

Chatterbooks in partnership with The British Council

Schools partnership profile: Staffordshire and Egypt

Chatterbooks is a UK-wide network of children's reading groups. It was started in 2001 by The Reading Agency, the independent charity working to inspire more people to read more. Chatterbooks encourages children aged between four and 12 to visit libraries with their families, read adventurously and become confident about talking about books. Currently over 8,500 children in the UK are part of 566 reading groups.

Through Chatterbooks, the British Council and The Reading Agency are now bringing young people together in international school partnerships, reading books for pleasure. A 2009-10 pilot phase has brokered partnerships between 14 schools in the UK and China, Egypt, Ghana and Pakistan, involving around 200 young people aged ten to twelve. The aim is to develop young people's awareness of different cultural perspectives on global issues and to open them up to books from other countries. The project also develops young people's oral and written skills and language awareness, as they communicate with their international peers by email, online and through the exchange of letters and project materials.

"I feel different because I'm working in the Chatterbooks project. I feel that I'm a reader and I will be a leader." Sara Ahmed, pupil, Mostafa Kamel Experimental School.

"I love Chatterbooks because we learn things I don't know." Sophie, pupil, Tower View Primary School.

In November 2007, higher level teaching assistant Barbara Moss from Tower View Primary School in Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire visited Mostafa Kamel Experimental School in Cairo, Egypt to develop a plan of shared activities as part of the British Council's Connecting Classrooms network, and the two schools began to develop a close working relationship. Then in August 2009, they were chosen to take part in the Chatterbooks pilot project.

"I thought the project's attraction was that it would encourage our students to read, and to enjoy reading, especially when they are reading in a different language," says Ghada Hassan, one of the Mostafa Kamel teaching staff closely involved with the project. The school has about 20 Year Six students, aged ten to 12 years, taking part.

The children in Cairo and Burton-on-Trent have simultaneously read Michael Morpurgo's *This Morning I Met A Whale*, and *What Planet Are You From?* By Lauren Child, which look at climate change issues. They have been reading and sharing their views on the books through regular email contact, through the British Council's E-languages website and the Superclubsplus website, which give them a secure forum in which to exchange ideas. They have also been sending each other photographs, writing and artwork inspired by their reading.

Reinforcing the climate theme, the Mostafa Kamel Chatterbooks group read some of their books in front of The Pyramids, whilst the Tower View group read some of theirs in the snow, swapping photographs of their sessions with each other.

“I liked the photos when they were reading near The Pyramids,” says Tower View Year Five pupil Ashleigh, aged nine years, of her Egyptian counterparts.

“We wanted to finish our climate change sessions in the best place to announce to the world about our project,” explains teacher Mohammed Kamal, who had been reading the books in weekly sessions with his Egyptian pupils. “Our motto was on this day that we are the voice to those who are voiceless, so I organised this trip.”

“It’s been very interesting to find that there has been very little difference in how pupils from both the two schools have responded to the books they have read, and that they mostly agree on the issues that they raise,” says Tricia Kings, Chatterbooks project manager for The Reading Agency.

“The children are certainly more interested in our Egyptian partner school thanks to this Chatterbooks project,” says Rachel Holford, a teacher at Tower View Primary School.

“I like seeing what they are doing in Egypt,” confirms her Year Six pupil Olivia, aged 11 years.

“We have no formal evidence of improvement but our impression is that the children have certainly grown in confidence with their reading and discussion about books,” continues Rachel Holford. “This has been witnessed in both the classroom and during our Chatterbooks sessions.”

“Yes, our participants are now good readers and they can present their own comments on their readings,” agrees her Egyptian counterpart Ghada Hassan. “They are now creating new drawings, songs, poems and stories on their own. And they have started thinking about other children in other countries; how they think and what their interests are.”

The project also supports professional development for teachers, building skills in using literature to support intercultural understanding, language learning and the development of reading skills. Staffordshire Library and Information Services have worked to support Tower View Primary School staff in the delivery of their Chatterbooks sessions. They have shared content which they have used for local library-based Chatterbooks groups, and helped to adapt these to the needs of the school-based group, visiting the school on a number of occasions, and also hosting visits to their local library. Indeed, Tower View held one of its Chatterbooks sessions in Burton town library and all the children who were not already library members joined that day.

“The enthusiasm of the children and the commitment and enthusiasm of the school staff has been fabulous. It’s been wonderful to see children committed to staying after school for a reading group. They love listening to the stories and discussing them,” says Jean Needham, children and young people’s team lead for the library service.

The two Chatterbooks groups have also taken part in two web chats with children’s authors – Helena Pielichaty and Tom Palmer – with over 200 responses to each author.

“I like Chatterbooks because we learn as well as have fun,” says Tower View Year Five pupil Chloe, aged 11 years.

“Chatterbooks is now set to be rolled out more widely, as the language and literature option for schools within the British Council’s Connecting Classrooms network,” says Sara Knowles, learners and networks manager for the British Council. “Through reading the project connects children and teachers globally and enables them to explore intercultural concerns and share ideas. Shared reading creates cultural relations magic.”

“My group of children said to me ‘we owe the people who work on this Chatterbooks project and we appreciate them,’” concludes Mohammed Kamal.

For more information about this project, please contact:

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Web links:

www.chatterbooks.org.uk

www.britishcouncil.org/learning-connecting-classrooms-chatterbooks.htm