

NPQSL Case Study

To improve standards in Reading by closing gaps in attainment in KS1 and KS2

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When I started my project in September 2018, I was an Assistant Headteacher working in a small community school in County Durham. I had worked in the school for three-and-a-half years. The school is in an area of high deprivation with high levels of unemployment; 39% of the pupils are Pupil Premium. In February 2019, I was seconded to another school in County Durham as the Teaching and Learning Lead. The school is a larger, two-form entry primary school and its most recent inspection by the local authority graded the school as Requires Improvement. The focus of my work from February 2019 was to close gaps in Reading between school and national data, boys and girls and Pupil Premium and non-Pupil Premium children. This focus was chosen as a high priority on the School Improvement plan; standards in Reading were on a three-year downward trend from 2016 to 2018. In 2018, 59% of pupils achieved the expected standard in Reading at the end of Key Stage 2 compared with 75% of pupils nationally and 91% of pupil from a similar school in the locality. Additionally, 69% of pupils in Year 1 passed the phonics screening check, compared with 82% of pupils nationally and 84% of pupils from a similar school in the locality.

With a focus on improving progress in Reading across Key Stages 1 and 2, I needed to consider how data was already collected and used in school in terms of monitoring, assessment and school improvement planning. I did not want to increase staff workload, and I needed to make sure that staff were clear that this data was being collected and used to improve outcomes for our children. After ranking strategies to measure the quality of teaching on the Teaching and Curriculum Excellence face-to-face day, I concluded that the three best techniques to use in my setting were work scrutiny, learning walks and data analysis. I decided to use these techniques to get a comprehensive overview of the teaching of Reading.

By introducing and providing training for staff in order to have the knowledge and skills needed to deliver a high-quality synthetic phonics programme, progress in phonics was rapid. Regular learning walks quickly identified and addressed misconceptions and areas for improvement and meetings were held weekly to share progress and identify next steps. The impact of this was that the percentage of Year 1 pupils who passed the Phonics Screening Check increased from 68% in 2018 to 81% in 2019. The percentage of boys who passed increased from 56% (2018) to 70% (2019). The percentage of girls who passed increased from 76% (2018) to 95% (2019) and the gap between Pupil Premium children and non-Pupil Premium children narrowed from 22% (2018) to 4% (2019). The introduction of a new reading initiative for Years 2 to 6, which focused on understanding of texts, promoted independence and provided crucial data about each child's progress in reading and next steps for groups and individuals. The impact of this was that the gap between school and national data in 2019 narrowed to 7.5% based on the 2018 national average. The gap between boys and girls narrowed from 26% (2018) to 15% (2019). The gap between Pupil Premium and non-Pupil Premium narrowed from 43% (2018) to 10% (2019).

Throughout my project, I felt that exploring how to build trust with staff and developing effective communication had the greatest impact on me as a leader. After reading the 'How to Build Trust' document by Browning (2014) on the Leading with Impact face-to-face day, I was particularly keen to embed these strategies into my day-to-day practice. The strategies I found to be most effective were being visible around school and showing care for colleagues. I felt that I needed to be honest, open and transparent from the beginning, with all team members and stakeholders. The impact of this was that staff began to implement new strategies immediately and were positive when promoting Reading across the school. When communicating with others, my own positivity and enthusiasm was important to convey; one team member said "You are so passionate about the children and everyone can see that." After discussing with colleagues from other schools effective ways of communicating with parents, and reading the Education Endowment Foundation's report on Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning, I was drawn to the use of social media as an effective communication tool.

This project also helped me to identify my strengths as a leader and use these to increase the capability of others. When I completed the online resilience audit, I scored highly. After discussion with my in-school coach, I established that I wanted to support team leaders in becoming more resilient and confident in their own decision-making. I read Bell's 'Six Resilience Factors for Leadership' (2016) before coaching team leaders to develop their problem solving skills. I encouraged team members to think about possible solutions to problems before seeking advice. I was drawn to the Guardian article 'How can senior leaders improve their reflective practice?' (2013) and encouraged team members to use the urgent/not urgent, important/not important Carroll diagram to develop purposefulness. I also considered the strengths of each individual and directed others to the person I felt was the most suited to support them. I offered trust to team leaders, encouraging them to decide on the best course of action to solve a problem and then reflecting on it. This resulted in team leaders becoming more confident in their decision-making and when seeking advice from me, they had a list of possible solutions prepared.

Completing the NPQSL programme has increased my capacity as a leader. It has supported me in becoming more reflective, which in turn has allowed me to develop key skills, such as delegation. Taking part in the programme has also given me confidence; after completing my NPQSL project I was successful in my application for the post of Deputy Headteacher in the school I was seconded to, and I started the job in September 2019!