# Best Practice Network school improvement library

## Improve teaching and learning in English and in doing so raise outcomes for pupils

### Headteacher, Primary and Nursery School, North West

Tags: EYFS, KS1, Literacy, English, Reading, Writing

### The issue

* Need to improve outcomes in Reading and Writing in EYFS, KS1 and KS2 and diminish differences between key groups, including boys and girls in EY and pupil premium at KS2
* Changes to the curriculum and Primary assessment for English
* Need to develop a consistent approach to English
* Requirement to embed English across the curriculum
* Challenges in the assessment of writing and reading
* High expectations for standards combined with a reduction in finance in real terms
* Need to improve pupil outcomes while reducing workload for teachers

On 14th September, the DfE published two documents of considerable importance: ‘Primary assessment in England: Government consultation response’ and the 2017/2018 ‘Teacher assessment frameworks at the end of KS2’. This follows on from significant changes made to the National Curriculum in 2014 and from previous changes to end of Key Stage Assessment at KS1 and KS2. In summary, expectations are significantly higher than previous years, in Writing, assessment remains within a secure fit system, and Reading tests will remain challenging. A consistent approach to English was required at my school.

In addition to the increased expectations for standards, the school budget is facing a real terms cut. Currently my school has a large carry forward, however, the use of the current additional funds is not sustainable and is only used in its current format to ensure a rapid turnaround of the school and for accelerated progress for children.

Finally, Ofsted have shifted their focus to the curriculum. Therefore, changes to teaching of English need to be embedded across the curriculum.

All of this will need to be achieved whilst reducing teacher workload and with succession planning in mind. Therefore, in addition to raising outcomes, changes made will need to provide a framework for teachers so as to reduce the amount of planning and marking required. My leadership will need to ensure that, moving forwards, there are other staff members who will be able to lead English.

2017 data from the school indicates an improving picture from 2016, especially at end of KS2. However, differences remain between vulnerable groups in specific year groups and low attainment across the school until Year 6 (though this is also below National). Gender differences in English can be seen with girls outperforming boys until Year 5 and Year 6 when the gap closes. Children in receipt of Pupil Premium perform less well than their peers, particularly in KS1. Closer analysis of PP data in KS2 shows that when children with SEND are accounted for the gap closes or diminishes (ie compare non SEND children with and without Pupil Premium). Therefore, this indicates that an approach to English which reduces barriers associated with our PP children (such as limited vocabulary, difficulties with spelling) is required.

In EYFS progress is rapid from significantly low starting points. GLD for 2017 was 62%. Although boys’ writing continues to improve, 52% (2016) to 57% (2017), it remains an area of concern as it was the lowest area of development for 2017. Disadvantaged pupils’ writing increased by 12% this year: 44% (2016) to 56% (2017) but again will remain a focus. As a result, the project will need to address these areas specifically and teaching and learning will be monitored against them.

At KS1 data is below National by 22% in Reading and 24% in Writing. The school aims to be within 10% of National in KS1. Therefore, rapid improvement is needed in across Y1 and 2 classes, with clear implications for the work within EYFS in terms of transition. At KS2, data is below in reading by 12% and by 5% in writing. However, progress from KS1 to 2 is in line with national (a significant improvement from 2016, writing progress -8.8). At KS2 children need to be far more secure in key skills so that they can address more complex challenges both in reading and writing.

### The solution

* Analysis of pupil data
* Review of teaching and learning through learning walks, observations, book looks, listening to staff and pupil surveys
* Work in partnership with Governor's School Improvement Committee and Pupil Premium Governor
* Collaboration with SENCo and SALT
* Allocation of Pupil Premium funds
* Redeployment of staff to target areas
* Pupil progress meetings
* Same day interventions
* Termly 1:1 moderation of PP pupils
* Developed partnerships with other schools to share practice
* Developed a programme of CPD for internal staff and partner schools
* Hosted training from external consultants
* Worked with SLT to reform teacher appraisal and feedback to improve quality of teaching and learning
* Developed a school wide strategy for the explicit teaching of vocabulary
* Increased parental engagement around reading
* Purchased books and resources to be handed out or offered as rewards

Use of SWOT analysis indicated that there were teachers who could offer support within school to others, thus increasing capacity. Additionally, it showed allocating a teacher to the project team would create an impact in lower KS2 where progress had been less strong. Deployment of a member of staff returning to teaching to team-teach alongside the strongest teachers would lead to an increase in attainment for the children and secure excellent training for her.

I presented pupil data combined with examples of work, monitoring and pupil voice to the governors’ School Improvement Committee. Additionally, I met with the governor for English. As a result of the discussions, it was clear that further work was required to ensure absolute consistency, especially to secure English skills early. By presenting the starting point, governors had a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of English. Challenge from governors also made clear the need for my project to ensure that succession planning for English leadership is incorporated. Furthermore, challenge was also provided in terms of ensuring that the work is sustainable and affordable in the long term. Consequently, training will be provided to the project team and then cascaded, meaning that when new staff arrive, the knowledge is with the project team and not with an external consultant.

Finally, I also met separately with the governor for Pupil Premium. From data analysis and discussion, it was clear that the link with SEND and PP was high. Additionally, data across the school was varied indicating that greater consistency was needed. As a result, within the plan I would need to collaborate with the SENDCo to fine tune teaching and learning to ensure that children showing dyslexic tendencies were well supported. Additionally, I would need to collaborate with the school’s SALT to ensure that vocabulary teaching was embedded (research and our own context indicates that children from poorer backgrounds have significantly less vocabulary).

The work with governors forces me to be highly reflective and leads me to ensure that I fully understand the strategic direction of the project.

I made certain that I understood data outcomes as well as what was happening within school day-to-day before making the necessary changes. I did this in a variety of ways; knowing the data, lesson observations, book looks and listening to staff and pupil voice. As a result, I understood school-wide trends and also challenges for individual children.

I analysed the position of the school with regards to data, measured against other schools locally, across the authority and nationally (which essentially is the educational market). This meant that I could find where best practice was in schools of similar context and even visited one, Penn Wood, bringing back numerous ideas to develop vocabulary.

At every stage, I shared a clear vision for teaching and learning in English and the outcomes needed. I also maintained high performance expectations. Before and during significant change, I provided support and modelled appropriate values and behaviours. This meant that I was able to lead authentically having shared my own teaching. I was willing to unpick ways to improve as well as best practice. Therefore, staff engaged wholeheartedly.

Extensive research including the work of Beck (2013) indicates the power of teaching vocabulary explicitly. This is essential in the context of our school which is in a deprived area: children come in significantly below typical for their age. Therefore, the project focused heavily on this.

Furthermore, research set out by Teacher Development Trust indicates how best to design CPD. Therefore, I carefully designed the project to allow for frequent, meaningful engagement from all stakeholders (including the children); shared the evidence with staff; and had a clear rationale. I also thought carefully about how to develop participants’ skills to critically engage with this knowledge base, giving them time to try out new ideas and report back on their findings.

I ensured that analysis of data was transferred to the project action plan which also included SMART targets, actions which were dated and fully costed. The aims of the English action plan were aligned to the monitoring and evaluation schedule. The action plan is reviewed termly based on a triangulation of data, lessons and books; actions are regularly reviewed and adjusted based on continuous feedback (books, staff, children, further research). Added to all plans across the school and cross-referenced back to the English plans were outcomes for reading and writing across the curriculum, responsibility for which lay with the subject leaders.

In terms of accountability and responsibility, Mary Myatt (2016) discusses the principal of high challenge, low threat in which one builds credible relationships with colleagues which enables authentic leadership and robust conversations. With this in mind, all challenging conversations around teaching and learning were framed around work and outcomes, not the person. As a result, during the design phase, I worked with the senior leadership team on how to deliver feedback, especially how to use language which is not personal. I found that by directing feedback around the learner, using non-threatening language, and by asking the teacher to reflect, I was able to confidently address weaker teaching. Additionally, teachers responded more positively, often finding a solution themselves. Therefore, improvement in teaching and learning was made efficiently.

In order to distribute responsibility and accountability throughout the school, I used a SWOT analysis to identify the strategies that would be needed to overcome any potential barriers and to ensure that I got the most out of the team. Succession planning was developed as a result, ensuring that there were a number of skilled teachers who could lead in the future.

In designing the project, I ensured that rapid improvements in English could be seen in teaching and learning (evidenced through learning walks, books, planning, pupil & staff voice, SIP reports etc) and through outcomes. Evidence within school currently showed that further work was needed to embed and improve skills. Teaching across the school needed to be wholly consistent. Within the skills needed to develop, the highest priority is vocabulary. Therefore, a strategy for the explicit teaching of vocabulary was designed in partnership with the school’s speech and language therapist, English consultants & from research (Beck 2013).

Advice and guidance provided through the Local Authority did not always match research or fit the context of our own school within lowest decile for deprivation unlike the vast majority of the LA). Therefore, building a wider partnership with schools of similar context was necessary. Additionally, learning from schools established in Talk for Writing would be needed. Visits to other schools were therefore planned and budgeted for. Furthermore, I planned for training to be hosted at my school so that national consultants’ expertise could be sought on site.

Engagement with parents has previously been limited to formal parents’ evenings and special assemblies / events. A parental survey, found that parents would like to see their children’s books more often. Informal discussions with me (on the playground and through small meetings over coffee) indicated that many lack the confidence to come into school as a direct result of a negative experience of school themselves. Parents also reported to class teachers that they feel unable to help their children, especially with reading. Some parents reported that this is a result of low literacy levels themselves. Consequently, I have included a number of opportunities for parents to come into school with the children in a non-threatening environment. Additionally, we have budgeted for resources such as books which can be won or handed out at special times.

At the end of the project, the school needed to be in a position to support other schools (for example through SLE roles).

The project accountability is with the ‘School Improvement Committee’ who report back to Full Governors. Funding of this project has come through Pupil Premium. I have reported termly data, highlighting different groups and trends. Challenge has been provided where data is low. In some cohorts this is reflective of individual needs (such as high levels of SEND). However, in other cohorts, governors have sought assurance that additional support and / or changes have been made to ensure rapid improvements. This challenges me to ask myself whether I am doing enough to support teachers.

Not all members of the committee have attended every meeting leading to less robust discussions. Consequently, I reported the data to the Chair of Governors. Reflecting on this led to discussions of redesigning the committee structures and/or to utilise technology to ensure attendance.

To maintain the drive and enthusiasm for the project, I ensured that my values and sense of purpose are visible at all times. During the school’s inspection in February 2018, Ofsted commented: ‘Morale is high.’ Where outcomes are less strong, I endeavour to demonstrate what Mittal and Sindhu identify as “empathy for others,” while not letting my “empathy be confused with sympathy”, and therefore remaining “capable of making tough decisions”. This meant that expectations and standards needed to be clear for everyone and they needed to believe in the methodology.

Goleman describes six leadership styles. Being aware of ‘coercive’ and ‘pacesetting leadership’ is important as, whilst rapid change is necessary, this would not enable staff to be their best. As a result, I have utilised a ‘coaching’ style when faced with challenges; staff have been finding their own solutions. For example, a teacher found a vocabulary activity too time consuming for the pay-out, she changed the approach, impact was increased and the approach became whole-school.

EEF recognises that TA deployment needs to be highly strategic as the cost is large but the impact can be small. Therefore, I used knowledge gained from ‘Making the best use of teaching assistants - Guidance report (March 2015)’; modelled this in training; and assessed the impact through the monitoring and evaluation schedule. As a result, use of TAs became stronger.

Through analysis of data and monitoring, it became clear in Spring Term that planning teams needed to be changed. Classes within KS1, lower KS2 and upper KS2 had been planning together. However, monitoring/data analysis indicated change was needed. Therefore, I created new planning teams and also supported one particular team due to the needs of the teachers.

Reading data was used for both accountability for staff and also to target support for children. Staff were consulted through the Pupil Progress Meetings, looking at individual attainment and identifying barriers such as attendance, home life and specific learning difficulties. Through these, I coached staff to enhance their practice, but also looked at whole school trends such as attendance, making improvements in other areas as needed.

The project is funded through Pupil Premium so it is essential that this group is closely monitored. Therefore, I set up termly 1:1 moderation with a focus on disadvantaged children. Staff chose children who were either typical of a group or whom they needed expert advice on to ensure rapid progress. Additionally, I worked closely with the SENDCo to ensure that all learners’ needs were met. Improvements were made to quality first teaching to mirror research on dyslexia. Due to the budget reducing and staff sickness, interventions proved increasingly difficult to sustain. I therefore introduced same day interventions within the main structure of the day. I learned that whole-school change needs to be robust to function in the most challenging of situations.

As part of the project, I delivered training on pedagogical approaches which support collaboration (such as Kagan Styles, Building Learning Power) to reduce workload. By switching the onus of learning onto the child, rather than the teacher spending time creating worksheets which have limited impact, time and energy is saved and/or re-deployed.

Early evidence from the project (through staff feedback) indicates that the introduction of a refined approach to medium term planning, paperwork and the support in place from SALT with regards to vocabulary, is reducing workload.

Training given to staff on editing and improving is both enhancing the standard of work submitted and reducing marking time as teachers are not addressing secretarial skills in their marking.

I have provided training on expectations within each year group, particularly grammar. Teachers who are highly knowledgeable in English are able to identify the most important areas to tackle. Therefore, they do not waste time on superfluous activities; rather they are able to deliver feedback and teaching to move the learner on in the moment (as opposed to realising the areas when marking after the end of the school day).

In order to engage parents, a wide variety of opportunities have been provided this year: phonics workshops, book looks, observing learned Talk for Writing texts, and listening to the teacher read a story.

Parental surveys and feedback show high levels of attendance, though this becomes less so higher up the school. Therefore, further work is needed to reduce any barriers (such as time or confidence to support at KS2).

Governor engagement is strong which was referenced during the February ’18 Ofsted. Challenges from governors are addressed well and reported back in detail. Element A in the Framework for Governance (2015) lists eight aspects of effective governance. ‘Knowing the school’ is highlighted as one and therefore during the three committee meetings, I have reported on both data and monitoring of teaching and learning. Governors understand that children enter school with levels of literacy lower than typical. As a result, it is recognised that the time is needed to close the gap, and also that additional work is needed beyond changes and enhancements to teaching English. Therefore, I report aspects of the wider care that children and families receive to governors.

Through staff feedback, the approach adjusts with certain teachers taking the lead on aspects of English (such as vocabulary, shared reading, and editing). Improvements to teaching are shared in staff meetings, both formally and informally, with opportunities built in to other staff meetings.

Following analysis of data (internal) and books (through moderation, book looks and pupil progress meetings) it became apparent that the regular planning groups (KS1, lower KS2 and Upper KS2) were not facilitating lessons to be tailored to the needs of the children. For example, a Year 3/4 class with high SEND were not achieving within spelling and phonics; a Year 2 class needed more challenge. Therefore, I combined the appropriate year groups across school so that teachers could plan together, based on the data, needs of the pupils and strengths of teachers.

During the early stages of the project, I deployed an SLE from the TSA to support a colleague with English, and in particular to focus on feedback. As a result, the teacher learned new methods for delivering feedback within the lesson leading to improved progress and also independence for the children. Furthermore, this led to a reduced workload for the teacher. Her work was shared to feed into research into enhancing feedback and developing school-wide policy.

Following a visit to a high performing Talk for Writing school, ideas and strategies which would work at our school were shared which lead to improvements in the planning stage, spelling and drama. My school then hosted training from external consultants, providing guided tours of the school. I then provided training to another school. In order to do this, I needed to work with the team to ensure that we were highly confident in our approach, that it was research based, and that it worked for our children. The documentation developed was given to the schools attending training but was also used as examples of best practice at the school to share among present and future colleagues.

Due to the high levels of SEND at the school, including a provision for children with complex needs, I worked closely with the SENDCo. We identified barriers for children with autism, such as the negative impact the support materials for the rest of the class hanging on the ‘washing line’ had. Therefore, we set up optional concentration stations for children needing time away from stimulating displays. Additionally, I worked with the Vision Support Team, to agree how to ensure that children with visual impairments could access the learning on flipcharts during shared, modelled and guided writing.

As discussed above, both data and teaching and learning are monitored systematically. In addition to the monitoring completed through the project, subject leaders also evaluated writing within their subjects. This lead to improvements in writing across the curriculum. Pupil progress and attainment is monitored in a variety of ways. Through Pupil Progress meetings strengths are recognised and shared. Termly, aspects of English were monitored through a benchmarking process: typical children from each cohort were selected to be evaluated and then feedback was provided around areas of English such as handwriting, spelling, composition and effect, and sentence structure. This process enabled me to be able to provide feedback to individual teachers and discuss what they needed to do to improve. It also enabled me to see progress against whole school targets for development. Finally, it enabled me to identify the best practice within the school and signpost colleagues to each other accordingly.

The system I embedded ensures that children complete a baseline writing task so that teaching and learning can be planned around the needs of the children. Additionally, the texts are analysed by teachers to ensure that key vocabulary is taught. Where there is a specific need, this work will be pre-taught / followed up by support staff. Furthermore, key changes were made so that the system adjusted according to the age of the pupils. For example, there was less need for the Year 6 pupils in Spring and Summer Term to be learning full texts by heart.

### Impact

The aim of the project was to raise standards in English:

* Reception: Reading increased by 10%; Writing has maintained standards despite the 2018 cohort having nearly double the number of SEND children (19% to 36%).
* There are now no gender differences in Reading and Writing.
* Disadvantaged data shows that difference of -9% in Reading (an improvement of 6%) and -16% in Writing (broadly the same as 2017).
* End of Key Stage One: Reading data increased by 14%; boys’ Reading has increased by 7%; girls by 20%.
* Writing data has risen by 5% with boys’ writing increasing by 12%. The number of non-SEND pupils at Pre-Key Stage has reduced from 33% to 3%.
* End of Key Stage Two: Reading data has risen by 14% with a 2.9 increase in the scaled scores which reflects both the 11% raise in High Scaled Score and more children secure in their reading.
* Writing sees a slight increase at Expected Standard and Greater Depth. Internal monitoring shows that children are more secure in their writing, with more children sitting well within the Expected Standard.
* Pupil Premium difference has been reduced from -25% to +5% in Reading.
* In Writing, differences between girls and boys has been diminished and children with Pupil Premium outperforming non (+14%).
* There remains more work to be done, including in KS1 reducing differences between Pupil Premium and non.

By providing a common structure and language for staff to plan from, collaboration has been increased and workload reduced. Teachers do not need to spend time finding texts, activities and considering how to plan a unit, as this is formatted for them. Furthermore, with both long and medium term plans in place, teachers can draw upon these in future years. This frees up time to consider the direct needs of the pupils at the same time as reducing teacher workload.

Moving forwards it will be essential to ensure that there is complete consistency. There has been a clear drive to improve standards in order to raise outcomes for children and also to secure a Good Ofsted judgement. I will now need to ensure that the teaching and learning is embedded and that new staff are trained quickly. Part of the aim of the project was to ensure that colleagues within the English team were skilled and motivated to lead independently.