

# Creating a Reading Community in an Infant School

By Amanda Watkin



## Context



- My name is Amanda Watkin. I teach at Thurnham Infant School in Bearsted, a leafy suburb of Maidstone in Kent. I am the Year Group Leader for Year 2 and have led English in the school for over 7 years.
- We are a three-form entry school, rated Outstanding by Ofsted, with a high standing in the local community. Parental support is excellent and we have a relatively low percentage of SEN and Pupil Premium children.
- Traditionally reading is very strong in our school, with excellent KS1 SATs results. However, I was concerned that this could lead to complacency and with the ever-present prospect of Ofsted Deep Dives into Reading, we decided that the time had come to update our reading books. During the previous year, we had updated our phonically decodable books, both for group reading in school and for children to take home and we were now confident that we have an excellent selection of books to help children 'learn to read'.
- Our next task was to update and review the books children read for pleasure. Previously, children chose books from book banded boxes in each classroom. However, many books were randomly banded and felt old and tired. I wanted to allow children a completely free choice of reading books to take home, either for them to read to themselves or for an adult to read to them. I did not want children's choice of books to be constrained by their reading ability. So our aim was to provide a rich selection of more up to date and varied books, as well as the classics, for children to share at home and in school. We hoped this would encourage a love of books and stimulate imagination, creating more of a reading community between school and home.
- We also hoped that by stimulating imagination through providing a wider range of books, this would feed into writing, which is a slightly weaker area for us, and one which has been highlighted on our School Improvement Plan (SIP) for several years.

## OU Research inspiration and rationale

- I started attending a Reading for Pleasure (RfP) group during Lockdown 2021. I wasn't sure what to expect at first, but I found a group of like-minded teachers who were all passionate about reading and keen to share ideas and practice. I enjoyed reading the suggested research, especially **Reading communities: why, what and how? by Teresa Cremin (2019)**
- I had already realised that many of us in school needed to update our knowledge of recent children's literature. I therefore started my research around the OU research area of **knowledge of children's literature and other texts** (Teachers as Readers (TAR) Strand 1).
- However, I also felt that I needed to know more about our **children's reading practices** (TAR 2) at home, so that we could help provide appropriate support to parents.
- I hoped that by basing my project around these two areas, I would be able to -
  1. *help parents in their efforts to support reading, by providing appropriate information about how to help children read at home,*
  2. *find out what type of books the children enjoy, to help us in our choices of new books for school.*
  3. *share information about new and award -winning authors with staff, as well as information about more culturally and socially diverse books and authors, to enable us to provide a wider range of both fiction and non-fiction books.*

## Aims

Based on the Teacher's Reading Research and our SIP, I identified the following aims –

- Find out how and what children are reading at home, by sending a survey to parents.
- Seek to improve staff knowledge and awareness of up-to-date children's literature.
- Raise funds to buy new books.
- Be brave and remove all tatty and out of date books from class libraries.
- Restock class libraries with new reading for pleasure books for children to share in school and to take home.
- Encourage a love of reading so that children want to read at home, stimulating their imagination, so feeding into their writing in school.



## Outline

- My first job was to **explain the project to staff**, which I did in several Staff Meetings.
- I then set up a **WhatsApp group** to share book ideas. This has been well used by staff. An off-shoot of this is that a staff book swap has been set up by another member of staff.



- All classes then set about **clearing out all old books**, feeling a bit embarrassed about the state of some of our book boxes. We debated what to do with these. Could we raise money from them? We finally decided to let children have a free choice of the books to take home to keep.



- I then created and **sent a parental questionnaire** to 270 parents, using Microsoft Forms. We had 129 responses with useful and helpful comments. Outcomes were shared with staff and we immediately identified and sorted out an issue with some home reading. The survey showed only 34% of the children read to themselves every day, 41% read to an adult every day but 74% of those who responded read to their child every day. Parents are keen to encourage a love of stories but how could we encourage children to read to themselves for pleasure at home as well as reading to an adult? The biggest challenge to reading at home was time, with 56% of parents saying they don't have time to read with their child. We therefore need to find a way to encourage infant aged children to read alone and develop their own pleasure in reading.



### Thurnham Reading Questionnaire 2021

Amanda Watkin

129 responses

#### 4. How often does your child read to themselves?



#### 5. How often does your child read to you?



#### 6. How often do you read aloud to your child?



- Next we organised a whole school **Fundraising Day** – Wear Something Silly for April Fool's Day. We raised just over £1000, so allowing each class an initial sum of about £100 to spend on new Reading for Pleasure books.
- We shared ideas about recently published books, culturally diverse books and books showing different family structures – as suggested by our School Improvement Officer.
- Each class then enjoyed choosing new books and sharing them with the children. Here are some of our new selections –



## Impact

- The children have really loved sharing the new books and have been excited to read them in class and to take them home.
- They have been very excited to be allowed to choose any book to take home, rather than only ones chosen to match their reading ability. Some have said 'can I really take this one?'
- Parents have also been inspired by the new books, sometimes asking if we have the sequel in school, or any others by the same author, as their child has enjoyed the book so much.
- The comment below is from a parent of a very reluctant reader -

*I know you are not giving out books as so close to end of term but there are two books in the Winnie series that I.... would like to read that I wondered if he could borrow Wednesday and return definitely by Friday as a special request. One is Winnie and a computer if you have it? He would have to tell you the other one. I wouldn't normally ask but he is starting to want to read!*

This is a comment from the parent of a 7-year-old who enjoyed her early introduction to Shakespeare –

*I..... read Macbeth very well, particularly the second time, though her review of the story was that it was "gross"! It actually led her to ask a couple of very thoughtful questions on things like living with guilt (or not living with it in the case of Lady Macbeth!)*

- Some previously very reluctant readers have been photographed at home choosing to read for pleasure –



- Parents have given more time to sharing books with their children and reading seems to have become a family activity for many –

*E.... read 'The fleas who fight crime'. She did a great job with this book as it had lots of tricky big words to pronounce. We all enjoyed it!*

*Daddy and E.... found this book interesting. E.... partly because William Caxton was born in Kent, and Daddy because coincidentally he was doing some work for CERN in the week. (So learning about all the work Tim Berners-Lee did while he was at CERN was quite useful!) When she was reading, E..... used the glossary herself to understand the meanings of words she wasn't sure of - and there were quite a few in this book. Felt it was a very educational read on many levels!*

- Some classes have already introduced some timetabled Reading for Pleasure time in school to allow children to interact with each other when reading the books. It is lovely to see children lying on the floor, chatting with friends and sharing books. I am hoping to introduce this across the school next year.
- Teachers and other staff have enjoyed reading the new books to the children as a class or in small groups. It has encouraged many of us to look for more diverse books, as well as more up to date books. Story time has once again become the highlight of the day!

## Reflections

- We all feel that the project has revitalised reading in school and at home.
- Staff have been really excited to be given the opportunity to clear out old books and begin to restock. We have all been inspired by the choice of new books available and it has been lovely to see everyone getting excited when the next parcel of books arrived in school!
- We plan to continue to restock the books when funding allows.
- Allowing children a free choice of books has really inspired them to choose challenging books, and to talk to each other about book selections.
- The parental questionnaire gave some really useful feedback about reading at home and book selections. This enabled me to send some more targetted information about reading at home, which was well received.
- Whether this will have an impact on writing in school remains to be seen, but a community of children and parents being inspired to read together feels like a big step in the right direction.