



Bridging the chasm – the road to great reading results and a love of reading

Ruth Murad, executive principal of Montgomery and Percy Shurmer Academies, Birmingham and Jasmine Woodward, head of school at Montgomery, provide a fascinating insight into how excellent phonics and writing skills had not translated into excellent reading results, and how the schools found the solution.



It became blindingly clear after the 2016 Reading tests that reading at Montgomery and Percy was not working. We had long been outperforming national averages for phonics: our pupils could decode well but this was not translating into understanding what they were reading. We had been aware of some flaws in how we were delivering reading and made some changes to our curriculum, but it was only after the dismal results in 2016, that we truly understood the scale of the problem we were facing. The glaring question was what were the underlying issues that prevented our pupils from bridging, not a gap, but a chasm?

We embarked on a period of research (see references) and action research and quickly found three key barriers:

- a lack of pedagogical understanding on behalf of teachers about how to teach reading comprehension
- our pupils did not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge
- our pupils did not have enough background knowledge to enhance their understanding of a text.

This is what we had discovered:

1. Pedagogical Understanding

Like many schools, we had decided to move away from guided reading in 2015 and turned to whole-class texts. Yet this, in itself, did not resolve the issue. We knew that whilst many of the children performed well with simple retrieval, teaching them the skills of inference was far more problematic. Most teachers used the well-worn phrase, “Read between the lines”. Unfortunately, if you cannot infer in the first place, this advice is of no use whatsoever. Talking to teachers about their subject confidence revealed that, although they themselves were all competent readers and adept at inferring, summarising and identifying authorial intent, they needed greater pedagogical understanding in order to ensure children could unlock these skills too.

2. Vocabulary Knowledge

Analysis of pupil work and reading research uncovered one of the greatest barriers to our pupils’ progress: understanding the meaning of words within the context of a text. On the one hand, the pupils seemed to demonstrate excellent understanding – it was one of the reasons why our writing results were outstanding. How could it be that children who could write fluently, with varied structure incorporating fantastic vocabulary appropriately, fail to recognise and understand far simpler words in the texts of others? The reasons for this were two-fold. First, as teachers we spent far more time on teaching and discussing tier three words (when our focus should have been – and is now – tier 2



words) and secondly, pupils were not making links from word to sentence, from sentence to paragraph and from paragraph to whole text.



3. Background Knowledge

Have you ever been told a joke that you just didn't get? You understand all the words; you just don't see the connection that makes it funny. For some of our pupils, reading was like that. How can you understand why Willie is behaving in the way he does at the start of Goodnight Mr Tom if you are not aware of effects of living in an abusive family? How can you read with a sense of growing dread Prince Kaspar, when you learn that Johnny Trott is boarding the Titanic, if you do not know how that fateful journey ends? The connections we make, and our emotional responses we have to a book, are as much about our own background knowledge as about the words on the page.

Compounding these issues is the fact that 98% of our pupils are EAL learners, which added a further complexity. This could have been considered an insurmountable barrier but, for us, it simply meant that the project needed to be implemented from Nursery upwards.

Through parent voice, we knew that families were more confident in supporting their children in maths than in reading. Right from the start, we knew that including all of the school community would be an essential part of the journey.

We put together a working party for reading, consisting of senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, whose first priority was raising the skill set of all staff through a series of training sessions. These sessions broke down the skills involved in comprehension and modelled teaching methods. The CPD was heavily sourced from the research we had read but was adapted and tweaked to fit the

needs of our children. We also worked alongside external consultant Sonia Thomson from St Matthews, a local Talk for Writing training school, to support the training and we visited their outstanding school to learn from their practice. Her support and expertise have been invaluable.

We chose the core texts for each year group with the aim that there was sufficient challenge (books previously identified as Year 6, were moved to Year 4) and that pupils would experience a range of authors, contexts and language structures. We had decided from the very beginning that every pupil would have access to their own copy of whatever book their class was reading.

The reading team developed a tight structure for teaching reading that took the children step by step through vocabulary, inference, retrieval and authorial intent. Each part of the reading cycle required repeated CPD to ensure staff fully understood it. We continued to track the progress of the project through dialogue with children and staff, peer observation, team teaching and outcomes in books. This then fed into the training cycle - we adapted, amended and abandoned where necessary.

One of our biggest breakthroughs was when we made the decision to embed non-fiction texts within the fiction cycle. Linking non-fiction to the class texts allowed the children to make huge leaps in their understanding. Non-fiction was no longer a two-week unit every term, but an essential part of understanding a story on a deeper level. Topics are carefully selected to enhance their understanding – directly or indirectly. The reading skills are still taught through these discrete non-fiction lessons, and they are threaded throughout the term to fit in with the storyline of the book. If your class were reading *The Boy in a Dress*, you might expect to also read an article about gender stereotyping or about the differences between transgender and transvestite.

Sometimes, the additional texts we choose may be written for an older or more academic audience, such as Dickens or extracts from a thesis. These occasional jolts to the reading system are met with the relish of anticipation.

It wasn't simply what happened in the classroom, though. Culturally, there was a shift. We became "teachers who read and

readers who teach". Families were invited to regular reading workshops: we explained how reading comprehension 'works' and how parents could support children at home, even if the home language wasn't English.

Impact

Did the changes make a significant difference? The reading test results speak for themselves:

KS2	2016	2017	2018
Montgomery	52%	58%	89%
Percy	38%	43%	71%

Resistance overcome

At the start of the project some resistance from staff was encountered. Many teachers were concerned that the children, as EAL learners, would not have the language to access the newly selected more challenging texts. Part of overcoming this response was to allow colleagues to see that children would naturally find the reading material difficult but it was part of the teacher's role to scaffold the learning so children could access these texts. This soon paid dividends as staff began to see the links between the teaching of vocabulary and increasing background knowledge, and the children's ability to respond to a text.

In order to deliver the amount of training required throughout the initial stages of the project, agreements were made with staff and Governors to allocate additional teacher training days and twilight sessions. Meetings with parents explained the rationale behind these days so that the whole community was united in the desire to radically improve reading.

Reading was, and still is at the heart of our School Improvement Plan. Initially budgets from other areas within the school were diverted to ensure investment in the reading programme was given precedence over any other subject area. Money was allocated to purchase support from a Specialist Leader in Education who was able to quality assure the project. The working party team was allocated a budget for supply cover to meet regularly and also visit schools with outstanding progress data. High quality reading materials were purchased for pupils, with each child having access to a copy of the text being studied in class. In addition we ordered new

home-reading books, magazines and comics for the children and sourced a range of books for parents to access.

To raise the level of professional dialogue, published research material was made available to all staff. A financial commitment was made to provide a range of academic literature on the pedagogy of reading and language, as well as precis of longer reading materials for some staff who were less likely to read these publications. To encourage teachers' love of children's literature, every teacher was allocated a small budget to purchase books for their classroom that would enthuse the pupils.

What next?

Our journey will continue to develop a culture of reading and a love of books for our children and our families. We shall continue to invite parents to family learning sessions and story workshops. With the closing of the local library and funds no longer allocated to the mobile library van, opening up our school library to all local families and including books for adults to borrow will be essential.

We are continuing to embed the reading project and still have to realise our vision of 100% of pupils reading for pleasure, using the skills of a competent reader. We will continue our cycle of action research, using our new knowledge and changed assumptions and then implementing and reviewing and evaluating once again. Reading has become accessible - it doesn't matter as much that the children do not understand every word they read at first. They and we have learnt that they learn to understand it – and, more importantly, they are learning to love it.

Reading research references

- Reading Reconsidered by Doug Lemov
- Bringing Words to Life by Isabel L Beck, Linda Kucan, and M. G. McKeown
- Guided Reading Layers of Meaning by Angela Hobsbaum, David Reedy, Nikki Gamble, and Wayne Tennent
- Closing the Vocabulary Gap by Alex Quigley