

# Petitioner submission of 12 December 2023

## PE2037/E: 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](#) (22.11.2023) and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) letter referred to in the Cabinet Secretary's submission regarding the teaching of reading in Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

In their response, the SCDE state that it is important that teachers are taught *“the principles of systematic synthetic phonics instruction, rather than the specifics of one programme.”*

I agree with this statement. It is a total misrepresentation to suggest that I am requesting that one programme should be used. I am advocating for an entirely generic approach based on published research rather than programmes or commercial resources. This content should include the principles of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) and the complexities of the English alphabetic code, and how best to teach it to all learners (including and especially those who struggle with reading and dyslexia) for reading and spelling. In addition, evidence-based principles of how the brain learns to read should also be covered. Collectively, this is known internationally as ‘the science of reading’.

*“On ITE programmes across Scotland, student teachers are taught about systematic synthetic phonics within a broader understanding of the development and teaching of reading”*

More detail is required about what exactly is being taught to pre-service teachers. Do all ITE programmes cover this content? Is systematic synthetic phonics presented as the *only* approach to developing word reading skills? Or is it merely included as one of a number of approaches?

While the SCDE response maintains that SSP is covered in ITE, it is clear not all academics agree with this assertion. In the Sunday Post (26.11.2023) a University of Glasgow academic was quoted as saying:

*“Many educators face challenges in addressing the specific needs of struggling readers, primarily due to a lack of access to research-*

*informed reading instruction methods. It's crucial, therefore, that we provide teachers with comprehensive professional development in these areas, equipping them with both the knowledge and tools to effectively support every student's reading journey."*

This academic, along with another from the University of Dundee, is carrying out research to evaluate current literacy teaching practices in Scottish classrooms in order to "*pinpoint both the strengths and weaknesses in how reading instruction is delivered*". This is clearly at odds with the SCDE's position.

I have serious concerns with the SCDE's statement. Some of the details highlight that the knowledge being shared with pre-service teachers is incompatible with SSP and the science of reading. The letter states that ITE covers:

"active learning within play pedagogy (eg games which provide opportunities to practise fluency with sight words)"

One of the greatest issues I face when training teachers in research-informed reading instruction is their lack of knowledge on how to teach children to read, but also what this looks like in the classroom.

Unfortunately, instead of core practice, many teachers (through no fault of their own) have no idea how to structure a reading lesson and instead focus on 'play pedagogy' involving simple games and activities. While most of these activities are fun and appropriate as enrichment, they focus almost exclusively on word level work (as opposed to sentence or text level work which is fundamental for fluency) and do not provide adequate opportunities to practise the skills of blending for reading or segmenting for spelling, supported by handwriting.

In addition, sight words have been found to be particularly problematic in the teaching of reading as they encourage children to memorise words as if they are visual wholes. Indeed, neuroscience findings show that if we teach sight words, we are actively programming the wrong part of the brain. (Dehaene, 2013 and McCandliss et al, 2015).

The fact that this sort of poor practice, coupled with reading methods that contradict how the brain best learns to read, illustrates a worrying lack of knowledge around SSP in general and in the science of reading in particular.

As ITE programmes around the world change their content to align with the science of reading, it appears that in ITE in Scotland is either

unaware of these developments, or worse still, is choosing to resist the research findings.

I urge the Committee to investigate this thoroughly and to seek views from 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.

## References

Lawson, E. and Wright, M., '*Call for change in literacy teaching as study shows one in three kids struggle*', The Sunday Post, 26 November 2023.

Dehaene S., '[\*Inside the letterbox: how literacy transforms the human brain\*](#)', Cerebrum, 3 June 2013.

Yoncheva YN, Wise J, McCandliss B., '[\*Hemispheric specialization for visual words is shaped by attention to sublexical units during initial learning\*](#)'. Brain Lang, 2015.