Creating a Reading Culture: how one school did it

Herts for learning Lead Teaching and Learning Adviser English (Primary) Kerry Godsman shares her enthusiasm for the work of Mandeville Primary School, St Albans.

When you walk into the reception of Mandeville school, you see their well-stocked and welcoming library. Beyond that, looking through the doors to the playground and across to the field, stands a wonderful construction – the Reading House. The structure is an impressive statement of the school’s commitment to raising the profile of reading. However, it is just one outcome of their year-long focus on English, in particular reading and oracy.

Mandeville is a two-form-entry primary school with a diverse school community – 30 different first languages are spoken. The Headteacher, Cathy Longhurst, identified reading as a top priority in her school development plan back in 2014. This was not driven by SATs results, but by her conviction that raising standards in reading would impact positively on all areas of the curriculum. Together with Cate Cooper, the Assistant HT and Head of English and Communication, she convinced the governing body that this was the right priority and so began Mandeville’s plans for their first ever Festival of Reading.

The festival’s title, Head of English and Communication rather than Literacy Leader, reflects the school’s approach to teaching. They state that ‘Oracy is at the heart of everything that we teach’ as the school has high numbers of children with English as an Additional Language. However, they find that many of those children with English as a first language need just as much support with language and vocabulary development because they do not have access to books or good models of spoken language at home. Every lesson taught has a planned oracy/ speaking and listening aspect. In the Foundation stage, the school draws on the WellComm Toolkit, a Speech and Language Toolkit for Screening and Intervention in the Early Years. With 1 in 10 children under 5 years of age experiencing some degree of difficulty in learning language and communication skills, early identification is crucial.

In KS1 Big Talk is introduced, followed by Talk for Writing in Lower KS2 and Philosophy for Children in years 5 and 6. This keeps the focus on speaking and listening throughout and, by varying the approaches for different age groups, engagement and interest are maintained.

When the children returned to school in September 2014, they found the school transformed for the Festival of Reading. Cathy and Cate wanted to use every aspect of the school environment to involve and excite their children and ensure that their week-long festival felt different and exciting. As well as book corners in all the classrooms, displays around the schools and a high profile given to the school library, teachers had set out tents and gazebos around the school field. One large tent was provided for children who wanted to read during break times – no entry without a book! A box of books, changed every day, was provided for FS and KS1 children, while KS2 children were able to bring their own choice of reading books. Smaller tents and gazebos, decorated by the children with pictures of their favourite book characters, contained a range of reading activities and workshops were held in them across the week.

Local authors, Pete Johnson and Dave Cousins, started the week off with readings and activities whilst in the Foundation Stage, a storytelling company, Drama Llamas, held the children spellbound. Parents were invited in to watch extended shared reading sessions and teachers also modelled reading to children to show them how to read and how they might change to reading with their children as they move through the school.

Although poetry often has a lower profile in long term plans than other genres, the teachers recognised its value in developing vocabulary and feeding into reading comprehension. Accessible to all children because it makes fewer demands on reading and writing stamina, poetry was the main focus of the Reading Festival. Each class focused on either a poet or a type of poetry, learning poems by heart and performing them with actions for the closing ceremony. Joseph Coelho, performance poet, visited and his work fed into a Poetry Slam with each class choosing a representative to go forward to a final competition. This was judged by Linda Day of Waterstones, who also presented the prizes. The laureate, groups of students from a local secondary school, Mariborough, attended the festival dressed as book characters whilst all Mandeville teachers dressed as Wally from the Wombles books.

The festival was a tremendous start to the school year and teachers were determined that the momentum would be maintained. Jo Brown, a local librarian, attended parents’ evening and, with perseverance from the school in getting forms filled in and returned, library membership was increased by 50%. Two reading clubs were formed and these proved so popular that four clubs have been running since September 2015. Discussion groups called Chatterbooks were developed at KS2 to enhance more able readers. The local Waterstones bookshop created a display using book reviews written by the Chatterbooks children. There were competitions not to write a review contributed poems instead, based on books that they had read and discussed. Inspired by their experience of having their writing published at the bookshop, several children went on to enter the Royal Commonwealth Essay competition. They wrote poems on the theme of Childhood in the Commonwealth – Past and Present. Although they didn’t win, they were thrilled to receive tickets for eight children to attend Westminster Abbey for the prize-giving. They described the experience as ‘breathtaking’, the speakers as ‘inspiring’ and are still talking about the day they met the Queen!

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As the autumn weather turned wet and windy, the reading tent was taken down. The children missed it hugely and lobbied Cathy, using letters and pleas to the school council, to have somewhere permanent that they could sit and read in break times. If they couldn’t have a tent, they asked, could they have a shed? Cathy felt it was serendipity when a leaflet from Phoenix Shelters arrived on her desk with a picture of a structure on stilts and the building project was started. Finally, in June 2015, it was opened by the Mayor of St Albans. It still has the smell of freshly cut wood and the ‘Reading House’ banner has yet to be put up, but it is very much in use and part of school life. It is large enough for 30 children and reading lessons and storytelling sessions take place there during the school day. Of course, it is in full use during break times as well.

Poetry continues to have a high profile in all year groups. The school became involved in the School Shadowing Scheme as part of the Poetry Award (CLiPPA) run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE – www.clpe.org.uk). They drew on Poetryline a free resource-packed website which features films of poets performing, poetry teaching resources and recommendations and access to poetry support for schools. They also used resources from Poetry Alive (www.poetryalive.com) to help children recite poems by heart through the use of actions to make key words and phrases memorable. The school uploaded their performance of poems by shortlisted poets to the CLPE Poetry Award website and a group of children from years 3, 4 and 5 won the opportunity to perform at the Poetry Show at the National Theatre alongside the poets. I was lucky enough to see the children rehearsing in the Reading House and I was confident that they would be great on the day!

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Then it was time to look at the yellow cards which they identified as adjectives but agreed that, depending on context, some (e.g. dry) could be used as verbs. They were asked to combine the green and yellow cards to make expanded noun phrases and encouraged to discuss those created. Some children were able to talk about how their expanded noun phrases showed personification. Finally, having been told that all the words on the cards were taken from the book *The Promise*, they were asked again to infer and predict what the story would be about. Their predictions were significantly more perceptive and accurate than those made at the start of the session. They were also desperate to get on to reading the book to see how their predictions compared with the actual story.

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The school has also changed its approach to Guided Reading this year. Rather than have a carousel of reading activities for the class to carry out, while the teacher works with a group, they have an expectation of sustained silent reading (or, in Foundation Stage, listening to a story being read) to develop reading stamina. The teacher provides a selection of books for each table to choose from in order to ensure that the texts read are appropriately challenging. Teachers had found that children were not used to reading at length and this had, amongst other things, impacted on their ability to cope with SATs test papers.

The impact of the reading focus in the school is evident everywhere, from children carrying books to read at lunchtime to the quality of the writing on display and in their English books. Almost every child can recite a poem and has the confidence to perform speaking clearly and using actions. At the Friday coffee morning, parents spoke enthusiastically about their children choosing to read more often and how they wanted to make more additions to the Reading House (fairylights and awnings) to make it even more special. The children are buzzing with excitement about the opportunities that they have had, including mixing with royalty!”

I also saw an excellent Guided Reading lesson take place in the Reading House. Cate was working with a group of Year 3 children to develop their inference skills and broaden their vocabulary. She showed them a picture of the front cover of the book, *The Promise*, that they would be reading in future sessions and asked them to predict what the book might be about from clues on the cover. Two piles of cards, one yellow and one green, were then made available for the children to choose from. They chose the green cards which had a selection of nouns taken from the book. The meanings of the words were explored through actions and discussion – in particular the word ‘wind’ which, without context, could be wind (weather), or wind (wool or bobbins). They decided that as all the other words were nouns it was probably the weather related ‘wind’. Throughout, Cate was doing the following:

- encouraging active listening: ‘Hold that thought … can you tell me how that compares with what Abi was thinking … ?’;
- prompting the children to respond using response hooks ‘I disagree because … ’;
- and ensuring full responses ‘Can you put that word into a sentence … ?’.

Cate was also using Aidan Chambers ‘Tell Me’ approach and encouraging the children to hypothesise and speculate using tentative language: ‘I like the way that you started with maybe … ’.

She went on to ask the children to compose a story based on the nouns from the cards. Next they closed their eyes, visualising what the dog in their story might look like and adding descriptive words and detail. They brainstormed synonyms of the word *driving* to add to their story, improved the range of verbs used and discussed a possible soundscape around the sounds wind would make in their chosen context.

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**Kerry Godsman**

An experienced teacher and accredited adviser, **Kerry Godsman** leads the Herts for Learning Primary English team. Her interests lie in the teaching of reading comprehension, visual literacy and the use of quality texts as a stimulus for writing. Kerry presents at conferences locally and nationally and contributes to various publications.