

Report summary

Removing barriers to literacy

The most recent Annual Reports of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, other reports by Ofsted and independent research have drawn attention to the fact that the attainment of particular groups of children and young people in literacy falls far below that of the rest of the population. Despite gains over the past five years for some traditionally underachieving groups such as Black Caribbean boys, their attainment still falls far below the average for others. The underperformance of those from low-income families is very marked, particularly at secondary level, as is that of looked after children. If overall standards in literacy are to improve further, then they need to rise for these groups especially.

A recent report by Ofsted focused on the teaching of reading in 12 primary schools. Nationally, one in five children leaving primary school does not reach the standard expected for reading and writing. The report, *Reading by six: how the best schools do it*, highlighted the good practice of 12 outstanding schools across England representing a diverse range of communities. They showed that it is possible for all schools to achieve the highest standards. It found that the best primary schools teach virtually all their children to read, regardless of their social and economic background, ethnicity, languages spoken at home, special needs and disability. The success of the 12 schools reflected their determination that every child would learn to read, together with a step-by-step approach to teaching reading, writing and spelling systematically through phonics.

This report looks at a wider age-range and types of provision. Between June 2008 and February 2010, inspectors visited 45 early years registered providers, 37 secondary and 61 primary schools, 21 colleges, 16 independent training providers, eight local authority providers of adult and community learning, and education provision in one prison and one young offender institution. They were selected because previous inspections and current data indicated strengths in their provision, and in the case of schools, particularly for those who were eligible for free school meals. The survey focused mainly on the following groups: pupils eligible for free school meals; looked after children (children in public care); and White British boys from low-income households. In the second year, the focus of the survey shifted, in all the schools selected for visits, to pupils known to be eligible for free school meals who were reaching at least average levels of attainment nationally in English. The

intention was to identify good practice in supporting these learners. In the main, the providers visited served areas of high socio-economic disadvantage and yet achieved outcomes in English that were at or above the levels expected nationally.

In raising the attainment of learners in literacy who are most at risk of not gaining the skills they need for successful lives, the factors identified from visits on this survey included:

- 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 includes examples of how these factors were leading to measurable improvements. Importantly, inspectors identified practice in the successful providers visited that others could replicate. The most successful providers emphasised that there was no 'eureka' moment, that is to say, specific or unusual practice. Rather, they made what one school described as 'painstaking adjustments' to what they did when their monitoring provided evidence of weaknesses and 'stuck with what worked'. However, despite this success, the providers had seldom succeeded completely in narrowing the attainment gap for all groups of pupils. Inspectors did not find any examples of either primary or secondary schools focusing specifically on engaging the families of White working class pupils, despite the fact that this group of pupils is consistently among the worst-performing. Even the providers that were judged to be outstanding acknowledged that 'there is still more to do'.

Inspectors found many good examples, however, of early years registered providers and primary schools building strong relationships with parents and carers and supporting them, through training and advice, to further their child's literacy. Fewer examples were found of such work in secondary schools.

The schools visited that were less successful in narrowing the attainment gap set their sights too low for children from disadvantaged groups. Too many of the secondary schools visited during the survey paid insufficient attention to assessment data in English when pupils moved from Year 6 into Year 7. This resulted in some students working at levels not matched closely enough to their ability. Data showed their poor progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in English.

In the provision for young people and adults, the most successful sessions were those where teachers drew on learners' experiences and ensured that learning activities were closely related to language used in everyday work and social settings. Learners were motivated by working towards qualifications in literacy. However, the National Tests of Literacy at levels 1 and 2, the nationally recognised assessments for adult literacy learning, did not assess writing skills sufficiently. A very small minority of the learners were working towards qualifications that were at the same level as or lower than qualifications they had already passed, often in response to the entry requirements of further education programmes.

Key findings

- The successful providers visited understood the often multiple barriers facing children and learners from disadvantaged groups which prevented them from acquiring literacy skills. However, only very few had consistent success in overcoming these barriers for all groups of children and learners.
- The most successful schools, colleges and other providers of adult education and training visited made outstanding use of national test and assessment data to raise the expectations of staff and to set sufficiently challenging targets.
- The most effective providers visited had at least one senior member of staff with an excellent knowledge of literacy and its pedagogy. They understood the stages of language development and how and when to provide additional support.
- The early years registered providers and primary schools visited understood the need to teach phonics rigorously and systematically and the importance of regular practice in reading. The primary schools visited in the second year of the survey all used a structured, systematic approach to teaching phonics. The teachers and teaching assistants led daily, discrete phonics sessions with groups of pupils for 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the age of the children.
- The most effective providers visited reflected on and adapted their curriculum, including any intervention programmes, to meet changing needs. They taught literacy in contexts that were relevant and meaningful to their learners. The staff identified learners' different starting points and needs accurately.
- Inspectors saw a wide variety of effective approaches to the teaching and learning of literacy that built on the consistent use of phonics. Many of the approaches were in common use, but they were particularly effective in the providers visited because those teaching had consistently high expectations and the tasks set matched the needs of learners well.
- In the secondary schools where teachers in all subject departments had received training in teaching literacy and where staff had included an objective for literacy in all the lessons, senior managers noted an improvement in outcomes across all subjects, as well as in English. The high-performing colleges visited adopted similar strategies to improve outcomes.

- The successful schools visited often nominated learning mentors or staff to support looked after children and other pupils who were potentially at risk of underachieving. This ensured that they received continuity in terms of support and guidance, including prompt access to external agencies that were best equipped to tackle social and emotional problems that could affect learning.
- In the schools visited, a culture of good behaviour, mutual respect between staff and pupils and good partnerships with parents supported the learning of literacy well. In the colleges and other providers of education and training visited, the staff treated learners as adults and drew skilfully on their experiences to enliven the classes and ensure that learning activities were relevant.
- Even in the successful early years registered providers and schools visited, inspectors found that some groups of children and learners attained relatively less well in literacy. Nearly always, those known to be eligible for free school meals and, in the secondary schools, looked after children and White boys, in particular, underachieved relative to the other pupils.
- In the less successful secondary schools, the limited use of assessment data on pupils on transfer to Year 7 led to insufficiently challenging targets for some pupils.
- Headteachers sometimes limited their ambition for pupils because they measured success against the average for the pupil group rather than against the national average for all pupils. If the targets set for pupils from low-income families are below that of their peers, schools are less likely to succeed in narrowing the attainment gap.
- Virtual headteachers found it difficult to gain accurate data on the progress of pupils who were looked after. Assessment information was often missing because looked after children were moved frequently. There was often a gap before a pupil's new school or local authority received information.
- Inspectors saw few instances of systematic phonics teaching in the secondary schools, colleges and other providers of adult education and training, despite the fact that for learners without a grasp of the link between sounds and letters, this knowledge is necessary to develop their literacy.
- For adult learners, the National Tests of Literacy, which many adult learners sat, tested reading skills but did not assess learners' writing. As a result, these did not offer learners and providers confirmation of improvement in writing skills.
- In five of the 22 colleges and other providers of adult education and training visited in the second year of the survey, learners were working towards outcomes that did not provide suitable challenge. In these settings, the qualifications learners were taking were at the same level or a lower level as the qualifications in English or literacy that they had passed previously.

Main report published 21 January 2011
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090237

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090237.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No. 090237

© Crown copyright 2011

