



leeds metropolitan university

Research Briefing

Evaluation of Reading Matters Executive Summary

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Introduction & Background to the Research

Reading Matters is a charitable organisation committed to improving the life chances of all children by improving reading skills. It offers an intervention programme of one-to-one support for pupils in the 11-16 age group who are found to be under-achieving in literacy. While the programme is organised around activities that directly focus on reading, the trained volunteers also focus upon issues such as motivation, confidence and attitude to reading, as a means to support pupils throughout their school careers.

Starting in October 2004, a research team from the Education wing of the Carnegie Faculty of Sport & Education at Leeds Metropolitan University has undertaken a three-year evaluation to assess the short-term and long-term benefits of pupils' involvement with Reading Matters. This research briefing provides an executive summary of the main findings of the three-year study. We document how Reading Matters provides a valuable experience for pupils, practitioners and reading

volunteers alike. Moreover, we highlight the importance of the one-to-one interactions that support learning and that constitute the pedagogical heart of the Reading Matters approach.

Methodology

A comprehensive account of the overall methodology can be found in the final report. Thus, it is not our intention to replicate this detail other than in providing the following summary.

The study adopted a mixed methodological approach, implementing a combination of qualitative data collection methods, along with the use of standardised pre- and post-intervention reading tests for word recognition and comprehension (NFER Group Reading Test II). In year one, all those selected pupils and their allocated volunteers supported through Reading Matters took part in a one-to-one, in-depth semi-structured interview. This qualitative approach has been able to capture much of the added-value of the Reading Matters programme, beyond simple increases in technical reading skills.

In years two and three the study used a combination of follow-up reading tests, one-to-one and group interviews with pupils from year one, and survey work that looked at reading behaviour more generally. Additionally, the pupils' teachers were invited to engage in in-depth semi-structured interviews in these years, enabling the researchers to triangulate data to more holistically evaluate the Reading Matters approach.

Ethical Considerations:

All participants were volunteers and both schools and individuals were given information about the study's focus and the procedures involved, and their participant rights, including our procedures for ensuring confidentiality, and their rights to withdraw without consequence. Data was managed in accordance with Data Protection Act 1998 and with reference to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association.

A Summary of Main Findings

(1) Reading Matters is utilised by teachers as a means of supporting pupils' learning more generally. Whilst the intervention, at first glance, concentrates on literacy skills, teachers perceive its wider benefits to be more about raising confidence and self-esteem, and improving an individual's engagement in the mainstream classroom. Such perceptions govern the recruitment decisions that professionals make. Consideration of pupil biographies, through consultation with practitioners suggests that schools do not make recruitment decisions based upon professional judgements about certain pupils being 'poor readers'. More often, these decisions to include a young person in Reading Matters are based upon considerations of their classroom experiences, relations with peers, perceived lack of confidence and self-esteem.

(2) Reading Matters, over the 10-week period of its intervention enables pupils to gain technical skills associated with reading. Such increases in their ability to decipher and understand texts is indicated by both reading test scores, but more authoritatively through the reporting from class teachers, pupils and the reading volunteers. In contributing to technical skills development, it must then be recognised that school practitioners utilise Reading Matters to complement other classroom-based strategies that they use to support pupils' literacy. In this sense, Reading Matters stands amongst a wider programme of pedagogical approaches and makes a valuable, additional contribution. Seeing Reading Matters used by teachers alongside the pedagogies of the classroom further supports the research evidence that effective literacy development draws from a range of approaches, rather than a narrowly-defined 'one size fits all'.

(3) There is some evidence to suggest that improvements at a skills level are particularly beneficial to those pupils whose first language is one other than English. Such issues require further research, as the current research is unable to take full account of other interventions and means of support that are available either within the school, or outside in the community.

(4) Qualitative data, triangulated across a range of active agents (practitioners, pupils, volunteers) suggests that **Reading Matters makes significant contributions to pupils' confidence and self-esteem, and thus their interactions in the classroom with peers and staff.**

(5) As its impact is wider than supporting reading, volunteers can be seen to operate more

as learning mentors than as adults that support the development of reading skills. As the constituency of the intervention groups is more accurately related to issues of self-esteem and disaffection, the description of volunteers as learning mentors is more accurate.

(6) The organisation of the Reading Matters approach around one-to-one learning support is the key factor in its success. This approach is considered important and additive by practitioners. In teachers' assessments of its benefits, it is in its provision of this close mentoring that Reading Matters is able to positively contribute to the collective work that they do in the classroom.

(7) Further benefits of Reading Matters lie in those opportunities it gives young people to engage in learning through alternative stimulæ and with a level of choice. Exposure to reading other than the type experienced in the formal classroom seems to be a key quality of the intervention that contributes to making a difference to these disaffected learners.

(8) Within the first year of the intervention, there is evidence that pupils see clear personal benefits of the Reading Matters support, although a few experience some level of embarrassment at being identified as needing further support. Interestingly, many pupils were not wholly aware of the reasons why they were selected for additional support as they perceived the intervention to be about reading skills development, and did not consider themselves as being a poor reader.

(9) There is evidence to suggest that those pupils that attend Reading Matters do maintain those

gains made in the year of attending the intervention. In this sense, **Reading Matters may operate to provide an acceleration of the learning during the intervention that exposes them to alternative curricula and stimulæ.** Used in addition to a range of pedagogies within the classroom, it contributes to pupils' maintenance of progress.

(10) Of significant concern throughout the three years of the research is the degree to which young people separated 'school reading' from other ways in which they engaged with a broader range of material. Pupils made clear distinctions between their reading experiences at school (and outside of Reading Matters) and their wider reading behaviour. This raises serious concerns about how, when looking at school reading behaviours such pupils can seem disaffected and demotivated readers, but can be seen to have richer reading biographies once we go beyond this one component in their engagement with 'text'.

(11) Reading Matters staff, particularly volunteers, were significantly praised by school practitioners and their pupils. Reference to their professionalism and quality in supporting learning was clearly evident throughout the three years of the study. Perhaps significantly, young people and practitioners conveyed how volunteers established a non-threatening, supportive and non-judgemental environment that was wholly conducive to learning. Important in the considerations of a professional approach to the support of learning is the preparedness of volunteers to do such work.

(12) By providing a programme of structured training, Reading Matters' support for their

volunteers' learning sets out a positive approach from which they can build the pedagogies that they utilise in working with children and young people.

Reflecting on the research evidence relating to the support of reading in particular, in preparing volunteers, it is important that there is a dialogic relationship between training, provision and research whereby pedagogical awareness is further developed and refreshed.

Final Words – Making a difference

These summary findings provide us with a picture of Reading Matters that is very positive in its support of learning through one-to-one mentoring. Finally in our considerations it is important to emphasise what the research considers to be the two factors that contribute to its success.

Firstly, throughout the study we have suggested that many, if not the majority of pupils recruited to Reading Matters are not disaffected readers, but they are discouraged by the reading that they associate with school, the classroom. Reading Matters is able offset this in ways in which its volunteers expose pupils to a wider range of reading. Thus it broadens their conception of what constitutes reading and in doing so, perhaps brings closer together their own 'lifeworlds' of reading (and learning) and those provided in school by reading volunteers.

The second part of our considered explanation of why Reading Matters is able to impact positively, particularly in terms of pupils' confidence and self-esteem, centres on the way in which the close one-to-one mentoring work of the volunteers is complimentary and additive to the whole class work of the teachers. Clearly, in the professional considerations of practitioners, the close, in-depth learning mentoring that

characterises the work of volunteers is something that is wholly necessary in meeting the needs of particular pupils. At the same time, pedagogies that are better at supporting these affective aspects of learning, such as one-to-one mentoring, are difficult to enact within the mainstream classroom in ways that are inclusive of all pupils.

That Reading Matters is able to provide such close support is something of which they should be proud. It is clearly this aspect of their work that makes important differences to the learning experiences of those pupils they work with. This approach provides the pedagogical heart of Reading Matters and it is clear from the responses of practitioners, pupils and volunteers that its close mentoring is key to understanding the contributions it makes to building confidence and self-esteem. Once again we would emphasise the sense of this indeed being a 'contribution'. The partnership between Reading Matters and its schools is one that involves significant professional awareness and collaborative working.

Further Information

For further information about Reading Matters please contact Andrea Smart at:

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