

Tell me in Story-time

Benjamin Harris

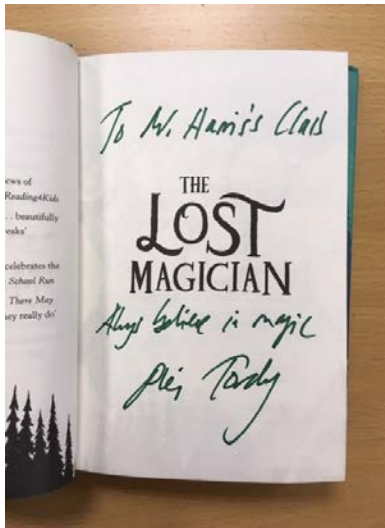
@one_to_read



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. This year, our school is focusing on Reading for Pleasure as a key drive in our curriculum's 'Reading Package': we want to develop the will as well as the skill in *pleasurable* reading. In October 2018, I led a whole INSET day focusing on the Open University Reading for Pleasure aims to help establish the crucial importance of this to our children's 'will' to read. As a result of this, the children across the school are now enjoying 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

I have always been a keen advocate of reading to children, but this year – influenced by the research of Cremin *et al* (*Building Communities of Engaged Readers*: Routledge, 2008) – I have reflected much more on the wider possibilities of Story-time in schools, especially by how talking about responses to a book can lead to deeper understanding and a feeling of pleasure from reading. This led to the project to research and to develop approaches to Story-time, so that children of all ages really enjoy the 'magic' of being read to regularly, and are involved in high-quality book-talk, both teacher- and child-led.

Aims

This year I have become interested in developing my approach to Story-time and to use this research to support other teachers in their own reflections about reading aloud. Specifically, the two aims of *this* research project, which connects to the Reading Pedagogy strand of the OU Reading for Pleasure research, are:

- a) to develop older children's enjoyment of being read to regularly
- b) to develop the quality of children's responses to a book, mainly through informal talk

Outline

From the beginning of the year, my class (a Year 6 cohort of 18 girls and 10 boys) appreciated that I was very much a 'Reading Teacher', in that I talk about books I love all the time and regularly recommend books to the class, the classroom is packed with books and, perhaps most importantly, I read to the children every day and have told them that this is my favourite thing to do as a teacher.

Previous surveys of children's responses to Story-time showed that they liked to choose which book would be read to them. I had selected sixteen high quality books ready for the class to choose from on the first day of term in September. The first three they chose and which were read during the Autumn term were 'The Lost Magician' (Piers Torday), 'Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror' (Chris Priestley), and 'Cloud Busting' (Malorie Blackman).



Whilst reading these books, I would regularly pause between sections or at points for children to reflect through talk on what was happening, or to pick up on new vocabulary. During the story, I also asked the children to use a whiteboard to record thoughts under titles inspired by the four parts of Chambers' 'Tell Me' approach (Chambers, *Tell Me - Children, Reading and Talk*: Thimble Press, 2011). We called them 'Likes', 'Dislikes', 'Puzzles' and 'Connections'. At the end of Story-time, we would discuss their thoughts and a display was put up for children to record these using sticky notes. Below is a transcript of the final display of the class' ideas gathered during the reading of 'The Lost Magician'. (There was a good deal of discussion about why the book follows the storyline of 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' throughout the first half of the book. Over the course of the story, some children returned regularly to this and this is evidenced in three of the boxes.)

Tell me grid created during the reading of 'The Lost Magician' by Piers Torday

(September – October 2018)

<p>Likes</p> <p>The mystery</p> <p>The story twists in and out of similar to Narnia and then unlocks to a different story</p>	<p>Dislikes</p> <p>The words are sometimes tricky to understand</p> <p>It's very like Narnia [at the start]</p>
<p>Connections</p> <p>Leader of the Never Reads is like the White Witch</p> <p>The Beavers in Narnia are like the Bears</p> <p>The youngest child disappears while playing a game (Narnia = Lucy, Lost Magician = Larry)</p> <p>The beavers were waiting for the Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve and the bears were waiting for readers</p> <p>Nicholas Crowne is like Aslan because he made the library like Aslan created Narnia</p> <p>The Green Man is like the Giving Tree</p>	<p>Puzzles</p> <p>Is Simon dyslexic?</p> <p>If Jana kills all the Reads I think there will be a pile of pages in the Forgotten Forest</p> <p>It's less like Narnia now (half way through)</p> <p>Is it going to end up as a war?</p> <p>Why is it like Narnia?</p> <p>Is Tom Thumb good or bad?</p> <p>Who are the Never Reads?</p>

Some children, although enjoying the story, were not keen to share ideas about the book being read. Then a few of these children reported in a survey that although they generally liked the story being read, they didn't usually read the genre into which it fitted. There was clearly going to be a block to these children talking about a book, if they didn't fully connect to it!

Alongside this development of Story-time, I provided the class with a designated 'Independent Reading Time' at the start of the day, where all sorts of reading was encouraged – books, magazines, comics...anything – to promote real enjoyment of reading on their own or with friends (see also the research by Rebekah Denby and Becky Thompson on the OU RfP website). This period of the day proved – and continues to be – extremely popular. I took advantage of the time to talk to all the children about their books, likes and dislikes, and this then began to shape my understanding of who each individual was as a reader. From reading to them every day, I realised I was giving them something they *needed* as readers; but from talking to them in these interviews, I began to understand what my class *wanted* from Story-time.

Before Christmas, I ran a meeting with the class to review the choices of book we would read together in 2019. I told them that I had noticed that many of them had begun to enjoy 'real-life' fictional genres during the later Autumn term, and asked if they would like to choose more from this genre for the class book. The response to 'Cloud Busting' in particular had been very positive and many said they enjoyed the 'real-ness' of the story, as well as the poetic form of the novel.



Following the meeting and the especially positive effect 'Cloud Busting' had had on the class, I gathered together more 'real-life' books for the class to explore. In January, I introduced these books to them as possible class reads: some of these books included 'Jelly' (Jo Cotterill), 'Front Desk' (Kelly Yang), 'The Boy at the Back of the Classroom' (Onjali Q. Rauf) and 'Pax' (Sara Pennypacker). January's class reading vote resulted in 'Jelly' being chosen.

With this book, the level of talk in the class changed.

Impact

Here I want to draw particular attention to the difference that reading a genre enjoyed by the high majority of the class made, and how this positively affected the children's pleasure in reading and being read to.

1) How we read the novel 'Jelly'

I made a conscious decision to read 'Jelly' in a different way to the other books read this year. In previous Story-time sessions, I would stop occasionally to discuss a particular word or to ask about a point of inference: "What does that word tell you about...?"; "Why did he/she do that...?" I had found that this interrupted the flow for children wanting to get on with hearing the story: this demonstrates that the 'skill' must be very much balanced by the 'will' to read, both in school and home contexts.

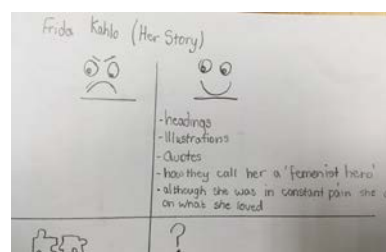
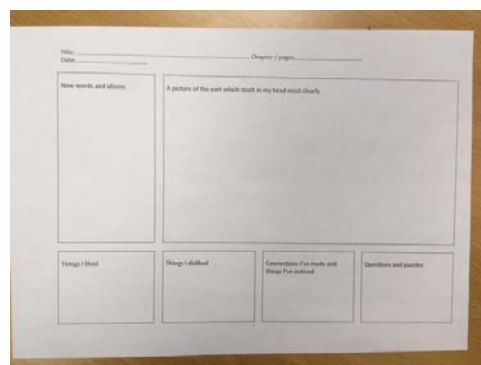
'Jelly' has a very 'immediate' feel to it, being told in the present tense and in the first person. Stopping regularly, I decided, would really interfere with the 'voice'. So I decided to stop stopping and reserved discussion until the ends of chapters.

Noticeably, the children had a lot more to say following this change to my reading a novel. In part, this was perhaps because they were allowed to see the wood for the trees: the larger scale picture was built up allowing them to make wider connections within and between chapters. (Appendix 1 shows one example of a typical conversation after a chapter is read. Here, the children discuss why Jelly would open up to someone she has really only just met, and her reasons for this - and why she doesn't open up to her mum - demonstrating the children's various memories of events from their *larger-scale* readings of the chapters.)

The class also became the reading 'authorities': my questioning began to follow *their* lead. After each chapter, I simply said, 'Does anyone have anything they would like to say about that part of the story?'. There were always starting points from the children and some which engendered some really quite in-depth discussions. I occasionally had to draw threads together for the children, but generally the class or group run the discussion themselves quite naturally.

2) How 'Tell Me' focused children's responses to Story-time

Soon after introducing to the class the four main 'responses' inspired by Chambers' "Tell Me" approach, I noticed that one child (a particularly keen reader) would divide her note-paper into a set pattern of boxes just before I began reading. I talked to her about this and found that she had designed her own 'Story-time Grid' to record the four responses detailed above, as well as space for 'New words' and a picture - she had noticed that many children in the class also enjoyed drawing what came into their heads during the reading too! I made a word-processed version of the grid for the whole class to use, if they wanted to, and these have been used regularly in our Story-time sessions since. Some children also made their own during Independent Reading Time to help structure their responses to their own books.



Providing the optional 'Story-time Grids' helped children to focus their thoughts for discussion by allowing them to record their thinking (and evidence) as they listened: these became 'banks' of personal responses and questions to which they could refer in discussion. The grids helped to focus attention on detail and clearly showed a child how they personally were 'reading' this novel. In this way, Story-time became an *active*

reading time for all in the class: the listening led to thinking, which in turn led to good book-talk.

3) How talk was developed during 'Independent Reading Time'

Some children had so much to say that they wanted to say about the book, that I opened up the opportunity to discuss the previous day's reading during the Independent Reading Time. Again, I kept the group fluid and talk purposeful by simply saying: 'If anyone would like to discuss yesterday's reading of 'Jelly', then please sit with our group on the carpet'. Usually a group of about five to eight children attended the discussion, whilst the others made their own choices of how to spend their time reading.

In these group sessions, we followed a similar pattern to the whole class discussion. Some children in particular chose to talk during this session, rather than during the whole-class time. Many of these children had categorised themselves as 'sort-of' readers in recent surveys. However, their discussion and comprehension was as accurate and as rich and assured as any 'confident' reader.

There was a great deal of talk about why characters react in particular ways in the book. Jelly's mother in particular provoked a lot of discussion – and some contrasted impressions – as the book developed. One conversation focused on how one reader's feelings towards 'Mum' had changed from the start of the book up to the middle point. There were many different suggestions of evidence for and against how 'Mum' was acting with regards to her boyfriend's treatment of her and to her daughter's physical and emotional development. The conversation here developed itself; only occasionally did I feel I needed to interrupt to say 'What made you think that? Can you find some evidence for that?'.

These discussions clearly demonstrated to these self-proclaimed 'sort-of' readers that they were *enjoying* reading (see Appendix 2), especially in this social context, that they read frequently (through *talking* about the book almost daily), that they were taught some technical skills through my modelling of 're-reading' a section if they made a particular point or assumption, and mainly that they were motivated by this urge to read and then talk. One boy, who told me at the start of the year that he liked reading but hardly ever got into a book or read books regularly, asked daily: "Are we doing that group thing with the book tomorrow?" because he was so pleased to contribute and the effect his understanding and ideas had on the group's discussion.

4) How the novels impacted on children's reading choices

Many children regularly asked about the book being read: 'Where did you get the book?' 'Has that author written other books?'. Some children had even asked their families for particular books to be bought as presents for birthdays or Christmas so they could have their own copies at home. It was wonderful to hear that one child had been given 'Cloud Busting' for Christmas and had read it to her aunt! In our Library time, children asked for help to find the authors we read so that they could read them as their borrowed school library books. Parents commented to me that they had heard about the books we read as a class and have asked for lists of similar books that their children are clearly enjoying. It is inspiring to see how Story-time has had such an impact on the wider lives of the children.

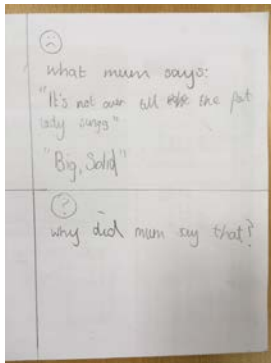
Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

1) The most important thing I have learned is that although I am a hugely passionate Reading Teacher, what matters most in Story-time is to find books that *the class* really want to hear. The books I initially selected, albeit varied in their genre, were a mix of new books, 'tried-and-tested' favourites, and 'old-but-gold', but were more a catalogue of my own preferences in reading. I knew that the children would enjoy them all, but there proved to be other genres and titles that engaged them immediately and more thoroughly.

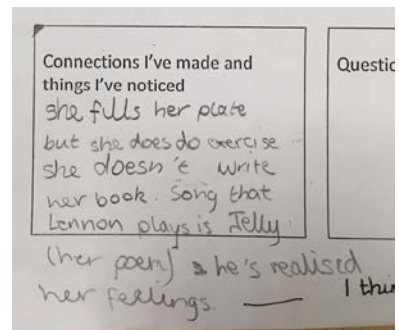
As a result I have extended my love of books this year by reading very different themes to my usual choices, mainly as a way of relating more to the class and *their* reading tastes. I believe too that because of the social connection we all have over one book, I am especially enjoying discovering this new reading. (Is this a feeling that is in some part shared by the class? Do any of those who prefer different genres actually feel better about a 'new' type of book because of all the talk and social interaction about it? We have already set up 'Reading Rooms', a project which I plan to publish later in the year on the OU RfP site, which is to investigate the confidence that might be gained by *sharing* our reading tastes and responses.)

2) Giving the children a freer questioning style and stopping fewer times during reading has allowed them to lead the reading much more. It has been difficult *not* to step in and question from my own teacherly point of view but such reservation has had positive effects: notably, children's volition to speak is clearly much higher.

3) The influence of Chambers' 'Tell Me' approach helped the children to understand that their own personal likes, dislikes, connections and questions may also be mirrored in other children's responses...or they may not! (See A's and S's comments in Appendix 2.) This sharing of views clearly adds to the enjoyment of reading for children: it demonstrates that reading is



process with more than one 'correct' answer. I plan to make use of a large 'Tell Me' grid to record, combine and contrast children's responses during the group sessions now, so that they can make reference to each others' ideas during their discussion.



It's not always easy to find a single book to engage, motivate and inspire a whole class of

children to read that book enthusiastically and to talk about it for pleasure. But by my working alongside the class as a teacher and as a reader, we have discovered common connections.

And we want to talk about them!

Appendix 1: transcript of part of a group discussion following reading Chapters 21 and 22 of 'Jelly' by Jo Cotterill

- BH** So what did you want to talk about today?
- A** Why did Jelly share the poems with Lennon but not with anyone else....like why at that moment?
- G** Because Lennon hadn't called her names.

- A** But she's known him the least amount of time.
- E** Well that just kind of says something. She trusts him over her own mum and she's only known him for like a few days. Partly the reason is they got on so well in the café, but it's more that he's a nice person. And it's like whoever the mum is with, she turns into them. Like when she was with Chris she was mean and now she's with Lennon...
- A** (*agreeing*)...she's being really nice. And I maybe think that when she said she was on the phone, I don't really believe her because she could have been on the phone to Chris. She keeps getting texts from him and she deleted [them] but maybe he keeps sending her texts.
- BH** Do you think there's any evidence that she isn't on the phone to Chris; that she really has cut off from him?
- A** Well she did delete that text...

Appendix 2: transcript of a group discussion discussing why talking about the class novel is important

- BH** I want to talk about why you like coming to talk in the group in the morning about what we've read the day before.
- E** On my reading survey, I've put that I'm reading a lot more and I think that's partly because when we started reading 'Jelly' I was more into my own books and I wasn't really into it ['Jelly']. And then now we've started the groups I've gotten more into it because at first there was not much going on. But as soon as the granddad came in, I wanted to start talking about it.
- BH** What made you want to start talking?
- E** Because of the granddad...his opinion really.
- G** He acts like a child...
- E** He acts really obnoxious!
- BH** But what made you want to talk?
- E** I just have loads of views on granddad. I think he's a character who's been put in there to be hated...to see how some people actually are.
- BH** Do you think that talking helps you to enjoy your reading more?

T Yup!

A I think I would probably enjoy it anyway but I think the talking helps me to understand it more so I can see other people's views and how they thought about it because they might have thought one thing or picked up something I might not have heard.

S I like it because some people have the same thoughts as you. When I talk about it I feel more like a reader...

BH Can you explain why?

[Pause for thought from S.]

G I think that when you're in a group it feels like you're expressing your thoughts and you get told your ideas are good and then you feel like you're a reader.

BH Have you thought about this a bit more now, S? Or do you agree with anything G has said?

S Sometimes when you're reading a book but you don't really pick up on all these details that are in the book. When you talk about it, you start to realize "Oh yeah, I remember this bit".

BH I've noticed that a lot of people want to talk more about this book, 'Jelly' than some of the other books we've read. Do you know why that might be?

S Because it's a real story.

E It's real life.

G Yeah!

S This stuff really happens in real life. It makes you think more about the world.

E Yeah, that's why I was talking about the granddad because I think he's been put in there I think to be kind of hated and talked about... It made me think, well some people might be like this around the world.