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What were the processes and outcomes of involving secondary school pupils transitioning from primary to secondary school in pre-arrival shared-reading? A case study

Alison Baverstock^a, Jackie Steinitz^b, Julie Morris^c and Catherine Fenwick^d

^aDepartment of Journalism and Publishing, Kingston University, Kingston upon Thames, UK; ^bKingston University, Kingston upon Thames, UK; ^cCoombe Boys' School, New Malden, Surrey, UK; ^dAim Higher (London), London, UK

ABSTRACT

Coombe Boys' School in New Malden worked with Kingston University to establish a 'Big Read', a scheme of pre-arrival shared-reading for boys transitioning from local primary schools into year 7 of the Coombe Boys' secondary school. A novel was chosen for shared-reading, and all arriving pupils were given a copy at their Induction Day (at the end of the summer term). Copies were also made available to all staff. The book was the basis of group-based activities during the school's Summer School (three weeks before of the start of the autumn term) and of cross-curricular individual and group-based activities during the early teaching weeks of the new school year. Outcomes were monitored using online surveys of pupils, staff and parents/guardians, and through face to face interviews with individuals from representative groups. Here outcomes are reported, both direct and indirect, comparisons made with similar schemes within higher education, and recommendations are made for how the scheme might be adapted for greater effectiveness in future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Shared-reading; literacy;
transition; pre-arrival;
community

Introduction

This paper describes the Coombe Boys Big Read; a pre-arrival shared reading scheme set up by the school in collaboration with Kingston University in the summer of 2017 to assist boys with their transition from primary to secondary school. The paper describes (1) previous shared-reading schemes in the US and at Kingston University, (2) the process leading to collaboration between the school and Kingston University, (3) the specific processes of setting up and running the scheme, (4) the findings from surveys conducted after the Big Read on pupils, staff and parents/carers, (5) changes which have taken place in parallel at the school, (6) subsequent developments, (7) recent interviews with the Head, staff and pupils on the impact of the scheme, (8) learnings for next time and (9) some reflections on the similarities and differences between running a Big Read at a school and a university.

Background: shared reading schemes in the US, and the Kingston University Big Read

The distribution of a free book as part of an introduction to their forthcoming University experience has been a fairly standard element of preparation for many future US students. 'Common Reading' schemes have been popular, the book is often handed out during the summer Orientation Day that precedes their entry and highlighted as their 'first coursework'. The book is used during

various activities and discussion groups at the start of their first semester, and there is usually a visit, and sometimes seminars, by the author. Commentators (e.g. Ferguson 2006; Golden 2012; Twiton 2007) have been positive about the role such pre-arrival shared-reading experience can play in creating an advanced sense of community, helping students feel less nervous about their new life, providing a basis for the development of conversations between new arrivals and hence the possibility of creating friendships – which is widely acknowledged to be one of the main concerns for potential students. However since the book distribution has been largely organised by either marketing or induction departments, and the outcomes of the schemes have generally just been described rather than formally researched.

In the UK, pre-2015, similar schemes of pre-arrival shared-reading had been trialled within a few University departments, mainly English or Creative Writing, but they have been on a much smaller scale, and again they were unmonitored with no associated published outcomes.

In 2015–2016 Kingston University became the first UK institution of higher education to run a whole-University pre-arrival shared-reading research project, distributing books (*About a Boy* by Nick Hornby (1998)) to all arriving students, making them available to staff, and then monitoring the associated impact of The Kingston University Big Read (KU Big Read; #KUBR) across the University. The general student response of feeling ‘more connected’, delight at receiving ‘a present’ from ‘their University’ and immediate student involvement on social media to announce the arrival of the book were all fairly predictable, confirming the findings of initial research undertaken by a staff-student team exploring anticipated reactions by interviewing a representative sample from the first years of 2014–2015 (Baverstock et al. 2016). What was less predictable, because so far untested, was the response of wider staff within the institution, who embraced the project with particular enthusiasm, so much so that the first shared book (Nick Hornby’s (1998) *About a Boy*) had to be reprinted twice. Administrative staff were particularly keen, and the book prompted greater reported feelings of staff connectedness across the institution. For example, it was adopted for team-building within several non-student facing departments (e.g. Finance and Estates) and both staff and students reported via subsequent questionnaires that in addition to discussing the book at the University, the book formed the basis of wider conversations with friends, neighbours and family.

In 2016 Kingston shared the project more widely, encouraging the Kingston community to become involved. Copies of the 2016 book (*The Humans* by Matt Haig (2013)) book were bought by the Royal Borough of Kingston for wider distribution within local libraries and museums, and by the Kingston branch of the University of the Third Age, inviting the wider associated communities to attend events at which the author spoke. Copies were given to The Joel Community, a local shelter for those experiencing temporary homelessness¹ and to Hillcroft College,² which offers a supported education to women who have missed the usual pathway. They also collaborated with Edinburgh Napier University, producing an edition of the book for them and comparing outcomes with their staff and students.

Process leading to collaboration between Coombe Boys School and Kingston University

The KU Big Read scheme came to the attention of Catherine Fenwick, Director of AimHigher South London.³ AimHigher is a network of state-funded schools, colleges, Local Authorities and Higher Education providers working collaboratively to create opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to have equal access to Higher Education, and seeking to engage young people (from Key Stage 3 to post 16), their families/carers and key personnel, often with little knowledge or experience of higher education, in outreach activities. These activities are designed to increase aspirations, raise awareness and support the transition of young people so they can make informed choices about their future. Fenwick wrote:

As an honorary staff member at Kingston University I was very much aware of the undergraduate transition project The KU Big Read, and in both my AimHigher role and as a governor of Coombe Boys' School, I was aware of their focus on literacy and successful transition. Julie Morris (Assistant Head in charge of Key Stage 3 at Coombe Boys) spoke to me about developing a reading project to support transition I immediately made the link between the school and the University. The project is an excellent illustration of cross-sector working, understanding the challenges of transition and belonging regardless of the learners' stage in their education journey and brokering relationships to enable effective collaborative practice.

In March 2017 Fenwick arranged a meeting between Morris and Baverstock, Director of the Kingston University Big Read, and as a result Kingston offered to help Coombe Boys' School develop the idea of shared-reading, providing Coombe with a copy of *How to run a Big Read*, the document they had produced to support Edinburgh Napier's involvement in their project, and agreeing to mentor them through the process.

Morris: There had been a focus on literacy at Coombe Boys' and in particular on encouraging the boys to read for pleasure. We know that reading develops conversations and concentration and helps towards examination success. As a school we are always looking forward, seeking new ways to help transition and I have been interested in the different learning styles in primary schools and how, especially for boys, there can be a drop in reading when they come to secondary school. I have been fortunate to meet all the boys coming to Coombe Boys' in their primary settings and have seen a difference in some of their attitudes to reading and learning. I have also witnessed what a huge difference there is in the primary and secondary settings. I hoped that having a shared project would help the students feel welcome and give them a focus over the summer to ease their worries.

In the past the school's literacy initiatives have been based on the school's agreed Literacy Action Plan; this included a decision in the academic year 2016–2017 to have all the pupils undertake an Accelerated Reading Test on arrival at Coombe, to share reading ages across all departments to boost awareness of where help is most needed and to work with under-achievers identified by class teachers with the Accelerated Reading Programme. This involved either working with the boys identified as having lower reading ages in small groups and offering them extra support in lessons. Students with lower levels were supported through extra reading in tutor time with sixth form students or a lesson in the library where they could read and undertake the test again after they had completed the book.

Also significant was the arrival of a new Head of English at Coombe in September 2016. Aoife Nolan had seen a book given to the arriving first year at her previous school in Tower Hamlets. What impressed her about the Kingston University scheme was

the clearer purpose and wider benefits of what had been established. For Coombe, modelling the scheme on what a university had done led to concentration not on just being given a book, but rather its potential impact for creating a wider community within the school.

Setting up the Coombe Boys Big Read – the practical details

(1) Establishing the project as part of the school's strategic vision

Morris sought support for introducing a Big Read at Coombe Boys' School. The Headteacher, David Smith, was enthusiastic and could see the benefits of getting involved. The school leadership team then discussed participation at one of their regular meetings, and the decision was made to go ahead.

(2) How the book was chosen

Baverstock provided advice on the kind of book likely to make a good choice for a shared-read and outlined the various issues that had informed Kingston's choice (e.g. reasonable length of chapters so

readers get a sense of progress; type-size large enough to be read with ease; inclusion of relevant issues likely to prompt discussion such as transition, managing change and living in a city; cover appeal; the availability and willingness of the author to visit and talk about their work). She made introductions between Coombe and the children's librarians within the Royal Borough of Kingston Library Services and promoted links with the local independent bookshop, Regency Books, who contributed suggested titles for consideration.

Coombe already had a book club among teachers, and this was used as the basis of the group that would choose the book that the boys would receive. Volunteers were called for to join this group and 15 staff (out of a total of 60), from a variety of different subject areas, opted to take part. They began by making a list of characteristics that the book should have.

The final choice came down to two books (incidentally both from the same publisher, independent publisher ChickenHouse⁴) and most felt that although the other title was a good read, and was preferred by some as a more effective story, *Beetle Boy* (Leonard 2016) offered more themes for discussion around transition and managing change.

(3) How the book was purchased and funded

Stock of the books was ordered through Regency Books. They gave the school a 20% discount and arranged delivery directly to the school. The books were paid for out of school funds.

(4) How it was presented to staff and the steps they were encouraged to take

Roll out to the Coombe staff was achieved via presentations at staff meetings. It was a simple concept to grasp – everyone would receive a free book and read it before the start of term and devise lessons to fit with book's themes. The books were given out to staff on 30 June 2017 and the immediate response from teachers was positive.

Towards the end of the summer term, Baverstock made a presentation to the Middle School and senior management team staff at Coombe on the life-long value of literacy and the likely wider benefits for the institution of involvement in shared-reading, based on the Kingston experience. The response from teachers was positive, bringing on board some who were initially sceptical.

In deciding to adopt the Big Read, the school also used the opportunity to make additional changes to the school curriculum and structure to reflect an increased prioritisation of reading for pleasure. Morris comments:

'My first plan was just to introduce the Big Read. I have long been interested in why reading standards drop in secondary school; reading the Ofsted report *The Wasted Years* (2015) I was intrigued to understand why this happened. Visits to primary schools and discussions with primary school teachers helped me learn more about transition, and through this experience I became convinced that for the Big Read to help transition more fully, it would help it to devise a learning programme whereby the book could be used as a teaching tool and the boys undertake a project-based learning style lesson; the kind of lesson familiar from their primary environment.' The additional changes were as follows:

Firstly, it had been decided to accompany the introduction of the Big Read with the introduction of DEAR Time across the school. This had been used by the new Head of English, Aoife Nolan at her previous school. The scheme proposes a period of sustained and uninterrupted reading for both pupils and staff, at regular intervals, followed by the opportunity to discuss what they have been reading. This had been found to be highly effective in improving commitment to, and the habit of, reading for pleasure. How often, and for how long, DEAR time is scheduled is left to the individual institution, but Ms Nolan had timetabled this every week, but scattered across all subjects so while no subject was lost more lesson time than any other, the relevance of reading was seen within every part of the curriculum. Nolan: 'It can't just be about English, and involving a cross-section of staff with a very broad span, encouraging readers to talk about their feelings, both what they have reads in the

book and their own reactions to it.' Staff took to this and it became common to see them carrying around a copy of the book they were reading, and thus inviting questions from pupils and colleagues.

Secondly, the formal state of preparedness for lessons had been changed and boys were now asked to demonstrate that they were ready for the day by having three things on their desk: their planner, their pencil case and the book they were currently reading for pleasure.

Thirdly, the school's Learning Resource Centre was repurposed. A room that had been reformatted to offer a bank of computers as its central point had been repurposed back into a library, and was now a place of quiet calm for reading. New shelving was added, with improved signposting, along with a significant amount of new stock and comfortable chairs for reading. The result had been increased usage and more boys dropping in to pick up reading material.

The outcomes to the questionnaires (discussed later in this paper) must therefore be viewed in this wider context of the greater priority being placed on reading within the school.

Information and book delivery to the new pupils and their parents

New pupils and their parents were told about the scheme in preparatory emails and letters. They were told that the school would be giving out a free book to all new pupils during Induction Day.

Induction Day (5 July 2017) enabled the new boys to spend a day in their new school, with their parents coming in for a meeting the same evening. The gift of a book was mentioned during the day's activities, and then handed out to the boys by their new form teacher at the end of the day, before they went home – with a request that they read it before the Summer School (the school's three-day induction for the new pupils in late August). Matt Pellett, Head of Year 7 and Head of Transition commented: 'It felt really good to be gifting each boy their own book, and offering them a common goal for the rest of the summer.'

At the parents' evening, the project was explained to them; both concept and potential benefits. Parents were encouraged to use the book as a tool for discussion with their sons over the summer, and commented very positively on the initiative. Morris: 'They do not know each other either and so it gave them something to talk about too.'

Copies were also made available to sixth form pupils at the school studying Drama, as they would be using the book as the basis for dramatic presentations of the most memorable scenes on the boys' first day at their new school.

Book distribution to staff

Copies were given out to staff during staff meetings. Everyone was given one, including administrative and support staff, and most were actively given a copy rather than individuals being encouraged to pick one up from the library or reception (although this was also an option). Those who were not there had a copy put in their in-tray in the staff room.

The book's role in the Summer School

The book formed the core of the Summer School, which takes place before the start of the autumn term and prepares the boys for transition, and within the first teaching week of term. Staff collaborated over the development of the book within project-based learning (similar to how pupils learn in primary school).

Book-related events during the early weeks of term

It was left to staff to consider how they could best implement the project within the context of their lessons. There were a few concerns from staff that it was not relevant in their subject, but these were minimal; the majority were enthusiastic there were some very imaginative lessons based on the book.

Sixth formers studying drama who had received a copy at the end of the previous term used it as the basis for acting out the most dramatic scenes as part of the programme on the first day of school, when the only pupils present are the year 7s.'

Survey to assess the outcomes

In October 2017 surveys were conducted on pupils, staff and parents/guardians/carers in order to assess the attitudes to and outcomes of The Coombe Boys Big Read on each of these groups. This section of the paper now reviews the methodology and summarises 7 key findings from these surveys.

Methodology

The survey questionnaires, which were adapted from those used to monitor The Kingston University Big Read, were set up using Survey Monkey online software. Each survey comprised 20–24 questions with identical questions used for each group wherever possible. The questions were a mixture of multi-choice, rating scales and open-ended questions. Broad topic areas are summarised in the table, though the wording is shown in shorthand form and sometimes varied slightly between the groups (Figure 1).

Pupils completed their surveys during lesson time while parents and staff were sent an email asking them to complete the survey. One follow-up reminder was also sent to both groups.

Overall replies were received from 118 pupils, 26 staff (out of a total of 60) and 25 parents/guardians (from a potential total of 118 families). The response rates were thus 100% for pupils, 43% for staff and 21% for parents. These rates need to be borne in mind when interpreting the results; while the pupil survey fully reflects the attitudes of all the Year 7 pupils, the staff and parent surveys may include an element of bias towards those who elected to answer a survey. On reflection further reminders to staff and parents/guardians could have improved the response rate and it would have been beneficial to have told the parents at the Induction Day that they would be asked to complete a questionnaire.

The average time spent completing the questionnaire was 4 minutes for the staff, 5 minutes for parents and 7 minutes for pupils. 60% of staff respondents and 88% of the parent respondents were female (probably as the school generally holds the mother's name as the primary contact point).

Survey results: seven key findings

(1) Most pupils, teachers and parents quite or very much enjoy reading for pleasure.

Each respondent was asked to rate how much they enjoy reading for pleasure on a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 = not at all and 7 = very keen). The question was asked as this metric was found to be an

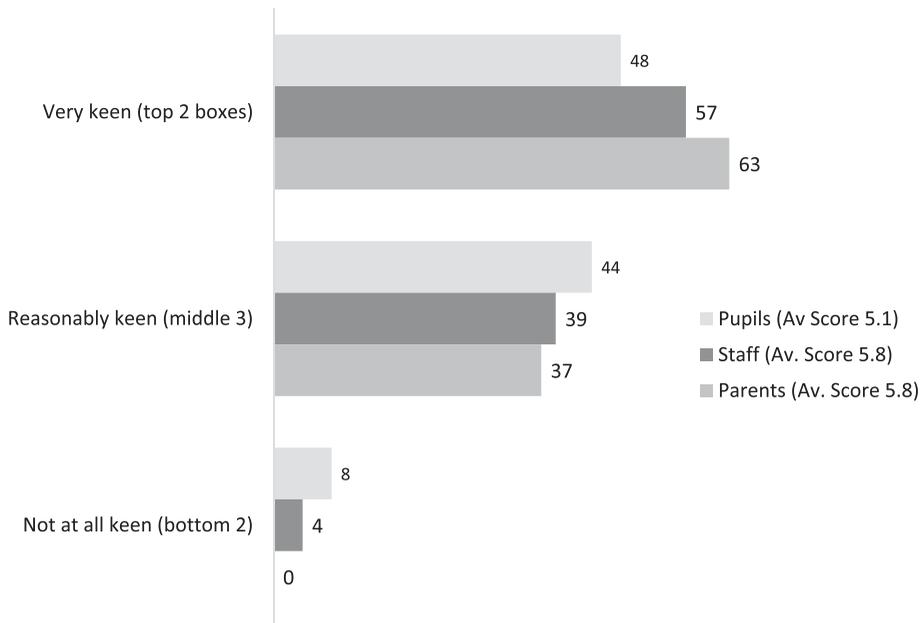
How heard about the BR?	How did you hear about it? Did you get enough info?
Book distribution	Did you get a book? Where from? Easy to get a copy?
Reading the book	How much did you read? What prompted you to start?
Discussion of the book	Did you discuss with anyone? Who? Did you give your copy to anyone?
Using the book in lessons	[Pupils and parents] Did your/your child's teachers discuss the book in classes? Was it useful? [Staff] Did you get teaching materials? Were they useful? Did you use the book in activities? If so how? If not please tell us why?
Events	Did you attend any?
Verdict on the book	What did you think of the book?
Verdict on the Big Read	How useful was the BR for new pupils?
Next year	How interested in taking part next year? Suggestions for improvement? Suggestions for book or book type?
About you	Enjoy reading? [Staff and parents] Gender? Age?

Figure 1. Topics covered (not exact wording) in the online surveys of pupils, staff and parents.

How much do you enjoy reading for pleasure?

7 point scale: 1 = not at all, 4 = reasonably so, 7 = very keen

% of respondents, n(pupils) = 108, n(staff) = 23, n(parents)=25

**Figure 2.** The extent to which respondents enjoy reading for pleasure.

important correlating factor with the enjoyment of the project in the Kingston University Big Read. The Coombe surveys showed that almost all the pupil, parent and staff respondents quite or very much enjoyed reading for pleasure. The average score for pupils was 5.1 out of 7 and for staff and parents it was 5.8 (Figure 2).

Pupils were invited to write additional comments on their enjoyment or otherwise about reading. Of the 35 who commented 25 wrote something very positive about reading:

I like the idea and it was a very fun book
 I read every night
 I read for escapism
 I love reading so much
 I like reading books because they expand my knowledge
 I like it because we were quite stressed and then we had a whole period of reading and relaxing

A couple read on occasion, depending on what else they have to do:

I read if I am bored
 It depends on how I feel. If I feel excited I would play sport. If I was tired or bored I would read a book.

Two did not like being told what to do:

I don't like reading a book I am told to read. I prefer reading when I feel like it.
 If it's a good book I really love to read but if it's a book I read because I have to or it is boring or I can't remember what I am reading I hate it

Just one was not keen under any circumstance:

I would not choose to read. If there was nothing to do I would rather go outside

(2) Most participants felt that they had received the right amount of advance information about the project, though a few parents would have liked more

How did you hear about The Coombe Boys Big Read? Please tick all that apply
 % of respondents, n(pupils)=114, n(staff) = 26, n(parents) = 25

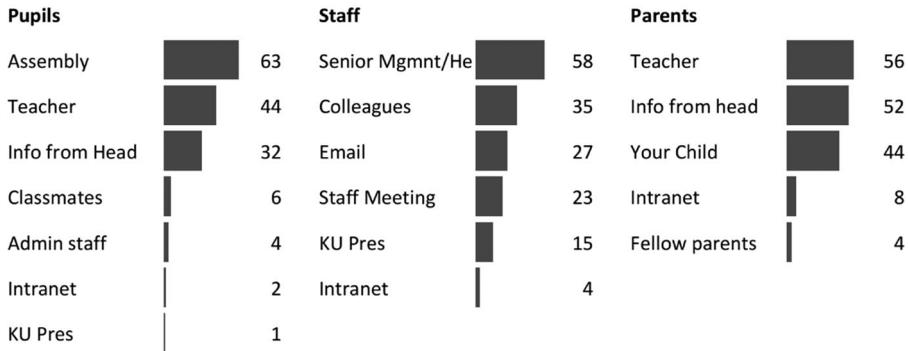


Figure 3. How respondents reported learning about The Coombe Boys Big Read.

When asked how they had learned about the scheme pupils, staff and parents/guardians reported hearing about it in a number of ways, with many having found out about it from more than one route (Figure 3).

Most respondents thought that they had received the right amount of information, and none of the parents or staff thought that they had received too much. This is an encouraging finding for those running the scheme as it is always hard to judge how much information to offer; scheme proponents can feel they are providing too much information, yet this suggests that respondents were appreciative of hearing about the scheme in more than one way, and they valued the reminders (Figure 4).

Additional comments from a few parents suggested that they would have appreciated further information:

Did you get enough information on the Big Read to understand what was involved?
 % of respondents, n(pupils)=115, n(staff) = 25, n(parents) = 24

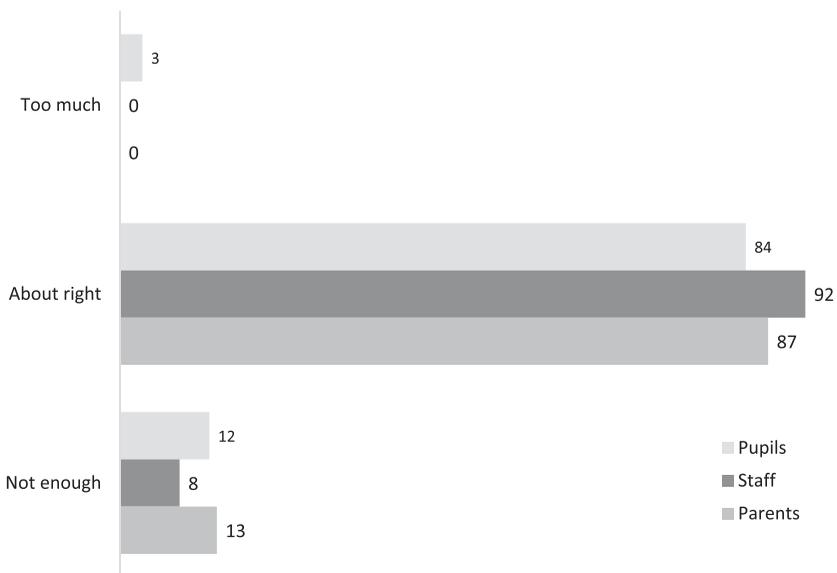


Figure 4. Verdict on the amount of information about the scheme.

The Open Evening (November 2017) was good for year 7 parents. We learned how the Big Read helped shape lesson planning for the first half of the Autumn term. Good to know it is used cross-curricular. Maybe include a brief summary of the type of lessons/curriculum map the boys did as a result from each department in a final letter to parents when the project ends?

As a parent I wasn't sure what we should be doing apart from reading the book. Is there more we should be doing?

(3) The majority of each group read the whole book

By the time the surveys were conducted in October 61% of the pupils, 80% of staff and half the parents had finished the book. The evidence of strong staff support is particularly encouraging; all of them at least started the book and 80% of them finished it (Figure 5).

Respondents were then invited to comment on what made them start the book. Eighty of the pupils did so, revealing very varied motivations. For some, the title, cover and blurb were important factors in getting them reading:

The title and the big beetle looked cool and interesting.

I looked at the blurb and it was amazing, and once I started reading I really got engaged into it.

For others it was the start of the book:

Interesting intriguing start to the book.

It was very exciting at the start

The mystery of when Darkus' Dad went missing.

I read the first chapter and got so stuck in that I couldn't stop reading.

I even read it 3 times.

Some started reading it in order to make friends:

The school told us to read it so we had a better connection with other people.

Because I can talk to new people and make new friends.

How much, if any, of the book did you read?

6 point scale: 1 = 0%, 6 = 100%

% of respondents, n(pupils)=115, n(staff) = 25, n(parents) = 25

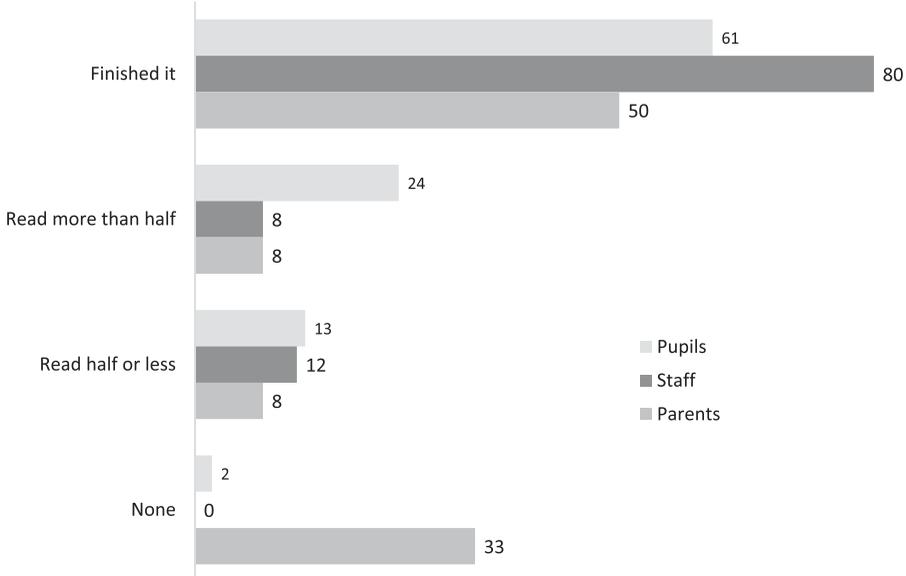


Figure 5. Completion rates for the book.

Others read it because they were told to do so, although it was unclear in some instances whether it was parents insisting or the boys responding to the influence of their future teachers:

The teachers, and it was really good.
 I was forced.
 To not get in trouble if I didn't read it and the book cover and the blurb was appealing.

The reasons mentioned by staff for starting the book show strong engagement with the scheme and an understanding of both school strategies and their own development as effective teachers:

Knowing I would be working with students and wanting to be able to relate the topic well in lessons when doing relevant activities. To ensure I could be enthusiastic in my lessons about the book and to keep any enthusiasm students had for the book ... along with me wanting them to feel it was a worthwhile activity to read as there was a shared experience in which they could engage with their teacher and other students ... this has been great for students wanting to talk about it.
 Research to plan projects connected to the book.
 I felt I needed to know the book in order to share with pupils.
 Part of the support for Year 7 and our push on literacy.
 Was happy to read it with my own child.
 I was asked to read a few books and help select the best one.

Overall the Coombe staff emerge as empathetic, collegiate, connected with and focussed on organisational goals, the effectiveness of their teaching and the welfare of their pupils. They showed a willingness and flexibility to develop new teaching materials at relatively short notice.

Parents had various motivations for reading the book, mostly connected to supporting their sons in making an effective transition to secondary school. This is a time of difficulty for many parents; they are about to lose the close contact they have with the primary/junior school and common ground was clearly valued:

To be able to talk to my son about it and engage with him.
 My son is not a confident reader and easily gets disheartened, so I read the book to enable me to discuss the story with him and also encourage him to continue if he was struggling.
 I wanted every bit of information that I could get.

(4) The book was successful in generating discussion. Although it was widely talked about most respondents kept their book rather than passing it on to someone else to read.

Sixty-nine per cent of pupils, 100% of staff and 77% of parents/guardians discussed the book with someone, and the book was discussed both inside and outside school (Figure 6).

Although they talked about the book most respondents did not pass it on for someone else to read. Reasons for this varied, but from informal feedback it would seem that both pupils and their parents saw the receipt of a book from their new school as precious, for themselves/their son alone, and it was therefore something they did not wish to share (Figure 7).

Did you discuss the book with anyone? Please tick all that apply.
 % of respondents, n(pupils)=114, n(staff) = 25, n(parents) = 22

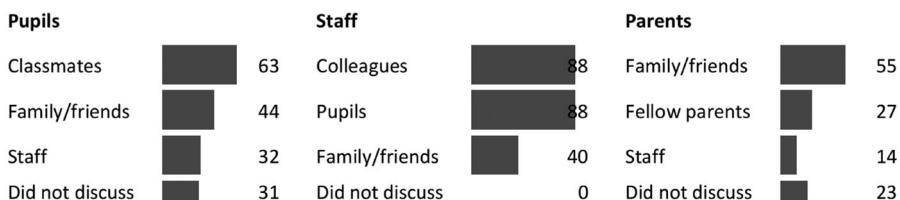


Figure 6. Discussion of the book with others.

Did you give/lend your copy to anyone else to read? Please tick all that apply

% of respondents, n(pupils)=117, n(staff) = 22, n(parents) = 22

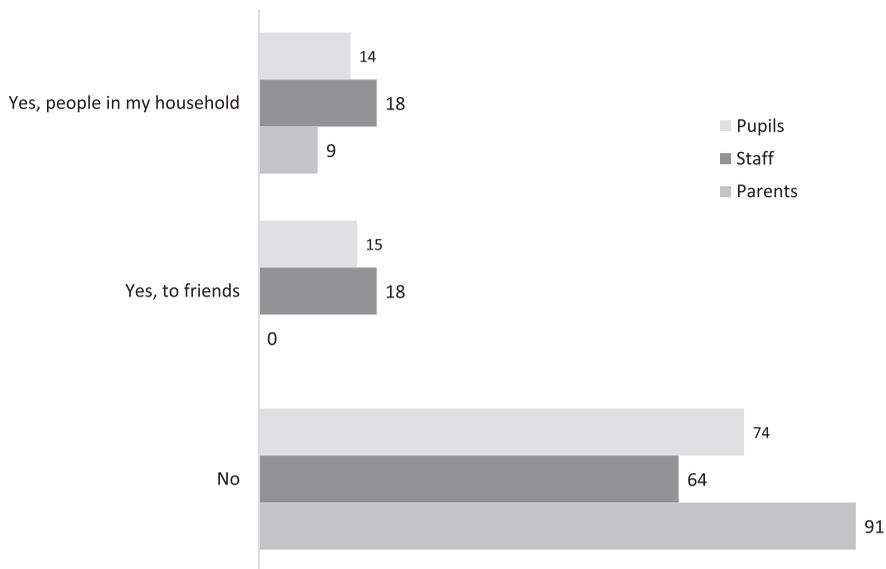


Figure 7. Extent to which book was given/lent to someone else.

(5) The book was widely included in lessons and the pupils were very positive about the impact of this

Eighty-four per cent of pupils said that their book had been used in classes and 87% of them found this fairly or very useful:

It helped me remember some of the parts of the story I forgot.

Once my teacher told me that there was a second book I straight away went to the library to find it.

It was very useful as they helped us to understand the book more.

All staff were asked to develop book-related teaching materials for Induction Day, Summer School and early weeks' teaching, although they were given complete freedom as to the kind of materials they produced. Their choices varied, and considerable ingenuity was shown. The boys particularly mentioned:

We used it to draw in art and create a new cover for the book.

We did a mini-investigation around the school about the book.

The signs put up helped us to find our way around the school.

We went on a treasure hunt to find questions about *Beetle Boy*.

Meanwhile, 91% of parents/guardians reported the book being used in classes and 93% of parent responders felt this was fairly or very useful (50% fairly and 42% very). Only two parents/guardians offered additional comments:

My son found the fact that everything was being routed back to *Beetle Boy* a bit tiresome. He reads a little ahead of his age group and wasn't a massive fan of the book. He is currently very focused on Greek Myth stories (Percy Jackson type).

Tricky question ... you don't get much out of an 11 year old boy ... the homework sometimes reflected what was being done in class ... that was useful because it started a discussion with my son.

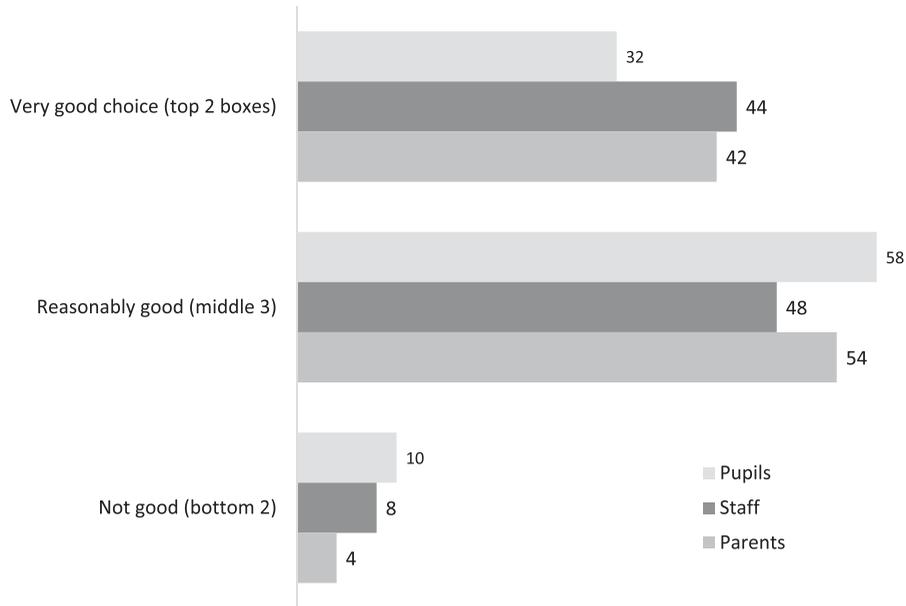
Two-thirds of staff (67%) respondents had used the Big Read with pupils, 8% had used it for homework and at the time of interviewing 25% were planning to use it but had not yet done so.

Staff provided more detailed descriptions of their various associated activities:

What did you think of the title selected?

7 point scale: 1 = not good, 4 = reasonably good, 7 = very good choice

% of respondents, n(pupils)=116, n(staff) = 25, n(parents) = 25

**Figure 8.** Verdict on the selected book.

I created three Summer School days in the art department. The boys attending did mind maps of the characters, and drew cartoon versions of what they thought they looked like. I drew up the characters from their work onto very large wallpaper hangings and they painted them. They have been laminated by the school and are on display. 'Students were really engaged in activities and enjoyed the design elements based on what they had read and visualised whilst reading.

It was part of the SMSC⁵ lessons in Autumn term.

A beetle trail was devised and implemented during the first day of term (when only the year 7s are present). Introduction lessons in the library. Discussions on thoughts of the story, plot, characters etc.

- (6) The verdict on the scheme was very positive indeed. Respondents mostly considered the book a good choice, the scheme was widely deemed useful for new pupils and there was strong enthusiasm for taking part again next year

The vast majority of respondents thought the choice of book a good one for the pupils (Figure 8): When asked for comments on the title chosen, some pupils commented literally on the wording of the title (making it clear that wording in the questionnaire needs to be clearer next time):

The title was a very good choice because it makes you want to read more.

Beetle Boy is a fair name. It is just that I want Lucretia Cutter in the title on the front cover – but thankfully the next book *Beetle Queen* has exactly what I wanted.

It fitted the book nicely.

The majority of pupil comments about the book were positive:

I enjoyed it a lot.

I loved the book.

It was really good and I cannot wait for the *Battle of the Beetles*⁶ to come out.

The book was good and very fun to read.

But there were also a few negative comments (around 11% of the comments received)

It was boring.

I liked the book personally but some others didn't.

It was more an elder person book and not as childish as for our age.

It was a bit dark for the summer holidays.

Comments from parents and guardians on the book were also mostly – though not universally – positive:

Loved it! We read it together in France this summer, he couldn't wait for the next chapter. We have just bought *Beetle Queen*.

My son loved it and has read the next in the series. He's eagerly awaiting the next one.

The book appealed to my son, and he found it easy to read and follow the story. He has since gone on to buy the next book in the series (a first for him)

My son enjoyed this book and found it easy to explain the story,

It was quite a good book in terms of interest and different to what my son would normally read but the subject matter was a bit of a strain sometimes.

My son did not enjoy it but he read it nonetheless.

Staff comments on the book were also mostly positive:

It appealed to the boys and the illustration made it look easily readable.

Good choice for the boys.

Perfect for all ages. Something for everyone.

It provided an accessible read for almost all Year 7 boys but wasn't the most enjoyable of all the options available.

Overall the Big Read was seen as very beneficial to new pupils. When asked to rate how helpful it was for new pupils on a 7 point scale 76% of staff scored it in the top two boxes; their average score was a very high 6.2 out of 7. This high rating by staff is particularly relevant as the staff are the best placed to see the impact of the book in helping transitioning pupils in comparison with previous years' intakes when there was no Big Read. The parents group was also very positive, with an average score of 5.7. The pupils were also broadly positive, with 36% saying it was very helpful and a further 49% somewhat helpful (Figure 9).

Do you think the Coombe Boys Big read was helpful for new pupils?

7 point scale: 1 = not helpful at all, 4 = somewhat helpful, 7 = very helpful

% of respondents, n(pupils) = 115, n(staff) = 25, n(parents) = 25

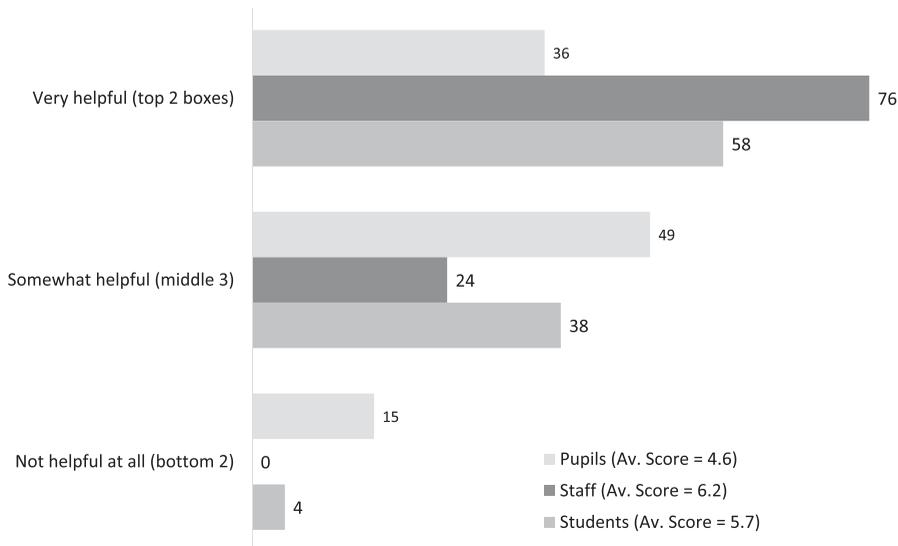


Figure 9. The Coombe Boys Big Read was widely considered to be reasonably/very helpful for new pupils.

Pupils were mostly very positive in their comments, noting that it was good for starting conversations, it gave them something to talk about and it got them to read more:

It helped me make some friends
 Because it gave pupils who may not know other children the chance to start a conversation.
 It gave me/us more descriptive language, and a wider imagination.
 The book got us ready for secondary school.

A few pupils (about 5) however were less enthused:

It didn't help me with anything.
 All you did was read, and reading is boring
 It took lots of time in my holidays, and put pressure on me
 The teachers said that it would help us make friends, but for me it made no difference

The few comments made by parents on the project as a whole were all positive:

Great introduction as there was a focal point for all boys to discuss so they felt part of the same thing.
 It was a fantastic bonding exercise that made the boys feel that their new school cares about them.
 He felt part of a wider group from day one.
 It was a good idea to encourage the children to engage with reading ... it helped them engage with a new school, teachers and other pupils.

Staff also talked about the importance of common ground, the value of concentrating on literacy skills and a joined-up curriculum:

It helped get over some of the nervousness students can feel when they first start school as they had a shared experience that was great for allowing them to talk without feeling too much like they were being judged so much by the others. It was something many were excited to discuss and they enjoyed reading, so the experience of discussing and sharing was easier for many of them. It was great to refer to the book in the Summer School prior to the students starting, as many who had not yet started reading it before attending the Summer School could see that it was something which would be linked to their learning once they were to start at the school. This encouraged most of those who had not yet started reading it to read the book.
 I think it has really helped the students to read more and it was such a great thing to discuss with the new year 7s. Common ground to get people talking at a difficult transition point.
 It has given a good focus to the start of the year. It makes the curriculum seem more joined up. All the pupils had read the book giving them something in common.
 Helped raise the profile of reading with Year 7s and their parents, and helped them understand our commitment to literacy.

There was strong interest in taking part in the scheme again for the year ahead, especially from staff (80% were keen/very keen) and parents/guardians (65%) (Figure 10).

(7) Respondents had a number of suggestions for books for next year and for how the scheme could be improved

Pupils were very positive in their comments about how the project had worked this year:

It is perfect
 I thought it was really helpful.
 It was very good this year.

Specific ideas for next year included boys suggesting that the book be both more challenging and easier to read; titles in other formats including Manga; tying the Big Read to some kind of competition; allowing more time for reading in class; 'a book which offers more new words to learn' (presumably a book with a more challenging vocabulary). A common request was for a 'book with at least three stories in the collection' – in other words a book that is part of a series. It was common for boys who had enjoyed *Beetle Boy* to move onto the next title in the series and many parents had either bought it themselves or the boys asked for it in the library after the start of new term. Wider related research would imply that getting engrossed in a book can start a reading journey,

How interested are you in taking part in the KU Big Read next year?

5 point scale: 1 = no interest, 3 = fairly interested, 5 = very keen

% of respondents, n = 217

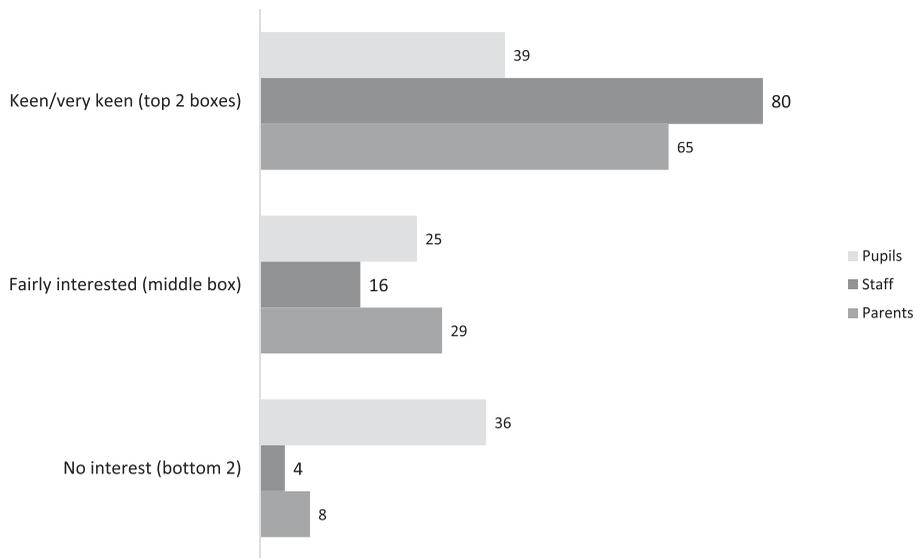


Figure 10. Strong interest in taking part next year, especially by staff and parents.

either for other titles by the same author or, in the case of high profile book recommendations, the next suggested (Rich 2007).

Staff thought it would be helpful to have the findings from this survey presented to staff and ‘a return visit from Alison Baverstock to talk to them all about outcomes’ was also requested. They also mentioned the possibility of offering two titles, a more challenging text for higher ability pupils and a less challenging one for others although other staff thought this could impact on the shared community feel arising from everyone reading the same book. It was suggested that the conversations about the book should start earlier, giving the staff more time to read the shortlist over Easter, thereby getting more staff commitment.

There was general parental/guardian satisfaction with the choice of the book, but additional suggestions included a ‘happy book’; a ‘light and more humorous read’ and information on how the book was being used. One parent suggested ‘The circulation of a topic map in early September showing how the book links to learning in each department’ and another wanted ‘more information via school leaflets’.

All responders were invited to suggest a title or genre for next time, and it is notable that the most popular choice was the sequel to the chosen book, demonstrating the popularity of the title chosen and the overall value of series. The spread of book suggestions was very wide; suggested genres included action; adventure; comedy; horror; mystery and science fiction. In total 56 respondents suggested a specific title or author.

What has happened since The Coombe Big Read

Morris: ‘It was common for the year 7 boys to have already read the second book in the series, *Beetle Queen*, before they arrived at school. Many enjoyed it more than *Beetle Boy* and they are hugely enthusiastic to read more. They have formed a book club, and when we first met I gave them the other book that we were thinking of (Sherrick’s *Black Powder* 2016) so they could tell me if they thought we should have picked that one. I thought it would be great to hear what they thought. We are also starting Key Stage Recommended Reads across the school and the boys are reading the suggestions with staff –

and these will feature in posters across the school. The current Year 7s will help me choose the title for next year. I am working to get the author into school so she can run some lessons with the whole of Year 7. Due to the relationship I have made with Regency Books since starting the project, I have also been able to get other authors to come into school. The author of *Black Powder* is going to come and work with Year 8 students.'

A Year 7 Reading Group had also been established, run by Morris and the school's librarian Sue Gooding, with regular attenders from the keener readers within the year group. Having enjoyed commenting on *Beetle Boy* in class the group has agreed to help choose the book for next year's intake by working their way through the titles shortlisted for the Costa Coffee Book Award (Children's Book of the Year) and then they plan to move on to those shortlisted for the Carnegie Award. Copies of the shortlisted books have been bought to support this and they are positioned on a specially labelled shelf in the library. Their recommended reads for the Big Read 2018 are going to be made into posters and put up around the school, with the idea of encouraging others to read the shortlist. Several of the boys involved (average attendance was 10-12) had been recruited and trained by Gooding for the position of Junior Librarian, and had badges to confirm their new role.

Follow up interviews in the school

In early December 2017, Baverstock undertook a series of interviews in the school, with pupils, staff and the Headteacher, to find out more about the outcomes of the project.

Discussions with pupils

Six boys gathered in the Coombe Library at 8.30am for one of their regular Wednesday morning meetings: Sam; Zaid; Patrick; Paul; Ted and Keir (a reduced number compared with the usual weekly attendance of 10-12). On arrival the School Librarian had laid out brand new copies of all the books on the Costa Coffee Shortlist for Children's Book of the Year and let each boy take a title to read. The books were brand new, mostly hardbacks and the boys were told they would be the first reader. It was notable that having been given his title, each boy held on to their book during the discussion that followed, several stroking the design features (e.g. cut-outs and gold lettering) on the covers. At the end of the session the librarian reminded them that she was hoping each boy would write a short review about the title they had chosen. Everyone was willing.

A discussion about what kind of book should be chosen for the following year's new intake followed. They were very forthcoming with their opinions: on the respective attractiveness of covers; on what is appropriate in a book for young people and what kind of book would make the best choice. They commented on what had just made them choose the title they had (although it was in some cases due to the fact that they had already read another of the books being offered). Once the discussion got going, Patrick commented on Sarah Crossan's (2017) *Moonrise* containing 'quite a bit of swearing' but said it also offered 'a perspective you don't usually see, with quite a lot of meaning behind it'. They generally liked Tom Gates' books as 'they would be better for boys who don't read very much' although Patrick confirmed the value of 'books that are challenging so they can progress their reading'. They thought it was a good idea to have a book that had an accompanying audiobook, and were particularly enthusiastic about the recordings they had heard of the David Walliams books 'which have loads of sound effects which are really enjoyable'. Paul wondered whether they could make their own audio book and get the Drama Department involved, so they could do the different voices.

Stuart admitted that what kept him going at the start of *Beetle Boy* was 'Mum telling me I had to' but he has since read the next book in the series, and they all agreed that a book from a series was a good idea. Several thought the follow-up book by the same author would work well for the year ahead. The librarian suggested using Michael Morpurgo's (2007) *War Horse*, to tie in with the

anniversary of the end of the First World War but Sam thought that ‘apart from the boy and the horse, you could not really get attached to the other characters, and the others are all a bit grim’. They generally thought that *War Horse* would be OK for those who liked History, but not for those who don’t – as was the case with *Black Powder*, the runner up for their own school’s book choice. Zaid’s whole family liked Eva Ibbotson who has written several really good books. Keir had also read *The Borrowers* (1952) and *How to train a dragon* over the summer holidays. They discussed whether a happy ending was needed, and thought it was important although in a story ‘if there are things that don’t go well, it can still have a happy ending’. Ted thought it was a ‘bit boring if all comes out OK’.

Overall, the boys were passionate about reading, articulate in expressing their opinions, knowledgeable about their school (the remark about involving the Drama Department was particularly revealing) and very eager to contribute; even though only ten weeks into their own secondary school experience, they were already taking a mentoring role for the future Year 7s who would be joining the following September. They were particularly thoughtful about how to encourage reluctant readers, and quick to comment on the part played by the Big Read in getting them to read more regularly.

The one outstanding issue was logistical: is that of permission to attend the group. All the boys need to get their planners signed by their form teacher before leaving the Registration period and that morning there had been a wait to get this done. Morris confirmed that she can sign planners too. The regularity with which this was reported as a reason for being late shows the need for straightforward administrative processes not to block access to involvement.

Discussions with staff

Morris, who had overall responsibility for the project at Coombe commented:

I feel very lucky to have been able to launch this at Coombe Boys’ School. I feel this has given literacy a new lease of life and raised the profile of reading in the school. I also feel this has developed a sense of community. Many of the boys have told me how happy they felt to receive a present from the school. This scheme has also given us all a chance to express our thoughts about the book and has assisted in breaking down the barriers of transition and in forming positive relationships. I am so looking forward to running the scheme again next year.’

Aoife Nolan, Head of English, commented that she had seen a similar book distribution scheme in her previous school in Tower Hamlets, but then she had just been given the book, with no wider understanding of its benefits other than a direct one to literacy. Hearing from Kingston University about how the project had improved connectivity within the organisation and led to increased collaboration had been motivating, and made her see the project differently – hence using the opportunity to introduce other literacy initiatives.

Hannah Lucas, Head of Music commented that the project had made her start reading again in term time

something I had previously tended to do only in the holidays. I liked the fact that the scheme enabled me to display my strong commitment to reading, and made me aware of the big part that books and reading play in my life. Many staff taken to carrying a book around them – which prompts questions from the boys about what the book is like and whether we would recommend it. I get the children to hold up the books they are currently reading and encourage them to talk about their covers, getting them to treasure what they have and lavish the same attention to detail as they do on their phones – and they have been enthusiastic about doing this.

Sam O’Reilly, Head of Performing Arts (and formerly the head of English at Coombe Boys’ School) had shared the book with her sixth form Drama students and got them to stage scenes from the book for the first years during Induction Day. This had been a powerful experience; the older pupils had really understood the book’s role in helping the new arrivals transition into their new school and was much appreciated by the new year 7s. She commented that

it had been interesting to watch the sixth formers behaving like staff members, explaining school protocols to the new arrivals and encouraging them on their journey through the school. They had also really enjoyed reading the book. Overall the experience had boosted the connectivity between the six formers and the new arrivals.

This could have the added benefit of boosting the new arrivals' awareness of the sixth form as being the end of schooling.

Jennifer Besidone, Head of Food and Nutrition, but also involved in teaching Design and Technology, had enjoyed the experience of shared-reading, and read much more herself as a direct consequence. She had also found the book to be a particularly effective way of engaging the boys. She had developed a project of producing beetle-shaped key rings and liked the way this linked to what other colleagues had organised, such as the librarian's beetle trail around the school which served as a route-map, and the group-based work Geography colleagues had organised on different beetles from around the world. The Head of Year 7 and PE teacher Matt Pellett talked about the genuine pleasure he had got from giving the books to the new students, and how much more significant it had seemed than handing out a free pen.

One final anecdote, reported by Hannah Lucas, illustrates how reading for pleasure had really become embedded in the culture at Coombe Boys' School. It concerns a year-8 recent arrival who had transferred to the school half-way through the autumn term. He wanted to know 'What's all this about reading? I want to be a footballer – why do I need to read books?' Lucas imaginatively referred the question to his new classmates, asking them why he needed to spend time reading. The answers had been immediate:

How else will you be able to read and understand your contract?

You need to be able to read in order to pay your bills.

Discussion with the Headteacher

David Smith, Headteacher of Coombe Boys' School for the past two years (after 12 years as Deputy Head of Coombe Girls' School), commented:

As a Trust⁷ we believe in single-sex education from the ages of 11-16; there is evidence that between these ages both sexes do better in a single-sex environment. Parents do however often raise the issue of gender with me, asking what we do to promote the emotional intelligence, empathy and understanding of our boys. The Big Read is one of the things I regularly mention.

Feedback from parents⁸ as well as other schools in the area has revealed that our book initiative is widely noted and admired. Giving a book to our new arrivals was seen as helping them feel expected and welcomed, with a wider sense that the school is looking out for them – before they even arrive. We also had positive feedback from our Link Inspector, Graham Willet, formerly Director of Education for Kingston. His recent report included feedback from his conversations with the boys; one year 7 pupil had told him how 'special' he had felt to be given a book.

Transition to secondary school is a difficult process, not least for parents. Mostly used to being at the school gate throughout their child's primary education, they have to get used to their increasing independence as they start secondary school. I particularly liked the fact that we were encouraging them to develop their literacy through giving them something, and a book was appropriate. It was handed out by the staff to the boys when they came for Induction day; encouraging them to engage with the joy of reading through offering them a book of their own to keep was a very powerful message of what we are as a school. We are always looking for ways to demonstrate that we value everyone and are a caring community, for example organising a collective birthday lunch each month and trying to boost our shared memory for events. We now have clear evidence that the new Year 7s see us as kind.

The book also played a key role in delivering a more effective process of transition. We know that early engagement is important, and that the sooner the children start to look forward to their new school the more likely they are to adapt well. The book initiative was something that both boys and parents/carers could get involved with straightaway, and talk about during the remaining weeks of the summer holidays.

Linking the book to project-based learning across the curriculum has had a big impact on the school as a whole. Project-based learning is familiar from primary schools, and the common starting place enabled pupils to think outside the book and introduced them to the different subjects they will study. This is a one of the big changes from their primary school, where they generally have just a couple of teachers, to secondary education where they will have around 14 each year. In previous years we have developed projects for the pre-arrival Summer

School, often based around STEM subjects, but this year the book, with its wide range of themes, had a much more natural reach across the entire school. Looking ahead, I can see this is a project that will remain at the heart of what we do, and the choice of the book will be vital. It needs to have a broad range of themes that can be developed by colleagues and relate to the issues of transition and change. It also needs to be fun so it's an enjoyable activity for everyone.

The project also fitted our Literacy Strategy. We were aware that our boys' literacy skills were not where we wanted them to be, and this across all ability streams. Of course this is a national problem, but one of our key targets as a school is to reduce the gap in performance for our boys between Maths and English at GCSE. Our new Head of English was keen on the Big Read, but she also suggested that we use the opportunity to implement the DEAR strategy across the school at the same time, giving a massive emphasis to books and reading. It is likely that we will still have boys achieving more top grades in Maths than in English, but the gap between the two is narrowing, and we are confident that the Big Read can play a big part in boosting their overall attainment.

The Big Read has also done good things for the sense of community among staff. We try to involve staff in decision making and designing the way forward as this not only helps create an effective organisation but also boosts staff motivation. We were very pleased by their willingness to get involved in this project. Volunteers to help choose the book came from right across the discipline range (e.g. including Science, IT and Music as well as the more obvious reading-related subjects of English and Drama).

We also tried to get everyone involved, not just the teaching staff, and every staff member got a copy of the book, whatever their role. Building on this, we are developing shared-reading sessions between staff in administrative roles and the pupils, particularly boys who need extra individual support with their reading. We've seen this have a particularly positive effect on staff who don't normally get involved with the children (e.g. financial managers) who have not only really enjoyed providing reading support, but have also had their roles enhanced through seeing the individuals behind the pupil numbers they deal with on a daily basis.

The culture of staff carrying the book they are reading around with them has grown, and most people are now doing it. Of course this means you are revealing your personal tastes – and I'm not afraid of letting it be known that I like a bit of science fiction – but the process has definitely prompted conversations in corridors and in the staff room, for example about what people are reading and the benefits (or otherwise) of the Kindle. My own reading for pleasure has certainly increased since the Big Read was introduced.

The school certainly feels calmer and more connected. Statistically the project also correlates with a significant improvement in pupil behaviour. We have a 'call out' system for those who are not engaging with the curriculum, and the number of incidents where intervention was needed is just 40% of what it was at the same time last year. Our attendance figures are also slightly better than last year and applications to join us are up. So we feel the book project is contributing to a significant change in the school's culture.

Morris, part of the same interview, added:

This is a time of change in education, and much of it feels like a hard slog. This project enabled us to go back to basics, to involve everyone in a project that while it ran right across the school, involved everyone, generated very little additional work and enabled us all to feel good about what we were doing. There was a strong sense of collective pride in doing something positive for the boys, and for each other, and that doesn't always happen in education. Above all we feel proud that we ran something that has had an impact and been a success – and made us all feel happy.

We can certainly get better at it in future, but we now have a group of young men keen to tell us what they think about the books they are reading and wanting to be involved in future. I can see the current Year 7s presenting to the year ahead about reading and the part it plays in helping you get settled in a new school.

Summary and learnings for next time

It is clear from the formal surveys, from the interviews and from informal feedback that the Big Read project has proved a great success at Coombe Boys with each of the key stakeholder groups; pupils, staff and parents/guardians. Most people read the book, many discussed it, it was widely used in lessons and it was considered to be very helpful for new pupils. The impact of the Big Read, in conjunction with other changes to literacy which took place in parallel, seems likely to have long-lasting repercussions. It will be interesting to track the progress of this Year 7 cohort, which has also benefited from other changes to enhance literacy, with that of previous years.

There were a number of learnings from this Big Read for next time:

(1) Book selection method

Those involved in the choice of the book had found the process enjoyable and energising. It would be a good idea to extend involvement in this, across both teaching and non-teaching roles, and all disciplines. There is also potential for pupil, parent and governor involvement.

(2) Involve all staff in scheme presentations

Although the project was for Year 7 pupils, as it impacts on the whole school, and was visible to all, it was thought it might have been a good idea for the initial presentation to be to all staff, not just those in the Middle School. Along similar lines, the preparation of a supporting information pack with ideas on how to use the book in lessons or with individual pupils might be useful, particularly for staff using the book who are not teachers (e.g. administrative staff involved in one to one reading).

(3) Parental information

Many parents wanted more information on the scheme, and how it would be used. Given that the parental response was overwhelmingly positive, this would potentially encourage wider pride in their children's school. Parental responses to being willing to recommend the school to others are already up on previous years.

(4) Information for staff on how the book is being used

Staff were curious, but relatively uninformed, about how their colleagues were using the book within different curriculum areas. It is suggested that a presentation is organised, perhaps at a staff or governors meeting, on how the book was used across the institution. This could be in combination with another presentation from Kingston University on how the school's use of shared reading compares with that of universities involved in The Big Read.

As an example for how this might work in practice, after the visit of the author to the university, a Balloon Debate had been organised, inviting staff from a variety of roles to talk about how the chosen book related to their specific research, teaching, professional role or personal interests. This had proven particularly interesting and led to stronger feelings of collegiality and cross-disciplinary interest as well as a deeper understanding of many administrative and support roles (e.g. catering and reception staff in particular).

(5) Questionnaire wording

The wording of certain questions in the pupil questionnaire needs re-examining. For example, a question relating to the book as a 'title' drew pupil responses about the words on the front cover.

(6) How to increase the response rates to project questionnaires

A very high response to the pupil questionnaire was due to it being completed within a lesson period. It was thought that a higher response from parents could have been obtained by sending reminders. For each questionnaire, Kingston University sent at least two reminders after the initial despatch, and each time the majority of respondents replied immediately.

(7) How to personalise each copy of the book

Given the widely reported specialness of receiving their own copy of the chosen book, and their general reluctance to share it, commissioning a special Coombe Boys School Big Read book plate, on which form tutors could both write the name of each recipient, and sign it as their form tutor, might be worth considering.

(8) Future academic study

There were several comments from colleagues within the school that involvement in the project with Kingston had prompted teachers to consider further University study themselves. Kingston could make more use of the link with the school, advertising relevant courses and in particular flexible options for part-time study and the value of personal/professional development.

How the Coombe Boys' Big Read compares with trying to establish pre-arrival shared-reading within a university

Unsurprisingly there were many processes, issues and outcomes in common between running a pre-arrival shared reading scheme at a school and a university. Indeed the formal surveys conducted after each project yielded broadly similar results in terms of the percentage of students/staff who finished the book, the percentage who discussed it with someone else and the overall positive verdict on the scheme. Aspects of the project which proved to be remarkably similar between the two organisations included:

(1) The specialness of receiving a book

The response of pupils/students and staff at both school and university had been similar. Recipients had talked about their pleasure in receiving 'a gift' or 'present' and feeling 'less nervous', 'welcome' and 'expected' by their new institution as a result.

(2) Similar criteria for a shared book

Both school and universities used similar criteria in making their choice of a book for shared-reading: a strong story with particular emphasis on an effective opening; short chapters to give a sense of progress; a legible type face and characters that could be related to. How the book is chosen varies from institution to institution, but both Coombe and Kingston sought to use a transparent process, making it a genuine community choice.

(3) A title that is part of a series

Kingston University were keen on a book by an author who had other titles in print, so that a reading journey begun could be extended by those following a 'listen to all the other albums' trajectory. Penguin, publishers of the first KU Big Read, had noted a subsequent 'halo' effect around Nick Hornby's other titles which they presumed was related to the highlighting of one of his books. Coombe Boys' chose a book for which the author was developing a sequel and found this to be popular with the boys. Many went on to read the second title before starting school, and the sequel was the most suggested title for a Big Read for the following year.

(4) The difficulties involved in choosing a book to share

Both institutions found it was difficult to find a single title that everyone would like, although choosing by agreed criteria and placing an emphasis on the primary need being to find something to suit

the designated market (arriving undergraduates/Year 7 pupils) helped clarify the minds of those involved.

Both school and university groups considered whether rather than a single book across the entire community, a choice of books might be made available, perhaps according to the faculty (university) or reading level (school). In both institutions it was decided that the unifying vision of a shared book across the entire community was socially preferable to separation into different groups reading different titles.

Related to this, study of the associated processes within other universities involved in shared-reading, and discussions with them, has revealed that it is a relatively common experience for academic staff from particular disciplines to feel that they are particularly well qualified to choose, or 'curate' a title for shared-reading on behalf of the institution as a whole, and it is not uncommon for there to be an ensuing reluctance to participate if their preferred title is not subsequently chosen. Colleagues within the school emerged as more collaborative, more tolerant of the reading preferences of others, and more inclined to see reading for pleasure as relevant across the entire range of subjects and roles involved. As Coombe's Head of English commented: 'Personally I would have preferred the other book on the list of two, but I could see the value of involving the whole community in the choice of book and was happy to stick with their decision.'

(5) The key role of the library

In both institutions the librarian(s) played a central role. This was particularly important within the university, where packed agendas meant that not all relevant meetings could accommodate the Big Read as an item for discussion. The library presence at every university meeting enabled the dissemination of associated information and enthusiasm.

(6) Extending the circulation of books for sharing

Kingston had found the books to be appreciated by other years within the establishment, and potentially of significant value at other key points within wider retention strategies. For example, non-return at the beginning of the second year can lead to students dropping out. Coombe was likewise thinking about introducing shared-reading within other year groups, and Kingston made available copies of their current KU Big Read (*My name is Leon*) for distribution to the sixth form pupils of both Coombe Boys' and Coombe Girls'. It was anticipated that this would play a part in the transition to the co-educational sixth form in the year ahead.

Although there was much in common there were certain key differences particularly in relation to the size of the organisation, the perceived role of the project in developing literacy, and the nature of the staff relationship with the project.

(1) Size of organisation

The school was a much smaller organisation than the university (170 new pupils plus 80 staff compared with c.4,000 new university students and 3,000 staff). Smaller numbers arguably made management of the school project significantly easier and certainly related communication was managed more quickly and arguably more effectively than had been the case with similar initiatives within higher education. For example, only one respondent among school staff claimed they had not heard of the scheme whereas within the universities involved awareness among academics, as revealed through questioning and casual conversations, could be limited due to a (freely acknowledged) general tendency for academics to disengage from all central communications over the summer period.

Coombe staff were particularly speedy to volunteer to help choose a book, but this may have been influenced by project novelty. Systems for choosing books within higher education tend to rely on

nominated quotas for involvement from within each faculty/directorate and then the seeking of individuals to represent their unit through participation, although this may again be related to organisational size, ease of communication and project (over-)familiarity.

(2) Staff relationship with the project

However the more effective roll out of the scheme within the school, in comparison with such schemes within higher education, was arguably not purely a function of organisational size. All the universities so far involved in the KU Big Read (Edinburgh Napier University and the University of Wolverhampton) have reported a consistent minority of colleagues who resisted such schemes on the grounds of upholding the principle of 'academic freedom'; reporting reluctance to having materials chosen for them and resenting the anticipated costs of the associated venture – all of which factors impeded their own associated involvement. Several academics nominated their own or their students' work as the shared read and there were individuals who felt that the purchase of so many books was negative in terms of both environmental impact and the awarding of disproportionate financial momentum to the future career of the single individual writer chosen. School staff consistently emerge as more collaborative, inclined to participate in an endeavour likely to benefit their target audience even if personally disinclined towards involvement, and significantly more flexible in developing new materials to suit a changed teaching situation if required, particularly at short notice.

(3) Roll out within the organisation

Project delivery within schools was facilitated because the scheme had been adopted by senior management and was disseminated down the organisation from there. Within the universities consulted, a variety of individuals headed up the project, from the PVC for Student Engagement (Edinburgh Napier University) to the Dean of the Science Faculty (University of Wolverhampton). It was generally found that across universities, lateral communication methods are less well established and project dissemination may require many more presentations to groups of staff to persuade them of the benefits of involvement. For example, within Kingston, the project was most enthusiastically seized by academics managing transition and welcome for those with particular learning needs (e.g. English not their first language; transition through non-traditional routes), and then by administrative and professional support teams. Within the school it was adopted first by teaching colleagues and then spread into wider administrative and support roles.

(4) Project benefits relating to literacy

For both school and universities shared-reading can offer a number of anticipated benefits, notably relating to transition and creating a sense of community. A close benefit was also the potential for developing the literacy of those involved.

Concern over low levels of boys' literacy in the UK has been widely reported, in both the educational and general press. Of late, increasing attention has also been drawn to poor literacy skills in the UK population entering and participating in higher education, and particularly to misplaced assumptions about literacy levels within universities:

Around one in ten of all university students in England have numeracy or literacy levels below level 2. These figures indicate a major basic skills challenge among current students, which is often not resolved at the point of graduation. University programmes typically rest on the assumption that entrants have good core academic skills acquired at school. But while England is graduating more young people from university than many other countries, the basic skills of those in the potential entrant pool (aged 16-19) show more weaknesses than elsewhere, with one third of the age group having low basic skills. This suggests an imbalance between an entrant pool with weak skills and a high level of university participation. (Kuczera, Field, and Windisch 2016)

Overall, the school staff identified much more closely with the literacy-related rationale behind their Big Read, for improving the literacy of their students, and the manifold consequent benefits, than did university academic staff – although university library staff were consistently quick to see a connection.

Notes

1. www.joelcommunityservices.org.uk.
2. www.hillcroft.ac.uk.
3. <http://aimhigherlondonouth.org.uk/> based at Kingston University but working across the wider area.
4. www.chickenhousebooks.com.
5. Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development, a strand offered within all state secondary schools.
6. This is the third title in the series, implying the responder had already read the second, *Beetle Queen*.
7. Coombe Secondary Schools Academy Trust. Formed 2012 <http://www.coombeschools.org/page/?pid=30> which includes Coombe Boys School, Coombe Girls School and Coombe Sixth Form.
8. From parent surveys, through informal contacts at open evenings, and from feedback from parents and children who attend other schools, from meetings of the School Council and Parents' Council.

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