

Background

In Oxford, the second most unequal city in the UK, 1 in 6 children live in poverty and 35% of students do not meet the national standards for reading and writing.^{1,2} Disadvantaged pupils in the county of Oxfordshire perform less well than their peers nationally at all key education stages.³ This relationship between poverty and educational attainment is a common pattern across the country: less well-off pupils in England are around 10 months behind their more privileged peers by the end of primary school, widening to a 19-month gap at the end of secondary school.⁴

We are focused on reducing these inequities in Oxford through our mission to enrich young lives through stories. Our work with schools is proven to drive engagement with stories and reading for pupils and teachers, nurturing creativity, literacy, and wellbeing for communities most in need.

“Having taken part in the Spellbound programme for the past year and witnessed first-hand the impact it has had on our pupils, we would jump at the opportunity to sign up again. This year’s partnership with The Story Museum has opened up so many opportunities to engage our pupils with stories and reading, introducing teachers to new approaches, materials, and texts and enthusing and inspiring the community to develop a lifelong love of reading, books, and stories.”
– Spellbound School headteacher

Why Spellbound Schools?

Spellbound Schools is our approach to supporting children’s learning in Oxford based on over 15 years of community delivery and teacher consultation. We partner with schools for one year at a time providing teachers and pupils with high-quality creative content to support curriculum learning and emotional wellbeing.

Over the course of the 2024-25 academic year, we worked with 7 local schools selected based on their Index of Multiple Deprivation score, levels of Pupil Premium, and rates of English as an Additional Language. In addition, we considered whether pupils were meeting national standards of reading and writing and consulted with teachers to understand specific schools’ needs.

Our Learning team has a combined 113 years’ experience teaching in classrooms, bringing their expertise to engage both children and teachers through in-school sessions and daytrips to the Museum. Their formal teaching experience gives them vital insight into the pressures teachers face



¹ <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/population-statistics/poverty-deprivation-statistics>

² <https://oxfordshire.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Oxfordshire-Uncovered-2023-v11-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>

³ Oxfordshire Education Commission (2023) *Time for Change: Improving Educational Opportunity for All Oxfordshire’s Children and Young People*. Available at: https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s67203/OEC%20Report_11.09.2023.pdf

⁴ Education Policy Institute (2025) *Annual Report*. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025/>

and enables them to deliver a programme of activity which is sensitive to each school's context. The programme for Spellbound Schools includes:

❖ 4 x Days of Delight: visits to the Museum for each school

A *Day of Delight* includes a visit to the Museum, a themed literacy session, and a 'Wonder Walk' through Oxford, learning about the inspiration for the city's most famous writers. Pupils gain inspiration from stories in all their forms, igniting their imaginations and curiosity to learn more. This year, as part of their visits, schools enjoyed our temporary exhibition *Here Be Dragons*, co-curated with former children's laureate Cressida Cowell. Schools can also choose to split their *Days of Delight* into eight half-days, ensuring that as many students as possible benefit from our

Half of school leaders in England have reported having to cut school trips and outings due to rising costs.¹ Our 'Days of Delights' ensure that Spellbound Schools pupils can continue to enjoy vital enrichment and learning outside of the classroom.

in-museum sessions.

❖ 2 x In-school storytelling sessions

Our experienced Story Leaders visit schools to share traditional oral stories from around the world, offering two days for each school. They arrive bearing a mysterious, battered suitcase that has travelled to many mystical story lands! Within, a mesmerising selection of multisensory souvenirs are brought to life by a performance and participative role play session in front of an exquisite textile backdrop. Our Story Suitcases bring a magical corner of The Story Museum to each school they visit complete with resources for teachers to keep. These include activity and lesson plan ideas designed to evoke creative responses and emotional connections to stories, seed empathy with characters, and pique curiosity about what will happen next.

"The session stimulated imaginative thinking and encouraged children to invent their own stories, characters, and worlds. After the session one of the children came up to talk about how the storytelling had created images in her mind and how she loves writing her own stories." – Teacher, Spellbound School



❖ Extreme Reading Adventures

Extreme Reading Adventures is designed to encourage children to forge emotional connections with reading. The programme provides six 'adventures' linked to chosen books, with a focus on making reading for pleasure fun and personal. The National Literacy Trust recently reported that only 34.6% of children and young people enjoy reading in their free time, with an 8.8% drop from

the year before.⁵ a love of reading which is proven to be vital for children’s cognitive development and wellbeing.⁶

This year, we ran two terms of Extreme Reading with 30 students participating overall. Each week, the participants received a gifted book wrapped as a present. Levels of book ownership for young people aged 8 – 18 are at their lowest since 2016, a cause for concern given the strong correlation between children owning their own book and independent motivation to read. Alongside gifting children high quality and engaging books, we offer an associated immersive adventure to build their excitement and curiosity around the text. This year, pupils created poetry at the History of Science Museum, participated in bug handling, and became detectives to solve a ‘crime’ at The Story Museum! At the end of their programme, each student was gifted a book that was personally selected for them and tailored to their interests, followed by a celebration with certificates and cake.

- 91% of parents said their child’s confidence in reading and literacy had improved
- 87% of students attended 5 or more sessions (out of a possible 6)
- 100% of pupils enjoyed Extreme Reading Adventures
- 86% of pupils said they had made new friends through Extreme Reading Adventures
- 90% of pupils had read at least 1 gifted book
- 100% of pupils said they wanted to come back to The Story Museum again
- 100% of parents said they would use their Dream Tickets to visit the Museum for £1

In our feedback surveys, we also asked parents to tell us 3 words they would use to describe their child’s experience in Extreme Reading Adventures, which we have collated in the word clouds below:

"It has been a great activity for them! You have been so generous with your time and the books, she has been more interested in reading as a result of attending the project. [She has] independently picked up and finished three books, something she’s never done before."

- Parent of pupil participating in Extreme Reading Adventures



Spring 2025 Word Cloud



Summer 2025 Word Cloud

❖ Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers

⁵ [Reading For Pleasure Research | National Literacy Trust](#)

⁶ [Reading for Pleasure | University of Cambridge](#)

29 teachers took part in CPD training, focusing on an introduction to storytelling and oral storytelling techniques. In our evaluation, teachers gave us 3.7/4 for how much they felt their teaching practice was enriched and scored us 9.5/10 when asked how likely they would be to recommend the sessions to another school or colleague.



16 teachers also took part in Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils, a national reading club designed to promote a culture of reading for pleasure within schools run in partnership with Cheltenham Festivals. We are proud to run the Southeast hub of this club, and we met with the teachers throughout the year to discuss the latest quality books in children’s publishing, which teachers could in turn share with their students.

“1 boy in Year 6 has become obsessed with reading David Almond Books after being introduced to Skellig and The Final Year through his teacher’s enthusiasm for Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils. At parents’ evening this child was sitting reading a David Almond book he had got out of Oxford Library because he wants to read more!”

– Testimonial about the impact of Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils in 2024.

We are committed to providing teachers with quality resources and arts-based learning techniques that strengthen their teaching practice. We work alongside teachers to understand their curriculum demands and workloads and we are constantly consulting with and listening to teachers’ feedback to improve our CPD provision further.

Evaluation

At the beginning and end of the academic year, we surveyed teachers and pupils about their attitudes to reading and storytelling, their vocabulary, and confidence. Our evaluation shows marked improvement in many areas but especially the increase in students’ vocabulary. This is critical not just for educational outcomes but also for children’s mental wellbeing.



97% pupils enjoyed their visit to The Story Museum



90% pupils enjoyed exploring stories with classmates



97% teachers said pupils engaged positively with Spellbound



97% teachers said pupils engaged positively with Spellbound

Outputs	Expectation	Reality
Number of participating students	2,000	2,681
Number of participating teaching staff	200	229

Number of students taking part in Extreme Reading Adventures	28	30
Outcomes	Baseline Data	Final Evaluation
Students are confident speaking in front of others	56%	81%
Students can tell simple stories orally	75%	94%
Students have a rich vocabulary to use in conversation	38%	81%
Students enjoy listening to stories	100%	100%
Most students in the class enjoy reading	67%	93%
Students enjoy telling stories orally	75%	100%
Teachers are confident using oral storytelling techniques	80%	93%

In summary, our evaluation shows how the Spellbound Schools programme helps to develop a vibrant culture of reading and storytelling in the classroom. The increase in pupils' vocabulary and enjoyment of reading demonstrates how access to high-quality stories and cultural experiences supports vital curriculum goals around oracy and literacy. Moving forward, we are excited to start working with our Spellbound Schools over a two-year period, strengthening our relationships with teachers and school communities, and enabling us to have even greater impact on young people's creativity, literacy and wellbeing.