

Education and Skills Committee

PE1668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction

18 March 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Committee agreed to take evidence from the petitioner, Anne Glennie, on petition PE1688. The petition was lodged in August 2017 and attracted 282 signatures. The text of the petition is set out below.

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.

Anne Glennie will be accompanied by Dr Sarah McGeown. Ms Glennie provided the following biographical information:

Anne Glennie is a literacy consultant and teacher trainer, providing evidence-based training in all aspects of children's literacy for schools in Scotland. She is the author of 'Reflective Reading', an approach used widely in primary schools for reading comprehension and reading for pleasure. She sits on the Reading Reform Foundation committee and is a founding committee member of IFERI – the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction. She is also a children's publisher, specialising in high quality, Scottish historical fiction for children.

Dr Sarah McGeown, Senior Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh. Dr McGeown's research primarily focuses on the effectiveness of different types of initial reading instruction and the importance of promoting motivation and engagement in reading. She has published over twenty research articles, books or book chapters on these topics. Dr McGeown is currently an Associate Editor for the Journal of Research in Reading and her research has been shortlisted twice for the United Kingdom Literacy Association's Literacy Research in Education Award. In 2019 she co-founded LALco: www.lalco.org.uk to promote greater communication and collaboration between research and practice on language and literacy issues in Scotland.

The remainder of this short paper covers three issues: the work of the Public Petitions Committee (PPC) on the petition; a study on knowledge utilisation in the teaching profession; and how this may link to a forthcoming inquiry into ITE and the early phase of teaching. Attached in [Annexe A](#) of this paper is the initial SPICe briefing on the petition published in 2017.

PROGRESS OF THE PETITION

The PPC considered the petition on four occasions. More detail on its work can be found on [the petition's webpage](#).

On 9 November 2017, the petitioner, along with Dr McGeown and Gordon Askew from the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction gave evidence to the PPC. The petitioner and Dr McGeown argued that their petition is not looking to prescribe approaches in Primary classrooms, Dr McGeown said:

“This petition is about ensuring that teachers and teacher training institutions have access to and use research-informed reading instruction to ensure that all children in Scotland can achieve their potential in reading. This is not about removing teacher autonomy and it is not about implementing a prescriptive approach to the teaching of reading. This is about empowering teachers by ensuring that all teachers have access to the most up-to-date research on children’s reading instruction and then allowing them to make decisions about how best to apply it based on the specific students that they teach.”

The petitioner’s and Dr McGeown also argued that synthetic phonics ought to be used in schools and suggested that other methods were less effective and less effective at closing the poverty related attainment gap.

In a later submission to the PPC Dr McGeown provided definitions for a number of different approaches including synthetic phonics:

Systematic phonics instruction: Teaching letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequential fashion.

Synthetic phonics: Blending (synthesising) letter-sound correspondences to read unfamiliar words (e.g., /c//a//t/ = cat)

Analytic phonics: Segmenting (analysing) words to split them into their consistent letter-sound correspondences (e.g., cat = /c//a//t/).

Eclectic approach: An approach that teaches children a variety of strategies to read new words (e.g., whole word teaching, use of context, phonics (analytic)).

Following the evidence session in the PPC sought views on the petition from the Scottish Government, the GTCS a number of teaching trade unions and teacher education institutions in Scotland.

The GTCS’ submission stated:

“The issue of the application of Synthetic Phonics is one which has been debated by the education system for over two decades both internationally and at UK level. A significant level of research has been undertaken in order to identify its impact. This research would indicate that for some children there is an improvement in their reading skills while other research would suggest that the complexity of reading acquisition in English makes it unlikely that the universal adoption of one method, synthetic phonics only, leads to overall improvement.”

The GTCS also noted that while it is responsible for accrediting ITE courses, it does not “define or restrict the development of the skills of teaching literacy”. The GTCS strongly

supported research evidence informed teaching practice in its submission. One of the [GTCS' requirements for all ITE programmes](#) is that the programme should prepare teachers to “engage with research and scholarship and, where appropriate in the future, be actively able to practise research through, for example, professional enquiry.”

The Scottish Government's view was that synthetic phonics is one of a range of approaches teachers might utilise. He said in his first submission:

“Curriculum for Excellence is a teacher-led approach to learning. Our curricular approach is deliberately non-prescriptive, recognising that children learn in different and unique ways and that it is for empowered practitioners and teachers to decide the teaching methods which are most appropriate for individual children. As such, prescribing any single approach to learning and teaching runs contrary to the principles and framework on which the curriculum is based.”

Aside from the petitioner, Dr McGeown, the GTCS and the Scottish Government, two other individuals wrote to the PPC. Dr Marlynne Grant, an educational psychologist, broadly speaking supported the petitioner's view, while Dr Terry Wrigley, an academic, who did not.

The PPC explored with the Scottish Government the actions it was taking in respect to the content and quality frameworks for ITE and the work in supporting research-informed teaching practice.

In relation to ITE, the Scottish Government noted that it is supporting the Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQulTE) project; the committee is due to hear from researchers on this project in the coming weeks. The Government also stated:

“Education Scotland is leading with the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) to oversee application of the ITE self-evaluation framework. This will be used to gather evidence at ITE institutional level on the actions being taken to develop the pedagogical skills of students in the priority areas of literacy, numeracy and health & wellbeing.”

In relation to professional development, the Scottish Government noted that Education Scotland had “focus on professional learning and leadership development” as part of its programme of reform. The Scottish Government also stated that the [Strategic Board for Teacher Education](#) had “established a working group to consider how newly registered teachers can be better supported to develop their knowledge and pedagogical skills during the early phase (years 1-5) of their teaching careers; and to identify whether additional measures are needed to help teachers to access high quality professional learning designed to meet their personal development needs.”

SCOTTISH EDUCATION SYSTEM: KNOWLEDGE UTILISATION STUDY

In April 2019 the Scottish Government published a report on a study exploring how Scottish educational practitioners engage with research and the factors that support and hinder ability to make best of use of research evidence. The project was conducted by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change and commissioned by Scottish Government. The researchers identified seven themes arising from the study which are noted below.

Time and workload

The findings highlighted the importance of teachers having sufficient time to access, interpret and apply data and evidence. A lack of time was found to be an inhibitor to engaging with data and research. The study suggested that this may lead to rely on easy-to-access and summary forms of research. It concluded “these findings strongly indicate a need to consider how well teacher time commitments and workload matches expectations regarding teachers’ use of evidence and engagement with research.”

Relationships between practitioners, researchers and policymakers

The study highlighted the “importance of researchers working closely with practitioners and other partners to better convey research findings to influence practice and educational thinking but also to enhance research skills.”

The influence of key actors

The study noted that in terms of knowledge transfer and mobilisation, key actors included “Attainment Advisors, Educational Psychologists and other allied professionals, academic researchers and other leads at school and local authority level”. School leaders also play role. The study stated, “moral and practical support from school leadership, the local authority and Attainment Advisors is crucial in building a culture of research engagement and capacity at local level.”

Resourcing research engagement across local systems

The study noted that in some local authorities there were examples of local authority professional learning programmes aimed at building practitioners’ data and research capacity and skills. However, in some cases the study found that financial constraints had reduced these programmes. The study argued that there is clear value in investing in such programmes.

The value of collaboration to foster engagement with research and data

The study found a limited number of examples of collaborative practitioner research within or across schools. Normally these examples were supported by external partners through the Attainment Scotland Fund. The study argued that this approach “could enhance the capacity of staff to systematically engage with data and research, develop their pedagogical expertise as well as their leadership skills.”

Accessibility of research findings

The study noted that research findings could be better communicated to the teaching profession. The study drew upon others’ research and stated that this should happen along with the development and support for a culture of research engagement, where there is time to access, understand and apply this knowledge.

Existing educational infrastructure

The study suggested that “the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the associated Attainment Scotland Fund are working as drivers to focus teachers’ attention on the value of evidence-based practice. Professional culture across Scottish education and national educational policy appear to be contributing to fostering teachers’ positive disposition to research engagement and using data to inform their practice.” the study also noted that he

development of Regional Improvement Collaboratives could have “implications for knowledge mobilisation and teacher engagement with data and research.”

The [Strategic Board for Teacher Education considered the research in September 2019](#). It noted that a working group was being set up to build on the findings of the study. The minutes from the September meeting stated:

“It was felt that teachers were willing to engage with research but whether this happened was very much down to the ethos of the school. Access to research, especially that which is relevant to the Scottish system was an issue, as was connecting teachers with academic experts and sharing results from robust and quality projects.”

LINKS TO THE FORTHCOMING INQUIRY INTO INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND THE EARLY PHASE OF TEACHING

The Committee will shortly commence taking oral evidence on its inquiry into Initial Teacher Education and the early phase of teaching. One of the focuses of that inquiry will be on literacy and numeracy.

The petitioner’s submission to the Committee’s inquiry stated:

“Scottish teachers’ knowledge is so weak in this area, they are unable to evaluate the content or suitability of programmes or interventions, much less provide appropriate, timely and tailored teaching and support ...

“Scottish education has systemic deficiencies in how children are taught to read; solutions must be system-wide – not merely an optional extra for individual schools. By providing teachers with access to the research and scientifically proven methods for teaching reading, there is the potential to close gaps, teach dyslexic children to read and spell, improve our literacy rates and outcomes, and increase access to the curriculum for all.”

In its submission, [the University of Glasgow](#) stated that it is “committed to frequently updating and revising its materials and delivery on literacy and numeracy in line with research and policy”. Two local authorities, East Lothian and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, raised concerns about ITE’s preparation to teach literacy. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar said:

“More focus is needed in programmes on core teaching pedagogy in literacy and numeracy, including the fundamental ‘How do I teach?’ question”

The NASUWT’s submission said:

“It should be remembered, however, that professional learning does not end with the completion of the university course, nor indeed the probationary year. Teachers in Scotland, in line with the GTCS Standards, should be engaged in ongoing career-long professional learning (CLPL) throughout their career. It is to be expected that the appropriate knowledge and understanding required to teach the core skills of literacy and numeracy to children in their formative years will be developed and honed throughout a teacher’s career, supported by, inter alia, good Professional Review and Development (PRD) and coaching and mentoring schemes.”

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Research

11 March 2020

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The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

BRIEFING FOR THE PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Petition Number: PE1688

Main Petitioner: Ann Glennie

Subject: Improving literacy standards in schools through research informed reading instruction.

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to 1) provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; 2) ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics

Background

[Systematic synthetic phonics](#) is a teaching method in which letter names are not taught initially. Children learn up to 44 phonemes (the smallest units of sound) and how each can be represented. Another approach to phonics is analytic phonics which involves the analysis of whole words to identify spelling patterns.

Following the [Rose review](#) in England (2006), synthetic phonics were made part of the national curriculum in England. The review stated that:

“Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as ‘synthetic’ phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers.”

While there is support for the use of synthetic phonics, concerns have been expressed that its inclusion in the national curriculum might imply that it is the only approach. For example, the NUT said in 2011 that:

“Synthetic phonics is not the Holy Grail when it comes to the teaching of reading.”
([BBC 2011](#))

Education Scotland has a ‘National Improvement Hub’ which provides educational resources, including information on research evidence for closing the socio-economic attainment gap. This includes a [briefing on phonics](#) which states that:

“Phonics approaches have been consistently found to be effective in supporting younger readers to master the basics of reading.”

Phonics in Curriculum for Excellence

Particular teaching methods are not set out in the guidance on Curriculum for Excellence. The ‘Principles and Practice’ for Literacy and English refers to the use of phonics amongst other methods, although doesn’t specify synthetic phonics.

“Teachers will balance play-based learning with more systematic development and learning of skills and techniques for reading, including phonics.” ([Literacy and English: principles and practice paper, p2](#))

Education Scotland has published '[benchmarks](#)' to provide further guidance. These include:

- Hears and says rhyming words and generates rhyme from a given word.
- Hears and says the different single sounds made by letters.
- Hears and says letter blends/sounds made by a combination of letters.

The [Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy](#) assessed literacy in 2012, 2014 and 2016. This included measurement of reading ability at P4, P7 and S2. The percentage of P4 pupils performing “well or very well” at reading was 83% in 2012, 78% in 2014 and 77% in 2016.

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government’s vision for education, set out in the [National Improvement Framework](#) includes improvement in attainment in literacy as well as closing the attainment gap.

In May 2017, the Scottish Government published a [content analysis](#) of initial teacher training courses which looked at the number of hours provided for certain areas of the curriculum, including literacy. It found a high degree of variability. In the undergraduate degree for primary school teachers, the time dedicated to literacy varied from 48 to 173 hours. For the one year postgraduate course for primary school teachers it varied from 20 to 153 hours. The report did not discuss the content or skills taught.

Education Scotland’s hub includes [evidence from research](#), focused on tackling the attainment gap. Their briefing on phonics is quoted above. The Scottish Government published a [Research Strategy for Education](#) which includes:

“Examining the capacity and structure of education professionals to receive and implement the lessons of research and recommend necessary changes.”

The petition also calls for synthetic phonics to be taught in initial teacher training. The Scottish Government is developing [new routes into teaching](#) one of which, at Stirling university, aims to qualify more primary teachers with additional subject specialisms including literacy.

Scottish Parliament Action

In 2010, Murdo Fraser asked the Scottish Executive: “whether it will promote the formal teaching of synthetic phonics as a way to improve literacy standards.” (S3O-8960). The Cabinet Secretary for Education at that time, Michael Russell, MSP replied that:

“I agree that synthetic phonics has had considerable success. Many good teachers and lots of good schools are using the approach. However, it is important to stress that it is not the only approach. In certain circumstances, other approaches work well, in addition to or in place of synthetic phonics.”

More recently, the Education and Skills Committee has considered the content of initial teacher education courses as part of its [inquiry into teacher workforce planning](#). This has yet to report.

Camilla Kidner
Senior Researcher
18 August 2017