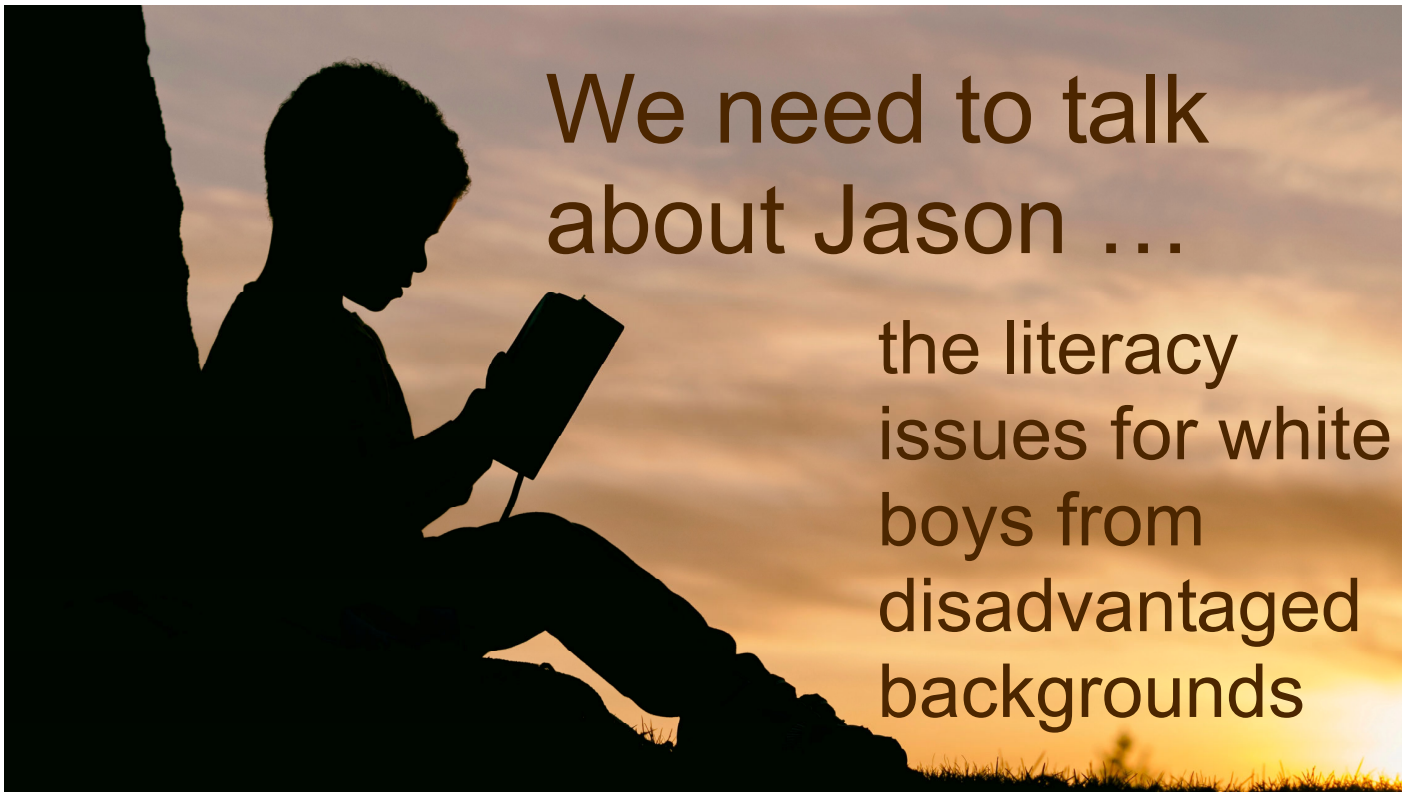


In this thought-provoking and insightful article, popular speaker and writer, **Jean Gross CBE**, draws on her long experience of working with underprivileged communities to provide us with case studies and practical strategies to engage disadvantaged learners.

I first met Jason when I was a young educational psychologist. He was referred because he was six and showing no signs of learning to read. Jason's small village school, which sat in the shadow of a spoil heap, served a former mining area on the Somerset coalfields.

Jason's parents, both out of work, were suspicious of school but were persuaded to meet me. They were not sure why he was struggling but did tell me he was very late talking. I also learned that Jason's dad had not learned to read when he was at school.

Jason had started school full of excitement, like most four-year-olds. All had gone reasonably well in Reception, though he didn't always do as he was told and found it hard to share. When I met him at the end of Year 1, however, he had begun to notice that other children could read and he couldn't.

When I talked to Jason I was struck by his limited vocabulary and lack of life experience. He had never been to the seaside, nor even played in a park. His horizons stretched not much further than the small council estate where he lived.

I gave the school some advice about how to teach him phonics and went away. He was placed in a small group made up of other children the teacher described as 'low ability', and had help in class from a teaching assistant (TA) allocated to the group.

A year later he had made little progress in literacy and was now well behind in maths. I felt that by now he had concluded that trying hard didn't help—nothing he did seemed to make a difference.

At some point in KS2 the school referred him again, in the hope of obtaining what was then called a Statement of Special Educational Needs. He still couldn't read. By now he had begun to have friendship and behaviour problems, increasing as he moved into Y6. He had a few fixed-term exclusions, but his very caring school managed him well and generally contained his behaviour.

I next caught up with him in secondary school. He had a Statement by now, for TA support in lessons. It made little difference. He still struggled with reading and at this point had begun to truant and get into fights.

He was permanently excluded while we were reviewing his Statement to try to get him into a special school. After months out of education he went to a very good Pupil Referral Unit. But it was too late for him to catch up academically and he left with no qualifications.

The saddest thing was not just that he now had almost no chance of getting a job and a high probability of getting into crime, but that if he followed a pattern I had seen many times in his community he would before

long get into serial relationships, and in all likelihood have several children who would follow a similar path when they went to school. The cycle of disadvantage would repeat itself.

As a teacher you are more than likely to have met many children like Jason—white boys eligible for free school meals. They may well have figured in your school's data as persistently underachieving, despite everyone's best efforts. If so, your school won't have been alone. National statistics show that disadvantaged white children are the lowest attaining of any group other than those of Gypsy Roma and Traveller heritage, at all key stages.

EYFSP white British FSM lowest attaining of any group except Gypsy Roma, Irish Traveller and White Irish pupils, with boys well behind girls.

Phonics test – 38% of white FSM boys failed to meet expected standard. At resits at seven, one in five had still not met expected standard.

At the end of KS2 non-EAL white disadvantaged boys are the lowest attaining of all major groups.

At GCSE 2018, white FSM boys average attainment was 28.5 against all pupils 46.5, the lowest of all major groups on almost all measures.

The barriers to learning

There is of course no one stereotypical disadvantaged white boy; every child is different. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Jason's story that I met repeatedly in the children I have worked with. We can learn, I think, from these commonalities.

The barriers to learning that these children shared were:

- Limited oral language skills
- A sense of powerlessness
- Difficulties in regulating emotions
- Early educational failure, particularly in reading, leading to disengagement from learning, truancy and exclusion

In my new book, *Reaching the unseen children*, I have tried to provide practical strategies to overcome each of these barriers. In this article I want to focus on just one issue—reading.

Why is reading so difficult for children like Jason?

Readers of *Primary Matters* will be familiar with Scarborough's 'reading rope' model, which helps us understand how the development of skilled reading involves multiple, interwoven skills—language comprehension strands (background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge) and word recognition strands (phonological awareness, decoding and sight recognition).

If I reflect on what I learned from assessing Jason at various points, I can clearly see the many frayed strands in his rope.

Jason and the reading rope

In the word recognition strands, Jason struggled with phonics from day one, as a result of poor phonological awareness—from lots of colds and blocked up ears, perhaps, or his history of late development of clear speech, or the family history of reading difficulties that had never been called dyslexia in those days but might well be now.

He had difficulty in detecting small differences in spoken sounds on one test I gave him, and was unable to blend a series of sounds spoken to him into a whole word. Because sounds were shifting and unclear to him, he was not able to link them consistently with print. He didn't retain phoneme-grapheme correspondences or high-frequency exception words.

In the language comprehension strands, when I first met him he could not point to a 'word' or 'letter', never mind understand what a phoneme was. He simply did not have the vocabulary levels or language structures he needed to make sense of even the simplest texts; on a reading test, even if I read to him a passage he could not read himself he was not able to understand it well enough to answer questions about it.

Background knowledge was a real issue: one test had a passage about a surprise parcel. Jason did not know what a parcel was. Inference was an impossibility – how can you read between the lines when the lines themselves are incomprehensible?

For children like Jason it is the **multiple** barriers to learning that make their reading difficulties so hard to tackle.

What we can do: language structures

I've written before for this magazine about how to develop vocabulary and wider language skills https://www.nate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/3-Building-Vocabulary.pdf so I won't explore these in detail—but here are a few great ideas I have come across recently.

Two are ideas for the EYFS, and one (the Haytor case study on this page) for KS1 and 2. The first is based on research showing that back-and-forth conversations between adults and children are (apart from sharing books) the most effective way of developing early language.

Early Years expert Penny Tassoni makes a simple suggestion for increasing the number of such conversations with children in need of a boost,

generally those who are disadvantaged. She recommends that staff list the children who need help with their language on a flip chart or whiteboard. Next to the names are a series of columns. Every time a member of staff has a conversation of five minutes or more with a child, they put a tick in the first column next to the child's name. Another conversation means another tick, in the next column, and so on. Using this visual record, staff can monitor and target those 'wandering' children who flit from activity to activity and may not be engaging with adults for sustained periods.

11/10/21					
Andrew	✓	✓			
Jason					
Conor	✓	✓	✓		
Brooklyn	✓				
…..					

The second idea is based on research (Horst *et al.,* 2011; Damhuis *et al*., 2014) showing that children remember more words if they hear them through repeated reads of the same book rather than hearing them the same number of times but in several different books. It seems that children really do know what's best for them when they ask for the same book again and again, however tedious that is for the adult. This finding was the basis of an innovative project in North Tyneside.

Over and Over: a project in North Tyneside

Ten North Tyneside primary schools with nursery provision each selected a group of disadvantaged children who were showing little interest in books and stories, including children with speech and language difficulties. The project involved school staff reading two books to the same group of children for 15 minutes daily, moving through a set of ten books over a six week period. Each book, from a box specially provided by the Schools Library Service, was shared five times as a minimum. Practitioners found that children previously unlikely to visit the book corner began to do so if they could see familiar books from the project on the shelves, and some also began to participate voluntarily in related activities which develop oral language, such as role play.

Home reading and vocabulary

An ingenious strategy developed at Haytor Primary in Devon focused on using home reading to develop vocabulary. Parents' comments on children's reading had been brief and mechanistic ('We read three pages') so the school changed the format and gave parents and children a new guide:

Was there a word here you enjoyed? Was there a word you liked the sound of?

Find two or three words and write them in your book.

In class, when children change their reading books at the start of literacy lessons they share their new words and explore their meaning. Finding interesting new words is celebrated with certificates and in assemblies. The impact has been transformative; children remember the words because they have ownership of them.

They learn to question; one boy halted an assembly with the headteacher to put his hand up and ask: 'What does that word mean?'

Some words really catch on; when one boy came in and said, 'I got a new word—lavatory. It means toilet', everyone in the class started to ask to go to the lavatory.

Parents engaged more with home reading, because the new system gave them licence to talk about the book and enjoy words rather than just 'hearing their child read'.

Phonics

Phonics is essential for Jason—but a struggle**.** He and many other children like him can, as we have seen, struggle to 'hear' the separate sounds in words, or distinguish similar sounds (like 'e' and 'i' from each other). As a result it will take him a long time to learn phoneme-grapheme correspondences. His short-term or working memory capacity may be insufficient for him to hold a series of sounds in his head in order to blend them.

To start with he will need specific work on phonological awareness, using activities such as those in Phase One of the Letters and Sounds programme or the more intensive Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) that the government are currently part-funding. It is important to get his hearing checked, too. Research on eight- to ten-year olds (Carroll and Breadmore, 2017) has found that around a third of the children who had a history of repeated ear infections had problems with reading and writing.

Then there are specific teaching strategies that can help—like multisensory methods, Elkonin boxes, masking cards to draw the child's eye across the word from left to right or using chunks the child already knows in order to reduce the load on short term memory when blending (for example, the 'and' in 'sand').

But what Jason will need is undoubtedly extra intervention, and sometimes this will only work if it is highly personalised, for example: teaching phoneme-grapheme links chosen to be of high salience for him (perhaps occurring in his name, or in a book he is enjoying) and using the phoneme-grapheme links he **does** know as the basis for blending words, rather than a set sequence.

Background knowledge

Background knowledge is essential for reading comprehension—and often a big gap for disadvantaged children. I was fascinated by a study (Tyner and Kabourek, 2020) which found that exposing pupils to rich content on topics such as history, geography and civics appears to improve reading skills more effectively than direct teaching of comprehension strategies. Surprisingly, the greatest effects on the reading comprehension of six- to eleven-year-old children on this study came from the amount of time they spent on what are called 'social studies' in the US, rather than the time they spent in English or maths lessons.

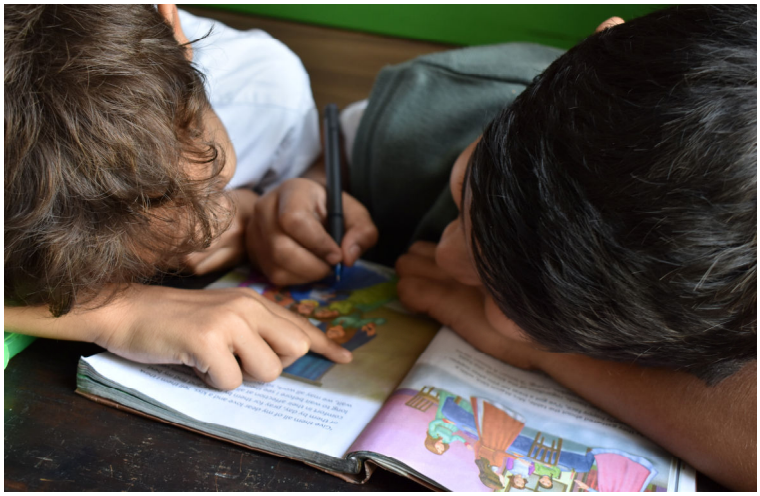
That seems to me a good argument for *not* narrowing the curriculum for Jason and others like him, with ever more time spent exclusively on English and maths. And as a prelude to both reading and writing, we need to use class trips, classroom visitors, online searches, videos and the kind of structured subject teaching that builds knowledge cumulatively over time. We can also aim to create vivid experiences, like the school I met who had a week-long simulation of World War 1 battlefields, with trenches dug in their field in which children sat (in the rain), a field hospital with bandages and fake blood, and a field kitchen where children baked bread and made soup.

Enjoyment of reading

Schools are unfortunately not always good at getting children reading for pleasure. I'm reminded of a friend's story: her nine-year old son (a white boy from a low-income family) had not always enjoyed reading, but during the coronavirus lockdown that changed, and one day she found him reading *Robinson Crusoe* in his bedroom. When he went back to school he stopped reading voluntarily. When she asked why, he told her it was because: 'At school whenever you read anything you have to write about it'. She raised this with the class teacher, whose response was: 'If they didn't write about it, how would we know they'd really read the book?'

Other schools do things differently, often with advice and resources from the Reading Agency and the National Literacy Trust. One example is the NLT's Virtual School Library, a digital resource in which every week a popular children's author or illustrator provides free audio and e-books, videos and their top three recommended reads. Such digital resources are often the best route into reading for disadvantaged boys, who are more likely than their peers to say that they prefer to read on screen both at school and at home (Picton *et al*., 2019).

My own top tip for increasing children's interest in reading for pleasure is to make reading a **social** activity. You can carefully put children into same-age pairs or threes on the basis of their interests and friendships and



suggest a book for them to read in instalments at home. Every day the pair or group should have ten minutes in class to talk about their reading. You can model these 'book talks' and provide guiding questions to steer their conversations, such as:

- How are you liking the book so far?
- What were the best bits you read?
- What feelings is this book evoking for you?
- Which character do you most closely relate to, and why?

Additional interventions

So far we have looked at what might constitute high quality classroom teaching that is geared to the particular issues faced by disadvantaged pupils, and disadvantaged white boys in particular. This is unlikely to be enough for many, however, given the high prevalence of literacy difficulties in this group. We need to provide additional intervention programmes.

But which ones? There are a large number of programmes which claim to boost reading, and in my book I have summarised the evidence on the programmes with the most robust research evidence. Here I want to make the point that many disadvantaged children, with the combination of multiple frayed 'strands' in their reading rope, are going to need help from the most skilled adults—who are more often teachers than teaching assistants—and that research evidence (Gersten *et al*., 2019) suggests that for early reading intervention (ages 6-9) one-to-one help is considerably more effective than small-group instruction.

The work of St Mary's Primary School in Kent, described in the box on the next page shows what can be achieved when this kind of help is provided—in the context of a whole-school approach that focuses on spoken language, reading comprehension and engendering a love of reading.

Putting it all together

There is, of course, more to St Mary's success than just good literacy teaching. Staff constantly promote children's confidence and sense of agency; no child is

St Mary's C of E Primary serves a disadvantaged and predominantly white community in Kent. 51% of all pupils receive the Pupil Premium. The school has had a Reading Recovery teacher for many years. It offers one-to-one Reading Recovery teaching to its lowest achieving Y1 and 2 children, extra phonics lessons, and the TA-delivered one-to-one Better Reading Partnership programme to children with less severe literacy difficulties.

Many children at St Mary's struggle with spoken language skills, so the school employs a speech and language therapy assistant for half a day a week, to work with children in the Foundation Stage and beyond.

School leaders and staff believe that reading and writing are the key to the curriculum, and place great emphasis on the early acquisition of literacy skills. The Phonics International synthetic phonics programme is used from nursery onwards. Recently, the headteacher introduced 'Destination Reader' in KS2, a structured whole-class programme which builds comprehension and enjoyment. It focuses on developing learning behaviours that up-level children's discussions, through proven techniques such as language stems.

St Mary's has kept its school library going and well-stocked. It is a 'Power of Reading' school, with all staff having had training from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education on the programme, which enables schools to deliver a whole curriculum based on high-quality texts. Children come to love reading as a result.

Over the last four years the school's KS2 results in English and Maths have been in the top 10% of schools in England. Children eligible for the Pupil Premium do as well as other children in SATs, in the proportion achieving greater depth as well as the proportion reaching the expected standard.

allowed to believe they are 'no good' at learning; behaviour is managed very effectively through strong relationships—not just with children, but also with their families. It is a school that seems to run on love.

So there are no quick fixes. But what this and the other schools I've written about in my book show is that it is possible to change a child's life course.

Too late for Jason, sadly—but not for others.

Jean Gross CBE has been a teacher, an educational psychologist and head of children's services in a local authority. She was formerly the government's Communication Champion for children. Before this, she headed a charity responsible for the national Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts literacy and numeracy tutoring programmes. She is the author of numerous articles and bestselling books on children's issues, including *Beating Bureaucracy in Special Educational Needs* (3rd edition, 2015, David Fulton) and *Time to Talk* (2nd edition, 2018, Routledge.