

PE1668/F

Joint submission from Petitioner Anne Glennie, Dr Sarah McGeown and Gordon Askew, MBE 11 January 2018

Firstly, we would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak in detail about the petition at the Scottish Parliament on 9th November and for their open-minded and thoughtful response.

Before presenting written responses to submissions received from other parties, we wish to highlight the following vital points:

- Where SSP is **well** taught, alongside comprehension and enjoyment of reading, the results are self-evident. Almost all children are learning to read regardless of background.
- Teaching SSP well involves children being given the knowledge and understanding to decode **unknown** words phonically, removing the need for guessing (e.g. from pictures or 'context'). It does not involve any **unnecessary** 'sounding out' of words (e.g. of all words).
- In schools who teach SSP well, there is no evidence of either comprehension or reading enjoyment suffering, quite the reverse. Teachers in such schools understand that children being able confidently and fluently to read unknown words strongly supports comprehension and enjoyment.
- All of this is dependent on SSP being taught **well**. Simply 'doing phonics' will not serve. Teachers need to be **fully trained** both in the evidence as to why and how SSP works, and in understanding of the content (in terms of the children's knowledge and skill) that needs to be covered. This training also needs to emphasise the vital importance of teaching comprehension and vocabulary alongside.
- Such training should cover the curriculum **content** involved. The **method** of delivery must be left to individual schools.

We would also like to draw the committee's attention to some recent, relevant developments:

The results of *The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* or PIRLS¹ (published 09.12.17) present England's best results in a generation. Notably, the attainment gap in England between high and low-performers has been substantially reduced from previous PIRLS cycles. This has mainly been driven by large improvements in the performance of lower-performing pupils. This success is due to the adoption of systematic synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction. The characteristic that was most strongly predictive of PIRLS performance was children's prior achievement in the Year 1 (Primary 2) Phonics Screening Check (PSC) – that is to say, the children who scored full marks in the PSC, went on to achieve the highest average scores in the PIRLS test of reading comprehension in Year 5 (Primary 4), four years later.

¹ *The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS, 2017)
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664562/PIRLS_2016_National_Report_for_England- BRANDED.pdf

The *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach*² was published by the Scottish Government on 13.12.17. Both Probationer supporters and local authority probation managers, reported explicit concern over new probationers' "preparedness" and "ability" to "teach reading and phonics". Probationers also "expressed some concerns regarding knowledge gaps in key areas, particularly in the teaching of phonics and reading". This issue affects not just probationers, but most primary teachers in Scotland. Explicit input on the teaching of reading and phonics continues to be ignored in our ITE universities, which instead promote out-dated whole-language approaches which focus on meaning-making, engagement and reading to/with children, without any direct instruction on the mechanics of how to actually teach children to read through knowledge of the alphabetic code (the sounds and letters), the skill of blending to read (decode) or the skill of segmenting to spell (encode).

To demonstrate the international nature of this issue and the support for research-informed, phonics-based approaches to reading instruction we would note that, in December 2017, members of the Developmental Disorders of Language and Literacy (DDOLL) Network Group issued a standard letter to all State and Territory Ministers of Education in Australia, in support of a Phonics Screening Check to identify children at risk of reading failure.

In this debate, three pertinent facts remain:

- Scotland's teachers lack the required subject knowledge to teach reading effectively
- Literacy results have plummeted to the point where Scotland is languishing behind other countries
- Children are failing as they lack the reading proficiency required for academic success

We urge the committee to take action. These issues could be solved if we acknowledge these problems and follow the example of science and other countries, by providing teachers the information and training they desperately need, and by giving children the best chance of success through research-informed reading instruction.

² *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach* (Scottish Government, 2017)
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/12/2065/8>