

Learning Committee 25.05.22

Present: Sarah (Yr 6 and literacy lead), Mark, Steph (Yr 1 + phonics lead), Mandy, Claire, Jodie, Katrina.

The meeting focused on governor questions about Reading and Phonics following visits to classes in the week of 16th May. For full governor reports on their visits please see the Learning Committee file in Governor Hub

1. Phonics

Q: Why did the school change the way phonics is taught?

Steph explained that changes were made to the method of teaching phonics following government guidance. This introduces reading books that match the children's phonics knowledge. Year 1 and reception work on one specific book a week and take it home when they are approaching fluency in reading it. (The high cost of the books was noted. Obtaining copies for all the children had only been possible thanks to funding from FOG).

At the start of each phonics session, the teacher uses flash cards to familiarise the children with different sounds in words. The teacher then models how sentences should be read, including how words should be emphasised or expressed, and the children copy. The meanings of the words are discussed and as the week progresses, comprehension is introduced.

A governor who had observed a phonics class (held every day) commented on how dynamic and interactive the session was.

2. Reading

Sarah explained that the approach to reading throughout the school had been re-evaluated last September. It had been concluded that there wasn't a strong enough emphasis on reading fluency. The approach, by following structured comprehension questions closely, was considered too formulaic. Although these questions remain important, particularly in years 5 and 6, the focus now is on whole-class reading of chapter books. These help build children's reading stamina and enjoyment. Reading has been a key part of the school catch-up effort. Sarah has led staff meetings on whole-class reading and the staff are growing in confidence in using the approach.

Mark commented that children are enjoying digging deeper into the texts and seem both inspired and engaged with them

Q: A Governor visiting Year 2 wanted to know where a group of 5 or 6 children absent for most of the session had been and what they had been doing.

Steph explained that these children, needing more help with the basics of reading, had been with her in Year 1 focusing on phonics. They do this for three out of five of the reading sessions in the week. On Mondays and Fridays they work with their own year group. They do therefore follow the same storybook as the rest of the class. However, this system has only been in place since

January and the Year 2 teacher is considering how it might be adapted next year in a manner that would still allow the less able learners to continue with phonics while also participate more regularly in the whole-class reading sessions.

Q: A governor noted the very wide range of abilities in the class they had visited, was that same for all years?

Sarah confirmed that this is indeed the case and that the range of abilities presents a significant challenge for teachers. The aim is to always be inclusive but it also needs to be recognised that there are children with extensive additional needs which have also to be met.

Q: Has anything been lost by moving away from more structured, small group approach to reading?

Sarah felt that the key elements of structured comprehension had been retained while important new elements focusing on fluency and enjoyment of reading had been introduced.

Q: When will we know whether the whole-class reading approach is working?

This year's SATS are unlikely to provide evidence of the improvements in reading that the staff are hoping for largely because of everything the current year 6 children have been through in the past two years of lockdowns. Improvements are unlikely to show up in the data for a year or so. However, anecdotally, teachers have reported that they are observing positive change and Sarah and Mark say that is what they have seen in classrooms across the school.

Q: How well equipped are the Teaching Assistants to support class reading?

TAs have undertaken the same phonics training as teachers. Steph observes all staff, including TAs and gives advice on how to guide children and give feedback. A discussion followed on methods of feeding back to children during the course of the lesson. Sarah said it was always important to deal with any misconceptions straight away. Governors were reminded that interventions and corrections in the classroom are part of the new marking policy. However, teachers also make clear – including by deliberately making mistakes themselves - that getting something wrong is perfectly acceptable and can be a means of learning.

Q: There are a significant number of children in the Nursery with quite complex SEND. Is it possible to make plans for their learning in future years?

Provision for these children is informed by assessments as they progress through the school. They will work with their classes but also get additional help working at more basic levels. This is going to be a challenge for next year's Reception class in which there will be more children than usual with EHCPs. The training of TAs will be extremely important.

Q: A 45-minute whole-class reading session felt quite long for year 4 – is it?

The session is not always 45 mins. Sometimes it's shorter or it can include extended periods in which the teacher reads to the children – which pupils really enjoy.

Q: A governor had noted that a child recently arrived from Ukraine has joined year six and wanted to know how they were settling in.

The lesson observed by the governor was the child's first at Gillespie. His English is not as proficient as had been hoped. Nevertheless he is settling in well and is working on vocabulary in separate sessions with the class TA. The child loves the daily swimming lessons that post-SATS Year 6 are doing and enjoys art. Other children are being kind to him but he has obviously experienced some considerable shock given the massive change in his circumstances and is very quiet. Staff praised the Islington Library service, which has already sent the school a set of reading books, translated into Ukrainian. Governors thought it worth inquiring as to whether there is any additional funding or support for Ukrainian refugee children joining Islington schools.

Q: Talk Partners. How are these managed, given that some children are much more engaged and fluent than others.

This is something teachers are very conscious of. Talk partners change throughout the year so children have a variety of experiences. Mark commented that even when one child in the pair is very quiet, they are still learning. The participation doesn't have to be equal as long as they are engaged. Teachers also work on eye contact and body language to facilitate better relationships but this can be challenging in some classes.

3 Parent Voice Results

The latest Parent Voice event, held during the parent-teacher consultation evening on 26th April, had been very positive with a large number of parents participating. The focus was reading and Mark outlined the main points that will be in an action plan, details of which will be presented to the FGB on June 15th. It will include:

- Ensuring reading books reflect diversity. More books featuring minority characters will be consciously introduced.
- Implementing a parent idea that would allow parents to go to the library with their children to choose books together.
- A review of how the home-school Reading Records are maintained. Some parents want more comments from teachers. Steph noted that this is much more difficult to do when taking a whole-class approach to reading rather than selectively working with small groups. Some teachers now ask the children to write in their own records, even if it is only a simple short sentence. Other approaches will also be considered. Sarah suggested holding reading workshops with parents in the autumn term to discuss further and share ideas.

Mark concluded by saying that two parents have volunteered to organise the library following the departure of Sue, the school librarian. They will work on it this term, ready for renewed borrowing in September when a more permanent volunteer will be needed. Four parents have also signed up to be reading volunteers and more are being sought.

The meeting closed at 7.05pm.