**Australia plans to adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check from England and recommend synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading: why?**

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**Background**

In the *Education Journal* 312: 20-23 I reported on the Federal Government in Australia`s response to recent international test results such as PISA, one which is arousing growing concern among many academics there who question the reliability of the evidence-base for this policy and are disturbed at its possible effect on young children`s learning environment. In this series of articles literacy experts from Australia are given a voice to articulate their disquiet. Here I am setting the scene by drawing attention to evidence of which policy makers in Australia and those advising them appear either to be unaware or choose to ignore. I will consider claims both for synthetic phonics as *the* method of teaching reading, and the results and effects of the phonics screening check since it became a statutory test for six-year-olds in England in 2012. Australia apparently intends to import the Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds from England, described by Senator Birmingham, Education Minister, somewhat erroneously, as a ` light touch assessment`, as it has now become a statutory high stakes test in England where a high percentage pass rate increasing year on year is expected of schools by both the DfE and Ofsted. Synthetic phonics is also required to be at the forefront in schools and in any course approved by Ofsted for training primary teachers in England.

Apparently in Australia the plan was first flagged in the budget last year and is reportedly expected to lead to `a shakeup in phonics teaching`. A panel nominated to design the Year 1 skills test, includes Jennifer Buckingham a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies who has published a research report setting out why in her opinion Australia should adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (2016). She claims, `There have been marked and measurable improvements in early reading achievement in England since the introduction of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in 2012 ` (p. 18). The panel is apparently considering the best way to implement the tests, including a trial and when and how often they should be conducted, rather than whether this would be the best approach to adopt. This information is taken from `Literacy and numeracy tests for Australian Year 1 students` (*The Australian* January 2017). Already synthetic phonics appears to be *the* method being advocated for teaching reading in several states including New South Wales, claimed to be an `evidence-based` policy. This information is based on a recording of a presentation by Nick Gibb, education minister in England and the advocate for this policy in England, in April 2017 in Sydney where he was introduced by Jennifer Buckingham. She said she met him when studying for her PhD. Questions were posed by teachers in the audience who appeared to accept this policy unquestioningly, expressing concern only at the lack of sufficient funds for synthetic phonics books. Nick Gibb proudly reported that in England £46 million had been spent on commercial synthetic phonics programmes over an eighteen-month period.

There have recently been statements in the media in Australia and publications by Jennifer Buckingham lauding this policy as the solution to a claimed fall in literacy standards in Australia. As far as I can ascertain no reference is being made to publications challenging these views based on the experience in England over recent years. I am only one of those who has published evidence on this topic dating back to 2012. Many of my articles are available online and Part IV of the revised edition of my book *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice,* the first edition of which won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015, is a comprehensive critique of `Synthetic Phonics and literacy learning: government policy in England 2006 to 2015`. In addition to evidence concerning the phonics check including from the NFER Research funded by DfE, there are chapters critiquing the Rose Report (frequently cited by Jennifer Buckingham), an evaluation of claims that there is one best method for teaching reading and relevant evidence from The United States (Clark, 2016a). None of these are referred to by Buckingham even in her extensive research report (Buckingham, 2016). I am not as some have suggested against phonics, but merely taking a detached position, and, pleading for a research-literate teaching profession prepared by their training to make an evaluation of evidence and permitted by government to act in their classrooms as independent professionals. This is no longer the case in England. In an article in which I appealed for a `research literate` teaching profession I stated that teachers in England are currently not only told what to do but how to do it, and that those training teachers have little freedom even to evaluate current policies (Clark, 2016b) Is Australia prepared to go down the same path?

**The phonics check in England**

**T**he Minister for Standards in England, Nick Gibb, repeatedly claims that synthetic phonics is *the* way to teach reading. He also still claims that the phonics check, a statutory test administered to all children in schools in England at the end of Year 1(around six and a half years of age) has been responsible for improvement in literacy attainment, in spite of the lack of such evidence even from the DfE funded research (Walker et al 2015, see also Clark 2016 Part IV and [www.newman.ac.uk/26june](http://www.newman.ac.uk/26june)). This test of 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) involves children saying each word correctly. Since its inception in 2012 the pass mark has been 32 with any child who does not achieve that mark listed as having failed and required to re sit the test at the end of Year 2. Rather than a `light touch` diagnostic check this has become a high stakes test for accountability with schools expected to increase their percentage pass year on year. Recently the NAHT expressed its opposition to the Phonics Check, stating that it `risks distorting learning`. There is currently a consultation by DfE on assessment in primary school and we await their response. UKLA submitted evidence, as did I, questioning the continuation of this statutory test, indicating that there is no proof that the check has been responsible for improved attainment in literacy and this high stakes measure is distorting the way that reading is being approached in the classroom as there is now pressure by the government and Ofsted not only for schools to show a high percentage pass on the check but to increase this year on year. Thus, there is a tendency in many classrooms to focus on practice of pseudo words, as these are half those in the check, and for more limited reading material to be available to the young children. Interviews with teachers and children are beginning to reveal the effect this focus is having on children`s perception of reading, and on the advice teachers give to parents on how to help their children. Evidence was presented graphically illustrating this at the recent UKLA International Conference at Strathclyde University by Jane Carter which has yet to be published, the first research to give the children a voice, something I appealed for as early as 2013.

**Is there a case for Australia to adopt the Phonics Screening Check?**

In the recent report by Jennifer Buckingham: *Focus on Phonics: Why Australia should adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check* (2016) she claims that: `Literacy levels of Australian children are persistently low by international standards` (p .3). She states that the Australian government proposed a phonics check in its May 2016 budget and Federal Minister Simon Birmingham has reiterated the government`s intention to introduce the Check in Australian schools (p. 1). She does recommend that a pilot study should be conducted before implementing the Phonics Screening Check nationally, although this appears to be to determine administrative aspects rather than to assess the value of any such measure. This reminds me of the criteria set by DfE when piloting the check in England prior to its introduction as a statutory test in 2012 (see Clark 2016 chapter 15). In her report, Buckingham repeats claims by Nick Gibb, that: `There have been marked and measurable improvements in early reading achievement in England since the introduction of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in 2012` (p. 18). It is not clear, however, on what evidence one can claim more than year on year improvement in the percentage of children passing the check. Nick Gibb, education minister, visited Sydney and delivered a speech in April 2017 where he continued to make claims for the phonics check, stating that in 2012 when the check was introduced only 58% of children passed the check and by 2016 the percentage has risen to 81% meaning that 147,000 more six-year-olds were on track to become successful readers. I realise that the decision to adopt a version of the phonics check in Australia was made by the Federal Government before this recent visit, though it is likely that his claim may have reinforced the decision.

I had been alerted to the recording of this speech prior to the recent UKLA conference at the University of Strathclyde in June 2017 and to Buckingham`s research report. There, I was approached by three Australian academics, from the universities of Sydney, Canberra and Curtin, all concerned at the prospect that the Federal Government appears to be intending to introduce the screening check from England as the solution to literacy problems in Australia. One of the academics, Paul Gardner, had prior experience of the Phonics Screening Check in England. Since then I have had further information including from Misty Adoniou of the University of Canberra, who sent me an online publication of hers dated November 2016 entitled: `A new phonics test is pointless – we shouldn`t waste precious money buying it from England`. She set out a persuasive case as to why Australia should not adopt this test as the solution to current literacy problems. She alerted me to the fact that the Federal Government provides a percentage of education funding although the state has responsibility for what happens in schools. Thus, the only way that the Federal Government can exercise power over what is taught in schools is to tie their education funding to `education initiatives`, and the phonics check could be one such initiative.

**Further evidence**

It is disturbing to find that the Federal Government in Australia is planning to spend money on adopting the Phonics Screening Check in the belief that it will make a major contribution to raising the level of literacy in Australia. This at a time when in England there is still no evidence that four years of the check, and very large expenditure on commercial synthetic phonics programmes, has resulted in other than an increase year on year in the percentage pass on the check, with no discernible improvement in literacy attainment. Furthermore, as with any innovation, or policy change, there are always unintended consequences which seem only now to be coming to be realised. See [www.reclaimingschools.org](http://www.reclaimingschools.org). There is evidence that the high stakes phonics check has resulted in time being spent in many classrooms in England practising pseudo words, and that this may also be confusing many children as to the purpose of reading. Surely time could be better spent studying the features of real written English, especially as many children are learning to read in a language that is not their mother tongue. In chapter 14 of Clark 2016 I give a critique of the claim that there is one best method of teaching reading, namely synthetic phonics; in chapters15, 16 and 17 I analyse the evidence from the phonics check. Chapter 18 entitled `Whose knowledge counts in government literacy policies: at what cost?` looks beyond England to evidence from The United States. Two further articles have come to my attention raising issues about the actual phonics check, one by Darnell, Solity and Wall (2017) who question whether the phonics check is even meeting the criteria set down for its construction; the other makes a powerful case against the inclusion of pseudo words (Gibson and England 2015), both backed by extensive research.

My attention has just been drawn to a Professorial Lecture given by Greg Brooks in The University of Sheffield on 1 October 2007 and Greg has sent me the transcript. It is particularly significant as Greg was a member of The Advisory Group for the Rose enquiry, whose report is cited in support of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading; his research is also cited. With his permission, I quote from the transcript:

Given the unclear analytic v synthetic result, it is entirely reasonable to ask why Jim Rose came out in favour of synthetic phonics. In doing so as should be clear from what I have said he went beyond the research evidence, despite Carol Torgenson having presented it to him and his Advisory Group.

In most places in the report he did stick to the word systematic, but there is that widely quoted passage where he equates systematic phonics with synthetic phonics.

To quote Brooks: `It does seem to me that the research evidence is strong enough to infer that systematic phonics ought to be taught in a broad and rich curriculum`.

The importance of the hundred key (tricky or sight) words in reading, forming as they do half the total words in written English, should be remembered, while phonics is important for speedy recognition of the ninety percent of *different* words in written English. This is often dismissed by advocates of synthetic phonics when they argue for phonics first fast and only. It is therefore worth drawing attention to chapter 9 entitled ` High frequency words: a neglected resource in learning to read` (Clark 2016a) and to a Guest Blog by an Australian academic, Anne Castles (http://readoxford.org/guest-blog-are-sight-words -unjustly-slighted). To quote from the blog:

Is sight word teaching effective? The short answer is yes.

Sight word learning does in fact generalise in various ways.

Finally, in a recent publication by Goodman, Fries and Strauss, *Reading -The Grand Illusion* (2016) the authors, a reading researcher, linguist and a neurologist, show how much more complex is the comprehension of written language than those supporting synthetic phonics would have us believe.

Language exists always in the context of its use. That is the way it has to be experienced for anyone to make sense of it (p. 146).

**References**

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