AN ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION OF THE PHONICS SCREENING CHECK: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS

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Abstract

The Phonics Screening Check was introduced in England in 2012 for Year 1 children. There have been criticisms of the Check in relation to its reliability and appropriateness as an assessment for early reading although supporters of the Check see it as a valuable tool in securing early reading progress. However, the government's own evaluation (2015 p.8) concluded that it "did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC".

With this in mind, this study sought to illuminate through evaluation, the intended and possible unintended consequences of the PSC foregrounding the voices of those most affected by the PSC: children and their teachers. The study was focused on a range of schools in the City of Bristol, selected for their diversity in relation to attainment data (PSC and reading) and socio-economic status. All of the schools had been judged to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. The study used an illuminative evaluation methodology with particular regard for methods that would enable Year 1 children to express their thinking.

The study has found that there is a subversion of the curriculum in Year 1 with PSC preparation having a disproportionate focus. Test preparation has become part of the curriculum to the detriment of specific groups of learners. Teachers are using the assessment tools of the PSC as their curriculum, including teaching pseudo word reading rather than using pseudo words as an assessment tool. Children see phonics as a separate subject, one that is disconnected from the meaning making process of reading. Children continue to try and provide explanations for classroom teaching with some of these suggestions having possible negative implications for children developing as readers.

The study concludes with a number of recommendations in relation to the teaching and learning of reading and phonics and policy in relation to the assessment of phonics and early reading.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The start of the research journey and the beginnings of the unfolding story

1.0 Introduction

Reading unlocks new worlds, different times and places and is an essential ingredient for engagement in the modern world. The teaching of reading and the commitment to children becoming readers, have been at the heart of my career as a primary school teacher, deputy head, Local Authority Literacy Consultant, Teaching School manager and university Initial Teacher Education lecturer. Much like the journey of learning to read and becoming a reader, this study is my journey as a researcher: learning how to be a researcher as well as learning more about reading and its assessment; how children and teachers experience the reading process in the classroom and develop their attitudes and beliefs about reading. Perhaps the most illuminating part of the journey were the parts lit by the voices of children and their teachers. It is these voices that are central to this study. Street (2016) identifies in research, cases and voices that are "telling" rather than "typical" and this research endeavours to explore "telling" voices to evaluate a key element of government policy on early reading: the Phonics Screening Check (PSC). This evaluation study reveals through these "telling" voices the intended and unintended outcomes of the PSC.

1.1.   Introduction to the field of study and the research aims and purposes

There is little disagreement in the debate about the importance of developing children as skilled readers. Voices from a variety of research and policy perspectives agree that being a reader is an indicator of future socio-economic success (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009) and that being a motivated reader who reads for pleasure and purpose is more likely to be a higher attaining reader and in turn, one who has wider academic success (DfE, 2012). Lewis and Ellis (2006 p.1) identify reading as a "vital foundation" for "future learning". The interest in reading has been further magnified by an apparent decline in the international scale on the PIRLS reading tests as documented by government and a wide range of reading

researchers (Gove, 2013; Dombey, 2011; Twist et al 2003, 2007). Whilst the nature of the international tests for reading have been contested (Goldstein, 2014; Stuart and Stainthorp, 2016), English speaking countries, most notably the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, have all been alarmed by their fall in the international rankings. These countries have been equally exercised in their quest to find the most effective approaches to raising attainment in reading with global economic futures at stake. This global interest in reading and consensus of concern about reading have not however, been mirrored by a consensus about the most effective approach to improving standards and so the most appropriate approach to the *teaching* of reading.

The debate about how to teach reading has been informed by multiple theoretical perspectives (Hall, 2010) although despite the characterisation of these perspectives as 'the reading wars' there has been general agreement that phonics has a role to play in the teaching of reading (Adams and Bruck, 1995; Stanovich, 2000; McCardle and Chhabra 2005; Torgerson, Brooks and Hall 2006). This study draws on the theory that surrounds the teaching of reading and the empirical research that has sought to apply that theory in the practice of the teaching and learning of reading. This further invites an exploration of government policy in this area which has claimed to draw on research to support and justify policy initiatives. 'The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading' (Rose, 2006) heralded a significant gear change in government policy perspectives in relation to the theoretical position that it privileged. This 'Independent Review' identified a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics as being the key to the teaching of early reading. This emphasis on phonics has many vocal critics suggesting that the focus on phonics is neither appropriate nor has justification in the theoretical or empirical evidence base (Ellis and Moss, 2014; Harrison, 2010; Kirby and Savage, 2008). The approach also has many supporters with Johnston and Watson (2005) providing a highly influential empirical study of Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, where they identified the apparent benefits of SSP over other approaches to phonics. This research influenced the 'Independent Review' and was also widely referenced in subsequent policy and government rhetoric. Whilst there have been significant

criticisms of their research design and findings (Wyse and Goswami, 2008) SSP has continued to be at the forefront of government initiatives. Since 2006 governments have strengthened this policy through a variety of curricular and accountability measures, most notably a new National Curriculum (2014) that enshrined the approach, changes to the Ofsted framework for inspection of schools and initial teacher education and funding for SSP programmes for all schools. In 2012 the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) was introduced as a mandatory assessment tool designed to test children's abilities, aged 6, to decode both real and pseudo words out of context using only phonic knowledge to decode each word. Whilst school results are not published publically, the data from the check form part of a schools' suite of data and this is used as a scrutiny and accountability tool by Local Education Authorities and Ofsted.

The introduction of the PSC was criticised (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2012; Clark, 2013; Moss, 2017) 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 raised issues with the PSC suggesting there are 'unresolved issues' in terms of 'validity and value' and "conflicting views of its usefulness" (Clark, 2013 p.10). Dombey (2011 p.23) suggests the check "distorts the process of learning to read." and so "threatens children's enjoyment of reading." Some of these concerns were directly addressed in the department of Education NFER Evaluation (DfE 2013, 2014, 2015). It is the PSC that is the focus of my evaluation study.

PSC scores have steadily increased since the test was introduced. This has allowed governments to claim some success. Nick Gibb (Minister of State for School Reform) makes this claim in the Department for Education (DfE) paper, 'Reading: the next steps' (DfE, 2015). He explains that these increased scores represent a success because the test has improved children's phonics skills and knowledge and that this in turn must be a good thing as, he claims, phonics is the fundamental building block of

learning to read. He is currently taking this message internationally, suggesting Australia should adopt a similar check (Honan, 2017). However, the DfE commissioned evaluation of the PSC, Walker et al (2015), concludes in its final report that since the check was introduced there has been no identifiable increase in standards in reading attainment attributable to the introduction of the PSC.

This study therefore begins from the premise that phonics has a role to play in learning to read but that if the statutory test, the PSC, does not have any evidenced positive impact on children's reading then it is important to also ensure that it does not have any other, unintended negative consequences for the child as a developing reader.

Whilst the phonics debate in relation to teaching, assessment and accountability continues to rage there seems to be one voice that has not been heard – that of children and their teachers. The groups that are at the heart of the debate, those learning to read and those teaching reading, have not been listened to and these groups and their insights should not be missed. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the statement by the High Commissioner For Human Rights (2005) enshrined the ethical, moral and legal rights of children to have their views heard about decisions that affect them (Mortari and Harcourt, 2012) and so there is also an ethical and moral imperative to seek the views of the child in relation to an aspect of education that holds the key to their social, educational and economic empowerment.

The study is framed by my personal understanding and values about reading and becoming a reader. Becoming a reader clearly involves developing the skills to be able to say words in the order they appear on a page or screen. However, this is not sufficient for reading; to be able to 'bark at the print' (Goouch, 2007 p.53) is not to be able to read. Reading and so being a reader, involves understanding, bringing meaning to and taking meaning from the words on the page (Tennent, 2015). This distinction is significant in this study: the distinction between a child who can read and a child who is a reader. If a child is a reader they are able to construct an inference-rich mental model as they read (Kispal, 2008) which enables the child to both respond to what has been read (cognitively and emotionally) and to make choices about whether to

continue to read or not. A reader reads purposefully: this may be to acquire new information to meet a particular purpose or for pure pleasure (Cremin et al, 2014). Reading for pleasure has the power to transport the reader to different times and places and the power to open up new worlds both real and imaginary. Not only this but being a reader is 'good for us': the level of a student's reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background (OECD, 2014). The ultimate goal for me as a teacher of reading and a teacher of teachers who will teach reading, is to ensure that the process of teaching reading reflects this ultimate goal of creating readers rather than just children who can read, at each step of the process.

This introduction has aimed to set the scene for my study in relation to the educational and political landscape. It has introduced some of the important debates that inform and prompt my proposed research. The next section will detail the research focus, the proposed aims and outline some of the main and subsidiary research questions.

1.2 Research Focus

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) suggest research needs clear questions to direct the research and before this, precise aims to determine and frame the questions. The research, **through seeking the views of children and teachers**, will aim to:

1. **Evaluate** the effectiveness and impact of the PSC in relation to its intended aims and specifically as an effective tool in enabling children to develop as readers

2. **Identify** any unintended outcomes, or negative 'washback' of the PSC, for example the effects of changes in teacher practices (the 2015 Evaluation report identified that the most significant change in practice was the explicit teaching of pseudo words) and the differences in possible impacts for children from varying socio-economic groups.

3. **Follow-up and explore** some of the findings of the 2015 DfE Evaluation of the PSC in relation to:
    - Teachers' views and understanding of policy in relation to early reading and their role in the implementation of policy

- The possible 'living contradictions' (Whitehead, 1988) within teachers' views and practices

4. **Seek** the views of and give voice to those directly affected by the PSC: children and their teachers. Whilst this is intended to open the evaluation to new perspectives it is hoped it will also support the identification of the extent to which the PSC shapes teachers' and children's reading values and practices as well as taking into account the possible influence of teachers' perspectives on children's views and so embed the research in a socio-cultural perspective.

1.3 Research questions

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) suggest that research questions support the problematisation of the area of study and enable the researcher to 'make the familiar strange'. The main research questions are therefore:

In relation to children's and teachers' views:

A. To what extent has the PSC been an effective tool in the teaching of reading?

B. To what extent has the PSC framed teachers' and children's practices and understanding of being a reader and being a teacher of reading?

1.4 Subsidiary research questions

The main research questions can be further understood through the following subsidiary questions:

Subsidiary questions for main research question A:

> **In relation to children's and teachers' views**:
>
> Does the emphasis on one skill involved in reading affect reading attainment?

Does the PSC enable teachers to identify children that need additional support?

Subsidiary questions for main research question B:

In relation to children's and teachers' views:

How are children's attitudes to reading influenced (if at all) by the PSC?

Are children from different socio-economic backgrounds influenced (or not) by the PSC in the same way?

What is the impact on children of reading and being taught pseudo words?

1.5 Personal rationale – an introduction

In order to provide a rationale for the research it is useful to refer to Pillow's consideration of reflexivity. She states that the researcher needs to "be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher's self-location…position and interests influence all stages of the research process." Pillow (2010 p.179). This research is situated in my personal history and professional story and as such, it is useful to explore this at the outset. My own 'case' could be described as "telling" (Street, 2016): my particular circumstances enable me, as researcher to have a unique perspective.

As a teacher of reading for over twenty-five years in a range of different capacities my career has closely followed the changes in the approaches. I currently work as a lecturer in Initial Teacher Education, responsible for the educating of student teachers in the teaching of reading in an era where negative responses to the questions on phonics training in the Newly Qualified Teacher survey could have been responsible for the closure of an Education Department. I have pioneered collaborative working between the University and the Reading Recovery Programme – a programme whose influences are from a different theoretical position than current policy might espouse. I have also worked as a trainer and consultant for a nationally influential phonics

commercial programme, which promoted the principles of SSP. I have also been a classroom teacher and have provided in class support for teachers as part of a Local Authority role. My interest in the PSC is therefore both personal and professional and spans a range of theoretical and practice models.

The PSC confirms the ideological position that SSP is the only way to improve standards in reading; that reading is a linear process and a set of stepped skills to be achieved. It effectively side steps a wide body of research that identifies reading as a more complex activity situated in a child's socio-cultural practices. This was made particularly clear when a head teacher recounted an incident with one of her children as they took the PSC: the word the child had to decode was 'nigh'. The children sounded 'n-i-g-hur' and then was very upset as she thought she had sounded an offensive word relating to her skin colour and ethnicity. This incident was not typical but was telling; telling in relation to the possible unintended negative consequences of a test focused on decoding rather than reading.

My research cannot therefore claim to be objective but is rooted in a socio-cultural view, situated in my varied experiences, knowledge and reflexivity. Research requires the researcher to suspend what they think they know so that they can be open to alternative models or ways of thinking (Street, 2016) and whilst this is an aim, I am acknowledging that this openness is hard to achieve when I have had a life time steeped in the learning and teaching of reading and phonics in particular.

1.6 Setting and methodology – an introduction

Taking these personal, professional and theoretical stories as a frame for my research the research will, through questionnaire and focus group interviews evaluate the PSC in relation to the research aims set out earlier. My ontological position sits within the paradigm of relativism, the belief in how the "local and specific construct and co-construct reality" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011 p.98). Crotty (1998) sets out an overview of methodological positions and using this I can locate my epistemological position as social constructivist, in relation to the building of knowledge, and social constructionist, in relation to understanding reality as a construction based on experiences and perspectives of this knowledge, and this is set within an interpretivist

paradigm. By choosing evaluation as my approach to research, I am selecting a methodological approach "grounded in problems arising in the real world," and that is a "reflective learning process" and "part of the development of practice." (Abma and Widdershoven, 2011 p.669 - 670)

Elliot and Kushner (2007 p.321) identify educational evaluation as a "response to a need to determine the worth of funded educational programmes". Robson (2011 p.176) defines evaluation as a methodology that seeks to "assess the effects and effectiveness of something". My evaluation of the PSC 'assess[es] the effects' (including the unintentional effects) on children as identified by the children themselves and their teachers. Parsons, (1976) identified a 'new wave of evaluation' which according to Elliot and Kushner (2007 p.323) "urged an acknowledgment of programme evaluation as a political process …as it typically revealed contestation over programme goals and over the criteria for judging the merits of a programme". This is particularly relevant to my evaluation as it engages with the 'political process' of evaluation and so uncovers contested perspectives.

Parlett and Hamilton (1977) introduced the term 'illuminative evaluation' following a need for situationally located theories of evaluation. MacDonald and Parlett (1973) produced a 'manifesto' for this approach that included an emphasis on processes, responsiveness to context and an awareness of unanticipated events. Patton (1987 p.18) argues that "every evaluation situation is unique" and so requires "situational responsiveness". This embedded nature of context is relevant to my evaluation as it identifies the different effects of the PSC in different contexts i.e. in different socio-economic areas.

Schools were selected from different socio-economic areas across the City of Bristol. The PSC scores/school outcomes were also considered to ensure that there was representation within each socio-economic area of a range of PSC scores. Teachers completed an initial questionnaire about their views, values and understanding of the role of the PSC and this was followed by focus group interviews with children in Year 1 classes. Interviews took place in the summer, following the PSC. Once the interviews

had been analysed, focus group interviews were held with the teachers in each of the schools.

Silverman (2000) outlines the different types of 'stories' that research can tell: the hypothesis story (the story that begins with a hypothesis that is then tested); the analytical story, described by Silverman (2000 p.243) as a more "conversational way of writing" which develops through a series of questions and responses, and the mystery story, writing that develops the questions by discussing them and leading the reader into interpretations of the data (Alasuutari, 1995 p.183). This research could be described as a hypothesis story: the starting point being the hypothesis that the PSC is not a value free activity and that the values that it espouses have the possibility of affecting the views, attitudes and understandings of both teachers and children in ways that were perhaps both intentional (in relation to theoretical understandings of the reading process) and unintentional (in relation to attitudes developed and the implications of those attitudes), positive and negative.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature that is relevant to the different key aspects of this study. The body of literature about reading and the teaching of reading is vast and so the literature review necessarily selects key areas to review. It begins by discussing the range of theoretical approaches to reading and in particular the theoretical perspectives around the role of phonics in learning to read. It explores the tensions between the different perspectives and discusses the differences in understanding the reading process and understanding the processes in the teaching of reading. Key arguments in the reading debate are set out and their relevance and influence on policy and so the PSC. The review considers how policy has developed in relation to these theoretical perspectives and so how and why the PSC was introduced. The literature review then considers the literature that focuses on the PSC itself: this reflects on the reliability and validity of the check. As the PSC was introduced in 2012 the literature in this area is not as extensive as in other aspects of reading.

The literature review then moves on to consider the significance and relevance of the voice of the child in relation to research about reading. It reviews the literature that both justifies and promotes children's voice in the research process and also considers the possible issues, barriers to and criticisms of research with children, rather than research 'on children'.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology of the study setting out initially the research paradigm before discussing the justification for and choice of evaluation as the research methodology. This chapter also provides and overview of the methods used and considers the ethical implications of the study and in particular discusses the ethical considerations when researching with children. The approach to the sampling process is explained and an overview of the approach to the data analysis is set out, and this is further elaborated in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 gives the detail of the analysis process and sets out how the findings were established. Chapter 5 then shows the analysis of the data relating to the teachers and the resulting findings and provides a discussion of these findings. Chapter 6 explores the analysis of the children's data and sets out the findings and related discussions.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis. It provides a summary of the findings in relation to each research question and subsidiary research question. It goes on to make recommendations for policy and practice and suggests further areas for research. The conclusion considers possible alternative approaches to the research and the further opportunities it offers in relation to research. It concludes with a personal reflection.

This introductory chapter has aimed to provide an overview and road map for this thesis and represents the starting point of the research journey and the beginnings of the unfolding story.

Chapter 2

The Literature Review: The many stories that are told

2.0 An introduction

Wolcott (1990, p.17) discusses the literature review as something that enables the researcher to provide the "necessary 'nesting' of the problem". The possible 'problem' in question in this research is the potential unintended consequences of the PSC on the knowledge, skills and understanding of teachers in relation to the teaching of reading and also the possible unintended consequences of the PSC in relation to children's understanding of what it means to be a reader and their attitudes to reading. The literature review will therefore consider some relevant contextual arguments that inform this hypothesis in relation to the theory of reading and phonics in particular; the policy debate that explores how theory has been used to develop the policy that has determined practice and led to the introduction of the PSC; an exploration of current research that focuses on the PSC and how this informs this study alongside a consideration of current assessment practices of which the PSC is a part and also the literature that both justifies and problematizes the central role of children as active agents in the research process.

2.1 Theory, phonics and reading

The literature about the theory of reading including both how we learn to read and how we teach reading, is vast. This literature review therefore, has selected literature that is representative of the main theoretical and research perspectives to provide a clear background and context for this evaluation study.   It is also relevant to note the voracious and often ferocious nature of the debate within the literature in this area: reading research, as already stated, is a highly contested area. Whilst this part of the literature review aims to present an overview to date, it should be noted that this overview is being viewed and presented through my particular 'reading values lens' and where this is particularly relevant, this will be noted for the reader.

The differing perspectives in the reading debate have been characterised as the 'reading wars' (Chall, 1967; Stanovich, 1995; Connor, Morrison, and Katch, 2004). The question of how we learn to read is informed by different perspectives and viewpoints

(Hall et al, 2010). These perspectives have become increasingly visible where governments have promoted a specific perspective, suggesting that in reading, there is one ultimate answer. In this debate it is evident that no one has asked children about their knowledge of how they learn to read or how the teaching affects their understanding of the reading process and their attitudes to reading and this will be a focus of a later section within this chapter.

The range of theoretical perspectives are significant in understanding both the reading debate and the basis for, justification and criticisms of, the PSC. The theoretical debate exists on a number of different levels. There are specific theoretical frameworks of how we read for example, the 'Simple View of Reading' that proposes there are two distinct and separate skills domains (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) and 'orchestration models' (Kelly, 2008) that propose that reading draws on a range of cues. At another level, theory impacts on subparts of reading, for example there are theories that relate to word recognition processes, for example the 'Dual Cascade Model' that suggests orthographic, semantic and phonemic processes are involved in word recognition (Coltheart et al, 2001). Other theories relate to reading comprehension, for example Kintsch's 'construction-integration' model (1988). These theories can be further sub-divided when looking at the practical application of theory into teaching practice for example Goodman's (1970) whole language approach that demonstrated the range of skills and knowledge that children drew on to read. In contrast, Stuart's (2006) study of the application of word reading theory in practice, concluded that children should receive phonics teaching as they began schooling. This later study followed the Clackmannanshire studies by Johnston and Watson (2004, 2005) that focused on the type of phonics taught: they claimed their research showed that Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) was a more effective approach to teaching word reading than other forms of phonics.

A further layer of theory can be added when considering the learning theory that underpins research: so cognitivist learning theory that underpins much of word reading theory and the socio-cultural approaches that often underpin theory around reading comprehension, for example Smith's model of "comprehension as a social act" (2010, p61). Hall (2003) captured these perspectives clearly in the book 'Listening to

Stephen Read: Multiple Perspectives in Literacy' where she asked a range of researchers, from four theoretical perspectives (psycholinguistic; cognitive-psychology; socio-cultural and socio-political) to analyse and comment on Stephen's reading. The resulting discussion demonstrated the different priorities and starting points for analysis that characterise the differing theoretical viewpoints. Hall (2010) identifies the socio-cultural, educational, linguistic, psychological, neuro-scientific and biological traditions of reading research and suggests that these different research perspectives rarely collaborate, even publishing in different and distinct academic journals. The resulting discussion demonstrated the different priorities and starting points for analysis that characterise the differing theoretical viewpoints.

These theoretical viewpoints are significant in understanding the antecedence and context of current reading curricular and pedagogy. These in turn, determine the assessment and testing regime, namely the PSC. In addition, each theoretical viewpoint positions the child in a different way and this is important in developing an understanding of how the approaches to reading and reading assessment could affect a child's understanding of herself as a reader or reading itself and as Bruner (1996, p.63) notes, "pedagogy is never innocent. It is the medium that creates its own message."

Rassool (2009) identified distinct paradigms of knowledge, research and understanding and explored the fundamental differences in these that frame the differences in approaches to literacy and so reading. These differing fields of study will be explored in the following sections to exemplify and explore the contrasting theories that are seen as significant in what academics and policy makers in the field of reading, have termed the 'reading wars' (Stanovich, 1995, Goodman, Calfee and Goodman, 2013)

2.1.1 Theory, phonics and reading: **experimental psychology and the psycholinguists**

The cognitivist approach to reading can be found in the biological and psychological research perspective and increasingly from the field of neuroscience. Rassool (2009 p.8) locates this "experimental behavioural psychology" as focusing on the "*cognitive processes that underlie skilled reading and learning how to read*"(authors emphasis). Freebody and Freiberg, (2001, p.222) characterise this perspective as ;

the notion that 'reading' refers to a fundamentally single, internal and thus fully portable, individual and determinable activity – that it is a finally discoverable psychological process.

 Comber and Cormack (1997, p.1) suggest this theoretical view of reading is based on "a view of the individual learner doing brain work, solving the literacy puzzle". Huey (1968) identified the 'discovery' of how we learn to read as the ultimate goal of the psychologist as it required the ability to uncover the complex workings of the brain. This more recent pursuit of the 'Holy Grail' (Burkard, 1999) of the application of this knowledge into reading instruction has been, in large part, fuelled by political and ideological imperatives. Goodman (2014) claims that this imperative has led to a particular cognitivist research approach being privileged and cites the 'The National Reading Panel' (1997 – 2000), as only accepting 'scientific research'. This panel was established by the American government in 1997 with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of reading and was significant in framing a similar investigation in England. Scientific research, it was claimed "has solved many of the world's thorniest medical mysteries – mysteries just as complex as reading" (Lyon and Chhabra, 2004 p.17). This experimental psychology approach is viewed as the only logical view (Reyna, 2002a) because these scientific lines of enquiry use "methods and data that can be subject to scrutiny and replication" (McCardle and Chhabra, 2005 p.450).

Reading, therefore from this theoretical perspective is characterised as "a set of basic skills" that can be discovered (Goodman, 2014 p.2). This has meant that the focus necessarily surrounds knowledge of orthography (Perfetti, 1985) or "word-reading rather than text-reading" (Perkins, 2015 p.13). This has led to the experimental psychologist view being regarded as the phonics or 'bottom up' approach to reading: starting with the smallest units of sound, building these into words, building words into sentences and so eventually to the meaning of the text as a whole (Graham and Kelly, 2008). Comber and Cormack (1997 p.2) go on to suggest that experimental psychologist theories of learning to read were "built on laboratory tests" often focusing on micro elements of the reading process such as "where reader's eyes were directed as they read". The epistemological starting point of this view is that there is a discoverable truth to be found and that the logical approach that follows, is that of the

"medical model of methodology" which enables the researcher to "make confident assumptions about causality in research" (Harrison, 2004 p.28). McCardle and Chhabra (2005) go as far as to say that this type of research is not constrained by theory; the only theory that it uses is the hypothesis of the experiment. However Harrison, (2004, p.31) disputes this claim suggesting all researchers operate "within a personal and professional belief system" and that these "exist in a state of socially and rhetorically contextualised tension."

The 'evolving epistemological surface' of the experimental psychologist researcher focuses on the brain of the child as somehow distinct from the child herself, ignoring or perhaps disputing the view of the child as active in her learning. It could be argued that this perspective sees the child as passive in the reading process. The teacher therefore has to be the 'deliverer' of knowledge and that this knowledge needs to be 'discovered' by scientific investigation.

It is helpful however to pause and reflect at this point. It is all too easy to position this view as one dimensional. I am aware that as a writer I am selecting the literature that offers a particular view of this theoretical standpoint. But as outlined, the perspectives on reading are multi-layered and complex and as such there are other elements of the cognitivist stance that need to be explored.

It could be argued that an understanding of the experimental psychologist view has become tangled in the complexity between how we read, how we learn to read and how we teach reading. Opponents of the cognitivist view are often not opposed to the knowledge that has been 'discovered' but to its application in recommendations for teaching, often not made by the original researchers but by policy makers (Moss, 2009). So, knowledge learnt from eye movement study that "fluent readers fixate nearly all words and access the meaning of the word that is being fixated before moving on" (Perkins, 2015 p.6) is useful knowledge when considering how the reading process operates but to then extrapolate this to the flash card and decontextualized reading instruction practices of some reading programmes, is both not helpful and also not the intention of the researchers in the first instance anyway.

There are also a myriad of cognitivist researchers including those within an educational research background, Solity for example, who would identify himself as an instructional psychologist who claims to "shift the emphasis from what happens 'in the mind' to the structure of the environment and how it influences cognition" (Solity and Vousden, 2009, p.475) and this view begins to build a bridge between the theoretical positions and begins to challenge the polarised characterisation of the viewpoints.

Different elements of the experimental psychologist view are disputed: Clay (1972), Pressley, (1998) and Wolf (2008) would dispute that fluent reading is a linear process in which we first recognise letters and then build them into words, arguing a different view of knowledge that suggests that "we have top-down hypotheses – ideas about words and then letters, generated by overall expectations – and bottom-up hypotheses – ideas about words generated from the letters we have taken note of" (Dombey, 2009, p.5). Strauss, Goodman and Paulson (2009, p.27) would dispute the findings on eye movement, claiming his research shows that "patterns of eye movements are selective and purposeful, organized around the construction of meaning and not letter identification."

Other criticisms focus on methodology: Calfee, (2014, p.2) would argue with the definition of 'scientific' claiming "there are many forms of scientific inquiry, most fundamentally the technique of observation, of close examination of the phenomena under investigation". Further criticisms question the decontextualized measures used in scientific study, for example a focus on single word reading and non-word reading as the 'measure' of reading and how this differs from 'real' reading situations that are contextualised.

Assessment in this paradigm involves the assessment of these distinct skills in relation to the linear assumption of progress in reading skills. The PSC could be seen to sit comfortably in the cognitive theoretical viewpoint: it focuses on word reading; it decontextualizes the words to read and 'measures' through its pass and fail approach, children's application of letter sound knowledge, blending or synthesising of sounds and so word reading skills.

Many criticisms of this view come from psycholinguists and applied linguists (Goodman, 1986; Britton, 1975; Wells, 1986). The psycholinguist claim was that reading was a process and that context cues played a significant part in that meaning making process. Rassool (2009) argues that the 'reading wars' has in part, largely been played out between these two paradigms that "share some similarities": both focus on skills acquisition and the discoverable nature, through approaches to scientific experimentation, of how to acquire those specific skills. The key difference between them is that "one emphasises context and meaning whist the other stresses individual skills in isolation" (p.10). Both paradigms however, have an "individual, child-focused, pedagogic orientation" (p.10).

The roots of the psycholinguistic paradigm can be seen in the work of Goodman. He drew on the psycholinguistic approach and developed it within the "framework of applied linguistics" (Rassool, 2009 p.9) and this was referred to as the 'whole language approach' (1967). Goodman focuses on how children actively constructed meaning calling reading a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967). He studied mis-cues: how children used a range of cues to make sense of and take meaning from, what they read. Assessment in this approach focuses on the close observation of the reader, identifying the cues used and analysing the mis-cues that then leads to further focused support and teaching (Clay, 2000). The reading process is seen as driven by the search for and active construction of meaning contributed to by a child's social and cultural understandings and knowledge of the world and of text. Goodman (1986) contended that learning to read is easier when it is done in a relevant context, where the learner has some control or interest in the context and where children learn to read as part of purposeful and meaningful wider learning.

Criticisms of this whole language approach focus on the lack of coherence in the theory in relation to differences between adult and child learners. The approach does not distinguish between the skilled reader and the beginner reader suggesting they draw on the same social and cultural practices and range of reading cues. Perfetti, (1985, p.239) focused this criticism further saying "it does not recognise that one of the cueing systems is more central than the others" i.e. the word recognition cue. This criticism also addresses a further area of contention: that reading is staged and linear.

Dombey, (2009, p.9) makes a comprehensive argument as to why reading is not a "sequentially ordered" process but this is disputed by Stanovich (1995) who acknowledged the role of socio-cultural knowledge but argued that the first process was word recognition and it was from this that the process of comprehension could take place. He called this 'constrained reasoning': the application of social and cultural knowledge is constrained by the ability to recognise the words on the page. Ehri and Snowling (2004) also identified a 'staged model' of reading with four phases but with the early stages identifying the importance of letter sound correspondences. The proponents of the PSC would appear to adhere to the contention that reading is a staged process with the mastering of word recognition being part of the early stages of the reading process.

It is not only the psycholinguists that are the subject of criticism by the cognitive experimental psychologists in the reading wars but also those within the socio-cultural paradigm (Rassool, 2009).

2.1.2 Theory, phonics and reading: **Socio-cultural reading theory**

The socio-cultural perspective offers a different paradigm from which to study reading. This theoretical position also provides a lens to study the PSC. This theoretical position moves the focus from acquisition of defined and specific skills and knowledge and the location of these processes within the brain, to a focus on "the community within which the reading is taking place" (Perkins, 2015 p.15). This view "argues against a universal concept of literacy and proposes an acceptance of different 'literacies' within various social and cultural contexts" (Rassool, 2009 p.11). The socio-cultural view does not disregard the mind in learning but sees it "as embedded in material activity" (Edwards and Daniels, 2004 p.108). McNamara and Conteh (2008) identified learning as culturally contextualised and as situated in social and historical frameworks; reading therefore is not just about learning a set of skills but is socially constructed. Harrison (2004) points out that text is a product of the culture in which it is produced and Bloome and King Dail, (1997, p.612) that "the teaching of reading is in itself a social and cultural practice" and Hughes, (2010, p.400) that reading is situated in "the cultural influences of family, school, peer group, media and nation and the structural

influences of 'race', class, gender". Comber and Cormack (1997 p.22) say "[reading] is not a set of unchanging and universal skills or knowledge" but one that changes with and in relation to, historical culture and social factors. Luke (1993, p.4) suggests that "[reading] is constructed by individuals and groups as part of everyday life. At the same time [reading] also is constructive of everyday life". These ideas highlight the difference between the epistemological position of the cognitivist and the socio-cultural theorist; with the social-cultural theorist shifting the focus from the individual learner to the cultures and communities within which their literacies are constructed. For example, the approaches of the psycholinguist could not be applied in Qur'anic literacy where, as described by Rassool 2009 p.12), reading purpose is about prayer and comprehension and interpretation are not required as these purposes are "performed by the Ulamah (learned scholars)".

Socio-cultural theory, in relation to reading, sites the learning process not just within formal instruction in schools but in all aspects of a child's life and in particular the home. Studies (Barrs et al, 1989; Barrs, 2003; Levy, 2011) have shown the significance of the learning children do before they arrive at school. There is also strong evidence to show that different groups have quite different literacy competencies (Comber and Cormack, 1997) and a variety of studies, in particular the seminal work of Heath (1983), Street (1993) and Rodriguez's (2013) work on funds of knowledge, have shown how cultural and social practices influence the type of literacy a child uses as they reach school age. Children whose family literacy practices best match those of formal schooling tend to do better in reading (in the way reading is constructed by the culture of formal schooling) than those whose family practices reflect other cultural and social literacy priorities (McLachlan and Arrow, 2011). This also necessarily focuses the socio-cultural researcher on the role of 'purpose' for literacy learning and so investigating which practices and environments enable children to identify a purpose for reading and so foster motivation in learning (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Cremin et al, 2008). The learner is therefore actively engaged in the learning process, where knowledge is subjective and learning inductive (children actively creating and interpreting meaning). This position also sees the learner as actively constructing meaning as they read "constructing both the text and the meaning so what the reader brings to the text is

as important as what lies in the text itself" (Perkins, 2015 p.4). Assessment then focuses on understanding and working with the child's perspectives of literacy that the child brings from their own particular social and cultural experiences. The skilled practitioner can then use this to support development beyond a confined set of pre-determined skills (Henning, 2017).

This paradigm is likely to disregard the PSC as an invalid assessment. The construction of reading that it promotes is not recognised as valid or relevant. "A sociocultural approach to assessment recognizes the dynamic interaction between teaching, learning, and assessment, spread across people, places, and time" (Morton and Guerin, 2017 p.1) and so focuses on the interactions of learning rather than fixed and determined ideas of 'skills competence'. Bearne (2017 p.74) describes this as an approach that "fully engages" with children's "literacy assets" and so using the daily classroom interactions as the tools to support development.

It is Ellis et al (2017 p.86) who attempts to provide a view of literacy learning and assessment that incorporates "the three central theoretical tenets" and so offer a possible balanced view and this will be explored in the next two sections.

2.1.3 Theory, phonics and reading: A balanced view

Whilst these theoretical debates are characterised as 'the reading wars' there is in fact more consensus than is often highlighted. Stanovich, (2000, p.416) stated that "the consensus was sitting right there waiting for us to grab it" and he goes on to credit his wife, a teacher, for pointing out that good teachers make use of all the evidence and use it pragmatically. This uneasy consensus is not new. Gough (1981, p.95) concluded, "Goodman was dead wrong about what separates the skilled adult from the beginner reader … [but] …I believe that Goodman's insistence on reading for meaning is exactly right. Our problem is to find a way to teach the child to decode while doing just that". Adams and Bruck, (1995) suggest we need to keep what is good about the whole language approach whilst layering in the knowledge about word recognition gained from scientific research. McCardle and Chhabra, (2005, p.450) say that what is needed is an "integrated approach" and the research evidence from Torgerson, Brooks and Hall, (2006) showed improved outcomes where phonics teaching and text-level

learning embedded in children's social and cultural practices, were integrated. Therefore there is some consensus in the different perspectives of what children need to develop as readers and these are summarised by Snow, Burns and Griffin, (1998): knowing how sounds are represented; practice with a range of texts; a developed background and vocabulary knowledge and specific skills of comprehension. Alexander and Fox, (2004, p.128) studied reading from a range of different theoretical perspectives and concluded that, "each had something to offer but also [left] out key elements of the reading process". Kennedy et al (2012) also argue for a balanced approach and maintain this as a value position that discourages single focused approaches that then determine reading instruction programmes.

2.1.4 Theory: personal positioning

Having identified some of the many competing perspectives in relation to the conceptualisation of reading in relation to research and pedagogy, I want to make clear my personal position. This is best understood with reference to a learning theorist rather than a specific reading perspective. Illeris (2004; 2009a; 2015) describes his theory of learning as "The Three Dimensions of Learning". The dimensions are "content" and "incentive" which combine to create "the internal acquisition processes" and "inter-action (between the learner and the environment that initiates and supplies the learning input)" (2015 p30). This theory begins to frame for me my rather 'eclectic' and 'unbounded' understandings that draw both on the literature but also my myriad of differing experiences. Illeris' three dimensions seem to me to bring together my perspective on the teaching and learning of reading. Illeris' 'content', in relation to reading, focuses on the skills and knowledge needed. There is some consensus in the different perspectives of reading, summarised by Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) about what this content might be, covering how sounds are represented; practice with a range of texts; a developed background and vocabulary knowledge and specific skills of comprehension. The 'incentive', in Illeris' model, in relation to reading, is about maintaining interest and motivation by framing learning in ways that best reflect and acknowledge children's social and cultural experiences and this is further developed through the 'interaction' element of the model, so developing organisation, environments and processes of learning that best facilitate learning to read. Illeris

suggests that these three dimensions sit within the social and cultural context in which the learning takes place and in reading this enables the teacher to adapt the three dimensions in relation to the culture (locally and globally) in which the learning takes place.

Illeris does not claim that this is a water-tight theory but more a framework for developing understanding of learning. He states;

> it can be read as an account of how combining many different contributions, finding the essential values, judging them and elaborating them…can produce a coherent whole, which is certainly not the one and only truth but a structure and overview that can be used and can help to grasp and handle the confusing and complex field of reality. (2015 p31)

This seems to best describe my position in relation to this research and thesis. It is perhaps a pragmatic position but recognises in part what Rassool (2009) outlines in relation to literacy as "multifaceted" and so requiring "different levels of analysis within a broad and flexible framework that incorporates complexities". She goes on to state that literacy "constitutes simultaneously a social practice, an ideological practice, a cultural practice and an educational practice" and that this complexity should inform policy. In the same way Ellis et al (2017) offers a model of three domains: cognitive knowledge and skills; cultural and social capital and personal-social identity in a proposed model of assessment and practice. Ellis et al (2017) state that "The theoretical paradigms enact different definitions of what matters, generate different kinds of data and different ways to capture, think about and respond to evidence" (p.86) and this encapsulates my position.

With this in mind it is important to consider the PSC in more detail: how and why the PSC came about in relation to policy development and which have shaped the current curricular and classroom practices.

2.2 The policy story

The PSC cannot be viewed and evaluated in a theoretical or cultural vacuum. The evolution of policy needs to be explored to understand the purpose, rationale and aims of the PSC and these are the basis of this study's evaluation. An insight into policy

development also provides a further context for the positioning of teachers and children in the discussion about the teaching and learning of reading and so the justification for their inclusion in this study's evaluation. There is a wide range of literature about policy as well as the policy itself and so this review will aim to summarise and select. This section will discuss the specific evolution and construction of policy in relation to the teaching of reading and the PSC. A summary timeline of significant policy and curricular documentation can be found in appendix 1 as a reference guide for this section of the literature review.

In 2011 the Education Minister, Nick Gibb pronounced "Evidence from around the world points to synthetic phonics, taught systematically, as the method that will bring all children up to the high level we want". This built on statements since 2005 from Education Ministers (from New Labour and Coalition governments) about their desire to raise standards in reading through the implementation of a "phonics, first and fast" approach (2005, Parliamentary Select Committee). The policy rhetoric around phonics and reading suggests a position that is both unequivocal and uncontested and yet the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier in this chapter indicate this is not the case. Therefore it is useful to consider the political imperatives that underpin and perhaps explain the reading policy development that led to the introduction of the PSC in 2012.

A new National Curriculum was introduced in 2014 that enshrined as statutory a SSP approach. It could be argued that curricular is not policy but what a curriculum does is promote a view and set of values around what must be taught. The curriculum of 2014 details not just what is taught in relation to early reading but also how early reading must be taught e.g. stipulating that children should read phonically decodable text in the early stages of learning to read and stating that phonics should be the prime approach to word reading. In addition to the curriculum, the White Paper "Reading: the next steps" (DfE, 2015) deals specifically with reading and a 'phonics first, fast and only' policy and the more recent paper "Education Excellence Everywhere" (DfE, 2016) foregrounds the success of the PSC in raising standards in reading whilst also claiming government is only interested in "outcomes and not methods" (DfE, 2016, p.12). There seems to be an apparent contradiction here with a curriculum which clearly details the 'how' to teach alongside the 'what to teach' and establishing the expected outcomes.

2.2.1 Policy: Political eras and the evolution of reading policy

Hodgson and Spours, (2004 p.7) identify the need to look at policy in relation to the influence of "political eras" and this can be seen in the two party political model that has dominated recent political history (Moss, 2009). There is a need for successive governments to both distance themselves from previous government approaches but also to demonstrate they have a new approach that will improve outcomes for children. Whilst there has been clear rhetoric around transformation from the New Labour policies to Coalition policy (2010 to 2015) and then Conservative government policy (from 2015), the trajectory of phonics policy can be seen as a continuation. The dominant discourse around 'outcomes', 'improving standards' and 'mastering of basic skills', was evident in 1998 and the New Labour National Literacy Strategy: A framework for teaching.

What is interesting to observe in this policy rhetoric is that phonics was introduced as the main approach to the teaching of reading in 2006 with schools being required to implement the recommendations of 'The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading' (Rose, 2006). This change in practice was assured by National Literacy Strategy training events across the country. I know this because I was one of the Primary Strategy Consultants that 'delivered' training. The reality in terms of practice is that there has not been a policy change but a continuation of policy. Any failure of previous policy in relation to raising standards in reading could therefore be viewed as an indictment of current policy. The current government could argue that this is a failure of implementation rather than a failure of the policy itself. However, Fisher, Brooks, and Lewis, (2002) suggest that previous governments did in fact focus on implementation, through employing teachers as consultants to train other teachers in phonics and to support schools in their implementation of policy. This study has a focus on the current second wave of implementation i.e. the guaranteeing of implementation through the PSC and how this compliance tool is viewed by teachers. The voice of the child in this study provides the unheard voice in relation to the possible unintended consequences of this method of policy implementation guarantee. A more detailed focus on implementation of policy will be discussed later in this section.

2.2.2 Policy: The wider influences on reading policy

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data have, according to Ball (2013, p.40) been used "repeatedly [by the coalition government] as points of reference and forms of legitimisation for their policies". Morgan (Minister for Education, 2016) references England's decline in ranking in the OECD and PISA league tables. Morgan points to Shanghai, Poland and Germany as making more rapid improvements in education attainment than England. International evidence has been used as the driver for policy with Gibb claiming (2014) "High-quality international evidence has proved that systematic teaching of synthetic phonics is the best way to drive up standards in reading". However, these same league tables seem to indicate something contrary to the claim: countries like the United States that had a similar, first, fast and only phonics approach as part of their "No Child Left Behind Act" (2001) and an outcome of the National Reading Panel's enquiry (2000) is also moving down the international league tables. Countries such as Canada, where phonics is part of a balanced approach to the teaching of reading is rising up the tables. In the most recently published OECD report (2016) Canada was ranked second, with the United Kingdom twenty-first and the United States, twenty-fourth. The government has instigated high stakes testing to ensure compliance to the phonics policy and yet countries that are regularly at the top of international rankings, such as Finland (ranked fourth in 2016) have "high levels of autonomy for its schools" and does "not have competition between [them]" (Ball, 2013 p.40). Ball describes this as a government "pick and mix" approach, selecting only the international practice that fits with a government's current ideological position.

The OECD shows, according to Ellis and Moss (2014) not a general decline in standards in reading but a divide, largely on socio-economic grounds, of those that can and do read and those that cannot. Rather than address or acknowledge the complexity of the issues Moss and Huxford (2007, p.18) point to the "repeated tropes" or "free-standing" problems that are identified by governments and "dealt with individually" by "distinct packages" so rather than seeing reading development as a complex mixture of "fields" policy becomes reduced to "what is wrong with phonics delivery". This is a much more contained and measurable focus (ably addressed by the PSC) for

government and so it could be argued, inherently more appealing than addressing the socio-economic divide in relation to reading standards. For this reason it is also one line of enquiry for this evaluation study: what are the differences in schools across different socio-economic areas in relation to the PSC both in terms of outcomes, approaches to the check and children's views and understanding of it in relation to reading as a whole.

2.2.3 Policy: **The appropriation of theory, research and knowledge as 'evidence' in reading policy development**

Moss (2009, p.157) states that "One of the dominant conceptions underpinning the current round of public sector reform is that policy can and should act as a mechanism for transferring appropriate knowledge from one place to another." The Coalition and current government has positioned themselves as 'independent' in the production of knowledge about reading by claiming the language of "evidence based practice". Therefore what counts as evidence becomes crucial.

In the desire to distance current policy from New Labour policy, Ellis and Moss (2014, p.252) suggest that the education minister, Nick Gibb used the Parliamentary Select Committee both to and for political advantage. In constituting those asked to appear before the committee he privileged one body of evidence – the psychological perspective, preferring this 'scientific' approach to research, one that focused on quantitative data and randomised control trials. Comparisons are frequently drawn with the medical profession and the nature of medical research. Indeed in 'Education Excellence Everywhere' (2016) Morgan states that one policy aim will be to "support the development of a high status, world-leading teaching profession, by supporting the establishment of an independent College of Teaching, a new professional body along the lines of the Royal Medical Colleges". However comparisons with medical research do not seem to extend to the ethical frameworks that provide a useful check and balance on medical research. Ellis and Moss (2014, p.253) argue that the medical framework states the requirement for "several methodologies … to be necessary to understand such complex situations" Evidence, for the purpose of the Parliamentary Select Committee however was drawn from one methodology only and according to

Moss and Huxford (2007), this focused on how children read and not how best to teach children to read. Goodman (2013) asks the question 'Whose knowledge counts in government literacy policies?: Why expertise matters' arguing that research evidence from particular research backgrounds and methodologies were systematically side lined and ignored in both the United States and English policy making. Alongside this was evidence from influential pressure groups including the Reading Reform Group and representations by owners of commercial enterprises, including Ruth Miskin. The influence of the market was further consolidated with Ofsted publishing the 'Reading By Six: How the best schools do it" (2010) report naming a few selected commercial programmes (including the programme developed by Ruth Miskin). Gunter, Hall and Mills (2014) term this the rise of 'consultocracy', saying that it was integral to reading policy design (and delivery and enactment) and so knowledge and 'evidence' production.

I was, for a few years of my career a Ruth Miskin Literacy consultant, providing training in her commercial phonics programme. I felt (and still do to some extent) the programme, taught with the passion and verve of a good teacher, would enable children to learn to read. When I look back on this time however I also remember the uncomfortable position of selling the programme as well being a pedagogic coach and realising that teachers were learning how to introduce and run the programme rather than focusing solely on learning to teach children to read. Teachers saw success as children moving through the programme rather than evidence of children learning to read. There are some resonances here with the rationale behind this evaluation study: has success in the PSC become the aim of teachers at the expense of children being developed as readers?

It can be argued that a truly evidence based approach would seek a range of methodological approaches and research positions, paying close attention to the peer review of those methodologies and findings. A truly evidence based approach would acknowledge issues with bias and the complex nature of commercial interests (Ellis and Moss, 2014). Dombey, (2010) in her summary of the evidence referenced in policy, indicates the decontextualisation of findings that fail to present the actual research conclusions. Ellis and Moss (2014) argue that research has been misappropriated by

policy makers and that there needs to be a new contract between researchers and policymakers to ensure an ethical use of research evidence. Governments have used a selective approach to the use of research evidence and have sought to translate this into curricular policy and then into policy that ensures the implementation of the preferred research viewpoint.

2.2.4 Policy: Implementation and accountability of reading policy

It can be argued that the PSC is designed to ensure the implementation of reading policy and to guarantee teacher accountability for implementation. Bryan (2004, p.142) focused particularly on the use of consultants (as part of the Primary National Strategies) as "policy levers". As a Primary Strategy Consultant between 2005 and 2009 I did not see myself "as a lever", I thought what I was doing was merely a practical enactment of a commitment to making a difference to the lives of children. On reflection I can see that perhaps my understanding of how to make that difference was framed by the discourse that introduced, unquestioned, SSP and a new accompanying vocabulary of "targets, accountability;…leadership, entrepreneurism, performance-related pay" (Ball, 2013 p.49). The Coalition Government had a focus on reducing the state and this enabled a justification for ending both the Primary Strategy and the employment of its consultants. It could be argued that without these policy levers, new levers were needed. Private consultants and companies were able to fill the space: the language of the policy discourse changed both to enable this to happen and to reflect the reality of practice. The early policy texts e.g. The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, Rose (2006) discussed teaching and learning and pedagogy and this was replaced by the terminology of phonics 'programmes' and a committee was established to identify commercial programmes that 'worked'. Alongside this 'marketisation' of the policy drivers there has been an accompanying increase in a "culture of distrust" (Olssen, Codd and O'Neil, 2004, p.192). This has enabled an introduction of greater surveillance instruments e.g. Ofsted, as well as compliance and accountably measures e.g. external testing and in this case, the PSC. Ball, (2013, p.57) identified this as a "Regime of accountability that employs judgment, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change". He goes on to say that "clearly, the issue of who controls the field of judgment and what is judged, what

criteria of measurement are used or benchmarks or targets set, is crucial" and this is particularly pertinent to phonics policy. The "criteria for judgment" was framed by the introduction of the PSC in 2012. The "criteria for judgment" was not, as one might expect from the stated aims of policy, to demonstrate children's reading abilities and attainment but whether they are able to decode a series of decontextualized non-words and words. This is the perfect test for the policy makers: initial low scores can provide a justification for policy and regulation; as teachers begin to teach to the test (Clark, 2014) scores will improve and provide evidence that the policy is working.

Having explored the evolution of the PSC in relation to policy implementation the next section will explore in more detail the specific literature surrounding systematic synthetic phonics.

2.3 Systematic Synthetic Phonics

As detailed in the section on policy it was The Independent Review of the Teaching of Reading by Rose (2006) that began the rapid development of policy in relation to phonics teaching and learning. Rose (2006) identified the need for the systematic teaching of letter sound correspondences and this had been recognised in earlier studies (Ehri et al, 2001) and also later in the review of the literature in relation to phonics teaching by Torgerson, Brooks and Hall (2006). Rose, however went further and as with the US National Reading Panel (2000), recommended systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). SSP the focus is on learning the smallest units of sound and then synthesising or blending these into words (Glazzard, 2017). The focus is on the rapid learning of letter sounds and the blending and segmenting of words from the beginning of learning. It is distinct from other forms of phonics which focus on larger units of sound so for example in analytical phonics children are encouraged to analyse the larger units of sounds in words and recognise patterns and links between them. Dombey (1998) calls this a whole-to-part approach. Blending therefore comes later in the learning process.

Rose (2006) drew his conclusions based largely on the study by Watson and Johnston (1998). This research focused on schools in Clackmannanshire, Scotland and involved different groups of children being taught SSP, analytical phonics and sight vocabulary

training. The researchers concluded that SSP led to better outcomes in reading, spelling and phonemic awareness. They also claimed that boys made particular gains with SSP and in a later study by Johnston, McGowen and Watson (2011) this claim was further supported. However, there have been many criticisms of the Clackmannanshire study. Wyse and Goswami, (2008) identified a number of issues in the research design that rendered the study's results invalid and unreliable. Ellis and Moss (2014) described the study as insufficiently robust on which to based policy. Whilst Watson and Johnston went on to conduct further studies to try and remedy the methodological issues, Clackmannanshire remained "below the average for comparator authorities" (HMI, 2006 p.4) casting further doubt on the reliability of SSP as a superior method.

Stuart and Stainthorp (2017) cite two further studies that claim to show the superiority of SSP. They present the research of Christensen and Bowey (2005) and Hatcher, Hulme and Snowling (2004) whose studies show SSP gives greater gains in word reading and comprehension. Bowey (2006) makes a case for the teaching of SSP in Australia where other approaches have been more broadly adopted. In 2005 the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy concluded that explicit instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondences was recommended – but did not go on to stipulate SSP. Subsequently the lobby in Australia for SSP has been vocal. Studies by McGeown, Johnston and Medford, (2012) and McGeown and Medford, (2014) have been cited as evidence for the superiority of SSP. Hempenstall (2016) and Buckingham (2016) make the case for SSP and the introduction of a PSC in Australia but do not provide any additional research evidence for SSP.

More recently Rastle, Taylor and Davis (2017) conducted a study with a focus on the benefits of phonics over meaning based approaches. They concluded the phonics approach showed considerable gains but this experimental psychology study used adults rather than children and an invented sound symbol language as its test. They acknowledge that there may be differences with children. This seems to reiterate Moss and Huxford's (2007) point that research evidence can be appropriated to make policy about teaching reading when the research does not focus on this.

Machin, McNally and Viarengo (2016) conducted a study involving the intensive support of a local authority consultants in training and supporting teachers in the use of SSP. They concluded that this had positive effects on children's early attainment although it is important to note that the gains were not long term – and gains were no longer evident in children aged 11. They suggested that all children appear to learn to read eventually but proposed there may be benefits of learning to read early that could be further investigation.

Shapiro and Solity (2016) focused their research on the differing effects of two SSP programmes – one which taught multiple letter sound correspondences and the other that taught only the most common correspondences alongside high frequency word learning. Findings suggested that there was no benefit in the more comprehensive programme. This is relevant to a consideration of the PSC and its selection of some of the less common letter sound mappings.

Higgins, Henderson, Martell, Sharples, and Waugh (2016 p.14) reported for the Education Endowment Fund in its guidance report on improving literacy in Key Stage 1 that phonics should be taught systematically referring to "extensive evidence" but states clearly that "Only a few studies have compared synthetic and analytic phonics, and there is not yet enough evidence to make a confident recommendation to use one approach rather than the other." By contrast no research is provided in Ofsted's report Bold Beginnings (2017) for advocating that teaching SSP as the preferred approach in the Early Years.

Despite this mixed picture of the research evidence SSP was enshrined in the National Curriculum (2014) and became the basis and justification for the PSC.

2.4 The screening check

The impact of the PSC on children and teachers is the main focus of this evaluation and it is therefore relevant to explore debates in the literature surrounding its purpose and effectiveness as a tool in improving children's reading outcomes.

Despite evidence to suggest that teachers were able to make reliable teacher assessments of children's skills and knowledge in phonics (Snowling et al, 2011) the

PSC was introduced for all children in state schools in England in 2012 as a method of assessing and reporting to parents, local authorities and government. In 2009 Gove, the then Minister for Education, in a speech to the Conservative Party Conference signalled the desire to introduce a phonics test in the first two years of a child's education. The rhetoric here focused on the test results being reported to parents so that they could challenge the child's school: "schools which have failed to get their pupils reading." Bradbury (2014, p.616) suggests that the assumption being made by Gove is that if children do not pass the test then they are not "being taught properly"; success then is not about being able to read but is about passing the PSC. The child as an individual, with his or her unique needs and differences is not mentioned in this speech. Children are 'done to' by teachers.

The White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching' (2010) further signalled the government's intention to introduce the test. The White Paper (p.8) took the stance that the curriculum included too many "non-essential" elements and failed to focus on those aspects of the curriculum that would enable children to "achieve standards matching the best in the world". The Paper goes on to set out the details of the accountability regime through assessment, introducing the need for "a simple test of pupils' ability to decode words" (p.11) as a means of both keeping parents informed about the progress of their child and "the effectiveness of the schools". There is a clear conflation of success in phonics (and note here, this is not 'success in reading') with effectiveness of a school. There is also an apparent contradictory focus on teacher freedom and school autonomy and yet a clear statement that SSP is the "best method of teaching reading". It would seem those drafting the document noticed this possible contradiction and felt the need to state that "there is no contradiction between …autonomous teachers and schools and high levels of accountability." The PSC is couched in terms of being "proper assessment" (p.11); it does not go on to explain what improper assessment might look like.

2.4.1 The PSC consultation

The PSC was trialled in the year before the check was introduced and was also subject to a public consultation between 2010 and 2011. The consultation document further

confirmed the rationale for the test as checking whether children had learnt to decode "to an appropriate standard" and that where pupils had not met this required standard they "should receive appropriate support". This reflected the White Paper's (2010) suggestion that the test would enable teachers to identify children who needed additional support. It is also clear in stating that one of the purposes of the check was "to encourage schools to pursue a rigorous phonics programme for all children at the start of primary school." The compliance agenda is clear although it is also evident that the ultimate aim is for children to become readers who read for "enjoyment and understanding" (p.3). The consultation asked for responses around the structure, content and use of the check, including the proposal that the check should contain no more than 40 words with no more than half of these words being non-words. The consultation document explained the reasoning behind the inclusion of non-words: these words being designed to ensure children were using decoding skills rather than memorising whole words. The consultation makes it clear that these words will not be words that can be found in other languages and would involve "normal letter combinations" (p.5). The consultation results were published but were not available recently (Dec 2016) on the DfE website. Following a phone call and email to the DfE, I was informed that the results had been archived. After some weeks they provided me with a link to the archived results. These showed that 64% of the 1071 respondents to the consultation were not in favour of the check including non-words. The consultation fails to give a percentage of respondents who were in favour of the introduction of the check (despite percentages being given for all other areas) just stating that "many" were in favour. Only 28% of respondents felt that the focus on phonics was the right focus for an early reading assessment check.   The Annex of the consultation document provides further details, with 66% of respondents saying the check should not focus on phonics decoding. The Annex provided additional negative responses to the specifics of the proposal including when it should be administered (with 58% saying that June was not the best time to administer the check) and the time given to children for each word (with 51% saying 10 seconds was not an appropriate time) and whether the results should be published on the online data and reporting systems that Local Authorities and Ofsted use as a key data set for assessing school performance (with 68% saying results should not be published). All of these elements (non-words; time of

the test; time given to children for each word and the publishing of the results) were subsequently introduced into the PSC ignoring the consultation respondents. Schools were first required to administer the check in 2012 and it consisted of forty words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) and the PSC has not changed in format or pass mark since it was introduced.

2.4.2 Criticisms of the PSC

Both during the consultation and when the check was introduced there was a wide range of critics including teacher organisations (United Literacy Association; National Association of the Teachers of English; National Union of Teachers) and academics (Dombey, 2011; Clark, 2012; Davies 2013; Gibson and England, 2016; Bradbury, 2014). These criticisms have focused on a number of different aspects of the check: its reliability; the potential damage it could have on children as developing readers and specifically the use of the pass/fail terminology with children who are so young; its fitness for purpose i.e. in identifying children who are at risk of not developing as readers; the inclusion of non-words and various concerns about the possible effect on the more able reader and on children with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Margaret Clark has been one of these very vocal critics of government reading and specifically, phonics policy. Each year since the test was introduced Clark has reported on the outcomes of the check, challenging what the PSC results data might be telling us and questioning the claims of the check. She raises the issue of reliability and argues a number of different points. Her first point is the arbitrary nature of the pass mark – a reliable test should have a pass mark that has a clear and justifiable rationale. No such rationale has been published. Clark (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) draws attention to the spike in the pass rates around the pass mark of 32. In 2012 when the test was introduced, only 1% of children scored 31 marks whilst 7% scored 32. This was later acknowledged in the government's own independent evaluation of the check conducted for NFER by Townley and Gotts (2013, p.6) who identified, "a spike at the threshold of meeting the expected standard" and they suggested that "pupils on the borderline may have been marked up." In a response to this, in 2014 and for subsequent years, the pass mark was not announced to teachers before the check

took place, however the pass mark has continued to be 32. It could be argued that if the pass mark was not the same, then the validity of year on year comparisons would be in question.

2.4.3 Criticisms of the PSC: Reliability and non-words/pseudo words

Clark's second point in relation to reliability is the nature of the inclusion of the pseudo words or non-words. The 2011 'Response to the consultation' document states that the inclusion of non-words is appropriate because it ensures that the check tests decoding skills rather than a child's existing vocabulary knowledge or sight knowledge of real words. It goes on to say that an assessment widely used at this time (as part of the Letters and Sounds guidance document, 2013) used non-words and so it was a method that teachers were familiar with and made the check quick and efficient to administer. The consultation had asked teachers about the time a check should take and so the focus on keeping the check quick and efficient can be claimed to be rooted in teachers' responses. However the conflation of the inclusion of non-words and the need to keep the check time manageable seems rather ingenuous.

Clark identifies that there has been no clear subsequent rationale given for the inclusion of non-words or as she calls them, pseudo words and that there has been "no analysis undertaken of the contribution of pseudo words to the final scores". This is particularly relevant because there is a wider leeway given for the pronunciation of these words, for example the alternative pronunciations of the long vowel sound 'ow', could be pronounced as in cow or in show. Davis (2013) would argue that this removes the test further from the real business of reading, where the correct pronunciation of the grapheme has to be determined by the meaning of the word. For example, I would not read Michael Gove to be Michael Guv (as in glove) or Michael Goove (as in move) because I am able to identify the correct pronunciation as I am aware of the context and so draw on my prior knowledge to decide how to read the name. By setting children pseudo words to read as part of a test, decoding is dislocated from meaning and so is dislocated from reading itself. Reedy (2014) in the UKLA letter to the Secretary of State for Education, suggests that competent readers will try to make sense of these words, and so "changing 'proom' to 'groom'" and therefore being

"marked down." However, it could be argued that this attention to what a word actually says is essential – competent, expert readers need accurate decoding to effectively gain meaning from text. Children who 'guess at words' based on their approximate appearance will not grow into readers who read and comprehend accurately, after all Graham Rawle has made his living out of the 'Lost Consonants' jokes in the Guardian newspaper (1990 to 2005) demonstrating the need for close attention to each letter sound correspondence as we read, so "dogs [do not] begin baking when the doorbell rings" rather than barking! Dombey (2011) suggests that doing well in a test that is made up of non-words is not a predictor of being able to read for meaning in other real reading contexts. She argues that it is the knowledge of the context and meaning that we create as we read that ensures we do not make decoding errors. We know dogs do not bake, we know they bark and so the 'reader' re-reads if they read 'dog bakes' rather than 'barks' because a reader is checking for sense and meaning as part of the process of reading. Non-words could encourage the child to think that such words are in some way 'real' and that in reading text they may encounter such words.

This also contributes, Davis (2013) suggests, to the unreliability of the test as it will give "false positives" so identifying children as failing the test but who are in fact clearly developing as 'readers' able to read with fluency, motivation and engagement who are making meaning from what is read. The test could also therefore give "false negatives" so identifying children "as making sound progress" who are not able to transfer their skills to a running text and who may also have more negative attitudes towards reading. It is in fact these children who are in need of additional support as they are merely able to 'bark at print' (Tennent, 2015).

Gibson and England (2016) investigated the inclusion of pseudo words in the PSC, identifying the different ways that these words could be constructed: non-words that sound like real words; non-words that have letter strings that cannot appear in real words; non-words that contain common letter strings that have rime units from real words and some legal letter strings that do not have analogous rime units. Their concern was raised because there has been no clear rationale for the type of non-words that are included in the check. They further demonstrate this through reference

to the PSC online support for teachers administering the check. From this they found that some of the non-words were in fact, very rare real words mistakenly identified as non-words. They acknowledge that this does not have any real implications for the test itself but is still a point worth making. It is possible that children will fail to investigate new (to them) and unusual vocabulary in text if they continue to believe there might be non-words in real texts. Gibson and England (2016, p.495) go on to say that the guidance seems to have an "unawareness of permissible alternatives in sounding out pseudo words". They also suggest that the pausing needed to address pseudo words can be interpreted as children either unable to read the word, or pausing and then not blending into a word, but that this is consistent with how non-words need to be read. Where there is no context or real word meaning to support reading then some pausing is needed – to look beyond the vowels in particular to see if what follows will affect the way the word needs to be pronounced. Smith (1985, p.54) had already identified that reading is not a simple left to right skill: if we read "hot, hope… hoist…horse" we need to read beyond the letter 'o' to make a judgment about how the letter will be pronounced, either on its own or when combined with subsequent letters.

Siegal (2008) and Stanovich (2000) have justified and promoted the use of pseudo word reading in assessment claiming that it is a clear indicator of future real word reading. The DfE in its inclusion of non-words clearly see them as supporting the identification of children who need additional support. Gibson and England (2016 p.499) provide arguments in response. They suggest that "real word reading may be *at least* if not *more* accurate in predicting future reading fluency" and are clear that whilst non-word reading may predict future reading attainment, real word reading does the same and without any possible unintended harmful consequences. They also point to research in neuroscience that demonstrates the brain becomes more 'active' when processing non-words, because it is trying to make the word 'fit' previous knowledge. This additional brain activity slows the process and as a consequence the word is more likely to be 'read' incorrectly even if the reader knows the constituent sounds.

2.4.4 Criticisms of the PSC: Reliability and data

Clark's third argument in relation to the reliability of the check focuses on the data from the check. She draws attention to the 2013 data highlighting how summer born boys in particular have less chance of 'passing the test' (55% pass rate) compared to older girls (81% pass rate). This data are not published as part of the detailed data analysis of the PSC that the DfE publishes each year and Clark had to request this information additionally. However, the issue of labelling the youngest learners taking tests as 'failures' was the subject of investigation for the Education Select Committee. Evidence from Crawford, Dearden and Meghir (2010) was considered and the call for age adjusted test scores to acknowledge the disadvantage faced by summer born children was noted. Clark further highlights the issue by discussing how these children are then given additional phonics instruction in Year 2 but she claims that what these children need is not more phonics instruction but merely the chance to 'get older'.

2.4.5 Criticisms of the PSC: Reliability, test construction

Solity (2016) provides further evidence of the unreliability of the check. His research focuses on the claims that the PSC assesses phonics knowledge. Analysis of the words in the check revealed that 40% of the words could be decoded if the child had a wide vocabulary. He cited an example taken from the 2014 check, where children had to decode the word 'brown'. To be successful the child needed to discard the alternative pronunciations of the 'ow' grapheme and to do this vocabulary knowledge of the word was needed and could be relied on solely to read the word correctly. He also found that only 68% of the grapheme phoneme correspondences (GPC) that could have been tested (so GPC that appear in the National Curriculum for Year 1) were tested. This potentially could lead the government to extend the test to include more GPC but Solity argues that the GPCs that are tested reflect what is found in the language i.e. not all GPC are represented in real words equally and only a small number appear frequently and so rather than extend the test to reflect the curriculum, the curriculum should in fact be reduced to reflect only the common GPC with the others being learnt through the reading of real texts and the teaching of vocabulary knowledge.

2.4.6 Criticisms of the PSC: Validity and sensitivity

Duff et al's (2014 p.121 - 122) research focused on the "validity and sensitivity of the check in identifying children at risk of reading difficulty". They found that the check was a "valid measure of phonics skills and is sensitive to identifying children at risk" although they also stated that the check was not necessary as they felt that teachers already had the skills to identify children at risk and also have sufficient mechanisms in place within school assessment practices to measure children's phonic skills. This mirrored a survey of teachers conducted by the combined teacher unions (ATL/NAHT/NUT, 2012) that found 91% of teachers said the check did not tell them anything they did not already know.

2.4.7 Criticisms of the PSC: The distorted view of reading

Other concerns about the PSC focus on the possible, as yet unknown effects, on children's views and ideas about reading and language. Dombey (2011 p.23) sees the PSC as "distorting the process of learning to read". She argues that as teachers will be judged on the results of the check that many will skew their teaching of reading towards phonics and this can only be at the expense of other reading teaching that focuses on alternative strategies. Dombey focuses her argument on whether a focus on phonics teaching, whilst possibly engaging and enjoyable for children, will not necessarily engage them with the process of reading itself and so will not enable children to become readers who choose to read. She continues to argue that the focus on decoding for the purpose of a test will dislocate phonics and word reading from making meaning. Making meaning is the part of reading that is the reward, it is the part of reading that gives pleasure and by separating it from the skills of reading, Dombey asserts "is very likely to kill the goose that lays the golden egg." (p.28). It is Clark however that draws us back to the voice of the child. In her article titled 'The effect of the phonics check on young children's ideas about written language. Why should we be concerned?' (2015) she laments the fact that none of the research to date had included the voice of the child.

2.4.8 The PSC: The NFER Evaluation

The government commissioned a three year NFER Evaluation of the PSC. The evaluation had two aims: "To explore whether issues raised in the pilot had been

addressed" e.g. teacher confidence in administering the test and "To identify and track the impact of the check on teaching and learning". The final report was published by Walker et al in June 2015. This report found that whilst there had been an improvement in phonics attainment there was no evidence "of improvements in pupils' literacy performance or in progress that could be attributed to the introduction of the SC." (2015, p.8). The evaluation did however identify some changes in practice including the teaching of pseudo words; changes to Reception Year phonics teaching and an increase in additional phonics support. The evaluation also grouped schools into typological groups based on their positive attitudes to phonics "first and fast" and those that valued a "mixed methods approach" (2015, p.35) with phonics as part of that approach. It was demonstrated that a positive attitude to phonics was reflected in higher PSC scores but that this was not then reflected in higher Key Stage 1 reading assessment scores. This suggests that a focus on phonics first does not raise reading standards but equally, a mixed methods approach also does not negatively influence reading standards at Key Stage 1.

Interestingly whilst Literacy coordinators surveyed reported positively about SSP they also reported that other approaches were used. Teachers also seemed to show a lack of awareness of the contradictions in their answers, with teachers reporting they believed in teaching phonics "first and fast" but also answered they believed "a variety of methods should be used to decode words." In recognition of this contradiction the evaluation team added to the question in the following year a clarification about what "first and fast" meant i.e. "phonics as the only way to decode words". Despite this, 34% of respondents that suggested they believed in "first and fast" also said that a variety of methods should be used to decode.

The evaluation did not find any evidence to suggest that the more able reader did not score highly on the check or that children with English as an additional language were disadvantaged. 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. This is an area that requires future investigation.

2.5 Children's voice

Clark and Moss (2001) see children as active agents within their social settings and see the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the more recent statement by the High Commissioner For Human Rights (2005) as enshrining the "ethical, moral and legal" rights of children to have their views heard about decisions that affect them (Mortari and Harcourt, 2012). Lansdown (2005) identified the different ways that researchers have interpreted these rights; from consultation, to participation and self-initiation. Makin and Whiteman (2006, p.35) view children as "partners in teaching and learning transactions" and that children's perspectives can only serve to "deepen and enrich" knowledge because of children's "privileged position" in relation to knowledge of their learning. More recently, Robinson (2014, p.1) drew together studies which explored children's perspectives on "aspects of their primary schooling" and in particular looked at children's views of assessment. She identified that children wanted more choice over the timing and style of assessments.

Harris (2015 p.27) noted that whilst children were well researched they were generally silent in relation to literacy education, with children being the most affected by reading policy and practice but the least consulted. She highlights that the voice of the child is capable of "provoking educators to question their own assumptions" and in particular in revealing "unintended consequences of instructional choice." This was clear in Levy's (2009) study; he found how the introduction of graded readers narrowed children's definitions of reading. In Hanke's (2014 p.143) study of children's views of guided reading, she finds that "pupils could misinterpret teachers' intentions" and so reduce the benefits of the approach. Meek (1992, p.226) argues that "the learners' view of the task (of learning to read) plays a significant part in their mastery of it" and more recently the Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit (2015) identified meta-cognition as one of the key drivers in raising standards. From a professional stance this is a significant justification for the research focus and approach.

It is important to also note that the role of children's voice in research is contested; Lomax (2012 p.106) identifies those that challenge the view suggesting the "over-privileging of children's knowledge and…the valorising of the all-knowing and all seeing child". Buckingham (1991) warns against seeing the child as inherently wise. Maybin,

(2013 p.384) identified the need for alertness in relation to the child's voice in that the child's voice "is socioculturally shaped" and shows in her study how the voice of the teacher is replicated in the voice of the child illustrating a "total absorption of an authoritative voice, which is reproduced as it if it were their own." These are important methodological considerations for this evaluation, where children and their teachers are central, and as such, a detailed discussion of the voice of the child in research is set out in sections 3.4 to 3.4.2.4.

2.6 Teacher professionalism

The PSC could be viewed as an accountability measure for teachers as much as a measure of children's attainment. Whitty (2002 p.66) suggests that there has been "a shift to 'regulated' autonomy" of the profession, where teachers are no longer seen having a "mandate to act on the behalf of the state in the best interests of it citizens" to one where they need to "be subjected to the rigours of the market and/or greater surveillance on the part of the re-formed state." This view chimes with notions of power and the need to protect the child from teachers' use of unsanctioned methods of teaching reading. In this way teachers, it could be argued, have been removed from participation in the professional debate about reading. Teachers who responded to the PSC consultation did not then see their views represented in the final version of the PSC; teachers who were consulted in the PSC evaluation (Walker et al, 2015) had their professionalism and experience questioned following the first phase of the evaluation (2014) and then challenged following the 2015 report, with Gibb (2017) claiming;

> Unfortunately, the pernicious arguments that ignore the evidence in favour of phonics still abound and are having a detrimental effect on the take up of phonics in some parts of the country. By 2014, about two-thirds of primary teachers surveyed by the government agreed that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics has value in the primary classroom. However, 90% also 'agreed' or 'agreed somewhat' that a variety of different methods should be used to teach children to decode words. The evidence in favour of using phonics during early reading instruction is overwhelming. Now, the battle is to spread this message to all classrooms.

Ironically, the title of this speech was "The importance of vibrant and open debate in education".

Harrison (2010 p.217) argues that this removal of the voice of the teacher positions teachers as technicians, who need to be told what and how to teach. He argues that "…teachers are viewed as technicians whose fundamental role is to teach decoding, and then all the problems of low literacy will be solved." He goes on to make the claim that "such an inference would be naïve and ill-judged…because it misunderstands and misrepresents the complexity and multifaceted constellation of skills that a good teacher of reading brings to her job."

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has provided an overview of some of the key areas that underpin this study. The field of research in reading, teaching reading, learning to read and the PSC is vast and so this literature review has necessarily selected aspects that are most relevant to this study but it should be noted that this cannot be an exhaustive overview of the literature in these areas for that reason. Some aspects, such as the voice of the child, are developed in more detail in other areas of the study. The voice of the child is a key element to this research and as such needed a place in the thesis where it could be explored more deeply in relation to the study's methodology and so you will find in section 3.4 to 3.4.2.4 an in-depth discussion of this area.

Chapter 3

Methodology: The story map and how this story will be told

3. 0 Methodology an introduction

I have come to understand that there is no more important part of research than its methodology. "Methodology is the lens a researcher looks through" (Mills and Birks, 2014 p.32) and so determines every decision that is made in the research process. It is the story map that sets out both the way to navigate the story and also the reasons why particular pathways were chosen. The literature review has demonstrated just how significant methodology is in relation to reading research – with different views of knowledge determining methodological choices and different methodological choices resulting in different conclusions about the most effective approaches to the teaching of reading. The literature review shows how government has adopted a conceptualisation of reading which can be mapped to a methodological position and so the ideological positioning of policy. The teacher's professional voice and the voice of the child were touched on in the literature review but it is here, in the methodology, where the methodological choice of listening to teachers' and children's voices will be justified and explored.

I have identified myself within the qualitative research paradigm, having "an interest in observing and asking questions in real-world settings" (Patton, 1987 p.21). This chapter will therefore explore how this "interest" has been approached and so accounted for: detailing and making explicit the theoretical assumptions including the research paradigm; the methodological choices; the design of methods and techniques for data gathering and the strategy for sampling. Through these processes, consideration of the ethical implications and an awareness of my positioning as researcher will be set out.

3.1 Methodology introduction and research paradigm

Moss (2016 p.927) identifies an important consideration for the researcher: that useful knowledge generated from research needs to have some reference to the "contexts in which that knowledge will be set to work." She argues that too often, politicians and policy-makers appropriate knowledge without considering if this knowledge will

"translate" into "'useful knowledge' from the perspective of practitioners" (Moss, p.928). This premise provides the backdrop to this research: that is, the contexts in which this research was conducted were central to both the generation of new knowledge and to understanding the application of knowledge, as dictated by policy and in the contexts in which that policy knowledge was enacted. This nests this research within a socio-cultural perspective: a theoretical underpinning that recognises behaviours and practices as contextually shaped by the social and cultural setting of the research as discussed in the literature review.

In recent years there has been a significant step change in educational research with a call to apply a positivist and scientific approach and so uncover 'truths' about practice. Researchers such as Leckie and Goldstein (2017), Churches and McAleavy (2016) and Nelson and O'Beirne (2014) encourage teachers to research their practice with guides to calculating 'effect size' and 'randomised control trials'. This leads to the conclusion that education research needs to show that "if a teacher changes their practice from x to y there will be a significant and enduring improvement in teaching and learning."(Hargreaves, 1996 p.5). My research position recognises that practice x and practice y can have very different outcomes depending on the context they are applied and that whilst practice y may produce improved outcomes using one measure, other measures may be adversely affected. In addition, practice y may result in improved outcomes but this might not be the case when practice y is 'scaled up' to become a national policy directive. And, where practice 'y' is 'scaled up' and demonstrates on average, improved outcomes, what does that average tell us in relation to different contexts (average by definition means that some contexts will have above and some below average outcomes – even well above and well below). Patton (2002 p.59) argues that reducing the evaluation of a policy or programme to such quantitative measures "oversimplifies the complexities of real-world programs and participants' experiences" and crucially that these measures miss other factors that cannot be quantified. 'Bigger picture issues', in relation to impacts on the organisation as a whole are also not accounted for with simple quantitative measures. A socio-cultural research perspective, on the other hand, could be characterised as a holistic approach that "assumes that the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the

sum of its parts." (Patton, 2002 p.59). This holistic approach reflects my understanding of the teaching, learning and role of phonics, which I have argued in the literature review, needs to be viewed as part of a holistic understanding of reading. Therefore, changes in the teaching practices of phonics may impact on reading as a whole. These impacts may also vary depending on the contexts from which they arise.

Central then to my research methodology are the choices of these contexts or social settings and so the research participant sample. The sample needed to recognise that different groups i.e. teachers and children, within different contexts, may have different viewpoints based on their unique experiences of reading policy and practice and more specifically the PSC. Further to this, the activities and methods chosen also needed to recognise the socially situated nature of the research and be appropriate. Grbich (2007, p.8) identifies this perspective as social constructivist and interpretivist research which aims to explore the "way people interpret and make sense of their experiences….and how the contexts of events and situations….[set within] wider social environments have impacted on constructed understandings." Holliday (2002) identifies these as the considerations of the qualitative researcher and whilst Silverman (2006) is reluctant to define the qualitative researcher, he points to the work of Hammersley (1992, p.160 -172) who sets out some 'common preferences' of the qualitative researcher including: a preference for meanings rather than behaviour and a preference for inductive, hypothesis-generating research.

Silverman (2000) suggests research is different ways of telling a story and each story is offering a way to represent and interpret these individual 'understandings'. I would suggest that research is not a single story but a more complex web that draws together and is informed by, the researcher's story from her personal and professional life as well as her story as a new and developing researcher. These stories are embedded within their story settings; rich backdrops of the personal, professional and political. This 'nesting' of stories (children, teachers and my own) and the considerations made when exploring these stories, were first encountered in the introduction to this study and will be further elaborated here.

Crotty (2003) makes a distinction between the social constructivist and social constructionist. Social constructivism he suggests, recognises that we all interpret the world differently because of the different contexts, experiences and personalities that shape the way we both experience and interpret the world. The social constructivist would argue that individuals construct their realities and understanding of these realities and as such, these must all be "valid and worthy of respect" (p.58). Social constructivism also informs our understanding of learning, theorising learning as being "constructed progressively as a result of the learner's action and interaction" Packer and Goicoechea (2000 p.227). The social constructionist recognises and stresses the significance of this process by which culture shapes our construction of reality and so our understanding of it. Therefore, rather than a simple acceptance of realities as they are presented by individuals, a more critical or analytical stance is needed requiring and awareness and an 'unpicking' of what has contributed to the constructed realities of individuals. Shadish (1995b p.67) identifies this as "constructing knowledge about reality, not constructing reality itself." Crotty (2003, p.59) argues this is quite complex as "we tend to take 'the sense we make of things' to be 'the way things are'" and so we can become "victims of the 'tyranny of the familiar" (p.59). It is possible to develop a social constructionist critical stand point with the stories of the realities of the research participants (and this will be further explored when discussing the approach to the data analysis). However, as a researcher I need to be aware of the construction of my reality with the 'unpicking' of my own particular 'tyrannies of the familiar' – being able to make 'my familiar' strange and to problematize my previously held assumptions. The very choice of research focus, the nature of the research questions and methods chosen all communicate to the reader in some way, my personal realities and my 'familiar'. This more critical constructionist viewpoint needs to be lived throughout the study.

This research has a focus on evaluation: evaluating the impacts of the introduction of the PSC and this methodological choice needs further consideration in relation to its compatibility with my research perspectives and justification within my research paradigm.

3.2 Methodology choices – evaluation

So far I have demonstrated how the principles of social constructivism and social constructionism, as part of an interpretivist and socio-cultural perspective, underpin the methodological choices made. The chosen methodology, illuminative evaluation, was therefore rooted in these perspectives.

One impetus for my research design was the construction of the PSC found in the government commissioned, NFER three year evaluation (Walker et al, 2015). The evaluation's main findings are set out in section 2.3.8. The evaluation raised a number of plot lines that needed further exploration: if practice has changed, what are the stories of the children who experience this change and what underpins the apparent contradictions in teachers' discussion of reading practice. Using an evaluation methodology for this research, mirroring in some respects the NFER evaluation, was a deliberate choice. This choice could be described as a political act: it highlights what is missing from the government's evaluation by foregrounding children and teachers; it focuses on voices within their contexts and acknowledges the situational nature of policy application.

Robson (2011 p.176) defines evaluation as a methodology that seeks to "assess the effects and effectiveness of something" and Patton (1987) suggests process evaluation does this by investigating the "informal patterns and unanticipated consequences" of program implementation. It does this by including the "perceptions of people close to the program about how things are going" (Patton, 1987 p.24). Kushner (2000) explains the need to shift evaluation from considering the quality of the program itself (so in this case the quality of the PSC and the ease of teachers in administering it) to the qualities of the program. These formative descriptions enable an evaluation of the qualities (intended or otherwise) of the programme (so a description of the lived experiences of teachers and children who are required to participate in the PSC and their interpretations of those experiences).

Elliot and Kushner (2007 p.323) acknowledge "evaluation as a political process …as it typically revealed contestation over programme goals and over the criteria for judging the merits of a programme." Kushner (2017 p.20) suggests that evaluation can

challenge the "single narratives" and "one-dimensional explanations" given by those who make policy. This is particularly relevant to my research as it seeks to engage with the 'political process' and so uncover possible contested perspectives of the check particularly in the light of the Walker et al (2015) NFER evaluation. What the NFER evaluation does, in the responses of senior leaders and teachers, is provide a basis from which to suggest that there is a "discrepancy between the official view of what should be going on and what is actually taking place" (Robson, 2011 p.182). These discrepancies focus on: the value of the PSC as a means of assessing children; of raising standards in reading; views about the most effective approaches to the teaching of reading and the effects of changes in practices that have taken place since the introduction of the check.

Parlett and Hamilton (1977) introduced the term 'illuminative evaluation' following, as they saw it, a need for situationally located theories of evaluation. They acknowledge the complexities of programmes or initiatives and as Elliot and Kushner, (2007 p.324) note, there are limitations to "abstracting effects from the complexities of the interactions taking place". MacDonald and Parlett (1973) produced a 'manifesto' for this approach that included a greater emphasis on processes, responsiveness to context and an awareness of unanticipated events and emphasised the situatedness of each evaluation. Patton (1987 p.18) argues that "every evaluation situation is unique" and so requires "situational responsiveness". This embedded nature of context is relevant to my research and so in the sampling of schools and participants.

House and Howe, (2005 p.81) introduce the term "democratic evaluation" and say that this approach to evaluation "incorporates the views of insiders and outsiders [and] gives voice to the marginal and excluded". A main consideration in this research is the inclusion of the voice of the child who, it could be argued, has until this point been excluded from previous studies. The voices of their teachers have been marginalised by successive policy makers and so including their voice was also a deliberate choice. Greene (1997) considers an advocacy model of evaluation where the researcher is actively advocating for the participant; House and Howe (2005 p.83) illustrate this with an example of a study of School Age Care Centres where the "evaluation employed a 'bottom-up' approach by asking how the children experienced the centres" and this in

part, mirrors my evaluation, asking children about their experience of learning to read within the context of the PSC and within the context of the reading learning environment created by teachers. Shaw (1999 p.13) calls this "deep attentiveness" and he cites Greene (1994, p.541) proposing evaluation research can give voice to "the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked".

What is also visible here are the values of the researcher and a view of evaluation as a mechanism of social justice. Kushner (2000 p.39) locates evaluation as a "social service" and "an instrument for provoking questions about social justice" and this resonates with my research perspective. Kushner (2017 p.10) further suggests that democratic evaluation should use "techniques of data-gathering and presentation [that are] accessible to non-specialist audiences". Chapter 4 details the analysis process and so aims to enable a range of readers to access the study. It also aims to make clear to the reader what Kushner (p.10) describes, when considering the "key justificatory concept" of democratic evaluation, as the "right to know".

It could also be argued that because I am focusing on the particular contexts or cases as central to the evaluation my study would be more closely aligned with case study methodology. However, it is not the case itself that is of sole interest: the PSC is the focus and its effects on the case that I am interested in so whilst the study of cases may be useful within the evaluation it will not define the study itself. However, the idea of 'case' will be important. In the introduction, I outline briefly Street's (2016) ideas on the importance of considering the "telling" case or voice. Mitchell (1984) introduced this idea suggesting that a telling case or voice is one that offers new insights, and this is one of the guiding principles in the analysis of the data. Street (2013, p.40) discusses the need to identify "telling instances of behaviour that elucidate, contradict, or expand relationships presented in earlier fields of study" and this will be outlined further in Chapter 4.

3.3 Overview of the data collection methods and process

The research design involved a mixed methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. Evaluation lends itself to a mixed methods approach which "combines qualitative and quantitative research approaches…for the

broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding" (Johnson et al, 2007 p.123). In addition research that involves young children embraces mixed methods as in Clark and Moss's (2001) 'Mosaic' approach. The Mosaic approach offers the possibility of a using a variety of creative and playful approaches to engage with the views and perceptions of children. Creswell (1998) further suggests that numeric data can provide an initial description that enables the researcher to explore and provide a further contextual backdrop to the construction of the qualitative data methods and this 'process' informed the research design. The research has a layered design (see Fig.1 below) to include a quantitative approach as the contextual backdrop and then a deeper, probing layer of this initial data through the use of qualitative methods involving children and teacher focus groups with a focus on developing a more creative and playful approach to data gathering as part of the children's focus group.

Fig. 1

	Date	Method Used	Purpose
Layer 1	Gathered April and May 2016	Teacher questionnaire	To provide an initial overview of teachers' (in Reception; Year 1 and 2) viewpoints on the teaching of early reading and the PSC in particular.
Layer 2	June and July 2016	Children's focus groups	To gather the views and opinions of children in Year 1 (those children that had just taken the PSC)
Layer 3	October 2016 to February 2017	Teacher focus groups	To follow up ideas and issues raised in the teacher questionnaire and children's focus groups and to probe more deeply attitudes and practices.

It is perhaps also helpful to refer to Fig.2 which demonstrates that whilst the research was designed in layers, these layers were interrelated and informed each other. So the teacher questionnaire informed the children's and teachers' focus groups; the children's focus groups informed the teachers' focus groups; in the analysis of the focus groups, the teacher questionnaire was returned to, to identify if themes identified by the focus groups were also visible in the questionnaire data. This approach to the analysis will be discussed in section 3.7 and the processes of analysis in Chapter 4.

Fig.2
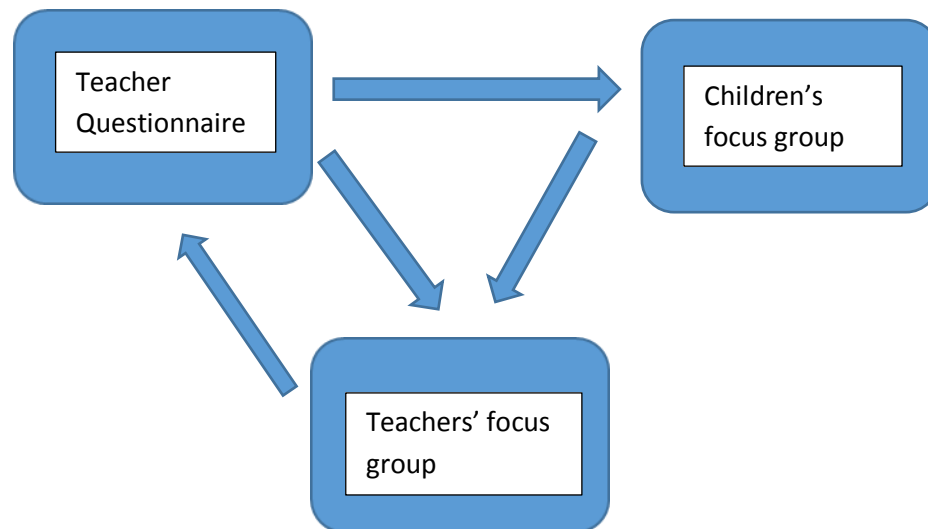
Triangulation, the "cross-checking [of the] relevance and significance of issues.....from different angles to generate and strengthen evidence in support of claims" (Simons, 2009 p.129) was a consideration when selecting this mixed methods approach. "Triangulation by procedures" (Opie, 2004 p.72) was addressed by both surveying and discussion in teacher and children's focus groups. A further element of triangulation was built in to the research design by sampling 'groups' of teachers and children (rather than individuals) and each 'group' was sampled from schools in diverse socio-economic areas (the sampling rationale is explored later in this chapter). By following the teacher questionnaire with focus groups I was not necessarily aiming for "increased validity" as outlined critically by Cohen and Manion (1995 p.238) but to explore "the multiple realities of specific social relationships" (Burns, 2000 p.420). In the research analysis I then attempted to "inter-mesh" these methods in pursuit of

"knowing more" (Moran-Ellis et al 2006 p.51). This will be discussed in more detail in section 3.5 and 3.6.

3.4 Ethics

My research was prompted by the ethical dilemma that faced a number of children - whether to say a word they knew to be 'forbidden' (see section 1.5) and with this in mind the following sections will outline the ethical processes undertaken throughout this study. The Children's Commissioner for England (2011 p.4) argues that children are "more knowledgeable about what happens in school than many in the adult world engaged in policy debates about education" and teachers' professionalism and experience has a role to play in policy and so it is children's and their teachers' voices that frame my "ethical space" (Kushner, 2000). Marby, (1999 p.210) said the researcher needs to consider "the uniqueness of each ethical dilemma" and address concerns as they are raised and so see ethics as an ongoing process. The following sections of this chapter will demonstrate how ethical considerations were reflected and acted upon at each step of the research process. However, whilst I understand ethical considerations as a process rather than an event, it is noted that appropriate procedures were adhered to. In accordance with British Educational Research Association guidance (BERA, 2011) issues of consent, the right to withdraw, arrangements for anonymity and confidentiality, regard for the potential risks to participants and researcher and the security of data, were outlined and addressed in the University of the West of England's Ethics approval process. The ethical approval for this study can be found in Appendix 11. The thinking and discussion surrounding this procedural element can be found in the following sections.

3.4.1 The Questionnaire and ethical considerations

In order to get an overview of attitudes and experiences of teachers to the PSC and to identify areas for deeper investigation, I chose to use a questionnaire. Whilst questionnaires are commonly used and can appear to offer a degree of validity and reliability (allowing for a large number of respondents to be investigated with relative ease), it is not a problem free research method (Punch, 2009). It does however, allow the researcher to describe "the nature of existing conditions, or identify standards

against which existing conditions can be compared" (Cohen and Manion, 1995 p.83). Heath et al (2007) recognise the wide use of survey and questionnaire data in research and suggest that the method is widely used because it is an accepted method of seeking views in democratic societies and so is both understood by participants and researchers alike. Sampling of teachers and schools for the questionnaire will be discussed later in this chapter.

The construction of the questionnaire was an iterative process involving first identifying areas of tension in the Walker et al (2015) evaluation, for example, the apparent contradictory nature of teachers' description of their beliefs and practices in the teaching of early reading and also the nature of changes in practice to accommodate the PSCs inclusion of non-words. Framing questions that were "clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable" and indeed ethical (Cohen and Manion, 1995 p.92) was, as Cohen and Manion describe, a difficult task. One difficult aspect was avoiding questions that could be construed as professionally judgemental: a first iteration of the questionnaire asked teachers to rank the importance of different approaches to teaching reading, but this had a possible unintended consequence of making the question sound like a test of teacher knowledge rather than the seeking of viewpoints. In the same way, the first iteration of the questionnaire used more theoretical vocabulary than might be commonly used in the classroom e.g. asking teachers about whether their approach to teaching phonics was using an analytical or a systematic synthetic model.

Initially the questionnaire had a high proportion of open questions that asked for a written response. It was useful to return to the questionnaire's purpose in the consideration of question format and style: the questionnaire was intended to be used to gather an initial overview and it was the focus groups that followed that were intended to provide the qualitative detail, explanation and exploration of ideas. Keeping this in mind, questions were re-framed using the Likert scale which offered an approach that could allow for some nuance in teacher responses but was also more efficient in relation to the questionnaire data analysis. This efficiency was necessary in relation to the timescales of the research: the questionnaires needed be analysed relatively quickly so that the children's and teachers' focus groups could follow within

an academic year time frame so that the teachers who completed the questionnaire were the same teachers that taught the children in the focus groups. Open questions also take longer for a participant to complete, and it was important to recognise the current workload and time pressures that teachers are experiencing. There was an indication, in the questionnaire instructions, of how long it would take to complete (approximately 10 minutes) to enable teachers to quickly decide whether completion was possible.

3.4.2 The Children's focus group and ethical considerations

The group that is at the heart of the reading debate, those that are required to take the PSC in England, have not, as yet been listened to. House and Howe's (2005 p.81) view of evaluation as "democratic" and so "incorporat[ing] the views of insiders and outsiders [and] giv[ing] voice to the marginal and excluded" explains the inclusion of the children's focus group in my study and is an ethical standpoint. Valuing the voice of the child is, according to Rinaldi (2006, p.156) is "a way of being, of thinking of oneself in relation to others and the world, a fundamental educational value" but it is not without its challenges.

Meehan, (2016, p.383) identifies "four theoretical approaches" that underpin the case for children's participation and voice: "participation, power, critical pedagogy and pedagogy of listening" and this guided my decision making around the planning process and procedures for the children's focus groups and will provide a frame for exploring this here in relation to methodology, ethics and elaborating on the literature (as set out in section 2.4).

3.4.2.1 Participation

There are well rehearsed arguments that children are "capable and independent, as active citizens and decision makers who are able to contribute ideas" (Palaiologou, 2014, p.690). This viewpoint has impacted on the research design, moving from research *about* the child to research being developed *with* children (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011). Participation however, is a complex construct and what may appear as participation can be merely illusionary, as Palaiologou (2013) contests. She

argues that participation "can mask tokenism" (p.691) by the privileging of research methods that involve children at the expense of choosing research methods that are best matched to the research question. With this in mind, it is useful to revisit, the purpose of my evaluation and the participation of children. Harris (2015 p.27) provides a useful justification, noting that children are the most affected by reading policy but the least consulted. She highlights that the voice of the child is capable of "provoking educators to question their own assumptions" and in particular in revealing "unintended consequences of instructional choice". There are a few precedents in reading research where children have had their voice heard through their participation and these are outlined in section 2.4. The participation of children in my study was therefore not tokenism but fundamental to understanding the impact of the PSC on those it is intended to benefit and an ethical standpoint in relation to the inclusion of children.

Kellet (2010) asserts that it is still the adult who mediates and interprets the voice of the child and who typically designs the research, methods and techniques. Perhaps truly ethical participation involves not just the 'consultation' of children but also the involvement of children in research design. Hart (1992) introduced a 'participation ladder', moving from the 'participation' of young people that he characterises as 'manipulation' to 'rung 8' of the ladder where young people and adults share decision making. It is helpful to question my methodology in the light of this. My research design was not an all-encompassing 'democratic evaluation', engaging participants in identifying the research question, parameters of the evaluation and designing appropriate methods. I used an 'illuminative evaluation design' with the aim of illuminating voices that had previously not been heard; as the researcher I had defined the nature of participation that I felt was possible where children were often unaware of the high stakes nature of the PSC. This could certainly be challenged in relation to the authenticity of the voice of the child in my research and so its ethical stance. I am committed to finding ways to "let children speak for themselves" (Tertoolen et al, 2012, p.117) in relation to the policies and practices that impact on their lives but acknowledge the limitations of what was possible within the school structures that my research was conducted and within the "ethical space" (Kushner, 2000 p.151) that it

was possible to create. These tensions are reflecting the bigger issue that is present when considering the ethical participation of the voice of the child – that of power.

3.4.2.2 Power

The development of reading policy has been framed by the rhetoric of the economic discourse with justifications being "masked in social and moral rationales" (Meehan, 2016 p.384). Children, within this context are viewed as needing protection by the powerful. Viewed in this way the PSC could be argued as a way of government protecting the child. This approach locates children as 'other' as "becomings" rather than "beings" (Thomson, 2008). The alternative view sees children as active meaning makers and so does not locate children as 'powerless victims' of circumstance but as "critical participants" (Lever-Chain, 2008 p.83). In the same way this research views children as capable of asserting their place and power in the development of policy and the evolution of reading practices. With this ethical stance taken, the research design, through its critical pedagogy, needed to ensure that children could be positioned in a 'powerful' way.

3.4.2.3 Power, ethical considerations and Critical Pedagogy – the design of the focus group

If participation is justified then it is essential to recognise that "power mediates all research production" (Spyrou, 2011 p.154) and so the mitigation and recognition of the power imbalance in the development of policy, must not to be replicated in the research process. Spyrou (2011 p.157) notes the "tendency of researchers to jump in and out of children's worlds in order to quickly 'collect data'" and this, it is suggested, "may end up caricaturing children more than really offering us meaningful insights into their lives." The power of the adult researcher to do this typifies the ethical dilemma that the researcher faces when attempting to listen to the voice of the child. Children have little choice in this process: in the eyes of the child, Palaiologou (2014 p.699) suggests, adults have always been the ones that are the "decision-makers and the planners" and who "pose what is". When the researcher comes to their classroom it is "what is". This raises the issue of consent. BERA (2011, p.5) articulate that 'participants must both understand and agree' to the research process to give

informed consent. Heath et al. (2007) identifies the need for the researcher to not just outline the research to participants but to ensure it is understood. Time was spent with the children talking about what a university was; what happened there and what research was. The research was outlined in language children were familiar and their assent was requested. Formal consent forms and information had been provided to head teachers, teachers and parents (see Appendix 30 and 31) but it was important to enable the children to have the option to withhold their assent and to ask questions about the process. Children did ask questions about the university and made connections with family members but none withheld their assent.

My research was time constrained and so I did not have time to build rapport and then design methods with the children as is suggested by Kellet (2010). Instead I considered 'ethically considerate' methods that could enable me to authentically 'listen' to children's voices. Interviews can be intimidating for young children, particularly when they do not know the interviewer. Waterman, Blades and Spencer (2001) suggest caution in questioning children: they demonstrate how children will answer non-sense questions because they are used to doing what adults tell them to even if what they are being asked to do is baffling. Mauthner (1997) argues that focus groups are a more appropriate method and reflect the typical organisation of classrooms (and so fit into the child's day). Therefore I designed a focus-group approach using a 'mosaic' of methods (Clark and Moss, 2001) that reflected both the practice children were familiar with in the classroom and offered a creative and imaginative way to both ask children about their reading but also to provide an intrinsic purpose to the activity. I considered Aitken's (2014) research design that used role play activities and this playful approach had resonances with those of Koller and San Juan, (2014) who used play based approaches when interviewing children and with Meehan (2016) whose approaches enabled children to express their ideas through art, drama, stories and games. Marwick and Smith (2014) explored the use of playful methods using story characters. From this, I designed methods using the children's book Beegu by Alex Deacon as a catalyst for exploring children's perspectives of reading. In the book, Beegu is an alien creature who finds herself on earth. Beegu is eventually reunited with her mother. Beegu's curiosity about how things work on earth provided the

stimulus for asking children about reading. This approach is one that is frequently used as a pedagogical approach in the classroom to stimulate discussion, develop reading comprehension and to act as a stimulus for writing. The approach was therefore rooted in classroom practice, designed to ensure a smooth transition from the classroom to the 'research classroom'. It was designed to 'give voice' to children using the voice of play. Following the reading of the story I introduced children to a toy Beegu (see Appendix 23) who asked children what 'reading was and whether it was worth learning to do' and so what she would need to do to read like a human. Children spoke directly to Beegu rather than speaking to me as researcher; the aim was to put children at ease and to ameliorate the potential power imbalances of the research process. I was also aware that children might not understand the meaning of the questions from Beegu and so I also planned other elicitation approaches to use alongside Beegu to provide children with further support and stimulus. Harris (2015) used a photo sorting activity to explore children's perspectives on reading and this approach was harnessed, where possible, by using short video vignettes of the children's classroom phonics and reading practices. Where possible these were taken in the half hour proceeding the focus group interviews and in the children's classroom. Having something concrete to talk to (the Beegu character) and about (the photos and videos) and a purpose for talking enabled children to share their thinking. Whilst my focus was on the child's view of reading, the research method was designed to suggest that there was not a 'right answer' but that the child was the expert and so any view or perspective was valid and worth voicing. The story of Beegu positioned children as the favoured human; adults are portrayed as unhelpful in the story and this further developed the idea that it was the children who held the answers and who had the authoritative viewpoint. The method was intended to *give* children voice in such a way as to enable them to "freely and openly express themselves" (Spyrou 2011, p.153) and so positioning the adult as the one who "lacks the knowledge that children have … and who wants to learn from them" (Mayall, 2000 p.122). This is not the usual power relationship in a classroom and so the use of Beegu enabled this ethical shift of expertise to happen. The children's focus group schedule can be found in Appendix 9.

Whilst these methods, or this critical pedagogy, were designed to reveal the 'insider' perspective, my role as researcher was still to interpret children's voices during the focus group, to ensure that the discussion was moved on where necessary as well as ensuring that I was open to a new idea or direction that the group could take that revealed children's understanding and views further. Listening therefore was a key practical and ethical consideration during the research design and during the focus group itself.

3.4.2.4 The ethics of listening

There are a number of levels on which to reflect on listening in the research design. One area of interest is the interpretation of voice – the assumption that children have a "unitary" and authentic voice (Mazzei and Jackson, 2009). It was both important to be aware that a group of children would not represent one view and that children do not express their views and opinions equally. A focus group has the potential to enable some children to express their thinking whilst others remain silent. As a researcher I tended to adopt 'the mantle' of teacher, employing my professional strategies for engaging children through questions as well as managing the behaviour of children to ensure that children did not actively sabotage the voices of others. Clearly, taking a 'teacher' stance affects the way children perceive the focus group and may affect their responses but I felt it was more important (and ethical) for children to feel comfortable and secure in a more familiar classroom relationship environment. This will be further explored in the concluding chapter.

Kellett (2010 p.91-92) further identified that children are also vulnerable to the power differences within a group so "class, linguistic skills, physical ability or popularity" can shape the "research encounter." I was aware, when conducting the groups that, it was easier to listen to the voice of the articulate biddable child and it was possible that this was the voice that has been represented in the research. The reflexive process needed to be constant both through the pedagogical interaction with the children and during the analysis of the data.

 Spyrou (2011 p.158) questions the ways that researchers interpret the child's voice, suggesting that "researchers impose their own meanings on the data they collect." It

is suggested that only by spending time with the group of children, by studying their semantics, will the researcher be able to understand what children mean rather than presenting her own understanding of what children say. In my design this was not possible for practical reasons both in relation to my own time and work commitments and more significantly, the schools' flexibility and ability to accommodate the research. There was also a danger of what Lomax (2012 p.106) identifies as the "over-privileging of children's knowledge and…the valorising of the all-knowing and all seeing child". It was therefore useful to remember that what children said was necessarily constrained by the limit of their vocabulary. The children, aged six, had limited life experiences but McLeod (2008 p.63) argues that this gives us access to "untarnished" views. However, children are as much influenced by the social, cultural and ideological world they inhabit as the researcher. Maybin (2013 p.384) recognised the shaping of the child's ideas by the influences of family, peers and communities and identified the need for alertness, in that the child's voice "is socioculturally shaped". She shows in her study how the voice of the teacher is replicated in the voice of the child. Institutional contexts are part of this and the different schools in the study had distinct approaches to both the teaching of reading and the positioning of children in learning. The research design enabled me to be sensitive to this possible 'institutional voice' and in particular the process of data analysis enabled me to look across the children and teacher data set to identify this possible 'replication of voice'. This too is a feature of the social constructionist theoretical stance – the need for a critical awareness of the way the culture and context have shaped the realities of the participants.

3.4.2.5 Teachers' focus group and ethical considerations

The purpose of the teachers' focus groups was clearly to gather data in order to answer my research questions but when conducting the focus groups it appeared that they provided something for the teachers beyond this - a forum or platform to express their views and experiences. With this in mind it has been useful to frame my discussion of the teachers' focus groups using the same four theoretical approaches that Meehan (2016) proposed to underpin the case for children's participation and voice: "participation, power, critical pedagogy and pedagogy of listening". This also seems to address clearly Mann's (2011) assertion that what is required of the

researcher is a clear accounting of the process involved in the design and conduct of the focus group to ensure that it is credible, valid and trustworthy.

3.4.2.6 Participation

The participation of teachers in a research project about teaching and learning is perhaps obvious and so not as theorised as perhaps children's participation, however it is still an area for exploration. One of the main reasons the PSC was introduced was to ensure that children were taught SSP as the prime approach to early reading and by inference, that teachers were teaching children SSP. The PSC, it was argued in the literature review, was a way of ensuring policy was enacted. However, Ball, (2013 p.8) suggests that policy is not "an 'object', a product or an outcome, but rather a process, something on-going interactional and unstable." It is teachers who implement policy and in so doing may intentionally or unintentionally, subvert, misinterpret or adapt what is stipulated by policy to meet their class, school and personal needs and beliefs and so create a new iteration of the policy. Teachers' participation, the hearing of their voice in this study was therefore a key element in evaluating the intended and unintended consequences of the PSC. There were therefore, ethical implications in relation to ensuring teachers were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of their comments which was done clearly through signed information and consent forms (see Appendix 30 and 31). Whilst head teacher consent was also sought and given, they did not listen to or take part in the focus group, enabling teachers to feel they had a free and open forum for sharing and discussing.

The PSC could be viewed as an accountability measure for teachers as much as a measure of children's attainment in SSP, as discussed in the literature review. The participation of the teachers in the focus groups was designed to enable teachers to explain and explore this professional complexity. In order to explore the teaching of reading, teachers were encouraged, within the focus group, to discuss their ideas with each other – and these ideas were not always homogenous. This was designed to offer

the teachers an opportunity to share their professional expertise with each other as well as with me. Individual interviews (used in the Walker et al, 2015 evaluation) do not enable participants to engage in professional dialogue. The focus group design aimed to recognise and value the teachers as skilled practitioners and professionals and this was a deliberate ethical stance. Some teachers, during the focus groups, commented that they did not often have the opportunity to share with each other their practices – it was not uncommon for a teacher to appear surprised by the practice of teachers in other year groups.

3.4.2.7 Power and ethical considerations

Krueger (1994) uses the term facilitator rather than interviewer when discussing the role of the researcher in the focus group. He suggests the role is one of "moderating or guiding the discussion" (p.100) but whatever I named myself in this process I was aware that, for my teacher participants, I also had other 'names' or labels for different professional identities. I was known to many participants as the leader of many English courses that some had attended; to others I was the manager of a Teaching School Alliance that I had managed for the preceding two years; to others I was an Initial Teacher Educator (ITE) – and for some, their ITE tutor for English when they had been students. I was now presenting, at the focus group, with a different identify, as researcher. Each of these professional identities carry meanings for the researcher and the participant and these meanings in turn suggest different constructions of power. Hebdige (1988 p.280) argues that "The choice of names and words is significant and contains various clues to the perceived power relation between the researcher and participants". It was possible that teacher participants could have viewed me as having an influential role i.e. having influence with their senior managers or beyond this, the local authority for example. The participants' view of the integrity of my roles, names or labels ascribed had the possibility of influencing their responses: there could have been a reluctance to offer what could be considered a 'dissenting' viewpoint for fear that this would be 'reported' to those in authority. In the same way, a perception of influence could have encouraged participants to voice more strongly positive or negative viewpoints about the PSC if it was felt that I could in some way influence policy. Clearly, the ethical implications of anonymity and confidentiality were

an important aspect of addressing this possible perception of power – making participants aware that their viewpoints were reported anonymously and that it was *their* viewpoint that was being sought in the research. However, it was in the design of the focus group or critical pedagogy of the approach that issues around power could be more effectively acknowledged and mediated.

3.4.2.8 Power, ethical considerations and critical pedagogy

In order to acknowledge and account for the possible assumptions about the power of my role, careful consideration of the focus group format, style and questions was needed. I decided to hold the focus groups in participants' schools and in all cases, in one of the participant's classrooms at the end of the school day. Immediately I was the visitor, the one who needed to wait for participants to gather, for the children to go home, for teachers' conversations about parents and children to be finished.

I was particularly aware of the time demands placed on teachers and so the length of the focus groups was determined by the teachers' discussion. Gallagher, (2008 p.397) suggests that "power is something that is exercised, not possessed….power does not exist in the abstract, since it is the power to do something specific" and this notion of power is useful as it constructs the possible power I hold alongside the contextualised power of the teacher participants as exercised in their domains, where I was the less powerful 'outsider'.

Pillow (2010, p.179) maintains that "the researcher [needs] to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher's self-location…position and interests influence all stages of the research process" and this included the informal 'chat' on my arrival at the school, my introduction to the focus group, the focus group itself and the informal 'chat' when the digital sound recorder was turned off at the end. I deliberately engaged in very informal conversation on arrival at each school; the aim was to create a relaxed and open style of exchange. Teachers already knew about the research project because I had interviewed some of their children in the few months before. Teachers expressed an appetite at the time of the children's focus groups to hear a little about what children had said and so there was already some 'buy-in' and interest. I was clear at the outset that I could only share general ideas and

themes from the children's data as I did not have the children's consent to share personalised responses with their teachers.

Because many of the teachers already knew me or knew of me there was generally a good rapport established during the focus group interviews. Patton, (2002 p.386) says that one of the benefits of a focus group is that "interactions among participants enhance data quality" and generating a discussion amongst teachers was easier in some schools that in others – partly because of the different sizes of groups i.e. in one school there were just two participants (the third teacher who had volunteered was off sick) and in another there were eight teachers. However, it was clear, that in the same way as with the children's focus groups, there were power differences between members of staff: between experienced and less experienced and between the more vocal and articulate and the quieter and more hesitant. Patton (2002) also alerts the researcher to be aware of the quieter participant, particularly where they may wish to share a minority perspective. In contrast, Simons (2009) introduces the term 'group think', where either one person dominates a group, overtly or covertly and so determines the groups' responses as a whole or where one response causes the group to pursue one line of thinking. This was evident in some of the focus groups – including the children's groups and so this information also informed the analysis of the data.

The focus group questions were designed based on the responses from the teacher questionnaire and points that had been raised in the children's groups (see Appendix 15). There were three sections to the teachers' focus group questions. The first section 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 their ideas and practice, to reveal beliefs and the basis of the beliefs about the teaching of reading and also to address the contradictions evident in the Walker et al (2015) evaluation and my questionnaire. 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 some of the generalised findings from the children's focus group, and asked the teachers to consider why they thought children may hold the beliefs they did or provide explanations for some of the children's perspectives.

Roulston (2010 p.205 - 216) sets out a "typology of conceptions of qualitative interview" and whilst I used focus groups rather than individual interviews, Patton (2002 p.386) argues that a focus group *is* an interview, albeit one where participants, "get to hear each other's responses." Whilst I have positioned myself within the social constructivist and social constructionist paradigm my stance as an interviewer fits more readily with that of the 'neo-positivist' – mainly because I aimed not to participate in the discussions of the teachers' focus group as an equal partner but aimed to merely ask the questions in a more neutral manner without expressing my own perspectives and so minimizing my influence. I did this because of the possible roles and identities I held for teachers. I felt that if I co-constructed responses or took a more 'romantic' approach: conversational and confessional (Alvesson, 2003 as cited in Roulston 2010) this could confirm or compound issues of power, with participants viewing me more as an information provider than as researcher. The 'neo-positivist' approach positions the researcher as objective but even when trying to maintain a neutral position I found it almost impossible to avoid smiling and nodding when responses were given – whatever those responses were. Teachers also knew enough about me to know that if I had maintained a neutral expression throughout that I would not have been quite 'myself' and perhaps this would have raised more questions about my role and purpose and so power position.

3.4.2.9 Listening

The PSC policy makers could argue that they had already given teachers a voice – in the public consultation before the PSC was introduced and subsequently in the NFER evaluation but it would appear that this voice was either not listened to or was ignored (both the consultation and evaluation showed that teachers felt the PSC was unnecessary and not appropriate). A possible issue or tension for my focus groups was that I too was asking questions, perhaps viewed as consulting, but I was not in a position to act on responses. A common query at the end of the focus groups was "And what will you do with your research and our views." Teachers were keen for their views to be shared and shared specifically with policy makers. This is certainly a consideration when reflecting on the possible audiences for dissemination of the research and positions dissemination as an ethical concern.

Many of the ethical issues raised in the discussion about the children's and teachers' focus groups were directly addressed in the sampling considerations in the research design.

3.5 Sampling

The research aims set out that teachers' and children's views will be sought to evaluate the PSC. The research questions and subsidiary questions (see section 1.3) further identify that it is children and teachers from different socio-economic areas that are of particular interest and relevance to the research aims. The research aims (see section 1.2) therefore required a purposive sampling approach: a selection of the sample based on a particular feature of interest (Silverman, 2006) e.g. socio-economic indicators. There is wide ranging evidence about the influence of socio-economic status (Neuman and Celano, 2001; Machin and McNally, 2006; National Literacy Trust, 2005; Kellet, 2010) and so the research sample involved selecting schools that represented a range of school socio-economic contexts.

This study was conducted in a city that provided this range. Bristol is a large and diverse city with a population of 500,000 and with 16% from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Bristol City Council Census, 2016). This diversity underpinned the research scope and questions. The city is served by 107 primary, infant and junior schools.

In relation to programme evaluation, as set out by Patton (1987 p.53), it is useful to provide "maximum variation sampling" and in this research this involves sampling schools that have a wide variation in socio-economic status and also differing attainment levels in the PSC and end of Key Stage 1 reading tests. This type of purposive sampling enables the researcher to place greater significance on common themes and stories that are evident in the data as they will have been present in very different or contrasting schools across a range of socio-economic and attainment contexts. In the same way, a "maximum variation sample" can also enable the researcher to identify if certain themes and stories from the data are only evident in

schools from one socio-economic group or attainment level, and this relates directly to the subsidiary research question: Are children from different socio-economic backgrounds influenced (or not) by the SC in the same way?

Flick (2014 p.175) further refines these ideas suggesting that "typical" cases in each of these 'sub-groups' are needed: in my research these are schools that are 'typical' of schools in three (in order to represent the range) different socio-economic areas. Measures that are publically available are the data for children receiving free school meals in each school; the percentage of children in receipt of the 'Pupil Premium' award (an amount of money given to schools for children who are in receipt of free school meals or who 'have ever' been in receipt of free meals since the start of their formal schooling) and also the percentage of children with English as an Additional Language. These data enabled me to begin to identify and refine my research sample and so identify schools that were "typical".

Another factor in my sampling was 'convenience'. Having spent the previous two years managing a Teacher School Alliance, I had established good relationships with a wide number of schools. I have provided training; brokered funding for support and challenge activity and established relationships with head teachers in relation to strategic city developments and improvement agendas. Alongside this, as a university Initial Teacher Education tutor I have visited schools regularly and maintained strong partnership relationships. These factors also played a role in my sampling strategy: I approached head teachers in schools with whom I had an established relationship (and which fitted the purposive, socio-economic and attainment sampling criteria) to invite them to be part of the research and the children's and teachers' focus groups: this could be termed 'convenience' sampling. 'Convenience' sampling was also used to establish the schools that were requested to complete the questionnaire. As part of my schools' training role I regularly met with school English subject leaders and they were asked if their schools might be willing to take part in the questionnaire. Of the schools that agreed to take part, publically available data were used to ensure that there was a range of schools from different socio-economic parts of the city. The schools PSC data was not publically available and so this was not used as a criteria for their inclusion as a participant in the questionnaire.

The sampling of the focus group schools required a variation in PSC data from schools in similar socio-economic status areas. 'Convenience' sampling therefore played a further part in the selection due to the nature of the PSC data. These data, at school level, are not in the public domain. It cannot be gained from the Local Authority (LA), through a Freedom of Information (FoI) request because schools are not obliged to give their data to the LA. The Department for Education (DfE) holds the data, however a FoI request for these data was also refused on the grounds that;

> in the reasonable opinion of a qualified person (in the case of government departments, a Minister), disclosure of the information under the Act would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs

Details of this refusal can be found in the Appendix 32. The only way to have access to the school level PSC data was through schools voluntarily offering it to me and therefore schools with which I had a relationship.

The schools in the final sample used in the research and their contextual data are detailed in Appendix 14 and their attainment data in Appendix 22. Each school has been given a pseudonym and agreed to have their data in this thesis. Within each of the schools further purposive sampling supported the identification of children for focus group interviews. Teachers were asked to select children for the focus groups and were asked to include children with a range of attainment levels in reading and a mix of genders. I also asked teachers to consider identifying children with a mix of attitudes to reading and also requested that they selected children who would be willing and comfortable sharing their ideas with someone they were not familiar. This final criterion was an important ethical consideration as the children were aged between 5 and 6 years.

Leaving this selection of children to the teachers, albeit with clear guidance and explanation of the purpose of the guidance in relation to the research process, could be viewed as problematic. Teachers could have selected children they thought would represent their teaching positively or skewed the sample in favour of the more able child. However, this research foregrounds voice and recognises the value of single voices; it does not claim a positivist stance with randomised controls and does not

seek to present an objective 'experiment'. In this sense any child selected by teachers has valid and valued ideas to share. The extent to which children's ideas were also typical across such contrasting schools also further suggests the validity of the sample. However, in the analysis it was important to consider the possible differences in the focus group samples and it is evident in the interpretation of voice that a reflexive position is taken, for example when discussing the children in the two higher socio-economic status schools' knowledge of children's literature in contrast to the other schools.

Teachers were also selected in relation to Flick's (2014) notion of "critical cases" and so needed to be teachers that were particularly affected by the PSC so teachers in Year R who are required to ensure children are prepared for the PSC in Year 1; teachers in Year 1, where the PSC is carried out and teachers in Year 2, where the PSC is repeated for those children that 'fail' the test. It was also necessary to ensure the class teachers of the children selected for the focus groups were part of the teacher focus groups to enable possible common attitudes, language and understandings between teachers and children to be identified.

Whilst the discussion about the sampling of teachers is outlined above in one sense the critical sampling stage was at school level. Once schools had been selected in relation to the sampling criteria for differing socio-economic schools, the selection of teachers had been determined. If the school was a one form entry school then the teachers in the focus group were necessarily the three teachers in the reception year, year 1 and 2. In the two schools where only two teachers took part this was due to staff illness of the third teacher.

3.6 Approach to the data analysis

"Analysis transforms data into findings" (Patton, 2002 p. 432) and as such enables the data to tell a story. The authorial decisions are what determines the way the story is told and the nature of the story itself. Unlike any other story, the author of the research story must account for these authorial decisions because they influence or even possibly determine, the story ending and the answering of the research

questions. The way a researcher approaches the data analysis will determine the nature of the findings.

Roulston (2001) demonstrated how she returned to previous research she had conducted, applied a different analytical theoretical frame, and offered different answers to the research question. The decision then around analysis was significant. As I read more about data analysis, the need to ensure a clear 'compatibility' or line of discovery from my research questions and paradigm through to the methods and analysis, was evident. And this line evolved and shifted as possible approaches to analysis were considered providing a constant 'critical friend' to question each decision.

The main approach to my analysis is Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Whilst Braun and Clarke (2006 p.78) argue that its power as an approach, lies in that it can be used both with theory and as a theoretically free approach, St Pierre and Jackson (2014) argue that these are the very reasons for its limitations, being too generic and 'basic' to be considered anything more than an approach for the "novice" researcher. Thematic analysis is a "deliberate and rigorous" process that enables the "identifying, analysing and reporting [of] patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p. 79). Thematic analysis identifies the active role of the researcher in the process rather than a passive approach that sees themes 'emerge' or themes being 'discovered'. Thematic analysis does more than simply "give voice" to participants; it recognises that in any analysis "we select, edit and deploy to border our arguments" (Fine, 2002 p.218) and so provides, through the reflexive process, a possibility for a more critical stance to be taken. Braun and Clarke (2006 p.87) suggest a six phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarising; initial code generation; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and then reporting.

St Pierre and Jackson (2014 p.715) argue that thematic analysis is used by researchers because the justifying, explaining and teaching theoretical frames for analysis is too complex and so researchers return to the "quasi- statistical analytical practice" of coding data. They argue that this cannot sit within an interpretivist paradigm and is more commensurate with a positivist approach. They further support this argument by

reflecting on the way teams of researchers may establish blind coding to ensure reliability and validity to the coding process and so an objective application of coding and identification of themes. They suggest this demonstrates a quasi-positivist stance where objectivity is prized through the "decontextualisation" of data and the "scientific language" of the 'emerging' of themes. They draw attention to the work of Goldstein (2011 p.81) who warns against the "tendency to look for patterns where none exist". However, Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013 p.403) suggest that thematic analysis provides a "transparent" approach to analysis that enables the researcher to define a clear sequence of analysis. Thematic analysis, they argue is a "recursive" approach "with frequent reviews" and this enables the researcher to identify the story that is being told in relation to the research process.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a somewhat maligned approach because it has not, until now, been adequately theorised and so it has been given a low status as a non-theoretical analysis 'method'. However, they assert that thematic analysis at a latent level (so beyond a semantic analysis of the words spoken by participants) enables the researcher to identify "underlying ideas, assumptions ad conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (p.84). This sits within the social constructionist paradigm enabling the research to "theorize the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts to be provided." (p.85).This approach therefore enabled the research questions to be answered and to provide further analysis, interpretation and theoretical hypothesis of what underpinned the answers.

It could be argued that I have drawn here on grounded theory, where the analysis of the data enables theory to be constructed. There are certainly many parallels between thematic analysis and grounded theory – in terms of the coding approach and identification of themes. Pidgeon and Henwood (1997a) propose that grounded theory is really only appropriate for large scale studies and so that much research that claims to use grounded theory in fact, uses what could be termed 'grounded theory-lite' which has practical similarities to thematic analysis.

Patton (2002 p.436) points out that the distinction between data analysis and data gathering is, in many interpretivist and naturalist inquiries, rather "fluid". As I gathered my data this was particularly evident i.e. using a basic questionnaire analysis to inform the focus group questions and children's focus group data informing the teachers' focus groups. I also adopted this "fluid" approach in the identification of recurrent responses and ideas that became clear as the data gathering process continued. For example, certain questions in the questionnaire were formulated because of an apparent contradiction found in the Walker et al (2015) evaluation, around teachers stated views and their practice. This contradiction was replicated in my questionnaire data and pursued again in the teacher focus groups.

These ambiguities or contradictions provided an interest in Bakhtin's tensional theory of analysis. Hong, Falter and Fecho (2017 p.20) outlined how Bakhtin's theory showed the "inevitability of tension in our lives and qualitative data analysis" and so how this tensional approach could help the researcher look for and explore moments of tension in the data and "embrace multiple perspectives" on issues of tension. They suggest that by "identifying and unpacking such tensions, we can better understand the complexities of the classroom." (p.21). Stewart (2011 p.288) uses Bakhtin's idea of tension to provide an "additional tier to thematic analysis". This approach to analysis also recognises the tensions I felt as a researcher. Hong, Falter and Fecho (2017 p.22) encapsulated this saying that "even as we endeavour to see the world through the eyes of the other, we can't escape the opposite tension imposed by our own experience." This goes beyond the reflexivity of Pillow (2003) to a "methodology of discomfort to encourage researchers to seriously think about the gap between them and participants" Hong, Falter and Fecho (2017 p.24).

3.7 Summary and conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodological considerations, from the bigger picture of the research paradigm and the chosen evaluation methodology to the decision making and reflection on the processes involved, specifically the methods, sampling processes and data analysis outline. The methodology is the 'golden thread' that runs through the research story: it is what enables the reader to judge the

reliability and validity of the research process and so the research outcomes. The methodology chapter is perhaps the catalyst for this process but the detailing of the analysis process is what lays bare the thinking tools and processes. The following chapter will expand on the principles set out in the methodology and turn the theoretical and reflexive considerations into their practical application.

Chapter 4

The analysis process: the story unfolds

4.0 Introduction

Miles and Huberman (1994 p.1) identify the need for the qualitative researcher to have clarity about the approach to the data analysis to ensure the methods used are "practical, communicable, and non-self-deluding" so that we can get "knowledge that we and others can rely on." This chapter provides a detailed overview of this analysis process. This outlines the "data condensation" process (Tesch, 1990 cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994) and sets out a road map of my analysis journey from the raw data to the generation of initial codes, the identification of themes and the review of these themes including a mapping process that resulted in the defining and naming of themes - all processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006 p.87). It also details the process and role of the quantitative data from the questionnaire. The findings are then detailed in the two further chapters, one with a focus on the teachers' data and a second with a focus on the children's data (with links back to the teachers' data where appropriate). The teachers' data were presented first because these data provided the context for the children's data: the teachers' data establish the culture that is being socially constructed in classrooms in relation to the PSC. This study's socio- cultural theoretical framework for reading is applied here in that the children's data then demonstrate children's social construction of reading within the culture created.

Whilst the aim is to ensure clarity and transparency and so reliability and validity for the study, it is also a way of demonstrating and accounting for, what could be described as, 'the work behind the scenes'. This 'work behind the scenes' has been documented in this chapter and in the appendices.

4.1 The analysis process

The analysis process is set out in Fig.3 on page 85.

Fig 3

Phase 1

Questionnaire data – reading of responses as they came in, field notes made

Children's data gathering – field notes and initial questions raised

Teachers' focus group questions generated using the initial questionnaire analysis and initial questions raised by the children's data

Teachers' data analysed line by line – annotated notes added, generation of initial codes (see example in Appendix 4)

Children's data analysed line by line – annotated notes added, generation of initial codes (see Appendix 5)

Codes used to map data set – identification of the 'typical' and the 'telling' (see Appendix 2)

Identification of where codes were in tension (see Appendix 6)

Return to the quantitative questionnaire data to identify 'contextual backdrop'

Codes used to map data set – identification of the 'typical' and the 'telling' (see Appendix 3)

Identification of where codes were in tension (see Appendix 13)

Sorting and re-sorting of codes (reflecting on different groupings to identify possible) themes)

Sorting and re-sorting of codes (reflecting on different groupings to identify possible themes) – see Appendix

Final themes reached and added to final column of mapped data (see Appendix 2 final column)

Final themes reached and added to first column of mapped data (see Appendix 7 initial column)

Phase 3

Themes mapped onto quadrant grid (see Appendix 10)

Stray codes outlined below quadrant grid

Themes mapped onto grid (see Appendix 12) Stray codes outlined below grid

Phase 4

Looking across both data sets' themes e.g. tensions and symmetries

(see Chapter 7)

Phase 1, the initial analysis of the data, can be traced to the planning for the focus groups as these were informed by an initial reading of the questionnaire data. The teachers' focus groups were also informed by an initial listening to the children's data and the field notes made following the children's data collection. The steps in Phase 1 may not usually be considered as analysis but Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the researcher is in fact engaged in informal analysis each time they read or engage with their data. Miles and Huberman (1994) also suggest that this 'early analysis' should be communicated and accounted for.

Following the data collection the transcription process provided a useful re-familiarisation with the data, and notes were made during this process providing a number of levels of preliminary analysis: repeated ideas, the language used to talk about learning; particular comments that stood out; commonalities between schools and some differences that emerged. This was in part guided by the work of Street (2013; 2016) who identified the need to identify "telling instances of behaviour that elucidate, contradict, or expand relationships presented in earlier fields of study". Where comments and ideas appeared frequently in the teachers' data in all or most of the schools and were also made by a number of teachers in the school, or there was a pattern of similar ideas, an initial note was made to describe these as 'typical and illuminating' and this 'typicality' made the ideas 'telling'. This was also identified in the children's data but there were fewer 'typical' comments. This may have been due to the different approach taken with the children i.e. the schedule for the children's data collection was not as structured as the teachers' focus group and was led more by the children, meaning that some areas arose in some groups e.g. the PSC itself, because the children raised them, but not in others. Further details of can be found in the previous methodology chapter.

Where 'illuminating' comments were made but the ideas were presented in not all of the schools or were single comments in some or all schools, these notions were identified as 'telling' (see the Methodology for details of illuminative evaluation). 'Telling' cases, according to Rogers and Street (2015 p.7) are those "from which widely held assumptions can be challenged and from which lessons can be learnt". When the data was further condensed, these ideas were not lost but were then attached to

codes (see Appendix 2 for teachers' data and Appendix 3 for children's data - the first column indicates the code and illumination of the telling and typical). The line by line transcripts for each school can also be found in Appendices 16 to 29.

Phase 2 of the process and the first step in coding, involved allocating a number to each section of speech in the children and teachers' transcripts and then going line by line, reading and identifying the 'essence' of what had been said, annotating the script and so providing a basis for consideration of initial codes. An example can be found for the teachers' data in Appendix 4 and an example of the children's data in Appendix 5. These first annotations and then codes revealed some contrasting or even contradicting positions e.g. around the role of phonics in reading, and these were identified as potential tensions arising in the data. It was at this step that I identified Bakhtin's lens of tensional theory as a useful theoretical analytical lens (as discussed in section 3.6). Once these tensions were identified the idea of tensions as a means of analysis was then used when reviewing the data at the end of Phase 2. Clearly, some emerging themes were not identifiable as tensions, for example the theme 'pressure and stress' did not have a corresponding theme in tension (see Appendix 2). These tensions were noted and can be seen in Appendix 6 (tensions in the teachers' data) and in Appendix 13 (tensions in the children's data) and will be discussed further in the following two chapters. Following re-reading and some re-coding and changing of codes to reflect new thinking, particularly in the light of the identified tensions, final codes were confirmed (see Appendix 2 for the condensed teachers data and Appendix 3 for the condensed children's data).

With the children's data this process was more complex because of the need for a code to be applied to sections of data rather than being ascribed to one line or speaker in an exchange – teachers tended to speak in longer sections that provided context. Children also did not always explain their thinking without further probing. I therefore transferred the data to a more detailed grid that included the one significant line that had first attracted the code but embedded in the section of dialogue it had come from and this can be seen in Appendix 7. The aim was to get a clear picture of each of the children's focus groups' data but to ensure transparency of the interpretation process and by this I mean being able to see an individual child's comments in the context of

the discussion they were made i.e. what was said before and after by both other children and me as researcher. An example of why this was essential was when children were asked in one school about how they would start to teach Beegu to read. One child responded with "Once upon a time…" and then did not continue. Initially, this felt significant: the essence of story embodied in the words "once upon a time" had been disconnected from a story and, because the child could not continue, seemed to suggest how 'story' and so meaning, had become disconnected from learning to read. On returning to these data it became clear, when reading around this section, looking at children's comments before and after, that it was possible that the child had misheard the question and was talking about writing a story – and of course the starting point for writing a story is, 'once upon a time'. It did however highlight another area of interest; the many ways in which children interchanged talk about the reading and writing processes which will be explored in the analysis in Chapter 5.

As discussed earlier another reason why the children's data were initially more difficult to organise in the coding process was because the children's focus groups were more varied than the teachers' focus groups. The activities were approached by the children in each group slightly differently and so getting a 'feel' of the group, the dominant and quieter voices, the direction and flow of the children's focus group data, was not as straightforward. An additional difference between the children's focus groups was whether there had been the opportunity to record a short vignette of a phonics lesson before the focus group. In four schools (see contextual information about each school Appendix 14) filming was not possible. This was because of the timing of the focus group – the head teachers had identified a time that I could conduct the focus group and in four schools this was not at a time that also included a phonics lesson. In one school, the lesson had been filmed but the group was called back to class before there was an opportunity to share the vignette. This affected some of the areas of discussion, for example children in Birch Tree School talked about pseudo words because it was in the vignette played to them but children in Fig Tree School were prompted by the researcher to do so. This was important in relation to framing both the research findings and limitations. These will be explored in more detail in the children's focus group data analysis chapter 5.

Once the codes were established the final step of Phase 2 was carried out. This involved the sorting and grouping of the codes and considering possible 'emerging' themes. The term 'emerging themes' can sound as if the data had a life of its own, but this analysis was a dynamic process of interpretation and of "engagement with the text" (Grbich, 2007 p.25), actively seeking to interpret.

4.2 Teachers' themes

From the outset of the teachers' data analysis many of the things teachers said strongly associated with ideas of dislocation: policy dislocated from practice; practice dislocated from teachers' stated beliefs and phonics teaching as dislocated from reading (see Appendix 2 e.g. codes A, B, C, F). This dislocation was at times a conscious tension for the teachers and at other points, teachers did not seem to be aware or acknowledge the inherent tensions. Phase 3 of the analysis considered these tensions and their interpretation in relation to other possible themes. I was further informed in Phase 3, by the way that teachers had approached the focus group interviews. Field notes of conversations on arrival and departure showed teachers in many of the schools seemed to be really pleased that someone had valued their contribution. Teachers were keen to find out what would happen to their views and if I could influence policy. It is possible here, that my many professional identities as set out in the methodology, were being drawn on and I was seen not just as 'researcher' but also as 'influencer'. The focus group appeared for some to be a 'confessional' or 'off-loading' experience. Below, highlighted in bold are the words that suggested teachers were confiding and confessing.

Gum Tree School: Alison (line 8) ***Can I be completely honest****?*

*Dogwood School: Elisa (line 27) It's not a good thing **to have to admit** we teach to the test but we have to do it*

*Fig Tree School: Jan (line 45) I'm sorry – **I'm on my high horse now**.*

*Fig Tree School: Jan (line 65) **we are guilty of** not celebrating it [reading] as much [as writing]*

The confessional nature of the focus groups raised for me the possibility that teachers were aware that what they were saying subverted policy but also that some felt a need to confess where they had submitted to the PSC and introduced what they saw as 'poor practice'. The dislocations that were evident in the data coding process were being expressed in a more subversive way. This resonated with the tensions that I had identified and these could be viewed as both conscious and unconscious subversion of policy and the reading process and conscious and unconscious submission to the PSC as set out in policy. These appeared to be recurrent themes that acknowledged the identified tensions. This then led to considering how these aspects could be viewed in relation to an overarching interpretation or model.

The model of the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) was brought to mind. As outlined in the literature review the model 'dislocates' language comprehension from word recognition processes. The model is often presented in diagram form (see Fig 4.).

Fig.4
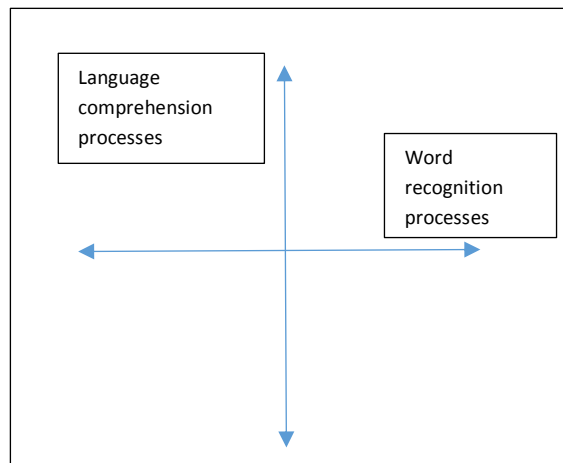
This model seemed to have parallels with the tensions identified in the data. Many of the codes identified suggested that teachers were submitting, either consciously or unconsciously, to the PSC process or to the policy that sits behind the PSC. When looking at the coded data this could be plotted on a similar diagram to the Simple View of Reading – although most commonly any single teacher or school could be plotted in

all of the four quadrants of Fig. 5 and also Appendix 10 where the codes are mapped onto each quadrant.

Fig.5

Unconscious submission	Conscious submission
Unconscious subversion	Conscious subversion

In addition, the same point could be coded in more than one way and so sit within more than one quadrant depending on the perspective used to interpret and code, for example, Nick Gibb, a policy maker may view some practice as a subversion of policy whilst a teacher may have viewed this as submission to the policy. This awareness of tension had made any attempt to neatly code the data in to the four quadrants' themes difficult and it was only by embracing Bakhtin's lens of tensional theory that it became clear that the different interpretations needed to be both acknowledged and explored as important in answering the research questions. These tensions were also evident when considering the data identified in the theme of 'subversion'.   Some data demonstrated a subversion (conscious or unconscious) of the policy but there were significant data that suggested a subversion not of the policy as such, but as a consequence of the PSC policy, the subversion of the reading process itself.

This was then the model that I used to continue the process of analysis in Phase 3 – looking across all of the coded teacher focus group data and 'sorting' the data initially into the four quadrants of the model and then re-visiting it to see if a tensional lens

located the coded data in more than one quadrant. From here I was able to identify voices that provided illuminative examples and 'telling' stories that exemplified the quadrant theme. Street (2016) identifies, in his research cases that are "telling" rather than "typical" and in this research I sought voices in the data that highlighted and were expressive of, insights into the experiences, views and beliefs of teachers who were affected by the PSC. These voices were identified as 'telling' as they provided a basis from which to 'challenge the widely held' policy voice that the PSC merely tested children's phonics knowledge and ensured teachers taught phonics. These voices identified as 'telling' showed the PSC had additional effects from which "lessons could be learnt" (Rogers and Street, 2015 p.7). These emblematic stories then provided the starting point for detailing other data that demonstrated the theme. Some of the 'telling' stories were also typical and were replicated in different ways across the teacher focus group data. Whilst I did not try to count responses against codes and so look for frequency of comments, there were times where it seemed relevant to note in the analysis the patterns of where certain coded comments were more typical in some schools than in others and so capture where views were shared by all teachers and so appeared to indicate a school's particular culture of reading. This process of considering the illuminative 'typical' and 'telling' ideas had been started in Phase 1 as noted earlier in this chapter. Discussion of the ideas of 'typical' and 'telling' were also explored in the methodology in section 3.2.

4.3 Analysis of the questionnaire data

The teacher questionnaire data were analysed twice: in Phase 1, before the teacher focus groups and again, in more detail after the completion of all the data gathering. The questionnaire data as Creswell (1998) states, provide some numeric data for description that enables the researcher to explore and provide a further contextual backdrop to the construction of the qualitative data methods. These data were gathered from a wider group of teachers across the city than the focus groups (see section 3.5 sampling) to enable this wider backdrop to be explored. This overview was the purpose of the first analysis of the questionnaire data. It helped to pinpoint the questions that could be explored through the teacher focus groups. The questionnaire data showed that teachers' responses to questions about approaches to teaching

reading, curriculum and policy requirements about reading (both as individuals and between teachers within the same schools) were not consistent and it was not possible from these data to clearly see what teachers did think were the most effective ways to teach reading and so whether the PSC supported or hindered this. This resulted in the first question for the focus group: In your experience (regardless of the curriculum requirements) – what is the most effective approach to the teaching of reading? The initial analysis of the questionnaire data also showed some trends in relation to teachers' views about and the usefulness of the PSC. This was then used to frame the second group of discussion questions in the teachers' focus group around the PSC to explore further an understanding of the positions outlined in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire data was then returned to following an initial analysis of the teacher focus groups: this sought to connect initial focus group findings with the questionnaire data and to begin to link the possible themes that were emerging, back to the questionnaire data. The data were collated on an Excel spread sheet (see Appendix 33). As with the qualitative data it was important at this point to log things that directly addressed the research questions and to set aside findings that were additional e.g. details about when phonics was taught i.e. in one lesson or across the school day. There were some lines of enquiry identified that whilst not addressing this research, would be worthwhile pursing at a later date, for example the differences in views of teachers of different ages and experience. It is important to stress again the research paradigm that I am working within is interpretivist and so this study is not searching for a knowable 'truth' about the PSC. The search for meaning is therefore not one that uses finite numerical measures. The questionnaire was used as a starting point and one element of the study rather than as central to the research.

4.4 Addressing the research questions

The analysis of the data was carried out with the research questions in mind – whilst this seems like rather an obvious statement, it was not always easy to focus just on these questions. From Phase 1, the data were so rich, had so many layers, twists and turns that in the analysis process it was easy to pursue interesting lines of enquiry in

the data that did not directly address the research questions. Rather than ignore these lines of enquiry, I kept detailed notes in case there were connections to the research questions that had, at first not been obvious. For example, in Phase 2 of the process it was noted that one teacher talked about the technicalities of the PSC in relation to the words selected for the test: this was coded initially as 'test administration' (see Appendix 2 data annotations condensed – row P) and then set aside as it did not seem to provide an insight into the research questions. It would have been possible to 'squeeze' this into the theme of conscious submission but rather than do this I detailed these other lines of enquiry as 'stray voices' (and these are noted at the bottom of Appendix 8) to recognise that whilst these were identified, they sat beyond the scope of this research but could provide possible future research focuses or the basis for a future paper. In the children's data, the role of reading aloud to children and also one child's discussion of their perceptions of reading as a joint or shared endeavour would be interesting areas to pursue at a later date. The children's 'stray areas' are detailed in Appendix 12.

4.5 Children's themes

The children's data, following coding, seemed to divide into two main themes, again themes that encapsulated the tensions that emerged: that of disconnection and connection. The disconnection was expressed in children's explanations of the reading processes and some of the practices associated with the PSC e.g. the teaching of 'alien words'. However it was also evident that children tried to make connections between their experience of learning to read and other learning experiences as they attempted to explain, reason and make sense of their experiences. These two clear themes also demonstrated the tension that mirrored the tensions of the teachers' data (see appendix 13). At this point I considered if the quadrant for analysing the teachers' data was also relevant to children – was their disconnection the same as subversion and their connections the same as submission. I also considered whether children were consciously and/or unconsciously disconnecting and connecting. I decided that whilst the PSC was clearly having an impact on children they were not in a position to consciously or unconsciously submit to it or the teaching that prepared them for it – they were in a sense both one step removed and at the same time, too embedded in

the process as part of notions of 'schooling' – to be 'subverters' or 'submitters' to the policy of the PSC. However, in an attempt to avoid dislocating and abstracting the PSC from a broader view of the culture of 'schooling' these broader issues will be discussed more fully at the end of Chapter 5 (teachers' data) and the impact of the culture in Chapter 6 (children's data).

The teachers' focus groups, as I have stated, had the feel of the 'confessional' the children's groups did not. The children, despite not knowing me and despite little preparation or thinking time, were generally engaged and had thoughtful contributions. In each school the children immersed themselves in my reading of the Beegu story. Some children knew the story and others did not but this did not seem to affect the way they listened and engaged. Children, who were seated around a table (in each school) leaned in to look at the pictures as the story was read, pointed to the pictures, commented and asked questions throughout. This same engagement extended to the introduction of the Beegu toy with children asking:

Gum Tree School: Tia (line 81) Would you like to have lunch with us? Would you like to have lunch Beegu?

And in other schools, asking to hug Beegu and kiss her goodbye when the focus group had finished and in most cases waving and saying good bye to Beegu rather than me. This provided further context for the analysis and will be drawn on again in the discussion in Chapter 6.

It was also useful to consider when analysing the data that teachers had selected children that were normally confident. Within each group however, there were children that did not make contributions unless prompted and others that would have dominated the group if others had not been encouraged to contribute. My skills as a teacher were used as much as my developing skills as a researcher: and this was significant. The activities in the focus group – the reading of the story of Beegu and the use of the Beegu toy were similar to many everyday classroom activities and so the children were perhaps reacting to me as 'teacher', following the classroom codes of practice e.g. putting their hand up to speak; responding to 'a look' when talking over another child. Because of this, I needed to be aware in the analysis process, that the

children were also being compliant and 'regulated' by school codes of behaviour that may have extended to what it was acceptable to say to a visiting teacher. The concluding chapter will reflect on the possible variations of the study in relation to children's voice and ways of researching with children.

Having considered these factors, I decided that I would continue to sort the data based on the two broad themes of disconnection and connection. From here I was able to identify voices that provided illuminative examples and 'telling' stories that exemplified the theme (and these are outlined in full, taken from the original transcripts and are in italics in Appendix 7). These emblematic stories then provided the starting point for other data that demonstrated the theme.

As with the teachers' data some of the 'telling' children's stories were typical and were replicated across schools.

4.6 Moving forward to the findings

Having mapped in detail and accounted for the analysis process that identified the data themes (teachers' data: conscious and unconscious subversion and submission; and the children's data: connection and disconnection) the following two chapters will explore these themes and the findings from the teachers and children's data. Before this it is useful to be reminded of the research focus and questions to support the reading of the analysis that follows. These can be found in sections 1.2; 1.3 and 1.4.

Chapter 5

The analysis and findings from the teachers' data: the teachers' stories

5.0 An introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, the data analysis process, focusing on the research questions, resulted in four main themes emerging: conscious and unconscious submission and conscious and unconscious subversion. These themes were identified as they enabled the complexity of responses to be made clear, with many findings being located within more than one of the four 'quadrants' depending on the positioning of the researcher. In relation to the subversion quadrants it was also appropriate to consider if the data demonstrate subversion of policy or subversion of the reading process. For this reason the sub-headings for this section will address either a single theme or two and so demonstrate the tension in the teachers' voices and interpretation of their stories in apparently opposing themes. The data shown under each heading can be traced in Appendix 2 i.e. the data presented in italics is the raw line data from the original annotated transcripts (an example of which is found in Appendix 4; with all other transcripts in Appendices 16 to 21) and is being used, as outlined in the previous chapter, to show not all of the data under a theme, but data that are particularly illustrative. These illustrative data have been identified as an emblematic example of the theme and so 'illustrates' similar points made in other schools. Where appropriate, some of the teachers' words are highlighted in bold to show the key ideas that illustrate the theme but are left within the teachers' original expression to provide contextualisation.

5.1 The role of phonics in learning to read: **conscious submission and unconscious subversion**

The PSC policy has been described as an accountability measure and as a tool of government that ensures teachers comply with the curriculum and policy requirements around the teaching of phonics as the first and main approach to teaching early reading (see the literature review section 2.2). An apparent endorsement of phonics as a main approach was first illustrated in the questionnaire data (see Appendix 33) which showed 97% (57 teachers out of 59) either agreeing or

strongly agreeing with the statement that teaching phonics knowledge was essential for the teaching of reading. 2 teachers (3%) 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. These discussions highlighted the nature of the conscious submission to policy and began to provide a further understanding of how this submission had come about and also how teachers' interpretation of policy could also be viewed as an unconscious subversion of policy.

Illuminative, telling and typical – responses in all schools to the question: In your experience (regardless of the curriculum requirements) – what is the most effective approach to the teaching of reading? (See Appendix 2. Code J for additional lines)

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*

*Lala (line 2) **understanding the concepts of what letters and words are, that letters go together and over blending.***

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***

*Lisa (line 2) And from reception having the parents involved so as soon **as you are learning new sounds, going home and parents, before they start school we do a phonics session with them showing them how we teach phonics so that they are on board***

These data are drawn from across all seven schools and from different teachers and there were further examples of teachers in each school agreeing with or adding to the illuminative quotes above (see Appendix 2). This initial analysis of the data appears to show that the PSC as a possible accountability measure has either been successful or was not in fact necessary as teachers clearly articulated that they saw phonics as central to the effective teaching of early reading and data explored later in this chapter demonstrates they would continue to teach phonics even if there was no PSC. There is an apparent conscious submission by teachers to current policy on reading and to the rationale behind the PSC. However, whilst the voices are supportive of a phonics approach, the nature of this support was nuanced and needs further explanation and discussion.

The two voices of teachers at Acorn School seemed to be suggesting that whilst they felt phonics was effective, they did not have anything to compare this approach with, as phonics, as the prime approach to teaching reading, was what they had been taught during their Initial Teacher Training and what they had subsequently put into practice in school. Both teachers were in their first 5 years of teaching and so would have been asked to rate their HEI as part of the Newly Qualified Teacher Survey and their judgments would have determined an HEI's future. It is perhaps to be expected that these teachers responded to the question about effective teaching of reading with a phonics focused response. Also relevant is that these teachers had been trained by me – and so it could be argued that they responded with a 'phonics first' approach because my identity as their English lecturer influenced the nature of their response. However, these teachers also show a conscious recognition that their 'submission' is a product of the prevailing socio-cultural context of the teaching of reading, at the point of their training and their subsequent teaching experiences. They are aware of other approaches but phonics is the one they know most about and have applied in practice.

Some teachers in Gum Tree School and Fig Tree School couched their support for the 'phonics first' approach in relation to identifying compliance to a scheme rather than to an approach to the teaching of reading. Jan in Fig Tree School mentions Read Write Inc as her first response. Mandy in Gum Tree School, in response to whether practice could change if the PSC was no longer statutory states (line 35):

I think we would stick with what we are doing as it is good practice, teaching it daily and following the scheme.

This could be an indication that this compliance to policy is also a suggestion of de-professionalization – or reliance on the out-sourced professionalism of the 'scheme' as outlined by Harrison (2010) and encapsulated in Gunter, Hall and Mills' (2014) notion of 'consultocracy'.

It can also be seen that Dogwood and Elm School have fewer responses recorded in Appendix 2 in relation to phonics first. For Acorn, Birch, Chestnut, Fig and Gum Tree schools the voices in the quotes above are illustrative of the other responses from teachers at these schools. The other teachers in Dogwood and Elm School did not disagree with teachers that expressed a phonics approach but they also provided additional responses about other aspects of the process of learning to read and this will be discussed later. Before this is addressed I want to outline how this conscious submission by the teachers was not viewed negatively or questioned by teachers (beyond the discussion in Acorn School) but viewed almost as 'common knowledge' – as if the question itself was a surprise because after all, the answer was 'obvious'. To step aside from 'a common view', as Crotty (2003, p.59) argues, is complex as "we tend to take 'the sense we make of things' to be 'the way things are'" and so we can become "victims of the 'tyranny of the familiar" (p.59). It is also possible that teachers knew my research focused on the PSC and so phonics was therefore at the forefront of their thinking from the start of the focus group. Kushner (2017 p.20) identifies policy as being driven by "single narratives" and it is possible that teachers have adopted the phonics narrative but are also shaping policy (p.30) by the nuanced approaches to its adoption.

The questionnaire data (see Appendix 33) provided an initial indication that this apparent submission also masked an unconscious subversion of policy. The curriculum states "phonics should be emphasised in the early teaching of reading to beginners" and just 8 (14%) of the questionnaire respondents thought that the National Curriculum required a phonics first approach with 45 respondents (76%) 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: 25 respondents (43%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics should be taught fast and first before other strategies' with 51 respondents (89%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'phonics must be taught at the same time and alongside other strategies' and all the 59 teachers (100%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that teaching a range of strategies to word reading was essential. It is possible to argue there is an unconscious subversion here with teachers' beliefs and practices in contradiction with policy requirements but teachers being unaware of the tensions that were evident. This therefore was explored in the focus groups to provide further insight.

The teachers in Dogwood and Elm schools, identified earlier as having fewer phonics focused responses to the initial question about effective approaches to teaching reading, demonstrated the complexity of the submission to policy. 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 (See below and Appendix 2 codes A and H).

Illuminative, telling and typical – Elm School: unconscious subversion

Taken from field notes: I arrived at school E at the end of the school day. The teachers had 'warned' me that they would be dressed up as it was World Book Day. Teachers were dressed in a range of extravagant costumes as were the children as they left school.

The contextual data (Appendix 14) shows that this is one of the highest attaining schools in the sample (PSC and end of Key Stage 1 reading) whilst having above national average pupil premium, EAL and FSM data.

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

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 and you probably teach yours as well** *(referring to the other teachers)*

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 1 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'. I think we do a lot on actually looking at pictures and that sort of inference and getting them to get clues from the pictures,** *we do it from day 1. If they can talk, they can talk about a book can't they.*

Teachers did not always seem aware that their approaches were a subversion of what was required by policy. The PSC aims to ensure children meet the required standard in decoding and so assesses the programme of study as set out in the National Curriculum (2014). The decoding element of the curriculum focuses on phonics as the prime approach to decoding rather than other strategies that might involve the reader using comprehension or meaning approaches to decode unknown words e.g. using the pictures or other contextual information. It can be argued that teaching a range of decoding approaches subverts the curriculum and so the policy rationale that sits behind the PSC. What the teachers are expressing here is an approach to reading that subverts the policy view.

This example is particularly telling because it illustrates what the government's evaluation (Walker et al, 2015) also raised, the apparent contradictions in teachers' stated views and practices. This is a telling example because it 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. This is particularly telling when viewed from the perspective of this school's contextual data. Government policy rhetoric would suggest a school like this is 'failing' (Gibb, 2014) its pupils because it is not following the prescribed approach to the teaching of reading and in fact, is following one that was cast as 'damaging'. 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.

It can be seen from the data presented that this detailed account of the approach to the teaching of early reading is outlined by two teachers (there were 4 teachers in the focus group) and these teachers were the Reception class teachers – particularly relevant as these are the teachers of very early reading. The Year 1 and 2 teachers' contributions will be explored in detail later in the analysis in relation to practice changes as a result of the PSC but as the reception teachers were talking, the other teachers did not challenge or disagree.

The second school that provided a telling illumination of submission to the PSC policy but also subversion, was Dogwood School. These 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 phonics rather than different strategies, other than phonics, to teach reading. Lines 1 to 7 below show the teachers submitting to the policy but demonstrating that they do this in ways that one teacher suggests is not *sitting and copying.* Lines 8 to 10 bring in other approaches to reading that go beyond phonics or represent different approaches to teaching phonics e.g. syllables, and also then consciously subverting policy by stating that other approaches to the teaching of reading are necessary.

Illuminative and telling – Dogwood School: submission and conscious subversion

The contextual data (see Appendix 14) shows that this was the largest focus group and 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 results (see Appendix 22 for year on year attainment data).

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*

Elisa (line 9) **And once they've got that, further up you can start to look at syllables and to doing it in different ways** *which is helpful for the other children that haven't necessarily learnt it through their segmenting and blending*

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 and that those are OK and that will work for some children and actually accepting and acknowledging and moving forward with that rather than being stuck in what we have to do.**

The teachers in the school start from a perspective of making the process of learning to read enjoyable and engaging and involving parents. Teachers use words such as "*playful; non-threatening; fun and imagination*" and locate their teaching in "*the environment*" and suggest that learning is active "*not sitting*". They refer to a holistic understanding of reading, making specific comments about story rather than word

reading. Phonics is alluded to when one of the teachers suggests children need to "*play with sound*" but the specific term "*phonics*" is only used by Elisa who appears to be referring to a more formal approach to the teaching of letters and sounds that extends beyond play. She qualifies this however, by adding that in her experience phonics does not '*work*' for all children and from this it is assumed she means that phonics does not enable all children to learn to read. This idea is picked up by Deb who identifies that not all children, in her experience, learn to read using phonics and that when it becomes evident that a child has difficulties with phonics that other approaches should be used. These teachers demonstrate a submission – they recognise a role for phonics for most children but seem to be suggesting that their approach is more flexible with a reading culture of engagement and enjoyment taking precedence. There seems to be an awareness that their approach is different from other schools and perhaps some awareness that they could be viewed as subverting from policy and policy rationale. There is further evidence for this when the PSC is discussed directly and this will be discussed in the following section.

5.2 Changes in practice since the introduction of the PSC: conscious submission leading to a conscious subversion of the learning to read process

Heimans (2012) comments on the effects of the 'No Child Left Behind' policy in the United States saying that it serves as a "salutary reminder of the power of politics to march with steel heels into the terrain of teachers and children and attempt to secure a flattened terrain." This rather militaristic metaphor helps to frame the theme of conscious submission highlighted here by evidence of teachers changing their practice for the sole purpose of raising scores in the PSC.

The questionnaire data provided the backdrop for the probing of this area in the focus group. The questionnaire data showed the number of teachers that had changed their practice directly as a consequence of the PSC. 68% of teachers (40 out of 59) said they had adapted their practice. When distilled further to just the year 1 teachers whose children take the PSC, 92% (22 out of 24 teachers) 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 (8 teachers out of 40) said they had done this to improve children's reading and for year 1 teachers this was 17% (4 teachers out of 24). 87% (35 teachers) said they had adapted practice in order to improve PSC scores and this rises to 100% of the teachers in Year 1 (24 teachers). This data helped frame the focus group discussion in section 2 (see focus group schedule, Appendix 15)

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. These areas of 'submission' will be explored using some illuminative and telling examples.

5.2.1 Adapting practice - concerns about disadvantaging groups of children: conscious submission and so conscious subversion of the reading process

Illuminative and telling – 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.***

This example is emblematic of the ways teachers described their adaptations to practice (see Appendix 2 codes B and D). There was a recognition that children were somehow 'beyond' what the check measured and were reading fluently and with understanding. Children had moved beyond the conscious application of phonics skills and were drawing on other strategies that enabled them to read with fluency. Understanding and comprehending 'on the run' enabled these children to self-correct when they noticed the text did not make sense and they could then draw on their

phonics skills for these small number of words. The progress of these children was being deliberately slowed to enable them not to be disadvantaged by the PSC because these children were focusing 'too heavily' on meaning in context. In relation to real reading, de-contextualised word reading is rarely required (Dombey, 2017). In real reading where unfamiliar or unusual words are presented they are in a context which enables the reader to expect the unfamiliar and so to slow down, re-read and apply phonics skills if needed. The other element of this illuminative example is how parents are invited to collude in this subversion and in fact, if they do not, then the teacher is indicating that their child may not score highly in the check. One of the justifications for the check was so that parents could be informed and indeed assured, that phonics was being taught in their child's school and that where this was happening, the expectation that their child would be being taught to read in the most effective way. This telling example would suggest that parents are being asked to halt the progress of their child as a reader in order for them to submit to and so pass the PSC and in turn, subvert the reading process alongside the teacher.

The teachers did not go as far as to say that their higher attaining readers would fail the PSC (Chestnut School, Sue Line 12; Elm School, Ava, Line 10) 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.

Illuminative and telling – 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 she had distorted her practice and so subverted the reading process, in order to submit to the PSC requirements and that practice was not beneficial for certain groups of children in her class. She appeared almost embarrassed by the practice she was 'confessing' to; a practice that was in some way inappropriate for the needs, maturity and attainment of the child. The teachers' submission to the PSC is resulting in a subversion of practice that is recognised as compromising learning for some children.

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

Chestnut School

*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 because although I've taught it once or twice in class …***

*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 and practice subverted, by the submission to the testing process. A PSC advocate (the Reading Reform Group for example) might suggest that the teacher's expectations were not high enough and therefore the PSC is raising those expectations – but clearly, the teacher is fulfilling the new higher curriculum expectations by teaching the higher levels of phonics but that the child is not able to access that curriculum. The school

achieves above national expectations for both the PSC and end of KS1 reading attainment and so clearly the school is not suffering from 'low expectations' as could be claimed.

Teachers in other schools indicated possible reasons why children had difficulty meeting the PSC expectations. Teachers identified specific needs: for example in Elm School the teacher talked about an autistic child in her class.

Elm School

Di (line 83) ***And phonics for autistic children doesn't work****. **They don't hear the sounds in words, they don't sound it out, it's like 'what are you asking me?'*** *And when she's writing, I sound it out for her and she just looks at me. Then she just writes it somehow – I **think she has a picture of the word.*** *It opens a whole can of worms.*

Each school shared similar experiences of children in their classes that were sitting outside of the policy rhetoric that all children will learn to read using phonics. This included children with skills at whole word reading or sight reading who did not seem to be able to master the phonics approach to word reading. These children had not been taught to sight read – they had been taught phonics - but were whole word reading apparently 'naturally' from early in their school careers. The teachers were clearly not trying to subvert policy but were recognising that policy was being subverted.

Birch School

*Lala (line 13) – I also think here is the **odd exception where phonics does not help** …*

Eve (line 14) - I've got one of them

Lala (line 15) ***I've got one that will never pass the test because he sight reads perfectly*** *and understands what he is reading and **it's a shame for those children who are put down as failed***

*Fay (line 16) But **he must be able to read the phonics words***

Lala (Line 17) ***He doesn't sound them** out at all so **he isn't using any form of phonics when he reads them***

This highlights not only how teachers are identifying children who are 'disadvantaged' by the PSC but also recognises that this 'disadvantaging' labels children as failures despite being able to read. Grundin (2018) and Clark (2017) highlight similar concerns identifying children who may be able to 'read' but who have difficulty articulating individual phonemes and so failing the check. The Reading Reform Foundation argue that phonics is particularly important for children that currently sight read or who do not articulate 'properly'. It is suggested that these children will have slower progress at a later stage if they cannot use phonics skills and that these children will reach a point where they cannot 'hold' or 'learn' the number of words they will encounter the more they read (Reading Reform Group, 2017). It is also suggested that when these children begin to encounter unfamiliar words they will not have phonics strategies to fall back on when they are unable to 'sight read'. What the teachers are claiming here is that these children (and they only identify perhaps one or two in each school) are not able, at this stage in their learning to sound and blend words – and clearly this is not because they have not been intensively taught but, they would claim, is to do with the child's particular and unique learning needs.

This is further illustrated by teachers in Elm School.

*Di (line 81) And **I have a child that stands out of the box a bit. She only learns words by sight,** she knows all her sounds but she won't sound them out for love nor money and **you can put any word in front of her and she will be able to read it.** She can say the sounds in words but she just knows them – I don't know how she does it, she knows the randomest words. She can't write …*

*Becky (line 82) **She is going to learn from purely sight***

Teachers in Elm School had talked earlier about the intensive support and training that they gave to these children before the PSC

*Chloe (line 72) So in year 1 when it was the screening check – it was like 'beg' and she might say 'b – I – g' –'tidy?' Like it would be something completely different and she got one at the beginning when she first practised, she then got 5 and she ended up passing the test and it made me feel really great – like well done, **it was so hard we were on her all the time, but I felt she sort of cheated a little bit because there are kids in the class that are better readers and they took it more seriously and they knew their sounds and they got the same as you.***

*Ava (the child's class teacher in Year 2) (line 73) So her sounds are still a bit crazy with her sounds in her writing – **she still doesn't know her sounds that well but she has done BRP and she is using these other strategies and she has shot up the book levels and so she is using other things***

The school demonstrates its focus on the PSC in order to secure passes but acknowledges that this focus merely enables the child they are discussing to pass the test and not to be able to read. It is the subsequent work and teaching, in this case the Better Reading Partners (BRP) intervention programme that enables the child to make progress with reading. This is an intervention programme used by all of the schools in the focus groups and involves one to one assessment using a running record and then specific support based on how the child has applied a range of reading strategies. Despite the progress this child has made in reading she is still not able to apply phonics skills in reading or writing.

5.2.2 The case of pseudo words: conscious submission to the PSC and conscious subversion of the reading process.

In this section (and across the thesis) the term alien words is often used interchangeably with the terms pseudo words and non-words. In the PSC the pseudo words are presented alongside a picture of an alien creature (see Appendix 34) and this has led to the classroom practice of calling the words alien words. One of the aspects of the subversion of practice and so the subversion of the reading process was the practising of reading alien words in preparation for the PSC (see Appendix 2 code C: Alien words as distortion and disconnect from the reading process). Teachers in the survey data, reported changes in practice to include the teaching of alien words (see section 5.2) and this was probed more deeply in the teachers' focus group. The explanations some children had given about the teaching of 'alien' words were shared (generally and anonymously) and teachers were asked to offer their views and ideas about the children's speculations. In these discussions, teachers in all of the 7 focus group schools talked about this practice and it was most often referred to as the aspect of changed practice that most 'troubled' teachers (Appendix 2 code B: Practice distorted). This was also highlighted in Walker et al's (2015) evaluation and Hodgson et al (2013) who undertook a survey of teachers' practices in the light of the PSC.

There were clear conscious decisions by the teachers in this study to teach alien words for the sole purpose of improving PSC scores although some teachers expressed their concerns about the practice:

Dogwood School:

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

Acorn School:

Beth (line 33) ***counter-productive***

Chestnut School:

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***

The teachers in Fig Tree School suggested that the teaching of alien words had always been part of practice and so did not represent a change in practice for the sole purpose of the PSC.

Roy (line 47) in Fig Tree School stated:

I have always taught alien words *and incorporated them into my lesson.*

Roy (line 48) (a newly qualified teacher in his first year of teaching), also said:

It is something I have always done*.*

But it was also telling that he justified this by saying (line 48):

I know teachers have done practice for the PSC

This suggests that the reason for the teaching of alien words was for the sole purpose of the PSC. What was interesting in this school, was that the teachers did not challenge this practice or question the value of this teaching that appeared to have no purpose other than for a test. This school responded to many of the questions with reference to the particular published scheme that was used in the school and was a scheme that the teachers felt very confident in teaching. Often phonics teaching was referred to by the scheme's name only (rather than as a phonics lesson or reading lesson). It appears that the teachers had 'out-sourced' their professional knowledge and perhaps their responsibility as teachers of reading, to the scheme. Mills (2011 p108) argues that "influential companies" have begun to "dominate our understandings" of the teaching and learning processes of reading and cite the Ruth Miskin scheme as an example of this. The scheme has placed an emphasis on alien words for some time and this is possibly the reason why the school had always taught them, and therefore not changed their practice and perhaps why the practice had not been questioned or further reflected upon.

Teachers in the other 6 schools 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. The discussion by teachers in Dogwood School is emblematic of these comments.

Illuminative, telling and typical: 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. So why has that concept dropped in at such an early stage that is such a….is against understanding what you are reading. I think that might be a real waste of our effort.**

Deb (line 30) Because if we disagree with that part of the test then by that association **then teaching to the test or changing your practice is a waste of time if you don't**

agree with that part of the test, then we are throwing all this effort into changing our classroom practice for something we innately disagree with.

*Flo (line 31) And **might we be confusing children who perhaps are finding it difficult to read,** and there are always some children, **it might be making it harder for them to read than better for them to read.***

*Elisa (line 32) **Because they are now trying to work out if it's a real word or not** and not just reading it.*

*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']*

Research (Stanovich, 2000; Siegal, 2008; Duff et al, 2014; Gibson and England, 2016) indicates that word reading assessment using pseudo-words (known by teachers as alien words) provides a reliable assessment of phonics skills and also is a secure predictor of later reading skills. However, the research goes 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. 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). This practice has become part of teachers' curriculum and this provides a very different perspective. The teaching of alien words, whilst is a submission to the requirements of the PSC is a distortion or subversion of the reading process from the teachers' viewpoint. The notion of 'negative washback' (Alderson and Wall, 1993) in language teaching seems to apply to and have parallels with alien word teaching in the focus groups schools. Moss (2017 p.62), in a similar way suggests that "the assessment tools themselves simply become the curriculum". Many schools illuminated this.

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.*

Cath (line 32) Yes, good point.

Beth (line 32) **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?'**

Chestnut School

Sue (line 12) **The higher ability readers often do less well because they are trying to make sense of those alien words so really it is a bit farcical that some that can just purely decode but have no understanding of those words at all will come out well.**

Gum Tree School

Alison (line 25) **The whole point is that you want them to read words and know what those words mean so you would never spend your time on alien words"**

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 by the teacher and so is appropriate and in another lesson, a word that does not make sense is termed 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. Alien words complicated this process. 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**, *especially when you work at schools, well like this one and my last one and loads of others 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.***

Alison and Mandy (line 31) Yeah!

Teachers in Elm School suggest that the EAL child is not disadvantaged in the PSC but this is because meaning is not the 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**

Di (line 14) **And for some children who are familiar with words they read what they want to see – auto correcting.**

Teachers in Dogwood School also suggested that children who have English as their first language but had more limited vocabularies not only suffered from the distortion of the reading process in relation to reading development, but the child's self-esteem was also threatened.

*Deb (line 45) and if you think about the specific demographic 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***

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 it is being taught. However, the possible purpose of teachers who use this approach is to highlight to children that reading is about making meaning: if they decode a word and it does not make sense, then they need to be aware of this and to re-read and check the word or ask what the word means if it is unfamiliar to them. However, if this is teachers' thinking about the activity, they did not explain, question or highlight this in the focus groups.

One of the concerns for many of the teachers was the amount of time that was spent on teaching and practising alien words. This further distorted the curriculum and sabotaged or subverted teaching from more valuable reading activities. Chestnut School is emblematic of school responses in this area particularly when asked if their practice would change if the PSC was no longer statutory.

Chestnut School

Illuminative and telling

*Ali (line 20) In an ideal world they wouldn't have to do the test and **so we wouldn't be wasting a term's worth of phonics teaching around just alien words**, we devote about a term to it, just alien words, **a whole terms daily phonics, that's 2 ½ hours a week…***

*Sue (line 21) **and extra for our catch up groups***

*Ali (line 22) **and that's just on alien words***

Researcher (line 23) If the test was no longer statutory do you think your practice would change and if so how?

*Ali (line 24) **We wouldn't do the alien words** and if anything **we could go back and revise phase 5** that children don't know and we could **then go on and do the grammar teaching** that is required for phonics because before they go to year 2 **there is a phase where you are supposed to teach grammar towards the end and actually (I wasn't here in the summer) but we leave that for the summer term and then I feel as though the children don't have enough time to apply it to their writing and I feel they are not as ready to go to year 2***

In the same way as Ali above talks about the pressure of the new curriculum teachers in most schools (see Appendix 2, Code L: Stress/pressure) also described the pressure they felt from the PSC. Alien word teaching is presented as having no other benefit than to improve PSC scores and so submitting to the pressure of raising attainment in relation to the PSC potentially puts attainment across the rest of the English curriculum at risk.

Other focus groups' responses to the discussion prompt: If the test was no longer statutory, do you think your practice would change and if so how?, were clear in relation to alien words:

Acorn School

Beth (line 35) **we wouldn't do alien words!**

Dogwood School

Deb (line 39) I **don't think we'd have alien words** *would we*

Gum Tree School

Mandy (line 35) I don't think our actual teaching of phonics would change **it would just be the omission of the alien words.**

Teachers also discussed what they **would** teach if they did not have to focus on the PSC.

Dogwood School

Deb (line 34) **You would have more time focusing on the sounds, more time focusing on the tricky words, you would gain time on things that mattered, comprehension and things like that.**

Acorn School

Cath (line 41) Well it would **free up more time for you to focus on that holistic approach**

Ann and Beth (line 42) yeah – **not just phonics, developing those other strategies**

*Cath (line 43) Phonics has come a bit of a focus **it's about developing the whole reader, reading in context, reading key words and that sort of thing***

Birch School

*Lala (line 10) I think the way we focus on phonics [in year 1] and coming up to it [PSC] especially **we almost forget about the reading** sometimes and focus purely on phonics and that's a bit of a shame. **We need to delve deeper into reading**.*

These teachers identify the value, to them, of a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading – a holistic approach as Acorn School calls it and in particular the need to focus on reading for meaning. Policy maker, Gibb (2015) maintains the PSC enshrines the phonics 'first, fast and only' approach and therefore it could be argued that it has been successful in relation to ensuring teachers focus on phonics rather than a 'balanced approach'. One of the issues that therefore needs to be highlighted is exactly what 'phonics first' means in relation to a child's reading development. Grundin (2017) emphasised this point in relation to children's age at the point of testing and so their point of development as readers. Children make progress at different rates and so a child may have been taught phonics first but after a relatively short time has made sufficient progress to move on to other strategies with a greater focus on meaning. Other children may require this 'phonics first' phase to be longer. The PSC therefore becomes an artificial marker in relation to this 'phonics first' requirement. It should also be noted that the Simple View of Reading, the theoretical model on which the policy is in part built, does not require phonics first, in fact it recognises that language comprehension, whilst a separate process, needs to be taught at the same time as decoding and it is this combination of the two that 'creates' reading comprehension, a point emphasised even by supporters of the Check, Stuart and Stainthorp (2016).

Not all teachers objected to the teaching of alien words and some indicated that whilst they did not necessarily see the value of teaching these words that children were not disadvantaged by learning them and that in fact, many enjoyed them. The teachers that expressed these views tended to be teachers in Reception classes rather than the Year 1 teachers who administered the PSC. Beth in Acorn School said their children viewed alien words as *"a joke" (line 66).* She said:

(Line 66) I think they think I do it to make them laugh. They do find it really funny they don't dislike it.

And in Elm School, the reception class teacher reported similarly:

Di (line 47) Our children just think alien words are hysterical.

Whilst this could be considered to be positive i.e. children are not being caused any distress, it is also relevant to reflect on why an approach that teachers had claimed was not useful to the teaching of reading, was not questioned more, as long as children enjoyed it. The intrinsic value of the activity needs to be interrogated in relation to children's development as readers and it could be argued that this level of thinking by teachers is vital if the professional standing of practitioners is to be maintained.

Fig Tree School was mentioned at the start of this section as a school that has always taught alien words. This school identified the real words as problematic in the PSC.

Jan (line 25) The last time I did it [the PSC] **one of the words was nigh – and it's like, 'n-igh' - that's not a word they are going to know – in a book where it's half non-words and half not, it's not a word they are going to recognise and it's in section where they say the whole point of having real words is so it's a real word you can sound out and think about** *…but actually none of that was available to them because they all went – 'n-igh- night' um it's not words children know* ….**and another word 'pumpkin' one year – it's not necessarily words children will have seen written down, there are not familiar with.**

This highlights a further difficulty: the real words are selected as set out in the test specifications (2012),

> The real words will include between 40 per cent and 60 per cent less common words, which children are less likely to have read previously. Less common words are included so that the majority of children will need to decode using phonics rather than rely on sight memory of words they have seen before.

Whilst the rationale is clear, it can be suggested that in practice, for a child, there is little difference between an alien word and an uncommon real word. This thinking is demonstrated by Ava in Elm School (line 39):

I feel I would get rid of the real words – if it's a non-word you can decide how it's meant to be said. So for example 'forest' For many children they use their sounds, like the word 'forest' and the child says 'for est' but you have to mark it wrong or 'rice' came up two years ago and we hadn't taught that a 'c' can be and 's' because that was being taught in year 2. **So maybe the real words go but then that goes completely against what I said to begin with – that you are teaching non-words that are never going to help them – I don't know, it's difficult!"**

If the word 'forest' had been an alien word in the PSC the child would have been scored as correct if he/she pronounced for-est rather than adapting the pronunciation to 'forest'. Teachers here are demonstrating a level of frustration with the PSC as, for them, it does not provide an accurate representation of either the child's phonics knowledge and skills or their reading abilities.

This was further exemplified by Lisa in Gum Tree School (line 13) who suggested that it was the higher attaining readers who were disadvantaged because they knew all of the alternative graphemes e.g. ow could be articulated as in 'cow' or 'snow'. If the child is presented with alien words, it does not matter which articulation they use, but with a real word (even if the child does not know the word) the child has to make the correct selection.

And I can say that the highest suffer **because then they know all of the alternative digraphs and things they can be going 'it might be this or it might be that' and they do themselves a disservice**

This submission to the PSC processes seems to disadvantage the higher attaining reader. This leads to a further consequence of teachers' conscious submission to the PSC – that of the dislocation of phonics from reading.

5.3 Dislocation of reading and phonics: conscious submission to the PSC and unconscious subversion of the reading process

An element of the questionnaire data that was probed more deeply in the focus groups was the apparent disconnect between phonics and reading, and phonics and the PSC. This is illustrated by the 64% of teachers (26 teachers of the 40 that had changed their practice) saying, in the questionnaire that they had adapted practice to improve children's phonics skills. This is very similar when focusing just on the Year 1

teachers, with 62% (15 out of 24) saying they had adapted practice to improve phonics skills. If teachers see phonics as supporting children's development as readers one might have expected to see teachers also indicating that they had changed their practice to improve reading. One might also expect that teachers who changed practice to improve PSC scores would also indicate that this changed practice improved children's phonics skills but there seems to be a disconnect. Only 20% said they had changed practice (8 teachers out of 40) to improve children's reading and for year 1 teachers this was 17% (4 teachers out of 24) whilst 87% (35 teachers) said they had adapted practice in order to improve PSC scores (100% of the teachers in Year 1 - 24 teachers) it was a significantly smaller number who also said they did it to improve phonics. The children's data (see chapter 6) also showed that some children did not associate phonics with reading and this was shared with teachers (see teachers' focus group discussion prompts in appendix 15) and prompted some discussion about the dislocation of phonics from reading.

Some of the teachers were concerned that the PSC was about word reading which was significantly different to 'real reading' or even reading words within a simple sentence. Teachers across all schools highlighted this subversion of reading with many identifying that their practice had changed to focus on word reading only during their phonics teaching as this subversion was a necessity because of the PSC requirements. This conversation between two teachers in Chestnut School was emblematic of this position.

*Ali (line 35) Well you know **I would love to be doing sentence level work with them in phonics** but **you don't because you know that's not what they are tested on** later on in the year so you think, well **you need to prepare them for the test and so you just do word level stuff***

*Sue (line 36) Yes, sentence level, I still try and do that, **I'm a great believer in sentence level work** but **I still push to do that because it makes sense when you have the words in sentences** – it helps*

*Ali (line 37) Yes, **but it doesn't help them do the phonics test so I don't encourage it***

*Sue (line 38) No, **we are really pressurised to make sure we get our pass mark** aren't we.*

Teachers recognised that as a consequence children may also see phonics as disconnected from reading, and word reading as distinct from 'real reading'. There was recognition that teachers were complicit in this process and that they did not make the links explicit to children. Teachers tended to view this as an area for their development, as their 'fault' rather than identifying the PSC as the source of 'the disconnect'. Teachers in Gum Tree School grappled with this when they discussed why some children did not see phonics as connected to, or a skill to use, for reading.

Illuminative and telling

Researcher (line 49) When interviewing children in a range of schools there were a number of children in each school who didn't think phonics was about reading. I thought this was interesting. Do you have any ideas why this might be the case?

Mandy (line 50) **I think it's because it is just words and not sentences** *isn't it. I think that* **they are not using the other reading skills that we teach them like inference and all of those that they think of as reading.** *If it's not a story – I think they think that reading is like that*

Lisa (line 51) and although we make the links with them I think, I always say, not sure if this is a bad thing, that **we are going to have our phonics lesson now so we are going to think about our sounds** *so maybe they are not putting, maybe we need to say,* **maybe make it more, straightaway, that this is reading, that we need to make it a bit clearer to them** *but you know..*

Mandy (line 52) **I also think it is because of the activities, particularly the final application is on a white board or paper, they see physically that you are writing and so they must think its writing** *and they haven't made the connection with warm-ups done verbally with the reading*

The lesson sequence was also identified as subverting the reading process in Acorn School but through the discussion there was a realisation that the lesson sequence was being determined, not by a focus on developing readers but a focus on securing success in the PSC.

Beth (line 54) Well I suppose **in phonics lessons we learn a sound and we learn words with the sound** *in and sometimes we do sentence work, picking out a word with the sound in in a sentence but it's never from a book*

Cath (line 55) I think **it's because it is isolated words – you are effectively teaching them isolated words** *which then, I mean if they …..I do a lot less phonics as I do all the SPAG in year 2…and the phonics is booster groups … but you know,* **if you are not putting them in sentences and sentences that link on, then it is just isolated words**

*Ann (line 58) Yes, **in year 1 you do probably spend a lot of time on phonics with one word because that's what the phonics screening …..***

Fig Tree School identified the dislocation as also physical, in relation to the timetabling of the curriculum but reiterated a feeling of responsibility. This subversion of the reading process had not been conscious it appeared until the point of articulating it in the focus group when it became a conscious subversion and so carried 'guilt'.

*Jan (line 89**) I think we see it as separate – so I was saying on a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday we do phonics sessions** where it is very much phonics but **we don't do very much linking between our story side.***

*Roy (line 90) **Mine is two different things. Phonics in the morning and reading in the afternoon.***

Jan (line 91) We apply it don't we

Roy (line 92) Yes

*Jan (line 93) J: So with the children we might read a sentence from the story and look at the sounds in it together so obviously we draw attention to it but we feel, or **I probably feel that the phonics is so heavy so much that we are expected to get through. It feels like the phonics lesson is pushing to look purely at sounds and breaking the word down. I think we are guilty of teaching them separate and so that's why they have said that – sad isn't it!***

These teachers seem to suggest that their professionalism is being subverted by the PSC. Teacher knowledge about their children and the approach to the teaching of reading that they understand to be effective (and this is a particularly powerful argument in schools where the reading attainment at the end of KS1 was high before the introduction of the PSC and now remains high, even when the previous year's PSC scores go down) is being subverted because of the required submission to the PSC.

5.4. The socio-cultural context: a subversion of teaching and learning

This chapter has begun to outline what could be described as the culture of the teaching and learning of early reading and begins to provide the socio-cultural context for the children's data. Language can give insight to the construction of the culture and as such, I looked across all schools' data at the language used by the teachers to describe the teaching and learning that prepared children for the PSC. I felt this language was both 'telling' and 'illuminative' as it further identified the culture of

teaching and learning. To me this language appears more violent and coercive than I might have expected when discussing the teaching of early reading with teachers.

Acorn School

Ann (line 28) ***ramming it down their throats***

*Beth (line 38) the children **have to sit through** all of that*

Fig Tree School

*Jan (line 63) we **pull them out** to read*

*Jan (line 73) children **have to go through** all of that ….and let you [the child] **struggle***

Dogwood School

*Deb (line 10) **ramming the same thing down their throats***

*Bess (line 13) you **push them***

Gum Tree School

*Alison (line 10) **desperately trying to push them***

*Alison (line 20) because **it's painful for them***

*Lisa (line 13) **the highest suffer***

*Mandy (line 59) we have **got to get them to where they need to be***

Chestnut School

*Sue (line 65) we just **race through it***

*Sue (line 88) **ram everything in***

Elm School

*Chloe (line 58) it's just **so mechanised***

*Ava (line 68) **lots of sounds to cram in***

*Ava (line 76) it's a lot **to put into them***

Birch School

*Lala (line 15) it's a **shame** for those children **we put down as failed***

This forceful language identifies the culture that has been created through: a curriculum that is so full that it requires teaching at speed; a view of the child as an 'empty vessel' waiting to be filled; an approach that is painful and creates suffering for the learner and an urgency to teaching that requires 'pulling and pushing' and so coercion.

5.5. Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented the key themes in the teachers' data of conscious and unconscious submission and subversion. These data provide the context and culture in which to consider the children's data. I have presented the teachers' data first in part, so that any replication of teacher voice can be made visible and the possible impacts of the practices that the teachers discuss can be considered in relation to the voices of the children that follow. If, as I have argued, reading is a socio-cultural practice, then the voices of the children need to be viewed as being culturally situated and in part a reflection and response to that culture.

Chapter 6

The analysis and findings from the children's data: the children's stories

6.0 An introduction

As outlined in chapter 4 both the nature of the children's focus groups (using a more playful approach) and my role as researcher (a more active role to enable children's discussions and to probe where appropriate) were different to the teachers' focus groups. This meant there was a need to be open to the possibility of the data being different and therefore needing a different approach to considering the organisation and representation of the coding of the data. Chapter 4 explains how two main themes, disconnection and connection, were identified. Children expressed ideas and opinions that were interpreted as examples of how the teaching and learning of phonics has become disconnected from the reading process in a range of ways and that reading, for some children, was disconnected from its purposes. It was also clear however, that despite this children were constantly trying to make sense of the world around them, trying to connect their experiences of learning to read with knowledge of their worlds and so provide explanations for practices that at first did not seem to make much sense to them (see Appendix 12 for an overview of the themes). Much like the teachers' data this highlighted tensions both for children, in their search to explain something and also in the interpretation of the data, where children provided a connection for an apparent disconnection (see Appendix 13 that outlines the tensions). These tensions will be explored within each of the elements of the theme presented in this chapter and are noted in the subheadings if both themes are present.

Within each theme I have identified illustrative or emblematic data, and this is presented first with further illuminative examples to further exemplify, and in some instances to show how the data were not just telling but was also typical (see chapter 3 section 3.2 where the terms typical and telling were explained). An overview of the data mapped to the themes can be found in Appendix 3, an example of annotations made to identify the themes can be found in Appendix 5 and data from children in each school in Appendices 24 to 29. This enables the reader to return to the raw data to see the wider data relating to each theme discussed.

The children's groups had the story of Beegu as a focus and the Beegu toy as a stimulus (see Appendix 23). Beegu was keen to learn to read and children were asked if they could tell Beegu if reading was a worthwhile activity and what Beegu needed to do to learn to read. Beegu is identified as 'she' in the book but the data show that children often use the pronoun 'he' and so there are times in the data where I mirror children to avoid distracting children from the point they are making.

The children were not asked directly about the PSC as many children were not aware that they had been tested (the children's focus groups took place during June and July and the PSC was conducted in June) and so direct discussion may have caused unnecessary distress and this had been an ethical consideration. However, the PSC was raised by some children and if this was the case, the discussion was developed. This in part explains why data from each of the children's groups did not cover the same areas of discussion, unlike the teachers' groups where the questions were the same for each group.

The last chapter, an analysis of the teachers' data, gave the context and culture from which to understand and interpret the children's data. The teacher's data chapter finished with an analysis of the language used by teachers to describe the teaching of reading and preparation for the PSC. The data in this chapter reflects how children have constructed their ideas about reading within this culture as outlined by the teachers.

6.1. Phonics as separate from reading: disconnection and connections

The theme of phonics as disconnected from reading, was evident in all of the schools' children's groups (see Appendix 3 Code B). Appendix 14 demonstrates the range of schools the focus groups were drawn from and so indicating that this disconnection was found regardless of the children's school's socio-economic status; Ofsted grading; PSC outcome data; reading outcome data or size of the school. The children in Fig Tree School provide an emblematic example of the theme. The children were keen to talk about reading and were enthusiastic about teaching Beegu to read. When phonics was raised there was a discussion about whether phonics was anything to do with reading. Some children (Emma and Hira) were clear that phonics was not about reading.

Illuminative and telling: Fig Tree School

Hira (line 20) **Phonics is when you do sounds** *but* **if you don't know your sounds then you won't be good at phonics.**

Emma (line 22) **Phonics is when you learn words**, *new words.*

Researcher (line 23) So phonics is when you learn new words.

Frank (line24) **Phonics is when** *you kind of like, when* **you, learn the alphabet***? (this is said like a question rather than a statement)*

Researcher (line 27) Beegu says **"Is phonics about reading then?** *Will phonics help Beegu to read?"*

A number of voices saying yes and no

Researcher (line 28) Directed to one child that said 'no'. **Why won't phonics help Beegu to read?**

Emma (line 29) **Because it's your sounds so it's not like reading, you are just learning sounds like ir, or, air**

Researcher (line 30) So **why do you do that** *then?*

Emma (line 31) **To get our brains more brainier**

Hira (line 33) Um, **phonics is about you learning sounds different sounds and different words.**

Researcher (line 34) **So is it about reading** *says Beegu?*

Hira (line 35) **No, you just sound out the words**

Researcher (line 36) OK

Giles (line 37) **Phonics is about sounds** *and if you know your phonics it's, you're going to learn your sounds and* **when you know you sounds you gonna be able to sound out words.**

Children seemed to view phonics as a separate subject, disconnected from reading, rather than as part of the early reading process. The data here suggest children see it as a 'subject' in its own right and a subject that you could 'get better at' independently of reading. 'Learning sounds' was part of that subject. The children tried to provide some explanation and identified phonics with being "brainier" as if 'intelligence' was a value in itself rather than it being linked to understanding or in this instance, reading. Children here did connect phonics with word reading but then do not seem to connect

word reading with reading more widely e.g. of text. It is possible that children, aged six, do not compartmentalise their learning and so whilst some did not connect phonics lessons with reading this may not be significant. Rose (2006) suggests that the skills of reading precedes their application in that the phrase often used following Rose was "learning to read and then reading to learn". This encapsulates reading as a linear process (Ehri, (1995); Chall, 1996;). Hall (2013) however, identifies one difference between highly effective and less effective teachers of literacy, is the contextualisation of the learning activity. In other literacy learning, the teaching of grammar for example, Myhill et al (2013) have demonstrated contextualised grammar skills learning was more effective than decontextualized learning.

Phonics as word reading and as a 'subject' in its own right were seen in other schools in response to the question 'What is phonics?

Illuminative and typical: Acorn School

*Aleena (line 50) It means like **you need to learn words and sounding** out like, 'g' like 'g' and like sounding it out and **you have to do that and say the words***

*Lemar (line 52) **It's like a word and you read them and you sound them out.***

*Hassan (line 62) Um, **phonics is kind of like learning and you do lots of fun stuff with phonics** and um, and when you do phonics you might like it*

*Researcher (line 63) **What is phonics?***

*Nadia (line 64) **Learning digraphs***

Researcher (line 65) "What's that?" says Beegu.

Nadia (line 66) It means so, two letters go together and make a sound

Researcher (line 67): So what is phonics?

*Lemar (line 68) **When you learn words***

These children do not mention reading when discussing phonics – there is a disconnect with reading and a connection made with decontextualized single word reading. The children here also introduce some of the technical vocabulary about phonics e.g. digraphs, and this associated terminology perhaps lends itself to seeing phonics as a separate subject, with its own set of related vocabulary that can be 'fun' although not connected to anything else.

This disconnection led to one child in Fig Tree School seemingly to suggest that the purpose of books was not to read and enjoy but to enable someone to practise their sounds.

*Frank (line 143) **All the books are good because they help with good sounds.***

The children in Birch School also demonstrated their knowledge of the technical language of phonics – and this language seems to show how this enables the disconnection of phonics from reading and its connection to a subject in its own right. This was further exemplified in other schools (see Code E Appendix 3):

Birch School

*Bill (line 61) **Digraphs, split digraphs and trigraphs it's like, like phonics**, well **if you don't know what a digraph is it's like if you see an 'I' and something and an 'e' then that means an i.***

And this was further elaborated when the children in Birch School were explaining their earlier phonics lesson:

*Researcher (line 83) **What are you doing here?** [looking at video vignette of lesson]*

*Bill (line 84) **We are blending, we are blending split digraphs** - see, there's another spit digraph (B sounds and blends the words in the clip)*

The children do not identify what they are doing as reading although it could be argued that the term blending i.e. synthesising the sounds together, is the process used for word reading. This use of the 'teaching terminology' of phonics for reading further distances the activities of the phonics lesson from text reading. The vignette of the lesson continued but the lesson did not include any application of word reading in context.

Children in Gum Tree School also explained what they were learning in their phonics lesson and were clear that the lesson was not about learning to read.

*Researcher (line 72) So what were you doing here? (Researcher shows children the next clip – the teacher is talking about vowels and has a focus grapheme on the board). **Is this about reading?***

Neil (line 73) **No, it's about digraphs**

Tia (line 74) So **when it has the 'e' at the end and a line and an 'a' it don't say 'a'**

Researcher (line 75) Ah, **so you don't think that is about reading?**

Neil and Tia (line 76) **No**

Whilst these appear to be clear indications of children disconnecting phonics from reading and so are 'telling' in relation to the research questions, in many schools this view was contested by other children who challenged each other around this point i.e. some children (in the data presented below) made a connection between phonics and reading. It is possible to argue that 'connection-making' is a higher cognitive skill and so with mixed attainment children's focus groups it might be expected that some children would not be able to make such links. However, when reflecting on the teachers' data here, teachers had identified that it was possible that teachers did not make the links explicit to children and that the way phonics was taught may have contributed to children disconnecting phonics from the reading process. It is possible therefore, that children's ideas are the unintended outcomes of the approach to teaching. To provide a fuller picture of children's ideas in this area the theme around connections (Appendix 3 Code R) is useful to explore.

6.2 Phonics and reading: connections

In each school there were children that had made the connection between phonics and reading. In Chestnut School children expressed this clearly when asked what Beegu needed to do to learn to read:

Illuminative and telling: Chestnut School

Mabel (line 94) **English and reading**

Felix (line 95) **And phonics, because then we can see the word and what it makes and the sounds**

Children in Chestnut School also provided an explanation of phonics that identified the link to word reading and also a link between reading and writing and phonics.

Mabel (line 39) **Sounding out is like when you have a word and you don't know what it means you look at the letters and say the letters and then it maybe makes a word** *but if you just like do like 'eat' and you go, um, um like* **you sound out just the letters**

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and if we don't know what it is we just look at the teacher when she is saying something and we listen when she is saying 'ee' and we know the letters that we need to do for 'eat'

Pete (line 54) **Um, phonics is about finding out, um different sounds** if you don't know **but you like want to find out and reading is** um, **I think about, the same as like phonics but you actually have to read the words not just find out the words, you've got to read them.**

Pete (line 64) **If you don't know how to write you should know how to read first** because **when you look at the book you are reading you see the words and when you see the words you put them in your head and next time you want to do writing in a phonics lesson um, you can use the words you have seen in a book. So reading is sort of a little bit to do with phonics because it helps you with writing.**

It is also noted that the children in Chestnut School were expressing their ideas and the connections that they made, in longer and more sophisticated articulations. It is possible that in some of the other schools children made the connection between phonics and reading but were not as able to articulate this level of meta-cognition. Chestnut School is in an area of high socio-economic status with very low deprivation indicators (see Appendix 14). This may be a possible factor to consider in the interpretation of the data in relation to the research question that considers possible differences in the unintended consequences of the PSC in different socio-economic areas. Data presented later will also show this as a school where children named a large number of children's authors, talked about their home book collections and where teachers talked about the pressure that parents placed on them. However, it should also be noted that this focus group was held in a small meeting room (the other schools had allocated outside classroom space i.e. corridor or shared space or spare classroom space) and this may have appeared as quite formal to the children and so alerted them that their responses needed to match this formality.

Children in other schools (see theme R Appendix 3) also made the connection between phonics and word reading and phonics and reading although they did not always express this as clearly as the children in Chestnut School. For example children in Acorn School said:

Lemar (line 52) **It's [phonics] like words and you read them and you sound them out.**

Researcher (line 69): And **would phonics help Beegu to read?**

Aleena (line 72) **Extremely yeah**

Bella (line 73) **If you see words that you haven't seen in a book before then you learn them in phonics**

These sorts of comments were typical across all schools but there were also instances of children moving beyond a simple connection: children at times, replicated the policy voice.

6.3. Phonics and reading and the policy voice: connections

In Birch School some children made the connection between reading and phonics but went on to summarise the connection, appearing to replicate the voice of policy. Bill's final explanation does this very clearly.

Illuminative and telling: Birch School

Researcher (line 18) **How would he teach Beegu to read?**

Bill (line 19) I know, I know, to **do some phonics**

Casey (line 21) **But what is phonics?** (this is the child asking this question)

Researcher (line 22) That's a really helpful question for Beegu. **What is phonics?**

Bill (line 23) I know, **it's how you learn and how you read**

Eric (line 24) **It's how to sound words**

Mixture of voices (line 25) Yeah

Dani (line 26) **It's how you say the letters** and **you keep practising so you know and words and so you don't get confused**

Bill (line 27) **The better you do phonics the better you can read**

It is not possible to say if Bill was articulating his experience i.e. an improvement in reading following an improvement in his phonics skills and knowledge, or if this was a replication of the voice of the teacher (who in turn replicates the policy voice of the National Curriculum) and this replication of voice was also identified in Maybin's (2013) research where she noted how children can totally "absorb" the "authoritative voice". This child has however, represented the policy voice of the National Curriculum very succinctly. It can also be seen from the data that most children talk about 'sounds' when telling Beegu how to read. Using sounds was often children's first response to

Beegu – replicating the policy position of phonics first. However, as with the teachers, there were some exceptions and these children revealed a disconnect with the policy voice.

6.4. Phonics as the only approach to learning to read: disconnection

Individual children in Acorn, Chestnut and Dogwood Schools were possibly identifying (see the data below) how they had learnt to read when they gave Beegu advice. These children talked about approaches that could be described as contradicting the policy rhetoric. Whilst not typical, these comments are telling as these children identify as readers who have not necessarily learnt using phonics as the prime approach.

Acorn School

*Researcher (line 29) Beegu says, "**What will you teach me**?"*

Aleena (line 30) I'm going to teach you some words

Researcher (as Beegu) (line 31) How are you going to do that?

*Aleena (line 32) Well, **I have to say the word then you have to say the word***

*Researcher (line 33) **So some copying?***

*Aleena (line 34) **Yeah***

This child is suggesting that Beegu reads using, what could be termed a whole word reading approach, an approach that Ann, a teacher in Acorn School (line 47) identified as one child using independently - almost despite phonics teaching. This was not an approach that teachers in Acorn School said they taught and it is possible the child is replicating, not the voice of the teacher but the voice of a parent. It is also possible that this is what the child does during the word reading element of a phonics lesson – appearing to sound and blend but in fact, whole word reading. It is possible to hear a word sounded and blended by others and then to repeat the whole word and then remember it. This child may be expressing their individual, active, problem solving approach to the typical word reading or flash card activity found in a phonics lesson.

The possible replication of the voice of the parent is seen more explicitly in Dogwood School and the child here also talks about what could be termed a 'whole word' approach to reading.

*Amy (line 62) I learnt to read, when , so **I have a book at my house which before I started school I just remembered what all the words were cos daddy read it to me loads and loads** so I thought if Beegu's parents read to him for days and days then he could....*

This child, whilst not typical, provides a telling example of the different ways that children are actively engaged, have volition and agency in learning to read and this process is not always determined by a school or can be 'controlled' by policy.

A child in Chestnut School talks about the need to use a range of strategies, however her description of this, it could be argued, replicates policy in that she suggests phonics is used first but if it does not 'work' then other strategies need to be employed.

Chestnut school

*Darcy (line 37) **Sounding out is where you look at the words and, um, say them, um, if the words doesn't make sense you try another way of reading the word***

Here there is a clear connection between phonics and reading being made and also, more significantly, a connection being made between reading and meaning making. This moves beyond phonics as an approach to only reading single, decontextualised words, as expressed by other children. This may again be reflecting the difference in the articulacy of children in Chestnut School or could possibly also reflect the differences in ages of children in Year 1 and so in the focus group – with some older children (within the year group) possibly demonstrating greater levels of articulacy and maturity. The differences in the age of children has also been noted in relation to the PSC with summer born children being highlighted by critics of the PSC (Clark, 2015) as disadvantaged i.e. they disproportionately 'fail' the check. The differences in children's interpretations of learning to read, in my data, may have been due to their age at the point of the focus group.

In analysing this theme I returned to the teachers' data to see if there was any possible links between what teachers said about the phonics and reading connection and disconnection and their children's ideas. No clear patterns emerged: in all of the schools different children expressed ideas of connection and disconnection. In some schools teachers seemed to express a concern about the disconnection of phonics

from reading in their practice e.g. Chestnut School, but this disconnection was not disproportionately identified by children in this school.

It was also noted that sometimes the same child expressed both disconnecting and connecting viewpoints, for example Aleena in Acorn School, whose voice is captured in the different examples above. It is possible to see in these data how Aleena said that phonics was '*extremely useful*' for reading at one point in the focus group and at another point, that whole word reading was useful and also suggested that phonics was just about word reading and sounds, at a different point in the focus group. Children (and adults) can replicate the voices of their peers in small group situations (Kellett, 2010) making connections continuously with their own understanding as new points are made by other children. The children are not necessarily contradicting themselves but are demonstrating the complexity and process of learning, in this instance, the process of learning to read. They are also perhaps, recognising that there is more than one 'truth' in relation to learning to read. It is also possible that children viewed me as a teacher and so when responses by other children were acknowledged this might have been viewed as an 'acknowledgement' of the 'right answer' and so children may then seek to replicate or add to it, to 'please'.

This could have been the case for one connection that was made by some children in every school – so was typical and telling: the connection made between phonics and writing and that writing was the reason phonics was taught.

6.5 Phonics is about writing and not reading: connections

Reading and writing can be seen as reciprocal processes and so phonics is both about decoding words to read and encoding words to spell. This relationship was expressed in different ways by children and some children expressed a relationship between phonics and writing i.e. that phonics was about learning to write, but did not identify the same relationship between phonics and reading (see Appendix 3 code F). Children in Birch School returned to the phonics and writing links throughout the focus group – even when prompted that we were trying to help Beegu to become a reader. The children did not seem aware that they were referring to writing when Beegu was asking them directly about learning to read. The following extracts from different parts

of the Birch School children's focus group transcript illuminate how regularly the phonics/writing link was returned to.

Example 1

Researcher (line 10) ***Is reading just about book levels****?*

Bill (line 11) ***No! Reading helps you write***

Researcher (line 12) Oh I see, go on

Casey (line 13) ***See it's here (point to book) and that's a question mark***

Eric (line 14) ***And reading helps you spell things***

Example 2

Eric (line 62) ***If she [Beegu] don't know a key word you can look on a sound mat so you know how to spell it***

Researcher (line 63) so that's spelling …..

Casey (line 64) ***so whatever it starts with you have to find that sound and write it first***

Researcher (line 65) Yes, so that's writing …. What about reading?

Example 3

Researcher (Line 69) ***What are you doing*** *[children are watching the play back of their phonics lesson]?*

All children (line 70) ***Phonics***

Researcher (line 71) ***Why are you doing phonics?***

Bill and others (line 72) ***To learn!***

Researcher (line 73) To learn what?

Casey (line 74) ***To learn writing and stuff***

Example 4

Researcher (line 93) and so ***is it good to be able to read?***

Bill (line 94) ***Yes, because it helps you to write***

Casey (line 95) and it helps you sound

Example 5

*Researcher (line 105) **And anything else about reading at all?** Any other reasons why Beegu should learn to read?*

Eric (line 106) so he can read a book

Researcher (line 107) Is that a good thing?

*Eric (line 108) **because it makes your handwriting better***

In the final example there is an association with reading and handwriting – which seems a little unusual. However, often in the early stages of writing and phonics teaching, handwriting is taught at the same time as new graphemes are introduced and this may have been the reason for the link made. In addition to this it was noted that Eric contributed his ideas frequently to the group and was interested in the Beegu story, often responding directly to the Beegu toy e.g. Line 44 Appendix 21, Birch School transcript. When looking at the Birch School's children's transcript as a whole, Eric makes a lot of interjections and sometimes it is not always clear how these linked to the area of discussion e.g. Line 15 Appendix 21 Birch School transcript. It is possible that Eric, having previously talked about writing in an excited way, was still thinking about writing and what, in his mind he thought made good writing, when he responded with the comment about handwriting.

The reciprocity between reading and writing is possibly understood and being expressed by the children in Birch School however this link seems to blur the lines between reading and writing for the children and in relation to this study, the purpose of phonics as set out in policy as the prime approach to the teaching of reading (rather than writing). The teachers were asked if they could explain why children had readily made this link with some teachers explaining that phonics lessons commonly did not include reading (except for single word reading) but regularly included the spelling of words (Appendix 2 code F). One of the teachers in Birch School, Eve made a point of saying that in their school they always made sure that lessons included reading and writing; Eric seems to have a different understanding. Of course, the practice Eve is describing may be the practice she adheres to and it may even be part of the school's agreed practices but there may be some variation across the school. The lesson

vignette shared with the children in Birch School of their lesson did not match Eve's description.

Eve (line 52) – I think in our phonics sessions we do a mixture of reading words and spelling words, reading sentences and spelling sentences so I think they would pick up that they use that to read because I think it's made quite clear – the phonics session involves reading words as well as, spelling, writing

One child in Chestnut School presents quite a sophisticated response, showing clarity about the reciprocity of reading and writing. This is the same school, but not the same child, mentioned in section 6.3 (Connections: phonics and reading) that had particularly articulate children in the focus group who showed high levels of meta-cognition in their reasoning.

Chestnut School

Pete (line 64) **If you don't know how to write you should know how to read first because when you look at the book you are reading you see the words and when you see the words you put them in your head and next time you want to do writing in a phonics lesson um, you can use the words you have seen in a book. So reading is sort of a little bit to do with phonics because it helps you with writing.**

It is noted that this child does not talk about using their sounds to write in the phonics lesson but remembers what the word looks like and uses this to write the word. It is possible to view this child as one who subverts the policy agenda as he does not seem to use phonics to read or write but instead, uses a whole word approach.

What Birch School illuminated was children making the links between phonics and writing more readily than links with phonics and reading and this was illustrative of other examples from schools:

Fig Tree School

Researcher (line 13) How would you help Beegu to read? **What would you teach Beegu?**

Frank (line 14) **If he had a big write book and he wanted to write a sentence he could look up on the sounds and think, what goes first?**

Dogwood School

Researcher (line 68) And Beegu says **is that [phonics] to do with reading?**

Mark (line 70) **No it's [phonics] for writing – if you want to write a story**

Elm School

Researcher (line 49) **Can you help Beegu then [to read]?**

Kira (line 50) **He needs to know how to write A B C**

These illustrative examples seem to resonate with teachers' explanations of their phonics lessons – that most phonics lessons contain minimal reading, with word reading only. Teachers also explained that most phonics lessons usually contained the spelling of words using the sounds taught in the lesson. The voices of children in Chestnut School resonate with this view and are emblematic of this idea:

Researcher (line 45) **What happens in a phonics lesson?**

Darcy (line 46) Well **you sit on the carpet and have a book, not a reading book, well a phonics book.**

Researcher (line 47) Ooo – hang on a minute, what's the difference between a reading book and a phonics book?

Darcy (line 48) Well, **a phonics book is bare with just lines and a reading book is got words and pictures and then….and then, well you start writing, well you sort of, the teacher says a word, then you write it.**

Researcher (line 49) - **so in phonics you do writing**

Darcy (line 50) **Yes**

Felix (line 58) Well **it's kind if the same as reading, what you have written in your thing, you have to read it again and check you haven't made a mistake or anything.**

Researcher (line 59) so how do you know what you have to write in a phonics lesson?

Felix (line 60) Well, **I write and then I check it again and I check it again and then I start writing again and if it's too long I put a full stop then I carry on my writing**

Researcher (line 61) I see and that is what you do in phonics is it?

Felix (line 62) Yeh

Mabel (line 66) Writing is a bit as well about capital letters because he [Beegu] can't start a sentence with like a little 'a' because then it makes, it does the same word but after we don't really know why they didn't put a capital letter.

Researcher (line 67) And do you do that in your phonics lesson?

Mabel (line 68): **Yes but sometimes we forget it. So we are just always clapping and then she [the teacher] says "capital letters" clap again, "capital letters"**

Children's views could be interpreted as children making sense of the teaching and learning they experience as part of the phonics lesson – they are describing what happens in a lesson and the role of the teacher. The 'teaching' they describe in these extracts are about the teacher correcting or reminding children about punctuation – children do not describe what the teacher does to teach reading. These are telling exchanges when read alongside teachers' views about the distortion of their practice as a result of PSC preparation (see the previous chapter and Appendix 2 Code B). The practice the children are describing is not practice that will directly prepare children for the PSC. The teachers' focus group emphasised the PSC as this was the research focus. It may be that teachers also had concerns about improving children's writing and spelling - teachers did talk about pressure more generically as well as specifically about PSC (see Appendix 2 code L) and the children may have been reflecting an increased focus on writing as well as PSC preparation. It is perhaps this tension that teachers are expressing in the questionnaire data when they identify their changes in practice being for the sole purpose of raising attainment in the PSC and not for reading (see Appendix 6) and this in turn, is reflected in the children's experience of learning to read and shown in the data.

6.6: The case of alien words: disconnection and connection making

The PSC contains 20 pseudo words and the purpose of the words is to assess how children use their phonic knowledge and skills out of context: both the context of a known word and the context of a text. This therefore, it is argued, provides an accurate measure of children's phonics knowledge (Stanovich, 2000; Siegal, 2008; Duff et al, 2014; Gibson and England, 2016). It is argued by teachers that there is a need to familiarise children with these sorts of words and to practise them so that children are familiar with this format for the PSC. In the PSC the words are accompanied by a picture of a strange creature, or alien, in order to demarcate the real words from the pseudo words (see Appendix 34). This has led to the practice of calling these words 'alien words'.

In four of the activity focus groups (see Appendix 3 code I) children raised the issue of alien words when talking about what happened in their phonics lessons. When talking

about 'alien words' these children did not initially question why they were learning to read pseudo words and many, it will be shown, seemed to accept it was just 'something you did' in a phonics lesson. This seems to be a logical conclusion for children based on the earlier data presented that showed some children saw phonics as a subject in its own right and so 'alien' words were just part of the 'phonics subject'. Another point that is noted in the data below is that when alien words were raised by the children it was often evident to me that the activities were about test preparation, for example a number of children in the schools talked about being '*taken out'* of class to '*do alien words'*

Chestnut School

*Researcher (line 87) So **why do you have to be able to read alien words***?*

*Felix (line 88) **Well you don't have to but sometimes teachers just take you out so if you are learning about alien words you can make up some alien words.***

Fig Tree School

*Frank (line 55) **We've done one [a test] with Miss X and she has them on her list** but we don't, you don't look at them but you look at ….*

Emma (line 56) (interjects) I got 5 wrong

Frank (line 57) I got 3 wrong.

What was evident was that if children were questioned about the purpose of alien words, none of them were clear about why they were reading them - with the exception of one child, Claire, in Dogwood School

*Claire (line 90) I **know, Miss X said that um they are just to help you with your sounds they are not for any other use they just help with sounds – a bit of a waste of time***

It is not clear, if Claire is replicating the voice of the teacher here (as teachers in Dogwood School had identified the practice as not a good use of time) or that this is her reflection on the process. Children, when questioned about alien words, were clearly making every effort to make sense of the practice. Chestnut School provides an illuminative and emblematic example here:

Chestnut School

Darcy (line 82) **Because we can see the alien words and if we find it in a book we say "oh that's an alien word"**

Researcher (line 83) **Oh, do you find alien words in books then?**

Darcy and others (line 84) **No but if it is an alien book, um and it's all about aliens, um in alien it means something though maybe we can see that's maybe 'tee' but they swapped the letters around.**

Researcher (line 85) **So what's the point of alien words?**

Felix (line 86) It's like, well **in our school, the alien words that we do in school are in English they are not in alien language** and **like, "squirt" or something and there is an alien next to it and if it's a real word there is not an alien next to it.**

Researcher (line 89) **So do the alien words help you with your reading?**

Mabel (line 90) **They don't. They just confuse you.**

Researcher (line 91): **Beegu says does she need to learn to read alien words, would that help her to read?**

All children together (line 92) **No**

What is illuminative and telling here is that children are seeking a purpose for the activity – so they suggest that they might find alien words in books or in fact, that there might be aliens' books that are full of alien words. However, when questioned further they continue a logical line of argument that suggests that in their school their alien words are in English and recognise that it is then distinguished by the alien picture beside it. What is particularly telling is that Mable suggests that alien words *'just confuse'* the reading process and the children collectively agree that Beegu does not need to bother with alien words in her quest to learn to read.

In Dogwood School children are clear that the words are not real and do not make sense, but they too try and provide a possible explanation for learning to read the words. The children suggest that it could help them to not mix up the words (real and alien) and this reflects some of the teaching practice (seen in some of the short film vignettes) where children are asked to decide if a word was real or not.

Dogwood School

Researcher (line 77) **What are alien words when you do phonics**?

A number of children (line 78) **laugh**

Penny (line 79) Um **I think we are practising to not say them like, yeah write alien words and stuff like that**

Isla (line 83) **They're not real, they don't make sense.**

Researcher (line 84) Right they are not real and they don't make sense – **so why are you learning those then?**

Penny (line 85) : **So you don't get mixed up with real words and alien words**

Researcher (line 86) I see and **would you get them mixed up?**

Penny (line 87) **Er – no (laughs)**

Mark (line 88) **I think alien words are for when you are writing a story and you were going to write something and then someone can't read it when you are older and you are writing so you might not do it.**

Penny makes an interesting point about practising to *not* say the alien words. This thinking is actually quite useful for the child (but not useful in the context of the PSC perhaps). It is possible that this child is aware that if she reads a word it should make sense, and so if a word is read that does not make sense then she is possibly indicating she knows not to read it but to re-read and check before saying the word, as a decoding error must have been made. There is an expectation that what is read should make sense.

Mark suggests that the teaching of alien words is about writing – possibly here, equating alien words with misspellings or spellings that someone/ an adult cannot read. This could also be viewed as the child recognising that what is read and therefore what is written, needs to make sense to the reader. The focus these children place on meaning is useful for both reading and writing.

The other children in this group were focusing more on the 'mixing' of real and alien words and the need to know which was an alien word and which a real word. This was also evident in Fig Tree School:

Emma (line 44) ***If you learn alien words you won't get mixed up with real words****. An alien word is 'bock'*

*Researcher (line 45) OK so when might you get mixed up, so **when might there be alien words?***

*Emma (line 46) **Like if you don't know a real word you might say an alien word and if you don't know an alien word you might say an alien word.***

*Researcher (line 47) So **do you have to learn alien words?***

*Emma (line 48) **Yes***

*Researcher (line 49) OK. So **do you ever read books that have got alien words as well as real words?***

*Frank and Emma (line 50) **No***

*Emma (line 51) **But we do a phonics test with alien words in***

*Researcher (line 65) **So you were going to tell me about the test and alien words in the test***

*Giles (line 66) Um **they are really testing us about when we see the alien because the alien is there on the alien word and if it's a real word there is no alien there***

The discussion about 'mixing' real and alien words is a possible reflection of the practice discussed by the teachers in Chapter 5. The practice that has been adopted and discussed in this chapter, involves the children being presented with a word and having to decide if it is 'real' or 'alien'. Teachers use a range of activities and games to do this. This practice is then interpreted by children. Emma's comment (line 46) is particularly telling: she seems to be suggesting that if you do not know what a word means, you are reading an 'alien' word – so rather than questioning whether the word makes sense or not, it can be assumed that the word is 'alien'. This may well have implications for ensuring children read for meaning rather than 'bark at the print' (Goouch, 2007 p.53) although it is noted that Rose (2006) in the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading suggests that 'barking at print' is a stage that children have to go through before coming readers for meaning (2006 p.20).

Children in Fig Tree School also mention alien words in the context of the PSC. Giles realises that the PSC is not testing whether they can distinguish real and alien words. Giles reaches this conclusion, correctly, because he realises that all of the real words do not have a picture beside them, whilst the alien words are accompanied by an alien

picture – which to Giles is clearly rather a giveaway! This insight by the child calls into question the practice of children being asked to read a word and to decide if it is real or not – the practice was identified as practice to prepare children for the PSC but as the child points out, they do not have to be able to do this; they merely need to be able to decode the word. The children do not however, offer any other explanations but go on to discuss who they think put the test together and concluded that it must be their head teacher.

Researcher (line 78) Who makes up the words for the test? **Where does it come from?**

Hira (line 79) **We don't know**

Joy (line 80) **I think Mr R [the head teacher] does it.**

Emma (line 81) Mr R

Frank (line 82) **Mrs M (the class teacher)**

Emma (line 83) **No it doesn't come from Mrs M. Mrs M doesn't have a big pen and Mr R does**

Researcher (line 84) **Ah he's got the biggest pen so he must put the words in the test?**

Giles (line 85) **I think somebody else** *because I can remember that it might have been the head teacher because* **the teacher wouldn't have time to do it at playtime or if we go to the toilet we might look so it be coming from the head teacher.**

Emma (line 86) **I think it's somebody in the school but somebody we don't know**

Again, the children are trying to make sense of their school experiences: they use their problem solving skills to decide who could make the test and who has to be ruled out. The children explain that they think the test will show who is good at reading but one child is not sure about this.

Researcher (line 75) So **if you are really good at the test you are really good at reading?**

Some voices (line 76) Yes

Joy (line 77) **No. cos in the test there might be, some of the words might be tricking you and you think, some of thems got to be human words not just alien words but what if they were all alien words and they were trying to see if you could figure it out**

The children see the test as a test of reading (although my question lead them to believe this it could be argued) – although the policy states that the test is a test of

decoding and not reading. It could be argued that teachers too seemed to conflate the PSC with a reading test and so the culture created is that single word decoding is reading rather than reading being about reading for purpose and meaning.

Where children raised the PSC I felt I needed to be careful about the way that I further probed children with an awareness that I did not want to unduly upset or make children anxious about the PSC if it had not been something that they were fully aware of. It was telling, although not typical, that one child thought that the PSC was designed to 'trick' children. This interpretation could potentially lead to anxiety and it would be useful to further explore with teachers how they frame the check for children and whether they use the term 'trick' to ensure children are highly focused for the test.

6.7 Immersion in the Beegu story

What I had not anticipated in my research design was that children in a few schools, recognised that Beegu in the story was an alien and that this was a little confusing for them when talking about 'alien words'. Some children in Gum Tree, Elm and Dogwood School, thought that Beegu could possibly read all of the alien words that were in their phonics lesson and that they might mean something to Beegu as an alien. What was also noted here was the engagement that children had with the text and with the Beegu toy. Dogwood School children in particular interpreted the questions within the context of the story – they had empathised so meaningfully with Beegu that they approached some of the discussion from Beegu's point of view:

Dogwood School

Researcher (line 2) **Do you think it is worth Beegu trying really hard, putting in lots of effort and learning to read.**

All children (line 3) **Yes**

Researcher (line 4) **Why** *do you think Beegu should do that?*

Amy (line 5) **Because of, well because then he would, then they wouldn't ignore him because they would know what he was talking about**

Mark (line 9) **Because if they were trying to say something why they didn't want him, he would know**

Researcher (line 10) **Is it worth Beegu learning to read** *(to another child)*

Isla (line 12) **No**

Researcher (line 13) **Why not?**

Isla (line 14) **Because he might want to be like other people but he is perfect how he is already**

Penny (line 56) well, well **he might of speak in alien words [referring to Beegu], in space, where aliens are, they mightn't have words but they might sound them out differently**

The children were demonstrating some of their values about reading – reading enables you to join in with the community around you and it enables you to better able to understand the culture. Isla seems to suggest that reading is a common skill and that learning to read is perhaps a form of compliance that requires change. Isla suggests that Beegu is '*perfect as he is*' and so there is no need to force the reading process on Beegu. This resonates further with the ways that some children talk about learning to read with clear associations around compliance with school processes and perhaps could be read alongside the language used by teachers to describe their teaching at the end of the previous chapter. This will be explored in the following section.

6.8 Disconnection from reading, connection to school practices and processes

Children in most schools, with the exception of Dogwood and Elm School (see Appendix 3 codes E and K) made strong associations between the teaching of phonics and the procedures and practices of the lesson. The learning process was, for some children about compliance with the rules of learning as set out by their teacher. This at times, also saw the PSC as part of these schools processes.

Fig Tree School

Researcher (line 9) {Beegu says] **Is it worth learning to read?**

Hira (line 10) Yes, but if you don't learn to read then if you don't, **if you don't do your sounds, and if you don't go to school and sit on the carpet and do things and put your hand up then you won't know what it is.** *I would teach him [Beegu] that – what* **is on the wall** *– and then he would say it and if he didn't know it he would be quiet but if he did know it he would put his hand up and then he would get chosen.*

Giles (line 88) **Because you need to learn sounds or you won't learn anything.**

Emma (line 99) Reading is a good thing because **if you don't read then you are not brainy but if you are not brainy and there's a phonics test then you won't know your phonics sounds and then you get them all wrong.**

Children in Chestnut School talked about being '*on the carpet*' (Darcy, line 46) and physically locating the teaching and learning of reading in relation to the phonics lesson.

Common to most schools (apart from Dogwood and Elm School, see Appendix 3 code K) was the association of reading with making progress through reading book levels. Whilst there were only one or two comments in these schools, the typical nature of this 'measurement' of reading was telling in relation to the research questions as it was an indication about how children viewed and understood the purpose of reading.

Fig School

Frank (line 118) **These have got numbers on them, when they get higher they get trickier – the highest level is rainbow.**

Acorn School

Hira (line 10) **If you read really good you go up a new level**

Chestnut School

Felix (line 31) Storybooks **– there is a level of story books and there is a level of fact books**

Gum Tree School

Researcher (line 9) What is reading?

Tia (line 10) Reading is about your levels

Birch School

Researcher (line 6) So its [reading] about books?

Bill (line 7) **It might be a level or not a level or a normal book and if you can read it, well done and you keep moving up different kinds of levels**

Eric (line 8) Like level 7

Bill (line 9) or 13

In this final example there is a possibility that the child is replicating a teacher or parents' voice in the phrase '*well done*'. Being a 'good reader', according to this child, is about making progress in terms of book levels and this is what is valued. This possible identification of the voice of the teacher is also found in Gum Tree School when Imaan answers Beegu's question "what is reading?"

Imaan (line 18) **Reading is about your education.**

Neil (line19) **Reading is not your education.**

Imaan (line21) **It means learning**

The word 'education' seems quite abstract for a child of six, although it is clear she has a 'definition' of education as 'learning'. It is possible that this a replication of the voice of an adult. These views of '*reading as levels'* and as part of your '*education'* were not the only views expressed about reading. As indicated earlier, children were engrossed by the Beegu story, they were keen to listen to the story, to empathise with the character and were eager for the pages to be turned. This level of enthusiasm for the story did not, however, always translate to children's views about reading and these will be explored further in the next section.

6.9 Reading from pleasure and purpose: disconnections and connections

One of the first questions that Beegu posed to children in each of the schools was 'whether it was worth her learning to read'. Children in all of the schools tended to respond to this question as a group, with a mixture of voices, most saying that 'yes' it was worth Beegu learning to read but in four schools there were also voices that said 'no'. To try and explore this, Beegu asked each child in turn the same question. Responses that were positive were coded across four main areas (see Appendix 3 codes L, M O, P): reading as a pleasurable or purposeful activity; reading as a purposeful activity in relation to future benefit; reading as positive because it was positive to 'master a skill' and purposeful just because it made you 'clever' and so linked in some way to academic success. In four schools (see Appendix 3 code Q) children expressed ideas that reading was not a good thing for Beegu to do because it

was 'boring' and also 'effortful'. Acorn School provides an emblematic and telling example of children's responses.

One child in Acorn School, in response to the question about whether it was worth Beegu learning to read, described reading:

Bella (line 84) **it is really fun**

However when asked 'what was fun about reading (line 85) the child responded,

Bella (line 86) **You get to have lots of different words that you haven't seen before**

There does not appear to be a connection made to reading whole texts, stories or non-fiction text or indeed to the meaning of the texts. Reading here seems to be about reading words – albeit 'different' words. This idea had been expressed earlier by a different child;

Nadia (line 14) [it is worth learning to read] **because you can learn new words**

Whilst a disconnection with reading for meaning was suggested here, children also indicated that reading was purposeful – but this was as a future benefit rather than as something available to them now. This is possibly an unusual response, with many children aged six, being more inclined developmentally to consider their immediate experiences rather than abstracting to future experiences.

Lemar (line 16) Yes, **because you need to be able to read when you are a grown up.**

Aleena (line 18) I know, **because it's really important when you have a job**

Nadia (line 20) **I think it's kind of good to read because you need, you need to know how to read those words to read.**

Teachers were invited to discuss these ideas and others expressed by children across the schools and whether they felt they had the balance right between reading for pleasure and the teaching of reading using phonics (see Appendix 15 question 3).

The teachers in Acorn School stated:

Cath (line 75) Clearly not! **I think that sort of thing will have come from parents – it wouldn't have come from school**

Cath (line 78) felt the focus was to *"enjoy it [reading]"* and that as a school they had *"done a fair bit on reading for pleasure" (Teacher A, line 80)* with *"story time at the end of the day [as] a non-negotiable"* Cath went on:

Cath (line 81) **we always talk about the emotions that reading creates in you when you have a story read to you so …we do everything we can …maybe we are not doing it quite right though**

This suggests that the teachers were trying to create a reading culture that had a focus on reading for pleasure and purpose but that perhaps, the process of learning to read was what dominated children's thinking rather than the 'end product' or reading. The culture of learning to read as set out by the teachers across schools, with a focus on preparation for the PSC, could be impacting on children's view of reading and being a reader. It appears that Cath is suggesting that perhaps the development of the reading culture is not as 'balanced' as she had hoped or imagined it was.

Reading for pleasure and purpose as a future goal was also expressed by children in other schools:

Dogwood School

Claire (line 27) Because if you keep on reading then you will be able to read everything and then **when you are a grown up and you are driving to London then you'll be able to see things and read the sign posters.**

Elm School

Kira (line 7) No, Because **when you are older like there might be lots of words on something that you have to read or something at university that you have to read and you might not know the words and it might be difficult to read this word and you might be 75 or something and still can't read the words**

Kira seems to express almost a fear of not being able to read aged 75 and perhaps this, along with having been told you need to read '*words*' at '*university*' has been used as an 'incentive' or 'motivation' or 'threat' even, to the child of the importance of learning to read. Kira also expresses that reading is effortful and mentions the need to 'persevere' in her experience of learning to read:

Kira (line 53) **I started to read a book but got muddled up**

Researcher (line 54): Might Beegu get muddled up when she starts to read

All (line 55) Yeh

*Researcher (line 56) **Any advice for when she gets muddled up***

*Kira (line 57) **You just need to persevere and try your hardest***

*Kira (line 61) **You get a book and you have to try and like you've got to like persevere. And she might find it a bit difficult at first but it's really easy when you've got the idea.***

Mark in Dogwood School offers a similar insight into the effort required when learning to read. This child returns to his theme throughout the focus group.

*Mark (line 21) **I don't really like it [reading]***

*Researcher (line 42) **Can you think how you learnt to read?***

*Mark (line 43) Um…**practise***

*Mark (line 60) **Just practising***

*Mark (line 112) **I haven't got any books I like.***

Researcher (line 138) Well Beegu says thank you very much, Beegu now knows lots of things about learning to read and he is going to think a bit more carefully whether he decides to read of not.

*Mark (line 138) **One more thing, he has to practise every day.***

Having stated that there are no books Mark likes, he later goes on to name a number of books that he has enjoyed and this will be discussed later in this section.

As is clear from Appendix 3, code Q, there were only a small number of children who expressed this 'effortful' view, however it is important to listen to these 'telling' if not 'typical' voices as they illuminate the voices of children who may find reading difficult. It is these children that the rhetoric of the PSC claims to target – the right of every child to learn to read. Learning to read can be effortful and so the context and culture

in which it takes place becomes even more important if the process and the outcomes are to be motivating and engaging.

There were children that identified a current purpose for reading that made it a useful thing to learn to do (see Appendix 3 code M). In Gum tree School Neil (line 29) said:

 *"****when you are playing computer games and there are words you need to read them by yourself****"* and in Acorn School, one child talked about it being good to read books that she had written herself:

Lemar (line 24) It's because he can make his own books and he can read his own books.

However it was in two schools Chestnut and Dogwood School, where children talked about the pleasure of reading different texts more extensively.

Chestnut School

Researcher (line 3) what do you think about reading?

Lots of voices (line 4) ***Good and fun***

Felix (line 5) ***Fun and interesting***

Researcher (line 6) And what do you think?

Pete (line 7) ***story books are good to read and non-fiction books are interesting***

Felix (line 8) ***Books are interesting because they have lots of facts, like finding out lots of facts and so I know lots of stuff***

Darcy (line 9) ***I like stories because they are fun to read and you also get ideas from them, stories***

Mabel (line 15) yes – ***I read because it's good and it's fun to read***

Researcher (line 16): Beegu, did you hear that? It's good and it's fun – it's worth putting in all that effort. (Continuing round the group)Is it worth Beegu learning to read?

Darcy (line 17) Yes, ***because when you've learnt it you really enjoy it***

Holly (line 18) ***It is worth it because if you read it makes you, like happy***

Felix (line 21) Yes because ***it's interesting and you can get to learn facts and you can make your own stories and it's*** very ***{child's emphasis} fun.***

All the children here seem to express a positive view of reading in relation to reading for meaning. It may have been that children followed the tone and ideas of the children that had spoken before but in other schools there tended to be more of a mix of views about reading and why reading was a good thing. It could also have been that the teachers had selected this group because they were positive, but teachers had agreed to select a mix of children for the group in relation to attainment and so perhaps, even the children who were lower attaining readers continued to enjoy reading. The teachers in Chestnut School had expressed concerns about the focus on the PSC (see Chapter 5) and the stress and pressure they felt as teachers in relation to the check (see Appendix 2 Code L). It is perhaps therefore 'telling' to consider the ways that the children in Chestnut School talked about home and home reading.

*Felix (Line 129) Well **sometimes I go to the shop and buy a book** 'cos it's where I got [indistinguishable book name] for my birthday and I **have like 49 of them and then I got 'Unicorn School' from a shop that I bought myself.***

Researcher (line 130) What about anyone else?

*Pete (line 131) **I've got Beast Quests at home**. I've got about…I think I've got about…*

*Felix (line 132) **I've got 40 of them***

*Pete (line 133) **I think I've got 11***

Researcher (line 134) You have got so many books at home and so many books at school – you are very lucky

*Pete (line 135) Well, **one of them is a library book** – I don't know which one it is.*

*Mabel (line 136) **There's one called, I think I have, it's called "The busy Zagandzig".There is someone called Zig and someone called Zag and Zag goes to the zoo and they lost themselves. And a crocodile eats him. [children laugh]***

Children clearly own a number of books and talk knowledgably about them. Reading here is expressed in terms of book titles and story plots which give visible pleasure. This exchange had followed a longer exchange (from lines 97 to 127 – see Appendix 28) where children talked about particular books that they thought Beegu should read. They explained that these books came from the school library (line 117) and one child expressed how they wanted particular books from the library:

Holly (line 127) **We can get them from the library and there's the Chocolate Factory, the one from Roald Dahl and Magic Finger but now I really want Roald Dahl and the Chocolate Factory**

It is possible that the role of the home and the role of the school library also contributed to the culture of reading that was created in this school – possibly balancing the PSC focused culture that the teachers were expressing concerns about. However, it should be noted that as a researcher I pursued some of these areas for discussion because they had been raised by the children when answering the question about whether Beegu should learn to read. Perhaps if I had asked children in the other schools more directly about books they enjoyed there may have been similar responses. Chestnut School is located in an area of high socio-economic status and was previously discussed as a school where the children spoke with greater articulacy and gave greater depth to their explanations. Also discussed earlier was the caution needed when making causal links between socio-economic status and the ideas expressed by the children (i.e. there are many other possible influencing factors: time of the focus group; room it took place in; selection of children) however, the other school where there was a similar discussion about books was in Dogwood School (Appendix 5 lines 97 to 137), the other school in the sample from an area of high socio-economic status. This is also the school where Mark had first claimed he did not like any books but in the transcript below it can be seen he becomes engaged with the discussion about books and names many he enjoys. He also makes an insightful point about linking the purpose of reading with the Beegu story:

Dogwood School

Researcher (line 97) So let's imagine Beegu has got all of this sorted out and learns to read, **what would you say Beegu should read.**

Various voices (line 98)

Claire (line 99) I know, I **know, information books**

Claire (line 101) **There is information about like real words about our language**

Mark (line 102) **He could find um a book that tells him how to read**

Researcher (line103) That would be good wouldn't it.

*Penny (line 104) **I've got one, it's a 'you choose' because it's sort of a game and you have to read it as well.** So basically the first one is where would you go and you just have to pick somewhere that's on the page and then the second page would be who would be in your family and then the second one is, what, what hat and shoes will you wear*

*Researcher (line 111) **Are there any other story books that you enjoy reading***

*Mark (line 112) No, **I haven't got any books I like.***

*Isla (line 113) '**Fix it duck'***

Researcher (line 114) You like a book called fix it duck

*Isla (line 115) **It's quite babyish but I still like it***

*Mark (line 116) **I have some books I like um, I've got a science book and a ….and a….two spaces books***

*Penny (line 124**) I've got another one, 'The worst witch'***

*Lots of voices (line 127) **I like that one***

*Claire (line 128) I like '**Room on the broom'***

*Mark (line 130) **I like 'Room on the broom' and I like some more but I can't think what they are called and there is 'Harold and the purple crayon'***

*Researcher (line 133) And **where do you get your books from***

*Penny (line 134) **The book shop***

*Some children (line 135) **the library***

*Mark (line 136) And **I get some for my birthday***

*Penny (line 137) Yes **I get them for my birthday***

Dogwood School was also a school where children mentioned their parents' role in learning to read and also, that Beegu's parents would need to be able to read in order to help Beegu (see Appendix 3 code T). It appears that the reading culture is constructed by the school but also the child's wider community of friends and family.

6.10 Concluding remarks

At the start of this chapter I explained that the children's data were presented after the teachers' data in order to frame the children's data within the culture that the teachers had described. The key findings emerging from the children's data are that, for many children, there is a disconnect between phonics and reading; between word reading and reading for meaning and learning to read and the pleasure and purpose of reading for meaning. The teaching of alien words further added to children's disconnection of phonics from reading. Children however seemed to search to explain school practices and to make connections, with some children understanding and explaining the links between phonics and reading, phonics and writing, reading and writing, and reading for pleasure, purpose and meaning. Children's explanations of 'alien word' teaching were innovative and offer a view of children as active meaning makings with agency and volition in the learning process.

Chapter 7

The conclusion: And so the story ends – endings and new beginnings

7.0. Introduction

This study began with the premise that phonics has a role to play in learning to read. Assessment of this skill, as an element of the learning process, was not in question in this study. A focus on how children develop as successful readers, who read for pleasure and purpose, has always been at the forefront of this research and of my varied professional lives and identities. Evaluating the PSC from the viewpoints of children and their teachers, is the study focus. The DfE commissioned evaluation of the PSC (Walker et al, 2015 p.8) stated; "The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvements in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress, that could be clearly attributed to the introduction of the PSC" and so its value as a tool in promoting the development of young readers, invites further scrutiny. Whilst the PSC national outcome scores are increasing there is no evidence to suggest that this in turn, is improving the ultimate aim of improving children's reading. If the PSC is not impacting positively on children as readers then it is important to identify whether the PSC has other, unintended negative consequences for the child as a developing reader. This could be termed assessment "negative washback" (Taylor, 2005).

The qualitative approach taken within my evaluation methodology did not seek to uncover generalizable 'truths' but to signpost and explore 'telling' stories from children and their teachers that illuminate an understanding of the impacts of the PSC on being a teacher of reading and a child, learning to read. Whilst conclusions will be drawn in this chapter the conclusions and 'answers' to the research questions are indicators and in some instances warning signals of the possible impacts of the PSC on children and teachers. Kushner (2017 p.7) describes evaluation as shifting attention to "the way the programme is seen and experienced" rather than just a focus on its outcomes and an insistence that evaluation should focus on "people in and around the program". Data, Kushner claims, are more important than findings as it is the data that "represents the people – their hopes, fears, aspirations and failures." (p.161).The findings therefore detailed in this chapter, illuminate the voices of the people, the teachers and children,

who participated in the research. To this end, the conclusion represents the findings from the range of voices heard in the research including representing single voices of children and teachers as well as findings that represent many voices and so are a more typical viewpoint. In the data analysis chapters the strategy and rationale for this stance and the analysis process that produced these findings is explained – and in a commitment to Kushner's representation of data as more important than findings, the full data are available in the appendices. Kushner is alluding to the fact that there are many possible interpretations of data and many questions that could be asked of the data. My interpretation of the voices of children and teachers will necessarily be influenced by my many professional identities and so the conclusion will also account for my personal journey as a researcher. I also chose to analyse children's voices in the light of the construct of early reading as created by the culture and practices expressed by their teachers; seeing children's perspectives as being, in part constructed by the early reading culture and practices of the classroom. The conclusion will therefore also seek to identify aspects of the data, aspects of the social construct of early reading, that were not discussed in the analysis chapters as they did not directly answer the research questions. These areas are evident in the raw data (see Appendices 10 and 12) and provide interesting opportunities for future research or further analysis with a different set of research questions and these will be discussed in this chapter.

This chapter will also make some tentative recommendations for practice: tentative because the data clearly demonstrate the complex nature of teaching, learning and schools. It has also been made clear in the literature review, the complex nature of transferring research findings into practice. The data show that there is not a blueprint for 'success' in reading: with each teacher and school having a nuanced interpretation of the curriculum, assessment and set of reflections on their professional practice and experience. The children's data also demonstrate the complexity of children's understanding and interpretation of the assessment and teaching of early reading processes and practices. Outcomes data demonstrate a complex picture of the relationships between practice and attainment (PSC and KS1 reading) outcomes. The recommendations therefore, should be viewed as discussion points for teachers, teacher educators and policy makers in order to prompt deeper reflection on practice

and the intended and unintended impact of early reading practices in relation to the PSC.

7.1 Findings: the main research questions

In relation to children's and teachers' views:

Research question A. To what extent has the PSC been an effective tool in the teaching of reading?

Teachers across all of the schools, regardless of socio-economic status, submitted to the PSC process including the changing of their practice to prepare children for the PSC even where this was a subversion of their personal views about effective practices in the teaching of reading. Stuart and Stainthorp (2016) would view this as demonstrating that the PSC is an effective tool in the teaching of reading: their position focuses on the need for teachers to teach phonics systematically as these skills are fundamental to learning to read. Teachers' personal views, they would argue, are not relevant where there is a body of evidence that demonstrates the teaching of phonics systematically is required and that a national assessment approach i.e. the PSC is needed to "ensure this is occurring". What this accountability agenda does not recognise and what the findings of this study demonstrate, are that teachers are teaching phonics systematically – not because of the PSC but because they see it as an essential skill. The analysis of the data show that the PSC distorts this practice, distorting the practice that the proponents of the PSC want. This distortion will be discussed below.

The outcomes data for each focus group school, regardless of socio-economic status, (PSC results for the years 2014 to 2016 and the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) reading assessment results) demonstrate no clear link between PSC outcomes and the subsequent KS1 reading data although the sample size is too small to be able to offer a conclusive statement. This is however, in line with the findings of Walker et al (2015) in the DfE commissioned evaluation of the PSC using a much larger data set.

The analysis shows (see section 5.2.) that teachers did not view the PSC as an essential or effective tool in the teaching of reading for a number of reasons:

1. Preparation for the PSC (that is seen as necessary because of the high stakes nature of the check) takes time away from teaching other aspects of reading and in particular comprehension. This effective teaching was characterised as a more 'holistic' approach with phonics viewed as an essential but not sufficient skill in proficient reading. Chall (1995), Hempenstall, (1994), Lyon (2005) would argue that this 'holistic' approach is detrimental to children learning to read and that phonics must be the prime approach. What is demonstrated in this study is that phonics is being used as the prime approach (and would be even if there was no PSC) and the 'holistic' approach is one where teachers add to phonics, rather than replace phonics. In one school that focused on comprehension and engagement first and then introduced a systematic phonics programme, results in both the PSC and the end of KS1 results are consistently above national expectations.

2. The study found that teachers had in place robust assessment procedures for phonics and the teaching of early reading and so the PSC did not provide any added value to this in relation to effective tools in the teaching of reading (see section 5.2.2 and 5.3).

3. Some teachers thought that the PSC had a detrimental effect on the teaching of reading and in particular in relation to the focus on pseudo words. This was characterised in this study as a subversion of the reading process. Individual teachers provided examples of this including the 'holding back' of the more able reader from reading texts in the lead up to the PSC so that they could focus on word reading and decoding of pseudo words (see section 5.2.1).

It is noted that the analysis also shows there were two teachers (out of the 24 in the focus groups) in different schools, who thought the PSC *could* be necessary in relation to making clear the phonics expectations and ensuring assessment took place. Alongside this, and more typical was the 'othering' of schools (see Appendix 10, code E) where teachers talked about 'other schools' perhaps needing the PSC to ensure that they complied with curricular requirements and assessed children's phonics skills and knowledge. There was a submission to the accountability agenda as necessary for 'other' schools but was not needed for their school. All six schools in the focus groups

had teachers that suggested 'other' schools may need the PSC – it would be useful to find in future research, a school that felt they were the 'other' school, that they needed the PSC in order to enable them to assess effectively and as a tool to enforce their teaching of phonics. This view mirrors the position of Stuart and Stainthorp (2016) who suggest the PSC is in part needed to ensure compliance with phonics as the first and prime approach to early reading. Ball (2013 p.57), arguing from a perspective of a critique of policy, might see this an example of how policy has developed a "regime of accountability that employs judgment, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change". In this study the judgments and comparisons are being made, not just by policy makers but by the teachers themselves. However, it is the PSC and the teaching of phonics that policy makers and the teachers seem to be identifying as what needs to be complied with and to be accountable for, rather than compliance and accountability for ensuring all children develop as successful readers.

The children's perspectives on this research question will be explored in relation to the subsidiary questions below. The findings from the teachers' data and analysis are presented first, as with the analysis chapters, to provide the context in which the children's ideas were expressed.

7.1.1 Findings: subsidiary questions for main research question A:

In relation to children's and teachers' views does the emphasis on one skill involved in reading effect reading attainment (comprehension) and attitudes?

Findings from the teachers' data and analysis on this subsidiary question

The teachers' data and analysis demonstrate that the PSC has encouraged a focus on the one skill of phonics although teachers clearly stated that other skills and strategies were taught outside of the phonics lesson (see section 5.1). Again, as with the main question A the time given to the preparation for the PSC took time away from teaching other elements of reading, with reading comprehension as one element identified by some teachers. Not only did the PSC preparation take time away from other elements of the teaching of reading, teachers also suggested that it took time away from the teaching of phonics – in that the teaching of phonics would have, in the past, extended

into Year 2 but that the PSC had become a cut-off point for phonics teaching. There was no clear evidence however, from the study to suggest that comprehension attainment was affected. Teachers' views on children's attitudes are more fully outlined below (question B subsidiary question).

7.1.2 Children's views on whether the emphasis on one skill involved in reading affects reading attainment (comprehension) and attitudes?

The children's analysis did not attempt to 'measure' attainment but revealed children's attitudes to reading. Children's attitudes to reading cannot be directly attributed to the PSC but need to be read in the light of classroom teaching and learning approaches expressed in the teachers' data and the culture created as a result of the PSC.

The main findings were:

1. Some children in each of the study schools, disconnect phonics teaching and word reading from the process of text reading; these children do not all automatically make the connection between the skill and its application. It may be that this disconnection does not impact on children's reading but research with a focus on effective literacy teaching (Wray et al, 2000; Pressley et al, 2001; Hall and Harding, 2003; Flynn, 2007) and research that focused more generally on effective teaching and effective instruction in particular (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) identifies the importance of the application of skills in a meaningful context and the importance of connection making in the learning process. The Education Endowment Fund's report on improving Literacy in Key Stage 1 (2016), whilst stressing the need for a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics for early reading also stipulates that children need to apply these skills in meaningful contexts. It could also be argued that not all children demonstrated this disconnection but if each child's voice is to be valued and some children in each of the study's schools showed this disconnect, then it is an area that warrants further reflection and will be discussed in the recommendations.

2. Children in the study had a wide range of attitudes to reading although some children in the study did not connect their school reading with reading for

pleasure and/or purpose (see section 6.8). This evidence of disconnection will be discussed further in the recommendations.

3. Children demonstrated how they tried to make sense of their classroom experiences, offering explanations for phonics classroom practices that are attributed to PSC preparation e.g. the teaching of pseudo words (see section 6.5). When these explanations were about their development as readers, misconceptions about reading were evident, for example children suggested that pseudo words could be found in books or other writing. This study could not determine if this had a detrimental effect on children as developing readers although the children's voices give an insight into the constructions of reading that children are making aged five and six. The literature review discusses the importance of positive attitudes to reading and their implications for future reading success and so the recommendations will draw on the voices of these children.

7.1.3 Further subsidiary question to question A: Does the PSC enable teachers to identify children that need additional support?

The data (questionnaire and focus group) and analysis showed that, according to the majority of teachers, the PSC does not provide any additional information in relation to identifying children who need additional support. This is in line with Walker et al's (2015) larger scale evaluation. Some teachers in my study suggested that the PSC may contribute to the assessment data they collect but that they have other phonics assessment data that is as effective, if not more so, than the PSC. The submission by teachers to the PSC did not add to teachers' knowledge of their children as readers.

7.2 Findings: main research question B. To what extent has the PSC framed teachers' and children's practices and understanding of being a reader and being a teacher of reading?

Teachers' practices and understanding of being a reader and a teacher of reading.

As outlined in the literature review, the PSC can be viewed as a policy implementation tool (Ball, 2013; Moss, 2016) – ensuring that teachers comply with the wider policy

that stipulates that phonics should be both the first and prime approach to the teaching of reading. Teachers, in both the wider questionnaire sample and the focus group sample, identified phonics as essential in the teaching of reading (see section 5.3). This view was expressed by focus group teachers as one that they held almost despite the PSC and independently of it. Teachers' construction of their understanding and knowledge of the teaching of reading was shown to be influenced by their training (in some instances), an adherence to their school's approach and their experience of teaching reading. It is not possible to conclude that the PSC has also influenced this construction – partly as teachers seem to suggest the PSC was not required – however it was one key policy driver that all teachers knew and submitted to. This was in contrast to teachers' knowledge of the National Curriculum (2014) requirements for early reading which from both the qualitative and quantitative data and analysis was demonstrated to be more inconsistent (see section 5.3). Here there was an unconscious subversion of the National Curriculum requirements with teachers advocating a balanced or holistic approach to the teaching of reading with phonics as only one key element of the process for the beginner reader.

Teachers consistently identify reading as a meaning making process in the analysis. There is also a consistently expressed commitment to developing reading for pleasure in the qualitative and quantitative data and analysis. However, teachers' espoused views of the need for children to pass the PSC, is shown to influence practice in a number of ways and so compromise the expressed desire to develop children as readers for pleasure and purpose. Teachers' practices have been influenced by the PSC in the following ways:

- Continuing to teach phonics with a focus on word reading when a child has secured this knowledge and is applying it to text reading and in addition, is applying a wider range of skills to support comprehension which then has a further effect on word reading (this will be further discussed in the implications for further research).
- Increasing the pace of the teaching of the phoneme/grapheme correspondences for all children even if some children have not secured previously taught phoneme/grapheme correspondences.

- Teaching pseudo words (rather than pseudo words being an assessment tool)

- Increasing time spent on specific PSC preparation.

- Compressing the phonics curriculum into reception and Year 1 despite teachers suggesting there were benefits to 'spreading out' the teaching.

- Increasing time spent on single word reading as opposed to applied text reading.

The data and analysis show that for some teachers, there is a resentment of the requirement to submit to the PSC which they suggest is compromising their professional skills and knowledge and in particular their knowledge and understanding of individual children's learning needs (see section 5.2.1). Teachers highlighted groups e.g. EAL and autistic children, whom they identified as being disadvantaged by the PSC – disadvantaged because they, the teachers, did not feel able to teach these children in the way they understood to be most appropriate to meet individual needs.

7.2.1 Children's practices and understanding of being a reader

The analysis of the children's data found that children's views of reading ranged from reading as a pleasurable activity that could be engaged in now, to reading as a necessity for future and for adult life.

- Most children said that they enjoyed reading although it is possible that children, in a school setting, felt there was a 'right' answer to questions asked in school about reading by someone who, whilst explaining about a university and research, looked like and sounded very much like a teacher (see later conclusions about positionality and research). The value of reading, was expressed in a number of different ways and some children expressed this as a value in learning words rather than gaining pleasure and enjoyment from reading and using reading for a purpose.

- Children from schools in all socio-economic groups expressed these diverse views of reading although children from the two schools in areas of higher socio-economic status talked in more detail with each other and me as researcher, about reading preferences, authors and books. There is not enough evidence to suggest that this difference was about socio-economic status as

there were many other variables in the research process that could have influenced children's differing responses but this will be returned to later in the chapter when considering further areas of study and recommendations.

- As stated earlier, children did not always connect phonics lessons and PSC focused activity e.g. word reading; pseudo word reading, with real reading of text. A view of reading may therefore be being constructed by children, not based on the phonics focus but based on the more holistic approaches used for the teaching of reading that were evident from the teachers' analysis. When constructing an understanding a view of reading it is possible children were drawing on their experience of reading in context and not the phonics lesson – which some did not consider to be reading or connected to reading.

- Phonics lessons, and some activities that were being taught in relation to the PSC were connected by some children to learning to write rather than learning to read. Reading and writing are reciprocal processes and so this is a valid conclusion for children to draw. Teaching writing (specifically, segmenting to spell) can also support reading, where children are reading what they have written and applying the same skills to different process. When viewed in relation to the teachers' views that they are spending more time in preparation for the PSC, it is perhaps surprising that not all children readily connect phonics teaching and learning with reading. However, children from across the focus groups, so from across schools in different socio-economic areas; PSC attainment; KS1 reading attainment and Ofsted judgments, identified 'sounding out' as a key skill to learn and to apply when learning to read – even if they did not explicitly identify phonics with 'sounding out'.

7.2.2 Subsidiary questions for main research question B: In relation to children's and teachers' views how are children's attitudes to reading influenced (if at all) by the PSC?

Teachers' views of how children's attitudes to reading are influenced (if at all) by the PSC

Whilst the teachers' data show that teaching practices have changed, teachers did not directly state that these changes in practices had influenced children's attitude to reading. However, there are two points to consider here:

1. The disconnect teachers acknowledged between the teaching of phonics and reading.
2. The language used by teachers to talk about the teaching of phonics and the stress and pressure many teachers identified they felt due to the PSC.

It could be argued that the first point, the disconnect between reading and phonics, ameliorates any negative impact of changes in practices on attitudes to reading, as the changes in practice affect *phonics* lessons in particular rather than class *reading* lessons and *reading* opportunities (if children's attitudes are based on their experience of what they consider to be reading). This disconnect may neutralise any possible negative effects in relation to attitudes to reading. The second point however balances this. The language used by teachers suggests that a negative culture or climate is being created in classrooms. Even if teachers seek to protect children from these pressures it is possible that children will be influenced and affected by the pervading culture and so this could negatively impact on children's attitudes to reading.

7.2.3 In relation to children's and teachers' views are children from different socio-economic backgrounds influenced (or not) by the PSC in the same way?

Whilst data were gathered from schools in different socio-economic contexts, there was no clear evidence in the analysis to suggest that teachers' practice, in relation to the PSC was significantly different in different socio-economic contexts. In only one school did teachers discuss the impact of the PSC on children from more

disadvantaged contexts: this was in relation to vocabulary knowledge and why children with a more limited vocabulary knowledge may be disadvantaged by pseudo word reading. In the sections above differences have been discussed in relation to attitudes to reading by children in varying socio-economic circumstances.

The analysis showed that teachers felt that some children who had English as an additional language were adversely affected by the PSC (see section 5.2.1). This was stated in relation to two elements:

1. The EAL child's growing understanding of the English language and in particular vocabulary knowledge and comprehension being compromised by pseudo word reading. Time spent on pseudo word reading would be better spent on vocabulary development.

2. The understanding of the reading process i.e. reading should always make sense; when a word does not make sense the child should stop and check they have read it correctly and/or ask what the word means. Pseudo word reading suggests to children that there may be words that have no meaning.

7.2.4 In relation to children's and teachers' views what is the impact on children of reading pseudo words and being taught pseudo words?

Teachers' views on the impact on children of reading pseudo words and being taught pseudo words?

The teachers' analysis and data identify that the teaching of pseudo words divert teachers and children from the key message of reading: that what is read has meaning and so what is read should make sense to the reader (see section 5.2.2). Teachers expressed concern that additional time spent on the teaching of pseudo words took time away from more productive and effective practices in relation to teaching reading. This time was considered by many teachers to be necessary in relation to test preparation only. Teachers identified further possible impacts including:

- Confusion for children between a misspelling and a pseudo word;
- Confusion for children with EAL (as outlined above);
- A muddying of the message that reading was about meaning;

- The disadvantaging of higher attaining readers who continued to strive to make meaning (not necessarily disadvantaging in the PSC but in relation to holding these children back in the preparation period for the PSC, by encouraging them not to read texts during this time)
- Time taken away from vocabulary instruction i.e. spending time reading words that do not enable children to extend their vocabulary repertoires.

7.2.5 Children's views on the impact of pseudo words.

It is recognised that children only have their current experience to reflect on and so the data, analysis and findings demonstrate children's understanding and interpretation of the teaching and their learning of pseudo words rather than a reflection by them on its impact.

Children, when asked, made sense of learning pseudo in a variety of ways although none of the children identified them as a tool that would enable them to apply the skills in text reading (see section 6.5). Most children did not see the benefit of pseudo words in learning to read. Some of children's explanations may have negative impacts on reading e.g.one child suggesting that they were practising to *not* say these words. This is contrary to the strategies that children need to apply when encountering a new word. Pseudo words test children's ability to sound and blend, and so 'read', any set of letters. However, in real or authentic text reading, children need to be alerted that the word 'read' does not make sense and so they need to apply strategies to remedy this, rather than 'skipping it' or 'not reading' it as the child is suggesting i.e. *not* saying it.

Children knew these words did not make sense or carry meaning for them. Children accepted that they would be asked to 'read' words that did not have meaning. This has possible negative implications for children's search for meaning when reading real texts. However, as children disconnected such activities from real reading it is possible they will not apply this thinking to real texts – but if this is the case, it is also possible to argue other discretely taught skills will also not be applied when reading.

There was a suggestion that the PSC and pseudo words may just be a 'trick' and that therefore children should be alert to this trickery. Again, this was only one child, but it

is telling that the language of deception is being used when discussing the teaching of reading and this should encourage reflection by teachers and policy makers on practice (see recommendations).

Whilst these suggestions by children were individual and not shared by all children and do not necessarily or inevitably result in a negative impact on the learner, it is clear that the data and analysis show that children do try and make sense of their teaching and learning and so this needs to be considered by teachers in the structuring of learning and the approach taken to explaining purposes.

7.3 Recommendations and implications for policy and practice including the need for further research

Policy

These recommendations are drawn from the findings of the study. Policy needs to be based on clear research evidence and to this end, many of the recommendations for policy suggest areas for further research before the PSC continues as a high stakes test in its present form. It is recommended and noted that:

1. High stakes testing has a number of unintended outcomes. This negative washback needs to considered and balanced against any positive washback. There is no clear evidence the PSC is raising attainment in reading and whilst it may be viewed by policy makers as a 'positive' compliance measure there is clear evidence in this research to suggest teachers do not need a test to make them teach phonics. There is evidence in this study of negative washback in relation to the narrowing of the reading curriculum; the teaching of pseudo words to prepare for the PSC (rather than pseudo words being an assessment tool); the disproportionate time spent on test preparation; negative implications for some higher attaining readers and children with EAL and the classroom climate created by the pressure of the test. It is therefore recommended that the PSC should be an optional tool available to teachers to supplement school assessment practices. Ofsted currently inspect assessment practices: if outcomes in a school were not in line with national expectations

Ofsted could direct schools to use the PSC if the school did not have an equivalent assessment tool in place.

2. If the PSC stays in place, the pseudo words in the test are problematic. It is recommended that these words are replaced with real words and so encourage teachers to extend children's application of phonic skills to a wider vocabulary. This too however, has possible negative implications and so further research is needed in this area (see also the bullet point below). Whilst this may be resisted, as it is stated that the purpose of the pseudo words is to ensure that no child can 'sight read' and so by-pass the application of phonics skills, it is important for policy makers to balance the negative unintended outcomes of using pseudo words with any positive outcomes in relation to reading attainment (of which there is no current evidence). Darnell, Solity and Wall's (2017) research concluded that there was little or no difference between using real or non-words in phonics assessment and so the replacement of non-words with real words would not compromise the assessment of phonics skills and knowledge. Because of the high stakes nature of the PSC, pseudo words are being taught as the curriculum rather than being used as an assessment tool. This practice contributes to the negative unintended outcomes of the PSC.

3. Further research is needed to identify if and how the child who has wider phonics knowledge and skills is disadvantaged by the inclusion of pseudo words. This study has shown that teachers identify an issue for children (and so with the rationale for the use of pseudo words) with the distinction between real words that the child has not encountered before, and pseudo words – for the child, there is no difference. Because of this, the more phonically knowledgeable child may try out the alternative articulations of graphemes with the real words – but as the real word is unknown, the child is not able to identify the 'correct' articulation and this application of skills is not acknowledged or rewarded in the PSC. When reading pseudo words the same process will be rewarded, as any alternative articulation can be accepted.

4. Further research is needed to identify any links between PSC attainment and the end of key stage attainment in reading. The quantitative data from this study, whilst small in scale, did not find a positive link between attainment in

the PSC and later attainment in reading. This further research cannot be a purely quantitative research as correlation and causation will be difficult to demonstrate where the end of key stage test attainment will be as a result of a combination of the teaching of a wide range of skills, attitudes and knowledge, as well as children's individual reading (in relation to the depth and breadth of independent and school based reading) alongside other interventions that may have taken place. End of key stage reading test preparation will also influence test scores.

5. Professional development for teachers that encourages critical reflection on teachers' practices and policy needs to be promoted (see recommendations for teachers below that expands, explains and links this recommendation to the data and analysis in this research). Professional development needs to provide not just technical or performative training in relation to the teaching of reading and in relation to increasing PSC scores, but to develop in-service teachers' understanding and knowledge of the research that underpins practice and so provide the tools for critical analysis of policy, curriculum and practice. Accurate knowledge of the national curriculum requirements should form part of teacher development

7.4 Recommendations - teachers' practice

1. The data and analysis from this study showed that the PSC is currently being used/viewed as the curriculum for the teaching of phonics and early reading. This is narrowing the reading curriculum in relation to the time that teachers are able to spend on the other skills and elements of reading that are set out in the National Curriculum. The teachers of early reading should work with school leadership to develop strong school reading policies that drive practice and that reflect more accurately the aims of the NC i.e.

> The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is
> to promote high standards of language and literacy by
> equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and
> written language, and to develop their love of literature
> through widespread reading for enjoyment.

2. As part of developing reading practices it would be useful for teachers to revisit the purpose of pseudo words i.e. as an assessment tool that can be used to support formative assessment. Teachers in the study talked about practices where children needed to read single words and to decide if the word was 'real' or not (so a pseudo word). If this is seen as preparation for the PSC then it should be noted that the check does not require children to make this choice – merely to read the pseudo word. Children are prompted that the word is a pseudo word by an 'alien' picture that accompanies it. Some of the issues teachers raised about pseudo words e.g. children with EAL finding these words confusing because their vocabulary range did not enable them to know if the word was real or not, could in part, be addressed by changing the preparation practice. Preparation should mirror the presentation of task in the PSC. Children can then sound and blend the word enabling the teacher to assess children's phonics knowledge and skills. Whilst children *do* need to develop an awareness that the words they read need to make sense, muddling this with the assessment practice of pseudo word reading is not helpful – and this is reflected in both the teachers' and children's data in this study (see sections 5.2.2 and 6.5)

3. Teachers' concerns about single word reading could be addressed by small adaptations to practice. When word reading, teachers could ensure they discuss and share the words' meanings. In the same way, if every discrete phonics lesson included application in a meaningful reading context then children may more readily see the links between phonics learning and real reading that currently, many children do not link. This supports the findings of Hatcher, Hulme and Ellis (1994) who identified that phonics teaching was more effective when children were given immediate opportunities to apply their knowledge in reading and writing. Stuart and Stainthorp (2016 p.67), whilst being strong advocates of the phonics first approach and the PSC, stress that the skills of reading (of which phonics is one) "are never separate in the act of reading" and go on to say that "teachers do not have the luxury of teaching children one aspect of reading in isolation from all the others: nor should they, because different kinds of knowledge and understanding develop in tandem and influence each other." In addition this will enable children to learn that if a word they are reading (a word they know is

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real because they are reading an authentic text) does not make sense then this is the cue to stop reading and to re-read, re-sound and blend and/or if it is still not a word recognised, to ask an adult what the word may mean, as it may be a word they have not yet encountered. This will enable children to apply their skills, make links to their independent reading practice and to bring together two elements of reading – word recognition and language comprehension that are seen as separate skills but integrated processes in reading.

7.5 Variations and opportunities

As stated in the introduction, reading is a complex process and is the focus of research across a wide range of disciplines. This study, in comparison to many, is small scale and so its findings provide further questions and prompts for consideration: telling rather than typical or immediately generalizable, conclusions. The small scale nature of the study provides future opportunities for extending the study. This study focused on one city, which whilst typical of many large cities will be unique in relation to its geographical, cultural and socio-economic make-up. The study's sampling approach identified schools for the research in different socio-economic parts of the city (see Appendix 14) from the schools that had expressed a willingness to take part in the research and it can be seen that even with this sample, the schools that were identified as 'medium' had indicators lower than national averages e.g. in 2016 the national average for children claiming FSM was 14.5% (DfE 2016) and in the study's 'medium socio-economic status schools' this was 35% and 37%; the national average for EAL pupils is 20.1% (DfE, 2016) and in the study's schools this was 24% and 33%. The city's statistics also show that the average of all of its schools place it above the national average in relation to FSM, with 20% being eligible compared to the 14.5% national average. This demonstrates that four of the study's sample schools were also above the city's average. Practices in a city often have some similarities – with particular professional development providers dominating and with similar messages from local school improvement providers. This suggests that the study's findings could be developed by both extending the study to more of the city's schools and an even wider scale study sampling schools from across the country.

In contextualising the schools, a range of attainment data was gathered. Whilst a basic analysis of these data demonstrated no clear link between PSC outcomes and end of KS1 outcomes, these data could be explored in more depth in relation to patterns of attainment.

The quantitative data gathered through the questionnaire addressed a range of questions that as the study progressed, did not have a clear 'home' in the research themes or provide data against the final research questions. An example of this is that data were collected about teachers' ages and length of service and this could be mapped onto their attitudes and practices to identify if age and service length impacts on attitudes to the PSC, PSC preparation practices and beliefs and practices around the teaching of early reading. The questionnaire provided data on the amount of time teachers spent teaching phonics and this could be explored further in relation to questions about attainment and reading for pleasure for example. The further research opportunities were also evident in the qualitative data. Appendix 12 shows there were a number of issues or subjects raised in the children's data that did not fit into the final themes and did not directly answer the research questions but present opportunities for further study e.g. the role of the parent; the role of reading aloud and being read to and reading as effortful. Appendix 10 shows similar opportunities presented by the teachers' data e.g. the parental role/ responsibility/blame and teachers' belief in the role of enjoyment and pleasure in reading.

7.6 Methodological considerations and future opportunities

As the study was constructed, methodological considerations, choices and decisions were made. These choices affect the scope and nature of a study and so when considering future opportunities, a reflection on methodology is useful.

This study was constructed with a clear timeline of data collections – moving from the questionnaire (quantitative data collection which provided an idea of scope and focus for the qualitative methods) to the children's focus groups, and then the teachers' focus groups that were informed by the children's data. Future studies could adapt this approach to provide multiple school visits for children's and teachers' focus groups over a longer time period as this would enable the research to focus on longer term

implications and effects of the PSC. In the analysis chapter I often qualify data with an acknowledgement that data were collected at a particular time and place in each school and how this could be a factor in the nature of responses from teachers and children. For example, in one school I was asked to hold the children's focus activity group in a school official meeting room whilst others provided a classroom, and these locations may be influencing factors on responses. A longer scale study would enable these factors to be addressed with focus groups being conducted at a wider range of times and places. In addition, a longer study would enable the following of children: capturing these longer term ideas could be significant when considering possible negative (and positive) washback of the PSC. The research questions in this study about attitudes to reading would be further built upon in a longer term study.

As children grow older their oral linguistic competencies extend as does children's abilities to think in the abstract and to reflect on and give some perspective to, the ideas and thoughts they had as younger children. A longer term study could benefit from these developments. This point also highlights some of the challenges of this current study. Researching with children, valuing and encouraging their opinions and ideas are not without challenges as a researcher. To enter the world of the child and to see things from a child's perspective, as an adult, can be difficult. An example in this study was how unprepared I was as a researcher for some of the children to enter so readily in to the world of the story 'Beegu'. Some children's responses were directed to the character of Beegu and to the situation that Beegu found herself, for example suggesting it might be better that she did not learn to read as she was '*perfect just the way she was*'.

The children in the study were necessarily expressing their responses in the language that was available to them and this was then being interpreted by me as a researcher. Understanding children's meaning is in itself a complex area: in trying to ascribe meaning to children's utterances the researcher is doing so from an adult perspective, and additionally in this research, these interpretations were also influenced by my teacher identity, layering on, sometimes unconsciously an adult *and teacher* view of the world. There are instances in the data analysis where the reflexive process enabled me to identify where this might have been happening e.g. when discussing the child who started their response with 'once upon a time' (see section 4.1). A longer scale study

would not protect the researcher from having similar challenges but as children grow older, their ability to qualify and explain their responses may develop and so ameliorate possible misinterpretations.

The chosen methodology was evaluation, a deliberate choice in relation to a democratic methodology that focuses not on the programme (the PSC) but on the effects on those affected by it. Democratic and illuminative evaluation enables a shift away from the single narrative of attainment data to the multiple narratives of the children and teachers. Kushner (2017 p.28) identifies that there is a danger with this approach of feeding "into scepticism towards the practitioner" and in the recommendations in particular, I have tried to ensure that these could not be interpreted as implied criticism of the practitioner but are a result of practitioners being "a collaborative resource" in the evaluation. These reflections also highlight other possible methodological opportunities for future study that would further ensure that children and teachers were clearly positioned as collaborators. Teachers and children could be more comprehensively involved in the research design in future studies, using this study to support the development of the research questions and to probe some of the findings of this study. This could then involve a more ethnographic stance, being immersed in the teaching of early reading and phonics in particular in the classroom, as part of the research process. This would certainly enable a deeper understanding of the choices teachers are making when they plan phonics lessons and when they plan with PSC preparation in mind. Talking with and listening to children as part of the phonics lesson learning would also support a deeper probing of their learning and the culture in which that learning is taking place. This in turn offers new research opportunities – if teachers are true collaborators in the research then it is the teacher who will be listening to the voice of the child rather than the 'distanced' researcher. Lambirth and Cabral (2016 p.13) identified this as one of the "key elements that allow[s] teachers to (re)gain agency and experience change".

The teachers and children from each of the schools made valuable contributions to the evaluation as a whole. However, there were some schools in the study that raised for me a particular interest. Elm School, graded outstanding by Ofsted, with above national FSM and EAL indicators and with higher than national attainment data, had teachers

that expressed an approach to the teaching of reading that was, at times, in contradiction with current policy. There is an opportunity for a focused case study of this school and how and why it is so successful in relation to reading attainment at KS1 and 2 and wider successes, as outlined in its Ofsted report.

Each of these methodological considerations and opportunities have been informed by my developing identity as a researcher but also in relation to my personal contexts and multiple identities and the next section will chart my reflections on this element of the study.

7.7 Personal reflection

In the introduction and context to this study I set out my many professional identities. These multiple identities have highlighted the need for a reflexive stance throughout the research. At the start of this study I thought it would be 'enough' to be aware of these multiple identities and so be alert as to how they may affect the research process. I now realise that these identities are not fixed and so easily identifiable at any point but are more fluid. Looking back at my field notes during the data collection and taking a reflexive stance to my analysis, I have been able to see that I move fluidly in and out of my professional identifies. This was particularly evident during the children's focus groups. As I arrived at the school I was entering in the way that I had last left it – so this may have been as the manager of the local teaching school and so at the school for a meeting or training event; or as an Initial Teacher Educator and visitor of a student, but I moved into the researcher identity when explaining the research, the right to withdraw and the need for informed consent. This shifted again with the children as, without much awareness I re-appropriated my primary class teacher mantle, using both conscious and unconscious 'teacher' strategies in particular in relation to managing a group of children, their responses and behaviour. With the teachers I was consciously aware at times, of a desire to 'train and educate' when teachers discussed the contents of the curriculum and knowing that the curriculum objectives outlined were different to what they were expressing. On leaving the school my identity as colleague and researcher combined, where teachers asked how I could represent their views at a policy level. When analysing the data I made additional jottings against lectures and sessions that were planned for

ITE students as the analysis enabled me to gain a deeper insight into what might need to be emphasised, explored and developed with new teachers. This outline suggests the identities were clear at each step, however I have tried to indicate that they were in fact not only fluid between identities but also within identities – with identities mixing and informing thinking. What is important is that there is a recognition that this research is necessarily informed by these multiple identities and that the analysis and conclusions are unconsciously as well as consciously coloured by the lenses of these identity perspectives. This mirrors the multiple perspectives on reading as set out in the literature review – different theoretical perspectives offer different lenses from which to view learning to read and here I am acknowledging the different lenses from which I am able to view both the process and outcomes of this research and these have been documented throughout this thesis.

7.8 A unique story

This study represents a unique contribution to knowledge. Whilst there have been many criticisms of the PSC, perhaps most notably and persistently by Clark (2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016) and more recently studies about its reliability and validity (Solity, 2016; Duff et al, 2014) this study is a unique evaluation of the PSC from the perspective of children and their teachers. The use of an illuminative evaluation methodology provided a new approach to the study of the PSC alongside the innovative approaches to the elicitation of children's views. The findings provide a new perspective from which to assess and make judgments about the implementation of the check and to raise questions about its role in developing children as readers. The reflexive process throughout the study has enabled my positioning, as teacher, consultant, teacher educator and teaching school manager to be a strength of the study. It has enabled a unique perspective and given wide and varied dissemination opportunities. The study provides additional insight into how assessment practices could be evaluated and the voices of those closest to assessment practices, heard.

7.9 Happy ever after?

It is easy to finish a study such as this on a concerned note having identified the possible negative washback of a national initiative that has the potential to affect children's

development as readers. However, the voices and actions of the children in the study provide a hope for a 'happy ever after'. Reading the story of 'Beegu' to children showed the power of the picture book: the power to engage, to transport the listener to another world, to suspend reality for a few moments and to empathise with situations and characters beyond experience. It would seem no amount of preparation for the PSC can dent the engagement and enthusiasm of children for a good story. Children's sense of identity, as separate from school labels of attainment and compliance was encapsulated in the voice of Isla from Dogwood School. When asked about how to teach Beegu to read she suggested that this might not be such a good thing as even though Beegu might want to comply "(s)he might want to be like other people" there was no need to be like everyone else because "(S)he is perfect how (s)he is already".

There is a message here to all teachers, researchers and policy makers: children do not fit a single and identical template or model that can assessed in a singular and identical way: children are individual and unique. We have a duty to recognise this 'perfect' uniqueness in the approaches we take to enable children to develop as readers who read for pleasure and purpose.

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