

PE01668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction

Petition summary: Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to i) provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; ii) ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

We would like to thank the Education and Skills Committee for considering this petition and have outlined key points for the committee below.

1. This petition aligns with two key priorities of the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (2019) (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/2019-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/>), namely:
 - Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
 - Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.

A recent comprehensive review of research informed reading instruction (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018) highlights the importance of systematic phonics instruction to optimally develop word reading skills among young learners. Furthermore, studies comparing systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) with more eclectic reading approaches find both short- and long-term gains in reading, spelling and reading comprehension for children taught by SSP (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, 2012; McGeown, Johnston & Medford, 2012). Children taught by SSP also rely less heavily on their language skills when reading new words (McGeown, et al, 2012; McGeown & Medford, 2013), therefore it is particularly beneficial for children who start school with weak vocabulary skills, typically those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). This petition therefore has the potential to achieve current education priorities.

2. Initial teacher education in Scotland does not sufficiently prepare student teachers to teach children to read using research-informed reading instruction, nor do professional learning courses for teachers already in the profession.

There is evidence that many (~20%) of probationer teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach literacy: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/gathering-views-probationer-teachers-readiness-teach/pages/8/>. Anecdotally, both Glennie and McGeown have also spoken to many Scottish teachers who did feel confident teaching children to read, until they learnt about systematic synthetic phonics, and realised that their reading approaches were not research-informed. For example, one teacher recalled teaching the word 'Floppy' by telling the children that the two p's were the dog's ears and the y was its tail. We recognise that this example is not representative of typical practices but provide it as this was a teacher who said she felt confident teaching children to read. We would like to highlight therefore that although approximately 80% of probationer teachers may feel confident, they are not necessarily using research-informed practices.

3. This petition has been challenged and we'd like to respond to the main challenges here:
 - This petition is not about introducing a prescriptive approach to the teaching of reading. This petition is about empowering teachers and creating a research-informed profession. Training teachers in research-informed reading instruction (including systematic synthetic phonics) will not remove teacher autonomy/professional

independence – teachers will still need to make many decisions about early reading instruction based on the contexts in which they teach.

- We are not endorsing systematic synthetic phonics at the expense of reading for pleasure or developing children’s language skills. Quite the opposite – becoming an independent and confident word reader provides a strong basis for developing language skills and a love of reading. For example, recent research shows that a child’s reading skill determines how much they choose to read, rather than vice versa (van Bergen, Snowling, de Zeeuw & van Beijsterveldt, 2018). It is therefore essential to develop early reading skills, as children who read more develop their language, reading, spelling and academic abilities (Mol & Bus, 2011) and children with better reading skills report greater reading enjoyment (Clark, 2019).

We would encourage the committee to take this petition seriously and we are very happy to engage in further discussion about it. With this petition, there is the potential to achieve current education priorities and, more importantly, have a genuinely positive impact on the literacy skills of children living in Scotland. We know that teachers lack knowledge and expertise in this area. We have a responsibility to create a teaching profession which is research-informed, to ensure children have the best possible opportunity to become confident and successful readers.

Yours sincerely,
Dr Sarah McGeown

Senior Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, Moray House School of Education and Sport,
University of Edinburgh.

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