

Better Reading Partners – A Trainee Teacher's Experience

James Gunter, Rianna Forrest, Kimberley Sheffield and Ryan Ford, Year 3 Initial Teacher Education Students, University of the West of England.

Over the past year, the University of the West of England in partnership with Bristol Local Authority has been involved in a research project where second year undergraduate student are trained as Better Reading Partners who volunteer to support young readers in six of Bristol's primary schools. Some of the volunteer tutors outline their experiences of working one-to-one with children who had been assessed below age-related expectations.

Bristol and its schools

Bristol is a particularly diverse city. It boasts a vibrant and rich range of different cultures, ethnicities and socio economic backgrounds. Anyone who has visited the city will see it is not shy of this fact; rather it openly encourages cultural expression and pride in diversity. The schools involved in this research project, located in areas of relatively low socio-economic status, were identified by the local authority to receive additional support for literacy. Each has a high percentage of Black or Ethnic Minority pupils and children with English as an additional language.

Purpose and background

A number of years ago, fifteen ITE trainee volunteers were trained as Better Reading Partners (BRP) in response to a request from the local authority Reading Recovery teacher leader. These fifteen students then went on to volunteer in schools for the following six weeks. Given the success of this small scale project the following Year Two undergraduate cohort of students were trained, but only those who volunteered were then placed in schools.

The aims of this project were not solely based on raising the attainment and reading ability of children within the schools but there was also a purpose for us as the trainees. Through the students involvement there was hope that it would assist in improving our employability through our greater confidence and skills in teaching reading, particularly with children who have English as an additional language (EAL).

The Better Reading Partners programme emphasises formative assessment through running records. The importance of formative assessment has also been constantly highlighted through the ITE programme; therefore the BRP project develops the trainee's already existing understanding.

Initial apprehension

Before starting the project many of the students, ourselves included, felt apprehensive and daunted about

working in inner-city schools, as there is a tendency to see such areas in terms of negatives. Before our school experience we didn't consider the many benefits of working in an area with low socio-economic status. Additionally there were concerns about the potential difficulties working with EAL learners.

Better Reading Partners and theory

The Better Reading Partners system was selected as it mirrors many of the skills and expectations of successful teachers of literacy. BRP works on the principle of three reads; a familiar text, to focus on fluency, expression and comprehension; a new text, for testing decoding ability; a recent text, which would have been the new text from the previous week, for developing speed and comprehension. This would then act as a rota, with new texts being introduced, practised the following week, and then added to the catalogue of familiar texts.

The BRP system aligns with The Simple View of Reading model recommended in the *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (2006), known as the Rose Report. The model suggests that to become a successful reader requires language comprehension and word recognition. BRP enables the teacher to address these two elements through the 3 read process.

Training

Prior to any training and visits into school we completed a questionnaire regarding our confidence levels in various aspects of the teaching of reading. This would give the initial data to measure the improvement in confidence and ability of the ITE students. Following this we underwent training as Better Reading Partners which involved two 3 hour sessions, led by Reading Recovery teachers from local schools. The training involved; interpreting reading assessment data; personalised provision; different types of reading for different teaching and learning purposes; how to conduct running records; calculating a numeric value for children's reading level; effective praise and prompt strategies and how to overcome children's difficulties.

These skills were taught through interactive and engaging activities such as role play, which proved important in consolidating understanding and practising processes. Perhaps the greatest challenge was becoming competent in running records. We had opportunities to practise whilst watching a video of a child reading, and although many struggled to keep up with the fast pace required for running records it was helpful to have the opportunity to practise before doing it for real with our designated children.

We were also taught about reading behaviours, for example, letting children hold the book; discouraging finger pointing; appropriate prompting; helping the segmenting and blending of phonetically decodeable words; linking the book to the child's previous experiences and asking open-ended questions to establish the child's understanding of the text.

The training began to alleviate the initial apprehension and anxiety we felt. It opened our eyes to the expectations and requirements in school.

The in-school experience began with an induction afternoon during which we were given an overview of the school, met with the school's Reading Recovery teacher and had a short reading session with our allocated children. From then on we would each visit the schools once a week for a 1 hour session over a period of ten weeks.

Individual experiences: James, Asha and Abdi

I worked with two children, both with English as an additional language, speaking Somali. Both were working below age-related expectations. Asha was relatively shy and quiet although she greatly enjoyed reading. In contrast Abdi was at a higher level but had little interest in reading. During the first session I asked them about their attitudes to reading; the languages spoken at home; the reading opportunities at home and their personal interests. This gave me a valuable insight into how best adapt the sessions to ensure the children were constantly engaged and enjoying the reading.

We worked closely in collaboration with the school staff and were constantly made to feel like we were a valuable and important asset to the school, and that our time and effort was appreciated.

This was mirrored in the progress I saw in the children's reading. Within four sessions both children had progressed through the school's reading scheme. Abdi had become much more enthusiastic and interested in the reading sessions. Furthermore, as Asha became more used to working with me, she became more confident in her reading, willing to discuss the texts and responsive to questions.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the programme was attempting to address comprehension, particularly for Abdi. He would consistently decode 90-95% of words in the text, however when coming to asking comprehension questions he would struggle greatly. Therefore I needed to adapt my current method to

ensure he could develop furthermore. This was done in conjunction with the Reading Recovery teacher, who supported and assisted whenever needed.

From this I saw greater progression in his understanding of the texts over the last few weeks, highlighting the importance of appropriate questioning and scaffolding.

Individual experiences: Rianna, Hadiya and Faheema

I worked on a one-to-one basis with two Year 1 EAL children. Looking at their reading diaries it was clear that both of these children rarely read at home. However, it was important that I did not jump to conclusions and assume that these children's families were uninterested in listening to their children read at home

The children had differences in personality, as well as in their reading abilities. Whereas Hadiya was extremely chatty and lively and was keen to share all her outside experiences with me, Faheema barely spoke to me due to sheer nervousness. Hadiya was a confident reader and had high word recognition but had low comprehension skills so I planned comprehension activities to support understanding of the content of what she was reading. I asked open-ended questions about the texts to assess her understanding. Over the course of the ten weeks, Hadiya went from a Reading Recovery level ten to a level sixteen, showing that carefully tailored one-to-one support can make a difference.

With Faheema I used investigative questioning and friendly conversation so that over time she began to feel more confident in my presence and answered my open-ended comprehension questions about the texts. I was encouraging and constantly gave praise to help build her reading confidence. Through the weeks I came to realise that she had high word recognition and a high comprehension, she just needed to continue practising to build her confidence. Through my one-to-one reading with this child, she managed to move from a level six to a level nine (Reading Recovery levels). Though this may not be seen as a dramatic increase, her confidence in reading had increased enormously, which will set her up well for reading in the future.

Over the ten-week period, building relationships with the children gave them confidence in reading, which in turn, gave me confidence in myself to put the BRP training I had received into practice.

The class teacher often planned group guided reading sessions with her class and the children in her class would often read on a one-to-one basis with the class teacher, learning support assistant or a lunchtime assistant, several times a week. I wanted to encourage them to read for pleasure, to have a passion for reading and to see that reading can be enjoyable as well as useful. I asked Faheema and Hadiya what their interests were and found books and activities which matched these to encourage reading for pleasure. Through taking part in these BRP sessions, I have learned that children need time and patience, a range of different reading opportunities, activities and experiences and a chance to

talk and engage with reading before they start showing any visual signs of reading improvement.

Individual experiences: Ryan and Masani

The process of my BRP experience was to collect Masani from her class and find a place to sit in the corridor. This was one of the biggest problems of my experience. The school didn't seem big enough to accommodate every trainee teacher, as many of us were huddled together in the corridor or even sat on the floor in the cloak room. This sometimes hampered the beneficial value of the process as the child was often distracted by staff and peers passing by. Once we had found a space, I would begin informal conversation to make the child feel comfortable before starting reading.

It was extremely rewarding to witness how Masani's reading progressed over the ten weeks I was working with her. I noticed her passion for reading increase dramatically, partly down to allowing her to choose the books she wanted to read. In the first few weeks I would choose the next book for her, but I noticed that she often seemed disengaged. Handing over this control allowed her to find what she enjoyed reading. Correlating with this increased enthusiasm, her reading level also increased two Reading Recovery levels.

The BRP project gave me a unique experience to develop a strong relationship with one child. Initially Masani was very quiet and reserved; so much so she seemed reluctant to leave the classroom when I went in to collect her. However this completely changed within a few weeks and as she began to enjoy reading I was able to learn a lot about her, including her family background, planned holidays, what she did at the weekend and what she was looking forward to in the future.

Individual experiences: Kimberley and Sita

I worked with Sita during my BRP sessions, a girl in Year 3 who had English as an additional language, speaking Somali. She was enthusiastic about reading and very eager to improve, excitedly anticipating our weekly sessions. She would be keen to start the book each week and was disappointed when the session came to an end. I loved her enthusiasm and I felt privileged to be someone she was so eager to work with. After a few sessions it became clear that her ability to decode phonetically was excellent as was her ability to recognise and read tricky words and high frequency words. She sped through the texts and believed that that was the sign of a good reader, the volume of texts they could read in one session.

It only became apparent where Sita needed support when I asked her comprehension questions. She struggled greatly when asked to re-tell the story or even to answer literal comprehension questions. After discussing this with her teacher it was decided that the main aim of each session would be to build on her comprehension by discussing the text and asking literal and inferential questions. Each session we only read one or two pages and discussed these in depth.

As the school only had a limited number of books on the subjects that interested her I chose a selection of books from the children's library at the University that were suitable for her ability and matched her interests. It became clear that part of the reason she was struggling with understanding the meaning of the texts was her limited vocabulary due to English not being her home language. I made talk a priority of the session. It was a refreshing change to be able to have one-to-one time with Sita and get to know her likes and dislikes outside of the classroom. In turn, she liked finding out about me, particularly my attitudes to reading and how I progressed into a confident reader throughout school.

Overall, I feel I have learnt a great deal about how to personalise learning. It is vital that we do not lose sight of the individual needs and interest of children and lose their 'voice' amongst the demanded for raising attainment levels and performance tables.

Findings and professional development

Upon reflection, this project was a valuable part of our training at University. It held many benefits, for example we felt that our confidence in teaching reading, and particularly teaching children with English as an additional language had greatly improved. Our phonic skills and knowledge had improved and we developed a greater understanding and range of tactics for adapting activities and differentiation for personalised provision. We now have greater confidence in supporting children working below age related expectations. In addition our attitudes towards working in an inner city school have become more positive.

References

DfES (2006) *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (the Rose Report)*. London:DfES

More information on the BRP Programme can be found at: <http://www.educationworks.org.uk/what-we-do/reading-support/boosting-reading-potential.html>

For a downloadable copy of the Reading Recovery Levelling visit the following site and click on the first link: http://www.thegrid.org.uk/search.shtml?cof=FORID%3A11&safe=high&gl=uk&lr=lang_en&q=reading+recovery+levels&sa=Go&cx=011043051669635435376%3AAngrlqjxkygm