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Reading the room

Research is at the centre of BookTrust's plans to get children reading, by placing a firm focus on understanding family life. Katie McQuater speaks to Ruthann Hughes to find out more about the charity's approach to learning

For an organisation that promotes the benefits of reading, it's perhaps not surprising that learning and curiosity are at the heart of BookTrust's approach.

The charity has a strategic commitment to behaviour change: getting a generation of children reading – across England, Wales and Northern Ireland – through programmes that provide families with books, resources and advice to encourage parents and carers to read with their children.

Such a significant goal requires dedication to evidence: producing it, gathering it, analysing it and acting on it.

"Learning, evidence and insights are very much a cross-organisational endeavour within BookTrust," says Ruthann Hughes, director of research and impact at the charity. "Having an evidence-led way of working requires learning to be happening in quite a big cross-functional organisation, so it's very much a shared endeavour."

While the research and impact team contributes significantly to this, it works closely with other teams within the organisation. This 'shared endeavour' involves collaboration with, for example, a design and innovation team and a partnership team that works on the ground with families to deliver resources and inspire children with their reading. Data, insights and evidence filter into almost everything BookTrust does, because it has set itself up to "do social innovation in a really structured way", says Hughes. "When it comes to learning, we are firing on all cylinders – because it's in everything we're doing."

From ethnography to understand how it can help foster reading habits within families, to identifying strategic opportunities, testing ideas, evaluating pilots and feeding insights back into organisational planning, the organisation conducts a significant volume of research – all of which is carefully curated to ensure it will feed into its key strategic priorities.

Supporting this is what Hughes terms 'a jigsaw of learning', of which the research and impact team is part. In the past three years, the team has grown from three researchers to nine today. A mixed

methods team, it comprises various skills and areas of expertise: theory of change, monitoring learning, and deliberative engagement being a few.

Hughes says the varied skill sets complement those of others within BookTrust.

Making reading happen

In 2021, BookTrust set out a new five-year strategy outlining how it would support families to adopt or change behaviours that help them to create and cultivate a reading habit. In the charity's own words, this was a 'new and ambitious direction' and it now uses a 'theory of change' COM-B behaviour model to guide and inform its work, based on extensive internal and external evidence.

The research and impact team carries out a large amount of work focused on data, insight and evidence on what is required to establish the reading habits that the organisation is working to create. This includes reviewing external evidence on the various outcomes the organisation needs to meet to contribute to sustained behaviour change. "A complex theory of change approach requires a lot of analysis and synthesis of external evidence," says Hughes.

Research priorities are formed from the organisation's strategic priorities, and encouraging shared reading in the early years of life is a core focus of its work, because of a body of evidence showing the positive impacts of reading at an early age. Hughes explains: "We know that if we can crack reading behaviours in the early years, children are much more likely to continue reading through childhood and into adult life and therefore go on to experience the multiple, transformative, long-term benefits of reading."

Interventions by the charity in the early years space include Bookstart Baby, a programme where every child aged up to 12 months is eligible for a free pack of books and resources.

"We want to get children reading so that they can go on to enjoy better wellbeing, better parental child bonding, better school readiness and outcomes through school," says Hughes. "Later in life, wellbeing is affected by reading. Reading

has a really positive contribution to improving life outcomes generally, particularly for disadvantaged families."

While the organisation wants all children to have access to reading, it also runs more targeted programmes aimed specifically at low-income families and children in care, for example. It is currently developing more targeted interventions focused on low-income families, designed for children from birth to five, with research informing the design of interventions. "We're trying to build up the moments where families are supported in their reading journeys through BookTrust," says Hughes.

The organisation's BookStart Preschool and BookStart Toddler early years targeted offers aim to support low-income families with shared reading, and BookTrust has distributed packs to 425,000 families through more than 5,000 early years settings, alongside 'Storyteller' resources for early years practitioners, with evidence from co-design activities informing the design of the programmes.

For example, families and practitioners told the researchers that the bonding moments between a child and an adult sharing a book are important. Parents and carers were motivated by the positive feelings they experience in these moments and seeing their children's responses. BookTrust took this on board and designed its books and resources in

these packs to foster positive interactions between parents and carers and young children, with an emphasis on play.

Additionally, the organisation's Family Survey found a lack of confidence among target audience families. For some, reading was associated with negative experiences at school for example, with some saying that the word 'book' brought back unhappy memories of lessons. BookTrust developed its resources and messages accordingly to communicate that there is no right or wrong way to share a story and that shared reading can happen anywhere. It is also developing tools to help build parental confidence.

Exploring new territories

One of the ways in which BookTrust is expanding its understanding of how reading can work in families' lives in a way that's going to help is ethnographic work involving digital contributions from participants via video calls and diaries.

Through this research, the organisation is exploring "new territories" to help it aid families in their reading, explains Hughes. "Some low-income families have particular challenges around time and access to activities and resources and we want to be there for these families, so we are trying to learn with them about how we can help." It has been working with innovation consultancy Untapped to



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devise a methodology focused on ‘deep conversations and understanding the granularity of everyday life,’ says Hughes.

There are methodological challenges that come with conducting research with seldom-heard groups. Hughes explains: “Within our target audience, accessing at scale the kinds of families we’re trying to support, and getting their involvement in research, is an ongoing endeavour.

“This is wider than just our organisation – I think there’s definitely a challenge around representation of low-income families in panel work.”

Additionally, while pointing to the “really big benefits of the opportunities created by online research”, Hughes highlights another challenge in this area, not unique to BookTrust, that can cause a barrier for participants – that of internet and device accessibility.

“Where we are working with low-income families, there’s the ongoing challenge of how you make sure that those families are properly able to contribute to learning, because there are challenges around access to data, as well as device ownership. There are issues around families sharing one smartphone, and therefore we need to be thinking about how we plan for that.”

Measuring at scale

At the other end of the spectrum, quantitative research, including the BookTrust Family Survey, a national study of low-income families that involved 2,150 families last year, is important to help the organisation measure at scale.

“For us as an organisation, it’s fundamental to listen to the voices of the families that we are seeking to support, so being able to do that at a national level with that number of low-income families is really important to us and remains an ongoing focus,” says Hughes.

Insights from the survey will be shared outside BookTrust with the aim of

contributing to wider conversations about development in the early years. And internally, findings from the research are underpinning various strategic decisions.

For example, research informed the development of the Storytime programme, offering story sessions for young children in 2,000 libraries. At the point of scoping it out, the organisation drew on a finding from the Family Survey that almost half (47%) of low-income families are not registered with a library. Additionally, qual and co-design work highlighted that libraries were not necessarily viewed as places to visit with young children – for example, some families said that they viewed libraries as places where children are expected to sit down quietly and listen, and this deterred them from attending.

As well as using research with families to shape the development of the Storytime pilot, the organisation drew on insight from library staff to develop tools aimed at supporting libraries, particularly to engage new families and work with local community organisations. Continued research with libraries, including feedback surveys, is used to evaluate what’s working.

Elsewhere, BookTrust’s Letterbox Survey this year received 350 responses from children in foster care, sharing their feedback on the long-running Letterbox Club, a programme that delivers age-appropriate book parcels to children within the care system. Hughes says: “It’s an old-school paper survey that we feel is important for the audience we’re researching here.”

The organisation is also embarking on its first longitudinal study, working with a cohort of families from the start of family life – birth onwards – to understand how reading behaviours formulate in families and the role of BookTrust within this.

Across the various research activities, there is not one standout approach when



it comes to methodology. A mixed approach is key, according to Hughes. “It’s about having the awareness of and ability to flex and use different methodologies and to learn as we go.

“As an organisation, we’re learning – but we’re also learning about the learning. Continuous improvement applies also to the way we structure and approach our learning activities with families and practitioners and we are always listening to feedback.”

This listening extends to business planning. The research and impact team creates opportunities in the planning cycle to review current and recent evidence so that the organisation is continuously building its understanding of what works and what doesn’t. This involves a lot of sharing with different parts of the charity, with cross-functional



teams set up to focus on specific goals – for example, one team focuses on working with vulnerable people.

Speaking with Hughes, there is a sense that no opportunities are wasted, with the organisation looking to put every bit of evidence it gathers towards that ultimate, overarching goal.

But of course, changing habits doesn't come quickly – in bookish terms, it might be more akin to absorbing yourself in a lengthy classic rather than a digestible holiday page-turner.

“The biggest challenge is that we know that behaviour change is complex, takes time, and requires a breadth of activities,” says Hughes. “It's not an easy win and we wouldn't expect it to be. It requires a really structured, thoughtful approach to learning and innovation.”

Representation matters

BookTrust recently worked with Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, a senior lecturer and associate professor in children's and young adult literature studies at the University of Glasgow, to share her report on the representation and experiences of people of colour among children's book creators in the UK.

The organisation has been tracking the proportion of creatives – authors and illustrators of colour – in UK children's publishing since 2017. “In summary, we have found there has been strong progress over the past five years but there is still further to go on representation of creators of colour and there is further to go in representation of children and children's lives that are as diverse as the UK population is,” says Ruthann Hughes, director of research and impact at BookTrust.

The organisation is also exploring what books and resources to share with families, considering representation of different family structures, different socioeconomic backgrounds and different geographies within children's literature, according to Hughes.

The BookTrust Represents initiative introduces children to new texts in schools, supporting authors and illustrators of colour to engage with students through virtual and in-person events.

An evaluation report for the programme, based on the experiences of teachers, pupils and authors, found that representation in children's books has a critical impact on children's wider learning and development in the classroom and beyond, and that author visits and use of diverse and inclusive books in schools had a positive impact on children's engagement with books and their own motivation to read and write their own stories, as well as developing their future aspirations.