

A Different Response to PISA: Australia's plans to adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check from England

By Margaret M Clark OBE

In *Education Journal* 311: 24-25, I outlined some of the current literacy initiatives in Scotland, in part a response to criticisms following Scotland's fall in ranking on international tests such as PISA. That article was based on plenary sessions at the UKLA International Conference at the University of Strathclyde. Here, I report the Federal Government in Australia's rather different response to international tests results, one which is arousing concern among some academics and teachers who are questioning the proposed testing, and its implications for the curriculum.

It is intended to import the Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds from England, described by Senator Birmingham, Education Minister, as a "light touch assessment". Apparently "the plan was first flagged in the budget last year and is reportedly expected to lead to a shakeup in phonics teaching". A panel nominated to design the Year 1 skills test includes Jennifer Buckingham, a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies who has published a research report setting out why in her opinion Australia should adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (2016). She claims: "There have been marked and measurable improvements in early reading achievement in England since the introduction of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in 2012" (p. 18). The panel is to consider the best way to implement the tests, including a trial and when and how often they should be conducted, rather than whether this would be the best approach to adopt.

This information is taken from *Literacy and Numeracy Tests for Australian Year 1 Students (The Australian, January 2017)*. The brief online report is followed by numerous comments, disturbingly, many critical of the competence of teachers. In 2010 when DfE in the UK announced its intention to introduce a phonics screening test it also constrained the researchers funded to conduct the pilot study who were commissioned only to help plan the administration of the check, not decide whether it should be implemented (see Clark 2016, chapter 15). Synthetic phonics appears to be the method being advocated for teaching reading now in New South Wales, and as an "evidence-based" policy. This information is based on a recording of a presentation by Nick Gibb in April 2017 in Sydney where he was introduced by Jennifer Buckingham, and questions were posed by teachers in the audience who appeared to accept this as the policy, expressing concern only at the lack of sufficient material on synthetic phonics.

The Phonics Screening Check in England

According to the Minister for School Standards in England, Nick Gibb, synthetic phonics is the way to teach reading and he still claims that the phonics check, a statutory test administered to all children in schools in England at the end of Year 1 (around six and a half years of age) has been responsible for improvement in



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literacy attainment, in spite of the lack of such evidence even from the DfE funded research (Walker et al 2015, see also Clark 2016 Part IV and www.newman.ac.uk/26june). This test of 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) involves children saying each word correctly. Since its inception in 2012 the pass mark has been 32 with any child who does not achieve that mark listed as having failed and required to re-sit the test at the end of Year 2. Rather than a “light touch” diagnostic check this has become a high stakes test for accountability with schools expected to increase their percentage pass year on year. Recently the NAHT expressed its opposition to the Phonics Check, stating that it “risks distorting learning” (see *Education Journal* 308: 7). Currently there is a consultation by DfE on assessment in primary school; the closing date for submission of evidence was 22 June.

The phonics check is noted in the document as a statutory test at the end of Year 1, yet there are no questions posed in the consultation document as to whether it should be retained, as there are for baseline assessment for example. UKLA submitted evidence, as did I, questioning the continuation of this statutory test, indicating that there is no proof that the check has been responsible for improved attainment in literacy and this high stakes measure is distorting the way that reading is being approached in the classroom. As there is now pressure by the government and Ofsted not only for schools to show a high percentage pass on the check but to increase this year on year there is a tendency in many classrooms to focus on practice of pseudo words, as these are half those in the check, and for more limited reading material to be available to the young children. Interviews with teachers and children are beginning to reveal the effect this focus is having on children’s perception of reading, and on the advice teachers give to parents on how to help their children.

Evidence was presented graphically illustrating this at the recent UKLA International Conference at Strathclyde University by Jane Carter which has yet to be published. She cleverly placed young children who had recently sat the check in the position of experts as they tried to explain to Beegu, a soft toy, the rationale behind the real and “alien” words, and the relationship if any of phonics to reading. She also explored the extent to which the Phonics Screening Check was framing teachers’ and children’s practices and understanding of what it is to be a reader. She gave many disturbing illustrations from her dialogue with the children and teachers. I look forward to the publication of this powerful evidence, the first research to give the children a voice, something I appealed for as early as 2013.

In chapter 14 of Clark 2016 I gave a critique of the claim that there is one best method of teaching reading, namely synthetic phonics, and reported on several critical evaluations of the phonics check. Two further articles have come to my attention raising issues about the actual phonics check, one by Darnell, Solity and Wall (2017) who question whether the phonics check is even meeting the criteria set down for its construction; the other makes a powerful case against the inclusion of pseudo words (Gibson and England 2015). Both articles are backed by an extensive body of research. In a recent publication by Goodman, Fries and Strauss, *Reading -The Grand Illusion* (2016) the authors, a reading researcher, linguist and a neurologist, show how much more complex is the comprehension of written language than those supporting synthetic phonics would make us believe: “The phonics illusion is that reading depends on the ability to sound out words” (page 128).

In this book we take on the formidable misconception: that reading involves the accurate, sequential recognition of words and that accurate word recognition is necessary for comprehension. (Goodman et al 2016: xx.)

What is the case for Australia to adopt the Phonics Screening Check?

In view of this recent evidence, and my critiques of the effect of the phonics check over the years since 2012 in articles, summarised in Clark 2016 and updated in www.newman.ac.uk/26june, it was with some surprise that I read the recent report by Jennifer Buckingham: *Focus on Phonics: Why Australia should adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check* (2016), and found no reference to any of my publications! According to Buckingham, “literacy levels of Australian children are persistently low by international

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standards” (p. 3). She states that the Australian government proposed a phonics check in its May 2016 budget and Federal Minister Simon Birmingham has reiterated the government’s intention to introduce the Check in Australian schools (p. 1). However, she does recommend that a pilot study should be conducted before implementing the Phonics Screening Check nationally, although this appears to be to determine administrative aspects rather than to assess the value of any such measure. This reminds me of the criteria set by DfE when piloting the check in England prior to its introduction as a statutory test in 2012 (see Clark 2016 chapter 15). In her report, she claims that: “There have been marked and measurable improvements in early reading achievement in England since the introduction on the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in 2012” (p. 18). It is not clear, however, on what evidence she bases a claim for more than year on year improvement in the percentage of children passing the check, although Nick Gibb has continued to make such claims over the years. It was drawn to my attention that Nick Gibb had recently visited Sydney and had delivered a speech in April 2017 where again he made claims for the phonics check, stating that in 2012 when the check was introduced only 58% of children passed the check and by 2016 the percentage has risen to 81%, meaning that 147,000 more six-year-olds were on track to become successful readers. I realise that the decision to adopt a version of the phonics check in Australia was made by the Federal Government before this recent visit, though it is likely that his claim may have reinforced the decision.

I had been alerted to the recording of this speech prior to the recent UKLA conference at the University of Strathclyde where I gave a paper entitled *Evidence-based literacy policies and a research-literate profession: How to meet the challenge* (*Education Journal* 310: 18-19). There, I was approached by

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three Australian academics, from the universities of Sydney, Canberra and Curtin, all concerned at the prospect that the Federal Government appears to be intending to introduce the screening check from England as the solution to literacy problems in Australia. One of the academics had prior experience of the Phonics Screening Check in England.

Since then I have had further information including from Misty Adoniou of the University of Canberra, who sent me an online publication of hers dated November 2016 entitled: *A new phonics test is pointless – we shouldn’t waste precious money buying it from England*. In her short article she claims that: “In the May budget, the federal government allocated money to buy England’s phonics screening test for six-year-olds in Year 1.” She states that “the Australian government claims the test will address a decline in reading as measured by international tests for 10- and 15-year-olds” and that “it aims to tie

education funding to this phonics test and has threatened to withhold federal education funding for states and territories that do not implement it”. However, the matter was to be further discussed. Apparently, the panel’s report has not yet been published. She sets out a persuasive case as to why Australia should not adopt this test as the solution to current literacy problems.

Education in Australia is essentially a state responsibility. However, the Federal Government provides a percentage of education funding although the state has responsibility for what happens in schools. Thus, the only way that the Federal Government can exercise power over what is taught in schools is to tie their education funding to “education initiatives”, and the phonics check could be one such initiative.

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Final comment

It is disturbing to find that the Federal Government in Australia is planning to spend money on adopting the Phonics Screening Check in the belief that it will make a major contribution to raising the level of literacy in Australia. This at a time when in England there is still no evidence that four years of the check has resulted in other than an increase year on year in the percentage pass on the check, with no discernible improvement in attainment. Furthermore, as with any innovation, or policy change, there are always unintended consequences which seem only now to be coming to be realised. For a brief resume of my evidence see *Flawed arguments for phonics* in *The Mismeasurement of Learning: How tests are damaging children and primary education* (2016) which can be downloaded from www.reclaimingschools.org and a blog *Phonics fanatics, Politicians who think they know best*, based on research by Dominic Wyse and others as well as official data, downloadable from <http://wp.me/p5izk8-jp>.

I stated that: "In England, the powerful place of commercial interests in determining government policies, the material recommended and even the supplementary funding for the teaching of reading is disturbing."

I reminded readers that about half the total words in written English are not phonically regular, others can only be identified within the context. Children do need to decode speedily the words that appear much less frequently, accounting for over 90 per cent of the different words in written English and with these words a grasp of phonics will assist. However, the evidence is that this is better practised in context, not in isolation. Time spent on practising pseudo words for the phonics check could be confusing children, and would surely be better spent studying other features of real written English, especially as many children are learning to read in a language that is not their mother tongue. The recent publication by Goodman et al (2016) makes a persuasive argument for considering the interpretation of a written language such as English in a less simplistic way than is currently the case.

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