

Young Readers Programme: Developing a love of reading in primary schools

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This report highlights the enduring importance of our Young Readers Programme by providing children with impactful positive reading experiences as well as opportunities to choose and, crucially, keep books. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with over 1 in 4 children who receive free school meals telling us that they received their first book of their own as a result of taking part in the Young Readers Programme. Teachers also feel more empowered to support their pupils' reading for pleasure, and the programme creates sustainable change by promoting a school culture that celebrates reading.

Reading for pleasure can have far-reaching benefits for the individual, as well as society as a whole. For example, children and young people's reading enjoyment is linked with their reading attainment ([Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2020](#)), maths attainment ([Sullivan & Brown, 2013](#)), and mental wellbeing ([Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018](#)).

However, fewer than 1 in 2 (47.8%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2022 that they enjoyed reading ([Cole, Brown, Clark & Picton, 2022](#)). This could have an economic impact on wider society, as suggested by a value-for-money study indicating that if all children read daily for enjoyment, the number of young people getting five good GCSEs could increase by 1.1 million over a generation (i.e., 30 years) ([British Land, 2021](#)). In turn, this could boost

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their average lifetime earnings by £57,500 and the overall economic impact of those increased incomes could raise the UK's GDP by an estimated £4.6 billion.

One way to improve reading enjoyment is to provide access to a range of interesting and diverse reading materials, either at home, at school or within the community. Indeed, research has shown that book ownership and access to books at home can have an impact on a variety of outcomes, including increased reading enjoyment and reading behaviours ([Cole, Clark and Picton, 2022](#)), increased reading confidence ([McGrane et al., 2017](#)), wider educational attainment ([Evans et al., 2010](#); [Schubert & Becker, 2010](#)), higher mental wellbeing scores ([Clark & Picton, 2018](#)), as well as increased income in adulthood ([Brunello et al., 2015](#)).

However, our own research has also shown that while book ownership has increased over the last decade or so, there is still a sizeable percentage of children and young people in the UK who say that they don't have a book of their own at home.

In 2022, 1 in 15 (6.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they didn't own a book, and this was even more pronounced for those who received free school meals, with nearly 1 in 10 (9.7%) saying that they didn't have a book of their own at home ([Cole, Clark & Picton, 2022](#)). For younger children, book ownership was even lower, with 1 in 5 (18.6%) children aged 5 to 8 saying they didn't have a book of their own at home in 2022 ([Cole, Brown & Clark, 2022](#)).

The Young Readers Programme

One of the programmes that we deliver to encourage reading for enjoyment and increase book ownership for children aged 4 to 11 is the Young Readers Programme. Started in the UK in 1997, the programme targets schools in under-resourced areas that have above average free-school-meal eligibility rates. Children who participate in the Young Readers Programme take 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 1.4 million books across the UK. Teachers or other members of staff, such as the school librarian, also receive training in reading for enjoyment and receive additional books for their school library.

While Young Readers Programme events differ from school to school, they 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

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

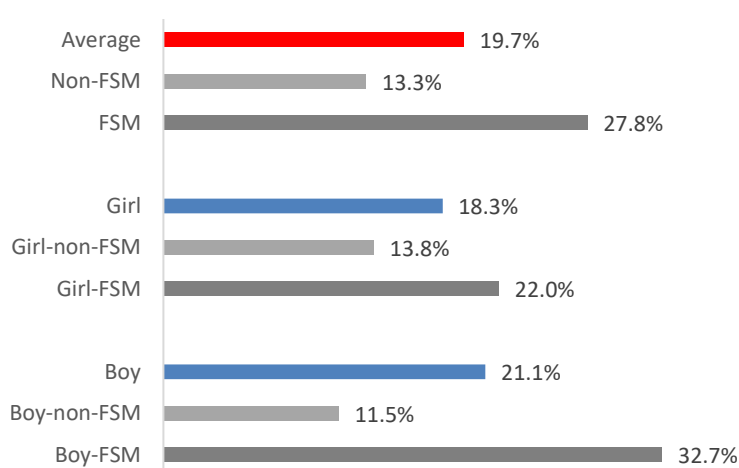
Sometimes parents and guardians are invited to these events. For instance, a school might hold a ‘book café’ event at the beginning of the school day and invite parents into the classroom to enjoy a hot chocolate and help their child choose a book. We find that the best way to engage parents is to promote 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.

Book ownership

All children participating in the programme have the opportunity to choose books to take home and keep. This is a crucial part of their experience, with 9 in 10 (87.7%)¹ children telling us that it is important to them to have books that are theirs to keep forever. This is true for all children, regardless of their gender and free-school-meal eligibility².

Indeed, for 1 in 5 (19.7%) children this was the first book they had ever owned. This rose to over 1 in 4 (27.8%) for children who received free school meals (FSMs), a proxy measure of socioeconomic background, and to 1 in 3 (32.7%) for boys who received FSMs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Children who said these were the first books they had owned, by gender and free-school-meal uptake³



¹ All figures in this report are based on the latest evaluation data collected from 1,135 participating children in the 2021-22 academic year
² The percentage of pupils who said it was important to have a book of their own was similar for non-FSM (86.0%) and FSM (88.4%) pupils, as well as between boys (86.7%; boy-non-FSM: 89.2%, boy-FSM: 83.6%) and girls (89.6%; girl non-FSM: 84.2%, girl-FSM: 93.1%).
³ Total number of pupils = 1,135, FSM = 450, Non-FSM = 354, Girl = 523, Boy = 535, Girl-non-FSM = 170, Girl-FSM = 208, Boy-non-FSM = 163, Boy-FSM = 224. Those who said they defined their gender a different way (n = 16) were excluded from this analysis due to small sample size,

Children also told us in their own words why it was important to have a book of their own. For example, some valued the fact that they would have their books forever and wouldn't have to return them:

"It is important because when you finish reading you can keep it in a collection of books or something like that and be proud of your success."
(Boy, 10)

"They feel more special than just borrowing a book and having to return it."
(Girl, 9)

"I would like to keep my own books so I can pass them on to my siblings or children in the future." (Girl, 10)

Others valued the fact that the books they received were entirely their own:

"It is important because if I was sharing an amazing book with my sibling we would always fight over who can keep it." (Girl, 9)

"When we want to read them, we can read it without our brothers taking our books." (Boy, 8)

Teachers also noticed the positive impact of having their own books on children. 94.2% of teachers told us that their pupils were proud to have books of their own, and all of the teachers either strongly agreed (95.5%) or agreed (4.5%) that receiving free books had a positive impact on children. Some told us:

"They were so proud that they went home hugging their book."

"Child A is very proud and will talk about the book to anyone who will listen."

"The gratitude shown when given the books was overwhelming. I am confident they would not have had access to these types of books prior to running the programme in school."

When considering reluctant readers specifically, almost every teacher either strongly agreed (87.3%) or agreed (11.9%) that receiving free books as part of the programme had positively impacted reluctant readers. Several comments from teachers also highlighted the importance of receiving books for reluctant readers:

"Some of the lower ability, reluctant readers felt very proud to have a book to call their own and show much more motivation during reading lessons or reading for pleasure time at school."

along with those who responded they would rather not say (n = 52). Likewise, those who said they didn't know their FSM status (n = 261) and those who indicated they would rather not say (n = 54) were excluded from this analysis.

“One of our more reluctant readers has taken great pride in owning his own book. He brings it to school most days and loves reading it with his friends and teachers.”

“One child who used to be a reluctant reader has asked for a series of books for his birthday. Mum was overjoyed with the change in his attitude towards reading and that he now asks her to sit and listen to him read at night.”

Encouraging a love of reading

Ultimately, the Young Readers Programme aims to engage pupils in reading and book talk after they have received the books and attended the events, and we know that the programme particularly benefits those who might be classed as reluctant readers. For example, nearly 3 in 5 (56.6%) of those who didn't enjoy reading before the programme⁴ told us that they enjoyed it very much or quite a lot after taking part. Similarly, nearly half (45.0%) of children who did not engage in reading in their free time before taking part⁵ had started reading weekly after the programme.

The Young Readers Programme supports children's reading in many other ways. After taking part, 2 in 3 (65.7%) children said that reading was more fun, and 1 in 2 (52.7%) said they read more in their free time (see Figure 2). 3 in 5 (58.0%) said they liked reading different types of books more, and just over half (50.6%) said they were better readers after taking part in the Young Readers Programme. Children also showed an increased interest in speaking to their peers about their reading, with 1 in 3 (33.4%) pupils saying that they liked talking about books with their friends more after taking part.

Figure 2: Benefits of taking part in the Young Readers Programme



⁴ defined as those who enjoyed reading only a bit or not at all before taking part, n = 416

⁵ defined as those who didn't read weekly before, n = 328

Teachers echoed the programme's impact. For example, almost all (99.3%) teachers told us that children's reading enjoyment and motivation had improved, while almost 9 in 10 (85.2%) said that children were reading more frequently.

In addition to improved reading enjoyment and behaviours, teachers also observed more peer interactions surrounding reading. 7 in 10 (70.8%) teachers found that children were recommending books to one another more after taking part in the programme and, similarly, 2 in 3 (67.9%) teachers noticed that children were more comfortable talking about books with their friends. Their comments highlighted the benefit of the programme on discussions about reading:

“Just the book talk has been enriched, they are keen to recommend books to each other and review ones that they have read.”

“It also benefited children who are working below year group expectations in having discussions with their peers around books - particularly graphic novels - in turn raising their self esteem and confidence.”

The importance of book choice

What is the crucial element that makes the Young Readers Programme so impactful? We believe, and so do children and teachers, that it is a result of book choice. We know that personal interest, agency and choice are important elements in supporting reader engagement (see e.g. [Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008](#)). Research has shown that children who are able to choose their own reading material are more likely to read ([Fisher & Frey, 2018](#)). Allowing children to choose books for themselves can increase their motivation to read ([Pachtman & Wilson, 2006](#)) and lead to children investing more time and effort into reading ([Reynolds & Symons, 2001](#)). Furthermore, choice can empower children, enabling even reluctant readers to maintain persistence and effort in their reading ([Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008](#)).

Indeed, children and teachers who have taken part in the Young Readers Programme confirm the importance of book choice to support reading engagement. Most (80.6%) children who took part in the Young Readers Programme in 2022 told us that they liked being able to choose books for themselves and, after taking part in the programme, 1 in 2 (47.0%) also told us that they were better at choosing books as a result of taking part in the programme. Children expressed enjoyment at getting to choose freely for themselves, as they were able to choose books that suited their interests and ability.

“I'm happy that we got to request books that we liked instead of picking books that we would never read.” (Girl, 11)

“For me it is important, because new books that I choose make it more fun because I can choose them. Usually my parents choose them for me.” (Boy, 9)

This aligns with the 1 in 2 (52.6%) teachers who told us that participating children got better at choosing books that suited their reading skill. Many of the comments from teachers and children have highlighted reasons why choice is important for children’s reading engagement:

“Usually when free books are given out, it’s the same book for each child. This experience allowed them to choose books more aligned with their reading level.”

“It was important to involve the children in the process of selecting a book as it was felt that it would raise the status of book ownership.”

“We had a pupil with ADHD who previously found it difficult to concentrate on reading. Through the Young Readers Programme we were able to give pupils more choice in which reading materials they accessed. Due to this, he has completed the whole set of Dogman books and when asked what his proudest achievement was this year, he said ‘My reading’.”

Teachers also frequently describe the benefits of receiving the books on children’s motivation and reading confidence:

“One pupil is much better at selecting appropriately levelled texts, where this was a barrier for her previously to engage in reading.”

“The reluctant readers are reading amazing comics and poems and easier-to-read stories about their own interests as I was able to purchase books catered to their needs and likes!”

Diversity and books that reflect pupils’ backgrounds

The ability to choose their own books also means that children are able to explore diverse representations and find characters that are representative of their own backgrounds. Indeed, recent research has suggested the importance of choice to engage children from all backgrounds in reading, by increasing the possibility that they will find books that reflect their lives and cultures ([McClung et al., 2019](#)). Yet our own research ([Picton & Clark, 2022](#)) has shown that 2 in 5 (38.9%) children and young people say they find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them, which increases to 1 in 2 (53.1%) for children aged 8 to 11.

Almost all teachers (97.7%) said that the programme had increased children’s access to books with diverse characters that were representative of them. More than 9 in 10 (93.3%) teachers

also said that the books provided as part of the programme allowed children to see themselves reflected. This was mirrored in comments from teachers:

“We have many EAL children in school and having books that they can identify with is crucial. A Nigerian girl in my class showed me a Black history book with a real sparkle in her eye.”

“Some children were thrilled as their cultures were represented in the text.”

“I have three Asian pupils in my class and I was delighted to see representation for them. It was great to be able to introduce them to books that had Asian & Glaswegian characters.”

“The added focus of ensuring a diverse range of characters in books has been very encouraging for children.”

“One student has ASD and spoke highly of a character who also had ASD. It was evident through their discussions and book talks that they liked this representation.”

Creating lasting change

The Young Readers Programme also creates a sustained change in school by fostering an enriched reading for pleasure environment. More than 9 in 10 (92.2%) teachers reported, for example, that the programme had increased the focus on reading for enjoyment in their school, and more than 4 in 5 (85.2%) said the programme had increased the focus on book talk in their school.

Many teachers also told us that the programme had changed their knowledge and teaching. For example, 3 in 4 (75.8%) teachers said they had an increased awareness of the importance of reading for pleasure as a result of the programme, and 4 in 5 (82.0%) indicated an improved understanding of the importance of book ownership. The percentage of teachers who said they had good strategies to support reading enjoyment specifically for reluctant readers almost doubled after taking part in the Young Readers Programme, from 49% to 94.1%. We also saw an increase in teachers’ confidence to support their pupils’ reading as the percentage who were confident in expanding children’s reading habits increased from 7 in 10 (68.0%) teachers beforehand to 98% after.

Responses also indicated broader impacts of the programme in schools. More than 2 in 5 teachers said that the programme included elements they would integrate into their regular teaching practice (43.0%), or learning that they have since shared with their colleagues (43.8%).

Conclusion

In sum, it is clear that the true potential of the Young Readers Programme stems from the interrelated nature of some key 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 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. Furthermore, the programme creates sustainable change within the wider school by encouraging changes in classroom culture around reading, particularly in relation to promoting informal book talk amongst pupils, developing reading identity amongst pupils and even developing teachers too.

The Young Readers Programme's simple approach to increasing book ownership and enjoyment of reading remains as valuable and as needed as ever, particularly for children from lower-income homes. It gives children the chance to choose and keep free books that match their interests at fun events, which 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.

This is against the backdrop of the current cost-of-living crisis, which means that family finances are being squeezed by inflation, high energy costs and recession. Many parents are struggling to afford the cost of living, limiting their ability to buy books and other learning resources for their children, and to afford activities supporting learning such as after school clubs or visits to the library. This means that even more children and young people will miss vital opportunities to engage with reading at home this winter. This is why initiatives like the Young Readers Programme are more vital now than they have ever been.