



“The impact has been transformative...”

An interim evaluation of the Phoenix School Specialist Classroom Provision



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Introduction

By Veronica Armson,
Executive Headteacher at Phoenix



Who we are...

Phoenix is a Special School for over 500 autistic young people between the age of 3-19 years, and continues to be recognised as an outstanding provision. 60% of our students are non-speaking and use alternative and augmented communication systems (AAC). We provide our students with an exemplary education and, since 2014, our Phoenix Outreach Service (POS) has supported mainstream schools across Tower Hamlets to provide free training and the best possible education for the increasing number of autistic students in our local authority.

Our context...

As with many areas of the UK, autism diagnoses in Tower Hamlets have continued to increase. Phoenix and other local maintained Special Schools are however full, and many children that would previously have received a specialist education are in mainstream settings instead. Due to the complexity of need of these young people, many mainstream schools report not being able to provide adequate provision and wish they could do more to educate and support the needs of their students.

Our innovative practice...

We undertook a pilot across 22 mainstream schools in Tower Hamlets, to set up Specialist Classrooms for autistic children, with a significant support package from Phoenix School and our Phoenix Outreach Service. Schools in the pilot received extra outreach support for planning an effective curriculum, alongside an assessment model and interventions. The Headteachers and Senior Leaders from all pilot schools worked alongside Phoenix to ensure quality education through a peer learning process. Staff working in the specialist classes have a buddy class teacher from Phoenix who they can meet and plan with, and there is a partnership link with Phoenix directly. These classrooms enable students to remain in their respective schools whilst receiving a well planned and effective education that meets their needs. Such is our commitment to determining the efficacy of the provision, we have sought input from experienced researchers from the University of Birmingham and UCL – these researchers are supporting us to collect rigorous quantitative and qualitative data, and to produce a high-quality evaluation. This interim report provides an overview of the project and outlines our initial findings.



Specialist Classrooms: What do they look like?

Our Specialist Classroom Provisions (SCPs) were created for students who have been working academically below their peers, and who would be suitable for a specialist setting. These SCPs aim to provide **an education that is more suited to the strengths, needs and abilities of these students** compared to what would typically be available within mainstream settings.

Whilst some schools had already established their own specialist classrooms prior to this project, **the support, input and oversight of Phoenix has helped to elevate the quality of specialist classrooms** in Tower Hamlets.



Enabling environments

A large focus of the SCP project has been the creation of **low-arousal environments that are calming, enabling and supportive**. Doing so has required collaboration between SCP teachers, their Senior Leadership Teams, Phoenix staff and POS. Schools now report that their environments feel much more suited to the needs of their students.

Additionally, limiting class sizes to a maximum of 10 students has enabled schools to foster intimate learning environments where staff energy can be fully devoted to **thoughtful and focused teaching**.



Bespoke curriculum

As most of the students taught within the SCPs are working well below the National Curriculum level, providing an education that is suitable requires additional resourcing and **a curriculum that is tailored to individual need** including comprehensive support for communication.

However, where students are working at National Curriculum level for *some subjects*, **the uniquely flexible nature of our SCPs allows students to also access mainstream lessons if and when appropriate** in addition to the bespoke teaching provided within the SCP.



Specialist Classrooms: The key elements of the Phoenix offer



Outreach Support

Each SCP receives weekly visits from a dedicated POS. These experts model good practice, help to create enabling environments, and offer support with teaching, planning and behaviour.



Training Events

Phoenix hosts and delivers accredited training programmes for all SCP staff in all schools and at Phoenix. This training develops a more experienced workforce across the schools.



Half-Termly Resource Evenings

SCP staff come for training at Phoenix and work collaboratively with peers from across the SCP network and their Phoenix buddies to build a community and to share effective practice. Each session is led by Phoenix staff and POS and focuses on an area of good autism practice including communication, moderation and curriculum planning.



Parent Training

Parents from all SCPs are invited to all Phoenix training, which is run on a termly basis.



Buddy System

Each SCP teacher has a partnership with a Phoenix Buddy – an experienced teacher based at Phoenix that can offer support, resources and tailored advice. The SCP teachers come to Phoenix, where the buddy teacher models and advises on a return visit at least once a term. This system acts as a key point of contact.



Buddy Weeks

Buddy weeks are run over two weeks twice a year and allow the SCP staff to visit Phoenix and learn from good practice and for Phoenix teachers to return to the SCP to advise and support teaching.



Effective curriculum

Phoenix provide a curriculum for all pathways of learning and they train teachers and subject leads to have an understanding of how to plan and teach a well planned and resourced curriculum that meets the needs of their class.



Communication strategies

The Speech and Language Team from Phoenix offer advice and training to ensure there are opportunities to support communication and that it is embedded into the curriculum.



Assessment Model

SCPs have access to *Phoenix Steps*, a bespoke assessment tool that enables staff to set accurate yet aspirational targets for their autistic students. The schools work with our Senior Leaders to ensure they are using the assessment tool accurately with their pupils. This enables schools to celebrate achievements at levels below the National Curriculum.



Data and Moderation

Data against the Phoenix steps is collected each term, informing Phoenix of progress and areas for training. Phoenix buddies support with this process twice a term.



Resource Bank

Schools can access a large, online bank of resources created, developed and regularly updated by Phoenix. This includes transactional, well being and curriculum focused resources.



Annual Celebration Evening

At the end of each year, SCP staff and Headteachers are invited to Phoenix for a celebration evening to reflect upon successes and plan for the future.

Measuring progress...

Many autistic students develop, practice and master a range of important skills despite working below the National Curriculum level. However, these **important skills and achievements often go unrecognised**, especially within mainstream settings.

Phoenix steps is a bespoke assessment tool designed by Phoenix to fill the gap below the National Curriculum and, as part of the SCP project, it has been successfully implemented across more than 10 mainstream schools.

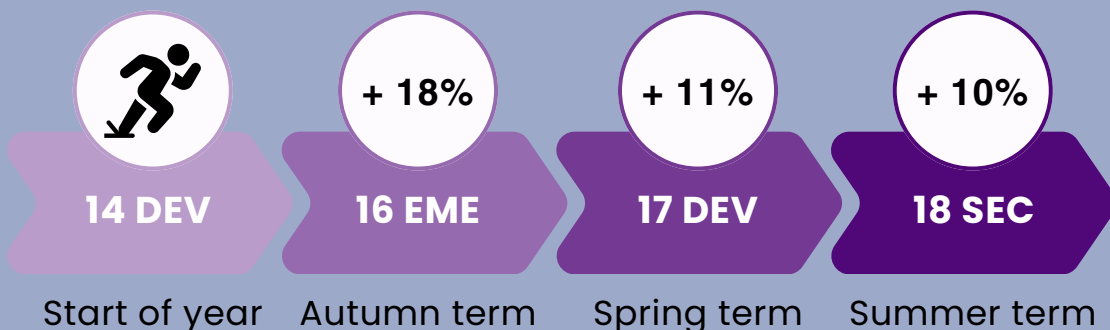
Phoenix Steps 1-14 are in line with the Engagement Model, and are not linked to subject-specific goals. Steps 15-24 cover subject specific skills for English, Maths, Science and PSHE, for skills between the Engagement model and the National Curriculum. Steps 25-36 are equal to Years 1-6 of the National Curriculum, divided into smaller, measurable Steps. Steps 14 and beyond are divided into four stages that denote the students' level of skill acquisition: **ENT**ering, **EMER**ging, **DEVE**loping and **SEC**ure.



According to SCP staff, the Phoenix Steps...

- ✓ Help them to understand the strengths of their pupils
- ✓ Help them to understand where their pupils can improve
- ✓ Enable them to more effectively plan their teaching

Phoenix Steps Progress



Average progress from a sample of 31 pupils from across eight of our SCPs

"Parents and family members comment on progress being matched at home. Stories of individual progress, social and academic, have been regularly shared"

Anonymous SCP teacher

Staff perspectives

In order to evaluate the impact of the SCP project and the support provided by Phoenix, we have been using interviews, feedback sessions and anonymous surveys to explore staff opinion...



of teachers, SENCOs and Headteachers feel supported by Phoenix Outreach



of teachers feel they understand how to adapt teaching/learning to successfully support autistic students



of teachers feel they understand the strengths, interests, and needs of their autistic students



of teachers feel they understand how to enable autistic students to contribute to and influence decisions



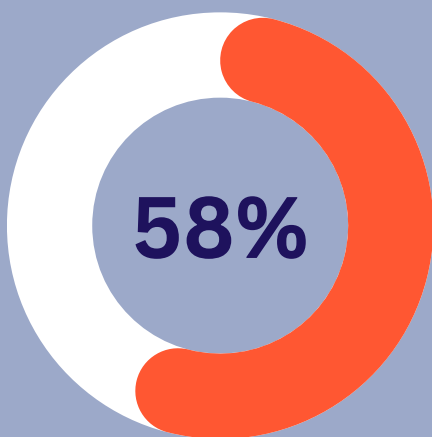
of SENCOs and Headteachers were satisfied with how quickly students adapted to the SCP



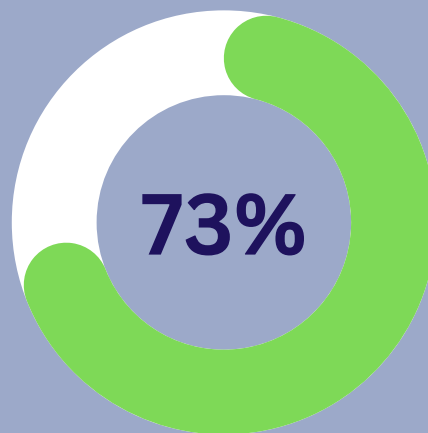
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We also asked staff to assess the quality of autism practice in their school by reflecting on the *Autism Education Trust's* (AET) Standards of Good Autism Practice. They self-rated their school's alignment with each of the 16 Standards on a scale from 0 to 5. The overall scores for each school across the 16 Standards were then compared, and the chart below illustrates the increase in the average overall score across the schools.

AET Standards of Good Autism Practice



Before the
Phoenix SCP Project



After Year One of the
Phoenix SCP Project

Average alignment with the AET Standards across each school

What the schools say...

Many Schools have provided great examples of the successes they have experienced since joining the SCP project.

Since opening their SCP in **September 2023**, schools have witnessed incredible progress from their students and also report improvements in the ability and sensitivity with which their staff respond to the needs of autistic learners.



Children are calm and regulated throughout the day – they are thriving with the adapted environment, specialist support and tailored provision

“The impact of the Phoenix SC Pilot has been **transformative for both staff and students**. We now have 17 children in our [two] specialist classes – this allows them to receive a **high level of specialist interventions** delivered by staff who have undergone **extensive and high-quality training** from the Phoenix Outreach Team. This specialised training has significantly upskilled our staff, making them **knowledgeable about all aspects of autism** and equipping them with the tools to support our students effectively.

Developing consistent systems for communication have empowered children to make requests, express their needs and manage frustration more successfully

Over the past 16 months, the progress of our students has been remarkable. We use the Phoenix Steps assessment system, an excellent tool introduced by Phoenix, which provides the most accurate measurement of these children's progress. The system makes it easy to track and break down individual achievements, supporting us in setting precise and effective targets. The Phoenix Outreach Team has also been exceptional in responding to our specific needs by offering continuous training, support and advice in the classroom, and school-wide strategies.

We are able to support families who otherwise would have had children across more than one setting and other support to the wider family e.g. sibling support group, training

Children are accessing a bespoke curriculum that is engaging and is matched carefully to their evolving needs



The school's inclusive reputation means we are becoming a school of choice for children with additional needs

Parents have been particularly impressed with the significant improvements in children's communication skills. The wider school has also benefited from upskilling in autism practices through various INSET and training sessions conducted by the Phoenix Outreach Team. This has ensured that children in specialist classes have appropriate access to mainstream classes, promoting a balanced and inclusive educational experience. The introduction of the specialist classes has allowed us to focus on each child's unique needs and provide the best possible support, thus making it a highly positive addition to our school that we now don't think we could live without!”

Our conclusions..



SCP Students are making progress



SCP staff feel supported by Phoenix



Autism practice is improving across Tower Hamlets



Our next steps...



Building on existing data (e.g. Phoenix Steps progress, staff surveys and staff interviews).



Collecting new data (e.g., student case studies, attendance data, parent surveys and parent interviews).



Understand the impact our SCPs have on students, parents, staff and schools.



Build on the project to support with recruitment and training across all schools in Tower Hamlets, for the Specialist classrooms, to ensure consistency throughout provisions.



Complete provision maps, to inform stakeholders of the full costs and savings: invest and save.



Work with Speech and Language therapy and improve the consistency of communication strategies for pupils in the SCPs.

Our team...

A dedicated team at Phoenix have led and supported the SCPs through (see across). In addition, 18 Phoenix Class teachers have been buddies to the SCP teachers, providing ongoing support at both Phoenix and in their setting. The schools involved in the project are supported by their Headteachers and SENDCo's, who ensure the class teachers can attend the Phoenix professional development.

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Phoenix Leadership Team:

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