

## PE1668/B

Dr Sarah McGeown submission of 18 July 2017

I am writing in support of the petition: **Improving literacy standards in schools through research informed reading instruction (PE01668)**. This petition requests: i) national guidance, support and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics instruction; ii) to ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

I am writing this letter from the perspective of a researcher and teacher educator. I have been carrying out research into children's reading development for over twelve years and have extensive research knowledge on this topic. To date, I have co-authored 20 articles in peer-reviewed journals, two books and two book chapters in this area. I have also worked extensively with teachers across Scotland to support children's literacy attainment (see <http://www.readresearch.ed.ac.uk> for a recent collaborative project) and provide research-informed professional learning sessions for teachers. Much of my research into children's reading has focused on their early reading acquisition and development, specifically the effectiveness of different types of phonics instruction.

As the Scottish Government's Research Strategy for Scottish Education highlights: i) improving literacy attainment and ii) closing the poverty-related attainment gap, as priority areas, the petition written by Anne Glennie is very timely and action should be taken as a result of it, to ensure Scotland takes a research informed approach to the teaching of literacy. Indeed, the Scottish Government have recently made clear their commitment to use research to inform practice, in order to improve equity and attainment in Scottish education.

In this letter, I will not reiterate details of the evidence base for phonics instruction. In the petition written by Anne Glennie, reference is made to several very credible international inquiries in English speaking countries (UK, US and Australia) into the teaching of early reading. All inquiries highlight the advantages of systematic phonics instruction for beginning readers. In the UK inquiry, the use of a synthetic phonics, rather than analytic phonics approach to teaching is recommended (see glossary at end for description of terms used). It is beyond the scope of this letter to provide details of the subtleties and complexities in terms of how phonics programmes can vary, and even how systematic synthetic phonics programmes can vary (e.g., see Shapiro & Solity, 2015); however, I'd be happy to provide further information if requested. In addition to these international inquiries, there is Hattie's (2009) synthesis of meta-analyses focusing on different types of reading instruction, which provides compelling evidence for the benefits of phonics instruction.

In this letter, I will briefly share some of my own research findings, to demonstrate why I have a particular perspective on this topic and how this research could inform the Scottish Government's current priorities within education. With regard to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, research suggests a 13-month gap in vocabulary skills between children from more and less affluent backgrounds at the start of school (Sosu & Ellis, 2014), therefore identifying the most effective approach to teach reading to children starting school with weak language skills is essential. My

research has shown that systematic synthetic phonics is particularly beneficial for children starting school with weak vocabulary skills (McGeown, Johnston & Medford, 2012, McGeown & Medford, 2013), as children's vocabularies do not predict their early word reading success to the same extent as when they are taught with a more eclectic approach.

In addition, in terms of raising literacy attainment in general, my research has shown that systematic synthetic phonics leads to statistically significant early gains in letter-sound knowledge, phoneme awareness and word reading when compared to an eclectic approach (McGeown, et al., 2012). Furthermore, we have found that at age 10, children who have been taught by systematic synthetic phonics have significantly better word reading, spelling and reading comprehension than those who have been taught using a more eclectic approach (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, 2012).

Those who oppose phonics instruction often argue that it undermines children's ability and opportunity to read for pleasure. However, it is only children who are independent and confident readers who will be able to read for pleasure. Indeed, better readers report higher levels of reading motivation and greater time spent engaging in reading activities (McGeown, Norgate & Warhurst, 2012; McGeown, Duncan et al., 2015).

My position on phonics is based on the research I have conducted and the extensive research base which supports this approach. However, while I advocate systematic synthetic phonics as the dominant approach to teach (the majority of) children how to read words, I also believe very strongly that phonics needs to be embedded within a wider curriculum, which supports the development of oral language skills (i.e., to develop vocabulary breadth and depth) and promotes a joy of books, stories and reading. Synthetic phonics provides children with a self-teaching mechanism to read new and unfamiliar words. It can, and should be, an enjoyable element of children's early reading instruction (McGeown, Johnston et al., 2015). However, phonics only serves the function of developing word reading skills efficiently and effectively, it cannot teach children the meaning of words, therefore significant attention also needs to be given to developing broader language skills.

The petition by Anne Glennie requests greater support and professional learning for teachers in systematic synthetic phonics and ensuring teacher training institutions train new teachers in systematic synthetic phonics instruction. I agree with this wholeheartedly. I'd also add however that we should be careful not to introduce a prescriptive approach to the teaching of early reading as this would undermine teacher's professional judgement and may not ultimately lead to optimal literacy outcomes. In Scotland, we should be proud of, and maintain, teacher autonomy. However, by providing teachers with professional independence, we also need to be confident that they are the beneficiaries of the high quality research that is available to inform their teaching. For example, there are different ways to implement systematic synthetic phonics and individual teachers will be best placed to identify the speed and approach that will best suit their students' abilities and needs. This type of nuanced understanding can only be achieved with high quality training and professional learning for teachers.

I would urge the Scottish Government to take this petition forward and request evidence from researchers who have carried out research in schools examining the

effectiveness of phonics instruction, in addition to teachers with classroom experience of delivering phonics. I genuinely believe that a more collaborative approach among policy makers, researchers and teachers is what is needed to achieve the Scottish Government's mission of achieving greater levels of equity and attainment in literacy. I am available to provide more information on this topic, if requested, and could also provide details of other active researchers in this area.

### **Terms:**

Systematic phonics instruction: Teaching letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequential fashion.

Synthetic phonics: Blending (synthesising) letter-sound correspondences to read unfamiliar words (e.g., /c//a//t/ = cat)

Analytic phonics: Segmenting (analysing) words to split them into their consistent letter-sound correspondences (e.g., cat = /c//a//t/).

Eclectic approach: An approach that teaches children a variety of strategies to read new words (e.g., whole word teaching, use of context, phonics (analytic)).

### **References**

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