



Synthetic phonics and Reading Recovery at Victoria Park Infant School

Victoria Park Community Infant School is a three-form entry school with 170 children on roll. A small number of children come from an area of Bristol that is increasingly occupied by young professional families, but the majority come from local authority housing estates with high levels of social deprivation. 42% of the children are eligible for free school meals. Historically the school served a mainly white working class population, but the intake is now ethnically diverse. 23% of the children are from minority ethnic groups and 12% have English as an additional language. Languages spoken include Bengali, Punjabi, Tagalog, Urdu, Gujerati, Lithuanian, Polish and Portugese.

The challenge

Seven years ago in 1998, the school's Ofsted PANDA rated attainment at E or E*. 50% of the children left the school unable to read.

The school recognised the need for major changes and elected to become involved in two LEA literacy initiatives. They first implemented systematic synthetic phonics teaching in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. Jolly Phonics was introduced in the Foundation Stage, together with Phonographix towards the end of the Reception year, and into Year 1 and 2. Children who were not quickly picking up on phonic learning in Year 1 received small group intervention with a skilled teaching assistant (TA).

The effective teaching of synthetic phonics within the literacy hour quickly had an impact and reduced the number of children struggling with early literacy skills. It did not, however, completely eliminate them. Every year there are still eight to ten children who move into Year 2 who have not got off the ground with reading or writing and who without help are predicted to achieve a Level W at the end of the year. Usually these are children who experience multiple social disadvantage, have restricted language skills, or in some cases have been identified as dyslexic.

The intervention strategy

To meet the needs of these children, the school decided to train a teacher in Reading Recovery. Her first target was to reduce the numbers of children predicted to leave Key Stage 1 at Level W. To this end, she worked directly one-to-one with the very lowest achieving Year 2 children, on a 0.5 teaching timetable.

In 2000-2, her Reading Recovery role was increased to full time. The school wanted to use Reading Recovery strategies to impact on a wider group of children. Having reduced the number of 'Ws' to zero, her first target in 2000-1 was to increase the numbers of children achieving Level 2B+. In 2001-2 she focused on increasing children's attainment from a predicted 2B to 2A.

She continued to work one-to-one for 12-20 weeks with the lowest attaining children, but also worked over the course of the year with 30 other Year 2 children, delivering short-term 'Booster' reading programmes precisely targeted to each child's individual needs.

This had to stop in 2002-4, when the school's funding situation changed and the Reading Recovery teacher reverted to part-time. The number of children who accessed Reading Recovery or teacher-led Booster programmes reduced. Booster work did continue, however, delivered by a TA trained and supported by the Reading Recovery teacher.

In September 2005 funding from the *Every Child A Reader* initiative enabled the school to revert to its former, highly-valued full time provision.

Staff development

From the start the school's Reading Recovery teacher led staff INSET on early reading and writing. Early on, she arranged for a staff meeting to be held at the nearby Reading Recovery centre, where staff watched and discussed Reading Recovery lessons from behind a one-way screen. Staff were trained in using running records to assess children's reading progress. The headteacher arranged continuing opportunities for them to watch lessons in school on a rotating basis. As a result, they have taken on a number of general teaching strategies from Reading Recovery – notably encouraging children to apply independent problem-solving strategies to work out unknown words – and specific strategies such as cutting up sentences children have written, for them to re-construct and read.

A team of skilled TAs (now Higher Level Teaching Assistants) have been trained in reading with children using Reading Recovery principles, with ongoing monitoring and support for their work.

Assessment and pupil tracking

Each term class teachers at Victoria Park assess children's progress in literacy and mathematics. The Reading Recovery teacher and literacy coordinator have provided term-by-term estimates of where children should be in terms of Reading Recovery 'book levels' (Appendix A). Running records are used to identify the book level at which children are reading. Any child who is under-achieving is quickly identified, so that additional help can be put in at an early stage rather than at the end of the year.

Children who are really struggling will be targeted for 1-1 reading with a trained adult. Other children's needs will be met through carefully planned guided reading. The school's stock of books have all been levelled using Bookbands and Reading Recovery levels, so as to ensure that texts are closely matched to children's needs.

Impact on attainment

From the low starting point in 1998, when the school was graded E* for reading, results changed dramatically. In 2001 and 2002, when whole-class synthetic phonics and individual Reading Recovery and Booster programmes were running, the school was graded B in comparison with schools nationally and A in comparison with similar schools. In 2002 88 % of the cohort achieved Level 2+, 79% 2B+ and 26 % Level 3 in Reading.

In 2003 and 4 the numbers achieving L2+ continued to improve to 94% and 93%, but the percentage of children achieving Level 2B+ (76% and 77%) did not increase proportionately, which the school attributes to the reduction in Booster provision in the period when they were not able to fund a full time Reading Recovery teacher in the school.

Long term follow up

Children have retained the gains they made in the infant school.

The school has tracked the reading levels of the first cohort of children who received either Reading Recovery or Booster support when they entered Year 2 in September 1999 (Appendix B, Table 1).

12 of the 15 children in the cohort entering Year 2 at Level W achieved Level 2+ at the end of Key Stage 1.

When tracked through to the end of Key Stage 2, 11 of these initially very low achieving children had achieved level 4+.

Out of the total of 29 under-achieving children who received Reading Recovery or Booster, 26 (90%) achieved Level 2+ at the end of Key Stage 2 and 14 (48%) achieved Level 2B+. **Four years later, 28 of the children could be tracked to Year 6. 25(89%) achieved Level 4+ and 5 achieved Level 5+.**

Long term follow up of the second cohort of children who received either Reading Recovery or Booster support when they entered Year 2 in September 2000 has produced equally impressive outcomes (Appendix B, Table 2).

14 of the 20 children in the cohort entering Year 2 at Level W achieved Level 2+. Half achieved Level 2B+.

When tracked through to the end of Key Stage 2, eleven of these initially very low achieving children had achieved level 4+.

Out of the total of 32 low-achieving children who received Reading Recovery or Booster, 26 (81%) achieved Level 2+ at the end of Key Stage 2, 22 (69%) achieved Level 2B+ and 5 achieved level 2A+. Four years later, 29 of the children could be tracked to Year 6. 21 (72 %) achieved Level 4+ and 2 achieved Level 5+.

In 2002 the KS1 results for the children receiving Reading Recovery or Booster support in were even better, with many more children achieving Level 2A (Appendix B, Table 3). Out of the 32 low-achieving children who received Reading Recovery or Booster, 26 (81%) achieved Level 2+ at the end of Key Stage 2, 22 (69 %) achieved Level 2B+ and 16 achieved level 2A+.

Other outcomes

The school report a significant reduction in numbers of children placed on the SEN register, and a big impact on behaviour and attendance.

Staff have also noticed a knock-on effect in other areas such as mathematics, as children's self confidence and resilience are greatly improved when they have experienced a sense of achievement and success with their reading.

Parental involvement has increased. Parents of children who receive intervention sign a contract to provide support by ensuring their child's regular attendance. They quickly see the impact on their child's reading, and this has a positive effect on their engagement with the school and with their child's learning. Many parents come in to watch their child's lessons; parents who have not previously come to curriculum workshops or contributed to home-school diaries now do so on a regular basis.

The future

Now back to strength with their Reading Recovery and Booster provision, the school is able to intervene even earlier with its lowest attaining children, targeting children in Year 1, as well as maintaining its effective teaching of synthetic phonics. Jenny Holt, the headteacher, is confident that the school will be able again to achieve the outstanding results that brought them their A grading. More important is the difference this makes to individual children. As one child recently told Jenny when describing his extra reading lessons, 'It's changed my bloomin' life.'

Appendix A Reading Level Targets

Foundation Stage

Term	Target Level	Reading Recovery Level
Term 2*	W	RR 2
Term 4	W	RR 4
Term 6	W/1C	RR 5/6

Year 1

Term	Target Level	Reading Recovery Level
Term 2	1C	RR 9
Term 4	1B	RR 12
Term 6	1A	RR 16

Year 2

Term	Target Level	Reading Recovery Level
Term 2	2C	RR 19
Term 4	2B	RR 22
Term 6	2A	RR 23/24

* The school operates a six term year.

Appendix B Table 1
Reading results for Reading Recovery and Booster children in 2000 Year 2 cohort

Child's initials	September 1999 NC reading level	End of Key Stage 1 test result 2000	End of Key Stage 2 Test result 2004
J	1	3	4
E	1	2B	4
J	1	2B	4
J	1	2A	4
C	1	3	4
W	1	3	5
N	W	2A	Moved
I	1	2B	5
J	W	2C	3
R	W	2C	4
A	W	2C	4
L	W	2C	4
J	W	2C	4
C	W	2C	A
S	W	2C	4
L	1	2B	4
S	W	1	N
L	W	2C	4
C	W	1	4
K	W	1	4
D	1	2B	5
E	W	2C	4
J	1	2B	4
E	W	2C	4
M	W	2C	4
D	1	2B	4
A	1	2C	4
F	1	3	5
B	1	3	5

Table 2
Reading results for Reading Recovery and Booster children in 2001 Year 2 cohort

Child's initials	Sept 2000 NC reading level	End of Key Stage 1 test results 2001	End of Key Stage 2 test results 2005
B	W	2B	4
R	W	2B	3
S	1	2B	4
L	1	2A	5
J	W	2A	4
L	W	2B	3
L	W	2A	4
M	W	1	N
E	1	3	5
L	1	2B	4 (Y5)*
L	W	1	Moved
E	1	2B	4
A	1	2B	4
T	W	2B	Moved
C	1	2B	4
R	1	2B	4
M	W	2B	4
R	W	1	3
S	W	1	4
O	1	2B	Moved
J	W	2C	3
B	W	2B	4
S	1	2B	4
E	1	2B	3
E	W	2C	4
C	W	2A	4
F	W	2C	4
C	1	2A	4
T	W	1	3
C	W	1	N
J	W	2A	5
M	W	2C	4

* In year 6 L was educated at home

Table 3
Reading results for Reading Recovery and Booster children in 2002 Year 2 cohort

Child's initials	Sept 2001 NC reading level	End of Key Stage 1 test results 2002
H	W	2A
D	W	2C
K	W	2A
T	1	3
L	1	2A
C	W	2C
C	1	2C
C	W	2B
S	1	2A
L	W	1
J	1	2B
S	W	2C
J	W	1
K	1	2B
R	1	2B
D	W	2A
N	W	2A
K	1	2B
L	W	1
D	W	2A
G	W	W
B	W	2A
R	1	2A
N	1	2A
M	1	2A
J	1	2A
Z	W	2A
W	1	2A
A	W	1
L	2C *	2B
S	2C *	2A
A	2C *	2B

*Joined 'booster' programme after Christmas 2001