

Makes library time more meaningful and helps teachers to personalise learning

HILBRE HIGH SCHOOL, MERSEYSIDE

Scale of the challenge

"I don't do books," is the kind of remark that Learning Resource Manager, Jane Scott, was used to hearing in Hilbre High School in the West Kirby area of Merseyside.

She believes that the problem of reluctant readers is an uphill battle, and it is a battle that is getting harder to fight.

"Pupils can be quite upfront about it to staff," she says. "It is as if they have stuck a label on themselves, despite everything that we say about the importance of reading to the rest of the curriculum."

The school is set in a challenging area, has many pupils on free school meals and sits alongside two grammar schools in an area where the 11-plus still exists. It also has a sizeable number of special needs pupils.

Clearly, the root of the problem goes far deeper than a simple preference for computer games and the Internet over books.

Her concerns echo those of many peers and experts who all say the same thing: that if pupils have not developed the reading habit before entering secondary school, cultivating the habit after that is doubly difficult.

Despite all of this, her school is living proof that methods that engage the confidence of young people can help overcome the prevailing attitude of "can't read, won't read".

Implementation

The school has been running Accelerated Reader since September 2004. It started using it in year seven originally and then extended it to year eight. "The challenge is by no means over," says Jane "But the benefits among the 180 students involved have been marked."

The first and most obvious benefit felt by teachers was simply that of having a yardstick. They assessed the reading abilities of their pupils and for the younger teachers in particular, knowing the ability of the students in their care was vital.

Students have responded with real enthusiasm to the Accelerated Reader method, which is based on reading books, taking online quizzes to test their comprehension and reading skills, and then reading more books suited precisely to their capacities.

The online quizzes give immediate feedback, which they appreciate, and enable them to stick certificates of achievement inside their English books.

Individual teachers have added to the positive upward boost in different ways, some giving merit points for pupils passing a fairly modest level of performance. This all adds to the general sense of improvement.

One of the most useful aspects, claims Jane, is that it has made it easy to spot the weak and reluctant readers. Teachers can then intervene, and provide support to those in most need, or encourage others to grasp the challenge.

A clear indication is given through the class summaries of those children who are not reading enough or who are 'dodging' the quizzes, and individual summaries give clear advice to help each child progress through the year.

Results

"Overall," Jane said, "the program is valuable. The children have enjoyed it as they get structure for their library time. The quizzes provide opportunities for rewards, which creates incentives to try harder. It is making library time more meaningful and helping teachers to personalise learning, matching students to books suited to their needs."

"For teaching staff, knowledge has been powerful," Jane says. "They have benefited by being able to see clearly how well the students have absorbed books, in order to adapt their methods."

Parents too have become more involved, not only seeing the software running during open nights, but being informed by teachers about their children's reading habits and about any changes to their reading diet that parents could support at home.

Slowly, the school is seeing signs that the battle for a new mindset on reading is turning. "Originally when pupils used to come in for a library lesson, it was hard to get them to

focus – boys in particular – and even harder to get them to try different genres, but we are seeing real improvements here,” she says.

“By creating a focus we are creating the reading habit. Those already inclined to read, are keener than ever to do better. Reluctant or struggling readers are also showing signs of improvement.”

“One student originally refused to do her reading practice, but with support from me and from this method, she has improved, and that extra bit of confidence has really helped.”

“Small positive steps like giving pupils printed certificates to take home, building in time for an adult to offer positive feedback helps create a positive and focused environment around reading. Time as ever, is the only barrier, and despite the set-up time needed for this, it is now freeing up time.”

“For instance, pupils simply do their own quizzes after reading a book without any support, and staff only have to deal with the results and the next steps.”

“We have pupils coming in during breaks and at lunchtimes to take more quizzes and show me the results so that I can advise them as to what they need and that could not have happened before.”