

Whose knowledge counts in Government literacy policies and at what cost?

By Professor Margaret M Clark OBE

Four articles of mine on the Government's synthetic phonics policy for teaching reading in England were published in Education Journal in 2013. In the first I analysed the evidence claimed to support synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading (March, Issue 156). In the third article I reported results from the first interim report from the NFER research commissioned by the Government (June, Issue 168).

Articles two and four were devoted to the background and results of the first and second years of the phonics check required of all children in Year 1 in schools in England in 2012 and 2013 (April, Issue 160 and October, Issue 177). In the fourth article I questioned the cost of the commercial phonics programmes and training courses for teachers that schools were encouraged to purchase with additional funding from DfE between September 2011 and October 2013. I noted that only selected programmes and training courses were available for such funding and that I was seeking details of the cost of this aspect, including a breakdown of the programmes that have been purchased. Under the Freedom of Information Act I have now secured this information which forms the first part of this article.

In the same article I noted that a new book was about to be published, with chapters about literacy policy in England and Scotland but also US, France and Germany where commercial influences seemed also to have taken control of government policies on literacy. The second part of this article is devoted to relevant parts of that 2014 publication, *Whose Knowledge Counts in Government Literacy Policies? Why expertise matters*, K. S. Goodman, R. C. Calfee and Y.M. Goodman (eds) New York: Routledge.

Part 1 Costing the synthetic phonics policy in England

Match-funding for commercial programmes and training courses on synthetic phonics

Over the period September 2011 to October 2013 DfE made match-funding available for schools that either purchased commercial materials or training courses from

`The Importance of Phonics` catalogue. The match-funding programme was managed for the Government by a group of five organisations known as Pro5; an agreed commission was included in the catalogue sale price.

1. Over that period a total of £23,593,109 match-funding was provided for schools, approximately £22 million for materials and a further £1.3 million for training courses. As the schools could only claim up to 50% of their total expenditure on the phonics materials

or training, at least a similar amount was spent by schools. Furthermore this only covers expenditure during that period and only on the materials on the list issued by the Government.

2. The claim for the commercial programmes was approximately £19 million (excluding VAT), but it was possible to obtain a breakdown by programme for only Mainstream Programmes, accounting for about

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£11 million of the match-funding for programmes. The other categories were Supplementary Resources (£3.5 million), Supplementary Resources Decodable Readers (£3.7 million), Phonics Catch-up Schemes (£501,000) and Phonics Catch-up Supplementary Resources (£108,000). The three programmes receiving the largest amount of the £11 million were Read Write Inc. (over £4 million), Phonics Bug (nearly £4 million) and Floppy Phonics (approx. £3 million). Four other programmes were listed as receiving the rest of the money. It was stated in the response

that, “schools were free to choose which products and/or training to purchase from the Catalogue independently of the Government”.

3. A breakdown of those receiving the largest amounts within the training programme of approximately £1,095,733 showed that £546,614 went to Ruth Miskin Literacy Ltd. Sounds Write Ltd received £129,734 and Ann Foster Literacy £73,654. The remaining 27 providers listed received the rest of the money.
4. Over the period September 2011 to October 2013 when match-funding was available it was claimed by 14,263 schools (233 for training only and 1,697 for training and products).

Some other costs of the phonics check

I also asked a question under the Freedom of Information Act concerning the cost of elements of the phonics check. The answers to this are as follows for 2012 and 2013 taken together:

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| • Distribution to schools including printing and collating | £458,000 |
| • Guidance products | £217,000 |
| • Item level data collection | £176,000 |
| • Main data collection and production of the statistical first release | £63,000 |

The total over the two years was noted as £914,000 plus £300,000 for the pilot. There would in addition be the cost of the NFER research commissioned by DfE.

Who were the experts consulted?

I asked for the names of those who were responsible for devising the phonics check. I was informed that as the answer to that question was “already reasonably accessible”. DfE were not required to provide it under the Freedom of Information Act. I was, however, directed to <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf2/phonics%202011%20technical%20report.pdf>

That publication is the Year 1 Phonics screening check Pilot 2011: Technical report of 131 pages. On page 11 it is stated that “the pilot framework was initially developed in conjunction with four leading phonics experts: Jenny Chew; Ruth Miskin; Rhona Stainthorp and Morag Stuart”. On page 18 the following experts are listed as involved in the independent review of the assessment framework: Alison Bailey, Bryan Byrne, Rhona Johnston, Maggie Snowling and Janet Vousden. I was informed that “the test was constructed by test development experts within STA following the pilot, including test development researchers and psychometricians, to meet the specification”.

From the detailed technical report I was not able to establish who was responsible for several of the aspects of the final check that I and others criticised. It was clear that the experts named were in favour of the use of pseudo words. However, from this detailed report it is still not clear who decided to make the first twelve words of the check all pseudo words; to inform the teachers in advance of the pass mark of 32 out of 40; to restrict the information made available (including to parents) to a pass/fail; for there to be a lack of diagnostic information from the test, and for those who scored less than 32 to retake the test the following year. I wonder whether any of these decisions would have caused concern to any of the independent experts consulted for the pilot study.

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I acknowledge the help I received from DfE and the detailed answers prepared for me under The Freedom of Information Act. Clearly these costs are only “the tip of the iceberg” as they do not take account of materials or training courses purchased before or after the match-funding initiative and other costs to the schools in administering the phonics check. There will also have been costs to institutions involved in training teachers, as they are required to give synthetic phonics a high profile in their training courses. Many will have purchased commercial programmes and/or employed synthetic phonics experts as trainers on their courses.

Part II A wider perspective on the commercialisation of literacy policies

Whose Knowledge Counts in Government Literacy Policies? Why expertise matters (Goodman et al, 2014) is in two parts: Part I The Political Realities and Part II Aspects of Literacy: the knowledge base. Part II explores many important aspects of literacy teaching, including the curriculum, text complexity, the role of children’s literature, diversity in children’s literature and the roles of

writing teachers. Part I will be the focus in this article, however, as it extends the discussion beyond what is happening in England and reveals similar concerns among professionals in other countries about who determines literacy policies and at what cost. The chapters in Part I of Goodman et al are as follows:

Kenneth Goodman: Whose Knowledge Counts? The pedagogy of the absurd (chapter 2); Patrick Shannon: Re-reading poverty; reorienting educational policy (chapter 3);

Jacques Fijalkow: Neoliberal and Neoconservative literacy education policies in contemporary France (chapter 4);

Henrietta Dombey: Flying blind: government policy on the teaching of reading in England and research on effective literacy education (chapter 5);

Sue Ellis: Whose knowledge counts, for whom, in what circumstances? The ethical constraints on who decides (chapter 6);

Renate Valtin: About the dubious role of phonological awareness in the discussion of literacy policies (chapter 7).

As chapters 5 and 6 refer directly to policy in England and in Scotland I consider these first. In chapter 5 Henrietta Dombey critiques the current coalition government policy on synthetic phonics in England discussed in my previous articles in a wider context, stressing that we are enduring a policy that is likely to be counter-productive and that:

“The challenge for the future is to change this state of affairs, by persistently calling attention to research and practice in England, and to the experiences of our colleagues elsewhere in the world.” (76)

Sue Ellis, while contrasting the position in England with that in Scotland stresses that:

“Literacy educators and researchers are finding themselves in an increasingly tangled political and legal landscape, where frameworks that help to locate what evidence really means in the context of complex interventions are extremely important.” (90)

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In chapter 4 Jacques Fijalkow points out that France has a highly centralised state system; programmes are decided in Paris and “imposed throughout the country by means of an impressive array of training and control policies” (47). He deplores the fact that those whose knowledge should count does not count.

“First, in spite of over 100 years of data collection and studies, research from the human and social

sciences..... is not valued. Second, teachers` knowledge does not count either..... Clearly there is an irony that leaves an important question unanswered. How do people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard? (65)

In chapter 7 Renate Valtin cites similar concerns in Germany where politicians prefer the advice of those who offer simplistic solutions, ignoring the wealth of research available. On page 96, for example, she questions whether there is sufficient empirical evidence on phonological awareness for it to be

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regarded as the strongest predictor of learning written language in alphabetic orthographies, and on page 99, she stresses that: "The task of segmenting words into sounds or phonemes is very difficult". She expresses concern that preschool programmes in Germany disregard linguistic and educational knowledge about emergent literacy in school. Her final comment is:

"In kindergarten, time should be devoted to oral language development and to experiences with the functions of written language by providing a rich literacy environment." (106)

I have deliberately left until last the insights from chapter 2 by Kenneth Goodman. Although part of it concerns tracing the development of the programmes holding sway in the United States and how this power developed, there are also many important points of universal concern. He states that:

"While there are still major differences among researchers, the issues that should be the ones being debated are not the ones politicians and the press are highlighting." (23)

He refers to a small group of new neo-conservatives whose mission is to control the curriculum. The following quote seems to resonate well beyond The United States:

"Their strategy is to frame the campaign as reform of a failing educational system. They chose to attack reading methodology and write into law a simplistic phonics model as a key to making public education appear to be failing. They are responsible for the emphasis on testing, the labelling of schools, and the punishments, which are designed to lead to their privatization." (26)

Part of Goodman`s chapter is devoted to the development and spread of a particular screening test, DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Literacy

Skill), a series of sub-tests each of which takes only one minute to administer. One sub-test is a test of the ability to sound out nonsense digraphs and trigraphs, the premise being that the best test of phonics is non-words where meaning doesn't get in the way of the phonics. However, Goodman claims that there is widespread agreement among reading authorities

and psychometricians that DIBELS is a very bad test, yet the test is administered three times a year and those who fail are taught the skills of the test and retested. He notes a conflict of interest as the authors of that test were sitting on committees judging applications by states for funds, and making the adoption of the test a condition of approval for state funding. He discusses the effects

of such tests on the curriculum and on teachers and reports a further worrying development.

“The story becomes even more disturbing, as not only was this test used in developing countries, but, in Senegal, according to Goodman, where the home language is French for only 2% of the pupils, they were tested in French!”

As may be seen from the information cited above, England is not the only country where evidence from research is being ignored, simplistic tests are driving the curriculum, available resources for schools are being spent on commercial products linked to the tests and schools are being ranked on the basis of such tests. In the words of Fijalkow: “How do people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard?”

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A similar test EGRA (early grade assessment) has been developed and translated into English, French, Spanish and several native languages. He claims that DIBELS showed little linguistic sophistication in its construction and that EGRA did not go beyond that. The story becomes even more disturbing, as not only was this test used in developing countries, but, in Senegal, according to Goodman, where the home language is French for only 2% of the pupils, they were tested in French!

Final comments

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