

Reading, Writing & Jam

The impact of an author visit

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Context

Lydgate Infant School is a four-form entry school in Sheffield. I am a class teacher in Year 2 and co English Lead. I am also a UKLA Regional Representative for Yorkshire. This project took place in a Year 2 class in June 2021.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

There were two of the Open University's Teachers as Readers findings (Cremin et al., 2014) which inspired this project:

- *A reading for pleasure pedagogy which includes reading aloud*
- *Reading communities that are reciprocal and interactive*

Reading aloud is a key pedagogy for promoting Reading for Pleasure. 'Books which we live through together for the sole purpose of shared enjoyment represent a rich resource for conversation, connection and for spinning webs of reader relationships' (Cremin, 2018). When an opportunity to meet the author of our current class read aloud arose, I was keen to use it as a way of enriching our read aloud experience and further build our class reading community of engaged readers through this 'book in common' (Cremin 2018). **Meeting an author or illustrator (a 'star performer'), 'bridges the gap between children and books in a way that no other experience can'.** (Chambers, 2011).

This EOP is a reflection of the impact of the author visit on the motivation of children in a Y2 class to read for pleasure.

Aims

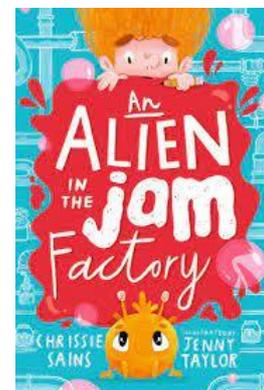
The aims of the author visit were to enrich the reading aloud experience and to build a reading community through a 'book in common' in order to engage more children in Reading for Pleasure.

Outline

Choosing a read aloud book

In order to make the reading aloud session more **learner-led**, I read the blurbs of three **rich and challenging** chapter books and asked the children in my class (Year 2) to vote for one book. I had read all three texts ahead of the vote. *An Alien in the Jam Factory*, written by Chrissie Sains and illustrated by Jenny Taylor, was by far the most popular. I read it aloud daily (sometimes more often) and the children were utterly engaged by it.

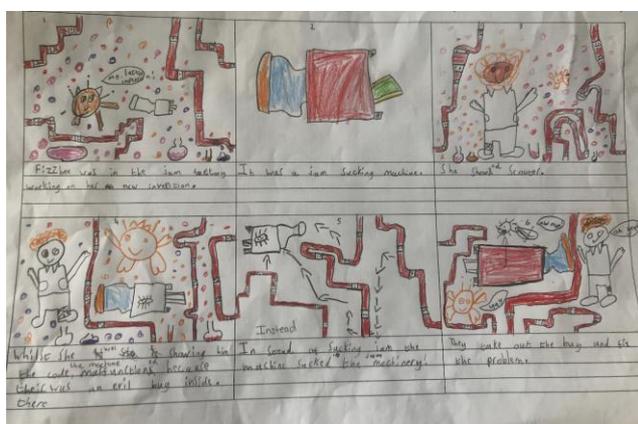
When we finished the book, the children asked for the sequel. On learning that the second book hadn't yet been published, a group of



children decided they wanted to write their own. I posted about this on Twitter and Chrissie Sains replied, generously offering to do a virtual author session to talk to the class about their ideas for her third book in the series. The children and I were thrilled!

Preparing for the visit

I put aside our pre-planned English unit of work to focus on preparing for the author visit. (To pursue the children's interests in this way was liberating!) **We immersed ourselves in the text, rereading it and exploring the characters and setting to help us think about what could happen in a sequel.** The main character has cerebral palsy, so we undertook some research to learn more about the condition, building understanding and empathy. We ate a lot of jam: jam tarts, jam on crackers and jammy dodgers! Our teaching assistant was engaged by it all and made a huge jam factory display for the children to hang their many jam invention ideas on. The classroom buzzed with excitement. Children were playing games related to the story at playtimes and text-related words ('jamtastic') were overheard in conversations.

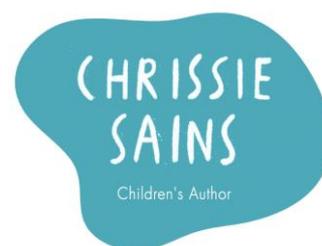


The National Writing Project teacher group I participate in (led by Jeni Smith) <https://www.nationalwritingproject.uk/> were supportive in suggesting approaches for generating new character and plot ideas. In class, we began by outlining the plot structure on Post-it notes before making storyboards. This worked well as it reduced the pressure of 'getting it right' first time – they could move the notes around, put them in the bin if they didn't like an idea, add in new ideas etc. The children had agency over who they worked with (alone, in a pair/trio

or in a small group with me) and where in the classroom they worked (at tables, sitting/lying on the floor or in the book corner). Most worked collaboratively in pairs or trios (choosing their own partners). When one child (regarded by his peers as a good reader and writer) was struggling with ideas, I invited over another child (who finds the technical aspects of reading and writing hard, but has a superb imagination) who then came up with a way of making the problem in the story more exciting. They presented their plot to the rest of the class and both children were proud of their collaborative writing. Sometimes the whole class were asked to stop, listen to an idea and make suggestions of how it could evolve. Ideas were bouncing everywhere and I found that **a writing as well as a reading community was being built**, driven by this **authentic, purposeful writing project**.

The author visit

By the day of the virtual author visit, the excitement that had built over the previous three weeks was at fever pitch. During the visit, the children all had an opportunity to read and talk about their storyboards with Chrissie. Chrissie also explained how she became an author, how she generates ideas for stories, what she does when she gets 'stuck' and answered questions prepared by



the children. It was a fantastic experience where the children and I learnt a great deal and **were inspired to read and write.**

Impact

Children were reading for pleasure in school

The affective impact of the read aloud and author visit was striking, with children enthused and inspired. It led to a **change in children's reading behaviours**. Children began to bring in their own copies of the text from home, reading it on their own or with a friend. Interestingly, children began bringing in other chapter books from home and talked informally about them with myself and their peers – this hadn't happened with chapter books before. A love of one chapter book had encouraged them to read others. I brought more chapter books into the classroom and they were quickly snapped up. The new books were early, highly illustrated books with short chapters so that more children could access them independently.



A child who could read but chose not to earlier in the year ('Reading is boring') whispered to me ahead of the author visit, 'I can't tell you how excited I am about meeting the author'. He read the book at home as well as in school, and not long after the visit he brought a new chapter book of his own into school to recommend to me.

Children were reading for pleasure and engaging in informal book talk at home.

One child described how her older sister was reading *An Alien in the Jam Factory* to her at home. This impacted positively on her to desire to read in school, led to her reading with improved fluency and expression, and she was enjoying reading. Here we saw the will influencing the skill and vice versa. (Cremin, 2019)

The author visit generated a closer connection between reading in school and at home. As the in-school community was developing, families were drawn in by their children's interest and enthusiasm.

Here are some quotes from parents (names have been changed):

'We borrowed a copy from the library and read it together.'

'Anna has really enjoyed the book and mentions it a lot in conversation. She has mentioned the author and has asked for a copy. We actually bumped into James tonight at swimming lessons and he had a copy with him so it reminded me to order one.'

'I really think the work you have done around the book has given Anna more interest in reading and chapter books.'

'Seb loved the story. He enjoyed helping the author with the story line for book 3 and is definitely very keen to read it when it comes out and we will look out for it.'

'Heshan talked a lot about the book and still does. He remembered a lot of details and told me bits about the characters on walks to school. He was really excited about the author visit and told me the author liked his character idea. He asked for the book and reminded me many times to buy it which we did. I do think the work on the book has encouraged him with his reading and helped him to

move forward and I think being immersed in it so much in it gave him confidence and inspiration to get into chapter books.'

'Megan has not stopped talking about this book. She also was very impressed when Chrissie Sains met with the class and has mentioned this several times. Many thanks for inspiring her to love reading. It has been a real joy to see this develop and flourish in her.'

'Jasmine has been talking about the book and also reflecting on the main character and how he had cerebral palsy - it's raised her awareness. She kept reading and enjoying it at home.'

Children were inspired to write and draw for pleasure in response to the text.

Reading for pleasure can lead to writing for pleasure. Following the author visit, a child commented that Chrissie had given her *'lots of ideas for writing on my own'*.

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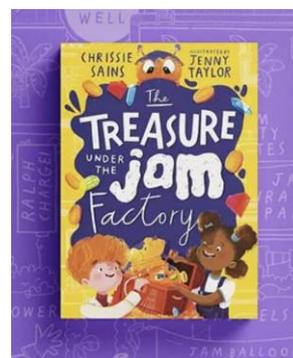
To say Noah has loved reading An Alien and the Jam factory would be an understatement. My house is now filled with bits of paper entitled "Alien and the Jam factory 2" or detailed drawings of jam machines!

'She has made up stories and her own version of events based on it.'

'Maggie really enjoyed the 'Alien in the Jam Factory' project. She was really enthused and came home fizzing with potential ideas for the next book and drawings of possible front covers. Thank you for going the extra mile in bringing English to life for your pupils.'

A year later...

When the second book in the series was published a year later (The Treasure under the Jam Factory), I sent a copy to the junior school and their Year 3 teacher read it aloud to them. On a visit to the junior school a few weeks later, the children ran to thank me and chatted about how they had loved both books and the author visit. One child said, 'I can really see some of our ideas in the book!'



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Reading aloud helps to create communities of readers. This has been shown by research (Cremin et al, 2014) and was evident in my classroom. Reading aloud and the **author visit provided the motivation for children to read** this and other texts of their own volition.

I was mindful that linking our read aloud to writing might reduce the pleasure for some children, as they may have associated it negatively with 'work'. However, this was not the case and this was



perhaps because of the **social aspect of reading and writing together** in an enthusiastic community with this book in common, and the excitement of writing for the author of a book they loved.

The TaRs research found that the success of the read aloud pedagogy was dependent upon teachers' knowledge of children's literature and of their children as readers. To nurture RfP beyond the author visit, the teacher would need to have to have sufficient knowledge of children's literature and of their children as readers to be able recommend further **texts that tempt** and to be able to engage in **informal book talk** about those texts.

An Alien in the jam Factory was one of the texts I discovered whilst undertaking a project with the OU/UKLA Teachers Reading Group a few months before, where I aimed to widen my own teacher knowledge of contemporary children's literature. I used new knowledge of first chapter books to continue RfP activities after the author visit. These included book blankets outdoors and 'first chapter fun' where I read the first chapter of a number of books and the children kept a list of the books they wanted to read during independent reading time (the list also went home ahead of the summer holidays). I continue to write a school Reading Newsletter (begun as part of the TRG project) in order to share high quality text recommendations with families at home.

On reflection, the read aloud worked well because it was LIST (Learner-led, Informal, Social and supported by texts that tempt). This was the first author visit that I had undertaken, but its success has encouraged me to do more in future.

Many thanks to the marvellous Chrissie Sains for her generosity of time, kindness and enthusiasm.

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