It all began when I was trying to help a 16-year-old boy at Springwell Learning Community who had a very low reading age. Traditional interventions were not working for him – he just wanted to work out in the sports hall.

Springwell is a special school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) in key stages 1-4, and also serves as the PRU for other schools. As lead teacher of intervention, I was running out of ideas to help him. In the end, I stuck letters and sounds up on the sports hall walls and got him to throw tennis balls at them. It was a eureka moment: for the first time in his school career he began identifying sounds and was willing to engage in literacy.

Slowly he progressed through phases 2 and 3 of Letters and Sounds and left school at the end of the year able to read basic words, although with no qualifications. Even so, when I took him into the sports hall, they change their minds and were willing to engage in literacy.

The rationale
When I work with pupils who struggle with reading, they find everything hard. In a classroom setting, they close down and retreat into themselves. Yet when I take them into the sports hall, they come alive again as they dribble a ball through a slalom of letter sounds or bounce on the trampoline saying the sounds of the letters I hold up as they jump, trying to continue to develop their reading skills.

All 15 pupils in the first pilot study progressed in reading by an average 1.4 sub-levels.

Discovering that learning can be fun is an important lesson for many pupils.
A typical session
A colleague from Springswell, Kayleigh Dunwell, helps deliver many of the sessions, as well as the training, in the schools we support. We recommend teachers work with between four and six pupils at a time and a typical session lasts 25 minutes.

We begin with a starter, using high frequency word balls from Smart Kids to encourage pupils to work together and to review what they have remembered – they have to read the first word they see when they catch the ball. Then we use the Alphabet Arch (see picture right) – a giant arc of letters that they have to arrange in the right order – and issue an instruction, for example, ‘stand by the first letter of your surname. The pupils’ position on the alphabet then determines the running order for the session, so we don’t have any arguments over whose turn it is.

After that, we play two activities: one involves identifying all the sounds within a word before reading the whole word out; the other involves identifying the sounds and then writing the word in a sentence. Differentiation is provided in two ways: the sounds we choose to focus on and what we ask pupils to do with them. Sometimes they name a sound and throw a ball at it; on other occasions, we select a sound or word and, again, they have to hit it with the ball.

Confidence first
Some pupils with SEBD have never experienced success, so an important aspect of Active Phonics is building self-confidence. With this in mind, after assessing what level pupils have reached, we might start off by simply getting them to repeat sounds after us. Later, they will identify the sounds themselves, before graduating towards finding sounds in a word and then including those words in a sentence. Every step of the way is personalised to keep them achieving.

Active Phonics was initially designed for key stages 3 and 4 and we still have a Key Stage 3 group to cater for the regular influx of new pupils we have arriving in school. We always try as far as possible to place learners in groups of similar ability.

However, we have found that the intervention works with all ages, and most of our current work is with key stages 1 and 2. In fact, the majority of the schools we have been working with through the SHINE award scheme (see box below) are primary schools, although we do have a secondary school in Barnsley, which uses it in their nurture group.

Developing the methodology
All the schools participating in the second SHINE pilot use the same phonics structure and stage planning. Schools also focus on the same sounds at the same time to ensure that our evaluation of the intervention is consistent across the board. To support this, I have created resources for tracking progress and all the teachers taking part compare notes every half term.

However, you don’t need to be involved in a pilot to pick up our methodology. All you need is some knowledge of phonics. We use Nicola Byrne’s Phonics Planning from LCP, which gives us the structure, the order and the words to practise, and then follow this precisely, although we change the activities to suit our learners’ needs.

Meanwhile, we are developing the tools and resources, games and strategies that make up Active Phonics. So far, there are 10 lesson plans available for free on the website, with accompanying videos that outline the activity, the resources required, how to do it and a top tip.

The videos conclude with ‘something to bear in mind’. For example, to avoid having pupils waste valuable time queuing, we have introduced reading and writing stations on the way back to the main activity. However, if queues still build up, we advise lining pupils up diagonally so everyone can see what is going on.

Likewise, we suggest that if someone asks why some of the letters they are working with are in red, the teacher might reply: ‘These are the vowels. What are the vowels in your name... or in this word?’ The key is to use every opportunity to keep pupils working on words.

Most schools have got the basic PE and phonics equipment. Some schools in the pilots have had to buy a set of boccia balls, but the costs involved are minimal.

The SHINE Awards
After trialling the programme in our school for a year, I approached SHINE for funding to run a pilot project in two local schools. SHINE is an education charity that helps disadvantaged young people by providing them with extra English and maths support and creative learning opportunities.

The project was awarded a bursary in the Let Teachers Shine Awards 2013. This proved successful and the schools involved continue to use the programme.

A second bursary in 2014 allowed me to run a follow-up pilot in 12 local schools over two years. I am currently applying for a third bursary with a view to extending the project to a further 50 schools in 2016.

I want to get Active Phonics into as many schools as possible. To this end, I am writing a manual and want to produce a video to accompany each lesson plan. I would also like to set up an Active Phonics network where schools share ideas and activities – schools participating in the second pilot project have lots of new ideas, which feed into our ongoing fine-tuning of the delivery of the intervention.

Meanwhile, Ms Dunwell and I are also supporting schools that simply want to find out more. For example, around 60 schools observed Active Phonics sessions at Springwell in 2014/15. At other times, we visit schools and deliver a session to their pupils, or deliver bespoke training for their staff.

Come and meet us and observe us in action.

They come alive again as they dribble a ball through a slalom of letter sounds

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Literacy

**Literacy outcomes**

Last year, all 15 pupils in the first pilot study progressed in reading by an average of 1.4 sub-levels. Feedback from the second pilot project echoes this.

Ward Green School, which used the intervention with 98 pupils, said: ‘80 per cent of pupils in Year 1 are expected to make the phonics threshold this year – a rise from 59 per cent in 2014. Better phonics understanding is impacting reading and writing confidence.’

King’s Oaks School observed: ‘On average, the children in KS2 have made 3 points of progress in reading and writing so far this year.’

Of the 11 pupils who took part at Darton Primary School, three were selected for special mention. The current cohort has had 14 lessons. Increase in reading ages: pupil 1: nine months; pupil 2: three months; pupil 3: two years. They always look forward to Active Phonics and pay attention. They have implemented the sounds that they learnt and have used [them] in spelling.’

**Difficult-to-engage children are now showing enthusiasm for phonics**

Meadstead Academy, which targeted 10 pupils, reported: ‘In the phonics screening assessments the majority of children have made between 10-15 points in progress since the beginning of the year, putting them in a strong position for their phonics screening test in June [2015]. All pupils are now secure in their phase 3 phonics sounds and letters and can apply this in a written task – the majority of children were not secure in phase 2 at the start of the programme.’

**The importance of resilience**

Although the primary aim is to boost reading and writing, the intervention also promotes key life skills, such as learning to work together and taking turns. Indeed, I find that pupils quickly become really supportive of each other. A few of them experience success for the very first time and this helps them start to develop resilience.

Resilience is especially important – I’ve known pupils throw chairs across the classroom when they get something wrong. However, in the informal, relaxed setting of the sports hall, they quickly learn to move on from their mistakes and try again. While their progress in literacy is measurable, everything else that we see alongside this is almost as important, as it has a ripple effect across the school.

Schools in the pilot projects have observed similar benefits. Meadstead Academy reported: ‘We have noticed a shift in some pupils’ behaviour – they don’t seem to have as many melt-downs during their reading sessions and often seek out support to improve.’ High View School commented: ‘Difficult-to-engage children are now showing enthusiasm for phonics.’

**Working on several levels**

Active Phonics helps pupils who have fallen behind in their phonics and reading, especially if they are disengaged or display challenging behaviour, lack social skills or become stressed when required to read.

- The sessions are active and practical, allowing pupils with ADHD to burn off some of their excess energy.
- Sessions are multisensory and cover sounds several times, which suits pupils with dyslexia and SpLd.
- Boys respond well to the competitive elements of the programme.
- Pupils learn other skills such as teamwork and turn-taking (SEAL).
- Pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties often have a stressful and chaotic home life. Stress activates the amygdala, part of the limbic system, affecting the ability to learn and store new information. Because pupils enjoy the sessions, this reduces their levels of stress, allowing learning to take place.
- Sessions are fun, resulting in higher engagement. Pupils want to come to them.

**Intervention or whole-school teaching?**

So far, the schools we support have run Active Phonics as an intervention, although that is about to change. When one of our first pilot schools, Worsbrough Common Primary School, saw all nine participating pupils catch up with their peers and simultaneously make good progress in social and emotional development, it decided to introduce the programme as one of its five standard weekly sessions of phonics for all pupils in Key Stage 1.

I originally developed Active Phonics to help young people in key stages 3 and 4, so it is exciting to see that younger pupils are also benefiting. It’s not a miracle intervention and it won’t work for everyone – pupils with dyspraxia, for example, are likely to find some of the activities difficult.

However, as an alternative approach, using tried and tested phonics teaching materials, it helps to remove barriers for many disaffected pupils. If enjoyment is the key to unlocking learning, Active Phonics makes it easier to bring that about.

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**FIND OUT MORE**

- **Active Phonics resources.** All the resources, including flashcards with the sounds, can be downloaded for free. [http://active-phonics.co.uk](http://active-phonics.co.uk)
- **Active Phonics training.** Over 200 professionals have already received training free of charge thanks to bursaries from the SHINE Awards. Schools interested in taking Active Phonics forward should contact Mr Fallis through the Active Phonics website above.
- **Phonics Planning** by Nicola Byrne published by LCP: [www.lcp.co.uk/phonics-planning](http://www.lcp.co.uk/phonics-planning)