

'A Chapter a Night'

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Context



I have worked at St Philip's for just under four years. St Philip's is a small primary school in Stockport, and when I started, reading for pleasure was not a priority at the school, I was amazed that there were very few real books available. Recently St Philip's had been ranked as one of the lowest schools in Stockport for Level 4 + in reading.

It was obvious that we needed to act quickly to improve reading at our school. The first thing we did was put Reading for Pleasure (RfP) at the heart of our curriculum. Through simply buying a lot of 'real' books and running a variety of initiatives such as 'book bingo' and 'extreme reading' we were able to quickly boost children's enthusiasm. As a passionate reader myself, who was brought up in a family that loved and cherished reading, I was desperate to get our children enjoying reading.

We were overjoyed that this was recognised in our most recent OFSTED where the school moved from 'Requires Improvement' to 'Good'. Putting RfP at the centre of everything we did was a key driver in improving our OFSTED judgement. I was delighted that OFSTED commented that;

- The teaching of reading is a strength. Pupils are developing a real passion for reading.
- Reading is a strength of the school.
- Many pupils have developed a passion for reading and parents say that their children now read for enjoyment at home.
- Older pupils who act as 'reading heroes' enjoy helping younger children with their reading.
- The wealth of books in the library area located in the heart of the school is very popular with pupils. The bookshelves act like a magnet as pupils move around the school; many pupils linger to browse the books as they pass down the corridor.
- Pupils read more fluently and widely. They talk readily about the books they enjoy and offer their opinions about different authors. Many pupils have developed a passion for reading and parents say that their children now read for enjoyment at home.

I am certain that putting all our energy into developing and embedding a culture of RfP was a key reason why not only did we get an OFSTED report that recognised how much our children love reading, but that it was vital in our children achieving a 100% pass rate in the 2018 KS2 Reading SATs.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

St Philip's, its children and staff clearly already put RfP at the top of its list of priorities, even before we began working with the Open University. Why did we want to run a Teacher's Reading Group and why did I want to develop further?

Following a brilliant training day run by John Murray (Reading Explorer), I was put in touch in Teresa Cremin. John felt that with the love on reading that flowed through St Philip's we would develop even further by working with Teresa and the team. We were keen to learn more; we did not want to be complacent in terms of promoting reading for pleasure.



I was excited before my first Reading Group meeting to complete the initial questionnaire; however, I did not anticipate finding it as difficult as I did! Despite being the lead teacher for reading at a school, I struggled on the questionnaire. A lot! My knowledge of children's authors and illustrators was weak. If I had taken part in the original research project I would certainly have fallen into the 46% of teachers who 'named 6 children's authors. Roald Dahl dominated the list (744), with Michael Morpurgo (343) Jaqueline Wilson (323) and JK Rowling (300) receiving 300 or more mentions'. In fact, in my original questionnaire I named all of the authors mentioned above!

TaRs (Cremin et al., 2014) found that in order to foster RfP effectively, teachers need to develop:

1. *Considerable knowledge of children's literature and other texts*
2. *Knowledge of children's reading practices*
3. *A reading for pleasure pedagogy which includes:*
 - *Social reading environments*
 - *Reading aloud*
 - *Independent reading*
 - *Informal book talk, inside-text talk and recommendations*
4. *As Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach*
5. *Reading communities that are reciprocal and interactive.*

I was disappointed that I struggled to name more authors. Most of the ones I named were either ones I has treasured in my own childhood or had used as a teaching tool. After the first meeting, I was determined that I would improve my own knowledge of children's literature. If my own knowledge of children's literature was so poor, how could I truly promote a culture of RfP and support other teachers in my school to do this effectively? The worrying, but obvious answer was that I couldn't!

A quote from the research summary that really stuck with me was:

'Without secure subject knowledge and thoughtful appreciation of reading and being a reader, teachers are not effectively able to employ a reading for pleasure pedagogy.'
(Cremin et al. 2008)

I knew that I had to improve my own knowledge of children's literature if I was to be as effective as possible in supporting my children in developing a true love of reading. After our first meeting, I was really excited to get reading more!

Aims

- To increase my knowledge of children's literature
- To read more children's literature myself
- To be able to talk more readily with my class about books I had read myself
- To be better able to facilitate a discussion around books where the children's voice was the powerful one, not my own

Outline

There were three things that I did with my class in order to improve my own knowledge of children's literature:

- 1) 'A Chapter a Night'
- 2) Class Reading Challenge
- 3) 52 Books in 52 weeks challenge

1) A Chapter a Night

This was by far my favourite activity of the year-it was definitely the most unplanned, but it took off in a big way.

Making more of an effort to talk to my class about what books they were reading, one child asked me if I wanted to borrow their book and take it home and read it that night. I said I couldn't read it all as I in the middle of reading 'The Imaginary', but that I wouldn't certainly take it and read the first chapter. After reporting back the next day that I thought it was brilliant and after a discussion where the child told me why they loved it, I had pretty much thirty sets of hands all up offering me a book to take home. 'A Chapter a Night' was born!

This approach has allowed children of all reading abilities to get involved in a discussion about books. They suggest books that they can/are able to read, every night I am inundated with suggestions.



An unexpected benefit of this approach was the incredible discussions that came out around what makes a good first chapter; is it a 'killer' first line, for example 'The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do', from 'A Monster Calls' (Patrick Ness). Even months later I remember how silent the class were as got to the end of the first chapter of 'Shadow Forest' (Matt Haig) and heard 'Nothing would ever be the same again.'

Some days, children have struggled to get into our classroom as others crowded around the door to see what I had read the previous night and what I had thought about it!



2) Class Reading Challenge

This year, following the start of our work with the Open University, we relaunched our school reading challenge. Each class was given a book box (a mixture of fiction, non-fiction and picture books) that contained brilliant books. Every child in the class was invited to take part in the challenge, with the aim of trying to read all of the books by the end of the year. The project ran like a 'swap shop', take a book, read it, bring it back and wait for another.

Having only ten books meant that people were always waiting for a book. This was the key; it kept the children eager and interested in the books, if not slightly jealous of their peers who currently had one. The strength of this idea was that not only did the children and I become really familiar with ten books/authors that we might not usually have read, but it meant we had a focal point each day for a discussion as the books were returned.



3) 52 books in 52 weeks challenge

A simple idea that I picked up off Twitter! To encourage myself to read more children's literature I set myself a challenge to read 52 books in 52 weeks. The rules I set were that 1) no two books could be by the same author, 2) there must be a mix of fiction, non-fiction and picture books, 3) that they must be books that are appropriate for the year group I teach. I also add the books I have read to the signature section of my email. So far I have read twenty books, that without this challenge I would not have read.

So far this year I've read these wonderful books:



Impact

To assess the impact of the initiatives, the first thing I did was to re-do the original questionnaire that I completed at our first reading group meeting. I found this much easier (and quicker) to complete. I could easily name many children's authors, more than I could fit in the box. Interestingly, the authors that I went for were 100% different from the first time I completed the questionnaire. I was delighted with this change; I was sure that knowing more children's books had allowed me to better develop a RfP pedagogy in my class.

For the first time in my career, I was really able to talk to children about a book, not just talk about THE book. These meaningful conversations were only possible because I knew of high-quality children's books, and I knew about them because I had read many of them myself. Another hugely pleasing indicator of the impact of the work is that not only had every child in my class, at some point, taken part in our class reading challenge, but that the majority of my class had read a book because it was one of the books I had pinned on my classroom door.

I have also been delighted that some previous reluctant readers have been so inspired that they persuaded their families to buy them books because they couldn't get the copy from school.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

I have absolutely loved trying to read more children's books, it has definitely improved my work with my class! One of the most pleasing aspects of all three initiatives is that regardless of the year group I teach in future, they would all be easily adaptable for any age group.

I am excited about continuing to read more children's books over the course of this year. I have some way to go if I am to meet my '52 in 52' challenge, but I am motivated to get there because I can see the positive impact these challenges have made to the children I teach.