

# How can planning for table top activities and core texts based on boys' interests help raise attainment in Reception?

## Southwold School, EYFS Phase

### Abstract

The aim of this research project was to see if planning linked to boys' interest would have a noticeable impact on their progress and attainment. A sample group of eight under-achieving boys across both reception classes were chosen as the control group. Over a period of ten weeks, teachers planned one table top activity inside the classroom and one in the outside area linked to an interest the boys had. In addition, two core texts each half term were linked to identified interest; which in turn would mean that over those weeks, all table top activities would be linked. The data submitted in the EYFS tracker was used to assess impact and the progress archived.

Over the course of the research, it was observed that boys were indeed more inclined to work at tables linked to their interests and their engagement at tables they would typically avoid, such as writing and art, increased. Teachers also observed that boys would be more willing to independently complete recorded outcomes when combined with a tactile task, for example; writing number sentences after completing practical addition problems. It also became apparent that boys were more willing to write at open ended, self-access areas, for example at an easel, as opposed to pre-planned writing activities. As a result, of the eight boys included in the research process, six achieved ELG, with the other two assessed just below at 'Reception developing'. Across the whole of Reception, significant progress amongst boys was observed; at baseline, just 18% of boys were assessed as on track, rising to 74% in the Summer Term.

### Introduction

Southwold Primary School is a two-form entry primary school in the London borough of Hackney, offering education for children between the ages of three to eleven. 41% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, well above the national average of 25%. The proportion of pupils eligible to receive the pupil premium is also higher than average. Furthermore, 45% of children in the borough lived in households with an income of less than 60% the UK median after housing costs have been subtracted in 2020/21. This was worse than the average London Borough. At baseline, children came to Southwold significantly below where they should be for a typical child of their age (27% GLD). This was particularly prominent amongst boys (18%), as the table right, (Fig. 1).

**% at a Good Level of Development**

	<b>Baseline (WAE)</b>
<b>All (58) (51) (57)</b>	27%
<b>Disadvantaged (16) (15) (17)</b>	25%
<b>Boys (29) (27) (29)</b>	18%
<b>Girls (29) (28) (28)</b>	35%
<b>SEN (9) (9) (10)</b>	0%

**Fig 1: Percentage of children at good level of development**

It should also be noted that although the children in Reception were not in statutory education during the lockdowns, many children missed out on early years provision. A report published in June 2022, (Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England), highlighted the extent of this;

*“Analysis of national data showed that between January 2020 and January 2021, there were large falls in the take-up of funded entitlement places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, and, to a lesser extent, amongst three-year-olds. This was especially marked in areas with large ethnic minority populations and limited labour market participation. Attendance was also lower than we could have expected in deprived areas, and areas with low female employment and high unemployment rates. This suggests that children from poorer families and in workless households were most likely to be missing out on childcare. Speech and language delays were reported across all age groups as children had fewer opportunities to develop their communication skills at home.”*

Boys were chosen as the focus group of this research, as typically, they underperform compared to girls. As highlighted in Fig 2, In the 2021-22 academic year, 63% of boys achieved GLD, compared to 87% of girls.

**% at a Good Level of Development**

	<b>Baseline (WAE)</b>	<b>Autumn</b>	<b>Spring</b>	<b>Summer ELG</b>
<b>All (49)</b>	33%	55%	67%	75%
<b>Disadvantaged(16)</b>	19%	43%	56%	56%
<b>Boys (27)</b>	43%	59%	64%	63%
<b>Girls (22)</b>	25%	59%	70%	87%
<b>SEN (2)(6)</b>	0%	0%	50%	45%

**Fig 2 Percentage of children at GLD, 2021-22**

This is a trend that continues as children progress through their education. In 2019, 62.9% of boys received Grade 1-4 (A\* to C) GCSE grades whilst 71.7% of girls received the same results. 54.2% of 16-year-old boys achieved a Grade C/4 English Language GCSE compared to 70.5% girls. (Men and Boys Coalition). In 2018, UCAS reported that 29,100 more 18-year-old females applied for university than males. Girls also outperform boys in Progress 8 scores; the average Progress 8 score for girls is 0.22, whilst the average score for boys is -0.25.

By identifying barriers to learning in boys and more importantly, how to overcome them, we can hopefully see this trend change and see boys achieving broadly in line with girls.

## Research Process

The research was carried out by the EYFS Phase Leader with the support of the two Reception Teachers. In the first instance, the teachers were asked to identify four boys from each class to be the focus of the study. All eight boys chosen had been assessed as 'below expected' level in both the school and Government baselines. These eight boys completed a questionnaire created by the Phase Leader which asked them a range of questions based around their personal interests as well as areas around the classroom they typically engaged with. The table below, Fig 3. is a collation of their responses.

<b>Overall findings</b>	
<b>Jay: Child A, B, C, D</b>	<b>Magpie: Child E, F, G, H</b>
<b>What toys or games do you like to play with?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• binoculars</li> <li>• Marvel/ superheroes x 3</li> <li>• Lego x 2</li> <li>• Cars/ transport x 4</li> <li>• Playdough</li> <li>• Sand</li> <li>• Roblox (iPad)</li> <li>• Baby doll</li> <li>• Fire and police</li> <li>• guns</li> </ul>	
<b>What stories or books do you like?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Ol</u> get off our train</li> <li>• Train books</li> <li>• dinosaur books x 3</li> <li>• Star Wars</li> <li>• The Gruffalo</li> <li>• Marvel/ Superheroes</li> <li>• Stories with animals</li> <li>• Paw patrol</li> <li>• Peppa pig</li> </ul>	
<b>What tables do you like to go to in the class?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art table x 2</li> <li>• Maths table x 4</li> <li>• Art table outside</li> <li>• Fire station role play x 2</li> <li>• Climbing frame x2</li> <li>• Writing table x 2</li> <li>• See saw (playground)</li> <li>• Playdough</li> <li>• Sand pit x 2</li> <li>• water area</li> <li>• bikes</li> </ul>	

Fig. 3 Collation of children's questionnaire responses

Over the preceding ten weeks of the project, Reception used these responses to plan and resource one activity inside the classroom and one in the outside area linked to a boys’ interest. In addition, one core-text each half term would also be linked to one of the interests identified. This ensured that across those weeks, all tables would be linked to a boy’s interest.

Throughout the course of the project, teachers were asked to observe the learning of the eight boys to observe if planning for their interest would increase their engagement with the table and activity. As it became more apparent how the boys liked to learn and the types of activities they engaged with, teachers across the phase made further adjustments to the provision. This included developing opportunities for self- directed learning through free access areas, with a focus on writing as well as large- scale concrete resources to support maths learning such as numbered stepping stones.

Each term, the EYFS data tracker was used as an assessment tool to measure the impact the changes to the learning environment had on the boy’s progress.

### Findings

When activities were linked to a boys’ interest, their level of interest and engagement with the task increased. This became more evident in the weeks when the core text- and therefore all tables- were linked to a named interest. Of the eight boys focused on within the study, six of them achieved ELG. While the other two did not achieve ELG, they did make visible progress, Fig. 4.

Child	Baseline	Autumn	Spring	Summer
A	1	3-4s	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
B	1	3-4s	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
C	1	3-4s	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
D	1	3-4d	Rec Emerging	Rec Developing
E	1	3-4d	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
F	1	3-4s	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
G	1	3-4s	Rec Developing	Rec Secure
H	1	3-4d	Rec Emerging	Rec Developing

Fig 4: Data Tracking

This level of accelerated progress was evident across all boys in reception, Fig. 5.

### % at a Good Level of Development

	Baseline (WAE)	Autumn	Spring	Summer ELG
All (58) (51) (57)	27%	47%	58%	74%
Disadvantaged (16) (15) (17)	25%	50%	53%	59%
Boys (29) (27) (29)	18%	39%	37%	72%
Girls (29) (28) (28)	35%	50%	50%	78%
SEN (9) (9) (10)	0%	11%	22%	30%

Fig 5: Focus Group Data Tracking

Throughout the research process, teachers in Reception also made a number of observations with regards to how to boys engaged with their learning. It was noted that boys preferred more tactile activities, such as cut and stick, building blocks and puzzles. This was used to inform planning with large-scale maths activities being incorporated into the outside area. Furthermore, boys were more willing to then complete a ‘recorded aspect’ once they had completed the practical task, as seen overleaf:



It also became apparent that boys were regularly engaged with the free writing table in the classroom and more reluctant to write at the pre-planned writing table. To encourage writing in the outside area, additional free writing stimulus were added to the provision. This included an easel, mark-making mirrors and a free writing table. This stimulated the boys to want to write in the outside area.

## Impact and conclusion

The research project has highlighted how integral planning based on children's interest is vital to engage them with learning and more importantly, make significant progress. With reference to boys, who were the subject of this study, 72% achieved ELG this year, compared to 63% the year before. When activities were based on their interest, boys showed a greater level of enthusiasm towards accessing the table by choice and maintained focus for sustained periods. This was particularly noticeable in areas which boys typically avoided, such as art and writing. This ensured that boys accessed a broader curriculum and developed skills in range of areas. What also became apparent, was boys began to apply these skills to their own outcomes, such as 'Spiderman wristbands' demonstrating a sustained interest in a new area.

The research also highlighted the importance of free access and self-selection areas across both the inside and outside provision. Children, in particular boys, are able to demonstrate their own creativity and critical thinking and create a wider range of outcomes. It serves as a fantastic tool to engage reluctant learners to be able to explore on their own, feel successful and learn at their own pace.

Our children would benefit greatly through having at least one core text each half term linked to a class interest as well as a wide range of free-access and self-selection areas across all areas of learning.

## References

*How Children Learn: From Montessori to Vygotsky - Educational Theories and Approaches Made Easy*, Linda Pound, Jan. 2005

*Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England*, La Valle et al, June 2022

*'Troublesome boys' and 'compliant girls': Gender identity and perceptions of achievement and underachievement*, Debra A. Myhill, 2004

*Gender similarities in the brain during mathematics development*, Kersey et al, 2019