

# How does a targeted phonics intervention support lower attaining children to make rapid progress in reading and writing fluency?

Southwold School, KS1 Phase

## Abstract

The focus of this study was to explore how targeted phonics intervention would support lower attaining children to make rapid progress in reading and writing fluency. It was evident through the phonics scores, reading level trackers and before and after samples of writing that the phonics intervention significantly impacted the children's overall literacy skills. The study showed that most children were able to recognise and read the phonics sounds before they were able to use them in their writing consistently. However, by the end of the study, there was greater accuracy in applying their phonetical knowledge when writing independently. Additionally, teachers involved in the study stated it had positively impacted children's attainment and confidence in literacy lessons. Through the evidence collected, it was clear that utilising precision in small group targeted intervention had a significant impact on children's reading and writing fluency.

## Introduction

Southwold Primary is a larger than average primary school located in Hackney. The school was recently rated Ofsted outstanding and pupil attainment is above national average by the end of Key Stage 2. It is an ethnically diverse school where the percentage of EAL children is much higher than the national average. Saracho (2017) states: "Young children whose culture and language differ from the ones in the school encounter functional language difficulties, such as differences in using language to communicate for various purposes". Therefore, ensuring that children at Southwold have the most effective literacy provision is of the utmost importance. Literacy is an essential skill for life that lays the foundations for all learning. Phonics is the key element to children becoming fluent readers and writers; the DfE (Department for Education) states, "*Almost all children who receive good teaching of phonics will learn the skills they need to tackle new words. They can then go on to read any kind of text fluently and confidently, and to read for enjoyment.*" (Department for Education, 2013).

The statutory phonics screening which was introduced in 2012 and is a requirement for all schools in England, "*The purpose of the phonics screening check will be to confirm that all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard*", (Gov, 2012). Therefore it is evident that having a strong basis for phonetical knowledge is key to children becoming competent readers and writers. At Southwold Primary, phonics is taught discreetly daily from nursery up to Year 2 using an effective programme; however, for some children this daily lesson may not be enough.

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic and partial school closure, there has been a significant loss of learning, and studies have shown that the gap in attainment is widening. In a study Blainey et al. (2020) states that *“Younger year groups generally showed bigger reductions in attainment than older year groups, and children eligible for the Pupil Premium showed larger average declines than those who are not.”* (Blainey et al , 2020).

It was evident through assessment that children attending Southwold Primary had been affected and there were large gaps in their phonetical knowledge. Therefore, the study aimed to select children who were working below age expected standards in literacy and give them targeted support in phonics to improve their skills.

The three children, who class teachers deemed would benefit most, were selected. The progress of these children was then analysed through their phonics scores, reading assessment data and before and after samples of writing. As it is expected that, despite the intervention, most children will make progress, this was considered when analysing. The class teachers involved in the study were also interviewed to give their opinions on the children’s overall progress and confidence in all literacy lessons.

A potential limitation for the research was attendance, after the selection of the key children in the focus group, it was evident that a small number of the children had lower than expected attendance. Therefore, these children had missed several daily phonics sessions. Additionally, the levels of the children, although the intervention was only six children at a time, it was clear that even within that small group of six, there would be varying levels of abilities and learning styles.

## Research Process

The phonics interventions were targeted for the group of children selected for the study. This consisted of a group of six Year 1 children and a group of six Year 2 children. All children that were selected were working below the expected level for reading and writing when compared to their age group. Gap analysis from phonics screening selected specific learning to focus on each day. The Year 1 and 2 interventions differed slightly to meet the needs of the individual children. The Year 1 children needed more practise to identify and recognise digraphs and trigraphs, whereas the Year 2 children were ready to move on to applying their knowledge of phonics when writing. It was noted from discussions from teachers that even though some children were able to identify and often even read the phonics sounds it was not always applied to their writing. It was therefore important that in this intervention, children were continually given the chance to practise writing the phonics sounds.

The research process lasted for three half terms and took place every day. The intervention was run by one experienced teaching assistant and took place during lunchtime; each session was 15 minutes long. This ensured it was consistent and of a high standard for all children. During discussions in phase meetings, it was recognised that teaching assistants’ timetables are very full, and teachers were concerned that adding an extra intervention may have been a struggle. Therefore, it was decided that one teaching assistant would carry out the intervention during lunchtime for 15 minutes for each group. Even though one sound was the focus of each session, at the beginning there was a quick recap of 5 other phonics sounds. Children were then given the opportunity to read and write words containing the sound. Finally, the children wrote sentences with the words including the sound.

Regular discussions about the children’s progress and the structure of the intervention took place to ensure it could be adapted to meet the needs of the children in the group. For example, after two terms, the Year 2 group were able to easily identify the phonics sounds, so they no longer needed the 5-minute recap at the beginning. The children in this group then spent more time applying their knowledge and reading and writing the phonics sounds in different contexts.

Several things were looked at to analyse the impact of the intervention on the children’s progress. The reading book band levels and phonics screening scores were analysed to see how much progress the children had made. Additionally, samples of the children’s writing were looked at; prior to the beginning of the interventions a sample of the children’s independent writing was taken at the end of the research time frame, another sample of children’s independent writing was taken and compared. Evidently, children would be expected to make

progress over the time frame despite the intervention, so this would be taken into consideration on analysis. The class teachers involved in the study were also interviewed to give their opinions on the children’s general progress and confidence in phonics and reading lessons. Additionally the reading SATs scores of the Year 2 children were looked at to see if the phonics intervention had any impact.

### Findings

It was evident from when the interventions started that they were having an impact on the children’s phonetical knowledge and overall literacy skills. It was clear from the children’s book band levels and phonics scores that all children had made significant progress. The samples of writing before and after showed that many children had made more than expected progress in their writing and were able to apply their phonics sounds more confidently. Additionally, teachers involved in the study all gave positive feedback, particularly regarding children’s confidence in phonics and reading lessons.

### Reading book band levels

One of the main findings from the study was how it enabled children to make accelerated progress in reading. As children become more confident readers, they move up a book band level, see appendix 1. It is expected that all children will move up book band levels throughout the year; however, the results show many of the children made more than the expected amount of progress. Figure 1 below shows all children involved in the study and their progress.

Fig 1.

Child	Baseline Spring 1	Check Spring 1	Check Spring 2	Check Summer 1	End Summer 1
Child A	Red	Red	Dark Green	Blue	Light Green
Child B	Red	Red	Red	Dark Green	Dark Green
Child C	Blue	Blue	Green	Green	Brown
Child D	Blue	Green	Green	Brown	Brown
Child E	Blue	Green	Green	Brown	Light Green
Child F	Red	Dark Green	Blue	Blue	Light Green
Child G	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Purple	Purple	Brown
Child H	Blue	Red	Brown	Dark Blue	Purple
Child I	Blue	Blue	Green	Green	Brown
Child J	Green	Green	Green	Brown	Brown
Child K	Green	Green	Blue	Blue	Brown
Child L	Green	Green	Blue	Blue	Brown

All children involved in the study at least moved up one book band level, with most of the children at least moving up three. One child (Child H) moved up five book band levels over the study. As it would only be expected that children in Year 1 and 2 move up on average of 3 book bands per year this is exceptional progress. In addition to helping children make accelerated progress the intervention also supported children who were not moving up book bands regularly enough. Child J had been on green level for an extended amount of time and, even though this child was receiving one to one reading and phonics lessons in a small group, they were not making enough progress to move up a level. However, after the targeted phonics intervention, this child had made enough progress to move up to the next book band.

### Phonics scores

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, the Year 1 children’s phonics screening scores were analysed. Children made significant progress since the beginning of the intervention. The children all made more progress than they made previously and five out of the six Year 1 children passed the phonics screening.

Fig 2.

Child	January phonics scores	June phonics scores
Child A	8	35
Child B	3	20
Child C	20	36
Child D	19	36
Child E	25	39
Child F	7	36

### Samples of Writing

A large part of the intervention focused on writing the phonics sound in words and sentences as well as being able to read and decode words. Therefore, it was also essential to analyse children’s independent writing before and after the study. When looking at all the children’s work it was evident that all children had made progress in their writing. It was clear that children were able to use their phonetical knowledge more regularly in their writing.

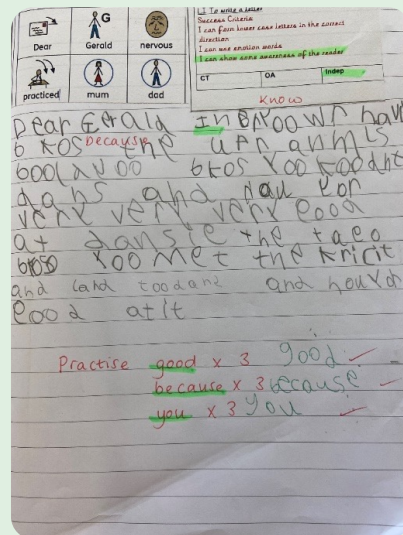
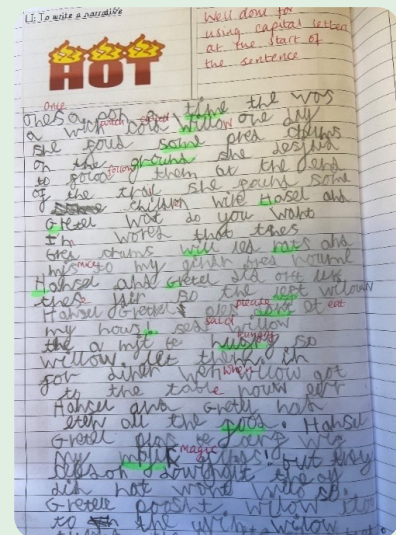


Fig 3. Before



After

In figure 3 below, it is clear that this child has made more than the expected progress over the research time frame. This child was now able to write more confidently using their phonetical knowledge. She has spelt the word 'found', 'ground' and 'out' correctly, showing she is now able to spell the 'ou' sound correctly in words consistently. In addition, this child has been able to spell other words which are now much more phonetically plausible than in the previous sample. Although the progress in children’s writing will be due to numerous factors, the intervention has aided the children in using their phonics in their writing.

As the intervention was every day and the children were writing a sentence in each session, it also supported children to be able to structure their sentences. When looking at the samples, it was clear that many of the children were able to write more structurally correct sentences than before the intervention.

**Reading Comprehension**

Although reading comprehension was not a focus of the study, improving children’s ability to decode words and read more fluently, in turn, developed their comprehension skills. This was noted through comments in the class teacher interviews and the Year 2 SATS scores. When comparing the practice SATs in January when the interventions first began to the SATs, which took place in May just before the end of the interventions, it is evident that child H and G made accelerated progress in comprehension; after the targeted support they were able to confidently comprehend the text and pass the SATs.

**Fig 4.**

Child	November reading scores	March reading scores	May reading scores
Child G	8	16	30
Child H	1	16	34
Child I	0	3	8
Child J	0	0	9
Child K	0	0	6
Child L	0	0	4

**Teacher interviews**

To get an idea of how the study affected the children’s overall progress, it was also important to get the views from the class teachers involved in the study. One teacher said, “Child C is now able to write more confidently and is more competent at independently using their phonics sounds in their writing. Another said that she noticed a difference in one child’s confidence and participation in phonics lessons. She stated, ‘Child B was more confident and was able to participate more in lessons as she was able to recognise and use more of the phonics sounds.’ In discussions class teachers all agreed that the phonics intervention had a positive impact on all children involved in various ways.

**Impact and conclusion**

Overall, it is evident that the interventions had a positive impact on the children’s progress in literacy. By really focusing on the core phonetical knowledge, children were able to decode words more easily, which led to them becoming more confident readers. Additionally, they were able to apply their knowledge of phonics and use it in their writing; this led to their writing being more readable. There is clear evidence that over the research time frame that many of the children involved in the study made accelerated progress in different areas. The key element to the success of the intervention was that it was run consistently and effectively. Being run by one adult allowed it to be easily monitored and adapted to meet the needs of the children. Additionally, having a structure to the intervention and building up the skills ensured that the children were able to apply the skills learnt in other contexts. Recommendations from the study would be to ensure there are high-quality phonics interventions taking place consistently for key children in Years 1 and 2. This would involve ensuring that any teaching assistants delivering interventions have adequate training and are given time to facilitate.

## References

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## Appendix

Book Band Colour	Phonic Phase	Year Group Expected
Pink (Band 1)	Phase 2	Reception
Red (Band 2)	Phase 3	
Yellow (Band 3)	Phase 3-4	
Blue (Band 4)	Phase 4-5	Year 1
Green (Band 5)	Phase 5	
Orange (Band 6)	Phase 5	
Turquoise (Band 7)	Phase 5-6	Year 2
Purple (Band 8)	Phase 5-6	
Gold (Band 9)	Phase 6	
White (Band 10)		
Lime (Band 11)		Year 3
Brown (Band 12)		
Grey (Band 13)		Year 4
Black (Band 14)		Year 5
Free Readers (Band 15)		Year 6