



**The first podcast in our series tackles informal book talk. Three practitioners share their experiences of developing this pedagogy, alongside the research findings.**

## **STARTS**

00:00:02:13 - 00:00:08:07

Brittany

It's just lovely now, you walk around school, children are able to talk about their favourite book. It's really, really evolved.

00:00:08:09 - 00:00:12:16

Mike Tuckwell

They're coming in the morning saying, "Oh, I finished that book!" or, "Mr. Tuckwell. I've got the next one in the series."

00:00:12:17 - 00:00:18:03

Lisa Hesmondhalgh

It's valuing all tech so that it's not just book bound. It's all different tech.

00:00:20:14 - 00:00:39:11

Debbie Thomas

Welcome to this OU Research and Practice podcast. I'm Debbie Thomas. I'm a lecturer in Reading for Pleasure with The Open University at the OU we're really keen to support teachers and other practitioners in developing their knowledge and understanding of Reading for Pleasure. As we know that it's key to creating social justice and to improving the life chances of all children.

00:00:39:23 - 00:01:08:13

Debbie Thomas

There's extensive international research supporting the benefits and challenges of Reading for Pleasure, and the OU have been engaged in research in this area for many years. You might already be familiar with the Teachers as Readers research from 2014, which has been really key to setting out what teachers and schools can effectively do to foster a Reading for Pleasure culture.

In this podcast, we're focusing on one of the four strands of our RfP pedagogy on talk about texts and making recommendations through using informal book talk.

00:01:09:01 - 00:01:38:11

Debbie

So what do we mean by informal book talk? It's a bit different to the talk about books we might use in our English lessons. This informal book talk is relaxed, chatting about books that's learner led and arises spontaneously between adults and children, but more importantly, between children themselves. It's initiated from texts that they've been reading or sharing, but it's the blether about reader-to-reader conversations which are driven by children's desires to share and comment and make meaning together.

00:01:38:18 - 00:02:02:07

Debbie

It's not driven by objectives or teacher questions or a specific outcome.

Teachers in the Teachers as Readers research saw how they talk about texts changed in the classroom over time, and children began to ask more authentic questions and they gave extended contributions, and they fostered greater reader engagement. It began to feed recommendations and therefore drew on a wider range of text types.

00:02:02:13 - 00:02:32:05

Debbie

And they got to know each other, reader to reader. So the benefits of informal book talk became really apparent. But that's also been found in research elsewhere. Neugebauer and Gilmour, in a study in the US in 2017, also found that intimate and personalized reading interactions between teachers and children were more effective in supporting reader motivation. And there's also been a smaller study by Moses and Kelly with a class of six-year-olds in the US, which highlighted the role that these types of social interaction play in developing positive views of reading.

00:02:32:13 - 00:02:50:09

Debbie

So whether children were doing things like selecting books for each other, finding books of interest, getting to know each other as readers. So that became a central part of their social interactions. But now let's hear from our guests so that we can explore what these research findings look like in their context. So I want to welcome Lisa, Mike and Brittany.

00:02:50:16 - 00:02:52:07

Debbie

Please go ahead and introduce yourself.

00:02:52:08 - 00:03:03:15

Lisa

Lisa Hi, Debbie. I'm Lisa Hesmondhalgh. I'm head teacher at Peover Superior Primary School in Cheshire and director of English for the Aspire Educational Trust. Very happy to be here this morning.

00:03:03:24 - 00:03:04:21

Debbie

Thanks, Lisa. Mike.

00:03:04:22 - 00:03:15:20

Mike

Hi Debbie. I'm Mike Tuckwell and I'm a year six teacher in the English Lead Woodlands Park Primary School in Devon. And once again, I'm pleased to be part of the Reading for Pleasure group here.

00:03:15:24 - 00:03:17:09

Debbie

Thank you. And Britney.

00:03:17:17 - 00:03:25:05

Brittany Evans

Hi, I'm Brittany. I'm assistant headteacher and English Leader at Lea Forrest Primary Academy, which is in Birmingham. I can't wait for this today.

00:03:25:11 - 00:03:44:22

Debbie

Welcome. Thank you. Thanks, all three of you for joining me. Well, I've already been talking about what some of the research tells us about this area, but actually we know that it's not as straightforward as that. It's a bit of a process to get there in terms of creating informal book talk in the classroom. So Brittany, tell us a bit about how your teachers have been gradually developing that informal book talk over time.

00:03:45:09 - 00:04:05:21

Brittany

Yeah, it's something that hasn't just happened. It's taken - probably we started our journey with it maybe three years ago and it actually looked very formal at the beginning, but we had to provide opportunities in the classroom to model to the children what that would look like and different sentence starters that they may be able to use within that talk.

00:04:06:03 - 00:04:27:02

Brittany

So we found time in our timetables during our English sessions and then through story times at the end of the day. And then what we've noticed that as time has gone on and the children have been exposed to it and it's been modelled to them that it's evolved, the children have now taken it on themselves and they're really independent with it.

00:04:27:02 - 00:04:50:19

Brittany

We also provide opportunities for them to do at home. So at first it was in the classroom and but as time has gone on, we have - it's called a reading suitcase. And on a Friday, the children get to take that home. And it has different genres. So there's newspapers, magazines and actually the children come in on a Monday and they're really confident now and articulate in sharing that literature that they've read over the weekend.

00:04:51:02 - 00:05:14:00

Brittany

But it wasn't just a quick fix. It's taken a lot of time, a lot of modelling, and also with teacher knowledge, we've had to expose our teachers and work with that as well. But it's people's confidence, I think, sometimes, and that's the teachers' confidence has grown with it. You can see the children as well. And it's just lovely now you walk round my school children are able to talk about their favourite book or they recommend books to each other.

00:05:14:08 - 00:05:16:10

Brittany

It's really, really evolved.

00:05:16:15 - 00:05:40:18

Lisa

And I would agree, Brittany, we've been on this journey now as a school for the last four or five years, and initially it was very structured, very planned, and we deliberately planned-in what we called a Reading for Pleasure time separate to our reading and our English. And then gradually that's evolved now to become, rather than reading for pleasure time is now an independent reading time because we felt that that puts a ceiling on what reading for pleasure was.

00:05:41:01 - 00:06:03:20

Lisa

But from working with lots and lots of different schools at different stages of the journey, like you say, you've been doing this for three years is that we've got some skills like myself like myself where it's very informal it happens just as it happens. It's very organic. We've got some schools that still have to have that protected time on the timetable to make sure that children and adults are having a chance to chat informally and blether informally about books.

00:06:03:20 - 00:06:22:18

Mike

I see that that some formal then leads really quickly into the informal so that it can be a formal structure very quickly adults to adults, adults to children, children to children are having those conversations in the corridors as they're coming in from break time or they're coming in the morning saying, "Oh I finished that book!" or, "Mr. Tuckwell I've got the next one in the series!"

00:06:22:19 - 00:06:31:11

Mike

And that really. I've seen although we're less on that journey than maybe Lea Forest, we're starting to see elements of that informal book talk coming from the formal approach.

00:06:31:23 - 00:06:51:14

Lisa

We initially baselined all the children using some of the resources from The Open University around what books children like. And we use that as a way-in with some of our children and deliberately chose texts that the children said that they liked and different authors that they liked. And then adults deliberately sat in the corner or sat at their desk and read those different texts.

00:06:51:14 - 00:07:05:04

Lisa

We had multiple copies of those text to get the situation started. And then what we found, like you said, Brittany, is that children are going home, that we can go to the library and the books themselves, buying the books themselves and bringing them back in. And it just snowballs from there doesn't it?

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Brittany

Yeah. We use the OU questionnaire. We found that really a very useful tool.

00:07:10:21 - 00:07:24:09

Debbie

That's great. And I think what's interesting, the discussion that we're having now talks about that kind of from the formal to the informal. And it makes me think about, you know, Mike, we were chatting earlier and you say about, you know, I'm not sure if this is right, are we getting it right? Because actually that's something we worry about in teaching, isn't it?

00:07:24:09 - 00:07:45:09

Debbie

You know, we know this is what the research is saying and we want it to be informal. But how do we get there? How do we know what we're doing is working? And actually I think that's something really useful. Professor Theresa Cremin's developed that pedagogy checklist, so that acronym for us to use so that whatever we're trying out and whatever changes we're making, we can use that idea of LIST to check, you know, how it's working.

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Debbie

And that stands for Learner led, Informal, Social and with Texts that Tempt. And I think all of you there were talking about aspects of that you know, particularly that you pick up on text that tempt I think that Lisa and Brittany you were both talking about that, but also, you know, that idea of informality is something that takes time, doesn't it?

00:08:03:21 - 00:08:12:18

Debbie

I mean, the other aspect I suppose, lots of teachers say to us about is just not having enough time. I mean, Lisa, how have you found your teachers make time for that informal book talk.

00:08:13:01 - 00:08:32:03

Lisa

That, again that's something that's taken time and it had to take - really come from the top of the schools, from the SLT, from the head teacher, from the senior leaders within the school, really kind of showing that the research around reading for pleasure, the will influences the skill and making sure that everyone in the school understands that this is important.

00:08:32:10 - 00:09:08:16

Lisa

It's not just an add-on, it's just not something that we do, and that by investing in the time within the curriculum will bring benefits to the children in later life. Again, like we said initially, it's having to be timetabled, but as teachers and staff have seen the benefit of it and if it was led by your head teacher or your deputy head say through the formal assembly initially where the teacher might read an assembly and then through Zoom assemblies like we had during lockdown and then teaching assistants popping into classes in the afternoon and reading and it's building in those, those little ad hoc times as well as your timetabled time within the curriculum.

00:09:09:05 - 00:09:26:19

Mike

I also hear you talking about the subject knowledge of teachers. Not so important for informality of discussion though. I've had teachers coming into my class that wouldn't have done initially and they spotted a book being read by a child and going, "Oh, I've read that one." or, "I've read that one by a similar author and what's it like?"

00:09:26:19 - 00:09:43:20

Mike

And that has really generated a great way of having more informal discussions around the school. So I agree with that in the way that subject knowledge is key for all of us to have TAs and teachers for improving the quality of our informal book chat.

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Debbie

So we were talking about teachers having time and how we get to those authentic reader to reader conversations. But let's think about what we say then to teachers who are just starting out. You know, if you're just beginning this process, what sort of things will be saying to them and what kind of support can we give them?

00:09:59:15 - 00:10:32:07

Lisa

I think it's important for teachers to realise that the process of developing informal book talk and blether within your classroom is quite messy and it's very, very different to what your usual teaching of reading might look like, particularly if you have silent reading in class or everyone drop and read or ERIC or something like that. And that needs very careful modelling,

particularly for the younger children in school that aren't used to being able to sit and chat and sit on the floor and lie with a friends and make a noise and chat and that does take time and it can be quite scary for teachers.

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Lisa

You know, as teachers we are quite controlling. We do like to control the learning environment, don't we? And it's a generic thing, it happens but yeah, it's helping us understand that...

Debbie

It's a risk isn't it? I think it's a risk factor.

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Lisa

Yeah, I think it is yeah.

00:10:44:03 - 00:10:45:16

Lisa

Yeah that's the right way of describing it, yeah.

00:10:45:16 - 00:10:56:09

Debbie

Yeah. But also I guess leaders have got to be able to take that risk because you've got to be, you know, you can't do this if someone's going to pop in your room to observe, you're not going to want to take that risk are you?

00:10:56:19 - 00:11:13:11

Lisa

Yeah. We've done it by observing each other, by sharing what our practice looks like across school. And then when new schools have then began the journey, they've come to visit and they've seen what an independent reading session looks like. And I think that's really useful for the teacher or school that's just starting this journey.

00:11:14:14 - 00:11:34:08

Brittany

We introduced something quite nice doing a staff briefing to support with that confidence of choosing books. So teacher at the end of staff briefing on a Monday, they would bring a text that they've enjoyed and they just share it with staff and think about what themes run through it. And we use that to try and build staff knowledge really.

00:11:34:08 - 00:11:43:04

Brittany

But it also gives teachers that confidence - oh, that was shared during briefing. I'm going to go and grab that off the shelf and share that with my class. And we found that's had an impact.

00:11:43:15 - 00:12:03:20

Debbie

I mean, I think, you know, that's one of the things to reflect on, isn't it? Is the books, you know, we've all been talking about the books and how important that is and staff knowledge. I mean, Mike, what do you think about, you know, other teachers have told us that books in common, you know, ones we've all read or as a school or a class or maybe just with my friends, they can act as those stepping stones towards that child led, informal book talk.

00:12:03:20 - 00:12:07:11

Debbie

But what do you think the role of books in common might be playing?

00:12:08:07 - 00:12:28:08

Mike

Well, I think there's some, but the first one is the whole class where, when you've had the class story, which is fundamental, giving the children the exposure to a range of different texts and genres and in the safety that they're not going to be answering questions at the end of each session about that in a relaxed, free environment really does create a good atmosphere.

00:12:28:13 - 00:12:47:12

Mike

And I've seen that transformed in the last two years certainly with my class. I'm currently reading 'The Garbage King' (E. Laird) for the second time and the response I've had from low attaining readers about, this is a really enjoyable text that they've read and they'd want to read more books by Elizabeth Laird as a result of that. I think that's the whole class one.

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Mike

But I think there's also that part of children wanting to be part of a club where they've seen other books being read by other children. So, for example, one of my colleagues went round and asked each of the teachers what would their children like to read and then ordered those books. So we had a range.

00:13:04:09 - 00:13:28:19

Mike

We had some children that wanted to be part of Percy Jackson Club and wanted more books, some more texts from there. I had a number of boys and girls that wanted the Ultimate Heroes books about football stars from Sanny to Harry Kane. And they really enjoyed sharing those. And what I've suddenly seen is, you've had some readers that have taken those books and then read it because they've been joining those discussions and likewise other children picking up packs which they'd never have read before.

00:13:29:07 - 00:13:35:10

Mike

And all of that has encouraged that sense of community and feel that we want to be doing this together.

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Debbie

Yeah, being part of that club is really powerful, isn't it? I think you've really encompassed some of those things I was talking about in LIST because you're talking about there it being learner-led and the children getting the choice over the books. You've got text that tempt and you're creating those social contexts. And as you said, over time that's becoming more and more informal, you know, which is great.

00:13:54:19 - 00:14:14:16

Lisa

Yeah. What some schools and trust have done is – to be learner-led – is they've developed something called seven before seven and 11 before 11. So the children have looked at the award winning book lists from the UKLA or from the Lollies or from Blue Peter and they've chosen seven texts that they think every seven year old in the school should read.

00:14:14:16 - 00:14:30:20

Lisa

And then the headteacher is invested in a huge amount of text that the children then read and share. They have a passport they carry around. They stamp the passport when they read the book. And it's like Mike said it's our own little informal book club and the same for the 11 before 11. That's a really lovely way of having that within your school.

00:14:31:07 - 00:14:55:18

Mike

I like the way that that's developed as well. The range of authors. I think there's a tendency you worry as a teacher when we give the children the choice, they're going to go for the celebrity authors that we see plastered on the high street bookshops. But instead as we – our subject knowledge and as our class stories and we've shared books in a formal book chat the children have started to go with those authors and those texts that we might have shared as adults, and that's increased the range of text that tempt and I like what you said Lisa, about giving the children those lists, and I know some classes have certainly done that within our School, have used the award-winning texts to then create that range.

00:15:06:13 - 00:15:20:14

Debbie

But is that only really going to work for if you're a keen reader, that's for the lucky ones, the ones who already love this and want to be part of it. What about if you're one of those RfP disadvantaged? If you know you're not really interested in reading, you don't enjoy it. Do I engage in informal book talk in the same way?

00:15:20:14 - 00:15:21:12

Debbie

Does it work for me?

00:15:21:24 - 00:15:37:23

Mike

I've seen that for when we've given the children a choice. A couple of children chose graphic novels. We managed to get the Alex Rider, the whole series, and they were suddenly

transformed with the Ultimate Heroes ones I talked about, one of my colleagues came in and said, "I've got the Marcus Rashford biography." and it went on from there.

00:15:38:05 - 00:15:54:22

Mike

And then from that they suddenly started to read other texts that other children have been reading. So it has been a way in. It's not perfect. It hasn't worked for every child, but I certainly think it's better than we had before where children had their choice from the library and we're just starting to ask them the questions.

00:15:55:02 - 00:16:14:05

Lisa

We deliberately chose text that would support those those children struggle with reading. So the Tom Palmer books, for example, and we introduced the Tom Palmer books After the War, D-Day Dog, Armistice Runner, from Barrington Stoke and targeted children within the class that we felt would benefit from that. And again pulled lots of different texts.

00:16:14:22 - 00:16:26:03

Debbie

But what about if I'm not really that keen in engaging in that book chat? I mean, Brittany, do you get kids who engage in the book chat and want to do this informal book talk when they've not necessarily been keen readers?

00:16:26:22 - 00:16:49:03

Brittany

Yes, what we've introduced, and it's been quite successful, so we've got reading nooks around school and they're accessible during lunch time and break times, so it's not there independently. So we found that some of our children that are less reluctant to read for pleasure, it might be at lunchtime or break time. You see them sometimes they're on the little beanbag reading a book because they've dropped sometimes.

00:16:49:03 - 00:16:57:00

Brittany

So not all children like to go outside do they? And so that's been quite helpful to engage some readers that way.

00:16:58:02 - 00:17:17:19

Lisa

It also depends on the text Brittany as well, doesn't it? Like with a poetry book where you've got short extracts of poems or - some of our children love the Lego Book where they're just looking at the Lego figures. And it's not necessarily a book that's packed with prose. So for those children that struggle, it can be a graphic novel or a picture book that they can enjoy and share and talk about with their friends.

00:17:18:08 - 00:17:34:00

Mike

That range is important. We've introduced the The Week magazine and the newspapers and having just a range and we're going to start introducing football magazines, just trying to get everything that we can to get the children into reading and to reading for pleasure.

00:17:34:02 - 00:17:38:16

Lisa

It's valuing old text, isn't it? So that it's not just book bound, it's all different texts, isn't it?

00:17:38:23 - 00:17:57:14

Debbie

Yeah, I think that's really key what you're saying there. The Texts that Tempt makes such a significant difference to all children, don't they? And particularly those less keen readers, if we can key into that, that's great.

Okay. Well, thank you. It's been really fascinating to hear about how informal book talks developed in your settings, both successes and, you know, the challenges that you're still on this journey.

00:17:57:19 - 00:18:13:14

Debbie

And I know that you're all really committed to the difference Reading for Pleasure makes. All your hard work, you know, is obviously going to be really worth it. So thank you, Lisa, Brittany and Mike for your time and insights today. If our listeners want to explore informal book talk a bit further, then you can visit our website [OURfP.org](http://OURfP.org)

00:18:13:20 - 00:18:34:09

Debbie

And there's the five circles on the home page. One of those is informal book talk and you can download, we've got a free poster, we've got research summaries, you can access some practical strategies, documents, and then there's also great video, John Biddle from Moorlands Primary in Norfolk, there's a brilliant video of him talking about informal book talk and actually showing what Lisa was saying about how it looks in the classroom.

00:18:34:20 - 00:18:48:18

Debbie

We're going to have some more podcast episodes to explore our FP pedagogy further, so we look forward to sharing those with you soon.

**ENDS**