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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.

The development of a research-literate teaching profession and evidence-based government literacy policies

By Margaret M Clark OBE

Abstract: The Government in England claims that all children should learn to read using synthetic phonics and that this policy is evidence-based, failing to acknowledge alternative evidence.

A phonics screening check introduced in 2012 to be taken by children around six years of age at the end of year 1 is mandatory. It consists of 40 words to be read aloud to the teacher, 20 are real words and the other 20 are pseudo words. Any child who fails to achieve a pass mark of 32 words read aloud correctly is required to re-sit the check at the end of year 2.

Increasing the percentage pass rates each year on the check is required of schools on what has become a high stakes test taken by children around six years of age, rather than a light touch or diagnostic assessment. There is evidence that decoding has come to dominate reading instruction in early years classrooms in England in preparation for the check.

Ofsted in its school inspections, concentrates on a school's adherence to government literacy policy. As teachers in training in England now spend a greater proportion of their time in schools than previously, where synthetic phonics is the required method of teaching reading, the students are unlikely on teaching practice to see other methods employed. There are unlikely even to be discussions there of alternative approaches to the teaching of reading.

Now even literacy courses in initial teacher education institutions are to be required to focus on synthetic phonics if these institutions wish to retain their validation to train teachers. Their adherence to this policy is to be inspected by Ofsted. With more limited time in the training institutions, and the new demand for a focus in the literacy courses there on synthetic phonics there will be little time for tutors to provide their students with evidence of other successful approaches or comparative information from other countries, even the other devolved countries in the United Kingdom which have adopted very different approaches. Yet Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland scored statistically higher than England in PIRLS 2016. Thus, during their training, it seems doubtful if teachers will either acquire the knowledge or the competence to be a research-literate profession or to critique government policies should this be permitted.

Attendance at courses of continuing professional development in England are unlikely to widen teachers' horizons if they are funded by DfE as the main focus will be on synthetic phonics and a condition of acceptance on such courses may even require the purchase of prescribed commercial synthetic phonics materials.

There is extensive research evidence to support these statements.

How can the teaching profession in England be made research-literate with the knowledge to critique current and future government policies and what changes would be required to enable them to use that expertise to improve the literacy curriculum?

Keywords: Literacy policy, school libraries, story reading.

Focusing only on phonics in the early stages of learning to read, particularly in a language such as English, whose orthography is not phonically regular, inevitably limits children's initial experience of print.

Were children's experience of written language in the early stages not confined to phonically regular words, but also

to include the hundred key words in written English, which are not phonically regular, this would enable children's initial experience of written language to include more meaningful interesting text. A hundred key words account for fifty percent of the total words in written English (see Clark, 2016 chapter. 9). Phonics instruction may help the children to decode the ninety percent of different words in written English. Without this instruction children might tend to guess at these other words. Therefore, for children learning to read in English their early experience of written language should involve both phonics and learning speedy recognition of the 100 key words. This combination would enable them to experience meaningful written language from the start and appreciate that the purpose in reading is to make sense of a different form of language not to speak words out loud.

As Margaret Donaldson and Jessie Reid as early as 1982 stressed: "Learning to read is learning to comprehend language expressed through a different medium." (Reprinted Clark 1985: 16.)

They stressed the need to recognise the decontextualised nature of written language and that it is not merely speech written down, a view also expressed by other contributors to that book *New Directions in the Study of Reading* (Clark,1985).

As early as 1970s, others including Frank Smith in The United States and Marie Clay in New Zealand were stressing the importance of appreciating that print is not merely speech written down. (See Clark 2016 for an outline of the insight from such researchers). It is questionable how many insights from the research on literacy over the years since 1970s will have been discussed in the training of today's teachers in England.

To make sense of the written form of language we need to identify the individual words at sufficient speed. The focus currently in England in the early stages seems to be predominantly on decoding, and that out of context, contrary to what was recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation for example which stressed that even decoding

should be practised in meaningful contexts. Fluency and sounding out words, rather than making sense of a written form of language seems to dominate early instruction with the assumption that only when children can decode successfully should they experience a range of written language. Thus, many young children assume that the purpose of reading is to transform print into sound rather than to understand language in a different medium. Children's early reading instruction should surely include an appreciation that understanding and enjoying language in a different medium is the purpose in reading, whether orally or silently. The current approach may be particularly confusing to the many young children in England learning to read in English for whom it is not even their first language. Many young children questioned shortly after taking the screening check showed a lack of appreciation that reading is not merely sounding out symbols (See Clark 2018; Carter J, 2020a; Bradbury, A and Roberts-Holmes, G 2017).

Learning to Read: relevant research

It has been claimed by Nick Gibb, the former education minister who has been the advocate for synthetic phonics over many years, that academics would not support instruction in phonics as part of children's early instruction in learning to read. What concerns them is the Government's insistence that synthetic phonics is the only way to teach all children to read, and that the focus in the early stages should be solely or mainly on decontextualised decoding. Little appreciation seems to be given to the very different skills that young children possess when they start school. Indeed, some children are already on their way to reading with understanding before they start school, a few are already reading silently with understanding (Clark, 1976). Such children's progress may indeed be set back by the current curriculum and preparation for the phonics check which they experience in school. Some parents did express this concern in our independent research (Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

There is research to back up these statements, some

as early as 1970s, yet few teachers in training, or even experienced teachers in England, are likely to be qualified professionals in the fullest sense of the word able to critique current and future government policy or even permitted to do so. How many teachers, or even their lecturers would be aware of the significance of the researches of for example:

Frank Smith, whose book *Understanding Reading: a psycholinguistic approach* made such an impact when published in 1971; Marie Clay in New Zealand who developed Reading Recovery, whose first book *Reading a Patterning of Complex Behaviour* was published in 1972 (see chapter 7 in Clark 2016 for a tribute to her work); or Emelia Ferreiro from Argentina who explored young children's developing awareness of the difference between drawing and writing and many other significant researches (see *Awakening to Literacy* 1985, editors Goelman, Oberg and Smith).

My research on young children who could already read silently with understanding when they started school revealed that not all children did need formal instruction to learn to read and raised the issue as to whether some children's failure might be as a consequence of the age at which they were taught, or the methodology (Clark, 1976, *Young Fluent Readers*).

Stories as a first step

There is now one would hope, a greater appreciation of the cognitive processes involved in the comprehension of written language for different purposes. Stories read and reread to young children coupled with dialogue as the stories are shared with adults helps young children to appreciate the features of written language. If young children follow the story on the page, they may also come to appreciate the different significance of letters, words and punctuation. Some children come to school with a rich background from stories shared with parents and with a plentiful supply of illustrated children's books by imaginative children's authors. Other children come to school with few such experiences. Yet, there is research evidence as to the impact of such experience on

children's progress in learning to read.

In 2017 the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS 2016 were published, and England's improved performance was by Nick Gibb, an education minister, attributed to the new insistence on synthetic phonics as the way to teach all children to read and the mandatory phonics screening check. However, cautions about any such claims were made in the international report on the study and the influence of home background on the PIRLS results of the ten-year-olds in the study was stressed. Parents are the students' first teachers and 39 per cent of the students had parents who reported often engaging their children in early literacy activities such as reading, talking or singing to them as well as telling them stories and teaching them to write alphabet letters. These students had higher reading achievement than students whose parents engaged them less frequently in early literacy activities.

This is quoted in Clark, 2018 chapter 5 (page 35) where its implications are explored. The results for students whose parents reported that their children performed early literacy activities when beginning primary school were shown to illustrate the important influence of home environment on later attainment. It is even possible that one contributory factor to high scores in the phonics screening check in England might have been the children's experiences in their homes, an aspect that has not been investigated.

As early as the 1980s there was a Granada Television Series *Time for a Story* for children from four years of age which introduced young children to a range of fascinating stories each of about 500 words written for the series by well-known children's authors. No constraints on language, or punctuation were put on the authors, only that the stories be approximately 500 words long. During each ten-minute programme a story was introduced to the children, the key words and phrases shown on screen and explained, then the story read. Little books with illustrations from the television series and teachers' handbooks could be purchased to accompany the series. Wendy Dewhirst and I were the

consultants for this series. The short stories enabled young children to hear written language and contrast it with spoken language from an early age. Young children in primary schools in England may not have many such experiences, unless they have parents who read and re-read stories. Yet there is research evidence as to how important such experience is for young children preschool and when learning to read.

Current government policy with its focus on decoding in the early years may allow very little time for story reading as part of reading instruction in schools thus widening the gap between more and less advantaged children. Children should be made aware of the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (see Clark 2016: chapter 10). Using the most creative of these short stories I was able to show how they could be used to stimulate many young children to retell the story orally in language similar to the original. Some children reproduced the story in writing while a few even invented their own parallel stories. When lecturing to teachers and working with young children I read these short stories to stimulate the young children to compose their own stories. There are many examples of just how creative some young children can be when given the opportunity in *Young Literacy Learners* (Clark, 1994 and Clark, 2016).

Only if the early years curriculum is creative enough will teachers appreciate the wide range of knowledge and skills even within a single age group of young children and plan experiences to meet the needs of all the children. Even within a single age-group of young children some children may not yet appreciate the difference between drawing and writing or words and letters. While other young children when stimulated by rich written language can retell a story orally in similar language, and others under seven years of age are able to compose and even write and illustrate their own parallel stories.

School Libraries in England

Many young children starting school have had a rich experience of written language in the form of stories, others

have had very limited experience of books and own few if any books themselves. One would hope that schools would be able to provide disadvantaged children with experience of books. It is therefore to be regretted that in England school libraries are not mandatory and such libraries as do exist are not therefore likely to be inspected by Ofsted. When resources are in short supply school libraries are unlikely therefore to be a priority or will be the replacement of librarians who leave. Public libraries may not be able to compensate and with the focus on decoding in the early stages there may be limited time for story reading to young children as a frequent regular occurrence in early years classrooms (see Carter 2020b). An All Party-Parliamentary Group for Libraries reporting in 2014 recommended that school libraries should become mandatory; their recommendation was not accepted. In 2015 the National Literacy Trust published a report on School Libraries (Teravainen and Clark, C 2017). In their summary it was stated that: “There are no official figures on the number of school libraries in UK”. “There is no statutory requirement for schools in England to have a school library, and often the decision to have one depends on the head teacher.....fast developing technology and the new opportunities it offers for school libraries means that new research is needed to capture the impact of these technological developments.” “It is crucial that up-to-date figures are collected to determine the state of school libraries”. (page 4).

The future of the phonics screening check and synthetic phonics

There has been consultation by the government on some aspects of assessment in primary schools in England, but little since its introduction in 2012 on the phonics screening check. The future of the check was not considered in the 2017 consultation, yet the government does not intend to consult at present as to whether the check should remain mandatory or even continue. In an independent research study in 2017, we sought the views of teachers and parents on the check

and found most teachers and parents were unhappy about the check; the pass/fail nature, the use of pseudo words and the requirement for children to re sit the check if they failed to reach a pass mark of 32. Many teachers expressed the view that the check was not diagnostic, and told them little they didn't already know. Even some parents whose children passed the check, and particularly those whose children were already reading, expressed concern that its high status and the predominate focus on decoding in the early years, had set back their children's reading (Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

Jane Carter explored the extent to which the phonics screening check framed the teaching practices of being a teacher of reading. She gathered data from a questionnaire in 2016 completed by 59 reception year, year 1 and year 2 teachers. Most agreed that phonics must be taught, but there were some disturbing comments made by the teachers concerning the cultural context of the classroom. (See 'Carter, 2020b and 'What determines literacy policies.; evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice' Clark 2018 Ed J Review 25: 2-30). In that article reference is also made to other research including that of Bradbury and Russell-Holmes on grouping for phonics tuition in early years classrooms, in England, 2017).

Improving on previous best

In 2021 a comprehensive review of Education in England was published by Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, both with extensive experience, including as Chief Education Officers. That book entitled, *About our Schools: Improving on previous best*, examines in detail the policy and practice from the late 1970s to the present day in England and sets out what policy makers and education leaders can do to enable schools in England to improve. It involved interviews with 14 Secretaries of State together with many leading educationists and is backed by extensive reading. The authors highlight key areas in need of improvement and consider how we can enable teachers and schools to improve the learning environment and broaden the horizons for all pupils. The book in its 641 pages addresses not only teachers but also policy

makers and parents giving a comprehensive review of policy often in the exact words of those who were interviewed. The authors state that they read a lot and spent around 150 hours interviewing the 'witnesses', included fourteen secretaries of state, four heads of Ofsted and many other key players in education.

The authors claim that some chapters will be more relevant than others to specific readers but that politicians should be considering all the issues in the later chapters. Nearly all the secretaries claimed to base their policies on evidence, but it is their comments on where they get their evidence and the importance they place on certain elements that is important. When considering whether politicians do make a difference there are several references to Nick Gibb who worked with five secretaries of state, and who became a minister of state in 2010 serving continuously until 2021 with only a two-year break. It is claimed that he influenced at close hand the work of all five secretaries of state leading a personal crusade for traditional approaches to teaching, including the use of synthetic phonics in early reading.

Nick Gibb is a figure of influence because of his sheer length of time and maniacal focus on the knowledge rich curriculum to the exclusion of all else (page 82). He was responsible for answering the written questions on literacy and assessment in the House of Commons.

Following the reshuffle in 2021 and appointment of Nadhim Zahawi as Secretary of State, Nick Gibb was replaced by Robin Walker who is now responsible for answering the written questions. It is not yet clear to what extent this will change the Government's policy on early reading instruction. However, in two written answers by Robin Walker to literacy questions on 28 February there does seem to be a rather different tone. One was on the importance of World Book Day, the other on children's communication skills. He was asked what steps the government was taking to ensure that supporting children's spoken language development is part of what at that time was still the forthcoming Schools White Paper. His reply included the following: "The Schools White

Paper will consider the links between early years and primary education as critical stages to children's development in oracy and spoken language. We expect to publish the Schools White Paper in early 2022". (See *Education Journal* 480 9.3.22: 39-40).

A suggestion is made in the book that Nick Gibb was "sometimes regarded as ploughing a separate furrow rather than being part of a team" (page 81).

We are reminded on page 107 that education in England is very centralised and that central government decides on education policy and enacts legislation. Schools are required to work within the framework set down by government. We do not have any comments from Nick Gibb on his role, as on page 85 the authors state that Nick Gibb, who was still in office at the time of the enquiries, declined to be interviewed by the authors!

In the final chapters recommendations are made by the authors who claim that there is now widespread agreement among educationalists that partnerships of schools working collaboratively are better (p 573) They propose that a Schooling Framework Commission be established to overcome the twin dangers of a lack of clarity and overcentralised power. They recommend a wide membership for the commission.

They argue that formalised approaches to schooling should not be until age 6 with excellent child-care and in a rich social and educative setting beforehand. They state that evidence from other nations indicates that a later start accelerates progress especially in reading and particularly when spoken language is a strong focus in the early years (page 588).

In the final chapter among the recommendations are the following: "Through universities and our network of expert consultant teachers and the infrastructure of the Chartered College of Teaching and the EEF, we should be able to establish the agreed processes for helping children to learn to read and the alternative processes for those children who struggle initially." (Page 588.)

They argue that: “There should be an enquiry into whether the starting age for school be raised to six. The power of Ofsted should be reviewed with a view to reducing its enormous function.”

Of particular relevance to the theme of this article are the following two proposals:

1. Every year 100 expert consultant teachers paired with a 100 trainee teachers should be randomly selected to visit two or three schools from a list of 25 countries as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. There should be professional learning and CDP entitlement for all staff with details recommended by the Schooling Framework Commission in consultation with the teacher unions, Chartered College of Teaching and Chartered Institute of Educational Advisers. It is proposed that they would gain their status after 5 to 7 years part time study for a master’s degree at a university.

Were the proposals in this book, or even some of them to be accepted, this would represent a major shift in power from the current centralised control on the curriculum and assessment by central government reduction in the current wide-ranging powers of Ofsted, continuing professional development for all staff, independent from DfE provide insights into developments in other countries and an appraisal of alternative methods of learning. Thus, teachers in England might become true professionals.

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NB A list of references, a recent research report and further articles can be read and downloaded from the Newman University website:

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