The Book Show: Creating Book Trailers to Support and Enhance Boys' Success and Enthusiasm as Readers

By Nicky Sulter

Background

In 2010-2011, Dr Linda Gibson-Langford led a global team of teacher-librarians and school librarians undertaking action research projects for the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC). The team produced fourteen action research papers and posters on the topic of re-engaging boys in leisure reading through school library initiatives. The research was first presented at the 2011 annual IBSC Conference in London.

A revised version of Nicky Sulter's research paper, focused on primary age boys and book trailers, is reproduced here with permission of the IBSC.

Introduction

Reading, for the sheer love of it, is an experience we try to foster in every boy at St John's School in Johannesburg, South Africa. Within this philosophy, reading is modelled as an enjoyable end in itself, and an important 'gateway skill' for school, university and life. This position is substantiated by an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) survey of 265,000 students in 35 countries, which showed a consistent relationship between the enjoyment of reading and higher student achievement. Put another way, if a young boy develops a passion for reading, concerns regarding the meeting of academic standards often fall away. This paper is focussed on creating opportunities for boys to sustain the habit of wider reading as they move toward their secondary school years. Within the early stages of the first cycle of this action research, reconnaissance indicated that the boys in upper primary school were turning away from reading for leisure, and subsequent planning took place to develop a strategy to support and enhance boys' success and enthusiasm as readers. The objective was to investigate any changes in boys' enjoyment of reading before and after the study and to make suggestions for changes to existing practices.

Rationale

In the Preparatory School at St John's, we have the full spectrum of readers, and although we need to cater for everyone, we especially need to focus our attention on those who battle with reading. With PISA and OECD statistics pointing to a decrease in boys' literacy, and given our school's philosophy of sustaining a rich reading culture, we observed a trend in our Year 6 students; boys who appeared to struggle, not so much with the mechanics of reading, but the appreciative understanding of the relationship between reading and doing well in adult life. We wanted to find a way to enthuse boys to read while at the same time support their success as readers. Turning reading into a fun event such as developing and presenting book trailers was a hunch that we thought might work.

Literature review

We understand as teachers that strong reading skills are pre-requisites for high academic standards. We also understand that this is tempered by the research on boys' innate abilities, specifically their reading skills. Newkirk

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(2002, p. 63) reinforces this reality by saying: "Children who find reading difficult . . . simply don't get enough pleasure to continue, no matter how desirable the end product is". The present view, well documented in numerous studies, indicates that boys lag significantly behind girls in reading development. In the 2001 and 2006 Progress in

International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS), girls in almost all participating countries attained higher mean scores for reading than boys (*England Falls in Reading League,* 2007).

There seem to be many separate but interconnected reasons for this. Physically, boys' brains develop differently and at a different pace to girls', especially as far as language skills are concerned. Boys' brain development, mainly in the area of the hippocampus, may lag by as much as eighteen months behind girls'. If boys are forced to read before they are ready, this may result in failure and negative associations with reading (Hawkes, 2001; James, 2007; Sax, 2007; Sullivan, 2009).

Linked to this is the evidence that boys tend to learn differently to girls. Hawkes (2001, p. 37) claims that boys are not good at being "inert" and that generally their learning styles suggest that they prefer "structure, closed tasks, kinaesthetic learning, multi-sensory approach to learning, analytical tasks, practical, hands-on-activities and shorter tasks". The problem is that, for boys, as noted by Newkirk (2002, p. 58), reading is often "disconnected from action".

Further, Newkirk (2002, p. 13) claims that much of what boys enjoy reading is not valued for what it is. He observes: "It is easy to feel gratified by students who value what we value, who like the books we like". More often than not, boys' choices differ radically from conventional adults' choices. Sullivan (2009, online) supports this idea, claiming, "half the boys in the United States probably read little or nothing that the adults in their lives would consider real reading". In the light of adult criticism, it is no wonder that many boys, especially in adolescence, maintain negative associations with reading.

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Related to this, Newkirk (2002, p. 12) emphasises the need for us to embrace and value the popular culture in which most boys are immersed. He notes that we need to "move beyond the predominant censorious attitude towards popular culture and open up to the transgressive pleasure of boyhood".

The belief that peer recommendation seems to be a significant factor in engaging boys in reading is supported by Smith and Wilhelm (in Newkirk 2002, p. 49) who see the value of peer recommendation and observe that, "boys read books recommended by friends and are more likely to attend to print stories that can be shared. An ungregarious literacy has no appeal for them".

Bearing in mind our need to embrace popular culture, of which modern technology comprises a large portion, Millard (in OME 2004, p. 40) believes that technology can play a vital role in boys' reading enjoyment. He notes:

It is imperative that educators and parents be aware of the impact of the multimedia world, and understand the positive ways in which these new languages and cultures can be harnessed as adjuncts to book-based literacy.

Endorsing this view, Newkirk (2002) goes further by contending that the reason boys feel so at home with interactive technology is that it gives them a sense of power and control over a situation, which they do not have in the real world where adults are perceived as the power-holders. Reading Kadger's experience of introducing book trailers as a way of moving from conventional book talk, which was more about her performance as a teacher rather than her students being invited to make meaning, convinced her that "the book trailer offers an invitation through the selection of images, text, voiceover, and soundtrack" (2008, online).

If the literature suggests that boys need a more active reading experience and that, through multimedia, this could be harnessed as adjuncts to book-based literacy, it is reasonable to assume that incorporating the creation of book trailers as part of their reading experience might enthuse and engage boys to read at a deeper level.

In addition, if book trailers lead to better engagement in the story and thus the reading experience, as Pattison (2010) recommends, then linking the reading of a story with images, music and sound effects might lead to greater comprehension of the object of the reading experience, and thus greater confidence in reinforcing this experience.

Bearing in mind the above literature, it seems logical that creating a book trailer, that is, one-to-two minute digital videos designed to entice classmates to read specific books, might not only harness boys' natural urge to be active, but result in a deeper reading experience that goes some way towards offering boys a realistic reading experience where their needs, both physical and mental, are nurtured. In sum, it might prove to be the link that connects reading to action.

Research Context

The Preparatory School (Prep) at St John's caters for 380 day students from years 3-7. Academic emphasis with strong learning support, combined with a rich sporting and cultural ethos, pervades the school.

Literacy in all its forms is given priority throughout the Prep and boys are encouraged to improve their reading and comprehension skills with various programs. Reading for enjoyment is constantly promoted through numerous initiatives, including silent reading, literature circles, book sales, *Hooked on Books* theatre productions, storytelling events, family literature quizzes and participation in the Kids' Lit Quiz (see http://www.kidslitquiz.com/).

It has been observed that, in spite of ongoing encouragement to read for pleasure, the boys seem to lose interest in reading as they approach adolescence. Taking a cue from Wilson (in OME 2004, p. 15), who claims that boys respond best to "active learning opportunities", our supposition was that leisure reading, linked to the production of book trailers, might engage this group and keep them inspired to continue reading for pleasure.

Participants

The twenty-five boys in the sample research group were all from the same Year 6 home room class (11-12 years). According to tests carried out at the beginning of the academic year, the reading ages of this cohort ranged from two years and ten months to one month above their chronological age. These statistics illustrated a group that was mostly competent readers; however, a small number of the group seemed unmotivated to read at all. With the support from their teachers, as well as the Deputy Headmaster, and with consent from the boys themselves and their parents, the action research began.

Research Methodology

Overview

Action research was the obvious choice for such an investigation. It is a flexible, problem-solving approach, which facilitates a process of change within the classroom situation, allows for reflection, and enables further change if necessary (Bearne, Graham and Marsh, 2007). Certainly, it was the method of choice for me as I was able to identify an area of concern in the school library – the waning interest in reading of pre-adolescent boys – devise an intervention aimed at improving the situation, and allow for reflection and improvement in my teaching practice.

Intervention and process

The action – devising book trailers – was divided into four parts: reading and reflecting on the chosen book, scaffolded activities to assist in the preparation of the book trailer, making the book trailer, and viewing/presenting the book trailer.

I explained the concept of a book trailer to the sample group. They were quick to make a connection between a book trailer and the *Hooked on Books* approach to promoting reading. The idea that the audience would be left in the lurch, feeling compelled to read the book in order to satisfy their curiosity, appealed to the boys.

Bearing in mind Newkirk's (2002) and Sullivan's (2009) assertions regarding boys' reading choices, I selected ten titles that I thought would appeal to the boys. I took care to include a variety of genres – fantasy, action, war and romance – and made an effort to select books that would cater to their differing reading abilities. I also felt that it was important to choose books with strong storylines that would lend themselves more readily to the production of a book trailer. After hearing a brief synopsis of each book, the boys were given the opportunity to select one to read during the school holiday. In all, five book titles were chosen.
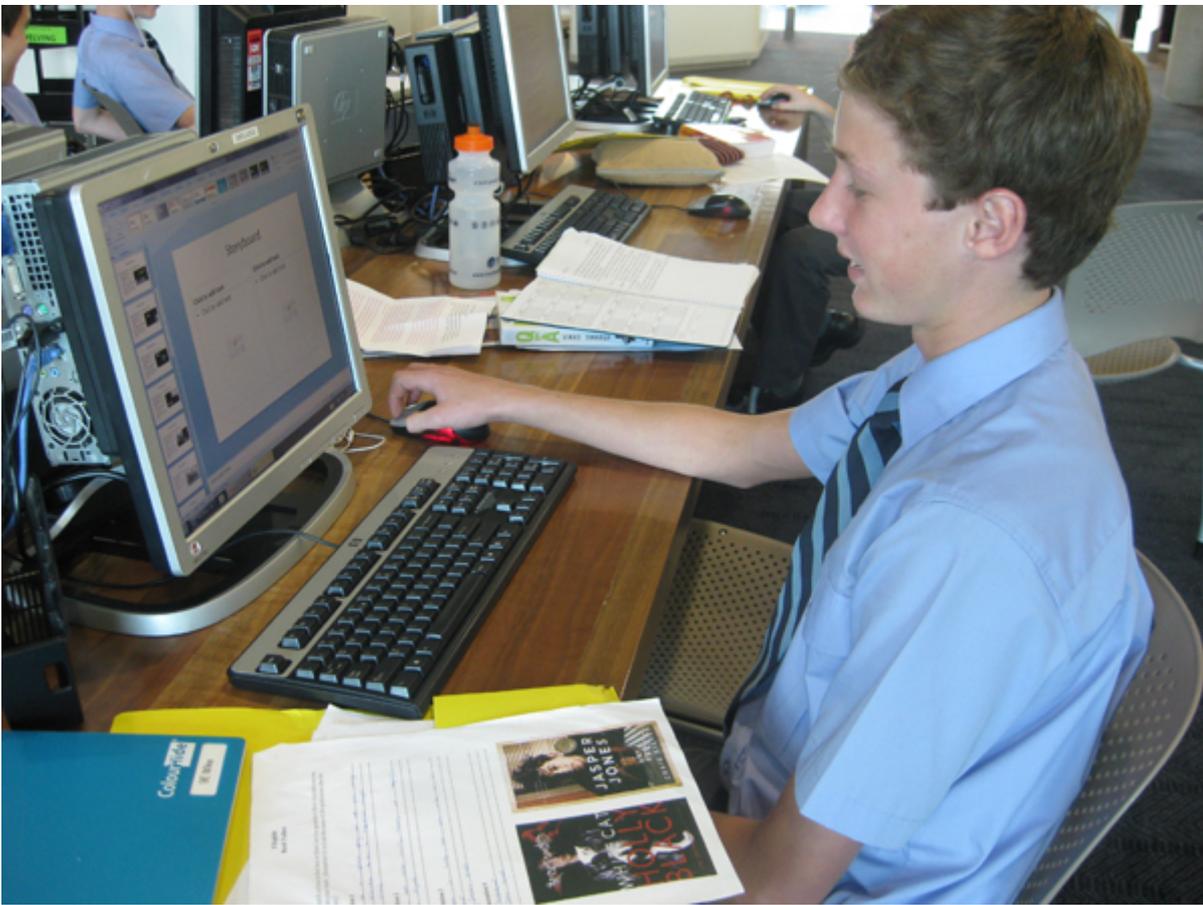
On their return from holidays, several of the boys had changed their minds about their books, and chose other titles to read. I allowed this, as it was of primary importance that the boys enjoyed their books and related well to the story.

Once all the books had been read, the boys were placed in groups of varying sizes, according to the book titles chosen.

As the concept of a book trailer was new to the boys, I moved slowly from the 'known' to the 'unknown' to raise their confidence and make it easier for them to understand what they had to do. To this end, I used the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar to model each step we were going to take, culminating in the production and viewing of the book trailer. The boys had recently finished studying the book as a class reader, so I knew that they were familiar with it and that it had been a highly popular read. Through the study of *Holes,* they had also gained knowledge of some of the important elements of a fiction book such as plot, characters, setting and conflict.

During this stage of the intervention, my intention was to encourage the boys to focus on aspects of the book that would help in the creation of a powerful and effective book trailer. The emphasis was on looking at how the senses, particularly visual, could be portrayed. To this end, we began by examining the covers of their books. The boys explained to members of other groups how their cover, with the use of symbols, typeface, colour, pictures and images, gave hints on what the story was about. The relative prominence of the author's name vis-à-vis the title was also discussed. In their responses, the book cover was felt to be vital as an initial attraction to a book. The connection was made between the importance of the cover in the promotion of the book and how that related directly to the book trailer, also a promotional vehicle.

Keeping in mind the importance of appealing to the senses and emotions, the boys embarked on numerous activities relating to the setting, characters, plot and conflict in their books. Through answering questions related to each of

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these aspects, they began identifying elements that would create the desired impact in their trailers. They were guided to constantly bear in mind the need to keep their viewers in suspense. In an attempt to vary the activities and in order to sustain their interest levels, I filmed their discussion on the conflict in their books. These conversations gave the boys a chance to respond verbally, which they did with much confidence and eloquence. They also allowed

others to chip in and give their viewpoints, and I responded from time to time by asking more probing questions to provoke in-depth comments from them. The discussions were lively and spontaneous, and prompted some thoughtful answers. When asked about the conflict within the main character in *Varjak Paw*, one boy responded with insight and understanding: "Varjak has to overcome his fear so that his brothers and sisters stop making fun of him and his grandfather and father stop saying that he is a disgrace to the name of Varjak".

Giving the boys a chance to engage with both book and computer, I led each group in creating a *wordle* about their book. This gave them an opportunity to think again about key themes and to use different colours, shapes and typefaces to convey the essence of the book. They found the exercise stimulating and many of the more technologically-minded boys took the lead in this activity.

The final stage in the preparation for the making of the book trailers was the viewing of examples of trailers on the Internet. Some of these books the boys had read, while others were chosen for the way in which they managed to capture the essence of the story while simultaneously keeping the audience watching and in suspense. Unsurprisingly, this led to requests to read some of the books viewed. In addition, the boys were asked to reflect on the book trailers and write down in point form all the things that they had personally noticed that had created an impact or added to the success of the book trailer in any way. They noted the effective use of music, the use of quotes from respected critics, newspapers and other authors, direct quotes from the book, the use of suspense, the use of interviews with those who had read the book, the simplicity of some of the trailers, and the use of text on the screen.

The boys gathered this information and began the making of their book trailers. MacBooks, using the Photobook program, were used to create the trailers. There was a definite reluctance to take on this next step, in spite of the fact that they were familiar with the software programs being used, and had a good idea of the main themes in their books and the features they should focus on. However, those most at home with the technology began experimenting with slides and text, and slowly the others in each group began contributing.

At this stage, further energy was injected into the project by a visit from the education officer of the local iStore who helped the groups out with technical difficulties.

Throughout the process, I offered help, encouragement and suggestions to the boys, and they felt free to ask for advice and seemed to appreciate the interest shown and the time they were given in which to do the work. Although their homeroom teacher had been more than generous with the time he had allowed me for this project, exams were looming. I therefore arranged for the boys to come in on a Saturday morning and supplied them with refreshments, and in those four hours, they made huge strides on their book trailers.

Interestingly, they responded extremely positively to the fact that they had the freedom to come and go as they pleased on that morning. One of the boys commented: "We should do this more often – it gives us time and there are no bells". They were able to concentrate on getting to the essence of their trailers, discuss how to build suspense, discard unnecessary details and create contrast and variety in their work, without any time constraints. There was the sense that they were making their own choices and were in control of the situation. This response feeds directly into Smith and Wilhelm's observation about boys and formal schooling: "The boys almost universally felt that school denied them choice and control and therefore any sense of personal agency or competence" (2002, p. 109). This stage of the intervention provided the boys with a positive and largely self-regulated environment in which to work.

Once the book trailers were completed, many of the boys expressed a desire to show them off to their peers and other classes. They were tremendously excited about being invited to show them to the teachers during a staff meeting, too, and several groups were invited to discuss their project with the Headmaster.

Most significantly of all, the response from the 'target market' – other potential readers – was very positive indeed. This was especially so amongst those boys in the class below this research group. After the viewing, there were an encouraging number of requests for the books featured.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

A preliminary survey investigating the boys' reading habits, their attitudes to reading and other forms of entertainment, as well as influences on their reading and choices, was carried out.

Some of the responses to the questions required making a choice on a scale of 1-10. These were graphed and then analysed for evidence of similarities and differences in the above-mentioned categories. Answers to questions requiring affective responses were attributed themes and then graphed accordingly so that trends in the participants' feelings about certain aspects of reading could be established.

During the execution of the project, boys were asked their opinions on various aspects of the books such as covers, characters, setting, point of view and plot. Some responses were videotaped while others were written. In addition to revealing the boys' views on each topic, the responses helped to indicate the level of engagement in the reading for understanding phase of creating book trailers.

Throughout the intervention, data was collected in the form of incidental and spontaneous verbal, reflective responses from the boys, as well as my own observations on levels of engagement. This data was recorded in a journal at each session.

Photographs of the groups participating in the different stages of the project were also taken, and used to gauge levels of engagement at each stage of the process.

The final survey, carried out on the completion of the book trailers, consisted of two parts and was used to reflect the boys' experience of the entire process. The first part focussed on the specific aspects of creating the book trailer, and responses were recorded on a scale of 1-10 from least to most enjoyable. The results were graphed to determine variations and similarities in responses.

In addition, the open-ended questions of the survey sought reflective, written responses from the boys regarding their views on whether creating and viewing a book trailer had in fact enhanced their success in, and enthusiasm for, reading. The responses to these questions were analysed for themes and issues raised by the boys. The dominant themes were then used to categorise and collate the responses. From this analysis, a set of findings was developed, the results of which helped draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention.

Discussion of the Findings

Preliminary survey

Predictably, coming from an environment where reading is constantly supported, all but one boy was positive about reading for leisure. The greater majority felt they were above-average readers, but when asked whether they felt they read enough, just under half of them said that they did not. A distinct preference for fiction and graphic novels over other types of reading material was evident. Reading for fun and relaxation – as an end in itself – was a popular view, though intentional reading – as a means of finding out more about the world and as a vital life-skill for life – was also important to most of the boys. However, they admitted that they would much prefer to 'chill' with friends, communicate on their cell phones, watch television, play interactive games, surf the Internet or play sport, than read. This telling response, reflecting their affinity for modern digital technology, is borne out by Newkirk's (2002) and Millard's (2004) observations of boys today.

Reflection surveys

A reflection survey was used to gauge the boys' immediate responses to the various aspects of the intervention: reading their specific book, the group discussion on elements of the book, writing tasks related to the book, making 'wordles', planning and making the book trailer, and showing it to others. These responses averaged from 7 to above 8 on the scale of 1-10, where 1 was least enjoyable and 10 was most enjoyable.

"I thought long and hard about the story, over and over."

By far their favourite activities involved those where they integrated both their reading and understanding of the book with technology. This element seemed to create the motivation to engage the boys in a more active reading experience. Their reflective responses were honest and straightforward, with 18 of the cohort sharing that creating the book trailer had made them think more deeply about the book. As one boy expressed: "I thought long and hard about the story, over and over" while another observed: "You had to dig deep to get the right things [for the book trailer]". Boys made comments that indicated a high level of engagement, for differing reasons, such as "It makes you want to read the book again" and "It made me see that the book was not all that bad" as well as "It made me think more about it because I loved the book".

An unexpected feature that emerged from the action, and which is plain in the boys' responses, was that viewing book trailers affected their attitude to choosing books. The majority (24) of boys agreed that a book trailer was a good way to interest people in reading because "they capture people into reading". One boy felt that "It leaves them agitated" while another suggested, "It gives them an urge to read the book". This delightful response perhaps sums up the boys' renewed enthusiasm for reading: "Modern day people prefer movies and a trailer can turn a book into a movie inside your mind". However, they qualified this when asked whether they personally would be influenced to read a book after viewing its book trailer. The quality of the book trailer, its ability to sell itself, and above all, the subject of the book and their interest in it, would determine their decision to read it or not. It is interesting that the persuasive nature of the trailer would only go a short way to influencing their final choice.

"It is a great book and I want others to enjoy it."

Without a doubt, however, the most exciting part of the project for the boys was the opportunity to show off their book trailer to others, especially those boys in the year below them. I had thought that many of them would feel reluctant to do this, yet it seemed that showing their work off to an authentic audience was vital to validating the work they had done. In their more affective responses, their reasons for wanting to show the book trailers become more apparent. Some genuinely wanted to enthuse others about their book by noting: "I think it would get a lot of them excited about the book". and "It is a great book and I want others to enjoy it". Two participants offered these comments: "I would like to encourage them to read it" and "I want them to see that reading is interesting and fun" which was encouraging for me as their teacher. For others, impressing their peers was also important. It was heart-warming to hear "I can prove to my friends that I read" and "I want them to know I am not bad at doing stuff". However, at the opposite end of the scale, and in keeping with the suspicion that there were several boys who did fear censure and criticism, some of the boys were cautious, saying, "They will hate our trailer" or "Our trailer is not the best; I would hate them to laugh or anything".

. . . making the book trailers operated as a catalyst to further their interest in and enjoyment of reading.

The final questions dealt with the transformative nature of the intervention. Asked if working on the computer and making the book trailer had made them feel more positive about reading, a small number (5) felt it had made no difference at all and they found the whole process boring. Another group indicated that they felt no different, as they already enjoyed reading ("Reading is fantastic anyway"), while others (15) felt positive, as shown by the following responses: "The book trailer allows you to express your passion for the book"; "It made the book fun"; "It made me feel good about reading"; "It gives the book 'true' feeling"; "It got me more enthusiastic about reading" and "I would like to read more books". These responses indicate that, for some boys, making the book trailers operated as a catalyst to further their interest in and enjoyment of reading. In addition, it seemed to be an ideal medium through which they were able to be creative and explore a variety of ways to get the important messages in the book across to their audience. Once again, the key seems to lie in connecting the two activities – reading and IT – that is where evidence of greatest change seems to have occurred.

Conclusion

It is clear from this initial intervention that developing a passion for reading amongst modern pre-adolescent boys undoubtedly requires meeting them where they are 'at'. Today, this includes finding common ground wherever possible between reading and digital media, giving boys freedom to choose reading material without the pressure of

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adult disapprobation, building their confidence by facilitating their control over their work, encouraging them at every opportunity to embrace reading for pleasure and, perhaps more importantly, enhancing positive peer interaction throughout the entire process. For reading is both a delightfully solitary activity and a joyous, shared one – and teenagers, with their dependence on peer approval, can play a critical role in encouraging each other to read for the sheer joy of it.

Implications of the Study on Practice

In response to this first phase of my action research, teachers at our school will be encouraged to reflect on the need to constantly be aware of those activities which enhance the learning environment for boys, specifically in terms of the role played by technology in the learning process.

On a professional level, book trailers will become an integral part of promoting books and reading in the library. After reflection, the next planning stage will see the inclusion of non-fiction books as well as graphic novels to give greater freedom of choice to the students.

Reflection

> . . . Being exposed to the action research process has meant that I will never approach my teaching in quite the same way again. The simple problem-solving nature of it means that changes to teaching practice, no matter how big or small, can be made through the use of this process on an on-going basis.
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> There have been daunting moments when the sense that I wasn't reaching the boys and connecting to those things that were important to them, were overwhelming. Many times I questioned whether I was on the right track and whether the creating of the book trailers would indeed enhance their reading, or whether I should have stuck to my unadventurous initial hunch of pursuing Sustained Silent Reading as a way of inspiring them to read more.
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> As the project progressed I realised that I needed to be guided by the boys, and not the other way around. Taking a backseat and allowing them to take control of their work was a hard lesson for me, but the rewards were manifold. The mutual trust and respect that grew were invaluable. The intensity and ongoing interaction between the boys themselves and with me created a classroom atmosphere I had never experienced before. I learnt so much about each child and felt enormously proud of what they achieved and witnessing their own pride in their work, especially when showing their book trailers to others, was extremely gratifying.

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