

How Can the Bird that is Born for Joy Sit in a Cage and Sing?

Abstract

This article provides an insight into being a Reader-in-Residence with The Reader Organisation. It describes work to encourage reading with children in a Glasgow primary school. The article has been included in this special issue because of Professor Cottrell Boyce's support of the work of The Reader Organisation and because of his specific mention of this work in his Kilbrandon lecture.

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When we first met, John, an 11-year-old twin boy in P7, lived in the shadow of his charismatic and exuberant brother. Unlike his sibling, John was very moody and suffered from anger management issues. He permanently scowled, lashed out on occasion and chose to be removed from events around him, unable either to enjoy the situation or express his opinion. His peers were all wary of him and would approach any potential interaction with caution, something which only exacerbated the situation, both in terms of the class dynamic and John's own self-esteem.

The idea of reading anything at all was anathema to John. He had got through 11 years of his life viewing reading as something for others which happened in the classroom and had no relevance to his life beyond school. He was literate yet inarticulate, capable but disengaged. When asked for his thoughts on anything, ranging from a response to a text or his views on something he loved, such as football, his response was always the same: a mumbled, 'dunno'. The prospect, then, of sharing a text out loud, with somebody else and *for pleasure* was something John met with extreme scepticism.

John's starting point is similar to many children and young people that The Reader Organisation (TRO) works with. We, TRO, are a national charity dedicated to bringing about a Reading Revolution, creating spaces and environments in which people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities are able to enjoy and actively engage with literature on a deep and personal level.

Every week we connect people with great literature all over the UK, with reading groups in prisons, dementia care settings, libraries, community centres, boardrooms, foster homes and schools.

As the Reader-in-Residence for St Mungo's Learning Community in Glasgow, a project funded by The Tudor Trust, I have been responsible for creating these reading spaces over the past three years, working especially with children on either side of the awkward transition between primary and secondary education. I read weekly with the same Primary 7 children in two different primary schools for the entire duration of their final year before following them up to secondary school and continuing our reading groups together, at least throughout the S1 year and often also into S2. In all, four days a week is spent reading in schools, and across the three years over 1700 hours of reading takes place involving over 350 young people. The overwhelming majority of these children, like John, started off self-identifying as non-readers and having very low self-esteem.

St Mungo's Learning Community was selected due to its status of residing in an area classified as being in the most deprived 0-5% of the whole of Scotland (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2012). For many families faced with myriad difficulties on a daily basis, and for parents who may have struggled with their own education, reading, if it had ever been valued at all, had fallen well down the order of important things to do.

However, whilst pupils from the most deprived areas perform less well than those from the least deprived areas at all stages, pupils living in less deprived areas and performing well or very well was 17 percentage points higher than for pupils living in more deprived areas in P4; 14 percentage points at P7; and 16 percentage points at S2 (The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy, 2012), reading for pleasure is more important for children's cognitive development than their parents' level of education (Sullivan, 2013) and setting has been no obstacle to the model's success.

Through our bespoke shared reading model, Get Into Reading, we bring books to life, reading aloud weekly together in 1:1 or small group settings. Depending on the vagaries of the school timetable these groups range in length from 45 minutes to an hour. In this time I, the facilitator, read aloud to the group, stopping at interesting points to discuss personal responses to the text. Unlike other reading groups, everything happens live in the room and group members are never asked to go home and read the text alone. While the opportunity is always there to read or to speak during the conversation, group members are under no obligation to do any more than simply sit and listen if that is all they wish to do.

The focus of Get Into Reading is on pleasure and enjoyment, demonstrating that books can be personally relevant to all young people, who may be struggling with aspects of their learning or social development, giving them encouragement, enjoyment and stability. We always choose books and poems from outside the curriculum and tailor them to the interests of our groups and individuals. Often the text we read is decided upon from a selection by the young people themselves and there is a real sense of their ownership from the off.

After consultation with his teachers, John was chosen to be in a 1:1 as it would give him the chance to have some 'me time' without the shadow of his brother and allow him to discover reading at his own pace. In the first few weeks he would often avoid eye contact and speak or sit in any way that suggested he was not interested in engaging with the text or our 'discussion'. In these moments I would never press John beyond his own comfort zone and would simply make him the offer, 'Shall I read on? Despite his outward reluctance to show enthusiasm he always replied, 'If you like'.

A few weeks after starting, we read an extract from David Almond's *Skellig* in *A Little, Aloud for Children*. The anthology is one that we put together as an organisation celebrating the best short stories, poems and extracts from novels that we have read with young people throughout the UK. It is a great introduction to reading for many of the young people I meet as the daunting pressure of committing to a lengthy read is removed; no piece is over twenty minutes in length and each child can see the end before they begin. John loved the mystery of the extract; it is about a boy happening upon an unknown figure in his derelict garage, and he was intrigued to find out more. When I asked him what he thought of it, he said, 'I give it eight out of ten'. This was the most positive response John had offered so far and when I wondered what he would change to improve the score he immediately said, 'I'd give it a ten if I knew who the man was.' John had never been this animated before and in our subsequent discussion I offered him the chance to read the whole book so that we could find out more. Rather than retreat back into his disengaged shell, John absolutely jumped at the chance and smiled for the first time.

In the following weeks as we read, John became more and more involved in the story, discussions and session as a whole. He would remember the exact page on which we had left off, even if we had been away over a holiday, sit forward poring over the book, prompt questions and, occasionally, read aloud himself. Staff walking past our open door would comment that this was the first time they could ever remember seeing John smile and look so content. His transformation was all through the love and care he had developed for the characters in the story. When we finished the book he said his favourite part was the ending, when they named the baby sister Joy as **'that's exactly how I'm feeling right now'**.

In reading *out loud* a little bit of the story each week John was able to absorb it at a much slower pace, allowing things to settle in properly and form deeper-rooted thoughts. This is crucial to the Get Into Reading model and especially important when working with young people who are not used to spending time with a book. Any anxiety about having to assimilate knowledge and produce a verbal or written response quickly in order to meet a deadline is removed and the young people are able to luxuriate in the pleasure of the reading. Rather than a means to an end the actual act of reading becomes the active focus, a living craft. As one deputy head teacher involved in the project stated, 'Time and support are what is needed not pressure to get things finished.' This is echoed by the young people involved all over the county. One Primary 7 girl attending a group last year reflected, 'I love coming to this. As soon as we start reading I forget I'm in school and my brain goes on an adventure.'

Whilst not an explicit aim of the project, the improvement of the young people's wellbeing, confidence and literary consciousness leads to a marked improvement in their literacy levels. Last year, eight out of 20 of the primary school children tested over a six-month period using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale Third Edition, a standardised diagnostic test, saw their vocabulary age increase by three years or more when operating at their most confident level. Given that all the young people involved started with vocabulary ages below their real age, this is remarkable. Furthermore, 65% of children who started with a vocabulary age below their actual one now have a score that is higher than their own age. At no point during our sessions did we explicitly highlight and learn new words; rather, by reading and exploring the text at a comfortable pace and with real interest attached, these words stuck. In my experience, literacy is a by-product of reading for pleasure, not the other way around.

John's development happened over a period of several months. Such sensitivity and self-awareness was unthinkable when we first met, but knowing that his continued participation was not conditional on any exam or assessment of ability meant that he was able to trust in our sessions and meet them on his own terms.

Of course, the main catalyst for his improved well-being was the connection he made with *Skellig* itself. For John, the events in the story were a whole new experience and there was no mistake that the joy he was feeling throughout the book was twofold; the plot itself was enthralling and the fact that he was reading it himself made it even more so. For many young people, particularly boys, who are reluctant or non-readers, the assumed response to encourage engagement is to get them reading something about a topic they already love. The most frequent example of this is getting boys to read football books. One pitfall of this is that there is a danger of losing the pleasure of reading in this scenario. If John had read a football book first he may well have enjoyed it but as he already loves football his enjoyment is derived from his love of the subject not from the act of reading. It is unlikely that John's perception of reading would have changed, other than realising that books can contain information about something he likes. However, by reading something together that John would never have picked out independently, he was able to discover that books and reading itself have the capacity to connect, challenge and reward him with a new kind of pleasure.

Subsequently we went on to read *The Savage*, also by David Almond, and his class teacher noted a marked improvement in his willingness and confidence to participate in class. John is also far less angry and interacts with his peers far more readily; they also like being around him now. In his first year at St Mungo's Academy, rather than remain in a 1:1 session, John chose to join a group, mixing effortlessly with his peers and relishing sharing his responses to a story with more people. The 'joy' of being in the world of *Skellig* had a deeper and longer lasting root than just existing in our sessions. It has permeated through to John's wider life, allowing him to overcome the blocks he faced elsewhere and ultimately thrive in hitherto challenging situations.

To fully realise our mission of creating reading spaces for everybody, the Reader acquired preferred bidder status from Liverpool City Council in January 2013 to transform the unused Mansion House in Calderstones Park, Liverpool, into an international flagship

project for shared reading and a model reading community. As of September 2014, we have signed a lease with Liverpool City Council for the Mansion House giving us residency of the building for 125 years. We want people from the local area, the wider city of Liverpool, the rest of the UK and beyond to read, learn, play, make new friends and find new opportunities here.

For 18 months, we have welcomed thousands of visitors of all ages to enjoy shared reading groups, heritage tours and many more special events for the community. Other significant steps in the regeneration of the Mansion House have included opening a thriving social enterprise cafe, reopening the Gallery space to host passionate local artists and utilising the beautiful 'secret garden' of the Mansion House for theatre productions by Shakespeare's Globe and other companies, as well as for our first Children's Literature Festival.

In July and August we also held a two-week summer holiday reading camp called *Book It!* for 25 of Liverpool's most vulnerable looked after children. Referred by their teachers or social workers, these were all children who were approaching, or struggling to adapt to, the transition between primary and secondary school and who would not particularly be looking forward to the long summer break; a desperately sad situation for any child. Each day the children would be collected from their homes in minibuses, arriving at the Mansion House for 10am and staying until 4pm. Many of these children have had turbulent and inconsistent living arrangements and would lack the basic skills needed to do almost all of the things we take for granted in childhood: make friends, have fun, play.

The fact that mixing with peers was so difficult for many of the young people meant that the two weeks were supremely challenging for all staff involved. However, through anchoring everything in the Get Into Reading model and offering a consistent, kind, safe and fun place to come each day, every young person made friends, learned how to better express themselves and discovered that they had something to offer to a group that was valued by others. The importance of the latter for self-esteem, confidence and emotional wellbeing should not be downplayed.

Alongside countless short stories and poems by authors including Anthony Horowitz, Philippa Pearce and Roger McGough we all read *The Unforgotten Coat* by Frank Cottrell Boyce, a beautiful book about two nomadic Mongolian boys who arrive in Bootle for the last term of primary school trying to escape from a pursuing demon. This book resonated with all of our young people and, like *Skellig* was for John, proved to be a gateway to a whole other way of seeing the world. Whilst reading was only a part of the day, it shaped everything else that we did; the two Mongolians, Chingis and Nergui, needed a Good Guide to help them settle into Bootle so we all had our own 'Good Guide Books' to show off what we did around the Mansion House and park. We took photos, collected feathers and leaves, went on ghost tours of the house and had visits from miniature ponies and birds of prey; all new experiences for the children and all linked to the reading. The discussions, games and artwork borne out of the children's experience of reading for pleasure were incredible and surprised themselves more than anyone else. 'I never knew I could do that' or 'I thought I'd hate this but it's great' were common phrases in response to each new activity.

Staples of each day were our morning song, story and toast sessions, dressing up and fruit of the day. Such was the sense of collective belonging that tough, image-conscious boys were eager to dress up as the Gruffalo, Max from *Where the Wild Things Are* and princesses and be perfectly happy going out into the park to play amongst complete strangers without any reservations.

One social worker said that there was no doubt at all that the summer school helped Mike stay in his foster placement, which was troubled and fragile. Mike attending, and willing to attend every day, meant his carer had a break from him and was more able to cope in the summer holidays, resulting in the placement not breaking down. This saved thousands of pounds and sadness for Mike as he would have otherwise had to go into residential care. She went on to say that this should be on each holiday for these children as it provides security and an environment where they can learn. 'Mike had invaluable interactions with others; you can't put a price on it!'

End Notes

Patrick Fisher is the Scotland Co-ordinator for The Reader Organisation and has read with young people in schools for the past five years.

A Little, Aloud, for Children is published by David Fickling Books and available to buy in both paperback and Kindle editions.

Acknowledgements

The Reader Organisation is a national charity with 108 staff & 110 volunteers, reaching more than 4000 beneficiaries every year in over 400 weekly shared reading groups.

For more information on The Reader Organisation, our wider work and potential training opportunities please visit www.thereader.org.uk or email patrickfisher@thereader.org.uk

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