

Reading the distance

-Exploring the reading stamina challenge

'Reading stamina' -It's an interesting pair of words that I sometimes come across online or when working with schools. Therefore, I thought I would delve into it and offer some useful thoughts and guidance about the topic.

Introduction-Making connections

As well as supporting schools and making literacy programmes, I love distance running. Therefore, I am going to start with running stamina before I leap into reading stamina as I believe there are some useful connections to explore. If we consider what is meant by 'reading stamina' we understand that it is a reader's ability to focus and read independently for extended periods without distraction, maintaining engagement and comprehension. Essentially, there are similarities with physical (running) stamina, however, with reading we focus on mental endurance.

In 2014, when I became a headteacher, I took up distance running. Distance is a little false as my first ever run was less than a mile! Since then, I have gone on to run many half-marathons, the Brighton Marathon and even a 40 mile ultra. If I was able to progress from less than one mile to a 40 mile ultra, I must have been able to build my running stamina.

As a runner, I did this by focusing on three areas in my running and they are as follows:

-Training time (the amount of running I will do in a given week.)

-Pace (Miles per hour.)

-Distance (The number of miles I will cover in a given run.)

I found that if I tailored these to the race I was building up for, I tended to perform at a standard I was happy with. As I improved as a runner, I was then able to set new targets. Essentially, for running, I break down my approach, and the bigger challenge, into achievable steps and actions. Within running this is important for various reasons: Firstly, the idea of focussing on running 40 miles in one run could be quite daunting, especially as it required me to run for just over 6 hours! Secondly, a key idea in running is that you must not increase more than one of these areas in a training run, as this could lead to injury. For example, you should not increase your pace and make the run longer during a training run. It is generally one or the other when you are training.

Reflection: Before I go on to connect this knowledge with reading, please pause and consider any connections that might be beginning to form.

I believe the three areas mentioned above, offer us a suggested approach to a different activity-reading. Whilst there are some huge differences between these activities (running and reading),

there is something within the three identified areas and the idea that we need to break a challenge down into manageable steps.

From my experience, reading stamina can be affected by what is happening around the reader (noise, distractions etc) but it is primarily affected by how challenging they find the text. For example, when their knowledge and skills are not sufficient to take up the challenge of a text, reading stamina reduces or becomes a barrier to comprehending the text. Given this challenge, like running, we need to ensure our children have the right 'training' over their time in school. I identified three key areas for running training, therefore, I will offer three key areas for reading.

They are as follows:

-Reading time (The amount of time spent reading in a given week.)

-Pace (Words read per minute or 'reading rate'.)

-Text length (The number of words covered during a reading session.)

I am fully aware that there are many other aspects to reading but for the purpose of this article, I would like you to consider these three areas and if they are part of decision making when planning lessons and your reading curriculum. Why? I feel they offer us a useful insight into breaking down the challenge of reading whilst empowering young pupils to build reading stamina over time.

Why discuss 'reading stamina?'

Firstly, I feel it is a misunderstanding I come across on a fairly regular basis. I have often heard that some practitioners felt their children did not do well in the Key Stage 2 reading paper due to issues with children's reading stamina. Essentially, the children ran out of steam and did not get through the extracts and/or all of the questions. Whilst 'reading stamina' might be a useful label for this situation, it can also be a troublesome one. For me, it is too broad and does not help practitioners get to the heart of the problem(s) children might be facing. Importantly, like a 40 mile run, reading stamina challenges need to be broken down into clear areas so schools can respond effectively and target any specific weaknesses. As schools 'train' the specific areas, their children's reading stamina will improve.

I want to dig a little deeper into this challenge and provide practitioners with some useful knowledge about what the challenges might be and more importantly, what can be done to help address them.

Text length

Let us start by looking at the third area I identified- Text length. Initially, let us consider the number of words children have to read in the KS2 reading paper as that is the 'big race' they build towards in Key Stage 2. Interestingly, it's worth noting that the number of words children need to read has been pretty consistent over the last six versions of the Key Stage 2 reading test.

	2017		2018		2019		2022		2023		2024	
	Extract	Questions	Ex.	Qu.	Ex.	Qu.	Ex.	Qu.	Ex.	Qu.	Ex.	Qu.
Words	1937	1203	1488	1077	2168	1020	1553	975	2046	1174	2012	1061
Total	~3100		~2600		~3200		~2500		~3200		~3100	

What has varied though, is how the words have been distributed between the extract and the questions children have to read. Noticeably, the 2019 had the longest extract at 2168 words but as a consequence, the words contained in the questions was a little lower. 2022 (the first SATs after COVID) is the anomaly as the total number of words dropped to lowest figure of 2500. 2018 also had a low number of words but I cannot give a reason for this. Maybe it contained more challenging vocabulary? If you know the answer, please let me know as I would be interested to find out why it dropped to 2600 words from the 3100 in 2017. *Please email me via info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk*

What impact does this knowledge of text length in the KS2 Reading SATs have on classroom practice and helping children develop reading stamina?

Essentially, it should not have any impact as this is about the process we use to assess children's reading, and the classroom is all mostly about teaching. If we teach reading well and ensure our children read widely and often, the reading SAT will capture the impact and our children are likely to do well. However, it does offer us a marker about how many words children are expected to read at the end of their Key Stage 2 journey. Therefore, having this in mind could help inform practice throughout Key Stage 2.

In Orbital Reading, my reading approach for Y2-6, children read a text or passage independently in every session so I believe that the idea of 'total words' needs to be considered. For example, we would not generally expect a Year 2 pupil to read the same number of words in 10 minutes as a year 6. Therefore, the key consideration is about the length of text we present to children over Key Stage 2 and within each year group. We know that they need to be able to focus for around 3100 words in the Key Stage 2 reading SATs. Within the optional Key Stage 1 reading papers, children generally read around 1100 words. Therefore, the figures of 1100 and 3100 offer us some guidance on how we might ensure children regularly read a sufficient amount of text across a given week.

Reflection: How often do your current Year 4 children read around 2100 words? (In the text and any presented questions)

Pace/Reading rate

As well as an increase in the amount of text children are expected to read, we also know that reading rates vary between Year 2 and Year 6. Therefore, reading rates offer something interesting to explore and consider.

In 2024, Year 6 children had 60 minutes to read the extracts (2012 words) and answer the 23 questions (1061 words.) Obviously, time is used for writing the answers, ticking the boxes etc but we could say that they had to read 3100 words in 60 minutes which is roughly 52 words per minute. When we consider that the average reading rate of 10–11-year-olds (who comprehend well) is 139-194, the 52 words per minute is low, thus achievable. Therefore, the idea of children rushing and ensuring they get through the text is something that should be addressed. Even at the lower rate of 139 words per minute, a child will be able to read the extract and questions in just over 22 minutes. They will have to reread at various points and obviously spend time completing the questions and double checking their answers. They might also head back into the extract at various points.

What impact does this knowledge of reading rate have on classroom practice and helping children develop reading stamina?

Primarily, we need knowledge of reading rates and use this to inform how much text we would expect pupils to read in a given time.

In Orbital reading, teachers are empowered to select a text and use it as many times as required. For the 20-minute session in year 6, I believe we should aim for 1000 words in the extract/passage and questions. Like the reading paper, this would require a low reading rate but we need to factor in time to reread, complete questions, proof-read responses etc.

Like with text length, we would build this up over Key Stage 2. To offer an understanding of reading rates, the following numbers are useful:

Ages 6-7 =53-111 words per minute

Ages 7-8 =89-149 wpm

Ages 8-9 =107-162 wpm

Ages 9-10 =123-180 wpm

Ages 10-11 =139-194wpm.

Using the reading rate to identify the number of words children need to read in a given time is not exact science. For example, if they just need to read the text and do nothing else then we might take the amount of time given to reading it and use the wpm figure to select the number of words in a text. We also know that reading rates fluctuate depending on what they are reading and the level of challenging vocabulary.

Let us look at an example of what this might look like in practice:

Year 5 Summer term

-The children will read a given text before discussing the key events with their peers.

-The 123wpm (lower boundary) means a text length of 1230 words would be appropriate. Anything over 1800 would not be suitable as this would require a reading rate above what is recommended. For reference, 1230 words would be about 3 pages of A4 (size 12 font.)

As I said, it is not an exact science. There are other factors to consider:

-Reading rates are likely to slow if there are numerous examples of challenging vocabulary.

-If the context is unfamiliar, we might see increased examples of repeated reading.

-We might add note taking to the task so would need to reduce the text length. As well as reading the text, time would be needed to jot notes etc.

-Reading rates are not something to train. They simply offer us a small window into a child's reading.

The key learning for me is to be aware of reading rates and use this to inform how much text pupils will be expected to read in a given time. Whilst we would not select all texts on this basis, we do need to be aware of the reading rates. Obviously, we need to accommodate for the differing rates across the class. It would not be appropriate to expect all children to read a full text at a given rate. As I mentioned, reading rates do vary from pupil to pupil and can also vary depending on what they read.

Reading time

To end this look at reading stamina, we need to think about the time we allocate to reading. Again, to support us, we know that children need to be able to read text, read questions and answer them in an hour (unless they have additional time.)

In the 2024 paper, the children had 2012 words to read in the extract. At a reading rate of 139wpm, it would take them around 14-15 minutes of non-stop reading. Therefore, we need to consider a few things when we think about reading time.

1. Time spent reading a given text.
2. Time spent reading a given text and focusing on an activity.

What impact does this knowledge of reading time have on classroom practice and helping children develop reading stamina?

Given the notion that children can potentially cover the Key Stage 2 extract in around 15 minutes (without rereading etc), I believe 10 minutes of independent reading time in a reading lesson, each day, offers sufficient practice time. This forms an essential part of the Orbital Reading lesson structure and is often lacking in the reading lessons I have seen in the past. Before I created Orbital Reading, I was shocked at the number of instances where children did not have to independently read a passage. Lessons often required them to follow along whilst the teacher or a confident reader read the text. They would then move to questions and essentially, used listening comprehension, with some rereading, to answer a bank of questions. With this approach, we are not supporting our children to increase their 'reading time' as they progress through Key Stage 2. Therefore, the expectations of the reading paper are likely become a significant challenge for them.

As well as reading lessons, I believe schools should timetable various opportunities for independent reading time. Here, they can control the amount of time pupils will be expected to independently read. Obviously, we will factor in discussions, recommendations, sharing texts etc as we know they all help support a reading culture. Within Y5/6, my recommendation is to consider giving various opportunities for children to read independently for 20-25 minutes. Like a runner training for a marathon, by running the distance before the race, they know they can do it on race day.

Time also become an interesting marker when recording reading. Instead of recording that a child has read a certain number of pages, why not shift to a 'minutes' system where the amount of time is recorded. I am currently working with two schools who are trialling an online recording system for reading and it allows them to set challenges based on the number of minutes they read in a given period. It is an exciting approach and offers schools a wide range of data for analysis. More importantly, the children are more motivated and the levels of engagement remain very high.

Summary

By using the connection to running and the idea of training for the big event, we are better placed to consider the reading stamina challenge and how we might support this over time. If children are struggling to complete the paper in time, look closely at why this is and do not just label this just as a reading stamina issue. Use the three areas I identified above to help narrow down what made things tricky for the pupil. Obviously, practitioners have extensive knowledge of their children and what is going on in their lives. When things get tricky, we can all find it challenging to remain focused on a task.

Beyond the three areas I offered, there can also be a need to dig a little deeper:

-What is their reading rate and how does this correlate with the figures I shared? If it is lower than the identified words per minute, we might need to consider if there are reading difficulties, such as decoding, at play. This is a huge topic to explore and one I might pick up in another article.

-What was their understanding of the vocabulary in the text?

-Did they struggle to connect it to their knowledge of the world?

-Was reading fluency a challenge which caused them to reread and return to the text a lot when attempting questions? (If this is the case, look at a fluency rubric for greater detail and consider the HfL Reading fluency project as an approach to address it.)

-Consider if it is a general focus issue: For example, can they only focus for short periods so need the activity broken down into bitesize pieces.

-Deeper question-level analysis: Look at the questions and the domains assessed but also dig a little deeper. Was the way the questions were presented the issue? Was the sentence, that contained the answer, difficult to read in terms of clauses and/or vocabulary?

Whilst reading stamina can be a challenge for some pupils, the way we explore it and help overcome it should not be. With greater knowledge and awareness, I believe we can get to the heart of the problem.

If you require any further training on reading or wish to explore Orbital Reading in greater detail, please do not hesitate to get in touch via info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk or visit www.carlpattison.co.uk