

Word rich readers

The Weald School

Problem: What challenges do your school(s) have that need to be addressed?

The amount of time that KS3 pupils spend in reading for pleasure drops dramatically during the primary/secondary transition phase. The National Literacy Trust found a significant drop in boys' reading enjoyment between ages 8–16; from 72% at ages 8–11 to 36% at ages 14–16; girls' pleasure reading also reduced in the teenage years, though less markedly (Sellgrin, 2017). This pattern is replicated in a number of different ways in our school, represented in a 40% drop in fiction loans from school library between Year 8 and Year 9, for example. There are a number of reasons for this; not least that pupils face increased pressure to prepare for GCSE literature study, combined with greater 'digital' demands on their time than ever before. However, reading for pleasure between the ages of 10 and 16 is reported to be *more* important than influences before the age of five and socio-economic factors combined in relation to academic attainment overall (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). This is, in part because reading research shows that 'a pupil's vocabulary and the extent of their background knowledge make a huge difference to their ability to infer meaning from texts' across the curriculum (Christodoulou, 2016, p. 87).

Narrative knowledge, as conceptualised by Bruner, is marginalised by current policy, and yet may have a role as 'an irreplaceable container of life experience in a complex and unpredictable world' for our most deprived pupils (Heinemeyer, 2017, p. 3). 'You can't make someone read' begins *The Rights of the Reader* (Pennac, 2006, p.13) but that is precisely what secondary English teachers are being asked to do by current UK policy. For the first time since its inception, the National Curriculum for English (NC) foregrounds the fostering of a 'love of literature' through 'widespread reading for enjoyment' (DfE, 2013, p. 13). It is imperative that we find a way to keep pupils reading during this crucial period.

Innovation: How will the innovation help improve the problem you have identified and benefit teachers and learners?

Our innovation will see intervention groups of Year 8 pupils read a novel in class at the start of each half term from January to June 2019, ensuring that participating pupils will have read six novels by the end of the academic year; control group pupils will continue to read the two that form part of existing schemes of work.

So, instead of the current 'diet' of 1–2 books studied as class readers each academic year of KS3 in line with current departmental schemes of work, pupils will more than 'triple' their novel consumption by reading six novels in a year as whole class texts.

Our innovation challenges Pennac: we *can* and *will* make children read. Participating pupils will be 'word-rich'; that is, they will have 'consumed' approximately 200,000 more words than their non-participating counterparts. The reading will not incorporate additional study of the texts, they will simply be encouraged to enjoy good narratives. Novels will be carefully chosen for their contemporary appeal. The innovation creates conditions for widespread reading for enjoyment, and has the aim of increasing reading outcomes for pupils, based on findings from Sutherland et al. (2017) in relation to 'Faster Reads'; a project involving two novels read back-to-back, after which quantitative analyses showed pupils' mean comprehension increased by 8.5 months overall and 16 months for poor readers.

Supporting strategies will encourage engagement rather than analysis; Gambrell (2011) defines engaged readers as those who are 'intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals' as well as being 'strategic' about their reading behaviour, 'knowledgeable' in terms of construction of meaning and 'socially interactive' about reading (Gambrell, 2011: 173-174). Wigfield et al (2008) in their CORI Model (Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction) propose that when readers are 'fully engaged' in reading, they 'comprehend better, use reading strategies effectively, and are motivated to read' (Wigfield et al., 2008: 433).

Existing evidence: What evidence is there that this innovation will improve outcomes?

A body of literature explores the dichotomy that seems to exist between reading for pleasure or enjoyment and the kind of accountability measures in relation to reading which are present within current policy assessment frameworks at GCSE. As teachers are required to concentrate on decoding, comprehension and developing pupils' knowledge about linguistic and structural aspects of texts through minute deconstruction 'then the reason for reading the text in the first place may be neglected' (Cremin, 2014:157). The highly analytical deconstructive approach, especially at word and sentence level, seems to be in tension with pupils gaining pleasure from achieving global coherence of whole texts.

Interdisciplinary, mixed-method research by Westbrook, Sutherland, Oakhill and Sutherland (2019) was designed to tackle this tension and enhance adolescents' reading levels, by enabling

413 Year 8 pupils to experience the pleasure of reading two whole texts in one term. Year 8 pupils' measurable comprehension increased by 8.5 months for average pupils and 16 months for struggling readers; pupils' reading motivation and engagement were also greatly enhanced. Weald School was one of the ten participating schools in this project.

Cliff-Hodges similarly emphasises the substantial pressure on English teachers to combine motivation of young readers with the attainment of high scores in public reading tests and examinations and considers it ironic that a possible reason for pupils 'forgetting' how to read novels is actually 'literature teaching itself, especially if novels are viewed as set texts instead of narratives written to be read for pleasure' (Cliff-Hodges, 2015: 93).

The US RAND Reading Study Group also acknowledges motivation as a key component of comprehension arguing that 'If pupils fail to see the relevance of an assignment, they may not read purposively, thus compromising their comprehension of the text' (Snow, 2012:15). In addition, literature texts tend to be read 'in very particular ways and in quite specific institutional contexts as part of a highly complex process of cultural induction, social stratification and occupational qualification' (West, 1994:126).

Furthermore, within the high stakes assessment systems prevalent in the current UK climate, Giovanelli and Mason (2015) argue that 'manufactured readings' of texts can fare just as well, if not better, than 'authentic' ones given that teachers have greater control over what is perceived to be the correct way of responding to any given text. The very nature of the examination system for English may be 'anti-reading'.

Put simply, 'In order to become a proficient reader, one must read a lot' (Willingham, 2017:135). Our innovation will dramatically increase the amount of reading that participating pupils do.

Research question or hypothesis: What effect will the intervention, implemented for how long, with which pupils, have on what outcomes?

The primary research questions are:

- What is the impact of 'a novel in a fortnight' delivered half-termly for two terms on reading comprehension for Year 8 pupils?
- What is the impact of 'a novel in a fortnight' delivered half-termly for two terms on attitudes towards reading for Year 8 pupils?

Secondary research questions are:

- Is the impact of 'a novel in a fortnight' delivered half-termly for two terms different for boys and girls?
- Does 'a novel in a fortnight' delivered half-termly for two terms have a detrimental

effect on other English outcomes?

Method: Include sample, design, measures, intervention, process evaluation, and analysis

Sample/ participants

Approximately 110 Year 8 pupils will participate; they will comprise two innovation groups and two control groups. There are eleven year 8 classes in the school: four of these classes are made up of high prior attaining pupils, and the remaining pupils are taught in seven 'mixed prior attaining' classes. The four participating classes will be drawn from the 'mixed prior attaining' classes, based on class teachers meeting the inclusion characteristics. We will aim to match abilities across the participating classes so that innovation and control groups are broadly similar in terms of existing data at the start. Average CAT scores and KS2 writing levels will be used for comparison.

Inclusion criteria for participating teachers will be based on timetabling restrictions (avoiding 'split' classes) and seeking similarity in terms of experience/expertise. Whether teachers are 'control' or 'innovation' will be randomly drawn.

Consent for data to be used in analysis will be gathered from pupils, parents and participating teachers.

Design and assignment to condition

Four teachers met the inclusion criteria. As two of the teachers had received training about/shown an interest in similar teaching methods in the past and two had not, pairs of teachers with similar experience of this approach to reading were formed. One teacher from each pair will be randomly selected to teach the intervention and the other will teach the control group.

Measures

At the start of Year 8 pupils in both the control and intervention groups will complete a Literacy Assessment Online reading test to establish baseline standardised scores and reading ages for reading comprehension for all participants.

At the end of Year 8 pupils in both the control and innovation groups will complete a second Literacy Assessment Online reading test giving comparison standardised reading comprehension scores and ages for all participants.

At the start of Year 8 pupils in both the control and intervention groups will also complete an attitudinal reading habits survey designed internally and already in use within the school. Again, this will be repeated at the end of the year with some additional questions for the intervention groups about the reading they have done. This will give us some qualitative feedback about pupil

views to support the reading comprehension scores, since it includes questions about how often pupils read for pleasure, and their feelings towards reading.

Finally, we will use our internal writing exam taken by all pupils at the end of year 8 in comparison with KS2 writing scores as secondary data to see if there has been any measurable deficit effect on writing as a result of increasing time spent reading. This will be marked 'blind' by non-participating English teachers in the department.

Intervention

All pupils will follow the same programme for the first term but for each subsequent half term of the year intervention group pupils will undertake a fast, immersive read of an additional class reader, meaning that they will have read (but crucially not studied) a further four novels during the year. The reading will take place during the first two weeks of each half term, comprising eight 50 minute lessons in total per novel. Teachers will be encouraged to use a range of reading strategies, including teacher reading aloud, guided reading groups, pupils reading aloud and pupils reading independently. It will be a 'shared' reading: slower readers will be supported by the recapping exercises and the teacher reading at different points during the process. Faster readers may end up, therefore re-reading sections of a novel, but this is a recognised characteristic for 'good' readers.

The novels will be selected by the participating teachers and both intervention classes will read the same books. We will aim to pick novels that will both engage and challenge readers, drawn from a range of recent acclaimed young adult fiction writing, possibly drawn from Carnegie/UKLA shortlists.

Control group pupils will continue with their current schemes of work for English, which includes the reading of two 'class reader' novels in the first term. Intervention group teachers must also meet the objectives of the year 8 schemes of work in the remainder of the term: intervention group teachers will decide how best to meet the objectives in the shortened time frame.

Process evaluation

In addition to the quantitative data generated in terms of reading ages and comprehension levels before and after the intervention, and the pupil views collected via the attitudinal survey, we will also conduct individual interviews with participating teachers at the end of the process.

These will be transcribed and coded in order to explore other factors around the delivery of the innovation, such as impact on the remaining schemes of work in terms of time, as well as gauging anecdotal evidence about the process itself, perceived levels of engagement during the reading phases, and choice of texts. Finally, we will undertake some observation of classes during the reading phase in order to monitor perceived levels of engagement with the texts directly (and to ensure that the process is being carried out as the research design was

intended).

Data analysis

Pre- and post-test reading comprehension scores will be compared across control and intervention groups to establish whether the intervention shows evidence of promise. The effect size will be based on reading comprehension progress between pre and post test.

We will also look at the impact on boys, on girls, and on pupils in receipt of Pupil Premium specifically.

In addition, the qualitative data generated from teacher interviews will inform the findings.

Conclusion: What will happen if your innovation improves outcomes, or not? What are the limitations of your evaluation?

Potential limitations

There are a number of potential limitations to what appears at first to be a simple intervention. Firstly we will need to consider the level of challenge in the texts. Although there might be disagreement about which novels to teach at KS3, there is a general acceptance that certain texts lend themselves particularly well to 'discussion, reflective reading and creative interpretation' (Ellis & Barrs, 1996: 36). Research suggests that some texts are better at 'teaching' than others - dependent on factors such as familiarity of context, narrative voice and relationship with the reader, as well as complexity of sentences and vocabulary. 'All of this suggests that 'texts that teach' are ones which challenge and make demands on readers: they require readers to become active and involved in the world of the text' (Barrs & Cork, 2001: 36). We also support the notion that 'no curricular choice is innocent' (Scholes, 1985, p. 62), and will therefore seek to justify all text choices made.

In an ideal world all participating groups should read the same book at the same time to ensure that there is equity. This may, however, be cost prohibitive, since a single set of class texts is approximately £180-£200.

There is also a danger of cross-pollination in terms of control groups getting wind of the nature of the intervention and reading more to keep up - or teachers adjusting practice.

Bias is also a potentially limiting factor; we must avoid searching for a positive outcome because we have invested in one.

Intervention pupils will also be missing some aspects of the schemes of work followed throughout the year by the control pupils due to the amount of time that they will spend reading. There is a chance that this may have a detrimental impact on other areas of English, such as writing. We

would hope to identify this via the use of the writing examination, and may need to ensure that intervention pupils received some additional writing teaching following the research phase.

Finally, we have, as a department, already been involved in two external research projects relating to reading; therefore it might be a 'fertile' ground already supporting reading rich pedagogies and not necessarily representative of other secondary schools.

Implications

If results are positive we would aim to report findings widely and seek to roll out the innovation internally across KS3 and the department.

If results are neutral nothing has been lost and we will return to existing schemes of work for all teachers.

If results are negative, we can offer small group directed intervention for the 55 pupils (approximately) in the innovation group at the end of the year.

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