

Dawn Simpson, Deputy Headteacher at Hartside Academy, reflects on the journey taken by the school to create a successful reading culture.

TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S LIFE CHANCES THROUGH READING

We all know the importance reading has both as a skill that underpins most elements of the curriculum, but also as an essential skill that prepares children for life beyond school. Apart from the obvious academic benefits of reading, it also promotes vocabulary acquisition, fosters creativity, instils a deeper understanding of the world, but most of all, it is an enjoyable activity.

When developing a plan for improvement, we started by asking the children what they wanted from their library. They were keen to have a calm and vibrant environment, filled with lots of their favourite authors. We secured funding through the Foyle Foundation and stocked the library with the books the children asked for. Next, we developed an outdoor reading den for children to access on a breaktime and remodelled the library, making it somewhere that the children wanted to be. We trained Year 6 children to be librarians and made it accessible every lunchtime.

The children thoroughly enjoyed going to the library, however we found that it wasn't translating into books being read. It was at this point we subscribed to Accelerated Reader. Accelerated Reader assesses the children and assigns them a book of a suitable level that will be accessible so that they're not intimidated, but challenged to promote their progress. The children then simply choose any book within their level, read it and complete a quiz when they are finished. Teachers and school leaders could then access the data to monitor the children's independent reading.

This was a turning point for us, as we could then not only monitor the reading within lessons, but also the reading that was happening outside of lessons. We started to monitor the percentage of correct answers the children were achieving, as well as how many minutes per day they were reading on average. We aimed for the children to be reading twenty minutes per day, because although fifteen minutes is sufficient to achieve accelerated reading gains, twenty minutes reading per day can significantly improve academic performance, but more importantly, life chances.

Since then we have continued to use the data we gather through Accelerated Reader, to quality assure our independent reading offer. We regularly host class and house competitions, which really motivate the



boys and we have started to look really closely at the book choices the children are making. Initially, we were keen to just break the ice with reading, even if this meant that sometimes the children were reading books that hooked them in, but didn't always challenge them. However, now that the children are in good reading habits, we have adapted our practice. We put a lot more emphasis on the choices they make and try to steer them into broadening their reading horizons, while making sure that they have access to sufficient challenge.

Our journey continues and there are still many avenues to explore. I recently read an article published by the National Literacy Trust which said that children who own books are six times more likely to read above their expected level. The next step in our journey is therefore to remove this barrier and to aim for every child in our school to own at least five books by the end of next academic year.

In conclusion, there are many ways of measuring the impact of our actions, including consistent improvements in our phonics and end of KS2 reading SATs over the past five years. But if you want to really see what our reading culture looks like, take a moment to look into the window of our library on a break time where you'll see children choosing to spend their free time reading.

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