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Informal book talk: digging beneath the surface

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the field's predominant focus on teacher-led talk in reading contexts, this study considers child-led relaxed conversations about texts. It examines what is afforded by the occurrence of such relaxed book talk and how this is enabled with young children in school. Data are drawn from a co-participative study with four teachers in England that captured naturalistic video observations. The paper offers novel insights about the social and personal affordances of informal book talk, the role it can play in developing positive dispositions towards reading and the salience of familiar texts and the classroom reading culture.

KEYWORDS

Informal book talk;
relationships; reader
identities; reading culture

Introduction

The value of talking about texts has been the focus of international attention for decades. This has tended to concentrate upon adults leading and modelling extra-textual talk during shared reading (e.g. Greene Brabham and Lynch-Brown 2002; Kindle 2011; Lepola et al. 2023). This work often considers how adults model text talk to support children's language development (e.g. Cabell et al. 2019; Whitehurst et al. 1988) or how children, both with and without a supporting adult, use talk to co-construct their understanding and comprehension of texts (e.g. Chambers 1993; Maine 2015).

The developmental gains afforded by book talk and dialogic shared reading are well established. These include language development (De Temple and Snow 2003; Wasik and Hindman 2014), increases in both expressive vocabulary (Hargrave and Senechal 2000; Sim and Berthelsen 2014) and narrative skills (Lever and Senechal 2011), as well as enhanced comprehension (Mol et al. 2008; Zucker et al. 2021). Predominantly, research into children's talk about texts has examined how adult-led and adult-framed book talk facilitates the development of such specific language skills and competencies. In this sort of attainment-oriented book talk, children's responses are often directed, or firmly guided by the adult's agenda.

Nonetheless, there are studies that take a broader view of the potential outcomes of book talk and of the adult's role. For instance, some suggest that talk around books can promote socio-emotional development and empathy (Pillinger and Vardy 2022), can encourage creative and critical thinking (Roche 2014), and enhance children's involvement in texts (Cohrssen, Niklas, and Tayler 2016). Others highlight the significance of book talk to the reading for pleasure agenda, indicating that non-assessed talk about texts, which is led and shaped by the learners themselves, can motivate and engage young readers (Cremin et al. 2014; Moses and Kelly 2018; Mottram 2014; Rodriguez Leon and Payler 2021). However, in comparison to the number of studies which have examined adult-led book talk, far fewer have focused upon child-initiated informal book talk.

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The current study investigates child-initiated informal book talk, as part of reading for pleasure pedagogy in early years and key stage 1 classrooms. Working alongside four teachers, known for their esteemed practice in motivating volitional readers, the team explored children's informal talk about texts over a 9-month period. Video observations of naturalistic instances of these 4–7-year-olds' book talk were collected and analysed. In this paper, following a review of the extant research literature, the methodology is described, and the findings are reported with reference to two research questions: what is afforded by the occurrence of informal book talk and how is this enabled with young children in school? The ensuing discussion considers the rich contribution that informal book talk offers children, personally and socially, and the salience of practitioners' conceptions of the nature and value of such talk, as well as the significance of the children's self-chosen texts and their familiarity with them. Finally, recommendations for future research and enriched practice are offered.

Research examining young people's volitional talk about texts

Research consistently draws attention to the importance of agency in motivating young readers and supporting volitional reading – that is reading for pleasure (see Cremin et al. 2024). Indeed, multiple studies demonstrate that children and young people derive pleasure from being able to talk about books on their own terms and in their own way (McGeown et al. 2020; Merga 2020), and from linking texts to their experiences (Button and Millward 2005), to other texts they have read (Torr 2007), and to facts they know (Alexander and Jarman 2018). This enjoyment appears to be the result of the young people feeling knowledgeable, competent and connected to others through their engagement in and response to texts. For instance, when children's genuine and often spontaneous responses are honoured and valued during shared reading, they can feel empowered to lead more of these conversations for themselves (Wiseman 2011).

However, children's agential talk about texts is marginalised if schoolbook talk is adult-led, formalised and focused on specific learning outcomes and their assessment. Arguably, an alternative, more relaxed and child-centric approach to talking about texts is needed that values children's agency as readers and, thus nurtures their reading for pleasure within and beyond school. Such reading, 'shaped by the reader's own goals and interests – which may include social and relational ones – is commonly undertaken in anticipation of some form of satisfaction' (Cremin and Scholes 2024). Significantly, volitional reading is associated with academic, social and emotional benefits (e.g. Sun et al. 2024; Torppa et al. 2020). Accordingly, children's own Informal Book Talk (IBT) has the potential to contribute both to educational achievement and psychological wellbeing and deserves closer scrutiny.

In a year long UK study of 45 primary classrooms, IBT gradually emerged in response to teachers' loosening the 'reading reins' and offering more space and time for reading for pleasure (Cremin et al. 2014). Linked to enhanced teacher knowledge of children's texts and individual readers, IBT was recognised as a key characteristic of the reciprocal and interactive reading communities that developed. It was evident in the time assigned to reading aloud and independent reading, and arose spontaneously in classrooms, libraries, playgrounds, corridors and other socially supportive reading environments. These apparently casual conversations encompassed a wide range of interactions about books and included recommendations and talking about being a reader (Cremin et al. 2014). At times fleeting and at others more sustained, some of this was labelled 'inside text talk' as it involved reciting sections from texts or integrating text quotations into everyday contexts (Mottram 2014). A key component of such talk was shared familiarity with texts and life, such that texts known to groups of children bridged experiences and connected individuals.

The contribution of child-led book talk to developing positive attitudes to reading has also been noted in a few other studies. For instance, in an early childhood UK setting with 3- and 4-year-olds, Rodriguez Leon and Payler (2021) found the repetition of shared book reading opportunities supported children's volitional interactions around books, and that this facilitated deeper interpretations

of the text. In a US classroom of 6- and 7-year-olds, Moses and Kelly (2018) identified that when the teacher avoided imposing talk restrictions and sought to encourage child-led free-flow book talk, this supported the development of a love of reading. Researching in another US classroom of 9- and 10-year-olds, Coakley-Fields (2019) observed how IBT between the children and their teacher often involved creating connections between familiar books across the day. Such unofficial, off-the-cuff conversations were seen to create 'an inclusive reading community' through which children could make links to and between books, themselves and each other (Coakley-Fields 2019, 727).

Additionally, the significance and impact of extensive volitional book talk has been demonstrated with US teenagers (Ivey and Johnston 2013). In this research, four teachers stepped back from assigning whole-class classic texts for reading and instead prioritised the young people's autonomy and the personal relevance of texts. The teenagers were enabled to choose, read at their own pace, and several copies of 'edgy' texts were offered, prompting discussion of the issues within them. Widespread IBT was evidenced, which appeared to be triggered both by the texts and the teenagers' social relationships and was also reported between teenagers and their parents.

Collectively, these studies indicate that IBT is volitional, mainly driven by children's interests. In this way, IBT connects to the social motivation to read. Historically reading motivation has been characterised mostly as an individual concept (e.g. Conradi-Smith et al. 2013; Schiefele et al. 2012), more recent studies, however, recognise social reasons for reading (McGeown and Conradi-Smith 2024; Mottram, Young, and Satti 2022). Studies which attend to this dimension of reader motivation often draw on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), which suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are critical psychological needs, and some examine how volitional reading activities align with these (e.g. Cantrell et al. 2017; Howard 2011; Neugebauer and Gilmour 2020; Wilhelm 2016). These studies, which all focus on teenagers, show that many are driven to read by a desire for connections with others – peers or adults. However, there are far fewer studies, like the current one, that consider the affordances of young children's self-initiated conversations about books and the contextual factors that impact upon such IBT.

Methodology

Recognising a gap in research related to the affordances of IBT for younger children, this paper seeks to address two research questions:

- (1) What is afforded by the occurrence of IBT for young children?
- (2) How is IBT enabled for young children in school?

This paper foregrounds the first question, while the second question is mobilised in order to explore in what ways the occurrences of IBT discussed in the paper are contingent on contextual elements.

Informed by participatory and practitioner research methodologies (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020), the study commenced with a series of three meetings between the researchers and four primary school teachers to co-design and pilot the research. The teachers, selected using purposive intensity sampling (Patton 2015), were known to the university-based research team due to their involvement in previous volitional reading initiatives. The team perceived the practitioners were skilled in the art of motivating young readers and creating space and time across the school day for relaxed reading for enjoyment. Their practices encompassed daily reading aloud, and regular opportunities for children to choose to read on their own and with others, with self-chosen books. Prior to the development of the main study, the teachers co-designed and trialled an observation proforma, and shared video extracts which indicated the presence of IBT in their classrooms, outdoor areas, corridors and libraries. These early discussions provided an opportunity to co-construct a shared understanding of IBT – as child led, relaxed and with texts of choice – and negotiate methods of data collection.

Two of the teachers worked in Reception (YR), with 4–5-year-olds, and two were in Year 2 (Y2), with 6–7-year-olds. Three of these classrooms (one YR and two Y2) were in London, with each class including a significant cohort of children who used English as an additional language. The fourth class (YR) was in the Yorkshire and Humber region of England, these children mostly spoke English as their first language. The intake of two of the schools was below the national average for children eligible for free school meals (a proxy to indicate areas of socio-economic disadvantage) and two were above.

Data collection

The data collected was intentionally naturalistic and observations of incidences of IBT were recorded on video, enabling the team to attend to the multimodal components of communication (Flewitt 2006). The children were already familiar with the use of tablets for teacher observations as part of classroom routines; these appeared to have little impact on their interactions. The teachers and visiting researcher sought to seize the moment and filmed as unobtrusively as possible in response to observational evidence of an instance of IBT between children or children and adults. All video observations were accompanied by contextualising information in the form of written observations, many included reflective conversations between the university-based researchers and the teachers. This provided insights into the time and place of IBT episodes, the children's perceived literate identities and perceived social and academic positioning in class. The study's video data set encompassed 29 videos which ranged from 23 s to 20 min and 45 s. Predominantly, the episodes of IBT recorded were between children, talking in pairs or trios, a far smaller proportion involved children and adults.

The process of data gathering in the main study encompassed two phases. The first (October 2022–April 2023), involved the teachers gathering video observations of children engaged in IBT. During this period, the teachers met regularly with the university-based researchers to share contextual details relating to individual IBT episodes. Phase two (April–June 2023) involved one researcher visiting each setting for a half day. During these visits, the researcher, in alignment with the teachers' practice of videoing responsively, sought to gather additional video observations of IBT episodes and gained first-hand experience of the classroom context and some young readers. At the close of the visit, the circumstances perceived to underpin the occurrence of the observed IBT episodes were discussed.

Informed by the British Education Research Association's (BERA 2018) ethical guidelines, consent was gathered from the children's caregivers via information letters and teachers' verbal explanations. In most cases, the teachers were able to gain consent for all class members so observational video recordings could be conducted based on spontaneous incidents of IBT at any time during the research period. Where individual children were not permitted to participate, recordings were still carried out, so they felt part of the process, in line with concerns raised by Richardson (2019) about how children may feel disenfranchised if not included in data collection activities. However, the video footage of non-participant children, even when this included other children with consent, was not included in the analysis. Children's assent was gained through a discussion of the study with their teacher and the completion of a visual ethics sheet. The researcher monitored children's body language, and positioning in response to their awareness of recording devices (tablets) placed nearby, as an ongoing way to consider their willingness to continue (Huser, Dockett, and Perry 2022). Teacher consent to share contextual information about the circumstances and their perceptions of the observation was also gathered.

Data analysis

The time-intensive nature of video analysis was incompatible with the teachers' workloads, so the process of data analysis was completed by the university-based researchers. All the video

observations, both those gathered by teachers and the researcher, were subject to the same analytical process and were treated cumulatively. Prior to analysing the video observations, the research team engaged with the contextualising information that accompanied each incidence of IBT.

The process of analysis involved reviewing all the video observations in order to select a sub-set of videos for closer scrutiny. A ranking process was used to grade each video against selection criteria. The criteria were: (i) how pivotal a text was in the IBT episode; (ii) the quality of the footage, in terms of clarity of visual and audio recording; (iii) relevancy to the research questions; (iv) the amount of available contextualising detail. An extract of the rankings given to the videos is provided in Appendix 1. The four highest-ranked videos from each class setting, two from the class teacher and two from the researcher, were selected for further analysis, creating a focused data set of 16 videos. Working in pairs, the university-based researchers co-constructed narrative annotations of these 16 video observations. Through these discussions, and influenced by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), an inductive process of open coding was established. An initial set of codes grouped into five categories was generated. Connected to the first research question, two categories related to the possible 'personal' and 'social' affordances of IBT were constructed. The categories of 'material', 'pedagogical' and 'textual' were constructed in relation to the second research question (see Table 1). Codes were applied to the data at both semantic (explicit in the data) and latent (interpreted from the data) levels (Braun and Clarke 2006). Mindful of the abstraction and inference involved in latent coding, the team engaged in reflexive and critical discussions to reach an agreement that children's actions or behaviours could be interpreted as agentic, or self-positioning, for example. These codes were then applied to the extant narrative annotations within Dedoose.

Influenced by Braun and Clarke's (2013) suggestion that recurrence is indicative of salience, the research team noticed the frequent recurrence and salience of codes aligned with the categories of social and personal influences on and of IBT. However, these interplayed with underpinning material, pedagogical and textual elements, which appeared to be enabling instances of IBT.

The empirically grounded themes relating to the affordances of IBT and the ways it was facilitated in these classrooms did not emerge from the data, nor were they pre-existent, as Braun and Clarke (2006) they were constructed through the analytic work of probing and interpreting the codes and categories. The first, relating to social affordances, was 'opportunities for building and sustaining relationships'. The second, relating to personal affordances, was 'opportunities for repositioning reader identities'. These are briefly introduced and then examined through episodes of IBT to illuminate their nature.

Findings

Social and personal affordances

The data illustrated that the most frequent IBT affordances provided young children with opportunities to both build and sustain relationships with others in their classes (social), to reposition themselves as readers in relation to their peers, and seemingly to construct positive reader identities through interactions with others (personal). Codes arising from the data pertaining to the social relationships afforded by IBT included 'relatedness / creating connections', 'reminiscing together', 'linguistic overtures' 'identifying and sharing of content', 'shared [sustained] attention', 'power dynamics' and 'sense-making' (see Table 1). Coding of data also surfaced the ways in which IBT was a powerful medium through which children were afforded opportunities to position themselves differently, act agentially, and express themselves genuinely with one another. Codes relating to personal influences were applied to segments of data where it was evident that children were making their own choices and able to act in ways that fulfilled their own 'in-the-moment' needs and desires. These included 'autonomy', 'bringing knowledge to texts', 'competence', 'agency / self-efficacy / empowerment', particularly in their choice of texts and attempts to engage with

Table 1. Coding framework of the influences on and affordances of IBT.

Influence	Code	Code description
Material	Proximity of books	Books being discussed are nearby, within touching distance or within sight
	Number of books	When a larger number of books ($n > 3$) has an impact on the IBT
	Placement of books	The book is placed on one or more children e.g. on someone's lap
	Changing of books	Texts were changed rapidly or frequently within an episode
	Proximity to others	Children or adults are seated or moving close to one another
	Seating arrangements	Changes to the layout of or usage of class furniture, e.g. chairs and cushions
Pedagogical	Tactile elements	Instances when children touch books or other individuals during IBT
	Facilitating	Adult uses speech to prompt talk or to suggest avenues to pursue talk
	Affirming	Adult uses words or facial expressions to value children's contributions
	Change of mind	Adult models the possibility of changing one's mind, regarding book choices
	Allowing movement(s)	Adult has provided instructions that make movement permissible
	Creating spaces	Moving books or classroom furniture to indicate that IBT is welcomed
	Absence of teacher	Adult's absence has an influence on the occurrence or quality of IBT
	Presence of teacher	Adult's presence has an influence on the occurrence or quality of IBT
	Formal framing	Adult directs IBT towards formal learning outcomes
	Informal framing	Adult uses communicative cues to indicate IBT is taking place
Personal	Modelled sentence starters	Using recognised prompt phrases, modelled either previously or in the episode
	Connectedness	Children appear connected to those around them during and through IBT
	Autonomy	Children appear to use IBT to act agentically in the classroom
	Bringing knowledge to texts	Children link information to a text, author, storyline or topic
	Competence	Children appear to use IBT to position themselves as readers and members of the class
	Agency/self-efficacy/empowerment	Children make choices around the texts selected, and their participation in the social interaction and talk.
	Links to own experiences	Children link personal or familial experiences to the books being read
	Self-expression	Children use IBT to express themselves, sharing opinions, emotions and insights
	Sense-making	Children use IBT to create understandings of texts and topics
	Identity construction	Children appear to use talk and actions to position themselves in relation to the book's subject matter, or as a reader.
Social	Identifying and sharing of content	Pointing or other hand gestures to indicate interest in content on the page
	Cultural capital	Using books to indicate access to knowledge of value to the class
	Fluid pairings	Children moved between different pairings within an episode
	Lead or follow	Interactions when a child led the reading / talking and another follows
	Linguistic overtures	Using familiar sentence starters to invite individuals into a conversation
	Appropriating others' behaviours	Imitating the behaviour of another, e.g. teacher / child
	Power dynamics	Clear differences in power between individuals or where individuals compete to assert power
	Reading pairs	Each child has a copy of the same text, reading in sync with another
	Relatedness/creating connections	Seeking out connections with others
	Reminiscing together	Remember a prior reading of or interaction with a text with another
Textual	Shared (sustained) attention	Moments when two or more individuals are intensely focused on a shared interest
	Illustrations	Illustrations prompt children's talk or allow children to share interests
	Familiarity	Children or adults have already come across a text, author or illustrator
	High-value texts	Texts that are considered important to the class, group, pair or individual
	Extending or changing the text	Creatively amending elements of the book often for comic effect
	Non-linear page turning	Turning pages out of the conventional sequence
	Ownership/possession	Physically holding or touching a book, or desiring to do so
	Topics of interest	The book depicts a subject known to or of interest to the child/children

others. They also involved some children leading interactions by 'linking reading to their own experiences', 'sharing their own responses to texts', 'self-expression' and 'identity construction' (see Table 1). These codes were not only applied to data involving high-attaining pupils but were frequently

used when analysing IBT episodes involving children described by their teachers as ‘struggling readers’, ‘new to English’, ‘less communicative’ or in one case a child who ‘struggles with social interaction’.

Textual, material and pedagogical influences

The data also revealed key influences on children’s IBT in these classroom contexts. The textual influence codes of ‘familiarity’ and ‘ownership/possession’ were frequently applied as children used the sharing of known and familiar books, both as ‘books in common’ (Cremin 2023), and as physical objects, to test out, establish and/or reinforce a sense of kinship through meaningful social interactions. Material ‘proximity to books’ in classrooms and other school locations was part of every observed interaction, where children had freedom to select texts of their own choosing, and these were easily accessible. ‘Proximity to others’ was also an apparently essential part of the IBT exchanges as children chose to be physically close, leaning over, pointing, exclaiming, and inviting others to join in, even when reading separate texts. Under the pedagogy category, children drew on ‘modelled sentence starters’, language drawn from text familiarity, and remembered experiences of hearing texts read to support their IBT. Being ‘allowed to move’ was also a common feature of the IBT observations; children positioned themselves in different groups and moved during episodes to seek out friends, specific texts, or willing IBT collaborators. The next section includes vignettes and commentary to examine and exemplify the dominant themes which related to the social and personal affordances of IBT. To a lesser extent, some material, textual and pedagogical influences are exemplified and discussed.

Opportunities for building and sustaining social relationships

As noted, children’s IBT revealed the opportunities afforded by informal interactions around familiar texts for children to connect socially, make new relationships and appear to feel confident that they had something relevant to share with unfamiliar peers or close friends. In the vignettes below, the complexity of what IBT can offer in terms of both encouraging and sustaining social relationships is evidenced, alongside the challenges that children may experience in their attempts to use IBT for this purpose.

Building relationships through IBT

This episode took place in the tree house during an afternoon break. The house is a fixed feature of the playground that can be chosen by children as a location for their free play. It contains a shelf of books, including texts that children have encountered in reading aloud, assembly or literacy lessons. Alex, Jawhara and Aiden who are in Year 2, do not normally play together, but on this occasion, they had gone to the treehouse to explore books.

The children, sitting together on the bench inside the treehouse, were all looking at self-chosen books, when Aiden exclaimed ‘This one looks really cool. It’s called My Dad is a Grizzly Bear’ and started to read it to himself. Alex returned his book and picked another commenting to the others ‘Do you remember this book by Nadia Shireen, ‘Billy and the Dragon?’ – it was so fun’. While murmurs of ‘yeah’ were heard, neither Aiden nor Jawhara looked up. Alex tried again, asking Aiden, ‘Do you remember when they was flying in the air with the dragon?’. In response Aiden offered a little laugh – ‘Yeah’.

A few moments later, Jawhara asked ‘Do you remember when Miss first came to the school, and we read ‘The Koala who Could?’, ‘Yeah’ replied Aiden without looking up. Next, Aiden showing them a spread from his book commented, ‘Oh, look at the page with the football bed’, the others looked and laughed loudly in apparent recognition. Later, Jawhara commented ‘Ooh I like, I like. Do you know what I’m going to choose now?’. ‘Which one?’ Alex queried. ‘The rabbit one’. Demonstrating shared knowledge of the text, they all chorused ‘That Rabbit belongs to Emily Brown’. Jawhara explained she wanted to read it ‘because we stopped there’ – referring to the stage they had reached reading the book in lesson time. (Video 6)

This vignette indicates the children's motivation to involve others in book talk, even when there is no previously established social relationship. In common with most of the incidences of IBT in this study, access to familiar texts appeared to be an important starting point for conversations and commentaries. Noticeably, the children here employed different 'linguistic overtures', based on their experience of adult 'modelled sentence starters' to engage each other in IBT. The complexity of beginning such talk with peers is illustrated from the outset when Alex tried unsuccessfully to elicit a sustained response from Aiden. His 'formulas' to open up the discussion included drawing on shared memories of when books have been read in class, with '*Do you remember ...*' and selecting episodes from the texts that he perhaps perceived would be memorable creating a shared emotional response. Jawhara also used '*Do you remember ... ?*' with a focus on sharing when they had heard the story, but again did not appear to get the response she desired. Aiden gained a more successful, but still limited reaction from the others by showing them a funny illustration in the book which they all seemed to recognise. It may be that the focus on a specific part of the text made his overture more appealing, or that his status in the group prompted the others to join in.

At this point, Alex took Jawhara's space next to Aiden saying, 'I'm going to see *The Koala Who Could*' because I can't remember anything.' But before he settled, Aiden, connecting to his own choice, commented 'I've never seen this book before, have you?'. 'Yeah, I've took it home before' Alex replied, and Jawhara exclaimed 'I've got one at home'. Moments later, closing his own book Aiden, almost to himself, noted 'That's a nice book, I liked that'. 'What's it about?' Alex quickly questioned, and Aiden, showing him the cover, explained 'It's about a boy and a girl who have the right mum, but the wrong dad, cos the dad's a grizzly bear'. 'Oh yeahhhh, cos we read it when it was all muddy and that' Alex replied and Aiden agreed, 'Yeah and at the end he finds his real dad'. The two boys, who had edged even closer, looked at each other in silent agreement. Alex, seizing this opportunity asked, 'Do you want to read *My Monster Smells Gross*, or *Oi Frog?*'. They both turned to the bookshelf to look for a text and after a few seconds excitedly chorused 'Oh the Troll!'. 'I love that book' Alex exclaimed, 'Me too' Aiden agreed, and they settled down with it, sitting close together and smiling in anticipation. (Video 6)

The additional attempts at beginning book talk, from both Jawhara and Alex, focused on narrating their choices '*I'm going to see The Koala Who Could ...*' and asking questions to the group as a whole '*Do you know what I'm going to choose now ... ?*'. Aiden also narrated his own thoughts about 'My Dad is a Grizzly Bear' as a '*nice book*'. Similarly, Jawhara and Alex offered 'think alouds' on the theme of completing or returning to a text, also potentially in the hope that others might respond. Interestingly, not all their utterances were directed specifically, or even obviously said to the group, this may indicate that solo IBT is also of value, offering a space to develop opinions, reflections and reminiscences on texts. However, in this instance, their verbalised thoughts and behaviours appear to have been shared with the intention of engaging the others, although this was not successful for Jawhara who was largely sidelined by the boys and lost her space next to Aiden.

The group dynamics here, and in the data set as a whole, tend to indicate that paired IBT may be optimal at this age, indeed the number of paired episodes far outweighed the other configurations in the data. Also, that open questions may be helpful, especially when the book is not known to all involved. The most successful linguistic overture for IBT in this extract is Alex's direct question '*What's it about?*' which he asked in response to Aiden's think aloud about 'My Dad is a Grizzly Bear'. This question elicited a much fuller response than any previous attempts, probably because there was shared understanding of what sort of reply is required, and Aiden had the knowledge and experience to provide it. Once this effective interaction was established and Alex showed genuine interest in what Aiden had to say, they seemed to have enough rapport to forge their way forwards and select a text to share together.

Sustaining relationships through IBT

The analysis also indicated that for many children in the study, reading for pleasure together and sharing relaxed conversations about self-chosen texts afforded opportunities to support their existing relationships with peers. The following vignette offers one such example. Best friends Mia and Aabida were in the book corner, a place their teacher reported that they visit almost daily during

free-choice time. Their teacher, observing them sharing 'We're Going to Find a Monster', set up an iPad to film and moved away. The book, gifted to all the Reception children the term before, had been read aloud to the class several times.

The girls sitting very close together on the floor, each held the edges of the book which was lying across their laps. Mia stretched her arm across and gestured to Aabida to turn the page. Silently, they looked at the double page spread together, then Aabida observed, 'Look out a whale', 'Amaazing, it's fun' Mia observed. However, when her friend went to turn the page again, Mia gently pushed it back down and asked, 'Where do you think they are?' Thoughtfully, Aabida replied 'They are in ... [pause] Antarctica'. With implicit permission to proceed, she turned the page, and both girls looked intently at the visuals before Aabida pointed and read, 'Look out a fearsome wolf' and added 'Charlie, sings a soft song to soothe it' Whilst these are not the exact words of the text, they are closely aligned with the story, indicating she was cognisant of the narrative.

At the next page turn, Aabida again took the role of the storyteller, 'Watch out ... a tiger', prompting Mia to lean down nearer to the text and assert '*I'm* reading it' before turning the page herself. Aabida, looking up at her friend grinned broadly and appeared to pause in her own reading to give Mia space. Later, when Mia observed 'Look. The lion will get you', Aabida gently corrected her and gestured to the visual, 'No, look the path into the cave'. Her correction may have been twofold, as the animal is a tiger not a lion, and the protagonists hide safely in the cave. Mia accepted this without comment and, pointing to its disappearing tail, remarked with emphasis 'Finally, it's gone'. Taking back the telling space, Aabida then traced the visuals of the different terrains with her finger and noted that the heroes went 'through the oceans, through the mountain, and through the jungle' to find the monster. The girls mostly continued in this highly companionable manner with Aabida offering retellings based on the visuals and voicing familiar phrases, and both girls pointing and looking closely together. As they reached the denouement, Mia pointed animatedly to the two protagonists and remarked on the action in the closing pages. When Aabida's retelling brought the story to a close, the girls were still huddled together, bent closely over the book with their arms around it. (Video 9)

From the outset, both girls held the pages on their side of the book, and throughout, bar two brief moments of distraction on Mia's part, the text remained the object of their shared attention, interest and enjoyment. Their proximity, relaxed manner and focussed looking and pointing indicate that for most of the vignette, they were both literally and metaphorically on the same page. It appeared that their prior knowledge and pleasure in this shared textual possession, created an affinity or kinship space which served to support their sustained engagement across this relatively lengthy self-initiated reading event which lasted well over three minutes. Even when Mia sought to assert control as the main reader, '*I'm* reading it', her claiming of the space was treated with affectionate recognition by her friend. The brief interlude about the tiger offers evidence of joint meaning construction; they built on each other's words, with Aabida gently responding to Mia's warning, 'Look. The lion will get you' by pointing to the cave's safety and explaining 'No, look the path into the cave' before Mia, accepting the correction, rounded this interchange off with the relieved observation, 'Finally its gone'.

Aabida's retelling throughout made good use of the visuals and her voice rose and fell, and she emphasised key phrases, perhaps in imitation of her teacher's voice in previous readings. Alongside Mia's teacher-like question 'Where do you think this is?', Aabida's inflection and intonation are likely to have supported their understanding of the text. In this instance Aabida paused, pondered and then, drawing on the icebergs depicted on the page, suggested 'Antarctica'. In fact, she knew the author was referencing a snow globe in the heroes' home. Throughout, the girls demonstrated their knowledge of the playful and imaginative nature of the text, for instance the fearsome tiger is in fact the household cat and the 'monster' is the protagonists' brother in a dinosaur onesie! Thus, in this vignette, Aabida and Mia are sharing more than the actual narrative, they are cognisant and complicit in creating the dual narrative.

In their classroom, as in all of those in this study, teacher notes and researcher observation of routines revealed that taking time to re-read and share texts volitionally is valued and supported within their reading curriculum. Through their regular engagement in IBT, Aabida and Mia can nurture and sustain something that is meaningful to them in their social worlds – their friendship. They appear to use the opportunity that IBT offers to assert and support their relational commitment to each other. Arguably, these enjoyable experiences are also strengthening their dispositions towards reading.

Opportunities for repositioning reader identities

For some children, school and classroom contexts can be disempowering spaces where their agency, along with the identities as readers may be constrained (Hall 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018). However, the data analysis in the four classrooms observed, illustrate the potential for informal interactions around books to mediate children's sense of agency and empowerment, creating more favourable conditions to construct positive reader identities. The following vignette describes an episode with Noah, a Y2 child who was described by his teacher as having some difficulties with social interactions.

After the lunch break, Noah dashed into the classroom to select a non-fiction book about the Queen's Jubilee for reading time. It was a particularly popular text in the class that had been gifted to each child the previous year.

Noah sat alone on the carpet looking at the book, quietly talking or singing to himself. A classmate arrived clutching another book, and despite there being a great deal of space, sat right next to Noah. He put his own book down and began interacting with Noah and the 'Queen's Jubilee' book. Whilst the dialogue was inaudible, Noah responded verbally, making eye contact and pointing to illustrations until his peer moved on.

After a brief exchange between Noah and the researcher, a small group of girls gathered near him, one asked, 'Can I have that after?', and another leant forward saying, 'Noah, can I show you something,' pointing to a 'Harry Potter' image. Noah obliged but kept hold of the book.

Oliver arrived and sat close to Noah and slid the Jubilee book towards him. Calmly, however, Noah slid the book back to the middle and, appearing to relax, leant in toward Oliver. Together they turned pages until settling on a page with the royal family tree. Dialogue spontaneously flowed, during which Noah commented in an authoritative tone, 'No she wasn't born in 1922, my mum was born in the 80s'. The discussion continued and Noah asserted, 'No you're younger than her, because she was born in 2012'. After a brief interruption, Noah clarified his and Oliver's year of birth and Oliver pointing to the top of the family tree asked, 'Which one is the oldest?'. Noah responded, 'I would say him', in an authoritative tone, whilst indicating to whom he was referring. (Video 22)

Noah, the teacher reported, was often on the periphery of classroom interactions, indeed, early in this episode, he seemed quite content sitting alone with this prized book. However, through his possession of the book he became a magnet for other children. His familiarity with the text and his well-developed understanding of dates and time facilitated his social interactions, this was a subject on which he could speak with confidence and authority.

As the episode progressed, observations of Noah's body language and vocal intonation suggested increasing confidence, and his social interactions appeared effortless in terms of leading the IBT, sharing his understanding of the text and responding with equal ease to clarify points, or to offer additional information to Oliver. Oliver did not challenge his assertions, possibly seeing Noah as more informed. Whilst Noah may not have set out to be the centre of attention, he appeared to 'grow into' the space, content to express himself and share his knowledge and understanding. In the final exchange, there was a noticeable change in Noah's communication, he used a louder and more assured tone of voice and Oliver seeking his opinion, deferred to his points. It is possible to argue that, in this episode, IBT not only represented an opportunity for Noah to potentially feel agentive and empowered, but also offered him a space to reposition himself as a reader, and for his peers to position him – and see him – differently-particularly since, as his teacher suggested, he often lacked confidence and was on the periphery of social interaction. Even if Noah's own reader identity was more positive than his teacher imagined, through his observed responses, it is conceivable that the IBT interaction reinforced any positive perceptions he might have had about reading.

Another example of a child potentially repositioning themselves through informal book-based interaction is described in the following extract of adult-child IBT. Nafisa, a Reception child described by her teacher (Adilah) as being in the early stages of learning English, requested that her teacher read 'Handa's Surprise' to her. The book had been shared with the class and

had been on the classroom bookshelf for months. Throughout this interchange, her teacher gave her undivided attention to Nafisa, whom she ensured controlled the page turning and led the interaction.

Nafisa:	pointed to an illustration and made eye contact with Adilah.
Adilah:	responded saying, 'Guava'.
Nafisa:	repeated 'Guava'.
Adilah:	'It's a yummy fruit'.
Nafisa:	scanned the illustrations and commented, 'and this one, pineapple'.
Adilah:	'You know the pineapple, yes'.
Nafisa:	quickly added, 'Pineapple is sharp, don't touch', whilst pointing to her hand and making eye contact with Adilah.
Nafisa:	again, pointed to the illustration, 'and this one?', asking Adilah to name the fruit.
Adilah:	'That one's a passion fruit'.
Nafisa:	'I want to eat that'.
Adilah 'Yes, maybe we'll try some'.	
Nafisa:	put her finger to the side of her lip, as if thinking. Then looked at Adilah, 'Ummm, we need to cut it up'.
Nafisa:	pointed to another illustration, looking at Adilah.
Adilah:	'That's a tangerine'.
Nafisa:	'A tangerine'.
Adilah:	'It's like an orange but smaller'.
Nafisa:	'Ahh, this one is a baby one', smiling and looking at Adilah.

(Video 10)

Several elements played potent roles in mediating this interaction. Firstly, the book's clear and vibrant illustrations enabled Nafisa to point to the fruit or the element in discussion. This reduced the 'verbal load' and need for specific vocabulary and allowed the dialogue to flow. Secondly, Nafisa was very familiar with the text, enabling her to draw on previous experiences to progress the interaction and express herself. Thirdly, the interaction was enriched by Adilah's detailed knowledge of Nafisa as a reader, research evidence suggests this is crucial in supporting readers (Allen-Lyall and Davis 2020; Cremin et al. 2014; Reedy and De Carvalho 2021). Lastly, Adilah's pedagogical approach meant her responses both fulfilled Nafisa's requests for vocabulary, whilst also valuing and affirming her comments, gestures and suggestions. Nafisa's contributions were acknowledged, reciprocated, and taken seriously, creating a pedagogical space in which she could flourish.

This episode of IBT was an opportunity for Nafisa to develop her English language and practice new vocabulary, as well as develop her knowledge of print and wider general knowledge. However, it was also an opportunity for her to be communicative and listened to, to express her ideas, her personality, and her experience. In more teacher-directed book talk activities, such opportunities may not have been available to Nafisa. There is a danger that the capabilities of children in the early stages of learning English are defined by their 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) status and may be viewed as 'not achieving' the expected standard in language or literacy attainment. Yet, in this episode, Nafisa was able to lead the interaction, expand on the verbal exchanges, express her emerging thoughts, and position herself as competent and capable.

These examples suggest the potential of IBT to disrupt or challenge children's perceived positions and identities, particularly for those young people who are less assured socially. Without any formal learning requirements, assessment or pressures to perform, it is possible to argue that IBT enabled Noah and Nafisa to experience being listened to, being experts and more. Through self-initiated relaxed interactions around texts, they appeared to enact positive, agentic reader identities.

Discussion

Using known texts that had previously been read to them in whole-class activities, the children in this study used language and gestures to share familiar book-connected content with those around them. They showed sensitivity to language, selecting and playing with memorable parts of texts and using shared textual language as a way of expressing themselves. These self-initiated informal interactions offered the children rich and nuanced opportunities, both socially and personally.

The data indicate that the young people deployed common linguistic refrains to refer to and reminisce about titles, authors and humorous illustrations, seemingly leveraging shared prior experiences to respond to texts, broker interactions and build shared understanding with their peers. This often occurred between children who did not habitually interact at school. Accordingly, the young people were able to build relationships through IBT. In addition, children used the physical sharing of books as well as proximity to each other to affirm connections with their friends. These interactions involved the appropriating of teacherly phrases and gentle tussles over control related to reading and talking about texts. However, instead of these experimentations in power dynamics reflecting or leading to interactional tensions, they appeared to be indicative of children's comfort with one another, allowing them to remain on the same page literally and metaphorically. Through the experience of IBT, children were thus able to strengthen and underscore their relationships with one another.

There were also moments in which children handled and talked about books in ways that positioned them as competent readers, as knowledgeable in some way, or as experts on a subject. They frequently used linguistic and gestural references to books and their contents, (written and visual), to assert themselves, indicating their knowledge of specific texts. In their interactions, children sometimes projected a particular image, or version of themselves and in their teachers' views, these indicated that they were beginning to construct and express new identities through IBT, repositioning themselves subtly in the social environment of school. In these ways, IBT afforded the expression of agency, self-efficacy and at some moments even a sense of empowerment.

Considering the influences on IBT, the extracts shared and the wider data analysis highlight the significance of the practices that facilitate this with young children in school. The episodes involved little or no direct adult scaffolding; they were predominantly child-led. While the teachers modelled sharing their thoughts about texts, they also encouraged and valued children's authentic responses, empowering them to feel they had something to say. Additionally, teachers created reading cultures that were typified by informality and sociality. They also facilitated IBT by developing children's shared understanding of particular books through regularly reading them aloud, and by providing relaxed opportunities for uninterrupted time to interact with peers of the children's choosing about self-selected texts across the school day.

Well known, loved and shared books were at the heart of the documented episodes of IBT. Through repeated re-readings, often in response to requests, children in these classrooms had become familiar with several 'books in common', which earlier research (Coakley-Fields 2019; Cremin 2023) and the current study, indicates are particularly potent in nurturing IBT. Furthermore, its occurrence was facilitated by the availability of these familiar books, which existed in multiple copies in some classrooms. Most of the texts with which the children chose to engage, were highly illustrated and visually appealing. Often humorous, many included rhythmic refrains and repetitive memorable language. Arguably, the children's shared knowledge and familiarity created a baseline from which connections to life experiences could be made, this, Wilson and Rennie (2019) assert, can deepen young people's book-related conversations.

The IBT interactions observed were also underpinned by the teachers' understanding of book talk as spontaneous and extra-textual, thus laying the foundations for children to lead and construct the conversations with one another. All the IBT opportunities that were seized, happened outside formal lessons, when the young people were allowed to choose to read and decide where to sit and with whom. This afforded them agency, enabling them to exert a sense of ownership over their reading

and engage autonomously and with others in ways they appeared to find of value. Agency, research suggests, is not only critical to developing reading for pleasure, but also supports children's growing sense of self-efficacy and identity (Adelson et al. 2019).

Conclusion

Previous text talk research has primarily focused on adult-led book talk and its contribution to the development of measurable skills and competencies, such as children's vocabulary, language and comprehension. In contrast, this paper offers a novel examination of naturally occurring book-related interactions which are child-led, free flowing and characteristically informal. It reveals new insights about IBT that emerges spontaneously between children or between teachers and children and, through digging beneath the surface, demonstrates the subtle, layered affordances of such relaxed non-assessed interactions around self-chosen texts. The study shows that IBT can afford meaningful opportunities for children to build and sustain their social relationships, creating a higher degree of social cohesion. Additionally, IBT enables children to be agentive and to take ownership of their reading experiences, potentially enabling them to reposition themselves as knowledgeable readers and enact new reader identities.

Young people's perceptions of themselves as readers are always in flux, influenced by the environment, the text, their assurance and experiences of reading, and the identity positions that are made available to them by adults and peers, as well as those they adopt in any given context. The data indicate that through these child-initiated interactions, the young people were enabled to develop positive dispositions towards reading, even when they were less than assured academically, socially, or lacked confidence in speaking English. IBT has the potential to be an affective, positive experience for all children. For those who have low self-efficacy as readers, disenfranchised perhaps by an overemphasis on phonics (Wyse and Bradbury 2022), or by a perceived lack of progress in reading comprehension, opportunities to engage in IBT could be particularly powerful. Arguably, it could have a role to play in reversing the worrying decline in children's reading for pleasure internationally (Mullis et al. 2023).

Nonetheless, IBT could remain unnoticed in the classroom. Practitioners may need help to recognise the nature and power of child-led IBT for reading for pleasure and for children's social and personal growth. If the potential of IBT is to be realised, practitioners may also need support to develop relaxed enabling environments and reading cultures in which it can flourish. Additionally, more research is needed to discern the nature and variety of this informal discourse at different ages, the power dynamics and optimal configuration in terms of size, as well as the shaping influence of particular kinds of texts. Informal book talk deserves increased attention, both by reading researchers and the education profession.

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Appendix

Extract from video ranking exercise						
	Salience of text	Quality of audio-visual	Potential to respond to RQs	Quality of contextualising notes	Total	Selected (yes/no)
Video 1	5	3	4	4	16	Yes
Video 2	3	1	3	3	10	No
Video 3	5	4	4	4	17	Yes
Video 4	4	4	4	4	16	No