The Reading Framework

Not the best guide to follow

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Abstract

Across a carefully detailed argument, the shortcomings, inconsistencies and contradictions of the government's recent *Reading Framework* are made clear in the light of a substantial body of academic research on the nature of reading and the development of literacy. The dogmatic approach taken towards these issues by government and by Ofsted, not least in relation to initial teacher education and the place of phonics-teaching, is once again exposed. The article concludes by pointing readers towards recent writing which offers a better way forward for understanding and nurturing early literacy.

Keywords: reading; phonics; literacy; phonics screening check; initial teacher education; Ofsted

Last July, the government published *The Reading Framework: teaching the foundations of literacy*.[1] It is intended to provide guidance for schools which will help them to meet current expectations for the teaching of early literacy. There is a lack of clarity as to how literacy is defined, but 'Section 2: Language comprehension' contains useful advice, including the value of having a range of engaging books accessible to young children, and of encouraging songs and stories. This is undermined by the requirement that children should only have access to phonically regular texts when they enter the reception year in school, and are to 'start to learn' through the exclusive use of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The guidance makes no mention of beginner reader behaviour, nor of the value of building on existing skills and interests established at home and in any nursery provision, and in many instances through children's recognition of environmental print.

Although the document emphasises the importance of a language-rich environment and the quality of interactions between adults and children, together with the value of reading for pleasure at the outset, it suggests that this should happen after children have worked through appropriate levels of decodable text. At this stage, teachers are instructed to display only decodable books so that pupils do not encounter text that includes phonics that they have not yet learned. Although unlikely to be put into practice, this would mean that very few books would be available when children first enter their reception class, which would inevitably hamper any meaningful literary experience.

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Such advice ignores the fact that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance. It is contrary to the expectations of early learning goals for the end of the reception year which state that children should be able to: 'demonstrate understanding of what has been read to them by retelling stories and narratives using their own words and recently introduced vocabulary'; and 'use and understand recently introduced vocabulary during discussions about stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems and during role play'.

It is disappointing that the positive strands of the document are overshadowed by the emphasis on SSP, which is considerable. Although the *Framework* includes useful guidance on choosing books in order to offer children a rich and varied experience, literacy specialists point out that: 'If children are offered only decodable books at school, they will be denied the right to explore freely, play read, return to books they enjoy and begin to recognise words in a meaningful context'. They are concerned that reading for pleasure is undervalued in the framework. 'Teaching up to an hour a day of phonics to Reception children is potentially going to have a negative effect on their genuine engagement with books and reading'.[2]

Misjudging pupils; misrepresenting evidence

Nick Gibb, the then schools minister, writes in his introduction to the *Framework*: 'Reading engagement is not possible if children struggle with the basic mechanics of reading … The evidence for phonics is indisputable, with the Education Endowment Foundation considering it the most secure area of pedagogy'.

This ignores any awareness of literacy that children may bring with them into school. It also misrepresents the recommendations of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), set up with the help of a government grant in 2011. As teachers well know, the EEF's purpose is to support educational institutions by promoting the use of evidence to inform practice. A specialist early years section was added in 2015, and updated recently. This makes clear that research shows that knowledge of children's development, and their current understanding, are crucial precursors to putting an early literacy strategy in place. A comprehensive account of this underpinning research can be found in Breadmore *et al*.[3]

Further, the EEF explicitly recommends that teachers should: '1. Develop pupils' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language. 2. Use a balanced and engaging approach to developing reading, which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills'.[4] Also:

> There is evidence that a combination of early literacy approaches is likely to be more effective than any single approach. For example, some studies suggest that it is possible to develop certain aspects of literacy, such as knowledge of the alphabet or

> letter names and sounds, without improving all aspects of early literacy. It is likely to be beneficial to put a range of activities in place, and to use these in combination with regular assessments of early literacy skills across both reading and writing capabilities.[5]

Bearing in mind that the school starting age in England is one of the youngest in Europe, that children in the reception class are still part of the early years foundation stage and that most are not yet of statutory school starting age, these recommendations are important. It is the case that summer-born children, particularly boys, are too often misdiagnosed as having special educational needs at the time they are assessed through the early learning goals at the end of the reception year, and that the youngest pupils in a cohort continue to achieve at lower levels than their classmates through to secondary school.[6] Although the schools minister, having mandated that all children should start school in the September after their fourth birthday, eventually allowed parents of summer-born children to negotiate a year's delay to starting school, this can cause problems at school-leaving age.

Further, in relation to key stage 1, the EEF states:

> The evidence suggests that children benefit from a balanced approach to literacy that includes a range of approaches. The emphasis of the different approaches will shift as children progress; effective diagnosis can help to identify priorities and focus teaching to ensure that it is efficient … Some of the most promising approaches that emerge from the evidence so far include:
>
> **Oral language interventions** which focus on spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom appear to benefit all pupils. Some studies show slightly larger effects for younger children and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. A focus on oral language skills will have benefits for both reading and writing.
>
> **Reading comprehension strategies** focus on learners' understanding of the text. They teach a range of techniques that enable pupils to comprehend the meaning of what is written, such as inferring the meaning from context, summarising or identifying key points, using graphic or semantic organisers, developing questioning strategies, and monitoring their own comprehension and identifying difficulties themselves.

The advice of the Foundation is that:

- Language provides the foundation of thinking and learning and should be prioritised.
- High-quality adult-child interactions are important and sometimes described as talking with children rather than just talking to children.
- Use a wide range of explicit and implicit approaches including planning the teaching

of vocabulary, as well as modelling and extending children's language and thinking during interactions and activities such as shared reading.

- Collaborative activities that provide opportunities to learn/hear language often also provide opportunities for wider learning through talk. Skills such as social awareness, relationship skills and problem-solving are developed, as well as knowledge.
- Use a balanced and engaging approach to developing reading, which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills: both decoding (the ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language) and comprehension (the ability to understand the meaning of the language being read) skills are necessary for confident and competent reading, but neither is sufficient on its own.
- It is also important to remember that progress in literacy requires motivation and engagement, which will help children to develop persistence and enjoyment in their reading.
- Children will need a range of wider language and literacy experiences to develop their understanding of written texts in all their forms. This should include active engagement with different media and genres of texts and a wide range of content topics.[7]

These recommendations are consistent with empirical as well as research evidence, such as that referenced by Margaret Clark and the considerable work done by Professor Clark and other members of the United Kingdom Literacy Association.[8]

Reid endorses the EEF advice.[9] She considers the approach recommended in *The Reading Framework* to be too simplistic and, although she does not dispute the importance of phonics, she objects to evidence being cherry-picked and that SSP be the only sanctioned approach at the start. She does not accept that reading comprehension should not be taught until the child is a fluent reader or that, before then, comprehension should be developed only through talk and sharing stories with adults.

Underevaluating, overclaiming and confusing

It is encouraging to see that the importance of talk and stories and the need to develop children's vocabulary are acknowledged in the *Framework*. However, this is undermined by the advice that non-decodable books should be excluded from the book corner, and that children should be taught phonics for an hour a day by the end of reception, rather than being immersed in the richness of the English language throughout the year. Much of the evidence cited in the framework is dated, and any evidence that is contrary to the government stance is ignored. There are also unsubstantiated statements, and a reiteration of the apparently benevolent effect of the phonics check. This reiteration is made by drawing on data that supports the rise in the number of children who

have reached the expected standard in phonics, but that does not indicate the lack of significant improvement in reading levels at the end of key stage 1 (see Figure 1).

The former minister has been strongly influenced by the report of a seven-year study of an initiative in 22 schools in Clackmannanshire, which appeared to show the effectiveness of the intensive use of SSP on pupils' literacy achievement.[10] However, an analysis of the wider context of the Clackmannanshire initiative supports Moss and Huxford's argument that literacy problems cannot be couched within a single field of reference, and that policy-makers need to consider evidence from different paradigms if they are to make robust decisions.[11] Furthermore, it appears that the minister is not aware that, since the publication of the Clackmannanshire study, the findings he relies on have been disputed. It has been pointed out that the Scottish HM Inspectorate of Education found that: 'whilst this programme has made a strong impact on pupils' ability to sound out, spell and recognise words, further work was required to link these skills to other aspects of reading, such as comprehension'.[12] Subsequently, Dombey has pointed out that:

> Both the current coalition and recent Labour governments have relied heavily on the research of Johnstone and Watson in Clackmannanshire. Yet this research has been seriously challenged: The systematic teaching of synthetic phonics showed dramatic gains for reading individual words, but much smaller gains for comprehension. The intervention has left the Local Authority with below average scores on Scotland's national reading tests. HMIE has remarked on Clackmannanshire's low performance when compared with Local Authorities with a similar socio-economic profile. It makes no sense to direct all England's schools up the Clackmannanshire cul-de-sac.[13]

A blog-post some years ago led to an extended and thoughtful discussion around the issues:

> I can see why the Clackmannanshire study convinced the UK government to recommend then mandate the use of SP for reading instruction in English schools (things are different in Scotland), but I haven't yet found a follow-up study that measured literacy levels at 16, or the later impact on educational attainment; and the children involved in the study would now be in their early 20s. What concerns me is that if more is being implicitly claimed for SP than it can actually deliver or if it fails to deliver a substantial improvement in the functional literacy of school leavers in a decade's time, then it's likely to be seen as yet another educational 'fad' and abandoned, regardless of the gains it brings in decoding and spelling. Meanwhile, the many other factors involved in reading comprehension are at risk of being marginalised if policy-makers pin their hopes on SP alone. Which just goes to show why nationally mandated educational policies should be thoroughly piloted and evaluated before they are foisted on schools.[14]

In their review of phonics teaching, Torgerson *et al.* point out that:

> There have been a significant number of systematic reviews of experimental and quasi-experimental research evaluating the effectiveness or otherwise of phonics teaching since 2000. Most of the reviews are supportive of phonics teaching, but this conclusion needs to be tempered by two potential sources of bias: design and publication bias. Both of these problems will tend to exaggerate the benefit of phonics teaching. Furthermore, there is little evidence of the comparative superiority of one phonics approach over any other.[15]

The Reading Framework's dismissal of the importance of comprehension and enjoyment in the early stages of learning to read, and the recommendation that children should not have access to books with a range of types of text for up to a year when they first go to primary school, remove opportunities for them to develop any sight vocabulary and to read for meaning. The suggestion that this limited approach is helpful to literacy development risks undermining young children's motivation to read. As Boardman points out, reading begins at a very early age, and depends on a wide range of experiences.[16]

Dr Sinéad Harmey, lecturer in literacy education at UCL's Institute of Education, acknowledges the need for a document that focuses on teaching all children to read well: 'At the heart of the document is the desire for all children to become confident, competent engaged readers … There is need to pay careful attention to those at risk of reading failure, along with its many social and emotional implications'.[17]

However, she notes that there is a clear recognition by scholars in the field of literacy research of the dangers of oversimplifying the reading process: 'a model, in reading research terms, should describe reading development and how the skills operate and interact. Clearly, this *Framework* does not do that'. She considers that the document is lacking in some aspects, and is 'overly simplistic and incoherent in several places. A prime example is the mismatch between the title and contents. It's called the early reading framework, yet it addresses writing' (*ibid.*).

This confusion is highlighted by Bradford, who points to the lack of clarity as to whether the focus of the document is on reading, writing, speaking or listening, and thus how literacy is defined.[18]

Practitioners' expertise ignored

Guidance in *The Reading Framework* does consider the role of poetry, rhymes and songs in attuning children to the sounds of language, but ignores what they may have experienced at home or in their nursery setting. 'Birth to 5 matters', a document drawn up by the Early Years Coalition, contains comprehensive guidance linked to the guidance for the early years foundation stage; pages 87-90 focus on early reading

and contain many suggestions which should be taken into account in the reception year.[19] By contrast, *The Reading Framework* adopts a very prescriptive focus on SSP in line with longstanding government policy, which has shown little interest in the professional knowledge of teachers or of our heritage of expertise in effective support for early literacy.

As an experienced early years teacher and former head of a demonstration nursery school, as well as the former CEO of The British Association for Early Childhood Education and Chair of the Early Childhood Forum, I went with representatives of the main subject associations to discuss the former schools minister's proposed review of the primary curriculum with him nearly 10 years ago. I had hardly uttered an introductory sentence on early literacy before Nick Gibb put his hands over his ears and said 'I'm not listening'. He was already a committed convert to, and proponent of, SSP. It was poor consolation for us in the Primary Umbrella Group when, apart from its leader, all the members of the team of academic specialists in primary education who had been asked to advise on the current primary curriculum review resigned soon after this. They could not agree with the expectations of Michael Gove, then secretary of state for education, which focused on factual direct instruction.[20]

Readers will recall that Mr Gove, in rejecting much of the enlightened and effective approach to primary education that had been developed in the UK over many years, including the comprehensive work on the primary curriculum led by Robin Alexander,[21] referred to educational academics as 'the blob.' Brundrett has noted that: 'Policy in the primary curriculum since 2010 has involved the demise of the expert view'.[22] The approach to curriculum innovation following the election of the coalition government in 2010 was essentially politically controlled rather than consultative, or evidence-based. The emphasis on direct instruction had been going on for some time. I wrote to Chris Woodhead in the late 1990s when he was Ofsted's chief inspector to question why every section specifying the content for each national curriculum subject was headed by the phrase 'Children should be taught'. I received the entirely accurate reply that you cannot legislate for learning. Since then, there has been a relentless focus on centrally determined instruction at the expense of recognition of children's existing interests, experience and knowledge.

As Bradford observes:

> Approaches to literacy education are underpinned by particular ways of conceptualising reading and writing, and by related ways of conceptualising how reading and writing must therefore be taught. This recent document from the DfE is a prime example of the perception of reading as the accurate identification of letters in order to decode conventional text, which ignores individual child-initiated efforts to make meaning. Current literacy policy, curricula and pedagogy draw on narrow

> theories of how best to teach children to 'bark at print', which is what the *Reading Framework* is promoting through its lack of understanding of the implications for practice of the complementary importance of reading for meaning. (*Op.cit.*)

The particular challenges of decoding English text were evident long before they were highlighted by Wyse and Goswami:

> The phonological complexity of syllable structures in English, coupled with the inconsistent spelling system, mean that direct instruction at levels other than the phoneme may be required in order to become an effective reader … the complexity of reading acquisition in English makes it unlikely that the universal adoption of one method, synthetic phonics, without any evidence of proof of concept (for example, via randomised controlled trials), will deliver the results expected by Rose and by the UK Government.
>
> It is important to bear in mind that the English language makes particular demands on readers: written English has a phonological complexity and an inconsistent spelling system, which demands sophisticated teaching approaches … In written language, as in spoken language, the ultimate aim is communication and comprehension. We argue that teachers are more likely to help children to achieve this aim if government recommendations for practice are built on a rigorous synthesis of the full range of evidence, including research about different languages and effective reading teaching.[23]

The role and influence of Ofsted in schools and in initial teacher education

As teachers are all too well aware, in contrast to the role of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), which was to advise government on educational policy and practice and to provide constructive advice to schools, Ofsted has become an enforcer of government prescription. Many teachers and school leaders would find it hard to agree that inspectors are successful in its stated aim that: 'Ofsted exists to be a force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation. This is our guiding principle. The primary purpose of inspection under this framework is to bring about improvement in the services we inspect'.[24]

The current approach to the inspection of primary schools involves a 'deep dive' into the teaching of early reading. In line with the recommendations of *The Reading Framework*, schools that go beyond the requirements of the teaching of SSP are likely to be criticised, and to be graded as requiring improvement, in spite of Ofsted's acknowledgement that different approaches to teaching can be effective: 'Ofsted does not advocate that any particular approach should be used exclusively in teaching. Different approaches to teaching can be effective. What is appropriate will depend on the aims of a particular lesson or activity, and its place in the sequence of teaching a

particular topic'.[25] There is also its inclusive definition of teaching in the early years, which still features in the guidance:

> Teaching in the early years should not be taken to imply a 'top down' or formal way of working. It is a broad term that covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities, communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges. It takes account of the equipment that adults provide and the attention given to the physical environment, as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do, as well as taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (characteristics of effective learning), and how practitioners use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and to monitor their progress. (*School Inspection Handbook*, para. 333.)

Paragraph 38 of Ofsted's newly introduced education inspection framework for initial teacher education states that:

> We will judge fairly partnerships that take radically different approaches to the ITE curriculum. However, for primary and secondary school ITE, this does not mean to the point of exclusion of the full ITT core content framework, which the DfE has made compulsory from September 2020. We recognise the importance of partnerships' autonomy to choose their own curriculum approaches. If leaders are able to show that they have built a curriculum with appropriate coverage, content, structure and sequencing, then inspectors will assess the partnership's curriculum favourably. [26]

Further, paragraph 52(v) states that: 'Ofsted will not advocate a particular method of planning (including lesson planning), teaching or assessment; it is for partnerships to determine their practices and it is for leadership teams to justify these on their own merits rather than by referring to this handbook'.

And paragraph 100 makes it plain that: 'Ofsted does not advocate that any particular teaching approach should be used exclusively with trainees'.

However, the section on criteria for judgement of 'good' in primary phase initial teacher education programmes states categorically that: 'Training ensures that trainees learn to teach early reading using Systematic Synthetic Phonics, as outlined in the ITT core content framework, and that *trainees are not taught to teach competing approaches to early reading*' (my emphasis). [27]

This inconsistency is of considerable concern, as it makes it likely that, in the future, intending primary and early years teachers will not be equipped to teach early literacy

effectively, or in accordance with the recommendations of a rigorous systematic review: 'It would seem sensible for teaching to include systematic phonics instruction for younger readers – but the evidence is not clear enough to decide which phonics approach is best. Also, in our view there remains insufficient evidence to justify a "phonics only" teaching policy; indeed, since many studies have added phonics to whole language approaches, balanced instruction is indicated'.[28]

Clark *et al.* (2020) have reported on their enquiries into political directives on the content of initial teacher training in early reading,[29] which raise concerns, particularly in the light of Ofsted's current education inspection framework for ITE. One could wish that Ofsted took its own advice, namely that it will look for evidence in initial teacher education that:

> The curriculum ensures that trainees are taught how to apply principles from scholarship relevant to their subject and phase when making professional decisions. Trainees learn how to assess the appropriateness and value of new approaches that they might encounter in future by: considering the validity and reliability of any research on which the approach depends; considering its context in existing community debates (for example, subject, phase, SEND, psychology); and relating it to their professional experience.

The validity and reliability of the Clackmannanshire research is not in question, but its application has been overextended, not least by the former schools minister. Mr. Gibb's promotion of SSP, based on the Clackmannanshire findings, reveals a startling and disappointing lack of understanding of effective early literacy teaching, and indeed of professional issues around both research and practice. Phonics has always been part of the repertoire of teachers, who understand the value of linking sounds to letters. But they realise that this is not enough. English is a rich language with complex orthography, and many of our most common words are not spelt regularly. For example, phonics hardly helps with 'was' or 'once', nor does it distinguish between the present and past tenses of 'read'. Early readers learn to decode words in context, and need to encounter meaningful text. Their individual awareness of environmental print, together with varied experience at home and at nursery, inform their knowledge of words, which becomes the basis of a growing sight vocabulary.

The phonics screening check: questionable evidence generates nonsense words

In the past, HMI concluded that: 'Phonic skills were taught almost universally and usually to beneficial effect' and that 'Successful teachers of reading and the majority of schools used a mix of methods each reinforcing the other as the children's reading developed'.[30] Phonics has always been widely regarded as a necessary skill for learning

to read, write and spell, but not necessarily the one that must be acquired 'first and fast'. As Dombey observes:

> The most successful schools and teachers focus both on phonics and on the process of making sense of text. Best practice brings these two key components together, in teaching that gives children a sense of the pleasures reading can bring, supports them in making personal sense of the texts they encounter and also shows them how to lift the words off the page.[31]

It is worth noting that almost all other nations do not start to teach reading formally until children are older. The age of entry into schools here in the UK is up to two years younger than in most European countries, which generally offer up to three years of coherent early childhood education before the start of formal schooling.[32] The summer-born cohort of children here in England are not of statutory school age until they enter year one, and the annual entry mandated by the former minister disadvantages this group. Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research suggests that teaching more formal skills early (in school) gives children an initial academic advantage, but that this is not sustained in the longer term. There are suggestions that an early introduction to a formal curriculum may increase anxiety and have a negative impact on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn:

> While it does appear to be possible for schools to teach young children basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, there appears to be no lasting benefit to such learning. If assessed at an early age, children who have been taught these skills are likely to perform better than children of the same age who have not. However, the evidence consistently shows that this early advantage is not sustained in the longer term. Children who are taught these skills up to three years later seem to acquire them rapidly, and thereafter perform as well as or better than children with an early start.[33]

There is more recent research showing that children taught to read at seven achieve as well at 11 as those who are drilled from four or five.[34]

It is disheartening that the former minister has used his position to dictate a limited method of teaching based on questionable evidence, which ignores the sophisticated understanding of early literacy that has been developed in this country. A phonics screening check for all children now takes place towards the end of year one, and any child who does not reach the expected standard is required to sit the check again in year two. As well as 20 commonly used words, the check also includes 20 non-words, identified as such with an image of an alien. Teachers and parents understandably distrust a reliance on the ability to decode non-words as a valid measure of literacy. This approach confuses able readers, who expect text to make sense, and bewilders children who are in the early stages of linking print to meaning, which is the purpose of reading.

The claim that reading levels have risen in England, based on the results of the phonics check, is not supported by the scores noted in the standard assessment tasks in reading, which are assessed on the same group of pupils in the same term at the end of key stage 1. (Results for 2020 are not available due to the pandemic.)

Figure 1: Scores in standard assessment tasks (SATs) in reading

	% meeting the expected standard in the phonics check at the end of Y2	% meeting the good level of development in the KS1 Reading SAT
2019	91	75
2018	92	75
2017	92	76
2016	91	74

The United Kingdom Literacy Association has undertaken a survey of teachers who have participated in the phonics check, and found some causes of concern:

> The most worrying aspect of the survey findings was that most schools indicated that the phonics check seriously disadvantaged, and in some cases impeded, successful readers. Schools overwhelmingly stated that they felt that there were far too many nonsense words, and that these confused more fluent readers, who had been taught to read for meaning, and therefore tried to make sense of the 'alien words' they encountered. This not only slowed down the pupils' reading and made it less fluent, but also resulted in errors as many able readers sounded out the phonemes correctly, but blended incorrectly. One teacher commented: 'Many children reading well above their chronological age did not pass the test' and another explained: 'The better readers stumbled over nonsense words as they expect words to follow certain rules. For example; 'thend' read as 'the end'.[35]

The campaign group More than a Score points out:

> A report from researchers at Newman University and Leeds Beckett University found that 85% of heads believe the test should not be compulsory, while 65% of teachers believe it should be discontinued altogether. (Clark et al, 2018) The survey also raises concerns about the government's motivation for the test with 89% of heads and 94% of teachers agreeing that the check provides them with no useful additional information about their pupils. Parents largely agree: 80% stated that their child could already read well when they took the test and almost two-thirds

believe it should be stopped.

Heads and teachers are particularly concerned about the use of 'pseudo words' in the check. These words, such as 'reb', 'wup' and 'meft' are included to ensure children know how to blend sounds, even when the words have no meaning. Four out of five heads and teachers believe they should not be used in the test. One head commented, 'These alien words serve no purpose for reading skill' while a teacher noted, 'Children who are competent readers are becoming anxious and tearful over pseudo words'.[36]

Soon after the introduction of the phonics check, two academics explained:

> This paper argues that direct control of the early years literacy curriculum recently exercised by politicians in England has made the boundaries between research, policy and practice increasingly fragile. It describes how policy came to focus most effort on the use of synthetic phonics programmes in the early years. It examines why the Clackmannanshire phonics intervention became the study most frequently cited to justify government policy and suggests a phonics research agenda that could more usefully inform teaching.[37]

Ofsted at odds with itself

Recently, Clark has tracked government policy on early reading, which shows how ministers have ignored evidence that does not accord with their views.[38] The current neo-liberal agenda can be seen in many aspects of government policy, which is taking control of school structures as well as the curriculum. Discussions in parliament around the 1944 Education Act warned against political interference into professional matters:

> It has been felt that, in certain areas, there is a danger that the Secretary, or director of education, may fancy himself in certain subjects, or in some branch of study, and may go into a school and, by an obiter dictum, try to direct the secular instruction of that school more, as he would say, according to the wishes of the authority. That sort of interference with the individual life of the school is undesirable. (R. A. Butler, reported in *Hansard*, House of Commons, 10 March 1944, Vol 397 Cols 2363-4.)[39]

As indicated earlier, it is of serious concern that the minister's insistence on the teaching of early reading exclusively through SSP is endorsed, and indeed enforced, by Ofsted. Its report on *Bold Beginnings* only examined schools which were using this approach.[40] It appeared to define the reception year as preparation for the start of key stage 1 rather than as part of the early years foundation stage. In spite of a constructive dialogue with members of Early Education and TACTYC (The Association for Professional Development in the Early Years), Ofsted continues to insist on SSP as the only way to teach reading, and that this should start in the reception year, when many children are not yet of statutory school age.[41] There has been much criticism of *Bold Beginnings*,

for example, TACTYC [42] and Jarvis and Whitebread, who point out that: 'the ways in which humans most effectively learn to make meaning in the early years have been increasingly ignored within contemporary education policy'.[43]

Ofsted's assertion that it does not advocate that any particular approach should be used in teaching is at odds with what its lead inspector for early years made clear in a blog post:

> We've made the early reading deep dive mandatory because it's so important that children learn to read fluently as quickly as possible. Inevitably, fluent readers will learn more, because they can read and gain knowledge for themselves. All inspectors have been trained to focus on the things that make the biggest difference, drawing on the evidence set out in our report 'Bold Beginnings: the Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools'.[44]

To prevent myths being created, I've set out here what inspectors will be looking at during deep dives into early reading. They will consider the extent to which:

- direct, focused phonics is taught every day in Reception and key stage 1
- children read from books with the sounds they know, while they are learning to read
- teachers and teaching assistants provide extra practice through the day for the children who make the slowest progress.[45]

Lecturers from Leeds Becket University have provided a comprehensive commentary on the effects of Ofsted's approach to the inspection of initial teacher education, which raises many questions.[46] This underlines the point made by Andreas Schleicher, division head and coordinator of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the OECD indicators of education systems programme. He recommends that teachers should be involved in change so that governments can make education more equitable and resilient.[47] His advice has implications for initial teacher training and continuing professional development in pedagogy, as well as for the curriculum in England.

The OECD advice is particularly relevant bearing in mind that children here in England start formal school earlier than most European countries:

> The potential areas for reflection for England include the importance of maintaining a child-centred and developmentally appropriate approach while adapting practices to the increasingly diverse needs of the ECEC population. Research indicates that it is important that pedagogy remains child-centred, and developmentally appropriate, with an emphasis on play-based learning. The implementation of different curricula at different stages can affect whether this is achieved. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England is distinct to the national school curriculum and the

transition between the two curricula is facilitated by the early years curriculum being adopted in school reception classes for children aged four to five.[48]

The claims of former schools minister Nick Gibb about the effectiveness of the phonics check reveal a woeful lack of insight into effective early literacy teaching, and a regrettable reluctance to consult with experienced professional educators and academics. Phonics, as an important element of teaching children to read, has always been part of the repertoire of teachers. They understand the value of linking sounds to letters, but realise that this is not enough, given the complexity of the English language. As teachers know, early readers learn to decode words in context, and need to experience meaningful text. Children's individual experience of environmental print, and of writing that is relevant to them, informs their growing understanding and knowledge of words, and is the basis of a confident sight vocabulary. It is regrettable that this is not acknowledged in *The Reading Framework*.

There is an alternative …

The OECD's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results for 2016 show that under the main version of the study, Ireland has the highest score in Europe, and only Russia, Singapore and Hong Kong recorded higher marks. Pupils in Ireland now have much improved levels of achievement in literacy at the age of 16. This progress was supported by a significant investment in research, which resulted in a comprehensive guide to effective approaches to early literacy that informed an ambitious programme of professional development.[49] Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment commissioned an enquiry that informed the guide, which applies to children between three and eight years. Its thorough account of research, together with the clear recommendations on the implications for practice, is commended to our politicians and the inspectorate, as well as to practitioners.

In addition, a recent article by Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright proposes a sophisticated and effective insight into the reading process which will help teachers working with children in the early stages of learning to read or who are experiencing difficulties with reading.[50] Dominic Wyse and Alice Bradbury, working through the Helen Hamlyn Research Foundation, have compiled a comprehensive critique of current policy coupled with constructive proposals for ways forward.[51]

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