

Teaching Phonics



a no nonsense approach to change

Debbie Hepplewhite's *No Nonsense Phonics* programme offers paper-based phonics provision with ample code, word, text and book content to support both teaching and learning. Here, **Kate Flowerdew** charts the journey and benefits enjoyed by her school in adopting this method.

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Over the last year and a half we have totally changed the way that we teach phonics. It all started when...

Mary, our Inclusion Team Leader, had been using Debbie Hepplewhite's *Phonics International* (PI) resources for many years with intervention groups, and had seen much success in using them to support lower attaining writers in Key stage 2. As a group, the children often discussed the resources and how they were learning; they referred to the PI alphabetic code chart as 'Debbie's Chart'. The children were intrigued by the person behind the resources, and, as she lived locally, Debbie was invited into school where she was treated like a celebrity by the children. Mary discussed with her how she was using the resources, and the progress pupils were making. The next thing I knew, Debbie had offered to come back to give advice on how the teaching of phonics might be improved across the whole school.

In no time at all, Cath, the other Deputy and English Subject Lead, and I were meeting Debbie and showing

her the best practice that we had in school. Ours was a traditional 'Letters and Sounds' school, with small groups of pupils working at similar levels, being taught by all the staff that we had available, in all of the spaces we could find. At the time, we did have concerns about the quality of learning, teaching and assessment in some groups, and about the appropriateness of some learning spaces (such as the staffroom, and the rather echoey hall). There was also the issue that whilst some members of staff were spending a long time on creating resources for each lesson, others weren't able to do this, so often found resources online which weren't always fit for purpose. Cath and I were keen to meet Debbie and receive advice on how we could support staff to tweak their practice to enable pupils to learn more effectively.

As we visited different groups and looked at the learning, Debbie began to open our eyes to some bigger questions, and we realised that what she was suggesting was a large-scale restructuring of our practice:

- How might learning be improved if teachers taught their own classes?
- Couldn't the impact of phonics teaching be strengthened if teachers were able to pick up on incidental teaching of phonic concepts in class, and in different contexts?
- Wouldn't it be better if the resources used across the whole school were consistent, and highly visible in all learning spaces?
- How sure were staff that all pupils were learning effectively?
- What messages were we giving to pupils about learning and the transfer of skills when their work on mini-whiteboards could so easily be rubbed off?
- Was there enough being asked of pupils? Couldn't they be working harder and be learning more?

We have never been the sort of school that buys in schemes of work, tending rather to set up working parties to generate our own plans and resources. We have always found this beneficial in terms of staff engagement with the changes we are making, and a greater understanding of how and why we are making those changes. But this was something new and different. Here we had an expert in her field offering us support, and challenging some long-held ideas and wisdoms, and, when we thought about it, we didn't actually have evidence to support them.

Moving forward

When staff first met Debbie, her enthusiasm and knowledge was inspirational. Most of what she told us fitted in well with the *'Simple View of Reading'* that staff had been basing their lessons on for years. The idea of whole class teaching linked well to the mastery approach of the new curriculum, and she brought along a passion for phonics, reading and writing that was refreshing. But ... Debbie was questioning our practice, and sometimes that was difficult to hear. Many members of staff were challenged by the seemingly rigid structures that she was suggesting, such as pupils sitting in rows to be taught and paper-based resources that appeared to offer little variety in terms of the structure of lessons. Concerns were raised around the lack of fun in the resources. How would pupils engage if they weren't being entertained as they learnt?

Debbie had to be resilient in the face of challenges from staff. One of the first things she did was offer to model lessons for us. Pupils were genuinely engaged in her lessons and, when it became obvious how well children responded to what they were being asked to do, this helped many begin the journey with us. Every time Debbie has been into school, or had meetings with me, our knowledge and understanding has grown a bit more, and this has had a massive impact on learning.

No Nonsense Phonics Skills

Last year, Debbie asked us to trial some new resources. In fact, I don't think she has ever been to school without bringing me something new to play with! The Year 1 and 2 pupils responded really well to the new system and, as they became familiar with the routines, their understanding, the speed at which they worked and their independence in learning grew. It became normal practice that all pupils in a class worked on the same learning and we discovered that we could move children

up together. We didn't need the ability grouping that we had previously used. Staff were no longer putting a ceiling on learning. Children who couldn't read the entire body of the mini-story were still learning the new graphemes, still being exposed to new vocabulary, and were having a go at their own pace. The children loved the structure and didn't notice who was working at a different pace, and more confident readers were able to progress faster through the content, while continuing to work on the same grapheme.

Staff were used to a *'revisit and review, teach, practise and apply'* model of phonics lessons, but with advice and appropriate materials, we were able to add more depth to the lessons. Revisit and review were no longer always whole class, but also involved individual work.

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Consistent and clear blending and spelling routines have become the areas that I model most for teachers, and I'm very pleased that a description of these appear in all of the *No Nonsense Phonics* teacher books. The biggest difference we saw was in the quantity of reading and writing that we were expecting children to work with in the 'apply' part of the lesson. No longer were they only accessing 2 or 3 sentences; now, pupils were engaging with substantial texts in the mini-stories. And no, these don't have pictures, but pupils really enjoy becoming their own illustrators at the end of the lesson.

One day, Debbie asked if I would be happy to be videoed working with my class. This was a new experience for me, and quite out of my comfort zone. After some coaching and support from Debbie, I found myself meeting the crew, being wired up and my class and me being filmed! The children loved it and the film crew were able to catch so much of the good practice that was becoming routine in my class. Pupils were totally engaged in their learning, enjoying developing their skills, being independent and working hard!

So what's happening now?

Teaching staff in both Early Years and Key Stage 1 are committed to developing their practice in phonics in line with the *No Nonsense Phonics* and *Phonics International* principles and using the resources. This has been supported through Performance Management, and the coaching and support we offer staff.

On INSET Day in January, I ran a training session on the *No Nonsense Phonics* resources for our Teaching Assistants. Following that, I've seen alphabet charts appearing around school in Key Stage 2 teaching areas, and group interventions for Years 3-6 being taught and resourced using the new materials.

I did a walkthrough this week of phonics lessons across Early Years and Key Stage 1. In every class the same letter frieze is in place, with the same example pictures for each grapheme being used, and, even after a year of using the resources, pupils are still utterly engaged in lessons. They know how to succeed. Even the youngest pupils can talk about holding their pencil correctly using 'froggy legs'. Consistently, pupils are working hard and staff can prepare for lessons quickly.



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Teachers and support staff are beginning to identify what else would help them teach, such as table-top resources for use in Early Years, which Debbie was happy to make for them. And, as staff confidence has grown, their enjoyment of teaching with the resources has grown as well. Consistently, some of the most powerful parts of the lessons I see is when learning is focused on new vocabulary and comprehension of texts. In one memorable lesson, the teacher demonstrated what ‘haul’ meant by dragging me across the room on the chair I was sitting on, and I recently overheard a Year 2 teacher telling a colleague that pupils had loved the story about the ‘cashmere jumper’! One of my favourite things to do is to have children acting out part of the stories to deepen their understanding.

We still have a number of children who are working below the expected standard and have to continue to find ways to support these children in their learning. But teachers now have a much better understanding of the needs of the whole class; reading skills and test results are beginning to improve. As our Headteacher Nathan said, ‘This is a marathon, not a sprint,’ and we are looking for sustained improvement in the quality of learning over time.

What next?

I’m looking forward to the Year 1 phonics screen this year, as this will give us another way to monitor the impact of the changes. Staff report that pupils are retaining the graphemes that they have learnt and they

are definitely reading and writing more in a day than they have ever done before. There has also been a noticeable improvement in spelling.

Pupils take their workbooks home and many read through the words and stories with their parents, but this is an area we are keen to develop. The upcoming parents’ evenings will give us another opportunity to talk to children and parents about consolidating their learning at home.

Also, Debbie has now asked us to trial resources for our Nursery pupils, and before Christmas she asked us to teach lessons for Sir Jim Rose to watch. It’s great to see both children and staff continuing to develop in their learning!

Kate Flowerdew

is Deputy Head at Spurcroft Primary School in Thatcham, West Berkshire. She has worked at the school for 16 years and has seen the school grow over this time from 180 pupils to 460 pupils. She currently teaches 2 days a week in a Y1/2 class which gives her plenty of opportunities to put theory into practice! She is responsible for Pupil Premium, Phonics and Personal Development across the whole school, as well as having a focus on Early Years and Key Stage 1.



To see Kate’s teaching of phonics and the *No Nonsense Phonics* resources in action go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9rxCsEP_rc

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