

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2037](#): Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction, lodged by Anne Glennie

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition seeks two actions, to—

- provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;
- ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

Synthetic phonics means the teaching of reading “in which phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters or groups of letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesised)”.¹ The systematic element refers to the order in which these phonemes are taught – starting with the easiest sounds and progressing through to the most complex. There are other phonics approaches, eg analytical phonics.

Previous petition

This petition is substantially the same as [PE1668](#) which was lodged in 2017. In Session 5 the petition was considered by the Public Petitions Committee and referred to the Education and Skills Committee. The petition was closed by the current Education, Children and Young People Committee. That Committee’s reason to close the petition was—

“That [the Committee] has no current plans to scrutinise initial training education. ... the Committee agreed that should it consider initial training education later in the parliamentary session, it would reflect on the issues raised in your petition as part of its work.”

The policy landscape in relation to guidance and the autonomy of higher education institutions has not substantially changed since 2017.

¹ National Literacy Trust <https://literacytrust.org.uk/information/what-is-literacy/what-phonics/>

The [SPiCe briefing for the 2017 petition](#) noted that synthetic phonics is part of the national curriculum in England – since 2013 most primary schools in England are required to teach reading using systematic synthetic phonics and a “phonics screening check” which monitors progress of pupils, normally at the end of Year 1.

In its submissions to the Session 5 Public Petitions Committee, the Scottish Government’s view was that synthetic phonics is one of a range of approaches teachers might utilise. The then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said in [his first submission](#) on the petition:

“Curriculum for Excellence is a teacher-led approach to learning. Our curricular approach is deliberately non-prescriptive, recognising that children learn in different and unique ways and that it is for empowered practitioners and teachers to decide the teaching methods which are most appropriate for individual children. As such, prescribing any single approach to learning and teaching runs contrary to the principles and framework on which the curriculum is based.”

And then later—

“I agree that teaching phonics is an important part of learning to read, but that it is only one part of the approach to learning to read and systematic synthetic phonics is only one of a range of phonics approaches. ... While there is evidence to say that teaching phonics systematically helps children learn to read, there is debate among academics as to whether the synthetic phonics method is better than other methods.”

The General Teaching Council for Scotland echoed this view, it said—

“The issue of the application of Synthetic Phonics is one which has been debated by the education system for over two decades both internationally and at UK level. A significant level of research has been undertaken in order to identify its impact. This research would indicate that for some children there is an improvement in their reading skills while other research would suggest that the complexity of reading acquisition in English makes it unlikely that the universal adoption of one method, synthetic phonics only, leads to overall improvement.”

The submissions the Session 5 Public Petitions Committee received from academics provide a flavour of the debates on approaches to teaching younger children to read, and particularly the focus on synthetic phonics (see for example submissions from [Dr Sarah McGeown](#) and [Dr Terry Wrigley](#).) In addition, the GTCS’s submission [highlighted a paper](#) which discussed some of the debates around the evidence supporting the use of systemic phonics.

Guidance

Guidance in Scotland on teaching reading to younger pupils does not promote one approach above others. For example, the [Principles and Practice for Literacy and English](#) refers to the use of phonics amongst other methods, although doesn't specify synthetic phonics.

“Teachers will balance play-based learning with more systematic development and learning of skills and techniques for reading, including phonics.”

Education Scotland offers support to practitioners in a number of areas, including literacy and synthetic phonics, through online platforms such as the National Literacy Professional Learning Community.

In late 2021, the Scottish Government announced it would set up a National Response to Improving Literacy group. The [National Improvement Framework published in December 2022](#) reported that a Terms of Reference paper has been produced. The outcome of the work of this group was to develop “recommendations aimed at enhancing practitioners’ professional learning in literacy and improving further the learning experiences of children and young people.”

The Scottish approach to curriculum content and pedagogy is intended to be less prescriptive than in England. The UK Government’s [Department for Education recently updated its Reading Framework which is detailed guidance](#) “for primary and secondary schools to meet existing expectations for teaching reading”. Systematic synthetic phonics is a crucial element of this guidance. The DfE highlights a number of sources to support its focus on systematic synthetic phonics. These including the [2006 Independent review of the teaching of early reading](#) by Jim Rose and, from the USA, [the 2000 Report of the national reading panel: teaching children to read](#), and a Scottish Executive funded [seven-year study by Johnston and Watson undertaken in Clackmannanshire, published in 2005](#).

Teacher education courses and ongoing professional learning

The quality of teaching of reading is important. [A guidance report by the Education Endowment Foundation](#) says, “based on evidence from primary schools, it is likely that the quality of phonics provision is as important as the quantity of instruction provided” and one of the features of an effective programme includes ensuring that all staff have the “necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge, for example, sufficient linguistic knowledge and understanding”.

Teachers in Scotland must undertake an Initial Teacher Education (“ITE”) course offered at university. The ITE course will include a significant period of working in school classrooms. Teachers normally would then undertake a probationary year in a school before being able to fully register as a teacher in

Scotland. Teachers are expected to continually undertake professional learning throughout their career. Employers (normally local authorities) have a significant role in supporting probationer and fully qualified teachers' learning and continuing professional development.

The content of university courses is, to a degree, governed by the GTCS's requirements for all ITE programmes. These state—

“The [ITE] programme should include educational theory and practice that supports student teachers to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice in areas such as educational theory, childhood development and developing positive relationships. The legal and statutory frameworks which govern teachers' work should also be addressed throughout the programme.”

However, the universities are independent institutions and have autonomy over the specific content of their ITE courses.

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Researcher

20/08/2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP