Context

I am a student teacher in my final year of training. A child sees the world through a teacher’s lens and therefore I hope to inspire and to provide the children I teach with the skills that they need to read for pleasure. Reading offers an inner stillness and calmness, providing an escape from everyday life. However it is much more than escapism; reading is also beneficial to our overall wellbeing (Latchem and Greenhalgh, 2014). It is an important gateway to personal development (Holden, 2004).

There are many literacy related benefits to reading for pleasure. Clark and Rumbold (2006) list benefits such as attainment, breadth of vocabulary, greater comprehension skills and greater self-confidence. Although these are important academic benefits, I feel that the holistic development of children is even more important. Reading for pleasure encourages children to use their imagination and enhances their social skills (Allan, Ellis & Pearson, 2005).

OU Research inspiration and rationale

Reading for pleasure refers to an interest in reading and making the choice to read for enjoyment (Clark and Rumbold, 2006), it is partly fueled by teachers’ knowledge of children’s literature (TaRS). I have a particular love for teaching children with special educational needs. I am a strong advocate that all children deserve to experience the joy that reading can provide. I believe that we do not only have to read stories with our eyes or listen with our ears; we can also experience stories through taste, touch and smell.

Due to disability, some of these children cannot simply choose a book from the class library or verbally say when or if they want to read. Therefore this can limit the choice that they have in terms of reading for pleasure. Special education is a matter of finding solutions to these problems to ensure that these children are equipped and supported in their learning. I want to provide these children the opportunity to read for pleasure, however not in the traditional form of simply reading a book. This is why I have chosen sensory stories for my project. These are stories told through a combination of text and sensory stimuli. For example, a drop of water can be trickled down a student's face to give meaning to a piece of text that talks about rain.

Sensory stories allow stories to become accessible. A child with sensory impairments or physical disabilities may face practical barriers to their learning. Children who experience sensory processing difficulties may need support in learning to regulate their reaction to sensory stimuli. Sensory stories are a fun way of providing this support and of simply sharing a story together.
Sensory stories allow language and sensory stimuli to work simultaneously with one another. There is the repetition of language which allows children to recognise words and begin to understand their meaning. They are able to associate a word with a sensory stimuli. For example they would begin to associate the word perfume with something they can smell.

**Aims**

My absolute goal for this project is to make children fall in love with reading. I want to provide children with special educational needs pleasure from shared reading experiences through the use of sensory stories. I also wish for the children to develop certain skills that they will need throughout their lives.

I hope that using sensory stories will help to improve the children’s communication skills. Sensory stories can aid eye tracking, turn taking and concentration (Gray and Garand, 1993). I wish for the children to express their preferences both in their choice of whether they wish to read for pleasure and how they can demonstrate what they like and dislike through their reaction to the stimuli in the story. Another aim is for an increase in the children’s confidence. Encountering stimuli within the safe storytelling space can enable children to feel more confident in encountering similar stimuli in the world, e.g. car horns and strong smells (Watson, 2002).

Additionally, I want the children to improve their tolerance of stimuli. This is especially significant for children who experience difficulties processing sensory stimulation. Through repeating sensory stories and by practicing experiencing stimuli, children can improve their ability to tolerate those they find difficult. The structure of stories can build the confidence of all children and children with autism especially will find the predictable nature of a repeated story reassuring (Gray and Garand, 1993).

**Outline**

I chose to use a sensory story twice a week with a group of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD children). As previously stated, reading for pleasure is associated with making the choice to read. These particular children cannot simply walk over to the bookshelf and lift a book. However they too deserve the choice of if and when they want to read.

These particular children were nonverbal and some communicated through PECS and others through Makaton. I gave the children the choice of two things, for example sensory story or the use of their IPAD. For the PECS children I stuck symbols of both the IPAD and a story onto their PECS book and they chose the activity they wanted. For those children who used Makaton they would either sign for story or IPAD. These options allowed the children to make a choice of whether they wanted to read for pleasure in the form of a sensory story.
I used three sensory stories over my teaching practice. These sensory stories were:

- The Haircut

- The Funfair

- The Little Seed

I repeated each sensory story a number of times. This repetition allowed the children to become more comfortable and to anticipate what stimuli they would experience next. To develop the children’s vocabulary I ensured to repeat the language in the story and associate it with a stimuli. For example in the ‘Funfair’ story the children had to ‘hook a duck to win a prize’. I would allow the children to hold and feel the duck and as they did this I would continually repeat the word duck. This was to allow the children to associate words with different experiences in the form of objects, smells, tastes etc.
Impact

Using the sensory stories was hugely beneficial. For the children who were able to make a choice as to whether they wished to listen to a sensory story, they were given ownership of their learning. The children thoroughly enjoyed the sensory stories and this was reflected as they continuously chose to have a sensory story as opposed to another activity.

The repetition of stories allowed the children to become familiar and comfortable with the different stimuli (Pieper, 2016). The children were able to anticipate what was going to happen next. For example on the first telling of the story some children flinched when they heard the ‘snipping’ sound of the scissors. They continued to do this on subsequent tellings. However, after hearing the story a number of times, some of the children flinched as I read the line, ‘He began to cut Chris’ hair’; prior to hearing the actual ‘snip’ of the scissors. This flinch communicated that they knew what happens next in the story. In special education learning and progress is made in very small steps. Anticipation is a wonderful way to demonstrate learning when working with sensory stories (Pieper, 2016).

Most importantly the communication skills of the children were greatly improved. Communication is an essential aspect of literacy. In this case it was not about how these children used speech. It was about how they used eye contact, how they listened and about how they took turns with their peers etc. Presenting each child with the story objects in turn provided each child with multiple communicative opportunities per session. The children were also provided with opportunities to express their preferences, and it was identified that sensory story sessions can both contribute to helping others understand the individuals’ likes and dislikes, and to giving the students a sense of agency and empowerment. For example it was excellent whenever a child was able to push an object away. It was the child’s way of communicating that they disliked the object. The sensory stories were also extremely helpful in the development of turn taking as well as with regard to remembering.

The children’s knowledge of language was highly developed through the sensory stories. Through repeated vocabulary, the children began to recognise and associate words with different objects and of course their senses. For example in the story ‘The Funfair’, the text discussed the smell of candy floss. I would say the word candy floss and some of the children begin to sniff. Therefore they associated the word candy floss with its smell, proving that they had an understanding of the meaning to the word. Sensory stories help these children to make sense of a world that can be overwhelming and confusing.

Overall the children clearly experienced great pleasure through reading and experiencing the sensory stories. Some of the children have reward charts for behaviour. Each morning they get to choose a reward that they can earn if they gain four smiley faces throughout the day. Some of the children continually chose the symbol for stories indicating they wanted a sensory story. This consolidates that the children thoroughly enjoyed the shared reading experiences of the sensory stories.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Reflecting on the sensory stories, I feel that it would be rewarding for the parents to see how well the children communicated through the sensory stories. Inviting parents into the school for these sensory story sessions might provide them with inspiration on how to use language and sensory
stimuli at home in order to help their child develop. On reflection, if teaching special needs and using sensory stories again, I would consider making simple sensory stories comprising of only a few things to help parents read for pleasure with their children. For example a sensory story on bath time consisting of simply a short narrative along with a rubber duck, bubbles and a sponge. This may help an everyday routine such as bath time become more familiar and comfortable to certain children.

In the future, I feel that I could also utilise sensory stories in the mainstream school within a foundation stage/ key stage 1 setting. Sensory stories are a fantastic way of developing language and communication skills. For example, the children could think of different adjectives to describe an object found within the sensory story.

I will continue to develop professionally as a teacher. As sensory stories are expensive to purchase I plan to create my own. I have already created some sensory stories, for example one titled ‘Under the Sea’, and I will continue to do so. This project has helped me to better understand ways of enhancing children’s literacy. I have learned different strategies to develop children’s communication and language, such as repetition of key vocabulary and the use of different stimuli associated with the vocabulary. I will continue to use sensory stories throughout my career as I feel they are a useful learning tool, and most importantly, they encourage children to read for pleasure.

As a teacher, the children’s response to the sensory stories were very rewarding to see. We all sat in a circle within a calm environment and all the children were able to take turns. Each child had a different responses to the way they remembered smells and touch etc. Some would laugh and clap their hands with anticipation and excitement. The children, the assistants and I felt pure joy and that is what reading is about.

Reading for pleasure is essential and every school should consider it as a priority for its children (Cremin et al., 2014). Not only is it linked to greater attainment and confidence, it also correlates with children having a better understanding of the world (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). Instilling a child’s love for reading helps to ensure that they will become lifelong readers. Reading for pleasure, most importantly, makes us happy and for me this was evident through the smiling faces of the children during the sensory stories.