

WE STAND FOR AMBITION.

University of
Kent

1:1 Reading Support Programme

2024/25



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Executive Summary

Overview

As part of its commitment to raising attainment through collaboration with local schools, the University of Kent has implemented a Reading Support Programme targeting Year 7 students across three schools in Kent and Medway. The initiative was designed to address entrenched literacy gaps, particularly those intensified by regional deprivation and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students were paired with trained reading ambassadors in one-to-one sessions; delivering focused interventions aimed at improving reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills. The programme placed strong emphasis on relationship-building, consistency and student-led learning approaches to foster reading confidence and intrinsic motivation.

This report outlines the key findings from the 2024/25 academic year, including quantitative improvements in reading age, qualitative feedback from students and ambassadors and reflections on delivery effectiveness.

Project Aims

This evaluation seeks to ascertain how well the Reading Support Programme met its aims, which were as follows:

1. Increase participants' reading confidence and self-efficacy.
2. Improve participants' sense of accomplishment.
3. Improve attitudes towards reading (i.e. more enjoyment).
4. Increase access to/support from role models.

Data Collection Methods

A mixed-methods approach to the evaluation was implemented, which involved:

Pre and Post Surveys

Participants completed a short attitudinal survey at the beginning of the programme and upon conclusion. This asked questions around their attitudes and behaviours towards reading and their sense of self within the school environment.

NGRT Assessment

Participants completed a New Group Reading Test (NGRT) Assessment at both the beginning and end of the programme. This is a standardised, adaptive assessment designed to measure reading abilities in students aged 6-16. It assesses both word reading and comprehension skills, providing practitioners with insight into students' reading levels and identifying those who may need extra support.

Ambassador Journals

An ambassador reflective journal whereby the student ambassadors on the programme kept track of student progress in a 'diary' format; tracking the number of pages read, words they struggled with and general comments.

Summary of key findings

- Survey responses and free-text feedback showed strong enjoyment of the programme and perceived improvements in reading skills, particularly fluency, confidence and word recognition, supported by consistent ambassador observations.
- Among the 47 students included in the final analysis, 46% increased their reading age by six months or more within a 10-week programme and 57% made at least expected progress. However, high variability and testing issues limit confidence in NGRT outcomes alone.
- Overall shifts in reading enjoyment and confidence were small. Though more positive changes were observed in schools using longer session models, indicating programme design and delivery length may influence both engagement and outcomes.
- Challenges were identified in the evaluation methods used which has likely impacted the reliability of results. For example, significant challenges with NGRT administration (e.g. rushed completion, variable conditions, test fatigue) required exclusions and resulted in a small sample size raise questions about the validity of independent testing as the primary outcome measure.

Recommendations

1. Adopt the one-hour session model.
2. Review and revise parental consent procedures.
3. Adapt the survey model to an interview format.
4. Review the feasibility of using school-based data to measure reading attainment rather than independent testing.
5. Consider opportunities to increase reading enjoyment.

“I would not change anything. I loved reading with my ambassador and we have had fun together reading together and playing games together.”

1. Introduction

Widening educational inequalities intensified by socioeconomic deprivation and the lasting disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly impacted pupil attainment across the UK. Among the most affected areas is literacy, with an increasing number of students entering secondary school lacking the foundational reading skills essential for academic success. This deficit not only hampers students' ability to access and engage with the broader curriculum but also poses a substantial obstacle to achieving strong outcomes at the GCSE level. In turn, this undermines their eligibility and readiness for progression into Higher Education (HE). Evidence from national studies underscores the importance of attainment at Key Stage 4 as a pivotal predictor of future participation in HE. With academic performance during this stage closely linked to long-term educational and career opportunities (Crawford, 2014).

There is a well-established body of research highlighting the strong correlation between students' reading habits, their attitudes toward reading and academic attainment. For instance, analysis by Clark and De Zoysa (2011) demonstrated that reading enjoyment is not only directly associated with improved educational outcomes but also exerts an indirect influence through the development of positive reading behaviours. In other words, students who derive pleasure from reading are more likely to engage with texts regularly. Thereby reinforcing literacy skills that underpin academic success (Clark and De Zoysa, 2011).

A substantial evidence base also exists regarding the effectiveness of targeted literacy interventions. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), through its Teaching and Learning Toolkit and various evidence reviews, has identified several high-impact strategies aimed at enhancing reading comprehension. Among these, oral language interventions which encompass structured activities such as reading aloud and guided book discussions have been shown to yield particularly strong gains. Especially when implemented consistently and intensively over time.

However, it is important to contextualise these findings. Much of the existing research draws on interventions delivered by professional educators, including classroom teachers and teaching assistants. Fewer studies have examined the impact of similar interventions when delivered by university student ambassadors. Nonetheless, emerging evidence in this area is promising. Notable examples include the *Suas Paired Reading Programme* and Bournemouth University's *Books and Stories* intervention. Both of which found that guided reading sessions facilitated by university students contributed to measurable improvements in reading ability and student confidence (Office for Students, 2022). Additional findings from volunteer-led tutoring programmes further suggest that the effectiveness of literacy support is not solely dependent on the professional background of the tutor, with positive outcomes reported across a range of tutor types (Ritter et al., 2009).

As part of our commitment to rigorous evaluation, we assess the Reading Support Programme annually to ensure it is achieving its intended aims. This report provides interim findings in the form of an implementation and process evaluation of the 2024/25 cohort. It outlines the programme's aims, activities delivered, our evaluation methodology and short-term insights and recommendations.

2. Programme Design

Programme Overview

The Year 7 Reading Support Programme was first piloted in the 2023/24 academic year, with the participation of the same three schools whereby the programme currently runs. The Outreach and Widening Participation team, in collaboration with Kent's partner schools, have identified that low literacy levels in secondary schools across Kent and Medway as a key concern and disadvantaged students in particular are not achieving the standard 5 passes at GCSE (including English and Maths). Low literacy levels often mean that students are not able to access the wider curriculum, The Year 7 Reading/Literacy Support Project is designed to achieve increased literacy levels and support students to access the curriculum. This is designed as a series of 30-minute small group sessions over a period of 12 weeks whereby student ambassadors employed by the University engage in reading with targeted students at selected partner schools.

Programme Aims

The principal objective of this research is to ascertain whether participation in the reading programme increases learners' literacy scores. Secondary aims of this research included:

1. To increase participants' reading confidence and self-efficacy.
2. To improve participants' sense of accomplishment.
3. To improve attitudes towards reading (i.e. more enjoyment).
4. To increase access to/support from role models.

The programme was completed with two different student cohorts; cohort A and cohort B. Cohort A ran from November to February and cohort B ran from February to May. For the purposes of this report, both cohorts have been analysed together due to no noticeable differences in results.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The primary research objective of this project was to ascertain whether participation in the reading programme increased learners' literacy scores. A mixed-methods approach was implemented, which incorporated three sources of data collection, which included attitudinal surveys, NGRT attainment assessments and ambassador journals. The programme evaluation received a positive ethical opinion from the Central Research Ethics Advisory Group at the University of Kent.

Data Collection Methods

Pre and Post Surveys

Students completed a short attitudinal survey at the beginning of the programme and upon conclusion. This survey was designed to understand more about student feelings towards reading - both at home and at school - and their sense of self within their own school environment. The same survey was completed at the end of the programme, with added questions around their experience of the reading support. These have been anonymised, compared and analysed for the purpose of this report.

NGRT Assessment

Participants completed a New Group Reading Test (NGRT) Assessment at both the beginning and end of the programme. This is a standardised, adaptive assessment designed to measure reading abilities in students aged 6-16. It assesses both word reading and comprehension skills, providing practitioners with insight into students' reading levels and identifying those who may need extra support. The reports available on the 'Testwise' platform can suggest appropriate interventions to help with development in targeted areas.

Ambassador Journals

Ambassador journals were used to capture ongoing, qualitative insights into student progress throughout the programme. Each ambassador maintained a reflective log for the pupils they supported: recording the number of pages read each week, specific vocabulary that students found challenging and general observations about reading pace, fluency and engagement. This informal but structured approach enabled ambassadors to track progress over time and adapt their support to meet students' evolving needs.

Participants

As the programme aims to target students who have entered secondary school with lower-than-expected reading ages, students are selected to participate in the project by teaching staff based on their literacy levels and measures of socio-economic disadvantage including free school meal status (FSM) and index of multiple deprivation (IMD).

Once identified, the students were split into a treatment and a matched comparator group, whereby there are 2 groups of 20 students. Students were matched using sex, FSM status and Index of Multiple

Deprivation (IMD) quintile (+/-1). Both groups had access to the programme, but this was staggered to assess the impact of the programme. One group of students begins their participation in Term 2 and the other 20 in Term 4. Both groups are required to carry out both pre- and post-evaluation surveys, as well as a standardised NGRT literacy test. This allows us to compare the results and determine any meaningful differences.

However, for the 2024/25 cohort, comparator group students were unable to complete the mid-point assessment due to time constraints. As a result, this report presents findings from the full cohort across all participating schools. The schools have been anonymised and split into School 1, School 2 and School 3.

4. Findings

Reading Age

Although a total of 101 students participated in the Reading Support Programme, the following analysis focuses specifically on the 67 students who provided consent to take part in the research. Of these, 64 students completed both the pre and post intervention NGRT assessments.

As will be discussed below, there were challenges throughout the implementation of test which included students' completing the testing very quickly. The significantly shorter duration suggests that some students may not have fully engaged with the test or rushed through it, which would likely result in scores that do not accurately reflect their true reading ability. Due to this, all students who completed the test in under 10 minutes have been excluded from the data. This protocol removes some students who performed substantially lower or higher than expected. Following applying this exclusion criteria a total of 47 students were used as part of the analysis. Due to the small sample size, the cohort has been aggregated and data on reading ages will not be separated by school.

As displayed in table 1; of the 47 students included in the analysis, 46% of students (n=22) increased their reading age by 6 months or more. As the programme is approximately 10 weeks long, this demonstrates an increase at double the expected progression rate. Additionally, 57% of students (n=27) displayed an increase in reading age of 3 months or more which is in line with the expected progression.

Table 1: Proportion of students who increase their reading age by the end of the programme.

Total Students	6 months+ increase	Any increase
47	22	27
100%	46%	57%

Table 2
results of these
As is shown,

summarises the
47 participants.
there was a

large variation in testing results which would indicate uncertainty as to the programme's effectiveness. However, following discussions with schools their own internal data shows that students are on average increasing their reading age at a quicker rate than those who have not participated in the programme. One school estimated that on average, students were making as much as 18 months progress across the academic year which was 6 months more than peers who did not receive the programme. This insight raises questions about the reliability of the current test results. Challenges experienced with this method of data collection are discussed in a later section.

Participant	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
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1	09:05	09:03	-0:02
2	09:07	10:11	+1:04
3	10:00	13:05	+3:05
4	09:03	09:05	+0:02
5	10:11	10:08	-0:03
6	10:08	13:02	+2:04
7	11:07	09:07	-2:00
8	09:03	09:07	+0:04
9	11:07	11:10	+0:03
10	10:03	11:10	+1:07
11	12:01	15:10	+3:10
12	08:10	08:06	-0:04
13	09:00	09:07	+0:07
14	09:00	11:02	+2:02
15	07:07	09:10	+2:03
16	07:02	10:03	+3:01
17	07:05	14:07	+7:02
18	08:00	11:07	+3:07
19	07:09	11:10	+4:01
20	08:02	12:07	+4:05
21	11:04	08:06	-2:10
22	08:02	07:10	-0:03
23	12:01	09:10	-2:03
24	08:06	09:07	+1:01
25	10:11	07:05	-2:06
26	12:01	11:07	-0:04
27	08:00	09:03	+1:03
28	14:03	12:01	-2:02
29	11:07	11:10	+0:03
30	10:00	12:07	+2:07
31	11:10	11:02	-0:08
32	12:01	14:00	+1:11
33	12:11	12:11	0
34	13:02	10:00	-3:02
35	12:07	12:01	-0:06
36	07:09	08:04	+0:07
37	11:02	08:06	-2:06
38	09:07	09:10	+0:03
39	08:10	11:07	+2:09
40	12:01	11:07	-0:04
41	10:08	09:03	-1:05
42	10:08	11:04	+0:06
43	11:07	07:09	-3:10
44	13:02	14:10	+1:08
45	14:00	15:02	+1:02
46	08:00	10:00	+2:00

47	11:04	09:00	-2:04
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Table 2: Summary of student test scores

Challenges in testing methodology

Quasi-experimental evaluation methodologies are difficult to implement within education settings. Throughout the evaluation of the programme, implementation of testing has experienced a range of challenges. This includes logistical challenges of setting up the tests for the students, variable testing conditions dependent of school availability, student perceptions of completing tests and student motivation to complete them. These challenges are not new and were experienced in previous cohorts.

This year, the programme leads worked closely with the schools to try and reduce wherever possible the need for additional testing to avoid test fatigue and over testing. This was unavoidable in some circumstances and within most cohorts, students were required to test within the programme at least once. Generally, working with the schools to prevent over-testing has been positive, as the department believe that avoiding over-testing students should be prioritised wherever possible and that the welfare of students is a priority consideration within the evaluation design. Yet there are still significant limitations to this approach which include variable testing conditions, less influence on when and how the tests are administered, and the potential for variable test results.

The programmes experienced variable testing conditions within schools. The preferred method is one-to-one testing, under exam conditions in their first session with their mentor. However, limitations from schools meant that in some schools this was not possible and testing had to occur in small and sometimes larger groups.

Timings of the tests within the school calendar may also play a factor in their success. Anecdotally, there was one instance where the testing week clashed with off timetable experiences for the students. This impacted student motivation but also the logistical implementation of testing as it required testing being completed in a reduced timeframe under less preferred conditions. Whilst this may seem like an avoidable circumstance, schools are fast-moving environments balancing multiple competing priorities and sometimes instances such as this may be unavoidable.

Due to the current challenges experienced with testing methodology, it should be considered whether it would be feasible to remove testing and instead use in school assessment data and metrics to measure reading age and progression. Many participating schools already administer NGRT assessments as part of their routine practice and can triangulate these results with additional assessment data. Drawing on in-school data may therefore enhance the validity and reliability of outcome measures, while also reducing administrative burden and improving consistency of implementation. However, it also needs to ensure that data collection is consistent across schools and taken at the required time points to be meaningful.

Survey Results

Students completed both pre- and post-evaluation surveys, with the post-evaluation including additional questions focused on their experience of the reading support programme alongside assessing any changes in their attitudes toward reading. It is important to note that Cohort 1 at School 3 did not complete these additional questions on the post-survey. Therefore, the following results are based on responses from 51 out of the 67 participating students. The weighted average across all three schools is presented below, where 1 = Disagree a lot, and 4 = Agree a lot:

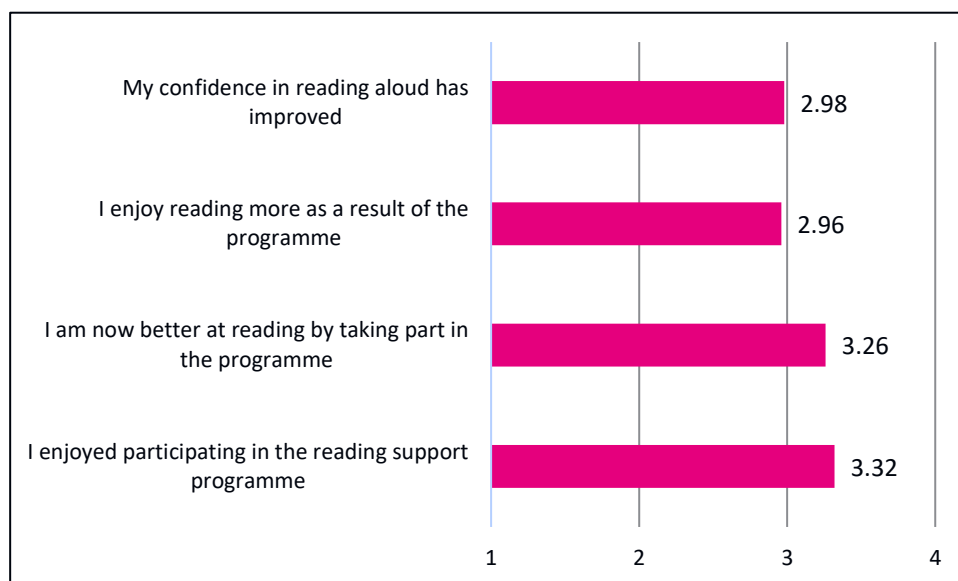


Figure 1. Weighted average for student perceptions of the Reading Support Programme.

The post-evaluation survey results indicate that students had a generally positive experience with the reading support programme, with the highest ratings reflecting strong engagement and perceived improvement in reading skills. The statement *"I enjoyed participating in the reading support programme"* received the highest weighted average score of **3.32** out of 4, suggesting that students found the sessions enjoyable and rewarding. Closely following this, the statement *"I am now better at reading by taking part in the programme"* scored **3.26**, indicating that students not only enjoyed the sessions but also believed they had made meaningful progress in their reading ability.

Ratings related to reading confidence and enjoyment showed slightly more moderate responses. *"My confidence in reading aloud has improved"* received an average score of **2.98**, while *"I enjoy reading more as a result of the programme"* was rated slightly lower at **2.96**. These results suggest that while the programme supported skill development and was well-received overall, its impact on students' confidence and long-term enjoyment of reading was less prominent. This highlights a potential area for further development of the programme which encourages or develops reading enjoyment. This could include discussions and setting reading tasks to complete between sessions where appropriate.

Attitudinal Questions

As part of the survey evaluation, students were also asked to complete attitudinal questions around their perceptions of reading. These questions were asked at the start and end of the programme to assess attitudinal shifts. These questions were taken from an international validated survey on reading. Four statements were used. These were:

- I enjoy reading.
- Reading is easy for me.
- I think reading is boring.
- I only read if I have to.

Overall, there were small but insignificant shifts in attitudes. Given the small sample size, aggregated averages of all schools were used to assess changes in perception.

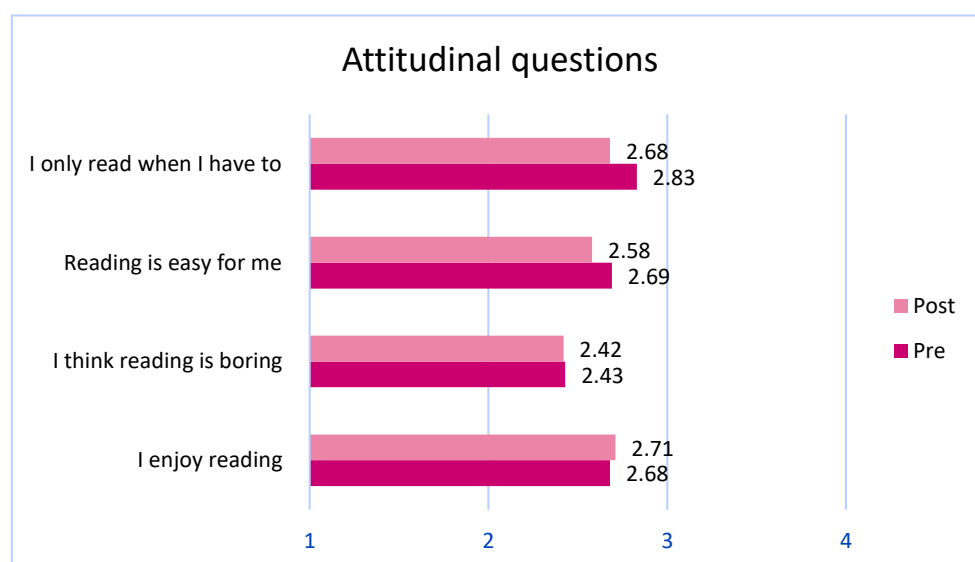


Figure 2: Weighted averages of attitudinal questions.

As can be showed in figure 2, there was a minimal increase in enjoyment from 2.68 to 2.71. There was also a minimal decrease in the statement “I find reading boring”. This would suggest that the programme is not influencing students’ overall enjoyment of reading. This may be something for programme developers to consider moving forward, as research suggests that enjoyment of reading is linked to higher attainment (Clark et al, 2024). However, when assessing school averages; 2 out of 3 schools show more promising changes. As shown in table 3.

I enjoy reading	Pre	Post	I think reading is boring	Pre	Post
School 1	2.85	2.69	School 1	2.08	2.38
School 2	2.4	2.57	School 2	2.65	2.5
School 3	2.78	2.88	School 3	2.56	2.38
Average	2.68	2.71	Average	2.43	2.42

Table 3: School weighted averages of attitudinal questions related to enjoyment of reading.

School 1 had set up the programme slightly differently than the other two schools. At School 1 & 3, students were taken for 30 minutes from the English lessons, whereas Schools 2 used a 1 hour model and missing different lessons each time. These results align with feedback from delivery staff who described the longer session model as more accessible and engaging for students.

Survey results additionally show that across all schools and the aggregated average, students reported lower scores for the statement “reading is easy for me”. This may be because students’ progression within the programme means they are reading more challenging books or are having discussions around comprehension of more challenging words than they were experiencing at the start of the programme. As ambassador journals indicate increased pace, fluency and comprehension for nearly all of the students. The journals also provide insight into words or phrases that students found challenging throughout the session, which also range in difficulty progress in difficulty throughout the programme.

Finally, there was a minimal decrease in the statement “I only read if I have to” which may indicate that students are reading more for pleasure outside of the programme. This statement consistently decreased across all schools as shown in table 4.

I only read if I have to	Pre	Post
School 1	2.92	2.69
School 2	2.9	2.86
School 3	2.69	2.5
Average	2.83	2.68

Table 4: School weighted averages of attitudinal questions related to frequency of reading.

Challenges in survey methodology

Further reflection on survey methodology has been undertaken as part of the evaluation. It was felt that whilst using a validated and internationally recognised survey had benefits of reliability and comparison, its practical application was not as appropriate for the targeted students within the programme. This is because the students have been specifically targeted due to lower reading ability, and comprehension of survey questions (particularly at the start of the programme) may be challenging for the students. Additionally, the surveys were quite long and provided limited qualitative information.

Upon discussions with delivery staff and further reflection on the surveys, it is recommended that the surveys be replaced by short one-to-one interviews with the students, which include scaled questions with symbols such as smiley faces to support students with expected lower reading ability. It is expected that this will produce additional benefits such as ensuring that rapport can be built with the students, and their first experience of the programme is not that of tests or surveys, as well as reducing challenges of comprehension and providing the opportunity to gain deeper insights from qualitative discussions alongside the use of quantitative scales.

Free text feedback

Despite challenges with the surveys, there were some free text opportunities within them which provided some useful feedback. For example, for the school which had reduced the session time to 30 minutes, feedback highlighted the issue of students wanting more time to be able to read.

"I enjoy that I can get time to read at school and I think we should have more days of reading sessions."

This feedback suggests that, despite the constraints, students valued the sessions and were eager for additional opportunities to engage with reading in a supportive environment. It reinforces the idea that session length may directly influence not just outcomes, but also student motivation and enthusiasm for reading.

Additionally, free-text responses from students further highlight the positive impact of the reading support programme. Pupils frequently mentioned their enjoyment of both the reading activities and the interactive games, with one student sharing:

"I enjoyed the reading and reading games, and how [Ambassador] offers to help me with words and taking turns. I would not change anything; the programme is really nice."

Another commented:

"I [liked] playing the reading games and reading the books aloud. I would not change anything."

These reflections suggest that students not only found the sessions engaging, but also appreciated the supportive, collaborative dynamic with their ambassadors. The fact that multiple students indicated they would not change anything about the programme reinforces the strength of the current model in creating a positive and enjoyable reading environment.

Finally, the free-text responses also highlight student recognition of their own development:

"Quite fun, helped me out. When I used to read, I couldn't read as many words, now I can read more words."

Another commented:

"Helped my reading to get better and how to effectively [read] with full stops, commas. This programme has helped me."

These responses highlight that students can recognise a tangible benefit to the programme in terms of

their reading ability.

Ambassador Feedback

In addition to the survey data, qualitative feedback from ambassador journals provides further insight into students' progress throughout the programme. Ambassadors consistently noted improvements in students' reading fluency and overall engagement. Journal entries frequently described how pupils became more comfortable and responsive as they built rapport with their ambassadors over time. This increase in confidence and willingness to participate was particularly evident in students who had initially been hesitant or reluctant. Although the attitudinal survey results showed small shifts, the ambassador feedback captures meaningful personal growth that may not be fully reflected in quantitative measures. These observations suggest that the programme had a positive relational and developmental impact, especially in fostering trust and encouraging more consistent participation in reading activities.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations for the programme have been developed in response to the above analysis:

1. **Adopt the One-Hour Session Model:** Schools should aim to implement the one-hour session structure, which combines reading and literacy-based games with ambassadors. This model, used by School 2, was associated with the strongest improvements in reading outcomes. Additionally, students in other schools expressed a desire for more time during sessions, suggesting that longer engagement may further enhance both enjoyment and impact.
2. **Review and Revise Parental Consent Procedures:** Future programmes should consider shifting to an opt-out consent model, where ethically appropriate. A significant number of students were excluded from the research due to unreturned or declined parental consent forms. This not only reduced the overall sample size but may also have limited the validity of the findings. An opt-out approach could help ensure broader participation and more comprehensive data.
3. **Adapt the survey model to an interview format:** Some survey questions were challenging to interpret for students. Questions need to be simplified using more concrete language, and by adopting an interview/discussion format with ambassadors, they can check for understanding as well as creating an opportunity for qualitative feedback.
4. **Review the feasibility of using school-based data to measure reading attainment rather than independent testing:** Several challenges have been identified in the implementation of NGRT assessments. Considering these issues, consideration should be given to the feasibility of using existing school-based metrics and assessments to measure progression in reading attainment. Many participating schools already administer NGRT assessments as part of their routine practice and can triangulate these results with additional assessment data. Drawing on in-school data may therefore enhance the validity and reliability of outcome measures, while also reducing administrative burden and improving consistency of implementation.
5. **Consider opportunities to increase reading enjoyment:** It would appear from the survey results that participating in the programme did not influence student's overall enjoyment of reading. As research indicates a clear link between enjoyment and attainment, programme developers should consider additional methods within the programme specifically designed to increase enjoyment of reading.

6. References

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