

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

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“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.)

On 5 December 2017, immediately after the announcement of the PIRLS 2016 results, Mr Gibb made a speech in The British Library in celebration of what he claimed was England’s successful Progress in the International Literacy Study. The following give the flavour of his comments there and in his other speeches: “Prior to our reforms, schools were using variations of a method called ‘look and say’ ... Decades of evidence from around the world – including the influential study from Clackmannanshire in Scotland – pointed to systematic phonics as the most effective way to teach children to read. Despite all the evidence in favour of phonics – we faced opposition from various lobby groups: those opposed to testing; those professors of education who had built a career on teaching teachers to use the ‘look and say’ approach; and the teaching unions. Today, we received the first set of international evidence that confirms that our approach is working ... England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016... These results are a vindication of the government’s boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism.”

A central platform of this policy since 2012 has been the Phonics Screening Check, a statutory assessment for all children at the end of Year 1 (at 5 and 6 years of age). During a visit to Australia in 2017 Nick Gibb promoted this policy and the check in particular. The developments in Australia are discussed in Clark, 2017.

In my article on 25 September in the 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.”

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 this as an assignment on current government policy with the word Discuss, followed by, ‘Please cite references for any statements you make’. It would be tempting to set a similar challenge to education ministers!

Introduction

In Part I, claims for the Phonics Screening Check, this year’s results of which were announced on 27

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September were evaluated, and I reported on expenditure with synthetic phonics at its core, some recently announced. I reminded readers of the evidence of the possibly unintended effects on early years classrooms in England of the high status as accountability data now 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. It should either be discontinued or at least no longer remain statutory (Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

In this second article I scrutinise claims made by government ministers, and Ofsted inspectors for this policy as evidence-based. 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. I will therefore cite references challenging whether that research is methodologically sound and the claims as to its findings. In September 2018 he added the National Reading Panel in US. In Part IV of Clark, 2014 (updated in a revised edition Clark, 2016), I analysed, with many references to research, government policy in England on learning to read. This was based on edited versions of articles published between 2006 and 2015 following the publication of the Rose Report. Readers are referred to chapter 13 there for a critique of the Rose Report and claims made for that report as supporting Synthetic Phonics as the method of teaching reading. See also chapter 7 in Clark, 2017 and for a further challenge see chapter 8 by Greg Brooks, who was himself a member of the Rose committee. In chapter 14 of Clark 2016 I examined the evidence for one best method of teaching reading to all children, (alternatively see chapter 6 in Clark, 2017).

For more recent evidence readers are referred to two books I edited: *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017) and *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018). These two books have contributions backed by many references from 18 academics from the UK, USA, Australia, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland challenging many of the statements made by ministers, Ofsted and others in England, and more recently also in Australia, for what is repeatedly claimed to be an evidence-based policy. In this article I will indicate the specific relevant chapters in these books and name the authors.

In May 2018 with a team from Newman University and Leeds Beckett University I undertook an independent survey of the views of teachers and parents of the Phonics Screening Check and government policy in England with synthetic phonics mandated as the only method of teaching reading. In chapter 2 of our final report other relevant researches are summarised, those by NFER commissioned by DfE and published in 2015, whose findings were ignored by the Government, the researches of Bradbury and Russell-Holmes (2017) and Carter (2018). The NFER research revealed that very early after the introduction of the check teachers were expressing concerns. It also showed that contrary to statements by the Government phonics even in 2012, did play an important part in the teaching of reading in many schools in England. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes and Carter in their researches not only reported on the views expressed by teachers but the effects on classroom practice of the high stakes now accorded to percentage pass on the check. These researches are summarised in an article in *Education Journal* on 25 September. The report and my recent articles are available to read and download on <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

The only research referred to by the School Standards Minister until recently in his speeches and articles, is research in 2005 in Clackmannanshire, a small county in Scotland.

Is the research in Clackmannanshire in 2005 a sufficient evidence-base for current policy?

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 criticised at the time (by Ellis in 2005 cited in Clark 2014).
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

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authorities. The county has now in place a policy to improve these. Paul Gardner in chapter 3 of Clark, 2017 cites several important references, including as early as 2006 a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Scotland, expressing concern at low standards of literacy in Clackmannanshire. He also refers to two important articles critiquing the research one by Ellis in 2007, the other by Ellis and Moss in 2014 also traces the history of Nick Gibb's increasing commitment to synthetic phonics since 2005.

Can the government still defend this as its research base, and what is added by the report of the National Reading Panel in USA to which reference has been added?

Evidence or ideology from the USA

An interview with Nick Gibb was published in *Research Ed* Issue 2 September 2018: 40-43: "People say, 'Where's your evidence for phonics?' I say well there's the Clackmannanshire studies, the National Reading Panel in US....there's loads of evidence."

In Clark, 2016: 152 you will find quotations about the National Reading Panel from a book edited by Allington (2002). One chapter was by Joanne Yarvin, a member of the panel who wrote a minority report. Elaine Gargan wrote a further critique and based on these Allington commented: "It's one thing when profiteers and ideologues (sometimes one and the same) distort the research to fit their agendas, but it is something quite different when the distortion carries the imprimatur of the federal government (Allington: 91)."

The push for evidence-based reading instruction is but a thinly disguised ideological push for a national reading methodology, for reading instruction that meets the 'phonics first' emphasis of the Republican Party platform and the direct-instruction entrepreneurs, those who profit financially when federal and state governments mandate the use of curricular materials like the ones they produce (Allington: 265)."

Read Allington's edited book to judge the strength of the National Reading Panel Report as research evidence. This pre-dated the developments in England.

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?

The lack of the evidence for these three related claims is analysed in chapter 13, 14 and 18 (in Clark, 2016); chapters 1, 6 and 7 by Clark; chapter 4 by Misty Adoniou; chapter 8 by Greg Brooks (in Clark, 2017). This is also discussed in chapter 1 by Clark and chapter 2 by Jonathan Glazzard in Clark, 2018. Each of these chapters has further references.

Are academics anti phonics?

This is a claim made repeatedly by the School Standards Minister who seems to believe that until his intervention phonics did not have a place in classrooms in England. The academics who contributed to the two books I published in 2017 and 2018 do make it clear that there is a place for phonics in the teaching of reading. What they oppose is the claim said to be based on evidence that synthetic phonics should be that method, and that it should be mandated as the only method of teaching initial literacy. In Clark, 2017, in Appendix I a publication by UKLA in 2014, backed by references, makes that association's position clear. In Appendix II a joint statement in 2016 by ALEA and PETA in Australia makes their position clear. Yet the views of all three have been repeatedly misrepresented, claimed to be anti-phonics.

Was phonics indeed not a part of the teaching of reading in classrooms in England prior to 2012? In the report of the research by NFER in 2015, a research commissioned by DfE, there is evidence that phonics did in 2012 have a place in the teaching of reading in many classrooms (see chapter 16 in Clark, 2016). For further evidence see Sue Reid in chapter 3 and Bridie Raban in chapter 10 of Clark, 2018.

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The future of the Phonics Screening Check? Should the check remain statutory, or be discontinued?

There have been criticisms of the reliability and validity of the check and whether there is any dramatic improvement in literacy levels since its introduction other than a higher percentage pass on the check each year (see chapter 4 by Misty Adoniou, chapter 10 by Terry Wrigley in Clark 2017 and chapter 2 by Jonathan Glazzard in Clark, 2018). Further references are cited in all these chapters. It appears that the Government has not yet consulted the teaching profession on the Phonics Screening Check (see Appendix I in Clark and Glazzard, 2018). The following summary is based on the views expressed in an independent survey in May 2018 of the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents (see Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

1. Many teachers consider that the Government should seriously consider either discontinuing the check or at least making it voluntary.
2. Most teachers do not agree with the pass/fail scoring on the check or the requirement that children who fail should re-sit the check.
3. Most teachers (and many parents) do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo/alien words in the check. This is apparent not only in their answers but also in their comments where they gave their reasons.
4. The responses to this survey by the teachers and parents, in their answers and in the comments made to the key questions, suggests a degree of concern about current Government literacy policy of which the Government should now be aware.
5. Concern was expressed both about the high stakes pass/fail Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement in England that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children.
6. Many Head Teachers and teachers expressed negative views on both the check and current Government policy. There was a significant difference when teachers were grouped by length of service with a higher percentage of the more experienced teachers likely to express negative views.

There is also research as to possibly unintended effects of the check on the classroom experiences of literacy in the early years as a consequence of the high stakes accorded by DfE and Ofsted to percentage pass on the check (see chapter 2 in Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

Do the results of PIRLS 2016 prove the success of the government's policy?

In his speech in December 2017 on the announcement of the results of PIRLS 2016, Nick Gibb claimed these proved the success of the synthetic phonics policy and introduction of the check in 2012. The pupils who sat PIRLS in 2016 at ten years of age had been the first pupils to sit the check in 2012. England's ranking of 50 countries since the previous PIRLS in 2011 had risen from joint 10th to joint 8th. Ministers have recently been taken to task by the statistics watchdog for several exaggerated claims (reported in an article by Rachel Wearmouth in *Huff Post* on 8 October. See also the report on page 5 of this issue, above).

Nick Gibb was chided for claiming that the reading ability of nine-year-olds in England had 'leadfrogged up the rankings last year, after decades of falling standards, going from 19th out of 50 countries to 8th'. He made this more exaggerated claim in his article on 27 September, the day this year's check results were released (having correctly reported the results on 5 December 2017). Sir David Norgrove pointed out that in truth it had jumped from 10th in 2011 to 8th'. For some reason Nick Gibb refers to the pupils as nine-year-olds, whereas everyone else refers to them as ten years of age (the mean age was 10.3). Part II in Clark 2018 presents 'Evidence from PIRLS 2016'. Chapter 5 in which I analyse the evidence from England and the claims made, is available online on the same link as the survey. Chapters 6 by Gerry Shiel and Eithne Kennedy describes 'Literacy policy and performance in the Republic of Ireland' and in chapter 7 Sharon Mc Murray considers 'Why Northern Ireland schools perform so well on the PIRLS 2016 study'. Both these countries, with very different policies and with teacher involvement in their development and implementation ranked statistically higher than England in PIRLS 2016. This finding has so far been ignored in England.

I encourage readers to study these three chapters and will here limit myself to a few cautions. The following is a quotation from the report on PIRLS: "Drawing unqualified conclusions about causal

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effects of policy is impossible on the basis of PIRLS alone.....and there is no sustained evidence that countries with phonics programmes have higher average PIRLS performance in general (quoted in Clark, 2018: 33).

1. The Government attributed the slight improvement in attainment on PIRLS solely to a policy that had only just been introduced and which had not yet been accepted by all teachers. These pupils were the first to be assessed on the check. Predictions were also made that current policy will lead to further improvement by the time of the next PIRLS.
2. England was one of only two of the 50 countries that did not administer the parent questionnaire. Therefore, the evidence on home background is based on teachers' views. England had a higher proportion of head teachers than many other countries who claimed that parental expectations for their children's achievement and their attitude to reading were 'low or very low'. We have no way of assessing the accuracy of this view.
3. It is possible that the contribution of the home to the pupils' achievement in England may have been underestimated. According to the international report 'good readers had an early start in literacy learning'. There is no first-hand data on this issue from England. Parents may have contributed in unrecognised ways both to their children's performance on the check and their subsequent attainment on PIRLS.
4. Literacy online was assessed in 14 countries. We have no such information from England for ePIRLS either on the pupils' attainment or their attitude to such reading tasks as it was not one of these 14 countries.

Update on expenditure

Damian Hinds made an announcement that a further £26.3 million has been made available to fund new Primary English Hubs. They are tasked with building "a network of excellent phonics teaching in every region". The names of these 32 schools have now been released, chosen it is reported "through a competitive process". Each hub will work with up to 170 primary schools in their area to "build a network of excellent phonics teaching in every region". Here again the emphasis is on phonics. (<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/the-five-schools-policies-in-damian-hinds-conservative-party-speech>).

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