Final Project Report

Reading Rooms: Fostering constructive & inclusive dialogue between communities

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1. Project Summary / Introduction

This inter-disciplinary project sought to investigate and advance the potential of shared reading groups to promote purposeful and meaningful dialogue among Northern Ireland interface communities. Trinity College Dublin partnered with Verbal, a voluntary organisation with nearly 30 years' experience working to improve cross-community relations in Northern Ireland. The project aimed to design a new framework and identify suitable literary texts for cross-community groups; conduct a pilot shared reading group; seek feedback from participants on group processes in relation to health and well-being, literary texts, and shared futures; and present findings in a report.

2. Objectives of the Project

The objectives of the *Reading Rooms* project were as follows:

- To contribute to the research of the Shared Island unit through investigating the potential of community-based shared reading programmes to foster constructive dialogue in interface communities.

- To build on existing research in bibliotherapy and shared reading groups, creating a robust methodology for text selection as well as a model for shared reading groups that can be applied in other settings/contexts.

- To enhance and expand the delivery of Verbal's cross-community dialogue model to maximise the positive outcomes for participants and communities.

- To use participatory action research to elevate the voices of those from marginalised communities

3. Project Background & Theoretical Basis

This project is a collaboration between academics at Trinity College Dublin and the Derry/Londonderry-based reading charity Verbal. Verbal's work is premised upon the significant benefits of shared reading for a variety of groups. Verbal work with children and young people, including vulnerable young people who are in the care system, children with learning difficulties as well as young adults in the criminal justice system. Verbal also runs sessions with older adults including those in and out of care settings and individuals at risk of isolation. The staff at Verbal includes experts in psychology, literature, software design, creative digital media, art and community work. They design storytelling, literature and language arts programmes to address the specific needs of the programme participants. The team at Verbal have seen first-hand the significant benefits of shared reading for their different cohorts, and their methods (outlined below) are shaped by their many years of experience in running shared reading groups. The benefits which the Verbal team has tracked for participants echo the existing literature on shared reading which has highlighted the various social, emotional, and psychological benefits of such groups.

Literature, particularly that ever-so-slippery concept of 'high quality', 'serious' or 'classic' literature, has long been viewed as educationally, and even morally advantageous. Recent studies have sought to quantify the impacts of reading, to explore the comparative benefits of reading non-fiction

or self-help texts versus literary fiction, and to interrogate the specific benefits of reading, including shared reading, for different cohorts. *Reading Rooms* builds upon this existing research, seeking to interrogate the potential of shared reading to promote constructive dialogue in interface communities in Northern Ireland.

Recent research (cf. Billington, 2012; Billington, Longden & Robinson 2016; Longden et al 2016) has argued that reading groups present significant potential because they are a low-cost, low-risk intervention. Reading groups can draw upon existing community structures such as libraries or health centres, and they can be easily replicated when a model is found to be successful. Volunteers can, and do, play key roles in many reading group projects, providing further opportunities for community engagement and ownership as well as helping to ensure the long-term sustainability of such interventions. This study draws on reader response theory, specifically studies of empathy and literature, and research into the potential impacts of shared reading.

Shared Reading

A significant portion of existing research on bibliotherapy involves the reading of self-help texts. These studies often describe specific medical benefits of reading such as the ability of guided self-help reading to help reduce the symptoms of depression and other mental health issues (cf. Anderson et. al. 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2003; Gualano et. al. 2017). Since the 1990s there has also been research focused on the reading of literary fiction in particular and the specific benefits of this literature for readers. This has varied from assessment of the pedagogic value of shared reading for young children (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Flack, Field & Horst, 2018) to the value of shared reading for adults living with dementia (Longden et al 2016), and analyses of literature-based prison reading groups (Billington, 2012; Billington, Longden & Robinson 2016). A large number of recent studies have focused on the health benefits of shared reading programmes (Baker, 2006; Billington et al., 2016; Billington, Longden and Robinson, 2016; Longden et al., 2016). Other researchers have sought to explore the social, communal, and individual benefits of shared reading beyond a medicalised context. Adam Hansen and Tony Prince (2019) sought to measure the impact of running Shakespeare reading groups in community settings in Newcastle and Sheffield. They found that participants reported improved wellbeing and in particular benefitted from being part of a group. They also found that members most prized the opportunity to encounter other views, as well as learning new things (p.15). The reading group setting was experienced by these participants as a low-pressure environment in which they could meet new people, learn new things, and engage in lively discussion.

Longden et al. (2015), describe shared reading as 'a practical intervention that offers utility in diverse settings, including prisons, adults experiencing social disadvantage (eg, vulnerably housed, recovering from substance dependence) and patients living with depression, dementia, chronic pain and neurological conditions' (p.113). The benefits listed by Longden and her collaborators include enhanced relaxation, calmness, concentration, improved quality of life, increased confidence and self-esteem, feelings of mutuality, shared community, common purpose, and opportunity for structure and continuity for individuals who might lack this in their lives outside the sessions, as well as a place to reflect on personal experience (p.113). These benefits, in particular the sense of shared community, common purpose and opportunities for reflection, have clear relevance to the aims and objectives of the *Reading Rooms* project.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of many shared reading programmes is that the groups involve adults reading aloud in regular sessions in comparison to a standard book club format in which reading is completed individually followed by group discussion. Longden et al (2015) argue for the benefits of shared reading concluding that participants 'discovered meaning; transcended norms or habits; attained higher meta-levels of awareness; employed enhanced processes of identification, imagination and reappraisal; or were roused into the recovery/discovery of previous experience in new forms' (p.119).

This belief in the specific value of shared reading/reading aloud also underpins Verbal's approach in their reading rooms programme. Verbal focus on a shared reading approach, with groups coming together to listen to a story read aloud by the session facilitator. The facilitator stops at set intervals to ask questions which are guided by the programme aims. Participants are given copies of the set texts so that they can read along, or re-read parts at their own discretion. This approach has a number of practical advantages over formats wherein participants are asked to read in advance and then congregate for sessions which are more akin to a traditional book group where readers share impressions and discuss the text, characters and plot of the selected text. These practical advantages include reducing pressure on participants who may have caring, work, or educational commitments that would prevent them from completing reading outside the sessions, as well as allowing the facilitator to stop at various points to ensure that the group are happy that they have understood the set text and to answer any questions that might arise. The participants are also given copies of texts free of charge to reduce barriers to engagement and photocopies act as "comforters" at the start of the session for new participants.

However, while the practical advantages of the shared reading method are clear, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting this method over and above the more traditional book group format. Limitations of time and a focus on other elements (specifically intra-textual elements which may shape the impact of a text on group discussion), meant that this shared reading format was not an element interrogated in detail in this project. Further research is required and could seek to assess the relative benefits or drawbacks of each format, and whether specific formats work more effectively for different cohorts. For example, children and young adults may prefer to read in their own time, and this reading could be integrated into family interactions. In their 2018 article Hall, Levy and Preece advocate for shared reading as a family practice which is beneficial for child development and familial bonding. In contrast, reading groups for older adults with dementia may benefit from a shared reading approach where pressure to complete reading beyond the session and report back on that reading is omitted in favour of a shared experience amongst the group. Additional research which systematically compared the impact of each reading group method/format would add considerably to the existing literature and could provide an empirical basis for reading group-based interventions with various cohorts.

As a result of the group nature of shared reading there are other factors which potentially impact the experience of participants, and which must be acknowledged. These include the role of the facilitator, the specific setting, the composition of the group and the types of literature selected. Constraints of this project mean that we are not able to explore all of the potential influencing factors which may impact on the kinds of discussion prompted by the chosen literature, however the project team are seeking to explore specific elements. This project is primarily interested in interrogating the specific elements or characteristics of the chosen literature which contribute to fostering productive dialogue amongst participants. The project explores the role of the facilitator primarily through testing

different formats for discussion, using Verbal's established method which includes 'stops' during the reading for discussion, which is contrasted with a format in which the text is read in its entirety followed by guided discussion led by the facilitator. Elements not examined here such as the impact of the physical environment/setting and reading format (e.g. shared reading v's individual reading with shared discussion) present rich potential for further research.

Literature and Empathy

A considerable and growing body of literature has sought to demonstrate the connection between reading literature and the development of empathy. Studies such as Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) have specific relevance for this project. In their article 'Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection: A Theoretical-Empirical Framework' Koopman and Hakemulder argued that literature, in particular narrative texts, encourage readers to take on the perspective of the characters represented, thereby allowing them to temporarily view events outside their own perspective and encouraging empathy development.

Research on the specific qualities of the literature which might prove most effective, either in eliciting an empathic response or in the various goals assigned to shared reading projects, such as improving wellbeing or social cohesion, is more limited. Early studies are often vague on text selection, relying on the individual researcher or reading group facilitators/coordinators to select texts based on a subjective and uninterrogated measure. In Billington et al's (2010) study the selection criteria for texts is that they form part of what is ambiguously described as 'serious "classic" literature'. An overview of the texts selected for the project shows authors including William Shakespeare, William Stafford, Rupert Brooke, Wendell Berry, W.B. Yeats, Robert Graves and Raymond Carver and Charles Dickens. There are some female authors including Carol Ann Duffy but generally the corpus is drawn from overwhelmingly male authors. This is a potential drawback of focusing on "classic" literature, that the implicit biases of the canon – which is overwhelmingly male, white, and European/North American – are inadvertently replicated.

Recent research (c.f. Kidd and Castano 2013; Kidd and Castano 2019, Koopman 2016) have sought to interrogate various different literary forms and types, often seeking to differentiate 'literary fiction' from 'popular fiction' and highlight the superior benefits of the former. Kidd and Castano (2013) conclude that literary fiction evokes an empathic response over and above that provoked by what they describe as 'popular literature'. In a follow-up study Kidd and Castano (2019) note that 'two experiments yielded strong evidence that characters in literary fiction are perceived as less clear and stereotypical than those in popular fiction', concluding that 'researchers interested in how fiction influences social cognition may find it useful to further explore how the methods of characterization in literary and popular fiction evoke different sociocognitive processes' (p.529). Silke and Brady in attempting to differentiate between these two categories argue that 'literary fiction is a type of writing that pays more attention to character and theme than a central plot [...] Typically, these texts are more complex in narrative style and literary technique and feature higher levels of ambiguity and complexity in characterisation. Through these techniques, reading becomes an exercise in theory of mind' (p.3). Yet, this seems deeply problematic given the highly subjective nature of the category of 'popular literature' and the fact that many texts which have fallen into this category at time of publication, such as Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca,* become seen as 'literary fiction' simply through the passage of time.

Indeed, *Rebecca* is cited as an example of 'serious' literature in Billington's 2010 study without any reference to the work's place in the canon of popular literature.

Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) go further in attempting to differentiate the textual qualities which might increase the potential of a text to provoke an empathic response. They focus on what they call 'fictionality', 'narrativity' and 'stillness'. Koopman and Hakemulder argue that 'narrativity can result in a broadening of readers' consciousness, in particular so that it encompasses fellow human beings. Fictionality might stimulate readers to consider the narrative they read as a thought experiment, creating distance between them and the events, allowing them to experiment more freely with taking the position of a character different from themselves, also in moral respects. Literary features, like gaps and ambiguous characterization, may stimulate readers to make more mental inferences, thus training their theory of mind. (p.79)

In order to attempt to differentiate the importance of the various qualities which they identify in literature they propose a multi-factor model of literary reading which 'contains (our simplified versions of) two theoretical positions within the field of reader response studies on underlying processes that lead to empathy and reflection: the idea of reading literature as a form of role-taking proposed by Oatley (e. g., 1994; 1999) and the idea of defamiliarization through deviating textual and narrative features proposed by Miall and Kuiken (1994; 1999)' (p.80). To this they add the concept of 'stillness' which they propose as 'an empty space or time that is created as a result of reading processes: the slowing down of readers' perceptions of the fictional world, caused by defamiliarization' (p.80). These studies have helped inform Verbal's model including the use of stops to allow for reflection and discussion.

While critics like Koopman and Hakemulder, Nusbaum, Mar and Oatley and others are looking at individual reading practices, the benefit of shared reading is that it involves an extratextual element in combination with the experience of reading fiction. The participants encounter the texts in a group setting and then navigate their experience of the text as a group, gaining insight not only into the world of the characters, but also into the perspectives of their peers in the shared reading process through the discursive portions of shared reading sessions. Discussion and dialogue are foregrounded in the Verbal model (see additional information below) with at least half of the hour-long session dedicated to discussion of the set text(s). As such participants not only experience the advantages of reading the literary text, and all of the potential benefits thereof which have been described above, including helping to enhance empathic response, increased self-reflection, and improved theory of mind, they also experience all of the social, emotional and psychological benefits of group reading. This project also brings together members of interface communities who are often positioned in opposition to one another, and who may navigate largely segregated arenas such as education and housing. The value of such intergroup contact has been demonstrated in studies by researchers such as Miles Hewstone and Joanne Hughes (2015).

However, while Koopman and Hakemulder seek to interrogate and identify specific elements in texts which might be most likely to elicit an empathic response, they too lean on an exclusive distinction of literature which would separate 'literary' texts from essentially non-literary texts. Due to the deeply subjective nature of these kinds of distinctions and the perhaps arbitrary nature of any categorisation of a text as 'literary' or non-literary, or literary v's popular, this project does not utilise these categories and instead seeks to identify structures, genres and themes which are most effective

at provoking constructive dialogue within the reading sessions. Like the studies described above, however, we are specifically looking at meaningful dialogue, in particular cross-community identification and empathetic response. This project sought to explore how elements such as theme or form impact on participants ability to engage in the kind of role-taking and empathetic imagining that might most effectively provoke an empathic response. This was aimed at encouraging participants in the reading groups to engage with other members of the group in meaningful dialogue, and to reconsider previously held views or positions as a result of both the experience of empathising with characters from different worldviews in the literature, and from sharing this experience with the diverse members of the reading groups themselves.

This project sought to interrogate questions of content and text type, focusing on the shared reading of interface communities in Northern Ireland. The project focused on the structural, thematic, and formal qualities of literature, seeking to assess which literary forms (such as short story, flash fiction or poetry) or genres are most effective at sparking discussion across the four cohorts involved in this study. The project also explored themes and narrative structure of the texts to understand if these elements play a key role in encouraging engagement. Further, the study sought to go beyond the text itself and to explore the role of the facilitator and the structure of the shared reading session might impact upon participant experience. An important element in study design has been the model currently employed by Verbal which the project team has sought to interrogate and which the intervention will test.

4. Reading Rooms Methodology and Design

Reading Rooms draws on the wealth of experience and expertise of the Verbal team and utilises many of the existing formats which have been developed by Verbal through rigorous testing as well as collaboration with academics in the University of Ulster. As described above, the Verbal model is based on shared reading/reading aloud. Sessions are c.1hr in duration. They are led by one of Verbal's trained facilitators. Approximately half of the session involves the facilitator reading the chosen text aloud. For the most part Verbal works with short stories, selected by members of staff or consultants for their individual programmes. As part of text selection, the staff member will identify suitable spaces for the facilitator to pause and intervene with discussion questions, aiming to encourage group discussion and to ensure that all members of the group have been able to follow the set text. The specific stories selected, and the questions asked, will be based on the individual programme and participant cohort.

There are four key models or documents created by Verbal which have helped to shape project design and methodology. These are:

1) Cross Community Area Network Programme
2) CCAN Evaluation Plan
3) Narrative Arc and Story Map
4) Story Quality Selection Sheet

1. Cross Community Area Network Programme.

The CCAN programme was set up by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and aims to increase positive relations across communities in Northern Ireland, and 'form bonds that are characterized by respect, where cultural diversity is celebrated and people can live, learn, and socialize together' (Morning, 'Connection Through Empathy', p.4). Six CCANs were established in the greater Belfast area. As part of the programme Verbal have developed a Connection Through Empathy curriculum designed to increase cross-community understanding, cohesion and reconciliation. There are nine core elements which Verbal have integrated throughout the CCAN curriculum. These are: 1) Intergroup Contact; 2) Humanisation of the Outgroup; 3) Compassion Training; 4) Entitativity Reduction – the tendency to perceive the outgroup as homogenous and separate'; 5) Modification of Salient Group Memberships – fostering inclusiveness; 6) Identification of common ground; 7) Empathy expression; 8) Trust building; and 9) Empathic Distress Management – avoiding overwhelming participants through providing a balance of emotionally heavy topics with moments of brevity and enjoyment.

2. CCAN Evaluation Plan

This document outlines the multi-stage empathy audit designed by Verbal to assess the psychological impact of the Cross Community Area Network programme.

3. Narrative Arc and Story-mapping

This document focuses on analysing individual texts (generally in the case of Verbal these are all short stories). The story is broken down into different sections: Exposition; Inciting incident/obstacle to overcome; Climax; Falling Action; Resolution. Stops or question breaks are then inserted after the end of each section, with questions designed to instigate group discussion and facilitators provided with suggested questions or guidance from annotators who aim to shape the discussion around the theme or focus of the reading groups. The literature and the psychology questions are linked together in terms of this narrative arc, which provides a psychology case-study journey for the psychology questions developed from the story: the story's exposition is used for participants to carry out a situational analysis; the rising action is used for problem identification; the climax is used to consider potential impacts of the characters' actions; the falling action provides participants with the opportunity to consider the consequences of behaviours and alternatives; and the resolution provides an opportunity for reflection on lessons learned. This could be community dialogue as in the case of the current programme, or self-esteem and wellbeing for groups with young adults.

4. Story Quality Score Sheet

This document again focuses on textual analysis. Specific areas analysed include: length; language; potential triggers; and audience. The analysis also looks at Immersion/Realism focusing on: narrative; character relatability; and setting. Finally the assessment examines engagement, looking at: opening (is it engaging and accessible?); narrative; and plot; character; language. The SQSS document also looks at Programme Coherence, including analysing the narrative resolution, potential themes for conversation (specifying a number of themes in line with the individual programme).

Drawing on the literature review conducted for this project in combination with the documents provided by Verbal outlining their current model the team have designed a 12-week shared reading intervention. Four groups were recruited by Verbal to participate in the programme. These groups are:

- Glenbank (CCAN) - 8 participants (all female)
- Black Mountain Women's Group - 11 participants (all female)
- Online Zoom group (CCAN) - 6 participants (all female)
- Simon Community - 3 participants (all male)

All groups are facilitated by trained Verbal facilitators. While the Verbal model is the foundation upon which the intervention is based, as described above, the Trinity team has sought to reshape the 12-week programme and the analysis of this programme so as to test and interrogate specific elements of the Verbal models. Having conducted a literature review and studied Verbal's previous documents and reports (with a particular focus on Empathy Curriculum, StoryMapping, and SQSS), the TCD team put in place a methodology to build on and explore some of the existing approaches, all the time informed by the key principles, goals, and aims of this project.

Text Selection Criteria

The following guiding principles for text selection were identified:

- Texts should contain 'universal' themes that have the potential to encourage empathy and generate discussion.
- A range of literary forms should be included. The 12-week programme includes short stories, flash fiction and poetry.
- A diversity of texts should be included, aiming to create as broad appeal as possible.
  - Efforts have also been made to ensure a range of diversity in terms of authorship, so that group members are provided with differing perspectives of these 'universal' themes.
  - Diversity is also included in relation to genre, with texts including fantasy, realism, magic realism, autobiographical narratives, historical fiction among others.
  - Text selection should be informed by a wide range of contributors to help ensure a diversity of texts. The team have achieved this in part by recruiting an advisory panel of experts in English Literature from the UK and Ireland.
- To maximise impact ideally the texts selected for a specific shared reading programme should be tailored to the aims of that programme. To tailor the texts to the participants of *Reading Rooms,* the team drew on the CCAN programme already developed by Verbal. Specific themes were identified in this programme including: childhood experience; personal identity; intergenerational relationships; familial relationship, communication, isolation; fear/desire, and autonomy and choosing paths. Additional themes related to shared identity and dealing with people who are different were also noted – place, family, nationality, class; community cohesion/conflict; social relationships; independence/thinking for yourself; Shame/Guilt; kindness; thinking about the future; and the shared environment. These themes were identified as a useful starting point for selecting suitable texts for use in this Reading Rooms programme.

As described above, this project sought to explore and test some of Verbal's existing methodology. One area which was identified as suitable for interrogation in this short project is the narrative arc

identified in the SQSS document. The team wished to test whether this conventional narrative arc is in fact more effective in stimulating discussion or whether less structured narratives might provide equal opportunities for discussion for participants. The project also sought to analyse group members' responses to Verbal's discussion format. As described above in standard Verbal sessions there are 5 stops inserted in the story, at which times the facilitator pauses to introduce questions/prompt discussion amongst the group. In the 12-week *Reading Rooms* programme, facilitators tried different approaches to questions/discussions: 1) Pause on five occasions while reading the story; 2) read story in its entirety and then begin questions and discussions; 3) for weeks that feature multiple texts, pause and discuss after having read each of the short texts. At the end of the programme, reading group members were asked about their preferred question/discussion format. Feedback was sought from both facilitators and participants to understand how these alternative reading structures might impact the discussions and experience of the literary material. See Appendix 1 'Reading Rooms Text Delivery Table' for a full breakdown of which texts were read with or without stops.

Advisory Panel

As part of the methodology, the project team introduced an advisory panel consisting of experts in English Literature from across the faculty at Trinity College Dublin and from the University of Roehampton, as well as colleagues from Dublin City University and University College Dublin. The panel consists of 13 specialists with varying expertise in English literature (see full list of panel members above under 'Acknowledgements') who were invited to contribute towards text selection (to which the project team have also contributed).

The *Reading Rooms* advisory panel was asked to consider the guiding principles outlined above. In introductory materials, the advisory panel was provided with background information on the project and its aims, as well as on Verbal's work, and the specific reading groups involved. In particular, we were guided by 'universal themes', the principles outlined in the Empathy Curriculum and the idea of finding 'common ground'. There are many ways to understanding 'common ground' – a panel allows for a range of interpretations. We asked members of the advisory panel to suggest texts that could be read aloud in 30 mins (max) and that might be used to generate a discussion with the potential of fostering empathy and understanding.

In their contributions, the panel were asked to identify suitable texts, to state reasons for this selection, and to answer the following questions:

- Is this text accessible? Is it suitable for those who may be new to literature as well as those who are seasoned readers/listeners?
- Does it engage with universal themes?
- Is it a humorous text? [We sought to avoid a long list of 'heavy' texts]
- Does the text engage with themes of peace/conflict? [This could be on any level, personal, national, international – not necessarily related to NI]
- Do you think any aspect of the author's background might be relevant to the discussions?

Through this process we received a wide range of text suggestions with the additional supporting information about the reasoning behind these selections and information on form, author, and themes. Based on this long-list and following detailed discussions we created a suggested range of texts for the 12-week programme. There is a focus on universality in all the texts.

Interestingly, many of the experts thought that stories directly engaging with Northern Ireland would be deemed appropriate for inclusion in this programme. However, following consultation with Verbal, and in line with research which advocates for texts that force the reader to think beyond their own experience, it was decided to limit the number of texts with Northern-Irish specific content, with the rest of the texts touching on relevant themes but outside of a Northern-Irish setting/context. In the end, we have included two texts by Northern Irish writers: Brian Friel – a story about boyhood in rural Tyrone – and Wendy Erskine – a story about a working-class Protestant community. Participant responses to these stories and a comparison of these responses to those stories not set in a Northern-Irish context could help shape future reading-based interventions in Northern Ireland.

Range of forms and Genre

The forms of text included in the 12-week programme include poetry, short stories and flash fiction. In the post-sessions analysis and, in particular, in the focus groups with participants and surveys with the facilitators, we sought to identify whether any specific form might be more effective in promoting productive discussions or whether specific forms did not work well. There are a wide range of literary genres included in the reading programme, in order to appeal to a diverse group of readers. These include: historical fiction, dystopian literature, fantastic realism, folktale, and realist fiction amongst others. We sought to explore whether particular genres of literature might provoke or create space for productive dialogue in relation to a wide range of themes. See Appendix 2 'Selected Texts – Table' for a full list of selected texts.

5. Results

This study indicates that shared reading groups can indeed provide opportunities for fruitful discussion around themes related to the Shared Island initiative, can encourage participants to empathise both with fictional characters from narratives under discussion and with each other, and can facilitate inter-community engagement in a safe and low-pressure environment. The results of the study are very encouraging and highlight the potential for future research.

For each session feedback was collected from facilitators and participants. The facilitator feedback captured engagement rates (levels of response to set questions, depth and length of discussion prompted by each text), participation levels (expressed below as a percentage) as well as their subjective impressions of the 'success' of the session. As demonstrated below, there were some clear differences between the four groups. The zoom group consistently demonstrated the highest levels of participation across all sessions. They also reported higher levels of engagement and the ratings for session success were higher (an average of 4.7 out of 5 for 10 completed texts). In contrast, the Black Mountain Women's Group reported lower levels of participation and session success, however when we explore the results further it is evident that despite this the group did consistently discuss themes like shared identity, nationality, thinking about the future and also specifically thinking about the future on the island of Ireland. Two groups of the four reported average participation rates over 90%, while the lowest participation rate was 64%. The table below reports a collated summary of feedback however, all groups reported a variety of responses to different texts and, as discussed below, this enabled the research team to explore in more detail responses.

	Average Engagement (1-5)*	Average Participation %	Reported Session Success (1-5)*
Black Mountain Women's Group	3.375	64.29	3.5
Zoom Group	5	99	4.7
Simon Community Group	4.15	96	4.16
Glenbank Community Group	3.85	82.85	3.7

* both are measured on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being low and 5 being high

Literature Selection Evaluation

Participant responses to the reading material were generally positive, suggesting that the model used for the selection of literature was effective. As outlined above, this included consulting with all stakeholders (Verbal, experienced facilitators) as well as drawing upon the expertise of a literature advisory panel to suggest texts with universal themes that might appeal to particular groups in Northern Ireland. While these texts were included in schedules across all the groups, pressures and commitments of individual groups meant that not all texts were read across all groups.

One specific finding of the study relates to the use of flash fiction. Many participants commented on the length of the material, with the majority enjoying the flash fiction format, marvelling at how much discussion could emerge from such short pieces:

> **Participant:** "we got the same amount of time for discussion that's what we did, as what we did with the longer ones.
>
> **Interviewer:** So, it's nothing to do with the length of the story.
>
> **Participant:** No, it's the content."

Others noted that the shorter material was easier read with stops:

> "I think if it's only a short story or a poem it's better to read, you know, only a paragraph, just read it and ask the questions. But if it's like a six-page story, you want to kind of break it up or leave it and go."

The diversity of form (flash fiction, short stories, poems) was generally welcomed, while some felt that the content could be more diverse and multicultural texts could be included. Others made similar comments about how the material had introduced them to new ideas and ways of thinking about other groups: "I think we've all broadened our minds with like the traveller's story" (a reference to Oein DeBhairduin's 'How the Moon Travels'). Although the use of difficult or abstract language did not seem to be a concern for participants, one reader suggested that "a wee glossary at the back would be handy to let you know what that word means."

Feedback from participants and facilitators indicates that the diversity of the texts, which included both universal and particular/Northern Ireland-specific themes, was important to the success

of the programme. Participants welcomed the stories set in Northern Ireland, with some wishing to see more stories like these on the list:

> "there seemed to be a lot of chat for the ones that were local, because you were able to put yourselves in …. There was a real connection between the local stories, and we actually said you just know that that's set here…. There was a warmth with it, or a real connection."

The local flavour was a way in which readers could immediately identify with characters. However, it was also noted that the diversity of texts was important and that twelve weeks of texts set in Belfast would not be appropriate either. During this discussion, some participants said that it was not necessarily the local setting that they identified with, but people from the same class as themselves who were having similar experiences and struggles: "I don't think it matters really where the place is as long as you can identify yourself within that situation." The timing or schedule of texts was also noted as important with facilitators preferring to tackle heavier texts or those more likely to stimulate significant debate or tension within the group later in the sessions to allow the group to develop a strong relationship before introducing potentially controversial topics for discussion.

Reading Format

In the main, sessions that incorporated regular stops for discussion and questions were more favourable than those sessions where stories were read through in their entirety before discussions began. This was particularly true for longer stories with many participants noting that "you take a story in more when you have those wee breaks." For shorter material (flash fiction and some poetry) participants felt that there was no need for as many stops. These findings overwhelmingly support Verbal's existing model of incorporating stops throughout the reading sessions for effective engagement.

The majority of participants indicated that having a physical copy of the text in front of them while the story was read by a facilitator allowed for greater focus and engagement:

> "one of the weeks we didn't have the story in front of us and H was reading the story and it was weird…. If you have it in hand following, it sort of sticks in a wee bit more."

While most groups met in person to read the texts, one group met over Zoom. Rather than participants coming from local interface communities, this format allowed people from diverse geographical areas in Northern Ireland to meet regularly to read and to share their experiences. Participants in this group were pleased with this approach, but also organised an in-person gathering which seemed to cement relationships in the group. Many participants acknowledged that the individual facilitator, and the delivery of the material, also played an important role in participant engagement and thought that "it depends on the person who's reading the story, it seems to have an effect on you." Reading aloud had other benefits, such as making the material accessible to different types of readers including those with visual impairment or those for whom English is not their first language.

The Potential to Generate Purposeful Dialogue

As with any reading group, not all texts appealed to all participants, and not all stories generated purposeful discussions, a fact that was acknowledged and accepted by many participants: "So we can't prejudge a story, because what works for me might not work for A, but it might work for M or L. Do you know what I mean?" Nevertheless, even with stories that may have been less popular, participants could still generate meaningful discussions, with one participant noting that "I don't think we've had a story that we haven't had a conversation with," and "even if we think 'well that wasn't our best story ever,' there's always something to talk about." However, there were also a number of stories that seemed to work particularly well across the various groups.

When asked in the focus group sessions about memorable texts and/or discussions, many cited Dan Rhodes's 'Coping', a piece of flash fiction that deals with universal themes of shared identities, social relationships, and shame as well as topics such as cheating partners, affairs, divorce, co-parenting, and growing up in a single parent family. Facilitators noted across the groups that participants were fully engaged with this story:

> "The engagement with this story was absolutely fantastic. Most participants had an experience, related to the story, that they wanted to share with the group."

This facilitator also indicated that perhaps the success of this story and the discussion that followed was in part due to the participants having an established relationship with each other and cautioned the use of the story for an opening session:

> "I would however be a bit apprehensive about using this text at the beginning of a *Reading Rooms* …. I do not think a group would be as open with one another if they did not know each other."

Several people noted the importance of the universal themes in the story generating engaging discussions, saying that "Everyone has been through some form of loss, so it's a topic that really brings people together" and "You identify with the woman and can see why she left!"

It was also noted that there was quite a bit to discuss, despite the shortness of the story itself, and that it was a good example of a story that could generate empathy among participants:

> "I was surprised that the group were able to spend the whole session engaged in conversation about such a short story, they were really engaged and empathetic towards people in the group who had been through similar experiences."

> "where you're feeling empathy … you've been in that situation or you know somebody or you know the ripple effect that that has had."

Stories such as 'Coping' provided opportunities to talk about issues that would not normally be discussed:

> "All of the discussion, these subjects we don't normally discuss or ask. One participant would have never told the story … so it gave an opportunity to reflect and comment on it. The group is comfy with each other so there is no judgement when participants share personal stories."

Roddy Doyle's 'The Pumping Station', also proved popular across the groups. This is a text that engages with themes of relationships, family, childhood, generations and futures with a facilitator

noting that it was a "Fantastic story, and everyone has a different interpretation. Personally, I think it would be a great story for week 1 / 2." Although participants across the groups seemed to enjoy stories that employed realism as a mode, they were not put off by the fantastic elements of this story, with one facilitator commenting that "it was really interesting that the surreal nature of the story really engaged participants" and "I found that this text was a good way to talk about 'futures' with the group." Similarly, many of the participants commented on the text as a good starting point for discussions about the 'future'. The representation of childhood in the story also seemed to bring the group together and generate meaningful discussions, with a facilitator commenting, "I think stories that allow reflections back to childhood really engage the participants and they seem to enjoy thinking back on their own lives and recalling memories, so this text worked well on that front."

Wendy Erskines's short story, 'To All Their Dues', also proved to be a success in that it engaged participants, stimulated discussions, and encouraged empathy. The story addresses themes of shared identity, community, shared islands, paramilitary activities, and power. As noted above, the inclusion of local texts was a topic debated in the early stages of the research, and although a slight discomfort was noted in some of the discussions, it was still deemed to be a good choice of text. One facilitator commented that during the discussion, "the depth of conversation was really good. I could sense a little bit of discomfort or reserve at times from a couple of participants who seemed to be unsure about speaking on the topic of NI divisions and paramilitaries" and that "there was a clear sense of anger from one participant but in a positive way, I mean positive in terms of how the story gave him a means of discussing these local topics and getting things off his chest." One participant noted that he could identify directly with the story saying, "Yeah, I've gone through similar experiences."

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings' – which engages with themes of social relationship, conflict, cruelty, profiteering, and kindness – received a mixed response, in terms of whether or not participants enjoyed the story, with some noting that they found "it kind of disturbing, but fascinating," while others thought it was "too far-fetched" because of its magic realism. Despite this, however, the story prompted interesting discussions among the cross-community groups. One participant commented: "I thought that the discussion we had about that was amazing. It just brought up so many issues about human beings and how we can treat each other", while a facilitator noted: "I find it personally interesting that in a mixed religious group many participants related this circumstance to Lourdes; something stemmed from the discussion on people making money out of other people, they also discussed pilgrimages and gave examples from the Catholic faith. There was a fantastic moment when a Protestant participant asked more about pilgrimages, Bernadette and the appearance of Mary at Lourdes and was gaining understanding." One facilitator noted that their group engaged well with the magic realist elements: "I believe this text, because of its 'strangeness' in terms of the magical realist qualities engaged the participants well and caught their attention because, as one participant stated, 'it was something different'. Two out of the three participants also asked to take copies of the story home so that they could reread it again and one participant said 'I've learnt more today than I did in school'."

There were also a few stories that, in general terms, were not as well received as those highlighted above. George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant', David Foster Wallace's 'Everything is Green', and Ursula Le Guin's 'She Unnames Them' did not prove as popular across all the groups. It was found that 'Shooting an Elephant,' which some groups read through in its entirety (without stops) before beginning discussion, was too long without stops, contained difficult language, and would

benefit from an accompanying glossary. The subject matter – dealing with animal cruelty – was also deemed to be a difficult read by some. However, one of the groups – that included a number of stops while reading – engaged fully with the text and had meaningful discussions about the abuse of power. It was felt that 'Everything is Green' contained difficult language, with one facilitator noting that it was difficult to read aloud. While some participants engaged fully, there was not as much enthusiasm as for previous texts. Participants commented that 'She Unnames Them' was a little too abstract and difficult to understand, although in one group it did generate an interesting discussion about biblical and well-known stories. Exploring those texts which were less well received, a common feature is that they contain challenging language or are abstract and do not contain a clear narrative arc. It would be useful in a longer-term study to explore whether texts such as these could be introduced to more established groups with greater success.

It is important to note that there was a general acceptance across all the groups that not all the stories were going to have the same impact each week, and that some people would prefer some of the texts over others. Many also commented that even if they did not engage with the story from the outset, the groups discussions often brought new perspectives on the story:

> "you may not think of it when you're just reading it, but when somebody points out something else that's missing, that's made it all glue together and made the conversations very interesting."

Mental Health and Well-Being

Participants were unanimous in stating that their participation in *Reading Rooms* was good for their mental health and well-being. Some participants identified particular discussions and stories, such as 'Coping', that they say "helps with your mental health" or 'The Pumping Station' where there were "discussions of so many social issues. For example, he came to the water because he was struggling with his mental health. He was experiencing so many different memories like people with dementia." This was also a narrative that addressed ideas of futures, which could also be discussed in terms of mental health: "Futures – can be scary."

Some facilitators worried that stories that dealt with darker themes might be 'triggering' for some participants. For example, in relation to Raymond Carver's 'So Much Water, So Close to Home', one facilitator made the following comments:

> "I found facilitating this session difficult. I felt uncomfortable reading the text as I was unsure how the group would react to it …. I felt like I had to warn the participants at the beginning of the story."

> "When the participants did speak about their own experiences, the conversation was extremely dark and intense."

Another facilitator, although cautious and sensitive in her approach, found the participants fully engaged with this story, despite its difficult content:

> "All of the participants were very absorbed in this story and it's the first time that participants haven't been restless or distracted when I've delivered a story without question stops. The

participants were very moved by the story and it made them angry but in a way that stimulated a lot of discussion about domestic violence and gender relationships."

For many, becoming emotional during a session was not necessarily viewed as something negative:

> **Participant:** We have had other moments when we read stories, and have had people emotional ….

> **Interviewer:** And was that okay? I mean, if people had an emotional response to the stories?

> **Participant:** Yeah, absolutely.

> **Participant:** But that's what books are supposed to give you, an emotional response, that's all part of life.

Scalable model

A central aim of the project was to create a scalable model for use with a variety of cohorts. This is outlined below:

Programme Design
Programme goals should be clarified in advance. This will shape text selection, discussion themes, and facilitator questions.
Stakeholders should meet to discuss aims and goals and make-up of participating groups
Any specific group requirements should be highlighted in advance to feed into text selection
Text Selection
Where possible draw on a range of expertise to guide text selection, e.g. the literature advisory panel employed in this project.
Create a longlist in consultation with stakeholders
A variety of forms should be included from flash fiction, short story, poetry etc.
Include a diverse range of texts, including stories with local themes as well as those with universal themes
Aim for a diversity in authorship to include texts written by people from varying backgrounds and experiences.
Ensure that texts are easy to read aloud. If language is deemed complex, provide a glossary.
Create a shortlist and organise sessions by theme based on the goals of the project.
Programme Delivery
Organise texts in a schedule. Opening sessions should include texts with obvious universal themes such as 'childhood' or 'family' and incorporate humour or 'lightness' where possible.

Break stories into shorter sections with stops for questions and discussion. This method created by Verbal helps ensure maximum engagement and allows space for productive discussion.
For shorter texts questions can be moved to the end.
Texts with heavier or more controversial themes can provide opportunities for dialogue but these should be scheduled for later in the programme to ensure that the group is settled and will have developed the relationships required to manage these discussions.
Facilitators should be consulted on the reading list to ensure that all texts are appropriate for each specific group and supports should be in place for facilitators and participants in the event that any difficult conversations arise from the sessions.
Consider utilising new technologies such as zoom to increase accessibility and diversify groups in terms of geographical location and participant background.

Futures and Shared Island

As outlined above, throughout Reading Rooms, participants directly engaged with discussions about Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland, and the future with participants agreeing that the programme helped generate understanding of different communities. These conversations occurred on many levels, some explicitly as was the case with discussions surrounding childhood and futures inspired by a reading of 'The Pumping Station' as well as paramilitary violence and intimidation as represented in 'To All Their Dues'. Discussions of 'So Much Water, So Close to Home' (which is not set in Northern Ireland) also led to detailed conversations about death and violence in Northern Ireland's recent past. Conversations about life on the island of Ireland also featured throughout on a more implicit level as participants from various backgrounds shared their own experiences, often relating them directly to themes raised by the stories and poems.

Participants noted the positive effects of *Reading Rooms* in building cross-community relationships, commenting that "It still continues when we leave here, on the wee WhatsApp group," and acknowledging that *Reading Rooms* "opens up different perspectives." For many, *Reading Rooms* held a unique place in cross-community activities in terms of bringing people together in a meaningful way: "I mean of all of these cross-community [activities], this is the only one that we would really be friendly with." When asked if they thought *Reading Rooms* encouraged people to mix with each other in a way different to some of the other groups, they agreed that this was the case, explaining that it was because, in *Reading Rooms*, "everybody's talking and everybody's giving their opinion and saying, you're getting to know about their lives, and you would say 'oh I wouldn't have thought that of you. I didn't think that would happen to you'." *Reading Rooms* had also generated a culture of respect where people felt comfortable sharing experiences about themselves:

"as someone who was on the front line of all the Troubles in the area that I lived in, and I did talk about that on and off, you know, about how it affected me… I never felt that I was being judged and I never felt that I couldn't tell these people what happened to me."

Drawing upon personal experience and discussing the success of *Readings Rooms*, particularly for groups of women, some felt that greater efforts could be made to establish *Reading Room*s for men.

It was also felt that *Reading Rooms* could be extended right across the island of Ireland to generate greater awareness and understanding between peoples and communities, with one participant stating: "Yeah, then we could do cross-community and go down south."

During the focus group discussions, participants were also asked about their views on the current state of Northern Ireland as well as their thoughts on the future of a shared island. The majority of participants expressed a desire to move beyond simplistic binaries of 'Orange and Green' and 'Protestant and Catholic' with one person noting that "your politics and religion shouldn't be the same … I come from a Protestant nationalist family," and another stating that "we come together in here and I can't think of one time that has been an orange and green conversation. Unless we've had to fill in a form to tell what you think of the other side or whatever."

These conversations were also linked to the political culture of Northern Ireland more broadly:

> "**Participant:** I think Stormont should really be focusing on mental health, suicides, drugs, instead of the colour.
>
> **Participant:** Stop making it orange and green."

> "And when we talk about cross-community, it's not cross-community cause cross-community for me is not about religion. It should be people from North meets with a group from West. That's still cross-community. But there's too much focus, especially from funders."

The desire for elected politicians to focus on issues such as mental health and other areas was mentioned in a few of the focus groups: "work, jobs, housing for everybody. Good healthcare. That's the main thing." There was also a call for more young people in politics – "I think younger ones should be brought in because they see a future" – as well as for greater representation of grassroots within politics, as noted by this participant:

> "I think the first thing I would do if I was in Stormont is really, really get down to grassroots and listen to grassroots people, you know, what was happening on the ground and the real issues that matter …. The civil servants have perceptions of people with disabilities and older people, etc., and if they would just listen to their constituents and look at the people rather than make perceptions. And I also believe in integrated education."

Integrated education was deemed to be important by a significant number of participants – and a recognition that their society was not simply made up of Catholics and Protestants but is much more multicultural – some of whom pointed to the success of *Reading Rooms* and felt a similar model should be rolled out in schools:

> "The first thing I would do would be to have integrated schools … All the churches are empty…. There's a charity ... I mean, the kids all get along together from both sides. Then they're getting on the bus. One going to the Shankhill one going to the Falls. And they've changed – now they're into their tricolour and the Union Jack. So, I mean, that's ridiculous.

The topic of a united Ireland came up in several of the focus groups with some participants surmising that it would never happen as it was not something that people wanted, while others believed it would happen, but not for a long time: "I think there may be in years, but not in our time."

Conclusion

This is a short pilot study with a relatively small number of participants and, therefore, the results and conclusions should be read within this context. The findings overwhelmingly validate Verbal's existing approach to *Reading Rooms*, while also building upon this strong foundation to create an effective model for the selection of literature. For example, establishing a literature advisory panel, including flash fiction, organising a schedule according to themes, and creating a long list of diverse texts (both in terms of form and content) that engage with the universal as well as the particular has created a programme with high levels of engagement across 12 weeks. Verbal's format of including stops with questions for discussion has also been tested and validated, and is a format favoured by participants across all groups. Selected stories have allowed participants to engage in meaningful dialogue about a range of topics, from childhood to mental health. Some stories specific to a Northern Irish context have explicitly encouraged conversations about life in the region, while other stories engaging with themes such as conflict, family, and so on, have also generated discussion about experiences past and present in the area.

One of the most significant findings from the research is the value that participants placed on *Reading Rooms* above other cross-community initiatives, with some noting its unique position in establishing meaningful relationships:

"there's so much sameness rather than difference from all of our stories and all of our sharing"

"we bonded over these stories and we have built up a level of trust through our discussions over the last couple of years."

Drawing upon their experiences of *Reading Rooms*, participants believed that such a model could be employed right across the island of Ireland (and beyond), and that it is a meaningful and successful initiative that should be rolled out to younger and future generations:

"give them stories and tell them that they're enough as they are. That's all they need."

6. Outputs

Symposium

On the 14th of June 2022 the *Reading Rooms* team held a symposium (facilitated by Trinity Long Room Hub) to highlight initial project results and to bring together academics and professionals working in related fields. Oein De Bhairduin, author, activist and educator, provided the keynote speech, while representatives from Trinity College Dublin and Verbal presented on different elements of the *Reading Rooms* projects, as well as initial findings from the research.

Report

The project team have created this report for submission to the Irish Research Council. The findings of the study will also be made available on the Verbal website and through TARA, Trinity's open access repository.

Database of texts

An important output from this project is the database of texts created for the reading groups. This includes the longlist compiled in discussion with the literature advisory panel as well as the shortlist of texts chosen for inclusion in the 12-week programme. These lists will be made available in the report through Verbal's website and TARA, Trinity's open access repository. We also hope to include an annotated version of the shortlist which includes some feedback from facilitators who have used the texts with different groups.

7. Relevance of the research conclusions for public policy and opportunities for future research

At a time when the future relationships between Northern-Ireland, the UK and Ireland are all being actively negotiated at the macro-level and at an international level as well as at the micro-level within communities, projects such as *Reading Rooms* have increasing relevance. This project has shown that programmes such as *Reading Rooms* can provide an important forum for cross-community dialogue. As described above, participants cited the reading groups as being more successful than other community-building interventions that they have been involved with, noting that the sense of community established within the groups extended beyond the sessions. Shared Reading groups provide a low-pressure environment where participants can learn from one another, gain an insight into other communities or individual experiences, as well as collectively gain an insight into different experiences and cultures through the texts they read. Importantly this project shows that these groups can also provide opportunities for productive dialogue on the future, and specifically the shared future on the island of Ireland. Further research could explore how these groups could be rolled out on a wider basis, including north-south collaborations to bring together communities from both sides of the border. This could involve working with local organisations or libraries to host groups, or utilising online forums to bring together groups from all across the island.

The success of the zoom group would indicate that utilising these online forums holds significant potential benefit. As the results table above indicates the group which met virtually reported the highest levels of engagement, session success and participation. The success of the online format warrants further research which could compare in-person sessions with online sessions. The practicalities of online groups, which remove the requirement to travel and might enable those with mobility issues or with caring responsibilities to participate, should be explored as potentially important factors in increasing participation if reading programmes such as this were to be rolled out on a wider basis.

The project has also built on and contributes to existing research around the myriad benefits of shared reading, providing specific data on the benefits of shared reading for community building in the Northern-Ireland context. The results relating to the benefits for mental health and the social benefits of shared reading mirror existing research findings. The unique findings relate to the potential of shared reading to foster constructive dialogue in interface communities and as we have described above the project demonstrates that shared reading provides a safe, low-pressure environment in which participants have opportunities to build inter-community relationships and broach challenging discussions around the past and the shared future on the island. Shared reading programmes could complement other community-based interventions aimed at fostering dialogue and have been shown here to be perceived as more engaging or effective than other interventions. Shared reading groups

also have the potential to engage participants who may be less likely to take part in explicitly political forums and can be tailored to meet the needs of various cohorts.

The productive partnership established here between Trinity College Dublin and Verbal Arts Centre could be developed further. Additional research is required to assess details of text selection in greater depth. This project has demonstrated the efficacy of short-form fiction such as poetry or flash fiction however limitations of time and funds available meant that this intervention was only 12-weeks in duration, and none of the groups was able to deliver all of the selected texts due to cancellations etc. A longer-term project could build on the initial findings to future explore the use of very short form fiction, the use of poetry in reading aloud sessions and test this against the use of longer form fiction which was not included here due to time limitations. There were no novels included in this project and further research could explore the comparative benefits of reading longer form fiction versus short form fiction.

In addition, this project has demonstrated the various benefits of different genres. Magic realist texts such as 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings' and 'The Pumping Station' stimulated discussion. While a number of groups did not get the chance to deliver Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery', those that did reported that this dystopian fantasy text stimulated discussions on tradition, including sectarian traditions in Northern Ireland. As described above realist texts were also very popular and Erskine's realist short story 'To All Their Dues' prompted specific discussion around the future, shared identity, and the future of the island of Ireland. A longer-term study would allow these initial findings to be explored and tested further and could also provide an opportunity to create a longer text database that could be shared with other reading groups. Verbal also works with a variety of cohorts including young people and further research could investigate shared reading groups with young people to provide opportunities for this important cohort to discuss issues related to the future and specifically the issues foregrounded in this study such as shared identities, nationality, class; community cohesion/conflict; dealing with people who are different; thinking about the future and thinking about the future on the island of Ireland. It would also be beneficial to explore how the narrative arc functions for younger cohorts in particular as a guiding tool within the literature. Trinity College Dublin is a hub for research in children's literature and Verbal have significant expertise in working with these vulnerable cohorts and so this partnership could be very beneficial in providing a forum for young people to discuss these important issues and have their voices heard. Future research could potentially explore the creation of an empathy-building shared reading curriculum for use in schools across the island of Ireland.

8. Development of the Shared Island Initiative:

This project was a North/South collaboration, bringing together researchers from Trinity College Dublin with experts in reading group delivery from the Derry/Londonderry-based charity Verbal. The project aimed in particular to contribute to the Shared Island Initiative Theme 2: Civic, social and cultural connections and understanding on the island. The project has achieved these aims in the following ways:

•   A key goal of the project was to foster 'better acknowledgment and understanding of the diverse identities and experiences on the island.' We sought to achieve this goal through the

identification of specific literary texts for use in cross-community reading groups, as well as the discussions within these groups. The project has created both a 12-week programme template which has been tested with four diverse groups within Northern-Ireland, as well as a longer list of proposed texts based on the findings of the research which can be utilised by Verbal for further work with target communities as well as shared with other groups/organisations to inform curriculum development in subjects such as English and History.

• The programme brought together participants from diverse communities and backgrounds who read and discussed literary texts in a forum, thus cherishing 'diverse identities and traditions on the island of Ireland … through artistic and cultural exchange.' There were 33 participants in total who came from a broad range of backgrounds. This included two groups of women from interface communities in Belfast, a group of men attending services for the homeless, as well as a group of women from across Northern Ireland who met on Zoom. Many of the participants from within these communities are often societally marginalised, therefore aligned to the fund's commitment to funding research which engages with vulnerable or marginalised groups. As noted, one group was comprised of individuals who had experienced or were at risk of homelessness, another vulnerable and frequently marginalised group in Irish society. The project team and Verbal were keen to include participants not just from the two dominant communities in Northern Ireland (Catholic and Protestant), but also people from marginalised communities as any discussions on the future of the Shared Island must be inclusive and focused on the needs and desires of marginalised groups whose voices are seldom heard. The focus group participants called for more inclusive cross-community initiatives that recognised the multicultural nature of Northern Irish society and moved beyond simplistic binaries of 'orange' and 'green'.

• This project has worked to solidify 'cultural links on the island, taking account of North/South and East/West dimensions'. The partnership between Trinity College Dublin and Verbal initiated as part of the project has been very productive and both parties wish to continue and further develop this collaboration. As detailed above the team has identified significant potential for further collaboration and aims to develop on the work begun in this project.

• Many of the elements undertaken in the project – the selection of suitable literary texts, the Reading Rooms programme, participant feedback, creating a new model and framework, writing a report – acts as a clear demonstration of engagement with civil society, community, 'arts and cultural sector initiatives' that will enable 'constructive and inclusive dialogue around the future of the island' foregrounded by the Shared Island Initiative.

• *Reading Rooms* has created a bibliotherapeutic intervention which can support the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland by engaging cross-community groups in a series of constructive and inclusive dialogues. This research project will help to shape Verbal's future work and creates a model which could be further developed by this collaborative project team, or taken forward by other community groups aiming to foster constructive dialogue using a reading-based intervention. This addresses the issue of cross-community cohesion, a key challenge of our time which affects the island of Ireland as a whole. The project is framed by the principles of the Good Friday Agreement and included participants from a range of diverse backgrounds in Belfast, thus 'including the voices of women, young people and new communities … that have been underrepresented in the Peace Process,' and ensuring as 'broad a range of perspective and experience from civil society'. The views

and opinions of these participants have actively informed the research process and are highlighted in research outputs including this final report. Researchers employed a Participatory Action Research methodology which helped to facilitate active participation of individuals in shared reading focus groups in the research process aligning with the New Foundations' focus on financing collaborative engaged research.

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Appendix 1 - Reading Rooms Text Delivery Table

Week and Theme	Selected Stories	Author	Format	Annotations format	Delivery Date
Week 1: Presumptions	A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings	Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Short Story	Storymapping (5 stops)	29th March
WEEK 2: Relationships	1.Coping 2.Everything is green, 3.Why the Moon travels	1. Dan Rhodes 2. David Foster Wallace 3. Oein DeBhairduin	Flash Fiction	Read texts in full and questions at the end	5th April
Week 3 Community	Peggy Park	Bryan Washington	Short Story	Read text in full and questions at the end	12th April
Week 4: Parents	Simple Arithmetic	Virginia Moriconi	Short Story	Read text in full and questions at the end	19th April
Week 5: Hope and dreams	The Potato Gatherers	Brian Friel	Short Story	Storymapping (5 stops)	26th April
Week 6: Traditions	The Lottery	Shirley Jackson	Short Story	BOTH WAYS (5 stops & no stops)	26th April
Week 7: Futures	The Pumping Station	Roddy Doyle	Short Story	Storymapping (5 stops)	3rd May
Week 8: childhood	Bonfire	John Patrick McHugh	Short Story	Read text in full and questions at the end	3rd May
Week 9: Kinship	So Much Water, So Close to Home. Crossing Spider Creek	Raymond Carver Dan O'Brien	Short Story Flash Fiction	Read text in full and questions at the end Storymapping approach to flash	10th May

				fiction: 5 stops with only one question at each stop	
Week 10: Families	To All Their Dues	Wendy Erskine	Short Story	Storymapping (5 stops)	17th May
Week 11: Power	Shooting an Elephant	George Orwell	Short Story	Read text in full and questions at the end	24th May
Week 12: Agency	She Unnames Them Standing Female Nude	Ursula Le Guin Carol Ann Duffy	Short Story Poem	Read texts in full and questions at the end	31st May

Appendix 2 Selected Texts

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Short Stories										
John Patrick McHugh	Bonfire	Pure Gold		2021	Yes	childhood; friendship; death; prejudice; class	No			This story is narrated by a young boy who is losing his mother to cancer. The narrator and his best friend Terry spend their summer roaming the island where they live and lighting bonfires. When the narrator realises that other children look down upon Terry however, his grief and rage morph into prejudice.
Shirley Jackson	The Lottery	The Lottery and Other Stories		2009 [1948]	Yes	group think, traditions, herd mentality	No	No	Yes	Set in a dystopian world in which communities have an annual lottery in which all the townspeople are included and the conclusion of which is that one member of the community will be stoned to death by the remaining members. The story follows the townspeople in the leadup to the lottery.

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings	Leaf Storm and Other Stories		2005 [1968]	Yes	belief, community	Yes	No	Not really	A man with huge wings arrives in the yard of a family in a small town. Suspecting him to be an angel of death arrived to take a sickly child the family imprison him. Fantastic realism, largely humorous.
Roddy Doyle	The Pumping Station	Once Upon A Place	Eoin Colfer	2015	Yes	Place, memory, community	No	Doyle is Irish	No	A young boy goes to swim in the sea near his home in Dublin and when he emerges he finds himself in a world decades in the future.
Bryan Washington	Peggy Park	Lot		2019	Yes	Place, memory, community, childhood				A group of men recall playing on a baseball team as children in Houston, Texas. The story is narrated in a collective voice
Donal Ryan	Long Puck	A Slanting of the Sun			Yes	religion, conflict, death, love, suffering, friendship, sport, culture, ethnicity	No	No	Yes	Ryan described the short-lived friendship between an Irish priest based in Syria and a young local Muslim. The two connect over hurling; their games win the attention of locals and slowly bring people together, with no heed paid to race or religion. This idyll, though, is interrupted by rumblings of war.

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Raymond Carver	So much Water, So Close to Home				Yes	Death, kinship, meaning of family	No	Yes	Yes	Examines issues of kinship, responsibility, the meaning of family-- also explores relation between domestic and wider space; Further recommendation: Story "Fat" by the same author-- themes of prejudice, connection, kinship
Éilís Ní Dhuibhne	The Bray House				Yes	Yes - about identity and about, to some extent, class. But also about climate	No	Apart that she's from Dublin, I don't think so.	Yes	The section of this book imagines the destruction of the British and Irish Isles from a nuclear disaster. It's quite short but it speaks to two major things: identity and the climate crisis.
Wendy Erskine	To All Their Dues	Sweet Home		2020	Yes	Yes - death, love, family, conflict	Yes	Not sure	Yes	Wendy Erskine's work crackles with empathy, the first writer to get under the surface of how working class protestant communities are seen. Rich in insight humour and empathy, this is essential work
David Park	Oranges from Spain	Oranges from Spain		1990	Yes	Yes - death, memory, grief	No	Perhaps	Yes	A man recalls a summer he spent working in a shop in his hometown of Belfast. At the heart of this tender story is a terrible atrocity which the narrator struggles to make sense of.

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	It it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
George Orwell	Shooting an Elephant	Selected Essay			Yes	Death, power, suffering, injustice.	No	Yes. Orwell was a member of the English establishment and a member of the colonial military police. This is one of the experiences he had while serving the Empire which caused him to question his background, and the moral mission of his job..	Yes	This is an essay about power and responsibility - who has it, how they use it, and how they can be damaged by it. Orwell, as a military policeman charged with keeping order in Burma, has a moment of crisis when called on to commit a cruel and senseless act of violence.
Polly Devlin	The China Doll	The Far Side of the Lough			Yes	Childhood, coming of age	No	NI author	Yes	A young girl hears this story from an elderly woman in Lough Neagh, about the time she got a doll sent from a America, and the cruel experience she suffered.
Seamus Deane	Feet	Reading in the Dark			Yes	childhood, hardship, suffering	No	Author from the region	Yes	Growing up in Derry-Londonderry in 1940s, describes tragic family scene from perspective of child, hidden under the kitchen table. His young sister has died, and he describes the movement of feet around the kitchen as her body is taken away.
Brian Friel	The Potato Gatherers	The Lucky Bag			Yes	Suffering	No	Author from the region	Yes	Universal childhood themes, poverty, hopes and dreams, set in Tyrone in 1950s

Poetry										
Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Robert Frost	The Mending Wall	North of Boston		1914	Yes	Community, boundaries, traditions	No	No	Yes	The poem is about two neighbours who perpetually gather to repair their boundary wall, the poem raises questions about landscape, nationalism, tradition and encourages an interrogation of inherited wisdom/traditions
Ciaran Carson	Last Orders	Belfast Confetti		1989	Yes	identity, mistaken identity, political uncertainty	No	Yes, Catholic Irish/English language poet from Belfast	Yes	Examines Northern-Irish identity politics, using tricks with pronouns
Eavan Boland	Eviction	The Historians		2020	Yes	Yes - themes of memory, power and empowerment, women's experience, anger, and justice.	No	Yes. Boland, (d. 2020), was a major figure in poetry and in women's writing in Ireland and internationally. Her work often examined themes connected to women's experience and gender equality and by how the lives of ordinary people get left out of official account, her poetry is often concerned with memory/how we understand ourselves.	Yes	It depicts two situations everyone can imagine: a young woman faced with the force of the law; and another moved to anger by her sense of injustice, and the cold way history can miss the truth of real lives. It offers plenty of scope for discussion and reflection.

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Maggie Smith	Good Bones				Yes	It engages with universal concerns about the bad things that happen in the world and how we balance that with maintaining positivity in bad times	Yes	the poet was thinking particularly about her role as a mother.	Yes	This is a poem about how bad things keep happening in the world, the prejudice, pain, and cruelty that are part of our daily lives. It pits the innocence of childhood against the adult knowledge of these many bad things, attempting to warn children about the badness in the world while still preserving hope and empathy. It is what Auden said all the best poetry was: "a clear expression of mixed feelings."
Lorrie Moore	People Like That Are the Only People Here (Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk)	Birds of America		1998	Yes	Yes: parenthood, love, illness, death	Yes	n/a	No	This is a powerful story about a universal fear. It follows, in bitter, wry, perceptive, clear prose, the experiences of a mother whose young baby has been diagnosed with cancer; in bringing us to think about this awful experience, to find meaning in it.

Novels

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Kurt Vonnegut	Slaughterhouse 5	n/a	n/a	1969		war, memory	No/yes	Not really	Yes	pp.1-13 [end of para 1]; Memories of WWII, the legacy of conflict, moral ambiguity
Rónán Hession	Leonard and Hungry Paul	n/a	n/a	2019		family, self-identity, friendship	Not this part	Hession is Irish	No	pp.1-20 [or 1-5 for use after another longer reading or in conjunction with flash fiction/poetry]; This section introduces Leonard, a very normal person, who has recently lost his mother, and it explores the details of his mundane experience in a really engaging way. I think there is a lot to empathise with here.

Flash Fiction

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Dan Rhodes	Coping	Anthropology and a Hundred Other Stories	n/a	2005		Relationships, Empathy, Cognitive Dissonance	Yes	No	no	ironic short story about the author's ability to deal with the break-up of a relationship
Dan Rhodes	Indifference	Anthropology and a Hundred Other Stories	n/a	2005		Relationships, Empathy, Cognitive Dissonance	Yes	no	no	a deadpan short story about the author's relationships
Joanna H. Woś	The One Sitting There	Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories	James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka	1992		Legacy of grief, empathy, moving on	No	no	no	

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	Is it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Dan O'Brien	Crossing Spider Creek	Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories	James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka	1992		Love/relationships, chance	No	No	no	A man has gone hunting alone and severely injured himself. He tries to get his horse across a creek knowing that help lies close at hand but that if he cannot get the horse to cross he may not survive.
David Foster Wallace	Everything is Green	Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories	James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka	1992		Perception, relationships	No	No	no	A short story about a couple's relationship and their strained efforts to communicate/ understand each other
Play extacts										
Christina Reid	Joyriders			1997	Yes	Yes, personal choice, growing up, ambition, sadness, fear, defiance		Reid is from the area		It's a play that focuses on people trying to understand their own place in the world - set in 1980s Belfast; I'd recommend some bits from Reid's other works too but Joyriders is about teenagers and might have better broad appeal. There's some good back-and-forth dialogue in Galvin's We Do it for Love too which draws on stereotypes and expectations of Catholics and Protestants. Dowd's Bogchild seems another good text to draw from maybe.

Author	Text Title	Collection Title (where relevant)	Editor(s)	Year of Publication	Is this text accessible?	Universal themes?	It it a humorous text?	Is the author's background relevant?	Does it engage with themes of Peace/conflict	Notes / additional text selections
Christina Reid	Tea in a China Cup				Yes	The play is Beth's story, as her mother dies, and it engages with loss and love and family.	Yes	Reid is from the area	Yes	Insight into a unionist community - the play is about three generations of one family. The grand-daughter, Beth, is best friends with a Catholic girl, so she performs the intra-community connections. She also struggles with how to be herself within such a strong culture, and how to deal with her familial and cultural inheritance.