Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Priority Area

School case studies

The case studies were collated and written by Prof Riikka Hofmann's research group
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The case studies in this document were written based on school leader interviews conducted in March 2025 and schools' documentation about their Priority Area projects.

The case study interviews explored project starting points, the identification and analysis of key problems to be addressed, the design of the projects, their implementation and mechanisms supporting it, outcomes to date and key learnings.

The exploration and analysis of the school case studies, as reported here, was informed by research on change mechanisms influencing school's implementation of research-informed interventions to enhance equitable learning outcomes (Hofmann, 2024) and findings from earlier analyses of school projects in the region during the preceding Opportunity Area programme (Hofmann & Ilie, 2022).

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Case Study: Manea Primary School

The school and the challenge: KS1 writing and phonics

Manea Primary School is a community, mixed-gender, primary school in Cambridgeshire with 230-240 students aged 4-11. The school faced pressing challenges in both writing and phonics, with outcomes in Key Stage assessments below national averages. In both areas, fragmented practices and inconsistency in approach hindered progress.

Analysing the sources of the problem to inform the intervention

Owning the challenge together shifted the mindset

Initial efforts to improve met some resistance. Staff were familiar with their routines and hesitant to change. However, once the leadership team shared the school's performance data openly, the tone began to shift. A collective realisation emerged: change was necessary and urgent. The school used twilight staff meetings and INSET days to explain the rationale behind the change programme, which helped staff feel part of a shared mission. In the words of the team, "this is our data, this is the reality of where we are at, we have to make these changes, and we have to get everybody on board."

A consistent curriculum and targeted professional development supported writing

In writing, the school's End of Key Stage results were lower than national averages. The school found that students lacked stamina in extended writing, that planned/taught GPS (Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling) was not always evident in books, and that there was a lack of proof reading and self-editing of independent work, in particular the checking of spelling. They found that teachers could improve the quality of their feedback, improve their modelling and subject knowledge, and follow a consistent approach.

To address this, staff adopted a structured curriculum using *Grammarsaurus* for planning, quality texts, and a two-year rolling cycle. They introduced the *Nelson Handwriting Scheme* and *Jane Considine Spelling Programme* for Years 2-6. Targeted CPD focused on grammar, punctuation, editing, and feedback. Ongoing monitoring by the English Lead and Literacy team supported consistency, progression, and effective implementation across the school.

Similarly, a structured approach and targeted training was key for teaching phonics

In phonics, the school wanted to improve the percentage of year 1 pupils passing the phonics screening check. This would result in fewer children needing catch-up sessions and resitting the screening in year 2. They found that the teaching of phonics in Year R and Year

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1 did not follow the same SSP, and they also found that Year R, 1, and 2 followed different programmes (transitioning from phonics in KS1 to spelling programmes in KS2), which led to difficulties in the KS2 transition.

To address this, the staff used a structured approach to phonics and early reading through the consistent use of *Little Wandle* resources, phonically decodable books, and targeted intervention for students who did not pass the PSC. Staff receive comprehensive training, including *Little Wandle* and *Jane Considine* modules; even support staff in Year 6, who may never deliver a phonics lesson, were trained to understand the importance of the early reading journey. Ongoing monitoring by the English and Phonics supported fidelity, progression, and staff confidence in delivering the programme. Microsoft Forms/Survey Monkey surveys are used to gauge confidence as the project develops, and these are completed every half-term and monitored by the English lead.

Outcomes of the intervention so far

A consistent experience for pupils is now taking shape

While longer-term outcomes are still developing, staff have already observed key shifts. Writing books show improvements in stamina, structure, and presentation. Pupils are independently applying GPS strategies and engaging more confidently with feedback. There is clearer modelling by teachers, increased use of long writing tasks, and more visible progression.

In phonics, teaching assistants and teachers use shared mantras and routines from Reception to Year 6, creating a coherent experience for learners. Children now know what to expect, wherever they are in the school. Staff confidence in teaching phonics has grown, and formative assessment is used more precisely to identify and support pupils at risk of falling behind.

Mechanisms facilitating/hindering change

Staggered implementation helped staff manage change well

The school now has a culture of change and must balance multiple ongoing initiatives. Leaders carefully staged the roll-out of new initiatives to avoid overload. The writing and handwriting schemes began in September, phonics in October, and reading in January. This gave space for each change to bed in and allowed monitoring to focus on one area at a time. Staff workload remained manageable, and quality of implementation was kept high.

Flexibility and responsiveness helped maintain momentum

The school started the phonics intervention in July, but by October, discovered that the original plan was not going to work. This was because the original programme did not have books aligned to it, and so the school would have books not linked phonetically to their scheme, which the school did not want. So the school changed their programme in October. This adaptability – paired with transparent communication – sustained staff engagement and ensured the programme stayed aligned to pupil needs.

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Families and governors strengthened the effort

The phonics work extended beyond the classroom. Families were involved through welcome meetings and 'come and read' sessions, and received handouts to explain the approach. In March, the school shared early data on the benefits of parental engagement. Governors remained closely involved, receiving regular updates and supporting accountability. Reading and phonics are now central parts of the School Development Plan.

Important learnings

- **Consistency enables coherence**. Aligning approaches across classes and key stages reduced fragmentation.
- **Collective ownership drives change**. Open discussion of data fostered a shared commitment to improvement.
- **Start with a plan, but adapt as you go**. Flexibility helped the school respond to emerging insights.
- **Don't change everything at once**. Phased roll-out protected both staff energy and implementation quality.
- **Include everyone**. From teaching assistants to parents to governors, the school brought its whole community on the journey.

The changes underway at Manea are not just about programmes, but about culture. Staff speak a shared language of literacy, pupils experience greater consistency, and confidence is growing across the board. While the journey is ongoing, the school has already laid the foundations for long-term progress.

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