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Creating calmer transitions, improving regulation and strengthening readiness for learning

Using soft starts to support learners

School/Background Context

The school is a Catholic primary school situated less than a mile from the centre of Middlesbrough. It currently has 397 pupils across 13 classes. The site, built in 1933, includes a nursery, an ICT suite, a sensory room, and extensive field areas. In 2023, as the school began to expand, two modular classrooms were installed on the school field.

Over 25% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, and 59 pupils are currently identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) support plans or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Within the target class for this project, nine pupils have an SEN plan.

The Challenge

At the start of the academic year, the school's doors opened at 8:30 a.m., with formal teaching beginning at 8:55 a.m. The use of this period varied across classes. Initially, pupils in the target class used the time to complete maths and writing activities independently before registration, followed by a 40-minute SoundsWrite phonics session.

However, a number of pupils found this transition into the school day difficult. Many struggled with the fast-paced start, leading to issues such as:

- some children refusing to leave parents
- some children becoming distressed and upset in class
- some children falling asleep during morning inputs
- quality of work messy and unorganised at the start of the day
- tantrums and behaviour issues

These difficulties affected both learning and classroom atmosphere. It was therefore decided to implement the "Soft Start" approach for all pupils, not only those with identified SEND.

What They Did

Stage 1 (Month 1)

Discussions were held with the SENCO and the Executive Headteacher regarding the unsettled morning routines. Based on successful practice in another school within the trust, "Soft Starts" were introduced in Key Stage 1 to provide a more flexible and nurturing start to the day.

Following the first two weeks of the Soft starts I observed and discussed with fellow and more experienced KS1 staff how they used the 8:30-8:55 period.

In Y1 both classes used a very practical carousel approach where children used equipment such as play doh, hand manipulation games and colouring on a rota each day. The other Y2 class which has a wider range of behavioural issues didn't use a Soft start approach. The Y2 class completed math and writing tasks before the teacher talked through them before the SoundsWrite lesson began.

Below is an outline and result of some of the trials completed in my class during the initial stage

Practical games and activities - Children really enjoyed this element but often got too excited and struggled to bring themselves back down to work level after soft start finished. "They're getting too excited doing it and refusing to leave them. They almost need a Soft start from the Soft start". Children who came in a little later than others got frustrated and upset that they missed out on activities.

Small group carousel around table - As children were coming in at different times, there was no designated start and end of activities. Children were getting too confused of where to be and when. This led to some children getting distressed and anxious where they needed to be. "It's impossible to monitor and becomes too loud when they're switching between tables for activities. I'm not even sure which children have done what" TA

Mixed class soft start - The idea of having an open door between the adjoining Y1 and Y2 class didn't work as some of the children clashed with others who were going into another classroom. "they're just coming in for a laugh and if anything disrupting the children who want to do the activities because they think you can't see because you're in there" Y1 teacher

Mindfulness colouring, drawing and puzzles - Some children with behavioural issues found it too difficult to pack away any unfinished pictures or puzzles when soft start time finished. This led to them being unable to regulate their emotions for the remainder of the morning.

Children going to colour tables to complete a mix of activities - Children were often rushing to the tables to 'play and talk' with their friends and not necessarily completing tasks. Some children were not being responsible for their equipment at the start of the day.

Following these observations, the approach was refined to better suit the needs of the class.

Stage 2 (Month 2)

The classroom layout was adapted to reintroduce carpet time, providing a calmer and more social environment. Activities on the board were changed to include paired or group discussions and short, collaborative tasks. This supported social development and reduced over-reliance on adult support.

Adults used this time to read with pupils or engage in informal conversations, helping to build stronger relationships and improve emotional readiness for learning. The SoundsWrite session was moved from 9:05 a.m. to 9:25 a.m., allowing a smoother transition from Soft Start to formal instruction. These changes had a positive impact on pupil morale, engagement, and readiness to learn.



More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting



Better outcomes for learners with SEND



Increased engagement of learners with SEND

What They Did (continued)

Stage 3 (Month 3)

Considering how some children struggled with the flexibility and freedom linked to the soft starts within the Y2 class, plans to re-introduce and trial 'cross-class' soft starts were shelved. During December, implementation consistency was affected by Christmas events and timetable changes, which limited the time available for Soft Start activities. Some of the earlier progress plateaued as pupils became more excitable and struggled to regulate their behaviour.

Stage 4 (Months 4-5)

After the winter break, Soft Starts were reinstated with greater structure. A short handwriting or spelling task was added to the beginning of the session to reinforce routine and expectations. Pupils then transitioned to carpet-based learning activities designed to reinforce previous lessons in a fun and collaborative way (e.g. spelling wordsearches, draw pictures of the nouns in text, find and act out the verbs). We again found the benefit of these activities as children enjoyed the opportunity to work together and work closer with adults in a relaxed environment. In the New Year we trialled our Y5 and Y6 Headstarters joining us for the Soft starts and working with target children. This allowed them to get to know the target children better in a relaxed and comfortable setting.

Outcomes and Anticipated Impact

The introduction of Soft Starts led to significant improvement in pupils' emotional regulation and attitude toward the beginning of the school day. Incidents of distress and reluctance to enter class declined considerably. At the start of the school year, the introduction of the soft starts has been key in giving me the time to develop relationships with all children. This has in turn helped create a stronger team dynamic.

By extending the Soft start into the school morning, it has eased the impact on children who arrive late into school. It has enabled them to come into school at a more settled time and also meant that they are not missing as much of their SoundsWrite lesson.

This approach didn't positively impact all children in the same way. Some children struggled with the changing routine and the freedom they were given first thing in the morning. For this reason I maintained the flexibility of our Soft Starts depending on the days events and how children has been feeling/behaving during the week.

CW and OR have always had issues regulating his behaviour in school. This year has seen an improvement in his behaviour with a range of behavioural techniques used to support him. CW reality struggled with Soft Starts in the beginning and having the freedom to do a more fun activity at the start of the day. He would then refuse to leave his Soft Start activity which would then have a negative impact on the remainder of his morning. It had the reverse affect for him as he was starting his day negatively. Following this I then adapted the Soft Start activities so they were less like 'Golden Time' activities and slightly more academic. I also made children aware of when Soft start finished and gave regular countdowns.

MK is an AEL child who is currently working more than a year behind his age expected level. One of the target on his support plan are to develop his independence around the school day routine. In the beginning the SoftStart had a negative impact on MK day as the variation in activities led to him being thrown off and not sure what he should do. With this in mind we adapted our Soft Starts to start with a job at tables (writing date and handwriting) before coming to the carpet. This allowed MK to see some consistency and routine at the start of the day.



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Outcomes and Anticipated Impact (continued)

The most pleasing progress came academically and particularly the impact on SoundsWrite. The impact the Soft start has had on our SEN and lower ability children has been astounding. Of the 9 SEN children in class, SoundsWrite was the lesson that caused the most anxiety and issues for many of them as this was the area they most struggled. Over the past 3 months we have seen unexpected progress from these children with the data below showing their progress on their phonics scores.

Child	September Result	January Result
MK	0	0
JKO	1	5
OR	6	22
LG	13	19
JW	19	26

Although it isn't possible to measure how this groups motivation and confidence has changed as a result of a Soft start to the school day, it has been evident in our SoundsWrite lessons. As the children have become more focussed and motivated in the lesson, their confidence has soared too. They are much more willing to engage and volunteer during lessons. Although I am sure that there would have been some progress in their SoundsWrite without a Soft Start. As their teacher I am sure that it has played a major part in their progress for a number of reasons.

- Developing a more personal relationship with these children during the Soft Start has allowed me to be more aware of their needs and anxieties.
- The longer SoftStarts also meant that those children arriving late didnt miss all of the SoftStart and were able to access a softer start to the day.
- As some children were coming from disruptive home lives and morning routines, the softer starts gave them the opportunity to settle and a kinder pace.
- The routine of our soft starts helped them to understand that the school day had still begun and that there was still expectations on them.

Although some children didnt necessarily need a Soft start to day, alot of their learning during SoundsWrite was impacted by other children who did. Often the starts of our day were disrupted by other children who werent yet ready to start the school day.

Next Steps

During a school twilight on childhood trauma this month, I presented my project and findings to all staff. Following this, as a school we created a list of Soft Start non negotiables which would be rolled out whole school stating Spring 2 half term. This means from March every class in school will be doing a Soft Start at the start of the day until 9:15. During trials in March all staff will begin this before a later staff meeting following Easter to share success and practices.