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Improving standards in reading and writing

Primary and secondary phase

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How using systematic synthetic phonics has helped schools improve reading and writing

North Walsham Infant School & Nursery, Norfolk, used systematic synthetic phonics to improve literacy across the school. Up until 2005, teachers were using a variety of reading schemes with variable outcomes for different groups of pupils, and wanted to improve the way literacy was taught.

The school adopted a programme of systematic synthetic phonics. Pupils are assessed regularly and organised into groups for daily sessions at their own phonic level. This ensures that every child has acquired the skills and understanding needed before advancing to the next phonics level, and means staff can respond swiftly to support those children not making the expected progress. The school's systematic phonics programme is supported by continuing professional development for staff to ensure teachers and teaching assistants are using consistent and up-to-date strategies for successful literacy teaching.

Since implementing the programme, pupils at North Walsham have demonstrated an ability to read and write significantly above the national average for their ages.

Case Study from education White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching', Nov 2010

A small number of the secondary schools visited by Ofsted as part of their report on 'Removing Barriers to Literacy' used a phonic approach with their Year 7 pupils. One secondary school used rigorous half-termly assessments of pupils' progress in reading and spelling to identify underachieving groups who might benefit from specific phonics intervention.

The students, taught in groups of seven, were given guidance based on familiar spelling rules that were relevant to their work in other subjects.

As additional support for students whose reading problems were a barrier to their learning across the curriculum, the school considered ways of tackling gaps in their reading. For students in Years 7 and 8, the school decided to use a commercial scheme with all its withdrawal groups. The school chose this approach because it felt it would cover a number of areas where students' skills were weak; namely, phonic knowledge, reading comprehension, reading fluency and handwriting. Over five months, the average accelerated progress of a Year 7 pupil on the programme was:

7.4 months' gain in word reading

9.1 months' gain in reading

7.8 months' gain in spelling

The school invested time and resources in training teaching assistants to provide the programme effectively.

Students on the programme sustained the gains they had made and the school's data showed how the initiative had narrowed the gap between these students and their peers in English and in other areas of the curriculum.

Case study from 'Removing Barriers to Literacy, Ofsted, January 2011

Background

The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) is supporting schools working in partnerships to develop and harness their local subject expertise in the use of systematic synthetic phonics in the teaching of reading and writing.

The Schools White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' (November 2010) states that the Government will:

“Ensure that all children have the chance to follow an enriching curriculum by getting them reading early. That means supporting the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and introducing a simple reading check at age six to guarantee that children have mastered the basic skills of early reading and also ensure we can identify those with learning difficulties.”

A national phonics screening check for Year 1 pupils will be introduced in 2012. The purpose of the check will be to confirm that all pupils have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard. Pupils who have not reached this level should receive extra support from their school to ensure they can improve their decoding skills, and will then have the opportunity to retake the check.

Improving reading and writing through a partnership approach

By working in a partnership with other schools and, potentially, with local providers of ITT, schools can:

- raise standards in reading and writing throughout the entire school partnership through improving phonics teaching, and
- contribute towards ensuring that future teachers are well prepared to teach reading and writing using systematic synthetic phonics.

How this can be done?

Schools working in partnership should firstly identify areas for joint development and improvement. Many partnerships may have identified a need to develop reading and writing teaching through the use of systematic synthetic phonics.

School partnerships should then identify actions to enable them to jointly develop knowledge and skills in this area. We know that schools are used to doing this as part of the regular school improvement cycle, but working in a school partnership may offer additional opportunities, and your **TDA Regional Lead** can help you with this.

Some ideas:

- Jointly identify the key features of effective practice in teaching phonics and share good practice across the partnership.
- Make effective use of available resources (see below) in a structured and collaborative way, for the benefit of staff, pupils and other stakeholders in schools.
- Provide professional development opportunities for existing teaching and support staff in this key area.
- Develop a shared vision between the collaborating schools, for training new teachers and existing teachers in the teaching of reading and writing.

- Harness the expertise of existing Leading Partners in Literacy Schools within the school partnership.
- Strengthen induction for newly qualified teachers in the school partnership.
- Develop ITT programmes through enhanced partnership between schools and HEIs, thus securing better trained NQTs for the profession and developing the next generation of teachers.
- Integrate ITT training with other programmes in schools, e.g. NQT induction, early professional development.
- Seek ways to integrate teachers' learning with accredited programmes and provide opportunities for partnership members to draw on relevant specialisms within the partnership, e.g. teachers with specialist training to support pupils with special educational needs¹.
- Share commercial resources and pool other resources for greater purchasing power in relation to resources or training.

Leading Partners in Literacy Schools

Since 2008/9, all initial teacher training (ITT) providers have had the opportunity to access funding through the ITT: Leading Partners in Literacy programme to support work with schools that strengthens the literacy element of primary ITT. These projects have been shown, through external evaluation to be highly successful. They have strengthened trainees' subject knowledge for teaching, supported the development of teachers' subject knowledge, impacted on children's learning, and strengthened the role of schools in training. For more information, contact prioritiesforpartnership@tda.gov.uk

What is on offer from TDA?

Useful resources

The following resources can be used for CPD opportunities for teachers and support staff at all key stages:

- [Developing Literacy in Initial Teacher Training](#) (online e-learning resource)
- [Reading by six: how the best schools do it](#) (Ofsted, 2010)
- Department for Education (DfE): a range of resources including:
 - [Choosing an effective phonics teaching programme](#)
 - [Teaching the higher levels of phonics](#)

The DfE has published (October 2010) revised [core criteria](#) to help schools choose an effective phonics teaching programme. It has published a list of products for which publishers have submitted self-assessments against the revised core criteria and which have been reviewed by independent evaluators. The list is at <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/b0010235/publishers/>

Separately, the DfE is procuring a catalogue of systematic synthetic phonics materials and training, through which schools with Key Stage 1 pupils may access

¹ For further information, access the special educational needs (SEN) key resources.

up to £3000 of match-funding. For further information please see <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/teachingstyles/phonics/a00191791/match-funding-for-systematic-synthetic-phonics-products-and-training>

The DfE is also strongly committed to improving literacy, and has highlighted the importance of reading for pleasure. Further information and resources around 'encouraging reading for pleasure' can be found here <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/b00192950/encouraging-reading-for-pleasure>

Practical help

TDA Regional Leads can also offer support and signpost school partnerships in developing effective practice at all key stages. This may be through the coordination of a workshop for the partnership, for example, or through other mechanisms most suited to individual partnerships.

Extended relationships

In addition, making links with schools or other bodies outside the school partnership can enable members to learn from other schools with leading practice in phonics, for example by taking part in the [school to school visits scheme](#)².

Contact

For more information please contact your local Regional Lead or the TDA at prioritiesforpartnership@tda.gov.uk

² Please note, school to school visit scheme places are limited.

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