



Introducing the Reading and Vocabulary (RAV) Project

Adequate reading skills and vocabulary knowledge are crucial for learning, especially at secondary school when pupils are expected to learn from independent reading. The RAV project builds on findings from two large-scale longitudinal studies, the [Aston Literacy Project](#) (ALP) and the [Vocabulary and Reading in Secondary School Project](#) (VaRiSS):

Aston Literacy Project

- In primary school, we can raise standards in basic reading skills through systematic phonics teaching
- Linguistic skills (knowledge of speech sounds), segmenting skills (breaking a word up into its sounds – c-a-t), and verbal skills (the ability to perform these activities out loud) are key to decoding
- It was shown that for both reading accuracy and efficiency, there was an advantage for nonword reading (required for the phonics check) compared to the pre-phonics standardised test norms
- We need to ensure to also address how we can support exception word reading, and vocabulary and reading practice may particularly important factors to consider here

Vocabulary and Reading in Secondary School

- Vocabulary and reading are very closely related, with vocabulary knowledge important for reading success and reading providing opportunities for vocabulary learning
- Significant growth in vocabulary and reading comprehension was observed from Year 7 to 9, but there was also very high stability (i.e. if children were ranked in ability order, there was little change in their ranking across years)

- A substantial number of pupils start secondary school without the basic reading skills and vocabulary knowledge needed to access the curriculum
- In early secondary school, achievement gaps in vocabulary and reading narrow but are not closing

What will RAV achieve?

To date, research has focused on children in primary education, but little is known about how reading and vocabulary develop across the transition from primary to secondary school. Once children can read, their reading experiences provide crucial opportunities for them to learn new words. The goal of the RAV project is to examine how reading is involved in vocabulary learning. The project builds on pilot data showing that in Year 5 pupils, both reading ability and reading practice contribute to vocabulary ability, and that reading ability also directly predicts reading practice. This highlights the importance of supporting reading ability while at the same time encouraging reading practice.

- The RAV project will track reading and vocabulary progress as pupils move from primary to secondary school (Year 6 to Year 8). This will tell us how reading can be harnessed to promote vocabulary: should we focus on improving basic reading skills, encouraging independent reading, or both?

This project is timely. The [Oxford Language Report](#), published in April 2018, emphasised teachers concerns that vocabulary is a barrier to learning for many pupils in both primary and secondary school.

Working closely with teachers and policy makers

The RAV project was recently launched in Bedford Square, London, attended by teachers, policy makers and other key stakeholder groups. Two directors of research schools, Megan Dixon and Alex Quigley, led discussions from primary and secondary perspectives.

Discussions highlighted the importance of research in providing clearer questions and addressing specific problems. For example, the ALP project shows that the efforts that teachers have made to improve phonics instruction is benefitting young readers. The discussion focused particularly on the best ways to promote vocabulary learning in primary and secondary classrooms. For example, it is important to teach vocabulary items explicitly but also provide pupils with the skills that they need to learn new words independently.

One issue raised was that treating vocabulary as an isolated concept and teaching specific lists of curriculum words was not effective or efficient, but instead the focus should be on supporting children to be independent learners. One way to do this might be to focus on

meta-awareness of vocabulary knowledge. The point was made that vocabulary interventions may lead to improvements on targeted vocabulary, but not standardised scores, so it is important to consider how best to promote generalisation beyond intervention targets.

In the concluding discussions, it was argued that from a policy perspective, the reality is that reading and vocabulary difficulties are not going to be 'fixed at 5', and therefore we need to develop a policy message for each stage of education: early years, primary and secondary. Teachers play a crucial role in translating research into practice. It is critical that issues relating to reading and vocabulary are highlighted in initial teacher education and continuing professional development for all teachers, not just those working in the early primary years. The RAV project will provide useful insights about how to promote independent reading and how to ensure that children have the basic reading skills that they need to benefit from this.

Who is involved in the project?

Dr Laura Shapiro, Professor Adrian Burgess, Sanne van der Kleij (Aston University)

Dr Jessie Ricketts (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Research assistants (Aston University, Royal Holloway, University of London)

Primary and secondary schools from Birmingham and Greater London

Advisory panel of academics, teachers, policy makers and other key stakeholders

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