

## **PE1668/G**

Dr Sarah McGeown submission of 11 January 2018

The GTCS raise several issues relating to this petition which we discuss below.

Firstly, the GTCS comment on the complexity of the English writing system, compared to other alphabetic writing systems. English has an opaque orthography (i.e., there is not always a transparent/consistent relationship between letters and sounds, evidenced by irregular words - e.g., was, pint, yacht). However, nonword reading skill (i.e., the ability to sound and blend letter-sound correspondences, a skill acquired with synthetic phonics teaching) is a strong predictor of the ability to read irregular words. Indeed, the ability to sound and blend letter-sound correspondences better predicts irregular word reading than vocabulary knowledge, reading frequency and orthographic processing skills (REF 1). Furthermore, research has shown that children who take a more phonological approach to reading (i.e., use letter-sound correspondences to read unfamiliar words, characteristic of a synthetic phonics approach) have better irregular word reading than children who take a more visual approach to reading (i.e., attempt to recognise the word using visual characteristics) (REF 2). Therefore, while learning to read in English is more complex than in other alphabetic orthographies, having good nonword reading skills and taking a more phonological approach to reading (both characteristic of a synthetic phonics approach) results in superior irregular (and regular) word reading.

Secondly, the GTCS have misunderstood the petition, in that they state, "It would however not be the position of the GTCS to specifically support synthetic phonics as the sole means by which young people should develop their reading skills". However, the petition does not request that synthetic phonics becomes mandatory across all schools in Scotland, as the sole method by which children are taught to read. The petition requests that professional learning and teacher training institutions receive research informed reading instruction (specifically synthetic phonics). Teacher education institutions do not cover this sufficiently at present and the guidance given to teachers on reading instruction is patchy and not informed by research. Indeed, this view is confirmed by the Scottish Government's recent report *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach* (13.12.17.) in which probationer supporters, local authority probation managers, and probationers themselves all express concern with a lack of knowledge in key areas "particularly in the teaching of phonics and reading". The little official guidance contained in the Experiences and Outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence and the POLAAR resource promote a mixed methods approach, rather than a research-informed approach. Sight words, letter names and context clues are not features of SSP. The multiple strategies referred to in CfE are outlined in the POLAAR appendix and are multi-cueing strategies, which amount to word-guessing – such as 'look at the first letter', 'look at the picture' 'look at the shape of the word' and 'look at the last letter'. The only strategy required (and one that works consistently) is phonics all-the-way-through-the-word for reading and for spelling. Once teachers have received research informed guidance on reading instruction, they can then decide how best to apply this in the classroom. We predict that the majority of teachers, if guided by the

research evidence, will choose to use synthetic phonics in their classrooms; however, it will not be mandatory.

Thirdly, the GTCS note that “children learn differently and through a variety of means” and that a “one size fits all approach” is not appropriate. Firstly, there is strong evidence that synthetic phonics benefits the vast majority of readers, but that it is the lowest attaining children who show the greatest gains. For example, since the introduction of synthetic phonics, England’s reading scores have increased by 7 points on average (from PIRLS 2011-2016); however, the lowest attainers have seen the greatest gains (an increase in 17 points), compared to the highest attainers (an increase in 2 points) (REF3). Given the Scottish Government’s priority of closing the poverty related attainment gap, and the evidence that the lowest attainers benefit particularly from synthetic phonics, we have a responsibility to ensure ITE teaches this to ensure teachers are confident in this approach.

Indeed, my own research has shown that children who learn to read by a more eclectic approach (i.e., receive a variety of word recognition strategies – sight word reading, use of context etc.) have poorer word reading skills and reading comprehension skills than children who learn by a more phonics focused approach (REFs 3, 4 & 5). Instead of teaching all children a range of reading strategies, teachers who receive research informed reading instruction will be able to make decisions about how best to teach their children to read based on their knowledge of the specific students that they teach. For example, children with weak vocabulary skills benefit specifically from a more phonics focused approach, as a child with weak vocabulary skills will struggle to use context to decipher unfamiliar words (REFs 5 & 6). Similarly, children starting school with no letter-sound knowledge will use ineffective strategies to differentiate between words if taught as sight words (i.e., they will use visual cues associated with the word or card), therefore a more phonics focused approach is more suitable for them.

It is important to appreciate that synthetic phonics programmes vary (i.e., it is not a single programme taught at a specific pace). Indeed, some synthetic phonics programmes include (limited) sight word teaching, which is particularly beneficial for children starting school with weak phonological awareness skills (REF 7). A research-informed and more nuanced understanding of children’s cognition will allow teachers to decide how best to teach their students to read.

Fourthly, the petition was not intended to undermine teacher autonomy, agency or ownership. Giving all teachers access to research informed reading instruction will empower them and will contribute significantly to their professional learning and development. This will ultimately benefit the children that they teach. There is strong evidence that synthetic phonics is beneficial for the majority of readers but is particularly beneficial for the lowest attaining children/children from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e., those with weak vocabulary skills/letter-sound knowledge) (REFs 3, 4 & 5). Given the Scottish Government’s commitment to closing the poverty related attainment gap, this cannot be ignored. It is critical that the desire to promote teacher autonomy is balanced with the rights of children to receive the highest quality reading instruction.

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## References

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