

PE2037/F: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

Petitioner written submission, 12 June 2024

Since my last submission to the committee, there have been several significant international developments around reading reform.

This week, [the state government in Victoria, Australia announced that from 2025 all students from Prep to Grade 2 \(P1-P3\) will be taught using a systematic synthetic phonics approach](#) saying

“The weight of evidence at home and abroad has become clear and compelling – with studies from the United States, United Kingdom and across Australia now recommending systematic synthetic phonics as the most effective method to teach children to read.”

“The evidence shows that explicit teaching and the use of systemic synthetic phonics instructions gets results – while we already lead the nation in NAPLAN results, we’re always looking to improve, especially in relation to lifting outcomes for disadvantaged students.”

“We want to ensure that every student in a Victorian government school is taught to read using the evidence-base that fosters the strongest outcomes.”

In May, New Zealand’s Education Minister, Erica Stanford announced that its long-standing intervention programme, Reading Recovery, would be scrapped. Instead, [from next year the government is making it mandatory for schools to use a structured literacy approach](#) that aligns with the research, based on phonics, decoding, and comprehension.

It is difficult to convey the enormity of this decision. Reading Recovery was founded in New Zealand in the 1970s by Marie Clay and has been successfully promoted and used in schools and classrooms around the world ever since. But it is now considered pedagogically flawed because of its reliance on multi-cueing (looking at pictures, the shape of words, the first/last letter) rather than sounding words out through phonics. [Recent research also showed that ‘students who participated in Reading Recovery did worse in later grades than similar students who did not get the program’.](#)

Why is this relevant for Scotland? Reading Recovery and Reading Recovery clones (reading programmes or interventions that are based on the same flawed concepts) are actively recommended in Scotland by the GTCS, academics teaching in ITE, the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) and local authority advisors. Many schools and authorities have invested significant sums of money in this programme. Ironically, even Dyslexia Scotland promotes Reading Recovery. In addition, Scotland’s most widely used ‘phonics’ programme, Active Literacy, is also based on the same flawed concepts around reading.

In May, [Dr Jennifer Buckingham published a report: 'An investigation of literacy instruction and policy in the United Kingdom and Ireland'](#) which explores the reasons for the great variability in literacy rates and policy. It is a comprehensive, thorough, and balanced report, containing potential lessons for all countries seeking to improve attainment in reading.

Dr Buckingham engaged with a wide variety of stakeholders in Scotland during her visit to the UK, including Education Scotland. Interestingly, they admitted that there is indeed a problem with teacher knowledge when it comes to reading:

“Through their work with schools and local authorities, Education Scotland has found that newly qualified teachers do not necessarily feel well-prepared to teach reading and are sometimes dependent on schools for their development as a reading teacher.”

Dr Buckingham describes how Scotland ended up in this position, despite being internationally renowned for the Clackmannanshire research into synthetic phonics and its “pivotal role” which led to reading reform “elsewhere in the world, and especially England.”

“This is not what happened in Scotland, partly due to the decentralisation of education decisions to local authorities and partly due to vocal opposition to both synthetic phonics instruction and prescriptive policies.”

“...there was also strong and vocal opposition to SSP from influential education academics, including Ellis (Buie, 2005).”

“These views are still widely held, leading to a proliferation of approaches to reading instruction of variable effectiveness.”

Dr Buckingham also reviewed Curriculum for Excellence’s position on reading instruction:

“Although all the documents emphasise the importance of literacy for education and as a life skill, and indeed as an entitlement for all children and young people, the documents do not provide any information from research literature on how children learn to read and the most effective ways to teach them.”

“The ‘refreshed’ practice guidance for the early years published more recently does not provide information on effective teaching strategies from the extensive scientific research evidence on language and literacy (Education Scotland, 2020).”

In addition, Dr Buckingham highlighted concerns around interventions and advice for teachers on dyslexia, noting that:

“The Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit contains a mix of evidence-based and non-evidence recommendations (e.g., Reading Recovery).”

Interestingly, Dr Buckingham also noted discrepancies in The Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education report (which I highlighted to the Committee in a previous submission.)

Providing a summary of views on how reading is taught in ITE in Scotland, Dr Buckingham states:

“Teacher education was widely perceived as not providing graduate teachers with knowledge about the scientific research evidence on reading and the skills and strategies to use evidence-based teaching methods. This was the view of people in schools and in universities. Like the Curriculum for Excellence, there is an emphasis on teacher autonomy, play-based and cross-curricular learning, and reading for pleasure.”

I first highlighted these issues to the committee over seven years ago. This matters for all children but especially for those with dyslexia or for children who struggle with reading as they are not getting the help they need. It is possible to teach 95%+ of children to read to in line with age-related expectations, if we follow the science.

Every child has the right to be taught to read in the most effective, up to date way. Yet this is still being left up to individual schools, teachers, or local authorities to decide what is best. But without access to the latest information and international developments in research and practice, they simply cannot make informed decisions. They don't know what they don't know, and reading is left to chance.

Reading is arguably the single most important skill that children learn at school—it impacts life chances, opportunities, self-esteem, and mental wellbeing. As other English-speaking countries around the world ensure reading instruction is aligned with the science, you have an opportunity to take action, to provide vision and leadership, by doing the same for Scotland. Please don't leave our children behind.