

PE1668/H

Petitioner submission of 11 January 2018

While Mr Swinney may believe that Curriculum for Excellence is non-prescriptive, it does in fact promote mixed methods with its inclusion of sight words, letter names, context clues and multi-cueing – all of which have been shown through research to be detrimental to beginning readers. Currently, there is very little national guidance available to teachers in Scotland about beginning reading instruction. Rather than being led by research, teachers rely instead on commercial resources such as reading schemes and books. Simply repeating that **teachers are empowered** does not make it so. Teachers may have professional freedom to choose their methods, but they can only be truly empowered if they have the necessary knowledge of reading pedagogy, awareness of current reading research, an understanding of how children learn to read, and suitable resources to help them take this forward in the classroom. Without this knowledge, it is impossible for teachers to evaluate resources or tailor teaching effectively to suit classes or individuals.

A curricular approach should support teachers and children with the information they require. To prioritise the philosophy of a curriculum and teachers' professionalism over children's progress, indicates clear confusion on the part of the Deputy First Minister of the purpose of schooling in the first place. Society relies on us, parents rely on us, and indeed expect us, to teach their children to read. We are failing in this fundamental duty.

I would like to re-iterate that the petition does not call for a change to Curriculum for Excellence, nor does it ask for phonics to be prescribed as the only approach, or for it to be made mandatory. I simply want this essential information to be included in ITE and made available to all teachers.

Where reading is concerned, children do not *'learn in different and unique ways'*. The infamous learning styles theory, where children are either visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners has been completely debunked. Reading scientists are very clear that the structures of the brain used for reading are the same for everyone. Several research studies even show the changes that different teaching methods have on the brain and illustrate the clear advantages that teaching through phonics provides¹ (Yoncheva, Wise & McCandliss, 2015).

While it is true that children may have different learning capacities, regardless of those individualities, **all beginner readers have to come to terms with the same alphabetic principles if they are to learn to read and write – this is the foundation of the English language.**

Teachers can only *'take research-informed approaches and tailor them to the needs of individual learners'*, that Mr Swinney describes, if they have the knowledge and information in the first place. **Teachers in Scotland do not have the detailed subject knowledge of reading pedagogy that they require to teach, assess and help children overcome reading difficulties – simply because it has rarely been part of teacher education. It is now the case where we have universities in Scotland that that are producing leading-edge research on the science of**

reading – but this information is deliberately withheld from students by the schools of education.

Mr Swinney states, *‘teaching phonics is an important part of learning to read, but that it is only one part of the approach to learning to read’*. **All phonics advocates would agree that phonics is an essential part of learning to read, but also recognise that it is insufficient on its own.** Phonics advocates support the *Simple View of Reading* which present both aspects of reading: Decoding: *What are the words?* (Can a child read, decode them or ‘get them off the page’?) and Comprehension: *What do the words mean?* To understand the words, you first need to be able to read them – phonics is used to decode the words so that children, regardless of their previous experience, home background or personal learning profile, can learn to read independently and with confidence. **Good decoding is a prerequisite of good comprehending.** It is imperative that systematic synthetic phonics is taught within a broad and language-rich curriculum, supported by high quality literature, listening and talking and work on vocabulary and comprehension. No phonics advocate has ever promoted ‘phonics only’ and to imagine that they do illustrates the deep misunderstanding of phonics within the profession and its misrepresentation by academics and others.

I would also agree with the point that *‘it is more effective to match phonics teaching to the needs of individual children’*. But crucially, teachers can only do this if they know about phonics in the first place. It has been shown both in the Review of the *Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach*² (Christie, Robertson & Stodter, 2014) and in the recent *Gathering views on probationer teachers’ readiness to teach*³ (Scottish Government, 2017) that teachers are not being trained in beginning reading pedagogy or phonics at all; therefore, they lack the deep knowledge required to tailor teaching to individual children.

Mr Swinney states that *‘there is debate among academics as to whether the synthetic phonics method is better than other methods. Indeed, I understand that Prof Sue Ellis and Dr Terry Wrigley have expressed reservations about the petition.’*

It is crucial to note that Professor Sue Ellis is not an impartial advisor in this debate. Prof Ellis is widely recognised as an SSP opponent and a critic of the internationally-renowned Clackmannanshire research⁴ (Ellis & Moss, 2013). Prof Ellis has published many papers, articles and comments throughout her career, which undermine and underplay the importance and significance of phonics in beginning reading instruction. Prof Ellis is a whole-language advocate and continues to train both student teachers, and currently serving teachers, in out-dated methodologies such as running records, miscue analysis and multi-cueing.

In February 2016, Education Scotland published a short ‘reading briefing’ paper for teachers⁵. It was only six pages long, but it was a positive step in the right direction and gave a clear steer to teachers and schools. This paper finally acknowledged the importance of phonics, particularly for disadvantaged children. However, Prof Sue Ellis did not agree with the content of this briefing. It was re-written in April 2016 to present a whole-language view of teaching reading. **All references to phonics being an important first step for disadvantaged children were removed.** The

new document⁶ cites instead Professor Sue Ellis's own research and thanks her at the end of the document for her contribution.

When seeking advice on national literacy policy it would be normal to consider robust research alongside a range of views, instead of relying on a couple of individuals. Scotland is a small country, educationally speaking, and certain high-profile academics appear to have considerable power and undue influence over Education Scotland's output and over the Deputy First Minister himself. This is an issue I have been concerned about for some time but did not feel it was professional to name individuals. I implore the committee, and the Deputy First Minister, to listen to and consider the views of academics and specialists working in the field of reading research, rather than education, on this fundamental matter.

Considering Scotland's steep decline in reading attainment, it is clear that, whatever approaches schools are currently using, they are not working. We have had over forty years of freedom to choose our reading methods, forty years of professionalism and empowerment and forty years of mixed methods (whole-language and phonics). Reading research and practice has moved on. Other countries are adapting their practice accordingly, but we have chosen to leave schools and teachers to their own devices. By doing this, we continue to fail our children, particularly those that are living in the attainment gap, and we continue to leave their academic futures to chance.

To dismiss current international research and evidence, to deliberately withhold this most essential information from practising teachers, and to deny effective instruction to thousands of beginning or struggling readers – because of ideology, arrogance or allegiance to a failing curriculum, is both a tragedy for the children involved and a national scandal for those in positions of power. I hope that one day it is exposed as such.

References:

1. *Hemispheric specialization for visual words is shaped by attention to sublexical units during initial learning* (Yoncheva, Wise & McCandliss, 2015)
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0093934X15000772>
2. *Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach* (Christie, Robertson & Stodter, 2014)
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/resource/0044/00449063.pdf>
3. *Gathering views on probationer teachers' readiness to teach* (Scottish Government, 2017)
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/12/2065/8>
4. *Ethics, education policy and research: the phonics question reconsidered* (Ellis & Moss, 2013)
<https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/42995/>
5. *A Knowledge Into Action resource for practitioners and education staff Briefing 2: Early Reading* (Education Scotland, February 2016)
http://www.thelearningzoo.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/KIABriefing2_tcm4-873016.pdf
6. *A Knowledge Into Action resource for practitioners and education staff Briefing 2: Early Reading* (Education Scotland & Ellis, April 2016)
<http://www.thelearningzoo.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/KIABriefing2new.pdf>