

Closing the Gap: A Practical Plan for Schools



Here are my suggestions as to what practical steps schools can take to get rid of the gap for good.

We need to:

- Admit we have a problem. No matter how hard we've worked, no matter how difficult it is to acknowledge – we need to recognise **and accept** that **what we are currently doing is not working**.
- See the SSLN (Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy) results as **an urgent wakeup call** and **take action now**.
- Review, with an honest and critical eye, all aspects of our teaching and provision for literacy at all stages. This may mean admitting that we don't currently know all the answers.
- Understand that **reading is comprised of two distinct elements: decoding** (phonics) and **comprehension** and we must ensure that both aspects of reading are adequately addressed in our policies and programmes. (See the Simple View of Reading*)
- **Adopt a recognised synthetic phonics programme*** throughout the school and ensure that it is implemented properly. Or, as a minimum, reflect honestly on your current phonics provision to **see if it meets the criteria that research-informed programmes are based on**. (In brief: no sight words, no letter naming, no guessing or multi-cueing strategies – but one clear strategy of using phonics all-the-way-through-the-word for reading and for spelling.) Please note, this need not be an expensive undertaking – programmes, such as Phonics International, provide everything required in an online database that you print yourself. A whole school site licence starts at £99 for a year.
- If you are struggling with the previous point, then you need training to update you on why the above is the best approach and how it is supported by current international research and leading-edge classroom practice.
- **Train our teachers**, all of them, to ensure that regardless of age and stage, that **every** teacher knows how to teach or support a child that may be struggling with reading, writing and spelling.
- **Teach** knowledge of the **Alphabetic Code** – that is the sounds / phonemes in our language and their corresponding letter / letters (spelling alternatives).
- **Teach** the skills of reading, writing, spelling and handwriting (Teach reading, writing and spelling together – especially in the earliest stages) whilst ensuring our practice is **fit for purpose**. Do not lose the learning in the quest for engagement or active learning. **Learning to read is a very real, exciting and fulfilling journey all by itself**.
- **Provide extra 'little and often' practice for the slower to learn children**. It's not that they can't do it – it's just that they need a little more time, patience and practice to help embed crucial learning.
- **Teach parents** about the school's approach to teaching the mechanics of reading – and give **clear and explicit advice about how they can best support their child**, including an emphasis on **reading to** and **talking with** their children.
- Ensure that children are given **sufficient practice in blending for reading and segmenting for spelling**. Often the only practice we give our children is through their reading book – this is **not** sufficient. A good synthetic phonics programme will provide word, sentence and text level material for practice, as well as offering opportunities for vocabulary enrichment, comprehension and grammar. It should also be able to be used as spelling programme throughout the school and as an intervention for any struggling readers.

Closing the Gap: A Practical Plan for Schools continued

- As soon as possible, **replace old reading scheme books with reading books that are cumulatively decodable**. Old schemes are based on 'look and say' and sight words – they will **undermine** any phonics teaching that is taking place and encourage children to guess at unknown words. Guessing is never an appropriate strategy.
- **Assess where you are now using tools that are fit for purpose**. (With a focus on sight words, letter naming and multi-cueing strategies, **I do not consider POLAAR to be fit for purpose**. In addition the 'Phonemic Blending Test' uses only real CVC words which are insufficient – also there is no way of knowing if a child has learned these words by sight. Most tests that are designed to assess blending ability use a combination of unknown longer words and nonsense words.) Good formative assessment should mean that teachers are aware of how much of the Alphabetic Code has been taught and is becoming embedded, as well as how well the skills of reading (blending), spelling (segmenting) and handwriting are developing for each child. A link is provided to some useful assessments** below.
- Introduce the **Phonics Screening Check***** from England. It is free, readily available, easy to administer and will give you **robust data and a crucial benchmark for comparison**. It will identify which children need more help and it will highlight if teaching in your school, with your preferred methods, is doing what needs to be done to set children off on the path to being independent, free and fearless readers.
- From next session do your utmost to address the points above and from the very beginning of P1 be clear that this is the year that things will be different. Do not be tempted to group children by ability at this earliest of stages – a focus on teaching, learning, practice, consolidation and revision – and a mantra of 'keeping up' rather than 'catching up' will serve all children well.
- Ensure that all of the above takes place within **a rich literacy environment** that instils a love of texts and reading in all its forms – whether for pleasure, leisure or learning.
- Do not attempt to tick every box in the race to 'do it all'. Give yourselves the professional time, space and permission to focus on the priorities at hand.
- *Believe that every child in your school will become a reader, aim for 100% - and expect to get very close.*

*Synthetic Phonics Programmes that are research-informed (this list provides suggestions and is not exhaustive):

Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters, Jolly Phonics, Phonics International, Read Write Inc., Sound Discovery and Sounds Write

**Some free useful assessment documents:

www.phonicsinternational.com/assessment.html

***The Phonics Screening Check:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-2014-materials

*The Simple View of Reading is available to download here:

www.phonicsinternational.com/The_Simple_View_of_Reading_model.pdf

