

BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS AND READING FOR PLEASURE



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This is an Egmont Reading for Pleasure Award submission: Experienced teacher (3 years plus)

(All children's names used are pseudonyms)

CONTEXT

I work at an independent girls' school in central London. I am a Year 3 class teacher and following the completion of an MA in Children's Literature, I was given the role of Children's Literature Advisor.

When I started teaching my class at the beginning of this academic year, I realised that although many of them loved listening to stories when I read aloud to the class, they were not very confident or enthusiastic independent readers.

They also had a difficult year last year, with lots of friendship issues within the class and were quite fractured socially when I started to teach them.



OU RESEARCH INSPIRATION AND RATIONALE

This research focused on **building “reading communities that are reciprocal and interactive”** (Cremin et al, 2014).

It explored whether friendships could be built and nurtured alongside and as a result of nurturing reading for pleasure. I wanted to look at whether encouraging children to read for pleasure through lending each other books and through pursuing reading as a shared activity would help them to grow closer and to form friendships.

In reference to the research on reading for pleasure that she conducted, Cremin (2014) noted that: “The Phase II project...highlights the power of fiction to foster empathy and create bonds between readers” (p.10). This made me wonder whether that shared bond could extend not just to a relationship between readers, but could grow to become one between friends. I also started to wonder whether those shared bonds could bridge differences and help children to get to know each other better.

Daniel Pennac (2006) says that “When someone reads out loud, they lay themselves wide open” (p.172). It struck me that this was also true of lending someone else a book that belongs to you. It would surely create a level of intimacy and vulnerability that would lead to the breaking down of barriers. Pennac (2006) says that, “When a person we like gives us a book, we look for them at first between the lines - for their tastes, for the reasons they thrust it into our hands, for a sign of the bond between us” (p.88).

AIMS

I wanted to investigate whether, in trying to encourage the children to read for pleasure, I could also help to build bridges of friendship between them and unite the class by helping them to discover common interests.

Chambers (1991) states that, “...far and away the commonest reason for choosing a book is that we have heard about it from our friends” (p.74). He goes on to observe that, “In the end, what learners do for themselves, guided by a skilled teacher-provider, is more effective than anything teachers do for learners who are not involved in helping each other” (p.79). I wanted to develop my findings from the research project into reading for pleasure that I carried out with my class last year. During this project, I discovered that by encouraging the children to recommend books from the classroom library that they had enjoyed to each other, rather than coming to me for recommendations, they became more independent readers who started reading a book with a greater expectation that they would derive pleasure from it. They were also more inclined to pursue the recommendations given to them by their peers and rated those recommendations more highly than those offered to them by adults.

My aim was to build a community of readers within my class who would spur each other on to read for pleasure and, in the process, get to know each other better, discover common interests and build relationships that I hoped would turn into friendships.

OUTLINE

In order to encourage the children to read for pleasure and to try and build friendships between them, I put the names of half the children in the class in a box every Monday morning and asked the other half of the class to choose a partner at random by picking out a name. The children were then encouraged to talk to their partner at break or lunchtime and try to find out as much as they could about them. Each child was then asked to bring in a book from home to lend to their partner that they thought they would enjoy, to be returned at the end of the week. Every Monday, the children would pick a different partner.

Some of the children swapped books with their partner more than once during the week and much discussion ensued about the books, both between partners and between established friends, who wanted to share what they had been lent that week.



OUTLINE CONTINUED

I wanted to achieve several things in doing this:

- to mix the children up and put them with other children who they didn't necessarily know well and that they might not have chosen to swap books with;
- to expose children to a wider range of books other than those in school and those that they possessed at home;
- to give them an insight into each other's characters and interests by allowing them to glimpse a little of what their partner was like and was interested in outside school;
- to encourage what Chambers (1993) calls "book gossip" (p.12) and Safford (2014) refers to as "inside-text talk" (p.96).



"Love means sharing what we like with the people we like. And this sharing helps populate the invisible citadel of our freedom" (Pennac, 2006, p.87-88).

IMPACT

Many of the children reflected on the fact that they got to know each other better through having a different partner to swap books with each week and that they enjoyed the process.

“I enjoy having a book friend because I made friends with more girls.” – Alana

“When I get to know other people, it makes me very happy.” – Tara

“It is nice to share with your friend and learn more things about her.” – Nancy

Jackie explored the relationship between sharing books and making friends when she commented that: “You could see where different books lead to...you know what other people like...you can find out more about who people are.”

Lara and Bella had not previously found much to read together.

Many of the children also mentioned that they did not get along well, but after sharing books they enjoyed encountering books that they had not read before. **Other, Lara exclaimed:**

“I made friends with Bella and it feels amazing.”

“We got to read some great books we might not have seen otherwise.” – Maria



IMPACT

Some children commented on the fact that being lent books by other girls increased their confidence and their enjoyment of reading.

“I enjoyed having a book friend because lending books to each other is fun and finding a book can be hard.” – Tara

“I enjoyed having a book friend because then I got new books to read.” – Cecilia

“It feels like I know what book I really like inside” - Lara learnt about her own reading preferences during this project; her classmates’ choices and opinions clarifying her ideas for her in a way that an adult’s could not.

When asked what it feels like to read a really good book, Annie replied:

“Great, great, great, great, great!” Her enthusiasm for reading was bubbling over and had changed so much since the start of the project, when she would have had to be told to choose a book from the shelf in the classroom to read.

Alice stated that she would prefer to share a book with a friend (over reading alone or being read to by an adult), **“So I can make new friends.”** Reading had become a social activity that children were starting to choose. I felt that this crossover from teacher-led learning activity to child-led social activity was really important.

REFLECTIONS ON IMPACT THE TEACHERS AS READERS RESEARCH HAD ON PRACTICE

- I have been interested for a while now in the idea of reading communities and this is the strand of of the Teachers as Readers research that I have focused on here. Mottram (2014) talks about how children, “...value themselves, and others, as readers” (p.108). This is what I sought to foster in the children I teach through encouraging them to swap books and get to know each other better.
- The Teachers as Readers research also emphasises the importance of teachers being aware of, “...the everyday reading habits and practices in the children’s lives” (Mottram, 2014, p.110). By encouraging the children to bring reading matter into school to share with others, I developed a greater awareness of what they enjoyed reading at home. Although this project refers to the children swapping books with each other, I made it clear to them that any kind of reading material would be welcome.

NEXT STEPS

- The children in my class have made it clear that they would like to continue to swap books with each other, discover new reading matter and build friendships in this way. When asked if they would like to continue, Chloe said, “We should do it all year.” If I had been in any doubt about continuing to facilitate the children in growing their friendships and reading for pleasure through this project, Hattie would have made up my mind for me when she said, “It’s very fun...it felt very happy.”
 - The correlation between reading for pleasure and building friendships that this project has brought to the fore makes me wonder about the way we choose books and the way in which we choose friends. I feel that there are areas of overlap here and I would like to investigate this further.
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NEXT STEPS CONTINUED

“There exists in our world an unusual, partly savage tribe, ancient and widely distributed” (Lurie, 1990, p.ix).

Adults are ‘other’ to children; we are not “insiders” (Meek 1998, p.22) to them. Even though we were once part of that tribe we cannot go back and re-enter it. In terms of my own role within the classroom, as a result of this and previous research projects that I have carried out (as well as my daily observations as a classroom teacher), I am increasingly convinced that it is largely my job to facilitate the children in taking charge of their own learning and in learning from each other – in short, to get out of the way. What they can achieve together and for each other as a tribe is so much more powerful than what I can offer them.

It makes me wonder - are children able to share and tell stories with and to each other on a level that is not accessible to adults? What is the significance of the listener/ storyteller relationship when both are children? These are areas that I would like to explore further.

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