

# 'Early literacy: National policies and evidence-based guidance'

May 2026

# Session overview

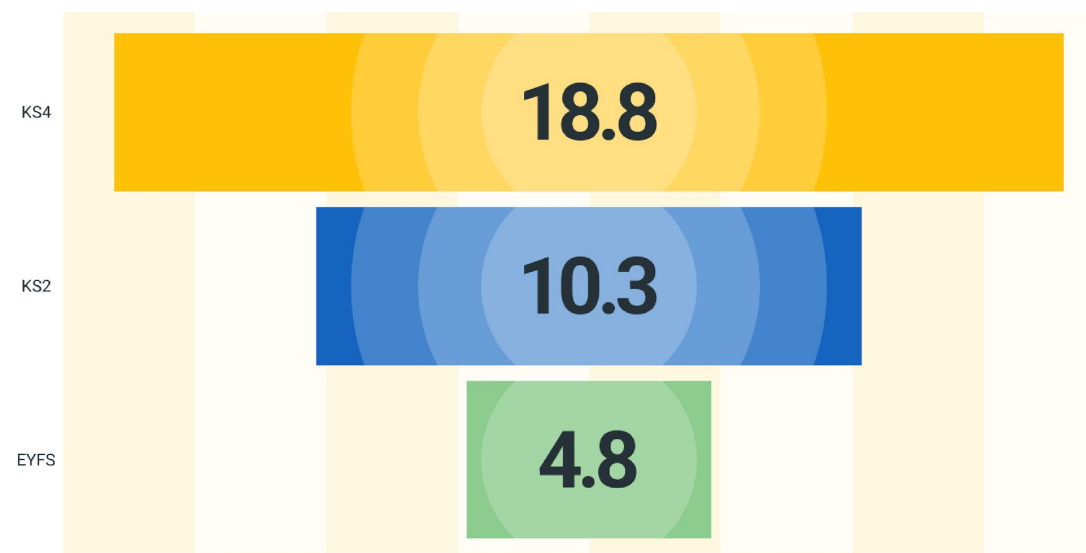
1. Background to EEF
2. National policies
3. Moving from evidence access to evidence use
  - a. Policy levers
  - b. Working with schools

Background:

## Education in England in 2011

- Sudden increase in school autonomy
- Very few studies with rigorous methodologies for measuring efficacy (fewer than 5 RCTs)
- Most research only available in academic journals
- Skepticism on whether randomised controlled trials are possible – “Schools will never agree to be randomised”
- **Evidence not frequently used in decision making**

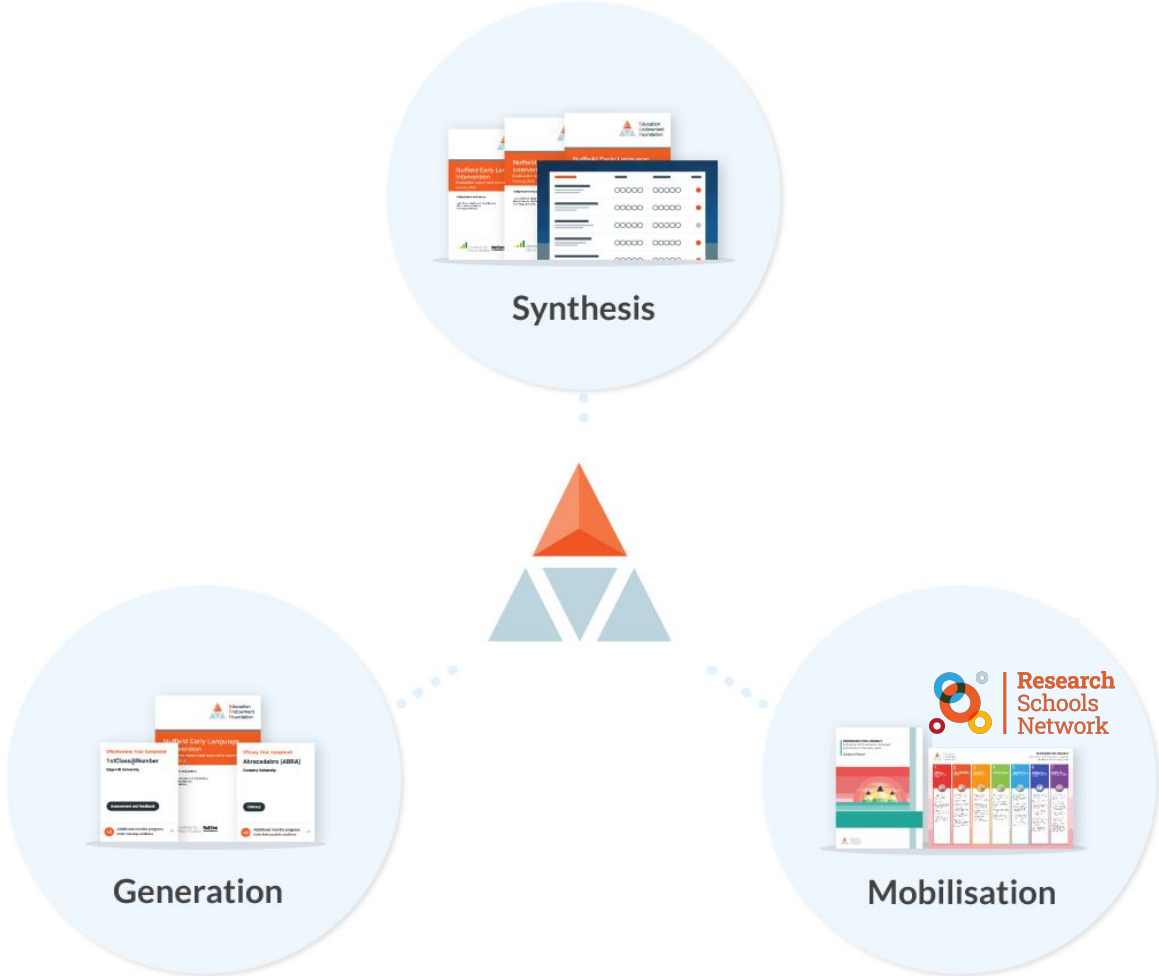
Months gap between disadvantaged pupils (FSM6) and their peers (2022)



Education in England: Annual Report 2023, Education Policy Institute (EPI)

Background:

# Education Endowment Foundation



## Evidence Generation:

# Rigorously answering the questions that matter

**Efficacy Trial: Completed**

## URLEY (Using Research Tools to Improve Language in the Early Years)

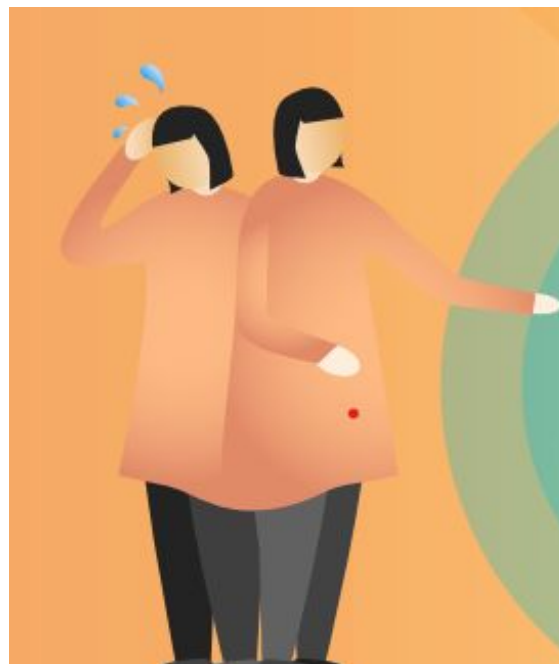
University of Oxford, UCL, and A+ Education

Professional development and mentoring for early years practitioners

**-1** Additional months progress  
Under best possible conditions

Cost     

Evidence     



**Efficacy Trial: Completed**

## Nuffield Early Language Intervention

University College London and ICAN

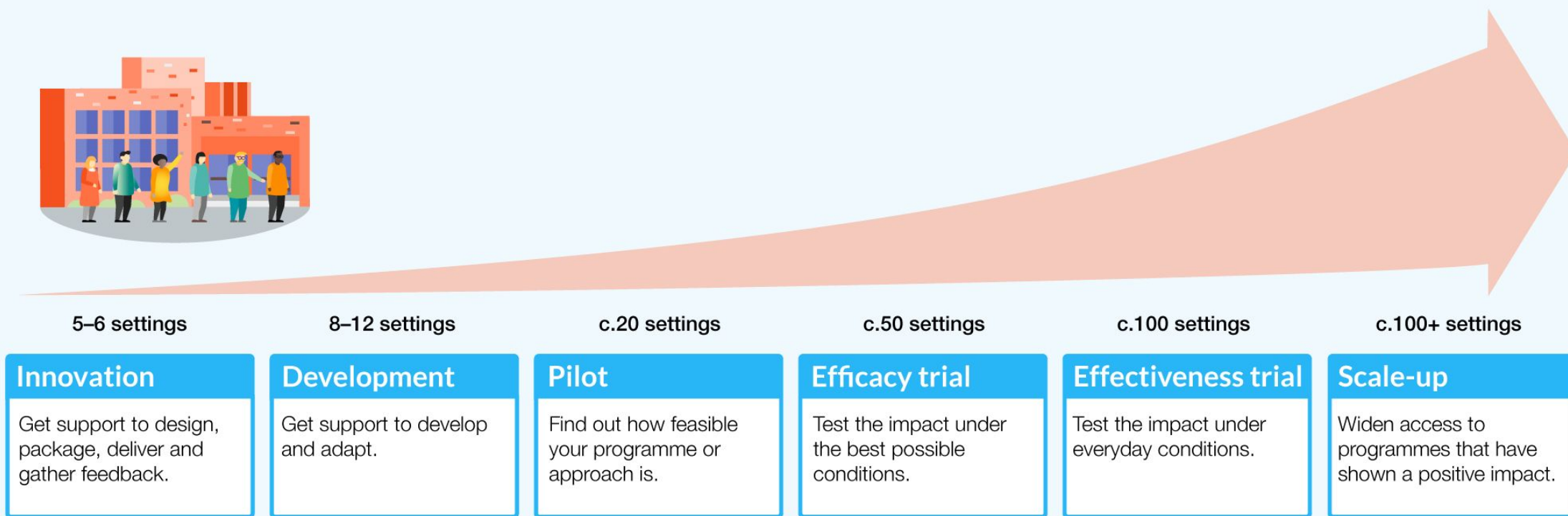
Improving spoken language skills in young children around the time that they start school

**+4** Additional months progress  
Under best possible conditions

Cost     

Evidence     

## Evidence Generation: **Building pipelines of evidence**



5-6 settings

### **Innovation**

Get support to design, package, deliver and gather feedback.

8-12 settings

### **Development**

Get support to develop and adapt.

c.20 settings

### **Pilot**

Find out how feasible your programme or approach is.

c.50 settings

### **Efficacy trial**

Test the impact under the best possible conditions.

c.100 settings

### **Effectiveness trial**

Test the impact under everyday conditions.

c.100+ settings

### **Scale-up**

Widen access to programmes that have shown a positive impact.

## Evidence Generation: Scaling with policy makers






















Evidence Synthesis:

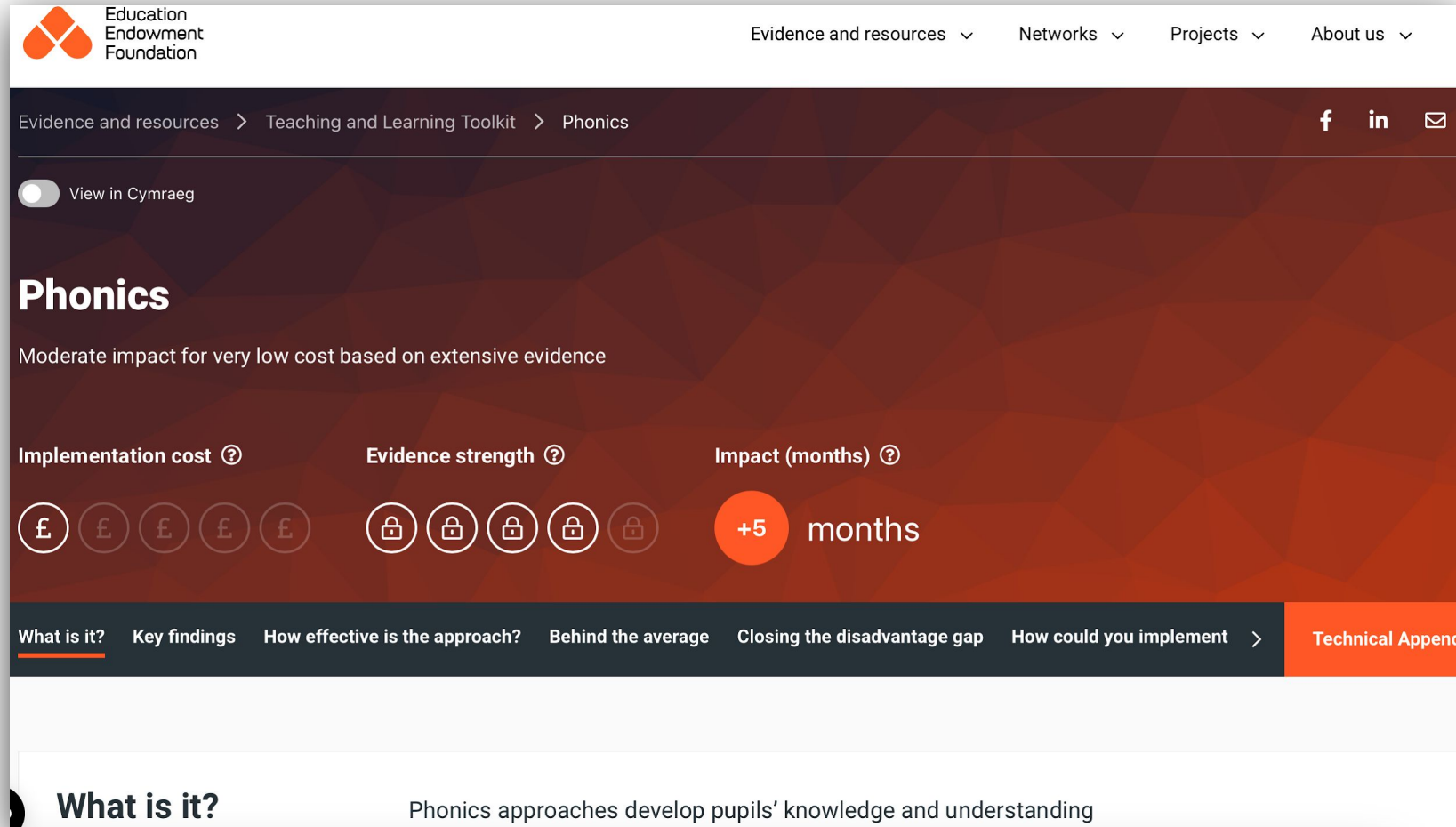
# The Teaching and Learning Toolkit

## An accessible resource used by 70% school leaders in England:

- A summary of over 5000 studies, regularly updated with the latest evidence
- Summarising impact, security and cost of 30 different approaches
- Not a step-by-step recipe for impact but a useful reference point to be combined with professional expertise

Toolkit Strands 	Cost 	Evidence 	Impact 
<b>Arts participation</b> Moderate impact for very low cost based on moderate evidence			
<b>Aspiration interventions</b> Unclear impact for very low cost based on insufficient evidence			
<b>Behaviour interventions</b> Moderate impact for low cost based on limited evidence			
<b>Collaborative learning approaches</b> High impact for very low cost based on limited evidence			
<b>Extending school time</b> Moderate impact for moderate cost based on limited evidence			

# Evidence Synthesis: The Teaching and Learning Toolkit



The screenshot displays the 'Phonics' page on the Education Endowment Foundation website. The page features a dark red background with a white navigation bar at the top. The main content area includes a toggle for 'View in Cymraeg', the title 'Phonics', and a summary: 'Moderate impact for very low cost based on extensive evidence'. Below this, three metrics are shown: 'Implementation cost' (represented by five pound symbols), 'Evidence strength' (represented by five padlock icons), and 'Impact (months)' (represented by a red circle with '+5' and the text 'months'). A dark blue navigation bar at the bottom contains links for 'What is it?', 'Key findings', 'How effective is the approach?', 'Behind the average', 'Closing the disadvantage gap', 'How could you implement', and 'Technical Appendix'. The 'What is it?' link is currently selected, and the page content below it reads: 'Phonics approaches develop pupils' knowledge and understanding'.

Education Endowment Foundation

Evidence and resources ▾ Networks ▾ Projects ▾ About us ▾

Evidence and resources > Teaching and Learning Toolkit > Phonics

View in Cymraeg

## Phonics

Moderate impact for very low cost based on extensive evidence

Implementation cost ⓘ Evidence strength ⓘ Impact (months) ⓘ

£ £ £ £ £ 🔒 🔒 🔒 🔒 🔒 +5 months

[What is it?](#) [Key findings](#) [How effective is the approach?](#) [Behind the average](#) [Closing the disadvantage gap](#) [How could you implement](#) > [Technical Appendix](#)

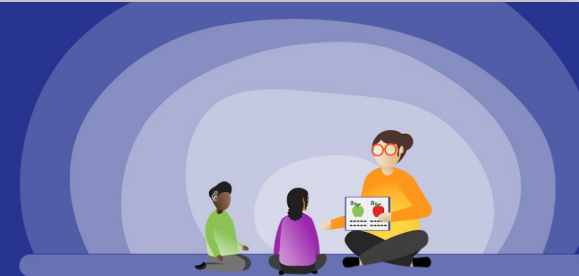
### What is it?

Phonics approaches develop pupils' knowledge and understanding

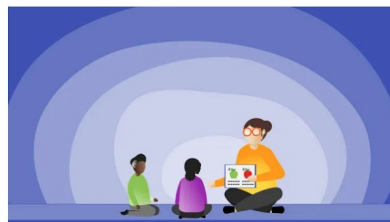
# Evidence Synthesis: Early Years Evidence Store

## Early Literacy

Approaches and practices to support literacy in the early years.



### Approaches for supporting early literacy



Early Literacy Overview



1. Interactive Reading

Interactive Reading



2. Teaching Sound  
Discrimination



3. Teaching Sound Manipulation

# Evidence Synthesis: Early Years Evidence Store

## Approaches in action



### Hunting for Lions

Watch as Shannon uses interactive reading when reading a story during choosing time with some three- and four-year-olds.



### Monster Song

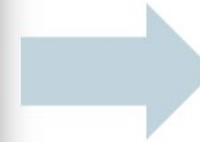
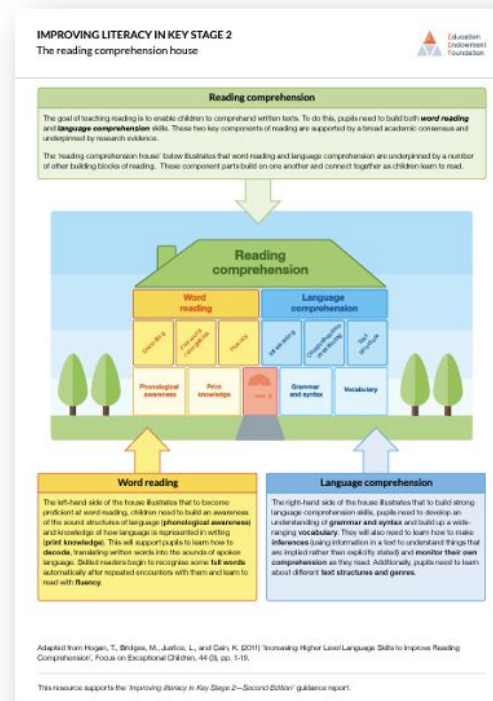
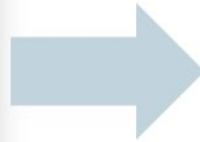
Watch as Adam uses interactive reading when reading a song book as part of 'choosing time' with some three-year-old children.



### The Gruffalo's Chorus

Watch childminder Honey use interactive reading when reading a very familiar story with a small group of two- to three-year-olds.

# Evidence Mobilisation: Guidance reports and tools



**IMPROVING LITERACY IN KEY STAGE 2**  
Reader's Theatre

The Walsley Multi-Academy Trust uses Reader's Theatre to support pupils to develop their reading fluency. Reader's Theatre is a whole school teaching strategy that complements how guided and reading instruction and repeated reading of texts can be used to support pupils to develop reading fluency. The Trust have developed their own guide to support the use of Reader's Theatre in the classroom.

The Walsley Multi-Academy Trust is a family of schools in the North East of England.

Step 1: Adult as model	Step 2: Echo reading	Step 3: Text allocation
The adult reads the selected passage of the class text aloud as an 'expert model' of fluency and pupils follow the text with their own copy. This may be repeated multiple times as necessary.	Children echo back the section read by the adult, emulating their intonation, tone, speed, volume, expression, movement, use of punctuation, etc.	Children work in pairs or triads. Each group may: 1. all have the exact same short section of text, or 2. a longer section might be split into short parts, so that each group has a different piece.
Step 4: Repeated choral reading	Step 5: Close reading	Step 6: Text marking
In their groups, children read their section aloud, echoing the initial reading by the adult.	In their pairs/triads, children make a close reading of their section of text and think about meaning, audience, and purpose. The teacher asks children to look closely at the writer's use of language and consider characteristics, etc.	Each child has a copy of the text to annotate in order to inform their performance. This is discussed and agreed as a group. Prompts are provided to direct their reading.
Step 7: Practise	Step 8: Perform	Step 9: Reflect
Time is provided for groups to rehearse their reading. They may decide to change or add to their performance slightly as a result of their practice.	Each group performs their rehearsed piece. (Adult may record so that children can appraise their own performance.)	Children evaluate their own and/or other performances and give feedback. They may use a reading fluency scale or the prompts as success criteria to support articulation of evaluations.


1. Young, D. and Rowland, T. (2016) 'Reader's Theatre: Effects on Word Recognition Automaticity and Reading Fluency', *Journal of Research in Reading*, 41, pp. 475-485.  
Barnett, T. G., and O'Connell, D. (2010) 'Reader's Theatre: "Hold on, let's read again"', *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(5), pp. 8-16.  
Young, D., Blakey, F. and Rowland, T. (2017) 'Reader's Theatre Plus: Comprehension and Word Study', *The Reader Teacher*, 7(2), pp. 201-205.

This resource supports the 'Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2—Second Edition' guidance report.

# Evidence Mobilisation: Guidance reports and tools

## IMPROVING LITERACY

Supporting oral language development



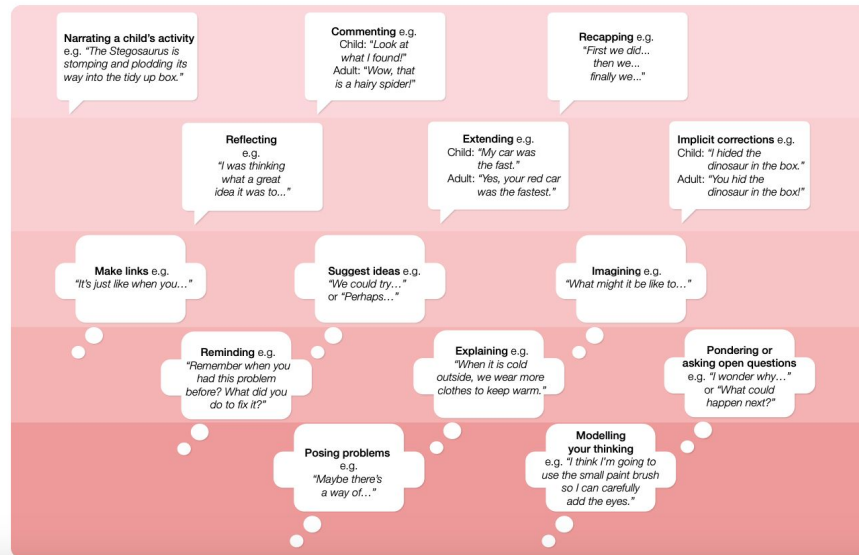
**Communication and language provide the foundations for learning, thinking, and wellbeing.**

A child's core language acquisition occurs between one and four years old, with children acquiring basic phonology, syntax, and vocabulary during this period<sup>1</sup>. Evidence indicates that success in literacy relies on the secure development of language<sup>2</sup>, and that these skills are amongst the best predictors of educational success<sup>1</sup>.

**Effective environments for supporting oral language**

There is evidence that the rate at which children develop language is sensitive to the amount of input they receive from the adults and peers around them, and that the quality of this input is likely to be more important than the quantity<sup>3</sup>. Ensuring all children experience effective language support requires a considered approach appropriate to the needs of individual children as well as staff training for good implementation.

**Fig 1.**



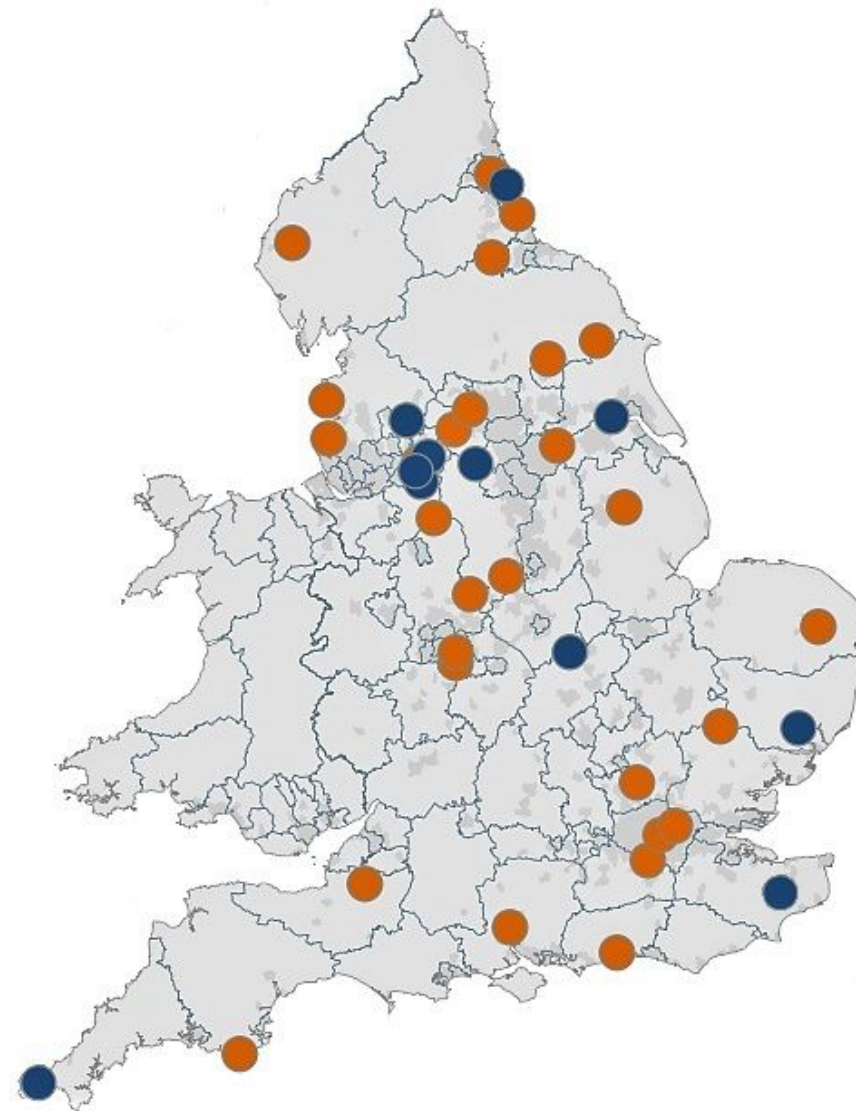
# Evidence Mobilisation: **Guidance reports and tools**

Watch the video of ShREC in action below:



Evidence Mobilisation:  
**Research School Network**

The **Research School Network** acts  
as a bridge between evidence and  
practice



# Evidence Mobilisation: Research School Network

## Parental Engagement in Early Reading

Early Years Series



by Lincolnshire Research School  
on the 27th November 2024

Share on: [f](#) [X](#) [✉](#) [🖨](#)



### Jo Glew

Early Years Lead (she/her)

Since gaining QTS I have worked for 15 years in Primary Education, across EYFS and Key Stage One. My passion is phonics and reading, and I have lead phonics for 14 years in my school, mentoring, coaching and monitoring teaching and intervention to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children, especially disadvantaged children.

# National policies

## National policies:

- ❑ In 2011, the EEF launched with a £125 million endowment to build research evidence into the school system to inform decision-making in schools e.g. EEF Toolkit
- ❑ The Phonics Screening Check was piloted in 2011 – it became statutory in 2012 for year 1 pupils
- ❑ In 2011, the Department for Education began formally validating systematic phonics programmes
- ❑ In 2013, researchED and similar grassroots teacher movements became more popular with English school teachers and leaders (including engaging with evidence on reading)
- ❑ In 2015 onwards, OFSTED inspection reports increasingly highlighted phonics as an important component of effective early reading instruction
- ❑ In 2018, a small number of primary school ‘English Hubs’ (34) were created to support implementation of early reading (particularly phonics and ‘reading for pleasure’)

National policies:

**National policies  
engagement**

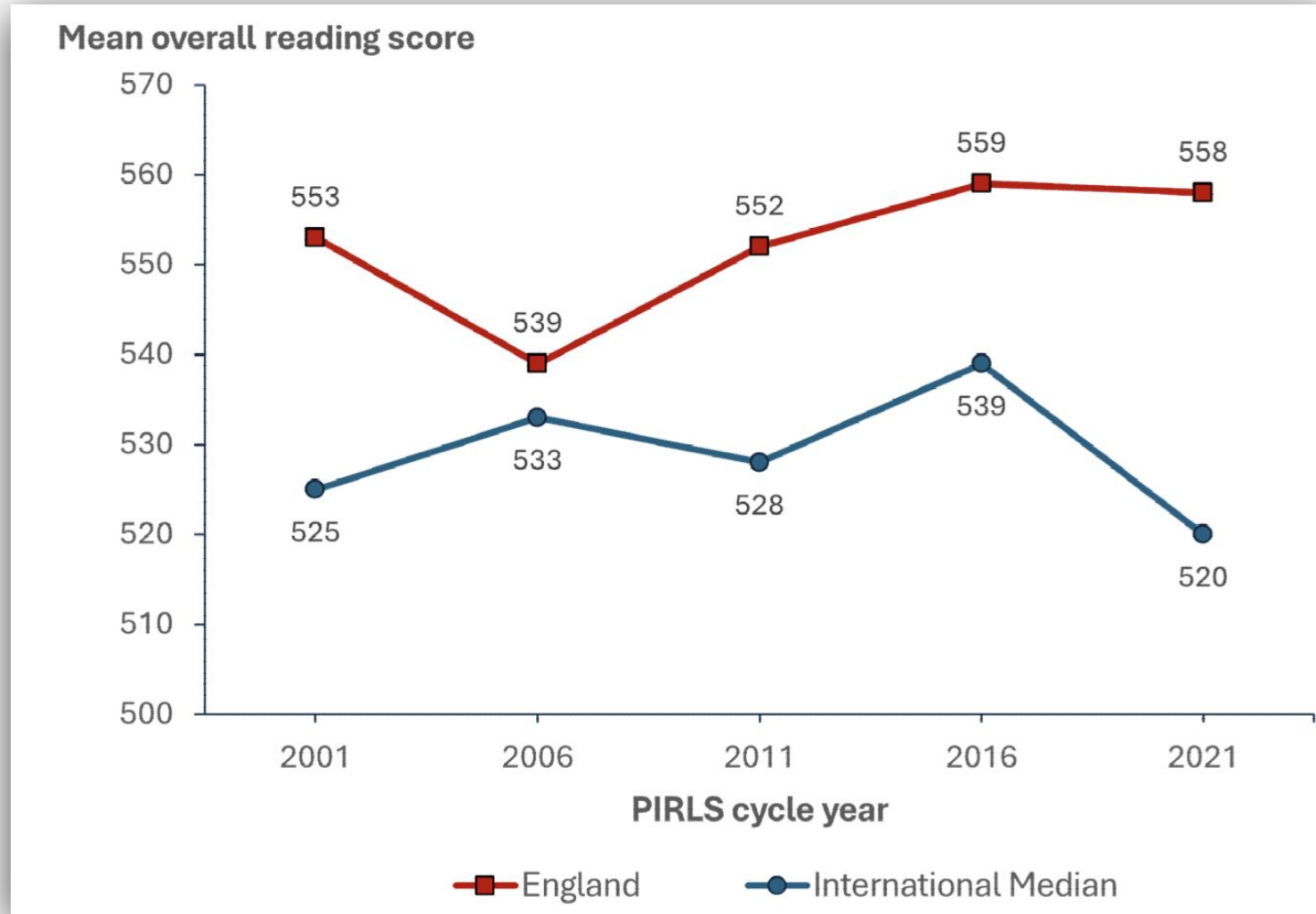


**+ Grassroots**



## National policies:

## Reading successes in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2021)



## National policies:

### Reading successes in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2021)

- ❑ Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 achieved highest ever international ranking for reading (4th out of 43 countries)

....but

- ❑ 40 score-point average gap between FSM-eligible (disadvantaged) and non-FSM pupils in England (roughly one year of progress).

## National trends:



## National trends:

“I’ve been asked to turn around reading in my school. No idea where to start! How on earth do we deal with something so complex??”

**Anon**

## National policies:

### Reflections and questions

- What national policies related to curriculum and assessment best support early literacy?
- What robust evidence do we need to support those policies?
- What methods do we have to scale excellence with early literacy?
- What evidence-based resources help build capacity for teachers and leaders?
- What networks do we need to foster in the teaching profession to share knowledge and positively influence early literacy?
- How do we support effective implementation in challenging school contexts?
- How can we combine 'top down' policies with 'bottom up' engagement?

# Moving from evidence access to evidence use

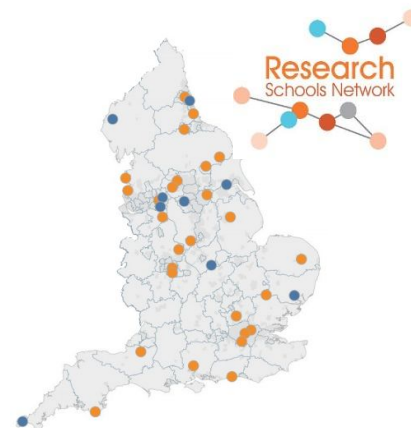
## Evidence mobilisation

# A variety of approaches

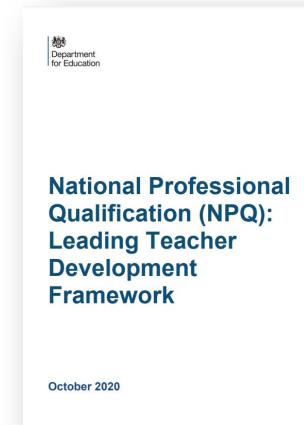
1 Accessible  
resources



2 Communities  
of practice



3 Policy  
engagement



4 Scale up  
activity



National  
Tutoring  
Programme



## Case study 1

# Embedding evidence in policy



Department  
for Education

## National Professional Qualification (NPQ): Leading Literacy Framework

A wider advisory group of individuals and organisations has provided further support and challenge during the framework drafting process.

The content of the framework and its underpinning evidence have been independently assessed and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).



## Case study 2

# Promoting school-led research use



### IMPROVING LITERACY IN KEY STAGE 1

#### Summary of recommendations

Evidence needs to be relevant, actionable and appropriately applied to context

Schools and researchers are both required to create appropriate recommendations

<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>Develop pupils' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language provides the foundation of thinking and learning and should be prioritised.</li> <li>High quality adult-child interactions are important and sometimes described as talking with children rather than just talking to children.</li> <li>Use a wide range of explicit and implicit approaches including planning the teaching of vocabulary as well as modelling and extending children's language and thinking during interactions and activities such as shared reading.</li> <li>Collaborative activities that provide opportunities to learn/hear language often also provide opportunities for wider learning through talk. Skills such as social awareness, relationship skills, and problem-solving are developed, as well as knowledge.</li> </ul>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>Use a balanced and engaging approach to developing reading, teaching both decoding and comprehension skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>Effectively implement a systematic phonics programme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systematic phonics approaches explicitly teach pupils a comprehensive set of letter-sound relationships for reading and sound-letter relationships for spelling.</li> <li>Consider the following when teaching a phonics programme:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Training:</b> ensure all staff have the necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge.</li> <li><b>Responsiveness:</b> check if learning can be accelerated or extra support is needed and identify specific capabilities and difficulties to focus teaching.</li> <li><b>Engagement:</b> lessons engage pupils and are enjoyable to teach.</li> <li><b>Adaptations:</b> carefully consider the potential impact of adaptations to the programme.</li> <li><b>Focus:</b> a responsive approach to grouping pupils is likely to help focus effort and improve teaching efficiency.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>Teach pupils to use strategies for developing and monitoring their reading comprehension</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading comprehension can be improved by teaching pupils' specific strategies to support them with inferring and self-monitoring their understanding.</li> <li>These include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prediction;</li> <li>questioning;</li> <li>clarifying;</li> <li>summarising; and</li> <li>activating prior knowledge.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers could introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be strategically reduced as a child progresses until they are capable of completing the activity independently.</li> </ul>	<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>Teach pupils to use strategies for planning and monitoring their writing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pupils' writing can be improved by teaching them to plan and monitor their writing.</li> <li>Producing quality writing is a complex process but a number of different strategies are likely to help, depending on the current skills of the writer.</li> <li>These include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>pre-writing activities;</li> <li>drafting, editing and revising; and</li> <li>sharing.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers should introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be gradually reduced as a child progresses until the child is capable of completing the activity independently.</li> </ul>	<p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>Promote fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and purposeful practice and explicitly teaching spelling</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transcription refers to the physical processes of handwriting or typing, and spelling.</li> <li>Children must develop fluency in these skills to the point that they have become automatic. If children have to concentrate to ensure their transcription is accurate, they will be less able to think about the content of their writing.</li> <li>A large amount of purposeful 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.</li> <li>Spelling should be explicitly taught. Teaching could focus on spellings that are relevant to the topic or genre being studied.</li> </ul>	<p><b>7</b></p> <p><b>Use high quality information about pupils' current capabilities to select the best next steps for teaching</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect high quality, up-to-date information about pupil's current capabilities and adapt teaching accordingly to focus on exactly what pupils need 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.</li> <li>Teaching can be adapted by:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>changing the focus:</b> models of reading and writing, e.g. The Simple View of Reading, can be used to diagnose pupils' capabilities and select a particular aspect of literacy to focus on next.</li> <li><b>changing the approach:</b> if a pupil is disengaged or is finding activities too easy or too hard, adopt a different approach to teaching the same aspect of literacy.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>Use high quality structured interventions to help pupils who are struggling with their literacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools should initially focus on ensuring they offer high quality in-class support for the whole class. However, even when excellent classroom teaching is in place, it is likely that a small but significant number of children will require additional targeted literacy support.</li> <li>Use accurate assessment of capabilities and difficulties to ensure interventions are appropriately matched to pupils needs.</li> <li>Use one-to-one and small-group tutoring ideally involving structured interventions. There is consistent evidence the approach supports children struggling with aspects of literacy.</li> <li>Regularly review children's progress whilst they are part of the intervention to ensure the support indeed enhances their learning.</li> </ul>
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## Case study 2

# Communities of practice



<p>25 Jan</p>	<p>📅 Twilight / Briefing - 25th January 2024 3:45pm - 4:45pm</p> <p><b>Twilight - Effective Professional Development</b></p> <p>Free online sessions to learn more about the EEF recommendations</p> <p>free</p> <p>ASPIRER</p>
<p>25 Jan</p>	<p>📅 Twilight / Briefing - 25th January 2024 4:00pm - 5:30pm</p> <p><b>Making the most of Metacognition in the classroom</b></p> <p>This session will be facilitated by Debbie Tremble one of the Staffordshire Research School Evidence Leads.</p> <p>multiple ticket options available</p> <p>Maths Evidence Lead</p>
<p>25 Jan</p>	<p>📅 Twilight / Briefing - 25th January 2024 4:00pm - 5:00pm</p> <p><b>Research School Briefings</b></p> <p>Join the team from London South Research School at Charles Dickens to hear the latest news from the EEF.</p> <p>free</p> <p>London South Research School</p>
<p>30 Jan</p>	<p>📅 Twilight / Briefing - 30th January 2024 3:45pm - 4:45pm</p> <p><b>FREE twilight on the NEW Improving Primary Science Guidance Report</b></p> <p>FREE twilight on the NEW Improving Primary Science Guidance Report</p> <p>free</p> <p>THE Pinnacle MARKING TARGET</p>

# **A theory of evidence use underpinning both approaches**

## CONTEXTUAL FACTORS



### What is being implemented

Consider whether the approach is:

- evidence-informed
- right for the setting
- feasible to implement



### Systems and structures

Develop an infrastructure that supports implementation e.g. time, roles, logistics



### People who enable change

Ensure people are in place across the school who can support, lead and positively influence implementation

## PROCESS

Sustain

Explore

## BEHAVIOURS



### Engage

Engage people so they can shape what happens, whilst also providing overall direction



### Unite

Unite around what is being implemented, how it will be implemented and why it matters



### Reflect

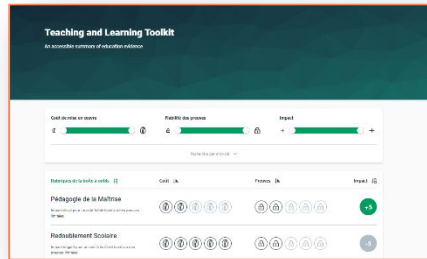
Reflect, monitor and adapt to improve implementation

Deliver

Prepare

# Final thoughts

# Evidence-use in education is a global movement



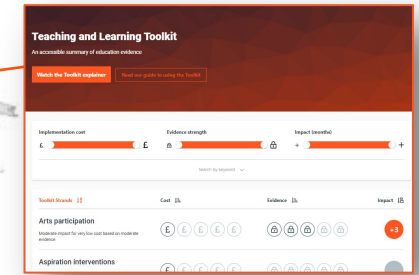
Teaching and Learning Toolkit

An accessible summary of education evidence

Call to action buttons: Call to action, Facilitate the process, Impact

Navigation: Home, About, Contact, Search

Content: Pedagogía de la Mañana, Reducción de la Deserción Escolar



Teaching and Learning Toolkit

An accessible summary of education evidence

Navigation: Home, About, Contact, Search

Content: Implementation cost, Evidence strength, Impact benefit

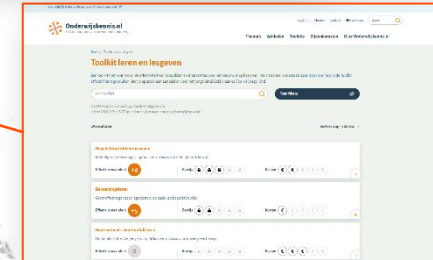


SUMMA

Plataforma de Prácticas Educativas Efectivas

Navigation: Inicio, Quiénes somos, Investigación, Mapa de Prácticas Educativas, Plataforma de Prácticas Educativas, CO-INECE, Ley de SUMMA, Actualidad

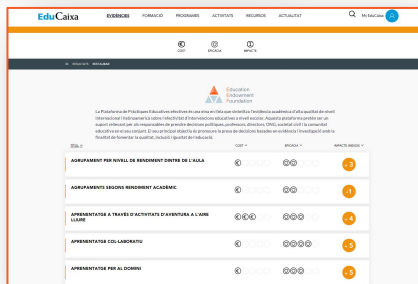
Content: Agrupación de clases en bloques, Agrupación de estudiantes según rendimiento académico, Altas expectativas, Aprendizaje



OnderwijsKennis

Navigation: Home, About, Contact, Search

Content: Toelichting leren en lesgeven



EduCaixa

Navigation: Inicio, Quiénes somos, Investigación, Mapa de Prácticas Educativas, Plataforma de Prácticas Educativas, CO-INECE, Ley de SUMMA, Actualidad

Content: ASIGNAMIENTO POR NIVEL DE BIENESTAR ENTRE DE CALLA, ASIGNAMIENTO SEGUN BIENESTAR ACADÉMICO, ASIGNAMIENTOS A TRAVÉS DE FACTORES DE BIENESTAR A LARGO PLAZO, ASIGNAMIENTOS COLABORATIVOS, ASIGNAMIENTOS POR AL COMÚN



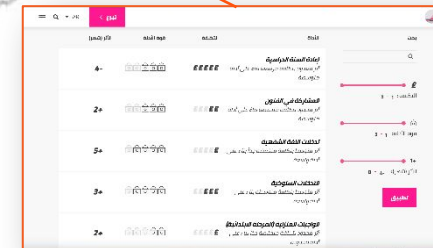
Home / Excellence in learning

### Curriculum and learning

The use of assessments and reporting to monitor, plan and report on student learning across the curriculum.

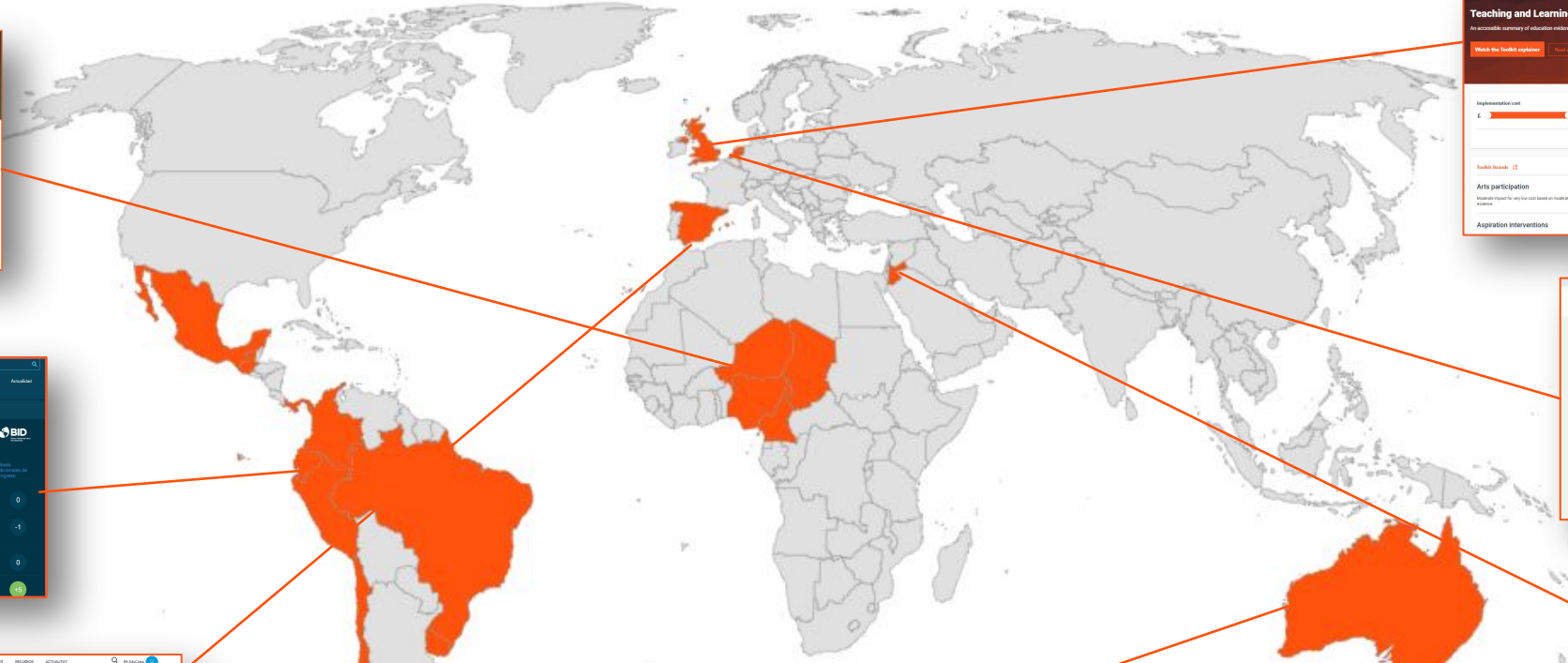
Navigation: Home, About, Contact, Search

Content: Arts participation, Aspiration interventions, Collaborative learning

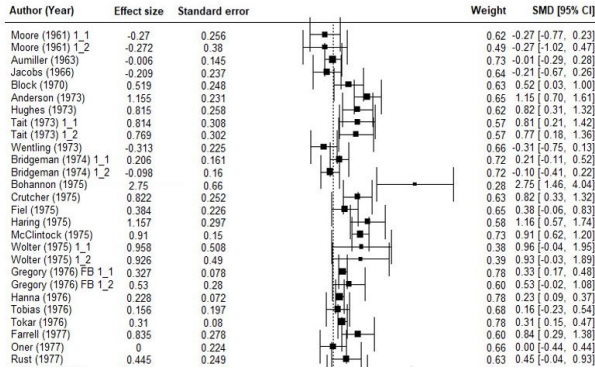
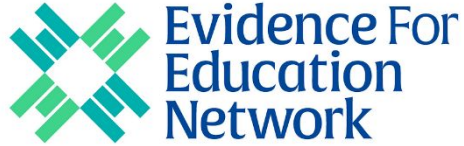


Navigation: Home, About, Contact, Search

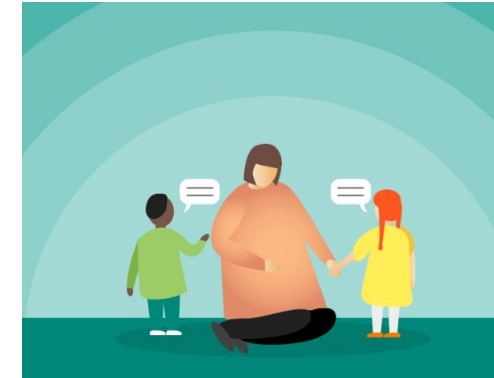
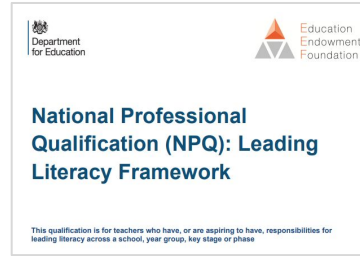
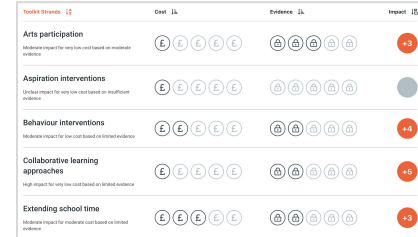
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# Evidence-use to improve literacy requires national and international infrastructure



Shared standards  
Peer learning  
Methodological innovation

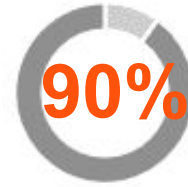


**Efficacy Trial: Completed**  
**Nuffield Early Language Intervention**  
University College London and ICAN  
Improving spoken language skills in young children around the time that they start school

# Returning to education in England 2011 – what progress have we made?

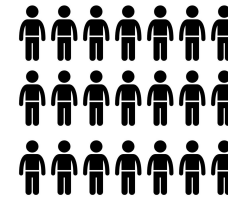
- Sudden increase in school autonomy
- Very few studies with rigorous methodologies for measuring efficacy (fewer than 5 RCTs)
- Most research only available in academic journals
- Skepticism on whether randomised controlled trials are possible – “Schools will never agree to be randomised”
- Evidence not frequently used in decision making
- Literacy outcomes resilient after the COVID-19 pandemic
- Literacy a sustained policy priority

**70%** of senior  
leaders use EEF's  
Toolkit



of all primary schools  
found EEF resources  
useful during the  
pandemic

**1.7m**  
children  
involved in  
EEF projects



**16,000+** schools,  
nurseries and colleges  
taking part (over half of all  
schools in England)

National policies:

Reflections and questions

- What national policies related to curriculum and assessment best support early literacy?
- What robust evidence do we need to support those policies?
- What methods do we have to scale excellence with early literacy?
- What evidence-based resources help build capacity for teachers and leaders?
- What networks do we need to foster in the teaching profession to share knowledge and positively influence early literacy?
- How do we support effective implementation in challenging school contexts?
- How can we combine 'top down' policies with 'bottom up' engagement?

# Questions?