

Developing literacy intervention for older students struggling with literacy: How does research inform our choices and decisions?

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Introduction

Most research into literacy difficulties and literacy intervention focuses on early intervention when there is the greatest opportunity to close the gap between normal and slower progression in literacy development. Sequential and systematic approaches for younger children are often effective because new learning behaviours are established before less helpful responses are practised and embedded. Older students tend to have varied profiles of needs for support. Either they have specific needs often related to a deficit in one area of literacy which can be addressed with a targeted programme or they have more complex and individual profiles of helpful and less helpful knowledge and skills.

The former group are usually known to the SENDCo and diagnostic assessment is used to determine the nature of support with regular monitoring of impact on the student's learning and frequent adjustment of instruction based on further assessment. Often, such students also receive support from external agencies including speech and language specialists and educational psychologists. The group of students with uneven profiles of literacy difficulties are often less able to access support because on the surface, they seem to manage in class and have often developed coping strategies which mask their difficulties. Although it is difficult to address the needs of older students, it is also possible to make a difference if they are identified and supported early in transition to secondary school, rather than waiting until the later examination preparation stage when students have had an even longer period to embed unhelpful approaches to learning. The attainment gap may not be closed but students can develop stronger literacy skills which are necessary for learning in all areas of the curriculum.

There are groups of *consistent* low attainers across the Key Stages, including: boys, pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), some ethnic minority groups, pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL), pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), pupils with high rates of mobility between schools, and Looked After Children (LAC). These characteristics often interact and place a pupil at increased likelihood of under-achievement. Low attainment is often due to complex interactions of a variety of social/demographic factors.

The following sections point to research in some relevant areas informing the development of GROW@KS3 - a response to intervention at the point of transition. GROW@KS3 arises from a theory that suggests the causes of difficulty are multiple, they differ from student to student, and each student has a different profile of strengths and weaknesses. GROW@KS3 is most helpful for students with an uneven profile of literacy knowledge and uses reciprocity between reading, writing and language use to strengthen literacy skills based on the needs of individuals or groups with similar profiles.

Relevance of the type of intervention

- There have been decades of research about (a) the nature of literacy difficulties and (b) development of interventions (Compton et al., 2014) but many interventions do not result in transfer from 'laboratory' to the classroom. Adolescents who have already

gone through years of reading instruction and still lag behind their same age peers are a very heterogeneous group in their reading abilities (Calhoun and Petscher, 2013).

- Significant gains in key literacy skill development have been hard-earned for struggling adolescent and particularly adult learners (Alamprese, MacArthur, Price, & Knight, 2011; Calhoun, 2005; Calhoun, Sandow, & Hunter, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2011; Sabatini, Shore, Holtzman, & Scarborough, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2010, 2011, 2012). This difficulty, to find robust responses to intervention, may not be surprising in view of the atypical educational histories of older learners and the heterogeneity of their backgrounds and skill deficits (Calhoun, Scarborough and Miller, 2013).
- Intervention programmes often target knowledge structures that fail to foster reading skill development that is “generative” in children with reading difficulties (Compton et al., 2014, p.57). Some interventions fail to account for how children think or learn.
- Effective teaching approaches for low attainers include: early intervention, one to one and/or small group support and personalisation (Brooks, 2002).
- Programmes designed to change daily teaching practices and with cooperative learning at their core are the most effective (Slavin et al 2008).
- There are fewer interventions to help pupils struggling with reading in secondary education in comparison to a wide range of interventions designed to help primary pupils (Brooks 2002, 2007).
- Modality of teaching can matter considerably for older struggling readers – building from decoding to spelling, fluency and comprehension was most effective in reading intervention (Calhoun and Petscher, 2013).
- Although one-to-one literacy programmes for the secondary age group have not been widely employed, three key features of successful programmes have been identified: monitoring and evaluation of the quality of instruction; planning and structuring of the tutoring session; and tutor training (Houge et al., 2008).
- Whole school approaches can produce substantial improvements in academic outcomes (Sharples et al., 2011). Intervention needs to be planned into provision, well-communicated and integrated into wider practice.
- Interventions longer than one term may produce proportionally further benefits but the gains need to be carefully monitored. Good impact – sufficient to at least double the standard rate of progress – can be achieved, and it is reasonable to expect it from an intervention (Brooks, 2007).

The significance of points of transition

- Changes are present in students’ thoughts and views about their own learning during the last years of primary education and the first years of secondary education. Where change occurs, it is primarily a negative trend: avoidance orientation increases significantly when development orientation decreases. Boys develop a more negative conception towards school and learning than do girls. Deep processing activities, which focus on metacognitive skills, decrease from as early as one year before students leave primary education, when they are 11 years old, and continue to decrease until the end of the second school year of secondary education, when they are 14 years old. It is possible that the conceptions that students in the last years of



primary education use to regulate their learning processes are not in line with how teachers in secondary education exert control on the learning processes in secondary school learning environments. (Robbers et al., 2017).

- In their longitudinal study, Anderman and Anderman (1999) found that personal mastery goals decreased as students made the transition from elementary to middle school. However, this study shows that the negative development around motivation already starts in the period between the last two years of primary education.
- Students' learning is particularly vulnerable at the point of transition to secondary school. It is associated with a shift from intrinsic to more extrinsic motivation for academic achievement and attitudinal shifts away from academic achievement (Braund, 2009). Significant factors in addressing difficulties are teacher-student relationships, high expectations, secure and well-managed environments.
- A number of protective factors have been implicated in helping typically developing children to adjust at transition. Individual factors including temperament/social skills, self-esteem and coping appraisals/strategies (Causey and Dubow, 1994; Lord *et al.*, 1994; Sirsch, 2003; West *et al.*, 2010) have been found to be important. Additionally, support at the family level has been consistently found to impact on children's psychosocial adjustment across the transition from primary to high school (Roderick, 2003; Levitt *et al.*, 2005) and peer support has also been recognised as a protective factor or 'a buffer' at transition by helping people to cope with stress and protecting their emotional well-being.

Focuses for teaching and learning

- Secondary school age pupils' literacy problems can be effectively targeted by direct, explicit and systematic fluency, vocabulary and comprehension instruction in one-to-one situations (Houge et al., 2008)
- To address vocabulary and fluency deficits, pupils must increase the range and amount of personal reading (Tunmer, 2008).
- Reading fluency can be linked with reading aloud and so considered an early skill which loses relevance as students become able to read silently. However fluency is related to both reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency in both silent and oral reading (*ibid*). Fluency practice is most effective when it is oral rather than silent, involves more than two readings and when it receives feedback (Reutzel, 2006).
- Fluency is a critical element for many older pupils with reading difficulties, since it is necessary for comprehension though it can be hard to influence through intervention. Nevertheless, evaluations of fluency interventions have reported moderate to large effect sizes on speed of reading (although improved comprehension did not always result from improved fluency) (Wexler et al., 2007).
- Poor comprehenders have difficulty with reading comprehension despite having good word reading skills and no apparent language or cognitive problems (Oakhill, Cain and Elbro, 2015). Good word recognition skills may mask comprehension difficulties in the classroom (Nation & Angell, 2006).

- Individual differences in monitoring one's own comprehension during reading, significantly affects comprehension. (Oakhill, Cain and Bryant, 2003). Not noticing inconsistencies might mean that the reader isn't building a sufficiently effective mental model of the text.
- Quality peer-to-peer and teacher-pupil interaction can help pupils transfer understanding of reading texts into their writing and develop a metalanguage to apply to their own writing Corden (2000). A series of research projects into the benefits of peer observation of writing (Couzijn [1999]; Rijlaarsdam and Braaksma [2004]) showed that giving children opportunities to shift roles from writer to reader improved writing.
- There is no evidence yet on an effective writing intervention (Brooks 2007). Talk can extend the capacity of working memory for writing (Latham.2002). For children concentrating on the secretarial aspects of writing, the demands on working memory may significantly hamper their ability to compose continuous prose. Talk and collaborative work can link composition to the long-term memory store (i.e. linking to meaningful experience) rendering the working memory more efficient.
- Van den Bergh and Rijlaarsdam (2001) researched the writing of 15 year olds as they wrote an argument. They found that children who produced different quality of writing had different writing processes and the best writers had the highest scores for understanding what the task meant and high scores for generating ideas.
- There is little evidence to indicate that the teaching of formal grammar is effective and teaching sentence-combining has a more positive effect. Sentence-combining /manipulation of syntax enlarges the writer's repertoire and gives more choice during writing – writing quality and accuracy (Andrews et al, 2005).
- There is robust statistical evidence for teaching of grammar within the context of writing (Myhill, 2012).

Metacognition, feedback and developing self-regulation

- The role of feedback from the student to the teacher and from the teacher to the student is important and has high effect sizes in a meta-analysis of research studies into teaching and learning. (Hattie, 2009 and Hattie and Timperley, 2007).
- Using feedback to enhance learning involves:
 1. focusing feedback on the task not the learner;
 2. providing elaborated feedback (describing the what, how, why) and presenting elaborated feedback in manageable units (e.g., avoiding cognitive overload);
 3. being specific and clear with feedback messages - keeping feedback as simple as possible but no simpler (based on learner needs and instructional constraints);
 4. reducing uncertainty between performance and goals (i.e., helping the student to see where they are now relative to success on a task);
 5. giving unbiased, objective feedback;
 6. promoting a learning goal orientation via feedback (move focus from performance to the learning, welcome errors); and
 7. providing feedback after learners have attempted a solution (leading to more self-regulation). It may be optimal to use immediate, directive or corrective, scaffolded feedback for low-achieving students, and delayed, facilitative, and verification feedback for high-achieving students (Shute 2008).



- Effective feedback can refocus or redirect attention, developing a closer alignment of effort and activity with the desired outcome (EEF, 2014).
- Talk plays a role in the development of metacognition. Students' ability to 'think about thinking' (metacognition) and to self-regulate their learning is strongly related to their academic success (Hattie, 2009).
- Reflecting, planning and goal setting in collaboration with students can make the purpose and impact of what they are asked to do more explicit. Higher level comprehension can be enhanced by simply asking the student to frame the idea in their own words and respond to questions such as 'why' or 'how did you know that?' (Wolf, Crosson and Resnick, 2006).