

PE1668/O

Petition submission of 21 June 2019

I am writing to the committee in response to the Deputy First Minister's latest submission (17th June 2019).

I agree entirely that '*phonics is only one part of learning to read*' – I have never claimed otherwise and neither do proponents of phonics. *Phonics instruction should absolutely take place within a 'rich literacy environment'* and a successful literacy strategy should include all 'Five Pillars of Literacy': **phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension** – as well as reading for pleasure.

The problem we currently have in Scotland is that teachers are not equipped with the required knowledge to deliver all five elements effectively. Crucially, the one that is lacking is phonics – hence the focus of the petition on this aspect. We know from our own surveys (*Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach, 2014* and *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach, 2017*) and from the Education and Skills Committee, that there are serious gaps in teachers' knowledge in beginning reading instruction. In some universities, this is actively withheld, with outdated methodology still being promoted.

How can teachers '*match teaching to children's needs in phonics*' when they don't know how to assess phonic knowledge, blending skills, or teach the alphabetic code? With the correct knowledge and support, phonics training can provide an easy way to assess children and provide appropriate and timely intervention. (In addition, the phonics check, currently used in England and in some Australian states, could act as a screener for dyslexia, and be a much more appropriate and relevant assessment than the P1 SNSAs. It is light-touch, low-stakes check that doesn't require a computer, takes 5-6 minutes per child, provides robust data that can be compared year on year – and it's free.)

The Deputy First Minister draws attention to the report *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert (Castles, et al, 2018)*² which he states '*promotes 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 systems work.*'

Providing teachers with access to the research and training in phonics, will ensure that teachers have the deep and necessary understanding of how children learn to read, the alphabetic code and its role in not only reading, but spelling (and therefore writing) too.

The Deputy First Minister also states: '*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.*'

It is important to know that this paper has an unusual conclusion, that goes against the vast body of research on systematic synthetic phonics. However, regardless of this, it is crucial to highlight that there are no known approved analytic phonics

programmes being used by schools in the UK. Analytic phonics is, by its nature, an eclectic approach and therefore cannot be delivered systematically or be part of a programme of work. Learning to read in English is best served by logical, step-by-step instruction of the alphabetic code to build up knowledge and skills gradually while all previous learning is practised, reinforced and applied in context. Synthetic phonics, theoretically speaking, makes more sense – as teachers have more control over the sequence and speed of letter-sound learning, ensuring instruction is optimal and *'can be matched'* to children's needs. Castles et al make reference to this too: *'On the face of it, synthetic phonics would seem to have some clear advantages: By introducing grapheme-phoneme correspondences individually, it is possible to control the learning environment more effectively and to ensure that each correspondence is taught explicitly and in an optimal sequence'*.

The Deputy First Minister does not seem to realise or appreciate that teachers are not receiving the account of reading acquisition that is shared in the Castles et al paper – the whole point of this petition.

(Incidentally, the first longitudinal research study that proved the efficacy of systematic synthetic phonics over analytic phonics was carried out in Clackmannanshire. This research is internationally renowned, but sadly ignored here in Scotland.)

I would also like to point out, in a further ironic twist, that **Professor Kathy Rastle, one of the co-authors of the paper *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert* highlighted by the Deputy First Minister, has actually signed this very petition and supports its aims.** Professor Kathy Rastle, was also interviewed for an article in the GTCs magazine³, after the paper's publication, which acknowledges the problems that this petition is describing and suggests a solution:

'What is highlighted by both Dr McGeown and Professor Rastle is the wide gap that exists between the state of research knowledge about learning to read, and educational policy and practice.

In Professor Rastle's view, the first step to reduce that gap is "to acknowledge and begin to treat learning to read as a scientific problem – it's not a political issue and it's not an issue about educational philosophy."

"In the paper we distil what we believe are the most important findings from the last 100 years of reading research. We tried to go from the earliest foundation of alphabetic skills all the way through to comprehension, and offer ideas in each section for how the science can be translated into practice."

"I think the most important thing that a primary school teacher could do is to implement rigorous systematic phonics in their classrooms. And that doesn't mean phonics with a bit of guessing or pictures, it means proper systematic phonics. Teachers should also insist on a phonics screen to test the

effectiveness of that practice,” says Professor Rastle. Professor Rastle does stress however that there’s much more to reading beyond phonics. “Every reading researcher would agree with that,” she says, “and we talk in our paper about some of the ways that these other aspects of reading, and the science behind those, could be translated to the classroom.”

Sometimes referred to as “the great equaliser”, both *Dr McGeown and Professor Rastle stressed that, if implemented at an early stage, phonics has the ability to put children on a more level playing field, helping to reduce the Matthew Effect which sees the attainment gap widen over time.*”

I note the developments described by the Deputy First Minister with regards to ITE, Career Long Professional Learning and the work of The Strategic Board for Teacher Education.

*The Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQuITE) study is being carried out over six years and is focussing on quality of the university experience, consistency between the university programmes, policy add-ons to ITE programmes, placement patterns, effective practice for partnerships and quality of support from mentors. While these developments are welcome, **their wide-ranging remit do not include reading, research, phonics or literacy specifically and therefore will not address the concerns of this petition.***

I believe there needs to be an urgent and specific review of ITE provision with regards to literacy and beginning reading instruction. In the meantime, there needs to be new, clear, comprehensive and accessible national guidance to support schools and teachers, who do not always have the luxury of time to find, explore, or immerse themselves in reading current research and consider the implications for classroom practice.

By providing teachers with access to the research and scientifically proven methods for teaching reading, there is the potential to close gaps, teach dyslexic children to read and spell, improve our literacy rates and outcomes, and increase access to the curriculum for all. **Choosing instructional approaches that are evidence-based and effective is the single greatest thing that can be done for disadvantaged children in Scotland and their education.**

Our teachers, and our children, are being left behind. We cannot hide behind cherry-picked quotes and circuitous non-arguments. This is a matter of national concern and it is too important to be left up to individual teachers and schools, especially when, through no fault of their own, they are woefully unaware of the research, the science and the practical implications of teaching the alphabetic code in the classroom. Scottish education has **systemic deficiencies** in how children are taught to read; solutions must be system-wide – not merely an optional extra for individual schools.

A child learns to read once in their life – **we now have robust evidence through scientific enquiry that means we know exactly what to do to ensure that we get**

this right for every child. With the challenge of the attainment gap, there has never been a more important time to act. Every child in Scotland has a right to be taught how to read. **All children, including those with reading difficulties and dyslexia, should be taught using the most up-to-date scientifically proven methodologies – failure to do so amounts to professional negligence** and I believe that parents will begin to resort to legal action to hold schools and authorities to account, as has been the case in other countries.

I implore the committee to seek out and listen to the real experts and researchers in this matter, such as Dr Sarah McGeown, Professor Kathy Rastle, and those listed below.

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This submission is supported by the following international colleagues, researchers, and academics working in the field of reading instruction in English:

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¹ <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/Pages/nrp.aspx/>

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

³ <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/News/teaching-scotland/76-the-science-of-reading.aspx>