Author: Dr Jane Carter

Work completed at University of the West of England Coldharbour Ln, Stoke Gifford, Bristol BS16 1QY

'The assessment has become the curriculum: teachers' views on the Phonics Screening Check in England'.

Abstract

The Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was introduced in England in 2012 for Year 1 children (aged 5 and 6). There have been criticisms of the Check in relation to its reliability and appropriateness as an assessment for early reading (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2012; Clark, 2018) although advocates of the Check (Hempenstall, 2016) see it as a valuable tool in securing progress in early reading.

This mixed methods study sought to evaluate the intended and possible unintended consequences of the PSC foregrounding the voices of children and their teachers. This article reports on findings from the teachers' data. The study focused initially on questionnaire data from fourteen schools (59 teachers) selected for their diversity in relation to attainment data (PSC and reading) and socio-economic status. Focus groups in seven of the schools (25 teachers) enabled a more in-depth exploration of teachers' views and practices in relation to the PSC.

The study identified the 'negative backwash' of assessment (Taylor, 2005). The PSC was seen as an end in itself, rather than a way of securing progress in one of the skills of reading. It found that, as Moss (2017) suggested, the assessment had become the curriculum, to the detriment of specific groups of learners (higher attaining readers and children with EAL). Teachers were found to use the assessment processes of the PSC as objectives for teaching rather than using them as the tools of assessment

Introduction.

In 2010 the English government's white paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' initiated the introduction of both a prescribed approach to the teaching of early reading through Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) and a national assessment of children's phonic skills and knowledge at the end of Year 1 (children aged 5 and 6) - the Phonics Screening Check (PSC). There is 'general acceptance that systematic synthetic phonics instruction has a part to play in promoting early reading as one element in a rich literacy curriculum' (Ellis and Moss, 2014 p.241). There is less consensus about the necessity for a screening check that relies on the SSP approach to phonics instruction. The check involves 40 words that children, in Year 1 are required to sound, blend and read. 20 of the words are real words, although are not words children will necessarily be familiar, and 20 pseudo words. Pseudo words are 'non-words' (Gibson and England, 2016) and seen as the 'purest assessment of phonic decoding' (DfE, 2012, p. 8). They are often referred to in the classroom as 'alien words' since a picture of an alien creature is presented next to

each pseudo word in the PSC. The selection of words is also an area of contention and explored by Darnell *et al* (2017) in some detail. There have been a range of voices that have criticised the Check from its introduction (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2012; Moss, 2017;Clark, 2018;) with concerns raised about the test's fitness for purpose i.e. as a test of early reading skills; effectiveness in its identification of children in need of additional reading support and its appropriateness for all children, in particular children with English as an additional language and the more able reader (Davis, 2013). Research focusing on the 'validity' of the check and its 'sensitivity' (Duff et al, 2014 p.3) has been conducted and Clark (2013 p.13) has suggested there are 'unresolved issues' in terms of 'validity and value'. Dombey (2011 p.23) suggests the check 'distorts the process of learning to read' and so 'threatens children's enjoyment of reading.' More recently additional concerns have been raised about how the Check has impacted on teachers and children (Clark, 2018) and its impact on the grouping of children (Bradbury, 2018). Carter (2019) demonstrated how the Check had impacted on children's understanding of learning to read, seeing phonics and reading as separate.

Context: accountability and compliance

Bradbury (2014) details the changing rhetoric surrounding the PSC from its initial introduction by Michael Gove, who was the Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in England, to its introduction in 2012. Initial mention of the PSC came in 2009 where it was suggested that a national 'simple reading test' was needed. During this period the focus on phonics as the prime approach to the teaching of reading was becoming a priority for Gove. By 2012 the DfE had introduced the PSC as a 'short, light-touch assessment' in decoding with the aim of identifying children who did not meet the required standard. Bradbury (2014 p.619) contests that rather than a test to 'identify children' who may need additional support this was a test to 'ensure teachers are teaching phonics above other methods…and to judge schools.'

Ball (2013), Moss (2016, 2017) and Braun and Maguire (2018) identify how the wider statutory assessment agenda can be viewed as a policy compliance and accountability tool. Moss (2009 p.158) argues that 'holding individual schools to account for the progress they make towards a target becomes an important means of keeping everyone on board for the job of implementing the policy'. Bradbury (2014) argues that the PSC has become another such accountability tool in relation to the teaching of phonics. Whilst the PSC outcomes for each school are not made public, the outcomes are made available to the bodies of accountability, the Local Authority or Academy Chain and Ofsted. This has been further embedded with the establishing of DfE English Hubs across England (2018) with a remit of supporting schools who have been identified as having below national average PSC outcomes. The accountability agenda is evident through the layers of school leadership to classroom teachers who are set PSC targets. 74% of teachers who were considering leaving the profession, according to the National Education Union workload survey

‘Tackling Stress’ in 2017 were doing so because of the pressure to increase test scores.

According to Moss, (2017) this accountability agenda has led to the distortion of the curriculum with ‘the assessment tools themselves simply becom[ing] the curriculum’ (p.62). The NFER Evaluation of the PSC (Walker *et al* 2015) commissioned by the Department of Education identified that one of the changes reported by subject leaders since the PSC’s introduction was the teaching of pseudo words. Siegal (2008) identified pseudo words as good indicators of future real word reading and so were useful assessment tools. What subject leaders were indicating was that pseudo words were not being used to support assessment but were being taught as part of the reading curriculum programme of study. Roberts-Holmes (2014) noted how assessment was framing not only what was taught but also pedagogic approaches. His study of early years’ pedagogy noted that there was a shift in the curriculum and the approach to teaching towards more ‘rapid skill and knowledge acquisition’ and that children were increasingly ‘drilled in phonics’ from nursery and reception. Bradbury (2018, p.539) also considered the impact of the PSC on pedagogy and the grouping of children and concluded that ‘assessment can rapidly alter practice’ noting the way that teachers grouped children by ability not because it improved attainment but as a way of managing phonics teaching and learning and preparation for the PSC in particular.

The Research Study – its background and approach

The NFER Evaluation of the PSC (Walker *et al* 2015) had a stated focus of the efficiency of the PSC’s implementation and to identify its impact on teaching and learning. The evaluation, whilst interviewing some Year 1 teachers did not explore teachers’ *views of the impact* of the Check, only *what the impacts were* on teaching. It also did not consider the voices of Year 1 children. Therefore this unique small scale, mixed-methods study sought to listen to the voices of children and their teachers. The children’s data are reported in Carter (2019) and the teachers’ data are shared in this article. This study provides an evaluation that considers the lived experiences of teachers and so enabled an evaluation of the qualities of the programme intended or otherwise (Kushner, 2000). It sought to investigate the ‘informal patterns and unanticipated consequences’ (Patton, 1987) of the PSC implementation through working with those closest to the programme. Its approach was to identify any potential discrepancies between the official view and what was ‘actually taking place’ (Robson, 2011, p.182). Braun and Maguire (2018, p.8) had seen teachers ‘doing without believing’ in relation to the enactment of assessment policy and Newman and Clarke, (2009) identified the conflicts when policy is enacted and the difficulties of creating coherency from divergent demands. These studies provide some context for this research’s main question and the data presented in this article:

In relation to teachers’ views, to what extent has the PSC framed teachers’ practices and understanding of being a teacher of reading?

This study was conducted in a diverse city in the UK. 59 teachers who taught in Reception (children aged 4 and 5), Year 1 (aged 5 and 6) and Year 2 (aged 6 and 7) classes (identified as the teachers most impacted by the PSC) from 14 schools took part in a questionnaire. The English Subject Leader from each school volunteered their schools to take part in the research after consultation with teachers and head teacher. Following this a smaller group of 7 schools were selected. These schools were purposively sampled using a range of socio-economic indicators, PSC and reading attainment data to ensure a range of schools in the study: this is set out in Table 1. All schools were graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted: the quality of teaching and learning therefore was judged to be at least good and so it was assumed the quality of the teaching of reading was part of this judgment. The schools' and teachers' names have been given pseudonyms and the study was subject to the ethical approval process at the host university.

Table 1.

School pseudonym name	Free School Meal %	Pupil Premium %	EAL%	PSC data	KS1 reading test data	Ofsted grade	Number of teachers in focus group
Acorn	48.6%	48%	33%	2016 86% 2015 68% 2014 79%	2016 77% 2015 79% 2014 65%	Good	3
Birch	59.3%	59%	29%	2016 65% 2015 68% 2014 65%	2016 57% 2015 86% 2014 57%	Good	3
Chestnut	9%	9%	16%	2016 86% 2015 77% 2014 95%	2016 86% 2015 83% 2014 87%	Good	2
Dogwood	12.1%	12%	11%	2016 78% 2015 79% 2014 51%	2016 80% 2015 88% 2014 88%	Outstanding	7
Elm	34.7%	34%	24%	2016 86% 2015 88% 2014 78%	2016 83% 2015 82% 2014 82%	Outstanding	4

Fig Tree	37%	37%	33%	2016 76 % 2015 80 % 2014 74 %	2016 67% 2015 75% 2014 89%	Outstanding	2
Gum Tree	37%	35%	43%	2016 69% 2015 73% 2014 79%	2016 68% 2015 52% 2014 56%	Good	4

The research had a layered design to include a quantitative approach using a questionnaire as a contextual backdrop (Creswell, 1998) and was followed by a deeper, probing layer of children and teachers' focus groups. It is the teachers' data that is outlined in this article. The focus group questions were designed using the responses from the teacher questionnaire and questions that had been raised from the children's data. There were three sections to the teachers' focus group questions. The first was an open question about what teachers saw as the most effective approach to the teaching of early reading. This was designed to enable teachers to share practice, to reveal beliefs and the basis of the beliefs about the teaching of reading. The NFER evaluation (Walker *et al,* 2015) had identified some contradictions in what teachers said about their beliefs and practices and this study sought to further explore this. The second section focused on the PSC itself with a focus on practice, in relation to the PSC and views about its role and value. The final section reported to teachers some of the generalised findings from the children's focus group and asked teachers to consider why they thought children may hold the beliefs they did or provide explanations for children's perspectives.

The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed. The main approach to analysis was Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis: a 'deliberate and rigorous' process that enables the 'identifying, analysing and reporting [of] patterns (themes) within data' (p.79). The six phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (p.87): familiarising; initial code generation; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and then reporting was used.

The initial analysis of the quantitative data demonstrated a number of tensions: tensions between what teachers described in relation to practice and what is prescribed in the curriculum (some conscious and others unconscious); tensions in relation to the role of phonics as a necessary element of the teaching of early reading but not in itself sufficient for developing children as readers; tensions between the awareness of children's needs as developing readers and the need to prioritise the outcomes agenda. The data presented here are the voices of teachers that demonstrate these tensions.

The role of phonics in learning to read: practice and curriculum tensions

Teachers identified phonics as their main approach to the teaching of reading in the questionnaire data which showed 97% of teachers (n = 57) either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that teaching phonics knowledge was essential for the teaching of reading. 3% of teachers (n=2) were neutral about phonics as essential but none of the teachers disagreed with the statement. This was further elaborated in the focus groups. The first question of the focus group invited teachers to share their views, based on their classroom experience, about the most effective approach to the teaching of reading.

Acorn School

Ann (line 1) I'm a bit blinded because phonics is all I have ever known so that's what I know.

Beth (line 2) I do like phonics and I do think it is a very good approach but it is all I have ever known."

Birch School

Fay (line 1) Phonics plays a big part in it so children need to know individual alphabetic sounds and then move on to the digraphs and trigraphs and then using them to blend for reading

Chestnut School

Ali (line 1) I think daily phonics and repetition every day.

Sue (line 2) I still believe the best thing is daily phonics.

Dogwood School

Elisa (line 7) I think phonics does play a big part.

Elm School

Di (line 1) Phonics are very important

Fig Tree School

Jan (line 1) We follow Read Write Inc, don't we, so the essentials, the sounds

Gum Tree School

Alison (line 1) I think phonics does work

These data are drawn from across all seven schools and there were further examples of teachers in each school agreeing with or adding to the voices above. If the PSC is an accountability measure as outlined by Bradbury (2014) and a necessary and 'positive' compliance measure as stated by Stuart and Stainthorp, (2016) then this data would suggest it has been successful. All of the teachers

identified phonics as an essential part of learning to read. The two voices of teachers at Acorn School however suggested that whilst they felt phonics was effective they did not have anything to compare this approach with. Phonics was the approach they had been taught during their Initial Teacher Training and what they had subsequently put into practice. It is therefore perhaps to be expected that these teachers responded to the question about effective teaching of reading with a phonics focused response. However, these teachers show an awareness that there may be other approaches that could also be useful.

In Dogwood and Elm School there were fewer additional responses in relation to agreement with phonics as the first approach. Whilst phonics was mentioned as a key approach to the teaching of reading, the teachers went on to talk much more about other strategies that they said were of equal importance. Data from Elm School is particularly interesting when considering the contextual data for this school: it is one of the highest attaining schools in the sample (PSC and end of Key Stage 1 reading), has above national average pupil premium (pupils who qualify for additional funding in recognition of socio-economic disadvantage), pupils with English as an Additional Language and pupils who qualify for Free School Meals and is rated outstanding by Ofsted. Gibb (2014) described schools who had a mixed methods approach to the teaching of reading as 'failing' because it does not follow the prescribed approach and so is 'damaging' children. However, this school has some of the highest scores across the city for both phonics and end of Key Stage 1 and 2 reading attainment.

Elm School

Di (line 1) Phonics are very important, tricky words

Di (line 6) And there's all the strategies that they need to know to be a fluent reader so being able to use the picture clues and all those other things we teach our children

Researcher: Would you say you integrate those things from the start or would you say you very much focus on just phonics to begin with.

Becky (line 7) No, we do it together, as once you've got a child who actually can sound out a word or can use the picture cues, because our books at the very beginning are very much, repetitive tricky word sentences with just one word that is changing, I think they need to use the strategy of using the picture but also developing their understanding of what's happening in the picture, why do you think that character is doing that and what do you think will happen next even if we help them read the sentence, I feel getting that from day one and them understanding that they just need to talk about the book.

Di (line 9) Probably the talking is more important as a lot of our children see reading as 'I just have to read the words, so I am going to read the words

and turn the page, read the words and turn the page' and when you get to the end of the book and you go, what happened in that book or in that story they are like, 'don't know because they haven't looked at the pictures'.

Teachers did not always seem aware that their approaches were in tension with what was required by policy and the National Curriculum (2014) which focuses on phonics as the prime approach to decoding.

This example illustrates what the NFER evaluation (Walker et al, 2015) raised, the apparent contradictions in teachers' stated views and practices. The example demonstrates that this is not 'muddled thinking' on behalf of teachers but a reflection of their experience of 'what works' for the children they teach.

Dogwood School's teachers' responses differed from those at Elm School in that the initial responses to the question about the way that reading was taught focused more on its 'approach' to teaching rather than strategies other than phonics. Again the contextual data is interesting showing that this was one of the schools in an area of high socio-economic advantage. The school had focused on improving PSC scores following scrutiny after its low (against national standards) 2014 PSC results although during this period it had continued to have reading attainment scores above the national average at the end of KS1 and KS2.

<u>Dogwood School</u>

Researcher: In your experience what is the most effective approach to the teaching of reading?

Alice (line 1) Equipping the children so they feel they can do it.

Alice (line 3) Playful ways that happen across the day and all the ways you can present it to the children in a non-threatening kind of, not in a copying and sitting sort of way, but all around them in any way you can present it to children and involve them in it

Bess (line 4) And involve their parents – that's so important

Cat (line 5) And I would say playing with sound as well and in the environment

Deb (line 6) Actually reading to them things that are fun and catch their imagination so that they realise the point of reading that they get something out of it, that it is not just word reading that they get nothing from it, they get something from a story

Elisa (line 7) I think phonics does play a big part in that as well because, for some children, my experience further up shows it doesn't work for all children but I do believe that further down the school phonics does work for a lot of children

Flo (line 8) And those sight words, how they learn those as well – those really high frequency words

Deb (line 10) And acknowledging really early that some children it just won't work for and for others it is totally fantastic and they just get it and so rather than continually ramming the same thing down their throats that there are other ways to teach reading

The teachers in the school start from a perspective of making the process of learning to read enjoyable, engaging and one that involves parents. They refer to a holistic understanding of reading, making specific comments about story rather than word reading. These teachers recognise a role for phonics for most children but suggest that their approach is more flexible with a reading culture of engagement and enjoyment taking precedence. Shuayb and O'Donnell (2008) identified the influence of child-centred approaches that require flexibility and autonomy in contrast to the influence of a view that sees education as emphasising centralised standards with political and socio-economic aims. There is some awareness by these teachers that there is a tension between their stated understandings of teaching reading and the curriculum view.

The questionnaire data provided an initial indication of these tensions. The curriculum states 'phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners' and just 14% (n=8) of the questionnaire respondents thought that the National Curriculum required a phonics first approach with 76% of respondents (n=45) thinking the curriculum required phonics to be taught but alongside other strategies or as part of a balanced reading curriculum. The remaining 10% said they did not know what the curriculum required. There were a number of contradictions visible in this data: 43% of respondents (n=25), agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics should be taught fast and first before other strategies' with 89% of respondents (n=51), agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'phonics must be taught at the same time and alongside other strategies' and all of the teachers (n=59), agreeing or strongly agreeing that teaching a range of strategies to word reading was essential. What might be evident here is Hammersley and Gomm's (2008) argument that people do not always do what they say or say what they do and McNiff and Whitehead's (2006) term, 'living contradiction' where people's actions appear to be in conflict with their stated values. This was amplified in the data that focused on teachers' changes to practice.

Changes in practice since the introduction of the PSC: tensions in practice and values

The questionnaire data showed the number of teachers that had changed their practice directly as a consequence of the PSC. 68% of teachers (n=40) said they had adapted their practice. When distilled further to just the year 1 teachers (n=24) whose children take the PSC, 92% (n=22) said they had adapted their practice. One teacher said he/she had not adapted practice with one teacher saying he/she did not

know if he/she had. When asked for the reason for the change in practice 20% of the group that had changed practice (n=8) said they had done this to improve children's reading and for year 1 teachers this was 17% (n=4). 87% (n=35) said they had adapted practice in order to improve PSC scores and this rises to 100% of the teachers in Year 1 (n=24 teachers).

All the teachers in the focus groups indicated that the PSC had affected practice in their schools. They identified this in a number of different ways including: an adaptation of practice to ensure higher attaining pupils were not disadvantaged; increased time given to testing children before the PSC to both prepare children for what to expect and to monitor progress towards school targets; an increased amount of time spent on phonics that teachers did not feel was the most effective use of teaching time in relation to developing children as readers and a greater focus on the teaching of alien or pseudo words.

Adapting practice – tensions in meeting the needs of more vulnerable learners

This example shows how one teacher described the adaptations to her practice in the light of the PSC.

> *Chestnut School*
>
> *Ali (line 13) And actually I always speak to those higher ability readers' parents at parents evening, we have a parents evening just before, and I say, really encourage your children to say what they see and not try and make sense of it as you would normally encourage them to do with reading and I give them extra work to do over the holiday period just before to ensure they are ready for it because they read so quickly, because they are fluent readers, actually we tell them to do the opposite to slow down and read words that don't make sense.*

There was an identification that children were 'beyond' what the check measured: children who read fluently and with understanding. Children had moved from the conscious application of phonics skills and were drawing on other strategies that enabled them to read with fluency. The progress of these children was slowed to enable them not to be disadvantaged by the PSC.

The teachers did not say that their higher attaining readers would fail the PSC but teachers noted that their scores did not always reflect the skills these children had as both readers and skilful users of phonics. This suggestion of having to halt the progress of the more able reader was highlighted in other schools.

> *Acorn School*
>
> *Ann (line 58) In Year 1 you do spend a lot of time on phonics with one word because that's what's in the phonics screening*
>
> *Beth (line 59) Yes and it frustrates those children who are fluent readers because I'm like 'sound out your words, sound out your words' but when*

*they read a book they just read it, they can read, they don't need to sound out every word but there I am – 'use your robot arms'. **

*robot arms' is an approach taken by some teachers to help explain the segmenting of words or speaking in sounds before blending the sounds to make a whole word.

Cath (line 62) It's at the point when they become natural independent readers and they use context more to work out what words mean than phonics really – yes, it's there as a tool, they have got it as back-up but generally they don't often resort to phonics.

Beth was aware that there was a tension in her practice and that this was not beneficial for certain groups of children. She identifies the use of an approach (robot arms) that might be appropriate for a child in the early stages of deliberate decoding when reading but the same approach would slow the reading of the fluent reader but enable them to be accurate in the PSC. Dombey (2011) had highlighted how the PSC had the potential to distort practice with teachers balancing the need for children to be successful in the PSC and for them to develop as readers. The teachers in this study are outlining not just how the PSC is defining what is taught but also how it is taught. This concern was identified by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) who point to the way educational assessment is shaping the classroom experiences of children and how the pressure on teachers to meet their targets impacts on their practice.

Other teachers identified further groups 'disadvantaged' by the changes in practice as a result of the PSC. They suggested that lower attaining children were having to be taught a level of phonics that was beyond/above their current understanding.

<u>Chestnut School</u>

Sue (line 82) I think that although at the moment we are teaching them split digraphs, split digraphs are perhaps not very often in books lower than a 9, because of the maturity of those words so if those children haven't got to a level 9 or above they are not daily reading those words and practising them, so when they see them in the phonics test they haven't got any idea what that is

Ali (line 86) It's really sad as I have some children who are very much still on CVC words but I am having to teach them split digraphs because we are having to teach them to the whole class, I need to keep them altogether, I couldn't have different children doing different sounds, those children doing CVC words are very unlikely to see a split digraph for a long time in their life and they are having to sit through a lesson being taught that and we are teaching it because we know it will come up in the phonics test and so they need to be exposed to it and how else will they be exposed to it.

The teachers are indicating that their professional judgement is being over-ridden. The PSC 'pass mark' requires children to have mastered more complex phonic knowledge and a wide range of phoneme/grapheme correspondences. Rather than supporting children to develop at a pace that the teacher considers to be appropriate for the child the teacher is expressing the pressure she feels to have 'covered' what is required. This teacher describes how this dilemma is of particular relevance to the SSP approach as prescribed by the National Curriculum. It requires a systematic sequence of teaching the phoneme/grapheme correspondences and the use of phonically decodable text matched to the child's phonics knowledge. In this way, the teacher stating that the child is 'unlikely to see a split digraph for a long time' makes sense as the texts the child will be given to practise reading will be matched to the slower pace of progression the child is moving at – so the child's books will only include CVC words with the sounds they know securely. This approach reflects the English Hub advice given to teachers about the use of the phonically decodable text. The teachers are however also expressing what Braun and Maguire (2018 p.8) call 'a sense of deep unease' of teachers who are compliant with assessment requirements but also show a concern for the changes in practice they have instigated. Braun and Maguire (2018) go on to identify 'a sense of selling out of professional values' and a 'destabilising' of 'passionately held child-centred principles' (Robert-Holmes, 2014).

Pseudo words: assessment and curriculum tensions

In the PSC the pseudo words are presented alongside a picture of an alien creature and this has led to the classroom practice of calling pseudo words 'alien words'. Research (Siegal, 2008; Gibson and England, 2016) indicates that word reading assessment using pseudo-words provides a reliable assessment of phonics skills and also is a secure predictor of later reading skills. However, Gibson and England (2016) go on to point out that using less familiar real words is a similar predictor and so the case for the use of pseudo-words is debatable. Teachers in the survey data, reported changes in practice to include the teaching of alien words (rather than their use as an assessment strategy) and this was probed more deeply in the teachers' focus group. There were clear decisions to teach alien words for the purpose of improving PSC scores although some teachers expressed their concerns about the practice. This was a conscious 'living contradiction' and a compliance 'that is not uncritical or unaware consent' (Braun and Maguire, 2018). This unease is identified here:

<u>Dogwood School:</u>

Alice (line 28) *teaching to the test; Teacher Deb (line 30) a waste of time*

<u>Acorn School:</u>

Beth (line 33) counter-productive

<u>Chestnut School:</u>

Sue (line 12) a bit farcical; Ali (line 20) wasting a term's worth of phonics teaching

Elm School:

Ava (line 17) It is literally teaching to the test; Ava (line 49) they have no idea what we are doing and why I am asking them to do it

Fig Tree School:

Roy (line 70) there is no reason to be able to read the words [alien words]

Gum Tree School:

Alison (line 29) it's for no other reason [than the PSC] Mandy (line 54) pointless

Teachers suggested, in different ways, that the practice of teaching alien words was detrimental to the process of learning to read where reading was characterised as a meaning making process. Whilst the use of pseudo words may predict future reading proficiency there is no current research on the short or long-term effects of actually *teaching* the reading of pseudo words (rather than it being purely an assessment practice). Moss (2017 p.62) outlines what the teachers are indicating, that 'the assessment tools themselves simply become the curriculum' and in doing so disturb the fundamental principle of what it means to be a reader i.e. to read with understanding. Stuart and Stainthorp (2016) whilst supporters of the PSC, make clear that word reading and language comprehension are interdependent processes and should not be viewed as separate. The contradiction between reading for meaning and the teaching of pseudo words is evident in the voices of the teachers.

Acorn School

Beth (line 31) You are teaching them [children] that it's OK to blend something and not understand it or think that doesn't make sense so I actually think it is counter-productive. Because a lot of our questions are like, 'does that make sense' they will say, 'Well it is a silly non-sense word' and you go 'can't argue with that because that is what I have taught you – sorry!'"

Birch School

Eve (line 23) And children try and make them real words because they are reading higher books and they are thinking – 'why am I reading non-sense words?'

Dogwood School

Flo (line 29) It could actually be quite damaging because language is about communicating and you might have nonsense words but they are communicating something. If you are reading a nonsense poem the

language is used to communicate an image or a movement or sound and you want children to have faith that language is communicating sense.

Deb (line 33) And they should always accept that when we give them books they are real words and they have meaning and they have been put there for a reason, we want them to understand the meaning not try and work out if they should even bother because it isn't even a word.

Alice (line 43) They have got enough words to understand without having to work out if it's bonkers or not. And those kids who can't work out if it's bonkers don't know really why it's going in the bin or the red dragon or whatever [this refers to games played with alien words – if children read a word and decide it is an alien word they put it in the 'bin' or 'red dragon's mouth']

One of the potential difficulties here is the approach to the teaching of alien words. Typical classroom practice, as outlined by teachers in Dogwood School e.g. Alice (line 43), involves children being asked to read a mixture of real and alien words, applying their decoding skills. As each word is read, children are asked to say if it is real or alien. This adds a further layer of complexity to this issue as the PSC itself does not require children to discriminate real and alien words; if it is an alien word to be read this is made clear, with the addition of a picture of an alien. It is possible that some of the issues teachers have with alien words relate to the way they are being taught.

The potential confusion for children was also noted by Gum Tree School when considering the links between reading and writing and how in one lesson a word that does not make sense is termed an alien word and so is appropriate and in another lesson, a word that does not make sense is termed as an incorrect spelling.

Lisa (line 32) Often in your literacy they have spelt something wrong and we say, 'oh look you've spelt that wrong ….and we say, yes you have to make sure you are sounding it out correctly and then the next lesson we are saying 'you need to look for those words that's what we are doing now, so I think for some children they probably are thinking 'what the ...is going on!'

In four of the focus group schools children with EAL were discussed in relation to alien words noting that for many of these children there was little difference between a real word and an alien word – many real words these children were reading were new to them and were words that they needed to ask or be told the meaning. Teachers described the difficulty explaining to the child with EAL that some words they were being asked to read did not have a meaning when at the same time, encouraging the child to ask about meaning and to extend their English vocabulary.

Gum Tree School

Lisa (line 30) and when they are learning language….. where the kids are EAL well, words they are decoding are often alien words to them anyway and so they are already having to apply it [phonics] but at least there's a purpose. Whereas you're kind of getting them to apply it to words they don't know and tell them well that is real and then the ones they don't know going, it's made up.

Teachers in Elm School suggest that the EAL child is not disadvantaged in the PSC but this is because meaning is not its central focus.

Becky (line 13) It's like EAL children sometimes do better because they don't even realise when it's an alien word because they just sound them out and read them and they must think it's just a word they haven't heard and so they read it but some EAL children who don't have that breadth of comprehension they find it really imposing because they are like, that word doesn't make sense – I've never heard that word before so why are you asking me to say it

The NFER evaluation (Walker *et al,* 2015) did not find any evidence to suggest that children with English as an additional language were disadvantaged by the PSC. It is worth noting that this 'disadvantage' was considered in relation to PSC scores rather than progress in reading overall and in particular progress in reading for meaning which was not a focus of the 2015 evaluation. Teachers in Dogwood School also suggested that children who have English as their first language but had more limited vocabularies were similarly disadvantaged by the PSC and they also suggested that a child's self-esteem could also threatened.

Deb (line 45) ..and you look at children who come from a different demographic then their vocabulary isn't as developed then there will be a lot more words that they don't know and will potentially say it's an alien word because they have never come across it and that's quite detrimental because you say 'no, no, of course that's a real word' and that conversation is actually quite demeaning

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper the contextual landscape of the accountability agenda, concerns about the impact of high stakes assessment along with and backdrop of concerns already raised about the PSC itself, were set out. The research reported here sought to listen to the voices of those closest to the implementation of the PSC and in doing so, value the contribution of the professional voice. To evaluate a programme comprehensively, the lived experiences (Kushner, 2000) of those most affected need to be considered in order to move beyond numeric quantification of success to a deeper understanding of the impact on day to day teaching and learning and on the professional life, values and views of teachers. By exploring the

voices of teachers the qualities of educational programme implementation become evident. Where teachers experience competing demands – outcome targets, parental concerns and children's learning needs - tensions arise when implementing new policy. Hong, Falter and Fecho (2017 p.21) see value in 'identifying and unpacking such tensions [so], we can better understand the complexities of the classroom.'

Since the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading in 2006, teacher training, in-service training, curricular and the newly established Department for Education English Hubs (2018), have all contributed to the focus on SSP despite as yet, any conclusive evidence that SSP rather than any other form of systematic phonics teaching, is the most effective approach (Torgerson *et al,* 2019; Higgins *et al* , 2017).Teachers in this study outlined a commitment to teaching phonics as a key approach to the teaching of early reading although it was less clear whether this was a pure SSP approach and where SSP sits within each schools' approach to the teaching of early reading i.e. whether other strategies are used and when and how they are used. Teachers also shared their adaptations to practice in the light of the PSC and these practices presented a tension between teaching to the test and reading development including: the slowing of pace in teaching for higher attaining readers; the quickening of pace for the lower attaining readers; the teaching of pseudo words rather than their use as an assessment tool and the possible confusions for children between pseudo words and a mis-spelt word. These practices reflect Ball's (2013) identification of how education policy implementation can bring into being unhelpful or indeed damaging practices which nonetheless satisfy performance requirements.

In addition these practices add a new dimension to what Beard, Brooks and Ampaw-Farr (2019) identified. They found that teachers had lost sight of why phonics is taught and the need for teachers to understand that phonics is not a subject in its own right but is a means to an end. Whilst the teachers in this study were clear that phonics was a key approach to the teaching of early reading, the practice that they went on to outline in relation to the PSC, demonstrated Beard, Brooks and Ampaw-Farr's concerns about the separation of phonics teaching from the explicit application of phonics in reading. The relationship between assessment and curriculum is therefore again highlighted in that practice was adapted to explicitly address assessment demands rather than learning needs. Further large-scale research is needed to identify if the preparation for the PSC contributes to phonics being seen as a separate body of knowledge and whether this ultimately has an impact on children's reading and attitudes to reading.

The teachers in this study were offering in part, a critique of their own practice – their reflections unsettled and disturbed them. 'Doing without believing' as outlined by

Braun and Maguire (2018) was evident. Opportunities and forums are needed for teachers to be able to share their professional concerns and voice practice questions in an environment away from the eye of accountability and compliance. Teachers need time to be able to explore the research that underpins the teaching and learning of reading as well as the tensions that are within it. This can provide the tools for critical analysis of policy, curriculum and practice and so a secure and robust basis for the requirement of the draft schools inspection framework (Ofsted Handbook, 2019 p.87) which states that teachers need to demonstrate they have 'a clear understanding of how pupils learn to read'. The final version of this document, published in May 2019, has been re-drafted to exclude the statement about 'understanding' and is replaced by the requirement for teachers to have 'sufficient expertise in the teaching of phonics and reading'. This shift to the performative does not mean teachers should not endeavour to understand the evidence on which the teaching of reading rests and so continue to develop as professionals rather than as 'technicians' (Harrison, 2010).

The NFER evaluation (Walker *et al,* 2015) states that there is no conclusive evidence the PSC is raising attainment in reading and this was further supported by McGrane *et al* (2017) in the report that analysed England's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study data. If the PSC is not having a positive impact on reading outcomes then it is essential that any potential negative washback is considered. Indeed, even if the PSC has a positive impact on reading outcomes one year later (at the end of Key Stage 1) and five years later (at the end of Key Stage 2) the data presented in this article demonstrate the need for a continued discussion about the unintended consequences of high stakes tests.

Acknowledgements

BERA ethical guidelines were followed and the research was subject to an ethical review by the University of the West of England 'Research Ethics Committee'. Approval for the study was granted on 4th May 2016 (UWE REC REF No: ACE/16/03/015)

Statements

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest: there is no conflict of interest

References

Ball, S. (2013) *The Education Debate* (2nd Ed) Bristol: Policy Press.

Ball, S. Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012) *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge

Beard, R., Brooks, G. and Ampaw-Farr, J. (2019) How linguistically-informed are phonics programmes? *Literacy* 53 (2) 86-94

Bottery, M. (2007b) Reports from the front-lie: English headteachers' work in an era of practice centralization. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership,* 35 89-110

Bradbury, A. (2014) 'Slimmed down' assessment or increased accountability? Teachers, elections and UK government assessment policy, *Oxford Review of Education*, 40 (5), 610–627.

Bradbury, A. (2018). The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability: A 'necessary evil' amid the policy storm*. British Educational Research Journal*, 44 (4), 539–556.

Braun, A. and Maguire, M. (2018) Doing without believing – enacting policy in the English primary school. *Critical Studies in Education.* Available on line http://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1500384 (accessed 20 June 2019)

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.

Carter, J (2019) Listening to the voices of children: an illuminative evaluation of the teaching of early reading in the light of the phonics screening check. *Literacy.* Available online at: https://rdcu.be/bqnkg (accessed 3 June 2019)

Clark, M. (2018) What determines literacy policies: evidence or ideology? The power of politicians over policy and practice*. Education Journal Review.* 25 (2) 2-29.

Clark, M. (2013) The phonics check for Year 1 children in England: unresolved issues of its value and validity after two years. *Education Journal*, Issue 177 13 -15.

Clark, M. and Glazzard, J. (2018) The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018. Available online at: https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017 (accessed 5 December 2018)

Creswell, J.W. (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Darnell, C., Solity, J. and Walls, H. (2017) Decoding the Phonics Screening Check. *British Educational Research Journal*. 43 (3), 505-527.

Davis, A. (2013) To read or not to read: decoding Synthetic Phonics. *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy,* 20. 1 – 38.

Department for Education (2010) *The Importance of Teaching.* London:DFE

Department for Education (2012) *Year 1 phonics screening check 2012 scoring guidance.* London:DFE

Department for Education (2014) *National Curriculum*. London: DFE

Department for Education (2017) *Primary Assessment in England: Government Consultation Response.* Available online https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644871/Primary_assessment_consultation_response.pdf (Accessed 5 February 2019)

Department for Education (2018) English Hubs. Available online https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-hubs-list-of-primary-schools (accessed on 20 June 2019)

Dombey, H. (2011) Distorting the process of learning to read: The “light touch” phonics test for six year olds. *Education Review*. 23 (2), 23 -32.

Duff, F., Mengoni, S., Bailey, A.,Snowling, M. (2014) Validity and sensitivity of the phonics screening check: implications for practice. *Journal of Research In Reading*. 38 (2), 09 – 123.

Ellis, S. and Moss, G. (2014) Ethics, education policy and research: the phonics question reconsidered. *British Educational Research Journal*. 40 (2), 241-260

Gibb, N. (2011) Creating a world class education system: speech to Centre for Social Justice Conference, London, 12 September. Available online at: http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a00197988/nick-gibb-speaks-at-the-centre-for-social-justice [Accessed on 11.01.19]

Gibb, N. (2014) Speech to the reading reform conference. Available online: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-to-the-reading-reform-foundation-conference (Accessed on 3 February 2019)

Gibb, N. (2017) Speech to ResearchED 2017 National Conference. ‘The importance of vibrant and open debate in education’ Available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-vibrant-and-open-debate-in-education (Accessed on 5 February, 2019)

Gibson, H. & England, J. (2016) The inclusion of pseudo words within the year one phonics ‘Screening Check’ in English primary schools. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. 46 (4), 491-507.

Gove, M. (2009) *Speech to the Conservative Party Conference 2009.* Available on line at https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601288 (Accessed on 20 June 2019)

Hammersley, M. and Gomm, R. (2008). Assessing the radical critiques of interviews. In M. Hammersley (Ed.) *Questioning qualitative inquiry: Critical essays* p.89-100. London: Sage

Harrison, C. (2010) 'Why do policy makers find the simple view of reading so attractive and why do I find it so morally repugnant'. In K Hall, K. Goswami. U. Harrison, C. Eliis, S. and Soler, J. (Eds). *Interdisciplinary perspectives on learning to reading Culture, cognition and pedagogy*. London: Routledge pp207 - 218.

Hempenstall, K. (2016) *Read About It: Scientific evidence for effective teaching of reading*. Research Report 11. Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies.

Higgins, P., Martell, T., Sharples, J.and Waugh, D. (2017) Education Endowment Foundation: Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1. Available online https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Presentations/Publications/Literacy/KS1_Literacy_Guidance_2017.pdf (Accessed on 20 June 2019)

Hong, X., Falter, M.M. and Fecho, B. (2017) Embracing tension: using Bakhtinian theory as a means for data analysis. *Qualitative Research*. 17 (1) 20-36

Kushner, S. (2000) *Personalising evaluation.* London: Sage

Kushner, S. (2017) *Evaluation research methods: managing the complexities of judgement in the field*. Charlotte, NC : Information Age Publishing, Inc

Machin, S., McNally, S. & Viarengo, M. 2016. "Teaching to teach" literacy. CEP Discussion Paper 1425, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics. Available online at: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1425.pdf (Accessed on 6 November 2018)

McGrane, J., Stiff, S., Baird, J., Lenkeit, J. & Hopfenbeck, T. *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): National Report for England Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment (OUCEA).* Available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pirls-2016-reading-literacy-performance-in-england (Accessed on 20 December 2018)

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. *Action Research Living Theory.* London: Sage

Moss, G. (2009) The politics of literacy in the context of large-scale education reform. *Research Papers in Education*. Vol. 24. (2) pp155-174

Moss, G. (2016) Knowledge, education and research: Making common cause across communities of practice. *British Education Research Journal*. 42 (6), 927-944

Moss, G. (2017) Reimagining the future in the light of the past. *Literacy*. 51 (2), 56-64

National Education Union (2017) Tackling Stress. Available on line https://neu.org.uk/advice/tackling-stress#how-bad-are-staff-stress-levels-in-education (Accessed on 20 June 2019)

Newman, J. and Clarke, J. (2009) *Publics, Politics and Power: Remaking the Public in Public Services.* London: Sage

Ofsted (2019) Ofsted Handbook for Inspection (draft) Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/801615/Schools_draft_handbook_180119_archived.pdf Accessed on 19 June 2019.

Ofsted (2019) Ofsted Handbook for Inspection. Available at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/801429/Education_inspection_framework.pdf Accessed on 19 June 2019

Patton, M. (1987) *Creative evaluation.* Newbury Park: Sage

Robert-Holmes, G. (2014) The 'datafication' of early years pedagogy: 'If the teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data' *Journal of Education Policy.* 30 (3), 302-315

Robson, C, (2011) *Real world research*. 3rd Ed. Chichester: Wiley

Rose, J. (2006) *The independent review of the teaching of early reading*. London: DCSF

Siegel, L. S. (2008). Phonological processing deficits and reading disabilities. In J. L. Metsala & L. C. Ehri (Eds.), *Word recognition in beginning literacy* (pp. 141–160). Mahwah, NJ:Lawrence Erlbaum.

Shuayb, M. and O'Donnell,S. (2008). *Aims and values in primary education:England and other countries.* England: Interim Reports, The Primary Review, University of Cambridge. Available on line https://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/research-survey-1-2.pdf (Accessed on 19 June 2019)

Stuart, M. and Stainthorp, R. (2016) *Reading development and teaching*. London: Sage

Taylor, L. (2005) Washback and impact. *ELT Journal*, 59 (2) 154-155

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G.,Gascoine, L. and Higgins, S. (2019) Phonics: reading policy and the evidence of effectiveness from a systematic 'tertiary' review. *Research Papers in Education* 34 (2) 208-238

United Kingdom Literacy Association (2012) Phonics screening check fails a generation of able readers. Available online at: www.ukla.org (Accessed on 23 July 2015)

Walker, M., Sainsbury, M., Worth, J., Bamford, H and Betts, H. (2015) *Phonics screening check evaluation: final report*. London: DfE