

Evidence-based literacy policies and a research-literate profession: How to meet the challenge

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The School Standards Minister (in England) made a plea that young teachers enter “a research-informed and research-enthusiastic profession”. Few would agree that current policy is evidence-based or research informed. Teachers, in England and in other countries such as USA, seem not only to be told what to teach but how to teach it, and those training teachers have the content of their courses dictated by government.

There is frequent testing of children from an early age with data gathered for accountability. *The Mismanagement of Learning: How tests are damaging children and primary education* (2016), a series of essays on this issue can be downloaded from www.reclaimingschools.org. (NB education in UK is devolved and therefore the DfE is only responsible for education in England, however, the issues discussed here apply in other countries also, including USA (see Goodman et al 2016).)

I have recently published a series of articles related to two current government policies, the claims made for and central place given to synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading together with the high stakes phonics check, and the proposal to introduce baseline assessment (also being considered in Scotland) as a way of measuring children’s progress and for accountability. Part IV of *Learning to be Literate* (Clark 2016) critiques the evidence on synthetic phonics and in Clark 2017 chapter 10 is devoted to baseline assessment. A consultation is underway at DfE on assessment in primary schools (closing date was 22nd June 2017). Many associations including UKLA, BERA and TACTYC (linked with other organisations under the umbrella term ‘Better without Baseline’) have submitted evidence. I have also submitted personal evidence on both the phonics check and baseline assessment. For a copy of my evidence, email Margaret.clark@newman.ac.uk. There is also a powerful movement, ‘More than a Score’, attempting to influence policy in England which many professionals regard as overwhelmed by data collection and testing for accountability. Many professional organisations are now attempting to have their voice heard in policy making and to alert parents to what is now happening to the learning environment in primary schools. (See www.morethanascore.co.uk).

In recent publications, I have considered three Cs in an analysis of current government policy on literacy learning: claims, costs and commercialism. I have been able by Freedom of Information questions to reveal the costs of these two policies to DfE, though not to individual schools or to institutions training teachers (as this information is not held centrally). I have also been able to identify the names of individuals and commercial organisations which have received finance through the recommendations from DfE (see my articles online).

How do people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard? The EU High Level Group of Experts in 2012 (of which Greg Brooks was a member), recommended that professionals acquire the competence to make critical evaluation of literacy research. How do we meet this challenge and would current government policies stand up to such a scrutiny? At a seminar on 26th June at Newman University to launch my new book, *Understanding Research in Early Education: the relevance for the future of lessons from the past*, I considered the need for a research-literate education profession and the obstacles in the

Continued on page 19.)

Continued from page 18.)

way. Five of my recent articles and the paper for the seminar are all available on <http://newman.ac.uk/26june> and summaries of the papers from a research seminar in 2016 into baseline assessment are available online at <http://newman.ac.uk/24feb>.

There are claims that in UK we should move to requiring a Masters' level teaching profession and compulsory and free continued professional development as in many other countries. Concern is being expressed at the move away from university-based teacher education to mainly school-based training in England and similar proposals in Scotland. It is felt that this will make the achievement of a research-literate profession less likely. In my seminar paper, I list several recent reports on the need to retain university based teacher education, including one by BERA and a recent paper for the Scottish universities by Ian Menter (see www.newman.ac.uk/26june). This should of course be in partnership with schools, but only in that way are we likely to have professionals with the knowledge and skills to evaluate research and undertake research into the positive and negative consequences of their own practice.

References

Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Revised edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Clark, M.M. (2017) *Understanding Research in Early Education: The relevance for the future of lessons from the past*. Third Edition. Abingdon: Routledge. This book is intended for students, undergraduates and practitioners. Key researches are evaluated within their historical context. readers are asked to consider the strengths and limitations of each and their implications for practice.

Goodman, K., Fries, P.H and Strauss, S.L. (2016) *Reading The Grand Illusion: How and why people make sense of print*. Abingdon: Routledge. This book is based on dialogue between professionals from education, linguistics and neurology. The hope of the authors is that "readers armed with a knowledge of how reading works and how well equipped children are for learning to read, will not tolerate the teaching of reading as a sequence of skills and vocabulary drills and will join with professionals in demanding instruction which builds on and promotes language development in the context of use." (Page 159.)

Gender equality won't be achieved unless businesses take action

The Young Women's Trust has launched new research which looks at how employers could encourage more women into male-dominated sectors such as engineering, IT and construction. The announcement followed a YouGov survey commissioned by the charity which showed that three in five employers thought that while positive action would be needed to achieve workplace gender equality, just a quarter had taken steps to improve women's representation.

The charity will explore ideas including open days and work experience for women, support with job applications and targets for recruiting women, particularly when it came to apprenticeships. Young Women's Trust will also provide employers with guidance on how to implement the measures, as employers had said that they lacked knowledge on what action they could legally take.

Young Women's Trust chief executive, Dr Carole Easton, OBE said that the growing skills shortage in sectors like construction and engineering would not be filled unless employers helped more young women into relevant apprenticeships. But she added that Young Women's Trust had found that young women were being shut out of the sectors due to issues such as gender stereotypes and a lack of support.

Dr Easton stressed that women still make up just nine per cent of engineers, 11 per cent of the construction workforce and 17 per cent of IT professionals. She added that instead, women were more likely to go into lower paid sectors, where they received less training, fewer opportunities and often struggled to make ends meet. Young Women's Trust and Professor Davies will be conducting the research over the next six months.