

The Phonics Screening Check: Intended and unintended effects on early years classrooms in England

By Margaret M. Clark OBE
Visiting Professor, Newman University

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. In this article I present research evidence on the increasing effect of the high stakes nature of the check on children's early experiences of reading in state schools in England.

Shortly after the publication of *Reading the Evidence* (Clark, 2017), the results of PIRLS the Progress in International Reading Study 2016, were released. 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, from joint 10th to joint 8th. This improved ranking, according to 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). 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.

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, 2017). 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. No questions were asked as to the future of the phonics check, whether it should remain, and if so as a statutory assessment. 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 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.

Until recently there has been 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? 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.

The lack of evidence as to the views of teachers and parents on the effects of the Phonics Screening Check was the reason for planning our survey. 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. 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.

Research evidence on the effects of the check: Ofsted's Report *Bold Beginnings* (2017)

What we have in England is a one-off pass/fail 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. 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. With these official endorsements the effect of this policy on practice in primary schools in England should come as no surprise.

Among the recommendations in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings on the Reception curriculum* published in November 2017 are the following: "All primary schools should:

- make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year.
- 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:

- 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 now plan to investigate what proportion of their time is already devoted by students in training as primary teachers in England to synthetic phonics and whether Ofsted indeed does have such information. The Ofsted report 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 by Jane Carter and by Alice Bradbury and Guy Russell-Holmes, the findings of which we summarize in a new chapter 2 in our final report on our independent survey illustrate the effects of some of the practices feared by Scott (see Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

Research by Jane Carter on teachers' voices (Carter, 2018)

Jane Carter explored the extent to which the Phonics Screening Check framed the teaching practices of being a teacher of reading. She refers to possible 'Living contradictions' within the teachers' views and practices. 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, most said they had adapted their practice in order to improve PSC scores with a number referring to the need because of the check to practise alien words. One teacher commented: "It's not a good thing to have to admit we teach to the test but we have to do it".

Research on grouping in the early years by Alice Bradbury and Guy Russell-Holmes (Bradbury and Russell-Holmes, 2017)

The report gives recent evidence on widespread effects of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practices in early years classrooms in England. It appears that Phonics is seen as a distinct subject which required specific pedagogic practices, separate from Reading. Many survey respondents commented that this practice of grouping is determined by Senior Management and only those who were in a position of strength, either through their successful results or personal professional standing feel able to challenge the orthodoxy of grouping. There is reference to what is described as an 'unexpected finding' namely the role of private companies in determining schools' grouping policies. As the Phonics Screening Check is an important early accountability measures for schools, teachers feel that their grouping decisions for Phonics are partly determined by these targets.

The research evidence

While some of this evidence has only recently been published it is disturbing that DfE was alerted to some of the concerns of teaching professionals soon after the Phonics Screening Check was introduced in 2012, and, in research commissioned by DfE (see Clark, 2016 chapter 16)! As was noted earlier, the government has not involved 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 not been consulted as to whether in their view it should remain statutory, become voluntary or be abolished. Furthermore, the funds allocated by DfE since 2012 for literacy courses and materials, which have been substantial, are with synthetic phonics at their core. In the final section of this article I present a summary of our recently published independent survey into the views of teachers and parents on the check and current government policy on the initial teaching of reading.

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. 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 More than half 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.

References

- Bradbury, A., and Roberts-Holmes, G. (2017) *Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1 "A Necessary Evil"?* Final Report. National Education Union and UCL Institute of Education. NEU 279/1117.
- Carter, J. (2018) *Teachers' voices: evaluating the Phonics Screening Check*. Paper delivered at the UKLA International Conference in Cardiff.
- Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice*. Revised edition. Abingdon: Routledge. (First edition 2014). Birmingham: Glendale Education).
- Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2017) *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning*. Birmingham: Glendale Education.
- Clark, M.M. (ed.) (2018) *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology*. Birmingham: Glendale Education.
- Clark, M.M. and Glazzard, J. (eds.) (2018) *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents*. Final Report September 2018. This can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.
- Ofsted (2017) *Bold Beginnings: The reception curriculum in good and outstanding schools*. DfE No.170045. assets.publishing.service.gov.uk.
- Scott, W. (2018) 'The power of Ofsted over approaches to the teaching of reading in England' In ed. M.M. Clark, *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology*. Birmingham: Glendale Education. Chapter 12.