

Reading communities and 'books in common', Teresa Cremin

Are you a member of any reading communities?

Do you attend a local book group perhaps?

Or participate in the community of avid teacher-readers on Twitter?

And do you see yourself as a member of your classroom reading community?

Is there one?



Personally, I've been a member of the same book group for over 20 years and even though we moved away a decade ago, I still drive back each month. Our debates are often very vehement- some loved, some loathed *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara for instance (it is harrowing), but after our deliberations we live with our differences and move on. Whilst we spend time relating the text to our lives, sharing anecdotes, and discuss the author's intent, character construction, language, style and the cultural and historical context of the text, our personal and emotional responses receive *much* more airtime. We also connect the book to others we've read, invoking our 'books in common' as a group. And we drink a lot of wine! As adults and as readers we know each other well – a strong sense of connection and community exists. Possibly you recognise some of this?

In our research into reading communities in schools, both in *Teachers as Readers* and *Extracurricular Reading Groups* research (the latter were shadowing the Carnegie / Kate Greenaway Awards), we found that when the adults opened up as readers and shared their personal affective (not primarily pedagogic) responses, this helped them develop more authentic reader to reader relationships with younger readers.

In *Teachers as Readers*, (TaRs) when practitioners enriched their repertoires of children's literature, they found it easier to join in children's casual conversations about texts and were more able to skilfully book match and recommend books to individuals. Many also became more open and interested in receiving text recommendations from their students and the resultant, often relatively brief conversations, about the 'books in common' that they had swapped, prompted the sharing of life to text and text to life connections – human to human – not teacher to pupil. Over time, teachers noticed children exchanging more texts too and recognised the value of these emerging reader to reader networks.

In the *Extracurricular Reading Groups* research we observed the strong relationships which the predominantly secondary school librarian leaders had with students in their groups. The Carnegie shortlist created a set of 'books in common' which became the focus of deep discussion. These groups also made myriad personal responses and used the opportunity to debate wider questions about families, society and the world. This discussion was rarely initiated by the adults present and almost never led by them; the

young people tended to raise their own questions, debate and argue about the words and the world, and, through this, their views, values and feelings came to the fore.

This was in marked contrast to the English classrooms from which many of the group members came; the reading sessions there were framed by teachers' questions about the class set text. The young people expressed strong views about the differences: they repeatedly told us that in the English classroom due to assessment *'there is no choice'*, you need to *'hold back'*, and have to *'watch what you say'* or *'you'll be marked down'*. This surely constrains not only comprehension, but their capacity to make connections, both with the text and with other readers.

In the extracurricular sessions, students felt they could voice their views and *'say what we really think'*. In this context relationships could be, and often were, rather different. School librarians positioned themselves as co-readers and many of the teachers who attended came as readers too. Students noticed that some were *'less teacher-like'* in the group and commented that teachers were *'more relaxed here'*, *'she reads the books too'* and *'she like- treats us like a friend – like someone we can talk to'*. This meant that the young people felt they were freer to voice their divergent opinions and could take the time to explore their own issues and affective responses in this trusted community of readers.

It isn't easy in the classroom to make the time to talk informally about texts, to engage in two-way recommendations as the TaRs teachers did and then to respond to a child about the 'book in common' you've both chosen to read. But if we want to build communities of readers then it's essential we position ourselves as fellow readers and seize informal opportunities to engage in such significant book blether. Initially the young may assume we're going to ask endless questions to check their understanding of a character or specific vocabulary, but if we're authentically engaged as readers, they'll soon come to realise that we're genuinely interested in their personal thoughts, feelings and views. We can offer our own opinions too and seek to help our students recognise that conflicting views and diverse opinions are normal, healthy, interesting and inevitable. Reading communities are characterised by reciprocity, interaction and difference, not by conformity.



We can also seek to capitalise upon the potential of 'books in common' through informal, non-assessed discussions emerging from book swaps, book groups or reading aloud for instance. Some texts, as in adult book groups, are more affectively engaging and memorable than others, but many have the potential to create bonds between different pairs and groups of readers if we open up space for relaxed book blethering.

Books which we live through together for the sole purpose of shared enjoyment represent a rich resource for conversation, for connection and for spinning webs of

reader relationships. Such 'books in common' nurture our pleasure in reading and play a particularly resonant role in helping build communities of engaged readers.

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This blog was first published on the NAAE site.