

Recommendations for Well-being

Olivia Bruton
@pantelaimon7



Context

For the first 5 years of my career, I worked as a year 6 teacher in Kidderminster. Since September, I have been teaching key stage 3 and 4 pupils at Albright Education Centre in Sandwell. This is a short stay medical provision, which accommodates pupils from Key stage 2 to Post 16, in the centre, at home and in hospital.

Part of my role is provide a static base for pupils in year 9 who find it challenging to move around the centre for different subjects. This means I teach them Maths, English, Science and Humanities.

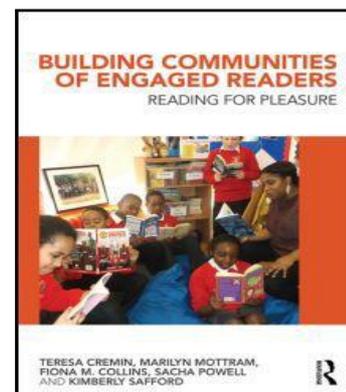
From the day I started, it was clear that reading was central to all areas of the curriculum and promoted by staff on a daily basis. Part of our current school development plan is to improve pupils' independence and motivation to learn. I wanted to connect this directly to reading and find out if it could improve mental health too.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

When working in a bookshop and primary setting, I had seen the impact of good quality book recommendations. Therefore, I focussed my research on the pedagogy of informal book-talk and recommendations. This also fit with the more personal project of improving my own knowledge of Young Adult literature.

For further inspiration, I found the following texts useful:

- *Fostering a love of reading for boys at secondary school*, Hannah Grace
- *Reading for Pleasure and Reading Circles for Adult Emergence Readers*, Sam Duncan
- *Reading communities: why, what and how?*, Professor Teresa Cremin



According to Sullivan and Brown in *Reading for pleasure, and attainment in maths, vocabulary and spelling*, children who read widely (those who visit libraries and read newspapers and books more than once a week) from the age of 10, perform better in tests at the age of 16 than those who don't. This shows how important it is to empower young people to read for pleasure. Whilst success should not always be measured on exams, there is no doubt that people feel a better sense of well-being when they are succeeding academically.

Aims

My initial survey found that pupils were aware of the value of reading and regularly took recommendations from teachers. However, 40% of pupils had never recommended a book to another pupil and would not feel confident doing this. In addition, they did not know how to find books for themselves. This was a significant majority in a school where reading time is protected and promoted.

I focussed on three KS3 pupils who could read but chose not to. They had low self-esteem and academic attainment. They had particular difficulty retaining information and all stated that they would never choose to read. Additionally, these pupils found it challenging to talk to peers and build friendships.

My aims were

- to explicitly teach pupils how to search for suitable books
- to empower pupils to recommend books to each other in order to improve their motivation to read for pleasure independently
- to track the impact this has on their emotional well-being and social skills

Outline

My first step was to use the established reading culture of the school. Each subject has a 'topic library' and our library is well-stocked with contemporary books for children and young adults. I made sure that the choices were attractive but not overwhelming. I used many large, bright, non-fiction books (including lift-the-flap, photography and recipe books) to entice the pupils across all the subjects I taught.



“This is my favourite book in the topic library.”

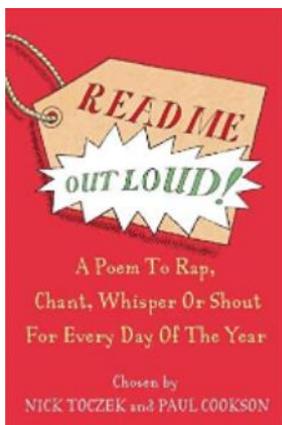


“I like the ones with real pictures not drawings.”

I made a point of recommending specific books and chapters to particular pupils. I based these on their interests and ensured they were short and relatively easy. I modelled, **‘I think you would like this because...’** and **‘I found this at the weekend and thought of you because...’** at all possible opportunities. I did this with no suggestion that pupils should take any action: I just showed my love of books and interest in the pupils.



When the pupils told me how much they hated poetry, I passed no judgement on this but read a poem every day.



#booktalk

All staff were encouraged to have a poster on their door to show what they were reading and had just read. This was accompanied by a short review. Staff had a mixture of adult, children, YA books and magazines to showcase a wide variety of reading in school. Pupils were encouraged to ask questions; staff were encouraged to talk.



Library lessons

I took the pupils to the library and explicitly showed them how to choose books. I lent books to pupils and had conversations about books I had started but chosen not to finish. Reading was at the centre of all lessons but at no point did I pass judgement on the fact the pupils were consistently telling me they would not read outside of my lessons. Even when they said they had enjoyed the lesson, resisted the urge to suggest they read at home.

Book Tasting

Building on this, I ran 'book tasting' sessions to find out which classroom books the children enjoyed the most. This forced them to engage with the books on a deeper level and consider their own preferences.

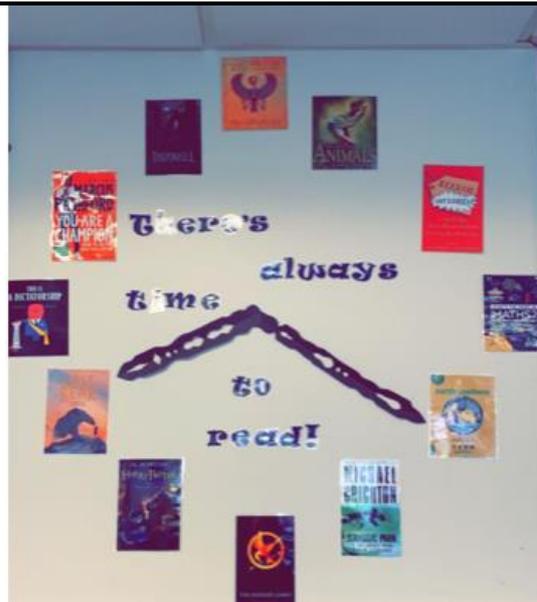


Book Tasting!

Name of book	What did you like?	What would make it better?
The Last Bear	The cover and it has pictures	I don't know
Egyptology	Lift the flap. I learnt to write in hieroglyphs	If there was a space version
Whats the point of maths	Lots of pictures Things about football and the Egyptians	More about animals

Name of book you would like to try	What appeals to you?
Stranger Things the other side	I love the program and want to find out what happens to Will in the upside down
Look inside Space	It looks like the Egypt one but it's about space
Premier League football	I like football and <u>wordsearches</u>

I teach another KS3 group who are avid readers. I made sure I discussed their reading preferences with them at break times, in front of the more reluctant readers. I taught them to appreciate books as beautiful objects, not just work. When reading is challenging and overwhelming it is not fun. However, beautiful non-fiction and picture books can be touched and explored like historical artefacts. All children like to get 'hands on' with things.



A display we made together to celebrate the books we enjoyed reading (and that the children had learnt to tell the time).

I embedded this strategies from September to May. Finally, once the children seemed ready, I taught them how to use bookshop websites:

www.waterstones.com

www.foyles.co.uk

www.mrbsemporium.com

They learnt to use the search function and look through suggested reading lists to find books they might enjoy.

Impact

For a long time, I was disappointed with the lack of impact my work seemed to be having. Parents continued to tell me their children did not enjoy reading (and nor did they); pupils rolled their eyes when I told them they had time to explore the new books in the topic library; and they repetitively informed me that reading was boring.

However, there was a shift in attitudes during the spring term. One day I forgot to read the poem of the day. A pupil asked for it. Over the next couple of weeks, my target pupils asked if they could read the poems aloud themselves. They started sharing thoughtful reflections about them and I observed them discussing the poems with each other later in the day. One pupil said, "**I preferred the one yesterday because it rhymed.**" Another commented, "**This one was tricky to understand but, now I get it, it's clever.**" Pupils started to attempt to read words they did not understand and ask for interpretations of metaphors. Here, there was a clear motivation to read so I handed the poetry book over to the class and let them take over the daily readings.

The second thing that happened was that a pupil came into the classroom holding a book she had started at home the night before. The book was 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone', which had been on her bookcase for years but she had found 'too boring' to read (despite having a phenomenal amount of Harry Potter merchandise and loving the films). Here was another shift in attitude. Over the following week, I made time for her to read the book, which she continued during her lunch break, and chatted at length about the things she liked and disliked about it. She made numerous comparisons to the film and is now reading the second book. She even asked for my help to write a poem about it, based on the structure of the poem of the day.

The book tasting proved successful as two of the target pupils asked to 'go to the library' to add to the books I had offered. This was the first time they had asked to go voluntarily. They declined my offer to accompany them and said they would **"bring a selection back to the classroom."**

This showed a confidence I had not previously seen. One pupil was able to have a lengthy discussion with me about why she had picked the books and then chose one to keep out of the five.

Pupils were keen to make their own posters to go on classroom doors but were not that interested in what teachers themselves were reading unless they physically showed them the books.

Pupils asked to make their own door posters to share their recommendations.



Ask Imani and Shelbie about

#booktalk



They like the cover!

Ask Mason about



He thinks it's cool



Ask Emma about

#booktalk



"It's for age 14+"

Ask Keira about



"I like the way it's written"

Finally, when I taught pupils how to search for books online, they showed such a level of excitement that I had to extend the lesson. Natural conversations opened up with pupils sharing their interests in television programs, dinosaurs and sports. They learnt new things about each other and one of my target pupils asked to stay in at break instead of playing football to continue (the only motivation he had previously shown in anything at school was playing football at break time). I had never seen him as animated as when he was telling me that he wanted a particular graphic novel about a 'Stranger Things'. He shown empathy towards the character, prediction and inference skills. In addition, he discovered another pupils also loved the series, which gave them a chance to chat. In my setting, pupils find it especially hard to begin spontaneous conversations with each other so this was a wonderful moment.

Clearly, something was happening in the classroom.

The following morning two of the target pupils approached me. They asked me to repeat the lesson – with a twist. They wanted to write a list of recommendations for other pupils in the class. I exclaimed that this was a wonderful idea (hiding the fact it had been my intention to launch this idea the following week). We put the idea to the class and they were excited.

The work the pupils put into their lists was exemplary. They asked their peers thoughtful questions, paid more attention to their punctuation and grammar, and even considered how much the books would cost.



Recommendation for a friend

1. Harry Potter created by JK Rowling . A box set of books. I chose this because she likes Harry Potter and she is reading the 1st book. It looks nice and is in her house colour.
2. Murder Book a graphic memoir of a true crime created by Hilary Fitzgerald Campbell. I chose this book because she likes crime documentaries. It is funny and she likes crime things.
3. The children's book of word searches created by Gareth Moore. I chose this book because word searches are fun.
4. 100 days of drawing created by Jennifer Orkin Lewis. I think that she will like this book because she has a big craft box at home .
5. One of us are lying Karen M. Mcmanus. It is a crime story and the cover looks interesting.

Book recommending for a friend



Book 1 : Minnie mouse
I know she likes Minnie mouse because she has over 50 Minnie Mouse teddies and tones of merch as well.



Book 2: Turning Red
She has watched the film and loved it and was very excited to watch it.



Book 3: Diary of a Wimpy Kid The Last Straw
She likes Diary of a Wimpy Kids books because of then pranks and the humour but I know she hasn't read this one.
Author Jeff kidney



Book 4 : The Knitting Book
She is trying to learn how to knit and hopefully make some blankets and it give you a visual guide to knit



Book 5 : Lift-the-flap Picture Atlas
In Geography she says she doesn't know where places are and she loves lift-the-flap books.

Books you should read



I THINK YOU WILL LIKE THIS BOOK BECAUSE YOU LIKE DINOSAURS AND THERE ARE THREE DIFFERENT PARTS.



I THINK YOU WILL REALLY LIKE THIS BOOK BECAUSE YOU ARE FASCINATED WITH MOTH MAN AND THIS BOOK TELL YOU SOME OF THE SIGHTINGS OF HIM.

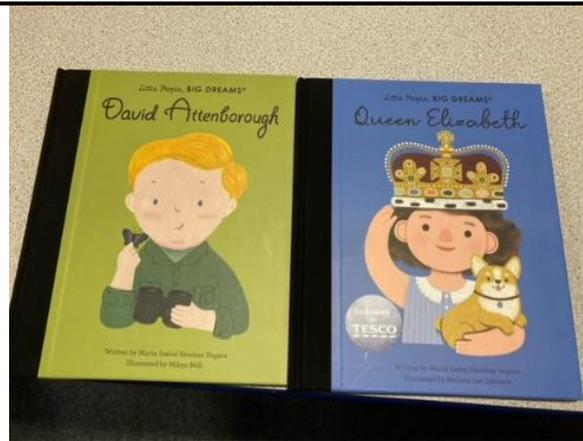


I THINK YOU WILL LIKE THIS BOOK BECAUSE YOU AND YOUR MOM COULD READ IT TOGETHER BECAUSE YOU BOTH LIKE STRANGER THINGS.

Recommendation lists created by target pupils.

In the weeks that followed, pupils also began making recommendations for me to get for the class library. These were often linked to our topics of study and pupils had clearly thought about them at home. One example was Bonnie Wright's book, which a target pupil recommended three days after it was published. She also informed me I could get a signed copy at a local Waterstones.

A week later, one of the target pupils said she had a surprise for me. She had purchased two books at Tesco. One of the 'Book Tasting' books was from the Little Leaders series. She enjoyed it and then bought two more at Tesco: one linked to our work in English, the other linked to the Jubilee. This showed a motivation to read outside of school. She had gone to a shop and used her own money to purchase books.



When I repeated the survey, the target pupils were overwhelmingly positive about the fact they could recommend books to each other and find them for themselves. Furthermore, they could see themselves reading a book at home because they had found texts that interested them. A teacher had not picked them: a peer had and this made them interesting. It was ok to find these books cool. It was ok to find these books beautiful.

The sheer amount of conversations happening during the lesson meant that pupils felt part of a community and spoke more frequently for the rest of the half term. Moreover, they felt proud of their work and touched by having someone else make a list that showed they 'knew' them.

Well-being had improved through learning how to recommend. I measured this by the fact that the pupils were happier in lessons. They were more willing to take part in discussions; use information they had learnt in books to contribute in Science and Geography lessons; and they showed better retention of these facts in quizzes.

The words, **“Oh, it said about that in the book,”** were uttered frequently over the following weeks – and always followed by a smile and expression of pride.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Reading poetry aloud had a much bigger impact than I imagined. This is something we will be bringing into our KS3 English curriculum next year and I will continue to use as a way of engaging pupils. We have planned a unit of work that celebrates poems and concludes with pupils creating their own poetry anthology.

Being positive about reading (no nagging or criticising) also played a big part in improving children's well-being and attitudes towards reading. By removing the expectations of reading at home and in the absence of any

sanctions, reading became a positive experience rather than a chore. It took months to break down the expectations pupils had of me as an English teacher. They were constantly surprised by my lack of criticism when they said they didn't like reading or chose to put a book back. Knowing your pupils and using the power of suggestion will always be more effective than punishing pupils for not reading and introducing temporary rewards for large reading quantities.

Teaching children how to search for books is something I would like to roll out across the whole school. The target pupils valued the time dedicated to this in school. Although the curriculum is so full, there should still be time in KS3 to teach children how to find books for themselves and each other.

Most importantly, if the target pupils stay at the centre, it will be vital to track their reading for pleasure and academic progress. I would like to teach them how to become more proficient at searching for books online and in local libraries and bookshops.