

## STORIES AND CHOICES

A new research study commissioned by Egmont Publishing UK

In collaboration with The Book People and Family, Kids & Youth research

Reading to children is a powerful way to encourage them to read for pleasure. Children who are read to daily by their parents are much more likely to be independent readers themselves. Yet reading to children is decline. Many parents cease to read to their child once their child has mastered the skills to read independently, believing *can read means will choose to read* for pleasure. So, what happens if the school steps in to ensure children are read to? This is the simple idea behind Egmont's most recent study, *Stories and Choices*. What happens if teachers in Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) read aloud to their class daily, with no formal teaching agenda, no testing of comprehension, no cross-curricular projects, no measuring of impact? Simply have storytime for pleasure and nothing more? And, because we know choice is really important to encourage children to read, what happens if we supply a lot of books and magazines?

### Context

The Department for Education's 2015 report, *Reading: the next steps*, states that nothing is more important in education than ensuring every child can read well, and the way to do this is to instil a passion for reading for pleasure. So how to instil a passion for reading in the environment of education? The National Curriculum comprises statutory elements and non-statutory elements, which in practical terms are discretionary. 'Reading for pleasure' is statutory.

*Pupils should be **taught to** ...develop positive attitudes to reading and understanding of what they read by...listening to and **discussing** a wide range of fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction and reference books or textbooks*

Department for Education English programmes of study: Key Stages 1 and 2. National Curriculum in England. September 2013. Statutory requirement

However, being 'taught' to develop positive attitudes and 'discussing' has an implicit expectation that children should have an opinion and will be expected to share it. It naturally leads to testing understanding and comprehension. This is no surprise in the context of education. But it does mean that children are very likely to view reading as a lesson.

There are other references to reading for pleasure that are non-statutory and, therefore, optional:

*Pupils should continue to have opportunities to listen frequently to stories, poems, nonfiction and other writing, including whole books and not just extracts, so that they build on what was taught previously*

Department for Education English programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2. National curriculum in England. September 2013. Notes and guidance (non-statutory)

And the Department for Education states that the way to address the imbalance in reading between disadvantaged and advantaged children is for the disadvantaged children to read the right *quantity* of *suitably stretching* literature.

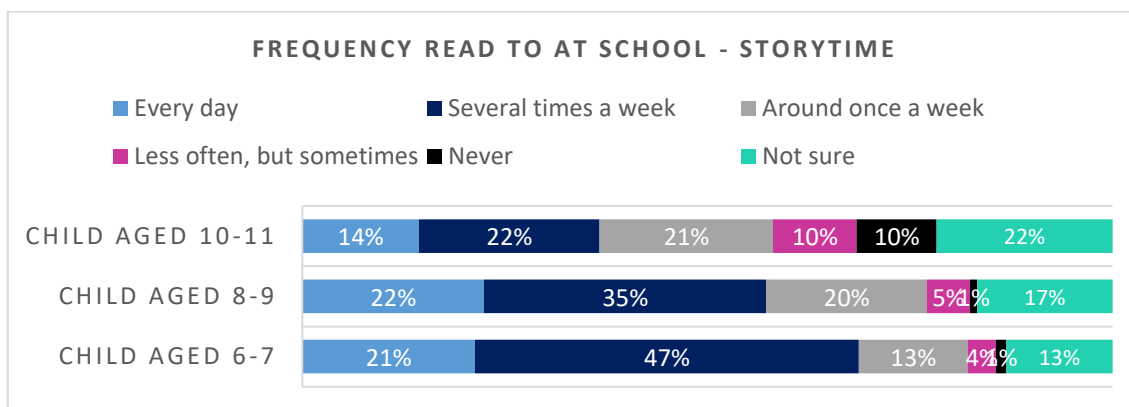
In the curriculum the notion of reading for pleasure is rather lost in the language around teaching. And there is a big issue here: pleasure can't be taught, but it can be shared. When children are read to, just for fun, the pleasure is shared and the pressure is off.

*Reading aloud conditions a child's brain to associate reading with pleasure, creates background knowledge and provides a reading role model; when children are read aloud to, they are 'enveloped' in a risk-free learning environment that removes the pressure of achievement and the fear of failure, allowing the freedom to wonder, question and enjoy material beyond their reading abilities*

Wadsworth, 2008, cited in Safford 2014: 94

It's uncommon for children in Key Stage 2 to be read to every day at school, just for fun. Egmont/Nielsen data<sup>1</sup> reveal how few enjoy a daily story:

- 21% of parents of 6-7 year olds think their child is read to daily at school, just for fun
- 22% of parents of 8-9 year olds
- 14% of parents of 10-11 year olds believe their child has a daily story at school



Source: Egmont / Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2018

<sup>1</sup> Egmont/Nielsen Understanding the Children's Book Consumer 2018

## The Project

So, Egmont decided to see what happened when a school prioritised sharing the pleasure. We worked with 7-11 year olds and their teachers from September to December 2018 at St Joseph's Catholic Academy in Stoke on Trent, an area of deprivation and a National Literacy Trust Hub.

- 27% of the children are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is higher than the national average.
- 8% are from an ethnic minority
- 13% are from Traveller families

Some of the parents can't read. A sizeable number of children have no or very few books of their own, and most are not read to at home. The school has not had new books for some time; what they do have is not as varied as they'd like; and they only have magazines when teachers buy them.

## Project design

- The teachers committed to reading aloud to their class every day for 20 minutes, a storytime for fun and relaxation
- Egmont supplied 624 new books and 1120 new magazines:
  - 4 sets of 31 storytime books per class
  - 32 books per class for the classroom library
- There were class workshops and teacher discussions at the beginning, middle and end of the term
- There was a magazine workshop for year 6
- The Book People's 'Book Bus' visited the school before Christmas and gave every child a voucher to choose any book they liked
- In January 2019 there were closing interviews with the teachers and the governors
- We would aim to gather some feedback from parents via a questionnaire and meet 2 families from each school year, before and after the project

## Initial research with families

With the help of the Head Teacher we identified eight families – most of them not keen on reading – as participants. We aimed to talk in August, before the project began, and again at the end, to see if the school activities had any impact at home. In fact, there was low engagement with the idea of being involved in the project, despite agreeing to participate.

In addition, we aimed to gather wider feedback with an online questionnaire sent to all 120 families. However only 22 parents filled it in. Standing at the school gates to speak to more parents resulted in a total of 42 responses out of a possible 120.

Despite the school sending a letter about the project at the beginning of term almost all those 42 parents claimed not know about it.

This low engagement is an interesting finding in itself and illustrates the significant challenge of reaching parents who are disengaged and passively engaged in their child's reading.

It was clear some parents had very negative memories of school. One mum cried when talking about learning to read because it had been so traumatic for her. All parents placed importance on reading – focusing mainly on learning to read – and all appeared to view reading to their child as a positive activity, regardless of whether they did it or not. Five of the eight children were read to in some form, sometimes. Reading consisted mainly of set school reading on weekday evenings, led by parents, with the child reading aloud. For some, reading books from school was the only reading that occurred.

### First workshops – the children

The first class workshops were one week into the new term, so the children had experienced a few days of being read to by their teacher. During these storytime sessions they had the choice of simply listening or they could follow what the teacher was reading with their own copy of the book.

Most children said they had not been read to at home for quite a while. There were some sniggers if a classmate said they were still read to. It was thought of as babyish, not desirable. And the good readers, especially in Year 6, were not keen on the idea of being read to, seeing themselves as too grown up for it.

Some of the children's responses to a question about whether they had any books at home was interesting. The teachers knew those who had few or none, so they were surprised when they said yes they did have books. It became clear that they were answering literally – 'do you have any books at home?' Yes – if there were any books *at all* in the house – even if they were not theirs.

At this stage, their ideas about reading were mostly to do with education and a better future. They talked of its importance for learning, doing well at school, getting a good job. Some also mentioned practical benefits, like being able to read instructions and recipes. Few mentioned pleasure or enjoyment, although older children (over 10) talked more about imagination and exploration.

The children thought of reading in the context of a class guided reading lesson. Lots said they didn't like this, that it was difficult to focus on the story while following the text, that their reading partners put them off, that they didn't like reading out loud to their class mate.

*I like to read myself and I don't like other people saying it when I'm reading, because I like seeing it in my head... because I can see the words and I know where I am*  
Girl, Year 4, 8-9

*[reading alone] So you can have peace and quiet and so you don't get distracted*  
Boy, Year 4, 8-9

Few had any real idea of the pleasure of listening to a story. This first week had been a new experience. In fact some children were actually a bit apprehensive because being read to was unknown or unfamiliar. They talked of concerns, for instance, that storytime could cut into playtime, that they might be uncomfortable sitting on the floor, be bored, and would not be able to choose the book.

Hearteningly, at least some were already a little positive about being read to by the teacher. Reasons included not having to try to keep up with their partner in guided reading, that they could follow the story, and that the teacher explained hard words as she read. And, pleasingly, there were some early comments about fun, like enjoying when the teachers put on different and funny voices.

*I really like people reading to me because they add funny accents to the stories*  
 Boy, Year 5, 9-10

### First workshops – the teachers

One week in to the project and the teachers were feeling good about reading aloud to the children, especially the disadvantaged children, and keen to devote time to it. Those who'd been Key Stage 1 teachers were also feeling nostalgia about reading to children again, since there was little time for it in Key Stage 2. They were feeling positive but also apprehensive. Could they find time to read for 20 minutes every day? And was one term too short to make a difference?

*Excited to share stories with them but worried about trying to fit this into the timetable*

*I think you'll ignite it, I don't know how much you will see it flourish*

They felt optimistic about all the new books and the magazines that would be coming to the school. Some of the children have very little and the teachers felt the new resources would have a big impact on them.

### Mid-way through the term – the children

At this point we found the children's attitudes to reading were beginning to change. We found the children were still thinking of reading in terms of education, but several were now also thinking in terms of pleasure and being read to in storytime was beginning to gather some positive traction.

*It will help you get a job and you will know more and you can go to college*

Boy, 9

*I like people reading to me because when I read I sometimes get distracted and then I lose which page I'm on*

Girl, Year 4, 8-9

*To get ready for big school. To learn your spellings*

Boy, 7

*After a busy day you want to end the day in a good way so she (the teacher) ends it in a good way by reading*

Girl, Year 5, 9-10

## Mid-way through the term – the teachers

At this point, the teachers were beginning to sense a positive shift with some of the children and an increased wish to read independently. They thought this was because of class storytime and reading an entire book, which was in contrast with the short texts they typically read. The Year 6 teacher noticed that a couple of girls, who were good readers and initially said that they didn't like to be read to, were now shutting their copies of the book, closing their eyes and just listening.

The teachers were enjoying reading aloud, appreciating the time was without any expectation of *formal* teaching and learning, but they were also finding it difficult to make the time every day.

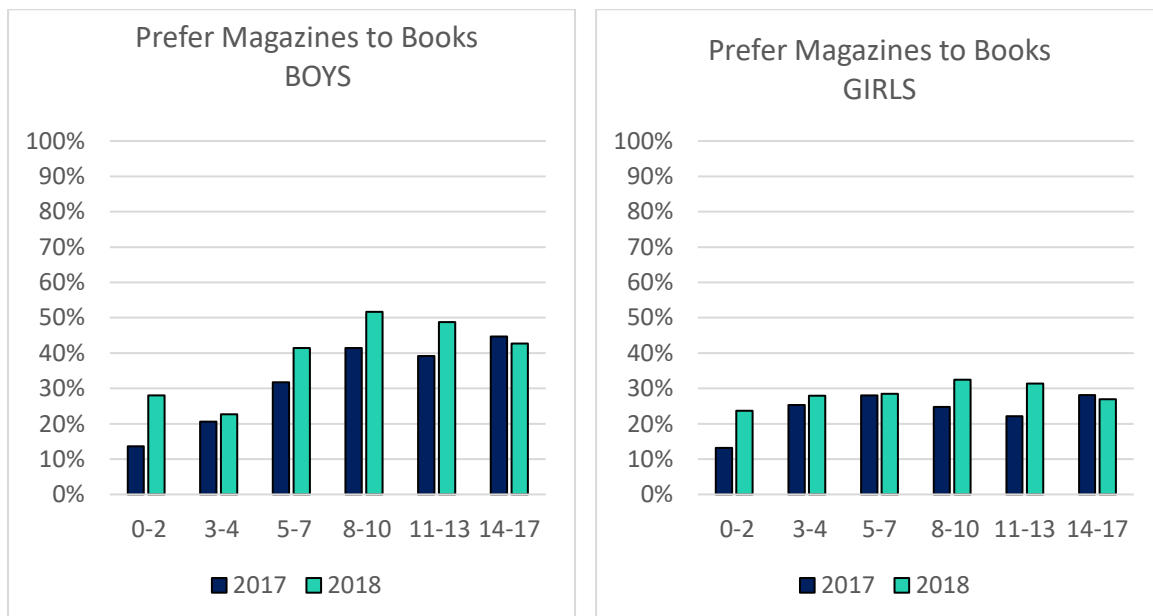
One teacher said her class were enjoying storytime so much that she could not do it on the day when several children had to leave early to go swimming because they'd be so upset to miss it.

*It's quite nice to be able to just read a book without having to do what we normally do... it's quite refreshing*

*I don't do it every day. Most days, or if I can't do it at end of day I move it to pre-lunch*

## The impact of magazines

Magazines are children's own popular culture. They are exciting, easy reading and a lot of fun. 35% of 0-17s say they prefer magazines books and this has increased year on year (28% in 2017). Preference peaks with 8-10 year olds when one third of girls and over half of boys say they prefer magazines to books.

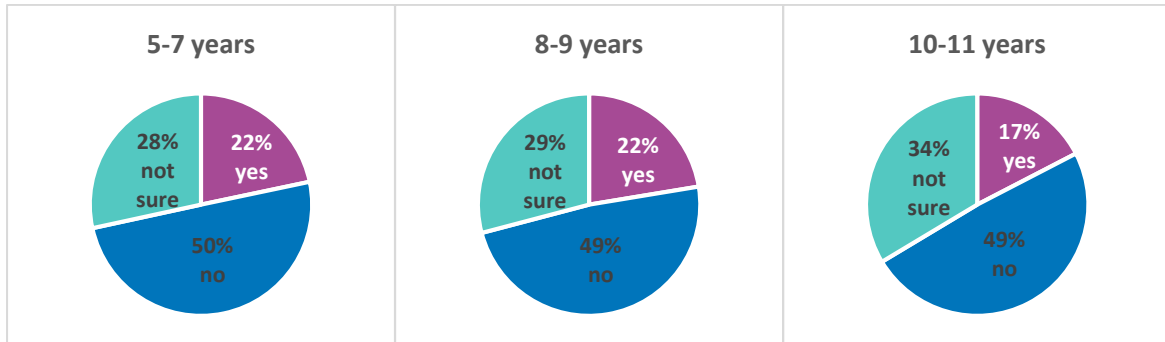


Source: Egmont Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2017 / 2018

Research shows that having a wide choice of reading material is important to encourage independent reading, as is making reading fun, so there is a good case for magazines to be found in schools.

However, few schools have magazines:

**Does your child's school provide magazines for children to read for fun?**



Source: Egmont / Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2018

Part of the Stories and Choices project involved sending in magazines to the school. Over the term, nine separate deliveries were made and in total 1120 magazines were given to the school. The children were able to take the magazines home to keep.

**Selection of magazines sent to the school**



The children loved the magazines and read them with gusto. As one boy said, *'Magazines make good reading because it's kind of like reading but just with more pictures.'*

Prior to the project the school had few and infrequent magazines in class. Those that they did have were bought by the teachers with their own money. They favoured titles that offered educational content.

At first, the teachers were in two minds about the magazines the children received. They could see how enthusiastic the children were, but they were more ambivalent about the content. It was not considered 'purposeful', meaning it did not lend itself to formal teaching and learning. However, by the end of term the teachers could see the impact they had on reading for pleasure and a place for them as part of a broad reading repertoire.

*Magazines make good reading because it's kind of like reading but just with more pictures*

Boy, Year 5, 9-10

*They could be used during private reading time*

*Magazines help them see different types of writing and see that not all reading is fiction and story books*

*The magazine element of the Egmont project was really successful*

## Formal teaching with magazines

Stories and Choices is about pleasure and choice of reading material but we also wanted to address the preconceptions of teachers towards popular culture magazines by showing what a rich resource they can be in the classroom. Children read all kinds of content and need to have a critical eye while doing so. Our workshop (co-created with the UK Literacy Association) helps children learn critical reading skills and exposes them to another kind of reading. It uses Egmont's 'Toxic' and 'Go Girl' magazines. The workshop includes thinking about

- who the magazine is aimed at and what an editor does
- why the content has been chosen and the purpose of the page or the article
- why particular words have been used, the tone and persuasive elements

It was stimulating for Year 6 and provided learning all readers. For those less confident, it was helpful to think more about what they were actually reading. For those more confident and able, it explored aspects they didn't usually consider, like the editor's role and magazine production, and the different ways that words are used.

*What I think is absolutely brilliant about magazines is they contain content that children want to read about*

David Reedy, General Secretary, UK Literacy Association



## The impact of the Book Bus

Near the end of term the Book Bus visited St Joseph's as part of this project. The Book People gave every child a voucher to choose their own book. Remembering that some of the children have no books of their own, this was very special for them. The excitement was palpable.

Teachers said even those children who typically thought reading was boring were really excited.

Teachers left the children to choose and the positive impact of a child making their own

choice was tremendous. However, some

children who were unfamiliar with having their own books and with making these choices independently did struggle and wanted adult advice.



The children took their books back to their classrooms as if they were trophies and were keen to start reading straight away. One teacher said she could have heard a pin drop in class as they all sat there reading their new books. In another class, a teacher noted just one girl who did not open her new book. She told the teacher it was so special that she was going to take it home and show it to her mum first. She is dyslexic, as is her mum, and she felt very emotional about having her own book to share. It was a significant day and the children were thrilled with their choices and status as book owners.

The timing of the visit, near to the holiday break, meant the children had experienced a term of being read to and of having access to exciting new books and magazines, and there had been a lot of focus on reading for pleasure. The teachers felt that if the Book Bus had visited at the beginning of the term the response may have been more muted for some children.

*Just look at today, at how excited they were to get a book of their own... they ran back to their classrooms and 'Miss can I open my book'*

*They were looking at it in awe, like 'I've got my own book!'*

*I honestly don't think as many would call reading 'boring' anymore: I would say every single child was excited about getting their own book*

At the beginning, and even at the middle of the project, the children spoke of the importance of 'reading for their education', above all. Now that had changed and the feelings of pleasure were clear.

With very few exceptions, the children were engaged and listening to their teachers. They animatedly described the plots of the books that their teachers had read to them and discussed favourite characters and parts of each book. They talked of laughing with friends, sharing a story, feeling relaxed.

*It's a good experience because every day if your teacher reads to you, it's relaxing*

Girl, Year 5, 9-10

*They're wonderful books because when she reads we can just lay down and close our eyes*

Girl, Year 3, 7-8

*Calm and cosy*

Boy, 9

*It doesn't really matter whatever happens, like you forget about what's happening right now, you just go somewhere else and it's like that in a book*

Girl, Year 6, 10-11

*Books can  
make you feel  
good*

Boy, 10

*I felt really excited  
and curious to  
know what's  
coming next*

Girl, 10

*I felt happy because our  
teacher uses different  
voices depending on the  
emotion*

Boy, 10

*It gives you lots of  
knowledge...it just makes you  
clever, I just like lots of things  
about reading*

Girl, Year 4, 8-9

Naturally, they had some moans, mostly practical, like teachers reading too fast to follow along, or not liking it if the flow of the story was interrupted by other children asking questions or being naughty and getting told off. Also, not getting to choose the book themselves, struggling to hear and sitting cramped on a small part of floor. This last point is interesting as the teachers all thought the children enjoyed sitting on the floor in the book corners!

### End of term – the families

At the end of the project we spoke to five of the eight families we'd met at the start. We wanted to see if a school project had any impact at home. There was mixed awareness of storytime. One dad who did know it had been happening said he believed that the focus on reading had a positive effect on the dynamics within the whole school, and a real impact on his daughter, who is in Year 3. All the parents had been impressed by the magazines coming home and the Book Bus books.

*The magazines they get and stuff like that, the  
books that they've been given...I can see it from  
this year that he's been more interested in reading  
than he was*

Dad of son, Year 4, 8-9

### End of term – the teachers

The teachers were unanimous in declaring the project a success and they were surprised at the speed of change. The children are now more likely to think positively about reading, to ask to be read to in class and to read themselves. All ages enjoyed being read to. Younger children who were still learning to read enjoyed having books read to them that were more complex and exciting than those they use to learn. The benefits for older children who can read fluently included the simple joy of escapism and being lost in a good story.

*Three months from  
September to now is  
such a small space of  
time... we've already  
seen the positive impact*

*A lot more of my  
children ask to read  
books off my  
bookshelves now.  
It's something I've  
really noticed*

*We read 'Bill's New Frock' by Anne Fine as  
our first book. We finished it...and the  
next time we did independent reading I  
had about six children asking me for Bill's  
New Frock*

Lower-ability readers, regardless of their age, particularly benefited from the project because they could access stories they could not read themselves. They were also motivated to improve their own reading so that they could read the new books. The more able readers were, typically, resistant to the idea of storytime at first. They became increasingly enthusiastic over the term. It helped them to broaden their choices, so that they read a wider range of books.

*It has given all children the impetus to try to move up the levels in their home reading book, especially the lower ability children who want to improve their reading in order to access some of the newer texts we were given*

*The project has had a great impact on the pupils who enjoyed reading but perhaps would not have chosen some of the kinds of texts which have been read to them. They have broadened their choices and have started reading a much wider range of books*

The disadvantaged children who typically have no or few books at home, who are not read to and whose parents have low literacy levels benefitted enormously from simply being able to listen to a story, to not feel self-conscious or babyish. Some now have increased self-esteem through owning their own book.

*One of my SEN children was filling in his workbook today and it was about what is good about your teacher reading to you. He said 'you always do funny voices'. I don't think he would have said that to me in September... I do think he's got something from it*

*For some children the idea of being able to own their own magazine/book has increased their self-esteem*

Year 4 teacher

## Key findings:

### The thrill of the new

We can't underestimate the enormous impact of the new books and magazines and the simple fact that brand new is a motivation in itself. The children were in awe: 'Miss, these are new', 'Miss this isn't even on sale yet!' Having books that are not tatty and old inspired something akin to reverence in the children, and especially for the more disadvantaged children who don't have access to new. Having more choice increased excitement and motivation to read.

*The children have loved having 'brand new' books and have been really drawn to the newer books on the class bookcase*

*The children loved the new books, especially the 32 different books we were given for our class libraries. They ask to read more when they have finished their work and in almost all instances, will choose one of the new books*

## Empathy and relationships improved

Teachers noted children's improved empathy. They also talked of the benefits to their relationships with the children. Reading to them broke down barriers, created a shared experience and shared intimacy. In fact Daniel Pennac, in 'The Rights of the Reader', says 'when someone reads aloud they leave themselves wide open'. Reading to children is a selfless act of giving and children respond well to it.

*Reading for pleasure for a small amount of time each day does wonders for the teacher/pupil relationship.... It's especially vital for so many of our children who live in 'literacy-starved' homes*

## Improved well-being

The children had an improved sense of wellbeing. Experiencing quiet, calm storytime in a busy school day was relaxing for children and teachers observed their sense of peace and escapism. All children benefitted, but it was most marked for Year 3 (age 7-8) who had just moved up to Key Stage 2 and were trying to settle in, and for Year 6 (age 10-11) who have secondary school and SATs ahead. Teachers thought that there had been an improvement in focus and attention spans, too.

*For those who were taking a while to settle into a new Key Stage, the storytime sessions were something they really looked forward to*

*Some children with difficulties paying attention have constantly improved/increased their attention spans throughout the process*

Year 3 teacher

*I feel it has been a very grounding, peaceful time in their day. It's been very valuable for some children to be able to rely on having that opportunity to enjoy a story with their classmates*

Year 4 teacher

The project was positive for the teachers. They, too, found it calming and stress-releasing. One teacher said she had made more time at home to read for pleasure as she found reading in class relaxed her.

*It has given me enjoyment at being able to share my love of reading with my class*

*I already enjoy reading and it allowed me to share my passion with the children and model good reading to them. Hopefully, some of them will remember the time spent reading together*

Despite agreeing to read aloud to their class every day for 20 minutes, the teachers read on average 3 or 4 days a week. It was extremely difficult to fit storytime in daily with the demands of the school timetable and the curriculum. The teachers have a suggested solution to their lack of time. They believe the curriculum approach to teaching grammar is too technical, very time consuming and can turn children off reading; time for daily stories could be created by having less focus on it and more on the more enjoyable aspect of reading aloud.

*Finding time in the packed timetable. It is already a challenge to fill the demands of the curriculum so in a sense this was more pressure on top of that*

*The primary curriculum is very squeezed and even finding 10 minutes some days is impossible*

## Attainment improved

Across Key Stage 2 the children's reading levels improved by an average of 10.25 months as a result of the project. Levels were evaluated at the start of the project and again in February 2019. Over those 5 months the school would anticipate the average reading age to have improved by 5 months (with each passing month children's reading ages are expected to improve concurrently). The remarkable overall improvement at St Joseph's was led by Year 3, which improved by an astonishing average of 15 months. Year 4 improved by an average of 9 months, Year 5 by an average of 10 months and Year 6 by an average of 7 months. The school is of mixed ability and so those averages include some already capable readers, who might not be expected to improve so much. There there are some truly astonishing individual improvements within those averages, for example:

- A boy in Year 3 aged 7 years 6 months, with a reading age of 7 years and 4 months at the start of the project, had reached a reading age of 10 years by February – an improvement of 2 years and 8 months.
- A girl in Year 4 aged 8, with a reading age of 5 years and 11 months at the start of the project, had reached a reading of age of 8 years by February – an improvement of 2 years and 1 month.
- A girl in Year 5 aged 9 years 11 months, with a reading age of 5 years and 11 months at the start of the project, had reached a reading age of 7 years and 6 months by February – an improvement of 1 year and 7 months.
- A boy in Year 6 aged 10 years 2 months, with a reading age of 5 years 11 months at the start of the project, had reached a reading age of of 6 years 11 months by February – an improvement of 1 year.

## Summary and conclusions

The project began with a question: What happens if teachers in Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) read aloud to their class daily, with no formal teaching agenda, no testing of comprehension, no cross-curricular projects, no measuring of impact? Simply have storytime for pleasure and nothing more?

'Stories and Choices' has shown that reading aloud to children just for fun is behaviour-changing for all ages and abilities. Choosing and owning a book is thrilling and motivating for those that have few or none. Providing a good range of books and magazines, and having them new in the classroom is highly motivating for children. And it improves reading attainment, in some cases dramatically.

It's all beautifully simple and very impactful. But there is one big problem: teachers are under pressure to deliver a demanding curriculum that leaves little time for other kinds of school activities. However, if reading for pleasure is so important, and reading aloud is so impactful, then there must be a case for making it a statutory part of the school day, every day.