

Report summary

Reading by six

How the best schools do it

Too many children in England do not read or write well enough by the time they leave primary school. The proportion of 11-year-olds that reach the expected level (Level 4 of the National Curriculum) in English has stalled at around 80% and the national average point score for reading at the end of Key Stage 1 has remained between 15.6 and 15.7 for the last four years.

The best primary schools in England teach virtually every child to read, regardless of the social and economic circumstances of their neighbourhoods, the ethnicity of their pupils, the language spoken at home and most special educational needs or disabilities. A sample of 12 of these schools finds that their success is based on a determination that every child will learn to read, together with a very rigorous and sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics. This approach is applied with a high degree of consistency and sustained. If some schools can do this, it should be a moral imperative for all primary schools. This study shows that primary – including infant – schools can achieve very high standards in reading if they focus on this objective, adopt a consistent approach and make every minute of every lesson count.

The diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics is central to the success of all the schools that achieve high reading standards in Key Stage 1. This requires high-quality and expert teaching that follows a carefully planned and tightly structured approach to teaching phonic knowledge and skills. Pupils are given opportunities to apply what they have learnt through reading – including time to read aloud to adults to practise their decoding skills – writing and comprehension of what they are reading.

The best phonics teaching is characterised by planned structure, fast pace, praise and reinforcement, perceptive responses, active participation by all children and evidence of progress. Effective teachers are highly trained to instil the principles of phonics, can identify the learning needs of young children and recognise and overcome the barriers that impede learning. Schools with Nursery classes begin such teaching early on. The curriculum gives children rich opportunities to talk and listen in a wide range of contexts. This contributes to developing their familiarity with

books and stories and their knowledge of the meanings of words. There is a strong focus on developing the children's capacity to listen, concentrate and discriminate between sounds.

Well-structured resources are used appropriately, either individually or in combination, to support the teaching programme. Phonics teaching is monitored to ensure consistency and steps are taken if improvement is called for.

The assessment of individual pupils' progress, phonic knowledge and skills is sufficiently frequent and detailed to identify quickly the pupils who are failing, or in danger of failing, to keep up with their peers. Effective provision for them to catch up is put in place early and there are high expectations of what all pupils should achieve. Children should be involved in the assessment of their progress and receive regular supportive feedback on their work. The quality of formative assessment and the interaction that stems from it make an important contribution to learning.

All children should be reading at standards appropriate to Level 1A/2C when they are six, that is, by the end of Year 1. Children at this stage who are still struggling to read should have individual support which is carefully attuned to overcoming barriers to their phonological development.

In any school where the teaching of reading and writing falls below the 'outstanding' benchmark and pupils' achievement lags behind that in the most effective schools, there should be a critical focus on the teaching of phonic knowledge and skills. Shortcomings in the rigour and fitness for purpose of schools' programmes for phonics teaching should be redressed urgently, for example through using a high-quality synthetic phonics scheme. This should be accompanied by training for staff to use it, by rigorous monitoring of the implementation of the programme, especially the quality of the teaching, and by evaluation of the impact of the programme on pupils' decoding and spelling skills.

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