

LPU: Nick Spice

In college on the 27th September 2001, we covered Literacy Progress Units. These new additions this year to the secondary school curriculum came about because over the last five years, concern has been expressed that some pupils who are moving from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 have only achieved Level 2 or 3 as opposed to the recommended Level 4. Research has shown that those who enter Key Stage 3 behind everyone else continue to lag throughout their subsequent years of schooling. Therefore the government aims to bring their subject ability into line with their peers through giving them a chance to boost areas of their knowledge that at present are indeed lacking. This is hence part of the National Literacy Strategy that aims to increase the literacy standards of all, throughout secondary schools.

We learnt how Literacy Progress units cover six main areas. These consist of writing organisation, information retrieval, spelling, reading between the lines, phonics and sentences. Senior staff have a key role to play in making sure this initiative is effective. They must fit these into the existing school timetable or create time when normal lessons do not take place. Ideally they will become personally involved, providing suitable resources, enrolling staff to oversee the sessions and evaluating the successes of the pupils. The teachers themselves identify who has only achieved a Level 2 or 3 from Key Stage 2, prepare the pupils for the process and encourage the pupils to maintain a positive attitude while they progress. The parents themselves must be notified as to how their child is developing and ideally be reminded that they can work with their child on areas covered by the Literacy Progress units out of school as well.

With only six pupils in each group, the aim is that there will be more scope for one to one tuition and any one who starts to become left behind can be catered for straight away. For every one of the six units, there will be eighteen sessions, with each session lasting twenty minutes. It is essential that these sessions add a twist to what the pupils would normally learn in an English lesson. Replacing the core English lesson would result in the pupil falling even further behind his or her class mates. It is to be hoped that the sessions will be informal and enjoyable, with no stigma attached to the scenario and much satisfaction as the pupils and the teacher interact with one another.

Within every lesson, there is a set teaching sequence. First of all, prior knowledge and objectives are realised. Then the teacher demonstrates what needs to be learnt. An activity allows all to investigate the task and then the new found knowledge is applied by the pupil before it is consolidated through a debate or a concluding activity. These five steps are known as remember, model, try, apply and secure.

After the lesson, I visited the National Literacy Strategy web site that is composed by the DFEE. It explained what Literacy Progress Units were but most interesting were the theories that real life teachers had on the subject after their experiences of putting them into practice.

Val Masson from Eastbury Comprehensive School in Barking and Dagenham found that pupils attending these sessions were enthusiastic about volunteering responses to teachers questions without the fear of being mocked or criticised by their peers who

may be seen as more able. Chris Martindale of Featherstone High School in Wakefield agreed. He claims that pupils are proud to do the sessions as they find that it builds up their confidence and turns what was something of a chore prior to now, into something that they actually found enjoyable.

Martindale employed support assistants who carried out the units at the start of the day because they believed that the pupils' minds were fresher and yet to be soiled by the trials of the forthcoming day. Sessions were held by each of the two teachers from Monday to Thursday and the Friday was spent planning for next week. The sessions were not seen as punitive or compulsory and this hence created a lively and uninhibited learning environment for both pupil and teacher. Diana Bruce at Kidbrooke School in Greenwich sees the units as being a logical extension of the legacy of the Literacy Hour, where special needs teaching can be applied according to the specific needs of the individual, rather than a less focused teaching of a larger group.

I oversaw such a session in the first week of the school term at a 'normal' secondary school. I was surprised by how enthusiastic the pupils seemed. It was a very different atmosphere to the formal nature of the class room and with so few pupils present, it was harder for the working ambience to be shattered. With each grouping lasting only twenty minutes there was also less time for attention to wander. The children seemed to have more confidence to speak without the fear of ridicule from their peers and the teacher was able to encourage when a child made a mistake without feeling that the more able pupils in the class were being held up. The pupils seemed to accept that this was not a punishment for them, but a genuine effort to help them.

Although it is doubtless a challenge for many schools to try to fit these Literacy Progress Units into schedules that are fit to burst and to try to find extra rooms that may not be readily available to hold these meetings in, The initial signs are that academic progress is being made and pupils who have specific areas to develop to advance to Key Stage 3 are having the chance to be given a boost in an unthreatening environment. The informal approach and virtual one to one tuition appears to captivate children rather than frighten them, and they are learning to have courage in themselves. This can only be a good thing and very beneficial to each pupils successful learning development.