



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

### AGENDA

**28th Meeting, 2019 (Session 5)**

**Wednesday 30 October 2019**

The Committee will meet at 10.00 am in the Robert Burns Room (CR1).

1. **Decisions on taking business in private:** The Committee will decide whether to take item 3 in private.
2. **Public petitions:** The Committee will consider the following petition—  
  
PE1668 by Anne Glennie, on improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction
3. **Work programme:** The Committee will consider its work programme.
4. **STEM in early years education (in private):** The Committee will consider a draft report.

Roz Thomson  
Clerk to the Education and Skills Committee  
Room T3.60  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
Tel: 85222  
Email: [Roz.Thomson@parliament.scot](mailto:Roz.Thomson@parliament.scot)

The papers for this meeting are as follows—

**Agenda item 2**

Paper from the Clerk

ES/S5/19/28/1

**Agenda item 3**

PRIVATE PAPER

ES/S5/19/28/2 (P)

**Agenda item 4**

Draft report (private paper) (to follow)

ES/S5/19/28/3

## Education and Skills Committee

28<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2019 (Session 5), Wednesday 30 October 2019

### PE1668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction

#### Introduction

1. This paper invites the Committee to consider an open petition for the first time:
  - [PE1668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction](#)
2. The paper sets out the terms of the petition, as well as the background to its consideration by the Public Petitions Committee and options for initial action by this Committee.

### PE1668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction

#### *Terms of the petition:*

*Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to i) provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; ii) ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.*

#### Background

3. The [SPICe briefing](#) for the petition sets out the background:

“Systematic synthetic phonics is a teaching method in which letter names are not taught initially. Children learn up to 44 phonemes (the smallest units of sound) and how each can be represented. Another approach to phonics is analytic phonics which involves the analysis of whole words to identify spelling patterns.”
4. The SPICe briefing also highlights that particular teaching methods are not set out in the guidance on Curriculum for Excellence. The ‘Principles and Practice’ for Literacy and English refers to the use of phonics amongst other methods, although doesn’t specify synthetic phonics.
5. The Public Petitions Committee first considered this petition on [9 November 2017](#), when it took evidence from the petitioner, Anne Glennie, Dr Sarah McGeown, senior lecturer in developmental psychology at the University of Edinburgh, and Gordon Askew MBE from the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction. The witnesses argued that adopting synthetic phonics would help to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap in reading as it is “a method of instruction that is not dependent on a good vocabulary for success”.

6. At the end of this evidence session, the Public Petitions Committee agreed to write to a range of stakeholders, including the [Scottish Government](#) and the [GTCS](#) (the hyperlinks are to the responses received).
7. The Public Petitions Committee next considered the petition on 15 March 2018. The Convener summarised the submissions received to this date:

“On the one hand, there are the submissions that acknowledge that there is a place for systematic synthetic phonics but say that it should be within a package of measures or tools to allow teachers to apply what they consider to be the most suitable approach for an individual pupil. The other argument, which has been presented by the petitioner and supporters, is that because of the limitations and “little official guidance” in the curriculum for excellence and the primary 1 literacy assessment and action resource, teachers are hindered in being able to fully consider the most appropriate approach for pupils.”
8. The Public Petitions Committee also considered a [submission](#) from the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (“the Cabinet Secretary”) at its meeting on 15 March 2018. In his submission, the Cabinet Secretary confirmed that he had invited Education Scotland to develop a self-evaluation framework to support universities providing initial teacher education to evaluate their work. The Public Petitions Committee therefore agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary to seek an update on the self-evaluation network.
9. On 24 May 2018, the Public Petitions Committee considered the Cabinet Secretary’s [response](#) and agreed to wait for the publication of the self-evaluation framework for initial teacher education, and then seek the petitioner’s view on whether it addresses the concerns raised in her petition and subsequent correspondence. The [framework](#) was published in December 2018, after which the petitioner made a [further submission](#) setting out her views on the framework. The [Cabinet Secretary](#) then provided a response in June 2019 setting out his response to the petitioner’s further submission. These submissions were considered by the Public Petitions Committee on 27 June 2019, when it agreed to refer the petition to this Committee.
10. In agreeing to refer the petition to this Committee, the Public Petitions Committee considered that it may aid this Committee in any future work it undertakes in this area, such as the extent to which initial teacher education provides training on how to teach reading.
11. The petitioner and Dr Sarah McGeown have provided further submissions for consideration by the Education and Skills Committee. These are in [Annex C](#) and [Annexe D](#) of this paper. Anne Glennie’s submission, which was originally addressed to the Public Petitions Committee, comments on a response from the Deputy First Minister dated 17 June 2019. Dr McGeown’s submission responds to various points in the petition which have been challenged during its consideration to date.

**Options for action**

12. In the first instance, the Committee could write to Education Scotland to ask for an explanation of what work it does to evaluate the delivery of initial teacher education in relation to developing teachers' knowledge in reading instruction.
13. In 2017, the Committee held an inquiry into [teacher workforce planning](#), part of which focused on the content of initial teacher education (the relevant recommendations of which are included at [Annexe B](#)). The Committee has periodically returned to previous work to consider whether progress has been made since it last considered the issue, and in the Cabinet Secretary's correspondence with the Public Petitions Committee, it appears that changes have been implemented in a number of areas. It would therefore be possible to keep the petition open to include this issue in any future work which revisits this inquiry. Other options available to the Committee are listed in [Annexe A](#).

Gary Cocker  
Assistant Clerk to the Committee  
October 2019

**Annexe A***Options available to Committees considering petitions*

Once a petition has been referred to a subject Committee it is for the Committee to decide how, or if, it wishes to take the petition forward. Among options open to the Committee are to:

- Keep the petition open and write to the Scottish Government or other stakeholders seeking their views on what the petition is calling for, or views on further information to have emerged over the course of considering the petition;
- Keep the petition open and take oral evidence from the petitioner, from relevant stakeholders or from the Scottish Government;
- Keep the petition open and await the outcome of a specific piece of work, such as a consultation or piece of legislation before deciding what to do next;
- Close the petition on the grounds that the Scottish Government has made its position clear, or that the Scottish Government has made some or all of the changes requested by the petition, or that the Committee, after due consideration, has decided it does not support the petition;
- Close the petition on the grounds that a current consultation, call for evidence or inquiry gives the petitioner the opportunity to contribute to the policy process.

When closing a petition, the Committee should write to the petitioner notifying the decision and setting out its grounds for closure. Closing a petition does not preclude the Committee taking forward matters relevant or partly relevant to the petition in another way.

**Annexe B****Relevant recommendations from the Committee's report, "Teacher Workforce Planning for Scotland's Schools", published 2017**

The following are recommendations from the [Recruitment and Initial Teacher Education \(ITE\) section](#) of the Committee's report which are relevant to the petition under consideration.

16. Having teachers that understand, and are able to teach, the core skills of literacy and numeracy to children in their formative years is an absolutely fundamental requirement in improving attainment in literacy and numeracy. The Committee notes the evidence from teacher training institutions explaining the complexities of ITE course content and that counting hours is too simplistic as a stand-alone approach to assessing ITE. The Committee is concerned that the baseline of quality in relation to course content, and student ability, may be lacking in some instances.

17. The Committee welcomes the Government's acknowledgement of the issues raised in evidence. The Committee recommends that the actions to be undertaken in response include an investigation into the extent of the problems raised in relation to literacy and numeracy. This should include assessing baseline standards on all courses for student primary teachers. It should also include an assessment of the entry requirements for these courses and the standards achieved on qualification. The Committee notes that certain issues, including in relation to primary school courses and student entry levels, have been raised previously by the 2011 Donaldson Report and the 2016 STEMEC Report.

18. The Committee recommends that the cycle of revisiting existing courses to renew accreditation should be shorter to ensure course content is responsive to the changing needs of Scottish education. The Committee recommends that the Government considers the benefits of making one organisation responsible for the accreditation of ITE courses and the assessment of the delivery of these courses.

19. The Committee welcomes the evidence received from student teachers highlighting the variation across different teacher training institutions and placements regarding training on supporting pupils with additional support needs, including that education on additional support needs is not guaranteed in some courses, which has left some student teachers unprepared to support those pupils with additional needs.

20. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with the GTCS to address the inconsistency in additional support needs education during Initial Teacher Education, with the aim of ensuring that all teachers receive high quality baseline training which prepares them to assist pupils with a range of additional needs, regardless of which institution and course they receive their initial teacher education in.

## Annexe C

Anne Glennie

## Petition:PE01668

Submission from Anne Glennie to the Petitions Committee 19<sup>th</sup> June 2019

I am writing to the committee in response to the Deputy First Minister's latest submission (17<sup>th</sup> June 2019).

I agree entirely that '*phonics is only one part of learning to read*' – I have never claimed otherwise and neither do proponents of phonics. *Phonics instruction should absolutely take place within a 'rich literacy environment'* and a successful literacy strategy should include all 'Five Pillars of Literacy': **phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension** – as well as reading for pleasure.

The problem we currently have in Scotland is that teachers are not equipped with the required knowledge to deliver all five elements effectively. Crucially, the one that is lacking is phonics – hence the focus of the petition on this aspect. We know from our own surveys (*Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach, 2014* and *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach, 2017*) and from the Education and Skills Committee, that there are serious gaps in teachers' knowledge in beginning reading instruction. In some universities, this is actively withheld, with outdated methodology still being promoted.

How can teachers '*match teaching to children's needs in phonics*' when they don't know how to assess phonic knowledge, blending skills, or teach the alphabetic code? With the correct knowledge and support, phonics training can provide an easy way to assess children and provide appropriate and timely intervention. (In addition, the phonics check, currently used in England and in some Australian states, could act as a screener for dyslexia, and be a much more appropriate and relevant assessment than the P1 SNSAs. It is light-touch, low-stakes check that doesn't require a computer, takes 5-6 minutes per child, provides robust data that can be compared year on year – and it's free.)

The Deputy First Minister draws attention to the report *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert (Castles, et al, 2018)*<sup>2</sup> which he states '*promotes the need for an agenda for instruction and research in reading acquisition that is balanced, developmentally informed, and based on deep understanding of how language and writing systems work.*'

Providing teachers with access to the research and training in phonics, will ensure that teachers have the deep and necessary understanding of how children learn to read, the alphabetic code and its role in not only reading, but spelling (and therefore writing) too.

The Deputy First Minister also states: '*They argue that evidence is not yet sufficient to conclude that the synthetic phonics approach should be preferred over an analytic approach and that the key ingredient of a successful phonics programme is to ensure phonics instruction is delivered in a systematic way.*'

It is important to know that this paper has an unusual conclusion, that goes against the vast body of research on systematic synthetic phonics. However, regardless of this, it is crucial to highlight that there are no known approved analytic phonics programmes being used by schools in the UK. Analytic phonics is, by its nature, an



eclectic approach and therefore cannot be delivered systematically or be part of a programme of work. Learning to read in English is best served by logical, step-by-step instruction of the alphabetic code to build up knowledge and skills gradually while all previous learning is practised, reinforced and applied in context. Synthetic phonics, theoretically speaking, makes more sense – as teachers have more control over the sequence and speed of letter-sound learning, ensuring instruction is optimal and ‘can be matched’ to children’s needs. Castles et al make reference to this too: ‘On the face of it, synthetic phonics would seem to have some clear advantages: By introducing grapheme-phoneme correspondences individually, it is possible to control the learning environment more effectively and to ensure that each correspondence is taught explicitly and in an optimal sequence’.

**The Deputy First Minister does not seem to realise or appreciate that teachers are not receiving the account of reading acquisition that is shared in the Castles et al paper – the whole point of this petition.**

(Incidentally, the first longitudinal research study that proved the efficacy of systematic synthetic phonics over analytic phonics was carried out in Clackmannanshire. This research is internationally renowned, but sadly ignored here in Scotland.)

I would also like to point out, in a further ironic twist, that **Professor Kathy Rastle, one of the co-authors of the paper *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert* highlighted by the Deputy First Minister, has actually signed this very petition and supports its aims.**

Professor Kathy Rastle was also interviewed for an article in the GTCS magazine<sup>3</sup>, after the paper’s publication, which acknowledges the problems that this petition is describing and suggests a solution:

**‘What is highlighted by both Dr McGeown and Professor Rastle is the wide gap that exists between the state of research knowledge about learning to read, and educational policy and practice.**

**In Professor Rastle’s view, the first step to reduce that gap is “to acknowledge and begin to treat learning to read as a scientific problem – it’s not a political issue and it’s not an issue about educational philosophy.”**

**“In the paper we distil what we believe are the most important findings from the last 100 years of reading research. We tried to go from the earliest foundation of alphabetic skills all the way through to comprehension and offer ideas in each section for how the science can be translated into practice.”**

**“I think the most important thing that a primary school teacher could do is to implement rigorous systematic phonics in their classrooms. And that doesn’t mean phonics with a bit of guessing or pictures, it means proper systematic phonics.**

**Teachers should also insist on a phonics screen to test the effectiveness of that practice,” says Professor Rastle. Professor Rastle does stress however that there’s much more to reading beyond phonics. “Every reading researcher**

**would agree with that,” she says, “and we talk in our paper about some of the ways that these other aspects of reading, and the science behind those, could be translated to the classroom.”**

**Sometimes referred to as “the great equaliser”, both Dr McGeown and Professor Rastle stressed that, if implemented at an early stage, phonics has the ability to put children on a more level playing field, helping to reduce the Matthew Effect which sees the attainment gap widen over time.”**

I note the developments described by the Deputy First Minister with regards to ITE, Career Long Professional Learning and the work of The Strategic Board for Teacher Education.

*The Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQuITE)* study is being carried out over six years and is focussing on quality of the university experience, consistency between the university programmes, policy add-ons to ITE programmes, placement patterns, effective practice for partnerships and quality of support from mentors. While these developments are welcome, **their wide-ranging remit do not include reading, research, phonics or literacy specifically and therefore will not address the concerns of this petition.**

I believe there needs to be an urgent and specific review of ITE provision with regards to literacy and beginning reading instruction. In the meantime, there needs to be new, clear, comprehensive and accessible national guidance to support schools and teachers, who do not always have the luxury of time to find, explore, or immerse themselves in reading current research and consider the implications for classroom practice.

By providing teachers with access to the research and scientifically proven methods for teaching reading, there is the potential to close gaps, teach dyslexic children to read and spell, improve our literacy rates and outcomes, and increase access to the curriculum for all. **Choosing instructional approaches that are evidence-based and effective is the single greatest thing that can be done for disadvantaged children in Scotland and their education.**

Our teachers, and our children, are being left behind. We cannot hide behind cherry-picked quotes and circuitous non-arguments. This is a matter of national concern and it is too important to be left up to individual teachers and schools, especially when, through no fault of their own, they are woefully unaware of the research, the science and the practical implications of teaching the alphabetic code in the classroom. Scottish education has **systemic deficiencies** in how children are taught to read; solutions must be system-wide – not merely an optional extra for individual schools.

A child learns to read once in their life – **we now have robust evidence through scientific enquiry that means we know exactly what to do to ensure that we get this right for every child.** With the challenge of the attainment gap, there has never been a more important time to act. Every child in Scotland has a right to be taught how to read. **All children, including those with reading difficulties and dyslexia, should be taught using the most up-to-date scientifically proven methodologies – failure to do so amounts to professional negligence** and I believe that parents will begin to resort to legal action to hold schools and authorities to account, as has been the case in other countries.

I implore the committee to seek out and listen to the real experts and researchers in this matter, such as Dr Sarah McGeown, Professor Kathy Rastle, and those listed below.

cc public domain

***This submission is supported by the following international colleagues, researchers, and academics working in the field of reading instruction in English:***

Dr Jennifer Buckingham (Australia)

Professor James Chapman, Institute of Education, Massey University (New Zealand)

Dr Molly de Lemos AM, BSc (Hons), MSc (Natal), PhD (ANU), MAPsS (Australia)

Nancy Duggan, M.S.C., Executive Director, Decoding Dyslexia MA (USA)

Dr Steven Dykstra (USA)

Margie B. Gillis, Ed.D. (USA)

Susan Godsland, dyslexics.org (UK)

Dr Kerry Hempenstall, Senior Industry Fellow, School of Education, RMIT University (Australia)

Debbie Hepplewhite, MBE, FRSA (UK)

Dr Sarah McGeown, Moray House School of Education, Edinburgh University (UK)

Dianne Murphy, Thinking Reading (UK)

James Murphy, Thinking Reading (UK)

Sir Jim Rose, CBE, FRSA - Doctor of Laws - Formerly Her Majesty's Inspector and Director of Inspection for the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) (England)

Dr Linda Siegel (Canada)

Professor Pamela Snow, PhD, FSPA, MAPS (Australia)

Michael Stark, Director and Trustee, Educators International (UK)

Abigail Steel, BA Hons, PTE, LLB (UK)

Laura Stewart (USA)

The Right Honourable Robert W. Sweet, Jr (USA)

Distinguished Professor Emeritus William E. Tunmer, PhD, Massey University (New Zealand)

Grace Vilar (South America)

Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM (Australia)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/Pages/nrp.aspx/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100618772271>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/News/teaching-scotland/76-the-science-of-reading.aspx>

## Annexe D

**Dr Sarah McGeown**

**PE01668: Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction**

**Petition summary:** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to i) provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; ii) ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

We would like to thank the Education and Skills Committee for considering this petition and have outlined key points for the committee below.

1. This petition aligns with two key priorities of the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (2019) (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/2019-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/>), namely:

- Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.

A recent comprehensive review of research informed reading instruction (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018) highlights the importance of systematic phonics instruction to optimally develop word reading skills among young learners. Furthermore, studies comparing systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) with more eclectic reading approaches find both short- and long-term gains in reading, spelling and reading comprehension for children taught by SSP (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, 2012; McGeown, Johnston & Medford, 2012). Children taught by SSP also rely less heavily on their language skills when reading new words (McGeown, et al, 2012; McGeown & Medford, 2013), therefore it is particularly beneficial for children who start school with weak vocabulary skills, typically those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). This petition therefore has the potential to achieve current education priorities.

2. Initial teacher education in Scotland does not sufficiently prepare student teachers to teach children to read using research-informed reading instruction, nor do professional learning courses for teachers already in the profession.

There is evidence that many (~20%) of probationer teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach literacy: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/gathering-views-probationer-teachers-readiness-teach/pages/8/>. Anecdotally, both Glennie and McGeown have also spoken to many Scottish teachers who did feel confident teaching children to read, until they learnt about systematic synthetic phonics, and realised that their reading approaches were not research-informed. For example, one teacher recalled teaching the word 'Floppy' by telling the children that the two p's were the dog's ears and the y was its tail. We recognise that this example is not representative of typical practices but provide it as this was a teacher who said she felt confident teaching children to read. We would like to highlight therefore that although approximately 80% of probationer teachers may

feel confident, they are not necessarily using research-informed practices.

3. This petition has been challenged and we'd like to respond to the main challenges here:

- This petition is not about introducing a prescriptive approach to the teaching of reading. This petition is about empowering teachers and creating a research-informed profession. Training teachers in research-informed reading instruction (including systematic synthetic phonics) will not remove teacher autonomy/professional independence – teachers will still need to make many decisions about early reading instruction based on the contexts in which they teach.
- We are not endorsing systematic synthetic phonics at the expense of reading for pleasure or developing children's language skills. Quite the opposite – becoming an independent and confident word reader provides a strong basis for developing language skills and a love of reading. For example, recent research shows that a child's reading skill determines how much they choose to read, rather than vice versa (van Bergen, Snowling, de Zeeuw & van Beijsterveldt, 2018). It is therefore essential to develop early reading skills, as children who read more develop their language, reading, spelling and academic abilities (Mol & Bus, 2011) and children with better reading skills report greater reading enjoyment (Clark, 2019).

We would encourage the committee to take this petition seriously and we are very happy to engage in further discussion about it. With this petition, there is the potential to achieve current education priorities and, more importantly, have a genuinely positive impact on the literacy skills of children living in Scotland. We know that teachers lack knowledge and expertise in this area. We have a responsibility to create a teaching profession which is research-informed, to ensure children have the best possible opportunity to become confident and successful readers.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Sarah McGeown

Senior Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh.

References:

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