Observe, document, act

**Context**
I teach at Harston and Newton Community Primary School, a single-form entry village school, just west of Cambridge. I have recently returned to the classroom following my completion of an MPhil in Education which focused on Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature, and I now teach Year 6.

Shared and independent reading time occurs frequently throughout the week in my class. In addition to daily Guided Reading sessions, I always share three poems a day with the children and continue to read from our ‘class novel’ at some point in the day. The school has recently extended the use of home reading journals into Key Stage 2 as a means of encouraging reading at home. However, not all of my class are regular readers outside of school and being new to the school this year, I did not feel I had a full picture of the children’s current or historical reading practices.

In order to further promote reading within the class, I have also introduced a daily ERIC slot to ensure that children are reading daily for at least ten minutes and during this session, my TA and I too, read our own books alongside the children.

**Research inspiration and rationale**
The TaRs Project showed that the more knowledge teachers have about children’s reading experiences and practices, the better we can encourage Reading for Pleasure (RfP) and build communities of readers within our classrooms and schools (Cremin et al., 2014). The research highlighted the significance of the sheer range of reading material that children now read both in and outside of school and the need for teachers to be aware of what and how their children choose to read in the 21st century, whether this is with book-based reading or other mediums including: graphic novels, comics, magazines, newspapers and of course, the internet.

**Aims**
I wanted to find out more about the children in my class as individual readers and discover what their reading practices are like, outside of the more formal teacher-directed reading sessions which we have in school. I was keen to see if the children displayed a different attitude to reading when they have increased agency and choice over reading materials. I therefore aimed to:
- Observe and log what children were selecting to read independently during their ERIC time.
- Discover more about the children's reading preferences and experiences by asking them to bring their favourite book to school for a special RfP session.
- Investigate if there were similar patterns in the children’s preferred reading material and consider the implication of this for classroom practice and for the children as readers.

**Outline**
Over the course of a week of observation, I recorded all the books that my class were reading during their ERIC sessions in order to find out more about them as individual readers. All of the children had chosen to read the books they selected either from the school or classroom library or a book from home. The only time children changed a book during the week was if they had finished reading and needed a new one. I noticed that during the ten minute sessions the children remained focused and remained on task.
During the same observation week, nearly two thirds of my class were out of school playing in an inter-school sports competition, so for one afternoon only I was fortunate enough to run a thoroughly enjoyable RfP session with only nine members of my class! The children knew we would be having an RfP session at this time; they had been asked to bring in either their all-time favourite book to share with the others, or a book they had just finished reading which they wanted to tell others about. I wanted to see what texts they would choose to share and why they had been selected. What was initially planned to be a half-hour sharing session ended up lasting for nearly an hour and a half as the children were completely engaged in ‘book talk’ and discussion about their own texts and those of their peers.

We discussed popular authors, how to choose books to read, favourite locations to read, adaptations of favourite books and much more. Designating a specific time slot for this session in what is normally a very busy timetable afforded me the opportunity to really listen to the children and find out much more about their reading experiences, which otherwise I might have struggled to do.

Impact

Having conducted my reading log, I was struck by the popularity of series readers amongst the children, with over two-fifths of the class reading a book from a well-known series, predominantly the Barry Loser books and A Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Only one child had chosen a non-fiction text (The Ruthless Romans from the Horrible Histories collection) and only two Children’s Laureates were being read: Michael Morpurgo and Jacqueline Wilson. I was surprised at the limited range of books read by the children, especially since our school library is very well stocked with many recent award winning books, as well as ‘classic’ texts by well-regarded authors.

When I asked the RfP focus group children about the apparent popularity of series reading, they could justify this popularity eloquently and enthusiastically, directing me to the texts’ presentation, the use of different fonts and illustrations, and the use of the diary format which they all found enjoyable and engaging. Their explanations matched that of another Year 6 child captured by Victor Watson, that “reading the latest book in a series which you already know is like going into a room full of friends” (2000, p.6).

The children absolutely loved being given the opportunity and time to discuss and share their books and opinions with peers, reiterating the TaRs research findings. In a relatively short space of time I gained a much deeper understanding and picture of these particular nine children as individual readers. We were able to discuss Daniel Pennac’s The Rights of the Reader (2006) and talk about the ways in which you are ‘allowed’ to read; one boy quite happily explained that “I go straight to Chapter 3 because sometimes the first chapter of a book can be a bit weird or difficult to get into so if 3 is all right, then I’ll go back to the beginning and start again”. Had he not explained this to me, I would not have had this insight into his reading process.

Other children were able to talk about who influenced their reading choices (predominantly parents and peers) and what attracted them to certain types of books. Indeed, in the days following this first RfP session, the buzz about reading and sharing books informally really took off with an increase in
'book talk'. In fact, I even caught two of the children involved in the first dedicated RfP session buying books off each other at break time ("Miss Davis, I've just bought 3 Wimpy Kids for a pound!") and this enthusiasm began to spread amongst those who missed the initial focus group session.

**Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice**

Before I had completed this ‘observe and document’ activity, I was able to discuss the children in my class’ fluency of reading, or their ability to infer an author’s intention or even state if they were “able to identify and explain the effect of the author’s language”, but I could not have offered a fuller picture of what they are like as readers. By expanding my knowledge of the children as individual readers, as recommended by the TaRs research, I truly now know what their favourite book(s) are and why, which authors they enjoy reading, the text types/genres that they prefer to read and even how they choose which book to read in the first place.

This observation and discussion activity reiterated the importance of uncovering children’s reading experiences and of talking about books and reading practices with children in my role as a Reading Teacher. More importantly, knowing now how much the children enjoyed taking part in the activities I planned, ensures that I will continue to schedule opportunities for children to engage in RfP practices on a regular basis. This in turn will continue to give me an insight into how independent reading and shared discussions are developing as my class develop their own reading community.

Furthermore, now I know the reading material that children are accessing is more limited than I had first imagined, this highlights the important role I have in helping the children to continue to expand their reading repertoire by recommending and sharing new and quality texts with them.
