

Reading to Reflect on Ourselves: Teaching with ‘Can I Build Another Me?’

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Context



Park Primary School is a large community primary school located in Stratford, East London. Through our school values of Confidence, Creativity and Care, we try to prepare pupils to become well-rounded, thoughtful and successful individuals.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

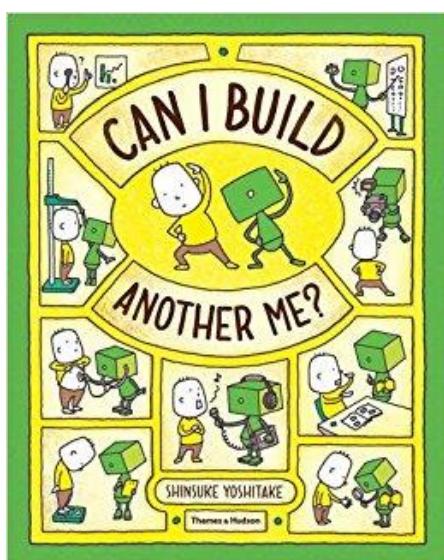
The strands of the TaRs research that most influenced the project were Strand 1 (Considerable knowledge of children’s literature and other texts) and Strand 3 (A Reading for Pleasure Pedagogy, focused on social reading environments).

One way in which we attempt to promote a love of reading is in our ‘*Thinking Through Texts*’ sessions, which are taught by the Assistant Headteachers whilst the teachers are on PPA. *Thinking Through Text* sessions are about deepening pupils’ engagement with high-quality texts, for the purposes of enjoyment, criticality and comprehension.

Aims

Most of my teaching experience to date has taken place in Year 4 classrooms, and I wanted to see the extent to which pupils are able to reflect on their identities through engaging with a brilliant text. ‘Social reading’ remains a quite unfamiliar notion in the school – work-in-progress – so the focus of this project is to get pupils questioning, interacting and reflecting on the book. The outcome – beyond the reading itself – is the production of a class book, in which all children produce their own versions of our favourite pages.

Outline



The book that is at the heart of this project is Yoshitake Shinsuke’s ‘*Can I Build Another Me?*’ (2016, Thames and Hudson). This beautifully illustrated book follows a little kid called Kevin who wants to avoid domestic chores, so he buys a robot, in the hope it could trick his family. The robot asks Kevin to tell him all about himself, his family, his likes and dislikes, the things he can and cannot do and so on, in order that the robot can best emulate him.

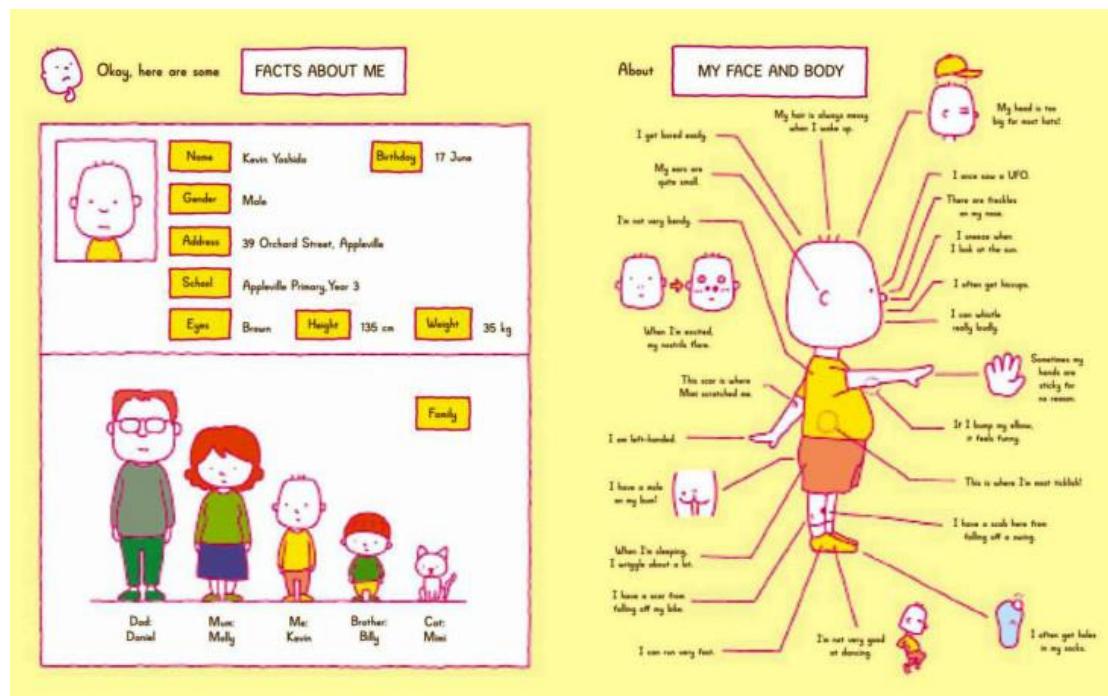
In each page, we learn a bit more about Kevin.

Shinsuke's style is so simplistic and cute, filled with humour, and all of the children were taken by the very idiosyncratic drawing style (which we recognised from Shinsuke's other texts).

Over the course of four lessons, which took place fortnightly, pupils had the chance to explore the book, to talk and reflect on how 'their' robot would be different, and to produce their own pages. The final lesson involved painting all of our sketches and putting the book together as a class.

In the first lesson, we just enjoyed going through the book, ensuring that everybody got the idea. We enjoyed talking about the comic book style, which was important for future lessons, where pupils would sketch their own reflections.

After reading the whole text together, we focused on the fantastic page showing a side-profile of Kevin, with all of his different body parts being labelled up.

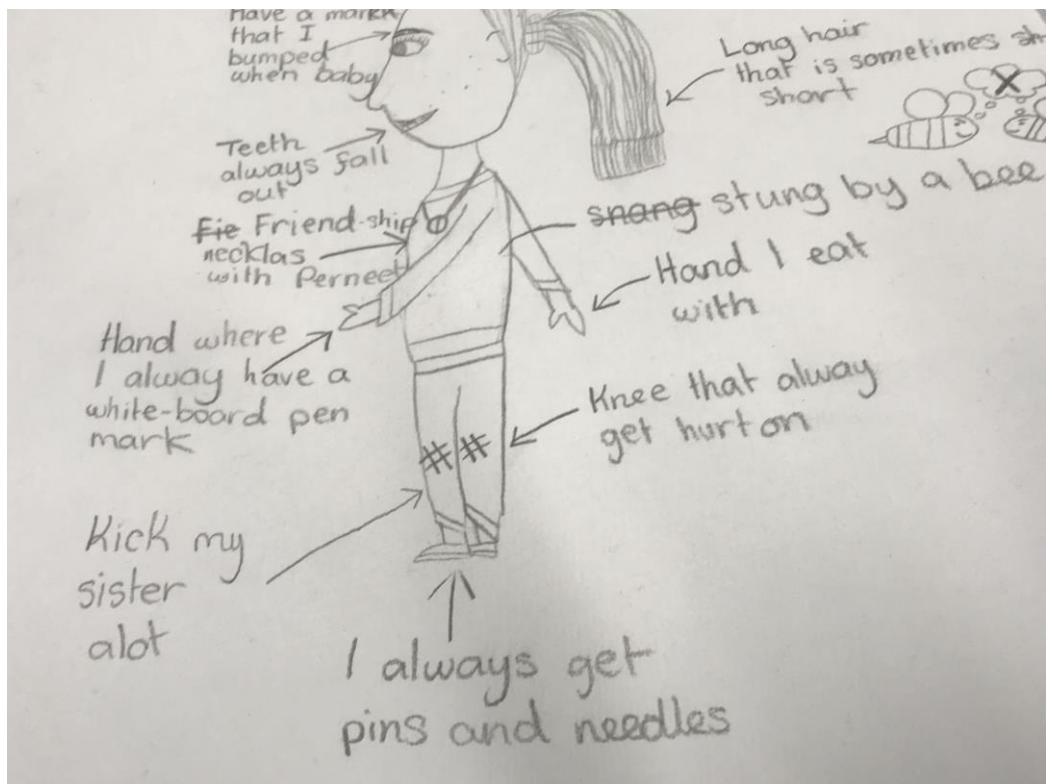


We picked out the fact that the label did not just identify the body part; each one hints at something that makes Kevin unique, or tells a quick anecdote about him. We then did the same ourselves, in a circle, following P4C style conventions. We shared stories first about our hands. I shared about doing a scissor kick during my first year of teaching, which caused me to break my arm – I showed my scars. Children began sharing their stories, and as time went on, they were focusing more on storytelling and listening. Stories were told about temporary tattoos, about henna designs, cuts and scars and the inability to stop biting fingernails.

This itself was really enjoyable, and we were genuinely learning new things about each other. No children were 'required' to share, but all were expected to listen and join in in this way.

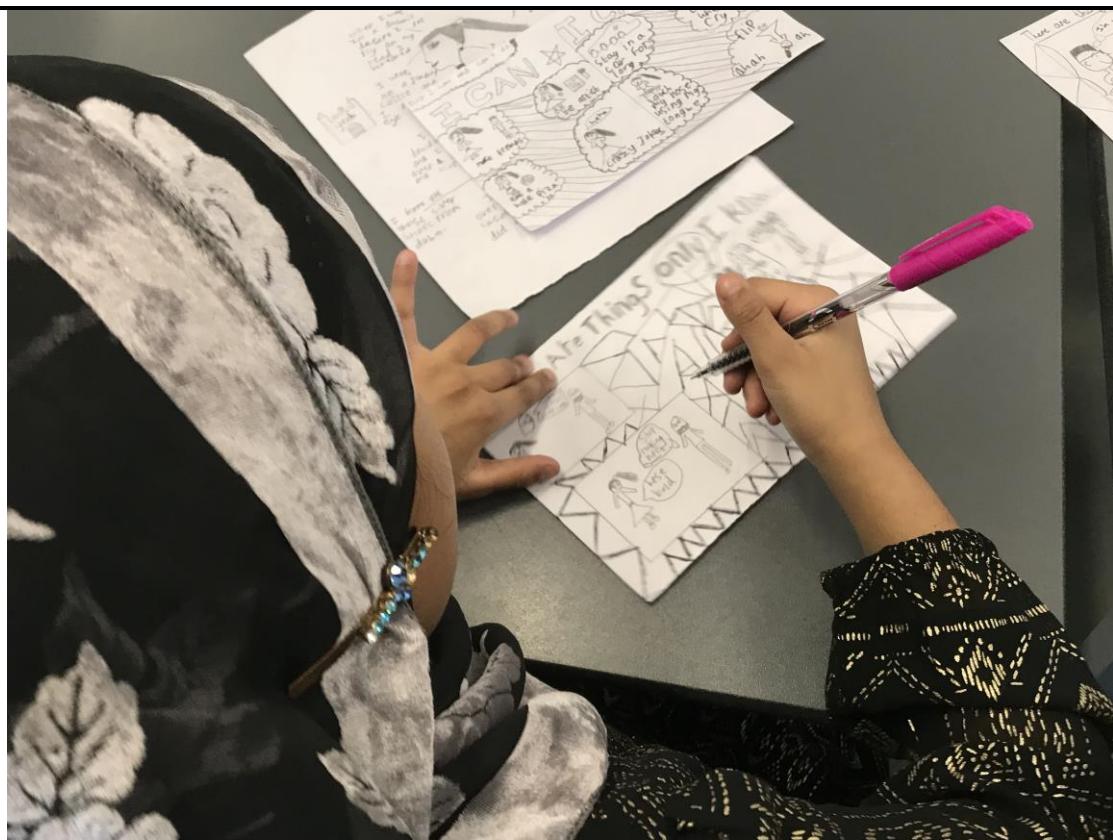
After this, we spent a bit of time looking at the style of Shinsuke as an artist, and each of us devised our own cartoon version of our selves. These cartoon versions would feature throughout all of our subsequent written and drawn work.

We then began producing our own version of the My Face and Body diagrams.



Over the following two lessons, we explored the book again and the classes selected their favourite pages. This time around, they favoured 'My Likes and Dislikes' and 'Things Only I Know'. With both of these, I shared a few ideas about how they might want to go about it and organise it (the page above is A4 size, and the Likes and Dislikes/Things Only I Know are each only A5 size), but the children had a lot of freedom to take it their own way.

Whilst the majority of the time was given over to the children talking, thinking and writing about their own Cartoon Body Picture, Likes/Dislikes and Things Only I Know', we did give over plenty of time for sharing great examples and hearing more stories. Unashamedly, we listened to some music and the children made requests.



The final lesson is one in which we all settled ourselves down to paint. Emulating the style of Yoshitake Shinsuke, we considered how effective it is that so few colours are used; tints of only three colours are used throughout the whole book. We decided that we would each like to choose our own three colours, but that we would stick to them.

Each of the three classes who took part produced their own book, which was named after their own class; we published '*Can We Build Another Brunel?*', '*Can We Build Another Berners-Lee*' and '*Can We Build Another Hawking?*'

Parents were then invited in to see the children's work, and the children visited classes lower down in the school to share their books.

Impact

I think that the most poignant impact of this project is not the production of a beautiful book – though these are lovely for the kids to have – but instead, it is the quality of talk about the texts of their lives that took place in the classroom throughout. The text is a fabulous hook (as are his other creations, such as *It Might Be An Apple*) and it captures pupils' attention pretty much immediately. It was incredibly accessible for all children to share stories about themselves, and it was easy to modify the questioning to ensure that pupils who were very new to English were able to take part.

Pupils listened very well to each other, and through regular peer sharing of the project, all children got the chance to learn about each other's lives. For me, as a teacher who visits each class for a couple of hours each fortnight, it really gave me a vivid picture of the children as people; our talk opened up discussions of religious identity and representation ("I've never seen a cartoon headscarf before") and family types (that there is no correct

way to ‘do family’ and that we all probably have different families in some way).

Pupils seemed taken aback by how many ideas could be generated by a quite simple text.

Thinking of the TaRs Strands, the project – and those being undertaken by my colleagues in Key Stage 1 and Upper Key Stage 2 – is a good way to flag up the benefits of an engagement with newly published texts beyond the obvious canon of children’s books. Good work could be done using Roald Dahl and other established celebrity authors, but given the flood of excellent books into the children’s literature market, it served as a good showpiece of the potential of the great new books being published.

In terms of creating a social reading environment, the project was firmly focused on the text, yet much of the work was oral. Even though pupils were each producing their own work, they really enjoyed discussing each other’s stories. Despite having a class that is made up of pupils from a range of different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds, this diversity of experience is rarely reflected in the diversity of ‘output’ in lessons. This project allowed children to share glimpses of their family life that they might not otherwise have been willing to share or to talk about. They were keen to support each other when they got writer’s block.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

This is the first time that I have taken a children’s book that I have enjoyed myself, and attempted to piece together a small unit of work around it myself. Truth told, I did not plan every element of it at the beginning, and I did allow it to develop in its own direction. The children were able to steer which parts of the book we would focus on, and this flexibility is not something I would ordinarily give them, if I am brutally honest. Similarly, it was the children who really wanted to paint, rather than use felt-tips or colouring pencils, and this also seemed to really motivate them. They feel like they owned the project, and this was something I can really learn from.

Thinking of future ideas, I want to continue bring as many new and interesting books into the classroom as possible, and will not shy away from trying new things, even if we are ‘going in blind’, creating our own learning journey from scratch.

I am certainly hoping to get more pupils involved in this project, and I think I will do it with Year 4 in 2018-19 right at the start of the academic year, as a way for them to get to know each other more quickly, and to support the development of new group dynamics.

The fantastic Yoshitake Shinsuke will continue to be a muse; we will explore ‘*It Might Be An Apple*’, ‘*What Happens Next?*’ and ‘*Still Stuck*’ with the intention of bringing more of his work into classrooms.