



# **Greenside School/ Reading Project 2008-2009**



# **Improving Children's Reading Skills: A Pilot Project**

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**2008 - 2009**

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## Introduction

Children with severe learning difficulties (SLD) make up a heterogeneous population. They frequently experience lifelong difficulties with learning to read and write. These difficulties are both intrinsic and environmental in nature. Many children with severe learning difficulties may fail to develop the skills of reading and writing due to specific cognitive deficits and impaired underlying processes. An important reason that these children fail to acquire literacy skills is due to a lack of sufficient understanding of the literacy tasks they are asked to do and hence show a limited interest in reading and writing tasks. Literacy learning experiences often don't make sense to them.

Competing medical, self-care and therapeutic needs may limit opportunities to learn literacy skills and be given a lower priority by parents and teachers. Limited opportunities for literacy learning may present themselves as limited access to adapted print or tools, limited support for communication or simply less time for literacy learning leading to fewer literacy experiences and less teaching both at home and at school (Koppenhaver, Hendrix and Williams 2007).

In spite of many years of focused and skilled teaching, many young people with severe learning difficulties may fail to develop the skills required for reading, such as simple word recognition. Some may learn phonic sounds but fail to generalise this skill to the reading of simple text, while others may find it difficult to learn any sounds or words. Indeed many young people with SLD can only deal with very simple material and some not even with the basics of reading and writing. This has led many teachers' to think of literacy teaching as being dependent on "*perceived ability levels*" and the needs of the individual pupil (Lacey, Layton, Miller, Goldbart & Lawson, 2007). The content of literacy lessons and literacy teaching for this group has also been dictated by the demands of the curriculum.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2001) guidelines for teaching reading to students with severe learning difficulties encouraged teachers to interpret the teaching of reading as:

*'.....any activity that leads to the derivation of meanings from visual, or tactile representations ,for example, objects, pictures, symbols or words'* (QCA, 2001, p.7).

Over the last few years, the use of technology for text based reading and writing and opportunities for exploring print in the wider environment have shown that young people with severe learning difficulties can show progress with their literacy learning. Koppenhaver, Hendrix and Williams (2007) assert that there is enough evidence, for educators to effectively teach literacy, to young people with severe learning difficulties both at an individual and a class level. The next section provides a review of current thinking and research on the teaching of reading to young people with severe learning difficulties.

## **Teaching literacy to pupils with severe learning difficulties**

Lacey, Layton, Miller, Goldbart and Lawson (2007) undertook a survey of literacy lessons for students with SLD across thirty-five schools in the United Kingdom. The schools, based in the Midlands, the Greater Manchester area and the southwest of England, were selected on the basis of good Ofsted reports for the teaching of literacy skills. The schools consisted of primary, secondary and all age special schools. The survey combined a literature review, observations of lessons and interviews with teachers as well as focus group interviews of teachers and 'expert witnesses' interviews. One hundred and twenty-two lessons were observed across the age phases (5 to 16 +) over a one year period. The survey revealed that teachers of students with SLD used a mixture of conventional and inclusive methods to teach literacy.

Conventional methods of literacy teaching involved the use of phonics, reading and writing numbers and words, recognising social sight vocabulary, reading with symbols and the use of Picture Exchange Communication System cards (Bondy and Frost, 2001) or activities based on the advice of the Speech and Language therapist. Inclusive methods involved the use of symbols, pictures, drawings, live theatre, drama, storytelling, film and digital technology.

Results from the survey indicated a greater use of conventional literacy teaching methods with pupils with SLD than the use of inclusive methods. Lacey *et al.* argued for a greater use and exploration of alternative media and its potential for teaching literacy that was not based on learning to read and write text. Research by Layton & Miller (2004) found that instruction by teachers for students with severe and complex needs varied. Some adopted the teaching of communication skills rather than literacy

learning. Others focused on books and on empowering pupils to participate in other cultural media.

In Lacey *et al*'s study about a third of the teachers in the research felt that literacy involved a written aspect while communication was about listening although most of the teachers felt there was little to distinguish the teaching of literacy and communication. In a survey by Layton and Miller (2004), many teachers of children with SLD as well as profound and multiple learning difficulties interpreted literacy teaching as the teaching of communication skills thereby giving it a functional focus. Cartwright & Wind-Cowie (2005) argue that for pupils with severe learning difficulties, access to literacy should be through the development of their communication skills. Reading in particular should be taught through interactive stories and through personalised reading programmes or learning plans which are structured to be fully 'pupil-centred' as a way of promoting inclusive and individualised learning. They also advocate the use of objects of reference to promote conceptual understanding.

Research indicates that students with language and learning difficulties learn more easily through visual modalities than auditory ones (Porter & Ashdown, 2002). Research with students with Downs Syndrome has borne this out (Buckley, 2001). This suggests that using whole word recognition approach might be more helpful for teaching students with SLD. The work of Sheehy (2005) has demonstrated how the use of morphing software (that is software that can construct images and produce animated accentuation programmes) can be effective in supporting the use of pictures to teach word recognition to children with severe learning difficulties.

Although 96% of schools for children with SLD report the use of symbols (Abbott and Lucey, 2005) there is to date a lack of substantial research to demonstrate how the teaching of symbols is used in a systematic way to teach reading. Sheehy and Howe (2001) however, did show that symbols incorporating a technique that they designed could be used effectively to teach children with severe learning difficulties, who were non-readers, to recognise words.

The extent of the use of inclusive literacies such as drama, TV and storytelling with students with SLD in special schools is currently unknown. Lacey *et al.* (2007) argue that although the use of these methods may provide a means of accessing literacy for students who are unlikely to learn to read or write, their use may be limited as teachers do not see using these as leading to the acquisition of reading and writing.

Layton and Miller (2004) assert that for children with severe learning difficulties, literacy needs to be represented in developmental terms that are underpinned by wider aspects of education as well as the curriculum.

There is an extensive body of research that suggests that parental involvement in reading is correlated to emergent literacy (Senechal and LeFevre (2002). Hewison (1988) found increased parental involvement was more effective in increasing reading performance than special small group reading instruction at school by a reading specialist. Literature on training parents to teach their children to read suggests that specific and simple methods such as written checklists or instructions may be the most effective (Edwards & Panofsky, 1989, Resetar, Noell & Pellegrin, 2006). Although this research was conducted with parents of children in mainstream schools there is no reason to suppose that it is not applicable to parents of children attending special schools.

To summarise this section, much of the literature advocates the use of more inclusive approaches to teaching literacy but does not suggest abandoning the teaching of literacy using conventional approaches particularly with more able pupils within this group.

## **Aim of the Pilot Study**

Greenside school is a special school situated in North Hertfordshire and has on its roll pupils aged between two to nineteen with severe as well as profound and multiple learning difficulties. An increasing number of pupils present with Autism. The school also caters for some pupils with moderate learning difficulties although these are in the increasing minority.

The County of Hertfordshire covers a fairly large geographical area within the United Kingdom with a mixture of urban and rural populations. Unemployment rates in Hertfordshire are lower than average for the United Kingdom and there are very prosperous areas as well as small pockets of social deprivation and differing ethnic communities. Greenside School reflects this diversity in terms of its pupil population.

In 2008, the school put in a bid for specialist status for cognition and learning. In line with this bid the designated focus was to explore ways of raising the learning levels of pupils. Reading was chosen as a starting point with a view to improving reading

levels for a small cohort of pupils in key stage 3 through a pilot project. The educational psychologist supporting the school was approached at the beginning of the year to provide support with designing an intervention programme that also involved parents. A Teaching Assistant was assigned to work with the Key Stage 3 co-ordinator. The Key stage 3 Co-ordinator also had responsibility for English in the secondary department (referred in the project as the literacy co-ordinator). They worked jointly with the Educational Psychologist. The suggestion of personalised reading programmes advocated by Cartwright & Wind-Cowie (2005) lay at the heart of the intervention.

## **Theoretical Position**

There is no one ideal theoretical framework or indeed one ideal method for conducting research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Constructivist theory views knowledge as actively constructed by the learner. The theoretical stance adopted in this study was that learning to read should be a sense-making process with constructivist theory underpinning this argument. A dialectical constructivist theoretical stance was adopted. This views knowledge acquisition as an interactive process that includes direct instruction and modelling. From this perspective, effective learning involves students constructing reading relationships through their interaction with the facilitating adult and is similar to the scaffolding and/or fading strategies described by social constructivism. Watson's (2001) research into classroom practice, has demonstrated the effectiveness of constructivist approaches with pupils with moderate learning difficulties.

A thematic analysis that adopted a social constructionist paradigm was used to analyse the data from the focus group. The approach considered specific aspects and latent themes to make sense of the parents' experience and their views of participating in the pilot project to assist their children's reading.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Selective sampling was used in selecting the pupils. The demographic characteristics of the participating pupils are provided in Table 1. They included 4 females and 2 males aged between (11 to 13 years). All the pupils were in Key stage 3. Key stage 3 covers Years 7 to 9. All attended the same special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties and English was their main language. The inclusion criteria for

pupil participation in the pilot project were based on meeting two criteria. These were: (1) Pupils had reading levels that were *p* 7 or above (*p*- levels indicate attainment levels below Level 1 of the National Curriculum) or at the early stages of the National Curriculum levels for reading and, (2) Parents of the pupils provided their written consent for their child to participate in the project.. One of the pupils had a hearing impairment and a restricted speech-sound system. Another pupil was on the Autistic Spectrum.

**Table 1 Participant demographics**

Subject	Gender	Chronological Age	Year Group	Ethnicity	Reading Level (NC or <i>p</i> - level)	Disorder
Pupil 1	Female	12.10	8	WB	1A	Hydrocephalus and epilepsy
Pupil 2	Female	13.8	8	WB	P7	Developmental Delay
Pupil 3	Male	12.11	7	WB	P7	Down Syndrome
Pupil 4	Female	14.8	9	WB	P8	Developmental Delay with gross motor and visual-perceptual difficulties
Pupil 5	Male	12.6	7	WB	P7	Autism
Pupil 6	Female	12.10	8	WB	1A	Developmental Delay

**Note: WB=White British, NC=National Curriculum, *p*- level=performance level descriptors**

### ***Research Design***

A two-phase, sequential mixed methods design based on a sequential explanatory strategy was used (Cresswell, 2005). The research design used a pre- and post intervention design. Only a within-subjects design was used. A qualitative approach using data from a focus group was used to include the parents' voice in the study. The method involved obtaining each pupil's baseline attainment of their phonic skills, their phonological skills and their ability to read high frequency words using an adapted version of the assessment tool SIDNEY (2000). This is described in greater detail in the section on Assessments.

Based on the initial assessment results, individual programmes were devised by the literacy co-ordinator for each pupil. Following the intervention, all pupils were retested on the same measures used to obtain baseline measures. The qualitative phase of the pilot study used a focus group to research the parents' experience of their children's involvement in the project. A schedule of the focus group is included in Appendix 2. The pilot spanned a ten-month period from October 2008 to July 2009. This was slightly shorter than the anticipated period due to the time it took to complete and collate the initial baseline assessment measures. The focus group was conducted in July 2008.

## ***Procedure***

### *Pre-intervention*

The Literacy co-ordinator and the Educational Psychologist jointly adapted the SIDNEY as a pre-assessment measure that could be used for pupils with SLD. Instructions and materials were adapted and advice was also obtained from the school's link speech and language therapist. Written consent was obtained from the parents of the pupils for their children to participate in the pilot project by the school. Each pupil was administered the assessment individually by the literacy co-ordinator over a couple of days so as to ensure that fatigue and a lack of motivation did not effect the pupil's performance. Both pre- and post assessments were administered either by the Teaching Assistant or the literacy co-ordinator.

Following the baseline assessments, the literacy co-ordinator devised a personalised reading programme for each pupil in consultation with the Educational Psychologist. Support for the teaching of concepts was obtained from the Speech and Language Therapist who also advised the Teaching Assistant during the course of the project. Following this each parent was provided information about their child's performance on the baseline reading measures in a face to face session by the literacy co-ordinator. The pupil's personalised reading programme was also shared with the parent. Each parent was informed that work would be sent home with written instructions on how the pupil could be supported at home. Parents were encouraged to contact staff at any time during the duration of the project.

A Parent's coffee morning was held in April 2009 which was attended by the school's link Speech and Language Therapist, the Educational Psychologist, the Literacy co-ordinator and the Teaching Assistant. Parents were shown examples of the ICT

resources that were used and ways of supporting their child at home. Following this session parents requested support with additional 'reading' strategies that they could use. This was provided by the educational psychologist and a reading strategies booklet was sent to all parents. Certificates from the SIDNEY programme were presented to the students at assemblies as a way of acknowledging their success at regular intervals.

### *Content of the reading intervention programme*

In line with current research on the teaching of reading to pupils with severe learning difficulties, both a conventional and an inclusive approach were adopted. Each pupil was provided with a daily individual twenty-minute session with a Teaching Assistant assigned to the study. The Teaching Assistant was trained by the literacy coordinator. The Teaching Assistant delivered the personalised reading programme in a specially designated room that had a large rainbow alphabet on the wall. Within this personalised reading programme, the format of each session was the same and is provided below:

**Table 2: Content of a reading session**

Cueing into session and calming down time	5 minutes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter sounds</li> <li>• High Frequency words</li> <li>• Sound/symbol correspondence (singing along to jolly phonics)</li> <li>• Practicing previously learned sounds</li> <li>• Concept development (through games)</li> <li>• Synthesis/segmenting skills</li> <li>• Linking the above to work on text (books or ICT)</li> </ul>	15 minutes
Computer time (used as a reward)	5 minutes

Reading instruction through computer programmes was based on two main principles:

1. The software was used to complement other reading activities.
2. The supporting adult was involved in the computer activities together with the student to enhance their learning by giving appropriate guidance to the student and reacting to the student's attempts with positive reinforcement.

The following ICT programmes and strategies were also used during instruction:

- 1) Sherston Literacy Box Programme

- 2) Abc-CD produced by Sherston which is an animated alphabet programme that helps provides a visual and oral link to develop an understanding of symbols and sounds.
- 3) Alphabet soup, an animated programme with a choosing option
- 4) Road Spy: A phonics programme
- 5) Jolly Phonics CD on the interactive board
- 6) Storycraft Programme ('Bookshelf' activity) designed so that pupils can listen to a story of their choice and then choose how they want the story to continue and end. Pupils 'wrote' their own versions of well known fairy tales which were then printed and made into books that pupils could save, print out and take home to read or choose to read themselves or which could be read by the teacher in class. Pupils used this to produce a personalised 'library' of stories.
- 7) Choosing books from the library and sharing reading with a peer
- 8) Shape coding high frequency words
- 9) Sequencing familiar activities using picture cards
- 10) Teaching of social sight vocabulary (e.g. open, closed, Tesco's, ladies, toilet etc).

## **Assessments**

The Screening & Intervention for Dyslexia Notably in the Early Years

(SIDNEY, 2000) was adapted to provide a means of assessing and measuring pupils' reading progress. The assessments were based on synthetic approaches to phonics instruction, assessing phonological awareness skills and the ability to read the first one hundred high frequency words. A synthetic approach to assessing phonic skills sat well with the Jolly Phonics programme (Lloyd, 1992) that the school was using. The assessments in the SIDNEY were adapted to include signing and the use of pictures and the instructions were adapted to meet the needs of pupils with severe learning difficulties. These adaptations involved:

- Administering the assessments over a couple of days to allow for limited ability to attend and concentrate for longer periods of time;
- Time provided to allow for pupils' slow processing abilities;
- Use of picture cues for phoneme blending to reduce memory overload and allow for difficulties such as a restricted speech-sound system or hearing difficulties

- Adapting the font so it was consistent with the font used throughout the school and the use of lower case letters.
- Signing 'same' and 'different'

The assessment tool contained three sections and accompanying certificates on the successful completion of small amounts from sections one and two.

### ***Section 1 (Phonic Skills)***

This section assessed pupils' 1) knowledge of letter sounds, 2) ability to provide the symbol for the initial sound both orally and when presented visually.

### ***Section 2 (Phonological Skills)***

This section assessed pupils' ability to 1) identify the number of words in orally presented sentences to assess their understanding of word boundaries, 2) identify their understanding of the concepts of beginning, middle and end, 3) to identify the number of syllables in a word, 4) join together (synthesise) three sounds to make a word, 5) demonstrate their understanding of rhyming words, 6) demonstrate their auditory discrimination skills by identifying if a pair of words were the same or different, 7) demonstrate their ability to identify initial sounds from a choice of two in visually and orally presented words and pictures and 8) to break down (segment) words containing three sounds. Pupils were tested thrice on each measure to ensure consistency of the accuracy of their responses.

### ***Section 3 (Reading words)***

This section assessed pupils' ability to read the one hundred high frequency words. The words were grouped into the first sixteen words (making up over a quarter of the words used in reading and writing), then the next twenty four and finally the remaining sixty.

Appendix 1 contains the adapted version of the reading assessment that was used

## **Data Analysis**

Raw scores were used to measure pupil's progress with their phonic skills, their phonological skills and their ability to read high frequency words pre- and post intervention.

The focus group discussion was audio-taped with the group's consent. The data including any notes of the assistant moderator were transcribed and analysed. Major emerging or potential themes were identified and summarised. Responses were sorted into categories that were organised by names or code words to describe the meaning of the text segments. Files were created for the codes and a numerical and alphabetic system was used to identify the speakers. Thus P1 was Parent one and R was the researcher and 'J' the assistant moderator. Once the data had been sorted in this way, categories were grouped according to common features which were based on actual words or phrases used in the text segments. This involved recognising text segments that described an idea from the transcripts into new files which represented categories. A list of codes was generated with a view to grouping similar codes and discarding redundant ones. The grouped categories and initial themes were revisited and four major themes were identified.

## **Results**

### ***Part 1 – Pupils' Pre- and post intervention performance on the diagnostic reading assessment.***

All the students showed some improvement in their performance on different components of the diagnostic reading assessment. The pupils appeared to naturally fall into two groups. With the higher achieving three pupils, there was a maintenance in their performance of the alphabetic code knowledge with one pupil showing a dramatic improvement in her auditory discrimination skills by consistently and accurately being able to identify whether pairs of words were the same or different when the initial, middle or final phoneme was different. One of the pupils showed no progress with her ability to synthesise or segment sounds in words at the three phoneme level or consonant-vowel-consonant words. Another pupil was able to maintain her previous levels and the other pupil in this group showed some progress with her ability to segment sounds in words. These pupils also showed an increase in their ability to read the first one hundred most commonly occurring words. One of the pupils had progressed to being able to read 98 of the National Curriculum high frequency words from the year 4 to 5 list.

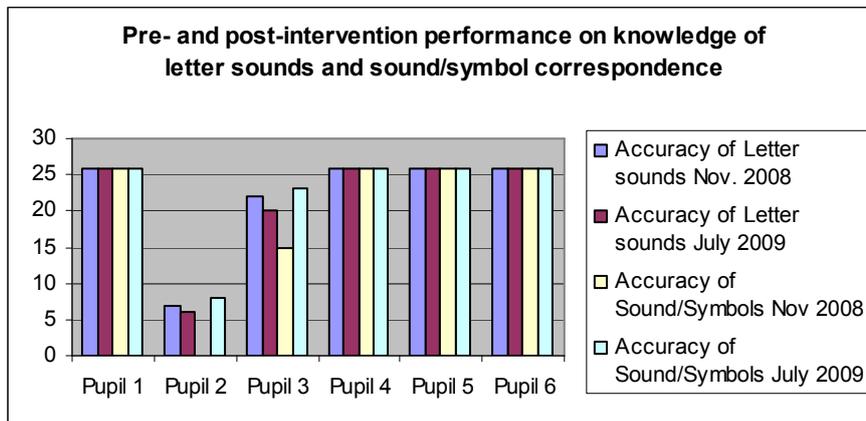
With the lower achieving three children, there was an improvement in their ability to identify the number of syllables in a word and with their sound/symbol correspondence. Two of the pupils showed a big improvement in their ability to

segment phonemes at the two and three phoneme level. One of the pupils showed no improvement in her ability to synthesise or to segment sounds in words. There was no corresponding improvement in these pupils' ability to synthesise sounds in words or to read high frequency words.

All the pupils demonstrated very little progress in their knowledge of rhyme. Apart from two pupils, all the rest had difficulties with understanding the concept of same and different. Only one pupil was secure with her understanding of the spatial concepts of beginning, middle and end.

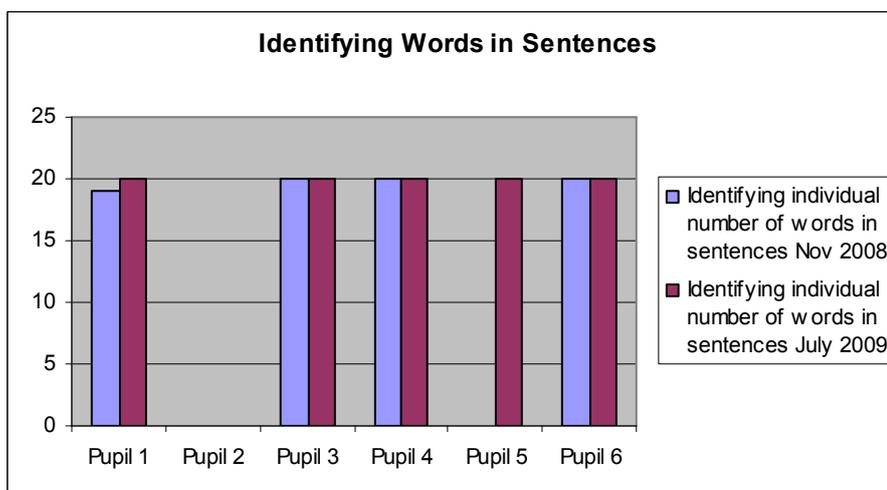
**Table 3/ Figure 1.** Letter sound knowledge (maximum =26). Sound symbol correspondence (maximum =26)

	Letter sound knowledge		Sound/symbol correspondence	
	November 2008	July 2009	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	26	26	26	26
Pupil 2	7	6	0	8
Pupil 3	22	20	15	23
Pupil 4	26	26	26	26
Pupil 5	26	26	26	26
Pupil 6	26	26	26	26



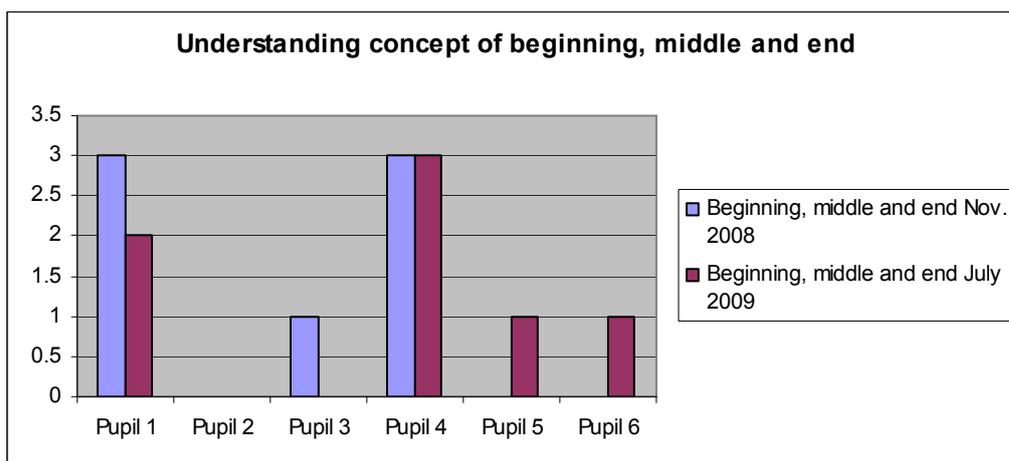
**Table 4 /Figure 2.** Identifying number of words in a sentence (maximum score= 20)

	Identifying number of words in sentences	
	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	19	20
Pupil 2	0	0
Pupil 3	20	20
Pupil 4	20	20
Pupil 5	0	20
Pupil 6	20	20



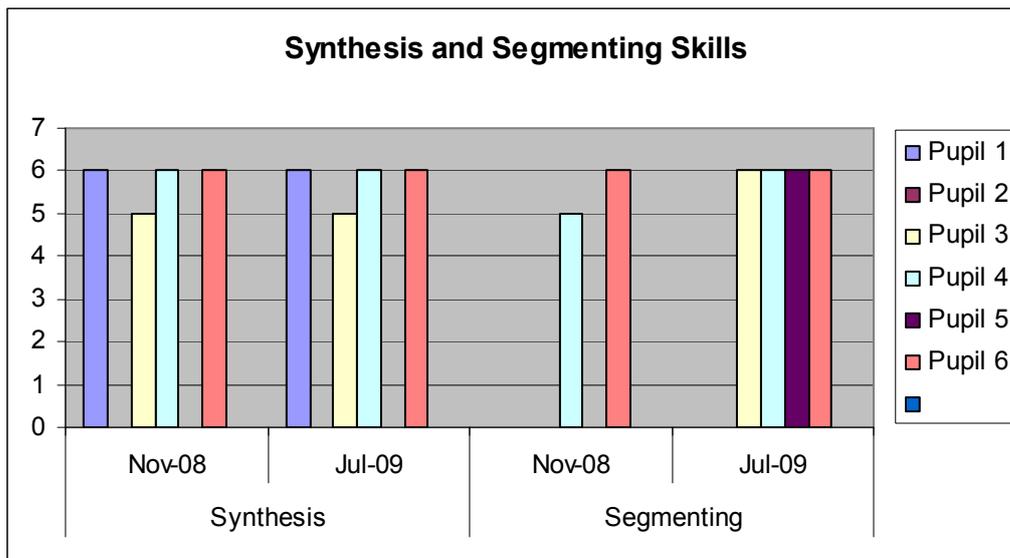
**Table 5 /Figure 3.** Understanding concepts: beginning, middle and end (maximum score= 3)

	Identifying number of words in sentences	
	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	3	2
Pupil 2	0	0
Pupil 3	1	0
Pupil 4	3	3
Pupil 5	0	1
Pupil 6	0	1



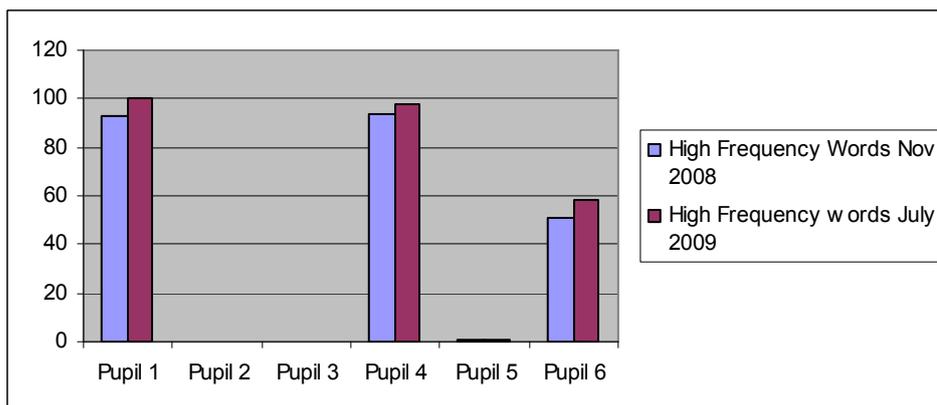
**Table 6 /Figure 4.** Synthesis and Segmenting Skills (maximum score=6)

	Synthesis		Segmenting	
	November 2008	July 2009	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	6	6	0	0
Pupil 2	0	0	0	0
Pupil 3	5	5	0	6
Pupil 4	6	6	5	6
Pupil 5	0	0	0	6
Pupil 6	6	6	6	6



**Table 7 / Figure 5.** Reading high frequency words (maximum score= 100)

	Reading the first 100 high frequency words	
	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	93	100
Pupil 2	0	0
Pupil 3	0	0
Pupil 4	94	98
Pupil 5	1	1
Pupil 6	51	58



All the pupils made progress in relation to their teacher assessed performance levels or their National Curriculum levels for reading.

	November 2008	July 2009
Pupil 1	1A	2B
Pupil 2	P7	P8
Pupil 3	P7	P8
Pupil 4	P8	2C
Pupil 5	P7	P8
Pupil 6	1A	2C

**Table 8: Pre- and post intervention Performance Descriptor or National Curriculum Levels for Reading**

### ***Part 2 – The Parents’ Views***

Four major themes, one of which had a sub-theme, were identified from the focus group data. Throughout this section, all the quotations from the parents are verbatim and grammatical inaccuracies, repetitions and pauses are presented as they were said.

#### ***Theme One: Fostering a feeling of inclusion***

Parents in the focus group expressed how having their children participate in the pilot project had helped foster a feeling of inclusion. Parents expressed how the project had helped at two levels. Firstly it had helped in making them feel included in their children’s learning and secondly the sub-theme reflected their view of how the pilot had helped to include extended members of the family in supporting their children’s learning. The following extract shows how being involved in assisting their children during the pilot project had led to a feeling of inclusion:

*P1: “Yeh, it makes me.....I’ve got no other children but it makes me feel like I’m doing...like (pause)”*

*P2: “Like helping”.*

*P1: "Yeh. Like helping...you know what other parents do with like mainstream kids. I just feel like....I dunno...."*

*P3: "A bit like having a child that comes home from school and does their homework".*

*P1: "Yeh. It does make me feel like that".*

*P2: "Whereas we feel we don't have to do that 'cause they don't get homework. Now we feel we are included. So that's nice 'cause we can do something to help them".*

*(Nodding from others in the group in agreement)*

Contained within this theme was the sub-theme of how parents felt that the pilot had been successful in involving other immediate and extended members of the family in supporting their children. One parent reported that her partner wanted to be more involved and do more and she laughingly expressed that at times she felt that it was her son and not his but that they took turns to support her son and praised him and that her son "loved it" (the praise and attention). The following extract illustrates parents' comments on the involvement of other family members in supporting their children's reading.

*P1: ".....and the other thing I can say is that my other half is feeling included as well. He's not his dad but good as. But he's been doing the flash cards and words with him as well rather than just mummy doing it all the time. So he does it, sort of like a game.....I think well you can do some of the things that teachers do at school. He can hit you for the day and not me (laughs)".*

*P2: "Just having the book with all the words and daddy will do your words and off she goes with him. She'll make jigsaw things.*

*P3: ".....she sits and reads it to herself rather than me because daddy can't anyway. He's got bad sight so he can't see anyway. It upsets him 'cause he wants to see to read. She sits next to him and reads to him".*

P1: *“Yeh, it includes everybody doesn’t it? In the past it was just mummy, now it’s the extended family as well.”*

P2: *“ My mum is so chuffed, her grandma, ‘cause she’s like, you’ve got to read, you’ve got to do this stuff. She’s been able to do it with her and my mum is so proud”.*

P1: *“ Yeah...X’s grandparents as well ‘cause they have him a lot and they’ve asked about the reading project and I’ve given them everything ,you know, that I’ve got for them to see and they are real proud of him and dead chuffed”.*

### ***Theme Two: Fostering a feeling of empowerment***

This theme referred to parents’ comments about how the pilot had led to a feeling of empowerment in terms of looking at different ways to support their children’s reading outside the school context and to be able to have something that they could engage their children’s interest in as well as a common forum for exchanging and sharing ideas.

P2: *“You know the thing is we’re not teachers so how do I explain ‘different’? But when you gave us the stuff to explain, it was ok”.*

P1: *“I’ve been using the stuff at home as well not just with reading and books you know. It’s like a lady’s wearing a white top and a man’s wearing a white top and the tops are the same but the lady and the man are different. So ‘X’ was a bit confused. I go what colour is the top? He goes ‘white’. I go ‘they are the same’. I go what’s that and he goes ‘lady’. I go what’s that and he goes ‘man’. So I go ‘that’s different’ (laughs). So he does try. I think he’s starting to understand.*

One parent expressed how she had used daily walks with her son to teach the concept of ‘same’ and ‘different’ by using different coloured leaves. Another parent shared how she played being the teacher at home as her child liked *“being bossed around”* and responded well to role play. Parents’ comments expressed that although they were not teachers they now felt confident and empowered to help other parents

*“I now feel that there are kind of others [Parents] that we can help”.* (P2)

Parents felt that a termly coffee morning at school would provide a forum for parents to share ideas as well as provide a means of backup and support as well as social networking. One parent's comments aptly illustrate this view:

*"I don't know about any other mums but when you have kids like with special needs and with disabilities you are kind of ostracised from normal children and families so the only like sort of contact we have with other children is via the families or people in school. We're not invited anywhere or anything apart from school children". P1*

*"It's quite heartbreaking when you think he's never going to lead a normal life. Oh god, he's never going to do that or he's never going to do this. So if he can read he's half way there.....you know like he can choose a programme on TV. He can let others know what he wants rather than a screaming session". (P1)*

### ***Theme Three: Effectiveness of support for parents provided by the school***

This theme related to the parents' perceptions of the support provided by the school in relation to the project. Parents expressed how having been approached by staff for their child to participate in the project had led to a feeling of relief that staff in school had recognised the potential that was there in their children.

*"X never had that even when he was at [name of another special school]. I felt like I was being a pain ringing about what about this, what about that, and they'd go, "oh he's all right" and put the phone down quickly. When you come in here you can talk to anyone".P1*

One parent expressed the view that she could see that her child had potential and the structure and support given to her child by the project had enabled her child to progress. Parents also commented positively on the support with the ICT resources that they could buy. Two parents commented on the usefulness of the word folders and books that were sent home and how the materials sent home were "*idea*" for their children. Parents commented on how the little books with instructions on what

they needed to concentrate on was helpful and that the material sent home had been pitched at the right level to enable them to keep going but not feel “overloaded”.

Parents also commented more generally on the support they received from the school as these comments illustrates:

“ ...Also you could ring the school about anything and everything. They're brilliant. You're never put off in any shape or form”. P2

“ ,,,,support you get from the school is fantastic”. P3

“You couldn't ask for a better school”. P1

Parents commented on their need for progress reports more frequently in terms of where their children were “.....just a couple of sentences on what she's doing” as at times they reported “....working a bit in the dark really” in terms of what their children were accomplishing or working at in school.

#### ***Theme Four: Increased awareness of print by children in their surroundings***

This theme related to parents' comments about the increased awareness by their children of print in their surroundings and a willingness to engage with reading related activities.

“He's a bit more interested in words and books than he used to be. .... normally he'd get a book and throw it across the room, “no book” and turn the pages really quickly so he could move on to the next game or something but he's quite interested in books now”. P1

One Parent reported that when her son was encouraged to sit down with her to do reading tasks he would do so and that if he didn't understand and enjoy it he would refuse to engage with the task and “just create and make a noise” which was not the case. The parent also commented that when she's doing her online banking and things like that , her son will come up and say, “mummy do number” which he never used to before. Some parents also reported that their children were beginning to read

numbers and letters in adverts on the telly (e.g. “that begins with ‘a’ or that begins with ‘b’) and recognising numbers and letters in posters in shop windows such as Iceland’s. Another parent commented on how her daughter had begun to go through leaflets and junk mail that came through the door and sit on the settee attempting to read it. One parent commented on her son’s increased awareness of print and his ability to link it to what he wanted.

*“The other thing that ‘X’ now does is when he goes into the café or restaurant....we go to certain ones where he’s accepted and things are normal there. He wouldn’t do it before but he will find, say he wants chocolate brownies or chocolate fudge cake, and he will go to the menu and find it and get your finger and point at it and I go ‘What’s that?’ and he’ll tell me what it is. But he never used to do things like that before. He’s recognising words”.P1*

All parents commented that although their children would have difficulties in commenting about their views on the project, nevertheless had observed a change in their children’s behaviour in relation to print and were generalising this increased awareness of print to contexts outside the school. and the home.

*“ S has now got this game. It’s like this computer thing and she sits there and she’ll say the word and it’ll come round again and she’ll say to me ‘how do you spell this?’ And I’ll think you know how to spell the word. And she sits in bed at night, has a cuddle but instead of me reading to her she reads to me and then she goes [mimics sleeping].”P3*

*“She can read most of the words. I’m making it sound like she’s really wonderful. She’s not but she can really. I can’t believe the progress she’s made. When I’m reading the paper, she goes ‘what you reading?’ She goes ‘what does that word say mummy and what does that word say?’ She’s just like a little sponge”.P2*

*“Y will look at the newspaper and like my magazines...you know girly magazines. She never did that before [the project]. She’ll say, “mummy who’s that and who’s that and she can read the words....the big print not all the words but she can read the headline stuff”.P2*

## Discussion

There is much to be positive about the outcomes. The student's performance pre- and post intervention as well as the observations of the parents did provide evidence of progress with reading skills and a positive change in reading behaviours. By the end of the intervention period (July 2009), all pupils showed an improvement or maintenance of previous knowledge of sound/symbol correspondence. Four of the six students were secure in their knowledge of the alphabetic code while the remaining two students showed an improvement in this area. This suggests that overall there was an improvement in the students' phonic knowledge. This quantitative gain was corroborated by parent's comments of a greater awareness and improvement of their children's alliteration skills. For example one student with autism was able to move his understanding that 'g' was always only for 'granddad' at the start of the project to the idea that 'g' was also for 'green' and other objects in his environment by the end of the project.

There was a variation in the progress of the student's phonological skills, with those with higher baseline attainment levels making greater progress than those with lower initial attainment levels. One student made dramatic progress with her understanding of oral word boundaries while another pupil made no progress at all. The remaining four students were either able to maintain their former levels of attainment or show some improvement with their ability to isolate words in short orally presented sentences.

Apart from one student, the remaining five students demonstrated difficulties with the concept of beginning, middle and end and also with the concepts of 'same' and 'different' when asked to identify whether pairs of words were the 'same' or 'different'. It was clear that four students had difficulties with understanding concepts such as 'same' and 'different' and that this then affected their ability to discriminate between pairs of words that were the same or different. However, five students were able to identify the correct initial sound from a choice of two in orally presented words (with pictures) which would suggest that some students' difficulties were more to do with understanding the concepts 'same' and 'different' rather than their auditory discrimination skills. Three of the pupils made no progress with their ability to identify pictures of words that rhymed although some of them were able to provide the rhyming word in a well known nursery rhyme (e.g. Humpty dumpty had a great.....?)

Student's skills with identifying the number of syllables in a word improved. Four out of the six students were able to show skill maintenance in their ability to synthesise sounds in words with a consonant-vowel-consonant combination. Two students made no progress with this skill. Again two pupils made no progress with their ability to segment words containing three sounds. The remaining four pupils made progress, with two of these pupils making dramatic progress from not being able to segment sounds in words pre- intervention, to successfully being able to segment words containing three sounds. Parents' comments again supported this perceived progress as some parents reported that their children were actively trying to break up sounds in words encountered in their environment and asking what a word was.

*“ ‘S’ will click on CBeebies .....and if there's any adverts come on the telly with numbers she's reading the numbers or she's reading the letters, not words, but that begins with 'a' and that begins with 'b' and I'm thinking Wow.....” P3*

There was an improvement in three of the student's ability to read a greater number of high frequency words. Two of the students made no progress in this area. Student's knowledge of words they could read in isolation was transferred to other contexts as commented by parents demonstrating that the students were applying their ability to read words to other contexts.

The students' progress following the conventional teaching of skills crucial to reading, although small, would lead one to question the belief held by some teachers (Lacey *et al.*2007) that since some older pupils would never learn to read or write, the focus for these pupils should be on the teaching of '*literacy for real life*' rather than teaching them to read. In this pilot, the students who fell in the lower group did demonstrate the ability to make some progress with aspects of their phonic and phonological skills and were able to use this to learn more about their world outside school and widen their understanding as reported by their parents.

*“.....He's pointing at street signs and numbers everywhere”.P1*

*“Well 'S' has always loved books but now I find she will sit there on her own with a book rather than go on the play station.....”. P3*

Student's progress was further reflected in their teacher assessed attainment levels for reading. All pupils went up a *p*-level or a National curriculum Level. This perceived

progress was also reflected in parents' comments on their children's reading behaviours, which parents reported their children had not demonstrated previously. Parents reported that their children were more willing to engage with reading based activities within the home context such as learning sounds, reading words and sharing books.

*"He's a bit more interested in words and books and pictures than he used to be". P1.*

Some students were also able to identify words in text (magazines, newspapers, junk mail etc) and in one case select items from the menu in a café.

The ability to engage in reading based activities at home and enjoy books was seen by all parents as providing their children with the same experience as their mainstream peers and therefore being inclusive in nature. It was also seen as empowering by the parents and enhancing the self-esteem of their children. All the parents commented on the inclusive power of the ability to read as well as its functional importance in the lives of their children.

*".....and she really knows 'cause grandparents have rung her up and said, ' you're doing well on your reading project and she loves that praise. I don't quite think she gets the concept of it but she does enjoy it and she knows that she's got to do her reading" P2.*

The progress of the students overall suggests that adopting both a conventional and an inclusive approach to the teaching of reading can assist some students with severe learning difficulties to make both quantitative and qualitative changes in their reading behaviour. However, as mentioned at the start, students with severe learning difficulties make up a heterogeneous population and the results of this pilot need to be interpreted with some caution.

## **Limitations**

Although the predicted improvement in children's reading skills or sub-skills was supported by this intervention approach, some caveats are necessary when interpreting the results of this pilot study. The limitations of the methodology are discussed in this section.

The reliability and the validity of the SIDNEY have not been established and it is a diagnostic as opposed to a standardised assessment tool, although it is a published resource. However, it does have face validity since it is based on research on reading development. Raw scores were used and raw scores cannot be interpreted very well without knowing the possible points or the largest possible score. A raw score can, however, have direct meaning if the maximum score is provided. However, raw scores unlike standard scores or percentiles have obvious limitations especially if they are obtained from a measuring instrument that has not yet been tested by statistical methods.

Pupils were not chosen randomly and there was no control group. Pupils were not matched in any way in terms of their language or cognitive skills and constituted a heterogeneous group. Any or all of these variables could have affected the results. Secondly although attempts were made to ensure procedural reliability, the very concept of a personalised learning programme for each student precluded this to some extent.

Although feed back was provided to the Teaching Assistant (TA) by the literacy co-ordinator this was done on an ad hoc rather than a regular basis. Mid-way through the pilot another Teaching Assistant had to be assigned to the project due to resourcing constraints. The TA was new to the project and therefore consistency of delivery in terms of her understanding and delivery of the intervention would certainly have affected the results.

All pupils were receiving literacy lessons in class and therefore the effects of contamination and co-intervention cannot be discounted. So the possibility of unintended intervention (contamination) needs to be considered in terms of influencing the results.

The personalities of the students in the study had a strong influence on their progress in terms of their motivation and willingness to participate in all the activities. The extent of the home support was another important factor in their progress. The design of the study did not allow for the measurement of these variables and therefore their effect on pupil's progress can not be discounted. The brevity of the study was an additional limitation as a longer time period would have allowed for more monitoring and fine tuning of the strategies used with individual students. Furthermore the test-retest interval could have had some bearing on the results.

Validity procedures for the qualitative aspect of the study were not addressed due to time constraints. It was not possible to use an external auditor for consensus checking or to go back and check with parents to clarify that the themes did reflect what they had said in the focus group discussion. This could have affected the validity of the data.

Finally, generalisations cannot be drawn from this study as the sample group of six pupils was small and not necessarily representative of students with severe learning difficulties, who can encompass a very broad spectrum of strengths and difficulties in relation to the acquisition of reading skills.

## **Conclusions**

In spite of the limitations of the project, it was encouraging to see an increase in the pupils' scores post intervention as well as the reported changes by parents in their children's reading behaviours. Future directions might include exploring, and where possible incorporating, suggestions by parents as well as addressing the documented limitations addressed earlier. These could include:

- The provision of systematic training to parents through assessing the needs of both the student as a reader and the parent as a teacher and then matching the teaching components to their specific circumstances. In other words there needs to be a greater matching of procedures to parents and students in the light of the heterogeneity of the SLD population.
- A framework for regularly auditing what is meaningful for the student and what influences the student's current behaviours and interests. Such an audit could not only inform teaching strategies but also provide a means of reporting of salient aspects to parents on a more regular basis.
- Linking work to literacy teaching in the classroom. For example, the teaching of concepts and accompanying vocabulary important to learning to read and the use of ICT and other opportunities for increased inclusive literacy experiences within class on a daily bases. The involvement of the Speech and Language Therapist to a greater extent in modelling the teaching of these concepts within a class context as well as through individual work is strongly recommended.

- To explore parents' suggestion of a forum for parents facilitated by school staff. The purpose of this would be to meet and share ideas and resources as well as provide parents with a means of networking with other parents.

A question that needs to be asked is how much of the students' improvement was due to the intervention and how much would have occurred in any case. Given the rate of the students' reading progress before the start of the pilot project and looking at their attainment levels at the end of the project, it would not be wrong to assume that the quantitative and qualitative changes in the students' reading behaviour would have been unlikely without the intervention. Three of the students were beginning to achieve at a level that would be expected of a student at the end of Key Stage 1 (end of infant school). The remaining three students' achievements were at the highest level of the *p*-scale suggesting that with continued additional personalised support they had the potential to improve their reading skills. These results are encouraging and more work needs to be done to see how this intervention can be effectively adapted and used with other students in different key stages throughout the school.

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## Appendix 1

# Diagnostic Reading Assessment

Name..... Date of birth.....

Key stage.....

Date.....

## Section 1

### Phonic skills

#### *A. Letter sounds*

Materials needed –Letters of the alphabet and a selection of objects.

#### Instructions

Prior to assessment ensure that pupils can match objects to the spoken word. E.g. give the pupil 2 different objects. Sit opposite the pupil and ask the pupil to give you the ball.

If the pupil is unable to match an object to the spoken word, do not continue with the assessment in this section.

Say the following letters to the pupil one at a time and ask the pupil to give you or point to the correct letter out of a choice of 3. Place results in the box below:-

Sound given to pupil	a	m	t	s	i	f	d	r	o	g	l	y	x
Letter chosen by pupil													

Sound given to pupil	h	u	c	b	n	k	v	e	p	w	j	q	z
Letter chosen by pupil													

Number of correctly identified letter sounds

## ***B. Sounds and their symbol correspondence***

Materials needed -Pictures of objects.

I am going to say a word e.g. - apple, (and adult shows a picture of an apple) show me what sound it starts with.-out of a choice of 3 letters.

Initial sound given to pupil	a	m	t	s	i	f	d	r	o	g	l	y	x
Letter chosen by pupil													

Initial sound given to pupil	h	u	c	b	n	k	v	e	p	w	j	q	z
Letter chosen by pupil													

Number of initial sounds identified correctly.

## **Section 2** **Phonological skills**

### ***A. Identifying individual words in sentences***

Materials needed

Ladder  
counters

Practice session.

Say a sentence slowly e.g. My name is... As you say each word place a counter on the ladder. Get pupil to practice this twice using other 2/3 word sentences.

Instructions

I am going to say a sentence. As I am saying it, put one counter on the Ladder for each word I say. Tick alongside sentences below if correct.

Sentences

Come here

Look here

Stop talking

Sit down

Look at me

Rabbits can run

How are you?

Donkeys can kick

Number of individual words in sentences identified correctly.

***B. Understanding the idea of beginning, middle and end***

Materials –Train, Traffic, A photo of the pupils standing one behind the other.

Instructions

(Use 2 pictures each time you test.)

Present picture to pupil and say. Show me the beginning of the train, the part that arrives first at the station, or the car that is first in the row, or the first person in the row of pupils.

Present picture to pupil and say. Show me the end of the train, traffic, or the end of the row of pupils.

Present picture to pupil and say. Show me the middle of the train, traffic, or -the person in the middle of the row.

Beginning

Middle

End

***C. Hearing syllables within words***

Materials-None needed

### Instructions

I am going to clap your name, say pupils' name, clapping each syllable as you do so e.g. Dan-iel. Ask pupil to clap his own name, then ask pupil to clap the names of 3 friends saying the name aloud as he or she claps it. The point to a familiar object in the room and say this is a table can you clap me the word table. Repeat with 2 other familiar objects e.g. window, chair.

Own name

Name of friend 1

Name of friend 2

Name of friend 3

### ***D. Phoneme blending*** (Producing words from given sounds)

Materials-Toy Dalek

Assessor explains that the Dalek is going to say some sounds and asks the pupils if they can make them into words.

Assessor presents the following words leaving a one second gap between each letter sound, showing the picture at the same time.

d-o-g

sh-i-p

h-a-t

c-u-p

m-a-tch

r-ai-n

## ***E. Rhyming***

Materials-Set of rhyming pictures

Practice session

Assessor asks pupil if they know the rhyme about postman **pat**. Assessor sings the song pausing before the word **cat** so that the pupil can supply the word cat.

Explain to the pupil that the 2 words pat and cat sound like each other and we sometimes say that words like this rhyme with each other. Repeat activity with humpty dumpty and remind pupil those words like **wall** and **fall** rhyme with each other.

Assessment

Place 3 pictures in front of the pupil, 2 of which rhyme and 1 which does not, and assessor says the names of the 3 pictures and asks the pupil which word sounds different to the other 2 words e.g. put out the pictures of the cat, hat and the man, the pupils should identify the man. Repeat the activity 3 more times with the remaining set of pictures.

Set 1

Set 2

Set 3

***F. Identifying phonemes*** (Use signing to say whether the words are the same or different.)

### **i. The same or different**

Materials needed- none

Instructions

Explain to the pupil that you are going to say 2 words and the pupil has to say if the words are exactly the same as each other or if they are 2 different words by signing or talking. E.g. chip and lip.

Tick below and put total score in box

Mouse mouse

Leg log

Sun sun

Back bag

Pop pop

Pig big

## **ii.Initial sounds**

Materials needed- pictures of a pram and a table a snake and a bunny.

### Practice

Tell the pupils that you are going to say some words beginning with the 'p' and 't' sounds and the pupil has to point to the picture of the pram when he hears the word beginning with 'p' or the picture of the table when he hears the word beginning with 't'.

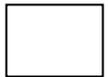
### Assessment

Tell the pupils that you are going to say some words beginning with the 's' and 'b' sounds and the pupil has to point to the picture of the snake when he hears the word beginning with 's'

or the picture of the bunny when he hears the word beginning with 'b'.

Use the following words

Snake  
Bunny  
Bun  
Sausage  
Baby  
Sun  
Book  
Silly  
Sand  
Bottle



### ***G. Phoneme segmentation***

Materials needed-Ladder, 6 counters

Practice session.

Tell the pupil that you are going to say some words as a Dalek would say them. Then say each word and ask the pupil to repeat the words in a similar voice.

Explain that the Dalek's batteries are getting low and you have to speak very slowly. Repeat the words in the list leaving a half second gap between each sound. Say the words again like this and push out one counter as each phoneme is said, into the ladder. Ask the pupil to repeat each of the above words like a slow Dalek and move a counter as they say each part of the word.

Instructions

Ask the pupil to say the following words like a slow Dalek again moving the counters as each part of the word is said.  
*(Video in order to refine the process for the adult)*

Practice these.

c-ar  
H-a-t  
B-all  
d-o-g

Assess these

u-p  
d-ow-n  
m-a-n  
f-our  
e-gg  
b-oa-t



### **Section 3**

#### **High frequency words**

Materials needed – flash cards

Present the first 16 words individually as flashcards to the pupil.  
Record the words correctly read.

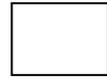
Continue with next set of 24 words if the above has been achieved.

Repeat with the remaining 60 words.

**A.** The first 16 words

**B.** The next 24 words

C. The remaining 60 words



.....

### Acknowledgement

Many of the assessment, intervention ideas and resources were taken or adapted from SIDNEY, Hampshire County Council (2000)

## **Greenside Focus Group Schedule: 9/07/2009**

### **Parents' views of the reading skills programme for their children**

#### **Introduction**

- Offering thanks a welcome and an introduction(NC) – providing name badges (JS)
- Attending to participants' comfort (refreshments) (JS & NC)
- Consent to record and an explanation of what will be done to the data( JS)
- Reiterating issues of confidentiality(NC)
- Recapping purpose of the study(NC)
- Outlining procedure including finishing time(NC)
- Setting ground rules for the group(NC)
- Providing an opportunity to ask questions (NC)

#### **Questions**

1. How did you feel when you were first approached about your child receiving extra support with reading?
2. What kind of support did you need?
  - When you were shown what your child was or was not capable of doing?
  - When you wanted to support your child with reading at home?
  - When you were unsure about what to do to help your child?
3. Has anything good come out for your child/ you personally /family/ others close to you by your child participating in the project?
  - What?
4. Is there anything you would like to say about your experience or that of your child of participating in the project?

#### **Conclusion**

- Summary (NC)
- Thanks(JS &NC)
- Debriefing (as appropriate) (NC)

### **List of things needed**

- Recording equipment (NC)
- Badges for parents with first names (JS)
- Drinks (JS)
- Fruit & biscuits (nothing too crunchy as it might obscure the recording!!)  
(NC & JS)
- Paper and pencil for Jill to take brief notes and order of speakers

**NOTE: JS to personally ring parents the day before to remind them of the date and time of the focus group and encourage them to attend.**

## Pre- and Post Intervention Raw Score data

	Pre	PST	Pre	PST	Pre	PST	Pre	PST	Pre	PST	Pre	PST
Reading sub-skills	Pupil 1 (SW)		Pupil 2(G)		Pupil 3 (J)		Pupil 4(S)		Pupil 5 (D)		Pupil 6 (C)	
Letter sounds (Max score=26)	26	26	7	6	22	20	26	26	26	26	26	26
Sound/symbol correspondence (Max score=26)	26	26	0	8	15	23	26	26	26	26	26	26
Identifying indiv. words in sentences (Max score=20)	19	20	0	0	20	20	20	20	0	20	20	20
Concepts (Max score=3)	3	2	0	0	1	0	3	3	0	1	0	1
Identifying Syllables (Max score= 4)	4	4	0	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4
Phoneme blending Max score=6)	6	6	0	0	5	5	6	6	0	0	6	6
Rhyming(Max score= 3)	0	3	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	2	3
Identifying similar and different words: auditory discrimination (Max score= 6)	3	3	0	0	0	0	6	6	0	0	0	6
Initial sound identification (auditory discrimination) (Max score= 10)	10	10	0	8	0	0	10	10	0	10	10	10
Phoneme segmentation (max score= 6)	0	0	0	0	0	6	5	6	0	6	6	6
High frequency words (max score= 100)	93	100*	0	0	0	0	94	98	100	1	51	58

**Note: Pre= Pre- intervention, PST = Post- Intervention, Max score = Maximum score possible, \* Able to read more than 100 words and reading words from the National curriculum list of High frequency words for years 4 and 5.**

