently, while agreeing that phonics may be vital in the early stages of learning to read, newer models (e.g. Perfetii and Stafura's Reading Systems Framework, 2014) suggest that other skills should be developed concurrently rather than sequentially as part of reading instruction.

It is clear that educationalists and psychologists still hold differing views about the reading process (Castles, et al., 2018; Solity, 2020) However, it seems likely that focusing purely on phonics and on the PSC results may reduce children's opportunities to practise the type of reading tasks that involve the contextual and knowledge-based skills that are so important in many of these theoretical models of reading. The emphasis on phonics, if not balanced with wider reading opportunities, may result in children not experiencing reading as a social and cultural practice and therefore not having the chance to read as an active reader.

Chapter Four Theoretical Framework

4.1 A socio-cultural theoretical framework

The fact that the PSC scores have risen significantly since 2012 cannot be disputed. Therefore, it could be said that the PSC is having a definite and measurable impact on the basic skills of young readers. However, the relative success of the PSC cannot be judged in isolation from its impact on the pupils as readers. At the heart of this debate is the issue of what *reading* actually means. Successful decoding is only one aspect: "Reading is not decoding yet decoding is an integral part of learning to read" (Hall 2003, p192). If ontological beliefs are to encompass reading in its wider sense of conveying meaning, then an appropriate framework for analysis should be applied. It is through socio-cultural research that useful learning theories have been generated that consider the tensions between cognitive skills and learning within an affective and social context:

> Sociocultural researchers are in a unique position to shape future advances in education because the philosophy itself is built upon the idea of *integrating knowledge* from individual, social, and cultural domains to solve practical problems, or provide insightful theory to inform practice." (La Tefy Schoen 2011, quoted in McInrerry et al., p33)

There are many theoretical frameworks influencing current literacy research. In the previous section, I have reviewed several of the theoretical models of the reading process, particularly information and cognitive processing models. It is now necessary to consider the whole question of the impact of the PSC from a wider context. Whilst recognizing the relevance of transactional theory and structuralist theories, I propose to use socio-cultural learning theory as an apposite lens to review the impact of the PSC.

For effective educational research to take place, it must involve a recognition of both the classroom environment and the children's societal position. It would seem sensible that: "the goal of such research is to understand the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand and the cultural, historical, and institutional setting on the other" (Wertsch 1995:56).

Definitions of socio-cultural theory suggest that learning is not just the acquisition of cognitive skills; learning takes place as a consequence of social interactions and is situated within a

particular environment (Leonard, 2002; Nagel, 2012, Bates, 2019). Socio-cultural theory allows researchers to consider how human activity is dependent on individual, social and cultural concerns. It is a means to appreciate the complexity of the context of the learner. This accords with the view that literacy learning has evolved over the years. From being seen as a naturalistic language process, it was then considered as a deliberate cognitive act. More recently it is being regarded as a form of sociocultural expression (Kucer, 2013). However, the PSC appears to stand apart from this sociocultural paradigm. As a pure phonic assessment, the PSC owes more to a reductionist view of literacy. If learning is seen to be influenced by interactions and the environment, then socio-cultural theory will allow for a wider analysis of the pedagogical approaches that have been promoted as a consequence of the need to raise PSC performance data.

A lot of the teaching strategies involved in preparing children for the PSC could be defined as belonging to the 'drill and practice' method of instruction. However, classroom learning has evolved in recent years to a broader view of learning, with problem solving and guided learning becoming more dominant (Van Oers, 2008). The testing involved in the PSC therefore appears to ignore how learning has advanced to take account of social and cultural influences. Socio-cultural theory suggests that learning is dependent on a multitude of variables:

> "…even when two children of the same age display a similar level of ability, their potential may be limited by personal or internal factors such as intelligence or motivation, or by external social and environmental factors." (Gray and MacBlain, 2015, p101)

If this is true, a rigidly defined SSP programme should be expected to have different results in different situations for different children. However, current policy suggests that all children should be able to learn using the same teaching programmes and be able to reach a specified level of competency by a certain date. SSP programmes are designed to be 'pupil-proof' (Davis, 2012, p570). Vygotsky's theories (1978) promote the idea that learning is not 'value-free' and that cognitive learning cannot be detached from an individual's environment. Cognitive development is affected by culture and environment. The Zones of Proximal Development are mediated by the role of others and social interaction; the necessity of having 'more knowledgeable' others to facilitate learning relies on the learner's social environment.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can provide a model for early reading. Children are supported through social interaction with a teacher and their peers to achieve new steps in their learning that they could not complete independently. Guided reading is one

approach that can be used with young children that would meet the requirements of learning in ZPD (Fountas and Pinnell, 2012; Nicholas et al., 2021). A good, well planned guided reading session will generally take place within a social context in the classroom. The adult will introduce the book which will be pitched at an instructional level. The children are supported to read by themselves. Aspects of phonics teaching can be included within this model as one of a range of strategies that might assist children in their reading. At the heart of the session will be reading for meaning. This sense of striving for meaning will become internalized by the pupils (Antonacci, 2000) so they are building up an idea of what reading a complete text actually entails. Guided teaching will both model and facilitate prediction, thinking aloud and the need for self-regulation. A very rigid approach to the teaching of phonics, with the sole aim of passing the PSC, would miss out or devalue the importance of these reading skills and might not allow for the development of thought through language and social interactions. The consequences may result in children's comprehension skills failing to develop in parallel to their decoding skills. This may have an impact on children's motivation for reading. Asking children who can read independently with confidence to continue to take practice tests for the PSC and to continue demonstrating that they can sound out pseudowords also means that they are being asked to work outside their Zone of Proximal Development.

Another aspect of socio-cultural theory involves self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's abilities to complete a task, offers a link between affective and cognitive domains (Ortlieb and Schatz, 2020). Self-efficacy is developed through teacher and peer modelling, and appropriate feedback. Supporting children through transitional periods, for example, between oral and silent reading, or in the stages between picture books and chapter books is important for maintaining and developing children's self-efficacy. Ortlieb and Schatz (2020) describe 'periods of perturbation' where readers might thrive or fail. One of these crucial periods could be at the point when children move from fully decodable texts to 'real' books. Given the difficulty that some children have in converting a pass in Year One to a pass in Year Two, at a time when they are moving from decodable to 'real' texts, it may be that preparation for the PSC could be triggering one such 'period of perturbation'. This phenomenon will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. Bandura's view of self-efficacy (1997) also promotes the importance of social modelling and social persuasion in learning. Bandura also emphasises the link between environmental factors, behaviour and personal factors (cognitive and affective influences). Learning is more than the delivery of instruction from the teacher to the learner.

Studies, such as that by Peura et al (2019), also aimed to review the relationship between children' self-efficacy and their reading skills. They found that there was a correlation between reading fluency and self-efficacy but that further research was necessary to fully investigate the relationship between different specificity levels (general, intermediate and specific) of self-efficacy and reading fluency. Again, the nature of the teaching strategies currently being used to teach phonics and decoding need to be investigated to establish whether the PSC is having a positive or negative impact on self-efficacy. This is explored through the pupil interview data in Chapter Seven.

The development of fluency in reading can be seen as a consequence of independent reading practice (Share, 1995). Share's self-teaching hypothesis, whereby children's fluency improves as they are repeatedly exposed to phonemes and words in their individual reading, suggests that automaticity is related to the time that children spend reading texts independently. The likelihood of children engaging in independent reading activities is strongly related to their self-belief in themselves as readers. Consequently, reading instruction must allow children to develop this sense of self-belief.

The need for reading development to be viewed from a socio-cultural viewpoint is necessary as reading cannot exist without a social influence: "…engaged reading occurs when readers co-ordinate cognition, in the form of knowledge and strategies within a social context to satisfy and achieve motivational ends, such as readers' goals, wishes and intentions" (Alvermann, 2013, pp80-81). Therefore it cannot be analysed as a pure decoding task, suggesting that cognitive frameworks alone would be insufficient to fully understand the phenomenon.

On starting school, children already have the belief that they will learn how to read (Hedegaard et al, 2013). They may even already see themselves as 'readers' (Levy, 2011). If children have already been exposed to reading as a social and cultural event, and are used to books having meaning, then being faced with sounds and words out of context may have a negative impact on their ideas of what being a reader entails. They have skills in 'reading' multimodal screen texts (Bearne, 2009). Their motivation for reading could quickly be reduced as the act of decoding does not match their prior expectations of reading (Davis, 2007; Levy, 2008, 2009) The privileging of phonics over other approaches also fails to take into account that children are: "not blank slates at the start of the instruction" (Cole, 1996, p285) or the role of previous literacy experiences (McCarthy, 1997; Wetzel et al., 2019). If children have already

understood reading to be a sociocultural, meaningful exercise, then the change to a diet of sounds and pseudowords will not help them to make links between their home and school practices and their understanding of the nature of reading:

> To subject either the fully-fledged readers, or those who are well on their way, to a rigid diet of intensive phonics is an affront to something fundamental in their emerging identities as persons. (Davis, 2012, p570)

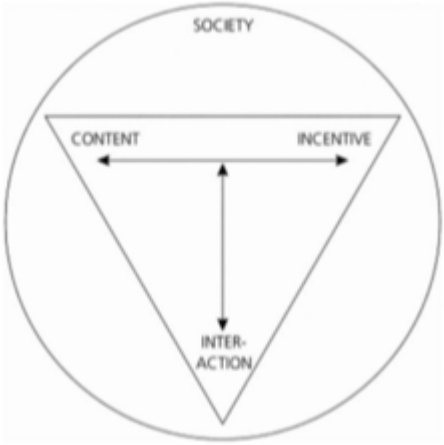
Children learn best when what is to be learned is functional and relevant, indicating that learning to read would be better approached as a whole-to-part or whole language process" (Stone, 1993, p361). Whole language approaches to the teaching of reading are generally child-centred, rely on adult guidance and social interaction, and comprise meaningful textual experiences. Although whole language approaches have been mainly disregarded by the current reading curriculum in England, it is possible to see that being offered a diet that is purely phonics driven, based on a restrictive and time-limited journey through a structured sequence of sounds, punctuated by artificially created 'fully decodable texts', will not encourage children to become thoughtful and responsive readers. It is at this point that some of the issues surrounding the impact of phonics teaching on pupils' later reading comprehension scores may originate. A heavily rigid SSP may be responsible for the apparent dislocation of phonics and reading in children's understanding. If comprehension does not develop alongside decoding in the early stages, there may be long term consequences. In a whole language approach, there is no separation between 'learning to read' and 'reading to learn' (Weaver, 1988). If children are not asked to read artificially simplified or contrived language, (or in the case of the PSC, pseudowords), then all of their interactions with text have a real purpose and meaning, leading to better overall comprehension. The PSC has caused teachers to concentrate on developing measurable skills rather than on developing readers (Routman, 1988).

4.2 Socio-Cultural Learning Theories

Examples of socio-cultural learning theories are helpful in understanding how the cognitive aspects of learning have a symbiotic relationship with affective, social and environmental conditions.

The Learning Triangle theory (Fig 2) (Illeris, 2015) suggests that there is a crucial link between the content of the learning and the incentive.

Figure 2 Learning Triangle Theory



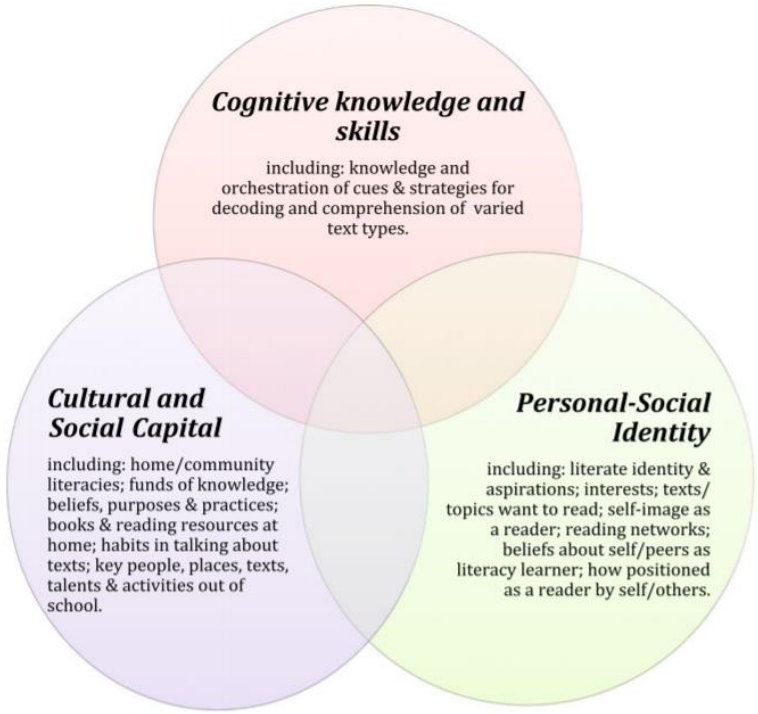
(Illeris, 2015)

If reading/decoding ability is the content, then children's motivations and emotions surrounding the reading lessons should be seen to be of equal importance. The PSC and the methods used to prepare pupils for taking the PSC seem weighted towards the content vertex of the triangle. As can be seen in more detail in Chapter Seven, the incentive aspect of the PSC is less evident for the children. The inclusion of alien words in the test would seem to weaken the incentive aspect of learning. There is also a separation, both for teachers and children, between 'phonics lessons' and 'reading activities'. Ability grouping is used in many schools to target their teaching in preparation for the PSC. However, this increases the "relative visibility given to proficiency judgments" (Moss, 2000, p102). This has been seen as a demotivating factor for children, boys in particular. Researchers have attempted to quantify the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the journey of learning to read (Moss, 2000; Guthrie et al, 2006; Becker et al, 2010) and have concluded that importance of intrinsic motivation is significant. Being assigned to a particular phonics group risks damaging a child's intrinsic motivation for reading. On the other hand, if targeted phonics teaching allows children to make rapid early progress in decoding, then pupils begin to see that reading is a skill in which they can enjoy some success. This could serve to increase both intrinsic motivation as children begin to understand the reading code and also extrinsic motivation as children can be rewarded for moving up through different levels or phases. The interaction element of the triangle is also weaker in the context of phonics sessions: letters and sounds are 'delivered' to children in a prescribed and restrictive format, from teacher to learner; there is little opportunity to facilitate child-led learning in a

commercially produced phonics scheme lesson. There is little evidence of interaction and of learning through social relationships in the preparation of children for the PSC and the need to 'deliver' a required number of sounds with a given time limit.

Similarly, the three knowledge-domains in Figure 3 also help to frame literacy in the context of cultural, cognitive and social/emotional identity.

Figure 3 Three Knowledge Domains



e 1: The three knowledge domains as a boundary object situating literacy as a cognitive, cultural & social/emotional ce. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Ellis and Smith 2017:86)

Reviewing the PSC through a socio-cultural lens would afford a means of evaluating early reading skills as part of children's global development. If current teaching programmes can be seen to limit the importance of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the role of personal-social identity by only focusing on the development of cognitive skills, then children's

overall reading progress may be hindered. Socio-cultural theories suggest that social, cultural and personal aspects should be developed simultaneously.

The social and cultural aspects of learning are important within the classroom environment: "School teaching is a special kind of learning practice that must become part of the identity-changing communities of children's practices if it is to have a relationship with their learning" (Lave, 1996:161). Decontextualised learning, to which the practice of teaching pseudowords could belong, does not allow children to make sense of their learning and denies them the opportunity to develop through participation in a legitimate activity.

Meyer's description (2002) of an American class of children now following a heavily prescriptive phonics programme is perhaps an illustration of how a pedagogical approach has altered children's understanding of their learning. Through a diet of pseudo and decontextualized words, some children had developed 'defensive learning strategies', i.e., they had learned how to be successful at reading without actually learning what they were supposed to have done. They have learnt how to echo words and sounds by copying others; they have learnt how to shout out words; they have not actually become fluent and confident readers with an understanding of what it means to be a reader (Roth, 2014). They have only peripheral or marginal engagement with the teaching activities (Williams et al, 2007); without active participation, the children's learning will be reduced.

Engeström's version of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (2000) which has developed from Vygotsky's earlier theories, suggests that environmental and societal influences are more useful when considering child development than a purely reductionist cognitive or behaviourist approach (Arievitch, 2008). Children's interpretations of themselves as readers and the way that they negotiate classroom practices and home Discourses about reading are important in facilitating object-oriented activity (Davis, 2007).

CHAT theory can be seen as a way to mediate the theory-praxis gap that is often evident in education (Roth, Lawless and Tobin, 2000). It is clear from the discussions with the teachers as part of this thesis that there are tensions between the need to teach phonics in order that their pupils pass the PSC and the need to develop other aspects of their reading development. The need to mediate between conforming to a rigid programme of synthetic phonics and what teachers see as instruction in wider reading skills is evident in the data collected as part of this

thesis. CHAT theorists suggest that in an activity-based curriculum: "Students learn neither to memorize content matter or prepare for the next academic level nor merely for the purpose of passing tests or obtaining grades" (Roth and Lee, 2007, p194). The preparation for the PSC (i.e., the repetitive practice tests, as opposed to high quality phonics teaching), could be seen as being purely for the purpose of meeting the required standard and fulfilling a school's data targets, rather than a vital aspect of a child's early reading experiences. Vygotsky (1978) considered the role of speech and language as a necessary aspect of learning. Language has meaning for the learner. "The individual always learns and uses the sense of a word in the process of participating in an activity" (Roth and Lee, 2007:209). Forcing children to spend time on pseudowords and decontextualized words suggests to children that words do not have to have a purpose. Consequently, a very prescriptive programme of phonics training would appear to stand outside the scope of socio-cultural learning theory and does not offer the same opportunity to learn in a meaningful Zone of Proximal Development. The teachers in this study who were facing what they perceived to be a reductionist or cognitive view of reading instruction faced the daily 'conflicts' and 'dilemmas' noted by Engeström and Sannino (2011) as they sought to manage interactions within their classrooms. Using Activity Theory as a framework for identifying "discursive manifestations of contradictions" within the teachers' interview data allowed a further analysis of the way that the PSC has had an impact on classroom pedagogy and agency (Engeström and Sannino, 2011)

4.3 Summary

Socio-cultural theory is therefore a suitable viewpoint from which to evaluate phonics teaching and the PSC. It will allow an insight into whether a highly bottom-up approach to reading, as monitored by the PSC, has unbalanced the relationship between the different co-existing learning domains. It will illuminate whether the emphasis on a limited cognitive skill has affected children's reading development and their engagement with reading as a social, meaning-making activity.

Chapter Five - Methodology

5.1 A Mixed Methods Methodology

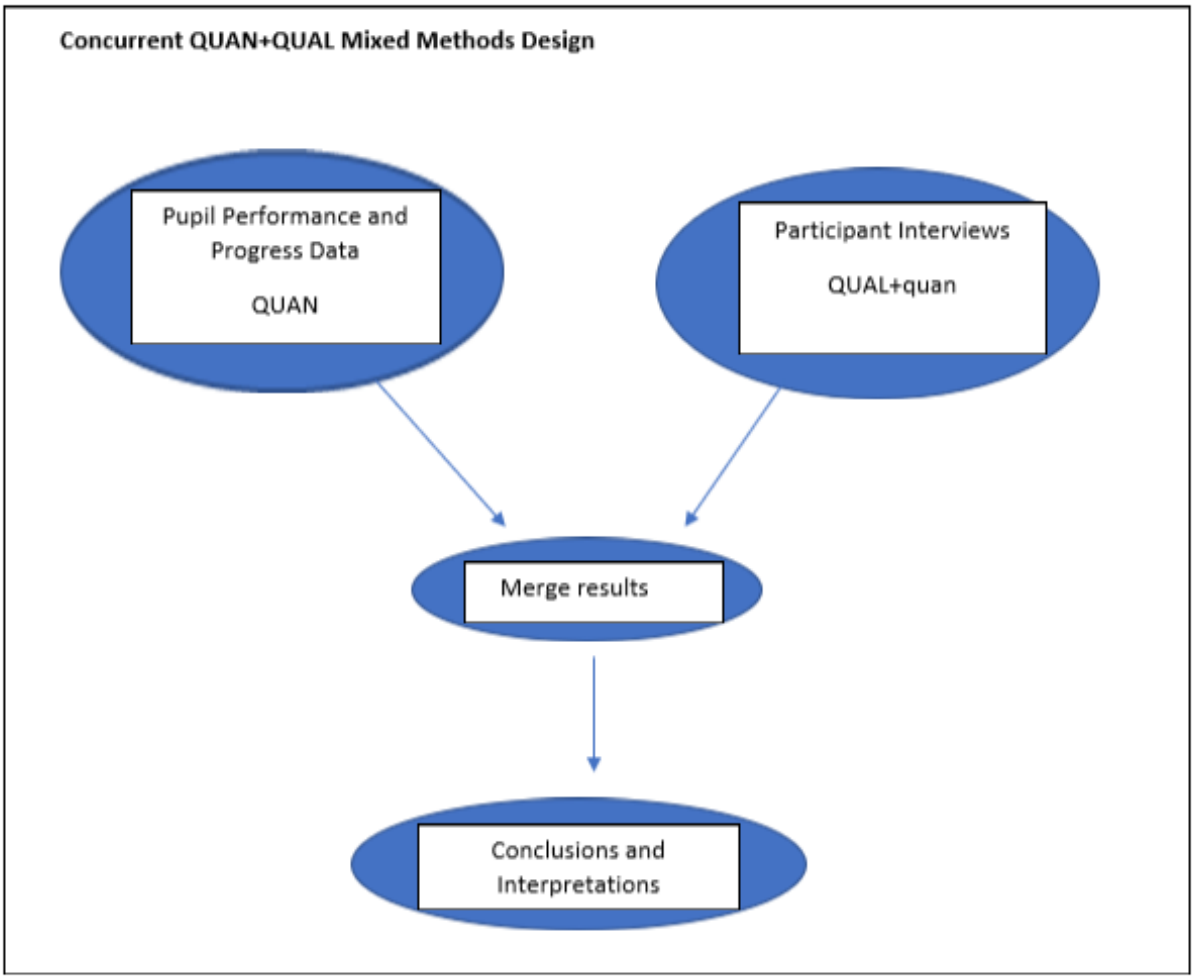
The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of the introduction of a formal Phonics Screening Check (PSC) for six-year-olds (DfE, 2012a). To fully assess this impact, it was necessary to approach the study from multiple viewpoints, to collate "different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse 1991, p122). The study was based on pragmatism (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), looking at the consequences of a specific action and taking a pluralistic stance. It aimed to combine a positivist data analysis of statistical evidence relating to pupil performance on the PSC and other formal reading tests, with a more value-laden qualitative investigation into individual experiences of both teaching and learning to read under the shadow of the PSC. As a design framework, a convergent mixed methods study was chosen, as a means to identify and analyse contradictions and tensions from the different agents. It aimed to utilise strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure the best understanding of the situation could be found (Morse and Niehaus, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The research questions focused on whether the PSC is a reliable and useful indicator of pupil attainment at age six; on whether the PSC has affected the pedagogy of teaching early reading; and whether children's perceptions on the nature of reading had changed. Consequently, both quantitative and qualitative data were necessary to fully explore these questions. As a research paradigm, the mixed methods approach is still continuing to evolve but a convergent rather than sequential approach seemed to best suit the research questions for this study and avoided the paradigm wars of quantitative versus qualitative research.

I began with a quantitative analysis of children's performance data, both national data and children's individual assessments taken from my three target schools. This facilitated a longitudinal aspect to the study as children's progress could be tracked over the five years after they had taken the PSC. However, progress in reading is a far more complex issue than that of a simple ranking or comparing of teaching methods and performance data, due to the many other variables involved, such as individual teachers, pupils' learning styles, influence of parents, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Consequently, I also intended to also address pupils' attitude towards phonics and their understanding of what reading actually is and to consider whether this has been influenced by the PSC. Likewise, a teacher's perspective on these questions would be valuable in establishing the day-to-day impact of preparing children

for the PSC. This provided a more qualitative aspect to the study. Therefore, a mixed methods study was used to facilitate an overview of both statistical data and the lived experiences of pupils and teachers. Any conclusions drawn from this study were therefore constructed through an integrated approach.

The phenomenon of the PSC is such that a mixed methods study would seem necessary to fully understand the issues. A pragmatist approach, taking a view from multiple paradigms, was appropriate. If a pragmatist view of research suggests that there are many ways of knowing, then collecting multiple forms of data in order to corroborate the findings, seemed to be a sensible decision. At first glance, the PSC is a statistical tool, a quantitative measure; it suggests that standards have risen, as the initial yearly rise in results has shown. However, that is too simplistic an approach. As can be seen in Chapter Six, different ways of analysing and comparing the data revealed different results. The voices of those involved in the PSC, both children and their teachers, added another interpretive view of the data. A pragmatic approach can therefore be purpose driven, whilst allowing the research to both zoom in and out of the situation. (La Tefy Schoen, 2011). The data analysis can provide the description of a phenomenon, before further development of the key issues and a triangulation of the results from different types of sources.

Figure 4 Concurrent Mixed Methods Design



The diagram above (Figure 4) shows that pupil performance data, both at a national and individual level, sit separately to the qualitative data collection. The conclusions in this thesis were therefore generated from the merging of the quantitative and qualitative data.

The challenge of this approach was therefore to ensure that the different qualitative and quantitative elements were sufficiently combined to generate inferences that have been grounded in both sets of results (Plano Clark, 2016), whilst avoiding the 'false dualism' (Pring, 2000) of following either a purely quantitative or qualitative paradigm.

As schools in the twenty-first century become more and more data driven, looking at pupil and school data is a vital starting point for any investigation into standards. If the stated purpose of the PSC is to improve children's reading attainment, thereby increasing social justice and equality of opportunity for those pupils at risk of struggling with reading, then a crucial strand of the research must involve investigating to what extent this has been achieved. It was vital to ascertain whether reading standards had improved as a direct result of the introduction of the PSC. The study therefore examined the impact by reviewing performance and attainment data, both at a national level and within the schools participating in the research. Yet a positivist data analysis would not fully answer the question of the impact of the PSC: there may have been unintended negative consequences, for both pupils and their teachers. Therefore, I considered it necessary to collect qualitative data from sample teachers involved in the preparation for and the administration of the PSC. Finally, this research project gave a voice to children who had taken the PSC, by sharing their thoughts and understanding of the processes by which they have been taught to read and reviewing whether their experiences of Year One schooling had been affected by the PSC.

Thus the methodology chosen was a mixed methods study, allowing for a simultaneous view of both quantitative and qualitative data, with a view to triangulating the findings from all three chosen aspects of the research: the teachers, the pupils and the test scores.

The Government's own evaluation of the impact of the Phonics Screening Check was based purely on quantitative data analysis. It has been frequently stated by government officials that

the pass rate for the PSC has increased. In a speech in 2018, Gibb, the government Minister for School Standards, announced that "163,000 more six-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers since the introduction of the phonics screening check in 2012" (Gibb, 2018). Indeed, just the increase in the proportion of children passing the PSC has seen a dramatic improvement from 59% in 2012 to 82% in 2018. However, this statistic taken in isolation raises a number of questions regarding teaching to the test. The fact that this increase in PSC scores has also not been matched by a parallel improvement in other reading tests (DfE, 2015a, p8) also casts doubt on the validity of DfE's own claims that the PSC has significantly increased the number of six-year-olds on track to become fluent readers (DfE, 2018).

To fully assess the impact of the screening check on schools, pupils and standards it would seem that a qualitative approach to the research questions would also be needed. It was possible to examine teachers' perspectives on pupil attitudes, yet as discussed later in this study (Chapter Eight) teachers' views do not give the full picture: when asked directly, the pupils did not share the opinions of their teachers about their phonics instruction. Consequently, it was necessary to collect and compare the views of the different stakeholders in order to reach a more balanced conclusion.

The views of the children should be seen as important. Their lived experiences of preparing for the test and the way that their early school life is affected by current policy is often overlooked. Clark comments that the views of children had not been taken into account in the NFER review (Walker et al., 2015) of the screening check. She states that:

> …the voices of the children have not been heard, and those of the parents to only a limited extent. Thus we still have no idea of the impact of this policy on children's perceptions of the features of written language….
>
> (Clark, 2015, p19)

This is beginning to change and other research has begun to look at collecting children's viewpoints (Carter, 2017; Clark, 2018a). However, there is still a greater emphasis on evidence collated from performance data and teachers' views than on pupils' experiences.

Collecting data via a mixed methods approach therefore seemed to be justifiable, given the need to assess the impact of the PSC from multiple perspectives. Creswell (2018) argues that mixed methods research belongs in the middle of a 'continuum' between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. He states that:

> If we further assume that each type of data collection has both limitations and strengths, we can consider how the strengths can be combined to develop a stronger understanding of the research problems or questions….In a sense, more insight is to be gained from mixing or integration of the quantitative and qualitative data. This "mixing" or integrating of data, it can be argued, provides a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself. (Creswell, 2018, p 213)

Quantitative purists (e.g., Maxwell and Delaney, 2004), with a belief in objective, positivist approaches to social science research, expect context-free and value-free methods to be the ultimate aim of educational research. On the other hand, qualitative, constructivist researchers (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 2000) believe that research is value-laden and that data leads to inductive reasoning. These opposing paradigms, with their contrasting methods and processes have given rise to the 'incompatibility thesis' (Howe, 1988), highlighting the differences between the two approaches, yet more recent developments in educational research have seen the value of a third paradigm that can "draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both…." (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p15). A pluralist approach to methodology would generate a stronger conclusion:

> Taking a non-purist or compatibilist or mixed position allows researchers to mix and match design components that offer the best chance of answering their specific research questions. (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p5)

When looking at the impact of government phonics policy, the collection of data from different sources is important.

> If findings are corroborated across different approaches, then greater confidence can be held in the singular conclusion; if the findings conflict, then the researcher has greater knowledge and can modify interpretations and conclusions accordingly. In many cases the goal of mixing is not to search for corroboration but rather to expand one's understanding.
> (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p19).

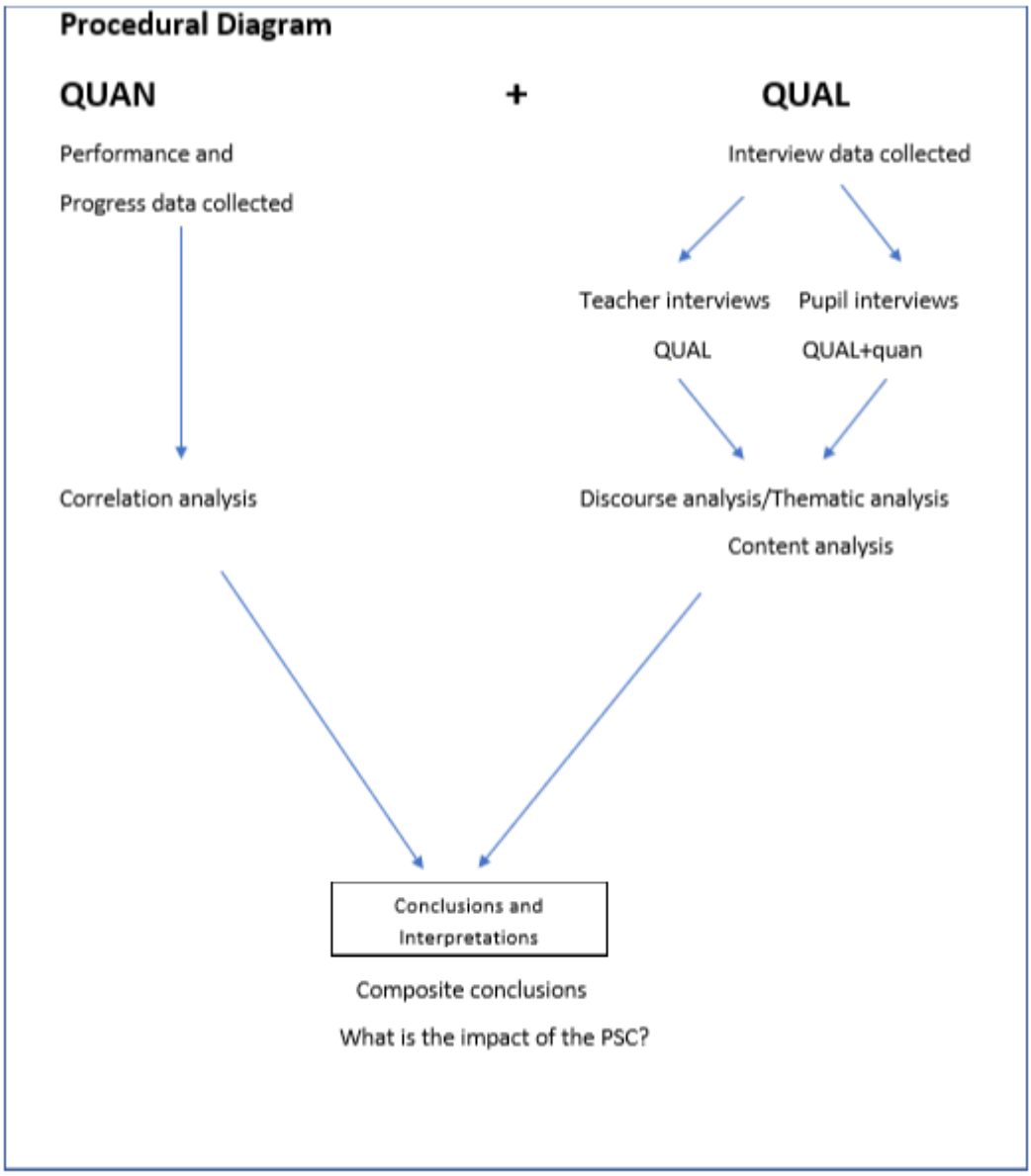
Using this mixed methods approach to explore a school-based issue would therefore increase the study's contribution to knowledge in a way that a single method study might not. Looking at unintended consequences may suggest that compromises need to be made between fast acceleration of phonic skills and the social and affective impact of that policy on particular groups of pupils.

According to Morgan (1998) and Morse (1991), it is not necessary to give the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research design equal weighting: one paradigm can be given a more

dominant role in the research. In my research design, the qualitative aspect has been given more priority as I believed this was more likely to answer the research questions about the impact the Phonics Screening Check has had on pupils, teachers and schools. The quantitative data, both at national and school level, add an additional dimension to the research by qualifying the measurable impact of the screening or perceived measurable impact of the screening on reading standards. The pupil data also allowed the claims that the screening check has had a significant impact on raising standards in reading to be evaluated.

Integrating findings from both the pupil performance data and the qualitative discussions with teachers and pupils would therefore generate a 'stronger understanding' of the impact of the PSC, which could in turn lead to a deeper and more valuable exploration of both the positive and negative consequences of the screening programme.

Figure 5 Procedural Diagram



5.2 Participant selection

The data collection involved three primary schools belonging to the same large Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) in the East Midlands. Two of the schools are currently graded as Outstanding by OFSTED and the third holds a Good judgment. All three schools score consistently highly in the PSC and in other national assessments.

5.2.i Teachers

The teachers' names have all been anonymized for the purpose of confidentiality.

The teacher selection was based on identifying those with more experience in teaching in KS1 and EYFS, specifically those who had been working before 2012, the year of the introduction of the PSC. This was to allow for a more longitudinal view of teacher experiences. When assessing impact of policy shift, it was necessary to speak to teachers who had experienced the point of change, and who had the ability to make comparisons with the before and after. Thus the teacher selection was influenced by the availability of staff in these schools who met these criteria. Further research into the impact that the PSC has had on new entrants to the profession and their views on how to teach reading would be valuable and could form the starting point for further research but this was not possible within the limits of this thesis. Due to the nature of some of the teachers' contracts within this MAT, the teachers from Schools A and B had all spent different academic years teaching in both of these settings. Their responses have been recorded under the school that they were currently employed in at the time, although it should be noted that their views will reflect their experiences across both of the schools.

Figure 6 Teacher Participants

	Name	Length of time teaching	Teaching Experience	Teaching before introduction of PSC
School A	Teacher 1	18 years	Y1,2	Yes
School B	Teacher 2	10 years	Rec, 1	Yes
School B	Teacher 3	25 years	Rec, 1, Y2	Yes
School C	Teacher 4	16 years	Y1	Yes

5.2.ii Pupils

For the child participants, I worked with three Year Two classes, one in each school. In two of the schools, where there were two parallel classes in this year group, one class was selected on the basis of the experience of the teacher, for example, in School A, the class with a teacher new to the school was avoided, to minimize disruption whilst that teacher was still settling in.

My initial plan was to do stratified sampling, based on the children's prior PSC scores to select participants from each of the three focus classes. However, given the relatively small number of potential participants and the fact that very few pupils in these schools had failed the PSC, I decided to use all the children who had returned a positive parental consent form, consequently moving to a convenience sampling approach.

The table below shows the number of children interviewed from each school.

Figure 7 Child participant data

	School A	School B	School C
Number of consent forms sent out	30	30	30
Number of positive parental consent forms returned	11	15	7
Number of positive child consent forms	10	13	7
Number of withdrawals during process	0	1	0
Number of boys interviewed	3	3	2
Number of girls interviewed	7	10	5
Number of group interviews carried out	3	3	2

Once the parental forms had been returned, I allocated the children to groups of three to five for the interviews. The groups were randomly selected with no prior knowledge of the children's reading attainment. As the chart above shows, there was a noticeable gender bias in the sample. There were significantly fewer boys taking part in each of the three schools. The boys were divided across the interview groups. There was no discernible reason for this gender bias as all three classes were reasonably balanced between girls and boys. It is possible that there was a greater reluctance amongst the boys to take part in a discussion on reading and this could suggest the need for further study into reading motivation amongst girls and boys and whether this has been influenced by phonics teaching. The data analysis revealed that there was not a noticeable difference between the answers given by the girls or the boys and so the role of gender has not been an area of discussion in this study, even though summer born boys have been identified as a nationally underperforming group on the PSC (DfE, 2019).

The children's interviews all took place within their first term of Year Two. I wanted to work with children who had already taken the Phonics Screening Check but I felt that the last few weeks of the summer term, after the PSC had been completed in mid-June, would not be an appropriate time to conduct their interviews due to the busy nature of schools at the end of the academic year. Interviewing in the Autumn term meant that a reasonable amount of time had passed since the PSC, therefore the experience of taking the test would not be fresh in their mind, perhaps allowing the children to be more reflective in their responses. The questions were also designed to not mention the PSC directly to avoid inducing any anxiety or worry on the part of the children; however, if any of the children were to directly mention the test during the discussion, then I would follow their lead.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

As a significant aspect of this study involved seeking the voice of pupils, it was important to be "particularly mindful of ethics owing to the age and vulnerability of children from birth to eight years" (Mukherji and Albon, 2010, p33).

As the research was taking place in a school setting and was focused on a particular aspect of school-based learning and instruction, it was likely that as a researcher, I would have been

'positioned in the teacher's role' (Horgan, 2017, p250) and as such, the children's answers may have been influenced by this 'power differential' (Horgan, 2017, p247). Spyrou acknowledges the need to recognise the contextual background to children's participation in research:

> …a critical reflective approach to child voice research needs to take into account the actual research contexts in which children's voices are produced and the power imbalances that shape them (Spyrou, 2011, p152).

Chesworth (2018) suggests that a focus on child-friendly methods may limit that quality of the research data collected and that a more reflexive or emergent approach may be more suitable when working with young children. Consequently, the structure of the children's interviews was designed to include practical and interactive methods of data collection alongside more traditional styles of discussion. The aim was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the children to allow for some triangulation from within the pupil data. The activities were also designed to allow for some individual responses alongside group responses. Thomson (2008) recognises the value that children's voices can have due to their experiences of policy and curricula in their daily lives in school. Yet she also acknowledges that the collection of research data from children does not result in a homogenous sense of 'voice' as children bring their own individual and different experiences to the research topic. The data that I collected from the children allowed for both a sense of a 'pupil voice' but within this data were significant individual responses of interest, which illustrated the value of the experiences of each child as they told their 'story' of reading lessons. One child's voice, in particular, has been used to illustrate the differences between teachers' and pupils' experiences of teaching in ability groups (see Section 7.6).

Prior to undertaking the children's interviews, I spent a few days in their classrooms, acting in a Teaching Assistant's role, working and supporting groups and individuals and being a visible presence in the classroom and the playground to begin to build relationships with the pupils. All three schools were offered the chance to have a familiar adult observer present during the interviews to make sure that the children felt comfortable during the process. All three schools declined this offer: firstly, an additional adult would have to be taken away from their scheduled role at that time and secondly, the preliminary sessions that I had spent in the classrooms assisting with daily routines and lessons meant that the pupils were happy and willing to take part in the discussion with me, without the additional security of one of their regular adults

being present. In School A (my current place of work), the children were already familiar with seeing me around school on a day-to-day basis.

Parents were also offered the chance to discuss any questions or concerns with me on the morning of the pupil interviews; however, no parents attended these meetings. The positive consent forms were returned without further parental interaction. The children whose parents had returned the consent form were then asked for their consent. There were three children from across the three schools who were asked if they wanted to take part but they did not wish to participate and they returned to their classroom activities straight away.

When carrying out research with children, it is always important to consider the impact of power relations. "Acknowledging the power relations in qualitative research interviews raises both epistemological issues about the knowledge produced and ethical issues and the implications for how to deal responsibly with power asymmetries" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p38). As one of their teachers (School A) or as a visitor to the school (Schools B and C), I was concerned that the children may have felt under pressure either to take part in the interview or to give the 'expected or correct answers' (Spyrou, 2001). As the purpose of the research was made clear, there was a risk that the children may have felt the need to comply and to please with their answers (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). Using group interviews rather than individual interviews aimed to reduce any anxiety and give the children the support of their peers (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). The children appeared confident and chatty. There was one withdrawal partway through one group session but the rest of the children in that group were happy to continue, suggesting that they did not feel under pressure to conform.

The fact that I was also working with pupils from my own school added further ethical considerations to the study. Although I had never taught any of the child participants as their class teacher, they were familiar with my monitoring of the teaching of phonics and reading in their classrooms over the years that they had been in school and they also regularly interacted with me in other roles around the school, e.g. taking assemblies, covering playground duty. Whilst being aware of the possibility that my day-to-day role may have unduly influenced the responses from pupils in School A, the fact that the collected data from this school were not significantly different from the responses from the children in the other two schools suggests that carrying out research within my own place of employment has not negatively influenced the outcome of this study.

The question of power relations is also pertinent to the role of ethics in the teacher interviews. As one of the schools is my own place of employment and the other two schools are also members of the same MAT, it was important to make it very clear to the participants that their interviews would be kept confidential and would be completely separate from any monitoring or evaluations that I may have already carried out or would carry out in the future as part of my employed role. Although I have subject leader responsibility for English in one of the schools, I am not directly involved with the performance management arrangements of any of the adult participants. In terms of overall feedback to the schools, I will be offering to summarize the key findings of the research for the staff teams, particularly if any key issues are discovered that could help to improve the experiences of the PSC for both adults and children, but the anonymity of the teachers will still be respected at this point. Despite all the preparations for ensuring that the teachers were free to discuss their own opinions, it is still possible that they were influenced by the school culture to give the 'expected answers' and to align themselves with the current academy and MAT policies. Consequently, it is still possible that there may still be some aspects of institutional bias within the teacher data; it is important to reiterate the fact that my position and the need to appear to be in accordance with the school culture may have led to some participants holding back on some of their beliefs and values. However, as discussed in Chapter Eight, there were both similarities and differences in the responses collected from individual participants across the schools, suggesting that the teachers had reasonable confidence that they could speak freely.

Both the audio recordings and transcripts of the teachers' interviews and the pupils' video recordings have been kept confidential, with the digital copies stored on the university's secure drive. Both the participants and their schools have been anonymized in this study.

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5.4 Positionality

I believe it is important at this point to make my positionality in relation to this research topic clear. My motive for completing this research project reflects my positionality - not only from an ethical position in having prior knowledge of each school but from my role as a teacher of reading. One of my biggest problems when teaching reading to older Key Stage Two children is that of children who can decode accurately but who struggle when asked comprehension questions. I wanted to know whether the change in emphasis to phonics in the early stages could be linked to children's weaker performance later on. Does being forced to decode using

SSP rather than by any other method affect children's engagement with reading for meaning? Is early success in SSP masking other deficits, such as language and vocabulary issues, which only become more noticeable as the children get older? Finding an answer to these questions would certainly help KS2 reading teachers. My hypothesis prior to collecting the data was that the recent push for phonics above all other methods, rather than as part of a balanced approach to reading instruction, may be causing difficulties with the concept of reading for meaning and that children were somehow missing out on early language and comprehension work. Restricting early exposure to reading for meaning and pleasure could cause deficits which become increasingly harder to rectify as the children get older. As a teacher in a school with an outstanding track record for getting children to pass the PSC and despite being involved in school-to-school support to ameliorate the PSC scores of other lower performing schools, I was beginning to doubt the government policy of phonics above any other method. From a background of seeing phonics as part of the reading process rather than the sole tool, I was also concerned by the increasing dominance of some commercial phonics programmes in controlling pedagogy in schools. There has been a sense that buying a new phonics scheme is the answer to a school's reading problem. Whilst a new scheme may improve the new measurable PSC scores for a school, is this enough to improve 'reading' standards? Although I would not refute the claim that improving phonics teaching will help many struggling readers to decode with a greater degree of accuracy, I felt that there were other pedagogical issues to be addressed. The PSC was being celebrated by government officials for the way it was forcing schools to address weakness in their phonics teaching, thereby apparently improving reading standards, but I was starting to think that these claims were perhaps somewhat misleading when faced with older children who were still struggling with other reading skills. My scepticism was beginning to grow.

I also speak from an insider perspective of a teacher constantly aware of the need for accountability and performativity. I have experienced how the teaching curriculum can be influenced by the pressures of external testing programmes. I feel I have 'intrinsic and tacit knowledge', both of the issues and the participants, and I share their 'insider capital' (Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014). I was interested to see whether Year One teachers felt the same way about preparing for the PSC as teachers facing other national tests.

Insider research can be at risk of lacking rigour and objectivity:

> Insider researchers are native to the setting and so have insights from the lived experience. Rather than this being considered a benefit, insiders are seen to be

> prone to charges of being too close, and thereby, not attaining the distance and objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research.
>
> (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p60).

However, acknowledging this insider knowledge and aiming to take a reflexive position should help to facilitate the transparency of the findings. "Without some acknowledgment of initial opinions, including beliefs and values, the research will certainly be biased" (Griffiths 1998, p130).

5.5 The Data Collection Process

The following table summarises the steps taken as part of the data collection process and attempts to show how the different elements of the mixed methodology are interrelated.

Figure 8 Data Collection Process

Date	Type	Data Collection	Direct relevance to research questions
Stage 1 Initial analysis of test data Jan – Apr 2019. Updated Autumn 2019 with Summer 2019 test data. No data available for Summer 2020.	Quantitative	**School and pupil performance data collection.** • Tracking individual pupil performance between Y1 and Y2/6. • Tracking national trends in both phonics and reading data. • Identifying significant trends and patterns to raise in teacher discussions about pupil performance and data.	• Is there a link between scores on the PSC at age 6 and reading achievement later in primary school? • Are children who fail given more support and consequently do they catch up with and/or overtake their peers?

Stage 2 Summer Term 2019 Schools A and B Dec 2019 School C	Qualitative	**Teacher Interviews** • Views about the PSC and preparing pupils to take PSC. • Thoughts about the pedagogy of teaching reading and teachers' understanding of reading development • Any unintended consequences of PSC • Perceived impact on the pupils in their classes • Pupil progress after Y1	• What is the perceived validity and reliability of the test? • Are some of the children who fail the PSC at age 6 actually capable readers who decode using methods other than phonics? • What do teachers consider to be the main consequences of a government-imposed system of teaching and assessing early reading? • How has the PSC altered teachers' understanding of the reading process?
Stage 3 School A – Nov 2019 School B – Sept/Oct 2019 School C – Nov/Dec 2019	Qualitative and Quantitative	**Pupil Interviews** • Pupils' views on reading and how they learnt to read • Ranking of different aspects of their literacy/reading work as a means of assessing pupil enjoyment of and engagement with SSP • Opportunity to assess pupil awareness of the PSC • Opportunity to compare pupil and teacher opinions, looking for both agreements and contradictions.	• How does the phonics screening check impact on children's views on reading and on their self-perception of themselves as readers? • What are the children's experiences of a heavily phonics-based curriculum?

5.6 Methods

5.6.i Quantitative Data Analysis

Pupil Performance Data and Progress Measures

Regarding pupil progress measures, data are not normally collected to show progress between Year One and Year Two or between Year One and Year Six, neither at a national nor school level. Currently, progress measures at a school level are only published between Year Two and Year Six; this is an important measure in both internal and external school monitoring. This progress measure between Y2 and Y6 is published nationally for each school and is used as part of Ofsted inspections. Schools therefore focus on progress rates between Year Two and Year Six. Published figures include the number and percentage of pupils who pass each test but these percentages do not reveal whether it is the same children passing both. Information is also available to show how many Year Two children nationally pass their resit of the PSC In order to evaluate the impact of the PSC, it would seem necessary to check pupils' trajectory through to the end of primary school, rather than just by using the PSC data alone. This cross-referencing of Year One data with children's future performance would also further illuminate the teachers' opinions about their pupils' progress and their understanding of the pupils' wider reading attainment. Therefore, the pupil performance data have been analysed to show the correlation between the PSC and other reading tests taken at age seven and eleven.

Pupil Interview Data

The start of the children's interviews comprised a short section on their personal opinions on reading. Using a simple Likert scale with cards for children to select their answer gave a basic quantitative view of whether children liked reading and a simple self-assessment of how they ranked their performance as readers.

The discussion that followed focused on how children learnt to read and their views of the different aspects of the reading process. A summative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2016) of this section of the interview was used, using word counts as indicators for children's understanding of how they perceived that they had been taught to read. Inductive coding was used to analyse the conversations, based on policy documentation and other theoretical models of reading. This quantitative recording of the content of the discussion aims to give a more

indicative view of a child's opinion of reading. Chapter Seven explores the quantitative data alongside a more thematic qualitative analysis of the children's discussion.

As part of the children's interviews, further quantitative data were collected as part of a ranking activity. Children rated different aspects of their literacy teaching and behaviours individually. These scores were then aggregated to create scores for each school and an overall combined score for all the child participants. This allowed the children's opinions to be illuminated and compared. The pupils' ranking data also facilitated comparisons with both policy intentions and the teachers' understanding of the children's views. Using a quantitative approach for this section of the discussion also aimed to eliminate the likelihood of the children copying or echoing the views of their peers. As this task was completed independently within the group context, it should have improved the reliability of the overall data.

5.6.ii Qualitative Data Analysis

Teacher Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for the teacher participants, with a view of offering some consistency between the interview questions between the teachers from different schools but also to allow each teacher to voice their personal opinions and to allow them to lead the discussion around areas of their particular interest. This also offered teachers the opportunity to describe specific features of the teaching choices in their own schools. The interviews were audio-recorded to allow for accurate transcription. The format of the semi-structured interviews pointed to a top-down, deductive analysis, using specific pre-identified broad themes e.g., accountability, teaching styles and test validity. A closer examination of the data then aimed to conceptualise additional themes and areas of interest. The selected thematic analysis approach aligned with an experiential analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013): the purpose of the data analysis was to illuminate the experiences of the teachers as they prepared children for the PSC. A manual selective coding approach was used, with semantic codes being applied to identify key themes and patterns for analysis. These overarching themes of interest included thoughts about underperformance, reading fluency and alternative approaches to the teaching of reading. This thematic analysis approach suggested a framework for "organizing and reporting" the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p297). It also allowed a method of accessing both the explicit and latent meanings in the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p297). In Chapter Eight, my findings and analysis are structured to show the emerging themes. As part of this review of the qualitative data collected from teachers, critical discourse analysis was also used to

identify ideas about conformity, the restrictive nature of the PSC, and contradictions between personal beliefs and school policies. The analysis of the teacher interviews also included aspects of CHAT theory (Engeström and Sannino, 2011) to further examine tensions between policy, practice and practitioners' values by examining the teachers' use of language when describing the systems in which they are working.

Pupil Interviews

The pupil interviews were carried out in groups to help reduce stress and anxiety for the children. The groups were made up purely of children from their own class groups and took place in familiar spaces in various places around the different school sites. The interviews were video-recorded to ensure that individual contributions could be matched to the correct child. The children's discussion responses were not coded in the same way as their teachers' responses: whilst certain individual responses were particularly illuminative, as a whole, their answers showed a lot of similarities. Thus, their comments have been grouped for analysis across the three schools. Repeated answers have been counted to show the patterns of the responses but detailed content analysis was not carried out.

Chapter Six The PSC and its impact on performance data

6.1 Introduction

When beginning to evaluate the impact of the Phonics Screening Check (PSC), it would seem prudent to commence with examining children's assessment and performance data. In order to evaluate whether the aims of the PSC have been achieved, primarily that all children are being taught to read via a programme of systematic synthetic phonics and that any pupils who are not reaching the expected standard are identified and given additional support to help them catch up, then an analysis of relevant assessment data would be the most logical starting point. The quantitative, statistical data will help to contextualise the qualitative pupil and teacher voices.

I start by reviewing national performance data for pupils at age six (phonics), seven (reading) and eleven (reading), looking at the claims made by the government and analysing whether or not they can be justified. This will also include a review of links between PIRLS data showing England's relative performance in a global context and the PSC. Looking at the national picture for both phonics and reading achievement will give a broad overview of the direct impact of the PSC on pupil performance whilst also attempting to justify the government claim that 163,000 more pupils are now on track to become better readers (DfE, 2018).

I will then compare assessment information from the three schools involved in this study to see whether the national patterns and/or government claims are mirrored in my sample. It will also be possible to track the progress of individual children to ascertain whether passing the PSC at age six leads to becoming a 'better reader'. Additionally, I will consider whether any other observations from the data collected lead to any hypotheses for further research.

6.2 Analysis of national performance data

The Phonics Screening Check (PSC) is taken by all Year One children. In subsequent years, children take Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) in Reading in Year Two at age seven and again in Year Six at age eleven. The PSC tests children's ability to decode forty decontextualised words and includes pseudowords; the SATs test children on their comprehension. In both Year Two and Year Six, the tests contain several age-appropriate texts,

which could be fiction, non-fiction or poetry, with a set of written comprehension questions to be answered. For eleven-year-olds, their paper is strictly timed and externally marked; for the seven-year-olds, there is not a strict time limit. The Year Two tests are marked internally and the scores are used to guide teachers towards a final Teacher Assessment.

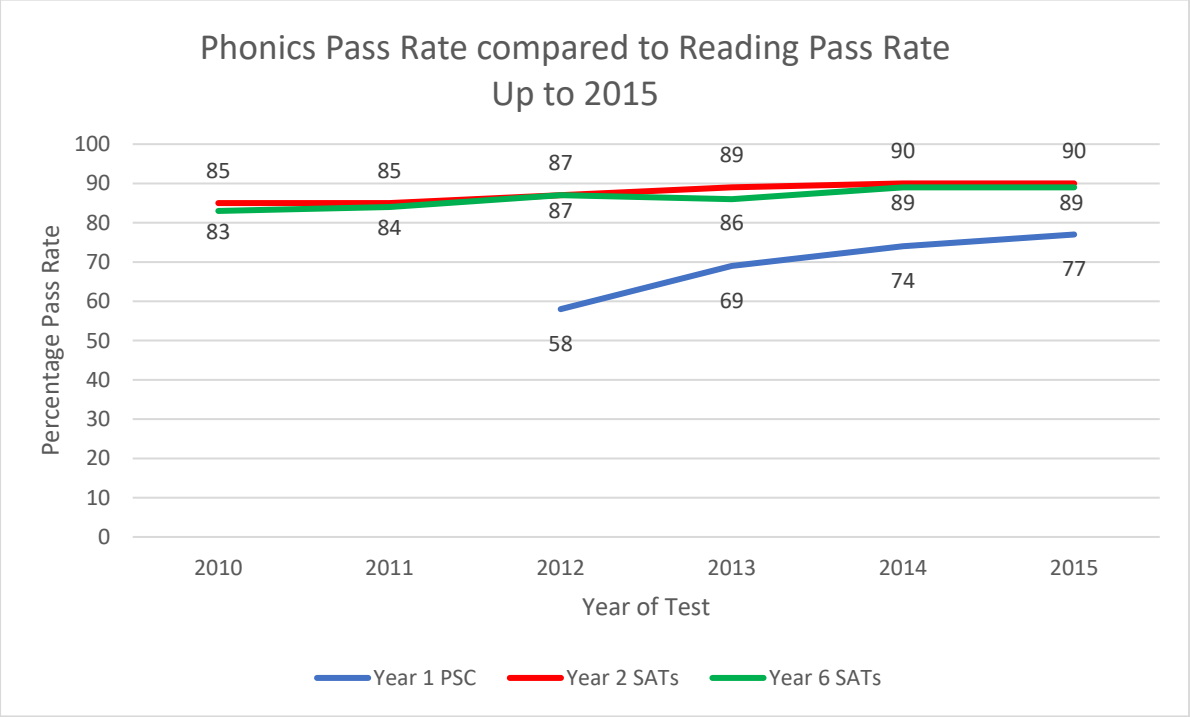
Looking at the national PSC scores in isolation reveals a clear improvement over the first few years of the test, following by a plateauing of results in recent years.

Date of test	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Percentage of children passing the PSC	58%	69%	74%	77%	81%	81%	82%	82%

These results suggest some clear success for the PSC in raising the standards achieved in phonics; however, the fact that the results have remained constant for the last four years of the test suggests that the maximum effectiveness of SSP programmes and the PSC has already been reached, a pattern that has been identified in other testing programmes (Linn, 2000). Whilst there may be particular schools that need support to significantly improve their scores, and these are the schools that should be being targeted by the English Hubs programme, this data may be indicative of the fact that there will always be some children for whom phonics is not the most appropriate method of learning to read (Bowers, 2020).

The following three figures track the national pass rates for the PSC from its introduction in 2012, alongside the national pass rates for reading SATs taken by pupils in Year Two (age seven) and Year Six (age eleven). Making comparisons between the two is difficult, given that there were notable changes in the SATs assessment criteria and standards in 2016, for both the Year Two and Year Six assessments. The English National curriculum had been updated and the tests were more rigorous: the drop in reading scores between 2015 and 2016 (seen in Figure 11) reflects these changes. The test results for 2016 "…are not comparable to test results from previous years which were under an entirely different system of assessment" (Morgan, 2016). For example, whereas in 2015, 89% of eleven-year-olds achieved the expected standard in reading, in 2016 only 66% of pupils met the new standard. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn regarding patterns in assessment data over time and trends in data have been identified both before and after 2016.

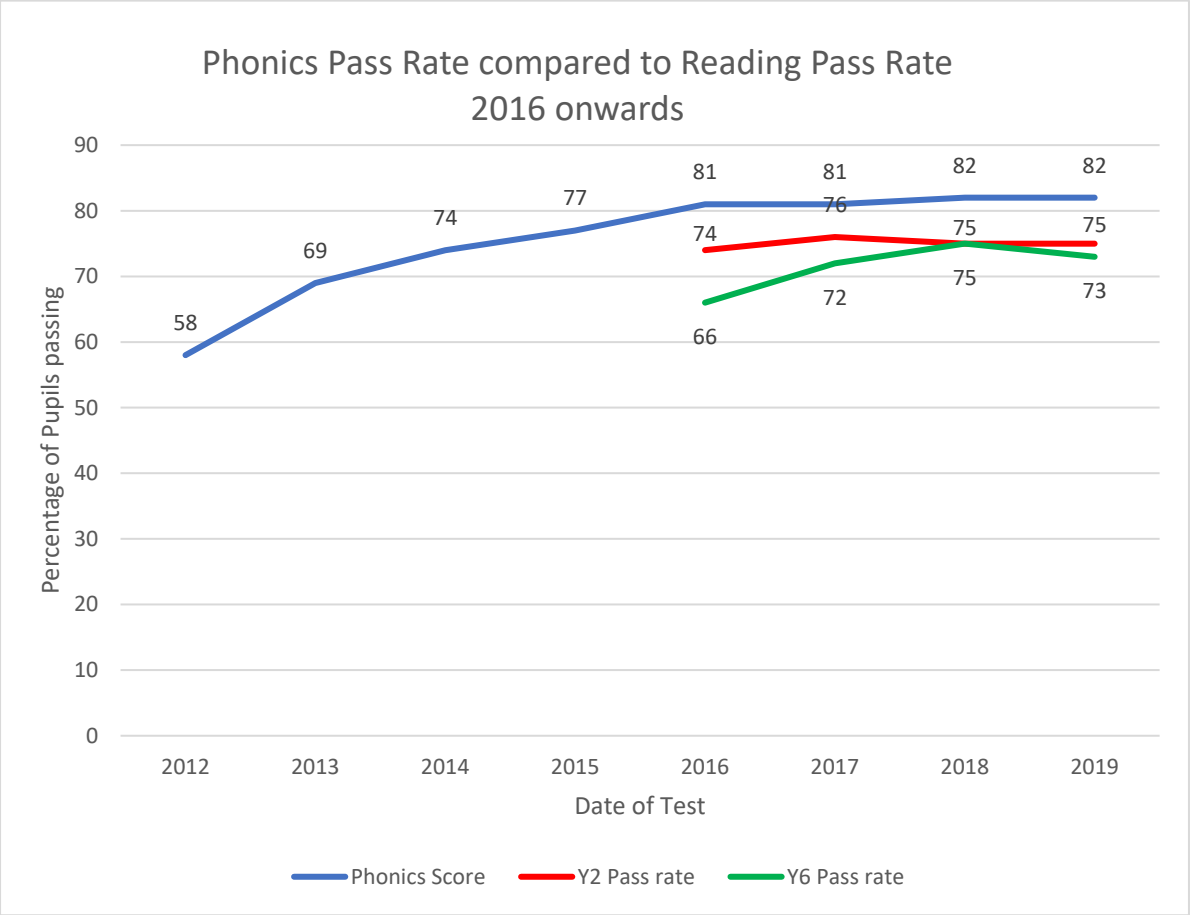
Figure 9 National Reading and Phonics Scores 2010-2015



This graph tracks the pass rate for the Year One PSC from the year of its introduction in 2012 until to 2015. There is clearly a sharp increase in the number of children passing the test in the early years of testing. Between 2012 and 2015, the pass rate increases by nineteen percentage points, whereas the pass rates in Year Two and Year Six continue to maintain slight increases, following the pattern of gradual improvement that was evident prior to 2012. In this set of data, the PCS scores track below the pass rates for reading. It is clear that the increase in scores for Year One pupils is not mirrored by a similar increase in Year Two; consequently, the data suggest that the PSC did not have the desired effect of putting more children on track to become better readers. Whilst they are clearly becoming better decoders, they do not appear to go on to become better at reading for meaning and comprehension. The children who had taken the PSC do not outperform the cohorts who completed Year Two assessments in previous years before the introduction of the PSC. (The Year Six children represented in this graph did not take the PSC. The first cohort of children to take the PSC did not take their Year Six assessments until 2017.) It is clear from this figure that reading comprehension standards remain higher than those for phonics, suggesting that being a good reader is not necessarily dependent on having excellent phonics skills; other methods of reading instruction, including the Searchlights Model (DfE, 1998) from the previous curriculum were still producing similar reading scores.

In the next graph (Figure 10), the new, more difficult Year Six assessments had been implemented. The drop in children passing these tests when compared to those passing reading assessments in 2015 is pronounced and the reading data now sit below the phonics pass rate.

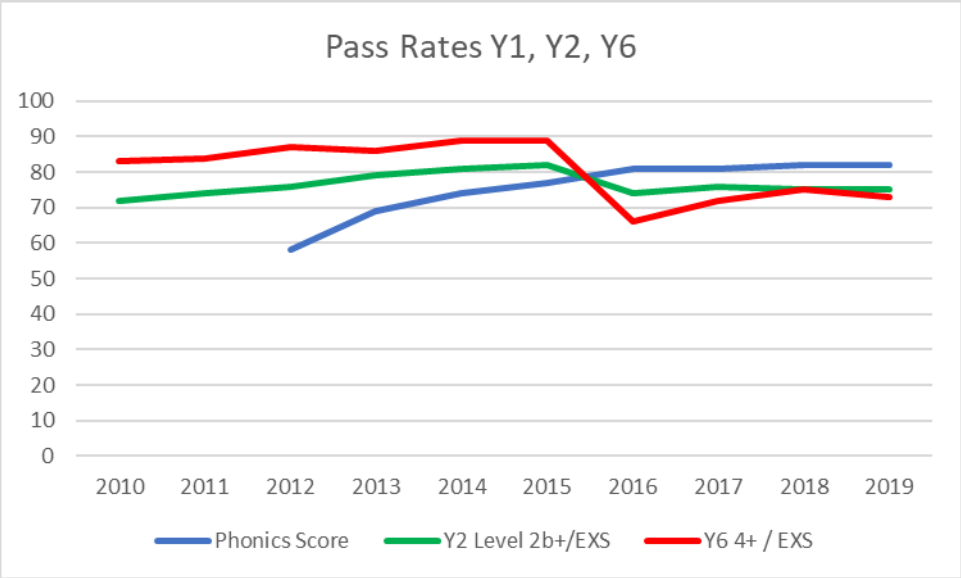
Figure 10 National Reading and Phonics Scores 2016-2019



The Year Six data is slightly more erratic that that for Year Two. The standards now expected for seven- and eleven-year-olds are more challenging and reflect a Government drive to improve performance. However, by changing the standard, it now appears that phonics is not enough to definitely ensure that children are on track to succeed in reading. The data reflect that a significant number of children who pass the PSC do not continue on that trajectory in later years.

The following graph (Figure 11) combines the data from the previous two graphs and illustrates how by changing the level of what is expected of a reader in Year Two and Year Six alters the relationship between the PSC and subsequent national tests.

Figure 11 National Reading and Phonics Scores – Pass rates 2010-2019



The sudden drop in performance in 2016 for Year Two and Year Six pupils, due to changes in assessment criteria, suggests that the arbitrary nature of assessment thresholds may be disguising the true extent of the value of phonics as an indicator of reading attainment.

The most obvious observation is the quick rise in the pass rate for the PSC in Year One. Although some schools had been involved in the pilot testing in 2011, 2012 marked the first national data collection and the overall pass rate was only 58%, which was significantly below the pass rates already being achieved in reading in Year Two and Year Six. However, as teachers became familiar with the expectations of the test, the pass rate at Year One rose rapidly between 2013 and 2016, reaching an 81% pass rate (2016 and 2017) and 82% in 2018 and 2019. The improvement in scores has plateaued over the last four years; indications are that this is indicative of the pass rate increasing in the short term as teachers become better at 'teaching to the test' (Stobart 2008). The pass rates are "broadly stable" (DfE, 2019). The narrowing of the English curriculum to focus on the teaching of phonics has led to improvements in this one aspect of the teaching of reading. As le Cordeur suggests, "Therefore, although the results have improved, the advantages of coaching have long since reached a point of satiety; no attention is paid to high-level skills" (le Cordeur 2014, p144).

Linn (2000) notes that this pattern is typical for testing of this type and is often used for political purposes.

> Based on past experience, policymakers can reasonably expect increases in scores in the first few years of a program….with or without real improvement in the broader achievement constructs that tests and assessments are intended to measure. The resulting overly rosy picture that is painted by short-term gains observed in most new testing programs gives the impression of improvement right on schedule for the next election. (Linn 2000, p4)

Significantly, over this time of rapid improvement at Year One, the scores for the same children at Year Two did not rise at the same rate. Between 2010 (pre-PSC) and 2015, the pass rate only rose from 72% to 82%; PSC data from 2012-2105 shows an increase of 19%. The reading data at Year Two had been showing a slight yearly increase before the introduction of the PSC. Equally maths performance data for the same time period also show a slight upward trajectory (2016 73%, 2019 76%). Thus, test scores were improving across all areas in general, not just in reading; consequently, it could be logically expected that standards in reading would have continued to show a slight yearly improvement in line with the maths scores without the introduction of the PSC. This reflects the DfE's own findings:

> Analyses of pupils' literacy (reading and writing) scores in the national datasets over four years were not conclusive: there were no improvements in attainment or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check; attainment and progress improved in the years both before and after its introduction. As far as it is possible to report, given the methodological

> limitations of the study, therefore, the evidence suggests that the introduction of the check has had an impact on pupils' attainment in phonics, but not an identifiable impact (or not yet) on their attainment in literacy. (DfE 2015a, p8)

The same 2015 report suggests that it would be "of continuing interest to review the results at Key Stage One in future years and also the results at Key Stage Two as the pupils who took the check progress through their later years of schooling" (DfE 2015, p8). This is what I have attempted to do through analysing the data from my three target schools. Admittedly, due to the changes in Year Six assessment mentioned earlier, it is hard to make direct comparisons between Year Six children who took the PSC and those who went through Year One before 2012, but the data show that in 2019, the pass rate at Year Six had dropped by 2% from the previous year, but for phonics, the same children managed a 3% increase on the previous cohort's data. Figure 11 also shows that before the SATs reading assessments changed, more children passed reading at Year Two and Year Six than phonics; since the assessment change in 2016, this trend has been reversed. The first cohort of children to take the PSC in 2012 achieved a 58% pass rate; by the following year, after the Year Tw resits, 85% of those children had met the expected standard in phonics. 89% of that cohort passed the end of Year Two reading assessment, showing that it was still possible to pass a reading assessment in Year Two without a pass in phonics.

Summer Born Children

Another aspect in the quantitative data analysis is the obvious difference in the pass rate at Year One between the oldest and the youngest members of the cohort. For example, in 2014, 82% of the oldest pupils in the year group passed whereas only 65% of the youngest children did so (Clark 2015, p4). This reflects the fact that some children are simply not mature enough at this stage to pass the PSC. When the pass rates are matched to the month of birth, it is evident how strongly age correlates to performance at this stage. The summer born children are clearly disadvantaged by the test. The following table shows the 2019 PSC data and illustrates how the pass rate drops month by month (DfE, 2019). For boys born in August, the test is noticeably more problematic than for their older peers.

Figure 12 Phonics Pass rate by month of birth

	Percentage pass rate	Percentage pass rate (boys only)	Percentage pass rate (girls only)
September	88	86	91
October	87	85	90
November	86	84	89
December	85	82	88
January	83	80	87
February	83	79	86
March	82	78	86
April	80	76	84
May	79	75	83
June	78	74	82
July	76	72	80
August	74	70	78

The pattern of the pass rate decreasing by month of birth still persists in Year Six reading assessments but it is slightly less pronounced. The 2019 KS2 data shows that 78% of September born children met the standard compared to 68% of those born in August – a smaller drop of percentage points compared to the September – August drop in Year One.

Younger boys disadvantaged by the PSC

Younger boys are the lowest achieving group when the data are analysed by age and gender. Similar results for attainment by age were found in Australian trials of phonics testing (Wheldall et al., 2019). Setting a pass/fail type test could therefore be seen as discriminating against the younger children. Labelling pupils as 'not meeting the standard' at Year One is unfair as for some of these children, a lack of maturity may have been the critical issue, rather than a need for extra phonics intervention, which may put these vulnerable children off reading at a crucial stage. This pattern of scores dropping by month of birth was also evident in the sample schools' results. Data collected from Schools A and B show that the average PSC score was 37.3/40 (N = 231). For those with a birthday in the autumn term (N = 75), the average was 38.1/40 and for those born in the summer term (N= 80), the average was 36.6/40.

A further set of wider data can be obtained by looking at the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study data (PIRLS data) in reading. The 2016 PIRLS tests were the first to involve

pupils who had previously taken the Phonics Screening Check in Year One. Pupils from the UK achieved their highest average score in 2016 of 559. Appendix Four shows pupils' PIRLS scores in relation to their PSC score. The higher scoring Year One pupils were quite clearly also the higher scoring Year Five pupils when considering average scores. However, the scatter graph in Appendix Five shows the range of scores achieved. Even those scoring the highest in Year One were not all successful in Year Five. Whilst the analysis of the 2016 PIRLS test (DfE, 2017) has found a moderate correlation of 0.52 between pupils' PSC scores and their scores in Y5 in the PIRLS assessment, there must be a degree of caution in attributing the rise in overall PIRLS scores to the PSC. The cohort of pupils who took the PIRLS tests in 2016 were the first to take the PSC in 2012. This was the year when the national pass rate in Year One was only 58%. This would suggest that the remaining 42% of pupils who failed to meet the standard at age six were given additional intervention to enable them to 'catch up' with their peers. However, the question remains as to whether the 42% of six-year-olds who failed in 2012 were actually already competent readers who had not been exposed to as much phonics teaching and the concept of pseudowords. Double et al. (2019) have researched the effects of intervention after failing the Year One check and discovered that those who passed at their second attempt in Year Two were more likely to be on track several years later than those that failed the Year Two PSC retake. Double's study is one of the few that aims to link early decoding skills to later reading comprehension and the findings appear to support the predictive validity of the PSC. The study, whilst unable to comment on the nature and effectiveness of the intervention programmes offered, found that if the PSC results were seen in a formative light, then it could be said that the PSC facilitates effective targeting of support in phonics which in turn leads to an amelioration of reading comprehension skills.

However, a further analysis of the PIRLS data (McGrane et al., 2017) also indicates several other factors that were predictors in the Year Five scores: numbers of books at home, being in receipt of Free School Meals, gender, age, having an internet connection in the home and attending a high performing school. Consequently, the improvement in pupils' performance in the 2016 PIRLS test cannot be attributed to the effects of PSC alone.

The discrepancies between the national data patterns for phonics and comprehension suggest that the two strands to reading are still co-existing as separate entities and that a focus on developing mechanical decoding is insufficient to rectify deficiencies in language and

comprehension. This leads to the tentative conclusion that the race to improve PSC scores by increasing the amount of teaching time spent on decontextualised phonic skills, thereby reducing the time spent on developing decoding and comprehension simultaneously, has not provided the answer to improving the overall literacy skills of pupils.

6.3 Sample Schools Data

I now intend to compare the trends in the national data with the assessment data collected from my three target schools. This will allow for a greater focus on progress rather than simply attainment alone as individual pupil scores can be tracked, allowing for a more detailed investigation of key groups of children e.g., those around the threshold for passing an assessment and also the more able children who score significantly above the average in reading and phonic tests. I have focused on collecting data from cohorts that have taken national tests at Year Two or Year Six since the change in assessment in 2016. Firstly, these are the most recent data and secondly, the type of assessment score introduced from 2016 onwards allowed for a more precise analysis, rather than the 'levels' awarded previously. [2]

[2] *SATs scores were reported before 2015 as 'levels', with children expected to be working at Level Two in Year Two and Level Four in Year Six. The ability range within each level was very wide. From 2016, SATs results are converted into scaled scores: in Year Six, children receive a numerical score between 80 and 120; in Year Two, the scores range from 85 to 115. For both year groups, a score of 100 represents a 'pass' or that the child has met the expected standard*

The two tables below show how the PSC data for different years have been tracked for individual pupils taking Year Two and Year Six tests in subsequent years.

Phonics Screening Data	Y6 Data
2014	2019
2013	2018
2012	2017

Phonics Screening Data	Y2 Data
2018	2019
2017	2018
2016	2017
2015	2016

The 2017 Year Six cohort was the first group of pupils who took the PSC in Year One, so three years of test scores have been collected from Year Six. It was possible to collect four years' worth of data from Year Two. Test scores from 2020 would ideally have been included; however, all national testing for 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. School B opened in 2016 and so does not yet have any Year Si pupils; consequently, the Year Six test results have only been collected from Schools A and C. School B also only has data for the Year Two in 2019 as this was the first cohort of seven-year-olds to be tested there. Data were only collected for the pupils who had recorded a score in both tests. If children had been absent during the period of testing, or had changed schools and therefore had no PSC score available, they were discounted from the data.

6.3.i Correlation between phonics data and reading data

If passing the PSC is to be seen as an indicator that a child is on track to become a good, fluent reader, then it is necessary to take a longitudinal view of pupil progress. In trying to ascertain whether there is a correlation between a child's score in the PSC and their later score in Year Two or in Year Six, pupil data were collected from the three schools. Children's phonic scores out of forty were matched with their individual Year Two or Year Six Scaled Scores[3] and a

[3] Scaled Scores are calculated for end of Key Stage tests. A child's raw score is converted to a scaled score with 100 being the Expected Standard. A score of 100 is meant to represent the same standard from year to year.

bivariate two-tailed Pearson correlation was calculated (Dancey and Reidy, 2014). The results of the Pearson correlation suggested a significant positive association between children's scores in Year Two and their score from the PSC in the previous year, with a moderate effect size ($r(231) = .519$, $p < .001$).There was also a small but significant positive relationship between Year Six scores and the year 1 PSC ($r(193) = .390$, $p < .001$).

Figure 13 Comparing Year 1 and Year 2 data

N = 231	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Minimum/Maximum scores	Range of scores achieved	Pass mark
Year 1	37.27	3.29	0-40	8-40	32
Year 2	102.90	6.98	85-115*	N – 115 *	100

**A score of below 85 would be recorded on a school's data profile as N. For the purposes of this thesis, one child who scored below 85 has been positioned on the graph as having a score of 80.*

Figure 14 Comparing Year 1 and Year 6 data

N = 194	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Minimum/Maximum scores	Range of scores achieved	Pass mark
Year 1	35.98	4.95	0-40	11-40	32
Year 6	107.02	7.34	80-120	83-120	100

In both Figures 13 and 14, the standard deviation is smaller at Year 1. This is to be expected as the majority of children score within the 32-40 range. At Y2 and Y6, the range of possible scores within the pass band is greater.

There is clearly a statistically significant correlation between pupils' performance in Year One and their subsequent reading scores in either Year Two or Year Six. This is to be expected as

The raw score needed may vary from year to year, depending on the precise content of the test. However, a scaled score allows for comparisons to be made between cohorts.

children must be able to decode adequately in order to access the reading comprehension tests. The strength (effect size) of this correlation declines as the length of time between the tests increases. Whilst causation cannot be inferred from correlation, the statistically significant relationship between the Year One PSC and the Year Six scores suggests that decoding ability, as assessed by the PSC, may be a significant factor in a child's ability to pass a reading comprehension task.

However, achieving high phonics score in Year One is not a guarantee of future success, suggesting that there are other variables which influence a pupil's reading scores. The following two graphs (Figures 15 and 16) show the spread of the scores achieved by the pupils. The additional red lines illustrate the respective thresholds for passing each test. The graphs show that a significant number of children fall into the bottom right quadrant of each graph, which represents children who met the expected standard in phonics in Year One but who had fallen below the threshold for passing in either Year Two or Year Six. In Year Two, fifty-seven children or 24.7% of the sample fall into this category. In Year Six, twenty-two children or 11.3% of the sample had been 'on track' in Year One but below the expected standard five years later. The phonics scores in each graph were jittered to avoid overplotting due to the frequency and distribution of identical scores in Year One.

Figure 15 Relationship between PSC scores and Y2 Reading data

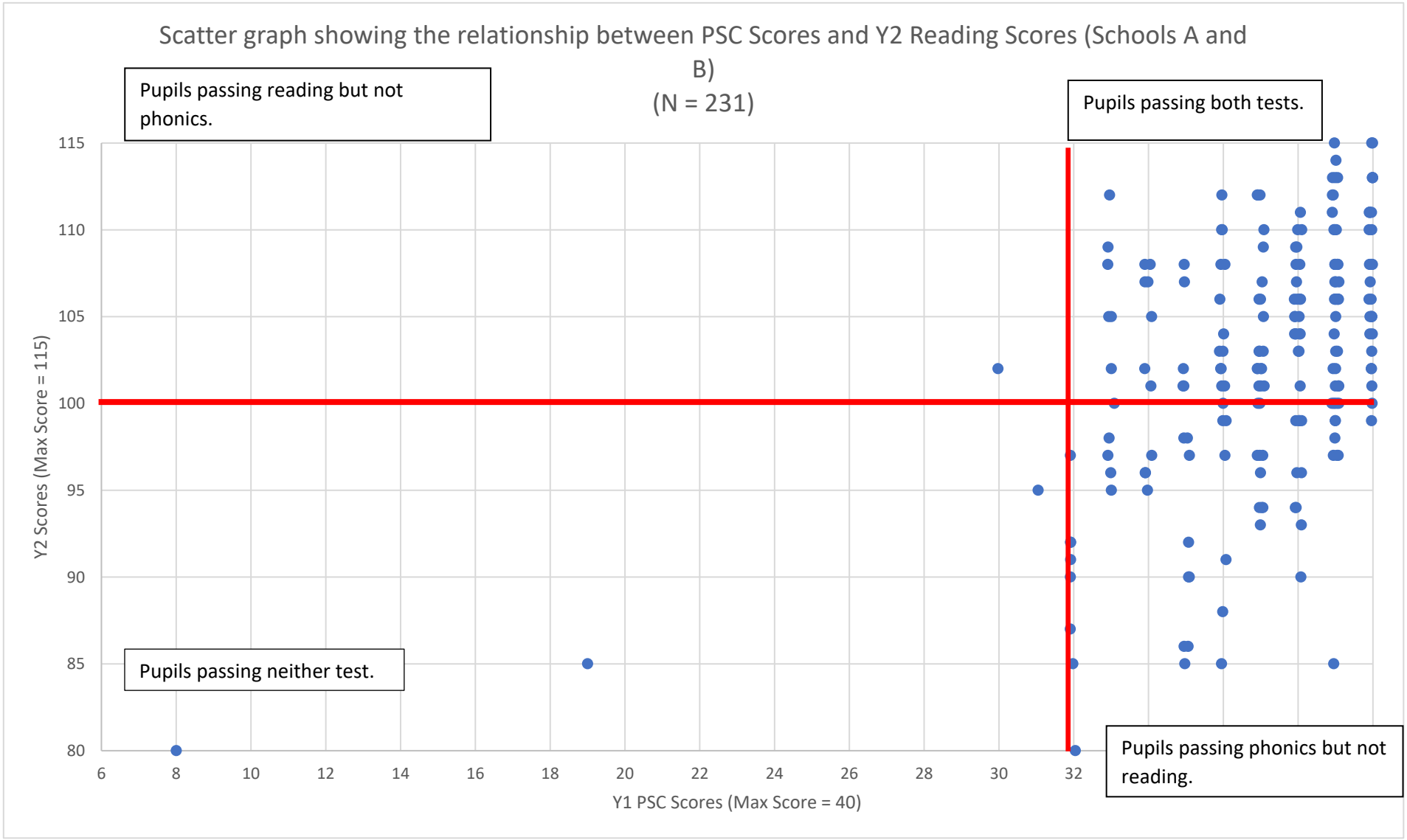
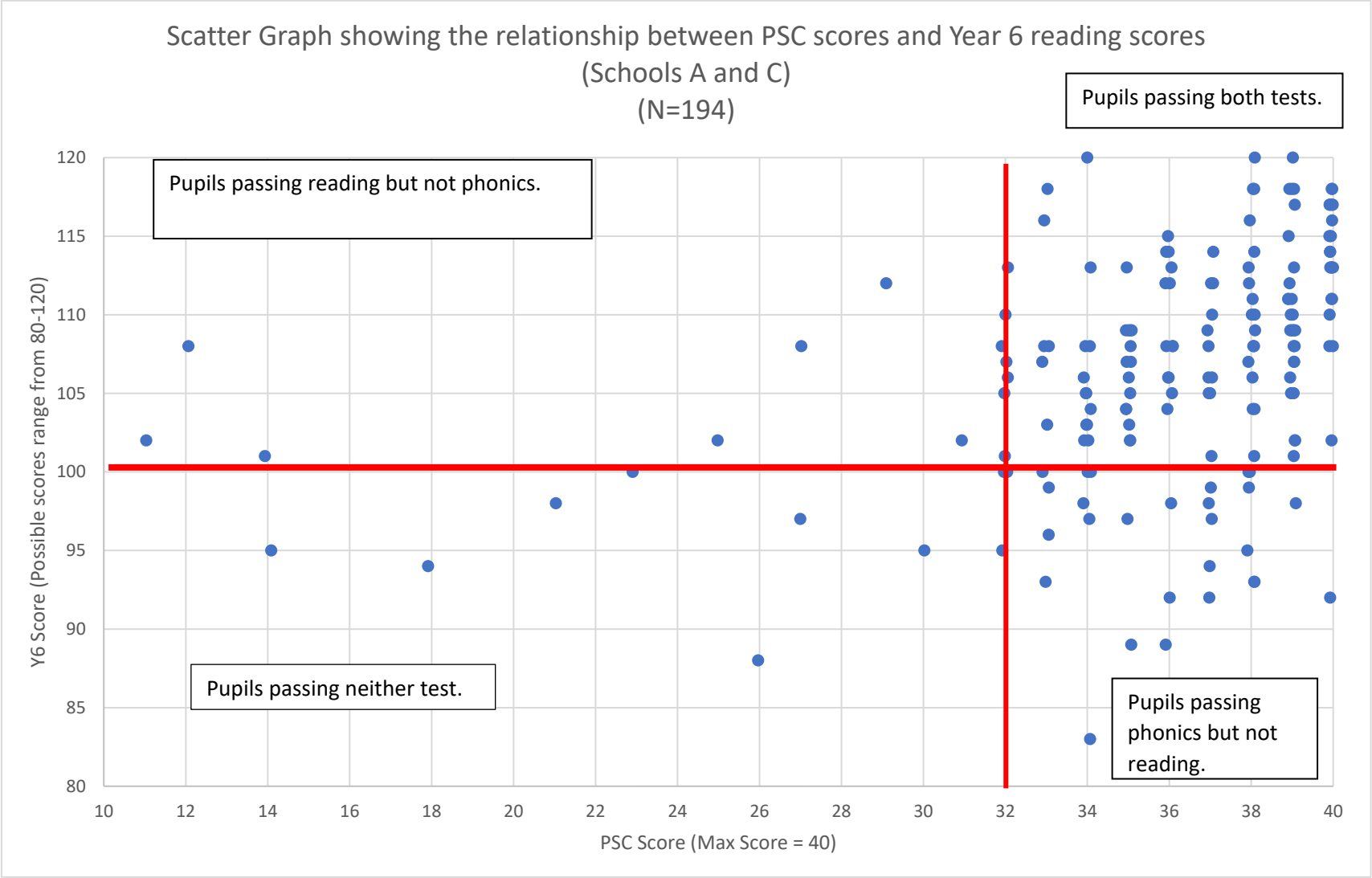


Figure 16 Relationship between PSC scores and Y6 Reading data



It is noticeable that almost one-quarter of the children in this sample pass in Year One but appear to be struggling less than one year later. It suggests that the DfE claim that passing the PSC means that they "are on track to become fluent readers" (DfE, 2018) is not entirely accurate. More children are 'on track' to become better decoders but other skills such as fluency and comprehension still need to be taught.

The fact that the PSC is designed to identify weak decoders means that those with adequate decoding skills but other difficulties could be overlooked as the initial focus in Year Two may be on providing intervention for any children who did not meet the required phonics standard in Year One. The aims of the PSC as outlined here suggest that 'reading help' refers to 'phonic help', rather than any other type of reading support:

> The new check is based on a method that is internationally proven to help children learn to read and the evidence from the pilot is clear - thousands of 6-year-olds, who would otherwise slip through the net, will get the extra reading help they need to become good readers, to flourish at secondary school and to enjoy a lifetime's love of reading. (DfE 2011a)

The emphasis on phonics may mean that weaknesses in comprehension and fluency are not being identified until later. In Year Two, there is only a limited amount of time for targeted intervention programmes to be put in place. Year Two assessments have to be completed by the end of May and so teachers have only 9 months to identify and address any issues. Supporting children with comprehension difficulties is harder to accomplish and it is difficult to see how a 'quick fix' solution can be found, whereas targeted phonics support is easier to plan, manage and see quick gains.

By contrast, children who fail to meet the reading standards in Year Two have another four years before their next national reading assessment. They have been identified as having wider reading issues and support can be managed more effectively over the course of the next four years, giving pupils and teachers more time to deal with problems and support these children. Furthermore, Year Six data is generally seen as the most significant in a school's profile: it is this data that is used publicly in performance tables, particularly in league tables published in the press; progress measures are calculated based on Year Six attainment; and Ofsted focuses more heavily on Year Six data. For this reason, schools are more likely to invest time and money in booster programmes for Year Six than in other year groups. Consequently, those children that dipped below the thresholds in Year Two are more likely to be given targeted support to catch up by Year Six.

This issue has been raised in the extant literature. Chall (1983) was aware of a group of pupils classified as 'late-emerging poor readers', namely those that made adequate or better progress in the initial stages of learning to read but then seemed to fall victim to the 'fourth grade slump'. For various reasons, the early gains faded away as the curriculum and expectations became harder. Catts and Tomblin (2012), in an American study found that 13.4% of all children could find themselves in this group of later-emerging poor readers. By far the biggest proportion of this group (52%) were acknowledged to have difficulties with comprehension alone, as opposed to word reading (36%) or issues with both (12%). The discrepancies between the national data for phonics and the national data for reading could perhaps be attributed to this phenomenon, and the fact that children can be taught the mechanics of decoding through rigorous and structured phonics teaching but may still lack the cognitive understanding or language development to fully grasp the comprehension aspects to reading for meaning.

The role of early vocabulary acquisition in a child's reading journey is not measurable under the current assessment framework: "Often we review progress in education by what is easiest to measure rather than by what is most important" (Schleicher, 2018, p35). However, vocabulary is an important factor in a child's potential success in reading:

> Children's phonological skills are important in learning to read but so is vocabulary. Phonological skills at age 5 are better predictors of reading at the age of 7 than at the age of 11. Vocabulary at age 5 is a better predictor of the more complex tasks of reading at age 11. (Evangelou et al, 2009:4)

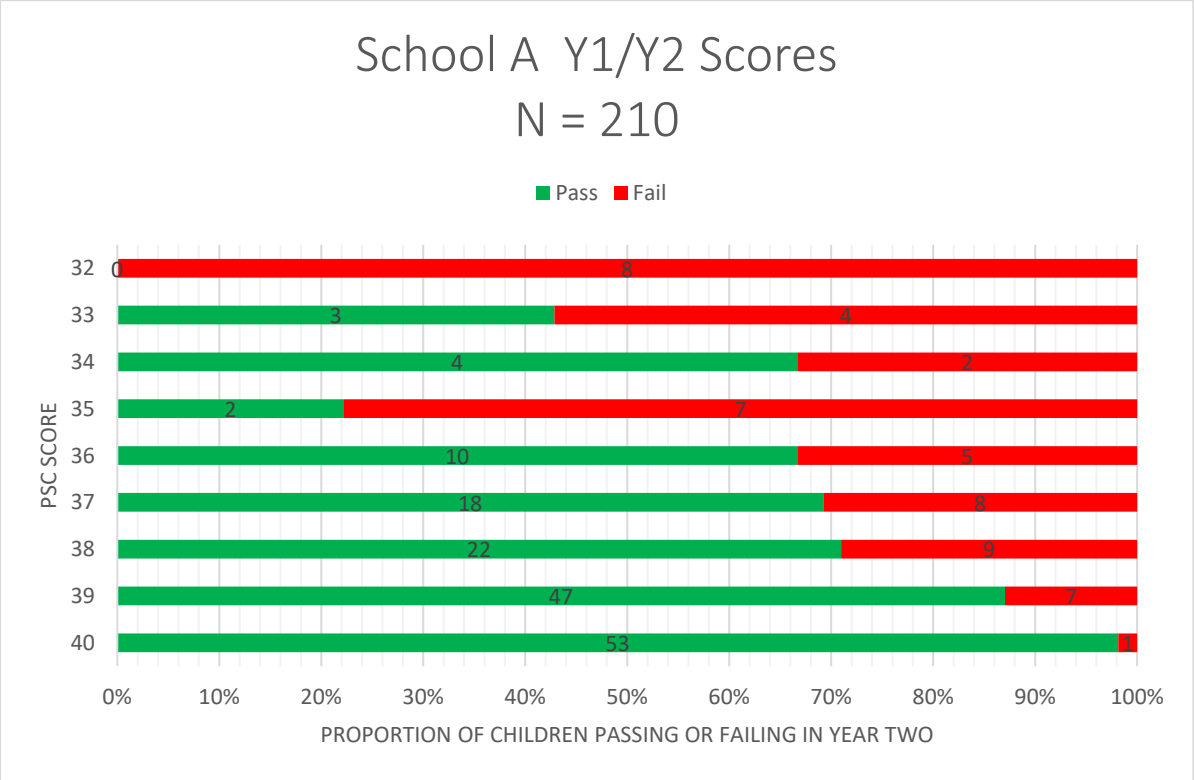
Although, for the purposes of this thesis, vocabulary has not been measured, it would seem true to say that phonological skills at age six, i.e., the PSC scores, do not appear to be an accurate predictor of reading at eleven, particularly for those who have achieved a low pass in Year One.

6.3.ii The Validity of the Year One pass mark

Since its implementation, the pass mark for the PSC has remained at 32/40. In this section, the data are reviewed to try to establish whether 32/40 is actually a reliable indicator that a good level of reading attainment has been achieved.

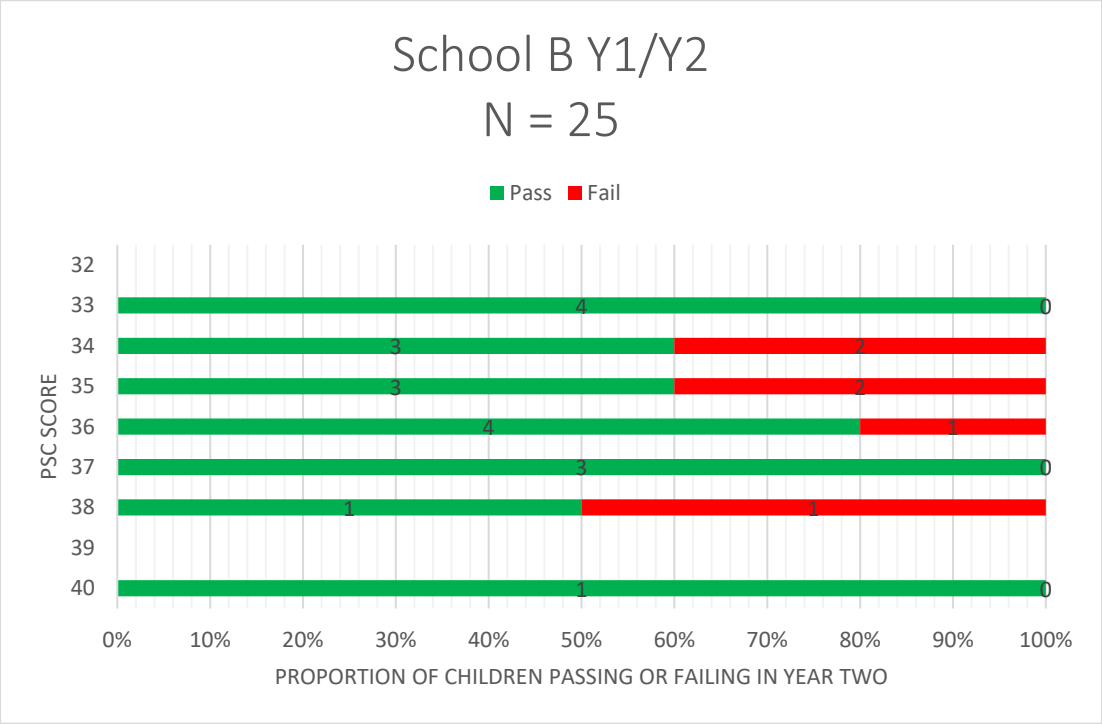
The following graphs group the number of children who received the same scores in Year One and then show the proportion in each group that went on to pass the Year Two Reading Test.

Figure 17 Reliability of Y1 scores as an indicator of Y2 scores (School A)



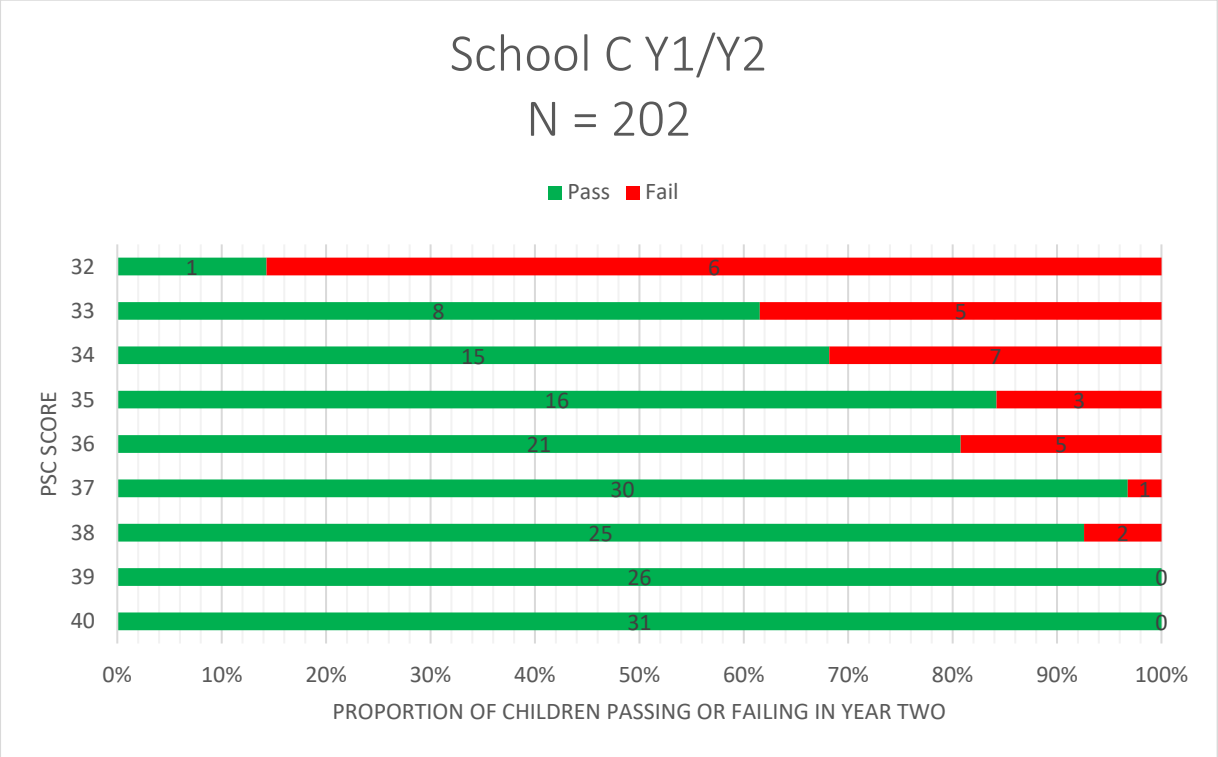
The graph above is quite clear that in the four years covered by this data, no children in this school who scored 32/40 (the exact pass mark) on the PSC in Year One went on to pass the reading test the following year in Year Two. Scores of 33/40 and 35/40 also seem particularly problematic. The numbers of pupils who scored well in Year One, and achieved thirty-six, thirty-seven and thirty-eight marks and still failed in Year Two is worrying. Only about three-quarters of the children scoring thirty-seven/thirty-eight on the PSC are judged to be reading at the current standard one year later.

Figure 18 Reliability of Y1 scores as an indicator of Y2 scores (School B)



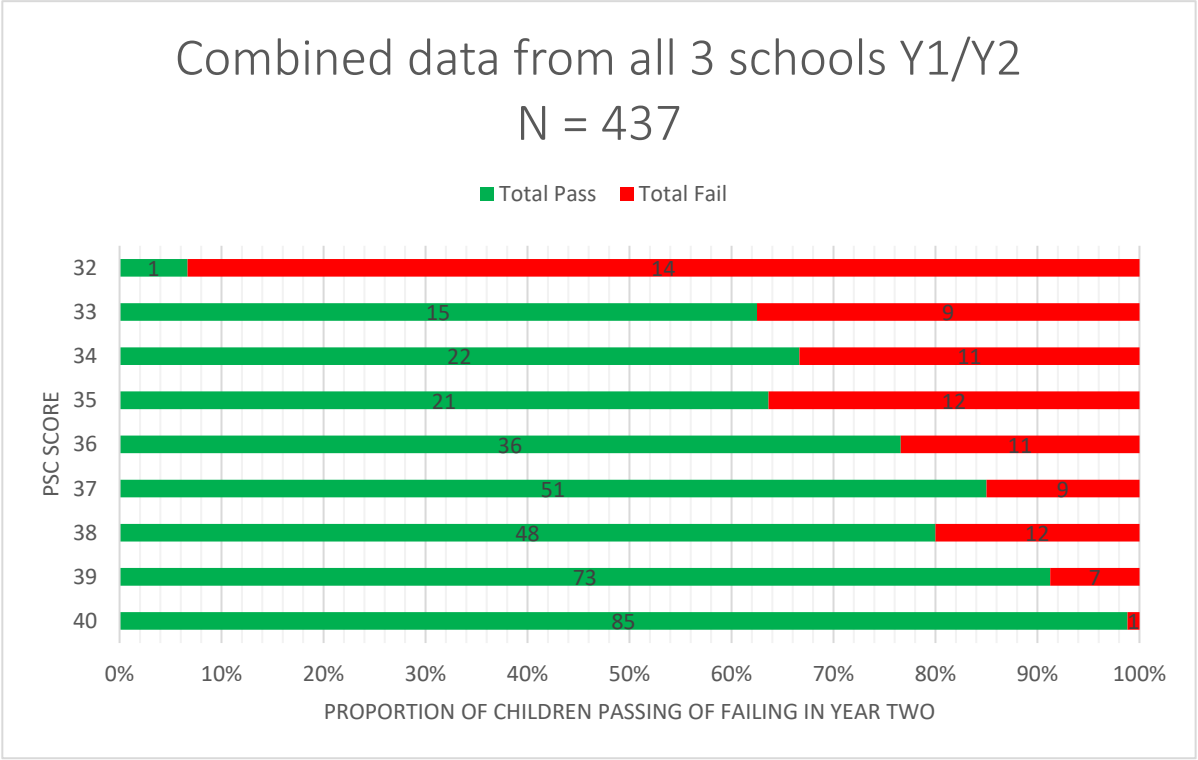
The data for School B is only based one cohort of children. In this year, there were no children scoring the exact pass mark of thirty-two. Whilst all of those who scored 33/40 in the PSC went on to pass, this school also recorded problems with children who had scored thirty-four or thirty-five. Although this is a much smaller sample, it still illustrates achieving a pass in Year One is not a guarantee of future success.

Figure 19 Reliability of Y1 scores as an indicator of Y2 scores (School C)



Pupils at School C who scored 32/40 in Year One also found the Year Two test difficult although their highest scorers in the PSC were all successful in Year Two.

Figure 20 Reliability of Y1 scores as an indicator of Y2 scores (all three schools combined)



Overall, these graphs show that scraping a pass at Year One is a very poor indicator of whether a child will pass at Year Two. In fact, it would seem likely that these children are the ones that slip through the net as in theory, they are on track and do not qualify for the extra help that failing in Year One should trigger. These graphs suggest that a higher pass mark, possibly 36/40 might be a better predictor of whether a child is likely to be 'reading' at an age-appropriate level a year later. The children scoring 35/40 or lower seem to be particularly vulnerable with a large proportion failing to meet the expected Year Two reading standard

A pass mark of 32/40 means that the child has only read 80% of the words on the test correctly. It is important to note at this point that these words do not have to be read with any degree of fluency: pupils are allowed time to sound out each word and then blend the sounds, before saying the actual word. Although the words in the PSC are decontextualized and the list contains pseudowords, it is worth remembering that if children are decoding fewer than 90% of the words in a passage accurately, then they are reading a full text at 'frustration level' and will therefore find comprehension exceedingly difficult (Parker and Burns, 2014). Decoding

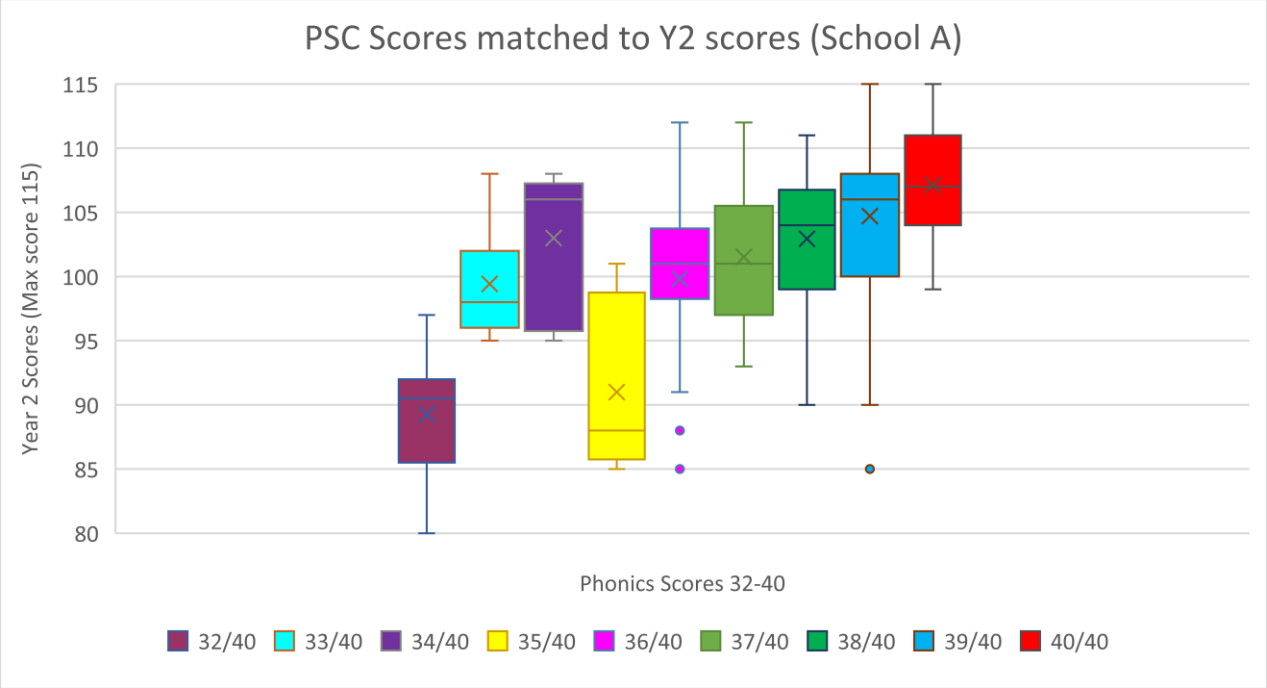
fluently is the gateway to allowing comprehension to take place, i.e., to be able to answer comprehension questions correctly by making sense of the text, children should be able to read the text with at least 90% accuracy. A PSC score of 36/40 would equate to a reading accuracy of 90%, even though this is still a point where approximately one-quarter (23.4%) of the children in the sample went on to fail to meet the Year Two standard. This would suggest that a heavily phonics-based diet in the beginning stages of reading is failing to engage children in the more socio-cultural aspects of comprehension and meaning making. It suggests a disjunct between isolated word reading and the transactional aspect of reading for meaning. By following these children through the school and monitoring their reading levels at age eleven, it should be possible to see whether these deficiencies in comprehension at age seven can be overcome.

As all three schools in my data sample were high achieving schools, each scoring consistently above national averages in the Phonics Screening Check, there were statistically fewer children who did not pass the Year One check. Only eleven children from across the three schools (N= 448) failed in Year One between the years of 2015 to 2018. The range of these eleven scores went from 8/40 to 31/40. A future area for study would be to collect a larger data set from children scoring 30-31 in Year One, i.e., those children who have just dipped below the threshold. Across my data, just 3 children fell into this category: one passed in reading in Y2 and the other two did not, giving a 33.3% pass rate for this group, which is better than the combined schools' pass rate for those achieving the Year One pass mark of thirty-two. Whilst this data sample is far too small to extrapolate particular trends, it does still raise questions about whether the current pass mark is appropriate and fit for purpose.

6.3.iii A breakdown of pupil progress

The overall correlation statistics discussed in the previous section suggest that the PSC cannot be relied upon to give a reliable indicator of future reading attainment. When children's progress is analysed in more detail, the weaknesses in the relationship between decoding and reading comprehension scores can be seen more clearly.

Figure 21 PSC Scores matched to Y2 scores (School A)



This box and whisker plot graph (Fig 21) shows the Year One and Year Two scores of all the children in the sample from School A who passed the PSC. It illustrates some important areas for further analysis. The x axis shows the Year Two phonics score achieved, with 32/40 being the pass mark. Children who did not meet the PSC pass mark are not included in this data set. The y axis shows the children's scaled scores on the reading test in Year Two. Passing in Year Two requires a scaled score of 100.

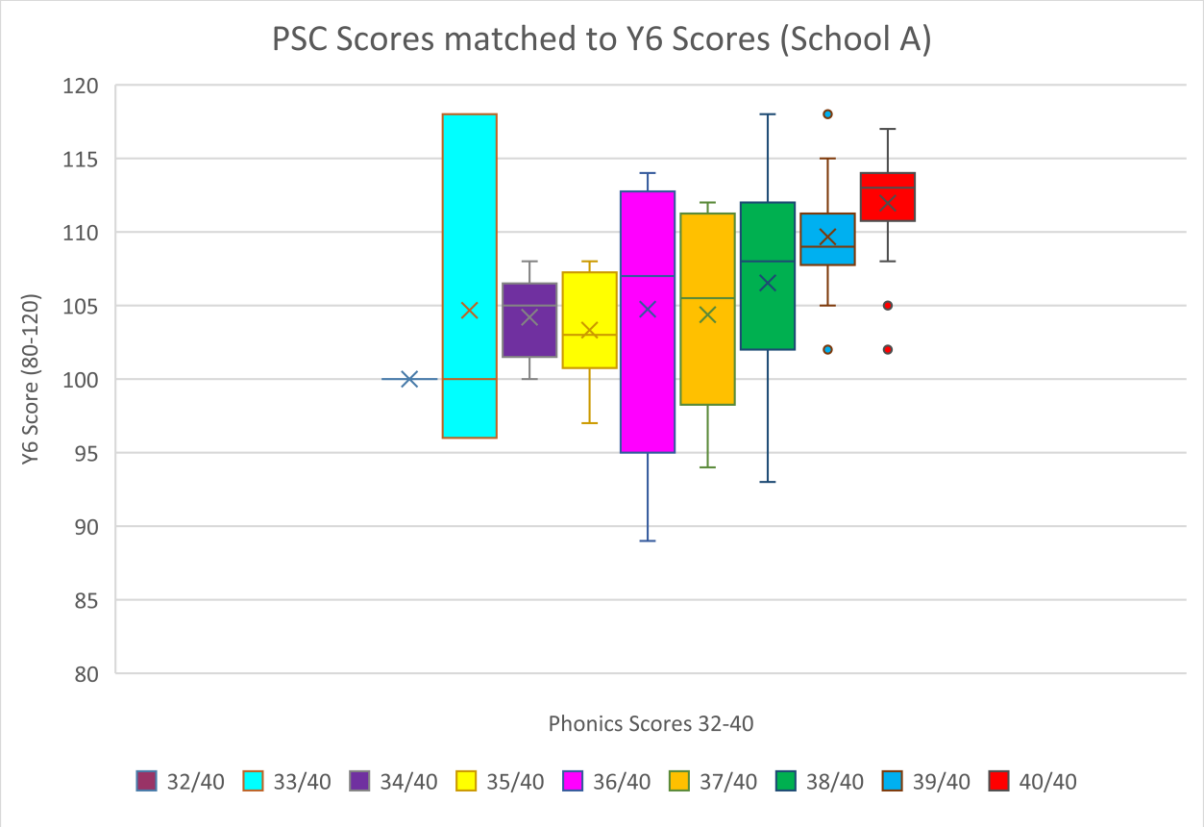
Firstly, in this school, it is significant that none of the eight children who scored 32/40 (the PSC pass mark) went on to pass reading in Year Two. The children in this four-year sample were in different classes, different cohorts and had different teachers, yet this data contradicts the government expectation that those who scored 32 or above are on track to be fluent, confident readers. There have been questions about the arbitrary nature of the 32/40 pass mark (Clark, 2015) and this data would seem to concur with this.

The range of the scores achieved in Year Two by children with identical scores in Year One is illuminating. Even with the exclusion of the outliers, there are children who score at the top

end of the scale in Year One who go on to 'fail' at reading in Year Two. Whether it is possible for these children to be identified at Year One and then supported to enable them to reach the standard in Year Two is an area for further research. As discussed in Chapter Eight, it was evident from the teacher discussion that this problem has been identified, even if a solution to the problem has not been found. It would seem that a test that combines decoding, fluency and comprehension would perhaps be more successful at identifying early readers who are struggling, but whilst the government high-stakes data is purely based on phonics achievement at Year One, teachers are likely to overlook the importance of good fluency and comprehension for all readers. The children who have failed at phonics in Year One will be the ones flagged up for intervention and additional support in Year Two, rather than those that are showing weaknesses with comprehension. Within the group of children who are very accurate decoders, i.e., those scoring thirty-eight or above out of forty, there will be children who have deficits in other areas of reading which have been masked by their accuracy at decoding. Applegate et al. (2009) highlight this phenomenon of children being labelled as 'good readers' purely on the basis of their accuracy and fluency, without an assessment being given on their comprehension skills. Stuart et al., (2008) identifies vocabulary as a more accurate predictor of reading comprehension. Again, this is a factor missing from the Year One screening. Given the tremendous range of reading scores achieved after only one year of further teaching, it would seem that "the Phonics Screening Check therefore serves little purpose, apart from serving as an accountability tool to teachers and as a mechanism for labelling children" (Glazzard, 2017a, pp138-139).

Using the same method to analyse the data profile between Year One and Year Six reveals similar findings.

Figure 22 PSC Scores matched to Y6 scores (School A)



The data sample becomes too small at 35/40 and below but it is important to notice that the average score at Year Six for those achieving 33/40 to 37/40 is very similar.

Year 1 Score	33	34	35	36	37
Average Year 6 Score	104.67	104.20	103.33	104.75	104.38

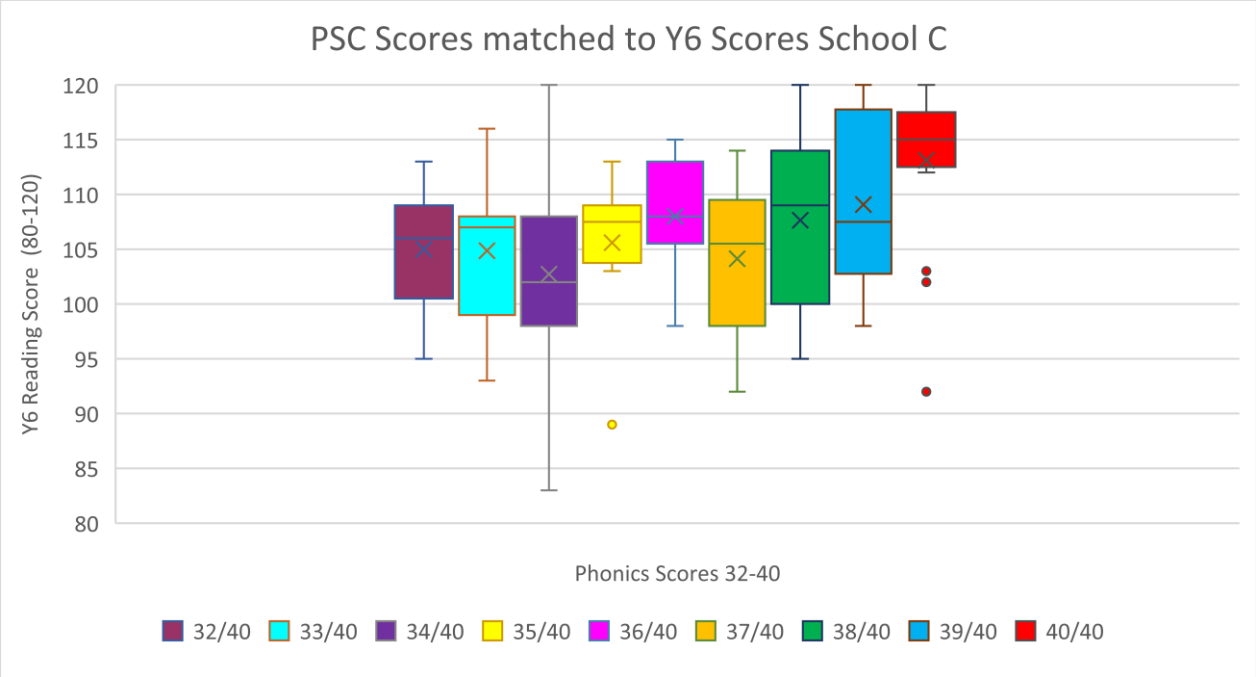
This perhaps indicates that as long as children have passed the Screening Check, they are more likely to be on track to achieve at Year Six. Interestingly, the outliers at Year Six appear in the 39/40 and 40/40 groups, perhaps suggesting that masked deficits in Year One may not have been fully rectified five years later. Although these outliers still passed, they were weaker passes and not achieving the higher scores that might have been expected based on their earlier success at age six. The range is still particularly large. For example, within the 38/40 group,

the Year Six scores range from 93 to 118, a difference of 25 scaled score points and at 36/40, the scores range from 89 to 114, again a difference of 25 scaled score points. It is interesting to note that children achieving high passes of 38/40 in Year One are not even passing in Year Six.

Children are commonly grouped for reading activities in this school. They are taught in ability groups for phonics in Reception and Year One; guided reading activities are also targeted by ability. The evidence of the outliers at the top end of the scale could suggest that grouping by ability needs to be checked to make sure that it involves an understanding of a pupil's wider comprehension skills, rather than a pure fluency or accuracy check. A pupil who is grouped purely according to their phonic and decoding skills may not be receiving the most appropriate provision to enable to master higher order skills. Using theoretical frameworks of reading development, such as Rumelhart's Interactive Model or LaBerge-Samuels Information Processing Model, phonics alone is not enough to support the assessment of reading development. The Simple View of Reading (DfE, 1998) highlights that decoding does not lead to skilled and effective reading without the parallel development of language comprehension (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). Sociocultural learning theory also identifies that basic cognitive skills should be accompanied by cultural, environmental and societal understanding. Further investigations into students' reading comprehension abilities have to be initiated by teachers and the data suggests that children at risk of comprehension difficulties are the ones slipping through the net, rather than those with the more easily identifiable decoding problems.

The analysis of scores for Y6 for School C shows similar results to School A.

Figure 23 PSC Scores matched to Y6 scores (School C)



The biggest range here is for the 34/40 group, again suggesting that 34-35 is an unreliable indicator of future progress. Similarly, for those scoring full marks in Year One, there are weak passes in Year Six and indeed in this school, one failure in Year Six with a scaled score of 92, which is not even a 'near miss'. As this is just one pupil, clearly an outlier in this data, a case study approach may be needed to understand why this score was achieved as there may be non-academic reasons for this apparent underperformance. This school also recorded a child who failed in Year One with a score of 29/40 who went on to score 112 in Year Six. There is a slightly wider variation in the average scores achieved at Y6 by children with the same score at Y1 but these scores are not too dissimilar from the averages noted in School A.

Year 1 Score	33	34	35	36	37
Average Year 6 Score	104.86	102.73	105.60	108.00	104.13

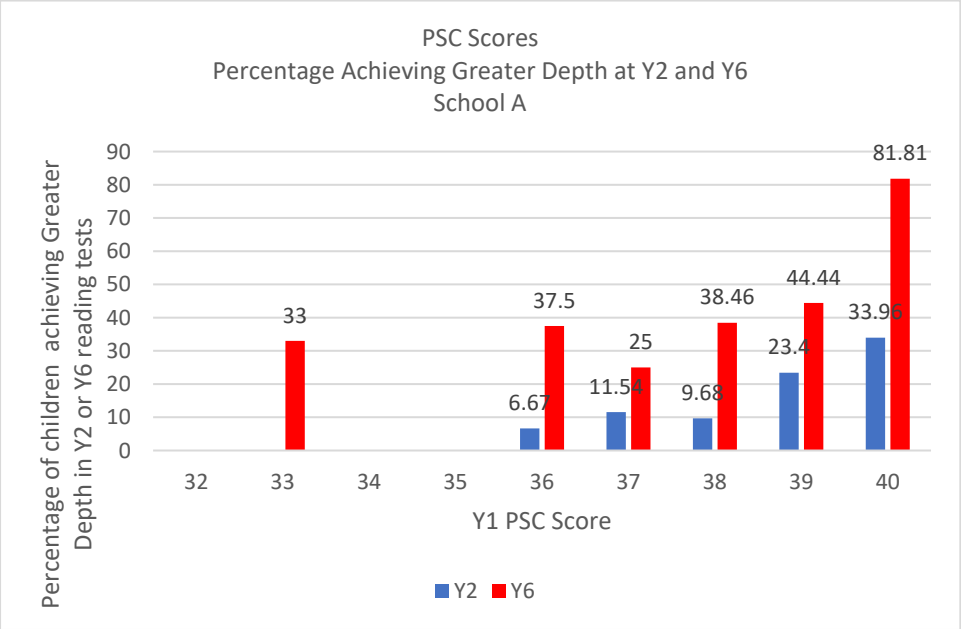
Overall, tracking the longitudinal data has clearly indicated that the impact of the PSC can be seen in improving phonics test scores; however, its usefulness as a predictor of future reading success is limited. It may also mask significant reading or language difficulties which become more apparent as the children become older. Therefore, time spent on specific test preparation, rather than high quality phonics teaching as part of a wider literacy curriculum, may not be in the best interests of all pupils. The data suggests that more time spent on vocabulary and comprehension may be of greater value.

6.3.iv Children achieving Greater Depth /More able children

So far in this thesis, the emphasis has been on exploring the relationship between passing the Year One PSC and then passing later reading comprehension tests. In this next section, the data relating to more able children will be discussed. At both Year Two and Year Six, a higher level pass can be achieved, which is known as 'Working at Depth'.[4] Children working at this level should be demonstrating higher levels of inference and deduction than would be expected for their age; they would be able to make links and comparisons between texts.

Figure 24 shows the percentage of children achieving a particular score in Year One in School A who then go on to achieve a 'Greater Depth' score at Year Two or Year Six.

Figure 24 Link Between PSC scores and Greater Depth Scores – School A



A score of 40/40 at Year One, according to this data, shows a strong correlation between achieving a higher level at Year Six. (The 33% score for children scoring 33/40 at Year One should perhaps be disregarded as this group only consists of one child out of three.) It would

[4] *In Year Six, a score of 110 or above is required to be awarded 'Greater Depth'; for Year Two pupils, the final level is based on Teacher Assessment, but a score of 110 would be recognised as a rough guideline for awarding a higher-level pass.*

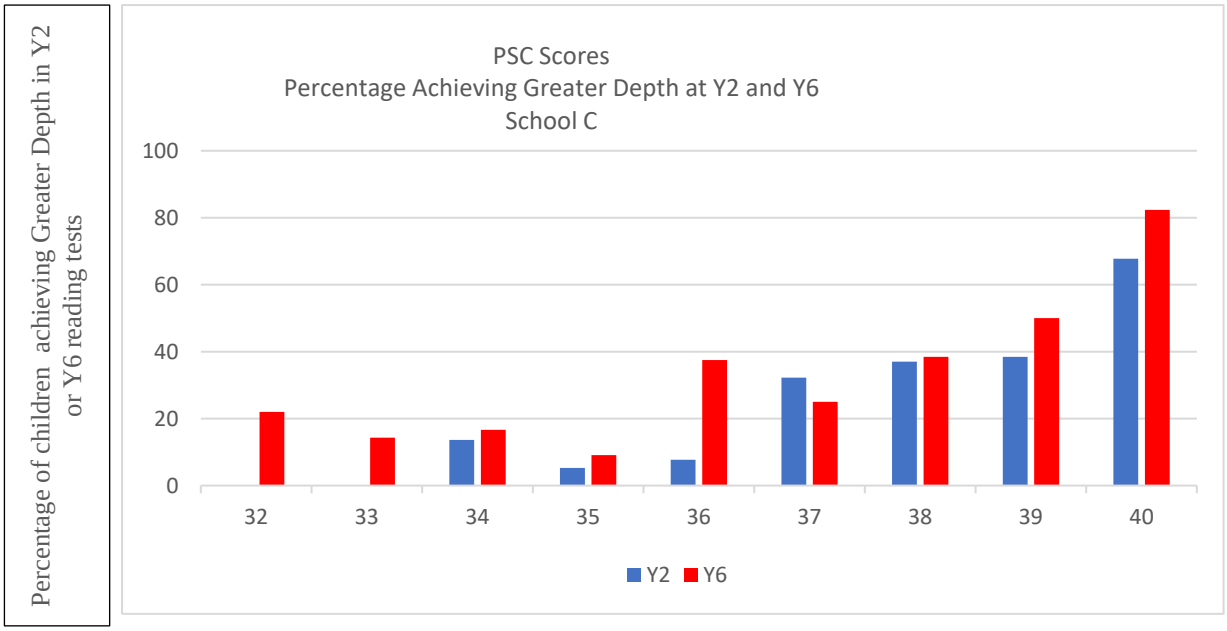
seem that it is highly unlikely for children achieving below 36 at Year One to reach the higher level in comprehension a year later.

It is also noticeable that the higher level passes are significantly higher at Year Six than at Year Two. Early success at decoding means that this group of children have more time to devote to developing comprehension; reading activities planned for them would have a focus on higher order skills such as inference and deduction; they have access to more challenging texts; and consequentially their comprehension skills develop at a faster rate than those still tackling fluency and decoding. They may also be the children for whom reading becomes a pleasure. The 'Matthew Effect' (Stanovich, 1986) may be important here; simply because these children can decode with confidence, they are more likely to enjoy reading and therefore read more. Their motivation to read is greater, thereby fulfilling the incentive aspect of Illeris' learning triangle theory. Ensuring pupil engagement seems to be crucial in maintaining momentum for developing reading skills.

As only four children achieved a Greater Depth reading score in the Year Two data collected from School B, a detailed analysis would not be statistically valid here, however, the conversions to Greater Depth came from the following Year One scores: 33/40, 36/40, 36/40 and 37/40, therefore mirroring the pattern of data collected from School A.

When looking at the 'Greater Depth' statistics for School C, a slightly different pattern can be seen.

Figure 25 Link Between PSC scores and Greater Depth Scores – School C



For School C, the rate of converting Year One scores to a greater depth score at Year Six is similar to that of School A, whilst the conversion rate at Year Two is higher than that of School A. For both schools, the data are taken from multiple cohorts. Over the three years relating to this data sample, both schools had similar average scaled scores for reading in Year Six but significantly, School A had much higher progress measure scores.[5]

	School A	
	Y6 Average Scaled Score	Y6 Progress Measure
2017	107	2.7
2018	109	3.1
2019	106	0.6

	School C	
	Y6 Average Scaled Score	Y6 Progress Measure
2017	106	-2
2018	107	-4
2019	106	-1.3

[5] *Progress measure scores are calculated by comparing the scores of children at Year Two and Year Six and refer to school data rather than individual pupils. A progress measure of 0 means that the children in the school make expected progress between Year Two and Year Six. Anything above zero means that the children have made better than expected progress, whereas a negative score means that the children are deemed to have failed to make the required progress.*

The reasons for the difference in the progress measures awarded to Schools A and C are far too complex to be analysed as part of this thesis and could involve a multitude of variables, but one aspect of this could be related to the differing approaches of the two schools to the teaching of phonics in Reception and Year One. School A, using a commercial phonics programme, which promotes decoding above all other aspects of reading, could be achieving the higher phonics scores in Year One, which do not automatically transfer to good or higher level passes in Year Two. The pupils may need longer to consolidate the comprehension skills needed to pass in Year Two and so some fail to reach this standard in the given time. They then have a long four year gap in which to hone these skills. It is these four years that are used to calculate a school's progress measures. The progress achieved over this period appears greater in School A, leading to higher progress measures for the school by Year Six. In School C, using a different approach to the teaching of early reading through the Government Letters and Sounds programme, in which only a fifteen-twenty minutes short phonics session is delivered, followed by a much broader 'literacy session' may allow for a more parallel development of reading comprehension and decoding. In turn, this may lead to a better conversion rate to Greater Depth in Year Two. If the Year Two scores are high, then it is harder to detect 'progress' over the next four years. Interestingly by Year Six, the performance data is so similar that any early gains in either phonics or comprehension appear to have been negated and both sets of pupils reach a comparable end result. Again, further analysis of this hypothesis, using data from a wider group of schools would be necessary to check whether the choice of phonics approach in Year One leads to a different pattern of results in Year Two and Year Six. Interestingly, the data from School C also shows that one pupil who failed in Year One succeeded in achieving a Greater Depth score in Year 6. A case study of this individual pupil would be needed to explain how this was achieved but it shows that it is possible to overcome apparent deficits in Year One. National data also mirrors this by showing that a small minority of pupils who fail at Year One do go on to achieve a Greater Depth score in Year Two.

Another reason for the spread of pupils achieving Greater Depth scores in Year Two and Year Six but lower Year One scores could be related to issues identified with the PSC causing problems for the more able readers who were already established and confident in reading for meaning (Richardson, 2014). Particularly in the trial phase in 2011 (Coldwell et al, 2011), and in the first few years of testing, good fluent readers were notably struggling with reading pseudowords and were misreading them in an attempt to turn them into words that make sense.

A common example of this from early PSC papers occurred in 2012 (DfE, 2012a) when children were shown the pseudoword 'strom' and read it as 'storm', suggesting that they were trying to make meaning from the letters (R. Gardner, 2012). Although all pseudowords in the test are clearly demarcated with a picture of an alien, many children certainly tried to make sense of what they were seeing. Whilst errors such as these may not have been numerous enough to cause a child to fail the screening check, they would certainly have precluded such children from scoring full marks on the test. This phenomenon may be less common now as teachers are spending more time teaching and practising pseudowords, but the screening check can still be regarded as being problematic for more able readers who have already outgrown a dependency on phonics and can confidently use other skills to read fluently and confidently (Carter, 2020). Forcing children to slow down and sound out words is sometimes encouraged so that they are not caught out by the PSC, yet this is detrimental to their wider reading progress. A score of thirty-two or thirty-three at Year One does not distinguish between a confident and fluent reader who reads age-appropriate books with understanding, expression and enjoyment but made errors with the pseudowords and a child who does not read fluently but who knew enough phonemes and had been taught to blend mechanically. The trajectory for their progress into Year Two would be very different and they would have very different needs. Gilchrist and Snowling (2018) note that the PSC has more validity as a measure of pseudoword reading competence than of other phonemic skills that are linked more strongly with later reading comprehension. They raise concerns about children "developing phonics as a 'splinter skill' divorced from real word reading" (Gilchrist and Snowling 2018, p104). This concept of phonics existing as a separate skill is a reminder of what can happen when decoding and comprehension are not developed simultaneously.

6.4 Summary

To summarise, the overall pattern of the data suggests the existence of some important links between performance at Year One and then at Year Two and Year Six; however, there are too many anomalies in the data to allow for a simple correlation. Nationally, the majority of children will pass their reading assessments at Year One, Two and Six. It is those children that don't fit the general pattern that are the most intriguing and would prove to be an interesting sample for a future case study. The data from the sample schools suggest that too many children who just scrape a pass in Year One fail to meet the expected standard one year later.

Similarly, a significant group of children with exceptionally high PSC scores also fail to achieve the expected standard one year later. The logical deduction here is that phonics scores may offer a misleading judgment. The idea of false positives and false negatives (Gilchrist and Snowling, 2012) raises questions about the reliability of the test.

If it were possible to identify why children who decode accurately at age six fail to leave primary school reading at the required level to be successful at secondary school, then a significant contribution to the development of reading assessment and instruction would have been found.

Chapter Seven - Pupils' Voices

7.1 Introduction

Ascertaining the views of pupils was an important aspect of evaluating the overall impact of the PSC. Performance data alone only gives one interpretation of the impact of the PSC. Although these pupils were not able to make direct comparisons between reading lessons before and after the introduction of the screening check, their views add validity to the research by allowing them to "give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts rather than rely solely on our adult interpretations of their lives" (Eder and Fingerson 2002, p181). It is the pupils who are experiencing the effects of government reading policy on a daily basis; consequently, their thoughts are of great importance and add a phenomenological standpoint to the research. Zhao (2017) describes side effects in education policy and research:

> If indeed the policies and practices that raise test scores also hurt confidence and attitude, we must carefully weigh the risks against the benefits. Do we care more about test scores or confidence and attitude? (Zhao 2017, p11).

Researching the views of the pupils will help to establish whether there have been negative side effects to current phonics policy. It became obvious during the pupil discussions that at times the children seemed to confuse phonics and reading with spelling and writing. Whilst every effort was made to draw the children back to *reading* rather than *writing*, it is clear that the boundaries between the two skills are understandably somewhat blurred in the children's minds.

One aspect of the PSC and its effect on teaching strategies that become increasingly obvious during my discussion with the children was the manner in which they confidently used the metalanguage that surrounds phonics teaching. Particularly in School C, (the one that was following the government's *Letters and Sounds* scheme (DfES, 2007) rather than a commercially produced one), the children effortlessly used words such as *phonemes, Common Exception Words* (words that are not phonically decodable*)* and *phases* (the label given to the different stages of the Letters and Sounds programme). This shows just how ubiquitous the language of phonics has become in schools.

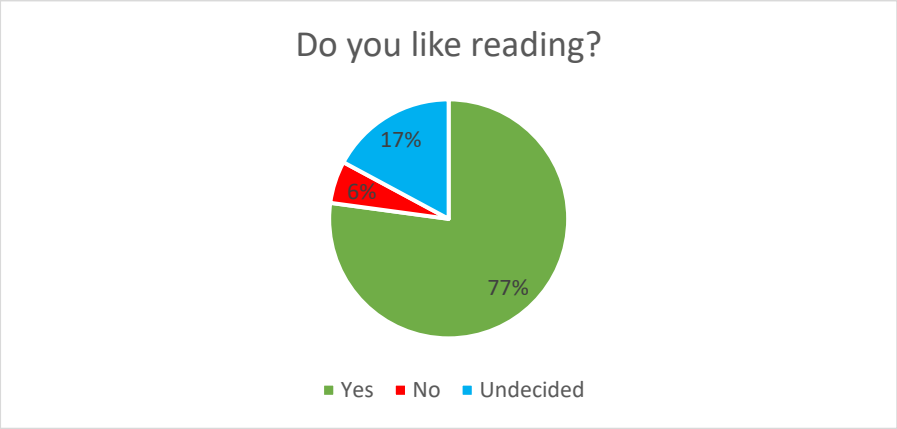
The children were asked about their opinions about reading. They were asked about which aspects of their reading lessons they enjoyed the most and which they thought were the most

important for someone learning to read. The children were then asked open-ended questions about various phonic related themes: grouping and setting, pseudowords and methods of decoding unfamiliar words. These questions were designed to sit alongside those asked in the teacher interviews, to allow for some comparison between the views of the teachers and their pupils. For ethical reasons, the children were not asked directly about their experiences of taking the Phonics Screening Check in the previous term.

7.2 Children's attitudes to reading

As an opening question, the children were asked whether they liked reading or not. A simple three-point Likert scale was used to record the response. Their answers were communicated by selecting from a choice of three cards. Their responses were hidden from the others in the group to avoid peer influences.

Figure 26 Do you like reading?



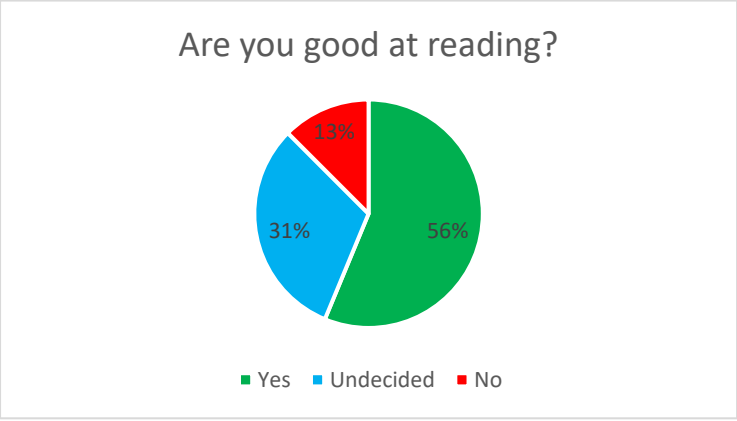
There may be some positive bias here as these are children who had opted to take part in a discussion on reading and there may also be bias due to the power relations at play between the role of researcher and the child participants (Christensen, 2008), but nevertheless, for the pupils in this sample, reading was viewed positively and the focus on phonics and the PSC did not appear to have destroyed their enthusiasm for reading. The question was purposely framed to elicit a response to reading, rather than phonics or Literacy; the results of the children's ranking tasks (discussed in Section 7.3) reveal that phonics is viewed less favourably than

reading. However, when the question just asks about *reading*, it would seem that the children have automatically inferred that I was referring to *books* rather than *decoding*.

The pupils were then asked to talk about books they liked or had been reading recently. Almost all of the twenty-nine child participants (except for two) were able to identify titles, series, authors, etc., with the range including both fiction and non-fiction reading. These books were titles they had read individually or were from home, rather than class books read together in school. Significantly, they were confidently naming specific books, e.g., *Gangsta Granny* (David Walliams) and *Sleepovers* (Jacqueline Wilson), rather than giving levels from a school reading scheme e.g., 'blue books'. One child from School B said that he had been reading 'Topaz books – Stage 13' and one pupil from School C wasn't able to name any books she'd read recently but they were the exceptions. (As the discussion progressed, it became clear that this pupil from School C was one of the weaker readers who was having extra phonics support as she had failed the check in Year One.) As a basic introductory question, it was encouraging to see the children were able to discuss their reading, rather than being too caught up with levels and phonics (Capper, 2013).

I then asked the children if they thought that they were good at reading, using the same three-point scale and asking the children to show their answers using cards. In order to consider the ethics of asking this question, all of the children could show their cards to me without showing their peers if they were concerned about their response. Again, the overall picture was positive in that the majority of the children believed that they were good readers.

Figure 27 Are you good at reading?



Their confidence or self-efficacy, particularly at the general level of specificity (Bandura,1997) suggests that the children generally feel successful in their reading. Whilst their self-assessments are more likely to be based on their fluency and decoding ability rather than their judgements on their comprehension skills (Guthrie et al, 2007), overall they have developed a positive outlook towards reading. Although I did not wish to focus on *how* they knew they were good at reading as part of the ethics underpinning this research, several children did elaborate on their answers. One boy (School C) justified his reading ability by the number of books he had read: "I've read four *Horrid Henry* books." Another from the same school thought that she was a good reader because she could "change my voice when I'm reading," suggesting that for her, reading was about reading aloud with expression and understanding, reflecting some of the pedagogical decisions taken in this school (see Section Eight). In the discussions and activities that followed this question, it should be remembered that the children's understanding of what being good at reading entails did not necessarily equate with accuracy, decoding or book levels. Later in this chapter, I attempt to establish whether the positive viewpoint shared by children across the three schools is because of their early instruction in phonics or is due to a wider introduction to books and reading. The proportion of children who did not think that they were good at reading was roughly in line with the phonic assessment scores, suggesting that those less confident readers were aware of their decoding ability in comparison to their peers, either through an awareness of the 'groups' that they had been placed in for phonics or from an awareness that their books were from easier bands or levels than those of their friends. It is also interesting that some of the children who weren't confident enough to say that they were good at reading still responded that they enjoyed reading.

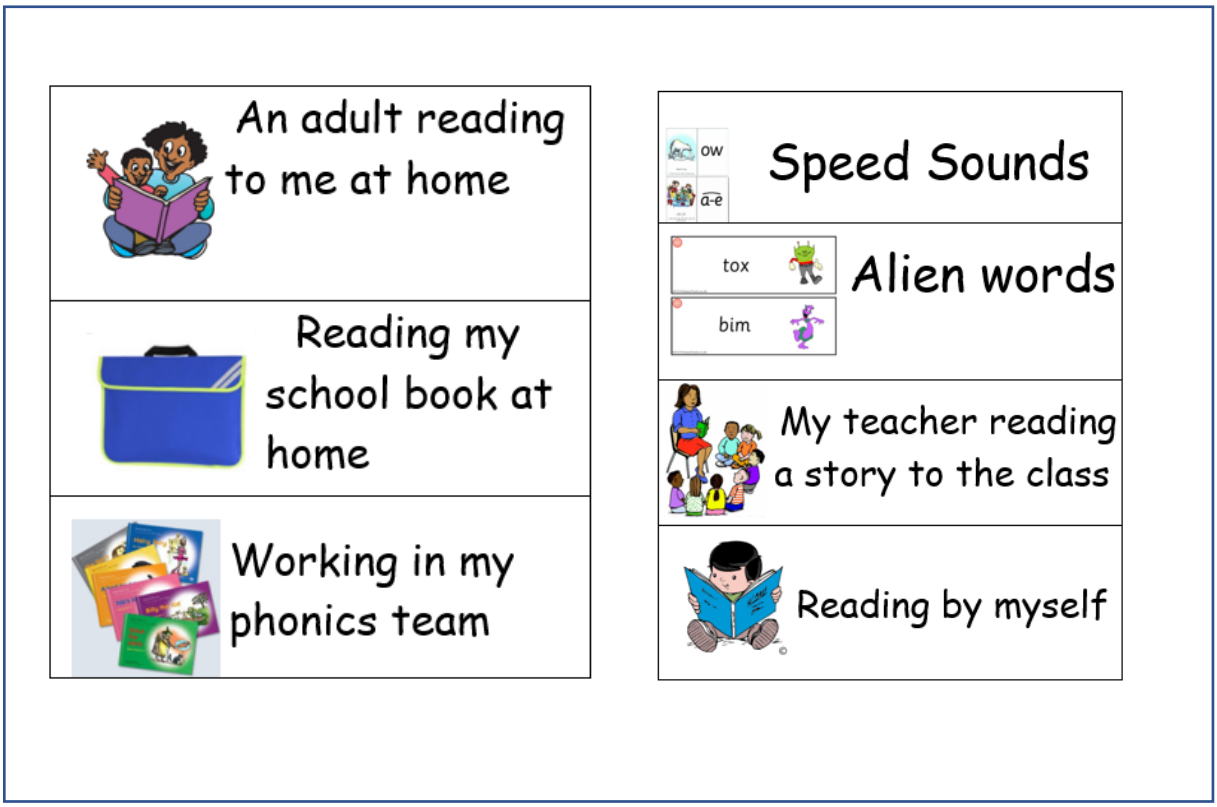
7.3 Children's views on the teaching of reading

It has been clear that many teachers have altered the style of their teaching in Reception and Year One in order to prepare the children for the PSC (Walker et al, 2015; Clark, 2015; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight but it is evident that many teachers now focus on decoding and pseudowords, rather than other reading strategies.

I wanted to determine what the children thought about the different elements involved in the teaching of reading in their school and to establish whether the PSC was influencing their experiences of learning to read. All twenty-nine of the child participants were asked to

complete two simple ranking exercises. Each child was given their own set of cards; each card was made up of a visual prompt and a label (Figure 28). The cards were read to the children so that all were clear about what each card represented. The children were asked to rank the cards in order, with their favourite activity at the top and their least favourite activity at the bottom (Figure 29). After completing this task, they were asked to re-rank the cards, this time thinking about which would be the most important thing to do if you wanted to learn to read and ranking their cards down to the least important element.

Figure 28 The seven activity cards for the ranking tasks.



The pupils certainly appeared to be giving this task some thought. Some changed their minds several times before saying that they were finished and they did not appear to be copying their friends as their answers were not identical.

Figure 29 Images of the children completing the ranking activities.

The data were collected for each school to see if there were patterns or differences, given that different approaches to the teaching of reading and phonics were being used across the school sample and also combined to give a total ranking from all the pupil participants. The graphs show the data at a school level, ranked both by enjoyment and by perceived importance for learning to read. The combined results are displayed in Figure 36. When a child ranked an

activity at the top of their list, it was given seven points. The activity at the bottom of their list was awarded one point. Each column in the following graphs represents the average points score for that activity within each school. The two graphs for each school represent the same data. In the first graph of each set, the columns are ordered from the most popular activity to the least popular. In the second graph, the columns have been re-ordered so that the activity that the children deemed to be the most important when learning to read comes first.

Figure 30 Ranking Task – Ordered by Preferences - School A

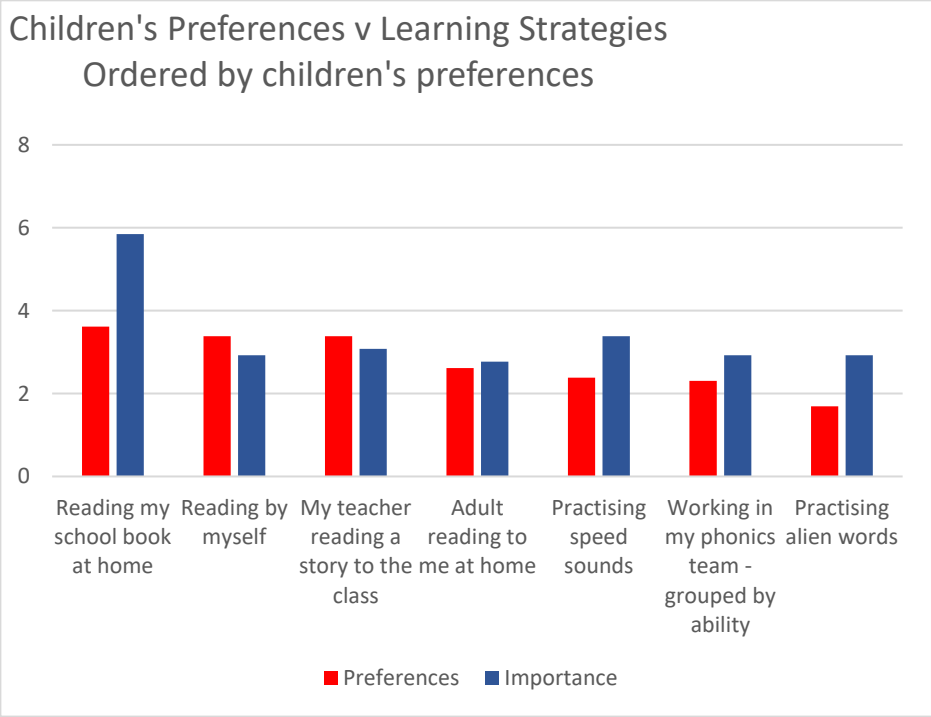


Figure 31 Ranking Task – Ordered by Importance - School A

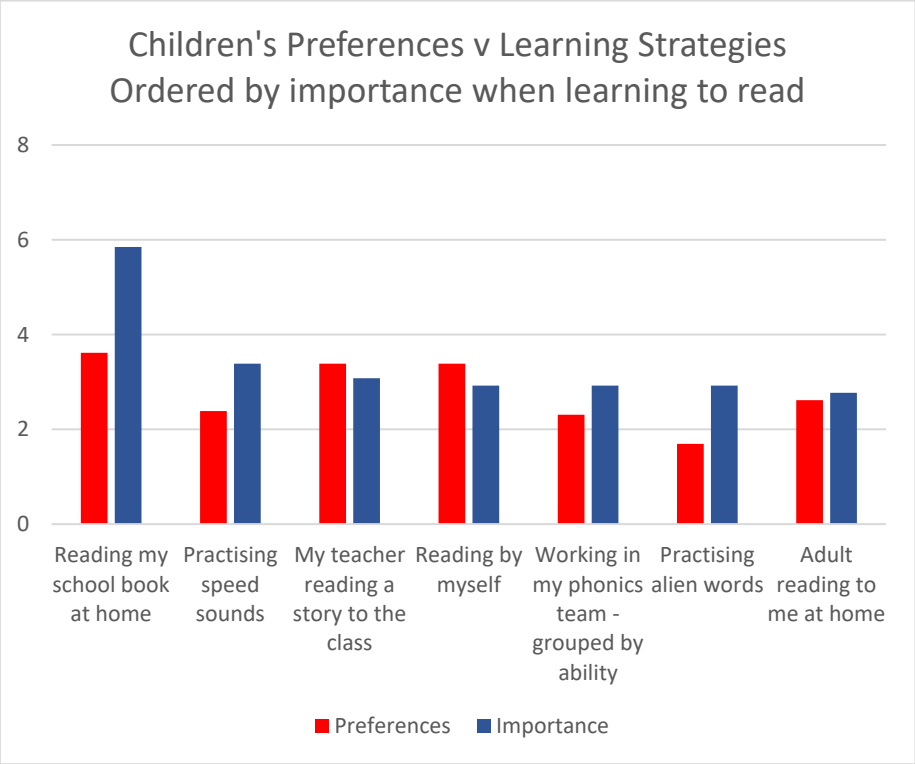


Figure 32 Ranking Task – Ordered by Preferences - School B

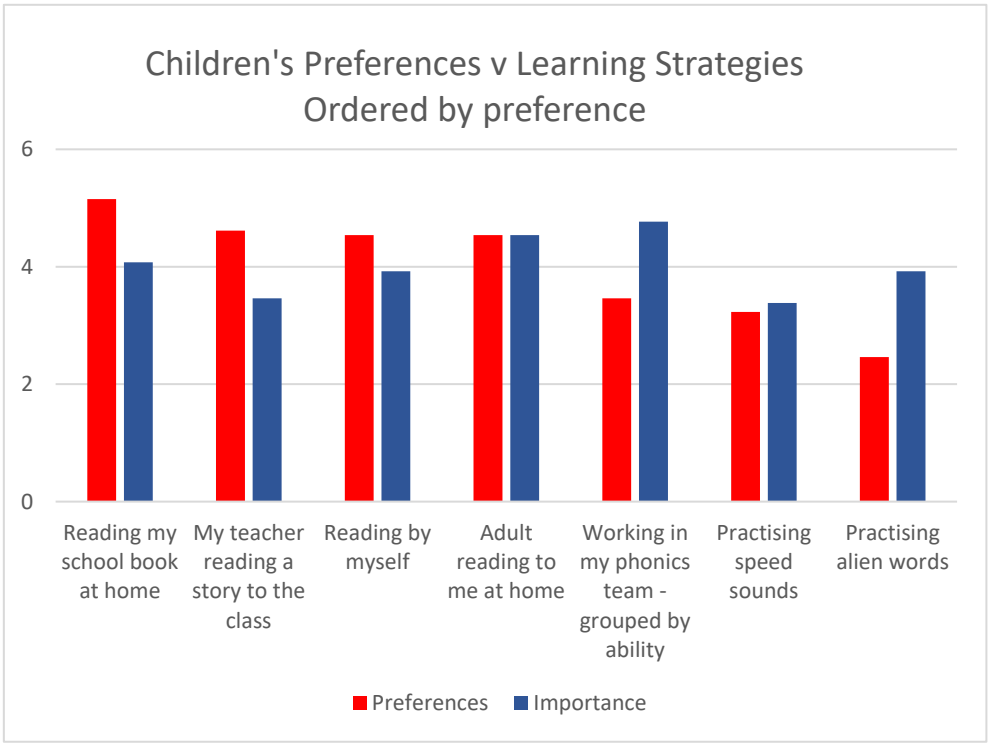


Figure 33 Ranking Task – Ordered by Importance - School B

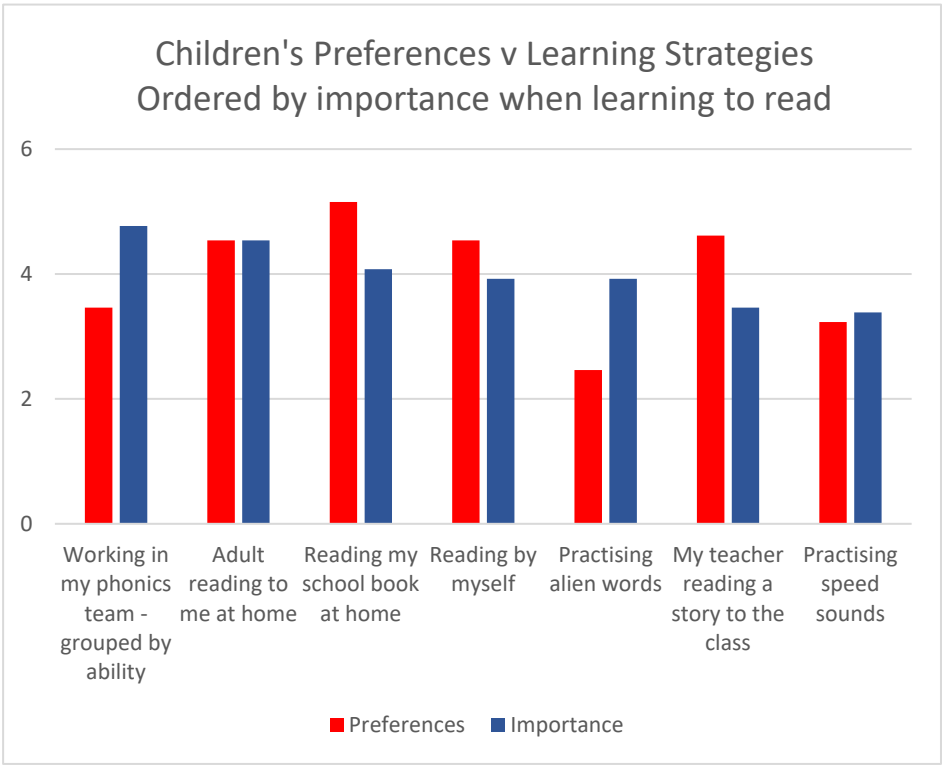


Figure 34 Ranking Task – Ordered by Preferences - School C

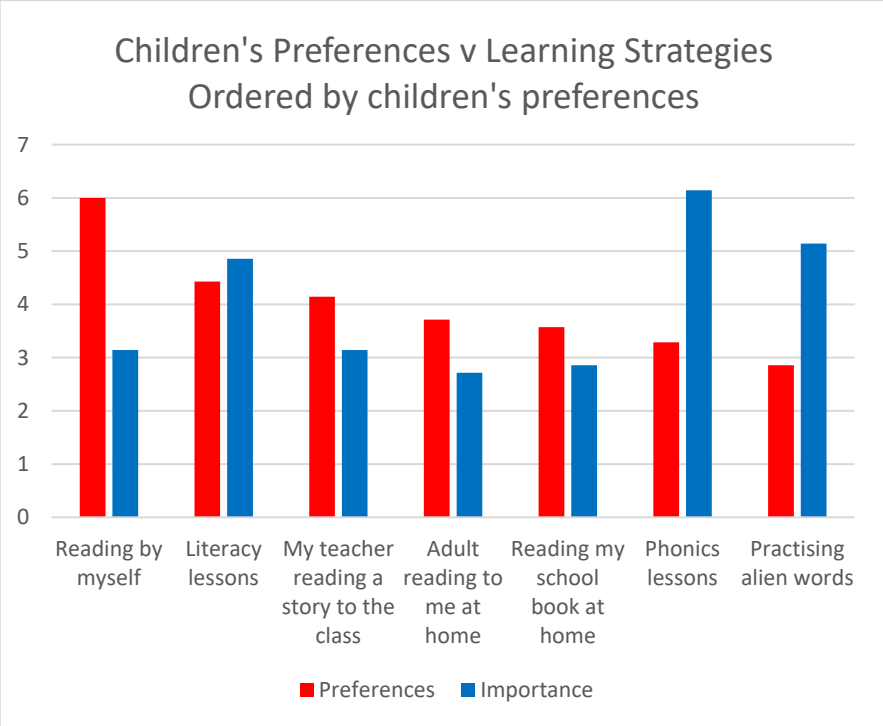
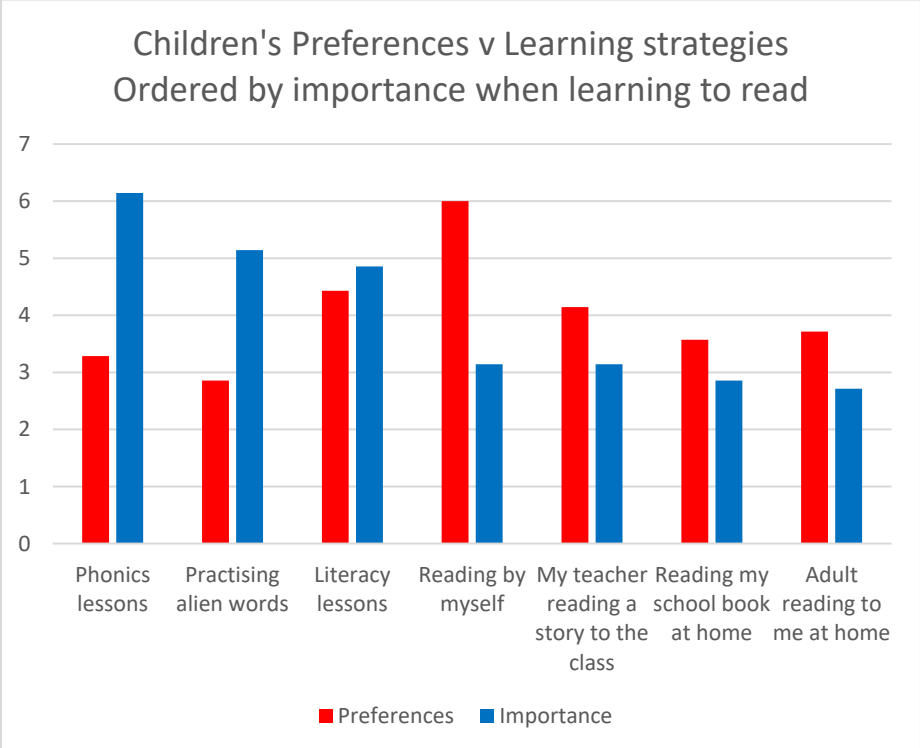


Figure 30 Ranking Task – Ordered by Importance - School C



This table (Figure 36) shows the order in which each activity was ranked according to popularity/enjoyment by the children in each school and also by whole group combined. The combined scores were obtained by counting the number of points awarded for each activity from the twenty-nine children and also by averaging the total points awarded by each school. Both ways of calculating the combined scores gave the same overall rank order.[6]

Figure 36 Children's ranking activity scores combined

	School A	School B	School C	Total (N=29)	3 schools' averages combined
1st choice	Reading my school book at home	Reading my school book at home	Reading by myself	Reading by myself	Reading by myself
2nd choice	Reading by myself	An adult reading to me at home	Literacy sessions	Reading my school book at home	Reading my school book at home
3rd choice	Teacher reading a story to the class	Teacher reading a story to the class	Teacher reading a story to the class	Teacher reading a story to the class	Teacher reading a story to the class
4th Choice	An adult reading to me at home	Reading by myself	An adult reading to me at home	An adult reading to me at home	An adult reading to me at home
5th Choice	Practising speed sounds	Phonics sessions (RWI)	Reading my school book at home	Phonics sessions (A+B)/Literacy sessions (C)	Phonics sessions (A+B)/Literacy sessions (C)
6th choice	Phonics sessions (RWI)	Practising speed sounds	Phonics sessions	Practising speed sounds (A+B)/Phonics sessions (C)	Practising speed sounds (A+B)/Phonics sessions (C)
7th Choice	Practising alien words	Practising alien words	Practising alien words	Practising alien words	Practising alien words

The phonics sessions in School C are generally ten-fifteen minutes a day, learning new sounds and reviewing sounds that have already been taught. This shorter phonics sessions aligns most

[6] *The final column in this chart was calculated by totalling the votes from all the children. The pupils in School C had a slightly different set of cards, reflecting the different approach to the teaching of reading in that school. Schools A and B use the commercial scheme (Read, Write, Inc), whereas in School C, phonics is taught through a structured programme of work but the remainder of the English session following the school's own plans. Consequently, because of the slight differences in the teaching techniques across the schools, the final totals can only really be correlated for the cards or activities that were identical in each school.*

with the initial ten minutes of a Read, Write, Inc (RWI) session (the commercial scheme chosen by Schools A and B). The rest of the RWI session covers reading a decodable text, some grammar and editing work, writing tasks and some comprehension work. For the purposes of this section of the data analysis, I have matched the RWI card with the Literacy Lessons card in School C. Literacy sessions in School C are also based around general literacy objectives and related to a text, albeit not necessarily a phonically decodable book but one chosen for its content and its relevance to the topic work for that term.

When the children's preferences are analysed, firstly by school and then as a combined total from all 3 schools, it is clear that the children's least favourite reading related activity is practising alien words. For children of this age, the term 'alien words' is used as an alternative, more child-friendly term for pseudowords, mainly because the pseudowords in the PSC are clearly demarcated with an alien graphic, to distinguish them from real words. Therefore, in the following discussions with pupils, the term 'alien words' is used consistently. It was evident through discussion with the children from all three schools that they are particularly unclear as to the purpose of alien words and this may add to their lack of engagement with tasks relating to alien words. Given that this is a fundamental aspect of the PSC, and that alien words were not a commonly used teaching strategy before the introduction of the PSC, the unanimous rejection of alien word reading by the pupils must demonstrate one key negative consequence of government policy. Requiring children to read alien words has become a teaching strategy and commercial schemes have been rewritten to include activities for practising decoding such words. This is further evidence that the test can become the curriculum (Linn, 2000; Elmore and Furhman, 2001; Gunzenhauser, 2003). Before the introduction of the PSC, reading alien words was only really used as an assessment tool for children already identified as having possible difficulties with phonic decoding. The PSC, as a compulsory test, has therefore proved itself to be a quick and cheap method of changing curriculum content and pedagogical approaches (Stobart (2008). At an age when motivation is a critical factor, the construction of the PSC risks children disengaging with their reading instruction. It also suggests that the pseudowords may have more of a negative impact on children's reading enjoyment and phonics training in general. Children at risk of failing the PSC are likely to be spending even more time on pseudowords than their peers (Booher-Jennings, 2005). The children's misunderstanding of the purpose of alien words when learning to read is discussed further in section 7.4.

Overall, the findings show that the children prefer reading activities that involve engaging with a whole book, whether that be reading at home, by themselves or listening to a teacher read to them. Activities related to the discrete teaching of phonics were rated much lower across all three schools. In School C, where the children have a much shorter phonics session, followed by a 'Literacy session' based on a 'real book' rather than a phonically decodable text, and involving a much wider range of language-based activities, classroom literacy sessions were ranked higher up the scale than the sessions at the other two schools, where a full hour of activities based around a decodable text is offered daily. These longer scheme-based literacy sessions offer a predictable and repetitive diet of activities based on sounds and a fully decodable text rather than the more creative or unpredictable nature of the activities planned by the children's teachers in School C.

It would therefore seem that the very activities which are often prioritized by Year One teachers as they focus on getting as many children as possible to pass the screening check are those that hold the least interest for the children. However, the overall positive response to the first question about whether the children enjoyed reading suggests that the daily diet of phonics has not put the children off. Indeed, the children may be seeing their daily phonics work as a 'splinter skill' (Gilchrist and Snowling, 2018, p104), divorced from the world of real and purposeful reading. Phonics, in whatever form it is being taught, does not necessarily detract from children's engagement with reading for meaning and enjoyment. Whilst the children are learning cognitive skills in their phonics sessions, they seemed to be unaware of how these skills were facilitating their reading development in other areas. This point will be discussed further as the children describe how they would teach someone to read.

It was surprising just how similar these results were from across the three schools. Similarities between Schools A and B might have been expected, as the pupils use the same commercial scheme, but given the different approach used in School C, it might have reasonably been expected that there would have been a more pronounced difference. Again, further data from a wider range of schools would be needed to verify this hypothesis, but it would appear that for children of this age, enjoying a good book is preferable to a formal English lesson, which is again preferable to a phonics session. This suggests that the children recognize that reading

should have a purpose and belongs within a socio-cultural experience, rather than positioning it as a collection of cognitive skills to be mastered.

7.4 Children's Views on Assessment

Without directly referring to the PSC and formal assessments, the children's views on reading assessment were gathered.

The children were asked how their teacher would know whether a new pupil joining their class was a good reader. This questioned was framed to avoid ethical issues by asking the children to consider whether an unknown child was a good reader rather than having to discuss their own experiences of being judged by the teacher. The children did find this question hard to answer. One of the most common answers, repeated across all three schools, was that she should just ask them. A summary of their responses is recorded below:

- *She could just tell her and then she'd say 'We can work on that.'*
- *You just try in the reading group and then you can get better at reading.*
- *Don't know. Not really. (Two children in the first group could not answer this question.)*
- *They would put their hand up every time there's a word.*
- *She would ask them.*
- *She would say, "Do you want to come and read to me and see if you're a good reader or not?'*
- *If you're on a level and you're really good you sometimes go up 3 levels. I was on Stage 5 and I went up 8 levels.*
- *You've got to explain your books. You might be a good reader because you can remember in your head about the story.*
- *You could do a reading test, like level 14, the last level.*
- *She would say read a book.*
- *She would test them – with a piece of paper to say what stage to go on (Book Bands – assessment based on reading a graded passage).*
- *Test them – get a red book or a yellow book.*
- *Get a 'free reader' book and then test them on that.*

This seems to suggest that the children's view of reading attainment is still related to progress through increasingly harder books. Not one child across the schools mentioned phonics or the PSC or even a formal written comprehension-based reading test. Some children used the word 'test' in their responses, showing some awareness of being judged to be at a certain level but the tests were related to how well they could read a book or a passage of text, rather than any form of formal test. No one talked about reading words out of context, whether that be real words or pseudowords. All the children were interviewed in their first term after taking the PSC and would have spent a lot of time practising for this test, yet no one reflected on or remembered this experience as a test of their reading attainment. This would suggest that the PSC itself has not had a significant impact on the psychological development of these children, nor on their perspectives on their educational development. They still saw reading ability as a judgement on how well you could read a book, mainly as a judgment on accuracy. However, there was one child who suggested that good readers remember what they had read in a book. This understanding of the transactional nature of reading suggests that even at aged six, children are able to generate a constructivist view of reading. Early readers can therefore understand the value and purpose of reading in conveying meaning and can value the importance of being able to discuss content as part of a socio-cultural literacy community. They are beginning to understand that reading is not just decoding. This hypothesis has been formed on the basis on the responses of just one pupil from the survey, which suggests that at that age, reading is still seen as a skills-based task by most children; however, the implication is that they are of an age when they are beginning to move towards a different understanding. It is not clear whether this child has been more influenced by her teachers or her home background but she was capable of a more mature understanding of what being a good reader entails.

7.5 Children's understanding of pseudowords

The use of the pseudowords in the PSC has always remained one of the most controversial aspects of the test (Davis, 2012; Gibson and England, 2016, Darnell et al, 2017; Castles et al, 2018a). Their use has been repeatedly criticized by those who see the skill of reading as being able to obtain meaning from print: "There is no text. The practice of investigating the mapping of isolated sounds onto decontextualized units of print has no purpose for the reader. It is a meaningless exercise" (Taylor, 1999, p223). It was noticeable that the children, when talking

about alien words, tended to refer to '*doing* alien words' rather than '*reading* alien words'. (The card in the ranking task discussed in Section 7.2 did not include a verb.) This is perhaps further evidence for the dislocation of pseudowords from the process of reading. 'Doing' alien words is seen as a separate activity rather than part of a wider reading programme.

It is clear from the ranking task discussed in the previous section that practising alien words was the least popular aspect of reading sessions for pupils in all three schools.

Firstly, I asked the children to explain what alien words are. All the answers followed similar patterns:

Question: What are alien words?

- *Tricky words what you can't spell (sic).*
- *A word that doesn't make sense.*
- *Words that aren't real.*
- *They're not true.*
- *Wrong words.*
- *Words what don't exist (sic).*
- *It's when like words that aren't real.*
- *Words like 'wok' and all that.*
- *They're like not real words and they don't make sense.*
- *They don't really exist.*
- *They're ones that don't exist.*
- *Like 'cud'. They're just random letters made up into random words.*

(Answers collated from across all three schools.
Repeated answers omitted.)

The children were clear about the alien words having no meaning. Interestingly, the two children who tried to give examples of alien words to illustrate their explanations actually gave real words instead (*wok* and *cud).* Their examples were just unfamiliar words for six-year-olds

rather than true pseudowords. The fixation on 'real or not real' has led some children to believe that any unfamiliar word must be an alien word. One consequence of this could be that children are less willing to develop their vocabulary by finding out the meaning of unfamiliar words. When reading whole passages, children may simply treat any unfamiliar word as an alien word, without an appreciation of the need to seek meaning from a text.

Their responses show that all children had clearly been taught to read alien words during their time in Year One. However, they were less certain about why they had been learning to read alien words.

Question: Why did you learn alien words in Year 1?

- *So we can think they're not real words.*
- *So we don't say them wrong if they're not real. So if we've seen every word, we know that they're not real words because we've practised them.*
- *So we know they're not real words.*
- *Because we need to learn about aliens.*
- *Because we can learn from it and learn from our mistakes in a different way. We can learn to know because we had a game in Y1 – 'The Treasure Chest' – and if we get it right, we get a treasure. If we get it wrong the pirate does a funny dance and sinks in the water. [This comment was followed by the whole group getting up to demonstrate the dance to me. The purpose of this game is to distinguish between real or alien words, rather than to be able to decode them.]*
- *I've got no idea.*
- *You can help yourself to sound out words.*
- *If we don't learn them, we might spell the wrong word.*
- *[Name of class teacher] tried to trick us on just alien words but we got them all right so that's how we learn alien words.*
- *Because you don't know much words [in Year 1]. This pupil tried to elaborate by comparing reading real and alien words was like her baby sister learning to talk, who was beginning to say some real words but also some nonreal words [baby talk].*
- *So we know what's real and not real.*
- *We're trying to learn so we know what's real and what's not real.*

- *The children might need help with alien words.*
- *So if you found a word and you were with a teacher and they were having alien words and you didn't know what it means, it would actually be an alien word and it would be like you can't say it, well you can but it doesn't make sense.*
- *They're making sure that… you might make a big mistake if you say them because someone might accidentally say the wrong word and go instead of 'ant' they might go 'tant'.*
- *So we know that if you did… when you were writing it… if you did it and you did a wrong word and it was an alien word, you would know, you would learn it so you don't make mistakes in your writing and don't spell lots of words wrong.*
- *So if you were talking and you said an alien word….*

The children generally agreed that they no longer practised alien words now that they were in Year Two, although it was pointed out to me by a couple of the pupils that some Year Two children did still work on alien words if they were still in phonics groups. The children were clear about which groups were still doing phonics, showing an awareness that these groups of children hadn't yet reached the stage of being 'finished' with alien words. Although one child said that alien words helped you sound out, the rest of the children were all unaware that they had been practising a reading skill; the answers from the other children were mainly related to drawing 'meaning' from the words, i.e., helping them ascertain whether words were real or not. They seemed to see pseudowords as a language-based skill or a kind of vocabulary activity. There was a belief that the intention of reading an alien word was to be able to decide whether it was 'real or not', rather than to demonstrate accurate decoding. Again, this suggests that the children are grappling with the constructivist view that the purpose of reading is to generate meaning. In the example of the pirate game, the rewards come from correctly identifying real and alien words, not from correct decoding. This game, which the children clearly enjoyed, may be partly responsible for the children's linking of alien words with meaning rather than decoding. There was a sense that by the end of Year One, they had learnt all the possible alien words, suggesting that the children believed that a finite list exists, so they

no longer needed to practise reading them. If they had learnt them all, they now knew not to make errors by saying alien words in error in their speech, writing or when reading. One girl, who suggested that when babies learn to talk, they start with sounds and babble, before they learn how to say real words, made an interesting observation about her understanding of how we acquire speech and reading. If babies use nonsense sounds/words when they are learning to speak before they acquire 'real words', then it is a logical jump for a child to link that apprenticeship model of learning to speak with a similar model of learning to read. Several children also made a link between being able to sound out alien words and spelling. This may be due to spelling becoming a bigger priority for Year Two children, replacing the time that had been allocated to 'phonics' in Year One.

7.6 Children's views on setting and grouping

As discussed in Section 2.5.i, there has been a large increase nationally in the amount of setting for phonics taking place in Early Years settings (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a). This has been attributed both to the PSC and the predominance of commercial schemes that promote setting. Such schemes suggest that children must work through a series of defined stages before moving on to the next stage, following a strict bottom-up cognitive approach to the teaching of reading and assume that all children start reading instruction as 'blank slates', waiting for knowledge to be transferred.

Setting for phonics teaching was carried out formally in schools A and B, with regularly re-testing and subsequent moving of children into new groups. School C, discussed in more detail later in this section, favoured a whole class approach with some more subtle forms of grouping for differentiated tasks within a session. Discussion with the Year Two pupils showed some interesting comments on the impact of grouping for phonics. In School B, opinions were mixed, although the more negative comments came from the children who were still in 'phonics teams' (which is what the school called the groups) rather than those who had 'completed' the phonics programme and remained in their own classroom to work on 'Literacy'. School B, as a one form entry school, was the smallest of the schools in the study; consequently, when grouping children, the only way to manage this was to set across ages and by using adults who 'belonged' to different year groups; School A, whilst following the same

commercial scheme as School B, was able to avoid as far as possible mixing children from across different year groups.

Some of the positive comments about setting from the children included:

- *Because in different teams you learn different things.*
- *Because you get to go on new levels.*
- *Cos you get to do trickier things and learn more stuff.*
- *I like doing writing in phonics teams.*

This shows awareness amongst the children of the hierarchy of readers suggested by Scherer (2016) and Roberts-Holmes and Kitto (2019). The idea of 'new levels' and 'trickier things' shows the children's views on reading being a progressive sequence of skills. The children are aware of the goal of moving up to the next group or level.

The more negative responses suggested social and friendship issues as well as worries about their learning.

Some of the negative comments about setting from the children included:

- *Because I don't know what levels we're on and I'm keeping this a secret but I don't really like surprises.* (Further prompting suggested she didn't like not knowing which book they're going to be reading in the next session, whereas the children who do 'Literacy' rather than 'Phonics' at that timetabled hour do know what their focus will be as it is reflected in resources set out in the classroom. There were texts displayed around her classroom that she and the other 'Phonics' children will not be reading, and fun activities set out that she would not be enjoying.) *But I do like Miss T (*the Teaching Assistant based in the children's class). [This child was very concerned that I might think that she did not like her phonics group because of the adult she was with; she was emphatic that she really

liked this member of staff, she just didn't like working in a phonics team rather than being in the classroom.]

- *I only like working in mine. I don't like working in someone else's.*
- *Some phonics teams might be different from what I do.*
- *It's bad because we like seeing each other. We want to be in all the same classroom because we don't like being in what we've already been. (Further explanation of this clarifies she doesn't like going back to the Year 1 classroom for phonics lessons when she is really in Year 2.)*
- *I don't like doing phonics.*

The child who commented on having to go back to the Year One classroom made an interesting point. In this school (School B), mainly because the staff try to make the best use of the available space and adults to meet the number of ability groups demanded by the commercial phonics programme that they are following, the Year Two teacher teaches 'Literacy' to any children that have finished the phonics scheme, in the Year Two classroom. The remaining Year Two children were divided up between the Year One teacher and the Year One/Two Teaching Assistants. At this point in the year, approximately half of the Year Two cohort were still following the Phonics programme, even though almost all of them had already passed the Year One PSC. This child's comments seem to be more concerned with the room and/or teacher that she had been allocated, rather than the fact she was in a mixed group of Year One/Two children. In her mind, she was going back to where she had already been – namely the Year One classroom, whereas the 'good readers' in the class were staying in the Year Two room. As the academic year continues, more and more of the Year Two pupils will be fed back into the main Year Two teaching group, as and when they are deemed to have 'finished phonics'. This separation of the children into 'Literacy' and 'Phonics Teams' will become more marked each half term. By the end of the summer term, there may only be a handful of children still needing direct phonics teaching, whilst the rest are 'allowed' to stay in their own classroom for their literacy work. This child, also an EAL pupil, seems very aware of the message that this allocation of rooms seems to be suggesting – the need to physically move down the corridor for her lessons suggests that she has 'gone backwards' because of her current achievements. This will have had an impact on her self-esteem. She is being removed from her own room, Year Two, because she needs to be in the Year One classroom. Whilst this undoubtedly has not been the intention of the staff working at this school, the very public

grouping of children will be having an impact on the self-motivation and self-confidence of some of the children, possibly upsetting the balance of the learning triangle (Illeris, 2015). Also, these children's self-efficacy may be at risk if every day they find themselves separated from the majority of their peers and restricted in their wider literacy activities (Bandura, 1997; Peura et al, 2019).

School C, by contrast, does not set pupils to the same extent as do Schools A and B. Phonics in School C is taught as a whole class session in accordance with the philosophy underpinning their chosen scheme. This means that all children are taught the same sound at the same time. All children are working at the same 'phase'. Once the initial teaching segment of the lesson is over, the children may attempt differentiated activities, but crucially, they are all related to the same whole class sound. Children who may be at risk of falling behind are given additional intervention in phonics at other times in the day. Whilst this approach may avoid some of the negative feelings towards setting that were voiced by some of the pupils in Schools A and B, it was still clear that pupils were still aware of their 'position' within the class. It was one of the more able children in one of the discussion groups who identified those in her class who needed to still 'do phonics'. The children at this school were also able to name the DfE 'Phonics Phases' that they were working on and so were aware of their progression through a defined list of skills. This approach did mean that all of the children were exposed to the same sounds at the same time and so there was a greater degree of equality of opportunity. This is more in line with Vygotsky's 'more knowledgeable other' theory as the weaker readers are able to learn in a shared classroom culture, alongside their more able peers.

7.7 Children's ideas on how they learnt to read

The children were asked to explain how they had learnt to read with the hope that this would prompt a further insight into their understanding of the impact of phonics (and by implication, the PSC). The pupils were struggling to articulate a response to this question so it was rephrased to see if they could explain how they would teach a younger child to read.

There was an overall view that you needed to give children easy books and then harder and harder books. There was very little suggestion that they had learnt to read through phonics. There appears to be a dislocation between phonics and reading in the eyes of the children. They

seemed almost unanimous that to learn to read, you had to progress through books, rather than learn sounds. When they talked about how they had first started to read, they remembered learning a word, suggesting a sight word approach rather than a phonics-based method. Even when asked what they would do if they were a Reception teacher helping the new pupils to learn to read, the dominant answers related to the teaching of words rather than sounds. The children seemed to think that they had learnt to read through an apprentice model. The idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) is suggested by the gradual increase in difficulty of the books that they were given to read: "…harder and harder and harder books" (child from School C).

On the other hand, when asked what they personally would do if they were stuck on a word, the most common response was that they would sound it out. No one referred to any of the 'searchlights strategies'; no one suggested looking at picture cues or re-reading the sentence. The 'sounding out' answer is indeed the only acceptable strategy that Ofsted inspectors are currently looking for when talking to children about their reading. Children's responses to this question are used by inspectors when forming their judgements about how effectively a school is teaching phonics, so it is no wonder that this had become the engrained response for this cohort of children.

It would seem that the children still believed that reading was about books and understanding rather than accuracy in decoding and phonics, hence their belief that reading development was related to graded books. Research may suggest that phonics is affecting children's understanding of the nature of reading:

> The emphasis on teaching sight vocabulary and phonics skills is seen to be potentially seriously damaging for children by changing the nature of reading, from understanding, appreciating, and evaluating what is read, to memorising phonics rules and decoding. (Solity and Vousden 2009, p471).

However, my discussions with the children did not corroborate this view. Whilst the pupils in the discussions may have spent a large proportion of their instructional time on tasks related to learning phonic rules and decoding, they were still focused on the importance of books and contextualised reading. From their point of view, phonics seemed to be playing a fairly small role in their reading development and had not affected their enjoyment of reading or their

appreciation of books and reading choices. Phonics and the PSC, whilst undoubtedly boosting their decoding skills, appears to have had a less obvious impact on their view of learning to read.

A content analysis approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) was used to review the children's answers. Their answers were coded according to key words used when the children were describing how they learnt to read or how they would teach a younger child to read.

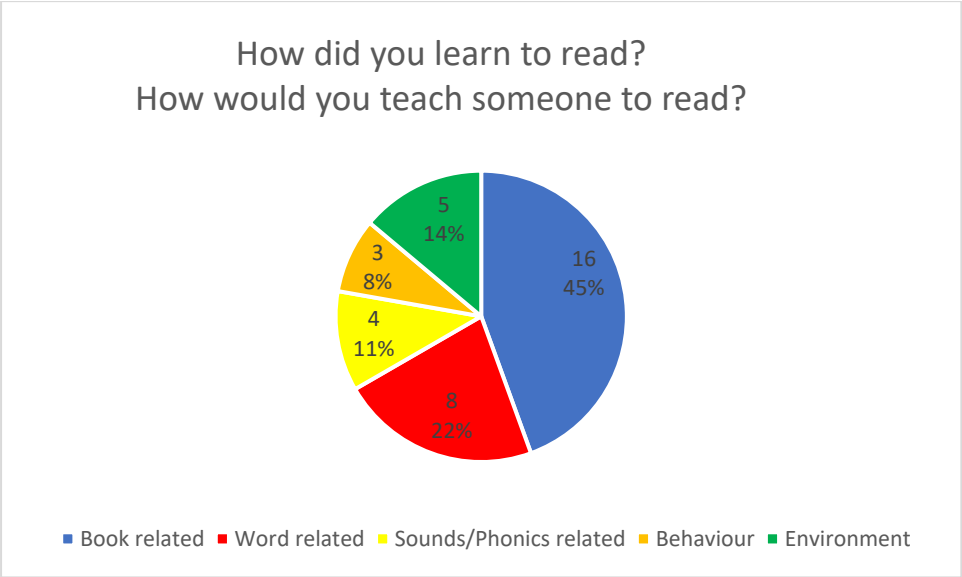
The chart below shows the codes chosen and key contextual words that were identified in the discussion. The results have been shown as percentages of the total responses. Some children offered more than one response whereas others struggled to answer these questions and so a response was not recorded for every child.

Figure 37 Content analysis codes

Key themes/codes	Key words in context
Book related	little books harder books harder levels
Word related	Sight words Words on a sheet Repeat the words Say the words
Sounds/Phonics related	Alphabet Blending Phonics Sounds
Behaviour related	Practising/practised I wanted to read so I asked the teacher To see if it makes sense
Environment related	Family (mainly related to naming who bought the books) Dad Mum Signs (environmental print) My dad read to me and then after a bit I could read.

The pupils' responses are recorded in the pie chart below.

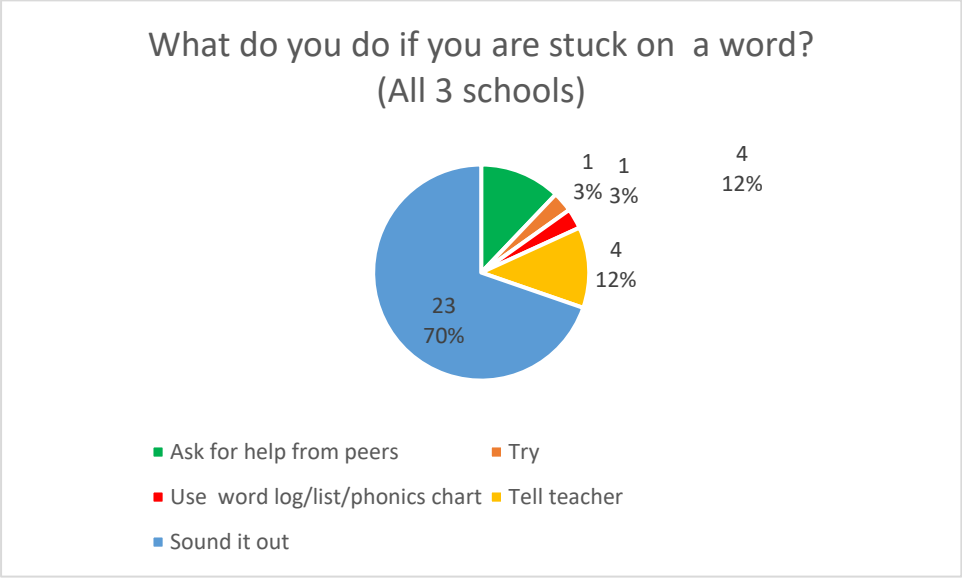
Figure 38 Pie chart: How did you learn to read?



It is very clear from this data that the children primarily saw reading as related to books and texts. Very few responses (eleven percent or four out of thirty-six responses collected) were related to decoding skills. Sixteen responses referred to learning to read at home and the children named family members as being the ones who gave them books and read to them. This naturalistic approach to reading, or a sociocultural communities of practice model suggests that the children believed in an apprenticeship approach to learning to read rather than the cognitive teaching of phonic skills mandated in government policy. Book ownership, or at the very least book availability in the home, seemed to be a very important aspect in the children's view of learning to read (Schubert and Becker, 2010; Clark and Teravainen, 2017).

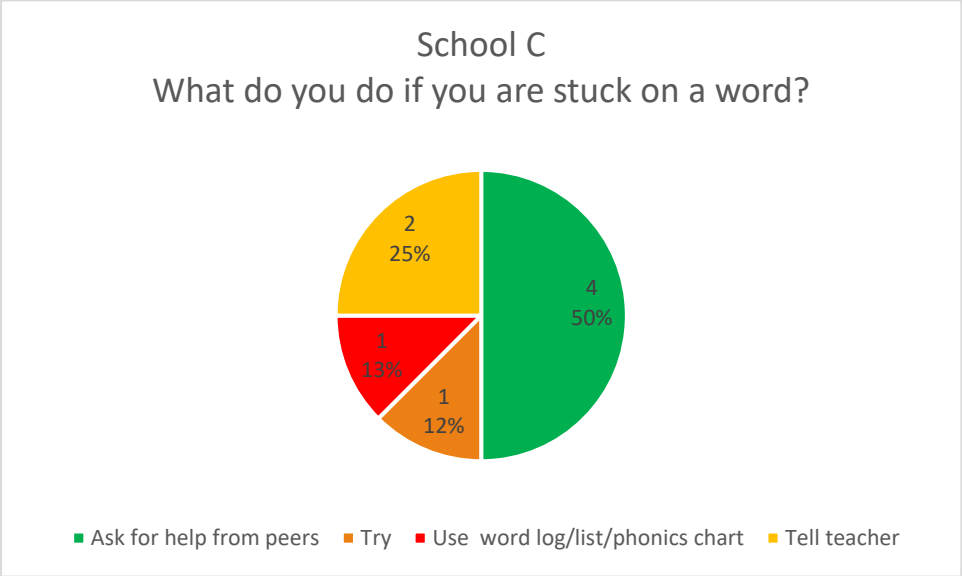
The children were also asked to comment on what they would do if they were stuck on a word when reading. Their answers illuminated more of their learning behaviours. In Schools A and B, 'sounding out' was the unanimous answer. The children in School C differed in their responses, reflective the more holistic approach to learning to read in that school. Content analysis was again used to quantify the children's responses. The first pie chart shows the combined answers from all three schools.

Figure 39 Pie chart: What do you do if you are stuck on a word?



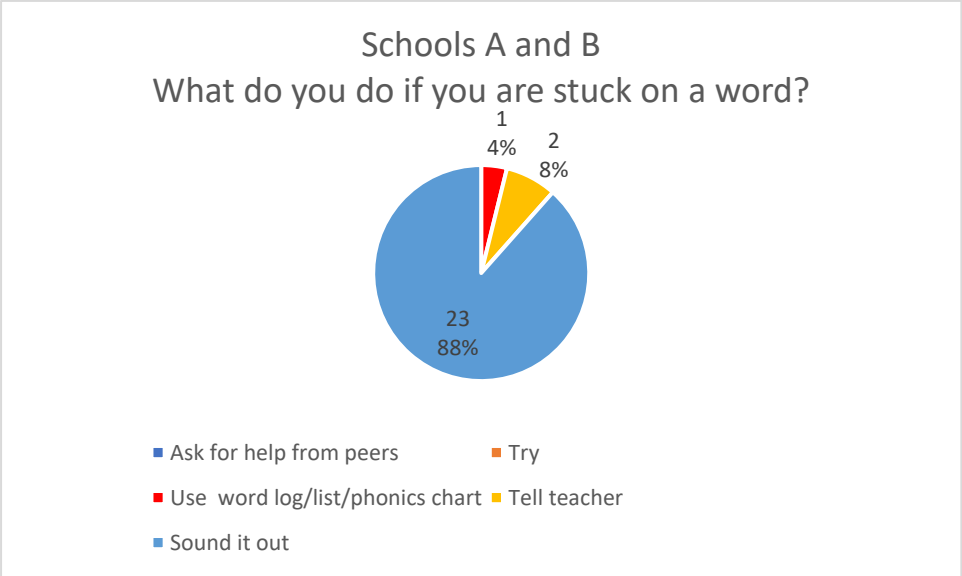
The data for School C showed a different pattern.

Figure 40 Pie chart: What do you do if you are stuck on a word? (School C)



The pupils at this school interpreted the question in terms of active solutions to their problem; their responses illustrate the school's attitude towards developing independence and resilience. 'Asking a friend' was mentioned by half of the children, with asking/telling a teacher another popular answer. 'Trying' or persevering showed the children have been encouraged to have a positive mindset when faced with a problem and they could suggest tools around the classroom to help them e.g., word logs (although these seem to be more related to spelling strategies than reading). They may also have interpreted the question as asking what they would do when they had tried sounding out and were still stuck. One of the children in this school suggested that you should try 'reading slower so you know what word you're saying', showing an awareness that words could be gleaned from the context.

Figure 41 Pie chart: What do you do if you are stuck on a word? Schools A and B



The children from these two schools showed a greater reliance on sounding out at their main strategy, in accordance with the required SSP approach. Again, like the pupils in School C, they are being encouraged to solve their problems independently. However, this strategy would not help them with non-decodable words.

This question of what to do if you are stuck on a word seemed to be the one with the most divergence of opinion between the different groups of pupils. Both groups of pupils represented their schools' approach to phonics. Whilst the pupils in Schools A and B offered the answer that Ofsted inspectors want to hear as part of their monitoring that SSP is being used as the strategy for teaching reading, the children in School C still produce

above average PSC scores. It would seem that preparation for the PSC can still differ between schools. The impact of these differing approaches in terms of the children's progression in subsequent tests is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six but it would seem that children can achieve highly in the PSC without the use of a commercial scheme that dominates the children's early experiences in reading and literacy.

7.8 Summary of children's views

Given that the children's interviews all took place in the term immediately after the PSC, it is significant that the children, even when talking about phonics and alien words, did not raise the subject of the test themselves. Whilst the issues surrounding the testing process itself cause anxiety for teachers (as discussed in Chapter Eight), the pupils in this survey did not seem to be overly worried by the process. The idea of a test in which some would pass and some would fail was not something that concerned them. If they had been aware of the test at the time, it had not remained at the forefront of their minds. They did not tell me whether they had passed or failed and in fact, they may not even have been aware of whether they had passed or not. (It is to be hoped that they had not been aware that they were being tested and that they had not been told the result.) Even though a significant amount of their teaching time over the previous terms had been focused around phonics and preparation for the PSC, the children's overall attitudes towards reading remained positive. Throughout the discussion, there appeared to be a disconnection between phonics and reading, with the children happy to talk about books but struggling to make links between phonics and learning to read. When describing how they had learnt to read, they talked about books, albeit books that were getting increasingly more difficult, but they did not fixate on phonics as their method for learning to read. Even when asked how they would teach a younger child to read, they described book-based methods, rather than sounds and blending. This was in contrast to their answers of what they would do if they were stuck when reading themselves, as they predominantly described sounding out difficult words. Across all three schools, phonics appeared to be considered as separate from reading and positioned as a discrete skill.

Overall, for this set of children, preparation for the PSC may have improved their phonic attainment, but apart from a few children who disliked setting or grouping, the impact on

their emotional wellbeing seemed to be negligible. This may be due to the skill in which the PSC has been handled by teachers in these schools, with the actual test mirroring the practice sessions, or it may be due to the fact that for most of the participants, phonics was 'finished' in Year One and their experiences of learning phonics had quickly faded in their memory. Again, a further area for research would be to consider the experiences of a larger group of pupils who have failed the check in Year One and to follow them in a case study approach through their intervention work to the point of retaking the PSC the following year. However, from the discussion data collected so far, it would seem therefore that the PSC may well have a greater impact on the staff in the school than the pupils.

Chapter Eight Teachers' Voices

8.1 Introduction

The third and final strand to the mixed methods approach to this thesis concerns the impact that the PSC has had on teachers. Qualitative data collected from teachers will complete the triangulation of the research findings.

The data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. The purpose of the original interview questions was to ascertain teachers' views on the impact that the PSC had had on themselves, their pupils and their teaching methods. The initial questions covered a range of areas:

- teachers' feelings about preparing children for the PSC
- teachers' understanding of what teaching reading means
- teachers' perceptions on the validity of the screening check
- the role of accountability implied by the check
- the perceived impact of preparing for a high-stakes test on their pupils.

Using a thematic analysis approach, other areas were also identified:

- the impact on children's spelling
- the importance of wider reading across the curriculum
- the impact of the PSC on more able children
- teacher allegiance (or submission) to their school's phonics programmes
- responsibility for pupil progress.

Two schools (Schools A and B) used a heavily phonics based commercial scheme to teach phonics and the third school (School C) took a more balanced approach, with less emphasis on phonics and more emphasis on wider literacy skills. The teachers involved in this study were all experienced and had been teaching in Key Stage One or Early Years classrooms before the introduction of the PSC and so were all in a position to comment on changes that they had witnessed since its introduction. Four teachers were interviewed from across the three schools. Two of the teachers had also worked in two of the three schools and so were able to talk about their experiences in both settings.

8.2 The Testing Process

Teachers at all three schools acknowledged that they did frequent 'mock testing', using real PSC materials. Whilst this testing served as a diagnostic tool, allowing for tracking, grouping and targeted intervention programmes to ensure that children were on target to pass the check, there was also a consensus that regular exposure to test materials and test style practice sessions would reduce the stress the children would face when taking the real test in June. It was seen as a way of normalizing the experience:

> *The proper one, yes, so they're used to it so when we get to the PSC they don't care. So they just go in, 'Oh yeah, not bothered, because I do this test all the time.'* [Teacher 4: School C]
>
> *I think how we did it…they'd go out and do like a test obviously throughout the year so from September, they'd go out and do a test with a TA and we'd use the proper cards and we'd use the proper sheets so they wouldn't be fazed, a bit like we do with Y2 and SATs so they wouldn't be fazed seeing it in that style…em…but I think, when it actually comes to it, in the room with 2 adults, obviously they're familiar adults, but the actual testing of it can be a bit daunting for some of them because they're wondering why they've got 2 people in a quiet room… and … the outcome. [Teacher 1: School A]*
>
> *I don't think they get worried because we built it into…it's never against each other, it's always… it's something you do for yourself. They always are dying to come and do it. I know it sounds bizarre but they actually are desperate to come and do it cos they... The way this academy chain is, they just want to improve their own skills all the time and they're self-driven which is lovely. Not one single person was upset or didn't want to do it, they were all queuing up saying 'Is it me? Is it me? I want my go.' Everyone wants to get 40. That's just the way it is. [Teacher 2: School B]*

Whilst the teachers may have concerns about the emotional impact on young children of taking a formal test, their pupils did not report feeling anxious about it and indeed, the PSC appeared to have slipped from their memories to the point that it did not play a role in the pupil discussions. It would seem therefore that the amount of planned test preparation has resulted in reducing the stress and anxiety for most pupils, in that they did not see the actual test as anything different from normal individual phonics sessions.

One thing upon which the teachers in all three schools were in agreement was that their informal tracking and assessment processes were robust and were providing useful information as part of their formative assessment. They could confidently describe what 'Phase' or 'Colour' children were working at in their phonics teaching sequence. The implication of this is that the emphasis on phonics and the end goal of the PSC has led to teachers being very aware of pupil performance and progress. They can match this in meaningful ways to children's journeys through their chosen schemes. The accuracy of these judgments might suggest that the PSC itself is not needed as teachers have developed greater accuracy in their own assessments which are matched to a next-step progression. The PSC itself, with its dichotomous outcome, is only providing an additional and somewhat meaningless label for these teachers. The PSC is not necessarily helpful for planning the next steps in a child's learning, for example, a failing score of thirty-one does not tell the next teacher whether the child has not yet been taught a few key sounds, has a problem with blending, or has struggled with the concept of pseudowords. Also a child scoring thirty-one is likely to have been grouped with children scoring thirty-two or thirty-three and may well continue to be 'grouped' with these children after the testing. Therefore, reporting to the child's next teacher that they are working at Phase 4 or on 'Yellow RWI' books would provide a greater level of formative assessment and suggest the next steps needed. The PSC pass or fail outcome is initially less helpful and only serves to indicate which children need to resit the test. Furthermore, the focus on phonic assessment and subsequent grouping is overshadowing teachers' views of pupil attainment; their awareness of pupils' comprehension skills, for example, is not a key focus. Reading difficulties that are not caused by phonic weakness are at risk of being overlooked, causing problems for children as they get older.

The practice tests identified by all the teachers could be classified as 'frequent summative' (J. Gardner, 2012, p239) or 'formative in a summative climate' (J. Gardner, 2012, p238). Gardner suggests that the summative can become formative, with purpose rather than timing being the

key factor. If all schools used the available screening materials or something similar with clear purpose on their formative value, then the high stakes PSC would cease to be necessary.

However, all the schools involved in this study had consistently strong performances in phonics and the teachers were all experienced in preparing children for the PSC. Consequently, their phonics teaching, alongside their assessment and tracking of pupil performance, is robust. The introduction of the PSC may have sharpened these practices and raised the profile of the need to track and monitor progress consistently. The actual process of taking the PSC may now be superfluous in these schools. The introduction of the PSC may now have served its purpose in refocusing teachers on high quality phonics teaching. Indeed, the teachers agreed that if the PSC were to be abolished, very little would change in their schools in the way that they would teach reading.

Question: If the PSC were suddenly abolished, what, if anything would change in the way you or your school teaches reading?

I don't think anything would change in the way we teach reading or sounds; I think it would just be that they'd have to obviously then apply the sounds in different ways because I think the phonic check is more the application 'cos I think the teaching would remain exactly the same standard. I think there's alternative spellings, they'd be exactly the same. I think it's just the application in a nonsense way. (Teacher 1: School A)

I think we would still keep that element, that really strong element of learning sounds to put together to decode, that needs to be in there because it's a basic mechanical tool of reading, however there would be more focus on developing vocabulary, understanding, listening, speaking, all those… things that we used to have in the olden days if you like, that come together to make a child be enthused to read for enjoyment or to find out facts. (Teacher 3: School B)

Nothing, because I think as a school, I'd hope that we'd keep going with it because I think it's quite important that we keep going with it because it's clearly shown that it works. (Teacher 2, School B)

I do truly believe that phonics is an important part of what they do but I think there has to be a lot more emphasis on their ability to sight read as well … one of the things we end up having to say to some of the children is if you don't need to sound it out, don't sound it out. (Teacher 4, School C)

Yeah, because there's a high level of…It does sometimes become mechanical, because that's their strategy, is that right? Just reading, because we're trying to get the fluency, by the end of the year, we do have, there's some decent fluent readers, and if you took away the emphasis on phonics, would that disappear? I don't know. (Teacher 4, School C)

On the other hand, there are still many schools where this concept of formative assessment is not strong. There are schools that are still performing significantly below the national average of 82%. In schools that are still recording scores of well below 50%, it is this sense of pace and the need for rigorous assessment and tracking of pupils that is often missing. For these schools, the PSC may be more valuable as a tool to encourage schools to evaluate and modify their teaching programmes to enable better outcomes for all. Without the national benchmark of the PSC, and just Ofsted inspections monitoring the quality of the teaching of reading, schools and therefore their pupils, may be at risk of slipping through the net, exacerbating that tail of underachievement that has always persisted. Therefore, it is true to say that the PSC has been used in some settings as a means to control the content and teaching styles used in Early Years classrooms.

One of the teachers raised an interesting point about the nature of the test. If the test is to signify whether a child has reached a certain level, then there should be more opportunities to demonstrate this. Currently the test is taken in Year One in the middle of June; children who

fail have to wait a whole year before retaking the test the following June. For some children, who were just below the threshold in June, offering a retest just a month later, in July, before the end of the academic year, may allow further children to pass, thus reducing the need for providing intervention and support for the whole of Year Two.

> ***Question**: What do you think about the policy of having to resit in Y2 if you don't pass?*
>
> ***Response**: I think in an ideal world, I would rather, if they didn't meet the standard in June, I'd rather they'd be retested by the end of the academic year…*
>
> ***Question**: So July?*
>
> ***Response**: I think, yeah, because some of them, for example a child at [name of school], she would have easily four weeks later been able to pass that… because she was, you know, passing it, but with children who are SEN or just very low ability in phonics, I think that's fine but it depends on the implications, for example in Y2 now, we've only got one child out of 60 who hasn't passed, so she's had to have a specialist programme every day, just sort of dripping it in every day, so still touching base with those and obviously she's in the intervention groups in the afternoon but actually I think if that more intensive support four weeks later, just to see if they can pass it within that same academic year…. again, it's when they're getting that time because the other children have moved on. [Teacher 1:School A]*

This could be a significant point. If the purpose of the test is to identify those who need support, then intensive support in the final weeks of Year One should be on offer, so that the child can catch up and is ready to start Year Two at the same level as their peers. For some children, a short burst of intensive support may be enough and may be more effective than a prolonged course of intervention, stretched out over a longer period. It is more likely that once having taken and failed the test in June, any available intervention gets lost in the end of term activities and those children already at risk of slipping further behind do not start to receive the appropriate support until several months later, in the next academic year. If the PSC was taken slightly earlier in the year, perhaps straight after Easter, there would be a longer

period in Year One to allow identified children to 'catch up'. Similarly, for more able children, who would be able to pass the test much earlier in the year, if they were offered a test date in January and passed, they could be released from the endless diet of test preparation and could focus on higher level reading skills instead. Schools regularly test children on practice tests every half term, in some instances purely to fit with managerial monitoring requirements, even though some higher attaining pupils obviously do not need this. This will clearly have an impact on teaching time. If there were termly test dates, for which children could be entered when they were ready, this would reduce some of the pressure of getting whole cohorts ready to perform on the same day.

Teachers at all three schools spoke about children who, for various reasons, underperformed on the day of the test. In one school, the presence of an external moderator in the room proved to be too much for one child. The test was normally administered in a small room with two adults from the school to meet the administration criteria but the arrival of a third (unknown) adult was intimidating. One nervous six-year-old, asked to read aloud in front of three adults, went on to fail unexpectedly, which had a negative impact on the school's performance data.

> ***Question**: And on the reverse side, can you think of any children that failed it in Y1 but that you think would pass or are on track to pass in SATs in Y2?*
>
> ***Response**: There's only really, there was one girl, for example at [name of school] last year, who failed but was consistent all year, she got top end, 38s but got 30 on the actual screen when we did it, you know, on that day…*
>
> ***Question**: So, a near miss…*
>
> ***Response**: Yeah, a near miss and I think that was due to moderation as well, but I think she is a fluent, confident reader, but I think again, because they were nonsense words, that's where she tripped up because she was reading it as a fluent confident reader and not necessarily applying her phonic skills. [Teacher 1: School A]*

For some, the stress of the day may simply be too much; for others, a range of unexplained factors may influence their performance. With children of that age, a minor incident could put them off. Similarly, children just sometimes underperform for no obvious reason.

> *Because it's a judgment about the day, about that specific ten minutes in time. They might come in, because we had one boy who was a sensational reader, fluent, could talk about… er… his reading, could answer questions and I thought you're going to be easy, so he sat there and I don't know what was the matter with him, totally blew it, totally blew it and he only just passed and he should have been getting 39 or 40.*
>
> [Teacher 4: School C]

For the test to be of statistical value in judging both a pupil's and a school's performance, it should demonstrate reliability (Harlen, 2014) and it is clear from teachers' recall of specific children's experiences in the test that it lacks an acceptable level of consistency. If the children were to repeat the test the following day, the question of whether they would achieve the same score again remains unanswered. A teacher's wider assessment data would provide a more reliable and accurate assessment of a child's decoding skills than a snapshot on a single day.

Again, the option of flexibility in terms of retesting children would probably be welcomed by schools, for both borderline children and unexpected results that don't match the teacher's bank of assessment data collected over time. This might also reduce the stigma attached to labelling children as those that have not passed the PSC. Being told that their child has not met the expected standard in phonics in Year One could have a detrimental impact on parental relationships with school. If this could be changed to 'has not passed it yet', it would provide parents with a more palatable view of their child's progress. A termly test window would allow for children to be entered when they were ready. Currently, even children who are extremely unlikely to pass still have to take the formal test on the required day.

The need to prepare children for the test tended to dominate the discussions.

> *So I think at the beginning of the year, when I first check and see gaps and teach to the gaps and then for some children, that continues to get quite intense for them if they're struggling and then for others that are already hitting 32-40, then we move on a bit more for reading for pleasure. (Teacher 2: School B)*

The implication that there is a change between 'intense' and 'pleasure' is particularly telling. It implies that learning phonics (or preparing for the PSC) is a struggle, characterized by stress or pressure, and the reward at the end is pleasure and enjoyment. The weaker readers, those that will not attain the required thirty-two out of forty, seem destined to never reach the reading for pleasure stage. Again, quite forceful language was used by one of the teachers, stating that priority is given to phonics after Christmas: "…with a real push after February half term to really drill down into those words." (Teacher 1: School A). This theme continued across the schools. "It's [*the PSC*] picked out that one strand and hammered away at that at the expense of other strands, I think." (Teacher 3: School B).

8.3 The Test's Validity

> *"We cannot say an assessment is valid without knowing what the intention was in using it and how well this intention was met." (Stobart 2012, p233)*

Another recurrent theme from the teachers' interviews was concern about the test's validity. As already discussed in the previous section, the fact that children may underperform on a certain day was a concern but the test's further validity as a predictor of future reading attainment in general or as an accurate judge of reading standards was questioned by the teachers. One particular area of concern related to PSC scores not matching teachers' more in-depth knowledge of their pupils' reading abilities.

Question: *So do you think the PSC has improved reading standards in your school? And by reading standards, I mean overall reading standards, not just phonics and decoding standards.*

Response: *We always have the issue of the gap because when you do the phonics screening, it's not necessarily your Greater Depth children who get the highest scores so I had a child who last year, she was… she started off in my 'working towards group' and then she got to 'Expected' but she actually scored 39…38... 39 and actually scored better than some of the children who were just fluent readers so I actually don't think it's a great representation of …these guys…it doesn't marry up so you know, you would expect your Greater Depth children to get 40 out of 40 but they don't*

because they're such quick readers, that actually they misread and they change the word.

Question: *And they have alternative strategies when they are reading by themselves.*

Response*: Yeah, and it's not a great indicator at all, I don't think. It indicates whether, if they don't pass, there's an obvious issue but if they do pass, you can't say that all your 39s and 40s are your Greater Depth readers and are fluent and can read and …understand comprehension questions. You can't say that. [Teacher 4: School C]*

Some of the teachers were very aware of the limitations of the test in judging overall reading attainment and took care to acknowledge that they were aware of inconsistencies in the data and of the need to identify children with deficits in reading comprehension. It would seem therefore that teachers still needed to use their professional judgements about the next steps for development. Ranking children by their phonics scores would not match with day-to-day assessments of children's wider reading abilities. Scoring highly on the PSC does not necessarily indicate the higher-attaining readers; indeed the stronger comprehenders do not always score full marks in the PSC as they can be caught out when trying to make meaning from the pseudowords.

As part of the teacher discussions the participants were prompted suggest reasons why so many children who passed in Year One went on to fail to meet the standards in Year Two. There was a notable difference in outlook between teachers who had been teaching longer and had experience of teaching in other year groups, particularly in Year Two and above, and those less experienced teachers, who had spent their teaching careers exclusively in Year One or Reception classes. The emphasis on the screening check in Year One, which has filtered through to performance management targets, with a relentless focus on alien words and 'teaching to the test', may have led some Year One teachers to believe that their sole aim is to ensure that their pupils pass the screening check, perhaps losing sight of a real understanding of what being a 'reader' rather than a 'decoder' means. Teachers are focusing on the need to improve PSC scores rather than the need to improve children's reading (Carter, 2020). This narrowing of the reading curriculum in Year One may be responsible for some children who appear to be 'on track' beginning to experience difficulties when the assessment foci become wider and harder. It is also true that the push to improve a school's performance data can lead

to the greater attention being paid to the overall attainment of a cohort, rather than the relative achievements of individual children (Braun and Maguire, 2020). The teacher discussions also have suggested that less experienced teachers have believed the assumption made by the Government's Schools' Minister Nick Gibb (2018) that children who can decode are on track and it is those that are less accurate decoders that should be prioritised for support. Whilst it is certainly true that children struggling with decoding need further intervention, accuracy is not the only skill that Year One teachers should be considering, for example, Solity (2020) suggests that mastery should be seen in terms of fluency rather than accuracy. When asked about the progress children make once they leave Year One, one teacher responded with a lack of awareness about the next steps:

> *HP: Can you think of a child who passed the screening check but didn't go on to meet the standard in Y2? And why do you think this is?*
>
> *Response: I don't really know. I don't know what happened when they got to Y2. I'm not involved in the data after that point. (School B)*

This suggests that for this Year One teacher, they have done their job if their children have passed the PSC. Their view of the curriculum is therefore defined by an accountability measure; their role in the teaching of wider reading skills is less clearly defined and is not as easy to measure. Teacher participants in this research project have admitted that the English curriculum becomes unbalanced in Year One, in favour of direct and discrete phonics teaching, which must mean that the teaching of comprehension and fluency skills is given less importance. Tensions between phonics and the reading curriculum will be discussed in more detail in Section 8.6. The teacher's comment above also implies that there is a need in this school to be more explicit in the analysis of whole school data, perhaps involving Year One teachers in the analysis of Year Two progress so that implications for teaching can be drawn out. This may be the case in other schools but further research would be needed to establish whether greater cohesion between Year One and Year Two teachers and their expectations is needed. This would also encourage Year One teachers to be aware of their role as 'teachers of reading' rather than just 'teachers of phonics' and to enable them to see the teaching of reading in a wider socio-cultural context, rather than the narrow skill of decoding.

The DfE does acknowledge the wider role that Year One teachers should have in the teaching of reading:

> As children begin to master decoding, it is vital that they also begin to read with speed and fluency. These are essential skills for becoming a confident, mature reader, and are best developed by instilling in children a love of literature. (DfE 2015a, p4).

The key word in this statement is 'begin'. Speed and fluency must be developed alongside mechanical decoding. It is also a tacit acknowledgement that the teaching of reading has to involve both phonics and an appreciation of good quality children's literature. However, this aim has been lost in many settings with the drive to raise PSC pass rates by teaching pseudowords and offering a restrictive diet of decodable texts Walker et al., 2015, DfE, 2021). The balance in the structure of reading instruction has been altered as a consequence of the introduction of the PSC. The fact that the data, both at a national and at a school level, shows that there is a significant group of children who are competent decoders but are struggling with reading comprehension, suggests that there should be a review of the approaches to the teaching and assessment of early reading.

8.4 Setting versus Whole Class teaching

It was significant that all the teachers interviewed showed a strong affiliation towards the specific phonics scheme that their schools had adopted, particularly when it came to the question of whether children should be set for phonics or taught as a whole class. The teachers at schools A and B were passionate about the need for children to be grouped by ability so that all pupils received the targeted teaching of the sounds and blends that they needed. On the other hand, the teacher from School C was equally committed to the need for whole class phonics teaching: all the children were to sit the same test and so needed to be exposed to all the sounds. Working together as a whole class would offer 'bootstrapping' opportunities for the weaker readers (Stanovich, 1986). Whereas the children had more concerns about setting for phonics than the PSC test itself, for the teachers, the positions were reversed. For the teachers, the need to achieve high PSC was given as the justification for adopting either setting or whole class teaching. One of the current drives in schools is the need to show fidelity to a scheme and so schools and teachers are constrained by the pedagogical decisions taken by the writers of these

schemes. The scheme used in Schools A and B requires a very structured approach to the grouping of pupils; the scheme in School C could allow for both informal grouping and whole class teaching. All the teachers interviewed were confident that the approach their school/scheme had adopted was the correct one and they could justify their reasoning. The teachers who were committed to the idea of grouping discussed their approaches in terms of academic performance, rather than the emotional and social effects noted by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017a) and Roberts-Holmes and Kitto (2019). However, there could be a possibility that the teachers have been almost brainwashed by the scheme: if results are seen as more important than anything else, then the negative aspects of this pedagogical approach are played down. Equally, all of the teachers had been using the schemes chosen by their schools for several years and hadn't necessarily had recent experience of using an alternative teaching style for phonics; consequently they were accepting of the pedagogical choices that their school leadership teams had dictated.

School C valued the whole class approach, even if there was an acknowledgement that there would be some differentiation within the activities. In this school, all children were to be exposed to the same sequence of sounds at the same time; there was equality of opportunity, even though there was a wide range of reading ability within the class.

> ***Question**: And you generally teach that as whole class rather than as ability groups?*
> ***Response**: Yeah, so they're all accessing the same but it is differentiated so we might say to the Greater Depth guys, 'Right, can you use these in words or can you spot this in a text?' sort of thing whereas the little guys, they're very much working on blending the sounds that they've written and checking it, 'Have you written it right?' That sort of thing. So because we've got, there's three adults working in here at the minute, we can differentiate like that but they like to be part of the whole group, who get a whole buzz effect. We do a lot of songs and games so things like that to engage them. [Teacher 4: School C]*

The teachers who favoured grouping described how the teaching could target the learning needs of the specific groups of pupils:

Question: *When you were teaching more in Year One and you grouped for phonics, what was your opinion of grouping? Would you rather have done whole class or do you think grouping was the better approach?*

Response: *I think the grouping worked well, depending on staffing, I mean at [name of school] for example, we really struggled with staffing so a lot of the phonics groups were mixed, here, you can really concentrate on the individual needs of that group because we've got enough staff, so I think it works well where you've got the people to really focus on the needs of that level of… [name of commercial scheme], whereas if you've got to mix, I think that's when certain things get a little bit blurred or get missed. [Teacher 1: School A]*

Question: *When you were teaching more in Year One and you grouped for phonics, what was your opinion of grouping? Would you rather have done whole class or do you think grouping was the better approach?*

Response*: I think the grouping works, only for the fact that you can more specifically target those who need specific, you know, like er… to cover something in a specific way or if you've got children like I had. At the beginning of the year, I had the lower ability children to really try and get them lifted off the ground with their reading skills but then towards the end of the year I had the higher ability ones and really pushed them towards greater depth so I don't think physically you'd be able to get round all your…. because we probably had about 8 groups going at one point…you wouldn't physically be able to support all those groups in one class I don't think, not as effectively, I think the way that we train up members of staff, whether they be teachers, TAs or whatever, to all have the skill set to be able to do that is really valuable.*

Question: *Does it bother you that some children are grouped with children that are older or younger? In a smallish school, you've had to group across the year groups.*

Response: *We've been kind of quite empathetic with that as well because we don't want children to feel that they're either doing really well …… [recording interrupted by other TA entering room] to feel demoralised by being with younger ones so we've worked really hard to tell them it's to help them move on. In fact, within my Y1 Literacy team, I've had two Y2s, who've now filtered back into the Y2 class and they're really*

pleased with themselves because they feel like they can cope and they can do it so that's been a bit of a positive one, I think. [Teacher 3: School B]

***Question**: When you were teaching more in Year One and you grouped for phonics, what was your opinion of grouping? Would you rather have done whole class teaching or do you think grouping was the better approach?*

***Response**: According to their ability so we do the RWI checks and then group them accordingly.*

***Question:** So, in your class of 30, how many ability groups have you got?*

***Response**: 3, we would have more if we needed but we only need 3 at the moment.*

***Question**: When you say that, is that because you've only got 3 adults? If you had 5 adults, would you split 5 ways?*

***Response**: No, I think because last year we had more groups than we did adults so we just taught it in a separate session because I was quite keen to make sure they were learning what they needed to learn.*

***Question:** But you're happy this year that 3 groups is enough?*

***Response**: Yes, we've got a TA with 10 children that are learning the Ditties [initial stage of the scheme], and my team are on Green and there's one person in Orange and we're all due to move up again. [Teacher 3: School B]*

Again, despite the quite different teaching approaches between the schools, in the end, the overall results for both phonics and reading in Year Two were not too dissimilar. Both approaches have been proved to be successful. The key may be not the scheme or its approaches but the overall quality of teaching. It would seem that the introduction of the PSC has led to schools being more didactic in their teaching approaches. Teachers are not free to make their own decisions about how their classrooms and their teaching sessions are structured. The PSC has meant that an increasing number of schools are turning to commercially produced schemes to give them the security that the required results will be

achieved and teachers have complied, whether willing or not, to the demands of these schemes.

The discussion around grouping for phonics and how that is managed showed certain differences between the views of teachers and children. Whilst children exposed to rigorous grouping, particularly when they were in the lower ability groups, expressed unhappiness with setting, teachers seemed to be less aware of this. The teachers focused more on the academic success of their grouping, rather than looking at social and emotional difficulties, perhaps disregarding the social and cultural aspects involved in learning to read. Whereas one teacher reported that they tried to avoid pupils feeling demoralised by being in a lower set, by explaining that they were being helped to 'catch up', this did not necessarily seem to assuage the negative feelings of these children. They were more concerned with being with 'the class' and feeling part of the group within *their classroom.* This was most apparent in the smallest of the three schools, where groups, by necessity, crossed between the age boundaries; in the larger school, following the same phonics policy, grouping could take place horizontally rather than vertically.

In all of the teachers' interviews, the choice of personal pronouns reveals their allegiance to the scheme or school policy. When asked to describe how they taught reading, the dominant pronoun was 'we'. When talking about grouping, resourcing, assessment systems, etc, all teachers were using the first-person plural, situating themselves as part of a wider community of teachers, TAs, etc., all following the same plan to get to the same goal:

> Basically what *we* do is if *we're* introducing Phase 5, for example, *we* will introduce the new sound, *we'll* look at what the equivalent was in Phase 3 as *we're* trying to embed choices, that there are alternatives, *we* look at how it's written and *we* also look at what the rule is to use it, so for example, there's some that are dead easy so it's always Phase 3 at the end and if it's Phase 5, it'll be in the middle, and so they start, as they get mature, it tends to be a bit of information that just some of them pick up but *we* just keep it going through, so when *we* get to the end of the year, that's something that's become embedded within their knowledge but *we* also get them to apply it, so one thing they really like is where *we* have pieces

> of coloured paper and they have to work out how many sounds are in the word and then each square represents a phoneme, for example. (Teacher 4: School C)

When talking about their personal beliefs, the pronoun I was more likely to be used:

> *I* don't think the children get enough good quality listening to good quality literature. *I* don't think that happens at all. Again, it's something *I* try to do…. (Teacher 2, School B)

This switching from 'I' to 'we' is perhaps suggestive of the 'double bind', an example of discursive manifestations of contradictions explored in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, (Engeström and Sannino, 2011), with a sense that personal opinions have to take second place to conforming to the school's phonics policy. There appeared to be tensions between conformity and experimentation (Lee, 2011). This teacher was mediating the difference between the team or school goal of maximising their PSC results by following a prescriptive programme of phonics with their own understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher of reading. Whilst overtly following the dictated programme for phonics instruction in her school, this teacher expressed her ambivalence to the scheme by suggesting that she has to provide additional teaching to achieve her goal of teaching children to become 'readers' rather than 'decoders'.

8.5 The use of pseudowords

The inclusion of pseudowords in the PSC has always been a divisive issue. Whilst they are a recognised way of assessing a child's phonological processing skills, they are now taking up an increasingly large proportion of the time allocated to phonics sessions as teachers endeavour to make sure that their pupils are prepared for this aspect of the PSC (Walker et al, 2015). Many schools who successfully taught phonics prior to the PSC did so without using pseudowords daily but have now had to include them in their teaching plans. The teachers interviewed were all clear about the purpose of their inclusion but admitted that there were certain problems, namely children misreading words as they tried to make sense of them.

***Question**: What's your opinion of alien words being on the screening check?*

***Response**: I think it's a positive thing because then we can check that they're sounding out correctly and not memorising the words. (Teacher 2: School B)*

***Question**: What's your opinion of alien words being on the screening check?*

***Response**: AHHH… Sometimes I think it's a bit mean to them, because particularly having done the check myself for a number of years, I think they're reading a lot of words as they think they should be… 'cos a lot of the children are able readers and are trying to make them into real words rather than nonsense words. I understand that they're there for the children to apply their skills and once you've got over that barrier, you've got to break these words down, then I think, you know, that it is showing that application but for a lot of children, they're constantly looking, including my own daughter when she did it, they're just looking to read the correct word which is a bit tricky for some of them. (Teacher 1: School A)*

***Question**: So what's your opinion of alien words being on the screening check?*

***Response**: The thing is we don't actually spend masses of time on that [alien words]. The only reason we do is because they sometimes try to change them into real words.*

***Question**: So they need to be familiar with the concept that they don't make sense.*

***Response**: It does, it does to a certain extent, it makes them decode, it forces them to decode, because they can't guess the word, and they can't sight read the word and that's the whole point of the phonics screening, isn't it? There's alien words in there so that more confident readers can't just sight read because they want them to decode. We don't, in our phonics sessions, have a particularly big focus on alien words, it's more the real words because it's…, because I think that's more important to develop that fluency because if they can sight-read, then great, but if you're throwing in loads and loads of nonsense words, we tend to save that more for when we're doing the phonics screening test.*

(Teacher 4: School C)

In School C, the school that is the least phonics dominated, the link between fluency and decoding was explored. The children need to develop the skill of sight-reading familiar words, words that they might have previously had to decode. If children are always 'reading' new and different alien words, they are going to struggle with developing fluency. It was also mentioned by Teacher 4 that children sometimes have to be coaxed out of decoding or sounding out every word that they see as some early readers seem to develop a habit or an understanding that reading is 'sounding out and blending':

> *Yes, because sight reading is what's going to build your fluency if your decoding is fine. I've said to them, right, remember, and only a few children naturally do this, decode a sentence and then go, oh I know what it says now, and then read it through and then that's a brilliant skill otherwise how do you know what that says if you're going 'I… t…. It…h…a…d... had… a ….' How do you know because it's going b… b… b… b…* .[staccato saying of sounds] *So I say to them, right, now you know what it says, say it, but I think naturally there's probably 2 or 3 children in the class every year who show that they already do that which is quite interesting. (Teacher 4: School C)*

This teacher appears to echo Allington's concerns that "many struggling readers read aloud word-by-word with little phrasing or intonation…These readers seem to have habituated reading as a word-by-word reading performance" (Allington 2014:18). It seems that the children need to be explicitly taught to move from sounding out to reading and the focus on individual words in the PSC does not lend itself to developing skills in phonics to help ascertain meaning from a text. Also, as children are forced to 'sound out' alien words, a key component of the test, this habit seems to become engrained, with children sounding out words that they could easily read by sight. Making sure that even confident, fluent readers have to keep practising sounding out so that they are prepared for the PSC slows children down in making that jump to fluent reading and reading for meaning. The emphasis on sounding out, even when it is not necessary, is holding children back:

> Their over-reliance on letter-sound relationships gets in the way of predicting what is coming in a text because they are not constructing meaning as they read. They do not rely on semantic or syntactic cueing systems because these have been sacrificed to the focus on phonics. Readers

> should use phonics; they should use it to contribute to the construction of meaning. (Meyer 2010, p73).

If they see phonics as the only way of reading, and indeed it is the only way that they are being taught reading, then transferring to fluency can become problematic.

8.6 Reading comprehension and wider reading skills

All of the teachers interviewed were well aware of the importance of developing children's reading comprehension skills. They talked about shared story times, language development and promoting reading for pleasure. Nevertheless, there were discrepancies between whether these teachers saw reading comprehension as a parallel development with decoding skills or as 'the next step' to be covered once a child can decode confidently. If learning to read is related to the ability to extract meaning from printed text, then the focus on phonics at the expense of other reading skills could be seen as "the imposition on our children of a uni-dimensional approach to the teaching of a multi-dimensional process" (Wray 2006, p117). The amount of time spent on phonics was hard to quantify but one teacher estimated that the balance of time spent between phonics and other aspects of Literacy was 80% phonics to 20% 'Literacy'. This comment was from one of the teachers in a school using a commercial phonics programme.

The fact that so many of the teaching strategies employed in the preparation for the PSC involve looking at isolated words, both real and pseudo, can lead to children failing to understand reading as an engagement with a whole text. Taylor (1999, p223) describes "decontextualized units of print" as a "meaningless exercise". Weaker readers in particular seem to struggle making the link between decoding words and understanding a text as a whole.

> ***Question**: Do you think there is a link between phonics and comprehension?*
>
> ***Response**: I think the phonics is almost like understanding the word sounds but they've got to… that's really the building blocks to be able to read fluently, and I think once they read fluently, then there's the comprehension so it's like the stepping stones, I guess once they've got the phonics, they can blend, they can read, then they become fluent, then they can understand what they read.*
>
> *(Teacher 1: School A)*

The teacher that spoke most vociferously about comprehension was from the school that was not using a commercial scheme and had timetabled phonics as the shorter fifteen-minute slot, followed at another time by a 'English/Literacy' lesson consisting of a more text-based approach. (For Schools A and B, their timetabled 'English' time was primarily driven by following their phonics programme, made up of longer one-hour sessions, all based around phonics teaching.) She spoke of their expectations for teaching reading. *"Well we've started this year to put a bigger emphasis on choral and echo reading so they start to be able to read like you want them to, so you show them the end goal." (Teacher 4: School C)* They are working on developing fluency as a means to aid comprehension and demonstrate reading for meaning. She then explained that in her opinion, there was not a link between phonics and reading comprehension and describes how comprehension does not match performance on the PSC.

> ***Question**: Can you think of a child who passed the screening check in Y1 but is unlikely to meet the standard in Y2? And why do you think this is?*
>
> ***Response**: I think it's just because they've been brilliantly coached, you know, actually recognizing the sounds, is a completely different skill to understanding… To be able to pick out the key information, like I said before, just because you can read it doesn't mean that you understand what you're reading. (Teacher 4: School C)*

Her comment 'brilliantly coached' seems to epitomise that narrow and restricted diet of phonics preparation, which masks deficits in wider reading attainment. At the end of her interview, she summed up her school's position: *"… that's why we have to put in specific reading planning. We don't just rely on phonics for reading, we can't."* (Teacher 4: School C) This is an acknowledgement that the PSC and its monitoring by Ofsted has led to schools feeling pushed to prepare for a test that they know is not assessing the full range of required skills. In some schools, external pressure to improve PSC scores is therefore taking priority over developing equally important comprehension skills. It is an example of teachers 'doing without believing' (Braun and Maguire, 2020).

8.7 Performance Related Pay

It is significant that many teachers currently face Performance Management targets based on their pupils' performance in the PSC. The existence of clear, measurable targets, such as PSC results, lend themselves to Performance Management targets.

> ***Question**: Were your Performance Management targets based on Phonic data or Reading data or neither?*
>
> ***Response**: Yes, phonics screen, the amount of children to pass the test.*
>
> ***Question:** Did you have a target for the number of children reaching the standard for reading in general?*
>
> ***Response**: Yeah, there were targets based on percentages of children to meet the targets in other areas of the curriculum but there was also an additional one for the number of children to pass the screen. (Teacher 1: School A)*

> ***Question**: Are your Performance Management targets based on Phonic data or Reading data or both?*
>
> ***Response**: Year 1 has always been phonics data as far as I'm aware. (Teacher 3: School B)*

Using PSC data could be seen as particularly harsh for Year One teachers. In Year Two, the current assessment guidance allows teachers to use pupils' SATs scores to inform their assessments. Therefore, borderline children, who have performed at the required standard on day-to-day formative assessments can still be given a 'pass' grade, even if they slipped below this threshold in the formal end of year summative assessments. In Year One, teachers are not allowed to give children the benefit of the doubt. If a child fails to reach the pass mark on the day of the test, it is a clear failure. The pressure to achieve the predicted targets is immense on Year One teachers.

The use of this data in judging teachers' performance serves to increase the 'compliance mentality' (Ellis and Smith 2017, p85) of Year One teachers and to raise the profile of high-quality phonics teaching even more, quite possibly at the expense of other reading activities.

> ***Question**: At what point in Year 1 do you think the phonics screen takes priority over anything else in Literacy?*
>
> ***Response**: So obviously the test's in June…really, I think they should be given that diet from as soon as they come in* [in Year One] *so that they can switch between the two quite naturally…I think priority tends to be given, certainly after Christmas, with a real push after February half term to really drill down into those words. (Teacher 1: School A)*

This relentless focus on words, 'flashcarding' (Teacher 1, School A), interventions and alien words could be causing these 'false negative' cases, where children who have passed the PSC in Year One do not have the wider reading and comprehension skills required to make adequate progress in Year Two. It is clear that decoding and comprehension are not valued equally in Year One, which could be the reason for progress stalling in later years.

8.8 Summary of teachers' views

Throughout all of the teacher interviews, common threads involved the need to prepare for the test. This involved specific time being allocated for mock tests to get the children used to the situation and a change in teaching strategies to focus on alien words. Teachers were confident that their formative school assessment procedures were adequate to help them assess their pupils and that across the year, they had sufficient evidence to judge their pupils' progress and attainment, both in phonics and in reading comprehension, although this may not have been the case several years ago. Therefore, at the time of the interviews, the PSC itself was only adding an additional assessment measure; if it did not exist, teachers in these schools would not have lost their understanding of pupils' progress. Whether this is true for all schools is an area for further research. The formal PSC was cancelled due to COVID-19 in the summer terms of 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, schools should have continued to monitor and track their pupils' progress in phonics and reading. An analysis of these formative assessments could form part of a review into whether teachers' informal judgements are robust enough to replace the national screening programme.

All the teachers demonstrated strong compliance to their schools' phonics schemes, showing that the need for a whole school approach is well embedded in these schools. The biggest difference in these schemes, and therefore in the teachers' views, was the question of whether to set for phonics or use whole class teaching. Whilst all the teachers were strongly committed to their schools' pedagogy, it is significant that overall, both methods were resulting in broadly similar phonics results by the end of Year One. A rigid adherence to a SSP scheme is claimed to improve results: many schemes advertise improvements in PSC scores as a selling point in their publicity material (https://monsterphonics.com/stories/). However, despite quite different approaches and pedagogical beliefs, the teachers in the three schools were all achieving similar results. It could therefore be reasonably deduced that the programmes are there to support teaching; the benefits of high quality first teaching are stronger than benefits of using one particular scheme.

Concerns about comprehension were raised across all the schools, acknowledging that Year One teaching should involve more than just phonics and decoding. However, the teachers were divided about whether comprehension should follow phonics and decoding, or be taught alongside it.

Finally, it seems that the PSC causes more concerns for the teachers than their pupils. Whilst teachers worry about data, targets, test preparation and pupil anxiety, the impact of the PSC on the pupils' confidence, self-esteem and well-being seems to be negligible, according to the pupil discussions.

Chapter Nine Discussion and Triangulation of Data

9.1 Introduction

Whilst the previous three chapters have examined the findings in the different stages of the research, it is now necessary to integrate the findings as part of the true nature of a mixed methods study. The key research question was an evaluation of the impact of the Phonics Screening Check in English schools; this can only be answered by combining "multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions and standpoints" (Johnson et al., 2007, p113). Therefore the key themes raised through discussions can be validated and triangulated through qualitative interpretation of the interview data, alongside the quantitative performance data at pupil, school and national level. The mixed methodological approach has combined the following:

- The test data for the children who have been previously taught by the teacher participants
- The views of the pupils who had been taught in Year One by these teachers
- The thoughts of the teachers who have responsibilities towards both the pupils and the data.

Integrating the research findings enables a more comprehensive contribution in this area. This 'simultaneous triangulation' (Morse,1991) of the data helps to validate judgments on the impact of the PSC, whilst giving equal value to both performance data and the voices of those involved.

9.2 The Status of the PSC

One of the key aims of this thesis was to investigate the consequences of mandatory, external testing of the reading skills of very young children. Regardless of whether one believes that the content domain of the PSC is appropriate, the introduction of a formal pass or fail, high stakes test is an example of government intervention in an area previously unchecked.

The sharp rise in national phonics results from 2012 onwards shows that teachers have been forced to adapt their teaching styles to suit the demands of the test. Time is certainly being allocated to test preparation rather than wider reading or literacy activities. Pupils' results carry significance not only at a school performance level but also for individual teachers in their

Performance Management reviews. Consequently, we now see the ubiquitous 'sounding out' message regurgitated by the child participants and the conformity of the teachers in following phonics schemes designed to ensure that children pass the PSC. The different types of research data presented here all indicate the impact of the PSC as a tool of discipline or a lever to enforce policy change.

9.3 The Content Domain of the Test

The question of the role of pseudowords is also partially answered by integrating the research data. The increasing pass rate seen in the national data demonstrates that pupils are mastering the skill of decoding pseudowords and have acquired the desired competency. The sounds taught and tested are therefore appropriate for the vast majority of Year One pupils. Teachers admit that preparing their children to meet the content domain of the test inevitably results in the drilling of blending skills which is at the expense of other reading-based activities. Yet for pupils, this need to practise reading pseudowords is the least enjoyable aspect of their reading lessons; they also do not understand its purpose or relevance. It may be helping their cognitive development but it is not helping pupils' affective development. Whilst time spent practising reading pseudowords has not particularly affected the emotional wellbeing or motivational drive of the child participants of this research, this may not be true for all pupils in all schools. Additional research in schools with below average PSC data would be necessary to further evaluate the impact of pseudoword reading on children's reading development.

9.4 The PSC and the nature of reading

The next theme to consider is whether the PSC has altered the nature of what 'reading' is perceived to be, both by the teachers and their pupils. The fact that the PSC data has risen at a greater rate than the comprehension data suggests that the celebratory stance of the government with its claims of 163,000 more six-year-olds on track to become fluent readers (DfE, 2018) was perhaps misplaced. The longitudinal performance data from the three target schools raises significant concerns that passing the PSC is not a reliable indicator of future success, and indeed, merely scraping through the PSC impacts negatively on children as they are deemed to be adequate readers and then are not considered for further reading support. Passing the PSC may lead to a false sense of security for both teachers and parents if they believe that a high

phonics score equates to being a good *reader*. The fact that this test does not offer a diagnostic assessment, nor does it test for fluency, means that it may mask problems that will become more obvious in the future. The longitudinal performance data highlights that there are children who achieve highly in phonics in Year One, but do not maintain that trajectory when tested again in Year Two or Year Six. The teachers interviewed all described their efforts to ensure that children are exposed to other reading activities, revealing that the more experienced a teacher is, the more they can see the greater picture. Particularly the Year One teachers who have previously taught older children were more sensitive to the role that automaticity, fluency and comprehension would play in shaping their pupils' future success in reading than were teachers whose careers had been spent teaching Year One or younger children.

The restrictive nature of a 'phonics' diet had been identified prior to 2012 as a concern. "The emphasis on teaching sight vocabulary and phonics skills is seen to be potentially seriously damaging for children by changing the nature of reading, from understanding, appreciating, and evaluating what is read, to memorizing phonic rules and decoding" (Solity and Vousden 2009, p471). Applegate (2009) also criticized the privileging of a phonics-based curriculum:

> If, as it seems, the processes of automaticity and comprehension are interactive and intertwined in their efforts upon each other, there is no rationale for partitioning them in our instructional schemata. To do so is to run the risk that some students and teachers will come to accept the notion that automaticity and fluency are ends in themselves and not means to the ultimate goal – a thoughtful response to text. Instead we believe that fluency must take its rightful place among many other cognitive processes that affect the quality of comprehension, such as background knowledge, vocabulary, motivation, selective attention, and schemata organization (Applegate, 2009, p519).

Similarly, Goodman (1996) acknowledged that comprehension does not automatically come after decoding:

> Reductionist research in reading has inevitably focused on recognition of bits and pieces of language rather than on comprehension of real texts. But we can't assume that perception of letters and words in the process of making sense of real meaningful texts is the same as recognizing letters and words in isolation or in highly reduced contexts. And we can't assume that comprehension follows successive recognition of words. (Goodman 1996, p5).

Whilst the teachers in this study were aware of this and were making allowances and adjustments in their teaching to compensate for this uni-dimensional approach, the pupils' answers were illuminative. The pupils had managed to separate 'phonics' from 'reading'. It

is true that these pupils were in Year Two and so the phonics element to their teaching and learning would have been reduced in the period after the PSC but they talked about enjoying books and sharing books with others, in class or at home. They rated their enjoyment of phonics teaching below their enjoyment of books and reading. Their focus on books rather than phonics, for example, when asked how they had learnt to read, suggested either that phonics had become 'separated' from their understanding of the reading process or that they had quickly forgotten the time they had spent practising phonics and alien words. It would seem that the PSC does not necessarily change children's perceptions of reading if it is positioned within a language rich classroom and the teachers are aware of the need to balance a phonics approach with opportunities to read and share high quality children's literature. Caution must be taken though if assuming that this is happening in all primary schools. Pressures to increase school data, coming from school management, local authorities, Ofsted and government initiatives such as school-to-school phonics support, can very easily take precedence over wider classroom pedagogy, leading to a 'drilling' approach to reading decontextualized words. There is an obvious risk that the PSC *could* change perceptions of what reading is but this risk can be mitigated by encouraging teachers to share a love of language and reading.

9.5 The PSC and Reading Instruction

Alongside the question of whether reading means 'decoding' or 'constructing meaning from text', contradictions were evident in the teacher discussions about whether reading instruction should have a sequential nature or not i.e., phonics first and comprehension second. The metalanguage of phonics uses sequential vocabulary: the children move from one phase to the next. Ehri's model of reading development (2005) describes four alphabetic phases. Government policy also suggests something of a sequential model by testing phonic knowledge at age six and comprehension knowledge at age seven. This is contrary to models of reading that value both word reading and comprehension as parallel constructs. The Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tumner, 1986) promotes decoding and language comprehension as independent skills but both have equal importance. Deficits in one aspect will not produce skilled and effective reading. Reading is a 'multi-dimensional process'.

Teachers could identify when phonics become the 'priority'; preparation for the test started months before the June administration date. One of the teachers describes how the move to reading for pleasure and comprehension questions happens towards the end of the year.

> ***Question**: Do you think there is a link between phonics and comprehension?*
>
> ***Response**: Not a lot.*
>
> ***Question:** Do you think you can expand on that?*
>
> ***Response:** Well, I think research proved or something that you had to be reading at a certain rate to actually get comprehension from the text…*
>
> ***Question:** Fluency…*
>
> ***Response:** Yeah, you know if the children are slogging away, decode, decode, they don't even remember what they've been reading at all, so it's a tricky one, until they get to the point where they've got it running through their veins, they can almost decode in a blink and move on, they're not going to understand a thing. (Teacher 3: School B)*

It appears from some of the teacher interviews that there is a definite tension between the necessity of getting the phonics teaching right first, to meet the high-stakes PSC, and the acknowledgment that wider reading skills are equally important. Teachers know that they and their schools are being judged on phonics achievement; their Performance Management targets, and therefore quite possibly their pay rises, are linked to their pupils' phonics test scores. Yet schools are still able to emphasize what it means to be a good reader. Another teacher (School C) points out that in her school, they model fluent and expressive reading so: "they start to be able to read like you want them to so you show them the end goal." They see phonics as just one part of a wider goal of developing 'readers'. There is a more holistic view of reading with fluency and expression encouraged as part of the drive for comprehension.

When asked how their teacher would assess a new pupil on their reading, the pupils predominantly chose books as the tool, not a word list. The fact that the children have constructed reading as a book related task rather than a word related task illustrates that teaching does not have to privilege decoding above comprehension and enjoyment. Therefore, although the demands of preparing children for the PSC could skew the year's teaching schemes towards decoding and word reading, it is still possible to plan for a broader reading curriculum. Problems would arise when phonics is allowed to completely dominate a child's

reading experiences, resulting in disengagement and a failure to develop the other skills necessary for competent reading.

If learning development takes places when a child participates in practices within their cultural community (Hedegaard, 2009), then the purpose of reading decontextualized flash cards and pseudowords only widens the disjunction between home and school practices. This is perhaps illustrated by the children's responses, both in the ranking task and in their discussions about reading: the significance of phonics was consistently ranked lower than those reading practices that involved reading for meaning and purpose or those reading experiences that were shared between children and teachers/parents. The children appeared to have disassociated phonics and preparation for the PSC from their wider understanding of reading. Whilst having the ability to decode with confidence is certainly a necessary skill, the ability to engage with and respond to a text is equally important for generating capable readers.

9.6 The Expected Standard

The pass mark for the PSC has been thirty-two out of forty since its inception. Initially, teachers knew what the pass mark was before their children took the test and this may have led to the suspicious spike in scores at thirty-two (see Appendix 6). More recently, teachers have had to submit their pupils' scores before the pass mark was released, with the expectation that the required score might fluctuate slightly from year to year. However, the pass mark has remained constant. Clark (2014) has questioned why thirty-two was selected to be the pass mark but has not been able to find any government justification of this 'arbitrary prescribed standard'. (Clark, 2014, p51).

The PSC may have clarified expectations for some teachers and some may have welcomed a clear indication of whether their pupils have attained an adequate competency.

> ***Question:*** *To what extent do you think the PSC has influenced the way your school teaches reading?*
>
> ***Response:*** *I think a huge amount because it really gives you something to benchmark from, so I think before we were happily teaching phonics but then when the phonics screen came in, it gave you a lot of pressure to make sure*

that you were getting to a certain point and that the children were really decoding correctly. (Teacher 2: School B)

The idea of giving teachers 'a benchmark', or something to aim out had been received positively by this teacher. It seemed to offer a validation of her teaching, a reassurance that her pupils were on track. It also seemed to offer an incentive to focus on those 'bubble children' who might meet the threshold with extra support. Interestingly the word 'pressure' is mentioned again. Even though the intentions of the PSC are viewed favourably here, there is still an element of external judgement and accountability. For schools that already taught reading through a phonic approach, the PSC provides a clear national target standard that had perhaps been missing from earlier phonic programmes.

9.7 The Validity of the PSC

When analyzing the performance and progress scores of individual pupils and groups of pupils, it is clear to see that there are inconsistencies with the data profiles. Although the vast majority of children in this study passed both the PSC and their later reading tests, approximately one-quarter did not. The data suggest that those who only just pass the PSC form an extremely vulnerable group, with a strong chance of failing to convert their early progress in Year One to a pass in Year Two. Disregarding any outliers in the data, there are also children with very high scores in Year One who do not match this potential in later tests. The national statistics do not really allow for such a detailed analysis and so the pupil data from the three schools draws attention to these anomalies.

Firstly, from the teacher discussions, it is clear that most teachers can identify those children who are likely to struggle with comprehension later. They are aware of their pupils' relative strengths and weaknesses. However, limited resources and time for intervention programmes means that phonic support takes a higher profile than other language needs. Likewise, after so many practice tests, teachers can identify which children may have failed the PSC unexpectedly for various reasons.

Secondly, it would seem that a banded approach to the PSC, rather than the dichotomous labelling might be more useful. If pupils scoring between twenty-eight and thirty-four were banded, whether formally or informally, as an at-risk group, it might allow for more targeted and appropriate support to be offered. For slightly less fluent or confident readers, scraping a

score of thirty-two might be offered less support over the next year than a child scoring thirty-one. If the PSC is to serve its purpose in identifying those at risk, it would seem that this group need to be highlighted. Pupils falling significantly below the standard of the PSC would already have been identified and would more than likely be children who had already been identified as having other processing or SEND issues.

9.8 The PSC and Pedagogy

As discussed earlier in Chapter Eight, the issue of grouping or setting for phonics split the teachers/schools in the sample. The PSC does not dictate classroom organisation and the government policy only stipulates systematic synthetic phonics should be taught, not how it should be taught. The choice of scheme is up to the schools themselves. It is relevant that one of the most popular schemes nationally and the one used in two of the sample schools requires children to be grouped by ability. As the pressure to improve results placed demands on schools, more Head Teachers have turned to commercial schemes and are even introducing them to pre-school classes (Campbell, Torr and Cologon, 2011). The Year Six data from the schools involved in this study were very similar, suggesting that grouping or whole class teaching did not have a long-term impact on children's reading attainment. However, the impact on the children's self-esteem and confidence was evident. This was acknowledged by both teachers and pupils:

> *We've worked really hard to tell them it's to help them move on. In fact, within my Y1 Literacy team, I've had two Y2s, who've now filtered back into the Y2 classroom and they're really pleased with themselves because they feel like they can cope and they can do it so that's been a bit of a positive one, I think. (Teacher 3, School B)*

However the sentiment expressed by a Year 2 child from the same school who is not yet able to rejoin her peers in the Y2 classroom was one of sadness. "*It's bad because we like seeing each other. We want to be all in the same classroom because we don't like being in what we've already been."* The school's purchase of a commercial scheme here was not influenced by the PSC itself; it was purchased as it was the best fit with the school's pedagogical beliefs; however schools with poor PSC results are currently being encouraged to purchase such schemes and are being offered financial support for both resources and training. Therefore, pressure to

improve PSC can lead to schools feeling obligated to purchase commercial schemes. The schemes are then dictating classroom practice.

9.9 Summary

Taking an integrated mixed methods approach to the analysis of the impact of the PSC has revealed the following aspects:

- The teachers in this study are still able to combine preparing effectively for the PSC with developing a love for reading but this may vary between schools.
- The reliance on using commercial schemes to address phonics scores has resulted in pedagogical changes in classrooms, the main one being an increase in grouping by ability, which can be upsetting for some children.
- The reliability of the PSC in predicting children's future reading attainment is recognised as weak by teachers and this is echoed by the correlation statistics from the three schools.
- The value of teaching and testing pseudowords is seen as questionable by teachers and takes valuable teaching time away from other reading activities.
- Children in this study appear to dislike practising pseudowords and are unsure of their purpose.
- The test can be problematic for specific groups of children, more able readers in particular.
- The effectiveness of phonics teaching has increased nationally as illustrated by test scores but these gains are not fully reflected in other reading tests.
- Schools that have different approaches to the teaching of phonics in preparation for the PSC can still produce similar results in other reading tests at age seven and eleven.

The combined data suggest that PSC has had a considerable impact on both the teachers and the pupils who took part in this study: it has affected the time spent on phonics, the nature of the resources used and the teaching techniques applied. It has been responsible for increasing teacher accountability and the related stress that this causes. However, the emotional impact on the pupils themselves appeared to be less obvious. The increase in the number of children passing is indicative that the PSC has been successful as a way of enforcing a phonics policy which previously had not been widely observed. However, in schools that have a high pass rate, its usefulness is limited. These schools have robust and rigorous tracking and assessment in place and the children receive clear and targeted instruction. The value of the PSC is perhaps

not in identifying which individual children need support but rather which schools are in difficulty. It has perhaps then become a tool for monitoring leadership and management in schools.

Chapter Ten Conclusion

The aims of this thesis were to examine the impact of a national phonics screening programme for six-year-olds in England. The introduction of the PSC in 2012 was at the time contentious and opposed by both practitioners and reading researchers, and its value and purpose are still being questioned today. In the nine years since its introduction, whilst its initial aims may have evolved somewhat, it is still clear that the PSC plays a significant role in the lives of children and teachers in Year One. It is important that children be taught to decode accurately and confidently as quickly as possible and there is evidence that a structured phonics programme is the best way to deliver this instruction. Nevertheless, the ability to decode must be matched by the ability to comprehend what has been read. This thesis investigated the consequences of the compulsory high-stakes testing of phonics.

The following supplementary research questions were addressed:

1. Is the PSC a reliable and useful indicator of pupil attainment at age six?

2. How has the pedagogy of teaching reading changed since the introduction of the PSC?

3. Has the PSC affected children's understanding of what it means to be a reader?

In order to fully evaluate the impact of the PSC, a mixed methods approach was adopted, enabling links to be made between pupil performance data and the experiences of those involved.

10.1 Reflections

The children's interviews were particularly illuminating. Although for ethical reasons, I was unable to ask the children directly about their experiences of taking the PSC in the previous term, I was still expecting it to play a more dominant role in the discussions. Whilst they could explain what happened in phonics sessions and how to blend and decode words, they were either unaware or had been unconcerned that they were being prepared for a test. This could be due to the sensitivities of the teachers in their preparations or could suggest that the children were compliant and did not see the test as anything out of the ordinary. Indeed, all of the children had been repeatedly tested using mock PSC resources throughout Year One as part of

each school's regular assessment and monitoring programmes. They just accepted that they no longer 'did' alien words or pseudowords in Year Two because they had learnt them all the previous year. They did not see the PSC as the end goal of their phonics work, rather that they had simply completed all of the words that needed to be learnt. They generally failed to associate pseudowords with decoding; they saw them as a task in identifying real or nonsense words. Pseudowords were linked to their understanding of reading for meaning. "We know that they're not real words because we've practised them" (Child, School B). They seemed to believe that they had now learnt all of the possible fake words and so would not make a mistake in their reading of real text for meaning. The children did not appear to relate alien words with testing. This apparent lack of anxiety about the PSC has been an unexpected positive finding of this thesis and goes someway to allay the fears of those that believe that an early high stakes test is potentially damaging to the wellbeing of pupils (Grundin, 2018).

In terms of the impact of the PSC on children's emotional wellbeing, the only real suggestion of negativity came from children who were unhappy about the grouping/setting taking place in their schools. The question remains unanswered as to whether schools' choice of setting over whole class teaching is an indirect consequence of the PSC or a direct consequence of the schools' choices when selecting a scheme that requires this approach. It is hard to judge whether a particular phonics scheme had been chosen by the school because they wanted to improve reading or because they wanted to improve the school's phonics performance data. From my knowledge of the three schools involved, I am aware that their schemes were originally chosen to improve reading rather than phonics data but it would not be possible to say the same for all schools. I believe that when schools have primarily concentrated on what the results say (or need to say) about their school, then pedagogy is at risk of being altered to suit the short term demands of the test, rather than the longer-term interests of the child. Teaching is replaced by test preparation, which in turn undermines the validity of the test scores themselves, (Zhao, 2017). These unintended consequences should not be ignored when evaluating educational policy. Children are more likely to be grouped by ability for phonics than for any other aspect of their learning (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017a). If one result of the introduction of the PSC has been to increase the number of schools that choose to set their children for phonics, then it can be logically inferred that the PSC has caused a pedagogical change which can put children at risk of harm emotionally (Jarvis, 2016), even if academically there might be some benefit. Nevertheless, it was exciting to hear the children in this study talking about books and reading; their love of reading did not appear to have been

diminished by a focus on phonics. They talked more about book titles, authors and characters than book levels or bands. In fact, when asked about how they had learnt to read, phonics was rarely mentioned. They identified that their books had become progressively harder but they talked about learning and recognising new words, rather than developing decoding skills. If this means that, in their minds, phonics as a skill is somehow separate from 'reading' as a skill, then their learning of phonic skills has perhaps been successful, in that it has created confident readers, who are able to enjoy their reading, without becoming overly concerned about decoding. In this respect, the early focus on phonics, and a curriculum heavily weighted towards the acquisition of the coding skills necessary to pass the PSC, has been justified. Pseudowords and other purely decoding tasks were clearly less popular with the children than other aspects of reading, showing that the pupils valued reading for its socio-cultural, affective and vicarious properties, rather than as a cognitive skill. However, it is also true to say that the child participants in this study have learnt to decode effectively through structured phonic teaching and therefore are able to experience the other benefits of reading. The teaching of phonics and its monitoring by the PSC have moved pupils quickly and painlessly from being non-readers to confident readers.

The role of the statistical data (both national and school) in this study has been important in trying to triangulate the views of different stakeholders. At a very simplistic level, the number of children passing the PSC nationally increased in the first few years after its introduction but the pass rate since then has plateaued. Whilst it is true that there are still some schools that are well below the national average for phonics data, the vast majority of schools have become reasonably proficient at producing six-year-olds that can pass the test. The national rise in the proportion of children passing the PSC suggests that one impact of the PSC is that teachers across the country have had to become much more focused in the rigorous teaching of sounds and blending, and are more likely to be more confident in identifying and addressing the needs of pupils who may need further support in order to pass. Therefore, it could be said that the PSC has been successful in addressing its initial aims of ensuring that fewer children slip through the net and enter Year Two without basic reading and decoding skills. Synthetic phonics was a key part of the reading curriculum in England before the PSC but the lever of the policy implementation was the test itself. Without the test, many schools would have continued to dabble in phonics, along with other methods of teaching and reading. The PSC has necessitated a reduction in schools using a mixture of methods to teach reading. The test has certainly been responsible for a sharpening of practice, in line with government policy.

However, since Ofsted has also recently focused on early reading, with the teaching of phonics and the provision of fully decodable books at the heart of their inspections of EYFS and KS1 provision, it could be argued that the PSC, with its harsh pass-fail judgments, is no longer the only lever in the government's phonics policy.

As a Key Stage Two teacher myself, I have found the longitudinal element to the data analysis the most interesting. Two key points have arisen:

- Phonics standards have improved since 2012 but reading standards (as judged in 'End of Key Stage' assessments at age seven and eleven) have not improved at the same rate. The PSC has therefore failed to have a long-term quantifiable impact on children's reading development.
- The correlation between performance in the PSC and performance on other reading tests is not irrefutable. Many children who pass in phonics at age six are having comprehension difficulties at age seven. It could be reasonably expected that these children were actually having comprehension difficulties at age six also but this deficit had been masked by the focus on phonics and the need to prepare children for a test on a very limited aspect of a much wider and more complex skill. By age eleven, more of the children have had more time and support to develop their comprehension. There is a strong correlation between PSC data and other reading scores but it is not as definitive as government rhetoric might suggest. The data from the sample schools record that approximately one quarter of the pupils pass in Year One but do not pass the next reading test in Year Two. This implies that the PSC is not sufficient in identifying all children who may benefit from additional support with early reading. Whilst acknowledging that the ability to decode words is crucial to being able to read, the quantitative data appear to suggest that comprehension is a skill that needs particular time and attention, with intervention when necessary. Time spent on phonics at the expense of comprehension in the early stages could be the reason for children struggling to reach the expected standard at age seven.

From the teachers' perspective, the PSC had a significant impact on their working lives: concerns about performance management targets; worries about how the children would cope in the test situation; and a recognition of the tensions between the time spent on phonics and the need to embed a wider reading for pleasure culture were all voiced in the teacher

discussions. The teachers involved did not question the importance of phonics; it was the importance given to the test itself that was the issue for them. It was telling that they suggested that if the test were to be abolished, little if anything would change in the way they taught reading. They would continue with the same schemes, resources and teaching methods but the pressure to ensure that their pupils performed on the day of the PSC would disappear. They were confident that their teaching and assessment approaches were effective and that the PSC was superfluous to their needs, only adding another layer of unnecessary accountability. Whichever scheme was used in the different sample schools, regular formative assessment was a key aspect and seen as positive. For these schools, a high stakes test was seen as an unnecessary distraction, although it was acknowledged that this may not have been the case in the early years of the test. The introduction of the test was recognised as providing a very clear standard to aim for that had perhaps not been there previously. There was concern, particularly from the school following the least prescriptive programme, that focusing too heavily on phonics might affect the development of other reading skills. What was noticeable was that all teachers appeared convinced that their school's approach was the best one: grouping or whole class; fifteen-minute discrete lessons or an hour of phonics-based reading and writing. They all showed significant conformity to their schools' programmes which had been designed to maximise children's decoding abilities and ensure strong performance in the PSC.

It is clear that in forcing schools to take the teaching of phonics seriously, the PSC has been successful in reinforcing government policy. Systematic Synthetic Phonics programmes now dominate children's early school experiences. Children who need more support with decoding have been formally identified, although it could be argued that good teachers should know this information through day-to-day formative assessments without the need for a high-stakes test. In terms of improving longer term standards in reading, the success of the PSC is less clear. The PSC resits in Year Two for any children who failed to meet the standard in Year One have meant that fewer children should have slipped through the cracks. However, additional funding to support these vulnerable children was never offered to schools. The PSC also only identifies children with weaknesses in phonics; it does not give diagnostic information or suggest how these children should be supported to catch up.

The test itself seems to have few negative associations for the children involved, even though it adds pressure and anxiety to the workload of teachers. In the schools in this study, the PSC does not appear to hamper children's enjoyment of reading, proving that high quality phonics

teaching can take place alongside meaningful reading for pleasure activities. For the children involved in the study, taking the test did not seem anything out of the ordinary and it did not appear to have concerned them. In fact, in the term after taking the PSC, they all failed to mention that they had taken a phonics test, suggesting that they were either unaware of the process or that it held very little significance in their experiences of phonics and reading.

10.2 Limitations of the Study

The schools involved in this study were all high performing schools. Whilst all three schools had pupils who did not meet the expected Year One standards, these pupils were a statistically small group. Nevertheless, this in itself proves that high quality phonics teaching in outstanding schools is not a 'magic bullet' that will bring about success for all. Further studies to compare the impact of the PSC on pupils and teachers in lower performing schools would add further insights to the research questions. For teachers who are under pressure to meet the national average scores for phonics, who may also be expecting an imminent Ofsted inspection, the PSC may take on greater significance as a disciplinary tool. It may be that teachers in schools where the pupils are struggling more in phonics may have a different view on the impact of the screening check, particularly if they belong to a school that is receiving support from the English Hub programme to help them improve their phonics scores.

Also, the numbers of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) or children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) included in this study were very small. Consequently, the children's responses in the qualitative discussions for this thesis were evaluated as a whole cohort, rather than assigned to designated groups. It has already been recognised that pupils with autism appear to struggle with the test as they find the concept of pseudowords difficult (Walker et al, 2015) so it could be assumed that they may have more negative associations with the PSC than other children. Also, research shows that EAL pupils perform nationally in the PSC at a similar level to non EAL children as phonics is simply a mechanical adherence to a set of rules for blending (Walker et al, 2015). However, these pupils are likely to need significant intervention to overcome language and comprehension difficulties as they move towards reading for meaning in later years. Additional research with a specific focus on particular groups of pupils would therefore be a valid direction for continuing to evaluate the long-term impact of the PSC.

10.3 Contribution to Knowledge

One of the most interesting aspects of analysing the quantitative data has been looking at the validity of the thirty-two out of forty pass mark. The claim made in 2014, that 163,000 more children were on track to be reading effectively (Gibb, 2018), includes many children that scored the minimum score of thirty-two. Data from 2019 still shows a spike at thirty-two.[7] This suggests that there is still an element of giving children the benefit of the doubt with the pronunciation of some of the words. Any children who are perhaps given a generous push towards the threshold are likely to have further difficulties with reading over the next few years. From the individual tracking data collected from the three schools, it would seem that a score of thirty-five or thirty-six would be a better indicator of children who are 'on track' for future reading success. Given that the pass mark for the PSC has not changed at all since its inception, it would seem that the time has come to review the pass mark in the light of children's later progress. Whilst a score of thirty-two may indicate adequate competency in decoding, it does not necessarily indicate a level of reading fluency that would allow for the comprehension of written text. On the other hand, there are others who believe that the phonic knowledge needed to score a pass is unrealistic for that age range, particularly for some summer born children and would like to see the pass mark reduced. However, the performance data has highlighted that children who score thirty-two to thirty-four form a particularly vulnerable group. They are unlikely to convert their pass in the PSC to a pass in reading the following year. It would seem that this group need careful monitoring and an early assessment of their language and comprehension skills, with support and intervention when necessary, to ensure that they are really 'on track' to become better readers. Teachers may be distracted by needing to support pupils who failed the PSC and are facing a resit in Year Two and this vulnerable group of pupils who just met the pass mark are at risk of being overlooked.

Another finding would suggest that there is a need for greater collaboration between Year One and Year Two teachers, so that both are more aware of the demands being put on staff and pupils in those year groups. Year One teachers should be aware of why passing the PSC is not a guarantee that a child will be a good reader in Year Two so that further support for developing wider reading skills can be added to the Year One teaching programme.

[7] *4,158 children scored thirty-one marks in 2019 whereas 20,790 scored 32 marks.*

Another issue identified by teachers during the research process suggests that the timing of the test may not be appropriate. For some children, having the option of taking and passing the test in January, for example, would mean that they would no longer have to keep 'practising' and could be spared the monotony of showing that they can decode alien words. Alternatively, if the test date were to be moved to Easter, it would give those who failed a whole term to catch up and be offered additional phonic intervention. They would then be ready to retake the test in July, hopefully meeting the expected standard by the end of the year. Having a termly 'screening window', whilst being more awkward practically for schools, might actually be more beneficial for both more able and less able pupils. It might also smooth out for inconsistencies in the data whereby children who currently underperform on the day of the test have to wait a whole year for retesting. Also, the number of 'false negative' results (Gilchrist and Snowling, 2018) might be reduced, if there was less of a focus on having to perform on a single day. Children could just be entered for the test when their teachers felt that they were ready.

10.4 Implications for Further Research

The final set of performance data collected for this thesis was from 2019. In the summer of 2020, no formal primary school assessments took place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 cohort of Year One children did not have to face the last-minute cramming and preparation for the screening check. It would be impossible to mitigate for the loss of learning time due to 2020 school closures so a comparison of data between different year groups would be unreliable. However, it would be interesting to compare the long-term progress of this unique cohort and whether the lack of a PSC score and preparation for the test will make a difference to their reading performance on leaving primary school in 2025.

My research focused on four teachers who were involved in preparing their pupils for the PSC. The impact on Year Two teachers would be another area for research, particularly with teachers who had been teaching before the PSC was introduced. Year Two teachers' views would allow an understanding of whether they felt that children now have different strengths and weaknesses when starting Year Two and whether they feel that the emphasis on phonics in

Year One has had an impact on overall reading standards. Year Two teachers also have to take responsibility for any re-sits that their pupils have to take. Their perspectives on the difficulties of preparing children for a catch-up test alongside continuing with the Year Two curriculum would be enlightening.

10.5 Final thoughts

Throughout the course of the data collection, I have enjoyed being able to share the insights of the pupils and the teachers. From my perspective, as a teacher of older children, it has been interesting to see the enthusiasm of the younger children for books and reading. The professionalism and the dedication of the teachers in ensuring what they see as the best provision for their pupils has also shone through.

After completing this thesis, I believe that the role of the PSC in monitoring and tracking children's progress may still be questionable. The long-term impact of the PSC, if judged by examining national reading scores at seven and eleven is not conclusive (DfE, 2015a) and the teachers in this study still challenged its usefulness and reliability as a diagnostic tool.

The PSC's impact on pedagogical change in the teaching of early reading in the three schools involved in this thesis has been clear:

- The PSC's emphasis on pseudowords has altered the way that teachers are teaching, regardless of whether they have always been supporters of phonics or not.
- The balance between phonic activities and wider reading activities in Year One has been affected.

It is also clear that new commercial resources specifically designed to focus on phonics and decoding have been produced and purchased. Older schemes have been re-written to acknowledge the role of pseudowords in the PSC.

However, as far as the children within this study are concerned, its impact on their social and emotional development seems to be negligible. As long as schools continue to place value on real books and reading experiences, and handle test preparation with sensitivity and professionalism, it would seem that pupils do not become overly anxious about the PSC. The screening check does not necessarily change pupils' view on the nature of reading. In fact, it

seems to exist outside the children's understanding of reading. It is therefore possible for the PSC to be administered within a language rich environment without causing long term damage to children. However, its usefulness may already be limited: it is a very expensive and punitive way of checking teachers' own informal assessments. It seems that most teachers do not need the PSC to help them assess their pupils; they are already aware of their pupils' reading abilities and can plan their teaching programmes accordingly. Formative assessments, that track the children as they move through the various phonics schemes and programmes, are enough for most teachers and will identify children with decoding difficulties quickly and efficiently.

Experienced teachers know that phonics alone is not enough and even though the numbers of children passing the screening check have increased, it is not necessarily true to say that these children are "now on track to become fluent readers" (DfE, 2018). As a policy lever, the PSC has achieved its goal of enforcing a preferred teaching method, but it is not sufficient as a panacea for all reading deficits. It may be that the national testing of phonics should have a time limited period and the value of the test should be reviewed before committing to the expense of administering it every year to every six-year-old. If passing the PSC is not necessarily a predictor of future reading success, then an alternative assessment may need to be considered, perhaps one that recognises the importance of fluency (Adlof et al., 2006). I would therefore like to conclude with a final telling comment from one of the teachers involved in the research, (Teacher 4, School C). Whilst conceding that phonics and the PSC are necessary features of Year One, she acknowledged that it cannot be allowed to dominate the English teaching for her pupils. She summarized her views on the limited impact that the PSC has had on teaching in her school by recognising the limits to phonics tuition and minimizing the PSC's importance:

"We don't just rely on phonics for reading, we can't."

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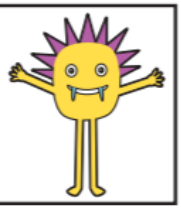
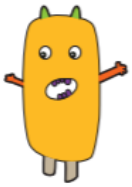
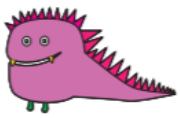
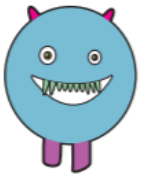
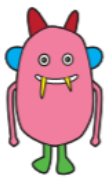
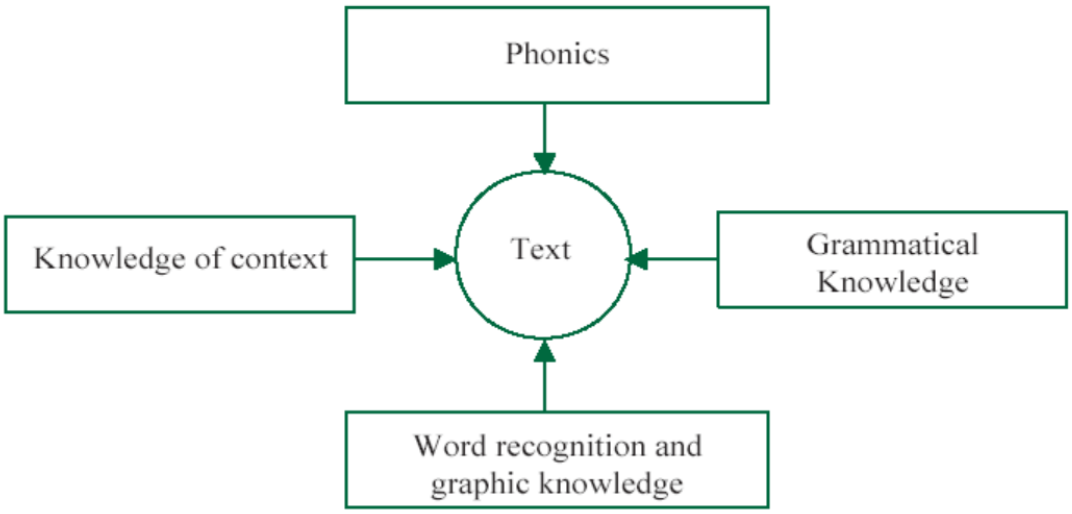
Appendix 1 Sample PSC materials (taken from 2019 test materials)

sut 	crust
yad 	trails
dop 	strip
uct 	scraps

shop	vaw 
yell	meast 
peel	waib 
check	zome 

Appendix 2 The Searchlights Model of Reading

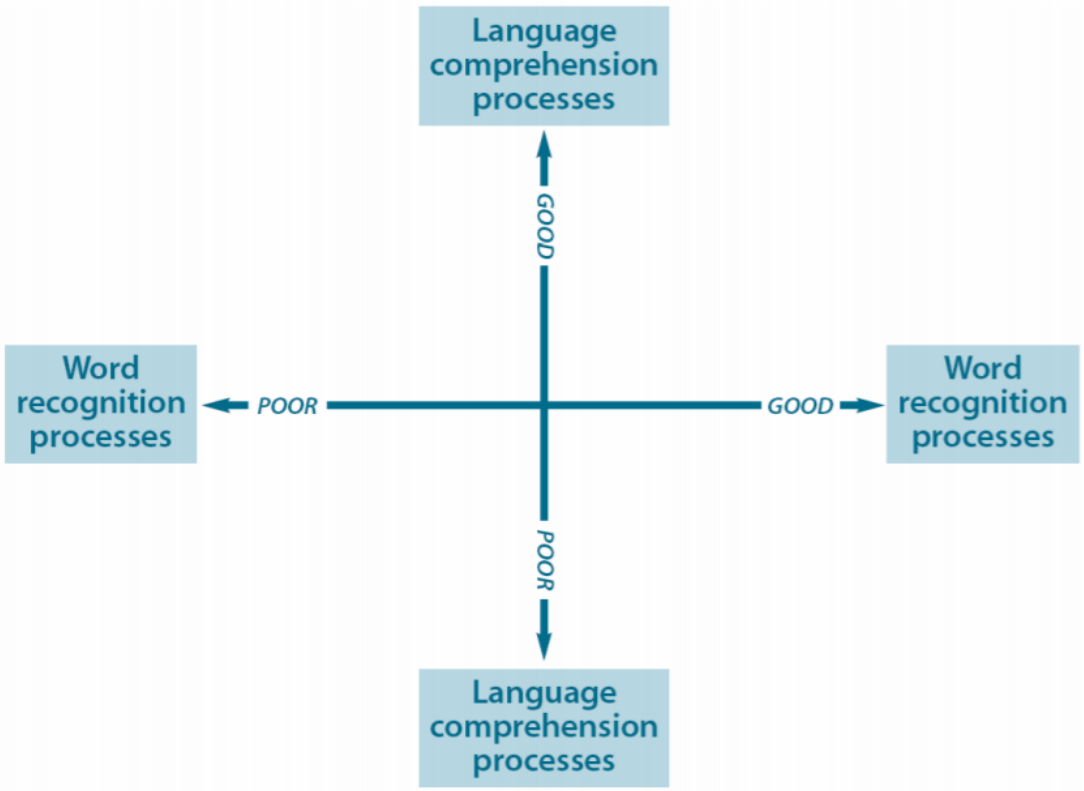
Taken from Primary Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching (1998)



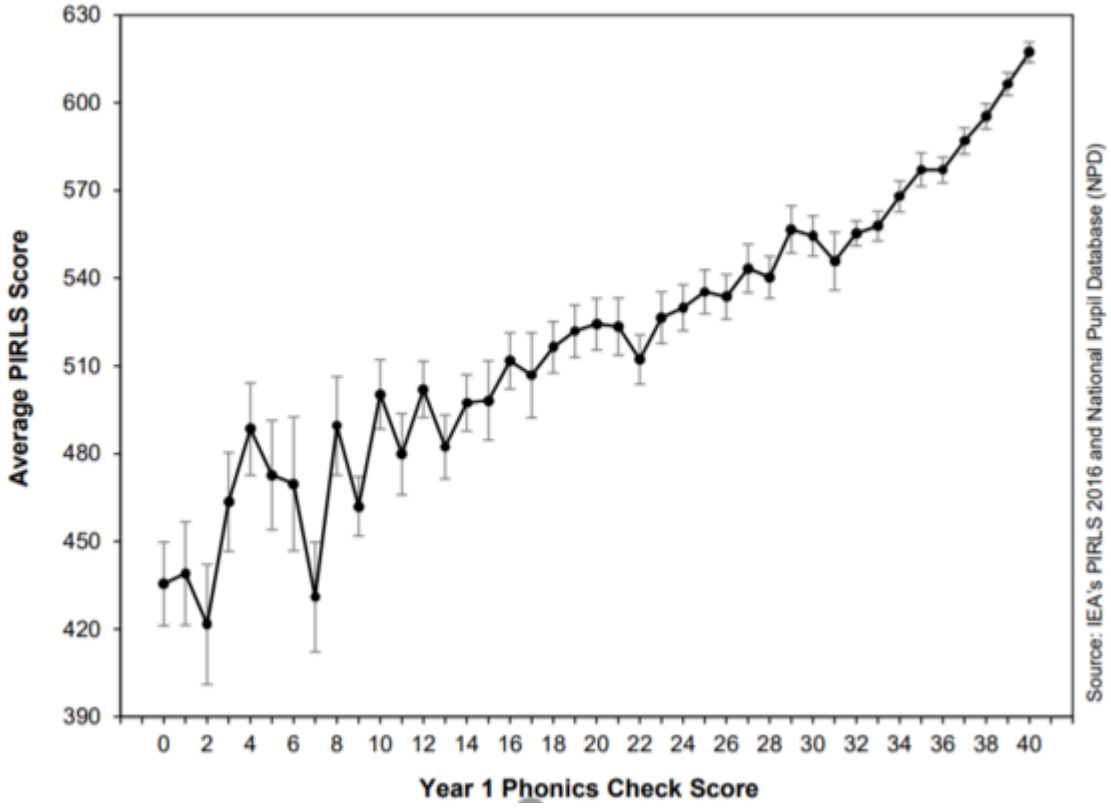
Appendix 3 The Simple View of Reading

Taken from Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics (2006)

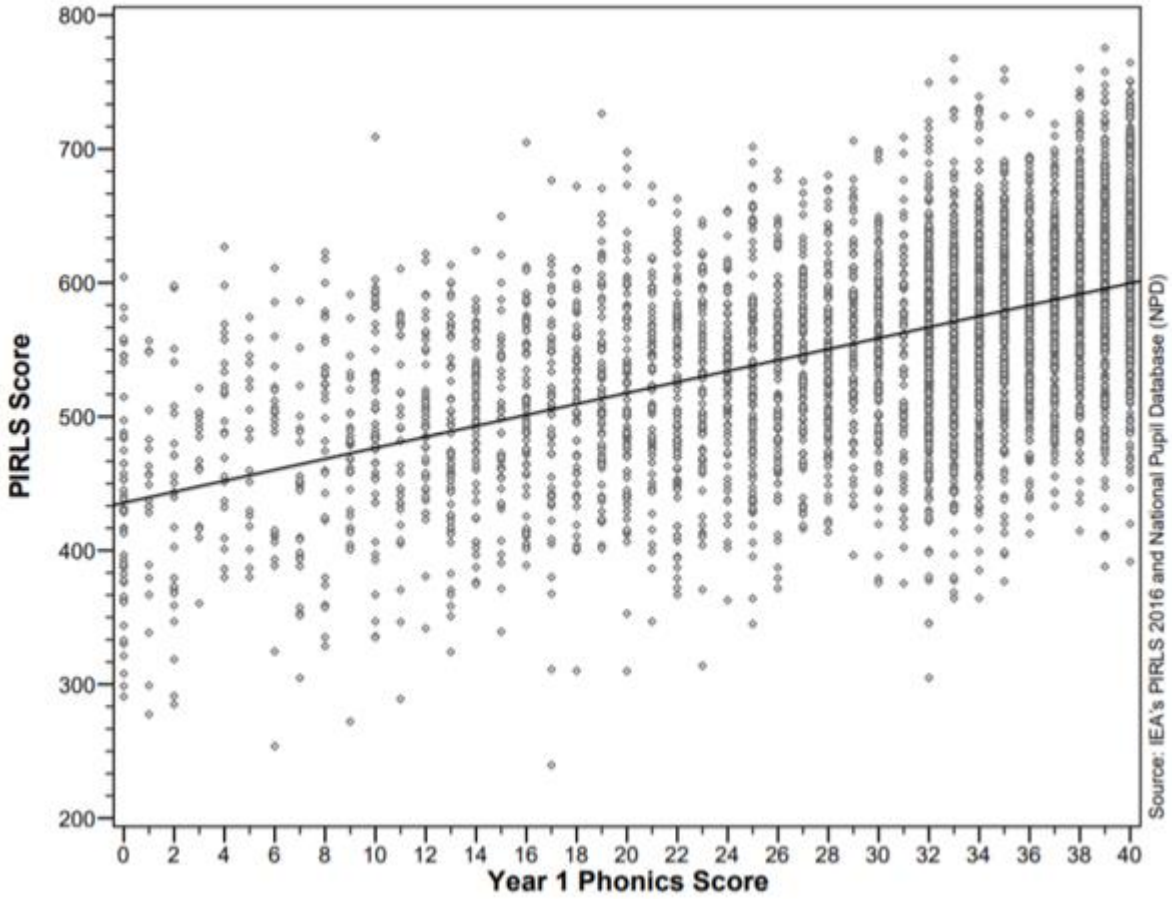
http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2006-primary-national-strategy.pdf



Appendix 4 Performance of England's pupils in PIRLS 2016 by their score in the Year 1 phonics check



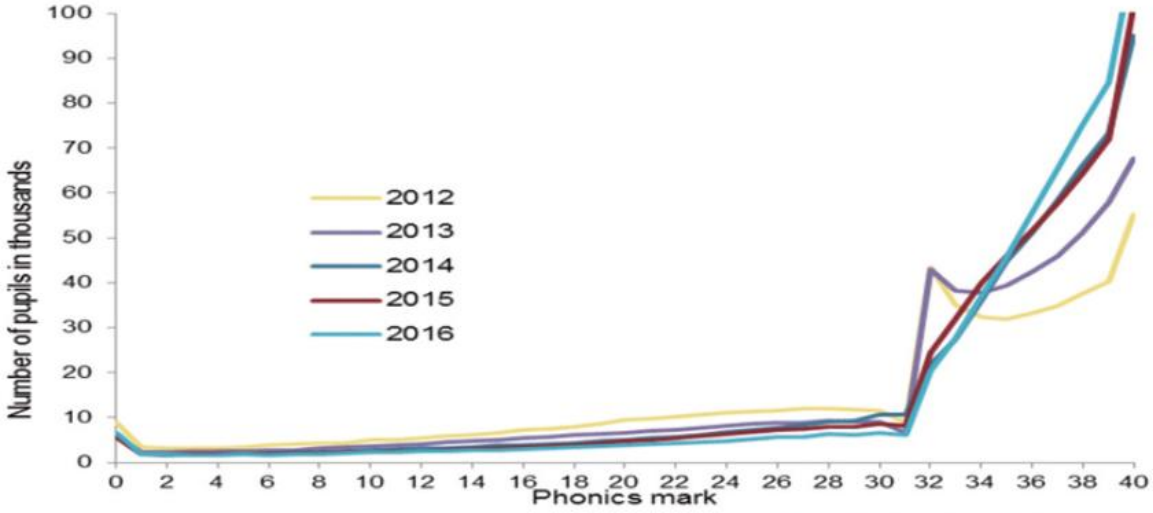
Appendix 5 Scatterplot of PIRLS performances by Year 1 Phonics Scores



Appendix 6 Graph showing the distribution of PSC Scores

Note the spike in scores at the 32/40 threshold.

Figure 1: Year 1 phonics screening check mark distribution:
England, 2012 to 2016



Source: National Pupil Database

Appendix 7 Ethics Approval

Downloaded: 17/11/2020
Approved: 29/06/2018

Helen Patmore
Registration number: 140105759
School of Education
Programme: EdD Literacy and Language in Education

Dear Helen

PROJECT TITLE: The Impact of the Phonics Screening Check on Children's Reading Development
APPLICATION: Reference Number 011752

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 29/06/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 011752 (form submission date: 19/05/2018); (expected project end date: 01/07/2019).
- Participant information sheet 1042366 version 2 (19/05/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1042365 version 2 (19/05/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1042364 version 2 (19/05/2018).
- Participant consent form 1042369 version 2 (28/04/2018).
- Participant consent form 1042368 version 2 (28/04/2018).
- Participant consent form 1042367 version 2 (28/04/2018).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

Consider having another adult known to the pupils present in the room while the discussion is taking place? They wouldn't need to be actively involved - more, just a familiar presence within the situation in case any of the pupils experience distress or discomfort.

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 8 Children's Information Sheets and Consent Form

The University Of Sheffield.

What do you think about reading?

- My name is Miss Patmore.
- I am interested in finding out what children think about reading.
- I would like to talk to you about reading.
- I would like to know how you learnt to read.
- I will use your answers to help me write a report about reading.

My Name: _____

I would like to take part in this reading project.

Tick ☑

Yes ☐ No ☐

Witnessing member of staff:

_____

Date _____

Further information can be obtained from Helen Patmore (hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk) Witham St Hughs Academy, Muntjac Way, Witham St Hughs, Lincoln, LN6 9WF, 01522 869590 or Dr Anna Weighall (anna.weighall@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177.

Appendix 9 Sample Letter to Parents

Thursday 5th December, 2019

Dear Parents,

I am a student researcher at the University of Sheffield and I am currently completing a research project on the teaching of phonics. Your child is being invited to take part in this project and I would be grateful if you would consider giving permission for them to do so. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

As part of this research, I will be visiting your child's school. I would like to talk to some of the pupils in your child's class about what they think about reading. This will be a small group discussion of approximately 30 minutes which will be videoed. These discussions will take place within ordinary reading sessions. The aims of the research project are to explore children's and teachers' opinions about the role of phonics in learning to read and to consider how pupils' abilities in phonics relate to their overall reading fluency and comprehension skills. Any information collected will be kept confidential and schools and pupils will be anonymised in the final report. Any audio and/or video recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

In order to take part in this project, both parents and children will need to complete a consent form. Pupils will be allowed to decide on the day of my visit (Thursday 11th December) whether or not they wish to take part and they will be allowed to withdraw from the discussion at any point.

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Sheffield's School of Education. If you would like any further information about this research project, then I will be at (NAME OF ACADEMY) at the start of the school day on Thursday 12th December to answer any questions you may have. Alternatively, please contact me at (hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk) or Dr Anna Weighall School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW, 0114 2228177 (anna.weighall@sheffield.ac.uk). Should

you wish to make a complaint about any aspect of this research project, then please contact Dr David Hyatt, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177 (d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk) .

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Patmore

Appendix 10 Sample Parental Consent Form

Participant Consent Form - Parents

Title of Research Project: **The Impact of the Phonics Screening Check**

Name of Researcher: Miss H M Patmore

Please initial the box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 5th December explaining the above research project. ☐

2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that he/she is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐
Please contact Helen Patmore (hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk) if you wish to withdraw your child from this project at any time.

3. I understand that my child's responses will be kept strictly confidential and that he/she will not be identifiable in the report that results from the research. ☐

4. I give permission for my child to take part in the above research project. ☐

5. I give permission for my child's responses to be videoed. ☐

Name of child _____

Name of Parent/Guardian	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

Appendix 11 Sample letter to teachers

The University Of Sheffield.

8th July, 2019

Dear ,

I am a student researcher at the University of Sheffield and I am currently completing a research project on the impact that the Phonics Screening Check has had on schools, teachers and children. You are being invited to take part in this project and I would be grateful if you would consider helping with my research. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The aim of my project is to explore the effectiveness of the Year One Phonics Screening Check as an accurate indicator of a child's future reading ability. I would like to compare children's phonic decoding ability with their overall reading fluency and comprehension skills. I am also interested in researching what impact the emphasis on phonics has had on children's overall enjoyment of reading. To do this, I would like to work with a small group of schools in Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire. This will involve collecting and analysing test data from the Phonics Screening Check and from SATs reading at Y2 and Y6. In addition, I will be inviting approximately eight Year One/Two children from your school to take part in a discussion group with me to find out their opinions about learning to read.

Alongside working with pupils, I would also like to talk to Year One and Two teachers about their experiences of preparing children for the Phonics Screening Check. If you are willing to take part, then this meeting would take approximately one hour and would be at a time and place of your choosing. If possible, I would like to audio-record this discussion.

The information collected will be kept confidential and all schools and participants will be anonymised in the final report. Any audio and/or video recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

As recognition of the time and effort given to help me with this research, a gift of a £25 book token will be given to each school involved.

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Sheffield's School of Education. If you would like any further information about this research project, then please contact me (hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk) or Dr Anna Weighall (anna.weighall@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177. Should you wish to make a complaint about any aspect of this research project, then

please contact Dr David Hyatt (d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Patmore

Appendix 12 Sample letter to Head Teachers

The University Of Sheffield.

21st November, 2019

Dear ,

I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Sheffield and I am currently completing a research project on the impact that the Phonics Screening Check has had on schools, teachers and children. I would be grateful if you would consider helping with my research. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The aim of my project is to try to explore the effectiveness of the Year One Phonics Screening Check as an accurate indicator of a child's future reading ability. I am also interested in researching what impact the emphasis on phonics has had on children's wider reading skills. I would like to compare children's phonic decoding ability with their overall reading fluency and comprehension skills. To do this, I would like to work with a small group of schools in Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire.

If you are able to help me with this project, then I would be grateful if you could provide me with the following data from your school records:

- Y2 and Y6 SATs reading scores.
- Y1 Phonics Screening data
- No individual pupil names need to be submitted but individual scores will be needed rather than an overall school percentage.

I am particularly interested in gathering information about the number of children who pass either the Phonics Check or the SATs Reading tests but not both.

If it is possible, I would also like to visit your school to talk to a Year One teacher about their experiences of preparing children for the Phonics Screening Check and about their views on how children learn to read. This meeting would take approximately one hour at a time and place of their choosing. This discussion would be audio-recorded. I would also appreciate being able to spend some time with approximately pupils in Year One and Two. I would like to talk to them about their opinions about reading and about how they think that they have learnt to read, for example, what strategies they employ when they come across an unfamiliar word. The children's discussions would be videoed and will be made available to their class teachers. Any information collected will be kept confidential and schools and pupils will be anonymised in the final report. In order to complete this part of the research, I would need to send a short information letter to parents and to obtain consent from parents and their children.

The information collected will be kept confidential and all schools and participants will be anonymised in the final report. Any audio and/or video recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

As recognition of the time and effort given to help me with this research, a gift of a £25 book token will be given to each class involved. I will also be available to take a staff meeting to summarise my findings on completing the project.

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Sheffield's School of Education. If you would like any further information about this research project, then please contact me (hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk). You can also discuss this project with Dr Anna Weighall (anna.weighall@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177. Should you wish to make a complaint about any aspect of this research project, then please contact Dr David Hyatt (d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW 0114 2228177.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Patmore

Appendix 13 Sample Consent Form – Teachers and Head Teachers

Participant Consent Form
Teachers and Head Teachers

The University Of Sheffield.

Title of Research Project: **The Impact of the Phonics Screening Check**

Name of Researcher: Miss H M Patmore

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 21st November explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any Negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. Please contact Helen Patmore *(hmpatmore1@sheffield.ac.uk) if you wish to withdraw at any time.* ☐

3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and that my school and pupils will not be identifiable in the report that results from the research. ☐

4. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

5. (Teachers only)
   I agree to my responses being recorded for later transcription. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant