



School-based reading group in Stockton

This **Chatterbooks** group, part of a national network of reading groups for children, coordinated by The Reading Agency and funded by Orange, has been running in a single primary school for four years. The monthly after-school sessions with Year 6 pupils have resulted in a strong working relationship between the community librarian and the school and ensured that the children are keen readers when they arrive at secondary school.

"Each session has inspired the children to develop a love and understanding of books."
Year 5-6 teacher, Thornaby C of E primary school

The effects

This **Chatterbooks** group was a natural development from a primary school's existing connection with its neighbouring library and its relationship with the community librarian. While the Chatterbooks meetings were held in school, the children were already familiar with the library and their parents visited the library for a briefing. The monthly after-school Chatterbooks sessions, run jointly by the community librarian and the children's teacher, are the fruit of much energy and creativity and have expanded to include trips and sessions handling artefacts and animals.

The experience

Shelagh Freeman, Community Librarian, Stockton Library Service

I got to know Thornaby Church of England primary school, 10 minutes from Thornaby Central Library, through the Stockton Children's Book of the Year project. Teachers were already bringing children to the library when we started the after-school Chatterbooks group. We decided to target Year 6 children and recruit more members when they moved on to secondary school. Just before the summer holidays, the Year 5 teacher selected 11 children with the same reading age whom she felt would benefit from Chatterbooks. We're now in our fourth year of 11 sessions a year.

Themes for sessions have included 'girls' books versus 'boys' books (the girls read Anthony Horowitz and the boys got Jacqueline Wilson), "Spooky reads" using the tBk booklist from Peters Library Service, an Internet session that included printing out bookplates and graphic novels and Graffix editions versus text-based books. Other books we have enjoyed include **Redeye** by Susan Gates, **Doomspell** by Cliff McNish and **Hoot** by Carl Hiassen. Some sessions have resulted from a partnership with Museums on the Move, linking historical artefacts with particular texts, and we have organised animal handling sessions.

It seemed easier to hold the meetings in school than to have the children picked up by their parents and delivered to the library. Meeting in school has kept attendance high. I invited parents to a drop-in session at the library during the summer holidays. This was an opportunity to get parental permission for children to attend and reinforced the message that Chatterbooks was a joint school/library project.

Outcomes

Children are reading more widely and having fun reading. They are more confident about their reading and about shaping and expressing their opinions. The Year 6 members go on to secondary school with a strong reading habit and a positive connection with public libraries. The community librarian has built up a working relationship with teachers and her presence in school through Chatterbooks has led to her becoming a community governor.

"I would probably not have read some of the books, for example I Was a Rat [by Philip Pullman]." Member

"I like Chatterbooks because we do fun things like getting animals in, trips with the group and just having fun with each other." Member

"The children have loved the experience." Teacher

"Since Rebecca joined Chatterbooks she has been more willing to read books by authors she is not familiar with." Parent

"It has been like an extra lesson in literacy for my son but more fun which is a very good thing. Thank you for all the hard work in encouraging my daughter to read more." Parent

Resources and staffing

Two members of staff (in this case one teacher and one librarian) is ideal for running a Chatterbooks group. The 11 sessions a year last an hour and each requires half an hour planning and paperwork time for the librarian, plus extra time in the first year to prepare the project folder (which saved time later).

Cost to the Stockton Library Service over four years has been:

- £200 for bags/folders
- £130 for training
- £500 for stock (the library buys 10 copies of each reading title)
- Refreshments – an essential component of a successful Chatterbooks group – cost around £6 a session.

Partners

- Stockton Library Service
- Thornaby C of E primary school
- Northern Children's Book Festival for special Chatterbooks author events
- Durham Museums Service
- Durham Parks and Countryside Department

Challenges/lessons learnt

It can be hard to involve parents, especially if they perceive Chatterbooks as just another lesson, and to maintain links with the group members after they move on to secondary school. Books need to be chosen carefully to ensure a good discussion. The adults must read the books too: children are quick to pick up on this. A project folder set up in the first year (with templates of letters, session plans, booklists and notes of feedback) is useful to inform future sessions and as evidence of good practice.

The future

There are plans to form a teenage reading or focus group from the original members as they move into secondary school.