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Conducting school-based research during Covid: evaluating the Silver Stories programme

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a small-scale pilot evaluation of the Silver Stories programme. Silver Stories involves school-age children reading to older people in the community and is a way of addressing literacy and emotional difficulties, as well as enhancing wellbeing. The authors collected and analysed questionnaire and interview data after a school term of programme implementation, across five schools in England and Wales, during the period of the third lockdown. The main finding was that participants experienced the programme as an opportunity for relationship-building between generations, highlighting the relational nature of reading as a 'literacy event' and wellbeing as a product of social interaction rather than an individual attribute. The pilot also indicated that school priorities might have shifted due to COVID-19 from academic attainment to a focus on social and emotional support. Although this was likely a temporary phase, it is also an opportunity to build back better.

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Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in England, older people faced increased social isolation as they were asked to shield themselves and avoid physical social contact, with serious implications for their wellbeing: isolation for older people is a recognised global issue that was aggravated by COVID-19 (WHO, 2021). Furthermore, children and young people experienced major school disruption for almost two years affecting every aspect of schooling, including wellbeing and literacy. Many of their learning and social and emotional needs were at the time of writing not fully met, especially for students from minority groups or disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2021).

The paper presents findings from a small-scale pilot evaluation of the Silver Stories programme, during the period of the third lockdown in England. Silver Stories involves school-age children reading to older people in the community for a period of time. For children, the programme is a way of enhancing their interest in reading, social skills and confidence; for older people, it can be a way of boosting their wellbeing by giving them a sense of involvement in their community by supporting school children with their literacy. The programme was not conceived with COVID-19 in mind; however, it proved to be highly relevant in addressing some of the issues that became more evident during the pandemic.

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The study highlighted the inter-connection between the academic and social dimensions of education and how reading can be perceived as a social activity. It also drew attention to the relational element of wellbeing, from the perspective of building relationships and volunteering. It also gave interesting insights into the pressures that schools experienced during COVID-19, and the challenges associated with conducting research in this period.

COVID-19 implications for students

Covid-related school closures had a significant effect on education. A National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) study on the impact of COVID-19 school closures found that, in summer 2021, children had not yet recovered from the learning they had missed during 2020 and 2021 – with Year 1 children remaining three months behind where they would be expected to be in reading and Year 2 children two months behind (Rose et al., 2021). Similar trends have been reported by DfE (2021) for all primary students. The Rose et al. (2021) study also found that for both Years 1 and 2 there was a substantial gap in reading and mathematics attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers. This is in the context of the Education Policy Institute (EPI) reporting that the attainment gap across early years, primary and secondary school stopped closing for the first time in a decade (although this stalling had started before the pandemic) (Hutchinson et al., 2020). The growing attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their classmates is also highlighted by EEF (2022) which notes that, despite some recovery, on average students were not performing as well in maths and reading compared to pre-pandemic cohorts.

Of equal concern is the impact on children's wellbeing that in the UK declined over the last decade (The Children's Society, 2021), with a record number of 420,000 children in England treated for mental health problems (Campbell, 2022). Rose et al. (2021) reported school staff concerns about student wellbeing in UK schools, and international studies have found that, although most school students have coped well after returning to school, some may require more targeted support to address increased stress levels (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2021). Health, wellbeing and attainment can be thought as synergistic (Bonell et al., 2014), and this is also highlighted by positive psychology wellbeing models such as PERMA (Seligman, 2018).

COVID-19 implications for older people

COVID-19 also had significant implications for older people in the UK and internationally. Being more at risk of having COVID-19 than young people, many felt they had to isolate to protect themselves. A survey conducted by Age UK (2020, p. 2) found that

a substantial group of older people [...] have been left frightened, depressed and very much alone. Some said they could no longer take pleasure in the things they used to enjoy, and [...] they found it hard to have hope for the future.

In the same survey, one in three older people reported increased anxiety, with some also describing feeling lonely and isolated. Similar negative impacts have been reported in other countries, e.g. De Pue (2021) in Belgium. Social isolation and loneliness among

older people, which became more salient during COVID-19, is also the focus of a World Health Organization (WHO) report, where this is recognised as a global issue, affecting Europe, Asia, North and South America (WHO, 2021). In that report, social isolation and loneliness are described as reducing older people's quality of life and damaging both their physical and mental health.

The Silver Stories programme and its purposes

In this context, we have worked together with a charity called Silver Stories <http://silverstories.co.uk> that organises children to read to older people in the community. The charity started regionally (Cornwall) but from 2020 has expanded nationally. The programme involves school-age children (Silver Readers) reading a story or poem to older people (Silver Listeners) weekly. It is seen as a way of tackling social isolation and promoting wellbeing for listeners, as well as supporting the enjoyment of reading and social skills for readers. Programme activities take place at a distance (on the phone) using a particular protocol and safeguarding procedures, and are cost-effective and Covid-secure. Children can put themselves forward or are involved in the programme because of a desire to participate, or reading and/or emotional/social skills difficulties, and whole schools can join the programme. Silver Listeners are recruited through family members, social prescribers, housing associations or charities.

Silver Stories is a whole-school intervention with an intergenerational element that addresses literacy difficulties as well as difficulties identified as relevant to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Gedikoglu, 2021). The Silver Stories programme proved to be highly relevant to the COVID-19 period (although it was not initially designed with Covid in mind), as it has few organisational demands. It is delivered at a distance and provides support for areas that were particularly affected by the pandemic, namely literacy and wellbeing. However, the programme's purposes should not be limited to COVID-19. The dual literacy and wellbeing purpose of the programme highlights the inter-connections between the academic and social dimensions of education, and shows how both dimensions are equally important, although this is often forgotten in the current outcomes-focused culture (Biesta, 2015). We particularly examine two issues relevant to the Silver Stories programme: an understanding of reading as a social activity, and wellbeing as relational.

Reading as a social activity

Reading can be seen as a social activity – one that gives reasons for reading and communicating that go beyond learning to read as a technical activity. Moss (2021) has argued that from this perspective the study of reading is not independent of the context and social interaction in which it takes place and makes it meaningful. Reading is thus not restricted to the cognitive processes involved at an individual level. Moss (2021) argues that prioritising particular ways of doing literacy – e.g. through formal, teaching-led approaches – can limit the range of literacy activities. This idea has been captured by the term *local or situated literacies*, in that literacy is seen 'not as an issue of measurement or of skills but as social practices that vary from one context to another' (Street, 2009, p. 21). Barton and Hamilton (2012) note that literacy understood as social practice is

about a process rather than an individual attribute; is linked to everyday life and social interaction; is an identity matter and involves the way people construct meaning about themselves and the world; and is constantly changing and evolving. Overall, thinking of reading as a social activity shifts emphasis from the individual to the social and raises questions about what forms of literacy are seen as valid within the context of education and why. It also draws attention to an understanding of literacy as an ‘event’ that is relational in nature and embedded in social interaction (Burnett & Merchant, 2020).

Relational wellbeing

Wellbeing can also be understood as being relational and generative rather than merely an individual outcome (Barnes et al., 2013). Atkinson (2013), for example, notes that wellbeing is often discussed as a kind of commodity, in the sense that it can be acquired, or achieved; she, however, argues that wellbeing could be approached as an effect of complex interactions with people, the material world and places. From this perspective, understanding and promoting wellbeing is linked to the dynamics of social situations. Taylor (2011) argues that this kind of approach to wellbeing moves away from measurable outcomes, such as happiness, to an idea of ‘being well enough with others’ (p. 777), in the sense that wellbeing is seen as both a process and an outcome. White (2017) notes that a relational approach to wellbeing can challenge the cultural anxiety ‘that all may not be well’ (p. 121) that puts all emphasis on individuals. Such cultural anxieties are often translated into ideas about healthy eating, exercising and the pursuit of inner harmony, as ways of achieving wellbeing.

Connecting with one’s community has been related to wellbeing, e.g. through the idea of *social prescribing*, an approach that involves linking people to their community to support their health and wellbeing – although the effects of such practices are poorly understood (see e.g. Bickerdike et al., 2017; Drinkwater et al., 2019). Despite the lack of evidence on social prescribing, intergenerational programmes have been found to promote enjoyment and understanding between different generations (e.g. Isaki & Harmon, 2015).

Research aims and methods

In collaboration with the charity, we conducted an ESRC Impact Accelerator funded pilot project over two school terms (May–July 2021 and October–December 2021 – the latter is not reported here). The study examined the following research question:

- How was the Silver Stories programme experienced by readers, listeners and other people involved (i.e. school staff and parents), with regard to the purposes, processes and outcomes of the programme?

Five schools in Southwest England and Wales (Table 1), 52 readers (Years 2–5) and 47 listeners were involved in the study. Participants (readers and listeners) were recruited through the Silver Stories charity that also provided support to schools.

In participating schools, one (at least) member of staff was identified as responsible for the programme (teacher, teaching assistant or other support staff) and was involved in

Table 1. School characteristics.

	Area	Type	Pupil premium	Urban/rural
School 1	Southwest	Academy	48.1%	Urban
School 2	Southwest	Independent	Non applicable	Rural
School 3	Wales	Community school	20.8%	Suburban
School 4	Southwest	Church of England	10.2%	Urban
School 5	Southwest	Academy	36.6%	Urban

setting up the sessions (liaising with the listener, scheduling the call, helping with reading selection and so on) and scaffolding the interaction between reader and listener during the call. Readers and listeners had no information about each other and did not communicate without a member of staff being present for safeguarding reasons. The call took place once a week for the duration of a school term and lasted about 15 minutes.

In each term, we conducted interviews with one reader, their listener, one of their parents or carers and the member of staff responsible for the programme ($n = 20$). Interviews were conducted about two to three months after the reader/listener started to be involved in the programme. We also sent out online questionnaires for all readers, listeners, parents and members of staff to examine their views about the programme processes and outcomes (once at the end of the term). Although we did administer pre- and post- scales exploring attitudes to reading for readers and social wellbeing for both readers and listeners, we do not report findings from these, due to missing data. Because of Covid-related restrictions and pressures we did not manage to conduct the whole range of evaluation activities that we initially planned (e.g. standardised reading assessments). Schools reported that they preferred to focus on emotional and social skills support rather than use standardised assessments with their students immediately after a period of lockdown; this seems also to be the reason why we had so much missing data in our scale measures.

Data collection was conducted online – or on the phone, especially for listeners without internet access or IT skills. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke (2006). Questionnaires were analysed using frequencies and thematic analysis.

With regard to thematic analysis, we used both deductive and inductive approaches, informed by a set of initial conceptual themes, whilst staying open to themes emerging from the data. We particularly wanted to understand how participants experienced Silver Stories and the procedures involved; what they thought were the purposes of the programme and about its dual literacy/wellbeing focus; why they decided to participate; what they believed were the main outcomes of the programme; and to explore COVID-19 challenges for schools. In addition to these broader areas other themes emerged from the data, such as details about how readers and listeners were able to build a relationship at a distance and without seeing each other, and the role of school staff in scaffolding their interactions. The main findings of this analysis are presented in the next section.

The study had ethics permission from the University of Exeter ethics committee (approval number: S2021–122) and participating schools were asked to sign a memorandum of understanding to indicate their wish to participate. Participating members of staff, parents, students and older people also received written information about the project and were asked to sign a consent form (or audio record their consent in the presence of a researcher, in case they did not have access to email).

Findings

We now report findings from the Term 1 programme implementation that took place between May–July 2021. Findings are organised into the following sections: purposes; reasons for participation; the reading element of the programme; the interaction between readers and listeners; reported outcomes and challenges. [Table 2](#) summarises a selection of the main end-of-term questionnaire findings.

Purposes of Silver Stories

In the interviews, participants discussed their views about the purposes of the programme. Many mentioned that the programme was about helping others while also helping yourself, as this parent explained:

I thought it was a nice idea – and if it helps someone out and that helps my son, then that’s good.

Parent, School 4

An interesting detail was that the students (readers) often felt that the programme aimed to help the older people (listeners), whereas for the older people this was a way of helping a younger generation – building a dynamic relationship and sense of mutual volunteering and agency for both readers and listeners:

I thought it was a really good thing for the children, and not realising that it was also intended to help elderly people who don’t have many outlets. And I do have outlets, but you know I am pleased to help as long as it’s helping the young people.

Listener, School 5

The programme was also seen as way of building confidence for readers who were expected to read to somebody different from their teachers and parents and as a way of fighting loneliness for listeners, as in this example:

I live on my own, so it’s nice to hear a young voice.

Listener, School 2

Some schools saw the programme as an opportunity to build links with the community, as discussed in the following quote:

I think it’s just because I have an enthusiasm for community links and just branching outside of the school walls really. I think that’s why I have been very lucky to be involved with it.

Teacher, School 3

Some participants also commented on the programme’s dual purposes, as in this example:

I think the lines were slightly blurred for me with regards to the reading progress [...] They were confident readers anyway, but for me the social aspect has been huge – the confidence in the children to read aloud over the phone to a stranger, [...] that for me was the purpose [...] to develop the link and the relationship there.

Teacher, School 3

Table 2. Main end-of-term questionnaire findings (selection).

Modal response in bold, with frequency of responses in brackets	
Listeners (n = 23)	
<i>Child reactions</i>	
Enjoying reading	a lot (10); slightly (1); not at all (1); missing (11) (most reported a lot)
Shown interest in me in meetings	agree (7); disagree (7); neutral (3); missing (6) (no clear pattern)
<i>About the sessions</i>	
What went on during meetings	only read (9); read and chat (10); missing (4)
What child read	stories (74%); poems and factual books (26%)
<i>Child improvements in</i>	
Reading skills	some (7); slight (4); none (4); missing (8) (most reported some improvement)
Reading attitudes	some (6); slight (6); none (4); missing (7) (most reported some or slight improvement)
Reading self confidence	some (6); slight (3); none (5); missing (9) (most reported some improvement)
Relationship skills	much (2); some/slight (4); none (9); missing (8) (most reported no improvement)
Parents (n = 4)	
<i>Expectations of programme</i>	
Offering support to an older person	yes (4)
Improved reading	yes (3); unsure (1)
Improved interest in reading	yes (2); no (1); unsure (1)
Improved social skills	yes (4)
<i>Child's experience</i>	
Child's experience of the process	positive (4)
Child's relationship with the listener	positive (4)
<i>Changes for your child</i> (very much improved 4 – not improved 0)	
Reading skills	4 (1); 3 (2); 0 (1) (most reported improved)
Reading attitudes	4 (1); 3 (1); 2 (1); 0 (1) (no clear pattern)
Reading confidence	4 (2); 3 (2) (most reported very much improved or improved)
Social skills	4 (2); 3 (2) (most reported very much improved or improved)
Readers (n = 16)	
<i>Reasons for taking part</i>	
<i>Rank order of reasons</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to be more confident with other people (1st) • to offer support to older person (2nd) • to help my reading improve (3rd) • to share what I am interested in reading (4th) • to get to know an older person (5th)
<i>Programme outcomes</i>	
I have supported the listener	yes (12); no (2); don't know (2)
Got on well with listener	yes (16)
More confident reading	yes (14); no (2)
Improved reading skills	yes (11); no (3); don't know (2)
Teachers (n = 16)	
<i>Reasons for choosing readers</i>	
To improve reading	yes (14); no (2)
To improve social skills and relationships	yes (15); missing (1)
To offer support to an older person	yes (14); no (2); don't know (1)
<i>Reading level at start</i> (age expectations: above, at, below)	
Reading accuracy	at (9); below (6); don't know (1) (most reported at age expectations)
Reading comprehension	at (9); below (6); don't know (1) (most reported at age expectations)
Attitude to reading	at (10); below (5); don't know (1) (most reported at age expectations)
Reading confidence	at (9); below (6); don't know (1) (most reported at age expectations)
Social skills	above (2); at (10); below (3); don't know (1) (most reported at age expectations)
<i>Changes due to the programme</i> (very much improved 4 – not improved 0)	
Reading skills	3 (4); 2 (7); 1 (2); 0 (3) (most reported improved)
Reading attitudes	3 (4); 2 (8); 1 (1); 0 (1); missing (2) (most reported improved)
Reading confidence	4 (1); 3 (3); 2 (9); 1 (2); 0 (1) (most reported neutral)
Social skills	4 (1); 3 (4); 2 (8); 1 (1); 0 (2) (most reported neutral)

Reasons for participation in the programme

As discussed, the most common reason for participation in the programme was the idea that it had the potential to help others. A speech and language therapist who was responsible for the running of the programme in her school said:

[The children] liked the idea that they were going to help people that were perhaps feeling quite lonely or were quite isolated; they felt like that they had a real purpose in helping.
Speech and Language Therapist, School 1

It should be noted though that almost all of the listeners recruited in the pilot were already active socially and most had family living nearby. It also seems that the reason they opted to participate in the programme was exactly because they were active members of their communities in the first place and had the confidence and energy to do so. This is illustrated in the quote below:

I knew [the Silver Stories pilot] was something that was had a bit of research in it. [...] I am a doer, [this is] my nature, I am volunteering for the Coronavirus, and I have done for a year. I am now doing the finger blood test and I've done the ear, nose and throat for a year, and I've had breast cancer and volunteered to see how radiotherapy would suit every woman in the country [...] That's the sort of person [I am] – I try and say 'yes'.
Listener, School 2

This was acknowledged by some of the teachers, as in this example:

We don't know the listeners, we don't know their background, but the children through conversations with their parents have decided that these listeners are lonely and that by them reading to them on a weekly basis they are helping them to combat loneliness [...].
Teacher, School 3

However, despite this focus on 'helping others', for some readers, participation in the programme was described by their teachers as a way of attracting attention:

[The student] is also very much a showman in respect that he likes to . . . he's confident on the stage and so, I think that's also helped him. He's not bothered about talking to other people.
Teacher, School 2

In other cases, students were described as pushing themselves out of their comfort zone by showing an interest in joining the programme or were seen as really enjoying reading, as in this case:

She's known as our little bookworm; she absolutely devours reading books she likes. She's very traditional and she likes to have an actual book to read, she doesn't like to read off tablets or phones.
Parent, School 1

From the school's perspective, participation in the Silver Stories programme was seen as contributing to a particular culture, one that values literacy:

It's worked well hand-in-hand with the reading culture we have at [the school] anyway and then Silver Stories on top.
Teacher, School 2

About the reading element of the programme

Schools were asked to select readers who would benefit from or were interested in the programme. Most schools involved good readers with no reading difficulties (School 3) or ‘a mix of quite good readers, some relatively poor readers and a mix of children with confidence issues’ (School 1), also reflecting the dual nature and purposes of the programme. In some cases, though reading progress was seen as the most important factor:

He is slightly below where he should be for Year 2, but he is definitely one that just needed more regular reading really. I think at home they struggle to read with him very regularly.

Teaching Assistant, School 4

Readers were selected because of their confidence (School 3) – or lack thereof (schools 1, 4 and 5) – or, as a way of supporting independent reading (School 2), due to mild difficulties associated with dyslexia (School 2), or because of students’ willingness and enthusiasm (School 3). Some children said they were unsure why they were selected for Silver Stories (School 1) or what the programme involved (School 2) before their first session.

Readings were selected either by the students themselves or the school staff (although in their questionnaires, all students reported that readings were their choices). In some cases, students selected their favourite books:

I can't quite recall the title of it [. . .] It's set in a sort of a fantasy world really, but I like that sort of material [. . .] It is apparently her favourite book

Listener, School 5

In other cases, school staff felt that the students could not make a good selection by themselves:

At first, he chose the books but then I did find that there were one or two that just weren't great ones for over the phone, [. . .] they were quite short stories in it [. . .] So, in the weeks following, I would have a look through some of the books on his level and choose one that would be a nice one to read over the phone.

Teaching Assistant, School 4

This particular member of staff suggested that a book bank would be useful to facilitate the selection of appropriate readings. It is not clear what would make a reading more appropriate to be read over the phone, but this seems to be about readings that the students could read comfortably and with limited support. In some cases, the experience of listening to the readings was very positive:

It's almost a story that he could be the main part, he's reading me a story about a family you know that have bought a boat and they are taking it to the water, but it's got a hole in it. But he's part of the book, he could almost be that child, he could be the main part that's talking.

Listener, School 2

However, in other cases, it was difficult for listeners to fully follow what was read to them:

I found it hard [but] I could hear enough in order to make positive responses back to her of how she was reading and pick up on things.

Listener, School 5

School staff had an important role in scaffolding the interaction between reader and listener and help them develop a relationship:

I tried [...] to be the bridge between [the reader] and [listener] who was the man that we read with every week, and just kind of helped introduce each of them to the other. And then mostly just try to encourage [the student] to be a little bit more independent with the conversation, and encourage some conversation [...]. So, if maybe [the student] could be a little bit quiet, I might encourage him with a question about the story or something like that

Teaching Assistant, School 4

For safeguarding reasons, the reader and listener knew almost nothing about each other and had never met or seen each other, so school staff had to step in and, in a way, scaffold their interaction. In some instances, listeners were uncertain as to whether they could correct reading mistakes or support the readers, as in this example:

There were a couple of words that he got wrong, but I didn't know whether I was allowed to correct him or if that was the teacher's [role] – you know, when they pronounce words.

Listener, School 2

This might indicate cases where the school staff responsible for Silver Stories took a more administrative rather than support approach to the programme (e.g. 'I always dial the number, wait to hear it's ringing, and then say what your name is and that you are from [our school] and you are going to read to them. So, it's not so difficult', Teaching Assistant, School 2), perhaps without realising how important their own role was for the way the programme was experienced by readers and listeners.

The interaction between readers and listeners

The interaction and relationship between readers and listeners proved to be one of the most important elements of the programme and a factor that affected how the programme procedures were experienced by the people involved. Where there was a good relationship, the experience of the programme was very positive, as in the instance below:

She smiles throughout the conversation. I think that sort of cropped up that I wish the listeners could see the children's face, because there are periods of silence where the listener may think that the child has disengaged but actually, the child is sat there smiling at the phone. (Teacher, School 3)

This was also recognised by the listeners themselves:

I don't think the point for me really is to get the hang of the story as a whole, but to actually enjoy [...] the connection.

Listener, School 5

In the end-of-term questionnaire, seven out of 23 listeners agreed that the reader showed interest in them during the sessions. By contrast, seven disagreed and three were neutral, and there were also six missing responses, thus indicating that not all listeners and readers were able to build a good relationship. In the interviews, the relationship between readers and listeners was described by both listeners and school staff as respectful (School 1), friendly (School 2), professional (School 3), neutral (School 4) and relaxed and interesting (School 5).

Evidence of a good relationship was the presence of an informal chat in addition to the reading element of the programme sessions. When there was no informal chat, then a relationship between reader and listener could not be easily developed and sustained:

All he done was tell me what he was going to read and read it and then he said oh, I've finished now, goodbye.

Listener, School 2

The opposite could happen when there was a desire for conversation and sharing, as in this instance:

[What I enjoyed the most was] sitting back and listening to the conversation prior to the reading that we did. [...] Quite often the listener will draw on their own childhood experience and say oh, [...] as a boy in the summer holidays he would play football on the curb [...]. And that conversation between somebody older and somebody younger [...] had me in tears on numerous occasions.

Teacher, School 3

The allocation of listeners to readers was generally a random process. As they knew little about each other for safeguarding reasons, their interaction (at least initially) could be experienced as uncomfortable. This is illustrated by one listener:

I was a little bit nervous I must admit not knowing quite how a little girl would adapt to talking to a complete stranger.

Listener, School 3

This is why, as discussed, the presence of a school staff was particularly important to support and scaffold their interaction, especially during the first sessions.

I've done other things, I am on committees here and they have an impact – but doing something like that pretty much by remote control where you can't see the person you are talking to, I think, it was satisfaction and achievement.

Listener, School 3

Reported outcomes

Generally positive outcomes were reported for readers and listeners, as outlined below.

Outcomes for readers

The programme was reported to generally have a positive effect on reading; however, many of the children who were selected for Silver Stories were already confident readers. The majority were reported to be at age expectations for reading accuracy, comprehension, attitudes to reading, confidence and social skills by their teachers in their end-of-term questionnaire. This was consistent across schools, with more noteworthy reading improvements in School 4, in which case the reader was selected because 'he is slightly below where he should be for Year 2'. The parent of this specific reader reported:

Reading is something he didn't get straightaway. [However] he's got more involved with reading just over the last school year [...]. Since March his reading has progressed really

fast, and he's actually really enjoying it now, and he's reading more independently at home, plus he wants to read to me a lot more.

Parent, School 4

Participants in all five schools reported, however, clearer improvements in interest in reading, confidence and broader social skills, as discussed below:

More confident to speak on the phone, more understanding of the sorts of conversations that are appropriate to have such as discussing the weather, plans for the weekend, if they're going on holiday, gardening – those light-hearted but personal conversations the children are far more confident with now. [. . .] Huge improvement I would say in social skills.

Teacher, School 3

This was consistent with parents' and students' responses in the end-of-term questionnaire across schools. However, it was not consistent with the teacher questionnaire that did not identify clear social skills improvements for most children. One reason given was that the programme was not offered for long enough. Other positive outcomes reported in the interviews were reading with expression (School 1), learning more words (School 1), reading more complex books (School 1), reading independently (Schools 2, 4), reading in front of others (School 3), and teaching siblings to read (School 5).

Outcomes for listeners

Almost all listeners reported a sense of satisfaction, as in the example below:

In addition, the sessions seemed to have given structure to some listeners' weekly routine, and for some of them, it was a way of tackling loneliness and isolation:

There is a gentleman [who] is genuinely very lonely, very isolated and his highlight of the day or the week was actually [the reader] talking to him. And he found out a girl he talks to, [. . .] he found out that it was her birthday, so he sent in Waterstone vouchers for her to buy some books for her birthday.

Speech and Language Therapist, School 1

Some listeners reported though unclear benefits in their end-of-term questionnaires:

[The reader] did not ask me questions. I got very little out of it and wonder if [the reader] did.

Listener, School 2

Challenges

The study was conducted during significant Covid-related restrictions and requirements for social distancing (third lockdown). This affected the ability of schools to organise the programme, as illustrated in the quote below:

The problem [is] purely Covid related I am afraid [and] because we're in class bubbles, my lunchtime is different to the children's lunchtime. Every class has got a staggered timetable of the day. [. . .] Is it better just to sort of block off a morning and we know that member of staff is out for that morning? Maybe, but then that wouldn't suit the listeners necessarily. It is quite a tricky one to sort of work out the best way to do it.

Teacher, School 3

Time management was also a relevant factor:

This term unfortunately it did trail off a little bit just with so many different things happening. There were a couple of dates that our listener wasn't able to do and then a few different things like when they go down to the transition afternoons [...] and all the different things that are meant for schools. It did just mean that in the last year really everything has been very back-to-back, and everyone is more pressed for time.

Teaching Assistant, School 4

In addition, some of the participating schools experienced staff shortages:

I can't bother any TAs at the moment because they are just so busy, I mean we've pretty much got no staff in at the moment anyway. [...] I think we've got about thirty-five members of staff self-isolating.

Speech and Language Therapist, School 1

These school difficulties also affected listeners' experiences in some cases:

I do think the communication from the school could be improved. I am sure the school are very busy and it's difficult for them, but there were one or two times when I was expecting a call, and none came [...].

Listener, School 4

Discussion

We now discuss the main findings of the study with a focus on what it meant to conduct school-based research during Covid, and how the purposes of the Silver Stories programme can be linked to a broader perspective on what is worth learning as part of ongoing debates about the purposes of school education itself. Education can be understood as a complex system, with Schuelka and Engsig (2020, p. 5) arguing that:

Complex systems are open and nested, meaning that there is little to no boundary between elements and surroundings, between inputs and outputs [with] the school itself a boundary-less space of discourses and *scapes*.

This complexity is also reflected in the way the purposes of school education are understood that Biesta (2015), for example, describes in terms of three key functions: *qualification* (the fostering of knowledge, skills and understanding); *socialisation* (being inducted in a particular society and culture); and *subjectification* (having agency, being author of one's own views and actions). At the expense of other purposes, qualification is particularly emphasised in the current market-driven educational culture. This is evident in the predominant focus on academic attainment, especially for particular high-stakes subjects and measurable outcomes (Biesta, 2009), seen as part of a broader neoliberal educational agenda (e.g. Ball, 2003; Holloway & Brass, 2018).

Silver Stories, as a programme with dual purposes and a focus on relationships, seems to extend narrow perceptions of school educational purposes. This is illustrated by the study's findings: the way the programme was experienced was particularly affected by whether readers and listeners could develop and sustain a relationship. This often took the form of an informal chat that was scaffolded by the member of staff present in the session. This informal chat was predominantly about everyday life (e.g. the weather, simple activities) – although more personal experiences were also shared (e.g. comparing past and present). So, findings could be seen as indicating that both purposes/dimensions

of the programme, i.e. literacy and wellbeing, were understood and experienced as relational and situated (Moss, 2021; Taylor, 2011).

With regard to literacy, the interaction between reader and listener was organised around the reading of a story or poem that was shared during the session. This moment can be seen as constituting a ‘literacy event’ between reader and listener. ‘Literacy events’ is a way of understanding literacy that draws attention to the social interaction that takes place around and through text – although the term is questioned for an assumed ‘boundedness in time and space’ (Burnett & Merchant, 2020, p. 47). Burnett and Merchant (2020) propose also the concept of ‘literacy-as-event’, a notion that emphasises relationships between people, physical objects and places; assumes that what happens can exceed what is perceived; and involves events generative in unexpected ways. In the study, such events were experienced as either powerful or uncomfortable, depending on the relationship between reader and listener. (The type of reading was also mentioned as playing a role in sustaining both parties’ interests, but in other cases it was seen as less relevant for the quality of their interaction). Such a ‘literacy event’ challenges the idea that literacy, and reading in particular, has a place only in formal classroom settings. This approach decentres the role of the written text and draws attention to the social interaction with regard to what makes reading meaningful (Moss, 2021). In the study, it was reported that more meaningful interactions took place when school staff understood the importance of their role and helped develop the relationship between readers and listeners (since they only interacted at a distance). However, the opposite applied in the case of school staff who adopted a more administrative approach. This is an area where programme-specific training might be needed for future iterations of Silver Stories.

In addition, this ‘literacy event’ often had an emotional supportive function. It is indicative that both readers and listeners thought they supported each other, in the sense that both groups felt that they had something valuable to offer to the other. This was often based on a misconception that older people were lonely and isolated, and/or that students were struggling readers. Such misconceptions were not necessarily challenged, as readers and listeners did not share personal information about themselves, but this did not negatively affect the quality of their relationship. Instead, it made it stronger, as in a way it led each group to assume the role of the stronger part in the relationship – emphasising a sense of mutual volunteering and agency for both readers and listeners. Agency has been related to notions of wellbeing (e.g. Ransome, 2010); however, approaches to wellbeing emphasising individual agency have been accused as being overly rational and individualistic, with some maintaining that ‘individual wellbeing and agency can only be understood in the context of specific social relations’ (Taylor, 2011, p. 789). This reflects an understanding of wellbeing as embedded in relationships. Participation in the study offered opportunities for relationship building based on a recognition that students supported older people who could be lonely and have health difficulties – whereas, at the same time, older people supported students with their literacy. This element of mutual volunteering was central to Silver Stories.

Schools’ strong interest in the Silver Stories programme might indicate that educational priorities have been reconsidered during and after Covid – at least for a short period (e.g. Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). One for example would expect a greater emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Gedikoglu, 2021) to address some of the Covid challenges and trauma. As discussed, schools were reluctant for us to use the

whole range of evaluation activities that we initially planned and especially standardised reading assessments. It might be that schools were concerned about identifying limited reading progress due to COVID-19, however we interpreted this in two ways: firstly, schools experienced significant pressures due to Covid that was impacting their timetable and staffing; and, secondly, it seems that repeated school closures led to a rethinking of school priorities, that was translated into a shift of emphasis from academic attainment to forms of pastoral support. So, after a period of lockdowns and educational disruption, schools seemed to have realised that what is mostly needed for their students are supportive relationships that can nurture both academic attainment and wellbeing. Older people who have been deprived of interactions with a younger generation for a long period of time might have similar emotional needs. This could also be the reason why Silver Stories was related to a school ethos/culture that is nurturing, open to the broader community and perceives literacy as transcending teacher-led sessions.

As, in the aftermath of COVID-19, schools seem to be rethinking their priorities with a focus not only on missed learning but also pastoral support (OFSTED, 2022), one could also hope for a broader cultural change: one that would place less focus on individual and measurable outcomes especially for high-stakes subjects and would involve a less narrow understanding of the purposes of education (Biesta, 2015). Thinking about literacy as an event and wellbeing as relational is an example of how education is not just about furthering individual skills, but learning how to engage in nurturing relationships; it is also a way for preparing students not just for employment but also for navigating a complex and challenging world. To summarise, on the one hand, Silver Stories involves a literacy experience embedded in the social interaction and relationship between reader and listener. From this perspective, literacy is not just an individual skill to be developed, but an emergent property that becomes meaningful through the social interaction within which it emerges. So, in the study, readers became more interested in reading, and in some cases better readers, in the context of their relationship and weekly interaction with their listeners. On the other hand, Silver Stories is about a nurturing relationship that can foster wellbeing for both readers and listeners. Wellbeing in this sense is not understood as an individual outcome, but a process that involves relating to other people. The mutual volunteering element of Silver Stories gave both parties a sense of satisfaction in the realisation that they supported each other.

Concluding thoughts

This paper reported findings from the Term 1 evaluation of the pilot implementation of the Silver Stories programme. The main finding was that participants experienced the programme as an opportunity for relationship-building between generations, highlighting the relational nature of reading as a 'literacy event' and wellbeing as a product of social interaction rather than an individual attribute. The pilot also indicated how educational priorities have shifted due to COVID-19 from academic attainment to a focus on social and emotional support. Even if this were only a temporary phase, it could also be an opportunity to revisit what was seen as widely accepted in previous decades and build back better.

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