

PE1668/K

Petitioner submission of 17 May 2018

It is encouraging to see that the Deputy First Minister's latest submission acknowledges the research base for the use of Systematic Synthetic Phonics as part of reading instruction. The Deputy First Minister also acknowledges that there are gaps in the knowledge and understanding of "some teachers" when it comes to high quality reading instruction.

I would again like to stress that this issue concerns more than "some" teachers; it affects those recently qualified as well as those currently in service. I work with around 1000 teachers in Scotland each year as part of consultancy work and literacy training. Whether working with a cluster group of up to 100 teachers, or with the staff of a single school, when we discuss this subject at the most around 10% of teachers in attendance will have had some sort of input on the teaching of beginning reading instruction. Interestingly, of the 10%, when questioned about where they trained, many had been trained abroad or in England. Without fail, every audience is shocked, with many teachers asking why nothing is being done to remedy this situation. I realise my evidence is anecdotal in this instance, but when two recent surveys have revealed similar findings (*Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach, 2014* and *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach, 2017*), I am truly at a loss as to why no action is being taken.

I have serious concerns about the self-evaluation framework intended to support universities to evaluate their own work. The issue of effective reading instruction has become such a problem precisely because ITE departments are generally known for ignoring the latest research findings and continuing to promote instead their preferred methodology and practices.

In contrast, ITE departments in England are routinely inspected by Ofsted during which inspectors will "evaluate the quality and effectiveness of training in phonics" (*Initial teacher education inspection handbook, Ofsted, 2015*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/getting-them-reading-early>). To facilitate this, and to ensure a measure of consistency, training sessions and materials were provided for all inspectors in England on early reading in schools, including systematic phonics, literacy and inspection methodology.

I do not believe ITE departments in Scotland are currently capable of evaluating their own performance in the provision of early reading instruction because of the poor understanding and misleading views about phonics that are currently perpetuated by education departments, high profile academics and others. Systematic synthetic phonics is often dismissed out of hand entirely as a valid approach to the teaching of reading. I also have questions surrounding the views, and experience, of those in the Working Group. For example, does the group involve any researchers working in the field of psychology, specifically someone knowledgeable in current reading research and best practices for reading instruction?

The Deputy First Minister also mentions the National Improvement Hub as a source of support for teachers already working within the system. There are five case studies on the site that appear when searching for "phonics": some of these involve

no phonics at all but are instead focussed on improving spoken language; one project is a Reading Recovery style intervention which includes running records and various reading strategies – **but none of the projects details anything at all that resembles systematic synthetic phonics practice.**

With regards to the Education Endowment Foundation also mentioned by the Deputy First Minister, it should be noted that of all the interventions listed in the Scottish Attainment Challenge: Learning & Teaching Toolkit – **phonics is the only one with a full “five padlocks out of five” rating for its evidence base.**

In addition, the toolkit stresses that: **“it is also 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 – and it needs to be provided for urgently on a national scale. I am utterly confused as to why the Deputy First Minister is happy to point teachers to this advice but is unwilling to provide the necessary support and action to make this available on a practical level to every school and teacher, should they wish to avail themselves of it.

It is also confusing for schools and teachers when the Deputy First Minister publicly endorses approaches, such as the STEP Physical Literacy Programme, which claims to improve literacy skills through physical exercises, although it has no credible research base, and has links with the discredited DORE programme. Schools are wasting PEF money on interventions such as these, but they are also wasting valuable instruction time for our most disadvantaged learners as this programme is often used to target those who have been identified as having dyslexia.

I urge the committee to keep this petition open until the new self-evaluation framework is published, as this appears to be the key strategy and solution as suggested by the Deputy First Minister. I would also note that although the committee wrote to several ITE providers to ask them for their views on this petition, I believe that no replies have been received thus far.