

# Reading Strategy - Research Paper



## Why is reading important?

Literacy – put simply, our ability to read and write – is often something that we take for granted, but it is these skills, that may seem entirely innate to most, that define our engagement with the world around us. As early as 3,500 BC, humans have been aware of the potential of literacy to open doors, allowing those who possess these skills to document their lives and learn about people, places and events beyond their own experiences.

Whilst children have been taught to read and write since the Egyptian era, for centuries these skills were restricted to the wealthy and powerful, positioning reading as an aristocratic endeavour. Whilst modern education systems have come to recognise the vital importance of students developing literacy (indeed Ofsted's latest framework emphasises the crucial nature of reading in enabling students to access the whole curriculum and its importance throughout a child's school career), arguably, remnants of this elitist experience of reading endure today.

Despite reading having been recognised as a fundamental feature of education for centuries, the number of students still not meeting expected standards is woeful, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to succeed in reading compared to their peers from more affluent homes. A recent study by GL Assessment (2020) found that 27% of students aged 15 still have a reading age of 12 or below, and those living in deprived areas will typically see far lower reading scores still. Consider the potential impact of these statistics within the context of a secondary classroom; at least 1 in 4 year 10 students would struggle to access the texts teachers deem appropriate for year 7 students. If these pupils are not identified quickly, and supported to address their reading gaps, they are likely to significantly underachieve in their academic progress and attainment throughout their school career, and are equally likely to be impeded throughout their lives. Indeed, the National Literacy Trust estimates that 7.1 million adults in England (16.4%) are functionally illiterate, meaning that they have a reading age of 11 or below. Not only does this restrict their access to the employment market, it also diminishes their ability to support their own children with reading and writing, potentially perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy.

GCSE subject	Correlation
English Language	0.65
Geography	0.65
Maths	0.63
History	0.61
Science Combined	0.61
English Literature	0.60
Drama	0.57
Citizenship	0.56
German	0.55

To many it will be unsurprising that there is a significant correlation between students' reading ability and their academic success. In a study of more than 370,000 secondary school pupils in the UK, GL Assessment found that this correlation was '...just as strong with maths and science as it was in the arts and literacy-rich subjects like English and History.' Arguably then, one could argue that reading is the master skill of secondary education.

Aside from summative academic attainment, reading has been shown to have a positive impact on a plethora of skills and attributes for young people, particularly when students engage in reading for pleasure; that is, reading that is not explicitly or directly linked to academic studies. Clark and Rumbold (2006) identify several main areas of the benefits of reading for pleasure:

- ▲ Reading attainment and writing ability;
- ▲ Text comprehension and grammar;
- ▲ Breadth of vocabulary;

- ▲ Positive reading attitudes;
- ▲ Greater self-confidence as a reader;
- ▲ Pleasure in reading in later life;
- ▲ General knowledge;
- ▲ A better understanding of other cultures;
- ▲ Community participation; and
- ▲ A greater insight into human nature and decision-making.

There is further evidence that suggests reading builds empathy in students and that our brains do not distinguish between experiences we live through and those we read about (Lemov et al, 2016), emphasising the potential of reading to exponentially expand our horizons. Therefore it is a pity that the number of young people engaging in reading for pleasure has been shown to decline during the teenage years and, especially for boys, who are '...more likely than girls to report that they spend *no* time reading for pleasure' (Nippold et al, 2005). This represents a missed opportunity for many students.

What does this mean for secondary school teachers? Alex Quigley (2020) summarises our responsibility to prioritise reading for all, thus: 'For every pupil in our care then, we are beholden to fill their day with the richness of countless books, helping them access a wealth of powerful reading experiences, so that they can be buoyed by the world of imagination and knowledge offered to us by possessing the capability to read successfully.'

### **How can we improve reading at The Spires College?**

The answer to this question is complex. Ultimately, the key to improving reading requires a multifaceted approach. In a report published by The Education Endowment Foundation (Improving Literacy in Secondary Education, 2019), seven recommendations were made:

1. Prioritise 'disciplinary literacy' across the curriculum
2. Provide targeted vocabulary instruction in every subject
3. Develop students' ability to read complex academic texts
4. Break down complex writing tasks
5. Combine writing instruction with reading in every subject
6. Provide opportunities for structured talk
7. Provide high quality literacy interventions for struggling students

Whilst a comprehensive literacy strategy might encompass all seven of these recommendations, we have decided to prioritise those that we feel would have the most significant impact on our students, based on our current pedagogical context. Subsequently, we have devised a three-strand strategy for improving reading at The Spires College:

- ▲ **Targeted reading interventions:** identifying and intervening with students whose reading knowledge and skills fall below that of their peers;
- ▲ **Prioritising academic reading:** promoting the benefits of academic reading within and beyond the classroom, and;
- ▲ **Reading for pleasure:** encouraging our students to read frequently, broadly and for enjoyment.

The challenge of encouraging young people to read is not a new one. However, in a modern, digital landscape with increasing competition for students' attention, this challenge has never been greater. A study of young people in America found that a typical teenager reads outside of school for an average of just four minutes per day during the week, and nine minutes per day at weekends (Bureau of Labor, 2015). If we are to succeed in improving our

students' ability to read, we first need to ensure that they have ample opportunity to engage in reading and with a broad range of literary texts.

For these reasons, we are curating a literary canon, a collection of texts which hold significant value, both in the style of writing and the messages they communicate, that will be delivered to all students in years 7-10 through a guided tutor reading programme.

Please read this report in conjunction with 'The Spires College – Canon and Catalogue'.

### **Why a reading canon and tutor reading programme?**

According to the Department for Education (2018) only 31% of young children are read to daily at home, and 1 in 11 children and young people report not having a book of their own. This figure increases to 1 in 8 children from disadvantaged homes (Clark and Picton, 2018). Our aim is for our canon, tutor reading programme and suggested reading lists to address and mitigate the reading gap created by social inequalities by providing all students with regular access to a broad range of engaging, high-quality and challenging literature.

By beginning each day with an opportunity for quiet, focused reading, our students will enjoy the privilege of hearing teachers breathe life into literature, modelling reading with fluency, pace, accuracy and enthusiasm. Teachers will be able to demonstrate how to tackle challenging, unfamiliar vocabulary and students will benefit from hearing teachers do so, developing students' phonological awareness.

We have already explored the academic and developmental benefits of students engaging in reading through their formative years. However, research suggests that, in particular, participation in *shared* reading experiences is linked to improve concentration, self-esteem and relaxation, as well as creating a shared community and common purpose (Longden et al, 2015). Another advantage of reading together is the democratising influence of collectively accumulated cultural capital which has long been the hallmark of an educated, sophisticated society. Without an understanding of these universal references, young people may be excluded from aspects of our societal practices that rely upon these, as well as experiencing a diminished knowledge of the world around them. One aspect of the value of shared reading is to be able to read and talk about important books told from different perspectives. When students are able to discuss their reading, knowing that other students experienced the same thing, the power of that shared experience is magnified.

By reading together each day, we hope our students will grow in confidence; shared reading allows students to access increasingly challenging texts, enabling them to familiarise themselves with complex vocabulary, imagery, patterns of syntax and ideas. This knowledge can then, with guidance, be transferred and applied to disciplinary literacy, allowing students to adapt their reading strategies and knowledge of language to the demands of each subject.

Our students will access our tutor reading programme from different starting points and we will use rigorous annual reading assessments to monitor this. However, the texts have been chosen to engage our students and we hope that the experience of having entertaining and thought-provoking literature read to them, will ignite a passion for reading in all students. Orthodoxy might claim that reading 'great works of literature' to students with additional needs or low prior attainment is an inappropriate ambition. However, we believe that access to challenging, important texts is a universal right, as are ambition and high expectations of ourselves and others. Lemov et al (2016) argue that, 'Becoming passionate about books and recognising that reading can bring pleasure are *especially* vital for older students who haven't experienced success in school. For many students, reading may have been a point

of frustration in the past. Helping them see what joy and pleasure reading can bring will unlock a barrier to achievement...[Reading] aloud is important in giving them a model for what effective reading looks like, as well as instilling a passion for literature so that students want it for themselves.'

Our ultimate goal is for students and staff at The Spires College to form a reading community, sharing their love of great books.

Why a reading canon and tutor reading programme? As Alex Quigley stated in 2013: 'The 'why' [is] to provide students with the 'cultural currency' too often hidden from their view. To share with them the best of what has been thought, said and written. But mostly ...to give them the power of stories. Giving them a ticket that can transport them into the rich depths of history, through breadths of time, back to the home of their heart. There really is little better I can share with them than the humble book.'

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