

# KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

INFORMING WHAT WORKS  
... RAISING ATTAINMENT  
AND REDUCING INEQUITY

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A Knowledge Into Action resource for practitioners and education staff

## Briefing 2: **EARLY READING**

This briefing uses published research to explore what teachers can do to support early reading skills. 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

- Children need to develop a number of inter-connected skills to learn to read successfully. An important first step is for children to develop decoding skills, through the teaching of phonics (how letters are linked to sounds) and phonological awareness. A balanced reading programme should also develop children's fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills.
- Evidence from Scotland shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have difficulties with their reading. One of the key factors which drives this appears to be the quality of the home learning environment, which can influence children's phonological awareness, vocabulary development and oral language.
- As a result, phonics-based approaches are more likely to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds master the basics of reading.
- The most effective approach to improving reading for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is to ensure that they receive high quality teaching. A range of teaching approaches including, for example, co-operative learning approaches can be effective for all learners, including those who were having difficulties with



reading. More targeted support programmes for children who are struggling with reading can also be effective if required, for instance one-to-one tutoring or small group teaching.

- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds can learn to read well when they receive high quality teaching which includes an appropriate mix of learning approaches that meets their needs.

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

Children need to develop decoding, fluency and comprehension skills in their primary years if they are to make good progress and become confident readers. Decoding skills are an important foundation for successful early reading, including knowledge about the alphabetic system and an awareness of phonics (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rowe, 2005; Sharples et al, 2011; Bus and van IJzendoorn, 1999). The systematic, explicit teaching of phonics is important for the teaching of reading, and there are a number of different approaches to doing this, e.g. synthetic phonics and analytic phonics. Evidence supporting a particular phonics approach is not conclusive, however what appears more effective is to match phonics teaching to the needs of individual children (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015a). It is particularly important that phonics is part of a balanced programme of early reading teaching (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). As Pearson et al. (2010, cited in Ellis, 2015) has noted, children can become good at phonics but remain poor readers.

As well as these important foundational skills, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills are important at all stages of education (Sharples et al., 2011). Fluency relates to children's ability to read aloud with speed, accuracy and proper expression (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Comprehension relates to children's ability to understand what they have read and includes skills such as vocabulary development (*ibid*). Hattie (2007) suggests that the key to children reading successfully appears to be paying attention to the 'five pillars' of good reading – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

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

Research (e.g. Buckingham et al., 2014) has consistently shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to find reading difficult, and that these gaps in ability are evident before the start of schooling. Results from Scottish research and national monitoring studies bear this out. For instance, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy 2014 shows that learners living in the least deprived areas had higher reading performance than those in the middle and most deprived areas at all stages, particularly at S2 (Scottish Government, 2015).

The relationship between a child's socio-economic status and their reading ability is a complex one (Buckingham et al., 2014). One of the factors that influences reading outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is the quality of the early home learning environment, which can influence children's phonological awareness as well as their vocabulary and oral language (*ibid*). The early home learning environment for reading is a measure of the availability of literacy resources in the home, cultural enrichment and reading-related parenting practices from birth to five (*ibid*). Parental education is one of the important factors that influences the home learning environment (Hartas, 2013). Evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland study suggests that some children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland face challenges in their home learning environment. For instance, children whose parents had higher qualifications were more frequently involved in home learning activities such as reading, painting and games involving shapes and numbers than those whose parents had fewer or no qualifications (Bradshaw, 2011).

It is important to note that the different factors that affect children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not determine their outcomes (Buckingham et al., 2014; Ellis, 2015). It is also important to note that children are “active agents who are capable of influencing their own interactions with parents, peers and schools” (Hartas, 2012). This means that children's own attitudes to learning and their social competencies are important factors to consider when planning their learning (*ibid*).

## **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?**

As Ellis (2015) has noted, children from disadvantaged backgrounds learn to read well when a number of important factors are in place. These include intellectually challenging classroom environments and teaching which creates a mix of literacy learning opportunities that match pupils' needs.

The Education Endowment Foundation, which aims to identify strategies that are effective for 'closing the gap' for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, highlights that phonics-based approaches have been found to have been effective in supporting younger readers to master the basics, as part of a balanced reading programme (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015a). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have developed a rich phonological awareness through their home learning environments (Rowe, 2005, Stahl and Miller, 1989).

The Education Endowment Foundation also suggests that reading comprehension strategies that focus on learners' understanding of words and texts are effective for children aged over eight, especially those who are not making effective progress (Education Endowment Foundation, 2015b). Programmes which specifically focus on vocabulary development can also assist children from disadvantaged backgrounds not only to develop their vocabulary but also to better identify concepts and their properties (Neuman et al., 2011).

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). For instance, cooperative learning approaches used with a class were found to be effective for all learners, as well as those who were the lowest performing (*ibid*).

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*).

## 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=I3+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/>

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

- How does your teaching reflect Hattie's 'five pillars of good reading' (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension)?
- What targeted interventions do you use to support children who continue to have difficulties learning to read?
- What aspects of the home learning environment do you consider when teaching children to read?
- How are you supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds to learn to read?
- How are you engaging parents to help them support home learning?

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.

# References

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