

WELL Project: Case Study

Improving Reading at Cockermouth School

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Summary

Our strategic plan for targeting underperformance in reading is now showing impact. We have gone from diagnosis of issues, to identification of specific need, to students receiving highly targeted intervention and strong progress being captured after the initial 12 weeks. Our reading data shows need, progress, and the waiting lists we have (we could scale up if we had more resource).

Running parallel we have the whole school approach of using Reciprocal Reader as a method for proactively promoting disciplinary literacy in subjects (i.e., how do I read like a scientist/historian?) It is the application of reading skills and the *sustained* impact of reading intervention that pose the biggest challenges. Take the analogy of fitness – you can do a fitness plan for 12 weeks and be faster and stronger at the end, but where will you be in a year's time? Here, we are benefitting from both ELE input and CUREE, supporting and challenging us to consider meaningful measures and what processes we would require to understand if progress is being made. We have recently linked up with NELT/Shotton Hall, brokered by WELL, who have the same experience of the impact of lockdowns on literacy.

The Focus

Prior to Covid we had identified reading ability as an issue warranting further investigation. Data had shown some students who had reading ages equivalent to primary school students, and we had begun a decoding intervention programme, Thinking Reading. Through the period of lockdowns and remote schooling we developed our understanding of the evidence base for literacy and set up diagnostic testing (Literacy Assessment Online) for all students in years 7 to 10. As of January 2022, from a cohort of approximately 900 students, approximately 160 have standardised reading scores 89 or lower, and therefore require further intervention to enable them to access the secondary school curriculum

Action

In 2021 we introduced a literacy strategy that initially focused on reading. The school is now able to offer 5 strands of literacy intervention for students in need:

1. THRASS Phonics (for the minority of students who may require additional phonics intervention). THRASS stands for Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills.
2. Thinking Reading (decoding)
3. Fluency for comprehension (fluency)
4. Reciprocal Reading (comprehension)
5. Plus IDL for dyslexia (an additional online interactive programme we have for students with dyslexia/dyslexic tendencies to assist with reading/spelling).

Students are matched to the appropriate programme after one-to-one screening (York Assessment for Reading Comprehension – YARC). We plan for students to be able to graduate from one programme to the next and have built this into our capacity and staffing.

We have also involved 6th form students in the support for reciprocal reading. They have been built into the programme as a way of moving away from an adult/teacher as sole support, to having an older mentor/guide to work with once they are at least halfway through a Reciprocal Reading intervention. The 6th formers are trained by the Teacher of Literacy (an experienced teacher with a primary school and literacy background) and work in pairs with small groups on intervention, whilst the teacher shadows. The verbal feedback from both parties has been fantastic.

In addition to targeted intervention, we have also begun the process of training all teaching staff in the same reading methods used in intervention. Sustained changes in teacher practice take time. We are applying the principles from the EEF Professional Development guidance ensuring that we dedicate and protect CPD time for teachers to learn about the need, the methods, and the impact of Reciprocal Reader.¹ We recognise the need to ensure teachers have time to practice, reflect and refine their practice. Our programme for embedding reading within each subject (disciplinary literacy) is structured over 2 years to enable the time and quality assurance needed to change habits in the classroom.

Results

The impact of these interventions on the confidence of students is both sobering and encouraging. Student voice has been captured both on film and on paper as a key aspect of internal evaluation and provide compelling evidence of the successful impact of our interventions on student confidence, learning and progress. We have shared these video clips with our staff, our governors and with the WELL Director to help show the need and the impact of our whole school reading strategy to date.

Students have responded well to the Reciprocal Reading programme. Year 8s have said things such as:

“I have confidence when reading aloud and with difficult words. Thank you so much for helping me with my reading, I really enjoy it now.”

¹ EEF, ‘Effective Professional Development’ guidance.

Parents have said:

"This has done more to get him reading than years of us trying."

Sarah Johnson, Head of SRP and Learning Support notes:

"The training facilitated by WELL has enabled us to understand the literacy needs of our students and then match support packages in a much more refined and evidence-informed way that ever before. We feel we now have tools to systematically address reading need at secondary school and create pathways so that every student leaves us confident from their ability to read."

Our first group of 15 Year 8 students have completed a 12-week programme involving 2 sessions a week, 3 of these students were from our disadvantaged cohort in Year 8. 9 of these students have graduated after one cycle with progress in single word reading between 9 months and 3 years and 9 months. In comprehension progress was between 3 months and 6 years. One of our disadvantaged students has already graduated after making 2 years and 10 months progress in comprehension; our pathway of monitoring and support is crucial to maintain progress here.

We target students for intervention based on need identified through screening and subsequent testing. However, we also prioritise our Pupil Premium students where appropriate. Currently, 30% of our students receiving intervention have PP status in a school where between 10 and 15% of students have PP status at any one time.

Conclusion and Next steps

By embracing the implementation approach and applying principles consistently, there has been a measurable impact on reading underperformance. Across the school, we will develop the roll out of Reciprocal Reader as part of our focus on disciplinary literacy. We are training our teachers to enable students to learn through reading in every subject. We will expect reading to be deliberately and frequently included in all subject delivery and we expect staff to use core common techniques to support all students in using text over sustained periods of time.

Reading intervention for students in need requires high staffing ratios for the interventions. We currently have interventions running for 50 of the 160 students in need. As students graduate from the programme others can join. By starting with students in years 7 and 8 we hope to reduce this issue year on year so that in 3 years' time we are mainly supporting students in Year 7 as they enter the school.

Our ultimate aim is to create a literacy package that can be a journey through decoding, comprehension, and fluency with post-intervention monitoring to sustain progress; we are continuing to build the foundations and capacity for this at present.

Quality intervention is expensive and requires highly skilled professionals delivering highly targeted programmes bespoke to needs of the students. Budgetary demands restrict the impact of these interventions. Our focus on whole staff development is intended to further strengthen the quality-first teaching of reading across the curriculum. We would welcome further investment in diagnostic assessments and

would support further work by WELL to connect schools with similar priorities to develop local consistency of assessment and to allow for the efficiencies of streamlined collaboration.