

Bookmark Reading Impact Evaluation

Insights from teachers and volunteers

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Introduction

Bookmark Reading supports children's reading in primary schools by offering a six-week programme involving two 30-minute face-to-face sessions each week with a child who needs extra support with their reading. By training volunteers to read with children in their local schools, the programme offers support for children in Years 1 to 3 who are at risk of not meeting the expected standard for reading, and it also helps them to develop a love of reading. The programme is flexible for both schools and volunteers, and sessions are easily scheduled through a digital platform.

Bookmark Reading commissioned the National Literacy Trust to explore the impact the programme has on children's reading skills and engagement. To this end, the evaluation was set up to collect information on pupils' reading skill as well as their reading enjoyment, behaviours and confidence before and after taking part in the Bookmark Reading programme. The same information was also collected from classmates who didn't take part in the programme to provide comparative data. The evaluation was also designed to explore volunteers' and teachers' perceptions of the impact on participating pupils, as well as their own experience of the programme.

This evaluation sought to collect data from teachers, volunteers and children in the 2019/2020 academic year. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, and the resulting school closures, it became impossible to administer the post-programme surveys and tests with pupils. Therefore, the evaluation was adjusted to focus solely on the perceptions of impact from teachers and volunteers, which were collected through surveys and interviews.

This report offers insight into the impact of the programme in the absence of pupil data.

Key findings

- Teachers reported a range of reading outcomes as a result of pupils taking part in Bookmark Reading. In particular, they reported changes in pupils' reading enjoyment (90.0%, n = 18), confidence (65.0%, n = 13) and fluency (65.0%, n = 13). 1 in 2 (45.0%, n = 9) also said they noticed a difference in pupils' reading frequency and comprehension. 1 in 3 (35.0%, n = 7) reported that pupils were more likely to read on their own initiative, and 1 in 5 (20.0%, n = 4) felt that pupils' phonics skills increased after taking part in the programme.
- Volunteers also felt that the programme had been beneficial for the children they worked with. 3 in 4 (76.6%, n = 59) volunteers noticed that pupils became more confident in their reading after the programme. Nearly 3 in 5 (57.1%, n = 44) also noticed pupils enjoying reading more. Over half (55.8%, n = 43) noticed changes in pupils' reading fluency, while over 2 in 5 believed that taking part in the programme improved pupils' reading comprehension (45.5%, n = 35) and made them more motivated to read (44.2%, n = 34).
- 4 in 5 (80.0%, n = 16) teachers thought that pupils who took part in the programme made expected levels of progress but only one teacher (5.0%) felt that pupils made more than the expected level of progress during the programme.
- 2 in 5 (40.0%, n = 8) teachers felt that the pupils who took part in the programme made more progress in their reading skills than their peers who started at the same level at the beginning of the year. However, more than half (55.0%, n = 11) of the teachers also felt that the pupils who took part made as much progress as their peers, suggesting that the programme might not have supported participating pupils especially in their skills development.
- While these findings might indicate that the programme has not been beneficial for all pupils' reading skills, it is also possible that the programme has helped pupils to keep up with the expected level of progress in their reading. In addition, interviews with teachers indicated that they chose pupils to take part based on their reading skills being just below the expected level for their age. This suggests that their reading skills might not have been particularly low when they started the programme and therefore it might indeed be more realistic for them to make expected or similar levels of progress compared with their peers.
- For many children, the programme had an impact on their wider reading engagement and skills. Teachers' and volunteers' comments also indicate that the programme may have an impact on children beyond reading, ranging from other academic skills such as writing to more general aspects of the children's lives, including improved attention and concentration, and improved social skills, self-esteem and overall wellbeing.
- The findings from teacher interviews, surveys and volunteer surveys also suggest that the programme is particularly beneficial for children who do not often get opportunities to read at home with an adult. These interactions with the volunteers were beneficial more widely as pupils got to meet adults from diverse backgrounds.

The positive relationships children built with the volunteers might also explain why their confidence in particular increased over the course of the programme.

- Overall, these insights suggest that the Bookmark Reading programme has an impact on pupils, especially on their reading engagement and confidence but also on their reading skills. The programme is also beneficial for pupils more widely and provides children with important opportunities to read with an adult. More research is needed to establish where the programme makes the greatest difference, however. To build on the perceptions of teachers and volunteers, we will restart data collection from participating pupils and their peers once schools have reopened.

Methodology

This report uses data from the following sources:

Teacher surveys conducted at the end of the school year

An online survey was conducted in April and May 2020 to explore teachers' perceptions of the impact of the programme on their pupils.

20 teachers from 16 schools completed the end-of-year teacher survey. Most (n = 14) ran the programme in the spring term. The remaining six teachers ran the programme in both the autumn and spring terms.

Volunteer surveys conducted at the end of each six-week programme

A paper survey was completed by volunteers at the end of the final session of the six-week programme, which was scanned in the digital platform. The survey asked questions relating to the changes volunteers noticed in pupils throughout the programme.

Data were collected from 77 volunteers throughout the academic year. Most (n = 70) had supported a child for one six-week period during the year. Seven had supported a child more than once during the year.

Interviews with teachers and volunteers

Interviews with teachers and volunteers were conducted via Zoom in April 2020. An invitation to take part in the interviews was sent to all participating schools and volunteers by Bookmark Reading. All the interviews were recorded and detailed notes were made on the recordings afterwards.

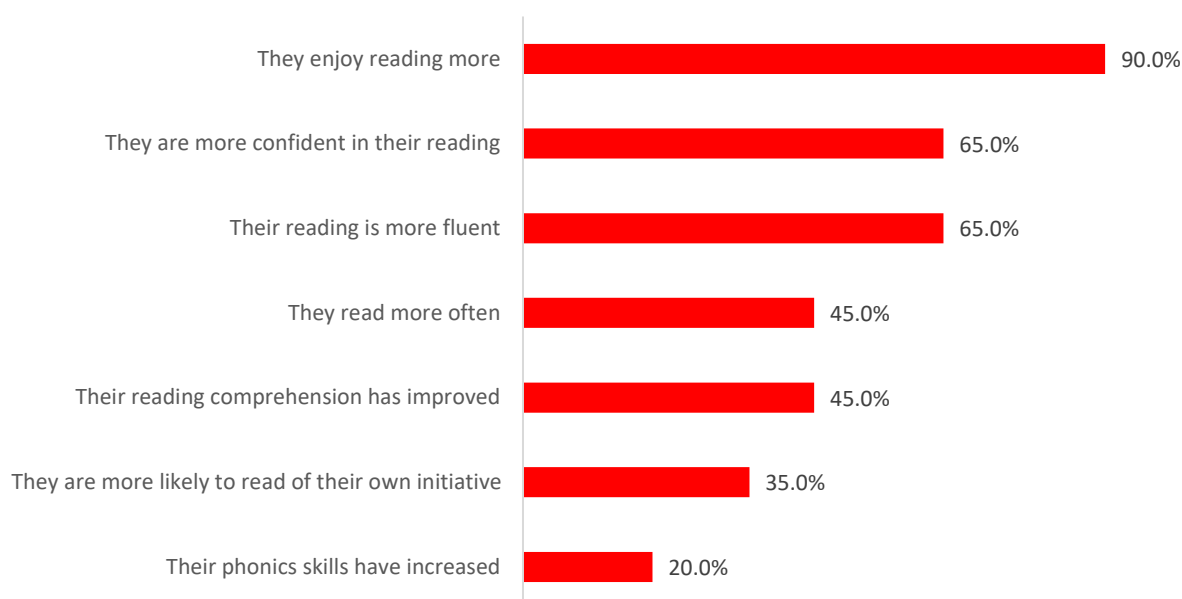
Three teachers from three schools and one volunteer took part in the interviews.

Pupils' reading engagement and reading skill

Teachers reported a range of reading outcomes as a result of pupils taking part in Bookmark Reading. As Figure 1 below shows, most teachers noticed a positive change in their pupils'

reading enjoyment, with 9 in 10 (90.0%; n = 18) saying that their pupils enjoy reading more as a result of taking part. 2 in 3 teachers (65.0%, n = 13) also feel that their pupils are more confident in their reading and that their reading is more fluent as a result of taking part in the programme. Nearly 1 in 2 (45.0%, n = 9) also say that their pupils read more often and that their reading comprehension has improved as a result of taking part in Bookmark Reading. 1 in 3 (35.0%, n = 7) teachers also report that their pupils are more likely to read on their own initiative, while 1 in 5 (20.0%, n = 4) think that taking part in the programme has increased their pupils' phonic skills.

Figure 1: Changes teachers have noticed in their pupils as a result of taking part in the programme



Volunteers also believe that the programme has been beneficial for the pupils they worked with, with nearly all of the volunteers saying that their volunteering had made a positive difference for pupils (92.2%, n = 71). Only six volunteers (7.8%) felt their volunteering had not made a difference to the child. In some cases, the volunteers attributed this to the children not being present in sessions. One of the volunteers had seen a change in the child but they attributed this to them reading at home over the Christmas holidays rather than their own volunteering.

As Figure 2 below shows, 3 in 4 (76.6%, n = 59) volunteers noticed that pupils became more confident in their reading after the programme. Nearly 3 in 5 (57.1%, n = 44) also noticed pupils enjoying reading more. Over half (55.8%, n = 43) noticed changes in pupils' reading fluency, while over 2 in 5 believed that taking part in the programme had improved pupils' reading comprehension (45.5%, n = 35) and made them more motivated to read (44.2%, n = 34).

Figure 2: Changes volunteers noticed in the pupils over the course of the programme



As shown above, the greatest impact of the programme perceived by both teachers and volunteers relates to changes in terms of pupils' confidence and enjoyment of reading. Indeed, this is reflected in teachers' and volunteers' interviews and comments in the survey.

Teachers in particular felt that the programme had an impact on pupils' reading enjoyment and engagement. This is also highlighted by their comments in the survey and the interviews:

"One child does not get read to at home and was a reluctant reader. She enjoyed her sessions so much and shouted with joy when she saw her volunteer at the door. She became a child who was excited to read." Teacher, survey

"All the children who took part in the programme talked positively about reading." Teacher, survey

"... [the programme] worked well for her because she became far more engaged in reading. She now offers to read aloud to the class during lessons, and has become far more fluent." Teacher, survey

"It's raised the enjoyment for the children of the actual act of reading." Teacher, interview

"We've seen an increase in interest, so the sort of softer qualities rather than the hard data. The enthusiasm for reading and books has increased, the children can talk about books they like reading, and what they've done with their reading volunteer and that they are looking forward next week to read such and such a book that's in the book box, it's their favourite book." Teacher, interview

While fewer volunteers than teachers noted the increase in pupils' reading enjoyment, this was still frequently mentioned in their comments:

“In the first session he was very quiet, disinterested in reading + struggled to identify letters and sounds. By the end he seemed a lot more interested in reading. He talked about the books he had started reading at home + had found favourites in the classroom book box that he enjoyed re-reading...”
Volunteer, survey

“At the start of the session the child did not enjoy the reading sessions. As time went on however, they enjoyed it more and looked forward to the reading sessions. They also wanted to read more books even after the session was over.” Volunteer, survey

“She liked reading at the start, but got bored easily. By the end she was very positive and she told me she'd been reading more in her home too - in one session she told me 'this book blew my mind!'” Volunteer, survey

“... when asked if she would like to play a game, she sometimes prefers to continue reading!” Volunteer, survey

“In the second [six] week programme... it felt like he really built on his progress and he was becoming more interested again, more willing I suppose to read a greater sort of variety of books. His dad said that he was reading voluntarily at home, which apparently had never happened before.” Volunteer, interview

The greatest impact noticed by volunteers, on the other hand, was in terms of pupils' reading confidence. More than 3 in 4 (76.6%, n = 59) felt that the pupil became more confident in their reading as a result of the programme. This was also evident in their comments:

“I noticed the confidence the child gained in reading during our sessions. Because we read in the school library there were some instances when other pupils would walk in. In the first couple of sessions the child would stop reading and hesitate. However, during our last couple of sessions I noticed that the child would carry on reading when others walked into the room.”
Volunteer, survey

“She was more confident talking about books, describing characters, their feelings + talking about her favourite books. She loved reading stories together + then re-telling them to me. Seemed more confident blending sounds together as the programme progressed.” Volunteer, survey

“... when she reads with me now, she reads with more bravery and confidently, she learns from her mistakes.” Volunteer, survey

“[The child] would pick out more difficult books as she progressed through the program. She became more confident in her ability and by the end of the program was speeding through her book level.” Volunteer, survey

“As the weeks went by I had seen a massive difference with my child's confidence, in terms of interacting a lot more with activities and describing what books she prefers to read and why.” Volunteer, survey

Teachers also gave examples of children whose confidence had increased over the course of the programme:

“A girl in my class found reading very difficult. She was behind her peers and therefore was losing confidence and interest. Bookmark gave her the opportunity to develop her skills in a positive and fun environment away from the rest of the class. It gave her valuable and much needed time with an adult 1:1.” Teacher, survey

“This child was, and is still, not a particularly fluent reader for a variety of reasons. However, he loved his Bookmark sessions and got excited about them every week. His confidence with reading unfamiliar words improved dramatically, as he was practising his phonics regularly, in a safe, judgement free environment with an adult who was solely focused on him. He was so proud of his certificate at the end.” Teacher, survey

“Obviously it is difficult as we are currently not at school, but in the few weeks between the children finishing their programmes and schools closing, the children's confidence had improved dramatically. They really benefited from the one on one time.” Teacher, survey

“Obviously their self-esteem and confidence has risen” Teacher, interview

“She did the 6 weeks with Bookmark and you could really see her enthusiasm and confidence grow throughout the 6 weeks. She also really liked having the individual time out of the class with the volunteer which I think says a lot considering every other time she goes out for an intervention she gets upset” Teacher, interview

Focus on reading skills

While the survey data indicated that the programme's greatest impact might be on pupils' reading enjoyment and confidence, both teachers and volunteers also noticed changes in pupils' reading skills, such as in their reading fluency and comprehension. Indeed, changes in pupils' reading skills are also highlighted in teachers' comments:

“Enhanced the selected children's reading skills and they also enjoyed reading far more resulting in them being more engaged for reading lessons in class.” Teacher, survey

“... struggling reader, her comprehension improved. The phonics activities also really helped.” Teacher, survey

“[A child] has moved 3 book bands and was beginning to really make progress.” Teacher, survey

“He was beginning to improve and progress in comprehension, but this has boosted him even more. I believe children who are middle ability can be boosted to above with regular one to one work with your volunteers.” Teacher, survey

Similarly, volunteers' comments also indicate a change in pupils' reading skills:

"At the beginning she was reading phonetically, however has become more coherent/fluent as the weeks have gone on. She still used phonetics from time to time but definitely not as much. She also has good comprehension & understands what she's reading." Volunteer, survey

"I think the programme has been valuable to develop the child's comprehension skills. The one-to-one sessions mean that there is more opportunity to discuss the meaning of words + events in the story. Some stories have quite an assumed level of cultural knowledge that is challenging for children from different cultural backgrounds. I've observed this child's understanding grow, the more we discuss the texts." Volunteer, survey

"Interestingly, at the end of the six-week programme the teacher said to me his test scores had gone up, he is now consistently getting better test scores." Volunteer, interview

"After several sessions [the child's] reading became a lot more fluent and he required less assistance from myself. He was reading full sentences without making any mistakes and required minimal prompts from myself." Volunteer, survey

"The child spoke English as their second language so getting extra practice was helpful...The reading sessions definitely helped his comprehension. He is very clever and it helped him catch up." Volunteer, survey

Moreover, volunteers also noted that some of the pupils taking part in the programme were already quite engaged in their reading but benefited in terms of their skills development in particular:

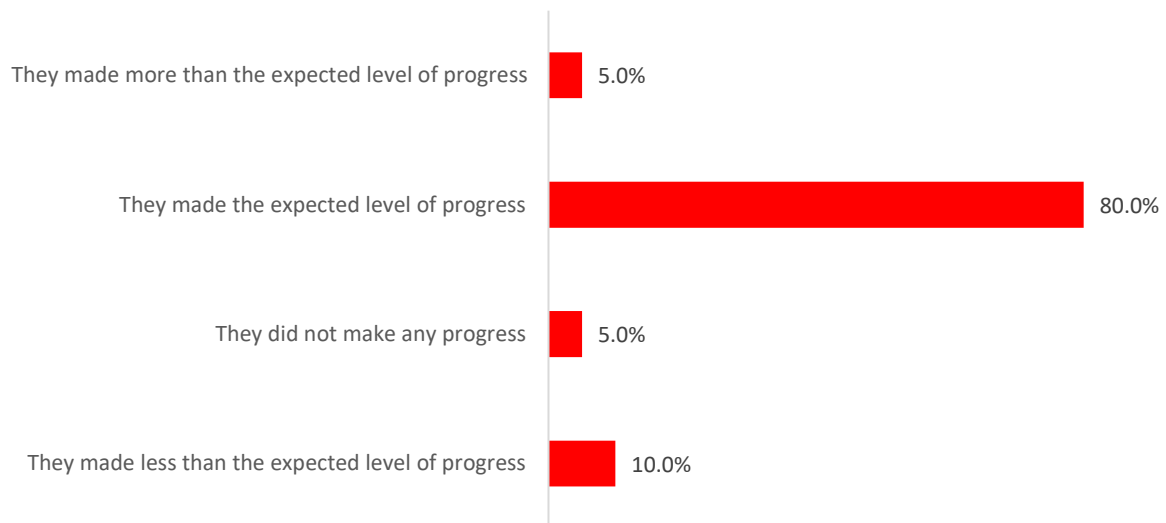
"Already clearly enjoyed reading but her skills improved from our sessions." Volunteer, survey

"[The child] was very enthusiastic about reading from the start but her confidence grew and grew over the six weeks. Her comprehension improved and she was sounding out words that she wouldn't have attempted previously." Volunteer, survey

"[The child] stopped rushing through and started taking punctuation into account. He already enjoyed reading and was confident, motivated to read." Volunteer, survey

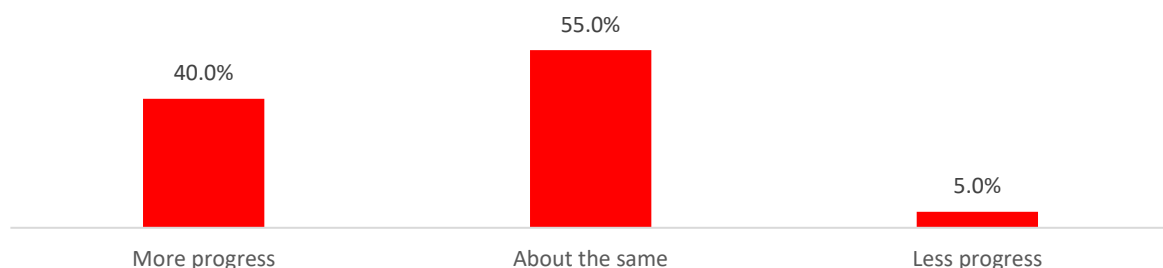
We asked teachers whether the progress the pupils made in terms of their skills was below, at or above their expected level. As Figure 3 shows, 4 in 5 (80.0%, n = 16) teachers thought that pupils made expected levels of progress but only one teacher (5.0%) felt that pupils made more than the expected level of progress during the programme.

Figure 3: Teachers' perception of the level of progress their pupils made in their reading skills



We also asked teachers whether they felt that pupils who took part in the programme progressed differently compared with their peers who started the year at the same level but who hadn't taken part. 2 in 5 (40.0%, n = 8) teachers felt that their pupils made more progress than their peers who started at the same level at the beginning of the year (see Figure 4), indicating that some pupils potentially made accelerated progress in terms of their skills. However, more than half (55.0%, n = 11) of the teachers also felt that their pupils made as much progress as their peers, suggesting that the programme might not have supported participating pupils especially in their skills development.

Figure 4: Teachers' perception of their pupils' progress in their reading skills compared with their peers who started the year at the same level



Some of the teachers and volunteers commented that they did not see a particular increase in reading skills:

“They enjoyed books more and liked discussing the books and images. However their reading ability didn't change very much.” Volunteer, survey

“And whilst I definitely thought that confidence and enthusiasm improved, the kids were so enthusiastic during the sessions and afterwards, I’m not sure how much it affected their reading skills... I didn’t see a huge amount of kind of the understanding element coming into it and the comprehension coming into it... I would maybe like to see a little bit more of that.” Teacher, interview

However, it is also possible that the programme has helped pupils to keep up with the expected level of progress in their reading. In fact, as one of the teachers suggested in the interviews, the programme has probably been beneficial for pupils’ skills even if they haven’t made such visible progress:

“But I would imagine that even if the children hadn’t moved up like a particular level that they will have strengthened their skills in reading.” Teacher, interview

It is also crucial to note that the level of pupils’ reading skills might not have been particularly low as they started the programme and therefore it might be more realistic for them to make expected or similar levels of progress compared with their peers. This is suggested in the teacher interviews as all three teachers speak about choosing pupils whose skills are just below the expected level but who could benefit from extra support and have been chosen based on a host of other factors. These include being on pupil premium or not having opportunities to read with an adult at home. The following quotes highlight how teachers chose pupils based on their reading skills being just below the expected level:

“We were going for the children that just sit below that expected band. So... with their reading they are not quite where they need to be but with a programme like this is might boost their confidence with their reading or their self-esteem or just give them that extra bit of one to one reading out loud practice that they need to get them there.” Teacher, interview

“The lowest ability children in the class we do a lot to cater for already, they are read with daily by school staff and they receive additional support in lessons and additional interventions. The group that we find more difficult, more challenging to support is kind of the children who are on the cusp, who are not quite consistent with securing and understanding the year group... but have the potential to so it’s those children we selected to work with Bookmark because we felt that those are the children that needed to gain confidence, we were concerned that they were losing a bit of passion for reading because they knew they were behind their peers and were finding it a little bit challenging.” Teacher, interview

“They are children who are pupil premium children, first and foremost, who are not where they should be for their year group so they are below the national expectations in reading... They won’t be well below, because that’s not what this project is about, this is about getting children who are just below to be at the national level.” Teacher, interview

The point of choosing pupils who just need some extra practice was also highlighted by one of the teachers:

“[The programme] will benefit children who are average in attainment and just need that extra push to get into reading.” Teacher, survey

Wider outcomes

For many children, the programme had an impact on reading more widely:

“[The child] really enjoyed the sessions and I feel she improved her comprehension, widened her vocabulary and feels more confident in reading.” Volunteer, survey

“[The child] made a noticeable improvement and moved on to more difficult books. His confidence also noticeably improved. He had also begun reading at home.” Volunteer, survey

“The first thing that I have noticed is that the child became more excited to read. The child not only improved their reading skills but they also became more confident in their ability.” Volunteer, survey

“By the end of the programme the child's reading was much more fluent and he seemed to take more pleasure in reading, remembering where we had left off the week before.” Volunteer, survey

Indeed, the programme may have an impact on children beyond reading. This was raised in one of the teacher interviews:

“It's not just about reading... There's so many advantages to this system that Bookmark has developed. Whole child development, not just reading.” Teacher, interview

This was also evident in the surveys as both teachers and volunteers commented on the wider benefits of the programme, ranging from other academic skills such as writing to more general aspects of children's lives, including improved attention, concentration, social skills, self-esteem and overall wellbeing. For example, the following quotes from the teachers show that they noticed the programme having a wider impact on the children:

“Hugely changed this pupil's attitude towards reading and also helped to improve their behaviour and self-esteem over a short period of time.” Teacher survey

“Improved self-esteem.” Teacher survey

“Personal/ social/ emotional progress.” Teacher survey

“This programme was very beneficial for a child who finds the classroom overwhelming at times. The 1:1 attention was extremely beneficial for herself esteem, confidence and general well being.” Teacher survey

A chance for one-to-one time with an adult

The teacher interviews suggest that the programme is particularly beneficial for children who do not often get opportunities to read at home with an adult. This was also one of the reasons for choosing which children would take part. This clearly highlights that the programme does not simply improve children's reading skills, enjoyment and confidence but it also provides important opportunities to interact with adults:

"In Year 1 they have a chance to read out loud with a teacher every single week but then in Year 2 and Year 3... they don't have the opportunity to read out loud all the time... there are still some children who need reading out loud and we just literally didn't have the time or the adults to give them that and this was a really good opportunity for those children." Teacher, interview

"This is about them improving their reading ultimately but the way that Bookmark does that is through the relationships that they build with these volunteers and by having a great time with this really cool adult that you've met... All of that adds up to them trying harder when they are doing their reading." Teacher, interview

"... no one reads with him at home... just in terms of somebody spending time with him, showing an interest in him, reading to him, you know having a laugh together over a funny book or something like that, I think it's opened his eyes, it's probably widened his horizons. So I think it's helped him." Teacher, interview

"Parental engagement... which we struggle with. So the next best thing is to have reading volunteers who are taking an interest in the children. Because basically what the children are lacking is somebody mentoring them in the way that you know I might mentor my child." Teacher, interview

This was also evident from the surveys as many teachers and volunteers reflected on the benefits of providing possibilities to read with an adult, which children do not always get at home:

"The programme worked well with those children who do not have an adult who read to them regularly or listen to them read." Teacher, survey

"A child with many siblings who has limited opportunities to read with an adult at home greatly benefitted from his sessions in autumn. He has made so much progress with his comprehension skills." Teacher, survey

"This programme was beneficial for a proficient reader whose single parent does not always have time for 1:1 reading at home." Teacher, survey

"I did feel from the start of the reading program that my child was quite a confident reader and did not have much trouble with his book. What I think what he got from the sessions was to have somebody who would sit with him and read for a specific period and chat about the book and any other subjects that arose." Volunteer, survey

“I feel like having the one to one time with an adult was just very helpful for the kids...” Volunteer, survey

Teachers also believed that the interactions with the volunteers were beneficial more widely because pupils got to meet adults from diverse backgrounds:

“I know that they spoke to them about their jobs, and I think it is great that the children get to meet such a diverse range of people because all they ever really know is their parents and a teacher, in terms of adults. I think it’s quite aspirational to meet those sorts of different people.” Teacher, interview

“And what’s lovely for the children is that they build up really nice relationship with their volunteer. We’ve got a little boy with developmental language delay and he struggles with reading and understanding. And his face just lights up when his volunteer, who is a man in a suit looking quite professional, when he comes in and comes and gets him from the class, he just absolutely beams... This is what the children need, they need another adult taking an interest in them. It’s good for their mental health and wellbeing which then is good for their confidence which then you know helps them with their belief in themselves to try things when they get stuck in their reading.” Teacher, interview

The positive relationships children built with the volunteers might also explain why their confidence in particular increased over the course of the programme, as the following comment from a teacher highlights:

“They absolutely loved their weekly sessions and 1:1 time really improved their confidence and love for reading.” Teacher, survey

A teacher also spoke about the programme having a positive impact on children’s confidence by giving them a chance to interact with an adult who was just focused on them:

“The relationships that the children build with volunteers is a very special one; they get to meet adults they may not usually cross paths with. Every volunteer we have had in school has been kind and compassionate, as well as incredibly patient with our unconfident readers. This has enabled the children's confidence to grow in reading and it has become an hour of their week where they actually look forward to reading!” Teacher, survey

“For us it was more of a confidence in their own ability to read and the fact that they would look forward to going to do some reading, which for a lot of them, reading didn’t necessarily bring up the most positive reaction in them to start with. They were really shy and didn’t want to do it and just really unconfident and I think that’s the thing that changed massively and that’s partly due to the relationship they have with the volunteers.” Teacher, interview

Conclusion

Insights from teachers and volunteers show that the Bookmark Reading programme has an impact on pupils, particularly on their reading engagement and confidence but also on their reading skills. Some findings also indicate that Bookmark Reading impacts pupils more widely as one key aspect of the programme is about giving children quality one-to-one time with adults, which they do not necessarily enjoy at home.

The findings on the impact of the programme suggest that it is beneficial for the children, but more research is needed to establish where the programme makes the greatest difference. To build on the perceptions of teachers and volunteers, we will restart data collection from participating pupils and their peers once schools have reopened.