

## **THRASS UK and I CAN: Helping to Maximise the Potential of Children with Special Educational Needs**

Earlier this year, I CAN, the national education charity that provides education services for children with speech and language impairments, announced that it had chosen to further increase the use of the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills) phonics programme at its Meath School in Surrey. Thirty teachers, assistants and therapists at the school have just attended a THRASS two-day Accredited Certificate Course, sponsored by THRASS UK, and their comments confirm the valuable role that THRASS can play in maximising the potential children with special needs. "If it had been around 20 years ago it would have saved a lot of heartache for my own children." "I can see how we can use it with our children, who have severe and complex speech, language and communication needs." "It made me question how my dyslexic child was taught and how he still struggles as a teenager." These were just some of the comments made by those attending the course.

Many children with a communication disability can succeed in mainstream education, particularly where 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 and I CAN therefore has two special schools which together provide intensive support for pupils aged four to 19: Dawn House School in Nottingham and Meath School in Surrey. I CAN has also been working with the Department for Children, Schools and Families to develop its new £2 million Inclusion Development Programme project to boost the confidence of teachers, support staff and early years practitioners.

The internationally acclaimed 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. It is therefore of no little significance that I CAN has chosen to extend the use of the THRASS programme at Meath School, where severe and complex communication disabilities are the primary disability, many 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.

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 10 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 120 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. The value of the Phoneme Machine was recently recognised in the September 2007 edition of *Independent Talking Points*, the magazine of the Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice (ASLTIP), in which Catherine Redmayne, the editor, wrote, "I would have paid just for some bits of this programme. Considering the whole thing was free to download, it was a wonderful offering from THRASS".

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. Users of the Phoneme Machine can also download interactive versions of these with children's voices saying the days, dates, months, numbers from one to 20, the 10 main colours and the names of the 26 lower-case letters (and their associated capitals).

The THRASS phonics programme is also enjoying huge success in South Africa where it is receiving corporate sponsorship from South Africa's Absa Bank through the THRASS Absa TalkTogether Literacy Project, a unique educational partnership that is aiming to revolutionise the teaching and learning of language in South Africa through partnerships between primary schools, universities and other organizations.

THRASS UK is working collaboratively with I CAN and other organisations in the campaign to help children communicate.

The THRASS extensive picture-based training website for schools and parents with easy access to a wide range of resources and support materials and extensive evidence of the widespread success of THRASS is at [www.thrass.co.uk](http://www.thrass.co.uk)

To learn more about I CAN, its *Make Chatter Matter* campaign and Meath School, visit [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

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](http://www.thrass.co.uk/keyfacts.htm)

For more information about the THRASS Phoneme Machine Version 5 and to register for a free download of the software, visit [www.phonememachine.com](http://www.phonememachine.com).

The THRASS multi-lingual calendar charts and associated software can be downloaded free-of-charge from [www.thrass.co.uk/cart/cc.htm](http://www.thrass.co.uk/cart/cc.htm)

To read the independent review of the THRASS Phoneme Machine that appeared in the September 2007 edition of Independent Talking Points, visit <http://www.thrass.co.uk/asltip.htm>

Demonstration lessons using THRASS can be viewed as videostreams or downloaded from [www.thrass.co.uk/tvc.htm](http://www.thrass.co.uk/tvc.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](http://www.thrass.co.uk/courses.htm)

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Mike Meade, Media Director, +44 1829 741413 Mob: 07970 151 738  
[mikemeade@thrass.co.uk](mailto:mikemeade@thrass.co.uk)

Chris Griffiths, International Development, +30 266 203 1207 [chrisgriffiths@thrass.co.uk](mailto:chrisgriffiths@thrass.co.uk)