

PE1668/J

Dr Sarah McGeowan submission of 17 May 2018

We are pleased that there are points of agreement between ourselves and the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. For example, the acknowledgement that there are gaps in knowledge and understanding of the latest and highest quality research in early reading instruction among teachers and those in ITE. While we see the value of the new self-evaluation framework, we do not feel it will do anything specifically to ensure that those training to teach in schools will have a better, richer understanding of the different ways in which children can be taught to read and the effectiveness of different instructional approaches. Petition 1668 called for teachers to have better access to research informed reading instruction. We do not see how the self-evaluation framework will address this specifically.

For teachers already working within the system, we are unsure of how the steps outlined in the letter will specifically lead to improving teachers' access to research informed reading instruction. While there may be delivery mechanisms to share information, it is not clear whether those who are sharing this information (i.e., delivering professional learning sessions and in leadership positions) will be well-informed of the most up-to-date research in this area.

In addition, while the Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit is a useful resource for teachers, it is limited as it provides only very basic information. To ensure teachers deliver the highest quality initial reading instruction, they need to have a much more detailed understanding of children's cognitive, language and literacy development, of different approaches to initial reading instruction and the effectiveness of these different instructional approaches. This type of understanding is best achieved through research informed teaching in ITE, or research informed professional learning sessions, to update experienced teachers' knowledge and understanding in this area.

Response to comments made during the Public Petitions Committee on March 15th, 2018.

At the beginning of the meeting it is noted that the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills stated that he is: "Not convinced it would be helpful to prescribe one particular approach to teaching reading".

To be clear, this petition called for national guidance, support and professional learning for teachers/ to ensure teacher training institutions provide access to research informed reading instruction, specifically, but not only, systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). Given that teacher autonomy is at the heart of the CfE, we would not propose a single approach to reading to be prescribed across all schools in Scotland. However, within research informed reading instruction, SSP has to be taught. Teachers need to understand this approach and the nuances behind it, so that they are in a better position to teach SSP well, if they choose to do so. At present, there is a considerable lack of teaching and understanding of SSP. In fact, there appears to be quite a lot of misunderstanding about what SSP actually is.

Other points made/discussed during the committee meeting:

- 1) Not the case that one system/size fits all. It is not right to put one approach down as a way forward for reading. Different children learn differently, they need different things. Synthetic phonics is one part of a puzzle.

Reply: It is true that there is considerable variation in the cognitive, language and literacy skills of children when they first start school. In addition, there is considerable variation in their home literacy experiences and their thoughts and feelings around books and reading. However, all children are being taught the same skill – they are all being taught to read. And there is considerable research demonstrating the effectiveness of phonics, specifically SSP, to do this. Therefore, while children will be at different stages of readiness to learn to read and may benefit from different paces of instruction, SSP offers an effective route towards ensuring children become independent confident readers. We agree that SSP is one part of a puzzle. SSP is concerned solely with developing children's word reading skills (more specifically, their ability to decode unfamiliar words). We do not propose that initial reading instruction should focus solely on developing this single skill. Children also need to understand the words and stories that they read, and experience enjoyment and take an interest in reading.

- 2) Reading is about comprehension, not just reading the words. Strathclyde University research – concern that synthetic phonics taught children suffer from poor reading comprehension. That synthetic phonics taught children can read words, but not comprehend.

Reply: We could not find this research in any peer reviewed publications, could the committee please direct us to this. The research that we are familiar with shows that systematic synthetic phonics is very effective at developing a child's word reading skills quickly. Reading comprehension is primarily underpinned by a child's word reading skills and their language skills. If a child can read words independently and efficiently, they have more cognitive resources left over to focus on their comprehension. Furthermore, if word reading skills are taught efficiently and effectively (e.g., by SSP), then there is more time available in the literacy curriculum to focus on other aspects of literacy which are critical for comprehension (e.g., language skills, promoting a love of reading, knowledge of the world etc). We agree wholeheartedly that SSP focuses only on developing a child's word reading skills – it was designed to do this. However, this is not, and should not be, to the detriment to their reading comprehension. As we have said before, SSP needs to be positioned within a literacy curriculum that also develops a child's love of words, reading and stories, and focuses on developing other crucial cognitive skills (e.g., language skills).

- 3) One member of the committee suggests that they see no benefit of pursuing this petition, as it is, as the focus is too narrow.

Reply: There has been considerable focus in the responses to this petition about SSP specifically and less focus on the need to ensure teachers have better access to research informed reading instruction. This has been very disappointing. In

research informed reading instruction, teachers need to learn about different approaches to initial reading instruction (whole word, use of context, phonics – analytic and synthetic) and the influence of these different approaches on children's attainment. Our concern is that at the moment, if teachers were to choose to use SSP, they are unlikely to have sufficient knowledge/understanding of this approach to teach it well. This is the feedback we have received from our professional learning sessions.

We are very keen to continue this discussion as we believe there are points of agreement among us, we just need to find common ground and ensure we have shared understanding of what this petition is about. We are very aware of the Scottish Government's commitment to narrowing the poverty related attainment gap in literacy and are disappointed that this petition is not viewed as a potential route towards achieving this. We are open to suggestions as to how to pursue this petition, as we strongly feel we could be losing an opportunity to raise the literacy skills of children living in Scotland, particularly those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.