

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

How can disciplinary literacy support the attainment of all pupils, including our most disadvantaged?

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About the author

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Shareen is an established educational author, writer and editor and has written educational resources and books for several leading publishers. Her books focus on English reading, phonics, writing, handwriting and spelling. In addition, she has co-written, with her husband, several story and non-fiction books for pupils in their earliest stages of reading. Her latest book, *'Disciplinary Literacy in Primary Schools,'* (2025, Hachette Learning Publications, formerly John Catt), advocates for the importance of explicit teaching of reading, writing and speaking across the curriculum.

She is a proud Fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching and part of the Confederation of Schools Trust (CST) Policy Advisory Group.

Introduction

This white paper calls upon governments to address the reading, writing and oral language achievement gap and to prioritise this across the curriculum. It outlines the strategies that will be particularly impactful for all groups of pupils. This includes those with special educational needs and/or those from disadvantage backgrounds (described as from lower socio-economic family circumstances). Funding is currently attached to pupils who receive free school meals.

‘Disadvantaged pupils’ can be defined by the UK Department for Education as:

- *‘Pupils who are recorded as eligible for free school meals (FSM), or have been recorded as eligible in the past 6 years (referred to as Ever 6 FSM);*
- *Children previously looked after by a local authority or other state care, including children adopted from state care or equivalent from outside England and Wales.’*

(Department for Education UK, 2025a)

This focus is implemented through an evidence-informed approach that supports all pupils to thrive by the time they finish school. The evidence for a systematic synthetic phonics approach to teaching is strong (Crawford, M., Raheel, N., Korochkina, M. et al., 2025) and is not the focus of this paper. However, beyond phonics, a disciplinary literacy approach to reading and writing will support pupils further. This area is rarely explored for younger pupils.

What is disciplinary literacy?

Disciplinary literacy focuses on the ways in which each subject discipline reads, writes and communicates across the curriculum (Shanahan, 2019). There are key differences between reading and writing in English to how scientists, mathematicians and historians read and write. For example, in English reading, pupils should:

- make connections
- draw inferences
- draw on background knowledge
- ask questions
- visualise what they see in their heads
- and clarify the meaning of unknown words, as well as monitor comprehension.

(Bilton et al, 2021, Willingham 2017, Oakhill et al 2014, Quigley, 2020 and Tennent, 2014).

However, scientists will utilise these English reading strategies, but will also explore scientific vocabulary, analyse data, make observations and draw conclusions. Conversely, historians will interpret sources, they compare and contrast information and look at trends over time. Each subject discipline has its own unique way of reading. Understanding this difference supports pupils to make progress across the curriculum.

A disciplinary literacy approach to curriculum and pedagogy is fundamental to ensuring educational excellence and equity. The ability to gain deep subject knowledge through subject-specific language is essential for academic success and ensures that the most vulnerable pupils can meaningfully engage with the curriculum.

The issue: equity for all pupils

Reading and writing is an issue for many pupils from poorer backgrounds or otherwise underserved in society (for example, not provided with enough help or quality services, such as housing). This is not to say that these groups cannot achieve and thrive – they can, but extenuating circumstances makes this a real challenge, and this is reflected in the national data. Disciplinary literacy is not the panacea for all difficulties, and a focus on reading is not the only way to improve the outcomes for these pupils. Other aspects include teacher quality, an ethos of high expectations for all pupils, high quality teaching in English and mathematics, deploying staff effectively and strategic leadership (DfE, 2025b & Macleod et al, 2015). The focus of this white paper is on educational excellence and having high expectations across the curriculum through a disciplinary literacy lens.

Identifying the problematic: What does the data tell us?

1. Attendance and reading as the main barrier to attainment.

Research from the **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2023)** in the UK shows that,

*‘Analysis of a representative sample of 300 schools’ Pupil Premium strategy statements found that 75% cited attendance and 74% mentioned **reading** as the main barriers to attainment for their pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding.’*

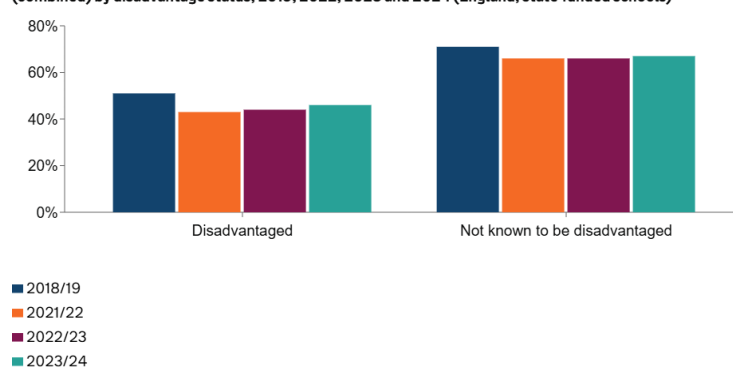
Source: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/attendance-and-reading-key-barriers-to-disadvantaged-pupils-progress-say-three-in-four-schools>

[Pupil Premium funding is additional money provided by the government to schools in England to support disadvantaged pupils and improve their educational outcomes.]

2. Data at the end of KS2 shows a gap in attainment.

England’s national data:

Percentage of pupils at the end of key stage 2 meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) by disadvantage status, 2019, 2022, 2023 and 2024 (England, state-funded schools)



Footnotes

1. Data is not available for 2020 and 2021 as assessments were cancelled in these years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Writing teacher assessment and reading, writing and maths (combined) measures from 2018 onwards are not directly comparable to previous years due to changes in the writing teacher assessment frameworks.

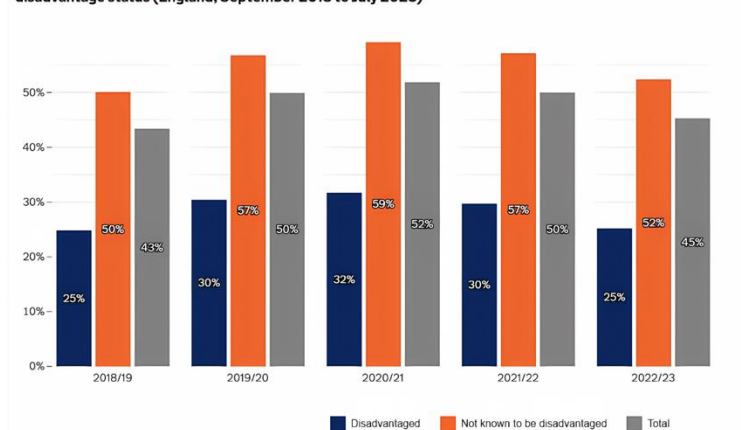
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Source: Department for Education (2025) KS2 attainment. Accessed: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2023-24#dataBlock-4be9dc29-19d0-4634-b845-8939fed88512-charts>

Looking at England's data, those underserved pupils (named as disadvantaged in the graph above), have a significant gap in their achievement in reading, writing and mathematics by the time they finish primary school. This has implications for their future employment and success in the world.

3. By the end of secondary school, the gap between those termed as disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged has significantly widened.

Percentage of students achieving a grade 5 or above in both GCSE English and maths, by disadvantage status (England, September 2018 to July 2023)



Source: Department for Education (2024) Attainment at 16. Accessed: [https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/compulsory_school_age_\(5_to_16_years\)/attainment_at_age_16/latest#tab_By_disadvantage_status_over_time_Visualisation](https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/compulsory_school_age_(5_to_16_years)/attainment_at_age_16/latest#tab_By_disadvantage_status_over_time_Visualisation)

4. Adult literacy skills are lower within the prison population.

Underachievement in reading and writing at primary and secondary school is overrepresented in the prison population.

'At any given time, there are around 80,000 people in custody in England and Wales. Around two-thirds of them have the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old. This is more than four times higher than in the general adult population.'

Source: National Literacy Trust, UK. Accessed: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/criminal-justice/#:~:text=At%20any%20given%20time%2C%20there,can%20make%20a%20huge%20difference.>

In conclusion, a renewed focus on how we teach literacy across the curriculum will support and encourage improvements for individuals into adult life.

The importance of disciplinary literacy – what are the benefits?

Disciplinary literacy benefits all, from early years right the way through to secondary or high school pupils. It enables the 21st-century skills needed in a global market; equips pupils with specialised skills and knowledge required within the disciplines and enables pupils to achieve across the curriculum.

Reading comprehension strategies

Explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies as part of a disciplinary literacy approach has been shown through several studies to improve pupils reading comprehension standards. This strategy is often time-limited (pupils only complete this for a short amount of time), but it is particularly beneficial for those who need explicit examples and forms a subject-specific example of metacognition.

‘More studies have been conducted with primary age pupils, but the teaching of reading comprehension strategies appears effective across both primary (+6 months progress) and secondary schools (+7 months progress).’ EEF, 2021

Critical thinking

Disciplinary literacy empowers pupils to read complex texts and information specific to each subject area. It encourages pupils to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information from multiple sources, promoting deeper understanding and critical thinking skills.

‘Disciplinary literacy provides learners with the specialist vocabulary to understand and communicate in specific-subject areas, helps learners develop critical thinking and expertise in each subject, supporting their metacognition.’ Bedrock Learning (2022)

‘Disciplinary literacy tries to get learners to grasp the ways literacy is used to create, disseminate, and critique information in the various disciplines.’ Professor Timothy Shanahan (2019)

Oral language and communication skills

By mastering the language and conventions of different disciplines, pupils develop stronger communication skills, enabling them to express their ideas clearly and persuasively in both written and oral formats.

‘It makes explicit the ways people within disciplinary communities think, read, and write. This allows students the opportunity to understand those practices so they can better navigate those spaces in society.’ Humphrey (2024)

‘Disciplinary literacy is about teaching pupils the language they need to participate in a subject.’ Quigley et al (2021a)

Engagement and motivation

Disciplinary literacy connects pupils to real-world applications of knowledge and skills, fostering a sense of relevance and purpose. This connection can spark greater interest and motivation in learning.

‘Therefore, the economic future of our state, as well as our students and their success as productive citizens and critical thinkers link to disciplinary literacy.’ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

‘Disciplinary literacy can offer a powerful approach for schools to consider implementing in their school to improve equity of curriculum access.’ Quigley et al (2021)

Preparation for the future

By engaging in disciplinary literacy practices, pupils develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success in secondary education, higher education, and future careers. They become adept at navigating the specific demands of different academic and professional fields.

‘One such benefit is that disciplinary literacy may be one of the most targeted ways to give students—especially historically marginalized ones—access to an exclusive space in society: academia.’ Humphrey (2024)

‘An approach to improving literacy across the curriculum whereby all teachers are supported to understand how to teach students to read, write, and communicate effectively in their subject.’ Quigley et al (2021)

Connections across the curriculum

Disciplinary literacy encourages teachers to collaborate and integrate content across different subject areas. This approach helps pupils recognise the interconnectedness of knowledge and apply skills and concepts across disciplines.

To conclude, disciplinary literacy offers a powerful approach to education, deepening comprehension, critical thinking, communication skills, engagement, and preparation for future success. By embracing disciplinary literacy practices, teachers and leaders empower pupils to become active and informed participants in knowledge of the subject disciplines.

Key actions

Whilst there are many benefits to disciplinary literacy, here are five key actions that might support rapid progress in this area.

Key action 1: Start early

The concept of disciplinary literacy should start early in primary or elementary schools, because the notion of schema or building a mental model is important. Schema can be described as a mental structure of organising complex bodies of knowledge in the mind. Very often, this concept is not always understood by all teachers, and can lead to a fragmented, rather than sequenced approach to learning throughout the primary years.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the building block and starting point for this learning and these might be basic to begin with but deliberately sequenced to build knowledge as pupils move through the primary years. The difference between novices and experts is that experts build on the knowledge they already have and connect them together (Haley & Lohr, 2018). Novices need concepts to be built up and this needs to be made explicit to them. Pupils need to learn new ideas by building on what they already know (Benner, 1982 & Ausubel, 1968). Ippolito et al (2024), stress the importance of starting early:

‘We believe that disciplinary literacy ways of thinking and working should be taught in age-appropriate ways as early as kindergarten...these are to adopt habits that can be later refined and shaped.’

Disciplinary literacy is often associated with secondary or high school students but starting early is a gap that should be explored.

Building foundational knowledge

The focus for primary or elementary pupils is on developing strong foundational literacy skills. Professor Timothy Shanahan and colleagues (2008 & 2014) emphasises that disciplinary literacy depends on basic literacy and advocates a 3-tier system, so that it is developmentally appropriate. The information below includes some of the key discourse in this area.

Tier 1 - Basic literacy includes:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- oral reading fluency
- vocabulary and encounters with subject specific vocabulary
- reading comprehension
- early exposure to disciplinary texts, such as stories to introduce concepts.

Tier 2 - Intermediate literacy includes:

- using increasingly complex spelling strategies (e.g. prefixes and suffixes);

- general reading comprehension strategies (e.g. prediction, summarising and visualising etc.)

Tier 3 - Disciplinary literacy includes:

- older pupils learn to read and write within the disciplines.
- literacy is subject specific and aware of the different ways that scientists, mathematicians and historians navigate their subject.
- build 'habits in the mind,' enabling pupils to think and speak within a discipline.

(Shanahan et al, 2008 and 2014, Condie et al, 2016, DfES, 2023 & Colwell et al, 2023)

Early emphasis on building foundational knowledge and subject-specific skills ensures that pupils are not left behind as the content becomes more complex. This should be age and stage appropriate. For example, in geography, pupils could be read stories about maps, then draw simple maps in KS1, before looking at more complex maps as they move through school. This knowledge across subjects supports them with reading, develops their background knowledge and thus improves reading comprehension (Willingham, 2017, Oakhill J, Cain K, Elbro C., 2014 and Tennent, 2014).

Key point:

- Disciplinary literacy should start early in an age-appropriate way, but priority should be given to foundational literacy skills.

Key action 2: Develop critical thinking skills and knowledge

The disciplinary literacy approach sits firmly within the salient aspect of understanding the subject disciplines as part of a knowledge-rich curriculum as opposed to only a set of generalised skills. 'Knowledge-rich' can be simplified as a *'well-sequenced curriculum that is underpinned by an understanding of how children learn...it must be based on a rich conception of knowledge that includes the skills and attitudes that contribute to success'* (Quigley, 2019). It emphasises the importance of careful sequencing and coherence, explicit teaching and long-term retention of knowledge. In addition, it facilitates critical thinking skills.

Fang and Colosimo (2024) argue that disciplinary literacy will prepare pupils for being citizens of the world and that current scientific issues that appear in the media, such as 'headlines in newspapers and websites require critical analysis as these reports can be distorted from the original source.' Being able to analyse sources and have a critical view of what is happening will be a key skill within the digital age, where information is freely available. Brock et al (2014) explain that young pupils are accessing content online and that we need to support pupils to take a 'critical stance' when encountering texts online and in print. This means that the need for critical analysis and checking sources of evidence is even more pertinent for the digital age.

Although the discourse around a knowledge-rich curriculum presents a dichotomy between knowledge and skills, Yandell (2023) dispels this myth by stating the following:

- Knowledge and skills are interdependent, not opposing forces.
- Critical thinking and problem-solving require a strong knowledge base.

Key points:

- **We need a strong knowledge base to write, read and communicate across the curriculum.**
- **We also need to be able to collaborate, be resilient, think critically and problem solve.**
- **Deep and meaningful learning across the curriculum, enables strong background knowledge, which in-turn, improves reading comprehension.**

Key action 3: Enhance oral language across the curriculum

‘Subject specific talk explores how, “mathematical talk is different from scientific talk, historical talk or artistic talk...they ask different questions, use different vocabularies and think and reason in different ways.” Alexander (2020)

Oral language is foundational for literacy and embedding subject specific talk supports comprehension, expression, collaboration and improves reading comprehension. If pupils can talk like scientists or historians, orally forming sentence stems in the discipline, then this will support them with their writing. Interestingly, Graham and Herbert (2010) carried out a study that showed that writing about texts in science and history etc., also improved reading comprehension and this will support pupils’ oral language. For example, if the pupils have written about the digestive system in science, this gives them the knowledge to speak and discuss this concept in more detail.

Key points:

- **Oral language improves reading and writing and reading and writing improves oral language.**
- **All these aspects are important for improving pupil outcomes.**

Key action 4: Teach concepts through stories

Stories are “psychologically privileged”

Willingham, D. (2009)

Stories play an essential role in disciplinary literacy because they support pupils with their knowledge and skills in a subject and improve background knowledge. In essence, pupils will remember more of the content of their learning if it is within a story.

Over 30 years ago, Graesser et al (1994) carried out a study exploring how much participants remembered from different types of texts. They listened to stories and then expository texts (e.g. non-fiction news articles, recipes, guides etc.). The results were quite profound:

‘Subjects listened to a set of stories and expository texts. Their memory was later tested and subjects remembered about 50% more from the stories than they did from the expository passages.’

This important research has implications for the books we read aloud to pupils to encourage reading for pleasure and the books we read across the curriculum. Stories are not only engaging and enjoyable, but they can also play a dual role in supporting pupils to understand key concepts. For example, for younger pupils, the concept of empire and migration could be understood through reading books like *Coming to England* by Florella Benjamin, or the concept of the water cycle in science, could be explored through a picture book about the process. This is also an opportunity to show a diverse range of characters who are relatable to a variety of pupils. For example, showing pupils who live in different types of housing or characters who are different from and/or similar to pupils.

Key point:

- **Stories are essential for all pupils, particularly those who do not read at home.**

Key action 5: Use technology for equity and inclusion

Debates and discussions about key questions and concepts across the curriculum do not always have to be face-to face and in-person. The emergence of modern technologies (for example, 1:1 devices) and apps enables dialogue to take place online, especially when giving feedback or collaborative working on a piece of writing. These might be alternative ways to incorporate pupils who are non-verbal or have a particular educational or social need.

Colwell et al (2023) explore the use of digital technology in their paper on supporting elementary teachers with disciplinary literacy. They argue that:

‘Digital texts and tools in elementary disciplinary literacy-focused learning can support, structure, and serve to enhance learning experiences, afford individualized interactions with text and allow students to engage in the study of texts beyond their traditional reading levels.’

In short, digital literacy can bridge the gap and provide support for our most vulnerable learners, enabling educators to adapt and differentiate their teaching to meet the needs of all learners. Adaptive teaching (for example, explicit instruction, flexible grouping, assistive technology etc.) is essential for all learners, but differentiation may still be needed for those with significant needs or mixed-age classes.

The quality of teaching will be an essential aspect of using technology in the classroom, as stated in a new report on, ‘Effective practices for literacy teaching,’ where professional development is cited as crucial:

‘...the presence of a digital literacy curriculum and appropriate ICT infrastructure are certainly necessary, but these alone are not sufficient. In addition, teacher-related factors are also important – especially teachers’ confidence and skills in using ICT effectively in their teaching practice. Thus, investment in both initial teacher training as well as continuing professional development is essential.’ (Harrison, et al., 2025)

Key points:

- **Digital literacy is a vital way of promoting inclusive practices in the classroom.**
- **Professional learning is essential for a digital literacy.**

Professional development implications

- Ongoing training is vital for teachers to develop confidence and expertise in disciplinary literacy.
- Professional learning communities can foster collaboration and shared practice.
- Schools must provide structured support, resources, and time for teachers to embed disciplinary literacy.
- Leadership plays a key role in orchestrating whole-school approaches.

Key recommendations

Recommendations for schools and organisations, including publishers

Recommendation 1:

Organisations should place disciplinary literacy at the heart of school improvement and curriculum planning. This is to ensure that pupils have deep learning without rushing through concepts. This needs to be age and stage appropriate. For example, oral language and stories for our youngest learners and beyond, to in-depth essays for our older learners.

Recommendation 2:

Ensure any training and professional development focusses on the following key aspects:

- ✓ Starting early
- ✓ Outlining the difference between reading, writing and communicating across the curriculum
- ✓ Developing oral language across the curriculum
- ✓ Embedding stories to read for pleasure, read aloud to pupils and stories to introduce key concepts
- ✓ Utilising technology for equity

Recommendations for governments, education departments and education leaders

Recommendation 1:

Build disciplinary literacy into the national professional development framework. Invest in training and resource creation tailored to subject and age, and school and teacher needs.

Recommendation 2:

Review school curriculum and embed explicit references to disciplinary literacy across all subjects and stages. For example, national curriculum statements around oral language across the curriculum.

Recommendation 3:

Invest in further research into the power of disciplinary literacy for primary-aged pupils and provide a synthesis of the research behind disciplinary literacy. For example, work with partners to better understand and deliver disciplinary literacy and the tools to assess pupil performance.

Recommendation 4:

Ensure supporting digital infrastructure is part of your national education strategy so that digital literacy is not a barrier for some schools.

Conclusion

Disciplinary literacy is a powerful way of improving reading and writing outcomes for all pupils, crucially including the most disadvantaged pupils. It is part of a wider group of strategies to improve educational outcomes, which includes work on attendance and ensuring pupils feel a sense of belonging. It should be prioritised by schools, organisations and governments.

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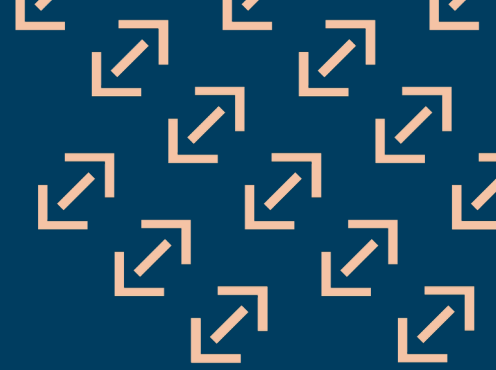
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