

# Building Book Chat

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## Context

I am the Reading Lead at St Michael's Academy, a junior school in Somerset. The school serves one of the most deprived areas in Somerset with most pupils living on the East side of Yeovil which is one of 6 recognised areas of deprivation in Somerset. As a direct result of the many social barriers that our pupils encounter there has been a large focus on improving pupil's spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Many pupils enter the school with low self-esteem and little aspirations. We are continuously striving to improve that mindset and this is evident with all pupils across the school.



We all passionately believe that all children can achieve regardless of background. Our literacy results in both Reading and Writing have always fallen short of our Maths results and although many things have been put in place to improve our reading curriculum and instil a love of reading with exciting and engaging lessons, we now continue to encourage reading for pleasure inside and outside of school. The will to read influences the skill to read, and therefore it is our job to create a rich reading environment within school providing many opportunities to read within the school day with the aim of motivating children to want to pick up a book and read independently. Through teacher surveys and discussions, we know that although children are engaged in our reading lessons and enjoy discussions and developing reading skills in this time, they are less likely to read independently and often 'give up' and do not read a book in full. Many of our children do not experience a 'culture of reading' in their family home and therefore we must enable children to develop a love of reading. As a school we need to reconceptualise reading as social and interactive and aid the children with the skills to confidently talk about the books that they are reading.

## OU Research inspiration and rationale



more children with reading.

From the Open University's Teachers as Readers (TaRs) findings (Cremin et al., 2014), I have been inspired to introduce informal book talk, inside-text talk, and recommendations. To achieve this, it was firstly important to give more time on the school timetable for independent reading where this important book talk could take place. With SLT on board we created a protected space on the school timetable where D.E.A.R (Drop Everything and Read) time would happen each day without fail. As a whole school we participated in training so all staff were aware of the importance of reading for pleasure time and discussed how informal book chat and recommendations will engage

## Aims

- Building Book Chat – to enable children to become more confident discussing books that they have read in an informal and social way. We would like children to be happy to discuss a book they have read and share their thoughts with their peers.
- To increase motivation for children to read for pleasure and have the volition to pick up a book and read.
- Create a community of readers who are engaged, interested and keen to read a wider range texts and authors.

## Outline

Book Chat did not happen overnight and it will continually develop as we guide the children to become more articulate and confident talking about the books that they have read. Different strategies and classroom practices have been introduced to build this book chat and make it feel more natural in the classroom setting.



## D.E.A.R Time

As we introduced D.E.A.R time as an event that would happen on the timetable, we began to introduce Book Chat, ensuring that children knew that we welcomed conversation around what they are reading and their reading choices. To begin with this needed some prompting, showing that children could chat about a range of areas connected to reading. It didn't even need to be about a particular book but could

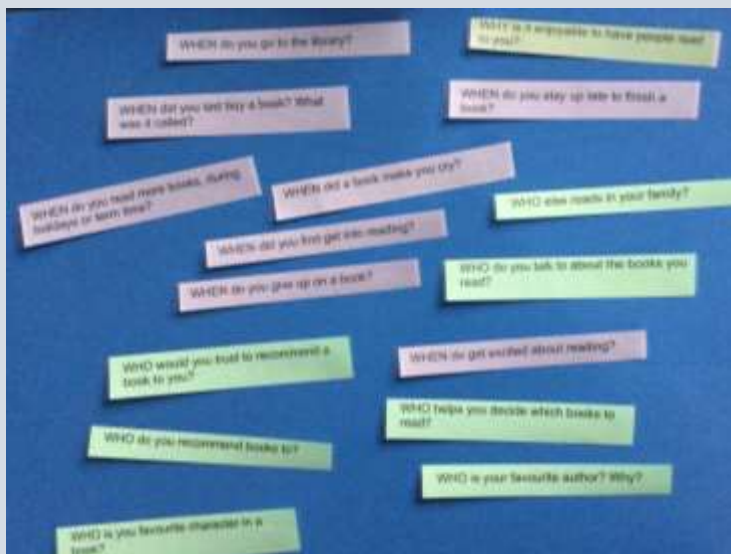


be about their reading habits. We provided each class with a range of questions and sentence stems to discuss their reading habits: where they liked to read, when they liked to read and favourite memories they had of books (this could include books in common and books we have read together as a class). The main purpose was to get them talking.

When children were ready to talk about books they had recently read we focused on Aiden Chambers' Tell Me questions. Among others these included:

- Was there anything you liked about this book?
- Was there anything you disliked?
- Was there anything that puzzled you?
- Were there any patterns – any connections – that you noticed?

If they wanted, children could pick up a question that they could discuss with a friend or a sentence stem. Over time these questions and sentence stems have become embedded and most children no longer make use of them: talk is more spontaneous and natural.



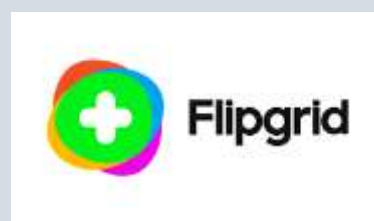
## Book Recommendations

We wanted to get away from children producing lengthy written book reviews - on some occasions we felt this put children off and lacked purpose. We want the children's recommendations to come through social interaction and chat with their friends. In many classes we have pushed writing short post-it notes on the front of a book when they have finished it, sometimes mentioning a friend that they think would like it. But most of the recommendations come through word of mouth and chat and buzz around the classroom.



During lockdown and home learning we looked at other ways that children would be able to continue to recommend books to their peers. We built in time to our Google Meets where children could share books they had been reading at home, although some children did not seem as keen to do this as they would have done in school. So, we then encouraged children to use other ways of recommending books to each other and leaving short

reviews through Flipgrid, Padlet and Jamboards – which kept up the book chat but just in a way that worked better when we were at home. Children do still add to these and now we can make use of sharing the video clips or written reviews with the class during our D.E.A.R sessions and the children really enjoy listening to their peers' recommendations.





## Book Clubs

Another way that we have encouraged Book Chat is through setting up Book Clubs. Within classes during D.E.A.R time, children work together and choose a set of books. Sometimes children will read a section or chapter or two together, but then continue to read the book independently (normally outside of school). It is up to the children to decide together how much they will read before they come back together to meet again. A different way of promoting conversation around a book, it encourages children to discuss their likes & how it made them feel rather than answering a set of comprehension questions. Children have been encouraged to work together as a group, respect each other's opinions, develop empathy, and articulate and share ideas within the group. Once again, this is about making this more of a social activity and encouraging children to read more to keep up with the group, and children can often be persuaded to read out of their comfort zone of book choices, opening them up to a wider range of authors.





## Barrington Stoke Books

We recently purchased a large number of Barrington Stoke books to boost our reading for pleasure stock. This publisher specialises in super readable/ accessible books with the aim of getting reluctant readers reading (although the books will appeal to all). They are particularly good for children who struggle to read due to dyslexia or visual stress. This is just a selection of the books we now have, and I love the fact that they use the best writers and illustrators to engage the children - Malorie Blackman, Tom Palmer, Anne Fine, Emma Carroll and Tony Bradman to name just a few - ensuring that all children will enjoy these books. These books tend to have a shorter word count and shorter chapters. They are fast-paced, full-of-action page turners, meaning some of our children that regularly struggle can get through a whole book, giving them a sense of achievement. As mentioned before, many of our children 'give up' before reading a whole book and these books encourage those children to read an entire novel.



## Picture Books & Core Values

As part of this RFP project, I also wanted to normalise the use of picture books across our school – to make it common practice for children to read and explore them across a KS2 setting and to expel the myth that picture books are only for younger children. I felt that in terms of informal book chat, the use of picture books would really build children's confidence in discussions around texts, so all children could happily discuss the texts and answer Aiden Chambers questions. To back this up I looked in detail at the work of Matt Tobin who has campaigned for the use of picture books for all ages.

'I have spent my entire teaching career championing the importance of picture-books in education: from Pre-School all the way up to Year 6 and beyond. I have worked hard at dissolving the myth that picture books are only for younger children' Matt Tobin.

There was also an opportunity to create a reading spine of picture books that linked to our school's Core Values - Positivity, Respect, Integrity, Determination and Expression. These books are becoming springboards for conversation: around the texts; around their enthusiasm for the book; around what they liked and disliked about it; and importantly around our Core Values, once again promoting empathy and emotional intelligence.



**Texts That Tempt**



Through fundraising events and charitable donations, we also felt that we needed to add to the range of books we had available for children to use in D.E.A.R time: exciting, engaging books that would be perfect to promote conversation and book chat; current, beautiful books that would give children those feelings of awe and wonder and make them want to discuss them with their friends; fiction and non-fiction books as well as poetry books and novels in verse, graphic novels, pop-up books and a range of magazines & newspapers. This range of new and exciting books are beginning to spark conversations between the children and entice them to read together and independently.





## Author Focus

With the aim of the project being to open children up to a wider range of texts, taking recommendations from friends, it was important to ensure children were aware of different authors. Through contacting authors, I have collated a range of unique messages that are appearing in our fortnightly Friday Flyer. Teachers share these messages with their classes and look at some of the books we have in our school library from that author. Parents also see a wider range of authors that they may not be aware of.

### Author Focus – Helen Rutter



"I read Helen Rutter's debut novel recently with my son, Jasper. I cannot recommend it enough. It is a wonderful, touching story about a boy Billy Kingston who has a stammer and how he copes with it in everyday life and when starting secondary school. We loved everything about the book: the wonderful characters, the emotions, the humour and especially the joke at the start of each chapter. A book that fits really well with Empathy Day and thinking how our actions may sometimes make others feel." Miss Clements

Here is a personal message from Helen to our school:

*Hello, you lovely lot at St Michael's Academy!*

I'm Helen Rutter and I'm the author of a book called 'The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh'. The story is all about a boy who has a stammer and how he copes with it in everyday life and when starting secondary school. I'm really excited to share this book with you. I hope you'll all enjoy it and that it will help you to understand how it feels to have a stammer. I'm also really excited to share this book with you. I hope you'll all enjoy it and that it will help you to understand how it feels to have a stammer.

Helen is currently writing her second book, we will let you know when this comes out.

### Author Focus – Tom Palmer



Knowing a wide range of authors is important and we ensure that children are exposed to a range of different authors through their reading lessons and the books that they have access to and can read in D.E.A.R time. By the time children leave St Michael's we hope that they can confidently name many different children's authors and books that they have enjoyed.

Tom Palmer writes lots of books for Barrington Stoke so they are fast paced and highly engaging. 'After the War' is a brilliant read which talks about events of the Holocaust and is perfect for our Year 6 children who are studying World War 2. Miss Clements highly recommends it.

A personal message from Tom Palmer:

*Hello to the children of St Michael's Academy*

I'm Tom Palmer and I'm the author of a book called 'After the War'. The story is all about a boy who has a stammer and how he copes with it in everyday life and when starting secondary school. I'm really excited to share this book with you. I hope you'll all enjoy it and that it will help you to understand how it feels to have a stammer.

Here are some other books by Tom that you may enjoy so look out for them in school.



### Author Focus – Katherine Rundell

Knowing a wide range of authors is really important and we ensure that children are exposed to a range of different authors through their reading lessons and the books that they have access to and can read in D.E.A.R time. By the time children leave St Michael's we hope that they can confidently name many different children's authors and books that they have enjoyed.



One of the Year 4 whole-class texts is 'The Explorer' and children have said super things about this book. I'm really excited to share a personal message to our school from the author herself.

*Hello St Michael's Academy!*

I'm thrilled that you're reading my books – I hope you find something in it to like. I really do believe that books are the best possible way to go on an adventure when you can't move around much: with every book, your world gets a little bigger, and you get a little tougher and bolder and funnier. Books broaden the world open!

(Also, for those reading 'The Explorer' – if you google 'Katherine Rundell's animals' there's a video you might like.)

Here are some other books by Katherine that you may enjoy so look out for them in school.



## Reading Festivals

As well as Author Focuses, we have also taken part in many virtual reading festivals this year, introducing children to a range of different authors, many of whom they did not know before. It has been wonderful to have authors on the big screen in our classroom talking about their books, their writing habits and different creative writing tips. Children have often enthusiastically spoken about wanting to read the different books discussed and we have ensured that we have had a copy of the book in school, so the children have access to it.



## Impact

In the brief time that we have embedded Book Chat and created a protected Reading for Pleasure time we have already begun to see a shift in attitudes towards reading.

## Children's views

I have enjoyed being able to talk about the books I like. It has meant other people have started to read them so we can talk about them together.

Sometimes it is hard to understand what a book is about, talking to somebody about it helps.

I like being able to read books with a friend, it makes it more fun!

Having to talk about my book makes me concentrate so much more during reading time.

I've loved being part of a book club. I felt so proud to read the whole of Northern Lights. It was complicated in parts, but talking with the group was brilliant as we helped each other understand different parts.

## Teacher's Views

It has been great to see the children reading to each other and really engaging in talking about the book, recommending them to each other and telling me facts they've learnt from non-fiction books. Even children who struggle to sit down and read a book independently have been really focused when they get to do it with a partner. They like the choice of where to sit and what to read and who with.

It has been wonderful to see children who have shown little enthusiasm with reading come up to me happily recommending a book with a big smile on their face 'Miss you'll love this book'

I can see how giving children a structured time to read and talk about a book has developed a love for reading. Children are looking at books that they wouldn't normally pick up otherwise

Creating book clubs in class took a little perseverance and guidance, but when some children got going, they worked so well. I could see children that would not have read at home getting through so much more independent reading so they could join in with the chat around the book with the group and not miss parts of the story.

I've been so happy to see children naturally making connections between the books they have read, enthusiastically comparing books and discussing how they found a certain part of a book or a character reminded them of another book.

## Accelerated Reader Targets

Although the year has been strange with home-learning and bubble closures we have already in one term seen a huge improvement with the number of children that have met their AR target. We believe this is showing that making use of DEAR time in school and building these conversations around books is motivating children to read much more on their own.

Spring 2	Summer 1
19.7 %	45.6 %

## Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

In a relatively short time, we have seen some really positive results in children's attitudes to reading for pleasure and more and more children are motivated to read and think positively about reading.

D.E.A.R time and Book Chat has supported children's volitional engagement as readers and both will continue to be pushed, monitored and celebrated across the school. In terms of going forward and as Covid restrictions are lifted the next steps will be to open these aspects out across the school, creating reading buddies across year groups and introducing more reading events such as Booknics to tempt parents into school and participate in reading activities with their children.