

Evaluation of the Inspiring Choices Literacy Intervention Project: 2023-2024

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**inspiring
choices**
York & North Yorkshire

York St John University

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1. Context

Inspiring Choices are the York and North Yorkshire partnership for the Uni Connect programme funded by the Office for Students (OfS).

The mission of Inspiring Choices is to empower, build capacity and skills, and tackle barriers for young people (typically aged 14 years and above), often from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, in York and North Yorkshire so to increase decision making about and access to higher education and career pathways.

When the OfS expanded school-university partnership activity in 2022 to include a commitment to raising attainment for students, Inspiring Choices built their framework for attainment raising projects on two key foundations:

1. Providing targeted academic support to learners; in particular, a commitment to raising attainment for students from early on in their education (pre-GCSE).
2. Tackling non-academic barriers to learning.

Through consultation with target partner schools in York and North Yorkshire, the local authority, GCSE assessors, and academic staff at York St John University, **low literacy levels were perceived to be impacting on all areas of curriculum for some learners in York and North Yorkshire.**

Literacy concerns proficiency in reading, writing, and listening skills, which enables people to make sense of the world around them and communicate effectively.
(UNESCO, 2024)

Against this backdrop, the need to address low literacy levels in learners became Inspiring Choices' first area of targeted academic support.

Inspiring Choices set about addressing concerns over low literacy levels in learners through devising and implementing the literacy intervention project.

2. Aims and scope

Here we report on the literacy intervention project devised to address low literacy levels and delivered by Inspiring Choices in 2023 and 2024.

In our report, we seek to examine:

- (1) the extent to which literacy levels and confidence may have been raised by the literacy intervention project.
- (2) what factors might be protective and inhibiting with respect to raising literacy levels and confidence.
- (3) what lessons can be learnt overall from the literacy intervention project (e.g., strengths and weakness of design).



3. The Literacy intervention project

3.1. Background and aims

Literacy is widely considered the cornerstone of all learning and is fundamental at all stages of life because it enables people to (i) **confidently** tackle daily tasks, (ii) make **informed decisions** about their lives (e.g., education and careers), and (iii) **enrich their health and well-being** (Breadmore et al., 2019).

In UK secondary school settings, literacy is of paramount importance as it directly influences attainment in all subjects, which has both direct and indirect effects on confidence and future progression and prospects (Breadmore et al., 2019).

However, many students are transitioning from primary to secondary schools with below the expected standard reading levels and the gap for these students is often maintained throughout secondary education. This concerning trend is particularly evident amongst children from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Farquharson, McNally, & Tahir, 2022).

Key Stages 2 (ages 7 to 11) and 3 (ages 11 to 14) are pivotal periods during which the literacy attainment gap can widen substantially, particularly among children from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. When this disparity manifests as less progress in reading and writing, it can have lasting consequences, including lower GCSE attainment. Therefore, closing the gap early on is considered a crucial endeavour (Bilton & Duff, 2021; Quigley & Coleman, 2021).

The aims of the Inspiring Choices literacy intervention project were to: (i) work with Key Stage 3 **learners significantly under age-appropriate national reading and writing levels** in York and North Yorkshire, (ii) **raise their reading and writing attainment levels** and (iii) **improve confidence** in their reading and writing across the curriculum.

3.2 Intervention activity undertaken

Noting that in-person, one-to-one tutoring improves literacy for students reading at least one year below their age level (e.g., Baye et al., 2016; Rutt, Kettlewell, & Bernardelli, 2015), Inspiring Choices engaged Catch Up® – a not-for-profit charity – who work to address literacy and numeracy difficulties that contribute to underachievement.

The remit of Catch Up® in this instance was to train coordinators and graduates from York St John University to deliver in-person, Catch Up® Literacy one-to-one tutoring with children significantly under their age-appropriate national reading and writing levels in York and North Yorkshire. Training was delivered via three, 2-hour, intensive sessions that focused on how to assess a learner's reading and writing level and how to conduct the 15-minute individual, one-to-one tutoring sessions. After completion of training sessions, Catch Up® issued access to their resources including the learner's Progress booklet and an online booklist of Catch Up® Literacy levelled books for use in the 15-minute individual, one-to-one tutoring sessions.

3.2.1 Intervention activity type

- Skills and Attainment (i.e., tutoring).

3.2.2 Intervention activity timing, duration, and frequency

- Over 10 weeks, participants received up to three tutoring sessions per week, with each session lasting 30 minutes, including 15 minutes of intensive one-to-one literacy intervention (i.e., participants could engage in a maximum of 7.5 hours tutoring in total).

3.2.3 Intervention activity mode of delivery

- Tutoring sessions were delivered in person, one-to-one, at the participants' school.

3.3 Participants

Examination of HEAT data in York and North Yorkshire identified two state secondary schools where learners may benefit the most from raising literacy levels: ‘Newton’ and ‘Greenwood’¹

- In 2023, participants were 8 KS3 (Year 7) male learners from Newton who had significantly below average age-appropriate reading and writing scores.
- In 2024, participants were 8 KS3 (Year 8) male learners from Greenwood who had significantly below average age-appropriate reading and writing scores.

3.4 Data collection activity

1. During weeks 1-3 of the tutoring intervention, participants completed baseline literacy tests, aligned with the expected progression of the National Curriculum, on:
 - Sight word knowledge
 - Spelling knowledge
 - Phonics knowledge
 - Letter names and formation
2. Pre and post the tutoring intervention:
 - A reading level score was assigned based on the book the learner was able to read and its corresponding reading level (e.g., Helicopters by Jill Atkins would be considered a reading level 5 out of a maximum of 12 levels).
 - A reading ease score was assigned by learners answering the question: ‘how easy do you find reading (out of 10)?’
3. A semi-structured assessment (see Appendix A for the reading interview assessment schedule) was conducted with questions centred on perceptions of reading, home reading and influences, and reading difficulties and solutions at baseline and the end of the intervention.

¹ Please note pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the anonymity of the schools and students involved.

4. Evaluation of the literacy intervention project

We based our evaluation on the three forms of data collected: (1) literacy tests at baseline (pre-test), (2) literacy levels and reading ease before and after the tutoring intervention (Pre-test/Post-test), and (3) semi-structured reading assessment at two timepoints (Qualitative; see Appendix A).

4.1. Approach to evaluation and data analysis

The quantitative and qualitative approaches used are outlined in Table 1 and were selected to help triangulate sources, capture processes and outcomes, and better evaluate the impact.

Table 1 – Characteristics of the literacy intervention project’s evaluation and data analysis activity

Evaluation type	Quantitative pre-test. Quantitative pre-/post-test. Qualitative.
Evaluation methods	Literacy tests at baseline. Literacy level and reading ease scores pre and post the tutoring intervention. Qualitative reading interview assessment responses with participants at two timepoints.
Evaluation strength	Mixed-methods Narrative/Empirical (Weak/Developing)
Approach to data analysis	Descriptive statistics: means and standard deviations. Paired samples t-test: compares the means of two measures taken from the same group of people. Here, it was used to assess for statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between pre- and post-tutoring literacy and reading ease levels for the 2023 and 2024 literacy intervention participants. We also quantified the difference as an effect size that signals the difference between scores in units of standard deviation (Cohen’s d). Content analysis: identifying, why, how, and what through an iterative process of coding, counting, and interpreting the participants’ responses to the reading interview questions.

5. Results of the literacy project intervention

5.1 Baseline test results

- Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c outline the average baseline literacy assessment scores for participants at Newton school and Greenwood school.
- Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c show that average sight word and spelling knowledge, phonics knowledge, and letter names and formation scores were similar across the two schools, but there tended to be greater variation in scores evident across the learners from Newton school.

Table 2a – Average Newton and Greenwood baseline literacy assessment scores for sight word and spelling knowledge

	Test Number	Sight Word Knowledge					Test Max.*	Spelling Knowledge				
		1 (20)*	2 (40)	3 (60)	4 (60)	5 (60)		1 (20)	2 (40)	3 (60)	4 (60)	5 (60)
Newton	M	19.75	39.00	52.88	52.75	58.43	M	17.50	31.00	42.43	40.17	35.40
	SD	.46	1.31	9.45	11.56	1.27	SD	3.51	10.89	19.34	18.87	17.44
Greenwood	M	19.50	39.38	58.00	57.25	56.38	M	17.63	37.38	53.00	40.86	43.50
	SD	.76	.74	.93	1.75	1.85	SD	1.30	1.69	3.21	16.23	16.26

Note. *scores in () equate to the maximum score the learner could achieve for the given test.

Table 2b – Average Newton and Greenwood baseline literacy assessment scores for phonics knowledge

	Phonics knowledge										
	Test Type	Grapheme – Phoneme Matching (28)*	Segment phonemes (10)	Blend phonemes (10)	Write phonemes (10)			Read adjacent consonants (16)	Write adjacent consonants (16)	Read Long vowels (10)	Write Long vowels (10)
					Initial	Medial	Final				
Newton	M	25.13	6.63	9.63	8.00	7.88	8.38	14.63	13.83	9.25	8.86
	SD	5.74	.92	.52	2.39	2.17	2.39	.92	1.72	1.39	1.77
Greenwood	M	19.25	8.25	9.25	9.50	9.25	9.25	14.63	14.13	9.38	8.38
	SD	9.48	2.19	.71	.53	.89	1.04	1.41	1.81	1.06	1.60

Note. *scores in () equate to the maximum score the learner could achieve for the given test.

Table 2c – Average Newton and Greenwood baseline literacy assessment scores for letter names and formation

	Test Type	Letter names and formation			
		Letter names: lower case (26)*	Letter names: upper case (26)	Letter formation: lower case (26)	Letter formation: upper case (26)
Newton	M	18.13	24.50	25.33	25.83
	SD	9.40	3.12	.82	.41
Greenwood	M	21.38	23.75	24.38	23.88
	SD	5.88	2.49	1.30	1.55

Note. *scores in () equate to the maximum score the learner could achieve for the given test.

5.2 Literacy level and reading ease

- Table 3 outlines the descriptive statistics for the pre- and post-test (i.e., pre and post the tutoring intervention) literacy reading level and reading ease scores for participants at Newton school and Greenwood school.
- Pooling the Newton and Greenwood school data, a paired samples t-test showed a statistically significant difference between pre-tutoring intervention literacy levels and post-tutoring intervention literacy levels: $t(15) = -7.472$, $p < .001$.

**Pre literacy intervention reading levels were lower than post
and the effect was large ($d = -1.86$)**

- However, pooling the Newton and Greenwood school data, a paired samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference between pre-test reading ease levels and post-test reading ease levels (out of 10): $t(11) = .00$, $p = 1.000$.
- Exploratory examinations of attendance data suggested that those attending more than two thirds of sessions experienced a greater positive change rate in their literacy levels than those attending less than two thirds: $t(14) = -2.149$, $p = .05$, $d = -1.11$.
- Overall, whilst all learners at both schools significantly elevated their literacy reading level, typically by two levels, there was no significant change in perceptions of how easy they found reading.

Table 3 – Pooled Newton and Greenwood participant literacy levels, reading ease, and attendance profiles

School	Pre-test literacy level	Post-test literacy level	Pre-test Reading ease	Post-test Reading ease	Attendance (out of 30 sessions)
Newton (2023)	6	10	9	9	23
	6	10	4.5	8.5	17
	7	10	5	8	20
	8	8.5	5.5	8	16
	7	8	8	—	13
	6	7	2.5	—	20
	8	11	9	9	21
	8.5	10	5	7	18
Greenwood (2024)	6	7	3	4	9
	6	7	7	7	15
	6	9	6	6	17
	5	7	8	2	8
	6	10	4	—	20
	6	10	7	6.5	22
	6	8	6.5	—	18
	6	9	9	3	14
	M = 6.47	M = 8.84	M = 6.19	M = 6.50	M = 16.94
	SD = .96	SD = 1.36	SD = 2.10	SD = 2.35	SD = 4.33

5.3 Reading Interview Assessments

5.3.1 Perceptions of reading enjoyment, purpose, and value

Analysis of the reading interview content showed, pre-intervention, that typically the learners at Newton liked to read but it would depend on the book and conditions for reading. Post-intervention, they more emphatically liked reading, notably because they could better comprehend what they were reading, as NEW7 said, *“Like it more now as can understand struggling words”* and NEW8 said, *“Yes like it more now I understand what I'm reading”*.

- The learners at Greenwood differed in their starting and end point perceptions of reading to those at Newton. Pre-intervention, all but two participants, did not like reading with a view that reading books is boring. Post-intervention, two showed an increased tolerance for reading, as GRE1 said *“Don't mind doing it but would rather not. Yes”*. Overall, attitudes remained less positive than evidenced for Newton.
- Across both schools, learners initially thought reading was about gaining knowledge and saying/practicing/reading words in a book. Only two students associated reading with alternative outcomes; NEW8 identified reading as a *“a time to be peaceful”* and GRE7 identified reading with *“adventures, troubles and imagination”*.
- The complexity and range of ideas about what reading is increased post-intervention to encompass knowledge development, personal expression and more diverse reading experiences and materials. For instance, NEW3 said *“Reading is where you can express your personality, you can learn facts about people and dinosaurs”*, NEW2 said *“Reading is fiction and non-fiction...”*, and GRE2 said, *“Reading something like a book but not always. Involves words, can be a game.”*
- With respect to the value of reading, learners across both schools initially felt reading was an important skill for school, such as English class and for doing well in tests and the future. NEW2 said *“...for GCSEs and for being an adult”*. Post-intervention, more learners recognised the immediate and long-term value of reading with six more learners identifying that reading was valuable for getting a good job or career. For example, NEW8 said *“Yes, if you don't know how to read it means you can't do a lot of jobs like police or army or teaching”*.

5.3.2 Reports of book ownership, home reading habits, and familial role models

- Pre-intervention, all learners at Newton reported owning at least a couple of books at home, with NEW6 indicating that they owned the most at “about 100”. Just over half of these learners reported engaging in reading at home. Post-intervention, there was a notable increase in the number of books reported to be owned at home. For example, NEW1 said, “*I have bought an entire shelf of new books*”. Only one learner reported still not reading at home, with the remainder typically indicating that they were reading a bit more at home than they did previously, as NEW2 said, “*Read sometimes before bed. – Yes*”.
- By contrast, pre-intervention, just over half of the learners at Greenwood owned books at home but only three of the eight learners sometimes engaged with home reading. Post-intervention, half owned books and read a little at home but seemingly on a lesser scale than the learners at Newton.
- When asked about who in their family likes to read, female family members (i.e., mothers, grandmothers, and sisters) were most often cited by learners at both schools and this was the case pre-intervention (n = 11) and post-intervention (n = 8). Male influences were less prevalent amongst learners from both schools, but fathers and brothers were sometimes cited (pre n = 4 and post n = 3).
- Post-intervention, three students from across the two schools stated that they read independently rather than with family members.

5.3.3 Reading confidence, difficulties, and solutions

- When learners were asked pre-intervention how they felt about someone asking them to read out loud, responses ranged from negative (i.e., feeling nervous or embarrassed) to positive (i.e., feeling alright and happy). At both schools, negative responses outweighed the positive (i.e., n = 6 learners at each school felt negative and n = 2 learners at each school felt positive about reading out loud).
- Whilst learners felt nervous about reading out loud, some would still engage in the task as they knew they could ask for help and that it would become easier the longer they read out loud for. For example, NEW3 said, “*anxious and nervous but knows to ask for help*”. Others simply would simply not read out loud or ask someone else to read instead.
- Post-intervention, all students providing a response from Newton responded positively and stated that whilst they still sometimes felt nervous, they felt more confident in their competence to read, as NEW7 said, “*More confident, much more than I was*”.

Now practised and become more confident reading out loud, read out loud in English”.

However, this elevation in confidence was not as apparent for Greenwood, with only one learner indicating that they felt more confident.

- In terms of difficulties with reading, learners across both schools suggested that dyslexia and disabilities may contribute and recognised that longer words, hard vocabulary, and a book’s complexity may make reading/comprehension challenging.
- To overcome such difficulties, learners suggested to (i) practice regularly (e.g., NEW4 said, “Read more and practice at home”), (ii) find engaging books (e.g., GRE6 said, “Get a book you’re interested in”), (iii) seek help (e.g., GRE7 said, “Ask parents and then can ask school”), (iv) start simple and gradually progress (e.g., GRE3 said, “Start reading smaller books”), and (v) use a variety of learning strategies and tools (i.e., NEW5 said, “sounding it out or covering reading bit by bit” and NEW8 said, “...do an easy book app”).

5.3.4 Cross-curriculum change in reading

- Across both schools, learners reflected that they noticed some progress in their reading and were able to read more in English and other subjects across the curriculum (e.g., history). Reading was also preferred over writing, which remained challenging for most learners, as NEW3 said, “Writing is harder (speed), reading alright, a bit easier now after sessions”.



6. Closing remarks and recommendations

To what extent may literacy levels and confidence have been raised by this pilot activity?	<p>Quantitative data suggests that the intervention was effective in raising literacy reading levels.</p> <p>Qualitative data suggested a more notable positive impact on learners at Newton, improving enjoyment, confidence, and home engagement with reading. While learners at Greenwood experienced some gains, their attitudes towards reading and confidence in reading out loud remained comparatively less positive, suggesting that additional, targeted support may be needed.</p>
What were the strengths of this activity?	<p>Evidence based intervention consistent with the theory of change model proposed by Inspiring Choices with a mix of methods and multiple timepoints to track and monitor the students.</p>
What were the challenges of this pilot activity?	<p>The small sample size across schools limited the scope of quantitative analyses and necessitates somewhat cautious interpretation of the quantitative results.</p>
What are the reflections and recommendations?	<p>The mix of methods used has provided a more nuanced understanding of the value and challenges of reading, which teachers/tutors can use to better understand the factors that might be protective and inhibiting for reading.</p> <p>The intervention appears to have had more substantial impact at Newton and so further interrogation of the samples, intervention delivery, and wider school environments may highlight why and any potential amendments to improve future intervention implementation.</p> <p>All data here represents the learner's perceptions and performance. To better triangulate and understand the impact of the intervention, teacher/tutor perceptions would be useful. Further, to conduct a follow-up with these learners after a prolonged period (e.g., a school year) would provide a better sense of whether the intervention is effective in both the short and long term.</p>

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Reading Interview Assessment Questions

1. Do you like reading?
2. Do you have any books of your own?
3. Do you read at home?
4. Does anyone in your family like reading?
5. What do you think reading is?
6. Do you think it is important to be able to read? Why?
7. How do you feel if someone asks you to read out loud?
8. Why do you think some people find reading difficult?
9. If you had a friend who could not read, what would you tell them they needed to do?
10. How easy do you find reading (out of 10)?

