

Guidance

‘Now the whole school is reading’: supporting struggling readers in secondary school

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Applies to England

Contents

[Executive summary](#)

[Introduction](#)

[What we learned](#)

[Leadership of reading](#)

[Identifying pupils’ reading gaps](#)

[Putting help in place for struggling readers](#)

[Staff expertise in teaching reading](#)

[Sharing information about struggling readers](#)

[Monitoring the impact of additional teaching and knowing what works](#)

What pupils said about the help they got with reading

What else did schools do

Conclusion

Annex A: detailed research methods



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Executive summary

The ability to read is a fundamental life skill. It is essential to us all if we are to participate fully in society and the workplace.^[footnote 1] Pupils with poor reading struggle to read independently, and so read less. As a result, they do not accumulate the background knowledge and vocabulary they need to improve their comprehension. It is therefore harder for them to access the curriculum in secondary school, because the required levels of literacy rise rapidly beyond primary school.

Without identification of their reading needs and targeted additional teaching, pupils who arrive in secondary school as poor readers are likely to continue to struggle. As the secondary curriculum places increasing demands on reading comprehension, older pupils who struggle with reading comprehension do not catch up.^[footnote 2] Each year, only 10% of disadvantaged children who leave primary school with their reading below the expected standard get passes in English and mathematics at GCSE.^[footnote 3]

In spring 2022, we led research visits to 6 secondary schools in which a higher-than-expected proportion of poor readers got a grade 4 or above in English language at GCSE. The findings illustrate how these secondary schools identify specific reading weaknesses, and how they provide targeted support for struggling readers. The report describes how these secondary schools make sure that pupils who have left primary school not able to read age-appropriate books with fluency become proficient readers who can access the secondary curriculum.^[footnote 4]

The findings use evidence from:

- research literature
- autumn term 2021 inspection data
- discussions with His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who are primary specialists or secondary English specialists
- visits to secondary schools that were shown to be effectively supporting struggling readers, to speak to leaders, pupils and staff

Main findings

Senior leaders prioritised reading. They invested in additional, bespoke help for struggling readers and training for staff who taught reading. Leaders made sure that this help was part of a well-thought-out curriculum and a wider school reading strategy for all pupils to become proficient readers. They communicated this commitment to all staff, raising the visibility of reading across the school so that all staff knew the part they played in supporting struggling readers.

Schools accurately identified gaps in pupils' reading knowledge. Schools screened all new pupils' reading. They followed this up with diagnostic tests to determine which aspects of reading pupils struggled with. These tests included assessment of fluency rates, word reading accuracy and efficiency, and phonic knowledge. This analytical approach meant that the schools could design additional teaching and intervention programmes to meet pupils' specific reading needs. Diagnostic tests gave schools more detail than initial reading age assessments. This meant that they knew precisely what to teach.

Staff who taught reading had the expertise they needed to teach weaker readers. Schools made sure that staff who taught specific aspects of reading, or particular reading programmes, had relevant training. Those staff also supported other members of staff. They shared their expertise and delivered internal training. The schools also gave training to subject teachers. They could then understand what pupils needed to know to become proficient readers, and what gaps in their knowledge might prevent this.

Leaders shared information about struggling readers with staff. Teachers and support staff knew which pupils were getting additional help, what aspects of reading they struggled with and what intervention they were receiving. They used this information in lesson planning. It also helped staff to create a consistent approach to teaching struggling readers.

Schools had clear procedures in place to monitor this teaching and its impact on struggling readers. Regular assessment meant that staff knew what progress pupils were making, and could make changes when pupils were not improving as quickly as expected. They could also evaluate the effectiveness of reading programmes.

As pupils' reading improved, they gained confidence and became more motivated to engage with reading in class. Some of these pupils told us that reading had previously caused them stress and anxiety, but that the help they got for reading was improving their confidence and motivation to read. Teachers also described pupils being more willing to read aloud in class.

Schools tended to stop additional support and monitoring once pupils were beyond key stage 3. Each of the schools assessed and monitored struggling readers until at least Year 9. However, none of them told us that they continued to monitor pupils' progress beyond key stage 3, or once pupils had reached their chronological reading age. Nor did they always continue to give pupils the additional help once they had 'graduated' from a reading programme. This meant that the schools did not always know the longer-term impact of help, or whether pupils continued to struggle in key stage 4. Several pupils told us that they felt less enthusiastic and motivated to read for pleasure by the time they reached key stage 4.

Introduction

Skilled reading

It is important that all pupils get the specific teaching they need, alongside a well-thought-out reading curriculum, so that they can read well before they leave school.

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) is a model of reading that says reading is the result of word recognition and language comprehension. The SVR was proposed by Gough and Tunmer and developed further by Hoover and Tunmer. [\[footnote 5\]](#) Hoover and Tunmer define word recognition as:

“... the ability to recognise printed words accurately and quickly to efficiently gain access to the appropriate word meanings contained in the internal mental lexicon” [\[footnote 6\]](#)

Word reading is the foundation for reading comprehension, which relies on a reader’s oral language abilities once they can recognise the words. [\[footnote 7\]](#)

The need for word recognition **and** language comprehension means that readers who struggle to recognise words accurately will also struggle to understand what they read. Good readers are strong in both word reading and language comprehension. Good language comprehension cannot compensate for poor word reading. [\[footnote 8\]](#)

In the early stages of learning to read, word recognition relies on phonics and learning the relationship between written letters and the sounds they make. Children should be taught how to decode words using phonics. [\[footnote 9\]](#) Phonics teaches children how to decode quickly and accurately so that eventually they can read words by sight.

Once children can decode words, they then need to be able to read and recognise words and their meanings accurately, and with ease, to become fluent readers. [\[footnote 10\]](#) Fluent reading is described as an extension of decoding, and requires accuracy, pace and expression. [\[footnote 11\]](#)

Secondary pupils may struggle with reading comprehension because they need help with decoding words, reading familiar words quickly by sight, and reading with accuracy, pace and expression. [\[footnote 12\]](#) Emerging research into the nature and role of fluency in secondary pupils, especially among pupils who struggle with reading, suggests that reading accurately and fluently is an essential link between word reading and comprehension. Once pupils have mastered decoding, and can recognise words automatically, this frees up their working memory so they can concentrate on comprehension. [\[footnote 13\]](#)

The decoding skills pupils do have may not be fluent enough for the demands of the secondary curriculum. A study with pupils in Years 7 to 9 found that only a small number of struggling readers with poor reading comprehension had adequate word reading fluency. [\[footnote 14\]](#) Although poor word decoding does not prevent comprehension, it is a barrier to skilled, proficient reading comprehension. [\[footnote 15\]](#)

Fluency with narrative texts in primary school does not guarantee that pupils will be fluent readers of secondary school texts.^[footnote 16] The reading needs of older readers (including those in upper primary) differ from those of younger pupils, because older pupils need to read and comprehend more information texts and less narrative fiction. Without additional help to address the gaps in their reading knowledge, pupils with poor reading fluency may get left further behind as they progress through school.^[footnote 17]

Help for older struggling readers

There is extensive research into early reading difficulties and interventions at primary level, but less with older pupils, who tend to have different needs. Research into the skills profiles of older struggling readers shows that reading difficulties can present themselves in many different ways.^[footnote 18] These pupils may have specific needs related to gaps in one or more aspect of reading, such as decoding, accuracy or language comprehension. Other pupils can, on the surface, appear to be managing in class, because they have developed coping strategies which mask their reading difficulties. Schools are less likely to offer these pupils additional help.^[footnote 19]

Identifying reading gaps and weaknesses

Very little research exists on how secondary schools identify struggling readers, and what they find difficult. Most of this has been outside the UK, often in the US. In the UK, some schools assess pupils' reading in Year 7, but it is not always clear how they use these assessments to target support and evaluate the impact of that support on improving reading.

Schools should use assessment to help identify whether problems are related to word recognition, oral language comprehension or a combination of these.^[footnote 20] This research explores how some secondary schools use different types of tests for different purposes. It focuses on how they use diagnostic assessments to identify specific areas of reading strength and weakness, and how they match additional help to pupils' individual reading needs.

Inspection evidence shows that schools frequently use reading ages as a measure of reading ability. Reading age assessments measure the gap between a pupil's actual age and how well they should be reading for their age. Reading age assessments tell schools less than they might seem, because older pupils vary a lot in how they read.^[footnote 21] Reading ages can show whether a pupil has a problem with reading, but not what that problem might be. They focus on comprehension and do not look at decoding and fluency, for example.

Diagnostic assessments of reading can identify specific areas of strength and weakness, so that additional help can be targeted accurately. Used alongside reading ages, diagnostic testing provides more precise and nuanced assessments than reading ages.

Rationale for the research

The rationale for this work lies in the need for all pupils to leave school as successful readers and with GCSE English at grade 4 or above. It is essential for pupils to be able to read proficiently, so they can access post-compulsory education and participate fully in society. Our education recovery reports also show that learning loss as a result of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic is making reading a greater issue in secondary schools.[\[footnote 22\]](#)

There are lifelong consequences for adults who struggle with reading. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), around 16% of adults in England have very poor literacy.[\[footnote 23\]](#) At this level, they will struggle to understand price labels, read instructions on medicines, make sense of a train timetable or fill in a job application. Adults with low literacy are more likely to have fewer job opportunities and a lower income.[\[footnote 24\]](#) The most recent data published by the Ministry of Justice shows that 57% of adult prisoners taking initial assessments had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.[\[footnote 25\]](#) A quarter of young offenders in the UK have a reading age below that of the average 7-year-old.[\[footnote 26\]](#)

Each year, around one quarter of 11-year-olds do not meet the expected standard in reading at the end of primary school in Year 6.[\[footnote 27\]](#) This level is considered to be the threshold of functional literacy, and gives children the knowledge and skills needed to manage the demands of the secondary school curriculum. Evidence suggests that fewer than 1 in 5 of these pupils can expect to get a GCSE grade 4.

According to 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data, at age 15 in England there is a gap equivalent to 8.5 years of schooling between the highest and lowest achieving 10% of readers.[\[footnote 28\]](#) The level of reading achievement of struggling readers suggests they will have difficulty with more complex texts that require specific subject knowledge.[\[footnote 29\]](#)

Methodology overview

In March 2022, we visited 6 secondary schools and spoke to:

- senior leaders with responsibility for reading
- curriculum subject teachers
- specialist reading teachers and support staff
- Year 7 struggling readers
- Year 10/11 struggling readers

We also had focus group discussions with HMI who are primary and secondary English specialists.

We used the National Pupil Database (NPD) to produce a sample of the highest performing 40 schools, based on the proportion of pupils who were below the national standard for reading at the end of primary school and achieved a grade 4 in English GCSE. The schools visited were those that were among the top 15 in our sample and were willing to participate in the research. [\[footnote 30\]](#)

The research was approved by Ofsted's research ethics committee and we got informed consent from everyone we spoke with, including pupils and their parents.

What we learned

This report starts by describing what inspectors said in focus groups about the problems they see with how secondary schools identify struggling readers and meet their reading needs. This is followed in each instance by examples of how the schools visited have addressed these issues.

Leadership of reading

Secondary school leaders face challenges in making sure struggling readers get help to meet their specific reading needs. As one HMI explained in a focus group, leaders need to understand that pupils may struggle with aspects of reading that require different support in and out of class:

“ It's very complicated – we talk about two things – teaching pupils to read who are struggling and helping them to access the curriculum. In other subjects they are being taught vocabulary useful for that subject. But is it actually teaching them to read? It's a very difficult area for secondary schools to navigate, not just the quality of interventions, but how much time it takes or where it is in the curriculum. It's a real tension for secondary school leaders to manage that.”

HMI said they rarely see leaders developing a coordinated strategy for struggling readers that identifies and addresses their specific needs, and matches individual programmes and additional help to those needs. Schools may have individual reading programmes and school-wide reading initiatives, but these are not joined up. HMI gave examples of schools that shared no information about pupils receiving additional help for reading across the school. One HMI explained:

“ There's no coordinated strategy for that vital group of pupils to access the curriculum because their reading skill is so low. The English department identify their weak readers and have their own strategy about what to do in English lessons, but not actually talking to the SENCo [special educational needs coordinator]. There's no kind of synergy there.”

HMI summed up how, without a carefully thought-out and implemented strategy behind improving reading, what some secondary schools are doing is 'tokenistic'.

In contrast, other secondary schools are treating pupils as individuals and building up a complete picture of their barriers to reading. One HMI said:

“ They are analytical about how to approach the problem.”

In each of the 6 schools visited, leadership of reading was at a senior level. This meant that reading was prioritised so that pupils left school as proficient readers. Leaders invested time and resources in staff training and bespoke teaching for struggling readers. Strong, involved leadership of reading also made sure that the progress of struggling readers was closely monitored. This allowed them to respond quickly, and look for alternative specialist help if pupils were not making expected progress.

In each school, reading was led by the deputy headteacher or a literacy lead who was part of the senior leadership team. In one school, information on reading was discussed at governing board meetings. This may not be unusual in a primary school, but it is unusual in secondary schools. The commitment to reading was backed by investment in bespoke reading programmes and external training for staff to teach them.

The priority that senior leaders gave reading, and their investment in reading, meant it had a high status across the school. Teachers and support staff all said it was part of their role to help struggling readers. Teachers expressed this by saying ‘reading is everyone’s business’, and ‘we are all teachers of reading’. Additional teaching for struggling readers was the responsibility of specialist teaching staff, but this was helped by the staff’s awareness of how they could support struggling readers in their own subjects. As one member of support staff said:

“ If you can’t read, it closes down the world, so we all want to promote reading.”

The high status given to reading by leaders created a culture where all departments demonstrated a similar commitment to reading. Staff did not see reading as solely the responsibility of the English department. In 2 of the schools, curriculum subject leaders had a focus on reading in their departmental development plans. These were matched to the needs of struggling readers as well as other pupils. Departments had reading leads who discussed reading at staff meetings, and led professional development on reading.

In at least 2 schools, staff described a ‘cultural shift’ in reading and the status of reading. This was not something that happened overnight, as one teacher explained:

“ You’ve got gradual change over the years, staff have actually started to really realise the fundamental importance of literacy, reading, writing, regardless of your subject.”

Strong leadership of reading made sure that these schools had staff with the right professional development and training to teach reading. The culture of reading embedded in all the schools was summed up by a Senior HMI who was part of a research visit to one school:

“In schools that get safeguarding right, leaders create a culture that safeguarding is “everyone’s business, all of the time”. In this school, leaders seem to have done the same with reading. Everyone we spoke to appeared to view teaching pupils to read – and to read well, with confidence and fluency – in this way.”

Identifying pupils’ reading gaps

During focus groups, inspectors told us that although schools assessed pupils’ reading, it was not always clear how these assessments were used or what their purpose was. They described how programmes like Accelerated Reader^{[\[footnote 31\]](#)} are regularly used by secondary schools to monitor and assess reading, but said that the information from these programmes was not used systematically in the school curriculum.

Our analysis of inspection evidence for 30 secondary schools, inspected between September 2021 and January 2022, showed that 28 used reading assessment tests to screen all Year 7 pupils and identify those at risk of struggling with reading. Standardised screening tests, such as cognitive ability tests or reading age assessments, effectively identified the bottom 20% or 30% of readers, based on a chosen cut-off score or according to the gap between pupils’ reading age and their chronological age. They showed pupils who were at risk of not getting a grade 4 in GCSE English. However, schools did not follow up with diagnostic tests to identify precise gaps in pupils’ reading knowledge.

We also saw from inspection evidence that schools focused assessment and teaching on struggling readers at key stage 3. Schools assessed pupils’ reading in Year 7 and new starters in Years 8 and 9, but there was less evidence of this happening in key stage 4. This means that pupils who begin to struggle later, or new starters in key stage 4, might not receive targeted support.

In the schools visited, we saw how leaders understood the importance of accurately identifying pupils’ reading needs. They made sure that staff had access both to standardised tests of reading attainment and further diagnostic testing.

Screening assessments identified pupils who struggled with reading and needed further assessment. All the schools screened the whole of Year 7, as well as pupils who joined after Year 7. Each school then used more granular diagnostic assessments to identify specific reading gaps and weaknesses, so they could give pupils the appropriate additional teaching. Diagnostic tests were most often used with the lowest 20% to 30% identified through screening. Schools invested in several diagnostic assessments to test different aspects of reading, including phonic knowledge, word reading efficiency, reading accuracy and speed, and comprehension.

Diagnostic tests included DiaPhon, Diagnostic Reading Analysis, Test of Word Reading Efficiency and Fresh Start.

One headteacher explained how her school used diagnostic testing:

“ When we’ve done the NGRTs [New Group Reading Test] we pick out those children who are below and have a standardised reading score of below 80, and we dig down and do diagnostic reading assessment. And we do that so that we can actually look at what is it with reading that you are struggling with. So we know if it is decoding then we have some phonics work to do and if it’s word-finding difficulties, it’s about fluency or comprehension. Then interventions are put in place to address those very specific skills. Diagnostic reading assessment will tell you accuracy, comprehension, fluency, speed, comprehension speed.”

This kind of detailed assessment was important to ‘try to work out what the barriers are’ as one reading support teacher explained.

Case studies

These cases studies illustrate how 2 schools used different ways to make sure they identified the additional help struggling readers needed as early as possible.

Case study 1

This school is a mixed urban academy converter with a sixth form. It has 1,600 pupils, of whom 24% speak English as an additional language. Around 34% are disadvantaged.

The school has a strong Year 6 transition programme that is an important part of how it helps struggling readers. Identifying struggling readers who will need additional teaching begins before pupils leave primary school. The reading teacher is a qualified primary teacher who visits the feeder primary schools to support reading in Years 5 and 6. This teacher works closely with the primary schools to identify specific weaknesses and the additional help for reading that pupils have already received. This means that the school has detailed information about struggling readers before they start in Year 7.

The school uses a baseline standardised reading test to screen all new pupils. This gives each pupil a reading age, and identifies which pupils may need additional teaching. The school also tests all new pupils’ spelling and comprehension, and assesses foundational skills such as phonics, word recognition and fluency. All Year 7 pupils do a cognitive ability test in the first 2 weeks of the autumn term.

Pupils with the lowest reading skills are tested in Years 7 and 8, at the beginning and end of the year, using a phonics one-to-one assessment. Pupils who need phonics teaching start a phonics programme at a level based on the letter/sound correspondences they know.

The school has 5 specialist reading programmes in Years 7 to 9, to teach different individual components of reading. These include programmes to improve vocabulary and spelling.

Every intervention has some form of baseline assessment to find out where pupils are, and to check the intervention is appropriate. The school also uses post-intervention assessment to understand what impact the intervention has had on pupils' reading. Leaders use this information to constantly review the effectiveness of teaching and individual reading programmes.

Case study 2

This academy is a mixed secondary school with a sixth form. It is part of a sponsor-led academy. The school has 1,150 pupils, of whom 32% speak English as an additional language and 30% are disadvantaged.

Oversight of struggling readers is led by the vice-principal and assistant principal. The assistant SENCo and English teacher leading on the form-time reading programme also have responsibility for the progress of struggling readers. The academy invests heavily in specialist programmes for struggling readers.

The academy benchmarks its whole Year 7 cohort in the summer term when pupils visit the school during an induction week. They do a single-word spelling test, a comprehension test and a reading rate assessment. This process identifies the lowest attaining 30% of pupils for further diagnostic testing. Those who are reading 1.5 years behind their chronological age are considered to be struggling readers who will have difficulty accessing the curriculum.

More detailed, tailored assessments decide which of 2 reading programmes a pupil should be put on. The school uses a systematic synthetic phonics programme for pupils with a reading age of 9 and above, to decide who needs additional help and which module of the programme they start on. All pupils in the 2 lowest attaining English classes do this phonics assessment.

The lowest 30% are also assessed for a tailored reading programme that is taught by staff who have been trained by the programme developers. Selected students complete three 30-minute individualised lessons each week. Lessons are in 2 parts: systematic decoding practice; and systematic language teaching related to graded prose texts. Staff teaching on this programme are trained to use diagnostic assessments to identify pupils' needs, match them to appropriate teaching and plan lessons. This training is followed up with additional coaching sessions and monitoring meetings, as well as observations of teaching.

Leaders monitor the impact of interventions using regular assessment and the progress teachers see in lessons. Pupils' reading and spelling ages are tested at the beginning, middle and end of the year. The academy also uses phonics

tests at the beginning, middle and end of the year. These assessments continue for Year 9 pupils who are getting additional teaching for reading.

Putting help in place for struggling readers

The best examples of support described by inspectors, and evident in the schools visited, were matched to the individual reading needs of pupils. According to one HMI:

“ The strengths of this programme being it is very diagnostic, so is absolutely bespoke for every pupil on it.”

However, this kind of teaching matched to need was described in only 4 of the 30 inspection reports we analysed.

In the schools we visited, the systematic use of detailed, diagnostic assessments gave a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of individual struggling readers. These assessments allowed the schools to offer what one leader described as a ‘tailored process for each individual student’ to improve their reading. Schools used a range of online and offline programmes, which were delivered by specialist teachers who had been trained to assess and teach specific aspects of accurate and fluent reading.

Teaching accurate word reading

All the schools recognised the importance of secure phonic knowledge and accurate decoding. They used a phonics programme for struggling readers who had gaps in their phonic knowledge. As one reading support teacher said, ‘The weakest readers always struggle with phonics.’

These schools recognised that although cross-curricular, school-wide initiatives improved reading, there were pupils who first needed specific teaching in phonics. Once pupils could read accurately, they were better able to access and benefit from what schools did to improve the reading of all pupils.

Most of the schools we visited used a systematic phonics programme designed for adolescent struggling readers, rather than repeating primary school phonics programmes. These programmes use age-appropriate books and accounted for the maturity and experience of readers in secondary schools. As one leader said, these pupils may need a different teaching approach and materials more appropriate for older pupils:

“ Many of these children who are coming to us with such a low reading age already have probably had intervention after intervention at primary school and it hasn’t worked, so they need something different.”

Two schools had additional one-to-one phonics programmes that could be used according to pupils' specific needs, alongside other group phonics teaching. One school leader described this as 'fast-track tutoring' that allowed the school to 'hone in' on specific letter/sound correspondences the pupils were struggling with. This was taught during tutor time by trained reading staff. In the other school, pupils making less progress than others on the group teaching programme were given additional one-to-one phonics pre-teaching. This took place for 10 minutes a day, and was taught by a trained teaching assistant. It was specifically designed to feed into the school's wider phonics programme, to help the weakest students 'be more successful' in these sessions.

The schools used different programmes to teach phonics, but they all had something in place for pupils needing additional help with word reading. At least 3 schools used a systematic synthetic phonics approach. The schools all used specialist phonics interventions designed for older struggling readers, which were taught by staff who had been trained to deliver them. These phonics programmes were largely short-term intensive programmes taught over a few weeks. Where they were most successful, pupils made rapid progress because there was an order to the teaching. Teachers assessed the pupils regularly. Pupils were only moved to the next stage when they had succeeded, and not before.

Assessing and improving pupils' reading fluency

Several of the schools visited used diagnostic testing to assess pupils' reading fluency. Leaders and staff talked about the importance of fluency and pupils' ability to read accurately and speedily using their phonic knowledge. Staff and leaders talked about fluent reading because they recognised that fluency, and in particular accuracy, was an important link between word reading and comprehension. As one reading support teacher explained:

“ The longer they are taking to read something the less likely they are to be taking it in fully. Lots of omissions, replacements of words – we call it misreading and careless reading. It's really common. It may not seem important but it can have a big impact on comprehension and change the entire meaning.”

Several of the schools used repeated exposure to reading books to improve pupils' reading fluency. They frequently used paired reading with adults or trained sixth-form pupils. Paired reading helps increase the range and amount children read, and is a way to build fluency and comprehension. To become expert readers, pupils first need to become less reliant on decoding, and fluency is improved through practice. Paired reading is one way to build children's experience of reading as part of the transition from novice to expert reader. [\[footnote 32\]](#)

The headteacher in one school described how paired reading helped struggling readers:

“ For paired reading we're looking at the weaker groups of readers – that's around fluency, decoding etc – this is the best strategy to help them initially. The theory behind it is that for the readers that really struggle, you start

reading aloud together... Then as you go through you're helping them with the strategies and modelling those strategies in practical terms – what it looks like to break it down, chunk it into syllables, sound it out. As you go through their confidence builds so you're reading less and less and they're reading to you.”

In some schools, paired reading programmes helped the weakest readers. Such as those with a reading age a year or more below their chronological age. Other schools used paired reading for readers who were below their reading age, but not weak enough to be picked up by other interventions. One school used a paired reading scheme in response to a lengthy waiting list for their main intervention, because they did not want struggling readers to be left for too long without support. This increased the amount pupils read and helped to improve their fluency.

Reading fluently also helps build pupils' confidence and resilience when tackling complex passages with unfamiliar words. Pupils reading at an age-appropriate level may still lack the confidence to read fluently and read unfamiliar words speedily enough to focus on understanding the text. One reading support member of staff described how a pupil's reading age can mask other reading weaknesses, such as the ability to decode at speed and read easily decodable words accurately and speedily:

“ They may not be massively behind their chronological age with regards to their reading, but it could be their fluency and their confidence in reading. Sometimes we find they can read but it's extremely slow so it's about trying to improve the fluency of their reading.”

In one school, leaders were very clear about the different needs of pupils who had poor decoding skills when they joined, compared with pupils who needed additional practice to become fluent. Assessments focused on identifying those who needed help with phonics and accurate word reading, rather than other components of fluency such as pace and expression. As well as specialised tests, staff at this school listened to pupils read, to refine their understanding of what help was needed.

Timetabling additional reading lessons

Schools had to make difficult decisions about when to timetable additional reading lessons. Each of the schools had considered when to give extra teaching, and whether pupils should miss lessons or not. There was no consensus about the best time in the day for additional reading lessons. This was a hard decision for leaders and one not taken lightly, as this senior leader explained:

“ We sometimes have to put literacy over something else... This is controversial... but we've made the ethical judgement as a school that, in terms of access to the wider curriculum, they would benefit more from having that focus.”

Other schools timetabled additional teaching outside the normal school day. Two schools said they had changed the time of extra reading lessons as a result of monitoring and evaluating their existing reading timetable. Both schools found that

teaching sessions before school worked best. One member of support staff described why the school made the decision to change teaching times:

“ Morning interventions are something new that we have started doing. We used to do it as part of the day, but this caused lots of disruption to normal lessons. They now have to come to school a little earlier to do the interventions.”

In this school, the headteacher said she felt that taking children out of lessons was ‘detrimental to their learning’.

Staff expertise in teaching reading

The HMI focus groups indicated that secondary schools did not always have staff trained to teach pupils who were in the early stages of learning to read. They also showed that teachers did not always know how to help struggling readers in class.

Several HMI said that staff at all levels often lack knowledge about the early stages of reading, and that this has an impact on the help struggling readers get. Secondary teachers often have little experience of, and training in, how to support struggling readers in science, history or modern foreign languages, for example. HMI also described how schools may test reading age and share this information across the school, but do not then give teachers and support staff the training they need to help these pupils.

As two HMI explained, a lack of expertise can lead to schools relying too heavily on a commercial reading programme, rather than investing in training and giving staff ‘the knowledge of learning how to read’. Staff need to understand how pupils learn to read and the knowledge and skills they need to progress from novice reader to expert.

In the schools visited, all staff who gave additional teaching to struggling readers were trained externally to teach reading. In 2 schools, staff had a 2-day intensive training course before teaching programmes that included phonics and reading fluency. These schools also had regular follow-up sessions with trainers who observed lessons to make sure they were being taught correctly. Schools could then adjust or adapt teaching as necessary. In another school, the SENCo, who had specialist literacy qualifications, trained teaching assistants so they could work with pupils who needed additional teaching in specific components of reading. Some externally purchased reading programmes gave schools a ‘link person’ who regularly monitored teaching and provided coaching.

In all the schools visited, staff who were trained to teach reading programmes disseminated their knowledge to other teachers. They became sources of expertise in delivering internal training. One school leader described how this worked for teaching phonics in his school:

“ We have a yearly session to staff that have bottom sets across the board, so they understand phonics and how weak at reading some of our students actually are [and] so that they can refer the students back to the programme

and understand the strategies behind that. Fostering awareness across the whole school.”

School leaders recognised that secondary teachers might not know how children learn how to read. Teachers also said there can be gaps in their own understanding of what being a struggling reader looks like in practice, and what they might find difficult. This gap in knowledge was described by a literacy coordinator during one school visit:

“ No one sits down with high school teachers and explains how Year 6 SATs work. For teachers that is something that is not explained. We don’t understand what the scaled score of 100 or 95 means in high school. Yes, there is definitely a gap there.”

In several of the schools, training for all staff included knowledge about how children learn to read, and the components of reading that proficient readers need to master.

In schools where teachers were trained to understand and spot reading problems, subject teachers better understood the knowledge pupils needed to become proficient readers, and the gaps in knowledge that might affect this. In one school, it was evident that teachers understood how pupils might struggle with different components of reading, as one of the mathematics teachers explained:

“ Sometimes struggling readers can fool people into thinking they are fluent readers, others will stumble over words and it is more obvious. Equally you can have a student who doesn’t read well out loud but takes in all the information and understands.”

The schools also used the expertise of primary teachers. In 2 schools, primary-trained teachers taught struggling readers and gave staff training. In another school that had recently joined with a next-door primary school, leaders were planning joint training in phonics for both schools. In one school, a primary headteacher on the governing board had provided training in phonics after the deputy headteacher advised that there should be phonics training for all staff. The school also had links with another primary school headteacher for training.

Investment in training gave all teachers a level of understanding and insight that meant they could help identify pupils who might need additional teaching, and could use specific strategies to help them in class. Specialist training and development for reading teachers also created a pool of expertise that staff could use for advice and help.

Training supported an ethos that valued and understood the importance of investing in reading and staff working together to help struggling readers. This culture of collaboration was evident in our discussions with staff. One reading support teacher said:

“ I am constantly being approached for advice. For example, the PE [physical education] department was thinking about displays and resources in the context of reading. After training they decided to make changes to resources in

regard to reading. The maths [mathematics] department were thinking about wording questions, drawing attention to keywords, getting students to read them aloud.”

Sharing information about struggling readers

In the schools visited, leaders invested resources in making sure information about individual struggling readers was shared across the school. Staff knew which pupils were getting additional help for reading and what aspect of reading they struggled with. Information was shared using pupil profiles, frequent emails, and school information management systems and departmental meetings. By sharing this level of information, schools extended the additional teaching for struggling readers into the classroom and curriculum subject teaching. There was coordination between departments, subject teachers and reading teachers.

Importantly, in these schools, the data shared about struggling readers always went beyond reading ages. Schools often had individual ‘pupil profiles’ that included information about specific reading programmes pupils were using. For instance, reading support staff in one school described how a pupil’s individual learning profile included their strengths, what they struggle with, interventions that are happening or that have already happened, and strategies to help them. All staff had access to this.

In one school, pupils getting additional help for reading were included on a support register. Teachers and support staff could see this so they knew who was receiving an intervention and what this was for. When we asked teachers in this school what information was shared about struggling readers, they said ‘pretty much everything’. They described how data was ‘updated weekly so you know who’s getting what’. Teachers could access shared spreadsheets to find out information, but could also contact key members of staff for further information if needed, such as a literacy lead or a member of the special educational needs and/or disabilities department.

Some schools also shared information on support strategies for individual pupils. This meant there was a consistent approach to how classroom teachers and support staff incorporated the learning from interventions with specialist teachers.

Monitoring the impact of additional teaching and knowing what works

HMI said in focus groups that schools often did not know whether any strategy to help struggling readers was working. This was because they did not evaluate the impact of individual reading programmes. HMI said schools found it hard to talk about the difference something was making and how this informed planning and evaluation. Buying programmes to support struggling readers should be the

beginning, not the end of the process. Before buying a programme, schools should know what will be needed. There is a body of knowledge that all pupils need so they can make progress. Schools should use insightful assessment to ask whether what is in place is helping those who need it most, and what progress these pupils have made in learning that body of knowledge.

In the schools visited, leaders continually monitored the impact of what they were doing, and knew what progress struggling readers were making. They had clear evidence that what they were doing was working.

These schools used regular assessments to understand the gains pupils had made after additional reading teaching. Testing was frequently linked to the individual programmes that supported different components of reading. In 3 schools, each reading programme had some form of baseline measure to monitor progress against. These also allowed the schools to check whether they had the right programme for pupils' reading needs. There was then a post-intervention assessment of the programme's impact. These tests were repeated termly and/or each year, so that schools knew what the pupils had learned, and could monitor their improving reading knowledge. These 'in-out' tests also gave schools information about the effectiveness of individual programmes, so they could make changes when pupils were not catching up as expected.

Each school assessed and monitored pupils until at least Year 9. However, we did not hear any evidence of them continuing to monitor the progress of struggling readers in key stage 4 or beyond. As one reading support staff acknowledged:

“ We need to understand whether what we're doing in Year 7 has an impact on them in Year 11.”

Schools frequently stopped giving pupils additional help once they had 'graduated' from a reading programme or had reached their chronological reading age. This meant that schools might not know if previously struggling readers were continuing to make progress with their reading.

Without further research, it is not possible to know why schools sometimes do not continue to monitor or support struggling readers beyond key stage 3. However, what we heard from one or two leaders suggests that a lack of additional funding after key stage 3 may be one reason. Another reason may be the perception that once pupils have reached their chronological reading age, or 'graduated' from a reading programme, they do not need further help or monitoring.

The lack of ongoing teaching for, or monitoring of, struggling readers in key stage 4 was described by a group of Year 11 pupils we spoke to in one school. Each of these pupils had received additional support for reading earlier in the school. These pupils said they would like more testing to make sure they were still improving as readers.

“ I think once we've got our reading age where it's supposed to be they just expect us to get it from there and keep it at that point.”

“ Testing reading ages every year stops at Year 9. When you know it, you could keep pushing it up and push it to the limit to get a better reading age. Everything stops after Year 9.”

Checking the impact of additional teaching

The schools we visited used different sources of information and data to track the impact of what they were doing. They did not rely solely on data from specific programmes. Schools gathered evidence from classrooms, books and pupils themselves. Leaders in 2 different schools explained that different evidence helped show how additional teaching was affecting reading in the classroom, as well the effectiveness of individual reading programmes:

“ We monitor through a combination of learning walks and lesson observations substantiated by data from interventions.”

“ The literacy programme has assessments along the way and when we correlated the spelling and reading tests with what we were marking in class it matched what the spelling test came back with. It assured us we had selected the right students for the intervention.”

When staff spoke about the impact of what their school was doing to help struggling readers, they frequently spoke about pupils’ confidence and motivation. Teachers at several of the schools had noticed that pupils were more willing to read aloud in class. A reading support teacher described how this backed up the evidence schools had from intervention assessments, and showed that pupils could put what they had learned into practice in the classroom:

“ You can see the progress they’ve made, you see it in lessons when they’re eager to read. It’s beyond the figures – we do what we do to see that palpable result. It’s not necessarily about that number on a spreadsheet or reading age – it’s about them having that confidence.”

Subject teachers also noticed pupils were making fewer mistakes when they read aloud in lessons.

Teachers said struggling readers could see they were improving, and this gave them the confidence and motivation to read more. For instance, in one school, support staff described how one pupil was ‘really proud because he’s moved from being really struggling to being confident enough to read aloud in front of older students.’

Using evidence from classrooms as well as data from interventions gave schools additional evidence of how specialised reading programmes and additional teaching were having an impact in the classroom. This was an important aspect of how schools knew what was effective. It showed that the additional teaching for struggling readers was helping them to access the full curriculum.

What pupils said about the help they got with reading

It was important to talk to pupils about the help they got with reading. By talking to pupils directly, we explored their views of the teaching they had received and their progress as readers. These discussions helped us to better understand the pupils' experience of struggling with reading.

Many pupils said that reading had previously caused them stress and anxiety. This was often when pupils were asked to read aloud in class. One Year 7 pupil said, 'It was really embarrassing because I didn't know how to say some of the words.' Another Year 7 pupil in the same school said:

" When there was a new book in class, it really stressed me out – I didn't know what was happening. Because I'm not the best at reading... if I get stuck on a word, I didn't want to be humiliated for it when reading out loud."

Pupils described how help with reading was improving their confidence and motivation to read. For instance, one Year 7 pupil said that a strategy to 'break down syllables' they were practising in reading classes helped 'boost my confidence to speak fluently in class'. This pupil therefore wanted to read more in class.

A Year 11 pupil in another school explained how he went to read one-to-one with an adult when he was in Year 10. This pupil explained how this 'has helped develop my reading confidence and reading out loud'. For these pupils, confidence and motivation went hand in hand. Pupils felt more confident, and were therefore more motivated to engage with reading, and read more.

What pupils said also confirmed the schools' use of diagnostic reading tests and targeted teaching for specific components of reading. A pupil in Year 7 said the school had assessed his reading and put in place additional teaching to improve his reading fluency.

" When I first joined the school I had to go out a couple of times and do some reading tests with teachers. I started to go into that [reading support] and it helps me a lot with my reading. I don't stutter as much as I used to."

In other schools, pupils could identify specific aspects of reading they were receiving help with. Each of the 3 pupils below talked about the additional teaching they had been given, and the impact it had on their reading:

" I feel like I'm a better reader now. I think because of the help with letter patterns, it makes it more easy to break up and learn more of the words.

" Lexonik has helped with suffixes and prefixes. So if I was to read in English where we do hard texts, when trying to pronounce a word I will usually refer back to the things we have learnt in Lexonik – the starting of words, the ending of words and what it means.

“ When I was reading a book I used to read it too quickly, and mispronounce a word, or miss words out. So it [reading support] really helps me to take my time and kind of take a breather when I’m reading so it’s not so stressful. So I can read really big books now compared to small ones.”

What else did schools do

The research described in this report focuses on the additional help secondary schools give to struggling readers in foundational reading knowledge and skills. In all the schools visited, this targeted help was part of a wider whole-school strategy that prioritised all pupils becoming proficient readers. This made sure that learning from additional teaching for reading was supported in class. A coordinated strategy for reading also helped to create a culture of improving reading, and made sure it was embedded throughout the school. Research shows that initiatives to create a reading culture and promote reading for pleasure will increase struggling readers’ motivation and enthusiasm for reading. [\[footnote 33\]](#)

We saw how teachers and support staff implemented ways to promote reading and made reading visible across the school. For instance, teachers had ‘what I am currently reading’ posters in their classrooms, or as part of their email signatures. One teacher talked about the importance of creating an ethos that promoted the love of reading. Displaying the fact that they read for pleasure was a part of developing that ethos. We also saw displays of subject-specific vocabulary around schools. In one school, a leader had put boxes of books outside her office for pupils to read.

Teachers and reading support staff also frequently talked to pupils about books and what they were reading. One school leader said that displays around the school were intended to ‘start conversations with teachers around reading’.

Pupils told us how teachers would talk to them about reading. For example, one Year 7 pupil said that his teacher would recommend new books because they ‘know what I like’. Other teachers talked about the importance of knowing their pupils and knowing their interests, so they could recommend books they might be interested in or broaden their horizons by introducing them to new authors.

The role of librarians

The schools spoke about the importance of having highly skilled librarians who could help purchase books and direct pupils to books they found interesting. Three of the schools had at least one professionally qualified librarian.

In all of the schools, librarians were part of school initiatives to increase pupils’ reading and they supported reading-for-pleasure initiatives across the school. One literacy leader stressed how valuable the school librarian was:

“ I want to really emphasise the importance of a well-informed librarian. Over the years we really had to fight for that but it’s made all the difference.”

Librarians also played an active role in supporting struggling readers. In 3 schools, librarians had access to data on struggling readers, such as reading ages, and helped pupils to find books that they might like and that were suitable for them. In 2 schools, librarians were responsible for online reading assessments. One librarian administered reading tests at the end of a paired reading scheme. Librarians used this information to find out what pupils were reading. In each of these schools, librarians were part of the way schools used data to monitor the progress of struggling readers and to recommend suitable books for them to read.

In one school, we heard how engaging with particular groups, such as struggling readers, was part of the librarian's performance targets. The librarian created opportunities for struggling readers to use the library more regularly, and frequently had the very weakest readers in the library.

Conclusion

The evidence from the schools visited shows how they are addressing some of the problems described by HMI around effective help for the weakest readers. What we saw in these 6 schools aligns with research evidence that underlines the importance of diagnostic assessment and targeted help to address specific gaps in reading. What the report adds to this evidence is the importance of secondary school leaders who commit time and resources to meet the complexities and challenges of making sure that all pupils become proficient readers.

The schools we visited used different reading programmes and assessments to make sure that struggling readers got the right help. There was a clear pattern in what these schools were doing and what they identified as their priorities.

In each school, leaders prioritised early screening, followed by diagnostic assessment where needed. These were used to give the right additional help to readers, based on the specific gaps in their reading knowledge. School leaders understood the need to identify specific reading gaps and weaknesses, and made sure that the staff working with struggling readers were trained to teach reading. Schools also monitored the impact of what they provided for struggling readers, and could make changes when something did not help pupils to catch up quickly.

We also saw how additional help for struggling readers was part of a wider whole-school strategy to improve the reading of all pupils. This meant that as well as additional teaching in the foundational components of reading, such as accurate word reading and fluency, struggling readers benefited from teaching across the curriculum that focused on the vocabulary knowledge needed for comprehension and subject-specific reading.

Annex A: detailed research methods

This project was an in-depth qualitative study. The aim was to understand what schools did and why, rather than measure the impact of additional teaching for struggling readers. There was also no intention to assess the quality of support for struggling readers or reading support across the school. The aim was to develop an understanding of what effective practice might look like, to support other secondary schools and inform inspection practice.

This research focused on: pupils in secondary school who struggle with reading; and schools that successfully identify and meet these pupils' individual needs, and how they do this. We wanted to investigate what some schools did that supported struggling readers to 'buck the trend' so that they made accelerated progress to get at least a grade 4 in GCSE English language. [\[footnote 34\]](#) We also wanted to understand how these pupils were supported so that they could access the wider curriculum and leave school with the reading skills to participate fully in society and the workplace.

The research questions guiding this research were:

- How do secondary schools with strong outcomes for struggling readers identify these pupils' particular reading needs?
- How do these schools commonly support these pupils so that they become proficient readers?
- How do leaders in these schools know the impact of their reading interventions?
- What do pupils who were previously struggling readers say about the support they have received and the progress they have made?

Data collection

We used different sources of data to provide background information when deciding on the research aims and the focus for visits to secondary schools. We collected data from:

- literature review – to understand the issues for struggling adolescent readers and review evidence of effective strategies and interventions shown to support older struggling readers
- secondary and primary schools HMI – to understand the current issues they find in schools and what might support inspection practice
- inspection evidence retrieval – to validate the sample of schools to visit, and better understand what schools do to identify and support struggling readers
- secondary school visits – to collect first-hand evidence from pupils, teachers and senior leaders about what schools do to help struggling readers

The background information directly informed our final selection of schools, as well as the topics and people we wanted to interview in schools. The use of academic literature and current practice ensured that the research was both evidence informed and practice led. This was an important consideration, given the research aim of supporting school practice and inspector training.

School visit sampling strategy

The aim of this research was to illustrate what some secondary schools do to support struggling readers effectively. We did not want to measure the effectiveness of support, but instead wanted to develop an in-depth understanding of some common threads of good practice and high-quality provision that could be used in similar contexts. We therefore used a purposive sample of a small number of schools where a range of evidence indicated accelerated progress for readers who did not meet national standards on entry to Year 7.

We used the NPD to identify 40 top performing secondary schools. In these schools, data showed that pupils who entered Year 7 with below expected standards in reading went on to make accelerated progress, and achieved at least a grade 4 in GCSE English language. All the schools in the NPD sample had at least 35 pupils in Year 11 who had achieved level 3 or below in the key stage 2 reading comprehension assessment in Year 6. [\[footnote 35\]](#) Data was extracted for Year 11 in both 2018/19 and 2017/18. We excluded pupils who speak English as an additional language, because we wanted to identify pupils who struggled with reading specifically rather than English language.

Visit school selection

We further validated schools by looking at their websites for information on how they identified and supported struggling readers. We looked particularly at schools' 2019/20 Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up premium information. [\[footnote 36\]](#) The catch-up statements gave detailed information about how schools had spent the additional government funding to support Year 7 pupils who did not achieve the expected standard in reading or mathematics at the end of key stage 2. We also looked at any recent inspection evidence that specifically mentioned reading. The final selection was determined by those schools that were able to host a visit, given the number of schools that were still affected by COVID-19-related pressures. Table 1 shows the final sample breakdown.

Table 1: List of secondary schools visited, with contextual data

Type of school	Phase of education	Inspection grade	Inspection date	% disadvantaged	Location
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Type of school	Phase of education	Inspection grade	Inspection date	% disadvantaged	Location
Local authority (LA) maintained	11–16	Good	Autumn 2021	34	Urban
Academy converter – multi-academy trust	11–18	Outstanding	September 2013	34	Urban
Academy sponsored	11–18	Good	Spring 2020	30	Urban
LA maintained	4–18	Good	Autumn 2018	33	Major conurbation
Academy converter	11–18	Good	Spring 2018	30	Major conurbation
LA maintained	11–16	Outstanding	Autumn 2014	30	Urban

Note: Major conurbations include London, the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Tyneside, Merseyside and Greater Manchester.

Limitations

A limitation to the research was a lack of validated data for GCSE outcomes after 2019, due to the use of teacher assessments in 2020 and 2021. This meant there was a risk that a school's performance and reading strategy could have changed and results dropped. In order to avoid visiting schools that may have seen a fall in performance, we looked at any recent inspection data for evidence of effective reading strategies. We also looked at schools' websites for any evidence of how they supported and identified struggling readers.

Another limitation was talking to pupils chosen by the school. This could result in only meeting pupils who spoke favourably about the support they received. The reason for allowing schools to identify pupils was primarily a logistical one. The alternative would have involved contacting parents of struggling readers directly.

As we were investigating what schools do well, we felt it was appropriate to speak to pupils selected by the school. As it turned out, the pupils were able to speak critically about the help they got.

We visited a small number of schools and therefore the findings do not represent what all secondary schools do. The report illustrates how 6 high-performing schools are effective in identifying what help struggling readers need and targeting individual teaching. The research was an in-depth qualitative investigation. The findings show what works in these schools, rather than providing recommendations for all schools.

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36. This funding was discontinued from September 2020.

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