

Early literacy support programme



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This small-scale research project focuses on The Early Literacy Support (ELS) Programme (DfES, 2007) within an urban primary school. Over the past few years there has been a large amount of investment provided by the Government to help raise children's attainment in literacy. As a result, additional support programmes and interventions have been developed. The ELS Programme is an intervention produced by the National Strategies aimed at Year 1 children, who with additional support, should reach or exceed age related expectations in literacy.

Aims

This research aimed to study the ELS programme to identify how children are selected to participate in in the programme and to investigate the staff and children's perceptions of the intervention and impacts as a result of the programme. This research examined three key questions;

How is Early Literacy Support supporting children's specific needs?

What are the perceptions of teaching staff on how Early Literacy Support has impacted on children's enjoyment, development and attainment in literacy?

What are the perceptions of the children on Early Literacy Support and their enjoyment and development in literacy?

Rationale

I have a keen interest in literacy and am interested in learning about different ways to support children who struggle to easily acquire literacy skills within the mainstream classroom. The main reason for conducting research into this area was to enable me to gain a better awareness of

literacy interventions for young children, which will ultimately increase my understanding and inform my future practice as a teacher. The class where I was on placement had a large number of children who required additional literacy support, so it seemed the ideal opportunity to further investigate the literacy interventions that children were involved in. Furthermore, although research has previously identified the positive impact of ELS and other phonics interventions, there is no documented research assessing children's or adult's views on the programme. The present research aimed to address this literature gap.

Literature Review

' Learning to read, write and spell are among the most critically important and empowering skills that children will learn at school' (Pumfrey & Elliott, 1990, p. ix). Literacy skills provide the grounding for education and future life, however, a large proportion of children in the education system experience literacy difficulties. Children who struggle to acquire literacy skills are a continuing educational concern in today's modern society (Pumfrey & Elliott, 1990). Browne (2009) identifies that teachers' largest concern is surrounding children who fail to make progress in reading and writing. There are a wide variety of possible causes of children's literacy difficulties, for example language delay, visual impairment, absence of books at home and general learning difficulties (Browne, 2009). It is therefore essential for teachers to assess the pupil's difficulties and identify underlying causes in order to provide support that is tailored towards their individual needs.

At Key Stage 1 in 2009, 84% of children achieved level 2 or above in reading and 81% of children achieved level 2 or above in writing (DfCSF, 2009).

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These figures remained relatively stable between 2007 and 2009. Although the majority of children are achieving age-expected levels, there is still a proportion of children who are under-achieving in literacy during their early school years. The gap between children who are struggling in literacy during their early years of schooling and their progressing peers will widen as children continue through their school life, which will have a negative impact on their self-esteem as well as educational attainment (Moore & Wade, 1995; Rose, 2006). Graham (2008) states that approximately 35, 000 children (6% of Year 6's) each year are leaving primary school with literacy levels below their age expected potential. Moore and Wade (1995) highlight that difficulties in literacy will also impact attainment in other areas of the curriculum, as reading and writing are crucial skills. It is therefore essential that children receive suitable, individualised support as early as possible to prevent later, exacerbated difficulties (Moore & Wade, 1995; Graham, 2008). Rose (2006) argues that children's reading and writing difficulties can be avoided through early assessment and by implementing appropriate interventions to support their individual needs. The use of early interventions can be seen as a preventative approach to avoid later difficulties (Burroughs-Lange & Douetil, 2007; Savage & Carless, 2008). This view has been recognised by the Government and schools are now formally required to provide focused support to children before Year 3 (Graham, 2008).

Following the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998, the Government introduced additional initiatives with the aim of alleviating literacy difficulties in today's young population, in order to raise attainment (Shiel, 2003; Soler & Paige-Smith, 2005; Graham, 2008). The Government

instigated three waves of support to help schools plan and implement adequate provision for every child (DfES, 2007; Graham, 2008). Wave 1 describes the provision of ‘Quality First Teaching’ which consists of systematic phonics and a rich language environment that all children should receive within whole-class literacy lessons. The DfES (2007) argues that ‘good teaching is the most effective way to raise children’s achievement’ (p. 9). Wave 2 is designed to help children who have experienced quality teaching but are still behind their peers, although they have the potential to reach age related expectations. This level of support is in addition to daily literacy lessons and usually consists of group work following a structured programme that is delivered by a teaching assistant. Wave 3 is designed for children who have Special Educational Needs and require personalised one-to-one support (DfES, 2007; Graham, 2008).

A recent focus in schools has been on Wave 2 interventions, with the aim of helping children to make progress in literacy (Rose, 2006). A commonly implemented Wave 2 intervention is The Early Literacy Support (ELS) Programme (DfES, 2007) produced by the National Strategies. The approach is used for children in Year 1 (age 5-6 years) whose literacy skills are developing slower than expected during their first term in Key Stage 1 (Shiel, 2003; Graham, 2008). The children identified to participate in ELS are expected to progress to, and possibly exceed, age-related expectations following small, focused group sessions (DfES, 2007; Hatcher et al. 2006a). A teaching assistant delivers the group sessions in close collaboration with the class teacher, which is essential for successful application of the programme (DfES, 2007).

The ELS programme consists of planned, systematic sessions that work alongside the Primary Literacy Strategy and incorporates aspects of Letters and Sounds (DfES, 2007). The sessions focus on supporting and developing children's phonological skills, helping them to link sounds to graphemes, decode words and subsequently improve their reading, spelling and writing (Hatcher et al. 2006a). This is essential, as studies assessing a variety of interventions have repeatedly identified that successful literacy interventions focus on phonological knowledge as a starting point to reading and writing (Hatcher et al. 2006b; Savage & Carless, 2008). Ehri et al. (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 52 intervention studies and concluded that phonemic awareness was the most significant contributor to reading and writing development. Rose (2006) stresses that effective interventions must build upon phonic work that the children have experienced within the mainstream classroom. Furthermore, he argues that interventions will only be successful if the work completed in the sessions is sustained and built upon back in the classroom when the intervention finishes (Rose, 2006).

Research has shown that the ELS programme has positive impacts in improving children's literacy skills, particularly reading (Burroughs-Lange & Douetil, 2007). Soler and Paige-Smith (2005) documented that children who were experiencing mild difficulties in acquiring literacy skills, progressed in literacy following the ELS programme. Further evidence comes from Hatcher et al. (2006a), who evaluated the effectiveness of the ELS programme compared to another reading intervention. They found that the reading skills of 6 year olds were raised in line with their peers by the time they had finished the programme. However, in this study there was no unseen control

group, so results cannot be compared to children with low literacy skills who did not engage in the programme (Hatcher et al. 2006a).

On the negative side, a constraint with the ELS programme is that the sessions are delivered by teaching assistants, rather than trained teachers. Researchers have argued that children who are struggling should be taught by skilled professionals who have knowledge of how to support and improve children's attainment (Stainthorp, 2000) However, research has consistently shown that interventions delivered by teaching assistants can be effective in improving children's literacy attainment (Hatcher et al., 2006b; Savage & Carless, 2008). Rose (2006) highlighted that successful interventions were regularly carried out by teaching assistants who worked effectively with groups of children. Evidence comes from Hatcher et al. (2006b) who assessed the effectiveness of a reading intervention and found that the majority of children had caught up with their peers by the end of the programme, although a proportion of children still required extra support. They concluded that teaching assistants are more than capable of successfully teaching a group intervention in order to raise attainment. Additional support comes from a longitudinal study conducted by Savage and Carless (2008). They found that the majority of pupils who had engaged in teaching assistant directed interventions in Year 1, achieved national average results at the end of Year 2.

Research to date stresses the importance of early interventions and highlights the success of teaching assistant directed group sessions. However, an important consideration regarding additional support is ensuring that the type of intervention given is related to the child's specific

needs in order to raise attainment (Bradley, 1990). Furthermore, although research has previously investigated the effectiveness of ELS, there is a lack of research that has examined the teachers', teaching assistants' or children's perceptions of the intervention and subsequent impacts. The present research aimed to further examine the ELS programme to address this literature gap by studying the intervention in an urban primary school, where staff had recently implemented the programme in order to raise literacy skills for a group of Year 1 children (see Appendix 1 for project plan).

The research aimed to investigate:

How is Early Literacy Support supporting children's specific needs?

What are the perceptions of teaching staff on how Early Literacy Support has impacted on children's enjoyment, development and attainment in literacy?

What are the perceptions of the children on Early Literacy Support and their enjoyment and development in literacy?

In order to answer the above research questions, ELS sessions were observed and staff and children were interviewed. Furthermore, children's literacy targets were obtained and their reading and writing levels were compared from before and during participation in ELS.

Methodology

Design

This small-scale research project employed a case-study design, examining the ELS intervention within one urban primary school. Demetriou (2009)

identifies that case studies enable researchers to collect and record in-depth data within a real-life context.

Participants

A purposive sample (Burton et al. 2009) of three Year 1 children from an urban primary school were recruited for the study as they had been selected by their class teacher to participate in the ELS programme. The sample also consisted of the Year 1 class teacher and teaching assistant who delivered the programme.

Data collection methods

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods was used in this study. Mason (2006) recommends using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods to enable a clear view of the data.

Furthermore, Evans (2009) highlights that using different categories of participants (teachers, teaching assistants and students), alongside a range of data collection methods enables triangulation and therefore increases validity and reliability of the methods and data collected.

The majority of the data collection involved qualitative research methods, in order to gain rich, detailed data regarding individuals' beliefs and opinions surrounding the ELS programme (Evans, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the class teacher, teaching assistant and three children who participated in ELS. This form of interview enables the researcher to respond to interviewees' answers to gain more detailed information (Burton et al. 2009). A set of key questions were planned (Appendix 5, 6 and 7) and additional questions were asked during the interviews depending on the

participant's response. Open-ended questions were asked to enable participants to express their own opinions, leading to more detailed, in-depth data (Burton et al. 2009). All interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and later transcribed.

Three sequential ELS sessions were directly observed, with the observer as a non-participant. Although this is a time consuming method, Burton et al. (2009) argue that 'observation can be one of the most powerful tools in research' (p. 95) as it can yield rich, real-life data that can be essential for the research. The observations were noted using a continuous narrative and were also recorded using a dictaphone to ensure objectivity.

Quantitative methods were used to examine children's literacy targets and attainment levels. Children's literacy levels before participating in ELS (Autumn Term 2010) were compared to levels after completing a few weeks of the programme (Spring Term 2011). This data was also compared to adults' and children's perceived improvements as a result of the programme.

Data analysis

Observations and interviews were transcribed and coded using the open coding method, by identifying emerging codes from the data related to the key research questions (Burton et al. 2009). The observations were transcribed and coded according to the ELS session activities that the children engaged in, such as sounds, spelling and writing sentences (Appendix 8). All interviews were transcribed and systematically coded according to themes related to the key questions, for example children's needs, development, enjoyment and attainment (Appendix 9).

Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, an ethical consideration form was completed (Appendix 2) using Bera (2004) guidelines, which was signed off by my MA Tutor. As the research was being completed in a school, the research proposal was explained to the Head Teacher and she gave informed consent for the research to be carried out in her school (Appendix 3). As the research involved children under 16 years of age, parents of the three children involved were sent a letter explaining the research and asking for their permission for their child to be interviewed and observed. All parents returned the letters signed (Appendix 4). The research was also briefly explained to the children and they were informed that they didn't have to answer any questions if they didn't want to. Interviews with both staff and children were completed at a convenient time for the participants and were kept short so as to not impact on their usual school/work routine. Interviews with children were conducted in a quiet room that children were familiar with to ensure that they were comfortable. Furthermore, observations of ELS sessions were conducted during normal timetabled sessions to minimise intrusion or distress for children. All data collected was coded to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Once the data was transcribed and reported, all interview recordings were deleted (Bera, 2004).

Results

Observations of ELS sessions are shown in Appendix 8. Interview transcripts with the class teacher (CT), teaching assistant (TA) and three children (A, D, and E) are shown in Appendix 9. The three children's writing targets are

shown in Appendix 10 and their literacy levels from September 2010 to April 2011 are shown in Appendix 11.

How is Early Literacy Support supporting children's specific needs?

Children's needs

During the interview, the class teacher (CT) stated that the ELS programme was implemented at the school as there was a need in Year 1, particularly to raise the levels in writing. The three children were selected to participate in ELS as they were working on a W level in literacy and they lacked confidence in reading and writing. She said ' they all have potential, they are beginning to use their sounds but need more input with decoding words to read and sounding out words to spell.... independently they weren't able to produce a sentence on their own.' Furthermore, child E had a lot of time off school so was selected in order to fill the gaps in his learning that he had missed.

The children's writing targets prior to starting the programme (Table 1), were all focused towards using sounds to spell and writing a simple sentence with correct punctuation independently. The teaching assistant (TA) said she was unaware of the children's literacy targets, but knew the children has been selected for the programme to increase their confidence in reading and writing.

Table 1 – Children’s writing targets.**Writing Targets – January 2011****Child A**

To use full stops and capital letters in my sentences.

Child D

To use a Thrass chart to help me spell.

Child E

To write a sentence on my own.

ELS session activities

During a typical ELS session, the TA stated that they look at letter sounds, apply an action to each sound, learn key words and write simple sentences using the key words. She said ‘ a lot of the sounds and words we use in the sessions are also Thrass words, and the children often recognise that.’

During ELS observations (Appendix 8), the majority of the activities observed were focused on sounds and spelling. Session 18 incorporated writing simple sentences using the sounds and spellings that they had learnt in the previous sessions. Children were occasionally required to read key words, however there wasn’t a specific reading activity incorporated into the observed sessions. Both the CT and TA stated that the ELS programme is followed strictly and not tailored according to the children’s specific needs or individual progress. However, the CT said that a feedback and assessment procedure is currently being implemented whereby the TA records a brief summary of the sessions to pass on to the CT.

What are the perceptions of teaching staff on how Early Literacy Support has impacted on children’s enjoyment, development and attainment in literacy?

Enjoyment

The CT and TA both identified that the largest impact of the ELS programme has been on the children’s confidence in reading and writing, both in the ELS sessions, whole class lessons and at home, which has increased their enjoyment in the subject. CT said ‘ they now believe they can write and seem to enjoy writing.’ Furthermore, she stated that ‘ the children are also starting to write things at home and show them to the rest of the class, which they never used to do.’ Within whole class lessons, she has also observed that the children are more involved during discussions and are ‘ definitely more positive towards their work’, especially child A.

The majority of the children seem to enjoy their extra literacy sessions. However, the TA noted that child A sometimes seems frustrated because she is missing out on class work, but otherwise she is enthusiastic in the sessions. The CT said that the children ‘ always come back from the session with a big smile on their face’, which highlights their enjoyment of the ELS sessions. Furthermore, when in the classroom, the children are now showing pride and pleasure in their literacy work. The TA stated that children ‘ come over and say look at all the work I’ve done, or can you read my writing.’

Development

During interviews, both the CT and TA were very positive regarding the impact that ELS has had on the children’s literacy skills since starting the programme in January. Children are now confidently answering questions,

they are able to write sentences independently and use their sound knowledge to spell and read words. CT stated ‘ they can now write a sentence independently without getting stressed out and they are beginning to spell all the simple words correctly.’ She also identified that children are more focused on their class work and are able to confidently complete writing tasks independently. CT described child E who was previously not focused on his work, whereas ‘ this week when he wrote about the school trip he wrote half a page on his own, which he would never have done before.’ This development has also been noted by the TA during ELS sessions, with child A now willing to try any activity, child D can correctly sound out words and child E has caught up with peers after a lot of time off. The TA stated that ‘ all children have definitely benefitted from the programme already.’

Attainment

As shown in Table 2, all of the three children’s levels in reading and writing have increased from W levels (not yet accessing the Year 1 curriculum, so assessed against P scales) in November 2010, to at least a level 1c in April 2011 during the period that ELS was implemented. The greatest improvement has been in writing, with child A and E achieving a level 1c+.

What are the perceptions of the children on Early Literacy Support and their enjoyment and development in literacy?

Enjoyment

During interviews with the children, it was clear that all children enjoy the ELS sessions, however child A stated that she didn’t want to be in the group anymore as she doesn’t think she needs to be in it. All three children stated

that they enjoy sounding out letters in the sessions and described how much they enjoy helping ‘Pip’ the puppet with her sounds. Child D said ‘I like it when we talk to Pip and help her sound out letters’ and likewise child E stated ‘I like sounding out letters and reading things.’ Writing was consistently the activity that children enjoyed the least as they found it the most difficult. However, when describing her favourite piece of writing, child A stated ‘I enjoy writing lots of things because I know how to write now.’

Development

When describing what the children thought they had improved at in literacy, all the children identified that they can now sound out letters to help them with their reading and writing. Child A felt that she had got better at sounding out letters and stated this was because she had been practising with the TA. She also talked about finding writing difficult in Foundation Stage and said ‘now I just remember how to write a word and can write it down.’ Child D said ‘I’ve got better at my reading because I can now sound out words to help me read. I am on List 9 hotwords already.’ Child E stated ‘I have got better at writing. I always make the sounds for the letters and words to help me to write.’

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate how the ELS programme is supporting children’s needs and assess adults’ and children’s perceptions of the programme. Interviews, observations and obtaining children’s targets revealed that the ELS programme is at present supporting the children’s specific needs. Furthermore, overall both staff and children expressed positive opinions regarding the ELS programme.

The ELS session activities focused mainly on sounds and spelling, with writing a simple sentence incorporated into some sessions. This links directly with children's needs before starting the programme and their individual writing targets, which Bradley (1990) argues is crucial in order for an intervention to be successful. Furthermore, the phonics covered in the session was linked to Thrass, which is the phonics programme that children experience in the mainstream classroom. This is crucial, as Rose (2006) argues that it is essential for children to have continuity to enable them to transfer their skills from the classroom into the session and vice versa. Although the sessions at present are supporting children's needs, their targets will change over time and it cannot be concluded that the sessions will continue to support their needs. The ELS programme is followed strictly, with no room for incorporating work to specifically target the children's individual needs if they are not covered by the programme. This is therefore in contrast to the view held by Bradley (1990). Although the programme must be followed, it might be beneficial if the TA knew the children's targets so she could focus on those particular skills, within the planned sessions.

Both the adults' and children's perceptions of the programme were very positive. The adults have seen improvements in children's literacy skills during the past few months, particularly with the children's confidence in all aspects of literacy. The adults stated that the children are now more confident at sounding out words and will independently complete writing tasks that previously they struggled with. The children were able to identify what they felt they had improved at, which were in line with the adults' opinions of the children's development. This increase in confidence appears

to have had an impact on the children's enjoyment in aspects of literacy, although writing was consistently their least favourite aspect. Only one child expressed her frustration with being involved in the group as she felt she was missing out on class work. The ELS sessions are timetabled for 20 minutes at the same time each day, meaning children are always missing foundation subjects as part of their topic work. Although the intervention is clearly aiding children's development, the children are potentially missing out on crucial learning experiences within the mainstream classroom. It would be interesting to investigate whether children's opinions of the intervention were more positive if the interventions were timetabled on a rotational basis to ensure that children were not always missing the same lessons.

The adults' positive opinions surrounding the impact of ELS are supported by the increase in children's progress and attainment in literacy. The children's attainment in both reading and writing had increased from W levels, to at least a 1c during the period that ELS was implemented. The current research therefore supports previous findings that have documented improvements in children's literacy skills and attainment following participation in the ELS programme (Soler & Paige-Smith, 2005; Hatcher et al. 2006a; Burroughs-Lange & Douetil, 2007). However in this study, it cannot be concluded that increase in literacy attainment is solely attributed to the ELS programme, because other variables were not controlled. Alongside the intervention, children were also experiencing quality teaching during their whole class sessions, with reading and writing supported across the timetable. Furthermore, the school has recently implemented the Read Write Inc.

phonics scheme to use during the literacy lessons, which focuses heavily on sounds and spellings. Therefore, it may be a combination of the ELS intervention, quality first teaching and literacy phonics schemes that have led to an improvement in literacy skills and subsequently an increase in reading and writing attainment. Further, controlled studies need to be conducted to assess the specific impact that the ELS intervention has on children's literacy skills.

Additionally, the present research only assessed a snap shot of the intervention and did not assess the impact of the programme on literacy skills and attainment in the longer term. Although the research documents an increase in skills and attainment, it cannot be concluded that the programme helped children to reach or go beyond age expected levels in literacy by the end of a school year. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal research to see whether children participating in ELS during the spring term of Year 1, achieve age-related expectations of at least a level 1b by the time they finish Year 1. Although Savage and Carless (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of ELS and assessed results at the end of Year 2, research has yet to assess children's attainment across the whole of Year 1.

The current research also supports the literature that suggests that teaching assistants can deliver interventions successfully in order to raise attainment (Hatcher et al. 2006b; Savage & Carless, 2008). However, prior to starting the programme the teaching assistant received no training and simply had to deliver the programme following the session plans. She was not confident in using Thrass as she had had no phonics training. In agreement with Savage <https://assignbuster.com/early-literacy-support-programme/>

and Carless (2008), it can be argued that to further improve children's attainment, teaching assistants who are delivering interventions need to be trained in phonics programmes and should be aware of approaches to support children's learning.

As this was a small-scale case study conducted in one urban primary school, the findings from this research cannot be generalised to other children or schools (Demetriou, 2009). Furthermore, case study designs have been criticised for being influenced by the researchers' subjectivity (Demetriou, 2009). However, to overcome this issue, the present research adopted multiple research methods and recording approaches in order to ensure objectivity, which therefore increases the validity and reliability of the findings (Burton et al. 2009). A strength of the research was that observations of ELS sessions were conducted sequentially over a 3 day period in order to increase reliability and observations were noted and recorded to ensure objectivity. However, the researcher's presence may have influenced the children and staff's behaviour, meaning the observed sessions may not have been a true reflection of typical intervention sessions (Wilson & Fox, 2009). Furthermore, the interviews yielded highly valid, in-depth data, however once again the results cannot be generalised as the answers were specific to the children and staff interviewed (Wilson & Fox, 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this small-scale study revealed the positive benefits that the ELS programme has had both on the children's confidence and their attainment in literacy. The research has increased my understanding of

literacy interventions to support children's learning and increase their attainment. Interventions would be something I would consider implementing in my own classroom if there was a need to boost children's literacy skills. Furthermore, I would carefully consider the timing of the interventions so as not to greatly impact of their learning in other subjects that the children may enjoy.

The recent changes being proposed in the Education Bill currently going through Parliament, has led to a period of uncertainty with regards to the curriculum, National Strategies,