



Let's Talk More About Books!

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Context

I am a secondary school English teacher and Principal Teacher of Literacy across Learning at Holy Cross High School, Hamilton in South Lanarkshire Council. Our aim is 'to raise the aspirations and motivation of our young people so they may achieve the highest standards possible during their time with us'. The school roll is approximately 1400 pupils, with 781 pupils in the Broad General Education (BGE) phase from S1-3.



Reading for pleasure is an integral part of our BGE curriculum. Over the course of 5 years S1-2 classes have participated in the First Minister's Reading Challenge on a weekly basis with timetabled access to the school library once a week. S3 classes also take part in reading for pleasure opportunities but these are planned more specifically around the needs of the class: from whole class reading groups to individual personal reading time built into their periods in English. As part of the core English curriculum, reading for pleasure is a key part of a child's achievement in the following Curriculum for Excellent English and Literacy benchmarks:

- Pupils can select and discuss a range of texts, giving a personal response and increasingly justifying and evidencing opinion.
- Pupils can independently select appropriate reading strategies to read confidently with understanding.

The English Department, alongside our full time librarian, has invested heavily in building our reading culture and with the First Minister's Challenge coming to an end this year, we intend to launch our own 'reading challenge' to complement the different reading for pleasure initiatives in place. Additionally, we have recently submitted our application to become a Scottish Book Trust Accredited Reading School.



OU Research inspiration and rationale

My inspiration was born out of my desire to enhance the reading for pleasure experience in the English classroom. How could I better support pupils in their reading choices and experiences within our dedicated reading time? From my initial research it was made very clear how important our dedicated reading time is: **55% of the pupils surveyed in S1 and S2**

classes do not read outside of allocated reading time in school. And so, it is vital that we use this time effectively to have the most impact on our learners.

*'it feels very cosy and Ms McMullin is very welcoming and when a new book comes in that I might like she tells me' –
Danielle McGuirk, S1*

*'I enjoy visiting the library because there are so many amazing and wonderful books to choose from' –
Adam McCabe, S1*

As mentioned, we have an established and structured approach to reading for pleasure, supported by a long-standing relationship with our school library, run by our full time librarian. The library is a highly-valued and well-utilised resource by pupils. In fact, **69% of pupils surveyed in S1 and S2 recognised the school library as the main place they would go to get a new book.** Our pupils feel highly supported by our librarian in their reading experience; a key finding from my initial research into pupils' thoughts and opinions on how their reading is supported in school. A significant reason for this is the **time and space given to chat about book choices during their visits.** This is only reinforced further by the fact that 'research reveals that children's pleasure in reading is strongly influenced by reading networks and relationships: between teachers; between teachers and children; between children and children' (Cremin, 2019).

Time given to reading for enjoyment is a priority in our curriculum, but I needed to prioritise more explicitly the opportunity for learners to talk about what they are reading. This led me to ask myself: how could I foster more enthusiasm and engagement with books in my own classroom space? What was my role in generating opportunities for pupils to discuss their reading in a less formal and less structured manner? **How could I better 'position myself as a fellow reader and seize informal opportunities to engage with such significant 'book blether' (Cremin, 2019)?**

My aim was to build in more opportunities within my English classroom to talk about books and have more open and informal conversations between learners and teachers around books and associated topics. My inspiration was to build in 'book club' discussion in my weekly dedicated reading time. **This led my focus of research to the Reading for Pleasure TaR: 'informal book-talk, inside-text talk and recommendations'.** Through my academic reading around the impact of informal book talk, it was clear that the need for talk around books needed to become more 'informal and spontaneous' (Cremin et al, 2014) in my classroom environment.

Aims

'Talking about books and reading and making text recommendations has been found to be influential on developing children's will to read' (Cremin et al, 2014).

Aims:

- To foster a classroom culture where informal book talk is a key part of the reading for pleasure experience of pupils, specifically during dedicated reading time.

- To allow more opportunities for pupils to engage confidently in discussion around books with their peers and teachers in a casual and informal manner.

My aims and approach are underpinned by the desire to enhance the reading experience of pupils in a way that is **realistic, manageable** and **easily implemented** by the classroom teacher. I wanted to adopt strategies that could be used in every English classroom.

Outline

The pedagogy and practice adopted was led by the need to be Reader-led, Informal, Social and Supported by texts that tempt (Cremin, 2019). Keeping this in mind, I split my approach into three key focus areas: **modelling, book blether and reading recommendations**.

Modelling

My ethos behind this enquiry was to keep my approach straightforward and manageable but most importantly, visibly impactful. Instead of being 'sucked into performing reading for pleasure' (Cremin, 2019), my first decision was to actively lead by example in a genuine and sincere manner. To help foster the reading culture within my classroom, **I chose to read alongside my pupils during their dedicated reading time** and take on a more hands on role as a 'Reading Teacher'. As a class we would set ourselves a reading target and I would participate in my own personal reading as my class read.



Reading Recommendations



To enhance the reading experience, I built in more opportunities for pupils to share reading recommendations at different points in the year. These recommendations came in the form of **informal suggestions during dedicated reading periods, as well as more structured reading suggestions derived from classroom / homework activities**.

Informal Book Blether

To help pupils develop the habit of informal book talk, it was important to build their confidence in talking about books in a more structured way. I felt this was very important in setting the scene and showing pupils *how* we chat about different aspects of books and reading, as well as giving them ideas of *what* they could ask/say. This led me to build in a short book blether activity during



reading time. I asked pupils to come up with different questions they would like to ask their peers about their books to create a Book Talk Box and took inspiration from the Jon Biddle's 'book-talk wheel' (<https://wordwall.net/resource/7399841/english/book-talk>).

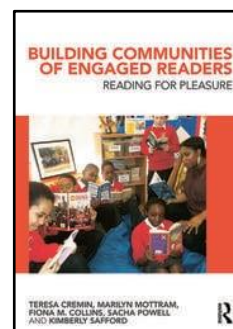
Pupils were able to pick out a topic at random and chat to each other about the books they were reading. This was done either as a whole class discussion task or in pairs/small groups.

Impact

Evidence of the impact of my enhanced approaches to reading for pleasure was gathered via class questionnaires and pupil testimonials as well as my own observations and experiences. Please see below for my findings:

Modelling

Incorporating my own reading time allowed me the opportunity to enrich my own knowledge and experience of children's literature as I used the opportunity to read teenage literature. As an avid fan of 'His Dark Materials' trilogy by Phillip Pullman, my first choice was 'The Book of Dust', Volume One...a text I then passed on to one of my S2 pupils to enjoy. **Pupils valued the fact that they could visibly see me reading and this validated the time given over to reading for pleasure.** It also acted as reading motivation. Pupil feedback shows that when pupils looked up from their reading to see me absorbed in a book of my choice, they too refocused and got back to the book in hand. In essence, reading for pleasure became a collective experience.



Pupil Feedback:

'I like the idea of everyone taking some time to enjoy a good book. English teachers usually love reading so it's nice to see which books they enjoy or share your love for' – Jenna Farquhar

'it [teachers reading in front of pupils] provides motivation to try and get through your book' – Starr Bennet-Smith

'it doesn't make reading look like a task but more like a fun experience' – Connor Gibb

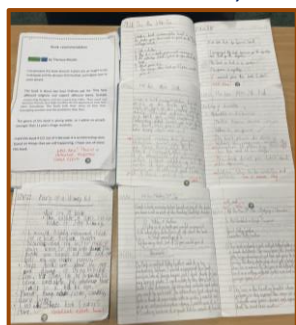
'it shows me that everyone should read and seeing the teacher read as well shows me how important it is' – Freya McEneaney

'it is really helpful to my teacher read because it motivates me' – Ellie Smith

'it gives us a role model and someone to look up to. I think how much they enjoy it and makes me think I can enjoy it too' – Sarah O'Hare

Reading Recommendations

The impact of modelling reading for pleasure leads me onto the second positive impact of reading alongside my pupils; the rise in reading recommendations between pupils, and teacher and pupils. **Our dedicated reading periods became a much more organic and authentic space to chat about what we were reading.** Three of my S3 pupils recommended 'The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo' which is now on my summer reading list! And in return, I too recommended books to my classes. It was



evident that my classes were emerging into 'reader-to-reader networks' (Cremin, 2019) exchanging information about their books as well as reading suggestions

This was only reinforced further by visible reading recommendation displays and short in-class / homework activities. At points in the year, pupils would be asked to share a reading recommendation to the class – a simple yet effective way to spotlight the reading interests of the class.



Informal Book Blether

The time dedicated to personal reading and informal book talk has increased pupils' awareness about the books each other are reading, and this initiative has been very well received. **100% of pupils involved in this pilot voted to have book blether built into their reading time permanently.** It has given learners increased opportunities to engage in dialogue with their peers on the topic of books and reading habits. Some have even asked to swap books when they are finished! Here are some testimonials about the impact of this pilot:



'the teacher gets to know what we are reading' – Shay Burns

'I enjoy sharing with the class information about my book' – Kyle White

'I think it's fun because we get to talk more' - Oliwier Tomaszewski

'I enjoy hearing other people's opinion because it's interesting to hear what other people think' – Finn Woodside

'I get to know what other people like' – Paul Dwyer

*'I enjoy being able to talk about my book to others as it helps me to stay focused and think about what I have read' – **Ethan Curivan***

*'our teacher is more involved in our reading' – **Ava Dempsey***

*'our teacher hears a bit more about what we are reading in class and outside of class' – **Cailean Hughes***



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

The little things make a big difference!

From my professional enquiry on how better to support informal book talk within the perimeters of the English classroom, what became clear to be is that my approach to reading for pleasure can be enhanced by embedding uncomplicated and unfussy strategies, which have a clear focus for learners. **Small-scale, manageable activities that can be established easily can be significantly beneficial to the reading for pleasure experience within the classroom.** For me this is important in taking reading for pleasure pedagogy forward in my department; something I wish to maintain and develop in the new session.



The 'Book Talk Box' approach was a straightforward initiative that did not eat up time or resources in its preparation. It is an undemanding activity that can be adopted by any English teacher and built into lessons effortlessly. Pupils responded positively to the relaxed, yet structured via the use of prompt questions, nature of the discussion that followed, whether as a whole class or in pairs. As book talk became more embedded in the classroom via this more structured approach, the more natural, organic discussion around books grew. **It is clear then, that providing learners with an initial platform to stimulate informal book talk is**



integral to the process. As I look to develop and enhance pupils' experience within dedicated reading time, my aim is to develop more resources to support this. Resources that can be shared across the department and used consistently as well as part of in-house CPD opportunities.

I would also like to explore developing informal book talk more specifically in the S3-4 classes. Next session, my aim is to build in the idea of 'books,

biscuits and blether' into dedicated reading time with a third year class of disengaged readers. I am going to use Helen Bradshaw's professional enquiry to support this (https://cdn.ourfp.org/wp-content/uploads/20210810133028/RfP-Project-Outline-H-Bradshaw-8c7e3721.pdf?_ga=2.183327459.455412271.1655725822-1516386119.1655725822).

Keep things visible: role-modelling is key.

The most important learning point I have taken away from this experience is the **vital role the teacher plays in developing learners' good reading habits and enjoyment of literature.** Within the context of the classroom, we are the next best thing to the school librarian and must take an active role in reading for pleasure. Teachers as Readers 'enrich the development of reading communities' (Cremin, 2019) by showcasing their genuine passion for books and by visibly modelling reading behaviours for their class to observe and mirror. Fundamentally, we have the power to change the attitudes of learners by becoming more noticeably involved in the reading for pleasure process and 'position ourselves as fellow readers (Cremin, 2019). From pupil feedback it was clear that they appreciated this approach above all.



To develop my role as a Reading Teacher further, my aim next session is to build in more reading activities that emphasise my position as a fellow reader in all my classes. Activities such as: creating a display of what I am currently reading, sharing my history as a reader when introducing the new Reading Challenge to my classes, classroom displays of 'books of the month', building in more informal discussion on reading habits.

We do not need to move mountains or create overly-elaborate initiatives to inspire pupils to pick up a book. Through leading by example, we are in the best position to highlight to our learners the benefits and joy of reading.

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