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Reading the Evidence: Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning, **edited by Margaret M Clark**

This week *Education Journal* publishes the latest article from Margaret M Clark on synthetic phonics and literacy learning. It is based on her latest book, published this week by Glendale Education, Birmingham, in which, as editor and one of the contributors, she and the other authors demonstrate through evidence that synthetic phonics is not the only way to provide literacy learning.

This article follows a series of other articles published in *Education Journal* three weeks ago which focused on moves in Australia to follow England down the road of adopting the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check the use of synthetic phonics as the preferred method of teaching literacy.

The seven academics who have authored the book all have extensive experience in the field of literacy: Greg Brooks, Margaret M Clark, Henrietta Dombey and Terry Wrigley from the UK and Misty Adoniou, Robyn Cox and Paul Gardner from Australia (Robyn and Paul had previously worked in England).

None of the authors dispute that phonics does have a place in the teaching of reading. In the book, set against a wider background of research on literacy, they evaluate the available evidence on the now mandatory policy in England of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and the statutory Phonics Screening Check.

The article that follows is an introduction to the book that explores these issues in more detail, providing the evidence that is too often absent from this debate.

In previous issues

Australia plans to adopt the Year 1 Phonics

Screening Check from England and recommend synthetic phonics as the method of teaching: why?

By Margaret M Clark OBE

Misplaced faith in phonics and the Phonics

Screening Check

By Dr Misty Adoniou

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By Dr Paul D Gardner

Published in
Education Journal
No. 313, on 26
September 2017

Reading the Evidence: Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning, edited by Margaret M Clark

By Margaret M Clark

This article by Margaret M Clark is based on extracts from the book, published online and as a paperback, October 2017, and available from Amazon, with acknowledgement to the authors. Minor changes in wording have been made only where this was needed for continuity. The statements made here are, in the book, all backed by research evidence. In many cases the evidence was already published but has been ignored by politicians in England and now in Australia.

Why this book and why now?

This book was written by seven academics all with extensive experience in the field of literacy: Greg Brooks, Margaret M Clark, Henrietta Dombey and Terry Wrigley from the UK and Misty Adoniou, Robyn Cox and Paul Gardner from Australia (Robyn and Paul had previously worked in England).

None of us dispute that phonics does have a place in the teaching of reading. Here, set against a wider background of research on literacy, we evaluate the available evidence on the now mandatory policy in England of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and the statutory Phonics Screening Check. Since 2012 this has been taken by all six-year-olds, at the end of Year 1 and again at the end of Year 2 by those who fail to reach a pass mark of 32 out of 40. This book is timely as claims are already being made in Australia for synthetic phonics to be adopted as the method of teaching reading and for importing the phonics screening check from England on the assumption that it will raise literacy levels. The Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb, made this claim on his tour of Australia in April 2017 and more recently in a speech in England on 9 September 2017 entitled, "The importance of vibrant and open debate in education" where he claimed: "Fallacious and unevidenced beliefs about reading instruction have blighted the early education of generations of children around the world" "But in recent years there has been a reading revolution in England's schools. ... This achievement is the culmination of evidence-based policy and teaching" "Unfortunately, the pernicious arguments that ignore the evidence in favour of phonics still abound ..." (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-vibrant-and-open-debate-in-education>).

Our aim in this book is to enable readers to make their own judgement as to whether the claims being made for synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading are justified and indeed whether it is true that academics are, as Nick Gibb claims, against phonics. What is in dispute is whether there is evidence of improvement in attainment in literacy to justify the mandatory adoption of this policy, the statutory phonics check, and not least, the large amount of funding which has been invested in it in England. Finally, we consider evidence of negative effects on the learning environment of young children for which this policy is responsible.

The climate in England in relation to academic freedom and literacy pedagogy changed significantly in the few years following the publication of the Rose review in 2006. In 2007, the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) held a seminar to review the detail of the Review's findings and to consider the implications for teacher educators. A question asked by Paul Gardner at that seminar now seems prophetic. What no-one in education realised in 2007 was the power and determination of policy makers to ensure their interpretation of Rose was the only possible interpretation. The UCET seminar report is a significant historic document because it may be one of the last recorded examples of the assumed professional respect attributed to teachers and the teacher educators in England. No-one predicted that their professional autonomy and their professional judgement would evaporate in subsequent directives

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and statutory requirements issued by government.

Gibb's claims that, "overwhelming research evidence" proves synthetic phonics is the best method to teach early reading and that a Phonics Screening Check for six-year-olds is the best means of predicting children's reading ability in later years, has been taken up by the Centre for Independent Studies in Australia. We might speculate on the reasons why it appears to be strongly advocating that the Australian Government impose on the nation's six-year-olds a non-diagnostic 'test' of a single reading strategy. The premise for doing so is that the Phonics Screening Check is claimed to be the single causal factor driving up reading standards in England. Reference was made in Australia to the increase in numbers meeting the 'standard' from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2016. The potency and simplicity of the argument posited is, that, if only all teachers taught synthetic phonics, reading standards would spiral upwards, just as they have done in England.

It is troubling that England appears to remain committed to its Phonics Screening Check experiment, despite little evidence of a positive return and disturbing reports of harmful teaching practices such as teaching children to read nonsense words. However, it is not unusual for governments of all persuasions to resolutely stick to signature reforms even when those reforms fail to deliver. The political imperative to persist usually outweighs the moral imperative to desist. However, it appears that the panel advising Australia's Education Minister failed to inform him of the research that was already published on the Phonics Screening Check in England.

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to learn from the research that has been conducted since the implementation of the Phonics Screening Check and mandatory synthetic phonics teaching in England. The lesson is clear. The Check, and synthetic phonics approaches are unable to deliver what was hoped. Australia should look elsewhere for answers to its literacy challenges. Already State Education Ministers in Australia have begun to let the Federal Education Minister Birmingham know that they will not be taking up the offer of the Phonics Screening Check.

When policy emerges at such a speed and the resultant changes are as far-reaching as those described here then oftentimes broad consultation might not be possible. However, it seems that at times a few people and those from a particular knowledge base are awarded this 'knowingness' mantle and are called upon to provide expert knowledge in this educational arena and in this case in the very specialised field of early literacy pedagogy.

We, as academics and leaders in the field of literacy are not routinely consulted nor allowed access to the conversations. Indeed, the Minister (in Australia) himself referred to those who "choose to continue the conversation about which is the best way to teach early literacy". The constant re-invigorating of the 'Reading Wars' serves only to keep one set of advice at the table to legitimise some 'knowledge actors' who then are able to 'legitimise ideas and practices'.

One best method for all children: what is the evidence?

The researches cited in the book support the belief that: There *is* benefit from the inclusion of phonics within the early instruction in learning to read in English, within a broad programme. There is *no* evidence to support phonics in isolation as the one best method. There is not sufficient research evidence for synthetic phonics as the required approach rather than analytic phonics.

The Rose Report and synthetic phonics teaching

We show that the research evidence for synthetic phonics was not as strong as was claimed in the Rose Report. The research was already wider ranging than that cited there and by the Coalition Government in 2010 to justify its stance on the teaching of reading through the use of synthetic phonics, first, fast and only, and the subsequent reinforcing of this policy and expenditure on it by DfE still in 2017. Now we see the claims that were made in England being uncritically accepted and influencing policy in Australia, where also the Rose Report is cited.

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The Phonics Screening Check

- This test has been vastly expensive to develop and administer.
- It may over-estimate those at risk.
- Its high-stakes position for accountability has been shown to lead to changes in classroom practice in preparation for the check.
- It is not diagnostic, and there has been no specific funding linked to the needs of individual children, other than commercial synthetic phonics programmes and training that follow the identification of children who are struggling (those scoring 31 or less rather than an arbitrary mark of 32).
- The role of the pseudo-words might be questioned as they have been shown to confuse some children who have tried to form real words of them.
- The pseudo-words have led to a dramatic and some would argue, unfortunate emphasis in many early years classrooms.
- It discriminates adversely between the youngest and oldest children.

DfE funded research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), and in the report of the research in 2015 it was reported that while changes in classroom practice were found as a consequence of the check, there was not evidence of improvements in pupils' progress that could clearly be attributed to the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check. One would expect a dramatic rise in the number of children passing the Phonics Check to be reflected in improvements in a reading comprehension test which the same children take just a year later. The data belies this, showing very little change. The results of the 2017 phonics check were released on 28 September (Department for Education SFR49/2017 *National curriculum and assessment phonic screening check in England 2017*). This was immediately followed by a claim in the *Daily Telegraph* by Nick Gibb in an article with the headline: "The final step in Britain's reading revolution." There he claims that "one of the cornerstones of education policy since 2010 has been the introduction of evidence-based reading instruction to primary schools and that: by encouraging teachers to use phonics – where pupils are taught to read by breaking down words into their component sounds - the government is getting closer to a time when all pupils are reading fluently and accurately by the age of 6." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/09/28/final-step-britains-reading-revolution>

Claims are made by the government based on the increase year on year in the percentage pass on the check. However, it is important to consider who fails and the consequences of failure. There were about 113,000 'eligible pupils' in Year 1 in State-funded schools in England born in either July or August (the youngest children in the age group). Only about 75% of these pupils met "the expected standard of phonic decoding" (that means gained a mark of 32 or more). This means that about 28,000 of these youngest children failed (or a few did not sit the check, but these figures are not shown in the table). Some of these children may have gained a mark as high as 30 or even 31, some may already be reading with fluency and understanding. Yet all will be required to re-sit the check in Year 2 and their parents will be informed of their "failure". To report in this way to the parents of these young children disturbs me, and, on the basis of an arbitrary pass mark of 32. Evidence is that these young children may well be spending time practising pseudo-words!

There is little published evidence so far on the effect on young children of failure to pass the check. Here is just one such incident as the mother still remembers it several years later and as it has been reported to me: "The mother of a young boy was given the following information orally by the teacher at a parents' meeting: 'Unfortunately, (the boy's name) has failed the check'. Angry at the tone the teacher was setting, and failing to get positive feedback, the mother responded with, (according to her), 'Surely, we should celebrate his effort, because a score of 28 is almost there!' For the rest of the year she says the child 'was bombarded with more phonics to the detriment of his reading'. The following year he did achieve a pass (with a score of 33)." Had he managed four more marks the first time he would not have been subjected to this, all to achieve five more marks a year later. It appears that this Phonics Screening Check, still being referred to in places as a "light touch diagnostic assessment", is being recommended as such to Australia. Also, it is to remain a statutory assessment for all children in England in Year 1 retaken in Year 2 by those who score a mark of less than 32.

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Some questions for readers:

- In view of the evidence, including the way this check is scored, should it be described as a diagnostic assessment?
- Is there any value in such a statutory test for all pupils at this age?
- Are there unintended consequences that are disturbing?
- Is this indeed an evidence-based policy, or has the knowledge of some of those with evidence been ignored by politicians?

Has “ideology trumped evidence” in England as Allington claimed it has done in the USA? Such policies are profoundly alienating for children as they replace the playfulness of our rich literature of picture books for young children with the stultifying conformity of unimaginative synthetic phonics course books. “Teachers who have received minimal initial education and are reliant on small doses of commercialized training while in post are sufficient to 'deliver' a packaged curriculum.” Allington describes this in a USA context, this may now apply in England and possibly soon in Australia.

The issue of child development is systematically ignored in English government policy in the current regime, other than instrumentally in terms of “school readiness” at the age of 4 or 5. There may be physiological reasons, such as the difficulties of many children around this age to focus on nearby objects such as print. We should also seriously consider the more specific point, namely that decoding at the level the grapheme and phoneme develops later than recognition of larger segments of print.

The phonics check serves no purpose for children who are already reading quite fluently: teachers can recognize this and these children should therefore not be subjected to the Phonic Check. For other children, the Phonics Check is too crude to recognize what stage of development they are at in literacy, what combination of skills they have and what might be the obstacles to overcome. Thus, a sensible screening in Year 1 would involve teachers selecting a battery of assessment tools as appropriate to the individual child. For those children who can read aloud quite fluently, using a combination of phonic decoding and recognising frequent irregular words, the teacher's attention will need to be on a growing ability to make sense of texts in a variety of genres, as well as on the range of vocabulary.

Why do we want children to learn to read?

In this context, perhaps we should consider why we want children to learn to read at all. Do we want to teach them in order to make society run more smoothly, to speed up the processing of insurance claims? Do we want them to be able to interpret more complex documents, such as White Papers? Do we want them to read works of fact and fiction that help them to think about other places, other times and other points of view? Do we want them to use the printed word to see the familiar in new ways? Do we want them to critically evaluate what they read, asking searching questions about such matters as who the text speaks for and who it excludes? In focusing teachers, children and parents on the first role (and an inadequate version of that) England's policy on the teaching of reading reduces the process of reading in the early stages to a pointless mechanical task. The policy assumes that taking on the roles of meaning makers and text users will be unproblematic once the role of code breaker is established. Yet the research cited in this book shows that the most effective schools balance their attention to word identification by simultaneously introducing children to these roles. And through these roles, effective schools and teachers engage children in the reading process – not through sugaring the pill of phonics learning with extrinsic rewards, but through showing them what reading can do for them, how it can enlarge and enhance their lives.

We are enduring a policy that is deeply counter-productive. However, when this becomes evident, when our scores on the international league tables continue to languish, it will probably be teachers rather than the policy that will be held responsible. We should not let this happen. The challenge for the future is to bring these issues into the open: to make our masters aware of the need for instruments to assess children, and the teaching of reading to reflect a more informed view of reading. All professionals should be well informed as to the approaches to the teaching of reading that have been shown to work in real classrooms, in England, and elsewhere in the world.

Reading the Evidence

Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning



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