

# WhatsApp Book Chat

by Gethin Wallace



## Context and OU research inspiration and rationale

I am a primary school teacher at St Fagans Church in Wales Primary School in Cardiff, South Wales. It is a one-form entry school with 200 children on roll. I enjoy finding quality children's books to read at home and in school and I am keen to develop children's reading for pleasure. Since 2018, I have been part of an OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group run by Jo Bowers. I have enjoyed expanding my knowledge of children's literature by being part of the Twitter book community, exploring online book recommendations and listening to children's book podcasts.



I have been promoting reading for pleasure in my own classes for the past few years. Regular reading aloud, fostering informal book chat and sharing a wide range of books have been successful ways of generating excitement around reading and encouraging children and their parents to seek out and share new reading matter. Seeing the benefits of developing a reading community within my class has encouraged me to want to develop a reading community across the whole school.

The Teachers as Readers research (TaRs) undertaken by Cremin et al. (2014) identifies the crucial importance of teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts. This is one of the underpinning requirements in fostering children's reading for pleasure and developing reading communities.

Conversations with fellow teachers revealed that their book choices often relied on well-known authors (authors they may have read as a child, or early on in their careers) such as Roald Dahl, Michael Morpurgo and Julia Donaldson. Though some of those who have younger children were more familiar with more recently published children's books, others expressed a lack of confidence in their knowledge of less well-known authors and contemporary books. Cremin et al. in *Building Communities of Engaged Readers* (2014) make the point that '*to motivate young readers and nurture the development of positive reader identities, a breadth of knowledge of good quality children's literature is essential.*' They go on further to state that by not keeping abreast of children's

literature, 'It raises the question of whether teachers possess sufficient knowledge to foster reading for pleasure, and whether they find it difficult to prioritise children's engagement and response as readers in school.'

In March 2020, the global Coronavirus pandemic closed our school to all but vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers. Working from home, my colleagues and I were less likely to engage in casual conversation about books and reading. This was one way in which I was encouraging colleagues to try out new authors and texts. A WhatsApp group had been set up for staff, initially to act as an easy way to share news and information in the uncertain and quickly-changing environment of the new pandemic. It soon became more of a place to chat, share concerns and maintain the close community we enjoy in school and as such was clearly and source of maintaining staff well-being. I realised that it was also a platform my colleagues were happy to engage with and wondered if it offered an opportunity to develop their knowledge of children's books, nurture their enjoyment of reading and begin to build a whole school reading community.

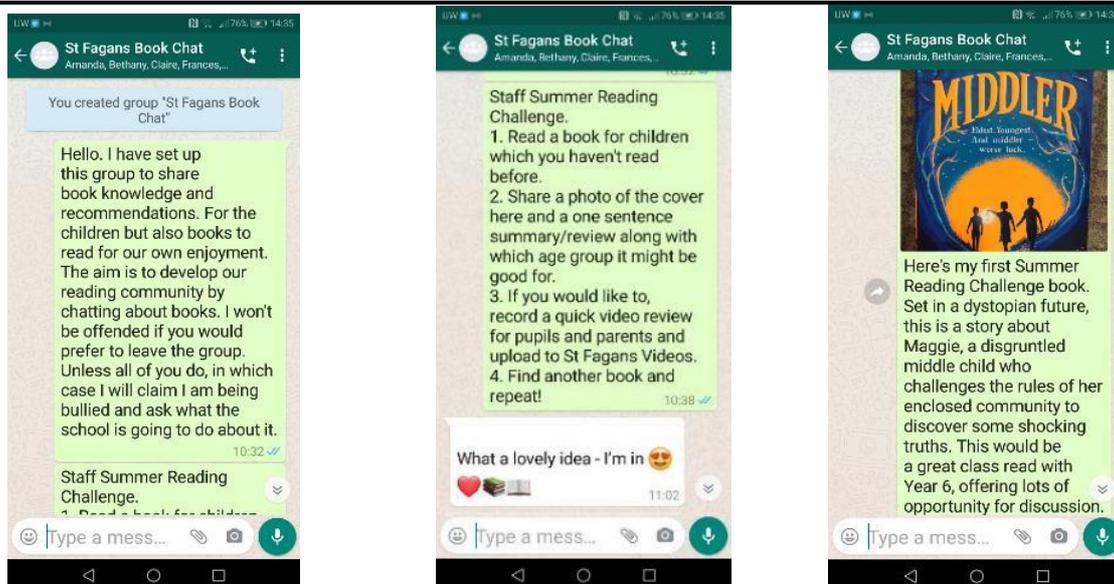
## Aims

For teachers to:

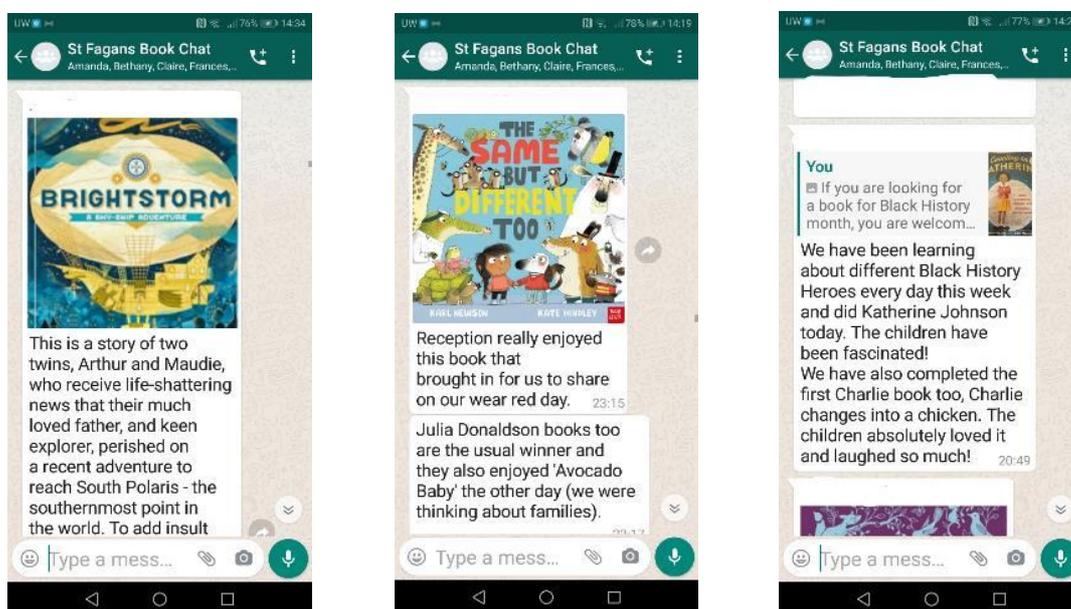
- increase their own knowledge of children's literature
- reconnect with and enjoy children's books
- share and use creatively their new book knowledge within their classrooms and school
- collaborate in developing a whole school reading community.

## Outline

- I set up a WhatsApp group called 'St Fagans Book Chat' and added the teachers from the school to the group. Not wanting to add to workload and sensitive to my colleagues' busy home lives, I made it clear that I was happy for them to leave the group if they did not want to participate. The response from my colleagues was very positive. I also posted in the school staff WhatsApp group, inviting other staff to join.
- Mirroring the [Teachers' Reading Challenge](#) set up by The Reading Agency in summer 2020, I invited staff to find a children's book new to them, read it and share a picture of the cover and their thoughts about the book in the group. I kicked things off with an example. Group members left positive comments expressing their interest.

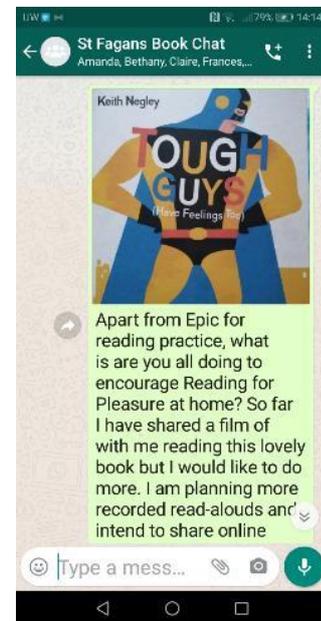
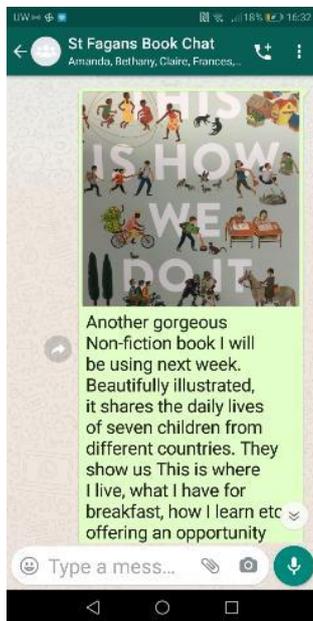


- I shared book recommendation lists on websites like <https://www.thereaderteacher.com/> and <https://librarygirlandbookboy.com/> podcasts, such as [In the Reading Corner](#) and events like the Reading is Magic festival
- Staff began to post about books they had read and leave comments discussing posts.
- I shared links to Twitter, blogs, podcasts and websites which had found interesting or relevant, to generate enthusiasm and show what the online book community offers. Others shared things they had seen too.



- Discussion wasn't confined to children's books. I invited members to share adult books they were reading for pleasure. This developed a sense of a reading community beyond 'work'.
- When we returned to school in June, group discussion continued, complimented by 'live', socially distanced informal book chat in school.
- To maintain momentum, I posted every two or three weeks to invite discussion with questions such as:

- What have you been reading to your class?
  - What books are the most popular in your class library?
  - What adult books are you reading at the moment?
- I included questions which responded to seasonal events like Non-Fiction November and Christmas books.



## Impact

The impact of setting up a school WhatsApp Book Chat group has been positive in a number of ways.

During the global pandemic, it has generated a sense of togetherness around books, which the teachers agreed has had a positive effect on their wellbeing. It has raised the profile of reading for pleasure in school and led to the teachers wanting to develop it further in their classrooms. The teachers said that it has widened their knowledge of children's literature and encouraged them to seek out new books to share with their classes. They agreed that the WhatsApp Book Chat group has developed a reading community amongst staff.

All the participants of our Whats App group have showed they are keen to build a whole school reading community and made some excellent suggestions how we might achieve this. In January 2021, two of my colleagues also joined the Cardiff OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group.

*"It has given me motivation to think about reading for pleasure in the classroom and to question what I can do and need to do to encourage more reading for pleasure in class."* Claire, Reception teacher

*"The Book Chat has made me remember the importance of enjoying books with the children with no pressure of follow-up work ... (and I have) felt more connected to colleagues during lockdown, discussing classroom practice but in a non-threatening, guilt-free way."* Meryl, Deputy Head and Year 4 teacher

*"(I have) gained knowledge of the different types of books that are out there for the children to enjoy and for us to use."* Owain, Year 6 Teacher

*"It has given me the green light to read at the end of each day in front of the class ... something I love to do as I think it is so important."* Huw, Year 5 Teacher

It has been wonderful to hear how my colleagues have shared their renewed enthusiasm for reading, used this knowledge in their classrooms and how this is having an impact on the children's reading habits.

*"(It has) renewed my love of reading and been a reminder that it is important to share my love of reading in class too! ... this year, the children have asked for us to read more and have also actively gone out and purchased the books we are reading so they can share them with their family members and read them at home."* Jen, Year 3 Teacher

*"For our topic on the Victorians, we read 'Son of the Circus', as recommended (on the WhatsApp Book Chat). We used the book as a focus for discussion during Black History month . . . We used the clear, detailed descriptions to draw Pablo and used the text for additional reading activities."*

Amanda, Year 4 Teacher

*"I have gained lots of ideas for books I can read to the children in class, including more new and modern books, which the children love!"* Bethany, Year 2 Teacher

## **Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice**

Starting a WhatsApp Book Chat group has been an excellent, informal way to kick start building a reading community in school. Pre-pandemic, it was difficult to find time as a staff to dedicate to talking about reading for pleasure. In lockdown, and when we returned to school in bubbles, informal book chat was harder still. WhatsApp has offered a platform for communication which feels sociable and invites informal chat. Importantly, it removes pressure and avoids a feeling that we are adding to our 'to-do' list. Participants can follow or join a conversation as they choose. This is seen as pleasurable.

I believe that the teachers engaged in this group are developing their knowledge of literature and this is impacting on young readers. Our WhatsApp Book Chat group has offered opportunities for colleagues to engage in informal book talk and this can now be mirrored with children in classes. It is encouraging my colleagues to become 'teachers who read and readers who teach'. With teaching staff engaged and enthused by the Book Chat group, we are in a good position to further embed reading for pleasure and grow our reading community to include other staff, children and the wider school community. We will continue to use our WhatsApp group to recommend books and share ideas, alongside other ways of promoting reading for pleasure in school.