

Petitioner submission of 11 September 2023

PE2037/B: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

I am writing to the Committee in response to the submission from the [Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills](#).

Guidance

I welcome the news that Education Scotland is working on new early reading resources. This is long overdue as, other than the POLAAR (Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource) document, there has been no guidance for teachers on this subject since before the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence.

The emphasis on early reading depending on a *'complex interplay of skills and background factors'* is concerning. Virtually all children (95%+) can be taught to read with systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) despite background and circumstances ([Burk, Hasbrouck, 2023](#)). Longitudinal research shows that SSP is also effective with children thought to be vulnerable and disadvantaged because of factors such as gender, socio-economic group, EAL, age, ASN, dyslexia, low language/social skills ([Grant, 2014](#)).

The Foundational Role of Phonics in Learning to Read

I am glad that there is agreement that the skill of decoding (and by necessity knowledge of letters and sounds and their relationship to the alphabetic code for English) is foundational to learning to read. If this is the case, why are decoding for reading and encoding for spelling, along with how the English language works, and how the brain learns to read, absent from current teacher education?

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQiITE)

I look forward to the requested update from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) on the provision for teaching reading in primary in ITE. However, given the conclusion of their six-year study ([MQiITE, 2023](#)) that *'Graduates report no real areas of persistent weakness, and levels of confidence and self-efficacy remain fairly high*

and fairly stable over time’, I have little faith in their capacity, or motivation, to reflect the reality of the current situation.

The MQulTE study’s conclusions completely contradict previous findings on this issue, including the SCDE’s own report from 2019.

The ‘[Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach](#)’ (2014) reported “a worrying mix of knowledge and understanding of the pedagogy of reading by students and newly qualified teachers” who “did not have a confident working knowledge of the pedagogy of reading”.

‘[Gathering views on probationer teachers’ readiness to teach](#)’ (2017) described new teachers’ ability to teach reading and phonics as an “**area of concern**”. Local Authority probationer managers “noted issues in the level of preparedness to teach reading and phonics”. Teaching reading was also highlighted by the probationers themselves as “an area in which they were less confident”.

Further, the ‘[Scottish Council of the Deans of Education Attainment Challenge Project](#)’ (2019), highlighted “the emerging need for: better data literacy; more strategies for working with pupils with additional or complex needs; better pedagogic content knowledge around teaching literacy and numeracy”. Three reports in as many years—all reinforcing the clear issues with reading pedagogy and literacy teaching, including phonics—yet now we are supposed to believe that there are “no real areas of persistent weakness” and that “levels of confidence and self-efficacy remain fairly high and fairly stable over time”.

This raises serious questions about the quality and validity of the MQulTE study. Should the SCDE be ‘marking its own jotters’, so to speak? Is a restricted sample of just over 900 people (and only 12% of the target group) sufficient to yield reliable data? Is a self-reporting statement of confidence from NQTs anywhere near adequate to evaluate the quality of ITE in Scotland?

Regarding the ‘distinct roles and independence of ITE institutions’, I agree that it is not desirable, nor should it be necessary, to prescribe content to our ITE institutions—it is the universities, as seats of learning, research and development, who should be leading the profession and informing them of the latest international evidence-based practices. The petition does not ask for systematic synthetic phonics to be prescribed

as the **only** information student teachers receive—it simply asks that it is **included**—as currently this is not the case.

'At Uni we were not taught how to teach children to read, instead we were just told it's important. This is frustrating, mainly because I feel that uni never actually taught us how to teach anything, it was more about why! I would love to have seen some lessons being demonstrated for every subject. With reading being so important this should definitely be covered more.'

Strathclyde University Graduate Primary Teacher, 2023

I implore the committee to seek out the researchers, psychologists, and neuroscientists, who are specialists in the field of reading acquisition, rather than relying solely on the limited scope of academics in education.

Reality

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all academic learning depends. Every day in Scotland, children with dyslexia and reading difficulties, and their families, deal with the impact of systemic failure in the teaching of reading. It is now recognised that *“Dyslexia does not develop when children begin with a good synthetic phonics programme and when slow-to-start children are given extra practice and teaching with synthetic phonics in order to keep up”* ([Grant, 2014](#)).

Teachers who have not been trained in the reading science or dyslexia are not best placed to provide the necessary tailored assessment and teaching required to remediate these difficulties.

Over a third of children in Scotland now have an additional support need (ASN)¹.

According to the SQA, ‘a record number of candidates’ (roughly one in five) in 2023 required special arrangements when sitting their exams². The most common was separate accommodation for students who required a **scribe** or a **reader**. In many cases, this will be because the student cannot read or write independently. This is an unacceptable

¹ [There were 241,639 pupils \(34.2% of all pupils\) with an additional support need \(ASN\) recorded in 2022.](#)

² [Record number of Scottish students given extra support to sit exams \(TES Scotland\)](#)

situation, but nothing is being done to address the root cause of these literacy difficulties.

It is long past time to acknowledge these problems and follow the reading science by providing teachers with the information and support they need, and by giving children the best chance of success through research-informed reading instruction. In good conscience, how could we do anything else?