EVIDENCE FOR LEARNING

Guidance Report

Lower primary

Improving literacy in lower primary

This Guidance Report is based on original content from 'Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1' produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The original content has been modified where appropriate for Australian context.

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It is expected that we will update this Guidance Report in response to recently published and soon-to-be published research, in line with the next version coming from the EEF.

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Foreword

Good literacy skills provide the building blocks for academic success, fulfilling careers and rewarding lives. Yet despite our best efforts, a student in year 7 from the lowest quintile of social economic status (SES) is more than 10 times as likely to have reading skills below national minimum standard in comparison to a peer in the highest quintile of SES.[1]

At Evidence for Learning we believe the best way to break this link between family income and educational attainment is through better use of evidence: looking at what has—and has not—worked in the past can help us to decide what is likely to work in the future.

It can be difficult to know where to start. There are thousands of studies of primary literacy teaching, most of which are presented in academic papers and journals. Teachers are inundated with information about programs and training courses, all of which make claims about impact. How can anyone know which findings are the most robust, reliable, and relevant to their school and students?

This is why we have produced this guidance report. Developed by our UK partner, the Education Endowment Foundation and updated for Australian audiences, it offers eight practical evidence-based recommendations – which are relevant to all students and particularly for those struggling with their literacy. To develop the recommendations, the EEF reviewed the best available international research and consulted experts to arrive at broad principles for effective literacy teaching. We at Evidence for Learning added to this Guidance Report through consultation with Australian Researchers and practitioners.

Of course, this Guidance Report on its own will not improve the literacy of primary school students. It is only when the research knowledge summarised in this guide is combined with teachers' professional judgement and expertise that students in classrooms across Australia will benefit.

We hope this guide will help to support a consistently excellent, evidence-informed primary system in Australia that creates great opportunities for all children, regardless of their family background.

The Evidence for Learning team

Introduction

What does this guide cover?

This report is part of a series providing guidance on literacy teaching. This guide broadly concerns the teaching of literacy to students between the ages of five and seven. It may also be applicable to younger students who are making rapid progress or older students who have fallen behind their peers. The concepts here are developed further in our 'Improving literacy in upper primary' Guidance Report for students from ages seven to eleven. We will also be producing a report that covers the typical requirements of teaching literacy in secondary school.

This report is not intended to provide a comprehensive guide to literacy in lower primary school. The recommendations represent eight 'lever points' where there is useful evidence about literacy teaching that schools can use to make a significant difference to students' learning. The report focuses on pedagogy and approaches that are supported by good evidence; it does not cover all the potential components of successful literacy provision. Some will be missing because they are related to organisational or leadership issues; other areas are not covered because there is insufficient evidence to create an actionable recommendation in which we have confidence. There are other important issues to consider, including, but not limited to, leadership, staff deployment and development, parental engagement, and resources and technology.

This guide draws predominately on studies within the Teaching & Learning Toolkit.[2] As such, it is not a new study in itself, but rather is intended as an accessible overview of existing research with clear, actionable guidance. More information about how this guide was created is available at the end of the report.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is aimed primarily at literacy coordinators, principals, and other staff with leadership responsibility in primary schools. Senior leaders have responsibility for managing change across a school, so attempts to implement these recommendations are more likely to be successful if they are involved. Classroom teachers will also find this guide useful as a resource to aid their day-to-day literacy teaching.

It may also be used by:

- school councils and parents to support discussions with school staff;
- program developers to create more effective Professional Learning and interventions; and
- educational researchers to conduct further testing of the recommendations in this guidance and fill in any gaps in the evidence.

Summary of recommendations

This guidance report contains eight recommendations regarding the teaching of literacy to students aged between five and seven.

The recommendations are arranged in five groups:

Speaking and listening

Reading

Writing

Assessment and diagnosis

Targeted interventions

For each recommendation, we have provided an 'evidence summary' box that describes the supporting evidence. More information about the process used to create these statements is available in the 'How was this guidance compiled' section.

Overleaf is a summary of the recommendations.

Summary of recommendations

1

Develop students' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language

A focus on developing oral language skills is especially important for the development of a range of reading and writing skills in this age group.

Useful speaking and listening activities include:

- students reading books aloud and being encouraged to have conversations about them;
- the teacher modelling inference making by asking relevant questions aloud and answering them his/herself;
- students engaging in paired or group work so they can share the thought processes that lead them to make inferences;
- activities which extend students' spoken and receptive vocabulary; and
- a teacher encouraging children to clearly articulate what they are going to say in their writing

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2

Use an engaging approach to developing reading which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills

Both decoding (the ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language) and comprehension (the ability to understand the meaning of the language being read) skills are necessary for confident and competent reading, but neither is sufficient on its own.

It is also important to remember that progress in literacy requires motivation and engagement, which will help children to develop persistence and enjoyment in their reading.

Children will need a range of wider language and literacy experiences to develop their understanding of written texts in all their forms. This should include active engagement with different media and genres of texts and a wide range of content topics.

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3

Effectively implement a systematic phonics program

Systematic phonics approaches explicitly teach students a comprehensive set of letter sound relationships through an organised sequence.

A phonics program will only be effective if it is delivered using effective pedagogy. How phonics is taught is important.

Consider the following when teaching a phonics program:

- Training – ensure all staff have the necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge
- Responsive – check if learning can be accelerated or extra support is needed and identify specific capabilities and difficulties to focus teaching.
- Engaging – lessons that engage students and are enjoyable to teach.
- Adaptations – carefully consider any adaptations to the program, as they may reduce its impact.
- Focus – a flexible approach to grouping students is likely to help focus effort and improve teaching efficiency.

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4

Teach students to use strategies for developing and monitoring reading comprehension

Reading comprehension can be improved by teaching students specific strategies that they can apply to both check how well they comprehend what they read, and overcome barriers to comprehension. These include:

- activating prior knowledge;
- prediction;
- questioning;
- clarifying;
- summarising; and
- inference.

Teachers can introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be strategically reduced as a child progresses until the child can complete the activity independently.

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5

Teach students to use strategies for planning and monitoring writing

Students' writing can be improved by teaching them to effectively plan and monitor their writing. Teaching several different strategies is likely to help, depending on the current skills of the writer. These include:

- pre writing activities;
- drafting, revising and editing; and
- sharing.

Teachers can introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be strategically reduced as a child progresses until the child can complete the activity independently.

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6

Promote fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and effective practice and explicitly teaching spelling

Transcription refers to the physical processes of handwriting or typing, and spelling.

Children must develop their fluency in these skills to the point that they have become automated. If children have to concentrate to ensure their transcription is accurate, they will be less able to think about the content of their writing.

A large amount of practice, supported by effective feedback, is required to develop fluency. Achieving the necessary quantity of practice requires that children are motivated and fully engaged in the process of improving their writing.

Spelling should be explicitly taught. Teaching should focus on spelling of words that are relevant to the topic or genre being studied.

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7

Use high-quality information about students' current capabilities to select the best next steps for teaching

Collect high quality, up to date information about student's current capabilities, and adapt teaching accordingly to focus on exactly what the student needs to progress. This approach is more efficient because effort is spent on the best next step and not wasted by rehearsing skills or content that a child already knows well.

Teaching can be adapted by:

- Changing the focus. Models of typical literacy development can be used to diagnose students' capabilities and select a particular aspect of literacy to focus on next.
- Changing the approach. If a student is disengaged or is finding activities too easy or too hard, adopt a different approach to teaching the same aspect of literacy.

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8

Use high-quality structured interventions to help students who are struggling with their literacy

Schools should focus on core classroom teaching strategies, which improve literacy for the whole class. However, even when excellent classroom teaching is occurring, it is likely that a small number of children will also require more focused literacy instruction to make expected progress.

The first step should be to use accurate diagnosis of capabilities and difficulties to match students to appropriate interventions.

There is a strong and consistent body of evidence demonstrating the benefit of one to one or small group tutoring using structured interventions for children who are struggling with literacy.

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1 Develop student's speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language

Evidence summary

This recommendation is based on extensive evidence from nine meta-analyses that include studies of students aged from five to seven. These studies examine a range of areas related to speaking and listening skills, and a range of outcomes including reading and writing.

Speaking and listening skills are at the heart of language, not only as foundations for reading and writing, but also as essential skills for thinking and communication. A focus on developing oral language skills is important for students aged from five to seven.[3]

There is promising evidence that reading comprehension can be improved with targeted teaching that improves students' speaking and listening skills.[4] Teachers could use approaches such as:[3,5,6]

- students reading books and stories aloud and being encouraged to have conversations about them with their teacher and peers;
- the teacher models the process of making inferences (using information in a text to arrive at another piece of information that is implicit) by asking relevant questions aloud and answering them themselves;
- students engaging in paired or group work so they can share the thought processes that lead them to make inferences; and
- activities that extend students' spoken and receptive vocabulary (approaches that explicitly aim to develop vocabulary work best when they are related to current topics in the curriculum and there are opportunities to practise using new vocabulary).

Speaking and listening activities can support students to practise essential skills for effective writing. Writing requires the consideration of purpose and audience, and the co-ordination of meaning, form, and structure. The co-ordination of these concepts is a complex, yet essential skill, that can be practised through purposeful speaking and listening activities for writing. For example, a teacher could encourage children to verbally articulate their ideas, which the teacher then puts into writing while explaining sentences and demonstrating how to construct them.[5]

2 Use an engaging approach to developing reading which integrates both decoding and comprehension skills

Evidence summary

The evidence for including a combination of both decoding and comprehension-led approaches in teaching reading is extensive. There is little evidence regarding precisely how these approaches should be integrated, or exactly which skills should be taught and when.

There is a broad consensus, supported by research evidence, that reading requires both decoding (the ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language) and comprehension (an understanding of the language being read).[7,8,9,10,11] Comprehension requires an understanding of the form of the language, which is composed of morphology and syntax, the meaning of relevant vocabulary and the context in relation to the text. Morphology refers to the arrangement of the smallest units of words that contain meaning, such as the 'root' word, 'child', and the affix, '-ish', which in combination make the new word, 'childish'. Syntax refers to how words are combined and organised into phrases and sentences.

Both decoding and comprehension are necessary, but not sufficient, to develop confident and competent readers. It is also important to remember that progress in literacy requires motivation and engagement, both of which help children to develop persistence and resilience, as well as enjoyment and satisfaction in their reading. If students are not making expected progress it may be that they are not engaged in the process and require a different approach that motivates them to practise and improve (see Recommendation 7).

Children also need a wide range of language and literacy experiences to develop their understanding of written text in all its forms. This should include active engagement with different media and genres of texts and a wide range of content topics. Students should read both narrative (e.g. fictional stories and poetry) and informative texts (e.g. news articles and speeches). Introducing children to a range of texts and reading experiences could support the development of students' reading comprehension, and their inference skills in particular.[12]

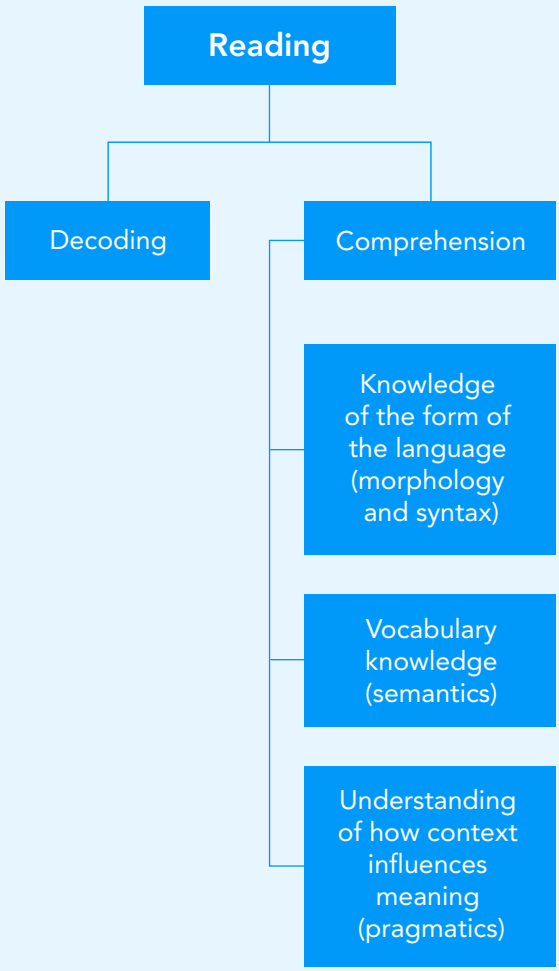

Figure 1: Integrated approach to reading

3 Effectively implement a systematic phonics program

Evidence summary

The use of a systematic phonics program is supported by very extensive evidence. Seven meta-analyses, which include studies of 5-7-year-old students, have consistently demonstrated the impact of phonics on early reading.

The purpose of phonics is to quickly develop students' phonemic awareness, which is their ability to hear, identify, and use phonemes (the smallest unit of spoken language), and to teach them the relationship between phonemes and the graphemes (a letter or combination of letters used to represent a phoneme) that represent them. There is very extensive evidence to support the use of a systematic phonics program with students in lower primary.[13]

Systematic phonics approaches explicitly teach students a comprehensive set of letter-sound relationships through an organised sequence. This often means teaching the skills of decoding new words by sounding them out and combining or 'blending' the sound-spelling patterns. It is necessary to teach these skills explicitly, but students should also have the opportunity to apply and practise these skills during normal reading and writing activities.[14] Teachers could support students to practise by providing them with text containing words that can be decoded using the letter-sound patterns they have already been taught, or by having children write their own stories using the letter-sound combinations taught and then reading their own and others' stories.[15] The goal is to improve the fluency (speed) as well as accuracy, of students' decoding to the point that it becomes automatic and does not require conscious effort.

Ideally, schools should use a systematic phonics program that has been rigorously evaluated. However, there are still only a small number of phonics programs that are available in Australia for which there is evidence of effectiveness.[16,17,18] The available evidence clearly indicates that it is important *how* phonics is taught, so it may help to consider the following features of effective programs.[19,20,21]

If your school is using, or considering, programs that do not have secure evidence of effectiveness, it is worth checking whether they include these common characteristics of effective programs:

- **Training** – ensure all staff have the necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge, for example, sufficient linguistic knowledge and understanding.
- **Responsive** – check if learning can be accelerated or extra support is needed and identify specific capabilities and difficulties to focus teaching.
- **Engaging** – lessons engage students and are enjoyable to teach.
- **Adaptations** – carefully consider any adaptations to the programme, as they may reduce its impact.
- **Focus** – a dynamic approach to grouping students is likely to help focus effort and improve teaching efficiency.

If you are implementing a phonics program designed by a developer, rather than strategies determined by a teacher, you should be mindful about implementing it the way it is intended so not to reduce its impact.

Box 1: Are some types of phonics teaching better than others?

A distinction is sometimes made between synthetic and analytic phonics. Synthetic phonics is a form of phonics teaching in which sounding-out is used. It teaches children to recognise phonemes discretely and match them to their graphemes, and then the skill of blending the phonemes together into words. The classic example is 'kuh – a – tuh'—'cat'. In analytic phonics, teachers show children how to deduce the common letters and sounds in a set of words which all begin (or, later, end) with the same letter and sound, for example, 'pet', 'park', 'push', and 'pen'. Only a few studies have compared synthetic and analytic phonics, and there is not yet enough evidence to make a confident recommendation to use one approach rather than the other.[9] Many phonics programmes combine both approaches.

4 Teach students to use strategies for developing and monitoring reading comprehension

Evidence summary

Extensive evidence from eight meta-analyses has consistently demonstrated the impact of teaching metacognitive strategies for reading comprehension. These include more studies of older students, but also include studies of five to seven-year-old students.

Reading comprehension can be improved by teaching students specific strategies that they can apply both to monitor and overcome barriers to comprehension.[22,23] A number of different strategies exist and some overlap. These strategies are:

- **Activating prior knowledge** – students think about what they already know about a topic, from reading or other experiences, and try to make links. This helps students to infer and elaborate, fill in missing or incomplete information and use existing mental structures to support recall.
- **Prediction** – students predict what might happen as a text is read. This causes them to pay close attention to the text, which means they can closely monitor their own comprehension.
- **Questioning** – students generate their own questions about a text to check their comprehension.
- **Clarifying** – students identify areas of uncertainty, which may be individual words or phrases, and seek information to clarify meaning.
- **Summarising** – students succinctly describe the meaning of sections of the text. This causes students to focus on the key content, which in turn supports comprehension monitoring. This can be attempted using graphic organisers that illustrate concepts and the relationships between them using diagrams.
- **Inference** – students infer the meaning of sentences from their context, and the meaning of words from spelling patterns.

The impact of these approaches is potentially high, although it can be difficult to achieve as they require students taking greater responsibility for their learning. These strategies need to be modelled and practised to ensure that they become embedded in the classroom and students become fluent in their use. For example, a teacher could model how they would attempt to understand a text using questioning.[24] Students should then practise these skills in collaboration with their peers with decreasing support and feedback from their teacher as the students become increasingly effective at using each strategy.

These strategies can be introduced individually, but students should also be taught how to combine strategies. The effectiveness of teaching students to integrate multiple strategies is well-supported by research evidence, and is likely to be more effective than relying on single strategies.[25] Ultimately the aim is for students themselves to take responsibility for automatically using these strategies to monitor and improve their reading comprehension.[26]

5 Teach students to use strategies for planning and monitoring writing

Evidence summary

There is moderate evidence for the impact of teaching planning and monitoring strategies for writing from three meta-analyses, but only a few studies involved five to seven-year-old children.

Writing is a very challenging skill to learn and there is less evidence about the most effective ways to teach writing than there is about reading. Nevertheless, access to effective writing instruction is especially important in an era when many lifelong skills (and standardised tests) depend greatly on writing skill.

Encouraging children to manage and monitor aspects of their writing is a key step. A number of different strategies are likely to help, depending on the current skills of the writer.[27]

- **Prewriting activities** – engaging children in activities prior to writing that help them think of and organise their ideas. This can involve tasks that encourage them to remember what they already know, find out about a topic they are not familiar with, or arrange their ideas visually (for example, by using a planning tool or graphic organiser) before writing.[28]
- **Drafting, revising, and editing** – helping students to get their ideas written down as a first draft which they can then edit and revise.
- **Sharing** – instructing students to share, read, and edit each other's work.

Children need to be introduced to, then practise, these skills with feedback from the teacher and from their peers. The aim is for them to increase the fluency of these skills and techniques so that they become automatic. The teacher needs to provide appropriate initial support that is gradually reduced so the child is ultimately capable of completing the activity independently.

Students also need to learn about text structure, and how texts in different genres are formed. Studies show young children benefit from explicit teaching and expository texts.[29] Providing students with models of simple structures for different types of text can support this.

Modelling is also important as students' progress from constructing simple sentences to being able to combine sentences with more complex grammatical structures. Teachers could model these processes, for example, by explicitly demonstrating how to combine several related, simple sentences to make more complex ones. Teachers need to encourage students to do this on their own as they write.[30]

6 Promote fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and effective practice and explicitly teaching spelling

Evidence summary

The evidence regarding physical writing skills is limited, and based on reviews and single studies. Fewer studies have been conducted regarding teaching transcription skills than other aspects of literacy.

Writing is a physical task as well as an intellectual one. 'Transcription' refers to the physical skills involved in writing and the skill of spelling words correctly. Students must learn to form letters and spell words correctly, write in joined-up handwriting, and use a keyboard.

Accurate letter formation is an essential early skill that forms the basis of a fluent handwriting style. Students should have regular practice of forming letters correctly, and should be moving on to forming joined-up handwriting.

It is necessary that children achieve sufficient fluency in transcription skills so that they become automatic. Automaticity is achieved, when children do not have to concentrate on transcription to ensure accuracy and are able to write or type texts at speed. If students do not have sufficient fluency, they will have to concentrate on monitoring their handwriting and spelling and will be less able to think about the content of their writing.[31]

There appears to be no quick way to develop these essential skills other than through regular and substantial practice. Practice should be:

- **Extensive** – a large amount of regular practice is required for students to achieve fluency in these skills. Achieving the necessary quantity of practice requires students to be motivated and fully engaged in improving their writing.[32]
- **Supported by effective feedback** – teachers can support children to practise effectively by providing opportunities for effective feedback.[33] Feedback should:
  - i) be specific, accurate, and clear (for example: 'It was good because you joined up your letters correctly' rather than 'Your handwriting is getting neater');
  - ii) compare what a student is doing right now with what they have done wrong before (for example: 'I can see you focused on making sure you crossed your "t"s, as you remembered more often than last time');
  - iii) encourage and support further effort;
  - iv) be given sparingly so that it is meaningful; and
  - v) provide specific guidance on how to improve rather than just telling students when they are incorrect (for example: 'Next time, you should make sure that all of your "t"s are crossed. This is where you put the cross').

Accurate spelling is a key component of writing fluency and should be explicitly taught rather than simply tested.[34] However, there is relatively little robust evidence about what constitutes effective approaches to teaching spelling. Some approaches do have some evidence to support them, especially when evaluated on the basis of improvements to the spelling of individual words. It is less clear which approaches lead to better spelling in the context of students' composition of full texts.[35] The teaching of spelling is likely to work best when the spellings are related to the current content being studied in school and when teachers encourage active use of any new spellings in students' writing.

There is some evidence to suggest that teaching word patterns may help with spelling.[36,37] Teachers could talk about morphemes (prefixes and suffixes, and root words) and show how these recur in different words. It may be that by being able to, for example, understand that the 'un-' prefix in 'unlike' has the same spelling and meaning as in 'unusual', 'unhappy' and 'unpleasant', students can see that they can break words into smaller parts, many of which they already know from other words. Other promising approaches include paired learning approaches and the use of techniques such as 'look-cover-write-check' (see box 2).[38,39]

Box 2: Look-say-cover-write-say-check

Ask the children to:

1. Look carefully at the word structure, shape, and form (or the salient orthographic, morphological, and structural features).
2. Say the word out loud. Focus on grapheme-phoneme relationships within the word. Exaggerate the pronunciation of the word to highlight correct spelling (for example, 'choc-O-late' or 'sep-AR-ate').
3. Cover the word.
4. Try to remember or picture the spelling, and write the word.
5. Say the written word out loud to check that it matches the sound and recall the structure, shape and form.
6. Uncover the word and check that the spelling is correct.

In the absence of better evidence regarding the teaching of spelling, teachers should be aware of the other strategies that good spellers appear to use, and consider teaching these strategies directly.[40]

These include:

- a phonic approach – sounding out the word, and spelling it the way it sounds;
- analogy – spelling it like other known words (for example 'call' and 'fall');
- the identification of the 'tricky' parts of words so that these can be learned (such as 'separate' and 'miniature') – many of the most common words in English are 'tricky' (also known as 'common exception words'); and
- a visual approach – writing the word in two or three different ways and deciding which looks right.

7 Use high-quality information about students' current capabilities to select the best next steps for teaching

Evidence summary

This recommendation is supported by moderate evidence from several reviews and intervention studies where an accurate baseline test is given to ensure the intervention is appropriate.

As students develop their literacy skills, teaching should respond to their changing needs. This requires teachers to collect accurate and up-to-date information (see box 3) about a student's current capabilities so that they can adapt their teaching to focus on exactly what each student needs to progress. Teaching that adapts to students' needs is more efficient, because effort is focused on the best next step, and is not wasted by rehearsing skills of content that a child already knows well. This approach can be used to identify appropriate catch up support for students struggling with literacy and can also be used to ensure that high-attaining students continue to make good progress.

Once a teacher has identified a student's needs, teaching can be adapted by:

1. **changing the focus** – targeting an aspect of literacy where a student needs more support; or
2. **changing the approach** – adopting a different approach to teaching the same aspect of literacy.

Box 3: Collecting high-quality information: effective use of assessment

A range of diagnostic tests and assessments for reading and writing is available and staff should be trained to use and interpret these effectively.[41] The results should be used to supplement, not replace, professional judgement about a child's current capabilities.

A helpful distinction can be made between using assessment to *monitor* a student's progress and using it to *diagnose* a student's specific capabilities and difficulties. Both are important. Monitoring can be used to identify students who are struggling, or whose progress can be accelerated, and diagnostic assessments can suggest the type of support they need from the teacher to continue to progress. When an assessment suggests that a child is struggling, effective diagnosis of the exact nature of their difficulty should be the first step and should inform early and targeted intervention (see Recommendation 8).[42]

Every assessment involves trade-offs, such as between the time taken to complete an assessment and its validity and reliability. Consequently, it is crucial to consider what data you hope to collect before selecting an appropriate assessment. For example, scores out of 10 on a weekly spelling test may be valid for the purpose of identifying students most in need of extra spelling support (monitoring), but the scores alone would not be valid for the purpose of informing future teaching (diagnosis) where an analysis of the *kinds* of mistakes a child makes in spelling should inform specific teaching strategies.

Changing the focus of teaching

Models of typical literacy development can provide useful tools to support teachers in selecting a particular aspect of literacy to focus on. For example, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) can be used as a framework for diagnosing students' weaknesses in reading, and suggest an appropriate next step for teaching.[43] According to the SVR, reading consists of two interacting dimensions: decoding (the ability to recognise, understand and pronounce individual words) and comprehension (the ability to understand the form and meaning of language). Proficient readers are skilled in both dimensions, while readers that are currently weaker may struggle with one or both. The four possible reading profiles are summarised in Figure 2.*

The principle of using such a model to identify a student's relative strengths and weaknesses can be applied more broadly. A similar model of writing development distinguishes between transcription (handwriting, spelling, and keyboard) skills and composition skills (composing a text that effectively suits its purpose and conveys meaning).[34]

Ultimately, the goal is fluency in these skills and integration of all dimensions of reading and writing, but in the short term it is critical to identify need and teach accordingly.

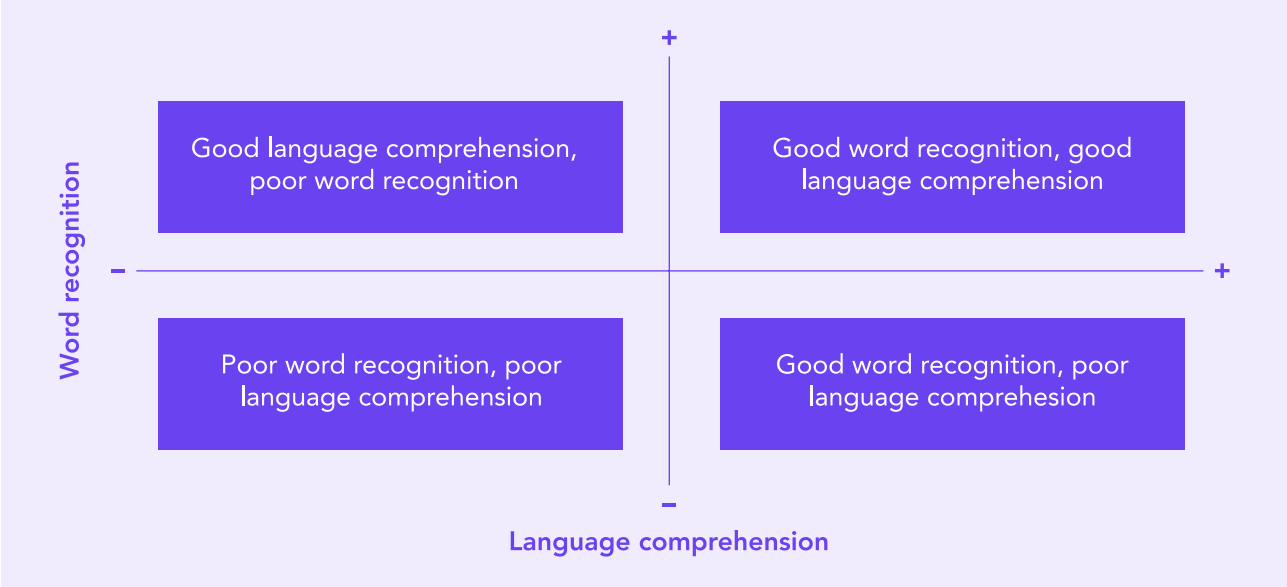

Figure 2: The Simple View of Reading

* It is important to remember that the SVR is a simplified and incomplete model that does not completely describe the complex process of reading development. However, it provides a useful starting point when considering how to support students to improve.

Changing the teaching approach

It may be that a student does not need more instruction on a particular aspect of their literacy, but instead they require a different approach. In this case the student may have become disengaged, or may be finding activities too hard or too easy. Re-engaging a student in their learning could require using an approach that is better suited to the student's interests, such as introducing an alternative text with a more relatable theme.

Where activities are found to be too challenging then scaffolding provides a useful analogy. In construction, scaffolding provides temporary, adjustable support enabling tasks that would not otherwise be possible. In education, scaffolding is a term that is used regularly, but its meaning is often conflated with 'differentiation', 'help' and 'support'[44,45]. Scaffolding has a precise meaning: it describes how someone who is more expert (an adult or peer) can provide structured help when a student is learning a new skill. There are many different frameworks for scaffolding, but they typically share three characteristics[46]:

- **Responsiveness to need** – scaffolding requires high quality information about students' current capabilities so that support can be appropriately tailored.
- **Gradual withdrawal of support as students' capabilities develop** – the rate of gradual withdrawal depends on the needs of the individual student and it can be done by reducing the amount and/or level of support.
- **Transfer of responsibility** – the responsibility for the skill should increasingly transfer from the teacher to the student over time.

A key principle of scaffolding is that one should aim to provide the minimum level of support that is needed. The level of support should gradually decrease in response to students becoming increasingly independent to avoid students failing to manage their own learning and becoming over-dependent.

8 Use high-quality structured interventions to help students who are struggling with their literacy

Evidence summary

There is extensive and consistent evidence from at least six meta-analyses and reviews, including studies involving students aged five to seven of the impact of structured interventions and intensive one-to-one support.

Schools should focus first on developing core classroom teaching strategies which improve the literacy capabilities of the whole class. With this in place, the need for additional support should decrease. Nevertheless, it is likely that a small number of students will require additional support – in the form of high-quality, structured, targeted interventions – to make progress.[47]

Identifying students who are struggling with their literacy is the first step (see Recommendation 7). Diagnostic assessments** should then be used to understand the specific nature of the student's difficulty and match them to an appropriate intervention or to plan targeted support.[42]

Targeted interventions involve a teacher, teaching assistant or other adult providing intensive individual or small-group support. This may take place outside of normal lessons as additional teaching, or as a replacement for other lessons. If students are withdrawn from normal classroom activity it is important that the alternative support is more effective than the teaching, they would normally receive. If the alternative support is not more effective, it is possible for students to fall even further behind as children left in their class will continue to make progress. It is also important that students do not miss activities that they enjoy, and that a plan is in place to ensure the student can make links between their learning in intervention sessions and their work back in the classroom.

Box 4: One-to-one or small group?[48,49]

On average, the smaller the group, the greater the impact: groups of two have slightly higher impact than groups of three, but slightly lower impact compared to one-to-one tuition. Some studies suggest that increased feedback from the teacher, more sustained engagement in smaller groups, or work which is more closely matched to students' needs explains this impact. Once group size increases above six or seven there is a noticeable reduction in effectiveness.

Although this is generally true, there is evidence that it is not always the case. For example, in reading, small-group teaching can sometimes be more effective than either one-to-one or paired tuition. It may be that in these cases reading practice has been efficiently organised so that all the group stays fully engaged as each take their turn, such as in Guided Reading. This variability in findings suggests that the quality of the teaching in small groups may be as or more important than group size.

**Refer to the glossary for the definition of diagnostic assessments as it relates to this Guidance Report.

At present there are only a handful of catch-up programs in Australia for which there is good evidence of effectiveness.[47,48,50] The following common elements are features of effective targeted interventions. If your school is using or considering programs that have not been rigorously evaluated, you should ensure that they include these features[50]:

- brief (15-45 minutes) and regular (3–5 times per week) sessions maintained over a sustained period (8–20 weeks) and carefully timetabled to enable consistent delivery;
- extensive training (5–30 hours) from experienced trainers and/or teachers;
- structured supporting resources and lesson plans with clear objectives
- assessments to identify appropriate students, guide areas for focus, and track student progress – effective interventions ensure the right support is being provided to the right child;
- tuition that is additional to, and explicitly linked with, normal lessons;
- connections are made between the out-of-class (intervention) learning and classroom teaching.

Box 5: Who should deliver catch-up interventions?

The evidence suggests that interventions delivered by Teaching Assistants (TAs) can have a positive impact on attainment, but on average this impact is lower than when delivered by a teacher.[50] Crucially, these positive effects *only* occur when TAs work in structured settings with high-quality support and training. When TAs are deployed in more informal, unsupported instructional roles, they can impact *negatively* on students' learning outcomes. In other words, what matters most is not whether TAs are delivering interventions, but how they are doing so. In this context, structured evidence-based programs provide an excellent means of aiding high-quality delivery.

Evidence for Learning's Guidance Report 'Making best use of Teaching Assistants' provides further guidance regarding the deployment of TAs.[50]

Acting on the evidence

There are several key principles to consider when acting on this guidance.

1. It is important to consider the delicate balance between implementing the recommendations faithfully and adapting them appropriately to your school's context. Some carefully considered adaptation may be necessary, however it is important not to take this too far as it could decrease the impact of the approach.
2. The recommendations should be considered together, as a group, and should not be implemented selectively. For example, although a structured phonics program is an integral part of strong early literacy teaching, it should be combined with the other important aspects of a broad and integrated approach to teaching reading.
3. It is important to consider the precise detail provided beneath the headline recommendations. For example, schools should not use Recommendation 8 to justify the purchase of lots of interventions. Rather, it should provoke thought about the most appropriate interventions to implement.

Inevitably, change takes time, and we recommend taking at least two terms to plan, develop, and pilot strategies on a small scale at first before rolling out new practices across the school. Gather support for change across the school and set aside regular time throughout the year to focus on this project and review progress.

Evidence for Learning has produced 'Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation'[51], a Guidance Report which could be used as a guide as you make changes. Figure 3 provides an overview of the implementation process which schools can apply to any implementation challenge.

The stages of implementation

Foundations for good implementation

- ✓ Treat implementation as a process, not an event. Plan and execute it in stages.
- ✓ Create a leadership environment and school climate that is conducive to good implementation.

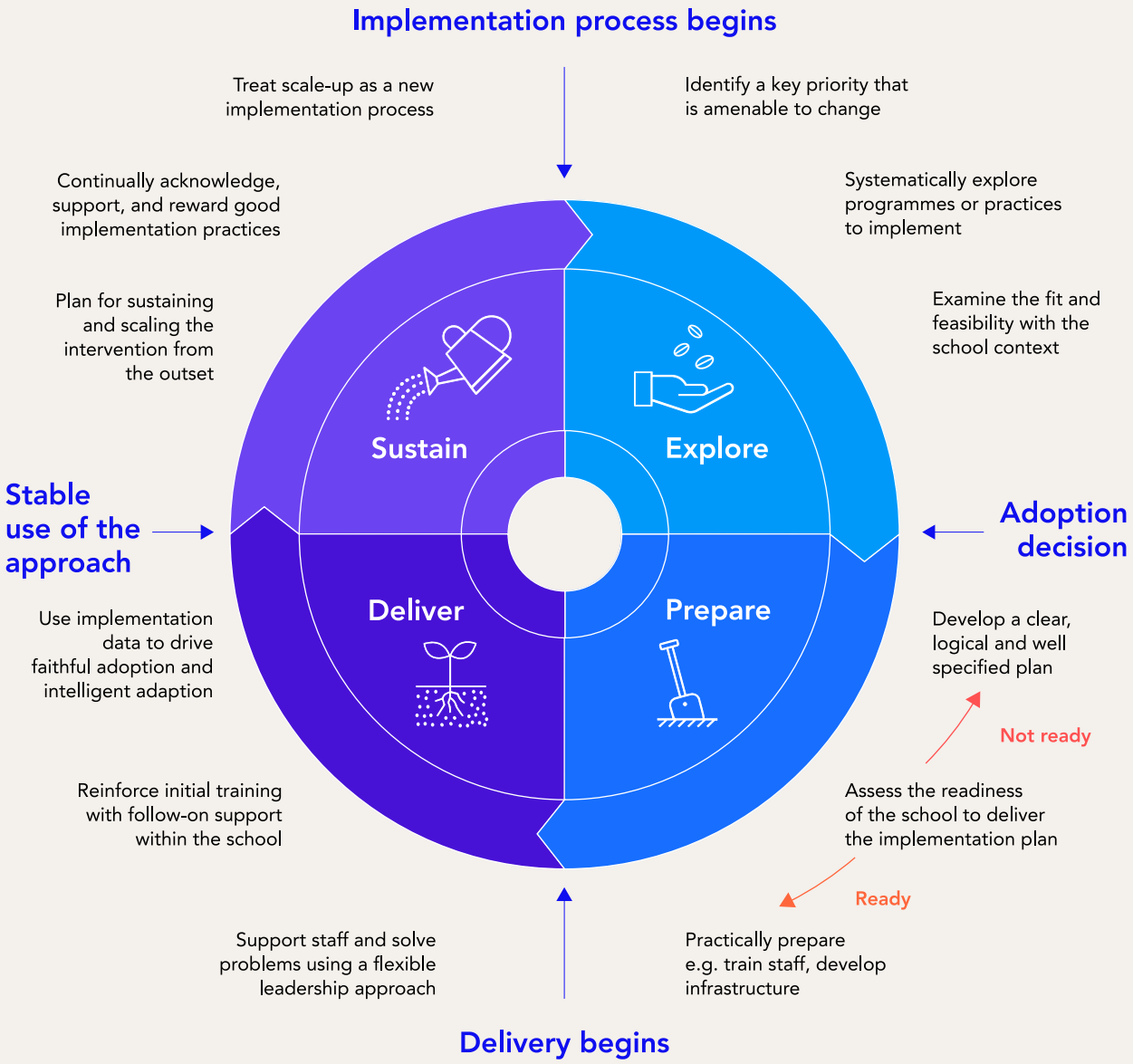

Figure 3: The foundations and stages of implementation

How was this guide compiled?

This Guidance Report draws on the best currently available evidence regarding the teaching of literacy to primary-aged students. The primary source of evidence for the recommendations is the Teaching & Learning Toolkit[2] which is a synthesis of international research. However, the report also draws on a wide range of evidence from other studies and reviews regarding literacy development and teaching. The emphasis is on rigorous evaluations that provide reliable evidence of an impact on students' learning outcomes. The intention is to provide a reliable foundation of what is effective, based on robust evidence.

The report was developed over several stages. The initial stage produced a scoping document that set out the headline recommendations and supporting evidence. This was subjected to an academic peer review. The feedback from this review informed the writing of a final draft of the report, a second external review was then undertaken by a group of academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders.

An **evidence rating** which represents the authors' judgement regarding the strength of the evidence base is provided for each recommendation. The authors considered three features of the evidence when creating the ratings:

1. **quality and quantity** – recommendations that were based on a large number of high-quality studies such as meta-analyses or randomised controlled trials received higher ratings;
2. **consistency** – recommendations that were based on relatively consistent evidence received higher ratings; and
3. **directness** – recommendations based on evidence that directly related to students aged five to seven received stronger ratings (in some cases recommendations received weaker ratings because it was necessary to extrapolate from research on slightly older children).

Further reading

The Australian Curriculum General Capability: Literacy aims to ensure that 'students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. Literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.' The website contains resources for school leaders and teachers that will assist in the implementation of the recommendations outlined in the Guidance Report.

australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/

Evidence for Learning has published a Guidance Report on 'Metacognition and self-regulated learning' which may be useful when thinking about Recommendation 4 and Recommendation 5. In addition, the Guidance Report 'Making best use of Teaching Assistants' may be helpful in supporting Recommendation 8.

Glossary

Analytic phonics	Analytic phonics involves the analysis of whole words to detect sound or spelling patterns, then splitting them into smaller parts and sounding these out to help with the decoding process. For a word like 'thrill', in analytic phonics one would encourage the break as onset and rime 'thr – ill' and get the child to sound this out (thruh – ill). One might also encourage a student to identify other words they know which start with this sound such as 'three, throw, threw.'
Diagnostic assessment	An assessment that aims to identify a student's current strengths and weaknesses to determine the most helpful teaching strategies and content to move the students' learning forwards. It can be distinguished from tracking or monitoring where the aim is just to check progress. Diagnostic assessment aims to make teaching more efficient.
Decoding skills	The ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language.
Etymology	The study of the origins and history of words and the way in which their meanings have changed. The etymology of 'phonics', for example, is from the Greek phone meaning voice. It was originally used in the 17th Century to mean the science of sound, but has now come to mean an approach to teaching reading.
Expository text	A non-fiction text that aims to inform a reader about a specific topic.
Expressive vocabulary	The words that a student can express through speaking or writing.
Grapheme	A letter or combination of letters used to represent a phoneme, for example, in the word 'push', the graphemes <p>, <u>, <sh> represent the phonemes /p/ ʊ/ /ʃ/ to make the work 'push' and phonetically /pʊʃ/.
Inference	Using information from a text in order to arrive at another piece of information that is implicit.
Meta-analysis	A particular type of systematic research review which focuses on the quantitative evidence from different studies and combines these statistically to seek a more reliable or more robust conclusion than can be drawn from separate studies.
Morphemes	The smallest units of words that contain meaning, such as the 'root' word 'child' and the affix '-ish', which in combination make a new word 'childish'.
Morphology	The form and meaning of a language; the study of the smallest units of words that contain meaning.
Onset-rime	The onset of a word is the part of a syllable that precedes the vowel of the syllable. The rime is the final part of a word, including the vowel and the other phonemes that follow it.
Orthography	The rules for writing a language, including spelling, punctuation and capitalisation.
Phoneme	A phoneme is a speech sound. It is the smallest unit of spoken language that distinguishes one word (or word part) from another. For example, 't' and 'p' in tip and dip. Phonemes are represented with a range of symbols as most letters can be pronounced in different ways.
Phonemic awareness	The ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, and the understanding that spoken words and syllables are made up of sequences of speech sounds. Phonemic awareness involves hearing language at the phoneme level.
Phonics	An approach to teaching reading that focuses on the sounds represented by letters in words (see also 'analytic' and 'synthetic' phonics).
Reading comprehension	The ability to understand the meaning of a text.
Receptive vocabulary	The words that can be understood by a person when they are reading or listening.
Reliable assessments	Assessments which are consistent and would produce the same results when repeated. If two teachers give different marks for a piece of writing, then their assessment is not reliable.
Segmentation	The separation of words into parts, usually into phonemes or morphemes.
Semantics	The part of language (or linguistics) and logic concerned with meaning; two main areas cover the logic of language, such as sense or reference or presupposition or implication, and lexical semantics, concerned with the analysis of word meanings and relations between them.
Syntax	The rules and principles for how words are combined and organised into phrases and sentences.
Synthetic phonics	A form of phonics teaching in which sounding-out is used. It teaches children to recognise phonemes discretely and match them to their graphemes, and then the skill of blending the phonemes together into words. The classic example is 'kuh – a – tuh'—'cat'.
Systematic phonics	The teaching of letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequenced fashion, as opposed to incidentally or on a 'when-needed' basis. May refer to systematic synthetic or systematic analytic phonics.
Valid assessments	Valid assessments measure what the assessment is supposed to measure.

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