

# Paired reading as a literacy intervention for foster children

The education of children in foster care has long been considered problematic. One contributing factor may be the lack of educational support from key adults in these children's lives. High turnover of school and home placements may preclude the presence of a consistent adult who is actively involved in a foster child's education. Moreover, research suggests that education is sometimes viewed as a low priority by carers in comparison with other aspects of a foster child's life. The aim of the study reported here by **Cara Osborne, Julia Alfano and Tanya Winn** was to address this issue by directly involving carers in supporting their child's literacy skills through the use of a 'paired reading' literacy intervention. Thirty-five carers and children took part in the project over a 16-week period. The results revealed an average improvement in reading age of 12 months during this time, suggesting that the programme offers a constructive way of enhancing foster children's literacy skills. Feedback from carers supported this view and suggested that the impact of the project may extend beyond the realm of literacy *per se*, resulting in improvements in confidence and motivation as well as reading ability.

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**Key words:** looked after children, foster carers, education, literacy, paired reading

## Introduction

In spite of increasing interest in the education of looked after children, the academic performance of these children still remains poor compared to the general pupil population (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a). The impact of this extends beyond the realm of school, with care leavers more likely to be unemployed by the September after leaving school (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a) and less likely to go on to higher education than the general population (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). In some senses, such findings are unsurprising. The early experiences of looked after children are often marked by neglect or abuse (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b) and once in care, these children may continue to lack stability in their home and school placements (Fletcher-

Campbell and Archer, 2003), all of which are likely to affect educational achievement. This is not to suggest that poor academic outcomes are inevitable for looked after children, rather that special attention might be needed to ensure that they are properly supported during their school careers (Jackson, 1998; Jackson and McParlin, 2006). The current study examined the impact of a literacy programme set up in schools, but supported by foster carers. Reading can be considered the foundation of learning, inasmuch as it offers a gateway to success in other academic areas (Jackson, 1987, 1998); it therefore offers a useful starting point when seeking to enhance the education of looked after children.

## Factors contributing to the education of looked after children

Research suggests that two of the key factors needed in order for a child in care to succeed academically are placement stability and a supportive home environment that encourages studying (Stein, 1997; Martin and Jackson, 2002). Unfortunately, placement stability of children in care is often poor, both in terms of care and education placements. For example, Fletcher-Campbell and Archer (2003) found that a quarter of the young people in care in their study had had six or more care placements, while a third had had three or more education placements during their time at secondary school.

A further difficulty is that there is often limited contact between the key adults involved in supporting the education of looked after children (eg social workers, carers and teachers) and a lack of training on the value of education (Social Services Inspectorate and Ofsted, 1995). Perhaps as a result, education is sometimes considered a low

priority by foster carers. For example, in a study by Barnardo's (2006), 39 per cent of children in care reported that no one attended their school parents' evening; this was in contrast to four per cent of parents of children who were not in care. Similarly, 47 per cent of children in care reported that they had never been praised for doing well at school, while just three per cent of the parents of children not in care reported the same. Sinclair (1998) suggests that such findings may be exacerbated by placement instability; turnover of carers and time pressures on social workers mean that looked after children may not have a consistent key adult in their life who will take an interest in and support their educational progress.

The low priority ascribed to education may consequently result in low expectations on the part of the children concerned (Firth and Horrocks, 1996). Harker *et al* (2003) interviewed 80 children in care and found that nearly a quarter felt that their educational progress was below average. When questioned about the barriers to their academic achievement, a number of children reported a lack of interest on the part of residential or foster carers. Children highlighted a general absence of support, for example, in terms of encouraging attendance at school, providing help with homework or attending school events. Deficiencies in more practical areas were also flagged, with some children bemoaning the absence of reading material and access to a local library.

Martin and Jackson (2002) took a slightly different approach to this issue and examined the views of a group of care leavers who had attained good levels of education (a first degree or postgraduate degree). These young people came from disadvantaged families and had similar pre-care experiences to a comparison group of care leavers with either no or very few qualifications. It therefore seemed that something within the high-achieving individuals' care experiences had promoted their educational achievement. In line with

this, three-quarters of the high-achieving sample emphasised the importance of carer interest in their education, citing the positive effect of encouragement to do well and achieve. In particular, it was felt that foster carers needed to value education, as well as hold an understanding of the best ways of helping a child to achieve a good education.

### **Promoting carer involvement**

Carer interest and involvement in their foster children's education therefore appears to be a fundamental part of supporting these children's academic progress. One sensible approach to enhancing the education of foster children might, therefore, be to encourage all carers to take a direct role in supporting their child's education. The current study was particularly concerned with facilitating carer involvement in supporting looked after children's reading ability. Reading was focused on for two reasons. Firstly, it has been suggested that looked after children are most likely to be behind in literacy as a result of a lack of adult involvement (Jackson, 1987, 1994). Indeed, research suggests that parents and carers can play a key role in helping children to learn to read (eg Lucey and Walkerdine, 2000), thus this seems a skill which is particularly likely to benefit from carer involvement. Secondly, early reading ability has been linked to future educational success (Jackson, 1987, 1998), implying that the establishment of good levels of literacy may facilitate success in other areas.

### **Literacy interventions for looked after children**

In recent years, a number of initiatives aimed at improving the literacy of looked after children have been launched, particularly through voluntary agencies. As Fletcher-Campbell and colleagues (2003) have highlighted, there is limited published (ie peer-reviewed) research on these initiatives, although a number of unpublished reports are in the public domain. Family learning projects, in particular, have

been carried out in a number of authorities (Fletcher-Campbell *et al*, 2003; Ofsted, 2009). Such projects are aimed at increasing foster carers' participation in their child's learning. However, they tend to involve a wide range of participants (of which foster carers are just one) and a wide range of skills (of which literacy is just one), meaning that it is difficult to extract the precise impact of such interventions on looked after children's literacy *per se* (eg Ofsted, 2009).

Other initiatives have focused on increasing looked after children's access to books and, in turn, their motivation for reading. Examples include the *Right to Read Fund* set up by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (cited by the Department for Education and Skills, 2007, as an example of good practice), the *A Book of my Own* initiative set up by John Bald, and the *Letterbox Club*, a joint initiative between the Booktrust and the University of Leicester. The Letterbox Club has recently been the subject of two evaluations (Griffiths *et al*, 2008; Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010). The project offers looked after children the opportunity to receive a monthly package of books and stationery over the course of six months. The results have been encouraging, revealing a significant improvement in reading ability following the six-month programme (Griffiths *et al*, 2008) and positive feedback from most children and carers involved (Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010). One difficulty acknowledged in the most recent report, however, is the lack of involvement on the part of some carers. Although not a requirement of the programme, nor explicitly suggested to participants, it was hoped that carers would participate by reading with their children (Dymoke and Griffiths, 2010). Feedback from those involved suggested that some of the children did indeed read the books they received alongside their carer; in other instances, though, carers were unclear on their role in the project, and did not appreciate that they could have read the books alongside their child. Consequently, the authors highlighted

the need to provide additional support for carers in order to help them support their child's reading.

One intervention that offers a structured way of engaging both child and carer in the reading process is 'paired reading' (Morgan, 1976), a literacy intervention that involves the pupil and a partner reading together. The technique involves a number of key elements, outlined succinctly by Topping (2001). The first stage involves both pupil and partner reading together, so that the pupil is provided with a model of competent reading. As the pupil becomes more confident, they are given the option of reading alone. If the pupil subsequently makes a mistake which they are unable to correct themselves, their partner repeats the correct word and begins to read with them again. Thus, paired reading involves a cycle, moving from reading together to reading alone, ensuring the child receives as much help as necessary. The process is designed to be interactive; the child selects their own reading material and is supported by their partner through discussion, questioning and correction, where necessary. This method enables the child to gain extra practice in reading, receive feedback on their performance, and also experience modelling of correct reading by their partner, thereby promoting reading fluency and comprehension (Topping, 1985, 2001). Thus, as well as providing an opportunity for the child to participate in regular reading sessions, it also offers a way of including the carer within this process.

A number of studies have found support for the use of paired reading in improving literacy (see Topping and Lindsay, 1992; Brooks, 2007, for reviews), although only one (Menmuir, 1994) has specifically examined its use with looked after children. Unfortunately, the findings of Menmuir's study were based purely on the basis of weekly monitoring records kept by foster carers and residential staff, and not actual reading ability. The responses were very positive, and suggested that the intervention had been helpful, but the lack of

an objective measure of reading ability means that such findings must be interpreted with caution.

The current study aimed to improve upon this methodology by taking pre- and post-measures of reading ability. The objective was to examine whether actively involving carers in the learning process, through the use of a paired reading intervention, would enhance the literacy levels of their children. Such a project extends upon past research by offering a structured method for including the child's carer within the reading process.

## **Method**

### **Design**

The reading ability of the children was assessed in terms of (1) reading age before and after the intervention and (2) ratio gain (change in reading age/change in chronological age). Feedback from carers was also used to illuminate any improvements found.

### **Participants**

The project was open to all looked after children, even those with good literacy skills, as it was felt that they all could benefit from reading alongside their carer. In total, 68 primary school-aged children currently looked after by foster carers were identified by schools to take part in the project. Ultimately, evaluation data were only provided for 35 children. The reasons for the missing data varied. In some cases, the school simply did not return the requested evaluation data. Often, however, the specific circumstances surrounding the care of the child meant that the school had not been able to put the intervention into practice; for example, a number of schools reported difficulties engaging the child's carer, while others stated that the child had changed placement (either home or school) during the course of the programme, which had prevented the intervention from continuing.

The mean chronological age (CA) of the children at the start of the evaluation was 9 years 4 months ( $SD = 1$  year 9

months; range = 5 years 10 months to 11 years 6 months), while their mean reading age (RA) was 8 years 0 months ( $SD = 1$  year 8 months; range = 4 years 3 months to 10 years 2 months). Thus, most of the children had reading ages considerably below their chronological age. There was, however, some variation in this, and seven of the children actually had a reading age above it.

### **Materials**

Children were allowed to select their own reading material during the course of the intervention. Reading age was assessed by teachers using the Salford Sentence Reading Test (Bookbinder, 2002). Additionally, a weekly monitoring sheet was used to track the progress of the work. This requested information regarding the number of sessions that had taken place that week and any difficulties the carers had encountered. The final monitoring sheet included some additional questions for carers regarding whether they and their child had enjoyed taking part in the programme, what its positive aspects were, whether anything could have been done differently and whether they perceived the programme to have had a positive impact on their child's reading ability. Thus, the aim of the monitoring sheets was not only to ensure that schools were liaising with carers and helping them to 'keep on track' with the project, but also to yield some feedback from carers regarding their perceptions of the project.

### **Procedure**

Training workshops for foster carers, school staff and social workers in the use and delivery of paired reading were undertaken by the lead area co-ordinator for the programme and the educational psychology service. Foster carers subsequently took part in the paired reading programme with their child for 16 weeks. Carers were advised that the reading should take place at least three times a week, for a minimum of 20 minutes each session. Schools liaised with carers on a weekly basis, and this contact was formalised through the completion of

the weekly monitoring sheets.<sup>1</sup>

Each school was asked to collect a baseline measure of reading age using the Salford test immediately before the paired reading began, and again immediately after the intervention finished. Salford is the most commonly used reading test in schools in this local authority, so staff members were familiar with its use and application. The same person in each child's school carried out the pre- and post-tests, ensuring consistency in their administration.

## Results

### Quantitative analysis

The average reading age of the children at the outset of the intervention was eight years ( $SD = 1$  year 8 months). During the course of the intervention, the reading age of all the children improved, rising to an average of nine years ( $SD = 1$  year 7 months) by the end. On average then, each child made one year's progress in just over four months<sup>2</sup> ( $SD = 8$  months, range = 1 month to 31 months). This increase was statistically significant ( $t(34) = 9.32, p < 0.001$ ).

Ratio gain was also calculated in order to assess the children's rate of progress across time. Ratio gain is defined as the number of months' progress made in literacy, divided by the number of months the intervention has been running; it therefore refers to the average amount of progress made for each month that the child has participated in the intervention. Overall, the mean ratio gain was 2.96. Thus, on average, for every month spent on the intervention, reading age increased by just shy of three months.

There was some variation in the amount of progress made. For example, one child made just one month's progress, while another made 31 months'

Table 1

### Mean increase in reading age according to initial reading ability

Initial reading ability	Mean increase in reading age
More than 36 months behind ( $n = 3$ )	1 year 3 months
24–35 months behind ( $n = 10$ )	1 year 4 months
12–23 months behind ( $n = 11$ )	1 year 2 months
1–11 months behind ( $n = 4$ )	6 months
RA better than CA ( $n = 7$ )	7 months

progress. Further examination of the data revealed that level of progress was related to initial reading ability, such that children with reading ages considerably below their chronological age at the outset of the project revealed greater gains than those with reading ages closer to it (see Table 1). This relationship was statistically significant ( $r(33) = -0.52, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, while all children showed some form of improvement following the intervention, poor readers demonstrated the greatest gains. This finding may, in part, be driven by a ceiling effect and will be considered in more detail in the discussion.

### Feedback from carers

Feedback was provided by some of the carers following completion of the project ( $n = 16$ ). All carers reported that both they and their child had enjoyed taking part in the programme and, with the exception of one (quoted below), none mentioned experiencing any difficulties:

*[Child] took until week 13 to begin to enjoy paired reading. Until that point it was a struggle with lots of tears and sulks.*

As might be expected, given the positive improvements found in reading age, all but one carer agreed that there

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of these sheets confirmed that carers took part in an average of three sessions during each week of the project.

<sup>2</sup> On average, the length of time between the collection of pre- and post-scores was just over four months (mean = 4.24 months). The ratio gain was calculated based on this rather than the length of the intervention itself.

had been a positive impact on their child's reading ability (this was the same carer who reported struggling to engage their child until week 13). Carers cited a range of examples, highlighting increases in reading fluency and comprehension:

*Now reads with plenty of expression, not monotone.*

*It has given [child] time to think about what she has read and therefore helped with comprehension.*

*He can recognise more words independently.*

Carers also reported increases in their child's confidence and interest in reading following the intervention:

*[Child] definitely shows more of an interest in books. Her confidence has grown enormously and she has enjoyed the one-to-one reading.*

*[Child] is trying to read a lot more on her own.*

*He now enjoys reading.*

In addition to improvements linked specifically to reading, carers also reported that taking part in the programme had enabled them to share valuable one-to-one time with their child. This was considered as important as the improvements in his or her reading ability:

*Spending quality time one to one and getting to know more about her reading ability . . .*

*[Child] enjoys looking at books together and discussing the story and topics covered.*

*Spending time with [child], seeing him enjoy books so much . . .*

## **Discussion**

The results of the paired reading study

were encouraging, demonstrating a marked increase in the reading age of the foster children who participated. On average, reading age improved by three months during each month that they participated in the project. Thus, in four months, each child made an average of one year's progress. Such findings meet both Brooks's (2007) and the Department for Education and Skills' (2003) criteria for effective literacy intervention. While it must be acknowledged that progress might not be expected to continue at this rate, the results suggest that paired reading offers a useful and effective short-burst intervention for enhancing the literacy of children in foster care.

The project was offered to all foster children, even good readers, as it was considered beneficial for all to spend time reading with their carers regardless of reading ability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, poorer readers showed the greatest gains in reading age. This finding may in part be driven by a ceiling effect – those children with good initial literacy skills had less 'room for improvement', and so might not be expected to show such dramatic increases in reading. Nevertheless, while poor readers showed particularly impressive gains, even those with an initial reading age above their chronological age revealed gains of nearly double the length of the intervention. Additionally, feedback from carers suggested that the impact of the project may extend beyond literacy skills alone, and have a positive benefit on the child's confidence and enthusiasm for reading, as well as the relationship between carer and child. This suggests that all readers – even good ones – may have something to gain from taking part in such a project.

## **Impact on literacy skills**

It is important to view these findings in context. Looked after children often come from backgrounds of abuse or neglect (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b), are likely to have experienced turbulence in their home and school placements (Fletcher-

Campbell and Archer, 2003) and may lack consistent adult support in their education (Jackson, 1998; Sinclair, 1998), all of which are likely to have affected their educational achievement. It is therefore extremely heartening to see that a short-term intervention such as paired reading can have a significant impact on these children's reading ability.

The rationale behind the study was that looked after children often lack a key adult who will take an interest in and support their education (Barnardo's, 1996; Jackson, 1998; Sinclair, 1998; Harker *et al.*, 2003). The fact that the results show that carer support can have a considerable impact on these children's reading ability is important because it suggests that the negative effect of certain factors such as past trauma and changes in school and home placements on educational progress can be ameliorated with carer support. The current study focused on primary-aged children, but future work is planned to examine the impact of paired reading on those of secondary-school age. Older children are most likely to suffer from the care experience, simply from the fact that they are likely to have spent more time in care (Jackson, 1994), and so carer involvement may be all the more important for them.

### **Impact on other areas**

A by-product of the paired reading work was that it facilitated links between carers, teachers and social workers. Social workers attended training sessions with carers and teachers liaised with carers to complete the weekly monitoring sheets. Thus, such work offers a useful way of raising the profile of educational achievement of looked after children, at the same time encouraging the key adults in these children's lives to work together to support them. Additionally, the results reinforce the need to encourage foster carers (and social workers) to value education and support their child with this.

The improvements found in reading are particularly important given that

early interest and ability in reading has been associated with positive outcomes later in life (Jackson, 1987, 1994). The feedback from carers certainly indicated that the benefits of the project extended beyond reading ability. Carers commented on increases in their child's confidence and motivation when reading, as well as their own enjoyment at being able to share one-to-one time with their child. Such comments raise two important issues. First, perceived changes in the children's reading confidence suggest that, in addition to improvements in reading ability, the children's self-esteem and motivation for learning may also have improved. This in itself may have important implications for other areas of learning. Second, the quality time shared between carers and children during the paired reading may have additional benefits. One possibility is that sharing time together during paired reading might lead to a closer relationship between the child and carer, and ultimately a better and more stable placement.

Plans are currently underway to examine these issues more extensively. The paired reading project is being rolled out across more schools in the authority and additional measures are being collected with a view to probing the wider-reaching consequences of the project – in particular, the impact on the children's views of themselves as learners and on carers' views of their relationship with their child. Additionally, future work aims to examine National Curriculum levels at the end of Key Stage 2 for those children who took part in the project, with a view to establishing a potential link between participation in paired reading and other academic achievement. Such work will help to ascertain the impact of paired reading on other areas, outside of literacy *per se*.

### **Limitations of the findings**

While the results of the current study are encouraging, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the findings. First, although very good progress was

made by those children who completed the intervention, the mean reading age of most still lagged behind their chronological age at the end of the study. This raises the question as to whether continuation of the project beyond 16 weeks might offer an even greater benefit, and potentially allow these children to catch up with their peers. A useful avenue for future research might be to extend the length of the current study, in order to see whether the improvements observed continue with further input. Equally, a follow-up study of the current cohort would show whether the present improvements were maintained, or indeed extended, following cessation of the project.

A second issue is that a number of schools did not return evaluation data. While such difficulties are common in most research studies, it may be that the particular nature of these children's lives exacerbated the problem in this instance. Indeed, a number of schools reported that children taking part had either moved school or carer, preventing the intervention from continuing. In some circumstances, schools made concerted efforts to liaise with new carers, with a view to continuing the project. Often, however, the intervention simply ceased. Consequently, the results of this study are based only on those children who completed the whole intervention and whose school returned their evaluation data.

Although beyond the scope of the current study, in future it would be worthwhile to examine the specific factors involved in preventing some children from finishing the paired reading intervention and, conversely, the factors which enable other children and carers to complete it. In particular, it would be helpful to gather further data concerning the experiences of carers during the course of the intervention – for example, what they found to be helpful or work particularly well, and vice versa. This would serve two purposes. First, it would allow additional support to be offered to future participants, with a view to reducing drop-out

during the course of the intervention. Second, it would allow consideration of the factors that are associated with the best outcomes on the project. Together, these would provide valuable information on when paired reading is most likely to be followed through by carers and children, and also when it is likely to work especially well.

It is important to express some caution here, however, and acknowledge that paired reading may not be a unitary process and what works well may vary from participant to participant. As Topping (1997) suggests, the intervention may offer a number of pathways to improving reading, such that 'different components of the technique might be most potent for different subjects, reducing the probability of finding a few process factors which are omnipotent for all' (p 84). This suggests that trying to attribute particular actions to particular outcomes on the project might not be the best approach, for as Topping argues, 'it would be naïve to seek a uniformly and ubiquitously "best" technique' (p 84). Instead, it may be more appropriate to consider the practical issues faced by carers and how these were overcome, with a view to using such insights to guide future participants in the project on how best to approach paired reading with their child.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, the paired reading project revealed a positive impact on the literacy skills of the children who took part. Such work is in its infancy, and it is hoped that follow-up research will provide further understanding of the impact of this work in supporting looked after children. Critically, the current work serves to highlight that poor educational progress in looked after children is not inevitable. With focused support from all those involved in supporting these children, substantial improvements can be observed. Such findings are encouraging and offer a useful way for schools, carers, social workers and educational psychology services to support children in foster care.

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