Supporting Reading and Literacy in Secondary Schools

A quick guide to supporting the needs of developing readers
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This guide is for SENCOs and whole-school staff.

The policy context of this guide

Pupils who struggle to develop as readers will find it hard to cope independently with the reading challenges of secondary schooling and see reading as a problem rather than as a tool for learning or a source of pleasure and satisfaction.

‘There can be no more important subject than English in the school curriculum. English is a pre-eminent world language, it is at the heart of our culture and it is the language medium in which most of our pupils think and communicate. Literacy skills are also crucial to pupils’ learning in other subjects across the curriculum.’

Moving English forward, Ofsted, March 2012

Ofsted reported, in March 2012, that as many as one in five children at entry to secondary school, or 100,000 children, did not reach the expected level at the end of primary English Key Stage 2 SATs. In 2011, 45% of pupils who achieved the lower end of what was then level 4 at age 11 did not achieve a Grade C in their GCSE English. As many as 5% of children are entering secondary school with a significant deficit in their reading skills.

This guide aims to:

+ describe the responsibility of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) in supporting whole-school approaches to struggling readers
+ provide practical strategies for use within secondary schools
+ suggest other resources that SENCOs can utilise to improve reading progress within their school.
In 2011 Ofsted produced guidance for inspectors, entitled *Getting them reading early*, which highlighted the importance of improving the teaching of early reading by adopting the conceptual framework ‘simple view of reading’. This emphasised the recommendations made in the Rose Report to move away from the Searchlights model and focus on recognition and language comprehension, as both are essential to achieve effective reading.

As teachers assess children’s performance and progress within both word recognition and language comprehension processes, they need to identify children’s particular learning needs and use this analysis to guide further teaching and interventions. This quick guide takes a holistic view of a young person as a whole person who needs to be motivated and encouraged to enjoy the benefits of reading, rather than seeing reading as a series of ‘skills’ that have to be attained.

**Expectations of the SENCO**

Ofsted’s *Reading and Literacy FAQs* (2012) for inspectors provides a concise summary of the expectations on school leaders and SENCOs:

‘Inspectors would want to find out whether leaders and managers know enough about reading – both to challenge where teaching is not good enough and standards need improving and to provide practical support for teachers. Inspectors...
would also want to be assured that leaders and managers have clear, simple, consistent procedures and recording systems to track pupils’ progress in reading.’

It goes on to say that school inspectors want to be reassured that leaders and managers know who the weakest readers in each year group are and what is being done to support them. It should also be clear where responsibility lies for the progress of these pupils.

**What is the challenge?**

With senior leaders in their schools, SENCOs should determine which assessments will be used to audit the needs of individual struggling readers, and then base interventions for groups on these assessment audits. Cognitive Ability Test (CAT) scores can provide a first step, with a

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**The SENCO role**

Typically in secondary schools the role of the SENCO covers areas such as:

- Middle leadership responsibilities – the strategic management of special educational needs.
- Wider responsibilities – to young people identified through the SEND Code of Practice and for monitoring and evaluating whole-school provision for vulnerable groups.
- Clarity regarding the identification of this group of learners (struggling readers may have additional provision) and which department/team holds responsibility for their progress.
- Wider inclusion – greater whole-school responsibility for meeting low incidence needs.
- Evidence of the impact of provision – provided to pupils, governors, parents, the local authority (LA) and other external agencies if required.
- Contribution to rigorous self-evaluation.
second stage of screening and assessment then required for students who are below national expectations in reading and other areas of learning. (The March 2014 issue of *Special* magazine includes an Initial Concerns Checklist, which is also available in the members’ area of the nasen website.)

The National Strategies used assessment focuses for reading that described the key elements of performance in this area of learning. While there is now a new National Curriculum, audits or assessment of pupils’ strengths and weaknesses within these areas will still provide a starting point for interventions and strategies for individual pupils.

So, to become fluent readers, children and young people need to:

- Use a range of strategies, including accurate decoding of text, to read for meaning.
  - This has most prominence in describing the early stages of reading.
  - Evidence comes from listening to pupils read aloud and observing how they decode words to make meaning from texts.
  - Reading aloud with fluency, understanding and expression also involves taking note of punctuation and other written language conventions.
- Understand, describe, select or retrieve information, events or ideas from texts...
and use quotation and reference to text.
- This applies to all levels of reading and all kinds of texts.
- Pupils’ skills in retrieving information from texts are shown in different ways, from comments and paraphrases or retellings to summary and synthesis.
- At the highest levels, work in this area demonstrates critical insights based on close reading.
- Deduce, infer or interpret information, events or ideas from texts.
- This area of focus is vital to making progress in reading and underpins attainment across all areas of reading development.
- Opportunities to develop inferential skills come from engagement with whole texts that challenge thinking and encourage pupils to enjoy the benefits of reading, rather than seeing reading as a series of ‘skills’ that can be acquired.

Finding solutions

The publication of The Sutton Trust information on what works for the pupil premium has signalled a renewed interest in evidence-based interventions. Ofsted’s report Excellence in English (2011) provides a number of case studies from schools where reading has been prioritised as part of a range of interventions to raise attainment. The report is explicit in identifying a link between reading for pleasure and developing a culture of excellence.

Moor End Academy

Moor End Academy in Huddersfield has a high percentage of students who have English as an additional language (EAL) on roll, so uses distributed leadership coupled with a creative approach to provide an engaging curriculum for students.

Teachers feel that they are encouraged to be creative and to take risks in lessons. This approach accompanies an emphasis on distributed leadership in English. All teachers are expected to lead on aspects of the department’s work. Teachers work well together and feel valued. Teamwork has been developed through a number of approaches, including:
- a carousel for GCSE course work where all teachers offer an area of specialism
- informal ‘teacher swaps’ where teachers exchange classes for a lesson
- team teaching, such as the use of the lecture theatre for large groups
- departmental mentoring, where a teacher other than the class teacher works with identified pupils
- opportunities for new and young teachers to be fully involved from the start, for example acting as ‘coaches’ where they have areas of expertise.
Round Oak Special School

Round Oak Special School in Warwick is a purpose-built special school that caters for students of secondary age with a wide range of special educational needs and/or disabilities. The Ofsted report notes that the school is committed to enabling all pupils to access a full range of texts, the key to this being a well-planned and differentiated curriculum.

Differentiation is a very strong and sophisticated element in the quality of curriculum and lesson planning across the school. The schemes are carefully tailored to the needs of students through:
- the use of specific objectives to guide general planning and individual lessons, usually at three levels
- the interpretation of schemes to ensure access for all students, using a range of media and multi-sensory approaches
- the provision of resources to match the differing objectives and capabilities of students, for example text at three levels: original, abridged, and in ‘communicate in print’ format
- a range of tasks at different levels to match the objectives, often with differing outcomes
- focused support from teachers and teaching assistants
- regular assessment in lessons to identify learning and shape progress
- flexible responses to students during lessons, adjusting approaches, support or materials as the lesson progresses.

Effective differentiation means that all students are helped to engage with the full range of themes and genres. Texts that might be considered beyond the reading capacity of many of the students are made accessible to them. Interactive whiteboards, DVDs, information and communications technology, drama and role-play activities are used to involve students and make learning enjoyable.

Nasen has made available on its YouTube channel several videos demonstrating how children can be included in literacy lessons. They can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/Nasenonline/

Strategic planning to improve reading

In Removing barriers to literacy (Ofsted 2011), the following key approaches are identified for ensuring success in tackling reading (and wider literacy) difficulties:
- Teachers with high expectations for pupils’ achievements in literacy.
- An emphasis on speaking and listening skills from an early age.
• A rigorous, sequential approach to developing speaking and listening, and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics.
• Sharp assessment of progress in order to determine the most appropriate programme or support.
• Carefully planned provision to meet individual needs.
• Rigorous monitoring of the impact of provision.
• High-quality pastoral care to support learning in literacy.
• Highly effective use of time, staff and resources.

The report also suggests that key to success is the rigorous monitoring and tracking of pupil progress against challenging targets for all groups of learners, and that initiatives must be championed by the school’s senior leadership team.

The needs of school staff

SENCOs should work with the senior leadership team, to ensure that:
• approaches for struggling readers are co-ordinated across departments – the learning support/SEND/inclusion staff must work with, particularly, the English department, but with all others too, to ensure consistency of approach and to avoid duplication
• an annual review and audit takes place of pupils who are working below
expected levels to ensure a focus on effective interventions, rather than ‘more of the same’

- a rigorous focus is placed on tracking the progress of this group of learners within reading, and consideration is taken of the progress impacting on other curriculum areas
- regular updates on new or refreshed approaches, such as synthetic phonics, are undertaken to improve staff knowledge.

Implications for all staff regarding the Ofsted Inspection Framework

Under the new inspection framework for schools, there is a much greater focus on literacy and reading in terms of pupil achievement, quality of teaching, leadership and management. It is important that all staff are aware of the considerations outlined below, and their respective contributions in providing appropriate evidence for whole-school improvement and inspection. Under the revised inspection framework for schools (September 2012, revised December 2013) there is a heavier focus on literacy, particularly early reading and intervention in Years 7 and 8.

Literacy and reading considerations for whole-school staff

- When teaching is being evaluated, do the observations in your classrooms reveal a focus on talking to children about their reading, writing and spelling, and listening to them reading?
- How do the outcomes of these evaluations identify how achievement has been raised?
- Are standards in reading and literacy for pupils rising, falling or staying the same?
- What are the rates of progress in reading and literacy across key stages? What do they tell you?
- What are the rates of progress of pupils on intervention programmes?
- With tracking and monitoring the progress of pupils with SEN and disabilities, is there school analysis of how these pupils perform?
- Do pupils with SEN and/or disabilities reach their targets? Is data used to identify and deal with underachievement?
- How do you evidence expectations, challenge and support in all aspects of reading and literacy?
- For specific reading and literacy interventions that are funded via pupil premium, are there published criteria for access to intervention, nature and type of intervention, timings, reviews, measurement of impact and outcomes?
- It is probably fair to say that teachers of subjects other than English will possibly have focused more on the support and development of writing skills, but will they be able to provide evidence of the quality of reading, speaking and listening for school inspectors?
- Are all teachers aware of the challenges students might face with any reading and writing tasks? Is this evident from teacher planning?
- Is there uniform use of effective
strategies to support pupils with reading (in all subjects)?

• With the support for pupils with language, literacy and communication needs, how well informed are teaching staff of the personalised approaches and styles of communicating with specific pupils where needs are so significantly different that they require a personalised approach?

• How is the personalised approach to learning captured in teacher planning, continuing professional development, and differentiation of teaching and learning? What evidence do you have to show?
The school library

This quote from the Ofsted report *Reading, writing and communication (literacy) (2011)* makes a clear link between a school’s library provision and the quality of provision. As any good librarian knows, just making space for the books will not create a swathe of children interested in reading. A good bookshop sells books to a range of customers – how does your school ‘sell’ reading to your students and other key stakeholders?

Here are some suggestions.

- Audit the school’s range of reading material – what are the pupils’ thoughts?
- Engage students by working with the school council to focus on developing a range of books to support key groups.
- Invite guest speakers from the local community or further afield.
- Use school assemblies – these are an ideal opportunity to promote the texts available and the school library.
- Use the school website and newsletter – these are powerful tools.
- Remind parents and pupils about your library by making sure updates are posted online regularly.
- Make use of peer recommendations and book groups – encourage pupils to produce short, punchy reviews of books they can share with their peers.
- Remember, a prominent library space helps draw attention to key texts, and if a book covers a particular issue, why not include some more information?

‘Around the school, an attractive and well-stocked library is often an indicator of effective support for pupils’ wider reading and information retrieval skills.’
• Incorporate developing your school library and pupil engagement into existing short-, medium- and long-term plans.
• Ensure that book displays live beyond the school library – classrooms, communal areas and playgrounds all offer valuable ‘advertising space’.

How does the school develop and build on pupils’ library skills as they progress through the years?

Simple activities to raise the profile of reading

• Blind date with a book (children donate a book, wrapped in brown paper)
• Book swap parties
• Themed days – focused on an author or topic
• Book fairs
• Transition events held in the library
• Reading buddy system
• Treasure hunts
• Review shelf talkers
• Reading journeys
• Get caught reading (children and all staff)
• Book boxes
• Young teen fiction events – local/national.

How does your school exploit what a well-run library can bring to your whole school?
Engaging parents and carers

Engaging families should be a key element in your school’s systematic approach to developing a focus on reading, as parents are best placed to give ‘real-life’ experiences of reading in context. *Understanding progress in English – a guide for parents* (DCSF 2010), available at http://ow.ly/ydaMn, highlights some basic strategies for parental engagement.

It is also important that the school is aware of families that are not engaging with the school and takes appropriate action. While schools need to be sensitive to the needs of families, they cannot allow a culture of low expectation to be accepted. *Excellence in English* (2011) gives the example of St Thomas of Canterbury Primary School in Salford, where parental involvement is keenly monitored: ‘Home reading is monitored rigorously on a daily basis; letters are sent to parents when this is not taking place. Parents are invited to the school to discuss reading with the

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Ideas for engaging parents and carers

- Include an information-sharing session about literacy as an agreed part of the transition/induction process or package from primary to secondary.
- Invite parents in to school to sample a lesson (when class teachers feel that practice is firmly established).
- Invite parents in to school to help support developments (find out about their own skills) and be actively engaged with groups of pupils.
- Organise a ‘reading tour’ so that parents value what they already do with their children and the importance of environmental print (use ICT and encourage parents/pupils to create their own ‘reading tour’).
- Hold a parent workshop during the school day or evening, with the class teacher/senior management team sharing information and inviting discussion about developments in the class/school.
- Communicate reading activities and successes regularly to all stakeholders.
headteacher and class teacher where they are unable to support reading at home.’

**Ofsted English surveys**

Every year, Ofsted conducts subject surveys and these offer valuable pointers to those looking to improve the quality of provision. While Ofsted cautions its inspectors that these do not constitute a ‘checklist’, they will enable you to benchmark your provision. These particular examples on the next few pages are taken from the visits collated in the report of December 2013.

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**Grade descriptors – the overall effectiveness of English provision**

*Outstanding (1)*

- English teaching is outstanding and, together with a rich and relevant English curriculum, contributes to outstanding learning and achievement. Exceptionally, achievement in English may be good and rapidly improving.
- Pupils, and particular groups of pupils, are well equipped for the next stage in their education, training or employment as a result of excellent educational experiences.
- Practice in the subject consistently reflects the highest expectations of staff and the highest aspirations for pupils, including disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, those for whom English is an additional language and those known to be eligible for the pupil premium.
- Best practice is spread effectively in a drive for continuous improvement.
Achievement of pupils in English

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<tr>
<th>Generic</th>
<th>Supplementary subject-specific guidance</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outstanding (1)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>+ From each different starting point, the proportions of pupils making expected progress and the proportions exceeding expected progress in English and in mathematics are high compared with national figures. For pupils for whom the pupil premium provides support, the proportions are similar to, or above, those for other pupils in the school or are rapidly approaching them.</td>
<td>+ Pupils show high levels of achievement in the different areas of English (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and exhibit very positive attitudes towards the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Pupils make rapid and sustained progress throughout year groups across many subjects, including English and mathematics, and learn exceptionally well.</td>
<td>+ Pupils rapidly acquire secure knowledge of letters and sounds and make sustained progress in learning to read and to write legibly and fluently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ The achievement of pupils for whom the pupil premium provides support at least matches that of other pupils in the school or has risen rapidly, including in English and mathematics.</td>
<td>+ Pupils express their ideas fluently and imaginatively in both writing and speaking. They are very keen readers and show a mature understanding of a wide range of challenging texts, both traditional and contemporary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Pupils read widely, and often across all subjects to a high standard.</td>
<td>+ Pupils’ writing shows a high degree of technical accuracy. Pupils write effectively across a range of genres, frequently showing creativity in their ideas and choice of language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Pupils develop and apply a wide range of skills to great effect in reading, writing, communication and mathematics. They are exceptionally well prepared for the next stage in their education, training or employment.</td>
<td>+ Pupils have a mature understanding of the differences between written and spoken language. They speak confidently and with maturity in relation to their age, using Standard English very effectively when required.</td>
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<td>+ Pupils, including those in the sixth form and those in the Early Years Foundation Stage, acquire knowledge quickly and develop their understanding rapidly in a wide range of different subjects across the curriculum.</td>
<td>+ Pupils have learnt to be effective independent learners, able to think for themselves and to provide leadership in learning, while also being sensitive to the needs of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>+ The learning of groups of pupils, particularly those who are disabled, those who have special educational needs, those for whom the pupil premium provides support, and the most able, is consistently good or better.</td>
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<tr>
<td>+ The standards of attainment of almost all groups of pupils are likely to be at least in line with national averages, with many pupils attaining above this. In exceptional circumstances, an outstanding grade can be awarded where standards of attainment of any group of pupils are below those of all pupils nationally, but the gap is closing rapidly, as shown by trends in a range of attainment indicators. This may include attainment in reading.</td>
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1The descriptors are set out in full in the School Inspection Handbook.
2Starting points at Key Stage 1 include levels W (and P levels), 1, 2c, 2b, 2a and 3; starting points at Key Stage 2 include levels W (and P levels), 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.
3Expected progress is defined by the Government as two National Curriculum levels of progress between Key Stages 1 and 2, and three National Curriculum levels of progress between Key Stages 2 and 4. From 2013, expected progress data between Key Stages 1 and 2 in English will be provided separately for reading and writing, but no longer aggregated for English. Expected progress for pupils attaining below level 1 of the National Curriculum at the end of Key Stages 1 or 2 is explained in Subsidiary Guidance.
## Quality of teaching in English

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<td><strong>Outstanding (1)</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Much of the teaching in all key stages and most subjects is outstanding and never less than consistently good. As a result, almost all pupils currently on roll in the school, including disabled pupils, those who have special educational needs, those for whom the pupil premium provides support and the most able, are making rapid and sustained progress.</td>
<td>+ Pupils’ language needs and their interests in literature and other media are addressed through the imaginative use of a wide range of resources, including ICT and moving image texts.</td>
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<td>+ All teachers have consistently high expectations of all pupils. They plan and teach lessons that enable pupils to learn exceptionally well across the curriculum.</td>
<td>+ Pupils are fully engaged through innovative classroom approaches, including well-planned drama activities.</td>
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<td>+ Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils’ understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with notable impact on the quality of learning.</td>
<td>+ The teaching of phonics knowledge, skill and understanding is systematic, highly enjoyable and quickly enables pupils to read fluently and write with confidence and accuracy.</td>
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<td>+ The teaching of reading, writing, communication and mathematics is highly effective and cohesively planned and implemented across the curriculum.</td>
<td>+ Pupils make real progress in their own work as a consequence of teachers demonstrating high standards in their own use of English. Progress is aided through teachers’ powerful modelling of the processes of reading and writing. Pupils are made aware of the importance of English to the world beyond school.</td>
</tr>
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<td>+ Teachers and other adults authoritatively impart knowledge to ensure students are engaged in learning, and generate high levels of commitment to learning across the school.</td>
<td>+ Teachers’ expert knowledge of texts is used successfully to extend and deepen pupils’ understanding. Pupils’ personal responses to, and their thinking about, literature and other texts are prompted by questioning which frequently probes pupils’ understanding of language.</td>
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<td>+ Consistently high-quality marking and constructive feedback from teachers ensure that pupils make rapid gains.</td>
<td>+ Teachers’ very good understanding of the English language ensures that the technical features of language are very well taught, including the differences between talk and writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>+ Teachers use well-judged and often imaginative teaching strategies, including setting appropriate homework that, together with clearly directed and timely support and intervention, match individual needs accurately. Consequently, pupils learn exceptionally well across the curriculum.</td>
<td>+ Systematic approaches to target setting, marking, feedback and peer- and self-assessment support and challenge all pupils to make precise improvements to their written or oral work.</td>
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Quality of the curriculum in English

+ The curriculum is distinctive, innovative and planned very well to meet the needs of all pupils in reading, writing, speaking and listening.
+ Imaginative approaches, experience of a wide range of challenging texts, and clear focus on basic literacy skills ensure a rich curriculum accessible to all groups, which enables pupils to make very good progress across the different areas of English.
+ The curriculum is continually reviewed and improved in the light of national developments. Key aspects such as poetry, drama and media work are fully integrated into the curriculum and help to provide a rich and varied programme for pupils. Schemes of work build clearly towards productive outcomes for pupils, involving real audiences and purposes; this helps pupils to appreciate the importance of English to their lives outside school.
+ Independent learning and wide reading are very effectively promoted. The curriculum builds systematically on technological developments in communications and pupils have regular opportunities to use ICT and mixed media, including analysing and producing media texts.
+ Pupils’ learning is very well enhanced by enrichment activities such as theatre and cinema visits, drama workshops, reading groups, and opportunities for writers to work with pupils in school.

In conclusion

This quick guide to supporting pupils’ reading and literacy in secondary schools brings together some of the best practice currently available so that you have the information you need to address this key issue. We have referenced a number of reports in this publication and they all warrant further reading, especially Excellence in English (2011), which illustrates that unpicking the issues around reading for pleasure can offer rich rewards for schools looking to improve.

All of the schools featured in this guide have not treated developing reading as a departmental issue but have looked to develop it as a fundamental part of their school offer. With a new curriculum and a new SEND Code of Practice there has never been a better time for schools to look at the part reading and literacy play in the whole school curriculum, culture and ethos.

‘We need a curriculum that is broadly balanced to meet the needs of all, but highly focused so that it can be personalised where appropriate. To do this, school leaders require a long-term view of where children are heading and the school must be confident in its contribution to the children’s journey towards being independent, productive, happy and contented adults. Making the connections and understanding our contribution to the key milestones in a child’s development have to be seen hand in hand with how we support parents, carers and families in making that journey together.’ Jane Friswell, nasen Chief Executive, Special, March 2014
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