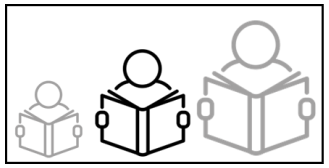
# Teenage reading: What do we know and what can we do?

Professor Jessie Ricketts

Economic and Social Research Council

Nuffield Foundation

Language and Reading Acquisition



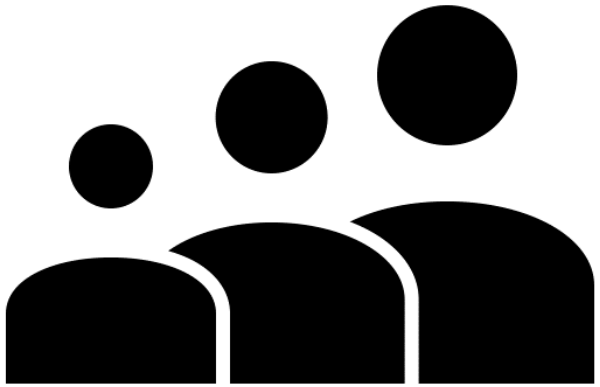
# Overview

- Background
  - Why teenage reading?
  - Establishing a shared understanding of reading

- What do we know?
  -Development of reading knowledge and skills, behaviour…

- What can we do?
  -Collaborate (more)

# Why teenage reading?



# Why teenage reading?

What teachers and school leaders were telling me:

- We are concerned, and not just about those with the most need
- We don't know what to do
- We don't have the training, capacity, resources

The research context:

- There's nothing interesting going on

✗ There is a lot going on with teenage reading

The educational policy context:

- We are focusing on primary reading

✗ Reading is not just a primary issue



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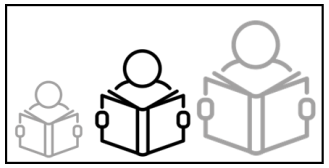
# Why teenage reading?



- Adequate reading is crucial for accessing the curriculum
  - Every subject
  - Likely greater influence as students get older
- Expectations of independence increase
  - Can 'read to learn'
- Reading needs will be a barrier to exam performance

access to the curriculum

assessing the outcomes of learning



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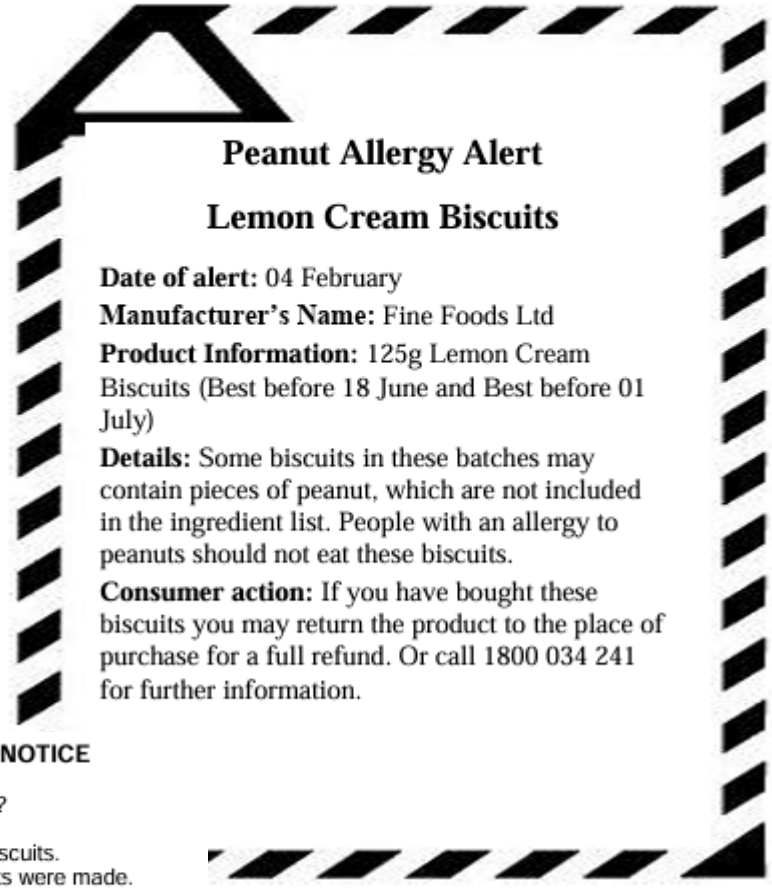
# Why teenage reading?

There is much need… and it matters for everyday life

- 20% of teenagers (15 years) show reading below acceptable standards

(e.g. PISA, 2015; Jerrim & Shure, 2016)

**R401 : Supermarket Notice**



**Peanut Allergy Alert**

**Lemon Cream Biscuits**

**Date of alert:** 04 February
**Manufacturer's Name:** Fine Foods Ltd
**Product Information:** 125g Lemon Cream Biscuits (Best before 18 June and Best before 01 July)
**Details:** Some biscuits in these batches may contain pieces of peanut, which are not included in the ingredient list. People with an allergy to peanuts should not eat these biscuits.
**Consumer action:** If you have bought these biscuits you may return the product to the place of purchase for a full refund. Or call 1800 034 241 for further information.

**Question 2: SUPERMARKET NOTICE**

What is the purpose of this notice?

A To advertise Lemon Cream Biscuits.
B To tell people when the biscuits were made.
C To warn people about the biscuits.
D To explain where to buy Lemon Cream Biscuits.



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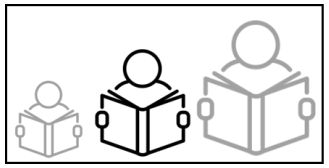
# Why teenage reading?

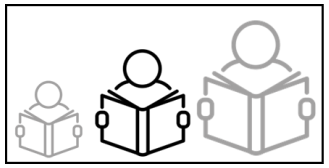


We knew very little about reading development in adolescence (some hints: Foorman et al., 2015; Reynolds & Turek, 2012; Francis et al., 1996)

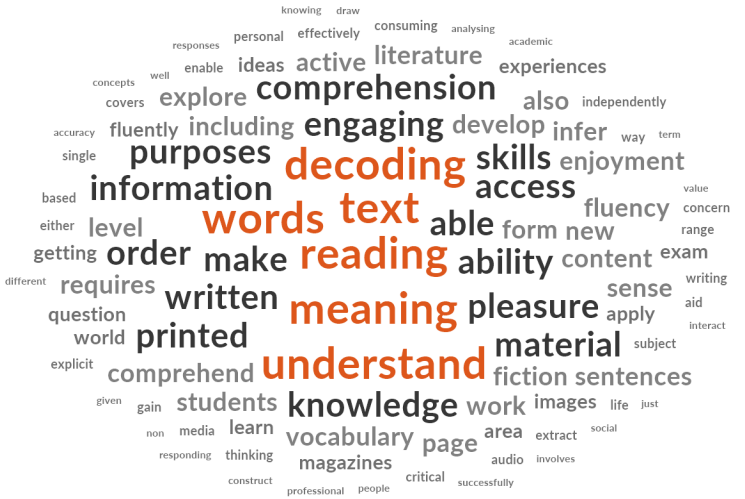
- Growth to 15y but slows over time?

Much is changing in adolescence

- Reading-related brain regions (Ben-Shachar et al., 2011)
- Language processing (Dawson et al., 2017)
- Reading behaviour (Cole et al., 2022: National Literacy Trust)



# Establishing a shared understanding of reading

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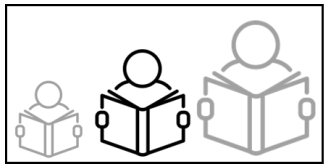
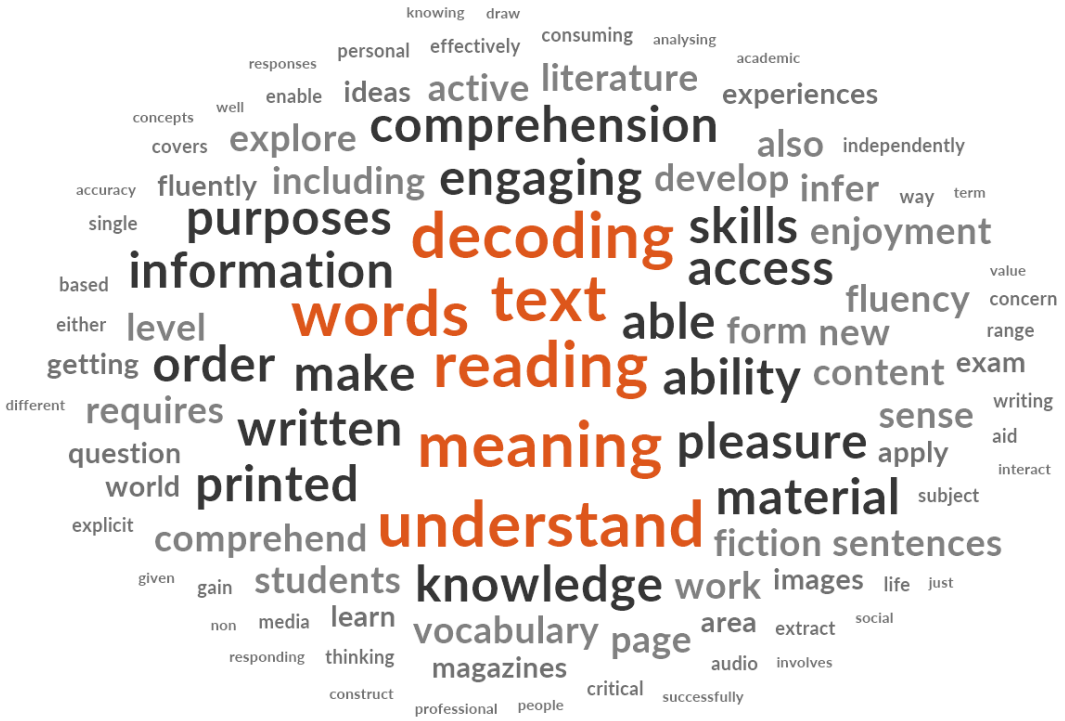
# First take a step back…






To you?

For yourself, for your students?

To your students?

Different things to different people



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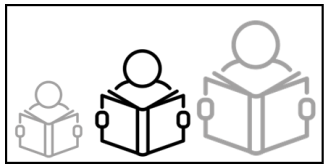
# What is reading?



word recognition

language comprehension

Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.

A broader definition of reading

- Knowledge and skills, but also:
- behaviour (e.g. frequency)
- affect (e.g. motivation, engagement)
- (and lots of other things, there are many definitions of reading)



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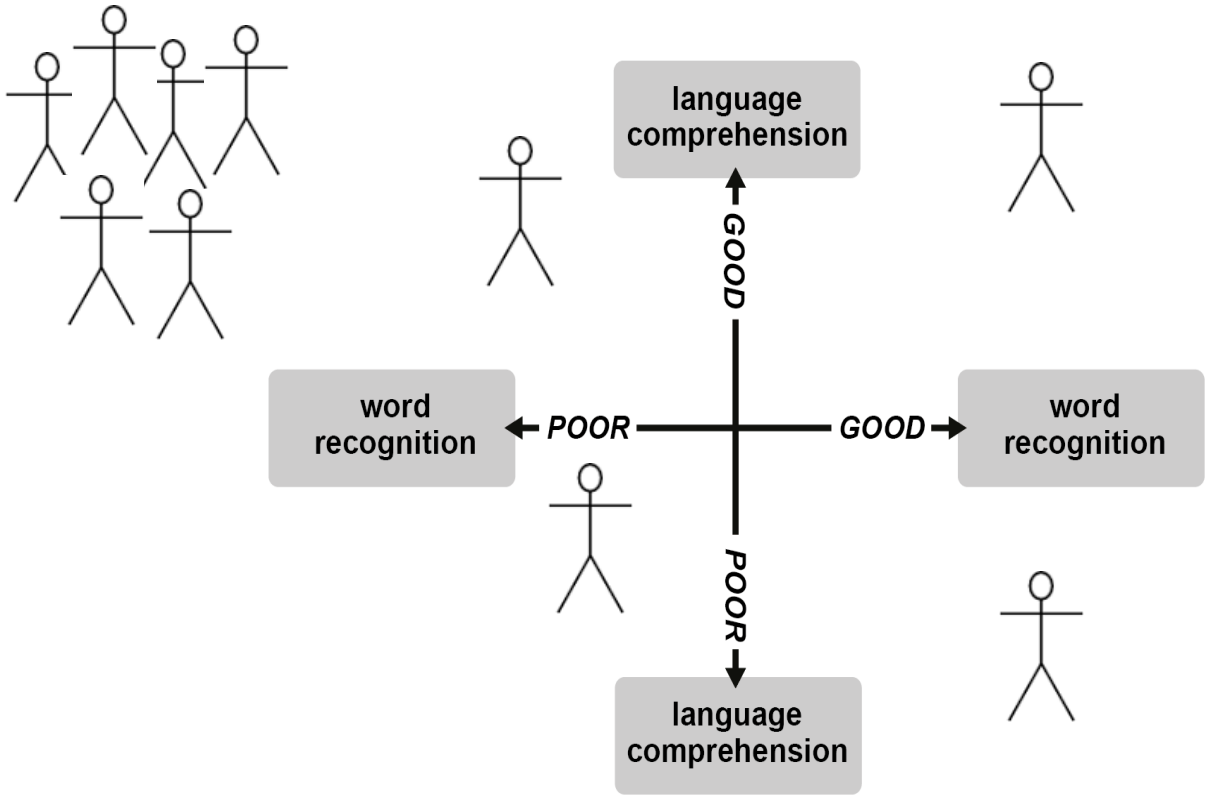
# What is reading for us, today?




**The Simple View of Reading**

- Both word recognition and language comprehension are necessary for successful reading, neither sufficient
- Relative contribution changes with age and experience (e.g. Nation, 2019; LARRC, 2015)
- Learning to read and teaching of reading is not simple but framework is simple
- Adopted by Rose Reviews (2006; 2009), National Curriculum 2013 and in initial teacher education

Gough & Tunmer (1986)
Tunmer & Chapman (2012)



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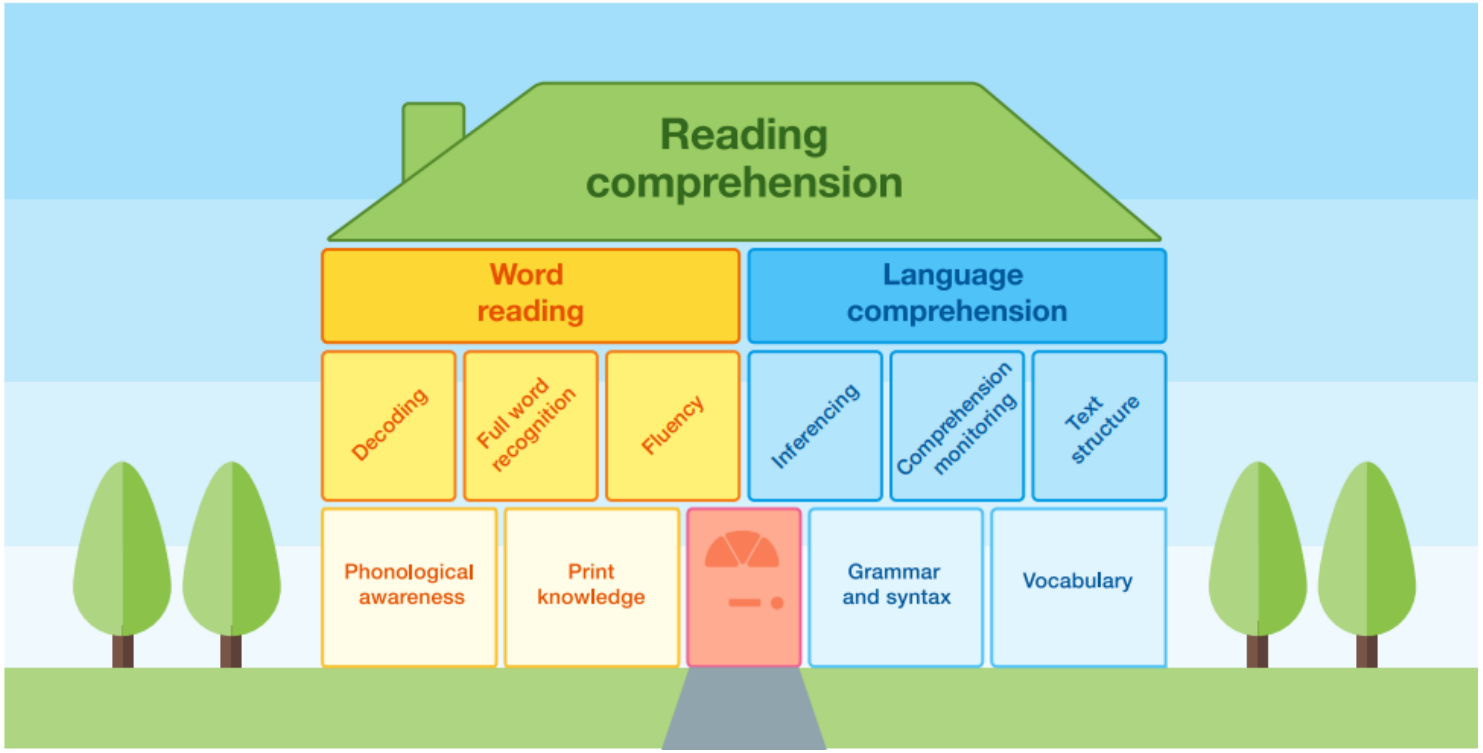
# Another way of representing this

## The Reading Comprehension House

*Adapted from Hogan, Bridges, Justice, and Cain (2011)*




https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-blog-supporting-reading-comprehension-in-key-stage-2

Both word reading and language comprehension are complex, in their own right

Many pressure points or barriers to successful reading



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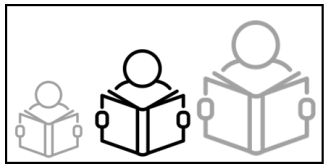
# Is the simple view too simple?



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Not developmental

Components not independent

(e.g. Nation, 2019)

And of course reading is about more than this…



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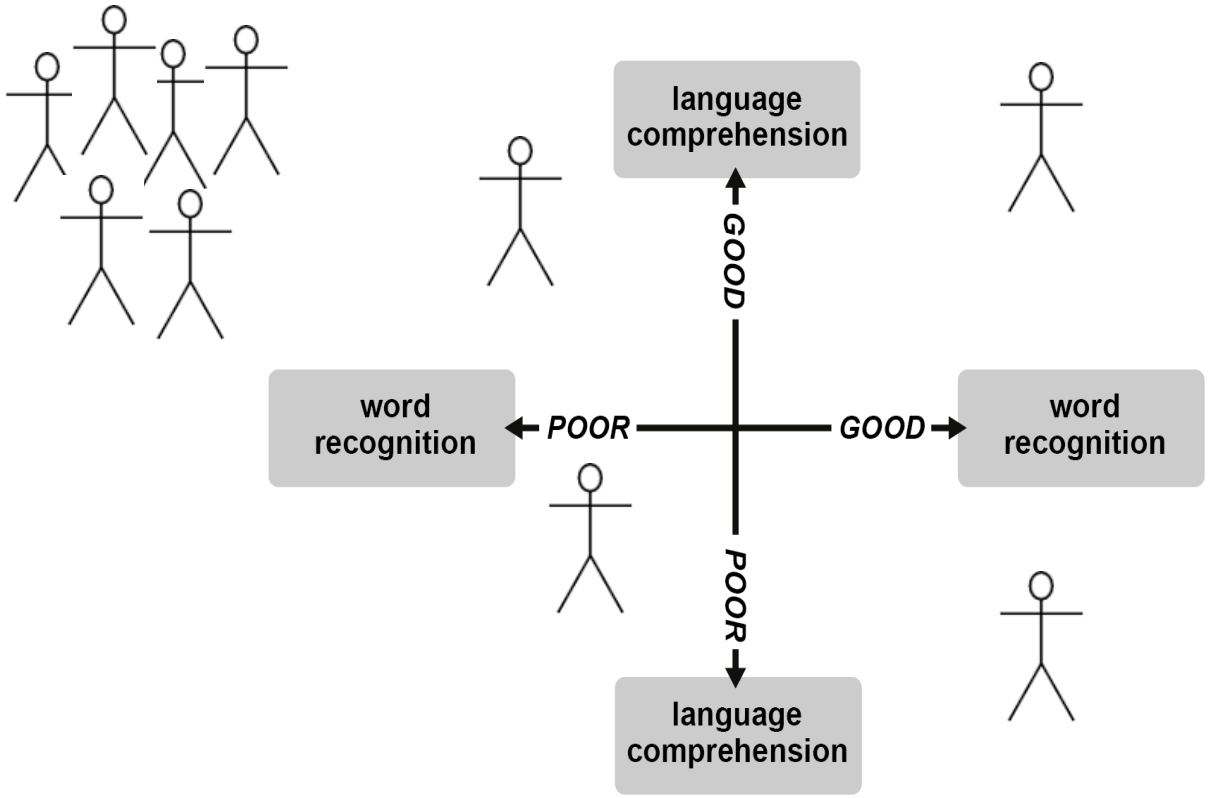
# Simple but effective




Identify need

Target intervention

Evaluation intervention

Gough & Tunmer (1986)
Tunmer & Chapman (2012)



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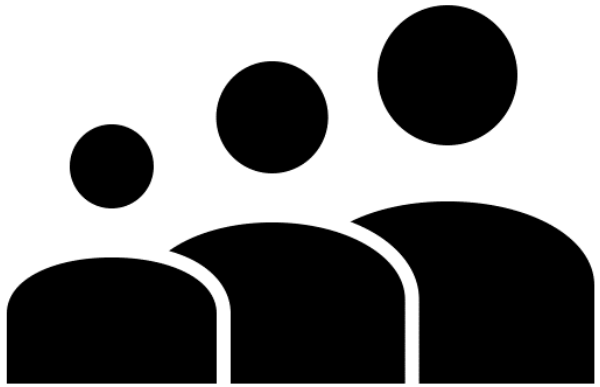
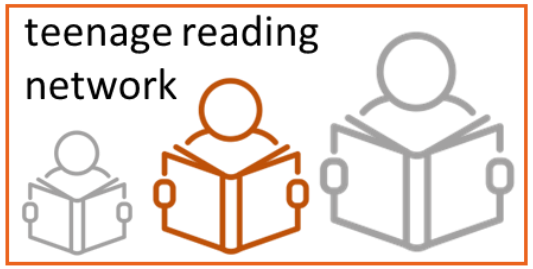
# What do we know?
# Development and variation

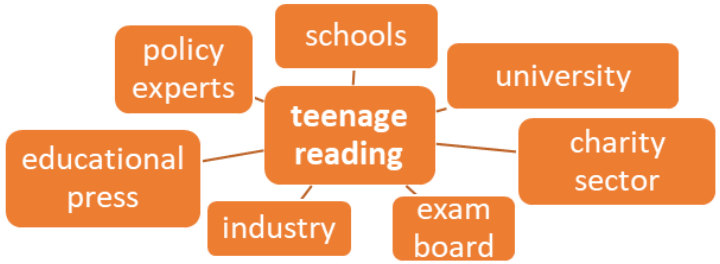


# My approach

- Combining **longitudinal** and **experimental** data to understand how individuals are different from each other and change over time

- Collaboration to navigate the **gap** between research and practice



Department for Education

RIGHT TO SUCCEED

Education Endowment Foundation

GL Assessment
A Renaissance Company

National Literacy Trust
Change your story

THE READING AGENCY

tes

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

fft

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# Large-scale longitudinal work

**Vocabulary and Reading in Secondary Schools (VaRiSS)**

Nicola Dawson

| **UK year** | R | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | **primary** | | | | | | **secondary** | | |
| Age 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |

Sanne van der Kleij
Laura Shapiro

**Reading and Vocabulary (RAV)**
primary-secondary transition

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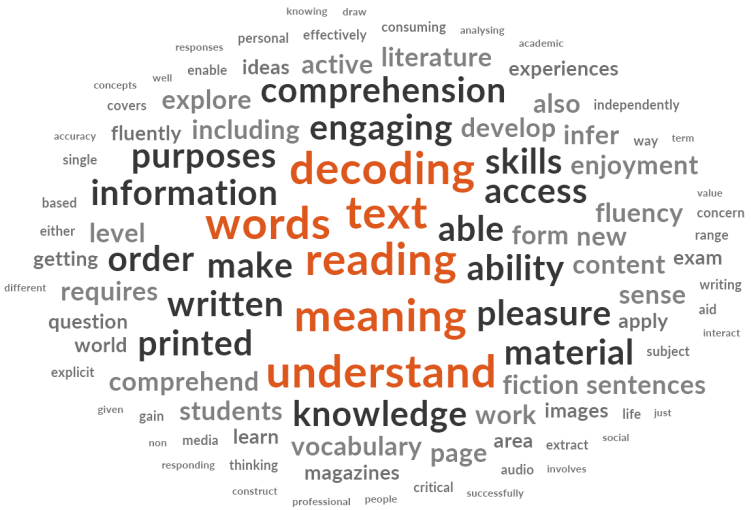
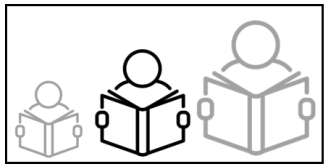
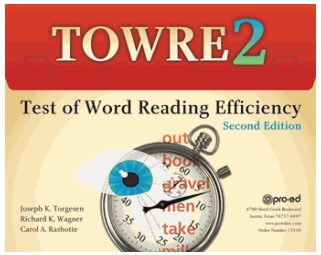
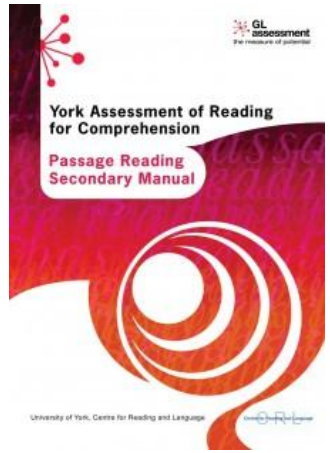
# Measuring reading



pump, chicken
cough, cello
delk, seldent




- Word-level reading
- Reading comprehension
- Also, spoken vocabulary

what does summer mean?



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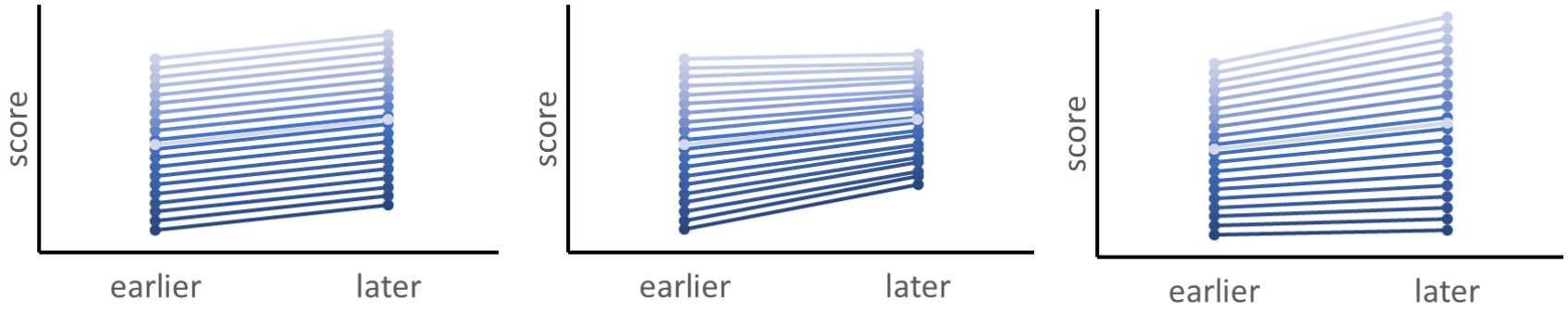
# Teenage reading development?

- Growth: Is there progress over time?
- Stability (Bornstein et al., 2014; 2016): Does pecking order stay the same over time?
- Spread: What happens to the gap between the least and most able readers?




- Evidence from children: progress, high stability, widening of gap
- Teenagers?



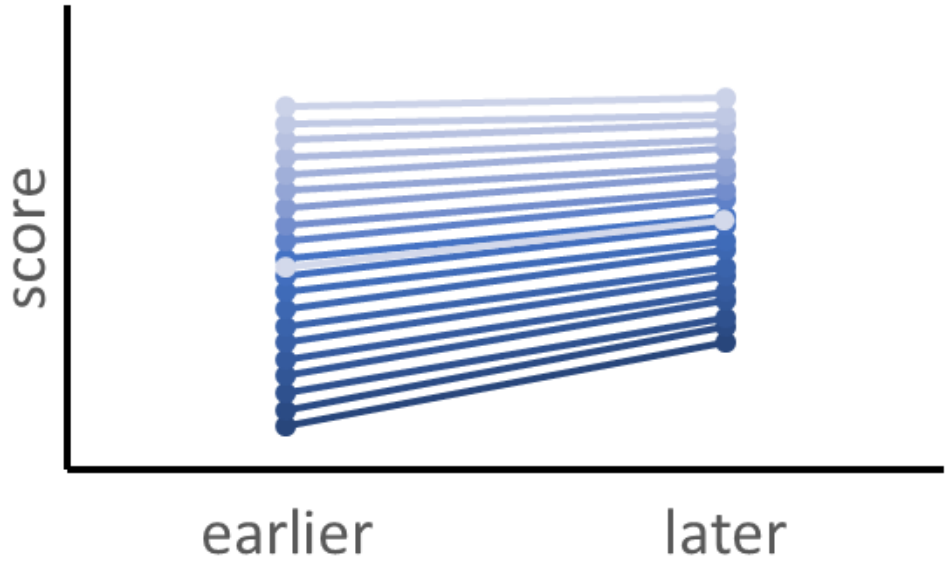
(Bornstein et al., 2014; 2016; Lervåg et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2015)

# Teenage reading development?

- Significant growth
- High stability (rank order preserved)
- Evidence of compensation: narrowing (but not closing) the gap

BUT

- Enormous variability
- Poorest performing 10-20%:
  - not exceeding levels of the average 9-year-old
  - can't assume they can access the secondary curriculum, will constrain outcomes




Ricketts et al. (2020)



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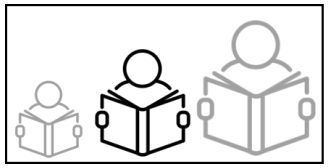
# What next?



- Teenage reading development – are we sure?

- Transition 'slump'? We need a robust test:
  - consistent and objective measures
  - comparison between transition summer and non-transition summer

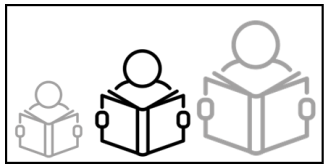
- Socio-economic status (SES) **gaps**: differences between children from more or less affluent families?

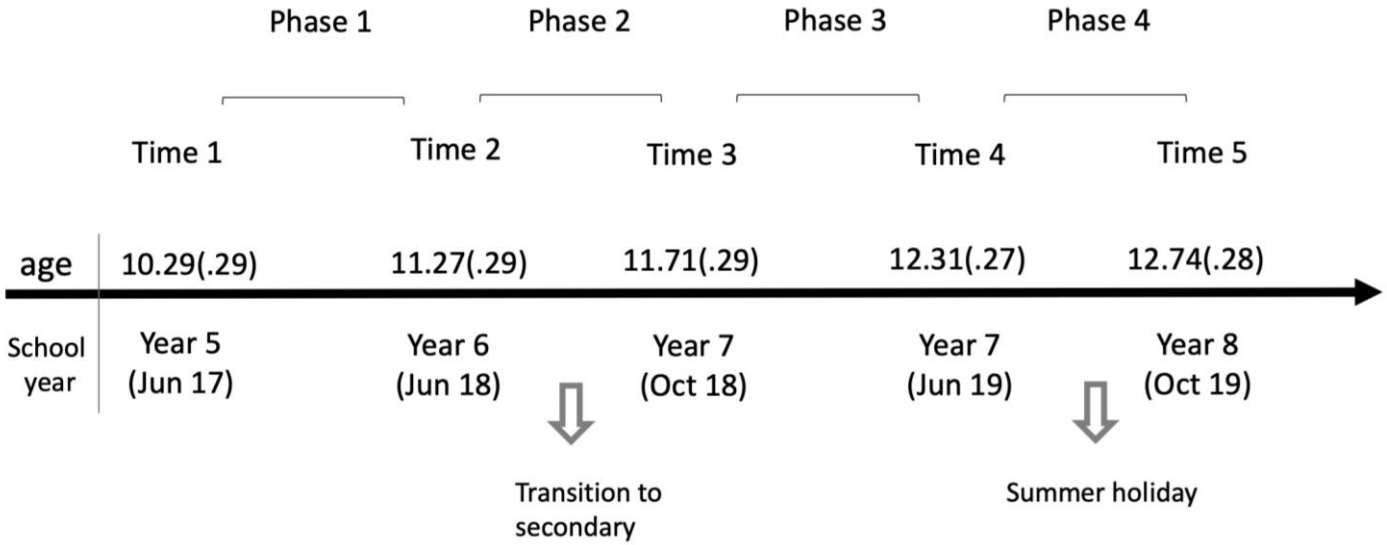
- What about reading engagement?



van der Kleij et al. (2022; 2023)

# Methods






- Word-level reading
- Reading comprehension
- Spoken vocabulary (everyday)

Also,

- Curriculum vocabulary
- Behaviour, motivation, engagement…
- SES: free school meals and/or mother's education

Supplementary materials: https://osf.io/c3vmg



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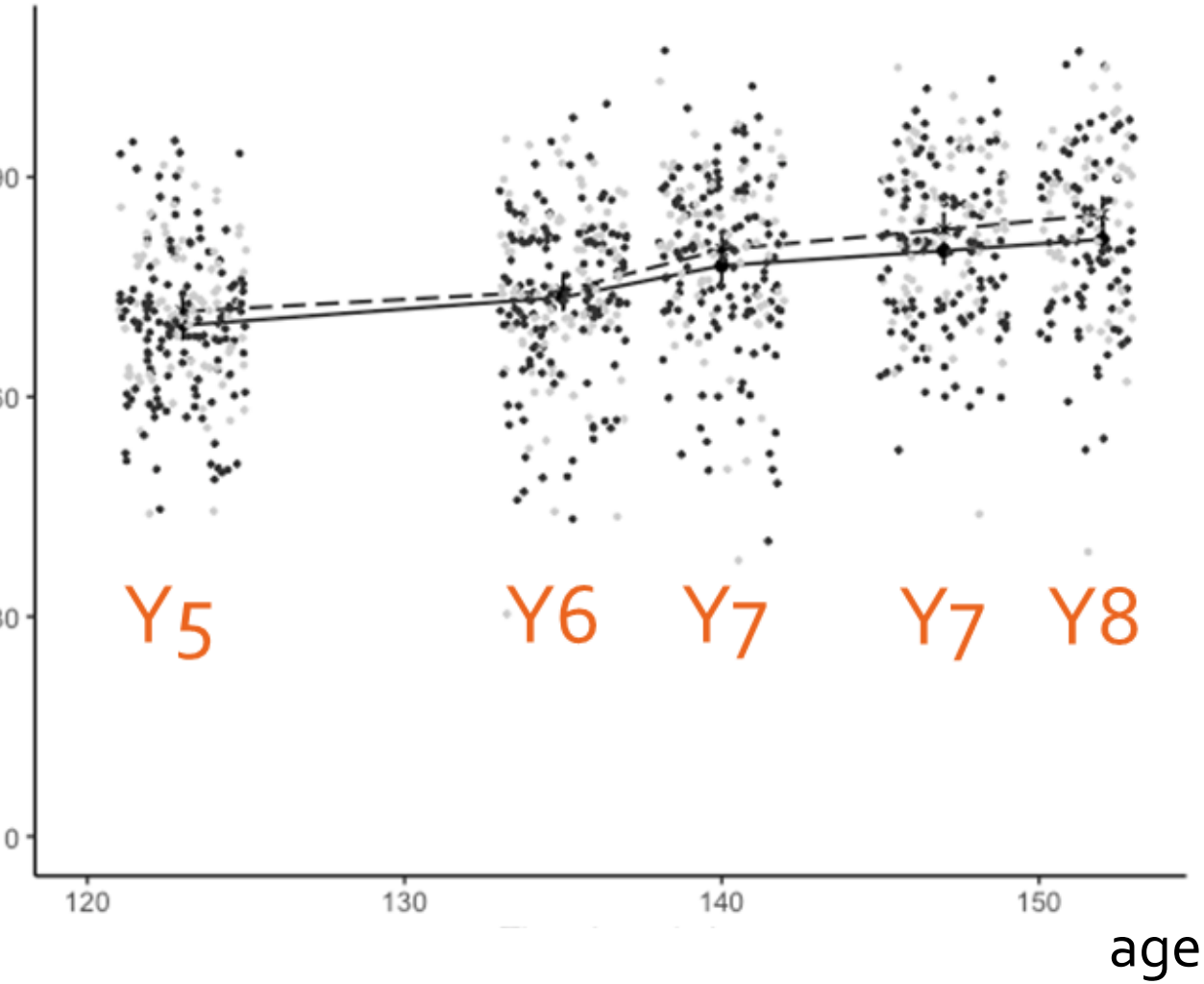
# Teenage Reading Development




Replication… confidence

- Some progress
- Stability
- Spread/gaps
- Huge variation

- This presents a real challenge for teachers and universal instruction

van der Kleij et al. (2023)



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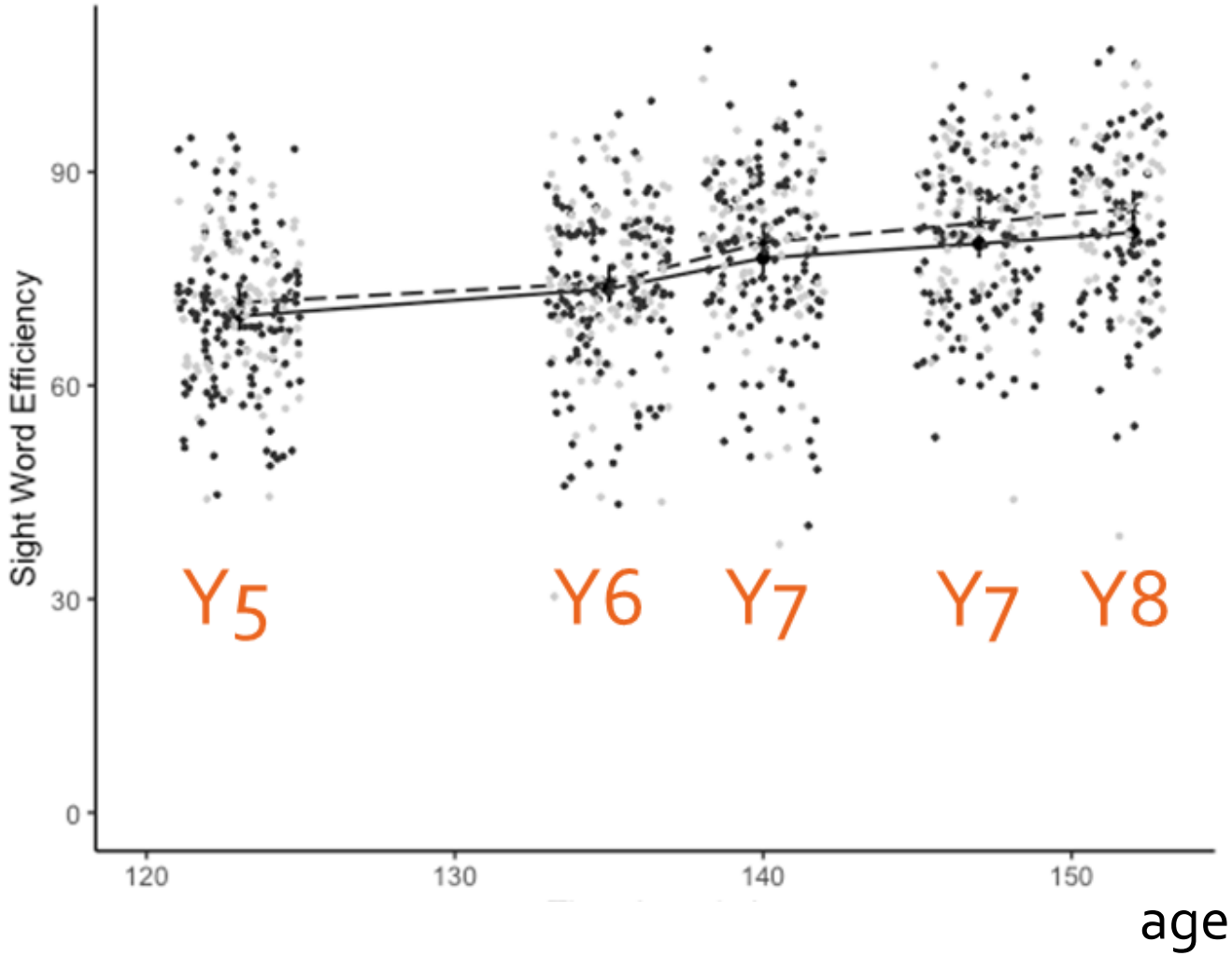
# High levels of reading need




- Can't 'fix' things in primary because some needs:
  - are persistent despite excellent instruction and support
  - emerge later as the challenge increases
- Reading is not just a primary issue
- Need continuous support into and through secondary

van der Kleij et al. (2023)



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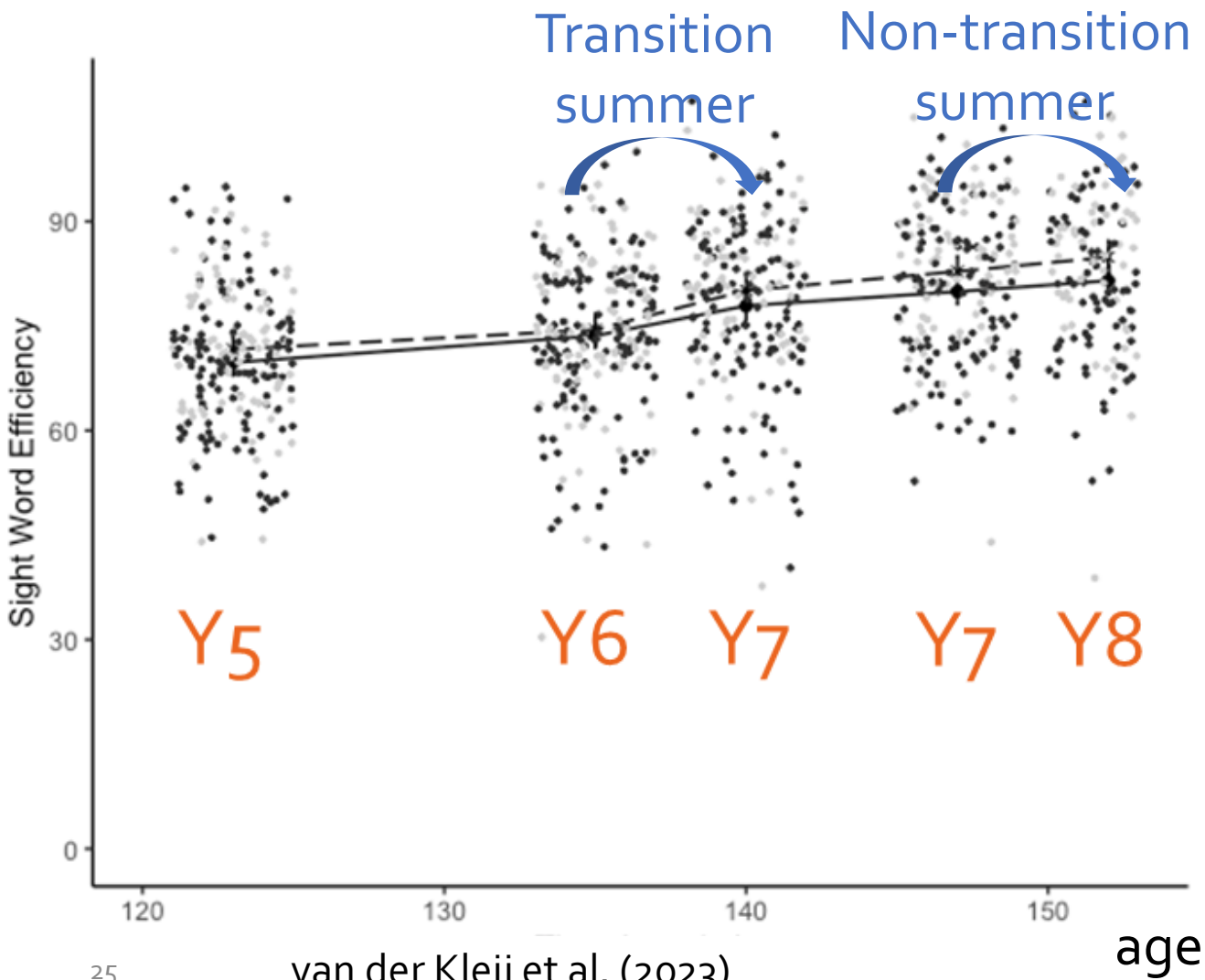
# Transition 'slump'?




van der Kleij et al. (2023)

- No transition slump
- Shift in challenge, expectations and context
- We need a joined up approach



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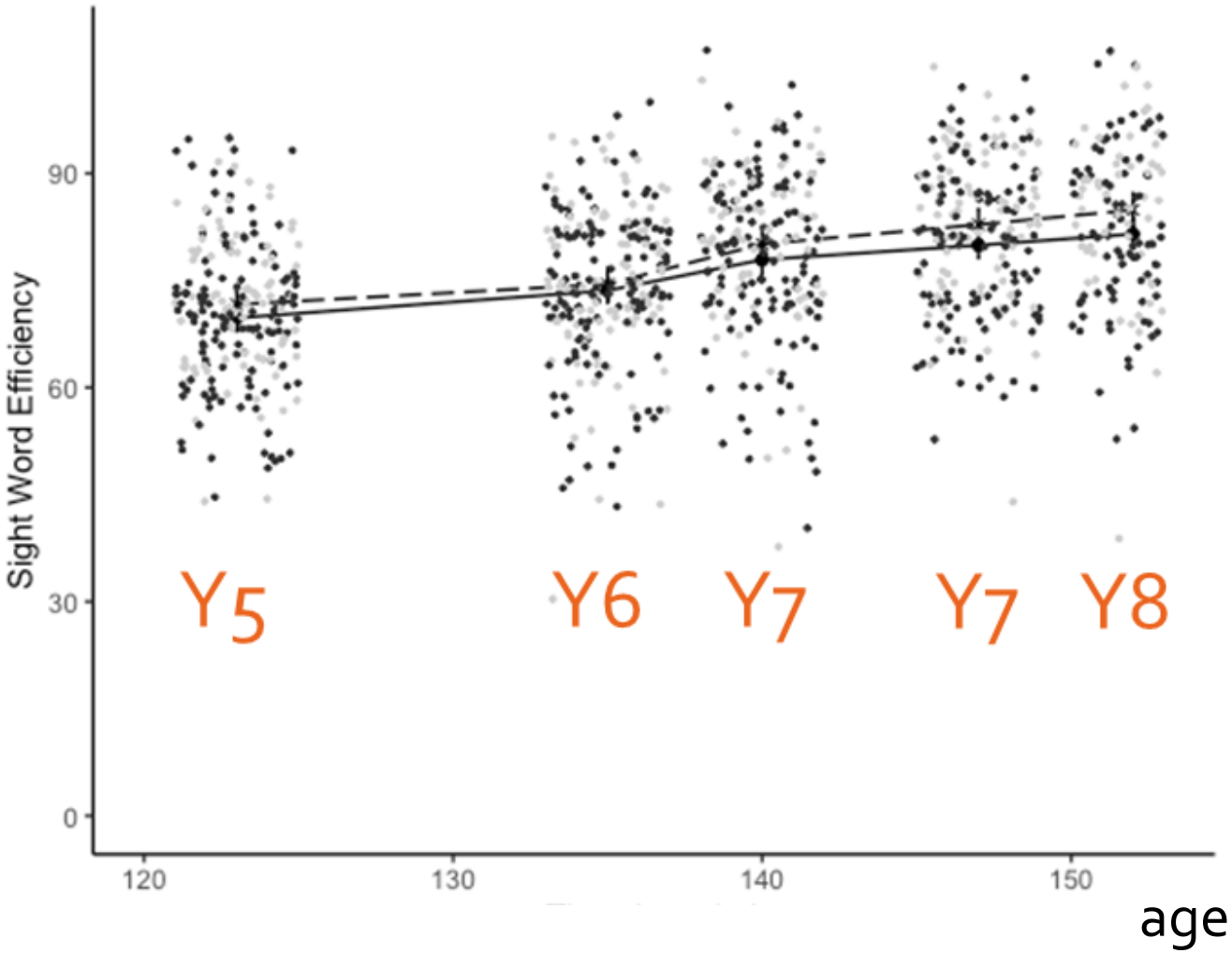
# And the gaps?




------ High SES

——— Low SES

- SES gaps for some but not all aspects of reading (and vocabulary)
- Again, gaps aren't widening, but are persistent
- We need to work to narrow (not close!) gaps

van der Kleij et al. (2023)



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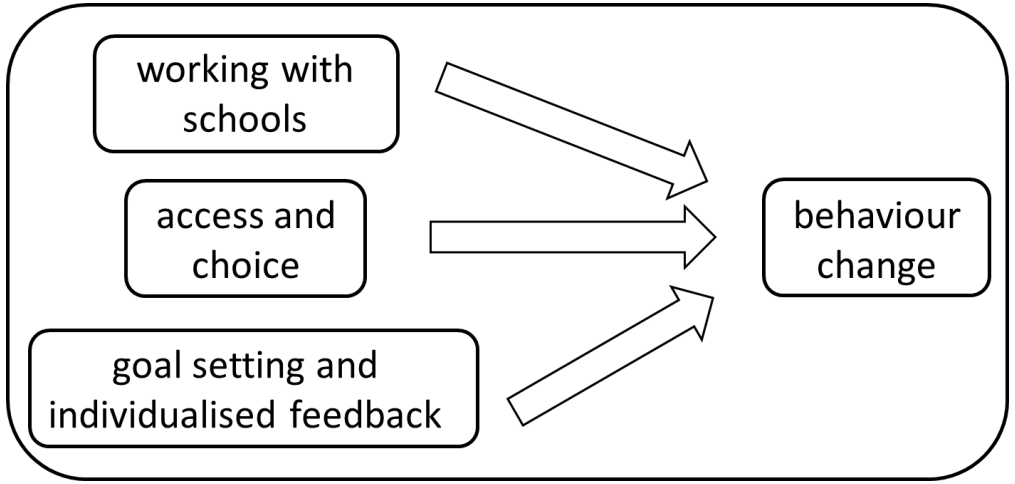
# Can we promote engagement?

Teenagers don't read much… what can we do?
A large naturalistic experiment…




Pre-test

Practice diary and drop-in session

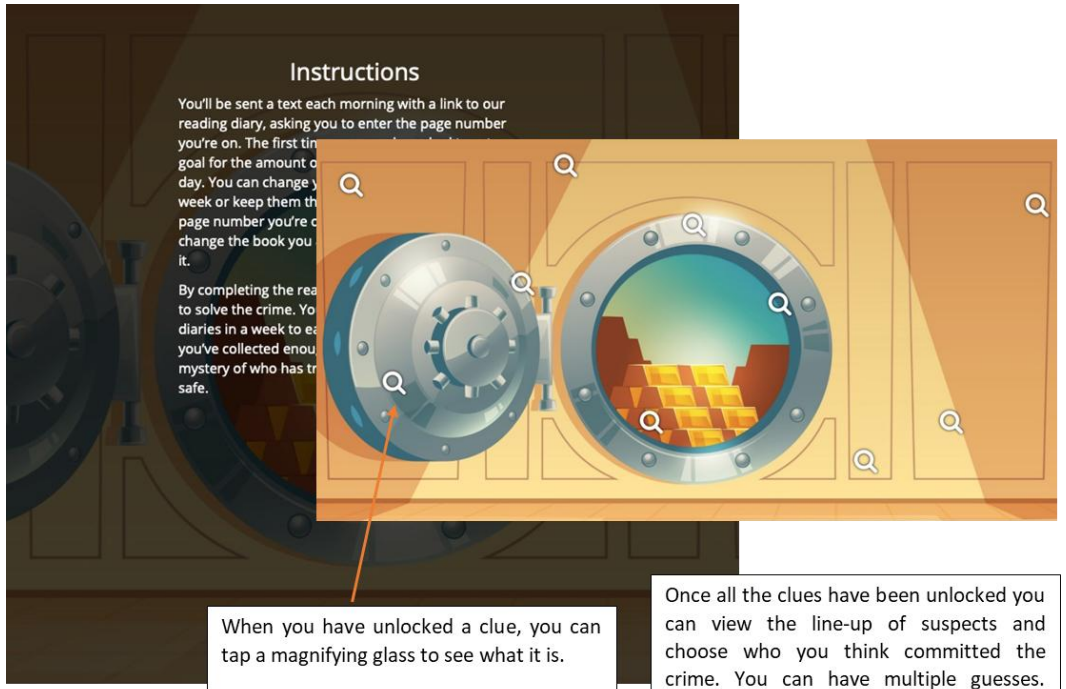
Reading phase (10 weeks)

Post-test

van der Kleij et al. (under review)

# Half complete a diary…

Completing the diary unlocks clues to solve the case




When you have unlocked a clue, you can tap a magnifying glass to see what it is.

NOTE: To view the whole crime scene, turn your phone to landscape.

Once all the clues have been unlocked you can view the line-up of suspects and choose who you think committed the crime. You can have multiple guesses. NOTE: to get a better view of what name belongs to what person, turn your phone to landscape

GORILLA

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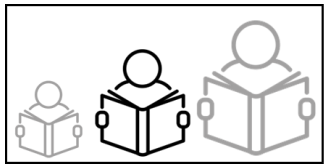
# Can we promote engagement?



Success: Tracking vocabulary growth

When adolescents read real books because they choose to, in their own time, the *quantity* of leisure-reading is linked to vocabulary growth

BUT little engagement

- Despite developing an attractive tool with input from experts, teachers and teenagers, few participants completed the diary consistently

We need to collaborate more deeply…



van der Kleij, Groenhoej, Vousden, Burgess, Shapiro & Ricketts.
Stage 1 Registered Report accepted in *Scientific Studies of Reading.*

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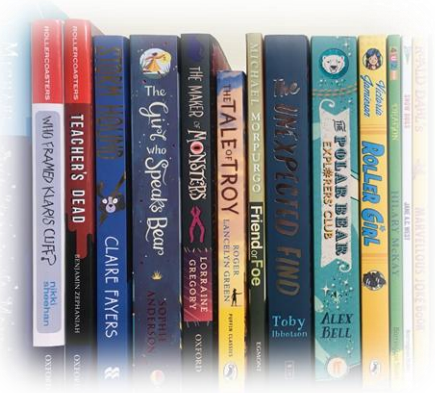
# Proficiency and engagement

- Virtuous circle, BUT
  - 'can' does not mean 'do' and 'do' does not mean 'can'
  - proficiency must come first






van der Kleij et al. (2022)

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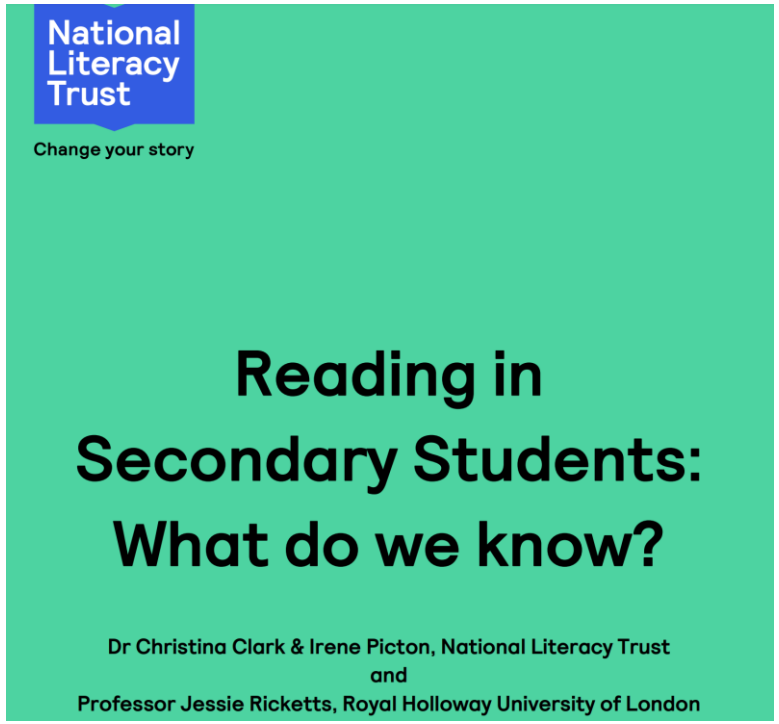
# Proficiency, behaviour and affect…




## There are high levels of reading need in secondary school

Evidence indicates a need to target the following in secondary students:

- **reading proficiency**, including word and text reading accuracy, reading fluency and reading comprehension
- **reading behaviour**, supporting choice of reading materials and encouraging more reading
- **reading affect**, including how motivated students are to read, how enjoyable they find reading

https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/reading-in-secondary-students-what-do-we-know/



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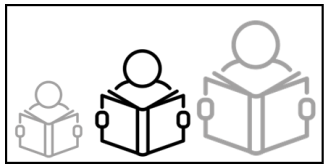
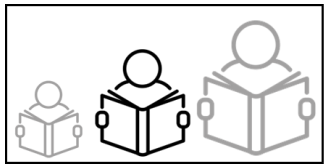
# What do we know?



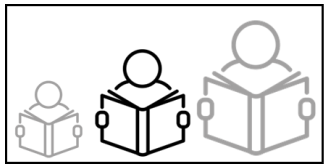
- There is progress alongside high stability
- There is huge variation, with high levels of need
- Transition from primary to secondary school is marked by a shift in challenge and expectation rather than a slump in knowledge and skills
- Promoting engagement is not easy, and we can't assume that primary approaches will be successful
- We need to integrate approaches to support proficiency and engagement

# What does this all mean?

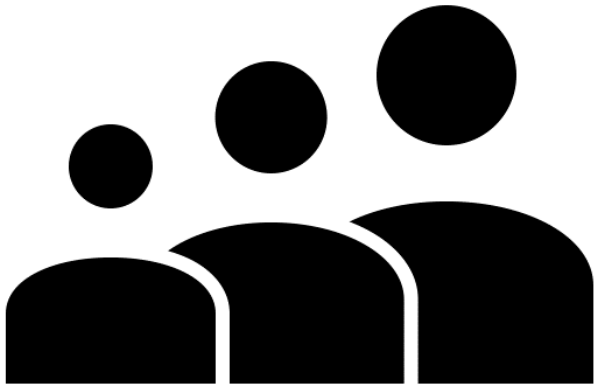


1. Professional development must be prioritised
2. Don't worry about the transition slump
3. Reading is not (just) a primary school issue
4. Both proficiency and engagement matter
5. Two-step assessment can help (more on this later)

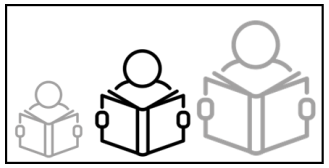
Public report: https://bit.ly/RAVreport2023



# What can we do?
# Collaborate (more)



# Engaging with policy



2019

Education Endowment Foundation

**IMPROVING LITERACY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

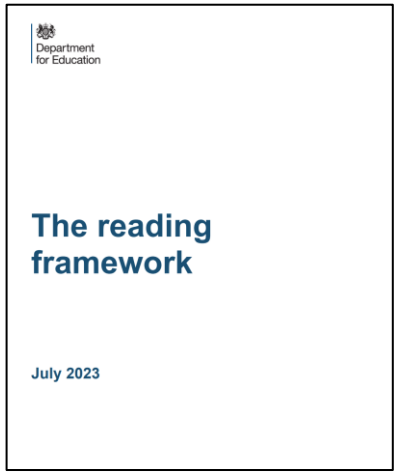
Guidance Report

2022

Ofsted
raising standards
improving lives

2023

Department for Education

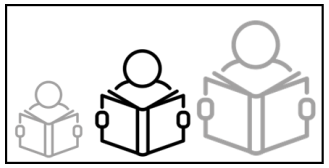



2025 onwards

Department for Education

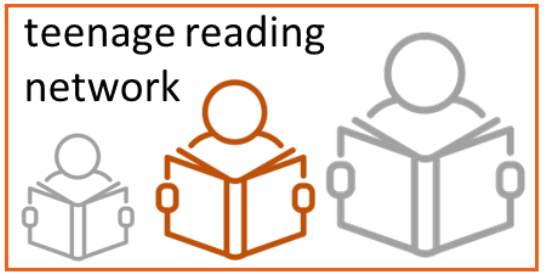
Training for all secondary schools

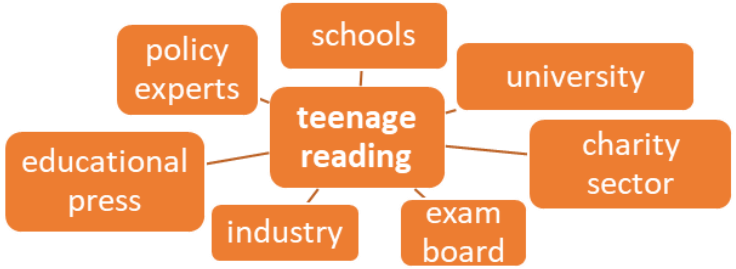
# Teenage Reading Network



Convened in 2023 to:

1. Create capacity and partnerships around teenage reading, ready for collaborative work
2. Foster interdisciplinary working and shared learning to tackle common goals
3. Identify priorities for research, practice and policy

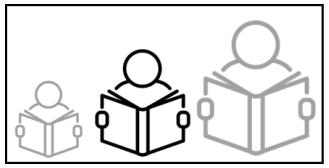





Language and Reading Acquisition

# Priorities resonated with work planned and underway



1. Co-create assessment frameworks to guide decision making
2. Co-produce professional development
3. Listen to students, work with them

## Priorities for research

**Teaching & Support**
- Effective CPD - reading development
- Approaches to develop whole school reading

**Pupil Voice**
- Barriers/facilitators to teenage reading

**Measuring progress**
- Role/impact of common school practices

**Transition**
- Impact of cognitive overload & reading demands

## Priorities for teaching

**Whole school reading culture**
- Ensuring reading is celebrated in school
- Pupils have access and choice of books aligning to interests

**Teacher confidence**
- Staff have confidence to support reading across subjects

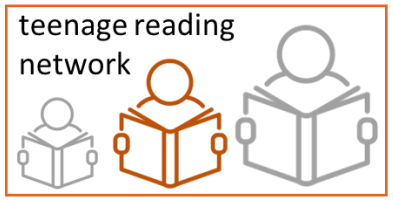
**Critical thinking**
- Pupils develop critical thinking across different mediums and genres

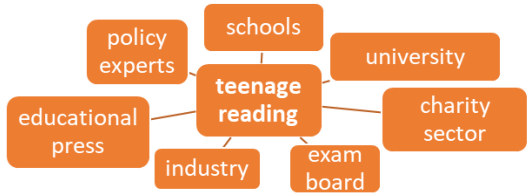
## Priorities for policy

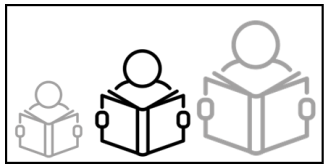
**Assessment**
- Ensuring assessments are accurate and fair

**Curriculum**
- Relevant to young people
- Guidance about secondary reading, including transition

# TRN priorities...



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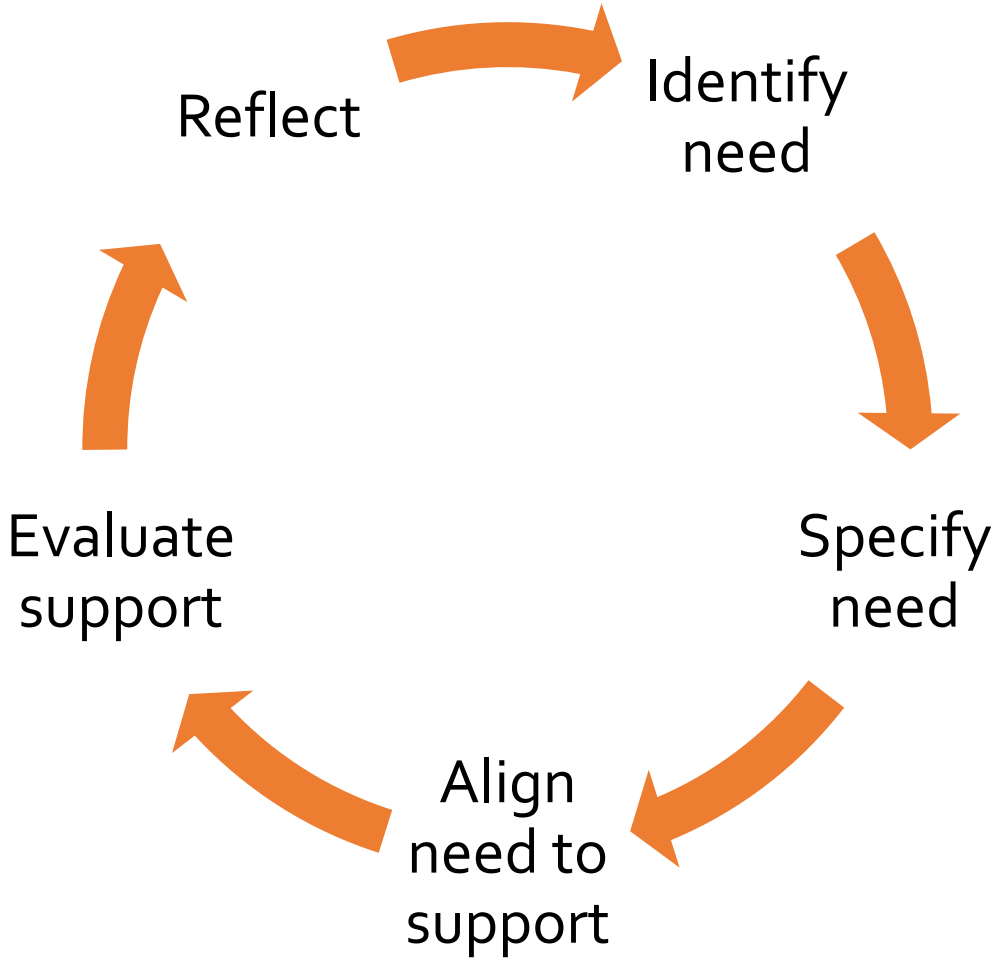
Language and Reading Acquisition

# Co-creating an assessment framework

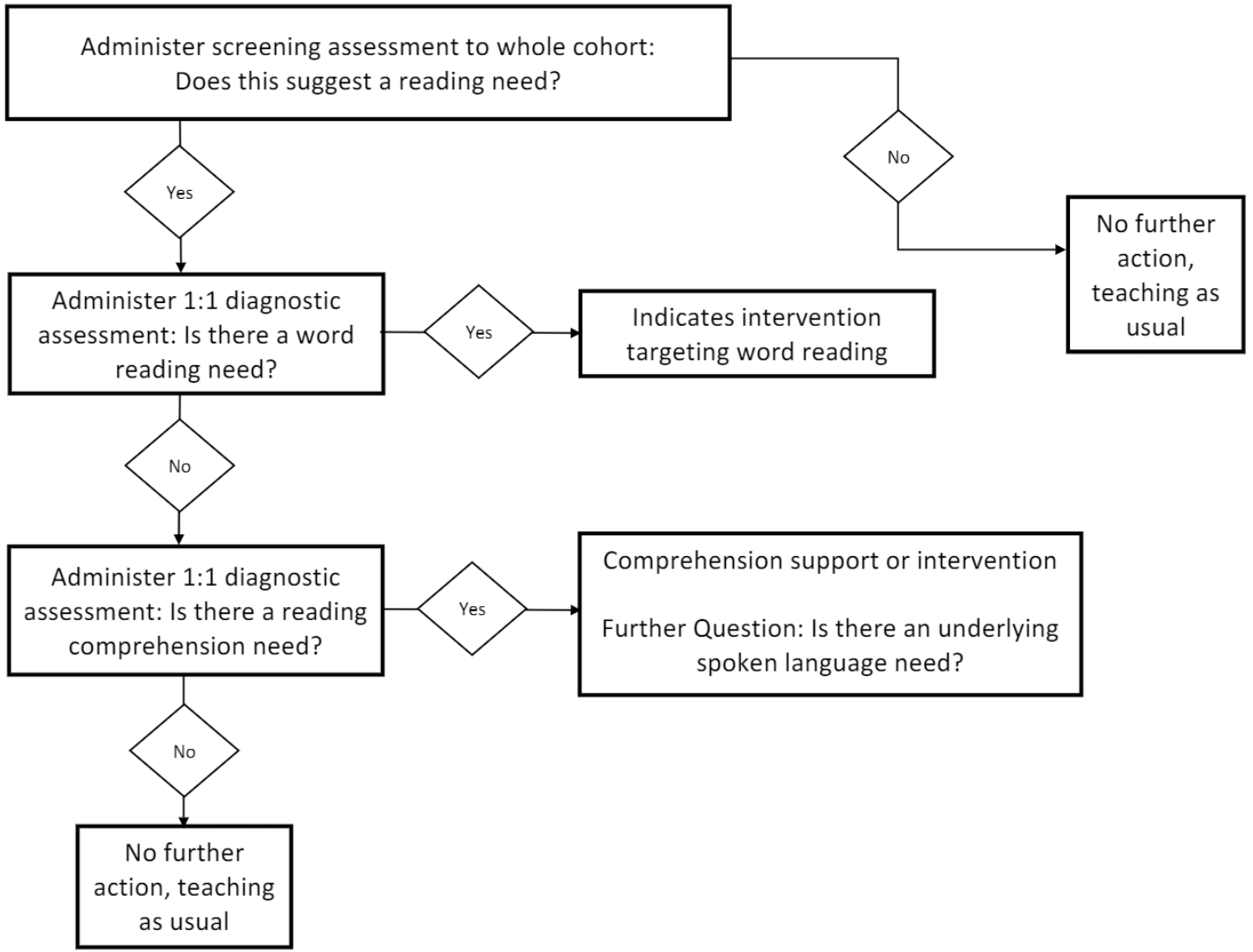
With:
Kate Jones
Paul O'Neill
Emily Oxley

**AND ALL** Blackpool secondary schools

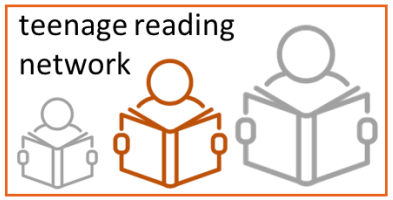


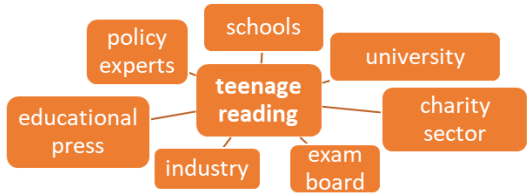

Pre-print: https://osf.io/tm5cg

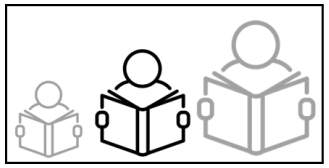
# The decision tree



# TRN priorities...



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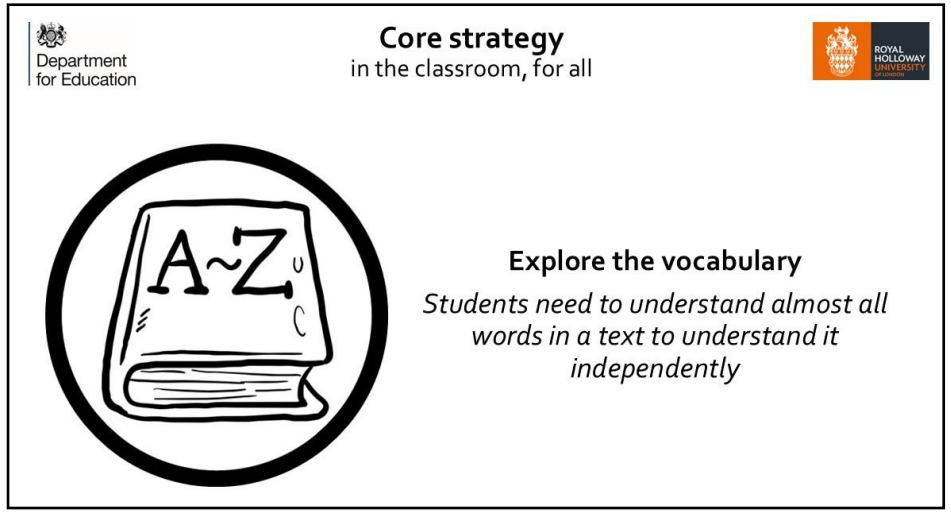
Language and Reading Acquisition

# Training for all secondary teachers

Guidance

- Introduction and reflection
- Research-led videos
- Teacher-led videos
- Reflection and action plan

## Teacher and school leader packages




- Co-created with teachers and school leaders
- Effective, feasible, accessible, acceptable
- Launched to all secondaries in England April 2025

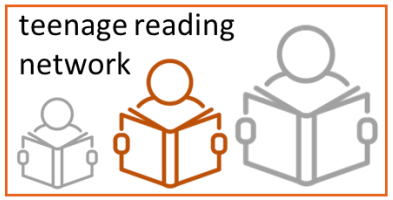
SCAN ME

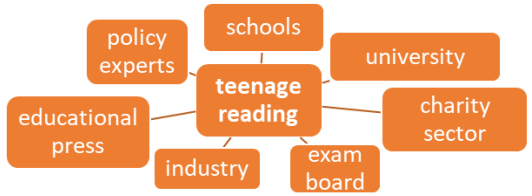
Megan Dixon, Lucy Floyer

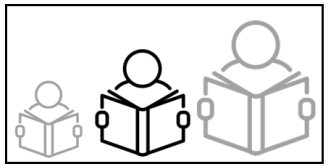
Department for Education

Language and Reading Acquisition

# TRN priorities...



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Language and Reading Acquisition

# Student voices

Courtney Hooton

Aims:

1. Building capacity in engaging with young people
   - Identifying approaches for engaging with young people
   - Scoping previous work
2. Communicating research evidence about teenage reading to teenagers
3. Enabling teenagers to engage with the topic of teenage reading

Phase 1: Scoping the literature → Phase 2: Discussions with teenagers and researchers working with them → Phase 3: Creating video content → Phase 4: Report



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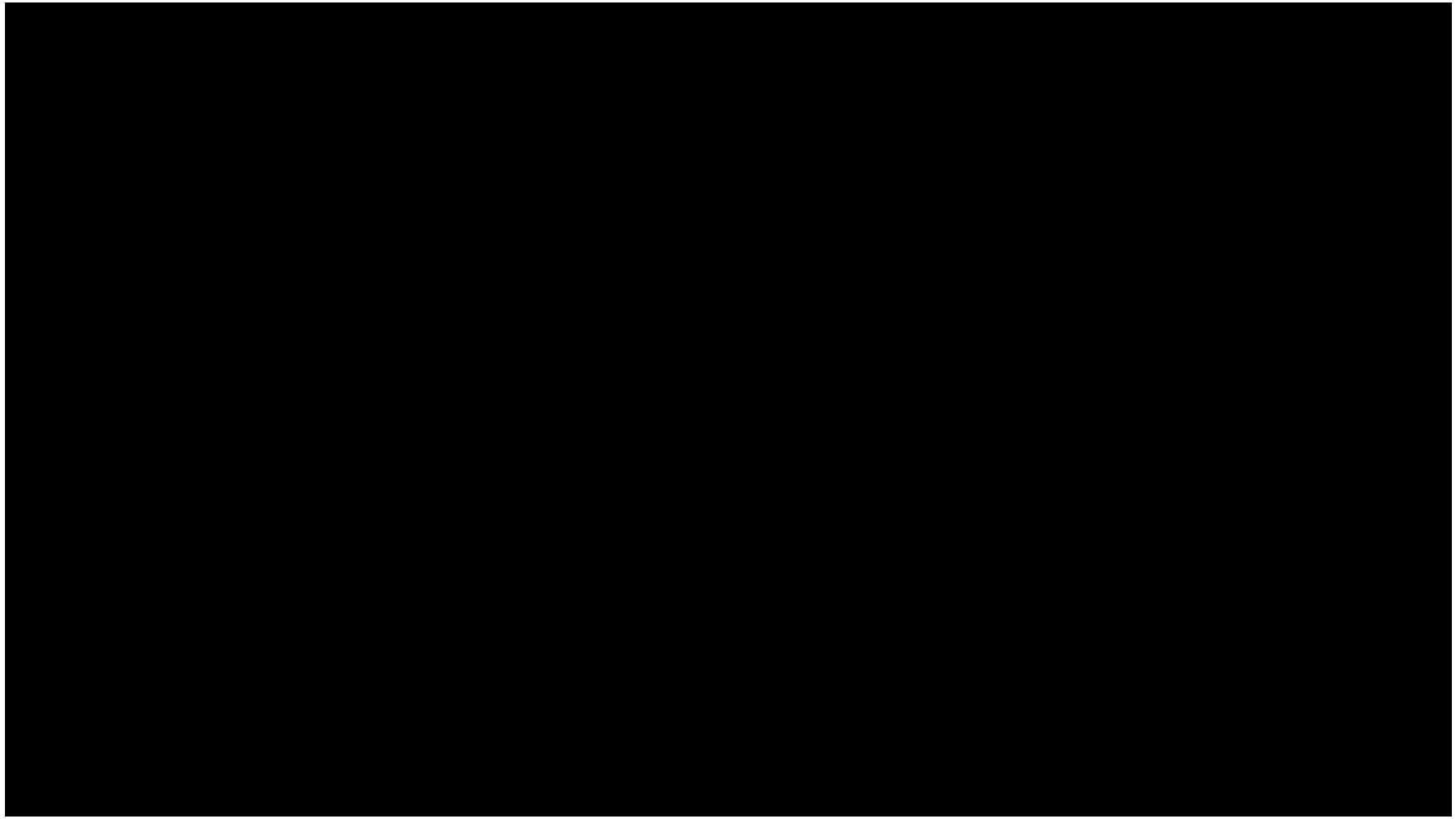
# Including teenage voices



The Emmbrook School

Woking High School
*Inspire, Challenge, Achieve*

[The Student Voices Project]

Language and Reading Acquisition

# Increasing engagement?

"If Molly-Mae Hague were to post a video of her reading, I reckon more people would read".

Authors: Tia Fisher

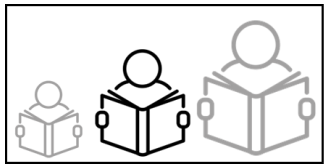
Booktok: Natali Crystal

[The Student Voices Project]

# The bottom line…

- We need robust research and evidence BUT…
- Implementation is important
- We need truly collaborative research to:
  - work with (not at!)
  - generate questions, priorities
  - do the translational research (in context)
  - ensure effectiveness of approaches in context
  - also… feasibility, acceptability, accessibility
  - and that it can all be actioned

effectiveness



feasibility

acceptability



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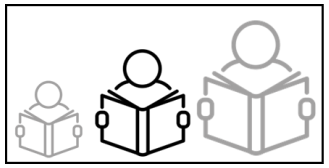

## What do we know?

Reading is complex and important for outcomes

Development: important changes over time

Very variable (and spoken language is crucial)

Knowledge, skills and engagement are all important

## What can we do?

We need to take a collaborative approach

-To co-create research

-To implement evidence-based practice, evaluate its impact

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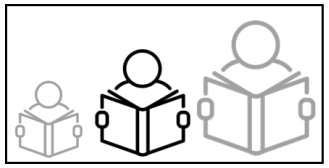
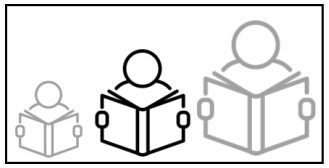
# Acknowledgements



- Thank you for listening!
- All schools, participants and families
- Nicky Dawson, Charles Hulme, Arne Lervag
- Laura Shapiro, Sanne van der Kleij, Adrian Burgess
- Right to succeed, Blackpool secondary literacy leads
- Many many research assistants!

https://bit.ly/AstonLiteracyProjectTeam
https://lara.psychologyresearch.co.uk

# Further reading



**Accessible report with recommendations for practice and policy:**

Shapiro, L.R., Ricketts, J., Burgess, A. & van der Kleij, S. (2023). *Reading and Vocabulary: Exploring how Skilled Independent Reading Supports Vocabulary Learning in Primary and Secondary School.* Aston University. https://www.aston.ac.uk/sites/default/files/aston_hls_rav_report_2023.pdf

**Academic papers:**

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 19*(1), 5-51. doi:10.1177/1529100618772271

Ricketts, J., Lervåg, A., Dawson, N., Taylor, L. A. & Hulme, C. (2020). Reading and oral vocabulary development in early adolescence. Scientific Studies of Reading, 24(5), 380-396. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2019.1689244

Ricketts, J., Jones, K., O'Neill, P. & Oxley, E. (2022, November 4). Using an assessment decision tree to align students' reading needs to support in school. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/tm5cg

van der Kleij, S. W., Burgess, A. P., Ricketts, J. & Shapiro, L. R. (2022). From Bibliophile to Sesquipedalian: Modeling the Role of Reading Experience in Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. Scientific Studies of Reading, 26(6), 514-526. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888438.2022.2068418

van der Kleij, S. W., Burgess, A. P., Ricketts, J. & Shapiro, L. R. (2023). Tracking vocabulary and reading growth in children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds during the transition from primary to secondary education. Child Development, 94, e57-e66. https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.13862



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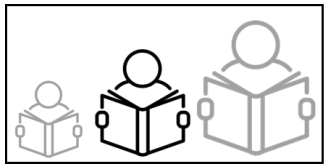



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