

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 MSP 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.

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18 August 2017

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