

## PROJECT DETAILS

**School:** All Saints' Academy, Cheltenham

**Project Leader:** Liam Wilkinson

**Research Strand:** AI for Equity

**Research Question:** How does the use of Microsoft Reading Coach improve reading fluency and attitudes to reading among KS3–KS4 students working below age-expected reading levels?

**Timeline:** June 2025 – ongoing (Year 2 in development)

### Key Data Collection:

- Baseline and post-intervention TOWRE scores (reading fluency and accuracy)
- AMRP reading attitudes surveys (analysing for year 2)
- Student attendance and session participation data
- Student and teacher interviews
- Parent feedback on engagement and home practice

### The Challenge

Not long ago, All Saints' Academy in Cheltenham identified a troubling gap in the school's provision: while students in Years 7 and 8 had access to a very structured programme of reading support, older students in Years 9 to 11 did not. Aside from the social stigma and the practical everyday handicap of limited literacy, teenagers without the foundational fluency that they need to access the curriculum are at a critical disadvantage during the high-stakes years of GCSE study. Liam Wilkinson, the project lead, discovered that teachers on their own needed additional support to identify and assist these at-risk students, because some students with needs were being missed, while others were being referred unnecessarily. There was also the question of how to deliver meaningful support at this age without further stigmatising students who were already acutely sensitive about their predicament. The challenge, then, was not just pedagogical and technological but logistical and personal: how do you create an intervention that is scalable, dignified, evidence-informed and feasible for older struggling readers who are already de-motivated and disenchanted by school and the idea of "having to learn."

### The Action Research Approach

At a tech fair, Liam (who is also the school's Associate Principal) chanced upon the brand-new Microsoft Reading Coach, a free, AI-powered tool that listens to students read aloud, provides real-time feedback on fluency and accuracy, and builds personalised practice around the words each student finds most challenging. The tool allows students to work on individual devices, so they can practise without being singled out. Liam established a

structured intervention model: after poring through different early reading screeners, he settled on the TOWRE test for the evidence behind it and its ease of use. Students were administered the TOWRE baseline test, and those in need were identified and grouped for targeted sessions twice a week over four-week blocks, and retested on completion. Parent communication was built in from the outset to encourage continuity of practice at home. In the first year, the group showed impressive progress — 14 of 22 students improved their TOWRE scores, and 8 moved up a grading level. There were, as always, stumbling blocks and open questions: student attendance averaged 60–70%, and without a tightly-controlled intervention, there is no way to attribute the improvements to Reading Coach alone. On that note specifically, many additional factors could be at work: emotional, socio-economic, questions of cultural capital among parents, etc. Clearly, year 1 was the tip of the iceberg. Programme leadership, more teacher training and involvement and timetabling also emerged as areas requiring strengthening. These are exactly the kinds of implementation insights that make action research valuable, and they are now directly shaping the Year 2 design, which will potentially explore student and teacher experience, search for ways to improve implementation, and probe into other variables affecting student engagement and outcomes.

### **The Broader Significance**

This project, on a small scale, addresses one of the most under-examined problems in secondary education: the students who reach their GCSE years still unable to read fluently, and for whom very little targeted provision exists. The focus on older struggling readers (including students with SEND and EAL needs) opens up an important and disturbing question: why did these students not receive support earlier, and what systemic barriers allowed them to “fall through the cracks”? At the same time, the project models something methodologically important for the Coalition. Liam's candid Year 1 evaluation — acknowledging variable outcomes, attendance barriers, and leadership limitations — demonstrates that honest self-appraisal is not a weakness in action research but its engine; that what may seem like “limitations” are in fact findings, or inputs for Year 2. The decision to use a standardised, validated assessment tool (TOWRE) gives the project methodological and quantitative rigour, and sets the project up for a follow-up pilot that seeks to contribute significantly to a field with a dearth of practical research. As the project moves into Year 2 with a strengthened delivery model, it offers the Coalition a rare opportunity to track how iterative, school-led research may contribute to improving the quality of provision for learners with very urgent, and essential, educational needs.