



CASE STUDY REPORT

Increasing children's engagement in independent reading and writing in the Early Years

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This study was originally published in 2010 as part of the 'What Works Well' initiative, part of the National Strategies for Education in England.

Abstract

Background: The purpose of the study was to explore how to encourage learners to apply their phonics skills and knowledge independently and so deepen and consolidate their learning.

Aims: The main aim of the project was to increase the amount of time pupils spend reading and writing independently, accelerating their progress in phonics, reading and writing.

Methods: The participants were early years foundation stage practitioners, headteachers, national strategies consultants, and teachers. They used CPD approaches such as action research and staff training to measure progress towards success criteria. Methods used included action research cycles, observations, reflection on resources, joint reflective planning, staff training, and adapting resources to target needs and interests.

Findings: The main findings were that resources that were adapted to target the needs and interests of the children, allowed for risk-taking in terms of writing impermanence, were able to be used widely in free play and those which supported thought processes involved in play were the most popular.

Implications: The findings suggest that adapting resources to target the needs and interests of the children, allowing for risk-taking in terms of writing impermanence, and providing resources that can be easily incorporated into meaningful play are key to engaging pupils in independent application of phonics skills and knowledge.

This abstract was generated by Camtree using a large language model (LLM) and added to the original report in 2023.

Keywords: Primary education; Early Years Foundation Stage; Communication, language and literacy

Introduction

What were your reasons for doing this type of development work?

The project was part of ongoing support in a school, focusing on developing the teaching and learning of phonics. Training in Letters and Sounds was followed by exploration of how we can encourage learners to apply their phonics skills and knowledge independently and so deepen and consolidate their learning. This work was also part of an MA in Educational Improvement, Development and Change.

Who might find this case study useful?

- Early years foundation stage practitioner
- Headteacher
- National Strategies consultant
- Teacher

Description

What specific curriculum area, subject or aspect did you intend to have impact on?

- Early Years Foundation Stage
- Communication, language and literacy

How did you intend to impact on pupil learning?

Intended impact:

- To increase the amount of time that pupils spend reading and writing during self-initiated learning
- Through the above, accelerate the progress all pupils make in phonics, reading and writing in Reception

What were your success criteria?

Success criteria:

- Children are observed to spend more time reading and writing during self-initiated learning
- Children will progress from Phase 1/ Phase 2 to being secure in Phase3/ Phase 4 in phonics respectively (following the Letters and Sounds programme) by the end of the two-term project
- Children will make significant progress in reading (focusing on decoding skills due to the project focusing on the application of phonics skills and knowledge, and so measurable using progress in book bands levels)
- Children's independent writing will reveal progress in use of phonics to spell and so will contribute to phonic phase assessments

What information or data did you use to measure progress towards your success criteria?

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes
- Periodic teacher assessment
- Pupils' work

Describe the CPD approaches you used

An action research approach was used for the project. Initial meetings with consultant and teachers were used to gather preliminary data concerning progress in phonics, reading and writing as well as attitudes to reading and writing. These meetings were followed by a series of action research cycles, which included observations, reflection on resources introduced and joint reflective planning. The project culminated in final observations and assessments of impact and planning future developments in this area. Staff training was delivered to the whole school on teaching phonics and the importance of providing children with opportunities to apply their phonic skills and knowledge.

Who provided you with support?

- Local authority staff
- School leader

How were you supported?

The head teacher provided valuable time and venues for joint planning/ reflecting sessions, without which the project would have been difficult.

Advice about possible resources to trial was gained partly from research and partly from an Early Years consultant and CLLD consultant.

Impact

What has been the overall impact on pupil learning?

Impact on progress: By the end of the project, all children were secure at Phase 3 and working within Phase 4 of Letters and Sounds and so had made considerable progress in phonics over the two terms in which the project took place (they had reached the age-related expectations for the end of the end of the Foundation Stage in two terms, moving from Phase 1/Phase 2 to Phase 4). Similarly, all children had progressed onto higher levels in the school's book-banded reading system. Progress in writing was evident in all children moving from writing their name to being able to write one or two full sentences. Whilst other influences may account for such progress, the heightened level of engagement in independent application of phonics skills and knowledge through phonics games, reading and writing can certainly be argued to be a contributing factor to this progress.

Impact on pupil engagement with independent reading and writing: All children showed an increased level of independent application of phonic skills and knowledge by the end of the project. At the beginning of the project, children rarely engaged in phonics, reading and writing activities independently. By the end of the project, these activities had become a regular part of their play. However, writing (or mark-making) as part of entirely self-initiated play remained an area for development by the end of the project, particularly for the boys in the class, who often required adult prompting or modelling in order to use writing or mark-making in their play.

Thoughts you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

The main findings as to the popularity of resources were that the most commonly used materials were those that were adapted to target the needs and interests of the children, allowed for risk-taking in terms of writing impermanence, were able to be used widely in free play and those which supported thought processes involved in play.

Adapting resources according to the needs and interests of the children

The Cross the River game was by far the most popular resource and was accessed in many different areas of the

classroom. Whilst this popularity could be attributed to the fact that it was one of the first resources introduced to the learning environment (it was introduced in the first action research cycle), its popularity was maintained throughout the project, with many of the observations of children focused on independent use of the resource (see 'Observations' upload). Practitioners have pointed out a potential reason for the popularity of this resource – the fact that they have worked hard to adapt it according to children's interests. They commented that it was popular 'for a while' and that as interest started to dwindle, they changed it, as they did with the second most popular resource – the train game. 'We adapted them [Cross the River and the Train Game] according to the children's interests and their self-initiated topics.'

However, we found a word of warning with providing reading and writing opportunities through purely phonics 'games' (as opposed to generic reading and writing materials). Whilst these phonics games seem to have been successful in engaging children in independent use of their phonics skills and knowledge, it is interesting to note that none of the children referred to these games in their end-of-project interviews (see upload). This could be due to the structure of the questions, which asked their preferences in reading and writing, but this in itself reveals the fact that children do not link these phonic games to the act of reading and writing. This 'missing link' was evident at the beginning of the project too, when interviews revealed a clear lack of understanding of the purpose of learning phonics, with half of the children saying they didn't know what they were for and the other half only referring to their purpose as to learn to read, and not linking phonics to writing (see initial interviews). By the end of the project, this understanding had developed slightly, with all children able to identify the purpose of learning phonics as enabling us to learn to read (in the sense of decoding the words on the page), although still only two children out of six interviewed displayed any knowledge of learning phonics in order to write. With this understanding (or lack of) in mind, the conclusion could be drawn that whilst Cross the River and the Train Game were popular activities to be involved in, the impact they have on children's understanding of why we learn phonics is minimal.

Resources offering opportunities for risk-taking/ experimentation

Another of the most popular materials which were accessed by all children were whiteboards for drawing and for writing. The popularity of whiteboards could be explained in two ways. On the one hand, whiteboards offer the opportunity for practising writing without the daunting element of your writing being permanent. In their use of whiteboards, children made use of this impermanence, constantly rubbing out their writing and starting again (see observations). Children's talk whilst they worked with whiteboards suggested that this impermanence helps to actualize the thought process they are going through as writers:

Child A:

'I want to write grass.' Writes a 'g' on the whiteboard then rubs out. 'No, I want to write water.' Writes a w on the whiteboard.

Child B: Takes whiteboard and pen to the book corner. Sits down and begins to write. 'I'm writing 'e'.' Writes 'e' and rubs out. ... Copies letters off front cover of a book as talks. 'I'm writing a story. The bear goes to the wood and he sees a boy.' Writes squiggles on whiteboard as he talks. 'No, I mean a spaceship.' Rubs out a squiggle and does another.

The impermanence is supporting revisions in thinking.

The other light in which the popularity of whiteboards could be viewed is the fact that when children were observed using them, they incorporated their use into meaningful play. For example, Child B used his to write a 'story', whereby squiggles represent the writing he spoke aloud.

Resources allowing easy incorporation into meaningful play (play that is meaningful for the child)

The importance of the ease with which resources can be incorporated into play to the popularity of the resources themselves was evident in observations of all the children. For example, Child C incorporated writing on a whiteboard into his play in his use of the Cross the River game, linking the game to knowledge of the class story 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt'. He used the whiteboard to write a label for himself as a character within his own version of the story (in the observation he writes 'dog' and crosses the 'river' making barking noises to get to the cave role play area). Child D, meanwhile, created her own rules for the Cross the River game, using a whiteboard as an element of the game (see observations).

Drawing as writing

In interviews at the end of the project, most children associated drawing with writing. Furthermore, when discussing what they like to write (interpreted as drawing), they expressed positive remarks about how 'fun' it can be. However, they also talked about disliking writing 'hard words', getting annoyed when writing (in the traditional sense of writing words) and becoming 'bored' when doing 'important writing'. The differentiation between what is 'important writing' – i.e. sitting with an adult and writing – and writing (or drawing) as part of play, suggests a further reason why writing opportunities presented within areas need to draw on the meanings and themes (or interests) that children construct within their play, rather than adult-imposed ideas of what 'should' be written.

Engaging boys

In addition to the resources mentioned above, developments in the construction area were very successful in engaging boys in applying their phonic skills and knowledge. This was the only area of provision where phonics, reading and writing activities were entirely used by boys. The reading books, labelling materials and class model book gave reading and writing a real purpose within the boys' play, although often the use of these resources did require prompting or modelling from an adult.

The role of the adult in pupils using the materials independently

Observations throughout the project revealed that the role of the adult was multi-faceted in increasing pupils' use of reading and writing in self-initiated play. Firstly, there was the necessity to introduce and explain materials and to model their use. Secondly, many children referred back to adults during play for support in using the materials, i.e. 'What comes next?', 'Is this a d?'. Adults were also used by the children as someone to praise and confirm their efforts, i.e. 'Watch me do this!', 'I've done it!'. Out of all adult interventions in child-initiated play, the most successful in terms of children's engagement were those which were initiated by the children themselves.

Quotes you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

"We changed Cross the River after a while to Cross Space with a rocket and phonemes on stars. We adapted a game to use trains to gather phonemes from stations. We adapted them according to the children's interests and their self-initiated topics they brought up." - teacher

"I love all of the books." - Child F

Child F: "I like writing for my mummy. At school." Child D: "It's fun. I write letters."

Quantitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Periodic teacher assessment

Qualitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes
- Pupils' work

Describe the evidence of impact on pupil learning

Pupil interviews - before and after the project, regarding attitudes to reading and writing and knowledge and understanding of phonics (see previous uploads and discussion).

Observations of independent learning (see previous uploads and discussion).

Teacher end-of-project interview (see previous uploads and discussion).

Examples of independent writing

Phonic phase before/ after project

Book band level before/ after project

What has been the impact on teaching?

The increased level of planning for opportunities for pupils to read and write within the different areas of learning (see previous planning upload).

Quotes you think are relevant to the impact on teaching

"We've had some good ideas about activities like Cross the River, which we made into Cross the Sea and Cross Space, Buried Treasure, the train game...We adapted them according to the children's interests and their self-initiated topics they brought up."

Evidence of impact on teaching

- Evidence from planning

Describe the evidence of impact on teaching

Planning during action research cycles (see previous upload)

What has been the impact on school organisation and leadership?

NA - class focus

Evidence of impact on school organisation and leadership

NA - class focus

Summary

What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

Planning collectively, in the context of reflection on ongoing observations of the impact of resources trialled on pupils' engagement and learning. This regular time to stop and reflect enabled our planning to become refined to children's needs and interests and increased understanding of pedagogy in reflection on why certain resources engaged learners whilst others did not.

What key resources would people who want to learn from your experience need access to?

Letters and Sounds

The Early Years Foundation Stage Practitioner Guidance

Mark Making Matters document

What CPD session and resources were particularly useful?

Mark Making Matters

Letters and Sounds

If another individual or school was attempting to replicate this work, where would they start and what would the essential elements be?

Start by observing where the pupils are in terms of progress in reading and writing and what engages them in learning (i.e. what interests them at the moment). Plan developments to continuous provision according to this information and using the suggested documents and others available. Continually observe pupils in independent learning involving the resources and regularly take time to reflect on what has been successful, what needs adapting and what is not working. Refine provision according to continuous assessment of changing needs, progress and interests.

Supplementary Materials

This report is accompanied in the library by the following supplementary material:

- Planning cycles
- Action research plan
- Initial pupil interviews
- Post-project semi-structured pupil interviews
- Post-project teacher interview
- Observations of pupils

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About 'What Works Well'

This case study was originally published as part of the 'What Works Well' section of the National Strategies for Education in England. The National Strategies were professional programmes aiming for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching in schools in England. 'What Works Well' involved teaching practitioners from all phases and areas of education sharing accounts of real developments which had improved learning and teaching, and made a difference to pupil progress. 'What Works Well' case studies were designed to support practice transfer and include sufficient detail and resources to enable others to implement the effective practice described. They were reviewed by experts prior to publication as 'User Generated Content' (UGC) under a licence which encouraged reuse and derivative works, but which precluded commercial use.

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