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In “Fewer pupils reaching expected standard in phonics” (Oct. 2, 2019), Paul Whiteman of the National Association of Head Teachers is quoted as saying that required testing of phonics “distorts teaching”: “No-one would argue that children should not have a good grasp of phonics ... but statutory testing is not the best way to assess this.”

Correct. Here is how it works:

Specifically, lower phonics check scores encourage more deliberate direct teaching of phonics. But very few phonics rules can be learned this way: Many are very complicated, hard to remember and hard to apply. In fact, teachers sometimes have to review the rules before teaching them. A few simple rules of phonics can be taught but most of our knowledge of phonics is absorbed from reading.

*Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction, comes to this conclusion: “...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships ... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p.38).

Anderson, R., Hiebert, E., Scott, J., & Wilkinson, I. 1985. *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education.

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