

Synthetic Phonics and Baseline Assessment under the Searchlight in 2017: are they value for money in a time of cuts?

By Margaret M Clark OBE

I Synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading in England

Good literacy is the foundation for all achievement in education and critical for everyday life. We have strengthened the curriculum focus on developing pupils' reading and writing skills and placed renewed focus on the requirement for pupils to be taught to read using systematic phonics.

Nick Gibb, Minister of State (Department for Education) 13 February 2017. Written answer to questions by Jim Cunningham MP.

Background

Since 2013 in a series of articles in *Education Journal* and elsewhere I have challenged the evidence base for claims by government ministers in England that synthetic phonics should be the method of teaching all children to read and that there is value each year in a phonics check with a pass/fail score administered to all children in Year 1 and if they fail to reach a pass mark of 32 repeated in Year 2, and even less in repeating it again in Year 3 as has been considered.

“In 2017 claims continue to be made by Nick Gibb both for synthetic phonics and for a positive effect of the phonics check on attainment. In a written answer to a question on 1 March 2017 he again claimed that “evidence shows that systematic phonics is the most effective approach to teaching young children to read”. He also claimed that the phonics check now passed by 89% of children in Year 1 has caused an improvement in the level of literacy attainment.”

In 2017 claims continue to be made by Nick Gibb both for synthetic phonics and for a positive effect of the phonics check on attainment. In a written answer to a question on 1 March 2017 he again claimed that “evidence shows that systematic phonics is the most effective approach to teaching young children to read”. He also claimed that the phonics check now passed by 89% of children in Year 1 has caused an improvement in the level of literacy attainment. Both debatable claims. I have updated my evidence on this in Part IV of the revised edition of *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2016a). I also challenged whether the phonics check had since 2012 achieved anything other than an improvement year on year in the percentage pass on that test, now a high-stakes test the results of which form an important element in Ofsted's inspection of schools and of courses of training for teachers.

My evidence came in part from the research by the National Foundation for Educational Research commissioned by DfE. My concerns about the effects of this policy on children's understanding of written language are set out briefly in *Flawed arguments for phonics* in *The Mismeasurement of Learning* (Clark

2016b downloadable from www.reclaimingschools.org). Freedom of Information Questions have enabled me to estimate the cost of the policy to DfE. In Issue 186 of *Education Journal* in January 2014 I reported on some of the expenditure on this policy and there is further information on expenditure by DfE up to 2015 in chapter 18 of Clark 2016a. I have continued to enquire as to the expenditure by DfE on synthetic phonics and will summarize this further information below.

The results of the phonics check for 2016, published in September, do show a gradual increase in the percentage pass on the phonics check over the years between 2012 and 2016, not surprising in view of the evidence from research as to how much time is being spent in preparing for what has become a high stakes test (SFR 42/2016, 29 September 2016). However, there are two disturbing aspects to which attention is not drawn by the Government. Table 5 in 2016 shows the difference in pass rate by month of birth with only 72% of the youngest children passing the check and 87% of the oldest children (only 68% of the youngest boys and 77% of the girls passed). I had to request this information in previous years, and did draw attention to its significance as being as important as the difference in percentage pass between girls and boys to which attention is frequently drawn. My further concern is that although the phonics check was expected to be a diagnostic assessment only pass/fail is reported with 32 a pass, and 31 a fail necessitating a retake of the check the following year, often with more practice with synthetic phonics. In the first two years when the pass mark was known in advance NFER pointed out that there was a disturbing peak percentage pass at 32 as compared with 31 (recorded as a failure). Although the pass mark is now not revealed to teachers in advance it has remained at 32. Figure 1, the marks distribution, shows that over the years there has continued to be a peak at 32 as compared with 31, suggesting the possibility of a less than reliable test. Taken together with the lack of evidence that there is one best method of teaching reading, namely synthetic phonics, how justified is the continuation of this policy and the ongoing expenditure with cuts affecting other aspects of education? Have this policy and the high stakes test fulfilled the claims made for them?

Four initiatives related to synthetic phonics with their costs are summarised below together with approximate costs of the phonics check to DfE. I was informed that DfE does not hold any information on the cost to schools or colleges training teachers of the initiatives related to synthetic phonics. The cost of developing the phonics check has already been reported.

Initiatives funded with synthetic phonics as their focus

1. Eight schools each received £10,000 as in 2015-16 the DfE funded 8 partnerships * to enable schools to work together to improve the quality of phonics teaching (up to March 2016) £80,000

*On a press release on about Partnership schools the names of the eight schools were given

2. External advisers in 2013 (linked to phonics check). £11,750

3. Ten Ruth Miskin Road Shows. "After a competitive tender in March 2016" DfE funded Ruth Miskin Training to deliver ten roadshows during March 2016 "to promote effective phonics teaching and early reading". £30,690

4. NFER was commissioned to undertake a pilot study in 300 schools, pilot study to consider whether children who failed the phonics check in Year 2 should be retested in Year 3. £64,606

On 1 Feb 2017, following several requests, I received a copy of the report (of the administration of the pilot study) with the comment that "there are currently no plans to publish the report" and a brief resume of the release by DfE to appear the following day. There were no recommendations for policy either in the DfE short document or in the NFER report. It has been reported that NAHT are pleased to learn that the phonics check will not be repeated in Year 3. I have so far failed to establish any written source for this, in spite of extensive enquiries.

The four initiatives listed above cost

£187,046

I have not been able so far to track any published reports on these four initiatives.

5. Match-funding for commercial synthetic phonics materials and/or training (matched by similar expenditure by schools) in 2011 to 2013.

This was claimed by over 14,000 schools DfE expenditure only: £23.7 million
(This was reported again recently by Nick Gibb.)

Through my Freedom of Information enquiries, I did establish that approximately £22 million was spent on one or other of the approved commercial programmes and a further £1.3 million on training courses and found out the names of those publishers who received payment which accounted for part of this expenditure (see page 148 in Clark 2016).

Cost of printing, distribution, collation and analysis of the results of the phonics check

NB this is DfE expenditure and does not include any costs to schools, nor does it include the development of the check.

I have now obtained updated information on the expenditure by DfE specifically on the phonics check. This covers only printing, collating, distribution of the tests and the analysis of the results. Each year since 2012 to 2016 cost has been approximately £260,000 per year, with a similar expenditure anticipated in 2017. Approximately £1.2 million

II Baseline assessment on entry to primary school

Background

In 2014 The Standards and Testing Agency claimed:

“The purpose of the reception baseline is to support the accountability framework and assess school effectiveness by providing a score for each child at the start of reception.... as the basis for an accountability measure of relative progress of a cohort of children through primary school.”

In answer to a question on 2 March 2017 on the international evidential basis on the validity and reliability of an accountability progress measure using an assessment at the start of school as a baseline .. Nick Gibb replied:

“There is evidence from The University of Durham that a baseline in reception can be used to measure progress by the end of primary school ... Baseline assessments are used in a number of countries for a wide range of purposes ...”

See *Education Journal* issue 297: 49 for the full reply and page 47 for his answer to a question on 1 March on expenditure so far on baseline assessment in 2016-17.

In a series of articles of mine and by colleagues in *Education Journal* since 2015 we have reported on research evidence that should hopefully influence government policy on baseline assessment, including well documented research on the unreliability of one off assessments of young children, the effect of the context on their apparent competence, and the poor predictive reliability of such measurements. In February 2016 at a research seminar at Newman University a series of research papers were presented. Summaries of all eight papers are available on line. No one challenged the strength of the argument against the proposed baseline assessment policy, stressing that it was not a criticism of specific providers but of the policy itself. Shortly after this it was announced, following a study commissioned by DfE, that baseline assessment would not be made a statutory requirement in 2016 because of compatibility concerns with regard to the scores on the tests from the three chosen providers. However, schools continue to be permitted to reclaim the basic costs for the use of the authorised providers, now four rather than the previous three, still in 2016, and no decision has yet been with regard to 2017. Judging by the Minister's response to recent questions it appears that this may merely have been a postponement and that an announcement may be imminent.

In a new edition of *Understanding Research in Early Education: the relevance for the future of lessons from the past*, chapter 10 provides up to date information on the issues on baseline assessments as predictors of progress. (Clark in press expected June 2017). I have set out below the expenditure by DfE so far on baseline assessment, mainly based on Freedom of Information questions.

Expenditure in Baseline Assessment by DfE since 2015

Amount refunded to schools for 2015-16

CEM £297,000; EE £2,391,000; NFER £475,000 (2015-16) Total £3,163,000
 (GL only in 2016-17 after it was added as an authorised provider £4,477. This is included in the figures from a written question on 17. February 2017 answered on 1 March by Nick Gibb. It is also stated in his answer that “further details on whether the optional baseline will be available for schools to use in the 2017/18 academic year will be provided in due course”.

Amount refunded to schools in 2016-17 expenditure to date: £745,000 and a further estimated £125,000

Approximately £870,000

Research Related costs (The results of some of these researches have been published)

NFER	£49,756
CEM	£73,667
Early Years review group	£12,131
Scottish Quality Authority to “examine the comparability from the different providers”	£192,877
Tribal Education to develop a trial of several approaches to reception baseline	£195,965

Total	£524,396

Written answer to question as to how many schools have used the various baseline measures in 2016-17 question on 2 March 2017 answer by Nick Gibb on 8 March.

Number of schools still using these commercial approved assessments in 2016-17

Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring Durham University:	913 schools
Early Excellence:	2,038 schools
GL Assessment:	33 schools
National Foundation for Educational Research:	917 schools

Concluding Comments

Following a speech by the education minister Nick Gibb on 10 September 2016 on the importance of education research I published an article in *Education Journal*, issue 281: 14-16, *An appeal for a research literate teaching profession: what could be the implications for policy?* In a further article in issue 186: 12-16 I asked: “Whose knowledge counts in Government literacy policies and at what cost?” As I stated in that article I am not asking readers to accept my analysis of research. I am pleading that teachers both in training and later are treated as professionals, encouraged to question and evaluate statements whatever their origins, whether from research or from government policy. In this latest article, I not only provide sources indicating where to find evidence to evaluate these two government policies but also information of some of the expenditure by DfE. Unfortunately, there is no way of estimating the cost to schools’ budgets of these and other policies and only in the longer term are we likely to be able to assess their effects on the education of the young children.

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