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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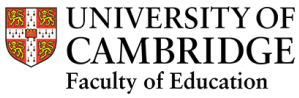

The case studies in this document were written based on school leader interviews conducted in March 2025 and schools' documentation about their Priority Area projects.

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: Spring Meadow Infant and Nursery School

The school and the challenge: KS1 writing

Spring Meadow Infant and Nursery School is a Local Authority maintained school in Ely, Cambridgeshire. The school caters to children aged 2 to 7 from Ely and nearby villages. It offers nursery classes and has a Special Educational Needs (SEN) unit supporting various needs including specific learning difficulties.

The problem the school considered as its greatest and most slowly improving challenge at the start of the programme was that KS1 writing outcomes were below national average level, as demonstrated by test outcomes.

Analysing the sources of the problem to inform the intervention

Need of training and senior support to enhance staff knowledge and confidence

At the start of the programme, the school observed inconsistencies in the way writing was being taught, and lack of confidence and specific content knowledge in writing instruction among its teachers. The school's own analysis suggested that teachers' expertise in the Talk4Writing approach, which the school was aiming to utilise, was insufficient due to previous lack of training, and that their planning for writing development was not adequate. The intervention design built on the identified need for a series of sessions for Talk 4Writing training aimed at improving staff confidence and writing-relevant subject knowledge. The assistant headteacher was expected to lead coaching sessions to support staff with planning to improve the writing lessons.

Changing school culture to enhance pupils' sense of themselves as writers

Besides, the school leadership observed a lack of motivation among pupils: pupils were not engaged in reading at school or at home, which suggested gaps in parental engagement as well. Changing the writing culture at the school was considered as critical so that all students could see themselves as learners with the confidence and motivation to cope as a writer. It was believed that peer observations, buying new books and using the updated library should promote experience sharing, and a literacy rich environment to support love of reading at school and beyond.

The outcomes anticipated short term, mid-term and long-term improvements in staff confidence with planning quality writing lessons showing fidelity to Talk4Writing model which, in turn, could improve student vocabulary, expression through writing, and increase learning outcomes in this domain above the national average levels.

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Outcomes of the intervention so far

Pupil enthusiasm for writing has demonstrably improved at school and at home

In terms of the availability of opportunities to read and write, the learning environment has been enriched by making available writing materials and books. Being able to purchase materials, books, pencils and pens has made this possible. The new books and materials have provoked interest and curiosity among the pupils, observed not only by teachers, but also by parents: parents have expressed surprise about their children's new interest in books and other written materials. On one occasion, for example, after a new writing activity, the children had talked excitedly at home about dinosaur footprints they had explored and written about at school. This was reported to the teachers by parents, who shared these observations and inquired teachers about what was going on in writing classes.

The school has acknowledged that to make the culture shift happen for students, there needs to be a culture shift for staff. Changing teaching is a lot slower than purchasing materials. The school leadership acknowledges that change is slow and new forms of teaching are not yet consistently observed. However, significant progress has been made.

Planning of writing lessons has been enriched, but not consistently improved

There have been changes in planning habits for writing classes. For instance, instead of focusing on technical subskills, such as spelling, punctuation, there has been more focus on writing at the level of discourse to put technical skills in context. There have also been changes in the way the teaching focused on capital letter formation and spelling, which required persuading parents as well about the effectiveness of new approaches. However, these changes in planning of writing have not as yet been observed consistently at all times and across all teaching staff.

Effective approaches to teaching writing are utilised more often, improving quality where in use

Lesson observations have provided evidence if improved quality in teaching writing with now much more consistent use of the new strategies than previously. While the writing strategies are still not always used successfully, the fact that they are being implemented means teachers are getting consistent opportunities to learn to use the new approaches and those are becoming established as core practice at the school. This has been supported by shared training for SLT which has enabled better monitoring of teaching improvements with aligned focus on what they needed to focus on in monitoring.

Writing outcomes have begun to improve

Following these changes, there have been significant improvements in the quality of writing in certain classes. For example, Year 2 was well below the curriculum standards at the start, yet in a short period of time were able to focus on the structure of writing instead of targeting writing subskills, such as spelling of individual words or capital letters.

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A school-wide shift away from deficit thinking about the pupils as writers has emerged

A bigger change has also been observed, which is likely to leverage future improvements. The changes in the culture of writing and resulting changes in children engagement and learning have offered the staff opportunities to observe the children as capable, offering reassurance about the abilities of all children, and enabling them to come to see all children as capable of learning to write. New discourses have emerged to support this, discussing all children being able to succeed in being on track and more nuanced understandings of how success may mean different things for different students at different times, with more nuanced approaches to teaching.

Mechanisms facilitating/hindering change

More generally, important progress has been made on issues which have facilitated the above changes, and which will act as mechanisms supporting ongoing development towards the goals.

Developing shared understandings, not just instructions of what 'to do', has enabled teachers to come to see their own role in ensuring no child falls behind

One such key mechanism in the school is the achievement of a shared understanding among the staff regarding the change process. This new process has entailed developing a shared approach among all the staff of identifying and addressing problems promptly to put things into place quickly when a child was starting to fall behind. This represents a significant shift from earlier practice in which children falling behind in writing was perceived as normal for the pupils in this school and not something that teachers could actively change.

The newly develop shared understanding that good writing outcomes for all children is something teachers can and do influence, and the shared knowledge of what should be done when this is not being achieved, is a real and concrete outcome from the intervention which will stop children from falling between the cracks and continue to develop. Collective participation in training has played a key role in enabling such shared knowledge to develop among all the staff regarding writing development.

Developing, articulating and consistently implementing explicit norms of the new practices has supported pupils' active participation in the new teaching approaches

Changing norms in a way that everyone knows what they are and should be doing to support writing needs to involve not only the teachers but also the pupils themselves. The development of a consistent and explicitly articulated lesson structure has been another key mechanisms to support change in practice, and ultimately outcomes.

> *'Consistent lesson structure, I think, didn't say that earlier, but that was the bit that I think if you ask me what was the thing that has had the biggest impact, it's a consistent lesson structure. So, children know what they're coming into. Children know how the units work. You know, they imitate the texts, they innovate the texts and then write their own.'*

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Involving everyone has supported real culture change: teachers, TAs, pupils, parents, governors

Successfully changing culture also involved the other people in a school and understanding this was one of the key factors in enabling consistent and sustained change. This concerns particularly teaching assistants who are often a group of people not included, or utilised to support, change efforts. A big culture shift at the school in terms of TA involvement is exemplified by a narrative about a TA who consistently went to see the headteacher after classes to discuss what she could improve in her work with a SEN child. This kind of engagement and reflection in TAs was not observed before the intervention and is now supporting the whole-school approach to ensuring no child is left behind in their writing development.

Peer observations paired not only teachers, but also TAs which also meant more work needed to be done in pairs contributing to shared understanding. This level of high engagement is attributed to the ethos of change: 'We invited them to participate (TAs)'. Also, it is attributed to funding as TAs were paid for training and CPD time. As such, funding enabled time and contributed to engagement. Also, the well-thought-out ethos and plan for TA participation contributed quality engagement.

The involvement of governors was about being informed and keeping the school accountable to sustaining change efforts. They also explored the data that the school collects as part of the project. While parental engagement is still challenging, the number of parents participating in school events has grown dramatically compared to the starting point.

Important learnings

A whole-school approach involving everyone ensures real and sustained culture change and good use of resources. A whole-school approached which involved the inclusion of TAs in staff training as key co-implementers of the intervention, and pupils in norm-building towards the new ways of working on writing, has leveraged a significant supportive change mechanisms in the school, ensuring all resources are utilised effectively, and the culture change required for improvement is achieved.

Good planning at the start helps reduce wasted efforts. The start of the project was challenging, with the project starting quickly without time to fully prepare. Starting an intervention without proper preparation has led to some initial waste.

> *Originally, I don't think we were aware of what it was or the or, you know, the size of the funding or the time to put something together. So actually, we were caught quite off guard, so we wanted to do Talk 4Writing, but we hadn't really thought through how we would do that, what that would look like? Which meant the first project was sort of wasted because we were still trying to catch our tail and work out what we wanted to do and how we wanted to spend the money and where we would have best impact. So I think for us... looking back at what did not necessarily go well what we could do differently, but what we would like to have happened is just a bit more time before the project started to really think about, you know this is the size of the money pot.'*

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Focusing on one important thing instead of many enabled effective change attempts. Linking with the good planning at the start, one of the school's key learnings is focusing intervention efforts: focusing on one specific thing that can be improved rather than six different things at the same time. A clear and specific focus enabled better planning because it was clear what one needs to observe over the period of academic year. It also involved being strategic regarding the time and resources invested in change and following EEF guidelines.

Trusting that change will happen, while accepting that real change takes time and entails false attempts, is essential for enabling staff to learn. Overall, the school has been surprised by how quickly initial change was ultimately taken onboard by all members of the school, and how quickly people realised the impact they could have. It is also worth highlighting how fairly small resources can be helpful in leveraging external expertise. At the same time, beyond these initial insights, a full culture shift is slow. What supported it in this school was that, unlike other change initiatives, they were not pressured to achieve change quickly and did not have to rush. Instead, the school had time to give to teachers to try out things and reflect. This was supported by a positive ethos regarding negative outcomes, in which it was OK to fail. Not only a new culture of writing, but a culture of improvement has emerged at the school from these efforts.

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