

A new approach to providing a sound foundation for literacy skills

Jane Kendall, who is currently SENCO at Swing Gate First School and Nursery, and part of the learning support team at Chesham Preparatory School, is the creator of *The Five Minute Box*. In this article she writes about how she developed this strategy for giving all children a sound foundation with literacy skills

It seems to be not unreasonable to ask that every child should have the opportunity to learn to read, write and spell when they enter school, and I have spent too many years to count endeavouring to get children started along that road towards literacy. I have worked as class teacher, special needs support service teacher, SENCO, LSA trainer and have now been persuaded into the commercial world, as well as continuing to teach full-time, with a system aimed at putting a manageable system into schools that will allow children the one missing element for success - *time* to learn!

The government's latest initiative to suggest that good 'Wave 3' initiatives (school-based support) are put into all schools, is perhaps, finally going to allow products like *The Five Minute Box* to give all children an opportunity to learn with confidence and enthusiasm.

The teaching profession has developed, over the last decade, into a system by which we seem to be continually setting up children with special educational needs to fail. The factors which can inhibit children's learning are built into everyday life at school – targets, testing, 'death by worksheet', etc. While I do recognise that testing is an important tool for planning next learning steps, surely we should not be overlooking the most important factor of learning – a way to learn that suits individuals with built-in recognition of success. Children with special educational needs very soon see themselves on the never-ending road of catch-up strategies.

It was this passion for special educational learning needs to be adequately recognised, from the day children start school that led me to develop the Box. It allows children to take responsibility for their learning. They can see progress, and can have the luxury of time to consolidate, and share, known skills with parents.

The system is called *The Five Minute Box* because I initially negotiated with a head teacher for just five minutes one-to-one support a day for each child that was on the special needs register for moderate learning difficulties or specific learning difficulties.

I have since extended the programme to include all reception age children as they enter school to ensure that no one slips through the net.

The system is not biased towards younger children, and has been successfully used as a 'fresh start' approach with secondary children, and with second language children of all ages. It is a multi-sensory system designed to support and work alongside any other phonics programme that is in place in the classrooms.

Catch-up strategies are in place in schools, and may well help many children to fill in the gaps, but what I could not help wondering is - why are we waiting for these children to fail in the first place?

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I know that when I assess children, and subsequently work with them, I go back to the beginning and use a multi-sensory method of teaching phonics, sight vocabulary and writing skills that is combined with the psychology of learning. But, added to the need to teach them these skills, I also have to deal with the issues of lowered self-esteem, poor learning strategies, anxious parents and time management for children to be withdrawn from lessons. Children do learn eventually, and I have worked to develop a way in which children can have daily one-to-one time that allows them time to achieve literacy skills. If children are in small groups, or even work in a pair, there is always one child who is still progressing more slowly than the others. If a child is absent, they have another gap in the input.

Using LSAs for this work has provided them with ownership of the children's learning, and has also provided them with an insight into how children learn. They are

able to share information and knowledge with me as SENCO – invaluable in helping to piece together the jigsaw of individual children.

By putting all children through a process that provides both baseline screening and an ongoing teaching programme that can be administered by support staff, I am ensuring that no child is slipping through the net. The system allows for children to go quickly through the skills, and keeps slower children in it for as long as it takes.

Advantages of the system

For SENCOs there are many advantages to this system:

- LSAs make use of short amounts of time in the day, which can be flexible
- there is no need for teachers to provide daily planning for the support staff, as the system is progressive
- children who subsequently turn out to be dyslexic have already had regular multi-sensory teaching that can then be built upon by specialist teachers
- self-esteem remains high as children can see the progress they are making
- the system is not seen as anything other than classroom provision
- parents of children who have dyslexic older siblings are reassured that their child is receiving multi-sensory teaching and all indications of dyslexia are being watched for
- children with English as a second language, who arrive in school at any age, can use the system to give a thorough and quick start to basic English literacy skills
- children with autistic spectrum disorders and Asperger's syndrome work with confidence with a system that follows a predictable and repetitive format
- there is no photocopying involved and no preparation time needed
- the record keeping provides ongoing IEP targets
- the information gathered in record booklets has been invaluable in providing a profile of children's learning over time for use with educational psychologists

- *and*, probably the most important of all - all children who use the system love it!

Motivation, organisation and self-help strategies are built in to the programme. The recording of progress is shared each session with the child, and progress is divided into small 'milestones'. These stages can readily be shared with parents and are easily monitored by the SENCO and class teacher.

What's in the Box?

The Five Minute Box itself is a self-contained plastic box which contains everything needed for every lesson. It comes with a training video and instruction leaflet which explains the philosophy and management of the activities. It contains individual recording booklets and copiable records of work sheets for a whole class. There is a set of plastic letters for all the sound recognition, auditory discrimination and spelling activities which are detailed in the instruction manual. It has a set of wipeable handwriting formation cards to use so the correct letter and number formation is built in from the start, thereby preventing the need to 'unlearn' and relearn formation. A whiteboard and pen are

included for use with every activity to ensure that the children connect all aspects of the learning to writing. There are nine sets of the early keywords taken from the reception and year 1 national literacy strategy, with boards for multi-sensory activities.

The programme is detailed to cover phonics work, writing and spelling, early sight vocabulary for reading and writing, and personal organisation, but it also includes an important element which I felt was essential, and needs daily practice for many children – that of learning personal information and the sequential knowledge we depend on to know who we are in time and space: days, months and dictionary skills.

As soon as the children acquire the early skills they are dropped off the programme. Typically there are five or six children left using the Box in each class by the end of reception, and two or three by the end of year 1. Those children who remain on the Box do not see themselves as failing – merely continuing with an activity that they love to participate in.

How it works in practice

Sounds too good to be true? 'Can it really be done in just five minutes a day per child?' is

a question asked many times. The LSAs who work with the boxes do manage to move children very quickly through the activities, and by eliminating photocopying and making resources and not chatting to the children they give all the available time to the one-to-one activities and not to preparation.

As a specialist teacher, I use the Box for extended sessions with children with dyslexia or moderate learning difficulties, and benefit from the fact that the LSAs have continued to practise daily, and build on the teaching that I do with the children in our weekly sessions.

The success has been in its simplicity. I was not trying to come up with a complicated process, simply trying to leave something in place that could be worked by LSAs, and to negotiate my way round the pressures of time management in the classroom to produce a way of allowing all our individual learners to achieve the same skills.

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