

Through the Looking Glass: Is universal provision what it seems?



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Foreword

The Driver Youth Trust has consistently been concerned with addressing the needs of those who find literacy difficult, many of whom will be dyslexic. As well as devising our flagship school programme, Drive for Literacy, we focus on policy work and commission research. In 2014 our report *Fish in the Tree* asked 'Why are we failing children with dyslexia?' and focused on the need for teacher training, whilst a year later *Joining the Dots* looked at the impact of educational reforms on those learners with a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND).

Through the Looking Glass, written by our Director, Christopher Rossiter, examines the recent reports on literacy that inform the education agenda and asks – is universal provision what it seems? We look at what we mean by literacy, by being 'disadvantaged' and ask where those learners with SEND, most of them in mainstream school settings, fit into the picture. Are the conventional assumptions accurate, or is the 'Looking Glass' world very different?

All the reports we analysed are well-intentioned and aimed at raising literacy standards. However, if we are not precise with our language, if we don't examine the nuances and complexities behind the definitions we use and if we don't include children and young people with SEND in our aspirations, we will not raise general literacy standards. In addition, we will not use the limited funds available wisely, and most importantly, we will fail those learners with SEND who are capable of great success even though their reading and writing skills may not be comparable to those of their peers.

Our aim is always to be practical. Therefore we have made a series of recommendations that we believe, if followed, will make real changes to the literacy landscape and to those learners with SEND, particularly those with literacy difficulties. We pride ourselves on being collaborative and so we welcome the views and opinions of others on the issues we have raised.

Sarah Driver

Founder and Chair of Trustees,
Driver Youth Trust



Executive summary

This report looks at our aspiration as a society for all children and young people to have literacy skills and questions why we fail to achieve this. It explores what we mean by literacy and questions what our ambitions should actually be. It concludes that until we address literacy skills for those with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), within the school setting, we will fail to deliver on our goals.

An analysis of the text in 21 strategies, policies and initiatives from some of the leading educational and policy organisations in the country identified the following key themes:

- **Confusion over which children and young people are the true focus of literacy improvement.**
- **Lack of clarity around what is meant by disadvantage and a limited discussion of SEND.**
- **Considerable positivity around the aspirations for children and young people, with suggestions for practice.**
- **Strategies that more readily focus on those children and young people who can 'catch up' with limited support, at the expense of more specialist strategies appropriate for SEND learners.**
- **Family background as the supposed reason behind failure to make progress, when in reality it is the failure to address the requirements of children and young people with SEND within the mainstream school system.**



Our recommendations

Influencers and policy makers

Is policy adequate for national literacy?

Review current and proposed government strategies for literacy and ensure that they:

- Have realistic goals that are relative to the needs of all learners including those with SEND for whom the challenges of reading, writing, speaking and listening are likely to require specialist input.
- Review the role of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) to ensure that the current roles and responsibilities actually deliver evidence-based practice for SEND learners.

- Address the requirements of those learners for whom reaching the SAT or GCSE standards (or other state-mandated standards) around literacy will always be out of reach. Ensure that not being able to read, write, speak or listen due to an impairment is not equated – explicitly or implicitly – with a lack of potential, aspiration or effort on the part of the learner or their family.
- Ensure that any government strategy on literacy is coherent with SEND Code of Practice and vice versa.

Language matters

Develop clearly agreed government definitions of key terms including, but not limited to:

- Disadvantage
- Special Educational Needs
- Disability

to ensure that debate and the resulting outcomes are based on a shared understanding of the groups under discussion and by doing so create a more nuanced debate that recognises the significant variations within these 'labels'.



Funders

When funding or considering research pieces on literacy, ask whether the work includes those children and young people with SEND who are likely to need specialist support.

When funding literacy initiatives, include specific funding criteria that will encourage bids from those looking at truly universal approaches and/or approaches that make best use of specialists.

Consider your language – are you inadvertently contributing to a culture of parental blame for low literacy?



Specialists

Where are the specialists?

During 2017, audit the availability of specialist provision needed to support learners with their reading, writing, speaking and listening requirements to include:

- The specialist dyslexia teachers that were funded following the Rose Review (2009).
- Speech and language therapists working with children and young people.
- Educational psychologists.

This audit should consider:

- Geographical gaps.
- Waiting times for state provision.
- The size of private sector provision and resulting inequity in access.

Consider alternative models for access (including pooling budgets to employ specialists between schools).

With such a view, develop a Specialist Support Strategy that:

- Is embedded within the school system thereby delivering evidence-based specialist practice to support staff and learners in mainstream settings, with the aim that advice is given within one half-term of a concern being raised.
- Considers the timescale for developing new specialist support staff, ensuring those previously trained re-enter the job market, with a view to reaching the national need by 2020.

- Builds specialist staff input into all initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and teaching assistants, ensuring that specialist skills can be built into teaching practice.

This Specialist Support Strategy should publicly state that it is a given that some children and young people will need more funding than their peers to be able to read, write, speak and listen. This should also recognise that measuring the impact of interventions should not solely emphasise a cost-benefit for each individual child, because this implies that the requirements of all children are equal.

Schools

Join things up

We need to ensure that any SEND and literacy strategies join up, with a particular focus on how schools will support those children and young people who may never reach 'mandated' standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening and yet are still able to achieve success either academically or vocationally. The statement of how these children will be supported should be published on a school's website.

Further, a consideration of alternative models for access (including pooling budgets)

could enable schools to fund specialists between schools or across groups of schools (for example within Multi-Academy Trusts).

Share good practice

Acknowledging that school-to-school support has empowered groups of teachers to improve their practice, there is a place for more targeted sharing of effective practice in relation to literacy between for example, SENCos, faculty and subject leaders across curricula and educational settings.

Ask for help

Many third sector organisations, including Driver Youth Trust, actively seek collaborations with schools sometimes for very little or no cost, particularly when trying to develop new initiatives.

Question your own unconscious bias

Consider carefully the assumptions that are bound up in the terms 'disadvantaged', 'SEND' and 'literate', and the learners to whom you apply these terms.



Introduction – Why this piece of work?

The goal of ensuring that 100% of children and young people acquire literacy skills is a noble one. It is an important ambition, both for individuals and society as a whole but, even in the UK, 100% literacy appears to be out of reach. In part, this may reflect our measurement of literacy – the ability to read, write, speak and listen – which is increasingly pinned against a very narrow definition of success linked to GCSEs and end-of-Key Stage tests. Many children may not reach these accredited standards but will still have the literacy levels that they need to thrive.

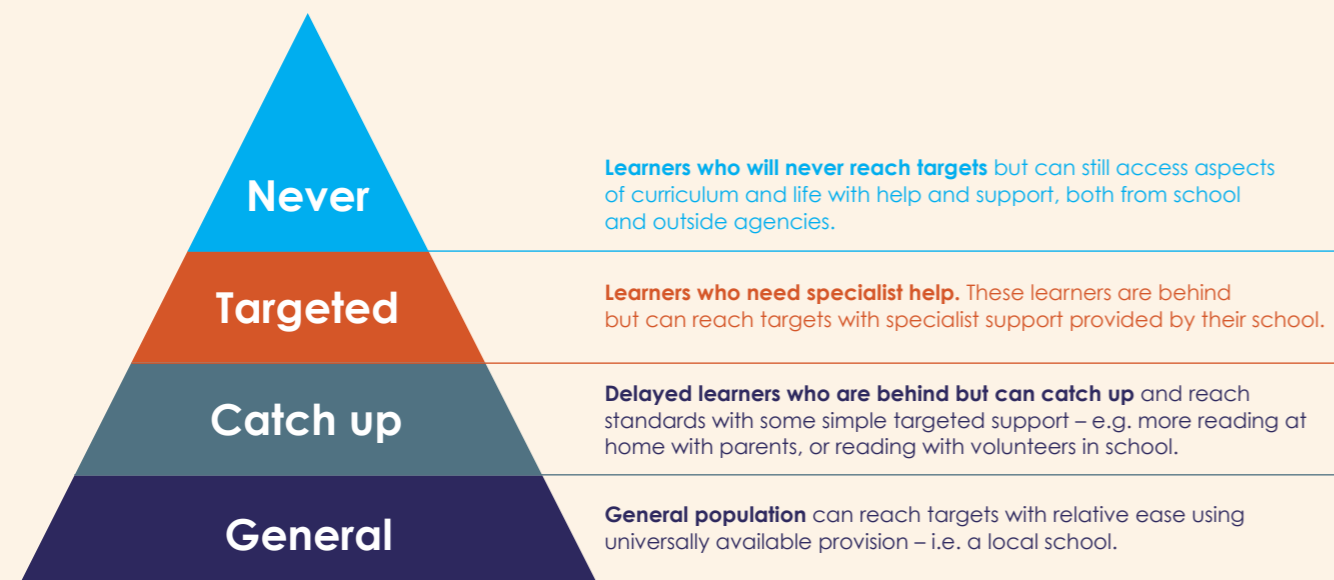
Others will never achieve all or some of these skills at a level that will allow them independently to access the curriculum or other aspects of life in the same way as their more literate peers. Most of these children will have some significant disability, including those with severe specific learning difficulties. Accepting this reality is not to lower our standards for these children. Far from it. Rather, it speaks

of the need to consider other approaches – both to help children develop the skills where possible, or help them circumvent the need for those skills.

This report explores in part what we mean by literacy and questions what our ambitions should actually be. Its main aim is to consider whether policy development – as led by think tanks, charities and other leading bodies – is too heavily skewed towards those who can reach these arbitrary end-of-Key Stage and GCSE standards. We will explore whether papers that claim to be about getting all children to be literate mean, in reality, only those who can reach those standards without specialist help. We also explore how these papers address the issue of young people who will never reach these levels even with specialist intervention.

Truly universal strategies consider the entire population. So in terms of literacy, a universal strategy might look like this – see **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: A truly universal literacy strategy would meet all four levels of the pyramid



Our hypothesis

Our hypothesis is that most influential papers, including those written by think tanks and charities, have a theory of change that assumes strengthening the universally available offer of teaching phonics or grammar, and creating more literacy-enriched classrooms, will support all children and young people to reach an 'appropriate level' of literacy.

Our guess is that these papers are presented as being for all when in fact they are targeted only at the lowest two levels of the pyramid – which represents between 80% and 90% of children, i.e. those who will be able to read, write, speak and listen with relatively low-cost support and limited specialist input.

Why does this matter?

Approaches that focus on widely available models, such as good classroom teaching of phonics, handwriting, vocabulary building or targeted interventions (e.g. volunteer one-to-one reading and parental engagement), are of course immensely valuable. On the whole, they do benefit all children. However, what they will not do is ensure literacy for all.

Therefore, our premise is that those position papers that claim to be universal and for all actually focus on solutions for the first two groups of children and young people (see **Figure 2**) and ignore a significant number for whom literacy represents the greatest challenge.

The implications of this are that funding and policy decisions that have been developed in response to these papers may be poorly formed and only partially successful because of the failure to join the specialist and SEND approaches with the

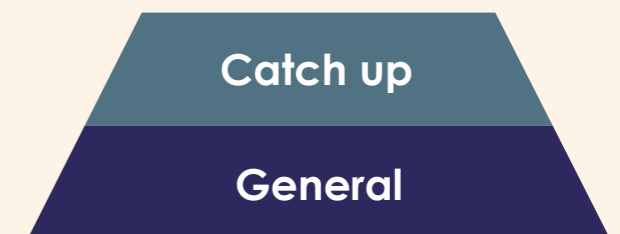
universal literacy agenda. This is a significant factor in our entrenched low levels of literacy.

What does this paper cover?

Through the Looking Glass will therefore:

- Outline the current statistics around literacy levels and remind us why literacy is important.
- Explore what we mean by 'literate' and by the notion of a universal offer for literacy.
- Present the findings from an examination of the top position papers from influential charities, think tanks and other key stakeholders, such as the government and Ofsted.
- Consider to what extent these findings support or challenge our hypothesis.
- Discuss whether wider work is needed on how to craft a truly universal offer.
- Make recommendations to inform: influencers, charities and think tanks; funders and commissioners; and those who design and deliver literacy interventions.

Figure 2: Most published papers focus only on the needs of between 80% and 90% of learners



Is universal provision what it seems?

For the purposes of this report, universal provision is defined as:

The entitlement to receive an education that is both effective and accessible to all children.

This definition is in line with the Human Rights Act (1998) as well as other obligations laid out in legislation and international agreements, such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), which proclaimed that:

'Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning.' (UNESCO, 1994, p.8)

As a society we place enormous value on literacy attainment, particularly through our education system. Vast amounts of educational funding have been, and continue to be, invested to ensure that every child can and should reach age-appropriate levels in four skill areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Through research reports, strategies and literacy campaigns, the government and its agencies talk about teaching these skills to all children – universal provision for every child across the country.

Yet despite the value we place on literacy, and despite the numerous initiatives there have been over the years, something isn't working. And this means something needs to change.

The focus of the Driver Youth Trust is on literacy. As this report will show, when we, as a sector concerned with literacy, talk about **every child**, we tend to mean only those who can meet the expectations laid out by the government within its existing education agenda.

What tends to get forgotten is that some children and young people are at risk of never achieving these expectations. These are the 1.2 million (DfE, 2016b, p.13) children and young people with SEND, including those with dyslexia, the majority of whom are educated in mainstream settings.

The requirements, indeed the very existence, of these children can appear to sit beyond the realm of mainstream educational thinking, discourse and planning. Their needs are addressed in separate strategies and approaches (if at all). So begins a divergence between what these children need and what we have to offer, and between what they can achieve and what we aspire to on their behalf.

It appears that 'universal' is not universal after all; it is not applicable to all and is not inclusive.

If we genuinely want to improve literacy standards in this country, then universal provision needs to apply to all pupils and we need to include those with SEND in the agenda. We also need to clarify our language about the issues and our aspirations for these children to ensure that instead of a repetitive litany of the problems, we actually address the issues in schools and classrooms across the land, making a practical difference for the learners sitting in them.

“ ...these children can appear to sit beyond the realm of mainstream educational thinking, discourse and planning.”

How successful is our approach to universal provision?

The impact and the cost of failing to address poor literacy, as reported widely in the sector, are a damning indictment of educational policy and practice over many years. These extracts illustrate a narrative that is all too familiar.

'KPMG conservatively estimated that failure to master basic literacy skills costs the public purse £5,000 to £64,000 over an individual's lifetime. This amounts to between £198 million and £2.5 billion every year.' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.10)

'48% of offenders in custody have a reading age at or below the expected level of an 11-year-old. Similarly, in a survey of prisoners' self-perception, 47% of prisoners said they had no qualifications.' (Morrisroe, 2014, p.7)

'Over the years, there have been many attempts to place an economic value on the cost of illiteracy in various nations. But the fact remains that it costs the global economy more than \$1 trillion dollars each year because up to one in five people worldwide struggle with illiteracy.' (World Literacy Foundation, 2015, p.4)

'The UK is the only economically developed country where 16 to 24-year-olds have the lowest literacy skills of any age group in society. In England 14.9% of adults aged 16-65 lack functional literacy skills. This equates to 5.1 million people. The challenge is intergenerational and closely linked to poverty.' (Vision for Literacy 2025, National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.10)

'17.8 million adults (56% of the adult working population) in England are reported as having literacy skills below GCSE grade C, with 5.2 million of these reportedly lacking functional literacy.' (Beanstalk, 2013, p.8)

'Low literacy is associated with lower earnings and employment rates, particularly for women.' (Morrisroe, 2014, p.10)

'Negative experience at school is also a key factor linking literacy to crime. Those with low literacy are more likely to be excluded from school and more likely to truant. 9% of very poor readers are persistent truants compared to 2% of those who are average or above average readers.' (Morrisroe, 2014, p.7)

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

SEND affects more learners than you think

Defining the label of SEND and then applying it to children and young people is a complex issue and can be arbitrary. In 2010 the number of pupils identified with SEND in the UK was five times the EU average. This led Ofsted to review how children were being identified and supported in schools. They concluded that 'as many as half of all pupils identified for School Action [support] would not be identified as having special educational needs if schools focused on improving teaching and learning for all' (Ofsted, 2010, p.5).

The Children and Families Act (2014), the catalyst for the largest reforms in decades, mandates a new system of identification.

This defines someone as having a SEND when:

They have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them (Section 20).

Special educational provision is provision that is additional to or different from that which would normally be provided for children or young people of the same age in a mainstream education setting (Section 21).

Such a definition is problematic, however, because what 'learning difficulty' and 'additional' or 'different' provision mean is open to subjective interpretation.

As a result of these changes, the numbers of children and young people identified as having a SEND have been declining, from over 1.5 million in 2010 to around 1.2 million in 2016 (DfE, 2016a, p.1). It is interesting to note, however, that the number of children

who have a 'statement' (now an Education, Health and Care Plan – EHCP) has remained consistent over this time at 2.8%. The decline in children identified as having a SEND has therefore focused on children without an EHCP. These are often children without multiple issues, though arguably children whose needs significantly impact on their learning. Most learners with dyslexia will be in this category.

The Act is accompanied by the SEND Code of Practice, which emphasises a graduated approach of 'assess, plan, do, review' to identify those children and young people not making expected progress (DfE and Department of Health, 2015, pp.86-87). For all learners, the cyclical process of the graduated approach enables teachers to spot difficulties in learning using a combination of observation and formal measurement, always beginning and ending with Quality First Teaching – thus answering the criticisms put forward by Ofsted in 2010 that too many children and young people were being identified as having a SEND, as well as providing a consistent code of practice within a legislative framework.

“ What is often missed in discussions about SEND is that the vast majority of children and young people with SEND will be in a mainstream school.”

Where are most children with SEND educated?

What is often missed in discussions about SEND is that the vast majority of children and young people with SEND will be in a mainstream school.

Data from the Department for Education (DfE, 2016a) show that of the 1.2 million SEND learners, **51.5%** (619,095) are in state-funded primary schools and **33.8%** (406,430) are in state-funded secondary schools. Far fewer of these learners are educated in special schools (only **8.5%**, 104,305) or in other settings such as pupil referral units (**6.5%**, 77,995), although the incidence of SEND in these settings is substantially higher.

So whilst many papers and commentators focus on children and young people who have EHCPs or attend special schools, the vast majority of SEND children and young people receive their education in a mainstream school.

There are children and young people, in all settings and phases of their education, who face the same demands from curricula and assessment as their peers, but with varying levels of support. They will not meet thresholds for specific identification or labelling, even when systems and processes are in place to identify them, as with the graduated approach. What this means is that many may not be on the SEND register, despite the fact that they have a special educational need, often one that affects their literacy skills. These children will not, under the present system, fall within the remit of the SEND Governor and SEND funding.

The aim to reduce the number of learners identified with SEND is all well and good if there is the necessary training and support in place to ensure their needs are met, or in the words of Ofsted (2010) 'if schools focused improving teaching and learning for all' but, in our view, this has been the missing link. Many schools don't have the joined up policies and resources to support these learners and we know there is a gap in meeting the training needs of teachers. In 2014, the Driver Youth Trust published its *Fish in the Tree* report, which demonstrated the dearth of training in teaching children with dyslexia, despite 84% of teachers surveyed saying this was important to them. It is vital that both teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to deliver on the requirements of these learners.

84%

of teachers surveyed said training in dyslexia was important to them



What are the outcomes for SEND learners compared with their peers?

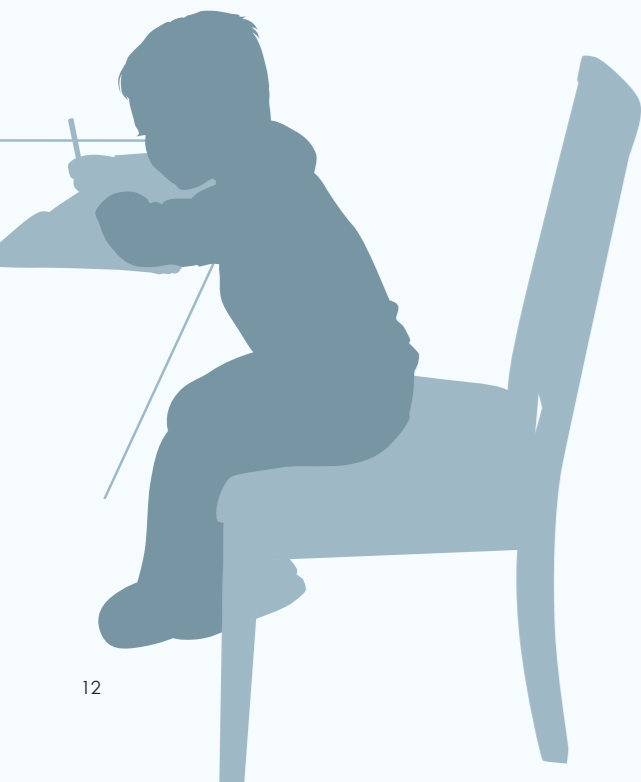
Children with SEND do not benefit from the same level of scrutiny or accountability as those deemed 'disadvantaged' because they are in receipt of Free School Meals; yet by comparison, their results are far worse.

As the most reliable source of national outcomes data, the Department for Education statistics provide demonstrable evidence of the enduring scale of progress and attainment of children and young people eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), i.e. those children who are considered socially or economically disadvantaged. The Department has a further definition of disadvantage in relation to children who are 'EVER6', i.e. pupils who have been eligible for FSM over the last six years or have been looked after by their local authority.

However, whilst statistics are collected for children and young people with SEND, those children are not necessarily classified as disadvantaged (because 'disadvantage' is defined specifically in relation to socio-economic status). Furthermore, as the Driver Youth Trust noted in its *Joining the Dots* report (2015), funding for children with SEND is not scrutinised or ring-fenced in the same way as specific funding for learners from deprived backgrounds who are eligible for the Pupil Premium Grant.

In other words, despite the fact that children with SEND get far worse results than those eligible for Pupil Premium (see right), we are failing to target and address this in the same way, somehow deeming one type of 'disadvantage' more worthy of attention than another. This reflects our attitude to universal provision as being relevant only to some, not all, of our children and young people.

“ Despite the fact that children with SEND get far worse results than those eligible for Pupil Premium, we are failing to target and address this in the same way, somehow deeming one type of 'disadvantage' more worthy of attention than another.”



Comparing progress of SEND learners to those eligible for Free School Meals

14.3% of children and young people are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) (DfE, 2016b, p.1). The outcomes for these children are rightly concerning (see **Figure 3**). Over the last six years, the attainment gap at Key Stage 2 between FSM/disadvantaged children and the national average has remained at least 14% in mainstream settings (DfE, 2016c, p.16). But look at the results for children with SEND.

When we examine the outcomes for those with SEND, for example at GCSE (see **Figure 4**), the attainment data demonstrate undeniably that children and young people in mainstream settings have worse outcomes in educational standards than any other group, including those eligible for FSM. This has been the case for many years, without exception.

Figure 3: Percentage of pupils reaching expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics by pupil characteristics, end Key Stage 2, 2011-2016 (DfE, 2016c)

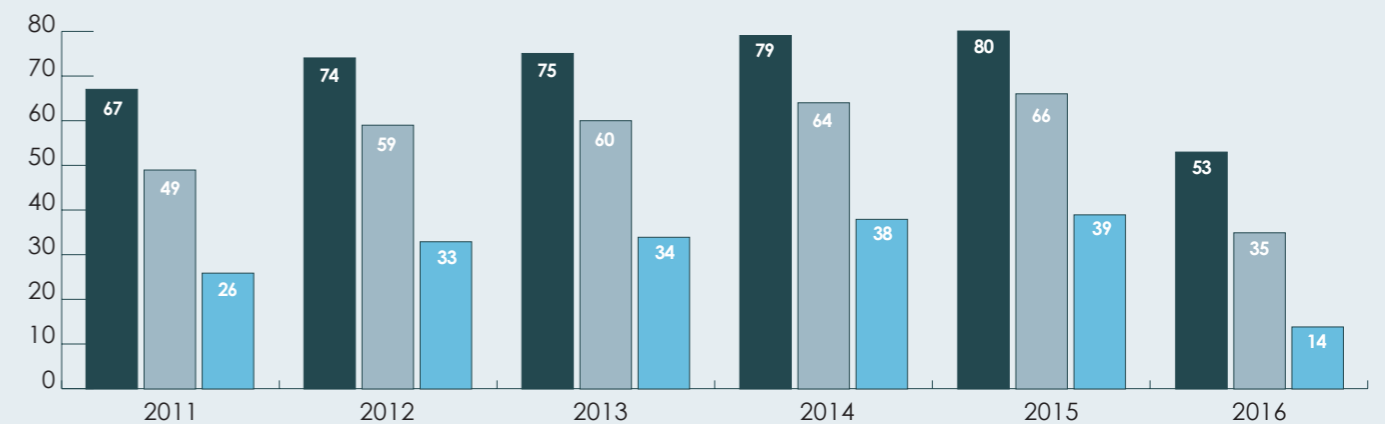
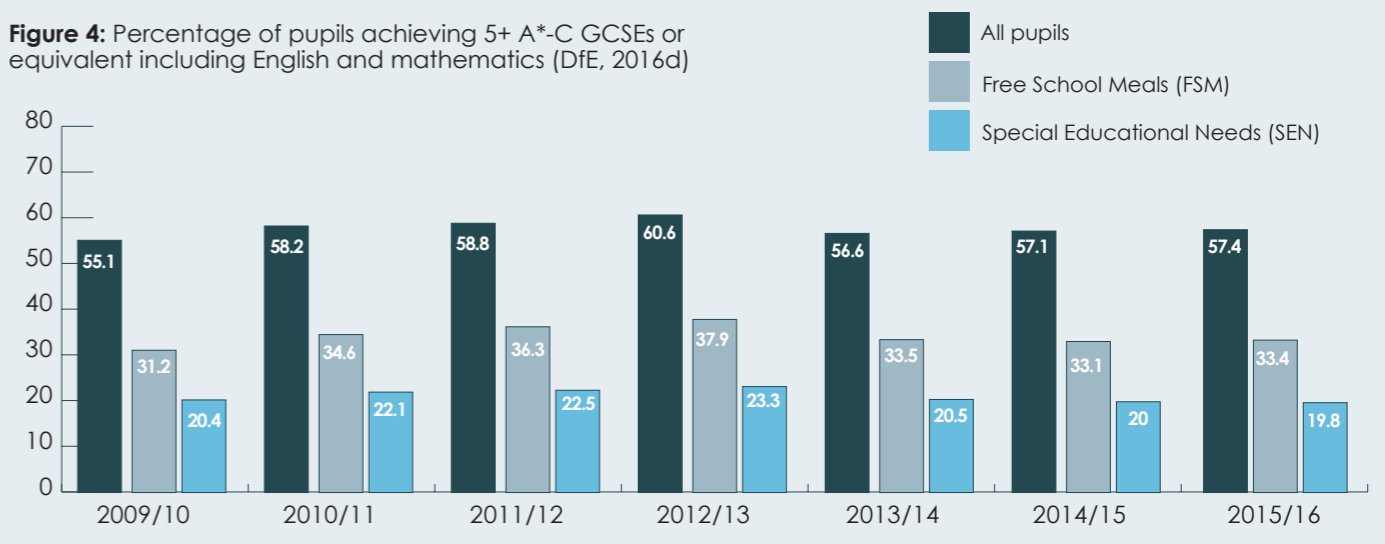


Figure 4: Percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs or equivalent including English and mathematics (DfE, 2016d)



“ In all instances progress for SEND pupils is lower than for those considered disadvantaged.”

Figure 5 shows average attainment data from 2016 with a gap almost twice as high for SEND learners as those eligible for FSM or otherwise disadvantaged (DfE, 2017a).

SEND learners not only have lower attainment than their peers, but they also make far less progress in reading, writing and mathematics (see **Figure 6**). In all instances progress for SEND pupils is lower than for those considered disadvantaged, and is at least half the percentage scores for this group (DfE, 2016c).

Figure 5: Average attainment data (Attainment 8 score) by pupil characteristics at Key Stage 4 (DfE, 2017a)

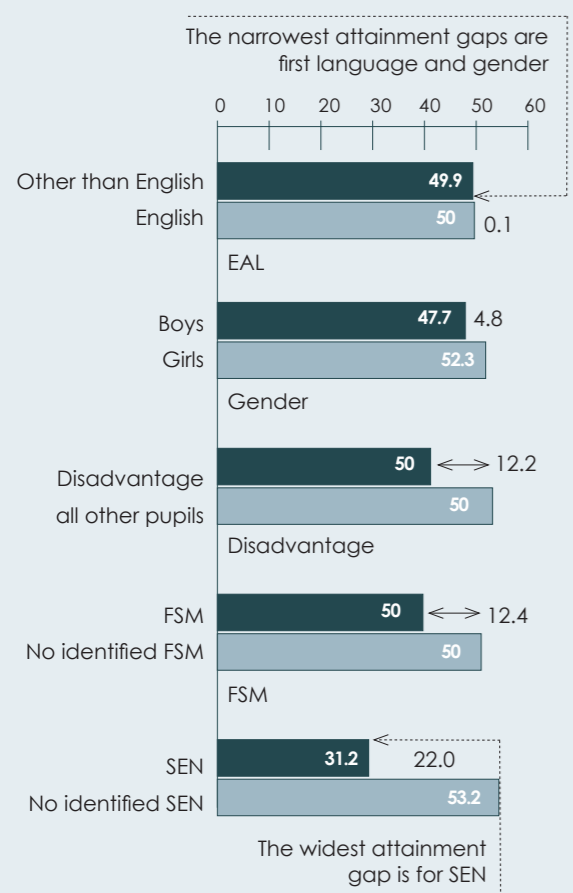
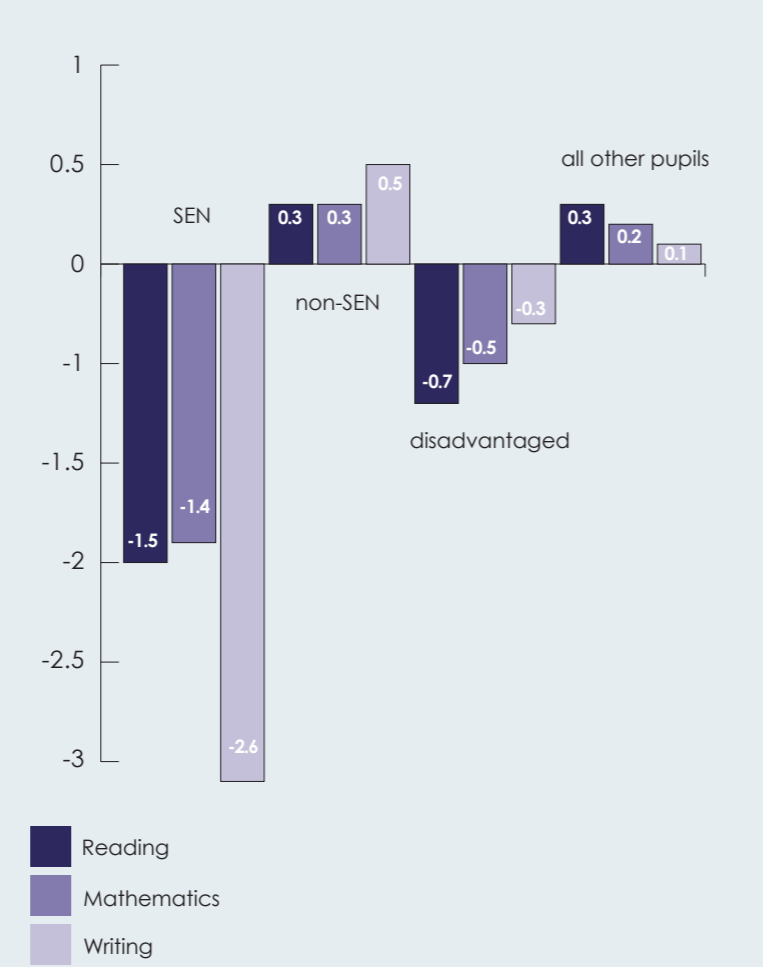


Figure 6: Progress scores in reading, mathematics and writing by pupil characteristics (DfE, 2016c, pp.18-22)



The difficulty with attainment and progress data is that it shows only those dimensions that you have chosen to compare. What is hidden in the comparisons between the groups, who appear to be clearly defined and distinct, is that for the most part, they are neither of these things. For instance:

- **One in seven children and young people (14.3%) are eligible for FSM – that’s around 1.1 million children and young people (DfE, 2016b). The number of children and young people with SEND is 14.4% or 1.2 million children (DfE, 2016a, p.4).**
- **The percentage of children and young people eligible for FSM who also have SEND is: 27.1% in primary, 24.8% in secondary and 36.5% in special schools; this is known as the ‘double disadvantage’ (DfE, 2016a).**

The overly simplistic language used to describe the characteristics and requirements of groups of children and young people, such as ‘SEND’ and ‘disadvantaged’, hides complex issues. Some children will be either SEND or socially-economically disadvantaged, whilst others are both. In addition, within the SEND category, there will be children with clearly defined difficulties as well as children dealing with a range of issues. There is little consideration of how the impact of these complexities plays out in national data sets, let alone in day-to-day educational experiences.

In summary, this data provides demonstrable evidence that the performance of children and young people with SEND is much lower in GCSE and end-of-Key Stage tests when compared to their peers, including those who are identified as disadvantaged socially or economically. It is not possible to discern from this data the educational outcomes of children and young people who are both SEND and socially or economically disadvantaged. What we can say, however, is that approaches for tackling the impact of social and economic disadvantage appear as a high priority in public policy, funding and even classroom practice; whereas children who are disadvantaged by having a SEND are not similarly prioritised.

14.4%
or 1.2 million children and young people have SEND



Where do we start?

With those who influence public policy

In order to develop our thinking and practice in relation to our understanding of how terms of SEND and disadvantage apply to literacy, we need first to consider our language and second, consider who is influencing policy and practice.

In recent years there have been numerous reports, strategies, policies and initiatives from government, think tanks and other education and third sector organisations, all with a wealth of good intentions and expertise, and all aimed at improving literacy. The organisations represented in our sample texts are noteworthy for their influence across the education sector and on public policy more generally.

We reviewed them to see:

- To what extent universal education really means universal.
- Whether SEND features as part of their thinking on how to close attainment gaps and improve educational practice in literacy.
- What language is used around issues and aspirations for all children and young people.

The 21 documents we analysed were published by:

- Ofsted
- All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education
- Department for Education
- Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
- The Sutton Trust
- Education Policy Institute
- The Education Foundation

- National Literacy Forum
- Beanstalk
- World Literacy Foundation
- National Literacy Trust
- Save the Children.

How have recent policies and initiatives recognised children with SEND?

Evidence presented in the numerous reports about literacy leads to the conclusion that failing to attain the requisite level of literacy inhibits educational and occupational success and is associated with poorer outcomes in, amongst others, health and longevity.

But do the reports we analysed make clear the complexities that underlie the literacy statistics? And what do they tell us about how to close attainment gaps and improve educational practice so that it universally benefits all children and young people, including those with SEND?

There is no doubt that a proportion of children underachieve and these children have similarities in terms of the social and economic status of their families. The attainment of these 'disadvantaged' children sit below the average in a normal distribution; they are 'the tail'. **However, simply looking at attainment and grouping these children as 'disadvantaged' by social or economic status hides a greater disadvantage: that is, that 27.2% of them have a SEND.**

Within the published texts we examined, there is a lot of focus on literacy in relation to disadvantage in terms of poverty. Yet from the statistics, it is clear that children with SEND do much worse than their peers

who are defined as 'disadvantaged' in terms of Free School Meals. So if we are really going to tackle the issue of literacy, then universal must mean universal. We need to develop effective strategies to support children with SEND in our schools, in addition to those in receipt of FSM. And as with Pupil Premium spending, there needs to be accountability for the associated expenditure and the results that go with them.

Design and methodology

Given that the focus of this report is on literature published by the education and third sectors, a traditional search for literature using academic databases was not appropriate. However, using the principles set out for systematic reviews of so-called grey literature, we identified and selected 21 publications on literacy since 2010.

The texts were analysed using the guidance from Krippendorf (2009) on Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). QCA as a method is systematic, whilst also being able to reduce large amounts of data. QCA involves the development of a systematic description of the data by assigning sections to categories in a coding frame. Categories are found inductively by grouping material together which is mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

The analysis process itself can be broken down into several sequential steps that at all times attempt to reduce the data whilst trying to retain its essence. Segmentation, using a formal criterion, was applied to separate parts of the data. Paraphrasing these sections allowed comparisons to be drawn and grouped together when identified as being related to the same theme or topic. The distinction between

topic and content is made by referring to the former as what is talked about, whereas the latter is the substance of the message. An example from the publications would therefore be the topic of disadvantage whilst the content related to a waste of potential. This is important as it feeds in to the deductive classification system used when all the paraphrases were categorized into groups, therefore generating data-driven subcategories for all of the main topics.

The analysis identified six themes from the selected texts on their goals and vision for educating all of our children and young people through universal provision.

They are:

- Disadvantage
- Achievement
- Love of reading
- Schools
- Families
- SEND.

We examine these themes and the language within them to see if they add anything to the issues and whether the implications add value to current policy and practice.



Exploring our themes

In this section, we explore the six themes identified by our analysis of the published texts.

Disadvantage

Description

Although 'disadvantage' appears repeatedly in the published documents, it is rarely defined accurately or precisely, or even at all. A rare example of disadvantage being properly defined is by the Education Policy Institute, which describes 'disadvantaged' children as 'those who are eligible for the Pupil Premium' i.e. those who have been eligible for Free School Meals in at least one of the last six years (EPI, 2016, p.37).

Most of the time it is described in ways that make 'the disadvantaged' sound like a homogenous social category. For example, the Department for Education's focus has been on 'improving reading overall, and narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers' (DfE, 2015, p.9). At other times, a child is described as disadvantaged when it is noted that fathers 'read to their children less, particularly low-income fathers' (ROGO, 2014, p.33).

This shift in emphasis from the group to the individual is subtle and used interchangeably throughout the literature, but rarely is the tension between the two categories – that of a disadvantaged group and that of an individual disadvantaged by circumstance – highlighted and discussed.

Poverty

Disadvantage in relation to the loss of potential is a position well made by the financial impact data discussed earlier. Ultimately 'from a societal perspective, allowing a significant number of children to fail to reach their educational and economic potential is a waste of human capital on a grand scale, resulting in lower economic growth and increased costs to the tax-payer' (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, p.7). The value of an education that is both effective and accessible to all children is therefore one that goes beyond individual-level considerations toward those across society.

Whilst it is acknowledged that 'educators cannot do much to fix poverty' (Hattie, 2015, p.6) educational disadvantage as a term tends to relate to poverty. As Ofsted notes 'there is a close association between poverty and low attainment' (2011, p.9).

How helpful is this? As Hannay (2016) notes: 'A family living next to a school rated inadequate by Ofsted is over 60% more likely to be poor than one living next to an outstanding school.' In other words, poor children are more likely to go to poor schools, rather than perhaps poor children as individuals have different learning needs.

This narrative is reiterated in the concepts of an ability to 'catch up' and make progress that frame disadvantage, again not as a pupil characteristic but as a product of the environment. The Beanstalk report, *Charter for Children's Literacy*, notes that poverty in itself is not a determining factor in education because 'early identification, intervention and support can close this gap' and 'in the best schools children's literacy attainment improves regardless of socioeconomic

background' (2013, p.9). What this proposes is actually Quality First Teaching and a universal approach to literacy that benefits all learners, irrespective of their income background.

What is striking about these reports is on the one hand the texts suggest that disadvantaged children and young people can catch up, whereas on the other, national school data strongly suggest otherwise. The evidence suggests 'segregated' children, the disadvantaged and those with a SEND, do not achieve. The Sutton Trust notes that segregation by school admissions, the quality of education, and learner outcomes in public examinations 'appears to affect school sorting and achievement – more segregated countries typically have larger socioeconomic achievement gaps than less segregated ones' (Reardon and Waldfogel, 2016, p.3). Its report goes on to cite the UK as a particular example of a country with high levels of segregation.

Our comment

The evidence clearly shows that disadvantaged children and young people have lower rates of progress and attainment in all areas of education. The DfE data outlined earlier put this beyond doubt. The assertion that all it takes to overcome socio-economic disadvantage is a good-quality education is overly simplistic. Good quality education is a start, but as we show this needs to be more appropriately targeted to the specific needs of individuals and there are always other societal aspects such as family and community support.

Time and again economic disadvantage is seen as both the principle marker ('you are disadvantaged educationally if you are poor') and the determining factor

('you will not succeed if you are poor') in educational outcomes. What is missing is a sense of proportionality; there is no acknowledgement that disadvantage presents itself in degrees or with other circumstances, such as with SEND. This picture is further complicated by the relationship between SEND and poverty. Families of children with SEND are often worse off economically, at greater risk of family break-up and children with SEND sometimes have parents with SEND.

There is little differentiation or shared meaning of the term 'disadvantage'. Whilst some texts indicate that this relates to socio-economic status, not all do. This raises questions as to whether this includes SEND as part of a wider group or not.

There needs to be a clearer definition of what is meant by disadvantage, one that takes account of the more nuanced reality of children living in poverty and children with SEND. It may help to expand the term 'disadvantaged' to include all learners who have additional educational requirements, whether because of socio-economic deprivation or SEND. However, raising the profile of SEND outcomes and making this a priority, as is the case for those eligible for Pupil Premium, would ensure there is both the expectation and accountability on schools and the sector to act and deliver for SEND learners.

“ A family living next to a school rated inadequate by Ofsted is over 60% more likely to be poor than one living next to an outstanding school.”

Achievement

Skills

The line on the importance of literacy as 'the key skill enabling active participation in all areas of life' (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.4) is well rehearsed. As the World Literacy Foundation notes, 'poor literacy also limits a person's ability to engage in activities that require either critical thinking or a solid base of literacy and numeracy skills' (World Literacy Foundation, 2015, p.4). The need to acquire these key skills by the end of the primary phase is identified as a particular milestone because 'if children do not read well by the age of 11 and do not enjoy reading, they are far more likely to have poor literacy as adults' (ROGO, 2014, p.3).

Reading well is seen as 'critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality – and to improving the wider life chances of the poorest and most disadvantaged children. Ensuring that all children are reading well by the age of 11 would make a game-changing contribution to making Britain a more socially mobile and fairer country' (ROGO, 2014, p.1).

Our comment

In general terms, these statements are true. However, even without the literacy skills of their peers, children with dyslexia or other impairments can be supported to access a full and rounded curriculum and succeed in exams. There are many young people with reading and writing skills behind age-related norms who can get a range of top grades (A/A*/9) across EBacc subjects.

Learners with SEND can only do this, however, if they get appropriate support in a school environment in which:

- The value of addressing literacy difficulties is recognised
- Effective resources are put into alternative strategies
- Teachers are trained to understand how to support those who struggle with literacy, and
- Support is given in assessments and exams.

Closing the gap

There are positive signs that achievement gaps for disadvantaged children and young people are improving. The Department for Education reports that 'twice as many pupils eligible for FSM achieved five good GCSEs including English and mathematics in 2013 than in 2005. But the achievement of other pupils has also improved and so the attainment gap has only narrowed slightly' (Sharp et al, 2015, p.5).

More recent evidence, such as that published by the Education Policy Institute, claims that 'over the course of Key Stage 1, disadvantaged pupils fall around 2 months further behind other pupils, and this progress gap between ages five and seven has barely changed in size over the last seven years' (EPI, 2016, p.43). Ofsted also warns that 'little progress has been made in closing the gap between the performance of pupils who live in the most disadvantaged areas of the country and those who live in the most affluent areas' (Ofsted, 2012a, p.10). This latter point appears to resonate with the government's announcement of educational 'opportunity areas' in Autumn/Winter 2016 (DfE, 2017b.)

The Fair Education Alliance tells us that closing the gap in literacy is certainly possible, with the most successful primary schools focusing on the 'development of literacy and numeracy skills, along with support for attendance, behaviour, confidence building and resilience' (2016, p.14).

The use of phonics to support reading is one area the government has particularly emphasised, claiming that 'almost all children, including those from deprived backgrounds, who have good teaching of phonics will learn the skills they need to tackle new words and read full texts ... This includes children who find learning to read difficult, for example those who have dyslexia' (DfE, 2015, p.14).

Phonics is clearly an effective method of teaching children to decode, and this may support some children with SEND. However, there is no discussion of how to address the requirements of those children and young people for whom phonics proves ineffective and what alternatives there should be after phonics has been delivered well. **Just 'more phonics' is not the answer.**

Closing the gap for SEND children and young people is complicated by the specific impact on learning because they process information and progress developmentally in different ways. For children with SEND, learning is not simply a matter of catching up. Such a view ignores or refuses to accept that some will never reach these standards. That is not to say, however, that those children cannot achieve through broader academic attainment at secondary, further or higher education. It may just mean they need an alternative method to demonstrate what they know and can do, rather than how well they can read and write – one that provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and potential.

42%

of all SEND pupils pass the KS1 phonics screening test compared to 86% who are not identified with SEND

Our comment

This isn't about 'closing the gap' for children and young people who are disadvantaged. This is about having a well-managed school with Quality First Teaching that benefits all learners.

Phonics does not work for every learner. This needs to be accepted and alternative strategies for accessing literacy addressed, recognising that failure to pass a phonics test at age 5 or 6 does not mean a learner is destined for failure.

Breaking the cycle

The failure to develop key literacy skills and other circumstances relating to the quality of a child's education, such as geographical location and home environment, are all cited as factors relating to a perpetual spiral of underachievement, both within an individual and across families and generations. For example, 'low achievement reduces motivation to read, which drags down achievement' (Beanstalk, 2013, p.7) and '**poor literacy is frequently intergenerational**: parents with lower literacy skills often lack the confidence and skills to help their children with reading and writing, which reinforces the cycle of disadvantage' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.4).

The Fair Education Alliance believes this can change 'if there is a greater focus on the following areas: quality teaching and learning, parent engagement, early years provision, school leadership, careers advice, links with employers, information, advice and support and university outreach' (2016, p.34). The quality, availability and accessibility of all these areas can be debated and challenged, but broadly they make up what is already available in the system and there is Quality First Teaching.

Our comment

If we accept that the disadvantaged group are deserving of our attention morally, politically and materially, then there is every reason that we might expect to see a well-articulated vision of what the system needs to deliver in order to raise standards.

Unfortunately, the proposed solution appears to be nothing more sophisticated than good-quality teaching. What is missing is a discussion of how best to identify barriers at the system level and how best to overcome them to bring about the greatest improvements. Solutions must be sufficiently practical for schools and teachers to manage in relation to their other demands and priorities, and they must bring about tangible results.

36%

of adults don't read for pleasure, rising to 44% of young people (aged 16 to 24)
(DCMS, 2015, p.7)

Love of reading

Entitlement

'Reading for pleasure' or developing a 'love of reading' are popular everyday phrases, although understanding how they relate to educational outcomes, indeed what these terms even mean, is less clear. Strong views are expressed that 'active encouragement of reading for pleasure should be a core part of every child's curriculum entitlement' (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.6), because **'reading enjoyment is more important in determining a child's educational success than their family's socio-economic status'** (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.8).

Furthermore, children and young people should not be denied the 'canon of English literature – from Christopher Marlowe to Ian McEwan – that belongs to every English speaker, whatever their background and no matter where they live. Full participation in this intellectual and cultural heritage depends upon universal, high standards of literacy' (DfE, 2015, p.7). So children and young people should not be denied the opportunity to read great literature, and without question, having the necessary literacy skills to do this is important. However, an entitlement to literacy should not be confused with an entitlement to literature; they are not one and the same.

If we want to advocate for making literature accessible, then logically we should identify how best to do this. This would most likely include ensuring the availability of public libraries and a variety of media, for example audio and films. However, this is not what the government or the other organisations cited are calling for. What they want is to improve progress and attainment of literacy, specifically of reading.

The love

A 'love of reading' is a difficult term to conceptualise and a definition has not yet been provided of where love starts and a more utilitarian approach to reading ends. Yet 'the government expects teachers to do everything they can to foster a love of reading' (DfE, 2015, p.20). **How to encourage anyone to love anything without an intrinsic motivation to do so is hard to understand.** Sharing texts, talking about them and understanding how useful they are will help children and young people understand their importance, but love requires more than that. Can it really be true that **'becoming a lifetime reader is predicated on developing a love of reading'** (Sanacore, cited in ROGO, 2014, p.32)?

Reading happens for multiple reasons and in many different contexts. A 'love of reading' generally appears to refer to reading literature as a hobby or pastime, when in reality many adults may only read for pleasure occasionally, if at all, but read continuously in relation to their professional and personal affairs.

There also appears to be a deficit in love for poorer children, who 'appear to be typically less likely to read for pleasure' (ROGO, 2014, p.20). These same children and young people 'from poor families' are also 'less likely to read frequently outside of school; less likely to have books of their own; and less likely to read as broad a range of materials – books, magazines and technology-based materials such as text messages and emails – as other children' (ROGO, 2014, pp.20-21). Presumably, this is in part because all those things cost money, which by definition poorer children have much less of.

Naturally, there are many children and young people who enjoy stories and learning about a whole range of different topics in school and away from it. However, difficulties such as those associated with SEND may make reading a less than enjoyable experience for many. Because many types of SEND also run in families (regardless of socio-economic status) some parents also share the same difficulties as their children. Regardless of the extent to which someone loves to read, it is simply false to suggest that children and young people from a disadvantaged background will inevitably find reading difficult, or indeed, that this will have a detrimental impact on their lives, especially if their reading skills are at a functional level that enables them to go about their daily lives without hindrance.

Our comment

Many children with a SEND that affects reading, such as dyslexia, will never develop a love of reading. Indeed, they will often hate or fear it. They can be supported to develop a love of stories or of poetry or encouraged to develop a thirst for knowledge about any number of subjects, but these things can be accessed in other ways such as through auditory or visual media.

In addition, there are too many assumptions around disadvantage and literacy that can be stigmatising – for example, that poor parents and families value literacy less by owning fewer books and reading less to their children.

Schools

Primary and secondary

In general, primary and early years settings are most often mentioned in relation to universal literacy, with the best primary schools teaching 'virtually every child to read, regardless of the social and economic circumstances of their neighbourhoods, the ethnicity of their pupils, the languages spoken at home and most special educational needs or disabilities' (Ofsted, 2011, p.10). Age 5, the beginning of primary school, is highlighted due to the impact language development has on literacy. Age 11, the end of primary school, is cited as being a key developmental milestone for literacy attainment. This reinforces the view that learning to read is fundamental for reading to learn.

There have been calls for 'post-primary school literacy issues' to be addressed (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.4), and a need has been identified for 'continuity in the teaching of literacy between primary and secondary schools to avoid alienating pupils with weaker literacy skills' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.6). However, the extent to which secondary schools have capacity, in terms of teacher knowledge and skills or curriculum time, is not addressed. Overall, the role that secondary-phase education plays has been downplayed.

In addition, the focus for secondary schools is more likely to be on developing faculty-based approaches to improve literacy, for example by improving subject-specific vocabulary. This is especially challenging following the transition between Key Stages 2 and 3, and the additional demands of curricula and assessment.

“All teachers are teachers of children with special educational needs.”

Our comment

If we want to address literacy levels, then we need to address the specifics of support at secondary level. This needs to go beyond the current practice of advertising for primary school teachers to teach those who have literacy difficulties in secondary schools. Work on

- understanding the needs of pupils with SEND upon transition,
- general teacher training on understanding the needs of those who struggle with literacy,
- targeted teacher training at faculty level that questions what skills a subject requires of a learner,
- technology,
- empowering pupil voice,
- early use of access arrangements for key tests and exams

would all lead to better outcomes.

Culture

A school's culture is often viewed as pivotal to ensuring positive educational outcomes for all children and young people. However, it is acknowledged that one of the hardest things to change is culture, which is referenced in relation to attitudes and behaviours, as well as cultural 'objects' that include the attendant policies and practices.

An example of a specific culture that is often promoted is a 'reading culture' (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.6) in schools. This can be confusing – what, after all, is a reading culture? Reading for meaning takes place in a school all the time (ask anyone with a difficulty in reading to confirm this). What is usually meant is reading for pleasure, the implication being that this is a more valued and worthy practice. However, how to do this in a practical and sustainable way is absent from the texts, which makes the point appear superficial or potentially unobtainable.

A desire to develop or change a particular culture does not automatically translate into a meaningful change. One particularly important part of an inclusive culture is to view 'each pupil as an individual and consciously avoid stereotyping disadvantaged pupils by referring to them as a group' (Sharp et al, 2015, p.8). This statement is in stark contrast to a system that, as we have discussed, categorises children into homogenous groups such as disadvantaged and SEND.

Our comment

An inclusive culture is the expression of shared values from across a school community, embedded and maintained through the perseverance of moral leadership. These values should cascade to every aspect of a school and be embraced by every member of staff, governors and trustees, learners and their families.

In our view, an inclusive culture in relation to literacy would embrace an understanding that children and young people have individual differences. These differences mean that a child or young person will have strengths as well as educational requirements that should be recognised for what they are – the characteristics of an individual.

Putting these two elements together – a shared value that sees merit in addressing the issues faced by those who struggle with literacy from a systemic viewpoint, while also acknowledging the individual difficulties faced and seeking to overcome them in a practical way – will result in a school culture that allows learners to access the curriculum and experience success, even though their literacy skills are not equivalent to their peers.

“ Low literacy is associated with lower earnings and employment rates, particularly for women.”
(Morrisroe, 2014, p.10)



Accountability

In 2011 the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education published a report of its Inquiry into *Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy*, in which it raised the following key points:

- **‘Head teachers are perhaps not accountable enough for literacy levels in secondary schools.’** (APPG, 2011, p.8)
- **‘The assessment and accountability system is also seen as a problem, distorting pedagogical practice and creating a barrier to the improvement of literacy standards. Until we are clear about what we are trying to assess in schools and how that data will be used, then the situation will not improve.’** (APPG, 2011, p.11)
- **‘Too many teachers are concentrating on “teaching to the test” rather than developing a love of reading because the pressure is on schools to achieve high results for the league tables. This causes more problems for secondary schools that have to work with children who have achieved a standard on paper which does not reflect their true ability.’** (APPG, 2011, p.11)

Our comment

Schools and the teaching workforce are subject to increased accountability due to changes in legislation and policy. Yet accountability for the outcomes of SEND learners, where it exists, is rarely prioritised in its own right and is instead divided amongst other priorities.

Driver Youth Trust (2015) has previously called on Ofsted to require schools to undergo a review of the provision and outcomes for SEND learners, as it currently does for Pupil Premium funding. This has yet to be realised. We understand that incentives to promote outcomes and effective practice are just as important. Ministerial recognition and a ministerial awards scheme for high-quality provision (similar to the existing Pupil Premium Awards) are two potential solutions for implementing our recommendation.

“Little progress has been made in closing the gap between the performance of pupils who live in the most disadvantaged areas of the country and those who live in the most affluent areas.”
(Ofsted, 2012a, p.10).

Teaching

Teachers' responsibility for 'reducing educational inequality' (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, p.38), which is 'especially important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds' (Sharp et al, 2015, p.8), is made very clear in the published texts. There is also recognition that in order to do this 'school leaders and teachers need to be supported in making decisions about the curriculum and teaching based on evidence of effectiveness and expertise around improving motivation and linking achievement with the home environment' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.6). Additional accountability is also needed in relation to disadvantaged pupils in early years and Key Stage 1 settings, where 'progress in closing the gap has been slow; and for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils ... these children are doubly disadvantaged by long-term poverty and a lack of effective accountability for their outcomes. (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, p.38)

Schools can best respond to the complex needs of disadvantaged pupils in three ways:

- **‘A whole-school approach promoting learning which sets high aspirations for all pupils.**
- **Strategies to identify and support under-performing pupils (not just low attainers).**
- **Strategies specifically targeted at supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.’** (Sharp et al, 2015, p.12)

These broadly follow educational good practice that is already in place and embedded in many successful schools that identify and support their learners appropriately. What is missing is the detail and acknowledgment of the need for access to other support, not just financial. The Education Policy Institute touched on this when they noted schools can only deliver Quality First Teaching and universal provision if they 'have sufficient funding, adequate opportunities to hire good quality teachers, accountability incentives that support fair outcomes at all stages of education, time and resources to focus on teachers' professional development, as well as access to vital support services from educational psychologists, SEN specialists, speech and language therapists and other trained educational support professionals' (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, pp.38-39).

Our comment

In order to deliver universal provision, education leaders must recognise the needs of those with SEND and see value in addressing the literacy difficulties they face.

Whilst much of the discussion about schools is useful and in line with good educational practice, there is little detail on the extent to which any solutions are already being implemented or how they can be adapted and shared to reflect the needs and priorities of individual schools. In particular, there needs to be training not only of classroom teachers, as noted in *Fish in the Tree* (Driver Youth Trust, 2014), but also of SENCos and Literacy Leads within the school system and within individual faculties at secondary level.

Families

The role of parents and families is highlighted as especially important for supporting the youngest children with reading at home, with strong evidence of 'factors in children's early and family life which act as predictors of educational attainment' (DfE, 2012, p.11). The All Party Parliamentary Group for Education argues that 'there should be a stronger focus on parental support and early intervention to encourage parents to act as reading role models and ensure access to books' (2011, p.9).

Effective support is required to ensure that 'all children are brought up in language-rich' home environments (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.4), while 'ownership of books, trips to a library, attendance at pre-school, parents teaching a range of activities and the number of toys and books available' to children all have 'a positive impact on school entry assessments' (DfE, 2012, p.11).

However, parents face many difficulties in supporting their children with literacy in the home. For example, 'poor literacy is frequently intergenerational: parents with lower literacy skills often lack the confidence and skills to help their children with reading and writing, which reinforces the cycle of disadvantage' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.4). A lack of resources is another factor which limits parents' capacity to support their children's literacy because 'not having enough money makes it harder for parents to pay for the opportunities and the support children need to flourish, from educational trips to books' (ROGO, 2014, p.2).

Therefore, parents and families need initial guidance and support that is accessible and 'embedded within a range of existing

services ... with staff trained to identify low literacy in parents and to offer appropriate advice and support' (National Literacy Forum, 2014, p.4). Support should continue into formal education with a whole-school approach that 'encourage teachers and parents to work together, with a shared understanding that reading should be for meaning and enjoyment as well as an essential skill' (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.6).

Our comment

The implicit assertion that parents are in some way to blame for their child's lack of literacy attainment is divisive, as is the suggestion that parents with lower earnings value reading less. While many parents, whatever their income, can and do support their children at home with reading or homework, others cannot.

Understandably, some parents will have literacy difficulties of their own, particularly when SEND affects them as well as their children. However, supporting a child with complex literacy difficulties can be challenging even for well-educated and literate parents. It can also put a strain on relationships – for example, between parents and teachers, who may view one another in an adversarial way. Whilst teachers may be accused of not doing enough for a child, a parent might be considered as overzealous, emotional or unrealistic about their expectations of what a school can provide.

Parents shouldn't be blamed as they are, and schools, whilst acknowledging the important partnership role with parents, should focus on delivering Quality First Teaching in a culturally inclusive environment as discussed above.

SEND

Mention of SEND is generally limited by questions posed as to whether the 'major increases in incidence are real' or whether a reason for the 'spike' might be 'the extra funding that is tied to students' (Hattie, 2015, p.19). What is clear in relation to literacy is that a 'common problem was some form of delay' of young children's development in speech and language (Ofsted, 2011, p.14). In addition, disadvantaged children are 'disproportionately likely to experience special educational needs ... which is associated with lower educational outcomes' (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, p.41); for example they are 'less likely to be able to read well by 11' (ROGO, 2014, p.9).

The suggested solution is for children with SEND to have 'specialist literacy resources' (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education, 2011, p.10). This includes the 'availability to schools of educational psychologists' (Hutchinson and Dunford, 2016, p.41) and 'especially speech and language therapy' (APPG, 2011, p.15). However, this assumes the requirements of children and young people with specific impairment types. The fact is that in 2013 'half of all pupils with a hearing impairment, close to 60% of those with a visual impairment and just under half of pupils with a physical disability were reading well by the age of 11' (ROGO, 2014, p.9). Again, this reflects the 'broad brush' approach to categorising the requirements of learners, here those with SEND, which does not address the nuances of their needs.

There is little to no mention of impairments that specifically affect reading and writing, such as dyslexia, even though these difficulties are associated with

negative educational, employment and economic outcomes, making reading-related issues relevant to various policy domains (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2009, p.1). Therefore, despite the mention of 'specialist literacy resources', there is no explicit understanding of the needs of these learners nor what these resources are or how they might support a child or young person who, because of the impact of their particular SEND, finds literacy inherently difficult.

Our comment

It is notable that SEND is rarely mentioned in the texts analysed. Where it is mentioned, there is a tendency to homogenise all children and young people with SEND. This does not reflect the complexities of their characteristics, nor is it a good way to ensure their needs are met.

What is needed is a more nuanced approach so that the needs of individual children, who often have complex literacy needs, can be identified and supported. Until this is done and until universal provision genuinely means for all learners, including those with SEND, we will not see our literacy and overall achievement standards improve.

Discussion

What did we find?

What we found by analysing the 21 texts is:

- **Lots of great ideas on building universal provision.**
- **An unchallenged assumption that literacy and reading are the same thing.**
- **Good thinking on supporting families who may have limited access to funding or social intellectual capital.**
- **Too many stereotypes and not enough nuance.**
- **Lazy use of language.**
- **Limited mention of SEND.**
- **Limited recognition that many children will never achieve a high level of reading ability but can, nevertheless, still access a broad curriculum and achieve well academically.**

For the most part, the texts do not address the issues facing children and young people with SEND, including dyslexia, particularly in relation to the impact of SEND on learning, educational outcomes or effective practice. Few advocate for the requirements of the 1.2 million children with SEND (DfE, 2016a, p.1), most of whom are in mainstream schools. When attempting to devise a strategy to ensure universal provision of literacy for every child, a particular focus on disadvantage by socio-economic status prevails at the expense of a more nuanced and granular discussion.

There is no greater disadvantage than being ignored, as we have demonstrated for children and young people with SEND and their families.

In a context where there is little nuanced attention to the requirements of children and young people or the specifics of their context, a child with a literacy impairment needs a more sophisticated approach.

Yet more readily we see schools not seeing the importance of addressing, in a whole school approach, the issues that those with SEND and those with persistent literacy difficulties face beyond ad hoc, 'add on' support, the quality of which is hugely variable around the country.

This approach is highlighted by:

- **Lack of teacher training.**
- **Lack of investment in training SENCOs and Literacy Leads.**
- **Schools not accessing specialist support early enough (or at all).**
- **Scarce resources, which could be allocated in the wrong place.**
- **Overuse of the same approaches or assessments, which focus on catching up and achieving specific standards and which leave many children and young people with a deep sense of failure and frustration.**
- **A failure to provide access to the wider curriculum that can enable children and young people with significant impairments to demonstrate their strengths and build on their talents.**
- **A failure to take advantage of advances in technology to support learners so that they can show what they know and can do, rather than how well they can read and write.**
- **A failure to prepare SEND pupils for success by putting in place access arrangements early enough.**

This last point is particularly important. Even without the literacy skills of their peers, children with dyslexia or other impairments can be supported to access a full and rounded curriculum and enjoy a successful school life. For example, many young people with reading and writing skills behind their age-related norms can still get a range of top grades (A/A*/9) across EBacc subjects. But this requires recognition and understanding of their difficulties and helping them to access learning and support, including in assessments and exams, by putting effective resources into alternative strategies.

Why does it matter?

These texts and the organisations that publish them influence educators, policy makers and commentators. If they fail to reference the many children and young people with SEND, the complexities of their requirements and the interplay between socio-economic status, family background and SEND in our mainstream education system, then they will fail to change the persistently low literacy levels we hear so much about.

These organisations rely on their reputation and brands to reach wide audiences and catch the ear of decision makers. The work presented in these reports is authoritative and is rightly listened to by politicians, leaders and teachers. However, the overly generalised discussions about the lack of professional expertise of teachers, the requirements of learners, and the absence of any substantive consideration of pedagogy and SEND raises the question as to whether this is accidental or intentional.

If SEND is intentionally left out of the educational agenda this may explain its absence from political debate, the national educational agenda and accountability measures. In turn this may explain why there is not a greater sense of urgency in ensuring that the outcomes gap for these learners is not as great a social issue as we think it should be, based on the evidence presented in this report. Most teachers and educational professionals are aware of this need and the appalling long-term failure to address it.

There appears little appetite to show leadership on calling for a greater emphasis for a more nuanced discussion about how best to structure and deliver a truly universal approach to literacy. The education sector itself has a role to play here. Ministers, Regional Schools Commissioners, local authorities and leaders of Multi-Academy Trusts or other school networks should champion professional expertise and ensure that think tanks, charities and other organisations understand the need to recognise the potential for schools and teachers to address literacy needs through specialist support and signposting to examples of good practice.

The way ahead?

There is a need to work towards a more cohesive understanding of how, as a sector, we can create strategic change. Such an approach is both solidly founded in the literature and recognisable currently by researchers, practitioners and policy makers in many countries. It is not just a theoretical exercise. All of the reports we refer to have, at the heart of them, a commendable desire to improve literacy. However, these reports that set the agenda for policy makers, for society's aspirations, for defining what we regard as important, largely ignore those with SEND and by doing so they ignore effective practice. This perpetuates poor practice and will ultimately result in resources being directed inappropriately.

To be truly transformational there is a need to embrace those who find literacy difficult, in the classroom, every day.

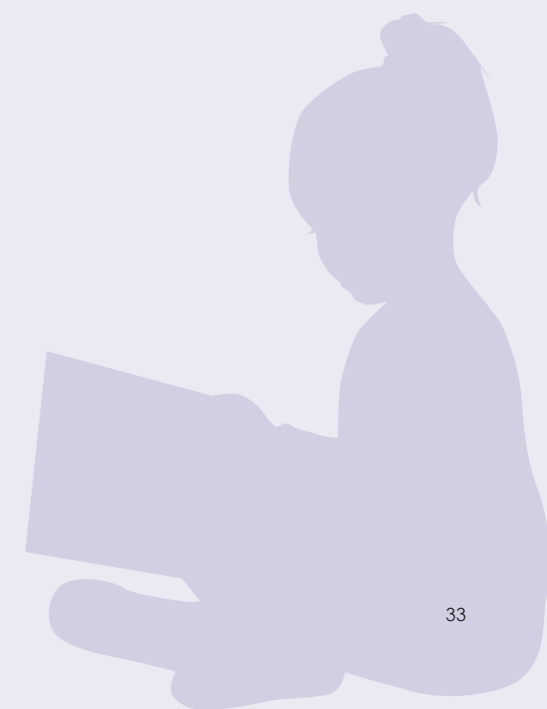
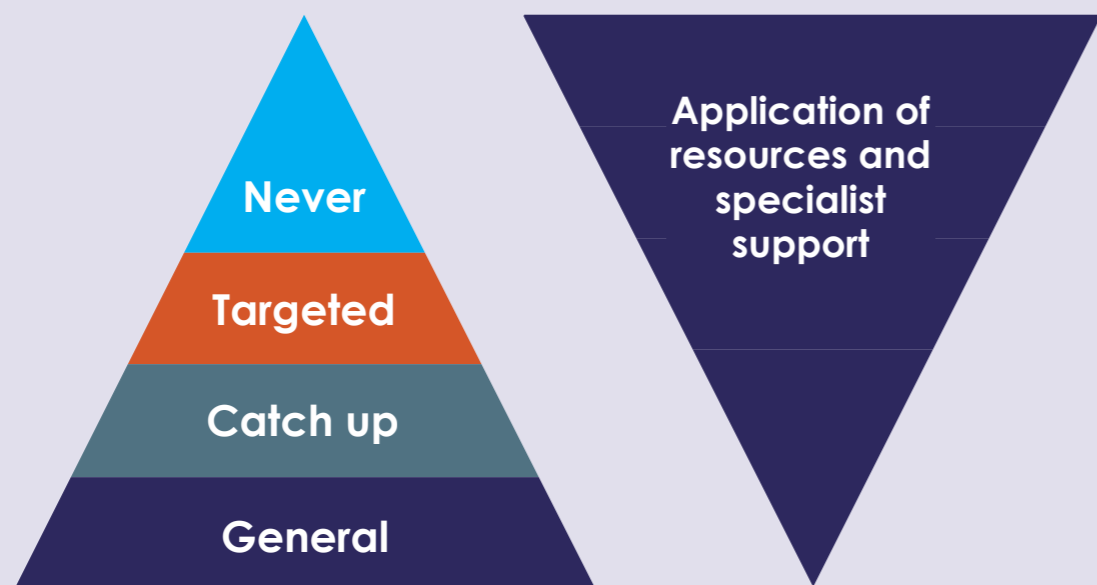
Universal needs to mean for everyone, it needs to be inclusive and only then will we see a change in both what we understand to be literacy and in the achievements of our children and young people. Within this is the need to recognise that some children and young people will need more funding than their peers to be able to read, write, speak and listen. There should be a recognition that measuring the impact of interventions should not solely emphasise a cost-benefit for each individual child, because this implies that the requirements of all children are equal.

What we need is for specialist knowledge and skills to be used for best effect to support learners with literacy difficulties, whether that is an outcome of disadvantage or SEND. There is support within the system, in well managed schools, accessing specialist teachers, speech and language therapists and others identifying and supporting children and young people in a way that enables them to succeed, but this is not universally accessible or embedded across the country.

There is undeniably much good work out there and changes to legislation (following the Children and Families Act reforms) give schools the framework from which to develop and deliver robust provision for all learners. Yet there is clearly more to be done to improve accountability in relation to outcomes for all learners, to genuinely listen and engage with the voice of parents and learners, and to ensure we have an educational workforce that can feed specialist knowledge and skills into mainstream provision.

“To be truly transformational there is a need to embrace those who find literacy difficult, in the classroom, every day.”

Figure 8: A truly universal literacy strategy would meet all four levels of the pyramid



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This report was commissioned and published by the Driver Youth Trust.

About the Driver Youth Trust

The Driver Youth Trust is a national charity dedicated to improving the life chances of children and young people with a focus on those with literacy difficulties and who may have Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), particularly children with dyslexia.

We focus our resources on specific areas where we believe we can make a sizeable and sustainable difference with a view to creating systemic change in how young people who face literacy difficulties are supported in education.

Our flagship programme, Drive for Literacy (DfL), is a collaboration between policy and practice and is informed by the evidence of our research. It is a whole school model for literacy, built around the Graduated Approach and starting from Quality First Teaching. Its aim is to build teacher capability and school capacity to identify and support learners who struggle with reading, writing, speaking and listening.

We commission research and campaign for policy change so that all children, including those with dyslexia, get the right support to learn to read and write, so that they can access the curriculum and experience success. Our past report, *Joining the Dots*, looks at the impact of recent education reforms on pupils with SEND, while our *Fish in the Tree* report asks the question 'Why are we failing children with dyslexia?'.



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