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Margaret M 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.

What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice

By Margaret M. Clark OBE

Abstract: *This article traces the development of government policy on literacy learning in England since 2006, with the requirement that synthetic phonics be the way to teach all children to read and the statutory Phonics Screening Check since 2012 be taken by all children at the end of Year 1 (about six-years-of-age). Evidence is presented challenging the claims by the government for this policy which now dominates classroom practice and the content of courses for initial teacher education in England. Successive Secretaries of State for Education and Ofsted inspectors are shown to have endorsed this policy uncritically and no attempt has been made to consult the teaching profession. Research evidence is summarised on the disturbing effect of the check on the classroom experiences of young children from as early as nursery class, and the dominance of practice in decoding, in particular, of pseudo words (20 of the 40 words on the check) as a consequence of the high percentage pass on the check required of schools by DfE and Ofsted. The voices of the children and teachers are cited based on recent research and the views of teachers and parents on the check based on an independent survey are outlined. These show the concern of many teachers and parents at the negative effect of current government policy.*

Keywords: literacy, policy, practice, politics, ideology.

Government literacy policy on learning to read in England since 2006 appears to have its origins in the Rose Report, *The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose, 2006). A critique of the report is to be found in chapter 13 of *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2016) with further evaluation in chapter 7 by Clark and chapter 8 by Greg Brooks in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a). Since 2006 my aim has been to present a balanced picture of the evidence concerning the government's mandatory policy in England that the method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics only, and since 2012 that the Phonics Screening Check be a statutory assessment taken by all children in state primary schools at the end of Year 1, when about six years of age. The check has 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) which the child is required to read out loud to the teacher. Those who fail to achieve a mark of 32 out of 40, the pass mark, are required to re-sit the check the following year. What had initially been claimed as a light touch diagnostic check has become a high stakes assessment with schools expected to raise their percentage pass year on year.

The results are scrutinised both by the government and by Ofsted. The increase in the percentage pass on the check is claimed to show that more children each year are, thanks to this policy, on their way to becoming fluent readers. I analysed these developments in Part IV of *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2014), updating this evidence in a revised edition in 2016. The School Standards Minister Nick Gibb, who has been committed to this policy since 2005, recommended to the Federal Government in Australia that it should, on the basis of its success in England, adopt synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and introduce the Phonics Screening Check into Australia. I felt that a balanced picture of the evidence from England was not being presented in Australia. In two edited books in 2017 and 2018 I presented evidence from seventeen academics in the United Kingdom, Australia, The United States, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latter two countries, with very different literacy policies, and with teachers involved in their development and implementation, ranked statistically higher than England in the recently reported findings of PIRLS 2016 (Clark, 2018).

The School Standards Minister for England Nick Gibb, immediately on publication of the PIRLS 2016 results in December 2017 made a speech at the British Library where he claimed not only that England's improvement in ranking on this assessment of ten-year-olds was the result of the phonics policy but also that children's potential had previously been stunted, not by their teachers but because of 'a dogmatic romanticism that prevented the spread of evidence-based teaching practices'. This he followed with a sweeping indictment: "Despite the evidence in favour of phonics – we faced opposition from various lobby groups: those opposed to testing, those professors of education who had built a career on teaching teachers to use the 'look and say' approach, and the teaching unions."

(Gibb, 2017)

He further stated that his case for synthetic phonics as the method for teaching reading is 'not an un-evidenced assertion' and is one 'backed up by decades of research'. Unfortunately the research he still chooses to quote is that in Clackmannanshire in Scotland whose methodology has been heavily criticised by many researchers (see chapter 14 in Clark, 2016 and chapter 2 by Glazzard, 2018). The School Standards Minister continues this theme in his recent speeches. Those who read *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a) dispassionately checking for evidence, would have found extensive research to challenge the claim that prior to recent government policy, phonics was not evident in classrooms in England and in The United States, where similar claims were made in 1990s, or indeed recently in Australia. That book contains a collection of papers by five literacy experts from the United Kingdom and Australia showing that phonics did already have a place in classroom practice. In *Reading the Evidence*, we included in the appendices, statements made by UKLA in 2014 in The United Kingdom, and a joint statement by ALEA and PETAA in Australia in 2016, both backed by extensive references (Clark, 2017a). Shortly after the publication of *Reading the Evidence*, the results of PIRLS the Progress in International Reading Study 2016, were released in December 2017. Critics claimed the results invalidated our claims in that book, as England's ranking had risen in this latest assessment of literacy of ten-year-olds when compared with the previous assessment in 2011, rising from joint 10th to joint 8th. This improved ranking, according Nick

Gibb, was caused by current policy and the phonics check which these children were the first to sit. Such claims are considered in a more recent book, *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policy, evidence and ideology with contributions from a further twelve academics* (Clark, 2018). Cautions are sounded in the report on PIRLS in drawing causal connections from this single set of data. It is also pointed out that not all countries that have an emphasis on phonics rank high. Both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rank statistically higher than England on PIRLS yet no attention has been drawn in England to what we might learn from these literacy policies which differ greatly from that in England. Readers are referred to these two edited books for evidence on the development of and effects, intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check on the literacy experiences of young children in England.

Evidence on the views of teachers on the Phonics Screening Check was to be found in the government funded research by the National Foundation for Educational Research as early 2015, covering the early years of the check before it became such a high stakes assessment. Even then teachers reported it was having effects on the classroom literacy experiences of young children, some of which concerned them (see chapter 16 of Clark, 2016, chapter 9 in Clark, 2017a). The government ignored the findings of this research although it was commissioned by DfE. In 2017 the government launched a consultation on assessment in primary schools in England in which reference is made to the Phonics Screening Check as a statutory assessment for children at the end of Year 1. There are questions on the future of other assessments, yet no questions as to the future of the phonics check, whether it should remain, and if so as a statutory assessment. I have evidence that this omission was no accident, based on the answer I received when I raised this issue at the Westminster Forum on December 7, 2017 following a presentation on the consultation.

The place of phonics testing in primary schools: the government consultation on assessment in primary schools in England

Below are extracts from an article, (Clark, 2017b) in the *Education Journal* 2017 306: 12-14 summarising the evidence I was submitting to the DfE consultation (Primary Assessment in England: Government consultation. Launch 30 March 2017.

Standards and Testing Agency. Reference STA/17/7935/e ISBN 978-1-78644-438-7). The DfE issued this consultation document on Primary Assessment in March 2017, with the 22 June as the closing date for responses. I considered the justification for the Phonics Screening Check remaining a statutory assessment in primary schools and the claim that synthetic phonics is the way to teach reading, as repeatedly claimed by the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb.

On page 10 of the consultation document reference is made to the phonics screening test as: “A light-touch, statutory screening check administered by teachers. The check assesses a pupil’s phonics decoding ability to identify pupils needing additional support...Pupils who do not meet the required standard are required to re-sit in year 2.”

Twenty questions are posed in the consultation document to which one is asked to respond. To my surprise, no questions are raised as to the future of the Phonics Screening Check, whether it should remain, and if so, as a statutory assessment. Following the consultation, it was possible that the only other assessments remaining in Year 1 might be teacher assessments. Thus, the screening check, whose reliability, validity and effect on the curriculum were not even being scrutinised, was likely to remain a statutory assessment. This pass/fail check with percentage pass within each school recorded each year, and an expectation of an increase in percentage pass each year, is far from being a light-touch diagnostic assessment as claimed. Disturbingly, it could become an even higher stakes measurement, with percentage pass an important aspect in school accountability as measured by Ofsted and the government.

No evidence-based criticisms of the status accorded by the government to synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading, or of the success of the screening test as having raised standards in anything other than the test itself have dented the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb’s faith in the policy. In the Conservative Manifesto only a few pages were devoted to primary education, yet, on page 51 reference was made to two key aspects of government policy for primary education:

“We will build on the success of the phonics screening test. We will expect every 11-year-old to know their times tables off by heart.”

This government that claims its policy is evidence-

based offers a depressing future for young children in the 21st century in primary school in England, as in their early years they will be expected to practise pseudo words, recite their tables and learn grammatical terms! Sadly, many of the youngest children will also have been recorded by the age of six as having failed the phonics check.

The following are important points to which I drew attention in Clark, 2017b:

i) The large difference in pass rate each year between the oldest and youngest children; thus, many of the youngest children, particularly boys, are labelled failures early in their school career.

ii) Not only are half the words in the phonics check pseudo words, but each year the first twelve words in the check have been pseudo words. Some of those confused by the pseudo words have been children who could already read, or children who have attempted to make these into real words. There are children, including some autistic children, who refused to attempt pseudo words, but read all the real words correctly, thus failing the check. The instructions for the check are ambiguous meaning that some teachers might stop the check without giving children who fail on pseudo words the opportunity to try the real words.

Recent developments in the phonics policy in England

The dictates from DfE and Ofsted on the place of synthetic phonics and the importance for schools of a high and increasing percentage pass on the phonics check were, I felt having a major impact on practice in schools, and institutions training teachers in England, removing the freedom of practitioners to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children. Yet the government remains committed to expenditure on further synthetic phonics initiatives, even funding a pilot study in 300 schools to consider whether the check should be repeated in Year 3 by those children who failed the phonics check in Year 2. The report of this study by NFER was not published but in a written answer Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister stated this policy would not be implemented. (NB Following a Freedom of Information

Question I did manage to obtain a copy of the report).

Until recently there was only anecdotal evidence on the effects of these developments on young children's experiences of and attitudes towards literacy. How will this greater emphasis on phonics in the early stages, the isolated nature of much of their tuition in phonics, the new emphasis on pseudo words and the phonics check influence their understanding of the nature of literacy and attitude to reading, also their parents' ideas as to how to help their young children? We need evidence from the children, including those who passed the check, any who could read but failed the check, and those required to re-sit the following year. The assumption that the needs of those who fail to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this check may still be met by a continuing focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems seems naive.

Freedom of Information Questions enabled me to estimate the large amount of money spent by government on synthetic phonics, including on commercial materials and courses. There are no records of how much has been spent by schools on commercial synthetic phonics products in attempting year on year to increase their percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check, nor how much has been spent by institutions training primary school teachers in England in meeting Ofsted's demand for a focus on synthetic phonics. From what was originally referred to as a 'light touch' assessment this has become a high stakes form of data, used by Ofsted in its judgement of a school's standing. Although the results for individual schools are not published they are available on Raiseonline, accessible to Ofsted inspectors.

At the Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar on 7 December 2017 the findings of the consultation document were reported. The answer I received to a question to the speaker confirmed my suspicion that the future of the Phonics Screening Check was not indeed scrutinised as part of the consultation. The lack of evidence as to the views of teachers and parents on the effects, intended and unintended, of the Phonics Screening Check was the reason for planning our recently completed independent survey. We felt that teachers and parents might have valuable evidence and be more concerned than their present comparative silence suggested. Our main aims were to establish whether in the view of the profession and parents what has now become a high stakes assessment does provide any valuable diagnostic information.

In their opinion is it value for money, should it remain, and if so as a statutory measure? What is the value if any, in recording the result as pass/fail and in requiring any children who fail to retake the check the following year? What is the effect of the inclusion of pseudo words in the check (which are 20 of the 40 words). It is important to consider the views of teachers and parents as to the effect the imposition of this assessment is having not only on those who fail but on children who were already reading with understanding at the time they were assessed. My attention was drawn to recent research into the effect of the check on grouping in early years classrooms in England shortly after we had completed the survey (Bradbury, 2018 and Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Here I present a summary of that and other relevant researches.

The Government insists that synthetics phonics be the mandatory only way of teaching all children in England to read. Furthermore, those who fail the check have more of the same, with the assumption that this method will in the end achieve success for all children. At a time of cuts to school budgets it seems appropriate to put the expenditure on this policy under scrutiny. I have been able to find out how much money is being spent by DfE on the phonics check, synthetic phonics materials and training courses. There is no way to establish how much money is being spent by schools to achieve a higher percentage pass each year on the check in order to be judged successful by DfE and Ofsted. However Bradbury (2018) notes that over 5,000 schools are using a commercial scheme recommended by DfE and in our recent survey we have been able to ask Head Teachers their views on such expenditure.

Comments

The NFER research in 2015 raised issues about the costs and benefits of a one-off assessment versus teachers being well-trained to monitor children's progress. What we have in England is a one-off pass/fail assessment, where the child reaches or fails to reach an arbitrary prescribed standard, an assessment that is expensive to administer, which may over-estimate the children at risk, which is not diagnostic and where funding has not been allocated for alternative methods which might have been appropriate for at least some of the children who failed the check. It should be noted that Nick Gibb was not the only person to place his faith in the government's phonics policy and the check. In spite of the evidence from the NFER

research, Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of State for Education added her voice to that of Sir Michael Wilshaw, HMCI and Nick Gibb, in claiming in The House of Commons: “We have a relentless focus on academic standards, with 120,000 more six-year-olds on track to become confident readers thanks to our focus on phonics.”

(19 October 2015: Hansard Column 680) (quoted in Clark, 2016: 144)

In 2012 Sir Michael Wilshaw stated that: “Ofsted will sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision – primary and secondary and Further Education. Ofsted will also start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education.”

(*Education*, online No 461 16 March 2012) (Quoted in Clark, 2014: 154, the first edition of *Learning to be Literate*)

With such official endorsements of phonics, not only in schools but in institutions that train primary teachers, the effect the Phonics Screening Check has had on practice in primary schools in England should come as no surprise.

Research evidence on the effects of the Phonics Screening Check between 2012 and 2018

Background: Politics and policies

In a written question in parliament on 18 July 2018, Peter Kyle asked the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that the Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching provides support for learners with dyslexia and other literacy needs. Nick Gibb’s reply followed the same lines as all his statements on literacy, yet again referring ‘to evidence-based practice in all aspects of early literacy, for all children, including systematic phonics’. He stated that the Department is currently in process of selecting English Hubs which will share effective practice with a particular focus on language and literacy teaching in reception and Key Stage 1.

He further claimed that ‘there is also evidence that structured synthetic phonics teaching, in addition to engaging with reading books, can also help pupils in reception and Key Stage 1 with dyslexia to read well’. Further he again stated that: ‘The reformed National Curriculum and the Phonics Screening Check, encourage teachers to use this method and since the

introduction of The Phonics Screening Check in 2012, 154,000 more six-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers'. Again, he cited England's slightly higher ranking in PIRLS 2016 than in 2011 as proof of the success of the government's policy, yet still ignoring the statistically higher ranking of The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with very different literacy policies, and with the involvement of professionals in the development and implementation of their literacy policies (see Clark, 2018).

Among the recommendations in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings on the Reception curriculum* published in November 2017 are the following:

All primary schools should:

- 1) make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year
- 2) ensure that when children are learning to write resources are suitable for their stage of development and that they are taught correct pencil grip and how to sit correctly at a table.

Initial teacher education providers should:

- 1) Devote a greater proportion of their training programme in the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics as the route to decoding words, and the composition of numbers, so that all newly qualified teachers are competent and confident to teach early literacy and mathematics.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-good-and-outstanding-schools>

We plan to investigate what proportion of their time is already devoted by students in training to synthetic phonics and whether Ofsted indeed does have such information.

That report has caused consternation and an outcry among early years professionals concerned that Ofsted has become the uncritical voice and enforcer of government policy. To quote Scott from her critique of Ofsted's current role: *The power of Ofsted over approaches to the teaching of Reading*:

"Not only is Ofsted inspecting uncritically in the context of government policy, it is also failing to interrogate the evidence and to challenge the ill-conceived approach that is being imposed on young children. Indeed, the pressures in schools to show achievement and progress at all costs and the fear of the effects of a weak Ofsted report are leading to counter-productive ways of working in many classrooms.

(Scott, 2018: 86). The research reported here illustrates the effects of some of the practices feared by Scott.

A further policy of The Department for Education announced on 11 April 2018 was that it plans to introduce a statutory baseline assessment in autumn 2020. This further policy means that children will be assessed by their teachers shortly after they enter reception class. According to Nick Gibb who announced this, it will be used as the baseline for measuring the progress primary schools make with their pupils...providing a fairer measure of accountability. It has been reported that the assessment will be by the teachers, will last about 20 minutes and will be recorded on a computer. It will cover communication, language, literacy and early mathematical skills, and possibly self-regulation. The National Foundation for Educational Research has been awarded the contract worth around £10 million to undertake the pilot study. Apparently, it was the only bidder as CEM and Early Excellence declined to tender. Yet these were the three assessments authorised by DfE over the period 2015-16 for which DfE reimbursed schools which used them during an earlier attempt to introduce such an assessment.

This is another example of a policy dictated by central government with a focus on accountability, which like the Phonics Screening Check (a statutory assessment since 2012), is likely to have major implications for practice in the early years. This move, like the recommendations of Bold Beginnings, the Ofsted report cited above, has been opposed by many researchers concerned about its implications for practice as well as the known unreliability of such assessments of young children (see Clark, 2017c, chapter 10 and a report by an expert panel from BERA, 2018).

Research evidence

Summarised here are the findings of three independent research studies on the impact of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practice and the views of teachers on the value of the check. The children now also have a voice. The first of these researches by the National Foundation for Educational Research was commissioned by the Department for Education over the period 2012-2015. The focus of the second research was on the views of teachers, and children who had recently sat the check. This is the only study of which I am aware to report the views of the children. This second research was

Jane Carter's Doctoral study and has not yet been published. However, she gave a paper on the children's voices at the UKLA International Conference in July 2017 and on the views of the teachers in 2018. With her permission I have drawn the summary here from the power points from these two lectures. Her Doctorate can now be downloaded from <https://people/uwe.ac.uk/Person/JaneCarter>. The third research, published in October 2017, looked at the impact of grouping practices in primary schools on children and on educational professionals. The role of private companies in defining appropriate pedagogy is also considered. One focus in that study by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was Phonics which they claim has come to have an identity separate from Reading in the early years curriculum, possibly because of the high stakes nature of the Phonics Screening Check taken by all children at the end of Year 1 in England. This appears to have led to streaming as early as in Nursery classes. Brief reference will also be made to information gathered by the author and her team during research into baseline assessment. During this research we collected information on the characteristics of children in Reception class in three primary schools in The West Midlands. It brings alive the nature of many of the classes on which current government mandatory literacy policy and the check may now be having a major impact. One might question whether pressure on their teachers to attain a high percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check should be a priority for teachers.

I had made a detailed study of the NFER research and reported the findings in Clark, 2016, chapter 16. I was, therefore, able to draw on that published source. I had also referred to the children's voices aspect of Jane Carter's research with quotations in Clark, 2017a: 92-93. Her more recent report on the views of the teachers became available in July 2018 after we had completed our survey. I have made a detailed study of the research report by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes published in October 2017 and drawn on that. Jane Carter, Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes confirm that I have fairly represented their findings.

There is evidence from these researches that many of the issues commented upon by the respondents to our survey had been raised previously, many even immediately after the introduction of the check, yet have been ignored by policy makers.

I Phonic Screening Check Evaluation, Final Report

(Walker, M., Sainsbury, M., Worth, J., Bamforth, H., and Betts, H, (2015)

This section is based on chapter 16 of Clark, 2016. In June 2012, for the first time the Phonics Screening Check was administered to all Year 1 children in England. In June 2013 a further cohort of children in Year 1 sat a similar check and those children who had failed to reach an acceptable level (32 out of 40 words correct) were required to re sit the check at the end of Year 2. The DfE commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to undertake research over the period 2012-2015 to consider the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools, on the wider literacy curriculum and on the standard of reading. An interim report was published in 2013. Clearly by this stage only some aspects of the remit could be considered. In June 2015 the final NFER Report was published (see Clark, 2016: chapter 16).

The interim report was based on case study interviews in 14 primary schools in June and July 2012; baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers. The final report draws on data over three timepoints. In 2014 there were interviews with staff in 19 primary schools, surveys of 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers immediately after the check in June 2014. Many of the findings in the final report were anticipated in the interim report. Already at that time issues were raised about the value of the check for certain types of pupils. This included not only children with special educational needs, but also high ability pupils, those already reading and those with English as an additional language.

Year 1 teachers expressed mixed views on the value of the check, although benefits were acknowledged, in confirming the results of other assessments, and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching. However, most Year 1 and Year 2 teachers reported that phonics teaching already took place daily and on average two hours per week. Around 90 per cent of schools already taught discrete phonics sessions in Reception and Years 1 and 2. Literacy coordinators were less favourably disposed to the check than teachers, feeling that the check results do not reveal anything of which teachers were unaware. Most teachers felt the check was not suitable for children with speech, language and communication needs and children with other learning difficulties. Reference was made to the pseudo words distracting some of these children and in some case

these children struggled to communicate their answers clearly (Clark, 2016: 132).

Most teachers interviewed in the case study visits to schools reported that, 'the check would have minimal, if any impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future (Clark, 2016:133).

The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvement in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the check. The most frequently reported change, already in 2014, was an increase in the pace of phonics teaching and an increased focus on pseudo words (see Clark, 2016: 135). The pattern described in these analyses suggested that a strong enthusiasm for synthetic phonics and the check amongst teachers tended to be associated with higher phonics attainment as measured by the check but not with improvement in reading and writing assessment at the end of Key Stage 1.

There was little evidence to suggest that many schools had moved towards a position whereby they were teaching systematic phonics 'first and fast', to the exclusion of other word strategies. Although most schools were committed to teaching phonics, they did not apparently see this as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

In the NFER blog in 2015 by Matt Walker, one of the authors of the report, he commented that:

In spite of these findings the government remains committed to the retention and indeed possible extension of the phonics check and related initiatives.

That research, though commissioned by DfE, appears to have been ignored by policymakers. More recent researches are still drawing attention to these same issues and in our survey many respondents commented on these same problems.

II An Illuminative evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check: listening to the voices of children and their teachers (Jane Carter)

This was the topic of Jane Carter's Doctoral research which I hope will soon be available as a publication. Jane gave a paper on the children's voices at the UKLA International Conference in 2017, and on the teachers' voices in 2018. With her permission I gave examples of comments from the children shortly after they had sat the check, based on her 2017

presentation (in Clark, 2017a: 92-93). Here I add to that evidence from her 2018 presentation at the UKLA International Conference evidence on the teachers' voices.

The children's voices to quote Jane Carter: "The group that is at the heart of the reading debate, those learning to read, have not, as yet been listened to."

I had been concerned that the views of the children on their experience of the check had not previously been explored so was pleased that Jane shared her power points with me. In her cleverly designed study, the children were the experts as they tried to explain to Beegu, a soft toy, based on the character in the children's book by Alexis Deacon how Beegu could learn to read: they were Beegu's teachers. This enabled the children, unprompted by the researcher, to talk about classroom practice including phonics, alien words and other approaches to learning to read they had experienced.

One child suggested that the purpose of books was not to read or enjoy but: 'to help you with your sounds'. Some children raised the issue of 'alien' words. Among the answers to this observation: 'they just help you with your sounds'. The children realised that in the check if a word had an alien next to it then it wasn't a real word. When asked if these words helped one child responded: 'They don't they just confuse us!'

Jane Carter stated that: 'There is widespread teaching to the test that has nothing to do with developing children as readers...and everything to do with raising test scores'. However, Carter stressed that in spite of this, in some cases the children are 'absorbing the policy voice and a passion for reading for pleasure'. Clearly the teachers were torn between raising as required the percentage pass on the check (as distinct from teaching effective phonics for reading) and providing a rich environment of literacy learning for the children. The children also recognised that many classroom practices. e.g. Treasure or Trash Words, real or not real words, were not needed. This indicated that the purpose of 'alien words; as a useful assessment tool was being misunderstood by teachers and that alien words were being taught as part of the curriculum'. In this research Jane reveals what are perhaps unintended consequences of the policy, in particular, the effect on practice in classrooms as a consequence of the current high stakes nature of the check.

The teachers' voices

Jane Carter explored the extent to which the Phonics Screening Check framed the teaching practices of being a teacher of reading. She was following up the NFER research commissioned by DfE which looked at the effects shortly after the implementation of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and of the introduction of the PSC in 2012 (Walker et al., 2015; Clark, 2016: chapter 16). Particularly interesting is what she refers to as possible 'Living contradictions' within the teachers' views and practices.

Jane Carter gathered data from a questionnaire in 2016 completed by 59 Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers. In October 2016 she conducted focus groups in seven schools to follow up ideas and issues raised in the teacher questionnaire.

Some 57 of 59 teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that teaching phonics knowledge was essential for the teaching of reading. There were interesting contradictions, however, as 25 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics should be taught fast and first before other strategies'. Yet, 51 of the 59 respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics must be taught at the same time and alongside other strategies' and all 59 agreed or strongly agreed that teaching a range of strategies to word reading was essential. Thus, many teachers while appearing to subscribe to government policy appeared to hold views that were incompatible. Most teachers claimed to have adapted their practice to government policy (22 of 24 Year 1 teachers). What is important is that these teachers did not also say this adaptation of practice was to ensure children developed as readers – teachers saw the check as unconnected to reading. Most of the teachers said they had adapted their practice in order to improve PSC scores and this rises to all, 24 Year 1 teachers. This was explored further in the focus groups where a number of teachers referred to the need because of the check to practice alien words. One teacher commented in a focus group: "It's not a good thing to have to admit we teach to the test but we have to do it."

There were some disturbing comments made by the teachers concerning the cultural context of the classroom: "It is just so mechanised." "Pounding them with sounds." "We are ramming it down their throats."

Carter stated that whatever the teacher practices some (most) children were positive about reading and teachers

showed commitment to developing children as readers who enjoyed reading and read for pleasure. However, she suggested her research should raise the following questions for policy makers:

- For the higher attaining readers (who could pass the test at an earlier age) is being prepared for the check throughout the year a backward step?
- 'First fast and only' - so when does the 'first' period end?
- Children that 'pass' – what does this really mean in terms of current and future reading?

III Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1 “A Necessary Evil”?

The Final Report of this research by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was published in October 2017 (Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G., 2017 see also Bradbury, A., 2018).

This report gives recent evidence on widespread effects of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practices in early years classrooms in England. The research which was carried out between April and June 2017 involved a nationwide survey and interviews at four case study primary schools. There were 1373 respondents to the online survey with a spread across Reception, Years 1 and 2 and some Nursery teachers. Interviews were also conducted in four primary schools in different regions of England. No Academy schools or areas which have selection were included in the study.

The survey data revealed that grouping is most common for Phonics (76%) Reading (57%) and Literacy (54%). They found that grouping for Phonics was likely to be across the year group rather than as for Literacy and Maths within the class. In the survey it was found that 58% of 118 Nursery teachers who responded used grouping for Phonics. In Reception this rose to 81%, in Year 1 it was 78%. This grouping for Phonics declined in Year 2.

It appears that phonics was seen as a distinct subject which required specific pedagogic practices, separate from Reading. The researchers suggest that this practice was influenced by the use of Phonics schemes from private companies (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes: 18). The teachers stated that: 'because the children were aware of which group they were placed in and why, this led to reduced self-esteem

and confidence' (p. 22). In the report the effect of these groupings on the mental health of the young children, an issue raised by some teachers, is discussed.

Many survey respondents commented that this practice of grouping was determined by the Senior Management. To quote: 'This language of fear and risk indicates the high stakes nature of testing in early years and Key Stage 1'. This was it is claimed 'associated with taking preparation for tests seriously'. It is suggested that only those who were in a position of strength, either through their successful results or personal professional standing felt able to challenge the orthodoxy of grouping' (p. 30). Teachers felt under pressure to use this practice to ensure their assessment results were acceptable and many written comments summed this up. It was noted that there was widespread reluctance to inform parents, showing the extent of teachers' contradictory feelings about grouping (p. 35)

Chapter 5 in the report is devoted to what is described as an 'unexpected finding' namely the role of private companies in determining schools' grouping policies, particularly Phonics Read Write Inc which was said to be the most mentioned phonics company, which appeared to influence grouping even in schools which did not buy the actual scheme. The researchers comment that this scheme recommends that pupils are grouped across the school 'in homogenous groups'. In one case study school, children were grouped for Phonics across the school, thus some Key Stage 2 children were placed with Key Stage 1 children. As the Phonics Screening Check is an important early accountability measures for schools, teachers felt that their grouping decisions for Phonics were partly determined by these targets.

To quote from the research: "Although the Phonics Screening Check is described as a 'light-touch assessment there are consequences for both schools and pupils if the expected levels are to be met,' and grouping and interventions are seen as the solution."

Furthermore, it is suggested that this leads to resources being prioritised on the basis of improving Phonics results; this it is claimed encourages the use of external schemes such as Read Write Inc. This research found evidence of resources being distributed to focus on borderline groups while leaving those guaranteed to pass and those 'hopeless cases to one side' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017: 6.2). Reference is made to different resources and staff being allocated to different

groups, for example lower groups being taught by teaching assistants. Mention is also made of adverse effects on the youngest children of the check and grouping. Specific attention is also drawn to intervention as a form of grouping, and in some schools, both grouping and interventions are in place.

In the light of their findings these researchers recommend that:

- Policy makers should examine whether the explicit and implicit support for grouping in policy documentation is appropriate, in the light of their stated aims of reducing gaps in attainment
- Policy makers should make the Phonics Screening Check non-statutory, because of the impact on grouping practices which, from age three, can have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing.

Finally, policy makers should also be aware of the frustration that teachers feel with Phonics companies undermining teachers' professional decision-making.

IV Contrasting patterns in three Reception classes

As part of a research into baseline assessment in 2015 and 2016 at Newman University which I directed, we gathered detailed information on Reception classes in three schools in the West Midlands. This was presented at a research seminar in February 2016 (Clark, 2017c chapter 10).

In a sample of only three primary schools, there were 16 different languages in the Reception classes in addition to English. In the four Reception classes 117 children were tested on baseline assessment in 2015, and for 52 English was not their first language. There was a year's difference in age between the oldest and young children; 26 children were born in September, October or November 2010, while 42 were born in June, July or August 2011. Already further children had entered these classes, for some of whom English was not their first language. Current education policy in England does not appear to acknowledge the importance of assessing how competent children are in their home language when they start primary school, including those whose first language is not English. I referred to new research by UNESCO, that 40% don't access education in a language they understand, and that, *A Review of 40 Countries* education plans found that less

than half recognised the important of teaching children in their home language, particularly in the early grades and that teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of bilingual classrooms` (*Education Journal*, 260: 12).

School 1. Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school had a nursery class. There were 59 children (24 boys and 35 girls) in two Reception classes. Three whose first language was not English had arrived since the deadline for completion of baseline assessment.

*32 of the children assessed did not have English as their first language and there were 11 different languages spoken by the children in the Reception classes.

Urdu 11, Punjabi 13, Hindi 2, Shona 1, Romanian 1, Lithuanian 1, French 1, Bulgarian 1, Swahili 1. (plus three not assessed Portuguese 1, Lithuanian 1 and Polish 1).

16 of the children assessed were born in September to November 2010 (the oldest) and 19 were born in June, July or August (the youngest).

School 2. Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 31 children (15 boys and 16 girls) in the Reception class. All these children were assessed.

*18 of children who were assessed did not have English as there first language. There were six different languages apart from English. Polish 2, French (African) 3, Tigrinyan (Eritrea) 7 Chinese 4, Estonian 1, Wolof (West African Language) 1.

Seven of the children who were assessed were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest and 11 were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

There were two looked after children in Reception class.

School 3. Early Excellence was used for assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 30 children (14 boys and 16 girls) in Reception class and all were assessed.

*There were two children whose first language was not English, one speaks Punjabi, the other Arabic.

Three children were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest) and 12 children were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

*We do not have an assessment of how fluent in English these children were. It is possible that some of these children may speak more than one other language.

The detailed information from the above research on the possible characteristics of children within even a single Reception class in primary schools in England, though collected for a different purpose, is pertinent to the current debate when taken together with the other research cited here. It brings home the reality of Reception classes in many schools in England.

In a speech on 31 July 2018 at the Resolution Foundation, Damian Hinds the Secretary of State for Education, gave his vision for boosting social mobility. He stressed the importance of the home environment but also stressed the importance of Reception class: "Most pressingly it is a persistent scandal that we have children starting school and struggling to communicate, to speak in full sentences. Right now 28% of children finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive." (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations//department-for-education>) (<https://gov.uk/government/people/damian-hinds>)

Faced with the findings of the research reported here teachers could be forgiven for questioning whether the government's current priorities for the teaching of reading in the early years as set out in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings* are indeed appropriate to bridge this gap, or are evidence-based.

The researches cited here show many unintended as well as intended consequences of the Phonics Screening Check. While some of this evidence has only recently been published it is disturbing that DfE was alerted to some of the concerns of the teaching professionals soon after the Phonics Screening Check was introduced in 2012, and, in research commissioned by DfE! The new policies noted here, including baseline assessment, may have further unintended

consequences for young children during their early years in primary schools in England. It is disappointing that so little attention is paid by government either to the warnings of professionals or to research evidence other than that which appears to support government policy.

A survey of the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017

Background

As was noted earlier, the government in England did not involve the teaching profession in the development or planning for the implementation of what is now a high stakes statutory assessment of reading, the Phonics Screening Check, or the decision to make synthetic phonics the mandated only way to teach reading to all children in state schools. The professionals have also not been consulted as to the future of the check, whether in their view it should remain statutory, become voluntary or be abolished. Schools are judged by the Department for Education and Ofsted by the percentage pass on the Phonic Screening Check with a requirement to increase the percentage pass each year. Universities involved in teacher education are required to present synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and there seems no opportunity for academics to challenge this policy in their teaching, in dialogue with the Department for Education, or even with other academics. Furthermore, the funds allocated by DfE since 2012 for literacy courses and materials, which have been substantial, are with synthetic phonics at their core.

There is little evidence that the views of teachers or parents as to the effects of the check, intended and unintended, on the literacy experiences of young children in England have been sought by the government since the early research by NFER commissioned by DfE shortly after the check was introduced in 2012. The final report by NFER was published as early as 2015. Yet, it appears that the disquiet expressed by some teachers interviewed during that research was ignored by policymakers: “the effects of the check even then on classroom practice; that the check was inappropriate for many children, those who could already read and those with speech problems among others; that the check told them little they did not

already know.”

Literacy coordinators were found to be even more critical of the check than teachers.

In the intervening years criticism of the check by teachers and even academics involved in teacher education has been muted. Their silence may be assumed by politicians to indicate that they are in support of the policy or are unconcerned. Further research has appeared since we planned our survey revealing disturbing effects on classroom practice in the early years as the check has moved from what was claimed to be ‘a light touch diagnostic assessment’ to a high stakes assessment for accountability. Attempts to achieve, as required by DfE and Ofsted, a higher percentage pass on the check each year seem in many early years classrooms in England to have led to preparation for the check dominating children’s early literacy experiences.

The aim of this independent survey, preliminary results of which were reported in July 2018, was to explore the views of Head Teachers, teachers who have been involved in administering the Phonics Screening Check and parents whose children have been assessed. The response to the survey has shown that their relative silence until now should not be taken as evidence that they are uninterested or unconcerned. Not only did busy professionals and parents complete the survey but many took time to add comments. The survey was anonymous, but we have been contacted by a number of those who completed the survey who have expressed interest to be involved in further research or to provide further information. Any further research will require us to submit a new proposal to the ethics committees and would require us to seek informed consent from anyone wishing to participate.

In the final section of this article I present an outline and summary of the survey.

Outline and summary of the report on an independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check

The preliminary report of this survey was published online on 6 July 2018. This has now been replaced by the final report: The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018. Editors Margaret M. Clark OBE,

Newman University and Jonathan Glazzard, Leeds Beckett University. This can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.

In addition to Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard the other members of the research team are Susan Atkinson of Leeds Beckett University, and John Bayley and Sue Reid of Newman University.

Outline

This was an independent survey and the results are anonymous. The aim of the survey was to enable government policy to be informed by the views of teachers and parents as to the effect of current policy on the literacy experiences of young children in primary schools in England. It was advertised nationally in England during May 2018 with links to the three survey forms, for Head Teachers who worked in schools with Year 1 classes, teachers who had assessed children, and parents whose children had been assessed on the check. Where a parent had more than one child assessed they were asked to complete the survey for the child assessed most recently.

Survey forms were returned by 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents. While not all questions were answered by all respondents, any percentages quoted here are based on responses by at least 180 Head Teachers, 1,108 teachers and 295 parents. We had responses from all regions of England and from teachers with a wide range of experience. Most of the teachers had assessed at least 40 children on the check and 56% of the Head Teachers had themselves assessed children on the check. Unfortunately, in spite of our attempts, the responses from parents were nearly all from parents whose mother tongue is English. However, many of those parents who did respond expressed concern at the effect of the check on the literacy experiences of their children., including those whose child had passed the check.

Since 6 July, when we released our preliminary report, we have studied several other researches which reveal further evidence on the effect of current policy on children's literacy experiences, as reported by their teachers, now also by children. In our final report these findings are summarised in a new chapter 2. The findings of our survey are reported in chapters 4 to 7 and the questions and answers in Appendices V

to VII. We have added to the appendices a summary of the additional data from the more complex analyses we have now undertaken. Appendix I reveals evidence that teachers have not been consulted on the future of the check. In Appendix II we indicate how much money has been spent by DfE on the check, on commercial synthetic phonics materials and training courses. We know from our survey that many primary schools have also devoted funds to commercial materials to ensure they raise their percentage pass on the check, but there is no evidence as to how much. Appendix III reports on recent developments in Australia where it appears the Phonics Screening Check may soon be introduced in some states. In chapter 3 details of the survey are reported and Appendix IV shows the information on the survey that was circulated.

Summary of the views of Head Teachers and teachers (see chapters 4, 5 and Appendices V and VI)

The percentages of Head Teachers and teachers who answered these key questions are based on at least 180 Head Teachers and 1108 teachers, those who answered these policy related questions.

1. Do you think the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have? No HT 89% T 94%.
2. Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check? No HT 71% T 75%.
3. Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1? No HT 64% T 74% Do you think it is useful to have pseudo/alien words in the check? No HT 80% T 80%.
4. Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school? HT Yes 46% (62 made comments). 48% of teachers used commercial materials and 215 made comments.
5. Do you think the phonics check should remain statutory? Yes HT 16% T 12% NB There were significant differences between the views of more and less experienced teachers (see Appendices).
6. To what extent do you agree with the government policy that the method of teaching reading in England to all children should be by synthetic phonics only? Agree HT 6% T 10% Disagree HT 62% (73 comments) T 47% (429 comments). There were significant differences with more experienced

teachers more likely not to agree.

Summary of views of parents (mainly based on 304 parents, see chapter 6 and Appendix VII)

1. Many of the parents had more than one child assessed.
2. Nearly half the parents who responded had a child assessed in 2017 by which time the percentage pass was high.
3. The check was passed by 75% of these children.
4. Eighty percent of the parents stated that their child had passed the check.
5. Of the parents who responded 80% stated that their child could already read with understanding when they sat the check and 85% that their child could already write recognisable words.
6. Many parents made comments in response to the questions, many expressing concern at the effect of the check, including those whose child had passed the check see chapter 6 and Appendix VII).

Many of these parents whose child was reading well at the time of the check or who passed the check still expressed negative attitudes to the check and the government policy. It would be valuable to have the views of a wider range of parents whose children have sat the check, including children who have speech, language and communication needs or other special educational needs and children who are new to English.

Implications

1. The views expressed by the teachers indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the check or at least making it voluntary.
2. *Most teachers do not agree with the pass/fail scoring on the check or the requirement that children who fail should re-sit the check.
3. *Most teachers (and many parents) do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo/ alien words in the check. This is apparent not only in their answers but also in their comments where they gave their reasons.
4. *The responses to this survey by the teachers and parents, in their answers and in the comments made to the key questions, suggests a degree of concern about current government literacy policy of which the government should now be aware.

5. *Concern was expressed both about the high stakes pass/fail Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement in England that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children.

*Many Head Teachers and teachers expressed negative views on both the check and current government policy. There was a significant difference when teachers were grouped by length of service with a higher percentage of the more experienced teachers likely to express negative views. Many recently qualified teachers in England may not have been alerted to the controversial nature of some of the evidence cited by the government as Teacher Education programmes may be dominated by a focus on synthetic phonics to enable them to meet Ofsted requirements (see chapter 2). This is an area for further research.

While frequently declaring their policies ‘evidence-based’, evidence which does not support current policy is ignored by politicians who dictate not only what should be taught in schools, but how it must be taught. This is backed by an accountability regime which forces teachers to adhere to these policies, even if in their professional judgement they have concerns. The constraints on the curriculum in pre- and in-service courses for teachers, and allocation of large sums of money to specified materials and courses means that recently qualified teachers may not have the knowledge or expertise to challenge government policies.

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Margaret Clark also writes about PIRLS 2016 in a short article in the next section of this issue, on page 76.