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I AM PART OF THEIR STORY

**The Maelor School,
Wrexham, Clwyd**

The Maelor School is a mixed comprehensive school based in Penley, Wrexham County Borough. It has 850 students on roll, and uses Renaissance Accelerated Reader with all Year 7 students. The school was recently recognised as the second best performing secondary school in Wales at the Renaissance Awards, in terms of their usage of Accelerated Reader and Renaissance Star Assessments. David Thomas, Literacy Coordinator and Head of Modern Languages, discusses the school's experiences with the programme.



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Comprehension

Reading Culture

Non-Fiction

Celebration

Reading Variety

Assessment

Motivators

Cultivating a reading ethos and developing comprehension at The Maelor School

We're currently in our third year of using Accelerated Reader. We originally came across the programme via a recommendation from a Deputy Head at another school, who spoke very highly of it. As the Welsh government has brought in a very prominent literacy and numeracy framework over the past 6 years we looked at a number of options, either to implement in one year or use across the whole school as a literacy programme outside of English, and we thought that this was the most attractive and the easiest to implement on the scale we wanted to.

We use Accelerated Reader with all students in Year 7. We aim to give students a really big push in terms of reading when they first join the school, with the impetus then carrying through the higher years. This does seem to be effective – Accelerated Reader has set a point of interest in year 7 that has certainly been carried into Years 8 and 9 so far. Every week, each form has one registration period in the library, from 8:45 - 9:15, and during that period they can read, swap books and take quizzes. This is really appreciated by pupils and staff because they have an opportunity to do that for 15-30 minutes every week, and on top of this most classes will have a quiet reading session in another weekly registration period, which is another 15 minutes of reading every week.

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Encouraging a wider range of reading

I think the biggest change we've seen since bringing in Accelerated Reader is the ethos of reading at the school - gradually seeing acceptance of reading across the curriculum, seeing acceptance that literacy is important across the curriculum, and that it's not just a thing for English lessons and not just a thing for primary schools. It's introduced people to a wider range of literature

than they would normally see because it encourages them to not stick just to the books they like, so you can do fiction or non-fiction and plenty of people do take on a variety of genres, so I think that's gradually encouraging a change of culture.

We do keep an eye on the balance of genres, and the types of books students are reading. If somebody is reading 95% in one genre or another, we'll say, 'right, your next book has got to be from another genre'. Because people have to read so many books at a certain difficulty level it encourages them to look outside the normal group of authors and small interest groups, so I think the programme almost forces students to read a variety of fiction and non-fiction.

As a knock on effect staff do have a better understanding of where pupils are coming from, particularly with the bridge between primary and secondary school, where I think there's an assumption that students are locked into certain types of reading when they move over. It's great then that staff can see them choosing a greater variety – it helps them to understand the Year 7 students and the delicate process of moving into secondary school.

Monitoring progress and comprehension with Star Assessments

We also make use of Star Reading, which we administer in September, January, April and then once at the end of the year, in June/July. It's very useful – we use the results to highlight students who need help with their comprehension, and we target the students with the three lowest reading ages in each class for support, with the aim of incrementally increasing it.

It's a similar kind of test to the new WJEC English GCSE, and the types of texts, the range of texts, the kinds of comprehension and the types of question are very similar also to the Welsh National Reading Test. I like the range of questions, I like the kinds of questions where students read through a piece of poetry or prose, and instead of asking about what's already there the test will ask about the author's intention, or, 'What makes you think that?' So instead of just lifting from the text students have to think in more detail about nuance and intention.

Overall we're confident about the results from Star because they more or less tie in with those from the Welsh National Reading Test and the CATs tests that we administer. Being computer-adaptive, it shows the students at the top that they still have some way to go – there are some students who think 'OK, I can do everything I need to do in English', and the later questions will challenge even them. The test takes 20-25 minutes to complete, and as soon as students are given their Zone of Proximal Development we send them to get their first books out. Certainly by the third week in September pupils are into a routine of borrowing a book, reading it and quizzing it every week.

Reading age is one of the measures we look at, and we find the Standardised Score particularly useful. At the end of last year, when students took the Welsh National Reading test, over 50% of the students in Year 7 improved their reading age by more than their chronological age, and I think Accelerated Reader has had an impact on that. Through the Star test, we track the reading age term by term and highlight support for those who have not improved, and there are fewer and fewer of those as time goes on, so I think Accelerated Reader is definitely helping and this is evidenced through the Star tests.

Publically rewarding reading attainment

We think the idea of public reward is very important – every half term we present certificates in assembly. One of the achievements we reward varies every time, so it's not just the person with the most points, or most books or words read being rewarded, and what we've found is that even some of the most reluctant readers have been delighted to have that public recognition and take those certificates home. I think as a result of these public rewards there's a lot more acceptance amongst boy readers in particular that reading is a normal thing to do, and we tend not to get anybody looked down on or called names because they are studious readers.

Accelerated Reader has helped us to encourage students to broaden their reading, particularly to include non-fiction

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We're looking at Accelerated Reader and Star as a five year plan, where, although we're only running the programme in Year 7, over 5 years there should be a change in approach to literacy overall, and reading in particular. We've given Accelerated Reader a lot of prominence and a lot of priority within the school development plan— it's not just a bolt-on, it's fundamental to the school's literacy programme. I know for a fact that some of the texts that people read in the Star test are as much in one piece as they would need to read in anything up to Year 9, so I think we're inculcating a sense of needing to read a couple of paragraphs but needing to read them carefully. I think that's been a lot of the effect: they've realised that they need to read carefully, and to read not just in order to read aloud, but to read for understanding. Understanding is not just about remembering, but about general comprehension, and I think that has an effect. Students when they're doing the quizzes think, 'oh, I know the answer', but they actually have to think more deeply than they've anticipated, so I think we're seeing an effect of pupils reading more carefully, reading more extensively, and reading being something that goes on and on throughout their secondary career.

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