

WEBSITE RESOURCE W5.1

Case study: Rivers of reading

Inspired by an idea she had heard about from a research project she is involved in, Della found creative ways to find out about the home reading experience of her class of five and six year olds and to recognise families' diverse cultural text experience.

The school is a larger than average infant school with a mixed socio-economic and ethnic population. The percentage of pupils speaking English as an Additional Language is slightly above average and rising, and a small number are at the early stages of acquiring English. The five and six year olds in my class are full of personality and enthusiasm. They challenge my thinking and make me laugh out loud on a daily basis. This activity aimed to help me build some knowledge of the children's home reading experiences and to give us a basis for discussing diversity and variety based on their own – and their families' – reading. It's all too easy for children, and indeed their parents or carers, to think that reading only happens in books. I was keen to show them that we read in lots of different ways and in a variety of forms and genres.

As part of the project 'Building Communities of Readers'¹ we had looked at our own reading histories as teachers and talked about the different kinds of reading we did each week. It would have been quite difficult for my class to do exactly the same activity, but I wanted to find out more about what they read at home. I decided to try to capture a snapshot of their reading over just one weekend hoping that this would give us plenty to talk about in terms of the different genres they came across.

I can't claim the idea for the River of Reading as my own.² It was something mentioned on the project as a way of getting children to record their own reading during a specified time – and, for this project, the reading of any of their family members. I adapted the idea to make it more visual and to avoid too much writing, which I felt could alienate some children.

My own reading over a weekend

I presented the idea to the children initially by showing them a large gift bag full of all the reading materials I'd read in a weekend . . . not just books but magazines, cooking instructions on packaging, Michael Bubl  CD insert, lots of receipts, my 'Carpet Right' order form, a Baileys' bottle. This gave the children a chance to build up an interesting picture of a day in the life of the person who taught them every day. They were amazed by how much I'd 'read' in a couple of days and we discussed the fact that reading wasn't just about the book they read at school.

I gave them an A3 River of Reading sheet (see Website resource W5.2) each with instructions on the back:

This is what you do:

1. Draw, stick on/ write anything you have read over the weekend . . . comics, magazines, football programmes, chocolate bar wrappers, television pages, shop recipes, Playstation game instructions, books, etc.
2. Invite your mum/dad/brother/sister/nan/auntie (anyone who fancies having a go really) to add their own tributary and do the same. Ask them to write their name next to their bit.
3. Bring it into school on Monday so you can share what you have produced and everyone can be inspired and impressed by it!

Happy Reading (cutting/sticking/drawing/writing)

Overflowing with rivers

The promise of a stamp in their book for each one brought in after the weekend obviously worked as I had just over 20 'Rivers' thrust at me on Monday morning. I was amazed (and touched) by the effort that each family had taken. Dads and older brothers and sisters had obviously been coerced into adding their own 'tributaries'. The illustrations of three of the Rivers shows the different ways the children tackled them. Figure W5.1.1 shows Jessica's writing and drawing with added bits written by her Mum and Dad. In Figure W5.1.2 Shifah has drawn in her river and stuck on a petrol receipt, a label from a jumper, a party invitation as well as packaging for food, sweets and comics. Aaron (Figure W5.1.3) chose to write and draw with tributaries by his Mum, Dad and brother.

We shared the Rivers with each other and talked about how we could group the reading materials into different genres. This gave us lots of opportunity for discussion about not only genre but different preferred reading choices by boys/girls, adults/children and opened up possibilities for cross-curricular work: graphs – creating databases; history – what parents read as children and sharing literary heritages. The three examples here give a flavour of differences in reading in different homes and in the whole class it was clear that every child's home culture was strongly feeding into their reading experience. Cultural diversity was shown in the different newspapers, magazines, books (including holy texts), family letters, food

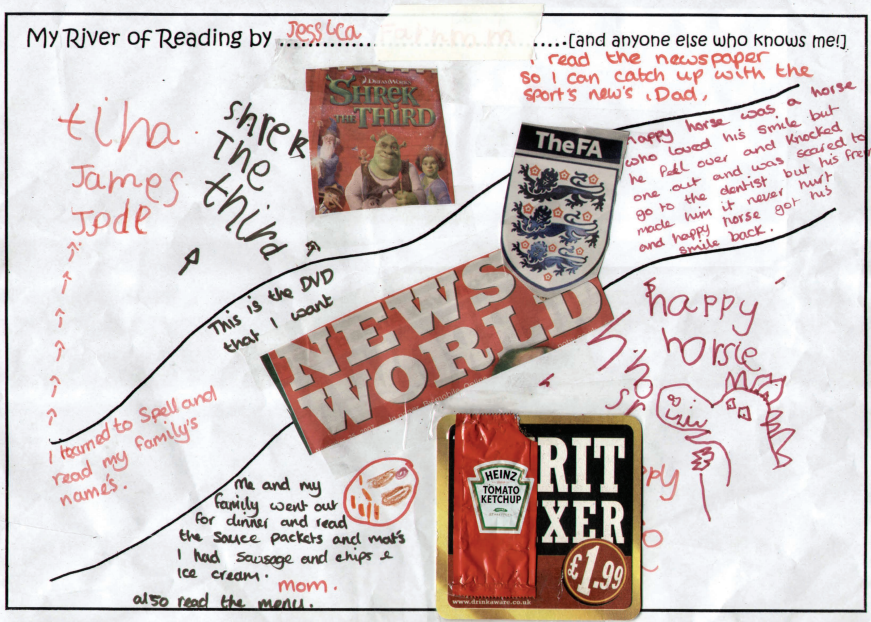


Figure W5.1.1 Jessica's river of reading



Figure W5.1.2 Shifah's river of reading

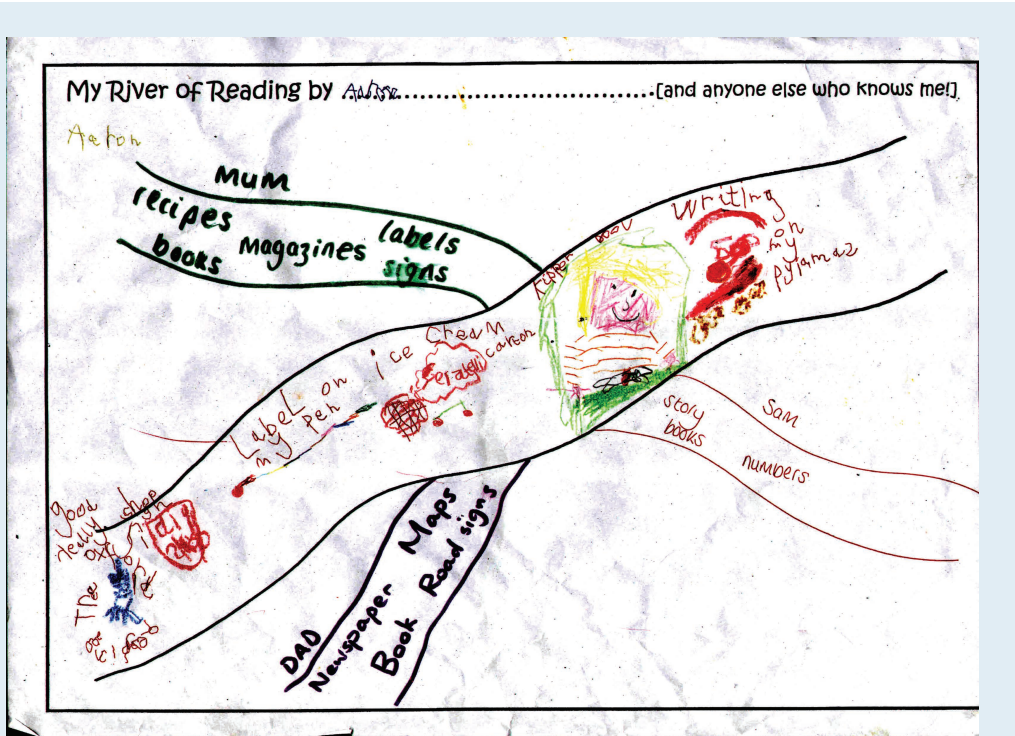


Figure W5.1.3 Aaron's river of reading

packaging, football programmes collected. Displaying the Rivers showed the class just how much their reading is valued. We made a very long river in the hall with the children sitting next to their own contribution and strung the sheets across the classroom pegged on a washing line and labelled with genre names.

The children's ideas about reading

As we talked about the Rivers we compiled a list of the different kinds of reading represented – I noted 167 different things then gave up with hand-ache! While we were doing this I asked the children why they needed to read a specific type of text. As we'd been doing a bit of work on connectives, it linked quite nicely:

I needed to read this because. . . .

- . . .it is my favourite thing in the world
- . . .to see when it was made
- . . .so me and dad knew how to play it
- . . .to see if there was any scary stuff
- . . .to find out more about the match
- . . .to choose what to eat

I also asked the children what they thought of doing their Rivers of Reading. Just a few quotes show their enthusiasm:

I just loved doing this.. it took ages but it was fantastic!

My favourite bit was looking for the words Power Rangers and Spongebob on my Dad's Sky TV Guide.

I read my favourite musical thing that goes on my wrist.

I loved it so much – I stuck all of these things on myself without any help.

We read loads of stuff!

I asked them 'So why do you think we teach you to read?':

Because if you didn't when you went to Year 2 you couldn't read the harder books.

You have to learn to read because reading makes you clever.

We are taught to read because you might get an important thing . . . like a letter from the Prime Minister and if you were a grown up and couldn't read then you wouldn't even have your Mummy to help.

You might want to find out information . . . like on Google.

You might want to buy something.

You wouldn't know the rules.

I discovered so much more during this project about the children's reading, particularly the wide range of reading they do at home, than I ever imagined.

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(A version of this article appeared in *English 4–11* (33) Summer 2008 pp. 19–21.)

Notes

1. *Building Communities of Readers* was Phase II of the UKLA research *Teachers as Readers* (2007/2008). Five local authorities, including Birmingham worked on a year's development project aiming to enhance teachers' knowledge of children's books and make strong links between schools, families and libraries in supporting children's reading.
2. Thanks to Gabrielle Cliff Hodges who shared work she had done with Rivers of reading compiled by secondary pupils. She came across the idea of rivers in: Burnard, P. (2002) Using image-based techniques in researching pupil Perspectives, *ESRC Network Project Newsletter*, 5.