

Evaluation of the Kinia
Remote Reading Buddy Programme | 2021

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Evaluation of the Kinia Remote Reading Buddy Program 2021

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Abbreviations

DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NPHE	National Public Health Emergency Team
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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Executive Summary

Literacy is a core component of the Irish curriculum (DES, 2011) and yet research consistently demonstrates that literacy outcomes for children are socially stratified (Williams et al., 2009). The National Literacy Strategy (DES, 2011) and the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme aim to address this inequality in outcomes through a range of initiatives. This report examines the experiences and outcomes of children, volunteers and schools taking part in the online Reading Buddy programme between April and June of 2021. The Reading Buddy programme is a well-established Shared Reading literacy support programme run by Suas Ireland for several years in DEIS schools in Ireland. With the restrictions on movement and schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic through 2020 and 2021, Suas Ireland and Kinia collaborated to adapt the face-to-face programme to take place online through the academic year 2020-21. Findings from a pilot online programme in Autumn 2020 suggested positive outcomes for children similar to the face-to-face programme. This report outlines the findings of a comprehensive mixed-methods study to evaluate the impacts of the online programme.

Findings highlight the positive literacy outcomes of the Reading Buddy online programme and interrogate the aspects of the process that facilitate and inhibit engagement and learning on the programme.

The purpose of this report is to:

1. assess the effectiveness of the online Reading Buddy Programme in relation to the following outcomes of interest: reading comprehension, reading fluency and academic self-concept.
2. investigate the impact of the remote model and technology platforms on programme outcomes and the experiences of participants.
3. inform future developments of the programme in relation to potentially extending and scaling up the online programme post-Covid.

This study took place in April-June 2021 at the end of the second school year heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The mixed methods evaluation study explores the perspectives of all participants in the programme: children, Reading Buddies and school leaders drawing on a pre/post-test design as well as surveys, interviews, and children's drawings. The findings below have clear implications for future developments of the online Reading Buddy programme and for online tutoring programmes more generally.

Programme Outcomes

- Substantial improvement in WRAT-5 literacy measures for Word Reading (ratio gain of 3.5) and Reading Comprehension (ratio gain of 3.1)
- Small increase in Academic Self Perception (in general rather than specific to English)
- Increased self-confidence indicated by child self-report and from Reading Buddies and school participant interviews
- Improved technical and interpersonal skills
- The experience on the programme was greatly valued by both children and volunteer Reading Buddies and brought fun and interest and enjoyment to both the child and the adult

On-line vs face-to-face: Perceived advantages and disadvantages

- There is no direct point of comparison in this evaluation as only the online programme was running at that time.
- The literacy outcome results are marginally lower for this online programme than for the face-to-face Reading Buddy programme (ratio gains of 3.1 and 3.4 versus 3.9). However, a range of factors could affect this and therefore it is not possible to make any strong claim on whether the face to face or online has significantly better outcomes. The evidence would strongly suggest that BOTH are effective and have an educationally significant ratio gain for children on literacy outcomes.
- All participants were extremely positive about the online environment for focus, convenience, and efficiency.
- Reading Buddies were extremely positive about the ease of engaging with the programme as Reading Buddies and the time efficiency for all participants in the online setting. However, it must be considered that most adults are currently still working at home and this might also have a positive impact on ease of access for Reading Buddies in comparison to a potentially noisier and less private office environment.

Challenges for the online Reading Buddy programme

- The single biggest challenge of the programme was the sound quality of the environment. This related more often to the physical space in which the programme took place than to the quality of the internet connection.

Training and Support

- The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the KINIA training and support.
- What was particularly effective for new Reading Buddies was a dry run of the whole process before the first session.
- The WhatsApp session group was very effective in troubleshooting any issues seamlessly and with a minimum of fuss.
- Some Reading Buddies felt a mid-point check-in would be very effective with either the teacher or Kinia staff to get some feedback on their own performance as Reading Buddies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, there are several implications for the Reading Buddy Programme. The recommendations highlight how to maximise the opportunities and minimise the challenges of using technology for literacy support programmes.

Technology

- Given the importance of sound quality to the programme, the hardware used by schools, in particular headphones, needs to be in good condition. Some participants noted problems with specific headsets and indeed the wiring on headsets can fail. For this reason, an analysis of the market in noise-cancelling headphones to evaluate cost, robustness and warranty would be a useful exercise.
- Similarly, the platform for the reading buddy sessions should be evaluated periodically relative to alternatives available to assess the sound quality.

☀ Training

- The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the Kinia training and support and training. The needs for training will change as Reading Buddies become more experienced and it would be worth considering training as evolving depending on the Reading Buddy expertise. Some additional supports requested include mid-point feedback to new Reading Buddies.
- Given the range in approach of Reading Buddies, it might be appropriate to tailor training to address this or alternatively exploit this to match Reading Buddies with learners who take a more or less “teacherly” approach to the sessions.
- There is a significant learning curve for school personnel in setting up the Reading Buddy programme for the first time. It would be useful at the end of each programme to gather tips and fixes from School Leaders to document them for new schools. These might be the less formal organisational elements and workarounds that schools use to streamline their processes. These can also inform any necessary updates to the programme design.

☀ Schools

- It is not a trivial issue to reduce noise in busy environments but for the online Reading Buddy programme this may be critical. The location for the online Reading Buddy programme in the school building is important to maximise engagement of learners. Spaces where ambient sound and reverberation are reduced and where children can be spread out somewhat to minimise disruption are most suitable.
- The timing of the Reading Buddy session in the school day is important to maximise children’s engagement with the programme. Where the programme runs when children would normally be in yard or art or PE other classes perceived by the children to be more “fun”, children are less positive about the programme.
- The timing of the Reading Buddy programme in the school year is also important to allow all participants time and energy to fully engage with the programme.

This report highlights the positive outcomes of the Reading Buddy online programme and interrogates the aspects of the process that facilitate and inhibit engagement and learning on the programme. Drawing on the perspectives of children, Reading Buddies and school personnel, the report provides an important insight into how the programme design and the online environment can interact to create a positive learning experience for all participants.





INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background to the report

This report examines the experiences and outcomes of children, Reading Buddies and schools taking part in the online Reading Buddy programme between April and June of 2021. The Reading Buddy programme is a well-established literacy support programme run by Suas Ireland. With the restrictions on movement and schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic through 2020 and 2021, the face-to-face Reading Buddy programme could not take place. As a result, the programme was adapted to run online through the academic year 2020-21. Findings from a pilot online programme in Autumn 2020 suggested positive outcomes for children similar to the face-to-face programme (NEPS, 2019; SUAS-CAMARA, 2020). This report outlines the findings of a comprehensive mixed-methods study to evaluate the Reading Buddy programme as it was deployed online in April-June 2021.

The purpose of the report is primarily to assess the effectiveness of the online Reading Buddy Programme, in relation to literacy outcomes for children in 20 Irish schools. In addition, the report explores other outcomes of the programme perceived by children, Reading Buddies, and school personnel. The report investigates how the Reading Buddy process operated online and the impact of the remote model and technology platforms on programme outcomes and the experiences of participants. These findings will inform future developments of the programme through a consideration of the opportunities and challenges offered by the online environment.

This chapter sets the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on education (section 1.2), outlines the Reading Buddy paired reading approach and outcomes for the face-to-face and online settings (section 1.3). The report then goes on to identify the key outcomes of the 2021 online programme and the factors which impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

1.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic and Education

This study took place in April-June 2021 at the end of the second school year heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. On March 12, 2020, all primary schools in Ireland, along with pre-schools, second level schools and further and higher education, closed as part of the government's efforts to control the spread of Covid-19. Schools did not open their doors again until September 2020 under very tight social distancing protocols. In response to the worsening situation in January 2021, schools again did not re-open after the Christmas break, with primary schools re-opening on a phased basis in March 2021. The provisions for continuity of learning through this period developed considerably from March 2020 to March 2021.

However, it is clear from research to date that for a wide range of reasons, not all children learnt as much as they would normally have learnt in school and the full impact of this disruption and loss of instructional time for children has yet to be fully quantified. The pandemic has been however a catalyst for a digital transformation in education with schools, teachers, learners and indeed wider society developing the skills and resources needed to engage with learning in online and blended contexts (Bray, Chorcora, Donohue, Banks, & Devitt, 2020; Devitt, Ross, Bray, & Banks, 2020; Murray, McNamara, O'Mahony, Smyth, & Watson, 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

1.3 Paired Reading and The Reading Buddy Programme

Literacy is defined broadly here as encompassing written and oral language, but also 'traditional' literacy skills and digital and multimodal literacies (DES, 2011). The Growing Up in Ireland study findings indicate that reading test scores among 9 year olds are socially stratified (Williams et al., 2009) and the National Literacy Strategy (DES, 2011) and the DEIS programme aim to address this through a range of initiatives. Paired Reading is a literacy initiative which has been shown to be effective in improving literacy as well as socio-emotional outcomes for children across a range of contexts (Brooks, 2016; Topping & Lindsay, 1992). It is a simple but effective intervention, in which a volunteer reads with a child one-to-one for two thirty-minute sessions per week over 8-9 weeks. The school provides reading material at an appropriate level, the child chooses what they want to read in any given session, and the child and the Reading Buddy read aloud together. Sessions take place in a quiet room or school library. The ratio gain for paired reading programmes has been estimated as substantial-remarkable for reading accuracy and comprehension in previous studies (Brooks, 2020).

Suas Ireland has delivered this programme to children (7 -14 years old) in DEIS schools with adult volunteers in a face-to-face setting for many years with positive outcomes for children (NEPS, 2019). This model allows children to engage with texts they may find too difficult to tackle on their own, and to improve their literacy levels accordingly. Where possible, the child will read alone, with the Reading Buddy offering support and encouragement to reinforce their confidence. During difficult sections of the text, the Reading Buddy will employ the "three Ps" methodology: pause, prompt, and praise. They will pause to allow the child a chance to tackle difficult words on their own, prompt if necessary, and praise the effort made. The emphasis on self-correction and positive reinforcement is designed to boost both independent ability and confidence.

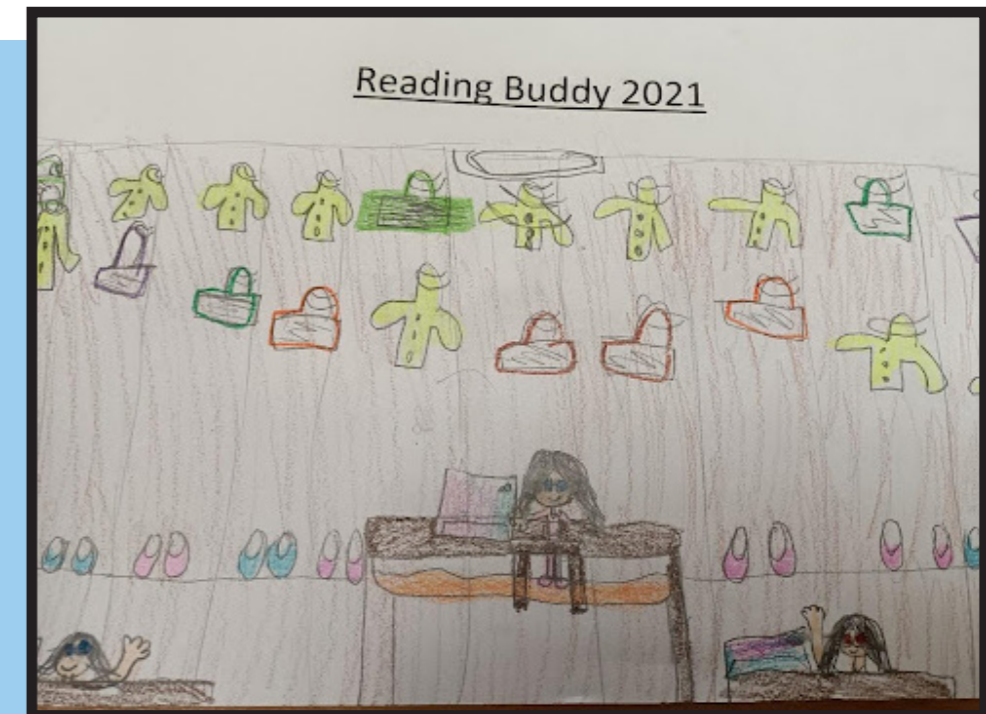


Figure 1 Drawing of the Reading Buddy Programme 2021 (child participant)

Kinia develops and delivers technology-based professional development for educators. With the onset of Covid-19, Suas Ireland and Camara Ireland collaborated to provide a small online pilot of the Reading Buddy programme in late 2020 to address the needs of children and schools during pandemic restrictions. The evaluation of the pilot suggested positive outcomes for children based on self-report questionnaires from children and schools. Based on the success of the collaboration and agreeing a strong alignment of mission and vision, Camara Ireland and Suas Ireland began to explore how their respective goals could be better achieved by working together. Following a business review of both organisations and all associated brands it was decided to transfer the assets of Suas Ireland to Camara Ireland. To symbolise the merging it was also decided to enter into a rebrand process. In July 2021, Kinia was launched uniting Camara Ireland and Suas Ireland.

The Online Reading Buddy Programme

- Based on Paired Reading methodology
- Duration: 8 weeks
- Contact hours: 2x 30-minute sessions per week
- Age of participants: 7 to 14
- Training: provided to school staff and Reading Buddies, both 45 to 60 minutes' duration
- Support: on-going support provided through the programme to troubleshoot issues

Figure 2 Online Reading Buddy Programme Model

The 2021 online Reading Buddy programme reached 135 children across 20 schools with the support of 175 Reading Buddies see (figure 3). Rather than meeting in person, children and Reading Buddies log on to a hosting site called Google Meet. Children, overseen by the School Leader in the school setting (see drawing in Figure 1), are provided with a selection of physical books to choose from that was aimed at their reading abilities. Reading Buddies have access to the same books through an online platform (Kindle Cloud Reader or the Folens PM eCollection) on their computer. A Session Leader oversees the Google Meet space to provide support if there are any issues that arise through the scheduled reading session. Using the same methodology as the in-person version, the online programme seeks to improve children's word reading & comprehension skills as well as building children's self-belief and attitudes towards themselves and school.

The Online Reading Buddy Programme 2021

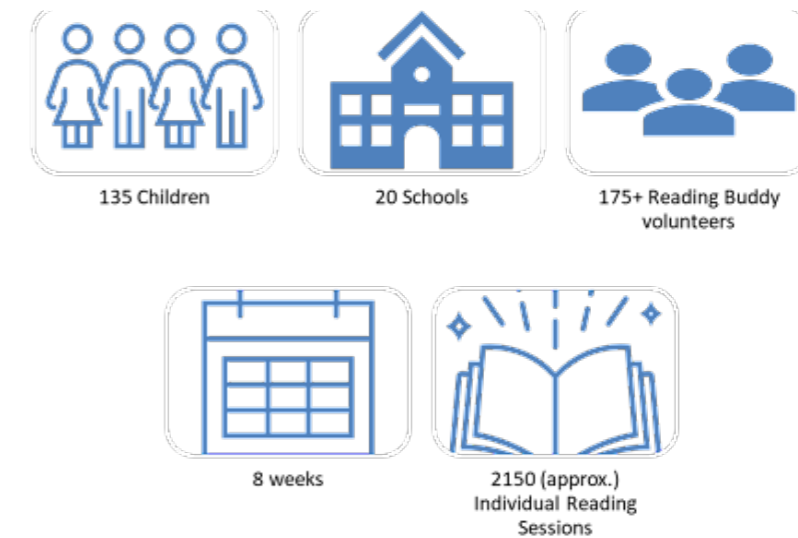


Figure 3 Online Reading Buddy Programme 2021

1.4 Outline of the report

This study aims to evaluate the learning gains of the online programme as well as the contributions of the online context to the process. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used in the research. Chapter 3 presents the child's perspective with results of the survey, tests and focus group data. The Reading Buddy and school perspectives are set out in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Chapter 6 draws together the key themes across all participants to synthesise the report findings and highlight the main implications stemming from its findings.



Methodology

2. Methodology

This chapter sets out the details of the framework (2. 1), study design (2. 2), one-group pre-test post-test evaluation (2. 3), research instruments and analysis (2. 4), participant sampling (2. 5) and limitations (2. 6) of the study.

2.1 Bio-Ecological Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development is commonly used to conceptualise child development as it emphasizes the interactions between the different systems in which the child lives (home, family, school, etc) and importantly for this study the increasingly complex processes between the child and their environment through which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). We adopted the bio-ecological model as the theoretical framework for our study focusing on the children taking part in the Reading Buddy programme and their outcomes through the programme as the focus for our research design and analysis. Specifically, we wanted to examine the children's outcomes on the programme and the proximal process, the Reading Buddy sessions, that facilitated their development. The PPCT (Person-Process-Context-Time) model (Fig. 4) provided the structure for our exploration and analysis of the online Reading Buddy programme that took place from April-June 2021. The bio-ecological framework informed the design of the study and the study instruments.

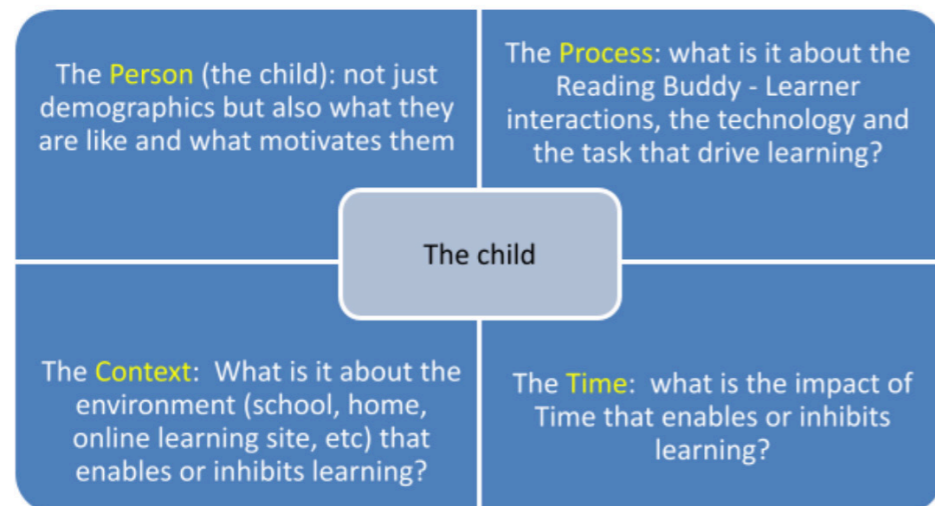


Figure 4 Bio-Ecological Framework PPCT Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)



2.2 Study Design

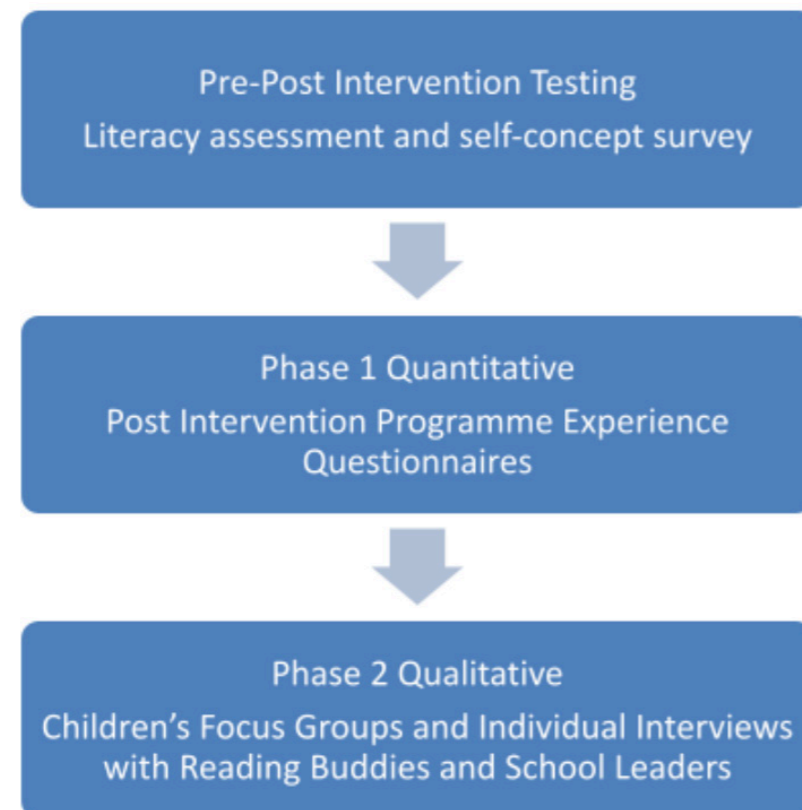


Figure 5 Study Design

The Reading Buddy programme aims to improve learners' word reading and comprehension skills, as well as building their self-belief and attitude towards themselves and school. This mixed-methods study aims to assess the effectiveness of the programme taking both a quantitative and qualitative approach, drawing on the perspectives of all participants in the programme. The literacy and self-concept outcomes were formally evaluated using a pre-post-test intervention. Complementing the pre-post-test intervention, a further two phases of data collection with all programme participants. Following the completion of the Reading Buddy Programme in participating schools, learners, Reading Buddies, and School Leaders were invited to complete phase 1 of the study where they were asked to share their experiences of the programme by completing an online survey. Drawing on previous studies and existing datasets, three online questionnaires

were developed and administered online to consenting participants. On completion of phase 1, a sample of participants were asked to partake in phase 2, which consisted primarily of qualitative data collection, namely focus groups and illustrations with learners and semi-structured individual interviews with Reading Buddies and School Leaders. The study design, instruments and consent materials received ethical approval from the School of Education Research Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin prior to the start of the study.

2.3 Pre-Post Test Intervention Design

The programme effectiveness was assessed using a one-group pre-test post-test study design. The children's literacy outcomes of interest were directly assessed using the WRAT-5 assessment instruments for word reading and sentence comprehension. WRAT-5 is widely used as a norm-referenced test to measure literacy and maths outcomes from age 5 on.

In addition, children's Self-Concept outcomes are measured using a questionnaire that draws on two existing scales:

- Academic Self Concept (Marsh 1990; 1993) subscale designed to measure children's perception of their competence in English (e.g., "English is one of my best subjects").
- Academic Self-Perception subscale of the School Attitudes Assessment Survey (McCoach, 2002) focused on learners perception of their own academic abilities in general (e.g. "I learn new things quickly").

Progress on the literacy and self-concept outcomes is determined through t-tests to estimate the degree of change from pre to post measures. Effect size and ratio gain (Topping and Lindsay, 1992) are calculated as impact measures for gains in standardised reading scores and reading age metrics respectively. The formula to calculate the ratio gain for Reading Age (expressed in months) is as follows (Brooks, 2016, p. 291):

$$\frac{\text{Average Reading Age at post test} - \text{Average Reading Age at pre test}}{\text{(Time elapsed in months)}}$$

Further inferential statistics are used to explore how outcome measures differed according to participant gender, age, starting level and other individual and school characteristics. Multilevel binary logistic regression was used to understand key factors influencing children's literacy outcomes.

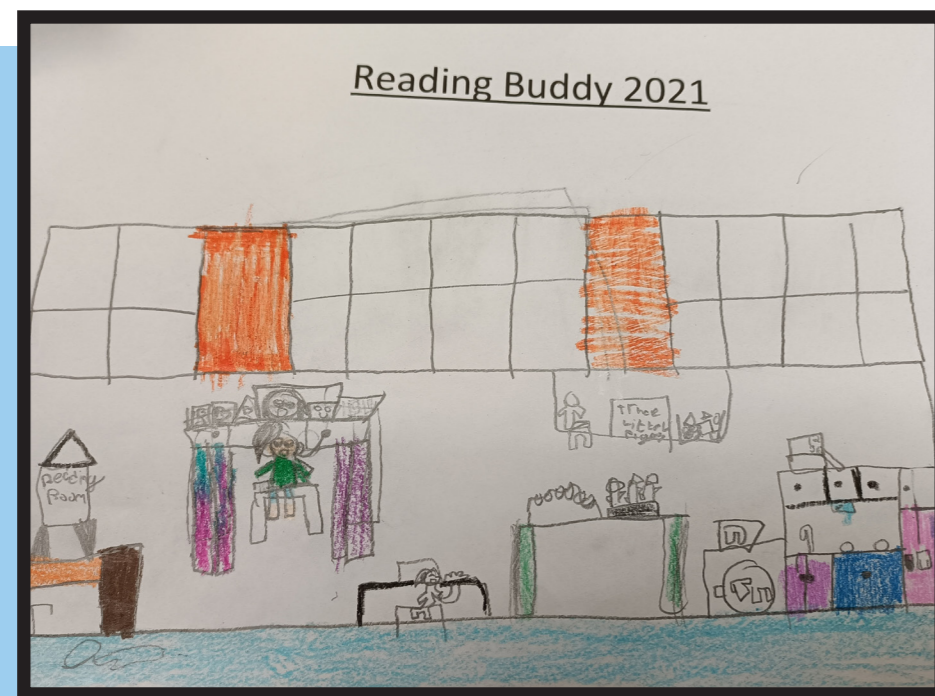


Figure 6 Drawing of the Reading Buddy Programme 2021 (child participant)



2.4 Research Instruments and Data Analysis

Phase 1

In addition to the pre-post intervention, the study comprised two phases, namely an online questionnaire followed by qualitative data collection in the form of child illustrations, focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. Three questionnaires were developed to gain feedback from participants in the programme in phase one. These questionnaires were the Session Leader Post Programme Survey, the Reading Buddy Post Programme Survey and the Children's Feedback Questionnaire. These questionnaires were designed to elicit responses on overall experience, programme set-up, the impact on the learners, the nature of the relationship between Reading Buddies and learners and training and support. Additionally, the questionnaires allow for participants to indicate any issues they experienced or any areas of concern, as well as suggestions for programme improvement. In addition to the data collected through the online questionnaire, participating learners were encouraged to create an illustration representing their experience of the programme. It was hoped that such illustrations would complement other data, allowing children an alternative means to represent their experience on the programme, particularly for students who may have experienced language barriers or difficulties with verbal communication.

Phase 2

Following this, six online focus groups were held with children from participating schools. Each focus group consisted of between 3 and 8 children and lasted between 30-40 minutes. The focus groups were conducted online with both researchers leading the questions using a semi-structured format. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of seven Reading Buddies and six School Leaders also. Each interview was approximately 30-40 minutes long and was conducted online using a semi-structure interview format.

Data analysis

Analysis of the quantitative survey data was largely descriptive, examining the children's literacy and other outcomes as well as all the participants experiences on the programme. The interview and focus group data was transcribed automatically and then reviewed and amended where necessary. Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data (open responses in the questionnaires, interview and focus group transcripts). The bio-ecological framework for the study provided the coding structure for the thematic analysis. The PPCT model was operationalised as pre-defined codes for programme outcomes, Person characteristics of the participants, Process characteristics of the online reading session (interactions, activities, etc), details of the Context of the school and the Reading Buddy and Time dimensions of the study (frequency, duration, timing, etc). The data was coded by the two researchers following a process of joint coding and reviewing and discussion of final conclusions to ensure consistency and high inter-coder agreement in the analysis process.

2.5 Study Participants

The Reading Buddy programme was run online in 20 DEIS schools across Ireland between March and June 2021, with approximately 6-8 children participating in each school. Each child was allocated one Reading Buddy to work with for the duration of the programme (8 weeks). If Reading Buddies were not able to make a session, a substitute (Back-up Buddy) was used where possible. As such, participants in this investigation included the children on the programme, the Reading Buddies working with them and the School Leaders who organised the programme in the schools. In all there were 135 children, 175 Reading Buddies and 21 School Leaders who participated in the online Reading Buddy Programme. The sections below outline the sample that took part in each phase of this study, summarised in Figure 6.

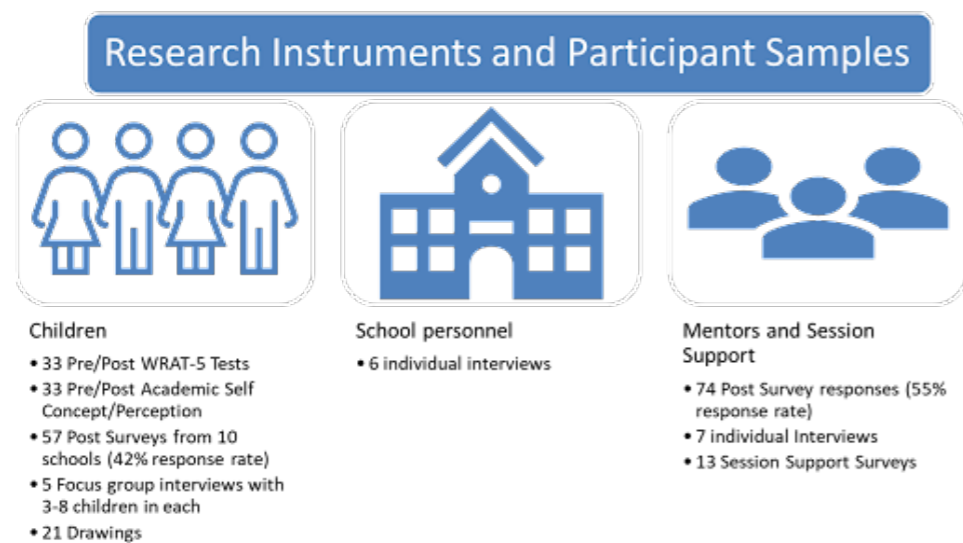


Figure 7 Research Instruments and Participant Samples

Child respondents and their School characteristics

A total of 135 children across 20 schools took part in the programme overall. The schools were mainly urban with only one rural school taking part. The majority of schools were mixed (13), 6 girls-only schools and 1 was a boys only school. Four of the schools were gaelscoileanna. All of the schools had a virtual learning platform in use in the school with most using Google for Education and a number of schools using Seesaw or Classdojo in addition or as the standalone platform. For the pre-test post-test component of this study, a sample of 33 children (12 male; 21 female), approximately a quarter of the overall cohort, took part. This sample is sufficient to allow reliable statistical findings in the pre-post test study design (Brooks, 2016).

These children were spread across 5 schools and are approximately representative of the overall child cohort in age and gender. The children were mainly in 3rd (n=18) and 4th (n=12) class with three children from 2nd class. This is reflected in the spread of ages from 7 to 11 with the average age of approximately 9 and a half years old. In this sample, the most frequent reason cited by the schools for selecting children for the programme was for low self-esteem (n=20), closely followed by low literacy levels (n=19). Eleven children were put forward for the programme for both of these reasons, the school felt their literacy level and self-esteem would benefit from taking part. In three cases, absenteeism was cited as the main rationale.

For the post-programme experience anonymous questionnaire and the drawing of the Reading Buddy experience, all 20 schools were invited to ask their Reading Buddy learners to take part (n=135 children). However given the extremely busy time of year when the study ended in June, only

10 schools took part in the survey component with 57 children responding, giving a questionnaire response rate of 42% of the overall child cohort. 21 children submitted drawings of their experience on the programme.

For phase two of the study, purposive sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Six schools and their learners were invited to participate in this interview phase of the study. These learners engaged in focus groups consisting of 3-8 per group. The School Leaders from these schools were also invited to take part in individual interviews about the programme in their school.

Reading Buddy and Session Leader respondent characteristics

On the online programme there were 175 Reading Buddies in total. Some of these acted as Reading Buddies working directly with children and some acted as Session Leaders, overseeing remotely the Reading Buddy sessions and troubleshooting any issues that arose. All Reading Buddies and Session Leaders were invited to complete the relevant anonymous programme experience questionnaire in phase one of the study. The post-programme survey for the Reading Buddies had 74 complete responses (55% response rate). The profile of the questionnaire respondents is representative of the overall population of Reading Buddies. The majority were female (approximately 70%). There was a spread across age ranges as in Figure 7. Close to half of the respondents are themselves parents. Out of the 74 respondents, 14 were experienced Reading Buddies, they had taken part in the face to face programme previously. Thirteen Session Leaders completed their survey. Seven Reading Buddies were recruited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews designed to investigate their experiences of the programme and the nature of their relationship with their respective mentee. Of these, four were female and three were male. One of these had extensive experience with the programme.

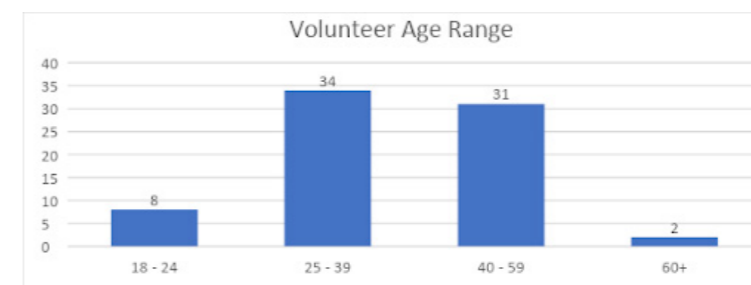


Figure 8 Volunteer sample age range

2.6 Limitations

The study is comprehensive but there are of course some limitations. This is a one-group study design, not a randomised control trial. As a result, the findings of learning gains cannot be compared directly to an equivalent population. However, as a standardised test, the WRAT-5 assessments effectively compare the intervention test results to an unseen control group, the standardised sample (Brooks, 2016) and as a result such one-group studies are common in the literature on reading interventions where a number of standardised tests exist. The sample size is not very large but it is sufficiently large ($n > 30$) to allow for statistical testing.

The timing of the intervention at the end of a very busy year also had some consequences for the data collection. Not all schools had the time to administer the end of programme experience survey to their children and so the children's responses on their experience of the programme could not be matched to the testing results. This could have proved useful in identifying factors of relevance to positive and negative outcomes.

As regards the qualitative data, all of the interviews and focus groups had to be carried out online due to the pandemic restrictions. This proved difficult in particular for the children's focus groups where there were some issues with sound and it was somewhat difficult to hear due to reverberation, ambient noise and low speaking voices. This had an impact on the transcription process also. However, with the support of school personnel and careful attention to the audio and video recordings, many of the issues that arose here were addressed.

2.7 Summary

The range of perspectives and methods used in this study provide a rich profile not only of the programme outcomes for children but also of the characteristics of the process that generated those outcomes. The analysis highlights the affordances of the online environment for learning but also some of the inhibiting factors. The evidence base suggests some clear recommendations for optimising the process to scale up the online programme in the future.



Figure 9 Example of schools and volunteers working remotely during pandemic



Children's Perspectives on the Reading Buddy Programme

3. Children's Perspectives on the Reading Buddy Programme

This chapter presents the children's perspective on the Reading Buddy programme. Section 3.1 presents the results of the pre-test post-test evaluation of the sample of thirty-three children. Section 3.2 presents the findings of the programme experience survey. Section 3.3 presents the key themes from the focus group interviews. Finally, section 3.4 draws together the findings from all the children's data to summarise the children's perspective on the outcomes and process of the programme.



Figure 10 Drawing of the Reading Buddy Programme 2021 (child participant)

3.1 Pre-Test Post-Test Evaluation

Literacy Outcomes

Literacy outcomes were measured using WRAT-5. These results show substantial impact for both measures, as in Table 1. For Word Reading, in terms of ratio gain, there was a significant average difference between the pre-post test scores ($t_{32} = 4.289, p < 0.001$). On average, post scores were 7 months higher than pre scores (95% CI [3.692 – 10.369]) giving a ratio gain of 3.5 which is classified as substantial (Brooks, 2020). For Reading Comprehension, there was a significant average difference between the pre-post test scores ($t_{32} = 2.817, p < 0.008$). On average, post scores were 6.2 months higher than pre scores (95% CI [1.712 – 10.652]), giving a substantial ratio gain of 3.1. The ratio gain is somewhat lower than the face-to-face results from 2019 (NEPS, 2019) and the effect size is medium but in the educationally significant range. Over the two-month intervention the children recorded on average 6 to 7 months of progress.

Table 1 Literacy Outcome Ratio Gain and Effect Sizes

	Ratio Gain	Effect Size	Impact
Word Reading	3.5	0.747	Substantial
Reading Comprehension	3.1	0.49	Substantial

There was no effect for the child's gender in these results, suggesting that girls and boys benefitted equally from the intervention. A regression analysis of reading comprehension gains (Table 2) would suggest that the age and starting self-concept of the child may predict comprehension gain outcomes ($r^2=0.414$ $p<0.001$). These findings may merit closer interrogation with a larger sample size of participants.

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-18.268	21.427		-.853	.401
	Age at end of programme	5.300	1.866	.420	2.841	.008
	PRE Academic Self Perception (General)	-35.973	13.818	-.385	-2.603	.014

a. Dependent Variable: Reading Comprehension Reading Age Change (in months)

Table 2 Regression Coefficients for Reading Comprehension gains

Academic Self-Concept and Self Perception

The Academic Self-Concept scores are less clear-cut. There is some improvement but the effect size is small. Furthermore, there is no control group as represented by the standardisation sample for the literacy measures to compare against and therefore these findings would require further validation. Children's Academic Self-Concept outcomes are measured using Marsh's Academic Self Concept (Marsh 1990; 1993) related to competence in English and the general Academic Self-Perception subscale of the School Attitudes Assessment Survey (McCoach, 2002). The boxplots (Figure 9) present the results for the pre and post scores on both sub-scales standardised in the range 0 to 1.

For Academic Self Concept in relation to English, there is no statistically significant difference in the pre and post test scores. This intervention is very focused on reading aloud but the questions refer more generally to English class, so perhaps the broader self-concept subscale does not capture that. On the specific question in relation to feeling nervous in English class, there was a significant average difference between the pre-post question scores ($t_{32} = 1.818$, $p < 0.079$). On average, post-responses on this question were 0.47 points lower than pre-scores on a 7-point likert scale (95% CI [-0.057 – 0.995]). The effect size is small however (Cohens $d=0.321$).

As regards Academic Self-Perception about learning in general, when the post-measure lowest outlier on the boxplot is removed, there was a significant average difference between the pre-post test scores ($t_{31} = 2.053$, $p < 0.05$). On average, on a normalised scale from 0-1, post scores were 0.03588 points higher (equivalent to 3.5 percentage points) than pre scores (95% CI [0.00023 – 0.07153]). The effect size however is small (Cohens $d=0.363$).

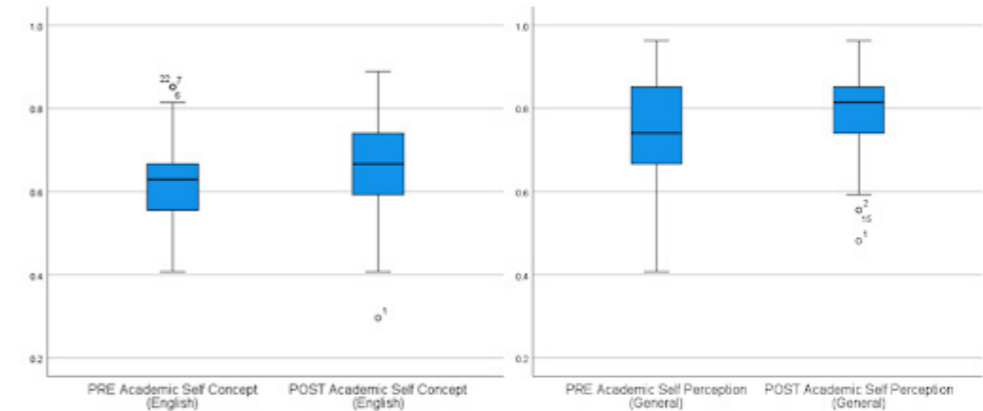


Figure 11 Pre and Post Academic Self Concept (English) and Academic Self Perception (General) Boxplots

3.2 Post-Programme Children Survey

The 57 full programme experience questionnaire responses (Figure 10) spread across 10 schools were overwhelmingly positive response to liking the Reading Buddy sessions – only 1 child responded no and 4 “don't know”. Similarly, there was a very positive response to continuing to read with their Reading Buddy with 51 positive responses. Unsurprisingly, the negative and unsure responses comprised many of the unsure and negative responses to liking the programme. They also included three participants who were negative or unsure about the online format.

As regards children's self-report of outcomes, there was a very positive response on children's improvement at reading (including the child who reported not liking the sessions). There are however quite a high number of “Don't know” responses here (8 out of 57) which would suggest it could be useful for children to be supported to self-evaluate before and after the

programme to allow children some sense of what “better” might look and feel like. Responses are much less positive about being happier reading aloud in class with just over half the children reporting that they are not happier or unsure. This aligns with the inconclusive results on academic self-concept. The School Leaders report low self-confidence as one of the main selection criteria for children on the programme so this could merit further investigation.

Overall the children are quite positive about the internet aspect but over a quarter (16) either did not like the online format or were not sure about it. This is not related to their responses on the ease of use of the device. The negative responses are spread across a range of schools. Therefore it does not appear to be associated with a particular connectivity issue in a school. The interview data from all participants mention issues that arose over the course of the programme and this result may reflect those issues. As regards the ease of use of the device, again this is mixed. The majority of the children were happy with this but nearly a quarter were not sure and 7 children did not find the device easy to use. Of these, all reported enjoying the sessions.

Overall the response of the children is a very positive experience despite any negative responses about the technology.

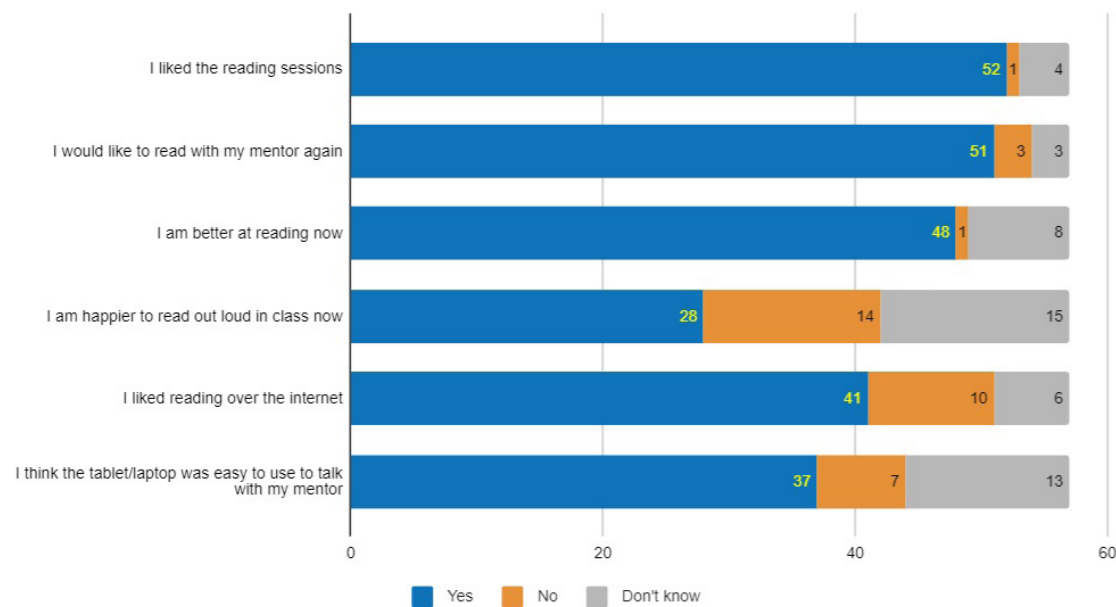


Figure 12 Children's Programme Experience Questionnaire

3.3 Children's Focus Group Interviews

The children in the six focus group interviews were overall hugely enthusiastic about the Reading Buddy sessions. As regards the outcomes they reported, they mostly noted that they were happier reading having completed the programme. Many of the children reported that they still feel nervous reading aloud but the interaction with the buddies definitely helped their confidence. They talked about how their nervousness reading reduced over the course of the programme:

“ I was on the first, like the first three or four sessions. Then I sort of got used to it. At the end I was able to read to them without being nervous.”

Focus Group School 3

“ I felt really shy of reading with people first, but then now I'm not.”

Focus Group School 5

Some talked about improvements with word reading (“bigger words”) and others with reading fluency:

“ Yeah, I felt good because I was reading on there and it was a good book. And it was like, I was reading kind of slow at the start but then, but then I have someone to help me get faster and faster.”

Focus Group School 2

One child noted that because their Buddy asked them about the story each week, he worked really hard to remember what was happening from week to week and that helped his memory.

The vast majority of the children got on great with their Reading Buddies, and looked forward to the sessions with them:

“ I missed them, and reading with them, it feels good.”

Focus Group School 4

The children talked about their connection to their specific Buddy in very positive terms. For the few children who had more than one Buddy, this was somewhat disruptive in their experience of the programme. Some of them would have a good chat with their buddies before and after the session and share a few jokes but others would jump right into the reading. Some said that their Reading Buddy would ask them about the story a little but this was not consistent across the children. One or two children said they would take breaks through the session and the Reading Buddy would bring them back to the reading then. One or two children said their Buddy didn't really chat at all and was quite silent but these children also noted that the sessions were helpful. The children were clear that their Reading Buddies definitely helped them and praised them a lot. Most often with words they didn't know or got stuck on, helping them sound them out or break them down.

“ And our Reading Buddy helped us do the words and all and we, like just it was really good. Really nice to read.”

Focus Group School 2

A few of the children talked positively about how they saw themselves as readers and how that was important for the Reading Buddy programme:

“ I was looking forward to it because then it would have got me back on my reading person personality 'cause I'll be reading for a while now.”

Focus Group School 2

“ I enjoyed reading with the reading buddy because I like reading altogether and I just thought it was really fun.”

Focus Group School 2

When asked about the books themselves, the children were overall very happy with the choices of books they had available. In one or two cases, the child had not been able to get the book they wanted as someone else got to it first and this was a clear disappointment. They talked with pride about the books they had finished and those who hadn't finished their books expressed disappointment at that.

“ Good but I didn't get to finish the book because there was a lot of pages [...] Yeah, but it was a big book though. but I finished almost half of it.”

Focus Group School 2

They also liked the physical aspect of the books – their feel and smell and the bookmarks they used. When asked about a preference for books or e-books, most of the children were happy with the paper books though a small few would have liked a tablet option.

The children were overall very positive about the technology and, for the most part, found it easy to use. In describing the online space, some mentioned how close their Buddy seemed to them:

“ It felt like he was actually telling me what to do right in front of me and he's actually living in Dublin. All that distance!”

Focus Group School 7

“ It was like my dad helped me at like reading a story at night, so that's what it was like having that. It was like having somebody read beside you in the real world.”

Focus Group School 7

A number of them did mention technical problems such as calls dropping, freezing, glitching or time lags in the sound or video. This was frustrating for the children, especially when they recurred as they did in the case of a very small number of children from different schools. The quote below illustrates that it is not just frustrating but also confusing when technical glitches arose:

“ I froze for a while and then it's very confusing when that happens.”

Focus Group School 4

One child mentioned that their headphones did not fit and another that the video didn't work. These problems with the tools also caused some frustration. Despite the problems though, most of the participants said they really liked the online format.

In addition to technical issues, some children mentioned that the classroom space was somewhat distracting due to having their friends around and the level of noise. For other children, this was not an issue as they had their earphones to cut out any outside noise. The only other negative mentioned by some of the school groups was being taken out of classes they enjoyed or even worse, yard time. This definitely was viewed as a negative even though they found the Reading Buddy sessions fun and engaging.

3.4 Summary

This chapter focused on the children's outcomes and experiences of the programme. The testing regime provides solid evidence that the programme has a positive outcome on literacy outcomes over and above what would be expected in the same 8-week timeframe of schooling. The children report greatly enjoying the programme and finding it useful for reading. They are almost unanimous in discussing the good relationship with their Reading Buddies and the help they provided, in particular in tackling new or hard words. The books too were a really important part in the children's enthusiasm and they took great pride in finishing them. The technology was managed well by the children and did not pose any significant barrier to them, though small issues did cause a fair degree of frustration. All in all, the children experienced and reported significant benefits and enjoyment in a manageable and (mostly) conducive environment for reading.





Volunteer perspectives (Reading Buddies and Session Leaders)

4. Volunteer perspectives (Reading Buddies and Session Leaders)

This chapter examines Reading Buddies' perceptions of the Reading Buddy programme. The survey and interview findings are presented thematically so that the discussions from the interviews can provide greater insight on the survey results.



Figure 13 Drawing of the Reading Buddy Programme 2021 (child participant)

4.1 Programme Outcomes

“ I think that was the main purpose of the Reading Buddy too. It's just the confidence to read and to get pleasure from reading so that you know.”

Reading Buddy 7

The Reading Buddies in the survey responded overwhelmingly that the Reading Buddy programme was positive for the children (69/73: Positive, 4/73: Somewhat Positive). While the Reading Buddies mostly reported a large to medium positive effect for literacy outcomes, by far the most positive impact from the Reading Buddies' point of view was in the children's self-confidence (Figure 11).

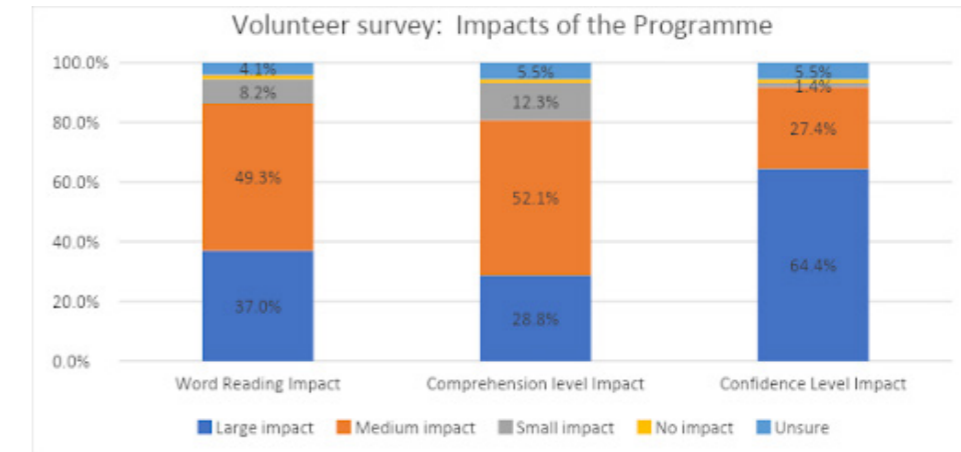


Figure 14 Programme Positive Impacts (Reading Buddy Perspective)

This fully aligns with the findings of the interviews where the most powerful outcome noted by Reading Buddies was confidence to read aloud and read with more expression:

“ She kind of read very quietly at the beginning, um, but then her confidence builds as we went on and she started to read more louder. She kind of sometimes emphasized certain words, which is nice. So she was kind of like bringing the characters back to life.”

Reading Buddy 5

Also improvements in social confidence over the course of the programme was frequently mentioned as connections with Reading Buddies deepened.

“ It was great to see her confidence build from the first session where she was so much quieter and even speaking to me she was very nervous to like our last couple sessions where she was so confident and like it is nice to see that when you give someone a bit of time and encouragement their confidence does build.”

Reading Buddy 5

The Reading Buddies noted the programme did benefit the learners' reading and contributed to an improved attitude towards reading. Some noted improved fluency, greater attention to detail and more attention on word errors and self-correction. A number of Reading Buddies said the child's ability to tackle more difficult words or sentences or even books had improved.

“ You know they were gradually less and less apologetic about making mistakes, and also when they made like just ordinary mistakes that any child would make. Um, they were able to rectify it without them being so self-conscious.”

Reading Buddy 7

The Reading Buddies in the interviews highlighted the simple benefit to the child of being able to connect on a weekly basis with an adult and enjoy one-on-one attention. They felt this contributed to the increased self-confidence, reading ability and interpersonal skills developed by the children. Two Reading Buddies even referred to the increased maturity of the children in the slightly formal environment of the online meeting place.

Outcomes for the Reading Buddy

The Reading Buddies had a wide range of jobs, roles and experience working with children. The programme did not always align with Reading Buddy expectations but the overall experience was very positive, with the Reading Buddies using words like, 'fun', 'a great laugh', 'quite nice'. They talked about looking forward to the time out of the working day spent with their Reading Buddy. In the survey and the interviews, the Reading Buddies were clear that volunteering had been worth the effort involved. 73 out of 74 reported the experience as positive or very positive in the survey. In the interviews, they noted the altruistic benefits for themselves, as well as other benefits of opening their horizons, developing skills that were transferrable to their family or work life also.

“ the bonus and was I got something out of it too. And that was that we enjoyed sharing this story together.”

Reading Buddy 7

4.2 Programme Process: The Reading Buddy Sessions

Reading Buddy-Child Interaction

The Reading Buddies were very positive about the children's attitude and focus in the sessions (73/74 rated as good-excellent). In the interviews they talked about their positive, curious attitudes at the beginning of the programme, which generally was maintained throughout with some waxing and waning for some children. The interviewees discussed trying to strike a balance between having fun and getting to know one another and making sure the reading was done, placing importance on building the relationship and developing trust.

The Reading Buddies' interview discussions of how sessions ran was very consistent and fully aligned with the instructions provided in their training. Mostly, they would spend 5 minutes at the beginning and at the end of each session having 'chats' with the learners, before diving into the reading. As reported by the children, there was a fair degree of variation in the Reading Buddy engagements with the learner. Some would chat more and some less, depending on the personality of the child but also on the excitement of the book. All of them helped with tackling hard words. Some Reading Buddies spoke about trying to strike a balance between letting the child read and stopping them to correct errors. Some would ask comprehension style questions. One put a lot of emphasis on word correction and reading accuracy. Others actively avoided more "teacherly" behaviours as they felt theirs should be a different role. For the most part, differences in approach were discussed in relation to the personality or perceived need of the child so the Reading Buddy looked to adapt to how the child responded. On the whole Reading Buddies spoke of emulating a positive, encouraging atmosphere in which the learners could grow in confidence with their reading.

The Books

In the Reading Buddy-child interactions, the book took a starring role. Some Reading Buddies talked about the focus fully on the shared story:

“ You’re almost going to go off on your own and share an imaginary story together. It’s the together experience that made it special and for me too.”
Reading Buddy 7

And the enjoyment they got out of the story, as much as the child:

“ I look forward to it like especially ‘cause the book that we were reading and maybe ‘cause I wanted to know what was going to happen next and I I could see that they were getting excited ‘cause they were getting more into the book”
Reading Buddy 6

The story was not just an excuse for reading, it was the driver as illustrated in the quote below:

“ It was very obvious that she enjoyed the first book that she read. I think ‘cause the second book she chose, she had read it. So I think if they already have read a book, I think that was making impacts on their ability to focus.”
Reading Buddy 5

Two of the Reading Buddies, like the children, also made mention of the importance of getting the book finished, a more important timeframe in the programme than the number of weeks it lasted:

“ I think like I could have done it for longer like we only made it halfway through the book”
Reading Buddy 6

The survey respondents were overall quite positive about the technology. However, as shown in Figure 12, problems were relatively common.

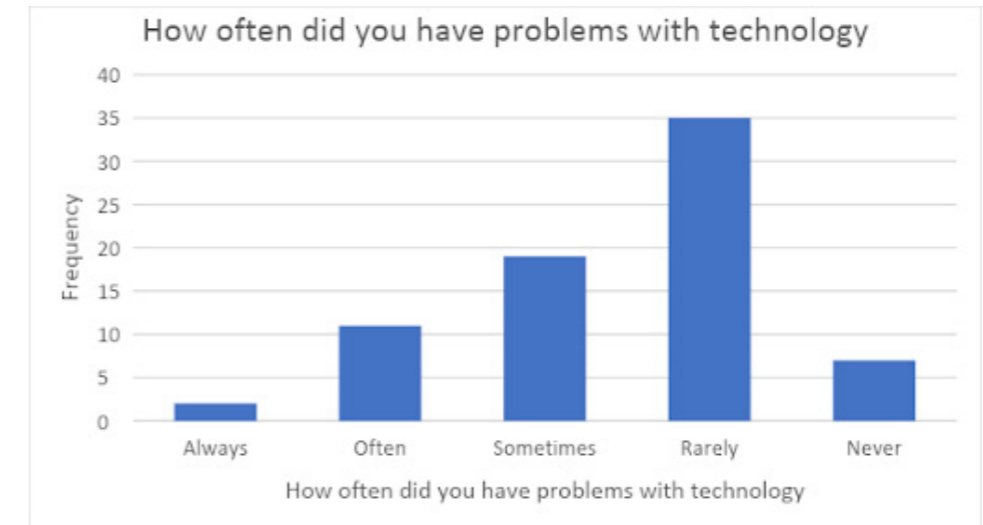


Figure 15 Technology Problems (Reading Buddy Survey)

As regards the impact of this on the Reading Buddy experience, the more technology problems reported, the less positive the Reading Buddy was about the experience (Chi Square = 5.305, df=1, p<0.05).

Despite any technical issues, the Reading Buddies in the interviews reported that the online space provided a very focused environment conducive to the programme goal of reading. The terms they used were very much of a physical space – going **in to the online space at the start or going back in** after a distraction. The online space seemed to act like a room within a room, overseen by the School Leader and the Session Leader but still separate and quiet within the noisy classroom environment. Some noted the importance of the dual screen to maintain a good view of the learner and eye contact. The Reading Buddies noted that the children were mostly well able to navigate the requirements of the technology and the occasion. In fact, as noted above, they felt this was an unexpected benefit of the online programme for the children.

A number of the Reading Buddies noted that the physical space which the children were in was a source of distraction for them. Sound quality was the biggest issue for the Reading Buddies. It was repeatedly mentioned as an issue with the sound of other learners reading and the background noise of a school environment. Some Reading Buddies mentioned that their learners' found this frustrating and this impacted on the connection between them during the sessions.

“ There were a couple of times, particularly where it started to get noisy where he would almost disappear down under the screen...”

Reading Buddy 1

In contrast to this view, one of the School Leaders expressed how much quieter the environment was because the Reading Buddies were not in the room with children:

“ Maybe you know if the adult was beside the children in the room. I can imagine it would be a lot noisier ... whereas I think online it was ... quite quiet.”

School Leader interview 2

Reading Buddies felt that sometimes the other learners in the classroom were a bit of a distraction for their buddy. In some cases the feeling was the children were too close to one another; this was assumed to be because of limited classroom space.

Online vs. Face-to-Face

With this interesting viewpoint of Reading Buddies new and old on the online and the school setting, Reading Buddies had differing views on whether the programme would be better in an online or a face-to-face environment.

The online programme allowed Reading Buddies who were not physically close to the school to participate. The online space itself was described as more focused, more in line with programme outcomes, more convenient and less stressful for the Reading Buddies. Online was seen to be more efficient and respectful of the Reading Buddy and the child's time:

“ It was a more productive use of time. I think it's much better, much more efficient use of everybody's time.”

Reading Buddy 3

While in person was described as more personable and better for establishing relationships, some Reading Buddies acknowledged that in person there would likely be more 'chats' and probably less focused reading. Even the experienced Reading Buddies responding in the survey who felt the face-to-face programme was either better or just about the same, responded that the online format had a mostly positive effect on learner's attitude and focus. Reading Buddies noted the convenience of the online format lends the programme for scaling up and potentially involving more corporate Reading Buddies:

“ Because your calendar rules your world and being able to fit something into a lunch time slot is, you know it is ideal, right?”

Reading Buddy 1

One perhaps unforeseen and almost mundane difficulty with the online environment which caused some frustration was the difficulty in finding the page in the book where the child has a physical book and the Reading Buddy has an ebook with different pagination. What would never be an issue in a face to face setting where there is only one book became quite difficult for some Reading Buddies. In particular where the reader was not a strong reader, finding the shared page proved unexpectedly difficult for one or two Reading Buddies.

The negatives of the online model are mostly noted as technical difficulties that then impact on the ability to make a connection with the child and thereby progress with the reading. Technical issues included sound quality, dropped calls, difficulty connection, learners struggling with the equipment. However, given that the technology mostly ran smoothly, these issues were few and/or were quickly resolved. The Reading Buddies did consider that it would certainly be positive to meet the learners in person or show them their workplace. This could be possible even with the online programme. All in all, while the barriers to successful online sessions were frustrating when they occurred, the Reading Buddies noted the effectiveness and convenience of the online environment despite them.

Programme Time

The dimension of time is important for the Reading Buddy programme – the length of the sessions and of the overall programme, the time of day it occurs, the days it falls on and the time of year it takes place. All of these factors have the potential to impact on the children’s outcomes and experiences of the programme. The online format meant that the time the Reading Buddy needed to commit was much less and much easier to fit into their day. As regards the impact on the children, the Reading Buddies reported in some cases they felt the duration of the sessions and programmes was too long for the focus of the children. In others they felt it was too short. The “just right” timing as expressed by some Reading Buddies is the time it takes to finish the book. Most important is the consistency over time. A number of Reading Buddies noted how important it was to them not to miss a session as they realised the commitment to every session was important to them. Equally, they felt that gaps caused for example by Covid-19 outbreaks in schools which resulted in the children being out were very disruptive. While the perfect timing might be difficult, being consistent with the timing that is allocated was important.

4.3 Training and Support

As regards the support and training for the programme, the Reading Buddies were extremely positive and included a number of positive comments about the Kinia team. The areas that were mentioned for improvement here were a small number of survey respondents who looked for a briefing from the class teacher before the start of the programme to get a sense of the children’s needs. One of the interview participants would have valued some feedback on her own performance as a Reading Buddy mid-way through the programme. Another Reading Buddy suggested more advice on sounding out words would be helpful for those not familiar with this. Beyond this the Reading Buddies and Session Leaders felt very well trained and supported by the organisational team.

4.4 Summary

The Reading Buddies were very positive about the programme. The key programme outcome they felt for the children was confidence even more than literacy though they could also see gains in reading. The Reading Buddies expressed some surprise at how much they got out of the programme themselves from the “feel-good” sense of giving something back as many of them expressed it, to learning new skills to bring to other aspects of their lives. The Reading Buddies highly valued the relationships with their Reading Buddies and spoke about how they endeavoured to create a positive, encouraging atmosphere in which the learners could grow in confidence with their reading. There was some variety in how they approached the Reading Buddy sessions but always with the child doing the vast majority of the reading. As for the children, a good book was really key to a successful engagement with their Reading Buddy. As regards the online dimension of the programme, for the most part the technology ran smoothly and provided a focused space very conducive for paired reading. However, where there were glitches, it did impact heavily on engagement. Sound quality was the most troublesome issue for Reading Buddies often coming from the classroom environment but making it difficult to hear online. Overall, the Reading Buddies were very positive about their experience and their support on the programme and 72 out of 74 saying they would like to volunteer again.

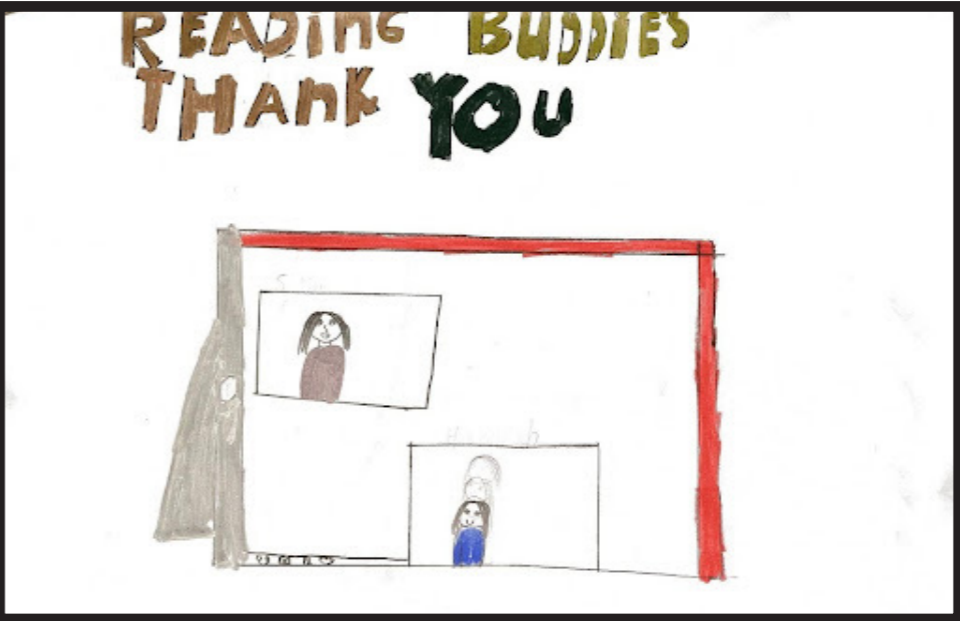


Figure 15 D6awing from Online Reading Buddy Programme 2021



School perspectives

5. School perspectives

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with six of the twenty-one school organisers of the Reading Buddy programme, termed School Leaders here. The role of the School Leaders in the school varied from classroom teacher to resource teacher but effectively they took responsibility for the smooth running of the programme in their school, from the set-up of the room and IT equipment, to the day-to-day troubleshooting of issues as they arose. In some cases, they had additional support within the school, for example with the technology or in the set-up phase. This chapter sets out their perspectives on how the programme operated in the school and its value to the children and the school community. Section 5.1 identifies the main programme outcomes reported by the School Leaders for the children on the programme and to a certain extent for themselves and the school. Section 5.2 explores the process through which these outcomes are achieved – the Reading Buddy sessions with the child-Reading Buddy-book interactions mediated by technology. The School Leaders view on the supports and training required to run the programme are outlined in section 5.3.

5.1 Programme Outcomes

The schools select children to go onto the Reading Buddy programme who are not confident readers but are readers. The School Leaders expressed this as the middle ground, where they might not qualify for most programmes but they would greatly benefit from some one-on-one attention and a focus on reading, and those that needed 1 on 1 attention for confidence.

“ so we kind of based it on their academic needs. I suppose I’m just kind of maybe social and emotional needs as well, and so we selected children that, like maybe needs a little bit of help with everything and a little bit more confidence in reading”

School Leader 1 Interview

Literacy Outcomes

“ they really came on leaps and bounds and they it made them special coming out of the classrooms as well, so that’s wonderful”

School Leader 5

The School Leaders were overwhelmingly positive about the programme from the point of view of the children’s outcomes and for their own experience. While they did not quantify specific literacy development, a number of different aspects were mentioned, such as sounding out skills, phonics and comprehension. The most fundamental outcome for the children which all of the School Leaders talked about was the increased confidence of the children to read aloud. They talked about the clear evidence of this as over time the children began to read louder and with more expression and enjoyment and this was noted outside the Reading Buddy programme also:

“ I spoke to the class teacher about this just to see how she noticed anything in the classroom and she said definitely she can just see like a greater confidence now when they’re asked to reading class”

School Leader 2

Linked to this greater confidence, some commented on improved reading fluency:

“ So no matter how much they got read, their fluency was definitely developing over the course of the number of weeks and they got more relaxed as well. I think so when they were more relaxed then you know your fluency does increase when you’re more relaxed. They got more familiar with their buddy ... For me fluency was definitely the biggest change.”

School Leader 5

Several of them discussed how the children seemed to have developed their identity as readers:

“ They kind of saw themselves as readers, which is really nice... I think that they learned themselves that they can do that. You know, they can read a book... Like that lad that was in the front seat in the focus group, Oh my God, he read two books and he just is so proud of himself and we're so proud of him as well.”

_____ School Leader 5

Interpersonal Skills and Other Outcomes

The School Leaders all discussed the value of the social connection established through the programme and how the social skills of the children had improved to meet the demands of the online reading sessions. A number of them noted how much more comfortable and confident the children were in holding a conversation over the internet both from the point of view of the technology and the confidence and social development that requires:

“ The social thing of developing a relationship with somebody and being able to chat.”

_____ School Leader 2

“ like they were learning the skills of introducing themselves to a mentor on screen and speaking a little bit about themselves.”

_____ School Leader 1

“ It's experience of working with the iPad and speaking to somebody on a regular basis and building confidence on the IT side, I mean that was huge.”

_____ School Leader 5

Like the Reading Buddies, the School Leaders discussed the huge value of simply the one-on-one attention that the programme offered for developing those interpersonal skills. This holistic value of the programme for the children is captured in the quote below:

“ I loved the fact that they were like as I said using you know so many new skills.”

_____ School Leader 1

“ Yeah, we made them become independent”

_____ School Leader 5 Interview

The quote below from the School Leader in school 2 summarises the comments of all the School Leaders about the positive impacts of the programme for children:

“ And I noticed that their voices, even after reading, were getting louder. You know, initially I could barely hear them, you know, and it was just kind of with their confidence growing. It was just great to see you know... They're putting more expression into the reading and just really getting into it and then discussing what they had read. So it wasn't just that they were reading and they were really kind of taking in what they were reading and then being able to discuss it and go back over it, which was great.

_____ School Leader 2 interview

5.2 Programme Process: The Reading Buddy Sessions

Reading Buddy-Child Interaction

The School Leaders talked about their perspective on the Reading Buddy sessions observing the children interacting with their buddies over the 8 weeks. They were full of praise for the Reading Buddies:

“ the volunteers were fantastic. They were so enthusiastic and patient, you know, and encouraging ... which is great.”

_____ School Leader 2

The School Leader observed the relationships developing between the Reading Buddies and the children over the sessions:

“ I think seeing the relationship kind of developed between the children and their reading buddies was fantastic because the first week we were doing that they were all fairly quiet and they were reading and they're very low voice and they weren't really conversing with the person on the computer screen and I was thinking, Oh no, I hope this is going to go well and you know, hope this is not a disaster. But as the weeks went on I could just see them building up that relationship.”

_____ School Leader 2

“ You could see a bond growing and the chat and then getting down to work with fun, work and then kind of back to the chat and and log off again and see you tomorrow”

_____ School Leader 3

They were clear on the importance of that relationship and the fit with the Reading Buddy for the programme to be effective.

“ And the pairings worked out really well because there was one boy who was particularly shy and he was paired with this kind of very exuberant Scottish woman and I think even the fact that she had a different accent, he was just completely kind of enthralled, you know, and he loved talking to her. Yeah, they just seemed to match them up very, very well.”

_____ School Leader 2

Like the Reading Buddies, they noted the importance of consistency and how missed sessions or changes or breaks could really have a negative impact:

“ It was kind of building a little relationship with the person. So I think it was important that it was the same person ... as much as possible.”

_____ School Leader 3

Some observed the range of activities of the Reading Buddies to engage, encourage and help the children with their reading:

“ [they] stopped and started a little bit, you know, a bit of reading, a bit of chatting, a bit of reading, a bit of chatting, but they needed that to keep them engaged.”

_____ School Leader 4

“ [they were] just delving into the books and into the different aspects of the book rather than just OK you reading and I listen which I kind of expected. It would just be a lot of reading, listening and prompting kind of words they don't know, but there was a lot more comprehension going on, which is lovely. And inferential questions and things like that, which is such a bonus... That's the stuff that it's hard to get time to do”

————— School Leader 3

Not all the interactions observed were always that successful but overall the School Leaders were very positive about the encouraging and engaging atmosphere the Reading Buddies helped create:

“ So I think that was down to the volunteers being able to create a relaxed atmosphere with the children, so they did engage with them.”

————— School Leader 6 Interview

The Online Space

Getting all the children set up and online at the same time was a challenge at first that many of the School Leaders discussed. However, they talked about how the children and themselves very quickly got on top of the demands of the technology very quickly and for the most parts after initial struggles, things ran smoothly and efficiently.

“ they would just kind of join the meeting. They learned how to do that pretty quickly and they have their little chat and then they would start reading their book and they would be reading solidly for about at least 20 minutes.”

————— School Leader 2

Like the Reading Buddies, some of the School Leaders talked about the privacy and peacefulness of the online space for reading:

“ Whereas with the Buddy they had their headphones, it was just the two of them, you know. So it was nice in that way that they felt kind of it was OK almost to make mistakes with somebody was there. To help them, yeah”

————— School Leader 4

However, there were technical factors that impacted negatively on children's engagement in that space. This was not frequent but one school in particular had some difficulties and the School Leader discussed how this affected the experience for some learners very negatively:

“ there would have been one or two who had dropped off mainly not because of the actual program itself but because of issues with say headphones or sound. So the technology. There were definitely two children who the technical issues frustrated them a little bit towards the end where we had issues with mikes with microphones or headphones and getting disconnected. You know having to disconnect because of a sound issue and then reconnect and it just broke it up for them a little bit. There was one particular people who had happened towards the end of the program and I could see that it did frustrate her and it did and I suppose impact her ... engagement, but her enjoyment was kind of a little bit dampened by that.”

————— School Leader 4

Some of the School Leaders also talk about the need to keep the children aware of the needs of the setting, reminding them to stay visible on camera and audible on the mike, an issue raised also by some Reading Buddies.

The Classroom Space

The relative peace of the online space is set in quite stark contrast with the physical space of the classroom where activity and noise levels are high with the School Leader managing this complex space:

“ Kind of like a bit of a call center, but they were all busy like chatting. And like yeah, there’s a lovely buzz going on then everyone was always like, really inquisitive as to what’s going on ‘cause the kids were also engaged. I mean, I think honestly a fire alarm could go off and they were just really engaged one on one on their laptop, but like there was a lovely buzz ‘cause they were quite animated.”

School Leader 3

The logistics of getting the sound, the space, the furniture and the internet access all at their best was a fine-tuned balancing act for School Leaders. They had to be close to the router, have enough space for the children to spread out a bit so that it wasn’t too noisy but they all had to be close enough to the router and seated comfortably so that they could be seen on screen and hold their book at the same time.

“ The thing is, you do need space, I think for volume. Because otherwise the child was likely heard on the microphone of this [other] child ... You do need a bit of space. You can’t have the laptops like right beside each other [...] ‘cause you don’t want to tell them to have to keep quiet either. If you’re getting excited and some things you know they’re having fun.”

School Leader 3

“ we are limited in space here in terms of we didn’t have a huge big room where we could spread everyone out because we’re just very limited.”

School Leader 6

“ There are only six of them in a classroom, so I could spread them all out so that they weren’t anywhere near each other so that they could just there wouldn’t be any interference. You know on the sound, and then they use their headphones. And so that was that was fine. They could hear perfectly what was going on”

School Leader 2

One school had to split the children across two rooms when they increased their participant numbers to 8 children as the Reading Buddies said it was too noisy to hear. When working well, headphones were essential to make it possible to hear and be heard and also make it easier to sit comfortably:

“ It was a little noisy but they didn’t seem to mind it ‘cause you know they all had headphones on and they were able to read.”

School Leader 6

Online Vs Face-to-Face

Overall the School Leaders interviewed were in favour of online over a face-to-face option although they do see the value of the real human contact. Having observed the programme online, they had come to realise that the Reading Buddies could develop a rapport online, possibly just as well as face to face. Furthermore, the online setting acted as a draw to the children and that also was positive:

“ I still think the online one worked very well and they still developed a really nice relationship with their buddy even though they weren't in the same room... and you know, being on a zoom call their own personal zoom call that was that was an attraction for the children in itself, you know.”

School Leader 4

As noted by the Reading Buddies, the online space offered a focus and quiet for the reading activity that they felt was really valuable in contrast to the noisy environment of a school room.

“ Maybe you know if the adult was beside the children in the room. I can imagine it would be a lot noisier. You know, if you only have one room to use, whereas I think online it was, it was quite quiet. It was very kind of, you know intimate maybe between the two, the child and the volunteer. So it was kind of nice in that sense”

School Leader 2

Two School Leaders noted that face to face would in fact require more space and potentially generate more noise. With space at a premium in schools at present, this was a critical factor in the feasibility of the programme. Furthermore the efficiency of the online programme that “cuts out the chit chat” (School Leader 5) was really important for the School Leaders as for the Reading Buddies. One School Leader expressed the opposite view that setting up people in classrooms would be much easier than machines. Having said that, a number of them did express the wish that some personal contact would be possible, similar to the Reading Buddies, with the suggestion that this could be for the graduation:

“ but I think maybe I would have loved for the children to be able to visit the workplace. You know for the graduation, yeah, I'd say that I thought it would have been nice just to see just to get them out of school and into a different environment and to see where their volunteers work would have been nice.”

School Leader 2

5.3 Supports and Training

Overall the School Leaders commented on a bit of a learning curve at the start for themselves and the children but that this eased over time:

“ It took a little bit of work to get set up and I suppose in the first week it was a little daunting because I wasn't too sure what we were doing and how it would work, but it got much easier as the program went on.”

School Leader 4

In setting up and running the programme, the School Leaders were extremely positive about the organisation, support and training from Kinia. They found the WhatsApp groupchat back channel excellent for resolving any issues that arose quickly and without fuss. They noted some organisational things that their school did to help the smooth running of the programme such as storing the books and devices together safely to ensure they were there on the Reading Buddy days as needed, using the school VLE to put the links for the Google Meet calls rather than using email that the children were less familiar with. These small adaptations made a big difference for ensuring the programme ran seamlessly.

5.4 Summary

Similar to the Reading Buddies, the School Leaders see improved self-confidence in general and with reading as the primary outcome for the children on the programme. Some specific skills are mentioned but confidence is key here. In addition, they discuss the benefits to the children in terms of improved interpersonal and technical skills. The developing Reading Buddy-child relationship and focused one-to-one attention is the key driver in this from the School Leader point of view. The School Leader observed a range of activities by the Reading Buddy to maintain the child's engagement and to support their reading. This is largely consistent across Reading Buddies with some difference in the level of interaction and reading focus. Similar to the Reading Buddies, the online space is characterised as a quiet and focused environment for reading within the hive of activity and noise in the school room. This is one reason why they see the online programme as more feasible than the face-to-face programme in their schools. In addition, they commented that it is convenient and efficient, but they lament the lack of human contact also. The logistics of managing this complex environment were demanding but after an initial learning curve for all participants and training and support they felt met their needs, the programme ran smoothly in all schools with all six schools in this sample looking to participate again in the future.





Conclusions and Recommendations

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study provides a unique insight into the experiences of children, Reading Buddies and schools on the remote Reading Buddy programme. This chapter summarises the key findings and outlines the main recommendations that arise from this.

6.1 Programme Outcomes

The findings of this study would indicate that the online Reading Buddy programme has a substantial positive impact on literacy outcomes for children. In addition, the survey and interview data would strongly suggest that the programme also has additional benefits in relation to building self-confidence, developing social and technical skills and providing children with much needed focused one-on-one attention in relation to reading. For the Reading Buddies, they reported unexpected benefits for themselves and greatly valued their engagement with the programme.

6.2 Shared Reading Process: Reading Buddy-Learner Engagement

All participants note the critical importance of the positive relationship that develops between the child and their Reading Buddy. This was greatly valued by both sides and brought fun and interest and enjoyment to both the child and the adult. For the most part, the sessions were quite consistent in how they ran but there was some reported variation in relation to the amount of chatting, reading, correction and reading comprehension activity that took

place. In some cases, this was reported as tailored to the child and could be a positive variation. There are some mentions on the Reading Buddy and child side of limited chat or difficulty in getting a conversation going and this was typically noted negatively, translating potentially as a more restricted engagement overall. The developing relationship through the paired reading process was central to the child's engagement and development.

6.3 Shared Reading Process: The Books

The books are the unsung heroes of the programme. The central role of the books is clear from the value the children and the Reading Buddies place in the book and in how the book drives the energy for the sessions. In some cases, children were reading a book that had been read already or did not get the book they wanted to read. This seemed to have quite a negative effect on the process. As in any other learning context, the more meaningful and interesting the learning experience, the more learners will get out of it. For an authentic reading experience, the book needs to be good and one the learner wants to read. The importance of finishing the book and the impact that had on confidence is captured in this quote from a School Leader:

“ I think that they learned themselves that they can do that. You know, they can read a book... We want that lad that was in the front seat in the focus group. Yeah, Oh my God, he read two books and he just is so proud of himself and we're so proud of him as well.”

School Leader 5

6.4 Shared Reading Process: The Online Space

While all participants were positive about the ease of access and use for the online reading environment, there was some difference of opinion as to how the online environment impacted on the programme outcomes. In this evaluation, there is no direct comparison with a group taking part in the face-to-face programme and many of the participants had no point of comparison with the face-to-face version. Therefore, it is not possible to quantify a difference between the two programmes. However, perspectives on this did emerge in the findings. The experienced Reading Buddies who responded in the survey felt that the programme outcomes for the child online were either just the same as or worse than the face-to-face version. The Reading Buddies in the interviews on the contrary talked about the online space as a productive part of the programme. They talked about the focus on reading that the online space afforded, a private space for reading in the busy world of school. This was echoed by the School Leaders who felt the private reading space mitigated possible negative effects of the noisy classroom environment of the school. All the Reading Buddies were very positive about the online context from their own perspective, and many commented on how easy it would be to recruit more Reading Buddies for the online programme as it was so easy to fit into a working day. Similarly, the School Leaders and Reading Buddies talked about the efficiency of the online set-up for all parties. However, it is worth noting that post-Covid these circumstances could change as many of these Reading Buddies themselves will be returning to offices and therefore the reality of conducting a Reading Buddy session from their work environments may not in fact be fully tested.

6.5 Shared Reading Process: Challenges to address

Given the complex nature of the online programme bringing hundreds of children and Reading Buddies into a quiet online space to read together, it is remarkable that the participants do not report significant technical or interpersonal barriers to address. Certainly, there are occasional network and connection issues, but overall Google Meet was well received by all participants and all participants happily discussed how well the Reading Buddy pairs got on together. The impact of each small technical glitch on the positive interactions should not be underestimated but according to the participants these were relatively rare and could be surmounted. The more significant issue which arose consistently across all participant groups was sound quality. The busy environment of the school combined with even slightly imperfect network connectivity and/or impaired hardware could completely derail a Reading Buddy session.

6.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings, there are several implications for the Reading Buddy Programme. The recommendations highlight how to maximise the opportunities and minimise the challenges of using technology for literacy support programmes.

Technology

- Given the importance of sound quality to the programme, the hardware used by schools, in particular headphones, needs to be in good condition. Some participants noted problems with specific headsets and indeed the wiring on headsets can fail. For this reason, an analysis of the market in noise-cancelling headphones to evaluate cost, robustness and warranty would be a useful exercise.
- Similarly, the platform for the reading buddy sessions should be evaluated periodically relative to alternatives available to assess the sound quality.

Training

- The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the KINIA training and support and training. The needs for training will change as Reading Buddies become more experienced and it would be worth considering training as evolving depending on the Reading Buddy expertise. Some additional supports requested include mid-point feedback to new Reading Buddies.
- Given the range in approach of Reading Buddies, it might be appropriate to tailor training to address this or alternatively to exploit this in matching Reading Buddies with learners who take a more or less “teacherly” approach to the sessions.

- There is a significant learning curve for school personnel in setting up the Reading Buddy programme for the first time. It would be useful at the end of each programme to gather tips and fixes from School Leaders to document them for new schools. These might be the less formal organisational elements and workarounds that schools use to streamline their processes. These can also inform any necessary updates to the programme design.

Schools

- It is not a trivial issue to reduce noise in busy environments but for the online Reading Buddy programme this may be critical. The location for the online Reading Buddy programme in the school building is important to maximise engagement of learners. Spaces where ambient sound and reverberation are reduced and where children can be spread out somewhat to minimise disruption are most suitable.
- The timing of the Reading Buddy session in the school day is important to maximise children’s engagement with the programme. Where the programme runs when children would normally be in yard or art or PE other classes perceived by the children to be more “fun”, children are less positive about the programme.
- The timing of the Reading Buddy programme in the school year is also important to allow all participants time and energy to fully engage with the programme.

This report highlights the positive outcomes of the Reading Buddy online programme and interrogates the aspects of the process that facilitate and inhibit engagement and learning on the programme. Drawing on the perspectives of children, Reading Buddies and school personnel, the report provides an important insight into how the programme design and the online environment can interact to create a positive learning experience for all participants.



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