



Book Clubs in Schools: Why and How?

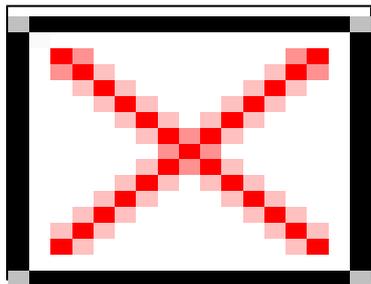
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[241](#) [2]

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Dr Rebecca Butler provides the answers

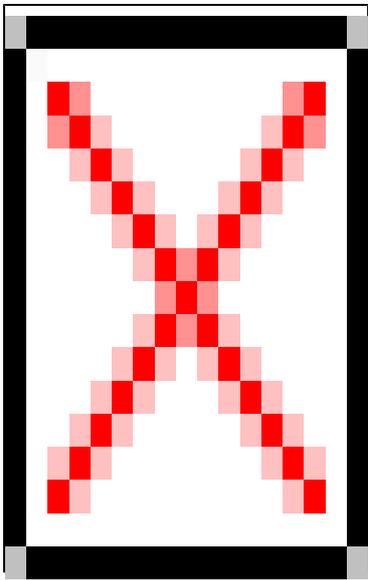


I see a book club in a school as an arrangement by which selected groups of pupils meet regularly over some weeks to read and discuss a whole book. Considerable effort is required on the part of school staff and management to set up and operate a book club, so the first question to be asked and answered has to be why bother? What are the advantages will come from running a book club? I've found the immediate benefit is an improvement not just in the reading skill of the pupils but in their ability to express their views on the text being read. I've been running book clubs in schools for over five years now and have found that they nearly always lead to an improvement in the SATS reading performance scores of the pupils involved.

You do however need to emphasise both to teaching staff and pupils that the club is not just designed to boost SATS results ? it has wider purposes. The examination of their own reading experience alongside that of other group members helps pupils deepen their understanding of literature and leads them to ask what an author was seeking to achieve. My own experience has been gained with pupils at the upper age end of the primary system and know how important it is that the pupils see reading not as a task imposed on them by the curriculum but as a source of enjoyment and fulfilment.

So much for why a book club is a good idea. How to go about forming one?

There are several requirements. The first is a quiet space, which need not be a library. It is essential (as far as possible) to avoid reading being interrupted by unplanned toing and froing of other pupils. The club will need eight or ten copies of a current text. Some schools will have funds to buy some or all of the necessary books; some schools will not. If your school has an active PTA they might help. Otherwise it will be necessary to approach publishers and bookshops. A well-directed email will very often produce an offer of free or discounted books. Publishers are often willing to help, after all, they have a vested interest in encouraging young readers.



In most schools some staff members will argue that the school curriculum is already overloaded without adding a further non-mandated element. I counter this argument in two ways: improved literacy is a core skill; a book club will provide benefits in other subjects such as history and geography. Even in scientific subjects the ability to get to the heart of a text is of undoubted benefit. It is also vital to get the support of senior management of the school for the book club. If the head, the deputy head, the librarian or the head of English backs the project, it will go ahead, even if only on a trial basis. And then the chances are that it will prove its worth. Such senior sponsors will have the power to create space for the book club in the timetable.

How are pupils to be recruited to the book club? The club leader and the staff members involved need to decide whether the club will benefit most the best qualified readers in their year (what I term the high flyers) or the lower ability readers. A mix of the two will not work for either group. The group should not exceed ten members. The selection of the members should be in the hands of the class teachers, who know which pupils can benefit most and contribute most. They will take into account the degree of support for reading each pupil gets at home. It may be tempting to consider holding book group meetings outside school hours, making it a voluntary extramural activity. I would urge you to resist this temptation. While it solves one problem (pressure on school hours) it risks branding the book club as an activity for which school staff have only tangential responsibility.

Book groups I have established have considered an astonishing range of topics such as gender roles in society, the use of prologues and epilogues and the use of morphine in the First World War and in present society. Our latest book was Hilary McKay's superb and award winning [The Skylarks War](#) [3], which proved a real favourite.

If you do decide to launch a book club I can promise you one thing: it will be an eventful, surprising and deeply fulfilling experience.

The author expresses her thanks, appreciation and affection to Saint Elizabeth's Primary School, Richmond, and Saint Richard Reynolds College, Twickenham and to Macmillan Children's Books for providing copies of [The Skylarks War](#) [3].

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Page Number:

18

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