Putting the SPARK back into reading

By Rhi Randall
Our school is set in beautiful rural Gloucestershire and is a typical small village school with a diverse cohort of children. Our 2016-17 number on roll was 114 children and we are slowly growing. We have a high number of Pupil Premium and SEND children for a school of our size. I teach a mixed Year 5/6 class of 26 children.
As Year 5/6 teacher, I was really disheartened with our previous year’s Reading SATs results with only 38% of children in the class achieving the expected standard.

Inevitably reading became one of our improvement targets across the whole school, with plans to focus specifically on our whole class reading sessions and to help develop greater reading stamina amongst our young readers. Our aim was to get 65% of our children reading at ARE with an aspirational target of 75%.
As a child, I was definitely an eager bookworm. My parents actively encouraged me to read and I was constantly lost in Roald Dahl’s delicious array of vocabulary and mischievous characters. It became glaringly obvious that my own personal love of reading at that age, and even now, did not mirror that of the children in my class.

Of course, there is always a small group of children who read frequently for pleasure but I found that the majority didn’t know what books to choose or grabbed the same books over and over again. Not only this, but also they couldn’t sustain interest in a book all the way through. In addition, there was a further obstacle in our way: a lack of parental engagement or interest in reading.

Getting my lovely bunch of reluctant readers to where they needed to be by the end of the year was going to take some doing...

...BUT I like challenges, so I set myself my own: ditch the results pressure and put the reading spark back into these children. I wanted them to LOVE reading and be excited about the wonderful adventures that reading would take them on.

I also wanted to share my own reading with the class as a Reading Teacher in line with the TaRs research.
I became involved in Cheltenham Literature Festival’s project *Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils* not realising the impact it would have, not only on myself and how I teach reading, but more importantly on the children...

Shackleton’s Journey *by William Grill* – just one of the books we read. My class were captivated.
The defining moment in our reading journey was our book sharing morning.

- All members of the class (including me and my amazing TAs) brought in a selection of books to share with each other.
- Instead of one book, children brought many – even some of their parents’ favourite books from childhood.
- They were excited to share and genuinely interested in everyone’s selections.

I found that gaining an insight into the children’s reading practices was hugely important. There were children who didn’t really have any books but had an abundance of car and bike magazines instead and this was their primary reading material of choice. On the other end of the scale, I had a boy who was already reading adult books – *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was his current favourite.
By bringing in a selection of our favourite books, we gave children a glimpse into us as readers. We talked animatedly about our choices and they realised that it was fine to like different reading materials.

Suddenly reading was the HOT TOPIC in our classroom!
Chatter and Excitement
My fabulous teaching assistant, George (who also happens to adore reading) brought in a magnificent dictionary to share. It dated back to the early 1900s and is filled with lost words and golden edged pages. Most children had never seen a book so old or so huge!

Needless to say, every unknown word we came across from then on had to be looked up using this dictionary.

The children’s interest in vocabulary flourished – everyone wanted a go at looking up words – especially my reluctant readers.
We shared: fact books, story books, old books, new books, recipe books, photo books, magazines, fairytales, picture books, travel books, biographies and even our parents’ favourite books!
Our sharing day was really powerful. It allowed me an insight into the reading habits of my children. They ALL stood up in front of the whole class and talked about their books and recommended them to others with excitement. There was a real buzz – exactly what I’d wanted - but not what I’d expected!
I started to encourage my TAs to play a more crucial role in the teaching of reading within my class.

- They read every book we study and become just as much a teacher as me.
- With enthusiasm, they join in with lessons, lead questioning and engage in discussion about the characters and plot.

Having all the adults in the class fully familiar and engaged with the books we choose has made a huge difference to my teaching and the children’s learning.
Our book sharing day was only a small part of my efforts to get my children to LOVE reading.

• My TAs and I spent the year reading and sharing the RT=RP books
• We placed an enormous importance on learning new vocabulary
• We became avid readers of children’s fiction and increased our knowledge of books
• I recommended a wealth of children’s fiction to my class and encouraged reluctant readers to ‘test’ them and review them as potential teaching resources for the next year
Reflections on the impact the TaRs research had on my practice

• The TaRs research states that by looking at our own experience as readers, we put ourselves in a much richer position to develop children’s reading. By reflecting on my own reading habits and sharing these with my class, it certainly helped them to see the value in RfP.

• By increasing my own repertoire of children’s literature and actively encouraging and supporting my TAs to do the same, we put ourselves in a stronger position to recommend books and choose ones that would stimulate and excite the class. This was extremely valuable.
Personal Reflections

My own personal reading journey has been hugely influenced by the RT=RP network. I’ve spent the year reading an array of children’s literature and rediscovering the impact that children’s books had on my own childhood. I now have books stacked up ready to read: children’s recommendations, teacher’s recommendations and those that I’ve searched out for myself. So many books – not enough time!

The impact on the children was also easy to see. More books were being shared amongst them, children were widening their book choices, they were discussing books and were actually finishing them! The vocabulary the children were using in their writing was wonderful and they were picking up books they’d perhaps never have looked at previously.

We were all getting so enthusiastic about the books we were reading.
This year’s SATs results were also a completely different story.

My children’s renewed interest and enthusiasm for reading contributed to the compete turn around in our school’s achievement.

81% of the children in Year 6 reached ARE this year - with over half of them achieving greater depth. This is a direct result of the children’s engagement. Without really trying too hard, these children had turned their own learning around.

The reading spark has definitely been reignited 😊

By remaining part of the RT=RP network in the coming year, I hope that my next class of children will continue to enjoy the pleasure that reading brings.

As a new personal target, I’d like to focus on getting our parents more engaged in their children’s reading in hope that their children’s enjoyment and love of books can continue to grow.