

Phonics International as a Whole School Phonics and Spelling Programme in a Primary School in England

Background to the school

The school is a successful village primary school in England with around 220 children on role, from ages 3 to 11. The majority of children come from relatively affluent backgrounds, with high numbers of graduate parents and low numbers of children attracting the Pupil Premium funding.

Teaching prior to the launch of the programme

Although the school received an *Outstanding* grade for its 2009 Ofsted inspection, standards in Key Stage One had not reflected the demographic of the school. In 2010, only 16% of Year 2 children achieved Level 3 for reading, and 16% for writing. In 2011, 21% achieved level 3 for reading, a slight improvement, but still only 17% achieved it for writing.

The teaching of early reading and writing varied hugely from class to class, with each teacher largely working with her own preferred resources – there was no fidelity to any one programme. *Jolly Phonics* was used in the Reception class, and some *Jolly Grammar* in Year 2. *Collins Big Cat Phonics* was also used in all Key Stage One classes to a certain extent. Teaching usually consisted of adult-led carpet sessions with limited opportunity for children themselves to practise skills in a planned way.

Intervention for children failing to achieve was provided through separate programmes, delivered by teaching assistants, often with teachers knowing little about their content.

Background to the launch

Perhaps as a result of its successful position in the community and the relative affluence of the parent body, the school has not historically had an ethos of welcoming large scale radical change to established practice. Launching a systematic synthetic phonics programme and achieving fidelity to it was always going to be a gradual process. To add to the difficulties, neither the head teacher nor deputy had ever taught children younger than Key Stage Two, so therefore lacked some practical experience of teaching early reading and writing, and as a result the understanding of the methodology.

The motivation for change came from three factors: the static standards at Key Stage One, particularly for more able children; the persistent numbers of children requiring intervention programmes in Key Stage Two; and recognition that standards of spelling and handwriting in Key Stage Two were not all they could be.

Stages of implementation

Only a small amount of inset time (1 hour) was allocated to the initial launch of the programme in December 2010, probably because senior management did not realise the extent to which things would need to change, and the complexity of the journey they were about to undertake. This first meeting occurred on 6th December, and the meeting began with a lengthy discussion about timetabling of the hall for Christmas concerts! However, just by having the alphabetic code explained to them, and some of the key principles behind synthetic phonics teaching outlined, a

useful boost to subject knowledge occurred and teachers were encouraged to evaluate their own teaching and resources.

For the first few months of the programme's use, it was mostly used as a route map for planning the introduction of alphabetic code (the letter/s-sound correspondences). Practices in teaching spelling and phonics changed very little. For example, some teachers sent home spelling lists of words whilst others used the lists for handwriting. Few if any of the routines outlined in the full *Phonics International* programme were adopted and only the most basic resources were used. However, through beginning to use the programme, teachers were becoming more confident in their understanding of the alphabetic code, and this was impacting on their professional confidence.

A presentation was given to parents one evening in April, explaining the key principles of the programme and how parents could best help at home. This was well attended, and feedback was very positive.

The major breakthrough occurred at the end of the first academic year when several staff changed age groups – the Reception teacher was to take her class through into Year 1, and the Year 6 teacher was to move to Year 2. Both teachers asked for advice on how to deliver phonics at their level, and I was able to demonstrate the full teaching sequence to them where the *Sounds Book Activity Sheets* are used for children to undertake their own learning, practice and self assessment routines.

By October 2011 it was obvious that particularly in Year 1, where the routines were being delivered with fidelity, the programme was having high levels of impact. The children's writing across the curriculum was developing very rapidly – the vocabulary in their writing was more adventurous and their ability to hear punctuation boundaries was advancing rapidly – in other words, their level of automaticity with segmenting for spelling was freeing them up to reach much higher levels with writing.

In November 2011 the school spent a large proportion of its *matched funding* on new decodable reading materials. (*Matched funding* is a government initiative in England to encourage and support schools to buy systematic synthetic phonics programmes, decodable reading books and training). We chose the *OUP Traditional Tales* series and the *OUP Floppy's Phonics* series as these had guidance for parents designed by Debbie Hepplewhite which complemented the routines we were teaching in school. We weeded out all our old stock of material which had been based on whole language approaches. This meant that children were now getting a consistent approach with the teaching of reading.

After another short training session, teachers across the school began to use a more uniform approach to the way they used the materials and taught spelling. For example, the '*left hand, palm facing*' routine for counting phonemes and practising spelling was widely adopted.

Having seen the impact on reading and writing levels, particularly at this stage in Key Stage One, the Senior Management team is now fully supportive of the programme's use in school, and as English subject leader I will be monitoring the delivery of phonics and spelling teaching this academic year, which will help enormously to standardise teaching approaches.

This September (2012), teaching assistants were trained fully in the rationale behind the synthetic phonics teaching principles, and all phonics and spelling interventions in school will be in future based on the *Phonics International* programme.

Measurable impact

End of Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (statutory national screening):

90% of children achieved the bench mark score of 34 or above (out of a possible score of 40). The children who did not scored 24, 26 and 27, showing that although they did not reach the bench mark, they were still able to attack the test with reasonable confidence and demonstrate solid alphabetic code knowledge and the skill of blending to decode unknown words.

End of Year 2 national teacher assessments:

Children at Level 3	Reading	Writing
2010	16%	16%
2011	21%	17%
2012	33%	25%
2013 target	67%	52%

Next stages in development

There is still much to be done in achieving fidelity to the programme across the school.

Regularity and timing of teaching

Not all classes are yet delivering teaching in regular small slots. Phonics teaching still tends to 'fall off the list' at busy times.

Visual support

Every class has a main alphabetic code chart on display. However, other code which is being taught incidentally is not often displayed, and nor are tricky words. All of this would further support children's learning.

The Phonics International 'Bookbag routines'

These still vary very much from class to class. Although there will be some variation due to age, there should be some key routines for informing parents and practising skills.

Handwriting

This is still of a poor standard in Key Stage Two, largely because there is no agreed style in school which all teachers use, and no agreement about how to teach it. I would like to see the introduction of *Debbie Hepplewhite's handwriting* to aid clarity and to make expectation very clear to all teachers, teaching assistants, children and parents.

Intervention

Teaching assistants are now trained in the principles of the programme. Teachers now need to become more skilled at delegating extra practice for slower-to-learn children to teaching assistants and parents, so that everyone works to the same routines and practises the same set of skills.

Developing Writing in the Foundation Stage

Thanks to *Teeny Reading Seeds* (pre synthetic phonics material for nursery based on the alphabet letters), many children are now coming out of the nursery class reading and writing simple words independently. We need to encourage children to begin to write simple sentences more quickly than we have in previous years, so that they are beginning to develop their grammatical awareness and inner voice for writing alongside their growing knowledge of alphabetic code.

Conclusion

Although the slow pace of implementation has at times been frustrating, nevertheless much has been achieved and results are extremely encouraging. One of the great things about *Phonics International* is how you can actually make quite a simple start and still have a great impact relatively quickly. Just by adopting the *Sounds Book Activity Sheets* and the core routines for teaching you can fundamentally shift the way children learn to read and write in a school. As teachers become more confident at using the alphabetic code chart, their incidental phonics teaching becomes more effective, and the principles begin to underpin teaching across the curriculum.

Once the *core* routines are established across the school, the programme offers such a vast quantity of support and resources - there is really room for a school to 'grow into the programme' in quite an organic way. So often with new initiatives, new challenges present themselves and resources go 'past sell-by date'. However, the *online* provision of the *Phonics International* programme, and the fact that it keeps developing to meet new demands and new challenges, means that it is well worth putting the time in to get a solid start because it will grow with the school.

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