Book-talk

Reading and talk

If children's main experience of stories is that they will be required to have an opinion or will be quizzed about the content, then we run the risk of putting children off reading. Positive reading involves becoming engaged in the story, as well as deepening understanding and appreciation through drama, art, music, dance, research and, of course, discussion, in which children talk their way towards deeper comprehension. Even as an adult, I find that I don't really know about a book until I have talked about it. Talking one's way into a deeper understanding is crucial for developing the ability critically to appreciate literature; answering comprehension questions may test understanding and challenge thinking but it is in the discussion that the ability to think critically can be developed.

It is worth remembering that for some children comprehension does not magically develop on its own. It has to be taught, modelled by the teacher 'thinking aloud' and teasing at an issue. In particular, the sort of discussion in which the children have time to think collectively, tentatively proposing and reshaping their understanding, is essential for developing readers.

What is 'book-talk'?

'Book-talk' is about the ability to talk about books, developing the confidence to offer ideas and then reshape them in the light of other contributions. It helps children to trust their own ideas and interpretations, to talk effectively about a book, deepening their understanding, shifting their ideas, thinking together as a group and moving comprehension forwards.

'Book-talk' only works if the books have anything worth saying about them. The quality of the book determines the depth of discussion. It is important to accept all answers positively from as many children as possible. Indeed, I often say that 'all comments are accepted' – but that does not mean that all comments are necessarily sensible interpretations. Children can and should expect to change their minds in the light of what others say. Children are encouraged to raise questions as well as make points and suggestions. Children's responses are nothing to do with guessing what the teacher has in mind.

The teacher acts as an interested listener. It helps to use a phrase such as 'tell me about…' to invite extended thinking. It also helps to use 'mirroring' to encourage further and deeper thinking, often drawing children back to the text or asking them to dig deeper. It helps if the children get into the habit of using tentative language, for example:

I'm not sure but… I was wondering whether… Perhaps… Does anyone else think that…?

Basic questions

These can be used with any book to get interpretation started:

What sorts of things did you like or dislike? Was there anything that puzzled you?

Encourage children to raise questions.

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General questions

Ask questions such as:

Have you read any other books like this? How did they compare? Which parts of the book stay in your mind most vividly? How did the main character change? What surprises are there in the book?

Special questions

These are specific to the book being discussed and should help to deepen understanding. For example, for *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne:

How long did it take the story to happen? Where did the story happen? Which character interested you most? Who was telling the story? Talk about the links between the story and the illustrations.

The questions listed are taken from Aidan Chambers' book '*Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*', which is essential reading for any teachers wishing to develop Booktalk in the classroom. The brief account given here is a simple indication of what is in fact a much more extensive and subtle approach with which teachers should acquaint themselves by reading 'Tell me'.

