

## 1 | HOW CAN I EMBED A LOVE OF READING IN MY YEAR 6 CLASS?



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### 1. | INTRODUCTION

I am a primary teacher in an inner London school. I decided to go into teaching, after a few years working for a youth development charity. I am currently in my second year teaching year 6, having completed my NQT year in year 4.

After a few weeks in year 6, I noticed that many pupils in my class were showing no real love towards independent reading. We had independent reading twice a day, around ten minutes in the morning and then again after lunch. I quickly noticed that many pupils would stare into the distance, flick through their book at random or make the daily walk to the book corner to choose a new book. While in the book corner they would disinterestedly flick through books before seeming to choose one at random to take back to their seat. This made me feel uneasy; this was my pupils' final year in primary school - they would soon be making the move to secondary, where their teachers may assume that they know what they like to read and can choose a book that they would enjoy independently. I wanted to try and make sure that my pupils left primary school with at least some knowledge of what they liked and disliked with regards to books; to be able choose a book that they would enjoy independently. As teachers we aim to be reflective practitioners, to undergo a constant cycle of reflection and improvement of practice to enhance our pupils' learning. I decided that it was important that I reflected on this observation and tried to improve my practice to help develop a love of reading in my class.

I shall begin by introducing the action research approach to this study. In doing so I will introduce the literature around this area and detail why an action research approach suited my particular needs. I will then discuss the observations of my pupils' reading habits and, after discussing the literature on the particular area of interest, I will go on to discuss my actions, the evaluation of these actions and the conclusion of my project.

## 2. | METHODOLOGY

All research aims to find out something that is not already known, a discovery or a new creation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The study I undertook utilised an action research approach. It is important to establish the similarities and differences between traditional research and action research. Traditional research is usually conducted by an official researcher who is an outsider on the research situation - this researcher observes the actions of the practitioner, who is inside the research situation, and develops a theory about how the practitioner can develop and improve their performance (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Action research approaches allow the practitioner - teachers in education settings - to become researchers themselves (rather than the subject of research); to focus their research on their actions in their schools and classrooms (Pine, 2009).

As Carr and Kemmis (1986) state, action research is the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. Traditional research focuses on linear methods; the researcher explains why and how the research must be conducted, then follows set steps of action towards an end point – the answer (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). When collecting the data in this way the 'experiment' has a controlled number of variables, the sample sizes are often random or representative – preferably using large populations so that theoretical conclusions are generalisable (Mertler & Charles, 2008). This is often referred to as the positivist tradition (Koshy, 2005). Action research, however, focuses on the local situation, aiming to get inside the individual or institution to understand the people or situation – it is based upon the interpretive tradition (Koshy, 2005). The researcher carrying out research within the interpretive paradigm does not make any generalisable claims; we agree a set of rules that allow us to interpret our results within the means of our understanding. With this in mind, action research is a non-linear cyclical process which is designed to achieve a concrete change in a specific location to improve teaching or learning (Pine, 2009); it focuses on the solution of a specific problem in a specific setting (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Action research addresses problems currently faced in a classroom or school by the practitioner; sampling is usually carried out in the school or classroom and research is designed over a flexible, quick timeframe so that results have practical rather than theoretical significance and can be used to improve the immediate practice (Mertler & Charles, 2008).

As stated, teachers are often striving to be reflective practitioners. Action research approaches enable them to be so by allowing one to learn through action leading to a personal or professional development (Koshy, 2005). The process involves a spiral of observation, self-reflective action and reflection on the consequences (Koshy, 2005). The researcher observes, plans a change, acts and observes the consequences of the change, then reflects on these consequences. The cycle then repeats; re-planning takes place, then action and observation of the actions, reflection on the consequences and so on (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This process is not rigid however. As Pine (2009) states, this reflection-action-reflection-action process is a spiralling cyclical process in which research issues change as you move through the cycle and learn from your experience; initial plans are disregarded, improved as action becomes more focused. The data collected from action research tends to be qualitative, not quantitative data usually collected through traditional research, which can be measured or

represented by numbers (Koshy, 2005). There are a number of criticisms of action research approaches. One is that action research is subject to bias or a lack of objectivity. However, if the action research cycle is collaborative, reflections and data are shared with and critiqued by other professionals to ensure they are robust and without bias (Koshy, 2005). Some argue that action research is not generalisable on the basis that it focuses on a particular problem in a particular situation and the results are often very specific to that problem. However, arguably the results from action research can be generalisable. Koshy (2005) proposes that deliberations which help one's understanding can be offered to others; whilst not be applicable to others' situations these findings could form part of a wider search for information and the recipient may be able to replicate the study to suit the recipients' needs (Koshy, 2005).

### **Ethics**

As previously stated, action research focuses on solving a specific problem in a specific location. As Zeni states (1998), teachers as action researchers are insiders undertaking research on the very pupils for which they are responsible. Zeni (1998) goes on to discuss that the point where good reflective teaching ends and action research begins can often become blurred. She states that action research often contains more systematic documentation of data gathering, more written self-reflection and collaboration and possible publication leading to a wider audience (Zeni, 1998, pp. 10-11). With this in mind I identified two main areas of potential risk to my pupils, which were obtaining informed consent from minors and lack of confidentiality for my pupils. To minimise these risks, I sought permission from my head teacher to undertake the research study and verbal consent from the pupils before the research began, as well as before each participated in the surveys (which they could choose complete anonymously or not). Verbal consent was also sought before conducting informal interviews and pupils volunteered to give this verbal feedback. All the pupils were free to opt out of the research at any time once it had started without further explanation. I also ensured that all data collected was stored anonymously and used pseudonyms in all presentation of data and in discussion with colleagues.

### **Observation**

My school is situated in inner London and is an above average sized primary school. The percentage of children in the school who are entitled to Pupil Premium is above national average at 26% and 50% of our pupils have English as an additional language. In my class 33% are registered as having English as an additional language, 19% are registered for Pupil Premium and 41% have special educational needs. As indicated, my initial concern was that the pupils in my year 6 class seemed disengaged with independent reading. Many seemed to struggle to choose books that they enjoyed and to stay interested for a sustained period of time. I was concerned that this negative attitude would become contagious to the other pupils; there seemed to be very few children who had a real love of reading. To see what I could do to try and improve the love of reading in my class, I referred to the literature on the subject.

There are numerous studies exploring children's attitudes towards reading and writing. It seems fairly established that boys are often more disengaged than girls (for example, see Merisuo-Storm (2006)). Merisuo-Storm (2006) states that a child's attitude towards reading develops at a young age, and he or she is strongly influenced by the habits of those around

him or her. If the child grows up in a reading-rich home environment he or she is likely to become a fluent reader at an early age who will read both in school and outside of it for pleasure. This is taken further by Wallace (1992) who explains that keen readers will continue to improve their reading skills while reading for pleasure, whereas poor readers do not read for pleasure so do not develop their skills further, causing the gap between the pupils' reading skills to widen even further. Worthy et al (1999) go further again, and begin to hypothesise that this widening of the gap causes a further disengagement of pupils who do not read in their free time. This intrigued me; whilst we as teachers strive to ignite a love of reading in our pupils, what they think of themselves as readers will impact on their enjoyment and attitude. I did not know what my pupils thought of themselves as readers or what they thought made a good reader and I wanted to find out.

Each pupil in my class is an individual, with different interests and motivations. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states, these interests will motivate each child to want to read different books and texts, meaning that a wide selection of books, on a variety of topics and at varying levels of difficulty, should be available to the pupils. As Worthy et al (1999) suggest, many of the books that reluctant readers want to read are not available in school. I wanted to know if this applied to my pupils, so I set about designing a pupil survey that would give me an insight into their reading preferences and their reading habits. I hoped that I would then be able to reflect on their responses and develop my next action in my cycle with a view to improving their interest in reading. I based my pupil survey on those made by Lockwood (2012) and Worthy et al (1999). I wanted to get an idea of what my pupils thought of reading, what they thought of themselves as readers and the books or genres that they liked to read. I chose to survey my pupils because I wanted to capture the information across my class. Surveys allow data to be collected on a large scale but they can also capture independent opinions; they allow anonymity for the participants and the data from them can be quickly analysed (Cohen et al 2005). However, there are some disadvantages to surveys; they can restrict answers as there is a chance that none of the options will be appropriate and they can become biased from the wording of the question (Cohen et al 2005). The survey that I created for my pupils contained a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions and open and closed questions. It was also scrutinised by other professionals to minimise bias or leading questions. Children in my class were keen to give me their feedback and the results of the survey were very interesting.

After collecting the results I decided to sub-divide them by gender. **Error! Reference source not found.** One of the questions I wanted to explore was *Reading is something I like to do...* Although I was relieved no one had said that reading was something that they *never liked to do*, I was concerned that 75% of my class read either *sometimes* or *not very often*. After further study of the responses, I noticed that not many boys had said they liked to read often; I decided to take a closer look at gender. The girls seemed to be fairly evenly split between *read often*, *sometimes* or *not very often* with approximately a third for each. However, a staggering 91% of the boys in my class said they liked reading either *sometimes* or *not very often*.

In response to *My best friend think reading is...*, 79% of my class responded with either *OK to do* or *no fun at all*. Again, analysing the responses by gender showed some disparities. Girls seemed to be split across all of the four responses (*really fun*, *fun*, *OK to do*, *no fun at all*) but 61.54% of them said their best friend thought reading was *OK to do* or *No fun at all*. However 23.08% of girls said that their best friend thought reading was *really fun* and the same

percentage said their friend thought reading was *no fun at all*. Contrastingly, boys' responses seemed to be more negatively skewed and all of them responded that their best friend thought reading was either *ok to do* (63.64%) or *no fun at all* (36.36%). These first few results suggested that I was right to be concerned; the majority of pupils in my class only read *sometimes* (45.83%) and half said that their best friends thought reading only *ok to do*.

The questions related to the pupils' reading habits were interesting too; the majority of my pupils said that they read during guided reading, got their books from the school library or book corner and did not read with anyone at home. The results also showed three main themes towards reading in my class: that my pupils were lacking motivation to read the books on offer; that their attitude towards reading had become disengaged and negative; and that they wanted more flexibility with their reading environment (for example, sitting with their friends came up frequently). These results correlated with the literature that I had reviewed. Worthy et al (1999, pp. 15-16) stated that reluctant 10-11 year olds like to read material that is often not available in schools, such as newly published books, books based on television and films, comics, cartoons and specialty magazines. When asked in the pupil survey, *If your school was to make one change to improve your enjoyment of reading in school, what should that change be?* 37.5% of my pupils said that they wanted new books. When asked to list their favourite author, a number of my pupils listed new authors that have released books that do not appear in our class book corner or school library yet such as David Walliams and Tom Gates. When asked *If you could read anything that you wanted to read, what would it be?* My pupils stated that along with newly released books, they would like to read magazines, atlases and comics. These results led me to my three main actions: to increase the number of new books in our classroom book corner in the hope of increasing motivation to read; to vary the independent reading sessions, giving them a more flexible reading environment that they could control; and modelling reading for pleasure. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states, it is crucial that teachers are able to recommend reading material that interests pupils and for the teacher's love of reading to be present, but as the pupils' age increases the influence of their teacher decreases and the influence of their friends increases. Hopefully my first actions two will lead to improved attitude towards reading, which I would develop and consolidate with the third action of modelling reading for pleasure, both by adults and, over time, their peers.

### 3. | ACTION

#### **Action 1 – New books**

Following the children's feedback my first action was to get a selection of new books for our classroom book corner. I obtained a wide range of books from their suggestions with the aim that every child would be excited about at least one book. Ten or more children said that they would like to read books about: sport, drawing, graphic novels and funny books. I started compiling a wish list for my book corner covering these genres from a range of authors, following recommendations from my colleagues, professors and reading lists on the BookTrust (BookTrust, 2015) and CLPE websites (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2015).

#### **Action 2 – Different Independent Reading Sessions**

Before I gave the children the books I wanted to make sure that I was presenting them in an exciting way; I knew that the first session with the books could influence the attitude towards the new sessions. I made the changes to our independent reading sessions in the afternoon and kept the morning independent reading session as quiet reading. Following numerous

suggestions of activities by Lambirth (2016), I decided on the following timetable for the first week's afternoon sessions:

**Monday:** Book-type tables (when types of book – audio-books, fairy tales, non-fiction, comics, poetry etc. – are all given a separate table and children choose where they want to sit) to include: non-Fiction, picture books, comics & graphic novels, poetry and focus author (David Walliams)

**Tuesday:** Reading partners

**Wednesday:** Pupils to choose seats but read quietly

**Thursday:** Book-type tables - to include: audio-book (The Hobbit), classic authors/books, comics & graphic novels, picture books and non-fiction books.

### Action 3 – Modelling reading for pleasure

I was particularly concerned about the opinions of the boys in my class towards reading. They had already told me that they did not read very often outside of school and that most did not read at home to anyone. I do not know if many of the pupils in my class see adults in their lives read for pleasure. Merisuo-Storm (2006) suggests that “many groups of boys have come to regard school literacy as *“un-masculine”* and thus undesirable, a threat to their masculinity”. I wanted to do as much as I could to prevent this thinking towards literacy in my class. Our class are lucky enough to have a male teaching assistant, who has been with them for almost two years; he has an excellent relationship with the pupils and the boys in particular respond well to him. He is an excellent role model for our pupils; he already models many excellent behaviours for learning and social skills and he has a love of nature which our class have become interested in through him. Between us we could model good reading behaviour in both genders. This was not difficult; I started reading Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone to my class and, not having read the series before, he became hooked along with the children and could be caught reading them on his break. The children seemed amazed at the speed with which he was getting through the books and would ask him how many pages he had read each morning.

## 4. | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

I evaluated the actions that I undertook in a number of ways including: informal interviews; observations; and pupil surveys. I asked pupils if they would like to volunteer to tell me what they liked or disliked about the activities, particularly about the book-type tables. I carried out observations of the class while they were reading and also asked children to give me feedback in a second short survey. I decided to use observations in my evaluations as they allowed me to see exactly what my pupils were deciding to read and how they were interacting with the books and their peers; I felt that this was the least obtrusive method to see how they responded to the new actions and activities (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Observations have their disadvantages however: they only allow a snapshot of the whole situation; if children become aware of the observation they can change their behaviours; and I, as the observer, may also miss key actions or meaningful aspects while attention is drawn elsewhere (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

The observations were very interesting. Monday's *book-type* tables found six of my boys sitting on the *poetry table*. After taking some time to flick through the poetry books a more

able reader started reading his poem out the other boys on the table. They enjoyed the recital and were soon taking it in turns to find a good or funny poem and read it aloud. Some more reluctant boys volunteered to read a poem aloud to their peers. Potentially, they were able to do so because they were amongst their friends and liked having their reading enjoyed. The boys on the *poetry table* continued to read poems to each other throughout the session.

A mixed group of children were sitting on the *non-fiction table* where a main draw seemed to be the new drawing books. The children quickly found pencils and scrap paper and proceeded to read the instructions out loud to each other, following the steps to try to draw the illustrations and animals on the page. They were discussing the instructions in their small groups in detail and re-reading the instructions to each other to ensure everyone knew what the next step was.

The third group focused on *graphic novels and comics*, which included: *The Phoenix*, *National Geographic Kids*, *Horrible Histories* and a range of graphic novels, including Shakespeare graphic novels and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. A small group of girls across a range of abilities and special needs sat on this table; there was a quick, excited initial discussion about the books which was soon replaced with silent reading when they all became absorbed.

The fourth table was *picture books*, with a mixture of children across genders and reading abilities. Three children read the books quietly and independently, slowly making their way through a number of the books (which included, *The Day the Crayons Quit*, *The Dark*, *Voices in the Park*, *The Tunnel* and a range of others). Two of my least confident readers however were sharing the books and reading together, putting on voices and appropriate intonations. Again, it was rare for these two boys to be confidently reading out loud, especially with intonation.

The fifth table did not seem so popular. It was a focus author table for David Walliams. Many of the children had mentioned David Walliams to me before and some had mentioned him on their surveys. However, in the excitement of new books and authors to explore, he did not seem much of a draw this time.

The first experience of the book-type tables seemed to have been a success. One less confident male reader commented that he really liked the book-type tables, because he could see what type of books his friends enjoy. He could then see if he liked them too and would know what present to get them for their birthday.

Tuesday's partner reading session straight after lunch also went well. The new books were put out again and the children keenly came to get one or two books in pairs. They sat down quietly at their tables and began sharing their books with each other. This time the boys were reading the drawing books and following the instructions with care and attention. Two girls were sharing a few picture books and were doing the voices; these were some of my more able readers and they were being closely watched by two other girls, who quickly started copying with their picture books, taking it in turns to read aloud to each other. The session soon ended and it took more than a few pairs longer than expected to put their books back. One of my boys, who responded in the initial survey that he *does not read very often* and thinks *his friend thinks reading is no fun at all*, commented after the session that "I like reading with my friend,

the books are very funny". From observation and brief conversations the boys seemed to be enjoying the new reading sessions.

Wednesday's afternoon session saw a return to quiet independent reading; the children came in quietly and sat down at their desks, they were again allowed the new books and they patiently took a book each. After over twenty minutes of silent reading, with me and my teaching assistant also reading, I quickly jotted down changes in the reading habits of certain children. All of the eleven boys in my class were reading books that they had chosen independently and all seemed to be on task and enjoying them. The books included: *Tom Gates*, an information text about planes, the *Lonely Planet World Atlas*, the *Atlas of Adventures*, *The Usborne Complete Book of Drawing*, *NBA Basketball*, *The Phoenix* comic and the others were reading well known authors. Two less confident girl readers were reading poetry books that they had got from the library at lunchtime and a few of the other girls were reading the new picture books. The graphic novels seemed popular again; three of the girls had made their way through over half of their books over the last three days.

Thursday afternoon saw a return to book-type tables, but with different book-types from Tuesday. When the boys saw the books on the tables they were first into the class and sat themselves between the *non-fiction* and *graphic novel and comics* tables. Three of them instantly started reading *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* together, patiently waiting to discuss what had happened when they turned the page. Two of the other boys on the table were reading *The Phoenix* comic. Again, the three girls who has been reading the graphic novels about Shakespeare all week were quick to find their books and sit silently, reading independently. The other boys sat at the *non-fiction table* where they were reading the *Atlas of Adventures* and the *Lonely Planet World Atlas* together, discussing the different facts about the countries and flags. The more able girl readers were sitting at on the *classic books and authors table* and were again sharing the poems together, taking it in turns to read them aloud to the group. In this session, I also had *The Hobbit* audio-book playing through headphones for a group of six children; they sat quietly throughout the session listening to the book, and when the session ended one girl found a copy from the book corner to continue independently. It was a pleasure to look around the classroom and see all of the pupils interacting with books and their friends with enthusiasm and enjoyment.

After initiating my actions I wanted to see if my pupils' attitudes and motivation had improved as had appeared to be the case in my observations; I decided to survey my pupils again. They began filling in their survey whilst sitting at their book type tables; the boys seemed anxious filling in the survey whilst sitting next to their friends, so I moved the pupils back to their home seats. The results were very interesting; whilst the responses to *Reading is something I like to do...* and *My best friend thinks reading is...* had improved slightly overall, they had not improved as much as I had hoped. However, on completing the survey in their home seats (away from their friends), a few of the more reluctant boys wrote more positive comments such as: "I think reading is not that bad at all and it is really cool"; and "I like the art books because they teach you how to draw, the other books are good too. I enjoy reading"; and a third boy commented that "I have become more sucked into the new books over the last few weeks". This seems to correlate with Merisuo-Storm's (2006) idea that boys often regard reading as "un-masculine". So, there is still hope that they will leave me with a greater love of reading; I just need to keep sharing great books with them in new ways.



## 5. | CONCLUSION

Carrying out this action research approach project has transformed my thinking and how I approach activities in my classroom. I have always sought to be a reflective practitioner, trying to change how I teach after reflecting on my pupils learning, enthusiasm and misconceptions, but the action research cycle has now become embedded into my way of thinking. I have begun to see myself following the cycle in other areas of the children's learning; for example how I can improve their Math's problem solving. I find myself observing possible challenges or problems; I then take a step back and discuss possible actions with colleagues and research strategies from the literature on the subject, before deciding on actions to try with my children. I subsequently find myself evaluating the actions and reflecting on the next action to try to further my pupils' learning. I know that I have a huge influence on the decisions and actions of my pupils and I have always tried to model and encourage them.

This action research project has emphasised that there is always more to do to encourage them; they need to be excited and involved in the various decisions being made in order to be fully engaged. I already have my next actions in mind for my current class. I intend to try and increase the book talk in my class, which I hope will increase the enthusiasm for reading further – we are going to make ourselves reader profiles that will be kept in the book corner for others to read. These profiles will be written by each child, myself and our teaching assistants and will include: which books they like and dislike; which books they intend to read in the future; and which books they have never read. There will be a space for a post-it note on each reader profile, where another child or adult will be able to give them a recommendation, based on their preferences, detailing why they think they will like the book they have recommended. I am going to start more of our reading sessions with a 'teaser' to whet the children's appetites, and try to end each session with a 'juicy bit' from the book I am or my teaching assistant is reading and over time I hope to hand the 'juicy bits' over to the class to share with each other. I have many ideas about what I will do differently with my next class to improve their love of reading. The first thing that we will do together is our reader profiles. I want to start the dialogue about books from the very beginning, making it clear to my pupils that what they think about books is important to me. I will make independent reading time more varied with a range of activities including: book-type tables; partner reading; and poetry only days. I am also liaising with our English Co-ordinator about setting up book buddies across the school, so that each child in my class will be able to share a book with a younger child. I hope this will allow them both to increase their confidence and enjoyment in reading and for year 6 pupils to model good reading habits and enjoyment to the younger children. I have really enjoyed the action research process and I am excited that I have been able to do it so early on in my teaching career. I plan to give myself a similar project each year to focus on with each class that I teach, as well as carrying out smaller projects as the year goes on to continue the cyclical process. It has focused me on the actions that I can perform to further my pupils' progress; evaluating these actions collaboratively with my colleagues has also made me think more critically about them, which has helped me progress my pupils' and my own learning even further.

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