

## PE1668/N

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 17 June 2019

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

I am writing in response to the Committee's request for comment in response to the submission of 29 January from the petitioner. I have addressed the key issues raised by the petitioner below.

#### **The Scottish Government's position on systematic synthetic phonics**

I wish to start my comments by setting out the consistent position of the Government on the issue of systematic synthetic phonics. In my letter to the committee of 14 December 2017 I confirmed the Scottish Government's view that phonics is an important element of learning to read but that it is only one part. In my letter of 10 April 2018, I commented that there is research evidence to endorse the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics. These are not inconsistent statements.

I would like to highlight to the Committee the following references from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)<sup>1</sup>, which can be found in the toolkit on the Education Scotland National Improvement Hub:

*'Teaching phonics is more effective on average than other approaches to early reading (such as whole language or alphabetic approaches), though it should be emphasised that effective phonics techniques are usually embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.'*

*'There is some evidence that approaches informed by synthetic phonics (where the emphasis is on sounding out letters and blending sounds to form words) may be more beneficial than analytic approaches (where the sound/symbol relationship is inferred from identifying patterns and similarities by comparing several words). However, the evidence here is less secure and it is probably more important to match the teaching to children's particular needs and systematically teach the sound patterns with which they are not yet confident.'*

These statements support the position consistently taken by the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, that phonics approaches are effective but that the phonics approach used should be matched to the needs of individual learners and should be part of a wider literacy strategy. That strategy should include the provision of a rich literacy environment, the teaching of reading comprehension and supporting children to develop their own independent reading for pleasure.

I also wish to highlight the report *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert* (Castles, et al, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. The report describes the debate between those who champion using a phonics-led approach and those who support a 'whole-language' approach, focusing on discovering meaning in a literacy-rich environment. The authors conclude that 'phonics is necessary but not sufficient on its own'. They promote the need for an agenda for instruction and research in reading acquisition that is balanced, developmentally informed, and based on deep understanding of how language and writing

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/pages/EEF-Toolkit-Results.aspx?911459f09ef0012d8e7c32f03e32d003d881d45febd1eba332753219e922d8f5>

<sup>2</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100618772271>

systems work. They argue that evidence is not yet sufficient to conclude that the synthetic phonics approach should be preferred over an analytic approach and that the key ingredient of a successful phonics programme is to ensure phonics instruction is delivered in a systematic way.

To summarise, the Scottish Government and Education Scotland consider phonics instruction to be an important part of learning to read (and that there is evidence for this) but that this must be part of a wider literacy strategy.

The guidance within the Experiences and Outcomes for Literacy and English does not endorse particular approaches and research bases for early reading instruction over others. The experiences and outcomes “describe expectations for learning and progression in all areas of the curriculum”<sup>3</sup>. The phonics paper within the EEF toolkit is an accessible summary of international research which supports schools and teachers to make informed decisions based on the best available evidence. It is important to note that these documents serve two distinct purposes.

As I have commented in previous correspondence to the committee, Curriculum for Excellence allows teachers the space to employ the teaching methods they consider most appropriate for individual children. It is for teachers to decide the extent to which phonics is used and what the wider literacy strategy looks like. This clearly requires teachers to have the necessary expertise and knowledge, including an understanding of the latest and highest quality research into reading instruction and I will outline the Scottish Government’s position on this below.

### **Initial Teacher Education (ITE)**

In previous correspondence to the committee, I referenced work that 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.

The Scottish Government is also supporting the Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQulTE) project, which is being led by the Universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde on behalf of the SCDE. This aims to provide more detailed insight and understanding of how effectively initial teacher education (ITE) is preparing newly qualified teachers for the classroom and will contribute significantly to the on-going development and delivery of quality teacher education in Scotland to help ensure we remain able to adapt to the changing needs of our children and young people.

### **Career Long Professional Learning**

The Scottish Government’s Next Steps paper on school reform<sup>4</sup> confirmed that Education Scotland would have a renewed focus on professional learning and leadership development, bringing clarity and coherence to the national landscape. This enhanced focus aims to ensure that education professionals will be supported by a streamlined and coherent professional learning offer.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/btc3.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-governance-next-steps-empowering-teachers-parents-communities-deliver-excellence/>

Education Scotland has developed a new national model for professional learning<sup>5</sup> which was published on 20 September 2018 and which replaces previous guidance. The Strategic Board for Teacher Education (SBTE), which brings together national organisations, teacher unions, and professional bodies to oversee and evaluate reforms to teacher education, has agreed that all partners involved will adopt this national model of professional learning.

The model should be used alongside self-evaluation activities related to the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) Professional Standards, or other Professional Standards, to map out professional learning. Education Scotland works closely with the GTCS and the majority of Education Scotland programmes and learning opportunities are mapped against specific GTCS standards.

Education Scotland is committed to working with all national organisations and Regional Improvement Collaboratives to support practitioners' engagement with the new model and plan their professional learning in all areas, including literacy.

The SBTE has also 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.

I hope the information I have provided is helpful in clarifying the Scottish Government's position and updating the committee on recent developments.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scelframework.com/about/the-national-model-of-professional-learning/>