

100% Increase in Book Borrowing!

BALERNO HIGH SCHOOL, EDINBURGH

Scale of the challenge

An ICT solution to accurately measure reading skills sounded ideal to the school librarian at this high school in a neighbourhood of Edinburgh. Clare Duncan had been in post for about four years and wanted to create a tangible record of reading practice and development.

Balerno Community High School had a number of special needs and gifted and talented pupils, who needed to be supported so they did not fall behind or become frustrated by being held back. Their very presence meant that any solution needed to work across all abilities.

Clare knew that an ICT solution would be popular with colleagues, parents and even HMI inspectors, all keen to see the school exploiting modern technology.

But when she and a teaching colleague saw demonstrations of the reading management software Accelerated Reader, she was also struck by its potential to launch a revived focus on reading practice.

She knew this would benefit the famously tricky intake of S1 pupils, fresh from primary schools, who come in as enthusiastic readers. This soon gets lost within the pressures and demands of the secondary school curriculum. The challenge is to maintain this momentum and to continue to give pupils the opportunity to practice and develop their reading skills.

"I knew English teachers would like it, and their co-operation was essential", she said.

Implementation

At the start of 2006, the software was being used by seven members of staff and all of the 140 first year pupils. One of the first initiatives was to test those pupils' reading levels. Instantly, the school had a much more accurate picture of individual need, critical for an individualised learning environment.

The pupils followed the Accelerated Reader method, reading books, taking online quizzes to test their comprehension, revealing their developing reading skills in the process, scoring increasingly higher points and being directed to more advanced books.

The school made good use of the program's reports which reinforce the pupils' confidence and help them focus on clear targets. For English teachers, the ability to show these reports to parents, helps ease communication with them and provide tangible evidence to support their judgement in gauging a pupil's reading level.

"It has been a real success", claims Clare, who quotes one particularly reluctant boy reader who labelled himself as a non-reader, now responding well to the quizzes and starting to view himself as a successful reader.

"Pupils saw that they were reading for a reason, and they simply loved the fun of testing themselves against the quizzes."

Results

A 100 per cent increase in book borrowing among year one pupils is, for Clare, an amazing outcome. "We are talking about pupils who literally did not visit the library before, pupils that we have introduced fiction to."

"With the lack of any dedicated reading time in secondary schools, I have lobbied hard to get more reading practice in place and to stimulate more fiction reading."

"If we compare this first year group to the same group a year earlier, we are seeing pupils inspired by their reports, fired up by the quizzes and starting to see that reading is fun."

"The cultural change among teachers is in some ways even more significant. For some, seeing the power of a new focus on reading practice has been a 'road-to-Damascus' experience. They are total advocates for this system and are pushing for more reading practice, and on ways to involve parents."

Clare says she feels she has a good case now to ask for more financial support to take what she describes as a pilot further and achieve more potential.

"It is most definitely worth the set-up time and effort when the outcome is to create a new focus on reading, motivate everyone involved, and measure skills with real accuracy – nothing else does this", she said.