



# LITERACY IN ENGLAND

COUNTRY REPORT  
SHORT VERSION

March 2016

**This document has been published by the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET).**

**The report was completed in 2016.**

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# 1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in England is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries<sup>1</sup>. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012<sup>2</sup>. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"<sup>3</sup>.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG's literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity<sup>4</sup>).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels**; both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the network and its activities see: [www.eli-net.eu](http://www.eli-net.eu).

<sup>2</sup> In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Equity" was added by ELINET.

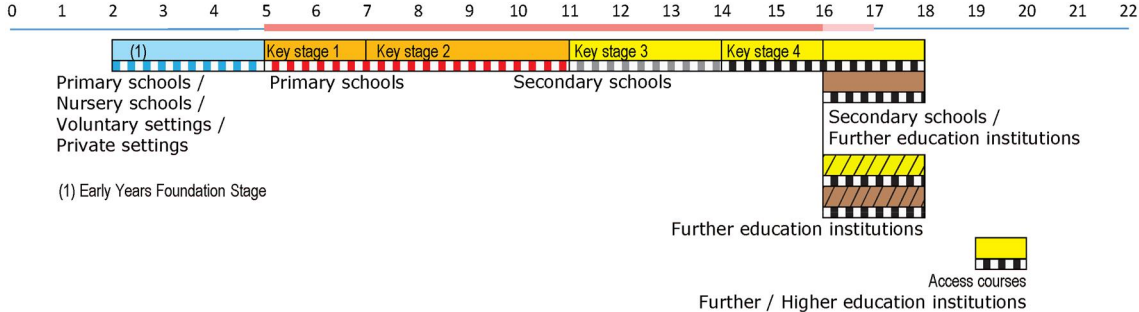
<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/>.

# 2 General Information about the Education System of England

Each of the four countries of the United Kingdom has its own education system. Each has sole legislative and administrative power over educational policy within its borders. In England, legislation requires that all those aged between 5 and 16 years should be in full-time education, which is usually taken to mean school. Some 93% of those are in non fee-paying publicly provided schools, some 7% are in private schools (ISC, 2015) and a very small proportion are educated at home.

As to 16 to 18-year-olds, the law in England is now that 16- to 18-year-olds must either stay in full-time education (at a school or college), start an apprenticeship or traineeship, or, work or volunteer for 20 hours or more a week, while in part-time education or training (Gov.UK, 2015a).

Figure 1: Structure of the English School System<sup>6</sup>



Non-fee-paying pre-school provision is available for all children from the age of 3 years, either in nursery classes or nursery schools, typically for only part of the school day. Attendance is voluntary; in 2014, 97% of the eligible three and four-year-olds attended. 39% of the state-funded nursery places are supplied by private or voluntary providers (DfE, 2014c). State-provided nursery classes may be attached to primary schools, or grouped in a nursery school.

To ease the transition into formal learning, the 'Foundation Stage' curriculum runs through the nursery years and into Reception, which is the first class of Primary School, the class that children enter in the September of the academic year in which they will have their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. The next 2 years of primary school, Year 1 and Year 2 (ages 5-7), constitute Key Stage 1. The following four years, Years 3 to 6 (ages 7-11), form Key Stage 2.

A few Local Authorities retain selective secondary systems, dividing children at 11 years into grammar schools and secondary moderns or 'comprehensives'. But less than 5% of England's students of secondary school age attend such state-funded grammar schools (Bolton, 2015). Less than 3% of students in grammar schools received free school meals (a much-used indicator of poverty) as against 18% of students nationally (Skipp et al., 2013). Over 12% of entrants to grammar school come from primary schools outside the state school sector (Skipp et al., 2013)

Most secondary students attend comprehensive schools. However, these vary in focus and range of courses offered: an increasing proportion are now academies, under the direct control of the

<sup>6</sup> See Structure of European education system at [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/facts\\_and\\_figures\\_en.php#diagram](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/facts_and_figures_en.php#diagram).

Department for Education, rather than the Local Authority, or free schools, under the control of the group that set them up. Currently some 20% of secondary schools in England are academies or free schools (DfE, 2014d). Both academies and free schools are subject to the same school admissions code as all other state-funded schools.

Secondary education is split in terms of curriculum into Key Stage 3 (Years 7, 8 and 9, ages 11-14) and Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11, ages 14-16). Students take a wide range of subjects in Key Stage 3, narrowing this in Key Stage 4, when they are preparing for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in their chosen subjects. These are usually taken in Year 11 in anything between 1 and 12 subjects. A 'good pass' in 5 subjects including English and mathematics is a prerequisite to preparation for higher education.

England is only moderately successful in enabling students to overcome the disadvantage of poverty. In 2013-14, fewer than 34% of GCSE entrants receiving free school meals achieved 5 good passes, while over 60% of all other students achieved this (DfE, 2015a). As to ethnic background, there is variation between ethnic groups, with over 74% of Chinese students, 56% of white British and 47% of Black Caribbean pupils achieving 5 good passes (DfE, 2015a).

### 3 Literacy Performance Data

England participated in IEA's PIRLS assessment of reading comprehension in Fourth grade (Year 5) in 2001, 2006 and 2011, and in PISA – the OECD's assessment of reading literacy involving 15 year-olds every three years from 2000. However, the PISA scores in 2000 and 2003 were based on samples that did not meet the PISA response-rate standards, so cannot be used for comparison. England took part in OECD's PIAAC study of adult literacy in 2012.

In PIRLS 2011, England, with a score of 552, performed significantly above the EU average of 535. Only three countries scored significantly higher. However, England's reading performance fell from 553 in 2001 to 539 in 2006, before rising again almost to its 2001 level. This contrasts with other EU countries, where average overall reading performance remained quite similar across all the cycles.

In PISA 2012, England, with a score of 500, performed only slightly above the EU average of 489. In 2000, England's overall level of performance at 523 was significantly higher than the EU average. It then dropped to 496 in 2006, falling further to 494 in 2009 before rising again to 500 in 2012. But, as noted above, the sample tested in 2000 did not meet the required sampling standard and may have produced a falsely inflated result. The more trustworthy comparison is between the scores for 2006 and subsequent years. During this time England's adolescents have made progress after a slight decline.

In England's PIRLS 2011 results, 18% of pupils were considered low-performing readers, slightly less than the 20% average across EU countries. In PISA 2012, the proportion of low-performing readers stood at 17%, less than the 19.7% average across EU countries. In PISA, such low-performing students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, and make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. As to changes across time, in PIRLS, the proportion of low-performing readers was stable, at 21.6%, across the two first cycles and then in 2011 decreased by 4.3 percentage points. In PISA, the proportion of readers performing below level 2 was, at 13%, lower in 2000 than in the two subsequent cycles of the study, whose figures are more reliable – 18.6% in 2009 and 16.7% in 2012.

The proportion of top-performing readers in England was 18% in PIRLS 2011, twice as high as the 9% EU average. In PISA 2012, the proportion of top reading-performers stood at 9%, more than the EU average of 7%.

In PIRLS, England did not administer the Home Questionnaire. So no data were available about the gap in scores between pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In PISA, at 93 points, this gap was slightly higher than the EU average of 89.

In PISA 2009, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was, at 24 points, lower than the EU average of 38. Similarly, in PIRLS 2011, the mean score difference between those who always spoke the test language at home, and those who sometimes or never did so was below the average for EU countries (18 vs 26). In PISA, this gap according to the language spoken at home was also lower than the EU average (48 vs 54).

In PIRLS 2011, the 23 score point gender gap in favour of girls in England was significantly higher than the corresponding EU average difference of 12. The same trend as the overall reading score was observed: the gender difference score decreased in 2006 and rose back to its 2001 value in 2011. In PISA 2012, this gap, at 25 points, was lower than the EU average of 44 points.

In conclusion, England has performed well in reading over time at grade 4 (Year 5). Although its performance significantly dropped in 2006, it returned to its initial level in 2011. The performance of England's 15-year-olds remained above the EU average across the cycles. But the substantial decrease noted between 2000 and 2006 may be more apparent than real. The important comparison is between 2006 and 2012, which shows a net increase of 3 points over the period. The proportion of low-performing readers is close to the EU countries' average in both studies. Among 4<sup>th</sup> graders, a very high percentage of top-performing readers is largely responsible for the very high overall score. England's spread of achievement, the gap between low and top performing readers, was higher than the EU average on PIRLS and slightly lower on PISA. Among adolescents, the gap according to socio-economic status was somewhat higher in England than the EU average. The gaps according to migration and language spoken at home were lower. The gender gap was higher than the European average for the younger pupils, but smaller than the European average for adolescents.

**The following issues could usefully be addressed:**

- Raising the performance of lower-achieving readers to address the long tail of under-achievement and ensure greater equity in reading outcomes. The high level of reading resources and access to additional support for reading in English classrooms can provide a basis for raising the performance of lower achievers.
- Clarifying the status of synthetic phonics in early reading teaching and learning, to ensure that students can draw on a wider range of word recognition strategies.
- Addressing the gender difference in reading in favour of girls, which in England is above the EU average level at primary level. This requires interventions to improve boys' performance and interest/engagement in reading.
- Identifying the effects of the Phonics Screening Check (DfE, 2015b) and the Key Stage Tests on students' reading performance and confidence.
- Ensuring that all students, especially 'at risk' students, have access to books and other educational resources at home.
- Ensuring that all students are taught by teachers who have regularly availed themselves of professional development related to literacy.

As far as adults are concerned, with a PIAAC 2012 score of 272, the United Kingdom (England + Northern Ireland) performed at the same level as the EU at 271. It should be remembered that only 17 EU countries took part in PIAAC in 2012, so the comparison with other countries should be taken with caution. At 124, the spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers – was somewhat wider in the UK than the EU-17 average of 117. The proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 in UK was 16.7%, very close to the EU-17 average of 16.4%.

Women performed somewhat less well, at 271, than men at 274, but the gender gap of 3 score points in favour of men was very slightly higher in the UK than the EU average of 2 score points, in marked contrast with the relatively high score difference between genders in favour of girls observed in younger generations. The gap of 44 points according to parents' level of education was somewhat higher than the EU average of 41, reflecting the trend in PISA. As for the gap according to the language spoken at home, at 27 it was nearly the same as the EU average of 28.

However, in England, adults aged 55-65 perform better than 16-24 year-olds in both literacy and numeracy. In fact, England is the only country where the oldest age group has higher proficiency in both literacy and numeracy than the youngest age group.



# 4 Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups)

## 4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to **creating a more literate environment**:

“Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where **reading for pleasure** is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole.” (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children’s emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children’s language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure in many ways. However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Particularly this is true in adolescence as it is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term *identities and self-concepts* related to reading and media use. (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff, 45f.)

### 4.1.1 Pre-primary years

#### Creating a literate environment at home

The home learning environment, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Taggart et al. 2015; UNICEF 2001). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

While England scores comparatively well on the number of books in the homes of pre-school and school-aged children, the effect of disparity is more marked than elsewhere in Europe. More pupils in England (15%) reported having over 200 books than on average across EU countries (12%) and only 9% reported having 10 or fewer books at home, compared with an EU-24 average of 11%. But, in England, the achievement gap between those with 0-10 books and those with 200+ books is 98 points. This is greater than the EU average of 82 points and may be important in interpreting the tail of underachievement in England.

In a large survey of the parents of children aged 3-5 years, the National Literacy Trust found that 99.7% of the children had access to children’s books at home, while 91.4% had access to a touch screen at

home. They also found that 71.7% of children looked at or read stories at home every day in a typical week (Formby, 2014).

Despite these seemingly re-assuring figures, it is a matter of concern that there are differences between parents that relate to social class and migrant factors. There is a need for programmes to engage all parents and raise their awareness of literacy as a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood. In particular there is a need for more family literacy programmes with a focus on supporting migrant parents and carers in understanding and fostering and enjoying the literacy development of their children.

#### **4.1.2 Children and adolescents**

##### **Creating a literate environment in school**

According to PIRLS 2011, there was a major emphasis on reading for pleasure in the intended language/reading curriculum in England. England was among a group of only 9 countries participating in PIRLS 2011 that reported this (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 9, p. 36). Indeed, one of the stated aims of the current curriculum for English in England is to "*develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information*" (DfE, 2014a, p. 3).

However, the accompanying assessment systems on which schools are judged focus heavily on technical competence – decoding isolated words and non-words in the *Phonics Screening Check* (taken by 5- to 6-year-olds); literal and low-level inferential comprehension in the two reading papers of the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum Tests in reading, taken by 6- to 7-year-olds, where attention is also given to English grammar, punctuation and spelling. The tests for 10-11-year-olds have a similar narrow focus. The data from these tests contribute significantly to judgements made about schools' effectiveness, by the schools staff, local authorities and other interested parties and by inspectors.

So, while England does indeed give emphasis in the curriculum to reading for pleasure, the use made of test data, through the DfE's RAISEonline, a computerised approach to recording and analysing key data, sends the message that technical aspects of reading and writing are more important (Ofsted, 2015a).

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 87% of pupils in England were in classrooms that had a classroom library (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 8.13, p.240; EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H2 in Appendix C). 70% of students were in classrooms with more than 50 books, well above the EU-24 average of 21% (ibid.). 73% of students in England were in classrooms where they could borrow books from the classroom library, compared with an EU-24 average of 57%. Further, 62% of students in England were in classrooms whose teacher took them to a library other than the classroom library, at least monthly. This was about the same as the EU-24 average of 65%. However, access to public libraries is increasingly problematic: Local Authorities in England have a legal obligation to provide libraries and are not allowed to charge for book loans. Cuts have been imposed on library services throughout England that have resulted in many library closures and reduced services and reduced book purchasing in those that remain (Davies, 2013).

##### **Offering digital literacy learning opportunities in schools (and other public spaces, e.g. libraries)**

50% of students in England have a computer available for reading lessons, compared to the EU-average of 45% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix C, Table I6). In England, 43% use a computer at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 40%. In England, 40% of students

are in classrooms whose teachers report that the students use computers to write stories or other texts at least monthly. The corresponding EU-24 average is lower at 33%. England lags behind countries such as Denmark and Norway where use of computers in reading and writing is concerned. However, a recent PISA publication notes that improved access to computers does not necessarily lead to higher scores.

In 2014, a study commissioned by the education technology charity *Tablets for Schools* found that 68% of primary schools were using tablet computers (ITPRO, 2014). In 9% of schools there was an individual tablet device for every student. It is expected that the number of tablets in England's primary and secondary schools will have risen from 430,000 in 2014 to almost 900,000 in 2016.

Most classrooms in England also have interactive whiteboards, which also contribute to digital interaction. However, their potential for enlarging teacher's pedagogical repertoires and students' understanding of literacy and its uses, is not always fully exploited. Where their introduction has focused on technical matters, they have not significantly enhanced the teaching of literacy.

In 2009, the European Commission extended its concern with digital literacy to include media literacy, including such competencies, as critical evaluation and use of media content, and skills to create content (Council of the European Union, 2009). With a widespread concern with media literacy, England plays a large part in developing school practice in this area. However, it does not feature significantly in the National Curriculum.

While England scored well above the EU-24 average for access to computers in primary school in 2011, there were still wide gaps in provision, with 50% of students not being given regular access to a computer for the purposes of reading and writing. More attention is also needed to teacher training in appropriate pedagogy.

### **Strengthening the role of public libraries**

Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion. A recent survey found that young people who use the public library tend to hold more positive attitudes towards reading than young people who do not use it (Clark et al., 2011, Table 6, p. 15). However, there were marked gender differences among those who did use the library: girls were significantly more likely than boys to say that they use the public library because it has interesting materials and materials other than books, their family goes, it is a friendly space that also has computers, it has clubs and because they saw how good it was when their family showed them around.

All library authorities have, over the past 15 years, developed initiatives to attract and involve teenagers in reading, through creative activities, focusing on popular authors, graphic novels and magazines as well as more conventional texts. Many libraries offer popular quizzes, competitions and games. However, these attract and involve only a minority of the age group targeted. However, these initiatives have been seriously compromised by increasing financial difficulties (Voices for the Library, 2015).

### **Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples**

The first pre-condition of improving a situation is recognition of the problem. Socio-economic background is a significant influence on literacy achievement in England: educational deficits appear early in a child's life, even before entry into school, and they widen throughout the school system,

especially during the primary phase of schooling (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). Parental (and child) behaviours and attitudes also have a pivotal part to play (Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman, 2011). In view of the impact of the early years, it is not surprising that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004).

### **Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents**

Perhaps in response to such findings, the Department for Education has funded the National Literacy Trust to develop a peer-led initiative to support parenting skills that impact on early literacy skills. *Early Words Together* is delivered by children's centres and community volunteers work with targeted families through 6 structured sessions over 6 weeks to empower parents to support the early literacy development of their children between the ages of 2-5 (NLT, 2014).

Another government-funded scheme, *Bookstart Corner* (Book Trust, 2015b), organised by the Book Trust, is an intervention programme for children aged 12 to 24 months, designed to address potential learning and literacy problems of children at risk of school failure. It involves a gift of books and is delivered through children's centres, but conducted by practitioners in the family home (Book Trust, 2015b). The sister programme *Bookstart* also supports disadvantaged families through the universal elements of its book gifting programme for babies and 3-year-olds, gifted respectively through health and early years professionals (Book Trust, 2015c).

Other government-funded and privately sponsored programmes have addressed the problems of teenage mothers, troubled families and those isolated at home. Public libraries have aimed to involve more parents of young children, through story-telling programmes and other initiatives. Aimed at primary school students, the *Summer Reading Challenge* has successfully involved many thousands of children aged 4 to 11 (nearly 800,000 in 2014) in reading six self-chosen books over the summer school holidays (The Reading Agency, 2015a).

The Reading Agency's *Chatterbooks* (Reading Agency, 2015e) is a national network of reading groups for children and young people aged from 4 to 14 years, which support children's literacy development by encouraging them to enjoy reading and talking about books. *Chatterbooks* groups are run in libraries and schools, and other places where children gather to do fun and creative activities. Developed with expert librarians and teachers, *Chatterbooks* gives schools a best practice model for running reading groups. The sessions are designed to give children confidence in speaking, writing and reading in a group, choosing books for themselves, and talking about what they like to read. It is used in school in a variety of ways – for example in supporting *Reading Recovery*; engaging boys in reading; with gifted and talented children; or supporting transition from primary to secondary school.

While parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, it also matters significantly during the teenage and even adult years (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). The National Literacy Trust (2013) has called for more literacy resources to be made available in economically deprived localities, such as pop up literacy shops, which would include online literacy support. Despite a difficult financial situation, in some areas there has been some increased access to library services. For example Norfolk County Council has worked with local businesses to set up a number of pop-up libraries around the community. As well as increasing library membership numbers, this initiative removes some of the perceived barriers in visiting traditional libraries and increases access to learning materials, particularly for those who would otherwise not engage with library resources.

However, as indicated above, such initiatives are threatened by recent cuts to library services (Voices for the Library, 2015). Current initiatives also tend to focus on the lower end of the age group, when it is those in the teenage years who are most at risk of losing interest in reading.

### **4.1.3 Adults**

#### **Fostering literacy provision for adults**

There are no formal government programmes to incentivise and support reading for pleasure for adults. However, there are organisations that promote adult literacy and reading for pleasure, such as the *National Literacy Trust*, the *National Institute for Adult Continuing Education*, the *Reading Agency* and *Booktrust*. Examples of current promotions include *Quick Reads* (Quick Reads, 2015) and *Reading Ahead* (formerly called the *Six Book Challenge*) (Reading Agency, 2015c) and the *Find a Read* database of recommended reads for emergent readers (Reading Agency, 2015d).

A small number of specialist publishers focus on producing books for adults who are beginner or reluctant readers. A notable example is *Gatehouse Books* (Gatehouse Books, 2015), which publishes and distributes books and resources for use in post-14 and adult basic education.

## 4.2 The Quality of Teaching

To improve the quality of teaching, important aspects must be considered:

- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Especially crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the report *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Come out on Top* (McKinsey 2007, p.17) states: "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers."

### 4.2.1 Pre-primary years

#### Improving the quality of preschool education

According to Eurostat (2014, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in United Kingdom is 0.3%. This puts the UK in the lowest third of the distribution. The percentages range from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland, to 1.01% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table D1 in Appendix B). England's low level of spending on Early Child Education and Care means that until the September of the year in which they become 5, most children have access to early childhood education for only a few hours each week. While the quality of Early Childhood education is high, with well-trained staff in all settings, there are insufficient places.

England's early learning goals (covering children in the Foundation Stage, i.e. aged 3 to 5) concerning literacy focus on phonic learning (the use of grapheme-phoneme correspondences) to an extent that is unusual for this age group in other European countries. Literacy Development in the Foundation Stage also involves initiating children into the pleasures of the written word. It is stressed in the curriculum document for this age group that children "*must be given access to a wide range of reading materials (books, poems and other written materials) to ignite their interest*" (DfE 2014a, p.8).

### 4.2.2 Children and adolescents

#### Literacy Curricula and Reading instruction in schools

From the start of Key Stage 1, reading is taught in England as part of the National Curriculum that also includes writing as well as speaking and listening and grammar under the heading of English. Throughout school education, English is considered as a Core Subject, in which reading and writing are centrally important.

Following its introduction in the Foundation Stage, phonics continues to feature as children progress through Key Stage 1. Despite the complex nature of English orthography, it is mandated that children should be taught to use their phonics knowledge and skills as the route to decode all words until automatic decoding has been embedded and reading is fluent (DfE, 2014a, KS1, Year 2, p. 17). It is noteworthy that phonics (and synthetic phonics in particular) is identified as the main approach to word recognition in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and at Key Stage 1. Other approaches, which some authorities consider might be expected to support this, such as the use of context clues, receive little instructional emphasis in the curriculum, or are actively discouraged. There is no attention to

approaches to phonics other than synthetic phonics: analytic phonics and the use of analogy do not feature in government documents.

At Key Stage 2 children should continue to apply knowledge of phonics in both reading and spelling, but the emphasis shifts somewhat towards the more meaning-focused technical aspects of reading and writing (i.e., vocabulary, comprehension of various sorts, spelling, punctuation and grammar).

According to Eurydice (EACEA, 2011a), England is among a small group of countries in which phonics is taught throughout primary schooling (others include France, Portugal and Spain). In a number of European countries (including Finland and Italy), phonics instruction is discontinued after the first or middle cycle of primary education. It should be noted that the curriculum analysed by Eurydice has been superseded. The new curriculum places even more emphasis on synthetic phonics.

It may be the case that the pre-2013 National Curriculum placed less emphasis on teaching specific reading comprehension skills than its successor, which includes a wide range of comprehension strategies. However, there may be a big discrepancy between the intended curriculum and what actually happens in the classroom.

The National Curriculum for secondary schools states that

*Teachers should develop pupils' spoken language, reading, writing and vocabulary as integral aspects of the teaching of every subject (DfE, 2014e, p. 10).*

While the secondary curriculum in England certainly includes attention to literacy learning in all subject areas, England's long tail of under-achievement documented in successive PISA surveys suggests that this is not adequately translated into action. There is a strong need for an identifiable literacy element in all subject areas, including English.

In 2011, teachers of Year 5 in England reported allocating less time to teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (123 instructional hours per year) than on average across EU-24 countries (147 hours) (Mullis et al., 2012a, exh. 8.4, p. 214). As to the nature of reading instruction at primary level, as Lankes and Carstensen (2007) observed from the PIRLS 2006 data, literacy instruction in primary schools in England at that time mainly consisted of a variety of methods with high individual support, but with a significant amount of individualised child-centred instruction. However, since 2006, the increasing governmental focus on synthetic phonics and the thoroughness with which this is monitored have made classrooms increasingly uniform in their approach. Instruction now tends to be whole-class, supplemented by teaching organised in small groups with apparently similar needs.

Among adolescents in England there are remarkable gaps in reading achievement – equivalent to almost three years of schooling – between students with good knowledge of reading strategies and those who have a limited knowledge of strategies, including metacognitive ones. There is a similar gap concerning the level of engagement. In view of these results, the reports of teachers concerning reading strategies and engagement are of interest. According to the PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia (Mullis et al., 2012a), in England, primary teachers reported implementing each strategy less often than on average across the EU-24, including basic strategies such as locating information within a text and higher-level ones, such as describing the style and structure of a text and determining the author's perspective and intention. If we assume that teachers across the EU-24 have a similar understanding of what implementation of each strategy entails, we can conclude that there is an under-emphasis on teaching comprehension in schools in England.

While there are no national data available for England's secondary schools, some PISA data also suggest that there is a need for explicit instruction of reading strategies: As reported above, in England, there is a gap of over 75 score points – equivalent to over two years of schooling – between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient for understanding and remembering a text, and those who have a limited knowledge of these metacognitive activities.

There is a clear need for greater attention to comprehension strategies in England's primary and secondary classrooms.

### **Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools**

In the UK students and teachers use literacy as a broad term to define reading, writing, speaking, listening and technological skills, opening up the concept of literacy to include digital and media literacies, seen central to learning. To improve the quality of literacy engagement and teaching, teachers and students are encouraged to use ICT in all subjects, as well as considering it as a subject in itself (DfE, 2014a, 2014e). Public and private partnerships promote ICT training and digital literacy engagement for students in the UK.

The new National Curriculum in England for the compulsory school years requires pupils to leave school digitally literate, which it defines as being able to use and express themselves through information and communication technology, at a level suitable for the future workplace and as active participants in a digital world (DfE 2014e). Much of this learning is accomplished in lessons on computing, one of the Foundation Subjects at Key Stage 3.

### **Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners**

According to PIRLS 2011, teachers in England, estimated that 22% of students in Grade 4 were in need of remedial support, and reported that 19% were in receipt of it (Appendix C, Table K1). On average across the EU-24, teachers estimated that 18% were in need of support, and that 13% were receiving it. In PIRLS 2011, 17% of students in England performed at or below the 'Low overall' reading benchmark. This is somewhat smaller than the proportion considered by their teachers to be in need of support, but close enough to the proportion in receipt of support.

The only national screening assessment in England, is the *Phonics Screening Check* (PSC) (Gov. UK, 2015b) for 5- to 6-year-olds. Extra attention is given to the skills of children not reaching the pass mark, who are then re-tested a year later. This new, statutory instrument was introduced at the end of the 2011–12 academic year, for all students at age six in publicly funded schools. The stated purpose was to confirm whether individual students have learned phonic decoding to an appropriate standard. Students who have not reached this standard at the end of Year 1 should receive support from their school to ensure that they can improve their phonic decoding skills. Students then have the opportunity to retake the PSC.

A three year survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research into the impact of the PSC commissioned by The Department for Education, led to the observations that:

- *Most children who achieve level 2 in reading and writing at Key Stage 1 [the standard expected for this age group] have previously met the expected standard on the check at the end of Year 1, but there is a substantial minority (over a quarter) who have not.*



- *As reported last year, one of the key messages to emerge from the evaluation so far is that many schools believe that a phonics approach to teaching reading should be used alongside other methods.*

(Walker et al., 2014, pp.10 and 11)

In England, at all levels of school education, teachers are expected to regularly assess student attainment, using the National Curriculum level descriptions and considering all three elements of English (speaking and listening, reading, and writing). It is the responsibility of individual schools to identify children needing extra support; this always involved teacher judgment, but a range of commercially produced tests are also available (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, p. 207). However, their use is by no means compulsory.

In primary schools, teacher assessment is supplemented by national tests. From 2016, both 7-year-olds and 11-year-olds sit two tests – one test for English grammar, punctuation and spelling, and one for reading. Both tests are more summative than formative or diagnostic in intention. Students will be awarded marks on a scale, rather than the National Curriculum Levels of previous years (DfE, 2015b, 2015e).

At secondary level, there are no national tests. At the end of Key Stage 3 (usually age 14) statutory assessment arrangements require teacher judgements to be recorded formally. At the end of Key Stage 4 (usually age 16) there is external assessment in the form of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications and vocational qualifications.

England needs a more comprehensive system of identifying those in need of greater assistance in the use of comprehension strategies and in engaging with reading and writing, as well as in the process of word identification. This should extend into secondary school and lead to appropriate support for those identified as in need of help.

### **Improving the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training**

In 2011, while only 1% of Year 5 students in England were taught by teachers who had not completed a Bachelor's degree or higher (compared with the EU-24 average of 20%), 28% were taught by a teacher with a post-graduate degree – about the same as the EU-24 average (Mullis et al. 2012, exh. 7.1, p. 188).

Over recent decades, the routes to qualification for primary teachers in England, have been through a three or four-year university bachelor's degree programme in primary education, followed by a year of probation. However, while in ten European countries initial education for primary teachers is at master's level and usually takes five years and while recent years have seen a widespread increase in the minimum length of initial teacher education in many European countries (EACEA, 2012, Fig. E2, p. 112), the trend in England has been in another direction.

Alternative routes into primary teaching have been developed in England, in which more emphasis is placed on experience of working in school. The most prominent programmes are the *School Direct Training Programmes* (open to "high quality graduates") and the *School-Centred Initial Teacher Training* (SCITT) programmes, designed and delivered by groups of neighbouring schools. These training programmes usually last for one academic year (full-time). While both the School Direct and the SCITT programmes strongly emphasise support by experienced teachers, both routes still include lectures, tutorials and seminars that aim to cover the same material as university courses. Both routes lead to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) recommendation, and most also to the PGCE qualification.

In addition, *Teach First* recruits 'high-flying' graduates who receive six weeks of intensive training in a university and then go on to teach in one of the scheme's schools (in low-income communities across England) for a period of two years, during which they complete the scheme's Leadership Development Programme (DfE, 2015i).

It is stipulated in the DfE 2015 document for England on Teachers' Standards that all teachers must:

*demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject* (DfE, 2015f, p.11).

All prospective teachers have to demonstrate professional competence in teaching reading skills by the end of their training. For instance, all trainees must be able to "*design opportunities for learners to develop their literacy skills*" (TDA revised 2008, p. 9).

It should be noted that those qualifying in England through the *Teach First* route have only a six week induction course before they start teaching in school – as unqualified teachers. As EACEA, 2011 observes, short-term courses "*tended to focus on generic teacher skills rather than on subject-specific pedagogy*" (EACEA, 2011a, p. 85).

However, a report by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) published in 2012, found that, of 44 newly qualified teachers studied, while twenty-one had good or better skills, only fourteen of these had received at least good training at every stage of their training and induction, with sufficient focus and in-depth learning, and not enough of the new teachers had experienced consistent high-quality training during their initial teacher education and induction to ensure that they developed good teaching skills, underpinned by a deep understanding of language development and the acquisition of literacy skills (Ofsted, 2012b).

It is evident that Initial Teacher Education in England needs a clear and compulsory focus on developing literacy expertise among future primary and secondary teachers, which should extend beyond decoding through phonics, to include both other approaches to word identification and comprehension strategies (for print and digital texts) and, also, where relevant, study skills.

As to CPD, much interest has been shown over the last decade – by the government, Ofsted, teachers and the wider professional community. Schools in England that place CPD at the heart of their planning for improvement, integrating performance management, self-review and CPD into a coherent cycle, raise standards and improve teaching (Ofsted, 2006). However, England has no statutory requirement for teachers to undertake courses of CPD. The revised set of Teachers' Standards, which came into effect in 2012, specifies only that teachers must "*take responsibility for improving teaching through appropriate professional development, responding to advice and feedback from colleagues*" (DfE, 2014f, p. 13).

The PIRLS 2011 data show that 27% of pupils in Grade 4 (Year 5) in England are taught by teachers who spent six hours or more engaged in professional development related to reading in the previous two years, while 45% were taught by teachers who spent less than 6 hours, and 27% by teachers who had not spent any time in literacy-related CPD. On average across the EU-24, teachers engaged more frequently in CPD than did teachers in England, although similar proportions had participated in no professional development.

Particularly in light of the need for improvement in comprehension strategies at upper primary and secondary level, improving the quality and participation rates of continuing professional development

targeted at building literacy expertise of teachers would seem to be an important priority. Despite the inclusion of the requirement to pass an ICT test in the award of Qualified Teacher Status, fostering digital literacy skills of teachers and students needs a stronger emphasis in both Initial Teacher Education and CPD in England.

### **Improving the quality of literacy instruction: Programmes, initiatives and examples**

All publicly-funded schools in the UK are connected to high speed internet. Investment from government and other sources for both research and teaching and learning initiatives is directed towards the integration of ICT in education, and the provision of resources and equipment, such as computers, ipads, projectors, smartboards, cameras, mobile devices, digital learning games and communication software. One exemplary programme in this area is the European project 'Innovative Technologies for an engaging classroom', one of the main aims of which is to increase participation through technology in UK classrooms.

At the pre-school level, programmes such as *Bookstart* and *Bookstart Corner*, described above, all focus on the quality of interaction between children, adults and texts. Most are aimed at meeting the needs of families living in difficult circumstances and have been shown to be effective.

At the primary school level, to complement the heavy concern with technical aspects of literacy learning of the government's formal tests, the *Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)* has developed scales for reading and writing that consist of graded descriptors of the observable behaviours of pupils at different stages, and also offer sets of "Next Steps" that the child might take to move forward (CLPE, 2016).

*Reading Recovery* is a school-based early literacy intervention designed for the lowest attaining 5-6-year-olds in mainstream education. Identified through sensitive screening, these children receive daily individual lessons with a specially trained teacher for up to 20 weeks. The aim is to accelerate learning to between three and five times the normal progress, so that children reach age-appropriate levels of reading and writing within 20 weeks. They develop the mental facility and attitudes to continue learning thereafter at normal rates of progress, from normal classroom teaching. In the year 2013 to 2014, 11,435 children received this intervention in the UK and Ireland, of whom 85% reached age-appropriate levels of literacy in 18 weeks or less (ILC, 2014).

In response to a lack of governmental attention to comprehension strategies in England's primary schools, other projects focus on developing comprehension and engagement. In the project *Reciprocal Reading*, upper primary students work on the same text, in groups of 5 or so, predicting, questioning, summarising and seeking clarification, learning through focused dialogue with each other.

*So Much More than Decoding* is an ITE project aimed at enabling intending secondary teachers of a range of subjects to address the literacy needs of their secondary students. The project has established an evidence base of the reading difficulties experienced by secondary-age school pupils both locally and internationally, which shows that only a very small proportion had problems that could usefully be addressed by systematic synthetic phonics. Building on this evidence base, the project has produced an informational booklet (Dombey et al., 2014) and teaching resources and has implemented teaching cycles within an action research framework to address a range of comprehension, fluency and attitudinal problems.

### **4.2.3 Adults**

#### **Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers**

Ofsted, the national inspection authority, sets and monitors the national standards for the quality of adult literacy providers and the national benchmarks for adult literacy performance. Institutions providing adult literacy education are accountable to Ofsted, and also to institutional Quality Assurance (QA) systems. Ofsted inspectors help bring about improvement by identifying strengths and areas for improvement, highlighting good practice and judging what steps need to be taken to improve provision further. Finally, they provide the relevant secretaries of state and other stakeholders with an independent public account of the quality of education and training, the standards achieved and how efficiently the provision is led and managed (Ofsted, 2012a, p. 5).

#### **Developing curricula for adult literacy**

The adult literacy standards (Excellence Gateway, 2015a) define the range of literacy skills and capabilities that adults need to function and progress at work and in society. The national standards for adult literacy and numeracy are specified at three levels: Entry level (corresponding to PIAAC Level 1, but sub-divided into 3), Level 1 (PIAAC Level 2) and Level 2 (PIAAC Level 3). The adult literacy and numeracy core curriculum (Excellence Gateway, 2015b) constructed in 2001 to reflect the newly developed national standards, gives specific detail about what skills should be taught. The adult literacy core curriculum describes the content of what should be taught in literacy programmes and sets out a clear set of skills required to meet national standards. It is divided into five levels and focuses on the speaking and listening as well as reading and writing.

#### **Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy**

In general teaching in the adult or FE sector is considered to be of lower status than teaching in schools. This is partly because so many teachers in the sector work part time (sessional) or do the job alongside other work or roles. It is also seen as offering less good working conditions and pay rates than the schools sector.

There is no national adult ITE curriculum in England. A number of awarding bodies design their awards within certain constraints. So there is a range of publicly available curricula for ITT courses rather than a single one. All generic adult teaching courses include considerable input on literacy and there may be optional modules available, but there is no requirement for a module in adult literacy.

There is no nationally agreed curriculum or set of quality standards. Each awarding body and provider is free to create its own qualifications within strict guidelines. Adult teacher training is, however, inspected by Ofsted, the national education quality assurance agency.

CPD is available for teachers of adult literacy, but there is no requirement to undertake such training. *The Society for Education and Training* (SET, 2015) (the successor to the *Institute for Learning*) acts as a professional body for adult teachers, and it is a requirement of membership of this body that teachers undertake a minimum of 30 hours CPD per year, but that does not have to be in their specialised subject area. Membership of SET is not a requirement for teaching in the sector.

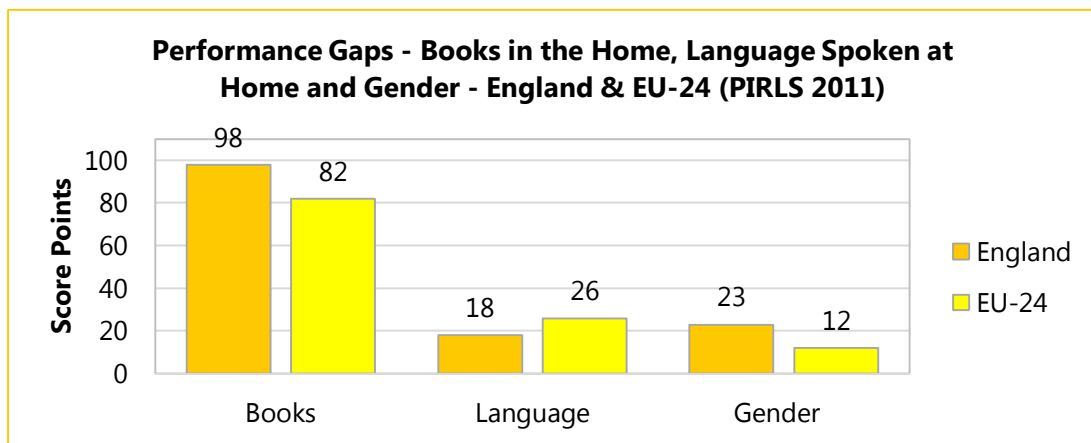
### 4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

Performance gaps in England and on average across the EU-24 are shown in Figures 2 and 3 below. The difference in achievement between pupils in England reporting that they always, on the one hand, or sometimes/never, on the other, spoke the language of the test was 18 score points – markedly lower than the corresponding EU-24 average difference of 26. However, the figures also show an above-average socio-economic gap at both primary and secondary levels and an above-average gender gap on primary level, but a below average gender gap at secondary level.

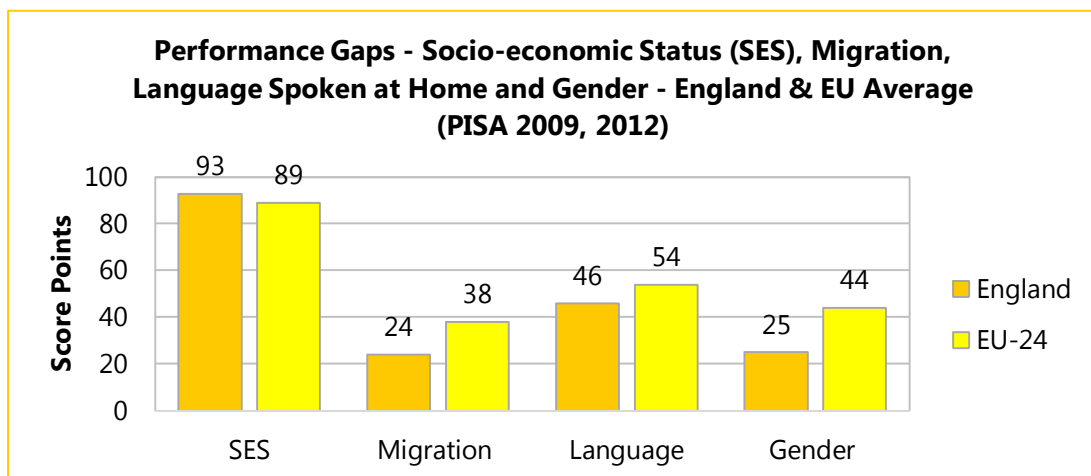
#### Gaps in literacy performance

Figure 2: Performance Gaps– Books in the Home, Language Spoken at Home and Gender – England and EU-24 (PIRLS 2011)



Gender: girls – boys; Education: University vs. Lower secondary/primary; Language: Student speaks language of test at home always vs. sometimes/never.

Figure 3: Performance Gaps: SES, Migration, Language Spoken at Home and Gender – England and EU averages (PISA 2009, 2012)



Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys.

### 4.3.1 Pre-primary years

#### **Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors**

Children in centre-based ECEC settings receive group language support (EACEA, 2014a p. 145).

While England has a relatively small achievement gap for children from a migrant background and those whose home language is not that of the school, the same cannot be said for those living in poverty, with a single parent, a teenage mother or a mother with a low level of education. More intensive effort is needed to develop their literacy skills.

#### **Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children**

Figures correlating pre-school attendance with literacy scores are not available for England from PIRLS 2011. But the topic has been researched. As Taggart et al. (2015, p. 15) note:

- *Pre-school has a positive and long-term impact on children's attainment, progress and social-behavioural development.*
- *At school entry (age 5), attending pre-school improved children's academic and social outcomes with an early start (before 3) and attending a high quality setting being particularly beneficial. Full-time attendance led to no better gains than part-time (half day) provision.*
- *Pre-school continued to influence outcomes throughout primary school, especially if it was of high quality. At age 11, high quality pre-school was especially important for boys, pupils with SEN and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

As noted above, in England non-fee-paying pre-school provision is available for all children from the age of 3 years, either in nursery classes or nursery schools, typically for only part of the school day. Attendance is voluntary; in 2014, 97% of the eligible three and four-year-olds attended (DfE, 2014c).

Two-year-olds from families with low incomes are also entitled to 15 hours per week of free early education. But currently only 58% are taking this up (Speight et al., 2015). England's Chief School Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has expressed concern about this situation and recommended that children with backgrounds of disadvantage should be given places in pre-school units attached to primary schools, where they and their parents would be most likely to have access to specialist help on topics such as speech and language therapy, behaviour management and parenting support (Gov.UK, 2015g).

#### **Identification of and support for preschool children with language difficulties**

In England, in order to identify language development problems, there are two systematic assessments of children, which include language skills screening and consist of: a) a *Progress Check* at age 2, b) the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* at age 5 (EACEA, 2015a). Language support is provided as a result of this screening and any consequent *Statement of Special Education Needs*. This statement and the support that follows are designed to meet the needs of the individual child. There is provision for support from educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and special education needs teachers, specialists in reading and other specialised professionals at a local level (EACEA, 2014a, p. 109). Language impairments include problems with phonology, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics.

However, it is not always easy for parents to access the necessary support for their children. Financial constraints on these public services mean that education and health services might not reveal all the possible sources of help (Afasic, 2015).

### **4.3.2 Children and adolescents**

#### **Support for children with special needs**

In England children with special needs get support in mainstream schools, pre-school settings or special schools. Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide free early education to two-year-olds with special educational needs or disabilities (EACEA, 2014b).

For children with delayed language development, support is provided as specified in the *Educational Health and Care Plan*, which supersedes the statement of special education needs, which results from screening, and sets out the needs of the individual child. There is provision for support from educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and special education needs teachers, specialists in reading and other specialised professionals at a local level (EACEA, 2014a p. 109).

However, provision for SEN is currently widely varied in England, with a mixed economy of learning support teams based in mainstream schools, specialist schools offering permanent placements and pupil referral units offering temporary placements for students subject to formal exclusion and requiring further assessment. All schools must appoint a teacher to be the school's SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator), who is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy. The SENCO co-ordinates additional support for pupils with SEN and liaises with their parents, teachers and other professionals who are involved with them. The SENCO has responsibility for requesting the involvement of an Educational Psychologist and other external services, particularly for children with statements (DEF, 2014f, 2014g). This also includes general SEN assessments, administration and parental support.

#### **Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school.**

According to Twist et al.:

*Teaching is generally provided in English, but support is often provided for students who are learning English as an additional language depending on student's level of fluency.*

(Twist et al., 2012, p. 206)

Fluency is often assessed and described using a framework originally produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Support may be provided by specialist teachers or bilingual teaching assistants. Those involved are expected to plan together to provide the most effective support, which often includes the following: pre-teaching, to enable students to access the lesson; support during the lesson; and follow-up consolidation.

Policies on equal access and equal opportunities for all mean that the teaching of English as an additional language (EAL) takes place within the context of the mainstream curriculum (South, 2012). All teachers are expected to thoroughly understand the needs of EAL pupils and pupils with SEN (DfE, 2011a, 2014e).

#### **Preventing early school leaving**

Early School Leaving (ESL) is usually defined in terms of the percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training. The incidence of ESL in the UK is approximately 13% (as against the EU mean of 17% for boys and 13% for girls) with a higher incidence of males leaving school early than females (Eurostat, 2008; Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

Although England's early leaving levels are lower than the European average, rates remain higher than in the Nordic countries.

Until recently, compulsory full-time education in England ended at 16 years, with a further year of part-time education or training (EACEA, 2015c). England's ESL prevention strategy is currently shifting towards a more targeted approach. The effectiveness of ESL preventive practices is ensured by:

- timely intervention (emphasis on tracking and early intervention work e.g. transition mentoring, Derby; Entry to Learning/ E2L pilots),
- integrated and effective responses (NGOs play a very important role in identifying, reaching and thereby supporting those in greatest need of support through a 'whole-adolescent' approach – e.g. Rathbone Youth Sector Organisation (Rathbone, 2015), National Black Boys Can Association (Excell3, 2015), World Living In (Worth Unlimited, 2015).

Meanwhile, effective practice in reintegration has focused on individual action plans (Maguire, 2010).

The reform of education provision for young people aged 14-19 in England has focused on the development of vocational learning that includes workplace training for young people disengaged from standard learning pathways. There are four routes: apprenticeships, Foundation Learning, General Qualifications, and Diplomas. In 2015, the government published a final progress report on meeting the recommendations of Professor Wolf's independent review of vocational education, released in 2011 (DfE, 2015).

### **Increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples**

#### **Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors**

In England a *Pupil Premium* is paid to schools for the most disadvantaged children, to the value of £14,000 for each child's entire school career (ages 3 to 16) (Gov. UK, 2015h). Free lunch is provided at school for all children in the 4 to 7 age range (Gov.UK, 2013b). Students over 7 years are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) if they or their parents receive any of a range of benefits aimed at relieving those on low incomes (Gov.UK, 2015j).

However, although the situation has improved somewhat, material poverty is still associated with lower educational achievement. In 2007, 51% of students receiving Free School Meals (FSMs) compared with 75% of the general population, attained the expected Level 4 in the assessment at the end of Key Stage 2 (11 years), whereas in 2012 the figures had risen to 66% and 88% respectively, reducing the attainment gap from 24 to 16 percentage points (Ofsted, 2013, p.22). For 16 year olds sitting their GCSE examinations, the picture is less encouraging: in 2007, 21% of students receiving Free School Meals achieved 5 GCSE passes at A\* to C, compared with 49% in the general population, whereas in 2012 the figures had risen to 36% and 63% respectively, reducing the attainment gap at this level from 28 percentage points by only one point, to 27 (Ofsted, 2013, p. 23).

A detailed best-evidence synthesis of classroom programmes and interventions at the school-wide level, aimed at reducing the gap in performance between students of low and high socioeconomic backgrounds, was carried out by Sharples and colleagues (Sharples et al., 2011). The central theme across their findings was that the quality of teaching matters most. Their conclusions also state:

*Changing instructional processes and teaching methods (e.g. cooperative learning, phonics instruction, meta-cognitive strategies) delivers the greatest improvements in learning outcomes*



*for children from deprived backgrounds. Simply changing the mode of delivery, through ICT or new curricula, is much less effective. These principles apply across all educational phases, from early years settings to secondary education.*

*... Schools that are successfully closing attainment gaps work hard to ensure that resources are targeted at the children who need them most. They rigorously monitor pupil progress (particularly of those in vulnerable groups) and use this data to inform targets, direct deployment of resources and monitor the impact of interventions. (Sharples et al., 2011, p. 37)*

### **Compensating for the gender divide**

The National Curriculum states that teachers should take account of their duties under equal opportunities legislation that covers gender, among other considerations (DfE, 2014e). The National Literacy Trust has also introduced some successful practices based on their research (Clark et al., 2012). These include: engaging boys in reading by making it purposeful, combining reading with appropriate texts and/or linking it to technology, supportive home environments, and male reading models. The report also mentions reading competitions, staff training, additional lessons or support, class visits to the school or public library and themed works linked to books (Clark et al., 2012). However, such provisions are not yet advised in steering documents, much less seen as statutory requirements.

The National Literacy Trust also runs several initiatives that motivate boys and men to engage with reading. *Reading Champions* (NLT, 2015a), for example, is a project run in both schools and prisons, where male reading role models have been used to boost the achievement of other boys and men. *Premier League Reading Stars* (NLT, 2015b) and *Kick into Reading* (NLT, 2015c) use the motivational power of sport to promote literacy and hold great appeal for a male audience (NLT, 2015d).

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