Imagine a primary school where over 7 or 8 years, children are read to, enjoy, discuss and work with around 82 core books. These ‘essential reads’ would be a store of classics, creating a living library inside a child’s mind. This is the ‘Reading Spine’.

Great Books
Great books build the imagination. The more we read aloud expressively, and the more children are able to savour, discuss and reinterpret literature through the arts, the more memorable the characters, places and events become, building an inner world. A child who is read to will have an inner kingdom of unicorns, talking spiders and a knife that cuts into other worlds. The mind is like a ‘tardis’; it may seem small but inside there are many mansions. Each great book develops the imagination and equips the reader with language.

Great Stories
Great stories speak to us as individuals and some children will return to certain books again and again. Great stories also build our language because around 75 per cent of our vocabulary comes from our reading. Reading develops the ability to think in the abstract; to follow lines of thought. Schools that have a reading spine, build a common bank of stories that bind the community together. These are shared and deeply imagined common experiences.

What is the Reading Spine?
The Reading Spine should be central to every school’s book stock, but should also be supplemented by many other books. In the Foundation Stage and Year 1, I have suggested a spine of 12 great picture books with which children should build a strong acquaintance.

Year 2 is a transition year, with both great picture books and ‘chapter stories’ included. The daily read-aloud programme is supplemented by guided, shared and independent reading.

In the Reading Spine at Key Stage 2, I have selected six novels in each year with a focus on one core picture book. This leaves enough space for teachers to add their own enthusiasms and new finds.

“A child who is read to will have an inner kingdom of unicorns, talking spiders and a knife that cuts into other worlds.”

Pie Corbett
Establish the core of key books that all children will experience: these should be ‘must have’ reads – the classics. The finest books that you can find! Leave space to add other books that come along or might suit the class. The aim is for every child to experience the pleasure and challenge of great literature.

STEP 2

Resource the core list: class sets are very useful so that the books can then be used for close study. As well as this, sets of six books can be used for guided reading. Also, try to gather other books/films by the same author for a wider author study.

STEP 3

On a daily basis develop your ability to read aloud for pleasure with expression on a daily basis, bringing the story alive for children.

STEP 4

Help children to inhabit the world of the story through book discussion, drama, art, dance, music, writing-in-role and play. Imaginative engagement with the text draws children into the tale, and makes it a deeper, more memorable and meaningful experience.

STEP 5

Learn how to draw on the core books to teach writing, for example, if you are teaching dialogue, use the core books as exemplars. In this way, both you and the children are constantly drawing on quality models that they will begin to know well. Moreover, the books will help to develop and deepen the children’s imaginative world, as well as becoming a key resource for their writing.

STEP 6

You will also need to thread in poetry. The Works Key Stage 1 (which includes Reception) and The Works Key Stage 2 (both Macmillan Children’s Books) provide banks of poems for enjoying, performing and discussing, and some may be used as models for writing. At the back of these two anthologies, the poems are organised by year group to create a poetry spine. You may also wish to select core poets for each term. Finally, it is important to thread into the Reading Spine high quality non-fiction. These books could be selected in relation to topics being studied, but there may also be key books that a school wishes to ensure children have encountered, such as The Diary of Anne Frank.

“Establish the core of key books that all children will experience: these should be ‘must have’ reads – the classics. The finest books that you can find!”