

Australia follows England. Why?

Most of the research section in this issue is devoted to what is about to happen in Australia. Like policy makers in many countries around the world, those in Australia are increasingly taking note of their performance in international comparative research programmes like the OECD's PISA. Performance at secondary school level in tests like PISA is of course based on success at primary schools. As the federal government in Australia looked around the world it was only natural that they would look closely at other English speaking countries.

Their attention was drawn to the support that England's schools minister, Nick Gibb, had given to synthetic phonics as *the* method of teaching reading and the claim that the phonics screening check since it became a statutory test for six-year-olds in England in 2012 has had a dramatic effect on schools achieving an increase in percentage pass each year on the check. Mr Gibb has long been a true believer in this, and extolled the virtues of this policy in England when speaking in Australia earlier this year.

Now Australia apparently intends to import the Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds from England, described by Australian Senator Birmingham, Federal Education Minister, somewhat questionably, as a "light touch assessment", yet in England it has now become a statutory high stakes test where a high percentage pass rate increasing year on year is expected of schools by both the DfE and Ofsted. Synthetic phonics is also required to be at the forefront in schools and in any course approved by Ofsted for training primary teachers in England.

Apparently in Australia 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 who 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." There have recently been statements in the media in Australia and publications by Jennifer Buckingham lauding this policy as the solution to a claimed fall in literacy standards in Australia.

We have over the years since 2006 published a series of articles by Margaret Clark citing research evidence that challenges the claims made by Nick Gibb, other ministers and Ofsted. These are summarised in Clark's recent book, *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark 2016). Few experts in England are against phonics, and most researchers merely want practitioners and those training teachers to make an evaluation of the accumulating evidence and be permitted by government to act in their classrooms as independent professionals. This is no longer the case in England, where teachers are currently not only told what to do but how to do it, and those training teachers have little freedom even to evaluate current policies. It is disturbing that Australia is now accepting uncritically the claims of people like Nick Gibb without a voice being given to opposing evidence.

Recently the NAHT expressed its opposition to the Phonics Check, stating that it "risks distorting learning". There is currently a consultation by DfE on assessment in primary schools, as experts question 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.

Over the next few pages we publish three articles that will shed light on these issues. The first is by Margaret Clark who, since 2006, has published a series of research articles in *Education Journal* and elsewhere. She notes that Australia seems to be adopting the policy of England in introducing the teaching of synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check when the evidence for this is at best questionable, and asks the question - why?

The two articles that follow this are by Australian academics. Associate Professor Misty Adoniou writes about what she sees as Australia's (and England's) mis-placed faith in synthetic phonics and the Phonics Screening Check. Dr Paul Gardner compares the politics and policing of synthetic phonics in England and Australia.

Australia plans to adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check from England and recommend synthetic phonics as the method of teaching: why?

By Margaret M Clark OBE

In *Education Journal* 312: pages 20-23 I reported on the Federal Government in Australia's response to recent international test results such as PISA, one which is arousing growing concern among many academics there who question the reliability of the evidence-base for this policy and are disturbed at its possible effect on young children's learning environment. In this series of articles literacy experts from Australia are given a voice to articulate their disquiet.

Here I am setting the scene by drawing attention to evidence of which policy makers in Australia and those advising them appear either to be unaware or choose to ignore. I will consider claims both for synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading, and the results and effects of the Phonics Screening Check since it became a statutory test for six-year-olds in England in 2012. Australia apparently intends to import the Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds from England, described by Senator Birmingham, Federal Education Minister, somewhat erroneously, as a "light touch assessment", as it has now become a statutory high stakes test in England where a high percentage pass rate increasing year on year is expected of schools by both the DfE and Ofsted. Synthetic phonics is also required to be at the forefront in schools and in any course approved by Ofsted for training primary teachers in England.

Apparently in Australia 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 apparently considering 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).

Already synthetic phonics appears to be the method being advocated for teaching reading in several states including New South Wales, claimed to be an "evidence-based" policy. This information is based on a recording of a presentation by Nick Gibb, Schools Standards Minister in England and the advocate for this policy in England, in April 2017 in Sydney where he was introduced by Jennifer Buckingham. She said she met him when studying for her PhD. Questions were posed by teachers in the audience who appeared to accept this policy unquestioningly, expressing concern only at the lack of sufficient funds for synthetic phonics books. Nick Gibb proudly reported that in England £46 million had been spent on commercial synthetic phonics programmes over an eighteen-month period.

There have recently been statements in the media in Australia and publications by Jennifer Buckingham lauding this policy as the solution to a claimed fall in literacy standards in Australia. As far as I can ascertain no reference is being made to publications challenging these views based on the experience in England over recent years. I am only one of those who has published evidence on this topic dating back to 2012. Many of my articles are available online and Part IV of the revised edition of my book *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice*, the first edition of which won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015, is a comprehensive critique of *Synthetic Phonics and literacy learning: government policy in England 2006 to 2015*. In addition to evidence concerning the phonics check including from the NFER Research funded by DfE, there are chapters critiquing the Rose Report (frequently cited by Jennifer Buckingham), an evaluation of claims that there is one best method for teaching reading and relevant evidence from the United States (Clark, 2016a). None of these are referred to by Buckingham even in her extensive research report (Buckingham, 2016). I am not (as some have suggested) against phonics, but merely taking a detached position, and, pleading for a research-literate teaching profession prepared by

their training to make an evaluation of evidence and permitted by government to act in their classrooms as independent professionals. This is no longer the case in England. In an article in which I appealed for a “research literate” teaching profession I stated that teachers in England are currently not only told what to do but how to do it, and that those training teachers have little freedom even to evaluate current policies (Clark, 2016b). Is Australia prepared to go down the same path?

Misplaced faith in phonics and the Phonics Screening Check

By Dr Misty Adoniou

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Australia’s flirtation with England’s Phonics Screening Check is symptomatic of a broader panic about declining literacy standards in the country. In the OECD’s international test of 15 year old school performance, PISA, Australia slid backwards in the 2015 results. The Australian Council for Education Research announced that academic performance in Australia was in “absolute decline” (Thomson, De Bortoli and Underwood, 2016). Although it should be noted, Australia remained more highly ranked than England in the 2015 PISA results.

In the national standardised tests, the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the 2017 results showed a national decline in writing over the past six years, alongside a stagnation in reading and spelling results (ACARA, 2017). These are indeed concerns for Australian educators. However, a belief that the answer to the decline lay in the implementation of a phonics screening check, and concurrent ‘phonics fast and first’ teaching methods is sadly misplaced.

Margaret Clark has outlined the evidence showing that, to date, the Phonics Screening Check in England has only succeeded in improving children’s performance on the Phonics Screening Check. The oft-quoted 23% increase in children passing the phonics screening check over the past 5 years has not resulted in a commensurate 23% increase in children passing the reading and writing assessments at the end of Year 2 (Department for Education, 2016). English children are definitely getting better at decoding pseudo words, but the jury is still out as to whether they are getting better at reading real texts with comprehension.

However, it should not be surprising that the focus on phonics fast and first has yielded little return in England. The Phonics Screening Check actually gives very little information about the literacy learning needs of those who take it. The check only seeks to provide information about children’s phonological processing. This is only one part of the literacy puzzle - the other components being comprehension, fluency, vocabulary and experience (Adoniou, 2017a). So, it is not a check that can alert a teacher to the various challenges that a child may have with the processes of reading and writing. It is misguided and naïve, then, to present the check as a solution to a literacy crisis – yet, Australian Education Minister Birmingham makes this claim for the check on his Facebook page, where he conflates the “phonological processing skills” assessed in the Phonics Screening Check, with “reading skills” more generally. The following emphasis is mine. “The ‘phonics check’ is one the Turnbull (Australian) Government’s reforms to boost education quality in schools - a light touch assessment that ensures teachers, parents and schools know at the earliest possible stage if children aren’t picking up *reading skills* as quickly as they should and so they can intervene rapidly.” November 23, 2016.

In fact, research conducted since the implementation of the Phonics Screening Check in England has revealed that it is not even fulfilling its brief as an effective assessment of phonological processing skills. Duff, Mengoni, Bailey and Snowling (2014) found that the screening check is no more accurate than a teacher’s judgement of which children are at risk of a reading difficulty. It fails to test many of the most common phoneme/grapheme correspondences in English, and in fact screens for a very limited number of phoneme/grapheme relationships (Darnell, Solity and Wall, 2017) which makes its utility as a phonological

screening check limited.

These limitations mean the check has negligible diagnostic or instructional use for classroom teachers. It fails to give any information about what the specific phonological struggles of a child might be, or whether the struggles are indeed with phonology (Glazzard, 2017). The research thus shows that the check simply cannot deliver on Minister Birmingham's understandable desire for rapid diagnosis and intervention for reading problems.

So we can summarise that the implementation of the Phonics Screening Check has yet to show evidence of improved reading comprehension skills in England, because it fails to assess all the requisite skills of reading and it fails to provide useful information about the one skill it is designed to assess – phonological processing. However its proposed implementation in Australia is even more problematic than these identified shortcomings. The Phonics Screening Check is quite simply the wrong answer to the right question.

The question is "Why are Australian students sliding down the national and international tests of literacy as they move through school?" The answer is not "because they don't know their sounds". The 15 year-olds sitting the PISA test know their sounds. Those who fail, fail because of their poor vocabularies and their inability to read the complex syntax structures of the pieces of text they are asked to read. This hypothesis is borne out by the results in the national testing regime NAPLAN.

When the children first sit the test in Year 3, the fail rate in the writing test in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, was 0.6% in 2016. That equates to around 456 children. It is conceivable, perhaps probable, that the majority of those 456 children have a significant phonological processing problem. The other 99.4% don't, or they wouldn't have been able to achieve a pass mark.

However, by the time those children reach Year 9, the fail rate has grown to 6.7%, or the equivalent of 4,489 students. That is not evidence that 4,000 students forgot their phonics, that is evidence that 4,000 students have not developed the other literacy skills of fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and experience. These are the skills being tested in the Year 5, 7 and 9 NAPLAN literacy tests. They are also the skills being tested in the 15-year-olds who sit PISA. PISA 2015 was a test of scientific literacy - not a test of science facts. It is possible to complete the test successfully with no knowledge of the scientific facts. However, what is required, is a scientific vocabulary, and an ability to think empirically. The students had to read scientific explanations of phenomena, alongside data charts and tables, interpret that information, analyse it and give a written rationale for their interpretation and analysis. It is these complex reading skills that are not being developed as students move through Australian schools. The Phonics Screening Check and its accompanying calls for phonics fast and first programs are simply distracting us from the real issues facing educators. It is not the basics that we require in Australian education, it is complexity (Adoniou, 2017b).

The 456 Victorian school children who failed the Year 3 NAPLAN writing test last year could have – should have - been identified, and given specialist intervention based on individual diagnoses of their problems. The NAPLAN tests provide very detailed information about students' skills and gaps, for those teachers who have been given the time and skills to do the diagnostics. (It must be noted, however, that teachers are generally not provided with these skills.) These children could then be given private lessons by specialist teachers every morning for a year for the same cost as the proposed AUD\$22,000,000 that has been allocated to the rollout of a phonics screening check that holds no promise of accurate diagnosis or tailored intervention for those it identifies as having a phonological processing challenge. As the Australian Primary Principals Association has noted (Hiatt, 2017), along with the Australian Education Union (AEU, 2017), and researchers (Duff et al, 2015) the money would be better spent giving teachers professional learning to support them to make informed diagnostic analyses and perform tailored interventions for struggling readers.

It is troubling that England appears to remain committed to its Phonics Screening Check experiment, despite little evidence of a positive return and disturbing reports of harmful teaching practices such as teaching children to read nonsense words. However it is not unusual for governments of all persuasions to resolutely stick to signature reforms even when those reforms fail to deliver. The political imperative to persist usually outweighs the moral imperative to desist. The danger of this position is clearly evident in Paul Gardner's account of the 'policing of phonics' in England in this issue. (See next article.)

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to learn from the research that has been

conducted since the implementation of the Phonics Screening Check in England. The lesson is clear. The Check is unable to deliver what it had hoped to. Australia should look elsewhere for answers to its literacy challenges. Already State Education Ministers in Australia have begun to let the federal Education Minister Birmingham know that they will not be taking up the offer of the Phonics Screening Check (Hiatt, 2017b). This may be an issue where Australia is able to overcome its intellectual cringe, and act on the research evidence rather than old colonial ties.

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The Politics and Policing of Synthetic Phonics in England and Australia

By Dr Paul D Gardner

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“One of my deepest concerns is that while education systems around the world are being reformed, many of these reforms are being driven by political and commercial interests that misunderstand how real people learn and how great schools actually work. As a result, they are damaging the prospect of countless young people.” (Ken Robinson 2015: ix)

In April 2017, England’s Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, visited Australia to promote the teaching of synthetic phonics and the introduction of the same Phonics Screening Check (PSC) that was initiated in England in 2012. He met with his Australian counterpart, Senator Simon Birmingham, who is intent on implementing the PSC in Australia. In addition to meeting with Senator Buckingham, he also met with Jennifer Buckingham, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). The significance of these meetings deserves unpacking because there cannot be many instances in which an education minister of one country travels halfway across the globe to support the singular policy initiative of his counterpart in another country. Given this level of interest, we might legitimately ask, why is such political attention being given to the privileging of synthetic phonics as the exclusive method of teaching reading? Is this an aspect of what Ken Robinson has detected as the trend of political and commercial interests to reform education towards homogenous pedagogic approaches and standardisation? (Robinson 2015: 12).

The narrative being woven in Australia is that England has found a magic formula to raise standards in reading and is benevolently sharing it. The narrative repeats Gibb’s mantra that, “overwhelming research evidence” proves synthetic phonics is the best method to teach early reading and that a Phonics Screening Check for six year olds is the best means of predicting children’s reading ability in later years. If this is the narrative, the current principal storyteller in Australia is Jennifer Buckingham and the Centre for Independent Studies. According to Jennifer Buckingham, she has recently met with “...some of the world’s best researchers...” on reading, in the UK (Buckingham 28 July 2017a). However, Buckingham does not tell us who these “experts” were. She does, however, make continual reference to the Rose Report (2006) and the Clackmannanshire study (Johnston and Watson 2005) in her articles as sources of evidence to support her arguments. Whilst all stories have their gaps, Buckingham’s narrative is one in which many of the main characters from the research world do not appear. Ellis’ (2007) and Ellis and Moss’ (2014) critiques of the Clackmannanshire study are absent. Also absent are Wyse and Styles’ (2007) and Wyse and Goswami’s (2008) critiques of the same study. Torgerson et al (2006: 10) research, conducted concurrently with the ‘Rose Inquiry’, reported that there is no significant indication that synthetic phonics improves students’ comprehension and that no form of systematic phonics is superior to another, is absent. Before continuing with the discussion, it is worth noting that following Johnston and Watson’s study, the Scottish inspectorate reported that Clackmannanshire was below average when compared with similar authorities (HMIE 2006: 4 cited in Glazzard 2017; 47). The problems persist in Clackmannanshire. Literacy levels are chronically low and ameliorative action is required. The local authority has identified the need to improve higher order thinking and critical literacy, as a means to develop “thinking readers” (Stirling and Clackmannanshire Education Service 2015: 14-15). This is another aspect of the narrative that is not being told by ardent advocates of synthetic phonics.

Obfuscation is convenient to the potency and simplicity of the argument posited by the ‘synphon’ brigade, which is - that if only all teachers taught synthetic phonics, reading standards would spiral upwards, just as they have done in England (sic) (Buckingham 2017b). The implementation of the Phonics Screening Check in England is cited as the single causal factor driving up standards. Reference is made to the increase in numbers meeting the ‘standard’ from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2016. This is treated as irrefutable evidence of success. However, as Margaret Clark (2016) has demonstrated, the reality behind the figures reveals a different truth and there has been negligible impact on Key Stage One SATs results in

reading.

To my knowledge, no-one who critiques synthetic phonics as the exclusive approach to the teaching of reading is anti-phonics. Yet, they are lambasted as if they are. The advocates of universal synthetic phonics are using 'alt.truth' techniques to marginalise their critics. They want a monopoly on 'truth' by silencing reasoned research and debate and thereby establish themselves as the 'common-sense experts' by side-lining the experts. It is reminiscent of Gove's Brexit declaration that, "people ... have had enough of experts" (Gove 2016, cited by Mance 4th June 2016).

The word 'independence' has become a key term in the lexicon of 'doublespeak'. *The Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report* (Rose 2006), was loaded in favour of synthetic phonics even before the review began. Firstly, Rose was not impartial and had long held that synthetic phonics was the best means to teach reading (Brooks 2007). Secondly, the Government's remit clearly signalled the report's conclusion. Rose was required to report on:

- What best practice should be expected in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics
- What range of provision best supports children with significant literacy difficulties and enables them to catch up with their peers, and the relationship of such targeted intervention programmes with synthetic phonics teaching. (Rose 2006: 7)

So far, I have explained how certain research evidence has been subjugated but there is a more personal retribution also at work. Until 2013, I taught English on a B.Ed course at a university in England. In 2011, the political imperative for synthetic phonics was written into the *Teachers' Standards* (DfE 2011) and Ofsted was mandated to scrutinise University Schools of Education. I recall two separate meetings with inspectors during an Ofsted inspection in 2012. The questions put to me related to no other aspect of English than synthetic phonics. Ten months later, in August 2013, I received a letter from the Vice Chancellor, informing me that I had been suspended, pending an investigation, because I had "failed" in my duty to fulfil the university's requirement to teach phonics. At the subsequent hearing I gave detailed evidence of my teaching and was exonerated and re-instated. However, I was moved from Teacher Education to another department. Anyone who attempts to reflect wider research evidence on reading and a broader perspective is simply 'policed' out of existence, or else they are ridiculed. There is now an unhealthy climate of fear in England, pervading debate on the subject of reading, which is not good for the future of our children and their teachers.

In the 'blink' of a decade in England everything had changed, and it had changed with little, or no contribution from those who had in-depth knowledge and experience of either English, or how to effectively teach it. Now that I am in Australia I have a feeling of *déjà vu*. The visit of Gibb in July, Buckingham's recent opinion pieces in Australian newspapers and the imminent report of Birmingham's 'expert panel' on how phonics checks might be implemented in Australia are all too familiar. The fact that Jennifer Buckingham chaired the 'expert panel' is indicative of how transparent and how close are the connections between the political sphere and the right-wing think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies.

Conclusion

The main research evidence cited by advocates in support of synthetic phonics as the method has been critiqued and found to be flawed. Experts in the field of literacy are marginalised by powerful bodies, who use the media to articulate unsubstantiated claims as 'truth'. In so doing, they blame teachers for not teaching literacy properly and proffer an erroneous solution in the form of the Phonics Screening Check, claiming that it has worked in England. This too is a piece of alt.truth but unless the media gives voice to the experts, the public will never know. We should all share Ken Robinson's concern that "political and commercial interests" are reforming education in ways that damage the prospects of our young people.

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