

## LEAD Teaching Alliance

Alliance name	LEAD teaching alliance
Alliance context	<p>Seventeen east midlands primary schools have united to form an innovative teaching school alliance specialising in leadership and teacher training for urban schools.</p> <p>The L.E.A.D. urban teaching school alliance is led by the Huntingdon Academy in Nottingham. Through collaborative working, the alliance schools aim to train and share outstanding teaching and leadership skills.</p>
Schools involved in the R&D project	Huntingdon Academy, St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Dunkirk Primary and Nursery School.
Research focus	Higher attaining children developing greater independence and engagement in their learning through a variety of methods involving talk in their lessons.
Research question(s)	How can we use 'thinking through philosophy' to impact on children's ability to answer inference questions in reading?

### The implementation phase

The importance of developing children's abilities to discuss and explore different lines of enquiry, related to various thought provoking materials is important. Our research question stemmed from on-going observations of how pupils within Huntingdon Academy use 'talk' as a response technique (most confidently with an adult), rather than as a starting point, as well as children using philosophical talk for philosophy sessions without linking communication skills to develop their knowledge in other subject areas.

Choosing the foci children, we decided to centre the research towards the progression of higher attainers in reading as well as developing inference skills – an important area proving to be a barrier to children's progression in reading comprehension. Through levels and discussion with the classroom teacher, underachieving children within the higher attaining groups were targeted.

Each child was at level four (surpassing age related expectations) at the beginning of the spring term but underachieving in their own ability. From the data all children bar child E were below their expected levels for this stage in year 5.

To assess their knowledge and understanding of reading, the pupils were given a narrative with 17 mixed retrieval and inference questions to follow. The children read the text and answered the questions in silence for an hour (above required test timings) and the results revealed that the average number of foci children who attempted the retrieval questions - which were scattered within the booklet to give more reliable outcomes - was 87 per cent, with accurate answers averaging at 78 per cent. In contrast to that, the inference questions showed that overall only 25 per cent were answered and accurate answers were just 7 per cent. From initial baseline assessments it appeared that the barriers to the pupils' progression in reading were due to their 'knowledge' in answering inference based questions. Supporting this, each child self-assessed the task using stars for achievements and wishes for challenges, 100 per cent commented on 'liking' and 'answering' the retrieval questions alongside 'the inference questions were hard' and the challenges of 'some of the questions'. 'Tricky questions' - subsequently linked to the inference questions - were left unanswered.

Alongside the written reading testing, a one-to-one interview with each pupil helped to understand the reasons behind their lack of inference skills, as well as to discover their ideas of 'talk' in their learning. As each child discussed their thoughts of "how do you know you/others are learning" it became clear that as learners, 100 per cent gained knowledge through mere listening. For example, child C felt she knew others were learning when they are "folding their arms, looking at the teacher who's talking". With strong behavioural needs within Huntingdon Academy, it is understandable that for maximum impact in teaching and learning, behaviour is consistently at a high standard but it led us to think - are the behavioural routines of 'listening' so embedded that the motivation to initialise stimulating conversation is constrained, with ideas as well as misconceptions internalised?

Unexpectedly, three out of the five interviewees could confidently explain inference including responses such as "giving information" (child A) and "it is like you point of view" (child B), although when discussing when they may 'infer', it was necessary to explain this as a 'guess' which led to the children linking their answers to mathematics, with inaccurate ideas of 'telling the time' and 'division'. Child D was mindful in responding, "when you're estimating, when you need to make a good guess like the paper size before measuring".

Finally the proposed questions of their reading books, levels and 'what does a 'good' reader look like', positively highlighted great confidence in talking about their current reading books - children were enthused discussing this - but had a lack of understanding in reading levels in terms of choosing books (school colour coding system) and age related levels. With mixed responses, the group gave answers of 'good' readers as "able to read in front of lots of people" (child D), "heavily reading like getting stuck into a book"(child A), "reading the book when you come in, they won't be reading out loud" (child B) and "sitting up straight, eye contact, folding their arms on the able" (child C); no

mention of discussion, understanding, comprehension nor enjoyment in reading, very isolated, generally quiet and insular.

## The innovation phase

Following the outcomes from the primary interviews and assessments, the pedagogical approach consisted of combining discussion techniques with a range of comprehension texts, to enable a deeper understanding of 'suggested' meanings; the skills and knowledge to overcome inference questions and a conversational based reading approach. An initial lesson process was developed through the idea of expanding inference skills through philosophical discussion techniques.

Opening the first session with philosophical prompts of 'would you rather...' questions, proved extremely successful in promoting conversation, with children (over time) actively using given prompts such as 'I agree / disagree because...'; developing their own and others lines of enquiry into thought provoking material. The group, once they knew how to facilitate 'talk', without hands up, taking turns, positive / empathetic response techniques such as "I understand what you are saying but my thoughts are...", their discussion was independent and effective. Body language was relaxed and often urged the teacher to instruct the children to 'keep focused' but when actually quietly observing this, it became apparent that the children could respond to one another, posing the question – "what does active listening look like?"

With enthusiasm and a learning 'buzz' we then linked this to discussion of the original text, beginning conversations with prompts such as, "if you were Fiona, how would you feel if...", "thinking back to the narrative, what was happening when..."; open questions that could enable individual viewpoints as well as recall of the narrative and author's suggestions through word - ultimately inference without the label.

The ambience and progression in talk previously witnessed gradually altered into a more isolated and 'textbook' approach. Pairs of children were seen reading the story aloud word for word to one another, child B read quietly to themselves with sporadic comments loosely linked to the question asked. Child C and E together lost focus and had to be addressed on numerous occasions by being encouraged to 'have a go' to talk about the given subject. With encouragement and leading the children to explore their ideas deeper (which developed talk slightly further) on the text, the children were given the task of re-answering further questions within the reading paper from this discussion. The results of this from the foci children, suggests that the children's confidence to answer inference questions increased, with only a small percentage of progression in accuracy in this area. Clearly, to enable a development in talk linked to reading, consistent focus with talk skills needed to be applied prior to writing comprehension - hence the lower outcomes of an unfocused pair with child C and E.

From the preliminary lesson, the original methodology needed to develop to accommodate the children's needs in discussing wider materials (with repetitive prompts) and the skills to do so from oral, written and pictorial stimuli (in basic forms) without any direct or obvious link to reading comprehension. To do this, a combination of the 'would you rather...' style of questioning mixed discreetly into material that rolled into 'would you rather be young and naïve or old and knowledgeable?' to 'would you rather be Grandpa or Fiona' taken from the narrative text. Also, allowing the children to make further choices as to whom they grouped themselves with for effective talk and how / where they sat, from chairs plus tables to woven pods on the floor. With greater independence to their logistical approach to group discussion, alongside a questioning prompt they understood and enjoyed the outcomes through talk were effective and furthermore developmental between the peers. This then led to a small written task, directly from the reading paper but presented as an activity that stemmed from **their** ideas - to write a short diary extract as though they were Fiona using the points they had already explored. The results between the direct 'read and answer' approach, to the discussion based method that led to a link to the text, showed an increase in all children's application and accuracy, with an increase from 0-33 per cent correct answers in the original question, to 66-100 per cent accuracy.

Linking talk to a non-fiction image (that would relate to a text) to support and explore understanding wider text types as well as trialling for valuable inference starting points was the next stage. Using discussion groups and comfortable sitting positions chosen at tables (as decided by the full group themselves), the children questioned and responded about the image using: What do I definitely know? What I can infer (guess)? What questions could I ask to further my knowledge or understanding? - grids to enable recording **after** talk - again an element insisted upon by all the children within the group.

In contrast to the written text stimuli, 100 per cent of the foci children said they found inferring from an image 'easier' than retrieving information from it.

Following this, the final strategy had to link to answering reading comprehension written inference questions. By combining the effective teaching methods explored as well as the written testing formats of reading comprehension papers, linked to inference, non-fiction texts were chosen that related specifically to the image and the children orally discussed the text and their ideas as they chose, or chose not to, before writing. In observations the language of 'agree / disagree / understand' flowed as well as "it's like the picture because I bet there was a war there too" with children asking "would you rather watch the battle or be in the battle?", it was possible to see the skills of 'talk' that the group had taught one another, embody themselves into effective learning methods, that led to focused and accurate written forms. The answers recorded were also with independence, with children writing their own string of thought with confidence over what others had said and they had responded to.

## The impact phase

As highlighted within the innovations implemented, the greatest impact from the philosophy based talk to reading was the huge increase in confidence and motivation to answer questions of inference where the children had to apply their own ideas beside a text. When re-interviewed with the original questions, responses were more independent, precise and motivated in their answers. For example child A altered the question from “when do you talk during lessons” to discussing when they ‘like’ to talk, describing “when it’s hard, like discussing the point, I want to discuss more” - a major turn-around from their first answer; “when you give an answer to a question - you put your hand up -when you need to do something... I don’t know” (child A).

Within the interview with child B, talking about how they knew others were learning in the classroom, they responded with, “because when Miss Wraight’s talking they’re always listening”, whereas they now felt that others learning was, “they can solve problems / questions faster, I know they have learned it because they could explain” - showing a development in recognising the focus of a teacher-led to pupil-led culture of learning.

Accuracy in answering inference-based questions increased - as shown previously within the final task - and both the level of spoken and written language applied to the task. The subsequent leading lessons saw a gradual increase in knowledge and accuracy. With further philosophy based reading sessions, it would suggest that children would continue to develop the skills to enable communication in explaining their ideas not only within reading but applied to any subject. As the sessions came to an end, the levels of each child were all higher, all moving to secure or excelling level four; even further ahead of age related expectations. Although these results cannot be solely linked to the implemented research methodology, when receiving feedback from the pupils’ current teacher, she described their approach to reading as “they had a more confident approach to answering inference questions”, and all completed and achieved in the subsequent reading paper with total independence. In describing any developments within reading or other areas, child A was described as ‘more focused and started to read more at home. Child A wanted to do better in reading. Not only did the discussion explore the foci children’s progression but there were positive developments in their approaches to answering written reading based questions as well as communicating answers and ideas within the classroom.

In order to achieve effective discussion that leads into inference texts or related subjects, the methodology adopted needs to be centred around the needs of the children, both with effective prompts and stimuli as well as logistics - choices which come from the children themselves directly, or as observed by the teacher. The approach that showed progression moves through reading and philosophical discussion as independent lessons before transferring the skills to use talk as a method to progress inference abilities, as well as other subject areas. Applying talk based and child led learning has demonstrated that learning, for the children, is about them and their ideas and with spoken and written

evidence in place, it is undeniable that the skills to be able to discuss and deepen ideas is an effective method in progressing knowledge, plus barriers, to learning - effective only once those skills are taught. With this in mind, the new curriculum within Huntingdon Academy, for example, has developed with not only new material, but with an innovative approach to lessons that combine an explorative, child-led, teacher-led and assessment process.

Alongside this, we shall further strive to share effective teaching and learning practice, as initiated by the research, as well as promote reading through a creative, inspiring library area where 'talk in reading' is the central focus. Our aim is to apply what the research has taught us; to teach and apply methods of talk and enquiry that enable pupils' to feel empowered to take a lead in their education, becoming independent, knowledgeable and most importantly, passionate learners.