

S.P.O.O.C.S

Having fun whilst preparing for KS2 SATs? You must be joking!

Last year, eleven primary schools in the West Midlands got into the spirit of things and took an innovative approach to SATs revision, with some 'spectre-acular' results.

In the spring term of 2008, over 400 children in Wednesbury, a town in Sandwell Local Authority in the West Midlands, were involved in trialling S.P.O.O.C.S, an innovative KS2 English SATs preparation programme. Provisional writing results are extremely positive. So why did many of these children, in the 14th most deprived LA in England, achieve better results than others in the LA and nationally?

The S.P.O.O.C.S programme involves children writing in role – as ghost hunters. They are unexpectedly introduced to S.P.O.O.C.S (the Society for the Prevention Of the Occupancy of Castles and Stately homes) by watching a 'live' news broadcast, filmed outside a Tudor building, in which there have been an unprecedented number of hauntings. A television journalist interviews Mrs Spector, a visitor who has witnessed some of the ghostly appearances, and Caesar Goole, the spokesperson for S.P.O.O.C.S. Mr Goole invites viewers to apply to S.P.O.O.C.S to become ghost hunters – in effect setting up the first writing task – a persuasive letter. All future writing tasks are then carried out within that ghost hunting context. Via 'live' video conferences on DVD, Y, the rather severe head of S.P.O.O.C.S, directs the children's other writing tasks and responds to their writing, giving children authentic audiences and purposes for their writing. S.P.O.O.C.S creators, Gill Matthews and Sylvia Karavis, believe that these two elements are often missing from children's writing experiences. 'Children don't always know who they are writing for, other than their teacher, or what they are trying to achieve in their writing. Without those two pieces of information, it is very hard to produce an effective piece of writing. We had seen so many children preparing for SATs by trawling through past papers and felt that it wasn't the way to teach or motivate young writers. So we decided to do something about it and S.P.O.O.C.S is the outcome.'

A strong narrative thread runs through S.P.O.O.C.S. As the programme unfolds, the children produce long and short writing tasks that involve all six main non-fiction text types, character and setting descriptions, stories and play scripts. The ghost hunters write recounts of their time in a haunted house, instructions for how to catch ghosts, non-chronological reports about the ghosts caught on surveillance cameras, explanations for the ghost traps they invent, persuasive texts to encourage visitors to return to the haunted building and discussions to support a parliamentary debate about the pros and cons of regularised hauntings – all within an imaginative context. They are then contacted by Hal B Rich III, the renowned Hollywood film producer, who asks them to write character and setting descriptions to brief his casting directors and set builders. He also invites the children to write the story of their ghost hunting experiences and ultimately, when his script writers walk out, the play script for the film. Not surprisingly, the film is a box office success and the programme ends with the children receiving an invitation to the 'Fredas' ceremony.

To set up the Wednesbury trial of S.P.O.O.C.S, all 11 of the head teachers attended an initial briefing session. 'We felt that this was really important,' Sylvia explains, 'unless the heads are informed and supportive, an initiative is unlikely to be

successful.’ The Year 6 teachers and teaching assistants were then trained by Gill and Sylvia. ‘We took them through the writing process, including a heavy emphasis on the need to incorporate opportunities for children to talk. We also enhanced their knowledge and understanding of the text types, explored the use of teaching strategies such as shared and guided writing, as well as explaining the programme itself.’

The children in the pilot schools responded very well to the challenges of S.P.O.O.C.S. Jonathan Roberts, Year 6 teacher at The Priory Primary School, reported children knocking on the classroom door first thing in the morning, asking to be let in. ‘I used to start the morning with numeracy but I had to change it and start with literacy because the children were so keen to write. They wanted to get feedback from Y, to know what their next writing task was and to talk about how they were going to tackle it.’ Whether it’s a coincidence or not, the teachers who saw the most dramatic improvements in SATs results were those who played along with the S.P.O.O.C.S concept. Jonathan felt that it was really important to keep the children in role, ‘I think they knew it wasn’t real but they wanted to believe that they really were part of the S.P.O.O.C.S organisation and I encouraged them to. I found that even my fairly street wise children were willing to suspend disbelief because they were enjoying themselves.’

Teaching assistants supported and enhanced the S.P.O.O.C.S experience. Because they had been involved in the training, they were able to support children during shared and guided writing sessions as well as in one-to-one situations when they could address specific aspects of a pupil’s writing. They were also involved in creating supportive learning environments. Classrooms were transformed into S.P.O.O.C.S headquarters. Working walls sprang up overnight – displaying pupils’ draft and polished writing as well as posters giving hints and tips on writing. Ghost-shaped cookies even made an appearance in some lessons, as schools got into the spirit of things.

Some teachers involved in the pilot learned valuable lessons. At a post SATs follow up meeting, one comment provoked several nods of agreement, ‘S.P.O.O.C.S is great fun, but it is about revising for SATs. What I discovered, through teaching it, was that the children’s knowledge of the structure of texts, particularly of some non-fiction texts, was really weak. I wasn’t revising with the children, I was teaching them. And that led me to question what was happening in other year groups. Why was I picking up the pieces? As a result, we’ve reviewed the coverage and quality of teaching of text types lower down the school.’

Jonathan is emphatic that the quality of his teaching improved, ‘I wasn’t that keen on teaching literacy, I preferred maths and science. To be honest, I went to the training day thinking that it was going to be yet something else to do. But I became really fired up about teaching S.P.O.O.C.S and started to think about creating other units of work along similar lines.’ Jonathan isn’t alone. Colleagues in his school and others have taken the principles behind the programme and developed units based around particular scenarios that involve children writing in role. Gill and Sylvia feel that, through developing and trialling S.P.O.O.C.S, they have identified some key elements that should be included in similar units of work. Their advice to teachers planning such units is to think about:

- an engaging opening event or experience that ‘hooks’ the children into the unit

- a lively and interesting context that can be sustained over a number of weeks
- an unfolding narrative
- authentic audiences and purposes for writing
- opportunities for children to work in role.

Gill says that there is one more key element to a successful unit, 'S.P.O.O.C.S does seem to have had an impact on many children's writing in the trial and we feel that these key elements played a part in that. But it wouldn't have had any impact without good quality teaching from enthusiastic and committed teachers. They are the real key to success.'

The S.P.O.O.C.S programme is available from Ellipsis Publishing. Go to www.spooos.co.uk for further details, FAQs and an order form.

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