

The 'Synphonpreneurs', the Minister and the English Test.

The Federal Minister for Education, the Rt. Honourable, Dan Tehan, has made the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) available across Australia. The PSC, which is already mandatory in South Australia, has been imported from England, where it was implemented in 2012. The test is only mandatory in England, but has not been adopted by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have their own education systems. The Check consists of 40 individual words, half of which are nonsense words. Year One students must read thirty-two of the words correctly in order to pass the test, which the UK Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, claims to be an effective means of assessing students' reading potential. He also claims it has been instrumental in driving up standards of reading in English schools. It is surprising, therefore, that the devolved governments of the UK have not also implemented the PSC. According to research undertaken by academics in England, both the Minister's claims are contested by teachers, parents and literacy experts. The contradiction between systematic research, and the Minister's opinion, indicates a serious schism in the English Education system. So, why does Minister Tehan think the PSC will work in Australia, and does he not risk causing a similar conflict here?

In order to answer both parts of the question, it is necessary to unpack some of the thinking that underpins the PSC. Phonics involves teaching children letter sound relationships help them to decode words. This is a universally accepted practice amongst teachers and literacy experts in both England and Australia. Phonics is embedded in the Australian National Curriculum and has been a common method of teaching early reading in schools for decades. The longevity of phonics teaching, and its universal acceptance amongst educators, has been turned into controversy by 'agent provocateurs', who claim the opposite to be true. In both England and, increasingly, in Australia, a small group of people with vested interests has systematically used national media to construct a myth, claiming that teachers and teacher educators have failed to teach children to read adequately because they do not know how to teach phonics. These 'agent provocateurs' have a vested interest in promoting a specific form of phonics, known as synthetic phonics.

Synthetic phonics involves teaching early readers sounds, called phonemes, and their corresponding graphemes (letters). Once the child has learned the letter sound correspondences, they then synthesise, or blend, the sounds to read the word. In many words that have a consonant, vowel, consonant, pattern, (CVC) such as: cat, dog, hot etc., this can be a relatively simple process. And for phonetic languages where there is a one to one correspondence between each alphabetic letter and the sound that maps onto the letter, synthetic phonics is an effective means of teaching decoding, but English is not a phonetic language, and many single letters can have multiple sounds. This can be demonstrated by identifying how many sounds are represented by the initial grapheme of the alphabet. The short vowel sound in 'cat', is not replicated in 'was', about, or ask. In fact, there are nine variations for the letter 'A' alone.

Equally, single sounds can be represented by several graphemes, e.g. gh, ph ,f , ff. English also has unsounded letters in some words, such as doubt, yacht, ghastly etc., and it is not possible to correctly read, 'bow', or read, unless the word is in context. Whilst synthetic phonics is a useful strategy to teach early reading, it must be complemented by other strategies; a fact teachers and teacher educators have known for decades.

However, in English schools, teaching early reading by means of synthetic phonics became a statutory requirement in 2010. In the same year, a clause, added to the national teaching standards made teaching by means of synthetic phonics a benchmark to be met by every graduating teacher. When the English National Curriculum was re-written in 2014, synthetic phonics, as the *sole* method of teaching early reading, was made statutory. This year, Ofsted has been instructed to regard teacher education courses inadequate, if they fail to instruct students that synthetic phonics is the *only* means of teaching early reading. The narrowing of the wealth of knowledge about teaching reading to a single method amounts to a form of epistemological fascism.

Earlier this year an amendment was made to the national teaching standards, which now includes a clause on the teaching of phonics. The teaching of English in teacher education courses is currently being audited, and Minsiter Tehan is promoting the phonics screening check. The Australian National Curriculum is also under review. Suddenly education in Australia is beginning to feel a lot like England a decade ago.

The 'drivers' behind the promotion of synthetic phonics in Australia, as in England, include a small band of people that have commercial interests in the whole-scale adoption of synthetic phonics, and an accompanying scheme of leveled decodable readers. These 'synphonpreneurs' are the proprietors of early reading programs, costing thousand of dollars, who view schools as lucrative market-places. They have adeptly used the media to spread the myth that teachers are failing, and they have inveigled their way into positions of power, alongside Ministers of Education, persuading them that 'research' categorically states synthetic phonics is the only way to teach early reading; a claim refuted by reputable studies.

Learning to read is a complex process. Teachers and teacher educators are well aware of this. As reflective professionals, educators are continually reviewing their practice, affirming what works and investigating ways to improve. Professional dialogue across the profession, as well as between teachers and teacher educators, is the most cohesive way forward for Australian educators; not imposition and myth making.

Dr Paul Gardner 27th July 2020.