

A knowledge-base from which to debate central government's domination of literacy policy and practice in England. A plea for a research literate profession

By Margaret M Clark OBE

School Standards Minister Nick Gibb made a plea that young teachers enter “a research-informed and research-enthusiastic profession” and he claimed to endorse an evidence and “research-based policy”! Yet in England teachers are not only told what to teach but how to teach it, and those training teachers have the content of their courses dictated by government and Ofsted.

In contrast, the EU High Level Group of Experts in 2012 recommended that professionals acquire the competence to make critical evaluation of literacy research. Would current government policies stand up to such a scrutiny? In *Education Journal* in 2017 (310: 18-19) and elsewhere I have analysed government policy on literacy learning in England, claims, costs and commercialism, issues not confined to England. I scrutinized claims made over recent years by the government for one best method of teaching reading, for the Phonics Screening Check as a measure of an “expected phonics standard” and as the explanation for any rise in reading attainment, some of the so far unchallenged expenditure on this policy. I have raised the issue as to how people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard. The claims made repeatedly by politicians, and as recently as in November 2018 in the House of Commons by the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb, have so far remained unchallenged.

It is disturbing that there has been so little challenge to the many dogmatic statements by government and Ofsted both as to the research basis for current policy and its effects on standards. The aim of this article is to respond to the repeated claims made for this policy by the Government as evidence-based. Publications referenced here should enable professionals and parents to engage in informed dialogue with politicians, such as the School Standards Minister and Ofsted inspectors.

Background

The Government reports and scrutinizes pupil characteristics and local authority results on the check. The School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, the strongest advocate over many years for the current government literacy policy dominated by synthetic phonics, continues to claim it is evidence-based and has resulted in improvement in the standard of reading in England. During November 2018 he repeated such claims twice, once in a debate and a second time in answer to a written parliamentary question. All contrary evidence is ignored or dismissed as ideology. At no time have teachers been consulted and large sums of money are earmarked for the policy by DfE. Schools are recommended to spend money on commercial programmes provided they advocate synthetic phonics. Indeed, to access DfE courses schools may even be required to purchase from their own funds a specific commercial programme. Synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method of teaching reading to all children. The Phonics Screening Check, the percentage pass on which in Year 1 has become high stakes data in the eyes of DfE and Ofsted, is claimed to be responsible for improved standards of reading, claims made on the basis of an increase in the percentage pass on the statutory Phonics Screening Check. Such an improvement is hardly surprising as preparation for the check now dominates many early years classrooms. Why are these claims still unchallenged?

The views of teachers and parents

The final report of an independent survey of the views of teachers and parents undertaken in May 2018 can be read and downloaded from <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>. There is a two page summary; Appendix I shows evidence that teachers have not been

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consulted by DfE on the policy; Appendix II lists expenditure by DfE on this policy; chapter 2 summarises research by others showing the effect of the high stakes nature of the check on early years classrooms. The survey report revealed the concern of many teachers and parents at the effect of the policy and their wish that the Phonics Screening Check no longer be a statutory assessment. On the same link are several articles summarising the evidence so far ignored by the Government, together with references to many other relevant publications.

Progressively the teaching profession in England has come to have both the content and method of teaching dictated by central government. A high percentage of teachers in England, possibly some of the more dedicated, leave the profession after only a few years. Shortage of funds and too low salary may be one cause, but another may be lack of autonomy and the need to meet accountability measures with which they do not agree and about which they have not been consulted. The emphasis on synthetic phonics required by DfE and Ofsted in initial teacher education training in England, and in many courses of professional development, may mean that recently qualified teachers are less well equipped with knowledge of alternative approaches in other countries, some of which rank statistically higher in attainment than England, with very different approaches. Consultation and dialogue with professionals in policy development and implementation of their literacy policies, not evident in England, appears to be a feature in other countries such as the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Both these countries, with very different policies, ranked statistically higher than England in PIRLS 2016 (see Clark, (ed) 2018 Part II and my article on PIRLS online). Surely, we should learn from other countries such as these. Neither of these countries has problems of recruitment and retention of teachers. In both countries professionals play an important role in the development and implementation of policy.

The domination of government literacy policy in England by synthetic phonics

Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice (Clark, 2016) Part IV summarises my publications on this up to 2015. Two articles of mine in *Education Journal*, numbers 351 and 352 in 2018, assess the justification for the domination of this policy, its effects, the expenditure and critique the claimed research basis justifying its imposition. These articles and two more recent articles in *Education Journal Review* 25(2) set out the evidence still ignored by government challenging the claims for this policy. These can be accessed on the same link as the report of the recent independent survey of the views of teachers and parents and will not be repeated here <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.

How robust is the research evidence?

I have already published articles challenging the research base for this policy, but draw readers' attention to two further publications, one edited by Allington as early as 2002 with contributions from members of the National Reading Panel in the USA, the other research apart from the Clackmannanshire research cited recently by Nick Gibb as his research evidence-base (see *Research Ed* September 2018, *Evidence-informed Education*; 4). In *Ethics, education policy and research: the phonics question reconsidered*, Ellis and Moss (2014) critically evaluate the Clackmannanshire research quoted by Nick Gibb, the School Standards Minister, as his research evidence and trace his commitment to this policy from 2004 onwards. At that time, he was not yet in government, but as a member of the Education Select Committee he heard the presentations of those witnesses claiming synthetic phonics as the way to teach reading. His commitment since then has been unwavering as can be seen from the transcripts of his speeches given on 11 September 2017, 5 December 2017, 23 January 2017 and 22 February 2018 at a Conference for Commonwealth Ministers. In none of his speeches or publications has he admitted that there is any contrary evidence or acknowledged that most of his claims are based on a rising percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check.

Ellis and Moss on page 249 referring to the Clackmannanshire research claim: "The weakness of the research design, including the way the statistical data were analysed and reported, suggest it would be

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unwise to draw any clear conclusions for pedagogy or policy from this single study.”

On page 252 they further comment: “Politics and research evidence remain awkward bedfellows. This is particularly so when research does not support the direction in which politicians and policy-makers want to move. It is not entirely clear why Nick Gibb committed so strongly to synthetic phonics as a teaching method for early reading when he did, except that it offered an easily understood message and played to his political advantage at a particular moment in the policy cycle.” Ellis and Moss comment that in 2012 Nick Gibb cited the Clackmannanshire study in a written paper to the discussion website mumsnet (page 246).

Recent claims for current policy

In parliament in November 2018 Nick Gibb again made extravagant claims for the success of the phonics policy, castigating those who do not accept his “evidence”. In an Opposition Day Debate on 13 November in the House of Commons he commented on the lack of reference to the importance of learning to read in contributions from Labour MPs claiming that: “Following the focus on phonics and the introduction of the phonics screening check, more children had learned to read more effectively and sooner.” The minister added that England had moved from joint 10th to joint 8th in 2017 in PIRLS (*Education Journal* 357: 29). (NB it was 2016 and elsewhere he erroneously claimed it was from 19th).

Where is his evidence young children now read more effectively and sooner?

In answer to a question from Sharon Hodgson as to what assessment had been made of regional differences in the results of the check and what steps were being made to reduce such disparities, Nick Gibb provided a table of improvements since 2012 in the percentage pass and by regions. It should be noted that in 2018 the range was merely from 80 per cent to 85 per cent pass in Year 1. Yet he claimed that “the Department recognises that more work needs to be done to tackle regional variations in phonics screening check results”.

To this end, a new national network of 32 English hubs has been announced with £26.3 million invested to improve educational outcomes. He continued that: “Due to the success of previous phonics roadshows which help schools use systematic synthetic phonics to support reading development, the Department has invested in a further 24 phonics roadshows in 2018-19. These will take place in local authorities where phonics screening check scores in 2018 were below the national average.” Here again the basis for intervention is the narrow one of percentage pass on the check, not reading attainment and the intervention is confined to a focus on one method of intervention (*Education Journal* 358: 33-35).

A summary of references critiquing Government policy with synthetic phonics at its core

Below references are given to a wide range of evidence published between 2006 and 2018, so far ignored by Government. These challenge claims that: “the current policy is based on firm research evidence that supports synthetic phonics as the only way to teach all children to read and that the Phonics Screening Check has been responsible for a marked increase in the reading attainment of young children in England since 2012 (not only an increase in percentage pass on the check).”

1. The views of teachers and parents based on an independent survey in May 2018.

Many of those who responded to the independent survey, teachers and parents, expressed the view that the phonics check should be discontinued. Singled out for particular criticism was the effect of the pseudo words in the check (20 of the 40 words). To achieve a pass (32 out of 40 words read correctly) much time is devoted to practising pseudo words. Many respondents did not think that children who failed the check in Year 1 should be required to re sit the check in Year 2. There is also evidence from other research on the effects of the high stakes accorded to the percentage pass on the check by DfE and Ofsted on the literacy experiences of young children in the early years summarised in chapter 2.

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Clark, M.M. and Glazzard, J. (eds.) (2018) *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents*. Final Report September 2018. Available to read and download from Newman University. <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017/>. See Appendices I, II also chapter 2 for a summary of other researches. (*These articles are also on this link)

*Clark, M.M. (2018) *How justified is it to dominate government policy on early literacy with synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check? Evidence, effects and expenditure. Part I Recent evidence on effects and expenditure. Education Journal. 351: 18-21.*

*___ *How justified is it to dominate government policy on early literacy with synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check? Part II A critique of the evidence. Education Journal. 352: 15-19.*

*___ *What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice. Education Journal Review 25(2): 2-30.*

2. Published evidence on synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check

There is evidence of the unreliability of the check also the high percentage failure among the youngest children. This check was originally claimed to be a light touch diagnostic assessment. Now it is high stakes data, the main criterion used by government and Ofsted when judging the literacy attainment of young children in schools and comparing attainment between regions (see statement by the School Standards Minister in response to a question by Sharon Hodgson on 19 November reported in *Education Journal* 358: 33-35).

Evidence up to 2015 is summarised in Clark 2016. The first edition won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015. Routledge published the revised edition which updated the information on government policy.

Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Revised edition. Abingdon: Routledge. Part IV chapters 13-18 'Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning: government policy in England 2006 to 2015'.

3. References to research challenging the claims by the government in England that current policy is evidence-based.

(Chapters from the following two books are cited in articles on the same link as the final survey report).

Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2017) *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*. (editor and contributor) Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook downloadable from Amazon.co.uk and paperback. (This has six additional contributors from UK and Australia).

Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2018) *The Teaching of Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (editor and contributor). Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook and paperback from Amazon.co.uk. (This has twelve additional contributors from USA, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and UK).

Critiques of the two researches cited by government in England as the evidence-base for current policy mandating synthetic phonics as the only way to teach all children to read: the Clackmannanshire research and recently also the National Reading Panel Report from USA. The Clackmannanshire research was until recently the only research cited by the School Standards Minister in a series of speeches to support the claim that the one best method of teaching reading to all children is synthetic phonics. In a recent publication in September 2018, the National Reading Panel from USA was added by the School Standards Minister (*Research Ed* September 2018). Allington's edited book published as early as 2002 has

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contributions from members of that panel raising issues about claims made for the report. Part I is entitled: 'Unreliable Evidence...' and Part II 'Politics, Policies and Profits: The Political Context of the National Reports'. In addition to references in my edited books Clark, 2017 and 2018 a further source for a comprehensive critique of the Clackmannanshire research is Ellis and Moss, 2014.

Allington, R.L. (ed.) (2002) *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ellis, S. and Moss, G. (2014) 'Ethics, education policy and research: the phonics question reconsidered'. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 40 No. 2: 241-260.

4. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS 2016.

The results of this are claimed by the government as proof of the success of current policy and the Phonics Screening Check. The pupils aged ten years of age who took part in the international study of 50 countries in 2016 were the first to have sat the Phonics Screening Check in 2012. England moved from joint 10th to joint 8th in the five years since the previous PIRLS. This was claimed by the School Standards Minister to be as a consequence of the government's policy and the Phonics Screening Check. NB Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with very different policies ranked statistically higher than England.

See Part II in *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018). Four chapters are devoted to PIRLS including chapters outlining the policies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, countries ranking statistically higher than England Their policies are very different from those in England, and teachers were involved in their development and implementation in contrast in England teachers have not been consulted (see Appendix I in the final survey report).

See also *Clark, M.M. (2018) *The progress in international literacy study PIRLS 2016: a cautionary tale*, in *Education Journal Review* 25 (2):76-83. (previously published in *Education Journal*).

Policy makers should guard against uncritical use of PISA international test results

Cambridge Assessment, part of the University of Cambridge, yesterday published a research report that warned policy makers to guard against uncritical use of PISA data. In *The Link Between Subject Choices and Achievement at GCSE and Performance in PISA 2015*, the authors, Dr Matthew Carroll and Dr Tom Benton, compared individual pupil achievement on the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) with the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education).

The researchers acknowledge that the two assessments have different purposes; PISA focuses on the performances of whole countries, while GCSEs are designed to test individual pupils' knowledge. But they say that understanding the links between performances on the two assessments is important, not least because it helps us understand the extent to which performance in PISA reflects the success or otherwise of the UK's school system.

As an example, the researchers found that the correlation between performance on the PISA reading test and in GCSE English is not particularly high. In fact, performance on the PISA reading tests is at least as closely aligned with achievement in GCSE science (correlation of 0.69) as it is with GCSE English (0.68). When the researchers then viewed published PISA questions they found that several asked students to read and interpret tables or figures of scientific information, a skill that is more often a feature of GCSE science than GCSE English. The researchers note however that in England, GCSE English forms a fundamental part of the way that school performance is judged, and there is a strong focus on teaching essay-writing skills. The authors write about their research in next week's issue of *Education Journal*.