



Apex Project & System-Wide Improvement

Eliza Hilton – Head of Education Programme, Fischer Family Foundation



Background: FFT and a progressive case for education data

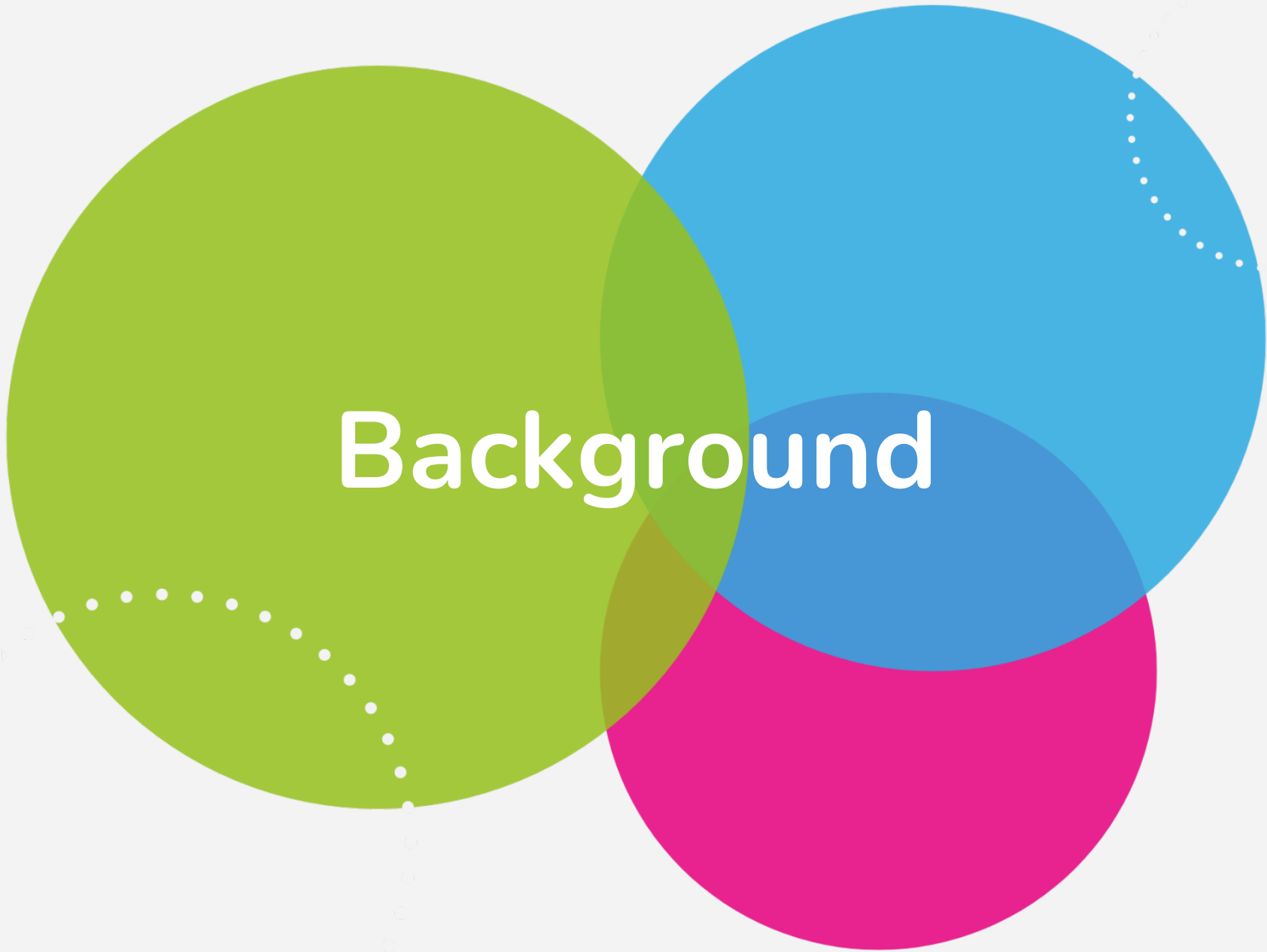
The problem: Literacy and social disadvantage

A potential solution: Apex case study 2021 – 2025

Comparisons: Other 'Breakthrough' schools

Brief conclusions and state of play





Background

fft Education



A not-for-profit organisation

25 years of helping schools



Data

16,000 schools, trusts and local authorities use our data analytics platform



Literacy

1000s of schools use our wide range of literacy programmes

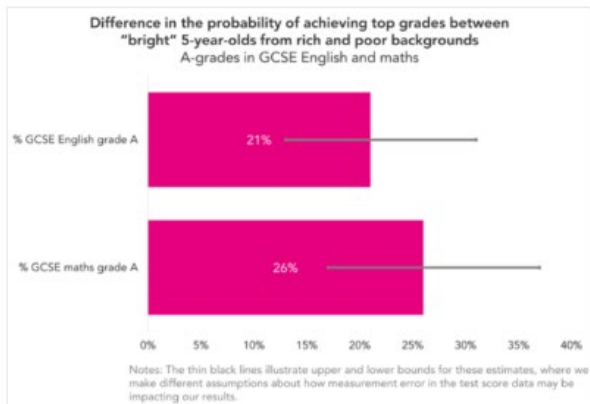


Research

2 million visits to our FFT Education Datalab research blog

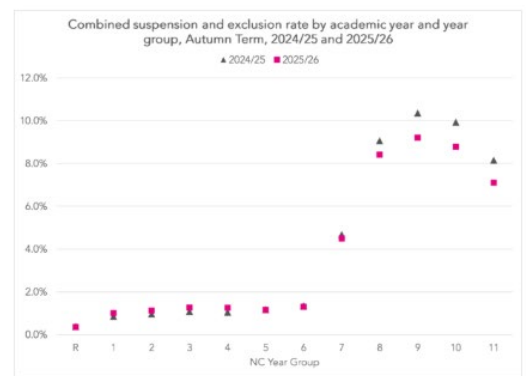


DATA LAKE



10 key findings about the outcomes of initially high-achieving children from disadvantaged backgrounds

By John Jerrim and Maria Palma Carvajal | 2nd April 2026



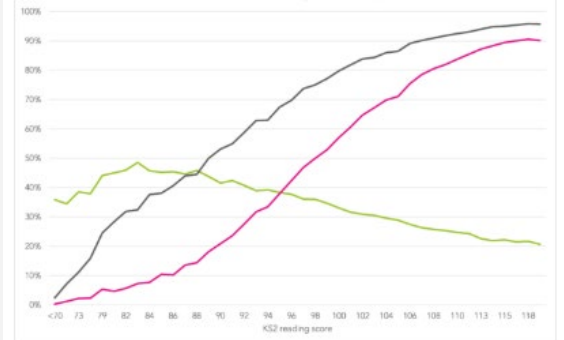
Exclusions and suspensions in Autumn 2025/26

By Dave Thomson | 24th March 2026



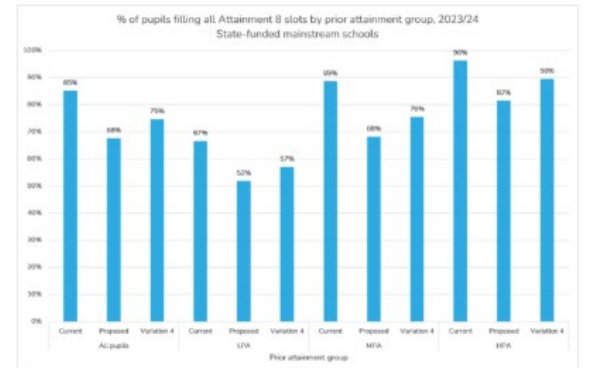
Understanding unauthorised absence

By Katie Beynon | 11th March 2026



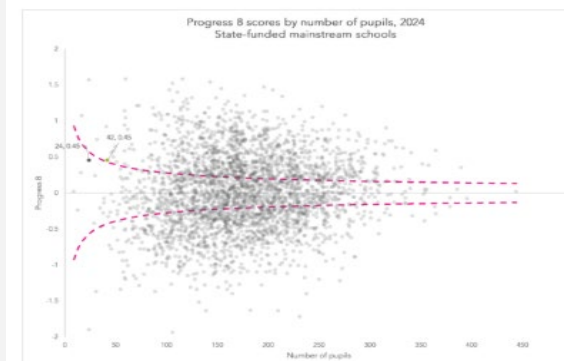
Outcomes for pupils with low reading attainment at Key Stage 2

By Dave Thomson | 19th March 2026



How will qualification entry patterns change as a result of changes to Attainment 8?

By Dave Thomson | 25th March 2026



Are DfE right to ditch confidence intervals?

By Dave Thomson | 25th February 2026



Mike Fischer CBE

- Founder & Chair FFT Education (2001-2026).
- Discovered in 1991 that a third of children entered secondary school unable to read well enough to succeed
- 10 million personal funds into education via Fischer Family Foundation
- Focused on 'early literacy failure' single most important issue in education: Apex.

Commercial:

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Digital
Microbiology

Not-for-Profit:

success for all
FOUNDATION UK

fft education
datalab

Fischer
Family
Foundation

s b l Systems Biology
Laboratory UK

Beginnings: Fischer Data Analysis Project

- **Normalises key concepts such as:**
 - Value-Add
 - Contextual Value-Add
 - 'FSM-Ever'
 - Persistent Disadvantage

Co-Founder – Statistician -
Mike Treadaway OBE



*Data should be used to
raise questions and
unlock potential*

The 'Disadvantage Gap' in England



Source: Education Policy Institute

More than 50% of pupils eligible for free school meals did not achieve 'the basics' (Maths and English level 4) in 2025

Only 36% of boys and 38% of girls who are White British and disadvantaged achieved the basics in 2025



First they said they needed data about the children to find out what they're learning.

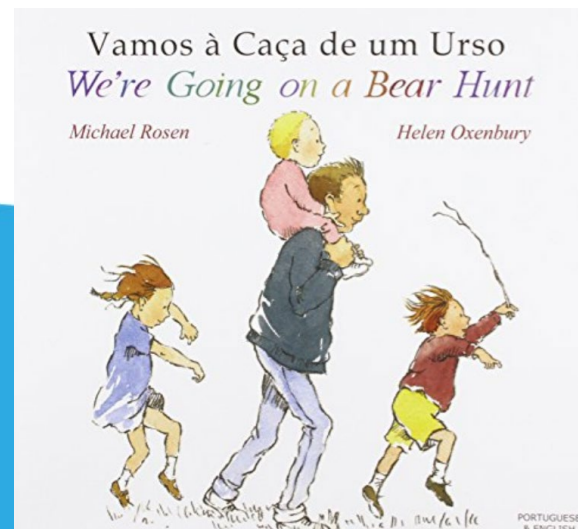
Then they said they needed data about the children to make sure they are learning.

Then the children only learnt what could be turned into data.

Then the children became data.

'The Data Have Landed' (2018)

Michael Rosen, British Children's Author and Poet

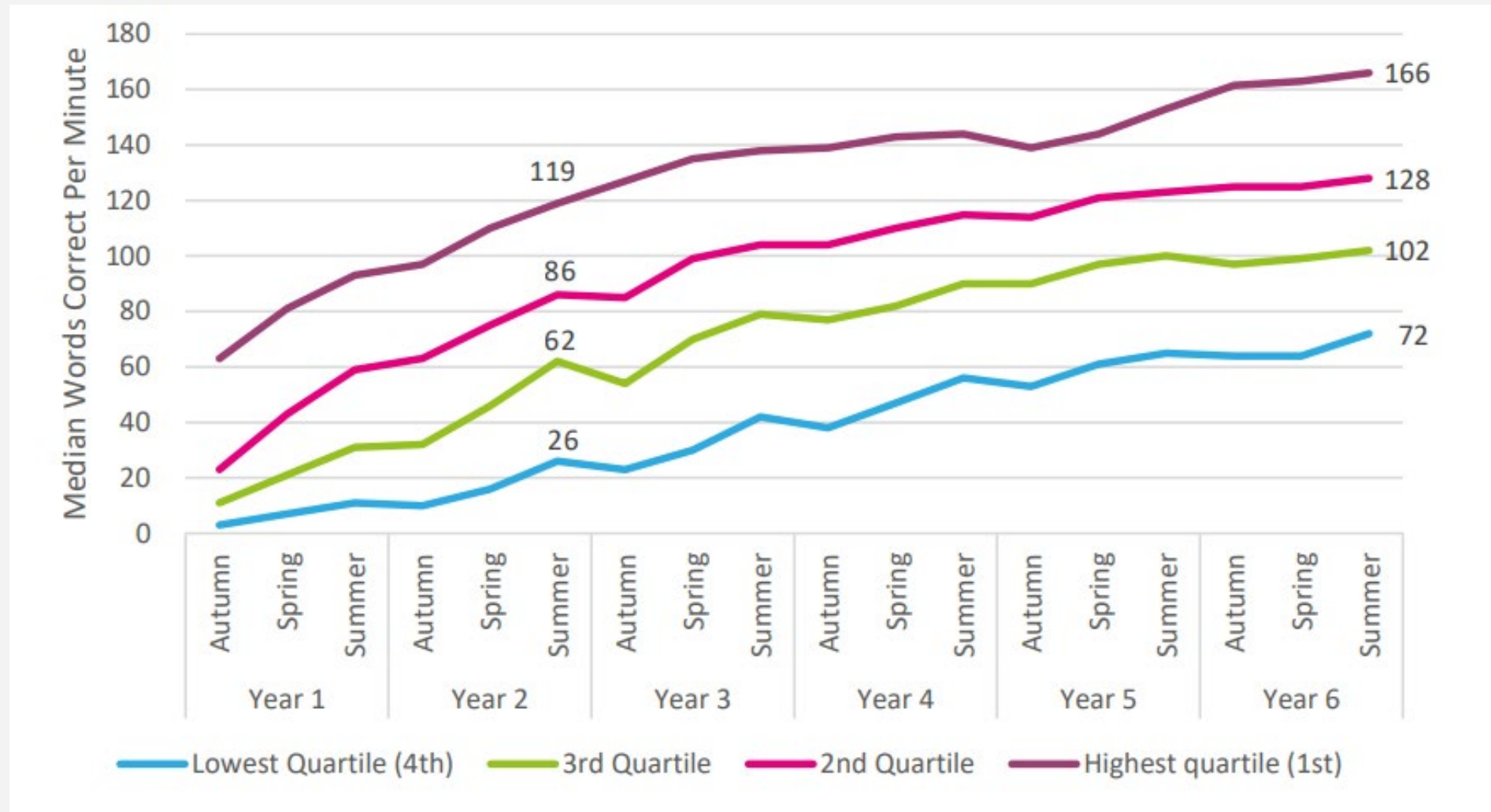


We need to make a compassionate, learner centric case for data!

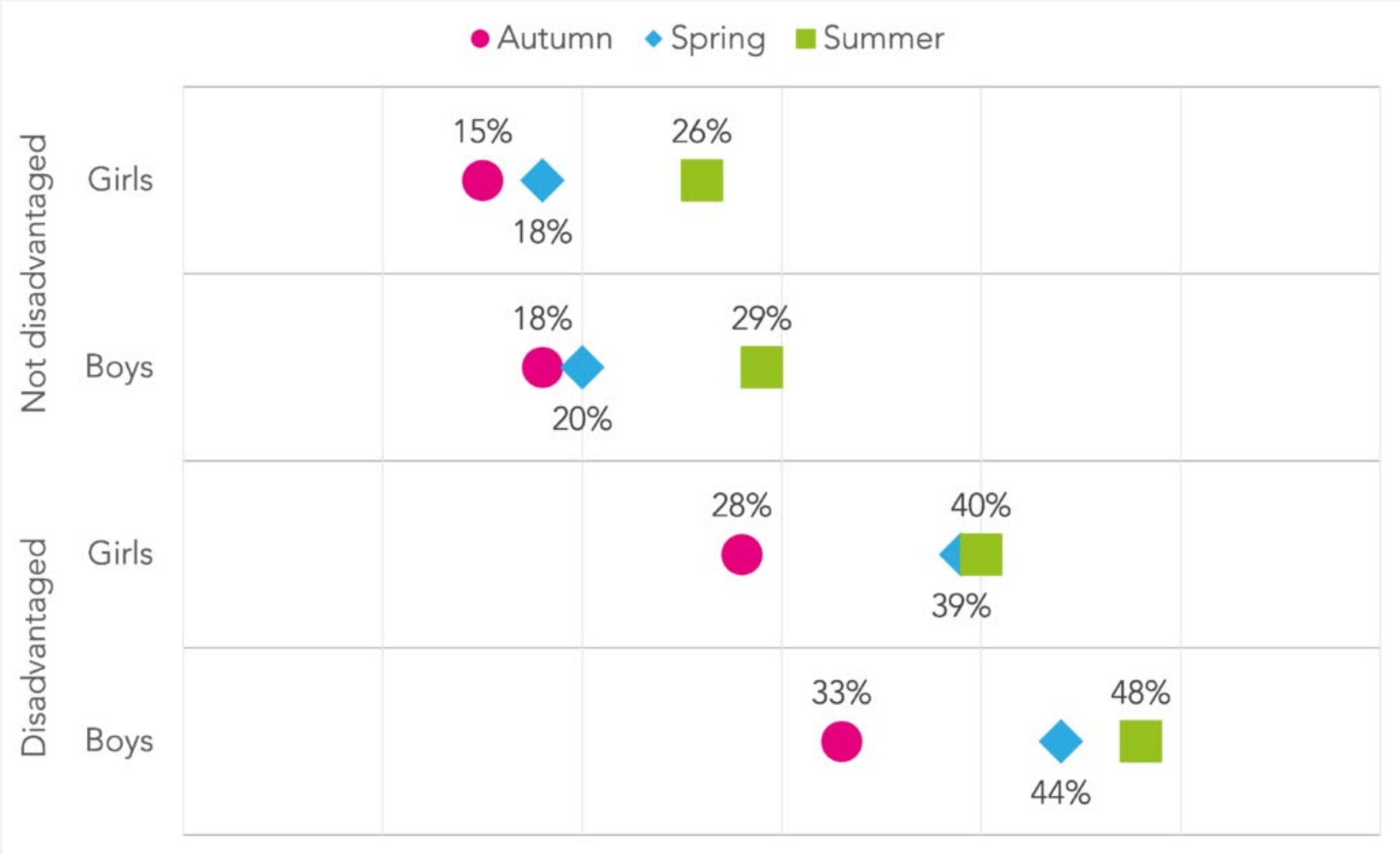
The image features three overlapping circles: a green one on the left, a blue one on the top right, and a pink one on the bottom right. A white dotted line starts in the green circle, moves towards the bottom, then curves upwards through the blue circle, and finally curves downwards through the pink circle. The text "Literacy and disadvantage" is centered across the overlapping areas of the green and blue circles.

Literacy and disadvantage

Oral reading fluency: lower and higher attaining readers



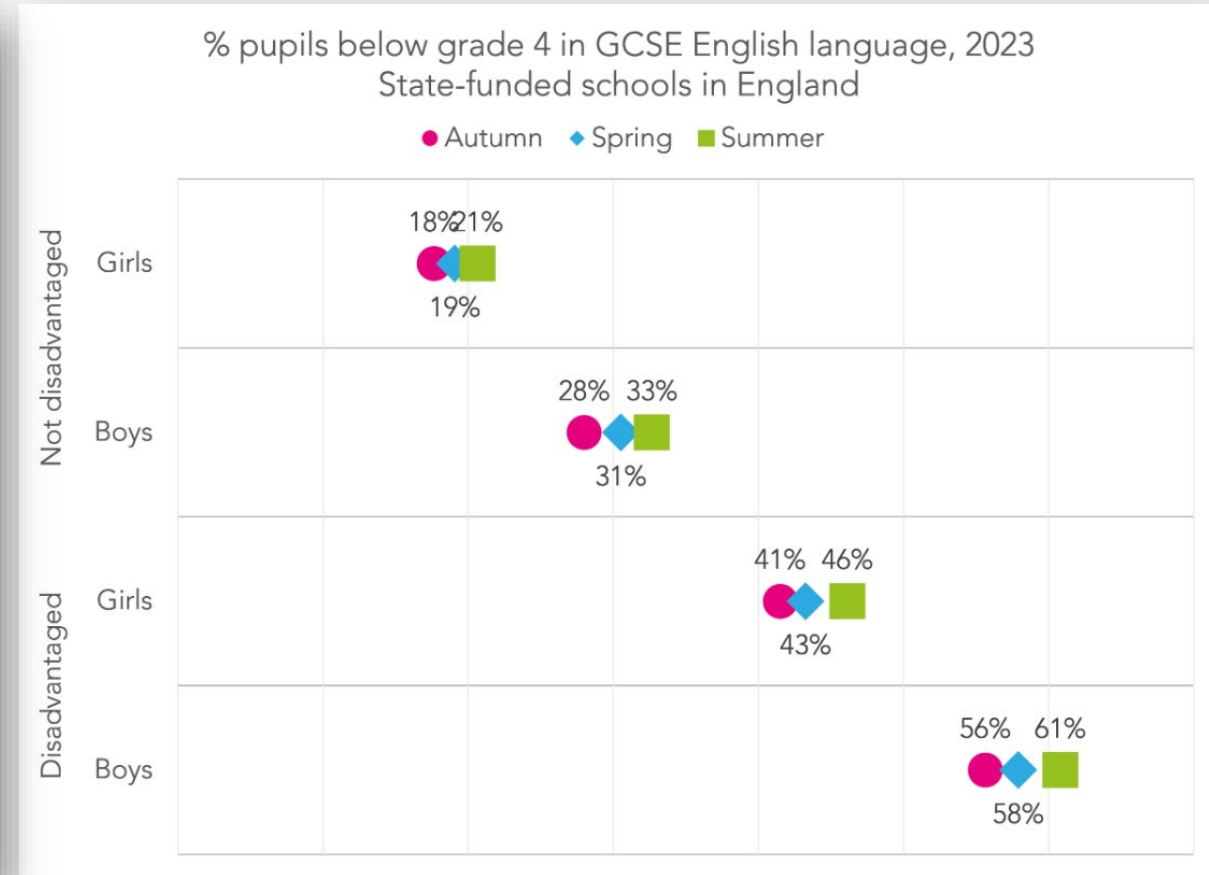
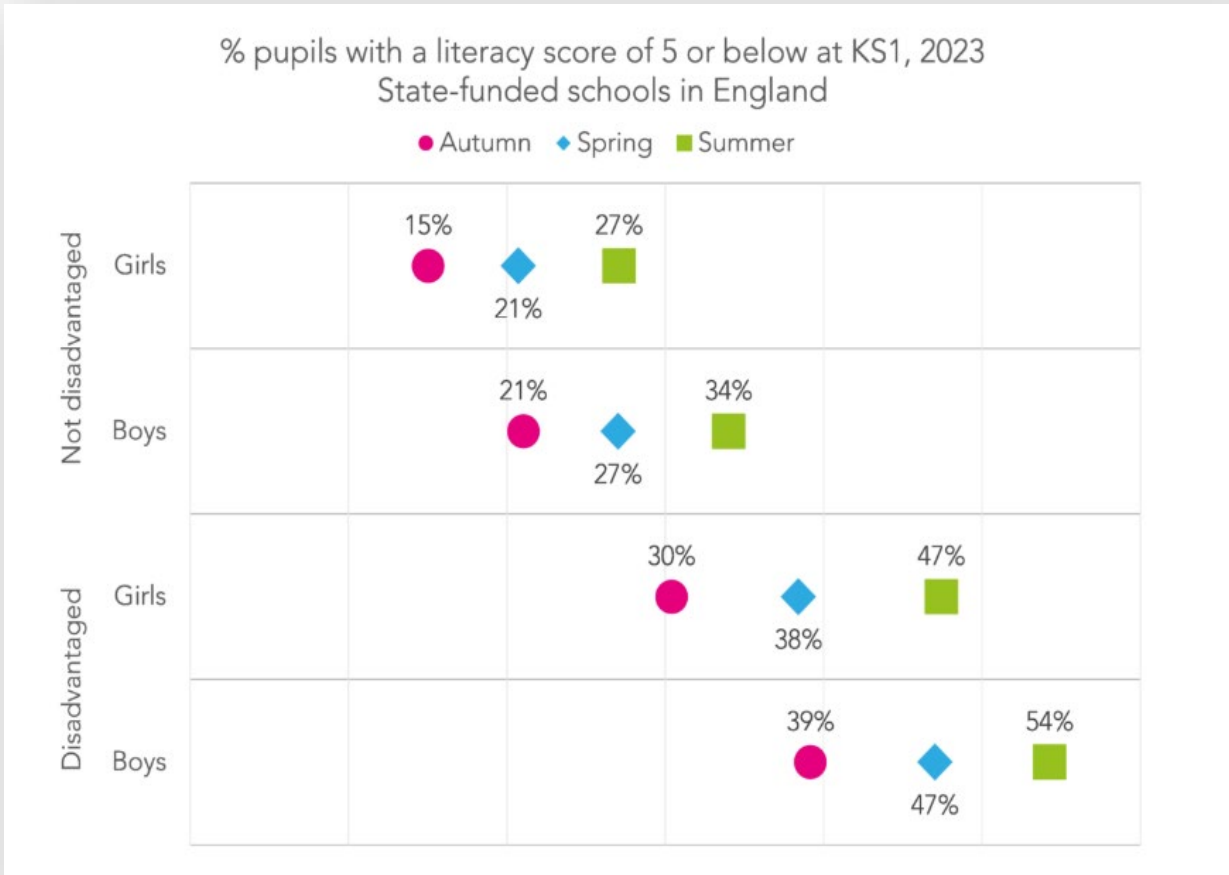
What's your chance of being in the lower quartile group?



The early literacy gap is (in large part) the disadvantage gap

- Age 7

- Age 16



Importance of Early Literacy: causal data



- By age 22, when weighted for all other factors, those with high early literacy skills age 7 compared to low early literacy skills:
 - 59% more likely to obtain a C at English
 - 46% more likely to obtain multiple qualifications at level 3
 - 46% more likely to obtain a university degree

A Venn diagram consisting of three overlapping circles. The top-left circle is green, the top-right circle is blue, and the bottom circle is pink. The text 'Apex Case study' is centered across the intersection of the green and blue circles. There are decorative dotted lines in white and grey around the circles.

Apex Case study

Is it possible fix the early literacy problem?

- Professor Robert Slavin and Dr Nancy Madden
- Johns Hopkins University Success for All Foundation
- 30 years, 38 states, 3 million children
- Literacy success requires cognitive and social-emotional support
- Cooperative learning, intensive tutoring, parent involvement
- Whole-school, evidence-led systems drive improvement
- Evidence-led policy

Strengthen the System. Change the Story.

2025 IMPACT REPORT



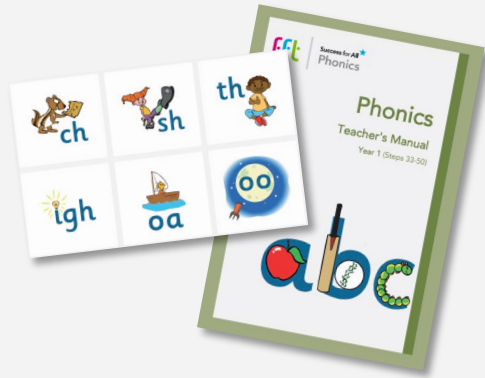
Success for All
FOUNDATION

DELIVERING THE PROMISE OF LITERACY
successforall.org

FFT: committed to improving literacy



Success for All
Phonics



Reading
Quest



Literacy
Intervention
Programmes



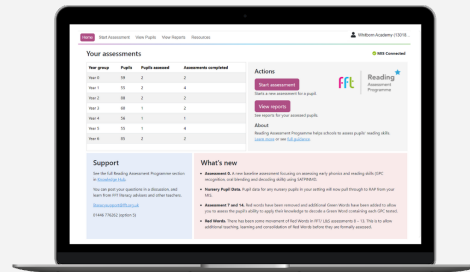
Tutoring
with the
LIGHTNING
SQUAD



Literacy
Reciprocal
Reading



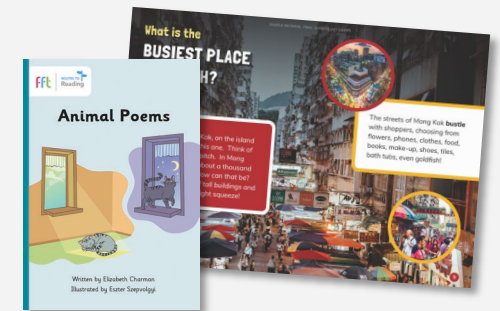
Reading
Assessment
Programme



Spelling
with the
JUNGLE CLUB



ROUTES TO
Reading



Apex: 'Tutoring for All' in the critical window of age 5 - 7



Our Apex project explores the question of what happens when you provide sustained, high frequency reading intervention for the youngest learners – and then measuring success.

A few notes on Tutoring with the Lightning Squad

What it is:

- Computer-assisted
- Formative assessment and continuous monitoring
- Paired reading (peer level)
- In person, supervised 1-2-1 or 1-2-2 or 1-2-4
- Adult led, pace set by tutor
- Real books for reference
- Linked to classroom practice – same pedagogy (phonics progression / decodable texts)

What it isn't:

- Computer-led
- Individual
- Independent
- Adaptive (only initial assessment is adaptive)
- Online only
- AI
- Separate approach to classroom



The Apex Project: 2019 forward

- Working with a small group of schools (all in deprived areas)
- Providing 'tutoring for all' grants for children aged 5 - 7
- Developing understanding of impact and decision-making process
- Longitudinal tracking of cohorts to assess impact
- Sharing within the group what works, and feeding back to FFT to improve our products
- Smaller studies such as the impact of eye-sight screening
- Initial tutoring pilot interrupted by the pandemic: then 60,000 pupils as part of national catch up!

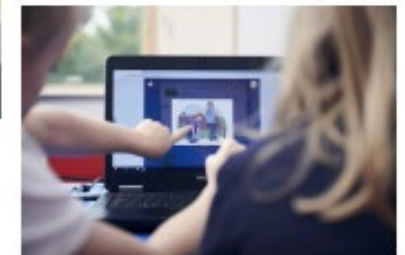
Apex case study

- 4 years of implementation
- 388 pupils
- Year 1 and Year 2 (i.e. ages 5 – 7)
- 5 schools where tutoring had been done most intensively: 50% who were felt to benefit
- 48% disadvantaged pupils i.e. areas of very high social deprivation

Closing the Disadvantage Gap by halving the number of pupils who are behind in reading

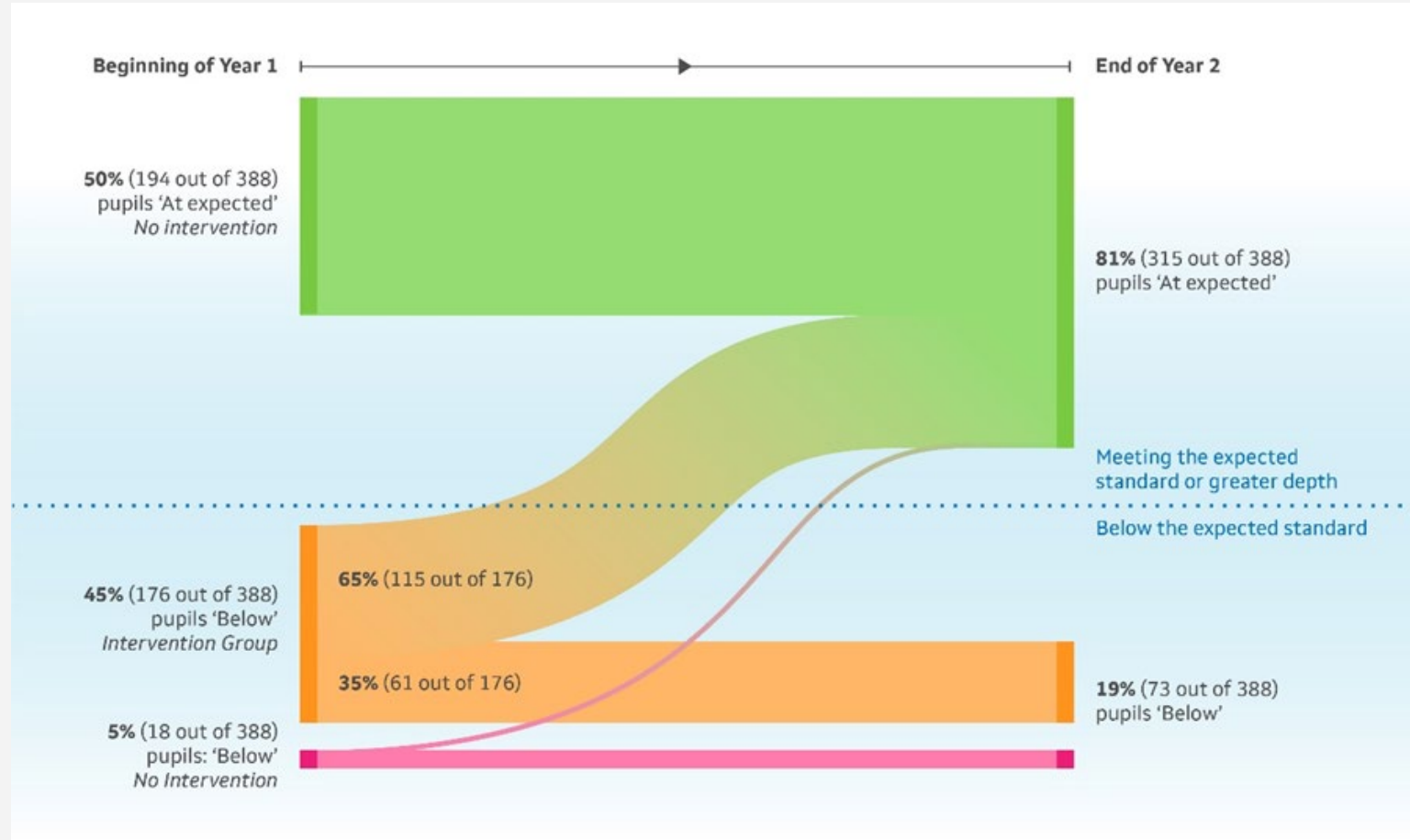
The power of an intensive reading programme for struggling readers in Year 1 and 2: A Case study from the Apex Project

Michael Fischer, Louise Parkinson and Eliza Hilton



Findings

- 65% of struggling readers can catch up within those two years
- £1000 to provide 30 hours of tutoring (adult tutor time cost)
- Closed the disadvantage gap. Disadvantaged pupils outperform national level non-disadvantage.



What we learned about tutoring

- The tech allowed for adults to be up-skilled rapidly
- Reading tutoring must include:
 - Oral language development
 - Supportive pair / adult
 - Repeated reading of known texts
 - Clear progression and appropriate starting point
 - Repetition, slower pace
 - Confidence
 - Sustained, small step achievement of reading
- For some (SEND) pupils learning to read is really hard, but *not* impossible
- Measuring small step progress and next steps





Breakthrough schools

10

10

10

Breakthrough schools (2%-3%): primary schools that close the disadvantage gap

Age 3 – 5 Early Years:

Focus on high quality practice: Expressive language, sounds, pre-phonics and the acquisition and mastery of first set of letter sounds and skills of breaking down and putting together the sounds e.g. c-a-t

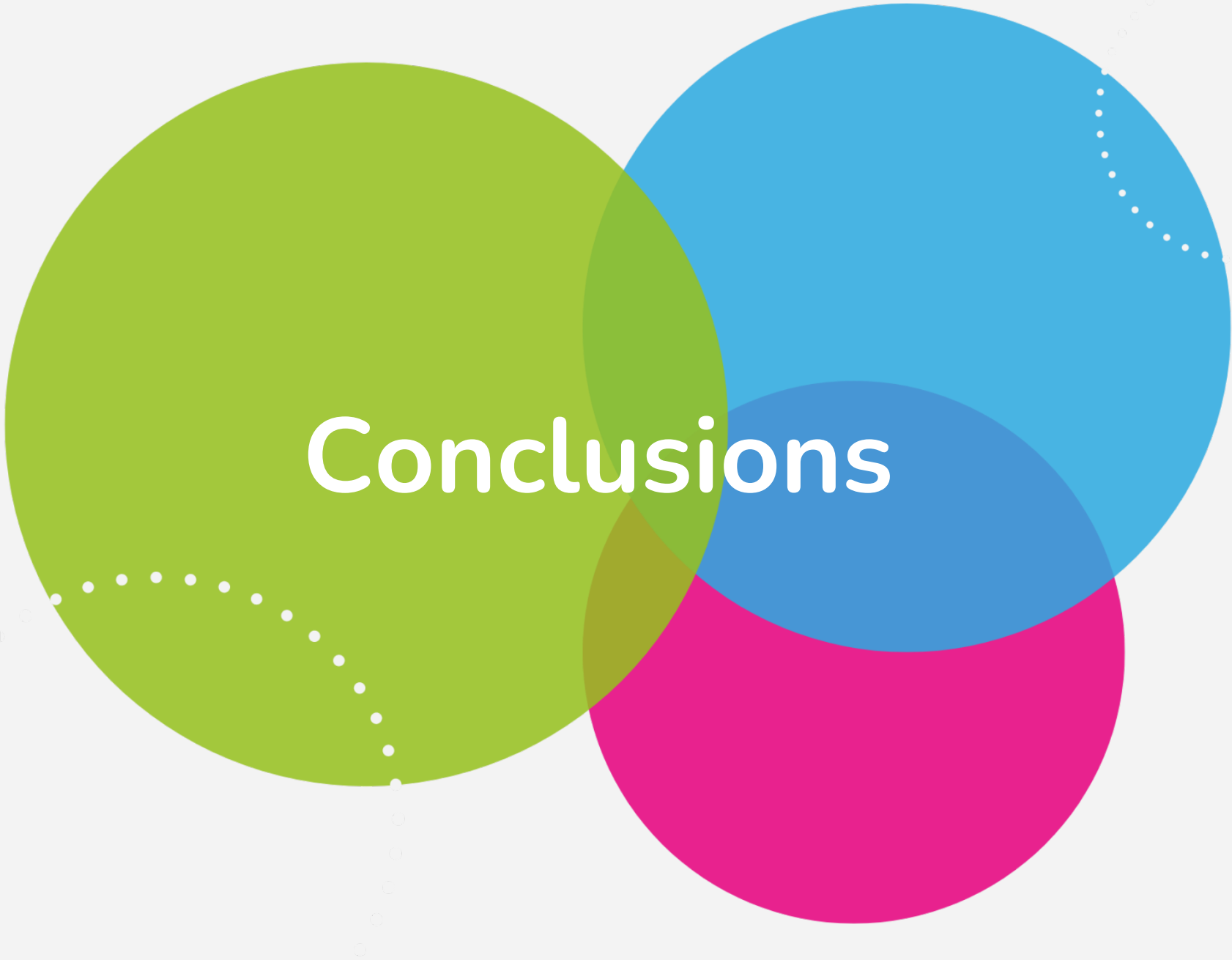
Age 5-7 Rigorous daily teaching of reading and individualised monitoring of skill development: Grapheme-Phoneme-Correspondences (at least 44), common exception words, fluency and ability to put skills into practice, and spelling using phonics.

Age 5-7 As much reading intervention as humanly possible – don't wait!

Age 7+ Continue teaching reading – daily lesson that isn't answering comprehension questions or silent reading. Could be paired reading, choral / whole class reading, following along. Work with whole texts, engaging with the story, explicit vocabulary work – link to writing, spelling / word level work.

Age 7+ Continued reading intervention for those that need phonics / fluency. Extend to vocab / reciprocal reading interventions for those that have fluency but still need support.

Book choice, library, parents & community, teachers as readers, self-efficacy & agency, school culture.



Conclusions

Conclusions

- We currently have a large group of struggling readers, who we can see are struggling age 5.
- This problem is not necessary – this is a societal choice.
- Some pupils need a bit of catch-up but some pupils need a lot
- Sustaining systematic intervention is what counts.
- Downstream benefits for pupils and society.
- Possibly 2%-3% schools nationally achieve disruptive early literacy attainment for disadvantaged pupils
- Policy debate currently focuses on the 75% who can read.

Thank you!

 www.fft.org.uk

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