

Reading by six

How the best schools do it



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Foreword by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Last year's Annual Report drew attention to the need to ensure that children have the literacy skills they will need in life.

In recent years, there have been major strategic and significant local initiatives to promote and support approaches to raising standards in reading and writing. Yet weaknesses remain in teaching children to read and write, with the result that the standards achieved by many children at the end of the primary years fall stubbornly short of what are desirable and, the evidence suggests, achievable.¹

The foundations for competent reading and writing are laid down from the age of three to seven. We know the importance of children developing their vocabulary, listening both to what others say and mean, and to the sounds of words. We know how to teach the recognition of letters and the association of sounds with letters and combinations of letters to decode and spell words. We know how to develop, encourage and improve reading and writing and how to overcome the challenges that some children experience, but the evidence suggests that we have not succeeded in doing these things consistently and persistently across all schools in the country.

This report draws from the practice of 12 outstanding schools in different parts of England to illuminate what works in teaching children to read. The schools represent a diverse range of communities but have striking features in common. They are passionate in their belief that every child can learn to read. Teaching children to read is at the heart of their curriculum. Rigorous, intensive and systematic phonics teaching underpins reading, spelling and writing. Teachers and teaching assistants are well trained and highly effective, and the schools are led and managed by able, committed headteachers and reading managers who assure quality and drive improvement.

The schools are not a rarified elite; there are many others that do an equally good job. The challenge is for all schools to emulate practices which are eminently transferable and which should be applied consistently and reliably everywhere. I hope you will be inspired by the examples here.



Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

¹ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09 (HC 11), 2009.*

Summary of findings and recommendations

- Too many children in England do not read or write well enough by the time they leave primary school. The proportion of 11-year-olds that reach the expected level (Level 4 of the National Curriculum) in English has stalled at around 80% and the national average point score for reading at the end of Key Stage 1 has remained between 15.6 and 15.7 for the last four years.
- The best primary schools in England teach virtually every child to read, regardless of the social and economic circumstances of their neighbourhoods, the ethnicity of their pupils, the language spoken at home and most special educational needs or disabilities.
- A sample of 12 of these schools finds that their success is based on a determination that every child will learn to read, together with a very rigorous and sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics.² This approach is applied with a high degree of consistency and sustained.
- If some schools can do this, it should be a moral imperative for all primary schools. This study shows that primary – including infant – schools can achieve very high standards in reading if they focus on this objective, adopt a consistent approach and make every minute of every lesson count.
- The diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics is central to the success of all the schools that achieve high reading standards in Key Stage 1. This requires high-quality and expert teaching that follows a carefully planned and tightly structured approach to teaching phonic knowledge and skills. Pupils are given opportunities to apply what they have learnt through reading – including time to read aloud to adults to practise their decoding skills – writing and comprehension of what they are reading.
- Schools with Nursery classes begin such teaching early on. The curriculum gives children rich opportunities to talk and listen in a wide range of contexts. This contributes to developing their familiarity with books and stories and their knowledge of the meanings of words. There is a strong focus on developing the children's capacity to listen, concentrate and discriminate between sounds.
- The best phonics teaching is characterised by planned structure, fast pace, praise and reinforcement, perceptive responses, active participation by all children and evidence of progress. Effective teachers are highly trained to instil the principles of phonics, can identify the learning needs of young children, and recognise and overcome the barriers that impede learning.
- Well-structured resources are used appropriately, either individually or in combination, to support the teaching programme. Phonics teaching is monitored to ensure consistency and steps are taken if improvement is called for.
- The assessment of individual pupils' progress, phonic knowledge and skills is sufficiently frequent and detailed to identify quickly the pupils who are failing, or in danger of failing, to keep up with their peers. Effective provision for them to catch up is put in place early and there are high expectations of what all pupils should achieve.
- Children should be involved in the assessment of their progress and receive regular supportive feedback on their work. The quality of formative assessment and the interaction that stems from it make an important contribution to learning.
- All children should be reading at standards appropriate to Level 1A/2C when they are six, that is, by the end of Year 1. Children at this stage who are still struggling to read should have individual support which is carefully attuned to overcoming barriers to their phonological development.
- In any school where the teaching of reading and writing falls below the 'outstanding' benchmark and pupils' achievement lags behind that in the most effective schools, there should be a critical focus on the teaching of phonic knowledge and skills. Shortcomings in the rigour and fitness for purpose of schools' programmes for phonics teaching should be redressed urgently, for example through using a high-quality synthetic phonics scheme. This should be accompanied by training for staff to use it, by rigorous monitoring of the implementation of the programme, especially the quality of the teaching, and by evaluation of the impact of the programme on pupils' decoding and spelling skills.

Introduction

1 Understanding the relationship between the sounds of spoken language and the way those sounds can be represented by one or more letters of the alphabet is as fundamental to reading in English – as well as to writing and spelling – as understanding the notes on staves and practising scales are to playing music. To misquote Shakespeare, it appears that ‘some children are born readers, some achieve reading skills and others have reading thrust upon them’. Primary schools encounter and must provide for all three types. The best schools work on the principle that every child can learn to read.

2 There has been much ado about reading for many years, fuelled, for example, by some employers who lament the level of basic skills of some of those entering the labour market and by secondary schools that admit poor readers. Actually, the concerns go back very much further, as do the efforts to redress them. The ‘initial teaching alphabet’, for example, was an attempt in the early 1960s to link sounds with specifically devised symbols. It was, indeed, an *initial* teaching alphabet and therefore doomed to fail since some of the symbols that had been devised in addition to 24 of the letters of the Roman alphabet existed only for the purpose of the scheme. The 18 additional characters had to be discarded or unlearned as the child transferred to traditional orthography. The approach was also relatively expensive, since reading books were limited in range and written in the scheme’s own well-intentioned but impracticable code. However, lying behind the initial teaching alphabet was a brave attempt at regularising what appeared to many to be the irregularities of sound–symbol relationships (phonics) in English.

3 The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998 provided for a daily literacy hour for Key Stages 1 and 2, which, together with structured lessons, raised national performance several notches before it stalled by the mid-2000s. Following the Select Committee report *Teaching children to read* in 2005,³ an independent review of early reading in 2006, informed by evidence from Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI), reiterated the importance of developing early spoken language as the basis for a systematic grounding in phonics for later reading and spelling.⁴

4 The Communication, Language and Literacy Development programme was set up in autumn 2006 to implement the recommendations of the independent review. Since 2006, schools have been urged to adopt a high-quality programme for the systematic teaching of phonics. Local authorities were funded to appoint consultants to train and support schools, and guidance was produced on teaching synthetic phonics in Reception and Key Stage 1 classes. Commercial publishers responded with new or updated schemes for teaching phonics. They also published decodable books – that is, early reading books specially designed so that children could practise reading using the phonic knowledge and skills they had already learnt.

5 The coalition government’s proposal to test the reading of six-year-olds is a reminder to the education system in England, if one were needed, of the imperative of teaching young children to read. This report examines best practice in the teaching of initial reading. It focuses particularly on approaches to teaching phonics as an indispensable tool for children to make sense of written words, in reading and in spelling them for themselves.

6 The report finds that the best practice has some strikingly common features as well as different manifestations. Keys to the success of all the schools in the sample include:

- clarity and constant purpose
- knowledge and understanding of the processes that help children learn to read
- a programme of rigorous systematic phonics work as the prime approach to decoding print
- consistent teaching of the highest quality, together with effective assessment of children’s progress and help for those who encounter difficulty in reading
- effective leadership and management of the school and of literacy.

Underpinning these essentials are well-conceived and structured resources for teaching phonics systematically, effective training for school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, and the efforts made by schools to involve families, in different ways, in supporting their children’s reading.

³ *Teaching children to read* (HC 121), House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005.

⁴ *Independent review of the teaching of early reading* (0201-2006DOC-EN), Department for Education and Skills, 2006.

7 The schools in this survey have two things in common: the belief that every child can learn to read and the strategies to make this happen. ‘The most important gift our school can give a child is the power to read,’ said one headteacher, a sentiment echoed by others. But it is not just rhetoric; the best primary schools do teach every child to read and nearly every child to read well. This report describes how some of them do it.

The schools and their approaches

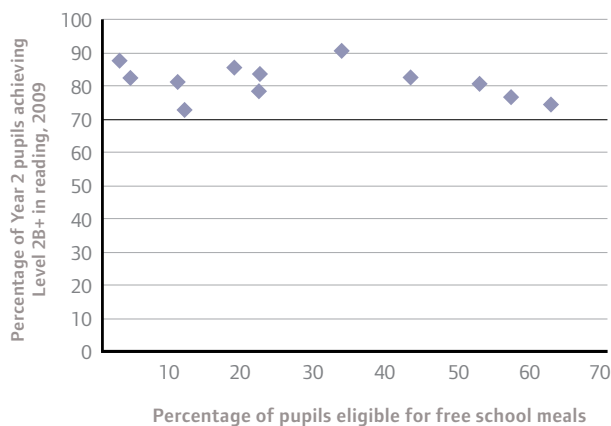


The schools and their approaches

Choosing the schools

8 The search for exemplary practice starts with considering schools in which teaching is outstanding and outcomes for their pupils are very high. An examination of such schools reveals that, in terms of children learning to read, the best schools can succeed regardless of the socio-economic circumstances of the communities they serve. If the school is good enough, the great majority of children will learn to read (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of Key Stage 1 reading proficiency at Level 2B or above in the outstanding schools in this report



The horizontal line represents the proportion of pupils reaching Level 2B+ nationally.

9 A sample of 12 schools was identified for this study. The schools were selected from Ofsted's database on the basis of their inspection outcomes and standards in reading at Key Stage 1 and, where relevant, English at Key Stage 2. All the 12 schools were judged to be outstanding in their last inspection, not only in terms of their overall effectiveness but also in the quality of the teaching and learning, and the quality of leadership and management. The quality of teaching is a key determinant. All the 12 schools visited had above-average results in reading at Key Stage 1 and above-average English results at Key Stage 2. Their school populations represent a spectrum in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds, and the schools are geographically widely distributed (Figure 2). The sample consists of four infant and nursery schools and eight full-range primary schools. Four are faith schools; the rest are non-denominational.

Figure 2: Location of schools in the sample



10 All the schools were visited by HMI during October 2010, relatively early in the school year. They observed over 100 phonics, reading and writing sessions in action. Although visiting within a short period of time restricted the range of work seen, it had the advantage of showing how different schools were teaching phonics to children at the same time of the year. The schools set the agenda for the visits; they were asked simply to show how they taught children to read.

The schools' approaches to teaching reading

11 The following portraits provide a brief introduction to the approach taken by each of the 12 schools to teaching initial reading. The illustrations of good practice have also been drawn from the 12 schools. The portraits are vignettes, written by HMI after visiting the schools to observe the teaching of reading and writing and meeting the headteacher, subject leader for literacy, reading manager and others. They also include data that reflect the context and performance of the school, using 2009 as the reference year.⁵ Many of the schools have higher results in 2010 but, as the full range of 2010 data were not available, the report uses data from 2009. Readers should bear in mind that one year's results may not be typical.⁶

⁵ In the tables of school data, CVA denotes the Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 contextual value-added indicator for the school, averaged over the three years 2007, 2008 and 2009; FSM denotes the percentage of pupils eligible for a free school meal; EAL denotes the percentage of pupils who speak English as an additional language. The data are derived from the RAISEonline reports for 2009, produced by Ofsted and the Department for Education for every school,

to which each school has access. RAISEonline – Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation – provides interactive analysis of school and pupil performance data.

⁶ More details about each school can be found on Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

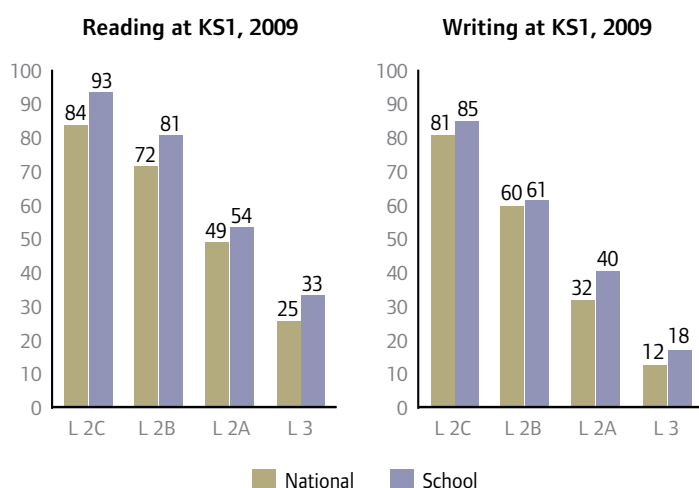
Blue Coat Church of England Infant School and Nursery, Walsall

12 A higher than average proportion of children joining Blue Coat are learning to speak English as an additional language but they rapidly gain fluency. When she came to the school in 2000, the headteacher, Janet Davies, saw a need for reading to be taught more effectively, especially in the younger classes.

13 The school tried out and then adopted the synthetic phonics approach of Read Write Inc. with enthusiasm. Talking, listening, extending vocabulary and gaining familiarity with core books are key elements of the Nursery programme before the children embark on systematic phonics sessions. Children's competence in language and early reading is assessed within a few weeks, after which they are taught phonics in groups based on attainment. The teachers and teaching

assistants maintain their consistent approach through frequent training and meetings, both within and outside school, and through constant monitoring by the headteacher and the reading manager, who is given time to visit classes when phonics lessons are in progress. Children's individual needs and progress are readily identified.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Blue Coat in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	293	238
Year 2	70	
Age range	3 to 7	
FSM	21.6%	17%
Deprivation	0.41	0.24
EAL	42%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	N/A	
L5 English at KS2	N/A	
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	N/A	

The schools and their approaches continued

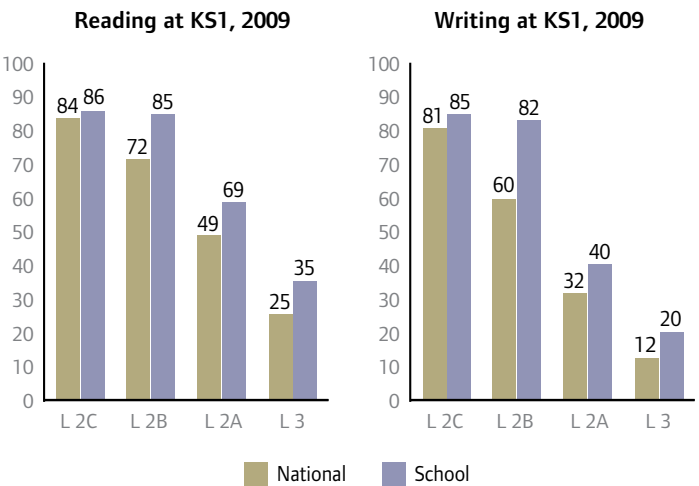
Bourne Abbey Church of England Primary School, Lincolnshire

14 The school mainly serves White British families. Its headteacher, Cherry Edwards, is a National Leader of Education and she and her staff support a number of schools in Lincolnshire.⁷

15 From Reception onwards, children read and write every day. The school introduced the Read Write Inc. scheme for reading and writing three years ago and it is now a lead school for the programme. Generally, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 children follow the programme for four days each week, and on Fridays spend time on a piece of more extended writing. From October during their Reception year, children are set by attainment across the year group. This setting continues in Year 1 and Year 2. The school considers that children do not become fluent readers using one skill alone,

so children take part in guided reading at least three times a week, and more often if they need this. As well as texts from the Oxford Reading Tree scheme, which include phonically decodable books, 'real' books are available for the children to take home, banded by difficulty. A team of parent helpers assists with guided reading.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Bourne Abbey in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	628	238
Year 2	65	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	3.7%	17%
Deprivation	0.09	0.24
EAL	3.7%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	88%	80%
L5 English at KS2	38%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	100.6%	

⁷ In 2005, what was then known as the National College for School Leadership was asked to establish a group of outstanding headteachers who would not only demonstrate excellent leadership in their own schools but would also be able to support schools in challenging circumstances. For further information, see www.nationalcollege.org.uk/national-leaders-of-education.

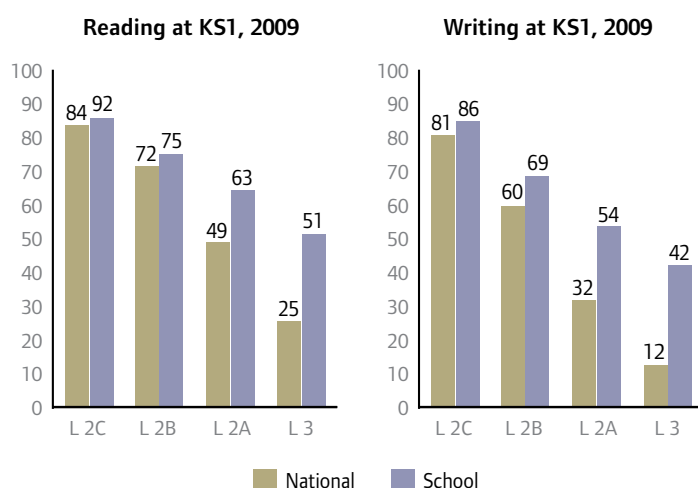
Fairlawn Primary School, Lewisham

16 Fairlawn has a multi-ethnic school population in which 36 home languages are spoken. It welcomes this cosmopolitan mix. When the headteacher, Robin Bosher, arrived in 2002, he found a good school but judged that pupils could achieve much more.

17 The provision for children's reading is meticulously organised, from when children start in the Fairlawn nursery annex to their departure as highly literate 11-year-olds. The nursery staff encourage careful listening to sounds and words in a language-rich environment, with specific phonics work four times a week. Children get to know three core books well each half term, and a wide range of resources stimulate interest in reading and writing. Progress is carefully assessed and recorded and there are daily opportunities for reading, ready access to books, and support for parents, including for those whose circumstances make

them hard to reach. Systematic phonics teaching is based on Letters and Sounds. This is embedded in a 20-minute phonics session for the Reception and Key Stage 1 classes at 11am every morning. The sessions are rigorously structured and taught in a very engaging way, taking the children through a sequence of phases of phonic development. Their reading is consolidated by the books and activities used in the rest of the curriculum. Boxes of banded reading resources are available in every class and children are encouraged to choose books at an appropriate level. The unusually long lunch period includes half an hour that is used for individual and guided reading.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Fairlawn Primary in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	504	238
Year 2	59	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	11.3%	17%
Deprivation	0.24	0.24
EAL	21.3%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	95%	80%
L5 English at KS2	53%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	101.1%	

The schools and their approaches continued

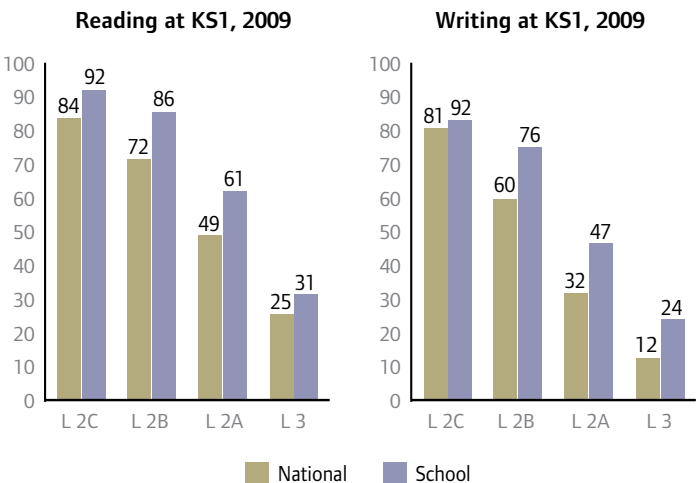
Kingsley Primary School, Hartlepool

18 Kingsley, led by Alison Darby, serves a stable local community. Many children at the school have parents and grandparents who also attended it.

19 The successful Kingsley system of reading is long-established. The school's approach to reading is meticulous, based on a main spine built on Letterland and Letters and Sounds, with some use of Jolly Phonics for individual children who are not achieving on the main spine. The phonics programme starts from the moment children arrive in the nursery. The school says that in the past it has had to counter criticism from some experts who baulked at the school's enthusiasm for introducing early reading activities to young children, but that criticism faded as the proof of its approach became evident in the consistently excellent standards. Children attend the nursery part

time, the older children in the morning, the younger in the afternoon. Even at this age, the variation among children in readiness for early reading activities is stark. Some come to the Nursery clearly having had rich early literacy experiences of books, stories and rhymes, and they are able to carry out simple tasks; others arrive still wearing nappies and sucking dummies. Despite this wide and challenging range, the school's nursery provision centres on language and literacy.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Kingsley Primary in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	487	238
Year 2	59	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	21.8%	17%
Deprivation	0.29	0.24
EAL	0%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	92%	80%
L5 English at KS2	66%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	101.2%	

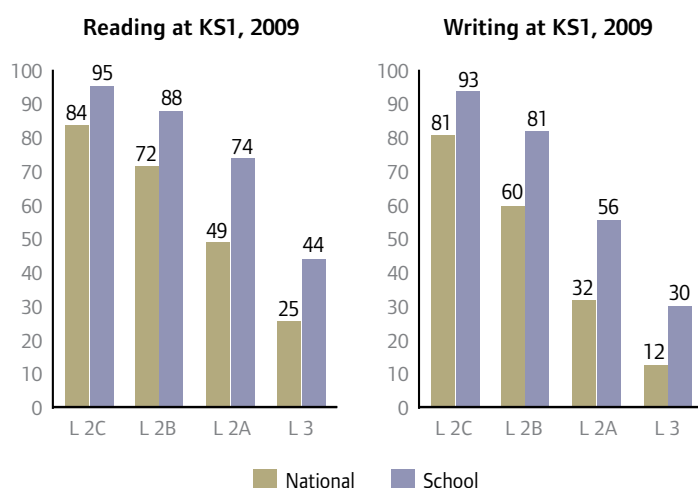
North Walsham Infant School and Nursery, Norfolk

20 The school serves a population which is described as being divided between those who commute to Norwich and those who do not. There is some rural deprivation. The school has a 52-place nursery.

21 The headteacher, Clare Fletcher, wanted to get the children to be much more active in learning and participating. The school invested in an integrated scheme, Read Write Inc., which 'promoted participation as well as literacy'. Every teacher was trained to use the scheme and the staff show pupils how to extend their language. They place great emphasis on story time. The children enjoy listening to five high-quality books each term from Reception to Year 2 – 15 in the course of a year. Life in the nursery contains a lot of imaginative play, role play and some practice of phonics. Staff encourage children to speak in sentences. In Reception there is a daily 20-minute phonics session with each

class organised into two groups within the classroom. There is tight, individual pre- and post-lesson tutoring, with the children being challenged through the whole day. The school says that there is a large and positive effect on children's self-esteem and confidence. Much of this is to do with the children's participation and work as partners that the scheme encourages. All the groups are composed so as to meet particular needs, and children are moved around the groups. In Key Stage 1, teaching assistants often work with the middle groups and teachers with the higher- and lower-attaining groups. The reading manager is released from her own teaching during the time for teaching phonics so she can guide staff and observe the needs and progress of individual children. Their success is celebrated at every opportunity and parents are very involved and supportive.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at North Walsham in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	228	238
Year 2	43	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	18.2%	17%
Deprivation	0.18	0.24
EAL	7.8%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	N/A	
L5 English at KS2	N/A	
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	N/A	

The schools and their approaches continued

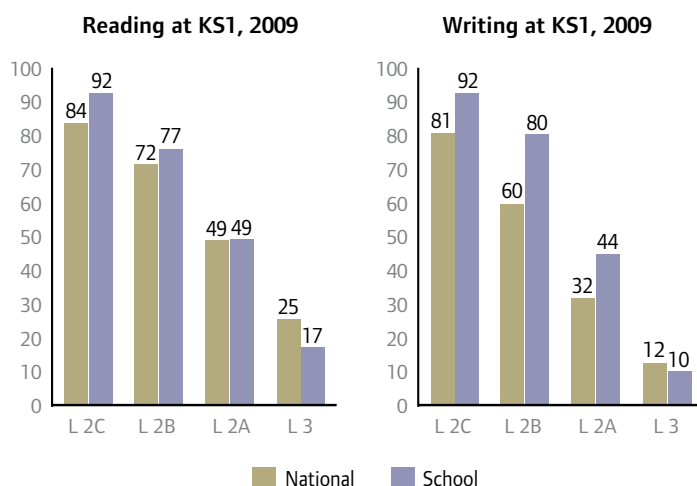
Old Ford Primary School, Tower Hamlets

22 The headteacher, Amanda Phillips, joined Old Ford Primary School in 2004 and now also heads Culloden Primary School. The school, in East London, provides for the immediate Bangladeshi community, together with White, Black African and Black Caribbean British children, and the children of Somali and European immigrant or refugee families.

23 There is a holistic approach to the teaching of reading in Old Ford in which phonics – based on Read Write Inc. – guided reading, early attention to writing and constant language development all play their part. As a result, children's reading progress is rapid and the majority of children reach Level 1A or 2C by the end of Year 1. The school is clear about wanting to develop confident readers who will experiment with words and take risks. Some children enter the nursery with

a background that has not helped them to develop independence and prepared them to come to school. Their speech is very limited. Priorities for the nursery are on language learning and practice; personal, social and emotional development, and instilling routines into the children's lives. For the first half term, language skills are developed through songs, games, toys, stories and rhymes. In the second half term, the children who are deemed to be ready are introduced, as a group, to phonics and learn to distinguish between sounds. The general pattern of organisation through the school is reflected in a daily literacy hour, half an hour of guided reading in English and two hours of extended writing at some point in the week. The school also retains a commitment to Reading Recovery for a number of pupils each year in Year 1.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Old Ford in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	726	238
Year 2	90	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	62.1%	17%
Deprivation	0.72	0.24
EAL	71.4%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	91%	80%
L5 English at KS2	12%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	101.1%	

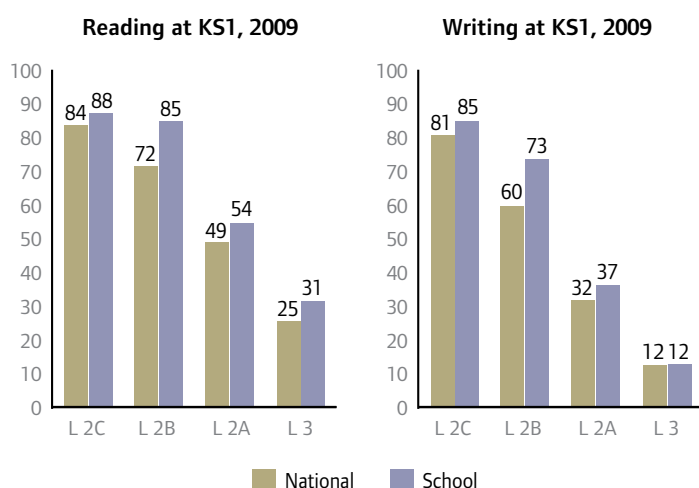
St Clare's Catholic Primary School, Liverpool

24 Nearly half the children at St Clare's are eligible for free school meals, reflecting some of the social issues, including unemployment, facing the families living in the area; and almost half are of minority ethnic heritage. This includes a rising number of children who have newly arrived in the country.

25 The headteacher, Michael Hennessey, attributes the strength of reading to the 'huge commitment from staff', especially from the teachers in Reception, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 who take daily guided reading groups in their lunchtimes. He also singles out the thorough and consistent approach to the teaching of phonic skills throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. The school introduces phonics after Easter in the nursery, using Jolly Phonics to introduce a sound and letter each week. More intensive phonics starts

in Reception, with two new sounds a week, teaching the whole class and bringing in the Letters and Sounds programme. Once the children are familiar with the routines, they are also given the first set of words of a first-stage reader to take home to learn. Once they know them, they are given the books with the words. Progress through the sounds that children need to learn follows a standard list and is supported for each child by two reading schemes: New Way, a phonically based scheme, and the Oxford Reading Tree. This combination of phonics and reading schemes, including a phonically based spelling scheme, Spelling for Literacy, is continued through Key Stage 1.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at St Clare's in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	248	238
Year 2	26	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	42.7%	17%
Deprivation	0.53	0.24
EAL	9.4%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	87%	80%
L5 English at KS2	27%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	100.2%	

The schools and their approaches continued

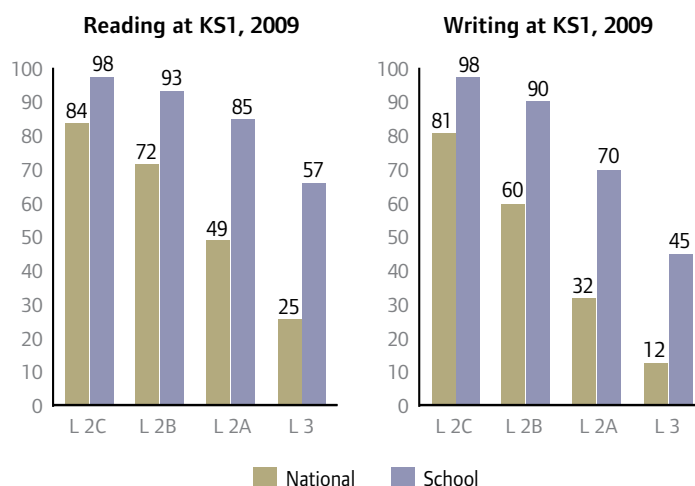
St Richard's RC Primary School, Manchester

26 Thirty per cent of the school's pupils are of faiths other than Catholic, predominantly Islam, and over half are of minority ethnic heritage. The school's population reflects the ethnically diverse area it serves.

27 The headteacher, Sharon Sesnan, is in her fourth year, but the long-service award belongs to the assistant headteacher and literacy coordinator, Kathryn Broadbent. She joined the school in 1974 and has worked very effectively with other staff, and with the considerable support of parents, to develop the school's hugely successful reading system. Staff identify the secrets of success in teaching reading as: consistency; a straightforward system rigorously applied; new staff trained into the system quickly; meticulous monitoring; and engagement with parents. This school has always seen reading as a core priority. The staff have a very

clear idea of where pupils need to be on the reading scheme in order to be on track to achieve Level 2 at the age of seven and Level 4 at the age of 11. The strong teaching of phonics, based on Jolly Phonics and Letters and Sounds, and a tightly organised and managed reading scheme, are all they need to achieve this. A range of resources is used to support the programme, including the Oxford Reading Tree and Ginn 360 books.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at St Richard's in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	367	238
Year 2	40	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	33.2%	17%
Deprivation	0.51	0.24
EAL	29.6%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	83%	80%
L5 English at KS2	24%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	100.9%	

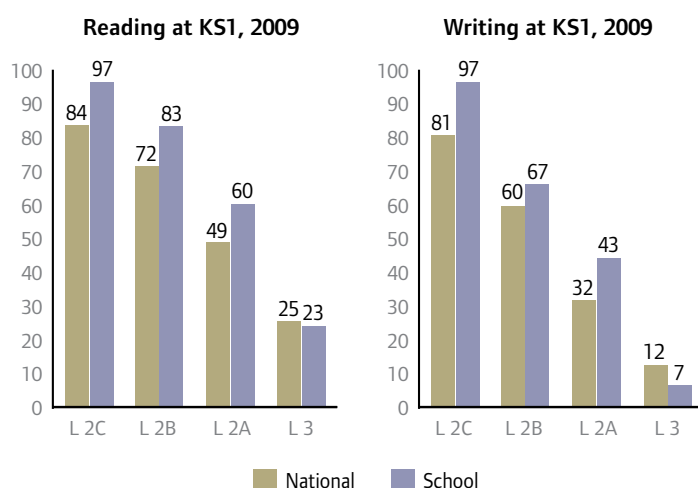
Thomas Jones Primary School, Kensington and Chelsea

28 A high proportion of the pupils are from economically and socially deprived backgrounds. Most of them live in local authority housing and, currently, 65% of the pupils are learning to speak English as an additional language.

29 The school is focused on ensuring that, by the time a pupil leaves the school, she or he can read. This, says the headteacher, David Sellens, is the so-called 'bottom line'. Everything is done to that end. It starts with the specific teaching of letters and sounds, recognised in the school's inspection in 2009 as having a positive effect on raising standards and preparing children well for when they move through the school. Jolly Phonics and Letters and Sounds are used as a basis, supported by a reading scheme, Rigby Star. The school is keen to

ensure not only that the pupils are able to read but also that they read because they like it. This means providing high-quality texts, both literature and non-fiction, and ensuring that children are introduced to these through cross-curricular projects, story-tellers, and the promotion of books and reading by teachers to children. Reading is given high status.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Thomas Jones in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	235	238
Year 2	30	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	52.3%	17%
Deprivation	0.51	0.24
EAL	65.6%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	97%	80%
L5 English at KS2	80%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	100.9%	

The schools and their approaches continued

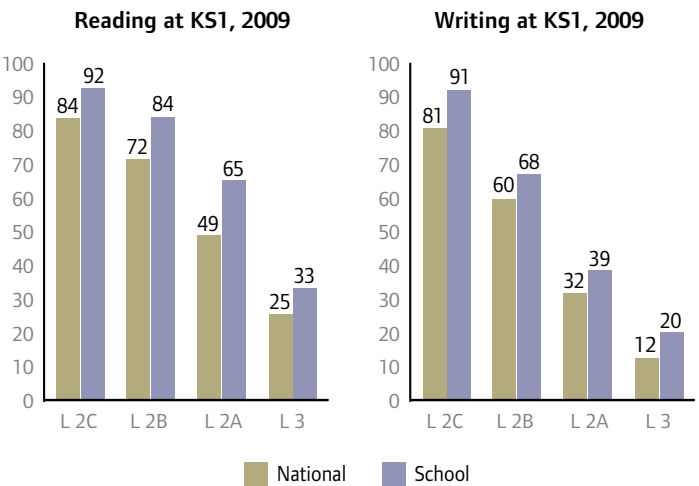
Trenance Infant School, Cornwall

30 The school serves the tourist town of Newquay.⁸ The vast majority of the pupils are White British; languages other than English include Polish and Filipino. The current headteacher, Lisa Mannall, took up her post in September 2007, inheriting the structured Read Write Inc. programme for reading and writing that her predecessor had recently adopted.

31 The keys to the school's success were reiterated constantly: absolute consistency across the school; high-quality training and staff development for everyone involved in teaching reading; very strong, logical progression from individual sounds to blending sounds to make words, then sentences, and then reading whole books; setting by attainment, with fluid movement across groups and, every eight weeks,

assessment of the progress of each child across the whole school to refine the groupings. In addition, the high-quality, consistent teaching has had a substantial impact on eliminating behavioural problems because the pupils are so engaged.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Trenance in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	331	238
Year 2	119	
Age range	4 to 7	
FSM	10%	17%
Deprivation	0.22	0.24
EAL	1.8%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	N/A	
L5 English at KS2	N/A	
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	N/A	

⁸ The school was designated as an academy on 1 November 2010 and is now known as the Trenance Learning Academy.

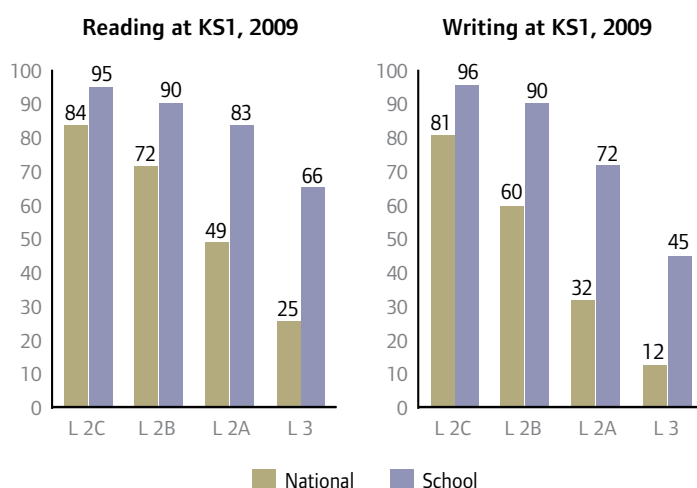
Turnfurlong Infant School, Buckinghamshire

32 Turnfurlong sits within a 1960s housing estate in Aylesbury. The school population is socially and ethnically mixed. Jan Tyson has been the headteacher for just over 12 years. Her expertise is used beyond Turnfurlong as a mentor for new headteachers.

33 Speaking and listening is an integral part of the school's curriculum, used by all staff as a vehicle in each lesson to improve reading and writing. Children use their developing vocabulary in an appropriately timely manner; every child at this school reads and writes almost every day. The school believes that the more children read and write, the more quickly their reading and writing improve. Children take part in daily systematic phonics lessons, lasting around 20 minutes, when they have numerous opportunities to blend sounds together to read words and segment words into

their individual sounds to spell. The staff developed their own programme of phonics, incorporating elements of Read Write Inc., Letters and Sounds and Jolly Phonics, leading on to a reading scheme based on Heinemann. In the summer term of their Reception year and throughout Years 1 and 2, pupils are set by attainment for phonics work so as to enable work to be matched effectively to their needs. The success of the school's approach is seen in its results at the end of Year 2. Attainment in reading and writing scores for the past five years has been significantly above national averages.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Turnfurlong in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	251	238
Year 2	83	
Age range	4 to 7	
FSM	2.2%	17%
Deprivation	0.15	0.24
EAL	16.7%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	N/A	
L5 English at KS2	N/A	
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	N/A	

The schools and their approaches continued

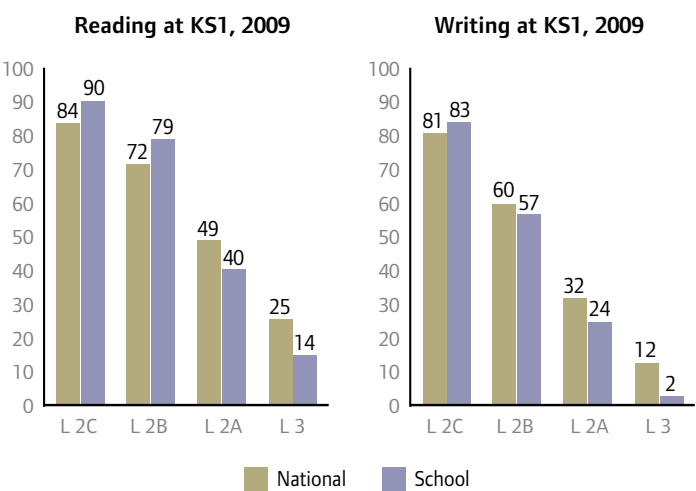
Woodberry Down Primary School, Hackney

34 This multi-ethnic school has a mobile population of pupils, almost two thirds of whom are learning to speak English as an additional language. There is much social and economic deprivation and a quarter of the pupils are refugees.

35 One of the assistant headteachers coordinates work on reading and writing, providing weekly staff training sessions to sharpen the skills of teachers and teaching assistants. She also trains the staff of other schools, especially the other three members of the Best Start Federation, of which the headteacher of Woodberry Down, Greg Wallace, is the executive headteacher. Phonics teaching uses the Read Write Inc. programme and is systematic, fast-paced and intensive. Within the nursery, there is a very strong emphasis on speaking and listening to prepare children to enunciate sounds, blend

sounds together and segment words into their individual sounds. Developing children’s social skills, including speaking and listening, is essential as many of those at the school come from homes where there is much less structure than usual. Formal phonics teaching starts properly in the Reception year, where pupils from the two classes are organised in seven attainment groups on a ‘carousel’ basis. Pupils are taught in sets based on attainment across each year group.

Percentage of Year 2 pupils reaching Level 2C and above for reading and writing in Key Stage 1 (KS1) at Woodberry Down in 2009, compared with the national average



2009 data	School	National
Roll	395	238
Year 2	42	
Age range	3 to 11	
FSM	56.6%	17%
Deprivation	0.59	0.24
EAL	62.5%	15.3%
Outcomes in English		
L4 English at KS2	87%	80%
L5 English at KS2	26%	29%
KS1-2 CVA 3-year mean	100.4%	

A common approach to teaching reading

36 Many of the schools described in the earlier pages reviewed their approaches to teaching reading in the last few years when phonics became a firm requirement of the curriculum and the principles of effective phonics programmes were articulated more clearly. As the headteacher of one school said: 'Phonics teaching has always been central here but staff looked again at their practice.' This meant focusing on having a systematic (or synthetic) approach to teaching phonics, the key features of which are to teach beginner readers:

- grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined incremental sequence
- to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word, to read it
- to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.⁹

37 These elements were strongly present in the schools featured in this report. Publishers also responded by making new or revised materials for the teaching of phonics and literacy available to schools. These schemes support the teaching of all the letter–sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence. They also provide a greater range of phonically decodable books.

38 Together the elements listed here form the basis of high-quality phonic work which is a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that has to be learned. The 12 schools all have thorough, well-conceived and well-planned programmes for teaching phonics which give children the understanding of letter–sound correspondences (the alphabetic principle) and the skills for blending and segmenting which – together with building comprehension – are the foundations on which reading, spelling and writing are based. About half of the schools in the sample use a single, comprehensive, dedicated scheme for systematic phonics teaching. The rest draw upon two or more published resources to forge a coherent structured programme which, when conceived and implemented well, can also provide a highly effective, phonics-centred approach to teaching reading, spelling and writing.

One school that took a measured decision to change its approach to phonics teaching was Bourne Abbey.

Big decisions at Bourne Abbey

Four years ago, having visited a school using Read Write Inc., one of the school's deputy headteachers felt that the scheme offered a better way of teaching phonics than the scheme they had been using. Initially, RWI was piloted in Year 1. The three Year 1 class teachers were so impressed by the scheme that it was rolled out to Reception and Year 2 the following year. RWI is now well established. Within Year 2, children come to the end of the RWI scheme and move on to literacy sessions, although pupils' understanding of more complex graphemic representations of particular phonemes are reinforced during a daily phonics input.

As well as reading scheme texts, 'real' books are available in Bourne Abbey for pupils to take home, banded by difficulty so that pupils know which level of book to choose, and so they may develop a breadth of reading experience within and beyond the reading scheme. The school has provided an ever-increasing range of phonically decodable texts so that pupils may quickly enjoy showing off their new reading skills at home.

39 Other schools in the group of 12 that have pursued a similar path are Blue Coat, North Walsham and Trenance infant schools and Woodberry Down Primary School, while Old Ford Primary School has modified the approach in a way the school feels best meets the needs of its children (described earlier).

40 Fairlawn Primary School was another school that reflected on its teaching of phonics and embarked on a fundamental shift three years ago – changing practice and creating policy, in that order – when it shifted its focus from teaching to learning, based on the principles of assessment for learning.¹⁰ The effect has been to achieve a higher proportion of children gaining Level 4 at Key Stage 2 and greatly improve the proportion of children attaining Level 5. All the 15% of pupils who are learning to speak English

⁹ See the revised core criteria in the Annex.

¹⁰ 'Assessment for learning has been defined as 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.' *Assessment for learning: 10 principles*, Assessment Reform Group, 2002, www.assessment-reform-group.org.

The schools and their approaches continued

as an additional language make at least two sub-levels of progress within a year, for example from Level 1 to 2B. All the children on the special needs register achieved Level 4 in English in 2010, including those on school action plus.

Synthetic phonics at Fairlawn

Before adopting Letters and Sounds, the school used a number of different resources. The headteacher, who had been a Reception teacher for seven years, feels 'that the scheme has fundamentally raised standards, that its pace is more challenging than many commercial programmes he has seen and that the six phases into which the programme is organised have led to high expectations, given continuity to learning and supported effective training'. The programme is used from the Nursery onwards. There is a strong concentration on sounds and letters in the two Reception classes, where there is a staged entry and banding of older and younger children. The activities recommended in the programme are seen as interesting for all the pupils and, as a result, there is little difference between the relative progress of girls and boys. The latter respond to the active nature of the learning, such as singing and clapping. Moving from Reception to Key Stage 1, children have access to the graded 'book baskets', based on Oxford Reading Tree, supported by other books at the appropriate level. They consolidate their knowledge of phonemes and graphemes, and increasingly apply their skills to text.

41 A further group of schools in the 12 constructed their early reading programme from more than one resource. These schools are every bit as committed to finding the best approach for their staff and children as those described earlier, using external consultancy only when they have identified a need to seek technical expertise, such as in pronouncing all the phonemes precisely. They include Kingsley, St Clare's and St Richard's, Thomas Jones and Turnfurlong primary schools. Their results speak for the success of their literacy programmes. In each case, the school's approach to teaching phonics reflects its confidence in its own philosophy and practice.

The systematic phonics programme at each school is undeniably rigorous. Although they draw from more than one scheme, the programmes are themselves coherent and applied consistently.

42 Kingsley School has an eclectic programme that has been developed over many years. Every child goes through the programme, including those on the autistic spectrum. The spine of its phonics programme draws on three sets of resources, two of which provide structure and progress, with a third used for individual children who are not achieving well enough on the main core. The school's reading scheme draws from four products until pupils reach a certain level, then the school's own colour-coded scheme is used – a mixture of reading scheme books, supplementary scheme sets, and fiction and non-fiction books for pupils up to Year 6. No child is left 'a free reader'; every child is monitored. The programme works because it is based on a thorough grounding in phonics and is applied systematically, consistently and with absolute rigour. It makes best use of resources acquired over the years and there are layers of assessment, monitoring and personal support for children who need more help with their reading. It is complex – quirky perhaps – but it works.

43 Like Kingsley, St Clare's has maintained a traditional approach to the teaching of early reading. With the introduction of new national policies and strategies, the school did not discard the methods it had always used to teach children to read. It updated and adapted them to include modern resources, but still relied mainly on its traditional combination of teaching phonics and using reading schemes.

44 It is easy to discern a common thread in all these well-thought-out approaches to teaching reading and writing based on the primacy of phonics. It is expressed in terms such as rigour, consistency, structure, monitoring, assessment, support and shared commitment. Good resources can be a great help, providing systematic structure, reducing the burden of planning, and offering pupils and teachers attractive and well-matched materials. But the resources do not replace high-quality instruction by teachers who really understand what they are doing in schools and who provide the pedagogical leadership that gives every child the best chance of becoming a proficient reader.

Conditions for success

Conditions for success

45 In all the schools visited, it quickly became apparent that they shared a number of characteristics, both generally in terms of features that had made them outstanding, and specifically in relation to teaching children to read. The main factors that determined the successful teaching of reading in the schools included:

- the quality of the overall leadership of the school and the leadership and management of the literacy teaching programme
- the principles on which the reading curriculum was based

- the quality and consistency of teaching, especially discrete phonics teaching
- the assessment of children's progress, especially early identification of difficulties and the resulting intervention.

46 The report discusses each of these in turn, illustrated, where appropriate, by examples drawn from the 12 schools.

Leadership

The headteacher

47 The first, most overt feature of headship in these schools is the determination that children *will* learn to read. Teaching reading is the avowed core purpose of the schools. All the headteachers take a highly professional, committed and personal approach to making this happen. They:

- articulate the school's vision and its ambitions for children's reading
- invest in the best teachers and teaching assistants they can find and scrupulously train or retrain them to teach phonics
- appoint the most suitable person to lead and manage the day-to-day teaching of phonics, reading and writing
- exert instructional leadership through demonstration, monitoring and dialogue
- build cohesive teams with shared values and consistent practice
- take responsibility for the achievements of the school and account for them to governors and parents
- are obsessive about the quality of children's learning as well as the extent to which teaching engages and enthuses them.

48 All the headteachers were highly visible as well as being uncompromising about the things that were important for their pupils. They recognised the vital importance of a secure grounding in phonics and provided the staffing, resources and structural framework for this to take place. They placed a very strong emphasis on books, reading and writing, sticking to principles that the school owned. They gave their staff the confidence that they were doing things the right way, even if that did not necessarily accord with orthodoxies promoted through local and national initiatives and interventions. Their results tended to endorse their convictions.

49 The 12 schools were led in such a way as to weld together a group of tightly knit, confident staff. They felt very well supported, positive and well informed about the work they were doing and provided excellent role models for children. As a result, the children were knowledgeable about books and usually keen to talk. The schools were invariably calm but purposeful, full of visual and printed stimuli. Leadership styles differ, but this is a picture of one of the school leaders, as perceived by some of his staff.

Through the eyes of staff at Thomas Jones

The staff are clear about the leadership approach of the headteacher, giving this picture of his example and influence across the whole school:

- 'He has very, very high expectations.'
- 'Very hands-on; pretty much all day, every day he teaches – it sends out a message to the staff; sends a message to the children, too.'
- 'He knows all the children and their families, and has strong contact with parents, for example, by being at the school gate virtually every morning.'
- 'He has expectations that we behave as well as teach professionally, including high expectations about standards of dress.'
- 'He recruits people with minds of their own.'
- 'He requires Year 6 to be scholars... like undergraduates; that's what he calls them – "scholars" – and they all want to rise to it.'

50 The headteachers and senior staff of these outstanding schools expected teaching of the highest quality and were passionately involved in how well children were learning.

Accountability at Bourne Abbey

Consistency and attention to detail are the hallmarks of this leadership team and of the staff. Everyone in the school knows what she or he has to do to improve. Individual performance management targets are set to ensure that all the staff play their part in raising the achievement of named groups of children. As the deputy headteacher commented, 'These are not woolly targets; they are numerical targets. We are measured against pupils' progress. We are held to account.'

51 The headteachers readily acknowledged that much of the success of their schools was the result, as one said, of the 'huge commitment from staff', adding 'especially of the teachers in Reception, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 who take daily guided reading groups in lunchtimes!' They all invested heavily in the training and continuing development of teachers and teaching assistants, particularly in relation to teaching phonics. For example:

- A newly qualified teacher at St Clare's described the training she received at the school in her first year of teaching as 'very, very thorough' and very different from that which she had experienced during her initial teacher education.
- A senior leader at Turnfurlong said: 'When you join the school, you see others teaching very regularly. This helped me enormously as a newly qualified teacher because I was not experienced in teaching phonics.'

52 Teamwork in these schools was important. At Turnfurlong, time and again the staff underlined the importance of their year group teams in ensuring that they provided a consistently high-quality experience for their pupils. One commented: 'We plan as a team and we are very critical. We see what works well and constantly look for new ways to change things for the better.'

The subject leader

53 The subject leader for literacy, often called the literacy coordinator or, in some of the schools, the reading manager, had an important middle or senior leadership role in these 12 schools. The most capable subject leaders for literacy were steeped in the detail of their school's reading and writing programme, knowledgeable about the strengths and development needs of all the staff who were involved in teaching phonics, and closely in touch with individual children's progress in reading and writing.

54 Commonly, discrete, systematic phonics teaching took place at set times of the day. The subject leaders were often released from their own classes at these times so that they could monitor the implementation of the phonics programme. This was an important function since the success of systematic phonics teaching relies on the disciplines of technical accuracy, sequencing, pace and

Leadership continued

challenge as well as the range of skills that expert teaching requires. When the job was done well, the subject leader tracked the progress of individual children from a slightly detached perspective and considered whether they needed to change attainment group in order to work at a level that was more appropriate to their needs.

55 In some of the schools visited, it appeared that monitoring compliance with the chosen approach, invariably accomplished efficiently, obscured the fact that compliance does not always guarantee effectiveness. While most of the teaching observed during the visits was good or outstanding, the impact of individual teachers was occasionally reduced because they neglected small details. For instance, they held flashcards of graphemes too high for the children sitting at their feet to read them, or they failed to challenge a child when one of the partners in partner work was persistently and unhelpfully dominant. In both cases, the school's normal monitoring should have identified these weaknesses and the teachers should have received feedback to correct them. Minor weaknesses, if allowed to continue, can impair children's learning. This was not the case at Turnfurlong.

Monitoring the quality of teaching at Turnfurlong

The literacy coordinator undertakes focused observations of the teaching of phonics, reading and writing. She provides written feedback to a set format which is discussed at a meeting of the senior leadership team. In addition, she attends each year group's team meeting and discusses with the team the areas of strength and those which require improvement. She has noted how much her colleagues value this feedback: 'People in this school are up for constructive criticism.' We are held to account.'

Leadership in the classroom

56 Systematic phonics teaching revealed the teacher not just as an instructor but as a leader of learning. In programmes of systematic phonics, the sequence of teaching and learning is prescribed, but conducting the class or group along this tricky path – anticipating pitfalls, delegating responsibility, overcoming obstacles and celebrating success – requires both leadership and pedagogical skills. Many of the teachers whose work is represented in this report showed all these qualities and, in doing so, were models for their pupils and for their colleagues, as in Trenance.

Opportunities for peer observation at Trenance

A list in the deputy headteacher's office allows teachers and teaching assistants to sign up to observe someone teaching a different level of the phonics programme. All they have to do is to say who they would like to observe and what arrangements they have made for their own session to be taught when they are observing elsewhere. Cover is found from within the school.

The teachers in these schools also played a valuable role in mentoring new teachers, especially if the newcomer was teaching in the same year group.

Principles for the reading curriculum

57 The curriculum for reading and writing in all the schools visited had at least four key components:

- developing children's oral language: speaking, listening and enhancing their vocabulary
- establishing their phonic knowledge and skills and supporting them to apply these to reading and spelling
- broadening and extending the range of reading and writing, progressing from simple texts that the children could read by themselves to a wider range of books
- locating the curriculum for reading within the wider school curriculum, so that each aspect complemented and reinforced the other.

Oral language

58 The majority of the schools visited that had nursery classes commented that, increasingly, children joined unprepared for learning and with poor listening and speaking skills. Lack of preparation extended to children arriving who had not been toilet-trained and children with dummies in their mouths. In these cases, the onus rested with parents or carers but staff still had to invest time in the early days or weeks in educating parents, reducing children's dependency and improving their socialising skills.

59 The schools attributed weak listening skills not only to poor conversation in the home but, very often, also to continuous background noise, such as constant television, the noise of siblings and raised voices, which are bound to dull sensitivity to the nuances of sounds. The schools responded with activities that developed listening skills: sounds first, letter-sounds later. Examples included teacher-led work where the teacher used an artefact (concealed from the children) to make a sound, and they had to guess which of a range of objects it was; paired work, where one child had to match the sounding instrument with that of another, sounded behind a screen. In the following example, the teacher used musical sounds to lead on to the sounds of spoken language.

Listening to sounds: Kingsley

The teacher takes out four simple percussion instruments, plays each one and asks the children to listen to each sound. The teacher places the instruments on the floor in front of the group, then hides her hands in the box and plays a duplicate of one of the four instruments that the children can see in front of them. The children have to listen very carefully to identify the sound and match it to one of the instruments they can see on the carpet. The children take turns to match the sound. Attention levels in the class are very high – the teacher speaks very quietly, forcing children to listen more acutely. Children find matching all the sounds difficult.

The teacher makes the challenge harder. She introduces three sets of bells, which make different sounds. The children have to listen very hard to distinguish between these sounds – but they try. One or two get the match right. This is a very good way of developing young children's concentration levels: there is no fidgeting or moving off. Next the teacher introduces and consolidates letter sounds. First, she recaps four sounds quickly: /a/, /p/, /s/, /t/. Then she holds up picture cards and the children recite the sounds and do the actions that they have learnt to accompany them, as mnemonics.

Other activities follow, at the children's tables and elsewhere. These are strongly literacy-focused and related to the sounds the children have been learning. The pace is quick, but the lesson is quiet and very effective.

60 The spoken language of some of the children was limited to basic statements such as: 'Me want...'. Vocabulary was often equally limited. These features required schools to place an early emphasis on speaking, listening, developing vocabulary and using sentences. Schools felt the need to generate the stimuli for improving vocabulary through every means possible, bringing the world to the children as well as taking the children out into the world. Many of them had been no further from home than the nearest shopping centre.

Principles for the reading curriculum continued

61 A key feature of the effective Nursery classes facing such challenges was to introduce highly structured days from the very beginning, both to get learning off to a good start and to compensate for the chaotic home lives that too many of the children were experiencing. Reading stories from big books that the children could see easily was important in engaging children in how books and stories worked.

Story for nursery children at Old Ford

Fifteen children are seated on the carpet in the nursery class when the teacher produces a big book entitled *Mrs Wishy Washy*. The children first work out which way up and which way round the book should be held, finding the front and the back. She also shows them how to care for the book and turn the pages. The children are asked what they see on the front cover and the back. As they look at the cover picture showing a woman with a large 'scrubbing machine', the children are asked what we do with it. 'Vacuum,' says one child, which the teacher picks up and discusses. Children follow the words and pictures well, joining in with the rhyming bits: 'Wishy washy, wishy washy; double bubble plop!' They discuss the plot and, as they become familiar with the words, they join in happily. The word 'horrid' is used ('a horrid moment') and the children discuss what this could mean and suggest alternatives.

62 Literacy work for younger children in this school included, every day, a 'big book' story session, phonics, guided reading, writing and sessions focusing on high-frequency words. The school based its teaching of reading on five principles:

- systematic phonics to help children who are trying to read
- context and experiences, to broaden vocabulary and develop comprehension
- knowledge of high-frequency words
- knowledge of grammar and syntax
- ability and confidence to 'have a go' in decoding words.

63 The school argued 'that phonics is one part in a bigger picture and that reading is aided by association and high-frequency words'. It claimed that as a result its children could read more fluently. Its very best readers reached Level 2B by the end of Year 1, and most children in Year 2 reached Level 2B or Level 2A. The school defended the success of its practice by pointing to equal success in the second school that shared its headteacher. Phonics still has primacy in the school's range of approaches and all the teachers had been trained through and used the synthetic phonics programme of Read Write Inc. This broad approach, however, is not recommended to any school whose reading results are not already well above average and where systematic phonics is not already well embedded.

Phonic knowledge and skills

64 The rigorous way in which daily systematic phonics work was conducted in the schools was impressive. In all cases, the teachers and teaching assistants knew exactly what they were doing and why. They understood the fundamental principles that lay behind the need for children to know letter-sound correspondences and to learn the skills of blending and segmenting to decode and spell words. They knew the sequence in which the letter-sound correspondences were to be taught, the way in which different resources should be used and how children were best grouped and managed. They observed and assessed children's understanding and progress minutely. They used a range of strategies to ensure that all the children participated actively and that learning was enjoyable as well as productive. The phonics sessions observed were fast-paced. The staff were passionate about teaching children phonics and showing them how to use their knowledge and skills to read, spell and write.

65 Such were the knowledge, understanding and skills shared between teachers and teaching assistants engaged in phonics that the two roles were largely interchangeable. The teachers were usually deployed in the more technically demanding situations, with the highest- and lowest-attaining pupils, for example. Adult-to-pupil ratios were usually very favourable for the daily phonics sessions, which were supported in some of the schools by teaching assistants drawn from other parts of the school. The example below illustrates the pace and variety of well-planned, intelligent and responsive teaching for 28 children. They had been in a Reception class for five weeks.

66 After this intensive 20 minutes, the children are divided into groups for activities which still have a literacy focus. The teacher is blending sounds with one group, a teaching assistant is playing a sound-sorting activity with another, and another assistant is helping children to cut out pictures, discussing and reinforcing the sounds recently learnt and sticking the 'sounds' into books for children to take home and share. Others make the shape of the letter 'h' in modelling clay and printing, paint things beginning with the sound /h/, find or draw h-shaped things in sand, and so on.

Learning a new sound and letter – what can be done in 20 minutes: St Clare's

The class is rehearsing sounds previously learnt, such as /s/, /t/, /i/, /p/, /a/ and /n/. Then the teacher brings out Donald the Donkey, a toy donkey wearing a sweatband. He's puffed out, he's been exercising, running and jumping. He's puffing – '/h/h/h/h/h'. 'He says he has a new sound for us today,' the teacher says. Donald and the teacher show children how to blow hard on the palm of their hands and all of them say, 'h/h/h/h/h/h/h'. Daniel says, 'I think the sound today is aitch.' 'Yes,' says the teacher, 'that's right....the name of the sound is aitch – but the sound it makes is /h/'

On a free-standing display board next to the teacher is a big book showing a page for 'H' and 'h' with pictures and words of objects and actions beginning with the sound /h/. The teacher tells children to get their 'magic fingers' ready. She uses a flashing pointer to direct their magic fingers and she writes the letter, forming the letter correctly, on the white display board where three lines, correctly spaced, even and straight (drawn with a board ruler) are all ready. As she writes the letter 'h' she says, 'Down, up, over; down, up, over,' describing the direction of the letter. The children repeat this and follow her directions with their fingers. She describes how the letters look: 'Look! The letters sit carefully on the line. They are not sinking below or flying above.'

Then she introduces a sorting activity. She has a large bag of items, a hat and a bin. As she extracts items from the bag, the children name them. Items beginning with the sound /h/ go in the hat; the others go in the bin. She extracts a horse, a heart, a feather, a house and other objects.

Children speak out, saying whether the items should go in the hat or the bin. The teacher hears a boy saying that the horse goes in the bin. She draws him to the front and together they repeat the word: 'horse'... 'horse'... 'horse'. 'What sound can you hear at the beginning?' He says /s/ persistently. 'Well,' says the teacher, 'there is an /s/ – good boy – but listen! I think it is at the end...' She stresses the /s/ sound at the end of 'horsse'.

They go through this a couple of times; then with the class, trying to establish the concept of the 'beginning of the word' and the 'end of the word'. Two children still struggle to distinguish between the two. The teacher goes through the same process with a girl using a picture of a 'house'. 'Listen to the beginning...' she says.

Principles for the reading curriculum continued

67 The example also shows how early phonics work can incorporate the physical skills that are a necessary introduction to learning handwriting. Multi-sensory approaches to phonics can – and should – support children in recalling the shape of a letter and, if physical movement is involved, the direction in which to form a letter. Writing ‘in the air’, on the back of another child with a finger, on the hand or in sand are all useful gross motor activities and, if taught properly, they reinforce the way in which the letters should be formed. Teaching handwriting, however, is about helping children to develop and refine the physical movements they need to create letters and sequences of letters. Handwriting comprises a set of kinaesthetic rather than visual skills and, although there is a close relationship with teaching phonics, it requires separate teaching if children are to develop handwriting that is sufficiently fluent to support their writing and spelling and be aesthetically pleasing to a reader.

Teaching handwriting at Trenance

One of the schools visited teaches handwriting three times a week, separately from its phonics scheme, using a commercial handwriting scheme. It chose this scheme, after considering different ones, because it was the closest match to the teaching of the letter shapes in their phonics scheme. This scheme, too, includes movement, including whole-body movements as warm-ups before the teaching.

68 Mini whiteboards, seen during some of the visits, were useful for giving children the chance to write down quickly the sounds they heard and to spell whole words by segmenting their sounds. The whiteboards were also very useful for the teacher’s assessment, since she or he could scan them efficiently to pick up errors. However, whiteboards are a poor medium for teaching handwriting. The pens used are frequently too big; this means that the children are not learning how to hold a pencil or pen correctly. Further, if children are sitting on the floor, they are not learning how to place the paper correctly in relation to their bodies and how to manage if they are left-handed.

All children should read and write daily.

Broadening and extending the range of reading and introducing writing

69 Fundamental to the structure of reading and writing at one of the schools was the notion that all children should read and write daily. As the subject leader put it, ‘How do you learn to write if you don’t write?’ The headteacher underlined the importance of supporting children’s writing. She said, ‘We model speaking in sentences so children understand what they are by the time they write them. We teach capital letters, spaces between words and full stops. We now never get children writing a string of words without these.’

70 In another school, the high quality of the teaching of literature in Year 6 built on the foundations laid down earlier. The example that follows was a small part of a Year 6 lesson on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’), taught by the headteacher.

Shakespeare in Year 6 at Thomas Jones

Part of a lesson on Sonnet 18 shows key elements of the school's overall approach to literature and language emerging clearly. A brisk question-and-answer session contributes to enlarging and consolidating pupils' oral vocabulary.

First, the teacher's use of technical and other language is uncompromising: the vocabulary of 'rhyming couplet', 'rhyme scheme', 'opposition', 'obsessed' is used in a short space of time.

This gives the pupils a rich subject-specific and descriptive resource from which to draw in writing their own responses to literature.

Second, the teaching builds up pupils' knowledge and understanding of an English literary tradition. In response to the teacher's question: 'What else have we read about oppositions?' hands shoot up to answer: 'William Blake!'; 'The Tyger'; 'Angels and demons!'; 'Darkness and light'; 'Good and evil'.

Third, by discussing Shakespeare's structuring of Sonnet 18 (namely, three quatrains rhyming 'abab', 'cdcd', 'efef', closing with a rhyming couplet 'gg'), the teacher helps the pupils to examine and understand how the meaning of a text derives not only from the actual words on the page but also from the way in which the writer arranges them, including the selection of rhymes. The lesson illustrates very effectively the requirement in the National Curriculum Key Stage 2 programmes of study for English that pupils should be taught to 'recognise the choice, use and effect of figurative language, vocabulary and patterns of language' and 'consider poetic forms and their effects'.

Finally, that such high-level discussion is common practice in Year 6 is borne out by many examples of the pupils' personal writing. They had risen to the challenge. English files contain evidence of what are called 'Personal responses' to poetry, including W H Auden's 'Twelve Songs', Philip Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney' and 'The Pike' by Ted Hughes, texts usually studied in Key Stage 4 and beyond.

Reading and writing across the curriculum

71 Although this review focuses on the early teaching of reading, and systematic phonics in particular, the schools gave many examples both of how the practices they used in teaching reading were applied elsewhere in the curriculum and of how the wider curriculum provided a stimulus for language development, reading and writing. In terms of phonics, the best teachers made frequent recourse to phonic decoding strategies when the class encountered unfamiliar words in other areas of the curriculum. Phonics teaching had reminded some of what good teaching is. Some of the other practices, such as partner work, were also being used successfully in other subjects. Children learnt to apply their learning more widely, as in this example.

Applying phonic knowledge and skills at Trenance

Outside the headteacher's office is a map of the imaginary kingdom of Narnia, placed at a level where the children can read it. The headteacher describes how she could hear five- and six-year-olds reading the names of the places aloud, that is, sounding out each letter and then blending the sounds together to read the unknown words ('The Lamp-post', 'The Shuddering Wood', 'Frozen Lake'). This is very good evidence that they are able to apply their learnt decoding skills to other texts, entirely independently and without prompting from adults.

Principles for the reading curriculum continued

72 The wider curriculum is important in helping to develop children's vocabulary. In one inner-city school, the creative and culturally relevant curriculum made a strong contribution to pupils' rapid progress from low starting points to reach the national average by the end of Year 6. Refugees and pupils who started school by speaking little or no English did particularly well. Staff showed exceptional levels of innovation and flair in designing units of work that captured pupils' imagination and developed their skills across a range of subjects. The school's inspection report quoted an example in which a project on the African-American cycling champion Marshall Taylor had enabled pupils to research a variety of sources of information and apply their higher-order reading skills.

If it's not broken, don't fix it: a case study

73 One of the schools visited had a broad-based but nevertheless well-structured and systematic programme that had been developed over many years. Every child worked through it, including children on the autistic spectrum. The spine of the programme was based on systematic phonics schemes, each with different strengths. The first stage started in the Nursery and was a traditional approach that included the following elements.

The phonics programme included children on the autistic spectrum.

Beginning to read at Kingsley

Letterland begins in the Nursery from the first week. It has been used 'for as long as anyone can remember'. Individual letter sounds are introduced at the rate of one a week. With three consonants and a vowel (initially /p/, /s/, /t/ and /a/), staff teach children how to build up simple consonant-vowel-consonant (cvc) words. In the Nursery, when the school says children 'learn' the sounds, this means they *recognise* the letter shape and name the sound. No writing or teaching of letter formation is involved. Alongside this programme, staff use the Phase 1 activities from Letters and Sounds to develop aural training and discrimination. The staff also introduce the names of letters, rhyming and alliteration. For the few children who find this oral-aural approach difficult, the school uses Jolly Phonics to help them learn sounds through games and gestures. Organisation is through formal activities, led by teachers and teaching assistants in three groups, morning and afternoon. Activities for the children to do at their tables and child-directed activities are related to the sounds to be learnt.

74 The staff aimed to get the children to learn – that is, recognise and name – 23 to 26 initial letter sounds consistently. A child who achieved this, irrespective of age, moved on to the next stage, which could happen in the Nursery, the Reception year or Year 1. This was, therefore, a completely personalised approach with very young children. No child was held back. If a child was ready for the next stage, for example because of being more advanced on entry to the Nursery, then the child moved on.

Words and sentences at Kingsley

In Phase 2, while phonics continues, the children are also introduced to the first high-frequency words from the Ginn scheme. The key worker (teacher or teaching assistant) and other adults go through the words, as games, with the child. The child takes the words home for their parents to help.

The child also has 'no text' preliminary readers from the reading scheme. A reading log is started in dialogue with parents, which continues through the school. Once a child 'knows' the words, she or he is given the first reader. No child is given a book until they can read the words. The phonics and early reading programme is supplemented with 'big books', shared reading, a home loan scheme, information for parents, outreach support and a bag with pencils, paper, book and crayons. This programme continues until the child reaches a level equivalent to National Curriculum Level 1A/Level 2C – when the child is in the Early Years Foundation Stage or Key Stage 1. This year, September 2010, some children went into Reception already reading.

In Reception, the process continues, with each child working at her or his own pace but with the two classes set across three attainment groups for literacy and numeracy activities, led by key workers. The basis

of the reading provision is still systematic phonics, accompanied by tightly structured progress through the reading scheme.

- Lower-attaining group: similar level to Nursery; sounds and letters
- Middle group: sounds and letters, cvc blending and 'toy talk'
- Higher-attaining group: higher-level sounds and the digraphs /ch/ and /sh/

For the top group, sessions last 20 to 25 minutes; for the bottom group they last five to 10 minutes. At this stage, 'unseen texts' are introduced, for example in one-to-one reading. These are used for assessing reading. Teachers also review what has been learnt at the beginning of each session. Formal letter formation begins in Reception, separately from phonics sessions.

The formal reading scheme has a core scheme supported by three other sets of graded resources. Once pupils reach a certain level, the school's colour-coded scheme kicks in, with a mixture of different reading scheme books. A supplementary scheme provides fiction and non-fiction books up to Year 6.

75 Everybody in this school, not just in the nursery, knew how the programme was executed. There were also five one-hour literacy lessons and two guided reading groups each week. Each child still read aloud individually: daily, twice a week or three times a week, as needed. The programme continued into Year 2, with the formal handwriting lessons introduced in Year 1 continuing, and an additional 'Writing is fab' extended writing session. There was an extra focus on sentence construction, and particularly on punctuation.

The quality and consistency of teaching

76 Systematic phonics means, fundamentally, teaching phonemes and the corresponding graphemes in a clearly defined sequence and teaching children how to use these to read and spell words. To teach children to do this successfully across the Reception and Key Stage 1 classes means having a strategy to ensure highly reliable, rigorous teaching every day.

77 There were many strengths in the best teaching seen in the 12 schools. It

- showed total clarity about what children should have learnt by the end of each phonics session
- was very well matched to children's attainment
- was fast-paced, varied and engaging
- constantly reinforced knowledge to consolidate understanding
- was highly consistent in approaches: across groups, classes and the school as a whole
- incorporated continuing formative assessment.

The teachers taught perceptively, with enthusiasm and were extremely well prepared. The pupils worked at a good pace; they too understood the purpose of what they were doing. In the very best teaching, the pupils were captivated by what was going on, repeatedly tasting and celebrating success and feeling positive about the progress they were making.

Staff development

78 The headteacher of Turnfurlong said: 'The watchword of this school in achieving such strong outcomes in reading and writing is consistency. This is achieved by a strategy of good training, clear planning, consistent practice and sharp monitoring.' She would be echoed by the other headteachers whom inspectors met. All the schools gave weight to staff training and development for teaching phonics so as to promote accuracy and consistency as well as pedagogical knowledge, skills and understanding. This was consistent with their view of reading as their core priority. While all the schools undertook their own in-house training for new staff, some supplemented it by sending new teachers for two days' training by the provider of

the phonics scheme they were using, seeing that as both crucial training for the new teacher and a way of refreshing the knowledge and skills of established staff.

Staff training in Blue Coat school

There is a comprehensive internal programme of staff training, as well as training for other schools. The headteacher and reading manager lead this and provide opportunities for about 10 to 12 schools each term to visit to see what they are doing. It is a national model school for Read Write Inc. and the headteacher makes presentations to other headteachers about systematic phonics. The school works on five alliterative principles that form part of the programme:

- Participation
- Praise
- Pace
- Purpose
- Passion

together with two of their own:

- Progress
- Presence.

The school has also absorbed practice from Philosophy for Children, encouraging questioning and accepting children's answers as valid and to be explored.¹¹ The school balances what it describes as a 'real-life context for learning' with a strong emphasis on creating an imaginative world. In Reception and Years 1 and 2, one hour a day is dedicated to literacy: half an hour on phonics and half an hour on literacy work in the children's own classroom. The school is also engaged in action research aimed at improving children's independent use of questions.

79 The schools were diligent in training teaching assistants as well as qualified teachers. This enabled them to contribute seamlessly to the teaching programme, especially when classes were split into groups. Whatever approaches they were using, the schools preferred not to trust their phonics provision to supply teachers, preferring to use other trained staff from within the school and deploying the supply teachers in their classes.

80 Several of the schools visited demonstrated phonics teaching using particular materials and hosted demonstration lessons for others. Some were in partnerships or federations and acted as a resource for other schools within the group. They also provided opportunities for peer observations. The schools also used 'twilight' sessions for staff development in reading. One school organised a session once a week to tackle specific issues that had arisen during monitoring and assessment.

Precision in teaching

81 An outcome of a heavy emphasis on staff development, including feedback from internal monitoring by the headteacher or subject leader for literacy, was high quality and consistent practice. Consistency at the first level was to do with the sequencing, rigour and pace and the practice of phonics instruction, including a strong emphasis on the precise enunciation of phonemes, a teaching skill that is vital for effective phonics teaching. Some schemes also promoted a range of teaching devices, conventions and multi-sensory strategies to promote children's active participation and to support them in the skills of blending and segmenting.

Consistency at Woodberry Down

The children are grouped by their attainment in phonics. The staff, however, use a full range of identical strategies across whatever group they are teaching to keep pupils highly involved in their learning. The range of phonemes are run through as a group. Words which are not phonically regular are pointed out and learnt as 'tricky words'. The terms 'magnet eyes', 'marshmallow [silent] claps', and 'my turn, your turn' routines (from adults and pupils) are used consistently and with great success. Working with partners is completely consistent, one child acting first as 'tutor', then as pupil. The 'tutor' holds a lollipop stick and points at the words her or his partner has to read so both remain engaged and active. Then they swap roles, repeating the same page in the book. For the pupils, this is fail-safe, interactive learning. The text on which the group works mirrors exactly the phonemes that have been rehearsed or taught and contain the non-phonically regular words that the group has studied. Pupils' reading and writing are therefore systematically and successfully supported and the pupils taste success.

82 In an infant school, four Reception groups were working simultaneously at different stages of the phonics programme.

Staff development and monitoring lead to high quality and consistent practice.

The quality and consistency of teaching continued

Group work in North Walsham

Reception group 1: The children are saying the sounds of the set 1 letters from Read Write Inc.: /p/, /a/, /n/, /t/, /i/, /g/, /s/, /d/ and so on. They know the letter sounds well and can blend the sounds together to read words. They then segment the words into their separate sounds, 'stretching them out', and identifying the sequence of sounds.

Reception group 2: The new sound being learnt is /o/... The teacher says, 'You might hear this sound in...: /o/ /o/ /o/ orange' (picture displayed) and the children respond: /o/ /o/ /o/ orange); /o/ /o/ /o/ octopus'; /o/ /o/ /o/ ostrich'. 'Say it to your partner', says the teacher; then 'to the sky', 'to the ground' and so on. They do. She says, 'O is a bouncy letter.' She hides the card which has a plain letter 'o' on one side and 'o' with an orange on it on the other side and the children have to say 'o' or 'orange' as the card is flashed at them. They write the new sound in the air using their 'magic finger'. They use it to stir /o/ /o/ orange juice' and trace it all around the orange. They then do imaginary clapping to reward themselves. The teacher puts a stuffed toy animal on her shoulder and, with help from the animal, the children blend the individual sounds of the word /n/ /o/ /t/ together to read the word 'not'. The letters are stuck on a magnetic board. The children use the letters separately, then together: /n/ /o/ /t/ – 'not', then 'got', then other words in the same way. The children catch on very quickly.

Reception group 3: The teacher leads the practice in blending sounds together to make whole words, starting with the sounds of the letters /c/ /o/ /t/; 'My turn, your turn'. 'Cot.' And on to /c/ /a/ /n/ – can. The teacher moves the letters closer in on the magnetic board and urges the children to use their 'magnet eyes'. This is followed by quick practice of sounds, that the children have learnt, supported by a pack of flashcards: 'm', 'c', 's', 'd', 't', 'i', 'n', 'p', 'g', 'o', 'c' and 'k'.

Reception group 4: The children are practising writing in a response to a letter they have received from an elephant. They write: 'I am [name]'; 'I am 4'. They move on from 'I am' to 'I can'.

83 In some of the schools visited, teachers and teaching assistants made excellent use of 'partner work', one child acting as the 'tutor' before swapping roles with her or his partner. All the pupils in the group were completely focused on their reading, but what was particularly strong was the praise given by the 'tutor' to the child who was reading. Partner work took place in different situations and at different levels, from activities on the carpet, focused on blending and segmenting, to paired reading at tables.

84 Unless they were directly teaching the class or a group sitting on the carpet, the teachers were constantly moving around the classroom, prompting, demonstrating reading and writing, helping children who were finding learning difficult. Teachers also talked to children about how they reached a conclusion or decoded a word. In one of the schools where the teaching was of very high quality and there was an absolute intolerance of poor teaching, the headteacher commented powerfully: 'The teacher is only as good as the progress of the least able child'.

85 Inspectors saw much outstanding teaching. The skill of exceptional teachers added value to the children's learning. Despite the rigorous application and monitoring of systematic phonics approaches, there was, nevertheless, as noted earlier, some variation in the quality of teaching within the 12 schools. One thing that could not be faulted, however, was the planning for phonics, reading and writing. The best of the products available to teachers for teaching systematic phonics were so well structured as to take much of the burden out of planning, giving teachers time to think about how to teach rather than what to teach and enabling them to focus on the needs of individual children.

Assessment of children's progress

86 Close and regular assessment of children as they learn to read is vital if teaching is to match their capacity to learn and if difficulties are to be identified when they first arise, and overcome. The built-in progression of systematic phonics and the regular teaching of it offer many opportunities for both formative and summative assessment.

87 Assessment of reading takes many forms. There is the assessment that takes place as part of teaching; constant observation of children's progress, whether they are stumbling and need more help or where they are insufficiently challenged, undertaken both by teachers in the classroom and by subject leaders for literacy or reading managers who keep a close eye on such children. Assessment results in feedback to and discussion with the child. In at least three of the schools visited, children had individual targets by Key Stage 1. Typically, they knew and could describe readily what these were.

88 The policy for assessment in Thomas Jones school argued for a clear link between formative and summative assessment. It set out that assessment needed to be:

- conceptually simple, but based on sound educational principles
- accessible, even for inexperienced staff
- not over-burdensome in terms of teachers' time
- firmly linked to learning.

The school expected that formative assessment and feedback to pupils were built into the practice of all teachers. 'Objectives sheets' were used to set targets for pupils and to plan opportunities to meet those objectives through teaching. Taken as a whole, the analyses of children's attainment and progress, the quality of the tracking, the formation of small groups for children with particular needs all showed that provision that was being matched closely to children's needs. In St Richard's, too, the monitoring and tracking of pupils were exemplary, identifying children who were not making the expected progress, triggering intervention and additional support for individuals and groups.

89 In terms of phonics, a principal use of assessment was to form teaching groups based on attainment or to inform accelerated promotion. In Trenance, it worked like this.

Assessment for grouping in Trenance

In the Reception year, the children are all taught as a class until they have learnt the first set of sounds in the programme; then they are grouped within the class. In February or March, the higher-attaining children are 'filtered in' to Key Stage 1 for their phonics work, depending on the group they need.

Every eight weeks or so, teaching assistants assess every individual child's knowledge and skills in phonics – and in word reading, depending on what level the child has been working at. The outcomes of these assessments determine the next groupings.

90 Some of the published schemes used by the schools to support their work in phonics provided assessment tools.

Use of commercial assessment tools

Schools using one scheme say that progression for pupils is fundamentally assured by the very thorough assessments of pupils' progress provided by the scheme. These assessments, which take place half-termly, test pupils' developing phonic knowledge and their recognition of non-phonically regular words, as well as their ability to blend sounds to read and segment sounds in words to spell. Pupils are then regrouped where necessary, ensuring that they continue to be taught in a group of similar attainment with a teacher or teaching assistant who use materials that are closely matched to the needs of that particular group. Guided reading is assessed as pupils work within their groups, and their progress is recorded in their individual profile books. The books chart each pupil's progress as a reader and writer. The profiles provide a rounded picture of a child's endeavours and successes for its parents and include the next steps that a pupil should take to continue to make progress. Assessment then feeds directly into planning.

The quality and consistency of teaching continued

91 Kingsley Primary School worked to the philosophy: 'If a child can't read, then they can't get on in life...'. In terms of assessment, this resulted in its policy of 'tracking back from Year 6 in order to ensure that the child moves forward.' The staff knew that, in order for a child to attain Level 4 in Year 6, she or he needed to attain Level 2B in Year 2; this meant that the child had to attain a certain level in Year 1 and likewise in the Reception class. Through experience, the school had established its 'reading milestones' that each child needed to achieve by a certain point in order to be on track. More academically able children were expected to reach the milestones more quickly. Children who were not learning to read quickly were identified early on and a programme of intensive support was put in place.

Grouping by attainment

92 Schools using systematic phonics schemes have found it increasingly necessary to group pupils by attainment because some children were making very rapid progress. One of the schools visited, for example, was initially nervous about grouping Reception children by attainment and so, during the first full year of adopting a new scheme, the headteacher waited (until December) before implementing setting. The progress made by many children, however, helped the staff to overcome their reservations and the school has now reached the point where Reception pupils are grouped by attainment from October, and from the beginning of the academic year in Years 1 and 2.

93 There can be clear benefits to many children in learning specific skills along with others at the same level of proficiency. They can gain confidence, not feel out of place and achieve success in an unthreatening environment. It is also far simpler to teach such groups, where planning is for the group rather than the individual. As children progress, however, some will inevitably learn faster than others. Grouping children for phonics teaching, within an early years setting or class, by matching work to their pace of learning and developing abilities, is often

done to good effect. In addition, in the best work, children are strongly encouraged to help each other, for example, by working in pairs, talking about the task and, in effect, taking it in turns to teach one another.

94 Observations conducted for this report showed almost universal grouping by attainment in phonics in Reception and Key Stage 1 classes, sometimes into fine divisions in terms of levels of knowledge and skills. Most of the children were engaged and on task to a high degree in their attainment groups and their work was well-structured and well-paced. The finely tuned and frequent assessment procedures and, in several schools, direct monitoring of phonics sessions by the reading manager enabled children to change groups readily, depending on the progress they were making.

95 There will always be the need to consider whether some children are making faster or slower progress than the rest of the group. It will not remain a homogeneous group in terms of their learning. Schools and teachers must exercise professional judgements about organising teaching groups to provide optimum conditions for learning. In these respects, good practice in phonic work simply reflects good practice in general.

Early intensive support
helps those who struggle
to read.

Individual learning support

96 All the schools had uncompromising strategies for supporting, reinforcing and accelerating the reading of individual children, particularly those who were falling behind. Kingsley was no exception.

A support programme at Kingsley

The approach here is described as intensive, methodical and relentless, with no exceptions. If the teaching isn't working for a particular child, the school will seek an alternative way to get through, even buying materials for a single child.

There are layers of assessment. First, all class teachers are responsible for their pupils' progress. Pupils' targets are the teachers' performance management targets. Children are regularly assessed against checklists of letters and sounds. These are supplemented by end of year assessments, when all the year groups are checked against the milestone for the year group. The pupils who have not reached the milestone are identified and listed. Each individual on the list has a 'provision map' and a personalised learning plan or individual education plan. The detail is written into daily plans for support workers.

97 All the schools recognised the importance of early identification of any children who were finding phonics challenging. In one of the schools, the children who were struggling to remember the first set of sounds, having difficulties in blending or otherwise making slow progress relative to their group were put on a 'hotlist'. They were then supported individually, or in a small group, for 10 minutes at another time of the day.

98 Another school used 'pre-tutoring' by a Teach First student,¹² or a teaching assistant, for the six children in each year group who had furthest to go to reach their reading targets. Each child had a 10-minute session weekly, within which they read the phonically regular

text that the group as a whole was going to be working on during the following week. This short session boosted their phonic skills. The child took the text home for the weekend and, on Monday morning, was in a position to feel more confident during the phonics session. This simple but effective intervention continued for short periods for the pupils that needed it in order to get their reading back on track.

Success for all

In one school, a teaching assistant works with two boys in Key Stage 1 who have statements of special educational need. One faces complex learning difficulties; the second has a statement for a speech and language disorder. The boys have 10 minutes a day of extra individual phonics.

On this occasion, the teaching assistant working with the two boys provides an outstanding model of the enunciation of phonemes so that the boys can hear the individual phonemes in a word and repeat these accurately. She uses a range of techniques to keep the boys alert and learning. 'My turn, your turn' is used with them until both of the boys are able to blend each phoneme in /flick/ and /stick/ very ably. To ensure they understand the vocabulary, the teaching assistant allows them to 'flick' a model frog. Both pupils are able to blend the sounds to the extent that they can read several short sentences. Their delight in their achievements is palpable.

99 At another school, Key Stage 1 teachers had some concerns about outcomes in Reception. So, in Years 1 and 2, they established a second guided reading session every day, in which pupils made outstanding progress. In a third school, as well as reading scheme texts, 'real' books were available for pupils to take home, banded by difficulty so that they knew which level of book to choose and so they could broaden their reading experience within and beyond the reading scheme.

¹² Teach First is a training programme for high-achieving graduates who may not otherwise have considered teaching or who are not sure about it as a long-term career. For further information, see: <http://graduates.teachfirst.org.uk>.

The quality and consistency of teaching continued

How are trainees being taught to teach reading using systematic phonics?

100 In the last four years, most initial teacher education providers have revised their primary and early years training programmes. Programmes based in higher education institutions now include additional sessions on teaching early literacy skills using a systematic phonics approach and the theoretical aspects of systematic phonics are covered effectively. However, the quality of school-based training is variable. Despite the good coverage in centre-based training sessions, not all trainees are confident to teach reading when they are in their schools.

101 Around 8% of Ofsted's reports on initial teacher education published between February 2009 and August 2010 judged trainees' skills to be 'very good' or 'excellent'. However, while leading literacy schools provide models of good practice, not all providers know where to find the very good practice within their wider partnership of schools.¹³ In addition, the trainees do not always have sufficient experience of teaching reading on their school placements. This is likely to contribute to the recurring low satisfaction rates reported to the Training and Development Agency for Schools by the newly qualified teachers who take part in its annual survey.¹⁴ In 2010, only 51% of the newly qualified teachers who responded said that their training had prepared them well to teach early reading.

¹³ The Leading Literacy Schools initiative was designed to strengthen initial teacher education in the teaching and assessment of literacy. As part of this, all providers of initial teacher education were invited to identify a range of suitable schools that had the skills and capacity to take on an enhanced role in training to teach literacy.

¹⁴ For further information on the survey of newly qualified teachers, see: www.tda.gov.uk/training-provider/itt/data-surveys/nqt-survey-archived-results.aspx

Coda

102 Systematic phonics teaching was alive and well in the sample of outstanding schools visited. Both the well-designed prescriptive schemes and the individual programmes constructed by the schools were being used very effectively. There was no evidence, in the schools visited, that one approach was any more or less successful. Much larger sampling would be needed to examine differential effects.

103 The recently published criteria for high-quality phonics teaching were strongly reflected in the systematic phonics teaching that was taking place in the sample of highly effective schools described in this report.¹⁵ Past concerns, such as fears about the effects of structured learning and teaching on three and four year-old children, may have little foundation. Equally, some of the tenets of synthetic phonics, such as inflexibly adhering only to decodable books until the child no longer needs formal systematic phonics teaching, could introduce an artificial ceiling and reduce the motivation of children who want to explore books and take on the challenge of reading them for themselves. What is important is that systematic phonics teaching does not fall prey to shortcuts and that children who are struggling to acquire the vital skills of blending and segmenting are given as much help as possible.

104 The excellence of much in-school and specialised training provision has made an impression on all the schools described here. It is a reminder that high-quality teaching is the key factor in whether or not children learn to read. But the practice involved in teaching systematic phonics successfully should be within the competence of any committed primary school teacher (and many teaching assistants). It involves simply the intelligent application of professional skills within an ambitious and well-led team.

Every primary school teacher should be able to teach systematic synthetic phonics well.

¹⁵ The revised core criteria are listed in the Annex.

Annex. Criteria for assuring high-quality phonic work

The following, revised criteria for assuring high-quality phonic work were published by the Department for Education on 26 October 2010. They are designed to provide schools with the clearly defined key features of an effective, systematic, synthetic phonics programme.¹⁶

Published programmes for phonic work should meet each of the following criteria. Further explanatory notes are offered below.

The programme should:

- present high-quality systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print, i.e. a phonics ‘first and fast’ approach (see note 1)
- enable children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills using a systematic, synthetic programme by the age of five, with the expectation that they will be fluent readers having secured word recognition skills by the end of key stage one (see note 2)
- be designed for the teaching of discrete, daily sessions progressing from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills and covering the major grapheme/phoneme correspondences (see note 3)
- enable children’s progress to be assessed (see note 4)
- use a multi-sensory approach so that children learn variously from simultaneous visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities which are designed to secure essential phonic knowledge and skills (see note 5)
- demonstrate that phonemes should be blended, in order, from left to right, ‘all through the word’ for reading
- demonstrate how words can be segmented into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words

- ensure children apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling, even if a word is not completely phonically regular
- ensure that children are taught high frequency words that do not conform completely to grapheme/phoneme correspondence rules
- provide fidelity to the teaching framework for the duration of the programme, to ensure that these irregular words are fully learnt (see note 6)
- ensure that as pupils move through the early stages of acquiring phonics, they are invited to practise by reading texts which are entirely decodable for them, so that they experience success and learn to rely on phonemic strategies (see note 7).

Explanatory notes

1. Phonic work is best understood as a body of knowledge and skills about how the alphabet works, rather than one of a range of optional ‘methods’ or ‘strategies’ for teaching children how to read. For example, phonic programmes should not encourage children to guess words from non-phonetic clues such as pictures before applying phonic knowledge and skills. High-quality systematic, synthetic phonic work will make sure that children learn:
 - grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
 - to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes, in order, all through a word to read it
 - to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
 - that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

2. Teachers will make principled, professional judgements about when to start on a systematic, synthetic programme of phonic work but it is reasonable to expect that the great majority of children will be capable of and benefit from doing so by the age of five. It is equally important for the programme to be designed so that children become fluent readers, having secured word recognition skills by the end of key stage one.
3. The programme should introduce a defined initial group of consonants and vowels, enabling children, early on, to read and spell many simple cvc words.
4. If the programme is high quality, systematic and synthetic it will, by design, map incremental progression in phonic knowledge and skills. It should therefore enable teachers to: track children's progress, assess for further learning and identify incipient difficulties, so that appropriate support can be provided.
5. Multi-sensory activities should be interesting and engaging but firmly focused on intensifying the learning associated with its phonic goal. They should avoid taking children down a circuitous route only tenuously linked to the goal. This means avoiding over-elaborate activities that are difficult to manage and take too long to complete, thus distracting the children from concentrating on the learning goal.
6. The programme should not neglect engaging and helpful approaches to the more challenging levels where children have to distinguish between phonically irregular graphemes and phonemes.
7. It is important that texts are of the appropriate level for children to apply and practise the phonic knowledge and skills that they have learnt. Children should not be expected to use strategies such as whole-word recognition and/or cues from context, grammar or pictures.

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