The reading framework

Teaching the foundations of literacy

Section 4: Children at risk of reading failure

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Keeping up from the start

Teachers should aim for all children to keep up with the school's chosen phonics programme, ensuring teaching time is sufficient for the content to be taught within the time-scales the programme sets out.

Some children need extra support from the beginning. Assessment (see [Section 3](#)) should identify such children as soon as they begin to fall behind their peers (if not already identified). Teachers, working with others if necessary, should investigate possible reasons, such as whether a child might have a hearing or visual impairment, or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).
To enable children to keep up, they should be given extra practice, either in a small group or one-to-one, whether or not a specific reason has been found. The extra practice should:

- take place in a quiet place, at a regular time every day so that the children become familiar with the routine
- be a school priority, with maximum efforts made to avoid disruption or cancellation
- be provided by a well-trained adult: teacher or teaching assistant
- be consistent with the school's mainstream phonics programme
- include activities that secure the important phonic knowledge the children have not grasped.

The emphasis should be on:

- consolidating the work the children have already met in their main class or group phonics session, with bite-sized steps so all of them can achieve success every day
- revising grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs)
- practising oral blending of spoken sounds to pronounce words
- reading words by saying the sounds and blending them.

The children should continue to read 'decodable' books (see [Section 3](#)), that is, books that include only words with GPCs they have been explicitly taught, until they can blend sounds to read new words fluently and automatically.

For various reasons, some parents cannot support their children's reading at home. Schools should provide extra opportunities for these children to read to adults and to listen to adults reading to them.

Audit: Keeping up from the start

	Current practice
Phonics lessons are of the highest quality to reduce the likelihood that children might need extra support.	
Children at risk of falling behind are identified within the first three weeks of their starting in their Reception year.	
These children have extra daily phonics practice with a well-trained adult.	
Each child receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Older pupils who need to catch up

After year 1, learning in the wider curriculum depends increasingly on literacy. Pupils who cannot read well enough do not have full access to the curriculum. Those who fail to learn to read early on often start to dislike reading. They read less than others – and less often – and do not accumulate the background knowledge and vocabulary from reading that their peers do. The word-rich get richer, while the word-poor get poorer.[1]

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[1] Robert Merton is credited with creating the term 'Matthew Effect': Merton RK (1968). 'The Matthew effect in science' Science: volume 159, pages 56-63. Keith Stanovich and others applied the term to the idea that, in reading, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
https://childrenofthecode.org/library/refs/mattheweffect.htm

Most of them will catch up if they receive a few months of intensive individual or small-group teaching; they should not need this extra support indefinitely. Late arrivals into the school may also need to catch up with their peers, particularly those who are new to the English education system or whose first language is not English.

Those with learning difficulties (see Section 3) may need longer, but every pupil needs to master the alphabetic code (see Section 3), whether they have special educational needs or not.[2]

School leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators in primary and secondary schools must take responsibility for making sure all these pupils make rapid progress.

If pupils' reading is below what is expected for their age, it is important to determine whether they have difficulty with word reading (decoding), language comprehension or both of these, since different kinds of teaching are needed for each. Figure 2 below, the model of the Simple View of Reading introduced earlier (see Section 1), suggests four patterns of performance that reflect 'relative differences in the balance of word recognition and language comprehension abilities'.[3] The model can be useful when thinking about children's reading difficulties and where they might lie in terms of three of the four quadrants.

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[2] Johnston R and Watson J (2005). 'The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study' Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

[3] Rose J (2006). 'Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report' Department for Education and Skills

Figure 2: The Simple View of Reading
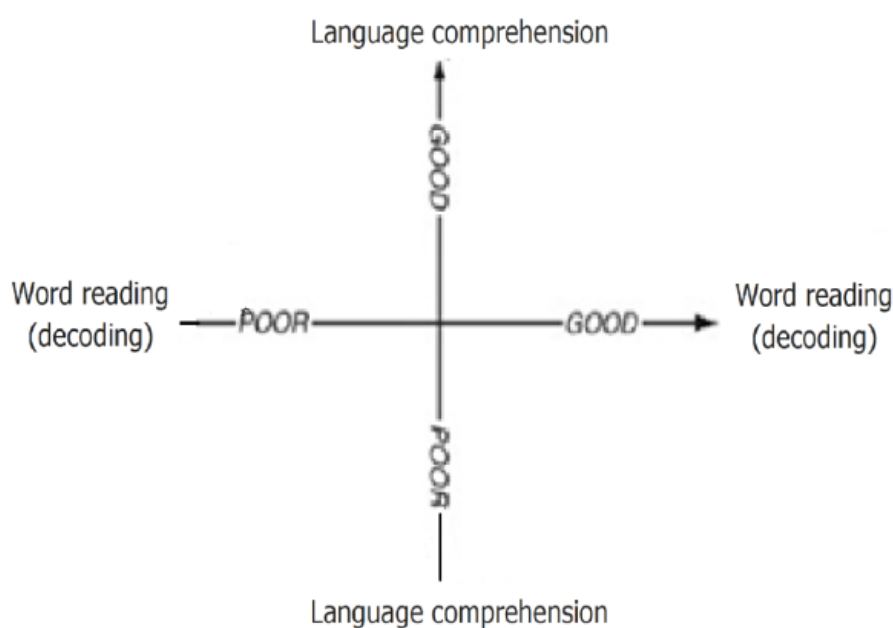
Good word reading but poor comprehension

The bottom right-hand quadrant represents children who have good word reading skills, but have difficulty understanding what they have decoded. Even if an adult read the text aloud to them, they would still have difficulty. Children with speech, language and communication needs or who speak English as an additional language might well fall into this category.

Good comprehension but poor word reading

The top left-hand quadrant represents those whose understanding is good: they have a large vocabulary and extensive background knowledge. However, they cannot decode words easily. They therefore need to be taught to do this urgently through a synthetic phonics programme that is systematic and rigorous, with plenty of practice.

The books they are able to decode are likely to be far below their good level of comprehension. This means that they need to continue to develop their understanding through hearing and talking about books and poems and learning new vocabulary across the curriculum, along with the rest of their class, while their decoding catches up with the knowledge and skills they already have.

Poor comprehension and poor word reading

The bottom left-hand quadrant represents children who have poor language comprehension and who also cannot decode words easily. Although they have similar difficulties with decoding as the children just described (represented by the top left-hand quadrant), their limited language skills can obscure their poor decoding.

Teachers may have low expectations of them and not realise how much their reading comprehension might improve if they had extra practice in decoding through a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme, in addition to developing their comprehension, because the first step in reading comprehension is the ability to decode common and familiar words 'at a glance' and unfamiliar words speedily and silently.

Assessing older pupils whose reading is poor

The school should use the phonics assessments in its chosen programme to identify the extent of these pupils' phonic knowledge and skill and to identify any gaps exactly. Even pupils in the bottom right-hand quadrant, whose decoding skills appear to be good, may not be able to read fluently enough to concentrate on comprehension and may benefit from extra phonics teaching.

These pupils do not need something different from others who are learning to read: the same alphabetic code knowledge and phonics skills underpin all reading.

Organising and teaching catch-up

Providing catch-up teaching is vital, however difficult it may be to organise the time, space and staff (see Section 5: Leadership and management on ways to handle this difficulty).

The phonics programme a school chooses for catch-up provision, as for beginner readers, should be an SSP programme. However, for older pupils who are still at the earliest stages of learning to read, schools might want to avoid programmes specifically designed for younger children and consider those with age-appropriate lessons and materials.

Teaching should happen in the same place and at the same time, so that the pupils know what is planned and do not have to cope with changes. Leaders may have to be creative to achieve this. Good reading is the only route to success at school, so leaders also have to overcome the concerns of teachers and of parents that pupils are missing some mainstream lessons.

Leaders should invest in a strong team, committed to making sure these children catch up. Ideally, they should be school staff or long-stay tutors, rather than external teachers or tutors who might stay only a short time. They should be trained, supported and coached.

To continue to develop these pupils' language and vocabulary, and encourage a love of reading, their class teachers should make sure that they listen to and discuss the same texts that their peers read in their English lessons. However, then asking them to read the texts by themselves and complete written comprehension activities wastes their time and further demoralises them, because their decoding skills do not yet allow them to read well enough. Written composition might also be too challenging for most of them.

Audit: Older pupils who need to catch up

	Current practice
Phonic assessments identify pupils with poor decoding skills as soon as possible.	
Sufficient support accelerates progress, including for new arrivals and pupils who are learning English as an additional language.	
Each pupil receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	