FORUM
Volume 61, Number 3, 2019
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.3.387

Early Education in England: the power of politicians over policy and practice

MARGARET M. CLARK OBE

ABSTRACT In this article, two government education policies for primary schools in England are scrutinised, the Phonics Screening Check and Baseline Assessment, both claimed by ministers to be 'evidence based'. What has become a high-stakes test rather than a diagnostic assessment, the Phonics Screening Check, introduced in 2012, now dominates early years education in England. Pilot studies of Baseline Assessment are under way and the government's intention is to introduce this assessment for all children in state primary schools in 2020. Children are to be assessed shortly after they enter reception class and, it is claimed by ministers, this will enable the children's progress throughout primary school to be monitored. The author summarises her extensive published evidence on both policies and indicates where to locate relevant but neglected research by many others. Reference will also be made to evidence from 18 internationally recognised literacy researchers critiquing synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching reading and the Phonics Screening Check.

Introduction

Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister, continues to claim that government policy is evidence based and that the phonics policy has resulted in improvement in attainment in reading in England's primary schools. However, SATs for Key Stage 2 published on 9 July 2019 show a slight fall in reading attainment of two points from 2018 to 73% in 2019.[1] Gibb frequently cites the rising percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) each year since 2012 as evidence for the success of the policy. Such a result is not unsurprising in view of the current high-stakes nature of a school's percentage pass on the check. The other evidence to which he has referred on numerous occasions is England's improvement on the Progress in International Reading

Study (PIRLS) in 2016 where the country's 10-year-olds rose from joint tenth to joint eighth since the previous assessment in 2011. These claims citing PIRLS were made by Nick Gibb in France at the G7 meeting in July 2019 to the education ministers and as recently as 1 July 2019 in an education debate in Parliament where he was complimented by Robert Halfon, Chairman of the Education Select Committee:

> I pay tribute to the work of the Minister for School Standards. And particularly the work he has done to improve literacy in our schools which will be remembered for years to come and will have a huge influence on thousands of children across our schools. (Hansard, 1 July 2019, Volume 662)

On 5 July 2019 the Department for Education (DfE) issued a press release with the heading: '"Education must continue internationalist approach", Gibb at G7'. This meeting of education ministers in France had as its focus early years schooling and teacher training. The following quotations are from the DfE press release (www.gov.uk).

> Speaking at a G7 meeting of education ministers in France this week, Minister Gibb reaffirmed his commitment to drawing on best practice and evidence from across the world when looking to improve the education system.
>
> Many of the government's reforms introduced since 2010 have been based on world-leading successful practices identified in other countries…

Nick Gibb cited yet again the rise in England's ranking from joint tenth to joint eighth following greater emphasis on phonics in primary school in the International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2016 as evidence of the success of government policy. He also noted that in 2018 South Australia adopted the phonics screening check for Year 1 pupils.

At no time has Nick Gibb referred to lessons that England might learn from either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Both these countries ranked statistically higher than England in PIRLS, yet they take a very different approach to reading pedagogy and to collaboration with teachers. Nor does the minister reference the cautions in the reports on PIRLS against drawing causal relationships from the data, or cite possible alternative explanations for this rise in ranking (see McGrane et al, 2017, and Part II Evidence from PIRLS 2016 in Clark, 2018a).

While consulting on other aspects of assessment policy, the Department for Education has not consulted either teachers or parents as to whether they regard the PSC as providing valuable information, or about whether the PSC should remain statutory (see Appendix I in Clark & Glazzard, 2018). Yet there is now considerable research evidence that preparation for the check is increasingly prevalent in the early years in primary schools, with frequent

practice of pseudo words (which form half the words in the check) and even setting for phonics teaching (see Clark [2019, pp. 23-24] for a summary of the research by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

In 2012 Sir Michael Wilshaw, then Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, stated that Ofsted would start a series of unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education, and that Ofsted would sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision (see Clark, 2016, p. 127). Thus, government policy is likely to be prioritised in courses of initial teacher education in England. Together with colleagues I am currently investigating the extent of this likely effect, by means of an independent survey of courses for initial teacher education in England. The survey had 33 responses from institutions across England. It was completed in April 2019 and interviews are currently being undertaken with those who expressed a willingness to contribute to the research. We hope to publish the results of this survey later in 2019.

Baseline Assessment is being piloted in primary schools in England and will shortly be introduced. It will see children being assessed soon after they enter reception class, as a means to monitor their progress through primary school. In the final section of this article, I will summarise the considerable research evidence as to the unreliability of such measures in predicting the performance of young children even under a much shorter timescale than that proposed by the government.

Literacy Learning in the Twenty-First Century: what the focus on decoding neglects

In my article in *FORUM* 59(3) (Clark, 2017a) I stressed how important it is that teaching initial literacy should commence with an analysis of the skills and knowledge that young children bring to the learning situation when they start school. Brought up in a print-filled environment, some children are already on their way to appreciating that written language is a meaningful communication. I drew attention in my article to features of written English that should influence our approach. English is not a language in which there is a one-to-one visual correspondence between the sounds we speak and the way these are represented in written language. From my own research and that of many others I cited insights that should influence policy and practice. Yet many politicians ignore such evidence and misrepresent or even ridicule academics who challenge their policies. I drew attention to the dominance of synthetic phonics and (since 2012) of the statutory PSC, taken by all children at the end of Year 1, at around six years of age. Any child who fails to read correctly at least 32 out of 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) must resit the check the following year, even those who can already read with understanding.

Decoding is now stressed as *the* way to teach reading by the government and by Ofsted, including in reception classes (see Ofsted, 2017; Scott, 2018). The current need for schools to achieve a high percentage pass in the PSC has

had a major impact on classrooms in the early years. By contrast, little pedagogical attention is paid to high-frequency words and their value for young children learning to read:

- relatively few words account for a high proportion of the *total* words in written as well as spoken English;
- some of the common words are not phonically regular;
- few of the most frequent words have meaning in isolation: most take their meaning from the words around them;
- they are not easily represented pictorially; as few are either nouns or verbs, these are much more likely to be influenced by the context (see chapter 9 in Clark, 2016).

In spite of the wealth of research evidence about the importance of story reading by parents in interaction with their preschool children, and by teachers in the early years in school, the reading of stories has also received little attention within a curriculum dominated by decoding. As long ago as the 1960s I published evidence from research by Bill Donachy on the effects of such interactions firstly on children themselves, but also on parents, whose self-esteem rose as they came to appreciate their contribution to their child's literacy, and on teachers, whose attitude to these parents was more positive (see Clark, 2017b, p. 52). More recently, attention to the importance of shared reading of stories appears in the report on PIRLS (McGrane et al, 2017). A few small projects currently do involve parents sharing books and stories with their young children, supported by local libraries. To obtain funding for such projects is difficult, in contrast to those projects involving synthetic phonics. Sadly, in England school libraries are not mandatory and so are not inspected by Ofsted. School libraries are especially vulnerable during a time of cuts in school funding.

I acknowledge that while high-frequency words account for about half the *total words in written English,* in order to read it is essential to be able to recognise speedily also the words that appear much less frequently. These words account for over 90% of the *different words* in written language. Children, if they are to read with understanding, need to develop strategies for speedy recognition of words they have not met before. Thus, like most academics, I do not deny the importance of phonics in learning to read. However, the evidence is that this approach is better practised within context rather than in isolation. Time spent decoding words in isolation, or as in many schools in England on practising pseudo words to enable schools to achieve a high percentage pass on the PSC, would be better spent studying the features of real written English.

Ideology Rather than Consultation

Synthetic phonics 'first, fast and only' is not the evidence-based policy claimed by the government. The frequently repeated claim that there is research to support the policy that synthetic phonics should be mandated as the only way

to teach all children to read does not stand up to scrutiny, nor does the insistence that decoding be prioritised in the initial stages of teaching children to read. The claims that there is evidence that this policy and the PSC have improved attainment in literacy do not stand up either. In this section I will critique the claimed research evidence for mandating synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading. I will also analyse whether there is evidence that the PSC and related policy have indeed been responsible for an improvement in literacy attainment. I will finally draw attention to research revealing possibly unintended consequences of the PSC on early years classrooms in England from nursery to Year 2.

In written answers to questions and in his speeches School Standards Minister Nick Gibb repeatedly claims both that current policy is 'evidence based' and that it has improved the standard of reading in English primary schools. For example, in 2018 he claimed that: 'since 2010 the government has focused relentlessly on ensuring teachers use evidence-based systematic phonics programmes resulting in the success of literacy teaching in primary schools' (see Clark, 2019).

Teachers and parents have not been consulted by the government as to whether they regard the PSC as providing valuable information and whether it should remain statutory (See Clark & Glazzard, Appendix I, 2018). Our independent survey was completed by 230 head teachers, 1348 teachers and 419 parents.[2] Headline results are as follows:

- 160 of the head teachers and 94% of the teachers do not believe the check provides them with information they do not already have on individual children;
- 127 of the head teachers and 75% of the teachers do not think pass/fail should be recorded;
- 144 of the head teachers and 80% of the teachers do not think the alien/pseudo words are useful;
- 152 head teachers think the check should not remain statutory and 68% of the teachers think it should be discontinued;
- most head teachers and teachers felt that the check had affected the way they teach reading;
- most parents reported that they had been asked to prepare their children for the check;
- most of those parents who took part in the survey had children who had passed the check, yet most of the parents thought the check should be discontinued;
- many parents expressed negative attitudes to the government policy and the check, making comments as to its adverse effect on their children's learning experiences in school and their reading.

Both the summary of the findings of the survey and of the research evidence on the government's phonics policy have been sent to the Secretary of State for Education, to Nick Gibb and to members of the Education Select Committee,

together with copies of the report of the survey. Surely it is time for government to undertake a consultation on the future of their phonics policy and the PSC?

The emphasis on synthetic phonics as the way to teach all children to read in England came to the fore with the publication of the Rose Report in 2006 (Rose, 2006). The claims made for synthetic phonics in that report, and since, have been criticised in a number of publications, most recently by Greg Brooks (2017; see also Clark, 2016, 2017c; Torgerson et al, 2006, 2019).

Until recently the research cited by Nick Gibb in support of the synthetic phonics policy for initial teaching of reading was that conducted in Clackmannanshire in Scotland around 2005 and this is still cited also by Ofsted. Clackmannanshire is a small rural county in Scotland with 18 primary schools. When considering this study it is important to note that:

- the research cited was conducted in 2005;
- its methodology has been seriously criticised (see, for example, Ellis & Moss, 2014);
- as early as 2006 a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Scotland expressed concern at low standards of literacy in Clackmannanshire and in 2016 Clackmannanshire commissioned an independent enquiry which produced a damning report on literacy standards, as a consequence of which the county now has in place a policy to improve the county's standards of literacy.

In an interview in 2018 Nick Gibb added a reference to research conducted earlier in the USA by the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000). Readers are referred to an edited book by Allington (2002) which includes a critical appraisal of the phonics aspect of the National Reading Panel Research by members of the panel who raised concerns about claims made in and for that report. Part I of the book is entitled: 'Unreliable Evidence…' and Part II, 'Politics, Policies and Profits: the political context of the National Reports'. In Clark (2016) you will find quotations from that book. A summary of the evidence is available in Clark (2019, pp. 11-12). To quote Allington:

> The push for evidence-based reading instruction is but a thinly disguised ideological push for a national reading methodology, for reading that meets the 'phonics first' emphasis of the Republican Party platform and the direct-instruction entrepreneurs, those who profit financially when federal and state governments mandate the use of curricular materials like the ones they produce. (Allington, 2002, p. 265)

PIRLS 2016: 'a vindication of the government's boldness'?

In *Teaching Initial Literacy: policies, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018a), 'Part II Evidence from PIRLS 2016' has four chapters on PIRLS. These include summaries of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland policies. Both of these countries rank statistically higher than England. The Republic of Ireland

ranked fourth. Only two countries significantly outperformed Northern Ireland. To quote Sharon McMurray, this showed:

> [t]he importance of a highly skilled teaching profession who have the competence and confidence to exercise professional judgement in the work that they do and have the theoretical and practical knowledge which underpins sound decision making. (McMurray, 2018, p. 51)

Yet according to Nick Gibb in 2017:

> [The PIRLS results for England] are a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism and they are a reminder of the damage that can be caused when dogma flies in the face of evidence.

(This and other similar quotations are to be found in Clark, 2018a, p. 31.)

The School Standards Minister predicted there will be an even higher performance in five years with the full implementation of the phonics policy and a rise in percentage pass on the PSC year on year. There is a possibility that the effect may not be as he predicts. Furthermore, there are many other literacy initiatives currently which might be entitled to some credit should reading attainment indeed improve.

A careful study of the reports on PIRLS would suggest a much more cautious conclusion than that the rise in performance of England is the result of the PSC introduced in 2012 (McGrane et al, 2017). The children who sat PIRLS in 2016 were indeed the first to have sat the PSC. However, according to the international report, 'good readers had an early start in literacy learning' and students whose parents engaged them in early literacy activities had higher reading achievement than students whose parents engaged them less frequently in early literacy experiences (Clark, 2018a, p. 35). Unfortunately, as England was one of only two countries of 50 participating which declined to administer the parental questionnaire, we have no way of knowing the influence of the parents on both the children's results on the PSC and PIRLS. The USA was the other country not to administer the parental questionnaire (see Clark [2019, pp. 31-34] for explanations given for not including this element). Questionnaires were completed in England, as in the other countries, by head teachers and teachers. Head teachers in England were more likely to believe that parental expectations for pupil achievement are 'low or very low', a much higher percentage than the international median (Clark, 2019, p. 33). However, in the absence of data from the parents we have no way of assessing the accuracy of this perception.

As recruitment and retention of primary school teachers is currently a problem in England and some other countries, further lessons might have been learnt from the PIRLS reports had politicians, or at least their advisers, studied the actual documents (McGrane et al, 2017). For example, in the Republic of Ireland teaching is regarded as a highly valued and respected career. The

literacy policy, the way it was developed, and the autonomy granted to teachers may have contributed not only to their high ranking in international studies, but also to the high regard for the profession and the career satisfaction of the teachers. Their respect for the contribution of their homes to the early literacy development of the children was also apparent (Shiel & Kennedy, 2018). The insights I gained from a study of these reports were first summarised in an article in November 2018 and are now reprinted in Clark (2019).

The Future of the Phonics Screening Check

Until recently the Standards and Testing Agency has been responsible for the PSC and when I sent my evidence to the DfE the unsigned letter I received in reply was from a member of the team working there, with no attempt to respond to my evidence. In the letter I was informed that a public consultation on the PSC had taken place. I already knew that consultation took place in 2011, and even at that stage before the PSC was introduced in 2012, concern had been expressed. No subsequent consultation has taken place. On 26 July I discovered that responsibility for the PSC is now being transferred to Capita and there is planned expenditure on the PSC until at least 2024. Capita was awarded £109 million in July 2018 to deliver the Key Stage 1 tests, the Key Stage 2 tests and the PSC from 2020 to 2024.

However, it is claimed that there are 'Significant weaknesses in DfE oversight of SATS'.[3] The Capita website states that Capita has been selected by the DfE Standards and Testing Agency to manage the administration, processing and support for all primary national curriculum assessment tests in England. This is a six-year contract starting in September 2019. 'The award of this contract will see STA moving to a single-supplier model to oversee the delivery of NCA test operations.' This involves the printing, distribution and collation of over 9 million test papers annually [4].

In view of the evidence presented here it seems important to call for a consultation on the future of the PSC involving parents and teachers rather than allow this expenditure to continue unchallenged.

Reception Baseline Assessment: another case of research ignored

To turn now to the Reception Baseline Assessment proposals. The DfE announced its intention from 2016 to require all children in reception class in England to be tested on a baseline assessment, conducted in English, and within six weeks of starting school. The assessment was to use one of three commercial baseline assessments identified by the Department. A single score from one of these measures was to be used to calculate how much progress the child made by the end of primary school when compared with others of the same starting point, and, to hold schools accountable.

On 24 February 2016, 60 researchers, teachers and policy makers attended a research seminar at Newman University to discuss recent work in this area. The research evidence against the proposed baseline assessment policy was powerful. (It was stressed that this was not a criticism of specific providers but of the policy itself.) Guy Roberts-Holmes reported on a nationwide survey (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2016) and stated that:

> For many teachers baseline assessment has had a negative impact on their working lives without benefiting the children they teach. Teachers and headteachers see all three baseline providers as inaccurate, unreliable and lacking in validity and hence in its ability to accurately measure 'value added' by schools.

At that seminar I reported on our research in Birmingham. We had information on the children's scores on the baseline assessments used, but also on the children's sex, date of birth, whether they attended the school's nursery class, and if so, whether they were assessed by the teacher of that class. We noted whether English was the child's mother tongue, and if it was not, which languages the child spoke. In three schools, 117 children were assessed in four reception classes; 52 children spoke at least one other language than English and 16 different languages were spoken by children. Clearly, many variables influenced the scores the children achieved on the baseline assessment. Yet the government's proposal was to test all children in English and no account was to be taken of the children's age and previous experience at the time they were tested.

In March 2016 it was announced that the policy would not be implemented that year as it had become clear that the scores from the three different measures could not be compared, something which should have been clear at the outset. However, schools were still encouraged to sign up with approved providers and the DfE would still cover the basic cost of approved baselines. I reported some of the expenditure on baseline assessment in 2015-16, which included £3,163,000 refunded to schools which chose to use the recommended baseline measures, and at least a further £524,396 on related research.

In a written answer to a question as to how many schools had used the various baseline measures in 2016-17 Nick Gibb responded:

Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring Durham University: 913 schools
Early Excellence: 2,038 schools
GL Assessment (which was added later to the list): 33 schools
National Foundation for Educational Research: 917 schools

Nevertheless, in April 2016 the DfE stated that it was still committed to assessment in Reception and as is stated above, the National Foundation for Educational Research is now commissioned to prepare materials.

This was not the first attempt to introduce baseline assessment. In the third edition of *Understanding Research in Early Education* (Clark, 2017c) I devoted a new chapter 10 to 'Baseline and Readiness Assessment of Young Children on Starting Primary School'. There I drew attention to the unreliability of assessments of young children by a strange adult as shown by many classical research studies from as early as the 1970s. I also referred to more recent research. Six of my articles published in the research section of the *Education Journal* between 2015 and 2017, from which I have drawn the above summary, were reprinted in the *Education Journal* Special Issue 1 on 24 October 2018 (Clark, 2018b).

In due course, on 11 April 2018, it was announced that:

> the government plans to introduce a statutory reception baseline assessment in autumn 2020… Schools will administer this assessment soon after pupils enter reception. This assessment will last 20 minutes and teachers will record the results.
>
> We will use it as a baseline for measuring the progress primary schools make with their pupils. (www.gov.uk)

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), the preferred bidder, is currently piloting the Baseline Assessment in preparation for its introduction in 2020.[5]

On 23 July 2019 *The Guardian*, reporting on the trialling process, noted that parents have no legal right to know that their child is being tested. According to the Department for Education (DfE) it is up to the discretion of the individual schools whether to inform them. In the first six weeks of the new school year, four-and five-year-olds in nearly 10,000 schools, about half the primary schools in England, will be taken out of class and asked questions for the new baseline assessment (RBA) ... but most parents will be unaware what is happening ... and 'families opposed to the tests are going to the high court in London to try to stop them, claiming they will cause distress and damage children's future learning'. They are asking the judge to allow a judicial review of the government's decision to pilot the tests in September before introducing them across England in 2020.[6]

On 4 July 2018 a report was published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) entitled *A Baseline without Basis: the validity and utility of the proposed reception baseline in England.* The report sets out the case against the government's proposal to use a baseline assessment of pupils in Reception to hold schools in England to account for the progress their pupils have made by the end of Key Stage 2 (Moss et al, 2018).

The government's proposal to impose a single baseline assessment, shortly after children enter reception class, as the basis for judging the competence of young children on entry to primary school and as an accountability measure, is a further disturbing (and expensive) example of policy making in which research evidence has been ignored. Taken together, the published research by Wrigley and Wormwell (2016), Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016), and

Moss et al (2018), among many others, and the evidence reprinted in Clark (2019), makes a powerful case against this particular policy.

A one-off assessment of young children aged around four or five years and conducted shortly after they enter reception class will be neither a valid nor a reliable predictor of their progress through primary school. Many variables will affect the result on the day of assessment, making it an inappropriate way to measure either children's progress or the 'value' added by the primary school. Only a limited number of children even complete their primary education in the same school in whose reception class they started. Researchers have drawn attention to these issues during previous trials, and have been ignored by government. The BERA Report offers a summary (Moss et al, 2018). Baseline assessment results will be affected by the following:

- how familiar the child is with the setting in which the assessment takes place and how well they know the adult who makes the assessment;
- whether the young child is accustomed to such question and answer contexts with adults;
- the precise nature of the tasks and type of responses expected;
- whether or not the assessment is in the children's home language, or a language in which they are fluent;
- the child's sex and precise age at the time of the assessment.

To what extent the proposed baseline assessment, planned to commence in 2020,will take account of these variables is not clear.[7] Given the government's track record of ignoring research evidence which exposes its policy failings, we cannot be optimistic it will be any different on this occasion. This assessment has already cost a great deal of money to develop and will, it appears, continue to be a burden on education funding.

Notes

[1] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-assessments-key-stage-2-2019

[2] The full survey report edited by myself and Jonathan Glazzard, together with my recently reprinted articles, can be accessed on: https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017. See also Clark, 2019, pp. 11-12.

[3] See: https://schoolsimprovement.net/significan-weaknesses-in-the-oversight-of-sats

[4] See: https://capita.com

[5] See: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reception-baseline-assessment

[6] See: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/23/testing-four-year-olds-begins-september-parents-in-dark-schools

[7] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-schools-to-pilot-new-reception-class-check-up

References

Allington, R.L. (Ed.) (2002) *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum: how ideology trumped evidence.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Bradbury, A. & Roberts-Holmes, G. (2016) 'They are children ... Not robots, not machines': the introduction of Baseline Assessment. Available at NUT (teachers.org.uk) and ATL (atl.org.uk)

Bradbury, A. & Roberts-Holmes, G. (2017) Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1: 'a necessary evil'? Final Report. National Union and UCL Institute of Education. NEU 279/1117.

Brooks, G. (2017) Weighing the Evidence on Phonics, in M.M. Clark (Ed.) *Reading the Evidence: synthetic phonics and literacy learning,* ch. 8. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice.* Revised edn. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315643502

Clark, M.M. (2017a) Literacy Learning in the Twenty-first Century: how much have we learnt?, *FORUM,* 59(3), 483-493. https://doi.org/10.15730/forum.2017.59.3.483

Clark, M.M. (2017b) *Reading the Evidence: synthetic phonics and literacy learning.* (editor and contributor), Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook, Amazon.co.uk, and paperback (this has six additional contributors from UK and Australia).

Clark, M.M. (2017c) *Understanding Research in Early Education: the relevance for the future of lessons from the past.* 3rd edn. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315206653

Clark, M.M. (2018a) *The Teaching of Initial Literacy: policies, evidence and ideology* (editor and contributor). Birmingham: Glendale Education. Ebook, Amazon.co.uk, and paperback (this has twelve additional contributors from the USA, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK).

Clark, M.M. (2018b) Reception Baseline Assessment, *Education Journal,* Special Issue 1. https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017

Clark, M.M. (2019) Literacy Policy, Synthetic Phonics and the Phonics Screening Check, *Education Journal,* 379. Special Issue. https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017

Clark, M.M. & Glazzard, J. (Eds) (2018) The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: an independent enquiry into the views of head teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report 2018. https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017

Ellis, S. & Moss, G. (2014) Ethics, Education Policy and Research: the phonics question reconsidered, *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(2), 241-242. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3039

Gibb, N. (2017) Reading is the Key to Unlocking Human Potential. 5 December 2017 Speech delivered at the British Library. https://www.gov.uk

McGrane, J., Stiff, J., Baird, J-A., Lenkeit, J. & Hopfenbeck, T. (2017) Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): National Report for England. DfE-RR770. www.gov.uk/government/publications.

McMurray, S. (2018) Why did Northern Ireland Schools Perform so Well on the PIRLS 2016 Study?' in M.M. Clark (Ed.) *Teaching Initial Literacy: policies, evidence and ideology,* ch. 7. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

Moss, G., Goldstein, H., Sammons, P., Sinnott, G. & Stobart, G. (2018) A Baseline without Basis: the validity and utility of the proposed reception baseline assessment in England. https://www/bera/ac/uk/publication/a-baseline-without-basis.

National Reading Panel (2000) *Teaching Children to Read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* Washington, DC: National Institute for Child Health and Human Development Clearinghouse.

Ofsted (2017) Bold Beginnings: the reception curriculum in good and outstanding schools. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/663560/28933_Ofsted_-_Early_Years_Curriculum_Report_-_Accessible.pdf

Rose, J. (2006) Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading: Final Report. dera.ioe.uk.report.

Shiel, G. & Kennedy, E. (2018) Literacy Policy and Performance on PIRLS 2016 in the Republic of Ireland, in M.M. Clark (Ed.) *Teaching Initial Literacy: policies, evidence and ideology,* ch. 6. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

Scott, W. (2018) The Power of Ofsted over Approaches to the Teaching of Reading in England, in M.M. Clark (Ed.) *Teaching Initial Literacy: policies, evidence and ideology,* ch. 12. Birmingham: Glendale Education.

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G. & Hall, J. (2006) A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling. Research Report. (RR711) www.dfes.gov.uk/research

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G., Gascoine, L. & Higgins, S. (2019) Reading Policy and the Evidence of Effectiveness from a Systematic 'Tertiary Review', *Papers in Education,* 34(2), 208-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2017.1420816

Wrigley, T. & Wormwell, L. (2016) Infantile Accountability; When Big Data Meet Small Children, *Improving Schools,* 19(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216651520

MARGARET M. CLARK studied for a degree in education and psychology at Glasgow University while she was a primary school teacher. She followed this with a PhD on left-handedness and a DLitt for her published research, *Reading Difficulties in Schools* and *Young Fluent Readers.* She was awarded an OBE for her services to early education and in 2017 was elected to the Reading Hall of Fame for her distinguished contribution to literacy research, theory and practice. In 1979 she was appointed as Professor and Head of the Department of Educational Psychology in the University of Birmingham. She is currently a Visiting Professor at Newman University.
Correspondence: margaret.clark@newman.ac.uk