

The views of teachers, parents and children on the Phonics Screening Check: the continuing domination of politics over evidence

By Margaret M Clark OBE

The information to which I will draw attention in this article comes from three sources. The first is a survey I have recently completed with colleagues into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on current government literacy policy, in particular, the Phonics Screening Check. The preliminary report which can be read and downloaded on line is entitled: *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents* (edited by Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard July 2018). <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

The second source is research by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes summarised in an article by Alice Bradbury (2018) entitled *The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability: A 'necessary evil' amid the policy storm* in the *British Educational Research Journal*. DOI: 10. 1002/berj.3449.

The third source is as yet unpublished research by Jane Carter based on her PhD study of the views of children and teachers on the phonics check. She reported on the children's views at the UKLA International Conference in Glasgow in 2017 and permitted me to quote from it in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, M.M., 2017: 92-93). She reported on the teachers' views at the recent UKLA International Conference in July in Cardiff. This powerful research should shortly be available in publications.

Background

At the UKLA International Conference at the University of Strathclyde in June 2017 I met two academics from Australia, Misty Adoniou and Paul Gardner, who had recently moved there from England. The English School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, had recently visited Australia and used his persuasive powers to encourage the Federal Minister for Education to adopt what he claims is an "evidence-based" and highly successful literacy policy in England and in particular the Phonics Screening Check.

Synthetic phonics first fast and only is mandated by the Government as the way to teach reading to all children in England and since 2012 all children at the end of Year 1, around six years of age, have been required to sit the Phonics Screening Check and should they not pass (score 32 out of 40 words read aloud correctly) resit the check at the end of Year 2. Twenty of the forty words are pseudo or alien words. Paul, Misty and I published a series of articles in *Education Journal* citing evidence that was being ignored in Australia on the effects of the check in England.

In November 2017, with contributions from three Australians and three literacy researchers from UK, I self-published *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*, which was launched in Australia at the Australian Association for Research in Education conference in Canberra. To present politicians with a more balanced view of the evidence on the impact of the check in England, copies of the book were circulated around Australia including to state education ministers.

The check had over the years since 2012 changed from, as it was initially claimed to be, a "light touch diagnostic assessment", to a high stakes test in the accountability programme, with schools required by DfE and Ofsted to increase their percentage pass each year on the check whether or not their children scored high on other assessments of literacy. Thus, it has come to dominate the early years literacy experiences of young children, with many hours devoted to preparing for the check, in particular the alien (pseudo) words which account for twenty of the forty words in the check.

In December 2017 the results of PIRLS 2016 were announced, hailed by Nick Gibb as a vindication of the synthetic phonics only policy and the check. The ten-year-olds who were assessed on PIRLS were the

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first children to have sat the check in 2012. England's standing rose from joint tenth in 2011 to joint eighth on PIRLS, though still statistically lower ranked than the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, both with very different literacy policies, a fact so far ignored in England.

Our critics claimed that result challenged the evidence we had presented in our book. However, by February 2018 I had published a further edited book *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology* with additional substantive evidence from further literacy experts, three from USA, a further two from Australia, several from England and chapters

reporting the policies in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. These countries with very different policies from England rank statistical higher. We also presented a carefully argued critique of the claims based on the results from PIRLS. None of these who contributed to these two books did, as was claimed, dispute that phonics has a place in the teaching of reading. What was being challenged was that there is evidence that there is one way to teaching reading to all children, and that way is by synthetic phonics, first fast and only.

Initially we hoped our evidence was having some effect on the political scene in Australia where education is a state rather than a Federal responsibility. However, in March 2018 a victory for the conservative government in South Australia, also the home state of the Federal Minister for Education, led to a statement that the state government will fulfil its manifesto commitment and introduce the Phonics Screening Check from England. An election is imminent in another state and should it move from Labour to Liberal (the Australian equivalent of the Conservatives) it may implement a similar policy (see Appendix III by Misty Adoniou in our survey report). Politics appears to rule literacy policy in Australia as it does in England! No evidence seems to dent the School Standards Minister's obsession with and commitment to synthetic phonics, nor his persuasive powers when presenting his version of the evidence to politicians in other countries.

At this year's International Conference in Cardiff on 6 July I convened a symposium with contributions from two Australians and two from England, all of whom had contributed to the initial book, *Reading the Evidence*. We reviewed the current situation and explored ways of making the teaching profession and parents more aware of the issues as a way of challenging political dogma.

We are now able to present more evidence on the effect of the PSC on the early literacy experiences of young children in England. There was some evidence of the disquiet of teachers reported shortly after the implementation of the check in 2012, in the report of the NFER research commissioned by DfE (reported in *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2016: chapter 16). Since then we have evidence that no attempt has been made by DfE to consult teachers as to whether in their opinion the check is a valuable diagnostic assessment and whether it should remain statutory, become voluntary or even be scrapped (see Appendix I in the survey report). This, in spite of the vast sums of money being spent on it and related commercial programmes by DfE, and also probably by schools

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desperate to meet DfE expectations (see Appendix II in the survey report for an estimate of the expenditure by DfE). I have proof that it was no accident that even in the consultation on assessment in primary schools in 2017, DfE did not include the phonics check in the assessments about which they sought the views of teachers (see Appendix I).

New evidence on the views of teachers and parents from an independent survey

I was aware that the lack of evidence of the views of teachers might lead politicians to assume they fully subscribed to the policy and to the statutory check. However, I was also conscious that many teachers were reluctant, even fearful, to speak out in opposition to the policy, even to express their concerns about the effects, intended and unintended, of this “high stakes” assessment of children at six-years-of-age, not only on those who failed, but even on children who passed. I decided to undertake an independent survey on survey monkey of Head Teachers in whose schools the PSC was undertaken, teachers who had experience of assessing children, and of parents who had one or more children assessed on the check. This survey was advertised nationwide during four weeks in May. Not only did we get a response from all regions in England from 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents but many of those who completed the survey also took the time to comment in response to a number of the questions. The preliminary findings are now available online and in Appendices V, VI and VII we give all the precise questions and responses to the multiple-choice answers. We indicate how many respondents answered each question and how many also made comments to a number of questions. On 6 July we released the link to the report of the preliminary results on the Newman University website. Over the next few months we intent to undertake more complex analyses. These will include comparison of the backgrounds of those who are more or less supportive of government policy, of teachers who are also parents of children who have been assessed and parents who are also teachers. I have jointly edited the report with Jonathan Glazzard of Leeds Beckett University with chapters by two colleagues at Newman University and another jointly written by Jonathan Glazzard and a colleague. Our preliminary results reveal enough disquiet about the check among both many teachers and parents (even those whose children passed the check) to feel that our current evidence should be in the public domain and should encourage politicians to involve teachers in consultation now as to whether the large sums of money spent on this policy and the check, including on commercial materials are justified.

The report contains our preliminary findings including quotations from comments made by the teachers and parents. Even many parents whose children passed the check expressed their concern at the way the need to achieve a high percentage pass, and increasing pass year on year, is now dominating early years classrooms. Of particular concern to many parents and teachers was the time now being devoted to practising for the check. Many teachers and parents commented adversely on the time spent on practising alien or pseudo words, which are of course half the words on the check. Some parents whose child had passed the check expressed concern not only at the waste of time practising for the check but also at the adverse effect it was having on their child who could already read at the time they sat the check. Many adverse comments were about the time spent on alien words.

We are aware of the limitations of our survey which was both independent and anonymous. This of course has its limitations as well as advantages as we have no way of identifying spurious responses. We do know a minority of respondents only answered a few questions and may have opened the survey merely to see the questions. However, what we also have on record is not only the date when the survey was completed but the time of day or night and just how long each person devoted to the survey. We are impressed by how long many respondents took to complete the survey and how many took time to make comments. We offered a dedicated email address for any respondent to contact us should they wish to be involved in any further aspect of the research.

In the preliminary report we have chapters devoted to the views of the Head Teachers, teachers and parents, with examples of the comments they made. Some of the teachers are also parents of children who have been assessed on the check and parents who are also teachers. Some of these parents have children who passed the check, and or have children who were already reading at the time they sat the check. We

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will compare their views. We asked how long the teachers have been teaching so can compare and contrast their views on current government literacy policy and the check.

The following are some of the key findings and policy implications from our preliminary analyses.

1. The views expressed indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the phonics check or making it voluntary.
2. Many of the respondents, teachers and parents, were critical of the inclusion of the pseudo words and of the time taken in practising them
3. The use of the check as a benchmark to measure overall school improvement appeared to be regarded as unhelpful by many.
4. Given the proportion of teachers and parents who disagreed with government policy, the Government should consider a broader repertoire of approaches to teaching children to read.

Many of the comments made by teachers in our survey were echoed in Jane Carter's yet unpublished research.

The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability

Shortly after our survey closed on 25 May my attention was drawn to an article by Alice Bradbury reporting a study on the effects of the check on teachers' classroom practices on grouping of children, in particular for practice on Phonics in preparation for the check. It appears Phonics determines grouping in many classrooms, even by many teachers who admit it is against their professional judgement. This may occur as early as Nursery with 58 per cent of the Nursery teachers admitting to grouping by ability in the absence of evidence that this does improve practice. There was evidence of children in the study schools of very different ages being grouped together for Phonics practice and of commercial schemes recommended by DfE being used to legitimise grouping, even by teachers who disagreed with such a policy. The findings of this research make disturbing reading reinforcing what many of those involved in teacher education have observed when visiting students to be a widespread practice. This includes in some schools, withdrawal of borderline children for practice on alien words, and grouping of children very different in age according to their Phonics level.

Final comments

We now have evidence from three independent sources of the views of teachers on the effect of the PSC on the literacy experiences of young children, partly as a consequence of its current high stakes position. Surely it is time for those determining policy to consult the teaching profession on the future of the Phonics Screening Check and for the attention of politicians to be drawn to this evidence before any more money is invested in this policy. Australia and other countries considering following England's lead need to be made aware of evidence such as this before following England's lead otherwise the check may dominate their early years classrooms as it now dominates many in England.

Footnote

The following question was answered by 1,108 teachers: "Do you feel the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?" Only 71 of these teachers answered Yes. In our further analysis we will be able to explore the background of those who did and did not find the check helpful. Only 20 of 180 Head Teachers answered Yes to this question.

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