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Providing the Whole Picture: The Importance of Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) in the Evaluation of Literacy Interventions and Programmes

Implementation and Process Evaluation of a Programme to Promote Reading Motivation and Engagement: Love to Read Reception

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the United Kingdom, continued declines in children's reading enjoyment and engagement have led to an urgent need for research-informed, school-based pedagogy to promote reading. This article shares findings from the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) of a 10-week whole-class programme designed to support children's reading motivation and engagement at the start of primary school (reception year, aged 4–5) in England.

Methods: Love to Read Reception was underpinned by six research-informed principles to support reading motivation and engagement—access, choice, time, connection, social and success—and developed through IPE guidance and training provided by the Education Endowment Foundation. The whole class programme was delivered in six reception classes in socioeconomically diverse areas across Liverpool. Implementation fidelity and process data were collected using weekly teacher diaries, preprogramme and postprogramme surveys and postprogramme interviews.

Results: All teachers delivered the programme as intended, reported the programme as both acceptable and feasible, and indicated a willingness to continue using it beyond the evaluation. Further, all commented positively on its alignment with early years teaching approaches. There were some differences between schools, for example, in access to books and levels of parent engagement. All teachers provided examples of positive changes to children's reading attitudes, behaviours and reading engagement skills, albeit with variation among students.

Conclusions: The IPE provided insights into how the Love to Read Reception programme was implemented and experienced across diverse school contexts and with different student communities. The evaluation revealed underlying drivers of change (e.g., children developing skills in book choice, integrating more book activities into play) that would not have been identified through outcome data alone. The article adds to a growing area of research that integrates process and impact evaluation, offering a more complete picture of how early literacy interventions work, for whom and in what circumstances.

1 | Introduction

While research-informed practices to support early reading skill (i.e., systematic synthetic phonics) is a statutory requirement in reception year in England, there is a lack of research-informed guidance to simultaneously support 'reading for pleasure'. Supporting children's early reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement is a key priority within primary school education in England. For example, the UK Department for Education's Reading Framework (DfE 2023) highlights the need to support

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Implications for Practice

What is already known about this topic

- Children's reading enjoyment and engagement are declining in the United Kingdom.
- Implementation and process evaluations are an essential early stage in the programme development process.

What this paper adds

- This paper provides insight into a reading programme designed to support children's reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement as they start school.
- This paper provides a detailed account of the implementation and process evaluation of a reading motivation and engagement intervention.

Implications for theory, policy or practice

- Initial reading instruction needs to support children's enjoyment, motivation and engagement in addition to reading skill development.
- Future reading motivation and engagement research should prioritise children starting school, given the lack of research with this age group.

children's volitional reading to ensure all pupils develop a habit of reading widely and often (e.g., 'It is ... essential that schools plan to systematically nurture pupils' desire to read ... both for pleasure and for information', p. 14). Within this framework, school-based practices such as reading to children, supporting book talk, making use of libraries and providing time and space for children to read are all encouraged. This is, in part, a response to consistent evidence that children's reading attitudes and volitional reading are continuing to decline (Clark et al. 2025).

Further, the most recent data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows while children's reading skills in the United Kingdom are higher than the international average, only a third (29%) of children enjoy reading, compared with almost half of children (42%) internationally. If children are to succeed in developing literacy skills as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework and as well as later statutory phonics skills checks, they must learn both the 'skill' and the 'will' of early reading development (Lepola et al. 2005). This means attending to children's reading motivation, defined as 'the drive to read resulting from an individual's beliefs about, attitudes toward, and goals for reading' (Conradi et al. 2014, p.154) and supporting their reading engagement. Reading engagement is a multidimensional concept reflecting behavioural (e.g., reading frequency and duration; text types read), cognitive (e.g., cognitive effort and use of cognitive strategies to support comprehension and immersion), affective (e.g., emotional responses while reading) and social (e.g., participation in reading activities with others) components (Lee et al. 2021; McGeown and Conradi-Smith 2023).

In England, where this research was conducted, there has been increased use of research-informed practices to develop children's word reading skills (specifically systematic phonics instruction) (Castles et al. 2018). Research exploring the reciprocal relationship between reading motivation and reading skill has demonstrated that earlier reading skill is a stronger predictor of later motivation than motivation is of skill (Toste et al. 2020). For this reason, a focus on developing children's reading skills is essential; however, this should not, and does not need to, be at the expense of fostering reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement. Indeed, systematic phonics instruction should be enjoyable in its own right (McGeown et al. 2015) and embedded within classroom pedagogy which simultaneously develops children's love and interest in books, words and stories.

Indeed, there are considerable benefits associated with book reading, for example, increased achievement in reading, writing, language and other academic outcomes (e.g., Cremin and Scholes 2024; Nation et al. 2022; Noble et al. 2019; Torppa et al. 2019), as well as social and emotional benefits such as improved empathy, perspective taking and well-being (e.g., Currie et al. 2026; OECD 2019; Santi et al. 2025 Sullivan and Brown 2015; Sun et al. 2023; Vezzali et al. 2014). While some children may be more predisposed to want to read or enjoy reading (Medford and McGeown 2012), teachers and school staff can also create 'motivating contexts' (Marinak and Gambrell 2010); practices, experiences and relationships which inspire and sustain a love of reading among children.

1.1 | Love to Read Reception

The programme developed and evaluated in this article specifically sought to foster children's reading enjoyment, reading motivation, and engagement and drew upon an earlier project funded by Nuffield Foundation. Based on a comprehensive review of the 'reading for pleasure' research literature (drawing upon different theoretical frameworks, and research from different disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches), six distinct research-informed principles were identified (see also McGeown et al. 2026). These principles—access, choice, time, connection, social and success—are described below.

The principle of *access* highlights the importance of ensuring all children have access to high-quality books/texts that reflect their interests, preferences, lives, experiences and abilities. It aligns with research demonstrating that access to appealing and personally interesting/relevant, and diverse books supports motivation (Gambrell 2011; Mahasneh et al. 2020). Further, among young children in particular, reading aloud increases children's access to a wider range of books than they would be able to read independently or naturally encounter (Gambrell 2011; Cameron-Faulkner and Noble 2013) and in doing so, introduces them to richer, diverse and more complex vocabulary (Nation et al. 2022; Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002).

Choice recognises the need for children to have autonomy over their reading materials and activities to support their reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement (De Naeghel et al. 2014; Guthrie et al. 2004, 2007; Ryan and Deci 2000). Indeed, reading personally enjoyable, meaningful and engaging content is essential to foster positive reading attitudes (McGeown and Wilkinson 2021). Given the diversity of children's interests and

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preferences, developing children's knowledge and skills in book choice, and providing time to practice these skills is essential to support children's agency and confidence to develop personally enjoyable reading habits (McGeown et al. 2026; Reedy and Reedy 2025).

The principle of *time* underscores the importance of providing quality time, both in school and at home, our for children to engage with books and reading activities that are personally meaningful and enjoyable to them. Indeed, evidence consistently shows that time spent reading is critical for literacy development (Torppa et al. 2019; Van Bergen et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, *connection* emphasises the importance of ensuring that reading materials and activities are personally meaningful and connect with readers' interests, lives and goals for reading and reflects the importance of value (Eccles and Wigfield 2002) and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000) in motivational theories, in addition to research highlighting the importance of personal connection to books, stories and characters (Brandt et al. 2021; Kuzmičová and Cremin 2021).

The *social* principle extends beyond the individual act of reading and recognises the social and relational nature of reading (Cremin et al. 2014) and the benefits of sharing and discussing books with others in ways that are meaningful and inclusive (Guthrie et al. 2007; McGeown and Wilkinson 2021).

Finally, *success* highlights the importance of children having positive reading experiences early in their journey as readers. It draws on multiple motivational theories: expectations of success (Wigfield and Eccles 2000), self-efficacy beliefs (Guthrie et al. 2007), and competence (Ryan and Deci 2000). Indeed, Lever-Chain (2008) argues that by age 5, young children may have often formed negative attitudinal beliefs about reading, or perceptions that reading is simply a matter of skill and proficiency; therefore, expanding perceptions of reading and nurturing and supporting both the skill and the will in the first year of primary school is important.

1.2 | Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)

An IPE is 'the generation and analysis of data to examine how an intervention is put into practice, how it operates to achieve its intended outcomes, and the factors that influence these processes' (Humphrey et al. 2016). Robust IPEs are essential as they provide insight into the real-world viability of programmes for both implementers (teachers) and recipients (children) before committing to costly randomised controlled trials (Moir 2018). IPEs in education are essential for understanding how and why an intervention works (or does not work) and are an essential early step in the lifecycle of intervention evaluation.

IPEs allow systematic evaluation of feasibility (i.e., whether the intervention can be delivered as intended within the existing curriculum and resources, e.g., other commitments, staffing, teacher expertise) and acceptability (i.e., whether the intervention is perceived to be appropriate, useful, relevant and agreeable for those delivering and receiving it) in addition to examining early evidence of effectiveness (e.g., for whom, in what contexts and why changes may or may not be found, e.g., subgroups and mechanisms of change). There is growing interest in this early stage of evaluation, and efforts to guide researchers in this type of evaluation are emerging. For example, Lemire et al.'s (2022) review of early intervention implementation identified four key components to examine implementation fidelity: adherence, dosage, quality and participant responsiveness. Within this framework, IPEs will vary depending on project and resource parameters. Further, the range of data collection tools and content are often considerably different to those used in other stages of intervention evaluation lifecycle (e.g., randomised controlled trials). Meanwhile, guidance for teachers to support with decisions around literacy intervention selection and adoption are considered essential for effective implementation (Whittingham et al. 2024). Indeed, school leaders and teachers have important decisions to make on whether to introduce a literacy intervention and so understanding acceptability and feasibility is important (Whittingham et al. 2024).

This article aims to contribute to knowledge and understanding of the methods involved in IPEs informed by training, guidance and support from the Education Endowment Foundation. Traditional models of educational intervention often prioritise fidelity to prescribed delivery methods (Troyer 2022). However, strict fidelity can limit teachers' capacity to adapt practices to their students' needs and classroom contexts (Joyce and Cartwright 2020). The Love to Read programme was therefore designed to balance *fidelity* and *flexibility*. Fidelity was maintained through adherence to the six principles and a delivery guide specified specific 'activities' and duration for delivery, ensuring consistency across settings. Flexibility was supported by encouraging teachers to use books which best reflected their students' interests, and tailoring activities (including supplementary activities) to their school contexts and communities. This approach recognises teachers as professionals with pedagogical expertise and contextual knowledge, while ensuring research integrity and comparability across settings.

The following research questions were agreed in collaboration with the Education Endowment Foundation

1. Is the programme being delivered as intended?
2. Can the programme be accommodated, and is it suitable and acceptable to settings?
3. Do different settings, or participants, have different experiences of delivery?
4. Do practitioners perceive any changes to children's attitudes, behaviours or skills in relation to reading enjoyment, motivation or engagement?

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

The IPE of Love to Read Reception took place in Liverpool, England. Schools were selected based on opportunity sampling. Demographic diversity was taken from school level data (indices of multiple deprivation, IMD). These indices, ranked from one

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to 10, represent all postal areas across England. A score of one represents the most deprived 10% of postal areas, and a score of 10 represents the least deprived 10% (IMD average of participating schools was 2; range 1–4). Schools additionally differed in size (smaller than average = 4, average = 1, large = 1). Five schools had a higher percentage of pupils for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL) compared to the national average of 21.2% (Department for Education 2022). Across these schools, all six schools started and completed the programme. Schools were sampled using opportunity sampling by invitations to local schools near the first author's university and to reflect diversity as much as possible (e.g., in school size and pupil demographics). Six reception class teachers from six different schools participated in the study. Three teachers were very experienced and had been teaching for more than 10 years, two teachers were relatively new to teaching and had been teaching for 1–2 years, and one teacher had been teaching for 3–5 years.

2.2 | Materials

2.2.1 | Teacher Professional Development

All teachers were required to participate in two 1 hour training sessions prior to delivering Love to Read Reception. These were held online and recorded due to early identified issues with teacher availability at the planned times. In the first training session teachers were introduced to the underpinning research and the six principles underpinning Love to Read Reception through a short talk by the research team (three teachers attended online, three teachers watched the recording). Immediately after the first training session, teachers were given access to the full programme and delivery plan. Teachers were encouraged to read these and come to the second training session prepared to share their thoughts on the programme, activities and delivery plan and any concerns they may have in relation to implementation. In the second training session of which three teachers attended and three watched the recording, the researchers and teachers discussed the programme/activities and no implementation issues were raised and the research team therefore focused on programme support which would be available to teachers during delivery (fortnightly online meetings and researcher availability via email, specifically to support with any delivery issues or answer any questions regarding programme delivery). During programme delivery, only two teachers attended a fortnightly meeting, with questions about data collection rather than programme content or delivery, both commenting that programme delivery was going well.

2.2.2 | Love to Read Reception and Delivery

The Love to Read Reception programme aimed to initiate and sustain a 'reading for pleasure' culture within reception classrooms and support young pupils' reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement. Love to Read Reception was adapted from an earlier version of this programme, funded by Nuffield Foundation, which involved cocreating the programme, activities and materials with teachers and other professionals, following children's input (McGeown et al. 2023) and was framed around the six research principles.

The Love to Read Reception programme was adapted from a previous iteration to include age-appropriate (aged 4–5) delivery activities, the inclusion of research and information which was contextualised for reception year teachers (e.g., reference to phonics instruction, young readers) and a 10-week delivery plan was also added. The delivery plan included explicit guidance about preparation time and activity delivery, albeit with flexibility included (e.g., book choice for read aloud). Within delivery of the programme there was both repeated and familiar activities (e.g., whole-class read aloud) and individual and more novel activities (e.g., supporting skills in book choice) delivered in the order of access, choice, time, connection, social and success. Preparation time was approximately 8 h (4 prior and 4 during) and delivery time approximately 10 h. The full Love to Read Reception programme can be accessed here: https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/lovetoread/reception/. The 10-week programme was delivered between January 2024 and April 2024, with teachers expected to complete approximately three 20-min activities per week. Schools were asked to ensure they had an adequate collection of high-quality books that reflected the preferences, interests, lived experiences and reading skills of reception-aged children, as this provision was considered essential to underpin the programme's successful implementation.

2.3 | IPE Measures

A range of data collection tools (predelivery and postdelivery surveys, weekly teacher diaries and postdelivery interviews; see Appendix 1) were selected to be most appropriate to answer the research questions, allowing for triangulation from data sources, while minimising duplication. All data were collected online for efficiency and ease. Details of each are provided below.

2.3.1 | Predelivery and Postsurveys

All teachers completed an online predelivery and postdelivery survey and the research team received a 100% completion rate for this. Both the presurveys and postsurveys included option boxes, Likert scales and open text boxes for further personalised information. The presurvey explored teachers' *teaching and professional experience* (e.g., years of teaching, number of reception classes taught, completion of 'reading for pleasure' professional development), details of their *school/pupil community* (e.g., school size, pupil demographics, perceptions of current levels of reading enjoyment/engagement), *existing knowledge and use reading for pleasure practices* (e.g., current implementation/practices, evaluation of reading for pleasure, use of reading for pleasure resources) and *self-assessments of knowledge* of the research, *confidence in* supporting *and perceptions of the importance of reading for pleasure* (each on a 10-point scale). In the presurvey, teachers were also asked about any concerns in relation to implementation of the programme (e.g., poor quality book provision; lack of time).

Postsurveys required teachers to repeat their self-assessment in relation to *knowledge of the research, confidence in supporting and perceptions of the importance of reading for pleasure* (10-point scale) in addition to providing their *views on the programme* (e.g., ease/difficulty of preparation/delivery, ability to align practice with

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implementation guidance, whether they would recommend to others schools, and other general perspectives on the programme, materials and support offered). It is anticipated that presurveys and postsurveys would have taken teachers up to 30 min to complete each. Presurveys were completed the week before delivery and postsurveys were completed the week after programme delivery.

2.3.2 | Weekly Diaries

During programme delivery, teachers were asked to complete very short online weekly diaries detailing the number of delivery sessions, which specific activities were delivered (each activity was numbered for ease and clarity), delivery duration and to rate how well delivery went that week (using 5-point scale from *extremely well* to *not well at all*). Optional open text boxes also allowed teachers to add additional comments/reflections, should they wish (e.g., reason [if required] for missing sessions, what went well, problems encountered, general reflections). The research team received a full (100%) completion rate for the weekly diaries; however, this required weekly monitoring, with frequent email reminders to ask teachers to complete these in a timely manner so that they were completed during programme implementation rather than after.

2.3.3 | Interviews

All teachers were invited to a semistructured interview to discuss their reflections on delivering the Love to Read Reception programme, specifically to summarise their experiences related to *implementation/delivery* (e.g., how similar/different it was to previous 'reading for pleasure' classroom practices, how difficult/easy it was to deliver, whether it interfered with the delivery of other teaching practices, whether preparation time was manageable), *children's responses to the programme* (e.g., how engaged children were during delivery, how easy/difficult children found the activities and new strategies/skills taught, whether any activities/principles were more or less engaging), *perceptions of effectiveness* (e.g., whether it considered effective at developing children's reading enjoyment and engagement, in what ways, whether any groups of children particularly seemed to benefit), and finally *general perspectives on the programme and its potential improvement* (e.g., what they liked, would change and suggestions for future programme improvement and aligned resources). Three teachers were able to schedule these online interviews. To reach all teachers, the final three were invited to complete the interview questions via email prior to the upcoming school break, requesting a detailed written response, as this was in the absence of an online interview. Only one teacher was able to do this, therefore there is missing interview data for two teachers. For analysis, online interviews were transcribed by the second author (relevant content only) and teachers' individual responses (whether initially oral or written) to each of the four interview sections (see above, i.e., implementation/delivery and children's responses to the programme) were collated. Following familiarity with the data (via repeated readings), both deductive (i.e., analysis conducted within the context of the four research questions) and inductive (i.e., data driven, derived from participant responses—e.g., reference to Special Educational Needs (SEN) or EAL in RQ3) approaches to analysis were taken (Proudfoot 2022). Quotes to include in the final article were selected to best reflect the full complexity of the interview data in relation to each research question and to best illustrate similarities and differences across classrooms.

2.3.4 | Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted from Liverpool Hope University Research Ethics Committee and followed the BPS ethical framework. Informed consent was required from participating teachers. As the programme was delivered to the full class, children could not be withdrawn from activities; however, parents were provided with an opportunity to opt their child out of participation, which no parent did. Participating schools received payment for participation. The researchers followed British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) throughout the entire research process.

3 | Results

Results are provided below, structured in relation to each research question. Different sources (weekly diaries, presurveys/post-surveys and post-interviews) have been utilised, as appropriate, to answer these research questions, with reference to the data source made for clarity. Teacher identifier numbers are provided after each quote.

3.1 | Is the Love to Read Reception Programme Being Delivered as Intended?

Through the IPE, it was found that all teachers, on average, delivered three to four sessions each week, each lasting between 15 and 20 min based on the weekly diaries (note: the delivery plan detailed approximately three sessions each week, each lasting approximately 20 min). This pattern was consistent across the 10 weeks, and across all teachers. Where the number of sessions was lower than expected (e.g., T1 in Weeks 9 and 10) this was due to unexpected staff absence. One teacher (T6) remarked that they were completing more than the required number of sessions because children had requested more sessions having enjoyed the programme so much.

Further, all teachers were asked to report 'Overall, how well do you feel delivery went this week' (using 5-point scale from *extremely well* to *not well at all*) in their weekly diaries. There were 60 data points (6 teachers × 10 weeks): 28 with a score of 5 (*extremely well*), 28 with a score of 4 (*very well*) and 4 with a score of 3 (*somewhat well*). These 'somewhat well' scores were from three different teachers in three different weeks, suggesting it was not specific to teacher/setting or activity focus. Overall, these findings suggest that all teachers consistently felt satisfied with the delivery of the programme in their classroom.

3.2 | Can the Programme Be Accommodated, and Is It Suitable and Acceptable to Settings?

Drawing upon the teacher diaries and postprogramme surveys, all teachers reported that the programme could be delivered as

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intended, that it was easy to follow and implement, remarking that the sessions did not require too much preparation, and that the programme was broken down into manageable chunks. It was noted in the weekly diaries that the programme had a clear and coherent structure that was easy to follow: 'Everything asked was extremely plausible and easy to deliver with very minimum preparation and cost. Everything was well explained in detail too which made it extremely easy to follow and deliver' (T6). In addition, teachers were able to adapt and integrate the programme well in their classes: 'After delivering the programme I feel like I have been able to adapt and add to the sessions to become part of our weekly routine within the class' (T2). This was reiterated in the interviews: 'activities were easy to implement and not overly strenuous on the timetable' (T3); 'if we didn't have as much detail in the book I would have gone "ergh" but actually it was really easy to lift and put into our planning' (T4).

Further, in the postprogramme surveys, all teachers stated that they would recommend the programme to other settings and would continue to use the programme in the future: 'We intend to keep many of the ideas and strategies going and will definitely implement them again next year with our new cohort of children' (T6). This was also mentioned in interviews: 'I'm gonna keep a lot of these activities going because I've been able to implement them and adapt them for other areas within the classroom and how we teach it worked really well' (T2). Weekly diaries highlighted the book buddy and travelling suitcase activities as having particularly positive impacts: 'Book Buddies has been really successful ... we are going to continue to make it a twice weekly fixture in our timetable' (T4)/'The suitcase has proven so popular, that we now send 3 cases home each night with different stories in' (T5).

Aside from staff illness for 1 week, across the 10 weeks, no teachers had any specific issues with programme delivery. Notably, one teacher did recognise that introducing a new programme can be challenging, but felt they adapted to this programme after a couple of weeks: 'initially because obviously it was a new program and it was trying to get in the routine of it and because it was new for the children to routine, it did disrupt like at the start, like maybe the first two weeks. But then we/I just then adapted' (T2). Importantly, within the postprogramme interviews, all four interviewees were positive about the programme in terms of its integration with current reading practice. For example: 'and it didn't disrupt phonics and it didn't disrupt their curriculum either ... from key stage one and early years it's all phonics, phonics, phonics, and that's it. So I was like, this is brilliant if we can get this going' (T2).

In addition, all interviewees provided examples of how it had supported their own professional knowledge and practice, supporting evidence of acceptability. For example: 'I loved the way it made me think about my practice. I thought I was doing a lot of reading for pleasure already but when I actually read through the book I realised that it could be better' (T2); 'We have enjoyed delivering the programme and the children have enjoyed it too. It has been great to have some guidance on how to encourage a love of reading' (T3). Further, one teacher commented on how it shifted their perception of priorities: 'I think it's changed my way of thinking of the importance I put on different areas. That actually something for them to enjoy has had a massive impact on their learning and their progress' (T2).

These findings were mirrored in the quantitative data whereby there were small positive increases in professional knowledge from predelivery to postdelivery. Teachers self-reported their understanding of the research knowledge in relation to reading for pleasure had increased from predelivery ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 1.83$; range = 3–8) to postdelivery ($M = 8.29$, $SD = 1.50$; range = 6–10). Similarly, teachers' self-confidence in supporting children's reading for pleasure showed a small increase from predelivery ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.41$; range = 5–9) to postdelivery ($M = 7.86$, $SD = 2.41$; range = 3–10). Finally, teachers self-reported importance of supporting reading for pleasure in classrooms was very high at predelivery ($M = 9.83$, $SD = 0.41$; range = 9–10) and increased to ceiling level at postdelivery ($M = 10.00$, $SD = 0$).

3.3 | Do Different Settings, or Participants, Have Different Experiences of Delivery?

Based on the postprogramme surveys and weekly teacher diaries, all six teachers reported positive experiences of delivery within their class however, there were some important differences. One teacher remarked that they found some of the book choice activities difficult to deliver as their existing book provision was limited and not aligned children's interests (T2). In addition, one teacher (T6) cited that some of the children, including SEN children found some of the activities difficult at first, but as the programme developed they grew in confidence. There was also variation in how successful implementing reading at home was. For example, one teacher (T3) stated that there were challenges with encouraging parents to read at home with their child, whereas other teachers were able to invite parents into school to deliver sessions.

This variation was detailed further in the post programme interviews, for example, one commented that it was impactful on both reluctant and engaged readers: 'Reluctant readers found this more engaging, which was great to see, I think as it gave them more ownership and confidence ... children who already had a love of reading only developed this further which was great' (T3).

Meanwhile, one teacher commented that it made a significant visible positive difference to SEN children, while another teacher commented that some SEN children struggled with group activities: 'because we had such a positive impact, especially with our SEN pupils and their parents' (T2) 'It was really accessible, some of our children with SEN would struggle with it as some were group activities but that is the same for lots of our learning' (T1).

Finally, evidence from the weekly diaries showed that reaching children with EAL was seen as a challenge by one teacher who said that EAL pupils found the programme difficult and that it would have been useful to 'have adaptations for the EAL pupils to allow for them and their families to engage more' (T2). Meanwhile another teacher mentioned in their interview children's existing knowledge of books/reading as influencing their contribution: 'Quite a lot of our children, because they don't really have books at home or read at home, when we asked

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them what books they liked they were coming up with TV programmes – I wanna read Peppa Pig books, I wanna read Bluey books' (T4).

3.4 | Do Practitioners Perceive Any Changes to Children's Attitudes, Behaviours or Skills in Relation to Reading Enjoyment, Motivation or Engagement?

Utilising data from the postprogramme surveys and teacher diaries, all six teachers perceived positive changes to children's reading attitudes, behaviours and skills. Teachers stated that children had more enjoyment, engagement and confidence with books, more interest and excitement about books and reading. Drawing on the interview data, all four teachers reiterated positive changes to children's attitudes, behaviour and skills, citing more interest and excitement about books/reading, demonstrating skills in selecting books (taking longer to choose, spontaneously using choosing strategies), more visits to the reading area, and more sharing books with others. Quotes are organised below in relation to reading attitudes, behaviours and then skills.

In relation to reading attitudes, it was noted from weekly diaries that 'The pupils got excited when they had voted for a book and it was read - they were more engaged with the story' (T2) and that 'Children are becoming excited for story time and vote on their choice of book' (T1). The sense of enjoyment was widespread, with one teacher noting 'The children (and staff) have loved every minute of the project and their enthusiasm for reading, stories and books has overflowed to home …' (T6), while another highlighted how 'The children felt really valued and they enjoyed sharing their ideas and preferences' (T4). This was reiterated in the postprogramme interviews, for example: 'I think this programme is very useful at developing enjoyment for children and will definitely boost engagement … the children have taken to it really well - child engagement has been high' (T2). Finally, when discussing what makes a successful reader, one teacher in the surveys remarked that children focused on the enjoyment of reading and being able to join in and talk about stories, as opposed to focusing on the mechanics of learning to read.

Shifts in reading behaviours were also noted: 'Really really useful since we've done it the children are just going in the reading area a lot more, they're a lot more excited to choose a book and excited for reading time' (T1). 'You can see that they are enjoying it because you can see it in their play - they're constantly seeking out books … I think that's been the biggest thing for me – they've enjoyed these activities so much that they independently are using those skills' (T2); 'I definitely have seen more engagement with books. Children visiting the reading area more frequently, and children sharing books' (T4). Reflecting on the programme in their postsurvey, a teacher noted: *The impact across our setting has been amazing! Its been lovely watching the children's confidence grow. Feedback from parents has been extremely positive too* (T6).

In addition, there were changes in books to send home: 'Not just giving them phonics book home now, but also book to read for enjoyment' (T2) and greater parent engagement: 'Since that day we're now seeing a lot more parents engaged with the reading at home … and when we're reading a story [in class] they [the children] are saying a lot more 'we heard that story at home last night' (T2). This was also evidenced in the weekly diaries with another example being: 'Parents are engaged with reading at home … We also have read with me sessions every two weeks where parents come into school to read a story, this is very successful also' (T1).

In relation to skills, there were reported shifts in inferencing and reasoning skills from the diaries: 'Children where very enthusiastic to talk about the events of the book and predicted what would happen next' (T1). Further, one teacher noticed significant changes in language and communication: 'those children who won't always get their literacy early learning goal, well they're really hitting their communication and language right now … we can see it in the data that it's had a massive impact on them, without necessarily targeting that' (T2). While others referred to skills specifically intended to be developed by the programme, for example, developing skills in book choice: 'but I think rather than just walking up to the shelf and just plucking one now, they will take a little bit more time, you know looking at it and thinking about whether they might enjoy it and yeah and really it was just quite simple strategies like thinking about you know?' (T4). It was also noted that teachers perceived changes in their own skills: 'I feel more confident in using different skills and that I'm on the right lines with practices I use to support reading for pleasure' (T3).

There were also some unanticipated outcomes. For example, one teacher reported they had seen a shift in their home school reading journals/library book record cards with parents keener to write about reading experiences at home with their children since the project has begun: 'We've also seen a shift too in our home school reading journals/library book record cards with parents keener to write about reading experiences at home with their children since the project has begun' (T6). Another teacher cited that the book buddy scheme had encouraged children to develop friendships with other students: 'The buddy system was really successful, throughout the week the older children were looking out for their buddy whenever they seen them across the school' (T2).

Overall, the programme was seen to have a positive effect on the classroom 'reading for pleasure' environment. Teachers reported in their postsurveys that 'The impact of the project in ten short weeks has been massive on our children …' (T6), and a key outcome was that 'I feel that I have helped to develop a strong culture of reading for pleasure within my class' (T4).

4 | Discussion

This article reports on the IPE of Love to Read Reception, highlighting the importance of diverse data collection methods to robustly evaluate acceptability, feasibility and effectiveness (specifically whether and how the intervention may work, in what contexts and for whom). While there is a significant body of research on understanding and supporting reading enjoyment and engagement among primary school children, research has primarily focused primarily on older primary school pupils (e.g., aged 8+) (Conradi et al. 2014) neglecting those at the earlier stages of their journeys as readers (although see Lepola et al. 2005). This study

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adds to the very limited research literature in relation to supporting young school-aged children's reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement, providing preliminary research insights which may inform effective pedagogical practice.

In general, all teachers were very positive about the programme, providing explicit and contextualised examples of why and how the intervention had been positively received (by both teachers and children) within their classes, in addition to providing insights for future programme development and delivery. Further, programme acceptability and feasibility were very positive across all settings, a key consideration in an IPE. The programme is discussed below in relation to current context and practice in England, and limitations and methodological considerations are also provided.

First, the current study demonstrates the value of including reading motivation and engagement pedagogy in primary schools, aligned with current guidance (DfE 2023). Yet some teachers felt that the 'reading for pleasure' culture within their reception year class had diminished over the years and the programme had been a way to revitalise this. By introducing activities sequentially and systematically aligned with research-informed principles, a comprehensive 'reading for pleasure' pedagogy had been introduced and teachers felt that this practice could be sustained. Teachers' comments and observations (across all data sources) that children's reading attitudes became more positive, that children became more confident in choosing and responding to texts, and more motivated to engage with books of their own volition suggest that the programme can support the affective and motivational foundations upon which later independent reading is built (Miyamoto et al. 2019; Taboada et al. 2009). That said, support for specific individuals and groups (e.g., English as an Additional Language) was recognised as a need for further development.

A key element of the IPE was acceptability and feasibility, and it is important to understand whether and how 'reading for pleasure' programmes such as this can be introduced and sustained within the school curriculum (e.g., to complement systematic synthetic phonics instruction, a statutory requirement in England). If children are going to become independent, successful and volitional readers, they must develop both the 'skill' and 'will' early in their reading development (Lepola et al. 2005), with 'skill' development also being enjoyable and engaging (McGeown et al. 2015). To date, there has been a disconnect between the skill and will in discussions of reading acquisition and development, yet this is not reflective of the research literature (Toste et al. 2020). The results from the current study demonstrate that integrating phonics and reading motivation/engagement pedagogy was not only feasible but perceived as beneficial, supporting emerging reading attitudes, motivation and engagement. This finding aligns with broader evidence suggesting that pedagogical approaches attending to motivation and identity can coexist with, and potentially enhance, skill development (Wood et al. 2021).

The evaluation of this programme is particularly timely, given growing concerns about consistent declines in children's reading enjoyment and engagement (Clark et al. 2025) in the United Kingdom, which has led to the National Year of Reading campaign (National Year of Reading 2026) and a UK 'Reading for Pleasure' Inquiry in 2026 (UK Parliament 2026). This article aims to contribute to our collective efforts to support children's reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement, focusing on those children in the earliest stage of school, and sit alongside the growing research literature in this area to inform teachers' professional knowledge and practice. The study focuses on an important time for children where formal schooling begins, and an area that is considerably under researched in the context of reading for pleasure.

4.1 | Limitations and Methodological Considerations

The IPE is limited in terms of its generalisability as it was conducted in six reception classes within a single city in England. That said, the small-scale nature of this IPE is appropriate, and reflected the resources and guidance available to the research team. In relation to the professional development and support offered (i.e., preprogramme training and fortnightly support meetings), uptake at both varied, but was generally low. This could have had consequences for, or been related to, teachers' depth of knowledge or engagement/confidence with programme delivery, or the quality of programme delivery. One possible reason for the low uptake in both is that the Love to Read Reception programme and delivery plan were intended to be accessible and fully deliverable without this professional development/support, although attendance at both training sessions was encouraged. Further, the fortnightly support meetings were advertised as noncompulsory and available if teachers had questions about programme delivery.

A further limitation is that the research team did not have the resources to conduct independent observations of classroom practice and instead relied solely upon teachers' self-reports (through diaries, surveys and interviews), which would have relied heavily on their self-awareness and self-reflection. While data were collected in a timely manner, thus reducing demands on teachers' memory, this should be recognised when interpreting the findings. In addition, reminders for completing data collection (e.g., weekly diaries) were sometimes required. This likely reflects teachers' challenges with workload rather than demonstrating a reduced engagement with the programme, although variability in engagement in providing data would be a useful avenue for future implementation and evaluation in schools to consider. Another point is that the researchers who developed the programme were also involved in all data collection, which could have encouraged socially desirable responses from the teachers. That said, in all data collection approaches, teachers were explicitly encouraged to provide a comprehensive and balanced perspective (e.g., invited to share what went well, what did not, what could be improved) and the researchers proactively sought responses to the latter two in order to inform programme improvement and iteration.

Finally, no data were collected from the children, relying instead on teachers reports of changes to children's reading attitudes, behaviours and skills. Unlike the measure of cognitive (e.g., reading, language skills) abilities, there are no robust (e.g., standardised) measures of young children's reading attitudes, behaviours and/or 'reading for pleasure' skills. The development of these will be essential if future evaluation of reading for pleasure

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pedagogy is implemented with this age group. In addition, no data were collected from school leaders, yet their support of literacy interventions are often key to (sustained) implementation, particularly in the face of challenges (Wood et al. 2021) such as schedule conflicts and managing teachers' workload.

5 | Conclusion

There is a growing emphasis on the need for methodologically robust evaluations of literacy interventions across all stages of the intervention development lifecycle. This article provides insights into the IPE of the Love to Read Reception programme and the breadth and content of measures, which can be utilised to inform our understanding of intervention acceptability and feasibility. These findings contribute to evolving and collective knowledge and efforts to support children's reading enjoyment, motivation and engagement, to increase the likelihood that more children will develop positive identities, practices and experiences as readers.

Author Contributions

Jamie Lingwood: conceptualisation (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), funding acquisition (lead), methodology (lead), project administration (lead), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal). **Sarah McGeown:** conceptualisation (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), funding acquisition (support), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review and editing (equal), resources (lead).

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was sought and granted from Liverpool Hope University (SEL-05102023-002).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are not available as permission was not requested from teachers to make the data they provided publicly available at the time of the study.

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