

PE1668/L

Petitioner submission of 29 January 2019

I am writing to the committee as the ***Self-evaluation framework for Initial Teacher Education***¹ has now been published by Education Scotland. It was hoped that this document would help ITE institutions evaluate their literacy provision and perhaps ensure that research-informed reading instruction would be included. Unfortunately, the only reference to literacy in the entire document is this:

‘Students are supported to develop a detailed understanding of their professional responsibilities in relation to literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing.’

Clearly, *this does not address the concerns of my petition and does not provide a strategy or a solution as indicated by the Deputy First Minister*. What has been encouraging however, throughout this dialogue is the complete about-turn of the Deputy First Minister, who was initially adamant that a phonics approach was not the way forward – to then finally ***recognising the evidence base for phonics*** and indeed pointing to the *Education Endowment Foundation* on the National Improvement Hub², which is there to advise schools and teachers. Regarding the use of phonics in reading instruction it states that:

‘Qualified teachers tend to get better results when delivering phonics interventions (up to twice the effectiveness of other staff), indicating that pedagogical expertise is a key component of successful teaching of early reading.’

‘it is important that teachers have professional development in effective assessment as well as in the use of particular phonic techniques and materials’

This is exactly what petition PE1668 is calling for. If teachers are to follow this advice, where are they supposed to access the professional development required – if it is not routinely undertaken as part of initial teacher education? Of the few schools and authorities that are adopting a systematic synthetic phonics approach many are, ironically, having to pay for specialists to come up from England to deliver this training. Do we not want our own teachers to have this pedagogical expertise – to be twice as effective – to be skilled in teaching all children, including those with difficulties, to read?

In truth, there is no robust, research-informed policy in Scotland when it comes to the teaching of reading and this is partly to blame for our declining literacy standards. There is no clarity in any official documentation for teachers. The Experiences and Outcomes of *Curriculum for Excellence* promote a *whole language* rather than a systematic synthetic phonics approach, as does POLAAR (*Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource*) which is supposed help P1 teachers identify children who are most at risk of developing later difficulties with reading and writing. Should teachers follow these documents – or the EEF as recommended by the Deputy First Minister?

In Scotland we have sector-leading flagship policies – and investment and action – on crucial initiatives such as *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach* and *Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools: A National Strategy for School Libraries in Scotland, 2018-2023*. But without clear, effective education and advice in reading instruction for our teachers, and without a nation of highly literate children, these admirable policies are building on sand. Children only learn to read once in their life – we must urgently ensure that this beginning reading instruction is as effective as it can be for all learners – and especially for disadvantaged children and children with dyslexia.

I must stress that this is a problem which will not go away. When this petition is closed, there will still be a significant – and growing number – of children who are being failed by systemic problems in our education system. Every child has a right to an education, and this includes being taught to read. Why then, do we continue to ignore the science and choose to leave this to chance?

I would also like to draw attention to the role of the GTCS in this matter. In a recent report by the Royal Society³, the GTCS was described as a **'research mediator'** i.e. keeping abreast of developments in research and communicating these to teachers/education bodies in Scotland. The GTCS do not seem to be aware of this function, neither do they seem aware of the Deputy First Minister's acknowledgement of the evidence base for phonics or the advice from the EEF on the National Improvement Hub:

'...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.' PE1668/C GTCS submission of 27 November 2017⁴

Furthermore, in a recent edition of *Teaching Scotland* magazine⁵ the GTCS states that it **'does not hold a policy position on teaching children to read'**, which clearly and directly contradicts the statement above.

I would suggest that if the GTCS purports to be research-informed and encourages our profession to engage with research, that they need to lead the way, as do our ITE institutions and Education Scotland. I hope that my letter highlights the grave confusion, ignorance and mis-information within the system. If our professional bodies are confused – where then does this leave teachers and schools? But more importantly, where does this leave children?

It is exactly four years ago since I first wrote to my MSP, Dr Alasdair Allan, with my concerns about the teaching of reading in schools and the lack of teacher knowledge on this subject. Through this petition, I have taken this argument as far as I can; to say I feel disillusioned is an understatement. We have data showing our literacy levels are in steep decline. We have reports detailing the lack of training that new teachers receive on reading instruction in ITE. We even have our own cutting-edge

research showing the positive impact systematic synthetic phonics can have in the classroom – particularly for disadvantaged children.

Our current priority is closing the attainment gap – if we are truly committed to equity in the classroom, reading – and being literate – is the one, fundamental thing that can truly level the playing field and give every child, regardless of background or circumstances, the opportunity to reach their full potential. Science and research show that systematic synthetic phonics is the most effective way of teaching all children to read. Please take action; being literate should not be left to chance in Scotland. Our children deserve the most skilled teachers and the very best instruction, using the most effective approaches – why would we accept anything less?

1. Self-evaluation framework for Initial Teacher Education
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/SelfEvalFrameworkforITE.pdf>
2. The Education Endowment Foundation
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/pages/EEF-Toolkit-Results.aspx?911459f09ef0012d8e7c32f03e32d003d881d45febd1eba332753219e922d8f5>
3. The Royal Society *Harnessing Educational Research*
<https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/projects/rs-ba-educational-research/educational-research-report.pdf>
4. PE1668/C GTCS submission of 27 November 2017
http://www.parliament.scot/S5_PublicPetitionsCommittee/Submissions%202017/PE1668_C.pdf
5. *Teaching Scotland* magazine published by GTCS (page 8)
<http://edition.pagesuite-professional.co.uk/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&edid=da371e50-5504-49f3-875d-f551b7ede658>