

The phonics check three year on: an analysis of the evidence and its implications

By Professor Margaret M Clark OBE

In a series of articles in *Education Journal* in 2013-14 I analysed the evidence for one best method of teaching reading, namely systematic synthetic phonics as currently claimed by the government, and the results and implications of the phonics check required of all children at the end of Year 1 in England since 2012. Edited versions of all but the most recent article (Issue 201 June 2014) form Part IV of my new book *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (www.witleypress.co.uk).

A reminder of the background to the phonics check: In an article in the *Guardian* in May 2014 entitled 'Phonics tests show progressive teaching is doomed to failure', Nick Gibb claimed that "the check's focus on phonics was influenced by a seven year research study in Clackmannanshire... with the children in the study having a reading age on average more than three years above their actual age by the time they left primary school". This in spite of many criticisms of the methodology of that study, the fact that the intervention was not merely an infusion of synthetic phonics, and that the children's reading comprehension was only three months ahead (see Clark, M.M. *Education Journal* 97, 2006: 27-9). Furthermore, an analysis of the evidence for one best method of teaching reading does not indicate that there is indeed one best method for all children; it does support the need for systematic teaching of phonics as part of a wider programme, but not that synthetic phonics is superior to analytic phonics, nor that phonics should be the only approach. (see Clark 2014 chapter 14).



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Results of the 2014 phonics check

The Press Release from gov.uk claims on the basis of the results of the 2014 phonics check: '100,000 more pupils on track to succeed in reading via phonics'. This claim is backed by headings in various daily papers: 'Rise in children passing literacy benchmarks as phonics method pays off' (*The Guardian*, 25.9.14) 'Pupils doing better on phonics tests year in year' (*The Independent* 25.9.14).

The Statistical First Release from the Department for Education on 25.9.14 states that there has been an increase in Year 1 pupils passing the test from 58% in 2012, to 69% in 2013 and 74% in 2014, and that 88% of pupils met the expected standard by the end of Year 2. This includes those retaking the test or taking it for the first time in 2014. It is also stated that within the various groupings the proportions achieving the expected standard have increased within the last year. In previous articles I considered these aspects in some detail. Here I will focus on the new evidence and the apparent impact on the curriculum. One aspect to which I drew attention was the large difference in percentage passing between the oldest and youngest pupils, both for boys and girls (Clark, M.M. 2014: 151). This evidence was not in the published tables last year, or again this year. Yet it is a very significant finding as there is a full year's

difference between the youngest and oldest children; indeed the youngest children might have matured enough to pass the following year without specific intervention programmes. The pass rate for the oldest boys was 65% in 2012 while for the youngest it was only 44%; for girls it was 72% and 51%. In view of the very detailed tables for other aspects it is a matter of surprise that there is again this year no table with this information. I have again requested this.

Comments on the results

1. It is no surprise that year on year the results have improved in view of the evidence that schools are now more familiar with the test whose structure has remained the same; evidence that time is being spent coaching for the check by many teachers in view of the high stakes nature of the percentage pass and that the pass rate has been known. As indicated in an interim report from NFER there is now a greater focus on pseudo words, more phonetic spelling tests, parental workshops on phonics, revision sessions in preparation for the check and an increase in the phonic sessions (Clark 2014: 159-60).

2. Half the words in the phonics check are pseudo words and NFER found that teachers were practising these words in anticipation of the check. However, if at around six years of age you were expected to pass a test of reading aloud correctly 'words' such as the following, what would you believe are the critical features of written English?

vol, teg, jat, ind, tull, shog, foid, thard, quiz, back, doom, short, freed, dress, fund, think

Yet, these are some of the 40 words in the 'phonics check' sat by all children in state schools in England in 2014 at the end of Year 1. We have no information on the relative contribution of the real and pseudo words to children's final score.

3. There is no diagnostic information in the test, only a pass fail mark. In the first two years this was divulged in advance to teachers as 32 out of 40. Attention was drawn by this author and NFER to the spike in percentage pass at 32 as compared with 31 and it was noted this was unlikely to result from any characteristic of the test itself. As stated by NFER there was "a spike at the threshold of meeting the expected standard suggesting that pupils on the borderline may have been marked up" (see Clark, 2014: 167). In 2014 the pass mark was not revealed in advance, but only on 30th June, after the last testing had been completed, but presumably before all the results had been sent in from the schools. No explanation for this has been given, or as to why the mark decided in 2014 is exactly the same as the two previous years. It is interesting to note that in the Statistical First Release (page 3) reference is made to the existence of this spike in 2012 and that there is no such spike in 2014; no indication of the significance of this is made, nor the possibility that it could have rendered the results in the previous years invalid! Yet, this check is coming to dominate early years classrooms in England.

4. Synthetic phonics, first last and only, is the Government's recommended approach for beginning reading, both in schools for all children and in colleges training teachers in England. The defining feature of synthetic phonics for reading is sounding out and blending of sounds; whereas with analytic phonics the sound-symbol relationships are inferred from sets of words. Many teachers would claim that for most children some systematic teaching of phonics should form part of their instruction. However, there is neither convincing evidence that there is one best method of teaching all children to read, nor that synthetic phonics is more effective than analytic phonics. The NFER reports revealed that some teachers were not clear as to whether or not they were indeed only teaching by synthetic phonics and not clear of the difference between synthetic and analytic phonics. It would be interesting were the NFER research to include a question asking teachers to define the difference between the two types of phonics teaching. It is

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should be noted that in the document Professional Standards for Teachers under the heading: 3 Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge, one of the statements is:

‘If teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics’.

It might be interesting to know how closely any such understanding is monitored by head teachers, including whether the distinction between different types of phonics instruction is appreciated by the teachers.

5. Using the Freedom of Information Act, I established not only how much the check had cost, but that £46 million had been spent on synthetic phonics commercial materials and training for teachers, from a list of recommended materials. This was over the two year period of match-funding, with half the money spent

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by schools, the rest by government. I also established which programmes and trainers had received most of the money and found that much had gone to the person advising the government. An edited version of these articles now forms Part IV of my recently published book (Clark, 2014). *Private Eye* in reporting my findings on costs drew attention to the fact that teaching groups had expressed concern at the government adviser’s initial appointment, “given her strong interest in one particular scheme”. They were reassured by the Government.

Match funding is no longer available thus it would be difficult to find out just how much is still being spent on commercial materials and training courses on synthetic phonics by schools and colleges training teachers.

Final comment

It is disappointing how little dialogue is centring on these issues. Yet, many would question whether this initiative is value for money, providing as it does no diagnostic information and with its influence on the curriculum in the early years. A final report is still to be published by NFER of its three year research, funded by DfE. In view of the issues that its two interim reports have raised it is unfortunate that it is not due out until about May 2015.

We should surely be worried at the perception of written language, and English in particular, that this emphasis may give young children who on starting school have limited experience of the world of books? How will this impact on the many children in our schools for whom English is not their mother tongue? Of equal concern is what is being offered to children who when they entered school were already well on the way to becoming literate, even in some cases reading with understanding. While some of these latter children have indeed passed this check, there are others who have failed and been required to re-sit it the following year.

Criticisms of this one size fits all approach and the negative effect of the phonics check have so far made no impact on government policy. Any protests from teachers, teacher trainers and authors have so far been muted, and ignored by the Government.

Several recent reports have claimed that many children are not ready for school. See for example *Are you ready: Good practice in school readiness* (Ofsted. April 2014. Reference 140074) This and other similar reports have been headlined in some of the media as: ‘Half all five year olds in England are not ready for school’.

In the United Kingdom we introduce children much earlier than in most other countries to formal instruction in reading, yet do not have outstanding results. This in itself is disturbing, made all the more so if tasks such as these discussed here predominate in the literacy curriculum we offer to young children and which we lead parents to believe are how they should help their children to acquire literacy.

Clark, M. M. (2014) *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice*. Birmingham: Glendale Education. Distributed by www.witleypress.co.uk.

Ofsted (2014) *Are you ready? Good practice in school readiness*. Reference 140074.

Private Eye. (2014) ‘PHONICS-A-FRIEND’ Issue 1359. 7 February: 28.