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# Evaluation of Coram Beanstalk's reading support programmes

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## Abstract

We compared two Coram Beanstalk volunteer reading helper programmes delivered in English primary schools during the academic year 2018/19 to see whether twice a week (compared to once a week) work with children brought greater improvements, pre to post programme, in volunteer-assessed reading attainment, confidence, enjoyment, and emotional well-being. Despite the evaluation not using a randomised design, our secondary data analysis of reading records for 1,220 children found that the children, volunteers, and support given were similar enough for a reasonable comparison of outcomes across the programmes. On average, young people improved across the two programmes in terms of their reading attainment, confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing. There was no statistically significant difference between the Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes in pre-post change in reading attainment or in children's confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing. In other words, children improved to a similar extent regardless of which programme they took part in. Our survey of 293 volunteers found that almost all thought their volunteering pattern was enough to build a rapport with children, whether this was once or twice a week. This was echoed in interviews with 8 volunteers who also described how much they enjoyed volunteering with Beanstalk but wanted Beanstalk to improve its communications with them and to develop more social opportunities as part of volunteering.

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# Summary

Coram Beanstalk trains and supports volunteer reading helpers who visit primary schools and other settings in England to provide 1:1 reading support, with the aim of improving children's reading ability and confidence. Coram's Impact and Evaluation Team were funded by Porticus to carry out an evaluation of Coram Beanstalk's volunteer reading help.

We aimed to find out whether a child having a volunteer reading helper twice a week, compared to once a week, increases improvements in reading attainment, confidence, enjoyment, and emotional well-being. We compared the main, twice-weekly Beanstalk programme, 'Reading 321', to the less common once a week 'Once Reading' programme.

We analysed reading records for these programmes completed in primary schools in the most recent available pre-pandemic academic year, 2018/19. These covered 1,169 children who attended Reading 321 and 51 who attended Once Reading. We also interviewed 8 volunteers and surveyed 293 volunteers. These individuals were very positive about their Coram Beanstalk volunteering, including how well their own once or twice a week pattern suited them; we were unable to assess any impact of volunteering pattern options on others, such as potential recruits and former volunteers as these individuals were not recruited into the current evaluation.

We compared the characteristics of children, volunteers, and support given to see whether they were similar enough to allow for a reasonable comparison of outcomes across the two programmes. On the whole, the groups and support were similar – the key difference was whether support was delivered once or twice a week.

Volunteers in the two groups were similar ages, mostly post retirement age, and had been volunteering for Coram Beanstalk for similar lengths of time. Children were broadly comparable in terms of gender, but children taking part in Once Reading were slightly older than those in Reading 321. Students taking part in Once Reading were from schools in areas of greater deprivation compared to students in Reading 321. Reading 321 students started earlier in the academic year and took part for a greater number of weeks compared to Once Reading. Children's initial reading attainment was comparable, as assessed by school staff, though Once Reading children had significantly higher pre-programme attainment. At the start of the programme, children in both programmes had similar levels of volunteer-assessed confidence, enjoyment, and emotional well-being in terms of choosing books, concentrating, maintaining a positive attitude, asking for help when needed, and being respectful of themselves and others.

Overall, the majority (73.5%) of children taking part in both Once Reading (70.7%) and Reading 321 (73.6%) showed improvement in their reading attainment between the start and end of the programme. Reading attainment improved to a similar extent from pre to post-programme for both Once Reading and Reading 321. Scores on confidence, enjoyment, and emotional well-being were much improved, pre to post programme, for both groups, which replicates the findings published by Coram Beanstalk itself in its Impact Report on the Reading 321 programme in 2018/19. These improvements again were consistent across both programmes, meaning that children improved in terms of their confidence, enjoyment, and wellbeing, regardless of which programme they took part in.

Our online survey asked how well Coram Beanstalk volunteering fit in with respondents' other commitments. 293 volunteers completed the survey in November 2021, a 21% response rate. Both the majority who volunteered twice a week (71% of sample) and the minority who volunteered once a week (22% of sample) found it fit well or very well, with only 3.9% of twice-weekly volunteers and 3.0% of once-weekly volunteers finding it did not fit. Almost all (96%) thought their volunteering pattern was enough to build a rapport with children; 15% of twice-a-week volunteers and 8% of once-a-week volunteers thought it 'more than enough' for this. Only four out of 293 respondents thought 'it is not enough'; of these, two were once-a-week volunteers and two were twice-a-week volunteers. Most volunteers in both groups thought twice a week was better for children. But once-a-week volunteers found this pattern best for them personally, and twice-a-week volunteers found twice-a-week suited them best.

Written comments by those favouring twice weekly suggested: that this greater time commitment conveyed the importance of reading; that a week is too long to wait when building on the previous session; and that weekly sessions become disjointed. Conversely, others favouring once a week volunteering cited practical considerations, such as competing commitments and travel time.

Our interviews with eight volunteers allowed for a closer look at what volunteers do in their sessions and the skills they use to support young readers. Volunteers were positive about their experiences with Beanstalk, with some commenting that it felt worthwhile and gave their week a sense of structure. In line with the survey findings, those who volunteered twice a week thought that twice a week was best, while volunteers who volunteered once a week thought that volunteering once a week was best. In terms of improvements to their experience, some volunteers wanted Beanstalk to improve its communications with them and to develop the social aspect of volunteering, such as by holding coffee mornings or Christmas get-togethers.

We conclude that differences in improvements in outcomes between programmes are small and inconclusive. While our two groups are broadly comparable, our research design does not allow confident conclusions on causality. This, together with the preferences and practicalities expressed in our survey and interviews, is evidence in favour of offering both patterns, while more rigorous evaluation is conducted.

# 1. Introduction

Coram Beanstalk supports children in England aged three to 13 years by training and supporting volunteer reading helpers who visit primary schools and other settings to provide 1:1 reading support, with the aim of improving children's reading ability and confidence.

Coram Beanstalk provides reading support programmes for the following children:

- early years (i.e. aged 3 to 5);
- Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) children (from Year 1 to Year 6, i.e. age 5 to 11) and
- Key Stage 3 (KS3) children (from Year 7 to Year 8, i.e. age 11 to 14).

This report focuses on support at KS1 and KS2. Reading helpers complete reading records when they start working with a new child and then again at the end of their time working with the child. The reading records are designed both to track progress and to be used as a tool to get to know the children when a reading helper first starts working with them.

Beanstalk's largest reading support programme is called Reading 321, in which helpers support one child for 30 minutes, twice a week, for an average of three terms (one academic year). Less commonly, Once Reading volunteers visit once per week during term to support children. Support takes place outside the classroom but within the school, typically during the school day.

Our primary research question was:

- Does having a volunteer reading helper twice a week compared to once a week increase improvements in the reading attainment of children?

Our secondary research question was:

- Does having a volunteer reading helper improve confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing for both KS1 and KS2 children?

For this analysis we focused on reading records returned from the Reading 321 and the Once Reading programme in the academic year 2018/19, the first available complete academic year of data before the COVID-19 pandemic. We were interested in the difference between reading programmes where children were supported either once a week or twice a week. We carried out secondary data analysis, conducted and analysed interviews, and surveyed volunteers about their volunteering pattern and experience of volunteering.

## 1.1 Aims and outcomes

Coram Beanstalk has developed a theory of change for the Reading 321 programme which we apply to both reading programmes in this report (Figure 1). The theory of change is aimed at primary school pupils and the ultimate goal is for children's lives to improve so that their risk of long-term disadvantage and the negative consequences of illiteracy are reduced.

The process of the Reading 321 programme starts with the school identifying children that could benefit from intervention due to one or more of the following reasons:

- child is reading below the expected level for their age;
- child has low confidence in reading and wider learning; and
- child lacks support and opportunities outside of school.

Suitable reading helpers are then recruited and attend a one-day training course to learn the skills of being a positive role model.

Intended intermediate outcomes for pupils across the programme include:

- children accelerate in their reading progress, narrowing the gap with their peers;
- children increase in confidence and attitude to reading and wider learning; and
- children increase their enjoyment of reading.

**Figure 1. Coram Beanstalk's theory of change for the Reading 321 programme**
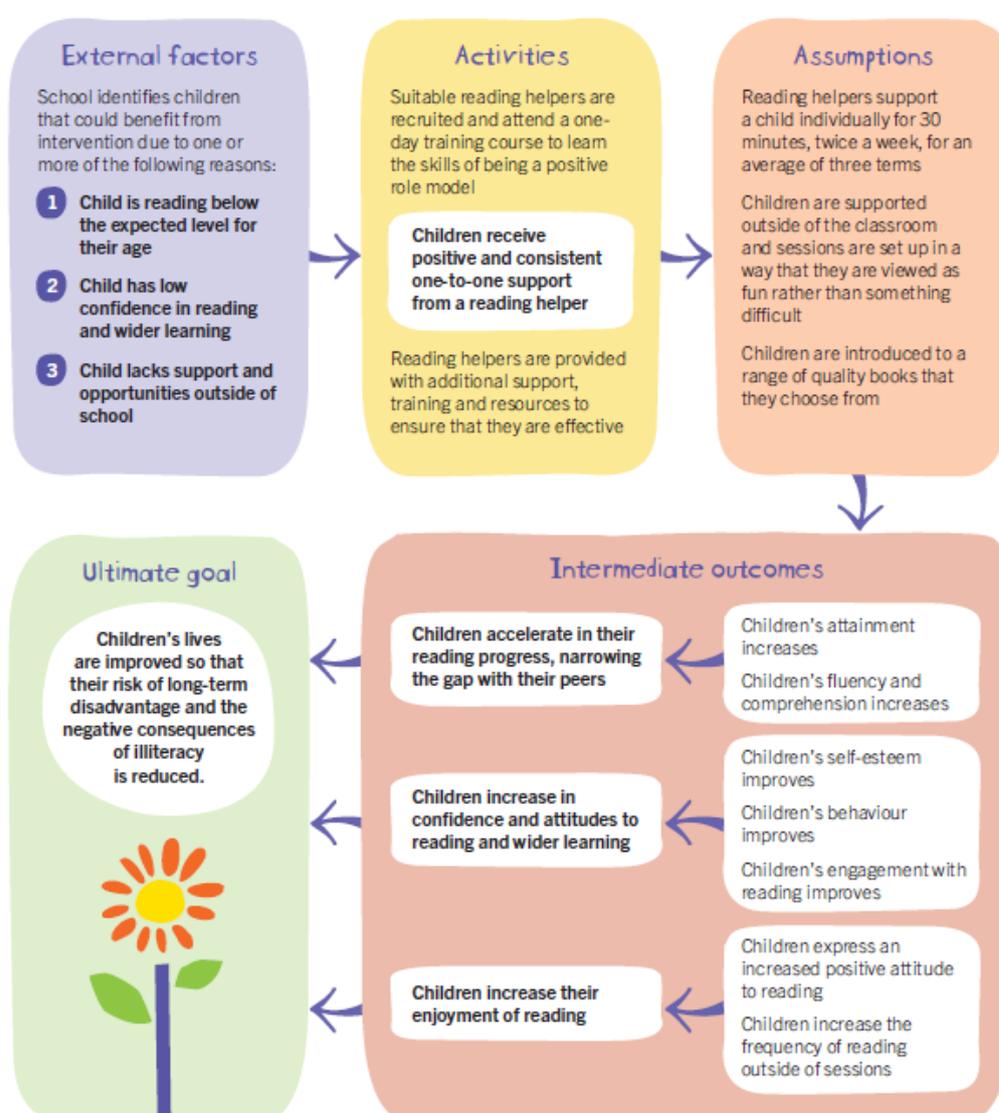
# 2. Methods

For this Porticus-funded evaluation we analysed reading records from the academic year 2018/19, interviewed eight reading helpers, and surveyed 293 reading helpers about their volunteering experience (Table 1). We chose to interview reading helpers to get in-depth answers, and send out an online survey to gain breadth of views across the pool of volunteers. Carrying out an online survey also meant we were able to include diversity monitoring questions to check for representativeness of the survey sample compared to the wider population of Coram Beanstalk volunteers, and to explore how responses differ by volunteer characteristics.

**Table 1. Data collected for this evaluation**

| Method | Timing | Amount |
|---|---|---|
| Secondary data analysis of reading records | Academic year 2018/19 | 1,220 reading records |
| Semi-structured interviews | November 2021 | 8 reading helpers |
| Online survey | November 2021 | 293 responses |

## 2.1 Secondary data analysis

Coram Beanstalk gathers data from schools on the impact of its reading support programmes through paper booklets called reading records. The reading records include information on the children's reading attainment before and after they have been supported by the reading helpers and the reading helpers also use the reading records to monitor the children's progress.

The type of reading support programme differs for each stage of education, with the Story Starters programme for children aged 3 to 5 years, Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes for children aged 5 to 11 years, and the Reading Leaders programme for young people aged 11 to 14 years. Reading support programmes are provided in schools across all nine regions of England.

Our inclusion criteria for this analysis were:

- Reading records from the Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes;
- Reading records for children who were supported in the academic year 2018/19 - specifically, children who started being supported from 4 September 2018 and finished by 25 July 2019; and
- Children in Year 1 to Year 6 of primary school (KS1 and KS2).

We used data from the following datasets:

- **Reading records from the academic year 2018/19**

This dataset includes all the information collected from the reading records returned in 2018/19. The reading records are completed on paper by the schools and volunteer reading helpers before being entered by Coram Beanstalk into an Excel data entry spreadsheet.

The reading records are split across different pages, some of which are completed by the school and some of which are completed by Beanstalk volunteers. Schools provide information about the child's reading attainment before and after the period of reading support. Reading attainment is assessed using a four-point scale (Below, Working Towards, At, or Above) with two sub-categories for each (Emerging or Secure). This scale was developed by Coram Beanstalk with consultation from professionals in education. Beanstalk volunteers provide information on child confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing in response to statements in the reading record, each with three response options; 'not yet', 'with support' and 'on my own'. These can be completed with the child or from the volunteer's own observations.

- **Schools with placements for 2018/19 taken from Beanstalk's Salesforce database**

This dataset includes all details about the schools that had placements for volunteer readers. In total, 1,258 schools had volunteer placements. This dataset also includes the number of children invoiced for per placement.

- **Volunteers with in-placement records against 2018/19 placements from Salesforce**

This dataset includes details about the volunteers associated with the school placements. Example details include: full name, date of birth, length of service, and volunteering pattern e.g. days and times volunteered. We merged these three datasets and carried out descriptive and inferential analysis to answer our research questions.

We carried out inferential statistical analyses to establish how similar the two groups (Reading 321 and Once Reading) were across the following variables:

- Pupil demographics (gender, year group)
- Volunteer information (length of period of volunteering, age)
- Nature of programme (duration of programme in school weeks, timing in academic year)
- School information (geographic region, Index of Multiple Deprivation)
- Pre-programme reading attainment
- Pre-programme confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing

Finally, we conducted Mann-Whitney U tests and used repeated measures proportional odds logistic regression models to examine pre-post change across reading attainment and confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing to understand whether there is a statistically significant difference in the degree of change based on reading programme.

We indicate throughout the report where associations or differences between variables or groups are statistically significant or not. However, the presence or absence of statistical significance reflects sample sizes and should not be conflated with the scale of a relationship or substantive importance of a finding.

## 2.2 Online survey

We sent out an online survey to volunteers in November 2021. A link was sent out together with a short description of the survey in Coram Beanstalk's monthly e-newsletter to volunteers. Coram Beanstalk told us it was sent to 1,400 volunteers.

We received 293 responses to the survey between 15 November and 2 December, meaning a response rate of 21%. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

We asked respondents to provide demographic information covering their gender identity, age, ethnicity, disabilities, and employment status. We then asked respondents questions relating to their experiences of volunteering, including how long, how often, and how many children they support with reading, as well as their perceptions of things that work well and not so well for them as volunteers. We also asked respondents about their views on supporting children once or twice a week with their reading.

We analysed the survey responses using descriptive statistics.

## 2.3 Interviews

We carried out semi-structured remote video and telephone interviews in November 2021 with eight reading helpers who volunteered either once or twice a week in schools. We asked reading helpers about their experiences of volunteering for Coram Beanstalk and their volunteering pattern, if there had been any barriers to volunteering, how volunteering fit in with other commitments, and whether they thought reading help once or twice a week best suited them and the pupils they supported.

Staff members in Coram Beanstalk provided us with contact details of reading helpers that they thought might interested in taking part in an interview. We then contacted the reading helpers with further information about the evaluation and asked if they were still interested in being interviewed about their volunteering experience.

We consulted the Impact & Evaluation Team research ethics policy and procedure before conducting the interviews, and reviewed whether carrying out this fieldwork would be high or low risk. Due to the research subjects and subject matter, we concluded that fieldwork would be low risk, meaning the project would not be subject to ethical review outside the Impact & Evaluation Team. At the start of each interview we explained the nature of the evaluation and anonymity to volunteers and asked if they were still happy to take part in the interview.

All interviews were conducted over phone or video call, in order to cover a wide geographic range, and lasted for up to 30 minutes.

# 3. Findings

## 3.1 Findings from secondary data analysis

### 3.1.1 Pupil demographics

In total, we analysed data on 1,220 children who attended one or other of the reading programmes. Most (96%, n=1,169) reading records were from children attending the Reading 321 programme, 4% (n=51) were from Once Reading.

We examined the characteristics of the two groups of pupils, to see whether they were similar enough to allow for a reasonable comparison of outcomes across the two programmes given the non-randomised evaluation design.

Overall, slightly more boys (51%, n= 584) than girls (49%, n= 555) attended a reading programme, with an equivalent proportion of boys and girls attending each of the two programmes[1]. Out of those who attended Once Reading, 50% (n= 25) were girls and 50% (n=25) were boys. Similarly, 49% (n=530) of those who attended Reading 321 were girls and 51% (n=559) were boys.

Children in Year 1 to Year 6 of primary schools were included in the analysis. The most common year group across all children was Year 2 (26.4%), with Year 5 (25.5%) being the most common for Once Reading[2] and Year 2 (27.0%) for Reading 321[3]. Thus children attending Reading 321 were generally younger than those from Once Reading.

Proportions of children split across year groups was not equivalent for the two programmes as illustrated in Figure 2[4]. In Reading 321, 27% (n=316) of pupils were in Year 2, compared to 12% (n=6) in Once Reading. A fifth (19%, n=216) of pupils in Reading 321 were in Year 3, compared to 14% (n=7) of pupils in Once Reading. A quarter (26%, n=13) of children from Once Reading were in Year 5, compared to 14% (n=162) from Reading 321. A fifth (20%, n=10) of children in Once Reading were in Year 6, compared to 16% (n=201) in Reading 321.

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[1] ($X^2(5) = 14.55$, p = 0.85)
[2] Mean = 3.80, SD = 1.76, Median = 4, Range = 1-6
[3] Mean = 3.52, SD = 1.58, Median = 3, Range = 1-6
[4] ($X^2(1) = 0.03$, p = 0.01)

**Figure 2. Year group by programme**
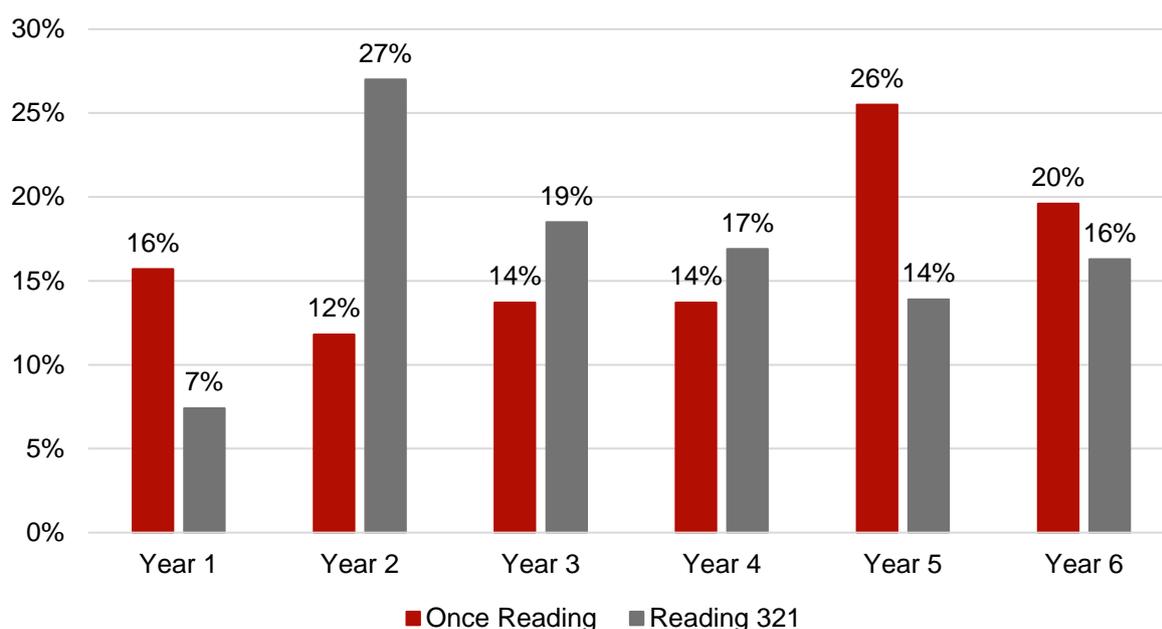


(n=1,220)

## 3.1.2 Volunteer demographics

We analysed data from 555 Coram Beanstalk volunteers. Reading helpers' length of volunteering ranged from under a year to 23 years. The majority (61.9%, n=343) had volunteered for up to 4 years (Figure 3).

A fifth (20%, n=111) of reading helpers had been volunteering between 1 and 2 years, followed by 2 to 3 years (17%, n=95), and 3 to 4 years (15%, n=86). A small proportion (9%, n=51) had volunteered for under a year. Another 9% (n=49) had volunteered between 4 and 5 years. The remaining (30%, n=162) had volunteered for over 5 years, with 7% (n=35) having over 10 years volunteering experience.

**Figure 3. How long reading helpers had volunteered for**



(n=554)
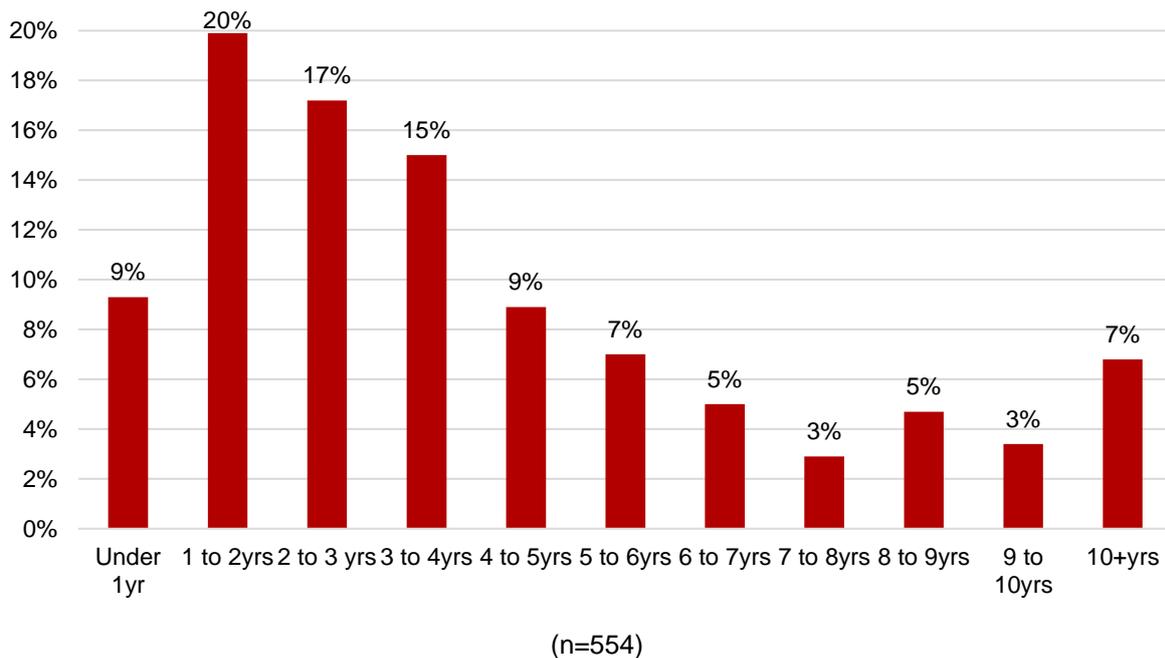
We compared the two groups of volunteers to see whether they were similar enough to allow a reasonable comparison of outcomes across the two programmes given the non-randomised evaluation design.

There were no major differences in length of volunteering between the two programmes (Figure 4). The majority of reading helpers in Once Reading (66.7%, n=20) had been a volunteer for up to 4 years, compared to 61.6% (n=323) of Reading 321 volunteers.

**Figure 4. How long reading helpers had volunteered for, broken down by programme name**



(n=554)
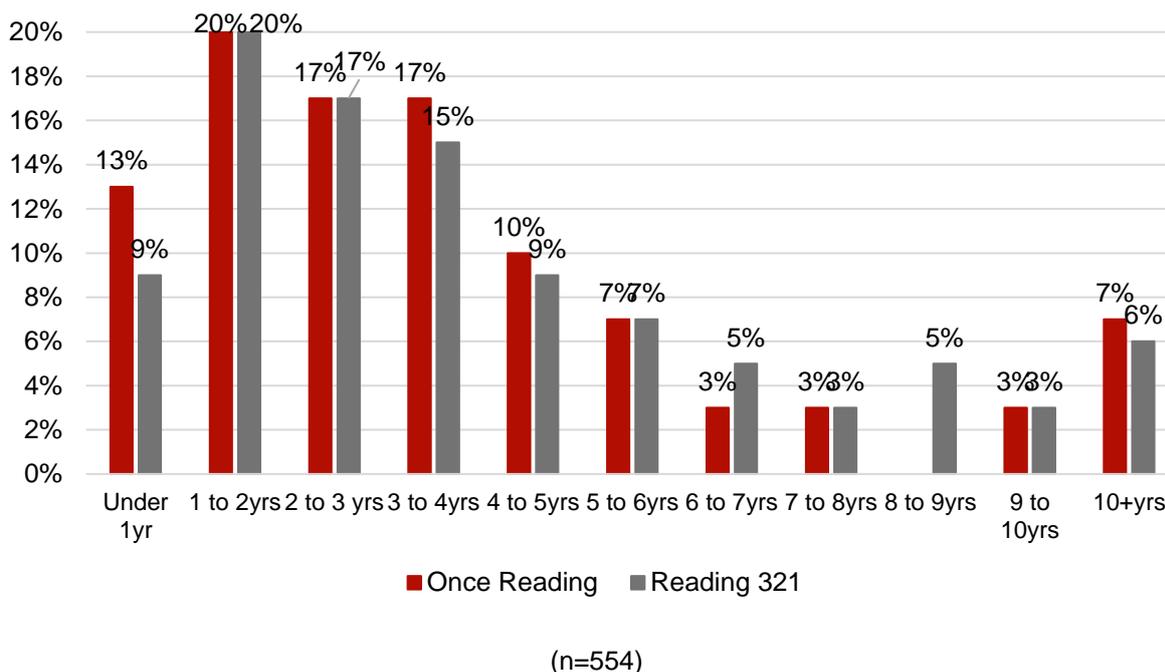
Reading helpers were generally older adults. Almost half of volunteers (48%, n=234) were between 66 and 75 years old. Nearly a third (29%, n=140) were between 56 and 65 years old. The average age of volunteers was 65.2 years of age[5].

Volunteers for Once Reading[6] were slightly older than volunteers for Reading 321[7], but this difference was not statistically significant[8]. The most common age group was 66 to 75 for both Once Reading (63%, n=15) and Reading 321 (48%, n=219; Figure 4). All volunteers for Once Reading were between 45 and 85 years old, whereas Reading 321 had a wider age range of volunteers, including a small proportion (4%, n=15) under 45 years, and three volunteers who were 86 years or older.

**Figure 5. Age groups of volunteers in Once Reading and Reading 321**



(n=485)
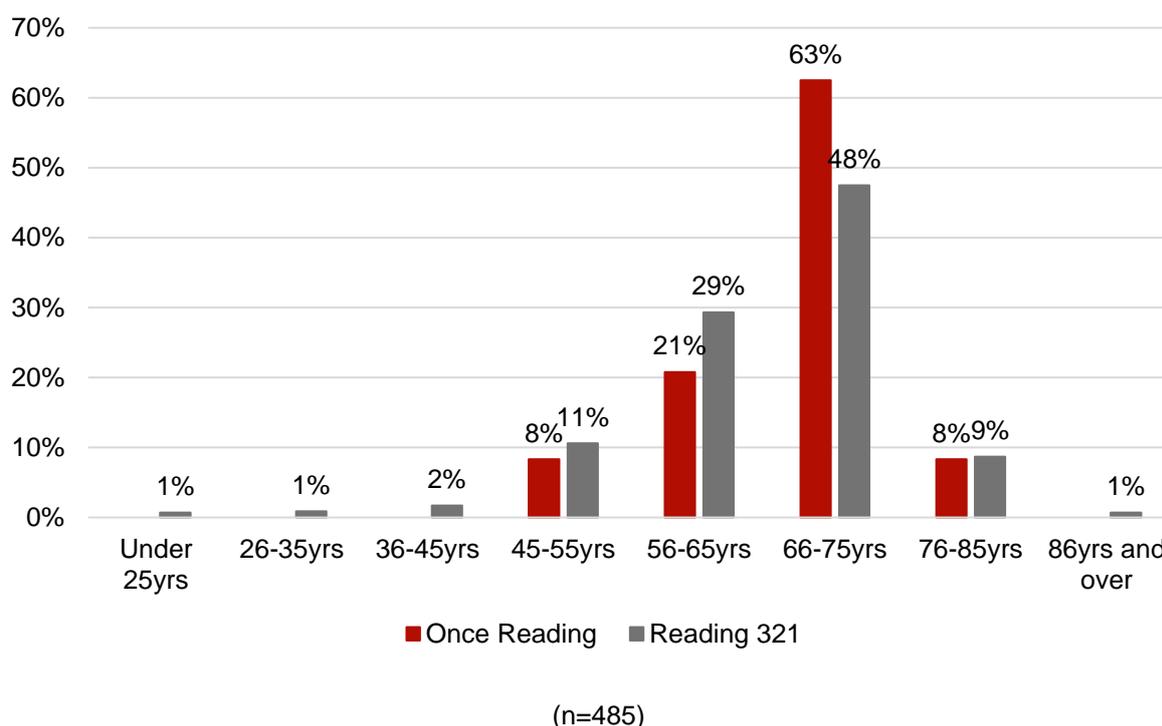
## 3.1.3 School weeks

On average, children attended a reading programme for 21.7 school weeks[9]. Half (51%, n=489) of children attended their reading programme for between 25 and 27 school weeks.

Children in Reading 321[10] attended their programme for slightly longer than those who attended Once Reading[11]. This difference did reach statistical significance[12].

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[5] SD = 9.66, Median = 67, Range = 19-87
[6] Mean = 67.38, SD = 7.31, Median = 68, Range = 47-83
[7] Mean = 65.08, SD = 9.76, Median = 67, Range = 19-87
[8] $t(483) = 1.14$, $p = 0.26$
[9] SD = 5.94, Median = 24, Range = 0-27
[10] Mean = 21.77, SD = 5.89, Median = 24, Range = 0-27
[11] Mean = 20.04, SD = 6.89, Median = 23, Range = 5-27
[12] $t(1216) = -2.04$, $p = 0.04$

Slightly more children in Reading 321 (50%, n=476) than in Once Reading (41%, n=13) attended their programme for between 25 and 27 weeks (Figure 5). In contrast, 25% (n=8) of children in Once Reading attended their programme between 5 and 9 weeks, compared to just 6% (n=58) in Reading 321.

**Figure 6. Number of school weeks children attended a reading programme for**



Once Reading ■ Reading 321

(n=1,007)
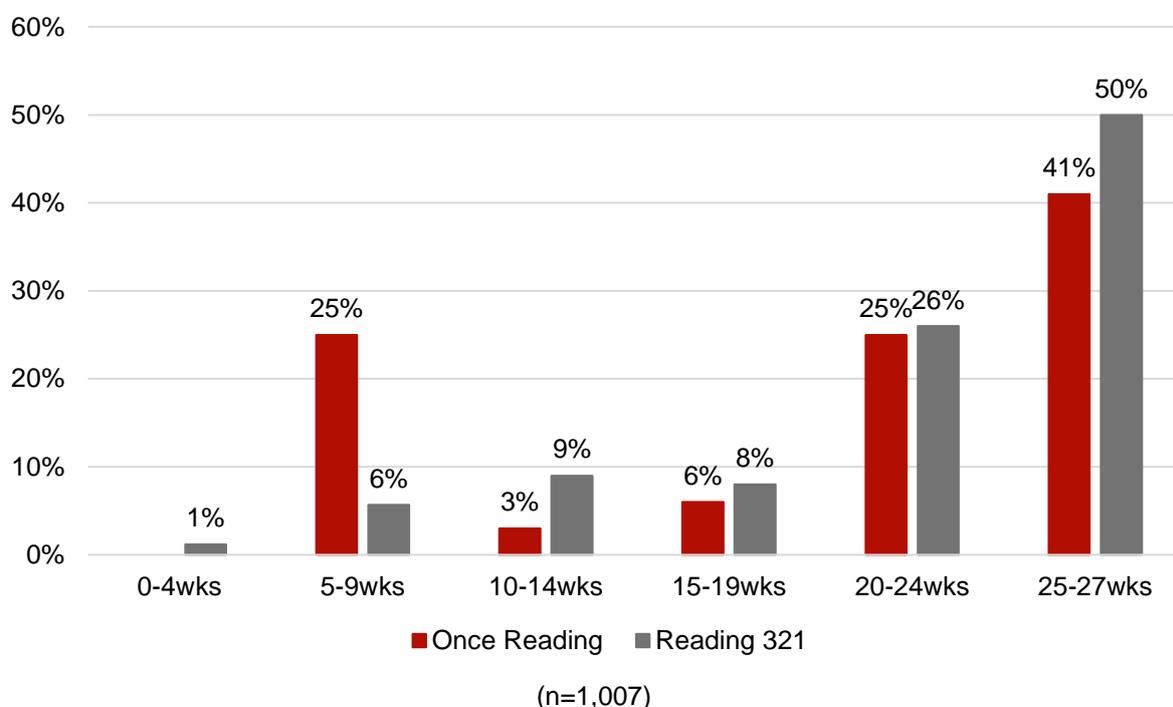
### 3.1.4 Regional breakdown

Pupils were from across all nine regions in England: North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, West Midlands, East of England, London, South East, and South West. Nearly a third (30%, n=368) of pupils who attended a reading programme were based in London, followed by West Midlands (16%, n=195) and South East (16%, n=194).

Overall the regional distribution between the two programmes were similar[13] (Figure 6). There were slight differences between the two programmes in London, the North West, and the South East. More pupils in Once Reading (37%, n=19) than Reading 321 (30%, n=349) were based in London. A higher proportion of pupils in Reading 321 (16%, n=194) than Once Reading (4%, n=2) were based in the South East.

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[13] $X^2(8) = 9.07$, p = 0.34

**Figure 7. Regional breakdown of reading records from Once Reading and Reading 321**
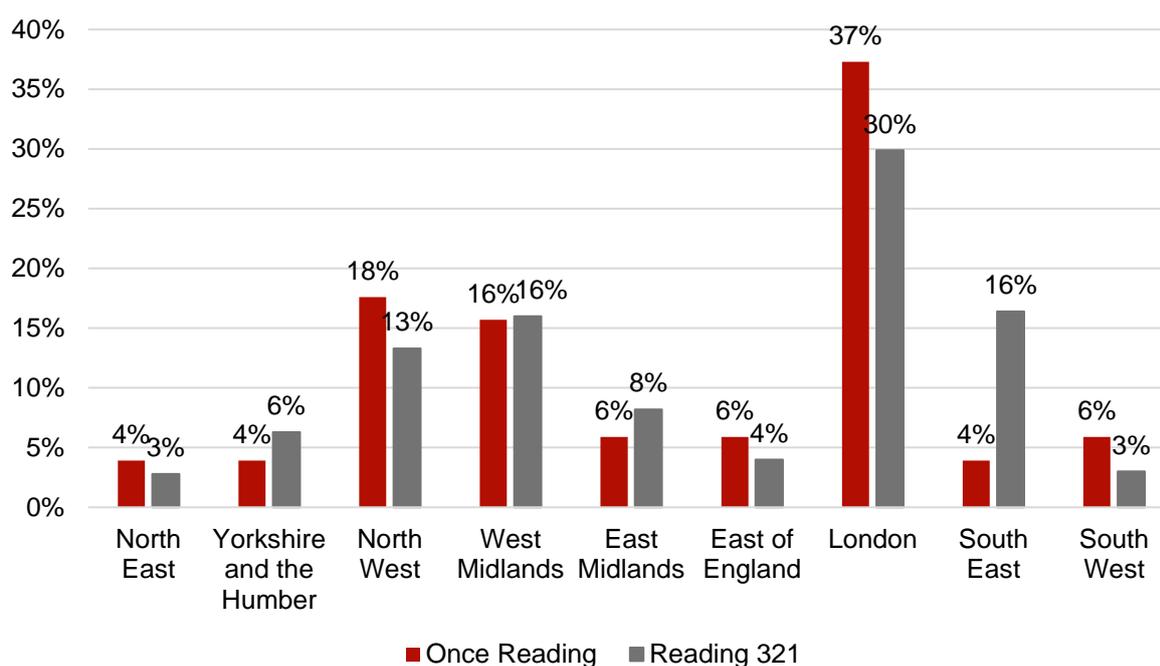


(n=1,220)

## 3.1.5 Index of Multiple Deprivation Deciles

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation in England and is part of a set of outputs that form the Indices of Deprivation. It follows an established methodology to define deprivation to encompass a wide range of an individual's living conditions. People may be considered to be living in poverty if they lack the financial resources to meet their needs, whereas people can be regarded as deprived if they lack any kind of resources, not just income[14]. Decile 1 is the most deprived and decile 10 is the least deprived[15].

For this report IMD deciles are based on school postcodes. The majority of the school postcodes we analysed (63%, n=770) had an IMD 2019 decile rank between 1 and 5, which indicates greater levels of deprivation, whereas 37% (n=450) of children had a decile rank between 6 and 10, indicating lower levels of deprivation. The average IMD decile across both reading programmes was 4.61[16]. A fifth (19%, n=227) of children had an IMD decile rank of 2, which indicates high levels of deprivation. Only 6% (n=78) of children had a decile rank of 10, representing low levels of deprivation.

Those who attended Once Reading had an average decile rank of 3.55[17], which is significantly lower[18] than those who attended Reading 321 who had an average rank of

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[14]https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019
[15]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthinequalities/bulletins/healthstatelifeexpectanciesbyindexofmultipledeprivationimd/2016to2018
[16] SD = 2.81, Median = 4, Range = 1-10
[17] SD = 1.75, Median = 4, Range = 1-7
[18] t(1218) = -4.28, p < 0.001

4.65[19]. Almost a third (29%, n=15) of children in Once Reading had a decile ranking of 4, compared to 9% (n=109) of children in Reading 321 (Figure 7). No children in Once Reading were in the three least deprived deciles.

**Figure 8. IMD decile ranks of children's schools in each reading programme (1 is most deprived, 10 is least deprived)**



(n=1,220)
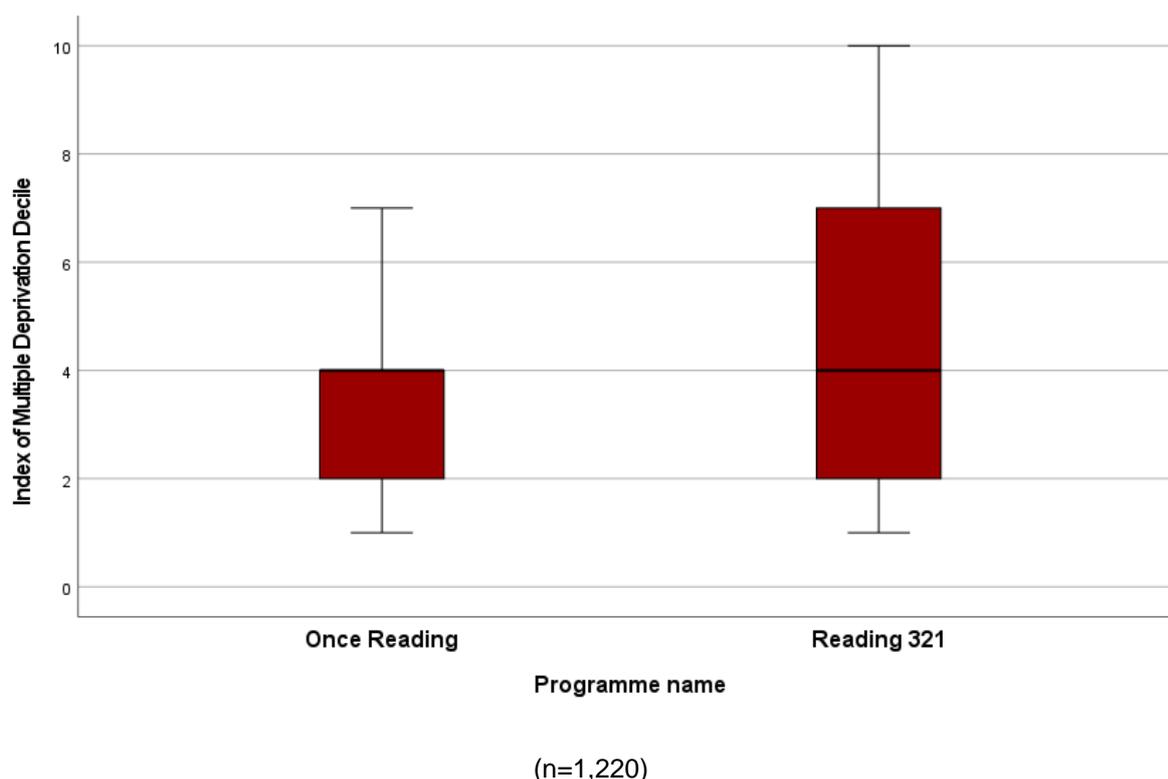
### 3.1.6 Number of reading records per school

Our analysis covered a total of 355 schools with children enrolled in a reading programme, including four schools with students enrolled in both Once Reading and Reading 321. The average number of students per school enrolled in Once Reading was 2.4, ranging between 1 and 3. For Reading 321 the average number of students per school was 3.5, ranging from 1 to 13.

### 3.1.7 Timing of support during the academic year

The majority (64%, n=785) of children started their reading programme at the beginning of the academic year in September 2018. A higher proportion of children in Reading 321 (65%, n=765) than Once Reading (57%, n=29) started their reading programme in September 2018 (Figure 8).

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[19] SD = 2.84, Median = 4, Range = 1-10

Most (84%, n=1,028) children finished their reading programme at the end of the academic year, in July 2019. A similar proportion of children in Once Reading (88%, n=45) and Reading 321 (84%, n=983) finished their reading programme in July 2019.

**Figure 9.  Which month children started their reading programme in**



(n=1,220)
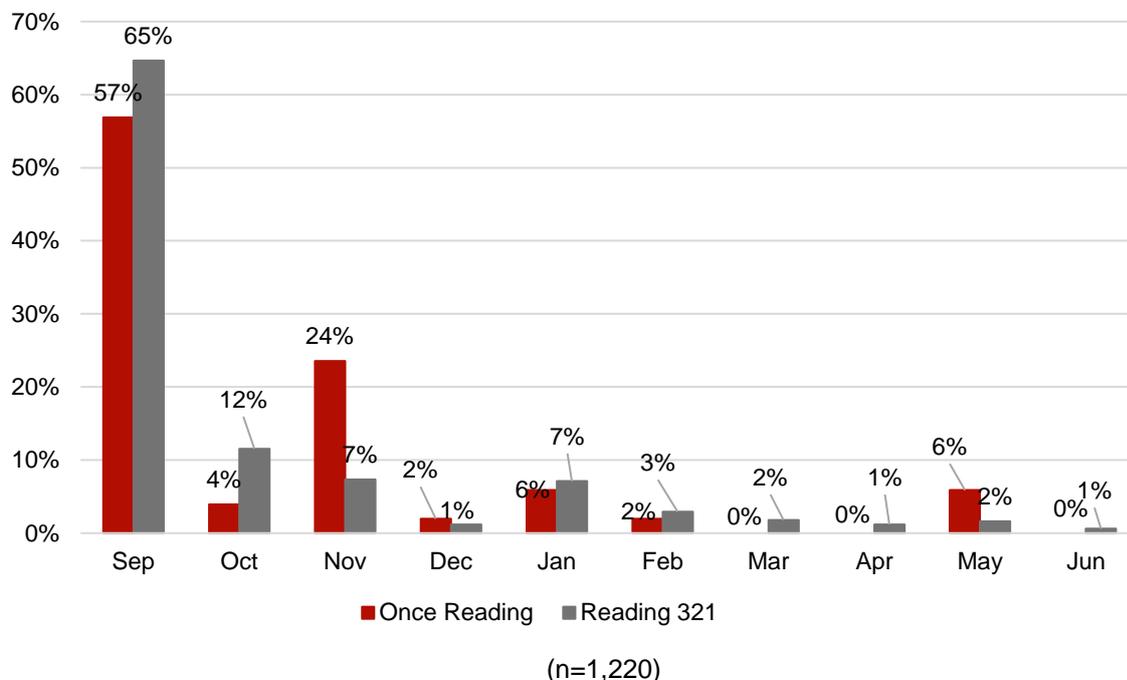
## 3.1.8 Reading attainment measure

At the start and end of the reading programmes, schools were asked to complete information about children's reading levels. The reading records use a four-point scale (Below, Working Towards, At, or Above) with two sub-categories for each (Emerging or Secure).

Overall, pupils in Once Reading had higher reading attainment levels at the start of the academic year than children in Reading 321 (Figure 10)[20]. A similar proportion of children in Once Reading (51%, n=23) and Reading 321 (50%, n=474) were classed as 'Working Towards' their age-appropriate level. A higher proportion of children in Once Reading were 'At' their age-appropriate level (29%, n=14) than children in Reading 321 (15%, n=135). Over a third (35%, n=333) of children in Reading 321 were classed as 'Below' their age-appropriate level, compared to a fifth (20%, n=9) of children in Once Reading.

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[20] U = 17364.50, p = 0.03

**Figure 10. Reading attainment levels in Once Reading and Reading 321 before the academic year**
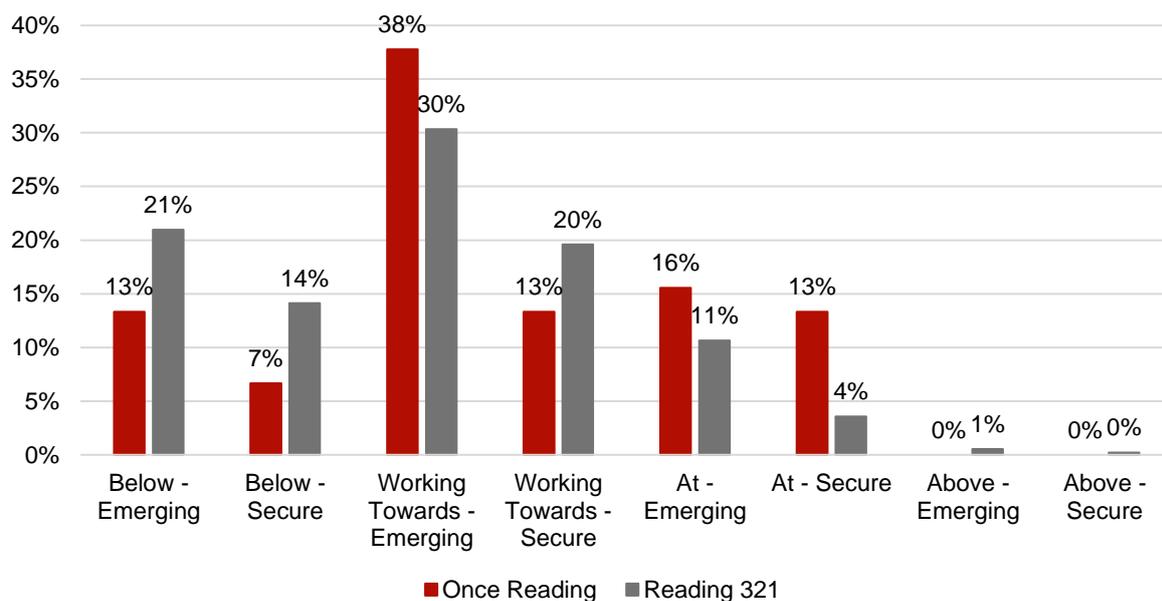


(n=994)

In terms of pre-post change across both programmes, there were 931 children with both pre and post reading attainment scores. The majority of these children made improvements in their reading attainment (73.5%), for a large proportion (20.4%) their reading attainment remained the same, and for a small number of children (6.1%) their reading attainment worsened over the course of the programme (Figure 11). The greatest amount of improvement seen was an increase in attainment of 5 levels; for one student this meant starting the programme at a 'Below – emerging' reading level and ending the programme at the 'At –secure' reading level.

**Figure 11. Pre-post reading attainment change in Once Reading and Reading 321 after the academic year**



(n=931)
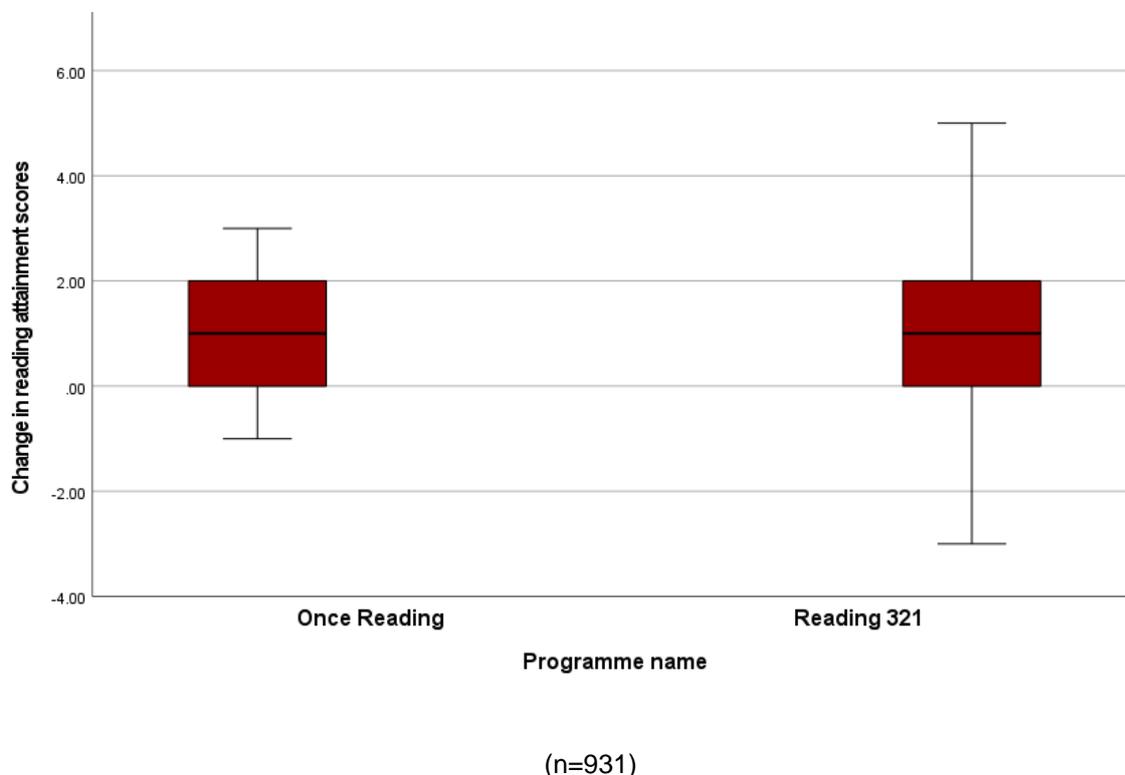
We ran a Mann-Whitney U test to understand whether there was a statistically significant difference in the change in pre-post reading attainment levels of children based on reading programme. There was not a statistically significant difference in the amount of change in reading attainment between the two programmes[21]. In other words, it seems that children improve in their reading attainment to a similar extent, regardless of whether they receive reading support from Beanstalk volunteers once or twice a week.

We also used a repeated measures proportional odds logistic regression to investigate the role of two predictor variables (baseline score and programme duration) on the difference between the Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes in terms of pre to post programme score change. The proportional odds assumption was violated in all models (with and without predictors), suggesting we should rely instead on the Mann-Whitney test reported above. However, our results from the repeated measures proportional odds logistic regression were not contradictory to the Mann-Whitney, with a non-significant interaction between programme type and time point (p=0.27) when baseline reading attainment and programme duration were included in the model as predictor variables.

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[21] U = 16,324, p = 0.24

**Confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing**

The reading records ask volunteers to assess the child(ren)'s performance before and after the programme, by marking how much support they have needed against a number of competency statements in the areas of confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing. Volunteers are able to complete the sections with the child(ren) they are supporting, or to base their responses on their own observations.

There are five statements about children's confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing:

- I am confident when choosing books with my reading helper
- I am able to concentrate in my session
- I can maintain a positive attitude throughout the reading session
- I can ask for help when I need it
- I can be respectful of myself and others

Volunteers can choose between three options; 'not yet', 'with support' and 'on my own'.

*Key stage 1*

At the end of the academic year, volunteers reported improvements against all statements:

- Prior to the start of the academic year, almost half (47%, n=182) of KS1 pupils across both programmes felt confident to choose books on their own. After the academic year had finished, the majority (76%, n=266) felt confident to choose books on their own. These results are similar to Coram Beanstalk's 2018 /19 Reading 321 report, where 47% were confident to choose books on their own at the start, and 77% were confident once the academic year had finished.[22]
- More children were able to concentrate in sessions on their own at the end of their reading programme (n=209, 60%), compared to at the start (n=153, 39%). These findings are similar to the 2019/19 Reading 321 report where 39% were able to concentrate on their own at the start, and 60% were able to on their own after the programmes had finished.
- Half (49%, n=191) of the children could maintain a positive attitude throughout the reading sessions on their own at the start of the programme. This increased to 68% (n=238) at the end of the programme. Again, this is similar to findings in Coram [Beanstalk's Reading 321 impact report](#) where there was a 20 percentage point increase in those who could maintain a positive attitude on their own.
- At the start, 41% (n=157) of children were able to ask for help on their own, 44% (n=169) of children were able to ask for help with support and 16% (n=61) could not ask for help. Once the academic year had finished, 68% (n=237) of pupils could ask for help on their own and 27% (n=95) could ask for help with support.
- The majority (69%, n=261) were respectful of themselves and others on their own at the start, which increased to 80% (n=278) once the programme had finished.

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[22] Coram Beanstalk (2020). *Reading 321 Impact Report 2018/19*. Coram Beanstalk: London.

**Figure 12. Responses to competency statements about KS1 children's confidence, enjoyment and emotional wellbeing before and after the academic year**



(n=347-388)
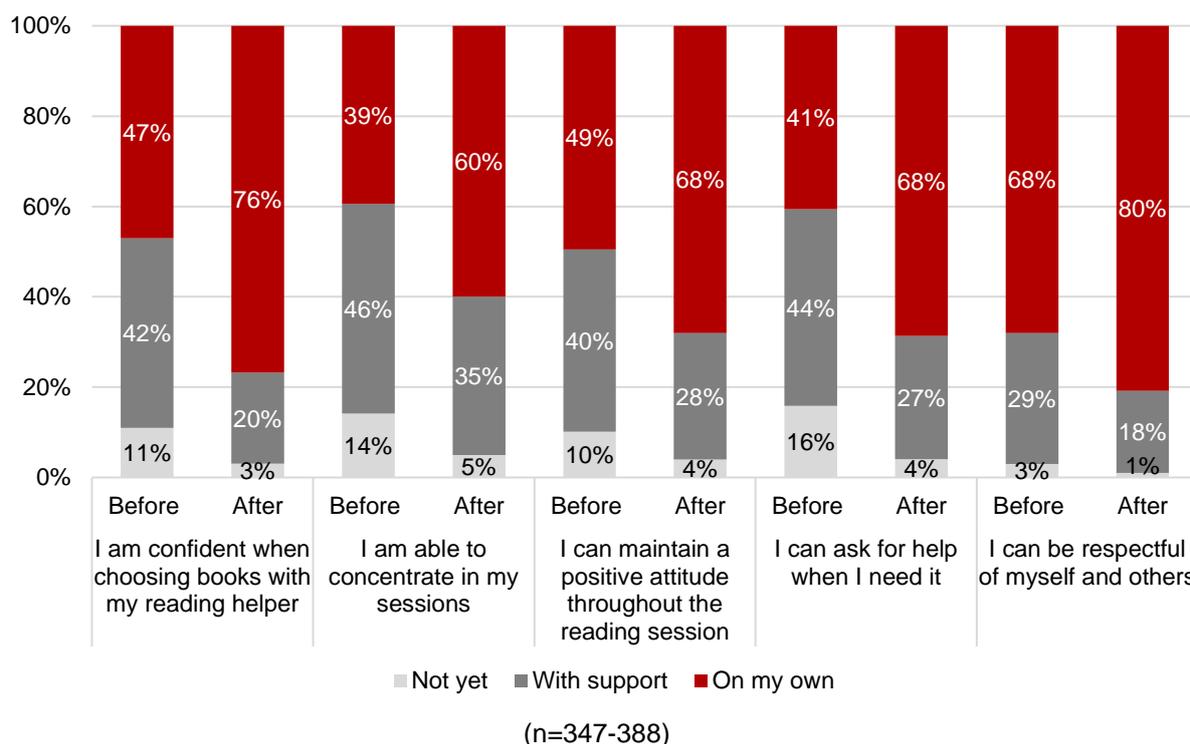
We calculated a composite total score for confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing scores. At the start of the programmes, there was not a statistically significant difference in terms of confidence, enjoyment, and wellbeing between the two programmes[23]. We ran a Mann-Whitney U test on pre-post change to understand whether there was a statistically significant difference in volunteers' perceptions of KS1 children's confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing after the programme, depending on the reading programme they received. There was no statistically significant difference between Once Reading and Reading 321 in children's pre-post-programme change in their confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing[24] (Figure 13). In other words, children were likely to show a similar amount of improvement against these statements, regardless of which reading programme they took part in.

We also ran Mann-Whitney U tests of pre-post change for each of the statements individually. There were no statistically significant differences between programmes for all of the statements except for maintaining a positive attitude[25]. All children that provided a response to this statement in Once Reading (n=4) showed improvement in maintaining a positive attitude compared to 34% (n=90) of children in Reading 321. This finding should be viewed with caution given the small number of responses from children taking part in Once Reading.

We then used a repeated measures proportional odds logistic regression to investigate the role of two predictor variables (baseline score and programme duration) in differences

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[23] U = 1924.5, p = 0.86
[24] U = 370.5, p = 0.22
[25] U = 204.0, p < 0.01

between the Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes in terms of pre to post programme score change for each of the statements. Unlike for reading attainment, the proportional odds assumption was *not* violated in models that included predictor variables. Findings are reported for three of the five confidence statements, as the models for the statements 'I am confident when choosing books with my reading helper' and 'I can be respectful of myself and others' did not converge. The interaction between programme type and time point was not significant for each of the three statements (Table 2), meaning that there was no significant difference between the two programmes in pre to post programme score change in terms of concentration, maintaining a positive attitude, and asking for help.

**Table 2. Results of repeated measure proportional odds logistic regression models, KS1**

| Statement | Coefficient of interaction effect between programme and time point (pre-post) | Robust standard error | p value |
|---|---|---|---|
| I am able to concentrate in my sessions | 2.80 | 2.06 | 0.17 |
| I can maintain a positive attitude throughout the reading session | 3.29 | 1.88 | 0.08 |
| I can ask for help when I need it | 0.08 | 1.70 | 0.96 |

Note: models include two predictor variables, pre-programme score on the statement, and programme duration in school weeks. Key Stage 1 only.

**Figure 13. Change in KS1 children's composite scores of confidence, enjoyment and emotional wellbeing, by programme**
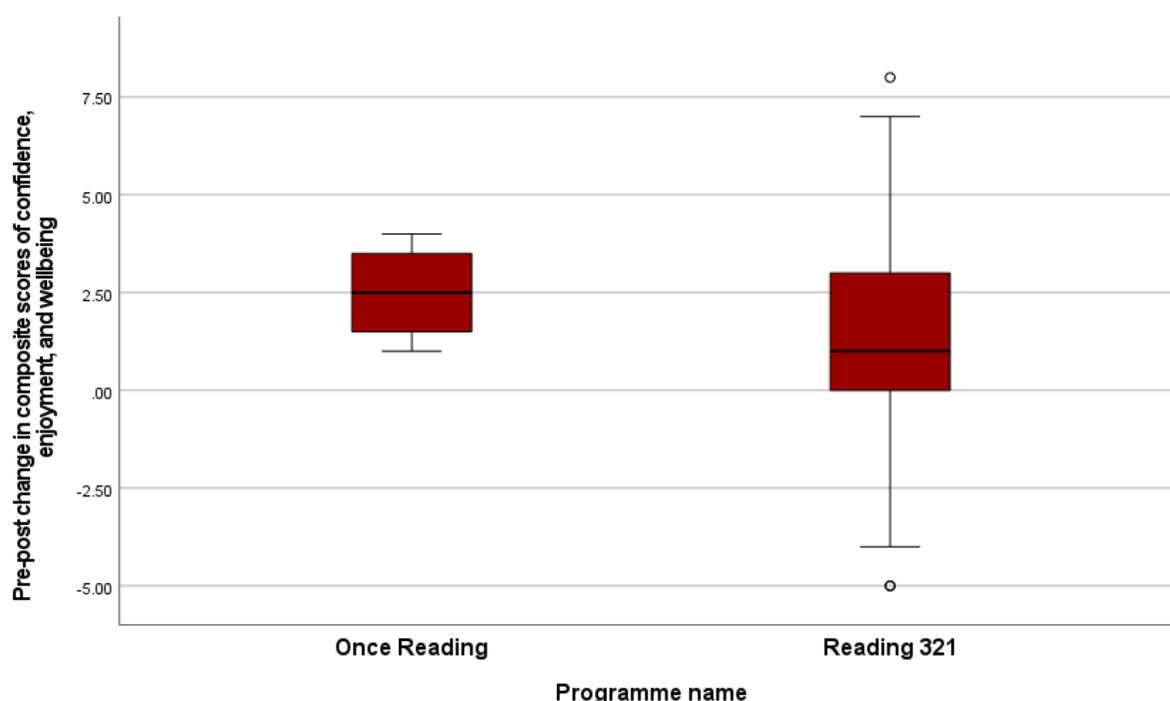


(n=291)

*Key stage 2*

At the end of the programmes, volunteers reported improvements against all statements (Figure 14). KS2 pupils were less likely to need support from reading helpers as KS1 children before and after the programmes in the areas of confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing. The findings for each of the statements were as follows:

- Prior to the start of the programme, volunteers felt that the majority (67%, n=471) of KS2 children were confident when choosing books on their own. This increased to 79% (n=563) once the programmes had finished. This is similar to findings from Coram Beanstalk's own 2018/19 Reading 321 Impact Report, where 68% of KS2 children were confident to choose books on their own at the start, which increased to 78% at the end of the programmes.
- Prior to starting their reading programmes, volunteers felt that 59% (n=417) of children were able to concentrate in their sessions on their own, which increased to 67% (n=478) after the programme had finished. Again, this is similar to findings from the 2018/19 Reading 321 impact report where there was a 6 percentage point increase in children were able to concentrate on their own.
- At the start, volunteers felt that 65% (n=459) of pupils were able to maintain a positive attitude throughout their reading session. This increased to 75% (n=537) once the programmes had finished. Similarly, findings from the 2018/19 Reading 321 impact report indicated that 68% could maintain a positive attitude at the start, which then increased to 75% at the end.
- The majority (65%, n=460) of children at the start were able to ask for help on their own when needed. Nearly a third (29%, n=205) were able to ask for help with support and 6% (n=45) were not able to ask for help. Once the programmes had finished, volunteers thought 76% (n=544) could ask for help on their own, 21% (n=153) with support and 2% (n=17) could not ask for help.
- Volunteers felt that a high proportion (83%, n=589) of pupils were respectful of themselves and others on their own at the start of the programmes. At the end, 90% (n=642) of children were respectful on their own.

**Figure 14. Responses to competency statements about KS2 children's confidence, enjoyment and emotional wellbeing before and after the academic year**
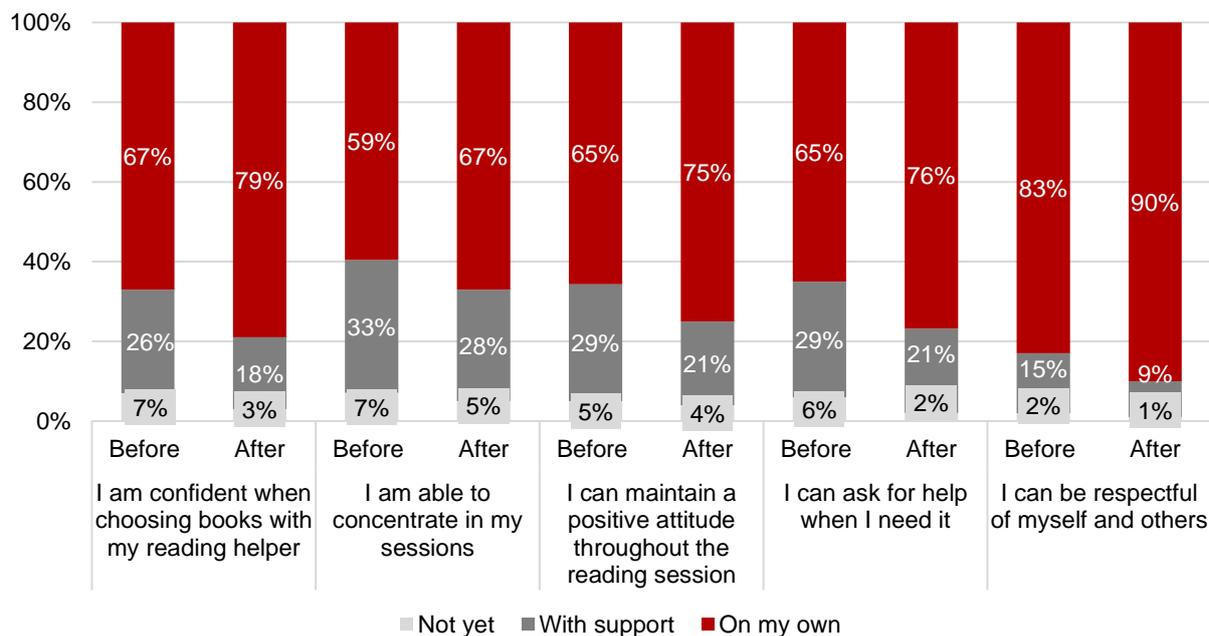


(n=705-714)

Overall, KS2 children in Once Reading and Reading 321 were at similar levels in regards to the competency statements about confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing (Figure 15) prior to the programmes starting[26].

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[26] U = 9851.00, p = 0.72

**Figure 15. KS2 children's confidence, enjoyment and emotional wellbeing before the academic year**
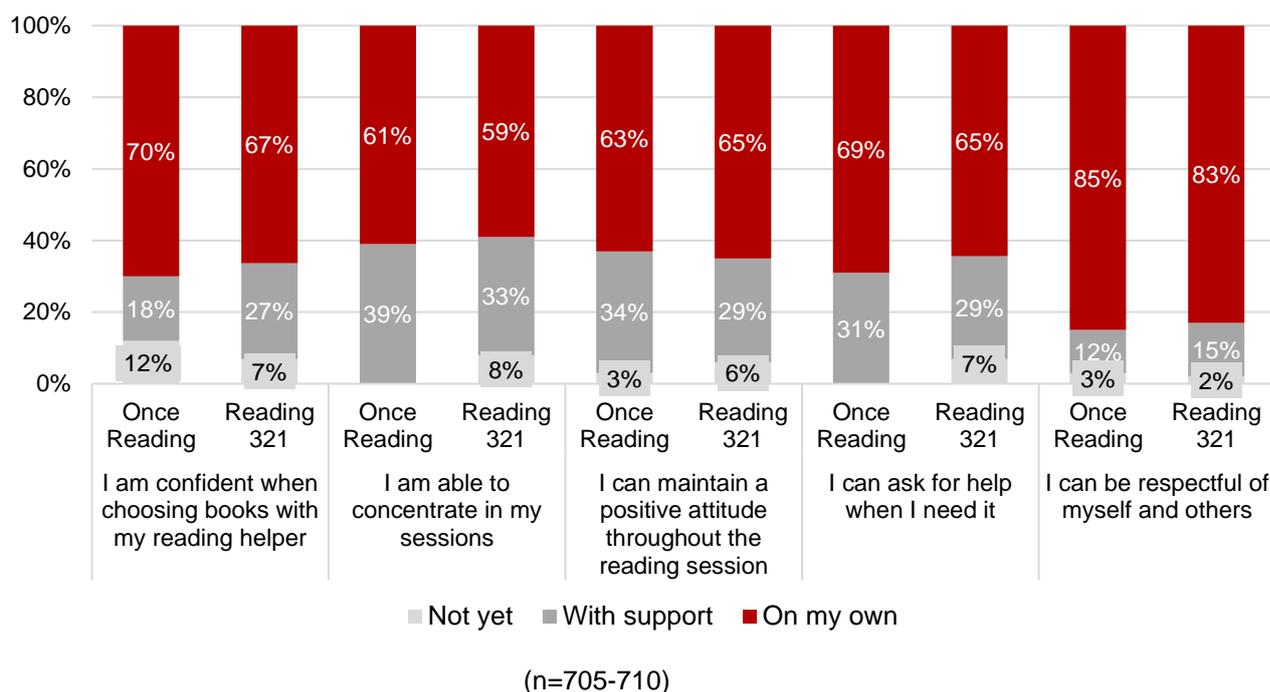


(n=705-710)

We ran a Mann-Whitney U test on pre-post change to understand whether there was a statistically significant difference in volunteers' perceptions of KS2 children's confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing after the programme, depending on the reading programme children received. There was no statistically significant difference between Once Reading and Reading 321 in children's pre-post-programme change in their composite score on confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing[27]. In other words, KS2 children were likely to show a similar amount of improvement against these statements, regardless of which reading programme they took part in (see Figure 16).

We also ran Mann-Whitney U tests of pre-post change for each of the statements individually. None of the statements showed significant differences in pre-post score change between the two programmes.

We then used repeated measures proportional odds logistic regression to explore the role of two predictor variables (baseline score and programme duration) in differences between the Reading 321 and Once Reading programmes in terms of pre to post programme score change across each of the statements. The proportional odds assumption was violated for two of the models that included predictor variables, and the model for one statement did not converge. These are therefore not reported in Table 3 below. We should instead rely on the results of the Mann-Whitney tests for these statements. For the two models that did converge and did not violate the proportional odds assumption, the interaction between programme type and time point was not significant, meaning that there was no significant difference between the two programmes in pre to post programme score change in terms of confidence in choosing books and concentration.

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[27] U = 7421.00, p = 0.34

**Table 3. Results of repeated measure proportional odds logistic regression models, KS2**

| Statement | Coefficient of interaction effect | Robust standard error | p value |
|---|---|---|---|
| I am confident when choosing books with my reading helper | 0.80 | 0.89 | 0.37 |
| I am able to concentrate in my sessions | 0.71 | 0.73 | 0.33 |

Note: models include two predictor variables, pre-programme score on the statement, and programme duration in school weeks. Key Stage 2 only.

**Figure 16. Change in KS2 children's composite scores of confidence, enjoyment and emotional wellbeing, by programme**



(n=619)
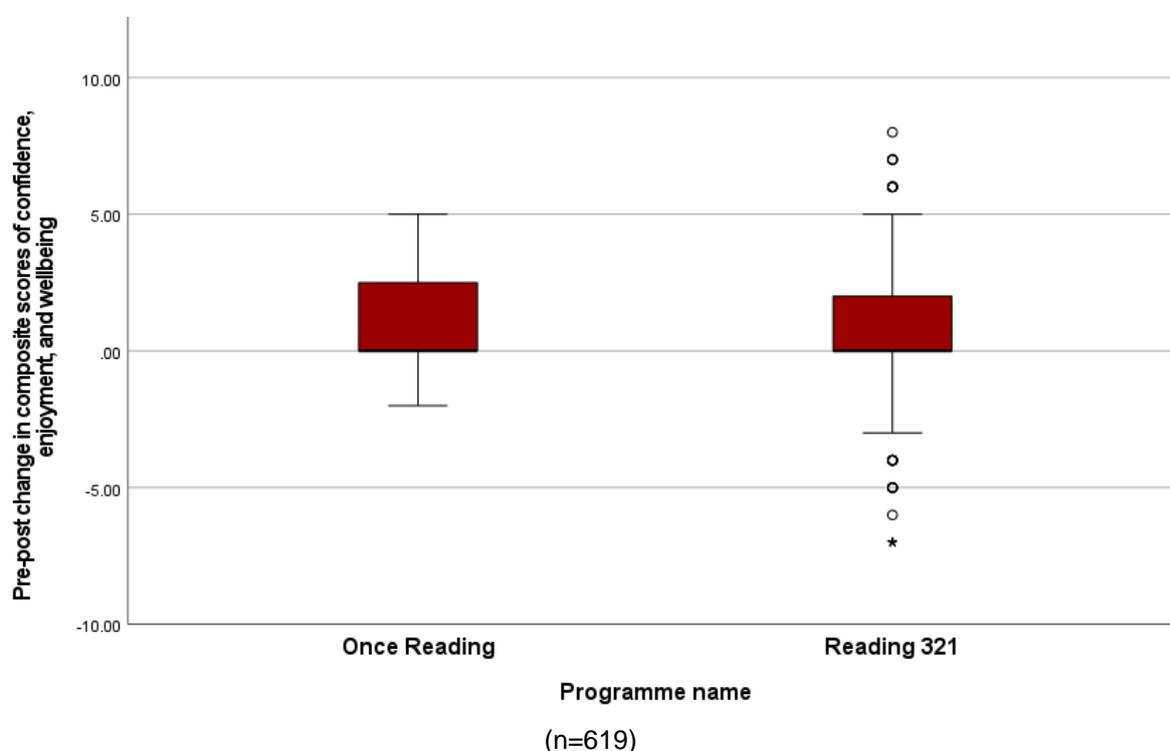
3.1.9 Sensitivity analysis

Given that children in Reading 321 (mean=21.77 weeks, SD=5.89) attended their reading programme for significantly (p=0.04) longer than children in Once Reading (20.04, SD=6.89), we chose to look at the differences between the programmes for children who attended their reading programme for 10 weeks or more. Children attending for this period of time were more evenly split across the two programmes thus allowing for a more reasonable

comparison, whereas 25% (n=8) of children in Once Reading attended their programme for between 5 and 9 weeks, compared to just 6% (n=58) in Reading 321.

As found in the main analysis, children in Once Reading had a higher reading attainment level compared to children in Reading 321 at the start of the programme[28]. For example, 35.6% (n=316) of children in Reading 321 were below their expected reading level, compared to 17.5% (n=7) of children in Once Reading. As in the main analysis, there was not a significant difference in pre-post change in reading attainment between the two programmes[29]. In other words, children improved to a similar extent (74.4% showed improvement), regardless of whether they took part in Reading 321 (74.2%) or Once Reading (77.8%).

In terms of their confidence, enjoyment, and wellbeing, at both KS1[30] and KS2[31] the differences in composite scores of these variables were not significantly different between Reading 321 and Once Reading. Similarly to the main analysis, we were unable to detect a significant difference between the two programmes in terms of pre-post programme change in these composite scores for both KS1[32] and KS2[33]. However, it should be highlighted here that the sample sizes for this analysis were very small (n=4 children in Once Reading had matched pre and post programme composite scores) and it is possible that a statistically significant difference could be detected with a larger sample size.

## 3.2 Survey findings

### 3.2.1 About the sample of respondents

**Table 4. Characteristics of survey respondents at a glance**

| Volunteer characteristic | Percent |
|---|---|
| Percent female | 79% |
| Percent aged 56 to 75 | 74% |
| Percent retired | 78% |
| Percent White (percent White British) | 93% (89%) |
| Percent without a long-standing physical or mental impairment, illness, or disability | 91% |
| Percent volunteering twice a week | 71% |

The 293 volunteers responding to our survey were mostly women (79%), with a gender identity the same as that assigned to them at birth (98.6%, with the other 4 respondents preferring not to say).

Respondents were generally older adults, with just 12.5% aged under 56 years. Most (74%) were aged 56 to 75. Relative to the administrative records on volunteers shown in Figure 5,

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[28] U = 14,168.00, p = 0.03
[29] U = 14,199.00, p = 0.60
[30] U = 1,161.00, p = 0.88
[31] U = 8,450.00, p = 0.80
[32] U = 360.00, p = 0.24
[33] U = 6,632.50, p = 0.47

our respondents were similar in terms of age, with a slightly more even spread across age groups, and a less sharp peak at 66 to 75 years.

We asked how respondents were spending their time. Most (78%) were retired, 8% had unpaid caring responsibilities, 11% were in work, 11% had unpaid caring responsibilities, 16% cited their volunteering, 4% were in education, and 2 respondents (0.7%) were unable to work. These total more than 100%, because respondents could select more than one option.

In terms of ethnic group, respondents were 93% White (of which 89% White British), 3.1% Asian or Asian British, 1.7% Black, African or Caribbean, 1.4% Mixed/Multiple, and 1% (3 volunteers) preferred not to say.

We asked respondents 'Do you have any long-standing physical or mental impairment, illness, or disability?' Seven volunteers preferred not to say; of those answering yes or no, 91% answered yes and 9% no.

### 3.2.2 Pattern of volunteering
Respondents had been volunteering for different periods of time, from less than a year, to '30 years or more'. As in Figure 4, based on administrative data, respondents to this survey had mostly volunteered for a few years - 66% told us they had been volunteering for Beanstalk for between 1 and 9 years – with a substantial right-hand tail of longer-standing volunteers. Unlike the administrative data, a higher proportion of 22% (rather than 9% to 13%, depending on programme) had been volunteering for less than a year.

Respondents supported at least 883 children at the time of asking, ranging from 0 to more than 5 each.[34] Most commonly (58%) respondents supported 3 children, with 7% supporting just one or two, 23% supporting more than three, and 12% not currently supporting any.

71% of respondents volunteered twice a week, 22% once a week, and the remaining 8% wrote other comments, such as 'not currently available, 'waiting to be matched with a local school' and 'more than twice a week'. Most (87%) had always volunteered in the same pattern, while 13% had previously volunteered more or less often per week.

### 3.2.3 Experience of volunteering for Coram Beanstalk
We asked respondents to describe their experience of volunteering for Beanstalk in three words (Figure 17). Almost all respondents (281) wrote at least one word. The words chosen were overwhelmingly positive, the most popular being 'rewarding' with 140 respondents writing this. Eighty volunteers described their experience as 'enjoyable', 70 as 'fun', 50 as 'interesting', 48 as 'challenging', '38 as 'fulfilling', 38 as 'satisfying', 24 as 'worthwhile', and 20 as 'stimulating'. Less commonly written descriptive terms included 'adventurous', 'intense', 'amusing', 'eye opening', 'emotional', 'motivational', and 'thought-provoking'. The small number of neutral or negative words included 'a mixed bag', 'variable', 'frustrating', 'difficult', 'dispiriting', 'tiring' and chaotic'.

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[34] This analysis treats those who reported supporting 'more than 5 children' as supporting 6.

**Figure 17. 'Which three words would you use to describe your volunteering experience for Coram Beanstalk?'**



We asked respondents how well their Coram Beanstalk volunteering fitted into their other commitments, like caring responsibilities, work, and education (Figure 18). The difference between once a week and twice a week volunteers was small. Only small minorities of once a week and twice a week volunteers gave a negative answer.

**Figure 18. How well does your Coram Beanstalk volunteering fit in with your other commitments?**
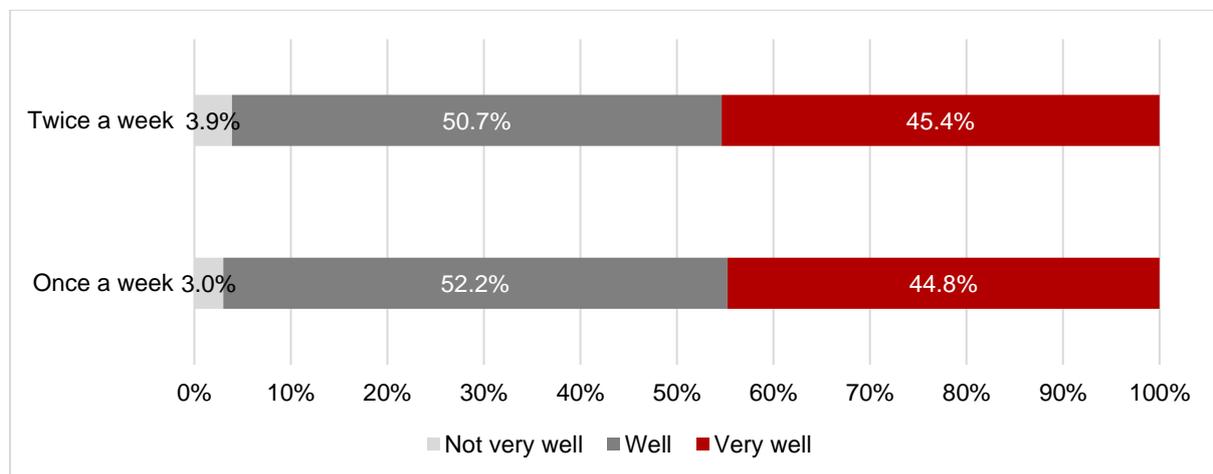


n=67 once a week; n=205 twice a week

We asked respondents whether they thought once a week or twice a week volunteering was based for themselves, for volunteers in general, and for children (Figure 19). Majorities of those with an opinion either way thought that twice a week was best for each of the three. Excluding those who were not sure, 92% (213/232) thought twice a week was better for

children, 83% (118/142) thought it best for volunteers in general, and 69% (186/270) thought it best for me.

**Figure 19. We are interested in whether once a week or twice a week is better for children and better for volunteers. What do you think?**
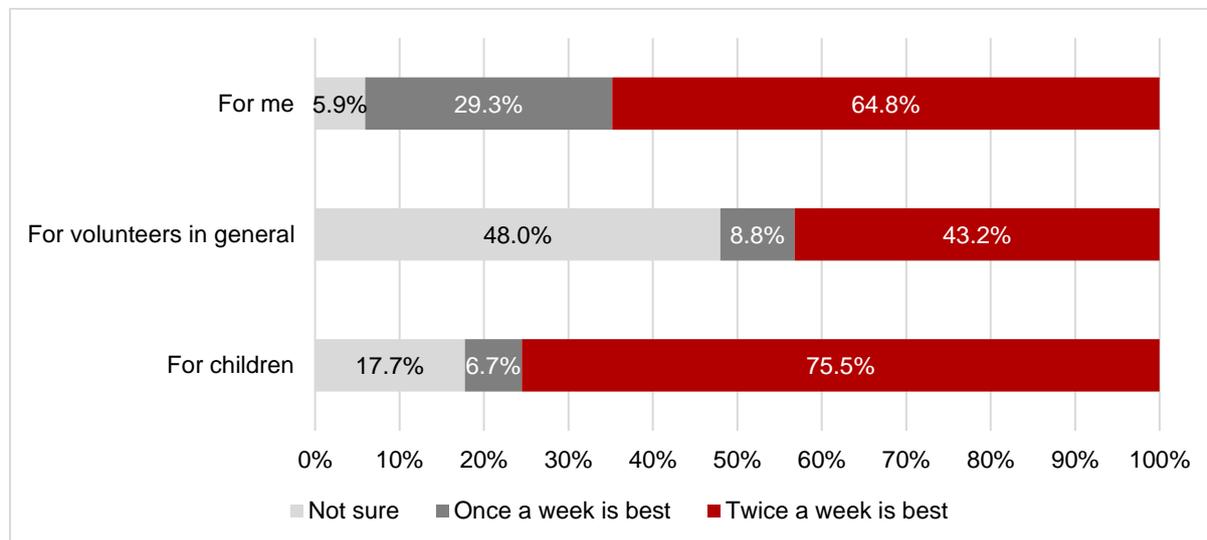


n=273-287

*Views on whether once a week or twice a week is better, by volunteering pattern*

Respondents' answers tended to reflect their volunteering pattern. The large majority of volunteers whose pattern was once a week said this was better for me (82% 53/65), as did the large majority of volunteers whose pattern was twice a week (83%, 170/206).

The majority of both once and twice a week volunteers thought twice a week volunteering was better for volunteers in general, but a larger minority of the once a week volunteers thought their pattern better for others (39% excluding 'not sure's; 10/26).

The same was true when asked which they thought better for children. A majority of both groups thought twice a week better than once a week for children, excluding those who were not sure. The largest group of once a week volunteers (45%, 29/65) were not sure whether once or twice a week was better for children, 43% (28/65) thought twice a week better, and the remaining 12% (8/65) favoured their own, once a week, pattern.

One twice-a-week volunteer wrote a comment which illustrates the feeling that twice a week is best, but may not always be feasible:

"I feel unsure about how to proceed. Twice weekly sessions are hard for me to maintain but if I reduce to once a week, the children I support may be disadvantaged by this."

*Building rapport with children*

We asked respondents whether they thought their volunteering pattern (once or twice a week) had let them build a rapport with the children (Figure 20). The overwhelming majority (96%, 277/289) thought it had. Of these, 81% thought it enough, and 15% thought it more than enough, while a small number of others either did not know (2.8%, 8/289) or thought it not enough (1.4%, 4/289). Of the four respondents who did not think their pattern was enough to build rapport with children, two were once a week volunteers and two were twice a week volunteers.

Two volunteers wrote about rapport in comments about their generally positive experiences of dropping down from seeing children twice to once a week:

"since Sept 2021 I've been asked by the Deputy Head to support 6 children once a week rather than 3 children twice a week. It might have taken a bit longer to get to know the children, but I have definitely built a rapport. Given the shortage of volunteers in my school, I feel it's better to support more children for half the time than half the children for longer."

"My first term volunteering I supported 3 children, twice a week. Rapport and trust built fairly rapidly and by the end of the term I could see encouraging results. However, after the COVID-19 interval, the school asked that I support 6 children, 3 on one day, 3 on another. I was working with Year 4 and rapport built quickly."

**Figure 20. Do you think your volunteering pattern (e.g. once/twice a week) has let you build a rapport with the child(ren)?**
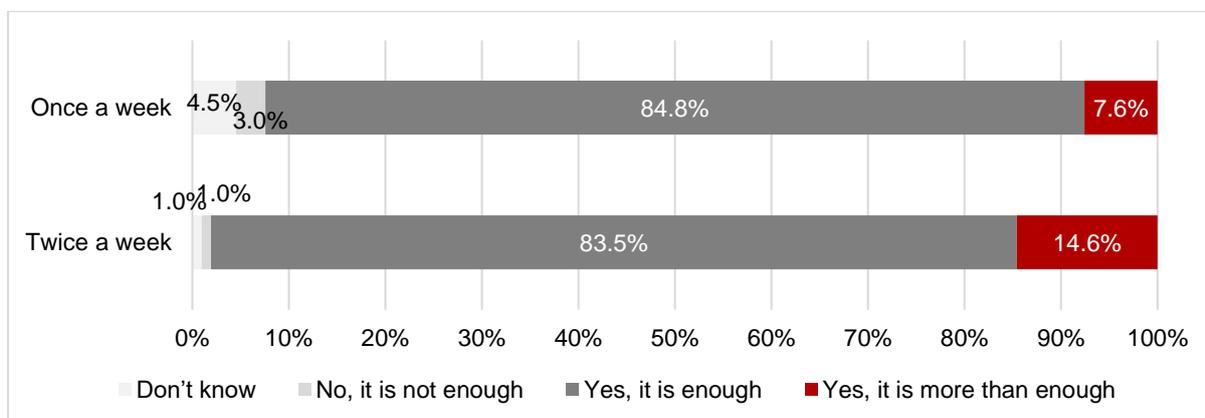


We asked respondents to comment on anything Coram Beanstalk could do to make volunteering better. Most respondents offered written comments, of which a small number reflected on volunteering patterns. Some mentioned flexibility, such as "continue to be flexible on time commitment" and "flexible hours would be a good idea". Comments recognised trade-offs and that there may be practical considerations for volunteers, schools and children.

Those favouring twice a week volunteering wrote comments including:

"I think the twice weekly element is very important. Otherwise sessions become disjointed and it is too easy for children to forget the previous session. As a volunteer visiting once weekly I think I would feel like an outsider and I wonder if I would have the motivation to continue."

"I firmly believe in Susan Belgrave's original idea of volunteering twice a week, taking three children for half an hour each."

"I much preferred having the same 3 children for 2 sessions per week. Half an hour does not seem long enough on a weekly basis."

"Twice a week is ideal. I would not be in favour of moving to once a week as I like to build on each session and a week would be too long."

"Twice a week for an hour and a half is quite a commitment but it is only during term time. I think the children benefit from the importance of reading better that is conveyed by this commitment"

Those favouring once a week volunteering wrote comments including:

"Although I enjoy my reading volunteering, I am beginning to find committing to two afternoons a week is starting to impact on my other activities. I would like to do one day, but I think this may be detrimental for the children."

"I hope to study full time next year, but if it was possible to reduce time to one afternoon a week, I would still be able to volunteer."

"I personally would like to do just one day a week as the school is not that close to home so I have to drive there. Also I find that as I am already doing another volunteering job the time I have to spend doing jobs in the home is eaten into more than I expected."

"Post covid would prefer once a week"

"When I began volunteering I was asked to go in twice a week and commit to a year at least. so I had no idea we could volunteer once a week.......which at times could work better."

## 3.3 Findings from interviews

We interviewed eight volunteer reading helpers in November 2021, five women and three men. The volunteers were based in London, the North West and the North East. Six out of eight were retired, one was in employment and the other was retired but in part-time employment. They had volunteered for Beanstalk for 1 to 14 years.

Four reading helpers supported three children each twice a week, which can be linked to the theory of change for the Reading 321 programme (Figure 1). Two reading helpers supported three children each once a week, which relates to Beanstalk's theory of change of supporting three children. One volunteer supported two children twice a week.

One reading helper supported seven children once a week.

**Table 5. Overview of interviewees' volunteering pattern**

| Interview | Volunteering pattern | Number of children currently supported |
|---|---|---|
| #1 | Once a week | 3 |
| #2 | Once a week | 3 |
| #3 | Once a week | 7 |
| #4 | Twice a week | 2 |
| #5 | Twice a week | 3 |
| #6 | Twice a week | 3 |
| #7 | Twice a week | 3 |
| #8 | Twice a week | 3 |

We reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and organised the key points under the headers below.

**What volunteer reading helpers do**

Volunteers said they started their sessions with children by getting to know them. One explained that she asked questions such as "can you tell me some things you like about school?, can you tell me anything you are not so keen on at school?".

The content of the books and other activities, like reading-related games, varied according to the interests of the child. As a result of these early conversations the volunteer said she would discover the children's interests, for example: "One is very into horses, ponies and unicorns so I trot off to the library and get the relevant books out and I let them choose."

Another volunteer described it as his role to pick up on children's interests and might then pick a book on a topic of interest, such as Formula 1 racing, or avoid a topic, if a class were already focusing on it. He said he offered children a choice of six to nine books to pick from.

Another volunteer said cooking might come up in conversation: "so the next week I'll bring in a recipe book and we'll look at recipes and we have a conversation which helps them expand their vocabulary, because you ask them what a colander is or a sieve."

We heard descriptions of the other varied activities volunteers did with children, such as word searches, puzzles, poems, and treasure maps.

One volunteer felt that the one to one nature of the interactions in sessions was significant: "it seems as if I'm making a difference. Even if it's just to give them a bit of one-to-one special time."

**Volunteer skills**

Volunteers' skills came across clearly in the interviews – they were not just listening passively as the children read out loud. One volunteer gave the example of one 'first class reader' she worked with, but "realised that it was comprehension with him that he could just zip through a book, no problem at all, but he couldn't answer a question about it. That's something that one needs to have one's antenna firmly out on and pick up on."

Another volunteer spoke of building children's engagement with reading to move from "I'm not a reader" to "I'm somebody who reads". He said: "it's as much about changing the child's perception of themselves as the technical thing of reading."

One volunteers' relationship-building skills appeared to have a positive effect in this example where a child opened up to the volunteer:

"I think she really enjoyed coming out to me because we could things she wasn't doing in class and she could tell me things she might not have told her teacher, or she might not have told whoever she was living with, so they trusted me so that was really nice"

**Content of sessions**

One volunteer told us she split her sessions between 20 minutes of reading and 10 minutes of child-led reading-orientated games. For example, she said that one child, keen on reading, might choose to carry on reading for the final 10 minutes.

Reading help was described as flexible both in terms of content and who received help with their reading on any particular occasion, as one volunteer illustrated: "Children are always there, or if not I can choose a child from another class". Another said:

"It depends on whether kids are in, if they are in the middle of some other work, and then they'll give me another child. I don't start with three children and work with the same children throughout the year."

**Other volunteering tasks beyond reading help**

Two volunteers talked about their other voluntary work for Beanstalk supporting newer volunteer reading helpers:

"We met for coffee and in fact we've met one other time to exchange notes and she had one or two queries that I was able to help her with and so forth, but I think she is enjoying it too."

Two volunteers mentioned their safeguarding role, with one having to write a log of everything that had happened after each session for one vulnerable pupil, and another refusing entry onto the school premise for one unidentified visitor.

**Views and experiences of volunteering for Coram Beanstalk**

Overall volunteers were positive about their volunteering experiences. Echoing the positive responses to the volunteer survey, our interviewees found the role worthwhile, but were able to go into more depth than in the survey on why. For example:

"The reason I'm still doing it is because I really enjoy it. I get a lot out of it, 'cause it's great to see the children develop and it's great when you get those lightbulb moments when they twig on something and they realise something they didn't know before, or when you see them enjoying themselves or when they put their hands up and say 'me first'. Selflessly, that's quite fun cause you feel like you're making a difference. That's why I still do it. For me it's very positive and I feel that I'm doing something useful."

We heard about the importance of Beanstalk volunteering for the volunteers. It gave a structure to the week for some. One said:

"I'm going to London this weekend, we're coming back Monday morning and I said to my husband 'I really want to get an early train if possible' because I don't want to let them down. I do love it, I never think '[sighs] oh it's Beanstalk today'."

**Views on volunteering patterns**

Reading helpers were happy with the amount of volunteering time they were committed to. In line with the survey findings, generally volunteers who volunteered twice a week thought that twice a week was best, while volunteers who volunteered once a week thought that volunteering once a week was best. All those we interviewed felt that they had enough time for their other commitments.

The reasons for these preferences varied. Some volunteers commented on the importance of building a relationship with the children (twice weekly volunteering allowing this relationship to be built very quickly). Twice weekly sessions were considered more suitable for younger and for more vulnerable children. One felt twice a week better than once because children "need continuity and consistency." One volunteer suggested that younger children were more suitable for twice-a-week volunteers: "They do forget at that age if you only see them occasionally." Others cited practical issues, including the school's curriculum not allowing enough time for twice-a-week sessions, and the volunteer's other commitments:

Interviewer: "If there is anything you could change about your volunteering pattern, would you?"

Volunteer: "No I think it's about right. I'd find it difficult to go in twice a week honestly, because it would mean I'd only have one free morning."

Finally, not all volunteers had a strong view on which pattern was best:

Interviewer: "What's your preference, once or twice a week?"

Volunteer: "I don't really mind. The children get a lot out of it and so I don't mind. I'm guided by the teachers who have been excellent, they have put children forward and swapped them in and out so I just do what they recommend."

**Possible improvements to the volunteering experience**

Volunteers wanted Beanstalk to improve its communications with them. They generally wanted more of a social aspect to volunteering. Interestingly, the two non-retired volunteers we interviewed (one working and one semi-retired) did not think this was as necessary. Retired volunteers called for coffee mornings, tea parties or Christmas get togethers, to allow the sharing of experiences with other volunteers. Two long-standing volunteers cited events or meetings like this in the past which allowed conversation and the swapping of books and ideas.

# 5. Strengths and limitations of research methods

We took a mixed-methods approach to this evaluation, analysing multiple sources of data including reading records, survey responses, and interviews with volunteers. Schools and volunteers completed the reading records, with schools providing an assessment of reading attainment pre- and post-reading support programme using a Coram Beanstalk-developed scale. However, it is important to recognise that statements of child confidence, enjoyment,

and emotional wellbeing were completed by volunteers based on their perceptions, or by children with support from volunteers.

This evaluation used an observational, non-randomised design which did not allow confident conclusions on causality. For instance, volunteers providing Once Reading and Reading 321 may differ in unobserved ways, other than the frequency of reading support they provide, such as in their skillsets.

While the overall sample size of reading records was large, the sample size of students participating in Once Reading was considerably smaller than Reading 321. It may be that a larger sample size would help to provide more precise estimates (i.e. smaller confidence intervals around observed statistics) and allow for a small but statistically significant difference to be detected, in favour of one or other programme.

The volunteers we interviewed cannot be considered representative of the typical Coram Beanstalk volunteer. Staff in Coram Beanstalk provided us with the contact details of reading helpers that they thought might interested in taking part in an interview. These volunteers were likely highly engaged with the programme and may have differed in terms of their characteristics or experiences of the programme compared to other Beanstalk volunteers.

# 6. Recommendations

- It seems that children improve to a similar extent as a result of both the Reading 321 and the Once Reading programmes in terms of their reading attainment, as well as their confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing. Given that volunteers are generally happy with their chosen pattern of volunteering and feel confident that it allows them to build rapport with the children they support, and given that flexibility was a common answer when volunteers were asked what Coram Beanstalk can do to make volunteering better, we recommend **continuing to allow volunteers the flexibility of choosing whether to take part once or twice a week**.
- That being said, our interviews suggest that twice-weekly reading support may be more suitable for younger and more vulnerable children. We **recommend exploring the suitability of the two programmes across different age groups** in further research.
- Children engaged in the Reading 321 programme for longer than they did in Once Reading – on average almost two weeks longer. There were 25% of children in the Once Reading programme who took part for just 5 to 9 weeks compared to 6% of the children in Reading 321, and a higher proportion of children started Reading 321 in the first month of the academic year compared to Once Reading. Although this did not appear to impact on improvements in reading attainment, we recommend **exploring reasons that may be contributing to these shorter periods of engagement with Once Reading**.
- Children engaging in Once Reading came from schools in areas with higher levels of deprivation compared to Reading 321. We recommend carrying out further research to **explore volunteering patterns across geographic regions with particular attention to potential barriers to twice-weekly volunteering in more deprived areas**.

- We recommend **seeking out opportunities to communicate more with Beanstalk volunteers**. Volunteers were keen to feel part of a social community and would welcome activities that bring volunteers together such as coffee mornings. Most volunteers already found their time with Beanstalk rewarding, but this may improve that experience further.
- Beanstalk may wish to **explore ways of diversifying their pool of volunteers**. Given that the average Beanstalk volunteer was more likely to be female and White compared to national population averages.

# 7. Conclusion

We conclude that children make a similar amount of improvement in terms of their reading attainment and their levels of confidence, enjoyment, and emotional wellbeing, regardless of whether they take part in Once Reading or Reading 321. It should be noted that this research used an observational, non-randomised design which does not allow confident conclusions on causality. For instance, the volunteers in Once Reading and Reading 321 may differ in ways other than the amount of reading support they provide each week, such as in their skillsets. It is also important to note that the sample size of students participating in Once Reading was considerably smaller than Reading 321; a larger sample size would help to provide more precise estimates (i.e. smaller confidence intervals around observed statistics). It may be the case that a larger sample size could allow for a statistically significant difference to be detected, in favour of one or other programme. Our main finding from this analysis, together with the preferences and practicalities expressed in our survey and interviews, is evidence in favour of offering both reading support patterns, while more rigorous evaluation is conducted.

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