

The 'Three Rs' of Reading Aloud during the COVID pandemic



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Context

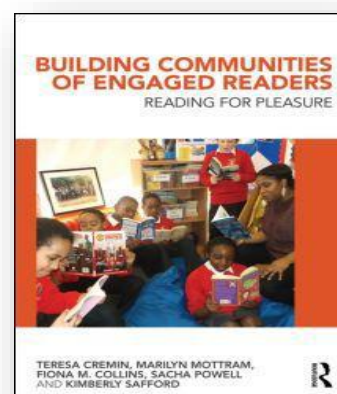
I work at Dunmow St Mary's Primary School in Essex, where I am a Year 6 teacher and the Lead Teacher for English. From September 2019, I am an OU Teachers' Reading Group Leader for North Essex.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

This Example of Practice develops the third strand of the Teachers as Readers research, *A reading for pleasure pedagogy which includes:*

- *Social reading environments*
- *Reading aloud*
- *Independent reading*
- *Informal book talk, inside-text talk and recommendations*

(Cremin et al., 2014)



Aims

I have always been passionate about the place of Reading Aloud in all our lives, especially in terms of the positive effect it has on increasing empathy, connection and emotional wellbeing as well as having a major effect on the development of reading confidence and comprehension. In this way, the aims of this Example of Practice were:

- to ensure children continued to receive quality Read-Aloud time during Lockdown and in the 'return-to-school bubble'
- to develop quality book-chat at home
- to identify some of the effects of reading aloud on children's wellbeing and emotional development, especially at a time of potential stress and unrest

Outline

I have called this Example of Practice 'The Three Rs of Reading Aloud'. After reflecting on the process of reading to my Year 6 class during and after Lockdown, I found that it had provided Reassurance, Recovery and Relaxation for all of us.

Reassurance

By reading aloud to someone, we connect; it is a shared gift. When we read aloud we are saying 'Here we are, together; I'm with you and I've got you'.



Like many teachers across the country, I recorded videos of myself reading aloud some short stories for the children to access on our private school network during Lockdown. (How wonderfully generous it was of publishers to relax their copyright restrictions in this way. Thank you, all!) The work of Paul Jennings had already proved popular with the class earlier in the year and they were the perfect length for a weekly video.

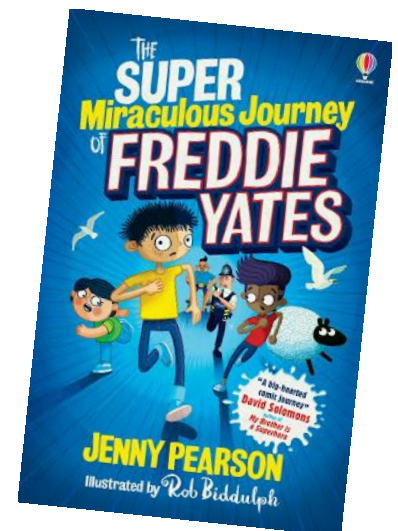
I set some discussion tasks around each one, so that the children could talk about their thoughts with their families. It is important to me that Story-Time or reading of any kind – is always accompanied by quality book talk. There was also a weekly task that the children could complete based around the story that I had read.

Recovery

To help the children in their 'recovery' from the strangeness of the Lockdown period, the perfect book to read aloud in class had to be found.

I knew exactly which book I was going to share with my children when we returned to school. I had already written a blog-review of Jenny Pearson's *The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates*, about the importance of choosing the right book for you as teacher and for the class.

(<https://afewtoread.blogspot.com/2020/04/my-super-nice-thoughts-about-super.html>). Having read this book during Lockdown, away from my class, I was desperate to read this book on our return. Apart from being well written with the voice so suited to reading aloud - and being wildly funny! - it was so *right* in its range of themes too: the importance of friendship, the end of Year 6, change.... the story of the three boys would make everyone laugh and enjoy their time back in school.



Relaxation

The intense, focused calm that happens when a story is told well, out loud, is an incredible feeling, not dissimilar to that which we experience in our moments of purest joy: the sense that time has stopped or stretched out for our benefit.

Like all schools across the country, the environment when my class returned to school was very different to when we left at the end of March. Children were sitting on their own, well-distanced (not in the groups to which they had been accustomed); books were not as freely available; one-to-one conversation and support between teacher and child was not as easily established. The class was split into two bubbles, so social groups had been disturbed.

Despite this, I wanted the eleven children in my bubble to feel as comfortable as possible. Reading aloud had always been a daily part of the timetable, and so it continued. The teacher working with the other children in a separate bubble also read every day to the group. The children, as before, were to sit at their desks while I read.

Impact

Reassurance

1) Developed feelings of wellbeing

In Lockdown, with the class at home listening to me read the Paul Jennings' stories, the children's emails to me soon mentioned how much they were enjoying the videos. One boy, dyslexic, who has struggled with his reading enjoyment over the years, wrote the most moving message to me:

I really like when you read because yesterday I have [sic] a bad day but when I listened to your story it made me happy

I surveyed the children about how useful these videos were once we were back in school. A different boy echoed (unknowingly) the sentiment of the email mentioned in his response on my survey of the usefulness of these videos:

Please explain your answer.

well sometimes i felt down so i listened to the story's and they mad me feel better

2. Human Connection:

Gradually I started to realize that the reading aloud videos seemed to be doing more than it said on the tin! They were generating human connection - connection through stories being heard and connection through the feelings being shared across the virtual divide.

One child said:

With the home learning stories Mr Harris read I would sometimes listen to them with my Nan and discuss the story with her.

How wonderful that the whole family started to share in the reading!

When surveyed about the helpfulness of Storytime during lockdown, a number of the children's comments referred to a connection with school, as with the response pictured here:

Do you think having the videos of Storytime while you were away from school helpful to you at this time?

Yes, they helped me.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
They were OK. They sort of helped.	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, they didn't really help me.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain your answer.

It is nice listening to the story and makes you feel at school.

One mum wrote to me and told me that she had asked her son about the impact of reading aloud in class and on the videos. He said:

I miss being in class listening to Mr Harris read. I like the voices and expressions he uses and the sound effects he makes. It relaxes me and I actually understand the story.

3. Enjoyment:

There was an element of choice in our schools Home-Learning Packs and although we set weekly reading tasks, I found that the ‘extra tasks’ for the read-aloud videos were seemingly a preferred choice for some! One boy created a whole advertising video about ‘Giffen’s Great Glue’ and another created a marketing campaign – both going way beyond the suggested outline of the task!



Giffen's Great Glue

My glue can hold anything together. ANYTHING. Have a broken mug that cant possibly be fixed? Use Giffen's Great glue. From broken boats to snapped table legs I can assure you that my glue will not disappoint. I have already sold thousands of packs and it is about time your misery is solved, and what better way to do it than by fixing something?

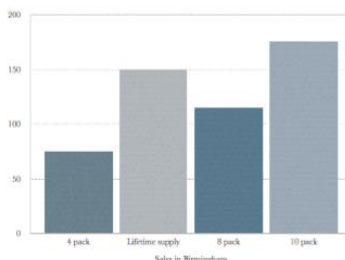
Packs	Price
3 Pack	£30
5 Pack plus a detailed booklet	£50
8 Pack	£30.99
Lifetime supply	£1,509.99

The customer was SO satisfied with it, they straight away ordered a lifetime supply!

This glue is extra-ordinary one customer said, while another commented on its all-round strength and value for money. The glue is transparent, so when someone comes round, they wont notice that you have glued your chair leg whatever; the glue is almost invisible. Each pack is re-sealable, so you don't have to use it just for it to spill out again. It won't stick to your fingers because it comes with special gloves that are Giffen's Glue proof. The world has never seen anything like this before.

At £10.00 per pack it is unmistakably a great bargain. Buy your pack of Giffen's Great Glue today! (Before it goes out of stock) 4 Pack = £45 (the 4 pack includes a free wrench) 10 Pack = £100 BEST VALUE. Now, before I allow you to buy, is there anyone that would like to try to separate my glue? *Someone tries and fails*. See, my glue is completely indestructible. So, who wants glue?

Different areas prefer different packs according to my graph here.



Above: One of the boys demonstrating ‘Giffen's Great Glue’ in his advertising video and another pupil’s marketing campaign for the same product.

Recovery

After Lockdown, back with my reduced-size class bubble, *The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates* proved (as anticipated) to be hugely popular, being rated an average of 9.6 out of ten in a class vote! The children were exceptionally motivated by the story and by the warmth and humour of the characters.

In a survey of opinions, children commented on how their favourite part of the book was where one of the boys in the class couldn't stop laughing, so much so we had to suspend reading for a while until the tears had stopped!

I contacted the author, Jenny Pearson, through Twitter to tell her about the bubble's reaction and she immediately sent them a video of her answering all their questions. 'Hi, Mr Harris' bubble!' she began. I looked around the room at that point to see all eleven children beaming with pride to be recognised this way. She also wrote them all a letter (pictured), its last paragraph being of particular importance to the children preparing to move to secondary school in a very strange time of heavy restrictions.

The children were delighted by both the video and the letter: this seemed like some kind of magic to them amidst the COVID gloom – not only had the book entertained them, but they were now being connected to and supported by its real-life author too!



Above: Jenny Pearson pops up to connect with my bubble!

THE **SUPER** Miraculous Journey of **FREDDIE YATES**



Hey, Mr Hamis's Bubble kids!
I hear you've been reading Freddie Yates and that you like it. This is SO great to hear. You obviously all have impeccable taste. I hope Freddie, Ben and Charlie made you laugh and think about how important your friends are. I also hope they made you realise the importance of planning ahead. In particular, packing enough undercrackers. One pair of pants will last you two days TOPS! (And that's if you burn them inside out on the second day). After that you are going to need fresh ones TRUST ME ON THIS!
Now, I don't know whether you believe in miracles or not, but I happen to think each and every one of you is a miracle and I think Mr Hamis thinks this too. So, as you head off into year 7 just don't forget how amazing you are, okay?

Keep reading

Jenny Pearson X



Join Freddie's journey... 30.04.2020

Above: Jenny's letter

Relaxation

I noticed a difference in how they chose to use the time in 'Storytime'— many would simply sit still or lay their head on the table, rather than draw or write as they had so readily chosen to do before Lockdown. There was a different feeling in the room now: a stillness, a silence; very, very calm. (However, this was broken quite regularly with outright laughter from many children during the reading of 'Freddie Yates'!)

One boy, who had previously loved drawing characters and scenes whilst listening, said, "Can I just listen?" shortly after coming back. I noticed that while I read he would either look at me reading or look to the side or into his lap, clearly concentrating. He always had an excellent recall of what had happened in the story: an example of how listening to a story can transport us, perhaps.

When children said "Don't stop" at the end of Storytime each day, they didn't want just to listen to the denouement of a particular cliffhanger; they genuinely wanted me simply to continue reading. When surveyed, the children's comments about whether Storytime was an important part of the day included many comments about its stress-relieving effect:

Yes, because it is peaceful and makes you relax

Yes, it calms me down after a stressful day

As part of this process, I noticed that a number of children's responses referred to what they were thinking about or imagining, once they had 'relaxed' into the story:

I imagine I am one of the characters

I just sink into the story and imagine I'm one of the characters.

3. Is Storytime an important part of the day for you?

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Yes, please explain why.

You can just relax and listen
to the story and it is just good.

4. How do you feel during Storytime? or What thoughts go through your head?

Whatever is happening in the story
I feel because I pretend to be
the character.

This empathising with characters is important to recognise. Children's literature often pits their young characters against difficult situations; mostly, these stories tell of how these difficulties are overcome. To read how one boy 'pretended to be the characters' himself, feeling what they feel, demonstrates not only how stories and listening to stories allow children to step out of their own reality, but also to discover hope and optimism when faced with problems.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

As we begin to consider the return to school of many more of the children in the Autumn Term, I would strongly encourage that leaders, class teachers, teaching assistants and librarians seriously consider the place of reading aloud in the school day.

My top tips, based on my experience, would be...

Senior Leaders:

1. Consider the place of Reading Aloud in your school's 'recovery' planning. Read through a few of the Examples of Practice on the Open University Reading for Pleasure website, should you want to find out more about the benefits of reading aloud, academically and emotionally.
(<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/reading-aloud>)
2. Make sure all children receive the Read Aloud time – some will of course need 'catch up' too and it might be tempting/easier to timetable this during the Read Aloud time. However, reading aloud has a hugely beneficial contribution to make towards the catch-up process too.
3. Encourage staff to read some children's books for themselves over the summer so they know what they enjoy. This passion will pass on to the children!
4. Support teachers in finding time for reading aloud in the classroom.
5. Read aloud to the whole school in assemblies- be the Read Aloud model for your staff and children!

Teachers, TAs and Librarians:

1. Read some great books for your year group yourself over the summer; choose your favourites, the ones that speak to you, and make a list.
2. On the first day back with your class/bubble/groups in September, show them the books and tell them a little about the contents.
3. Let the class choose the one that speaks to them for you to read aloud.
4. Find a time each day, away from interruption, where the children can listen to you read. Twenty to thirty minutes would be great. Also, don't forget – make sure they are comfortable during this time, they don't have to sit on the carpet in front of you, they could lie down or sit at tables or on cushions.
5. Read the book without stopping too much for 'teaching input' – you don't have to stop to explain every word or pick apart a point of interest...unless the children seem to want to. Just enjoy!

Whether you can't wait to be back in school with the children or are perhaps feeling a little anxious about it, I firmly believe that reading aloud every day and letting those stories wrap you up all in their magic is *more* than enough to pave the road to recovery.