

Evaluation of the Extreme Readers Project

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March 2017

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Introduction

The Story Museum aims to promote a love of reading in children through bringing books and other stories to life. In addition to the exhibitions on their premises, the museum run a number of programmes for schools to take part in. One such programme is the Extreme Readers programme, a six week intervention for children in Key Stage 2, focusing on promoting reading for pleasure. Each week the children are given a book which is used as the basis for the next session the following week. This approach allows all children access to a range of books, some of which they may not have chosen themselves. The sessions involve immersive experiences related to the books (such as meeting animals or pitching a tent), and at the end of the sessions each child is given a book specially chosen for them.

Current Research & Methodology

Coventry University was commissioned to evaluate the Extreme Readers programme in Autumn 2016. To evaluate the programme a mixed methodology approach was used. The children completed three measures immediately before beginning the programme and immediately after completing it: the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC), measuring reading accuracy and comprehension; a questionnaire measure of reading motivation; and the Myself-as-a-Learner Scale (MALS), measuring self-belief in academic skills. The children were invited to a focus group at the Story Museum at the end of programme. Parents were invited to give their views of the programme in a separate focus group. The aim of the evaluation was to understand the impact the six week programme was having on the children's engagement with reading and their reading ability.

It was planned for up to twelve children to take part in the programme. Schools were asked to refer children who would be likely to benefit from the programme (e.g. who had good basic reading skills but were not keen readers). However, not all children attended and logistical issues meant that not all children who attended were tested at both time points. Five children completed the YARC and MALS pre and post-test, and seven children completed the reading motivation scale at both time points.

Outcome results

York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC)

The YARC measures reading accuracy, reading rate and comprehension, children complete Form A at pre-test and a parallel Form B at post-test. The children are given standardised scores for reading accuracy, rate and comprehension. Standardised scores are standardised for the child's age, with 100 being average for the population of children that age, and two thirds of children that age scoring between 85 and 115 on the scale. Using standard scores allows us to control for the level of improvement in reading expected in typical children over the time period.

At time 1, the children showed scores which were within the average range, but slightly below the population average of 100 in reading accuracy and reading rate, while their reading comprehension was at the population average. When retested after the programme, they showed improved reading accuracy and reading rate, while reading comprehension scores were approximately stable. The children significantly improved on their reading rate, meaning they were reading the passages quicker at time point two. This may be from having more practice at reading during the six week intervention, or more confidence in their abilities. The children were reading aloud more accurately at time point two, this, however was not a statistically significant increase.

Figure 1: Mean standard scores on the YARC reading accuracy, rate and comprehension

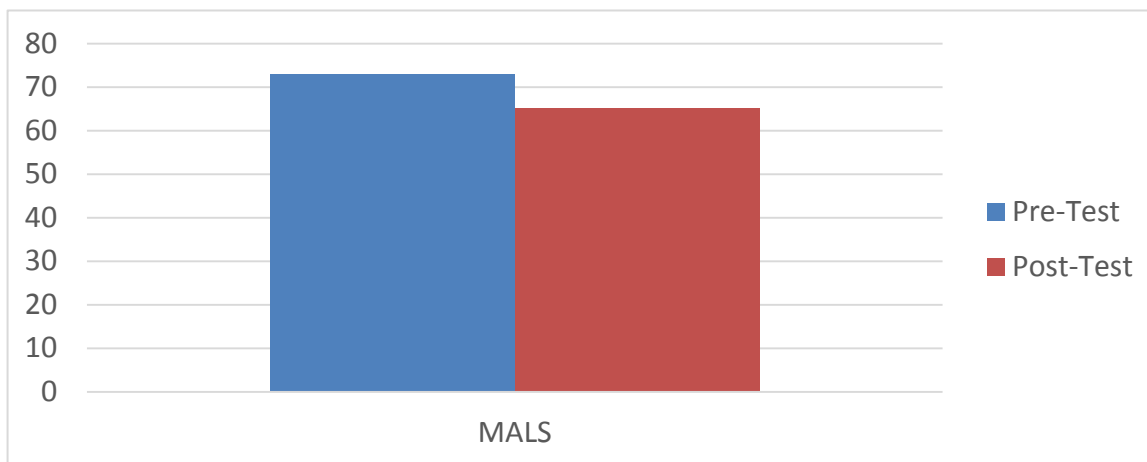


It can be suggested that from the YARC results that the children who had taken part in the six week intervention were making greater improvements with their reading than would be predicted from typical development, reading at a quicker pace and making fewer errors. Reading comprehension did not improve more than would be expected over the six week period; however this may be due to the difficulty in measuring changes in comprehension in six weeks. Typically, changes in comprehension take longer to show effects.

Myself as a Learner (MALS)

The MALS scale is a twenty itemed questionnaire that looks at academic self-perception, so how children see themselves academically. For example, children are asked to say to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement 'I need lots of help with my work'. The results for this measure are shown in Figure 2. Unfortunately, there was a significant effect in the opposite direction to the predicted one, with children showing lower academic self-perception after the programme. However this may not be due to the six week intervention. The pre testing was completed at the Story Museum and the posttest in the school environment, and it is possible the different environments may have played a part in understanding these results.

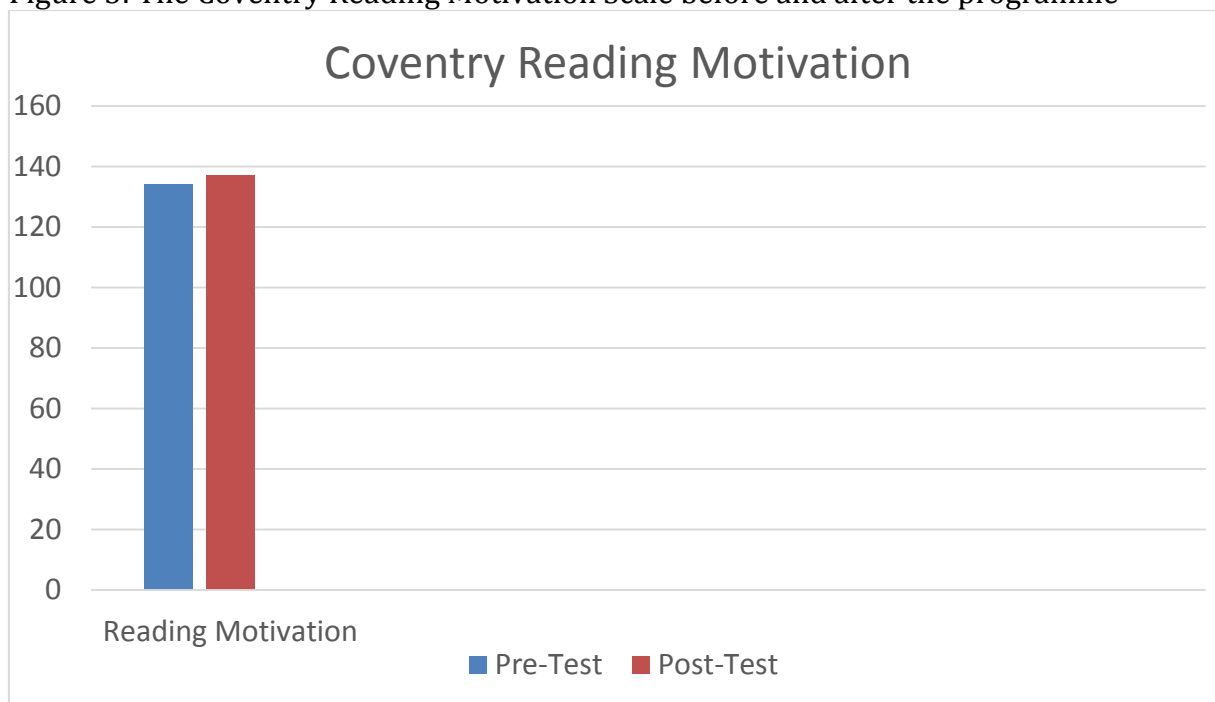
Figure 2: The Myself as a Learner Scale before and after the programme



Reading Motivation

Extreme readers aims to develop a love of reading for its own sake, or what is known as intrinsic motivation. A scale being developed at Coventry University looks at both extrinsic and intrinsic reading motivation. Seven children completed this measure, and as can be seen from figure 3, the children's motivation to read improved between the two time points. This finding suggests that the programme can improve children's motivation to read.

Figure 3: The Coventry Reading Motivation Scale before and after the programme



Children's perspective

The children provided their own perspective of the programme in the focus group following the sessions. These data were analysed qualitatively to draw out key themes. This quote sums up well the children's thoughts about the project, this is from a male attending the session *'It is the best thing in the world, get free books, see the museum, get to see things families wouldn't see.'*

The children were positive about the six weeks, and were excited to share their thoughts.

'It was fun.'

Book Access

They loved all the sessions, when talking with the children a particular favorite was the beetle session which was linked to *Beetle Boy*. The books were a highlight, having new books was exciting. This overcomes a barrier to reading for pleasure, that being book access. The children were receiving new books and were able to keep them. The books were considered 'fancy' and were ones the children hadn't seen before.

Interactive

The interactive nature of the sessions was important to the children. This is what kept them engaged. The visits to the Story Museum were a highlight. The children felt the activities were fun and engaged them with reading the story in a different way.

'Held a snake.'

'That we got books and did fun things.'

'activities'

'The activities felt like we were in the story we were reading.'

Favourite Sessions

There were two sessions that stood out for the children, the Beetle Boy related session and the Shackleton's Journey related session. The one session that one child didn't like was the first one because they didn't do much.

'When we went to the place in Cowley, got to make bread and fires, it was really fun.'

'The bug one- got to hold them and look at them.'

'When we got to hold the creatures because I am not afraid of spiders and things like that.'

'Bug one.'

'We got to hold the beetles.'

Friendships

Interestingly the children enjoyed meeting new people from different schools. It gave them a chance to know about different schools in the area. While also building their confidence to talk to new people. By the end of the six weeks some children had formed friendships.

'Made a new friend.' (two children said this)

Reading for Pleasure

All the children thought that taking part in the six week programme had helped them to increase the amount of reading they were doing. The children mentioned reading a lot more and two mentioned reading different things. This may relate to the comments the children made about the books being 'fancy', it had opened their eyes to different genres and authors.

'I have been reading a lot more, reading different things.'
'I have been reading different things.'
'I like reading more now.'

The six weeks had made them see that reading was fun, and therefore had increased the amount of reading they were doing.

'Got to see how fun reading is.'

The children all mentioned that the six weeks had increased the amount of reading that usually do. Clark and Rumbold (2006) identified several main areas of the benefits to reading for pleasure, which includes reading attainment, writing ability, text comprehension, grammar and positive reading attitudes. Therefore we directly asked the children if they thought the six weeks had had any impact on their reading. The focus of their responses was on the enjoyment of reading, and this resulted in them reading more. It is likely that over time this increased love of reading will impact on their reading ability.

'Yes- I like reading a bit more.'
'It has really helped. I didn't think reading was that fun.'
'Yes, sometimes I struggle with words.'
'I like a bigger range of books.'
'Yes, not sure how.'
'Yes, because now I know that I like books more.'

When asked directly about the books, the children varied on how much they had read. Some of the children had read a little of each, some had read one or all of the books. Given the timeframe of six weeks, reading all six books might have been a big ask for these children, but they at least gave all the books a try. This will have helped with improving their reading accuracy and rate potentially. Only

one child during the focus group mentioned they did not like one of the books, *Varjak Paw* and struggled reading it.

'They were really good, but I didn't get to read them all.'

'I struggled with Varjak Paw, but I liked the others.'

'I want to read the beetle boy.'

'Really happy, I have read the books.'

'They were good.'

The primary aim of Extreme Readers is to increase the amount of reading for pleasure children undertake. The responses of the children certainly indicate that this has happened. Being given books overcame the potential issue of book access. From the children's perspective the six weeks was an enjoyable experience, a different way to engage with books and developed their love of reading. What can be seen in the quotes provided is the development of intrinsic motivation, that personal will to undertake a task. The children are now valuing reading, are curious to learn more through reading, find it enjoyable and accessed books outside of their comfort zone. These four factors: importance, curiosity, involvement and preference for challenge are all aspects of intrinsic motivation that can predict reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Parent Perspective

Parental involvement is key for the project to work; as parents need to drop their children off at the Story Museum each weekend. Parents were therefore asked their thoughts on the six week programme at a focus group at the last session. The parents were told their child had been selected as they were considered reluctant readers. Parents had decided to come along as they were willing to try *'anything to help with [child] reading, we will try anything.'*

The parents echoed similar thoughts to the children, in that the sessions were positive.

'Really good.'

The children were actively talking about what they had done with their parents.

'Every time we picked [child] up talking about, from school we get done nothing.'

In particular the beetle session and the session at Barracks Lane were highlights the parents had heard about from their children.

*'My [child] liked the Barracks Lane because it was hands on.'
'The animal one was really good, but [child] now wants a tarantula.'*

It was also noticed by the parents that the children had made new friends from coming to the programme. This was an extra nice outcome for their children.

'Really good opportunity to meet new children from different schools, make new friends.'

One parent mentioned it used to be *'a fight to get him to read, but he will now.'* The parents thought the programme had helped with their child's reading. From taking part in the sessions, the parents felt their children were now keen to read and were inspired to read.

*'[child] has come back more eager to read.'
It has inspired him to think about stories, but not sure it will get him to read to himself.'*

One parent mentioned they thought the six weeks had helped with her child's reading as *'[child] is now at his age required standard, which he wasn't before coming here, so I can only attribute it to that he has come here and got more interested in reading.'*

The books were different to what the parents would have picked and the children, but they had loved the books. So it was eye-opening for the parents and children, enabling them to step outside of their comfort zone for selecting books. Access to different books may have also contributed to the children wanting to read more.

'It was nice to have different books that I wouldn't have chosen or [child] wouldn't have chosen.'

The parents discussed they felt the first book gifted was a difficult book for the children, the long words on the first page might have disengaged the children. Beetle Boy was mentioned by one parent as being difficult with all the names for the different beetles.

'The first book- the hardest book.'

The six weeks was a good time; as it meant it kept it novel and the commitment level was not too much. The two week break also meant the children were eager to return. Afternoon sessions were easier for parents to get to. Therefore the timing was suitable and should not be changed.

*'Good thing to do on a Saturday afternoon.'
'After the two weeks [child] wanted to come back.'*

*'Six weeks is a good block you can commitment to....
And it still be a novelty.'*

All the parents could not believe it was a free opportunity; a lot of things through school normally come at a price but to get so much for free was considered amazing by the parents. As discussed by these two parents:

Parent 1: I think it is really generous.....

Parent 2: It has been amazing they can do this and haven't had to pay for it. Every week you get a letter from school with something asking for money. But this six weeks, and get something each week and they had a good time.....

Parent 1: It has been a privilege.....

Parent 2: It is a treat.

One question that parents had was would it last. The positive impact was fantastic and a great result for the parents, but they were concerned for the long-term impact. It was suggested if there was a way for the children to keep in touch with the museum staff to check up on them and motivate the children to read.

'If they know they are not coming here will they stop carrying on reading.'

Discussion

The evaluation has given an insight into the impact the Extreme Reader programme had. The children were all more positive about reading, this was demonstrated through the increase in scores on the reading motivation scale and the qualitative data. The children reported reading more, and difficult books. They also saw reading as a fun activity.

The change in attitude towards reading, may be due to being introduced to books in a different way. The activities were a key part of what the children enjoyed. The beetle session and the session at Barracks Lane were mentioned by both the children and the parents, we can therefore see that the children were sharing their experiences with their parents. Overall we can conclude that participating in Extreme Readers improves reading accuracy and reading rate, reading attitudes and the amount of reading children undertake. This was reflected in the children's data and the comments of the parents.

There are however limitations to this piece of work which need to be taken into account when understanding the results. Not all the children completed the measures due to access to schools and attrition. A larger sample would allow more power to thoroughly assess the programme. To understand what impact the programme is having a control condition is needed and also three data collection points to follow-up on any long-term benefit of the programme.

Despite these limitations the projects has given insight into the impact this project has. From the findings discussed it can be suggested the six weeks has a positive impact on the children and further research is required to verify these conclusions.