

**An Evaluation of the ‘City of Readers’ student volunteer
initiative
at the University of Liverpool**

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Introduction

The Reader, an award-winning UK charity dedicated to promoting reading everywhere for everybody, is the official partner of the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS). Since 2008, The Reader has also partnered the University in a range of student volunteer initiatives. Most recently, students from two faculties have been involved in Liverpool's mayoral 'City of Readers' campaign. City of Readers is led by The Reader's Director, Dr Jane Davis MBE, and its mission is to transform Liverpool into a leading 'reading city'.

This report is an evaluation of the benefits to the student experience, as well as to those whom they reached – children, teachers, parents – of undergraduate students' involvement in City of Readers.

The research study was approved by University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee.

Background

Student Volunteering and The Reader

Reading in Practice

The first student volunteer programme partnering The Reader, 'Reading in Practice', was funded by the Higher Education Academy and placed undergraduate English Literature students as assistants in The Reader's community reading groups in Liverpool. Students helped to run reading groups in homeless hostels, dementia care homes, doctors' surgeries, mental health day centres, and neurological rehabilitation wards. Students' testimony demonstrated how their experience made more dedicated readers of themselves and others.

Most rewarding was sharing literature you love with people who might not have touched a book in years. The mentally stretching element was being encouraged to engage with literature that was not part of our University syllabus. (Student Volunteer, 2008)

The opportunity to translate their literary knowledge into real world contexts gave students a more primary and engaged sense of its value. A student based at a drugs detox unit wrote

watching an illiterate man listening intently to a text read aloud and suggesting perceptive ideas has shown me that reading offers common ground and something challenging and healing even during times of adversity.

Reading in Practice had pedagogical benefits, too. 'Preparing a text for a reading group encouraged students to think about it more deeply than they might approach it individually or in a seminar group; the reading group in turn enlarged the student's experience of the text' (HEA report on the volunteer project, *Wordplay*, 2009).

Reading for Pleasure in Schools

The success of Reading in Practice led to the award of University of Liverpool Knowledge Exchange funds to foster a reading for pleasure culture among children struggling emotionally, socially and educationally in partnership with Liverpool Children's Services. A student volunteer programme was initiated in which UoL undergraduates were trained by project workers at The Reader in its shared read aloud model and thence placed in local schools to 'read for pleasure' with children, one to one and sometimes in small groups.

Praised by the city council and by the funders for being imaginatively two-way - 'reaching out' to Liverpool's vulnerable population, 'reaching in' to enrich the student experience - the project has since reached 12 local schools and over 90 undergraduate Arts' students. This volunteer project, together with its predecessor, had considerable impact on the curriculum, leading first to a new Reading in Practice English module (commended as 'innovative', 'fascinating', 'exciting' by external examiners) and thence to a School of the Arts work experience module from 2011, from which almost 100 School of the Arts students have now benefited.

But the benefits of the volunteering initiatives went far beyond their academic impact, as student feedback abundantly indicated.

It taught me a lot about working with children, what they need and how they learn.

I valued how open people are when you read texts together, and the feeling of sharing something. I would advise anyone who has a passion for reading and would like to feel more involved with the community to take up this opportunity.

I had an absolutely fantastic time on this project and the responsibility prepares you for life after university. Thank you for the opportunity.

Benefits to the children with whom the students read have been tangible too. Results from a small pilot study, carried out in a particularly disadvantaged area of Liverpool in the first year of the Reading for Pleasure in Schools programme, showed that all pupils who participated improved their reading ages after a year of the intervention, and the improvements were greater than for the control group who did not receive the intervention. This trend was replicated in the following year. The study also indicated that there was an improvement in pupil engagement through the intervention, and that the latter helped children manage emotions and develop social skills.¹

Since 2014, the UoL programme has been linked to the Liverpool City of Readers initiative, the point at which this current study began. Its aim has been to evaluate the *mutual benefit* to school, university, student,² teacher, parent and child of the involvement of student volunteers in the City of Readers campaign. Since 2015, the scheme has been open to undergraduate students within the Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, in addition to those within the School of the Arts.

City of Readers

The Liverpool Mayor's 'City of Readers' campaign seeks, through a large-scale volunteer programme, to raise literacy standards across the city. It aims to make Liverpool the foremost reading city in the country and a national leader in school standards, by raising the profile of reading and developing a new generation of readers. The Reader is the official partner in the campaign and has extended its shared reading initiative as widely as possible across Liverpool schools, training staff and volunteers - from parents to sixth-form students - to read for pleasure with younger children across the city.

<http://www.thereader.org.uk/search-results.aspx?search=city+of+readers>

Shared Reading

The model of reading developed by The Reader is one of people reading aloud, together, stories, poems and plays and sharing their responses, thoughts and feelings in relation to the book. The model in which the volunteer students have been trained is specifically based on the student and child coming together weekly for up to one hour, to read fiction and poetry aloud. The emphasis is on sharing the experience of the book and on reading for pleasure, not for literacy or reading competence. The practice of reading aloud, means that the literature is accessible to all participants: potentially, every child can take part regardless of levels of literacy, educational, or cultural background. The reading is punctuated by spontaneous pauses

in which the child can voluntarily reflect on what is being read and how it might relate to his or her own life. Readers control their own involvement, contributing as much or as little as they like, according to mood and confidence levels.

The Study

Research Context: Reading for Pleasure

Over the last decade or so, a range of studies have shown the benefits of reading on educational and whole life achievement. The most recent of these, published by the Institute of Education in 2013, found that reading for pleasure had a powerful effect on children's cognitive development and the influence was greater than that of having a parent with a degree.³ These findings support earlier research carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), which demonstrated a powerful link between children's leisure reading, educational attainment and social mobility and concluded that 'finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change'.⁴ 'Reading enjoyment,' says a Department of Education research report on reading for pleasure (2012) is 'more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status.'⁵

The City of Readers initiative is thus taking place within a climate of widespread interest, debate and concern about the place and value of reading in children's and young adults' lives, particularly among educationalists and reading charities: 'More needs to be done to address the widening gap in reading experiences in and out of school;' 'What is required is the creation of a school culture in which all children and young people are encouraged to be enthusiastic readers'.⁶ Despite the urgent sense of priorities in respect of reading, there is very little academic research to date on interventions which promote reading for pleasure (rather than for literacy).⁷

The mayoral initiative is focussed primarily on raising standards of literacy and promoting educability. Routine audit data (such as child reading assessment scores) collected by The Reader's City of Readers team has formed part of this evaluation's data. However, this present study is primarily concerned with how the volunteer-reader-in-schools initiative affects attitudes to reading, and motivation to read, both in pupils *and* in the students who read to them. It also seeks to capture the reciprocal benefits to pupils and students (social and emotional, educational and professional) which proceeded from their shared experience of reading.

Aim:

To carry out an exploratory study of the experience of participating in the City of Readers initiative, for university students, primary and secondary pupils.

Objectives:

- To undertake qualitative investigation of the experience of taking part in the City of Readers initiative, including the effect on reading habits, and motivation to read, among university students and school pupils;
- To help to establish the benefits and challenges of the student volunteer reader model for other cities and HEIs;
- To inform future research by understanding some of the benefits and outcomes for participating children and students of the City of Readers shared reading initiative.

Research Method

Recruitment

15 University of Liverpool students were recruited, via advertisement, to the Student Volunteer programme, between October 2014 and July 2016. Five of these were taking the School of the Arts work experience module. Following training by The Reader, they were placed in local Liverpool schools for between 12 and 24 weeks, to read for one hour weekly with one or two children. This was the minimum requirement for the placement, though some students chose, in fact, to stay for a full half-day each week, reading with up to four children. (NB. The students who took part in the research gave informed consent. The right to participate in the initiative – whether as a volunteer or as part of an accredited module - was not affected by students' decision not to take part in the research if they chose not to do so.)

Children aged between 11 and 14 (Years 7-10) were selected for one-to-one reading with student volunteers by co-ordinating teachers at participating secondary schools. Parents and teachers were invited to participate in the research, and offer their view of how the children responded to the programme, as well as to give informed consent both for themselves and for the children in their charge. NB. It was made clear to all parents and teachers that choosing not to take part (for themselves or on behalf of the children for whom they were responsible), would not affect the children's right to take part in the City of Readers shared reading programme.

Data Collection/Analysis

Children

- Participating children completed The Reader's standard Young People's questionnaire - on enjoyment/attitude/motivation in respect of reading - at the start of the shared reading intervention and then again after it was completed. (The questionnaire was developed in consultation with CRILS and based upon pilot questionnaires used in the 2010 programme.)
- Teachers completed The Reader's standard teacher feedback form (developed in consultation with CRILS) at the close of the intervention. Teachers also reported back via personal interview and/or email exchange on the effect of the programme on children's: reading habits (at home or in class); behaviour and social interaction; motivation to learn and or educational aspiration.
- Audit data (children's reading scores) collected by The Reader routinely as part of the City of Readers initiative, and/or provided by individual teachers, were also available to the study, with parent/teacher consent.

Students

Students reported back on the following topics via individual (audio-recorded/transcribed) interview and/or email exchange; their experience of training for, and volunteering in schools (rewards and challenges especially); their motivation for, and expectation of volunteering and whether those expectations were met; personal impact (on study and reading habits, student experience).

Analysis

The questionnaire and email/interviewee responses were analysed to establish common themes or outcome patterns in respect of reading habits. Where appropriate and possible, these findings have been cross-referenced with the routine audit data relating to reading scores.

Findings

The Child

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data gathered was variable, and its reliability as evidence is affected by: the differing amounts of time for which pupils were involved in reading (where timetabling or other pressures affected the student volunteers' capacity to read with the same pupil every week); teachers' time or capacity to test children's reading age scores and attitude to reading questionnaires before and after the Shared Reading experience; the range of standard reading tests used and the variable ways in which the figures were submitted to researchers; the priority of establishing a functioning volunteer programme in each participating school and of ensuring that the research element did not over-burden teachers whose support was vital to the programme's success. The figures are indicative only therefore.

Of the 42 children who were paired with a reading volunteer we have evidence of reading scores before and after Shared Reading for 23 pupils. These show the pace of reading improvement to be at least in line with usual minimum expectation in respect of reading age (that each month and year of the child's chronological age will see a corresponding improvement in reading age) and in most cases in advance of that expectation (given that the maximum exposure to the reading intervention, for any child, was 6 months).

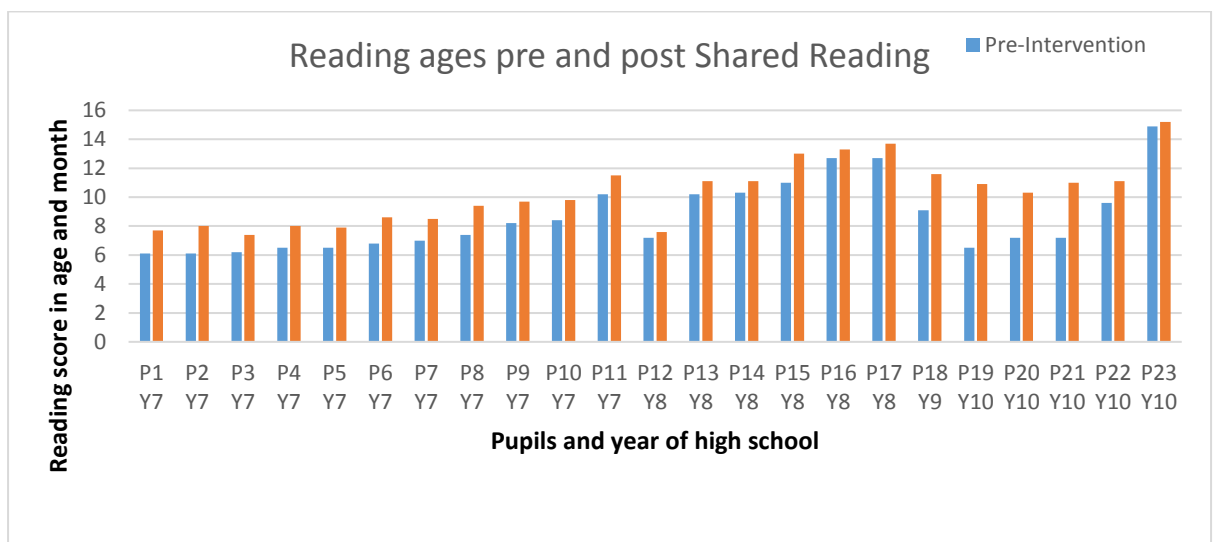
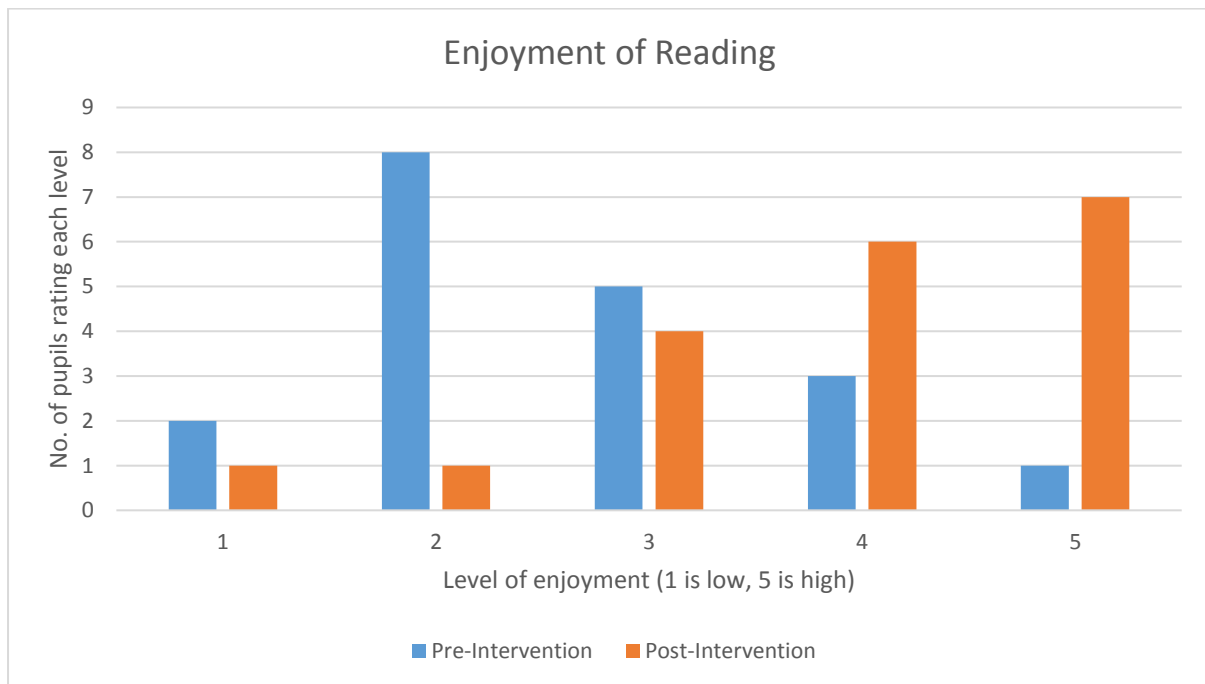


Chart 1: Reading Scores Pre and Post Intervention

From these findings, we can tentatively suggest that it is more common to get a sharper increase in reading age in children who begin the intervention with a reading age significantly lower

than their chronological age. Certainly that inference is in line with other Reader evaluations,* which suggest that those children who need most help with reading also stand to benefit the most from the shared reading for pleasure programme. While this might be useful guidance to teachers in deciding which pupils to select for the intervention, there are benefits to the intervention unrelated to reading competence, which, as we shall see, teachers particularly value, and which arguably need to be taken into consideration in selecting pupils.

Completed pre and post intervention questionnaires as to their enjoyment of reading were received from 19 of the 42 children who read with a volunteer. (NB. The children whose questionnaire responses are represented here do not correlate with those whose reading age is represented above.)



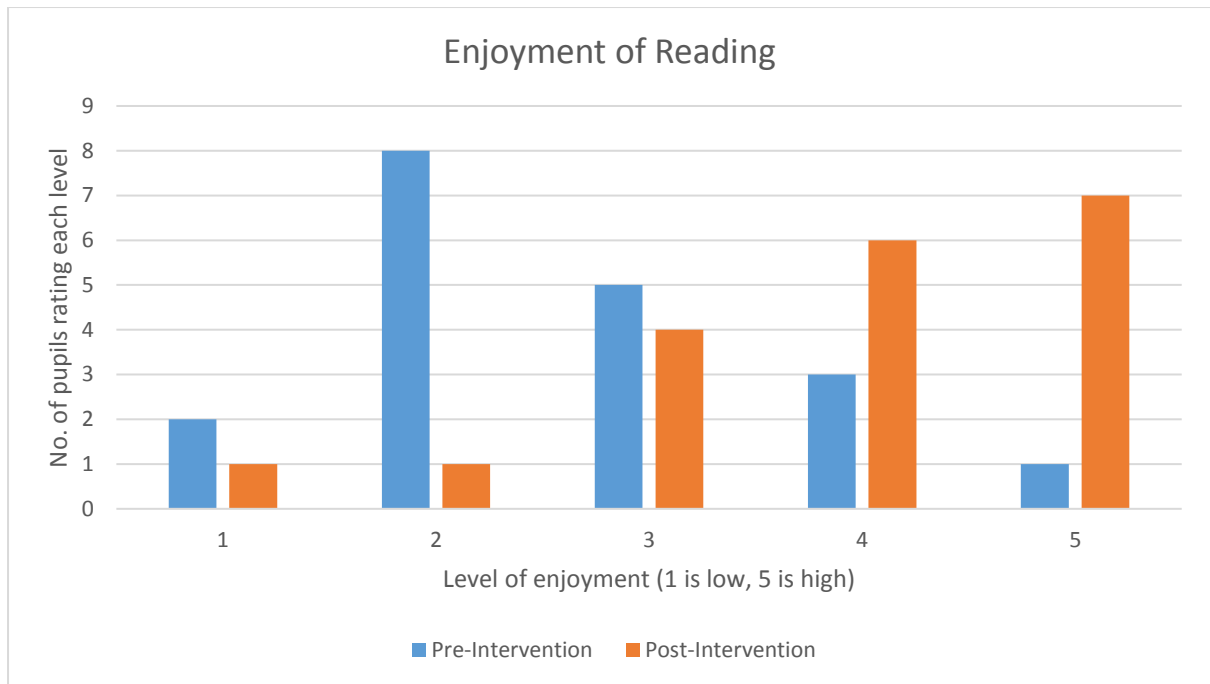


Chart 2: Children’s reported enjoyment of reading, pre and post involvement in Shared Reading.

Quantitative results indicate that trends in both reading age and reading enjoyment were uniformly upward, and this was corroborated by teacher testimony.

Qualitative Findings

Children’s progress in reading ability and reading confidence was a strong feature of teacher feedback.

J [Pupil 18] has always been a chatter box but reading was not something she ever seemed confident with. She would always pass the reading on after a sentence. However, she has made a lot of progress over the last few months. Now she will read and volunteer, and she encourages others to do the same. It helps the whole class when more children are keen to read, even though they may not be the best at it. Even J’s reading assessment was higher than I thought it would be.

 * As part of a recent Reader project, in which adult volunteers read 1:1 with a total of 20 children aged 8-16, the children were asked at baseline and follow-up to give a score between 1 and 5 as to whether they agreed with the statement 'I like reading on my own'. A greater mean score change between baseline and follow-up for reluctant readers (+2.13) as compared with enthusiastic readers (+0.33) suggests that the intervention was more effective at boosting enjoyment of reading for those whose pleasure in reading was *less* prior to taking part in Shared Reading.

Such changes in the teachers' perception of children as 'readers' is itself likely to benefit pupils' future relationship with books and reading.⁸

But the benefits of the intervention went beyond reading attainment and achievement per se, as teachers testified. Here are teacher feedback comments in relation to three children from Years 7 to 9, all whom were exposed to Shared Reading for the fullest possible period (24 weeks). (All are represented in Charts 1 and 2.) Yet they each offer different profiles and illustrations of how shared reading helped them.

- Pupil 19 showed one of the steepest improvements in reading age (6.5. to 10.9) and in reading enjoyment (from score 2 to score 5). Her teacher said that from having been a 'timid reader', Pupil 19 had become a 'much more fluent reader', was 'reading louder as well' and was 'more confident giving an answer now in front of peers'. Pupil 19's spelling had become 'much better' also.
- Pupil 4 showed much less dramatic improvement in reading age (6.5 to 8, though reading enjoyment score rose from 2 to 4) but had become 'much more willing and confident when reading aloud to the rest of her class'. The pupil was also voluntarily contributing to class discussion and answering questions where before prompting had been necessary. Again, ability in spelling had shown marked improvement.
- Pupil 16's reading age was above average before the Shared Reading and progressed in line with normal national expectations through the course of it. But in addition to greater willingness and confidence in reading aloud, this pupil showed 'greater concentration and engagement' and 'participation in class is now guaranteed'. Pupil 16 was now 'highly motivated to read, purchasing books on her own and reading in form'. (Her reading enjoyment score rose from 3 to 5.)

Concentration, participation and motivation are the three distinct areas of classroom life where the shared reading intervention was seen by teachers to have an impact on children's learning. The social engagement and interpersonal relations of pupils involved in the programme were also recognised by teachers to be enhanced, sometimes markedly and immediately.

Thanks again for setting this up; I think it will be a great success. One of the Y7 girls, [Pupil 2] has hardly spoken a word since she started with us in September and is very quiet and withdrawn but she was very talkative after the session. I couldn't believe the

transformation. I think she responds better to adults and the quality time given to her by [the student] seemed to unlock something. I was stunned.

By far the most powerful witnesses of the children's stronger engagement with, and often love of, reading, however, were the students themselves, who came to know the children very closely through their weekly and hourly one to one shared reading sessions. In what follows, mini case studies are grouped under the broad areas of benefit to the participating children which emerged from student report. Where relevant and appropriate, the findings are related to and supported by research in the field of child reading and learning. All child participants are given pseudonyms, and the qualitative evidence cross-refers to quantitative evidence where the latter is available.

1.Overcoming reluctance or timidity

Pupils were often selected by teachers for shared reading where their reluctance to read seemed related to low confidence levels more generally.

Lucy

Lucy (Pupil 10), for example, aged 11, was acutely shy personally as well as a timid reader and lacked belief in her own ability and potential. 'It soon became clear that Lucy didn't want to be there. She spoke hardly at all and looked altogether uncomfortable.' At first, the student simply read aloud with Lucy, who, by Week 3, still hadn't made eye contact. 'I began to doubt myself as there is no set way to tackle this. It's not as though you can say "look at me!"' The student learned instead to wait, to relax, in the hope that this would help Lucy herself to relax.

Week 4 was very memorable. Without hesitation or prompting, she looked me straight in the eyes and said 'I read a whole book last night!' and told me all about why she liked it. This would have been unimaginable in Week 1. I think what really mattered was that I cared about what she had to say. When she realized that I valued what she said and did, she seemed quite happy to talk, not only about the books, which she was clearly starting to enjoy, but about the other things she could do, like her artwork. One day she presented a photo of her artwork, as a special gift. The more she responded to my interest and enthusiasm, the more I responded to hers.

Close adult encouragement is vital in inspiring a love of reading in children.⁹ But such time and care in relation to reading is a privilege and advantage not available to every child.¹⁰ The

student volunteers were able to give this care in part because of their unique position: neither teachers nor friends, they were placed somewhere enablingly between fixed categories of adult-child relationship. It helped that the students were learning too. ‘I felt as nervous as Lucy on day one. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d spoken to a child. “How do I chat to her, what shall I talk about,” I wondered; “what if she doesn’t want to come back?”’

Emma

Emma, by contrast with Lucy (though the same age), was a forthright child, very direct about her attitude to books (‘I hate everything about reading’), and made it very clear she wanted nothing to do with them. When the student brought in a large variety of books chosen specially for Emma, she simply pushed aside those that were ‘too thick’. The student intuited that Emma’s feelings of anger and loathing were really ones of shame and frustration, related to the association of books with school and the association of school with failure.¹¹

I spent more time building rapport and less time actually reading, at first. I found out she liked dancing, and started to read to her *Poppy Love*. Initially, Emma put her head on the desk and refused to listen but she got interested in the dances Poppy was practising, and started comparing Poppy’s experience with her own, competing with her almost. For the first time she wanted to continue with the book, and, week by week, she gradually took over the reading herself. She told me that she had never finished a book before so this became the challenge that we set ourselves. We did indeed finish *Poppy Love* in the last session and celebrated the moment with a high-five!

Impressively, these students are learning experientially, from the inside - as engaged ‘amateurs’ - the kind of insights in relation to ‘what works’ in motivating children to read, which are widely recognized by educational thinkers and professionals: relationship, reward of endeavor, personal care and care for the book.

2.Channeling Energy, Harnessing Enthusiasm

Disaffection in relation to reading did not only take the form of disengagement, nor was it always associated with or expressed in difficulties with social interaction.

James

James, also 11 (Pupil 11) was naturally sociable and friendly. ‘He particularly loved discussing music,’ said the student volunteer: ‘he even sang to me in the second week, saying “you’ll love this one” as if he’d known me for years!’ Stopping James telling his own stories in order to do

some reading was the biggest challenge. James's astonishingly strong imagination and his excellent social skills led the student volunteer to wonder at first why James had been chosen for the shared reading sessions:

James's face dropped at the mention of reading. 'I hate books: all books are similar and boring.' James could talk to me non-stop, but when asked to read aloud he became self-conscious and hesitant. I think he suspected I was going to be judging and testing him. It was also plain he felt reading wasn't 'cool'. The challenge was to find a fantastically exciting book - perhaps the hardest thing I had to do as a volunteer. In the end, I went for David Almond's *The Savage* [a diary-cum-graphic novel told from the perspective of a young boy]. At first, it was the pictures and their fearsome edge which drew him in. James was also a great actor, so I let him act the book out as he read by putting on voices. He poured so much energy into it and this was when he began to get really excited and eager to see what happened next. At one point he practically jumped out of his seat saying, 'This book is proper good. I think it's the best book I've ever read'. I'm not sure who was happier about this, me or him.

'*Children must want to read,*' say the experts: 'evaluating this factor should be as important as evaluating the literary quality of the work.'¹² The great advantage of the week by week, one to one, reading for pleasure model is that the right book can be found, and the right book can, in turn, find the reader in the child. This is particularly valuable in relation to boys whose self-esteem can often be vulnerable in relation to reading,¹³ who are particularly apt to regard reading as not 'cool',¹⁴ for whom there are few ready role models;¹⁵ and for whom there is 'no magic bullet' when it comes to enthusiasm for reading - 'it's all about trial and error'.¹⁶

James was a highly intelligent boy, his questions spanning science, maths and philosophy. 'He was interested in how the world works, and even brought into consideration the potential of life after death. I often wished I had greater scientific knowledge and would refresh my understanding of, for example, the layers of the earth's core in order to apply it to the sessions and fuel his inquisitive mind.' Where reluctant boy readers especially are concerned, research has shown that 'motivation for reading literature can be increased if it is incorporated into other curriculum areas'.¹⁷ This offers one practical model perhaps of how a reading for pleasure agenda could be incorporated and promoted in schools by students from disciplines other than English Literature alone.

Molly

Children with strong minds and lively intelligence often proved the greatest challenge for student volunteers, in fact. 13-year-old Molly was outgoing and voluble, yet always easily distracted. The more excitable she became the more her concentration levels dropped, and the student volunteer had trouble keeping her attention.

She did not enjoy reading at all, but she did have a great passion for comics, sci-fi and superheroes. She told me she liked exploring different worlds, and when I asked her why, she profoundly replied: 'Because any world is better than ours'. It was at this point she told me how much she disliked school and how she was often in trouble for answering back.

As soon as she began to read, she immediately became shy, introverted and withdrawn. Confident in herself, she was not confident at all in her reading ability. She easily lost interest in the books I chose for her. When she found something challenging to read, she would completely ignore the words she found hard. The stories just seemed to Molly to be difficult words on the page.

Then someone at The Reader recommended Neil Gaiman's stunningly visual *Coraline*, and there was an obvious change in Molly from the moment we started reading this. She was much more engaged and excited, far more animated in her reading, and enthusiastically talking about what had happened previously and guessing what might come next. Now when she encountered a word she didn't know, instead of ignoring it and staying silent, she asked me what it meant and tried to pronounce it. Molly wanted to know what the words meant because they weren't any longer mere 'words on a page' but another 'world'. This is an example of where the chore of reading for fluency, comprehension or the identification of words, is replaced by a child's sense that he or she 'has the power to create the world they want ... in their own head'.¹⁸ The student was able to show Molly that 'within the covers of a loved book is an adventure of spirit – something that can speak to the child alone'.¹⁹

Love of reading – what professionals call 'intrinsic motivation'²⁰ - begins in the heart not in literacy classes. Love of books won't be inspired in an adolescent like Molly when acquisition of a large vocabulary or becoming a good speller is made the point of reading. But those benefits surely will follow from careful and caring reading.²¹ (See Chart 1, P15.)

Ethan

Eleven-year-old Ethan (Pupil 1) epitomised the value of shared reading for one student. In the pre-placement training they received from The Reader, the students were encouraged to let children finish the page or two they had agreed to read for themselves, with gentle intervention from the student if necessary, even where – sometimes especially where – the child was struggling with pronunciation and meaning. Where constant interruption and correction can be demoralising and diminish confidence - ‘affecting the child’s attempts to become literate, and indirectly his general attitudes about learning and himself’²² – the by-products of ‘keeping going’ were not only strengthened concentration and belief, but improved fluency itself.

I noticed in the first session that Ethan was very quiet and seemed rather shy. His delivery of words was not always very fluent and this was intensified when he read aloud. He said that he loved football. I had found *Keeper* by Mal Peet at The Reader office, but I was worried that it may be too difficult for Ethan. When we started reading, Ethan was struggling to pronounce and understand some of the longer words so I suggested that if was too difficult we could read something else. Ethan said, ‘the names and words are difficult but I can deal with that because I want to know what happens’.

Ethan persevered because the mystique of the Keeper in the South American woods captured his imagination. We let the story carry us through and lead us on. Ethan was more comfortable in reading aloud and would take more time when he needed to, without feeling pressured to read in a certain way or at a certain pace.

‘If children do not want to get any meaning from the text, it is not reading’.²³ ‘Not reading’, or reading for ‘survival’²⁴ of the literacy or comprehension test creates fear of failure, a rejection of books, and a disinclination for reading which makes failure at it more certain. Students were keenly aware of how their weekly read-aloud sessions could powerfully disrupt this vicious circle. Personal connection to the story and to one another was key.

I think that reading the story was also so successful because Ethan found relevance to his own life. The best example of this was in our third week of reading *The Keeper* when Ethan and I were talking about the football he had been playing in the lunch break as well as during the week since I had last seen him. He told me that he scored the two goals in the match and went on to describe how he ‘leant back and moved to the left and then kicked the free-kick’ just as The Keeper had described in the book. Peet, the author, talks of magic of football and magic of literature and for me this was a magical moment of my placement. It highlighted how much the story had meant to him and his life.

It is when literature begins to provide ‘a framework, a colouring book for the reader to paint in feelings from personal experience’²⁵ that reading, from being a resented hurdle, can deepen into a life habit.

3.Releasing the Imagination

In an informal focus group session with children who had experienced Shared Reading as part of a previous study,²⁶ the children explained why they enjoyed reading with the students much more than they enjoyed it in class:

In class, I can think about it but I can’t imagine it.

When the student reads, it goes in more, I liked it.

It gives you a picture in your brain.

When your teacher is reading it out in class, I can never get a picture; it’s the same when you’re by yourself; but when she is reading to you I can.

I understood the story better, I could imagine it more.

The crucial connection between ‘imagining’ and ‘understanding’, and thence to making reading a personal event, has long been recognized.²⁷ Here this imaginative-cognitive dimension was clearly related to the twin practices of reading aloud together and mutually expressing thoughts and feelings.

I feel more confident reading with the student because you understand the book more.

It’s better because you’ve got someone to talk to, because when you’re in class reading in your head you don’t really get the story much so it’s better with the students.

Reading made the burden of meaning-making, especially for struggling readers, a shared enterprise and journey rather than a painful individual effort:

It’s better when they are reading to me, because when you read yourself you’re dead slow when you get stuck on the words; with them it’s faster.

All of these benefits of Shared Reading were richly corroborated in the current study. Most student volunteers had examples such as that of Demi, another 12-year-old struggling reader, who began by barely completing a page of reading to becoming so engrossed she forgot to stop, reading four or five pages in one go. She said the most valuable thing about reading with the student volunteer was that it helped her to realise the story like ‘a film in her head’. Shared reading aloud released her from the dual task of reading and imagining simultaneously.²⁸

Thomas

Thomas, also aged 12, experienced a good deal of confusion when he read out loud, and had more difficulty than most with understanding. He never expressed any dislike of reading, however, and would never hesitate to ‘get stuck in’. But this was always in an earnest effort to get better at doing reading than out of intrinsic enjoyment of the experience.

The shared reading sessions helped Thomas to have patience, to re-read a line – and then he would generally correct himself. His little mistakes which could be cleared up in an instant soon appeared quite irrelevant. At the end of one session Thomas stated ‘I think that’s the most I’ve ever read in that time’.

I realised that the shared reading sessions were doing more than helping Thomas with comprehension when he was stuck. He seemed really surprised and pleased with himself that his difficulties in reading hadn’t got in the way. He had actually been able to enjoy the story instead. Over time, his lack of panic allowed him to find comfort and enjoyment through discussing his thoughts as he read.

In the end, of the four children I read with, Thomas actually enjoyed the ‘life’ in the book more than most. It came more naturally to him. When we were reading *Cosmic*, he picked out the sentence ‘Adulthood is wasted on adults’ and we talked a lot – sometimes jokingly, often seriously – about why he liked it and what it meant. Without these sessions, Thomas might not have realised how much he could get out of reading. He might have gone on thinking he was someone with “reading difficulties”.

Lana

Aged 14, Lana offered a different kind of challenge altogether. Intelligent and academically capable, she was resolute in her assertion that she didn’t enjoy reading: ‘I don’t like them books because they’re not realistic, I can’t relate to them.’ Lana hated English, and was under-achieving in it, but loved Maths, because it was analytical, complex and always had an answer. Lana considered reading merely as a means to an end – a way of gaining access to information. She had read a lot in preparing for her primary school SATs, but nothing since, and wouldn’t bother again until Year 9 SATS.

It was when the student ended one session with Roald Dahl’s poem, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, that Lana asked to read for herself, saying she ‘*liked the rhythm and the rhyme*’. Buoyed by this modest success, the student progressed through Roald Dahl’s poetry to *Mathilda* to Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

Lana always maintained that she couldn't connect with a book. But as we spent more time together, and talked together about what was happening in the story, Lana quickly became involved. When, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaire children are treated particularly terribly by their 'uncle', I felt powerfully that Lana was really feeling and living the children's adventures – she was imaginatively right inside the story. By the end of my time, she enthused about coming to the sessions and we both really looked forward to them.

Hitherto, Lana's experience of books had been 'incomplete'²⁹ – solely cognitive, that is. Shared reading's engagement of an imaginative and vital dimension enabled the kind of completion of the reading experience which conventional English lessons were unable to offer to Lucy.

Heather

Competent readers who were referred to the scheme because they showed no inclination toward reading were often a particular challenge. When asked whether she read in her spare time, Heather said she read on her mobile (which she checked for messages constantly in the first couple of sessions) and on the computer, but not in book form.³⁰ Heather not only 'detested' reading, and found English lessons 'boring and useless'. She was open in her extreme resistance to the shared reading sessions, and in her lack of respect for the whole programme. When the student gave her a selection of books to choose from, Heather indicated how little she cared by blindly choosing Cathy Cassidy's *Cherry Crush* without knowing anything about it.

As the weeks went on, however, Heather eventually began to open up; she began to read aloud in the fourth session, and from then on would read unprompted. When we re-capped on the previous week's session, Heather gave insightful and detailed accounts, often remembering details I would have neglected. The more we engaged with the protagonist [who is subject to harsh criticisms by her peers due to her motherless upbringing, and her Chinese working-class background] the more Heather responded to mature themes with informed and thoughtful comments particularly in relation to bullying, divorce and deprivation. Whilst Heather never indicated having direct experience of these, she was sincere in her admission of knowing financial hardship and her sense of how little it mattered 'whether someone has money or not'. The student intuited that part of Heather's 'couldn't care less' attitude had been defensive – a reaction to having too much to care about. What she found in the book was 'a vehicle, in places, characters, events, for experiencing feeling'.³¹ Not only did the one to one sessions allow

Heather to ‘prove to herself’, as the student put it, ‘that she had the resources to lead the reading and thinking that went on in the sessions’; they offered to Heather material which spoke to her personally in a way that school-appropriate material had not.

Students found that children who were naturally imaginative also sometimes needed help in seeing how books could ‘meet’ their inner worlds. Miya was very enthusiastic about the reading sessions and clearly had a liking for books, but her very openness and curiosity meant that she often became distracted, absorbed by people walking through the library or by objects that took her notice.

Reading *Angels Unlimited*, I noticed her absently staring and so I asked, to bring her attention back to protagonist who travels through time.: “*Miya, if I said to you, today you could go anywhere in time, where would you go?*” Instantly, Miya was engaged. She began talking about how she wanted to explore the future - 2203 – and she described it to me: “*There will be bright colours everywhere,*” she said. “*Like flying cars and different coloured dogs!*” As we both tried to visualise the journey, we considered how we would feel. While I said that I would feel scared, Miya became entranced by the different ‘swiggles’ and ‘multi-coloured spirals’ she imagined as we went through the ‘portal’, her eyes widening and her hand gestures quickening as she expressed her thoughts.

Such deep imaginative and intellectual engagement with narrative does not simply make children more motivated readers, but arguably is crucial for healthy development. ‘The facility of children to be entranced by images and metaphors – of their own or of others’ making – makes story a powerful mechanism for psychological growth and change.’³²

4.Emotional Support

In fact, as has already become clear, the potential students saw for reading to be an ‘important aid in coping with stress, life crises and growing up’³³ was one strong current of their testimony. Many found that their weekly reading session provided an important emotional continuity for the child, and that this emotional relationship was inseparable from any change in the child’s relationship to reading.

The students had been trained to give children opportunity to speak about themselves and their lives if they wished, as one way of creating the right atmosphere or mode – one of both joint attention and relaxation – for enjoying reading. Sometimes it was as though the children were simply unused to interpersonal activity and needed strong encouragement to make social-emotional connections and to be personally expressive. ‘When I first met Connor

he was shy and uninterested. He expressed strong interest in boxing and other violent activities. He would ask me why you would bother reading when you can just watch the television.’ ‘Megan was very difficult to get anything out of and would avoid expanding on any of her routine activities.’

Neither child was fluent in reading at first, struggling with two syllable words. An increase in fluency (in Connor’s case, a ‘dramatic’ improvement, as his English teacher put it) went hand in hand with a deepened inter-personal engagement and responsiveness. ‘When Megan and I were reading *The Suitcase Kid*, she wouldn’t stop talking, telling me about her relationship with her brother, her family, everything. In one session we were in fits of giggles over her brother calling her a, “sweaty squirrel” – now imagine that in a high pitched Scouse accent!’ In a passing comment after reading about the Dad in *Millions*, Connor said his Dad had recently moved into a different house to his mum. ‘Thereafter, Connor began to tell me all about his dad, sometimes in quite a joking way, especially when detailing his Dad’s poor cooking skills: “I don’t know what he’ll eat now.”’

‘Stories express feelings we recognise, and permit us to identify them, experience them in language.’³⁴ As one of the children put it when trying to explain why he preferred shared reading with the student to reading in the English class: “When you’re reading with the student, you go into the story, then you go into the characters’ lives, then you go into your life.” What was crucial in these shared reading relationships was the mutual contract of continuity – an implicit trust - between the child and the student and between both of them and the book.

Kyle, aged 12, ‘completely changed my perception of the reading for pleasure project’ said the student volunteer who read with him: he offered ‘a prime example of the kind of pupil that is continually in need of, and who will benefit most, from this sort of support’. This wasn’t just a problem of focus or enthusiasm for reading. ‘He had an absolute aversion to school and anything related to learning’:

I knew there was something deeper. When we first started the sessions, his baby sister had just been born and I think he was lacking attention. He said he came home to find the sofa covered in blood and no-one in the house. This is the sort of home life he was dealing with alone. He obviously had a lot going on in his head which meant he couldn’t concentrate for any prolonged period of time. He would lose interest after the first few minutes of reading and start to talk about his interests in cage-fighting, his home life, his fights at school. He was persistently agitated, his mind constantly flitting, second to second. We did manage to read Roald Dahl’s *The Twits*, but I didn’t feel I’d had, or perhaps ever would have, enough time with Kyle who I felt would need this kind of

support throughout his school existence. I was surprised because I really thought that he hadn't been enjoying himself right until the end, when he expressed disbelief and disappointment that our last session was looming. This was a realisation for me that perhaps some of my hard work had paid off.

This specific example alone offers a cogent argument for student involvement in the City of Readers initiative over the long-term.

5. Inclusion

Some students, as well as teachers, found that the Shared Reading programme was also particularly beneficial for students for whom English was an Additional Language (EAL).

Neha, in Year 10 (aged 14) had been a member of the school's own partnered reading scheme since Year 7. Her reading assessments had improved only slightly, however, despite the fact that Neha spoke relatively fluent English, and had no apparent difficulty with comprehension. Neha had emigrated to England four years before with her mother and siblings. A relationship with her father was never mentioned, and it had been assumed that some of the social-emotional issues Neha displayed – shyness and occasional acute anxiety - may have some relation to this, as well as to a sense of disassociation from her native culture.

It soon became noticeable that Neha was quite aware of her weaker reading ability, and expressed a strong desire to 'get better' with her literacy. She gave the impression that she did in fact love to read. She took full advantage of the school's scheme to provide students with books to take home. But she said she found many words difficult to pronounce and often felt 'dizzy' while reading continuously.

Neha's reading scores improved dramatically during her exposure to shared reading (see Chart 1, P21) and as her anxieties about her reading capability receded so her enjoyment of and enthusiasm for reading as a pleasurable activity was renewed. Her new appreciation of reading was manifest in one of the final sessions, which the student recorded:

Student: Do you read with your mum, dad or other family members now?

Neha: Yeah

Student: Who do you read with?

Neha: My little cousin. She's only six.

Student: Do you read to her?

Neha: Yeah I read to her and say can you read some of the bits and she just reads through them. She's only young - she can't read properly, but she tries.

Student: What gave you the idea to read to her?

Neha: I think it's like to get her better. Because if I can help myself I can help her too.

Neha had taken the experience of the shared reading project and brought it into other aspects of her life. The student describes this as 'one of the most successful outcomes of the project, because it displays how the act of shared reading does not simply improve reading aptitude, but can have a positive effect on the participant's life outside of the reading session'.

One teacher supplied this testimony from a pupil who had emigrated from Russia, in Year 10, which speaks eloquently for itself.

How My 'Reader' Sessions Helped Me.

For the past few terms, every Friday, I have been going to many reading sessions with a woman called Stephanie, who was helping me in the session and introducing me to some brilliant new stuff.

During my time in these sessions I have improved so much in my reading skills, as I began not very confident and uncomfortable with reading out loud, because I was afraid of getting something wrong and embarrassing myself. But with every session I have attended I started to notice I was gradually getting better with understanding words I did not know and becoming more confident, and comfortable with reading out loud.

During this time I have also been enjoying myself because Stephanie was very comfortable and encouraging around me. This is because she would start off just talking as a friend making me feel more relaxed so I won't feel embarrassed about speaking out loud. She has also helped me when I was stuck on a word or did not understand it. This helped me learn so many new things.

I think these 'Reader' sessions I have been going to are very encouraging and interesting; I have learnt so many new skills from them, for example, I think about it before I say the word. I will also use these new skills I have learned in the future.

6.Aspiration

One aspect of their role which the students treated with impressive and thorough seriousness and responsibility was the degree to which they offered a role model to the pupils with whom they read. For many of the pupils, further education hailed from a different world, not their own, as the students themselves recognised:

The project was not only successful in short-term reading support, but in widening awareness and the potential of further participation in education. Through learning with university students the pupils got an insight into student life.

Not only did we provide role models in reading, but we opened up their understanding of what university life is all about, and the options that are available to them in the future, presenting a broader outlook, for the long-term. Two of the boys I read with were particularly amazed that I was living in a different city away from home, to study; that I was living with all my friends and that opportunities such as these were available through education.

In the current climate of soaring tuition fees and with the price of education increasing, programmes like this are critical in promoting enjoyment of education and further preventing it from becoming a mere privilege of the wealthy. Education is the building block of life, and should be accessible to all.

One student told of Michael's aspirations to study performing arts. This ambition was a driving force, compelling him always to strive to achieve his optimum best at everything.

He would always attempt to differentiate voices and tones when reading. One of the most stunning experiences in the placement was seeing Michael struggling with some of the demanding words in Chris Priestley's *Uncle Montague*, and refusing to switch to an easier book when it was offered. 'I need to learn these big words one day, so I might as well learn them now.' This hunger for learning was something I had not anticipated, and I noticed Michael's constant and unwavering endeavour to improve his ability by never giving up on words. He was also constantly asking me to define words and would repeat the word and its meaning for himself, as if storing it in his memory for future reference.

Finally, parents too recognised, and gratefully acknowledged, a changed appetite for reading and learning in their children:

We were really happy and grateful you selected my son for one to one. It has really improved his confidence and he is asking to read at home now too. Thank you.

One great strength of the volunteering model in this context is the impossibility of separating the benefits to the child from those to the students, or from those to the teachers and parents to whom the children matter.

The Student

What were students looking for in volunteering?

Every student interested in the volunteering scheme was asked to complete a personal statement which described why they wished to become involved. It was very helpful to have an idea in advance of the training, of where students were ‘coming from’ – in terms of subject area, previous experience, and personal commitment. There was no prescription or pro forma. Students were encouraged to be as personal as they wished. Nor was this part of a selection procedure, since everyone who expressed a wish to take part had access to The Reader training.

These statements proved, unexpectedly, to be a rich record of what students seem to be seeking from volunteering at university.

‘Spreading a love of my subject’ or ‘inspiring a passion for books’ was the overwhelming priority for students of English Literature.

Reading is a gift that time has made me realise is indescribably precious and wonderful. I believe that everyone is entitled to this privilege. Being able to give a child the gift of literature will undoubtedly be one of the most rewarding opportunities this scheme provides.

I love books and always have done. I would love to be able to help another child to discover this pleasure. As Philip Pullman commented ‘If we all read aloud everyday, the world would be a better place’.

School is where I found and developed my love for reading, and it only feels right that I try and do the same for someone else.

For some, this desire to hand on the ‘gift’ of reading was impelled by first-hand experience of obstacles to enjoyment of books:

I am from a working class background and, though lucky enough to have always been encouraged to read, I fully understand that many young people are not able to access books at home, and that often a passion for reading that could have existed isn't nurtured.

At school, I found reading very boring until a few people sparked my passion for literature and influenced my decision to study English at university. They are also people I will hold dear and never forget. I would feel extremely proud to help someone find their passion for reading.

The placement encompasses everything I would have loved as a child - someone to steer me towards good books.

For others, there was a sense of urgency produced by the rapidly changing nature of childhood experience:

With two much younger siblings, I've noticed that their childhood differs from ours - they spend far more time captivated by computer games rather than books. It's vital for children to have a reading mentor of some kind.

'Giving back to the community' was a strong motivation across subject areas. Indeed, a lot of the students were already volunteer veterans, with a diverse range of experience: in primary schools, hospices, care homes, refugee/asylum seeker centres, animal shelters; with the Samaritans, with young people excluded from school or with children with special needs or severe learning difficulties; running theatre groups or sports coaching for disabled people, or teaching HIV/AIDS awareness in schools. The project fulfilled their keen desire to continue their work in the community.

Whilst I greatly enjoy my studies, I am also eager to be out in the world, beginning to apply the skills and knowledge my degree, and indeed experience of university as a whole, have equipped me with.

To participate in a scheme that believes reading helps to eradicate such problems as

social exclusion and disadvantaged families is a fantastic opportunity.

Helping others as a compassionate volunteer, enriching the lives of children and at the same time learning new things for myself, will be so rewarding.

Sometimes the motivation to ‘give’ was deeply heart-felt:

As an only child of two alcoholic parents, I know how it feels to be lonely and misunderstood – one of the “problem” children, whose domestic lives differ dramatically with those of their school mates. I have experienced the black abyss of youthful depression, where a child feels completely disjointed from society, solitary and isolated.

Clearly a strong motivating aspect – among the strongest – was not the issue of employability or ‘adding to the CV’ merely, but a commitment to the generosity of citizenship.

If you want to inspire or make a change or a difference, you have to act.

‘Preparing for life after university’ was another key impetus for participation. In a large number of cases, students saw volunteering in primary and secondary schools as the ideal apprenticeship for the teaching vocations upon which they were already decided:

I want to seize every opportunity I can to work with children in schools, but this project is particularly special because it combines relevant experience with the mission of encouraging child readers which I care about passionately.

For other students – from English as well as from Sociology, Psychology and Communications - the volunteer project gave valuable experience in relation to careers working with children as carers (social workers) or clinicians (psychologists). (See p. 9 below.) Virtually all students expected the volunteering experience to equip them with valuable social, communication and professional skills. For some – those considering publishing or arts administration, for example - the attraction was the prospect of working with books and people, while acquiring broader insights into the world of work.

But in all cases, students' recognition of what was to be gained instrumentally, in the way of transferable skills, was superseded by an impressive idealism:³⁵

It would be fantastic to really make a difference.

In so many ways, reading has helped me get where I am today. I feel a personal connection to the project's aims and would love to contribute my free time to a cause that is so close to my heart.

What did students get from the experience?

1. Personal development and rewards

All students felt that the personal value of the volunteer placement came from its being 'a collaborative journey with the child' in every sense and at every level:

As time progressed, so did the children and their reading, and simultaneously so did I in my awareness of the process of learning – especially the social and emotional aspects. It has been lovely to watch shy and reticent children blossom into avid readers.

The first few weeks were daunting and intense as I was aware of my inexperience. I felt my development from the first semester to the second was phenomenal in terms of my ability to interact with the children and enhance their enthusiasm.

It was a continual learning experience from day one, in encountering such a variety of personalities. By the end of the volunteer placement I felt I really knew how to understand the needs of individual pupils. It was a relief. I finally felt qualified for the role I was filling.

The emphasis in The Reader's training on trust, patience and perseverance – on listening and encouraging – was fundamental to the success of the placement and has really given me new confidence in my interpersonal skills and my ability to manage relationships.

This has been an incredibly challenging experience but that goes hand in hand with the rewards. The best moments were seeing a child really connect with a book for the first time.

Many students commented on how, in addition to learning how to engage *with* young people, they learned a great deal *from* them:

I gained a much deeper understanding of other values and beliefs. I think one really important aspect of the volunteering was working with people from different sections of society.

It creates connections. It made me feel involved with the Liverpool community.

I found that sharing literature with children from very different backgrounds to mine within my own native city was compelling. To hear about their lives and experiences was a privilege – I learned so much!

This is an experience that has opened my eyes and I have developed awareness and understanding that will benefit me for the rest of my life.

I strongly believe that this project is vital in bridging the gap between the university and the wider community.

2.Relation to Academic Study

English Literature students were fulsome in their appreciation of the opportunity to **communicate their passion for books:**

It was great to enjoy literature like this without thinking towards exams or essays but still feeling it wasn't selfish pleasure and was doing some good.

Although I have been with books and with reading, just like in my degree, it has been in an entirely different way - as a trigger for encouraging children to use their imaginations.

That's been the most rewarding thing – using my own love of literature. It's allowed me to enthuse children to come from a more authentic place in their response. It's a really big thing for me that reading shouldn't be 'taught'.

Many students also testified that the volunteering experience had **renewed or reconnected them with their own love of books:**

When I read to the child, I began to build a relationship with the text myself. My English degree has exposed me to some fantastic authors, but the emphasis is on reading them in an 'institutionalised' not a personal way.

I felt possibly the most important part of The Reader training was that it re-established my own passion for stories and poetry. I hadn't only begun my experience as a volunteer but *my* journey toward reading for pleasure.

As an English undergraduate, reading is something I do every day. Having spent so much time around books and reading over the last three years, it has been inspiring to see a totally different side to it – to approach reading less as grounds for academic work and more as a way of expressing yourself and forming bonds with others.

There was a strong sense at the same time of students **recognising the value of their subject more fully** by taking it out into the world. For English students, a sense of the relevance of their studies was sometimes specific:

Taking a children's literature module alongside my placement as a reading buddy really helped me, not only in extending the range of books I had to choose from, but in making me aware of what appeals to children's imaginative minds.

Other students were aware of the more implicit value of their long-term study of English:

I was drawing upon a different kind of knowledge from the strictly academic – the wide knowledge of literature I had gained experientially, not just measurably, as a student of the arts.

The sense of connection to subject knowledge went beyond English, however. One Psychology student got involved because she wanted to test in a practical way her belief that she had chosen this discipline because

my true passion and source of motivation in life is caring for others and being dedicated to working towards improving their wellbeing.

A Sociology student whose intention of becoming a social worker had been shaken by his experience as an intern with a social work agency, said that the experience had renewed his ambition and determination to work in a profession which addressed ‘the social disadvantages which hold people back’. He explained that his studies had taught him a lot about inequalities in education and that a sense of social justice had inspired him to volunteer:

It is troubling that so many children and young people under-achieve due to factors out of their own hands. This is an important reason for wanting to volunteer. If one-to-one reading with children can make a difference, then this is definitely something I wish to be part of.

3.Preparation for Life Beyond University

Some benefits were specific to intended career paths - teaching and working with children especially:

The school placement has given me a last motivational push before my PGCE begins in September – a belief in where I want to go and what I want to do. It’s also given me the drive to be a teacher who does not only care about grades, progress and success, but the social and emotional wellbeing of children.

I became aware not only of important governmental procedures in relation to safeguarding children, but realised the human importance of always being professional - reliable and punctual - as children are vulnerable and sensitive to change.

I saw at first-hand how structured the school environment is and how many priorities it has to manage, and just how difficult it is to fit in ‘extras’ like a reading for pleasure

programme, when schools are under pressure to raise literacy standards and pupil ‘performance’.

What I’ve learned is how subtle and precise a skill it is to keep children’s attention.

I’ve been privileged to observe how even the most disadvantaged and ‘book-poor’ children can enjoy reading and I will take this school experience into my own classroom as a teacher one day.

Many of the skills developed were recognised as being potentially generic and transferable – taking initiative, problem-solving, leadership - for being learned in relation to particular practical matters within the placement:

One of the biggest challenges I faced was persuading the school to let me stick to a reading for pleasure model. At first I was asked to listen to a whole class of children read for a few minutes each to monitor their progress – a long way from the hour-long reading for pleasure session for which I’d been trained. I had gently to remind the co-ordinating teacher that my role was not that of literacy assistant, but of reading buddy. Things got better after I’d raised this; the experience was frustrating but it gave me belief that I could deal with setbacks.

My ability to communicate with all age groups has massively improved. I’ve always been at ease with children and shy among adults. But strong relationship and communication with the teachers was essential here. I now have much stronger belief that people appreciate my contribution and value my comments. I’ve grown in my drive and readiness to take part.

Students had a strong sense that some of these learning opportunities were not available to them as part of their conventional degree study:

It’s surprised me how demanding the placement has been – I have definitely been out of my comfort zone at times. Once or twice I’ve gone from the school to give a presentation on a writer like Samuel Beckett in a tutorial and considered it a relative

break! - which is testament to the challenge of working with children and the world of work.

The responsibility I've been given has increased my self-confidence. Being able to 'lead' something has not been possible with any of my ordinary study or university activities.

I have enjoyed receiving constructive feedback. I've learnt that being shown where and how I might improve is not a sign of weakness but an encouragement to get better at what I'm doing.

One of the placement's constant demands was to be intuitive and always adapting to the needs of the moment. One of the most important things I've learned is the need to be flexible. Being in a work place was totally different to an academic environment as there was much less emphasis on taking time to think and much more on simply doing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence (qualitative and quantitative) points to the strong benefits of Shared Reading for all stakeholders, but particularly for the primary participants.

In relation to the pupils, the programme enhanced children's:

- motivation to read and their relationship to books;
- sense of educational opportunity or aspiration;
- social and emotional wellbeing;
- attitude to, and engagement with, learning;
- sense of inclusion.

In addition, the Shared Reading programme seemed to reach children's needs – educational and emotional – in ways that standard school activities were not always managing to do. One reason the programme has been so successful, perhaps, is that it takes place within a school and yet is not school-like. It enriches children's educational opportunity and motivation, that is, by offering something beyond conventional teaching fare or business as usual.

The students reported:

- valuing their studies more highly via the opportunity to apply them in the real world;
- a strong sense of fulfilling engagement with – and giving something back to – the wider local community;
- a sense of personal reward and development which other aspects of their degree work did not deliver in the same way;
- a stronger preparedness for the world of work.

The consensus among stakeholders (students, universities, employers) is that ‘employability’ requires social sensitivity, communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to tolerate uncertainty and to work in innovative ways.³⁶ Crucially, many of these attributes, student testimony suggests, were delivered intrinsically by the experience of Shared Reading in schools.

One crucial aspect of student involvement in Shared Reading mirrors the benefit to the children with whom they read: the experience, that is to say, complemented and supported their formal studies precisely by providing opportunities which conventional study alone excluded.

It is notable how often students refer to the training they received from The Reader and/or the follow-up support and encouragement which was available to them throughout the placement. The ability to turn to The Reader for advice on book choice or on approaching shared reading with reluctant children was strongly valued by participating students. At the same time, aspects of the students’ testimony might also prove valuable to The Reader as a guide to future student training. For example:

- the importance of being open to a range of possible book choices (beyond the tried and tested);
- the kinds of factors that might influence those choices (whether children are struggling readers or disaffected ones, whether they are EAL pupils or have experienced social isolation at school);
- students’ gratitude for personal feedback on their practice during the placement and how this might be built into the training programme.

The Future of Student Volunteering with The Reader

The City of Readers programme is set to continue and will be extending its programmes of pairing older ‘reading buddies’ with younger children. The Reader also plans to appoint a Reader in Residence at the new Alder Hey Children’s Hospital.

The findings of this report strongly recommend:

- a continued programme of Reader training for University of Liverpool student volunteers as part of the Mayoral City of Readers initiative;
- further expansion of City of Readers training and placement opportunities across disciplines and departments within the university;
- consultation with The Reader concerning possible training and placements for students – in a volunteering capacity or as part of accredited modules - in relation to other programmes or initiatives delivered by The Reader.

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