

Places and Spaces for Reading and Writing for Pleasure

Creating places and spaces for reading and writing for pleasure may be a key element of successful approaches to engaging children and young people as readers and writers. OU research for the Mercers' Company Special Initiative (2020-2023) with 6 London based initiatives and organisations Doorstep Library, Primary Shakespeare Company, Get Islington Reading, Ministry of Stories, World Book Day, and Literacy Pirates, reveals the importance of local knowledge, local responses, and carefully creating and curating physical and online spaces. Our interviews, observations and documentary analysis offer some emerging insights building on the 3 previous Blogs in this series charting our research journey with these organisations, [introducing the project](#), [highlighting innovative adaptations during the pandemic](#), and [outlining the ways these unique organisations work](#).

Local knowledge

The different programmes harness local knowledge and respond flexibly to local need. They are strongly linked to specific places and geographical areas, and these inform and support their work. Literacy Pirates works with children in their flagship local centre, Doorstep Library visits homes and begins reading for pleasure with families on their doorstep, whilst Get Islington Reading (GIR), Primary Shakespeare and Ministry of Stories (for the parts of their work funded by Mercers) connect with schools and, in the case of GIR, libraries in a specific London location.



To target the needs of children, teachers, and families in these places, the programmes work with partners from different local organisations, bringing them together for steering and planning meetings. These partnerships enable the programme leaders to identify schools with groups of students they want to reach, or who might be best placed to work with their programme. Previous relationships with schools and those who know them well, such as the School Improvement Service, are used to help encourage schools to get involved.

Get Islington Reading for instance, which is a collaborative initiative between the Reading Agency and the National Literacy Trust, takes the unique approach of drawing on geographically linked school improvement services, libraries, and secondary and primary schools to steer programme development and support networking and collaboration between practitioners in these locations. Several of the programmes also work with volunteers from their local area, which contributes to a shared understanding of the experiences of the children and families they are supporting, and



enables them to be rooted in the community. Even creative experts, authors and dramatists who work with the programmes are often sourced from the local area, strengthening these shared goals and values and a feeling of community.

We're working really closely with local partners, so that we're aware of what's happening in Islington and that we are not two national organisations bubbling into a local area and that it is genuinely

collaborative with those local partners (GIR, Interview)

Local responses

All the programmes find ways to understand the needs of their communities. Beginning the projects with some form of needs analysis, whether through informal discussion, stakeholder meetings or practitioner audits enables the programmes to plan and shape their work responsively, tailoring them to specific needs (of children, teachers and parents). For some programmes this also includes a process of negotiation and co-designing the programme with teachers, librarians, volunteers or children.

It genuinely is a conversation at the beginning and that was really working in terms of getting them on side, because you're not telling them what to do. You're asking how can we work together? (WBD Interview)

Although used to working on a national scale, World Book Day (WBD) has used this initiative as a way of working on a small scale with local teachers to develop and trial new resources - using their responses to shape programme development.

Creating and curating spaces

The use of space is also emerging as an important consideration in the work of the programmes, although there are significant differences in what, and where, these spaces are. For Primary Shakespeare, the Mercers funding has enabled them to explore online spaces as well as working in new school contexts. GIR has also created a virtual space by developing an online game environment that promotes RfP activities in real life around children's interests.

Some programmes may work with schools and in classrooms, but time is spent on making these spaces feel different to the everyday. For example, in this initiative, Ministry of Stories (MoS) has moved to include onsite work in schools, not only that centred around their bespoke 'shop' and centre in Hackney. They recognise that creating safe spaces for reading and writing, *'is about relationships and culture, as well as the physical space.* (MoS Interview)

Each programme finds different ways to ensure that the environment inspires and supports children's volitional reading and writing. Sometimes this involves helping schools to re-evaluate and re-design their spaces. Whereas some programmes, such as Literacy Pirates (LP), use their permanent environment (a Pirate Ship) to make the experience differ from literacy at school, using the space to signal different possibilities:

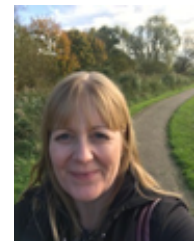
You feel you've walked into a ship, there's a tunnel, a secret tunnel for the children to go through for their entrance into the learning part of the ship. There are books everywhere. (LP Interview)

In the case of Doorstep Library (DSL), where the physical space is the doorstep of family homes, volunteers concentrate on creating a space in the day for reading through reading visits and resources. They also help parents to access local support organisations with the aim of enabling, 'a happier less stressful life' in which 'parents can take time to relax and reading is more likely' (DSL, Interview). This approach is in line with other research that highlights the positive impact of supporting families with shared reading practices and children's resultant engagement (Anderson et al., 2019).



In sum, while the six programmes are diverse, all their approaches involve creating spaces where children feel safe and supported to read and write freely. In line with previous research findings (Cremin et al., 2014; Ng, 2018; McGeown et al, 2020) children's reading and writing for pleasure can be nurtured in communities where they have choice and agency. In an Australian study, seeking out student voices and acting upon these served to reignite the young people's interest in reading (Ng, 2018). The empowering spaces we are noticing in our research, also involve listening to children's interests and ideas, connecting with inspiring authors and dramatists, and supporting families to participate on their own terms. The approaches taken by these six programmes offer an opportunity for reflection and development for the sector. Importantly, they evidence ways of engaging children and young people in reading and writing for pleasure that could inform teachers and schools, where spaces for pleasure, choice, and agency are often constrained by a focus on skills, testing and curriculum.

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