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Mastering reading: A targeted intervention model for secondary learners at St Christopher's

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

This project set out to address the persistent challenge of reading acquisition among secondary-aged pupils with complex SEND needs. While the school had already implemented reading age assessments and form-time mentoring, it became clear that these approaches were not sufficient for students with significant reading gaps. The intervention aimed to provide a structured, mastery-based reading programme that would accelerate progress, build confidence, and foster a culture of reading across the school.

Introduction

St Christopher's is a Church of England mainstream secondary school and stand-alone academy with approximately 1,300 pupils, including a sixth form. Prior to the project, teachers had informally expressed concerns about meeting the reading needs of their diverse teaching groups. However, there was no formal strategy in place to address these challenges. As a relatively new SENDCO, the project lead saw the Big Idea for SEND as an opportunity to collaborate with experienced professionals, apply evidence-based methods, and make a compelling case for change to senior leadership.

Implementation

The intervention was built around the concept of "Master Classes"—one-hour sessions embedded into the timetable for pupils in Years 7 to 9. Pupils were grouped by reading age rather than chronological age, allowing for targeted instruction based on individual need. Those with a reading age gap of three years or more were prioritised.

Each Master Class focused on one of the following areas, depending on pupil need:

- Sight word or phonics instruction
- Vocabulary acquisition
- Reading comprehension

The sessions combined direct instruction with structured collaborative learning. Pupils progressed through sequenced learning outcomes, and once mastery was achieved, they were invited to become "Masters" themselves—supporting peer tutoring and reinforcing their own learning. Metacognitive strategies were also taught, helping pupils to identify and apply their preferred approaches to overcoming reading difficulties.

Implementation (continued)

Parental engagement was recognised as a critical factor in the success of the programme. Families were informed via letter and encouraged to discuss the intervention with their children. Certificates of achievement were issued to celebrate progress, and extra-curricular reading opportunities were explored to promote a love of reading.

Delivery Model and Logistics

Sessions were delivered during the school day to avoid the perception of intervention as a punishment. Pupils were withdrawn from lessons on a rotating basis to ensure they did not consistently miss the same subject. A two-week timetable helped manage this process.

The Lexonik Literacy Intervention Programme was selected as the most appropriate tool for the school's context. One full-time TA was trained to deliver the programme, supported by regular meetings with the SENDCO. Fidelity to the intervention was maintained through bi-weekly check-ins and ongoing quality assurance.

Each group consisted of four pupils, with sessions lasting one hour per week. Pupils began with Lexonik Leap and progressed to Lexonik Advance once they achieved 100% on the Leap test. The cost per pupil was approximately £500, including staff time and licensing.

Impact and Outcomes

Early results were highly encouraging. Some pupils made six months' progress in reading ability within just a few weeks. Quantitative data from diagnostic assessments showed consistent improvement across all areas of the Lexonik framework. Pupils who had previously struggled with reading began to engage more confidently in lessons, and teachers reported improved access to the curriculum.

Beyond academic progress, the intervention had a positive social impact. Pupils grouped by reading age realised they were not alone in their difficulties, which fostered peer support and new friendships. Attendance at sessions was excellent, with pupils attending every session they were present for.

Teachers benefited from clearer communication of pupil reading levels, enabling them to adapt their teaching more effectively. The intervention also raised awareness of reading needs across the school, contributing to a more inclusive and responsive learning environment.

Parents responded positively, appreciating the transparency and support offered. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to better understand their child's needs and how to help at home.

Key learning

- Selecting an age-appropriate intervention for secondary pupils is challenging but essential.
- Fidelity to the chosen programme is critical; staff must be trained and supported.
- Withdrawal from lessons must be carefully managed to avoid disadvantaging pupils.
- Clear communication with staff and families enhances engagement and impact.
- TA delivery is effective when supported by training and a background in primary education.

Conclusion

The Master Class reading intervention at St Christopher's has demonstrated that a structured, mastery-based approach can significantly improve reading outcomes for secondary pupils with complex needs. By embedding the programme into the school day, training staff effectively, and engaging families, the school has created a sustainable model that supports both academic and personal development.

The project has grown rapidly, with up to 40 pupils participating at any one time. Continued monitoring, staff development, and communication with stakeholders will be key to sustaining its impact. The model is scalable, with potential for adaptation to suit different age groups, settings, and levels of need.



Better outcomes for learners with SEND



Improved mental health and wellbeing of learners with SEND