

Promoting reading for pleasure

Mélanie McGilloway says schools must demystify the library to help build a reading culture



“Around the school, an attractive and well-stocked library is often an indicator of effective support for pupils’ wider reading and information retrieval skills. In secondary schools, an enthusiastic librarian often raises the profile of reading and provides good opportunities for pupils to share their views on books and widen the range of authors and genres they experience.” (Ofsted)

In a time where the Government is much concerned about the level of literacy of children and young adults in Britain today and Ofsted is making the development of reading for pleasure one of its priorities, the school library is vital in helping academies make the cut. Promoting and inspiring a love of reading

“Literacy is an essential skill which begins when pupils start reading for pleasure.”

Several reports in the last year have emphasised that reading for pleasure is a contributing factor not only to the development of literacy but also to students’ educational achievement as a whole. A study carried out by Oxford University goes as far as saying that reading books is the only out-of-school activity for 16-year-olds that is linked to professional and managerial careers in later life.

School libraries should first work at developing a reading culture within the school, as this ultimately will impact literacy across the curriculum.

In Moving English Forward, Ofsted recommends that schools should now take steps towards improving the provision of reading for pleasure and one recommendation is to appoint a reading advocate who can keep up with developments in children’s literature. This is exactly what school librarians should be doing. The constraints of the teaching profession make it impossible for many teachers to do so, whereas librarians will see this as a core part of their service.

Provide reading material that students want to read

In order to develop and promote reading for pleasure, a distinction must be made between prescribed reading (*ie* set texts in English) and what students choose to read as leisure reading, whether it is post-apocalyptic fiction or humorous factual books. It is the librarian’s duty to act on the latter and consequently all types of reading should be encouraged. Whether youngsters enjoy fiction, non-fiction, comics or magazines, this is reading and goes towards developing literacy. It would be counter-productive to disallow certain types of text because they are deemed unworthy. A school librarian will have the required knowledge to recommend titles to students and allow progression in their reading.

Reading for enjoyment lessons

In Churchill Academy, all Year 7 and 8 students spend one English lesson a fortnight in our purpose-built reading room. The layout of our reading room invites an informal atmosphere; there are few tables and most of our seating is comfy chairs, arranged in small clusters around low tables, a lot of displays and even fairy lights. Students are actively encouraged to relax and feel at ease, which is for us the first step to seeing reading time as non-threatening. The first sign of this is often students taking their shoes off!

We offer a variety of activities around reading and books, such as looking at picture books or a Guinness World Records Fact Finder Challenge. The impact is that students see that we value different types of reading material, and encourage choice. We also work hard at demystifying the library as ‘boring’ and ‘quiet’ with activities such ‘LRC Supermarket Sweep’ where students are given a list of subjects or titles like a shopping list and they must locate the books and put them in their shopping basket. This encourages investigation of our book stock as well as revising library skills. And most of all, the students have fun.

Author visits

Listening to an author speak, or watch an illustrator draw, can be hugely inspiring for students, and often for many students it will be their only opportunity to meet a 'real-life' author. This can work particularly well with reluctant readers, as meeting an inspiring author can make them feel more connected to books. It is also a contributing factor in promoting writing. In Churchill Academy, we have an author visit at the beginning of Year 7 to talk to the students. This coincides with our 'literacy across the curriculum' week. This year we will be welcoming Liz Pichon. We also hosted a big event with comic-creating duo The Etherington Brothers this year, who talked to Year 8 students about creating stories. This again was part of a week of a week of activities focusing on literacy across the school.

Author visits can be expensive but they are worth the investment, and often authors will be happy to talk to a whole year group. However, inspiring students can be done in other ways such as holding a Skype event with an author, as we did with teen thriller author Andrew Taylor, who is based in Australia. There is a lot of potential in Skyping with authors, particularly if the author is happy to be involved prior to the actual event, possibly looking at some creative writing from some of the students, or judging a competition. Another alternative to be considered could be for students to interview and interact with authors over Twitter.

Hosting clubs in the library

Offering opportunities for social interaction between students goes a long way at making the library a welcoming place. In turn these positive experiences can result in more willingness to embrace the library's ethos.

Most school libraries offer successful book groups. In Churchill Academy, our book group shadows the Carnegie Medal, vote in the Red House Children's Book Awards, and even organise hot chocolate and cake sales in the library in aid of book charities. Our shadowing of the Carnegie Medal has also allowed us to create links with another local secondary school, as we take turns to host a Carnegie party each year when our two book groups get together to discuss and play games around the books, prior to the announcement of the winner. We are also planning to use Skype this year to link up to discuss the Red House Children's Book Awards.

But school libraries do not only offer book groups. Scrabble, chess, manga, craft, Warhammer: all these groups happen in school libraries across the country and help offer positive experiences of the library, as well as often supporting academies' after-hours provision.

Embracing new technologies

In embracing new technologies, some schools have opted to get rid of libraries in favour of solely electronic information. However



these decisions are often based on the wrong assumption that libraries are just about books. Libraries are the main information hub for the school; therefore it is fundamental that they keep up with developments in information technology. This is vital in research and information retrieval of course, but these new developments have a significant role to play in the promotion of reading as well. Some students will feel safer holding a Kindle or an iPad, than they will holding a book. Kindles, Nintendo DS, iPads and other tablet computers all are platforms which allow access to text. Our Kindle is used mainly during reading lessons, when students can borrow it to read. At the moment we download mainly free extracts from Amazon of books we have on our shelves. This works well as a promotion tool for our stock, but often students use it for a quick read or simply because they fancy the change of format. Using Book apps on iPads can be also particularly effective at making text more accessible and attractive to struggling readers.

Whether the technology facilitates leisure reading or research material, this will also go a long way at raising the profile of the library with students and accepting as a 'cool' place, and attenuating the stereotype of libraries, and therefore reading, being boring and old-fashioned. Developing collaborative work with cluster schools: Offering support, reinforcing links, easing transition.

School libraries have a vital role to play in the transition programme, though it is unfortunately often overlooked in the busy timetable of transition days. The promotion of reading is the perfect opportunity to strengthen those links between academy and cluster schools, with projects such as developing and housing a collection for those primary schools that do not

have appropriate libraries, as well as sharing a library team, with the academy librarian visiting cluster schools regularly to either help develop their libraries and/or work with the children. Creating such links will be crucial not only at easing students into secondary education but also at reinforcing the message that reading, and libraries, is an integral part of life in the academy. On 19th July, during a meeting organised by Booktrust, the National Literacy Trust and the Reading Agency on how schools can be supported to achieve Ofsted's new requirement for schools to develop strategies to promote reading for pleasure, Sam Lusardi from the Department of Education confirmed that the government would be fully supporting this development as well as the role of school libraries in achieving this. It is therefore imperative for academies to commit to the support and development of their libraries and library staff to allow them to fulfill their role in the development of the vital skill that is literacy.

Mélanie McGilloway is LRC Manager at Churchill Academy, in North Somerset. She also writes the children's book review blog Library Mice and is member of the executive committee of the national charity Federation of Children's Books, which won the Eleanor Farjeon Award this year, which recognises an outstanding contribution to the world of children's books. She was also part of the book selection panel this year for Booktrust's new bookgifting scheme aimed at year 7 students, Bookbuzz.



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