

Better Together

Rob Laight
@articulaight

I work at The Coppice Primary School, Wythall.

My school is found in Worcestershire, on the border of Birmingham, Solihull and Bromsgrove. I have worked at The Coppice for the last eight years.

I spend my days teaching Year Six — and have done for the last six years. I am also the Assistant Headteacher of the school with responsibility for leading reading and writing (amongst other things).

Both parts of my job presented advantages when planning to make changes to practice in order to improve the culture:

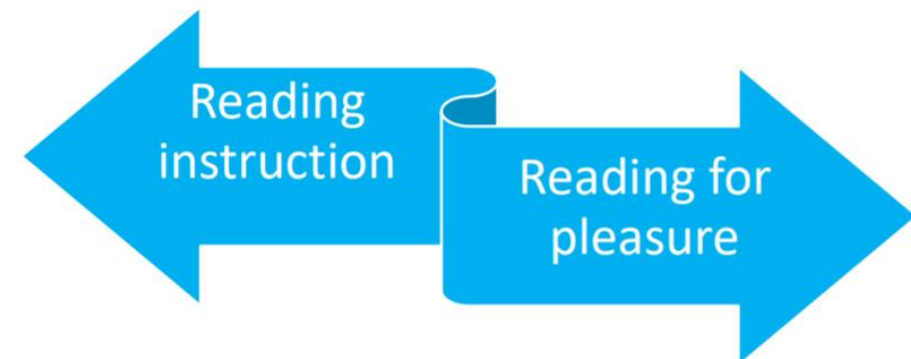
- Teaching Year 6 gave me perspective for diagnosing ‘the problem’ — I was able to see what kind of readers our school produced by the end of their time with us and observe how this had changed over time.
- Being English leader meant that I was able to secure vital ‘buy in’ from the leadership team when it came to making decisions about timetabling and how that time should be used.



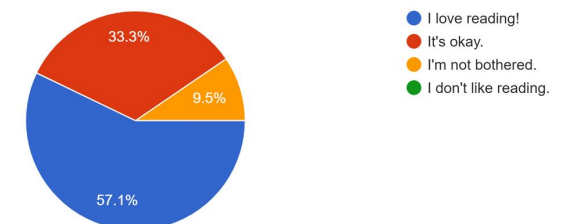
By some measures, Coppice has long been a successful reading school.

We have long been a school that has produced proficient readers. Our outcomes have been consistently above the national average and the average for our local authority and reading instruction has been a priority for teacher CPD for many years.

However, when evaluating the reading culture in our school, **I couldn't say hand-on-heart that we had achieved a successful culture of reading for pleasure (RfP)**. Too many of our children — certainly too many for my liking — *could* read, but did not choose to. Observations around school and conversations with children revealed that **reading was seen as important and valuable for learning, but not something to relish or treasure**. This was reinforced by the responses to my class reading survey — 40% of my class, who are mostly very enthusiastic learners — said that reading was 'okay' or that they were 'not bothered'. As someone who loves reading, I wanted all of my students to see reading as much more than 'okay'.

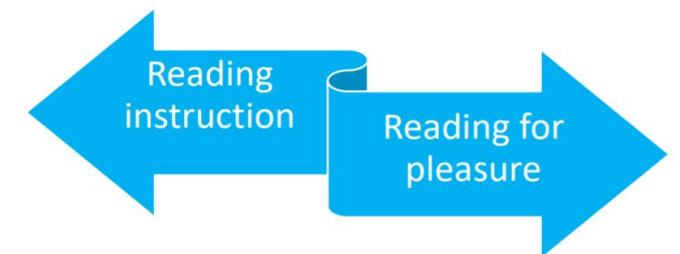


1) Do you like reading?
21 responses



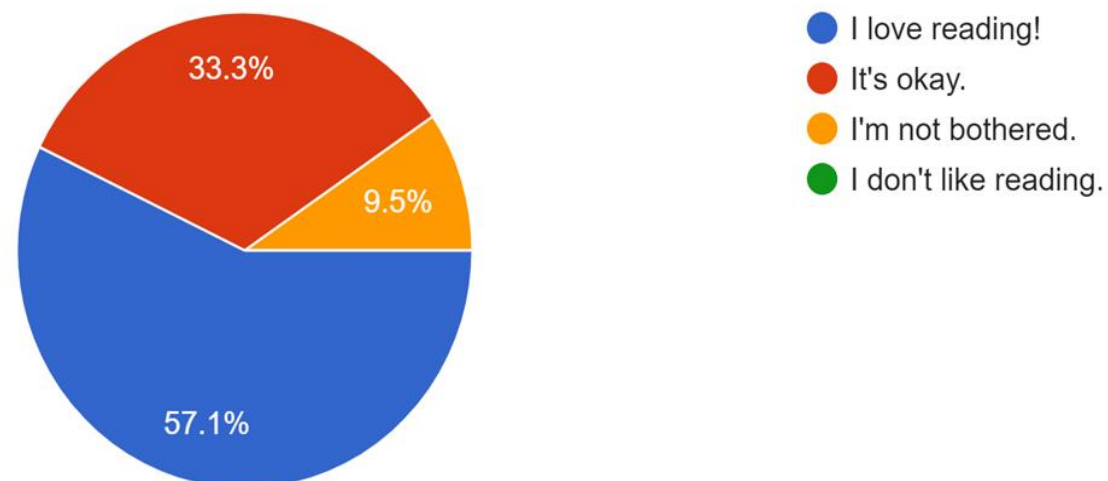
By some measures, Coppice has long been a successful reading school.

From this I (along with the rest of the SLT) drew the conclusion that change was necessary. **Until we harnessed the power of RfP, our school's achievement in reading would have a ceiling.** Beyond that, we were making 'school-time readers', not 'lifetime readers'. Encountering the research of Cremin et al., (2019) came at just the right time.



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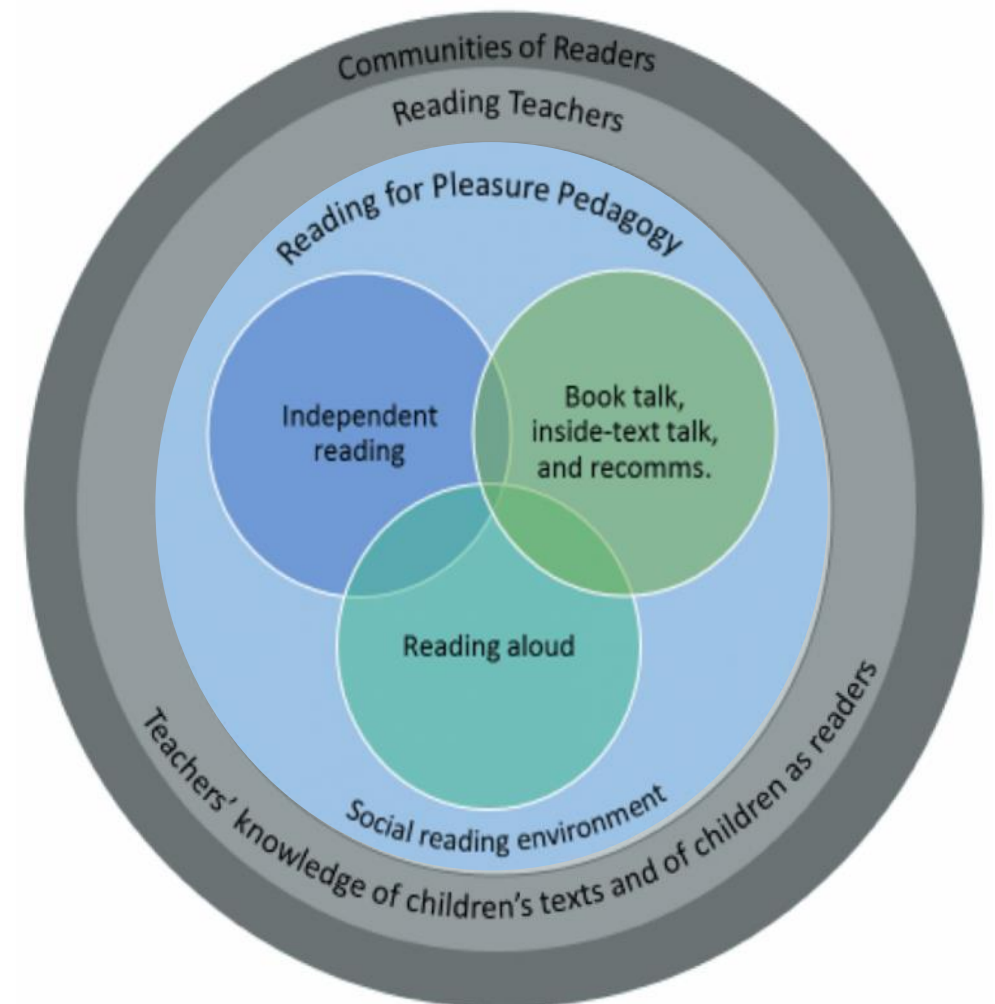
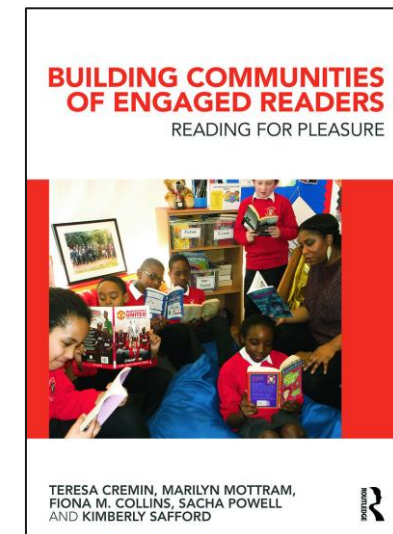


The Teachers as Readers (TaRs) project was the inspiration for my work.

I first encountered the TaRs project through engagement with the OU RfP Twitter community, which led to me joining a teacher research group.

While **recognising the importance and interconnectedness of the research insights**, I chose to focus my development work on reading for pleasure pedagogy - especially **'book talk, inside-text talk and recommendations'** (Cremin et al., 2014).

Focusing on RfP pedagogy allowed me to build upon previous development work about teachers' knowledge of literature and knowledge of children as readers.



“Reading for pleasure is more closely associated with **intrinsic motivation**; it is reading that children do for themselves at their own pace, with whom they choose and in their own way.”

...much depends upon the extent to which these pedagogic practices are LIST, that is:

- **Learner- led**
- **Informal**
- **Social and with**
- **Texts that tempt.**

“If as teachers we hold the reading reins too tightly and don’t ensure that our reading for pleasure pedagogy is reader-led, reader-directed and reader-owned, we will never **create communities of engaged readers.**”

“**Sustained time in school needs to be set aside for reading, alone and with others**, for hearing narratives, poetry and nonfiction, and **for book talk and recommendations** through responsive use of this pedagogy.”

“The 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**’ **play a particularly resonant role in helping build communities of engaged readers.**”

I sought to develop pedagogic practices that are **learner-led, informal and social** with **texts that tempt**.

- To **increase time for book talk, inside-text talk and recommendations** in my Year 6 class
- To help my class to increase their knowledge of their 'books in common'
- To help children in my class make informed, meaningful reading choices through increasing their knowledge of books and through **using peer recommendations**
- To reignite the motivation to read in a small group of my class (who had fallen into a bit of a 'reading rut') through **social relationships** and interactivity.

Creating the conditions: daily sustained time for independent, volitional reading.

Before I began my RfP project, an important step had already been taken that allowed this development work to happen and to be successful.

We had long **wanted our children to read independently every day**, but this had remained just that — a *want*, which was dependent on the motivation of the reader, their access to books and the reading environment at home. **We realised that while we couldn't control whether the children read for pleasure every day, we did have control over five days of reading.**

Heavily influenced by the research in '*Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure*' by Cremin et al. (2014), we changed the timetable of all of our Key Stage Two classes so that **every school day started with a minimum of 20 minutes of independent reading** (*because our children couldn't mix on the playground due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this expanded to 30 minutes for UKS2*).

We also reflected on the subtle messages our children had been receiving about independent reading time over the years: it was often a sporadic activity; the time given was often too short to really 'get into' a book; the teacher was often getting other jobs done during this time; **reading had often been pitched as a silent and solitary pursuit, rather than a social activity.**

Creating the conditions: daily sustained time for independent, volitional reading.

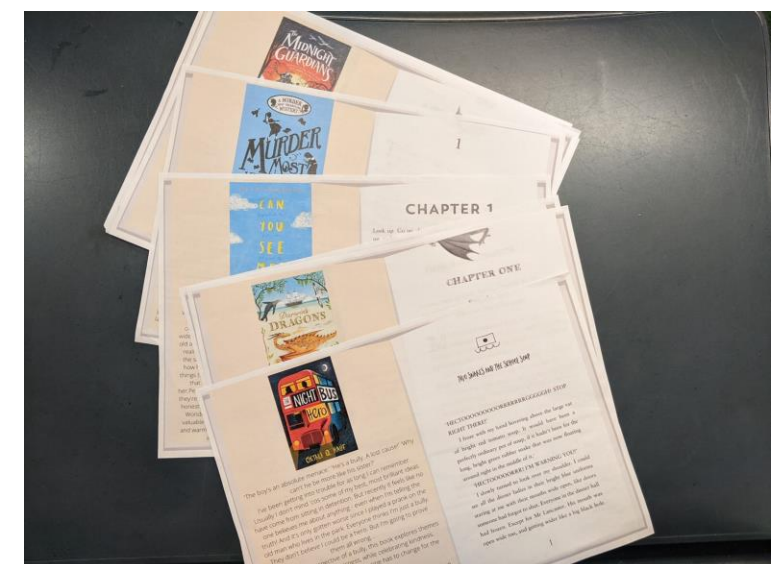
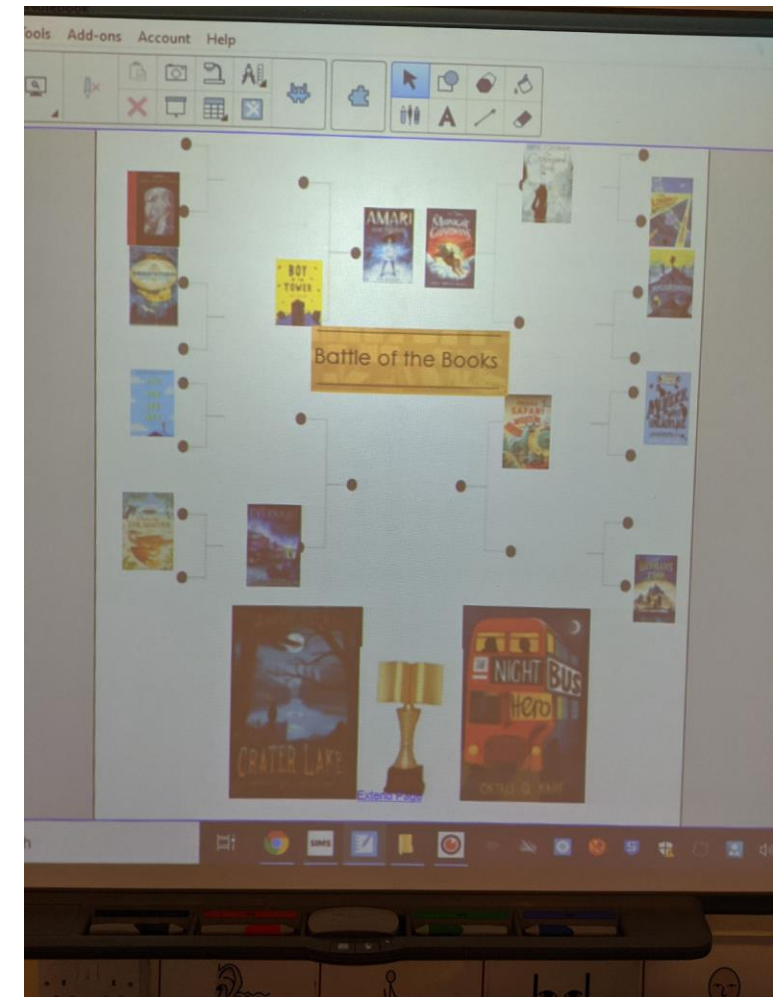
During our new independent reading time, **children were not expected to read alone or in silence** — though they could and many did on plenty of occasions. Time could also be used to **talk about what they were reading, to read books together and to take the time to browse unhurriedly** and make informed choices about what to read next, including the giving and receiving of recommendations. Teachers received training to recognise the value of this time on the timetable — **talking to children about their reading, making bespoke recommendations or even reading themselves** in these sessions. We began to take reading for pleasure more seriously and had more fun as a result.

It all started with *'The Battle of the Books'*.

The primary purpose (and the purpose that I shared with the children) of Battle of the Books was to choose a new class book to read aloud.

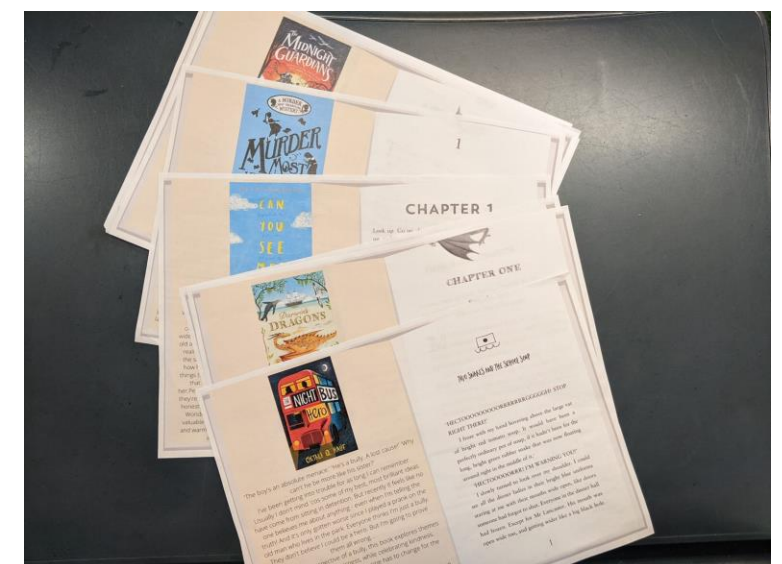
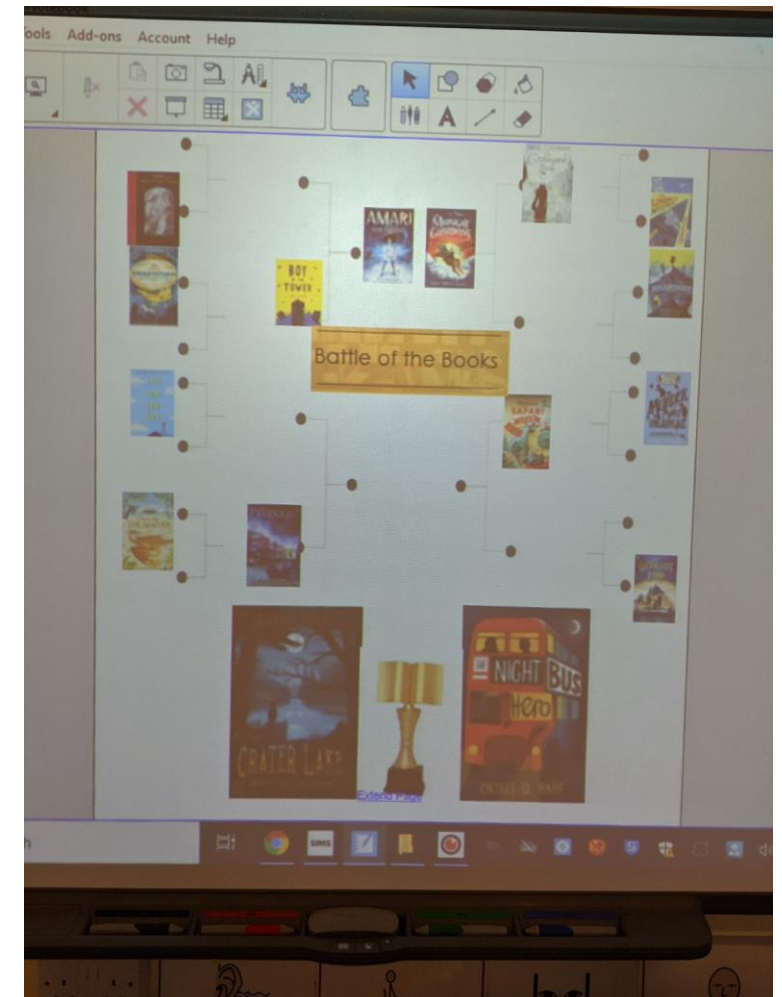
However, it also served different proximal purposes:

- It allowed the children to **read a snippet of some of the different books on offer** in the class library, allowing them to make **more informed choices** about what to read beyond just liking the way the cover looked. Once we reached the semi-final stage, I read each chapter one to the class so they could see how they enjoyed it as a book for our read aloud time.



It all started with *'The Battle of the Books'*.

- During the sessions, my TA and I circulated in the class to talk with the children: while they were reading and considering the books on offer, **we spoke with every child to gather information about their reading personalities** — how they like to read, what they like to read and the reasons why.
- Some of the books featured in the session were not books that I owned; with a finite budget for new purchases, I told children that their opinions would help to inform which books I would buy for the class library in the coming term. To facilitate this, **I created the resource to the right, which used reviews and first pages from *Authorfy* and *LoveReading4kids* to give children a 'taster' of a number of contemporary books.**
- *The Battle of the Books* was an enjoyable activity in itself!



It all started with *'The Battle of the Books'*

Battle Book
I really liked Battle of the books because it allowed all of the children to choose the book that they desired. Even if the book they wanted didn't get chosen, that ^{would} just encourages them to buy the book. Also it is nice to hear different stories in one day. By Lewis 6L

Maisie L
I was really intrigued when we did the battle of books because now I have a really big list of books that I can't wait to read. I also found it really exciting because we get to read a new class book.

I enjoyed 'The battle of the books' because we got lots of opportunities to read 16 blurbs & 1st chapters. I wrote down multiple books I would LOVE to read! At the end, we came to an excellent decision of Crater Lake!
Lara

Battle of the Books!
I LOVE battle of the books because it gives us a chance to taste different types of books so we can decide what to read. This time, Crater Lake won by 14 votes to 13 votes. I love this because you get to decide what book the class read instead of the teacher.
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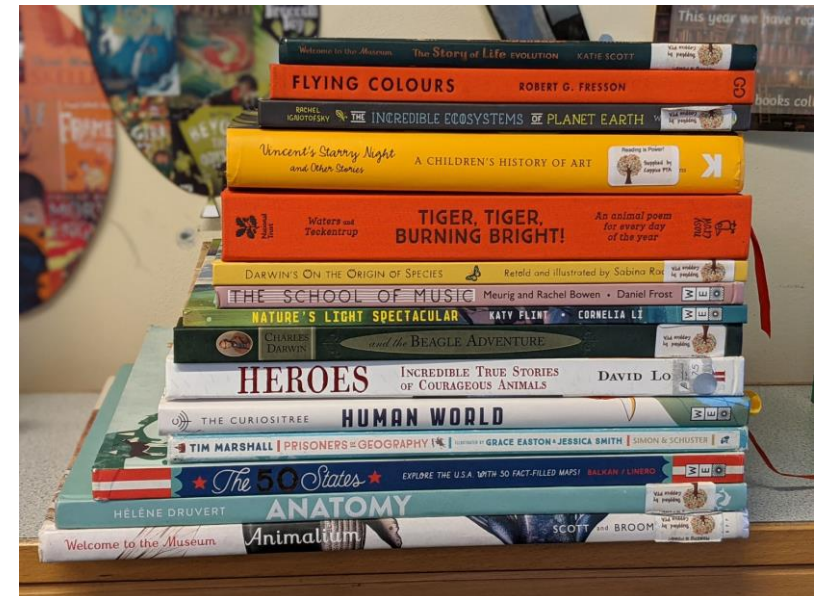


Selecting and promoting ‘texts that tempt’:

For the research project to be a success, I had to make sure that the **class library was full of books that appealed to my readers** and were perfect for being shared and discussed.

To do this, I made sure that I had **multiple copies of some of the titles that had proven popular** in our ‘battle of the books’. To do this, I traded and borrowed books from other class libraries and made an investment in quality nonfiction books (a common theme of our conversations with children during ‘battle of the books’ was that **plenty of my class preferred to read nonfiction books**, but felt that these were often restricted to current curriculum areas and that there weren’t as many appealing choices as there were with stories). Some of the books bought or borrowed are in the picture to the right.

Once I’d secured the **texts that tempt**, I made some subtle changes to my class library to promote the books - making stands for a rotation of large nonfiction books (perfect for sharing) and **rearranging books so that those with multiple copies were forward facing**.



Connecting the in-class reading community:

In order to change children's habits and encourage them to **see reading as a social activity**, I tried to arrange my seating plan to create the best reading duos.

This relied on **knowledge of the children as readers** (their reading personalities, tastes and histories) gleaned over the course of the year and through conversations at the onset of the project.

Establishing reading partners in class allowed for **recommendations to be shared between children** ('big up your book' became a regular partner talk activity) and doubled the usefulness of my book recommendations. It also allowed me to facilitate two or three children reading the same book and being able to have **someone to share inside-text talk with**.

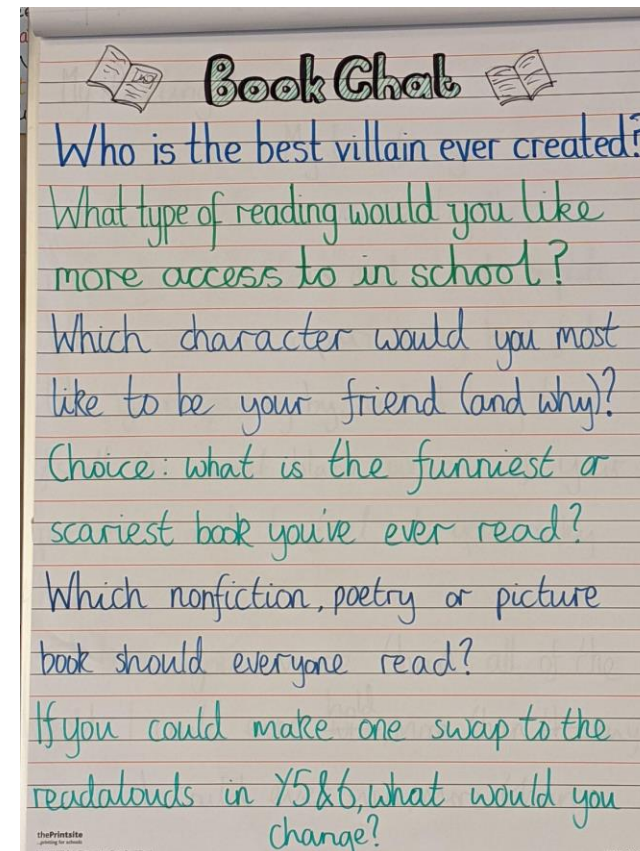
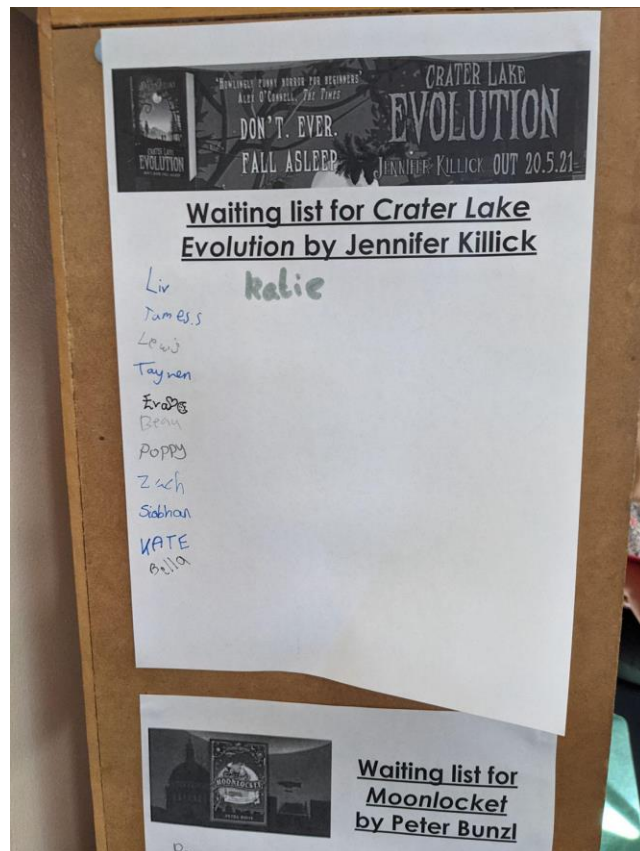


Connecting the in-class reading community:

Later in the year, as the project evolved, **we utilised ‘comfy reading’ on some days** — allowing the children to sit (or lie) how and where they wanted to in class. This required a bit of ‘holding my nerve’ as it seemed that the initial novelty would lead to less reading being done during this time but the children soon settled into good routines and it was a popular and regularly requested activity.



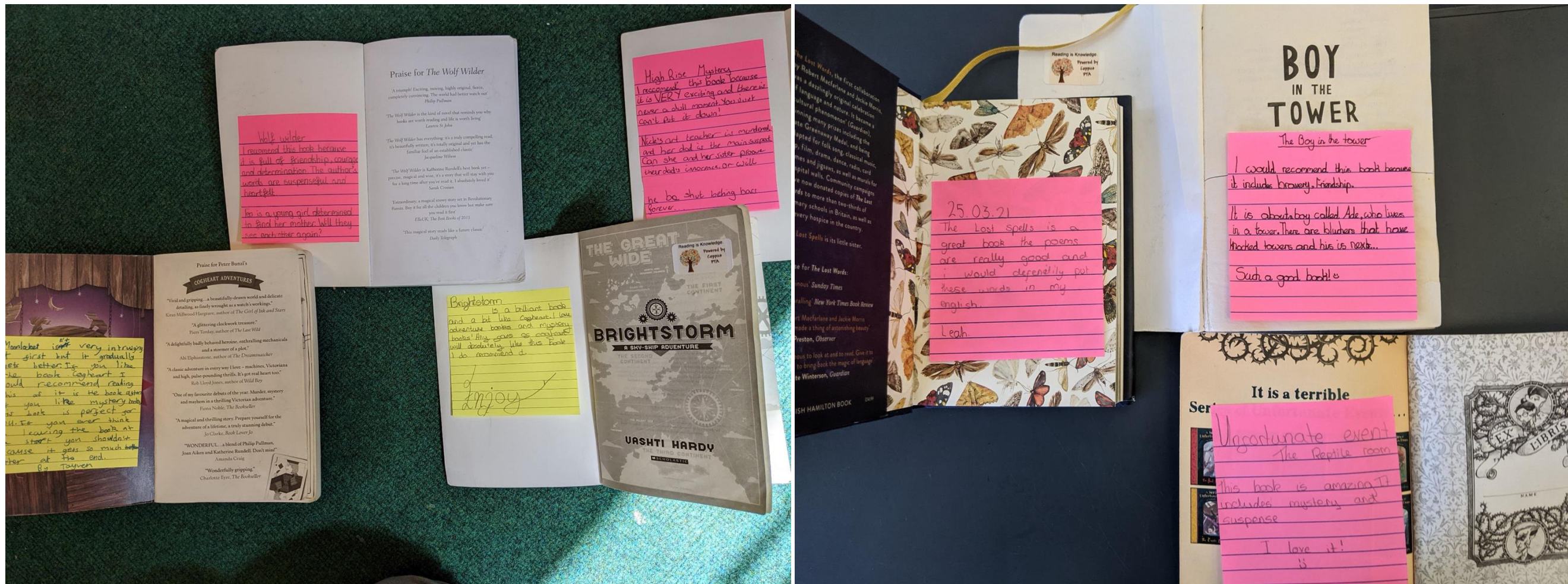
Other strategies for developing our reading community:



To generate a 'book buzz', **waiting lists were set up for the books that were popular** in 'battle of the books', sequels to class read-alouds and other books that I had recommended to the children.

I hosted **weekly 'book blether' questions to encourage open-ended book talk and recommendations.** This proved especially useful in illuminating children's shared reading experiences — **children were surprised to learn that they had 'books in common' with so many of their peers.** Open book talk was **engaging to some of my most 'hard-to-reach' children** I'd been targeting for impact through the project.

Other strategies for developing our reading community:



Whenever they finished a book, **children were invited to leave a post-it review for other children to read.** The children relished this responsibility and chance to help their classmates to choose their next book.

As well as this, we regularly set aside reading time for 'big up your book' where **children were encouraged to promote their reading and share their experiences with their peers.** This took many forms: sometimes it was paired talk with a reading partner, sometimes it was talking in small groups and sometimes it was 'show and tell' to the class.

By connecting webs of readers, I began to see children reconnecting with reading as an enjoyable activity.

While the strategies described in this Example of Practice included and benefitted all of the class, I chose **to focus my evaluation on a small group of children (4) who I would have described as being in a ‘reading rut’** — they weren’t really able to articulate what they enjoyed reading or how they enjoyed reading in our initial surveys and often spent a long time reading the same book despite so much time being given to read in school. This told me that they were likely simulating reading in the reading for pleasure time of the day, and that **they were almost certainly not reading outside of this time.**

In a crucial distinction, these were not children who struggled to read. The children I observed were proficient in reading, but did not derive pleasure from it. They could read but they chose not to.

Over the course of the project, I was able to observe some really positive changes in the way these children approached our daily reading for pleasure session. **They became more varied and ambitious in the choices they made, particularly in the way they explored nonfiction and poetry books.** One of my favourite anecdotes from this project involved a previously disaffected reader asking me if he could keep my copy of ‘Ancient Wonders’ (Flying Eye Books) in his desk so that no-one else could take it before he arrived the next day — the answer was *no* as the book was far too large for his desk, but I promised to keep it on my desk for him for the evening!

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There was plenty more evidence of these children, who used to ‘simulate’ reading, being far more engaged in their reading for pleasure: **they were able to articulate their likes and dislikes when selecting new books; they were quicker to settle and ‘get stuck in’ to their reading each morning; they gradually increased their participation in ‘book blether’ and ‘big up your book’ conversations.**

Feedback from parents was also positive. At parents’ evening, **one parent remarked that they used to have to ‘battle’ to get their child to read at bedtime, but that this hadn’t been a problem for most of Year 6.** Another parent (jokingly) *complained* that my promotion of ‘Welcome to the Museum’ books was costing them a fortune!

In the right conditions, children's perceptions of reading can change quickly.

Through **asking questions and facilitating conversations about reading that didn't have a desired outcome or 'correct answer'**, the target children **began to see reading as something they did for their own benefit and own enjoyment**, rather than something they would do for my approval or a feeling of proficiency.

Similarly, I found that children's **perception of nonfiction reading changed dramatically over the course of the project**. Nonfiction reading was previously viewed by many children as a means to an end: they would read nonfiction for research purposes, or read about their current topic as part of reading instruction. It hadn't occurred to some of my class that nonfiction could be read purely for the joy of it. **Many of the children have an innate fascination with space, nature or ancient civilizations, for example, but hadn't been given the time, direction or 'texts that tempt' to harness this fascination as a motivator to read.** This gave me further cause for reflection in the way nonfiction texts are distributed — due to size and cost, these top-quality nonfiction books were often given to the year groups who were studying them in the curriculum. By broadening the range of nonfiction beyond the current year's topics, it gave children the opportunity to revisit favourite areas of learning (*I was really glad when you brought the space books back because I've missed reading them from Year 5*) and develop their curiosity and understanding beyond the scope of the school's curriculum plan.

School budgets are finite and nonfiction books of the quality used in this project tend to be expensive, so this has led me to consider the idea of seasonal rotation between the libraries of three classes in the year group, in order to ensure that all classes have opportunities for multiple copies of the same books to be available.

'You can tell the true strength of a school by how hard it fights to protect reading time against the pressures of the curriculum' (Aidan Chambers)

Through my project, I introduced a number of strategies, though none were particularly original nor particularly complex. What they all had in common was that they all had high leverage in creating a social reading environment in my Year Six class. **Through the promotion of reading as a social activity, I was able to improve the perception of reading and motivation to read among those who had been disengaged with it.** The project reaffirmed the **vitality of inside-text talk and social reading environments to making sure all children see children as an interesting and satisfying activity.**

I am pleased with the outcome of my research project. On reflection, I think that certain conditions were crucial to its success.

Firstly, **creating time for volitional reading time was vital.** To create this time required changes to be made to the timetable — reading for pleasure replaced our previous start of day activities (which were maths and English retrieval activities) and time for reading *instruction* was reduced to accommodate more reading for pleasure. This required 'buy in' from my headteacher and SLT, which was significantly bolstered by the OECD finding, cited in '*Building Communities of Engaged Readers*' that 'the relationship between reading achievement and positive attitudes to reading is bi-directional'.

This highlights the need for groups like our TRG to keep reading for pleasure high on the agenda **so that school leaders can make decisions that protect reading time against the pressure of the curriculum.**

To promote reading for pleasure in the classroom, the teacher needs to be an active participant in the web of reader relationships.

Just as important as creating time for volitional reading was **ensuring that the time was well spent by children and adults**. While this was straightforward and fairly natural to me, as it would be to other Reader Teachers, it has made me reflect that **these practices will need to be shared, codified and reinforced to make sure that they cascade out to colleagues**.

This means that **teachers need to attend to the subtle, implicit messages about reading that children will pick up from their practice**. Pretty much all teachers know that they need to promote reading in an explicit way with their classes, but it's difficult to imagine these messages landing properly if they are being countered by the subtle messages of the classroom (e.g. if teachers are using children's independent reading time to do other tasks or if children only ever talk about reading in terms of intended correct answers).

Crucial to the success of this project is the way that it built on previous RfP work. I had already worked to develop my knowledge of children's literature as part of a previous project as an OU/UKLA teacher research group participant. It is highly unlikely that the strategies I've described here would be nearly as effective if I hadn't already developed my repertoire of children's literature to draw upon: the teacher creates the culture in the classroom, so **the social reading environment will only flourish if the teachers is an active participant and not a spectator**. For this reason, I will be encouraging colleagues (*in my school and others*) to **start with their own knowledge of children's literature if they want to make an impact on the reading culture in their classes**.