

Rationale

As a child reading was boring. Uninspiring. I was bribed to read by my Mum (a teacher herself) – a box of chocolates in return for reading a book all the way through! Consequently, I chose the book with the least pages in the bookshelf!

However, the bribe paid off – Roald Dahl’s Fantastic Mr Fox enlightened me to a magical world of escapism. Where anything could happen. It led me to reading Anne of Green Gables, Little Women, Jane Eyre, Pride and Prejudice, Shakespeare and going on to do a degree in law. It was never about just SSP and reading schemes – it was about the pleasure of first opening a book. The excitement of meeting new characters and learning new things.

Aims

The aims, therefore, were to:

- Introduce a new SSP programme to improve Year One screening results
- Ensure that teachers read a class story at the end of the day just for pleasure
- Advise teachers of potential books that could be read in different year groups (through reading spines)
- Listen to the children’s voice on the type of books they wanted to read
- Arrange library visits to ensure that all children had a library card
- Introduce guided reading regularly in all classrooms
- Introduce exciting reading areas in each classroom along with a new library
- Communicate the importance of reading with parents and carers

Outline

Reading is a skill that is required by all. Recently there has been much focus on automaticity, prosody and reading fluency along with intrinsic and extrinsic focuses. All of these are interlinked to ensure that a child is able to be successful at reading. Thankfully, reading for pleasure too has become a focal point. Reading for pleasure underpins a child’s motivation ensuring that they are driven to want to read.

Children struggle to read for a variety of reasons, including limited experience with books, speech and hearing problems, and poor phonemic awareness. Good readers are phonemically aware, understand the alphabetic principle but most importantly they also possess strong vocabularies – children who have stimulating literacy experiences from birth onwards have an advantage with their vocabulary development. Unfortunately, poor readers who have not consistently engaged in language play that develops an awareness of sound structure and language patterns or may have had limited (or even no) bedtime or lap time reading are at a huge disadvantage – entering both pre-school and school settings with a vastly reduced availability of vocabulary.

We know from research that reading is a language-based activity. There has been a huge emphasis on the use of Systematic Synthetic Phonics since it was given a higher profile in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998. In 1998, it was merely called ‘phonics’ – the term ‘synthetic phonics’ was not yet widely used. However, by 2003, it was clear that the NLS was not raising standards as had been previously hoped.

“To what extent, and in what ways, does the phonic element of the National Literacy Strategy need modifying?” (Torgerson, Brooks and Hall, 2006 cited by Chew, 2018 RRF UK).

It was identified that the NLS version of blending was different from the Clackmannanshire version – the NLS version was ‘scaffolded’ as the teacher pronounced the target word first and then the children identified the phonemes and re-blended them, whereas the key feature of Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics was that the children did not know the word in advance but worked it out.

In addition, the 2006 Rose review exposed the weaknesses in the NLS searchlights model. It identified the five competencies – recognition of letters; the ability to sound out phonemes; the ability to hear and blend phonemes; the reading of phonically regular words and the reading of some irregular words. It also stressed the importance of ‘pre-reading skills’. However, the whole-language/look-and-say influences still lingered on and continued to mean that many schools taught synthetic phonics only alongside other strategies, including guessing, first letters or context. It took until June 2012 for the national roll-out of Systematic Synthetic Phonics to occur.

SSP programmes were researched thoroughly and a new scheme identified for Hilltop. This involved visiting schools using the programmes and arranging for primary book consultants to visit the school with examples of different schemes. Once the SSP was identified the resources and books were purchased and the staff trained in the programme. Reading for pleasure can only be attained once early reading has been taught successfully.

Reading in the National Curriculum

Skilled readers though are not only able to read words but comprehend them. This was identified in the National Curriculum:

“It is essential that teaching focuses on developing pupils’ competence in both dimensions: different kinds of teaching are needed for each.” (National Curriculum, 2014).

It is not enough to teach a child how to work out how to read a word – they also need to understand what the word means. Without the combined skills of word reading and comprehension (both listening and reading) pupils are not able to read fluently in any subject. Access to a rich, broad vocabulary developed through good speech, language and communication is the foundation of this.

Rose, 2006, p.4 states in his review:

“It is widely agreed that phonic work is an essential part, but not the whole picture, ... For example, nurturing positive attitudes to literacy and the skills associated with them, across the curriculum, is crucially important as is developing spoken language, building vocabulary ...”

In addition, he identifies:

“Too little attention has been given to teaching the full National Curriculum programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided for speaking and listening remains too limited.” (Rose, 2006, p.16). Therefore, staff were trained in the importance of ‘teaching’ children to read.

An emphasis was also given to what children read. Children were encouraged to read comics, recipes, football magazines, encyclopaedias – reading was not confined to reading schemes. Both teachers and pupils recommended books to read and discuss their favourite authors.

Evidence of impact

It is evident that children enjoy reading at Hilltop. Staff, pupils and parents are motivated by the improvements in both the new schemes and the learning environments. Obviously, it will take time for the new SSP programme to impact on early reading, which in turn will give children the skills to read for pleasure. However, the new reading learning environments provide engaging books and an enjoyable place to read. Teachers and children research books and share these with each other. Class stories are read at the end of each day – children are given a voice and select their own class book. Our main focus for the future is to educate and engage parents on becoming involved in their child’s reading journey. This is a target once the new SSP programme has been implemented securely.

Reflections

As a teacher we are taught to constantly reflect on our teaching. I feel privileged to be in the position to ensure that every child can read – but most importantly – that they love reading. That they become aware that reading and the thirst for knowledge is a lifetime journey. As practitioners, this is one of the most important skills that we teach as it opens doors into not only magical lands and inspirational facts about the world we live in – it gives children vital skills that improve their future. The journey has only just begun at Hilltop but it is an exciting one. As English lead I look forward to both myself and the inspirational team that I work with to open children's minds with the gift of reading.



A library assembly with the local librarian visiting



Reading in our library area



We will be opening a new library soon

