



Young Readers Programme: Developing a Love of Reading Through Book Gifting

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Research shows that reading for pleasure can have far-reaching benefits for the individual as well as society as a whole. Yet, only half of children and young people in the UK enjoy reading (Clark & Picton, 2021). In this article, we discuss the National Literacy Trust's "Young Readers Programme", which addresses this issue by providing children with reading events where they not only learn techniques to choose books but where they also select a new book to keep. We highlight two key aspects of the programme, importance of choice and book ownership, before presenting findings from the evaluation of the programme. These show that the programme increases pupils' reading enjoyment and positive reading behaviours and improves teachers' confidence and knowledge in supporting children's reading. This indicates that this very simple approach to increasing book ownership and reading enjoyment could help improve children's life chances.

The importance of reading for pleasure

The National Literacy Trust is a UK-based national charity with a mission to give disadvantaged children the literacy skills they need to succeed. It has been estimated that one in six adults in England has low literacy skills, limiting their opportunities in life (Kuczera et al., 2016)¹. Low literacy is intergenerational and linked to poverty. Children from lower-income households start school around 4.6 months behind children from higher-income households, and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds leave secondary school around 18 months behind their peers (Hutchinson et al., 2020). We therefore focus our work in communities, families and schools in the most deprived areas of the UK in order to support those most in need.

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1 Redaktionens bemærkning: Samme tendens ses i den danske læseundersøgelse Rosdahl, A., Fridberg, T., Jakobsen, V., & Jørgensen, M. (2013). *Færdigheder i læsning, regning og problemløsning med it i Danmark*. SFI – Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Velfærd.

Promoting reading for pleasure sits at the heart of our work. Over the past 28 years, we have conducted extensive research, delivered programmes, worked with teachers to change practice and influenced government policy in this area. Research has shown that one of the most effective ways of helping children to reach their potential is to engage them in reading for enjoyment (Kirsch et al., 2002). Correlational studies show that more children who enjoy reading read above the level expected of their age (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2020) and make more progress in maths, vocabulary and spelling between the ages of 10 and 16 compared with those who don't enjoy reading (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). In addition, children who enjoy reading and view it positively also have higher mental wellbeing scores than their peers who do not enjoy reading (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

Reading for pleasure may also have an impact beyond the individual. A recent value-for-money study indicates that if all children read daily for enjoyment, this could also have a significant economic impact (British Land, 2021). The study estimated that the number of young people getting five good GCSEs (an academic qualification in the UK at the age of 15) could increase by 1.1 million over a generation (i.e., 30 years) if children read daily for enjoyment, which in turn could boost their average lifetime earnings by £57,500. Overall, the economic impact of those increased incomes could raise the UK's GDP by an estimated £4.6 billion.

Yet, there is still a lot we need to do as a nation. Findings from a survey of 42,000 UK children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2021 show that only half (51.5 %) enjoy reading (Clark & Picton, 2021). There is a link between reading engagement and book ownership, with more than twice as many children who have a book of their own enjoying reading and reading daily in their free time (Clark et al., 2021). However, a sizeable percentage of children and young people in the UK say that they don't have a book of their own at home, with more children from disadvantaged backgrounds saying this compared with their more affluent peers (9.2 % vs. 5.6 %).

The Young Readers Programme

One of the programmes that we deliver to address these issues is the “Young Readers Programme”², which is run in schools in areas of disadvantage. The Young Readers Programme started in the UK in 1997 and works with schools across the UK to encourage reading for enjoyment and increase book ownership. Each child who participates in the Young Readers Programme takes part in three reading events over the course of an academic year. At each event, children take part in games and activities, learn about book choice techniques and select a new book of their own to take home and keep. To date, the programme has donated 1.2 million books across the UK. As part of the programme, teachers or another member of staff, such as the school librarian, also receive training in reading for enjoyment and receive additional books for their school library.

Young Readers Programme events differ from school to school but are designed to feel different to a normal school lesson and will typically consist of:

- ▶ Fun games and activities
- ▶ A chance to hear a story
- ▶ A discussion about choosing books and the opportunity for all children to choose a book to keep
- ▶ A chance for children to begin reading their book, and to talk about the book they chose

2 The programme was originally inspired by the work of a US-based charity, Reading Is Fundamental, which was set up in 1966 to ensure children had books of their own to read at home. <https://www.rif.org/>

Events often have themes, dressing up in costumes or snacks and can be aligned with existing events, such as World Book Day or sports events. At the end of the academic year, most Young Readers Programme schools participate in a special final event, which may consist of a school trip where children get the chance to meet professional storytellers and authors.

Sometimes parents and guardians are invited to events too. For instance, a school might hold a book café event at the beginning of the school day and invite parents into the classroom to enjoy a hot chocolate and help their child choose a book. We find that the best way to engage parents is to promote elements of the event that are not necessarily associated with literacy (such as getting a hot drink) and hope that these events will encourage book talk in families in a fun and natural way.

Importance of choice

What sets the Young Readers Programme apart from other book gifting programmes in the UK is its emphasis on choice. Research has highlighted the importance of personal interest, agency and choice in supporting reader engagement (see, e.g., Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008). Indeed, pupils and teachers who have taken part in the programme confirm the importance of book choice to support reading engagement. Most (98 %) pupils we asked about this told us that they liked to choose books for themselves, and most (95 %) teachers noted that children were proud to receive books of their own. It is vital that children get to choose what they want to read, whether that is an award-winning piece of fiction, a joke book, a comic or an atlas. Many of our teachers and pupils have previously highlighted the numerous reasons choosing books is important for children's reading:

A boy who was never interested in reading. He didn't know about the different types of reading materials that were available to him. He has realised he enjoys biographies now and is happier to read. (Teacher, 2018–19)

For a lot of our children, they have quite specific genres that they love which we don't currently have in school, so by allowing them to choose their own book, a great buzz and excitement was created – this was particularly evident for our disadvantaged pupils. (Teacher, 2019–20)

People enjoy books more if they pick their own. (Pupil, 2020–21)

They were visibly delighted to find books relevant to their identity – powerful because they had for a long time been reluctant and disinterested. (Teacher, 2020–21)

To ensure that children have a great choice of books, we start by empowering teachers to select the range of books that their pupils will choose from. This is because teachers have good insight into their pupils' interests, hobbies and reading level and are best placed to speak to each child about the sort of book they might enjoy. The Young Readers Programme also supports teachers to expand their knowledge of children's books and encourages them to order titles that are diverse and reflect the different identities of their pupils.

Through funding raised from corporates, trusts and foundations, the Young Readers Programme team provides teachers with a budget and an account with a book supplier. Teachers are then able to select from almost any children's book currently in print in the UK. The budget allocated enables schools to order well beyond the number of books needed for their class size in order to allow plenty of choice.

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It is important that teachers are given ownership over the books ordered, as they are close to the children they teach and will have the best insight into their interests and reading abilities. We also encourage teachers to consult children directly about their personal reading preferences and other interests. In addition, teachers are provided with plenty of support, including a dedicated Project Manager and resources which recommend books for different reading levels and interests. Project Managers take time to build and sustain their knowledge of a great range of engaging children's books for all tastes. The teacher training provided also shares this knowledge of up-to-date children's books and authors in order to make sure teachers are confident to support children's choice. We encourage teachers to select as wide a range of books as possible, covering all interests and genres, and to present their books in exciting and attractive ways. Where possible, we also forge links between the school and their local library, with librarians using their expertise to build both teachers' and pupils' knowledge of children's books.

Supporting book choice skills

Of course, many of the children we work with do not regularly get the opportunity to select books for themselves; they may even have had poor experiences with books. Hence, the programme also focuses on developing each child's book choosing skills. Techniques we suggest to teachers to help children choose books include:

- ▶ **Look at the cover, read the blurb, then give it a go:** Many of the children we work with need support and encouragement to help them do things that might come more naturally to those who regularly select books. It is important that children know that a good way to begin when considering whether you'd like a book is to look at both the front and back covers and then try a page or two. Do they want to know what happens next? Do they find the writing style funny, exciting or intriguing? If not, put it back and try another.
- ▶ **The Five Finger Rule:** This is used to help a child decide if a book is the right level for their reading ability. We encourage children to read a page and raise a finger every time they come across a word they don't know. If they raise two or three fingers the book is probably at a good level for them, but if they raise five fingers it may be better to choose something else.
- ▶ **Recommendations and book talk:** One of the ways for a child to get excited about a book is when it has been recommended to them by one of their peers. We encourage children to talk informally about their books, and find that favourites naturally develop in the classroom. In this situation the class teacher should order many copies of the same book (or similar books) for the second and third book choice. Teacher recommendations may also have an impact on children's book choices.

Importance of ownership of books

While being able to choose a book that is right for them is an important element of the Young Readers Programme, so is the ability for children and young people to keep the books they have chosen. As we work in areas of economic disadvantage, many of the children that we work with do

not have books at home. Yet, owning a book can transform the way that a children view reading and provide comfort, as many of the teachers over the years have highlighted:

One pupil, who is a looked-after child, has been so emotionally overwhelmed with having books to own for themselves. It has provided them with comfort and belonging in a place that has been extremely uncertain. (Teacher, 2020–21)

A vast majority of the children do not have many books, if any, at home and they were very proud of owning a book themselves. They took good care of their books and read them, or pretended to read them, even if the text was too challenging for them. (Teacher, 2019–20)

The pride that children have in receiving their own books. Many do not have books at home, and having the experience of receiving their very own book is so motivating for them. Even just the smell of a new book is such a special experience that many of our children have not experienced before. Seeing their faces as they open their own book for the very first time is really magical! (Teacher, 2018–19)

We encourage teachers to use the books as part of free reading time in the classroom and as inspiration for informal book talk. We do not tend to prescribe specific work to the books – such as comprehension activities, for instance – preferring that the books feel associated with fun and enjoyment rather than typical classwork. We know the programme is working when children start to talk about their Young Readers Programme book with their friends during break time.

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Impact on pupils

Does the Young Readers Programme work to change children and young people’s reading engagement? Evaluation findings strongly suggest this. In 2020, three in four (76 %) children who had taken part in the Young Readers Programme said that they enjoyed reading at the end of the programme, which is a substantial rise from only one in two before taking part (50 %). Evaluation findings not only show that the programme had positively changed children’s reading enjoyment but also that it has increased their reading frequency, with nearly one in two (47 %) children saying they read daily at the end of the programme, an increase from just one in three (35 %) before.

These improvements are also reflected in teachers’ perceptions of impact. For example, when asked whether they had noticed any changes in children’s reading engagement, most teachers told us that their pupils’ reading motivation and reading enjoyment had improved over the course of the programme. Teachers also noticed other positive changes in children’s behaviours around reading. For example, 87 % of teachers had seen them reading new books, while 75.7 % of teachers reported that pupils were more likely to read on their own initiative and had recommended books to one another after taking part in the programme. Furthermore, 67 % of teachers thought that pupils were more comfortable talking about reading with their friends after taking part.

” Evidence collected from teachers suggests that the power of choice and ownership is a particularly valuable aspect of the programme.

Evidence collected from teachers suggests that the power of choice and ownership is a particularly valuable aspect of the programme. Teachers frequently describe the benefits of receiving the books on their pupils' motivation and reading confidence, as the following quotes show. This may be particularly due to the choice enabling children to read something that is the right level of challenge and taps into their interests as well as creating excitement around reading as an activity.

One child was a very reluctant reader who didn't read at home and didn't enjoy reading in school. The day after he had his books he asked could he read his new book, he finished the book in the day and has caught the reading bug. (Teacher, 2018–19)

Child A would never have chosen to read before this programme and was very reluctant to join in any literacy-based classroom discussions. This child is working at early/first level, however since this programme has created more than one story of their own promoting a love for storytelling and writing from the support of the books they chose. (Teacher 2020–21)

Children who are normally reluctant readers were engaged in the programme, as they had choice in the books they chose. This made them excited to receive new books and want time to explore and enjoy them. (Teacher 2020–21)

While we have not been able to assess the relative importance of the various elements of the programme, we would argue that it is in fact the combination of fun events, choice and ownership of books as well as enhanced teacher support that has made the programme particularly successful in supporting children's reading enjoyment and behaviour. It is clear that the true potential of the programme stems from the interrelated nature of these elements: teachers need to be knowledgeable and confident to support their pupils in making appropriate book choices, and children need to see these books as truly theirs in order to make this choice even more special. The events, on the other hand, create an engaging atmosphere around reading in general and send a message of reading as something enjoyable and fun, not a chore. Thus, it is likely that none of these elements would be as impactful in isolation as they are in combination.

Conclusion

In sum, as the Young Readers Programme looks forward to celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2022, this very simple approach to increasing book ownership and enjoyment remains as valuable and as needed as ever, particularly for children from lower-income homes. Evaluation has consistently demonstrated that giving children the chance to choose and keep free new books that match their interests at fun events can have a measurable impact on their reading attitudes, behaviour and confidence. As wider research demonstrates the links between reading for enjoyment and better opportunities in life, such programmes can be seen to have the potential to improve children's life chances.

About the National Literacy Trust

National Literacy Trust is an independent charity dedicated to raising literacy levels across the UK. We work to improve the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in the UK's most disadvantaged communities, where one in three people has low levels of literacy. We support schools, campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents and establish literacy projects in the poorest communities. Our research and analysis underpin all our work and make us the leading authority in literacy in the UK.

If you would like to know more about Young Readers Programme, please visit <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/young-readers-programme/>

You can also view a short, child-friendly animation detailing the book choice techniques here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfexEjXITuU>

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