

Early intervention helps meet and exceed expectations



Number of schools: 11



Region/ geography: Neath Port Talbot



Number of pupils: 106



Study length: 3 months



Research premise: In 2013, Neath Port Talbot LEA conducted an independent trial of Rapid Phonics in schools in their area. You can find their full report on our website at www.pearsonprimary.co.uk/rapidNPTtrial

Key points to take away

- Rapid Phonics **significantly improves reading and spelling attainment.**
- Clarity of **resource plans help deliver organised and engaging sessions.**
- Fun sessions **encourage pupils and help build confidence.**
- Resource flexibility allows for sessions to be **tailored to suit the group's or individual's needs.**

Background – pilot protocol

Eleven schools participated in the programme for the trial period to provide baseline and progress data for their target pupils. After initial training, participating staff were provided with the programme resources including single copies of the decodable books and access to the electronic versions of the books online. The chosen pupils were to receive at least two sessions of Rapid Phonics per week.

The *Salford Sentence Reading Test* (pre-2012 version) was chosen to determine a reading baseline as many schools already use it to track pupil progress in Rapid Reading. In addition, the *Schonell Spelling Test* was used to establish a writing baseline.

In line with usual intervention protocols, gains of six months or above (double “real” time) were of particular interest.

The tables show that gains in reading of over six months were more readily achieved than in spelling. This lag might well be expected as decoding is generally accepted as being in advance of encoding, especially in the acquisition of early or emergent skills. If reading involves the learning of a skill set that enables the reader to recognise words and their parts and convert them into sound and meaning, it is at least bound within an extant context that remains constant and can offer up a range of cues. Writing, on the

other hand, is all recollection; starting with a blank page, a context must be created from scratch (composition), and, moreover, a context that must conform to grammatical rules and graphic conventions in order to be successfully transcribed.

There was some suggestion (though not statistically conclusive) in the raw data that the gap between reading and writing gains was less pronounced in younger pupils. Perhaps they have had less time both to experience a range of reading contexts and to develop patterns of failure. They are closer to the learning of their peers and educated, for the most part, in a phase where emergent writing is understood and valued. For Year 1 pupils in the pilot, in particular, the intervention is also closer in time to their original experience of phonics and thus might feel more like consolidation of recent learning than breaking fresh ground.

Clearly, these tentative findings confirm well-researched statements on the importance of early intervention but also have implications for the teaching of writing in Key Stage 2. Certainly, in Neath Port Talbot, intervention has historically been focused on reading rather than writing, and one wonders how much opportunity children have to compose and scribe meaningfully “at their own level” in the mainstream classroom; how much explicit teaching occurs that scaffolds the emergent stage (while still enabling pupils to develop as thinkers, speakers, listeners and readers); and whether formative assessment is diagnostic enough to support next-steps improvement. The “low thresholds, high ceilings” principle of differentiation is a challenging one for schools to take on board, but is ultimately the only way forward for “closing the gap”, an aim that permeates all aspects of literacy.

Qualitative response

In addition to the baseline and progress data, schools were asked to respond to a questionnaire: Nine of the eleven schools submitted a response, and the following is a summary of the views they expressed:

The results

Reading progress by cohort and gender

	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4		Total %	% Boys	% Girls	% FSM	% NFSM
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G					
Gain of 6m +	3	4	12	10	20	24	7	2	77%	78%	77%	69%	82%
Gain of 1 – 5m	1	4	1	3	3	1	1	1	14%	11%	17%	13%	15%
No change	1	0	2	0	2	2	1	1	9%	11%	6%	18%	3%
Loss	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	–	–	–

B = Boys, G = Girls

Scores based on Salford Sentence Reading Test (pre-2012)

Spelling progress by cohort and gender

	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4		Total %	% Boys	% Girls	% FSM	% NFSM
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G					
Gain of 6m +	3	7	11	7	11	12	5	2	55%	56%	54%	56%	54%
Gain of 1 – 5m	2	1	4	6	9	10	3	1	34%	33%	34%	31%	35%
No change	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	5%	4%	6%	5%	4%
Loss	0	0	0	0	3	3	1	0	6%	7%	6%	8%	6%

B = Boys, G = Girls

Scores based on Schonell Spelling Test

- All found the Rapid Phonics assessment process straightforward to administer and “very informative... an excellent way to find out exactly where the children need to begin.” The number of sessions per week varied from two (the minimum entitlement for the pilot) to four and sessions lasted from twenty to forty minutes, depending on the contingencies of the timetable. Group sizes varied, but the model of four pupils at a time was favoured in most Foundation Phase settings, rising to a maximum of six in KS2.
- All schools agreed on the clarity of session plans (“very clear instructions”) and most had successfully organised resources in advance of teaching so that transitions during sessions ran smoothly. In several settings programme resources were usefully supplemented with additional ones e.g. magnetic boards and letters for the sound swap activity; sandboxes for additional rehearsal of grapheme formation; handwriting sheets to support the same; grapheme “vests” worn by pupils for human word building.
- Most children made satisfactory progress although, unsurprisingly, for the majority of pupils reading was felt to have outpaced writing. Most pupils found the sessions engaging and “fun”. Pupils placed in the same group did not always progress at the same rate and some settings attempted to counter this by subdividing groups (especially where there were more “challenging” pupils) or, in one case, by providing supplementary one-to-one sessions to consolidate learning.
- Most schools felt that more work needed to be done to “creatively” develop home links round the programme. Most had informed parents by letter or phone that their children would be involved in the programme and plan to bring parents of the next cohort into the school to give a fuller explanation of its content and opportunities.

The outcome – meeting and exceeding expectations

All schools felt that outcomes for most pupils had met their expectations or exceeded them and are planning to use the programme again in the new academic year. Many of the target children will move out of Rapid Phonics and on to Rapid Reading or the ESTEEM project (an LEA literacy intervention), while new children will be targeted for the Rapid Phonics programme. From their responses, schools clearly intend to continue to use the programme as part of their provision map of support for pupils identified as under-attaining.

We would like to thank all the schools, staff and pupils who participated in this project.

Neath Port Talbot Literacy Team, November 2013

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