

Preface

This issue of *Education Journal Review* is published at the end of December 2020, a year far worse than anyone had any inkling it would be a year ago. Some of the articles in this issue are, inevitably, about the effects of COVID-19 on education. Everything about COVID-19 has moved very fast. This time last year nobody outside a tiny group of health professionals had even heard of it. Now, two vaccines in the United States and one in the United Kingdom have been approved by regulators and the Oxford University/AstraZenica one in particular will be a game changer in bringing the pandemic to an end.

In this issue, and in those of volume 27 to be published next year, we will publish contributions that record what the situation was at different times, when our knowledge about the disease and SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes it, was different and less than it is now. The World Health Organisation has warned that however bad COVID-19 is, it may not be the big one, the pandemic that will be even worse and that will kill even more people than COVID-19. If we are to learn the lessons from this pandemic we need to remember how it was tackled as it developed and not just what happened at the end. We have a couple of articles on how the pandemic looked as we came out of the first wave.

If there was one lesson that shines through from COVID-19 it is that international cooperation is crucial in dealing with an international pandemic. A very small number of international organisations played a quiet but crucial role behind the scenes, and the OECD and Education International were two of them. We have an article on the OECD's TALIS project and another on a key OECD/EI conference on COVID-19.

However bad COVID-19 has been, there are some other issues that are still going on regardless of the virus. The controversy over the teaching of English in primary schools is one of them. Margaret Clark contributes a paper on her research on this and a short article to follow it up with what has developed since she wrote the paper.

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She has been elected to the Reading Hall of Fame, an independent organisation that recognises lifetime achievement in the field of reading. She was Professor and Head of the Department of Educational Psychology in the University of Birmingham and is now a Visiting Professor at Newman University.

The teaching of early reading in primary schools in England.

Does ideology trump evidence in the formation of government policy for primary schools and for institutions involved in initial teacher education?

By Margaret M. Clark OBE

Abstract: *Since 2006 there has been a growing insistence by government in England that in the teaching of reading, primary schools must focus on systematic synthetic phonics, not just as one of a range of strategies, but as the method of teaching all children to read. In 2012 it was announced that Ofsted would start a series of unannounced inspections of providers of initial teacher education focusing solely on the training of phonics teaching. Over the following years, the government, backed by Ofsted, has increased its hold over policy and practice on early reading in state primary schools, in institutions providing initial teacher education and courses offering further professional development for teachers. Claimed to be an evidence-based policy, contrary evidence has been ignored. A Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was introduced in 2012 as a mandatory assessment for all children in state primary schools in England at the end of year 1 (for children about six-years-of-age). This assessment of children's ability to decode has become a high stakes test with a school's percentage pass a major criterion in Ofsted inspections.*

In this article research evidence is reported on the effects of this policy based on observations in classrooms, also the views of teachers and parents on the impact of the Phonics Screening Check on children's early literacy experience in

primary schools in England. A further research reveals constraints already placed on the content of courses on early reading in institutions training primary teachers in England. The policy revisions recommended in a consultation document on inspection of courses offering initial teacher education published by Ofsted (in January 2020), and confirmed in the handbook will further narrow the content of courses on early reading. Ofsted's publication in June 2020 confirms that institutions will be required to present systematic synthetic phonics as the only way to teach early reading or be deemed inadequate.

While the policy analysed here refers to England, similar moves have been apparent in both Australia and in The United States. In all three countries an increasing role in policy decisions on early literacy is being played by consultants, to the exclusion of professionals, often consultants with commercial interests in producing materials to implement the policies.

Keywords: teaching reading, synthetic phonics, government policy, Ofsted

Improving standards of literacy has had high priority in most countries over recent years, with so called 'reading wars' on how best to teach children to read, particularly in countries with languages such as English, without highly consistent orthographies. While declaring their policies to be 'evidence-based', evidence that does not support current policy is often ignored by politicians who may dictate not only what is taught in schools but how it must be taught.

They often ignore evidence that does not support their current policy and are backed by an accountability regime which forces teachers, and even those who train teachers, to adhere to these policies. This has been true not only in England since the publication of the Rose Report (Rose, 2006) but also in USA with the National Reading Panel (see Allington 2002, 2018). The government and Ofsted (the inspection body in England) have increased their demand that synthetic phonics should be the only way to teach all children to read. Yet in the

most recent of a series of reviews of the experimental research on phonics, Torgerson and her co-authors, repeat their assertion that Rose overstated the case for synthetic phonics and that: “there remains insufficient evidence to justify a ‘phonics only’ teaching policy.... and that there is little evidence of the superiority of one phonics approach over any other.” [Torgerson et al, 2019: 234.] In 2005-6 Greg Brooks was a member of Jim Rose’s committee and with Carole Torgerson a member of a team contracted to produce a systematic review of the research evidence on phonics (see Brooks, 2017).

NB The education policy discussed here is mandatory only in England, not the United Kingdom, as education is a devolved power, with Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales having their own education policies. The Department for Education is responsible for children’s services and education in England. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England. It is an independent non-ministerial government department reporting to parliament. Since 2010 there have been five Secretaries of State for Education. However, Nick Gibb, Minister of State for School Standards who has been in post for many years, promotes the government systematic synthetic phonics policy. He has repeatedly claimed this policy is ‘evidence-based’, criticisms are ‘ideological’, and that it has improved the standard of literacy in England’s primary schools. He has made these claims in debates in parliament, in written answers to MPs’ questions, in articles and at conferences around the world (including in Australia). It is for this reason that I have cited below quotations from him to set the context for an analysis of unacknowledged relevant research.

Quotations from The School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb

1. Fallacious and unevidenced beliefs about reading instruction have blighted the early education of generations of children around the world Unfortunately, the pernicious arguments that ignore the evidence in favour of phonics still abound.... Extract from a speech by Nick Gibb September 2017 See Clark 2017: 13 for a fuller quotation. He made similar claims in Australia in April 2017.

2.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 (See Clark 2018: 3 for this quotation set in context).

3. Re PIRLS 2016 results for England:

These results are a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism....And they are a reminder of the damage that can be caused when dogma flies in the face of evidence (fuller quotation in context in Clark, 2018: 31).

4. On 10 June 2020 Nick Gibb was asked in parliament three written questions on the government's synthetic phonics policy with reference made by the MP asking the questions to our recently published research on teacher training. In his answer he stressed that: 'Providers in their training are therefore obliged to ensure their courses will ensure their trainees are able to demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics'. In his lengthy answers he ignored the question as to whether trainees might profit from learning approaches to literacy which have been successful in other countries and other parts of UK (see *Education Journal* Issue 416: 67).

Does research support government policy that early reading should be taught only by systematic synthetic phonics?

In *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*, Part IV presents research relevant to the questions posed below (Clark, 2016). In two edited books, there are contributors from the United Kingdom, the United States, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (Clark, 2017 and 2018). Several of my recent articles critiquing government policy insisting synthetic phonics be mandated as the only way to teach early reading in primary schools in England were reprinted in a Special Issue of *Education Journal* (Clark, 2019). A further two articles (Clark, 2020a and b) summarise more recent research. Below are a number of questions where claims have been made by the government yet relevant research has gone unacknowledged together with references where readers can find details of this evidence.

1. Is there one best method of teaching reading to all children? There is a lack of such evidence. See chapter 14 in Clark, 2016 and chapter 6 in Clark 2017.
2. Is there evidence that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children and were the conclusions in the Rose Report justified (Rose, 2006). There is extensive evidence against that view See chapter 13 in Clark 2016 and chapters 7 and 8 in Clark 2017, also Torgerson et al. 2019 for the latest review of the research.
3. Is there evidence that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children? There is extensive evidence against that view (see Clark, 2016). The Education Endowment Foundation made recommendations for a balanced programme for the teaching of early reading (see below).
4. Are academics anti phonics? This was not the case in 2006 when the government in England was still making this claim. See Appendices I and 2 in Clark 2017 where the response to that claim by the national literacy associations in the United Kingdom and Australia are reproduced.
5. Was phonics part of the teaching of reading in classrooms in England prior to 2012? A large national research project based on observation in classrooms showed that a significant amount of time in early years classrooms was devoted to a diverse range of phonics activities in England even by 1994. Such evidence was disregarded, according to Bridie Raban who directed the research, and for political reasons. See Raban, chapter 10 in Clark, 2018 where she compares developments in England and Australia.
6. Do the results of PIRLS 2016 prove the success of the government's policy as these ten-year-old children were the first to have sat the Phonics Screening Check in 2012? These claims seem exaggerated as discussed in Part II of Clark, 2018. There is little evidence of any improvement in attainment other than on the actual check that can clearly be attributed to this policy, though the government does cite the results of PIRLS 2016. The minister made no reference to cautions in the

reports on PIRLS against drawing causal relationships from the data, nor possible alternative explanations for this rise in ranking from joint 10th to joint 8th. (See Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology, Clark ed, 2018 Part II).

7. Is either the research in Clackmannanshire in Scotland in 2005 or The National Reading Panel Report in the United States in 2000 a sufficient evidence-base to justify adoption of synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching all children to read? These are the two researches cited by Nick Gibb as the evidence-base for requiring synthetic phonics to be the only way to teach children to read. Ofsted also cites the Clackmannanshire research. These researches have both been criticised by researchers, the Clackmannanshire study by Ellis and Moss 2014. The evidence is summarised in Clark, 2016 and 2019. Allington, in his edited book has contributions from members of the panel who expressed concern at the way the phonics aspect had been reported (Allington, 2002 and 2018, see Clark, 2016 and 2019). See below.

8. Do the results and effects of the Phonics Screening Check justify its continuation as a statutory assessment, and does it provide useful diagnostic information? The majority of the teachers and parents in our research project did not feel the PSC should continue as a statutory assessment, criticising many aspects of it. While consulting on other aspects of assessment policy, the Department for Education has not consulted either teachers or parents as to whether they regard the PSC as providing valuable information, or about whether the PSC should remain statutory (See Clark and Glazzard, 2018 and Appendix 1 on lack of consultation).

9. Should all institutions training primary teachers be required to insist that their literacy courses promote synthetic phonics as the only way to teach all children to read? (See Clark, 2020a, Clark et al 2020 and recommendations by the Education Endowment Foundation 2017 quoted below).

A critique of the two key researches cited as evidence for synthetic phonics

In written answers to questions and in his speeches, Nick Gibb repeatedly claims that current policy is 'evidence-based'. Until

recently the research cited by the Minister in support of synthetic phonics as the only method for initial teaching of reading was that conducted in Clackmannanshire (a small rural county in Scotland) around 2005 and this is still cited also by Ofsted. When considering this 'evidence' it is important to note that:

- The research cited was conducted in 2005
- Its methodology has been seriously criticised (see for example Ellis and Moss, 2014)
- As early as 2006 a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Scotland expressed concern at low standards of literacy in Clackmannanshire and in 2016 Clackmannanshire commissioned an independent enquiry which produced a damning report on literacy standards, as a consequence of which the county now has in place a different policy to improve the county's standards of literacy.

In an interview in 2018 Nick Gibb added a reference to research conducted in 2000 in USA by the National Reading Panel. Readers are referred to an edited book by Allington (2002) which includes a critical appraisal of the phonics aspect of the National Reading Panel by members of the panel who raised concerns about claims made in and for that report. A summary of the evidence is available (in Clark, 2019: 11-12). The themes referred to by Allington have also been analysed in studies in England which sought to investigate the connections between the political espousal of a strong emphasis on 'phonics first' and the rapid growth of both commercial programmes and of consultancy in schools. Such work identifies the power and ideological influences of consultants within policy and practice in the realm of reading, in particular of early reading in England (Ellis and Moss, 2014; Gunter and Mills, 2017). These themes and their influence on the perceptions of professionals and on practice in initial teacher education are further explored in our research report in Chapter 5 (Clark et al, 2020). It should be noted that a similar pattern can be identified within early reading policy in Australia as reported by several professional organisations there. In *Reading the Evidence: synthetic phonics and literacy learning* these developments in both England and in Australia are outlined, In the appendices the relevant documents, including those issued by UKLA, and ALEA and PETAA in Australia, are reprinted, showing that these associations were not opposed to the teaching of phonics as

was being claimed by both governments (See Clark, 2017 including the Appendices, and Appendix III in Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

Research into the effects of government phonics policy on primary schools in England

Research reported here shows that current policy in England requiring synthetic phonics only to be the way of teaching reading to all children in primary schools has had negative, possibly unintended effects on practice in early years classrooms in England. This evidence is based on both observation and recording of the voices of children and teachers. From reception class onwards (with four to five-year-old children) practice in real and non-real words in preparation for the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) dominates many classrooms. There is evidence from observation, showing grouping for phonics as distinct from reading, even in nursery and reception classes (Bradbury and Russell-Holmes, 2017). Carter in her research presents evidence through the voices of children (Carter, 2020a) and in a further article, Carter reports on the voices of the teachers, ‘those closest to the implementation of the PSC...’(Carter 2020b). She supports her own research with evidence from other authors, who ‘found that teachers had lost sight of why phonics is taught, and that phonics is not a subject in its own right but a means to an end’. To quote from her conclusion: “...these practices presented a tension between teaching to the test and reading development ...” [Carter, 2020b]

A balanced policy for early reading

Children, if they are to read with understanding, need to develop strategies for speedy recognition of words they have not met before. Like most academics I do not deny the importance of phonics in learning to read. However, there is evidence that this is better practised within context rather than in isolation. Time spent decoding words in isolation, or as in many schools in England, on practising pseudo words to enable schools to achieve a high percentage pass on the PSC, might be better spent studying the features of real written English.

In a recent valuable guidance publication for teachers, the Education Endowment Foundation lists key recommendations for the teaching of literacy at Key Stage 1

(EEF, 2017). The Education Endowment Foundation is an independent charity whose purpose is to improve the educational attainment of the poorest pupils in English schools. 'EEF aims to support teachers and senior leaders by providing evidence-based resources designed to improve practice and boost learning' (see educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk). It is therefore odd that the government ignores its evidence-based recommendations. Three of the key recommendations are:

1. Develop pupils' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language.
2. Use a balanced and engaging approach to developing reading, which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills.
3. Effectively implement a systematic phonics programme.

Note the emphasis is on 'integration of decoding and comprehension' and that the reference is to a systematic phonics programme, not to synthetic phonics as the only approach as currently required in England.

Initial teacher education in England since 2012

In 2012 the Chief Inspector of Standards in Education Sir Michael Wilshaw issued an edict 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." (Clark, 2016: 127)

Evidence from professionals involved in initial teacher education and from newly qualified teachers reveals that many institutions involved in initial teacher education have narrowed their literacy courses to comply with this edict. Gardner who taught in a university in England from 2004 to 2012 as a teacher educator, experienced the government's determination to enforce this policy within universities involved in initial teacher education (see Gardner: 28 in Clark, 2017). Hendry in a recent article reports a study in which she observed teachers in training and interviewed them as they became newly

qualified teachers (Hendry, 2020). Her study commenced in 2013 which she claims marked an important change in the delivery of ITE in England: “University-led postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) routes were required to increase the number of days that student teachers spent in school from 90 to 120 in their 38 week courses.... This change reflected government scepticism about universities’ contribution to teacher preparation...and an emphasis on school led professional training rather than education for future teachers... As a consequence, university based time to engage with theory and pedagogy for teaching early reading was limited and the role of the school-based mentor became increasingly significant.” (Hendry, 2020: 58)

In her study she found that: “The participants’ experiences highlighted the focus on phonics teaching as the main priority in the teaching of reading in the 20 schools involved in the study. As a consequence the student teachers received limited examples of wider pedagogy and a rich environment for teaching reading....With one or two exceptions reading experiences were focused on phonetically decodable texts and phonics schemes.”

She concluded that: “In essence when assessment and curriculum guidance prioritise one method for teaching reading, universities must work with schools, students and NQTs to re-establish a broader understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher of early reading.” (Hendry: 67)

Government policy on synthetic phonics is likely to have been prioritised since at least 2012 in courses of initial teacher education in England. We investigated this in a recent research by an independent online survey which had responses from 38 professionals involved in initial teacher education in England and with interviews of ten of those who completed the online survey. The qualitative data supported the data from the online survey showing that tutors preparing trainee teachers to teach early reading 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 points to the need for a balanced approach to early reading development, it is crucial that teacher education courses support trainees to critically interrogate government

literacy policy and that trainees are introduced to approaches that have been successful in the past in England and in other countries.

This research is now available to read and download from the Newman website (Clark et al, 2020). An article summarising the research (Clark, 2020b) is also available on that site and this information has now been sent to Ofsted, Ministers, Shadow Ministers and members of The Education Select Committee.

The future content of courses on early reading in initial teacher education in England

After the completion of our research, in January 2020, Ofsted issued a consultation document on initial teacher education with the new policy to be announced in June 2020 and implemented in September 2020 (Ofsted, 2020a). Responses to the consultation document were to be submitted by 3 April 2020. There are numerous statements in the consultation document referring to the need for institutions to require systematic synthetic phonics as the only way to teach early reading. I quoted a number of these statements in Clark, 2020a and b. Most of these statements remain in the final document, with only minor changes in wording, though not in intent. One such statement repeated in virtually identical words in the final version is: “In primary phase programmes, training ensures 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 teach competing approaches to early reading.” (Ofsted, 2020b: 38). NB: In the consultation document this was followed by “that are not supported by the most up-to-date evidence...” (Ofsted, 2020a 39). The statement is now followed on the same page by: “Trainees are taught the importance of providing pupils with enough structured practice to secure fluency in both reading and numeracy work”. Note the emphasis is on ‘fluency’, rather than understanding.

An institution will be deemed Inadequate if: “EY and primary training does not ensure that trainees only learn to teach decoding using systematic synthetic phonics as part of early reading.” (Ofsted, 2020b: 44).

In the consultation document, and in the final document there are no such edicts for any other subjects in primary or secondary schools. Indeed, no references are cited to justify this policy which removes from professionals any freedom of

choice in their presentation of literacy. Associated Ofsted/ DfE documents have long, and in some cases dated reference lists. None of the references refer specifically to evidence on synthetic phonics (DfE, 2019). It would appear that now and in the future, decoding, and in particular synthetic phonics, and preparation for the Phonics Screening Check may dominate reading in reception classes and years 1 and 2 in England, and recently trained teachers will have had their initial teacher education courses in the institutions, and their observations in schools, dominated by synthetic phonics. Any understanding of the distinction between teaching decoding and teaching reading seems lacking in both government and Ofsted recent documents. Government and Ofsted documents do not stress sufficiently the purpose of reading or the need for a rich language and literacy curriculum from the early years if children are to become readers who understand written language and enjoy reading. The emphasis seems to be on decoding and fluency.

Ofsted, in the final document, as in the consultation document, states that systematic synthetic phonics should be the only method advocated for teaching decoding in early reading (see pages 38, 44, 47, 49, 53, 55 for quotations) There were over 300 responses to the survey on the consultation document and it is claimed that these were in general favourable. Concern was expressed by some respondents on the focus on systematic synthetic phonics. However, the response is that: "Teaching SSP is a requirement of the primary national curriculum" and that "the clear expectation in the ITE inspection is that partnerships will train trainees to teach SSP in line with government expectations". (Ofsted, 2020c: 12).

There is however a conflict in the final document as it is also stated that an institution will be regarded as inadequate if: "Trainees do not know about up-to-date or pertinent research and so are unable to apply this knowledge in their subject and phase". Ofsted, 2020b: 44).

Furthermore, there is a clear statement that: "Ofsted does not advocate that any particular teaching approach should be used exclusively with trainees". (Ofsted, 2020b: 22.)

One must question the role of Ofsted in England and whether it remains an independent non-ministerial government department reporting to parliament or as Scott suggested merely an enforcer of government policy (Scott, 2018).

Conclusions

I have here listed issues on which there is research evidence that challenges the stance taken by both the government and Ofsted and cited sources where students could evaluate these researches for themselves. This could form the basis for a research module in institutions training early years and primary school teachers. Trainees could then emerge from training as professionals equipped to critique new policies, also with the expertise and knowledge to evaluate current policy. They would also be made aware and appreciate that there are very different literacy policies in other successful countries. They would then also become true professionals with the knowledge and information to better critique the repeated claims by the current government, and on occasion Ofsted, that current policy is evidence-based and that all criticism are merely ideology.

The proposed changes in initial teacher education in England in September 2020 will mean that:

- Tutors involved in early reading courses in initial teacher education will retain little control over the content of their literacy courses.
- Early years and primary teachers will not know about important aspects of early reading.
- Future primary teachers may have little awareness of the approach to literacy teaching in other countries, or even that the policies may be different (even in Scotland, Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland).

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Both research reports, a list of publications and recent articles can all be read and downloaded from this link.

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The administration of the Phonics Screening Check in autumn term 2020 to Year 2 children in primary schools in England

By Margaret M. Clark OBE

The Phonics Screening Check was not administered in June 2020, as most children were not in school, and together with the SATs tests all the papers from 2020 were shredded. However, the Government intends to reintroduce the check in June 2021 for Year 1 children. In spite of protests from many teachers, the government has instructed schools to administer the check to all children in Year 2 during the second half of the autumn term 2020, that is the children who would normally have sat the check in June. Only children in Year 2 who fail to reach the pass mark will then be required to sit the check with Year 1 children in June 2021 (estimated to be about 25%).

Response from DfE to Freedom of Information Questions: (The response from DfE was sent on 2 November 2020).

I sent seven questions in October, four relevant to England and the remaining three concerning use of the check in Australia. In 2019-20 it was claimed that the only costs prior to cancellation of the check were those of printing paid to Capita Business Services amounting to £104,357 and the cost of shredding the PSC papers was £2,800. The estimated cost for the current Year 2020-21 Test Cycle was £329,659. It was claimed that as Year 2 tests this Autumn term will use past tests this will incur no cost. It was not, however, indicated who will bear the cost of printing these test forms, DfE or the schools and of analysing the results! It was estimated that about 25% of Year 2 pupils may be required to re sit the check in 2021, at an estimated cost of £82,711.

I was informed that: “The Standards and Testing Agency has a contract with Capita Business Services Ltd ‘to deliver, the

print collation and logistics of the Phonics Screening Check. STA's contract with Capita is currently due to run up to and including the 2024 Test Cycle".

I assume that should DfE decide not to continue with the check Capita might be entitled to some compensation.

In answer to my questions as to whether Capita or DfE received any payment for use of the check by any Australian States, and/or whether there are any restrictions on their use of the PSC I was informed that:

"Since the materials are made available under Open Government Licence, no payments are made for their use by others". This answer means that the back tests are accessible to anyone and therefore could be used, for example, to coach children prior to testing. Until now the PSC was new each year and prior to being used was kept under lock and key until administered. This autumn term the schools are being instructed to use a past test from 2017, 2018 or 2019, all of which will therefore be readily available.

The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Autumn Term 2020: the views of the teachers

Alice Bradbury in a working paper reports her survey of the views of teachers on the impact of the use of the PSC with Year 2 in the autumn term 2020. There were 1,246 responses from Year 2 teachers, though not all answered every question. The survey will remain open until the end of the autumn term so these are only preliminary results. The survey has not explored whether the teachers feel the PSC should remain a statutory assessment and therefore their responses may be based on the assumption that it will recommence in June 2021.

1. The majority of Year 2 teachers did not agree with the statement that doing the PSC would have a positive impact on their teaching during the term. However, some of those who agreed did so because these children had not sat the check in June when in Year 1.

2. The majority of Year 2 teachers and headteachers did not regard the PSC as helpful in identifying children who are struggling in reading' because they already have this information, although a quarter of the respondents felt it did give them helpful information. Many felt that the check was motivated by a need to hold schools to account.

3. Many respondents felt that an additional test this year added an unwelcome pressure to the children and to the

teachers.

4. The check was regarded by many of the respondents as having a negative effect on the curriculum and the teaching of pseudo words was mentioned by some and the negative effect on fluent readers by others.

Concerns were expressed by many headteachers about the requirement to conduct this testing within the COVID-19 regulations and with staff absent due to self-isolation. It is recommended in the working paper that repeat of the check in June 2021 by any Year 2 children who do not reach the threshold mark on the check should be voluntary. It is also recommended that there should be discussion about the future of the check, “particularly the lack of useful information provided, and the potential for negative impacts on children who are struggling”. The working paper has been released very quickly after a limited survey on this issue and does not explore wider issues as to the concerns of many teachers, parents and researchers as to the way in which this check is now dominating the early years experiences of many young children in England. The reference for the working paper is: Bradbury, A (2020) *The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 2: 'It's getting in the way of what the children need right now'*. HHCP Working Paper 1. London: UCL Institute of Education.

The guidance for schools administering the Phonics Screening Check to Year 2 pupils during the second half of the 2020 autumn term

These instructions were issued by the Standards and Testing Agency in 2020 *Administering the Phonics Screening Check to Year 2 pupils in the 2020 autumn term* STA/20/8558/e ISBN 978-1-78957-569-9.

The information was sent to school staff, maintained nursery schools with eligible pupils and local authorities. Schools are required to administer a past version of the check to eligible year 2 pupils during the second half of the autumn term and submit the results by the end of term to their LA. By 22 January 2021 the LA must submit the phonics data to DfE. All pupils aged 7 by the end of the 2020/21 academic year must take the check (most pupils will be in Year 2). The responsibilities of headteachers and LAs are noted and children who are exempt. Schools may choose from past papers for 2017, 2018 or 2019, but it should be noted that schools can use

check materials from different years for pupils in the same cohort, if required!! Details of who should administer the check, when and where are detailed. However, it is stated that:

A member of staff who is trained in phonics and has experience delivering phonics sessions to pupils must administer the check on a one-to-one basis. They should also familiarise themselves with the training video to understand how to score the check consistently. It appears that the data will be stored by DfE and used to determine which pupils have not met the expected standard and are therefore expected to take the check in 2021 alongside Year 1 pupils. It is not stated whether the pass mark will be as in previous years 32 words read correctly. The results must be recorded in the pupils CTFs and they have to be reported to parents.

Final comment: The instructions cover many pages yet there is no reference to Covid-19 and its effects on the teachers or pupils, to whether teachers who would be qualified to administer the check might be available, or whether they or any of the children might indeed have the virus. This testing seems to put an unnecessary stress on both the children and the teachers. It can take up to twenty minutes to test each individual child, and in a quiet area away from the other children. Who will teach the other children during this time? There must be costs involved in printing the tests, recording the results and analysing the data, yet no estimate of this was made in response to my Freedom of Information Questions or to who will meet these costs. The circumstances in which these tests are being administered must give rise to serious questions as to the reliability and the value of any data that arises, and possible adverse effects on other aspects of the curriculum if preparation for these tests is given priority.

NB The latest news on the administration of the Phonics Screening Check to year 2 pupils from the Standards and Testing Agency was on 7 December 2020. I discovered this from their site <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/standards-and-testing-agency>). On that date amendments were made to three of the instructions:

3.1 Pupils who should take the check;

5.2 Check administration;

7.3 How DfE will use the data.

Attempting to find what these amendments were, I opened the pdf file on the site to discover that although the instructions are still dated September, they incorporate these changes, with no indication that there have been changes, or what is now different! I based my comments on the original instructions and have a copy of these so I can compare the two versions.

It is disturbing that as late as 7 December amendments were made. By then most of the pupils would have been tested. I wonder why amendments were made, who was responsible for making these amendments and for ensuring that all the relevant information was transmitted to the headteachers and LAs. I intend to investigate this further. I have sent Freedom of Information Questions to which I should have a response by the end of January 2021.