

We at Parents and Teachers for Excellence (PTE) are delighted to respond to this government consultation on primary assessment. The importance of getting the content and assessment of early years and primary education right cannot be understated, as experiences children have then will almost certainly be a defining factor in the rest of their lives.

Our response will primarily be focused on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment framework, specifically on the reading aspect. We have written more broadly about assessment in the past [here](#) and [here](#).

In short, while we believe that the intentions of the EYFS and accompanying profile are sound, their implementation is not fit for purpose in many regards, especially as a way of defining the standards and means of assessing learning of young children. Our analysis suggests that it is a very poor indicator of a child's school readiness.

To come to this conclusion, for every local authority in England for the last few years we compared the proportion of students achieving EYFS expected standards in reading, and the proportion achieving a good level of development (GLD) overall, with the proportion of students who went on to reach the required standards in the Year One phonics screening.

We found that there is no statistically significant correlation between the proportion reaching the expected standard in EYFS for reading and that in phonics a year later – the correlation was close to zero in each of the three cohorts we looked at.¹

Simply put, this means that how a child has done in their EYFS reading test gives no indication whatsoever as to how they will do on their phonics test a year later. As these two tests are supposed to measure essentially the same skill, this is clearly an issue.

The phonics test that children take in Year One is well-researched and has been shown before to be an accurate indicator of where a child is at in their development. The phonics check tests the whole domain of spelling knowledge that a child of that age must have, and is done under controlled conditions that should not be stressful or even seem like a test to the children participating. It is also popular with teachers,² and we fully support its continued use.

By comparison, the EYFS profile has few of these advantages, as well as several notable disadvantages. Daisy Christodoulou has written very well on the dangers of teacher assessment, but some of her key points bear repeating.³ Studies have shown that teacher assessment is often unconsciously biased against children from disadvantaged backgrounds – simply because it is carried out by humans – which is a problem that tests such as the phonics check do not have. The EYFS framework in its current form also increases teacher workload compared to the phonics check, and many past attempts to make teacher assessment such as the EYFS profile more reliable have just led to the assessment becoming more 'test-like' anyway. We recognise that the EYFS framework has a wide range of early learning goals, and that other aspects of the test may not be as unfit for purpose as the reading portion.

However, our data clearly shows that the reading portion of the test is simply not working. The fact that it does not correlate positively with the phonics test whatsoever suggests that one of the two

¹ In the cohort who took EYFS Reading in 2013 and phonics in 2014, the correlation was -0.07. In the cohort who took EYFS Reading in 2014 and phonics in 2015, the correlation was -0.1. In the cohort who took EYFS Reading in 2015 and phonics in 2016, the correlation was 0.

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/434820/RB418_Phonics_screening_check_evaluation_final_report_brief.pdf

³ <https://thewingtoheaven.wordpress.com/2015/11/01/why-is-teacher-assessment-biased/>

tests must not be evaluating children's reading ability accurately, and given the weight of research behind the phonics check it must be concluded that it is the EYFS Reading framework that is the problem.

Going forward, the way is admittedly less clear. The phonics check must be prioritised as the primary method of evaluating reading ability for children of such a young age. We believe that the reading aspect of the EYFS framework should be re-evaluated to support the phonics check a year later, and to rely less on teacher assessment which is sadly too unreliable to be effective. The government should also consider reducing the reliance on teacher assessment in other aspects of the EYFS framework (and indeed in all school assessment) for the same reasons. It is also worth noting that, despite the flawed 'Development Matters' guidance being downgraded to a non-statutory status, a great deal of early years providers still use it in the absence of other guidance – the government must therefore produce new statutory guidance to go with the new assessments and stick to it.

If the government wishes to develop skilled young people via a structured knowledge-led approach, then they must also ensure that all assessments, at all ages, focus on knowledge-attainment targets. All assessment statements should consist of phrases such as 'Does the pupil know how to... e.g. read age-appropriate texts' or 'Does the pupil know about... e.g. the basic chronology of the Kings and Queens of the Tudor Dynasty'. This straightforward, knowledge-focused approach being replicated across all ages would help focus assessments, and also reinforce assessment as a tool to support schools in enhancing what children know and need to learn.