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Friends for life

Pairing students with older people to read books aloud is about so much more than improving literacy, finds **Henry Hepburn**, who visits a community project that is getting teenagers to see beyond their own social bubble ▶

Callum* looked up. While reading aloud in a quiet nook of the library, he'd sensed a subtle change in the atmosphere. Jim*, it seemed, had fallen asleep.

Looking around, not knowing what to do, he caught the attention of his teacher. This was awkward. Jim, a retired and lonely gent, was his "reading friend"; Callum, an S3 student at Bannockburn High School, met Jim once a fortnight for a couple of hours to read to him.

A little snooze, however, was not something he'd been prepped for. He was, one teacher recalls, "totally and utterly thrown", and shifted nervously in his seat as he waited for someone to help him out, all the while wondering if he had a boring voice.

Suddenly, Jim piped up: why had Callum stopped reading? Jim hadn't been sleeping; he'd just been enjoying the book, and had shut his eyes to soak it up all the better.

"He was just so relaxed and so enjoying having young company, and listening to him reading, that that was [the way] his enjoyment was coming through," says Ruth Sheppard, the teacher who witnessed this scene. For her, it's emblematic of the unexpectedly profound ripple effects that a seemingly simple literacy project has had on both students and people from an older generation.

The Reading Friends project at the school just outside Stirling has been running for about three years. Student volunteers, usually in S3, walk the mile down to St Ninian's Library on a Tuesday afternoon every fortnight, where the group of volunteers – which varies in size but currently has nine members – spends a couple of hours reading to, and chatting with, an older person from the town, usually one to one. They can read anything. Novels are requested most often, with those set in the Second World War proving popular, while there is also a healthy demand for classics such as *Jane Eyre*.

The project is symbolic of an increasingly outward, community-minded focus that has taken root in Scottish schools in recent years. While billed as a literacy project, the impact goes far beyond reading and writing.

In a society in which young people are constantly gazing at their phones and loneliness is afflicting an ageing population, staff at the school believe it is more important than ever for students to come out of their bubbles and reach out. Along the way, students have been surprised to find their new friends to be couthy and full of spark, rather than feeble or grumpy; the older

people, in turn, have overcome stereotypes of teenagers who stalk the streets in hoodies and hang about menacingly at shop entrances.

The idea was the school's and, while there is a Reading Friends charity with which Bannockburn has become loosely affiliated, it tends to pair adults with adults; the school believes its own approach is uncommon and perhaps unique in Scotland.

The project has helped one lover of books to reconnect with the written word. Lorna Burnett developed lupus in her forties and cannot read without hurting her eyes; her health problems also forced her to retire early and she does not leave her home often.

"I used to read a novel in a couple of days – my head was never out of a book," she said on a recent BBC Radio Scotland phone-in.

Through St Ninian's Library, she was introduced to Bannockburn High's Reading Friends programme and paired up with a 15-year-old. Ailsa has read her two historical novels – it would have been more, but they have struck up a firm friendship and Burnett says "we end up chatting too much".

Sheppard, the school's languages and literacy leader, says the project helps both the adults and students to step outside their "bubble": the hubbub and eye contact is looked forward to avidly by all, whether it's an older adult who lives on their own and is fed up of the inanity of daytime TV, or a teenager enjoying a few hours of human contact away from the constant updates of social media. One time, a girl who is part of the project suddenly piped up: "I can't believe it, but I've not looked at my phone for an hour."

Better humans

There is another bubble that Bannockburn staff want students to see beyond: exams. School can seem like a self-improvement factory, with all the pressure to better oneself by gaining a good clutch of qualifications and the tendency to sacrifice other pursuits in the latter part of secondary school. For headteacher Karen Hook, however, it is crucial that students see beyond all of this, even in the latter part of secondary school. She believes a "sense of altruism and service and giving back to the local community" is just as important.

Each June, the school holds an "S6 conference" whose theme, says Hook, is always "what are you going to give back to the community that's given you so much over the years?" By "exposing [students] to people who have spent their lives serving others", the school hopes, "the better human beings they are going to be".

Hook says: "It is becoming more and more just what we do – schools have moved to be more at the centre of their communities."



School Leaders Scotland general secretary Jim Thewliss, whose organisation represents the secondary sector, concurs that "this sort of thing has been growing for a number of years in schools across the country", alongside a "growing community awareness" among both staff and students. He sees that reflected in more flexible secondary timetables, where community work has parity with more traditional "academic" work; in greater thought put into work placements; and in the emergence of national schemes such as Developing the Young Workforce, which has given greater status to vocational education.

"There's a bit of Greta Thunberg in most young people – it's just a matter of giving it the opportunity to flourish," says Thewliss.

The students who thrive most amid this fostering of civic-minded altruism, says Hook, are often those who find classroom



Broadening the sense of community inside and outside the school gates

Reading Friends is not the only Bannockburn High initiative that encourages pupils to step away from "academic" work to build links with people normally outside of their orbit. Others involve helping fellow pupils.

"The more people we work with and who we expose our young people to, the more opportunities we open up," says headteacher Karen Hook.

S6 pupil Emily Ward is a talented dancer who leads on choreography at Bannockburn's School of Musical Theatre, a new scheme that gives S1s

and S2s – most of whom have very little, if any, experience of performing – the chance to take part in a school show. She has learned a lot by seeing how skills that come naturally to her seem like a "puzzle" to younger pupils.

Acting depute head Kirsten Gunning says that, like Reading Friends, the emphasis is on gently helping people out of their comfort zone. Memorably, one boy on the autism spectrum decided he just wanted to watch, and did so until just before a Christmas show when, to

everyone's surprise, he got up and sang a whole song perfectly.

Jack Graham, an S6 sports leader, has worked closely with primary pupils and been surprised at the level of detail they sometimes need in instruction. This has helped him break down his own learning for exams into more manageable chunks.

Another S6, Neave Reilly, has volunteered at the Buttercup Cafe, run in a local church for people with memory loss. She has to test her knitting, dominoes and tea-making skills with the "sassy" and "feisty"

residents, who are not slow to complain if their cuppa is too milky. "You have to be assertive," says Neave, who believes her time at the cafe has helped back in class by making her "more confident to answer questions and put my hand up".

Taking on the "huge responsibility" at the cafe – a place where, unlike at school, "you're not the main focus" – has also given her more "perspective" about the importance of exams, and stopped her from "overthinking" them.

learning the hardest. While they might routinely show up late for class, with Reading Friends they will always be punctual and quick to chivvy along any peers messing about or not showing the same urgency. That, says Hook, can be down to how much they value the respect shown by their older reading friend – who does not have to be there and could walk away at any time – which they are determined to repay. One girl who was unsettled at school has “blossomed” as a reading friend; she is fastidious about small interpersonal details, such as how many sugars are required in her friend’s cup of tea.

The project can change perceptions about the whole experience of school, within which some students see themselves as failures or square pegs. But this girl, says Sheppard, has “developed a new sense of maturity in the way that she’s able to communicate: beforehand she would just shut down, the barriers were up and she was angry, whereas now she...respects herself an awful lot more”. There was a rapid effect on her confidence in classroom learning – “like a switch”. Being a reading friend has “made her attitude more mature” because she sees “the impact she could have on another person in a positive way”.

Reading that adds up

Students have also come to see their community in a different way. Most of the adult reading friends are of a mature age, and one woman in particular had vivid memories about life in Bannockburn during the Second World War. Students had been learning about the war in school and some found it difficult to engage with, partly because it was something commonly depicted as happening far away: the Blitz in London, the occupation of Paris, and so on. But staff heard students whispering “can you believe?” in awed tones when they learned that issues such as rationing were very real in their own small town.

Students have a “whole new respect for themselves because they are seeing how other people are viewing them [positively]”, and also display “more respect for the people round about them”, says Sheppard. When walking through the town, they are “more inclined to help, or to be polite or mannerly, whereas beforehand they might have just totally ignored [people] or walked on or been rude”.

Some strong friendships have been struck up that carry on beyond the fortnightly library sessions. One student whose grandmother died said that talking to someone they trusted of a similar age had helped them get through



A community school is a brave school

At the 2019 Tes Schools Awards, judges said that the winner of the Community and Collaboration Award, Bradford Academy, “felt like a brave school”, adding: “It is very easy for schools in Bradford to put their heads down and not be noticed.” Weekly antiradicalisation workshops, which encourage

mothers to speak openly in a supportive environment, were among the community projects run by the academy, an all-through school with about 2,000 pupils.

Other projects included Empowering Mothers Against Radicalisation, run with the Home Office’s Prevent programme; The

Linking Network, a local charity that brought pupils together from demographically diverse schools to debate contentious issues; and The Peace Foundation charity, which helped pupils to become ambassadors in their communities.

it. One girl even described her reading friend – a lady in her seventies with failing eyesight to whom she read the *Stirling Observer* – as “like my grandma”.

Staff wondered if another boy, Roy, would be OK when he ended up reading to two women who were thick as thieves and insisted they would not be separated. Yet despite the pair appearing “very intimidating”,

recalls Sheppard, “they just loved him”. The trio were “too busy talking and laughing, and you actually had to go over and say ‘Ladies, shh!’ At one point, I realised they’re not actually reading a book, but does that actually matter here?”

There is a lot of chat among the reading friends about school and how it has changed over the decades – tales of corporal



punishment always raise eyebrows – and the long view that the older people have helps students realise the impact that education can have on a life. “I wish I’d stuck in at school” is a common refrain, and can hit home harder than when teachers and parents – whose advice can wash over – try to influence young people. Some students have few reliable role models outside of school so it can be powerful “to know that they are cared about by someone who doesn’t have to care about them”.

But how do you quantify the impact of a project like this? Some questionnaires produced qualitative evidence, but staff say this side of things is frustrating – asking, say, how many books the reading friends have got through doesn’t begin to measure the benefit. They could do a reading assessment before and after, but they fear it would undermine the whole project; some of the students who get the most out of it are those who baulk at the idea of a test.

“You know what, maybe it’s about admitting that sometimes it doesn’t have to be about an assessment,” says Hook, the headteacher. “Maybe it’s about the feel-good factor, maybe it’s about what we’re doing for these young people, and maybe it is just about their happiness, their confidence, their wellbeing.”

Sheppard adds: “When you’re walking up from the library at the end of their reading time, you could not have on paper anything that captures how they’re feeling – there’s nothing that you could have to prove it because it’s so genuine, so natural, I don’t think any assessment would be productive...it goes against the grain of what we’re trying to do – it would absolutely take away from it.”

This raises a wider issue: what does a school do when the effect of a project – if any – is not immediately obvious using traditional school-performance metrics? Hook says you just have to have the courage of your convictions – and a supportive leadership

team that accepts that not every brainwave will be a roaring success in practice.

“There is huge scrutiny on schools in terms of impact measurement, and we see the value of that. But for a project like this, no amount of data would capture the feeling and the positives that we get from the people involved.”

The Reading Friends project is something of a one-off in Scottish schools. However, the Bannockburn attitude to community projects is reflected widely across the country. Billy Burke, headteacher at Renfrew High and a recent president of School Leaders Scotland, says: “There’s been a real desire in Scottish schools to work with communities in recent years. A lot of impetus has come from the students, who want to get involved in projects that they think will make a difference to the communities they live in, and who are more aware than they’ve ever been of the range of skills they’ll pick up along the way. And genuine community projects, where there’s a determination to do something meaningful and lasting, reflect the emphasis on school values that has become such a focus in recent times, and which should ripple out far beyond the classroom.”

Enduring sentiments

Back at Bannockburn, at the end of S3 the reading friends can look forward to a final event including tea, cake and quizzes. There are tears, as gifts and letters are exchanged. Sheppard recalls one book inscribed with a very personal message for a younger reading friend. It’s the sort of thing a teacher might sometimes give to a student, but she stresses that, no matter how genuine that gesture from a teacher, it is unlikely to have the same impact – simply because a teacher is employed to show an interest in students, whereas a reading friend has no such obligation.

“It’s not going to be the same as somebody in the community who’s gone out, thought about that person, bought something specifically for them, thought carefully about the past year that they’ve had together, written something for them to keep forever, and gifted that to them,” she says.

That sort of impact, adds Sheppard, is “not something that we can force in a school”. In other words, by looking outward, schools are not adding a few fripperies to the core business of learning. The clear message from Bannockburn is that reaching out into the community, if done well, does more than provide a temporary escape from school: in profound and sometimes unforeseen ways, it enhances both the work of teachers and the lives of their students. ●

***Names have been changed**
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