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Portfolio Case Study

Diagnostic Assessment, Individualised Placement, and Progress Tracking

for Young Learners at a Specialist Phonics-Based Reading Centre

Organisation	I Can Read
Location	Singapore
Engagement	September 2015 – December 2016 (15 months)
Learner range	Ages 2–12 · Complete beginners to developing readers
Focus areas	Diagnostic assessment · Individualised placement · Progress tracking · Teacher mentoring
Progression	Promoted to Senior Teacher within the engagement period

CONTEXT

I Can Read is a specialist phonics-based reading centre operating across Singapore, taking children from age two up to early secondary. Its programme is structured and evidence-based, built on phonological awareness, decoding, sight words and comprehension, and taught through a mix of small-group and one-to-one sessions.

The intake is deliberately mixed. Children turn up at wildly different starting points: some can't read at all, some can decode a word but not make sense of it, some read fluently but write with shaky grammar. A lot of them come through parents worried about how school is going. The whole thing the centre offers rests on one ability, putting each child in the right pathway from day one, and then tracking what happens carefully after that.

I joined as a teacher and was promoted to Senior Teacher during my time there, which brought extra responsibility: curriculum discussions, running professional development, and mentoring teachers who were new to the centre.

Everything rests on placing the child correctly. Get the level wrong and you knock their confidence, waste their time, and lose the family's trust all at once. The assessment isn't a formality. It's the thing everything else is built on.

THE CHALLENGE

The central challenge was getting the diagnosis right across an enormous spread of learners. Assessing a two-year-old who has never read anything is a completely different job from assessing a ten-year-old who reads fluently but can't punctuate a sentence. Both walk into the same programme, and both have to be placed accurately.

Three specific challenges defined the work:

- Diagnostic accuracy across age and ability extremes: the intake covered ten years of cognitive and linguistic development. The tools and the approach had to be adjusted on the spot to each child's age, ability and mood on the day, especially with the very youngest, where a formal sit-down assessment tells you almost nothing reliable.
- Placement with no single right answer: pitch a learner too low and you dent their confidence and slow them down; pitch them too high and they get frustrated and check out. What the assessment had to produce was a placement decision you could actually stand behind, with the reasoning to match.
- Showing progress in a way that meant something to parents: families here are invested and often anxious. The centre had to show them, concretely and often, that their child was moving forward. That needed a tracking framework solid enough to be trusted and plain enough to make sense to someone without a teaching background.

THE ASSESSMENT APPROACH

New students were assessed orally, not in writing. That kept the assessment responsive to the child rather than locking it into a fixed format. The instrument had a scripted core, which kept different assessors consistent, with room for open follow-up questions on top. The real skill was in those follow-ups: steering them as I went, reading what each child was showing me, and pushing harder or easing off as the moment needed.

The domains assessed varied according to the child's apparent level:

- For younger or beginner learners, phonological awareness came first (letter sounds, blending, segmenting), along with some basic sight words and whether they could engage with a simple piece of text.
- For stronger readers, I looked at how they decoded unfamiliar and polysyllabic words, how fluently and expressively they read, and how they answered comprehension questions, with written grammar and spelling added in where it made sense.

Each assessment produced a strategy, not just a level. I didn't run it off a scoring threshold. Instead I built a specific pathway for each child around where their strengths and gaps actually sat across all the domains. Two children with the same overall score could end up placed and paced completely differently, one strong on phonological awareness but weak on sight-word recall, the other the reverse.

PROGRESS TRACKING FRAMEWORK

Every learner's progress was tracked and written up formally each term through a structured, multi-dimensional framework. Each child got a detailed termly report covering sixteen specific criteria, each rated on a five-point scale, grouped into three learning domains:

Domain	Criteria assessed (rated 1–5 per criterion)
Reading	• Reads independently without reliance on diacritic marks • Can decode unfamiliar words • Can decode polysyllabic words and common extensions (e.g. _ed, _ing, _er, _est) • Recognises common sight words • Reads fluently with expression • Interprets and responds to punctuation marks • Completes reading homework each week
Comprehension	• Answers comprehension questions in complete sentences

Grammar & Spelling

- Is able to locate answers to comprehension questions by re-reading part of the story
- Can identify parts of speech (nouns, adjectives, verbs)
- Can write in complete sentences
- Applies correct punctuation to written work
- Is able to spell target words each week
- Demonstrates the ability to self-correct
- Demonstrates the ability to write legibly and neatly
- Completes homework each week

The framework did two jobs at once. Inside the centre it was an evidence-based record of each child's development, so teachers could see where progress was strong, where it had stalled, and what to change in response. For parents it turned that into a clear, criterion-referenced picture, detailed enough to trust and plain enough to follow without any teaching background.

Writing a detailed report for every student each term also built its own discipline: a habit of observing closely and documenting properly, which is exactly the kind of evidence-based practice that good programme design depends on once you scale it up.

Sixteen criteria, scored one by one, for every learner, every term. That isn't box-ticking. It's the evidence base that tells you whether the programme is actually working, and where it needs to change.

INSTRUCTION AND TEACHER MENTORING

Differentiated Instruction

Teaching at I Can Read mixed small-group and one-to-one work, and how much of each a child got depended on their needs and how they were progressing. Group sessions built confidence and let children learn from each other; one-to-one time was for drilling into the specific gaps a group setting can't reach precisely enough.

With learners spanning a decade of development, from toddlers to pre-teens, you can't teach them all the same way. The approach, the materials, the pace and even the tone shifted a lot between age groups, while the underlying framework stayed the same.

Senior Teacher Progression and Staff Mentoring

The promotion to Senior Teacher came off the back of how consistent and accurate my assessment and placement work had been. The wider role meant a seat in curriculum discussions and responsibility for mentoring teachers new to the centre.

Most of the mentoring happened through structured observation and feedback. I'd sit in on a new teacher's lesson, note what was working and what needed attention, and give them focused feedback afterwards, in writing and in person. It carried the same ethos as the rest of the programme: feedback tied to specific things I'd actually seen them do, not a general impression of how it went.

Weekly professional development sessions gave the team somewhere to swap methods, talk through particular learners, and keep practice consistent across the staff.

OUTCOMES

Diagnostic precision A placement strategy designed for every new learner, right across the age and ability range, matching each child to the correct pathway from their very first lesson.	Evidenced progress A structured term report for every learner, sixteen criteria, a five-point scale, three domains, giving a rigorous record of progress that parents could actually read.	Recognised expertise Promoted to Senior Teacher on the strength of that assessment work, picking up curriculum leadership and staff mentoring along the way.
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WHAT THIS DEMONSTRATES

This one brings out a different set of capabilities again from the others in the portfolio:

- Diagnostic assessment for diverse learners: running accurate, nuanced assessments across an exceptional range of ages and abilities, adapting on the spot while holding the standard steady.
- Individualised programme design: going past simple level placement to build a specific pathway around each learner's own profile of strengths and gaps, which is both sharper and more effective than dropping them at a threshold.
- Evidence-based progress tracking: applying the centre's multi-dimensional monitoring framework rigorously, every learner against its sixteen criteria each term, and turning the result into data solid enough to steer teaching decisions and clear enough to mean something to parents.
- Differentiated instruction across a wide developmental range: adapting approach, materials and pace across a decade of development, from toddlers to pre-teens, without letting the programme lose its shape.
- Practice-based teacher mentoring: developing new staff through structured observation and criterion-referenced feedback, built on what you can actually see in a lesson instead of abstract advice.
- Rapid professional progression: earning recognition and a bigger remit inside fifteen months, which shows I can get up to a high standard quickly in an unfamiliar setting.

References available on request

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