

A new way with reading

A radical US programme improves literacy at primary school, especially among boys, says Emma Burns

What are we to do about boys and English? It is a question that preoccupies parents and educationists. Ofsted is focusing on it. Study after study shows boys losing interest, then falling behind their female classmates.

Yet in a few schools it is a different story. Take Duncombe Primary in north Islington, London, where the 475 pupils represent 55 nationalities and speak, between them, 33 languages. There, the boys are outdoing the girls. This summer 62 per cent of 11-year-old boys achieved level 4 - the government's target for that age group - in their English SATs, compared with 58 per cent of girls. Last summer, girls were 14 per cent ahead of boys.

Then there is Dorchester Primary on northern Europe's largest housing estate at Bransholme, Hull. Here, where 48 per cent of children get free school meals, the percentage of boys achieving level 4 in English rose from 41 last year to 86 this year. The results for girls were 60 and 64 per cent respectively. Overall, those achieving level 4 in English rose from 49 to 72 per cent. What the schools have in common is that in September they started using Success for All (SFA), a literacy programme devised by academics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and now used in 20 schools in Britain. What distinguishes it from the national literacy strategy is that children are grouped by ability, not age, and work together co-operatively.

In practice, that means that at 9.10 am every day at Duncombe, and after assembly every morning at Dorchester, most children go to a different class, where, for the 90 minutes of literacy, they work with children from at least two year groups, sometimes three or even four. Very able seven-year-olds from Year Two might be with struggling ten-year-olds from Year Five.

The impact on older pupils matched with younger ones is a big worry for most teachers encountering the scheme for the first time. Camilla Marland, the SFA facilitator and literacy co-ordinator at Duncombe, says: "My concern was, how will it be for a boy who is weak at reading being put in a class with somebody's kid sister? That has occurred, but it really hasn't been a problem. The older children love the fact that for once in their lives they are achieving."

For teachers, this system of grouping means that the children in front of them are all working at the same level and need to concentrate on the same things in the

same way. Every lesson is planned to have a fast pace and frequent change of activity. As the scheme's fans point out, this leaves teachers free to concentrate on lesson delivery.

During the sessions, staff never ask those who know the answer to put their hands up. Instead all children work with a partner or team, with whom they discuss their answer to every question. It gives them the chance to organise their thoughts and to exchange ideas.

There are two main techniques: "Think, pair, share" is about working with one or two partners. The children must listen attentively, because they may be asked for their partner's views.

Then there is "numbered heads", in which two sets of partners make up a team. The teacher may suddenly ask all the "number threes" to stand up and report what their team thinks. Points are awarded for good listening and speaking. "There is no hiding place," says Marland. "That is one of the things my Year Six boys don't like about it - they can't switch off and let the girls answer everything. That is probably why they are doing so much better."

Another element to SFA is regular change. Every eight weeks, all the children are assessed for their progress in reading texts and word lists, and comprehension. Those who are ready move on. Those who are not stay and may find they are part of a new class. It can awaken boy's competitive instincts.

Barrie O'Shea, the head teacher at Duncombe, says: "I had a couple of boys, who hadn't been trying, lobbying me strongly about being left behind. The answer is: you have eight weeks to show that you have caught up with the rest of your group. Catch up and you will be with them again. Mess around and you won't. They caught up."

Sue Clough, the head teacher at Dorchester Primary, is not sure whether the startling results achieved by her boys this summer were due to them as individuals or to the impact of SFA: "They were a good cohort - it will be interesting to see how we do this year. I think SFA helps children, not just boys. It encourages them to listen and speak and negotiate, and it helps their confidence. It is a fantastic way to teach literacy, though I can't pretend it wasn't hard work at the beginning. It takes huge commitment from the staff."

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