

Literature Scan Summary

Background

Reading for pleasure is one of the most important indicators for the future success of a child, improving literacy, learning, health and wellbeing and social outcomes. In particular, it builds empathy and the ability to understand different perspectives¹. Children who enjoy reading have more positive relationships with family and friends, and are less likely to display risky behaviour². Reading for pleasure is an even more powerful factor in children's life achievement than socio-economic background³.

However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is concerning evidence showing that literacy achievement levels amongst 15-year-olds have been dropping and the wide disparities between population groups remain unchanged⁴.

Drawing from international and national research, this literature scan looks at the contribution that Writers in Schools programmes can make to literacy, wellbeing and educational outcomes, and the conditions that underpin



these. The programmes are varied, but tend to commission a range of writers to undertake sessions in schools with children and young people and/or their teachers. The formats also vary, from presentations to workshops and they can be online or in person.

Conditions that underpin a successful visit

For benefits of author visits to be maximised, certain conditions need to be in place. Planning and preparing for the visits is crucial¹⁴. Helping the class to learn all about the author in advance, and exposing children to the author's books through reading and read-aloud programmes is essential¹⁵.

Crucially, for the programme to move from entertainment to a rich learning experience, impacting children's reading, writing and wellbeing, the author/illustrator needs to be a good fit for the students.

Teachers need to be involved in the workshops. Not only did the workshops improve teachers' skills in teaching writing, but they ensured that teaching of the approaches covered in the workshop were sustained after the visit¹⁶. Teacher librarians can be pivotal in supporting a rich reading culture in the school, and can help to foster literacy and a love of reading among students¹⁷.

During Covid-19 pandemic, and with restrictions on school visits, the Writers in Schools programme moved online, using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Preparing students for the virtual visit in advance was crucial to its success¹⁸. Using the chat function in Zoom, with an additional host to respond to the chat, allowed for student engagement when they were for the most part muted during the visit. In some cases, it was observed that the chat function allowed students to ask questions more spontaneously, resulting in significantly richer questions than those posed during a formal Q&A session at the end of the

visit²⁰. Authors' interactions with children were also more immediate as a result of the chat function, increasing their connections with their audiences¹⁹. Because of this, some researchers have recommended building in time and space for interaction throughout author visits, beyond the usual Q&A time; not only would this enhance students' connection with authors and illustrators, but also it would strengthen child-to-child and child-to-teacher/adult interactions and connections²⁰.



Findings

Value and impact of the visits

Although the visits can be expensive for many schools, author visits have been found to create substantial links between students and authors, between readers and books, and between the processes of reading and writing⁵. Positive impacts have been observed in students' reading appreciation, confidence in writing, and creativity⁶. Following author visits, students' interest in books increased⁷, and they were more motivated to read books by the visiting authors⁸. The ways in which school libraries are perceived can be positively impacted by the visits⁹.

A school culture of reading for pleasure further improves student interest in reading fiction⁹. Research literature tells us that activities such as reading aloud to children, talking with children about text, going to the library, providing time for independent, free-choice reading, and providing spaces and places to read support reading for pleasure and help to support this culture of reading¹⁰. Additionally, highlighting the enjoyment that teachers derive from reading is important; it creates a reader identity that the teacher can model for students¹⁰.

Findings from a large-scale evaluation of a sustained UK Writers in School long-term residency programme suggest that where relationships between teachers and writers are strong, well established, and well managed, student achievement is raised and creativity enhanced¹¹.

Most programmes are considerably shorter in duration; however evaluations over four years of shorter-term UK programmes found evidence that even when writers make a one-off visit to schools, it can make a significant difference to children's attitudes to and enjoyment of writing¹².

Feedback from teachers indicates that the writers offer fresh perspectives and new approaches on the technical aspects of



writing¹². There was evidence of improvements in achievement in national educational measures such as tests and examinations; these were sustained only where teachers encouraged and reinforced the new approaches and techniques over a period of time¹².

The benefits of author visits are not just confined to confident readers and writers. While all students benefit from these programmes, particularly salient are the impacts on reluctant readers and those with special educational needs²¹. The research shows that Writers in Schools programmes can also positively impact students from diverse backgrounds, often under-represented in books and illustrations²². These children saw themselves represented by the author or author's book, commenting on the positive impact it had on their wellbeing, and how it had helped them to "feel seen". Benefits also extended to students who did not relate to the author or the author's book as they still appreciated learning about different cultures, communities, and ways of life.

Implicitly and explicitly, author and illustrator visits can help children and young people understand who can become a writer or illustrator, even for children who may not have framed themselves as having a 'writer identity'¹³.

Read Nz Writers in Schools Programme Evaluation

The Point and Associates evaluation of the Read NZ Writers in Schools programme has found it aligns with the literature. There is strong evidence that the programme is supporting the conditions which not only underpin storytelling, writing and reading for pleasure, but culture, identity and wellbeing.

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