

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 26 June 2024  
12th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

## PE2037: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Anne Glennie

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;
- ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2037>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 25 October 2023.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the General Teaching Council for Scotland.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.
4. [The Committee had received two written submissions prior to its last consideration of the petition.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 11 August 2023.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 640 signatures have been received on this petition.

### Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

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**Clerks to the Committee  
June 2024**

## Annexe A: Summary of petition

### PE2037: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

#### Petitioner

Anne Glennie

#### Date Lodged

29 June 2023

#### Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;
- ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

#### Previous action

I previously lodged [a petition on this issue in June 2017](#), and [gave evidence to the Public Petitions Committee in November 2017](#). The petition was then referred to the Education and Skills Committee. Despite lengthy correspondence with John Swinney MSP (then Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills), the petition was closed in May 2022 on the basis that the Committee had no plans to scrutinise initial training education.

I have met with and written to Alasdair Allan MSP on several occasions and have also been in email contact with Oliver Mundell MSP.

#### Background information

This petition has the potential to improve attainment in literacy and to close the attainment gap.

Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) is an approach to initial reading instruction which explicitly teaches letters and sounds, enabling children to read unfamiliar words by sounding out and blending.

Research shows that children taught by SSP make short and long-term gains in reading, spelling and reading comprehension.

While most schools in Scotland use some form of phonics, the vast majority also use sight words (memorisation of whole words); multi-cueing strategies (where children are taught to look at the pictures, the first or last letters in a word, or to use their knowledge of context/sentence structure to work out/guess unfamiliar words); and old-style levelled reading books (instead of phonically decodable readers).

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This means that the most common type of reading instruction in Scotland is not aligned with the scientific evidence.

Additional background information is available [here](#).

## **Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2037 on 25 October 2023**

**The Convener:** PE2037, which has been lodged by Anne Glennie, is on improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide national guidance, support and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; and to ensure that teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

Members will have noted that the petitioner submitted a similar petition in the previous session of Parliament, which was discussed by our predecessor committee. That petition was referred to the Education and Skills Committee and was subsequently closed by the current Education, Children and Young People Committee on the basis that it had no plans to scrutinise initial training education. Additional details of the previous consideration are included in the SPICe briefing.

The cabinet secretary's response indicates that work is under way by Education Scotland to develop a range of new resources relating to early reading, with part of that work outlining how systemic phonics approaches form one aspect of the overall pedagogy for early reading. The response goes on to state that it is the responsibility of the General Teaching Council for Scotland to ensure that initial teacher education programmes expose student teachers to a range of pedagogies to teach literacy and reading instruction and that it is important that Scottish ministers respect the independence of institutions that provide initial teacher education by not prescribing the detailed content of courses. The cabinet secretary has, however, written to the Scottish Council of Deans of Education requesting an update on the current provision of initial teacher education in relation to teacher skills and confidence to support children's reading in primary schools.

We have also received a submission from the petitioner that welcomes the news that Education Scotland is working on new early reading materials but expresses concern that decoding skills, and specifically information on systematic synthetic phonics, remain absent from current teacher training programmes. The petitioner has also shared details of studies indicating that newly qualified teachers lack confidence and working knowledge to teach reading and phonics.

There are a few tongue twisters in there. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**David Torrance:** Would the committee consider writing to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to ask whether the update from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education has been received and for its contents to be shared with the committee? Could we also write to the General Teaching Council for Scotland to seek its views on the actions called for in the petition, specifically whether it has any plans to update the requirements for initial teacher education programmes?

**The Convener:** Unless colleagues have any other comments or suggestions, are we content to proceed on that basis?

**Members *indicated agreement.***

**The Convener:** We will keep the petition open and seek further information as requested. I thank the petitioner for bringing the petition back to us, which is one of the routes that we, of course, offer to petitioners after due time and consideration.

## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 22 November 2023**

#### **PE2037/C: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction**

Thank you for your letter dated 1 November 2023 requesting a copy of the letter to the Scottish Council of Deans of Education on the current provision of ITE in relation to teacher skills and confidence to support children's reading in primary schools referred to in my submission of 11 August.

Zoè Robertson (Chair, Scottish Council of Deans of Education - SCDE) and [redacted] (SCDE representative for the National Response to Improving Literacy) replied to Scottish Government officials on 13 November. The response (attached for your information<sup>1</sup>) highlights how student teachers across Scotland are taught about systematic synthetic phonics within a broader understanding of the development and teaching of reading. In relation to phonics, the letter confirms that student teachers are taught key concepts and terminology; about different approaches to phonics and reading instruction; debates in the research literature about synthetic phonics, and; the principles underpinning systematic synthetic phonics.

As indicated in their response letter, the Council of Deans is represented on the National Response to Improving Literacy. Officials from Education Scotland and from Scottish Government Directorate for Education Reform will continue to engage with the SCDE via the National Response to Improving Literacy. The engagement with the SCDE will include the vital role that our ITE institutions play in supporting newly qualified primary teachers to develop the core knowledge, skills and confidence that they need in relation to early reading instruction, including phonics.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

**JENNY GILRUTH**

### **General Teaching Council for Scotland submission of 23 November 2023**

#### **PE2037/D: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction**

GTC Scotland welcomes the opportunity to clarify our role in Initial Teacher Education in response to Petition PE2037.

#### **Our role**

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<sup>1</sup> Note from the clerk – a copy of the SCDE response has been provided to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC Scotland) is the teaching profession's independent registration and regulation body. We work in the public interest to enhance trust in teachers by setting, upholding and promoting high standards. Our statutory role and core functions are set out in the [Public Services Reform \(Scotland\) Order 2011](#).

### **Setting standards**

Teaching in Scotland is a profession rooted in academic study in Higher Education Institutions. Teachers who qualify in Scotland must complete a GTC Scotland accredited teaching qualification called an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme and teachers who qualify outside Scotland have their qualifications individually assessed to ensure that they meet our standards.

We set the required design, expected component parts and other features of programmes of ITE which are assessed through an agreed accreditation process. Each programme must ensure the development of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities in educational theory and practice. In doing so, as a profession underpinned by professional standards, each programme must provide the opportunity for individuals to achieve the [Standard for Provisional Registration](#). We also set the minimum entry requirements for applicants to programmes of ITE.

Teaching is complex work in a complex system. Programmes of ITE need to prepare student teachers to become competent, thoughtful, reflective and innovative practitioners, who are committed to providing high quality learning for every learner. ITE introduces student teachers to this complexity, balancing both direct content about specific teaching methodologies with developing critical awareness to develop evidence-informed teaching, and adapt approaches in the interests of specific learners in specific circumstances.

ITE is indeed that – initial teacher education and does not aim to cover every teaching approach in detail. All teachers require access to ongoing high quality education opportunities throughout their career to continue to learn and develop as well as time and space to engage with research and literature to build their knowledge, understanding and skills.

### **Upholding standards**

When a student teacher successfully completes their ITE programme, they will apply for Provisional Registration with GTC Scotland and begin a period of probation, either through the [Flexible Route](#) or the Scottish Government's Teacher Induction Scheme.

This is a supported induction to the profession and is about improving the knowledge, understanding and skills that teachers have already demonstrated to meet the Standard for Provisional Registration to the level required by the Standard for Full Registration.



A teacher must demonstrate that they meet the Standard for Full Registration to gain Full Registration with GTC Scotland.

The Standard for Provisional Registration and the [Standard for Full Registration](#) are mandatory or 'benchmark' professional standards.

To maintain Full Registration with us, teachers must confirm their commitment to professional learning every 5 years through the Professional Update process. Professional Update is the scheme by which GTC Scotland meets our legal obligations to ensure reaccreditation of teachers.

### **Promoting standards**

To regulate well, we promote standards and the benefits of maintaining and enhancing them among teachers. In addition to our mandatory registration standards, we have aspirational standards which support the professional growth of teachers in Scotland.

The [Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning](#) for example, describes the advanced professional knowledge and pedagogical expertise that registered teachers develop as they continue to progress in teaching and the education profession.

### **Insight from our regulatory work**

We analyse the data we gather on the teaching profession to influence public policy development, providing policy makers with relevant evidence to support decision-making in the areas of teacher education and supply.

Over almost a decade of Professional Update we have gathered a consistent theme from teachers: they need time and space to reflect, think about their learning, the impact it has had, plan what to do next and fulfil their plan. They need space to ensure their pedagogy is responsive and to discuss their ethical dilemmas, to develop their professional judgement and therefore to further enhance trust in teaching.

### **The Petition**

This Petition seeks government support to promote research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics as part of ITE as well as further professional learning for teachers.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills' response to the petition clarifies, GTC Scotland has a role in accrediting ITE programmes. This extends to ensuring that student teachers are exposed to a range of pedagogical theories and professional practice.

In addition, while we are responsible for ensuring that registered teachers complete further learning through our Professional Update scheme, we do not prescribe what form it should take. Instead, we require teachers to use the professional standards to structure their ongoing learning and development.

We believe that teachers require time and space for education and learning throughout their career. More needs to be done as a system to build career-long teacher education and learning and to provide the system structures that will better support this. We are advocating for this development, and we are actively working with partners to influence in this area. In our current context of reform, it is our view that it is timely to build a career-long teacher education framework that starts with a deep exploration of how ITE, induction and early career can be further developed, supported and structured.

In the meantime, we are currently in the targeted stakeholder engagement stage of a review of the requirements for entry to ITE programmes, which is focusing specifically on the qualifications that prospective teachers are required to obtain prior to entry. This will be published for public consultation in 2024. Following this phase of work, we will be focusing on refreshing our accreditation process.

We would again take the opportunity to clarify that ITE focuses on ensuring student teachers meet a professional standard rather than dictating specific content that requires to be covered. There is, of course, a need for providers of ITE to balance content about specific teaching approaches with ensuring individuals develop the critical awareness skills they need to make effective choices about teaching approaches throughout their careers.

It is our view that more work is required to support an effective career-long teacher education model so teachers can continue to develop their knowledge, skills and critical awareness throughout their career across all aspects of teaching including research informed reading instruction. How the education system provides time and space for all teachers to develop, learn and grow is fundamental to successful education.

We trust that this has been helpful for the committee, and we thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments.

## **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 classroom 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.

## Petitioner written submission, 12 June 2024

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

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

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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.