

Book Blankets

Benjamin Harris (one_to_read)



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. During the academic year 2018-19, our school focused on Reading for Pleasure as a key drive in our curriculum's 'Reading Package': as a result of this, the children across the school now enjoy regular 'Independent Reading Time' (where they have free choice about what and how they read) and 'Story-time' (the periods in a day or week where teachers read a book to their class).

OU Research inspiration and rationale

A Book Blanket is a large spread of books placed all around an inviting reading space (such as a classroom!) I was introduced to this idea by Teresa Cremin when we were working on an OU/UKLA non-fiction workshop. They are a great way for readers to browse the class collection, supporting later choices or be introduced to a book box /collection of themed books. At the start of a new year (or when ready to inspire young readers with a collection), a Book Blanket can also help teachers to discover their class' reading tastes and enable them to 'hook' the children into reading in a personalised and enjoyable way.



The project grew naturally out of the OU Research strand:

- Teachers' knowledge of children's reading practices

And also supports

- Independent reading and booktalk as part of the TaRs RfP pedagogy.

(Cremin et al., 2014)

Aims

I carried out a selection of 'Book Blanket' activities in order to...

- help me discover my class' individual reader identities.

identify which books most attract the children with whom I work.

Outline

I created three Book Blanket spreads for the children to explore during their 20-minute Independent Reading Time (one week for each Book Blanket) with a total of roughly 40 to 50 books per session:

- **picture books**
- **poetry**
- **non-fiction**



2. I spent the first session of 20 minutes with all the books spread out across the tables.

I deliberately chose a wide range that I felt would appeal to Year 6, but I didn't preclude choices that might seem more appropriate to younger readers. I want my class to read for pleasure and that means choosing books that always appeal and not only those that will challenge or fit my idea of suitability.

Before they went to browse, I would give them a 'focus task'. Here are some examples:

- a) Find a book which you like from the appearance of the cover.
- b) Find a book with a fact you don't think anyone else knows.
- c) Find a book containing a poem with an eye-catching title.
- d) Find a book with a subject you're interested in.
- e) Find a book that you think will make you either laugh or think.



3. The children would then browse for 2 or 3 minutes, exploring and choosing from the books.

We would 'Stop and think' then, asking different children about their choices.

Then we would browse again with a different focus.

4. Once the children had explored the books with three 'browses', they were encouraged to sit with their favourite text (or share with others!) for five to ten minutes.

5. Then the children would fill in a mini-feedback form, so I could review their thinking as a class.

6. During the rest of the week's Independent reading sessions, the children had access to the books we had used in the browsing session. It was particularly evident that the non-fiction books were the most popular 'return-to' books!

Which book did you like best today?
I can only describe worms

What grabbed your attention about it?
It was bright and looked funny

What ONE thing would you like to share about it?
*Every page was about all different worms
and he tried to make them not the same*

Which book did you like best today?
Agula Superbook

What grabbed your attention about it?
pictures

What ONE thing would you like to share about it?
*That 35 billion years ago earth was
a ball of water and rock.*

Which book did you like best today?
The language of the cat

What grabbed your attention about it?
*I really like cats so I thought it would have some funny
poems in it*

What ONE thing would you like to share about it?
I like how it has quite a variety of poems

Which book did you like best today?
Science nature magazine

What grabbed your attention about it?
It was very colorful,

What ONE thing would you like to share about it?
It had a story page index



Impact of the browsing

Particular observations during the active sessions included:

- Both boys and girls engaged with the Book Blankets with the same enthusiasm.
- Children with SEN and behavioural needs browsed with focus and enjoyment, often stopping to discuss and show their partners in a way uniform with the other children
- After the 'browse', it was interesting to note which children exhibited a rather 'blethering bookworms' nature – children who enjoy reading in partnership and groups, to discuss their reading – and which were more 'lone literati' – the children who preferred to settle down on their own with a book.

Findings from using the mini-feedback slips

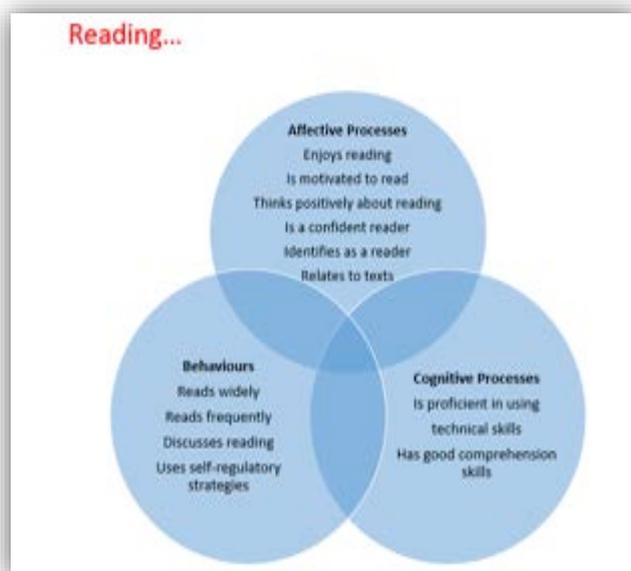
Aspects I noted when reviewing the mini-feedback slips:

- Children really responded to bright, bold and colourful cover designs. We say, “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but this is perhaps a vital consideration with children! Something worth discussing further.
- Interactive elements were very popular with the picture books and especially non-fiction: one book contained a mini card-game with which a big group of boys engaged, straight after the browse!
- Subject matter was extremely important: many children chose books because of what the books focused on, based on their current or previous interests.
- Size, shape or date of book did not matter to the children, they said. They didn’t see ‘big books’ as more exciting or attractive. A couple of older books I had from the 1980s were chosen by one girl who commented: ‘*I really like the way they’ve laid out the stuff inside,*’.

Findings in relation to the ROGO model

Reviewing the ‘Read on Get On’ model, I was impressed to see as a result of the Book Blankets, children:

- a) enjoying reading
- b) motivated to read
- c) thinking positively about reading
- d) developing confidence
- e) identifying as readers
- f) relating to texts
- g) reading widely
- h) discussing reading.



(ROGO model evidence base National Literacy Trust 2017, page 2)

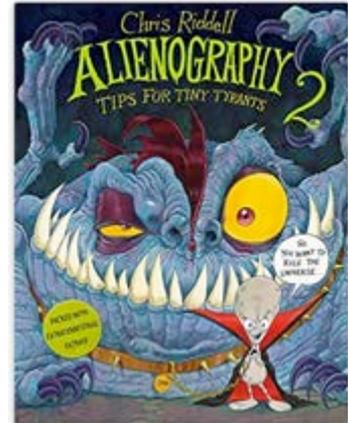
Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

1. Whether a teacher is teaching their first or thirty-first class, the children will ALWAYS have a different ‘readerly profile’ to every other class that teacher may have known: there were particular books which were chosen by both my class last year and my current one (*Alienography, Odd Bods, I want to be in a scary story...*); conversely I also noticed that books I had seen loved to bits by my previous class did not get such attention this year. Doing these

Book Blankets helped me get to know my class, this is key to fostering RfP as the TaRs work shows.

2. The children really enjoyed the sessions and many chose books from the blanket to read and share and read aloud to the class afterwards!

3. A student teacher observed the session and commented very favourably on it. She wrote to me afterwards: *On entering the room there was an instant buzz of enthusiasm. Allowing the children to freely wander around the tables to locate the book facilitated the opportunity for them to discuss with their peers about their choice of book and why.*



It was a brilliant way to instantly get the children involved in their learning in a fun and interactive way with little teacher input. I also believe it would not just be suited to Year 6, but could be used across both KS1 and 2, adapting the selection of texts appropriately. I was inspired by the session I observed and will definitely take forward into my teaching career.

Next steps:

a) Still in the early stages of finding out about my class as individual readers (it's an ongoing and hugely pleasurable task!), I have two more Book Blankets planned for the next few weeks:

- **Fiction** (a big one which I might 'theme' into separate blankets – fantasy, historical, SF, real-life...)
- **Graphic novels** (a very underrated text-type)

b) I plan to carry out others throughout the year too, with new and different texts, to keep track of their developing tastes and encourage browsing to support more discerning choices.

