



HOW FAR DOES ENGAGEMENT WITH COMICS POSITIVELY AFFECT CHILDREN'S ENJOYMENT OF READING AND WELLBEING?

UK Interim Report on the Comic Art Europe,
Comics and Literacy Project



Reading behaviour
(frequency / quantity / breadth)

Attitudes to reading

Identifying as a reader

Motivation to read
recreationally

Willingness for and
confidence in book talk



Creativity
Wellbeing
(happiness / self-esteem /
positive outlook)

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings of the initial phase of research into the relationship between comics and literacy undertaken with primary school children in the city of Manchester in North-West England. Literacy is a core element of the education system in England and it is through reading, in particular, that significant childhood development can take place (Department for Education 2012). The National Curriculum asserts that literature provides gateways to cultural, emotional and spiritual exploration (Department for Education 2013), whilst key social and academic skills are acquired in the processes of learning to read, reading aloud, and writing stories to be read and shared with others. Ofsted's School Inspection Handbook defines attention to the teaching of reading as a 'main inspection activity' (Ofsted 2021), and yet reading is frequently an area requiring improvement in schools, particularly amongst children in deprived circumstances, with one in four (27%) children leaving primary school in England unable to read well, rising to four in 10 (42%) disadvantaged children (Department for Education 2019).

Whilst educators broadly agree that fostering an enjoyment of reading in children is the key to producing successful readers and high attainers, comics and sequential art – a medium steeped in the colour, capers and imagination that children delight in – are often seen as an inferior reading choice by

both teachers and parents and one which should be opted for recreational purposes only (Arlin & Roth 1978; Powers 2008). It is this contradiction that forms the background to the research reported in this paper, which is part of a two-year study, conceived by Comic Art Europe in collaboration with Lyon Comics Festival in France, the Belgian Comic Strip Museum in Brussels and the Barcelona Comics School in Spain, that seeks to explore the transformational potential of comics as a dynamic tool for improving literacy.

With conversations about mental health becoming more prevalent throughout society, and children's welfare following the pandemic being at the forefront of school leaders' recovery agendas, another key area of investigation within the Comic Art Europe project is the impact that engagement with comics can have on young people's wellbeing. The Children's Society reports that children's wellbeing is at a 10-year low, with one in six children likely to have a mental health condition.¹ Encouragingly, the relationship between a higher engagement with literacy and better mental wellbeing in children and young people is well established (National Literacy Trust 2018). In this context, the research explores the claims of Dr Ian Williams, founder of GraphicMedicine.org, that comics can offer an added 'therapeutic potential',² which can provide support to the members, caregivers and educators of a generation beset by COVID-19.



¹ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/well-being>

² <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/why-graphic-medicine/>

2. Context

The research element of the Comic Art Europe project is led by The Lakes International Comic Arts Festival (LICAF), at the core of which is a family-friendly annual celebration that takes place in the English Lake District, offering presentations, discussions and workshops covering every genre, format and style of the comics medium and showcasing work by artists from countries as far as the Congo, the Philippines and Japan. Now in its ninth year, the festival's remit has expanded into the creation of the Comics Laureateship, community outreach, artist in residence programmes and the creation of Little LICAF; a subdivision of the festival designed specifically for ages 12 years and under. To undertake this research, LICAF partnered with The Phoenix, a British weekly story comic for children aged 6–12 published by David Fickling Comics Ltd, and Manchester City of Literature, one of UNESCO's network of 39 Cities of Literature. Both of these stakeholders share a mission to entice young people into reading.

Abraham Moss Community School (AMCS), a state school in Crumpsall, North West Manchester, was selected to participate in this project. AMCS has a highly diverse pupil population, with 'children [representing] a wide range of minority ethnic groups' and 'very many pupils [speaking] English as an

additional language' (Ofsted 2018). As a higher than average proportion of pupils attending the school are supported by Pupil Premium funding, it was considered to be a setting in which exposure to comics may not have been widespread. Lower key stage 2 (KS2) was selected as the pupil group with which to execute this study due to 7 years being an age at which children were expected to be able to access and enjoy comics, having already acquired the necessary phonics knowledge and comprehension skills. The school's most recent Ofsted report cited reading as an area for improvement and, whilst the list of provisions in class to promote reading for pleasure were extensive (library areas, guided reading, banded reading, home readers, class texts), KS2 teachers noted 'lack of parental engagement' and 'most children having English as an Additional Language' (along with their parents) as the main barriers to children developing more of an interest in reading. The two national lockdowns occurring in the 12 months prior to the commencement of this study are very likely to have exacerbated any pre-existing gaps in learning (Rose, S. et al. 2021).



3. Theory

There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating how comics can positively impact literacy: the combination of text and pictures can support the development of comprehension and inferential skills (Smetana et al. 2009); using comics as a stimulus can enrich learning across all areas of the curriculum (Tatalovic 2009); and reading comic books can help children learn and practise new language and literary concepts (Palumbo 1979). In the UK, comics are frequently marketed to educators as a 'stepping stone' into reading for reluctant readers or as an alternative to prose for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or English as an additional language (EAL). Whilst there is truth in these hypotheses (Snowball 2011; Recine 2013), studies have shown that they can be the preferred medium of skilled readers too (Botzakis 2014), owing to children regarding them, quite simply, as fun (Norton 2003).

Aside from reading, the creation of comics can give rise to 'a more thorough connection between arts and literacy' (Bitz 2004), and offer different types of learners a multimodal model through which to interpret the world and express themselves: 'When children are given opportunities to draw as part of the writing process this helps them to formulate, develop and extend ideas for writing, making their independent, self-initiated writing richer' (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2019). As visual images are such a prolific part of popular culture, found in every form of leisure and entertainment, comics offer children an attractive and familiar vehicle (and teachers an instant buy-in) through which to learn (or teach) creative skills. The 'cool factor' of genres such as Manga, now mainstream due to animated adaptations, can have social implications too. As Maynard (2012: 102) suggests, 'If children are reading something that is seen as trendy by their peers, it gives them a confidence boost'.

With enjoyment of reading and wellbeing sitting at the heart of this comics study, an existing reading outcomes framework, developed by The Reading Agency and other partners³, was loosely adopted to identify our intended outcomes and evaluate the efficacy of activities designed to promote positive change in each outcome area. Drawn from previous research (Cremin et al. 2009; Clark and Rumbold 2006), as well as experience within the research project team of both teaching and running a school library, these areas were: **reading behaviour** (frequency / quantity / breadth); **attitudes to reading; identifying as a reader; motivation to read recreationally; and willingness for and confidence in book talk**. Based on evidence supporting the reading outcomes framework that pleasure correlates with creativity (Kelly and Kneipp 2009), readers are more satisfied with life (Jenkins et al. 2012), and those who read for pleasure have higher self-esteem (Billington 2015), these outcomes were also expected to lead to impact in the areas of **creativity** and **wellbeing** (happiness / self-esteem / positive outlook).

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) advocates children having opportunities 'to hear from, to work with or to watch professional writers and illustrators. These experiences can be instrumental in helping children to understand how to realise ideas and, eventually, identify as writers and illustrators⁴ themselves. In light of this, professional comics creators were consulted and employed in the planning and delivery of the programme of activities.

³<https://readingoutcomes.readingagency.org.uk/>

⁴ https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/Reading%20for%20Pleasure_0.pdf

4. Method & Programme

A quasi-experimental approach was taken using comparison groups broadly matched across the characteristics of chronological age, reading age, ethnicity, Pupil Premium eligibility and SEND status; one of which received a comics 'intervention' in their learning while the other followed the normal curricula pattern. This involved two school classes that comprise the Year 3 cohort at AMCS, containing 27 and 26 children respectively. The chronological age of children in Y3 is 7-8 years and the average reading age of both classes in March 2021 was just over 6.5. In each class, three pupils were registered as having SEND and around a third of children had Pupil Premium status. The ethnicity of most children in both classes was Other Pakistani, followed by Arab and, as such, children's first languages were predominantly Urdu or Arabic. English was the first language of three children in total. The male/female split between participating pupils was 59%/41% in one class and 42%/58% in the other. There was a variation of 20% in pupils with a teacher-evaluated reading assessment of Y3 secure or better, with one group at 68% and the other 48%.

The baselining of the two Year 3 groups was performed using school reading assessment data and two question sets; one online and one completed by hand. A separate online survey was issued to parents. The children's data was collected in school in small groups, introduced and supervised by the LICAF researcher. Parental input was requested via school channels of communication, then answered and submitted from home. Statements on both classes' overall enjoyment of school, engagement with reading activities and receptiveness to new ideas and experiences were provided by their teachers.

In the online survey for pupils, answered by all participants, information was collected in relation to each of the seven expected reading, creativity and wellbeing outcomes and constructed using predominantly quantitative, 'scale' questions derived from academic research, government-run surveys and teaching practice.⁵ Where pre-existing frameworks were adapted, it was to make questions comprehensible to the subjects. Where relevant pre-existing questions could not be sourced, original queries were devised. The handwritten question sheet, completed by 50 participants, was designed to gather an overview of pupils' exposure to and experience of comics as well as their cultural consumption. It was presented in such a format to enable pupils to submit a drawing in answer to the instruction, 'Draw what you think a comic looks like.' The parental survey covered similar ground to that of the children's, with added enquiries into their own reading habits and public library use. Uptake of this survey was lower, with only 28 parents submitting a response. All three question sets will be revisited with participants once the intervention has concluded.



< books by visiting artists in year one of project

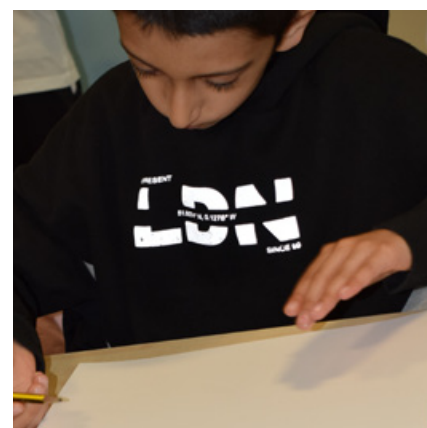
³hPIRLS 2011 Student Questionnaire Grade 4 (2011) developed by TIMSS & PIRLS; Student Questionnaire for PISA 2009 (2008) developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development; Family Reading Survey, National Literacy Trust (2017); <http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/rosenberg-self-esteem-scale/>; Millennium Cohort Study (2008); Evaluation of Bookstart England: Bookstart Corner (2013); KIDSCREEN-10 Index, The KIDSCREEN GROUP (2004); Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics (2014)

The intervention was planned for delivery across two academic years, each consisting of 20 half-day workshops led by two LICAF producers (Hester Harrington and Sim Leech, both qualified teachers) and five professional comics creators. In the first half of the programme, delivered between April and June 2021, these were: Marc Jackson, cartoonist specialising in comics for children; Rachael Smith, comics creator specialising in autobiographical comics centred around mental health; and Sayra Begum, illustrator also specialising in autobiographical comics, in the context of her Muslim, multi-cultural background. The intent of the programme of year one was to encourage recipients to develop and embrace a confidence for drawing and understand the basic mechanics of comics. Marc's workshops placed a focus on creativity, accomplishment and self-worth through drawing tutorials, and introduced pupils to comic literacy and how to embed text in a variety of forms. Following this was an investigation into comics using an autobiographical approach, to allow youngsters to interact with a genre of comics that bypassed superheroes (and the common misconception that comics = superheroes). Over six sessions, Rachael guided children through self-reflection and self-expression in comic form, with the communication of ideas and sharing of stories the driving force. The final stage of year one invited children to expand their visual repertoires through caricaturing and mark-making during sessions with Sayra in which she scaffolded the creation of comics that juxtaposed pupils' personal experiences with randomized fictional elements. Throughout year one, children were supplied with a temporary library of comics and graphic novels in class and a 12-month subscription to The Phoenix comic

delivered directly to their homes. The school class teacher and teaching assistants were present during every workshop, to support classroom and behaviour management and for the purposes of their own professional development.

Pupils were periodically photographed and filmed during workshops and samples of their creative output were retained for analysis. Informal observations were collected from all deliverers at the end of each session and pupils completed written feedback sheets at the culmination of key stages of the programme. In June 2021, the mid-point of the intervention, qualitative work was undertaken with the children, parents, workshop leaders and class teacher to evaluate what had occurred in terms of formal and arts learning and examine the attributing mechanisms of change. Pupils were interviewed in groups of three by the LICAF researcher, parents were asked to submit feedback to a series of prompts online, and focus groups were held with deliverers and the class teacher via Zoom. Further reading assessment data based on teacher judgements was obtained from the school in July 2021 (reading age testing had not been repeated with subjects by this point).

It is worth noting that the format of this research posed an ethical dilemma to those involved in planning the project in respect of the comparison group failing to benefit from the intervention; particularly given their age and prior shortage of external educational enrichment due to the pandemic. Consequently, Tom Fickling, Editor of The Phoenix, extended the comic's sponsorship of the project to include a 12-month subscription for every child in this group at the end of the study.



^ Pupil work to reflect Marc Jackson, Rachael Smith & Sayra Begum's objectives

5. Emerging Findings

5.1 Reading behaviour

Pre-activity: 80% of the intervention group had never chosen their own comic to buy, never been given a comic as a present and never borrowed a comic from a library. 70% said they never or almost never read comics or graphic novels outside of school. Fiction and non-fiction books were the materials read most frequently by the class, observed also by their parents. Reading before bed, choosing a book to read and listening to a story read by someone else were the activities most liked by the class. Nine pupils said they read for fun every day or almost every day. The most popular response to the question, 'How long do you read for, each time you read outside of school?' was 'for as little time as possible, so I can do other things'.

Mid activity: 16 out of 27 children (59%) reported spending more time reading since the start of the intervention. Reasons for this included an introduction to and subsequent enjoyment of the humour genre, self-awareness of improved reading skills, seeking out more reading material in colour, and increased access to reading material through their Phoenix subscriptions:

'I used to pick just normal books and now I pick, like, the funny books and stuff.'

(Meena)

'[W]hen I was reading my comic I keep on getting better and better. I read at morning and afternoon. [Before the workshops] sometimes I read at night.'

(Farhaan)

Of the 11 children who said their reading has not increased, four stated that they have started making different reading choices; selecting comics more often or books containing elements they've enjoyed in the comics they've recently engaged with in workshops or at home (cited as 'horror', 'colourful', 'exciting' and 'funny'). Workshop leader, Sim Leech, became aware of children's reading choices broadening over the twenty sessions. He described there being 'quite a bit of fuss and swapping of books to find specific things' at the start, which evolved throughout the project into children being more satisfied and inclined 'just pick something up and have a look at it and keep hold of it and keep going at it and try something different and something new, something that wasn't familiar'.

The comics brought into the classroom by LICAF were seen, by both the class teacher, Ben Dickinson, and workshop leaders, as instrumental in supporting the children's development of language, with Ben commenting that they 'dive into completely different types of vocabulary'. Furthermore, they allowed pupils to explore content they would not have otherwise accessed in Year 3: 'To have that exposure to Frida Kahlo, which they wouldn't have in the National Curriculum, is extra learning. It's extra information, extra knowledge that they're gaining, so it's beneficial'.

Two thirds of parents noted specific changes to their child's reading, including increased speed, independence, interest, confidence and enjoyment:

'More quicker to read and Good pronation [sic].'

(Arham's parent)

'Yes, she is more interested in her reading and tells me that she can imagine characters in her head when she reads.'

(Darshika's parent)

Meanwhile, school data collected in March and July indicated there was an 11% increase in pupils assessed as 'Y4 ready' in reading within the intervention group (and a decrease of 7% within the non-intervention comparison group).

5.2 Attitudes to reading

Pre-activity: 67% of the intervention group said they enjoyed reading, with an even split between males and females. 74% agreed a lot with the statement that reading is important. 30% agreed a little or a lot with the statement that reading is boring. Around half the class cited 'difficult words' or 'spellings' as the thing that made reading difficult for them.

Mid activity: The class teacher is confident that there has been a significant shift in attitudes to reading, saying, 'Reading has become a more positive thing to do within the classroom. They're all really positive, they all really want to engage with reading. I've noticed a massive change in the number of children that want to read during this comic project'. He ascribed this willingness to 'their excitement [being] there to read comics and enjoy comics'.

The opening exercise of the first session required pupils to mind map the features of a comic, revealing to workshop leader, Hester Harrington, that children's 'exposure to comics prior to the workshops was not particularly diverse'. By the end of the twentieth workshop, over half the class were able to distinguish differences between the features of books and comics and a third indicated a preference for reading comics over books:

'[Books have more writing and in the comics they have less writing and more pictures so you understand. And sometimes they don't even have words they only have pictures to show you what's happening.]'

(Gulsan)

'[Comics are different to book because] they have speech bubbles and you can break rules. They have panels, gutters - it's almost like you can do anything you want. Yeah [I like that about comics]. Yeah [I prefer that to reading books].'

(Tarfaan)

Around three quarters of children responded positively when asked how they felt about reading and receiving their Phoenix comics each week. Reasons for this included enjoying its arrival in the post (two pupils), it being funny (four pupils) and having the opportunity to practise drawing (three pupils). One pupil explained that they had 'stuff to do, we don't need to be bored anymore'. While class teacher Ben did not receive any comments from parents pertaining to their child's reading over the course of the intervention, in their written feedback, all but three parents (14/17) described positive reactions from their children to these weekly Phoenix deliveries. In accordance with pupils' interview responses, the emotions 'happy' and 'excited' were mentioned most frequently. Five parents alluded to the arrival of the comic at home via the post as a contributing factor to these positive reactions:

'He really loved it. When ever he sees the new post a smile came on his face & he says oh this is my post [sic]. Even my older child loved these [P]hoenix comic[s] [and] to be honest he read these books more [than my son in Year 3].'

(Zayan's parent)

Eighteen children perceived positive changes to their feelings about reading as a result of the workshops, with many of these changes stemming from an introduction to the comics format:

'I always used to read, like, normal books, just black and white, no pictures, but now I read The Phoenix I like it much more and that's the only thing I read at home.'

(Callum)

'I used to read a lot less but when I first opened up the magazine of The Phoenix it made me feel much better than just reading plain books.'

(Nabeela)

5.3 Identifying as a reader

Pre-activity: 93% of the intervention group agreed that they usually do well in reading, 78% agreed that reading is easy for them and 67% agreed that they would be happy if someone gave them a book as a present.

Mid activity: Introducing children to comics representing characters and historical figures from a range of ethnicities, for example Miss Marvel and Muhammad Ali, provoked enthusiasm and an eagerness to read. Likewise, one of the visiting artist's, Sayra's, Muslim faith and multi-cultural background, provided some children with an association that made them particularly interested in her work. LICAF producer Hester reflected that 'once they had a route in that was personal to them, either having met that artist or something about that character that they could link to via their name...that that was something that drew them in'. One girl's parent concurred with this, stating in their feedback that their daughter had been 'pleasantly surprised by seeing ethnically diverse characters such as a girl wearing a head-scarf' in The Phoenix.

5.4 Motivation to read recreationally

Pre-activity: 59% of the intervention group agreed that they read only if they had to. Six out of 27 children made references to reading in answer to the question, 'What three things do you most enjoy doing in your free time?' There were seven instances of reading being children's least enjoyable activities.

Mid activity: Many pupils put forward comics as the reason they now read more often or have increased enjoyment of reading. Comments that offered differing viewpoints on motivations to read related to a newfound inclination, escapism and tangible rewards.

'I used to kind of get forced to read it but now I don't need to get forced because I read it by myself, [that's] how much I like it.'

(Nabeela)

'[Reading] makes me inspired because it's fun and, say you just, like, got in trouble by your mum, you just read and it would all go away.'

(Liam)

One female pupil is now so 'fascinated' with comics that she has asked the class teacher if she can read them in her own time in school once a week: 'Every Wednesday at break time she's coming in and reading the comics [because] she's enjoyed [the workshops] so much'.

The last workshop, led by Hester and Sim, contained a reflective exercise on the project so far, in which children were asked to produce a comic based on the sentence starter, 'When I receive my copy of The Phoenix comic in the post...'. Hester recalls that discussions took place 'which proved that the majority of them are reading [their Phoenix] every week... and that they were sharing that experience with their family members as well, which wasn't there at the start when we came in just after Easter. For them all to have enough content to be able to have a response to that [task] would demonstrate that their reading at home independently had increased'.

Short, silent reading sessions were a recurring feature of the workshops. Hester observed that, quite quickly, children seemed reluctant for this task to be drawn to a close and that 'there would almost be a groan at the end of the 10-minute timer [when] they had to finish reading'. On the post-lesson feedback sheets, there are many instances of children requesting more of this comics reading time.



< Phoenix front cover and pupil drawings of Phoenix character, Looshkin



Pupils sharing

5.5 Willingness for and confidence in book talk

Pre-activity: Among a selection of reading activities, the most disliked by the intervention group were reading in front of the class and having conversations at home about reading. 48% did not like talking about what they read with other people and 41% did not like talking about books with their friends.

Mid activity: The majority of parents contributed feedback statements that implied that their child had discussed *The Phoenix* comic and its content with them, eight of which described conversations centred specifically on reading the comic, with their children discussing ‘what happens next’, ‘the characters’, ‘the story’ and ‘the plot’. Over half the children said they shared their *Phoenix* comics with another family member, generally siblings, giving rise to additional conversations that may have gone unnoticed by parents:

‘Sometimes my sister, at night-time, sneaks it because she really likes comics. [She’s] 21. She talks about, like, “How do they draw them people? They drew really good. They’re a artist [sic].” Like, stuff like that.’
(Badiha)

Around two thirds of the class described positive feelings when showing the comics they had created to the rest of the class or adults in the room, for example ‘excited’, ‘proud’ or ‘confident’. Other explanations for these positive feelings included enjoyment at eliciting laughter and receiving feedback:

‘[Showing my work to the class made me] [v]lery, very, very excited. Because everybody gets to see it. Because, like, when you only get to see it, like, there’s no people, it’s just you and yourself. You don’t see how other people react, their actions.’

(Tarfaan)

The culture of children sharing their work quickly became a highlight of the sessions; occasions in which, class teacher Ben stated, ‘there was never any negativity, there was always positivity’. This sense of moral support laid the foundations for new social interactions and Ben became aware of ‘groups of kids talking to each other about it that you wouldn’t necessarily see outside on the playground or within the classroom’. Artist Rachael Smith commented that it was ‘one of my favourite things – how supportive they all were of each other’s work. They wanted to share their work with each other, they discussed it with each other’. Sayra Begum agreed, adding, ‘it was hard not to let all of them go because they were all really excited to share what they had created’. Pupils’ negative feelings around presenting work related to shyness, worries about the standard of their work and, in just one case, boredom.

5.6 Creativity

Pre-activity: 92% of the intervention group had never made their own comic outside of school. 58% said they had never experienced a school visit from an artist or writer. 56% asserted that 'creativity...using your imagination or own ideas to make or do something' was a descriptor that sounded a bit or very much like them. When asked about their favourite activities to do outside of school, there were only four references to colouring, painting or drawing (out of a possible 81).

Mid activity: More than two thirds of pupils said that the way they came up with ideas changed over the course of the intervention. Rationale for this varied greatly. One pupil accepted he can change his mind when developing ideas, prompting new ones; another noticed his brain got 'faster'; one girl felt empowered to draw different things to her friends; and many realised reading comics could provide inspiration:

'[W]henever a person asks me to give an idea about comics I straight away know an idea cos I've read lots of comics and I can give a lot of ideas cos before I never...had much ideas.'

(Gulsan)

Changes specifically to children's creativity were detected by over two thirds of parents, in areas ranging from making up stories to playing outdoors more often.

'[My son] has always been creative and this has further blossomed after reading numerous books.'

(Hazeem's parent)

The class teacher described his pupils' passion for art as 'quite high' prior to their involvement with this project. Participation in the workshops made it 'even more desirable for them,' with many pupils latching on to Marc Jackson's philosophy of there being 'no right or wrong' in regards to drawing, and drawing being an activity in which rule breaking is not just permitted, but encouraged. Drawing was the workshop element that was cited as a favourite most often by children, followed by colouring, Marc Jackson's visit, making comics, being creative/ thinking of ideas and, finally, reading. A large proportion of children asserted that their drawing and colouring skills had improved and others noted a new appreciation for reading comics and improvements to their writing. Two pupils revealed their self-confidence had grown:

'I'm getting confident in my drawings and when they say, "It's fine if you get a mistake," I don't need to worry about that.'

(Uzma)

Having live drawing demonstrated in class positively influenced children's enjoyment of learning and drawing, helping them to develop a range of creative skills and positive behaviours including confidence, focus, dexterity and commitment. Hester recalls that, 'all the children, without a shadow of a doubt, were 100% engaged and enjoyed watching the artists draw. These techniques were carried through and they demonstrated them of their own accord when they were given free choice to draw their comics'. Visiting artist, Rachael Smith, expressed surprise at the amount she learned from children's work about 'telling stories and what stories should be told'.

5.7 Wellbeing

Pre-activity: Pupils in the intervention group rated their own wellbeing slightly lower than their parents' assessment of them, at an average of 27/40. 67% agreed that they felt happy with themselves. 48% agreed that they did not have much to be proud of and 44% agreed that they failed a lot.

Mid activity: Ten out of 17 parents provided examples of ways in which their child's wellbeing had altered over the course of the workshops, citing completely different reasons for this in nearly every instance. Whereas some parents became aware of their child becoming 'more active', 'excited', 'energetic' or 'confident', others remarked their child was 'more focused', 'calmer' or 'refreshed'. The term 'good communication' was offered twice.

More than half the children used both the words 'happy' and 'excited' when describing how they felt prior to and during the workshops. Explanations as to why they felt this way referred to the workshops being 'fun' (more fun than lessons), a desire to improve skills and learn new ones, enjoying the element of surprise and getting more opportunities to draw and be creative. Just over a third of children (10) reported feelings of sadness or upset after the workshops ended, due to not being able to see workshop leaders and comics creators again.

For the most part, children either did not feel or could be sure that any of their friendships had changed since taking part in the comics workshops. For the third of children (nine) that did feel there had been changes, one said they'd made a new friend in one of the workshop leaders, one read and made comics in the early stages of a new friendship, one collaborated on a comic with a classmate they didn't usually play with, and one discovered a common interest in drawing with his sister.

First my sister was not even bothered about me playing or anything, I didn't even listen to her, but then when I started drawing art and then I started doing things like 3D she said, "Why are you into all of this stuff?" and I said, "These are all comics things and I like it," so I started doing 3D and I made shadows that she couldn't make as well.'

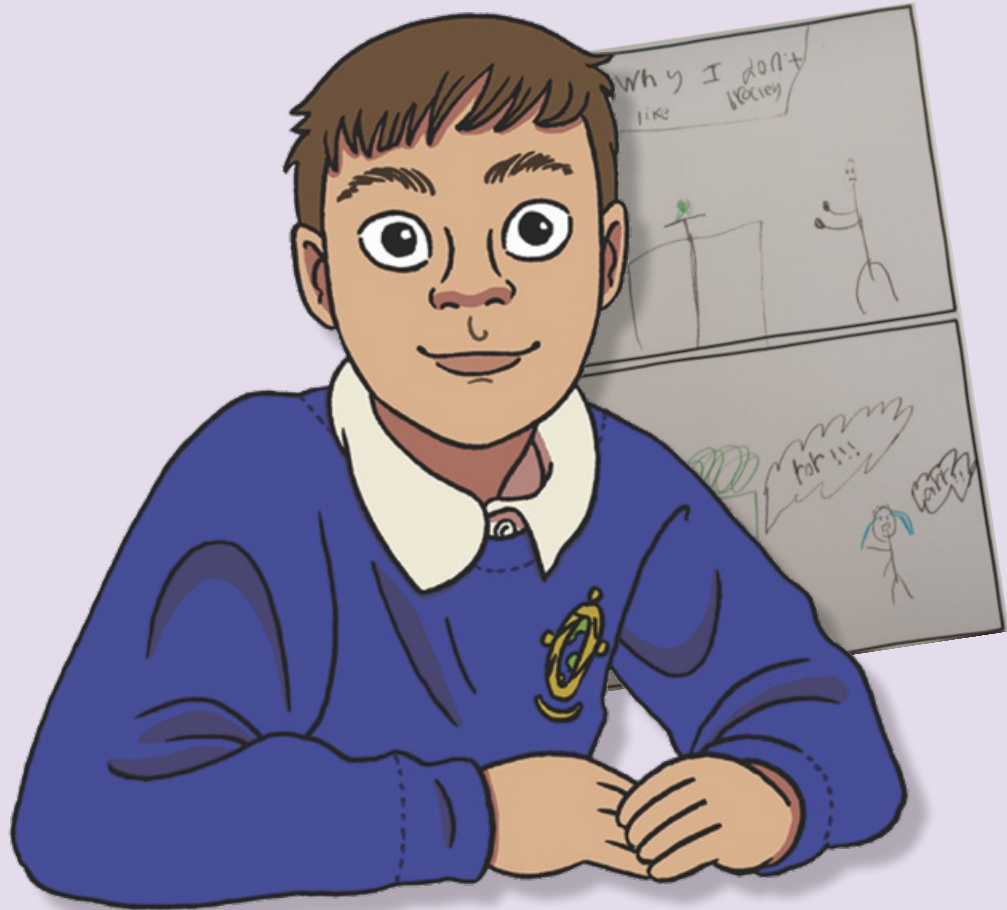
(Muzhir)



^ Pupils reading from LICAF comics library

Liam

comics provided an outlet for self-expression, resulting in improved behaviour in the classroom.



At the start of the project, Liam's survey responses presented him as one of the most disengaged readers in the class; no enjoyment of reading, no interest in reading for fun and of the opinion that reading was boring and a waste of time. In spite of this, his reading age was above the class average and he conceded that he usually did well in reading and found it easy. It's possible his responses could have been exaggerated, as his parent held a differing view of his reading habits, stating that he read every day for more than an hour each time. Liam very rarely read comics. He was, however, one of only two children in his class who had made their own comic outside of school.

In the words of his teacher, Liam possessed social skills 'beyond an 8-year-old,' making him an 'interesting character' within the class. Although 'bright,' he did not put maximum effort into all areas of his work and therefore displayed disengagement in learning at times. Negative behaviour, in the form of irritating other children, was occasionally a consequence which disrupted learning for everyone.

Whereas Liam had never habitually exhibited excitement towards approaching lessons, once the comics workshops began, Ben noticed that 'the first thing he would always ask me as soon as [he came in was], "Are we doing the comics today? Is Sim back? Is Hester back? Is Marc back?"'. Ben pronounced

Liam as 'probably one of the most enthusiastic children within that project'; the 'complete opposite to what he's normally like in the classroom'. He had 'found a passion that he enjoy[ed], which he probably didn't ever realise he'd have without [the] workshop'.

Ben noticed improvements to the way Liam collaborated with his peers: 'Still not perfect, but better than he'd usually do'. The act of sharing his comics with the class and provoking his intended reaction of laughter gave him 'a confidence boost and a self-esteem boost'. Thereupon, behaviour incidents declined and, despite intermittent issues during break and lunch times, 'within the lessons, [his behaviour] was completely different to what it would usually be'.

Liam was one of the few pupils who did not take a huge interest in his Phoenix comics, choosing only to read them at night if he was 'bored'. One comic brought in by the LICAF producers, *Strange Skies Over East Berlin*, nevertheless contains a bookmark featuring Liam's name. He selected this comic for three consecutive silent reading sessions and is keen to continue where he left off when the workshops resume.

Abdullah

workshops ignited a passion for creativity, leading to increased self and social confidence

Reading was not an activity Abdullah was excessively passionate about at the start of the project. It appeared in his list of three least favourite things to do, substantiated in his parent's survey responses, and he showed no real enthusiasm towards any reading materials when asked which types he read the most. He indicated that he read for pleasure and independent enquiry once or twice a week, but that he disliked talking about his reading with other people or listening to them read to him. Abdullah did not consider himself creative and was one of only two children in the class who had a cultural consumption score of zero. His parent said they read for their own enjoyment once or twice a month and that there were around five children's books in their home. The family did not use the public library and Abdullah had never borrowed, bought or been gifted a comic before.

In school, Abdullah displayed quiet and serious characteristics and was described by his teacher as a hard worker who was committed to his learning. Of his reading ability, Ben said, 'He's got a good reading understanding; he's got a good fluency of reading', but in respect of his creativity, he commented that '[Abdullah] was just not a confident drawer whatsoever'.

It was during the first workshop led by a visiting artist, Marc Jackson, that Ben noticed Abdullah becoming 'a lot more confident, a lot more open to making mistakes and potentially just going with the flow of things instead of having to re-do and re-do again'. Pupils were issued with pens rather than pencils and told to celebrate and build on self-perceived imperfections, so as to create something entirely unique. Sim, who co-delivered this workshop, observed Abdullah choose a yellow pen at the start of the day, 'possibly deliberately...so the picture was hard to see', then progress to 'a bolder, more visible colour' for his next drawing. By the end of the session, Abdullah was out of his seat and in the queue for the classroom visualizer: 'He went from, "I can't draw" to taking his drawings out to the front and showing them to Marc in a few hours', recalled Sim.



The changes effected in Abdullah from this point onwards did not go unnoticed by anyone, including himself. He asserted that improved drawing skills and increased self-confidence were creative and personal outcomes that could be attributed to the programme, describing it as 'fun' and 'exciting'. In fact, he admitted that he had become more 'silly' because he was having 'too much fun'. The change his parent succinctly detected to his overall wellbeing was 'being himself' and his teacher believed his eagerness to put up his hand to show his work indicated a 'massive transition in his confidence'. Upon analyzing Abdullah's final piece of work, Hester discerned he had 'filled the entire panel and [not just with] a tiny little character as a stickman on the bottom'. She went on to say that, 'Considering he said he couldn't draw, not only [did] he come up with a cause and effect, but that's really accomplished for someone who was very, very timid and really, really shy'.

Abdullah did not feel his reading habits or feelings towards reading underwent any changes throughout the intervention, and his dislike of being read to still stands. His artwork and flair for creativity may not have captured the attention of his parent, who didn't offer him any feedback when he brought his drawings home, but comics are certainly forging a new pastime for him and his siblings, with whom he completes his favourite pages of *The Phoenix*; the drawing activities.

7. Conclusion

Findings gathered so far support existing theories that reading comics can contribute to children's acquisition of vocabulary and language skills, offer them a vast source of knowledge, and invigorate the reading habits of youngsters less inclined to read for pleasure. Wider engagement with the medium, such as making comics and meeting comics creators, can support the development of creative processes that give rise to unique storytelling and other artistic outputs. Most importantly, it can evoke feelings of happiness, eagerness and calm.

Specific to this study, research indicates that giving children access to comics generates enjoyment of reading; not only of the comics medium, but of other reading materials as well. Whereas it could be argued that providing families, particularly those of low socioeconomic status, with any type of complimentary reading material would boost interest in books, in this instance the very nature of comics being humorous, image-based and dynamic led to improved reading behaviour, attitudes and skills in the majority of participants. The shared experience of reading and producing comics strengthened the reading culture and camaraderie in the classroom and initiated new bonds with friends and siblings outside of school. Facilitation of book talk in its various forms (presenting work, discussing style, describing plot, etc.) boosted many pupils' social confidence, resulting in increased opportunities for them to experience a sense of achievement and pride.

Workshops on the subject of comics generated mass appeal for drawing in the classroom, with evidence suggesting the angles of experimentation and breaking convention were fundamental to igniting creativity and unleashing self-

expression. Pupils acknowledged that reading comics provided stimuli for making their own which, in turn, developed their creative skill and inclination. In one, unanticipated, instance this process helped modify negative, attention-seeking behaviour through providing a more constructive outlet for communication and comedy.

Areas in need of further exploration are whether pupils are identifying as readers amongst their peers and families, motivated to read recreationally beyond the requirements of the workshop and benefitting from sustained improvements to their wellbeing. The scheme of work for the second half of the programme has been designed with this in mind and will include: a mini comic festival to showcase children's work and encourage them to promote reading for pleasure to fellow pupils; a library immersion day offering a range of reading experiences to appeal to different learning styles; and a focus on healthy living with links to the primary Physical Education curriculum, all the while further investigating the mechanics of visual storytelling.

Minimal apparatus is required to create and distribute a comic, highlighting the medium as an economical device for firing enthusiasm and achieving wellness. With many publishers bringing the format to younger readers⁶ and a wealth of inspiration to be found online, due to the rise of social media and the suitability of many platforms for sharing sequential art, accessibility to source material should pose little barrier to schools in harnessing the potential of comics to improve literacy by embedding comics-based learning into school improvement plans. As participants in this study have shown, it's a self-propagating cycle and the first step to making a comic book to inspire others is to read one yourself.

⁶ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/85687-comics-formats-go-younger.html>

References

- Arlin, M. and Roth, G. (1978).** 'Pupils' use of time while reading comics and books', *American Educational Research Journal*, 15(2), 201-216.
- Billington, J. (2015).** 'Reading Between the Lines: The Benefits of Reading for Pleasure', *Quick Reads*, University of Liverpool.
- Bitz, M. (2004).** 'The Comic Book Project: Forging alternative pathways to literacy', *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 47(7); 574-586.
- Botzakis, S. (2014).** 'Graphic novels: Who likes them and why?'. Retrieved from <http://ohiorc.org/adlit/inperspective/issue/2014-02/article/vignette1.aspx>.
- Clark, C. and Rumbold, K. (2006).** 'Reading for pleasure: A research overview', National Literacy Trust.
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2019).** 'The Power of Pictures: Summary of findings from the research on the CLPE Power of Pictures Project 2013-19'.
- Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, F., Powell, S. and Safford, K. (2009).** 'Teachers as readers: building communities of readers', *Literacy*, 43(1) pp. 11-19.
- Department for Education (2012).** 'Research Evidence on Reading for Pleasure, Education Standards research Team.
- Department for Education (2013).** *English Programmes of Study: Key Stages 1 and 2.*
- Department for Education (2019).** *National Curriculum Assessments: Key Stage 2, 2019 (provisional).*
- Jenkins, A., Ackerman, R., Frumkin, L., Salter, E. and J, Vorhaus (2011).** 'Literacy, Numeracy and Disadvantage Among Older Adults in England', Institute of Education, University of London.
- Kelly, K., and Kneipp, L. (2009).** 'Reading for Pleasure and Creativity Among College Students', *College Student Journal*, 43(4): 1137-1144.
- Maynard, A. (2012).** How comics help to teach Shakespeare in schools. *Asiatic*, Vol. 6, No. 2.
- National Literacy Trust (2018)** 'Mental Wellbeing, Reading and Writing: How children and young people's mental wellbeing is related to their reading and writing experiences.'
- Norton, B. (2003).** 'The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers', *The Reading Teacher*, 57(2), 140 -147.
- Ofsted (2018)** Inspection report: Abraham Moss Community School, 16-17 January 2018: 9.
- Ofsted (2021)** School Inspection Handbook. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/education>.
- Palumbo, D. (1979).** 'The use of comics as an approach to introducing the techniques and terms of narrative to novice readers.' Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association in the South, Louisville, KY.
- Powers, L.** 'Graphic Tales Make Novel Teaching Tools', *The Sunday Age* 21 Sept. 2008: 21.
- Recine, D. (2013)** 'Comics Aren't Just For Fun Anymore: The Practical Use of Comics by TESOL Professionals'. MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-River Falls.
- Rose, S., Twist, L., Lord, P., Rutt, S., Badr, K., Hope, C., and B. Styles (2021).** Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment and socio-emotional wellbeing in Key Stage 1: Interim Paper 1, National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Smetana, L., Odelson, D., Burns, H., and D.L. Grisham (2009).** 'Using graphic novels in the high school classroom: Engaging deaf students with a new genre', *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 53(3), 228-240.
- Snowball, C. (2011)** 'Graphic Novels: Enticing Teenagers into the Library'. PhD thesis, Curtin University of Technology.
- Tatalovic, M. (2009).** 'Science comics as tools for science education and communication: A brief, exploratory study', *Journal of Science Communication*, 8(4),7-77.
- Report author:** Rowena Singleton, for LICAF, October 2021



Workshop leaders and artists at work



www.comicartfestival.com



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND