

Title

Developing an alternative P1 literacy approach to support struggling early readers

What did we ask? (Research Questions)

Does the implementation of an alternative approach which includes; a greater time for developing phonological awareness, analytic phonics, a reduced pace, increased consolidation and active/play based experiences benefit struggling early readers many of whom are affected by poverty?

What is the evidence base? (link to your definition of the poverty gap)

Staff within the Local Authority have participated in extensive professional learning opportunities with a focus on narrowing the poverty related attainment gap in literacy. Analysis of standardised literacy data indicated that the concentrated focus on literacy improvement in target schools had resulted in a reduction in the poverty related literacy attainment gap (Local Authority Inspection Report, Education Scotland, July 2018). However, while standardised assessment data (Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring – P1 assessments) shows the majority of children at P1 are progressing well there is still a group of children who require additional support. Baseline data (which includes teacher judgement and standardised assessment results) highlights a group of P1s across the authority presenting with barriers to literacy learning on entry to school. This finding is replicated in National research, for example, Sosu and Ellis (2014). Research demonstrates the important role of language development in literacy outcomes for children (NELP, 2008). National Data shows that up to 70% of children within SIMD 1-2 enter school with language skills that impact on their ability to access the curriculum.

The European Commission (2012) outlined recommendations at the primary stage for children with literacy difficulties, these included exposure to high quality teaching delivered by adults who have an extensive understanding of literacy development. The accurate identification of needs, teacher access to training in a wide range of effective teaching strategies and pupil access to evidence based intervention approaches in their first year of school is recommended. A research review by Topping (2014) supported an ordering of tasks by complexity or mastery, as follows: rhyme, alliteration, blending, segmentation, manipulation and that children with the greatest difficulties required more intensive instruction to show continuous growth.

What did we do?

Following the analysis of local data and National research it was agreed to co-create a literacy approach for P1 children at risk of underperforming in literacy in P1. A range of factors were used to identify children at risk e.g. teacher judgement from early years setting, performance on Centre

for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) baseline assessment, observation of children's response to literacy activities in primary 1 and known additional support needs. This project was a collaboration between; Literacy Development Officers, Speech and Language Therapy, Psychological Service and school staff within the Local Authority.

P1 teachers attended CLPL in literacy to explore issues such as pace, challenge and suitability for all learners of the current approach. As a result of these sessions it was agreed that a parallel approach would be co-created. Areas to be included were advice around pacing (e.g. in relation to reading books, high frequency words) curriculum content, classroom organisation and effective methodologies. This was written in conjunction with all key stakeholders. Literacy Base staff co-ordinated the writing taking into account research evidence provided by Psychological Service and the on-going contributions from the teacher reference group, Psychological Service and from a teacher survey.

Ten pilot schools were identified/volunteered in 2016. For the purpose of the research ten comparison schools were matched to the pilot schools using SIMD measures (see later section). The Speech and Language Attainment team worked collaboratively to devise a new order for teaching initial sounds based on norms information linked to stages of speech and sound development. A 'softer start' to P1 was developed, focusing on early stages of phonemic/phonological development e.g. *rhyming, alliteration and syllable segmentation etc.* An alternative approach to phonics was developed (currently a synthetic phonics approach was employed). This focused on the larger units of sound for children who are unable or find it difficult to blend phonemes in order to read and write words.

Teaching staff from the experimental schools met regularly with Literacy Base staff to evaluate progress, to inform next steps and consider adaptations to the approach. Staff brought a range of data to these meetings e.g. on-going curricular assessments and samples of written work. Feedback from schools, Psychological Service and from analysis of the data enabled alterations to the approach to be made at the end of the first year.

Support visits were carried out in all target schools working with staff and pupils to ascertain progress and views. CEM test results were accessed and analysed by Psychological Service to evaluate progress

What have we found? 200 words

Quantitative data (CEM) years 2016- 2017 and 2017-2018

- Analysis focused on the performance of pupils scoring below 40 (performance bands 'below average' and 'extremely below average') and those scoring 40 and higher (performance bands 'average' to 'extremely above average') - for the lower attaining P1 pupils in the experimental schools, statistically significant increases were found in their reading and

phonics scores from pre to post-test. For reading, although scores increased, this did not bring the underachieving pupils' scores into the average range. However, for phonics, underachieving pupils moved from a mean score within the below average range up to a mean score within the average range. Results also displayed increases in their total scores, however, this was not statistically significant. Overall, lower attaining pupils in the experimental schools appeared to make good progress in their learning.

- While there were improvements found in the experimental group for the lower attaining children, improvements were also evident for lower attaining children in the comparison schools.
- For those P1 children in the experimental schools scoring average or above at pre-test, there seemed to be a slight decline in their reading, phonics and total scores, suggesting that the unintended spread of this approach to a different cohort was not helpful. However, this slight decline in scores did not result in the children moving down in performance band. It was felt that children scoring at 'average' or 'above average' at pre-test benefited from the continued high level of pace and challenge of the core literacy approach.
- Scores from children within SIMD 1 and 2 were compared to those within SIMD 3 – 10. Children in SIMD 1 and 2 within the experimental group displayed a slight increase in their reading scores between pre and post-test, and although this was not statistically significant, it is in line with the trend that the alternative programme has helped to improve reading in more targeted groups of children. This slight increase in reading scores did not result in SIMD 1 and 2 children moving up in performance band. When compared to the children in SIMD 3 – 10, these deprived children scored less in post-test reading, post-test phonics and post-test total scores, however, these were not statistically significant differences.

Qualitative data

- Observations/visits to experimental schools indicated that not enough opportunities are being planned/created to enable learners to apply/transfer skills learned (Reading/Writing) and that there were issues around fidelity to the approach.

Conclusion

- In summary, lower attaining pupils in the experimental schools showed significant increase in their reading and phonics scores from pre to post test. Results for pupils in the experimental schools who were achieving well did not show this improvement from pre to post test. Results from the children in SIMD 1 and 2 within the experimental schools also showed improvement from pre-test to post-test (in reading) but this was not significant. However, lower attaining children in the comparison schools also made improvements. When considered alongside the qualitative information gathered it is hypothesized that these results may reflect issues around the sensitivity of measures used, the fidelity of the implementation of the approach, knowledge of the barriers to learning of the 'at risk group' and content of the approach.

What do we plan to do next?

- More sensitive standardised assessments will be used to identify children's literacy difficulties to gain a better understanding of this cohort. It is hypothesised that the use of this tool at pre and post-test, along with other forms of intelligence will also give greater insight into children's progress.
- Continue to follow the progress of the original cohort (P3 in 2019/20) and the children in comparison schools.
- Increased moderation opportunities will be provided for staff in the pilot.
- Increased opportunity to share and discuss examples of identified good practice will be provided during engagement sessions. This will focus on a greater application of skills. For example, using phonic and spelling knowledge more readily in all reading and writing
- Co-creation of progression pathways in the area of early writing.
- Further involvement of Head teachers in terms of monitoring the impact of the alternative approach.
- Research and evaluation project to be carried out in relation to classroom organisation and management in order to provide further advice and support to practitioners.

References

European Commission (2012). EU high level group of experts on literacy, Final report. Luxembourg: Publications office of the European union, 120p.

Local Authority Inspection Report, Education Scotland (July 2018):

<https://education.gov.scot/assets/contactorganisationinspectionreports/northlanarkshirecouncilinspection.pdf>

National Early Literacy Panel (2008). Developing Early Literacy: A Scientific Synthesis of Early Development and Implications for Intervention. National Institute for Literacy.

Sosu, E. and Ellis, S. (2014). Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Topping (2014). Literacy Appraisal and Action in the Early Years: A Research Literature Summary. Education Scotland.

For further information contact:

North Lanarkshire Psychological Service

- Rhiannon Quinn quinnr@northlan.gov.uk / Nancy Ferguson FergusonN@northlan.gov.uk

North Lanarkshire Literacy Base

- Angela Glover angelaglover@ea.n-lanark.sch.uk /Coleen Straub

NB – Scott Chalmers, Chantelle Bulloch, Gemma Small and Sophie Wardrope (Research and Development Officers, Psychological Service) have worked on the analysis of data over the length of the project.