

Little Things Can Make a World of Difference!

Western Community Primary School

Mrs Frances Howe

Context



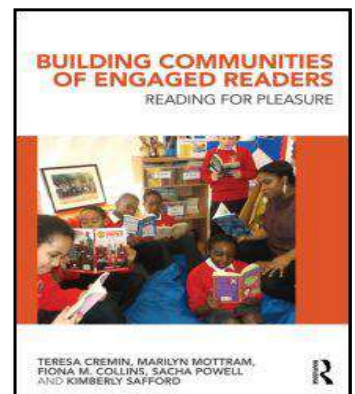
Western Community Primary School is an average sized primary school in Wallsend, North Tyneside. We have a mixed demographic and a strong sense of belonging and community in our school. Our school is passionate about books and have worked with Seven Stories (The National Centre for Children's Books) to plan our whole curriculum around the seven story plots. Stories are at the very heart of all that we do.



OU Research inspiration and rationale

One of the key recommendations from the UKLA Teachers as Readers (TaRs) report (Cremin et al, 2008) was for schools to develop equivalent reading relationships between staff, pupils and family members. Whilst as a school we place high value on reading, I was interested to see if by focussing my efforts on building a reading community in my classroom I could help shape children's reading identities.

I chose to focus on 'Reading for Pleasure Pedagogy' and 'Reading Communities' for this research.



Aims

The aims of this research was to

- Raise the profile of Reading in the classroom
- Make a conscience effort to engage in meaningful conversations about the books children were reading.
- Increase opportunities for children to read aloud
- Strengthen links between home and school reading.

Outline

Inspiring Interest

I started by asking my children about their favourite books and authors. We then created a class author alphabet. I used this to get an insight into the books the children were enjoying and interested in and also to help inform me of any literature I may not be aware of. I noticed that many of the books children gave as examples in the author's alphabets were texts we had read in school. None of the children mentioned any poets.

I then went to the library and picked out books by the authors children were enjoying or ones that were similar in style or



themes. Children were then allowed to pick one reading book from this selection to go alongside their school reading book. They were quickly able to distinguish between the books, understanding that one was for practising their reading, whilst the other was purely for enjoyment. I shared Quentin Blake's 'The Rights of the Reader' with my class and talked to them about how it was ok to put down a book we weren't enjoying and choose another.

To bridge the gap in children's enjoyment of poetry, we began to read a poem a day and I introduced a wider range of poetry books into the classroom.

I also applied to the Book Trust who donated a copy of the book 'The Night Bus Hero' by Onjali Rauf to each child in the class so that children could read along with our class reader. I also noticed that it made it easier for them to read aloud as they had the text in front of them.

Small tweaks were made to our class reading for pleasure sessions so that they were more informal and gave the children more freedom to interact. I also encouraged children to recommend books to friends. I began to seek out opportunities throughout the day to have meaningful conversations with children about the books they were reading. When I was changing the children's reading books, I also chose to talk to them about the books they were reading at home or for enjoyment instead of just focusing on their school books



Bridging the Gap between Reading at Home and Reading at School

I carried out a questionnaire with three children (focus group). I found that whilst they did like reading in school, they chose to do other activities at home. I also sent out a questionnaire to the parents of the children. The results showed that one of the children did not have access to a wide

range of books at home and another had lots of variety but Mum could not get them to engage. Nearly all of the parents said that the children do not see them reading as often as they would like and confirmed that the children chose other activities over reading. This highlighted the importance of me being a role model for reading in the classroom.

The children always have access to high quality story books in school but for these children I added in another level - they would spend some time reading the book with me and be able to take it home. Each week we set aside some time to read the book with myself or another adult in school. We discussed the books the children had chosen before they took them home to share with their family. We spent time discussing the story, exploring background knowledge of themes, events and characters, and exploring the vocabulary. We also took turns in reading aloud the story to each other. At the beginning of the session before they changed their books, there was time to feedback and say what they liked or didn't like about the books.

I also took time to check in with the parents at home times to see if they had enjoyed the books and to just have an informal chat about the books their child was enjoying.



Impact

Impact on Children in the Focus Group

One of the children found reading an incredibly difficult task and he chose to engage in activities other than reading at home. When I spoke to him initially he could not name his favourite book, he said he didn't know any. Things have really changed for him now. He can now name at least three books he loves, all of which are books he took home as part of this research. He began to put his books on my desk and ask if he could change them earlier. I even started to see him reading independently and most importantly enjoying the process! As he was reading he began to ask me what words meant and talk to his friends about the books he was reading. The most memorable thing he asked was if he could take a book home for his sister so he could read to her. His Mum also informed me that she 'looked forward to reading as a family.' His reading age has increased by three years and the small changes we made have been so significant in his reading identity and progress.



Another girl from the group was a confident reader but did not engage in reading at home despite Mum's best efforts. She could name a couple of books that she enjoyed but often chose to stick to the same author. She was thrilled that she was able to take books home from school and this really encouraged her to read. She also began asking me to change her books more than I anticipated, showing me she was really motivated to read them. On a number of occasions, she even had the confidence to tell me if she hadn't enjoyed the books, which was a real breakthrough. I was delighted when she started to bring books in from home to share with her friends in our reading for pleasure sessions and I also noticed she began reading some books her friends had recommended to her. Her reading aloud skills have developed significantly and this is something we worked on in our book discussions. I also noticed that she is reading more widely and sometimes choosing a non-fiction or poetry book to take home, whereas she would have only taken home a fiction book at the beginning.

When I reflected on the surveys taken initially and the surveys conducted at the end of the study, I could clearly see that the children's attitudes towards reading were becoming more positive and that there was

evidence to support the strengthening between children's home and school worlds.

When asked if they like reading at the beginning of the research, the responses showed that they clearly linked reading to their learning at school or indicated that they were unsure on how to respond to the question.

"It's kind of fun but sometimes the writing is too small."

"Sometimes I think it's boring, sometimes I think it's alright."

"You can learn new stuff in a book."

I asked children to respond to the question again and their response were much more positive and that they were making early connections as seeing reading as a pleasurable activity.

"It is fun and when you're bored you can read something."

"It is fun reading at school and it gives me a break from work."

"It's relaxing."

Initially, the children said they did not read at home but all of the children in the focus group could now name an adult they enjoyed reading with at home and could also name some of their favourite books. All of the children have an increased confidence in reading and see themselves as 'good readers'.

Impact on Class as a Reading Community

There is a lot of meaningful talk around books and children are recommending books to each other. I have also had parents approaching me to ask if it's ok for their child to share a book they have enjoyed at home with another child. It's great to see book swaps happening with the children

14. What is your teacher reading aloud to you?
"The Night Bus Hero"

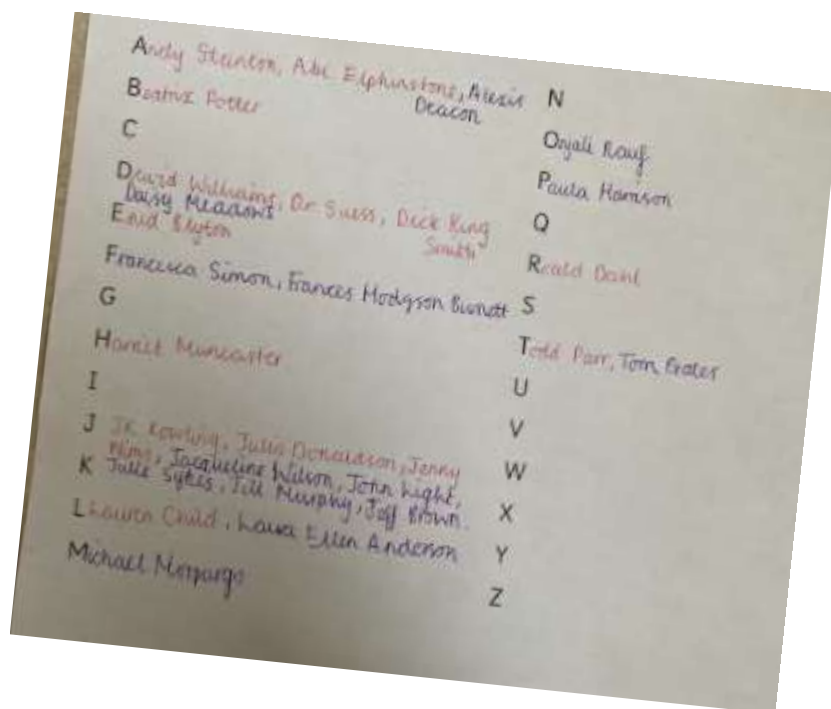
15. Do you like it when your teacher reads aloud?
 (Tick one box)

I love it ☒ It's okay ☐ I'm not bothered ☐ I don't like it ☐

Why do you think this is?
"Because Mrs Howe does funny voices and acts things out when she's reading to us"

based on their own recommendations. I am also actively recommending authors to children and discussing these. One parent thanked me for my recommendations and said her child had asked for her to download more books by the author to her kindle. Children are also recording some of the books they are reading in their reading logs and tell me about the events and characters. It is becoming much more a dialogue of reading rather than just a reading record.

Children are building on their knowledge of authors and we are updating our author alphabet regularly.



As I mentioned earlier we placed more emphasis on poetry in the classroom by reading a poem a day. I have noticed a handful of children choosing poetry books and one girl even asked if I had anymore as she was enjoying them so much.

Reading aloud is now much more of a class effort; rather than me reading aloud to the children. This has been really helped by the donation of the books from the Book Trust and every child now has their hands on a copy when we are reading. The children are actively practising read aloud skills such as phrasing and expression. I have observed them doing this in their own reading time too. One girl was even practising her reading aloud skills in her recent assessment paper!



Our reading for pleasure sessions are very informal in their nature and the children enjoy these. They can choose to read inside or outside and often read in small groups. This is a shift from the previous trends when they would choose to share with a partner or read on their own. We have used the iPads to record recommendations and watch these back at the end of the session.

Impact on Wider School Community

We also incorporated a 'masked reader teacher' into World Book Day for the whole school and I chose poetry as a focus for this. This was great as children listened to a variety of poems, saw their teachers as readers and also were given an opportunity to talk about the poems they enjoyed and which ones they didn't.

I have arranged lots of virtual author visits throughout the year from Reception upwards. The author alphabet I conducted with my own class told me that children need to actively build on their knowledge of authors and these were a great opportunity to hopefully inspire children to read something new. These will be ongoing to help children to continue to be exposed to new authors. It also means that teachers are developing their knowledge too.



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Our school already had built firm foundations for a strong reading culture and our whole curriculum is based around the seven story plots. We have worked closely with Seven Stories (The National Centre for Children's Books) to help ensure our children are exposed to high quality texts and to build on teacher's knowledge of children's literature.

What this research highlighted, is that the smallest changes to practice can make a world of difference to our children's reading identities and creating a reading community. By taking the time to evaluate our practice and listening to the children we can truly help shape their reading journey. The transformation in attitudes and the reading culture in my classroom has been phenomenal. I can truly say the children in my class love to read and that they do see me as a role model for reading. The evidence from surveys within the focus group and other evidence mentioned showed that we are on our way to building strong connections between children's home and reading worlds. I now have the tools I need to help support my children and I look forward to working on embedding these further.

Next Steps

Due to the current restrictions in relation to COVID-19, we have been limited to how we can share information with staff. In the next academic year I am looking forward to working with the wider school community to help share my knowledge and continue to build a reciprocal reading community. I also know that the tweaks I made are effective in strengthening home and school connections for children and I look forward to seeing how this supports other reluctant readers in school.