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Margaret M Clark was awarded a DLitt for her early published research on reading and an OBE for her services to early years education. 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.

Synthetic Phonics and the Phonics Screening Check 2012-2022: tracking and tracing the constants and changes in government policy

By Margaret M Clark OBE

Abstract: *The phonics screening check introduced in 2012 as a statutory assessment has increasingly come to dominate early years classrooms in England (see Clark, M.M. 2019 'The phonics Screening Check 2012-2019: a critique' Education Journal 387: 23-26). The check of 40 words, 20 real and 20 pseudo words, has each year since 2012 been administered in June to Year 1 children aged around 6 years of age. Over these years the Government has come to demand that in England teachers use synthetic phonics as the method for teaching reading to all children. Now, in 2021, backed by Ofsted, the Government will require any institution wishing to be validated to train primary teachers in England to promote synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading in their literacy courses.*

Key words: synthetic phonics, reading, literacy, PSC.

From 2013 to 2019 any children who failed to achieve the standard expected, a pass mark of 32, on the phonics screening check were required to re-sit the check in year 2. Over the same period synthetic phonics has been the method required by the Government for teaching all children to read in England. Ofsted now also requires institutions who wish to be validated for the training of primary teachers to promote synthetic phonics in their

literacy courses as the method of teaching early reading. Over these years I have published two research reports and written articles critiquing this policy, citing not only my own independent research but that of many others, none acknowledged by the government as evidence. In June 2019 in a Special Issue of the Education Journal Issue 379 my key articles critiquing government's phonics policy were reprinted. In my publications I have cited not only my independent research but that of other researchers whose evidence has also been ignored by government while claiming its policy is evidence-based. The two research reports, my more recent articles and my reference list can be accessed through a link at Newman University where they can be read and downloaded. (see note at the end of this article).

Over the period 2012-2019 the check has become a high stakes test with schools expected each year to raise their percentage pass. The School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, has repeatedly in speeches and written answers in parliament, used the increase in percentage pass on the check over these years as a measure of success for the policy and also as the measure of improved reading attainment, attributing this to the Government's insistence that systematic synthetic phonics should be the way to teach all children to read. In a recent written answer published in the Education Parliamentary Monitor he has repeated this claim citing the increase in percentage pass on the check since its introduction in 2012. He has again claimed the increase in England's rating on PIRLS 2016 should also be credited to the government's synthetic phonics policy. See below for an extract from that answer which mirrors many statements made over recent years in speeches by Nick Gibb and his written answers in parliament when asked questions on attainment in reading. In my articles I have cited many of these statements and presented evidence which challenges his more extreme claims as well as the limited research he has cited. See below for an extract from one such written answer.

Primary Education: Literacy

Stuart Anderson: [11671] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to improve literacy rates among primary school-aged children.

Nick Gibb: The Government continues to drive improvements in literacy levels by ensuring high quality systematic synthetic phonics teaching in all our schools to give all children the firm foundation on which to progress through school, and to help them develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information.

England achieved its highest ever score in reading in 2016, moving from joint 10th to joint 8th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings. This improvement is largely attributable to increases in the average performance of lower performing pupils and boys. These are the first international assessment results from the cohort of pupils who benefited from the changes in primary curriculum and assessment introduced since the 2010 election. In 2019, 82% of pupils in Year 1 met the expected standard in the phonics screening check, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012. Furthermore, 2019 results showed that by the end of Year 2, 91% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check. ...

...The English Hubs have adapted to providing intensive support remotely and have delivered more than 1,400 days of specialist phonics training to over 875 partner schools this academic year.

In December 2020 I published an article questioning whether ideology trumps evidence in the formation of government policy for primary schools and for institutions involved in initial teacher education in England (*Education Journal Review*, Vol. 26 No. 3: 2-17).

On 28 June 2021 there was a written question in parliament on National Curriculum Tests.

Ed Davey [21139] To ask the Secretary of State for Education with reference to More Than a Score report. Drop the Sats for Good published in 2021, whether he plans to implement any of the recommendations of that report.

In his reply **Nick Gibb** stated that..... “the Department has no plans to cancel the statutory implementation of the Reception Baseline Assessment in September 2021 and the Department continues to plan for a return to a full programme of primary assessments in the 2021/22 academic year. ...”

Nick Gibb went on to claim that in 2017 there had been a wide consultation on assessment and that in addition, “the Department engages with relevant stakeholders on a regular basis to understand their views on primary assessment”. However, there is evidence that no questions about the PSC were included in the consultation on assessment and that many teachers and parents are unhappy at aspects of the check and that it remains a statutory assessment. (See note at the end of this article on how to access the link to read and download my research reports and recent articles).

Cancellation of check for June 2020 (followed by requirement to test year 2 children in the Autumn Term 2020)

It was decided to cancel the testing on the PSC for June 2020 because of the closing of schools as a consequence of the pandemic. However, the Government later decided to require the schools in the Autumn Term 2020 to administer the check to year 2 children to determine which children should be required to sit the check in June 2021. Only children who failed to achieve a mark of at least 32 were to be tested in June 2021 along with year 1 children. As the papers for 2020 had been shredded the schools were allowed to select the check for 2017, 2018 or 2019 to administer.

In the same issue of *Education Journal Review* as my longer article was published (pages 18-22) my article from

Education Journal issue 435: 23-26, 'The administration of the Phonics Screening Check in the autumn term 2020 to Year 2 children in England: why at what cost to teachers and children?' was reprinted. I expressed concern about the requirement that schools test all year 2 children on the check in the Autumn Term 2020, which seemed an imposition on schools at that time with COVID cases among children and staff. Following my article, I sent Freedom of Information Questions to DfE for clarification about anomalies in the instructions to schools. My questions were sent on 22 December, and I received a response on 14 January 2021. No reference was made in the response I received to the fact that DfE by then had decided to postpone the testing on the PSC until June 2022, by which time those year 2 children who had been tested would no longer be in year 2!

Plans to assess years 1 and 2 children in June 2021 confirmed, then cancelled

In December 2020, the Standards and Testing Agency published a document setting out full details about the proposed testing on the PSC which was to take place in June 2021. However, I learnt that a decision to postpone the testing until June 2022 had been taken before the final date in January by which local authorities were required to send the results of the Autumn term testing to DfE. In GOV.UK Primary assessments: future dates 2020/21 published on 18 January it was announced that: "The national curriculum assessments due to be held in the summer term 2021, including tests, teacher assessments and the phonics screening check, have been cancelled."

I approached a number of schools to find out whether they were aware of this change in policy. I was unable to establish either when or by whom they were informed so I submitted a series of further Freedom of Information Questions to DfE on 30 April to which I received a reply on 1 June 2021. The following are my questions and the answers I received:

1. The Standards and Testing Agency was responsible for informing schools and other stakeholders of the cancellation and this information was sent on 7 January and followed by a reminder on 18 January. I was informed that LAs were not responsible for informing schools.

2. I enquired how many local authorities had as required returned the results of the Autumn Term assessment of year 2 pupils and from how many LAs no return had been received. The response was that all 151 local authorities had returned the results to the DfE.

3. I asked from how many schools nationally returns had been received, from how many schools no returns had been received, and what reasons had been given for non-returns. In total 16,397 schools nationally submitted returns and a total of 178 schools did not return the autumn term results. It was stated that DfE “did not have a record of the reasons as to why these schools did not return their results”.

4. It was stated that the Department received returns for 95% of eligible pupils.

5. As schools had the choice of whether to use the tests from 2017, 2018 or 2019 I enquired whether schools had been asked to indicate which tests they had used. The reply I received was that: “The 2017, 2018 and 2019 phonics screening checks are statistically linked, meaning the standard expected to meet the threshold remains the same across all three previous years. Therefore, it was unnecessary for schools to indicate which check they used ...”

6. Finally, I enquired whether it was intended to publish or otherwise use the data from the autumn assessments now that it had been decided to cancel the testing for June 2021. It was stated that as: “The data from the autumn 2020 phonics screening check was intended to only be used to determine which year 2 pupils have not met the expected standard in

phonics and who were therefore expected to take the statutory check in June 2021 (alongside year 1 pupils). Given that the June 2021 phonics screening check has been cancelled, the data will no longer be used for this purpose. We do not intend to publish the results from the autumn 2020 phonics screening check or use it for any other purpose.” This response was prepared by the Standards and Testing Agency.

At a time when schools were under so many other pressures the decision to make them administer the check to year 2 pupils was an added but unnecessary pressure. Furthermore, there is now a large amount of stored data which is no longer relevant.

Decision to require schools to assess year 2 children on the check in the Autumn Term 2021

On 16 June there was yet another change of policy, the announcement merely embedded in a speech by the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, at the Festival of Education. He stated that schools would be required not only to test reception class children on the baseline assessment in the Autumn Term 2021 but also to test year 2 children on the phonics screening check. No explanation was given for this latest change of policy.

In a press release that day Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, said: “The last thing children need after COVID-19 is another test which won’t tell teachers anything new or helpful about their pupils and will simply put them under more pressure. Children who ‘fail’ the test will be required to re-sit the test in the summer term. This is no message to give to pupils who have just experienced huge disruption to their education due to the pandemic.”

The information about this change in policy is now available on the government website with full details of its administration.

Concerns about the phonics screening check

In our research report in 2018 we revealed that many teachers and parents found that the phonics screening check did not tell them anything they did not already know and yet no consultation with either teachers or parents has taken place to establish whether the check should remain a statutory assessment, dominating as it does the early years curriculum in many classrooms in England. (Note: In a Special Issue in July 2019 *Education Journal* 379: 1-39, 'Literacy policy, synthetic phonics and the phonics screening check', a number of my relevant articles were reprinted.)

In view of the time and money still being spent on the phonics screening check it is worth reminding readers of four points I made there in my summary (see pages 37-9). Further evidence is to be found in my numerous publications and in those of others whom I cite.

1. Many of the teachers and parents responding to an independent survey in May 2018 expressed the view that the phonics screening check should be discontinued and certainly should not remain a statutory assessment. Singled out for particular criticism were the pseudo words and the fact that the check was not diagnostic but merely identified children as passing or failing depending on whether or not they gained a mark of 32.
2. There is evidence of the unreliability of the check, also the high percentage of younger children, particularly boys, among those failing the check and no corrections is made for age.
3. The two researches cited by the government for their claim that their policy is evidence based and that all children should learn to read using synthetic phonics have been widely criticised.
4. The improved results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS 2016 for England have been

attributed by the Government to its phonics policy and the screening check. This is a questionable claim. It should also be noted that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with very different policies, and where collaboration with the teaching profession features extensively, both ranked statistically higher than England, yet no lessons in England seem to be learnt from these other countries.

At the end of my article in June 2021 I suggested it was time for the teachers in England to be consulted on the future of the phonics screening check rather than be faced with contradictory edicts and expected to conform. This is true not only of the phonics screening check but also the government's policy for the initial teaching of reading, where teachers and lecturers in England are treated as technicians to carry out its policy, rather than as professionals with an important contribution to make to the dialogue as in many other countries.

Teaching teachers to teach reading in England from 2021

In July 2021 the DfE has issued a new document Initial teacher training (ITT) market review report July 2021. which has been greeted with concern by many in the profession. One wonders how many institutions in the face of this latest document will withdraw from initial teacher education? Within days of its publication it is already being claimed in *The Telegraph* that both Oxford and Cambridge Universities are considering their future in teacher education (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/jul/07/06/stalinist-rules-teacher-training-prompt-furious-backlash..>

In *The Guardian* the heading for an article by Sally Weale is: Ministers attacked for 'wrecking ball' plans to overhaul training. It is suggested in the article that "critics warn changes could put 10,000 training places at risk and affect teacher training for years to come". (see <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/05/ministers-attacked-for-wrecking-ball-plans-to-overhaul-teacher-training>).

The recent Ofsted Report referred to earlier takes away any remaining autonomy from those in the institutions responsible for literacy course if they wish to retain validation to train primary teachers. One effect of COVID has been to delay Ofsted inspections and therefore the full impact of that Ofsted report may not yet have been experienced. In an article in July 2020 in the Education Journal Issue 421: 22-27 on the Ofsted report I questioned whether Ofsted remains an independent non-ministerial government department reporting to parliament or has become merely an enforcer of government policy. In my conclusion I noted a number of effects of this new policy, all of which are even more relevant with this new report from DfE. They are:

- 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 know little about important aspects of early reading
- Future primary teachers may have little awareness of the approaches to literacy teaching in other countries, or even that their policies may be different (even in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland)

The paragraph in the July 2021 Initial teacher training (ITT) marker review report that is particularly relevant to the current discussion is on page 12. It seems important therefore to quote it here.

28. The CFF sets out requirements which teachers need to meet, regardless of the subject or phase in which they are teaching. For example, all trainees who teach reading must be taught about systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). Because learning to read is so foundational and indispensable for future success, it is essential that every teacher who works in the primary phase is fully equipped to

teach reading using SSP, regardless of the specific age group they initially hope to teach. It is important that trainees are familiarized with the evidence for the effectiveness of SSP and that time is not used teaching them alternative approaches. Learning to teach reading using SSP cannot be left to chance in the design of primary ITT programmes.

It will be interesting to see the extent to which professionals do voice their concerns, and whether the Government does on this occasion engage in a real dialogue and take their views seriously. Will this further intrusion into their professional independence lead any institutions to withdraw from the training of primary teachers in England and what form of training the Government will substitute? How many creative lecturers, and teachers in England in the face of these new constraints will leave the profession?

NB Information on two researches and related publications relevant to the government's synthetic phonics policy

1. *Independent research into the impact of the systematic synthetic phonics government policy on literacy courses at institutions delivering initial teacher education in England*

The report of this research is now available to read and download from the Newman University website

<https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/impact-of-the-systematic-synthetic-phonics-government-policy-on-literacy-ite-courses/>

An article summarising the research is available on the same website, as are other relevant articles including one critiquing the recent Ofsted publication, and a reference list of my publication on literacy from 2014 to 2020. These can all be read and downloaded.

This research was undertaken in 2019 by Margaret M. Clark, Sue Reid and Jude Sloan at Newman University, Jonathan Glazzard at Leeds Beckett University and Colin Mills at Manchester University.

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 was evidence of the situation at that time. The data was collected before the publication of the Ofsted Consultation document in January 2020, the results of which were announced in June 2020, to be implemented in September 2020. It is clear from the report that Ofsted would 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. NB This applies only to England.

Our evidence was sent to the Education Select Committee and to Ofsted and Preet Kaur Gill MP asked three written questions about the implications of our research on 10 June (see *Education Journal* Issue 416: 67-68 and *Literacy Today* Issue 93: 10-15).

An article summarising the research is available on the same website, as are other relevant articles including one critiquing the recent Ofsted publication, and a reference list of my publication on literacy from 2014 to 2020. These can all be read and downloaded.

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2. *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of headteachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018* edited by Margaret M Clark and Jonathan Glazzard. (Research team also included John Bayley, Sue Reid and Susan Atkinson).

<https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

