

PHONICS INTERNATIONAL AS AN INTERVENTION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

After teaching English within Secondary schools in Kent for a few years, it became abundantly clear that something needed to be done to improve literacy – particularly amongst lower ability pupils. Following traditional schemes of work was not working for these pupils and the gap between their reading ages and chronological ages was widening as they “progressed” up the school. To put it into perspective, this year 47% of our year 7 pupils have come to us with a reading age below their chronological age. Of these, 25.5% have a reading age of 9 years or below – that’s 12% of our year 7 cohort. This is slightly down on last year, but paints a fairly typical picture of our intake over the last ten years at least. The sheer amount of underachieving pupils in our school could be explained by the fact that we have a selective system in Kent and therefore the majority of higher achievers will invariably attend Grammar Schools. With these pupils struggling to access the wider curriculum a multitude of difficulties arise. They often display poor behaviour, their examination performance is inhibited, their self-esteem suffers and so the vicious circle is perpetuated.

My colleagues and I have spent many years trying to find a solution. We have trialled many phonics schemes and reading interventions over the years, with some success – but also with some failures! Finally, last year I stumbled across Phonics International. The one thing that particularly struck me was how age appropriate the resources were. So often I’ve had to rejig resources because they’re obviously aimed at a much younger audience. KS3 pupils – although glad of the help, are very easily insulted and hate to feel patronised! I am also a private tutor so was looking for materials for one of my tutees – a nine year old boy who was really struggling with his literacy. By this time I was also the Mum to an eight year old girl who had never had a day’s trouble with reading and a 5 year old boy who refused point blank to even give it a go. My 5 year old was bringing home Floppy’s Phonics books but using other schemes in school. Finding something that could work for all of these levels was a real

eureka moment for me. After some emails back and forth with Debbie Hepplewhite, I attended one of her training courses.

On returning to school we have really got started on a full scheme of intervention for our year 7's. I've found myself having to do an awful lot of presentations to explain what we're doing! I've had to deliver separate presentations to all staff, the English Department, GTP and PGCE students, Governors and Leadership Group where we looked at the shocking figures and talked about what needed to be done. Pupils starting in September were then tested over the course of the first term and then placed in sets according to reading and spelling ages. The whole English Department was trained on how to deliver synthetic phonics. As secondary school teachers, none of us had a clue about teaching children to read, and that's something which I have found particularly frustrating. We've had several whole staff training days since and I've now delivered five sessions to various staff on implementing synthetic phonics in all departments across the school.

Pupils with the lower reading ages have received a strict diet of synthetic phonics taught explicitly in English lessons. Those who were particularly low have been selected to have 1:1 input from tutors (although, sadly there is talk now of this funding being withdrawn), as well as reading sessions with teaching assistants. Our English classrooms now have Alphabetic Code Charts displayed (as advised by Debbie) and also other subjects around the school have also been keen to display the charts. Our school now has training school status and we're very keen to include PGCE and GTP students in the delivery of phonics. They have also now been trained in this, and apparently will have a question on it in their final assessment whatever their subject specialism, which I find incredibly encouraging.

Last week I trained volunteers from our sixth form. They are going to come into English lessons and help out within the classroom as well as take out small groups and individual pupils who need extra input. Apparently other secondary schools are inviting their sixth form volunteers to help with synthetic phonics support using core Phonics International resources.

We let the year 7s make their own folders by decorating coloured paper. We then laminated these and held them together with treasury tags. This way they have a folder that they can easily look back through and complete unfinished phonics work. It's also accessible to parents and easy to take home. I really expected lots of fallout from angry parents who would invariably be wondering why their child was completing "primary school" work. However I could not have been more wrong. The response was overwhelmingly positive as parents felt that they were finally seeing progress from their child who had been struggling for so very long.

Obviously every child in these groups is not the same and the different variables have been problematic. In just one group, we have children with speech and language deficit, hearing difficulties, English as a second language, dyslexia, autism, ADHD, to name but a few issues! However despite this, they have all found the materials not only accessible, but enjoyable. They love working through the Sounds Book Activity Sheets, the Cumulative Text sheets, reading the words and making up stories along with grapheme searches and word building with grapheme tiles. They also thrive on the routine of the structure of the lessons being the same. I find it helpful to put a timer up and allow them a specific length of time per task. Otherwise they either lose focus and don't complete it or race through it at break neck speed and don't finish it properly. They also enjoy word searches, crosswords and anagrams that I create with the focus graphemes. I think the key to success with all of this is that everything is short and achievable.

It's not only our year 7s who have been benefiting from Synthetic Phonics input. We have older students who have a permanent TA who, with the best will in the world, have struggled continually with how on earth to help them. I remember my reaction when I first saw the Early Years Phonics International resources – I instantly thought of two of our students in particular. One is severely dyslexic and the other has suffered brain damage. They now use these with their ever grateful TAs and I can truly say that it is making a real difference to them. Children who had never been able to read or write - now can.

For all this there is still much work to be done. The year 7s will be re-tested during the Summer term to monitor progress. I know there is improvement – I can't wait to see how much! There are still many staff to train and some staff to convince. Some like the sound of it, but don't see how they can implement this within their own lessons. My aim is also to train parents so that they can support their children even more at home. As for my private pupils I had a very reluctant reader who is now reading with fluency and confidence, two dyslexic pupils who are making real progress and my own son, now six, no longer runs and hides when I mention reading!

All of this sounds something like a gushing sales pitch. It definitely is not. If nothing else I am just so very grateful that I have found resources which I can use straight away with no tweaking. They are in logical order and make sense, and everything else you might need is also there. But it's not just the resources. I've felt so very frustrated for so many years not just at the lack of suitable resources but also at the huge gaps in my own knowledge. I now feel as though I actually know what I'm doing rather than flailing around trying to make different bits of different programmes fit. It has been inspirational in ringing the changes in our school. It hasn't felt like hard work because at the end of the day it's just what makes sense. We needed to find a way to help improve these children's literacy, and finally it feels like we have.

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