Setting up a Chatterbooks reading group in your school

What is Chatterbooks?

Chatterbooks is a nationally-coordinated programme of reading groups run traditionally through public libraries but now also being offered to schools. The aim of Chatterbooks, which is managed by the Reading Agency, is to develop children’s love and enjoyment of reading.

There are about 550 Chatterbooks groups across the UK, with some 8,500 children aged four to 12 years taking part. Around two thirds of those who join Chatterbooks are girls. There are usually 15 to 20 children in each reading group and they meet weekly, fortnightly or monthly.

Most groups are organised by public libraries but some are also now starting in schools, often in partnership with their local library or school library service.

A pilot in 2009 showed that the Chatterbooks groups in schools could take many different shapes and forms: some schools targeted children who would benefit from access to a reading group - reluctant readers as well as talented and gifted children; some children demanded a reading group; some created family groups. Some secondary schools have begun to run Chatterbooks groups too, for Year 6 pupils as a feeder activity.

Reading groups provide time and space for reading with children and encouraging children to read for pleasure and talk about books. Children can benefit in many different ways from a reading group that encourages creative imagination, drama, writing, art, speaking and listening skills, as well, of course, as reading and writing.

Why Chatterbooks?

So why make your reading group a Chatterbooks reading group? Chatterbooks’ offer to schools includes regular emailings, a training manual, activity ideas and a termly newsletter. Optional resources include training for staff who are setting up reading groups, Chatterbooks packs (£6.50 each) and a website, www.Chatterbooks.org.uk.

During a recent training day provided by Chatterbooks for school staff who planned to set up their own Chatterbooks groups, we explored a range of issues beginning with the reasons for setting up a reading group, how to make it a success, and how to evaluate that success.
Reading Agency consultant Tricia Kings said that schools have many different reasons for setting up reading groups. Among the reasons within our group included developing gifted and talented children, giving a boost to children who lack confidence in reading, helping children become aware of the different genres available, and encouraging children to think about what they like and be more confident in their opinions.

**Setting up your Chatterbooks group**

Public library or school library services (SLS) can help you create a Chatterbooks reading group in your school. Herts School Library Service, for example, offers ideas and advice for running groups in schools, from booklists to events and activities, as well as book boxes for reading groups.

There are a number of practical issues in running a reading group, beginning with the venue (library? classroom? local library?) and when the group meets, not to mention who will run it.

Once the reading group is established, it’s important that children see it as ‘their’ group, and that they help decide the activities, perhaps taking turns to lead it. Some children may not want to talk much when the group begins but will slowly develop their confidence in sharing their opinions.

Chatterbooks can help with a range of suggested activities for reading groups. Among those we discussed were the following:

- Find out what your children are choosing to read for pleasure – create a ‘hot reads’ wall where they can list their favourite fiction as well as non fiction, comics, magazines, websites etc.
- Get alternative endings for a story; think about a story, and change it. Perhaps the group can write their own book based on the idea of a story they have read.
- Ask children to bring their favourite books or stories to the group, having practised reading a page or paragraph, and persuade the others in the group to read it

**Planning and evaluation**

It may be useful to track the success of your reading group. For example, what are your priorities or intended outcomes? (which pupils you want to get involved, and why?), what are your indicators of success, how will you prove your success, and how will Chatterbooks activities help you achieve them?

Possible outcomes could include: pupils enjoying reading more than they did – perhaps their reading skills have improved or they are more confident in talking about books, or reading more, or more confident in choosing books? Feedback about a child’s progress may come from library staff, teachers, or parents and carers.

These outcomes could be used to justify requests for additional resources for the reading group – or perhaps as the reason for setting up new Chatterbooks groups.

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