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# versed

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**FOREWORD BY ELMA LAWSON**
Executive Director of Education

anthem

By Elma Lawson

Executive Director of Education

Anthem Schools Trust



## Welcome to the fifth edition of *Versed*

**Every student, every lesson, all the time – inclusion provides the purpose and meaning of everything we do!**

This edition of *Versed* offers a compelling reflection of our shared commitment across Anthem to getting the foundations right in every way, academically, relationally and systemically, so that *every student* can succeed. The articles collected here illustrate how this ambition is being realised in practice, through thoughtful, evidence-informed work that places students firmly at the centre.

At Oxford Spires Academy, we see the power of precise, data-informed intervention to strengthen students' access to the curriculum. Their work with students who have EAL reminds us that language is the gateway to success in education. By identifying those just beyond typical thresholds and responding with targeted, personalised strategies, the team has not only accelerated academic progress but also improved confidence, behaviour and belonging. This is *Keep up, not catch up* in action: forensic, responsive and rooted in high expectations for every student.

This focus on strong foundations begins even earlier in the educational journey. Benjamin Adlard Primary School's work on transition into Reception highlights the importance of getting the very first steps right. Their strategic, relational approach ensures that children arrive not only ready to learn, but feeling known, safe and valued. Alongside this, Vicki Briody's piece reinforces a vital truth which is that strong relationships with families are not an 'added extra', but the bedrock of success in the Early Years. Together, these contributions remind us that inclusion starts with understanding of children, their contexts and their families and that this must shape everything we do.

At Saint Mark's Academy, the focus shifts to the transformative potential of Key Stage 3. Their work to reposition KS3 as the 'intellectual powerhouse' of the school reflects a deep commitment to curriculum quality and ambition. By revisiting sequencing, clarifying foundational and disciplinary knowledge, and creating space for meaningful professional dialogue, colleagues are ensuring that KS3 is not simply preparation for examination, but a rich and rigorous phase in its own right.

Across all these articles, a common thread emerges, clarity of purpose, disciplined attention to the fundamentals, and a relentless focus on quality. These are central to our Education Strategy, where inclusion provides the purpose and meaning for everything we do. Whether through strengthening language, refining transition, building partnerships with families or rethinking curriculum design, each example demonstrates what it means to translate strategy into lived, daily practice.

**"Across all these articles, a common thread emerges, clarity of purpose, disciplined attention to the fundamentals, and a relentless focus on quality."**

It is particularly fitting that we share this edition of Versed alongside our conference, where we are privileged to hear from Mary Myatt. Her work has been influential in shaping thinking across the sector and resonates strongly with our own direction. Her call for *high challenge*, low threat, her emphasis on rich, coherent curriculum, and her insistence that all students deserve meaningful intellectual work are evident throughout the practice showcased here. In particular, the focus on foundational knowledge, high-quality talk and the ambition for KS3 closely reflect her thinking.

This edition of *Versed* is, ultimately, a celebration of professional thoughtfulness and collaboration. It demonstrates what can be achieved when we remain focused on what matters most, work together to refine practice, and hold fast to our belief in the potential of every student.

Thank you to all colleagues who have contributed and to those who continue to bring our shared vision to life every day.

By Stacey Noble
EYFS Lead
Benjamin Adlard Primary School



# Getting the foundations right: Transitions into Reception and school readiness

**The transition into Reception is one of the most significant milestones in a child's early years. For many children, it marks their first experience of formal education, routines, relationships and expectations.**

As we know from experience, children arrive at school with a diverse level of skills, knowledge, experience and confidence and this can be very daunting for students, parents and school staff. At Benjamin Adlard, we recognise that many of our children are disadvantaged, have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or face barriers to learning and/or their wellbeing. This is on top of their age-related development. Therefore, as teachers and leaders, we have to make adaptations and implement strategies which begin within the transition period.

## Personalised approaches for SEND children

At Benjamin Adlard, we realise that transition isn't a single event or a few 'stay and play' sessions; it is a well-planned, strategic process that enables children to feel safe, secure and ready to learn. This transitional time is imperative to build relationships and gain a deeper understanding of each child's individual needs and strengths.

To support a child with significant SEND needs, we adapted our transition process to provide a more personalised approach. This included offering additional, shorter visits to the setting so the child could explore the environment, meet key adults, and practise routines at a pace that felt comfortable for them. These adjustments helped to minimise sensory overload and build confidence through repetition.

We also incorporated visual supports, such as photographs of key people and areas within the environment, along with symbol-based widgets to aid understanding. Copies of these visuals were shared with parents so they could continue to reinforce familiarity and routines at home.

## Participation is key

Our transition process has proven to be highly effective in giving our children the very best start in their educational journey. We pride ourselves first and foremost on the strong partnerships we build with families, children and the local community. Open communication has ensured valuable information is shared and becomes a two-way process. Engaging some of our most hard to reach families has been a difficult task at




Resources from Benjamin Adlard's 'talking tent', designed to promote physical oracy and support children in articulating and practising specific sounds.

**"We have found that a welldesigned learning environment plays a crucial role in ensuring that practice is effective, intentional and responsive particularly during the transition phase."**

times but providing a range of opportunities for them to feel part of our school community in the transition period has been incredibly significant.

To support this, we have invited families into school in the first few weeks for shared breakfast while taking part in their child's learning and to watch lessons and to work together to support their children in the best possible way. We identify specific next steps early and, as part of our transition, invite parents in to participate in family learning.

During family learning sessions, we prioritise developing the skills that help children build independence, while also equipping parents with practical strategies they can use at home. For example, families recently took part in a playdoughmaking activity. Staff modelled how this simple, engaging task supports fine motor development through actions such as rolling, squeezing and shaping. Parents were then encouraged to continue similar activities at home, enabling them to further reinforce these key skills in their child's everyday environment.

## The bedrock of thinking and learning...

The DfE's *Strong foundations* document, alongside the EYFS teaching prompts in The Anthem Way and the Anthem EYFS strategy, has been pivotal in our approach to teaching and learning during our transition process. To quote the Strong foundations report, 'language is the bedrock of thinking and learning. It should be a priority in the curriculum'. Our recent Ofsted report commented how 'staff consistently ensure that children are involved in high-quality interactions'. These interactions happen as soon as children arrive.

Our interactions had to focus on strengthening our children sentence structure and vocabulary. As leaders we felt that for these interactions to be successful, all of our school team regularly participate in CPD sessions. This even includes lunchtime meal supervisors because they interact with our youngest children at lunchtime. No opportunity is to be missed.

As a school, we have aligned our Little Wandle Foundations phonics programme with the ShREC approach to provide the highest standard of guidance for all staff. These CPD sessions are broken down into progressive order and focus on specific approaches such as running

commentary and extending and recasting. Regular monitoring takes place following training sessions to ensure that these approaches are being implemented and successful.

## Optimising the learning environment

We have found that a welldesigned learning environment plays a crucial role in ensuring that practice is effective, intentional and responsive particularly during the transition phase. When provision is both planned and purposeful, it creates the conditions for children to engage meaningfully, demonstrate their understanding, and reveal where support is needed. This structured approach enables us to quickly identify barriers, recognise individual needs, and determine the most appropriate next steps to move learning forward with clarity and precision.

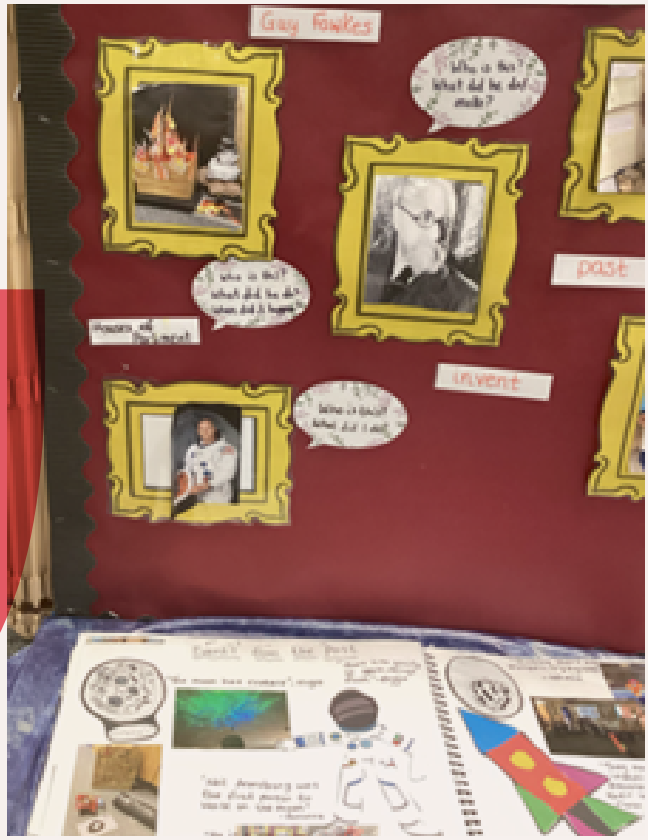
Our weekly enhancement planning is continually informed by ongoing assessment and reflective practice. Through our focus on language and vocabulary development, we identified a clear need for increased speech and language support within the cohort. In response, we adapted our environment so that it functioned as an active tool for teaching and intervention.

One key development was the introduction of a dedicated 'talking tent', designed to promote physical oracy and support children in articulating and practising specific sounds. The space was equipped with resources to strengthen oral motor skills, alongside carefully selected activities and books – such as *Would You Rather* – to stimulate conversation, extend vocabulary, and encourage confident, purposeful talk.

Our school is committed to continually developing our provision so that it meets the evolving needs of the families we serve. As part of our constant evaluation and next steps, we are expanding our inclusive offer by opening a dedicated EYFS Inclusion Base. This new provision will allow us to provide earlier, more targeted support for our youngest learners, ensuring that every child can access the right environment, expertise, and opportunities to thrive from the very start of their school journey.

**Resources from Benjamin Adlard's 'talking tent', designed to promote physical oracy and support children in articulating and practising specific sounds.**

**"At Benjamin Adlard, we realise that transition isn't a single event or a few 'stay and play' sessions; it is a well-planned, strategic process that enables children to feel safe, secure and ready to learn."**



By Vicki Briody

Anthem Director of Education

Primary (South)



# It starts with relationships: Working with families in Early Years

***"The Reception teacher is always the most popular teacher in school."***

I've heard this countless times throughout my career – and, having been fortunate enough to start my teaching journey in Reception, it's something I've reflected on often.

Early in my career, I assumed this perception was rooted in the common belief that the Early Years is simply 'all about play' – and certainly, that is what many children remember most. However, with experience, I have come to see that this popularity is also deeply connected to something more significant: the strong relationships Early Years teachers build with families.

When a child first walks through the school doors, they are their parents' most prized possession, suddenly spending seven hours a day in someone else's care. Establishing trust, connection and reassurance in those early days is not just important, it is fundamental. In truth, this relationship building needs to begin long before September, and this is where I believe Early Years practitioners get it right.

## Genuine partnership for positive beginnings

As we know, parents are children's first educators. Understanding a child's home environment during these formative early years is essential, not only for ensuring a smooth transition into school, but also for enabling practitioners to work in genuine partnership with families.

For children to thrive, they must feel safe and secure. This sense of security is strengthened when they see the adults around them communicating openly and working consistently together. In turn, this creates the confidence children need to take risks in their learning and to fully explore their environment.

It is also important to recognise that some parents arrive at the school gate carrying memories of their own negative experiences of education. Throughout my work across a range of schools, I have seen that the most effective Early Years practitioners do not simply reassure the child, they also build trust with parents, helping them to see school as a safe, nurturing and positive place for their family.

## Putting it into practice

Building strong relationships with families does not happen by chance, it is intentional and carefully nurtured from the very first interaction. A clear and consistent approach to

communication can lay the foundations for a successful and lasting relationship, not just in Reception, but across a child's entire primary journey.

This can be achieved through a focus on a few key principles:

**Open and respectful communication** – demonstrating a genuine desire to learn from parents as their child's first educators, while creating space for them to share their knowledge and insights. Most successful nursery and reception settings do home visits to see children at home as their first step in the transition journey. Catching parents on the door before and after school, for even the tiniest of updates is fundamental.

**Knowing families as individuals** – taking time to understand each family's context, values and experiences, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

**Two-way dialogue** – moving beyond simply sharing information, and instead actively inviting families to contribute their expertise, whether through supporting learning at home or enriching the curriculum with their interests, passions or professions.

**Ensuring families feel welcomed and valued** – creating a culture where families feel comfortable and included, from a warm greeting at the door each day to meaningful opportunities to engage in school life.

**Cultural awareness and inclusivity** – recognising, respecting and celebrating the diversity within the school community, ensuring all families feel seen, understood and represented.

Alongside these principles, small, consistent actions can make a significant difference: first impressions that build trust from the outset, daily informal communication, genuinely listening to families, creating opportunities for involvement, and maintaining consistency and reliability in all interactions.

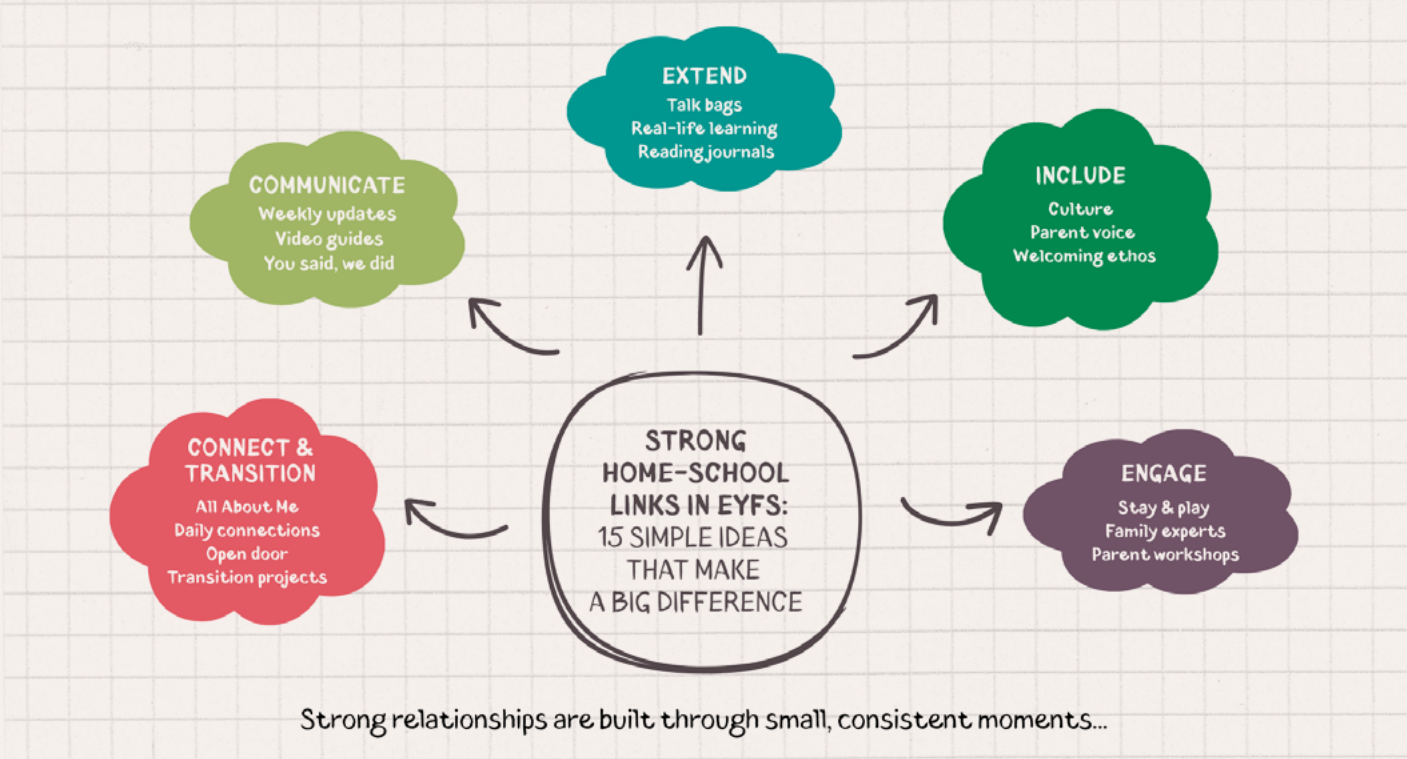
**'Building strong relationships with families does not happen by chance, it is intentional and carefully nurtured from the very first interaction.'**







**Welcomed and valued: Family members join in with stay and play sessions at Mount Street Academy.**




## Barriers, not obstacles

A strategic supported approach is vital to ensure strong communication from children's pre-entry to our schools. As leaders we must prioritise the time this takes both inside of the curriculum teaching time, as well as outside of the 9am-3pm school day.

At times, building these relationships is not without its challenges. Time pressures, language barriers, and differing expectations or prior experiences can all impact communication. However, when these are recognised as barriers to be addressed – rather than obstacles to avoid – schools are better placed to respond with flexibility, sensitivity and intentionality. Anticipating and mitigating these challenges early allows relationships to develop without unnecessary barriers.

Research shows that leaders who intentionally create enabling conditions make family engagement sustainable and impactful (Chartered College of Teaching, 2024). As leaders we should ask ourselves:

- In what ways do we help families feel welcomed, informed and involved from the beginning? Even before the start of term.
- How do we offer meaningful opportunities for families to take part in learning?
- How well are we supporting children and families through transitions and new beginnings?
- What accessible ideas are we sharing with families to support learning at home?
- How do we ensure that our communication strategies are meeting the needs of all families?

## Setting the tone: success starts here

Ultimately, strong relationships with families are not an 'added extra' in the Early Years, they are the foundation upon which everything else is built. When trust is established, communication is open, and families feel valued, children benefit from a consistent and secure environment in which they can thrive.

As educators, the investment we make in these relationships in the earliest stages does not just shape a successful start to school, it sets the tone for a child's entire educational journey. Getting it right from the beginning is not just good practice; it is essential.

By Kate Poulton

Head of English and Associate Assistant Principal

St Mark's Academy



# KS3 powerhouse: The importance of reviewing to improve the KS3 curriculum

**At St Mark's, in line with the Anthem curriculum principles, we believe that curriculum is never finished and we are constantly reflecting and reworking to ensure it is as ambitious for our students as it can be.**

Since Spring 26 we have been reworking our KS3 curriculum to ensure that it truly becomes the intellectual powerhouse of the school. This work was started in response to recent Ofsted updates that have differentiated types of knowledge, as well as Mary Myatt's inspirational work on transforming KS3.




**Cover of Mary Myatt's KS3 *From the Wasted Years to the Ambitious Years***

## A structured warm-up for GCSE?

In KS3 *From the Wasted Years to the Ambitious Years*, Mary Myatt writes: "KS3 should be a time when students fall in love with learning again – where curiosity is rewarded, depth is normal and ambition is expected." How many of us can, with confidence, say that our KS3 curriculum is the best it can be to support, stretch and challenge every student who walks through our doors to make expected progress? Are our expectations of what KS3 students can know and do too limited? Do we reward or allow space for creativity, curiosity and holistic development at KS3 or do we treat it as just a structured warm-up for GCSE?

Our Anthem curriculum principles were ahead of the curve in identifying this ambition when we launched The Anthem Way and our secondary SCPs have been working on ensuring that the curriculum across all subjects in all Anthem schools fulfil these principles. Leaders at St Mark's have this year given us the time and space and to ensure that we can implement the ideas and plans coming from SCPs.

## Creating a 'best yet' curriculum

At St Mark's we are focused on supporting middle leaders and teaching staff to reflect on and have a look at refining their KS3 curriculum so that it is the 'best yet' version.

Reviewing the KS3 curriculum was first highlighted as an area for development when we reviewed *Keep up not catch up* and considered whether curriculums were sequenced in an ambitious way – to both support transition and challenge students to make progress. As a Quality of Education team, we adapted our CPD calendar to have a focus on improving KS3 curriculum – but knew that this needed to start with departments reviewing their KS3 curriculum design before we could see individual students make progress.

In line with the new Ofsted framework, CPD was led on understanding the importance

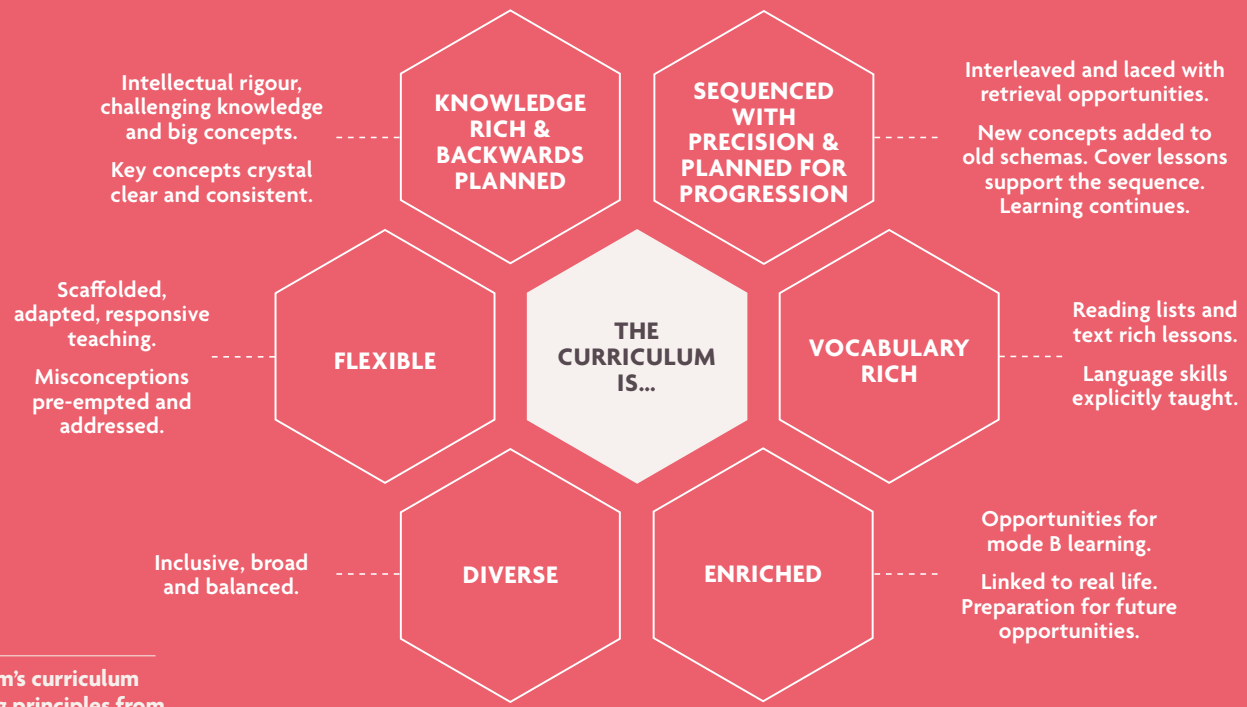
of and differences between 'foundational knowledge' and 'threshold concepts'. CPD had a disciplinary focus, and teaching staff explored and decided what these types of knowledge were for their subject. In the next CPD session staff then used a resource from Mary Myatt, *KS3 audit toolkit*, which is a great resource that asks questions around curriculum sequencing, consistency, resources, teaching and management. It worked as a prompt to enable HODs to have vital and in-depth discussions with teaching staff in their subject and identify areas for improvement. Departments were then given time to work on improving the curriculum sequencing of their subject with curriculum map templates provided by English and Science of how they could resequence effectively and highlight how different types of knowledge are spiralled across KS3.

Future CPD will drill down further into 'powerful knowledge, disciplinary knowledge and substantive knowledge', as well as look at how specific KS3 lessons can be sequenced more effectively with an end goal in each lesson. The aim being to keep both the scaffolding and support within KS3 teaching, but to also provide more challenge and purpose to the direction of every lesson and the knowledge being built.

## The powerhouse for success

Curriculum review is a huge job for every department to complete but a rewarding one and should be seen as an ongoing cycle as we face new developments, meet new challenges and teach new groups of students each year. We are therefore allowing time for this important re-sequencing work to happen, but initial impact has been noticed in a renewed enthusiasm for KS3 teaching and seeing it as the powerhouse to success for every student. Curriculum discussions are now focusing more on the key knowledge and concepts students need to learn, rather than simply covering content.

Early feedback from middle leaders has been positive, with staff valuing the time to discuss the purpose and sequencing of their curriculum in greater depth. Over time, we are also looking forward to and expecting a greater impact on learning and progress. As many of our St Mark's Middle Leaders are also Anthem SCP (subject communities of practice) leads we look forward to sharing this work via our subject communities and to having positive impact and influence on the curricular diet of KS3 students across the trust.




**Anthem's curriculum guiding principles from *The Anthem Way***

By Maurice Dixon

Senior Vice Principal

Oxford Spires Academy



# Strengthening foundational language skills in EAL learners: Unlocking curriculum access and academic achievement

**At Oxford Spires Academy, over a third of our students do not speak English as a first language. Within this, language proficiency varies; from complete beginners to accomplished speakers who may mask a limited technical and academic vocabulary.**

As a school we provide three levels of EAL intervention which are decided following a comprehensive EAL screening assessment; Beginners, Post-Beginners and Literacy Development.

As part of our KS3 *Keep up not catch up* strategy, one of our strategic actions following data analysis was to take a closer look at holistic support for EAL students. Specifically, we looked at those whose subject assessment data were in the bottom 20% of all students, but who were not currently receiving EAL intervention because their EAL assessments were higher than the threshold. We were concerned they might not have a strong enough language foundation, causing them to struggle to access the curriculum or to be able express their knowledge fully. We hypothesised that some behaviour issues or disengagement may also arise from any barriers to learning.

## Investigate, implement, review

The EAL team, guided by the data produced for the *Keep up not catch* up panel, carried out an *investigate – implement – review* process over 12 weeks to investigate barriers, implement interventions and review the impact on specific students.

The team focused on 20 students across Years 7, 8 and 9. In the investigation stage they met students, reviewed their academic data and carried out EAL assessments. Following their investigation, they allocated a specific new intervention for each student. These included one-to-one teaching, group intervention during tutor time, Sixth Form mentors, Jacari tutors and contact with parents.

They also listed 'high priority actions' on our MIS so that all their teachers could implement relevant strategies recommended by the EAL team to support these students in class. In addition,



An EAL student during small group intervention.

**'Students were so appreciative of the additional recognition and support, and grew in confidence – increasing their enjoyment, engagement and sense of belonging in school.'**

the team gave coaching support to teachers of these students to help them amend their lessons and make them more accessible to these students.

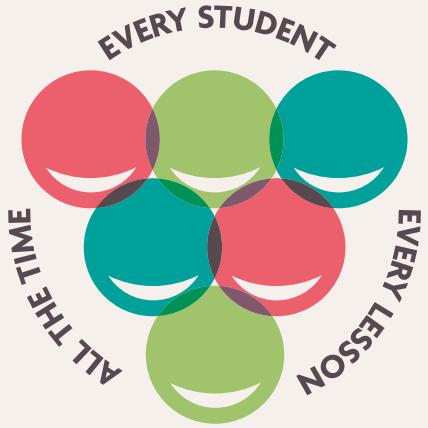
At the end of the 12 weeks the head of EAL reviewed the academic progress of students and repeated the EAL assessment, where appropriate, to measure progress. Students with specific 1-to-1 or group interventions showed good improvement in their EAL scores and in general. Teachers in foundation subjects were seen giving greater support with vocabulary in lessons. Several students gained 'best progress' awards in their subjects. The Year 9 average score across all subjects rose from 35% to 45%. We closed the assessment loop by reviewing the impact of these interventions at the next *Keep up not catch up* panel so that we could identify which students needed further support.

## Bringing improvements into focus

The additional focus had other benefits as well as improvement in academic outcomes. Teachers increased the number of positive behaviour points and students were so appreciative of the additional recognition and support, and grew in confidence – increasing their enjoyment, engagement and sense of belonging in school. Some had been masking their frustration with poor behaviour and saw their overall behaviour record improve.

The team also highlighted a small number of students who made slower progress than the others and so will need further support going forwards and in one case highlighted some processing needs that were passed to the SENDCO for further investigation.

We are delighted with the impact of the work of the EAL team in investigating the additional needs of these 20 students and accelerating their progress across the curriculum. The Anthem *Keep up not catch up* strategy and the resulting panel has facilitated a sharper focus on KS3 data and allows us to look forensically at, and strategically consider, key groups and individuals who would not have been identified for intervention or whole-school focus previously.




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