Children’s Engagement in Reading for Pleasure: Developing a reading environment to promote enjoyment in reading.

Leah Langlois

University of Chichester, UK
Abstract

This paper intended to study the impact that aspects of a reading environment, namely, reading aloud and creating a reading corner and library display, can have on children’s engagement in reading for pleasure. The research took place in a lower key stage 2 class with 29 pupils, in a predominantly white, middle-class, single form entry primary school, located in Southern England. The initial concept of this study emerged from the National Literacy Trust survey on children’s reading habits and preferences, which found that only 55% of children and young people stated that they loved reading. From this, the researcher was inspired to understand how developing a reading culture in a classroom can positively impact children’s reading for pleasure.

The study offered children the opportunity to be co-researchers as the teacher took on the role of researcher-practitioner and encouraged children to invest in the culture changes in the classroom. Although quantitative data was collected, the small research sample offered a more in-depth and qualitative insight into children’s perceptions and engagement in reading for pleasure.

To gather data whilst the reading environment in the classroom was implemented, a semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to all 29 of the children, followed by semi-structured interviews with a stratified sample of the class to gain a deeper understanding of the children’s responses in the questionnaire.

The findings revealed that, despite time restraints and scheduling limitations, reading aloud to children had the greatest influence on children’s attitudes, habits and preferences in reading of all the strategies implemented.

The purpose of this study is to measure the impact that developing a reading environment in a classroom can have on children’s engagement in reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure is that which takes place solely for enjoyment and not for development of skill. The reading environment considers the reader and their attitudes to reading, the different texts and text types available, the physical setting and how conducive they are to the activity of reading.

Current reading statistics shows that only 55% of children stated that they enjoy reading (Clark, 2016), and 34% did not reach age-related reading expectations (Department for Education, 2016).

The finding from this research may offer greater insight into the impact of the reading environment on one school setting and how they may impact children’s engagement in reading for pleasure to inform practitioners on how best to support and develop reading cultures in their classrooms.

Literature Review

‘I am concerned that in a constant search for things to test, we’re forgetting the true purpose, the true nature, of reading and writing; and in forcing these things to happen in a way that divorces them from pleasure, we are creating a generation of children who might be able to make the right noises when they see print, but who hate reading and feel nothing but hostility for literature’ (Pullman in Powling, et al., 2003, pp.10).
Children’s Reading Habits

In 2015 the National Literacy Trust found that, 55% of children and young people in the UK acknowledged that they enjoyed reading, and only 43% read daily (Clark, 2016), a slight increase from 2014 when the percentages were 54% and 41% respectively (Clark, 2015). This still indicates that over half of children and young people do not read every day, and almost half would not say they enjoy reading. More recently, the Key Stage 2 assessment data found that 34% of UK pupils did not reach the expected standard in reading (Department for Education, 2016), only adding to the huge numbers of children that struggle to read and do not enjoy it (Department for Education, 2012; Gamble, 2013; Kirby et al, 2011). This emphasises the importance of ‘promoting good textual health’ (Smith, 2008) and addressing the negative attitudes and behaviours towards reading.

If 45% of children do not enjoy reading (Clark, 2016), and 34% struggle to read (Department for Education, 2016), those children will not experience the full benefits of reading. Reading can provide entertainment, enjoyment and relaxation (Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003); it can also develop a more reflective outlook on the world, people and ourselves (Waugh et al, 2013). Chambers goes so far as to say that reading is not just a resource to use, ‘but is of itself, an experience to be entered into, to be shared and contemplated’ (1983, pp.39), moreover, ‘life is richer if we read for pleasure as well as purpose’ (Waugh et al, 2013, pp.17). These children are therefore failing to experience the deep personal and social richness that reading offers.

Reading for Pleasure

Reading for pleasure is the ‘reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading’ (Clark and Rumbold, 2006, pp.5) and is a form of play that allows the reader to explore and experience alternative worlds (Department for Education, 2012). Reading is seen not only as an enjoyable activity but as a major contributor to achievement and attainment, positively affecting vocabulary development and general knowledge (Nestlé Family Monitor, 2005; NLT, 2005; Marinak et al, 2015; Snell, Hindman and Wasik, 2015) and improving literacy standards in schools (Ofsted, 2011, cited in Gamble, 2013; Clark, 2012; Cremin et al, 2016). Clark (2005) found that children who enjoy reading are three times more likely to read above their expected age level, than children who do not enjoy reading, however it is not unusual for a child to have adequate reading ability yet lack interest in reading (Kirby et al, 2011). Remarkably, Clark and Rumbold (2006) believe that reading for enjoyment is essential to combatting social exclusion and raising educational standards as it develops expressive language; therefore, it is a good tool for readers who could be at risk due to socio-economic status (Flynn, 2011) but now have ‘the potential to overcome social disadvantage’ (Lockwood, 2008, pp.4). Supporting this, Hall and Myers (1998, in Clark and Foster, 2005) state that a child’s definition of themselves as a reader is intrinsically linked to their potential for learning.

Role Models

Eccles (1983, cited in Marinak et al, 2015) suggests that how much children value something significantly impacts their participation or engagement in it. Some readers have a narrow view of reading and require help to break that cycle from someone who already knows how to do it (Chambers, 1991). Thus, whilst a tangible reading environment must be developed, children also ‘need to see in their teacher a role model of a keen reader’ (Lockwood, 2008, pp.21; Phinn, 2000). Likewise, parents and the home environment are essential to fostering a love of reading; children are more likely to continue to be readers in homes where books and reading are valued (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Hume et al, 2015). Chambers (1983) coined the term ‘socialisation’ referring to a child’s behaviours, attitudes, values and customs learned from those around them, whether adults, siblings or peers. As learning to read starts before formal
schooling (Vlanchos and Papadimitridous, 2015; Washtell, 2008), parents play a crucial role in developing positive attitudes towards reading (Ofsted, 2004; Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Lockwood, 2008; Gamble, 2013; Hume et al, 2015) which can be achieved through socialisation. Therefore, the way a parent perceives, talks about, buys and keeps books will influence the values and attitudes of their children.

Where reading for pleasure is not modelled at home, parents cannot help the child in navigating the world of enjoyable reading. This highlights the importance of having positive reading role models in school, such as a reading teacher (Phinn, 2008; Didau, 2014; Smith, 2005; Cremin et al, 2016; Cremin et al, 2008) who demonstrates the behaviour they wish to encourage (Wray, et al., 2002); it is through the authentic model of valuing reading that it becomes meaningful and important to the pupils (Marinak et al, 2015; Cremin et al, 2008). However, Cremin et al (2008) found that teachers’ knowledge of authors and poets was undeveloped and may hinder the development of a reading environment, further emphasising the importance of authentic reading teachers. It is vital that all children have reading role models in their environment who read for both purpose and pleasure (Chambers, 1991; 2011; Lockwood, 2008; Gamble, 2013; Martin, 2003 in Waugh et al, 2013). When children value reading, they will read for pleasure, seek out more challenging texts and also be more likely to persist with a challenging read (Marinak et al, 2015).

Lifelong readers are only created where reading is an enjoyable experience (Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003). If this is the case, children’s engagement in reading for pleasure can be positively influenced through the development of a reading culture in the classroom.

Reading Environment

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reading novels was seen as a frivolous waste of time with the name itself denoting ‘novelty value’ (Lockwood, 2008). Reading was just

\[\text{‘a necessary skill to climb the rungs of the school curriculum, or to unlock to doors of knowledge in other subjects; a means to an end rather than an end itself’} \text{(Lockwood, 2008, pp.3).}\]

It is now enjoyed as a worthwhile activity for its own sake, the pleasure it holds and the experience it gives the reader (Pennaic, 2006; Cremin et al, 2016). To teach reading well without the risk of divorcing pleasure from the act of reading, children should be exposed to positive reading cultures at home and at school (Lockwood, 2008; Clark and Rumbold, 2006). A reading environment is made up of setting, text types, mood, time, attitudes and purpose, which must be considered when creating a reading environment that can help children become willing, avid and thoughtful readers (Chambers, 2011; 1991; Smith, 2008). Reading environments allow children to make the important transition from ‘learning to read’ to being ‘readers who learn’ as word learning and comprehension improve through increased reading (Mahdavi and Tensfeldt, 2013). An outstanding reading environment is one where reading has a high profile and pupils have freedom to choose appropriate books (Atwell, 2007 in Hudson and Williams, 2015), while teachers monitor and suggest choices to develop and widen children's reading (Ofsted, 2004; Cremin et al, 2008).

Aidan Chambers was a pioneer in thinking about reading environments and his theories still apply today, particularly that of ‘the Reading Circle’ which encompasses the reading environment. In class a school needs to consider the selection, stock, availability and accessibility of texts, making suitable time and settings for reading, and giving opportunities for pupils to respond to texts. Having a range of diverse texts reflecting pupils’ interests encourages enthusiasm in reading (Clark and Foster, National Literacy Trust, 2005). Unfortunately, Ofsted (2004) found children’s interests were seldom used to inform school’s text selections, therefore breaking ‘the Reading Circle’. When a range of materials and texts
are available to children, they must be given freedom and choice in what they read (Phinn, 2000; Cremin et al, 2016) to improve engagement (Hudson and Williams, 2015; Edwards, 2009), provide motivation to read (Marinak et al, 2015) and develop positive attitudes (Chambers, 1991; Ofsted, 2004).

The reading environment encompasses how reading is celebrated using displays, libraries, book corners, events and activities (Lockwood, 2008). Book displays showcase different texts, child and adult responses, and recommendations, making books more prominent in the school as they are engaging and stimulating (Lockwood, 2008; Chambers, 2011; Didau, 2014). The library is one of the most important reading spaces in a school (Gamble, 2013) and should be a print-rich environment with a plethora of genres and texts available. Designated book corners should feel comfortable and inviting (Gamble, 2013), but only used for reading as a devoted place for one special activity conveys its importance (Chambers, 2011).

Reading aloud

Although reading aloud is one of the most enduring and well-loved routines (Washtell, 2008), it has succumbed to time pressures in many schools (Lockwood, 2008; Didau, 2014; Waugh et al, 2013). However, it is crucial in developing a culture of reading in the classroom, as ‘the capacity of children to comprehend and enjoy language is frequently ahead of their ability to read’ (Chambers, 1983, pp.130; 1991; Mahdavi and Tensfeldt, 2013; Washtell, 2008), and can instil a love of literature even if children cannot access it themselves (Chambers, 2011). All children, regardless of ability, age or confidence, are exposed to rich, new and more complex language in a read aloud setting, therefore benefiting from it and catching a glimpse of their future reading selves (Gamble, 2013; Heller, 1995; Clark and Foster, NLT, 2005; Department for Education, 2012; Snell, Hindman and Wasik, 2015). Chambers (2011) further states that reading texts to children which they cannot yet read introduces them to texts they may reach for in time. However, Lockwood (2008) discovered that by Year 6, half of children did not hear books being read aloud anymore. Therefore, unless a child is an avid reader, they are missing out on the personal, social and educational benefits of reading (Waugh et al, 2013; Chambers, 2011; 1983). So, reading aloud is an opportunity to expose children to different texts, genres and authors (Washtell, 2008), scaffolding access to challenging themes and ideas (Gamble, 2013), and its emphasis should be on ‘letting the power of the story... come through to the children without interruption’ (Lockwood, 2008, pp.25).

This study considers what impact a reading environment can have on children’s engagement in reading for pleasure and how reading aloud can influence children’s reading habits. The reading environment factors include developing a designated book corner, using a recommending wall for book suggestions, creating a library display, reading aloud, implementing a ‘Drop Everything and Read’ (DEAR) time daily and introducing book clubs.

The research questions this study look at in detail are:

- What impact does the reading environment in a primary classroom have on children’s engagement in reading for pleasure; and
- How does reading aloud impact children’s engagement in reading for pleasure?

Methodology

This study was undertaken in a single form entry village school in Southern England with a lower key stage two class. The school encouraged children to read at home as much as possible, both independently and with a parent/carer, thereby giving a value to reading. The library was small but full of high-quality texts, exposing children to a range of genres and authors, but the classroom was lacking in this area. A ‘colour coded’ scheme was used to progress children in their reading, where each colour band contained a variety of genres,
authors and publishers, from which the children selected books to read at school and at home. Any adults who read with a child commented in the child’s reading journal. It was noted that children did not write in their own reading journal or have a place to reflect on their reading.

To successfully answer the research question, questionnaires, interviews and field notes were selected as methods of data collection. The use of multiple methods has gained influence when conducting educational research (Arthur et al, 2012) in addition to this ‘mixed methods approach’ in data collection offers a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for triangulation of findings which consequently strengthens the validity of the research (Cohen et al, 2007; Arthur et al, 2012; Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008; Greig et al, 2007). Whilst questionnaires gather more quantitative data which can be analysed, patterns extracted and comparisons made (Bells, 1999; Arthur et al, 2012), interviews obtain more in-depth qualitative information about unique opinions, habits and preferences about reading (Silverman, 1993, in Cohen et al, 2007). Field notes were also used informally for the duration of the study, as a way of reporting observations, reflections and reactions of the children (Hopkins, 2002). These methods were chosen to generate findings effectively and concisely which answer the specific research questions identified in the literature review.

In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the BERA (2011) ethical guidelines for educational research, the confidentiality and protection of participants was ensured by storing all data on a password protected laptop, pseudonyms were used for participants and the name of the school was not included in the study. All participants were informed about the purposes of the research and given the right to withdraw up until a given date. Interview participants were selected using stratified sampling (Cohen et al, 2007) based on their established ability grouping for English lessons. It is important to state that the sample size for the questionnaires was 29 children and 9 children were selected for interviews. As the sample sizes are small, the research may not be representative of the pupil population and findings are therefore subjective. Throughout the duration of the study, the practitioner-researcher (Burton and Bartlett, 2005) focused on establishing and developing the reading environment in the classroom. Due to limitations experienced, some elements of the reading culture were not implemented, including establishing a book club, creating a recommending wall and introducing a ‘drop everything and read’ (DEAR) time into the school day. However, developing a book corner, a library display and reading aloud could be implemented successfully. This gave children the opportunity to become ‘co-researchers’ in the study, making the research ethically stronger and reducing bias as it works alongside the children (Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008).

**Questionnaire**

To gain a general understanding of the children’s reading preferences and attitudes (Greig et al, 2007; Arthur et al, 2012), a semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to all pupils in the class. This was an appropriate method because they are simple, quick (Hopkins, 2002) and reliable (Bell, 1999), giving an overview of the population for the research (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007). The use of closed questions supplied quantitative data for analysis (Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008; Cohen et al, 2007; Arthur et al, 2012) whilst giving participants a range of answers and open questions gave respondents the freedom to respond however they wished, offering more qualitative data for comparison (Arthur et al, 2012). Greater honesty was also encouraged through participant anonymity (Cohen et al, 2007) but this also meant that clarification could not be given, meaning questions may be misunderstood; a pilot was therefore issued within the research class (Bell, 1999; Bryman, 2012; Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008; Cohen et al, 2007) to improve the questionnaire design and quality.

**Interviews**

The second method used was semi-structured interviews at the end of the study with a stratified sample of children representative of the whole class (Cohen et al, 2007; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004), to gain deeper understanding and validate the questionnaires themselves
(Cohen et al, 2007). All children consented to interview and were promised anonymity regarding responses (Cohen et al, 2007). To gain qualitative data (Bryman, 2012), the interviews included questions and prompts covering reading habits, attitudes and preferences but gave room to linger around children’s ideas (Greig et al, 2007; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004; Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008). This meant that opinions and motivations around reading could be explored fully, their responses could be probed and their habits investigated, which questionnaires cannot achieve (Bell, 1999). The interviews were purposeful interactions, offering a way to discovering children’s perspective at greater depth (Arthur et al, 2012). Nevertheless, they do have their limitations, including bias due to leading questions or the influence of the researcher through relationship (Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008; Cohen et al, 2007; Bell, 1999), the difficulty getting children to elaborate their thoughts (Hopkins, 2002), and their time-consuming nature (Hopkins, 2002; Arthur et al, 2012). Bell (1999) suggests that it is easier to acknowledge that a bias exists than attempt to eliminate it, so a balance was achieved between interviewer and interviewee as rapport was built through the practitioner-researcher role (Burton and Bartlett, 2005), both to address ambiguity and confusion, and make the children feel at ease (Hopkins, 2002). Additionally, no leading questions were used and clear phrasing was used to minimise misunderstandings. It is also worth noting that anything said in an interview by a child is not everything they think, feel or believe but simply what they shared in a contrived setting (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004).

Field Notes

Finally, due to the nature of the study, field notes were used throughout the research period to record the children’s responses. As the children were ‘co-researchers’ in developing the reading environment in the classroom (Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2008), it benefitted the research to use field notes as a quick and easy method for recording observations, reflections and responses (Hopkins, 2002; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). Alongside the questionnaires and interviews, field notes offered triangulation, validating the data collected and providing continuity among results (Cohen et al, 2007; Arthur et al, 2012; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). As field notes were used informally as required, there was no difficulty keeping up with the class and keeping them was not time consuming; however, it is important to recognise that field notes can be subjective due to researcher bias (Hopkins, 2002).

Findings and Analysis

The findings obtained from the chosen research methods are explored and discussed according to the research questions:
- What impact does the reading environment in a primary classroom have on children’s engagement in reading for pleasure; and
- How does reading aloud impact children’s engagement in reading for pleasure?

It is important to acknowledge that gender, socio-economic background and demographic differences have not been considered in this research and these factors might have influenced children’s reading engagement.

Establishing a reading environment in the classroom was difficult due to time constraints and organisational limitations; thus aspects of the reading environment, such as daily DEAR time and developing a ‘recommending wall’ for children to suggest books to each other, could not be implemented.

Due to the generally low attainment of the class, the reading learning in the class was for skill, rather than for pleasure, although both are vital as each improves the other (Lockwood, 2008). The class teacher was observed reminding children to log their ‘reading pathways’ on the chart with the intention to move through the ability colour bands. Likewise, the timetable had designated slots for reading aloud throughout the week, but was often forfeited to finish work
or extend a lesson. Spare time in the school day was utilised to revise spellings, handwriting and times tables, meaning there was little time left to read aloud together or implement daily reading time.

Children's reading habits and preferences

When asked to respond to the sentence, ‘I think reading is…’, 69% of children responded with a positive statement, and 21% responded negatively (see fig 1.1). One child stated;

‘I think reading is fun because it takes me to a different story world’.

Of those who responded positively, 80% stated that they read every day or almost every day, and 88% of those children indicated that they see their parents/carers reading. This could suggest that children who read with regularity, and are aware of those closest to them reading, have more positive attitudes to reading (Gamble, 2013; Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Lockwood, 2008; Hume et al, 2015).

When asked if they read enough, 66% of children stated they read enough, although 11% of those children also stated that they did not read every day or almost every day. This might imply that children who do not read regularly, but think they read enough, read because they understand it is an important skill, rather than for pleasure or enjoyment (Gamble, 2013). As Kirby et al (2011) argue, these may be the children with adequate reading ability but little interest in reading.

CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO READING

17% of children displayed negative attitudes to reading and had no desire to increase the amount they read; every child indicated that they rarely saw their parents/carers reading at home. This could indicate that children who do not read, and do not see their parents/carers reading, do not enjoy reading and have no desire to read (Ofsted, 2004; Smith, 2008; Hume et al, 2015; Kirby et al, 2011). One child, when responding to the sentence ‘I think reading is…’ wrote:
‘Very boring I would rather play on my Xbox 360’.

This highlights the impact negative attitudes can have on a child’s own engagement with reading. Likewise, disengagement and negative behaviours towards reading can lead to negative attitudes, further denoting that positive attitudes can have a positive impact on reading engagement and emphasising the importance of positive reading role models for children. Thus, readers create readers and non-readers create non-readers (Chambers, 1983). Both parent and teacher have a responsibility to value and prioritise reading (Phinn, 2000; Cremin et al, 2008), display positive behaviours and attitudes towards reading, and develop a recognisably text rich, reading environments (Clarke and Foster, 2005; Vlanchos and Papadimitriou, 2015).

Reading aloud

Part of developing a reading environment in the classroom included reading aloud with the children every day (Chambers, 1983; Marinak et al, 2015; Lockwood, 2008). Three books slightly exceeding the reading ability of the children were offered, of which ‘Ratburger’ by David Walliams was chosen. It was found that reading this book aloud positively impacted some children's reading habits; 5 children reported buying ‘Ratburger’ or other Walliams texts and began reading them with their parents/carers at home. One child stated:

‘Daddy reads one page and then I read one page before I go to bed… we’re catching up to the bit we’re reading in class!’

Others were also observed bringing their favourite Walliams books in for ‘show and tell’; and one child brought their copy of ‘Ratburger’ to read alongside the teacher in class, one of the many ‘little things’ that make up a reading environment (Lockwood, 2008). Additionally, 55% of children named Walliams or one of his texts as a favourite author or book. Of 53 different answers, the authors with the most mentions were David Walliams, Julia Donaldson and Roald Dahl (see fig 1.2). This suggests that reading a relevant text aloud that is popular among the children and slightly above their ability can positively impact children’s reading engagement.

![CHILDREN'S FAVOURITE AUTHORS](image_url)

*Fig 1.2 Children’s favourite authors*
This positive effect on children’s reading engagement could be due to the book itself if appropriately chosen, relevant and currently popular among children. In interview, one child stated:

‘I like Quentin Blake’s drawing, I like Tony Ross his drawing too, I like David Walliams and Roald Dahl’

Additionally, it could be that the children respond positively to Walliams’ humour and style of writing, observed when reading ‘Ratburger’ aloud with the class, as the children often laughed in response. The children could also have just enjoyed the experience of reading a book together in class (Waugh et al, 2013). Sharing imaginary experiences together binds listeners in a community (Chambers, 2011), evidenced in interview, when a child stated:

‘I like reading with other people’

It is worth stating that the book was read with the children in the same period the questionnaire was distributed and it could be possible that any book might have been named in the questionnaire had it been shared aloud in class. However, this is not necessarily negative. The findings above suggest that children can be positively impacted by the text read aloud in class, and be encouraged to explore further at home. One child stated:

‘I’m really excited because my Ratburger book is being delivered soon… we bought it on Amazon’

The teacher’s choice of the book to be read together can widen children’s knowledge and awareness of different texts, genres, authors and poets (Lockwood, 2008; Washtell, 2008). Accordingly, the teacher has the responsibility to choose an appropriate range of texts to be read aloud to widen a child’s repertoire and textual understanding (Marinak et al, 2015; Clark and Foster, 2005).

Although reading Walliams’ ‘Ratburger’ aloud was received positively, limitations were experienced. Due to timetable restrictions and pressures on progress, the book was unfinished due to inconsistent and sporadic reading. However, in the short time ‘Ratburger’ was shared the children’s reading engagement was impacted tangibly. Had reading aloud been consistent, and a variety of texts, authors and poets been introduced to the children, the impact might have been even greater.

Book Corner

A book corner, designed like a ‘bibliotheca’ linking to the children’s Roman topic, was also implemented in the research classroom. The classroom had not previously had a book corner, although a book box with a range of old and new texts was available but unused. On a few occasions, children were observed taking a book from the box to read, although the book box was disorganised and included tatty and age inappropriate texts. Topic books were displayed and easily accessible around the classroom on book stands and in baskets.
Some children were observed using the book corner to read independently when work was finished, however this was infrequent. 3 boys were chosen to select some new books for the class from the mobile library; which were subsequently displayed inside the book corner for all the children to enjoy. This ‘showing off’ could demonstrate the value children place on new books and in being given choice (Department for Education, 2012; Chambers, 2011; 1991; Hudson and Williams, 2015). Children were also observed taking their favourite texts from the book box and displaying them in the book corner, which could also imply that they had a desire to share and recommend books to their friends, took pride in their choices and recognised the book corner as a special place (Chambers, 2011). In interview, when asked where they like to read, one child responded;

‘I like to read in the library and the reading corner’

Although the book corner was used, it was not used its full extent in conjunction with daily DEAR time. This highlights the lack of priority given to reading in the class as 10 minutes a day could not be given to DEAR time, instead being used to revise spellings, times tables and handwriting.

It is not uncommon for new things in the classroom to cause excitement but, surprisingly, the children did not engage with the book corner straight away. The children may have avoided interacting with the book corner as it was a new phenomenon. Had they been familiarised with the area and given time to use it, it could have had greater impact on the children’s reading engagement. Likewise, timetable restraints meant an introduction of the book corner was overlooked.
Finally, the observed lack of impact on reading engagement could be due to the range of texts available in the book corner, which may not have been diverse enough for the different preferences of the children. Fig 2.2 demonstrates the spectrum of text types enjoyed by the children, which is varied and diverse, not just limited to books (Clark and Foster, 2005; Cremin et al, 2008). Although reading electronically can enhance reading development (Vlanchos and Papdimitrious, 2015), electronic devices were not available in the book corner, and 18% of children enjoyed reading electronically (websites, iPad or Kindle), which may have hindered their engagement in the book corner. Engagement in the book corner could have been greater had a more varied assortment of texts been available.

Library display

The third aspect of the reading environment executed was the interactive library display, titled ‘Intrigued by the first line?’, to encourage children to choose a book, based on the first line, rather than on the front cover. Texts were presented covered in black paper with the first line of the book on the front (see fig 3.1).

Teachers were observed interacting with the display, and commented positively. The school’s English subject coordinator stated;

‘I love the reading display in the library, it’s so imaginative and creative’
Fig 3.1 Library display

The existence and quality of such displays indicates the value on reading (Chambers, 2011). A high-quality display was created but the children failed to engage with it. Like the book corner, an interactive display was a new phenomenon in the school and so children may not have known how to use the display, unless modelled by a teacher. Children were observed using the library at the beginning or end of the school day to wait for peers/parents and throughout the day when given an opportunity to read independently. When a child was unaccompanied by an adult, they would take their book to class rather than enjoy the library environment. If this was the only time the children had in the library, they may not have noticed the display or had time to engage with it.

Despite the positive reaction from staff, teachers may not have encouraged their children to engage with the display because of their own time restraints or priorities. It is likely that timetable limitations were the main hindrance to the effectiveness of the library display, as it was noted that children did not have scheduled library visits in their weekly timetable.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to discover whether children’s engagement in reading for pleasure could be positively influenced by developing a reading environment in the classroom, namely through reading aloud, developing a book corner and creating a library display. The study offered children the opportunity to be co-researchers as the teacher took on the role of researcher-practitioner and encouraged children to invest in the culture changes in the classroom. The research involved using semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and field notes to gather data about the children’s reading engagement.
Although these findings were limited due to the small sample size, the research does fall in line with research from Chambers (2011), Lockwood (2008) and Clark and Rumbold (2006) who suggest that the reading environment in the classroom impacts on children’s engagement in reading. Data from the questionnaire found that parental reading engagement has a direct impact on children’s reading engagement; the children who responded positively to reading saw their parents/carers reading at home. Likewise, those who had negative attitudes to reading did not see their parents/carers reading at home. This serves to highlight the importance of reading role models on children’s engagement in reading (Ofsted, 2004; Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Lockwood, 2008; Gamble, 2013), thus, reading teachers who value and prioritise reading are crucial to developing positive attitudes towards reading among all children (Cremin et al, 2008; 2016) but particularly those who do not have reading role models at home.

It was found that reading aloud with the children had the greatest impact on the children’s reading engagement. Giving children the choice of the book being read aloud to them seemed to influence their own reading behaviour in that they identified the author of said text as their favourite and some children specifically bought copies of the text to read at home. Teachers therefore have responsibility for selecting and sharing different texts, genres, authors etc. with children in a read aloud setting to positively influence children’s reading engagement and widen their book knowledge (Chambers, 2011; Washtell, 2008).

The book corner was another practical element of the reading environment developed where the children were observed using it to read quietly when they had completed their work and display their favourite books from the mobile library or book box. When given the opportunity, children use a book corner to engage in reading activities; however, it is important that a range of texts relevant to the children’s preferences are available and accessible in the book corner (Clark and Foster, 2005; Cremin et al, 2008) as a spectrum of text types were found to be read by the children. Due to timetable limitations, the book corner was not used in conjunction with daily DEAR time, which could have had more of an impact on children’s reading engagement. When reading is not valued or facilitated in the school timetable, children may not use a book corner to full capacity.

The library display was successfully implemented but was not utilised by teachers or children. Although teachers commented positively on the display, children were not observed engaging with the display, despite its interactive nature, due to a lack of time spent in the library. The library is one of the most important reading spaces in the school (Gamble, 2013) but, unless used by teachers and opportunities given to children to access it, it will have little impact on children’s engagement in reading. Furthermore, displays demonstrate the value placed on reading (Chambers, 2011) and so should be high-quality, interactive and explained to be beneficial to children.

This research concludes that developing classroom environments that are conducive to reading is imperative if a school wishes to raise the profile of reading for pleasure. This can be done by ensuring that each classroom has a designated book corner with a range of texts available and is kept comfortable and special. Celebrating reading publicly with displays exhibiting children and teachers’ reading, responses, themes and various authors, can encourage children to interact and engage with reading for pleasure. Most importantly, teachers across the school should ensure that they consistently read aloud to their children, introducing them to a range of texts, genres and authors to expand their textual understanding and engage them in reading for pleasure.

Due to the limitations in the research, the full extent of a reading environment could not be implemented and therefore children’s engagement in reading for pleasure could not be measured in its entirety. However, the success of reading aloud to the children poses a new
research question regarding the effects of reading aloud daily on children’s engagement in reading. This would be a more longitudinal study and explore aspects such as text type, genre and consistency, which may impact children’s engagement in reading for pleasure differently.

Although this study did not transpire as intended, a significant link can certainly be made between children’s engagement in reading for pleasure and being exposed to consistent reading aloud and having positive reading role models. Therefore, it is hoped that this research will encourage teachers not only to value and prioritise reading more in the classroom, but also be a reading role model, and so display positive reading attitudes and behaviours, in the knowledge that it could be reflected in the children’s participation and engagement in reading for pleasure themselves.

Reference List


