



**Supporting and Improving  
Early Literacy Skills  
In Pre-school Children**

**Action Research Project carried out at:**

St. Gerards, Knowle

St. Martins, Knowle

School House, Whitchurch

**Led by:**

Karon Nichol, Nancy Kemp, Debbie Jones & Mandy Ewing

Statement of intent or research question:

‘Can changes in practice raise levels of achievement in literacy?’

## **The Bristol Boys Achievement Project (BBAP)**

The Bristol Boys Achievement Project (BBAP) is an action research project set up by Bristol City Council to address the national and Bristol's gender gap in achievement. It aims to bring together Schools, Children's Centres and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings to address boys' learning and development needs, and explore possible barriers to learning.

Staff at Sunshine pre-school were interested in implementing changes in practice to help support the development of literacy within the setting, and after attending a briefing on the BBAP, we felt that, although we don't currently see a gender gap in achievements, it would be a good way to carry out research into the effects these changes made for both girls and boys.

### **Our Hub Group**

Staff representing three Sunshine settings; St. Gerards, St. Martins and School House, joined a hub group with Knowle Park Primary school and Wansdyke primary school.

### **The Aims of Our Study**

- To raise awareness of literacy development in children in our settings
- To raise awareness of the importance of literacy to parents
- To see if skills in literacy can be improved by implementing changes to our practice

### **Introduction:**

All three Sunshine settings are based in South Bristol, two in Knowle and one in Whitchurch. Sunshine Preschool is classed as a private preschool, catering for children aged from two and a half to five years, operating term time only. Each setting has its own staff team, and these practitioners are attached to one setting, there are no peripatetic practitioners except the manager who took a lead on the project. As a result, each staff team carried out the research independently of each other, interpreting the strategies in slightly different ways.

### **Changes to Practice**

In response to High Achieving White Working Class Boys (HAWWC) research project, and sharing practice with our hub group schools, we decided to implement five new strategies into our practice at Sunshines. These changes were manageable and the responsibility was spread throughout the teams, enabling all practitioners to contribute to the project.

In all three settings we made the following changes to practice: we set up a lending library, we developed a home/school link bear, we gave opportunities for parents to be our 'Secret Reader', we made phonics name bags, and we introduced a 'story of the week'.

### **Lending Library**

Each setting developed a lending library where children could access books and independently choose one to take home and read. It was hoped that this would encourage parents to read a wider range of books with their children at home.

### **Home / School link Bear**

**St. Gerards** – Children were given 'Super Ted' on a rota basis. He was equipped with a book and bag of mark making tools. We asked children to draw their adventures with Super Ted and parents to scribe some comments if possible. Super Ted's adventures were made into a book so children could reflect on their experiences.

**St. Martins** – Children were given 'Rosie Bear' on a rota basis. Rosie comes with an overnight bag with pyjamas to change into and a diary. Children were asked to read stories to Rosie Bear and draw a picture of themselves with Rosie. Parents were asked to write comments about the books they had shared.

**School House** – Children were given 'Maurice the Monkey' on a rota basis. Children were asked to draw their adventures with Maurice and parents to write some comments if possible.

In all settings when the bear came back to pre-school we would share it with the group and thank the child for giving them a lovely time. Comments the children made about having the bear were also recorded.

The home/school link bear was designed to encourage a love of reading at home and to encourage conversations within the settings and between the children about their favourite books. The added element of mark making in the diary allowed children to make the link between the printed word and the marks they can use to communicate.

### **Secret Reader**

Parents, grandparents and people in the community known to Sunshines were invited to make a date and be our 'Secret Reader'. We told the children there was going to be a secret reader at some point in the session

and gathered them together when the reader had arrived. The reader wore our storytelling cloak and hat and either brought their own favourite stories or borrowed books from pre-school.

It was hoped this would encourage the wider community to get involved in the education of the pre-schoolers, as research shows other significant adults can support children by “extending and enhancing their social, emotional and cognitive experience” (Pascal et al, 2016)

### **Phonics Name bags**

We made an A5 laminated card with two Velcro strips on it. The child's name was put on the top strip and below it the individual letters of their name. Children were encouraged to:

- Create their name by copying the sequence of letters
- Trace over the name card
- Copy the name card
- Sound out the letters in their name

Once children had mastered this we added other familiar words to their bag. We hoped this would deepen the children's ability to use synthetic phonics and deepen the link between phonemes and graphemes before they started school.

### **Story of the Week**

Through curriculum planning we introduced a ‘story of the week’ which was read daily. Each day we read the story we would focus on different elements of the story; beginning, middle & end, repeating text, characters, changing endings etc.

The approach was to encourage the children to understand stories at a deeper level, enabling them to be exposed to a range of storytelling language which is vital for them to become storytellers themselves. This strategy was developed in response to Knowle Park's use of Talk for Writing, and was adapted to fit the skills and capacity of the settings.

### **How it went**

#### **Staff**

As the project got underway the staff team were optimistic about the results they may see and were fully on board and supportive of the project. Their enthusiasm and support drove the project forward and the feeling of joint responsibility enabled the strategies to be fully implemented. Two of the three settings used the phonics name bags and reported that children

enjoyed the independence of using them and enjoyed comparing letters with others and playing with the sounds to make nonsense words.

## **Parents**

Parents were also very supportive of the strategies. 100% of the cohorts borrowed books from the lending libraries; 100% of the cohorts took their home/school link bear home and over 25 Secret Readers across the three settings. The Secret Reader strategy is an area that could be improved upon, and staff are keen for a wider representation from the local community, especially males, to take part. For the second phase of the research project, as each setting continues to reach out to the wider community on other projects, these key figures will be invited back to the setting to be Secret Readers. Parents will also be more actively encouraged to join in on a more regular basis.

## **Children**

The children were very excited to use the lending library, they even borrowed books that they already owned a copy of much to the amusement of their parents! Children enjoyed the autonomy of choosing their own books, and on the whole the books were well looked after and were returned on time.

The home/school link bear was also hugely successful with all children being very keen to take it home. This meant we could also use it with a PSED focus, sending the bear home if we knew there was a special event at home or children's emotional development needed supporting.

The children particularly enjoyed the excitement and anticipation that a Secret Reader brought, and the strategy became more child led as children began to bring in their own books from home that they wanted to read as a Secret Reader.

## **What results did we see – in the settings**

Across the three settings, staff reported seeing an increased level of storytelling in play, higher levels of engagement in story time and children "reading" to themselves and each other. This self-reporting is backed up with qualitative data recorded in the children's Learning Diaries, such as spontaneous story telling during play captured by a nearby adult; small group reflections documented by the adult; and children representing stories through mark making.

## **What results did they see – in Reception**

We will be receiving data from Knowle Park to see if they saw any difference in baseline data between Sunshine children's literacy and other children's literacy.

## **Evaluation**

Overall the project has been a real success across all three settings, despite being implemented by three different staff teams, demonstrating that when staff are committed to making a significant change then positive outcomes are possible. However, these positive results could be due to the staff focussing on this area more, and therefore looking for signs of improvement more than they had done the year before.

Overall, it is felt that the three underpinning key aspects of the project: staff commitment, the child centredness of the approaches and parental support were the driving force behind its success and as the project goes into its second year, these three factors will remain at the heart of our mission.

## **What next?**

In the second year of the project, the focus will continue to be on increasing the status of storytelling. We will be setting up Story Squares, encouraging the children to create their own stories for their friends to act out; introduce more Talk for Writing elements into our practice and introducing more meaningful print around the environment. In the first year, the focus was mainly on the reading side of literacy, whereas in the second year we will look to focus on the mark making side of literacy as well. Strategies that have already been discussed within the staff teams include: increasing mark making opportunities across the provision, ensuring that writing for a purpose is modelled by adults and raising parents' awareness of early literacy practices.