

# The future of early reading courses in initial teacher education institutions in England: Who controls the content?

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*The education policy discussed here is mandatory only in England, not the United Kingdom, as education is a devolved power. The Department for Education and Ofsted are responsible only for schools in England. Since 2010 there have been five Secretaries of State for Education. However, Nick Gibb, has recently been reappointed Minister of State for School Standards. He has over many years promoted the government systematic synthetic phonics policy, for which he has been complimented publicly in parliament by both the Chairman of the Education Select Committee and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Nick Gibb has claimed the success of this policy in debates, in written answers to MPs' questions, in articles and at conferences around the world (including in Australia). It is for this reason that quotations I have selected are from him, not the Secretaries of State.*

**T**here has been a growing insistence by the government since 2012 that in the teaching of early reading in primary schools in England there should be a focus on phonics, not just as one of a range of strategies, but that synthetic phonics should be adopted as the only way to teach all children to read. This policy is claimed to be based on research evidence that synthetic phonics only is the best way to teach all children to read. None of the research that challenges the government statements and those of Ofsted is cited in government policy documents (Clark, 2019).

This policy has had a major impact on practice in schools, removing the freedom of practitioners in England to include other approaches they consider to be appropriate for their individual children. The introduction of the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) in 2012 as a mandatory assessment for all children at the end of year 1 when the children are around six years of age has had further, even possibly unintended consequences, in narrowing the children's literacy experience in the early years. Teachers and parents have expressed concern at the effects of the check, including on children who can already read (Clark and Gazzard, 2018). As early as in many nursery and reception classes in many schools, children repeatedly practice real and non-words (pseudo words) in anticipation of the check, this continues for those who fail and are required to re-sit the check. This has become a high stakes test where schools are expected to achieve a higher percentage pass each year, and children who fail to read 32 of 40 words correctly are required to re-sit the check at the end of year 2. Now the school's percentage pass on the PSC tends to be a major focus in Ofsted judgements and is frequently cited by the Schools Minister Nick Gibb as evidence of improvement in reading, and, as a consequence of the government's insistence on synthetic phonics. We now see this policy also being required by Ofsted in institutions involved in initial teacher education, and from September 2020 Ofsted may enforce this policy even further, requiring that tutors present systematic synthetic phonics as the method of teaching early reading.

## Effects of government phonics policy on primary schools in England

There is research evidence on the effects of the government's policy on classroom practice 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

*(Continued on page 10.)*



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)

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, a claim that may be exaggerated (See Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology, Clark ed., 2018 Part II). At no time has Nick Gibb referred to lessons that England might learn from either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, both countries ranked statistically higher than England in PIRLS, yet both countries take a very different approach to reading-pedagogy and to collaboration with teachers. Nor does the minister reference the cautions in the reports on PIRLS against drawing causal relationships from the data, nor possible alternative explanations for this rise in ranking (Clark, 2018).

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 Appendix I in Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

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). 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.

### **Ideology rather than consultation?**

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 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 Research 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 been analysed in work which has 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). These themes and their influence on the perceptions of professionals and on practice in initial teacher education will be further explored in our research report in Chapter 5 (Clark et al, 2020 in press). 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).

In our independent survey of the views of teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check we found that many expressed disquiet at the effects of the pass-fail nature of the check, the requirement to re-sit the check should a child 'fail', the fact that half the words are non-words and the consequent emphasis on practising such words. Even many parents whose children had passed the check, or who could read, were disturbed at the negative effects on their children's reading as a consequence of the dominance of decoding in classrooms, particularly of non-words in preparation for the check. Many teachers thought the check should cease as it told them nothing they did not already know and both many teachers and parents thought that at least it should no longer be mandatory (Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

In view of this evidence it seems important to call for a consultation on the future of the Phonics Screening Check involving parents and teachers rather than allow this expenditure to continue unchallenged (see Appendix II in Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

### **Initial teacher education in England since 2012**

In 2012 Chief Inspector of 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 with regard to synthetic phonics is likely to have been prioritised since at least



2012 in courses of initial teacher education in England. We have been investigating this in our current 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. We hope that our research will be available to read and download from the Newman website by April 2020 (Clark et al, 2020).

Initial teacher education inspection framework and handbook from 2020: Consultation Document issued January 2020 with responses by 3 April 2020

Since the completion of our research, in January 2020, Ofsted issued a consultation document on initial teacher education with the new policy to be implemented in September 2020 (Ofsted, 2020). It is stated: that: "36. We will judge fairly partnerships that take radically different approaches to the ITE curriculum. 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 partnerships curriculum favourably." (9) "91. Ofsted does not advocate that any particular teaching approach should be used exclusively with trainees....." (22) "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." (40)

However, there are numerous quotations in the document referring to the need for institutions to require systematic synthetic phonics as the only way to teach early reading. Two examples of such statements are:

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...39)

An institution will be deemed inadequate if:

Primary training does not ensure that trainees only learn to teach reading using systematic synthetic phonics (44)

Under Leadership and management, on page 46, and again on page 47, reference is made to the need in the primary phase for: 'Thorough training in the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics'. On page 53 It is stated that leadership and management are likely to be inadequate if one or more of the following apply:

For early years and primary programmes mentors do not support the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics. Some trainees (it is claimed) are being poorly prepared to teach systematic synthetic phonics after the completion of their course. (Ofsted, 2020)

There are no such edicts for any other subjects in primary or secondary schools in the document. No references are cited in the consultation document to justify this policy, removing as it does 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). Yet it would appear that following the recent Ofsted report *Bold Beginnings*, 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.

Should the proposed changes in initial teacher education be implemented in England in September 2020:

- Will tutors involved in literacy courses in initial teacher education retain any control over the content of their literacy courses?
- Will teachers in primary schools be equipped to critique this government mandated policy?
- Will teachers have any awareness of the approach to literacy teaching in other countries, or even that these may be different (even in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland)?



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