

THRASS and I CAN: Working Together to Break Down the Barriers for Children with Communication Disability

It is essential that children of all abilities should learn to read and write, yet a large and growing number of children are beginning formal education with relatively poor speech and language skills. I CAN is a national education charity providing education services for pre-school and school age children with speech and language impairments and it is of no little significance that I CAN has chosen to use the internationally acclaimed THRASS phonics programme at Meath School in Surrey, one of its two specialist schools for children with communication disability.

Many children with a communication disability can succeed in mainstream education, particularly where schools embrace collaborative working arrangements and pupils have access to the specialist staff and resources they need. However, some children with a severe or complex communication disability require specialist placement for some or all of their education. I CAN therefore has two special schools which together provide intensive support for pupils aged four to nineteen: Dawn House School in Nottingham and Meath School in Surrey.

The THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) phonics programme, pioneered by British Educational Psychologist Alan Davies, is used in thousands of nurseries and primary schools in Europe and Africa and has been shown to have the potential to at least double the normal rate of progress made by primary school children who have reading and spelling difficulties. This makes THRASS a natural choice for use at Meath School where severe and complex communication disabilities are the primary disability, many of the pupils also have difficulties with fine and/or gross motor co-ordination, attention control and accessing the curriculum and some pupils may have an additional learning need associated with mild autistic characteristics.

THRASS UK is also backing I CAN's Make Chatter Matter awareness-raising campaign to highlight the importance of young children's communication development as the foundation for learning and development. I CAN produced evidence, in its report *The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication*, that around 50% of children across the UK start school lacking the skills that are vital for an effective start to learning and up to 10% have a long-term persistent communication disability. THRASS is aiming to work collaboratively with I CAN and other organisations, in whatever way it is able, in the campaign to help children communicate.

As the first stage of this collaborative working, THRASS UK will be holding two training courses at Meath School later this year. The first, in June, will be a one-day course entitled "How the THRASS programme teaches essential speaking and listening skills" and will be for about 80 outside delegates, with the monies raised donated to Meath School. The second, in October, will be the two-day Accredited Certificate Course which THRASS UK is providing free of charge for all thirty teachers, assistants and therapists at Meath School.

The fundamental belief behind the THRASS programme is that the process of learning to read and write changes and improves a child's verbal ability, general knowledge, memory, intellect and social behaviour. In keeping with this belief, a key feature of the programme is that essential speaking and listening skills are taught from the outset, in the first of ten stages, known as Picture Location.

In this stage, teachers, assistants and parents work together to develop essential speaking and listening skills by acting-out, matching, naming, describing, categorizing and discussing one-hundred-and-twenty key pictures with their children. The creation of phrases, sentences and stories by the children is also very much encouraged and celebrated in order to develop imagination, competence and confidence in the children.

Two of the resources offered by THRASS are of particular value for teaching children with learning difficulties: the Phoneme Machine and the Calendar Charts for early language learning. The Phoneme Machine is a groundbreaking computer programme that uses moving human lips and the International Phonetic Alphabet to teach children, and indeed learners of all ages and abilities, to read and spell in an entertaining and fun way. It can be downloaded

free of charge in the countries that THRASS UK is licensed to serve and thousands of people have already downloaded it since it was launched last year.

The Phoneme Machine has software accreditation from market leader SMART Technologies, for use on its interactive whiteboards and, in addition, Alan Davies has recently been asked to present the software at Microsoft's African Schools Technology Innovation Centre.

The other resource is free Calendar Charts for early language learning that help develop essential speaking and listening skills, including general knowledge, memory, intellect and social skills and are available in several European and African languages. In addition, the latest version of the Phoneme Machine includes an interactive version of the English Calendar Chart with children's voices saying the seven days, the thirty-one dates, the twelve months, the numbers from one to twenty, the ten main colours and the names of the twenty-six lower-case letters (and their associated capitals).

For a summary of the main features of THRASS and the benefits of using THRASS, (including comments from teachers and parents), visit www.thrass.co.uk/keyfacts.htm

For more information about the Phoneme Machine and to register for a free download of the software, visit www.phonememachine.com

To obtain copies of the free Calendar Charts, visit www.thrass.co.uk/cart/cc.htm

To learn more about I CAN, its Make Chatter Matter campaign and Meath School, visit www.ican.org.uk or www.ican.org.uk/makechattermatter

Demonstration lessons using THRASS can be viewed as videostreams or downloaded from www.thrass.co.uk/tvc.htm

For details of the full range of THRASS resources for parents and schools, visit www.thrass.co.uk/resources.htm

The countries that THRASS UK is licensed to serve are shown in blue on the world map at www.thrass.co.uk/worldmap.htm

For details of THRASS Professional Development Courses that are held regularly in the UK, Europe, West and Southern Africa, visit www.thrass.co.uk/courses.htm

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