

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

By Professor Margaret M. Clark OBE

“Since 2010 the government has focused relentlessly on ensuring teachers use evidence-based systematic phonics programmes, resulting in a revolution in the success of literacy teaching in primary schools.” (From a speech by the School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, 8 September 2018.)

In the first of these two articles I consider claims for the Phonics Screening Check, this year’s results of which were announced on 27 September. I report on further expenditure with synthetic phonics at its core, some recently announced. I remind readers of the evidence of the possibly unintended effects on early years classrooms in England of the high status as accountability data accorded by DfE, ministers and Ofsted to a school’s percentage pass on the check.

The check when introduced in 2012 was to be a light touch diagnostic assessment. In the view of many teachers it does not even meet that criterion as telling them anything they did not already know (Clark and Glazzard, 2018). In the second article I will scrutinise claims made by government ministers, and Ofsted inspectors for this policy as evidence-based, citing references and challenging the policy makers to respond with alternative references that substantiate the claims. The most frequently cited research, indeed the only research referred to by the School Standards Minister in his speeches and articles, is research in 2005 in Clackmannanshire, a small county in Scotland.

In Clark, 2014 updated in a revised edition Clark, 2016, one section is devoted to summarising my articles critiquing the basis for government policy since 2006 following the publication of the Rose Report. Two books I edited published in 2017 and 2018 have relevant contributions from 18 academics from UK, USA, Australia, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. My aim is to draw attention to the wealth of unacknowledged evidence ignored in what is claimed to be an evidence-based policy. There is relevant evidence on the questions listed below and readers are referred to these publications. Since yet again in his article on 27 September the Minister cited Clackmannanshire as the definitive research evidence on which his policy is based I will here list some key points in anticipation of Part II.

In my article on 25 September 2018 in *Education Journal* (Issue 349: 33) I stated: “While frequently declaring their policies ‘evidence-based’, evidence which does not support current policy is ignored by politicians who dictate not only what should be taught in schools, but how it must be taught. This is backed by an accountability regime which forces teachers to adhere to these policies, even if in their professional judgement they have concerns. The constraints on the curriculum in pre- and in-service courses for teachers and allocation of large sums of money to specified materials and courses means that recently qualified teachers may not have the knowledge or expertise to challenge government policies.”

- Is there one best method of teaching reading to all children?
- Did the Rose Report in 2006 provide convincing evidence for the superiority of synthetic phonics?
- Is there evidence that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children?
- Are academics anti phonics?
- Was phonics indeed not a part of the teaching of reading in classrooms in England prior to 2012?

(Continued on page 19.)

(Continued from page 18.)

- Does the Phonics Screening Check provide useful diagnostic information?
- Do the results of PIRLS 2016 prove the success of the government's policy as these children aged ten were the first to sit the Phonics Screening Check in 2012?
- Is the research in Clackmannanshire in 2005 a sufficient evidence-base for current policy?

In short: Do the results and effects of the Phonics Screening Check justify its continuation as a statutory assessment? How robust is the evidence-base for synthetic phonics to be mandated as the only method of teaching reading to all children in England? Should institutions involved in initial teacher education and further professional development courses be required to emphasise synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading?

It would be interesting were students on initial teacher education courses set an assignment on current government policy with the word Discuss, followed by 'Please cite references for any statements you make'. I am tempted to set a similar challenge to education ministers!

Background

Three recent announcements from the Department for Education were the impetus for this article (21, 27 September and 2 October). The first was an offer on 21 September of funding to 36 schools during October provided they met certain criteria (<https://www.gov.uk/publications/get-support-with-teaching-phonics-and-early-reading>). The second on 27 September was the release of this year's results of the Phonics Screening Check. The check has been statutory since 2012 for all Year 1 children in state schools in England to taken in June (aged 5 and 6 years of age) and since 2013 for Year 2 children who failed the check the previous year. This year's results were heralded on 27 September by an article now available online by the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb, entitled: 'Our whizzpopping phonics revolution is transforming literacy in schools'. Claims for what he refers to as an evidence-based policy made in his speeches were repeated.

In these articles I will provide references where the legitimacy or otherwise of the main claims can be verified. I will briefly outline some of the expenditure on this policy, still ongoing. Finally, I will remind readers of research on the effects of the policy, and the Phonics Screening Check, intended and unintended on the early literacy experiences of young children in England as reported by teachers and parents. The announcement of 21 September is symptomatic of most of the government initiatives on early literacy since 2012. Thanks to Freedom of Information Questions I have been able to track the very large sums of money spent by DfE since 2011 on programmes and training courses specifically on synthetic phonics. Between 2011 and 2013 match funding was offered to schools amounting to £23 million by the government and a further £23 million by schools in addition to money spent on the Phonics Screening Check. The material had to be from a list of synthetic phonics material prepared by the government (for further details see pages 171-173 in Clark, 2014, also in Clark, 2016). Large sums of money are still being allocated on the check and commercial materials and courses, provided they have at their core synthetic phonics as may be seen in Appendix II in Clark and Glazzard, 2018). Thanks to further Freedom of Information Questions I was able to update the information and reported that a further £26.3 million had been made available and this was out to tender. At the Conservative Party Conference on 2 October the Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds made the announcement that £26.3 will be made available to fund new Primary English Hubs. They are tasked with building "a network of excellent phonics teaching in every region". I am not clear whether or not this is a further £26.3 million. In drawing attention to this UKLA expressed disappointment, commenting that this money would be better spent on 'high quality reading resources for schools and public libraries (<https://ukla.org/news/story/has-the-government-got-reading-priorities-right-in-England?platform=hootsuite>).

In Clark and Glazzard, 2018, you will find evidence from our survey into the views of teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check. In chapter 2 of the report other relevant researches are summarised, those by NFER commissioned by DfE and published in 2015, the researches of Bradbury and

(Continued on page 20.)

(Continued from page 19.)

Russell-Holmes (2017) and Carter (2018). This was summarised in an article in the Education Journal on 25 September. The report and this article are available to read and download on <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

Get Support with teaching phonics and early reading

On 21 September DfE announced an offer of funding during October for 36 schools. The subheading on the announcement is: *The Ruth Miskin Read Write Inc programme helps schools improve literacy through the teaching of phonics and early reading.* This must be a tempting offer to eligible schools as it includes:
2 days of whole-school Read Write Inc phonics training including the headteacher and teaching assistants
2 days of literacy leadership training for the headteacher and reading teacher
16 days in-school development days with the leadership team
19 days supply cover for the reading leader.

Among the conditions for eligibility is that the school has been rated by Ofsted as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. Full funding is available for eligible schools including 19 days supply cover for the reading lead. However, schools are required to buy Read Write Inc phonics resources and there is reference to the Ruth Miskin website. For DfE announcement see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-support-with-teaching-phonics-and-early-reading>

This expenditure and the conditions imposed to access it are the subject of scrutiny by Warwick Mansell on his website: <https://www.educationuncovered.co.uk/news/136021/dfе-under-fire-for-promoting-training-events-run-by-external-advisers-private-company.shtml>

I am not clear if this is part of the £26.3 million expenditure announced by the Education Secretary at the Conservative Party Conference on 2 October. If so, it appears from information on the Ruth Miskin website that these 36 schools may be the final schools of 108 schools 'to participate in a fully-funded professional development leadership programme ending in March 2020'. This is headed *Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (TLIF)* stated to be: "In conjunction with The Department for Education Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund". "The programme will focus on the teaching of phonics and early reading and writing with Read Write Inc Phonics. The final 36 primary schools are being recruited now." The offer is listed as a two-year CPD programme (it appears to be that announced by DfE on 21 September) and it is stated that 72 schools have started the programme. In the further details it is stated that the CPD programme is: "All funded by TLIF: Normal cost £14,700." Schools are required to purchase Read Write Inc Phonics resources. This information and further details are on <https://ruthmiskin.com/en/tlif/>

The Results of the Phonics Screening Check 2018

On 27 September DfE released the results of the 2018 Phonics Screening Check and Key Stage 1 teacher assessments for pupils in England at national, regional and local authority level based on provisional data. In Table N2 pupil characteristics for all pupils, and for boys and girls separately are presented, showing differences in percentage pass related to ethnicity, first language, free school meals, disadvantaged pupils and special educational needs. For this latter these are presented within types of special need.

Many claims have been made for the results as evidence for the success of the government's policy. However, there is little evidence for improvement in attainment that can be attributed to the policy other than a year on year slight improvement in percentage pass on the check (see Wrigley, chapter 10 in Clark, 2017 and for the most recent results Reclaiming Schools (2018) <https://reclaimingschools.org/2018/8/9/27/phonics-test-nick-gibb-fails-again>. Another source is Warwick Mansell's assessment of the evidence available on <https://www.educationuncovered.co.uk/diary/blog/136086/statistical-smoke-and-mirrors-in-education-ministers-recent-pronouncements-part-1.shtml>.

As many of the claims are being scrutinised by others I will here only draw attention to a disturbing finding still ignored by government. As early as in Clark 2014 on page 167 and in Clark 2017 chapter 9, I

(Continued on page 21.)

(Continued from page 20.)

referred to the difference in failure rate between the oldest and youngest children. This concern was raised with Nick Gibb at a meeting of the Education Select Committee, but dismissed as unimportant. The percentage pass is now reported by month of birth in Table N2. To appreciate its significance, you need to be aware that those born in August are a year younger than those born in September. In 2018, 89% of the oldest pupils passed the check and only 75% of the youngest children. Only 12% of the oldest boys did not meet what is referred to as 'the expected standard of phonic decoding' (that is score 32 on the check) and 8% of girls. In contrast, 26% of the boys born in August and 19% of the girls were reported as failures. This statutory assessment on all children at the end of Year 1, when they are not yet six years of age, means that around 7,000 boys and 5,500 girls born in August have been recorded as failures on a test whose reliability and validity have been questioned and which many teachers claim gives little evidence they did not already have.

One further unacknowledged concern to which I drew attention is the possibility that some autistic children may be less willing than others to read the pseudo words. Not only are these 20 of the 40 words on the check but they are the first twelve words. Autistic Spectrum Disorder is recorded for 7,857 children and 33% of these children are recorded as failing. It is possible that some refused to read the pseudo words. I reported on one such child who failed the check for that reason, both in Year 1 and again in Year 2 while reading all the real words correctly (Clark, 2016: 136).

The evidence for the policy: Clackmannanshire

1. Clackmannanshire is a very small county in Scotland with 18 primary schools.
2. The research cited was conducted in 2005.
3. Its methodology was seriously criticised.
4. In 2016 Clackmannanshire commissioned an independent enquiry whose report was headlined in an article on 3 October 2016 in *The Herald*. "Primary schools run by Clackmannanshire Council branded 'unacceptable' in damning report. The county's standards of literacy were low as compared with similar authorities. As a consequence, the county has now in place a policy to improve these."

Can the government defend this as its evidence or cite other research? This and other claims will be scrutinised in my next article.

References

Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Revised edition. Abingdon: Routledge. First edition 2014.

Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2017) *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2018) *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology*. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

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. Downloadable together with recent articles from <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>