

How do increased opportunities for reading for pleasure impact children's play?

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What did you plan to do and why?

The Scottish Government have prioritised play as an essential element to our education in Scotland and in the document *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan* (2013) they recognise that “High quality play opportunities and provision of a physical and social environment that supports play increase the likelihood of improved outcomes for children and lessen the impact of factors that lead to poorer outcomes.” It is within the need for ‘high quality play’ that I would like to explore the possible impact of reading for pleasure.

There is a wealth of research on the benefits of Reading for Pleasure; improved wellbeing, empathy, understanding the world, a place to escape etc. However, it is important to note that it is through choice and motivation that these benefits are allowed to develop fully. McGeown, S and Conradi-Smith (2023) discuss the importance of engagement in order to allow children to access the benefits of reading for pleasure. It is with this in mind that I want to explore how the children in my class (with a focus on children who often get stuck in cyclical and/or violent play) can explore opportunities to engage with reading for pleasure and the impact on their play experiences.

In addition to this Elite Ben-Yosef (2023) promotes the need for children to have leadership of their reading, in just the way adults do, to allow them to fully experience the pleasure that can come from reading. My plan is to observe the children at child led play and aim to ascertain whether there is a measurable impact on the children's play when they have ample opportunity to lead and embrace their own reading for pleasure experiences.

What has happened in your enquiry?



Observations were key to measuring the impact of the Reading for Pleasure activities on the children's play. A focus in our play-based classroom is on observations and using them to guide our work, so I began by taking notes on what I saw in the classroom, with a particular focus on 6 children whose play often veered into violent and/or cyclical role play.

I gathered lots of our ‘favourite’ books; books the children have enjoyed reading so far this year and displayed them below our smartboard (see pic). This is where we gather at various points of the day, meaning the display is at eye level for the children regularly, raising the prominence and status of books in the class. We would put whole class read alouds here for the children to revisit independently. This was a space in addition to our classroom library.

Children were provided extra opportunities throughout the day to read with myself or other staff. We made the most of in between moments such as when there was not enough time to start a whole new teaching group, support staff not needed elsewhere. I would also offer to read to children if they looked at a loss or bored with their play, possibly frustrated with something happening. In these moments children made choices about the book they read with staff, they discussed why they liked a book and sometimes used the recommendations at the back of the book to suggest new reads for the class. Using the library and secondhand sites I was able to stock the classroom with books specifically requested by the children.

To elevate the children's leadership with reading for pleasure I would ask children to choose the books, also encouraging them to bring in their favourites from home. Plus, we still continued to visit to the school library, allowing the children to choose a few books for the school library and one to take home if they wished.

What impact has this enquiry had?

Due to the nature of an enquiry taking place alongside an everyday teaching environment, it may be hard to ascertain how much of an impact the specific reading for pleasure activities had, however I would argue that what I did see and hear suggests that there was a tangible impact. I feel confident that reading for pleasure has played a role in improved experiences for all children in the class, but especially for the 6 children I was focusing on. They all showed more engagement and a general improvement in wellbeing when comparing their play choices at the start of the research period (6 weeks) with their choices at the end.

Children within the focus group (and in the wider class) are able to share favourite stories and characters, why they like them, these were mostly books they were introduced to in class. I asked lots of the children what their favourites were, why they liked them 6-weeks children said they had found new favourites that were books we had been sharing as a whole class or independently.

I was able to see this in the activities I observed over this time as many focused on those favourites that the children mentioned. Anna* showed a complete absorption in Nibbles the Book Monster books, which led to us to watch a ‘how to draw Nibbles’ video, and the whole class followed suit, joining in, every single child (class of 20). Over the next few weeks, we had creations of Nibbles and holes where he had been in the children's own created books. cut outs of Nibbles in cages, and lots of child led writing using text from the book. They were incredibly creative and these tasks were never suggested nor directed from me, therefore examples of high-quality play. They used the skills they had been developing in play, used inspiration from the book deepen and broaden their experience. All 6 focus children participated in at least one of these activities, but 4 of them were much more regularly using Nibbles as a focus for their creative play.

We also saw a group of children playing ‘Narwhal and Jelly’ at play time outside, swimming around making friends and becoming new superheroes, just like in the book. Plus, there have been lots of character drawings and buildings built for the characters we've met over the weeks; one of which was a castle for Murray and Bun; who the children love to shout ‘BUN!’ whenever he's mentioned in the class.

In addition, Rebecca*, Sam* and James* have begun bringing their own picture books from home for us to read as a class, I am encouraging other children to follow suit if they want to. Children are taking the lead and allowing more books available to the children that have not been curated by myself. The children get really excited to see what someone has brought in, helping to build relationships.

Another special moment was when 2 of the focus children were snuggled up on World Book Day, with one of them ‘reading’ a book to the other. These are two children who were more often found play fighting rather than calmer activities and there has been more observations of this type of activity within this group. They spent an extended period of time doing this (upwards of 10 minutes), showing they were choosing this task and enjoying it.

Further impact can be shown in the children's behaviour as we moved towards the end of the 6-week period. The focus group of children rarely get involved in loud, cyclical violent role play, an activity that was a daily occurrence is now seen once or twice a week from 2 of the children and even rarer for the other 4.. I would suggest that the activity of reading for pleasure has impacted the children's ability to widen their play choices, seeing calmer choices, such as drawing, cutting and sticking. They often remain calm throughout the day and are able to compromise better during their play with others. There are so many factors that could be creating this impact, but this was the only major change happening at the time, so feel that reading for pleasure definitely played a part in this development.

What are the implications and next steps?

The implication of these observations and conversations suggests there is a real chance of positive changes for children's play experiences when their class is immersed in Reading for Pleasure; activities and environment. This is further evidence to me that I should continue to provide reading for pleasure opportunities for my while listening to what they like, what they want and tying that in with my own knowledge about contemporary children's literature. The children had a wide choice available in the initial display, but also being able to suggest another book the children might like, going on what they said allowed us all to explore more and maintain levels of excitement around books and reading. This was not something I expected to notice, but considering the children's thoughts about the books available, I am reminded of Teresa Cremin's (2019) research that puts teacher knowledge of contemporary work as essential to developing the skill of Reading for Pleasure with their children.

Further impact was in the development of many children's play/creativity within the class, but in particular with the 6 focus children. They all did at least 2 of the following activities; voluntarily picked up books, asked people to read with them, chose to play using books as inspiration; at art table, role play and construction. These children were able to talk about the books they liked and why showing a developing knowledge of texts available to them. I feel confident that these children will be comfortable in new book spaces and that books are for them when they visit libraries and bookstores in coming days / months. I have seen them all have a positive reaction to books and to reading, impacting their wellbeing and in turn their play experiences in the class.

Moving on, personally I would like to explore more opportunities for audiobooks and how to help facilitate their use in the class, leading to even more independence for the children to choose their reads. I would also like to share my experience with other staff in the school and consider how can we expand this model to work for older children; allowing all children to experience the benefits that reading for pleasure can bring to their independence and choice in the classroom.

References

Ben-Yosef, Elite. (2023) *Reading to Fly: Creative reading as pedagogical equalizer. Reading to fly: Creative reading as pedagogical equalizer (+ more pictures of student work)*

Cremin, Teresa (2019). *Teachers' knowledge of children's literature: the cornerstone of reading for pleasure*. Scottish Book Trust. <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/learning-and-res...>

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