

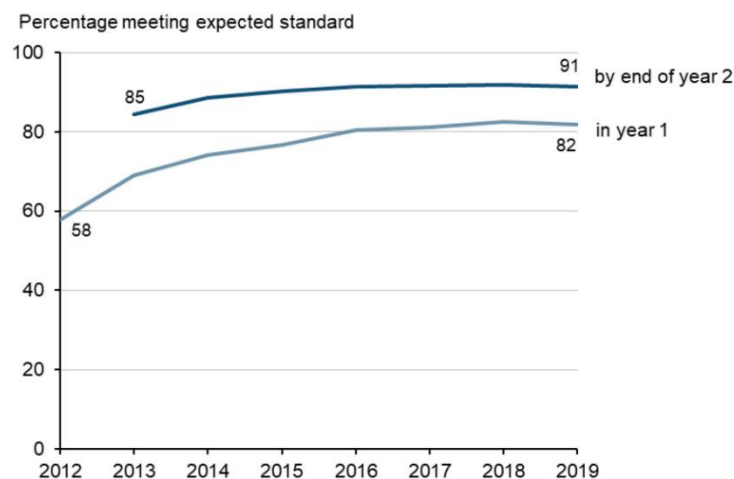
# Why are we once again seeing a plateau with the year one phonics screening check data?

## -What are my 'top tips' for overcoming this?

In 2019 when I left headship and started focusing on early literacy, particularly phonics, I was fascinated by the data surrounding it. This was mainly driven by the sudden focus on the 'lowest 20%.' I would hear this term and the questions surrounding it, so wanted the confidence to understand where it came from and how to explain it to others. In the first year of exploration, I soon discovered that we should actually have been talking about the lowest 30%, and given recent outcomes for the phonics screening check, believe we still need to.

### The plateau

In 2019-2020 (pre-pandemic), I would talk to schools about the current approaches to phonics instruction and how it has stagnated in terms of impact. I'd say something like "If we keep doing the same thing, we'll get the same outcomes." I'd then share the following graph:



I'd then follow it up by showing how this then correlated to the reading outcomes at Key Stage 1:

	% reaching the expected standard			
	2016	2017	2018 <sup>7</sup>	2019 <sup>8</sup>
Reading TA	74%	76%	75%	75%

As well as helping practitioners see the need for change, it showed them that it was a national challenge. Simply put, far too many children did not complete year one being able to decode well (around 20% and even more for disadvantaged pupils). What I soon found out was that the figure was likely to be larger than this. This was mainly due to various children accessing additional support and guidance before the year one phonics check so they could get the magical 32 marks needed to pass the phonics check. Having met lots of these children, it was

clear that they passed the check but still required lots of high-quality and rigorous phonics teaching. Unfortunately, in some cases they actually got the opposite- nothing. As I understood this more and more, I focussed on ensuring schools saw the PSC as a checkpoint and not the finish line.

In 2020, we then had the pandemic and outcomes after it, showed a decline. In 2022, 75% of children passed the year one phonics check, whilst in 2023, 79% passed it. Again, these correlated with a decline in teacher assessed reading at Key Stage one (67% in 2022 & 68% in 2023). Given the challenges we faced as a country, this was expected. However, what we did not want, is a legacy challenge and that is what we have. In 2024, only 80% of year one pupils passed the check and I predict a similar figure for 2025. Disappointingly, only 68% of disadvantaged pupils passed it in 2024. As well as the impact of COVID, there are other things to consider, and I want to use this article to share them so schools can reflect on their current approach to reading and consider if more can be done. If they cannot do more, can they do better? To support schools and practitioners with this, I offer five top tips.

### **The 82% trap**

In the same period where national data plateaued, then declined, our trust continued to improve. For context, as well as my independent work, I have other roles and one of them is as an early reading lead for a large academy trust. In 2019, 82% of the children across the trust passed the check and after the pandemic, 85% passed it. We have then gone on to achieve 88-89%, whilst continuing to take on new schools (some with significant challenges). As well as the effective strategy and the amazing work carried out by staff, parents and children in our schools, we made a simple, but vital change to target setting. We removed the focus on the national average. We focused on how close to 90% or beyond it, they could get. Getting 90% or more of the children to pass the check was and still is our focus. 90% sends out a strong message that supports what we aim to achieve in the classroom: The vast majority of children will be able to decode well when they leave Year 1. Those that cannot, will receive focused and intensive support on any gaps in knowledge. If 10% or less of your year two pupils require this, you have a task that is achievable. Even with challenging budgets and SEND challenges, schools are able to timetable the support their children need in year two. If numbers go beyond this, it gets very challenging to give the 'non-passers' the focused support they require. Also, if schools have less than 10% requiring phonics intervention in year two, they can scoop up those who just passed the check but require some ongoing extra-practice.

**Tip 1:** Do not settle for the National average. Focus on 90% or more and working at your phonics instruction until you achieve this. When you achieve it, go for 100%!

### **Every minute matters**

We know from the National Literacy Trust surveys that children are less likely to select reading at home as an enjoyable activity, than they used to. There are also other challenges that might reduce the likelihood that children will read at home: Illiterate parents, distractions in the form of technology and social media, both parents working late, the shift to decodable books that differs from how parents learned to read... I could keep going. However, all this tells us is that we must make every minute matter in school and ensure children not only learn to read, but get

the time to read. How does this connect with the 20% challenge and PSC plateau? I will show you:

**Teacher talk vs child practice:** Phonics is generally a 20-40 minute session depending on the programme the school uses. In many cases, I see a popular phonics programme lesson last over 35 minutes when it should be 20. There are many reasons for this, but it often comes back to how much the teacher talked, compared to how hard the children worked. In many cases, I observe that it is the adult who is working the hardest in phonics lessons.

Additionally, practitioners often over-explain instructions, as routines have not been fully established; they talk too much about the content and do not give succinct explanations, and finally, the number 1 challenge for practitioners- They over model and simply get the children to copy them. Whilst practitioners might have the best intentions, this excessive talk is often at the detriment of what children truly need: High-quality instruction and extensive practice. Effective practice lets them secure the knowledge but also shows the practitioner what children can and cannot do. Excessive teacher talk, modelling and asking children to simply repeat, is highly unlikely to do so.

**Tip 2:** Ensure every minute matters. Establish routines, keep teacher-talk succinct and ensure children are pushed to practise content and apply their knowledge. If lessons run beyond the recommended time, it is highly likely that there is space to reduce teacher talk and push the children even more.

### **Active engagement**

For some phonics programmes, practitioners must work a lot harder to check how well a child has engaged and what knowledge they have gained from the lesson. Flashcard only approaches, where the teacher sits at the front and uses various flashcards to teach and check learning, is a prime example. This is even more so when it is carried out as a whole class. With flashcard only approaches, the teacher somehow has to watch all mouths at the same time to see if they joined in and said the phoneme/word etc correctly- A pretty tough task! By using flashcards, we also offer children a small window to opt out, particularly if there has not been careful consideration about where children are seated. Where children are more likely to 'opt out' we need to place them in our eyeline to increase the likelihood that we will spot them. To tackle this problem, some programmes get the teacher to check-in on those pupils. For example, the word flashcard is shown to all children and they read it but the teacher shows it again to a pupil or row to check they can do it. What often happens in this case is that they simply repeat what they just heard from their peers.

Both Debbie Hepplewhite and I believe in paper-based approaches for phonics. By giving the pupil a task, we gain many benefits: 1. The teacher is not trapped at the front and can roam to offer support, assessment and challenge where needed 2. The task can contain many different challenges so we can truly focus on the small details. E.g. Words that end in s, words with more than one syllable, challenging vocabulary, capital letters... 3. Paper-based tasks generally increase the number of words children read in a lesson. For example, in my programme when reception children start Phase 3 (October or January), they read 5 new words with the teacher then have around eighteen words in a word bank and a further 25-35 words in a decodable text. This is in addition to the words covered in the revisit and [separate reading lesson](#). The paper-based tasks are not worksheets, they simply offer a task that follows on from high-quality

teaching. To reiterate the point, children do not start at the top of the sheet and work to the bottom. It is done in sections and complements high-quality teaching (there are lots of misconceptions around about this topic).

**Tip 3:** Ensure all children are actively engaged in the lesson. Seat them accordingly and be aware of the limitations of a flashcard only approach.

### **Focused extra-practice**

We know that there will always be children who require additional phonics practice beyond the daily phonics lesson (Nancy Young demonstrates this well in her [Ladder of Reading and Writing](#).) Therefore, schools must plan for this in terms of informal and formal opportunities. Due to various challenges, we know that achieving this is getting harder, but it is a challenge that must be overcome (even more so if you have a flashcard only approach.) Every day, the teacher should create time to revisit content with some key children. This might be a chance to read/spell words from the phonics lesson, recall graphemes or work on recognising them in a flashcard pack. In my programme, this would generally involve returning to a 'Time to read/write sheet' and zooming in to a particular part. By informally returning to content, practitioners increase the amount of repetition and gain useful information about what children retained from the phonics lesson.

**Tip 4:** Everyday, identify a child or group to revisit content from the phonics lesson. This is a short and sharp task where children are doing the heavy lifting. If they struggle, the teacher responds accordingly and might reteach specific content they need. Ideally, they will focus on the specifics of what the child/ren cannot do.

For formal extra-practice, we are talking about a specific activity that has been written by your phonics programme. It has specific instructions that focus in on a particular weakness. For example, my programme has three activities 1. Oral blending, 2. Blending and 3. Teaching an unknown GPC. Previously, I noticed that we often have too many children in reception unable to orally blend. This becomes a big hurdle in my opinion. They struggle to blend, thus struggle to apply new GPCs. Both are huge hurdles and will often put children on the 'backfoot' in their reading journey. Some programmes set out that the aim is for reception children to be blending by January/February. I say that they need to be blending as soon as possible.

**Tip 5:** Ensure the school is aware of who needs targeted formal extra-practice and what they need it for. They should receive this for a set period and the impact should be monitored. To support application in the classroom, there should be a clear line of communication from the person doing the activities with the child and their teacher (if not carried out by the teacher). Parents should also be aware of the extra-practice and how they can support at home.

If schools consistently address my top tips, they will see an increase in the number of children passing the year one phonics check, thus starting their reading journey with success. To supplement this, we know that high-quality daily teaching of phonics is essential. For this, the top three areas that will make the biggest difference are as follows:

**Simple routines and explanations:** Teachers and children need to know what they are doing and why they are doing it, every day. This requires training and ongoing coaching.

**Subject knowledge:** Teachers need a strong subject knowledge so they can teach with confidence and spot where and why children are struggling.

**Rigour and fidelity:** Stick to what the programme advises and focus on doing this with rigour. Do not simply move through the activities in a lesson, instead carry them out and focus on the children. Did they engage? Did they show success? With these two questions, focus on the lowest attaining pupils. Generally, if the answer is yes to both questions for them, it's likely to be yes for all.

## Summary

For some children, the reading challenge can be an uneasy experience so it is essential that we do everything we can to make this as successful as possible. Until the data shows you are getting right, you have to constantly work on refining your approach. Even when you start to achieve higher standards (90%+), you often still have to work on it because of new challenges: Staffing changes, changes in leadership, various SEND challenges, reduced funding etc. Schools continue to face significant challenges but as long as they are solution-focused, they will create an approach that works for all children. The only plateau they will face is the 100% version, and that will be just fine.

If you have any thoughts or reflections about this article, feel free to email me via [info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk](mailto:info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk)

Thanks for taking the time to read this.

*Carl Pattison*

Did you know that I have a proven low-cost phonics programme that helps school to tackle all of the guidance shared in this article? If you are interested in exploring it further, please visit [www.pearlphonics.co.uk](http://www.pearlphonics.co.uk) or get in touch via [info@pearlphonics.co.uk](mailto:info@pearlphonics.co.uk)

