

Book Club and Biscuits: The Secret to Winning Over Reluctant Readers

Katie Tidmarsh



Context

Elmhurst Primary School, Upton Park, is a large primary school situated in Forest Gate, a culturally diverse area of London. The school serves an area of high social deprivation. Almost all pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and most speak English as an additional language. Extending pleasure and comprehension in reading and ensuring that vulnerable pupils achieve successfully are two of our whole school development objectives and a book club was created to expose a low-attaining group of Year 6 pupils to a variety of age-appropriate, engaging texts across a range of genres.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

Young people who are not motivated to read, fail to benefit from reading teaching (Cox and Guthrie 2001) – a wake-up call to any primary school teacher.

Yes, instructional work is essential, particularly for Year 2 and Year 6 pupils for whom SATs loom on the horizon, but reading for pleasure pedagogy is an essential consideration when planning ways to ensure that vulnerable pupils achieve successfully, and not just in their exams.

There is a positive link between positive attitudes towards reading and scoring well on reading assessments (Twist et al, 2007). Cremin’s recommendation to foster both the skill and the will to read particularly resonated to this end.

Cremin’s distinctions between reading instruction and reading for pleasure

Reading Instruction is oriented towards:	Reading for Pleasure is oriented towards:
Learning to read	Choosing to read
The skill	The will
Decoding and comprehension	Engagement and response
System readers	Lifelong readers
Teacher direction	Child direction
Teacher ownership	Child ownership
Attainment	Achievement
The minimum entitlement (A Level 4)	The maximum entitlement (A reader for life)
The Standards Agenda	The Wider Reading Agenda

The target group of Year 6 pupils took part in a Pupil Reading Survey in September 2019 to establish their independent “will” to read.



Pupil Reading Survey



1. Do you enjoy reading? Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 I love reading!
Why?

2. What are you reading at the moment? What do you like about it?

3. What kinds of books do you mostly like reading? Do you have a current favourite author?

4. Where and when do you read at home? How often?

5. How good are you at reading and understanding books?

Not very good 1 2 3 4 5 Great!

6. a) I read because _____

b) I would read more if _____

My next steps are: (Leave blank until you have spoken to your teacher)

When asked to rate their enjoyment of reading (fig. 2), only 56% of pupils claimed to “like” reading. When asked to explain why they disliked reading, the most common reason given by pupils was that they couldn’t find books they enjoyed.

Data collated from Pupil Reading Survey Sept 2019

	Number of pupils
Reading enjoyment	Autumn Term
1 = Strongly dislike	0
2 = Dislike	2
3 = Sometimes like	6
4 = Like	4
5 = Strongly like	6

The pupils' reading "skill" was also assessed at the start of the project through KS2 SATs Reading papers as well as their contributions in Literacy lessons. November 2019 mock SATs data revealed that 83% of the class were working significantly below the expected standard; this was a key factor in the group's generally low confidence regarding their reading abilities.

Results from a KS2 Reading Paper taken in Nov 2019

	Number of pupils
Reading Level	Autumn Term
SBN	15
WTS	3
EXS	0

By the end of the project, it was hoped that these vulnerable pupils would all identify as readers (33% of whom were Pupil Premium, and 17% of whom had been learning English for less than 3 years).

Aims

As a high proportion of pupils had said that they didn't read because they couldn't find books they enjoyed, it was decided that a book club should be formed to expose pupils to a variety of age-appropriate, engaging texts across a range of genres.

The book club aimed to:

- create an environment where reading would be celebrated and encouraged;
- foster a culture of book talk;
- and support pupils in forming opinions and choices about books, thereby developing their independent choice of texts.

Outline

The 18 pupils chosen for this project were invited to a book club called 'Pageturners' via a "top secret" letter. No one was allowed to know about the existence of Pageturners, apart from their parents (much to the intrigue of other teachers and pupils at the school...).



Pageturners took place every Wednesday from 3.15 to 4.30pm. Sessions began with 15 minutes of book swaps, book talk and (equally importantly) biscuits, before the exploration of a new, focal text began.

These new texts (ranging from graphic novels, non-fiction, fantasy, mystery and humorous fiction to picture books) were introduced in engaging ways, with the session broken into three sections:

- Teacher-led group reading:** introducing the text, making predictions, reading a small section together

- **Exploration:** perhaps researching or understanding a key area of the text, exploring characters through role play, introducing pictures, videos or music to clarify and aid visualisation
- **Independent pupil-led reading:** emphasis on reading aloud, voice intonation, expression, characterisation and independent enjoyment – here, pupils were being taught how to enjoy a book on their own.

Likewise, a new biscuit would be introduced each week. Not to be left out of discussion, the sweetness, crumble and quality crunch of each biscuit would be evaluated too – a good way to acknowledge that we all have different tastes, whether that is Tom Gates and a Chocolate HobNob or Narwhal Unicorn of the Sea and a Custard Cream!

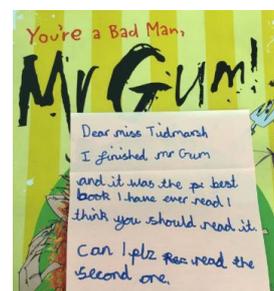


Pageturners pervaded Literacy lessons too, with 5-10 minutes of book talk safeguarded at the end of each Literacy lesson. In this time, the teacher, and occasionally the pupils, recommended and lent out books, pupils negotiated their place on book waiting lists and often this book talk evolved into children begging me to order new texts off Amazon or eBay. All of this hype – alongside the on-going efforts to keep our book club “secret” from other teachers and pupils – were designed to create excitement around reading.

Impact

A class reading identity was created

Initially, it was quite challenging to find the right texts to engage and motivate this group, however the more I got to know the children, the easier it was to identify books tailored to their interests. If there is one thing that this project has taught me, it is that it just takes one book for a pupil to realise that they can enjoy reading. The message here was sent from a child in the fourth week of Pageturners who had, since the beginning of the year, returned every book I had lent the pupil on the very next day, unread. It highlights the impact that the right book can have.



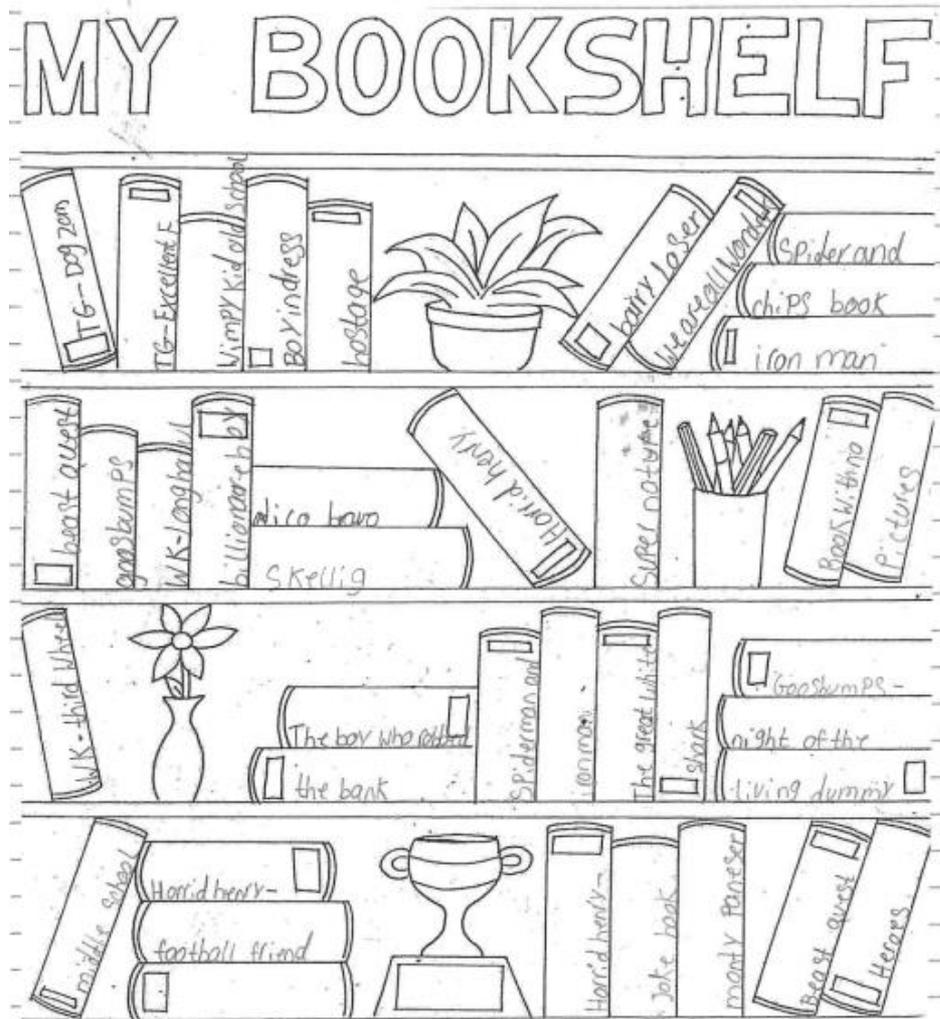
Marketing the books was key to how well-received they were by pupils and carefully-planned sessions soon had pupils clamouring to borrow the new text being read. Tactics such as secretly delivering books into pupils’ trays, creating waiting lists for popular texts, ordering books online in front of the children and lending books as a reward for excellent learning behaviour, all contributed to the feeling that books were special and something to be desired.

In Literacy lessons, this reading for pleasure culture was continued in daily, informal book talk. Children in the class wanted to read the same books and liked being able to talk about them with each other. As a teacher, it was clear that this reading culture was contagious and those children who hadn’t yet read the favourite books felt left out.

Pupils enjoyed tracking their own reading journey

Pupils soon trusted my book recommendations and their hunger for new texts led them to start asking for more texts beyond the ones being read at Pageturners. New texts would be carefully chosen and lent out from my personal collection (or “Book Cave” as it’s known to the children) with

a waiting list system for the most popular books. When texts were read and enjoyed, pupils wrote them down on their personal bookshelf (an example of which is shown below), helping me keep track of their developing tastes and preferences.



Where possible, the books selected for Pageturners were selected from the MyBookBlog library so that pupils could log their progress when reading and take part in the fun online quizzes relating to the texts. Pupil responses displayed their enthusiasm for the texts they were reading.



- Tom Gates Book 1: The Brilliant World of Tom Gates

Chapter: **Page 149 to Page 199**
Blog

? Tom doesn't know what his hobbies are, so he makes one up. What is your favourite hobby?

My favourite hobby is reading and playing on my tablet because it's very relaxing nobody can disturb you and it's really fun especially if it's a good game or book

Great to hear that reading is one of your favourite hobbies! *teacher comment*





- A Series of Unfortunate Events Book 1: The Bad Beginning

Chapter: **Chapter One to Chapter Three**
Blog

? Violet Baudelaire is an inventor, Klaus Baudelaire loves books and Sunny Baudelaire likes to bite things. Which of the three Baudelaire children do you like best so far?

So far, I like Klaus Baudelaire because she likes books and I do as well.

All the best people like books! *teacher comment*



- The Midnight Gang

Chapter: **Chapter 1: 'Monster Man' to Chapter 10: 'Rabbit-Dropping Roulette'**
Blog

? The Midnight Gang is a secret gang. If you were in a secret gang, what would it be called?

My secret gang would be called "Love READING because I love reading books and no one would suspected it yet Miss T will.

A brilliant idea for your secret gang!! *teacher comment*

Pupils also ticked off books they had read from our class "canon" and were rewarded with certificates for reaching certain reading milestones.

New strategies were developed to engage more reluctant readers

The children in this Literacy group took another Reading Survey in January 2020 and the responses, such as below, show a clear shift in attitudes towards reading.



Pupil Reading Survey



1. Do you enjoy reading? Not at all 1 2 **3** 4 5 I love reading!
Why?
I sometimes like reading because I get stuck in reading ^{to} learn new words.
2. What are you reading at the moment? What do you like about it?
I am reading ~~magazine~~ ~~grass~~ ~~granary~~. I like the part when they go for the queen's seat castle and usual steal all the jewelry.
3. What kinds of books do you mostly like reading? Do you have a current favourite author?
I like reading ~~fantasy~~ and ~~mystery~~ books. I have lots of favourite author.
4. Where and when do you read at home? How often?
I read ~~now~~ in my room ~~at~~ bedtime everyday for 20 minutes.
5. How good are you at reading and understanding books?
Not very good 1 2 3 **4** 5 Great!
6. a) I read because ~~to learn~~ ~~new big words~~ and ~~it is very entertaining~~ entertaining.
b) I would read more if I had more interesting books.



Pupil Reading Survey



1. Do you enjoy reading? Not at all 1 2 3 4 **5** I love reading!
Why?
I enjoy reading because it is fun you get to know what is happening like your inside the book.
2. What are you reading at the moment? What do you like about it?
I am reading Mr Stink the thing I like about it is when Chole is trying to keep a secret about a homeless man is staying in the shed.
3. What kinds of books do you mostly like reading? Do you have a current favourite author?
I like reading ~~horror~~ ~~adventure~~ and ~~fantasy~~ ^{types} of books. My favourite authors are Aaron Blabey and Liz Pichler because they tell what they are doing and what is happening.
4. Where and when do you read at home? How often?
I read in my room for 30 minutes everyday ^{entirely!}
5. How good are you at reading and understanding books?
Not very good 1 2 3 **4** 5 Great!
6. a) I read because I want to ~~know~~ know what is happening in the book and also it is entertainment.
b) I would read more if there was more like what is they are doing and telling about them.



Pupil Reading Survey



1. Do you enjoy reading? Not at all 1 2 **3** 4 5 I love reading!
Why?
I like ~~reading~~ reading because some books like some books I don't.
2. What are you reading at the moment? What do you like about it?
We are reading the diary of Mr Frank. This girl is hiding in ~~or~~ behind the book cabinet.
3. What kinds of books do you mostly like reading? Do you have a current favourite author?
I like reading non-fiction books. Sometimes I like reading animal books. My favourite author is ~~David Williams~~ David Williams.
4. Where and when do you read at home? How often?
I read in ~~under~~ ~~my~~ bed, under my desk. I read ~~to~~ for ~~10~~ 15 min.
5. How good are you at reading and understanding books?
Not very good 1 2 3 **4** 5 Great!
6. a) I read because it is fun. You can even get sleepy.
b) I would read more if I had ~~more~~ more non fiction books.



Pupil Reading Survey



1. Do you enjoy reading? Not at all 1 2 3 4 **5** I love reading!
Why?
I like reading because my teacher points lots of cool and some books. Thank you!
2. What are you reading at the moment? What do you like about it?
I am reading lego facts. I love this book because you get to find out amazing facts about lego.
3. What kinds of books do you mostly like reading? Do you have a current favourite author?
I like reading adventure books and animal books because they are more fun to read. My favourite author is Aaron Blabey.
4. Where and when do you read at home? How often?
I read in my living room and I read before bed. I read 10 pages before bed and 20 pages in my living room.
5. How good are you at reading and understanding books?
Not very good 1 2 **3** 4 5 Great!
6. a) I read because I love understanding so new books.
b) I would read more if I had ~~or~~ more time at home.

Data collated from Pupil Reading Survey Jan 2020

	Number of pupils	
Reading enjoyment	Autumn Term	Spring Term
1 = Strongly dislike	0	0
2 = Dislike	2	1
3 = Sometimes like	6	2
4 = Like	4	5
5 = Strongly like	6	10

Most pupils were now identifying as readers and for the one or two children who were still reluctant, new strategies were developed. For example, a 'Reading Buddies' scheme was started whereby teachers across the school were paired with pupils from the Literacy group for a 10 minute informal reading session each week. Reading Buddies provided yet another opportunity for pupils to enjoy reading in a relaxed setting, indulge in more book talk and view their teachers as readers. Many children were asking their Reading Buddies for biscuits as, like many of us, they began to see that a good book and a biccie went hand in hand.

Attainment levels improved

Reading attainment levels in this group also improved since the introduction of Pageturners, with only one child working significantly below the expected level by February 2020 (fig. 5). The intrinsic relationship between the will and the skill of reading was evident to me as a teacher in their classwork too: pupils were motivated to read more and, when they devoured these new texts, they were unknowingly improving their decoding and comprehension skills whilst also expanding their vocabulary.

Results from a KS2 Reading Paper taken in Feb 2020

	Number of pupils	
Reading Level	Autumn Term	Spring Term
SBN	15	1
WTS	3	15
EXS	0	2

Teacher-pupil relationships strengthened

As a teacher, Pageturners was my favourite part of Literacy teaching this year. I got so much enjoyment in sharing new texts with the children. I found myself reading more at home, and have spent more time hunting down new texts for the children and myself, than in any year of teaching previously. Two other KS2 teachers have since started similar book clubs with low-attaining pupils in their year groups and it is hoped that these book clubs will become a key component in supporting vulnerable readers at Elmhurst going forward.

When asking the children in my class what they thought of Pageturners, it was clear that this book club will hold a special place in their primary school memories too:

I liked pageturners because Miss T used to give us biscuits and at the same time, we read our books. Pageturners helped me because at the beginning of the year, I found books boring, but this year I love books especially alexander and tom gates.

Adeeb

I like pageturners because it has helped me read lots of enjoyable books last year I mostly liked a bit of books but this year the best books in the world now I have to persuade Miss Tidmarsh for books and maybe steal them!

Abdurahman

My favourite part of page turners is when we relax eat our snack and read this club has helped me a lot because my reading was really bad now it is fun and enjoyable. This club was the best club ever.

Krich

What I liked about page turners is that when there were new books I always got excited and it was really fun reading all those books but I can't believe how much changes I made through my reading. Next year people should be really excited because...

Nazira

I love pageturners because they introduce you into books such as bad guys actually I went it NOW but Page turners is my favourite and will always be.

Asad

My favourite thing about pageturners is when you get to act out the characters also it has stopped me from judging a book by its cover.

Asyjan

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Led by Cremin's distinction between fostering both the skill and the will to read, this project has shown me that it just takes one book to unlock a pupil's love for reading. An important factor in finding this 'one book' is choice. Schraw et al, 1998 (cited in Clark and Rumbold, 2006) found that there was a positive relationship between choice and affective aspects of reading, such as motivation.

Certainly, the range of texts we explored at Pageturners helped each child find several compelling texts. However, as these pupils prepare to leave for secondary school, where a far smaller proportion of children view themselves as 'a reader' compared with primary school (Clark and Osborne, 2008), I can't help but wonder whether this love for reading will diminish without a teacher to nurture it.

If pupils are to become life-long readers, they need to develop independent choice. Gambrell 1996 (cited in Clark and Rumbold, 2006) found that when children were asked which book they had enjoyed most, 80% of them said that the one they had enjoyed most was the one they had chosen themselves. While some pupils in this Literacy group are displaying this volition in choosing and sharing books with the class, others are beginning to recognise their preferences for certain genres or text types, some have found comfort in a particular text type e.g. graphic novels and a few are still entirely reliant on teacher suggestions.

Just like teachers, pupils need to put time into developing their “internal library” by reading a range of texts. If they can do this successfully, then children will have the knowledge to draw upon and choose future books – an independence that will be essential to make them lifelong readers without needing a book-loving teacher and her biscuits to persuade them to pick up a new text!