

PE1668/C

The General Teaching Council for Scotland submission of 27 November 2017

I write in response to the letter dated 13 November 2017 in which you requested a response to Petition PE1688 as outlined 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.

The General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above petition in respect of the two elements of the petition:

- 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.*

In responding to the petition, the definition of Synthetic Phonics being used by GTCS is as follows; *Synthetic Phonics is a **method** of teaching reading which first teaches the letter sounds and then builds up to blending these sounds together to achieve full pronunciation of whole words.*

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 following article from the British Educational Research Journal provides an outline of some of the key research in this area and the arguments for and against the universal implementation of the programme as a sole means of supporting and improving reading skills.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1080/01411920802268912/full>

In terms of a GTCS position regarding point one of the petition, it is the view of GTCS that it would support all of its registrants in accessing high quality professional learning based on research - informed reading which impacts positively on the attainment and achievement of young people. It would however not be the position of GTCS to specifically support Synthetic Phonics as the sole means by which young people should develop their reading skills but rather it should be regarded as one of a range of interventions and approaches.

For many years the Scottish Education system has recognised and valued the fact that children learn differently and through a variety of means. Evidence clearly demonstrates that a 'one size fits all' approach fails to meet the needs of individual learners. Indeed, Scotland's well recognised and respected approach to Inclusive Education clearly demonstrates this position.

With regard to point two of the petition, *ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics*, the GTCS as you will be aware has the responsibility for the accreditation of all Initial teacher Education (ITE) programmes, primary and secondary. The purpose of ITE is to ensure that all those who are at the beginning of their career are well informed and equipped to meet the demands of teaching and the young people whom they support.

A key aspect of the GTCS accreditation criteria is the need to ensure that teachers take responsibility for the development of literacy skills be that from the earliest point in school education to the senior phase and beyond. We do not however define or restrict the development of the skills of teaching literacy by providing the ITE students with a limited experience of the variety of ways to successfully promote and develop reading skills. Rather, we require that the pedagogical foundations be laid at university level while at school level the student are given an opportunity to both see these in action or put them into action in a variety of settings and through a variety of means. GTCS has and will continue to support the principle that all those entering teaching should have the opportunity to experience and learn from research-informed reading in the area of phonics but as previously stated not with a lone focus on Synthetic Phonics.

Finally, we are at a time in Scottish Education where schools, head teachers and teachers are being encouraged to show leadership and take ownership of education in the broadest sense and learning and teaching in particular. Importantly, the recent National Improvement Framework has as part of its key drivers Teacher Professionalism and Leadership both of which promote autonomy, teacher agency and ownership. <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00491758.pdf>

It would appear then that by adopting this very focused approach to reading and phonics that these aspirations would be undermined not only at teacher level but at school and authority level too.

While whole heartedly endorsing both research and professional learning, GTCS would wish to see an open, balanced and inclusive approach taken in respect of the teaching of reading and phonics both at the ITE stage and at class school and authority levels.