



# How to make reading effective and improve outcomes for all: An account of practice from collaborative action research in St John's Primary and Nursery School

## The Research-Practice Partnership

The **School Voices Research-Practice Partnership** aims to support schools in **responding to student diversity** and **improving learning outcomes for all**, whilst at the same time **promoting inclusion**. This will be achieved by focusing on **students' voices and dialogues** between teachers and children and young people through **participatory research approaches**.

The Partnership has been partly funded by **UKRI – Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF)**. The Partnership consists of a collaboration between: **University of Southampton** and three **hub schools (St John's Primary and Nursery School, St Mary's CE Primary School, Redbridge Primary School)** that were involved in an earlier pilot study. The hub schools and the University of Southampton support other schools in introducing these ideas through collaborative action research, considering the complexities within each school context. For more information – [www.schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk](http://www.schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk)

## The school

St. John's Primary and Nursery School is an inclusive and accessible school with 437 students, located in the Old Town of Southampton. The school comprises of 15 classes that include a Nursery, Reception and Years 1 - 6 (3- to 11-year-olds, mixed gender). There is a total of 58 members of staff, including teachers and support workers. The school serves a diverse community: 48% of children have English as an Additional Language, 34.7% of children receive Pupil Premium Funding (both above national) and 13% of children have identified Special Educational Needs and Disability.

The school's 'Vision and Values' are at the core of everything that the school does. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted through the values of 'Community, Diversity,

Aspirations, Empathy, Respect and Wellbeing', which are embedded throughout every aspect of the school life. Driven by inclusion, respect, and a moral purpose, the school is proud to be a School of Sanctuary and Rights Respecting School. The school embraces acceptance and tolerance, celebrates local communities, and explores local and national commemorations. Everyone works together to create a happy environment where all members of the school community feel safe, can enjoy, achieve, and make a positive contribution to the school and the wider community.

## Research focus and process

St John's has been involved in the partnership since the pilot year. This was the third year for the school taking part. The Year 6 teacher led this year's process. She was also involved in the first year

when the ideas were first piloted in the school. Five Year 6 became student researchers (three girls and two boys). Two were student researchers when they were in Year 4, and three were trained in the previous academic year by other student researchers who were then in Year 6 class. The students were chosen because some had low attendance, others joined the school midway, whilst others were shy and quiet and some were in receipt of Pupil Premium.

The school's focus was linked to one of their School Improvement Plan areas: reading and progress for all pupils around reading and literacy. The school improvement target was to make reading effective and improve outcomes for all.

Student researchers and the teacher discussed this focus in several research sessions and collaboratively thought about the starting point - **reading behaviours and attitudes of children in the school**. Then they focused on the following questions:

- Why do children enjoy reading, or why they don't?
- What types of books do they prefer to read and what are the reasons for these preferences?
- What motivates children to read?
- What are children's reading habits and experiences?
- How do children feel about different reading activities?
- What are children's thoughts on how reading can be improved at school?

Then they moved into collecting qualitative and quantitative data on pupils' reading behaviours and preferences, and challenges, including peer interviews, completing peer surveys, looking at reading logs, classroom and library observations, and a focus group and a parent survey.

## Participatory methods

### Peer interviews and surveys

Student researchers created a questionnaire for Reception Year to Year 5. It included closed questions about what reading means to them, how often they read, preferred genres, and what kind of books they like to read.



Student researchers asking questions to complete the survey

With the young children they asked them to rate the questions, on a scale of one to five, and they completed the questionnaire based on their answers. Questions included the following: How much do you enjoy reading? How much time is spent reading? How many minutes do you read each day? Number of books, how many have you read in the last month? How many pages, chapters of books do you typically read each week?

The survey also included open-ended questions, asking them to explain what motivates them to read, share personal stories or reflections on their reading habits and experiences, and children's thoughts on how reading can be improved at school. They also considered the fact that some children perhaps struggle to answer some of those questions and thought about having some pictures of different genres of books.



A pupil researcher conducting a peer interview

In the peer interviews, they were looking at detailed answers about why children enjoy reading or why they don't. They also focused on children's opinions on what types of books they prefer and descriptions of any challenges they face.

### Checking reading logs

The reading logs were checked, with notes on the types of books children enjoyed reading and any challenges they faced in completing the reading logs and comments on reading preferences or barriers, such as "I find reading difficult because the books are too hard."

### Classroom and library observations

In classrooms, they observed how children interact with reading materials, if they seem engaged, bored, or distracted, and asked for feedback on the types of books that spark interest. They looked at whether any genres gain more attention, and looked at group reading behaviours or reading struggles. They also observed whether children were engaging with classroom book corners and whether these are accessible to all pupils.

Library observations provided insights into what children choose to read in the library and why. For example, they noticed that children gravitate towards graphic novels because of the visuals. Notes were taken on children's library behaviour, such as time spent in the library, whether they asked for recommendations, and any comments or questions shared during the library visits. Focus group discussions explored children's reading experiences and different preferences (e.g., group reading, silent reading, reading aloud), and their personal thoughts on reading. Children were also invited to share suggestions for making reading more enjoyable or accessible.

Quantitative data in observations included the number of children actively engaged in reading, the frequency of reading-related behaviours, the count of children choosing books from specific genres, the frequency of different types of books being borrowed, and the time spent in the library.

## Outcomes

**Identifying language barriers to reading:** A key finding from the pupil researchers was that some children struggle with English, particularly those who are new to the country. This highlighted the need to better support pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) by ensuring that reading materials are accessible, without compromising the school's focus on rich vocabulary and high-quality literature.

**Improved library use and book corner:** Children reported feeling overwhelmed by too many books, which discouraged reading choices. As a result, the number of books was reduced to create a more inviting and manageable space. The selection was also broadened to include more non-fiction books, such as geography and history books, in response to pupils' interests.

**Support for students through storytelling:** Students' feedback has prompted the school to consider further strategies, especially for supporting those with EAL and those defined as having special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Next steps include exploring personal storytelling and encouraging children to use their own language to help promote reading.

**Pupil researchers' confidence development:** Through this process student researchers' confidence grew. For example, a girl who was previously shy and quiet, became more confident through her involvement in the research process.

**Staff engagement with findings:** The information gathered by the pupil researchers will be shared with staff in various formats, such as videos, staff meetings, and emails. These findings are helping to shape future planning.



Pupil researchers discussing their findings with the lead teacher

## Key ideas emerging

**The combination of qualitative data and quantitative data:** To learn about the reading behaviours and attitudes of children in the school, the pupil researchers gathered information through surveys, interviews, observations, reading logs, and other methods. These data sources provided a comprehensive understanding of pupils' reading, and identified the barriers to effective reading. It can also support the school improvement target of improving reading outcomes for all.

**The power of observation and its expansion:** This school has encouraged pupil researchers to carry out classroom observations since the pilot study. Two former pupil researchers were well trained in observation, and this year the approach was expanded to include observing pupils' reading behaviours in the library. The findings from these observations have informed decisions about reading promotion, library layout, and book selection, offering the school new perspectives from the pupils' viewpoint.

## Teachers' and Students' thoughts

It's really good being a student researcher because like you're also being responsible for not just yourself, but for other people's learning. And it's really nice because you get to like talk about other people and how they feel. And it's really good that you can like help them in any way that you can.

Pupil researcher, Year 6 girl

It usually gives teachers a better understanding of what each child loves and how they can continue to support and inspire us on our reading journeys. We've really enjoyed being researchers and giving people's a chance to be heard.

Pupil researcher, Year 6 boy

They are not saying it's just these and there's so many things that the schools are doing and of course, he's more mature and now, but it was like a young man, just very he has changed incredibly actually. it's great to see.

Headteacher

It felt great knowing that our voices helped make a difference. Looking ahead, our school is planning more ways to keep everyone excited about reading.

Pupil researcher, Year 6 girl

I like doing it because um it like, um it's like helping other children like read more and um so they know, like more stuff, like how to spell stuff and like no interesting facts will make like books with facts, and like comics and so then they can like be like it will help them um thing what they want to do when they're adults.

Pupil researcher, Year 6 boy

## Teacher team

- Keesha Carter (Year 5 and Year 6 Cohort Leader)

**Headteacher:** Kirsten Buist

## Research team

- Professor Kiki Messiou
- Dr Jay de los Reyes
- Chinmaya Potnis
- Ping Dong
- Karen Ibáñez Riquelme

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