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: Wilburton Primary School

The school and the challenge: Writing Outcomes

Wilburton Primary School is a small rural school serving a diverse student body. It faced challenges related to inconsistent writing instruction and varying levels of teacher knowledge regarding grammar and sentence-level expectations for each year group. This variability led to uneven student progress, including common issues like omitted words, inconsistent tenses, and subject-verb disagreement. These gaps contributed to writing outcomes that did not meet national standards.

Analysing the sources of the problem to inform the intervention

Inconsistent planning and instruction led to uneven student outcomes

Before the intervention, writing instruction at Wilburton varied significantly across classes, with each teacher relying on individual approaches. This inconsistency was partly due to a lack of professional development focused on writing pedagogy and a clear, structured framework for planning writing lessons. Teachers often felt uncertain about integrating writing across different subjects and expressed a need for more concrete guidance. This variability led to inconsistent student progress and a lack of clarity for both teachers and students about expected learning outcomes.

The English lead, supported by CPD, was tasked with creating a consistent structure

To address these challenges, the English lead was tasked with establishing a three-phase backwards planning model for writing, ensuring skill progression across year groups. This included:

- Developing a clear, structured approach to writing lessons, supported by external CPD, including the use of WordSmith dictionaries to enhance vocabulary development.
- Attending writing courses to gain fresh ideas for lesson design and implementation, as well as building a professional network for ongoing support.
- Working with a literacy professional to develop a consistent, concrete writing structure for lessons across the school.

All staff benefited from CPD and from observing a peer school's practices

All staff benefited from structured CPD sessions to explain and implement the new writing framework. Additionally, six staff members participated in two half-day visits to a similar school to observe best practices in writing instruction. These visits provided valuable insights

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into successful teaching methods and fostered a collaborative culture of shared learning within the school.

New staff also received two days of training in the Read, Write Inc (RWI) programme, ensuring consistent phonics and early literacy instruction across the school. Whole-school refresher training was also provided to maintain fidelity to the RWI approach, ensuring high-quality teaching and learning in every classroom.

New resources, like dictionaries and various apps, were also introduced

The school invested in additional resources to support writing development, including:

- Age-appropriate dictionaries and thesauruses for each class to enhance vocabulary use and language experimentation.
- An app for grammar, punctuation, and spelling, allowing for differentiated support, including homework for students with low attendance.
- One iPad per class to support reluctant writers and those needing structured writing support through tools like Clicker.

Outcomes of the intervention so far

Student writing has improved – and their enjoyment of it

The school has reported significant improvements in students' speaking, writing, and sentence construction. Teachers have noted increased student engagement and confidence, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with lower literacy levels. This early success demonstrates the potential for sustained improvement in writing outcomes as the new approaches become more embedded.

The biggest impact has been on staff development and collaboration

The approach used for this programme has been gradual and sustainable – outcomes are longer term, there is time to monitor progress, and staff have opportunities to share what works, what doesn't, what must be tweaked, and what fits the children and context bespoke to their school. This has given staff a sense of ownership and buy in, as they are a core part of the process.

There is a true sense of collaboration as well. For example, the visit to another school gave the school's staff an opportunity to develop relationships with each other, to have conversations on the way to and from the visit, and that relationship encouraged a feeling of collaboration which helped continued development at the school afterwards.

This approach used in this programme has supported not just this intervention, but also how well staff are engaging, understanding, developing, learning, and reflecting. Staff have now adopted the structure used in this plan for the whole school development plan as well. The exact same model has been used given its success.

Mechanisms facilitating/hindering change

Building staff buy-in and collaboration

The school's staff were all bought in from the start, and this buy-in was supported through phased implementation, collaborative planning, and ongoing professional development. Early career teachers received additional support, while experienced staff acted as mentors, creating a supportive, peer-led learning environment. Regular reflections and open discussions helped address concerns and maintain momentum throughout the process.

Support staff and teaching assistants were also brought along

There are weekly teacher meetings after school, and inset days for teachers, providing them more time to work and learn about things. To bring other staff along, the school has also used meetings and training for teaching assistants and included it in their appraisal and targets, to ensure consistency in teaching instruction.

A long-term perspective underpins the programme

The leadership team adopted a long-term perspective for this project, recognising that meaningful change in writing outcomes requires sustained effort over several years. By framing the initiative as a multi-year commitment, the school has fostered a more stable, less reactive work environment, improving both staff morale and student outcomes.

Important learnings

- **Foster a collaborative culture:** Regular peer observations and shared learning helped sustain momentum and fostered a supportive professional environment.
- **Invest in professional development:** Consistent, structured CPD is essential for building teacher confidence and skill.
- **Plan for the long term:** Sustainable improvement requires a multi-year commitment, with patience for gradual but meaningful change.

This case study illustrates the impact of structured, collaborative approaches to professional development and writing instruction in achieving sustained improvements in student writing outcomes.

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