



# Supporting young people at secondary school with literacy difficulties

Educational Psychology team

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# The purpose of this policy

This document has been written by the Portsmouth Educational Psychology Team to provide guidance to schools, parents, and other professionals who work with young people experiencing literacy difficulties at the secondary school level.

On a day-to-day basis, schools are responsible for supporting pupils with literacy difficulties and each school should describe their provision in their Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Support Plans.

This document is intended to support schools in implementing evidence-based practices that best support their pupils.

This document builds upon guidance previously written by the Portsmouth Educational Psychology Team entitled 'Supporting children and young people with reading difficulties'<sup>1</sup>. It has been shaped by the insights and experiences shared by pupils, parents, and teachers in the Hampshire region, which can be seen in speech bubbles throughout the document.



<sup>1</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/literacy>

# Literacy: a whole school approach

In the foreword to the Education Endowment's Guidance to Literacy, Chief Executive Sir Kevan Collins advised that providing a literate workforce is 'everybody's business'. Literacy skills can be both general, and subject specific, highlighting the role that all teachers have in supporting literacy skills for young people.

Within each subject, pupils have opportunities to develop their reading, writing, and communication skills and by each teacher having knowledge of the literacy demands within their subject, they can increase young people's chances of success. Indeed, literacy skills are necessary across curriculum subjects and as such should be supported at a whole-school level.

Many of the strategies which are supportive of young people with literacy difficulties do not require specific training but focus on the skills you will already be using within your settings.

For example:

- The use of Quality first teaching. Aspects of this approach which support literacy difficulties include a multi-sensory approach to instruction, reducing or altering demands depending on the young person's needs (for example, not calling on them to read aloud), a clear lesson structure, instructions which are broken down, and the availability of assistive technology.
- Communication between staff to ensure they understand a young person's needs and are providing a consistent approach to support.
- A whole-school approach which values and builds young people's self-esteem, focusses on their strengths, provides opportunities, and supports success.
- A well organised classroom with resources positioned so they are clear and accessible, clear labels, organised and tidy spaces for learners, and alternative resources to promote independence.
- Encouragement of reading for meaning and pleasure. Providing activities which engage young people and build their motivation through enjoyment.
- Combining reading and writing instruction in every subject to enhance students' understanding of key concepts and ideas. Reading can improve the quality of young people's writing, whilst writing about a text improves comprehension and fluency.
- Explicitly teaching spellings and key vocabulary for topics and subjects. Pre-teaching and repetition of spellings and word definitions can be useful across subjects, and young people can be encouraged to come up with memorable rhymes or mnemonics.

# Identifying literacy difficulties

Secondary school pupils who present with literacy difficulties are likely to have had significant and targeted support to develop their phonological skills, sight vocabulary and or reading comprehension at primary school.

Therefore, they are likely to be aware of these difficulties in relation to their peers and in many cases will attempt to mask them by:

- Acting out: e.g. disengaging with learning, avoiding work, presenting with disruptive behaviours and truanting.
- Acting in: e.g. a reluctance to contribute to class discussion, producing limited written work, attempts to blend into the background and avoid being noticed or drawing heavily on support from their peers.

Teachers might observe that:

- It is difficult to read the pupil's writing.
- Their writing does not make sense.
- They always appear to be procrastinating.
- They produce a limited amount of work.

*"Training on literacy development or what to look for is often absent from teacher training. By the time it reaches the SENCo's attention it has often been raised as a behaviour concern rather than a literacy need."*

Secondary school SENCo

*"Our son actively avoids doing literacy at home. His behaviour changes and he becomes very emotional if we try to instigate it."*

Parent

*"I keep my head down, keep going and hope no-one notices."*

Year 7 pupil



# Effective deployment of teaching assistants

Teaching Assistants (TAs) play a valuable role supporting young people with additional needs, including those with literacy difficulties. However, it is important for schools to think about how best to deploy these staff effectively.

When working in the classroom, there are a number of key principles which should be carefully considered. Firstly, TAs should not be used as a replacement to teachers, and it is important that young people with additional needs continue to access high quality input from their teacher as well as the support they receive from TAs. When TAs are directly supporting pupils with additional needs, preparation is key. This includes preparation for individual lessons, in which teachers should provide clear guidance to TAs around targets being worked upon as well as the purpose of any activity set. Further still, it is important that TAs' broader professional development is supported, such as training in how to promote independent learning skills in pupils.

Teaching assistants can play a key role in the delivery of one-to-one or small group interventions and will be most effective when they receive high quality training to support young people through structured evidence-based programmes.

When TAs work in a highly structured way and receive high quality support and training they can support positive outcomes for young people. However, when TAs are given only informal and unstructured roles, this can have a negative impact on students' progress.

Whilst it may feel that much of this advice is already well known in schools, it can be helpful for school leaders and teachers to reflect upon their current practices, considering areas of strength and areas which might benefit from some extra attention. More information on the effective use of TAs and effective implementation of interventions can be found online within the EEF reports 'Putting Evidence to Work: A School's guide to Implementation' and 'Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants'.



# Supporting the cognitive skills that underpin literacy

Carrying out literacy tasks involves using a wide range of cognitive processes and skills. If a young person has difficulty with some of these cognitive processes, literacy related tasks will be harder for them. By supporting young people with the wider cognitive skills that underpin literacy, such as working memory, processing speed and executive functioning, we can support them in developing their literacy skills. Each of these areas are summarised below, followed by suggestions on how they can be supported in school.

*"You have to put a lot of effort in."*

Year 7 pupil

## Working memory

Working memory is our ability to hold information briefly in memory while carrying out cognitive tasks, such as remembering directions someone has told us or learning someone's name and remembering it during conversation with them. When we have too much information to hold in mind, we experience 'cognitive overload' and have difficulty carrying out tasks effectively. Literacy tasks place a high level of demand on our working memory due to the amount of information we are accessing and applying. For example, writing involves generating ideas, organising thoughts, planning, constructing sentences, remembering correct grammar, and motor control in holding our pen or pencil. When supporting a young person with literacy difficulties, reducing the demands on their working memory can help them engage in their work more effectively.

*"I get confused. I'm not sure what I'm doing or how to do it best."*

## Processing speed

Processing speed is the amount of time it takes us to understand, make sense of and respond to information, whether it is visual (e.g., letters and numbers), auditory (e.g., language) or movement happening around us. Some people take longer to process information than others which can create frequent challenges. For example, a young person might struggle to keep up with the pace of a lesson in school or to complete their work in the time given. If a young person has not had enough time to process and make sense of information, they will have difficulty remembering or using this information later.

## Executive functioning

Executive functioning refers to a wide range of cognitive skills such as organising, planning, prioritising, self-monitoring (keeping track of what you are doing), flexible thinking and managing emotions. We use executive functioning skills in everyday life, such as when organising our work or school day, or going shopping. For young people in school, executive functioning difficulties may influence how well they can focus, follow directions, and organise themselves within their learning.

## Key Strategies to support working memory, processing speed and executive functioning:

- Minimise cognitive overload by reducing the amount of information given to young people at a time. E.g., providing instructions one by one, sharing short chunks of text to read at a time, reducing the amount of material to be remembered per session, revisiting previous learning, etc.
- Avoid cumbersome and unnecessary task demands, such as copying lengthy instructions from the board.
- Aim to increase familiarity of reading material before beginning to read or work with it. E.g., direct pupils' attention to key headings and the layout of the text and ask young people what different sections might be about.
- Make key information explicit, e.g., through repetition of key information or providing verbal (different tone or volume of voice) or visual emphasis (bold, underlined, use of supporting pictures etc.).
- Use visual memory aids for pupils to refer to, such as wall charts, posters, useful spelling cards, key terminology sheets etc.
- Quality over quantity: use fewer tasks per session and focus on them in depth to allow time for consolidation and deeper learning.
- Build in reflection time during lessons to check in on pupils' understanding. What is going well? What are they finding harder? What would help them to overcome any barriers?
- Use structures and frameworks to break down tasks for pupils, such as planning writing frames, sentence starters and cloze procedures.
- Help students break longer projects into manageable chunks, creating timelines for work.
- Explicitly teach study skills to pupils, such as how to note-take effectively, how to plan their work before beginning to write and what strategies to use when they need help, such as asking a peer or seeking a known resource.

## Metacognition

Metacognition is being able to reflect on your own understanding. It involves three stages: planning your work, monitoring your progress, and assessing what you have understood. To apply metacognitive skills, a young person needs to know about themselves as a learner, what kind of factors influence their performance, and what strategies they can use to help them in their learning.

Metacognition can be improved by asking young people questions that make them think in a metacognitive way. Questions can focus on their comprehension of the task, prompt them make links to previous learning, encourage them to consider strategies they are going to try, and support them in evaluating the strategies they have already used. Examples of metacognitive questioning for the three areas of metacognition are detailed below:

*"I find it helps pupils to discuss their ideas and sentences first before making notes or answering questions."*

Secondary school teacher

## Planning

- Tell me what you have to do.
- Where would be a good place to start and why?
- Have you learnt about/seen something like this before? What method did you use?
- Tell me how you could work out the answer.
- Why have you decided to use that method?
- What is an advantage of using that method?

*"Displays work well in my classroom - displays on punctuation, mnemonics, word classes, sentence types and so on."*

Secondary school teacher



## Monitoring

- How are you getting on?
- Tell me what you have done so far.
- I can see you have been using (name method). How did you start? What did you do next?
- Is there another way you could do this?
- Is this way working, or do you need to change something?

*'Ask for help.'*

Year 7 pupil

## Evaluating

- Was there anything you were unsure about?
- Was anything easier/harder than you thought it would be?
- Did you understand what you needed to do?
- If you did this again, is there anything you would do differently?

Young people will initially need these questions to be asked by adults and may need to be supported in developing their answers. The more that metacognitive questioning is used, the more young people get used to metacognitive thinking, and begin to use it independently over time.

*"It helps to give pupils alternative ways to record information like mind-maps and through images and colours."*

Secondary school teacher

## Language development

Language is a key skill which relates to our learning, social skills, and behaviour<sup>2</sup>. Language includes expressing ourselves and our spoken language, listening to others and understanding what they are communicating, having a good vocabulary and using narrative skills to create stories. Language is closely related to literacy skills from a young age and this continues into adulthood.

For example, we know that a young person's knowledge of vocabulary can really support their reading. When they lack the skills to decode a word, quite often they will draw upon contextual cues and meaning within the sentence to assist them, using their knowledge of vocabulary to make a plausible guess about what the word is. Therefore, promoting language development and understanding students' language needs can be crucial in providing effective support.

*"I try not to 'dumb down' vocabulary but instead make sure we discuss the meaning of new words so they can understand and use them in their work."*

Secondary school teacher

<sup>2</sup> <https://ican.org.uk>

## Key Strategies to support language needs:

- Spend time teaching subject specific vocabulary. Teachers should include subject specific language, vocabulary and reasoning in their talk alongside reading and writing tasks to give students the opportunities to practice using new vocabulary and concepts.
- Break writing tasks down into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Use modelling and allow peers to work together in writing tasks so that they can share their knowledge and skills and support each other with planning and evaluation.
- Provide sentence starters or guides such as 'My opinion that... is based on the fact that... ' to help prompt responses.
- Use acronyms that help young people structure responses within written work or discussion [e.g., the REST method: Restate (the question), Explain (your answer), Support (provide evidence from the text), Ta da! (conclude with a statement that wows the reader)].
- Setting goals and roles for small group discussions (for example who will summarise the key points raised and who will ask questions of other group members) to help encourage all students to participate fully.
- Leave a pause after students have given their answer to enable them to reframe, extend or justify their reasoning.
- Provide precise feedback about their strengths and areas for further development. For example 'I like the way you linked your point to our previous discussion about... expanding on... would be helpful to add weight to argument.'



# The use of assistive technology

There are many assistive technologies available to support young people in applying their literacy skills. These work by supporting the wider cognitive needs that typically underpin young people's literacy skills (working memory, processing speed, executive function). Such technologies are best used within lessons to complement quality first teaching. Integrating their use into young people's lessons can help to make the lesson content more accessible and allows young people to work with increased independence. Examples of where assistive technologies can be useful include:

## Typing

Typing on a laptop, tablet or within a specific app can alleviate demands on the motor skills associated with handwriting. This allows young people to focus on their ideas and language choices without their motor skills acting as a barrier. When introducing typing options, it will be necessary to set specific time aside to teach young people how to type, as they may not have proficiency in this skill.

## Spell-check and word banks

There are several literacy apps or programs that include options to provide spelling suggestions as pupils type and word banks on display that can be used to store subject specific vocabulary.

## Audio assistance

Options such as audio books can help young people access a wider range of texts and therefore, a greater depth of information associated with the subject or topic. Additionally, technologies that can read aloud what the young person has written will allow them to identify grammatical and spelling errors and increase independence in editing their work.

*"Give me a scribe or reading pen."*

Year 7 pupil

## Dictation

Pupils may benefit from dictating their ideas verbally using recording technology. This allows them to capture their ideas and organise and consolidate their thoughts before having to apply their ideas within written work.

Many young people will benefit from a combination of the above supports, which can be gained through low-cost, low-tech options such as the use of Dictaphones, audiobooks, and basic word processing programs such as Microsoft Word and programs found on tablet computers which now have many built-in features. There are also a range of more specifically designed tools and programs such as Reading pens, Clicker or Dragon's Naturally. This is of course not an exhaustive list and there are many options available that can be explored in terms of wider school and individual pupil need.

*"I prefer more practical tasks.  
It's hard to think of ideas."*

Year 9 pupil

# The use of peer support

Having positive role models within the classroom can have an impact on learning behaviours and academic skills, including reading ability. Interactions with peers who engage in academic behaviour, such as homework completion, can impact on an individual's learning habits and support their academic performance<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, placing students who find literacy difficult with students who are stronger academically can be more beneficial than placing them with similarly or lower attaining students.

Whilst peers can be useful to provide general modelling within the classroom, students can also be paired within more structured interventions such as those below.

*"I feel better being with my friends. I am used to and like working with them."*

## Paired writing

Paired writing is a collaborative writing approach to producing written work<sup>4</sup>. It is an evidence-based intervention which involves young people working in pairs in a structured and guided way. Paired writing enhances young people's enjoyment and engagement of writing activities by removing any potential barriers they may have and enabling them to be successful.

When young people are asked to write they must remember lots of skills all at once; how to organise their ideas, vocabulary, spelling rules, how to form their letters correctly, grammar rules, punctuation and so on. For some students this can be overwhelming and can sometimes lead to a reluctance to write.

Embarking on the writing process together immerses all young people in the types of high-quality discussions that inspire improved outcomes. Partners can experience how to experiment together with language, grammar and word order to achieve the best effects. It also means those at lower current attainment levels can be exposed to enhanced vocabulary and a wider bank of ideas for writing.

*"I look at my worksheet, or the board and just try to understand and maybe ask a friend if I'm really stuck."*

Year 9 pupil

<sup>3</sup> Harris, 2010

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.stvincent.herts.sch.uk/documents/2020\\_c2Paired-Writing.pdf](https://www.stvincent.herts.sch.uk/documents/2020_c2Paired-Writing.pdf)

## What are the essential elements to make paired writing a success?

1. Students should be explicitly taught how to act as 'critical friends' This is the foundation of making the process a success. We need to model how to discuss the learning, work together effectively and set up clear structures (e.g., question prompts, scaffolds) to give young people the skills to provide appropriate support and challenge to their peers.
2. Partners need to be carefully chosen and regularly changed. To have maximum impact on all learners, a variety of groupings need to be used. As teachers, we need to ensure that we are clear of the desired outcome of the paired opportunity. For example, exposing a less confident writer to the higher-quality vocabulary of a more confident writer; or pairing currently attaining pupils with partners working within age-related expectations when we wish them to be searching for proof of success in each other's work.
3. Opportunities must still be provided for independent writing. Over the week or unit of writing, students need opportunities to demonstrate their skills and the teacher needs the chance to observe/assess individual understanding and the impact of partner work.
4. Additional help for those who need it. Working alongside students as they write can be highly informative and teachers should use the opportunity to model writing skills, for example, editing for sense, talk for writing, scaffolding with colour-coded grammar.
5. Success criteria must be clear and accessible to all. In order to support each other in developing and improving writing, the students need a shared understanding of the success criteria. A good rule of thumb is to ensure the first success criteria. Topping describes paired writing as a framework and set of guidelines to be followed by pairs working together to generate a piece of writing for a purpose. It gives a supportive structure to scaffold interactive collaborative behaviours through all stages of the writing process.

## Paired reading

Paired reading is a very effective, evidence-based method and has been included in the English government review of What Works in Literacy Intervention (Brooks, 2013), as well as recommended as part of the national literacy strategy.

It aims to support young people progressing in their reading and consists of the young person reading a book out loud together with another person, at the same pace. Paired Reading is usually carried out between an adult and a young person (e.g., parent/ carer or school staff) but can also be supported by a more advanced peer (with at least a two-year reading age gap between both pupils). When the young person feels confident enough to read independently, they give a signal, and the adult/ peer will then only join in again if and when the reader misreads a word.

*"I don't like being chosen to read."*

Year 9 pupil

Psychologically, it draws on self-determination theory, which suggests that the needs of competency, relatedness and autonomy must all be met simultaneously in order to increase motivation. By reassuring, explaining, and maintaining pace, skills such as resilience and confidence are also developed, promoting self-efficacy and fostering positive attitudes towards reading.

By focusing on hearing and reading words at the whole word level, it's ideal for young people who struggle with decoding and experience phonological difficulties, such as those in the first stages of developing literacy or older young people who are struggling or reluctant readers.

It can be conducted as often as possible but at least three times a week for 15 to 20 minutes, on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. These can be adjusted according to the young person's needs and abilities.

## What are the essential elements necessary to make paired reading a success?

6. It might seem obvious, but it's important that both people are comfortable and sitting side by side so that you can read together (can use different copies of the same book).
7. If you are reading something new, start by talking about things like the front cover, the illustrations and what they already know about the subject matter. A bit of preparation will help your student get ready to read and understand what they are reading.
8. Start by reading together at a good pace. If your student is reading too slowly or quickly, encourage them to mirror your pace. This might be a little tricky at first, but once you have tried it a few times they should start to get into a good reading rhythm.
9. If your student makes a mistake, give them about four seconds to put it right. If they don't manage to correct the word, say the word for them and ask them to repeat it back to you. Then continue to read together, using praise as you read.
10. Every so often, pause to ask questions, look at illustrations and discuss interesting points or words in the text. Questions should be open, using words like 'who', 'what' and 'why' – open questions help you avoid short yes or no answers.
11. When you have finished reading, there are many things that you can do to give your student a chance to reflect on what they have read. You could use 5 minutes at the end of your session or ask them to complete a small piece of homework to share with you or their class teacher.

## Homework

It can be difficult for teachers to know how to set appropriate assignments, and how to encourage lower-attaining students to complete their homework<sup>5</sup>. Homework can be impactful for higher attaining students who enjoy and value their homework in working towards their learning goals. However, there is little evidence that homework has a positive impact for students with learning difficulties. Homework can also be difficult and frustrating for young people and their families, and can cause stress within the home, and between home and school<sup>6</sup>. The following strategies may be helpful in considering appropriate homework assignments:

- Parental/carer communication and involvement;
- devising short, relevant tasks;
- homework planners/diaries; and
- teaching students self-monitoring techniques

*"Our son has SEND and has a classroom assistant working with him. We attempt to support him at home although we usually find he is unenthusiastic to do this."*

Parent

*"I don't really do homework. 6 hours is enough. It's not fair when I've just done school. I'm not doing more work."*

5 Sharp et al. (2001)

6 Margolis, H. (2005)

# Targeted support

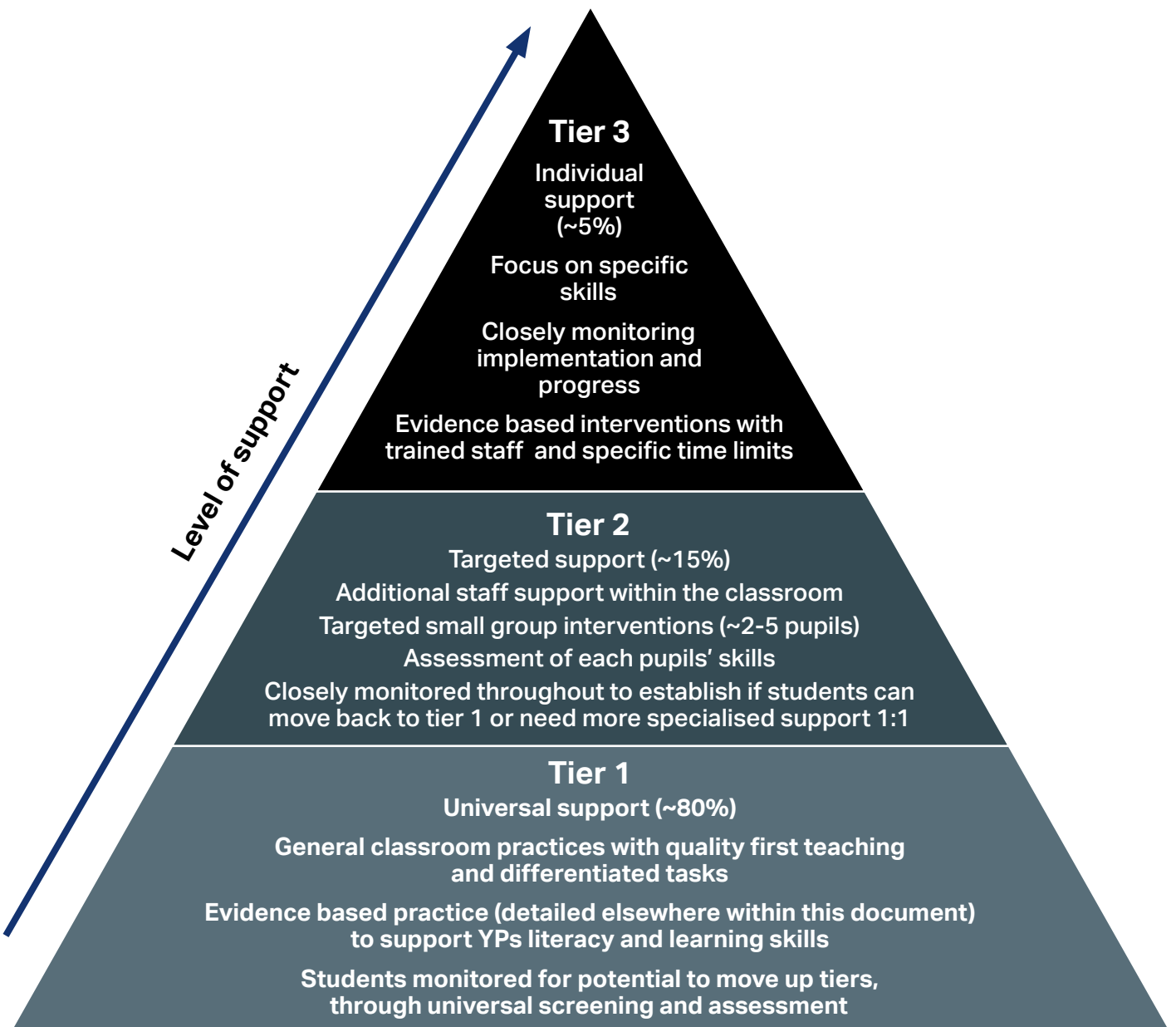
## Considering when to take young people out of class

Evidence suggests that young people learn most effectively within the classroom as they receive high quality teaching and can bridge learning to other tasks and skills more effectively. Young people have also reported that they don't want to miss out on lessons they enjoy, they can feel embarrassed or singled out, they want to be with their friends and

peers, and they can feel like they don't know what they are doing when they return to the classroom.

Many of the strategies within this guide can be used for whole-class support and will benefit a range of young people within your classroom.

However, there will be young people who need more specialist support and it's important to acknowledge there is a limit to what can be achieved for all pupils with quality first teaching in a busy classroom environment. Where an individual might need more specialist support and additional input it is important to consider a staged approach to supporting them.



## A staged approach to support **School approaches to assessment**

Tiers of support move from whole class teaching through to small group tuition and 1:1 support depending on the needs identified. In most cases schools should consider small group tuition as a first option, grouping students together who are struggling in the same area of literacy before moving to 1:1 tuition if, and only if, small group tuition is ineffective.

*"It's alright, but I hate it if I'm getting out of a 'good lesson'."*

Year 9 pupil

### Targeted small group or one-to-one support?

When deciding whether to offer targeted support within a small group or 1:1 it is important to consider:

- How significant the gap is between this child and their peers.
- The impact of previous interventions. Where difficulties are ongoing despite previous intervention then a one-to-one tailored intervention may be more appropriate.
- The targets the child is working on.
- Whether young people have received small group support before. As a general rule, when pupils have not received small group support before and the gap between peers is only just starting to develop, a small group intervention might be enough to help close the gap.

*"It's a waste of time. I won't improve."*

Year 7 pupil

Assessment helps us to:

- identify students requiring additional support
- identify their needs so that support is well-targeted
- assess progress and the impact of interventions

There are a wide range of literacy problems that secondary-age students might have, related to speech, language and communication, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Unless interventions are designed to target the underlying difficulties, they are unlikely to be effective. Some assessment can be undertaken by teachers to help clarify the areas that require further targeted support. In order to put Exam Arrangements in place, exam boards will expect standardised assessments relating to the young person's literacy skills to be submitted. However, a teacher's assessment will be the first point of call to understanding and putting support in place.

*"It helps, but you come back into class and you don't know what you're meant to be doing."*

Year 7 pupil

For any interventions that are put in place it is strongly recommended that baseline and post intervention measures are recorded and that appropriate SMART targets are set. Interventions should be in place for around 6 weeks to allow us to see whether there has been an impact. Gregg Brooke's evidence-based interventions provides a range of targeted support that is able to show impact over time for the majority of pupils.



# Supporting parents and carers

Many parents and carers feel unsure about how they can support their child's literacy skills, especially if this is not an area of personal strength. It is helpful for schools to reassure parents and carers that they do not need to be literacy experts to help their child. Schools can also support parents and carers to feel more confident and skilled in promoting literacy at home. Some ways to achieve this could include:

## School events

Events led by the headteacher or literacy coordinator and supported by other staff members can be used to share ideas and model ways that adults can support literacy at home. This can also be an opportunity to find out what further advice parents and carers would like.

*"It would be helpful to educate parents about literacy and inform them to keep reading with their children even when they start secondary school."*

Secondary school teacher

## Accessible information

Information around supporting literacy should be made readily available, such as on the school's website. This could include a video about supporting literacy, leaflets, reading lists, or 'top tips' for supporting literacy.

## Sharing examples

Schools can use their communication channels to share examples of literacy work from various subjects and year groups.

*"My mum and dad don't understand or know how to help, so I can't do it."*

*"It would help to know how they teach it and to have resources for home."*

Parent

## Communication with individual parents/carers

Alongside whole-school communications, direct contact with some families will be an integral aspect of engaging them. Meetings with parents/carers and teachers can be helpful in unpicking the young person's barriers, understanding where the parent needs support, and working collaboratively to think of ways forward that both the school and home can apply together. It is important to keep such input collaborative and manageable, and to avoid stigmatising or blaming anyone for the young person's literacy difficulties.

*"We feel unsure what is best when modelling or supporting with writing. Clear signposting to resources and reputable websites would be helpful."*

Parent

# Consideration of other issues

## English as an additional language

Where English is a secondary language the importance of Language and literacy rich environments at both home and school cannot be over-emphasised. This includes access to books and discussion in the child's first language and opportunities to read regularly and talk about books to enhance vocabulary, general knowledge and conceptual understanding. This may include use of illustrations, pictures and role play to support understanding; modelling of vocabulary across a range of contexts; encouraging young people to make predictions about what will happen next by modelling a think out loud strategy; and narrative approaches to support thinking and asking questions about Who, What, Where, When and Why.

It can be helpful to remember that where a young person uses English as an additional language, whilst they may seem skilled in English conversationally research shows that it can take up to 7 years to develop the same level of proficiency in their academic language. Therefore, it is likely that this developmental lag will also present in their reading and writing skills.

## Visual impairment

Young people who have a visual impairment may face additional challenges when learning to read or in making developmental progress in their reading skills. Many read at a slower rate than their sighted peers and may have less stamina for reading longer passages. It may mean they take longer to develop the skills and may require different strategies and materials. Depending on their level of vision they may need to learn a more tactile format e.g., Braille.

Young People with visual impairment might miss out on incidental reading experiences in their environment as they cannot see or notice the detail of what is around them as easily as their peers. This can impact on conceptual development and comprehension. They will therefore often need enriched leaning and reading experiences to build and consolidate concepts.

Young people with visual impairments often need to use a specific font type and size, magnification equipment, may read on an electronic device such as an iPad or even use a screen reader. They may also need interventions to develop visual tracking, visual discrimination and visual scanning skills. They should always have their own copies of any visual or reading material and are likely to need additional rest breaks from reading.

## Hearing impairment

Young people with a hearing impairment might face unique challenges at secondary school, including:

- the acoustic environment in a larger school combined with frequent changes of classroom.
- multiple teaching staff, who may have different teaching styles, expectations, and communication skills.
- more demanding subject content and subject-specific vocabulary. Young people may have difficulty understanding when one word has several meanings, for example, the word 'catch' means: › to catch a ball › to catch a cold › the catch on a gate › the catch of the day on a menu.
- Feeling tired due to the demands of the school day and the extra effort required to listen to others.

Hearing impairment can also impact acquisition and development of language. Literacy learning and language development are closely linked, and this means that the reading and writing content of many literacy-based subjects, such as English literature, history and social sciences, can be challenging. Having a hearing impairment can impact on reading comprehension and the ability to write more complex sentences and content.

School staff can support young people with hearing impairments through clear communication, the use of visual aids (e.g., colour coding), developing subject specific vocabulary, terminology and acronyms, understanding nuances of language, and making inferences. In subjects that focus on the use of written texts staff can provide pre-teaching, additional resources for vocabulary, support with group discussions, and checking understanding.

Specific interventions could include cued articulation for the development of phonological awareness (to be able to hang sounds onto actions), as young people with hearing loss may take longer to develop these skills. If they continue to have difficulties with phonics it may be necessary to clarify whether they have access to the full range of frequencies (Ling sounds).

It will be important that schools liaise with the young person, their parents or carers, and other involved professionals, such as the vision and hearing team, ensuring supports are appropriate and beneficial for the young person.



# Frequently asked questions

## How are literacy needs identified or assessed?

Literacy difficulties can be linked to a range of issues - working memory difficulties, handwriting difficulties, spelling, reading (decoding skills and fluency vs sight vocabulary), knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to name but a few.

Teachers should be vigilant to the early warning signs of difficulties in these areas by ensuring that there are regular opportunities during lessons to hear pupil's read, look at samples of their written work and consider their verbal response to questions given in class. Discussion with colleagues and parents at regular intervals through the year (for example at parent evenings) to confirm whether concerns are valid is also encouraged. Secondary schools typically employ trained staff with all the necessary qualifications to assess literacy concerns when they have been raised as a concern by class teachers and it would be appropriate to raise these concerns with the school SENCo so that further assessment can be actioned. Where assessments clarify a need, special arrangements can then be put in place during formal assessments to ensure these pupils are not disadvantaged and planned interventions (at whole class level, small group level or at an individual level) put in place to develop and improve skills. It is important to note that classroom practice should mirror support given during form assessments.

## Is there a link between cognitive ability and literacy difficulties?

Cognitive skills provide a foundation for learning and are necessary for academic performance but also within our everyday activities. Literacy skills rely on fundamental cognitive processes such as the ability to:

- Process information
- Think flexibly
- Hold information in mind (memory)
- Ignore distractions
- Focus attention and stay focused (sustained attention)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Neeltje et al. (2011)

<sup>8</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>

Understanding a young person's needs and developing a range of cognitive skills will be beneficial to their literacy development.

## How important is phonics at a secondary school level?

Phonics is an approach which focusses on improving a young person's accuracy in reading, and their ability to read and write words through understanding the letters that make up those words. Whilst phonics can be a positive approach, even for older students, it does not focus on all aspects of literacy, such as comprehension. In order for students to be successful learners it is important to focus on more than just phonics to ensure they become more fluent in comprehension, vocabulary and spelling, narrative writing etc<sup>8</sup>.

Phonics can be used as a specific intervention with older students however, as with any intervention, careful consideration should be given as to whether it is an appropriate approach to target the specific skills you are hoping to develop. For example, if a young person is finding decoding difficult, it may be an appropriate approach. However, if they are experiencing difficulties with vocabulary or comprehension, there will be other more appropriate interventions.

For phonics interventions, as with other interventions, it is important to track progress over time and consider whether the approach is working for the young person, or whether another approach might be more suitable.

## How do I know when a young person needs support?

Literacy difficulties will often be identified early on in a young person's education, usually when they are not making expected progress. Sometimes, a young person's literacy needs may become more noticeable over time, as the literacy curriculum becomes more complex and the gap between theirs and their peers' attainment widens. As well as issues in progress, it may also be noticed that young people are behaving in a way to avoid literacy, such as withdrawing or acting out.

Through regular observation and assessment at school, young people's skills and behaviours around literacy are usually well monitored, meaning difficulties can be identified early. Schools will communicate with parents and carers when they are concerned, and in turn, parents may wish to contact the schools if they are noticing their young person is having difficulties with literacy at home.

As discussed earlier in this document, the first point of call for supporting young people's literacy comes through quality first teaching, followed by additional support and possibly small group interventions to target particular skills. If effective, the young person may then be able to continue accessing universal support. If not, the next step is for schools to implement more individualised support and intervention.

### **How can I engage a young person in developing their literacy skills when they know it will be difficult for them?**

Although it is important to appropriately challenge young people in order to build their skills, we want to ensure they do not become demotivated, which may happen if they repeatedly experience literacy as difficult. It is important to ensure that all literacy work is appropriately planned and differentiated to suit the young person's skills, ensuring they can be challenged while also experiencing some success. It is helpful also to help young people reflect on what they have done well in their work, ensuring they recognise their achievements rather than over-focussing on where they struggled.

Alongside more formal literacy tasks, it can be helpful to engage young people with literacy in ways that remove some of the pressure and keep it fun. For example, telling stories verbally, acting out stories and creating mini performances, drawing out elements of a story they enjoy etc. Allowing young people some ownership over the work they do is also beneficial, such as letting them choose what book they would like to write a review for, or how they wish to present their work. It is helpful also to consider how to link literacy work to the young person's personal interests and aspirations and have this conversation with them. What do they hope to do in the future? How might literacy help them pursue their

goals? What aspects of literacy are going to be most meaningful to them?

### **At what point is it necessary to take a young person out of class to support them in developing their literacy skills?**

Young people report that by secondary school age, they are reluctant to be removed from lessons to receive further literacy support. They have had a lot of targeted support and interventions at primary school and perceive that this has had little impact for them and it is at the risk of missing out on key lesson content and therefore is always important to weigh up the pros and cons of doing so.

When considering this as an option, it is strongly encouraged that quality first teaching and in class strategies are fully in place (as outlined earlier in this guidance) and that pre and post measures of small group or individual targeted interventions that take place are in place to help evaluate impact and be fed back into the school's plan, do review cycle. Careful thought should also be given to which lessons a young person might miss (if any) in order to participate in these interventions, for example in some schools pupils are exempt from additional language lessons or attend interventions after school in order to facilitate this.

### **How do I support my child with literacy needs at home?**

Literacy skills can be supported at home regardless of a young person's age. The National Centre on Improving Literacy<sup>9</sup> suggests that taking an interest in a young person's learning and engaging with what they are doing can be key in increasing their motivation and enjoyment. They also suggest the following to be helpful for promoting young people's literacy skills at home:

- Games such as word association, puzzles, and looking for interesting or new words
- Ask questions about books and things they are reading and writing, you can talk about things they are learning at school or stories and current events

<sup>9</sup> <https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/supporting-your-childs-literacy-development-home>

- Model reading if possible such as books, magazines, the newspaper, online
- Offer a literacy-rich environment with appropriate reading material around the house. You could also visit the library to pick up interesting books or magazines
- Use technology in creative ways if you have access to it. Young people can look things up, use apps that read aloud, or play word games.

## How do we support parents/carers who also struggle with literacy to support their child?

It is important to note that it is possible that parents who experience literacy difficulties themselves may be self-conscious about this. It is therefore very important for schools and school staff to first and foremost strengthen relationships of trust that are open and positive, so any parent feels confident to raise concerns or questions and accept support and feedback. Irrespective of their educational background, parents can be excellent coaches for their children, by being involved in their lives, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, nurturing values and virtues, and helping to remove any barriers to effective learning. Parents/carers can encourage their children to spend time doing the required learning at home and teachers will play a vital role in supporting parents with instructions, such as how many hours they should study at home, what subjects, how many topics covered, number of practice questions attempted etc.

Further support services for parents who want additional help can be accessed through the below organisations:

Read Easy recruits, trains and supports volunteers to give one-to-one tuition to adults who struggle with reading

The Learning and Work Institute aims to improve access to learning for adults

The Reading Agency provides a number of free resources to help improve adult reading skills

Learn Direct provides online courses and a network of learning centres. Call 0800 101 901 for advice and information on their adult literacy courses

English my Way is a resource for tutors who support and teach adults with no or low levels of English, providing free teaching resources and tools to manage classes.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mayfield School and Portchester Community School SENCOs, Parent Voice and Year 7 pupils at Trafalgar School and Year 10 pupils at Miltoncross Academy in Portsmouth for giving their views as part of the focus groups we put together.

The Educational Psychologists who have worked together to write this policy include:

Victoria Parker, Beckett Markland, Lucy Moore, Catarina Soeiro and Abigail Cohman.



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