

“Reading saved my life”

Amanda Ellison considers whether Reciprocal Reading might be the perfect solution for the post-lockdown reading gap...

Leafing through publisher Mark Hodkinson’s memoir, *No One Round Here Reads Tolstoy*, recently reminded me of something significant – namely, how reading saved my life. A touch dramatic, you might think, but that’s how I remember it.

You see, my most profound childhood memory is of taking refuge in the idyllic world of the Famous Five *et al* whenever domestic discord reared its head. Even now, I can almost smell the musty pages of my beloved paperbacks, and recall vividly the sense of delicious escapism I enjoyed in Enid Blyton’s fictional universe.

Like many of today’s pupils, I didn’t hail from a household of readers, but from my first visit to the local library I was hooked. Books became my best friends. This, then, is ‘reading for pleasure’ – and I was lucky to discover it.

Shared endeavours

That’s why it pains me now that so many young people today are seemingly oblivious to the joys books can bring. The reasons for this are many and varied, as we all know. Book-deprived households, the appeal of more exciting – electronic! – pastimes, and, of course, poor reading skills.

To that last point, we as teachers are duty-bound to engage in the perennial challenge of improving reading standards. The task is exhausting, often frustrating – but how else will future generations get to experience the pleasures of reading, unless we help them acquire the

wherewithal to confidently engage with texts now? So we keep trying.

The lockdowns wrought by the pandemic compounded what was already a burgeoning problem. It was with this in mind that a couple of colleagues and I came up with the idea of trialling ‘Reciprocal Reading’. It’s an approach that primary colleagues may be familiar with, but secondary teachers less so.

The strategy involves four learners assuming the discrete roles of *predicting*, *clarifying*, *questioning* and *summarising* a piece of text. All being well, these shared endeavours will then encourage them to embrace the text independently.

‘It’s boring’

Research by the Education Endowment Foundation has yielded some interesting findings. While utilising Reciprocal Reading on a universal basis level improves metacognition rather than improving reading age (still valuable in itself, I’d say), using the same strategy with focus groups – particularly FSM children – points to tangible improvements.

The latter was therefore the approach we opted to test. We

identified 16 children whose reading ages were below their chronological ages and tested them using the New Group Reading Test, which was to be our starting point. From this initial group, we then selected two groups of four for targeted Reciprocal Reading sessions over a six-month period, with the remaining eight acting as a control group.

Before commencing, we issued the two focus groups with a questionnaire about their reading. Feedback confirmed what we already suspected – that struggling readers don’t like reading. Their responses included comments like, ‘*It’s boring*’ and ‘*I struggle to concentrate*.’ Only one said anything even slightly positive: ‘*It passes the time*.’

As the sessions got underway, problems soon materialised. Our designated timeslot was morning registration, hence children would habitually be absent or late – a sharp reminder for us to consider logistics next

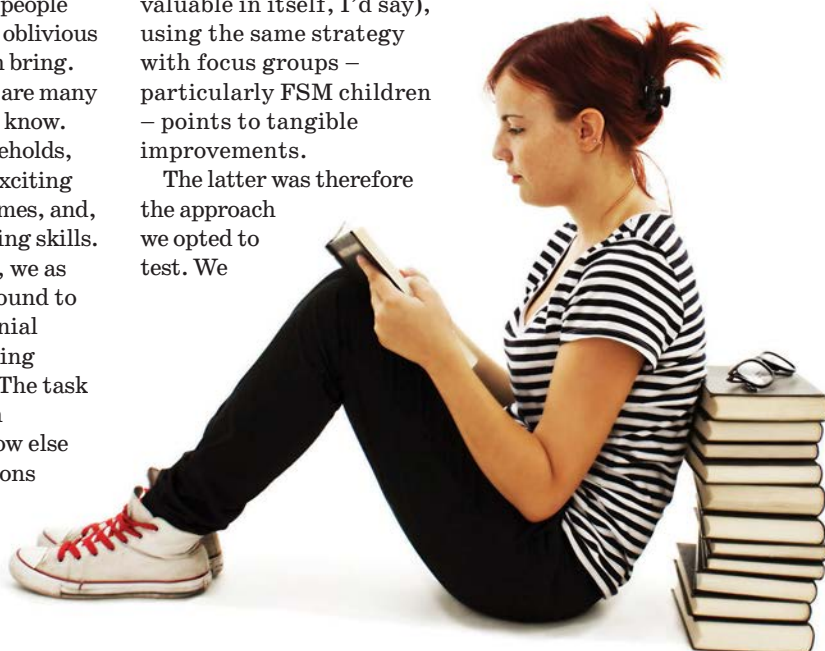
time, which highlighted the need for whole-school commitment. Some children also felt singled out, and were borderline hostile. This wasn’t a great starting point.

Signs of promise

Over time, though, our four-pronged strategy did show some signs of promise. The focus groups improved their reading ages by an average of 1.2 years, while the control group’s average advancement amounted to 0.8 years. Moreover, some of the children reported feeling more confident about reading.

Had we found the solution to the post-lockdown reading deficit? A project such as ours is probably too small-scale to warrant a definitive thumbs-up at this stage, but the indicators suggest that it could certainly form part of the solution – particularly when used alongside other strategies, such as re-reading.

In any case, the process certainly produced some valuable findings. It highlighted the potential that Reciprocal Reading has as a literacy strategy, but also the need for systemic approaches when raising standards in that most precious skill of reading. And so, we keep on trying.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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