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Literacy policy, synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check

In this special issue of *Education Journal*, we bring together a series of research articles by Professor Margaret Clark on literacy policy, and the position in it of the high priority given to synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check. Prof. Clark has long questioned what the research evidence for this policy is.

We start with a new article as an editorial that sets the scene. We then bring together in one place a series of articles published in two publications, the weekly magazine *Education Journal* and the academic journal *Education Journal Review*, during the last three months of last year. Together, they make a coherent case for questioning some of the assumptions that lie behind the Government's literacy policy in England.

The articles that follow are:

Reading the Evidence on the effects intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check. The power of politicians over education policy and practice in England. First published in *Education Journal* No. 379, 14 June 2019.

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. First published in *Education Journal* No. 351, on 9 October 2018.

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. First published in *Education Journal* No. 352, 16 October 2018.

What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice. First published in *Education Journal Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, November 2018.

The progress in international reading literacy study PIRLS 2016: a cautionary tale. First published in *Education Journal Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, November 2018.

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. First published in *Education Journal* No. 359, 4 December 2018.

Reading the Evidence on the effects intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check. The power of politicians over education policy and practice in England

Research by Margaret M. Clark OBE

In 2018 Margaret Clark was elected to the Reading Hall of Fame for her contribution to literacy research, theory and practice.

In 2012, HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw stated that: “Ofsted will sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision – primary, secondary and Further Education. Ofsted will start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education” (Education On-line, No. 461, 16 March 2012).

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. (Nick Gibb, 8 September 2018).

Margaret Clark wrote a series of research articles for *Education Journal* between 2006 and 2018 challenging with evidence aspects of the government education policy on literacy. Edited versions formed Part IV of her award-winning book *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Routledge published an up-dated version of this book in 2016. In 2017 and 2018 she edited two books, *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* and *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology*.

These two books have research contributions from 18 international literacy experts analysing the evidence on synthetic phonics and on the effects of the Phonics Screening Check. This check has since 2012 been administered to all children in primary schools in England at the end of Year 1 when they are about six years of age. Those who fail to reach a pass mark of 32 out of 40 words read aloud correctly are required to re-sit the check at the end of Year 2. Preparation for what has become, rather than a diagnostic assessment, a ‘high stakes’ test now dominates early years classrooms in England with schools expected to raise their percentage pass on the check each year. Furthermore, large sums of money are allocated to programmes with synthetic phonics at their core. The Department for Education still claims the current literacy policy is research-based as does Ofsted, ignoring any evidence to the contrary. The Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb, in his speeches and answers to written questions in parliament, still unchallenged, makes sweeping claims for the success of this government policy and ridicules anyone not accepting it.

In *Education Journal* Special Issue I we re-published six of Margaret’s articles on Baseline Assessment. Here we re-publish her recent articles in which she has analysed research evidence on the government’s current early literacy policy and the effects intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check on early education on primary schools in England. None of this evidence has been acknowledged by the DfE or Ofsted.

In May 2018, with a team of researchers, Margaret undertook an independent survey of the views of teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check. The final report can be accessed online on <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-synthetic-phonics-screening-check-2102-2017>. Her

(Continued on page 3.)

(Continued from page 2.)

recent articles can also be accessed and downloaded from that site.

She has now sent a summary of the survey report, a two-page outline of the relevant published evidence and a few copies of the survey report to members of the Education Select Committee. She, as a courtesy, sent copies also to Damian Hinds and to Nick Gibb. The only response she has had from DfE is an unsigned letter which deals with none of the evidence she presented. It has been suggested by an MP that Margaret Clark should be called to give evidence to the Select Committee. In this Special Issue we publish the outline of evidence of publications sent to the Education Select Committee and to Damian Hinds and Nick Gibb and extracts from the letter she received from DfE in response. Five of her recent articles are also reprinted here. In the article reprinted here from *Education Journal Review*, Vol. 25 No. 2, the findings of the survey of the views of teachers and parents are reported. Margaret's aim is to ensure that teachers, parents and grandparents of children in primary schools in England are aware of the evidence.

Should the Phonics Screening Check remain statutory in view of its adverse effect on practice and should a major criterion for funding by DfE continue to be support for synthetic phonics? Her report below lists sources of published evidence as yet unacknowledged by DfE and Ofsted and these articles provide more detailed evidence.

Part I Summary of evidence sent to the Education Select Committee. (A summary of the survey report was also sent and a few copies of the survey report).

Should synthetic phonics remain mandated as the only way to teach all children to read and the Phonics Screening Check remain a statutory assessment in England for all six-year-olds? There is overwhelming evidence ignored by government that does not support the government's current literacy policy and the claims made for it. This is summarised below.

Margaret M. Clark OBE 21.3.19. In 2018 Margaret Clark was elected to The Reading Hall of Fame for my distinguished contribution to literacy research, theory and practice. Margaret.clark@newman.ac.uk

1. Report of an independent survey in May 2018 of the views of teachers and parents

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 chapter 2 for a summary of other researches. Other articles can also be read and downloaded from there. See Appendix II for details of funding allocated to synthetic phonics programmes by DfE.

Clark, M.M. (2018) 'The views of teachers, parents and children on the Phonics Screening Check: the continuing domination of politics over evidence'. *Education Journal* Issue 347: 20-23.

___ 'The Phonics Screening Check: Intended and unintended effects on early years classrooms in England'. *Education Journal*. Issue 349: 29-33.

* ___ '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*. Issue 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.

2. Published evidence on synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check up to 2015

(Summarised in Clark 2014, updated in Clark, 2016). The first edition self-published won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015, then Routledge published the revised edition in 2016.

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

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Edition. Abingdon: Routledge. Part IV chapters 13-18 'Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning, government policy in England 2006 to 2015'. Paperback and e-book.

3. Two edited books with extensive references to research challenge the claims by the government in England that current literacy policy is evidence-based.

Chapters from these are cited in the two articles in *Education Journal* Issues 351 and 352 available on the same link as the final survey report.

Clark, M.M. (2017) *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*. (editor and contributor) Birmingham: Glendale Education. From Amazon.co.uk. Paperback and e-book. (This has six additional contributors from UK and Australia).

Clark, M.M. (2018) *The Teaching of Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (editor and contributor). Birmingham: Glendale Education. From Amazon.co.uk. Paperback and e-book, (This has twelve additional contributors from USA, Australia, The Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and UK). (Chapter 5 on PIRLS is available on the link to the survey report).

4. 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 by Nick Gibb also the National Reading Panel Report from USA.

Allington's edited book has contributions from members of the panel raising issues about claims made for that 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: 241-2.

5. Further articles

*Clark, M.M. (2018) 'What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice' *Education Journal Review*, Vol. 35 No. 2: 2-30.

* ____ 'The progress in international reading literacy study PIRLS 2016: a cautionary tale'. *Education Journal Review*, Vol. 35 No. 2: 76-83.

* ____ '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'. *Education Journal*. Issue 359: 18-22.

NB This special issue of *Education Journal* will appear with a selection of Margaret Clark's articles from 2018 on the same website link as the survey report.

6. We have recently completed an independent survey of the content of programmes for initial teacher education in England to explore the extent to which they are dominated by the demands of current policy in England.

Should synthetic phonics remain mandated as the only way to teach all children to read and the Phonics Screening Check remain a statutory assessment in England for all six-year-olds? There is overwhelming

(Continued on page 5.)

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evidence ignored by government that does not support the government's current literacy policy and the claims made for it. Yet on every occasion he makes a speech or writes the School Standards Minister and others continue to claim it is backed by research and has dramatically improved attainment. Teachers and parents have not been consulted on the Phonics Screening Check or the mandatory policy of synthetic phonics as the way to all teach children to read. Margaret Clark's intention is to request a consultation involving researchers, teachers and parents as to whether the Phonics Screening Check should remain statutory in view of its adverse effect on practice. Should a major criterion for funding by DfE continue to be support for synthetic phonics?

NB Articles with an asterisk are reprinted here.

Part II Extract from letter dated 13/5/19 in response to evidence submitted on 26 April by Margaret Clark
NB. The letter was unsigned with no attempt made to respond to the evidence submitted. The consultation to which it refers was in 2011, prior to the commencement of the check and was not as to whether to introduce the check but only in what form. There has been no subsequent attempt to consult teachers or to evaluate its impact on practice.

Department for Education: Policy Team 2019-0016616

'Dear Margaret Clark,

Thank you for your correspondence of 26 April regarding the phonics screening check. Your correspondence has been passed to me to reply as I work for the team responsible for the phonics screening check. I have noted the outline and summary that you enclosed

It is important that every child has an equal opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the future, and teaching all children to read fluently by the time they leave primary school is fundamental to this ambition.

The following paragraph rehearsed the purpose of the check and claimed that there are now '82% of pupils meeting the expected standard in the phonics screening check this year, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012.

The department conducted a public consultation on the phonics screening check in 2011..... The rest of the paragraph refers to that consultation.'

NB. The letter was from The Standards and Testing Agency and is unsigned.

Part III Five articles for inclusion in the Special Issue

'How justified is it to dominate government policy on early literacy with synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check? Part I Recent evidence on effects and expenditure'. *Education Journal* 351 9 October 2018.

'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* Issue 352: 26 October 2018.

'What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice'. *Education Journal Review* Vol. 25 No. 2 2018.

'The progress in international reading literacy study PIRLS: a cautionary tale'. *Education Journal Review* Vol. 25 No. 2.

'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'. *Education Journal* Issue 359, 4 December 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

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?

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- Was phonics indeed not a part of the teaching of reading in classrooms in England prior to 2012?
- 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

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(Continued from page 7.)

summarised, those by NFER commissioned by DfE and published in 2015, the researches of Bradbury and 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.html>

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.html>.

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 9.)

(Continued from page 8.)

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>

First published in *Education Journal*, No. 351, on 9 October 2018.

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

By 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.)

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 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

(Continued on page 11.)

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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 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

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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.

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

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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 McMurray 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 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

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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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What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice

By Margaret M. Clark OBE

Abstract: *This article traces the development of government policy on literacy learning in England since 2006, with the requirement that synthetic phonics be the way to teach all children to read and the statutory Phonics Screening Check since 2012 be taken by all children at the end of Year 1 (about six-years-of-age). Evidence is presented challenging the claims by the government for this policy which now dominates classroom practice and the content of courses for initial teacher education in England. Successive Secretaries of State for Education and Ofsted inspectors are shown to have endorsed this policy uncritically and no attempt has been made to consult the teaching profession. Research evidence is summarised on the disturbing effect of the check on the classroom experiences of young children from as early as nursery class, and the dominance of practice in decoding, in particular, of pseudo words (20 of the 40 words on the check) as a consequence of the high percentage pass on the check required of schools by DfE and Ofsted. The voices of the children and teachers are cited based on recent research and the views of teachers and parents on the check based on an independent survey are outlined. These show the concern of many teachers and parents at the negative effect of current government policy.*

Keywords: literacy, policy, practice, politics, ideology.

Government literacy policy on learning to read in England since 2006 appears to have its origins in the Rose Report, The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006). A critique of the report is to be found in chapter 13 of *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2016) with further evaluation in chapter 7 by Clark and chapter 8 by Greg Brooks in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a). Since 2006 my aim has been to present a balanced picture of the evidence concerning the government's mandatory policy in England that the method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics only, and since 2012 that the Phonics Screening Check be a statutory assessment taken by all children in state primary schools at the end of Year 1, when about six years of age. The check has 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) which the child is required to read out loud to the teacher. Those who fail to achieve a mark of 32 out of 40, the pass mark, are required to re-sit the check the following year. What had initially been claimed as a light touch diagnostic check has become a high stakes assessment with schools expected to raise their percentage pass year on year.

The results are scrutinised both by the government and by Ofsted. The increase in the percentage pass on the check is claimed to show that more children each year are, thanks to this policy, on their way to becoming fluent readers. I analysed these developments in Part IV of *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2014), updating this evidence in a revised edition in 2016. The School Standards Minister Nick Gibb, who has been committed to this policy since 2005, recommended to the Federal Government in Australia that it should, on the basis of its success in England, adopt synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and introduce the Phonics Screening Check into Australia. I felt that a balanced picture of the evidence from England was not being presented in Australia. In two edited books in 2017 and 2018 I presented evidence from seventeen academics in the United Kingdom, Australia, The United States, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latter two countries, with very different literacy policies, and with teachers involved in their development and implementation, ranked statistically higher than England in the recently reported findings of PIRLS 2016 (Clark, 2018).

The School Standards Minister for England Nick Gibb, immediately on publication of the PIRLS 2016

(Continued on page 16.)

(Continued from page 15.)

results in December 2017 made a speech at the British Library where he claimed not only that England's improvement in ranking on this assessment of ten-year-olds was the result of the phonics policy but also that children's potential had previously been stunted, not by their teachers but because of 'a dogmatic romanticism that prevented the spread of evidence-based teaching practices'. This he followed with a sweeping indictment: "Despite 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." (Gibb, 2017)

He further stated that his case for synthetic phonics as the method for teaching reading is 'not an un-evidenced assertion' and is one 'backed up by decades of research'. Unfortunately the research he still chooses to quote is that in Clackmannanshire in Scotland whose methodology has been heavily criticised by many researchers (see chapter 14 in Clark, 2016 and chapter 2 by Glazzard, 2018). The School Standards Minister continues this theme in his recent speeches. Those who read *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a) dispassionately checking for evidence, would have found extensive research to challenge the claim that prior to recent government policy, phonics was not evident in classrooms in England and in The United States, where similar claims were made in 1990s, or indeed recently in Australia. That book contains a collection of papers by five literacy experts from the United Kingdom and Australia showing that phonics did already have a place in classroom practice. In *Reading the Evidence*, we included in the appendices, statements made by UKLA in 2014 in The United Kingdom, and a joint statement by ALEA and PETAA in Australia in 2016, both backed by extensive references (Clark, 2017a). Shortly after the publication of *Reading the Evidence*, the results of PIRLS the Progress in International Reading Study 2016, were released in December 2017. Critics claimed the results invalidated our claims in that book, as England's ranking had risen in this latest assessment of literacy of ten-year-olds when compared with the previous assessment in 2011, rising from joint 10th to joint 8th. This improved ranking, according to Nick Gibb, was caused by current policy and the phonics check which these children were the first to sit. Such claims are considered in a more recent book, *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policy, evidence and ideology* with contributions from a further twelve academics (Clark, 2018). Cautions are sounded in the report on PIRLS in drawing causal connections from this single set of data. It is also pointed out that not all countries that have an emphasis on phonics rank high. Both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rank statistically higher than England on PIRLS yet no attention has been drawn in England to what we might learn from these literacy policies which differ greatly from that in England. Readers are referred to these two edited books for evidence on the development of and effects, intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check on the literacy experiences of young children in England.

Evidence on the views of teachers on the Phonics Screening Check was to be found in the government funded research by the National Foundation for Educational Research as early 2015, covering the early years of the check before it became such a high stakes assessment. Even then teachers reported it was having effects on the classroom literacy experiences of young children, some of which concerned them (see chapter 16 of Clark, 2016, chapter 9 in Clark, 2017a). The government ignored the findings of this research although it was commissioned by DfE. In 2017 the government launched a consultation on assessment in primary schools in England in which reference is made to the Phonics Screening Check as a statutory assessment for children at the end of Year 1. There are questions on the future of other assessments, yet no questions as to the future of the phonics check, whether it should remain, and if so as a statutory assessment. I have evidence that this omission was no accident, based on the answer I received when I raised this issue at the Westminster Forum on December 7, 2017 following a presentation on the consultation.

The place of phonics testing in primary schools: the government consultation on assessment in primary schools in England

Below are extracts from an article, (Clark, 2017b) in the *Education Journal* 2017 306: 12-14 summarising

(Continued on page 17.)

(Continued from page 16.)

the evidence I was submitting to the DfE consultation (Primary Assessment in England: Government consultation. Launch 30 March 2017. Standards and Testing Agency. Reference STA/17/7935/e ISBN 978-1-78644-438-7). The DfE issued this consultation document on Primary Assessment in March 2017, with the 22 June as the closing date for responses. I considered the justification for the Phonics Screening Check remaining a statutory assessment in primary schools and the claim that synthetic phonics is the way to teach reading, as repeatedly claimed by the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb.

On page 10 of the consultation document reference is made to the phonics screening test as: “A light-touch, statutory screening check administered by teachers. The check assesses a pupil’s phonics decoding ability to identify pupils needing additional support...Pupils who do not meet the required standard are required to re-sit in year 2.”

Twenty questions are posed in the consultation document to which one is asked to respond. To my surprise, no questions are raised as to the future of the Phonics Screening Check, whether it should remain, and if so, as a statutory assessment. Following the consultation, it was possible that the only other assessments remaining in Year 1 might be teacher assessments. Thus, the screening check, whose reliability, validity and effect on the curriculum were not even being scrutinised, was likely to remain a statutory assessment. This pass/fail check with percentage pass within each school recorded each year, and an expectation of an increase in percentage pass each year, is far from being a light-touch diagnostic assessment as claimed. Disturbingly, it could become an even higher stakes measurement, with percentage pass an important aspect in school accountability as measured by Ofsted and the government.

No evidence-based criticisms of the status accorded by the government to synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading, or of the success of the screening test as having raised standards in anything other than the test itself have dented the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb’s faith in the policy. In the Conservative Manifesto only a few pages were devoted to primary education, yet, on page 51 reference was made to two key aspects of government policy for primary education:

“We will build on the success of the phonics screening test. We will expect every 11-year-old to know their times tables off by heart.”

This government that claims its policy is evidence-based offers a depressing future for young children in the 21st century in primary school in England, as in their early years they will be expected to practise pseudo words, recite their tables and learn grammatical terms! Sadly, many of the youngest children will also have been recorded by the age of six as having failed the phonics check.

The following are important points to which I drew attention in Clark, 2017b:

- i) The large difference in pass rate each year between the oldest and youngest children; thus, many of the youngest children, particularly boys, are labelled failures early in their school career.
- ii) Not only are half the words in the phonics check pseudo words, but each year the first twelve words in the check have been pseudo words. Some of those confused by the pseudo words have been children who could already read, or children who have attempted to make these into real words. There are children, including some autistic children, who refused to attempt pseudo words, but read all the real words correctly, thus failing the check. The instructions for the check are ambiguous meaning that some teachers might stop the check without giving children who fail on pseudo words the opportunity to try the real words.

Recent developments in the phonics policy in England

The dictates from DfE and Ofsted on the place of synthetic phonics and the importance for schools of a high and increasing percentage pass on the phonics check were, I felt having a major impact on practice in schools, and institutions training teachers in England, removing the freedom of practitioners to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children. Yet the government remains committed to expenditure on further synthetic phonics initiatives, even funding a pilot study in 300 schools to consider

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whether the check should be repeated in Year 3 by those children who failed the phonics check in Year 2. The report of this study by NFER was not published but in a written answer Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister stated this policy would not be implemented. (NB Following a Freedom of Information Question I did manage to obtain a copy of the report).

Until recently there was only anecdotal evidence on the effects of these developments on young children's experiences of and attitudes towards literacy. How will this greater emphasis on phonics in the early stages, the isolated nature of much of their tuition in phonics, the new emphasis on pseudo words and the phonics check influence their understanding of the nature of literacy and attitude to reading, also their parents' ideas as to how to help their young children? We need evidence from the children, including those who passed the check, any who could read but failed the check, and those required to re-sit the following year. The assumption that the needs of those who fail to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this check may still be met by a continuing focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems seems naive.

Freedom of Information Questions enabled me to estimate the large amount of money spent by government on synthetic phonics, including on commercial materials and courses. There are no records of how much has been spent by schools on commercial synthetic phonics products in attempting year on year to increase their percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check, nor how much has been spent by institutions training primary school teachers in England in meeting Ofsted's demand for a focus on synthetic phonics. From what was originally referred to as a 'light touch' assessment this has become a high stakes form of data, used by Ofsted in its judgement of a school's standing. Although the results for individual schools are not published they are available on Raiseonline, accessible to Ofsted inspectors.

At the Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar on 7 December 2017 the findings of the consultation document were reported. The answer I received to a question to the speaker confirmed my suspicion that the future of the Phonics Screening Check was not indeed scrutinised as part of the consultation. The lack of evidence as to the views of teachers and parents on the effects, intended and unintended, of the Phonics Screening Check was the reason for planning our recently completed independent survey. We felt that teachers and parents might have valuable evidence and be more concerned than their present comparative silence suggested. Our main aims were to establish whether in the view of the profession and parents what has now become a high stakes assessment does provide any valuable diagnostic information. In their opinion is it value for money, should it remain, and if so as a statutory measure? What is the value if any, in recording the result as pass/fail and in requiring any children who fail to retake the check the following year? What is the effect of the inclusion of pseudo words in the check (which are 20 of the 40 words). It is important to consider the views of teachers and parents as to the effect the imposition of this assessment is having not only on those who fail but on children who were already reading with understanding at the time they were assessed. My attention was drawn to recent research into the effect of the check on grouping in early years classrooms in England shortly after we had completed the survey (Bradbury, 2018 and Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Here I present a summary of that and other relevant researches.

The Government insists that synthetic phonics be the mandatory only way of teaching all children in England to read. Furthermore, those who fail the check have more of the same, with the assumption that this method will in the end achieve success for all children. At a time of cuts to school budgets it seems appropriate to put the expenditure on this policy under scrutiny. I have been able to find out how much money is being spent by DfE on the phonics check, synthetic phonics materials and training courses. There is no way to establish how much money is being spent by schools to achieve a higher percentage pass each year on the check in order to be judged successful by DfE and Ofsted. However Bradbury (2018) notes that over 5,000 schools are using a commercial scheme recommended by DfE and in our recent survey we have been able to ask Head Teachers their views on such expenditure.

Comments

(Continued on page 19.)

(Continued from page 18.)

The NFER research in 2015 raised issues about the costs and benefits of a one-off assessment versus teachers being well-trained to monitor children's progress. What we have in England is a one-off pass/fail assessment, where the child reaches or fails to reach an arbitrary prescribed standard, an assessment that is expensive to administer, which may over-estimate the children at risk, which is not diagnostic and where funding has not been allocated for alternative methods which might have been appropriate for at least some of the children who failed the check. It should be noted that Nick Gibb was not the only person to place his faith in the government's phonics policy and the check. In spite of the evidence from the NFER research, Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of State for Education added her voice to that of Sir Michael Wilshaw, HMCI and Nick Gibb, in claiming in The House of Commons: "We have a relentless focus on academic standards, with 120,000 more six-year-olds on track to become confident readers thanks to our focus on phonics."

(19 October 2015: Hansard Column 680) (quoted in Clark, 2016: 144)

In 2012 Sir Michael Wilshaw stated that: "Ofsted will sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision – primary and secondary and Further Education. Ofsted will also start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education."

(*Education*, online No 461 16 March 2012) (Quoted in Clark, 2014: 154, the first edition of *Learning to be Literate*)

With such official endorsements of phonics, not only in schools but in institutions that train primary teachers, the effect the Phonics Screening Check has had on practice in primary schools in England should come as no surprise.

Research evidence on the effects of the Phonics Screening Check between 2012 and 2018

Background: Politics and policies

In a written question in parliament on 18 July 2018, Peter Kyle asked the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that the Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching provides support for learners with dyslexia and other literacy needs. Nick Gibb's reply followed the same lines as all his statements on literacy, yet again referring 'to evidence-based practice in all aspects of early literacy, for all children, including systematic phonics'. He stated that the Department is currently in process of selecting English Hubs which will share effective practice with a particular focus on language and literacy teaching in reception and Key Stage 1.

He further claimed that 'there is also evidence that structured synthetic phonics teaching, in addition to engaging with reading books, can also help pupils in reception and Key Stage 1 with dyslexia to read well'. Further he again stated that: 'The reformed National Curriculum and the Phonics Screening Check, encourage teachers to use this method and since the introduction of The Phonics Screening Check in 2012, 154,000 more six-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers'. Again, he cited England's slightly higher ranking in PIRLS 2016 than in 2011 as proof of the success of the government's policy, yet still ignoring the statistically higher ranking of The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with very different literacy policies, and with the involvement of professionals in the development and implementation of their literacy policies (see Clark, 2018).

Among the recommendations in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings* on the Reception curriculum published in November 2017 are the following:

All primary schools should:

- 1) Make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year.
- 2) Ensure that when children are learning to write resources are suitable for their stage of development and that they are taught correct pencil grip and how to sit correctly at a table.

(Continued on page 20.)

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Initial teacher education providers should:

1) Devote a greater proportion of their training programme in the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics as the route to decoding words, and the composition of numbers, so that all newly qualified teachers are competent and confident to teach early literacy and mathematics.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-good-and-outstanding-schools>

We plan to investigate what proportion of their time is already devoted by students in training to synthetic phonics and whether Ofsted indeed does have such information.

That report has caused consternation and an outcry among early years professionals concerned that Ofsted has become the uncritical voice and enforcer of government policy. To quote Scott from her critique of Ofsted's current role: *The power of Ofsted over approaches to the teaching of Reading*: "Not only is Ofsted inspecting uncritically in the context of government policy, it is also failing to interrogate the evidence and to challenge the ill-conceived approach that is being imposed on young children. Indeed, the pressures in schools to show achievement and progress at all costs and the fear of the effects of a weak Ofsted report are leading to counter-productive ways of working in many classrooms. (Scott, 2018: 86). The research reported here illustrates the effects of some of the practices feared by Scott.

A further policy of The Department for Education announced on 11 April 2018 was that it plans to introduce a statutory baseline assessment in autumn 2020. This further policy means that children will be assessed by their teachers shortly after they enter reception class. According to Nick Gibb who announced this, it will be used as the baseline for measuring the progress primary schools make with their pupils...providing a fairer measure of accountability. It has been reported that the assessment will be by the teachers, will last about 20 minutes and will be recorded on a computer. It will cover communication, language, literacy and early mathematical skills, and possibly self-regulation. The National Foundation for Educational Research has been awarded the contract worth around £10 million to undertake the pilot study. Apparently, it was the only bidder as CEM and Early Excellence declined to tender. Yet these were the three assessments authorised by DfE over the period 2015-16 for which DfE reimbursed schools which used them during an earlier attempt to introduce such an assessment.

This is another example of a policy dictated by central government with a focus on accountability, which like the Phonics Screening Check (a statutory assessment since 2012), is likely to have major implications for practice in the early years. This move, like the recommendations of Bold Beginnings, the Ofsted report cited above, has been opposed by many researchers concerned about its implications for practice as well as the known unreliability of such assessments of young children (see Clark, 2017c, chapter 10 and a report by an expert panel from BERA, 2018).

Research evidence

Summarised here are the findings of three independent research studies on the impact of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practice and the views of teachers on the value of the check. The children now also have a voice. The first of these researches by the National Foundation for Educational Research was commissioned by the Department for Education over the period 2012-2015. The focus of the second research was on the views of teachers, and children who had recently sat the check. This is the only study of which I am aware to report the views of the children. This second research was Jane Carter's Doctoral study and has not yet been published. However, she gave a paper on the children's voices at the UKLA International Conference in July 2017 and on the views of the teachers in 2018. With her permission I have drawn the summary here from the power points from these two lectures. Her Doctorate can now be downloaded from <https://people/uwe.ac.uk/Person/JaneCarter>. The third research, published in October 2017, looked at the impact of grouping practices in primary schools on children and on educational professionals. The role of private companies in defining appropriate pedagogy is also considered. One focus in that study by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was Phonics which they claim has come to have

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an identity separate from Reading in the early years curriculum, possibly because of the high stakes nature of the Phonics Screening Check taken by all children at the end of Year 1 in England. This appears to have led to streaming as early as in Nursery classes. Brief reference will also be made to information gathered by the author and her team during research into baseline assessment. During this research we collected information on the characteristics of children in Reception class in three primary schools in The West Midlands. It brings alive the nature of many of the classes on which current government mandatory literacy policy and the check may now be having a major impact. One might question whether pressure on their teachers to attain a high percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check should be a priority for teachers.

I had made a detailed study of the NFER research and reported the findings in Clark, 2016, chapter 16. I was, therefore, able to draw on that published source. I had also referred to the children's voices aspect of Jane Carter's research with quotations in Clark, 2017a: 92-93. Her more recent report on the views of the teachers became available in July 2018 after we had completed our survey. I have made a detailed study of the research report by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes published in October 2017 and drawn on that. Jane Carter, Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes confirm that I have fairly represented their findings.

There is evidence from these researches that many of the issues commented upon by the respondents to our survey had been raised previously, many even immediately after the introduction of the check, yet have been ignored by policy makers.

I Phonic Screening Check Evaluation, Final Report

(Walker, M., Sainsbury, M., Worth, J., Bamforth, H., and Betts, H, (2015)

This section is based on chapter 16 of Clark, 2016. In June 2012, for the first time the Phonics Screening Check was administered to all Year 1 children in England. In June 2013 a further cohort of children in Year 1 sat a similar check and those children who had failed to reach an acceptable level (32 out of 40 words correct) were required to re sit the check at the end of Year 2. The DfE commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to undertake research over the period 2012-2015 to consider the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools, on the wider literacy curriculum and on the standard of reading. An interim report was published in 2013. Clearly by this stage only some aspects of the remit could be considered. In June 2015 the final NFER Report was published (see Clark, 2016: chapter 16).

The interim report was based on case study interviews in 14 primary schools in June and July 2012; baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers. The final report draws on data over three timepoints. In 2014 there were interviews with staff in 19 primary schools, surveys of 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers immediately after the check in June 2014. Many of the findings in the final report were anticipated in the interim report. Already at that time issues were raised about the value of the check for certain types of pupils. This included not only children with special educational needs, but also high ability pupils, those already reading and those with English as an additional language.

Year 1 teachers expressed mixed views on the value of the check, although benefits were acknowledged, in confirming the results of other assessments, and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching. However, most Year 1 and Year 2 teachers reported that phonics teaching already took place daily and on average two hours per week. Around 90 per cent of schools already taught discrete phonics sessions in Reception and Years 1 and 2. Literacy coordinators were less favourably disposed to the check than teachers, feeling that the check results do not reveal anything of which teachers were unaware. Most teachers felt the check was not suitable for children with speech, language and communication needs and children with other learning difficulties. Reference was made to the pseudo words distracting some of these children and in some case these children struggled to communicate their answers clearly (Clark, 2016: 132).

Most teachers interviewed in the case study visits to schools reported that, 'the check would have

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minimal, if any impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future (Clark, 2016:133).

The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvement in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the check. The most frequently reported change, already in 2014, was an increase in the pace of phonics teaching and an increased focus on pseudo words (see Clark, 2016: 135). The pattern described in these analyses suggested that a strong enthusiasm for synthetic phonics and the check amongst teachers tended to be associated with higher phonics attainment as measured by the check but not with improvement in reading and writing assessment at the end of Key Stage 1.

There was little evidence to suggest that many schools had moved towards a position whereby they were teaching systematic phonics 'first and fast', to the exclusion of other word strategies. Although most schools were committed to teaching phonics, they did not apparently see this as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

In the NFER blog in 2015 by Matt Walker, one of the authors of the report, he commented that: In spite of these findings the government remains committed to the retention and indeed possible extension of the phonics check and related initiatives.

That research, though commissioned by DfE, appears to have been ignored by policymakers. More recent researches are still drawing attention to these same issues and in our survey many respondents commented on these same problems.

II An Illuminative evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check: listening to the voices of children and their teachers (Jane Carter)

This was the topic of Jane Carter's Doctoral research which I hope will soon be available as a publication. Jane gave a paper on the children's voices at the UKLA International Conference in 2017, and on the teachers' voices in 2018. With her permission I gave examples of comments from the children shortly after they had sat the check, based on her 2017 presentation (in Clark, 2017a: 92-93). Here I add to that evidence from her 2018 presentation at the UKLA International Conference evidence on the teachers' voices.

The children's voices to quote Jane Carter: "The group that is at the heart of the reading debate, those learning to read, have not, as yet been listened to."

I had been concerned that the views of the children on their experience of the check had not previously been explored so was pleased that Jane shared her power points with me. In her cleverly designed study, the children were the experts as they tried to explain to Beegu, a soft toy, based on the character in the children's book by Alexis Deacon how Beegu could learn to read: they were Beegu's teachers. This enabled the children, unprompted by the researcher, to talk about classroom practice including phonics, alien words and other approaches to learning to read they had experienced.

One child suggested that the purpose of books was not to read or enjoy but: 'to help you with your sounds'. Some children raised the issue of 'alien' words. Among the answers to this observation: 'they just help you with your sounds'. The children realised that in the check if a word had an alien next to it then it wasn't a real word. When asked if these words helped one child responded: 'They don't they just confuse us!'

Jane Carter stated that: 'There is widespread teaching to the test that has nothing to do with developing children as readers...and everything to do with raising test scores'. However, Carter stressed that in spite of this, in some cases the children are 'absorbing the policy voice and a passion for reading for pleasure'. Clearly the teachers were torn between raising as required the percentage pass on the check (as distinct from teaching effective phonics for reading) and providing a rich environment of literacy learning for the children. The children also recognised that many classroom practices. e.g. Treasure or Trash Words, real or not real words, were not needed. This indicated that the purpose of 'alien words; as a useful assessment tool was being misunderstood by teachers and that alien words were being taught as part of

(Continued on page 23.)

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the curriculum'. In this research Jane reveals what are perhaps unintended consequences of the policy, in particular, the effect on practice in classrooms as a consequence of the current high stakes nature of the check.

The teachers' voices

Jane Carter explored the extent to which the Phonics Screening Check framed the teaching practices of being a teacher of reading. She was following up the NFER research commissioned by DfE which looked at the effects shortly after the implementation of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and of the introduction of the PSC in 2012 (Walker et al., 2015; Clark, 2016: chapter 16). Particularly interesting is what she refers to as possible 'Living contradictions' within the teachers' views and practices.

Jane Carter gathered data from a questionnaire in 2016 completed by 59 Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers. In October 2016 she conducted focus groups in seven schools to follow up ideas and issues raised in the teacher questionnaire.

Some 57 of 59 teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that teaching phonics knowledge was essential for the teaching of reading. There were interesting contradictions, however, as 25 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics should be taught fast and first before other strategies'. Yet, 51 of the 59 respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics must be taught at the same time and alongside other strategies' and all 59 agreed or strongly agreed that teaching a range of strategies to word reading was essential. Thus, many teachers while appearing to subscribe to government policy appeared to hold views that were incompatible. Most teachers claimed to have adapted their practice to government policy (22 of 24 Year 1 teachers). What is important is that these teachers did not also say this adaptation of practice was to ensure children developed as readers – teachers saw the check as unconnected to reading. Most of the teachers said they had adapted their practice in order to improve PSC scores and this rises to all, 24 Year 1 teachers. This was explored further in the focus groups where a number of teachers referred to the need because of the check to practice alien words. One teacher commented in a focus group: "It's not a good thing to have to admit we teach to the test but we have to do it."

There were some disturbing comments made by the teachers concerning the cultural context of the classroom: "It is just so mechanised." "Pounding them with sounds." "We are ramming it down their throats."

Carter stated that whatever the teacher practices some (most) children were positive about reading and teachers showed commitment to developing children as readers who enjoyed reading and read for pleasure. However, she suggested her research should raise the following questions for policy makers:

- For the higher attaining readers (who could pass the test at an earlier age) is being prepared for the check throughout the year a backward step?
- 'First fast and only' - so when does the 'first' period end?
- Children that 'pass' – what does this really mean in terms of current and future reading?

III Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1 "A Necessary Evil"?

The Final Report of this research by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was published in October 2017 (Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G., 2017 see also Bradbury, A., 2018).

This report gives recent evidence on widespread effects of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practices in early years classrooms in England. The research which was carried out between April and June 2017 involved a nationwide survey and interviews at four case study primary schools. There were 1373 respondents to the online survey with a spread across Reception, Years 1 and 2 and some Nursery teachers. Interviews were also conducted in four primary schools in different regions of England. No Academy schools or areas which have selection were included in the study.

The survey data revealed that grouping is most common for Phonics (76%) Reading (57%) and

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Literacy (54%). They found that grouping for Phonics was likely to be across the year group rather than as for Literacy and Maths within the class. In the survey it was found that 58% of 118 Nursery teachers who responded used grouping for Phonics. In Reception this rose to 81%, in Year 1 it was 78%. This grouping for Phonics declined in Year 2.

It appears that phonics was seen as a distinct subject which required specific pedagogic practices, separate from Reading. The researchers suggest that this practice was influenced by the use of Phonics schemes from private companies (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes: 18). The teachers stated that: 'because the children were aware of which group they were placed in and why, this led to reduced self-esteem and confidence' (p. 22). In the report the effect of these groupings on the mental health of the young children, an issue raised by some teachers, is discussed.

Many survey respondents commented that this practice of grouping was determined by the Senior Management. To quote: 'This language of fear and risk indicates the high stakes nature of testing in early years and Key Stage 1'. This was it is claimed 'associated with taking preparation for tests seriously'. It is suggested that only those who were in a position of strength, either through their successful results or personal professional standing felt able to challenge the orthodoxy of grouping' (p. 30). Teachers felt under pressure to use this practice to ensure their assessment results were acceptable and many written comments summed this up. It was noted that there was widespread reluctance to inform parents, showing the extent of teachers' contradictory feelings about grouping (p. 35)

Chapter 5 in the report is devoted to what is described as an 'unexpected finding' namely the role of private companies in determining schools' grouping policies, particularly Phonics Read Write Inc which was said to be the most mentioned phonics company, which appeared to influence grouping even in schools which did not buy the actual scheme. The researchers comment that this scheme recommends that pupils are grouped across the school 'in homogenous groups'. In one case study school, children were grouped for Phonics across the school, thus some Key Stage 2 children were placed with Key Stage 1 children. As the Phonics Screening Check is an important early accountability measures for schools, teachers felt that their grouping decisions for Phonics were partly determined by these targets.

To quote from the research: "Although the Phonics Screening Check is described as a 'light-touch assessment there are consequences for both schools and pupils if the expected levels are to be met,' and grouping and interventions are seen as the solution."

Furthermore, it is suggested that this leads to resources being prioritised on the basis of improving Phonics results; this it is claimed encourages the use of external schemes such as Read Write Inc. This research found evidence of resources being distributed to focus on borderline groups while leaving those guaranteed to pass and those 'hopeless cases to one side' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017: 6.2). Reference is made to different resources and staff being allocated to different groups, for example lower groups being taught by teaching assistants. Mention is also made of adverse effects on the youngest children of the check and grouping. Specific attention is also drawn to intervention as a form of grouping, and in some schools, both grouping and interventions are in place.

In the light of their findings these researchers recommend that:

- Policy makers should examine whether the explicit and implicit support for grouping in policy documentation is appropriate, in the light of their stated aims of reducing gaps in attainment
- Policy makers should make the Phonics Screening Check non-statutory, because of the impact on grouping practices which, from age three, can have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing.

Finally, policy makers should also be aware of the frustration that teachers feel with Phonics companies undermining teachers' professional decision-making.

IV Contrasting patterns in three Reception classes

As part of a research into baseline assessment in 2015 and 2016 at Newman University which I directed,

(Continued on page 25.)

(Continued from page 24.)

we gathered detailed information on Reception classes in three schools in the West Midlands. This was presented at a research seminar in February 2016 (Clark, 2017c chapter 10).

In a sample of only three primary schools, there were 16 different languages in the Reception classes in addition to English. In the four Reception classes 117 children were tested on baseline assessment in 2015, and for 52 English was not their first language. There was a year's difference in age between the oldest and young children; 26 children were born in September, October or November 2010, while 42 were born in June, July or August 2011. Already further children had entered these classes, for some of whom English was not their first language. Current education policy in England does not appear to acknowledge the importance of assessing how competent children are in their home language when they start primary school, including those whose first language is not English. I referred to new research by UNESCO, that 40% don't access education in a language they understand, and that *A Review of 40 Countries* education plans found that less than half recognised the important of teaching children in their home language, particularly in the early grades and that teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of bilingual classrooms (*Education Journal*, 260: 12).

School 1. Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school had a nursery class. There were 59 children (24 boys and 35 girls) in two Reception classes. Three whose first language was not English had arrived since the deadline for completion of baseline assessment.

*32 of the children assessed did not have English as their first language and there were 11 different languages spoken by the children in the Reception classes.

Urdu 11, Punjabi 13, Hindi 2, Shona 1, Romanian 1, Lithuanian 1, French 1, Bulgarian 1, Swahili 1. (plus three not assessed Portuguese 1, Lithuanian 1 and Polish 1).

16 of the children assessed were born in September to November 2010 (the oldest) and 19 were born in June, July or August (the youngest).

School 2. Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 31 children (15 boys and 16 girls) in the Reception class. All these children were assessed.

*18 of children who were assessed did not have English as their first language. There were six different languages apart from English. Polish 2, French (African) 3, Tigrinyan (Eritrea) 7 Chinese 4, Estonian 1, Wolof (West African Language) 1.

Seven of the children who were assessed were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest) and 11 were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

There were two looked after children in Reception class.

School 3. Early Excellence was used for assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 30 children (14 boys and 16 girls) in Reception class and all were assessed.

*There were two children whose first language was not English, one speaks Punjabi, the other Arabic.

Three children were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest) and 12 children were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

*We do not have an assessment of how fluent in English these children were. It is possible that some of these children may speak more than one other language.

(Continued on page 26.)

(Continued from page 25.)

The detailed information from the above research on the possible characteristics of children within even a single Reception class in primary schools in England, though collected for a different purpose, is pertinent to the current debate when taken together with the other research cited here. It brings home the reality of Reception classes in many schools in England.

In a speech on 31 July 2018 at the Resolution Foundation, Damian Hinds the Secretary of State for Education, gave his vision for boosting social mobility. He stressed the importance of the home environment but also stressed the importance of Reception class: “Most pressingly it is a persistent scandal that we have children starting school and struggling to communicate, to speak in full sentences. Right now 28% of children finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive.”

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations//department-for-education>)

(<https://gov.uk/government/people.damian-hinds>)

Faced with the findings of the research reported here teachers could be forgiven for questioning whether the government’s current priorities for the teaching of reading in the early years as set out in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings* are indeed appropriate to bridge this gap, or are evidence-based.

The researches cited here show many unintended as well as intended consequences of the Phonics Screening Check. While some of this evidence has only recently been published it is disturbing that DfE was alerted to some of the concerns of the teaching professionals soon after the Phonics Screening Check was introduced in 2012, and, in research commissioned by DfE! The new policies noted here, including baseline assessment, may have further unintended consequences for young children during their early years in primary schools in England. It is disappointing that so little attention is paid by government either to the warnings of professionals or to research evidence other than that which appears to support government policy.

A survey of the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017

Background

As was noted earlier, the government in England did not involve the teaching profession in the development or planning for the implementation of what is now a high stakes statutory assessment of reading, the Phonics Screening Check, or the decision to make synthetic phonics the mandated only way to teach reading to all children in state schools. The professionals have also not been consulted as to the future of the check, whether in their view it should remain statutory, become voluntary or be abolished. Schools are judged by the Department for Education and Ofsted by the percentage pass on the Phonic Screening Check with a requirement to increase the percentage pass each year. Universities involved in teacher education are required to present synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and there seems no opportunity for academics to challenge this policy in their teaching, in dialogue with the Department for Education, or even with other academics. Furthermore, the funds allocated by DfE since 2012 for literacy courses and materials, which have been substantial, are with synthetic phonics at their core.

There is little evidence that the views of teachers or parents as to the effects of the check, intended and unintended, on the literacy experiences of young children in England have been sought by the government since the early research by NFER commissioned by DfE shortly after the check was introduced in 2012. The final report by NFER was published as early as 2015. Yet, it appears that the disquiet expressed by some teachers interviewed during that research was ignored by policymakers: “the effects of the check even then on classroom practice; that the check was inappropriate for many children, those who could already read and those with speech problems among others; that the check told them little they did not already know.”

Literacy coordinators were found to be even more critical of the check than teachers.

In the intervening years criticism of the check by teachers and even academics involved in teacher

(Continued on page 27.)

(Continued from page 26.)

education has been muted. Their silence may be assumed by politicians to indicate that they are in support of the policy or are unconcerned. Further research has appeared since we planned our survey revealing disturbing effects on classroom practice in the early years as the check has moved from what was claimed to be 'a light touch diagnostic assessment' to a high stakes assessment for accountability. Attempts to achieve, as required by DfE and Ofsted, a higher percentage pass on the check each year seem in many early years classrooms in England to have led to preparation for the check dominating children's early literacy experiences.

The aim of this independent survey, preliminary results of which were reported in July 2018, was to explore the views of Head Teachers, teachers who have been involved in administering the Phonics Screening Check and parents whose children have been assessed. The response to the survey has shown that their relative silence until now should not be taken as evidence that they are uninterested or unconcerned. Not only did busy professionals and parents complete the survey but many took time to add comments. The survey was anonymous, but we have been contacted by a number of those who completed the survey who have expressed interest to be involved in further research or to provide further information. Any further research will require us to submit a new proposal to the ethics committees and would require us to seek informed consent from anyone wishing to participate.

In the final section of this article I present an outline and summary of the survey.

Outline and summary of the report on an independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check

The preliminary report of this survey was published online on 6 July 2018. This has now been replaced by the final report: *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018.* Editors Margaret M. Clark OBE, Newman University and Jonathan Glazzard, Leeds Beckett University. This can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.

In addition to Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard the other members of the research team are Susan Atkinson of Leeds Beckett University, and John Bayley and Sue Reid of Newman University.

Outline

This was an independent survey and the results are anonymous. The aim of the survey was to enable government policy to be informed by the views of teachers and parents as to the effect of current policy on the literacy experiences of young children in primary schools in England. It was advertised nationally in England during May 2018 with links to the three survey forms, for Head Teachers who worked in schools with Year 1 classes, teachers who had assessed children, and parents whose children had been assessed on the check. Where a parent had more than one child assessed they were asked to complete the survey for the child assessed most recently.

Survey forms were returned by 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents. While not all questions were answered by all respondents, any percentages quoted here are based on responses by at least 180 Head Teachers, 1,108 teachers and 295 parents. We had responses from all regions of England and from teachers with a wide range of experience. Most of the teachers had assessed at least 40 children on the check and 56% of the Head Teachers had themselves assessed children on the check. Unfortunately, in spite of our attempts, the responses from parents were nearly all from parents whose mother tongue is English. However, many of those parents who did respond expressed concern at the effect of the check on the literacy experiences of their children., including those whose child had passed the check.

Since 6 July, when we released our preliminary report, we have studied several other researches which reveal further evidence on the effect of current policy on children's literacy experiences, as reported by their teachers, now also by children. In our final report these findings are summarised in a new chapter 2. The findings of our survey are reported in chapters 4 to 7 and the questions and answers in Appendices V to VII. We have added to the appendices a summary of the additional data from the more complex analyses we have now undertaken. Appendix I reveals evidence that teachers have not been consulted on

(Continued on page 28.)

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the future of the check. In Appendix II we indicate how much money has been spent by DfE on the check, on commercial synthetic phonics materials and training courses. We know from our survey that many primary schools have also devoted funds to commercial materials to ensure they raise their percentage pass on the check, but there is no evidence as to how much. Appendix III reports on recent developments in Australia where it appears the Phonics Screening Check may soon be introduced in some states. In chapter 3 details of the survey are reported and Appendix IV shows the information on the survey that was circulated.

Summary of the views of Head Teachers and teachers (see chapters 4, 5 and Appendices V and VI)

The percentages of Head Teachers and teachers who answered these key questions are based on at least 180 Head Teachers and 1108 teachers, those who answered these policy related questions.

1. Do you think the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have? No HT 89% T 94%.
2. Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check? No HT 71% T 75%.
3. Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1? No HT 64% T 74% Do you think it is useful to have pseudo/alien words in the check? No HT 80% T 80%.
4. Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school? HT Yes 46% (62 made comments). 48% of teachers used commercial materials and 215 made comments.
5. Do you think the phonics check should remain statutory? Yes HT 16% T 12% NB There were significant differences between the views of more and less experienced teachers (see Appendices).
6. To what extent do you agree with the government policy that the method of teaching reading in England to all children should be by synthetic phonics only? Agree HT 6% T 10% Disagree HT 62% (73 comments) T 47% (429 comments). There were significant differences with more experienced teachers more likely not to agree.

Summary of views of parents (mainly based on 304 parents, see chapter 6 and Appendix VII)

1. Many of the parents had more than one child assessed.
2. Nearly half the parents who responded had a child assessed in 2017 by which time the percentage pass was high.
3. The check was passed by 75% of these children.
4. Eighty percent of the parents stated that their child had passed the check.
5. Of the parents who responded 80% stated that their child could already read with understanding when they sat the check and 85% that their child could already write recognisable words.
6. Many parents made comments in response to the questions, many expressing concern at the effect of the check, including those whose child had passed the check see chapter 6 and Appendix VII).

Many of these parents whose child was reading well at the time of the check or who passed the check still expressed negative attitudes to the check and the government policy. It would be valuable to have the views of a wider range of parents whose children have sat the check, including children who have speech, language and communication needs or other special educational needs and children who are new to English.

Implications

1. The views expressed by the teachers indicate 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

(Continued on page 29.)

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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.

*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. Many recently qualified teachers in England may not have been alerted to the controversial nature of some of the evidence cited by the government as Teacher Education programmes may be dominated by a focus on synthetic phonics to enable them to meet Ofsted requirements (see chapter 2). This is an area for further research.

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.

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The progress in international reading literacy study PIRLS 2016: a cautionary tale

By Margaret M Clark OBE

The first PIRLS study involving 35 countries took place in 2001. The results generated headlines in England such as ‘English primary pupils are among the best readers in the world’ (DfES). In 2003 I published an article critiquing the results, with the subtitle a ‘cautionary tale’; such cautions are relevant to any international study (see chapter 19 in Clark, 2016).

In December 2017, the PIRLS 2016 report was published on standards of reading comprehension of ten-year-olds in 50 countries, one of which was England (Scotland and Wales did not take part in this cycle). By 5 December the Standards Minister for England, Nick Gibb had made a speech at the British Library, the transcript of which is downloadable from DfE (<https://www.gov.uk>). In that speech, and subsequent speeches, the latest in Fiji to the Commonwealth Education Ministers, he claimed that this international evidence ‘confirms that our approach is working’ as the international study of 9-year-olds’ reading ability showed that ‘England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016’ and that the low performing pupils are gaining most rapidly. The speech is full of unsubstantiated claims including a belief that by the time of the first check in 2012 synthetic phonics had indeed been adopted as the method of teaching reading in England. The evidence base for these claims is examined by seven literacy researchers in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017) and by further twelve in *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018), where Part II is devoted to an analysis of the PIRLS results. The literacy policies of Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland are very different from England and both ranked statistically higher than England. It is therefore surprising that in a government claiming to have an evidence-based policy no consideration has yet been given as to what we might learn from these results and policies (see chapters 6 and 7 in Clark, 2018).

PIRLS 2016

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international comparative study to assess and compare the reading performance of pupils in their fourth year of formal schooling across participating countries when around ten years of age. England has taken part in all four PIRLS cycles every five years since 2001. A total of 50 countries took part in PIRLS in 2016. Three aspects were assessed 1) reading comprehension 2) a student questionnaire and 3) a questionnaire to head teachers and teachers. A questionnaire was also distributed to a parent/guardian who was asked to provide information about their child and their home environment related to reading activities. England and the United States were the only two countries that did not administer these questionnaires. It means that for England we have only the views of the head teachers, teachers and pupils who sat the test as to the home circumstances, with no possibility of comparing their views with that of the parents themselves.

In answer to an enquiry as to why the United States did not administer the parent questionnaire we immediately had a response indicating that: “NCES found that parents tend to feel as though the questions may be a bit too intrusive or time consuming, consequently, we do not administer the parent questionnaire in many studies.”

I sent a Freedom of Information Question to the Department for Education

“On page 19 of the recently published PIRLS 2016 Report for England it is stated that England and The United States are the only two countries (out of 50) not to administer the questionnaire to parent/guardians. No indication is given as why this decision was made or by whom. Why was this decision made and by whom?”

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The decision that England should not administer the PIRLS 2016 home questionnaire was taken in September 2014 by DfE ministers. Much of the information asked for in the PIRLS home questionnaire is collected by the department in other ways for example, pupils' earlier performance at school, and their socio-economic background. A further consideration was the additional burden this would put on the parents. Previous experience of international questionnaires to parents demonstrate that they tend to elicit very low response rates, which, in turn, makes the data unusable.

Initiated in 2016 was a computer-based reading assessment of students' ability to acquire and use information when reading online. Fourteen countries took part in ePIRLS, including Ireland. From this there was both interesting information on the pupils' ability and their attitude towards online reading. I also enquired why England did not participate in this assessment.

The decision that England should not administer ePIRLS was taken by DfE ministers in June 2013. The ePIRLS assessment would take around 1.5 hour in addition to the 2.5 hours of the paper-based assessment, and it was recommended by the study organisers that ePIRLS be administered on a consecutive day to PIRLS. The need to release year 5 pupils for two consecutive half days would make it extremely difficult to engage schools. We already participate in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which moved to a computer-based mode of delivery in 2015. This has provided insights into on-screen skills for reading (and also for mathematics, science and collaborative problem solving) albeit at age 15, rather than primary age pupils.

Some of the information for this article is taken from the National Report for England (McGrane, Stiff et al., 2017). However, there is an international report and reports for individual countries, all of which can be downloaded. I consulted these, and the reports for Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland, as both ranked statistically higher than England and both gave the parental questionnaires. As England did not administer the parent questionnaire this aspect is not discussed in the report on England.

In 2016 England's sample was around 5000 Year 5 pupils from 170 primary schools. The average age of pupils participating in PIRLS 2016 was 10.2 (in England 10.3). England's average score in PIRLS in 2016 is 559, significantly higher than in 2006 and 2011. However, it is significantly lower than The Republic of Ireland (567) and Northern Ireland (565). In chapter 5 of Clark 2018 I discuss the findings and how much we can legitimately conclude from the report on any causal connection between government policy and the improved results. PIRLS 2016 is the first opportunity to assess how performance in the phonics check introduced in 2012 and taken at the end of Year 1 relates to performance in PIRLS; thus, this aspect has prominence in the report for England. However, warnings are expressed in the report:

"Drawing unqualified conclusions about the causal effects of policy is impossible on the basis of PIRLS data alone. ...Some policies will not have been in place for long enough to have an effect upon Year 5 pupils 'literacy levels in 2016'..."

the current results should be somewhat cautiously interpreted given that other countries have also adopted phonics approaches over varying lengths of time and the results have been mixed in terms of average PIRLS performance (McGrane, Stiff et al.: 146) and 'there is no sustained evidence that countries with phonics programmes have higher average PIRLS performance in general' (page 149).

It will be no surprise that the pupils who met the standard on the phonics check (a mark of at least 32 out of 40) had an average score much higher than other pupils. However, the range of individual PIRLS scores at each raw mark on the phonics check is quite wide (McGrane, Stiff et al. 2017 figure 4.6: 65).

Further findings

As noted by the minister 'a higher proportion of pupils in England were categorised as being 'very confident' readers (53%)'. However, they were reported as being slightly less engaged in their reading lessons as compared with pupils internationally and the percentage of pupils reporting they like reading is lower than the international median. The number of books that pupils in England reported they have at home is strongly related to reading confidence and enjoyment as well as average performance on PIRLS. We have no confirmation from the parents in England of the accuracy of these estimates.

(Continued on page 33.)

(Continued from page 32.)

Career satisfaction of primary school teachers

Thirty-five percent of the pupils in England who sat PIRLS in 2016 had current teachers with less than 5 years teaching experience (Northern Ireland 11% and The Republic 17%). As many had recently trained it is not surprising that in England the percentage of pupils in England with teachers who in the last two years had dedicated time for reading-related professional development is substantially lower than in the comparator countries. NB These are not the early years teachers involved in the phonics check, but the pupils' current teachers. Career satisfaction in NI (62%) and The Republic (60%) was higher than in England (51%). Career satisfaction in the Republic of Ireland in PIRLS 2011 and 2016 has been higher than in many other countries and associated with high scores.

It is interesting to note that in The National Report on England by McGrane et al., 2017, page 127 is devoted to 'career satisfaction of primary school teachers in the Republic of Ireland', with references from other research to back the statements. Recruitment and retention of teachers in some countries, including England, has become a growing problem. Indeed, concern has been expressed very recently in England by the Secretary of State for Education. However, his focus has been on reducing the workload. That may only be part of the problem. Excessive testing of young children for accountability, and dictation by central government not only of policy in general but how to teach, has removed the professional autonomy not only of teachers but also of head teachers. Even the content of continuing professional development is dictated within narrow policy confines. These constraints in England may well be discouraging young people from entering the profession and causing others to leave; the extent to which this is true is worth investigating. In contrast, in The Republic of Ireland teacher training courses remain highly competitive and trainee teachers are typically academically high achievers, whereas it is claimed that in the United Kingdom they are those with sufficient qualifications, 'but rarely the highest achievers'. Teaching is perceived as a highly valued and respected career in the Republic of Ireland, it is stated, which has not been the case elsewhere. It would seem worth investigating in what ways the literacy policy itself, the way it was developed and the autonomy granted to teachers have contributed to the Republic of Ireland's high ranking in international studies, to the high regard for the profession and the career satisfaction of the teachers.

The influence of home background on PIRLS results

Raising the percentage pass on the check year on year had not yet come to dominate practice in the early years in England at the time the pupils who were assessed on PIRLS sat the check in 2012. It is yet to be seen whether the full implementation of this policy does indeed improve the level of reading comprehension of pupils in England, their confidence in reading and desire to read. There are important findings from PIRLS on the influence of early preschool literacy experiences on attainment. We need to look beyond the results for England to examine this aspect.

England had a large proportion of pupils' headteachers who believe that parental expectations for pupil achievement are 'low or very low' (14%) much higher than the international median of 3%. However, the pupils' teachers were less likely than headteachers to report that parental expectations or support for pupil achievement are low or very low. As noted above we do not for England have any corroboration of this from parents.

According to the international report 'good readers had an early start in literacy learning'. The information from the parents revealed two ways that pupils get an early start in literacy namely: Having parents who often engage them in early literacy activities and attending pre-primary education.

Parents are the students' first teachers and 39 per cent of the students had parents who reported often engaging their children in early literacy activities such as reading, talking or singing to them as well as telling them stories and teaching them to write alphabet letters. These students had higher attainment. This is downloaded from <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/pirls/summary>

It is claimed that students whose parents reported that their children could perform early literacy tasks when beginning primary school 'illustrate that early preparation at home appears to have an effect on

(Continued on page 34.)

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attainment in fourth grade'. In the report for Northern Ireland it is reported that parents' enjoyment of reading was also associated with higher attainment. In Northern Ireland 49 per cent of the parents who responded to the questionnaire reported that they 'Very much like reading', a percentage greater than in any comparator country; their children had higher average attainment in reading. In England in the absence of such data the influence of the home, even preschool, on literacy achievement may be under estimated and that of school literacy policy over emphasised. It is possible that in England the parents contributed both to the pupils' high score on the phonics check and on PIRLS.

Literacy online

In the fourteen countries which participated in ePIRLS it is reported that good readers had little difficulty reading online, that a high degree of achievement was demonstrated, that they were able to navigate to the appropriate webpages, completing the assessment in the allotted time. Irish pupils performed as well on the digital ePIRLS assessment as they did on the paper-based PIRLS assessment.

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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

(Continued on page 36.)

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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

(Continued on page 37.)

(Continued from page 36.)

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.

(Continued on page 38.)

(Continued from page 37.)

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).

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