

# Encouraging and supporting reading in primary schools in England: the next steps

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This article is based on four recent sources of information:

1. The Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar: encouraging and supporting reading – the next steps, policy options and school library provision in England (11.2.15)
2. Oral evidence from the Education Select Committee given by Nick Gibb, School Reform Minister in response to questions from the chairman Graham Stuart (4.3.15).
3. A funding initiative by DfE to schools that excel in phonics teaching to become phonics partners, deadline for submissions 6.3.15.
4. A new action plan to help improve reading standards in primary schools, announced by School Reform Minister Nick Gibb to mark World Book Day (5.3.15).

## 1. The Westminster Forum

This seminar had as its focus two main topics: the first was introduced by Lord Graham Tope, the chair of the Libraries All-Party Parliamentary Group who outlined the findings from their report published in July 2014. This was followed by examples of good practice from a number of librarians and others associated with ensuring interesting material for children of different ages. John Dougherty, children's author challenged current practices as a way of stimulating and inspiring children to read at an early age.

The second part of the seminar included a summary by Matt Walker of the interim findings of the NFER research funded by DfE evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the phonics screening check. He could only draw on evidence from the two interim reports as the final report due in May 2015 will not appear until after the General Election. Andrew Davis of Durham University also gave a critique of the phonics check (see *To read or not to read: decoding Synthetic Phonics*, Davis, 2014). As is customary in these seminars there was ample time for contributions from those attending and the proceedings were then made available online for those who attended.

*The Beating Heart of the School: Improving educational attainment through school libraries and librarians* (Report of the Libraries All Party Parliamentary group July 2014)

The APPG commissioned the report on school libraries with support from CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). The key issues considered were:

- The state of play across the UK

What is good school library provision and why is it important?

- What does a good school library look like?
- School libraries and educational achievement, the views of headteachers.

Lord Tope stated that the answer to the first question is, 'we don't know'. In Northern Ireland school library services are statutory, while in England, Wales and Scotland there is no statutory duty to provide school libraries or school library services.

The recommendations in the report are:

1. 'The Department for Education should ensure that information on school libraries and school librarians becomes part of the annual data submission from schools'.
2. 'The Minister considers examining the role that school librarians and school libraries play in supporting pupil literacy levels, enjoyment of reading, information literacy skills and access to knowledge, as well as their self-esteem, confidence, sense of safety and wellbeing in the school community.'
3. 'The Minister welcomes the demonstrable contribution school libraries make to educational attainment and embed the school library in the Ofsted inspection framework'.
4. 'The Minister ensures that the Department for Education has a member of staff acting as lead for libraries to support work for headteachers and school librarians in delivering positive outcomes for pupils'.

According to Lord Tope although they had a response from the Minister following a meeting with him there was no comment in the report on any of those four simple, modest achievable recommendations, nor he thinks has there been any such move subsequently. (see section 4).

I expressed my concern that large sums of money continue to be spent on synthetic phonics commercial programmes and the phonics check; that this approach is mandatory; that the pass rate on the check is an important criterion in Ofsted inspection, and the measure by which DfE is measuring success for its current policy. In contrast school libraries are not inspected and lacking in funding; thus a distorted view of literacy is being given. This was supported by others. I also made a plea for non-fiction and fiction books to be available to young children, to ensure they read for pleasure and information from an early age, in particular children who came to school already reading fluently who may be switched off reading by the current narrow focus.

*Evaluating the impact and the effectiveness of the phonics screening check.* Matt Walker from NFER.

Matt Walker gave a brief report on the NFER research commissioned by DfE, based on the two interim reports. The aims of the research were to explore whether issues raised in the pilot evaluation had been addressed and to identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning. He stated that the government has produced a set of criteria for high quality phonic work, presenting the key features of an effective, systematic synthetic phonics programme. This envisages phonics as 'the prime approach to decoding print, ie, 'first and fast' approach. The phonics check is now statutory and a central strand of policy implementation'.

Briefly: He stated that there is little evidence to suggest that many schools are teaching systematic synthetic phonics 'first and fast' in its purest form to the exclusion of other word reading strategies and Many teachers believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods.

Matt Walker reported that the most notable change reported by the respondents included the introduction of pseudo words and a greater focus on assessment of progress in phonics. With regard to pupil attainment, Matt Walker stated that is something that will be looked at in the final report; however, 'attainment in reading and writing more broadly appears unaffected by the schools enthusiasm, or not, for systematic synthetic phonics and the Check and by their approach to teaching phonics'.

I made a further brief statement based on my knowledge of both interim reports, referring to the concern there expressed at the validity of the check, in view of the peak in percentage number of children scoring 32 as compared with 31 (a fail) I also noted that in view of the high stakes nature of the check it would have been surprising had the percentage pass not risen year on year; however, it was dangerous to use that as evidence for improvement in standards of literacy, an aspect the NFER research had not yet been able to report on. Both Matt Walker and Andrew Davis when asked to comment agreed with the point I had made.

## 2. Oral Evidence at The Education Select Committee on 4 March 2015 - Background

The Education Select Committee invited views by 15 December 2014 on the strength of evidence base for government policies. Nine topics were listed from which the Committee would select for one off oral evidence sessions early in 2015. Three topics gained a large number of comments, namely summer born children (111), school starting age (64) and phonics (90). Only the first two of these were selected for a session, held on 4 March, where the committee questioned expert witnesses and Nick Gibb, the School Reform Minister responded.

### Evidence

Although the topic was not phonics, concern was expressed by one of the expert witnesses at the problems for some young children of too early a focus on phonics. In response to Question 92 Mr Gibb responded that 'reception classes were placing a greater emphasis on phonics..... In the three years since we introduced the phonics check we saw 58% passing that check in 2012, and now we see 74% passing the check, *which means 102,000 six-year-olds are today reading more effectively than they would have done if we had not introduced this policy*' (my italics). I sent an email to the chairman drawing attention to the high failure rate on the check of 36% in the youngest boys, even in 2014 in contrast to 19% in the oldest boys. He raised this with the Minister, who dismissed this with a claim that in some schools 100% of the children passed. He also claimed an evidence base for current policy, yet again citing the Clackmannanshire research, and dismissed this high failure rate claiming that in a number of schools there was a 100% pass rate, his ambition for all schools.

## 3. Phonics partnership grants

The Department for Education has offered a grant of £10,000 to primary schools in England to become partners 'by building a network and sharing their success with other school'. The closing date for applications was 6 March. The notice issued by Tracy Sans, Raising Standards in English Team at DfE, contained the following statement:

The results from this year's phonics screening check show that, three years on from the introduction, 100,00 more six year olds (based on 2014 cohort numbers) are now on track to become confident readers. There is sound evidence that phonics is the most effective method of teaching reading to all children.

Having seen this notice I enquired around to establish how widespread was knowledge of this initiative. Finding no headteachers who knew of it, I wrote to DfE to ask whether the initiative was going ahead. I was informed that it had been published 'on social media and other communication channels' and that DfE were offering 'grants of £10,000 in 2015-16 to enable 12-15 groups of schools, reflecting a range of school circumstances to work in partnership to develop sustainable models for raising phonics teaching'.

## 4. New action plan to inspire thousands more children to read from DfE and Nick Gibb 5.3.15 (The policy paper Reading: the next steps is available from GOV.UK).

The following is quoted from the press release (the asterisks were not in the original)

Raising reading standards in schools, so that every child has the skills necessary to succeed in life, is a key part of the government's plan for education.

The latest figures show that a record proportion of children (89%) reached the expected standard of reading at age 11 (key stage 2) demonstrating that the government's reforms are working.

However, this standard has historically been set too low. One in 5 children still leaves primary school unable to read at a standard that will ensure they are well placed to succeed at secondary school - representing thousands of pupils who are leaving primary school underprepared.

The government is determined to ensure that even more primary school pupils achieve a firm grasp of reading and are given the opportunity to experience the pleasure and enrichment that comes from the world of books. To address this, the Department for Education has today published a new plan, aimed at schools, that clearly sets out the government's ambition for reading.

'Reading: the next steps' outlines new measures, including:

- \*\*a new programme to support up to 200 primary schools, where reading attainment at key stage 2 is currently low, to set up book clubs and promote library membership, to inspire thousands more pupils to develop a love of literature
- \*\*urging all primary schools to arrange library membership for all their year 3 pupils (age 7 to 8)
- boosting the promotion of poetry in schools by funding new resources to help primary teachers to introduce poetry recitation to their pupils at an early age, as well as funding a further year's extension of the national poetry recitation competition, Poetry by Heart

On World Book Day, School Reform Minister Nick Gibb said that nothing is more important than ensuring every child can read well. Poor reading can hold people back throughout their adult lives, preventing them from achieving their full potential.

Our plan for education is focused on ensuring all children leave primary school with a good grasp of literacy and develop a love of reading.

\*This approach is working: the proportion of 6-year-olds achieving the expected standards in the phonics screening check has risen from 58% to 74% between 2012 and 2014. That is equivalent to 102,000 more children doing well.

But our ambition is to go further, to improve fluency, exposure of pupils to great literature, and to instil the habit of regular reading. The measures outlined today are designed to build on the progress made so far and help primary schools in the vital role they play in driving up literacy standards across England. The plan builds on the measures already introduced by the government to boost literacy and to get more children reading including:

- setting high expectations for every age through the new national curriculum for primary and secondary schools that came into force in September 2014
- \*strengthening the requirement in primary schools to teach children to read through systematic synthetic phonics, since evidence shows this is the most effective approach to early reading
- \*introducing a phonics screening check at age 6. The first 3 years of the check have enabled teachers to identify nearly 568,000 6-year-olds who needed extra support. The results from this year's phonics check show that since its introduction 102,000 more 6-year-olds (based on 2014 figures) are on track to become confident readers
- \*boosting the quality of phonics teaching, by providing £23.7 million in match funding to over 14,000 primary schools, enabling them to buy systematic synthetic phonics products and training
- placing a greater focus on grammar, spelling and punctuation, with a new test for 11-year-olds and a strengthened requirement in GCSEs to use accurate spelling and punctuation
- introducing a catch-up premium for year 7 pupils who have not achieved level 4 at key stage 2 in reading, worth £500 per pupil. This enables secondary schools to deliver additional support, such as individual tuition or intensive support in small groups, for those pupils that most need it.

As can be seen this action plan does acknowledge the importance of libraries and access to a wide range of books to ensure not only that children can read but that they gain pleasure from reading. However, this action plan only seems to offer support to 200 primary schools 'where reading attainment at key stage 2 is currently low', and while urging all primary schools to arrange library membership for all pupils aged 7 to 8 there seems to be no new funding for this.

### Final comments

The DfE, as can be seen from the sources cited here, and statements asterisked in the plan for action above, still:

- Cites synthetic phonics as the best method of teaching reading to all children contrary to the weight of evidence that there is no one best method for all children
- Makes claims for success in raising literacy levels based on the year on year greater percentage pass on the high stakes phonics check, in the absence of other evidence, even from the NFER research commissioned by DfE whose final report due in May 2015, which could provide evidence, is now delayed by the General Election

- Intends to `strengthen the requirement for schools to teach children to read through synthetic phonics`
- Offer further money to schools succeeding in the phonics check to work in partnership with other schools.

**In contrast:**

Apart from some funding to encourage poetry recitation, the DfE in the action plan gives only two limited references to widening young children`s experience of literacy, as may be seen from the two items marked above with a double asterisk. Money for book clubs and to encourage library membership is offered only to 200 primary schools where reading attainment is low and all primary schools are `urged` to arrange library membership for all 7 and 8 year old pupils. Lord Cope and his committee must surely be disappointed if this is the extent of the impact of their report on school libraries and its recommendations.

**The following references give the evidence base for this article:**

Clark, M. M. (2014) *Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning: an evidence based critique*. Birmingham: Glendale Education. Downloadable as an ebook or as a paperback from [www.wileypress.co.uk](http://www.wileypress.co.uk). For a summary see also:

Clark, M. M. (2015) `An Evidence-based Critique of Synthetic Phonics in Literacy Learning`. Primary First. Issue 12 Spring.



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# DOCUMENT DIGEST

## Department for Education published:

**EYFSP 2015: technical specification** on 12 March 2015. This guide must be read in conjunction with the current version of the common basic data set (CBDS). It defines common data items that schools use in MIS software and that we use in our data collections. It can be downloaded free from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eyfsp-2015-technical-specification>

**Asbestos in schools: policy review** on 12 March 2015. A review of Department for Education policy on asbestos management in schools. It can be downloaded free from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asbestos-in-schools-policy-review>

## Department for Education and Nicky Morgan MP published:

**Letter from the Education Secretary to Dr Patricia Rice** on 12 March 2015. The Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, has written to the STRB, to confirm the government's intention to accept the recommendations in the 25th STRB report, subject to the views of statutory consultees. It can be downloaded free from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-education-secretary-to-dr-patricia-rice>

## National college for Teaching and Leadership published:

**School experience programme: the school perspective** on 12 March 2015. Two schools offer their perspective on the school experience programme and how this has assisted with recruitment to their ITT places. If you're a candidate wishing to access the school experience programme, please go to the Get into Teaching website. It can be downloaded free from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-experience-programme-the-school-perspective>

## Ofsted published:

**Ofsted inspections: clarification for schools** on 11 March 2015. This document confirms facts about the requirements of Ofsted and dispels myths that can result in unnecessary workloads in schools. It can be downloaded free from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-inspections-clarification-for-schools>

# CONSULTATIONS

## Consultation Outcomes Published this week

### Young Carers' draft regulations

The government response to the consultation on draft regulations to support young carers and their families. It includes a summary of the responses we received and the list of organisations that responded to the consultation.

**Department or agency:** Department for Education

**Coverage:** England

**Document type:** Consultation paper response

**This response published:** 13 March 2014

Consultation ran from 22 December 2014 to 26 January 2015

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/young-carers-draft-regulations>