Should Australia be following England’s Phonics Screening Check?

By Robyn Henderson with Margaret M. Clark

This hot topic should be read in conjunction with an earlier ALEA Position Paper: Does Australia need an assessment tool to measure literacy and numeracy achievement in Year 1 classrooms? (Honan, Connor & Snowball, 2017, March). The Position Paper can be accessed from www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/1486

In January 2017, the Minister for Education and Training, Senator the Hon. Simon Birmingham, commissioned an Expert Advisory Panel to advise the Australian Government ‘on the development and implementation of the Year 1 check’ (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017). The panel members were:

- Dr Jennifer Buckingham (Chair), Senior Research Fellow, The Centre for Independent Studies, and Director of FIVE from FIVE Project;
- Ms Mandy Nayton OAM, Chief Executive Officer, Dyslexia SPELD Foundation, Western Australian President AUSPELD;
- Professor Pamela Snow, Head of the La Trobe Rural Health School;
- Mr Steven Capp, Principal, Bentleigh West Primary School in Victoria;
- Professor Geoff Prince, Director, Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute;
- Ms Allason McNamara, Mathematics Teacher at Trinity Grammar in Victoria and President, Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers.

Once the panel’s report was available (see Expert Advisory Panel, 2017, April), a media release from the Minister (Birmingham, 2017, Sept. 18), indicated that there was a ‘need for literacy and numeracy checks for Australian Year 1 students.’ He argued that this is important ‘to ensure students don’t slip through the cracks’ and that, as a result, ‘educators can intervene to give extra support to those who need it to stop them slipping behind the pack.’

While few teachers would argue against the importance of teaching phonics or teachers making informed judgements about students’ learning, there is considerable concern about the Expert Advisory Panel’s recommendation that Australia should adopt a modified version of the Phonics Screening Check which has been used in England since 2012. (For an example, see Department for Education, & Standards and Testing Agency, 2017: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/621157/STA177753p_2017_phonics_screening_check_pupils__materials_-_standard.pdf)

As will be seen from the evidence provided here, one concern is about the type of teaching that such a recommendation can seem to favour. As stated in ALEA’s (n.d.) Declaration, ‘there is a need for explicit instruction in letter sound connections (phonics) and word analysis skills.’ However, the important caveat is that such instruction ‘should always occur within genuine literacy events and in contexts meaningful to the student’ (see ALEA, n.d.).
Other concerns have also been identified. In a blog post, Misty Adoniou (2017, Nov. 6), an Associate Professor in Language, Literacy and TESL at the University of Canberra, provides some details about the nature of the Phonics Screening Check and her concerns. She argues that the check is not serving England well, that it does not deliver what it claims, that it has not enhanced reading comprehension, and that ‘the test itself is flawed.’ To explain the latter, she provides details about some of the pseudo words that are used in the Check. She demonstrates that ‘the students must decode the word using only the phonemes identified in the marking guidelines.’ In addition, it is possible for students who speak English as an Additional Language to be disadvantaged, because some of the pseudo words used in the Check have been ‘real’ words in other languages, but are pronounced differently.

In the next section, Emeritus Professor Margaret M. Clark from the University of Birmingham in the UK highlights some of the concerns that have been raised about England’s Phonics Screening Check.

The Phonics Screening Check in England, by M. M. Clark
In 2010 the Department for Education in England signalled its intent to introduce a Phonics Screening Check to be taken at the end of Year 1 in all primary schools. This was claimed to be a light touch, summative assessment that would ‘identify pupils with below expected progress in phonic decoding.’ Those pupils who failed to achieve the pass mark set at 32/40 were to receive intervention and retake the test the following year. In June 2012, the phonics check of 40 words (20 pseudo words and 20 real words) was administered to all Year 1 children in state schools in England for the first time.

The Phonics Screening Check has continued as a statutory assessment in England since 2012 for Year 1 children and since 2013 for Year 2 children who failed to gain a mark of 32 in the previous year. Concerns with the test have included the following:

- the pass/fail decision resulting in many children between 5 and 6 years of age and their parents being told they have failed;
- no clear rationale for the arbitrary decision of 32 as the pass mark;
- the lack of any diagnostic aspects;
- the decision to make 20 of the 40 words pseudo words;
- the use of pseudo words as the first 12 words in the Check rather than real words;
- confusion for some children, including some who were already reading, caused by the pseudo words (20 of the 40 words);
- the possible effects on successful readers who might still fail the test;
- the large unacknowledged difference in pass rate between the oldest and youngest children (a year different in age);
- the effect of the coloured alien figures beside each of the pseudo words, which were intended to distinguish these, but actually distracted some children.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association (see UK Literacy Association, n.d.) and several teachers’ unions (ATL, NAHT, NUT) investigated teachers’ views and found that:

- nine in ten Year 1 teachers said the Phonics Screening Check did not tell them anything new about the reading ability of their pupils;
- 86% said they should not continue, including many who had been open-minded before administering the Phonics Screening Check;
- nine in ten teachers had their students practise reading made-up (pseudo) words;
- many felt under pressure to teach synthetic phonics immediately prior to the test. (See Clark, 2016, p. 126)
The Department for Education commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to undertake research over the period 2012–2015 to consider the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools, on the wider literacy curriculum and on the standard of reading (see Walker, Sainsbury, Worth, Bamforth, & Betts, 2015). Most teachers interviewed as part of the case study visits to schools reported that the check would have minimal, if any, impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future.

While many interviewees reported no substantial changes to teaching, those who did mention changes indicated:

- a greater focus on pseudo words;
- more phonetic spelling tests rather than high frequency words;
- parental workshops on phonics;
- revision sessions in preparation for the check;
- an increase in the number of phonics sessions;
- many schools appear to believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods;
- most teachers are positive about the importance of phonics teaching.

In its final report, the National Foundation for Educational Research stated that:

There were no improvements in attainment that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the check, nor any identifiable impact on pupil progress in literacy for learners with different levels of prior attainment. (Walker et al., 2015, p. 67)

Further information can be obtained from my recently edited book, Reading the evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning, which has seven contributors, all leading literacy experts, four from the UK and three from Australia (Misty Adoniou, University of Canberra; Robyn Cox, Australian Catholic University; Paul Gardner, Curtin University), two of whom had previous experience in England. The book can be obtained from Amazon in electronic form at a very reasonable cost and as a paperback. The following provide useful information:

- Chapter 9, The Phonics Screening Check: Its development and consequences intended and unintended – disturbing evidence on the Check’s effect on the literacy learning environment in state schools in England;
- Chapter 10 by Terry Wrigley – updates the information on any effect of the check on attainment up to 2017;
- the appendices.

What should we make of this in the Australian educational context?

In light of ALEA’s Position Paper authored by Honan, Connor and Snowball (2017, March), Clark’s critique of the Phonics Screening Check in England (above), the insights drawn by Adoniou (2017, Nov. 6) and those who have commented on her blog post, and the ALEA Declaration (ALEA, n.d.), we suggest that ALEA members consider the following:

- the assumption that one way of teaching literacy, by itself, will work for all students all of the time;
- misplaced emphasis on the teaching and testing of synthetic phonics;
- the assumption that all children who are taught to be competent in phonics will be effective at reading comprehension;
- the use of a pass/fail measure that does not take into account that children begin at different starting points in their journey towards becoming readers;
- the public devaluing of teachers, by denying teachers the opportunity to make professional decisions about the form and timing of literacy assessments for children in the early years of schooling.
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These questions are also useful to think about:

- Why would Australia want to introduce a screening check that has not worked well in England?
- If Australian teachers are already teaching and assessing phonics, then why would we want to change that?
- Aren’t teachers the best people to be making decisions about the learning that their students need?
- Isn’t phonics best taught as part of meaningful literacy activities?
- Why would teachers waste precious time teaching students how to pronounce pseudo words?

Further reading


References


More ALEA ‘Hot Topics’ at [www.alea.edu.au](http://www.alea.edu.au)
References, cont'd.


Authors

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Margaret M. Clark OBE, who is an Emeritus Professor of the University of Birmingham and Visiting Professor at Newman University, has a DLitt for her published research on reading. Her book Learning to be literate: Insights from research for policy and practice won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015 and she has just been elected to the Reading Hall of Fame. She is editor of and a contributor to the recently published Reading the evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning, available on Amazon as an e-book and paperback in UK and Australia.