

Reading success at Academy in Trafford 'confounds' idea that boys don't like reading

Wellacre Academy Flixton, Trafford

Wellacre is an average-sized secondary Academy for boys, located on the outskirts of Manchester. The number of students eligible for Free School Meals is typical, while the number of students with School Action Plus or SEN statements is well above average.

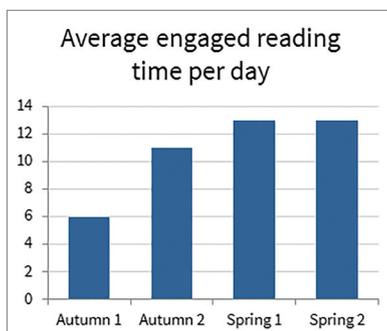
The academy uses Accelerated Reader™ (AR™) throughout Key Stage 3, and additionally a group of Year 10 students use the programme as part of a catch-up intervention scheme. It is in the second year of the Renaissance School Partnership programme.

Data review

Progress monitoring

Reading culture

Student engagement



The amount of time students spend reading has more than doubled over the course of this academic year to date, from an average of six minutes per day in the first autumn half-term to 13 minutes in the spring term.

“A pressing need”

The leadership team at Wellacre was concerned by low levels of literacy across the school. An OFSTED inspection highlighted literacy across the curriculum as an area needing additional attention, which was supported by test data staff were seeing.

“All the evidence suggested that some of our boys had deficits in their reading ages compared to their chronological ages,” explains Vice Principal Julie Sharrock. “Sometimes the gap was as much as three years. This was contributing to our concerns over the attainment of our students in Key Stage 4 across the curriculum, which was identified in an Ofsted inspection as a real weakness for us. In GCSE PE or History, for example, exam papers had reading ages of 14 or 15 but the reading tests provided evidence that students were unable to access those exam papers. So it became a pressing need for us.”

Because low levels of literacy were having an impact across the curriculum, it was clear that a whole-school solution would be needed to address the problem. The academy joined the Renaissance School Partnership programme to complement the implementation of AR with bespoke training and support from a dedicated programme manager.

“Reading is what we do”

A plan was put in place to embed reading as a central activity for every student’s time at school. Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time was introduced into the timetable after lunch for 25 minutes each day, and form tutors were given responsibility for their students’ success with AR.

Reading has become a central part of life at Wellacre. Every boy has a book with him at all times, and between them they read nearly 5,000 books in the first two terms of the 2014/15 academic year.

Julie remarks on the difference the Renaissance School Partnership has made. “Before, I never heard any discussions about reading for pleasure. Reading was just something that you had to do because the curriculum dictated that you did it.”

When the academy’s head of English, Tom Daly, joined the staff team this year he found it difficult to believe that literacy used to have such a low profile. “It’s amazing to hear from Julie what the reading culture was like,” he comments. “You would never have believed that there wasn’t a reading culture because our lads are walking around with books in their pockets. They are desperate to be involved, not only just with the programme because of its competitive edge, but also because they enjoy the fact that they are reading. There is just a very, very clear culture that reading is what we do.”

“The library is busy and vibrant”

“The success we’re having confounds this idea that boys don’t like reading,” Tom continues. “You see the frustration when boys can’t find the book they are looking for, from a series they have been reading. And it’s a frustration because they want to read it, not just because they want to take the quiz.”



Julie singles out the role of the library, and an excellent librarian, as integral to the success of the programme. “The library has gone from a very sparsely resourced and under-used part of the school into something that is busy and vibrant. Mandi, our librarian, is a really strong advocate of the programme and is really enthusiastic about her role. Her commitment to it has been very important.”

Alongside a supportive librarian, Julie and Tom have garnered support from teachers of specialisms far removed from English. The form group enjoying the greatest success with the programme has a technology specialist as a tutor. “She’s been very good at driving AR initiatives,” Julie comments. “She’s innovative in trying to get people on board, not just with her own form but with cross-curricular quizzing as well.”

Gaining such widespread support for the programme has been challenging, but the benefits are clearly felt. As Vice Principal, Julie has been able to promote the programme among the senior leadership team, and Tom ensures that it is on the agenda of every faculty meeting and briefing. As a result, participation with the programme has become a basic expectation for every form tutor.

“RSP has allowed us to push the programme further”

With the support of the staff team, students have become increasingly engaged with the programme. The average number of quizzes being taken by students has increased by 25% year-on-year, and the amount of time students have spent reading has more than doubled over the course of this academic year.

Student engagement has been a significant focus for Tom, who oversees the day-to-day running of the programme. He uses the weekly reports to identify any students who are falling behind and to intervene before their lack of engagement leads to a fall in attainment.

He gives the example of a tutor group with a worryingly high number of boys who had not taken an AR quiz recently. “We looked at the Summary Dashboard, and wondered why our participation was showing only 72%. Within ten minutes we found the 60 boys who hadn’t quizzed that half term, and saw that 15 of them were in one form. This particular form was practicing an assembly so they hadn’t been reading. Within three days we had them back on board and quizzing again.”

Under the RSP programme, staff have benefited from on-site training days that have been organised to meet the specific needs of the academy. “We’re now in our second year of the RSP programme so we have different needs,” Julie explains. “We have different people joining the team who are new to the programme, and other more experienced members of staff. The training is always bespoke, which is to the benefit of all.”

The training has allowed Tom to identify particular areas of weakness and to focus on specific parts of the implementation of the programme that would benefit from additional time and resources. “The consultation days have helped us to realise some things that

we’re not doing quite so well, and to nip problems in the bud. The partnership has allowed us to be much more innovative; it has allowed us to push the programme further than we would otherwise have been able to.”

“It’s been genuinely transformational”

Students have their reading progress monitored using the STAR Reading™ assessment that is available alongside AR. Students are tested once each term, tracking their progress and allowing staff to measure the effectiveness of the interventions they have put in place.

English results increased by 10% last year, standing against a national trend downwards. “They were an AR cohort,” Julie comments, “and I think in their attitudes towards reading and their higher-order thinking skills they were more prepared for the exams.”

So far this year, students have been making expected growth, which is a significant improvement on performance in previous years. Tom is looking to capitalise on the successes the academy has had with the programme in order to increase attainment further in the rest of the year. “That’s our next big challenge with the programme. Yes, it’s embedded, and yes it’s changing the culture. And I think if only for that, it’s having massive, massive success. But I think in terms of using it for its full benefit we want to make sure there isn’t just growth but accelerated growth.”

The consistency of implementation and ongoing forward momentum provided by the RSP programme will play a significant part in the future development of the reading culture at Wellacre. “The benefits have been absolutely huge,” Tom remarks. “I think if we didn’t have the partnership, AR wouldn’t have taken off and it wouldn’t have managed itself in the way it has. I can’t imagine what trying to implement the programme would have been like without the support of the partnership. It would have been ten times as hard. There is now a very strongly embedded reading culture where there wasn’t before. It’s been genuinely transformational.”

Julie agrees. “We recognised that the investment was worth it, because it has sustained the momentum. That’s what we were concerned about: that we could lose that momentum if we didn’t continue to invest in something that is increasingly popular with the students, and the culture that had started to be established.”



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