

Case Study: Helen Emery, Librarian, King Edward VI School, Lichfield, Staffordshire

Library Personal Shopper Experience

Having spent over 14 years promoting reading for pleasure via a huge range of whole school and class activities, Helen Emery, librarian at King Edward VI School, came to the realisation that book choice is such an individual decision that she needed to personalise the process; especially as every student was different and their reading habits changed hugely over their time they were at the school.

Year 7 were already surveyed on their reading habits and preferences via a questionnaire when they joined the school in September. However, this generic paper-based exercise was largely only followed up by a series of lessons on what the library could offer and students were left to borrow (or not!) as they wished.

To try and improve the offer, the library developed a one-off 'literacy chat' with each year 7 student. This was a one-to-one discussion with a member of library staff about the student's reading preferences and barriers. It happened in the library so that stock could be individually recommended to them at the time of the interview.

The library also undertook a survey (using survey monkey) of parents' awareness of what the library offered; the results indicated that whilst parents were very supportive, they were not aware of what the library did.

Helen soon realised that only 3 or 4 students could be seen each registration time (contact time with students is precious) so she developed the library 'personal shopper experience'. Students completed a questionnaire in advance on their specific likes and dislikes regarding books and reading; the library then (often with Student Library helper input) gathered 2 or 3 titles ready to recommend to them. King Edward IV School library have now done this with whole classes in years 8 and 9 too.

The project sits well alongside the school code of conduct - Respect and Strive. Current school focus is on 3 areas: wellbeing, collaboration and aspiration.

- **Wellbeing** - links to reading for pleasure and student wellbeing are well documented and researched.
- **Collaboration** – students' involvement in recommending books, alongside parental engagement, makes the scheme highly collaborative.
- **Aspiration** – the scheme encourages students to be aspirational in their reading, pushing the most able and supporting closing the gap for Pupil Premium students.

The project also links with the School Improvement Plan:

1. To embed the principles of emotional intelligence across the school. This project feeds into this through the theory that reading for enjoyment increases emotional intelligence, empathy and independence.
2. The school approach to 'challenge' from Year 7. This project enables the library to find the appropriate level of reading challenge for students and counteracts the potential of students becoming stuck in a reading rut or, worse still, switching off from reading altogether.

The idea of a "library personal shopper experience" started after a School Library Association Staffordshire Branch AGM with Adam Lancaster, who shared how he surveyed his students individually and collated the data. Helen also took inspiration from a Midlands Unconference some years ago where she spoke to a Librarian who did a similar initiative based on the theme of a doctor's appointment.

The project has resulted in several positives outcomes:

- Many students now ASK for a questionnaire to complete so they can have a book recommended.
- Students are more likely to ask library staff and also student library helpers for recommendations.
- Fiction book issues specifically to Year 7 have increased over 27% from last year (744) to this year (1023).

- One student remarked “Well done! You chose a book I really enjoyed!” Another “I haven’t read a book in ages but I loved the one you picked for me”.

Moving forward the library aims to put the questionnaire online for completion alongside parents – that way they can support reading of the recommended book. They also plan to increase how often the questionnaire is completed (once a term) to enable follow-up on how students liked the book. And they will look for further feedback from parents with ways to share successes of the scheme.

Tips:

1. Ensure the questionnaire gives plenty of information about students reading preferences.
2. Start small – just one class, or year group to see how it goes.
3. Engage other older students who are regular readers in recommending the stock.