

Read On - Write Away!

The Greenhill Study

Paul Davies
Research Fellow in the Centre for the
Study of Education and Training,
Lancaster University

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I am really pleased to be able to introduce the final part of the evaluation of Read On - Write Away! - **The Greenhill Study**

When we commissioned the evaluation group (Professor Peter Hannon, Professor Mary Hamilton, Viv Bird and Paul Davies) to develop and produce the evaluation strategy was produced in April 2002, and was intended to offer an overview of ROWA's operation and the impact it was having in Derbyshire. This second, complementary piece of work offers an in-depth study of one (anonymous) community.

Introduction

During 2000/2001 Lancaster University undertook an evaluation of the Read On - Write Away! literacy initiative and the City of Derby. The purpose of 2000/2001 evaluation was to complement other evaluations of Read On -Write Away! by producing an overall picture of its operation as an organisation and the impact it was having at a general level. During the course of this evaluation it was recognised that a more detailed study of how Read On -Write Away! operated at local level would provide an interesting, additional perspective. Consequently, it was decided to carry out a follow-up evaluation in 2001/2002 which took the form of a case study of one of the areas in which Read On - Write Away! was active. Greenhill was identified as a suitable area on which to base this case study.

(Throughout the rest of this report the initials ROWA! are used instead of the full title of Read On-Write Away!. almost all of the people on the Greenhill estate referred to Read On - Write Away! by using its initials rather than the full title).

The case study focused on several key issues that had emerged during the 2000/2001 evaluation. These were:

- developing the ROWA! programme at local level;
- social inclusion;
- progression;
- community empowerment;
- changed literacy practices
- inter-agency working.

The Greenhill estate was built in the late 1960's to house people originally living in a nearby large city. The estate has a population of approximately 3,500 people and is situated in a semi-rural area. Greenhill is an area of economic and social disadvantaged. Using the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Index of Multiple Deprivation (2000) criteria which takes into account factors such as income, employment, health, disability, education skills and training, housing and access to service, Greenhill is ranked at 661 from a total of 8414 wards. This places it within the 10% most deprived wards in the country.

Within the overall Index of Deprivation, Greenhill does rank well in relation to access to services because it has a post office, food shops, a

GP surgery and primary schools on the estate. Indeed one of the distinguishing features of Greenhill is that it has a very obvious physical centre based on a row of shops, a clinic, a library, a nursery and primary school and the Greenhill Residents' Association office. Although Greenhill residents do have difficulty accessing other important facilities such as higher education, hospital services, leisure and recreation facilities and supermarkets, its physical centre, and especially the Residents' Association office, has provided ROWA! with the opportunity to operate at the heart of the community.

Method

Greenhill was selected as the site of the case study for three reasons. First, it was an area of Derbyshire where ROWA!'s presence was particularly strong and where the local ROWA! co-ordinator was at the centre of a number of networks on the estate and was able to offer considerable help in constructing a varied interview sample.

The second reason for choosing Greenhill was its geographical features which made it a very attractive proposition. As previously mentioned, Greenhill is a small, almost self-contained community, which has a very obvious centre. The ring road which surrounds it acts, to some extent at least, as a physical boundary between itself and the surrounding area. Partly because of its physical characteristics, and partly because of its history as an estate built to house people moving from a nearby city, the community has a strong sense of identity and it in many ways distinguishable from neighbouring areas.

Finally, as described earlier, Greenhill is an area of economic and social deprivation and so provides useful insights into the extent to which ROWA! is able to make a positive impact on the regeneration of a disadvantaged community.

The study draws upon data from a relatively small sample of those who were involved with ROWA! was having in Greenhill in a statistical fashion. Instead it was undertaken in order to carry out a detailed examination of how concepts such as literacy, social inclusion, progression, etc are understood by people in one particular community. Hopefully this would then lead to a better understanding of how a local literacy initiative actually works. Whilst the findings arising from such a study will obviously be closely tied to the local context, they should, come to some extent at least, be of interest to similar projects elsewhere.

The case study was centred on the office of the Resident's Association which was located in the row of shops in the middle of the estate. The office was close to the library, the schools and other services and was very accessible to those residents who were either dropping off or collecting their children from school or were using the local shops. The Resident's Association office was the focal point for those members of the community and outside professional who were working to improve facilities on the estate. The office provided accommodation for the local ROWA! co-ordinator and was also used by other people such as welfare rights and housing advisors.

In close consultation with the local ROWA! co-ordinator two samples were constructed. The first was made up of Greenhill residents who had participated in aspects of ROWA!'s programme. The second sample consisted of key professionals who were able to comment upon the range of facilities and services provided for residents.

A sample of ten residents was identified and eight of these were interviewed. All but one were interviewed at the Resident's Association office because it was easy for them to get to and because it was a place well known to the residents and where they felt relaxed. The other resident was interviewed in her workplace. Seven of the residents were female and only one was male. This was broadly in line with the ratio of steps are being taken to increase the number of men. Ages ranged from mid twenties to late fifties.

The sample of professionals included:

- the local Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator (Derbyshire County Council);
- a children's librarian;
- a local health visitor;
- the head of the Early Excellence Centre (nursery school).

What was particularly significant about interviewing this sample was that they all worked within just a few hundred yards of one other. Not only did this make conducting the interviews very easy, but more importantly, it shows what great potential there is on the estate for inter-agency co-operation because of the physical closeness of these agencies to each other.

In addition to these pre-arranged interviews, a number of unplanned and less formal interviews were held with a range of people who either worked in the Resident's Association office or called in for information. Short interviews were held with people who had expertise in local housing issues, regeneration, welfare rights and sports and leisure.

The opportunity was also taken to speak to a number of local residents who had moved on from ROWA! courses to more advanced courses. For example, one woman, currently taking a diploma in social policy, called in to the Residents' Association office to seek help with information for a course project, and the ensuing discussion proved extremely valuable since it showed, first how it is possible to progress from ROWA! courses to advanced levels of learning, and second, how many ROWA! learners still rely on it for advice and guidance even though they have moved out of its official orbit.

The purpose of this case study was to undertake a more concentrated examination of six key issues that had emerged during the county-wide 2000/2001 evaluation. However, in order to place these five key issues with a historical context, what is first provided is a short account of how ROWA! developed its provision on the estate and how it has endeavoured to provide a programme that meets the needs of local residents. This is based on study of local documents, a number of interviews with the local ROWA! co-ordinator and discussions with activists at the Residents' Association office.

The person who eventually became the local ROWA! co-ordinator had already built up links with the residents on the estate over a number of years as a result of her youth and community role and her work as an adult education tutor. Moreover, the fact that she shared the same nearby city roots as did many of the estate's residents was equally as important since many on the estate felt that it had not been easy to assimilate with the local Derbyshire residents. Consequently, they felt more comfortable talking through their needs with the local co-ordinator because she knew, literally, "where they were coming from". This enabled ROWA! to make a good start on the estate as the local co-ordinator was well trusted by the community.

The local co-ordinator thought that the most important step was to undertake a analysis of local learning needs, but this proved more difficult than anticipated. The Residents' Association office hosted as small exhibition of local learning providers but residents appeared

reluctant to go into the office and talk to them. (The co-ordinator believed that it was due to the fact that many of the exhibitors were dressed in business suits).

Consequently, she took a flip chart and stood outside the office on the pavement stopping passers by whom she knew and asking them to write down the types of courses they would be interested in doing on the flip chart. Some of these ideas fitted into ROWA's orbit but others had to be passed on to agencies such as the then Training and Enterprise Council, FE colleges and the County Council's Lifelong Learning Division. This experience taught the local co-ordinator two main lessons. The first was that she had to be very pro-active in "spreading the word about ROWA!", and the second was that local learning needs were unlikely to be met by ROWA! working in isolation, and more likely by ROWA! working collaboratively with a number of other learning providers and agencies.

Many of the people who wrote down their ideas on the flip chart wanted to learn about computers, and it was partly this evidence which enabled the local co-ordinator to obtain the funds to buy laptop computers. Obtaining these laptops had a number of benefits. It provided residents with clear proof that "*ROWA! could deliver*". They were also impressed that "*we were worth having expensive laptops bought for us*". This gave their self-esteem as learners a considerable boost. Finally, laptops partially overcame the accommodation shortage problem on the estate as they could be carried between venues.

For example,

"We planned to run a course at the church hall but there was a clash of bookings with the luncheon club so we had to move the computers to another place".

The local co-ordinator felt that those ROWA! programmes that were designed to be delivered in close partnership with other agencies and groups (e.g. ROWA! Reading Partners with the primary school and Books for Babies with the library) were sufficiently secured and supported. The second was to develop other provision e.g. customised courses for adult learner. The third was to ensure that ROWA! had an input into the various regeneration projects and proposals that were relevant to the estate. Over time, the second and third areas became more important to the local co-ordinator as she felt that the day to day management of the

programmes in the first area was chiefly the responsibility of those agencies themselves.

Projects Run in Partnership with other Agencies and Groups

ROWA! has worked in collaboration with a range of official agencies and other groups on the estate. Partnerships had been forged with the library, the primary school, the Early Excellence Centre, and health visitor to name just a few. Furthermore,, a variety of projects have been run in conjunction with, for example, the Childminder's Group (Storysacks project), the Early Years Group (Under 8 fund Day) the Football Club (Family Learning Millennium Award Project) and the local pub (word searches, quizzes, etc).

Work in this area has generally been successful and ROWA! has developed particularly close links with library staff and teachers at the Early Excellence Centre. To a large extent they share ROWA!'s aims and are equally enthusiastic about working with ROWA! to improve the opportunities for developing levels of literacy (and numeracy) on the estate. Close links between ROWA! and the primary school on the estate have, in the past, been more difficult to establish, mainly because of the differences in how far each believes the wider community should be involved in children's learning. This is a key part of ROWA!'s philosophy but was not shared by the primary school. However, recent changes to the management of this school have provided an opportunity to review this situation so that the links between the school and ROWA! are currently being strengthened. Furthermore, there is evidence that indicates that ROWA! sponsored, school-based projects have had a positive impact on pupil's literacy practices. (See later selection on changes to literacy practices).

Running projects in partnership with other agencies and groups has been relatively problem-free, with representatives of other agencies explaining that this was largely due to the approachable, flexible style of the local co-ordinator and her obvious commitment to the estate. The local co-ordinator feels that involving more employers in projects would be a definite step in the right direction, but the lack of major employers on the estate or in the immediate locality is a major difficulty.

Developing Provision for Adults

This is an aspect of the work that has taken up a lot of the co-ordinator's time mainly because getting courses up and running with viable numbers is a very time consuming business. The main aim has been to mount courses that meet the needs of adult learners on the estate, but in order to do this quite a lot of informal market research has been required (talking and listening to residents) and then residents must be encouraged to actually sign up for the course. This has become easier over time as ROWA!'S profile has strengthened and the word of mouth recommendations of existing ROWA! learners often persuades new learners to "give the course a go".

Nevertheless, the co-ordinator still has to indulge in what she terms as "hooking", that is, making sure that course numbers are viable by targeting particular residents who have not yet applied for the course but whom the co-ordinator thinks might benefit from it. Another version of hooking involves first offering people exactly the course they want, and then, once a relationship of trust has been established, offering them a range of other course they can move on to even though they might have had initial reservations about taking such a course.

Developing provision for adults is usual carried out in co-operation with Derbyshire County Council's local Lifelong Learning co-ordinator who is also very active on the estate. Since there are very good links between these two local co-ordinators and, furthermore, because the ROWA! co-ordinator is also the basic skills co-ordinator for the area, planning a comprehensive and coherent adult learning programme has been reasonably straightforward. The relatively small number of people involved in planning programmes and their closeness to one another (both physical and philosophical) is one of the main reasons why ROWA! has such a high profile in the area. For example, ideas about courses and provision can usually be responded to rapidly because of the good communication links between agencies and the absence of inter-agency competition. Furthermore, a potential learner who approaches either the ROWA! co-ordinator or the Lifelong Learning co-ordinator and who needs are best met by the other, is simply introduced to that person in a matter of minutes after a short walk from one office to the other.

Regeneration

The local co-ordinator stressed that regeneration was an aspect of ROWA!'s work that she thought was particularly important. ROWA's contribution to this stems partly from those aspects of its programme that were funded through the Single Regeneration Budget and partly from the fact that the local co-ordinator has been called on frequently to support and advise other people's regeneration projects and proposals. They needed the expertise and experience that she had gathered from her ROWA! work.

An impression gained from both the formal interviews with the local co-ordinator, and from less formal discussions with a range of people within the Resident's Association office, was that developing literacy on the estate was closely inter-connected with its physical regeneration and the projects and the development of amenities and services. For example, developing sports, healthy living and leisure facilities, especially for young people. Learning was providing people with a boost to their skills and confidence and was creating a more positive attitude to what could be achieved on the estate when its residents worked with other agencies. On the other hand, regeneration 'activities' such as meetings, working groups and writing proposals and plans provided people with real opportunities to further develop their newly acquired skills by giving them experience of writing, note taking, etc.

Social Inclusion

there was a lot of evidence to suggest that the work undertaken by ROWA! was making a valuable contribution to the lives of many of the residents on the estate. Interviewees thought ROWA! was helping people to:

- adopt a more positive attitude to their lives;
- feel more confident about the future;
- join in with other residents to discuss, and then do something about, the various issues which affect the estate;
- pass these positive attitudes on to their children. In particular encouraging them to work hard at school and take learning seriously.

Taken together these outcomes might be described as making residents feel more included in their community and the processes of everyday life. Those interviewed genuinely believed that one of the major benefits of learning with ROWA! was that it made people more confident about mixing in social situations and sharing their views with other residents and those professionals who worked on the estate.

Chiefly because most of those who were interviewed were mothers, the theme of getting out of the house to mix with other women in the same circumstances was brought up time and time again.

"I did a women's access courseI was tired of being stuck at home with the baby."

"I hated being stuck in the house....joining in and meeting people has given me a new lease of life."

"I'm glad to get out....there's only so much 'Bob the Builder' you can take."

Apart from the actual learning itself, and what that could lead to in terms of future employment, it was the role played by ROWA! course in enabling

people to meet others in similar situations that was greatly valued by the interviewees. Although many of them had not yet, nor were ready to, obtain jobs, they nevertheless felt that they were on a path which would hopefully lead to paid employment and a more independent life.

"My kids know why I'm doing this....to get off income support, to give us a boost."

Another of ROWA!'s important contribution was the positive impact it appeared to be having on the children of its learners. Not only did people feel more confident about helping their children with their school work (discussed in more detail in another section) but they also believed that their children were benefiting simply by seeing their parents learn. Thus children were engaging with ROWA! in two ways. First through ROWA's involvement with the Early Excellence Centre and the local primary and secondary schools, and secondly through parental experiences of ROWA! which were being fed back into households.

"my son's proud that his mum has got a ROWA! certificate, now he wants to go to university."

"..he tries harder at school because I'm achieving...he'll get there through determination."

It's good for my daughter to see me learning. She sits down and writes and does sums whilst I'm working. It's getting her into the study habit."

One interviewee felt that:

"The estate is getting better because more people are taking learning seriously."

Another thought:

"Residents care what happens on the estate."

One who had lived on the estate for a considerable number of years believed that things were improving:

"There used to be nothing to do on the estate. The kids were bored got into trouble. Things are better now. People have done courses and have got decent jobs. It's all down to courses."

Almost all of the professionals who were interviewed seemed to be passionate about developing the estate and working with residents to bring about these improvements. The health visitor, for example, was encouraging positive parenting and healthy living. She had targeted teenagers and was helping them through such projects as baby sitting course and 'virtual babies', where they have to look after a pre-programmed computerised baby who would need hi/her 'parents' attention at the most inconvenient of times.