

'Success for All' a real achievement

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Staff at Biggin Hill Primary School give the "thumb's up" to the Success For All scheme. "This programme is the best thing since sliced bread... The children love it. The staff are motivated through seeing the success the children are having."

Staff at Education Action Zone primary schools were under no illusions when the zone was set up two years ago.

They knew improving children's ability in literacy - and improving it fast - had to be one of their main priorities.

But the difficulty lay in finding a way of achieving this.

Schools had been working hard using the National Literacy Strategy's tried and tested methods for a long time. And although this brought improvements in end-of-key-stage tests across most of the zone's schools, it was not bringing them fast enough towards their goal of hitting national averages for literacy set by the government.

So, showing the kind of innovative approach which has become their trademark, they decided to look further afield to find the answers they were looking for.

It was at this point that they stumbled across research into school improvement strategies which revealed marked improvements in performance in a small group of Nottingham primary schools which were taking part in a pilot of a scheme called "Success For All".

Success For All is a highly effective and well-researched programme which has achieved dramatic gains in pupils' reading in America. An evaluation, by Nottingham University, of its initial implementation in the Nottingham schools, echoed the finding of research in the USA, which suggests Success For All represents an approach to school improvement which has great promise for raising pupils' achievement - not only in literacy but also in many other areas of the curriculum.

SFA is a highly structured programme, which uses all available resources to ensure all children can experience success with reading the first time they are taught. The teaching of phonics, or pronunciation, is an important part of the picture. But equal emphasis is placed on the children understanding their reading material.

As pupils begin to move through the programme, in year 1, they work in pairs and small teams. Co-operative learning is a vital part of the programme. Working with other pupils provides children with an opportunity to discuss the concepts and skills they are learning in order to extend and consolidate their understanding.

These co-operative learning strategies are transferable and highly effective in most areas of the curriculum, as well as helping to improve literacy.

Every eight weeks children are assessed to determine whether they are making adequate progress. If they are not, they may be placed in a different group or assigned to a tutor who will then work with them individually for 20 minutes each day. Following a rigorous fact-finding and selection process, SFA was introduced into four EAZ primary schools in September, 2000 - Bude Park Primary, In cookbury Close; Biggin Hill primary, Biggin Avenue; Dorchester Primary, in Dorchester Road; and Broadacre Primary in Wawne Road.

Staff underwent a short, intensive, training programme prior to the scheme's initial introduction and have now been running Success For All for one term.

Children at the primaries had their first assessment at the end of the initial six-week period. Evidence from this

assessment reinforced the impression formed by the teaching staff that pupils of all abilities made considerable progress over the first few weeks of the programme.

Some teachers commented particularly upon the favourable effects of the programme on low ability pupils. Others have observed significant gains among those of higher ability.

Mick Hobbs, head teacher of Broadacre Primary, said he had recorded some spectacular improvements in his pupils' progress. A few children at the school have already moved through two National Curriculum levels - from 3 to 5 - since Success For All was introduced. Meanwhile higher ability pupils have shot ahead at an amazing rate.

Teachers also commented on the increased confidence and motivation of children in the programme. They believe this is due to its ability to make pupils feel they have achieved and can achieve. One deputy head teacher observed that much of the success of the programme was in the sheer weight of emphasis placed on speech skills.

Value is placed not only on the written work children produce, but also on quality discussion and the development of their learning and understanding.

This builds children's confidence so that they can enjoy using language to communicate with others. Success For All's increased opportunities for discussion through co-operative learning and teamwork are perceived to have brought benefits to all areas of the curriculum.

This has been demonstrated by pupils' increased willingness to answer questions and their ability to problem-solve in other subjects, such as science.

Despite all the effort required to implement a new programme like this, the positive results already seen have generated teacher enthusiasm and commitment. Curriculum support assistants, who are trained to assist in the delivery of the programme, have benefited from this professional development and are enjoying taking part.

Meanwhile, other teachers have commented on the positive reaction of parents. They can see that their children are making progress and appreciate the regular home work they receive.

Teachers also report on the good pupil behaviour they have experienced during SFA lessons. They believe the scheme's tight structure and quick pace mean that activities change regularly and, as a result, pupils are totally engaged by tasks given.

Some teachers believe SFA has had a knock-on effect on pupil behaviour throughout the whole school. The evidence gathered so far indicates that this programme is having a positive impact on pupils' progress in literacy.

The other benefits arising from the programme appear to be increased motivation to learn and improvements in behaviour.

Jack Harrison, head teacher of Biggin Hill Primary, concluded; "This programme is the best thing since sliced bread. At last there is joined up thinking regarding the teaching of literacy.

"The children love it. The staff are motivated through seeing the success the children are having."