

## **PE1668/A**

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In September 2017 the Scottish Parliament and Government have an opportunity to take an important decision on how best to teach reading in their schools. They will want to make their decision based on the best evidence, knowing their choices are likely to have an impact on reading standards, the social mobility of the country's children and eventually on the country's position in the OECD PISA rankings (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Programme for International Student Assessment). In 2000 when PISA began, Scotland was well ahead of the international average score in reading, but now, as of PISA 2015 (which came out in December 2016), Scotland is only average and is behind England and Ireland. This Scottish Parliament and Government are now in a position to begin to reverse this deterioration in the country's reading standards.

I am an Educational Psychologist with experience of working with children since the 1970s. At that time children in England were taught to read by memorising whole words; they learned the alphabet and letters at the beginning of words and they practised with graded reading schemes. Some children succeeded through this method but some did not.

By the late 80s structured teaching was replaced by discovery learning and the teaching of reading by whole language methods. Children were expected to tackle 'real' books through 'paired reading' and the 'apprenticeship model' with teachers as facilitators. Educationalists thought that children would learn to read as easily as they learned to speak, and that the whole language method would develop reading for meaning and creativity. However whole language was spectacularly unsuccessful at teaching a significant number of children to read. Educationalists claimed that those children who failed were 'dyslexic' as if this were the explanation. They did not question the method of reading instruction. As a psychologist it was distressing to witness the unhappiness caused by so many able children as well as children with learning difficulties who struggled to learn to read.

Gradually more structured methods of teaching reading replaced whole language, such as analytic phonics with onset-rime units of instruction and later the 'searchlights model' in the National Literacy Strategy (1998) in which children were taught to read using mixed methods and multiple cues: some words remembered by sight, some phonics and some prediction/guessing through pictures, grammar, syntax and the context of the story. The additional structure was welcomed but several children were still failed by these methods.

The breakthrough for me came in the late 1990s when I first came across synthetic phonics and read claims of its success with *all* children. I started introducing synthetic phonics into my schools but only a few schools were prepared to implement it rigorously from the very beginning of Reception (Primary 1). However when they did the results were remarkable. Potentially vulnerable and disadvantaged children were successful as well as those who learned to read more easily – who forged ahead. Their achievements in reading, spelling and writing were

raised as well as literacy standards as measured by English SATs at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

I conducted longitudinal research of whole classes of children taught synthetic phonics from Reception (Primary 1) and found that decodable readers and structured writing practice to apply the phonics they had been taught increased successful outcomes. Even children entering Reception (Primary 1) with poor language and poor social skills managed to learn well and to close the gap when compared with their more advantaged age peers. Synthetic phonics worked for all children taught in this way from the beginning, irrespective of their gender, date of birth, social grouping, ethnicity and first language (<http://www.rrf.org.uk/pdf/Grant%20Follow-Up%20Studies%20-%20May%202014.pdf>).

Synthetic phonics has a strong evidence base as shown by independent national reviews in England and Australia and in the longitudinal research in the Clackmannanshire study in Scotland.

As Scotland now debates how best to teach its children to read they will want to take account of the evidence. Following the independent Rose Review of the teaching of early reading (2006) it is now statutory in England to teach beginning readers through systematic synthetic phonics, which has had a positive impact on reading standards, although the effect of synthetic phonics is diminished when schools still use mixed methods of teaching, combining phonics with multi-cuing. I would urge the Scottish Parliament and Government to take the crucially important decision to improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction and to implement systematic synthetic phonics instruction right from the beginning of Reception (Primary 1).