

Date	September 2015
Key stages	KS1-KS2
School type	LA maintained, special
Themes	Phonics, special educational needs

Adapting ‘Letters and Sounds’ for use in a special school

Meadow Wood School

Context

Meadow Wood School, located in the Hertsmere borough of Hertfordshire, is a special school for primary-aged pupils with a statement of special educational needs for physical and neurological impairments. Most pupils at the school have cerebral palsy and additional complex needs, including sensory impairment, epilepsy, extensive medical needs and associated learning difficulties. Pupils at the school use a wide range of technological communication aids and almost all are wheelchair users. The school has integrated provision to provide for pupils’ educational, health and social care needs.

Brief description

Due to the complex needs of the pupils teaching literacy skills is a huge challenge for the teachers. Often pupils struggle to learn how to read and understand basic phonics. As a result the school has employed a wide range of specific strategies which involve adapting and delivering the Department for Education’s Letters and Sounds programme at an individualised pace for Meadow Wood pupils. The Letters and Sounds programme is divided into six phases which correspond to a child’s phonetic development.

When the project began in September 2013 the headteacher selected two pupils ready to move from Phase 1 of ‘early phonological awareness’ to learning the grapheme phoneme correspondences in Phase 2. Child 1 has varying degrees of cerebral palsy and is able to communicate through facial expression, limited gestures and eye gaze. Child 2 has cerebral palsy but is able to communicate orally.

The children’s progress was followed by a teacher who led the project, over a period of 18 months during which they changed classes and teachers. With support from a Herts for Learning (HfL) English Teaching and Learning Adviser the teacher supported other class teachers in the delivery and adaption of the Letters and Sounds programme for the selected pupils. As the project progressed, and the aspects of Phase 1 and 2 of the programme were regularly promoted, the children began to show signs of early phonological awareness.

Adaption of teaching methods and resources

Changing the structure of teaching and learning

The original Letters and Sounds programme requires 20 minutes of daily phonics teaching to be delivered in the following sequence: revisiting and reviewing previous material, teaching new material and practicing and applying teaching. At Meadow Wood this method was adapted to ensure that a new element of teaching would not be added every day and as a result the sequence became: revisit and review, practise and apply. With the adapted approach, new skills were only taught when the pupil was ready.

Teachers identified the aspects of learning that would be most beneficial to the pupils and determined whether they should be taught new phoneme grapheme correspondences or taught to read familiar key words by sight.

Using appropriate resources

One of the most important factors in the new approach was the identification of appropriate resources and adapting them to be used alongside communication aids in order to make phonics more accessible for those with physical and neurological impairments. Previous phonics resources and an old reading scheme that was not phonemically decodable were replaced to complement new phonics teaching. The new resources made a considerable difference to the progress of the identified pupils.

Teachers made their own games based on the interests of the children. Editable large dice, where graphemes can be inserted on each side, enabled the children to roll the dice, identify the phoneme, and find or think of an object that starts with the phoneme. Teachers also regularly used small magnetic whiteboards with magnetic letters as well as phoneme frames to aid learning.

Foam magnetic letters and flash cards proved very useful in the learning of the two pupils but had to be presented in a consistent font and the correct way up to aid recognition and avoid confusion. Voice output switches were successful in enabling the children to play with sounds with more independence. Published reading schemes were selected to ensure that the content closely matched the child's phonic ability.

The choice of commercial resources was just as important as the resources developed by the teachers. One teacher highlighted the use of a DVD of Phase 1 songs was a great way of engaging all the children and made a range of instruments available that they were encouraged to listen to and play.

Most of the new phonics resources which involved teaching phoneme and grapheme recognition were used only with the two selected pupils; however some phase 2 material was used with the other pupils to support their ability to recognise graphemes. Phase 1 resources used to support tuning into sounds were then used with other pupils as relevant.

Child 2 was able to access many of the resources listed above physically and had a mobile phonic display board created for her to interact with. This board reflected graphemes that she knew as well as words for her to move around. For Child 1 the resources had to be incorporated into her eye gaze system.

Impact

The desired end result was to develop their children's early reading skills through building on their phonetical awareness and comprehension skills. Although their differing complex needs make it difficult for teachers to confidently judge phonetical acquisition, the pupils appeared to have made considerable progress.

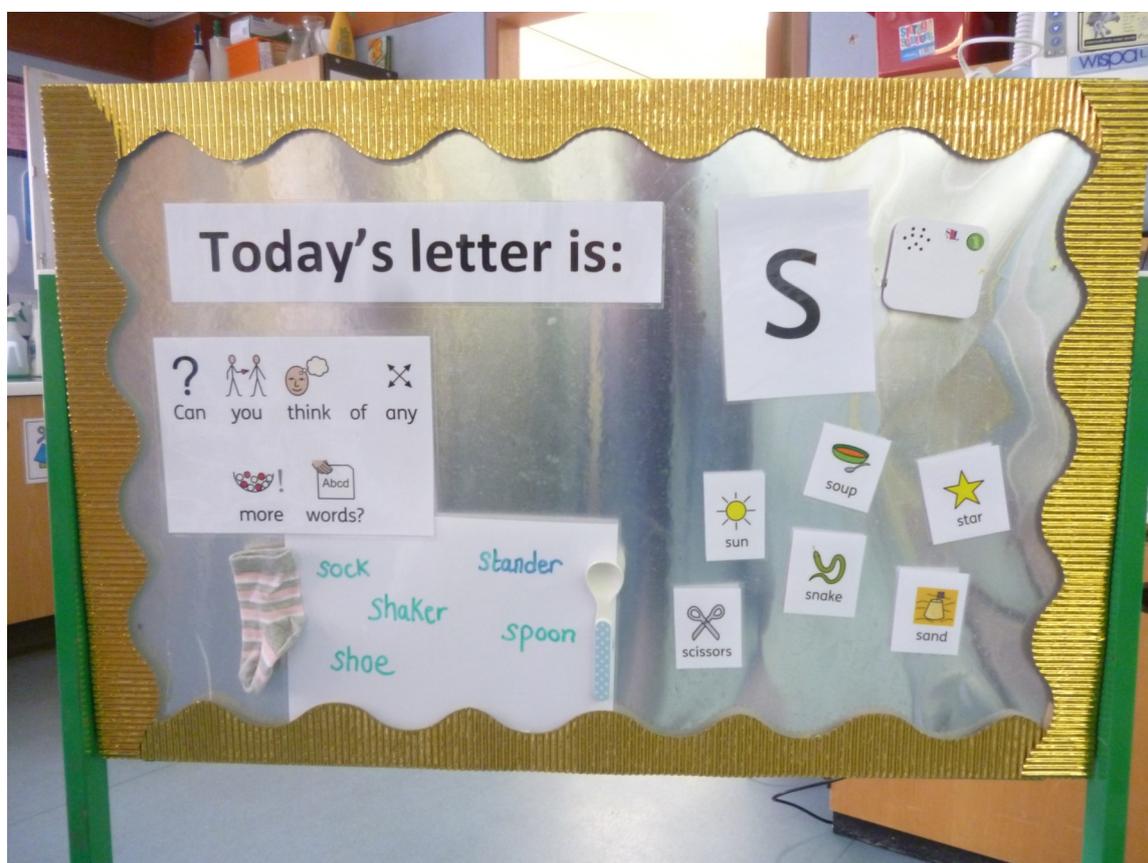
Child 1 made significant progress with her phonics and was able to recognise most Phase 3 phoneme grapheme correspondences. Her reading skills and comprehension have improved along with her love of reading. She is now confidently reading Phase 4 books that are aligned with her growing phonic knowledge. When the project started she showed no interest in writing but is now able to write some graphemes on a white board and can compose her own sentences on the computer including phonically plausible words using a keyboard.

Child 2 is able to identify some Phase 2 phoneme grapheme correspondences using her eye gaze equipment but this is not always consistent. She is more engaged with graphemes and enjoys hearing initial phonemes and matching them with familiar objects e.g. items of dressing up clothes and props.

Another child who was also exposed to the new resources is now able to say phonemes, identify graphemes and really enjoys engaging with phonics on the computer.

Next Steps

The school is continuing to use Phase 1 activities to engage all pupils with tuning into everyday environmental sounds and instruments. Resources are constantly being adapted to suit the needs of the pupils.



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Related documents and links	http://www.meadowwood.herts.sch.uk/ https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letters-and-sounds

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