

Ready to read?

How a sample of primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent teach pupils to read

Too many children in Stoke-on-Trent do not read or write well enough by the time they leave primary school. Stoke-on-Trent is in the bottom fifth of local authorities in England for the proportion of children achieving the expected standard of Level 2 or above in reading and writing at Key Stage 1. Of the 23,300 children attending a primary school in Stoke-on-Trent, over 7,000 go to a school that is judged inadequate or as requires improvement. Between January and March 2014, Her Majesty's Inspectors undertook a small study of how reading is taught in a focused sample of 12 primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent and the extent to which these schools were prepared for the introduction of the new national curriculum programme of study for reading in September 2014.

The findings of this study reveal that reading was not taught well enough in seven of the 12 schools and that six were not well prepared for the requirements of the new national curriculum.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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

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Contents

Recommendations	5
Introduction	6
The national curriculum in England 2014	7
Commentary	9
Early Years Foundation Stage	9
Key Stage 1	15
Key Stage 2	18
Conclusion	27
Notes	28
Selecting the schools	28
Evidence base	28
List of schools visited	28

Findings

- In seven of the 12 schools visited, the teaching of reading required improvement or was inadequate. Inadequate teaching of reading was observed in all of these seven schools, notably in Key Stage 2, Year 1 and, to a lesser extent, the Early Years Foundation Stage. Consistently weak teaching of reading was observed in three of the seven schools.
- In the five schools where the teaching of reading was judged to be good, children got off to a flying start learning to read in the Early Years Foundation Stage and their early success was built on in the following year groups.
- Lesson observations indicated that the teaching of reading was marginally better in the Early Years Foundation Stage than in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.
- All the 11 primary schools with Key Stage 1 provision taught phonics (letters and the sounds they make) in Reception and nine taught phonics in Nursery.
- Not all the schools taught early reading using phonic decoding as 'the route to decode words', as required by the national curriculum 2014. Three headteachers were unaware of this requirement in the new programme of study.
- Almost all of the schools visited used a range of early reading books to teach young children to read. Many of these books, however, were not 'closely matched to pupils' developing phonics knowledge and knowledge of common exception words'.¹ In other words, the books used did not support young children to practise and apply the phonics they were learning.
- Four of the schools did not send home phonically decodable books so that children could practise their new knowledge and skills at home.
- The teaching of phonics was not always of good quality and pupils did not progress quickly enough in several of the sessions observed.
- In almost all of the schools visited, the teachers observed did not teach children to form the letters correctly when they taught the sounds. In these schools, teachers did not link the teaching of early reading with that of early writing well enough. The interpretation is that they failed to understand the vital contribution of phonics to spelling.
- The general picture emerging from the schools visited was of a decline in attention to the teaching of reading as pupils get older. Too few of the schools visited taught reading well at Key Stage 2.
- In almost all of the schools visited, the main vehicle for teaching reading at Key Stage 2 was a daily, guided reading session. In the less effective schools this was rarely of good quality.
- Teachers in Key Stage 2 rarely provided sufficient guidance to pupils about their wider reading. Too little thought was given to ensuring that pupils read a broad

¹ *The national curriculum in England – framework*, Department for Education, July 2013.

range of books and, in most of the schools visited, pupils in Key Stage 2 did not read enough books.

- Some schools did not always cater well for older pupils whose reading skills were weak. Five of the schools did not check the phonic skills of older pupils in Key Stage 2. In these schools, teachers' knowledge of how children learn to read and how reading should be taught as they get older was observed to be insecure.
- In four schools, low expectations of pupils' reading skills limited their progress: if pupils were making expected progress overall from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2, leaders and teachers considered this to be sufficient, even if pupils' reading attainment was lower than average and the gap between the schools' reading results and the national figures were not closing.
- The assessment of pupils' reading was over-reliant on teacher assessment in most of the schools. Although commercial, standardised reading tests to assess pupils' reading ability were typically in use, few used the results to triangulate teacher assessment with other forms of assessments. Two schools reported using the information as a management tool to check the progress made by all pupils and to hold teachers to account. Only three of the schools visited reported the reading ages of pupils to their parents.
- Too few of the senior and middle leaders in the less effective schools visited monitored directly the teaching of reading, especially in Key Stage 2.
- Although nine of the 12 schools had a whole school reading policy that 'set out' how reading would be taught from the Early Years Foundation Stage to Year 6, most of these policies were vague expressions of intent rather than 'non-negotiable' directions. In three schools, decisions about how reading was to be taught and how often pupils read or were heard to read by an adult were left to the discretion of individual class teachers.
- Six of the schools visited were ready to implement the 2014 national curriculum programme of study for reading.

Recommendations

Schools and academies in Stoke-on-Trent should:

- ensure that senior leaders, teaching staff and support staff are familiar with, and prepared for, the requirements of the 2014 national curriculum programme of study for reading
- ensure that phonics knowledge is taught as the main strategy for teaching early reading - 'the route to decode words'
- begin to teach phonics in Nursery classes, where schools have them
- improve the skill levels and competence of teachers and support staff to teach phonics, early reading and reading with older pupils

- ensure that the correct letter formation is taught at the same time as the letter-sound and that pupils are taught to sit correctly at a table, holding a pencil comfortably and correctly
- pay more attention to the correct enunciation of sounds by pupils and adults
- ensure that all children learning to read are given decodable reading books - that is, books that are 'closely matched to pupils' developing phonic knowledge and knowledge of common exception words' - to read in school and practise at home
- improve the teaching of reading at Key Stage 2, especially the rigour of guided reading sessions; ensure that all pupils in Key Stage 2 receive clear guidance about the volume, range, quality and challenge of books they read; improve the wider provision for reading at Key Stage 2, for example the use of school libraries
- improve the assessment of pupils' attainment and progress in reading, especially at Key Stage 2
- improve the leadership and management of the teaching of reading: ensure that there is a whole-school policy in place that states clearly how reading will be taught at each stage; set higher expectations for the amount of progress pupils should make in reading; hold teachers to account for the progress that pupils make in reading
- improve communication with parents about how their children are taught to read and the progress they make; clarify and explain to parents, staff and pupils the reading behaviours and routines expected.

Introduction

There were 77 primary schools, including 22 primary academies, in Stoke-on-Trent at the end of February 2014; of these 67 had nursery provision. There has been a long history in the city of the local authority funding nursery provision; full time nursery provision continued to be funded from 1997 when Stoke-on-Trent became a unitary authority. In 2013, literacy levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in Stoke-on-Trent were in line with those seen in the rest of the West Midlands region and in England as a whole. This is in contrast to Key Stage 1 reading and writing results, which have lagged behind those in the rest of England for the last five years.

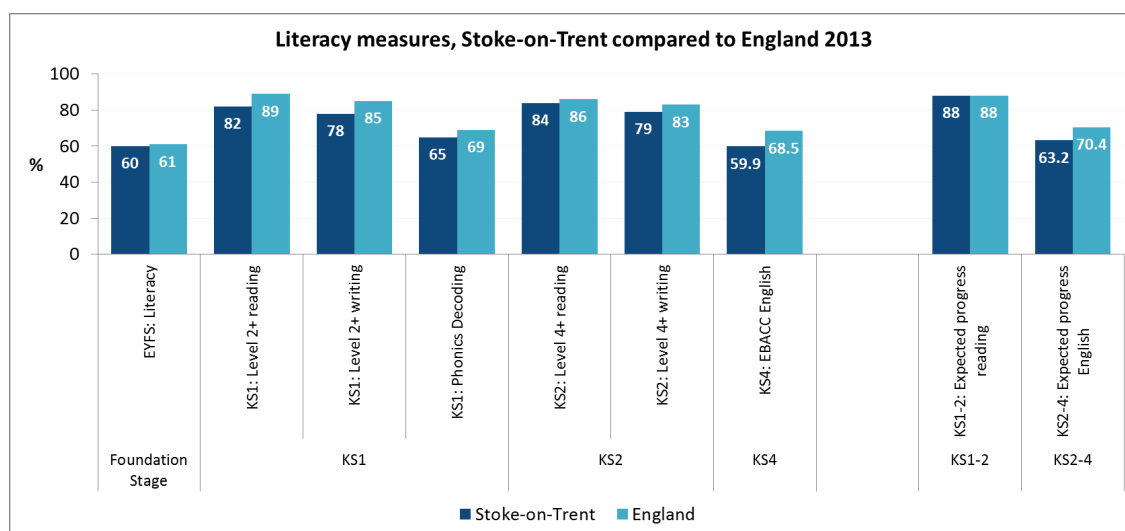
The table and graph below detail the gap in literacy outcomes for pupils and students at all stages of their compulsory education in Stoke-on-Trent and provide the rationale for this study. Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) wanted to understand why standards in reading in Stoke-on-Trent were so low.

Stoke on Trent literacy			
	2013		
	Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	England
EYFS: Literacy	60	60	61
KS1: Level 2+ reading	82	88	89
KS1: Level 2+ writing	78	85	85
KS1: Phonics Decoding	65	70	69
KS2: Level 4+ reading	84	85	86
KS2: Level 4+ writing	79	83	83
KS4: EBACC English	59.9	67.9	68.5
KS1-2: Expected progress reading	88	88	88
KS2-4: Expected progress English	63.2	70	70.4

Literacy measures in Stoke on Trent are below the national level at all key stages.

The difference is most pronounced for GCSE English, though this measure combines more skills than simple literacy.

Expected progress between KS2 and KS4 is also weak with fewer pupils in Stoke Secondary making the progress we would expect.



The national curriculum in England 2014

From September 2014, maintained schools in England will be legally required to follow the statutory national curriculum, which sets out in programmes of study, on the basis of key stages, subject content for the subjects that should be taught to all pupils. The national curriculum in England² states that the programmes of study for each national curriculum subject set out the 'matters, skills and processes' to be taught at each key stage. Schools are free to choose how they organise their school day, as long as the content of national curriculum programmes of study is taught to all pupils.

The introduction to the national curriculum programmes of study³ states that 'schools should do everything to promote wider reading'. The introduction makes clear that teachers should develop pupils' reading and writing in all subjects to support their acquisition of knowledge and pupils should be taught to read fluently, understand

² *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; paragraph 3.4.

³ *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; paragraph 6.3.

extended prose (both fiction and non-fiction) and be encouraged to read for pleasure. Schools should provide library facilities and set ambitious expectations for reading at home. The introduction also states⁴ that the programmes of study for reading consist of 'two dimensions':

- word reading and
- comprehension (both listening and reading).

The framework stresses the importance of emphasising phonics in the early teaching of reading to beginners (i.e. unskilled readers) for both the speedy working out of the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) and the speedy recognition of familiar printed words.

It also emphasises how good comprehension draws from linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) and on knowledge of the world. Pupils develop comprehension skills through high-quality discussion with the teacher, as well as from reading and discussing a range of stories, poems and non-fiction. This is why all pupils must be encouraged to read widely across both fiction and non-fiction to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live, to establish an appreciation and love of reading, and to gain knowledge across the curriculum. As the framework states:

'It is essential that, by the end of their primary education, all pupils are able to read fluently, and with confidence, in any subject in their forthcoming secondary education.'

www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum.

The programme of study for reading builds on the findings of the 'Independent review of the teaching of early reading: final report'⁵ (the 'Rose review'), which highlighted the need for schools to adopt 'the simple view of reading' – that is, a focus on decoding words and developing comprehension. This is not new guidance to schools: the Rose review was published in 2006. In addition, Ofsted's report 'Reading by six',⁶ which was published in 2010, has already demonstrated what good practice in the teaching of reading looks like.

Alongside the primary investigation of early literacy teaching in Stoke schools, this study also explored the extent to which schools in Stoke understood the requirements of the new framework and how well they were prepared to teach the statutory content of the new programmes of study.

⁴ *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; page 14.

⁵ *Independent review of the teaching of early reading: final report*, Rose, J. 2006; <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publication/s/eOrderingDownload/0201-2006pdf-EN-01.pdf>.

⁶ *Reading by six - how the best schools do it* (100197), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reading-six-how-best-schools-do-it.

HMI and local authority officers, therefore, sought to address two key questions:

- 'How are pupils in the Stoke-on-Trent primary schools visited taught to read?'
- 'How well are the primary schools visited prepared to teach the September 2014 programme of study for reading?'

The answers to these questions were explored through focused visits to 12 primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent.

Commentary

Early Years Foundation Stage

Teaching phonics

Inspectors visited 12 schools of which 11 were primary schools, teaching pupils from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to Key Stage 2. The 12th school taught Key Stage 2 pupils only. Three of the schools visited were primary academies.

All the primary schools taught phonics in the Early Years Foundation Stage; nine taught phonics in Nursery and all 11 taught phonics in Reception. Almost all started to do so from the time that children entered school.

Phonics sessions typically took place every day. Schools used a mixture of published schemes and programmes and some form of grouping rather than whole-class teaching. These included:

- teaching children in smaller groups according to their ability
- teachers and teaching assistants working with their keyworker groups
- teachers teaching most of the children while a teaching assistant worked with a smaller number who required extra support.

The Rose Review found that the settings that were most effective at teaching early reading grouped children for phonics teaching, matching work to their pace of learning and developing abilities.⁷ Only one school visited moved children out of their Nursery or Reception year group to work with others of similar ability.⁸

Almost all schools in this survey did not teach phonics as 'the route to decode words' as required by the national curriculum in England 2014. Three of the headteachers in

⁷ *Independent review of the teaching of early reading, final report*, Rose, J., 2006, paragraph 107; <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publication/s/eOrderingDownload/0201-2006pdf-EN-01.pdf>.

⁸ *Independent review of the teaching of early reading, final report*, Rose, J., 2006, paragraph 107; <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publication/s/eOrderingDownload/0201-2006pdf-EN-01.pdf>.

this sample were unaware of this requirement in the new programme of study. The teachers spoken to were positive about phonics as an approach to teaching reading, but in the majority of schools other approaches, such as a focus on sight vocabulary or picture cues, were taught alongside phonics. This finding reflects the findings of the evaluation report carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).⁹ The guidance to schools makes clear that phonics alone should be taught initially and that teaching other strategies alongside phonics is not recommended.

Case study of weaker practice - Reception class

The teacher drew the children's attention to the bold writing on the front of the book and asked them why it was in bold letters; they looked bemused. When they began to read and were not able to blend sounds into the correct word, she asked them to be 'picture detectives' rather than supporting them to try again or demonstrating to them how to break down the sounds in the words. The whole book was completed in this manner.

What the example above might reveal is that the teacher's subject knowledge is either limited or she has only a passing commitment to teaching phonics as the route to decoding and early reading. By asking pupils to focus on the pictures, the teacher denies pupils the opportunity to practise blending sounds and succeeding as readers; yet 'all beginner readers have to come to terms with the same alphabetic principles if they are to learn to read and write.'¹⁰ There is no guarantee that the picture will contain any clues to help decode specific words; some pictures may not directly relate to the text.

Organisation and environment

Frequent weaknesses were observed in the teaching of phonics to Nursery and Reception children. Dividing children into groups meant that children were taught in a range of different places; some were not conducive to good learning. Where groups were taught in the same room, noise from one group hindered the ability of the other to listen carefully to the sounds. Similarly, when children were taught phonics at different times of the day while other children worked at different tasks, noise interfered with teaching and learning.

Inspectors observed early years environments where there was very little evidence of children learning and rehearsing a wide range of stories, rhymes and songs. They saw rooms that were cluttered and untidy, where book and story displays were uninviting or that had no quiet reading areas. In contrast, other EYFS rooms had

⁹ *Phonics screening check evaluation*, Research report, May 2014, NFER, DFE-RR339; www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-evaluation.

¹⁰ *Independent review of the teaching of early reading, final report*, Rose, J., 2006, paragraph 34; <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publication/eOrderingDownload/0201-2006pdf-EN-01.pdf>.

displays that promoted reading and supported themes that were all linked to literacy work. In these environments, children also had access to listening centres to listen to, and rehearse, stories and rhymes.

Case study of good practice

The EYFS was a language-rich environment, including outside. There were plenty of captions and labels, plus displays of the letters that the children had been learning, indoors and out. Displays were eye-catching and at children's height. Children listened to stories twice a day at least, and there was a rhyme of the week that they learnt with support from parents. Some of the phonics teaching happened outdoors, as appropriate.

In one high performing school, where the teaching of reading was consistently good, the EYFS environment was arranged to support children in their reading and acquisition of phonics. Displays focused on developing literacy skills and sounds were displayed on the walls to help pupils with their learning. A large number of the day's activities focused on phonics and early reading. As a result, pupils were positive about reading and most read widely and often. A similar picture emerged in all the more effective schools: the EYFS environments were clean, uncluttered and phonics- and language-rich; reading activities punctuated the daily rhythm.

The more effective schools made good use of the wider environment in the early years classrooms and outdoor areas to support the teaching of reading and phonics. This included:

- incorporating physical activity into phonics teaching sessions
- displays of letters, words and pictures
- the use of daily activities such as water play and playing with dough to reinforce what had been taught earlier.

However, in other schools, adults missed opportunities to reinforce phonic skills and early literacy in the daily and weekly activities offered to children. In these schools, the teaching of phonics was too often an isolated activity.

Enunciation of sounds

Neither teachers nor teaching assistants always enunciated the sounds accurately and did not insist that the children enunciated them correctly. Where children were taught in large groups, the adult was not always able to check that all said the sounds accurately or that their recall of grapheme/phoneme correspondence was secure. Some adults were incorrect in their use of technical vocabulary. In addition, resources were not always selected with sufficient thought. For example, in more than one school, children were asked to choose objects and identify the phoneme that the object's name began with. This was sometimes open to interpretation. For example, some children said 'b for baby' when the adult had expected 'd for doll'.

Case study of less effective practice - Nursery

Enunciation of sounds

The children were sitting on the carpet with their key workers. The two groups were separate but quite close together. HMI sat between the two groups, but the adults were so noisy that it was difficult for her to concentrate. This arrangement was not conducive to good listening. The children were thinking about initial letter sounds and looking at the corresponding graphemes. The session was not well paced as there was too much waiting to have a turn. However, the adults had thought about resources and had chosen familiar items and presented them in ways that captured the children's interest, for example in a box, hidden.

Adults did not enunciate the sounds correctly all of the time, nor insist that children did so. The teaching assistant confused 'sound' with 'letter' and asked the children which letter their names began with when she meant which sound. This confused the children. She did not help them to think about their responses and correct them if necessary. 'What does "dog" start with?' she asked. 'Buh,' said a child. 'No it doesn't. It starts with duh,' she replied.

However, where schools had given careful thought to teaching correct enunciation of sounds, the benefits to pupils were clear. For example, in one school where the teaching of reading was good, the inspector observed a group of Reception children who were taken to 'the language lab' to practise enunciating sounds in a quiet environment where there were no distractions. The 'lab' was a well-resourced room that the school had developed to support pupils with identified weaknesses in speech. School leaders had ensured that some of its staff had acquired City and Guilds qualifications in speech therapy to support pupils with speech and enunciation difficulties. One resource included a filming technique to capture pupils' mouths shaping when forming sounds. In this room, the children could give their full attention to the teaching assistant and each other. They were able to hear sounds pronounced carefully and could then repeat them accurately.

Linking phonemes with graphemes

Another common weakness in most of the schools visited was the lack of any link made between the sounds that children were taught to read and how to write them and begin to spell words. Most schools did not teach good handwriting and letter formation. Examples of weaker practice included adults who missed opportunities to teach the correct formation of letters when teaching the grapheme. Inspectors also saw too many examples of young children being expected to write on a small board while sitting on the floor. This resulted in them having to lean over onto the floor or balance the board on their knees, neither of which supported good letter formation and handwriting development. This weak practice was frequently carried on into

Years 1 and 2, although the new programme of study states that pupils should be taught to 'sit correctly at a table, holding a pencil comfortably and correctly'.¹¹

Examples of lessons where inspectors observed good attention to letter formation were rare. The following are two examples of good practice.

Case study of good practice - Nursery

Teaching letter formation well

The pupils were split into three groups. The teacher emphasised being a good listener and reinforced listening skills. She pulled objects out of a bag: sock, spider, apple. The focus was on initial sounds: 's' and 'a'. Pupils selected an item and linked it to the corresponding letter/sound. The teacher introduced a new sound – 't'. Pupils practised writing letter 't' in the air. They wrote 'as', 'at', 'sat'.

Pupils were clear about the focus of learning. They used their current knowledge to support their new learning. Even though they were very young, they had grasped routines and enjoyed the activities set.

One school taught pupils cursive script from entry to the school and taught it systematically within phonics sessions.

Case study of good practice - Nursery

Teaching letter formation well

Children were sitting in ability groups practising initial sounds. The children were following phase 2 of letters and sounds and also learning 'tricky' words: 'no', 'I', 'the'.

The teacher introduced a new phoneme: 'l'. Children practised writing 'l' in the air with their 'magic finger'. The teacher demonstrated the cursive style for handwriting, which is used from Nursery onwards. The children practised writing 'l', emphasising the link from reading to writing. They then sounded out words with the 'l' sound: 'lamp', 'lit'. All were given good opportunities to practise their skills. They then played a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) game on the interactive white board. There were high levels of engagement, with the children being motivated and enthused by their learning.

¹¹ *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; 'Handwriting programme of study, Year 1'.

The importance of decodable books

Most schools used a reading scheme that comprised several different commercial schemes of mainly non-decodable texts: that is, a range of early reading books that are not closely matched to pupils' developing phonics knowledge and knowledge of common exception words. These books tended to be broadly banded together and colour coded according to difficulty of text. The range of difficulty of texts in the banding was often too wide. Some pupils who could not rely on help or support from home were doubly disadvantaged when they were given books that they could not read by themselves.

The following extracts illustrate the importance of children learning to read using decodable texts.

Case studies – less effective practice in Reception

John reading 'Boy on the Sand'

John explained that he had only been given the book that day. He could not remember the book he had yesterday. He knew where the front cover was and the title of the book. He could point to the author when asked, 'Where does it tell you who wrote the book?' And he knew that if you don't know a word, 'you sound it out'. John could sound out 'sand' and was able to read the first sentence in the book. However, he could only read simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words such as 'hat' and was unable to read 'made' as he had no concept of split digraphs. John said that he did not read to himself at home but his mum read stories to him. The book, although decodable, was not accurately matched to his current phonic level. After much discussion with him, he remembered his previous book was 'Go Kart' which was not a phonically regular text. When he read this book it was evident that he had memorised the sentences.

What might we learn from hearing John read?

We learn that he is not as far on in his acquisition of letter-sound knowledge as we would want him to be, nor is he on the way to becoming a happy, independent reader, despite having a supportive parent. We know that the book he has been given to read does not allow him to practise the limited phonic knowledge he has and that he is already learning that reading is about memorising. Of course, he will not be able to memorise all the words in the English language whereas he can, quite quickly, memorise the 44 or so letter-sound combinations that he needs to know in order to unlock most of the words he will meet. The books given to John to read do not support good reading development and make learning to read harder than it needs to be.

Jane reading 'Dick and his Hat'

The book was given to Jane on the day of the inspector's visit. She could not read the title and had no strategy for decoding the word 'Dick'. When asked what her teacher had told her to do if she could not read a word, she said 'look at the picture'. Unfortunately, there was nothing in the picture that would allow Jane to know that the word said 'Dick'. When asked what book she was reading before, she said 'Kipper' (non-decodable). Eventually, the inspector and Jane found the Kipper book and she read it. Jane went through the book and read 'Dad said, "Stop it", although the text actually read, "'Stop it", said Dad'. She paraphrased or reversed every sentence or caption in the book.

What might we learn from hearing Jane read?

We learn that she, too, has very poor phonic knowledge and skills and is trying to learn to read from memory. The inspector noted that both children became frustrated when faced with books that they could not read and that it was very obvious that phonics and early reading were not taught systematically in the EYFS in this school. The school used a mix of early reading books, most of which did not allow pupils to practise their phonic skills. The school was not teaching phonics as **the** route to decode words.

Key Stage 1

Teaching phonics

The approaches adopted in the EYFS were typically continued into Key Stage 1 in the 11 primary schools. A similar picture of strengths and weaknesses as seen in the early years in the teaching of phonics was evident in Key Stage 1. Eight schools divided pupils into groups based on ability, with additional, separate provision for those who were falling behind. Three schools taught phonics to the whole class at once. In one of these schools, the teaching of phonics was good because the system used by the school was followed faithfully across Key Stage 1 and adults' subject knowledge was good. In the other two examples, the teaching of whole-class phonics was less effective. In all schools, pupils were taught phonics by teachers and teaching assistants.

Interventions to support those pupils who were struggling to learn to read typically began before Year 1. Usually, interventions consisted of phonics teaching in smaller groups, led by a teaching assistant. One school had reviewed its practice of teaching phonics and reading and decided to provide immediate support for struggling readers from the point of entry to Reception rather than putting all of its efforts into remedial support following checks and tests in Years 1 and 2. The school reported that this was proving to be effective. Two schools provided additional speech and language therapy to supplement the teaching of reading.

Becoming a reader and reading frequently

Even at such an early stage of learning to read, not every pupil was heard to read, either at home or school, every day.

All schools expected pupils to take home at least one book - often, but not always decodable - from the reading scheme to read with family members. Most allowed the pupil to choose another book to supplement the scheme book. Reading diaries were usually completed at home and checked in school. However, there was wide variability in the frequency of checking on pupils' reading at home.

Four schools reported that pupils in Key Stage 1 did not read in school every day. One school relied on the weekly guided reading system alongside pupils taking home books to read with parents. In a second school, the policy was that pupils in the EYFS and Key Stage 1 would read with a member of staff once a week or, where a child was making insufficient progress, twice a week. However, the inspector noted that this school had to organise a large number of interventions to support children who were falling behind in Key Stage 1. The third school had no specific policy for hearing pupils read: it was left to individual teachers to decide whether pupils were heard or not. In the fourth school, leaders explained that only targeted children were heard to read every day. However, the reading records showed that some pupils in that sample had not been heard to read for two weeks.

In contrast, in addition to a weekly guided reading session, more effective schools used a range of strategies to ensure that younger pupils and those in danger of falling behind read to someone every day. Such strategies included:

- reading buddies where older pupils listened to younger ones
- reading with siblings
- reading to teaching assistants
- reading to parent/volunteer helpers.

Inspectors noted that less effective schools did not move pupils on quickly enough to more challenging books and there was evidence from pupils' reading diaries that not all staff responded speedily to parents' requests for a book to be changed. In several of the classes observed, pupils did not read enough books or have their books changed quickly enough.

Case study of less effective practice - Key Stage 1

All pupils had a reading book that they took home in a bag provided by the school. Books were banded according to difficulty and colour coded. Reading diaries were completed by parents and included informative, articulate evaluations. These were not acted on by teachers and there was little communication in these diaries between home and school. Parents were not sufficiently guided by teachers in ensuring that appropriate skills were practised or extended.

Engaging parents

All schools provided some information to parents about their approach to teaching reading and phonics. Some of the strategies used by the more effective schools to engage parents included:

- ensuring that the pupils' phonics targets were printed in, or pasted onto, their reading diaries
- providing information leaflets about phonics to parents
- delivering workshops to parents, starting in EYFS and continuing through all year groups where pupils still needed phonics teaching
- inviting parents into school for workshops so they could observe phonics being taught in Key Stage 1 and reading in Key Stage 2
- sending home resources to help parents play phonic games at home, such as a pack of high frequency words, phonic games, phonics spinners, white boards, pens, flypads
- asking parents to learn poems linked to the phonic scheme to support their child
- having parents volunteer in school; some went on to receive qualifications and become teaching assistants.

However, the dialogue between home and school was not always as positive as the examples above. Inspectors observed instances where school staff did not build on the enthusiasm shown by some parents.

Case study of less effective practice - hearing Key Stage 1 readers

Year 1 books were banded and pupils could choose freely from within the band.

Susan read confidently, competently and expressively. She considered words she was less sure of and mentally applied decoding skills. She corrected her own errors when she quickly applied comprehension for meaning and realised the word had not made sense. She used intonation well. She said she knew most words but knew skills such as segmenting as taught in school.

Mary understood the context of the story she was reading. She broke down the words into their constituent parts when she was unsure. When asked, she explained that her mother had taught her the decoding skills. She had been taught to break up words into smaller words or sounds.

Both girls had access to a wide range of books at home and spoke knowledgeably about a range of authors, including David Walliams and Roald Dahl. They explained that they do not often read to the teacher at

school. A visitor to the school hears all pupils in two classes so they just have to wait their turn. They could not say how long it was between the one-to-one sessions. Their reading diaries showed that there were not a lot of books read in a monthly period but the content of these individual books was extensive. Both girls had targets in their diaries, but they did not know what they meant. Both were absolutely sure that their teacher did not know how much they read at home.

In contrast, the following is an example of productive engagement with parents.

Case study of good practice - Key Stage 1

In this school, children were heard to read frequently and, where they were not heard regularly at home, additional reading time was given in school. Books were carefully selected to be decodable and were changed often. There was good dialogue between home and school via the reading diaries. Guided reading sessions were purposeful and well planned, with a major focus on reading for understanding. Children heard stories every day and this was supplemented with rhymes – also learned at home for homework.

A frequently overlooked element of teaching reading in the less effective schools visited was the importance of establishing good behaviours and routines. For example, inspectors observed pupils not have reading bags or, in one or two cases, reading diaries, in class with them. In others where they did, there was not a common approach across classrooms to where/how reading bags would be deposited by pupils, who would change the books, when and so on. In some classrooms, pupils could not remember when they were supposed to bring in reading books or when they last did.

Key Stage 2

Teaching reading

In seven of the schools visited, the teaching of reading was judged as requires improvement or inadequate. Inadequate teaching of reading was observed in all of these seven schools, especially in Key Stage 2. Consistently weak teaching of reading was observed in three of the seven schools.

Almost all schools described ongoing phonics intervention, sometimes led by teaching assistants from Year 3 onwards. None of the schools accounted for the impact of this type of intervention in the short or long term. Five of the schools did not check the phonic decoding skills of Key Stage 2 pupils.

Case study of weaker practice - Support for struggling readers

Asif was a struggling Year 3 reader. He received additional teaching assistant support three times a week. He worked on three texts over the week and on this day was working on the most familiar of those texts.

The teaching assistant explored the title of the book, the contents page and whether the book was non-fiction or fiction. The book was about Formula One racing. It took Asif a while to work out that the book was non-fiction. The teaching assistant did not teach decoding correctly. For example, for the word 'position', she told Asif to look for a word in the middle of the word 'position', so he said p-o-sit-i-o-n. This was the wrong way to teach any child to decode. She then used a similar approach for the word 'garage': g-ar-a-g-e.

Asif was unable to apply previous phonic knowledge because he had not been taught to decode correctly. He read 'gouge' for garage and could not read 'position' or 'pole'. He did not understand how to decode split digraphs. He tried very hard to decode but the book was above his current reading level and was not decodable: that is, it did not 'closely match his developing phonics knowledge and knowledge of common exception words'.¹² This school operated a policy of using a 'real book' approach even for struggling, older readers. Asif, a child who needed expert help and guidance, was being taught by an unqualified teaching assistant whose subject knowledge was inadequate. Consequently, he was not gaining a sense of joy in, or mastery of, reading. Asif's reading diary showed that he had read one book in a month. No one was monitoring the amount of reading that he was doing. He was making slow progress because he did not read often enough, was not being taught to decode correctly and the books he was exposed to, although interesting to boys, were not fully decodable and did not match his current reading ability. Leadership and management of reading in this school was judged inadequate.

Assessment

In all the schools visited, from Reception to Year 6, pupils were regularly tested for reading. The schools used a range of assessments including teacher assessment, national tests and assessments and commercial, standardised tests. Eleven schools tested for reading ages using commercial reading tests and, where this was the case, the results were used in the main to inform individual education plans for those pupils who had special educational needs.

Two schools used reading ages to manage the reading progress of the majority of their pupils and three reported reading ages to parents. One good school that did use reading ages as a major part of its assessment procedures for all its pupils reported that parents found reading ages simple to understand and the comparison between where the child was, chronologically, and their reading age score provided an obvious measure and contrast. Staff used the reading age information to report back to parents about the difference that reading at home was making so that parents felt part of the child's success.

In one school, where the data was conflicting - where the standardised reading ages were lower than teacher assessments - the reading ages were ignored. Leaders in

¹² *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013.

schools in which teaching was not yet good relied too much on teacher assessment as the only, or primary, assessment tool, not recognising that where teaching is not yet good, teacher assessment is also, usually, not yet good.

The following example shows how one school managed assessment of reading using a mix of tests and assessments.

Case study - good example of use of assessment

Each class had an identical folder and the contents were in line with what was expected by school leaders – set out in the school's 'non-negotiables'.

The folders included guided reading records from Nursery to Year 6, including what was planned, plus the pupils' responses. These were assessed against particular assessment foci and were very thorough and detailed. The Year 6 plans in particular showed that there was a high degree of challenge and expectation of a very mature response from the pupils.

Also included were the benchmarking tests for reading and comprehension, reading levels assessed against national curriculum levels, high frequency words checklists and spelling check lists.

Folders for younger classes also included a phonics phase tracker and phase assessment grids, plus spelling tests.

The cohort action plan was also included, as well as reviews of progress for pupils entitled to free school meals.

Guided reading

The main vehicle for the teaching of reading in Key Stage 2 in all schools visited was a guided reading session. The sessions observed varied hugely in quality and effectiveness. At best, the whole class was taking part in different activities that involved sustained reading of selected texts, while one group worked intensively with the teacher or a teaching assistant. However, inspectors observed other instances where one group of pupils worked with a teacher or assistant while the rest of the class was busy with tasks such as practising spellings or writing poems that did not promote their skills in reading. Pupils mainly worked with their teacher once a week because activities were organised into a 'carousel' approach. Even when pupils working independently in groups were reading, rather than completing low-level writing tasks, too often either the groups of pupils were not of the same reading ability so the text was too hard or too easy for some, or the groups were of a similar reading ability but the text was still too hard or too easy for all pupils in the groups. Rarely did schools use reading age data to ensure that pupils were grouped appropriately and that the texts given to them matched their reading ability.

All the schools visited devoted around half an hour every day to guided reading, usually in addition to the time programmed for literacy or English lessons. Over the

week, this added up to two and half hours - a substantial proportion of the Key Stage 2 teaching time – which, in five schools, had no discernible impact on the standards in reading that pupils reached. However, there was no evidence that senior leaders in schools where reading standards were not yet good had evaluated or investigated the impact of teaching in the guided reading sessions.

Case study of less effective practice - Year 6 guided reading

One group of five pupils were working on phase 3 phonics; all spoke English as an additional language. Pupils had a phonically decodable text and the work was appropriately matched to their needs. Three groups were working on a poem. All had a list of figurative devices with definitions to highlight in a poem. Pupils had to find examples of simile, metaphor, personification in the text, while the teacher worked with the focus group on Dickens's 'Great Expectations'. The pupils were given a list of unfamiliar words, such as 'aforesaid', from the text to check their understanding. They discussed the words and then, with the help of teacher, worked out the meaning. Some pupils were required to draw a picture of their predictions prior to writing.

HMI approached one group of boys who were off-task and had not completed any work during the first 10 minutes of the lesson. No adult had scanned the room to check whether pupils were working purposefully. Pupils were clear about the task but had chosen not to complete it. Asked how often they had a reading session, the group said 'not very often'. The school policy stated once each week, but work in reading skills books showed work completed in the first week of the January term, then not again until 6 February, then 25 February and then 17 March. It appeared that school policy was not being followed and pupils did not have frequent opportunities to develop language and comprehension skills.

The groups working independently made little progress in the lesson and the session did not enable them to deepen their knowledge of texts and stories. Adults in the classroom were unaware of just how little these pupils had achieved during the 25 minutes. Most pupils had written nothing; some had not even completed the pictures of their predictions, although, given that most had the phonic knowledge to attempt to write, asking pupils to draw pictures prior to writing deflected them from developing resilience when writing. It was not clear to the inspection to what extent the writing tasks actually improved pupils' reading skills. The session also raised questions about the leadership and management of the teaching of reading and about the teacher's subject knowledge.

Case study of less effective practice - Year 6 guided reading

Year 6 pupils were working in five groups: one with the teacher, one with the teaching assistant and others independently. All were working on similar tasks but on different pieces of poetry, related to rivers and the sea. As part of their 'reciprocal reading', pupils took on roles such as questioner,

clarifier and scribe. Pupils had clearly done this before and understood the routine. However, the session did little to either develop their comprehension skills or foster a love of reading. Some groups took too long to sort out who was going to do what, especially those groups working on their own. Then they struggled because the text was virtually inaccessible to them. They persevered though.

The pupils were not able to demonstrate how well they could read or comprehend. Reading diaries showed that they read two books at once and generally it took about three weeks for the books to be changed. There were not enough copies to go round in the lesson and pupils were not positioned where they could see them. The teacher had not checked to make sure that some of the words that pupils had to look up would be in the dictionaries or readily findable on the internet.

'Free reading' and challenging more able readers

Too often, Key Stage 2 pupils told inspectors that they were 'free readers'. What this appeared to mean, in practice, was that after, completing the school's reading scheme, large numbers of Key Stage 2 pupils were left to their own devices in respect of reading. Other than the weekly 30-minute group guided reading session with a teacher, some pupils could spend most of their upper Key Stage 2 experience without any broader reading guidance from a qualified teacher. This approach is in direct conflict with the national curriculum requirements that:

'All pupils must be encouraged to read widely across both fiction and non-fiction to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live, to establish an appreciation and love of reading, and to gain knowledge across the curriculum.'¹³

As it was usually the more able readers that completed a school's reading scheme quickly, paradoxically, they were more at risk of falling behind and not achieving well.

One successful school had broadened its reading curriculum and increased the level of challenge to pupils by:

- introducing class readers
- holding reading competitions, such as 'extreme reading' – photos of people reading in unusual places
- praising 'reading millionaires' – celebrating when pupils had read a million words
- ensuring that authors visited the school

¹³ *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; page 14.

- introducing an accelerated reader programme
- re-energising the school library
- re-energising the use of the public and school library services.

The difference in approach to Key Stage 2 reading between the most effective schools, such as the example above, and others, was stark. It was rare for the schools visited to guide pupils' wider reading and to challenge them to read across a very wide spectrum of material, including fiction and non-fiction. It was even rarer for leaders to monitor that range of reading over time. Even in three of the schools that were more effective at teaching reading, inspectors noted that the proportions of pupils gaining the higher Level 5 in reading in the Year 6 national tests were lower than average. There appeared to be no link drawn by the schools between the reading provision on offer at Key Stage 2 and outcomes.

The programme of study for reading for upper Key Stage 2¹⁴ requires pupils to be taught to maintain positive attitudes to reading and understanding of what they read by:

- continuing to read a range of fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction and reference books or textbooks
- reading books that are structured in different ways and reading for a range of purposes
- increasing their familiarity with a wide range of books, including myths, legends and traditional stories, modern fiction, fiction from our literary heritage, and books from other cultures and traditions
- recommending books that they have read to their peers, giving reasons for their choices
- identifying and discussing themes and conventions in and across a wide range of writing
- making comparisons within and across books
- learning a wider range of poetry by heart
- preparing poems and plays to read aloud and to perform, showing understanding through intonation, tone and volume so that the meaning is clear to an audience.

Only two of the schools visited had reviewed fully their reading curriculum for Key Stage 2 to ensure that it met these requirements.

¹⁴ *The national curriculum in England – the framework*, Department for Education, July 2013; page 43.

Resources

The schools surveyed had spent widely differing amounts of money on new books and resources to support the teaching of reading. Six schools had used the government's match funding to purchase materials to support the teaching of phonics. These amounts spent ranged from £1,000 to £10,000. Two schools had not purchased any new books in recent years, either to support early reading or to enhance the reading stock for older pupils. In one of these schools, the leaders believed that its current variety of schemes provided the flexibility needed for early reading. In another, a substantial sum had been spent by the new headteacher after finding that only £200 had been spent in the previous year. One school had purchased new books for the library. Another had spent £2,000 on books for guided reading and home reading books, extending its range of books from different genres. Yet another had enhanced the stock of its accelerated reader scheme. One school spent £8,000 reorganising guided reading books for Key Stage 2; purchased sets of class readers; improved all reading areas; subscribed to a children's newspaper; and increased the amount of printed material available such as comics and magazines. Some schools had already purchased e-readers and tablets for pupils to use.

Staff training

The amount and quality of training for staff in the teaching of reading and phonics varied considerably between schools. Some staff had received very little training, if any. Literacy leaders often provided additional guidance and advice, and in-house expertise was frequently cited as the first port of call. In the most effective schools, senior leaders often led the training and individual staff had developed specific skills to support others. For example, one school had two specialist phonics teachers on the staff and governors had recently appointed a teacher with enhanced responsibility to lead on the new national curriculum developments. In another school, two members of staff were leading teachers and they led the training and professional development for others. In contrast, staff in two schools reported having received no training at all on how to teach phonics and reading. Some staff had visited other schools to observe good practice. However, the specific skills that were to be developed through these observations were not always made clear.

The schools visited generally considered that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were not well prepared to teach reading. Of the five most effective schools, one headteacher reported that NQTs' subject knowledge was weak and that they lacked a basic understanding of the teaching of phonics and reading. As a result, in this school, NQTs had a two-year induction programme that included weekly meetings and bespoke training. Two further headteachers confirmed this view, reporting that NQTs were 'not well grounded' in the teaching of phonics or reading. In contrast, two other headteachers reported that the quality of NQTs varied depending on where they had studied. One felt that some NQTs had very strong reading and phonics skills that they 'showcased' to other more established members of staff.

Leadership and management of the teaching of reading

The leadership and management of reading were good in five of the schools visited. Across all the schools, the oversight of early reading was better than in Key Stages 1 and 2. Features of leadership and management of reading in the most effective schools included the following.

- Senior leaders gave reading a high priority.
- Regular monitoring took place that was precise, accurate and led to improvement. As a result:
 - leaders at all levels knew strengths and weaknesses in reading – they knew what needed to be done and were proactive in plugging gaps in pupils’ learning
 - staff were skilled because training for phonics and reading was given high priority
 - flexibility in grouping pupils according to their ability enabled teachers to respond to pupils’ developing skill and competence
 - staff had high expectations of what pupils could achieve
 - good support was given to parents.
 - expectations of how reading would be taught and assessed were set out clearly in a whole-school policy and provision map and included ‘non-negotiables’
 - thorough procedures for assessment and the outcomes of assessments were used to determine the next steps for individuals and groups
 - the performance of particular groups, such as those in receipt of the pupil premium, was closely monitored.

In contrast, in the less effective schools visited, too few of the senior and middle leaders monitored directly the teaching of reading, especially in Key Stage 2. In these schools, leaders did not have an accurate enough view of the quality of their own provision or the skills of different staff. Frequently, they assumed that teachers’ subject knowledge was better than it actually was. In some cases, the subject knowledge of senior leaders themselves was not good enough to challenge poor practice. Occasionally, the person leading on reading was inexperienced or did not have sufficient authority.

Whole-school reading policies

Monitoring of the teaching of reading in the less effective schools took place within a context where there was no clear agreed whole-school policy about how reading would be taught. Although nine of the 12 schools surveyed had a whole-school reading policy, most of these policies were expressions of intent rather than ‘non-negotiable’ directions on how reading had to be taught in the school. In three schools, decisions about how reading was to be taught and how often pupils were to

read or be heard to read by an adult were left to the discretion of individual class teachers. Sometimes, 'reading' was lost within literacy:

Case study of less effective practice

In this school, literacy and its importance in the curriculum were given a high priority, but there was no whole-school policy for teaching pupils to read. The specific incremental skills in reading at all levels were too often subsumed in broader literacy aspects. As a consequence, pupils' reading skills were insufficiently developed and applied for a variety of purposes.

In the less effective schools, in Key Stage 2 especially, teachers were too often left to work in semi-isolation, with limited guidance and support, to find a way to manage the teaching of reading in their classrooms. Paradoxically, where monitoring did take place, it was frequently too supportive rather than evaluative to be helpful: there were no links made between what was seen in lessons and the progress that pupils made.

The following examples illustrate less effective leadership and management of reading.

Case studies of less effective practice - leadership and management of early reading

In this school, the leadership and management of early reading, including monitoring and evaluation of the impact of teaching phonics, was too infrequent to raise standards. The coordinator visited classrooms once each year to check on what was being taught in phonics and or guided reading. Planning was also sampled annually. At the time of the survey visit, the coordinator was looking at handwriting and had sampled a number of books to check that teachers were following the school handwriting policy. The coordinator had lots of data on pupils' attainment levels, but this had not been analysed to any extent to identify gaps, progress made by groups or the impact of any intervention. However, the data could have been used as a powerful vehicle for the further development of the teaching of reading.

In a second school, the leadership and management of early reading, including the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of teaching phonics, required improvement. The monitoring of phonics teaching was too infrequent and informal. Data was not presented in a way that was readily accessible to governors and reflected a lack of self-criticism. Reading ages were not analysed nor used as a management tool. There was a lack of awareness of the requirements of the national curriculum from September 2014.

The new national curriculum programme of study for reading

Six of the schools surveyed were ready to implement the 2014 National Curriculum programme of study for reading. School leaders in each of these schools had a good awareness of the impending changes and had put in motion plans to ensure that staff were ready to implement the new curriculum in September. Time and resources had been set aside to allow staff to prepare. For example, one school was running pilots to ensure that plans could be fully implemented in September. In another school, the literacy leader was making necessary additions to medium-term plans and drawing up lists of poems for each year group.

The following example illustrates the work undertaken by one of the more effective schools to ensure that it was ready for September 2014.

Case study - example of good preparation for September 2014

In this school, whole-school training had been delivered for the new national curriculum. Literacy training had been provided for all staff. Joint observations had taken place in the EYFS and Year 1 to ensure that standards and expectations were high enough. Staff meetings had been committed to preparing for the new national curriculum. The changes and expectations had been identified and the school was adopting new assessment procedures in preparation for the changes. New resources had been purchased for the EYFS and more decodable books were in place. The school had also purchased more non-fiction books for early years. New resources for the teaching of English grammar, spelling and punctuation had also been purchased that were aligned to the new curriculum. Staff had plotted what would be taught and when: they had mapped out which skills would be taught within which foundation subjects. Support for teaching spelling in Key Stage 2 was developing. Reading ages had been gathered for all pupils. The school was running trials to see whether the collection of reading ages should begin in Reception; it currently started in Year 1. Although reading ages were used, this initiative was in the early stages of development and still required improvement.

In contrast, however, inspectors observed that in the six schools that were not well prepared for the introduction of the new programme of study for reading, staff had a very limited knowledge and understanding of the forthcoming changes and had devoted little time to reviewing or discussing the national curriculum framework. There was a lack of urgency on the part of these schools, for example, in undertaking reviews of the curriculum and reading books.

Conclusion

This survey found that a number of primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent have much more to do to ensure that 'by the end of their primary education, all pupils are able to read fluently, and with confidence, in any subject in their forthcoming secondary

education.¹⁵ In 2013, literacy levels at the end of the EYF) in Stoke-on-Trent were in line with those seen in the rest of the West Midlands region and in England as a whole. The challenge for primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent now is to build on these results to deliver better outcomes at Key Stage 1 and beyond.

Notes

Selecting the schools

The 12 schools sampled for this study were purposively selected to help identify the key issues with the teaching of reading in primary schools located in Stoke-on-Trent. The sample consisted of six schools that had been judged as requires improvement and six schools that were judged good at their last full inspection. Eleven of the schools surveyed were primary schools, all but two of which had full-time nursery provision. The 12th school was a junior school for pupils aged seven to 11.

Evidence base

During the survey visits, Her Majesty's Inspectors and local authority officers jointly spent one day in each school observing the teaching of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) and reading in the Early Years Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. They held discussions with senior leaders, middle leaders, English/literacy leaders and early years staff. They heard pupils read, examined home-school reading diaries and observed pupils using libraries and choosing books. They scrutinised schools' records on pupils' progress in reading and schools' policies on how reading should be taught.

The names of pupils in the case studies have been anonymised.

List of schools visited

Ash Green Primary School
Alexandra Primary School
Burnwood Primary School
Greenways Primary School
Hillside Primary School
Milton Primary School
Oakhill Primary School
Our Lady's Catholic Primary School
Sandon Primary School
Stoke Minster Primary School
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School
St Gregory's Catholic Primary School

¹⁵ The national curriculum in England 2014, Department for Education, 2014;
www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum#curriculum-changes-information-for-schools.