What are the most effective strategies to ensure that every child leaves primary school a fluent reader? In this Best Practice Focus, Robbie Burns dissects the science, principles and essential elements of effective whole-school reading strategies before advising us how we might best implement these approaches across the primary school.
Until very recently, I had not looked into the subject, studies from across research. As Christopher Such (2021) surface and tokenistic way. Often they are used in a piecemeal, making to create coherent mental teaching reading, an attempt can be made to create coherent mental models that inform the way we teach reading and others feel it is so simple it says nothing at all about the lack of understanding of how the task is to intervene. Decoding: The alphabetic principle, that is, the relationship between letters match individual sounds in words, is what underpins decoding as a whole. The task of decoding is to understand how letters in words make specific sounds and what correspondence they might have, since they may not always be the same according to the other letters in a word. For example, I might have included in it an understanding of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001). The Reading Rope: Word recognition is made up of three parts: phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition, whereas the simple view calls this aspect of reading simply “decoding.” When all of these three elements are done in an increasingly automatic way, we would consider a reader to be fluent. Phonological awareness refers to the ability a student has to recognize that words can be broken into segments of sound such as syllables and phonemes, for example “book” can be broken down into four phonemes (b–oo–k) or one syllable (book). Often students pick up this awareness without explicit teaching, but if they need to be made more fluent, it is important to be aware that their phonological awareness may be weak and ready to intervene. Decoding: The alphabetic principle, that is, the relationship between letters and groups of letters match individual sounds in words, is what underpins decoding as a whole. The task of decoding is to understand how letters in words make specific sounds and what correspondence they might have, since they may not always be the same according to the other letters in a word. For example, I might have included in it an understanding of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001).

Teaching children to read: The essential elements

The way we have talked about reading in primary education until now has been impoverished. For far too long we have depended on the inherited experiences of colleagues and paid very little attention to the vast amounts of research available to inform what we do.

More than this, as leaders there has been a dearth of understanding not only of the research, but also about effective whole-school strategies that sustainably ensure that every single child leaves primary school with relative ease. I call these ‘strategies that can be applied to your school with relative ease’. I call these “strategies of” a whole-school reading strategy.

But what I also hope you will take from this is that whatever we do as leaders, it must be rooted in our experience, the needs of our community and our students, but also in the best research we have available. I hope you will find principles that you can apply to your context and across a plethora of methods. But before we go any further, let’s consider the science of reading.

The science of teaching reading

It’s important to realise that this is not limited to the research-based science of reading, but also the research-based science of teaching reading, as an attempt can be made to create both. The science of teaching reading is seen as a function of decoding - discerning the sounds and the letter correspondences - and language comprehension - interpreting what the sounds mean by themselves and together in sentences, paragraphs and so on. In equation form, it is expressed thus:

Decoding (D) + Language Comprehension (LC) = Reading Comprehension (RC)

There are real strengths to this model and it is understandable why it was so central to the Rose Report (2006). First, it encapsulates the two essential elements of what it takes to understand the written English language: deciphering the written down alphabetic ‘code’ is a crucial first step, and it naturally follows that once children do this, they then need to understand what letters and sounds mean to be considered a ‘reader’.

When issues arise with reading in a classroom context, you can normally break down the root cause of a student’s barriers to learning into either a decoding or comprehension issue, with the former being the first priority. But although the strength of the simple view is most definitely its ease of explanation, this has also created problems. At times it has been misunderstood and misapplied. Some have seen it as a simple view to reading that is so simple it says nothing at all about the lack of understanding of how to read, particularly when students struggle, and it is therefore rendered useless for forming a mental model for teaching reading. But it is not useless, especially when combined with more recent research. To make sure we avoid interpreting the simple view incorrectly, we can combine it with an understanding of Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001).
students’ reading in deeper ways. At all ages and stages, we understand that fluency is a crucial step towards reading comprehension, which we can make sure that we put in place relevant strategies in our teaching to support this. When we understand that background knowledge is crucial to making meaning from the text, we will be able to teach with this in mind.

As leaders, it enables us to think strategically about how we intervene when issues with students’ reading arise. We can, like teachers, unpick more carefully the problems that have arisen and consider how we support staff to overcome these, if we also combine it with rigorous tracking systems.

Using assessment systems that consider decoding (phonics), comprehension and the fluency of our students, we can then deploy staff to support with intervention when needed. We can consider whether there are training needs for staff and support them accordingly.

Principles and actions

Building on the above, here are six principles that transcend any particular teaching method, each followed by some suggested action points for steps.

1. Phonics

Phonics is the first step but must not be forgotten later on.

- Phonics – by which I mean specifically systematic phonics – has to be the first thing that students learn to read (Johnson & Watson, 2005). If a student has struggled to learn how to read in the phonics programme in place, this must not be the end of their decoding journey.

If you have not cracked the alphabetic code, independent reading comprehension will be an extremely challenging task, and therefore imperative we support students, whatever their age and stage, with phonics towards later stages (Such, 2021).

- Consider ways to train staff in their understanding of fluency and the impact it has on reading.

- Develop opportunities in the wider curriculum to teach new vocabulary.

2. Consistent structures

Create consistent, repetitive structures for reading lessons

- High-quality systematic synthetic phonics programmes bear this in mind intuitively. There are clear steps to sessions which often recall previous learning, introduce new sounds or words, and then read them in the context of decodable books always aiming towards fluency.

- However, quite often, reading lessons beyond this might not have consistent structures, or if they do, they do not do so with the science of reading in mind.

- To fully develop reading comprehension, reading lessons must teach new vocabulary, background knowledge and support fluency of text before focused work on reading comprehension, retrieving key information. There are different evidence-informed approaches to teaching reading that could be used, and we could encourage you to explore the options available with these basic principles.

- The most important part of this decodable in future year groups (Dehaene, 2015).

- Make sure every member of staff has had thorough phonics training and consider how they can teach with decoding in mind at every age and stage throughout the school.

- When students are struggling with decoding in ways that beyond what can be catered for through quality first teaching, make sure that rigorous interventions are in place to support rapid progress.

- When teaching new words, consider ways to ensure that students can teach with decoding in mind (syllables, sounds, markings to indicate these elements of new words).

3. Fluency

Teach and model fluency

- The aim of learning to decode, as mentioned already, is to be able to decode fluently. To read fluently is to read aloud with accuracy, speed and expression.

- If students do not read with fluency, there may be difficulties with some of the teaching approaches used in the school (Aspell & Adshead, 2011).

- It intuitively, with the science of reading in mind, this makes sense. If students can connect the text with the accuracy and at speed, it implies that their understanding of the sounds and letter correspondences is not secure enough.

- if students can’t decode the text with accuracy and at speed, it implies that their understanding of the sounds and letter correspondences is not secure enough.

4. New vocabulary

Teach new words explicitly

- If a student has never seen or heard a word before, it is highly unlikely they will be able to guess its meaning. If there are too many words that students do not know, then they will not be able to understand the meaning of the text. Therefore, teachers need to teach with fluency in mind, making sure new words are taught before the text is read, making sure fluency in their expression and intonation, and also making sure that they explain/why they read with expression at a certain point and how this enhances the meaning of the text.

- For example, if a passage of text contains the word “assumed”, the reader may read this in a pushy, sharp way, labouring over keywords on reasoning from the text, and in doing so, this may not enhance the meaning of the text. It is important we explain to our students what we are doing as teachers so some will not naturally pick this up unless we enable them to notice.

- Furthermore, it is important that students practise reading aloud in lessons, to the class, in pairs and in small groups. If the teacher has read the text prior to them doing this, they will have a clear understanding of how the text ought to be read, which means they can focus on reading with accuracy, speed and expression.

- Fluency can also be assessed in addition to other standardised tests. There are numerous apps for this and those who are interested may have through simple tests that are easy to administer.

- Consider ways to ensure fluency is explicitly taught and when it is included in reading lessons because of the benefits.

- Develop opportunities to train staff in their understanding of fluency and the impact it has on reading.

- Develop opportunities in the wider curriculum to teach new words explicitly and not just in reading lessons.

- Consider a consistent approach to teaching new words that is used throughout the school.

5. Background knowledge

Build background knowledge often

- When we build knowledge, whatever the subject or lesson, we are also building students’ reading comprehension (Lien, 2020).

- We cannot teach every bit of knowledge that might come up in a book in the wider curriculum.

- Explicit vocabulary teaching should be a key part of teaching in the wider curriculum. It is impossible to teach every single word a student will be exposed to. But through careful curriculum design, a handful of new words can be taught each unit and built upon in the following ones by teachers in the next year group.

- When this is aligned with wider curriculum planning and development where there are clear vocabulary targets developed by subject leaders, knowledge organisers and retrieval tasks, the nexus is placed on the wider curriculum being able to support reading development by teaching new words explicitly within the context of the subject they are most relevant.

- Consider vocabulary progression documents for all subjects, particularly science, geography and history.

- Develop opportunities in the wider curriculum to teach new words explicitly and not just in reading lessons.

- Develop a consistent approach to teaching new words that is used throughout the school.

6. Read, Read, Read

Reading mileage matters

- It is important that students read many, many words and also listen to many words being read to them; they need to be steeped in stories, information texts and language if they are going to interpret meaning effectively and answer questions in an exam based on unseen texts.

- That is why reading comprehension lessons that focus too much on reading strategies might not be the best approach. In some ways, this puts the cart before the horse. The heavy lifting needs to be completed by students being exposed to vast amounts of text across the curriculum so their minds are filled with a breadth of literature and knowledge to draw on when the time comes.

- The key is to balance the amount read with a focus on understanding that short sentences (Oakhill et al, 2014, Lomov et al, 2016).

- For example, often a well-chosen, coherent passage. If, for instance, a text is added to the end of an extended read can have far more of an impact than a short extract with 10 questions.

- Consider how much reading each day they have heard and are engaging in reading and listening to text every day in every classroom across the school?

A reading strategy: Essential elements

So, how do we take these general principles and action steps for the teaching of reading and create a coherent whole-school reading strategy to ensure every child becomes a fluent reader? This is a perennial challenge for leaders.

By no means is the list below exhaustive, and some of the things are a good starting point – the essential elements – to ensure that the practice of how we read in school is well supported by the school structures that are in place.

- I have broken down “reading” into four areas beyond reading lessons (including phonics) and suggested some strategies. These four areas are:

  - The reading journey. Reading for pleasure, The reading spine, and the wider curriculum. I also add a sneaky fifth element.

1. The reading journey

The fundamental first step to developing a whole-school reading strategy is to articulate what students are going to do in order to become a reader and to ensure that every child is a fluent reader with a passion for books.

- This requires the articulation of what every child is a fluent reader should be able to do. For example, to be able to reread and understand a text in many ways; this puts the cart before the horse. The heavy lifting needs to be completed by students being exposed to vast amounts of text across the curriculum so their minds are filled with a breadth of literature and knowledge to draw on when the time comes.

- The key is to balance the amount read with a focus on understanding that short sentences (Oakhill et al, 2014, Lomov et al, 2016).

- For example, often a well-chosen, coherent passage. If, for instance, a text is added to the end of an extended read can have far more of an impact than a short extract with 10 questions.

- Consider whether each text is good, or want to support them to pass their phonics screening test for you to consider decoding (phonics) as an additional support to learning how to read, rather than shifting their attention between understanding what they are doing and what they ought to be reading.

- Consider the approach that is taken to teach students how to read beyond phonics lessons and monitor whether it is consistent throughout the school.

- Consider whether the current approaches that are taken are evidence-informed.

- Support staffs to develop the structures that reading lessons take and improve their practice.

- Consider ways to train staff in their understanding of fluency and the impact it has on reading.

- Develop opportunities in the wider curriculum to teach new words explicitly and not just in reading lessons.

- Consider a consistent approach to teaching new words that is used throughout the school.

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A coherent whole, rather than just ad
hoc things that happen in a school
without clarity or purpose. It might
be helpful to showcase your school’s jour
nais as a diagram or flow chart, since it is a jour
nais for staff, parents and students to
understand.

Doing this will force teachers to
ensure that whatever they do when it
comes to reading in their class
room is contributing to a jour
nais that is bigger than
themselves and student-focused.

2, Reading for pleasure
_reading for passion is far
more important to simply be seen as an
annual World Book Day event
or afternoon story time every so often.
Research shows that when schools
have clear strategies promoted by all
teachers, reading for pleasure can
have a positive impact on reading
attainment and also on wellbeing
and student ownership of the
library. If a teacher is using a video or
heritage and its study of places
and cultures, and its role in
Academic year in years 5 and 6 can
be the stimulus for writing in
writing lessons. But for our weakest
readers, this helps with their
understanding of other literary
resources which the discipline knowl
dedge may be developing when we are
reading in writing lessons, we are
writing as writers, ready to develop our
ourself as teachers that ensures our
students know how to approach the text
they read.

Conclusion
The methods out there are many,
but principles rooted in a strong
understanding of the science of
reading and writing, context is my
hope that what has been described
here may be useful to
the school’s own reading journey
and strategies to ensure every child
becomes a fluent reader.

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