

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent reports by Ofsted and independent research have drawn attention to the fact that the attainment of particular groups of children and young people in literacy falls far below that of the rest of the population.<sup>1</sup> The underperformance of those from low-income families is very marked, particularly at secondary level, as is that of looked after children.

Between **June 2008** and **February 2010**, inspectors visited providers of childcare, education and post-16 learning. The providers were selected because previous inspection evidence and data on achievement and attainment showed that they were particularly successful in enabling children and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to make better than average progress and to achieve good standards of literacy. The aim of the survey was to illustrate effective approaches that might help others to improve their practice in literacy.

## 2. KEY FINDINGS

- The successful providers visited understood the often multiple barriers facing children and learners from disadvantaged groups which prevented them from acquiring literacy skills. However, only very few had consistent success in overcoming these barriers for all groups of children and learners.
- The most successful schools, colleges and other providers of adult education and training visited made outstanding use of national test and assessment data to raise the expectations of staff and to set sufficiently challenging targets.
- The most effective providers visited had at least one senior member of staff with an excellent knowledge of literacy and its pedagogy. They understood the stages of language development and how and when to provide additional support.
- The early years registered providers and primary schools visited understood the need to teach phonics rigorously and systematically and the importance of regular practice in reading. The primary schools visited in the second year of the survey all used a structured, systematic approach to teaching phonics. The teachers and teaching assistants led daily, discrete phonics sessions with groups of pupils for 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the age of the children.
- The most effective providers visited reflected on and adapted their curriculum, including any intervention programmes, to meet changing needs. They taught literacy in contexts that were relevant and meaningful to their learners. The staff identified learners' different starting points and needs accurately.
- Inspectors saw a wide variety of effective approaches to the teaching and learning of literacy that built on the consistent use of phonics. Many of the approaches were in common use, but they were particularly effective in the providers visited because those teaching had consistently high expectations and the tasks set matched the needs of learners well.
- In the secondary schools where teachers in all subject departments had received training in teaching literacy and where staff had included an objective for literacy in all the lessons, senior managers noted an improvement in outcomes across all subjects, as well as in English. The high-performing colleges visited adopted similar strategies to improve outcomes.
- The successful schools visited often nominated learning mentors or staff to support looked after children and other pupils who were potentially at risk of underachieving. This ensured that they received continuity in terms of support and guidance, including prompt access to external agencies that were best equipped to tackle social and emotional problems that could affect learning.
- In the schools visited, a culture of good behaviour, mutual respect between staff and pupils and good partnerships with parents supported the learning of literacy well. In the colleges and other providers of education and training visited, the staff treated learners as adults and drew skilfully on their experiences to enliven the classes and ensure that learning activities were relevant.
- Even in the successful early years registered providers and schools visited, inspectors found that some groups of children and learners attained relatively less well in literacy. Nearly always, those known to be eligible for free school meals and, in the secondary schools, looked after children and White boys, in particular, underachieved relative to the other pupils.

<sup>1</sup> The term literacy in the report refers to the ability to read, write, speak and listen.

- In the less successful secondary schools, the limited use of assessment data on pupils on transfer to Year 7 led to insufficiently challenging targets for some pupils.
- Headteachers sometimes limited their ambition for pupils because they measured success against the average for the pupil group rather than against the national average for all pupils. If the targets set for pupils from low-income families are below that of their peers, schools are less likely to succeed in narrowing the attainment gap.
- Virtual headteachers<sup>2</sup> found it difficult to gain accurate data on the progress of pupils who were looked after. Assessment information was often missing because looked after children were moved frequently. There was often a gap before a pupil's new school or local authority received information.
- Inspectors saw few instances of systematic phonics teaching in the secondary schools, colleges and other providers of adult education and training, despite the fact that for learners without a grasp of the link between sounds and letters, this knowledge is necessary to develop their literacy.
- For adult learners, the National Tests of Literacy, which many adult learners sat, tested reading skills but did not assess learners' writing. As a result, these did not offer learners and providers confirmation of improvement in writing skills.
- In five of the 22 colleges and other providers of adult education and training visited in the second year of the survey, learners were working towards outcomes that did not provide suitable challenge. In these settings, the qualifications learners were taking were at the same level or a lower level as the qualifications in English or literacy that they had passed previously.

<sup>2</sup>The Green Paper, *Care matters*, proposed that there should be a 'virtual headteacher' in every local area to oversee the education of looked after children and those placed outside the authority, to take responsibility as if she or he were the headteacher of a single school; *Care matters: transforming the lives of children and young people in care* (Cm 6932), DCSF, 2006: <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/CM%206932>

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The **Department for Education** should:

- as part of its reform of performance tables, consider how to reflect the achievement and progress of pupils from disadvantaged groups, especially in literacy, compared with the national picture for all pupils.

The **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills** should:

- ensure that revisions to adult literacy qualifications include suitable assessment of learners' writing skills.

**Schools** should:

- teach phonics systematically as part of the teaching of reading and ensure that pupils' progress in developing their phonic knowledge and skills is regularly assessed;
- ensure that governors regularly receive reports which include the progress and attainment in English of particular groups, such as White British boys and pupils known to be eligible for free school meals;
- raise the expectations of staff for pupils from low-attaining groups, especially in Year 7, and use all available assessment information to ascertain their literacy needs and to set them challenging targets; this is particularly important to establish suitable expectations for GCSE English language;
- consider nominating a member of staff to take responsibility for maximising the achievement of learners who are potentially at risk of failing to reach average levels of skills in literacy;
- ensure that all teaching and support staff receive regular training in developments in teaching literacy;
- ensure that assessment information is available and shared for all looked after children, and where it is missing request the information promptly from the relevant local authorities.

**Learning and skills providers** should:

- ensure that learners without a grasp of phonics receive the necessary teaching;
- ensure that all teaching and support staff receive regular training in developments in teaching literacy;
- ensure that learners work towards literacy qualifications which are at a higher level than those they have previously passed.

**The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090237>**