

Dear Mr Allan

### **Phonics: Why We Need to Get Off the Fence in Scotland**

I am writing to you because I am deeply concerned about aspects of our classroom practice in reading, spelling and writing. Recently, through my own research and reading, I have discovered that, in Scotland, we may be promoting methods and strategies for the teaching of reading that have been shown to be ineffective – and even sometimes damaging – through scientific research.

Firstly, I would like to make it very clear that the scenario described above is **through no fault of our own**. It seems that when teachers are trained in Scotland, whether through the B.Ed. or PGDE route, that they are given little, if any, instruction, training or background on the actual teaching of reading. (By teaching of reading, I refer to **how to actually teach a child to read, from the beginning, regardless of age / stage**. I do not mean what is currently covered in teacher training such as the ‘frills’ of looking at post-modern picture books or positive engagement with reading for pleasure.) Indeed, the recent 2014 Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach highlights the following:

‘6 - A WORRYING MIX OF KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE PEDAGOGY OF READING BY STUDENTS ON PLACEMENT AND NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS WAS REPORTED.

When asked, those interviewed reported that too many student teachers and those just qualified did not have a confident working knowledge of the pedagogy of reading. This has been suggested in the past on an anecdotal basis and does seem to have some foundation. It is clearly a very concerning suggestion and one that requires further discussion with Universities involved in Initial Teacher Education.’

*2014 Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach (p.23)*

I would go further and suggest that this affects not only students or newly qualified teachers, but **the majority of teachers in Scotland**. Through my own work with teachers in Scotland, I regularly ask audiences about their training experience and if they were ‘taught how to teach reading’. A generous estimate would be that around only 10% of teachers indicate that they had some form of input on the pedagogy of reading. Of that 10%, they often fall into one of the following categories:

- I. they completed teacher training in another country e.g. England, Ireland
- II. they were trained many years ago and are approaching retirement
- III. they were trained at Moray House
- IV. they had instruction but only in terms of what reading schemes were available

It is truly shocking, given that reading is the ‘bread and butter’ or the ‘nuts and bolts’ of what we do every day, that the majority of our teachers, through a lack of training, are not only ill-equipped to teach reading, but are unaware of the current research and pedagogy surrounding the teaching of reading. Indeed, without this core knowledge, teachers are left to their own devices and more often than not, rely on a published ‘reading scheme’ or whatever resources happen to be in the cupboard. Reading schemes, particularly the older versions that most schools have in stock, are based on practices such as teaching ‘sight words’, on guessing from picture clues and on repetition of key

words, all which are shown to be ineffective reading strategies in current research findings. It also seems particularly ironic that at a time where, more than ever, teachers are being encouraged to undertake career-long professional learning and research and are asked to use 'evidence-based approaches' that this concept appears to be absent in our initial teacher training, in our classroom practice and in Curriculum for Excellence when it comes to something as fundamental as reading.

It is true that there are several authorities in Scotland where this is not the case. Places such as Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee have made decisions to 'buy into' reading programmes on a whole authority basis, where training and resources for methodologies such as Read, Write, Inc. and Active Literacy, which are programmes that do have sound basis that aligns with current research and the thinking on phonics, are provided. Many individual schools have also purchased resources such as Jolly Phonics to provide them with a core phonics programme also. Many more authorities and schools though are given the 'professional room' to choose their own approach. Without professional development on the pedagogy of reading, it is difficult to see how authorities, schools or teachers are well-placed to evaluate what constitutes an effective programme.

However, even where these phonic approaches are being used, they are also being undermined by some of the practices as mentioned above. These are often referred to as 'multi-cueing strategies' and appear to have become embedded into the teaching of reading in Scotland.

#### Multi-cueing Strategies

- I. sight words (where children learn by sight a bank of common words or Fry's / Dolch list)
- II. guessing what a word might be
- III. skipping a word, reading on and then guessing
- IV. skipping a word altogether and relying on the 'gist'
- V. guessing a word from its initial letter or sound
- VI. using the picture to guess what a word might be

In brief, **guessing of any kind should not be considered a valid strategy**. When taught through phonics, there is no need to guess at all. Children simply use their phonic knowledge 'all-the-way-through-the-word' to decode it and lift it off the page. This produces readers who approach text from a position of knowledge – they are fearless when they meet unknown words as they can apply their phonic knowledge instead of having to grapple with the unknown and resort to simply hazarding a guess. (N.B. pictures of course enhance our reading and certainly add to our context knowledge – but they should not be used as a tool to guess individual words)

Similarly, the concept of sight words is that children learn a bank of words **using their visual memory**. This strategy is flawed as research shows we do not read words as wholes. In addition, as a strategy, memorisation of words by their shape alone is unhelpful as our brains can only hold around 2000 words in this way. The strategy then stops working. In the classroom, the sight word method can appear plausible, as children look like they are reading their scheme book with ease, when in fact they are not reading, but memorising. These children then become unstuck as they find they no longer have a strategy that works when unfamiliar words appear, and when the picture support disappears as they read more sophisticated texts. (By contrast, a child could learn, for example, 10 words by sight – but the child who learns 10 sounds can read 242 words.)

This means that, even if following evidence-based practice that uses a phonics approach, when multi-cueing strategies become involved, this results in a ‘mixed methods’ approach. This ‘mixed methods’ (or ‘balanced’ approach as some teachers refer to it) has been shown to undermine phonics teaching, to confuse children and hinder progress – as we are teaching through conflicting and mixed messages. Even the most basic language we use to teach reading is confusing and illogical – ‘this letter makes this sound’ – for example, is commonplace in classrooms – but letters do not make any sounds – people do. **Unfortunately, it is our poorer readers, those who need a clear and systematic approach to reading and spelling that are the ones who suffer at the hands of this confusion and mixing of methods.**

These ‘multi-cueing strategies’ are also, unfortunately, being reinforced and embedded further through the Experiences and Outcomes in Curriculum for Excellence (and also within the ‘new’ POLAAR assessment resource published by Education Scotland).

**I explore sounds, letters and words, discovering how they work together**, and I can use what I learn to help me as I read and write. ENG 0-12a / LIT 0-13a / LIT 0-21a

International research indicates that the best way to meet the needs of all children and young people, when it comes to underpinning the beginnings of reading, spelling and writing, is through **explicit and direct teaching**. However, as we see above it is ‘discovery learning’ that appears to be advocated.

I can use my knowledge of **sight vocabulary**, phonics, context clues, punctuation and grammar to read with understanding and expression. ENG 1-12a

I can spell the most commonly-used words, **using my knowledge of letter patterns and spelling rules** and use resources to help me spell tricky or unfamiliar words. LIT 1-21a

**I am learning to select and use strategies** and resources before I read, and as I read, to help make the meaning of texts clear. LIT 1-13a

Within the Experiences and Outcomes, ‘strategies’ is mentioned six times with reference to reading and spelling. It is at no point made clear what these ‘strategies’ are, but it could easily be thought to be referring to the sorts of multi-cueing strategies above. There is no reference to the alphabet, the alphabetic code, (the very basis of our reading and writing system), all through the word sounding out and blending, oral segmenting (or identifying the sounds in words) for all through the word spelling.

Indeed, within these Experiences and Outcomes the two distinct components of reading – word reading/decoding and comprehension are here muddled together. The Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) outlines the two elements of reading: word reading (decoding) and comprehension. It is important that teachers can differentiate between these two elements, in order to correctly identify which aspect a child may be struggling with.

Furthermore, guidance or reference to what should be involved in the teaching of reading, either in the Experiences and Outcomes or in the Principles and Practice paper, is noticeably absent. (This is in direct contrast to aspects of comprehension and especially the higher order skills that are covered

comprehensively.) Guidance on the teaching of reading within support documents for Curriculum for Excellence also appears to be contradictory:

**‘Spoken language has particular importance in the early years. Teachers will balance play-based learning with more systematic development and learning of skills and techniques for reading, including phonics.’**

*Literacy and English: principles and practice*

**‘Research indicates that developmentally appropriate practice is most conducive to effective learning. For example, it suggests that there is no long-term advantage to children when there is an over-emphasis on systematic teaching before 6 or 7 years of age.’**

*Building the Curriculum 2, Active Learning in the Early Years*

In contrast, if we look to the current picture of reading pedagogy in England, there is something quite different happening:

- I. Within the standards for Qualified Teacher Status in England, there is actually a phonics requirement: Teachers’ Standard 3 states that **‘if teaching early reading, [teachers should] demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics’**. This in turn means that, in order to prepare trainees for the classroom, there is a key focus on SSP by all Initial Teacher Education providers
- II. As of September 2014 the new National Curriculum requires that all schools use Systematic Synthetic Phonics as the sole method for reading instruction. This must be based on ‘pure’ synthetic phonics principles, **which means no guessing, multi-cueing strategies or sight words**

This is quite at odds with how we operate in Scotland, as this extract from the Literacy Action Plan: An Action Plan to Improve Literacy in Scotland (2010) shows:

**‘All teachers now have a responsibility to help develop literacy skills. Importantly, *Curriculum for Excellence* allows space for innovation and local practice to develop. Practice should be tailored to the local context and the individual needs of the learner, with more targeted support offered to those young people who need it, so that all children and young people can reach their potential. The curriculum also allows a diverse range of approaches to emerge, within the framework, with practitioners learning from each other's experience.’**

*Literacy Action Plan: An Action Plan to Improve Literacy in Scotland (2010)*

I am a huge advocate of Curriculum for Excellence. I am proud that our curriculum is more than a curriculum – it is forward-looking philosophy, with each child’s journey at the centre. I also appreciate that our system is designed to be free from the political entanglement that is evident in England. It is a point Sue Ellis reinforces in her paper, *Ethics, Education Policy and Research: The Phonics Question Reconsidered*:

‘The various accountability measures that have been adopted to ensure the policy’s implementation actively curtail the ability of university academics, student teachers and the teaching profession to reflect on the full range of research evidence on the development of reading. They also constrain the freedom of professionals to adjust the delivery of systematic synthetic phonics programmes in response to observations of their effects in practice.’

*Sue Ellis (2013)*

*Ethics, Education Policy and Research: the phonics question reconsidered*

However, given the widespread lack of subject knowledge and of reading pedagogy, as already outlined above, it is evident that student teachers, and the teaching profession as a whole, are generally not inclined to **‘reflect on the full range of research evidence on the development of reading.’** Perhaps it is time to publish more specific support in this crucial aspect of every teacher’s day to day practice in the classroom, to assist all teachers, whether they are students, newly qualified or experienced in the classroom.

Despite overwhelming evidence from around the world (U.S., U.K., and Australia) there is still prominent opposition to phonics. Within the field of academia and education, there are high profile individuals, and even whole organisations, that hold an ‘anti’ phonics position. It is difficult to ascertain why this should be the case. For some, such as children’s author Michael Rosen, it is clear that their own experience of learning to read has coloured their viewpoint – they feel they ‘just learned to read’ and that children should ‘just read books’ to enable them to do the same. It is true that many children have learned to read by gleaning the alphabetic code for themselves, but it is often the children who come from a supportive home environment, who own their own books, and that are read to every night, that are able to learn to read and spell essentially by osmosis. It is a ‘method’ that does not work for all. Ultimately, given the fact that the greatest problem we face in Scottish education currently is still the attainment gap, we should be taking heed of any research that indicates success for all. Despite funding in Scotland for excellent initiatives such as Play Talk Read, the Early Years Collaboration and sharing of sector leading practice, which do, undoubtedly help and make a difference - there is something we have not tried across the board and - that is simply tightening up the teaching and learning of reading and spelling through a systematic synthetic phonics approach from the beginning, rather than the ‘mixed methods’ approach we have at the moment.

I truly believe, from reading the research on phonics that the evidence is utterly compelling – that such an approach would go a long way to narrowing, if not closing the gap entirely. Indeed, there is a mounting body of evidence which shows that, not only can the gender gap in reading be eradicated, but the attainment gap too. This is something we cannot ignore and something we cannot expect

schools or teachers to discover on their own. I do understand though, that currently we do not mandate practice or policy in Scotland. Sue Ellis refers to this in her paper Policy and Research: lessons from the Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics initiative:

‘Moss and Huxford (2007), in their analysis of the phonics debate in England, maintain that “Phonics in the policy context is not the same as phonics in the research context or phonics as a focus for a political campaign”. Each interprets the question of how to raise literacy achievement in a different way, works to different timelines and recognizes different evidence. In each context, what phonics ‘stands for’ varies, and is differently positioned in relation to the various tiers at which national policy decisions are made and interpreted. **The devolved and evolutionary approach to literacy policy in Scotland possibly curtails the number of different things phonics can ‘stand for’ and aligns it more closely to learning, in a smaller, more localized policy space.** This may explain why there are fewer struggles around it.’

*Sue Ellis (2007)*  
*Policy and research: lessons from the Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics initiative*

Ellis describes our ‘devolved and evolutionary approach’ to literacy policy in Scotland, which allows room for choice, adaptability to local contexts and professional freedom. I would suggest however, that when it comes to the teaching of reading and closing the attainment gap for our poorest learners, that we do not have the luxury of time to wait for evolution to take place. The pace of change is happening too slowly, many are even unaware that adaptations are required to our reading pedagogy, while many more still, continue to ‘do what they’ve always done’ when it comes to reading in the classroom. While we wait for schools and teachers to find their own way, ‘survival of the fittest’ continues and school is failing those who need it most.

It is deeply worrying that, in a country such as Scotland, where our teaching graduates are (and rightly so) held in the highest regard around the world, that we now lack pedagogical subject knowledge in comparison to teachers in England and elsewhere.

It is highly ironic that countries around the world have changed their policy and their practice following ground breaking research from Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire – but that here in Scotland we do not appear to have learned the lessons from our own research.

The greatest tragedy however, is that every moment we choose to ‘sit on the fence’ when it comes to phonics and the teaching of reading, we are leaving children’s success at school, and beyond, to chance.

Yours faithfully

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