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Read Around the Campfire: Creating a Reading Community

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Siobhan Harkins and Stacey Gillmore

Context



We work in Joy Lane Primary School in Kent as a Year 5 teacher (Miss Gillmore) and Assistant Head Teacher and English Leader (Mrs Harkins). With our whole-school target focused on raising attainment and progress in Reading, we are working towards building a 'reading school' where reading for pleasure is at the forefront. As a larger-than-average primary school with a high proportion of SEND and Pupil Premium, we work hard to develop and maintain effective relationships with our families; this project has afforded us the opportunity to establish further connections within a social and informal environment.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

Attending a Kent *OU/ UKLA Reading for Pleasure* group allowed us to reflect on the Teachers as Readers findings (Cremin et al. 2014) and apply these to our own practice:

- *A reading for pleasure pedagogy (which includes Social reading environments; reading aloud; independent reading; and informal book talk, inside-text talk and recommendations)*
- *Reading communities that are reciprocal and interactive*

Our initial discussions as part of the group were based around developing a 'reading for pleasure pedagogy'. As part of this, we were particularly interested in embedding 'informal book talk' into our curriculum as we had identified that reading had become task-orientated, only reserved for the Guided Reading slot.

After leading a staff meeting and trialling a form of informal '*book blether*' in a classroom, we identified the potential to apply this structure to a whole-school community event.

The Teachers as Readers (TaRs) findings suggest that RfP is '*strongly influenced by relationships*' and we were excited to foster a link between 'children, teachers, families and communities' so that we could establish a shared vision for reading as an enjoyable experience and to encourage talk around books.

Aims

Based on the TaRs research, we identified the following aims:

- To create a fun, informal space for reading and 'book talk'
- To create a stimulating reading environment
- To forge links with our parent community in a different context
- To actively demonstrate to the children and parent community that we are readers who value RfP
- To establish a new community of readers involving children, teachers and parents

Outline

Our whole-school community project was sparked by our attendance at the OU/ UKLA RfP group workshops. Upon sharing ideas and thoughts during one of these, the idea for 'Read Around the Campfire' was born.

Our School Hall became an indoor campsite where families were invited to come and lay their picnic blankets under the stars (fairy lights) and bring cushions, camping chairs, tents and even sleeping bags to create a cosy, inviting and informal environment to read, discuss and enjoy books. To boost engagement with our older children, who we have previously found a challenge to motivate, we asked for children in Reception to Year 4 to be accompanied by an adult, but invited Years 5 and 6 to attend with their friends or families.

During our first 'Read Around the Campfire' event, we offered a range of experiences for families to enjoy, including opportunities for families to listen to



teachers reading in the reading tent, a sing-along with one of our music teachers around the campfire or just the opportunity to meet with other families and discuss and share books.



Instead of charging for a camping pitch or running this event for free, we decided to utilise this event as a way to request for *book donations from our parent community*. Their donated book didn't have to be new or bought especially for the occasion but just had to be a pre-loved children's book to be distributed within our classroom/school libraries. They were then invited to fill in a *book dedication slip* so that their donation would be remembered and recognised within the school.

As we were unsure how many families would attend, and with 50 people confirmed on the morning of the event (according to the responses), we were confident that we had established a small yet responsive audience. As the event began in the evening, we soon learned that it had been a tremendous success with more than *150 people in*



attendance! Our first event was a massive success, but the amount of attendees resulted in a slightly unstructured event.

Joy Lane Primary School! Welcomes you to Read Around the Campfire!

Schedule for the evening

5:10pm Welcome from Mrs Harkins and Miss Gillmore

5:15pm Group campfire story with Mrs Pout

5:30pm - 6:00pm Family reading time

Join us in the Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 reading camps for some of our favourite stories!

Guest readers include Miss Gillmore, Miss Robinson, Mrs King and Miss Miles

6:00 - 6:10pm Singalong with Mrs Rawlings around the campfire

6:15pm Group campfire story with Mr Ashley-Jones

This ticket admitsguests



During our **second 'Read Around the Campfire'**, we aimed to respond to our feedback from families and made changes to the format of the evening, setting a cap on the amount who could attend and giving it a clear structure (see the invite with outline of the evening).

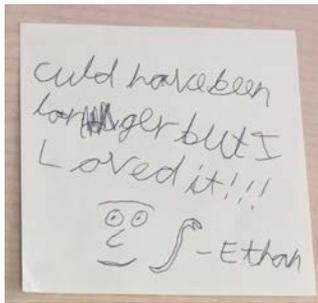


This provided us with the opportunity to try different ideas and activities, such as storytelling on the big screen to engage all of our audience regardless of age. We also invited a *small local children's book shop* to host a stall where families could buy new books if they wanted to.

Impact

As the first large-scale home-school reading event at Joy Lane, 'Read Around the Campfire' has signalled a significant shift in the school's approach to reading for pleasure, and it is set to become an occasion that will be embedded in the school's reading pedagogy.

Feedback from children who attended the event reveals that it was something that they wanted to do again (and for even longer!) and could see becoming a Joy Lane tradition:



'It was amazingly fun – I want it to happen again.'

'It is very good and we should do it every year! We could have food being sold if we do it again.'

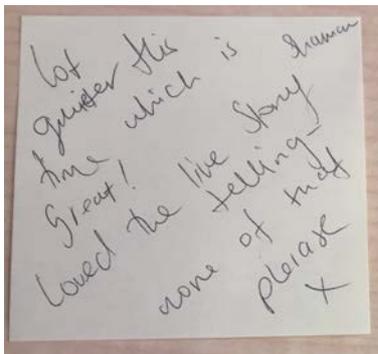
'When it's warm outside, can it be outside?'

Parental feedback has revealed that they valued us opening the school space in an informal way to allow for new bonds to be formed, especially between parents. While the atmosphere of the first event was not completely conducive to engaging in reading conversations (as detailed above), there were still many benefits noted by the parent community:

'What a lovely way to foster the community feel of the school. Plenty of conversation and beautiful singing.'

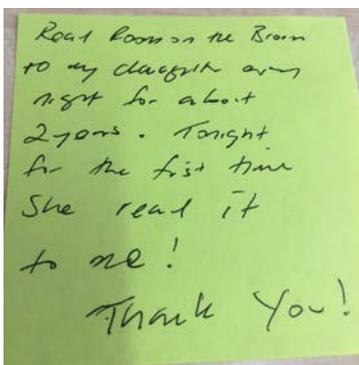
'My children had a great time. Also, working full time, I don't get to mingle with other parents and this was a great opportunity to.'

One of our aims was to foster links with our families and by holding the first event, it was the initial step towards building not only a community, but a new community of readers. The second event was adapted and responsive to the parent/carer feedback and thus created a more engaging, relaxed reading environment:



'Better with some structure this time. Would be fab to do similar on the school field with a BBQ. Great effort from all involved.'

Other seemingly small examples of impact reveal a changing attitude to reading for pleasure:

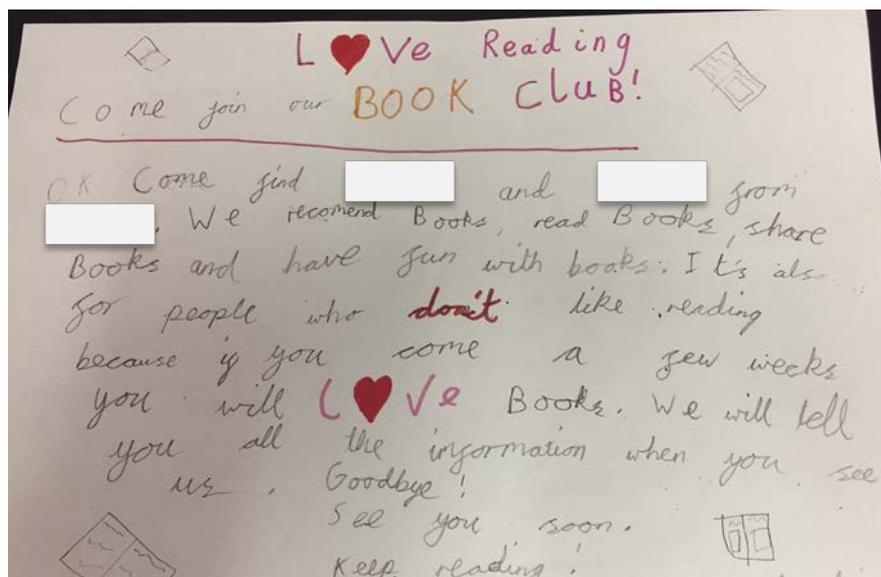


(See post-it) For this child in KS1, 'Read Around the Campfire' offered a new social environment, offering the opportunity to watch others reading with/to their families and to listen to stories being read aloud by teachers.

This resulted in the child having the confidence and desire to read their favourite bedtime story aloud to their parent for the first time after having it read to them for two years!

Read Around the Campfire also inspired a KS2 child (who is SEND and Pupil Premium) from a 'hard-to-reach' family to attend. Knowing that her friends would be there and it would be in a safe space clearly gave her the confidence to take part. While she attended alone, she had the opportunity to be part of a community that was out of her comfort zone - and she did this willingly!

Finally, although not directly related to 'Read Around the Campfire', the school's focus on reading as a social, pleasurable, shared experience has inspired a group of children in lower KS2 to create a book club at playtimes. This further demonstrates the changing culture around reading.



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

With reading as our whole-school target, we have been on the lookout for different strategies to improve reading practices in the school. Attending the OU/ UKLA Reading for Pleasure group has allowed us time to explore the Teachers as Readers (Cremin et al., 2014) research findings and helped us to refresh and refocus our approach, as well as inspiring us to try something new. Reading the research findings, words such as 'relaxed', 'choice', 'conversation', 'community', 'social spaces', 'informal' and 'book talk' really stood out to us as they were contrasted with the usual view of reading as decoding, comprehension, questioning and assessment.

'Read Around the Campfire' has sparked (!) the beginning of a new approach to reading and has inspired us to develop the event, as well as other areas, further:

- 'Read Around the Campfire' has the flexibility to be adapted. We would like to experiment with different structures and formats that reach different reading audiences, e.g. themed, author-based, seasonal, etc. In order to be able to do this, the use of pupil voice is key. What do the children want? Where do they want to take the next event?

- 'Read Around the Campfire' and other related events usually appeals to avid readers. We would like to consider ways to make the reading experience appealing to our reluctant readers and 'hard-to-reach' families.
- As we have trialled 'book blether' in our classrooms and are going to develop this further, we would like to embed this practice in our 'Read Around the Campfire' event, possibly asking families to bring a book to recommend to another family or to talk about their favourite books as a child with their own children.
- 'Read Around the Campfire' has revealed the need for more relaxed reading environments for the children to access and as a result, we are looking into how we can maximise the use of time and space during playtimes to create this informal, social reading space.