

# INTO KNOWLEDGE ACTION

INFORMING WHAT WORKS  
... RAISING ATTAINMENT  
AND REDUCING INEQUITY



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## BRIEFING 2:

# A KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION RESOURCE FOR PRACTITIONERS AND EDUCATION STAFF

### EARLY READING

This briefing uses published research to explore what teachers can do to support early reading development. It has a particular focus on meeting the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The briefing draws on a range of research including small-and large-scale studies and reviews. Teachers, local authority staff and others may find it a useful starting point in becoming familiar with the research in this area, although it does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of the research base.

### OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

- Learning to read is complex. Children must develop a range of inter-connected skills and knowledge. Some skills and knowledge develop as a result of direct instruction and practice. Others develop more slowly, through children having many repeated experiences with books.
- Evidence shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland are less likely to attain well in their reading. Key factors which drive this appear to be the quantity of reading experiences that young children have at home and the quality of those experiences. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have less access to high-quality picture books, their home reading experiences tend to be less frequent and their conversations with adults about books tend to be shorter, less playful and narrower in scope. Home learning environments influence children's views of what reading is for, their knowledge of books and stories, their phonological awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary and oral language development.

- The most effective approach to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds become successful readers is to provide high-quality teaching and home reading experiences. High-quality teaching is well planned but flexible. It provides succinct, meaningful explanations, contextualises tasks and makes them purposeful. It is also responsive to children's needs and gives them plenty of opportunities to practise and develop mastery skills, and enjoyment. This requires a range of teaching approaches, including: direct explanation; modelling; coaching; co-operative learning; and independent learning. These generic approaches are effective for all learners but teachers should monitor their impact on particular groups of children to determine the best 'learning mix'. High-quality home-school links support children's learning at home, and ensure that teachers build on this learning.
- Targeted support programmes for children who struggle with reading may involve one-to-one tutoring or small group teaching. These should be short-term interventions that aim to get children to the same level as their peers. Their success should be monitored and they should be adapted in response to this evidence.
- Reading provides access to many other curricular areas and it is important that all children learn to read well. An effective early years reading curriculum is a crucial first step in the literacy journey. In addition, reading instruction should continue into the middle and upper-primary, and secondary schooling.

## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ARE THE KEY READING EXPERIENCES AND SKILLS THAT CHILDREN AGED 4-8 YEARS REQUIRE?

Teachers need to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds develop a positive relationship with books and see reading as an enjoyable, relaxing, meaningful and enriching part of their lives (Perkins, 2015). This means children from disadvantaged backgrounds need to be introduced to books that are emotionally and intellectually engaging. They should experience wide-ranging conversations about those books with adults and other children. They need opportunities to browse, to talk about stories, re-tell stories, link stories to their own lives and share their reactions to stories. They also need to 'have-a-go' at reading in a range of contexts. To do this, teachers must be interested and knowledgeable about the child, about books and about literacy processes (Campbell, 2002).

Successful readers learn that reading is about communicating meaning and that what they read should make sense (Perkins, 2015). This is a particularly important message for children who may have had fewer or weaker home reading experiences. All children need to be taught to decode, making flexible use of a range of cues and strategies, with opportunities to practise their reading on a range of texts to develop fluency and confidence as readers. Teaching decoding should include teaching children how to use syntactic and semantic knowledge, alongside knowledge of the alphabetic system and phonics. This helps them learn to orchestrate visual, semantic and syntactic cues to make sense of the text (Allington, 2014). All young children, but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, need support to remember and reconstruct ideas whilst reading, and to use this semantic information fluently during reading.

Young readers need to 'crack the alphabetic code' (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rowe, 2005; Sharples et al., 2011). Systematic, explicit phonics teaching is important, but evidence supporting any particular phonics approach is inconclusive. What appears to matter most is to match phonics teaching to the needs of individual groups of children (Connor et al., 2007; Education Endowment Foundation, 2015a). Phonics should be part of a balanced programme of early reading teaching (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Analysis of US data by Pearson and Hiebert (2010, cited in Ellis and Moss, 2014) shows that children can become good at phonics but remain poor readers. Competence in phonics draws on the broader skills of phonological awareness (becoming consciously aware of the sounds in words) and is developed through the sort of word-sound-play integral to nursery rhymes and language games (Rowe, 2005; Stahl and Miller, 1989). Broader auditory discrimination skills that help children distinguish between quite similar sounds are also necessary. These can be developed through rhythmic musical activities and clapping games, as well as physical activities such as skipping and dancing (Flaughnacco et al., 2014).

Fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills are also important at all stages of education (Sharples et al., 2011). Fluency relates to children's ability to read aloud with speed, accuracy and expression to aid comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Comprehension can be impeded by poor vocabulary development (ibid), narrow cultural experiences and general knowledge, as well as by poor knowledge of texts and text structures (Shanahan et al., 2010). Activities that specifically focus on vocabulary development can assist young children from disadvantaged backgrounds to widen their vocabulary by understanding concepts and their properties (Neuman et al., 2011).

Research suggests that successful reading programmes should attend to areas including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Hattie, 2007). Allington (2005), suggested five additional areas to focus on including: interesting texts and choice; appropriate text levels; connecting writing and reading; balanced classroom organisation; and expert tuition.

### **WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US ARE THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES THAT CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS FACE IN LEARNING TO READ?**

Poor reading attainment has long-term effects and impacts negatively on wider educational attainment (Sosu and Ellis, 2014). Research shows that a family's socio-economic status can have an impact on children's literacy skills (Buckingham et al., 2014). The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy 2014, using an area-based measure of deprivation, also indicates that learners living in the least deprived areas have higher reading attainment than those from the middle and most deprived areas. The difference is evident as children move through the school system and increases between P7 and S2 (Scottish Government, 2015).

In the research literature socio-economic status is a measure which is usually made up of three components: household income; parental occupation; and parental education (Buckingham et al., 2013). A review by Buckingham et al., (2014) indicated that these factors are complex and interrelated. There is not a direct relationship between socio-economic status and literacy (ibid). For instance, the home learning environment has an impact on literacy development (Buckingham et al., 2014). The early home learning environment can be measured by the availability of literacy resources in the home, cultural enrichment and reading-related parenting practices from birth to 5 (Buckingham et al. 2014). Home learning environments influence children's views of what reading is for, their knowledge of books and stories, their phonological awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary and oral language development (Bonci, 2011).

Research suggests that low-income families tend to have lower-quality home learning environments (Buckingham et al., 2014). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have less access to high-quality picture books, their home reading experiences tend to be less frequent and their conversations with adults about books tend to be shorter, less playful and narrower in scope (Bonci, 2011). Evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland survey suggests that, in general, children whose parents had higher qualifications are more frequently involved in home

learning activities such as reading and painting than those whose parents had fewer or no qualifications (Bradshaw, 2011). However, it is important to note that some children from disadvantaged backgrounds do experience high-quality home learning environments (Buckingham et al., 2014).

Bearing in mind the research above, teaching and learning can therefore have disproportionately positive or negative impacts on young children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack access to literacy resources, cultural enrichment and reading-related parenting practices (Buckingham et al., 2014; Sharples et al., 2011). At the same time, some children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more 'resilient'. Evidence from the PISA studies suggests that this resilience can be fostered by activities and approaches that foster children and young people's motivation, and self-confidence (OECD, 2011).

### **WHAT ARE THE SCHOOL-BASED/LED INTERVENTIONS, STRATEGIES OR APPROACHES FOR TEACHING READING THAT HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN HELPING CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS TO READ?**

There is no doubt that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can become good readers given effective support (Buckingham et al., 2014; Ellis, 2015). This includes intellectually challenging, knowledge-rich classroom environments and teaching which creates a mix of literacy learning opportunities that matches pupils' needs. 'Growth mindset' research suggests teachers should challenge ideas that children have a fixed learning ability (Dweck, 2010). Also, children are 'active agents and capable of influencing their own interactions with parents, peers and schools' (Hartas, 2012a). This means that developing children's own attitudes to learning and their social competencies are important factors.

Drawing on randomised control trials, the Education Endowment Foundation reports some intervention strategies and programmes that are effective for 'closing the gap' for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They cover, for example, the effectiveness of phonics and phonological awareness programmes (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015a), and reading comprehension interventions (children aged over 8) (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015b). The What Works Clearinghouse from the USA produces practice guides that embrace broader research methodologies. They provide evidence-based classroom advice on, for example, comprehension teaching (Shanahan et al., 2010), and English as an additional language (Gersten et al., 2007).

Research suggests that the most effective approach to improving outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is to ensure that they receive high-quality teaching in the first place (Sharples et al., 2011). High-quality teaching is well-planned but flexible, provides succinct, meaningful explanations, contextualises tasks and makes them purposeful, is responsive to children's needs and gives children plenty of opportunities to practise and develop mastery skills, and enjoyment (Hall, 2012). This requires a range of teaching approaches, including: direct explanation; modelling; coaching; co-operative learning; and independent learning (ibid). These generic approaches are effective for all learners but teachers should monitor their impact on particular groups of children to determine the best 'learning mix'. An effective early years reading curriculum is a crucial first step in the literacy journey. In addition, reading instruction should continue into the middle and upper-primary, and secondary schooling (Leu et al., 2015).

If children are still finding it challenging to read, more targeted approaches can also be effective. For instance, specific programmes that provide one-to-one reading support by teachers, or well-trained support staff, have been found to be very effective, especially those which have a stronger emphasis on phonics (Sharples et al., 2011). These groups of staff can also provide effective support for readers with less serious problems by using small group teaching (in groups of two to six) (ibid). These should be short-term interventions that aim to get children to the class average (Pinnell and Fountas, 2009). Their success should be monitored and they should be adapted in response to this evidence.

Working with children's families and carers helps them promote rich and frequent home reading, because families know their children so well (Wood and Payler, 2014). However, programmes should be realistic, build parental agency alongside parents' engagement, capacity, knowledge and access to children's books (Hartas, 2012b).

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

- Does your teaching reflect the key areas of good reading which research has identified (phonemic awareness; phonics; fluency; vocabulary and comprehension) as well as interesting texts/choice; appropriate text levels; connecting writing and reading and balanced classroom organisation?
- What evidence do you use to determine (and revise) the best 'learning mix' for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in your class? Should the mix be changed?
- How do you engage parents to help them support home reading? What are your expectations? Their expectations? What resources could you provide to help parents, in particular those living in disadvantaged areas? How do you consider the home reading environment when teaching?
- How confident are you about your professional knowledge of the children, of books, and of literacy processes?



## FIND OUT MORE

The following resources, published by Education Scotland, may be of use:

Education Scotland Primary One Literacy Action and Assessment Resource (POLAAR)

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/p/polaar/introduction.asp?strReferringChannel=learningandteaching&strReferringPageID=tcm:4-536738-64&class=l3+d134498+d134510>

Education Scotland: 3-18 Literacy Review

[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/3to18LiteracyandEnglishReview\\_tcm4-856583.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/3to18LiteracyandEnglishReview_tcm4-856583.pdf)

Education Scotland SSLN Professional Learning Resources, supporting reading, writing and listening and talking (group discussion)

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/assessment/ssln/resources/literacyprofessionallearningresource/index.asp>

Education Scotland Journey to Excellence

<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/>

Education Endowment Foundation – Phonics

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z/phonics/>

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**This briefing is not a comprehensive overview of published research in a particular area. Nor is it a definitive statement of policy or a recommendation to adopt a particular approach.**

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