What is the impact of structured Phonological Awareness Teaching (PA) on teaching practice and literacy achievement in all Years 0-1 students and groups of identified students in Years 2-3 with specific learning needs?

For the Ministry of Education
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Project title:
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Project reference:
Russley School (TLIF 1-019)

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Inquiry Team

The inquiry team comprised 14 classroom teachers and teacher aides of Year 0-3 students from Russley Primary School, and two University of Canterbury professors. The lead teacher was Leigh Fowler.

Background

The problem of practice was identified after a number of Year 0-3 students were identified to be ‘below’ or ‘well-below’ reading and writing expectations described by National Standards, despite multiple evidence-based interventions. The teachers saw the potential of extending their awareness, knowledge, capability and confidence to teach Phonological Awareness (PA) as part of their usual classroom literacy programmes to raise student achievement. Their hypothesis was that structured, regular teaching of PA would be explicitly transferred to support reading and writing student achievement. For this school, the innovation was in working together to address a common problem of practice and using a systemic inquiry process while strengthening their knowledge of PA teaching practices.

The inquiry

This collaborative inquiry investigated the potential of an explicit and structured PA programme to raise literacy achievement for Year 0-3 students, including those with specific learning needs (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, and speech language impairment). The level of PA, as well as reading and spelling progress of 97 Year 0-2 children as well as some identified groups of children at Year 2-3 was assessed. All 14 Year 0-3 teachers and teacher aides attended three professional learning and development (PLD) opportunities in Term 3, 2015 (facilitated by the University of Canterbury team members). These sessions were intended to strengthen teacher and teacher-aide understanding of PA teaching activities and structure, integration or transfer of PA across literacy domains, and ways to link PA to the teaching of phonics.
The project leader mentored and coached the Year 0-1 and Year 2-3 team leaders to develop their leadership capability to effectively manage change, support teacher confidence and capability from the onset of the project, enabling teachers to share resources, professional knowledge and expertise, collaboratively plan lessons while solving ongoing problems and challenges. Teachers taught PA within their usual teaching programmes for 30 minutes a day over a six month period in addition to integrating PA and phonics within reading and writing lessons. Ongoing evidence was gathered from teacher/teacher aide surveys, parent/whānau feedback, student attitude surveys, assessment tools (e.g. writing work samples, running records, spelling tests, PA assessment tool, etc.), teacher observation, and Professional Learning Group (PLG) documentation. Emerging findings were shared within the school, cluster school meetings and external professional learning groups.

**Key findings**

1. Teacher aides reported an 80% increase in their confidence and ability to carry out PA assessments, understanding of PA, as well as their confidence and ability to support students to transfer PA approaches to reading and writing tasks.

2. Teachers reported a 66% increase in their knowledge of PA, confidence and ability to teach PA and their knowledge of the impact PA has on early literacy success.

3. There was a 76% increase in the daily teaching of PA.

4. There was a 34% increase in teachers systematically integrating PA into classroom reading and writing programmes. Although this percentage increase does not accurately represent the shifts made, as a number of teachers indicated that they had overestimated their level of competence in this area before developing professional knowledge and understanding of PA.

5. Teachers were well supported in regular PLG’s to engage in substantive dialogue, monitor ongoing student progress and achievement while sharing expertise, practice and resources in order to effectively plan targeted lessons to meet diverse student learning needs.
6. All students (100%) demonstrated significant progress in PA test items and around 16% of students demonstrated accelerated progress (more than one sublevel gain) in reading and writing during the months of the collaborative inquiry.

7. The students with identified specific learning needs made the most progress with 80% making accelerated progress (more than one sublevel gain) in reading and 20% in writing.

8. Teacher observations and related discussion showed high evidence of improved and sustained teacher capability and reflective practice in order to effectively teach PA and integrate PA and phonics across literacy domains.

9. There was a 7% increase in student perceived ability and enjoyment when engaging in reading and writing activities.

**Key implications**

- PA instruction, initially identified to support students with specific learning needs, can accelerate literacy progress for all students, if it is adapted for use within classroom settings at the right point of time in a student’s literacy development.

- Intervening early appears likely to reduce the need for PA and phonics teaching in later years, although some students with specific learning needs will require ongoing additional support.

- Acceleration in literacy is dependent on differentiation and targeted teaching to meet student learning needs, while ensuring there is explicit transfer and integration of PA and phonics across reading and writing domains.

- Programmes which require considerable investment to build teacher knowledge, capability and skills need to be well resourced to provide time for the learning to become embedded into teachers’ repertoires. This involves PLD from external expertise and time for teachers to work together in as a PLG to collectively build their understanding and capability.
• Commitment from the school leadership team and the deliberate strengthening of leadership capacity at multiple levels of the school to effectively manage change is fundamental to the success of an intervention, such as PA.

• Working in a partnership with ECE services, parents, caregivers, whānau and the community to understand and support the development of PA may improve early literacy success for students within the first year of school.

Reference List


For further information

Contact the project leader, Leigh Fowler at leigh.fowler@education.govt.nz
Please note that Leigh has recently been employed at the Ministry of Education.
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