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How did the embedding of a shared-read within a programme of Outward Bound activity impact on cohort bonding?

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Abstract

This project monitors and measures the addition of an opportunity for shared-reading prior to a course of outside exploration. Twenty 10-12 year-olds from military families, who did not already know each other, and who were preparing to take sponsored places on an Outward Bound course on the Welsh coast, were sent a copy of an age-appropriate book. Copies were also sent to the rest of the cohort they would be joining, and to staff members who would be working with them. The book was embedded within pre-course information, transition and welcome activities. The outcomes were measured through questionnaires sent to individuals, both students and staff, after the course. Overall, those sent the book were pleased to receive it, a high number of them read it, and it offered common ground around which relationships could be formed. Recommendations for how similar activities might be developed in future are discussed.

Introduction

The establishment and progress of the Kingston University Big Read (KUBR) has been reported in some detail within this journal. In brief, the programme seeks to connect incoming students to higher education, many of whom are the first in their family to go to university, with the staff and existing students of the institution they are about to join, through a single shared-book.

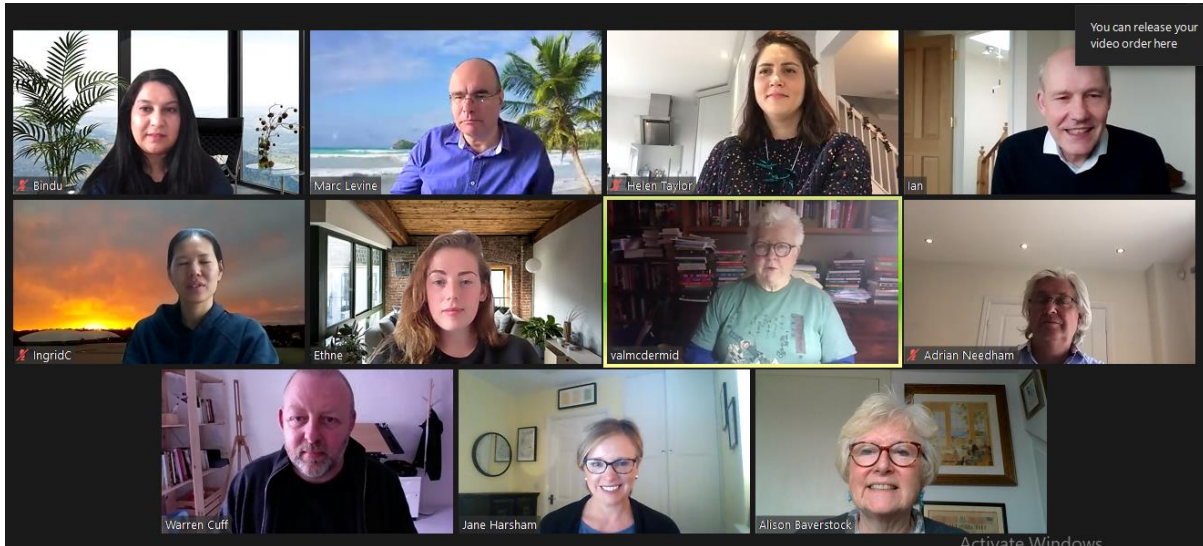
The book to be shared is chosen with care, through suggestions from students and staff across the university community, and is a bespoke edition. First established through research by the author of this paper in 2016 (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2016), and now in its tenth year of operation, the Big Read has been shown to be effective in offering a positive welcome to new generations of students, increasing collegiality across the institution, and promoting inclusion. The project won the prestigious Times Higher Award for Widening Participation and Inclusion in 2019. Originating at Kingston, the project has since been shared – and outcomes compared – across a range of other universities (Baverstock et al, 2019), as well as during the transition from junior to secondary schools in the Kingston area (Baverstock et al, 2018).

This paper documents the progress of a related project of bibliotherapy, working through the tri-service charity Reading Force¹, which seeks to improve communication within military families through shared-reading. The idea behind the new project was to apply the principles of The KU Big Read to young people from military families taking part in The Annington Challenge; an outdoor residential programme run by The Outward Bound Trust and funded by Annington; to issue them with a book before their arrival for their Outward Bound course and to observe outcomes in terms of pre-arrival nerves and the subsequent connectedness of the cohort. The methodology of the KUBR was used in drafting a questionnaire for the young people and outcomes were compared.

The initial idea

¹ www.readingforce.org.uk

Annington own the estate of military housing in England, Scotland and Wales. As part of their commitment to corporate social responsibility, and through the surveillance of their charities committee, Annington have generously sponsored Reading Force for five years. The founder of Reading Force, as part of general determination to both enable sponsors to appreciate the nature of the project they are supporting, and develop and maintain a strong sponsor-client relationship, goes into the offices of Annington on a regular basis to run an organisational book club, and has addressed a whole-company meeting on the work of the charity.



A meeting of the Annington Book Group during lockdown, with a pop-up appearance by best-selling crime author Val McDermid (highlight).

Through this connection, Annington got to know about Kingston University’s Big Read, and Jane Harsham, Annington’s Sustainability Manager, talked about possibilities for collaboration over a similar shared-reading project in a different context.

Another organisation sponsored by Annington is The Outward Bound Trust (OBT)², an outdoor education charity focused on providing key life skills for young people across the UK through wild adventure. Together with Annington, since 2011 they have run ‘The Annington Challenge’ which focuses on providing outdoor experiences for youngsters from military families across their six Outward Bound centres each summer.

In 2023 Annington funding enabled a total of 101 young people from military families to take part in the various operational age-groups organised by OBT (10-12; 13-17 and 16-22). The embedding of a book within pre-activity information was discussed, and the benefits linked to the impact of the KUBR were thought likely to be relevant to those embarking on an Outward Bound course; notably in encouraging arrivals to feel anticipated and welcome.

The proposal was that a book would be selected for circulation. It would be distributed to incoming participants and staff, and in the process offer a point of connection for everyone. The extent to which the experience had benefitted those involved would then be considered through gaining direct feedback from participants, and the outcomes discussed. The shared reading scheme took place on two Outward Bound courses for 10-12 year-olds, both at the OBT centre in Aberdovey on

² www.outwardbound.org.uk

the Welsh coast, including a 7 day 'Ridge' Course in July 2023 and a 5 day 'Basecamp' course in August 2023.

What were the objectives of all the partners?

Annington

Jane Harsham, Sustainability Manager of Annington, wrote:

'Annington is a huge believer in the experience of shared-reading and is a long-term supporter of Reading Force, believing in the impact of their supporting the cohesion and resilience of Armed Forces families. We felt that participants on our flagship philanthropic project, The Annington Challenge, would find the experience of shared-reading beneficial, given that the project requires youngsters – some as young as 10 – to join complete strangers of the same age on an Outward Bound Course at one of the charity's centres, often many miles from home and family.

Often the few hours after arrival at the centres are the most challenging, despite the very best efforts of the Outward Bound staff who do everything they can to encourage bonding and conversation. We felt that offering a book to everyone – youngsters, course instructors and centre staff – would provide one common topic for conversation and make settling in that little bit easier. A lesser objective was just to encourage youngsters to read! Literacy skills are hugely important and if undeveloped, this can have lifelong consequences.'

Annington funded the initiative including the purchase of books for everyone taking part, the administration of the scheme through Reading Force and OBT, and the initial capture of associated research data. They also supported, through funded time and engagement, the writing up of research outcomes.

OBT

OBT sought to understand the motivation of those embarking on an Outward Bound course and their feelings prior to arriving at centre.

'This project has been a great initiative to help us understand more about how young people feel before attending a summer course. As our summer courses are for individuals, they can be attending a residential for the first time, often nervous and not knowing anyone else on their course.' Natalie Harling, Director of Business Development, OBT

Annington's generous support of Outward Bound means that successful applicants to The Annington Challenge have their course cost heavily subsidized. This ensures that there is not a financial barrier to the Outward Bound experience for military youngsters. The motivation and commitment of those arriving through the Annington Challenge is therefore slightly different from those arriving through other pathways. It follows that those awarded these generous bursaries will likely be under a limited degree of parental pressure to take up the place having been awarded it, but may also be nervous about participation, given that this kind of activity may be a completely new experience for them.

Reading Force

Reading Force sought to trial research from one context within another environment. The charity's founder, who also runs The Kingston University Big Read (KUBR), was keen to link the new initiative with previous research through the Kingston University exploring the impact of a shared-read within

a particular community, and to trial this within the context of a specific military group, using the same methodology (Baverstock et al, 2018). This new proposal also connected to her wider role as Professor of Publishing at Kingston University. The university is charged with developing relationships within the wider community as part of their background commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, and so this project offered an interesting case study for delivery and learning.

With the encouragement of OBT management, and the financial backing of Annington, it was decided to go ahead with this project as a pilot and monitored initiative.

Initial challenges

As previously mentioned, an extension of the KUBR had already been trialled within local secondary schools as a means of improving transition and welcome within the move from junior to secondary school (Baverstock et al, 2018). Given the very positive outcomes reported during this process, and the spread of a local network of schools within the Kingston area offering similar schemes, there was confidence that this could work well within the context of participants arriving for an Outward Bound experience.

Working with local schools on shared-reading within transition, the role of staff participation had been seen as particularly important; staff talking about what they were reading, which turned into staff carrying around books and themselves reading during class reading periods (rather than, as might have been anticipated, catching up with marking or observing the class to ensure good order). Collectively, these initiatives had prompted informal conversations and a greater sense of community – and much more involvement in reading, which is research-proven to be highly developmental (The Reading Agency and BOP Consulting, 2015).

Whereas there was general positivity from the OBT management in trying out the initiative, it was acknowledged that persuading staff to take part in a shared-reading project could be more challenging, and the issue of which book to choose would be particularly significant. Whereas a ‘young adult’ title would be a good choice for the young people, it needed to be a book that would also hold the interest of staff.

Selection of the book

Both the Big Read (Baverstock et al 2017) and Reading Force have significant expertise in choosing books for particular recipients and through the project is in touch with young people within the relevant age-groups. Being also fully aware of titles being published, and those most likely to appeal to the target audience, part of their role was to recommend a title for shared-reading. Using similar criteria to those used when selecting a Kingston University Big Read, a proposal was made to Annington and OBT for *The Climbers* by Keith Gray on the grounds that:

- It features life outdoors, so was an appropriate choice for students embarking on an Outward Bound experience
- It is positive in outcome
- It offers relevant themes for discussion
- It offers a strong reading experience for both adults and young people, thus could be read with interest by both staff and students, across both age-groups
- It has been critically acclaimed by readers and endorsed by schools

- Both the cover and the story are gender non-specific
- It is reasonably short (120pp), so would not take too long to read or be intimidating
- It is published by Barrington Stoke, who specialise in books suitable for dyslexic readers (in terms of font, paper colour, page design) and reluctant readers
- It was long-listed for the highly prestigious Carnegie Medal³

This title was proposed to the partners and agreed, and henceforth included in information sent to both course leadership and planned participants. A copy of the book was bought for each participant. Those for students were sent directly to them, with a covering peer-to-peer letter from George Jordan, a participant in the Annington Challenge from the previous year. This was considered likely to be motivating for recipients, and that hearing from a previous participant would help reassure those who were nervous.

George's single page letter, written by him, was a motivating reflection on the value he had got from taking part in The Annington Challenge, and introduced the idea of a shared-book, to give everyone something in common before they met.

The letter is reproduced here, along with the explanatory notes for parents:



Annington Letter
_V2.pdf

OBT staff accepted the challenge of circulating the books to incoming delegates. As this was a new project, which required manual despatch within a process that had otherwise recently become entirely digital, it required attention to detail and additional effort. But the arrival of the books was received with interest by OBT colleagues. When Georgina Thow, OBT's Corporate Partnerships Lead, arrived at the OBT Centre in Aberdovey for a centre visit with funder Annington, she was delighted to find a copy of the book on the table in the staff room. She commented that she appreciated how this could work: 'I found I had something to talk about' and that students had clearly found it helpful to 'recognise something familiar in an environment new to them.'⁴

OBT participation was informed in staff communications and staff meetings, with email and phone call follow up to the Centre Administrator who arranged for all the appropriate staff to receive the book from the administration room. OBT staff were excited by the initiative which was seen as novel and interesting. Books for staff were sent to those likely to be closest to the students, and this included course administrators, catering staff, and relevant others. In all, 30 copies were made available across the staff team of around 90.

³ The Carnegie Medal for Writing (established in 1936) is an annual British literary award that that recognises one outstanding new English-language book for children or young adults. Administered by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) honouring the memory of Andrew Carnegie, who funded the establishment of many libraires, CILIP refer to it as 'the UK's oldest and most prestigious book award for children's writing'. Previous winners include Meg Rosoff, Terry Pratchett, Salley Gardner and Patrick Ness.

⁴ This is a perfect expression of Winnicott's theory of the 'transitional object'; something familiar that you take into an unfamiliar environment (Winnicott, 1953).

There were follow up emails to the Course Directors and Centre Administrator who were overseeing the targeted courses, and it was requested that information on the scheme be included in staff briefings at the relevant time. There was encouragement to use the book informally within the welcome process, when staff talk to young people on arrival to build rapport (e.g. learning their names, talking about social media etc), and ideas were discussed for how it could be incorporated. For example, asking if it had been received and if the arrivals had read it.

Reminders about the project were distributed to course participants two weeks before their course start date.

Survey Methodology

An online survey was conducted to capture the progress, outcomes and impact of the initiative. The questionnaire, which was based on the one used within the Kingston University Big Read, comprised a range of multiple choice, rating scales and open-ended questions. Besides demographic information topics covered included general attitude to reading, preferred reading formats, experience of shared reading with friends and family, feelings about being sent a book ahead of the Outward Bound course, and reactions to the book.

Topic	Summary of Question areas (not exact wording. Answer options not shown)
Previous attitudes to reading/ experience of shared reading	How much do you enjoy reading for pleasure? Preferred reading formats? Previous experience of reading same book as friends or family so you can discuss it.
Reaction to being sent a book before the Outward Bound course	How did you feel about being sent the book? Did it help break the ice?
Experience of reading the book sent and discussion about it	How much of it did you read? How much did you like it? Was it a good choice for the OB course? Did you discuss it with anyone and if so with whom?
Demographics	Age / Gender / Connection to the Forces

Figure 1: Topics covered in the questionnaire.

The link to the online questionnaire was sent to all course participants and staff. There were 72 participants across the two courses of which 20 were Annington challengers. Eleven of the 20 challengers replied to the questionnaire (6 females and 5 males) as did 11 of the staff (including 7 women and 3 men). Overall the response rate overall was lower than hoped and this is a learning for next time.

Some key indications from the survey on this group are summarised below together with the responses from the 11 staff who replied, though it should be noted that the replies from staff might be biased.

The cohort in general had not previously engaged strongly with reading, and they had little experience of shared reading.

When asked how much they enjoyed reading for pleasure on a 7-point scale (where 1=Not keen, 4=Quite keen and 7= Very keen) the average score among the 10-12 year-old cohort was 4.2, with 2

out of 11 picking the lowest option and only 1 choosing very keen. This average score is somewhat below other school surveys conducted on this age group within the Big Read.⁵ Respondents were invited to write more, and these comments confirm that the cohort in general was not previously strongly engaged with reading, though it is interesting to note that at least one perceived it as a worthy activity and two enjoy it when they find something that really appeals to them.

‘I have better things to do’

I don’t really like reading – my parents have to keep on at me to read’

‘I don’t like a lot of books. I normally read graphic novels but when I find a book I love then I will read the rest of the series if it has one or more books by the author’

‘Sometimes I am keen and other times I am not so keen

None of this cohort had previously taken part in Reading Force and when asked to answer on a 5 point scale about how often they read the same book as friends or family in order to discuss it (where 1=never, 3=sometimes, 5= very frequently) they had little experience, with all but one of them never/rarely reading the same book as their family (average score 1.7) and only rarely/sometimes reading the same book as friends (average score 2.5).

When asked about reading formats all the participants said they read printed books and 3 of the 11 respondents listen to audiobooks. Just two read ebooks.

Nonetheless, even though the group did not consider themselves as very keen readers, most of the participants and staff were quite or very pleased to receive the book

	Participants	Staff
How did you feel about being sent a book to read before your OB course		
Very pleased	3	4
Quite pleased	6	5
Not keen	2	1

Nine of the eleven participants and nine of the ten staff who replied to the question were quite/very pleased to receive the book. This was reflected in the comments:

‘At first I was not looking forward to it. I mean it was my summer holidays and I don’t see my parents often but when I hear what the book was about I was really interested so I ended up reading it aloud to my parents in the end.’ (participant)

‘I needed a book to read and so I was really happy’ (participant)

‘I talked about it with my parents and realised it was a good ideas as all the others in my group would have read it and we would have something in common.’ (participant)

‘I thought it was quite a good idea because if someone is scared about the Outward Bound

⁵ For information, and we can substantiate in references if you want this included, the score on the Kingston Schools survey was 4.8 (n=529), Coombe Boys 5.1 (n=118), Teddington 4.9 (n=125), Tolworth 5.2 (n=140). The Reading Force YA survey - though this was on older children (mostly in the 13-15 age group) was 4.2 (n=102)

course and whether they will make friends or not they know that all the others will have read the same book. That way they can talk about something without being too awkward.’
(participant)

‘It was good to get an insight into why we were asking the YP to read the book, also gave us a tool to build rapport with them about the book.’ (staff)

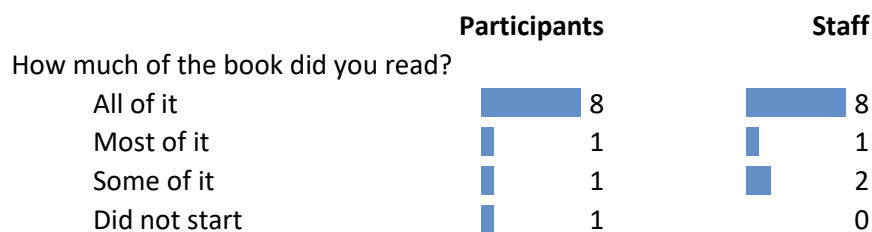
It was interesting that the receipt of a book turned into a topic of conversation with parents and grandparents before the course took place. This matches with the Kingston University Big Read experience, which now over nine years has recorded the arrival of the book as a point of conversation and connection (Baverstock et al, 2016 onwards).

The staff member and one of the two participants who were not pleased to receive the book had both rated their general pleasure in reading as a 1 on the 7 point-scale. The participant was the one who said they had better things to do (than read).

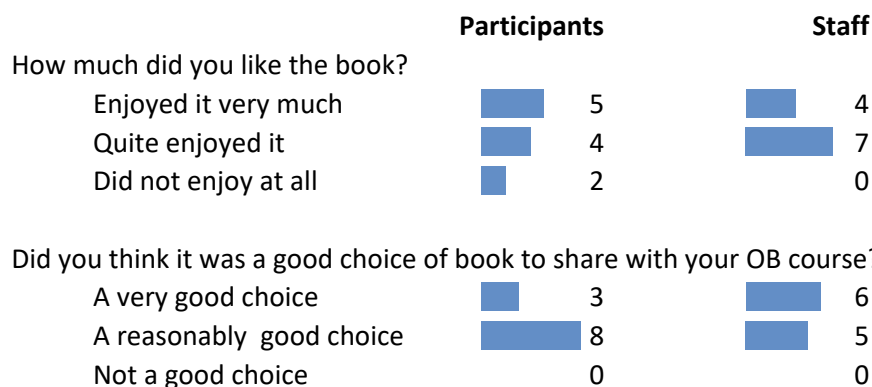
The book chosen was widely read and appreciated and most discussed it with their friends and family

While it is important to acknowledge there may be some participant bias (those who had enjoyed the scheme are more likely to have responded to an associated questionnaire) and response bias (those who responded cannot be assumed to represent the whole cohort of those involved) the responses indicate that the book was appreciated.

Almost everyone (nine of the eleven participants and nine of the eleven staff respondents) read most or all of the book.



All the staff and nine of the eleven participants said they quite or very much enjoyed it, and all thought it was either a very or reasonably good choice for the course. The staff were particularly enthusiastic with 6 of the 11 respondents rating it as a very good choice.



The associated comments were all positive:

'It was a really good book and I loved it. What I liked most was how you never knew what was going to happen next.' (participant)

'I really enjoyed the book' (participant)

'I thought the expression of jealousy but then realising that it doesn't matter how good you are was so sweet from the beginning to end was great and I loved when Nottingham and Sully were talking about their life so deeply but then the next day having to compete against each other' (participant)

'I personally loved the book and would recommend for kids aged 11 and up' (participant)










'It was a good book and I enjoyed it because it had an element of what we would be doing at the course.' (participant)

'The content of the book was a great choice, it was topical for young people but also had an engaging cover.' (staff)

'Great book, grateful it was not too big of a read as well.' (staff)

'I thought the idea and the book chosen was fantastic. I look forward to hearing how everything was received.' (staff)

Respondents were asked whether they had discussed the book with anyone and if so with whom (from a list including parents, carers, grandparents, brothers/sisters, friends etc). Nine of the eleven participants and also nine of the eleven staff discussed it with at least one group of people. Several discussed it with multiple groups (e.g. parents, siblings and grandparents).

	Participants	Staff
Did you discuss the book you had been sent with any of the following? (Tick all that apply)		
Parents	 6	 2
Brothers/Sisters	 5	
Grandparents	 2	
Other family	 2	0
Friends/colleagues	 4	 8
Did not discuss with anyone	 2	 2

Two participants wrote more:

'I was on holiday at my grandparents down in Newcastle the week before the course so I read it then and shared it with my entire half of my dad's family.'

'We spoke about it as a family and I told my grandparents about it too.'

While the book was greatly appreciated there is potential to develop the scheme further by giving it to everyone visiting the centre for future such courses.

When asked if the book helped in breaking the ice and getting to know others the staff respondents mostly felt that it did either a little or a lot while participant opinions were more mixed with 7 of the 11 respondents saying it had not really helped. This contrasts with the generally positive reaction to receiving the book and discussing it with others at home.

	Participants	Staff
Did knowing that others on your course had also been sent the book help you in breaking the ice, and getting to know them?		
A lot	2	3
A little	2	6
Not really	7	1

This issue cropped up in a couple of the comments at the end of the survey

‘I would have liked to discuss the book more on the Outward-Bound course – the only time we discussed it was when another child mentioned the book, but the instructor didn’t remember much of the book.’ (participant)

Learnings for next time

1. Clarity about who is getting the book is important. Staff can include it much more effectively in whole-group activities if they know everyone is receiving it. There was some confusion about who was getting it.
2. Earlier sending of the questionnaire to those taking part, and reminders to fill it in, would – from experience – increase the response rate.

Conclusions

1. The inclusion of a book within the welcoming process to an outward-bound course was seen as positive by recipients.
2. The choice of book was similarly regarded as positive; recipients were pleased to receive their copy.
3. Many recipients read it in full. The level of engagement was much stronger than anticipated, given the researchers’ prior experience with running pre-arrival shared-reading.
4. The receipt of the book had prompted strong levels of pre-arrival communication between the recipients and their family and friends.
5. The project was seen as a benefit to attendees of all sorts, not just military children, as a connecting activity. It could have been more discussed by staff within the course, the comments from staff who read the book were positive and uplifting.
6. The project correlates with a slightly increased turn-up rate. There was only one participant who dropped out this year, due to an unexpected circumstance rather than a desire not to

take part. Although given the change in managing an efficient online 'waitlist', this increase in turn-up may be due to improved delegate-management efficiency rather than the pre-arrival sharing of a book.

7. Greater embedding of the book within the early welcome activities and informal discussion times would be a benefit to the project as a whole.
8. The activity worked as a pre-connection activity but not one that was fully embedded within activity delivery, other than through cohort chats and chance discussions with staff. Ultimately OBT need to ensure a balance between the course content and any external project as the primary focus of the instructors was to deliver the course.

Recommendations:

1. The issuing of a pre-arrival shared-read prompted better cohort connection and so should be continued. This is a low-cost way of improving both attendance and connectivity.
2. Initial difficulties in arranging associated project logistics were overcome and this can be built on with swifter delivery in a second year.
3. The incorporation of shared-reading within activities not related to literacy is positive, and connects the developmental role of reading with other aspects of life. Given the immense benefit of being an effective reader to wider life, this is a strong positive for the scheme.
4. The potential reach to non-readers, or those with a low reading habit, and the possible opportunities for individual development are significant and should be continued. Perhaps in future a book for which an audiobook was also available might be considered, which might further engage those unused to reading for pleasure. An increased emphasis on reading is relevant to all involved, both participants and staff.

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