



Newcastle City Council and North East Solidarity & Teaching

Newcastle City Council's School Effectiveness Team and North East Solidarity & Teaching (N.E.S.T), a Newcastle University student-led volunteer initiative to educate, empower and integrate the forced migration community in the North East of England, co-founded and have co-delivered the Schools Project since 2021.

There are around 350 asylum-seeking pupils in Newcastle, and many more have settled in schools as refugees, so the aim of the project is to "make life a little easier for children from this background". Specifically, it is designed to "promote integration, improve their reading comprehension skills, make new friends, and feel safe in the school environment".

Using [Connectors](#), a groundbreaking reciprocal reading series for peer-to-peer learning and with books donated by Scholastic, student volunteers from the University lead reading in six primary schools during school time twice a week, and as after-school clubs in four secondary schools once a week.

For the collaborative Schools Project, these books are designed to "improve literacy, leadership skills and metacognition, improve motivation and behaviour, and spark curiosity and debate", and are a fundamental part of these schools' support for refugee and asylum-seeker children, from Year 2 right through to Year 11. Children work in small groups, supported by a volunteer, each taking turns to be the leader as they read and debate a book together.

"Many of these children have had a seriously disrupted school experience, so any extra support that we can provide greatly benefits their education and development," said Sarah Edgar, Education Consultant at Newcastle City Council.

"Readers who do not have English as an additional language, and/or come from a refugee/asylum-seeker background, really benefit from this additional support. We chose the individual schools because they are located in areas where international new arrivals are being housed. For the majority of these schools, educating children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds is a new challenge for them, and this project is designed to provide the additional support they need. It has been really impactful."

In 2022-23, the Schools Project tested the reading ages of 86 pupils, across six different schools, before and after 24 Connectors' reading sessions with volunteers. 30 of these were from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds, and 56 spoke English as an additional language.

- 67% of all readers made improvements: an average reading age improvement of seven months, ranging from one to 80 months.
- 70% of readers with English as an additional language made improvements: an average reading age improvement of seven months, ranging from one to 45 months.
- 77% of readers from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds made improvements; an average reading age improvement of seven months, ranging from 2 to 80 months.

They also tested the reading ages of 16 pupils who did not work with volunteers, over the same time period, as a control group. None were from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds, and five spoke English as an additional language. Only 56% of pupils in this control group made improvements to their reading age.

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"I used Connectors in schools and classrooms in deprived areas of Newcastle previously, so I know they would support our approach to guided reading with groups of children who may have been forced to seek sanctuary as a result of conflict, and are often suffering from Social, Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties," Sarah explained.



"Small groups develop their confidence, and provide a valuable opportunity to chat with student volunteers and open up about their experiences outside of the classroom, as well as allowing them to escape into a book. The children take the lead – and become in control of the group – and we see them building up their resilience. For secondary school students the Connectors texts are really accessible, and aimed at those with a low reading age.

"The books help them to learn so much new vocabulary in a range of interesting topics. As the children do not have much outside experience, we only use non-fiction books. They like the security of the open book: testing themselves with tricky words, building summary skills which they can take and pass on into curriculum learning in other subjects, becoming solid in those subjects. We have seen reading ages rise immeasurably and vocabulary, comprehension and social skills developing through it. Pupils' 'happiness' scores have also jumped."

The Connectors reading project has received overwhelming positive feedback from teachers and pupils alike. One teacher from Central Walker Church of England Primary School said: "The children who have taken part in the sessions have reported feeling more confident with their reading and oracy skills. The project has been fantastic for our school."

Another highlighted: "The students who have taken part in the weekly sessions have gained significant knowledge and understanding, and this has been recognised by their teachers in their main class English lessons. Children have become more confident engaging with their peers and accessing lessons more independently within their main class teaching."

Meanwhile, a secondary student at Jesmond Park Academy said: "I really enjoyed the reading programme after school as they helped me pronounce the words. The books are good because they have pictures with words. If they just had words, then I would not understand the meaning. The staff from the University are really nice. I go to extra classes at the University, and I feel I can talk to them. My confidence has improved with pronouncing words."

N.E.S.T Project Worker Tilly Atkinson, commented: "The programme is so simple for student volunteers to lead and we have a huge variety of books available. Attendance is very consistent: even as an after-school club we get 80-90%, and that applies for every year up to Year 11. Connectors has improved vocabulary and accessibility for all age groups, but I would point to the well-rounded support that it facilitates. The

relationships that student volunteers build with the children is fantastic, and supports what they can know and remember from books. I have been so impressed with their recall."

Beyond the reading comprehension activities, N.E.S.T student volunteers lead lunch-time and after-school clubs focusing on art and crafts, languages and science. Staff members translate student reports, letters to guardians, attend parents' evenings, and promote the wider opportunities available as part of the N.E.S.T Community Project. A number of students also attend summer trips, sports club, and English for Speakers of Other Languages classes.

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In 2023-24, Newcastle City Council's School Effectiveness Team and N.E.S.T are aiming to run sessions in 12 primary and secondary schools, potentially more if additional funding can be secured.

Sarah added that Connectors is also being applied to a separate council-led SEMH intervention alongside art to support the most vulnerable pupils in its schools. Key Stage 1 books, and reading tests, are forming the basis of this confidence-building project led by an educational psychologist and involving groups of teachers and teaching assistants, which also seeks to impact academic progress.

"Connectors brings children and student volunteers together, developing social skills, confidence and relationships, and through it we can now see evidence that refugee and asylum-seeking children and English as an additional language pupils actually make greater improvements to their reading than the rest of the school population," she said. "Scholastic overall develops a love of reading, a love of knowledge, and we have taken great pleasure seeing the progress made with children at the heart."

Case study developed: February 2024