

I AM PART OF THEIR STORY

Holy Family Primary School,
County Derry, Northern Ireland

Located in County Derry, Northern Ireland, Holy Family is an urban Primary School of approximately 450 students, 64% of which are eligible for Free School Meals. Four years ago the school started using AR, from Renaissance Learning with students in primaries 5, 6 and 7 and subsequently extended it to those in primary 4 and now primary 3.

Teacher and Literacy Co-ordinator, Tommy McDermott, explains how literacy standards have soared, leading to inspectors commenting on the 'very good standards in reading' throughout the school.



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Motivation

Reading culture

“AR is the best reading initiative I have witnessed in over 30 years of teaching.”

“Accelerated Reader is the best reading initiative I have witnessed in over 30 years of teaching” – this comment coming from a straight talking teaching colleague was viewed by me as a vote of confidence in Accelerated Reader. We are always looking for resources that will help take all curricular areas forward and, at the time, particularly wanted to introduce a product that would be received positively by both children and teachers – at Holy Family AR is that product.

To date, during this school year alone, the students have successfully quizzed on over 10,000 books and there are 12 children who have each read over one million words. Was this happening before the introduction of AR? Quite simply – no – AR has dramatically raised the profile of reading at the school.

We use a reward system in conjunction with AR whereby the children can exchange the points they earn from quizzing for one of the prizes displayed in a cabinet in the school foyer. Each prize has a different points value so the children know exactly what is needed to win it and on the last Friday of each month we hold a prizegiving ceremony in the Assembly Hall.

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In each primary group we hold a weekly competition in which the student who reads the most words takes home a trophy that they keep for a week before passing it on to the next winner. At certain times of the year, such as Easter or Christmas, we hold a special raffle that the students can't buy a ticket for, but they can enter by obtaining 100% accuracy in their AR quizzes. Any child that succeeds in reading over a million words is rewarded with a cinema pass and those that achieve their individual targets receive a homework pass. Each World Book Day we attempt to quiz on as many books as possible and this year we beat our previous school record by quizzing on 819 books on the day. We feel that offering the students such a wide variety of incentives helps maintain the high profile of reading within the school.

From the first time we assessed our students' actual reading ages and levels using STAR Reading baseline assessment and then compared the results to the difficulty level of every book in the library, we realised that we needed to invest in some new titles to ensure all students were being catered for. For AR to work effectively you need to offer students a good supply of books at the appropriate level of interest and difficulty. Similarly, children must

be given time to read. All teachers at Holy Family agreed to allow the students 30 minutes' daily reading time, which is very important. We also allow them access to our school suite of 30 computers from 8.30am every day so that they have the option of taking a quiz before starting lessons. However, the vast majority of quizzing takes place in class.

While we have plenty of evidence to show that a lot of reading is taking place, we are often asked what effect AR is having on the standard of reading within the school.

In preparation for a recent school inspection we decided to utilise the wealth of data available to us on our Renaissance Place site. For instance, we compared the progress in the reading ages of selected students over a one year period – specifically the STAR Reading results of our top 20 users in relation to those of 20 students who don't quiz consistently.

What we found was that the top users generally improved their scores twice as fast as all the other students, which gave us great confidence in the product. We were also reassured by the fact that the STAR Reading test is validated by NFER. We have used many NFER products over the years and hold them in high regard.

When it came to the inspection we were well placed to demonstrate our commitment to maintaining high literacy standards, which was reflected in the Inspector's report (see below).

It is always interesting to learn how different schools implement AR. Some of our methods wouldn't suit other schools and there are ideas we've seen used elsewhere that we would love to replicate. In this way it is important to regard AR as a tool that – if used correctly – can reap fantastic rewards, which is why we are always evaluating what we are doing and looking at how we can further improve.

Most recently we have set up a designated team to look weekly at our data and identify students who need closer monitoring and possibly direct intervention. Now that so many students across the school are actively engaged with AR we are looking at ways of improving their accuracy levels so that they are not just passing the quizzes, but increasingly achieving 100%.

School Inspector's Report :

The quality of the provision in English and literacy is outstanding. The children achieve very good standards in reading. By the end of KS2 almost all are reading at a level commensurate with, or above, their ability. The school has created a rich literacy environment to support the children's learning and promotes the enjoyment of books through a number of initiatives which engage the children very well in their reading: as a result the children demonstrate an enthusiasm for reading and are keen to discuss their favourite books, authors and characters. As they progress through the school the children read with increasing fluency, expression and understanding of the text.

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