

DOWNFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL

Reading Schools Case Study



Research Scotland

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BACKGROUND

This case study features Downfield primary school. It is based on a discussion with two teachers and online discussions with eight pupils.

Downfield primary school is a large primary school in Dundee with 400 pupils. The school supports a high proportion of pupils from the most disadvantaged parts of the city. The school is working towards Silver accreditation through the Reading Schools programme.

The school's Reading Schools activity is led by a P1 teacher, P6 teacher and supported by other staff in the school. They were initially interested in joining the programme to help raise attainment amongst P1-3 pupils at the school. After visiting another school, which was already accredited, they felt inspired to prioritise reading for pleasure as the primary aim.



First and foremost, it was about attainment, but through the seminars, we realised that it's about the enjoyment of reading."

Class teacher



READING INITIATIVES

The school already engaged in some activities that promoted reading for pleasure, such as taking part in the First Minister's Reading Challenge and celebrating World Book Day. Many of the initiatives are designed to ensure that all pupils are able to engage, without the barrier of cost.



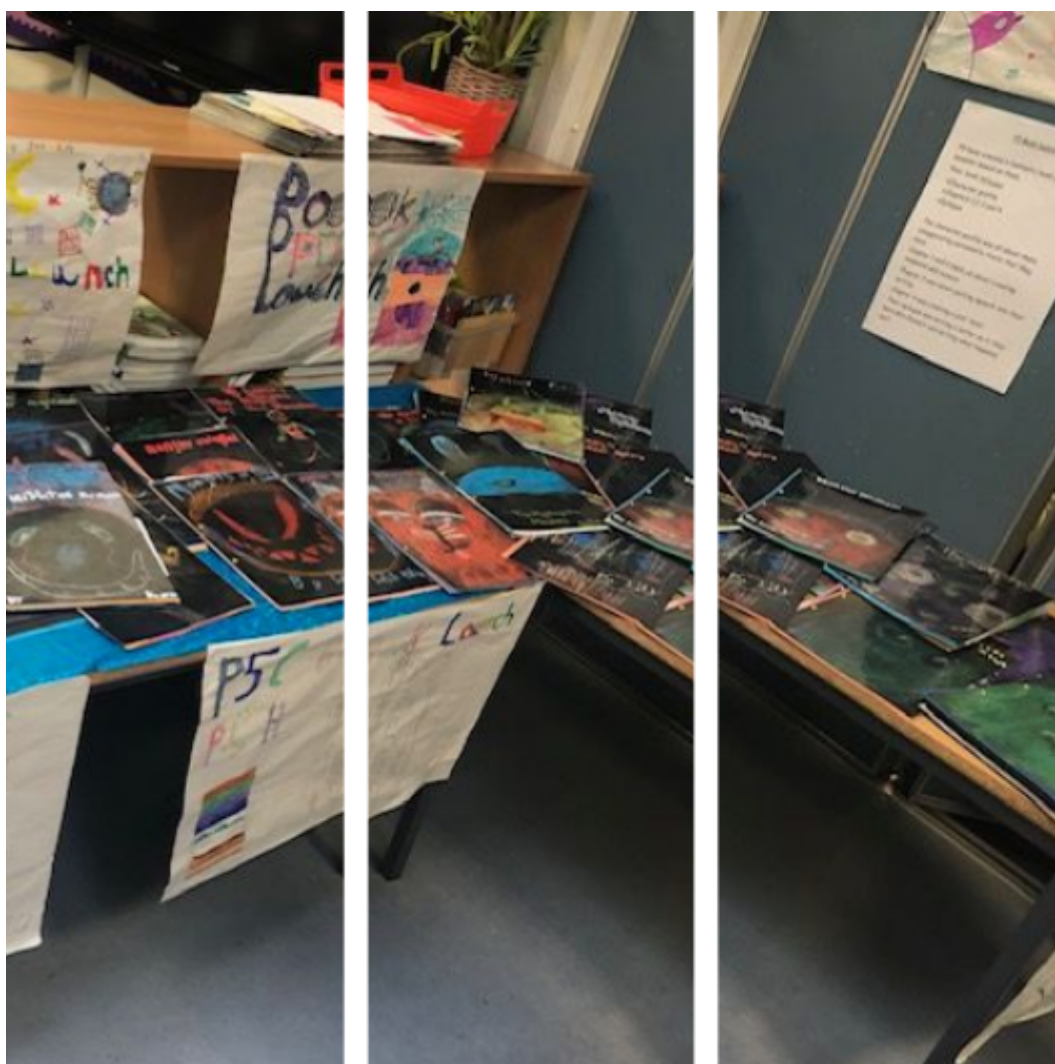
Over the past two years, the school has delivered a range of projects, to further promote reading for pleasure, including:

- Outdoor reading activities
- Book swaps
- Wall displays
- 'Catch me reading'
- Story sessions with parents/carers
- 'A masked reader' – teachers record themselves reading with a filter, and pupils guess what their favourite book is
- Create a book project – children write and create their own book
- Christmas reading – with teachers reading pupils Christmas stories
- Outdoor reading tents
- Paired reading – over Teams during Covid and in person before.

There are many small library areas around the school and each class has their own reading area. The small areas have been developed to include soft, comfortable spaces with cushions, to encourage pupils to make use of the space. Pupils said that they enjoyed reading in the library 'cushion corner'. The school has plans to revamp the main library and is aiming to make it more accessible to all learners.

Across the school, classes have taken up different activities. For example, in P6, pupils write a short book review of each book they read. The reviews are displayed in a collage along with the front covers.

To recognise pupils' achievements, the school has also started celebrating a 'Reader of the Week' at assembly. Each week a pupil is selected to receive recognition, a sticker and a bookmark for their individual progress in reading.



ENGAGING IN READING DURING THE PANDEMIC

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when pupils were educated from home, staff developed different ways of engaging them in reading activities. They established a virtual library and developed a PowerPoint presentation of activities based on books that pupils had already read.

There were activities shared to go along with the Read Write Count/Book Bug books which every child in P1-3 received. There was also a poll for everyone to vote for their favourite book.

The virtual library included links to various online resources, such as the BBC, Authors Live and relevant Youtube videos, to help families engage in reading activities together.

THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES FOR PUPILS

Reading for enjoyment

Pupils said that they enjoyed reading and the reading activities at school. They felt it was fun and interesting, and made them feel happy.



I really like reading books."

Pupil, P3



Sometimes I feel like I'm inside the book."

Pupil, P3

Pupils becoming active readers

Staff reported that pupils are getting through more reading during ERIC time, and reading a wide range of materials including: comics, poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Staff also noticed that pupils are choosing to read more often during the school day, for example, during registration in the morning. They are also more confident talking about what they are reading.

Pupils we spoke with read a wide variety of books, and said that they enjoyed reading both at home and at school.

Behaviour and attainment

Pupils in lower primary sometimes struggle to listen and focus, however staff reported that they demonstrated much more focus and attention during story time and reading activities.

The P1 class teacher leading the activity said that she had noticed an improvement in attainment amongst pupils in her class. In particular, she noticed an improvement in writing and vocabulary.

 Reading Schools definitely contributes to attainment."

Class teacher

Pupils said that they felt the reading activities helped them with reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary. They also said that they learned a lot through the books they read. One pupils noted that it gave her ideas for her own writing projects.



Sometimes it helps me find new words, which helps my brain grow."

Pupil, P4



It helps me form my letters."

Pupil, P3

EXAMPLE

One pupil in P2 receives additional support to help with his reading. Since the school started Reading Schools, this pupil's reading has improved significantly. He has been choosing more challenging books for himself, as he wants to learn new words.



Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are important at Downfield Primary and due to this, books by authors of many ethnicities which highlight the importance of inclusion were purchased. The school has recently welcomed new families who are new to Scotland. To help integrate the new pupils, staff have used books and stories to help children understand each other better. The books have central themes around kindness, respect and resilience, and include stories about different religious and cultural festivals, such as Ramadan and Diwali.

The school also invested in more books featuring LGBTI characters and diverse families. These new books are available in a “borrow box” in the staff room for everyone to access.



It gives us an opportunity to talk about different cultures.”

Class teacher



THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES FOR STAFF

Taking part in Reading Schools has already provided a range of benefits for staff. Teachers said that they were more aware of their position as reading role models and that they had a better understanding of the range of children’s author’s and illustrators.

Staff also said that they felt more knowledgeable and better equipped to use books and reading in different ways. In a recent survey conducted by the lead teachers, every member of staff expressed that they now feel very knowledgeable about children’s literature, which has helped with recommending books to children to read for pleasure and choosing class texts.



It’s increased my understanding of how reading can be used in class.”

Support teacher

WHAT WORKED WELL

The teacher leading the work appreciated the support from Scottish Book Trust. In particular, the webinars were helpful, providing simple, actionable ideas.



They definitely do motivate us... and the best thing is how understanding they've been."

Class teacher

The head teacher of the school is keen and enthusiastic for the programme to be a success. The teachers leading on Reading Schools activity feel they have benefited from support at senior leadership level.



If we need money for something, we usually get it."

Class teacher

A few of the other members of staff were able to attend Scottish Book Trust webinars which they would not have been aware of without Reading Schools. After every webinar or event, time was allocated at the weekly staff meeting to feedback what was learned. Cascading the knowledge this way allowed busy staff members to hear the main messages from Scottish Book Trust and ask any questions, without having to take time out to attend the webinars. In a survey, every staff member said that they found this feedback very useful and inspired them to try different activities in their class.

WHAT WAS CHALLENGING

The teacher leading the Reading Schools activity was based in lower primary classes, which are located on the ground floor of the school building. Generally she felt it was easier to engage the young pupils. At times, it felt difficult to engage the upper primary pupils, because she was not located near them.

Covid restrictions were also challenging as many plans, such as the library refurbishment and parent reading events were unable to take place. Technology has made this easier and the school intends to make full use of this going forward.

WHAT'S NEXT

At present, the Reading Schools activity is led by two members of staff. Going forward, they would like to encourage more teachers to attend training sessions and webinars with Scottish Book Trust, and to lead their own classroom reading journeys.

Whilst pupils are definitely reading for enjoyment more, and more often, they are tending to read the same sorts of books or materials. To address this, the school would like to invest in more books, covering a wider range of literature.

The school is also hoping to recruit a team of pupil 'reading influencers' to further promote reading for enjoyment. Downfield has bi-monthly citizenship groups and recently created two Reading Schools groups, for upper and lower classes to further engage with the pupils and hear their ideas.

The school is keen to create more permanent outdoor reading spaces. At present the reading tents are reserved for special events such as World Book Day. The school is looking to establish an outdoor library which will be run and maintained by P6-7 pupils.

As part of Book Week Scotland 2021, the school plans to create videos of the children explaining the contents of the bags and showing examples of activities to share with parents, as it is still not possible to have parents attend events in person.

The school plans to continue engaging in Reading Schools. Over time, they hope reading for pleasure will become embedded into the culture of the school, and will positively impact pupils' attainment.

