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## **Independent research into the impact of the systematic synthetic phonics government policy on literacy courses at institutions in England delivering Initial Teacher Education**

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The report of this research is now available to read and download from the Newman University website (<https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/independent-research-into-the-impact-of-the-systematic-synthetic-phonics-government-policy-on-literacy-courses-at-institutions-delivering-initial-teacher-education-in-england>). In *Literacy Today* 92: 9-13 and *Education Journal* 407: 16-20 in March 2020 a shortened version of Chapter 1 of the report was published with the title, *The future of early reading courses in initial teacher education institutions in England: Who controls the content?* This article is also reprinted on the same website.

**I**n January 2020, Ofsted published a consultation document on the future inspection of initial teacher education institutions in England. The new policy will be announced shortly and if ratified will be implemented in September 2020. Our research involved a survey which was completed by 38 academics at ITE providers in England, 10 of whom were interviewed to explore in more detail the findings from the survey. This research is evidence of the current situation.

Following the consultation, Ofsted is likely to further curtail the power of professionals in planning the content of their courses in early reading if they wish their institutions to retain the right to train teachers. We encourage professionals to read our evidence which we will also draw to the attention of members of The Education Select Committee.

### **The purpose of this independent research**

The aim of this research which was conducted in 2019 was to investigate the impact of recent government and Ofsted policy on the content of current literacy courses in institutions involved in initial teacher education for primary schools in England. We also wished to investigate the attitudes of the lecturers and tutors in the institutions towards the current government policy with synthetic phonics at its centre since 2012.

### *The research team:*

Professor Margaret M. Clark, Sue Reid and Jude Sloan from Newman University together with Professor Jonathan Glazzard from Leeds Beckett University and Dr Colin Mills from Manchester University. Professor Margaret Clark, Sue Reid, Jude Sloan and Professor Jonathan Glazzard devised the online survey whilst Sue Reid and Dr Colin Mills conducted the individual interviews.

The research report is jointly authored by the team and I acknowledge that this article draws from the text in the research report to which they all contributed.

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*The importance of this research:*

The government in England, and Ofsted, remain committed to synthetic phonics as the only way to teach all young children to read. Not only is this government policy mandated in schools, but edicts have been issued by Ofsted to instruct institutions involved in initial teacher education to forefront this in all their literacy courses. A major aspect of Ofsted inspections has been to ensure that this government policy is enforced. An analysis of the current situation is all the more relevant following the consultation document issued by Ofsted in January 2020. Should its recommendations be ratified, from September 2020 the emphasis on systematic synthetic phonics will be further strengthened and enforced. See below for a summary of the relevant aspects of the consultation document.

*The aim of the research and how it was conducted:*

Our aim in this independent research is to inform government policy, with evidence concerning the views of professionals currently involved in the literacy aspect of initial teacher education. An anonymous online survey was completed by 38 staff in ITE institutions in England and ten of these who completed the survey were interviewed to explore in more depth issues that were highlighted in the survey responses. The online survey was completed between February 2019 and October 2019. The questions were phrased and structured to elicit the following information:

- The professional initial teacher education experience and current role of the survey participant
- The types of ITE courses offered by the institution and the content of those courses especially with regards to synthetic phonics
- The level of attention given by Ofsted to the teaching of synthetic phonics in inspections at the participants' institutions
- The perceived impact of the systematic synthetic phonics government policy and Ofsted's commitment to that policy
- Whether or not the survey participant agrees with the current government policy on systematic synthetic phonics.

These issues were explored in more depth in the interviews with ten of those who completed the survey. The outline questions for the follow-up interviews were sent to the interview participants in advance of their interview to allow time for them to reflect and prepare for the interviews. These were conducted in the closing months of 2019 after the research team had had an opportunity to study the results of the online survey.

**Findings and their implications**

It was clear both from the findings of the survey, and the interviews, that the focus in English courses in institutions involved in initial teacher education of primary teachers in England is predominantly on the requirements of the government and Ofsted. Limitations in time spent in the institutions by the students currently necessitates this emphasis if the institutions are to meet Ofsted requirements. There is clearly little time to devote to wider aspects of English, though it was clear that tutors did attempt to present as comprehensive a course as possible. The answers to the survey made it clear that within most courses it was the assumption that the trainees would teach in England. Limited time was available either to critique government policy, or to compare and contrast, it with the literacy policies in other countries, even within the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland education is a delegated power and these countries have very different policies for early reading. It appears that many students who train in England

All ten lecturers and tutors interviewed considered phonics to be an aspect of the teaching of reading. However, all maintained that it was only one aspect of the teaching of early reading. They

*(Continued from page 19.)*

indicated that within institutions involved in Initial Teacher Education there is concern that the centrality of phonics is detracting from teaching of other aspects, not only of English, but because of time limitations, other areas of the curriculum.

Participants indicated that there may be tension between what university tutors are presenting to students as a holistic view of the teaching early reading and the sometimes polarised experience the students may experience in schools, many of which have adopted the government's policy wholeheartedly; the students' experience on teaching practice may well not give them a wider experience.

Concern was expressed by those interviewed around how Ofsted inspections are enforcing a focus on systematic synthetic phonics, and their experience that the quality of phonics training in their institutions may affect the overall judgement given in an Ofsted inspection. This is an issue that will become even more important if the draft framework for inspecting ITE is ratified, as failure to comply with teaching early reading using only systematic synthetic phonics will result in an Ofsted judgement of 'inadequate'. Decoding seems to be Ofsted's as well as the government's focus for teaching early reading. From the interviews it was clear that tensions within ITE institutions occur as staff grapple with producing reflective graduate teachers and complying with the demands of Ofsted to retain accreditation. They felt that the focus of universities should be to produce reflective and enquiring graduates that need to be able to question and critique. University-based courses should it was felt, have a depth of thinking and reflection on pedagogical practices and evidenced theory. This would enable students to make professional judgements to support progress, but also to challenge policy which is not supported by evidence. The tutors interviewed were all providing their students with the opportunity to do this. However, were they to be implemented recent proposed changes to the inspection framework will make this difficult to maintain, as this could result in an Ofsted judgement of 'inadequate' and a possible loss of accreditation for any institution in England that challenges the centrality of systematic synthetic phonics as the way to teach early reading.

### **Implications**

Government and Ofsted may, by the current policy and proposed changes, shut down critical debate in relation to the teaching of early reading and thus undermine the expertise and professionalism of experienced tutors. Thus, the teaching of early reading in universities is in danger of presenting a simplistic view of reading, where ideology based on flawed research is promoted over evidence-based research which presents the teaching of early reading as a complex skill. This fear is reinforced by the high stakes accountability of Ofsted inspections which can put in doubt the very existence of ITE institutions if they do not comply.

1. The expertise and knowledge of teacher educators in England is already being undermined as many feel unable to challenge the centrality of phonics, both promoted by government, and required by Ofsted as a key aspect in inspections not only in schools but also in the institutions involved in ITE.
2. Senior managers in institutions, in order to keep their accreditation, may currently not be challenging the centrality of phonics in their ITE curriculum. This is at present resulting in friction between them and some tutors. Should the recommendations of the Ofsted consultation document be implemented, these conflicts will be even greater.
3. The next generation of primary teachers in England may complete their training with a view of the teaching of early reading which puts phonics at its centre but with little attention to other aspects of reading.
4. Lack of time during their courses may result in trainees emerging from training with less expertise in the teaching of other areas of English.

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5. Government policy on phonics, including the focus in Ofsted reports which in the 2020 consultation document states that SSP is the only way to teach early reading, is shaping the primary English curriculum in both schools and ITE institutions.

6. The undermining of tutors' expertise will result in educational policy being the preserve of the ideology promoted by the government in power at the time.

Students may emerge from their training in England unaware that other countries have very different, and highly successful early literacy policies. Furthermore, the policies in these countries may not have been imposed by government, but developed and implemented with the active involvement of the teaching profession, such as in The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland for example. Both these countries had statistically higher ranking on PIRLS 2016 than England, a fact never acknowledged by the current government. There is a danger that rather than being well-qualified professionals, trainee teachers in England may emerge from their training rather as skilled technicians, with a limited knowledge base from which during their teaching career both to critique government policy and to contribute to the development of future policies. It is disturbing that this may be true also of future tutors who remain in the institutions providing initial teacher education should there be any further restriction on the courses they are required to deliver.

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative data presented in this report supported the survey data. The findings suggest that teacher educators in England lack autonomy in relation to how they prepare trainee teachers to teach early reading. They feel obliged to focus on Systematic Synthetic Phonics at the expense of developing trainees' understanding of a broad repertoire of strategies for teaching reading development. In addition, the time allocated to Systematic Synthetic Phonics is having a detrimental impact on the time allocation for other aspects of English.

Given the extensive research which exists which points to the need for a balanced approach to early reading development, it is critical that teacher education programmes support trainee teachers to use this research to critically interrogate government literacy policy. It is also essential that trainees are introduced to approaches which have been successful in other countries and other parts of the UK. However, we recognise that a divergence from government and Ofsted policies may be a dangerous move for teacher education providers in England, particularly if the proposed draft ITE framework is ratified. It is therefore critical that researchers, teacher education and literacy organisations continue to debate these issues and engage in professional dialogue and debate with the Department for Education and the inspectorate.

## **Appendix**

I circulated this summary in February 2020 with quotations from the consultation document to professionals who might wish to respond to the consultation. It is now Appendix I in our research report.

To all professionals involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for primary schools in England.

This is a summary with key quotations on early reading from the Consultation Document published by Ofsted in January 2020. You have until 3 April 2020 to respond. The framework will then be published in summer 2020. The full consultation document is on

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/initial-teacher-education-inspection-framework-and-handbook-2020-inspecting-the-quality-of-teacher-education>

*(Continued on page 22.)*

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[Initial teacher education inspection framework and handbook

*Framework and handbook for inspecting initial teacher education partnerships in England under section 18B of the Education Act 1994 and Education and Inspections Act 2006 (Ofsted)*

*The first part of the document is the framework, the handbook is the second part. Reference no: 200002 The framework will be published in summer 2020]*

This is a summary of the key points relevant to early reading from the consultation document.

NB All are quotations.

29. The arrangements for inspecting ITE from September 2020 are very different from those in the previous framework. The inspection will have more responsibility for focusing on areas that have the greatest impact on a trainee's education and development, and the overall impact on a trainee's education. Page 8.

36. ....We recognise the importance of partnerships' autonomy to choose their own curriculum approaches. If leaders are able to show that they have built a curriculum with appropriate coverage, content, structure and sequencing, then inspectors will assess the partnership's curriculum favourably.  
.....Page 9.

58. ....For inspections of primary partnerships, inspectors will focus on early reading/phonics and the foundation subjects as a whole. Other subject areas may be agreed as a focus with the partnership leaders  
Page 16.

### **Evaluating different approaches to teacher education**

91. Ofsted does NOT advocate that any particular teaching approach should be used exclusively with trainees....

92. The ITE framework focuses on factors that both research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to high-quality education and training.....Page 22.

### **Reaching a judgement of good, requires improvement or inadequate (page 35 onwards)**

(Outstanding (1) Good (2) Requires improvement (3) Inadequate (4)  
Under Outstanding comments are general. However,  
Good (2) Page 39.

- For primary phase, training will ensure that trainees learn to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics as outlined in the ITT core content framework and that trainees are not taught to use competing approaches to early reading that are not supported by the most up-to-date evidence...

### **Informed by up-to-date evidence.**

- The ITE curriculum is designed to equip trainees with up-to-date research findings, for example as outlined for primary and secondary phase trainees in the ITT core content framework. Page 40.  
Requires improvement (3) page 44

*(Continued on page 23.)*



*(Continued from page 22.)*

- Primary training does not ensure that trainees only learn to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics.

#### **Inadequate (4) Designed around subject and phase (page 44)**

- Primary training does not ensure that trainees only learn to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics.

#### **Leadership and management (page 46 and 47)**

169. Inspectors must consider how effectively leaders and managers ensure that overall partnership provision prepares trainees to teach subject(s) well, including...In the primary phase

thorough training in the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, early number work and handwriting, including focused practice in school placements, based on up-to-date research.

a thorough analysis of improvements in trainees' practice, for example in securing good behaviour, in teaching reading using systematic synthetic phonics...

#### **Inadequate (page 53)**

- For early years and primary programmes, mentors do not support the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics. Some trainees are being poorly prepared to teach systematic synthetic phonics after the completion of their course.

Evaluating the quality and effectiveness of training in subject/specialist areas of the ITE curriculum (page 56)

- whether trainees, 'if teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' by the end of their training....

NB There are eight references to systematic synthetic phonics as required for early reading in the consultation document but to no methods for other subjects.

Margaret M Clark 6 February 2020