

Book blankets to advantage the disadvantaged readers

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Context

- I am the Reading lead for a two-form entry primary school in Colchester, Essex. Queen Boudica currently has 401 pupils on roll and serves a mixed demographic with significant levels of social need and vulnerable families.
- Reading has been an integral part of the school development plan for the past 5 years and we will continue to focus on the pedagogy of informal book talk after our successes last year.



QUEEN BOUDICA
PRIMARY SCHOOL

OU Research inspiration and rationale

As part of the Open University's Reading Schools Programme: Building a Culture of Reading, we were encouraged to put together a change team to lead Reading for Pleasure (RfP) in school. After undertaking surveys to find out about staff and children's reading, we realised that we needed to know about our disadvantaged readers. We identified this group of focus children within the school – the children who could read but chose not to. As a school, we wanted to entice these readers to read. To do this, we needed to understand their habits and preferences. As Cremin et al. (2014) state:

... that when teachers knew more about children's reading practices and experiences beyond school they were more effective in nurturing RfP and building communities of readers. They understood more about each individual child's interests and preferences. Thus they came to question what counts as reading in their classes, began to include more than just books and worked in collaboration with children to widen the variety of texts which were recognised for reading. (Cremin et al., 2014)

Our second aim for this work was also informed by our survey findings: to develop the pedagogy of informal book talk.

Talking about texts and talking about reading was at the heart of the RfP pedagogy identified in the TaRs research. This book talk was informal and highly reciprocal; it was often spontaneous and involved two-way teacher-child / child-teacher and child-child recommendations and was found in many other un-assessed reading-focused activities. This talk was dependent on the teachers' knowledge of the children as readers, and their knowledge of children's literature and other texts. (Cremin et al., 2014)

We created a Change Team of staff within the school to work on a plan of action to support our aims.

Aims

Though the use of book blankets we intended:

- to get to know the focus children as readers, with their own preferences, habits and behaviours
- to explore the children's personal perceptions of themselves as readers
- to use these conversations to build reciprocal reading relationships with this group of readers
- to broaden the focus children's reading repertoires and encourage them to take risks with their choices
- for the focus children to choose to read for pleasure.

Outline

For more information on using book blankets the following link to Benjamin Harris' work is helpful: https://cdn.ourfp.org/wp-content/uploads/20210205160600/Book_Blankets_Benjamin_Harris_002-2.pdf?_ga=2.256322059.1020468446.1667908691-1957566562.1663824439.



We held pupil conferences with our focus children each half term. Change team members met with groups of four and they spent time together engaging with a book blanket.

The book blankets were put together in different ways but always consisted of no more than 20 books:

- 2 books that the children brought with them from their class that they had enjoyed. Change team adults would also bring 2 or 3 recently purchased/ read books
- 4 books selected from the non-fiction section of the school library
- 4 Books selected by the change team member based on their knowledge of the focus children
- summer term only - 4 books from the year group above (selected by new class teachers for transition).



We recognised that the conferencing needed to be informal and informative with these children and we used these conversations to find out if our actions so far (as part of the wider school approaches into RfP) were having an impact on these learners. Each time, the procedure for the book blanket was the same.

1. Books to be laid out in a 4 x 4 grid.
2. Focus children to be given 2 or 3 minutes to look and chat around the blanket. The change team member observed and documented what the children said as well as engaging in the informal chatter. Sometimes, with our youngest and EAL children the adult would begin by modelling a few comments: *I like...*; *I don't like...* or by asking a question such as: *Have you seen any of these books before?*
3. Focus children were given a challenge, for example, can you find a page in the book that has an animal on it?
4. Focus children were invited to browse and select a book they liked the look of. If it was the same as someone else, they shared it together. The change team member might find themselves with a number of roles at this point: as a co reader, as an observer, as a support if a child felt stuck with their choices.

5. The adult continued to notice and document whilst the children read and explored.
6. To finish, the focus children were given time to think of 3 words to describe their book and these were shared with the group. 3-word recommendations were put on Post-it notes and placed inside the book.

During regular change team meetings, we were able to talk about our findings from across the school and then adjust our actions, adapt book stock and provide CPD input to the staff depending on our findings from the book blanket activities.



Impact

- Book blankets gave us good feedback as a change team about what strategies, teachers were using in the classroom to develop RfP. This form of informal monitoring allowed us to support teachers who hadn't yet seen the potential of this strategy.
- Using the book blankets as a vehicle for the focus children to explore their thoughts and feelings around books, gave us more information that we believe we would have collected via a questionnaire. We were able to adapt conversations as appropriate and really encourage and guide these readers.
- Using book blankets allowed us to individualise the RfP journeys for these reluctant readers.
- The book blankets were a social activity; the children engaged in informal book talk facilitated by the teachers without either party being concerned about getting it right or wrong. The activity wasn't seen as the teaching of reading, but as something fun that they could engage with.
- The focus children began to look forward to our check ins. They viewed them as a positive augmentation to their learning. This was shown in the change of body language observed by the change team adults. Folded arms became relaxed. Children that flitted from text to text, settled more quickly with each session and we noted that they were more decisive in their choices.
- In KS2, the focus children felt comfortable to make demands on the adults by asking for particular authors' work, asking for the rest of a series. The children recognised that they had a voice during these book blankets, and they were being listened too. By asking for particular books we concluded that they must be finding reading pleasurable.

I like these groups because I always find something new to read.

My teacher got me the next Goosebumps story because she knows I like them.

Can I take this for XXXX because he really likes books like this?

I chose this one because it's got the same characters as our book in class. So I know I will like it.

- The 3-word recommendations moved from being a mix of positive and negative reviews to being majority positive. This showed me as a leader that the blankets were bespoke and reflected the children's preferences. The teachers were selecting the right books for these children. The Year 5/6 group described feeling a sense of responsibility about their recommendation so that it was useful to others. During a local advisor deep dive – the reluctant readers were interviewed, and the children were confident making book recommendations and articulating their thoughts on a wide variety of reading matter. The advisor commented on how positive this was in terms of their secondary school readiness.
- The pupil surveys completed across the school at the end of the year confirmed that there had indeed been a shift in the children's attitude to reading with 92% of the focus group now responding positively.

We do book blankets in class now as well.

Year Group / Gender	Autumn Do you like Reading?	Summer Do you like Reading?
	Red-no impact, Amber/Yellow -some impact, Green - good impact	
1 F	I don't like reading	I love reading
1 F	I don't like reading	It's okay
2 M	I don't like reading	I love reading
2 M	I don't like reading	It's okay
3 M	I don't like reading	I'm not bothered
3 M	I don't like reading	It's okay
4 F	I don't like reading	I love reading
4 M	I don't like reading	It's okay
5 M	I'm not bothered	It's okay
5 F	I don't like reading	It's okay
6 F	I don't like reading	It's okay
6 M	I'm not bothered	It's okay

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

As the Reading lead I introduced the idea of the book blankets as a vehicle to collect observations about children as a way of monitoring progress. It provided a focus for our meetings and meant that we were able to work together, unpicking reasons for observed behaviours and comments, as well as celebrating the successes of the changes we were trying to implement. In addition, we were able to collaborate on what actions we might consider moving the children forward as well as sharing expertise across the key phases.

Throughout this process, we were continually struck by how well this generic strategy can be personalised to impact as the school requires. We knew that it was important to get to know these children as readers, but we hadn't initially set out to do this through book blankets. It was a strategy that organically came out of the work we were already doing.

The book blanket observations clearly highlighted how important the social aspect of RfP is. Peer to peer book chatter is an important motivator for our can but won't readers. We believe it lowered the stakes for our reluctant readers and meant they could engage with books at a lower level of risk.

As a change team, we have all recognised the significant impact individual teachers have on a child's will for reading and that small changes that can make this happen. We have learned that children's perceptions of themselves as readers impacts how they interact with books and that by making them feel comfortable – with no written outcome, no tricky questions, no obvious focus on developing reading comprehension we have effectively given all children the opportunity to re-engage with RfP in our school.

To end, I wanted to include an unexpected extension of the book blankets that has happened for us in this second year. We have now used them in the coaching of our ECTs. Mentors and senior leaders use book blankets alongside the ECTs to support them to develop a deeper understanding of their disadvantaged readers and help to plan ways forward for each of their classes.