IJRSLCE | International Journal of Research on Service-Learning & Community Engagement

Volume 14 | Issue 1

Volunteer Experiences and Perspectives in a Community-Led Paired Reading Program for Grade 2 Learners

Debbie A. Sanders
Department of Language Education, Arts and Culture, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Recommended Citation
Sanders, D. A. (2026). Volunteer experiences and perspectives in a community-led paired reading program for grade 2 learners. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, *14*(1). https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.173626

International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement
Volume 14, Issue 1 | 2026 | ISSN: 2374-9466 | https://ijrslce.scholasticahq.com/

Volunteer Experiences and Perspectives in a Community-Led Paired Reading Program for Grade 2 Learners

Debbie A. Sanders

Abstract
This study explores the perspectives of volunteers participating in a community-led Paired Reading Program (PRP) aimed at improving the reading skills of Grade 2 learners. Despite the increasing importance of community involvement in supporting learners' reading competencies, research on volunteer experiences and their impact remains limited. A qualitative research approach was chosen. Semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with volunteers selected through homogeneous purposeful sampling, and observations of PRP sessions were carried out. The data were coded inductively to identify key themes. Findings indicate that volunteers are motivated by a desire to improve literacy and a belief in the transformative power of education. However, they face challenges such as varying learner engagement, limited resources, time constraints, and the need for structured training and support. Despite these obstacles, volunteers report significant improvements in learners' reading abilities and enthusiasm. They also reflect on their own growth and satisfaction, highlighting the program's reciprocal benefits. By providing insights into the volunteer experience, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of community involvement in literacy programs and the mutual benefits of volunteering for everyone involved.

Keywords: *paired reading, Paired Reading Program (PRP), reading skills, service-learning (SL) theory, volunteer*

Experiencias y perspectivas de voluntarios en un programa de lectura en parejas dirigido por la comunidad para alumnos de segundo grado.

Debbie A. Sanders

Resumen
Este estudio explora las perspectivas de los voluntarios que participan en un programa comunitario de lectura en parejas (PRP) dirigido a mejorar las habilidades lectoras de alumnos de segundo grado. A pesar de la creciente importancia de la participación comunitaria en el apoyo a las competencias lectoras de los alumnos, la investigación sobre las experiencias de los voluntarios y su impacto sigue siendo limitada. Se optó por un enfoque de investigación cualitativa. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas y abiertas con voluntarios seleccionados mediante muestreo intencional homogéneo y se observaron sesiones del PRP. Los datos se codificaron inductivamente para identificar los temas clave. Los hallazgos indican que los voluntarios están motivados por el deseo de mejorar la alfabetización y la creencia en el poder transformador de la educación. Sin embargo, se enfrentan a desafíos como la variabilidad en la participación de los alumnos, la limitación de recursos, las restricciones de tiempo y la necesidad de capacitación y apoyo estructurados. A pesar de estos obstáculos, los voluntarios reportan mejoras significativas en las habilidades lectoras y el entusiasmo de los alumnos. También reflexionan sobre su propio crecimiento y satisfacción, destacando los beneficios mutuos del programa. Al ofrecer información sobre la experiencia de los voluntarios, esta investigación contribuye a una comprensión más profunda de la participación comunitaria en los programas de alfabetización y los beneficios mutuos del voluntariado para todos los involucrados.

Palabras clave: *lectura en parejas, Programa de Lectura en Parejas (PRP), habilidades de lectura, teoría del aprendizaje-servicio (ApS), voluntariado.*

Introduction

Background

The use of volunteer programs to support reading skills (including decoding/word recognition, fluency, and comprehension) and academic success among young learners has become increasingly important. Reading enables learners to access information, engage with ideas, and participate meaningfully in learning (Beard, 2021). However, many Grade 2 learners in South Africa face significant challenges in reading. Research shows that many learners struggle to read for meaning, contributing to a broader educational crisis (Ardington et al., 2021). Addressing these reading difficulties is critical for improving learners' reading proficiency and overall academic performance (Beard, 2021).

Reading Challenges in South Africa

Reading is a critical skill in the South African Foundation Phase of schooling (Grades 1–3), as it enables learners to access the curriculum and engage meaningfully with learning tasks. Recent results from national and international assessments, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), highlight the ongoing struggle with reading proficiency among South African learners. The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2023) reports that the PIRLS 2021 study revealed very low levels of South African learners' ability to read for meaning by age 10. South Africa, with a score of 288 points, performed significantly below the PIRLS center point of 500. These PIRLS results corroborate the findings of the Annual National Assessments, which indicate that most learners in Grades 1–3 cannot read and write proficiently, even in their home languages. The Zenex Foundation (2022) notes that, despite over two decades of efforts to improve literacy performance in South Africa, learners' inability to read remains a persistent problem. Many learners lack the comprehension and decoding skills needed (Mojapelo, 2023; Vaz, 2024; Zenex Foundation, 2022).

In a study by Wahyuddin et al. (2022), learners demonstrated a low interest in reading and were more passive during classes that involved reading activities. Stent (2023) emphasizes that the literacy crisis has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that fewer primary school learners can now read for meaning than before the pandemic. Most learners entering Grade 2 are not even familiar with the alphabet (Mojapelo, 2023).

Various interventions have been implemented to address early reading difficulties. This study focuses specifically on the Paired Reading Program (PRP) due to its personalized, volunteer-driven approach, which combines individualized support, immediate feedback, and encouragement.

The PRP and Volunteer Involvement

This study focuses on a volunteer-led PRP designed to improve the reading skills of Grade 2 learners. Volunteer-led programs represent an innovative approach to tackling the issue of low reading skills by using community resources to support young learners. Paired reading is an educational technique where two people read a text aloud together, with one person being more experienced, such as a teacher, parent, or more advanced learner. The experienced reader guides and supports the less experienced reader, often a younger learner. This method aims to support the development of reading skills, fluency, and confidence by providing immediate feedback, assistance, and encouragement during the reading process (Lee & Szczerbinski, 2021).

Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Despite the known advantages of volunteer programs, South Africa faces a significant gap in empirical research on such initiatives. According to Fondling et al. (2023), whose work was the first South African study to offer a comprehensive analysis of volunteering activities, only three studies have been published on this theme. Community-led reading programs such as the PRP are thus still quite uncommon in South

Africa, particularly in low-income or rural areas, where most literacy initiatives are organized by schools or NGOs. This makes the PRP a unique school-based approach that offers a locally driven model of literacy support not yet widely seen across the country.

It is against this background that this study investigates the impact of community-led PRP. In conducting this study, the researcher aimed to fill this gap and provide valuable insights into the experiences and contributions of volunteers in assisting the reading skills of Grade 2 learners. Within the context of this paper, volunteer involvement is considered more than just additional reading practice.

Conceptualizing Reading in This Study

In this study, reading is understood as a multidimensional process involving several interrelated components. These include decoding or word recognition, which refers to the ability to accurately identify written words; reading fluency, which involves the speed, accuracy, and expression with which text is read; and reading comprehension, which refers to the ability to construct meaning from text. Collectively, these components are referred to as *reading skills* in this study. In addition to these cognitive processes, affective factors such as confidence, motivation, and engagement are recognized as influencing learners' reading development. However, these factors are not treated as core components of reading itself but rather as supportive conditions that shape how learners interact with texts and develop their reading abilities within the context of the program.

Purpose and Audience of the Study

The purpose of this study was to enhance the knowledge base of this important field of study by investigating the views of the volunteers who implemented a specific PRP with Grade 2 learners. The goal of this research was to investigate the critical role of volunteers in literacy development and to fill a significant gap in research by offering insights into their lived experiences, perceptions, and the contextual challenges they faced. The findings aim to inform future volunteer-led programs and contribute to the broader research into volunteer-led reading programs.

This research was intended to provide insights for teachers, volunteer coordinators, community-based organizations, and policymakers who are involved in literacy development. By highlighting the experiences and perspectives of volunteers in a community-led PRP, the study aimed to inform the planning, implementation, and support of similar initiatives in school settings. The findings may also be valuable to other schools seeking to design effective volunteer training, improve school-community collaboration, and shape policies that promote inclusive literacy support programs.

Research Questions

The main research question that was designed to guide the research was: How do volunteers perceive their influence on Grade 2 learners' reading skills as a result of their participation in the PRP?

From the research question, the following subquestions were developed:

1. How do participants understand the concepts of volunteering and paired reading in the context of the PRP?
2. How does the participation of the volunteers in the PRP influence the reading skills of Grade 2 learners?
3. What are the perceived benefits and challenges faced by volunteers when implementing the PRP?
4. What support systems do volunteers consider essential for ensuring the success of the PRP for Grade 2 learners?

The next section discusses the literature review, which will begin by outlining the theoretical orientation of this research.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Robert Sigmon's (1979) three fundamental principles of service-learning (SL) practice. The first principle posits that the recipients of the service (in this case, Grade 2 learners in the PRP) are the ones who require assistance, which may also influence the kind of support they receive. This principle corresponds with the notion of "student voice" as discussed by Furco and Norvell (2019), which highlights the importance of learner agency in the learning process. The second principle centers on "reciprocity": Learners benefit from the PRP while simultaneously developing the ability to serve and be served through their engagement in the program. This reciprocal dynamic also benefits the volunteers, aligning with Furco and Norvell's (2019) view that both service providers and recipients grow through their interaction. The third principle focuses on the learning gained by the service providers (in this case, the volunteers) (Furco & Norvell, 2019; Sigmon, 1979).

The PRP, as a form of SL, is situated within real-life educational challenges faced by young learners. SL is a hands-on, problem-solving approach that addresses educational and social issues, encourages reflection, and promotes social justice (European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education, 2021). In the context of the PRP, both learners and volunteers benefit from the learning process, and the community becomes an active partner in addressing literacy development. This aligns with SL's emphasis on reflection, community partnership, and shared responsibility for educational outcomes.

SL is a pedagogical strategy in which participants gain practical and civic skills through service activities that are deliberately designed to address community needs, in this case, the reading challenges faced by Grade 2 learners. The PRP is a typical SL initiative planned in collaboration with schools and community members; it integrates educational objectives with active service. Volunteers not only meet the specific needs of the community but also develop social awareness and a sense of civic responsibility (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2021).

SL was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because of its emphasis on addressing authentic community needs while simultaneously fostering growth for participants. The PRP exemplifies this by supporting learners' reading development and equipping volunteers with skills, insights, and a sense of contribution. It also helps in the exploration of the motivations of volunteers, the challenges they encounter, and the resources needed to ensure the program's success.

Volunteer-Led PRPs

Definition and Nature of Volunteering

In the context of the PRP, a volunteer is defined as someone who willingly offers their time, expertise, and services to support a literacy initiative without expecting monetary compensation. Fondling et al. (2023) describe volunteers as individuals who purposefully contribute to structured programs that benefit society. Similarly, Statistics South Africa (2020) explains that volunteering involves freely chosen activities conducted outside of one's household and without pay. Within the PRP, volunteers typically work with learners they do not know personally and provide structured support to improve reading skills. In South Africa, programs such as the PRP are relatively rare. This makes the study significant, as it provides insight into a unique, locally driven, volunteer-led approach to literacy support that is not widely implemented in South Africa.

Benefits of Volunteering for Individuals and Communities Through SL

Volunteers engaged in the PRP play a critical role in learner development. Salma et al. (2024) emphasize that volunteering develops leadership skills and strengthens community bonds, while also promoting learners' personal and academic growth. In early literacy development, consistent exposure to reading aloud and guided reading activities assists learners in developing word recognition and reading

comprehension. Volunteers themselves benefit significantly from these experiences, gaining new competencies that positively influence their personal and professional trajectories.

Fondling et al. (2023) identified six primary reasons for volunteering: first, values, where volunteers generously give their services; second, understanding, as they acquire new awareness and gain valuable practice; third, volunteers also experience personal development, gaining a sense of self-satisfaction from their contributions; fourth, volunteering has a social dimension, allowing individuals to interact with others and reducing isolation; fifth, the protective reason highlights how volunteering helps people distract themselves from negative emotions or personal challenges; and sixth, volunteering can aid career development by preparing individuals for future work opportunities. Thus, SL enhances the skills of both volunteers and learners, leading to mutual benefits and encouraging a deeper connection and commitment to the community.

Volunteer Programs in Teaching: An SL Partnership Approach

In the PRP, volunteers are essential partners in improving learners' reading skills. Tracey et al. (2014) found that volunteers who worked directly with learners better understood the value of their contribution and were motivated by the progress they witnessed. This echoes SL's emphasis on reflection and growth: Volunteers in the PRP reflect on their interactions and develop new insights into literacy support and learner needs.

Understanding Paired Reading as a Strategy for Reciprocal Learning in SL

PRP, as a structured reading approach, builds learner's confidence, exposes them to more complex texts, and encourages active reading in a safe, supportive setting (Lee & Szczerbinski, 2021). The paired reading model reinforces the SL principles of mutual benefit and reflective learning, ensuring a collaborative space for both academic and personal growth.

This study was guided by Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope model, which conceptualizes reading as the integration of word recognition and language comprehension processes. This framework aligns with the components identified in this study, namely, decoding or word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. Within the PRP, volunteers support these processes through guided reading, feedback, and interaction, thereby reinforcing both word-level and meaning-making skills.

Paired reading was selected for the PRP because it aligns with the program's volunteer-led, one-on-one design, allowing for immediate feedback and support tailored to each learner. Compared with other strategies implemented to improve reading skills (such as small-group instruction or computer-based programs), the PRP ensures a personal, interactive approach that helps build learners' confidence and improves their reading skills. It is also an accessible program that requires no specialized teaching qualification, making it suitable for community volunteers who wish to contribute meaningfully to the development of learners' reading skills.

Within the PRP, both participants begin by reading aloud together, with the volunteers adjusting their pace to match the learners. The text is selected to be just beyond the learner's independent reading level, challenging but still accessible. As the learner gains confidence, they gradually take over reading independently. Learners are encouraged to select texts they enjoy, adding an element of personal engagement. Topping (2014) observed that learners often took books home, indicating increased motivation and interest in reading, one of the intended outcomes of the PRP.

Volunteers and learners also agree on signals to indicate when learners want to read alone. When errors occur, the volunteers allow space for self-correction, offer gentle feedback, and resume paired reading when necessary. This balance of support and autonomy helps learners feel in control of their reading progress. Frequent praise and encouragement from volunteers further enhance learners' motivation and self-efficacy (Lee & Szczerbinski, 2021; Topping, 2014).

Volunteer and Learner Outcomes From Paired Reading: An SL Perspective

The PRP supports academic success and personal development for both learners and volunteers. Salma et al. (2024) found that schools that adopt volunteerism build stronger learning cultures. Learners involved in the PRP benefit from one-on-one attention, consistent encouragement, and meaningful interactions that promote a love of reading. In practical terms, learners develop their reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary growth through regular reading practice with immediate corrective feedback.

Volunteers also grow from experience. Lee and Szczerbinski (2021) report that volunteers involved in PRPs develop skills in communication, empathy, tutoring, and perseverance. These outcomes align closely with the goals of SL. The PRP, with its low cost, adaptability, and interpersonal focus, is an effective strategy for literacy development that enhances learner comprehension and leads to volunteer growth.

Challenges in Volunteer-Led Reading Programs Within an SL Framework

Despite its benefits, the PRP faces notable challenges. One recurring issue is the limited availability of appropriate and culturally relevant reading materials. Topping and Whiteley (1990) emphasize that success in reading programs depends on access to diverse, engaging texts tailored to learners' needs. Without these resources, learner engagement and progress may be limited.

Volunteers in the PRP may also struggle with time constraints. Balancing personal and professional responsibilities can affect their availability and consistency. Thurston et al. (2021) note that scheduling disruptions such as school events or public holidays can further reduce volunteer–learner interaction time. Another major challenge is the lack of structured training for volunteers. This challenge is not unique to the PRP examined in this study. Studies by Fondling et al. (2023) and the Zenex Foundation (2022) found that the majority of community literacy programs do not include structured volunteer training. As a result, volunteers are often not well prepared to support learners' reading skills. For instance, volunteers may not know how to diagnose decoding difficulties, scaffold comprehension, or select texts that match learners' reading levels. Without adequate preparation, volunteers may feel ill-equipped to support struggling readers or to meet the diverse needs of learners. Thurston et al. (2021) recommend formal training that includes instructional techniques, strategies for encouraging engagement, and tips for managing common obstacles.

It is against this background that the chosen methodology is discussed next.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to explore volunteers' perspectives on the impact of PRP. Qualitative research focuses on exploring related phenomena through nonnumerical data, emphasizing the context, meanings, and subjective experiences involved (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

To promote discussions among participants, focus group interviews were conducted, following the recommendation of Islam and Aldaihani (2022), to gather insights from a small group of participants on a specific subject. In this study, the focus was on the PRP for Grade 2 learners, allowing the researcher to analyze the implementation of reading sessions, evaluate the effectiveness of these sessions in improving reading skills, and review the feedback and experiences of the volunteers.

The researcher used a single-case study design. Such a study focuses on exploring a specific participant or group in depth (Allan, 2020). This approach enabled a detailed investigation into how the PRP for Grade 2 learners was implemented and its impact. The choice of this design was influenced by the need to understand the specific experiences and outcomes of the PRP, particularly focusing on volunteer experiences.

Program Context

The PRP was initiated by the school teacher-librarian, the Foundation Phase HOD of a local government school, a local nonprofit organization focused on literacy, and community members who were willing to volunteer their time. This formed part of a broader school-community partnership aimed at addressing early reading challenges among Foundation Phase learners. The program was managed by the school teacher-librarian, who oversaw session planning, learner pairing, and volunteer scheduling. Volunteers were recruited through local community centers, by word of mouth, and via school newsletters. Before participating, volunteers attended two training sessions to familiarize themselves with the PRP. The teacher-librarian also ensured the availability of a suitable space for the program and maintained regular communication with volunteers to support smooth implementation and progress tracking.

The PRP sessions took place twice a week over an 8-week period in one school term, with each session lasting approximately 30–40 min. The sessions were held in small reading corners of the school library, providing a supportive environment for consistent interaction, observation, and reflection, in line with the principles of SL theory.

Although the PRP was implemented within a school-based and volunteer-led structure, families were not directly involved in its delivery. However, they remain important indirect stakeholders in learners' reading development, as home environments and caregiver support are widely recognized as influential in the development of reading fluency and motivation. This study, therefore, focused on the role of volunteers within the school-based intervention, while acknowledging the broader ecological context in which reading development occurs.

Population and Sample

The researcher chose a homogeneous purposeful sampling technique. This approach ensures that each distinct characteristic within the population is appropriately represented (Obilor, 2023). This enabled the researcher to deliberately select participants who shared specific traits relevant to the study.

The selected group of participants was part of the same volunteer PRP at a specific school. Participants were selected based on their involvement in the volunteer PRP, their experience in teaching reading, and their understanding of the challenges faced by Grade 2 learners, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The criteria for selection also included their approachability, availability to actively participate in the study, responsiveness to the interview questions, and willingness to share their experiences.

The PRP at the selected school consisted of a total of 22 active volunteers. From this group, 15 volunteers were selected to participate in the study: two males and 13 females, ranging in age between 32 and 63. All participants had at least 5 years of volunteering experience, with some having considerably more. In terms of education levels, most volunteers held tertiary education qualifications, including teaching diplomas and undergraduate degrees in education, social work, or community development. A few participants also had postgraduate qualifications. The volunteers were motivated by a combination of personal values, a desire to give back to the community, and an understanding of the importance of early literacy development.

The fact that the 15 participants represented more than two thirds of the total volunteer population (22 active volunteers in the PRP at the selected school) made the sample a reflection of the broader group. The diversity in age, years of experience, and education enhanced the sample's representativeness. The earlier discussion ensured that the researcher gained a comprehensive view of volunteer experiences within the PRP.

The researcher considered the sample size of 15 participants sufficient for this qualitative case study, as it allowed for the collection of in-depth and meaningful data, while remaining manageable for focused and detailed analysis. Thematic saturation was reached after the 13th participant, as the researcher realized that no new insights emerged, suggesting that the sample adequately captured the

range of experiences relevant to the study. Table 1 contains a detailed description of the population's demographics.

Table 1.

Population Demographics

Participants	Gender	Age	Educational level	Years of experience in volunteering
Volunteer A	F	45	BEd Foundation Phase Teaching	10
Volunteer B	F	39	Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	8
Volunteer C	F	41	Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	6
Volunteer D	F	60	BEdHons in Language Education	20
Volunteer E	F	38	PGCE: Foundation and Intermediate Phase	5
Volunteer F	F	36	BEd Foundation Phase Teaching	5
Volunteer G	F	62	BEdHons in Inclusive Education	15
Volunteer H	M	56	Higher Certificate in Early Childhood Development (ECD)	11
Volunteer I	F	59	Higher Certificate in Early Childhood Development (ECD)	18
Volunteer J	F	32	BEd Foundation Phase Teaching	5
Volunteer K	M	32	BEdHons in Language Education	5
Volunteer L	F	56	Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work	13
Volunteer M	F	40	BEdHons in Language Education	10
Volunteer N	F	58	Higher Certificate in Early Childhood Development (ECD)	14
Volunteer O	F	63	BEd Foundation Phase Teaching	22

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through interviews with the participating volunteers, supplemented by the researcher's observations. These data collection techniques allowed the researcher to gain valuable insights into the volunteers' practical experiences with the PRP.

In addition to the interviews and observations, the researcher examined informal pre- and post-program reading data of the learners involved in the PRP, which the class teachers provided. These data included reading class assessments, learner reading logs, and termly reports. These classroom-based assessments offered an additional indication of reading progress and were used to complement the volunteers' reflections on improvements obtained through the PRP.

Data Analysis

To gain valuable insights from the participants' answers to the interview questions, along with the information obtained from the observations, the data were carefully interpreted. This involved consolidating and synthesizing volunteers' responses to construct meaning from the data.

The analytical process involved transcribing, comparing, and closely examining the interview responses and observations from the paired reading sessions, followed by coding and the development of themes. The participants' responses were manually coded, using letters of the alphabet to maintain anonymity. Each response was tagged with a corresponding letter, allowing the researcher to trace the data back to the specific participant who provided it, if necessary.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), guided the overall analytical process. During coding, the researcher engaged in a systematic comparison of the data to identify patterns, develop initial codes, and group these into broader categories and themes. This process included organizing related codes into meaningful clusters, similar to axial coding practices, to establish relationships between

categories and subcategories. Through this analysis, the researcher aligned the emerging themes with the study's research questions and objectives.

Ethical Issues

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Education of the University of South Africa, authorizing research within the allocated community-engaged schools. Volunteers' confidentiality and privacy were ensured through the use of codes. Participants provided consent for the recording of interviews and analysis of observations. Participation was voluntary, and volunteers were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

Trustworthiness in Data Collection and Analysis

Ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings is crucial for qualitative research. In this study, the researcher built a strong, reliable, and open relationship with the volunteer participants. This approach ensured their willingness to actively engage in the study and share their personal experiences related to the PRP.

A critical reader provided feedback and suggestions that refined the coding framework and addressed any discrepancies. This process introduced different perspectives, thereby preventing researcher bias and improving the accuracy of data interpretation. Transparency was maintained by carefully documenting each stage of the data analysis process, ensuring clarity and openness in the data. Participants were consistently asked to review the researcher's notes, interpretations of the interviews, and transcriptions (member checking) and provide feedback on the researcher's summaries of the interview responses and notes made in the observation schedules. This feedback process helped validate the accurate depiction of the data and enhanced the study's trustworthiness.

By integrating insights from the interviews and literature review, the validity and trustworthiness of the conclusions were further enhanced. It will also enable future researchers to understand and replicate the analysis. This careful approach confirmed the reliability and validity of the findings, enabling informed recommendations based on the study's results.

Research Findings

In this section, the researcher discusses the results of the research. The findings are organized to ensure that they answer the research questions (Table 1).

Table 2.

Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Frequency of Participant Mentions

Main theme	Subthemes/codes	Description	Frequency (*n* = 15)
Understanding of volunteering	Giving back, no financial reward, personal satisfaction	Volunteers viewed volunteering as community service and personal fulfillment	15
Understanding of paired reading	Guided reading, support, feedback, confidence building	PRP is seen as collaborative reading with immediate support	15
Perceived learner benefits	Improved fluency, confidence, enjoyment, engagement	Volunteers observed positive changes in learners' reading	13–15
Volunteer personal benefits	Sense of purpose, relationships, personal growth	Volunteers experienced reciprocal learning and fulfillment	11–15
Challenges: resources	Lack of books, inappropriate reading levels	Insufficient and unsuitable reading materials	10
Challenges: time constraints	Scheduling difficulties, limited availability	Volunteers struggled with consistency	7
Challenges: learner engagement	Low motivation, difficulty sustaining interest	Some learners were disengaged or struggled with the basics	6–10
Support needed	Training, teacher involvement, resources, communication	Volunteers requested structured support	8–12

Note. PRP = Paired Reading Program. Courtesy of Dr. D. A. Sanders.

Participants' Understanding of Volunteering and Paired Reading

All 15 of the participants correctly explained that volunteering is about giving time, effort, and skills to help others, without expecting anything in return. In the words of Participant C:

> *Volunteering, to me, is about me personally giving back to the community without expecting anything in return. It's about my time and skills given to try and help others.*

Two of the participants (F and G) highlighted the personal satisfaction gained from contributing to a cause they care about. Participant G commented:

> *Contributing to a specific cause that is dear to me. However, I do not expect monetary rewards, it's just the satisfaction I get from knowing that I am helping others.*

The researcher observed that the volunteers were enthusiastic, always on time for the reading session, and dedicated to the success of the program. They were extremely patient, even when the learners were struggling, and positive reinforcement was often given.

Regarding the discussions on paired reading, all 15 participants acknowledged its importance in boosting learners' confidence and enhancing reading skills. Participant F stated:

> *Paired reading is when I read together with the specific learners. One person (me) helps the learners read by guiding them through the text. It's a way to build confidence and improve reading skills.*

Participant A added:

> *It's about support. I must give the learner immediate feedback and encouragement, which helps them feel more confident and improves their understanding of the words we are reading.*

Participants' Views of the Advantages of the Volunteering PRP

Most of the volunteers (13) perceived a positive influence on the Grade 2 learners' reading skills and reported apparent improvements in both confidence and fluency. In the words of Participant K:

> *I saw a real difference in how the learners approached reading. They became more confident and started to enjoy reading together with me, which wasn't the case when I first started.*

The researcher's observations appeared to support these perceived improvements, suggesting that learners appeared to require less prompting and engage with reading more independently as the program progressed.

Participant L shared a similar observation, stating:

> *The learners I read together with slowly began to read more fluently over time. I noticed that they started recognizing words faster and didn't hesitate as much. This showed me that the paired reading sessions were making a difference.*

Participant D added:

> *What struck me was the increased enthusiasm for reading. In the beginning, some of the children were reluctant, but I noticed that as we progressed, they became more eager to pick up a book and read with me. It was rewarding to see that change.*

The observation schedule included specific criteria to observe the learners' engagement, reading fluency, and confidence levels. This helped the researcher identify patterns suggesting growing confidence and participation during the program. The researcher observed that as the program progressed, learners began to read with less hesitation and more enthusiasm.

Most volunteers expressed the opinion that the PRP provided significant benefits to all parties concerned: the learners (whose reading gradually appeared to improve), the volunteers (who gained a sense of accomplishment and purpose), and the schools (which noticed improvements in the learners' reading skills).

Participant G remarked:

> *It's incredibly rewarding to see how much the learners grow in their reading skills. They start hesitantly but as we continue, it is clear that their confidence in reading improves. It's a pleasure and privilege to be a part of that journey. I will not stop.*

Volunteers also reported reciprocal benefits: 11 participants highlighted personal growth and meaningful relationships with learners. Participant D emphasized the reciprocal nature of the program, saying:

> *I thought I was just helping the children but I came to realise how much I was actually benefiting and learning. It gave me a sense of purpose and I felt like I was making a real difference in their lives.*

Similarly, Participant C mentioned:

> *One of the biggest advantages was the personal relationship we developed with the learners. It's definitely not just about reading; it is about mentoring and guiding them. For me, this makes the whole program so much more meaningful.*

These views were corroborated by the researcher's detailed observations that volunteers frequently spoke to the learners about their daily lives, hopes, and even challenges. This helped the volunteers to build trust with the learners, which ensured the success of the sessions.

Participants' Views of the Challenges of the Volunteering PRP

Many volunteers highlighted various challenges that they encountered during the program, especially the lack of reading material, time constraints, and motivating some learners. A majority of volunteers (10)

identified limited resources as a key challenge, especially the availability of culturally relevant books at appropriate reading levels.

Participant F pointed out:

> *The biggest challenge was the lack of resources. Sometimes, we didn't have enough books that were at the right reading level for the learners, which can make it difficult.*

Time constraints were noted by seven of the participants, as Participant K explained:

> *Juggling my own personal commitments with the volunteering schedule was tough. I often felt like I wasn't able to give as much time as I wanted to give.*

Participant B shared a different perspective, stating:

> *Certainly not all, but there were some of the learners who had very low levels of participation. It was challenging to get them interested in reading, especially when they were already struggling with the basics. At times, I had to have a huge amount of patience and imagination to keep them interested.*

The researcher's observations corroborated these concerns, showing volunteers improvising with personal or self-created reading materials to maintain learner interest. There were also times when it was noted that the volunteers had to improvise by using personal reading material and even made-up stories. This adaptability was essential to keep learners interested and ensure the continued success of the program.

Participants' Views of the Support Needed to Ensure the Success of the Volunteer PRP

The volunteers unanimously agreed that they required additional support to make the PRP an even greater success. Structured training was highlighted by 12 volunteers, who noted that guidance on handling learners at different reading levels would enhance their effectiveness.

Participant I suggested:

> *We need more structured training. It would be helpful to have guidance on how to handle different reading levels, especially considering that our learners are often at different levels of reading competency.*

Ten of the participants reported that if they had better resources, their task would be much easier and more successful.

Participant N expressed this need, stating:

> *We could certainly do with different and a wider range of books. If we could get books that are culturally relevant and at varying difficulty levels that would be a real win.*

Nine of the participants suggested that it was essential to have ongoing guidance and communication with teachers and school leadership.

Participant G also highlighted the importance of ongoing support, saying:

> *Regular check-ins with the teachers or HOD or even the principal would be great. Sometimes, you feel like you're on your own. It would be great to have someone to turn to for advice or to discuss any difficulties.*

Additionally, certain volunteers noted limited involvement from class teachers, HODs, and the school principal in coordinating or supporting the PRP. They noted that the school librarian was their primary contact and support.

In the words of Volunteer M:

> *The teachers didn't really get involved – if we needed anything, we had to ask the school librarian.*

Eight of the volunteers also reported that there was a need for more structured interaction with the school staff, which could help them better understand learner needs, note improvements, and feel more confident in their approach. This sentiment was echoed particularly by Volunteer H, who expressed the view that:

> *If we could meet with the teachers, say, once a month or so, even just to hear how the kids are doing in class, I think we'd feel more sure that we're on the right track.*

The researcher's observations supported the answers given by the volunteers during the interview sessions. At times, the volunteers adapted their reading strategies to suit learners at different levels. The researcher also never observed the teachers, HODs, or principal providing direct support, which sometimes led to frustration, and the volunteers rarely communicated with teachers or school leaders. More frequent follow-ups with the volunteers could have helped to ensure that the necessary support systems were implemented.

The following section discusses the findings of the research by correlating the research results with the literature review.

Discussion of Research Findings

Participants' Understanding of Volunteering and Paired Reading

The participants explained that PRP reading was a collaborative and supportive practice in which they read together with the learners. Participant F, for instance, described the sessions as interactive, adapting to each learner's pace and needs. This understanding reflects the findings of Lee and Szczerbinski (2021), who argue that personalized, one-on-one support for PRPs can enhance learner comprehension.

In addition, participants' understanding of volunteering reflected a sense of enjoyment in fulfilling their community responsibility, describing it as a selfless act of giving time and skills without expecting material reward. This aligns with the definition provided by Fondling et al. (2023), who emphasize that volunteering is a purposeful contribution to structured program for the benefit of others. The findings reinforce the idea that participants viewed their volunteering as a form of assistance and as a meaningful engagement with the community, consistent with the SL ethos of reciprocity and civic responsibility.

The previous discussion directly answers the first research question, which explored volunteers' perceptions of their roles within the PRP. Their views highlight the foci of service (helping the Grade 2 learners) and learning (developing empathy, communication skills, and a sense of social responsibility), showing that their views aligned closely with the abovementioned principles of SL and the PRP's philosophy of collaboration.

Participants' Views of the Advantages of the PRP

The study by Salma et al. (2024) found that volunteers play an important role in supporting and assisting learners and providing valuable insights that contribute to their personal and academic growth. This sentiment was expressed by most participants, who reported perceived improvements in the learners' proficiency, confidence, and enjoyment of reading. Participant D noted a growing enthusiasm for reading among learners, reflecting a positive shift from initial reluctance.

The study by Tracey et al. (2014) found that there were mutual benefits to the paired reading volunteer program. The learners benefited by improving their reading skills, gaining confidence in their abilities, and developing a greater enthusiasm for reading. This view was echoed by Participant K, who noticed a huge difference in how the learners responded to the reading activities. These qualitative insights were supported by the informal classroom-based assessments, which suggested possible gains in reading confidence, fluency, and comprehension by the end of the program.

The volunteers perceived that the learners' reading fluency, confidence, and enjoyment of books appeared to improve. Learners also appeared, based on volunteer reports and observations, to demonstrate improved word recognition and enhanced understanding of texts (as perceived by volunteers). Many

learners appeared to recognize words more easily and understand the stories that were read with greater depth. These outcomes align with Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope model, the grounding theory chosen for this study. Within the PRP context, volunteers reported supporting both of these processes by assisting learners with decoding and meaning making.

These findings are consistent with existing research on literacy interventions. For instance, Topping (2014) and Lee and Szczerbinski (2021) found that structured PRPs have been shown to enhance learners' reading skills and motivation, outcomes that volunteers noted during their sessions. Salma et al. (2024) further highlight the mutual benefits of literacy program involving volunteers, supporting the relevance of the PRP and strengthening the validity of the study's conclusions.

The volunteers also experienced personal and professional growth through their involvement in the program. Participant D specifically emphasized that the volunteers benefited as much as the learners. The findings of Salma et al. (2024) are in line with this view, as they found that volunteering improves both volunteers' professional skills and provides them with a sense of personal fulfillment because they feel they are making a meaningful difference for the learners with whom they work.

These findings address the third question of this research, highlighting the perceived advantages of the PRP for both volunteers and learners, which demonstrates that there are mutual benefits and engagement for all parties involved. These findings further support existing understandings of how reading skills develop through structured support and practice.

Participants' Views of the Challenges of the PRP

The literature review and research findings highlight several key challenges when such a program is implemented. One significant issue identified in the literature by Topping and Whiteley (1990) is the limited availability of appropriate reading materials. This concern was echoed in the research findings, where many volunteers (particularly Participants F and K) reported difficulties in finding suitable books for the learners. The researcher's observations further validated these concerns, noting the absence of adequate materials during the reading sessions.

Another challenge highlighted by Thurston et al. (2021) is the time constraints faced by volunteers. The study's findings reflected this challenge, particularly for Participant K, who expressed having difficulties in managing the necessary time. The researcher also noted instances where volunteers were unable to maintain consistent engagement with learners due to these constraints. Additionally, disruptions such as sudden schedule changes were seen as factors that could interrupt the smooth flow of the program.

These challenges directly respond to fourth research question, which investigated the challenges that volunteers experienced during the PRP. The findings show that, despite the volunteers being motivated and committed, specific barriers**,** particularly the lack of resources, time, and learner motivation, limited program consistency.

Participants' Views of the Support Needed to Ensure the Success of the PRP

Several of the participants highlighted the necessity for structured training and for more comprehensive guidance. The researcher's observations supported this, noting that volunteers, at times, found it difficult to support each unique learner. This sentiment was echoed by the study of Thurston et al. (2021), who found that structured training and ongoing support for volunteers ensured the success of the program. Furthermore, the findings revealed that, at times, there was minimal involvement from teachers, HODs, and principals. This lack of engagement limited the volunteers' ability, indicating a need for stronger institutional collaboration.

These insights not only addressed the fourth research question, which sought to investigate the types of support necessary for PRP success but also connected to the SL theory, which emphasizes reflection, supervision, and reciprocal partnerships as key elements of successful volunteer experiences.

Finally, it is important to note that while volunteers consistently noted improvements in learners' reading confidence and fluency, these perceptions should be understood within the wider context of learners' literacy development, which can be influenced by classroom instruction and home support. As such, the PRP is best viewed as an important contributing factor rather than the only determinant of these improvements.

Limitations

The study had a limited sample size, which may not fully represent the experiences of all volunteers involved in similar initiatives across different contexts. Additionally, the research was conducted in a specific school and sociocultural setting, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or schools with different resources, learner demographics, or educational challenges. The study also examined volunteer experiences over a short period, providing only a snapshot of their perceptions and the learners' progress. Furthermore, learners were not directly involved in the research process, so the findings are primarily based on volunteer perceptions, which may not fully reflect the learners' experiences or progress in the PRP. It is also noted that the varying levels of prior experience and training among volunteers may have influenced both their effectiveness and their perceptions of the PRP. Finally, the absence of direct family involvement in the PRP represents a limitation of this research, as learners' reading development is also influenced by support received at home.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper investigated the perspectives and experiences of volunteers participating in a community-led PRP. The researcher used semistructured interviews and observations to gather insights from volunteers who were uniquely positioned to provide rich, firsthand accounts of the PRP, its effectiveness in improving learners' reading skills, the challenges encountered, and the support required for success.

Results from the study showed that volunteers felt the PRP had a positive impact on learners' reading skills. Despite challenges such as limited resources, varying learner engagement, and insufficient training, volunteers reported both learner improvement and personal fulfillment, highlighting the reciprocal benefits of the program.

A central contribution of this study is its detailed account of volunteer motivations, challenges, and perceived reciprocal benefits within a community-led PRP. In this regard, volunteers supported learners' reading development while also experiencing personal growth, increased motivation, and a sense of purpose through their engagement. This reciprocity between learner progress and volunteer development emerged as a defining feature of the program's effectiveness.

The insights presented in this study are particularly relevant for teachers, policymakers aiming to promote literacy through sustainable community engagement, community-based organizations, and volunteer coordinators designing effective training and recruitment processes. The findings align with established understandings of reading development, particularly the relationship between word recognition and comprehension. Together, these results highlight the importance of structured, well-supported volunteer involvement in strengthening early literacy development through collaborative school-community partnerships.

In response to the earlier discussion, structured training for volunteers should include guidance on supporting learners at different reading levels, as well as strategies to maintain learner engagement and provide constructive feedback. In addition, practical forms of communication could include brief monthly check-ins with teachers or the teacher-librarian, shared learner progress reports, and informal feedback meetings to assist in aligning volunteer support with actual classroom needs. Support should also include easy access to relevant resources, such as level-appropriate and culturally relevant reading materials, a dedicated and consistent reading space, and basic orientation guidelines, to ensure consistency in program implementation. This research also provides valuable insights for those wishing to introduce similar programs in other contexts. Additionally, this study's results can inform the development of more

structured training and support systems, which are key to ensuring the long-term success of volunteer-led educational initiatives.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research could explore volunteer experiences and the effectiveness of PRPs across a wider range of schools and communities, including both urban and rural settings. This would help determine whether similar benefits and challenges occur in different educational environments. It would also be valuable to examine the specific training that volunteers require, specifically in preparing for these sessions.

Long-term or longitudinal studies could track learners' reading progress over several years to assess whether improvements achieved through PRPs are sustained, and whether these gains influence the learners' overall academic performance. Research could also include the perspectives of teachers, school management, and parents, to gain a more complete picture of how PRPs affect the broader school community.

Furthermore, future studies may explore innovative ways to support volunteers by utilizing culturally relevant reading materials and technology, particularly in under-resourced schools. Using mixed-methods approaches would strengthen future research by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data on the PRP and learners' improvement in reading. Finally, integrating volunteer reflections with more formal reading assessments would provide stronger, evidence-based confirmation of learner outcomes and deepen understanding of how and why PRPs contribute to literacy development. In addition, future research into PRPs should also explore the relationship between family involvement and the effectiveness of the program in enhancing learners' reading development outcomes.

References

Allan, G. (2020). Qualitative research. In G. Allan & C. Skinner (Eds.), *Handbook for research students in the social sciences* (pp. 177–189). Routledge.

Ardington, C., Wills, G., & Kotze, J. (2021). COVID-19 learning losses: Early grade reading in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development, 86*, 102480. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102480

Beard, R. (2021). Reading—A personal and professional view. *Education 3-13, 49*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2020.1824698

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Department of Basic Education (2023). *PIRLS 2021 South African preliminary highlights report.*

European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (2021). *Policy brief. A European framework for the institutionalization of service-learning in higher education.* https://www.eoslhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/EASHLE-Policy-brief_SL-in-European-Higher-Education_web.pdf

Fondling, J., Murozvi, S., Yu, D., & Mtshali, N. (2023). Investigating volunteer activities in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa, 40*(5), 979–996. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2022.2163227

Furco, A., & Norvell, K. (2019). What is service learning? Making sense of the pedagogy and practice. In P. Aramburuzabala, L. McIlrath, & H. Opazo (Eds.), *Embedding service learning in European higher education* (pp. 13–35). Routledge.

Islam, M. A., & Aldaihani, F. M. F. (2022). Justification for adopting qualitative research method, research approaches, sampling strategy, sample size, interview method, saturation, and data

analysis. *Journal of International Business and Management, 5*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.37227/JIBM-2021-09-1494

Lee, L., & Szczerbinski, M. (2021). Paired reading as a method of reading intervention in Irish primary schools: An evaluation. *Irish Educational Studies, 40*(3), 589–610. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2021.1927797

Mojapelo, S. M. (2023). Whopping low reading literacies in South Africa. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science, 89*(1), 1–14.

Mortari, L., & Ubbiali, M. (2021). Service learning: A philosophy and practice to reframe higher education. *Athens Journal of Education, 8*(2), 115–138. https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.8-2-1

Obilor, E. I. (2023). Convenience and purposive sampling techniques: Are they the same. *International Journal of Innovative Social & Science Education Research, 11*(1), 1–7.

Salma, F., Abou Dahesh, A., Yacout, M., & Abbas, N. (2024). Volunteering, the new wealth of students: The importance of skilled volunteering in educational settings. In F. Al Husseiny & A. S. Munna (Eds.), *Revitalizing the learning ecosystem for modern students* (pp. 23–49). IGI Global.

Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (Vol. 1, pp. 97–110). Guilford Press.

Sigmon, R. L. (1979). Service-learning: Three principles. *Synergist, 8*(10), 9–11.

Statistics South Africa. (2020). *Volunteer activities survey 2018 statistical release*.

Stent, J. (2023, February 7). Literacy crisis deepening in South Africa, says new report. *GroundUp News* [Online]. https://www.groundup.org.za/article/literacy-crisis-in-south-africa-says-new-report/

Thurston, A., Nisperuza, G. L. B., Alvarado, L. K. A., Cockerill, M., MacKenzie, A., O'Keeffe, J., Ospina, J. M. G. O., & Garcia, P. O. (2021). A phase 2 exploratory trial of paired reading in Spanish language in Colombia. *International Journal of Educational Research, 106*, 101741. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101741

Topping, K. J. (2014). Paired reading and related methods for improving fluency. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 7*(1), 57–70. https://iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/64

Topping, K. J., & Whiteley, M. (1990). Participant evaluation of parent-tutored and peer-tutored projects in reading. *Educational Research, 32*(1), 14–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013188900320102

Tracey, D., Hornery, S., Seaton, M., Craven, R. G., & Yeung, A. S. (2014). Volunteers supporting children with reading difficulties in schools: Motives and rewards. *School Community Journal, 24*(1), 49–68. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1032241.pdf

Vaz, M. K. (2024). 10-year-olds reading for meaning? A study of Sesotho Grade 4 learners' foundational reading skills. *South African Journal of Childhood Education, 14*(1), a1573. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1573

Wahyuddin, U. R., Sahraini, S., & Syam, A. T. (2022). The use of paired reading method to teach reading skill for the eight grade students of Islamic boarding school. *English Education Journal, 13*(1), 695–706. https://doi.org/10.24815/eej.v13i1.22335

Zenex Foundation. (2022). *Perspectives on learning backlogs in languages in South African schooling* (P. C. Johannesburg, Ed.).

Declaration Section

Please note the following:

Data Availability

To maintain the confidentiality of the collected data and to protect the participant's views, it has been decided that the data will be available only upon request from the author.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the lecturers who participated in the data collection process and higher education institution for granting us permission to complete this research.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research was ethically approved by the ethics review committee of Unisa's College of Education Research Ethics Committee (CEDU REC). The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines governing research involving human participants, as outlined by this review committee.

Funding

Not applicable as no funding was obtained for this study.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The research was conducted independently and objectively, and the author has no affiliations that could be perceived as potential conflicts of interest.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable.

Consent to Publish

All participants consented to the publication of this manuscript in *Discover Education*. The author confirms that the manuscript is original, has not been published elsewhere in any form, and is not currently under consideration by another journal.

About the Author

Debbie A. Sanders is a dedicated educator who currently holds a senior lecturer position in the Department of Language Education, Arts, and Culture at the College of Education, University of South Africa (Unisa). With a passion for empowering students through education, she has dedicated her entire career to the field. She obtained a Doctor of Education (DED) degree from Unisa, specializing in special needs education. Sanders: esanded@unisa.ac.za. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4978-5158

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Debbie A. Sanders: esanded@unisa.ac.za