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The Effectiveness of an Enhanced Book-Gifting Intervention for Improving Reading Outcomes for Children in Care: Final Report

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Executive Summary

Background: There now exists a considerable body of international evidence demonstrating the consistently poor educational outcomes faced by children in care. These poor outcomes emerge early and worsen as children grow older, with the effects lasting longer term into adulthood. One popular intervention aimed at addressing this has been the use of book-gifting. However, there is limited evidence that book-gifting, on its own, is effective in improving reading outcomes for children in care. Moreover, previous research suggests the need for book-gifting programmes to be enhanced through including a direct role for foster carers to support their children's reading when receiving the books.

Objectives and main outcomes: This study sought to design and evaluate the effectiveness of an enhanced book-gifting intervention – 'Reading Together' (see: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/readingtogether/>) – that supplemented existing approaches to book-gifting by incorporating a paired-reading component for foster carers to undertake with their children and also providing the children with choice in relation to the selection of the books they receive.

Within this, the study sought to assess what level of support is required for foster carers and tested two approaches: one that provided foster carers with a Handbook providing guidance on how to undertake paired-reading and access to short online instructional videos; and another that supplemented this with the provision of an in-person training.

The study focused on measuring the effects of Reading Together on the primary outcome of children's levels of reading comprehension and also included a number of secondary outcomes (reading accuracy, reading rate, receptive reading and attitudes towards reading). In addition, the study explored whether any effects found for Reading Together were associated with the children's gender or age and also the foster carers' previous levels of education.

Design: A three-armed randomised controlled trial was employed, with children recruited through local authorities and, within each local authority, randomly allocated to either: the Handbook arm, that provided three book-gifting parcels over the course of nine months together with a Handbook to foster carers; the training arm that included the three book-gifting parcels and Handbook and supplemented these with the provision of a direct training session for foster carers; and a control group.

Children in the control group continued as normal for the duration of the trial and then received the Handbook-only intervention once post-testing was completed. The aim was to secure a final achieved sample of at least 528 children (176 children for each arm of the trial). Calculations suggested that this would be sufficiently powered (80%) to detect a minimum effect of $d=.19$. Alongside the trial, a qualitative process evaluation was undertaken, interviewing and tracking 30 children and their carers during the course of the programme delivery.

Setting and participants: The original plan was to recruit children through local authorities in Northern Ireland and England. However, it was not possible to undertake the study in Northern Ireland and thus the trial focused on England. English local authorities that agreed to participate in the study were asked to nominate children that met the eligibility criteria of being between 7-9 years of age and in foster care and where their social worker felt that they would benefit from the programme.

Results: The recruitment of local authorities proved to be more difficult than had been envisaged originally due to a number already offering book-gifting programmes and thus not being eligible to participate or citing other existing demands. A total of 22 local authorities eventually agreed to participate in the study helping to secure a final achieved sample of 266 children, randomly allocated evenly within each local authority to one of the three arms of the trial.

The Reading Together programme was delivered in a phased manner in each local authority and the trial ran from July 2019 to December 2020. The latter stages of the delivery of the programme in most local authorities were impacted by the national lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and post-testing had to be undertaken remotely, using video calling facilities, rather than being conducted face-to-face.

Overall, the trial found no evidence that Reading Together (either with or without the provision of in-person training for foster carers) had any additional effect on the reading skills and attitudes of children that received the intervention as reflected in the measures used. Whilst children did not make gains above and beyond those expected, those in both the intervention groups and the control group did progress on their maturational trajectories as expected over the timeframe. These findings should be viewed with some caution due to the lower sample size that was achieved and hence the fact that the trial was statistically under-powered.

The qualitative process evaluation found that the Reading Together programme itself, including the book-parcels received, the Handbook and the in-person training provided were all well-received by the children and foster carers respectively. However, the delivery of the programme was fundamentally impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown.

The demands associated with the closure of schools and children learning online from home, supported by their foster carers, were so challenging that foster carers felt it was too much to expect the child to participate in a reading session once they had completed their school work online.

It was not possible to sufficiently monitor and measure levels of programme fidelity but the qualitative interviews suggested that whilst foster carers did engage in some reading activities with their children, this did not tend to follow the guidance provided on paired-reading. Moreover, huge variation was found in foster carers' confidence and capacity to support home learning in general and reading specifically.

Conclusions: Ultimately, the findings of this study are inconclusive regarding whether a book-gifting programme, enhanced with the introduction of paired reading, can be effective in improving the reading skills of children in foster care. Whilst the trial found no evidence that Reading Together was effective, it is not possible to determine whether this was due to the ineffectiveness of the programme itself or the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown on the children and their foster carers.

The evidence from this study and elsewhere suggests that book-gifting programmes are popular and well-received. There is also clear evidence that paired-reading, when delivered with fidelity, is effective in improving reading skills amongst children. The hypothesis that underpinned this present study – that a book-gifting programme enhanced with paired reading can be effective in improving reading outcomes for children in care – therefore remains plausible and worthy of further exploration and study.

In reflecting upon the findings of the qualitative process evaluation of this present study, a number of recommendations are made for how such work could be progressed further. These include: giving consideration to more targeting of the programme; strengthening the intensity and fidelity of the programme; reflecting further on the support needs of foster carers and the role that peer support and the supervising social worker may play in relation to this; and considering further potential outcome measures in relation to exploring the more affective components of the programme and their potential impact on attachment relationships.

Trial registration: The trial protocol was registered in the Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies on 8 September 2019 (Registry ID: 1776.1v1). See: <https://sreereg.icpsr.umich.edu>

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	10
Section 1: Background	11
1.1 Context.....	11
1.2 Educational outcomes of children in care	11
1.3 Previous research on literacy and reading interventions for children in care	12
1.4 Paired reading	14
1.5 Book gifting	14
1.6 Research on the possible impact of the pandemic on the reading of children in care	15
1.7 Summary	16
Section 2: Methodology	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Research questions and objectives	17
2.3 The development of the intervention	18
2.4 Randomised controlled trial	19
2.4.1 Eligibility.....	19
2.4.2 Recruitment, consent and randomisation.....	19
2.4.3 Outcome measures.....	20
2.4.4 Sample Size.....	20
2.5 Qualitative Process Evaluation.....	21
2.5.1 Design.....	21
2.5.2 Recruitment.....	22
2.5.3 Interviews.....	22
2.5.4 The Talking Album	22
2.6 Ethics.....	23
2.7 Summary	23
Section 3: The Intervention	24
3.1 Introduction	24
3.2 Initial Design.....	24
3.2.1 Book Parcels	24
3.2.2 The Handbook	24
3.2.3 Paired Reading Training.....	25

3.2.4	<i>Guidance Videos</i>	25
3.3	The Pilot Study	25
3.3.1	<i>Pilot study methodology</i>	25
3.3.2	<i>Pilot study participants</i>	25
3.3.3	<i>Findings and recommendations from the pilot</i>	26
3.4	The Final Intervention	27
3.4.1	<i>Reading Together Book Parcels</i>	27
3.4.2	<i>Reading Together Handbook</i>	30
3.4.3	<i>Reading Together Carer Training</i>	31
3.4.4	<i>The Reading Together Website</i>	32
3.5	Summary	33
Section 4:	The Trial Findings	35
4.1	Introduction	35
4.2	Trial Procedure	35
4.3	Deviations from the trial protocol.....	39
4.4	Main findings.....	40
4.5	Exploratory and sensitivity analyses	41
4.6	Summary	42
Section 5:	The Qualitative Process Evaluation	43
5.1	Introduction	43
5.2	Methodology.....	43
5.2.1	<i>Alterations to the original design</i>	43
5.2.2	<i>Conducting pre-and-post intervention interviews with carers and children</i>	45
5.2.3	<i>Analysis of qualitative data</i>	45
5.3	The Case Studies.....	46
5.3.1	<i>Overview</i>	46
5.3.2	<i>Case study One: Connor - hard to engage reader</i>	46
5.3.3	<i>Case Study Two: Haley – very keen reader but did not engage</i>	54
5.3.4	<i>Case Study Three: Dave – the struggling reader</i>	58
5.4	Overview of key themes emerging from the wider qualitative data.....	62
5.4.1	<i>Introduction</i>	62
5.4.2	<i>Carer(s) and their context</i>	62
5.4.3	<i>Carers’ reading practice past and/or present</i>	63
5.4.4	<i>Carers’ home learning environment</i>	63
5.4.5	<i>Carers' views on needs of the child</i>	65

5.4.6 Children’s reading practices – comments by carers and children	65
5.4.7 The Reading Together Programme	68
5.4.8 The book parcels.....	69
5.4.9 The training and/or manual.....	70
5.4.10 The paired reading - 5 ‘W’s – what they read, why, when, where, with whom ..	70
5.4.11 Children’s reactions.....	72
5.4.12 Views on the Talking Album and Reading logs	73
5.4.13 Changes in reading approach between T1 and T2	74
5.4.14 The pandemic and schooling.....	75
5.4.15 The pandemic and foster carer/child relationship	76
5.4.16 The pandemic and reading.....	77
5.5 Summary	77
Section 6: Summary and Conclusions.....	79
6.1 Introduction	79
6.2 Key Findings	79
6.2.1 Effectiveness of the Programme.....	79
6.2.2 Measures of reading effectiveness.....	80
6.2.3 Reduced sample size	81
6.2.4 Book parcels and reading levels.....	81
6.2.5 Fidelity to the programme and support for engagement.....	82
6.2.6 Impact of the programme on relationships between foster carers and children ..	83
6.2.7 Other related impacts of the pandemic.....	83
6.3 Recommendations	84
6.3.1 Targeting the intervention	84
6.3.2 Strengthening intensity and fidelity	84
6.3.3 Foster carer peer support and the role of supervising social workers.....	84
6.3.4 Measuring ‘additionality’	85
References.....	86
Appendices.....	90
Appendix 1: Details of Statistical Models Fitted.....	90
Appendix 2: Outcome Measures	96
Appendix 3: Talking Album – Full transcript of Eddie’s Presentation.....	98

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Introduction

This study focuses on the development and evaluation of a reading programme – ‘Reading Together’ – targeted at children in care aged 7-9 years and their foster carers. Book-gifting is a popular intervention used to help address poor reading outcomes among children in care. However, evidence of its effectiveness is limited and previous research has suggested that help for foster carers is needed in how to support their child’s reading in order to maximise the chances of the book-gifting being effective (e.g. Mooney et al., 2016).

The Reading Together programme has been developed specifically to address these concerns by providing three book parcels over a six-month period but introducing a paired reading component to be delivered by foster carers at home. The paired reading component builds directly upon the Hampshire County Council paired reading intervention (Osborne et al., 2010).

Previous evaluations of book-gifting and paired reading with children in care have tended to be based on small samples and had not, with the exception of Mooney et al. (2016) had a control group against which to assess the intervention. Hence, this study was also designed to include a randomised controlled trial to address both substantive and methodological shortcomings in previous research in this field and with a larger sample (than in previous studies) of children in care.

Section 1 sets out the broad background and context for our study. Following this, Section 2 sets out the methodology used in the present study whilst Section 3 describes how the Reading Together intervention was developed and piloted and describes the final version that was then subject to the evaluation. Sections 4 and 5 then report the findings of the evaluation; with the former focusing on the findings from the randomised controlled trial and the latter on the associated qualitative process evaluation. Section 6 provides an overall summary of the findings and discusses these, drawing out the conclusions and recommendations for future policy, practice and research.

Section 1: Background

1.1 Context

This section sets out the broad background and context for our study. We have generally referred to the more common term 'children in care', while recognizing that the US, Canada and Australia refer to children in out-of-home care. We have tried to keep this report succinct, not too technical or theoretical, in order to make it more accessible for non-academic readers. Academic journal articles will follow.

The number of children looked after by local authorities (LAs) in England rose to 80,080 in the year ending 31 March 2020, up 2% on the previous year though less children entered care (perhaps due to disruption to the assessment processes in the pandemic). Of those children in care, 72% were in foster care (DfE, 2021a), the focus of this reading study.

Given this study involved an intervention over six months with testing of children's reading before and after the intervention, placement stability was an important factor in limiting attrition. A recent Ofsted (2021) report on fostering in England noted that 68% of children in foster care had one placement in the previous year but 32% that had more than one placement and 11% had three or more placements.

1.2 Educational outcomes of children in care

There now exists a considerable body of international evidence demonstrating the consistently poor educational outcomes faced by children in care, (e.g. Pears et al., 2018 in US, Tessier et al., 2018 in Canada) and systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses further confirm these findings (e.g. Goemans et al., 2016; Kääriälä and Hiilamo, 2017). Children lag further behind as they get older (Sebba et al., 2015) and these effects last longer term into outcomes in adulthood (e.g. Brännström, Vinnerljung, Forsman and Almquist, 2017, in Sweden).

In 2019, attainment for looked after children in England was much lower than for non-looked after children across all subjects (DfE, 2020). By age 11, in 2019, 49% of children in care reached the expected standard in reading compared to 73% of those not in care, and had dropped 3% since age 7 years.

In 2020, 56% of children in care had a special educational need, compared to 15% of all children, which might explain part, but not all of this gap in attainment (DfE, 2021b). Those in care but without an identified SEN, attained 11% lower than those not in care without an

identified SEN¹. The Children’s Commissioner in England (2021) noted that children who enter care as teenagers are over twice as likely as the wider population of children to be in the bottom 10% on average maths and reading point scores of their cohort at KS2 (aged 11).

The reasons for these poor educational outcomes among children in care are complex and multifaceted. Research to date identifies: ‘pre care’ factors, including exposure to abuse and neglect that has caused trauma and compromised the development of healthy attachment relationships; ‘in care’ factors, including placement stability, type and quality of placements, school changes, and continuity of relationships with key workers, school staff and carers; and wider ‘contextual’ factors including low expectations held by professionals and carers. These are overlain by other ‘in child’ factors including combinations of physical, mental, social, emotional and psychological needs (see for example, review by O’Higgins et al., 2017). Harnessing the support of carers can have positive effects (O’Higgins et al., 2017).

To address these issues, there have been legal and policy initiatives such as the statutory requirement for local authorities in England to appoint Virtual School Heads (VSH) (Sebba and Berridge, 2019) who coordinate targeted interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes of children in care. Hence, our study liaised closely with Virtual School Heads.

1.3 Previous research on literacy and reading interventions for children in care

The most common type of intervention with children in care involves the use of one-to-one tutoring in various forms. Some have used a didactic approach involving *direct instruction (DI)* (e.g. Flynn et al., 2012). This approach has been the subject of two randomised controlled trials both of which involved a literacy and maths programme *Teach Your Children Well*. Harper and Schmidt, (2016) delivered this in a small-group format whereas Flynn et al.’s (2012) was on a one-to-one basis with children in foster care. Both reported some positive improvements in reading.

Hickey and Flynn (2019) evaluated the impact of an individualised, home-based tutoring programme, known as TutorBright, in reading, language and maths. Children in foster care in the intervention group demonstrated statistically significant positive gains on reading fluency and reading comprehension, but continued to perform at below-average levels in reading and maths. Hence, while interventions during school years might help children in foster care to progress, the assumption should not be made that they will ‘catch up’ with their peers.

¹ Attainment data for 11-year olds from 2019-20 data were not published due to the lockdown

The effects of reading with a parent or carer in the home, not specifically with children in care, has been subjected to a systematic review and meta-analysis by Law et al. (2018) and to a meta-analysis by Barone et al. (2019). Law et al. (2018) reviewed 22 studies (none in the UK and none using book-gifting), that employed control groups and focused on book reading interventions carried out specifically by parents and carers with preschool children and reported positive effects, the largest effect being on receptive language skills (SMD=0.68; 95% CI 0.40-0.96). Importantly, the researchers concluded that parent-child book reading interventions may be as much about attention, communication and language development as they are about learning to read and write.

Barone et al's (2019) meta-analysis of the impact of 30 such interventions concluded less positively that they are often ineffective, and that only one specific methodology (dialogic reading) displayed systematically positive impacts. Rix et al. (2017) surveyed 598 foster carers and 35 fostered children and completed interviews with 18 foster carers and 13 children on reading and foster care. They reported that the less frequently a foster carer had themselves read with an adult when aged 10 years and younger, the more likely they were now to read with their foster child.

Rix et al. (2017) also noted that the majority of foster carers reported that they enjoyed reading but said they do not have the time to read for pleasure as frequently as they would like to anymore. Carers who reported lower levels of confidence in reading were more likely to report that their foster children found reading difficult, with those more highly qualified being more confident. Less than half of the carers had received help with supporting their foster child to read. Half of the carers reported that they read with their foster child at least once a day, though 16.5% never or hardly ever did so. Reading often occurred around bedtime to help with relaxation. Half of the carers found their foster child's lack of concentration a challenge when it came to reading together, and a third of carers stated that their foster child found reading difficult.

Over 90% of the carers believed reading helps with school work and builds communication skills, increased confidence and self-esteem and that reading had a calming effect on the foster child. Reading with the child was reported to improve the bond between the carer and child, and made children feel secure and loved, leading to happier placements. The more frequently a carer read with their foster child, the greater the positive influence on their relationship. Many of the interviewed foster children said their views of reading had improved since being in the placement because the foster carer made reading fun and enjoyable.

1.4 Paired reading

Paired reading is an approach to reading where a more fluent reader, normally an adult, that can be the carer or a volunteer, reads together with a child and has also been subject to research. An early study by Menmuir (1994) and later studies by Osborne et al., (2010) reported improvements but these studies lacked control groups so were unable to attribute improvements to the paired reading. A further replication of Osborne et al. (2010) by Vinnerljung et al. (2014) without a control group, found some positive improvements and noted that nine out of 10 foster carers and children read at least twice a week, but those reading less than that, made less progress.

A small-scale but in-depth qualitative study (Bell, 2020) interviewing six carers and four children in foster care aged 7-11 years engaged in a paired reading programme, noted that it provided considerable relational (the main focus of the study), social and emotional benefits and that similarly to Rix et al. (2017), foster carers and children tended to privilege the reading outcomes achieved over the relational advantages.

1.5 Book gifting

Book-gifting programmes targeted specifically at children in care have also been widely used. De Bondt et al. (2020) reported on a meta-analysis of 44 studies, all including a control group, but not specifically aimed at children in care, to test the effects of three major book gifting programmes: Bookstart, Reach Out and Read, and the Imagination Library. They reported that these programmes promote children's home literacy environment which subsequently resulted in more interest in reading and children scoring higher on measures of literacy-related skills.

The research on the effects of book-gifting with children in care is less compelling. The Letterbox Club (Griffiths, 2012) used in over a third of local authorities in England and Wales and all foster children in Northern Ireland, involves the delivery of personalised parcels to 7–11-year-old children at home monthly for six months. Evaluations by the designers (e.g. Griffiths, 2012) using a pre- and post-test with an age standardised literacy measure (Neale Analysis of Reading Ability, Neale, 1997) reported statistically significant improvements.

Winter et al.'s (2011) evaluation in Northern Ireland using secondary data analysis also found statistically significant improvements in literacy and numeracy scores with effect sizes of $d=0.24$ for reading accuracy, 0.23 for reading comprehension and 0.50 for mathematics. Similarly, in a more recent study, Forsman (2019) in Sweden noted improvements in literacy using Letterbox. However, there were no control groups in these studies, limiting the potential attribution of improvements directly to the programme.

The only previous randomised controlled trial of The Letterbox Club involving 116 foster children, aged 7–11 years in Northern Ireland (Mooney et al., 2016), found no evidence of programme effects on reading skills or attitudes to reading. However, the process evaluation that accompanied the trial (Roberts et al., 2017), concluded that it was well received by the children and the carers, who reported wanting more support on how to use the materials.

Hence, the study reported here is the largest randomised controlled trial that we are aware of focusing on reading in children in care. It sought to evaluate a reading intervention that we named *Reading Together* that combined a book-gifting programme with training and support for foster carers through paired reading in order to build on the previous research. It was delivered to children aged 7-9 years in foster care in 22 local authorities in England. It sought not only to make an important contribution to the existing evidence base regarding effective educational interventions for children in care, but also to contribute significantly to our wider understanding of the educational experiences and perspectives of this group of children.

1.6 Research on the possible impact of the pandemic on the reading of children in care

Baron et al. (2020) reported that referrals of children for maltreatment in Florida were 27% lower than expected during the school closure period in response to the pandemic, which they attributed to school staff being the highest source of referrals. The Children's Commissioner (2021) noted that referrals to children's services in England had fallen by 10% compared to the previous three years, as children became increasingly invisible in the pandemic, though the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) (2021) reported this figure to be 12.6%. Around half of the 129 local authorities (covering 89% of children known to the services) in the ADCS (2021) survey, reported a positive impact of the pandemic in terms of placement stability. Feedback from some children, families and carers suggested that relationships had improved due to less pressure on families to maintain routines.

As to the impact of school closures on children's reading, several studies have reported on the effects of the first lockdown though generalisations from other areas or countries are tricky given the variations in duration and arrangements of school closures. Cattan et al. (2021) in England reported a decrease in learning time by almost 40 minutes a day among primary school children between May and July 2020.

Blainey and Hannay (2021) noted that by December 2020, there were measurable declines in attainment compared to the previous year across virtually all subjects and year groups, though this decline was much less than at the start of the Autumn Term, suggesting some catching up had occurred (though there has been a further almost full term of closure since

then). In general, younger children showed larger decreases in attainment than older children, with reading on average, showing a one-month gap.

1.7 Summary

In summary, previous evaluations of book-gifting programmes have found them to be popular and well-regarded by children and their carers. However, the evidence in relation to their effectiveness is less compelling, with relatively few robust evaluations having been conducted to date. Research suggests that, on their own, book-gifting programmes may not be effective in improving children's reading skills and that, whilst well-received, carers would like greater help and guidance on how to use the books they receive to support their children's reading.

This, then, provides the rationale for the present study that seeks to enhance an existing book-gifting intervention for children in foster care by incorporating explicit guidance on how foster carers can engage in paired reading with their children; an approach that has a good evidence base for its effectiveness. The paired reading component built directly upon the Hampshire County Council paired reading intervention (Osborne et al., 2010).

Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This section sets out the main research questions and objectives set for the study before then describing the originally intended methodology agreed for the design of the intervention and its evaluation, using a randomised controlled trial and associated qualitative process evaluation. The intended design is described as set out in our protocol but in Sections 4 and 5 which report the findings, we refer to the methodology as implemented. Suffice to note here that for reasons given in later sections we recruited all children from England, we did not use Letterbox for the book-gifting intervention, we were unable to utilise care experienced peer researchers and all post-testing of children and post intervention interviews were conducted online due to lockdown restrictions. Other less fundamental changes are reported in the context of the implementation of the project.

2.2 Research questions and objectives

The study sought to address four key research questions:

- Can book-gifting programmes be effective in improving the reading skills of 7-9-year-old children in foster care, if supplemented with a clearly defined and enhanced role for the foster carer?
- Can this enhanced role for the foster carer be supported through the provision of a manual or does it also require direct training?
- Do the effects of book-gifting programmes that incorporate an enhanced role for foster carers differ in relation to the child's age and gender and also the educational qualifications of the foster carers involved?
- How can the contribution of foster carers to the educational development of children in foster care be better theorised and understood?

In doing this, the study had the following core objectives:

1. To develop two new models of delivery of *book-gifting*, based upon existing evidence, that seek to enhance the effectiveness of the intervention through incorporating an explicit role for foster carers through paired reading – one that focuses just on the provision of a Handbook for foster carers and the other that supplements this with direct training in paired reading;
2. To measure the effectiveness of the two new models of delivery in improving reading outcomes and attitudes towards reading among children aged 7-9 years old in foster care;

3. To assess whether both models have differential effects on particular subgroups of children, depending on their age and gender as well as the educational qualifications of the foster carers;
4. To compare the effectiveness of both models and to ascertain whether the provision of training in paired reading has significant added value alongside the provision of a Handbook providing general guidance on supporting reading;
5. To contribute to our understanding of the educational experiences of children in foster care and the potential role of their foster carers on these;
6. To work with policy makers to provide and share robust evidence to inform future decisions regarding how to address the educational achievement gap for children in care; and
7. To work with foster carers, children and practitioners to identify how best improvements in children's reading development can be supported.

2.3 The development of the intervention

Following the lessons learnt from previous research, described in the last section, the intervention was originally conceived to include three core components: book-gifting using the Letterbox Club parcels; a Handbook for foster carers; and in-person training for foster carers. Each of these components are described in detail in the next section.

- *Bookgifting: The Letterbox Club*² is a book gifting intervention that provides direct support to children in foster care to improve their educational outcomes. It comprises a brightly coloured envelope, personally addressed to the child in foster care, posted monthly May-October directly to the children. Each envelope contains: a personalised letter; two books (one fiction and one non-fiction which have been selected by a panel at Booktrust); stationery items and a mathematics game. This intervention does not rely on, expect or demand foster carer involvement and, as such, there is no manual or guidance for carers about how and in what ways they and the child should engage with the parcels.
- *The Reading Handbook*: The *Letterbox Club* intervention was supplemented with a Handbook sent to all foster carers prior to the first parcels being sent out, providing clear guidance and advice on how to support their children using the *Letterbox Club* materials. This provided an explicit role for foster carers in directly supporting the children's engagement with the parcels and books they receive, through the use of paired reading, and thus explicitly seeking to improve their reading skills.
- *In-Person Training for Foster Carers*: The Handbook was supplemented with the provision of direct training for foster carers in paired reading. This training was

² See: <http://www.letterboxclub.org.uk/>

intended to involve two two-hour sessions offered locally to small groups of approximately 6-8 foster carers by a trained instructor.

2.4 Randomised controlled trial

Full details of the methodology proposed for the randomised controlled trial were set out in the trial protocol that was registered in the Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies on 8 September 2019 (Registry ID: 1776.1v1).³

Reflecting the main research questions and objectives set for the study, the trial consisted of three arms:

- A Training Arm that included all three components set out above (namely: the provision of book parcels; the provision of a Handbook; and in-person training for foster-carers).
- A Handbook Arm that just included the provision of book parcels and the Handbook (but did not include the provision of in-person training for the foster carers).
- A Control Arm where the children did not receive any intervention but continued as usual. For those in this arm, they received the second intervention (the provision of book parcels and the Handbook) immediately following the conclusion of the trial.

2.4.1 Eligibility

Children aged 7-9-years in foster care in England whose social worker felt they would be able to benefit from the intervention were eligible to participate in the study. Children were excluded from the study if they met any of the following three criteria: (1) were not aged 7-9 years of age as defined above; (2) were not in foster care; or (3) if their social worker determined that they are not likely to benefit from the programme by virtue of the level of learning, emotional and/or behavioural issues they are experiencing or by the instability or other extenuating factors associated with their foster placement or personal circumstances.

2.4.2 Recruitment, consent and randomisation

Initially, it was intended to approach local authorities in England and Health and Social Services Trusts in Northern Ireland to participate in the study. Those already using a regular book-gifting scheme with 7–9-year-olds, including the Letterbox Club, were not eligible to participate. For those local authorities and Trusts that agreed to participate, they were then asked, through their social work teams, to identify eligible children to participate in the study.

³ See: <https://sreereg.icpsr.umich.edu>

Multi-layered consent was gained from foster carers, social workers and the children to participate.

Once multi-layered consent had been gained, children within each local authority or Trust were randomised into one of the three arms: the Training Arm; the Handbook Arm; or the Control Arm. Children had an equal chance of being allocated to each of these three arms and randomisation was undertaken 'masked', by someone not part of the research team. In cases where there are two or more eligible children participating in the study who were living in the same foster home, they were allocated together as a cluster.

2.4.3 Outcome measures

All children were tested in their homes by trained fieldworkers prior to receiving their first book parcels (pre-test) and as soon as possible after the end of the intervention (post-test) in relation to the following core outcomes:

- Reading comprehension (York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension)
- Reading rate (York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension)
- Reading accuracy (York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension)
- Receptive vocabulary (British Picture Vocabulary Test); and
- Attitudes to Reading (Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Survey)

Reading comprehension was designated as the primary outcome. Appendix Two outlines a brief overview of each of the measures used and their reliability, validity, and sensitivity.

The post-testing could not be done face-to-face due to the pandemic as the strict rules around travel and physical distancing prohibited home-based data collection methods. Data were therefore collected online and we were fortunate in that all foster carers involved had effective access to the internet. A training manual was created, and all fieldworkers were talked through the process of online assessments. The possible impact of these changes is further discussed in the conclusions.

2.4.4 Sample Size

The trial sought to recruit the five Trusts in Northern Ireland and between 15-20 local authorities in England. An aim was to secure a final achieved sample of at least 528 children (176 children for each arm of the trial). Calculations suggest that this would be sufficiently powered (80%) to detect a minimum effect of $d=.19$.⁴

⁴ This calculation was based on a significance level (alpha) of .05 and an estimated correlation between pre-test and post-test scores of $r=.743$ (based on the pre-test/post-test correlations for children's comprehension as

2.5 Qualitative Process Evaluation

2.5.1 Design

It was planned that the main process evaluation would run for the duration of the trial (months 15-24). Interviews with foster carers were planned to take place at two time points: in months 15-16 and during months 23-24. Prior to this, time would be spent identifying, approaching and negotiating access with key informants (months 12-14) and, subsequently, the analysis of the data was undertaken alongside that of the quantitative trial data (months 25-30).

The design of the process evaluation was based upon guidance specifically for process evaluations of all kinds and published by the Medical Research Council in 2015 (Moore et al., 2015). Moore et al. (2015) note that, following a clear description of the intervention and its causal assumptions, the key components that the process evaluation should focus on are the:

- Context (contextual factors that shape theories as to how the intervention works, contextual factors that affect and might be affected by implementation, intervention mechanisms and outcomes and causal mechanisms present within the context that seek to maintain the status quo);
- Implementation (fidelity, dose, adaptations and reach), and;
- Mechanisms of impact (participant responses to and interactions with the intervention, mediators, unexpected pathways and consequences).

With this in mind, the aim of the process evaluation was to explore the effectiveness or otherwise of the enhanced Letterbox Club models by examining in detail factors connected with their design, delivery, impact and relevant contextual factors. Stakeholder involvement, through the two Advisory Groups (one professional/academic and one care-experienced) was intended to be a priority in this process because it would help enhance quality, relevance and subsequent impact as well as maintaining the parameters of the relationship between the researchers and those involved in delivering the intervention (Moore et al., 2015).

The process evaluation was to include interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders including foster carers, teachers and children to explore expectations, experiences and perceptions of each of the enhanced Letterbox Club models, what has worked well, what has worked less well (and why), barriers to implementation or access, how the format and delivery of the enhanced models could be improved, and any unanticipated costs, adverse effects or benefits.

measured from the previous trial of the Letterbox Club in Northern Ireland (Mooney, Connolly and Winter, 2016).

2.5.2 Recruitment

In relation to the recruitment of the children and their carers, these were identified by the VSH in conjunction with the local authority/Trust social workers in order to provide a representative sample of children in relation to: gender; time in and type of care; and ethnic/religious background. The children were to be selected from one Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland and from two other local authorities chosen from those participating in England. Consideration of the demographic data of the area and other factors relating to the locality/local authority/trust were also taken into account.

With regards to sample size, in each site 10 foster children were to be selected (30 in total across the study). The selection of children was to be coordinated across the sites to ensure a balance in terms of: gender; age; time in care; whether foster care or kinship care; and educational qualifications of foster carers.

2.5.3 Interviews

In relation to carrying out the interviews, six trained Care Experienced Researchers (young adults formerly in foster care) were to undertake the interviews with foster children and their carers. They were to be trained and provided with ongoing support by Luke and Winter in Oxford and Belfast respectively. The plan was for each child to be visited prior to the start of the intervention (during months 15-16) and once the intervention had ended. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and NVivo was used to assist in the organisation and coding of the data.

In addition to interviews with foster carers and children, the original plan included approximately 15 interviews with key service providers in the Health and Social Care Trust/local authority in each of the three sites and with personnel from Booktrust and The Fostering Network. In total it was anticipated that 165 interviews would be undertaken across the three sites: 60 interviews with the 30 foster children and 60 interviews with their foster carers (at the beginning and end of the intervention period); 30 interviews with their social workers at the end of the intervention period and approximately 15 interviews with stakeholders.

2.5.4 The Talking Album

The Talking Album is a 'flip style' album comprising a hard cover and 20 inner pages that are transparent plastic sleeves into which photographs can be inserted. At the bottom of each plastic sleeve is a recording and audio device that enables a child to record their spoken voice, to play back their voice and to re-record if desired. The total recording time available is 2 hours. This provides an innovative way of capturing children's views 'in the moment' and preserving their memories, experiences and views.

It was planned that for a first semi-structured interview children would be given a Talking Photo Album and guidance as to how to use it. It was also planned that as part of the paired

reading approach, follow-up phone calls were to be undertaken to their foster carers once a month to check how the child's use of the Talking Photo Album was progressing. It was also planned that within the two months following the end of the intervention (months 23-24), each child would be visited again to go through the Talking Photo Album.

2.6 Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was given by both Queen's University Belfast and University of Oxford.

2.7 Summary

This section has outlined the original methodological design for this present study. A number of amendments to this design have since been made and these are outlined and explained in the following sections when reporting the findings from the study.

Section 3: The Intervention

3.1 Introduction

This section describes in more detail the nature of the Reading Together intervention. It begins by describing the initial design and the lessons learnt from the pilot. A detailed outline of the revised intervention is then described, that formed the basis for the main evaluation.

3.2 Initial Design

Reflecting the key lessons emerging from the review of the existing evidence base, described in Section 1, the initial design of the Reading Together intervention included the three core components of the book parcels, Handbook and in-person training. However, it was also decided at an early stage to produce and make available a number of short guidance videos for the foster carers to access through the Reading Together project website.

3.2.1 Book Parcels

As noted in Section 2, the original plan was to use the Letterbox Club as the book-gifting component. However, this proved not to be possible as Booktrust, the developers of the Letterbox Club, expressed concerns during the early stages of the project regarding the explicit focus on seeking to improve reading skills. By mutual agreement, Booktrust subsequently withdrew from the study and the research team decided to design and deliver its own book-gifting intervention.

For the pilot, the book-gifting intervention – named ‘Reading Together’ – comprised three boxes (specifically designed for the project) of three books, personally addressed to the child in foster care, posted at two-monthly intervals over a six-month period. Each box contained three books, which in the first box were selected by the research team but in the second and third boxes were chosen by the child (with help from the foster carer) from a list of fiction and non-fiction books. Two levels of difficulty of books were offered in the choices.

3.2.2 The Handbook

A Handbook to support paired reading was specifically produced for the project based on the principles of paired reading (as used in the Hampshire project) providing clear guidance and advice on how to support children’s reading. Carers in the two intervention groups (see below) received this prior to the first parcels being sent out, along with a top tips sheet and bookmark with the paired reading steps on it both designed to provide easily accessible reminders. Hence, foster carers were given an explicit role in directly supporting the children’s engagement with the books they received, and thus their reading skills.

3.2.3 Paired Reading Training

Direct training was provided for foster carers in paired reading. The training involved one two-hour session offered locally to small groups of approximately 6-8 foster carers by a trained instructor and requiring them to engage in a minimum of three 20-minute sessions of reading with the child each week. Where foster carers were unable to attend sessions, this training was offered online. The training sought to reinforce and elaborate upon the key messages in the Handbook.

3.2.4 Guidance Videos

Five short videos were produced, each between one to one-and-a-half minutes in duration, that provided simple practical demonstrations of key messages included in the Handbook. Each video included a presenter talking to the camera with extended illustrations of a parent and child demonstrating the advice in the home environment. These videos were made available to view online through the Reading Together website and the Handbook made reference to these and encouraged foster carers to view them.

3.3 The Pilot Study

The pilot of the original design took place between October 2018 and March 2019. It aimed to test the practicality of the intervention, to assess whether the measures were appropriate and were feasible. From May to September 2018 the research team developed Reading Together, designed a Handbook for foster carers explaining the principles behind paired reading, built a website with multiple resources and information, and recruited children and foster carers for the pilot study.

3.3.1 Pilot study methodology

The pilot intervention used two groups: a group of children whose foster carers received the intervention with training in paired reading, the Handbook and ongoing support; and a group of children whose foster carers received only the Handbook. Both groups received three book parcels during that period.

3.3.2 Pilot study participants

Ten foster parents and children were recruited for the pilot study. They ranged in ages, from seven years and four months to nine years and ten months with the average age being seven years and nine months. Foster carers were asked if they could attend a training session and on this basis five were assigned to a group to receive training in paired reading and the Handbook, and five to a group where the foster parents received only the Handbook.

Three children were lost at post-testing due to placement changes, all from the group that received the paired reading training. The findings were therefore based on seven children, with only two in the group who received training in paired reading though the additional three foster carers were interviewed following the intervention. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups at baseline.

3.3.3 Findings and recommendations from the pilot

Overall, the pilot demonstrated that the intervention worked well. While we did not make any comparisons from the quantitative data due to low numbers and the purpose of the pilot was to test the process rather than the outcomes, the raw scores changed in the right direction for the majority of children. The qualitative data indicated some areas for consideration i.e. how to manage children who get bored with reading and provided excellent feedback on what children liked about the parcels.

In the light of these issues we implemented the following **recommendations** in the main trial:

- *Consent from social workers:* For the main trial, the foster carer information sheet was revised, and the research team managed the flow of information by ensuring foster carers received information sheets and consent forms from social workers before initially agreeing to participate. Where possible, blanket consent for all identified children in a LA was obtained from the fostering manager, assistant director or similar.
- *Reading Together Handbook:* Ensuring all those in the Handbook group receive it. The Handbook was sent out at the same time as the first parcel and a follow up text sent to check receipt.
- *Fieldworkers administration of reading tests:* Fieldworkers were selected who had some prior experience of reading, checks were made during training and clearer guidelines given to ensure consistency across the fieldworkers. On the Garfield attitude test, two words were anglicised, namely 'bookstore' and 'vacation'.
- *Inform schools about the project:* Schools/teachers were informed about participation in the RCT via the VSH, who sent an information sheet to all schools in the LA, noting that this project might involve children in their school, and stating that it complements rather than conflicts with phonics teaching.

- *Interviews with children:* For the pre-intervention interview, foster carers were requested to ask the child to choose a book which could then be used as a focus for the early questions (making them more concrete). Where there were difficulties getting a child to answer or to elicit information, more prompts were given.
- *Book gifting:* Dates were set for book parcel distribution and foster carers and children were informed at the pre-testing when to expect to receive the books. A text was sent following book parcel distribution to check that it had been received.
- *Handbook:* The research team were explicit to foster carers in stating that they should not share their Handbook with other foster carers (including those in the control group) and explained why.
- *Training:* The need to record reading sessions in the logs was added to the foster carer information sheet and emphasised in the Handbook and training. The research team provided a leaflet to each foster carer as well as the information sheets highlighting their role in the project.

3.4 The Final Intervention

The details of the final, revised versions of the four components of the Reading Together programme, incorporating the lessons learnt from the pilot and guidance from the Project Advisory Group, are set out below.

3.4.1 Reading Together Book Parcels

The Reading Together intervention included three book parcels that were sent out over the intervention period at intervals of approximately two months between each parcel. The contents of the first parcel were pre-determined but children were allowed some element of choice for the second and third parcels. This was to give them a sense of ownership over the process and the help with motivation and willingness to read.

As the intervention progresses the books increased slightly in difficulty yet had a high interest level for this age group. Children were given a choice of three fiction and three non-fiction for each ability level. They were asked to choose one fiction and one non-fiction. Most of the children involved chose from the higher ability level.

The final book choices were influenced by a few factors. Two local primary schools were asked to share the books they were reading. This included the books children were reading at home,

on their own and in class. A local children's book specialist was also consulted. Choosing books proved rather difficult for the group for several reasons:

- *Themes:* Following from previous feedback, carers did not always feel it was universally appropriate to include certain themes, such as children in care, being orphaned or abused etc. Books were chosen to ensure these themes were not central.
- *Gender Inclusivity:* Children's books often have a gendered aspect to their themes, content and visuals. Our aim here was to include books which were not overtly gendered, and which showed a variety of protagonists in a variety of situations.
- *Popularity:* It was important for engagement to choose books which were not popular to the point of saturation. In schools, children were often telling us about the same books over and over again.

Contents of Parcel 1

In parcel one all children were sent the following three books:

- The Twits by Roald Dahl
- Toto the Ninja Cat by Dermot O'Leary
- RSPB: First Book of Birds

Alongside the three books children were also sent:

- A Reading Log
- Stickers to complete the reading log
- Book choice sheets

Contents of Parcel 2

In parcel two children were sent a letter to say this was their second of three parcels. All children received Flat Stanley by Jeff Brown. In the parcel they also received a small notebook and matching pen with a smiley face emoji on the front. They were asked to choose between the following books:

Table 3.1 Contents of second book parcel

	Higher	Lower
Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>There's a Yeti in the Playground</i> by Pamela Butchart • <i>Spynosaur</i> by Guy Bass • <i>The Enchanted Wood</i> by Enid Blyton 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Worst Witch</i> by Jill Murphy • <i>Henry Haynes and the Great Escape</i> by Karen Inglis • <i>Eek The Runaway Alien</i> by Karen English
Non-Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rotten Romans</i> by Terry Deary • <i>The Kids Only Cookbook</i> by Sue Quinn • <i>The Usborne Official Astronauts Handbook</i> by UK Space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Night Sky</i> by National Geographic • <i>The Awesome Book of Animals</i> by Adam Frost • <i>The Kids Only Cookbook</i> by Sue Quinn

Contents of Parcel 3

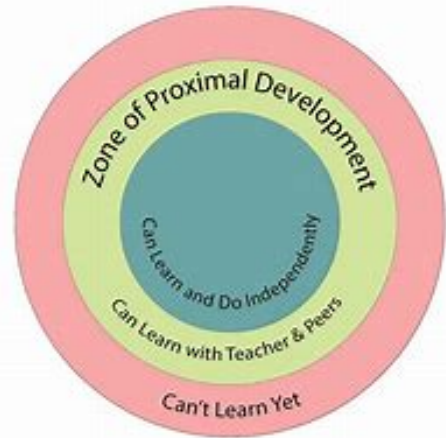
In parcel three children were sent a letter to say this was their last parcel and thanking them for taking part. All children received *Kid Normal* by Greg James and Chris Smith. In the parcel they also received a Charlie and the Chocolate Factory pencil and eraser. They were asked to choose between the following books:

Table 3.2 Contents of third book parcel

	Higher	Lower
Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cosmic</i> by Frank Cottrell- Boyce • <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i> by Jeff Kinney • <i>Kaspar</i> by Michael Morpurgo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Boy Who Grew Dragons</i> by Andy Shepherd • <i>Cookie</i> by Konnie Huq • <i>The Sheep-Pig</i> by Dick King Smith
Non-Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Plastic Sucks</i> by Dougie Poynter • <i>Quiz Whiz</i> by National Geographic • <i>Wild Things</i> by Guinness World Records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Quiz Whiz</i> by National Geographic • <i>Titanic</i> by DK Readers • <i>Space Poems</i> by Gaby Morgan

3.4.2 Reading Together Handbook

A PDF version of the Handbook used in the intervention can be viewed on the Reading Together website. The Handbook content is based on paired reading which, as summarised in Section 1, is an evidence-based reading strategy which has been around for many years. This reading strategy is based on a number of theories of learning, including the Vygotskian notion of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Here the carer is set up as the MKO and is able to pitch the material at a level which is just out of reach for independent reading. Through scaffolding and supporting children can make gains in reading and learning.



Paired Reading may be seen as a top-down method of reading instruction, it is a cognitive based, meaning driven method of instruction which does not emphasise phonology and individual sound- symbol correspondences. Reading for meaning is the primary objective of reading and readers are encouraged to comprehend a selection even if they do not recognise each word. The more affective components of the Paired Reading programme, such as praise, attachment building relationships and developing confidence are linked to behavioural learning theories, such as operant conditioning or attachment theories.

Three teachers had input to the Handbook and their comments were incorporated into the final design. The Handbook provided clear guidance and advice on how to support children's reading and how to implement a paired reading approach. This included information on developing understanding through questioning and FAQs which focused on some of the key issues carers were likely to face.

Carers in the two intervention groups (see below) received this prior to the first parcels being sent out, along with a top tips sheet and bookmark with the paired reading steps on it both designed to provide easily accessible reminders. Hence, foster carers were given an explicit role in directly supporting the children's engagement with the books they received, and thus their reading skills.

The Handbook is organised sequentially to take the carer through the paired reading journey from start to finish. As it is based on feedback from carers a range of troubleshooting sections are included and a range of options are given for each section. This emphasises the flexibility of the approach to fit in with the spectrum of ability. The Handbook was created by teachers

and researchers who have delivered training in paired reading and reading interventions to a wide variety of carers and parents and so this experience fed into the structure and content of the Handbook.

The core sections of the Handbook are:

1. *Introduction*: The Handbook begins by outlining the Reading together intervention and introducing the research team.
2. *The importance of reading*: This section outlines the importance of reading and paired reading for children in care and introduces the paired reading approach.
3. *What to read*: A section on what to read and how to choose suitable books allows carers to feel confident in their book choices.
4. *A paired reading approach*: This section contains a thorough outline of the paired reading approach, including what to do, sample scripts and the questions to ask. Sample scripts are given to ensure carers are following a similar structure to the sessions.
5. *Tips for a paired reading approach*: Once the intervention has been introduced a section on developing comprehension gives examples of what carers should be talking about with the children. This is organised as 'Before Reading', 'During Reading' and 'After Reading'.
6. *Frequently asked questions*: A section on 'Top Tips' and 'FAQs' finishes the Handbook and reinforces the messages of attachment, sustained reading, choice of material and fun.

3.4.3 Reading Together Carer Training

The in-person training for foster carers was designed to be interactive and relaxed. It included discussion of theories of reading and learning in an accessible way and gave carers the opportunity to practise the strategies discussed and to discuss their own unique situation with the research team.

The content was partly based on Bowlby's Attachment Theory and the links to learning; reflecting the fact that attachment is an integral part of learning and feeling confident and comfortable in the learning space can increase self-efficacy and self-esteem. As noted above, the training sessions were also partly based on Vygotsky's Scaffolding theory, here 'teachers' can improve learning and deepen understanding by asking questions and extending thinking.

All those who delivered the training sessions were experienced researchers with experience of reading. A trained teacher was present at more than half of the in-person training events.

The training events were delivered both face to face in groups and via one to one sessions over the phone. This mixed approach was due to the geographical size of some local authorities where carers were spread over a large area and it simply was not possible to find a location and time to deliver the training in a face-to-face format.

Trainers took part in standardisation meetings prior to the training and calibration meetings after each session to reduce differences between trainers. Training materials included pages to use for paired reading practice, an annotated PowerPoint, and a training pack. The training covered the following:

1. *The project*: This element outlined the research project and their involvement in the process.
2. *Reading*: This element outlined how difficult reading can be and the complexities of the process. Participants took part in activities related to comprehension, fluency and recognition and began to relate these to their own situation.
3. *Working together*: This element focused on the importance of relationships for learning and attachment theory. Carers looked at the impact relationships have on learning and why carers were well placed to be part of the paired reading intervention.
4. *Paired reading*: This element formed the majority of the training. Carers watched the demonstration video, discussed paired reading and watched the research team 'act out' a paired reading session before they were asked to pair up and try it themselves.
5. *Developing understanding*: When carers had a good grip on the mechanics of paired reading the training moved onto developing comprehension. Here carers brainstormed questions they might ask about the extracts they were working with. They also discussed the book parcels and the best way to use these during the intervention.
6. *Motivation*: This element encouraged discussion about book choice and the variety of reading materials which could be used. Carers discussed ways to use the parcels to build excitement and were introduced to the book logs as a way to help motivation and discussed praise and its place in reading.
7. *Questions*: Carers were given the opportunity to talk with the training team and ask questions. They were reminded of the website and the Handbook.

3.4.4 The Reading Together Website

Five separate videos were created for the programme and made available to all foster carers participating in the two intervention arms (the Training and the Handbook arms) to view through a password-protected section of the Reading Together website. The videos were also used in the in-person training sessions.

These videos served as consolidation of learning and distilled the major points necessary to implement the programme. They followed the Handbook and the training in terms of structure to give a coherence. They also aimed to serve as a programme reminder as carers moved through the intervention. This was a lengthy intervention and the book parcels served to help with motivation, to provide some new reading material and to act as a check in for carers. These readily accessible videos were another way for carers to access materials quickly and easily. The five videos were:

1. *What is paired reading? (1:32; 176 views)*: This video outlined paired reading and its theoretical underpinnings.
2. *How to do paired reading (1:40; 330 views)*: This video showed a paired reading session in practice and used real life children as examples. In this video the entire paired reading process was played out.
3. *How to give praise (1:03; 24 views)*: This video showed examples of praise being integrated into a session and emphasises the importance of praise during the reading session.
4. *Top tips (1:19; 24 views)*: This video talked through some of the most common questions carers asked and introduced simple solutions to some of the most common issues with implementation. This video emphasises the flexibility of the intervention.
5. *The child's perspective (0:58; 26 views)*: This video uses a child's voice to help show their experience of the process and the importance of taking their needs into consideration.

3.5 Summary

Reflecting the original research questions and objectives, two versions of the Reading Together programme were delivered and evaluated to test whether the additional in-person training provided for foster carers was a critical component of the programme. As such, the two versions of the programme that provided the focus for the evaluation were as follows:

Table 3.3 Versions of the Programme

	The Training Arm	The Handbook Arm
Description	Full version of the programme	Version of the programme without the in-person training
Components Included	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book Parcels • Handbook • In-Person Training • Website Resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book Parcels • Handbook • Website Resources

As described in more detail in the next section, the randomised controlled trial consisted of a three-arm trial where the effects of the two intervention arms above were compared with the progress of a third group of children in foster care who did not receive the intervention for the duration of the trial but continued as usual (the third “Control Arm”). The children in this latter arm received the second version of the programme (the programme without the in-person training) but without the Handbook, immediately following the conclusion of the trial.

Section 4: The Trial Findings

4.1 Introduction

This section reports the findings from the randomised controlled trial evaluation of the Reading Together intervention. As noted in Section 2, a protocol was registered for the trial and no amendments have been made to this since.⁵

As set out in Section 2, this was a three-arm trial that consisted of:

- The Training arm, that included the provision of the Handbook and specialist training for foster carers alongside the book parcels and access to the website (Arm 1).
- The Handbook arm, that included the provision of the Handbook alongside the book parcels and access to the website but without the provision of specialist training (Arm 2).
- The Control arm, where children did not receive either interventions and continued as normal. The children in this arm received the Handbook, access to the website and book parcels immediately after they had been post-tested (Arm 3).

4.2 Trial Procedure

A summary of the trial procedure is provided in Figure 4.1. All Virtual School Heads in England were contacted to invite them to take part in the trial (n=153). Of these, 22 were eligible (not currently providing a book-gifting scheme for 7–9-year-olds) and agreed for their local authority (LA) to participate. Each LA was asked to then nominate children that met the eligibility criteria of being between 7-9 years of age and in foster care and where their social worker felt that they would benefit from the programme.

As noted in Section 2, children were excluded from the trial if their social worker felt that they were unlikely to benefit from the programme by virtue of the level of learning, emotional and/or behavioural issues they are experiencing or by the instability or other extenuating factors associated with their foster placement or personal circumstances.

⁵ The full protocol can be viewed and downloaded from the Registry website: <https://sreereg.icpsr.umich.edu/sreereg/>

Figure 4.1 Flow chart summarising the trial procedure

Whilst the original target had been to recruit 528 children, this proved unachievable. The deadline for recruitment was extended by three months to ensure that the team had the opportunity to contact all local authorities in England. While all 153 authorities were contacted, it proved impossible to increase the number recruited beyond 22. For the remainder, their responses were as follows:

- Unable to participate as already running a book-gifting scheme. It is estimated that over a third of local authorities in England were delivering the Letterbox Club and thus this became a significant factor restricting the ability to recruit Local Authorities to the trial;
- Unable to participate because of existing commitments; and/or
- No response after follow up messages.

Of the 22 local authorities that agreed to participate, they had initially indicated that there were 426 children potentially able to participate. However, this reduced to 266 in total when the foster carers were contacted. Typical reasons for this included:

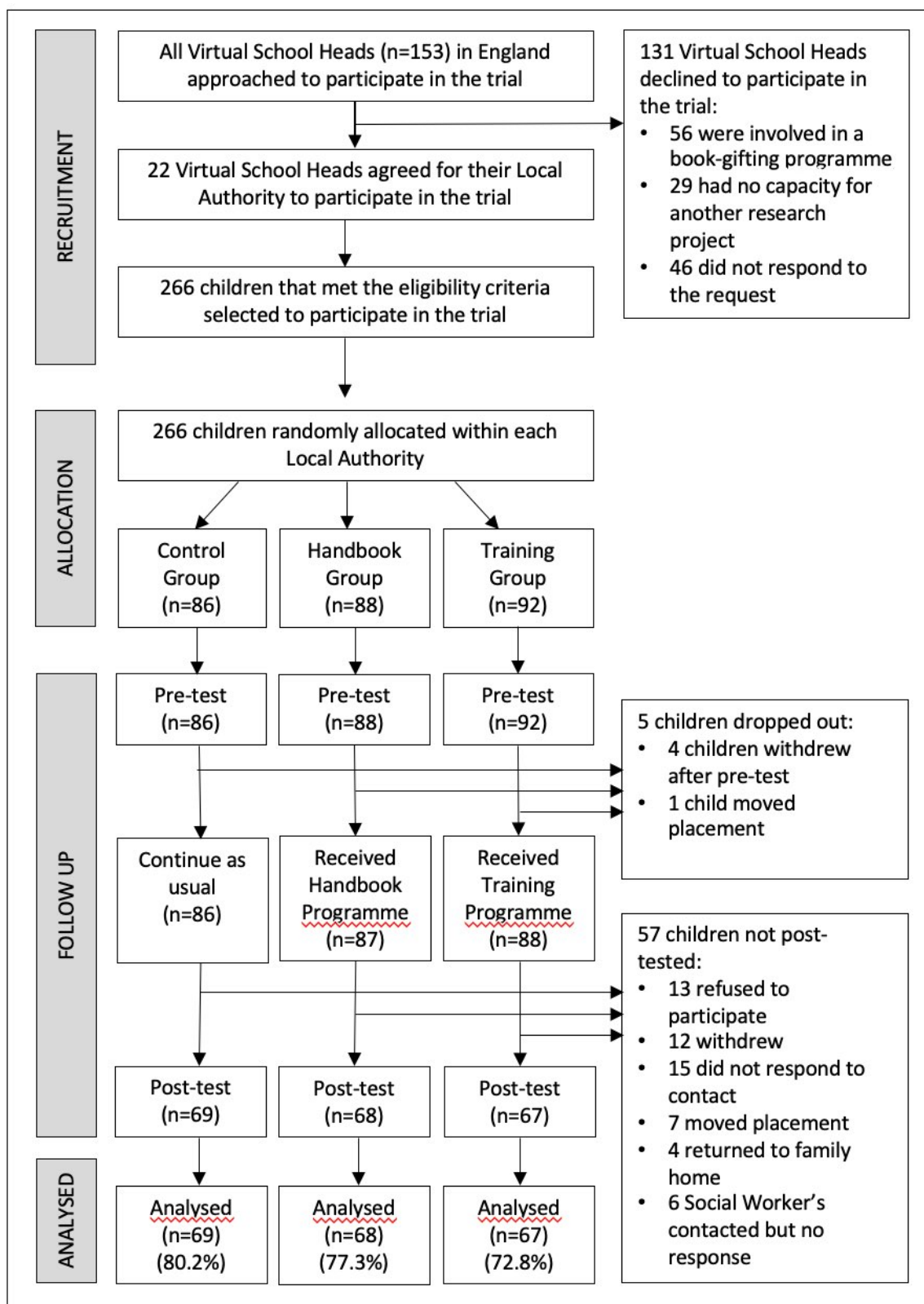
- The local authority had not secured the foster carers' agreement prior to passing their contact details to us and they did not want to participate;
- The placement circumstances had changed e.g. the placement had disrupted or was in danger of being disrupted;
- The child did not want to participate; and/or
- Foster carers did not answer calls or failed to respond to messages from the researchers.

Overall, it is disappointing that the original target figure was not achieved. However, the team has made every effort to maximise numbers. In this sense, there were no opportunities to increase the sample further. Given the overall timescales for the project, it would not have been possible to continue to attempt to recruit new local authorities once the intervention had begun. An achieved sample size of 266 is respectable given the very difficult contexts and hard-to-reach nature of this group of children.

Thus, and as summarised in Figure 4.1, a total of 266 children were recruited to the trial across the 22 LAs. In line with the trial protocol, children were then randomised to one of the three arms of the trial within each LA. Randomisation was undertaken blind by a researcher

independent of the research team. Where children recruited to the trial were living together in the same foster placement, these were randomised together as a cluster. In total, there were 58 children in this position (29 pairs) across 14 of the participating LAs.

Figure 4.1 Flow chart of participants in the trial



The breakdown of the final sample following randomisation, by intervention arm, is summarised in Table 4.1. It can be seen that children in the three arms were broadly balanced in relation to gender, age and LA.

Table 4.1 Characteristics of the sample following randomisation

Characteristics	Sub-Groups	Control Arm	Handbook Arm	Training Arm
Gender	Boys	44 (51.2%)	50 (56.8%)	45 (48.9%)
	Girls	42 (48.8%)	38 (43.2%)	47 (51.1%)
	Total	86 (100.0%)	88 (100.0%)	92 (100.0%)
Age (Years/Months)	Mean	8 yrs, 7.2 m	8 yrs, 8.6 m	8 yrs, 8.6 m
	Std. Dev.	9.7 m	10.4 m	10.0 m
Local Authority*	Local Authority 01	6	8	7
	Local Authority 02	2	2	4
	Local Authority 03	5	6	4
	Local Authority 04	8	6	5
	Local Authority 05	1	1	1
	Local Authority 06	7	9	10
	Local Authority 07	2	2	2
	Local Authority 08	6	6	6
	Local Authority 09	1	2	1
	Local Authority 10	2	3	2
	Local Authority 11	5	4	3
	Local Authority 12	3	4	5
	Local Authority 13	1	1	1
	Local Authority 14	5	3	7
	Local Authority 15	2	5	5
	Local Authority 16	7	5	5
	Local Authority 17	4	5	7
	Local Authority 18	3	4	4
	Local Authority 19	1	2	1
	Local Authority 20	4	2	3
	Local Authority 21	6	5	4
	Local Authority 22	5	3	5
		Total	86	88

*The names of the local authorities have been removed to maintain anonymity. However, it should be noted that they are geographically spread across England and represent a range of differing types of local authority by: levels of deprivation; urban/rural; ethnic diversity; and size.

The trial protocol specified five core outcomes and these are listed in Table 4.2 along with their descriptive statistics by intervention arm at pre-test. As can be seen, the randomisation process resulted in three broadly balanced groups of children in relation to these five outcomes.

The trial ran between July 2019 and December 2020. The delivery of the programme was staggered by LA, with start dates beginning in September 2019. The variation in start dates reflected the differing times that LAs were recruited into the trial. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 Pandemic hit in the middle of the trial with the national lockdown beginning in mid-March 2020 and occurring at differing stages in the delivery of the programme for all children.

Table 4.2 Comparison of the three intervention arms at pre-test by outcome variables

Outcome	Control Group	Handbook Group	Training Group
Reading Comprehension (YARC)*	102.8 11.11)	100.3 (13.30)	101.66 (11.51)
Reading Accuracy (YARC)**	102.1 11.35)	101.2 (11.68)	100.75 (11.97)
Reading Rate (YARC)**	102.8 13.83)	101.2 (15.27)	99.49 (14.07)
Receptive Vocabulary (BPVS)**	90.02 12.56)	87.48 (12.30)	88.69 (14.44)
Reading Attitudes (Garfield)**	63.08 11.97)	61.61 (12.05)	63.20 (11.04)

*Primary Outcome **Secondary Outcomes

As set out in the flowchart in Figure 4.1, following pre-testing, 62 children dropped out of the trial prior to post-testing leaving 204 children where pre-test and post-test data were gathered and upon which the main analysis reported below was based (76.3% of the original sample recruited and pre-tested).

Data collection at post-test for all children began from June 2020 and was all undertaken remotely, with fieldworkers testing and/or interviewing the participants through Skype/Zoom calls. Normative performance in the YARC and BPVS is standardised to 100. In general scores that fall between 85 and 115 are considered to be within the normal range for the age.

Scores between 70 and 84 are a cause for concern. Scores of 69 and below indicate a significant difficulty. The Reading Attitude survey is slightly different and is a scale score out of 80. Here, median performance for this age range is between 58-62. All scores fall within the normal range.

4.3 Deviations from the trial protocol

The following deviations from the original trial protocol should be noted:

1. The achieved initial sample size (n=266 children) was notably lower than the target of 528 children specified in the protocol and was also restricted to LAs in England. Unfortunately, access was not granted to recruit children in Northern Ireland and whilst efforts were made to extend the study to include children in the Republic of Ireland, the timescales were such that it proved not possible to achieve this in time.

For England, and as set out in Figure 3.1, whilst all LAs were approached, it was only possible to recruit 22 LAs and, within this, LAs varied in relation to the number of eligible children they were able to identify for participation in the study. This reduced sample size has adversely impacted on the power of the trial and this is discussed further below.

2. Once recruited and pre-tested, the loss of children to the trial was higher than anticipated (23.7% attrition). This was partly due to the insecure and unstable nature of some of the children's home circumstances but was also significantly impacted further by Covid-19 and the national lockdown. The potential influence of this level of missing data on the trial findings are considered as part of the sensitivity analyses reported below.
3. The unforeseen and unprecedented context provided by the impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown has meant that the programme was not delivered in 'normal circumstances'. This not only impacted on the ability to deliver the programme with fidelity but also on the external validity of the trial and thus the conclusions that may legitimately be drawn from the findings regarding the general effectiveness of the programme.
4. Insufficient data were collected on programme fidelity (data were only gathered for n=19 respondents across the two intervention arms). This has resulted in the trial not being able to address: Research Question 4 (the potential association between fidelity of programme delivery and effects achieved).

4.4 Main findings

The main analysis followed the procedures set out in the trial protocol. All analysis was conducted using Stata 16.1. The dataset and full details of the analysis (available as a Stata "do file") are available on request. The post-test adjusted mean scores for children in the three arms of the trial (adjusted for pre-test differences) and their associated standard deviations are compared in Table 4.3 for the five outcomes. The associated effect sizes (Hedges' g) and their 95 per cent confidence intervals are also set out.

It can be seen that the trial provided no evidence of an effect for either the Handbook or Training interventions compared to the control group for any of the five outcomes listed. As can be seen, the estimated effect sizes are all very small and none are significantly different from zero. Moreover, the direction of the effects appear to be randomly positive and negative and thus there is no discernible nor consistent pattern of change.

Table 4.3 Summary of main trial findings

Outcome	Group	N	Adjusted Mean	Std. Dev.	Sig.	Effect Size	
						g	[95% CI]
Reading Comprehension* (YARC)	Control	65	102.21	12.46			
	Handbook	68	103.01	14.26	.748	.060	[-.279, .398]
	Training	73	102.72	14.65	.829	.037	[-.295, .370]
Reading Accuracy** (YARC)	Control	64	103.05	12.32			
	Handbook	68	102.05	16.30	.655	-.069	[-.408, .271]
	Training	71	101.02	12.71	.351	-.162	[-.498, .175]
Reading Rate** (YARC)	Control	65	100.37	12.93			
	Handbook	65	97.81	14.74	.159	-.183	[-.525, .160]
	Training	71	98.95	13.16	.424	-.108	[-.443, .227]
Receptive Vocabulary** (BPVS)	Control	83	87.79	14.15			
	Handbook	86	87.77	12.78	.989	-.002	[-.302, .299]
	Training	87	89.92	15.42	.217	.137	[-.163, .436]
Reading Attitudes** (Garfield)	Control	84	60.81	11.36			
	Handbook	85	61.47	10.70	.703	.060	[-.241, .360]
	Training	90	59.44	10.93	.421	-.123	[-.419, .174]

*Primary Outcome **Secondary Outcomes

4.5 Exploratory and sensitivity analyses

In line with the trial protocol, the main analysis was extended to explore whether either age or gender of the child was associated with differential effects of the programme in relation to any of the five outcomes. Full details of the models fitted to test these are also included in Appendix 1.

It can be seen that there was no evidence from this trial that the Reading Together programme had differential effects in relation to age or gender of participant or the highest level of educational qualifications achieved by the foster carer.

In addition, three sensitivity analyses were conducted to test the robustness of the main findings as specified in the protocol. The first assessed whether the clustering of the data (children clustered within LAs) had potentially introduced any bias into the findings. The second similarly assessed whether the randomisation of children in pair clusters (by foster placement) potentially introduced any bias.

Both of these were assessed by re-running the main statistical models as two-level multilevel models. Full details of these fitted models are also provided in Appendix 1. No evidence was found that either the clustering of the data by LA or by pairs had any notable or substantive impact on the findings.

Finally, the third sensitivity analysis focused on the potential impact or bias introduced by the level of attrition and thus the missing data reported above. This was assessed through the use of multiple imputation. More specifically, all five main statistical models were re-run using multiple imputation and the details of the fitted models are also provided in Appendix 1. It can be seen that there is no evidence that the level of missing data reported had introduced any known biases into the trial.

4.6 Summary

This trial has found no evidence that the Reading Together programme, as delivered during 2019-2020 had any discernible effect on children's reading skills or attitudes towards reading. Moreover, there was no evidence that providing in-person training to foster carers had any effect above and beyond just providing them with the Handbook and access to the Reading Together website or no intervention. These findings were found to be robust and equally applicable to the children regardless of their age or gender.

The achieved sample for this trial was notably lower than that specified in the trial protocol. This has, in turn, had a significant impact in reducing the power of the trial to detect an effect. However, should Reading Together have been effective in practice, it is conceivable that the reduced sample size may have resulted in the trial findings showing positive effect sizes, albeit those effects not being statistically significant. However, and as reported above, the findings showed no discernible pattern of effects and thus any 'promising signs'.

It is important to note that these findings do not prove that Reading Together is not effective, only that the trial has not been able to provide evidence that the programme is effective. Whilst the internal validity of the trial remains strong, there are significant challenges to its external validity given the fact that the delivery of the programme was fundamentally impacted by the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the national lockdown. This does mean that considerable care is required in interpreting the lack of evidence of an effect for the Reading Together programme and how far this can be generalised beyond the unique context created by the Pandemic. This will be discussed in Section 6: Summary and Conclusions.

Section 5: The Qualitative Process Evaluation

5.1 Introduction

This section of the report details the findings from the qualitative interviews with foster carers and children which were completed as part of a process evaluation. A number of alterations were made to the original design of the process evaluation and these are outlined below.

This is followed by three indicative case studies to highlight in detail the wide range of children and carers involved in the Reading Together programme and the wide range of views and experiences. Following the presentation of the three detailed case studies, the subsequent section draws out the main overall themes to emerge from the qualitative findings and ends with a summary and conclusions.

5.2 Methodology

5.2.1 Alterations to the original design

The design of the process evaluation was changed to reflect that fact that Northern Ireland opted not to be part of the study. Recruitment to participate in interviews therefore took place in England and in those local authorities who were already involved in the study.

We had to expand the proposed number of local authorities from whom we would recruit families and children to be interviewed from 3 to 6 in total, 4 from the South and 2 from the North. This occurred because some local authorities only had very small numbers of children in the study and it was not possible to recruit 30 children and their carers from only 3 local authorities.

Although attention was paid to the age and gender of child participants, ultimately, we included all those who expressed a willingness to be involved because the numbers of those consenting to be involved was too small to be selective. 15 families from the North were selected and 15 from the South.

At the point of pre-intervention interviews, only 12 families in the North had participated and at the post-intervention stage this had reduced to 6 foster care families and their children. In the South 15 families agreed to participate in the pre-intervention interviews and at the post-intervention stages 13 were re-interviewed. We therefore had fewer total interviews than outlined in the original design.

As Northern Ireland opted not to take part in the study, the plan to recruit peer researchers was to occur in England only. However, this proved not possible because the pool of peer researchers was not large enough and the group was undergoing a period of change with people leaving and joining.

Furthermore, an attempt to recruit peer researchers via advocacy organisations proved either too costly (and had not been budgeted for), outside the timeframe for completion of the piece of work and/or the peer researchers in the organisations approached were involved in other projects. In the end, the qualitative interviews with children and carers were carried out by three members of the research team.

With regards to the interviews, the pre-intervention interviews were conducted in face-to-face encounters in the homes of foster carers as originally planned. However, in another alteration, some interviews were conducted with the child and carer together because that was their preference and some involved a separate interview for the carer and the child. Interviews with carers and children together lasted between approximately 30 minutes to just over an hour.

Between the pre-intervention interviews and the post-intervention interviews, it was not possible to follow-up with children as to whether they were completing their Talking Albums because of the onset of the pandemic and the national lockdown, which meant that it was simply not practical to intrude on carers and children to chase up on whether the Talking Album was being completed.

At the time of the post-intervention interviews, the pandemic and its impacts were still evident. Regulations were in place restricting travel and face-to-face contact. We had no option therefore other than to conduct the interviews with carers and children via online platforms (typically Zoom/Teams).

The impact of the pandemic made it impossible to interview social workers and stakeholders whose priorities were on dealing with the impact of the pandemic on their families and their working practices. We aim to complete a series of individual local authority briefings on the project and its findings to get their reactions and disseminate these via Virtual School Heads and key children's services personnel. We aim to interview them as part of this if they are available.

5.2.2 Conducting pre-and-post intervention interviews with carers and children

For those interviews in which carers and children were interviewed separately, each interview segment was approximately 15-30 minutes long. For those interviews where children and their carers were interviewed together these were between 25-70 minutes long. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed either by a member of the research team or by a transcriber approved by the university in which the research team was located.

The pre-intervention interviews focused on the context of the foster carer and child, carer and child reading practices (when, where, with whom, how often reading takes place), book preferences and books within the home. They also focused on making sure that the family knew about and understood the elements of the intervention and their role in relation to its implementation including the use of the Talking Album by children to record their views and experiences of the Reading Together programme.

The post-intervention interviews were also recorded. The length did not significantly vary from the pre-intervention interviews. These interviews focused on views of the parcels and their contents, views and experiences of the paired reading materials (manual, training and/or videos), the use of and views/experiences of the Talking Album, views of any changes in the carer/child relationship, changes in the approach to reading (since the first interview) views and experiences of reading together.

Lastly it should be noted that because of the pandemic, we adapted our interview schedule to include discussions around the impact of the lockdown on foster carers and children.

5.2.3 Analysis of qualitative data

Transcribed data was organised and coded using NVivo12. The process of coding involved four members of the research team reading randomly selected transcripts and generating a series of codes. These initial codes were shared within the team and an agreed set of codes generated making up the coding framework.

Four members of the research team coded qualitative data. As the coding progressed, research team members suggested additions and changes to the coding framework as they familiarised themselves with more of the data. Agreement within the team occurred to amend the coding framework by adding additional codes to it. From the codes, a series of broader themes was identified and these form the basis to the reporting of the case studies and to the overview of the qualitative findings more broadly.

5.3 The Case Studies

5.3.1 Overview

The purpose of the case studies presented in this section is to provide a rich, in-depth and detailed account of children and carers involved in the Reading Together programme. While acknowledging that every carer/child is unique, we have purposively selected case studies to provide illustrative examples of the varied contexts of the carer/child backgrounds, their reading practices, their engagement with and impact of the Reading Together programme, and lastly the varied impacts of the pandemic on schooling, the carer/child relationship and on reading. The case studies are structured and presented under the following headings:

- Carer(s) and their context
- Carers reading practices (in the past and/or in the present)
- Carers views on needs of the child
- Child's reading practices-comments by carer and child
- Comments on the parcels
- Comments on the training, manual
- Comments on the paired reading and any specifics on reading - 5 'W's – what they read, why, when, where, with whom
- Child's reactions
- Views on the Talking Album
- Changes in reading approach between time point 1 and time point 2
- The pandemic and its impacts on schooling, the carer/child relationship and on reading.

The case studies are followed by an overview of the wider qualitative findings, which are also presented following the headings outlined above.

5.3.2 Case study One: Connor - hard to engage reader

Context

Charlotte and Charlie are non-relative carers. Charlie works night shifts in a factory and Charlotte used to work in a school for children with special educational needs. They have been caring for Connor (aged 9 years) and his brother Christopher (aged 11 years) for about 2 years. Before then both boys had been with previous foster carers for 20 months. The couple have grown up children and grandchildren who live locally and visit regularly.

Foster carers' reading practices: in the past

Charlotte reflects that as a child of Connor's age, she was a 'wide range reader' and that in terms of how many books she was reading she said, as a young child 'four a night, I used to

do'. She said that she has recounted her school childhood memories of reading to Connor and his brother. Both have complained about reading saying that they bet Charlotte didn't have to read as much in school as they do now. Charlotte said her response was, 'Well actually I did, and I was reading what they would call wide range readers'. On Charlie (husband) and his reading she said, 'No, he didn't read when he was at school either, he doesn't enjoy it and he lost interest'.

Foster carers' reading practices: in the present

Charlotte does not read alone for her own pleasure/interest much now at all. Having her own children was one of the stated reasons for no longer reading as much as she used to. Charlie does not read for pleasure. Charlotte and Charlie do read with Connor as described below.

Charlotte uses the Kindle. She says, 'I quite like the Kindle just because you actually can't see how long the book is, so you don't sort of think, oh god I've only got this far'. The children currently appear not to use a kindle.

Foster carers' comments on the characteristics and needs of Connor

Charlotte says that 'Connor says he likes being in foster care'. She recounted a story where 'Connor came and gave me a hug and he said to me, 'You're the best'. I can't remember what I had done, probably gave him some pudding!'

Charlotte indicates that Connor has special educational needs and has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). She says that Connor's Education, Health and Care Plan is 'mainly based around his emotional and social rather than academic needs. It's even though he is behind, and he is underage related in everything and again he has a medical genetic disorder which causes learning difficulties. We are at a stage that I don't know whether his learning difficulties are from his previous life experiences in that he has not done things, so he is catching up, or whether it is down to his [needs].'

Charlotte is concerned that there is no consistency in Connor's ability stating, 'He has different levels of reading and sometimes it's beautiful, and sometimes you want to go and commit murder. I'm only saying that because he has just been reading his brothers Sherlock Holmes, and he's just, he didn't know what murder meant.' Charlotte and Connor discuss the meaning of the word 'murder':

Connor: It's where someone, like a murderer has come into a room and caused murder.

Charlotte: What is murder though? What happens?

Connor: When someone dies.

Charlotte: When someone is killed.

Interviewer: Someone is killed yeah.

Charlotte: And who is it that does that? What are they called?

Connor: Murderers.

Charlotte: That's right, and what else did we learn?

Connor: I don't know.

Charlotte: What other word did you not know?

Connor: Luggage.

Charlotte: Luggage, didn't know what luggage was, so do we know what luggage is?

Connor: It's suitcases.

Interviewer: Brilliant [...] So, if it's a big word like luggage, how do you... [Connor sounds out the word]

Interviewer: Good boy, that's really good, that's the way to help you do really long words.

Charlotte: He can break his words down really easily, it's the understanding of them.

[Connor reads another tongue twister out loud].

This display of Connor's knowledge reinforces Charlotte's concern not to 'write him off' and beliefs in early intervention, as noted above. She comments on the fluctuating progress 'Sometimes you think its Groundhog Day here and it is, I do actually find now Connor potentially will be more problematic when he gets to high school if we don't [get] over these next two [years]'. She says she is 'really firm with them'. She indicated that when in his previous placement, he had undergone another educational assessment 'because they thought he had severe learning difficulties, and he came out as being a potential high achiever, and they were all gob smacked'.

Charlotte said she is keen to help Connor 'because he likes reading, he enjoys reading and he will read in his bed'. She went on to say but 'when he struggles, he feels bad and can't verbalise it [...]. He would say I've read that and that. I don't think he has; I think he has used a lot of the pictures and the bits because it's got different parts'. He also 'likes to write stories as well, but he has not got the imagination. He will say, I've wrote a book, I will be like where is it? It's a page' .

What Connor reads

Connor says he likes books that are tongue twisters 'because of the tongue twisters and it's only got a bit on each page'. In the interview, he reads aloud the tongue twister 'Fox in Socks'. He continues and receives praise from the researcher and Charlotte who says, 'He

is good at reading, and he is also a very intelligent young man aren't you?', to which Connor says 'Nah'. Connor also says he likes 'The World's Worst Children', the Captain America series and the Captain Underpants series. Connor especially likes Casper (a ghost) 'because he gets bullied by the other ghosts [...] Because it's all about bullying [and] it goes from bad to good'.

Charlotte confirmed that Connor likes Dr Seuss. She said, 'He likes the ones with all the rhymes but that's because he knows them, and he can do them. He likes them and if I say to him to go and get a book or get your reading book from school, he will say he has forgotten it. So, I will say to go upstairs and pick one of your books and bring it downstairs so you can read that to me instead. He will come down with De Seuss and will go no, not that one because he knows it off the top of his head'.

Where Connor reads and stores his books

Connor stores his books in his bedroom, but he can't read in his bedroom because he shares a room with his brother. Connor says, 'Sadly he snores'. As a result of not being able to read in the bedroom, Charlotte and Connor confirm that they read schoolbooks together on the settee, most recently Molly and Ginger.

Who Connor reads with

Charlotte confirms that 'We were doing last week with Molly and Ginger. I was reading a page and then he was reading a page to try and get him to...' and Connor says, 'Copy how you read'. Charlotte says 'yes' and adds 'Yeah, rather than his, 'I-don't-really-want-to-read' voice. So, he has that voice, 'I'm-just-reading-it-because-you're-making-me-do-it' [voice]'. Charlotte confirms that 'So, I was reading a page and he was reading a page, and then when he does that he reads really well, and it's a pleasure to listen to.'

Sometimes Charlie and Connor read together. Charlotte says of Connor, 'He reads every day after school, and sometimes you will go and read with Charlie won't you. Now, Charlie won't listen to him if he (Connor) is doing his voice, Charlie just says, 'No, I'm not listening to you if you are doing that [...] We only do it for 5 or 10 minutes, we don't make you do loads, and loads do we?'

How often Connor reads

Charlotte and Connor confirm reading happens every day. Connor says he does read 'every morning in school'. This includes guided reading which Connor says is where 'you don't read, you just read a paragraph'.

Connor's attitudes towards reading

As the conversation unfolds, it becomes clear that Connor can find schoolwork, schoolbooks, reading and books in general a bit of a burden and the demands a bit overwhelming. When the RT programme was explained to Connor, he was asked 'Have you got a shelf in your bedroom that you can put books on'? Connor said he had 'but I think I have got too much books' and that he didn't need more 'because every year you can read each one, and then another year, and then another year by reading the same every year.' Charlotte later confirmed this sense of not needing any more books when asked about how often they visit to the library. She said, 'Not very often because we went to the library and they got books, then they just wouldn't read them, but they have got books that they have not read, and I just think... [...] Yeah, and he is getting books from school, it's an overload of books.'

Charlotte also pointed out that, so not to overburden Connor with reading related tasks, she had been in contact with Connor's school to explain that he is in a reading project and 'to say that he is going to be doing that, so that is probably going to be his reading at home, rather than him having to read his [school] reading book. He said as long as I am writing in his reading record what he is reading, and I will take the letter in as well so that they can keep that on file.'

Charlotte reflects that 'when these first moved in [...], I used to read to them every night, but now they don't. It's like they don't need that, and they don't want it. I do try and get them come and sit with me, it's really hard and difficult [...]'

Charlotte then says that 'Reading is a daily battle, when they come in from school, I ask them to empty their bags, get any letters out and you need to do your reading and your spellings'. In relation to Connor, Charlotte said 'So, earlier on I was cleaning to worktops there and I asked Connor to go and get his reading book and then you can read to me while I'm doing this. A little bit of that as well is about him doing things independently to a certain degree because he doesn't, and he doesn't at school. He will constantly want you there with him, constantly want you there'.

When Connor is asked about what helps with reading, he says, 'Getting a piece of paper and covering the other bit up and just reading the link and then going down.' Connor also indicates that he wants more time with Charlotte to read together. When Charlotte is asked whether she gets enough time to read with him, she says, 'Not really no', to which Connor replies 'That's not fair. [...] It's not fair that she doesn't get any time'.

Charlotte confirms that 'Connor has made a lot of progress, he was very babyish when he came to us to the point, I can't bath myself, yes you can'. She goes on to say '[...] you can't take away from the fact when people say to me, 'Oh you are doing a great job' and you just think, 'Well I'm just doing what they need and hopefully we are providing them with what they need'.

The Reading Together parcels

Connor got two out of three parcels. The second one was 'a long time coming, it didn't come when it was expected to come and then the third one, we sent the [choice slip] back, but we didn't get one at all. In terms of Connor's views about the parcels, Charlotte said 'but from Connor's perspective when I sat down with him and went through the programme he was very excited about it. He was very excited about getting something for nothing and again for looked after children when somebody gives them something, they think it is amazing. It doesn't matter what it is and if they think someone is giving something away, they say, can we have it. So, from that perspective he thought it was very nice and he also thought it was very nice that being the younger of the two siblings he was getting something, and it was just for him. Generally, he is a little bit overshadowed so from my perspective for him it was really nice'.

The Reading Together training

Charlotte went to the training. She said, 'The reading together bit, like the actual you starting and then getting them to read, I thought that was really good and I think if Connor had of been younger, I think he is probably one of the older ones. It was just before he was 10 but I think if he had of been younger, I think he would have re-engaged with learning. I think because of his age, he saw it as a bit of an easy way for him not to read. I think he just thought this is good, if I don't tap, she will read it all to me.'

Applying the paired reading approach

In terms of applying the paired reading approach, she said 'It sort of did work and it didn't work. We got one of those packs and I went through the pack with him, and he enjoyed the reading together bit, he enjoyed me reading to him but didn't necessarily enjoy his reading part in it. He sort of sustained that for about 2 weeks and then it was just me. So, I started having to say to him 'when I tap, you start reading', because he will just sit there smiling at me.'

In terms of the reasons why paired reading was challenging, she said 'To be fair I sort of half expected it because he has already lost his interest in reading. He hasn't had an interest in reading from when he was 8-years. He didn't really have any interest; he can read, and he can read well when he chooses to. He has lots of tactics to be able to stop reading in that he

mumbles. When we did the second lot of books and we were choosing we picked a recipe book because I thought I could engage him in that because he would physically have to be doing something.'

She spoke specifically about the cookbook saying, 'We have done some baking, not just out of that book as we have used a different book as well where I get him to read the instructions. I have to switch it around a little bit with him, but his general reading of a book is near enough.'

Connor's reactions to the paired reading approach

She then explained that 'I have sort of given up with him a little bit because his behaviour then goes off. If I force him to read, his behaviour just deteriorates. He does everything that he can; it's a bit like a self-destruct button. He would rather not read and go and sit in his room for half an hour then read. If he is not doing what I am asking him to do, and you are trying to do the reading together and he is still not engaging or he is jumping all over the furniture then you have to give him a consequence.'

As a result of how challenging and counterproductive the paired reading was becoming, Charlotte said she reverted back to 'reading to them every night and it was part of their routine. If you want me to read to you which they do, and I used to go up and sit on a chair in their room at 8.15pm and have to wait for them. Sometimes I would start reading the book very loudly so they could hear me reading and then they would get on with what they were doing and come up the stairs.'

In terms of identifying the factors that contributed to the challenges, Charlotte reconfirmed Connor's special educational needs and also the fact that he had attachment issues which, as he had become to feel more secure in the placement, had come more to the fore. Charlotte also confirmed that Connor 'struggles to sit still, he doesn't have a diagnosis of ADHD or anything [...] but he struggles to sit still at the side of you. His fingers are always on the go, I don't know whether he just wants to play with the pages. I think he struggles to actually...although he can sit at school and do things. I don't know whether it's when he sits to read there is just nothing, you are not moving your body and it's only your mind that is working. I don't know whether he can sustain that without fidgeting, it's like I want to get off, I want to go, I want to move'. And these factors can impact on his engagement in reading.

The Talking Album

Charlotte confirmed that, as a result of the pandemic, the Talking Album 'It's still there but it's not been used. I found it the other day in the cupboard and thought we could use that, so

we will get that back out again now he is being more independent with stuff. I think we might have a better shot at reading it and doing it now.'

The pandemic and schooling

Charlotte confirmed that she and Charlie made the decision to keep Connor and his brother at home during lockdown even though they were classed as children of keyworkers. She said 'We just made the decision not to send them in and we started with Joe Wicks P.E. We had a little timetable and when it got to actually doing Maths and literacy, anything like that, I really struggled. They have both got Education, Health and Care Plans and so they both had a one to one at school most of the time and it went from that to me as not a teaching assistant or a teacher trying to teach both in different year groups at the same time with them both sat at the table. It completely didn't work because all we did was fight'.

'Connor just didn't want to do it and he is very stubborn. He sat at the table for an hour and did nothing, just looked at his book. It was like a battle of wills and he won, I'm sorry but he won. I just thought if he is willing to sit there for 2 or 3 hours doing nothing well then...in the end even though he was in Year 5 I reverted back to printing off Year 2 material and even with that he was saying he didn't know how to do it. Towards the end it was do that and I will give you some sweets, which works wonders! We did baking and they watched Horrible Histories for Science and History or they would watch Science things on the TV. We made good use of the TV and we did Joe Wicks exercises.'

The pandemic and foster carer/child relationship

Charlotte confirmed that she had a daily routine stating that 'It would have been very easy for me to go, do you know what just go on your tablets all day and play games but at the end of the day they have got to go back to school, and they have got to start learning again. So, for me I thought once I do that if they then have to go back to school and have to start learning 9am – 3pm then they are not going to want to. That will cause me more problems at home later because I will have school on the phone. To be fair and very positive about the pandemic, both of them since they have gone back to school are working extremely hard.'

The pandemic and reading

Charlotte confirmed that books from the parcels that worked really well included the cookbook and the bird book. Charlotte said 'I encouraged him a little with the baking one [...] and the bird one, he got a bird one with pictures. During lockdown we went out and about on lots of bike rides and things. We went to a nature reserve up the road with a bird hide and we saw some of the birds, I said to him when you get back you can have a look and see if you can find some of the birds. He looked through the book and said he had seen all sorts but he hadn't. He does that with people as well!'

Charlotte said she thinks Connor might have read a bit more in the lockdown but did return to school and then had the summer off. She said of Connor, 'He does enjoy being read to and he does enjoy all the expressions, he does learn from it and takes it all in. When he does read you can see that he has when he willingly reads. His question always is how many pages do I have to read? I say to him it's quality not quantity, he says what does that mean? I said if you are reading to me nicely and put an expression in, do the voices then maybe two or three pages you will often then find, and it depends what mood he is in. He will either start reading and be enjoying it that he doesn't realise how many pages he has read or he just straight away doesn't do the expression etc. So, you know he is only going to do a bit and I don't know if that's because he can't be bothered because he doesn't want to or because he finds it difficult or he is tired after school. He does still pick up books, he is not just dismissing them altogether. He doesn't want to read his schoolbooks because he does that at school, it is a fine line with I do that at school, why am I doing it at home? I do my homework at home and I would say well, reading is part of your homework.'

5.3.3 Case Study Two: Haley – very keen reader but did not engage

Context

Helen and Hugo are maternal grandparents to Haley (aged 8 years) and Heather (aged 5 years). They have cared for their grandchildren for the last 2 years. Whilst approved as foster carers, they found the assessment and approval process challenging and this has led to feelings of mistrust and frustration in their relationship with children's services illustrated by reference to delays in children's services approvals for the children's medical treatment and their feelings of disempowerment in decision-making meetings.

Foster carers' reading practices: in the past

Helen and Hugo are avid readers. Both say they have always read. Helen explains that she was a keen reader as a child. She shares her memories, 'I started reading when I was younger, I used to frighten myself going to bed as well, I used to read Edgar Wallace [and] Agatha Christie, I love her. And that when Haley's age 'I used to buy a comic every week when I was a child, always. Sure, we didn't have the same things then, reading was the only outlet that you had [...] my brothers had the Beano and the Dandy, mine was a girl's one.'

Foster carers' reading practices: in the present

In terms of frequency of reading, Helen explains, 'I read anytime I can, I read when I am having a meal which we are not allowed to do really because they are not allowed to have their phones.' She goes on to say, 'I have to do my hair in the morning, so I read while I am doing that.' Haley agrees and says, 'Sometimes she doesn't have the book at the side, mostly she does, but she has got it in her hand, eating a sandwich or something while she is staring at

her book like this.’ Hugo also states that he was reading before the researcher arrived at the family home. Helen says, ‘We both were’ and Haley says, ‘All their spare time they just read’.

Regarding why they read, Hugo says ‘I like reading because it helps you with your spelling and spelling let me down in school. [...]. I can read, but when it comes to spelling...’. The couple also explain that they buy themselves, their children and their grandchildren second-hand books from a local market. Hugo says of a market stall holder ‘her books are pretty new actually; I don’t know where she gets them from [...] She doesn’t go above £2.00.’ They also look out for deals at the local supermarket and also highlight free offers of books that are used to promote fast-food for example (buy a burger and get a free small children’s book).

Helen and Hugo explain that they used to go to the local library which was in a beautiful building, but it was shut down and now another building houses a smaller library. Haley, Hugo and Helen all reflect on the loss of the old library. Helen says, ‘That’s where you had to go to that machine to sign your book out’ and Haley says, ‘I liked that. [...] I like it because, well I have my own card and it’s in my wallet so I can actually get my own books without them doing it.’

Although Haley has a laptop, the couple, in particular Hugo, do not like computers. Hugo says he hasn’t got a computer and Helen explains, ‘he doesn’t like computers’. Hugo says, ‘I won’t touch a computer; I can’t work them. I was on security and I used to have the latest computer on my desk, and I couldn’t use it.’ Haley comments that, ‘What I’m guessing about grandad is that he was good at his job, but not good at using the computer.’ Hugo agrees saying, ‘Electronics completely! I couldn’t turn my T.V off’, to which Haley says, ‘But he is smart, he is smarter than he looks!’

Foster carers’ comments on the characteristics and needs of Haley

Before she lived with their grandparents, Haley and her sister lived with their mother who Helen confirmed is a strong, keen reader. Haley is also a keen reader. Helen and Hugo confirm that Haley has an Education, Health and Care Plan⁶ and that she has ADHD.

What Haley reads

Haley engages the researcher in a long conversation about the books she has read or is reading. She discusses Harry Potter which she has just started. She says he likes it and when asked what makes a book a good book she says, ‘Harry Potter can talk to snakes which is good for me because I’m afraid of snakes, so he can tell them to leave me alone, they are

⁶ An Education, Health and Care Plan is a legal document which outlines a child’s needs, the services to address those needs and hoped for outcomes. The identified services must be provided by the Local Authority.

terrifying. [and] Hagrid comes to a house where he lives, well not really because they moved out and went into this place with thunderstorms and when it was thunderstorms, he broke the shadow and busted the door down, and it went pop. Then he walked in and said, sorry about that and put the door back on. I mean, why did he need to be like that? Why couldn't he just go and come in?' The researcher says, 'I wonder why, what do you think?' To which Haley says, 'I don't know'.

Haley goes on to explain that she has 'the Harry Potter DVD, that he has Harry Potter books [...] 1, 2 and 3 and 6 and that he remembers their titles [...] Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, I can't remember the others. Oh, Harry Potter and Prisoner of Azkaban'.

Where Haley stores her books and where Haley reads

With Helen present, Haley shows the researcher her book collection in her bedroom on a shelf above her bed. There she has the 800-page book, Harry Potter, [...] Jaqueline Wilson, [...] Beatrice Potter (and) [...] the bookcase with Roald Dahl as well as all his achievement certificates.

The researcher explores why books are kept. Helen says 'They were real good books' and Haley says it might be the connection to the book. When the researcher explores this further with Haley, 'If you thought this was the best book you had ever read, you would want to keep it? To which Haley says she 'would give it back to my mum' saying 'I know my mum loves a book so much, she would keep them as well.' She then points out a book her mother has given her saying of that and the Harry Potter books that she wouldn't hand them on, 'Never, not in a million years.'

Regarding where Haley reads, Helen and Hugo were clear to point out that all reading that they might do together takes place downstairs in the living room in the evening.

Who Haley reads with

Hugo and Helen confirm that Haley mainly reads alone and occasionally with Helen and Hugo.

How often Haley reads

Hugo and Helen say that Haley and her sister read every day. They believe that their own habit of reading every day is copied by their grandchildren.

Haley's attitude towards reading

When Haley explores with the researcher all of the authors he likes, her confidence and love of books comes across. She says of the Harry Potter series that book 5 'is the thickest book,

800 pages'. When asked what she would think of getting a book with 800 pages, Haley says, 'I don't know; I will probably take me a couple of years'. Asked if this would worry her, she says, 'That's OK because I like Harry Potter!' Haley also explores other authors she likes including JK Rowling, David Walliams, Roald Dahl. She mentions specific books including 'The Gangster Granny', 'Rat Burger' and 'Mr Stink'.

The Reading Together parcels

Haley remembers the parcels but was indifferent to them. When asked if she felt excited about getting them, she said, 'Yes and no'. When asked why she would say 'no', 'They are books.' When asked how she felt when opening them she said, 'Absolutely nothing as in I didn't feel anything different' and that he didn't have 'a favourite thing from the parcels.' Haley confirmed that she stored the gifted books in her bedroom on the bookshelf and that the Harry Potter books remain her favourite. Helen also indicated that Haley has not read the books from the parcels except for maybe one.

The Reading Together training

Helen was asked by the researcher, 'Did you receive the training Handbook, or did you go to a training session before the start of the paired reading intervention Helen? Helen replied, 'No. Oh actually I think I got the Handbook, but I didn't get a proper look at it what with all that's been going on'. She is then asked about the training videos, to which she says, 'No, didn't even know they were there'.

The paired reading

Haley and Helen confirmed that Haley did read every day; a page with Helen and then she read alone.

Haley's reactions

Haley has not really engaged with the reading together programme. Haley said she had read one book from the parcels and couldn't remember what it was. There appear to be a number of contributory factors:

- Haley was not enamoured by the parcel boxes, the books or the other parcel contents.
- Haley didn't want to do paired reading anymore. Helen said she didn't want to do it 'Unless she is feeling a bit down, she is reading really well now and is doing brilliantly', and so paired reading had stopped. Helen also said that she did start by using the paired reading, but that Haley then got the confidence to read herself.
- Haley is a very strong reader and the Reading Together books did not grab her interest.

- Because of the pandemic and home-schooling, reading at home was now something she had to do rather than wanted to do (as previously and highlighted in the pre-intervention interview). Helen confirmed that in the context of being home-schooled and then returning to school, Haley had to read anyway every day for school, send the school things and complete a reading log for school (like the reading together one). So, it appears that there was overlap and the feeling of overload. Haley confirmed the feelings of overload when she remarked that 'she (grandma) still makes me do homework on Saturdays and Sundays, and I don't like that. Saturdays and Sundays are meant to be free but they (grandparents) make me do reading.' When the researcher tried to reassure Haley 'well sure reading is not too bad, especially in the winter', her response was, 'There are other fun things to do as well'.
- Haley's situation changed because she was diagnosed with a disability and has been prescribed medication. The nature of the disability also made things challenging in the lockdown.
- Haley got other books from a later book gifting reading scheme that she was reading.

The Talking Album

When asked about the Talking Album, Haley said that her remembered it but said, 'we have not used that yet, I don't know where it is'. Helen said, 'We did take some photographs, but we have not done the talking bit have we really' to which Haley said, 'No, we haven't put them in it yet'. Helen confirmed that 'With all the home learning this year it was very difficult.'

The pandemic and schooling

Haley mentioned that during the lockdown she had to do a lot of homework.

The pandemic and foster carer/child relationship

Haley mentioned tensions in her relationship with Helen during the lockdown caused by Helen making sure homework was completed over the weekend and Haley keen to express that weekends should be used for other things.

The pandemic and reading

Helen said that Haley had not done any less or more reading in the pandemic.

5.3.4 Case Study Three: Dave – the struggling reader

Context

Diana and her husband are non-relative foster carers and have been foster carers for the last 15 years. They have two older daughters who live at home. Diana works as a teaching assistant and holds an NVQ level 3 in teaching. Her husband works in hospitality.

Foster carer's own reading: in the past

Diana loves to read and is a prolific reader. She remembers reading from an early age and was encouraged to read for both pleasure and learning, reading newspapers that her father would bring home after work. Diana grew up in a house where there were lots of books and thinks her love of reading came from seeing other family members reading.

Foster carer's own reading: in the present

Diana's love of reading continues now and she talked about taking at least 5 books to read on holiday with her. At home Diana will read anywhere and everywhere and as well as books will read articles of interest online. She enjoys most genres of books, except horror and wishes that she had more time to read. Her husband tends to read about things he's interested in, mainly articles on football.

Foster carers' comments on the characteristics and needs of Dave

Dave is 10 years old. He has three other siblings who are in other foster placements although he does have contact with them. He is slightly behind his peers in terms of his attainment and reading level and struggles with reading and concentration.

What Dave reads

Dave was very vocal about his dislike of reading. In fact, he said that he hated reading and thought that it was a waste of time. Further discussions however revealed that he does enjoy stories. Diana talked about the stories they like to read together including 'The Christmasaurus.' This prompted Dave to open up as he told the researcher 'Captain Underpants is funny.'

Where Dave stores his books and where Dave reads

There seemed to be a lot of contradiction between Diana and Dave's perceptions of reading and access to books. Dave said that he didn't have a lot of books whereas Diana spoke about Dave having 'in excess of about 20 books' plus the ones that he came with. Books tend to be given as rewards or as presents on birthdays and at Christmas, not just for Dave but with Diana's daughter and other children that they have fostered in the past.

Who Dave reads with

Diane tries to read with him regularly before bedtime, creating a calm and cosy environment with a hot drink.

How often Dave reads

Dave will read his schoolbook and Diana also tries to get him to read another book alongside this which they take turns to read. Reading is done for approximately 10 minutes a day at home.

Dave's attitude towards reading

Diana has to be careful when reading is implemented with Dave as he struggles with it and doesn't enjoy doing it. Aside from reading books, Dave talked about having to read the instructions when playing a game, including reading the facts on his 'Match Attack' cards. He also enjoys reading magazines.

The Reading Together parcels

Dave and Diana struggled to remember when they had received the parcels, but Dave was able to talk about the contents of the parcels including the activities and the books. He talked about receiving a funny book 'about a funny boy.' Diana remembered Dave being excited when the book parcels arrived and looking through the books to see which ones caught his eye.

The Reading Together training

Diana and Dave were in the Handbook group. Diana had no problems with the Handbook and found the instructions easy to follow.

The paired reading

Both Diana and her husband carried out the paired reading with Dave. They managed to carry it out a couple of times a week and enjoyed having the quality time to spend with Dave. Having quality time together to read also gave the family the opportunity to discuss the books that they were reading and talk about whether Dave was enjoying them or not. Diana used techniques to keep Dave's enthusiasm up as they read together, 'every so often I'd stop and say 'ooh I just need a sip of my drink, can you carry on?'' The family had also started using the library for audio books so that Dave could read independently whilst listening to the audio book. Diana also noted that Dave is more likely now to take over reading when they are supposed to be turn taking.

Dave's reactions

Dave was keen to share his books with the researcher, this time around. He showed her one of the books from the book parcel, 'Titanic' describing it as 'very experimental.' Dave seemed to have more confidence in using new words and was also able to talk about what the book was about. Diana's daughter also has an interest in the Titanic, so it gave her the opportunity to share her knowledge with Dave too.

The Talking Album

The family didn't complete the Talking Photo Album.

Changes in Dave's reading/reading practices

There was a definite change in Dave's response to questions about reading and books between the two time points. He seemed more engaged and willing to speak about his experience and keen to show how reading had helped him with his learning and vocabulary. Whereas during the first interview he said that he hated reading, this time when asked whether he liked reading, he responded, 'sometimes I like it, sometimes I don't.' He expanded on why he liked reading with, 'I like the inspiration.' Diana noted that although Dave wasn't quite at the reading level of his peers he was doing really well as Dave proudly stated, 'I am reading chunky books now.'

Diana also noticed improvements in Dave's vocabulary and comprehension of texts. He was able to follow and understand a story better than before, 'it's great because the books are now coming alive for him and he's beginning to see the enjoyment that he can get out of them.' Commenting on the interview for the RCT Diana noted, 'you know he can use all these big words. I don't know quite where all these big words came from today.'

There were changes in the family's approach to reading. Diana recognised that she was reading books less than usual and had been reading things on her phone a lot around the children; so they were less likely to see her reading an actual book. Diana made a conscious effort to get old books out of storage and go to the library so that the family were reading books rather than reading on their devices or not at all. The result was that the family would all read their own books, at the same time, in different pockets of the living/dining areas. This seemed to have a knock-on effect on Dave, as Diana noted that he had started to copy the rest of the family's reading behaviours to the extent that he would get out a book and read or just look at the pictures, before bed, without being prompted.

The pandemic and schooling

Although Diana works at a school she decided that for Dave it was better for him to be home schooled rather than to be at school where he would have had a different teacher and unfamiliar school routine. Diana said that she struggled to implement a routine for home schooling and reading, however Dave seemed more positive about reading and books. Home schooling consisted of online resources for reading and tasks related mainly to English and Maths. There wasn't too much pressure from the school, to complete a certain amount of work every day which Diana appreciated. Most days after lessons were spent outside doing experiments or playing sports.

The pandemic and foster carer/child relationship

'Lockdown for us, it did, worked wonders,' Diana found that Dave was calmer, more able to focus because of the time spent at home together. There seemed to be an improvement in the relationship between Diana, Dave and the rest of the family. The foster placement was approved for being a longer-term placement during lockdown so there was more of a sense of permanency for the family.

The pandemic and reading

Although Diana spoke about struggling with home schooling and keeping up with reading it seemed as though the family's approach to reading had changed and that in fact they were reading more, albeit in a more unstructured way.

5.4 Overview of key themes emerging from the wider qualitative data

5.4.1 Introduction

The case studies reveal the unique lives of children and their foster carers. They remind us that each child is an individual and that each child's context is also highly individual. Reflecting an ecological or systems approach, particularly notable are the following themes: the carer and their context, in particular their understanding of the importance of reading, their reading practices and the type of home learning environment created by the carer (the presence of books in the home and engagement in reading related activities); the nature and quality of the relationship between the carer and the child; the child, their needs and their own relationship with books; and the impact of the pandemic.

5.4.2 Carer(s) and their context

The interviews highlighted that foster carers were both relative and non-relative carers who came from a range of backgrounds, had been involved in fostering for varying lengths of time and who had cared for the child involved in the study for varying periods of time.

Relative carers in this study were overwhelmingly the grandparents. Non-relative carers were all local authority approved foster carers. There were single male and female carers and there were couple carers (all male/female in this study). There were some carers who had higher educational qualifications (degrees) and others with fewer qualifications and who had struggled at school.

There were carers who had been former fully qualified schoolteachers and there were carers who combined foster care with other jobs including working night shifts in factories and care homes. In those families where there was a male/female couple, the female appeared to take

on most of the foster carer roles and responsibilities and most males were working full-time in non-related jobs.

Children had lived with the carers involved in this study from anything between approximately one year to over three years. There were carers looking after one child and there were also carers looking after more than one foster child and/or foster child siblings.

5.4.3 Carers' reading practice past and/or present

Foster carers and children described their approaches to reading within their households. Some foster carers described a love for books and were avid readers:

***Gwen:** Yes, I used to love reading, I don't have as much time for it now, but I did an English Degree, English Literature and Language so, I've read tons and tons of books.*

Others said that they did not have the time to read for pleasure as much as they would like to now:

***Davina:** I don't read for fun anymore; I tend to read with a purpose, or I am doing something new at work, so I have to research the background on that. I do panel work for fostering, so sometimes that's reading reports that or 90-page reports that you have to read, so I do a lot of reading, but it tends to be around something to support fostering.*

There were also carers who did not like reading historically and struggled with it now:

***Edith:** Reading is not my thing really, it's something that really has to grasp me. I read the bible, but that's for my faith, but other than that it takes me ages to read a book because I have to read it, and sometimes I have to read it a couple of times to grasp it.*

***Researcher:** So, you tend not to want to sort of read because of that.*

***Edith:** No, I don't, and I feel like, my sisters are fantastic readers, I don't know if I have got a bit of dyslexia in there, I've never been tested for it so I don't know, but I kind of do struggle to read sometimes. Sometimes when I am reading I mix my words up as well.*

5.4.4 Carers' home learning environment

Most carers had many books for adults and children in their homes. Books were stored either upstairs in children's rooms (on shelves and/or in boxes) and also stored downstairs, again on shelves and/or in boxes. Some carers spoke about the use of kindles, iPads and computers. A

few carers did not like electronic devices or did not have access to electronic devices. Some carers actively supported the child's reading by facilitating their access to reading related activities such as visiting the local library, buying books second-hand, going to the cinema to watch films made about children's books, going to the theatre and/or pantomimes, involving the child in drama clubs.

With regards to the library, for example, there were a variety of views regarding its use by foster carers and children. Some, as indicated by the case studies, liked to visit the library, whereas others said that they did not have the time to visit the library:

Researcher: *Do you get the chance to visit the library at all now?*

Poppy: *No not really, I went the last time to try and get the kids to sign up, but then it's finding the time to go back there with them, I don't have the time and I generally don't have the time to go and sit in a library.*

Regarding buying books, these were either bought (new or second hand), or were schoolbooks or hand me downs or in some instances were given to the child as part of another book gifting scheme:

Poppy: *Well, I rarely buy them brand new, I go to the charity shop and you get 3 for £1.00.*

It appeared that most children preferred reading physical books compared to books on a device:

Leanne: *Yeah [Les] does have a Kindle, he doesn't read stories on it, he is picking up certain things and is doing it a little bit more freely now. He has a Nintendo DS so little things will crop up with bits of reading, and he will come and ask me what it says and then I have to read it with him. He won't attempt to do it himself and it's quite easy for him to ask somebody.*

Researcher: *Do you read things on things like a computer or tablet or things like that?*

Elija: *Only for school.*

5.4.5 Carers' views on needs of the child

Many carers in the study reported that the child they were caring for had special educational needs and had either an ECHP. For some children, their educational needs stemmed from social, emotional and behavioural difficulties:

Charlotte: *Because the two that we have got and Connor who is doing it, they both got Education, Health and Care Plans but they are both very different*

For others, they had been assessed and given a formal 'diagnosis' such as ADHD and autism. A few children had also been prescribed medication, for example in the management of ADHD:

Rachel: *Yeah, at first I thought there might be some dyslexia there you see, but his reading and his writing appears ok, but I'm still questioning is there something else going on. Now he has ADHD I now know how to..*

Other carers noted that the child had difficulties but that they had not received a formal diagnosis for them. Some carers commented on how far behind the child was when they arrived in their current placement and how much of their effort had gone into improving on their position:

Marie: *[Mia] does love reading though, she is very good at reading because I was quite shocked when she came to me because [of what was said about her background before she arrived] I've had her for two and a half years, now we read together every night.*

5.4.6 Children's reading practices – comments by carers and children

Family approaches differed significantly in terms of their approach to reading. In some instances, reading together was part of the daily routine and was considered 'protected time' whilst for others it was as and when there was time available. Most carers reported that even before the Reading Together programme, they read daily with the child they were caring for. For some this related to supporting the child to complete homework:

Orla: *Obviously we don't get time to sit with them other than the school reading.*

Emily: *Sometimes I don't want to read, but then mum says you have to read because it's a part of your schoolwork.*

For others, this related to additional reading together:

Marie: *She does love reading though, she is very good at reading [...] I've had her for two and a half years now, we read together every night.*

Wendy: *I do think it's just about spending time doing something with somebody who is enjoying it and I think for most if you say, go and read a book then they won't do it, but if the adult says, 'Shall we read the book together?' Honestly most children would do it and I think Will is like that as well, he likes that adult interaction.*

Other carers reported that the child did not like reading and that it was a challenge:

Anna: *Because we have been through a stage of Antony is not wanting to do reading, he hates it, it's stupid, stamping his feet and everything. So, I said well it's fine we don't have to do this, it's not for my benefit it's for your benefit to help you. He went, no I do and so the past couple of weeks he is getting back into it, and I think because we have been off school, they get book out and I read, and all he wants to do is look at the pictures. I'm like, no you need to be learning to words and reading because you are not going to.*

Foster carers also shared the techniques they used to help children with their reading:

Rachel: *I get him to read the labels because I always forget my spectacles, so he has to read for me. Some days he is in a good mood to read, other days he isn't, but when he is ready, if he is stuck I will go, hold on, say that again or spell it and he will spell it, and I will go that's so and so. That's how we have got him to read over the time he has been with us.*

One foster carer spoke about the joy of discovering a new book that neither her or her foster child had read before:

Edith: *I never read the Roald Dahl books so for me reading them together I am loving it, it is great.*

With regards to the children themselves, differences were noted between children who enjoyed reading and those who struggled with it. Those who enjoyed reading were keen to share with researchers, their choice of books and describe the characteristics of their favourite types of books:

Elija: *I wish they put more pictures in, if they had a page with a load of pictures like that and then the writing on the other side, that would be much better because then I would have a lot of writing and some pictures, I like pictures on every page.*

Tara: *It depends which author has written it because some authors write books that are really interesting and have cliff-hangers at the end of chapters and some aren't exactly that exciting."*

Quade: *It's a book about two boys that had a neighbour with a secret plan, but they did know once their brothers went over then they fell into her secret lab and they knew that she was switching people, and then they knew all about her switches*

For children who disliked or struggled with reading there were fewer references to book choice or characteristics of books.

Rachel: *We are talking about books.*

Rob: *I hate books.*

Rachel: *You don't hate books, that's not true. There was more, some books there were 3 of one book, and I thought, 'What are they doing to him?'. So, there is this expectation he can't fulfil.*

Regarding where children read, family practices varied considerably. Some children read downstairs only. Others read in their bedrooms. In one interview it was noted that the child read alone in their bedroom because the carer had received training that appeared to indicate that carers should not read with children in their bedrooms:

Lorraine: *When we are reading, when you do you reading (talking to the child, Liam) when you are doing your schoolbooks? We do it in the living room don't we? I have to turn the T.V off or he gets distracted more so by the adverts I have to say, and then at bedtime when he goes to bed, he will read, or he will colour or something.*

Interviewer: *That's nice in your bed, when you are laying on your bed you do a little bit of reading.*

Lorraine: *I do often think when he reads in his bed he often misses a lot of pages, but you do read something.*

Interviewer: *Do you start falling asleep when you are reading it?*

Liam: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *Sometimes that can happen can't it and does someone read to you when you are in bed or do you just read yourself?*

Liam: No, I read to myself.

Lorraine: You read to yourself in bed, don't you?

Interviewer: That's nice, and does anyone read with you?

Liam: No.

Lorraine: Not in your bedroom.

Interviewer: You do it downstairs?

Lorraine: Yeah because up in the bedroom we are not allowed to, we were told on the training we were not allowed to.

5.4.7 The Reading Together Programme

Overall, we found that there was no connection between carers' level of educational qualifications, willingness to be involved in the Reading Together programme and their commitment to it. Indeed, we found some carers who struggled with reading themselves who felt that they had also benefitted from the programme as illustrated below:

Interviewer: Just get them back in, yeah. It's a difficult time for everybody. Just in general, do you think being involved in the project has changed your views about reading, or it just makes you do more of what you were doing anyway?

Bonnie: No because it helped me. I was struggling with reading and it has helped me as well.

Interviewer: And how has it helped you?

Bonnie: Reading with Ben.

Interviewer: Oh, so it's helped both of you.

Bonnie: Yeah, I was a bit dyslexic, and I was struggling with reading and spelling so, helping him on the computer as well and doing it together. It has helped me a lot with him as well.

Interviewer: Gosh so it has helped both of you which is brilliant. Has it given you more confidence with reading?

Bonnie: Yeah, I can read a bit better now.

Interviewer: So, do you think you will carry on then Bonnie? You will carry on doing this amount of reading together?

Bonnie: Yeah.

Overwhelmingly, the Reading Together programme seemed to be well received by children and foster carers. In those few instances where it was less well received, this appeared to be because children were already independent readers and where they found the paired reading element as either unnecessary, undermining or a burden.

5.4.8 The book parcels

Most children, however, spoke positively about receiving the book parcels and the books that they received. Some children expressed excitement at receiving a parcel addressed to them. One or two children had a less positive reaction:

Interviewer: *First of all, then just thinking about the Reading Together parcels, I'm just wondering did you receive all of those Bonnie?*

Bonnie: *We did yeah.*

Interviewer: *Brilliant, and what did you think about them when they arrived?*

Bonnie: *Yeah, they were ok, [Ben] opened them, he did open them and then he looked and said he had a sore head. So, I said to him he could collect them on his bookshelf and when he was ready he can read them. Once this is all over and done with I think he will start again because his reading has come up quite a lot in school.*

Interviewer: *So, the important thing is he got them. Did you think that the contents of them were suitable?*

Bonnie: *I did, I think the writing could have been a bit bigger, I could hardly see the writing and had to put my glasses on.*

Interviewer: *[...] Were there any of the books that he did like or he did look at?*

Bonnie: *He did read one of them but he said there was not enough pictures in the book.*

Other children said that they liked the books that were sent to them and mentioned specific books:

Les: *I liked the stories, the different books in the boxes.*

Nuala: *Umm I like the Kid Normal book, and, and I liked the Ninja Cat and I liked the bird one.*

Leanne: *Which was your favourite one Les out of the books?*

Les: *The 'Night Sky' and the one about space.*

Sharon: *Ok, so you liked the one about space and about the moon and stars, things like that [specific details of hobby given]*

Leanne: *He used the books, didn't you to come down and look at the sky when it was clear.*

Les: *Yeah, but I didn't see anything.*

Other children mentioned books that they had received that they didn't like:

Eddie: *Cookie came in the second parcel but I was a bit sad as Cookie wasn't the one that I'd asked for. And I tried to read it but we didn't finish it because it was a bit boring because it was all about a girl.*

One child was disappointed that the books he received were too hard for him to read. Due to lockdown unfortunately, the research team was not able to fulfil all book choices as requested by the children though most were met. His carer replaced our books with books that were more suitable for his reading level.

Glenn: *Umm it was quite hard books so my Nanny got me umm new books about tractors.*

5.4.9 The training and/or manual

Training in paired reading was well received and foster carers felt that it was sufficient to help them to be able to carry it out with their children.

Frances: *[...] And I went to the training of course with someone from your team. And that was good.*

Interviewer: *Did you find it helpful?*

Frances: *Oh, yes and it helps.*

Foster carers found the Handbook clear and easy to follow. It served as a good point of reference when practising paired reading:

Leanne: *Yes the Handbook was very helpful.*

Interviewer: *Did you find the Handbook was useful? How was, how was that, in terms of?*

Diane: *Yeah, oh yeah absolutely, I'm sort of a stickler for reading instructions, you know, following it, and then adapting things to how...*

5.4.10 The paired reading - 5 'W's – what they read, why, when, where, with whom

The experience of paired reading varied across families. Some children enjoyed the process of reading together with their foster carers whilst more accomplished readers felt it undermined them:

Interviewer: *How did you find that kind of reading together?*

Nina: *I did like it a lot more. It is a lot more fun, I ain't gonna lie.*

Grace: *it didn't work at all for one [Gladys], she's outside the door. I think she was quite insulted with it and it was 'I do know how to read it.*

Grace: *But with Glenn, because he's a much poorer reader*

Interviewer: *Yeah*

Grace: *Umm he loved it and thought his was a great idea and in fact we do still use it, especially if he gets a new book from school.*

Wendy: *I don't think you were super keen were you?*

Will: *No, I don't like reading out loud.*

Improvements were noted in confidence, pronunciation concentration, conversation regarding a particular story. In general, as time progressed, the child became more independent and thus spent more time reading (during the Paired Reading session) than the foster carer.

Grace: *It definitely worked 100% with Glenn, it was a great thing. I think if you've got a child that really struggles with reading or maybe with a younger child you know, who isn't a free reader, it's a fantastic idea.*

Grace: *No it worked very well with him and it definitely has been a huge improvement, he would now, I mean he's still very behind but he's now reading at Year one and year, stroke, two, where he was only reading at reception.*

A number of children preferred to read alone rather than read with their foster carer, as noted by the carer below:

Gwen: *Yeah we do a bit, not as much. She did struggle with that and she can be very independent, and she is proud of the fact that she can read well so she doesn't want me reading to her. She especially likes to read the speech, so she will do that if I read the background, and then she can be the character.*

Suzanne: *You read every night when you come in, by yourself. You try, she tries to read in the bath. Wants to read with the lights off when it's meant to be bedtime. And you know so she does a lot of reading on her own (carer commenting to child).*

Children indicated that they liked to read in bed or on the sofa and related this to feeling cosy and relaxed:

Interviewer: do you have a special time that you like to read?

Neve: At bedtime.

Interviewer: yeah? and why is that?

Neve: Because it makes me fall asleep.

Interviewer: yeah okay and do you have a favourite place that you like to read?

Neve: In my bed. Too comfy.

In relation to where reading tended to happen, children also spoke about reading at bedtime as a means of winding down before going to sleep:

Wendy: At night-time from 8 o'clock I will say, 'Will its bedtime go and read' whereas before I would have read."

Interviewer: You said you read before bed is that a nice time to read

Daisy: yes. Yes, when everyone's like calming down cos it's bedtime.

Other times children reported that they read were after school and during school and often before watching tv or playing games or having time on tablet:

Interviewer: If you are reading with him whereabouts do you read?

Bonnie: In the living room.

Interviewer: And do you do that before tea or after tea, or before he goes to bed? Is there a time of day?

Bonnie: Usually after tea and then he has an hour on his tablet.

Foster carers and children spoke about using reading as a way of winding down at the end of the day:

Will: I like them because sometimes I get peace and quiet whilst reading them.

Other children spoke of how they read in order to learn:

Interviewer: And do you think it is important to have a lot of books Peter?

Peter: Yes, because you get more knowledge.

5.4.11 Children's reactions

Many of the children were aware of the importance of reading for learning and when asked, felt that reading was important to learn:

Interviewer: *Oh I like this; this is all about the solar system.*

Antony: *Jupiter has sixty-seven moons.*

Interviewer: *Sixty-seven moons! Are you sure?*

Antony: *Yeah, I will show you.*

Interviewer: *Show me the page.*

Antony: *Look.*

Interviewer: *Oh yeah, that's amazing that's a new fact for me today, thank you so much.*

Other reasons that were given by the children interviewed were that reading is fun and reading inspires you:

Tara: *You should have loads of fact books and story books so you can learn things and also, I don't know, just, I guess it's kind of fun.*

Interviewer: *Do you think it's important to have lots of books?*

Dave: *Sometimes yeah cos you can, oh no, learn lots of new words*

Interviewer: *Yeah*

Dave: *And also learn and things inspire you.*

Children spoke about the books they owned and thought about whether owning lots of books was important:

Interviewer: *Do you think it's important to have a lot of books?*

Paula: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *Why do you think it's important?*

Paula: *Because then you can read different types of books and if you only have a tiny amount of books you will just get through them so, super-fast and you won't have any more books to read.*

Neve: *Because if like, you had it for your birthday or as, as a special present then it could be a keep of a memory and you could pass to down to other people.*

5.4.12 Views on the Talking Album and Reading logs

Many of the foster carers and children did not complete the photo albums or logs, or they were completed only for a short time. The timing of completion of logs and photo album coincided with lockdown and additional pressures, so families were not able to submit fully

completed logs or albums. The team used the interviews as a way of collecting information about participation in the intervention in the absence of these logs and albums.

One child completed the Talking Album in full and recorded a video of himself presenting his Talking Album to the camera. A full transcript is available in Appendix Three. eThree children said that their Talking Albums were in various stages of construction. Two had taken photos but not got them developed. One mentioned that they had started to record things but had no photos. In their interview with the researcher they went through all the books they had read during the lockdown and had them ready to show the researcher. An example of a response is illustrated below:

Sharon: *That's good, and did you use the talking photo album?*

Leanne: *We did take the pictures but we have not had them developed yet and yeah, we just need to develop them and put them in the book.*

Sharon: *Ok super. Lockdown has prevented us from doing so many things that we would have taken for granted. Hopefully you will get a chance to get them developed soon and can insert them into the Album. What did you think of the talking photo album Les?*

Les: *I think it was good.*

Sharon: *Great, what did you like about it?*

Les: *I liked to record what I was saying and then listen back to remember.*

A full transcript of Eddie's video recording of his presentation of his completed Talking Album is included at the back of the report.

5.4.13 Changes in reading approach between T1 and T2

We explored the changes reported by foster carers and children, between the first and second interviews. There were some changes in the way that children responded to reading in comparison to the initial interviews:

Nancy: *Her confidence has grown and especially with the books that have been sent. She says, 'right I'm going to try, I'm not you know, don't, don't help me yet let me try.' So we have noticed the confidence and we still have to remind her at times you know, you're doing well.*

Eileen: *Umm he picked up on how you make the story interesting by changing the tone of your voice and, and play parts and he'd read one part and I'd read another part.*

Rachel: *Because, because he has an aversion to reading, we thought the shorter stories would work better.*

Foster carers and children thought about changes in reading as a result of both the Reading Together Programme and also lockdown

Diane: *And he's watching us doing that and he's beginning to mimic that, beginning to role, you know model us, what we're doing you know? Sometimes at night, if he can't sleep and he's the world's worst for going to sleep, sometimes I'll get up and I will find the fact that he's actually got out a book. And it might be just one that he's looked at the pictures.*

Children used a variety of media to access books although most reported reading traditional paper books when asked in the baseline interviews. At follow up, where lockdown restrictions had been imposed children were more likely to report reading on their devices as part of their home-schooling requirements.

5.4.14 The pandemic and schooling

Foster carers and children described how schooling changed over the lockdown period. There were a variety of experiences from home schooling, full time at school and home/normal schooling across different time points:

Will: *umm during lockdown I did my work at home*

Interviewer: *okay and were the school sending you things to do or how did it work?*

Will: *uh, we did it online.*

Interviewer: *You went to school? Was it different at school? What was it like?*

Gladys: *It was different cos we weren't doing much work, we were mostly out and about playing because and then as soon as the lockdown kind of restricted a bit, then we started doing work.*

Gwen: *We had to stop, so the school closed and then in July there is a key worker club and so you could go into school. I went there two days a week.*

Lockdown resulted in both positive and negative experiences for families in relation to schooling:

Interviewer: Do you think he found the home schooling and being at home and not sort of having that you know routine of the school day?

Eileen: Well, funnily enough, they both seemed to thrive on it.

Diane: No I was gonna say for us we were just getting into the swing of reading and then obviously lockdown and it was tough for, trying to do schoolwork and stuff like that but it wasn't overly successful. I think we had 12/14-week summer holiday in the end.

Some emphasised the negative impact of lockdown on children's social learning and relationships as well as academic progress:

Poppy: Missing out on uh opportunities to form relationships with their peers. Uh missing out on growing up and all the experiences that they should have and being at school and the whole learning process not just the academics but just being part of a group away from home.

Georgia: I mean she was struggling and a little behind her peers initially and I think this time period literally has set us back so far.

Interviewer: Yeah, and is there anything else about Covid and her education or how you have managed at home that you think might be important?

Georgia: I think we were just all surprised at how well she did manage.

Interviewer: What do you think helped her manage?

Georgia: I think it was because she didn't have to see her birth family which always worries her, she didn't have to see her social worker and so she said she just felt like a normal girl.

As a result of lockdown, charity shops and second-hand bookstores were closed, and this prevented books being passed on.

5.4.15 The pandemic and foster carer/child relationship

Foster carers described the change in their relationship with their foster children and attributed this to both paired reading and a consequence of spending more time together during lockdown:

Davina: That, whatever it is, so definitely it's had a positive impact just that connection. Time sat together, reading, talking about the book.

Diane: I mean very much for Dave, you know he really loves having you know, quality time spent doing stuff with him. Umm and actually the joy of reading is that we could discuss all of the books umm we could talk about them, umm, you know if, if he's struggling to read you'll be going no that's obviously not working, this one's not working.

5.4.16 The pandemic and reading

Diane: And lockdown wasn't great for trying to get reading done. We were doing quite well up until then.

Georgia: We have done a lot more reading than we typically would just because we have had a lot more time to fill, I think a lot of people have been reading more.

Suzanne: So I think during that time she probably read less

Interviewer: Yeah

Suzanne: because there was so much else going on.

Interviewer: Umm so do you think you did more or less reading during lockdown than you might normally do?

Neve: More I think

Sharon: And do you think you read more or less than usual over lockdown?

Haley: The exact same as normal.

5.5 Summary

In summary, the evidence from the qualitative process evaluation largely confirmed that from previous evaluations of book-gifting interventions. Most of the children tended to enjoy receiving the book parcels and valued these personalised gifts. Most also liked the books that were included in the parcels and, within this, it was notable that the most popular tended to be the books based on activities (birds, cooking and viewing the night sky).

The foster carers also tended to value the book parcels and felt they were well-designed and helpful. Some children and their foster carers were less positive about the parcels and the choice of books provided. This appeared to reflect a concern that either the books that were received were not pitched at an appropriate level, especially for those children who were either struggling readers or else quite advanced.

However, and beyond the book-gifting component, the findings were mixed in relation to the paired reading training and support provided through the Handbook and videos. Feedback on the in-person training from those who participated was very positive as was the feedback on the Handbook and the videos. However, it appeared that most foster carers only briefly read the Handbook and did not seek to follow the guidance in any clear or systematic fashion. A much smaller number actually accessed and viewed the guidance videos.

These findings appeared to be reflected in the limited fidelity to the programme that was found. Very few parents completed the reading logs and thus data on actual levels of fidelity was limited. However, the qualitative interviews suggested that for a number of reasons, many foster carers did not follow or sustain the paired-reading guidance provided. These included: the tendency for foster carers to revert to previous habits of reading with their children; the difficulties of finding regular time to undertake paired reading because of other competing demands at home; and the tendency for foster carers to consider the paired reading activities as restricting the time the children required to complete their other homework.

These latter factors were significantly exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown that caused significant and prolonged disruption to normal household routines and introduced considerable pressure and strain on their functioning and relationships. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine how much of this lack of fidelity to the programme was due to limitations in the programme itself or was a direct consequence of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Section 6: Summary and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The key findings are discussed below, followed by some conclusions and recommendations. We are aware of many RCTs that were abandoned during the pandemic. Our research team decided to continue in the face of major turmoil and the first half of implementation of the main trial took place when schools were shut. This meant a huge difference in what children were experiencing.

The strict rules around travel and physical distancing also meant some changes in data collection methods which have been set out in the methodology section. These changes were well received by both fieldworkers (who had spent many hours on travel to complete pre-tests) and families who found the online processes easy to follow. It is unclear how assessments completed in this way impacted on the results. However, in terms of feasibility and implementation, testing and collecting data in this way was a useful part of the amended study design.

6.2 Key Findings

This present study sought to design, deliver and evaluate the effectiveness of an innovative new reading intervention that combined the benefits of book-gifting programmes that have proven to be well-received and popular, but with limited evidence of being effective in improving reading skills, with an explicit paired reading component that has a significant evidence base in relation to being effective in improving reading skills among children.

6.2.1 Effectiveness of the Programme

There was strong face validity to the hypothesis that such an intervention – represented by the Reading Together programme – should be effective in contributing to the improvement of reading skills for children in foster care. However, the key findings from this present study are inconclusive in determining whether the Reading Together intervention is effective.

No evidence was found that Reading Together (either with or without the provision of in-person training for foster carers) had any additional effect on the reading skills and attitudes of children that received the intervention as reflected in the measures used. Whilst children did not make gains above and beyond those expected, those in both the intervention groups and the control group did progress on their maturational trajectories as expected over the timeframe.

We know that reading can be resistant to change and results often take a long time to show improvement. The early skills, which form the basis for reading development are well laid in very early childhood experiences. This may mean that children in care are more prone to reading difficulties but also that the prerequisite skills are an area of difficulty which they must overcome when progressing to becoming fluent readers.

Paired Reading does not follow a decoding/ phonics-based approach to learning new words. Instead, it focuses on improving fluency through whole text comprehension strategies. For struggling readers, especially those who struggle with memory, it is important to use a variety of strategies to facilitate improvement. This should include a mix of sight words, memory work, syntax work and phonics-based approaches.

It is important to consider who a Paired Reading approach is best suited to. Our results showed that there was no discernible difference in progress between high achievers and low achievers but we do not know how this type of approach to reading impacts on children with difficulties in pre-requisite skills.

While we do not have evidence that the programme does 'work' in terms of improvements in the outcomes measured, we also do not have evidence that it does not work. However, the research team has no vested interest in the Programme and cannot promote it on the basis of the current findings. The qualitative analysis proved interesting and a number of key themes emerged which feed into the discussion and help triangulate and explain some of the findings.

6.2.2 Measures of reading effectiveness

In this study we measured a number of aspects of reading including rate, accuracy and comprehension. The focus was on reading fluency and the child's ability to understand and read text. Measures were all higher order skills and we do not have information on the impact of Reading Together on prerequisite reading skills such as decoding, sight words, vocabulary, sentence construction and cohesion, reasoning, working memory or attention.

We also measured enjoyment of reading both academic and recreational. There were no significant differences between the control and intervention groups on this measure. Further exploration of more affective aspects of reading such as time spent reading and independent reading practices was undertaken through the qualitative data and findings show that Reading Together did allow some children more time to read with their carer.

6.2.3 Reduced sample size

It could also be argued that, with such a reduced final sample size, the trial itself was under-powered. As such, it could be contended that the intervention may indeed have had a positive effect but that the trial was too small to be able to detect such an effect.

However, it is notable that the main findings did not include any indication of a potentially consistent or positive effect; rather the differences in the post-test mean scores between the three groups of children appeared to vary randomly. Should Reading Together have been effective, one would reasonably expect to see some indication of positive effects in the findings even if these effects were not statistically significant. This was not the case in this present study.

6.2.4 Book parcels and reading levels

The book parcels were mostly well-received and valued by the children and the foster carers. We know that book choice matters when gifting books in a reading programme, and book choice is an important component of Paired Reading. Books were carefully chosen to represent a range of characters, particularly those in non-traditional gender roles and a range of genres.

We do not have data on how the book gifting component impacted on book choice and attitudes towards these wider roles and ideas. By choosing a range of books, children should have been prompted to read outside their traditional choices of novels. This may have proved motivating for some, but others may have been put off as they were not directly interested in the books.

In addition, a few foster carers reported that some of the books were too hard though two-thirds of the carers and children had chosen the higher-level books. As can be seen from the pre-test scores, the reading ability of participants at pre-test covered the full range of scores and was above the standardised mean of 100. Some were reading at a much more advanced level and some were reading at a level well below what was expected for their age.

In this programme we implemented an element of individual choice. This was done in the light of previous comments made by pupils in receipt of book gifting programmes in which no choice was given. Children in these previous programmes expressed the view that books which were not suitable, either in terms of content or difficulty, were demotivating and frustrating. Choosing books which were progressively more difficult, which appealed to the masses and which covered this ability spectrum was impossible without giving too much choice which would have become unwieldy. Whether children might have benefitted from greater targeting of books is unknown.

6.2.5 Fidelity to the programme and support for engagement

The in-person training was positively viewed by those who received it and there were also positive views towards the Handbook and the videos. Those foster carers interviewed were positively motivated to participate in the Programme which might reflect their local authorities' decision to suggest that they participate, or their own self-selection.

However, there appeared to be poor fidelity to the programme, with some foster carers and children not following the guidance provided on paired reading either in relation to the frequency required or over a sustained period. It was clear from the interviews that home schooling in the context of the pandemic had an impact on engagement with and adherence to the paired reading approach, as explored further below, and that there was huge variation in foster carers' confidence and capacity to support home learning in general and reading specifically.

In the Osborne et al. (2010) intervention, schools were directly involved in supporting the intervention. They assisted foster carers to keep on track through regular contact. In our study not only were schools not involved (they were simply informed of the study), but they were closed for significant periods of the intervention. Many people can deliver Paired Reading. It remains unknown from this study whether it might have been more effectively delivered had it been school-led or local authority-led.

Fidelity seems to have been affected by the school closures and demands of home schooling. Many foster carers interviewed found online home learning challenging in terms of persuading the children to maintain their attention, and this seems to have reduced the motivation and time for the Reading Programme. Some children were reported to distinguish between 'working at school' and 'not working at home'. The pandemic blurred the boundaries between school and home, with schooling taking place at home online and overseen by carers. For weeks, this became the norm.

For some children, having completed three or more hours of online schooling at home this was enough and they were unwilling to engage in a further reading session. In these cases, the carers, who had been delivering the homeschooling, sympathised with the children's views and found it difficult to insist on further reading choosing instead to do other activities. Having said this, it is also clear from the interviews with children and carers that some reported doing more reading and of enjoying their reading time together.

Overall, it is possible that the overall time spent reading was reduced for many (but not all) of the children, given the reading that they would normally have engaged in while at school

(across many subject areas) and Cattan et al's (2021) findings regarding the reduction in learning time during school closures.

6.2.6 Impact of the programme on relationships between foster carers and children

Attachments are an integral part of the learning journey, but we have no quantitative data on attachment and Paired Reading. It is important to understand the changes in relationships between carer and child which may have occurred as a result of this type of programme and specifically within the context of the pandemic where schools were either closed or open to children of key workers and children noted as vulnerable.

In the interviews with some carers it was noted that even though their child could go to school because they were deemed a vulnerable child/child of a keyworker, they specifically chose to keep their child at home and make time to undertake home schooling. For some of these carers, they felt that spending more time with their foster child during lockdown relationships had strengthened their relationship. This is consistent with the ADCS (2021) survey findings on increased placement stability during the lockdown. For others, tensions in the foster child/carer relationship had arisen around the practicalities of homeschooling and reading, as part of the daily learning experience, had become stressful and less of an enjoyable experience.

6.2.7 Other related impacts of the pandemic

As already noted, a key and over-riding factor in relation to the present evaluation was the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown that had a significant and prolonged disruptive impact on the children's education and on their home environment. Other related impacts on children and carers, which may in turn have affected reading, included changes in children's contact arrangements with birth family. For example, one carer reported that the withdrawal of face-to-face contact with birth family during the pandemic had enabled their child to settle a bit more.

Other carers reported changes in contact with their social worker. Other carers reported that their child was missing engagement in clubs and hobbies including drama. The Reading Together programme is built on a foundation of routine and consistency. This lack of routine and increased upheaval may have impacted how the intervention was viewed, valued and implemented.

These factors (and other related factors), in turn, make it impossible to determine whether the findings reflect the Reading Together programme not being an effective intervention or caused by the unprecedented context provided by the pandemic. As such, the impact of the pandemic ultimately render the findings of this present trial as inconclusive.

Recent studies have shown that there has been huge variability between schools and families in terms of Covid schooling (Engzell et al, 2021; Blum and Dobrotić, 2021; EEF 2020) which we have not been able to capture in this study. We cannot directly use the summer slide as a comparator as this was an ‘out of school’ learning format making significant demands on carers to engage the child in online learning, as opposed to a holiday.

6.3 Recommendations

The research team and our external Advisory Group believe that an intervention that can build upon the popularity of book-gifting programmes by incorporating a paired reading component might be effective.

6.3.1 Targeting the intervention

Given the concerns raised by some children and their foster carers regarding the appropriateness of the books provided, there is an argument that interventions such as this need to be more targeted. Identifying those children in foster care that might specifically be most likely to benefit from the programme rather than being delivered to all children in foster care of a certain age, might be beneficial. Consideration could be given to whether other interventions might be better suited to those that are struggling with reading and/or already considered to be advanced readers?

6.3.2 Strengthening intensity and fidelity

Local authorities might be best placed to deliver the intervention. This might enable the intervention to be better targeted and provide more direct intervention and support. It might be more appropriate to design the intervention to be delivered directly through schools in a similar vein to programmes such as Reading Recovery which would enable those children most likely to benefit from the intervention to be targeted and to provide more specialist and consistent support directly to the child and foster carer. Consideration to programme intensity or dosage could then also be considered. Fidelity also needs to be tracked to enable the study to be more rigorous in reporting fidelity levels.

6.3.3 Foster carer peer support and the role of supervising social workers

Foster carer peer support programmes such as the *Education Champions* and *Mockingbird* run by The Fostering Network⁷ seem to be particularly effective in keeping foster carers on track. A system of foster carer peer support could be used to support the reading programme and supervising social workers could provide some support for sustained engagement of the carers in the programme.

⁷ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/fostering-potential>

6.3.4 Measuring 'additionality'

Taking baselines of a wider range of reading behaviours at the start of the programme might provide a means of better measuring the additionality provided by the programme. This might mean looking closely at affective components of reading as well as links with attachment and the impact this type of programme has on relationships within the placement.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Details of Statistical Models Fitted

Table A1.1 Fitted models for Reading Comprehension (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables ¹	Confirmatory Analysis	Exploratory Analyses ²		Sensitivity Analyses		
	Main Model	Gender	Age	Clustering Effects for Local Authorities ³	Clustering Effects for Pairs ⁴	Multiple Imputation ⁵
Constant	102.208 (1.733)	104.582 (2.354)	102.293 (1.753)	103.081 (1.994)	102.515 (1.785)	101.363 (.911)
zPretest Score	8.265 (1.013)	7.998 (.997)	8.110 (1.060)	7.468 (.984)	8.999 (.961)	7.848 (.911)
Handbook ⁶	.803 (2.494)	2.870 (3.432)	.515 (2.541)	.239 (2.333)	.757 (2.567)	.268 (2.105)
Training ⁶	.514 (2.369)	-.899 (3.246)	.697 (2.401)	-.109 (2.201)	.376 (2.452)	.650 (1.962)
Gender ⁷		-4.815 (3.368)				
Gender*Handbook		-3.784 (4.806)				
Gender*Training		2.879 (4.615)				
zAge			-.465 (1.705)			
zAge*Handbook			1.235 (2.510)			
zAge*Training			-1.136 (2.450)			
N (children)	142	142	142	142	142	266
N (clusters)	-	-	-	21	129	-
Var (Cluster)				24.054 (13.342)	96.083 (23.185)	
Var (Residual)				108.377 (13.949)	38.012 (16.264)	

¹Dependent Variable: Reading Comprehension (YARC).

²See Table A1.6 for exploratory analyses focusing on carers' educational qualifications.

³Two-level models, with Local Authorities included as the second level.

⁴Two-level models, with foster carer homes set as the second level.

⁵Estimated using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata, based on 20 imputations and seed set as 3228.

⁶Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

⁷Coded 1=girls and 0=boys.

Table A1.2 Fitted models for Reading Accuracy (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables ¹	Confirmatory Analysis		Exploratory Analyses ²		Sensitivity Analyses	
	Main Model	Gender	Age	Clustering Effects for Local Authorities ³	Clustering Effects for Pairs ⁴	Multiple Imputation ⁵
Constant	103.055 (1.597)	104.524 (2.268)	103.107 (1.617)	103.132 (1.626)	103.134 (1.615)	101.011 (1.322)
zPretest Score	8.206 (.867)	8.096 (.884)	8.207 (.906)	8.133 (.857)	8.400 (.857)	8.409 (.858)
Handbook ⁶	-1.006 (2.249)	-1.333 (3.246)	-1.151 (2.301)	-1.154 (2.207)	-1.205 (2.280)	-.291 (1.918)
Training ⁶	-2.040 (2.178)	-2.170 (3.098)	-2.011 (2.215)	-2.004 (2.135)	-2.141 (2.207)	-1.034 (1.774)
Gender ⁷		-2.943 (3.206)				
Gender*Handbook		.784 (4.566)				
Gender*Training		.317 (4.362)				
zAge			-.767 (1.580)			
zAge*Handbook			1.184 (2.316)			
zAge*Training			.319 (2.251)			
N (children)	140	140	140	140	140	266
N (clusters)	-	-	-	21	127	-
Var (Cluster)				2.869 (5.637)	42.341 (29.963)	
Var (Residual)				106.038 (13.526)	67.060 (28.275)	

¹Dependent Variable: Reading Accuracy (YARC).

²See Table A1.6 for exploratory analyses focusing on carers' educational qualifications.

³Two-level models, with Local Authorities included as the second level.

⁴Two-level models, with foster carer homes set as the second level.

⁵Estimated using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata, based on 20 imputations and seed set as 3228.

⁶Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

⁷Coded 1=girls and 0=boys.

Table A1.3 Fitted models for Reading Rate (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables ¹	Confirmatory Analysis		Exploratory Analyses ²		Sensitivity Analyses	
	Main Model	Gender	Age	Clustering Effects for Local Authorities ³	Clustering Effects for Pairs ⁴	Multiple Imputation ⁵
Constant	100.366 (1.275)	100.363 (1.762)	100.431 (1.288)	100.486 (1.344)	100.364 (1.257)	99.008 (1.398)
zPretest Score	10.035 (.742)	10.005 (.746)	10.156 (.769)	9.944 (.723)	10.037 (.732)	10.498 (.760)
Handbook ⁶	-2.555 (1.804)	-.152 (2.546)	-2.864 (1.840)	-2.649 (1.750)	-2.553 (1.778)	-1.052 (1.793)
Training ⁶	-1.421 (1.770)	.829 (2.461)	-1.434 (1.791)	-1.362 (1.713)	-1.417 (1.745)	-.866 (1.841)
Gender ⁷		.024 (2.516)				
Gender*Handbook		-4.606 (3.600)				
Gender*Training		-4.351 (3.451)				
zAge			-1.043 (1.252)			
zAge*Handbook			2.074 (1.858)			
zAge*Training			.778 (1.793)			
N (children)	140	140	140	140	140	266
N (clusters)	-	-	-	21	127	-
Var (Cluster)				4.617 (5.001)	.358 (15.831)	
Var (Residual)				66.353 (8.627)	70.453 (17.960)	

¹Dependent Variable: Reading Rate (YARC).

²See Table A1.6 for exploratory analyses focusing on carers' educational qualifications.

³Two-level models, with Local Authorities included as the second level.

⁴Two-level models, with foster carer homes set as the second level.

⁵Estimated using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata, based on 20 imputations and seed set as 3228.

⁶Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

⁷Coded 1=girls and 0=boys.

Table A1.4 Fitted models for Receptive Vocabulary (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables ¹	Confirmatory Analysis	Exploratory Analyses ²		Sensitivity Analyses		
	Main Model	Gender	Age	Clustering Effects for Local Authorities ³	Clustering Effects for Pairs ⁴	Multiple Imputation ⁵
Constant	87.785 (1.161)	87.067 (1.636)	86.928 (.293)	87.706 (1.182)	87.956 (1.160)	87.688 (1.107)
zPretest Score	10.825 (.685)	10.861 (.695)	11.320 (.170)	10.845 (.676)	10.779 (.676)	10.877 (.696)
Handbook ⁶	-.023 (1.653)	.935 (2.309)	1.100 (.407)	.052 (1.629)	-.208 (1.654)	.320 (1.604)
Training ⁶	2.036 (1.643)	2.863 (2.306)	.088 (.407)	2.089 (1.619)	1.641 (1.645)	1.443 (1.613)
Gender ⁷		1.477 (2.350)				
Gender*Handbook		-1.970 (3.320)				
Gender*Training		-1.698 (3.308)				
zAge			.804 (.316)			
zAge*Handbook			-1.103 (.410)			
zAge*Training			-.600 (.427)			
N (children)	191	191	191	191	191	266
N (clusters)	-	-	-	22	175	-
Var (Cluster)				1.533 (2.823)	17.945 (14.938)	
Var (Residual)				82.686 (8.795)	66.050 (15.792)	

¹Dependent Variable: Receptive Vocabulary.

²See Table A1.6 for exploratory analyses focusing on carers' educational qualifications.

³Two-level models, with Local Authorities included as the second level.

⁴Two-level models, with foster carer homes set as the second level.

⁵Estimated using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata, based on 20 imputations and seed set as 3228.

⁶Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

⁷Coded 1=girls and 0=boys.

Table A1.5 Fitted models for Reading Attitudes (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables ¹	Confirmatory Analysis	Exploratory Analyses ²		Sensitivity Analyses		
	Main Model	Gender	Age	Clustering Effects for Local Authorities ³	Clustering Effects for Pairs ⁴	Multiple Imputation ⁵
Constant	60.813 (1.199)	60.722 (1.643)	61.000 (.334)	60.530 (1.299)	60.810 (1.188)	61.072 (1.215)
zPretest Score	4.852 (.702)	5.085 (.708)	5.061 (.175)	4.684 (.684)	4.850 (.695)	4.701 (.718)
Handbook ⁶	.662 (1.731)	-2.363 (2.419)	-.411 (.464)	1.003 (1.677)	.681 (1.715)	.096 (1.781)
Training ⁶	-1.373 (1.702)	-.290 (2.346)	-3.655 (.464)	-1.028 (1.649)	-1.367 (1.687)	-1.359 (1.748)
Gender ⁷		.173 (2.378)				
Gender*Handbook		5.895 (3.436)				
Gender*Training		-2.258 (3.398)				
zAge			.947 (.362)			
zAge*Handbook			-.287 (.469)			
zAge*Training			-3.250 (.481)			
N (children)	195	195	195	195	195	266
N (clusters)	-	-	-	22	176	-
Var (Cluster)				6.249 (5.312)	1.126 (24.769)	
Var (Residual)				88.377 (9.498)	93.229 (26.457)	

¹Dependent Variable: Reading Comprehension (YARC).

²See Table A1.6 for exploratory analyses focusing on carers' educational qualifications.

³Two-level models, with Local Authorities included as the second level.

⁴Two-level models, with foster carer homes set as the second level.

⁵Estimated using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata, based on 20 imputations and seed set as 3228.

⁶Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

⁷Coded 1=girls and 0=boys.

Table A1.6 Fitted models for Exploratory Analyses of Foster Carers' Educational Qualifications (Estimated Coefficients with Standard Errors)

Independent Variables	Outcome (Dependent Variable)				
	Reading Comprehension (YARC)	Reading Accuracy (YARC)	Reading Rate (YARC)	Receptive Vocabulary (BPVS)	Reading Attitudes (Garfield)
Constant	97.072 (3.447)	99.094 (2.919)	102.894 (2.492)	83.743 (2.414)	60.556 (2.480)
zPretest Score	9.974 (1.288)	7.452 (.921)	10.088 (.932)	11.215 (.890)	4.984 (.918)
Handbook ¹	7.872 (4.958)	5.407 (4.060)	-5.488 (3.491)	2.746 (3.368)	-.418 (3.595)
Training ¹	6.282 (4.950)	2.670 (4.093)	-.188 (3.728)	9.687 (3.425)	-1.194 (3.470)
Further ²	-3.869 (6.552)	.654 (5.586)	-4.770 (4.860)	7.551 (3.644)	-3.858 (3.759)
Higher ²	4.294 (5.224)	-.687 (4.588)	-1.534 (3.800)	4.454 (3.658)	5.149 (3.770)
Higher*Handbook	-6.517 (7.287)	-3.598 (6.236)	2.448 (5.324)	-1.265 (4.891)	-4.479 (5.182)
Higher*Training	-6.845 (7.219)	-3.976 (6.162)	-5.772 (5.354)	-10.146 (5.001)	-9.983 (5.155)
Further*Handbook	1.491 (8.602)	-.840 (7.225)	6.593 (6.276)	-3.541 (5.415)	3.888 (5.652)
Further*Training	1.529 (7.989)	-2.778 (6.784)	.630 (6.073)	-8.609 (4.869)	6.991 (4.996)
N (children)	86	85	84	122	124

¹Dummy variables for the two intervention groups (Handbook only; Handbook plus training)

²Dummy variables for foster carers' highest educational qualifications (higher = higher education; 'further' = further education; all others with qualifications no higher than school level as reference category).

Appendix 2: Outcome Measures

York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC)

Snowling, M.J., Stothard, S. E., Clarke, P., Bowyer-Crane, C., Harrington, A., Truelove, E. & Nation, K (2009). GL Assessment

Description The YARC is an individually administered in-depth assessment of a child's reading and comprehension skills. The early reading suite comprises four short tests specifically designed for pupils with reading difficulties. These tests assess a pupil's phonological skills, alphabetic knowledge and word reading in a time-efficient and flexible way. They are among the most sensitive type of assessments for beginner readers and may be administered up to three times during a school year.

Reliability Letter sound knowledge - core .95; Letter sound knowledge - extended (Chronbach's alpha) .98; Early word recognition .98; Sound isolation .88; Sound deletion .93; Deletion and Isolation combined .95.

Validity

Criterion Insufficient data in the public domain to evaluate.

Construct Similar standard scores achieved with NARA II and BPVS

Concurrent Correlation with the SWRT ranged .55 (Letter sound knowledge) to .88 (Early word recognition).

British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS-3) *Dunn, Dunn, Styles, Sewell (2009). GL Assessment*

Description The BPVS is a one-to-one test that assesses receptive vocabulary. Leading vocabulary assessment for standard English. As no reading is required, BPVS3 can be used to assess language development in non-readers and especially pupils with expressive language impairments.

Reliability (Chronbach's alpha) Built into the confidence bands (confidence intervals 95%)

Validity

Criterion Validity: W.I.S.C. -0.76, Schonell 0.80.

Construct Correlated with CATS verbal battery 0.72 with overall CATS scores 0.61

Concurrent

***Garfield - Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey.* McKenna, M.C., & Kear, D.J. (1990).**

Description The Garfield is a 20-item test and is an indicator of student attitudes towards recreational and academic reading.

Reliability The alpha coefficients suggest adequate internal consistency across gender, ethnicity, and grade level, with all coefficients exceeding .75.
(*Chronbach's alpha*)

Appendix 3: Talking Album – Full transcript of Eddie’s Presentation

Eddie completed a Talking Album and videoed himself going through the Talking Album page by page, pressing the button on each page to share his pre-recorded views and perspectives about the books he received through Reading Together with me. As Eddie can be seen in his video, we cannot share it, however an excerpt is illustrated below.

Eddie is sitting at a table with the Talking Album in his hands and looking into a camera. He begins his video with this introduction. ‘Hi, my name is Eddie and this is my Talking book’. He turns the black hard cover of the Talking Album to show the first page.

Eddie then presses the button at the bottom of the first page and his pre-recorded voice says, ‘I was very excited when my first parcel came and my sister Evie was really jealous’. This voice over is accompanied by a photo of Eddie sitting on a settee, in his school uniform, holding the first parcel up to the camera with a big smile on his face.

Eddie turns the page, pressing the button to activate his pre-recorded voice. His pre-recorded voice says, ‘Inside the box, there are books and lots of other things, like pencils, bookmarks and stickers. Even better, I got to choose my other books, but not for the first one’. This voice over is accompanied by a photograph of Eddie, still on the sofa, taking out the contents of the opened parcel.

Eddie then presses the voice activator button on the facing page where he says, ‘I enjoyed the book about birds. My favourite one (bird) was the oyster catcher and I did some research on the internet about the oyster catcher. And I even drew my own one’. This is accompanied by a photo which shows Eddie, dressed in a T-shirt at a table, using the pencil that came in the book parcel and with book on birds in front of him.

He turns onto the next page where there is a photocopy of the cover of the Vicious Vikings book. Eddie’s pre-recorded voice says, ‘I really enjoyed the Vicious Vikings book because it had lots of fun facts.

On the facing page, there is a photo of Eddie in the back of a car, with his school uniform and safety belt on, reading the Vicious Vikings book. Pressing the button, Eddie’s pre-recorded voice says, ‘I really enjoyed this one and me and Eric came and read it in the car on the way to school’.

Turning to the next page, there is a photocopy of the Titanic book and on the opposite page, a photocopy of the book called Cookie. Pressing the button, Eddie's pre-recorded voice says, 'I loved the Titanic book. There was a load of pictures and it was very nice because Eric knew lots about the Titanic and I also learnt from him'. Eddie can be seen holding up the Talking Album and becoming quite embarrassed at hearing his own words here. He smiles and drops his head behind the 'Talking Album' book.

Regarding the picture of the Cookie book, Eddie's pre-recorded voice says, 'Cookie came in the second parcel but I was a bit sad as Cookie wasn't the one that I'd asked for. And I tried to read it but we didn't finish it because it was a bit boring because it was all about a girl'. Eddie can be seen still holding his Talking Album up in front of the camera and smiling.

He then turns the page once more and there is a photo of Eddie sat on a sofa holding up a book to the camera on his lap. Eddie's pre-recorded voice says, 'We sort of read 'There's a Wolf in my Tent'.

There are no more photos and/or pre-recorded voice overs and Eddie ends by saying, 'Thank you for reading my Talking Book with me'. He smiles at the camera and waves goodbye.

The total time of this recording is 2 minutes and 23 seconds.