



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

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



COMIC ART
EUROPE



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)

Executive Summary

Introduction

Comic Art Europe is a project bringing together four European organisations to demonstrate the importance of comics in societies across Europe. The UK element of the programme was led by The Lakes International Comic Arts Festival (LICAF) in partnership with *The Phoenix Comic* and Manchester City of Literature and focusses on the relationship between comics and children's literacy; specifically how comics impact on children's enjoyment of reading and their wellbeing.

In the UK, literacy is widely accepted as the foundation for all learning, while literature is seen as a building block to support many aspects of children's personal and social development. As such, reading is a key area of Ofsted school inspections. However, it is one which requires improvement in many settings, particularly amongst children in deprived circumstances. Educators continue to look for ways to improve reading results and develop robust reading cultures, yet the potential of comics to contribute the development of reading skills has rarely been considered by educational authorities.

LICAF's two-year study of the relationship between comics and literacy aimed to explore the potential of comics in the classroom, and at home, to enhance children's experiences of reading and, consequently, their happiness and self-esteem; a national priority following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This report presents findings gathered between April 2021 and May 2022 at Abraham Moss Community School; a richly ethnically diverse state school in North West Manchester with above average numbers of children with English as an additional language (EAL) and Pupil Premium status. We examined two broadly matched comparison groups, the two Year 3 classes, one of which received a comics intervention in their regular learning whilst the other did not. Data comprised of measured outcomes in seven areas relating to reading, creativity and wellbeing and was collected from children, parents, class teachers and workshop leaders through baseline questionnaires, school reading assessment data and qualitative methods including focus groups, interviews, observations, written feedback, pupil work and photographs. The intervention was delivered across 40 half-day workshops by LICAF producers and five professional comics creators with contrasting backgrounds and specialties. Children in the intervention groups were supplied with 12-month subscriptions to *The Phoenix* and a classroom-based library of comics provided by LICAF.



Summary of Key Findings

Reading behaviour – engagement with comics led to children's reading ages increasing at a faster rate and inspired an appreciation for reading more widely.

Attitudes to reading – enjoyment of reading increased at home and in school and pupils encountered fewer difficulties when reading.

Identifying as a reader – children developed an appreciation of books in the form of gifts and interacted with books more willingly amongst their peers.

Motivation to read recreationally – reading became a favourite pastime for more pupils. Fewer pupils regarded it as their least favourite pursuit.

Willingness for and confidence in book talk – children engaged in more conversations at home about reading and felt more positive about reading in front of their classmates.

Creativity – children's perceptions of their own creative abilities improved and art, writing and attending school became more exciting.

Wellbeing – children took more pride in and felt happier with themselves.

Whereas these findings clearly demonstrate a positive impact of comics in the classroom overall, we did encounter a degree of ambivalence in the outcomes for some aspects of the seven impact areas we focused on. These may reflect the complexities of the way comics work in the particular context of our study or they may result from its design. The main report that follows includes critical evaluation of our approach, which may or may not account for these ambiguities. Further elaboration of the mechanisms affecting change through the intervention of comics in the classroom is provided through four individual and group case studies.

Summary of Key Findings

Reflecting on the findings of this study, we would prioritise the following actions:

- Schools should access and allocate additional funding for the acquisition of a diverse range of comics and comic books, for use in their libraries and primary and secondary classrooms.
- University teacher training should incorporate academic study of comics, including the holistic and creative benefits of reading comics and their specific application to the curriculum.
- Publishers and literacy organisations should signpost educators and parents to age-appropriate comics, compile free comics resources centrally online, commission more bilingual and translated comics and increase the proportion of comics incorporated into reading intervention schemes for all abilities.
- Strategic educational bodies, publishers and universities should commission further research into the potential of comics as vehicles for learning development with different constituencies in a range of contexts.

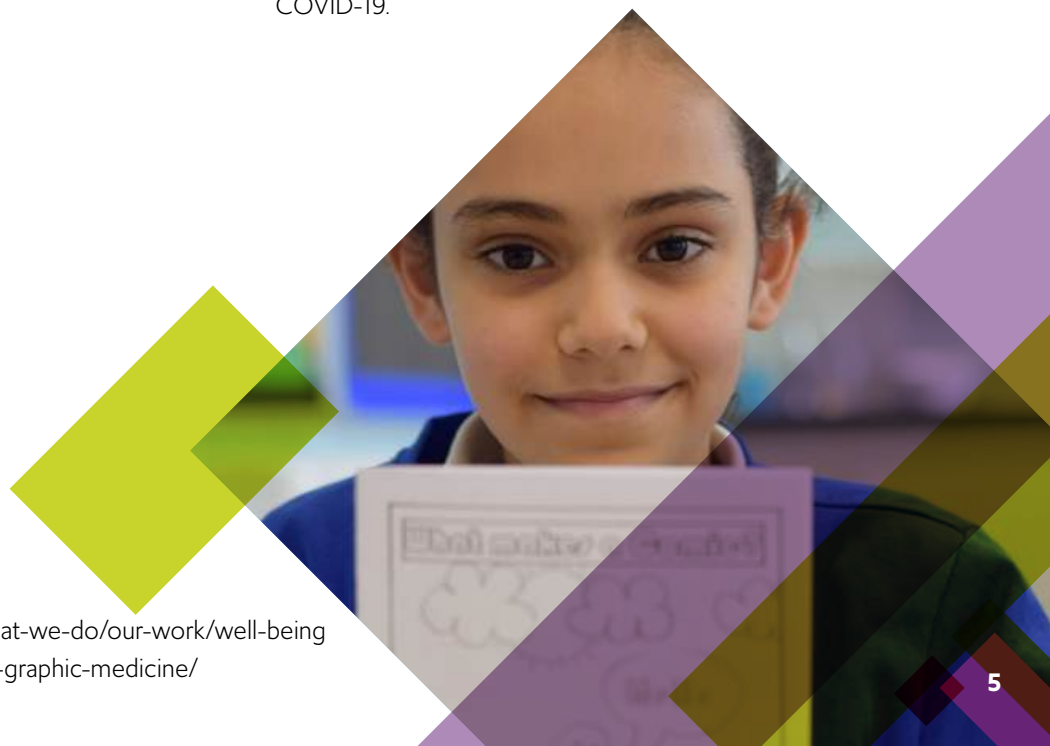
1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings 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 the UK 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 ten (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 here, 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 providing support to the members, caregivers and educators of a generation beset by COVID-19.



¹<https://www.childrenssociety.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 eleventh year, the festival's remit has expanded into the creation of the Comics Laureateship, community outreach, artists 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 phonics³ 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 was 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' (as did their parents) as the main barriers to children developing more of an interest in reading. The two national lockdowns for COVID-19 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 *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 practice 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). While bearing out these claims (Snowball 2011; Recine 2013), studies have shown that comics can be the preferred medium of skilled readers too (Botzakis 2014), as children regard 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 channel 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 partners,⁴ 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.'⁵ These experiences can be instrumental in helping children to understand how to realise ideas and, eventually, identify as writers and illustrators themselves. In light of this, professional comics creators were consulted and employed in the planning and delivery of the programme of activities.

³Phonics is a way of teaching people how to read and write by connecting the alphabetic letters of words to the sounds of spoken language. See <https://literacytrust.org.uk/information/what-is-literacy/what-phonics/>

⁴<https://readingoutcomes.readingagency.org.uk/>

⁵https://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 comprised the Year 3 cohort at AMCS, containing 27 and 26 children with parental permission to participate in the study respectively.⁶ The chronological age of children in Year 3 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 the intervention class and 42%/58% in the comparison class. There was a variation of 20% in pupils with a teacher-evaluated reading assessment of Year 3 secure or better, with the intervention group rated at 68% and the comparison class at 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.⁷ Where pre-existing frameworks were adapted, it was to make questions comprehensible to the participants. 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 than their children's, with only 28 parents (53%) submitting a response.

< books by visiting artists in year one of project

⁶ 27/30 children in the intervention group and 26/31 in the comparison group.

⁷ PIRLS 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 delivered across two academic years, each consisting of 40 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.

Year two of the programme ran between November 2021 and May 2022 and offered: increased opportunities to model reading and read comics communally; access to the school's secondary phase library and comics collection; sustained links to the KS2 curriculum; and new methods of working collaboratively to produce and promote comics. Marc made a return to the classroom, this time facilitating the processes of character and story design to portray and publicise healthy lifestyles, drawing inspiration from his Beano character Lenny The Lettuce and linking to areas of formal learning in Physical Education and Personal Social Health and Economic (PSHE). This exploration of wellbeing through comics was furthered in sessions led by Hester and Sim on mental health, mindfulness and sense of self, calling on content from creators such as Gemma Correll and Cece Bell. New collaborator Matt Smith, a Canadian/British cartoonist, filmmaker and educator with experience delivering workshops to children all over the world, built on the foundational learning of year one by examining some of the more complex features of comics including emanata,⁸ camera angles and alternative use of sound effects, which complemented pupils' understanding of their concurrent science topic on sound. The unanticipated event of external visitors being disallowed in school for a period, due to COVID-19 mitigation, proved not to be a hindrance to Matt, who expertly presented his sessions, drew his comics digitally and interacted with pupils remotely via Zoom. The last of the workshop visits in year two, once more in person, was from representatives of KUGALI; an entertainment company whose



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

⁸Marks, lines or other graphical elements used to portray movement or emotions associated with comic characters or objects.

mission is to share stories from Africa through comic art, animation and Augmented Reality. The objectives of Hamid Ibrahim, co-founder, and Fahmy Haroun, Marketing Associate, were to highlight the cultural diversity of comics creators and their stories, introduce the concept of story arcs to support children with the construction of their own narratives and develop creative practice through encouraging pupils to work in artist-writer pairs. A mini Comic Art Festival was held in the School Library by the group receiving the comics intervention to showcase examples of their work and promote reading for pleasure to fellow pupils in the year below, together with a Library Immersion Day which offered exploration of reading outside of the conventional classroom to appeal to different learning styles. Both of these events sought to create positive library experiences and reinforce the status of comics as valid, and accessible, reading material.

Throughout the project, children were supplied with a temporary library of comics in class and a subscription to *The Phoenix* comic delivered directly to their homes. School class teachers and teaching assistants were present during every workshop, to support classroom and behaviour management and for the purposes of their own professional development. These members of staff changed as children commenced Year 4, and pupil populations experienced slight variance with one participating pupil in each group leaving the school (plus four leaving and five joining the cohort – all non-participating) before the study concluded.

Pupils were periodically photographed and filmed during workshops and samples of their creative output were retained for analysis. Informal observations were collected from all workshop leaders 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 the class teacher of the, then Year 3, intervention group 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 workshop leaders and the class teacher via Zoom. In March 2022, interviews were held with a sample of twelve pupils who participated in KUGALI's workshop to investigate in greater depth their responses to some of the themes covered therein. Following the final workshop in May 2022, focus groups with the Year 4 teacher, LICAF teachers and visiting artists were again held over Zoom and a supplementary interview took place involving the teacher of the non-intervention comparison group to discuss this group's performance with respect to the research project's seven outcome indicators. All pupils and parents were asked to repeat the initial online survey, featuring a small number of additional questions. The completion rate for the remaining pupils was 100% and parents, 49%. Reading ages and further reading assessment data based on teacher judgements were obtained from the school as and when it was made available.

It is worth noting that the format of this research posed an ethical dilemma to those involved in planning the workshop elements of 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 the offer of a 12-month subscription for every child in this group at the end of the study.

5. 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 out of the 27 intervention group 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'.

Part 1 of the project: 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.'

(Meena⁹)

'When 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 [sic].'

(Farhaan)

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 i nterested in her reading and tells me that she can imagine characters in her head when she reads.'

(Meena's parent)

Workshop leader, Sim Leech, became aware of children's reading choices from the library of comics brought into the classroom by LICAF broadening over the initial twenty sessions. The 'fuss and swapping of books to find specific things' at the start, evolved throughout part one of the project into children being more inclined and satisfied to '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'. These comics were regarded, by both the Year 3 class teacher, Ben Dickinson, and workshop leaders, as instrumental in supporting the children's development of language, with Ben commenting that they 'delve[d] into completely different types of vocabulary' and allowed pupils to explore content they would not have otherwise accessed in the Year 3 National Curriculum, such as the life and art of Frida Khalo.

⁹All pupil names in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

School data collected in March and July indicated there was an increase of 11 percentage points in pupils assessed as 'Year 4 ready' in reading within the intervention group and a decrease of 7 percentage points within the non-intervention comparison group. It should be highlighted here that the comparison group were, at this point, being taught by a newly qualified supply teacher, owing to the class teacher commencing maternity leave earlier in the academic year. Inconsistencies in teaching practice – one factor of variability beyond the control of the project – may have partially contributed to these results.

Part 2 of the project: According to data supplied by the school, the average reading age of both groups at the start of the project in March 2021 was just over 6.5. When tested twelve months later, two months before the final workshop, the average reading age of the comparison group had risen by 11 months whilst the average age of the intervention group had increased by 18 months. A gap was also evident in the groups' 'Year 5 readiness' in reading in May 2022, with 60% of the intervention group being assessed as 'Year 4 secure or better' in contrast to 45% of the comparison group. Aside from the interposition of the comics workshops and supporting reading material, very few distinctions could be made between the teaching of literacy, specifically reading, between the two groups whilst in Year 4. Both received thirty minutes of guided reading per day, studied the same class readers which linked to areas of the curriculum and experienced reading carousel activities co-planned by the teachers of both groups. Increased focus on teaching the reading domains¹⁰ assessed as part of KS2 Standard Attainment Tests replaced, in part, the reading games favoured throughout Year 3, again in both classrooms. The only teaching tools to be used exclusively with the comparison group were *First News*, a weekly UK newspaper

and, besides reading, a five-week course of ukulele lessons for enrichment; pointing to this project's programme of work being the distinguishing factor in these differing rates of reading progress.

Perhaps surprisingly then, in respect of reading duration per occasion outside of school, greater growth was observed in the comparison group, wherein five additional pupils stated they read for as long as possible in their post-intervention surveys. The number of intervention pupils who selected this answer remained the same, as did the quantity who said they read for as little time as possible so that they could do other things. More positively, five fewer intervention group pupils said they did not read outside of school (this number dropped by 3 in the comparison group). One possible explanation for these results was the emergence of competitive reading habits between girls in the comparison group throughout Year 4. Their class teacher, Oliver Woodall, perceived this rivalry as a means to impress peers and staff members, advance through book bands to graduate from the class reading scheme and, ultimately, obtain access to books from the Year 6 library. Whilst their enthusiasm didn't go unnoticed, Oliver had reservations about the quality of reading taking place, remarking that, 'At times the children in this class rush[ed] their reading...just to say, "Look, I've finished a book!"', and that, when questioned post-reading, pupils often couldn't provide adequate summaries. It could therefore be said that pupils in the comparison group approached the post-intervention survey with a greater of degree of competitiveness and, as such, overstated their answers to survey questions concerning reading duration.



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

¹⁰<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/teaching-wiki/reading-domains-ks2>

According to pupils' survey responses, the frequency of general 'reading for fun' outside of school dropped in both groups, dipping slightly more so in the intervention group. Parents' views differed, however, with more parents of pupils in each group noting that their children were reading every day or nearly every day (increases of 9 percentage points in the intervention group and 26 percentage points in the comparison group). Contrasts between parent and child answers could suggest that parents thought children were reading when they were not, or that children underestimated their own reading achievements outside of school. More likely, in the view of the intervention group's Year 4 teacher, Alice Mackereth, the parents motivated enough to respond to the closing survey (42% of her class and 56% of the comparison group) may also have been those prone to worry about the perception, by school or those involved in this project, of home reading cultures and inflate survey answers in support of their child accordingly. Additional reading by the comparison group was not ubiquitously evident to Oliver, based on his evaluation of home reading records throughout the year.

Occurrences of pupils reading materials they'd selected independently rose in both classes, and to a greater extent in the comparison group, and reading in self-pursuit of knowledge dropped in the intervention group and rose in the comparison group (which may again be explained by the aforementioned competitive spirit in the latter). When questioned more specifically on the regularity of reading different formats and across different media, however, the intervention group showed marked improvements, with growth noted in every area besides newspapers and reading on screens, both of which had declined a little. The material read most frequently by this group by the end of the programme, and which demonstrated the greatest uplift against baselining, were comics and graphic novels, largely due, one would assume, to their weekly *Phoenix* subscriptions and access to comics loaned to the class by Little LICAf. The reading of comics by the comparison group also increased more significantly than that of other formats, though not to the same extent as the intervention group, and at the same rate as books in other languages. On average, the reading frequency across specific categories in the comparison group improved only marginally, with the reading of fiction, non-fiction, magazines, eBooks and poems decreasing. Parental survey answers also revealed that pupils involved in the intervention were reading slightly more broadly by the time it concluded than those who weren't, calling to mind Sim's reflections on the workshop participants' growing propensity to select and persevere with unfamiliar texts throughout part one of the programme.

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.

Part 1 of the project: The intervention group's teacher was confident that a significant shift in attitudes towards reading took place throughout the first twenty workshops, 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'.

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, a third indicated a preference for reading comics over books:

'[B]ooks 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, it being funny, and having the opportunity to practice drawing. One pupil explained that they had 'stuff to do, we don't need to be bored anymore'. In their written feedback, all but three parents (14 out of 17) described positive reactions from their children to these weekly *Phoenix* deliveries and, 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)

Part 2 of the project: Alice attributed her pupils' attainment and progress data being 'noticeably higher' than that of the other Year 4 class to 'the fact that they're very, very engaged in their reading'. She felt that this enjoyment of reading generally, not just of comics ('They're really engaged with whatever book we pick up'), stemmed from interest in content, visual aesthetics and increased reading choices afforded within the workshop environment. This comparison was also relevant to Year 4 classes she had worked with previously. Alice felt these positive attitudes to reading transferred to learning more broadly, citing maths, art and history as curriculum subjects children showed more enthusiasm for after participating in comics workshops:

'Even the ones who I would have called...less interested in learning, they're all putting their hand up, they're all excited about answering questions about reading...So I think, in general, [it] seems that works outside of the comics workshops as well.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Studying comics connected to topics such as the Romans was

of further benefit to higher ability pupils, in Alice's view, through strengthening their existing background knowledge, subject-specific vocabulary and knowledge retention. Approaching the topic of the Suffragettes through sequential art supported accessibility to and comprehension of the subject matter for learners at all levels:

'That is quite a dense topic... If it was just a wall of text, that would be so difficult for them, but because it was broken down into small steps and small pieces...we did the first bit and then the next bit and then we moved on and it wasn't just one massive paragraph. They understood that absolutely brilliantly.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Hester agreed that providing comic adaptations of classic literature (*War and Peace*) or biographies of historical figures (*Anne Frank's Diary*) introduced pupils to more complex concepts with relative ease:

'By having it in a comic format, they were happy to read it and they were accessing a breadth of reading material that, otherwise, would be [consumed by] a much older learner if it was just purely in literacy form. So it is encouraging capable readers to read beyond their normal accessible subject matter.'

(Hester Harrington)

This potential for comics to expand horizons was also witnessed in KUGALI's workshop, wherein comic books from Africa were brought into the classroom. Hamid Ibrahim, co-founder of KUGALI, observed the class' surprise at seeing comic books from and about the continent 'looking the way they looked'. Challenging pupils' pre-conceptions had the effect, in Hamid's view, of creating a 'more positive image' of African comics and 'open[ing] up their brains to imagining that'.

Looking at the data behind these impressions, we found that increased enjoyment of reading was noted by the children in both groups, although more noticeably in the intervention group; a rise of 21 percentage points, against 15 percentage points in the comparison group. Whereas parents in both groups agreed that enjoyment had increased, their survey responses indicated that it was by a greater margin in the comparison group (19 percentage point rise, against 8 percentage point rise in the intervention group); perhaps another indication of over-compensation by a number of well-meaning parents. There was an overall reduction in the number of pupils who felt reading was 'boring', with greater change evident in the comparison group by a further 8 percentage points. Likewise, more pupils in both groups considered reading to be important, with the comparison group again showing greater growth, but by a marginal 2 percentage points.

One survey question examined the children's views on their own reading abilities, to which pupils in the comparison group demonstrated greater positive change in all eight areas. The greatest contrast between groups related to the statement, 'I find it hard to finish books', where agreement rose by 17 percentage points in the intervention group and dropped by 22 percentage points in the comparison group. There are two possible factors which may account for these results. The first was that members of the intervention group became more self-critical or developed higher expectations of their reading techniques or skills, in response to reading that had been modelled by visitors to the classroom, or even by classmates in paired reading activities, over the preceding months. The second was the specific use of the word 'books' in the survey question, which it is possible the intervention group took to mean 'books as opposed to comics', due to the work undertaken to teach children the building blocks of comics and the ways in which comics and prose differ. Relative to comics, with their visual and textual cues, books may have felt harder to complete post-workshops, especially in light of reading choices having become more ambitious in this group throughout the project.

In the successive question, in which pupils were asked more specifically about whether there was anything that made reading difficult for them (with the verbal instruction to consider this within the parameter of the previous week), a drop was evident in the numbers of pupils answering affirmatively in both groups. This reduction was far more pronounced in the intervention group at 60 percentage points, in contrast to 21 percentage points in the comparison group. 'Tricky', 'long' and 'hard' words were still the main sources of difficulty for both, along with trouble understanding the meanings of words, and texts being considered too lengthy. Whereas the previous survey question explored how well participants read, through a matrix consisting of eight rows and a Likert Scale, this question required a 'yes' or 'no' answer and explanation from respondents who selected 'yes'. The answers to the latter question could be viewed as more focused and therefore more accurate. Be that as it may, these findings highlight one of the shortcomings of our survey design; that questions were possibly too comprehensive for the age group, negatively affecting the quality of some aspects of the data.

In their final surveys, children were asked to consider whether reading and making comics should be a part of school for every child. Reactions from both groups were similarly positive overall, with slight variations in where pupils thought engagement with the format would fit best. The intervention group showed a preference for incorporating comics into English and other subject lessons, whereas the comparison group favoured utilising them in Guided Reading activities and reading or learning at home. This is perhaps, attributable to the intervention group having interacted with comics linking to several areas of learning in their curriculum throughout the workshops and the other, having forgone these experiences, associating comics only with reading skills acquisition and less formal learning at home.

Workshop leaders were consistently impressed with how quickly children embraced new concepts and applied retained knowledge and original ideas to the tasks set. Marc Jackson commented that the workshops were of equal importance in addressing the attitudes to comics of school staff, citing one example of a child asking for permission to stay in and read at break, picking up a comic and being told by the class teacher, 'No, pick up a real book'. Although Alice quickly redressed the comment, Marc felt it was important to 'break down those stereotypes' and challenge the idea that comics are a 'lesser form of literature' derived, possibly, from issues with accessibility to the format. Alice acknowledged that her mindset ahead of this project was that comics were 'easy' and 'not really REAL reading' and, in a focus group between teachers involved in the project following the final workshop, revealed that the change in her awareness of how comics can support children in multiple ways had been 'huge':

'This has really helped me think about my own practice: so thinking about the comics as stimuli; thinking about teaching concepts through use of comics; history through the use of comics; PSHE...there's so many different things you can do with them to increase engagement.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Alice's experience of witnessing comics support children's understanding of new concepts, complex language and literary features, and realisation of the format's ability to break things down into smaller steps ('Something that we learn about in teaching all the time'), established that the use of comics in her classroom would now be a key approach: 'It does fit in massively with what I feel we should be trying to do in education.'

Parents, too, underwent changes in attitudes towards comics over the course of the project. Comments of this nature included: 'They're actually interesting'; 'If I didn't learn about comics I would never know what it was'; and 'I found they are fun for children to read and increases their creativity and imagination'. Darshika's parent made the following statement:

'I think they're a brilliant and much-missed part of childhood, that restores the sense of excitement at reading, calmness and creativity. A fantastic idea.'

(Darshika's parent)

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.

Part 1 of the project: 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 was something that drew them in'. One girl's parent concurred, 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*.

Part 2 of the project: By the end of the study, both groups responded more agreeably to the statement 'I usually do well in reading' (increases of 7 percentage points in both cases), with no pupils in the intervention group in disagreement with the statement, compared to four in the comparison group. Agreement that 'reading is easy for me' declined by 9 percentage points in the intervention group and grew by 19 percentage points in the comparison group, again pointing to the possibility that the intervention group were taking on greater challenges in, or starting to problematise, their reading. The nature of enquiry into this area expected children to critically reflect. As touched upon in the previous section, ambiguities in findings likely reflect the way in which before and after indicator questions fail to reveal that engagement with, interest in and enjoyment of reading was considerably greater in the intervention group, as evidenced by attainment and progress data and statements shared by their class teacher.

In regard to responses towards being given a book as a present, overall positivity in each group stayed fairly balanced. However, there was an uplift of 13 percentage points in pupils strongly agreeing that a gifted book would bring happiness in the intervention group, and a relative decline of 14 percentage points in the comparison group. This is likely a consequence of pupils involved in workshops receiving a number of free comic books and excerpts thereof; first-hand experience that produced memorable and positive reference points for these children when completing the post-intervention survey.

Pupils who took part in workshops continued to identify with the content, characters and creators presented throughout the second half of the intervention, examples being: a comparative relationship between comic book siblings and one child and his own siblings; affinity with a footballing character by a boy who has love of the sport; and appreciation of working with an artist who shared and represented the same culture as one child:

'[I enjoyed Kugali's workshop] because they make, like, things about their own culture. Because they're, like, African. Because I'm African too. Because they speak about my, like, country [sic].'

(Ghazal)



Pupils sharing

Just as annual LICAF events each October present opportunities for comics novices and enthusiasts to meet the makers and, within the family part of the programme, partake in live drawing tutorials, workshop 34 of 40 saw pupils in the intervention group deliver their own mini Comic Art Festival to a class of pupils in the year below. Posters were created by workshop participants in advance to advertise the event, incorporating skills and influences from prior teaching and comics reading, and the afternoon ran as a carousel of activities involving perusal of four-panel comics exhibited by the Year 4 author/illustrators, paired reading of children's comics and pupil-led workshops focusing on comic art techniques. Reflecting on the experience, Alice noted that several 'less obvious' children, namely boys (such as Asim) who would usually have expressed disinterest in stepping forward, were 'very excited to present their work and be seen as reading role models'. This left the visiting class coming away 'wanting to read more comics and [having] gained pleasure reading the ones Year 4 had created', according to their class teacher, Marriyah Javeed.

Prior to the intervention, stigma towards reading was apparent in both groups to class teachers but, in the opinion of Oliver, more so in the intervention group due to a number of 'big characters' therein. Over the course of the project Alice witnessed changes in these boys' willingness to be seen as, and admit they were readers. She was convinced that reading 'cool comics with cool characters [made] them think it [was] OK to like reading', to the point that stigma associated with reading of any kind was removed. A further indicator of this collective development of reader identities (following the conclusion of workshops) was the children's positive reactions to free commemorative books marking the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Alice remarked, 'All of them were very interested in it and were sitting there reading it, even the, "Ooh, I'm-too-cool-for-this" boys like Zayan'. In her opinion, one particularly influential child within the social hierarchy of the class contributed significantly to this effect. This 'ringleader' and 'undisputed class clown' was Tarfaan, and his decision to embrace reading and view reading as 'cool' inspired the rest to follow suit (notably brothers Rohaan and Arham who both made excellent progress in their reading throughout the second year of the project, according to Alice). Tarfaan's perceived status amongst his peers rose steadily over the course of Year 4, seemingly in conjunction with his increased engagement with workshops, which is considered in more detail in a later case study.

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.

Part 1 of the project: Many pupils put forward comics as the reason they read more often or had increased enjoyment of reading. Comments that offered differing viewpoints on motivations to read related to a newfound, intrinsic 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 was so ‘fascinated’ with comics that she asked the class teacher if she could 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’, said Ben.

The last workshop in year one of the intervention, 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 [were] 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 were many instances of children requesting more of this comics reading time.

Part 2 of the project: Post-workshops, the number of children who listed reading as one of their favourite leisure activities doubled in the intervention group but dropped by two in the comparison group. Reading was rated second favourite by both classes out of all activities put forward. In first place was playing, sport came third and art ranked fourth, again in both classes. The number of intervention pupils who listed reading as a least favourite leisure pursuit dropped by four, rising by one in the comparison group.

Alice remarked that *The Phoenix* had prompted shared reading at home, through the comic format’s ability to transcend language barriers:

‘A lot of parents [for whom] English isn’t their first language, they worry a lot about, ‘Oh, I can’t read with him because my English isn’t good enough’. But actually, because it’s a comic, I think it’s easier for them to sit and look at it with the children, so it’s sort of helping parents who maybe struggle a bit with their English.’

(Alice Mackereth)

As time can often be a constraint on reading at home, Alice felt the format of *The Phoenix*, a compilation of ‘stories that are in smaller chunks [that] you’re able to just do five minutes at a time,’ was also helpful in terms of parental engagement: ‘There’s been a lot of parents who said to me, “Oh, we love getting it, we sit and read it together”’. In her view, its subscription and home delivery service brought the added benefit for children or parents of ‘not having to go out and get it...it just comes to you.’

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.

Part 1 of the project: The majority of parents who contributed feedback statements 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] very, 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 her '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 [show their work to the class] 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.

Part 2 of the project: Fourteen months on, reading in front of the class remained both groups' least favourite reading activity. Whereas the comparison group enjoyed it less than previously (a drop of 14 percentage points in pupils liking it 'a little' or 'a lot'), the intervention group found it slightly more appealing, demonstrated by a reduction in pupils disliking this 'a lot' of 21 percentage points. Whilst there can be no certainty that the intervention group received more opportunities to read aloud during the school day as a result of the workshops, given that this is a core skill and communal activity which primary schools find opportunities to develop across all areas of the curriculum, it is possible that the nature of the reading taking place in the intervention group's classroom had an effect on this outcome. Within the workshop environment, children read, and had reading modelled to them, only in comic form; a medium that differed from usual and expected classroom offerings and was considered attractive from the outset. In many instances, these were comics they had produced themselves, which led to spontaneous dialogue about and unanimous enjoyment of their work by peers. These advantages created obvious engagement with texts, supporting pupils' comprehension, competency and performance when reading aloud, and therefore, feasibly, a more positive perspective of the activity.

The greatest variation in the intervention group's feelings about the activities listed within this area of questioning was towards having conversations at home about reading. Enjoyment of this rose by 21 percentage points and by only 10 percentage points in the comparison group. Parents' survey responses also signified an upward trend, revealing that the proportion of children in the intervention who talked about reading every day or nearly every day rose by 22 percentage points

compared to just 3 percentage points in the non intervention groups. Increased reading material within the homes of children partaking in the intervention, via the aforementioned Phoenix subscriptions and in-class handouts, is a likely cause for this growth, combined with developments to pupils' reader identities based on changes to the classroom reading culture.

Talking about books with friends became marginally less desirable to pupils in the intervention group (a decrease of 5 percentage points in positive responses) and more appealing to those in the comparison group (an increase of 18 percentage points in positive responses) perhaps, again, owing to confusion arising from the use of the word 'books' in the survey question. If a broader term that was seen to include a wider scope of reading materials had been used, results may have been less ambiguous.

Reflecting specifically on KUGALI's workshop, Hamid shared that engagement from the intervention group was higher than he had anticipated. Even diffident children, those who were 'a little bit more reserved', were 'involved in it' and 'really wanted to see what [was] going on' right from the start. Outside of the comics workshops, the intervention group completed a series of lessons called 'Movements for Change' in 2022. Alice remarked on her class's enthusiasm for sharing their knowledge and working with others due to extensive practice of discussing and presenting ideas in the workshop forum:

'It's because they're so used to adults being around and speaking to them, and noticeably different to other classes that I've had where an adult comes in the room and they clam up and they get really stressed...In terms of their excitement to share things with other people...that's something that they're very regularly doing in the comics workshop that does transfer.'

(Alice Mackereth)

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).

Part 1 of the project: More than two thirds of pupils said that the way they came up with ideas changed during the first half of the intervention. Rationale for this varied greatly. One pupil accepted he could 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 [sic].'

(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 regard to drawing, and drawing being an activity in which rule breaking is not just permitted but encouraged. 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'. She observed these techniques being carried through and pupils demonstrating them of their own accord when they were given free choice to draw their comics.

Part 2 of the project: In both groups, the number of pupils who considered themselves to be 'very' or 'a bit' creative rose in the 14 months between being surveyed. This increase was far more pronounced in the intervention group at 40 percentage points, compared to 12 percentage points in the comparison group, as a result of sizeable disparity between the groups' exposure to comics tuition and stimulus, arts apparatus and appraisal from subject specialists and professional comics creators.

Matt Smith became aware of the workshop participants drawing from the bank of skills collected in prior workshops with other artists, as Hester had in year one, and employing techniques he'd taught in his first workshop into their comics during his second, despite each session having a different stylistic focus:

'They were bringing in...the emanata from the first day - that was really cool - and then... some of the things that we talked about in my lesson show[ed] up in Mark's lessons... It actually [was] becoming accumulative.'

(Matt Smith)

Alongside this connectivity between artists' sessions, he noticed other commonalities, the origin of which, children explained, was The Phoenix: 'They were taking direct inspiration from the classroom text, which I thought was a really cool thing to celebrate.'

The class' inclination to take Matt's feedback and make improvements to their comics was something he found 'rewarding' and 'exciting as a teacher'. He observed many children making changes to their work after hearing his critique, with some leaving the queue for presenting work upon hearing Matt's feedback to classmates' ahead of them in the line. This, he felt, was a positive indicator of 'growth mindset' and 'self-reflection'. The process of analysing the choices of a cartoonist, professional or emerging, was equally beneficial to school teaching staff, 'reinforcing how much thought is going on and how [many] choices are being made and how much...the audience is being manipulated'.

Building on an effect that emerged in the first phase of the intervention, pupils continued to enjoy the risks and danger involved in creating comics in the later sessions. Fahmy Haroun, Marketing Assistant and co-deliverer of the KUGALI workshops, rationalised the appeal of this approach:

‘We explain to them, “In comics you can break a lot of rules”, so they go back with the mindset of, “If I want to be a storyteller, I have creative independence to pretty much explore whatever the world brings to me”, which is a very good thing, unlike, obviously, a set curriculum and Ofsted and all that stuff whereby you have to do things in a specific way. With comics, anything can be anything, pretty much.’

(Fahmy Haroun, KUGALI)

In year two, sessions were planned to incorporate curriculum learning wherever possible. One science topic which was explored in a remote workshop via Zoom with Matt Smith was sound. He designed a task which challenged the children to convey volume, frequency, vibration and distance in comic panels. He delighted in them ‘really excelling’ and ‘really running with those ideas of different sounds’:

‘Hamza used depth to draw a large foreground character unable to hear the conversation between two much smaller characters in the background, while bringing in the emanata from the earlier session!’

(Matt Smith)

Sim identified evidence of pupils’ comics skills transferring into work produced during formal curriculum learning through classroom displays towards the end of the second year. Their Anglo-Saxon posters incorporated confident use of scale on a large format (A3), considered composition and well-spaced narration alongside images through signposting and labelling, creating a symbiotic relationship between text and image to convey facts or information; one of the fundamental principles of comics. Alice confirmed that the intervention group’s ability to display information was sophisticated for their age, as well as their capacity to grasp and process new information quickly (as exhibited in a PSHE lesson in which pupils immediately got to grips with first aid):

‘They used the space brilliantly because they understood how things should be set out. And even verbal sequencing they’re really good at because... they’ve looked at so many sequences...they’re really good at visualizing things and linking things together. Definitely their higher order thinking...is really advanced.’

(Alice Mackereth)

Hester, too, noted that pupils' responses to Henri Rousseau in their art curriculum workbooks displayed fine motor skills and confidence in mark marking and composition that were akin to much older pupils:

'When they approach an artistic task, those nerves are removed because [the children] have been validated in their own individual drawing styles and different abilities and so they're not hung up on what it looks like, they're just concentrating and focusing on what they're actually trying to communicate through their visual language.'

(Hester Harrington)



Pupils reading from LICAf comics library

Alice gave this collective, creative osmosis credit for increased self-confidence in ability and greater productivity in lessons, demonstrated by pupils no longer requesting erasers or new sheets of paper to start their work again:

'They've realized that "What I do is OK and I don't have to compare it to other people". To develop that sort of confidence in your own ability so early is brilliant, but they'll never lose that, they'll always have it. They're so confident...so much more gets done in an art lesson, because of not having that half an hour of going around worrying and going, "I can't do this," because they've been taught, "Yes you can: get up, pick up a pencil and get on with it." That's a really noticeable thing, that so much more happens and gets done.'

(Alice Mackereth)

One pupil, Ayaan, was considered to have one of the, although naïve, more distinctive drawing styles in the class. Hester commented that throughout the process, he 'never felt any pressure to try and change his drawing self' owing to individual illustrative styles being acknowledged and consistently celebrated early on. Ayaan's initially small characters evolved into bigger, more confident iterations drawn in the same style with no interest, on Ayaan's part, to alter 'that visual vernacular; that signature that was so noticeably his.'

According to parents' survey responses, children who participated in the workshops displayed more excitement towards writing and artistic projects following the intervention, with those showing 'very much' excitement towards these areas rising by 29 and 34 percentage points respectively. Meanwhile, parents of children in the comparison group reported an overall dip in enthusiasm for both activities. Uplifts in pupils' excitement towards school and talking about their day were apparent in the intervention group and, again, diminished

in the comparison group. These results are indicative of the prior stated additional conversations about reading that took place at home over the course of the intervention and the collective sense of achievement, confidence and pride that pupils felt towards their workshop output, both written and drawn, which was sent home with them at intervals for sharing with families; further celebrating achievements on individual, school and project bases. Mechanisms that supported the success of this outcome area were, in the main: encouragement from project staff who fostered a safe space for trial (never error); inclusivity towards learners of all abilities and dispositions; and the autobiographical focus of many sessions, designed to legitimise pupils' characterisations and storytelling in comic art form.

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.

Part 1 of the project: Ten out of 17 parents provided examples of ways in which their child's wellbeing had altered over the course of the first twenty 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 not 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 he 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)

Part 2 of the project: When questioned in a series of small focus groups towards the end of the project on whether the workshops had made intervention pupils feel better about themselves in any way, children who responded in agreement specified: an improved sense of self due to a newfound ability to read without experiencing boredom; increased happiness due to the reading of comics being 'fun', 'interesting' and 'exciting'; greater confidence in their own artistic styles; and expansion to their imagination or creative power:

'I've learned that lots of people love comics because of the way they make you feel - like very entertained - and make you feel confident about what you're doing and make you feel good about everything you did.'

(Nabeela)

On reflecting what they would miss about *The Phoenix* once their subscriptions ceased, one girl expressed that she would 'miss the way it makes me feel', another remarked that she would 'miss reading all the fun comics and now I'll be bored again and have nothing to do' and one boy said he would be 'sad because that was the only thing to cheer me up when I was scared'.

The most distinctive areas of change in this area for the class that engaged with comics were both positive, in response to the statements 'I do not have much to be proud of' (disagreement increased by 25 percentage points compared to 10 in the comparison group) and 'I am happy with myself' (agreement rose by 29 percentage points compared to 8 in the comparison group). Changes in children were witnessed by all parents who completed the final survey. Of these developments, those that linked to wellbeing were 'confidence' (in relation to drawing, writing and talking to people) and 'happiness' which was seen by one parent as the most significant change as it 'affects her [daughter's] self-esteem'.

5.8 COVID-19

In designing the post-intervention survey, we took the opportunity to consider COVID-19 specifically as an impacting factor on children's experiences and outcomes. Many more children in the intervention group recognised that comics had helped them in some way throughout the pandemic (65%). This occurrence was understandably higher than in the comparison group (16%), given their differing levels of exposure to the medium throughout the preceding months. The nature of this assistance was, by and large, relief from boredom, with comics also bringing enjoyment of reading, help with drawing and a sense of comfort to multiple pupils.

After considering the pastimes they'd been denied throughout lockdown (predictably, seeing friends and family, travelling abroad and going to the park), children were invited to describe the things they *had* been able to do, or do more of, as a consequence of social distancing guidelines. Six pupils in the intervention group, and only one in the comparison group, proclaimed to have spent more time reading books or comics.

Alice felt there was a strong association between the workshops and her class's increased overall engagement with learning, in spite of the reported national pandemic learning loss, through the workshops and skills developed therein sustaining interest, providing creative outlets when pupils were in lockdown and offering mental stimulation:

'What I see in other year groups is the teacher saying, "Oh, they're so disengaged, they don't care about anything, I'm having to basically dance around to get anything out of them," and I feel like because [my class] had a lot of stimuli through *The Phoenix* and things like that, possibly it's kept their brains a bit more 'on' and kept them engaged with their learning because they've got this exciting thing that happens.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Weekly *Phoenix* deliveries likely played a part in providing entertainment during remote learning scenarios given that the children were in receipt of new reading material, puzzles, drawing tutorials and competitions via their front doors each week. Alice described this as particularly 'helpful' to her in her role as teacher:

'They're not just thinking, "Oh, it's boring, I never go anywhere," because they're able to go somewhere in comics...I think it has helped, I really do.'

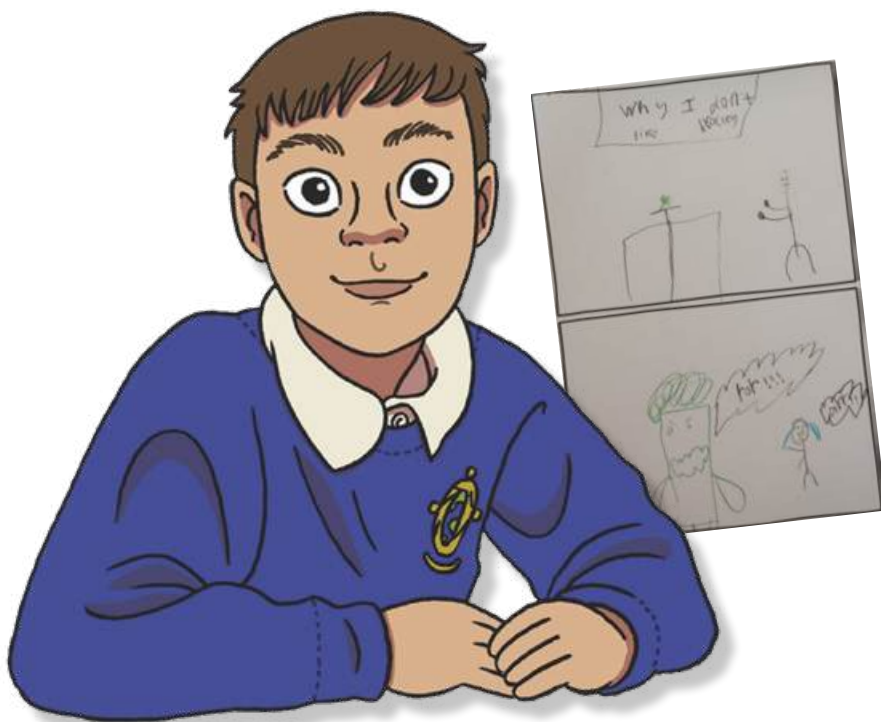
(Alice Mackereth)

6. Case Studies

For elaboration of the causal mechanisms seen to drive the differing behaviours and outcomes of and for participants in this study, and investigation into the application of comics to broader learning, several individual and group case studies were conducted. The first, Liam's, investigates a consequence of engagement with comics which was unanticipated in our original theory of change, relating to personal conduct. Abdullah's response to the intervention is examined in more detail on account of the scale and reach of his artistic progress. The group case studies seek to explore the experiences of learners at either side of reading spectrum and the benefits afforded to each from the workshop environment. These narratives were constructed using aforementioned quantitative and qualitative research methods, with specific discussion points raised about subjects in mid and post-intervention focus groups held with class teachers, LICAF producers and contributing artists.

6.1 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 Year 3 teacher, Ben, 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 he 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'.

By the end of the intervention, Liam maintained that he spent virtually no time reading for fun, but his frequency of reading 'to find out about things I want to learn' had risen from 'never or almost never' to 'once or twice a week'. Whilst he insisted he still thought reading was boring, his survey responses demonstrated some confliction, as increased incidence of reading across fiction, non-fiction, magazines, comics, websites and poems was evident, albeit time dedicated to each reading session had reduced. In answer to a question posed further down the survey he admitted that he did, in fact, enjoy reading more than previously.

After 14 months, Liam acknowledged that reading was less of a waste of time and reversed his opinion on the value of reading, agreeing strongly that it was important by the end of the project and stating that comics had supported him in Guided Reading lessons in school, helping him with 'questions and, like, reading so I practice, like, spellings and all that [sic]'. He was of firm mind that comics should form a part of schooling for every child in the area of Guided Reading, though equally adamant that they should not be promoted for home learning or reading. Liam also found greater pleasure in listening to stories read by others as well as reading before bedtime, describing it as an activity to 'pass the time'. This chimed with observations made by his Year 4 teacher, Alice, during the Library Immersion workshop in which pupils were invited to sample a range of different scenarios to help them find those most suited to their learning styles and conducive to reading. She described reading in a tent with a torch as a 'novel experience' which made Liam 'concentrate on reading far more than I've seen [him] do previously'. Equally, in response to reading on the floor with cushions, Alice remarked that 'Liam struggles with sitting still, so he liked this', suggesting that a feeling of informality or comfort was instrumental in him having a positive reading experience.

Of his behaviour issues and attitude to learning, improvements witnessed throughout year one of the workshops by Ben were sustained into year two, with highest engagement and lowest disruption occurring within the workshop environment:

'His behaviour is a lot better in the comics workshops and, I think, in general...he's getting on with things a lot better in the classroom...because his confidence is better...because he's getting positive attention and he's being more confident in himself...I think that has helped him a lot.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Alice believed the 'non-threatening' nature of the workshops invoked 'really positive, creative learning experiences' which were 'massively beneficial' to Liam in terms of his wellbeing, given his lack of confidence stemming from a fear of failure. The supportive environment and mutual appreciation of creative output fostered within the classroom throughout the intervention was a key mechanism in improving Liam's confidence which, in Hester's view, overcame his (and one other pupil's) tendency to self-sabotage earlier on in the project:

'It was almost like, if they undermine themselves in that self-deprecating way then no one else can because they've got in there first, and I think both of them maybe got that out of their system through comics.'

(Hester Harrington)

Liam's self-assessed wellbeing score remained the same prior to and following the workshops (23/40), however he did offer the insight that engagement with comics had made him feel better about himself in that they 'made me feel like I'm a better drawer' and 'made me feel like I want to do art.'

6.2 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 Year 3 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 analysing Abdullah's final piece of year one work, Hester discerned he had 'filled the entire panel and [not just drawn] 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'.

Whereas Abdullah did not feel his reading habits or feelings towards reading underwent any changes throughout the first half of the intervention, by the end of year two his survey responses indicated that he was spending more time reading for fun and reading books of his own choosing, namely fiction and comics. Furthermore, Abdullah revealed a change of heart

towards being read to by somebody else, now liking it 'a little', and came to find independent reading less boring and more enjoyable. It appeared this additional reading may have been taking place in school, however, as both Abdullah and his parent recorded a decrease in reading time at home.

Abdullah felt less inclined to talk about books with friends, read in front of the class and converse about reading at home. His parent was also conscious of a reduction in book talk at home, although evinced that Abdullah showed more excitement for talking about what he was reading in the moments these conversations did take place.

Abdullah's view that he was now a creative individual held firm for the duration of year two of the programme and, by its completion, his parent had also witnessed a growth in his confidence, specifically, 'He is confidence [sic] to talk to people'. Alice explained that the creative confidence born out of year one of the intervention had extended to and improved other skills such as 'writing' and 'maths', and enabled willingness for volunteering answers and wider class participation: 'I've noticed a difference in him and his...confidence level in general in class.'

In spite of a dip in enjoyment for reading about factual or school topics ('I don't like reading books about life'), Abdullah shared that one of the impacts comics had on his work in English was that 'they make me use my imagination.' This imagination was in full force during the final day of workshops in which pupils were asked to design themselves as characters embracing personal traits that could be seen as weaknesses as superpowers instead. Abdullah's response was to write, 'I'm quiet so it helps me concentrate,' accompanied by a drawing of himself wearing a cape and flying over the land, silently observing everything below him:

'He was able to acknowledge that, within himself, he is quiet, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he's not engaging; he's just doing it studiously in his own way. The drawing is very different from when he first started drawing; he's drawn it in purples and blues and he's filling the whole page.'

(Hester Harrington)

Abdullah's assessment of his own wellbeing improved by two points (31 to 33/40) and year two of the project brought about an awareness that reading made him feel 'calm'. Initially, comics had forged a new pastime for him and his siblings, as they would complete the drawing activities inside *The Phoenix* together. Much later, after reading KUGALI's *Lake of Tears*, Abdullah showed signs of relating to the comic, comparing the relationship between characters to his own with his siblings; 'Because my brother and sister annoys me a lot'. Whilst idyllic domestic scenes may not have endured, Abdullah's ability to identify with comics content offered an opportunity for better understanding himself and others; a positive impact with the potential for far wider personal and social outcomes.

6.3 Meena, Zaima, Muzhir, Gulsan and Darshika

comics offered new tools for literacy to children with prior high engagement with reading

These five pupils embarked on the project with above average reading ages and each demonstrated positive overall attitudes to reading and associated activities; they were united in their enjoyment of reading and all strongly agreed that reading was important, that they did well in reading and that reading was easy for them. Three of the group had above average wellbeing scores (Zaima and Gulsan scored significantly below average, although Gulsan's parent's assessment was almost double her own) and all but Muzhir reported enthusiasm for reading materials linked to curriculum learning.

In spite of their reading achievements, these children had acquired minimal exposure to comics outside of school, with only Muzhir having been loaned the format from a library and himself and Meena having read comics for pleasure. Only Meena had created her own comic. Two of the five parents associated with this group of pupils, Meena's and Gulsan's, completed the pre-intervention survey and both declared they had over twenty children's books in the home and that they or their child were public library users. Both parents cited reading and artistic pursuits in their daughter's top three activities, with writing being Meena's other favourite.

By the half way point of the programme, all five pupils displayed positivity towards their Phoenix subscriptions, enjoying the surprises associated with the arrival of each issue, 'Because you don't know what they're gonna [sic] put in there' (Meena), and involving their families in the practice of reading, '[My brother] chats with me about his favourite part in it and I chat about him which favourite part I am [sic]' (Muzhir). The three parents who provided feedback at this point in the project also referred to discussions they'd had at home over *The Phoenix* and wrote

about the specific characters and strips their children were each enjoying ('Fawn', 'Looshkin and Alex and Freddy', and 'Corpse Talk'), signifying a degree of parental engagement with children's reading. Work produced during workshops and taken home at the end of year one gave rise to other conversations with family members which left these pupils feeling 'good', 'proud', and 'excited'. Zaima described the impression her comics had made on her sister:

'My sister was like, "No, this can't be yours. You can't draw like that." My mum, she said, "Not even your big sister could draw like this at this age." I felt happy.'

(Zaima)

Meena's parent drew an association between the increased use of imagination through reading within this initiative and having 'a better understanding of what they are reading'. They reported that she was 'more confident in general' and that she 'like[d] to talk about different subjects'.

Of the three of these pupils who initially disliked having conversations at home about reading, two developed an appreciation thereof, with Gulsan moving from strongly disliking this to liking it a lot. By the end of the intervention Meena and Zaima were speaking to their parents about reading materials every day.

In their focus group interviews held in March 2022, each of these five individuals were able to provide an example of how their engagement with comics had supported their learning in English lessons, responding that they now used comics as inspiration to make their stories 'more interesting', that making comics had improved handwriting and that comics had introduced them to new vocabulary. One pupil, Meena, recognised that working with comics had made her generally 'more creative'. In relation to how comics had positively affected their wider learning in school, suggestions put forward were that comics: 'help you do something creative' (Gulsan); 'improve your reading and...help your spelling' (Zaima); 'helps [you] draw and think of new ideas' (Meena); 'know about, like, old famous people' (Darshika); and 'give you education...you could use them at different topics' (Muzhir).

In addition to improving aspects of educational attainment, there was a collective awareness that reading could elicit physical and emotional responses including excitement, relaxation, happiness and, in Muzhir's words, the ability to make you 'feel better'. Three of the children commented that reading was one thing they'd been able to do more of as a result of the COVID pandemic: '[I] read more comics to get me relaxed and not worried' (Muzhir).

Three of the group's wellbeing scores increased; two by 2 points and, in Zaima's case, 10 points. Darshika's parent witnessed increased confidence in drawing and writing, as well as 'mood and happiness in school'. Furthermore, the workshops were seen to 'improve her bond with siblings who also became fans of the Phoenix', and 'brought fun and colour into our lives.'

Three of the female pupils made references to careers in publishing when asked what they would like to do in the future; two mentioning 'author' and one, Meena, whose parent disclosed she had been 'showing storytelling through illustrations', specifying 'comic artist'. All five pupils definitively agreed that reading and making comics should be a part of school for every pupil as home reading or homework.



6.4 Nabeela, Waseem and Tarfaan

teaching through comics was inclusive for children with barriers to learning

Challenges faced by the above trio of pupils in accessing the curriculum as fully as some of their peers included SEN support for social, emotional and mental health, EAL status and (as yet undiagnosed) dyslexia. According to their pre-intervention surveys, all three had a dislike for reading in front of their class, experienced trouble reading stories with difficult words and did not enjoy reading information on topics they were learning in school. Activities they were all amenable to were choosing a book to read and listening to stories being read by others. Both boys listed gaming as a favourite activity, whereas Nabeela displayed a preference for art. They each had contrasting reading preferences, but were mutually underexposed to comics ahead of workshops taking place, and started with reading ages below the average of their class.

Nabeela's Year 4 teacher described her as 'extremely low in literacy', struggling particularly with concentration, focus, spellings and the ability to retain phonics knowledge. Notwithstanding the fact she was able to generate good ideas, she had trouble communicating these in writing; a process that quite often caused her stress. Sim was enlightened about this disparity between creativity and communication during a Finish This Comic task. Whereas Nabeela came up with 'original ideas that no one else in the class came up with,' the writing in her comics was 'very hard to understand', owing to misspelt and omitted words. Upon reading her story to an adult in the room, however, Nabeela was 'convinced it made perfect sense and was able to re-tell her story'. Alice agreed that the images acted as the 'memory prompt' for Nabeela to remember her story which, if otherwise had only been written, would have been challenging for her to recall:

'She wouldn't have remembered, because...in a normal writing lesson without pictures to help her, she will have forgotten what she's written five minutes afterwards.'

(Alice Mackereth)

Her aforementioned anxiety was never evident to the workshop leaders, however. Upon discussing Nabeela's achievements in a focus group held with Alice, Sim and Hester following the final workshop, Alice explained that this was on account of Nabeela being 'a completely different child when there's comics going on'; working 'really hard' and taking 'so much interest...so much pleasure'. In addition, Nabeela was very drawn to the work of Metaphrog brought in by LICAF – and one comic in particular, *The Little Mermaid* – which led to Alice noticing that she was reading more often and that 'her general level of reading and appreciation for it [had] massively gone up as part of the project'. The impact of year one of the project, in her parent's words, was that Nabeela 'ask[ed] questions more often.' Of *The Phoenix's* influence throughout, they said, 'My child started to use there [sic] free time reading.' This perceived change in reading attitude and behaviour was corroborated in Nabeela's final survey responses which showed positive change in the areas of reading for enjoyment, breadth of reading, book talk and wellbeing.

In the first year of the programme, Tarfaan displayed resistance to most aspects of the intervention. He had begun to produce his own comics at home, according to his parent, and yet he was generally unwilling to divert the content of the comics he created in workshops away from gaming and conflict, consistently volunteered negative comments on feedback forms and would not engage in meaningful conversations about his work, using interactions with adults as an opportunity to criticise the source material or task instead. This negative standpoint was likely a manifestation of underlying emotional issues recognised by the school and resulted in the, possibly desired, effect of attracting attention from the workshop leaders, albeit for the wrong reasons. Alice described him as the type of pupil who was 'frightened to fail and...scared of what you're going to say to them'; like Liam, another child who was prone to self-sabotage to save face.

Throughout the second phase of workshops, there became an apparent rise in examples of Tarfaan contributing positively within the workshop forum, in workshop leader and researcher session notes:

'Workshops 21 and 22

Tarfaan – has been resistant in previous workshops, but was on good form. Joined in discussions and contributed to class chat. Worked well!' (Sim Leech)

'Workshops 23 and 24

Tarfaan very enthusiastic all day – happily showing off his work.' (Sim Leech)

'Workshop 25

Tarfaan totally absorbed in source material (Sparticus comic) left on desks during lesson starter. Gladiator task: Tarfaan had a scene, with action/sequence!' (Rowena Singleton)

'Workshops 28 and 29

Tarfaan followed instructions perfectly – no wars!' (Rowena Singleton)

He was 'drawing to brief much more precisely in the latter half of the second year', in Hester's view, and 'certainly getting better at following instructions' according to his class teacher. The visualiser was seen to play a key role in this evolution. Hester believed that 'sharing work and getting validation [for] whatever it is that [he'd] produced' was pivotal for Tarfaan;

something he had little experience of in the first year ('I've only shown my work under the visualiser one time cos [sic] sometimes I'm not that confident'). Affirmation from classmates and workshop leaders that his comics possessed qualities provoked Tarfaan to eventually put forward his own positive responses, in the form of volunteering answers to questions posed to the class;

'I'm just always putting my hand up for every single answer because I just know them all and I'm just, like, bursting for the teacher to pick me because I know the answer.'

(Tarfaan)

This endeavour belied his prior acts of disinterest and indicated that, despite protestations, he'd taken huge amounts of instruction and comics theory on board, given that his answers were some of the most articulate and accurate proffered by the whole class.

Waseem arrived in the UK in July 2020 and joined Abraham Moss in Year 3. He had received schooling abroad, but it was not possible to obtain his EAL level upon arrival due to gaps in school assessments arising from staff absence. Workshop leaders regarded him as 'quiet', 'reserved' and 'tentative', with readiness to be involved, albeit at an insular level. When pupils entered Year 4, Hester recalled that Waseem became 'more animated, more collaborative'. He remained watchful, listening and learning well, but was doing so less passively and beginning to involve himself; a change potentially accelerated due to new seating plans. Partnership working, specifically in the KUGALI workshop in which pupils worked in writer/illustrator pairs, induced a new confidence in his ability to create comics. He bore the responsibility of collaborating well and was particularly welcoming of critique to further improve his work; a habit that stuck following the sessions with Matt Smith.

His engagement with the curriculum-focused comics brought into the classroom was felt, by the LICAF team, to stem from its presentation in visual form:

‘[Waseem] found the medium engaging because, although the curriculum content [was] present, it [was] packaged in a way that [was] visually enticing and attractive. It doesn’t matter how interesting a subject is – if he can’t read the words he can’t understand the meaning.’

(Hester Harrington)

Graphic representations accompanying the text enabled Waseem to ‘unpick the written strand’ of information relating to school topics such as the Romans or sound, join in with classroom discourse and, furthermore, enjoy the experience:

‘Every subject is, like, boring and we have to do it for a lot of time and it IS a lot of time because it’s not fun. But when you do comics it makes you happier because you have something interesting to do.’

(Waseem)

At the halfway point in the project, Waseem’s parent discerned that he was reading ‘faster’. Waseem explained that changes he had noticed in himself following workshop participation were that he had ‘got better at reading’, that he was reading for longer (‘30 minutes’) and that his feelings about reading had changed ‘a little bit’ in a ‘happy way’. Several workshops later, in a focus group setting, he offered an admission and deeper insight into his reading journey:

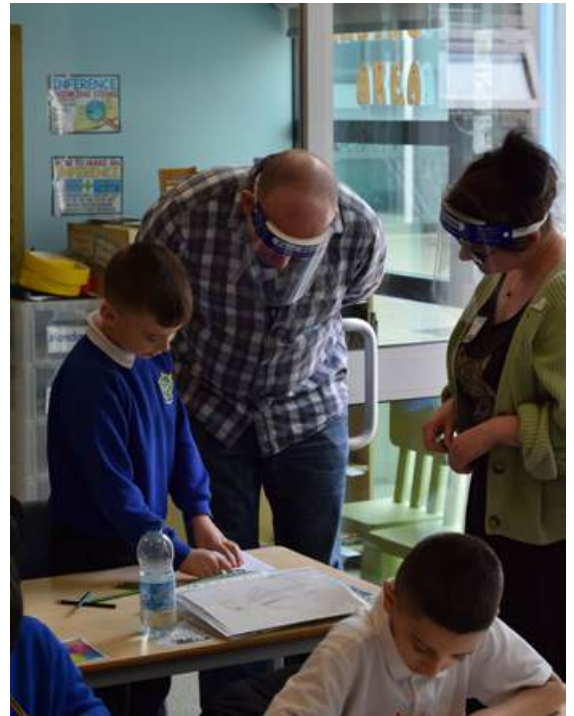
‘When I came to school I just acted like I’m reading it. When I ACTUALLY read it, it was good because...when you guys [LICAF and visiting artists] came and you were reading out loud...I realised I should read books like this.’

(Waseem)

Waseem’s reading assessment data in March 2022 was testament to this, as he demonstrated the biggest improvement to reading age in the class; +2.5 years in the space of 12 months, as was also achieved by Abdullah.

Observing Nabeela’s transformation from restless in class to rapt throughout workshops was ‘rewarding’ for Alice and gave rise to a better understanding of how to support Nabeela’s educational needs through using visual prompts. Tarfaan’s propensity to stay on track with tasks resulted in higher quality work, praise thereof and the confidence to confer with more willingness and maturity; completely changing the perception of his character by workshop leaders in the process. Greater accessibility to learning permitted greater comprehension for Waseem, effecting a determination to replicate reading as had been modelled and to master the skill independently.

The effects of this project manifested themselves very differently across case study subjects, and yet one commonality was evident; that each child's experience of change, be it personal, social, intellectual or to their wellbeing, was instigated through exposure to supplemental and unfamiliar reading material. That these ten pupils, in addition to many more in the intervention group, were all agreeable to consuming and reproducing one particular type of literature - to the point that one would be inspired to cease feigning reading and others would consider comics creation as a career - is a detail not to be ignored. Whilst this research centres primarily on the use of comics in education, each case study reinforces to parents and carers the importance of introducing young people to all styles of printed matter, specifically those, as we have heard from a class teacher, that may hold the least appeal to the fully grown.



7. Conclusions, Reflections & Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

Guiding children towards the self-motivated pursuit of reading purely for recreation and welfare in the first place is an overriding and perpetual aim shared by educators, parents and carers. This is a process in which comics can play a valuable role, though this is currently underplayed due to stigma towards the format's literary credentials. Our analysis of primary aged pupils' engagement with comics supports existing theories that reading comics can contribute to children's acquisition of vocabulary and language skills, offer them a rich and diverse 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. Just as importantly, this engagement can evoke feelings of happiness, eagerness and calm.

More specifically, our research findings show that giving children access to comics via the intervention accelerated their reading progression and broadened their reading choices beyond the comics medium itself. Engagement with the comics format led to increased feelings of enjoyment towards reading. It improved the status of reading as an activity amongst pupils' preferred leisure pursuits, and it alleviated the difficulties associated with the practice of reading for many children. Increasingly pupils who received the intervention expressed less resistance to the notion of identifying themselves as a reader; demonstrating greater willingness to read aloud in class and converse about reading at home. They

also developed an appreciation of the emotional benefits gained from receiving a book as a gift. With regard to creativity, the reading and production of comics increased the appeal of learning to pupils and their capability for independent thinking and production, extending across the curriculum. Excitement grew not only in relation to art and writing, but towards school more generally. In terms of wellbeing, pupils taking part in the intervention felt more confident and experienced increased pride and satisfaction in themselves. These children were also more inclined than those in the non-intervention group to share with families the details of their day.

The research also turned out some ambiguous and apparently contradictory findings. Reading duration at home underwent greater growth in the comparison group over the course of the project, as did the frequency of reading for knowledge. Pupils outside of the intervention had less trouble finishing books and found reading easier overall. Despite the intervention group's willingness for book talk outside of school, it was the comparison group who grew to find discussing books with friends more enjoyable. Further ambivalence was detected between parent and child survey responses, most notably in respect of children's reading behaviours and attitudes to reading. Such inconsistencies are perhaps inevitable given the complexities of conducting educational research in areas that cannot be isolated from the national curriculum, involving children of a young age and with families with EAL status, and where the risks of 'contamination' between the intervention and comparison groups are high.

7.2 Reflections

Some of the uncertainties arising within the data stem from limitations of the research design. Questionnaires were possibly too comprehensive for the age group and may therefore have diluted pupils' responses. Whilst oversimplifying would have created similar issues, a shorter survey may have provided more focused answers. It is also distinctly possible that Likert scale questions, phased so that agreement to one item denoted the presence of a trait and agreement to another item denoted either the absence of the trait or its polar opposite, confused pupils, as responses to these were contradictory in many cases. Parental questionnaires were sent to all families in English which accounts for lower than expected completion rates and may not accurately reflect the views of non-English speaking adults. In fact, it's highly likely that children involved in the project may have acted as translators, thus influencing parents' responses. Finally, questions used to measure changes to subjects' reading behaviours relied on children understanding the notions of frequency and duration. It is unlikely this skill was fully developed when children were baselined, and even more so in respect of this cohort having missed units of teaching on time due to COVID-19. Undertaking periodical observations of the comparison group would have mitigated ambiguity within the research findings.

In terms of the logistical implications of working with this age group in a school context, children's attitudes to reading in both classes were undoubtedly affected by class teachers changing – and with this teaching styles and classroom reading cultures – at the halfway point in the project as pupils entered Year 4. In spite of LICAF's consent to work in school, COVID-19 guidelines prohibited parents and carers from participating in workshops, interacting with workshop leaders or watching presentations by pupils. Inviting families, including younger siblings, into the creative, supportive and positive reading environment generated over the course of the project could have both strengthened the impact of the intervention on pupils and modified negative preconceptions about comics and their capacity to develop enthusiastic young readers. In a similar vein, the pandemic closed off the opportunity for pupils to visit a specialist comic book shop for the purposes of facilitating discovery and providing a specialist source of reading material and discussion than cannot be rendered by many schools, libraries or even regular bookshops.

Project organisation could have been improved in several ways. Year 3 and 4 classroom teachers would have benefitted from pre-intervention training to aid understanding of research objectives and ensure a consistent approach throughout. Similarly, co-planning sessions between all artists involved in the project would have been of value in devising a 'road map' of overall aims, drawing on each of their specialisms. Whilst the planning of all schemes of work was overseen by LICAF producers and conversations about these occurred individually or in small groups, the freelance nature of comics creation (and, again, the unpredictability of COVID-19 restrictions) created challenges in securing and collectively meeting with contributors far enough in advance to allocate responsibilities for teaching different elements of comics, avoid unintentional repetition, and expedite pupil progress with the full programme in mind. Notwithstanding these limitations, pupils did, as reported above, develop remarkable expertise in displaying and sequencing information through reading, analysing, reproducing and conceiving comics; skills which gradually transferred to work in many other curriculum areas. However, to uphold the impromptu observations made by teachers who witnessed this type of transfer across the curriculum, and to enable better interpretation of the mechanisms informing the wider reach of this comics intervention, a framework to formerly assess the application of pupils' comic art abilities to other contexts would have been beneficial.

7.3 Recommendations

It might be argued that providing pupils and their families, especially those of low socioeconomic status, with any type of complimentary literature would boost interest in reading. However, as our research shows, the very nature of the comic medium - , being image-based, often humorous and, in the case of *The Phoenix*, interactive -

is particularly effective at facilitating engagement with reading (along with writing and drawing) and in the case of the LICAF project led to significant shifts in enthusiasm for, and standards of literacy in the majority of participants. We therefore urge Local Authorities and schools, first and foremost, to harness the entertainment, excitement and ultimately skill development value of comics through investment in school library comics collections to nourish and sustain every child's reading appetite. Exposing children to a variety of styles of comic art will appeal to broader audiences from different cultural settings and offer the artistically inclined a diversity of stimuli for creating their own comics. Beyond galvanising reading for pleasure, comics should be used to improve decoding skills, develop visual and media literacy, and support wellbeing across all subject areas. Where possible, practices should be established at primary level, where willingness and excitement for experimentation remains high, and maintained throughout secondary, where literacy skills and tools to support mental health become paramount.

That training needs in educational settings are extensive. Although any school can commission professionals to lead a workshop on comic art, skills will only become embedded and portable in situations where class teachers can confidently develop and apply them to wider learning. In order to fulfil this role and facilitate more widespread engagement with comics themselves, teachers require a foundation of knowledge in children's comics and their mechanics, along with the modelling of reading and basic artistic processes. Logically, this should take place throughout teacher training. Many library supervisors, very often not qualified librarians, also warrant professional development in this area to ensure comprehensive understanding of everything comics have to offer and how to further support teachers, pupils and parents through age-appropriate recommendations for reading.

Those with parental responsibility would be remiss to underestimate the worth of comic currency within the home too, particularly in persuading youngsters to choose reading over more favourable, and often electronic, demands on their attention. Whilst kudos associated with a taste for and knowledge of comics isn't guaranteed at all ages, there is a greater probability that young people will be more receptive to reading material stylistically resembling that found across many forms of digital mass media.

To overcome the issue of identifying and locating suitable resources, guidance for teachers and parents needs to be made available by publishers and literacy agencies in the form of comics reading lists catered to children's interests, topical issues and curriculum foci, with details of where titles can be obtained. Free digital comics (circulated widely on social media owing to the suitability of many platforms for sharing sequential art) and associated learning resources should be compiled into a central, searchable hub similar to *The Literacy Shed*¹¹ to reduce costs for end users and provide stakeholders with instant access to reading material that links to programmes of study. An increase to the volume of comics compatible with programmes designed to monitor reading practice and progress, such as *Accelerated Reader*,¹² would further normalise the use of comics in education and afford pupils an elevated experience during pursuit of their reading targets. Providing shared reading opportunities for EAL families in the UK through the production of translated and bilingual comics would be a key step towards building healthier reading cultures across all communities.

Many of the findings within this report lend themselves to further investigation and several recommendations require action at a government level. Until necessary changes are put into effect, educational establishments need not delay the implementation of interim measures to enhance literacy provisions and embed comics-based learning into school improvement plans. Minimal apparatus is required to create and distribute a comic, highlighting the medium as an economical device for firing enthusiasm and achieving wellness. As participants in this study have shown, this is a self-propagating cycle and the first step to making a comic book to inspire others is to read one yourself.

¹¹<https://www.literacyshed.com/>

¹²<https://www.renaissance.com/products/accelerated-reader/>

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