

The program has proved itself many times over, in a very short space of time

BRESSAY PRIMARY, SHETLANDS

Scale of the challenge

Among the 38 pupils at Bressay Primary School in the Shetland Islands, reading ability was not a problem. But what was becoming evident within the upper age groups was that actual enjoyment of literature was seriously lacking.

Most of their material was derived from a formal reading scheme based on designated text that allowed for little choice. True, titles were available in the school's library, but with a lack of stimulus in reading generally the library was markedly under-used.

"We needed to find a way of generating enthusiasm for the written word", says teacher Donna Willis. "The 8 to 12 year olds had developed plenty of technical proficiency, but they were gaining very little pleasure from what they read. There was very little feel for words. We needed to light a spark."

Implementation

The school's head teacher, Fred Hibbert, knew all about Accelerated Reader having worked with it in schools in Australia. Furthermore, the local Educational Development Officer had heard of the system and was willing to support its introduction.

The system, developed by Renaissance Learning, was adopted at Bressay at the start of the new school year in 2005, with all the 17 pupils in the upper age groups involved.

At the same time it was decided to go for the system unequivocally by creating as much space as possible for reading. That meant dropping the reading scheme entirely, dispensing with the old textbook-based exercises in favour of reading whole books, and using some of the 15 per cent flexible time built into the curriculum.

With children asked to read at home for at least 30 minutes three times a week, that made for a total of approximately five hours a week. "It took some doing", says Donna, "but we didn't want half measures. We wanted to go for it wholeheartedly."

Results

The change, she says, was almost instantaneous. Pupils were "falling over themselves" to discuss books, not just in class but outside lesson time – and clearly at home, too,

judging by the amount of feedback from parents happy to contact the school and express their amazement at their children's progress.

"When I use the word instantaneous I don't do so lightly", says Donna. "It really was like that. It was immediate change. It seemed that almost overnight we began to achieve our goal, particularly among some of the older boys who had been lagging behind the girls."

Almost as rapid was a marked improvement in writing skills, the new taste for reading acting as a spur to greater literacy.

Of their own volition, some of the 9-12-year-olds appraised the school library and sorted out not only books for which matching Accelerated Reader quizzes already existed, but titles for which quizzes had not been bought.

Then, aware that Bressay had only a small budget, the School Pupil Council, made up of children from all ages, held a jumble sale to raise the cash for more quizzes.

On top of all that has been achieved, the school sees it as an added bonus that the adoption of Accelerated Reader neatly fits in with the emphasis in Scotland on allowing children to follow, as far as possible, their own interests, rather than have them dictated.

What teachers say...

"The programme has proved itself many times over, and in a very short space of time. The way the children have seized upon it is extraordinary."

"I think there can be very few things more rewarding for a teacher than seeing children actually enjoying lessons and soaking up literature. That is what Accelerated Reader has accomplished."