

Beanstalk Volunteers' OU/UKLA Reading Group by Beanstalk Volunteers, Birmingham

Context

Beanstalk is a national children's reading charity which recruits, trains and supports volunteers to provide one-to-one reading support for children aged 3-13. As volunteers, we are placed in an educational setting and work with the same children throughout the academic year to improve reading ability, confidence and enjoyment of reading. Beanstalk has a number of reading support programmes available for different education settings, depending on the children's needs and setting's aims.

The volunteers in our OU/UKLA reading group in Birmingham work with children in different primary schools across the city and have been with Beanstalk between one and eight years. Some of us work mainly with children in years 5 and 6, and others across Key Stages 1 and 2.



OU Research inspiration and rationale

A UKLA survey revealed that whilst teachers are adult readers of fiction and recognise the imaginative value which literature can offer, their knowledge and use of children's literature is worryingly limited (Cremin et al. 2009).

Research suggests that with support teachers can widen their knowledge and use of children's literature, recognize a much wider range of texts which appeal to the young and take risks in their choices (Cremin et al., 2014).

We thought if that is the case for teachers, it is also likely to be true for volunteer reading helpers.

Aims

While we all work with different children in different schools, we discovered that we had a number of common aims we wanted to address in our reading group. These included:

- extending our knowledge of current children's literature, both books and authors
- finding books that would engage reluctant readers
- trying out picture books with KS2 children
- finding more non-fiction books.

Many of the children we work with find reading difficult and have become disinterested. It was really important to see if we could find new books and new ways of making reading exciting for them.

Outline and impact

As volunteers, we work with children of differing ages, reading ability and motivations. It was important that we could adapt what we were learning to the children and how we work with them. The following comments were made by the reading volunteers in our final evaluations and give a flavour of how some of the children felt about reading at the start of the year:

'When choosing a book to read, she would always look at how many pages there were and if there was too much text, she wouldn't even try it.'

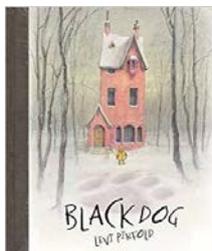
'When we started, her reading record said, 'Reading is boring!''

'The boy was truly disinterested and refused to open any picture books on the basis that they were 'too babyish.''

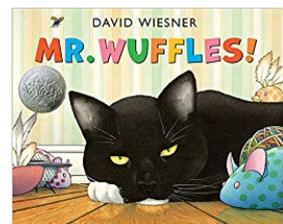
'I was working with a girl who was adamant she didn't like books. We looked at pop up books (these weren't considered by her as books).'

'They didn't like reading and couldn't see the point.'

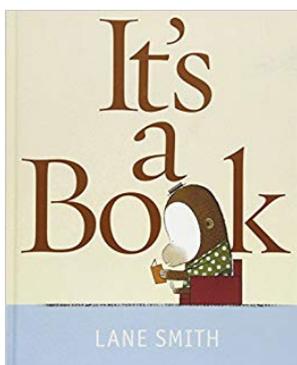
During our four meetings, led by Rebecca Kennedy from UKLA, we were given opportunities to explore new children's books that we hadn't seen before. Before each meeting, Rebecca identified a book which we were asked to find, read and share with our readers in school. These were picture books. In the meetings, Rebecca also shared a range of new texts with us. These included picture books for older children and more challenging books, dealing with current issues such as war and immigration. We had opportunities to browse and discuss these books with each other and Rebecca.

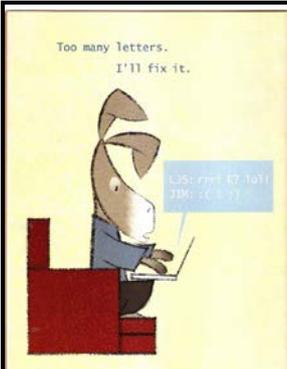


The reading group gave us confidence to try different books and use them in different ways because we had explored and discussed them with other adults beforehand. This is especially true for picture books for older children. There were two books we focused on for the sessions: *Black Dog* by Levi Pinfold and *Mr Wuffles* by David Wiesner, but we looked at a wide range of other books too. So many of these books can be read at different levels and offer a springboard for different conversations.



In our work with the children, we encourage children to select books they find interesting. But this sometimes means they don't know what to choose. Having a greater knowledge of books and authors gave us the opportunity to try out new books and different authors. Some comments from the reading volunteers:





'It's encouraged me to be more adventurous in my selection.'

After one meeting I chose It's a Book by Lane Smith. The children loved the voice of Jackass, Mouse and Monkey. The children even preferred the passage taken directly from Treasure Island to the computer translation.'

'When we read The Book with No Pictures. We had great fun - we took it in turns to read the black and coloured text; we used different voices and read it many times.'

It is without a doubt that our knowledge of newer children's books and authors has grown considerably. We have all discovered books we hadn't heard of or wouldn't necessarily have chosen in a library. We've been able to use these books in the sessions with the children and discovered different ways to engage a child in a book.

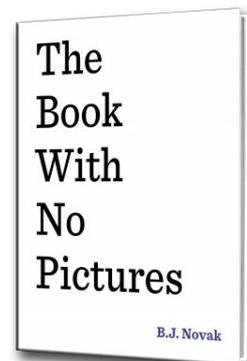
While children always enjoy the one to one time they have with their Beanstalk reading helper, the quality of books choices we now have has made a difference to their interest in books and reading. It's not just about reading the words – it's about discovering the story and enjoying it together.

Our group have commented:

'Her reading has improved considerably, with comments of new confidence and ability from her teacher and mother.'

'I love the laughter the stories evoke in the child and myself.'

'At the end of her third term, when completing her reading record, when I asked what she thought of reading, she replied 'I love reading now!'



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Although our knowledge is developing, there is still more to do so that we continue to widen our knowledge of children's literature, take risks with the books we share as volunteers and enrich our practice. The OU website, Research Rich Pedagogies provides a wealth of materials which can support us:

<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>.

Next year the group will continue to meet to discuss new children's literature from a wider range of genres. More meetings are planned, and Rebecca will once again lead us, introducing, guiding and supporting us to develop our subject knowledge of children's literature and our practice with children.