

Changing the attitudes and behaviour of difficult pupils one book at a time!

BARRS HILL SCHOOL, COVENTRY

Scale of the challenge

It is not surprising that reading was an area that Barrs Hill wanted to focus on, given that the 600 pupils speak some forty different languages, making English a second language for many of them.

Learning Support Unit teacher, Jane Manton wanted to find a way of supporting all pupils from the point at which they could read until reading had become a habit – helping them to become what she calls ‘unconscious readers’. A year ago she decided to try the software-based reading system Accelerated Reader.

Implementation

Jane and her colleague Janet Oliver, the school’s Learning Resource Manager, who is also a qualified librarian, began by trialling the system with one English group in Year 7. They have subsequently extended it to include the whole of Years 7 and 8.

“Every pupil in those years, whatever their reading level, now uses it,” she explains. “I was surprised to find we had very few natural readers, that is, children who were comfortable reading.”

Initially, even persuading some pupils to read books at all was hard work. However, Jane stressed that they just needed to read three thin books to get their first certificate and “there was a feeling anyone can do that”. Once they got started, Jane found most pupils quickly became enthusiastic, although some remain reluctant.”

Janet has opened up the library so that children can voluntarily come in on their breaks and at lunchtime to do the quizzes if they wish. “It’s often not the most fluent readers who come in their own time, but children who have English as a second language,” she says.

“All the children get an automated print-out when they’ve completed a quiz, which they take to their tutor or English teacher. What I like is that this system addresses everyone, so they can go at their own pace and work at their own level.”

Parents see Accelerated Reader for themselves when they visit the school for a 'Tutor Day' – which made one parent ask why her daughter hadn't had a certificate when she was always reading at home.

It turned out she was what Janet calls a 'secret reader', who read extensively at home but thought the books she had to read at school were boring. She is now part of the team helping to choose new books for the school library.

Results

While reading test scores won't be available until the end of the school year, Barrs Hill is already seeing significant motivational benefits.

The majority of children are becoming keen readers, and more of them are using the library, even those who claimed never to have been in there since they were shown around the school on their first day.

Many of the "difficult" pupils in particular have shown a change in attitudes to reading behaviour. Janet and Jane think this is because the tests provide an instant result, giving an immediate, positive boost which is extremely motivational.

"One of our most difficult students had read a very simple book and demanded a test when one wasn't available, so we had to use the software to create one!" explains Janet. "He got a certificate and was absolutely delighted. Now he's reading something slightly more appropriate, which already has a test."

"I believe many pupils remember the stress of first learning to read in primary school, and it puts them off going any further. What they need is some positive reinforcement. When we praise them, they don't always believe us – however, if the computer says they're good, they believe it must be true!"

What teachers say...

"It's a very good system, very black and white because it follows a simple pattern of read, test, win certificate."

"The quizzes quickly identify whether a pupil who is claiming to have read a book such as Matilda or Harry Potter has just seen the film. If they haven't actually read the book, they won't pass!"

"We need to make reading cool – and this system is helping us do that."