

## **The Aberdeen Reading Bus: A journey to excellence**

*Jenny Watson provides an update on this innovative project*

The Reading Bus is the focal point of a three-year pilot project to promote literacy, initially in the St Machar area of Aberdeen. (Morag Russell reported on the first year of this project in *Education in the North*, 15, 44-46.) Since the spectacular launch ceremony on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006, over 24,000 excited learners and a wide variety of visiting contributors have been on board this revolutionary vehicle.

This ground breaking project aims:

- To promote reading as a source of life long pleasure.
- To raise attainment and achievement of children at risk of early failure.
- To encourage family learning in a non-school environment.
- To involve and empower parents in their children's learning.

The Bus provides a context for innovative practice in promoting and developing children's literacy. This context is different from that provided by a school. It therefore opens up possibilities for new and different arrangements for learning which relate both to school and to the children's home and community. Part of the rationale for the bus is that working in new ways can use and develop personal, school and community resources to develop literacy and engagement within the community.

The Reading Bus team work in partnership with 14 different schools in developing highly motivating and successful programmes, as well as making regular visits to the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital, supermarket car parks, community centres and local parks and libraries in the community. The team, including cross-agency partners, has devised a comprehensive series of cross-curricular learning experiences that have challenged, engaged and empowered young people both in school and in the wider community.

The interior of the Bus includes a comfortable seating for around 18 children, a small group meeting area, two IT workstations, a data projector, an interactive white board, a kitchen unit and sink, shelving and display space for books and literacy resources.

Every day brings a new highlight for The Reading Bus. The project has been fortunate to have a national profile and the team, always including youngsters, has delivered presentations locally and nationally. But for the team it is the differences to individuals onboard the bus that make the real highlights; watching youngsters grow in confidence and self-esteem and helping them to engage in positive and successful learning experiences.

### **Programme**

The programme onboard the Bus is constantly evolving with learning opportunities being expanded and partnerships extended. The following examples give a flavour of the wide range of activities:

- **Storytelling**

The Reading Bus has a regular programme of storytelling from Nursery to Secondary School. Youngsters and their families enjoy this special time onboard the bus and are enthralled by the wide variety of stories told. One particularly effective session involved youngsters from the Base Unit at St Machar Academy. This was a particularly vulnerable group of second year pupils mainly working towards Level A.

Using puppets and working with Grace Banks, the youngsters created their own version of The Gingerbread Boy. The class were invited to “share” their story with a nursery class. This was a great success with the older pupils confidently performing their puppet show and then sharing picture books with the nursery class. One of the BASE pupils, rarely seen to interact with her peers, shared picture stories with confidence and animation.

- **Reading Radio**

In partnership with Station House Media Unit and schools The Reading Bus has a regular live broadcast every Thursday morning from 11am – 12 noon. These broadcasts can be heard in the Aberdeen area on SHMU 99.8 FM or online at

[.shmu.org.uk](http://.shmu.org.uk). Different classes prepare for the show over five sessions with their class teacher and The Reading Bus team. A team of four youngsters present the live show which includes interviews, chat, music, writing, debates and discussions. Whole schools are tuning in as well as parents and communities with stories of “grannies taking radios to work”! Each week two live guests are invited as “Reading Champions” to share their love of literacy.

This work has been selected as an example of cutting edge practise by HMIE and a film documenting the work will be included in their Journey to Excellence website in autumn 2008.

- **Writer in Residence**

David Barry joined the team in August 2007 as our Writer in Residence. This year long post is sponsored by Shell U.K. Limited and by Awards for All. Between August and December David has worked with 12 different Primary 7 classes and 6 first year classes with a challenge to write creatively about an “imaginary space”. The writing has been posted a blogs in the Youngsters’ Forum and youngsters are invited to be detectives and add comments about who lives in the space to work out the plot.

A selection of this writing has been published as a book called “Search Inside” and was launched at the Word 08. David has also taking a leading role in working with teachers and classes to prepare and produce the weekly Reading Radio show. This radio show is an ideal opportunity to share children’s writing, poetry, debates, book reviews, interviews and highlights with a wide audience.

- **Health Partnership**

The Reading Bus visits the Royal Aberdeen Children’s Hospital once a month. Sheila Lawtie, Health Co-ordinator, works with short and long term patients and with special educational units within the hospital. Sheila has worked with third year youngsters at St Machar Academy on the new European Health Rights for Children and Young Adults. The pupils created their own digi-blue animated films to illustrate these rights and these have been shared with youngsters through Action for Sick Children.

- **Presentations**

Youngsters from primary and secondary schools have presented several multi-media presentations at a local and national level. These presentations have included national presentations: The Scottish Learning Festival, National Community, Learning and Development Conference, Better Childhoods for Rural Scotland Conference as well as numerous local conferences and presentations to interested business and industry partners and international visitors.

The Reading Bus has a regular programme of presentations with the University of Aberdeen. One of these presentations took place in November when youngsters from Sunnybank School and St Peter's RC School presented an hour long presentation including two storytelling performances and "A day in the life of The Reading Bus at Sunnybank School". Over 100 student teachers enjoyed a vibrant presentation by the youngsters with no adult input. "Inspiring, fantastic, awesome," was the feedback from the students and for all the 60 youngsters involved in presenting it was an empowering experience. These regular presentations are an integral part of The Reading Bus programme demonstrating the value of youngsters as competent, responsible people, even in an adult context.

- **Parental Involvement**

A group of parents at Hanover Street School have worked with The Reading Bus Team to look at ways of motivating boys to read. This project received funding from Scottish Community Action Research Fund. The parents were supported by a research mentor. The parents circulated questionnaires to a wide audience, visited bookstores with youngsters and created their own "book bags" that include a wide variety of literacy materials. This project was launched at a high profile event at Hanover Street School and a short documentary film is being made to share the work with others.

### **Impact and Outcomes**

The Reading Bus team are exploring using the four capacities outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence to provide a framework for assessing the impact on young people, families and teachers. This evidence has been collated in a variety of forms including learning conversations, evaluations and questionnaires as well as data from

schools' quality indicators. The evidence will be presented in terms of the capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence – successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals and articulate contributors.

The Reading Bus and the research process have been used to engage young people, communities and teachers. The outcomes of this research will help to provide a linkage between theory, policy and policy development and practice. Research has been an integral part of the Reading Bus from the very start. Research has an evaluative role, but just as important is its role in exploring the processes of communication and learning found on the Bus. In the latter role the research has an immediate and direct informative effect on how the Bus 'works'.

The Reading Bus team feel it is important to 'listen' to the voices of youngsters, parents and professionals. All of these are important and valued partners without whom Bus practice would be far less well-informed. An important Bus theme is the vital significance of relationships and the trust that has been formed between youngsters, parents and The Reading Bus Team.

*I really appreciate the time and support given by Reading Bus staff. I feel that I am involved in every step of the way in activities and come away more confident to try things myself or carry on the work begun. Any future activities with The Reading Bus would be more than welcome in my class. (Teacher Evaluation)*

*Child B is not one of the 'scholars' of the class. He talked about how he was selected to be one of the children involved in some work with The Reading Bus. He was 'shocked' to be selected, but shocked in a very positive way. He felt very good about himself and said that not only had his confidence increased but now he has greater enjoyment of books. (Pupil – Kittybrewster Learning Conversations)*

*The book group raised the profile of reading and what can be gained from reading; some of this permeated home life. (Ashgrove Parent Group)*

*Child D reported great nervousness before presenting at a conference, but now had more confidence – 'I've done it before'. His confidence is so much improved that he would have no hesitation in doing it again. Before his first presentation he would not*

*have believed that he could actually do it. (Pupil – Kittybrewster Learning Conversation)*

*A wonderful project (blogging) which has touched many in my class in a way that as class teacher I could not. Next steps ... Go Nationwide! (Class Teacher)*

## **Conclusion**

This is a time when schools and teachers are facing the new challenge of working with the emerging framework of a curriculum for excellence. A Curriculum for Excellence provides explicit statements of the aims of education in Scotland, concepts which have long been implicit. In summary, the purposes of education are to enable all young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. The challenge to educators is to think differently about how education is delivered. The Reading Bus tries to broaden and deepen as far as possible the range and scope of learning activities in ways that empower and enable all children to realise those purposes. The Reading Bus provides the opportunity for everybody to think about how they can engage in the education process in new and exciting ways.