

Let's jump the word hurdles

Jolene Campbell

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Books a mother wrote for her Down's son are proving a hit in schools, says Jolene Campbell.

When Marie Dunleavy started to make books and games for her son Daniel, her aim was to teach him the first 200 common words. Daniel is now 9 years of age and has started to read novels.

Daniel has Down's syndrome. When he started in P1 at South Morningside Primary, he managed well with the class reading scheme, but, as it progressed, the leaps in vocabulary became too great for him. Other schemes failed similarly: Daniel became frustrated as he moved from one to another, making little progress.

Encouraged by teacher responses, Ms Dunleavy produced an integrated scheme of books, wordcards, games and phonic sets, all featuring the fictional Pops family. These have helped turn Daniel's reading progress into a success story.

His mother wanted books that progressed in small steps, were highly engaging, colourful and contained stories to which Daniel could easily relate. Pops, which stands for Plenty of Potential, is a family with a little boy, Kal, who has Down's syndrome. Ms Dunleavy wanted Daniel to see someone like himself portrayed in a positive way.

The books are designed with matching games on each page, lotto games at the back and a little hidden elephant in illustrations - an opportunity for pupils to collect praise if they can find them. Colourful wooden games provide the repetition through play that Marie felt Daniel needed.

"For me the most important thing is that these books and games have given Daniel a love of reading and improved his self-confidence," she says.

The Pops Reading Scheme is based on the first 800 words a child learns.

They are broken down into functional topics such as toys and animals. Ms Dunleavy also uses the first 200 common words in creating her stories.

Since she decided to make the resources available to other children, Ms Dunleavy has worked collaboratively with primary teachers and speech and language therapists. In consultation with Professor Sue Buckley, professor of development disability at the Down Syndrome Educational Trust, and Gillian Bird, an educational psychologist at the trust, she has produced resources that more teachers are using. Six schools in the Lothians now have Pops resources for pupils with developmental disabilities.

Longniddry Primary in East Lothian has been using them with Ben Connacher, who is demonstrating considerable progress - Ben has now started to build an impressive sight vocabulary. Amanda Hutchinson, Ben's teacher, says:

"Pops resources are very effective and highly engaging with colourful illustrations, which is good for visual learners like Ben. He loves the books and is making real progress."

His mother Lynne has been pleasantly surprised by how much Ben has achieved, using Pops books for one month.

"I didn't know he could match words so successfully. And this will help his speech, since they tend to work together," she says.

Alexa Pope, who worked with Daniel in P1, has now moved to Broughton Primary where she uses Pops resources. She finds them highly effective for children with language delay and would recommend them to any teacher for children struggling to read.

"When resources jump on too quickly and it becomes too difficult for a child, that experience fosters a belief that they cannot do it. If you pull it back to their level and slowly build up their confidence, it works," she says.

Support co-ordinators at Edinburgh City Council are monitoring the impact of the resources. Results indicate they benefit those with Down's syndrome and other children with defined learning difficulties, but could help pupils with a broader range of needs.

www.pops-resources.com/index.php
