

Literacy at the heart of learning

Rob Mackinlay talks to Andy Grace at Boulevard Academy in Hull about how it is working with a local public library to deliver a radical literacy strategy.



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POLITICIANS can find it difficult to gauge the value of libraries to their local communities, making them easy targets for cuts to public services.

But a partnership between a brand new secondary school and its local public library has benefited both parties and helped define some of the value libraries are delivering.

Because the Boulevard Academy in Hull is a new school, its Principal, Andy Grace was able to develop the curriculum from scratch, putting Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Maths at its heart. His experience of leading two previous schools with similar catchment areas, where levels of literacy and numeracy were very low, showed him the importance of putting literacy at the top of the agenda.

Literacy comes first

'When we opened The Boulevard Academy,' Andy explains, 'we wanted to make numeracy and literacy the main focus and as such these are the main aspects that we monitor and the most consistent part of our approach here.'

'It is my core belief that a child's level of literacy directly affects their ability to access and gain knowledge. For example, the maths GCSE has two tiers – higher and foundation – and typically students are entered for the foundation tier if they are not expected to get more than C grade or below. But if you look at the reading age required in the two exams they are the same. It means that the people setting the exams expect the same high level of literacy from all students. However, the problem is that some of the students don't have this level by the time they are entered for the examination and so they can't access the questions.'

The solution is that every teacher at the Boulevard Academy teaches literacy. Andy believes that by making literacy a central element of teaching across all subjects, students will be better equipped to access every aspect of the curriculum. 'All



Andy Grace

schools will have a literacy policy but I suspect that if you asked a teacher what their school's literacy policy was they may have to fish it out of a filing cabinet somewhere. But here every teacher is a teacher of literacy and numeracy and these are the only targets we set for youngsters in Year 7.'

Setting targets

In order to put literacy at the heart of learning at the Boulevard Academy, Andy structured the curriculum around the Accelerated Reader (AR) programme from educational software provider Renaissance Learning. Andy had used AR at his previous schools and wanted to make it central to students' studies at the Boulevard Academy.

AR is used in thousands of schools worldwide to support and develop an existing literacy strategy, but Andy's decision to establish it at the heart of the curriculum was unusual. He said that in his experience many schools don't go far enough with the programme: 'They often say "we've got AR or we use AR" but you really have to commit to it.'



He said his students were set challenging targets for every academic year: 'Because we use AR to establish every child's starting point and the reading quizzes measure their rate of progress, I find that our children become very motivated to beat their target. It is not unusual to hear youngsters cheer when they get their results and parents become very involved too. Last year all our students had reached their end of year target by Easter.'

According to Andy, he was only able to take such a radical step because the school's senior management was committed to his vision. 'My recommendation would be that a decision has to be made at a senior level of the school. With all due respect to school librarians, they don't tend to be close enough to that decision making.'

With 60 per cent of learning time given over to literacy and numeracy, Andy believes the Boulevard Academy is the only school in the country which has tailored its learning so fully around AR.

Because of this, other schools are taking a keen interest: 'Schools are always looking for what will create a difference and what will work – you can't be passive in this respect.'

Although AR was the tool of choice for Andy, the challenge was to make it possible to implement the programme. 'In my previous schools, some had libraries and if they didn't they had legacy resources. Here we started a brand new school so we didn't have either.'

Vital help from the library

Renaissance Learning, which supplies AR to almost 4,000 schools in the UK, recommends

that students need access to a number of suitably challenging books in order to develop their reading skills effectively. For a new school like the Boulevard Academy, building up a sufficient library stock can be expensive.

Andy said: 'The funding for any school is retrospective and we had to take into account the start-up costs of all aspects of the curriculum. This could have been problematic but fortune and opportunity seemed to meet when I approached the local library to organise regular visits for our pupils – it is only five minutes away.'

'I discussed our literacy focus with the library staff and that I wanted pupils to go and enrol and get books for themselves. I also explained to them about what we wanted to do as part of the AR.'

At this point it became clear that many of the books his students needed to read might be freely available from the public library. The initial contact with the library led to a meeting with Kay Walton at the Hull Schools Library Service. The service had just come to an arrangement with Renaissance Learning that allowed them to catalogue their books according to the Accelerated Reader Book Levels, which measure the complexity of a book's text. So not only did the library service have an awareness of AR, but it was geared up to support its use in schools.

While the library service was able to help the school make a start on its AR and literacy agenda, the proximity of the physical library was also valuable. Andy said: 'We intend that all our youngsters get into a

library habit and that they can go on their own or with their families.'

Part of the community

Andy is clear about the importance of local libraries for the communities and schools that they serve.

'I want this school to play a significant part in the community. The library is part of that community and if there's anywhere that has a literacy deficit the one thing it definitely needs is a library.'

As an increasing number of libraries come under threat of closure, he is aware of what it would mean for students at his school.

He said: 'Our nearest library is not the main central library in the city and in this day and age they come under scrutiny about who has enrolled, what the footfall is and other performance measures. I'm not aware that the library is in imminent danger of closure, but I'm just saying that if it were to close then I would have lost an incredibly valuable asset to the school.'

Although there are currently no plans for closures, Hull Library Service has got to find £400,000 of savings and is expected to reduce library opening times. The Schools Library Service is funded separately by contributions from the area's schools, many of which also use AR.

The partnership that has developed has meant that students borrow roughly as many books from the local library as they do from the school. 'In other words,' Andy explains, 'if it wasn't for the public library, I would have to buy as many books again.' [1]



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