

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC LIBRARY READING GROUP?
HOW GOOD PRACTICE CAN BE CREATED AND SUSTAINED

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Abstract

According to Usherwood & Toyne (2000) one of the most 'successful' methods of Reader Development activity in libraries are reading groups. The literature identifies a huge surge in popularity of reading groups that has led to groups being set up not only in libraries, but in the workplace and people's homes. The researcher predicts that the popularity of groups will continue to rise, as people clamour to talk about their reading experiences. Despite their popularity, the literature suggests that setting up reading groups and sustaining them requires consideration.

In order to examine the nature of reading groups and identify the principles of their 'success', the researcher has adopted a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to examine in detail the underlying principles of reading groups. This adheres to the exploratory basis of the research topic, as there is little documentation on reading groups. Three research instruments were used, interviews, focus groups and observations. As complementary methods they provided the researcher with a rich and in-depth account of the reading group experience.

The results confirm that creating and sustaining a reading group requires careful attention. A key contributor to a group's 'success', is an enthusiastic leader. Effective leadership is seen to impinge on all aspects of a creating a 'successful' reading group. Additional factors that contribute to a group's 'success' were having a good mix of people and maintaining variety in the sessions. The researcher concludes that reading groups are fulfilling the expectations of its members. However, a reading group also has the potential to impact on wider library activities, benefiting *all* readers.

The results have a number of practical implications for those involved in setting up and running reading groups. Staff training and sponsorship

emerged as key considerations. While 'success' is subjective, as each group is different, the researcher concludes that the principles are transferable to all reading groups. The discussion ends with suggestions for future research into the reading group experience.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish the background to the research topic and identify the key literature related to reading group activity. The results' chapters will draw on this and other literature to support the research's findings. This chapter also states the intended benefits and outcomes of the research, highlighting the practical implications for libraries.

1.1 Background

Reading, for many years has been stigmatised as purely a solitary pursuit by the fearful, shy and private individual. (Van Riel & Fowler:1996b). Nevertheless, reading as a leisure pursuit appears to have retained its popularity. According to Kinnell & Shepherd (1998) reading is in the top three of leisure activities. Also recent research by Book Marketing Ltd & The Reading Partnership (2000) identified that as a nation we are reading more than we did five years ago. However, it is only in recent years that the profile of reading has enjoyed a renewed enthusiasm. It is now seen to be a legitimate leisure activity and amid this wave of enthusiasm the popularity of reading groups stands out.

This project originates from the research *Checking the Books - the Value and Impact of Public Library Book* reading currently being undertaken by the Centre for Public Libraries in the Information Society (CEPLIS). The research head is Bob Ushered and the research associate is Jackie Toyne. The first stage of the project involved a questionnaire being sent to all UK library authorities asking about their fiction promotion and Reader Development activities.

Of the 91% return rate the results showed that currently 60% of library authorities are providing reading groups with another 30% considering starting them. This questionnaire demonstrated that reading groups are a major force in Reader Development. It was also repeatedly suggested in the subsequent focus groups, that reading groups, were the most 'successful' Reader Development activity for the libraries.

There has been substantial growth and progress of Reader Development over the past few years. Individual initiatives such as the *Branching Out* (2000) project has helped bring about this change. This initiative aims to change the culture of libraries and elevate Reader Development within the public library service. It has helped to establish reading as a cultural activity, based on the recognition, as Van Riel (1999a) expresses that "reading is active, creative and participatory, rather than passive and isolated" p292.

Equally the political interest with the National Year Of Reading and its successor campaign Read On have raised the profile of reading. Specifically stated in the review of the National Year of Reading projects (DfEE:2000), reading group activity appeared to make a significant contribution to the government's aims to establish "a new reading culture" pii.

Furthermore, last October, the DCMS announced £2 million pounds would be available for Reader Development projects. They recognise the libraries traditional strength in promoting reading as a skill and pleasure. (DCMS/Wolfson Announcement: 2000). This recognition and money are a huge boost for libraries. As McKearney (1999) states "...it is recognition at the highest level of the importance of libraries' relationship with millions of readers" p106.

Due to the growth of Reader Development activity it has led to wealth of research in the area of reading, its benefits and fiction promotion. (Kinnell

& Shepherd:1998, Bachelor:1999, Taylor:1999, Usherwood & Toyne:2000, The Book Marketing Ltd & The Reading Partnership:2000). This research is therefore extremely timely and relevant amid the present focus on readers and reading.

Although this research stems directly from the *Checking the Books* research, it is reinforced throughout the literature that reading groups appear to be having a significant impact. This is demonstrated by a clear surge in popularity of groups being set up around the country. (Sylge:1997, Bullimore et al:1999, Schofield:2000 and Hartley & Turvey:2000). Hartley & Turvey (2000) surveyed 330 reading groups during June to December 1999. This is only the tip of the iceberg of the total number of groups that are likely to exist up and down the country today.

This interest in reading groups has also infiltrated the workplace. The 'Orange Talks Books at Work' initiative was set up to encourage workers to set up reading groups. However, as Shapland (1998) asserts, the public library has the closest contact with the community and is therefore, a unique and unrivalled resource that no other organisation can rival.

As Doughty (1999) states, libraries attract the largest user participation of any of the cultural sector groupings. It would appear, therefore, that there is great potential for libraries to be forerunners in the reading group movement.

The political interest in reading, has clearly helped place public libraries at the forefront. As Shapland (1998) states "...they (public libraries) can use the current vogue for reading groups" p257. Public libraries have always been associated as the storehouses of books, therefore what better

place to engage a community of readers than by setting up reading groups in public libraries.

A key feature to emerge from the literature is the tips and resources for reading groups. Together with demonstrating the existence of reading groups, the literature also provides practical help on how to set up groups and resources for sessions. (Van Riel & Fowler:1996a, Stanley:1999, Oliver:1999) However, the researcher has identified few books totally dedicated to reading groups. Those identified come from America where reading groups have been in existence for many years. (Slezak:1995 & Jacobsohn:1998). In America reading groups are firmly established as a cultural activity. (Schofield:2000). Consequently the experiences, in these books, demonstrate the enormous diversity in groups. This could be an insight to what could happen in Britain, if reading groups continue to flourish.

The researcher also identified a number of information sources on the internet devoted to reading groups. The Resource Center for Book Groups (2000) and The Good Book Guide (2000), are two examples amid many. Publisher sites have also recognised the popularity of reading groups and many have produced reading group discussion guides and tips on starting up groups. (Reading Group Center:2000 & Reading Group Guides:2000). Many library authorities also have web pages publicising groups and giving advice, for example, Bookchat (2000) and Lincolnshire Readers Groups (2000).

There are also a number of virtual reading groups starting to emerge. One in particular states how they started the group in response to demand from people wanting to exchange their views. (Good Book Guide: 2000). This has certain implications for libraries. The LIC (1998) state that integral to developing the skills of public library staff is a knowledge of virtual reading groups.

The popularity of reading groups cannot be disputed. However, the pattern that seems to emerge from the literature is that people need advice and help in setting up and running reading groups. One of the problems identified from *Rediscovering Reading: an Evaluation of the Role of the Public Library in the National Year of Reading* report¹ was that guidelines for setting up reading groups were required.

Furthermore, last October the researcher attended a reading group seminar called *Joined Up Reading*, organised by the Off The Shelf festival in Sheffield. This session was devoted to running 'successful' reading groups. Ideas were provided on how to start groups and ways to publicise them. It was run by Rommi Smith. She is currently a Reader-in-Residence and has much experience in lead reading groups. This seminar certainly highlighted that starting reading groups and making them work effectively takes more than just getting people together for a chat.

¹ Executive summary prepared for the Reading Nation Conference, February 2000.

1.2 Research proposal

Reading groups are clearly a major force within the reading culture. They are a hugely popular activity together with being a 'successful' method of Reader Development. (Usherwood & Toyne:2000). If libraries are to seize this opportunity, then creating and sustaining 'successful' reading groups are chief concerns.

The researcher has chosen to focus primarily on public library reading groups, although reference will be made to groups that are not associated with the library. A primary reason for this is the time scale of the project. Attempting to cover all types of groups, for example workplace groups, groups that meet in homes, would be totally impossible.

The researcher therefore, hopes to identify the principles of a 'successful' reading group based primarily on the data collected from the six reading groups. Defining 'success' is subjective, especially in relation to reading groups. This issue was recently raised at the *Checking the Books* workshop². Performance indicators were not seen to be a suitable method to evaluate reading groups. Each group is very different, for example in terms of the number of members, and therefore judging reading groups against set criteria fails to take this diversity into account.

The results therefore will hopefully illuminate for the 30% of libraries considering having reading groups what to consider when starting up a group. Equally the results could also be used by established groups looking for a fresh injection of enthusiasm.

The ultimate outcome is to illuminate to those involved in Reader Development a model of good practice, that is not prescriptive but

² Notes taken from Checking the Books research workshop, 19th July 2000.

demonstrative of the 'success' principles that can be adopted to suit each individual group.

Each chapter takes an aspect of reading groups that has emerged from the data. **Chapter 3** considers the definitions and perceptions of reading groups. **Chapter 4** examines the factors associated with membership of a reading group, effective leadership emerging as a key feature. **Chapter 5** discovers the functions of reading groups, whether reading groups are fulfilling both the aims of those involved with reading groups and members themselves. **Chapter 6** considers the managerial issues associated with setting up and running reading groups. Finally, **Chapter 7** examines the role of the public library in the reading group experience and whether the public library reading group is unique.

The researcher stresses that although chapter considers a different issue, it will be apparent that they are entwined. The chapters follow a journey of discovery. It is hoped that, at the journey's end the reader has a holistic and informed picture of the reading group experience.

Chapter 2 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to address the methodological approach to the research. In any study it is the initial research purpose that ultimately dictates the approach. This topic originates from current research *Checking the Books - the Value and Impact of Public Library Book Reading*. The research identified that reading groups are a major force in Reader Development. What this research aims to do is take this general consensus a step further, to investigate what makes a 'successful' public library reading group and discover how good practice can be created and sustained.

2.1 Research approach

Although reading groups are not new in terms of their existence there has been little documentation about the formation and activity of groups. Therefore, a qualitative approach, unconstrained by predetermined categories of analysis, lends itself to the exploratory nature of this research. (Patton:1999). Previous dissertations in the area of reading and its benefits have employed a qualitative approach and succeeded in obtaining rich and illuminating insights. (Hamshire:1990 & Gor:1982).

A qualitative approach is not merely witnessing and describing what happens, but collecting data to hopefully develop principles and ideas. Whereas a quantitative approach begins with pre-determined hypothesis to be tested, a top-down approach, a qualitative approach works bottom-up. It is an emergent process of exploration and discovery which as Lofland and Lofland (1995) state gives it its edge and excitement.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. They embed themselves in the social setting and witness first hand the phenomena to be

studied. This is a key advantage of qualitative research as it uses the natural setting, hence its synonym to naturalistic inquiry. It enables the researcher, to develop a richer and fuller understanding having immersed themselves entirely in the activity. (Gorman and Clayton:1997).

This research could have employed a quantitative approach, using questionnaires to discover individuals' opinions on what makes a successful reading group. The researcher acknowledges the benefits of a quantitative approach as it allows a larger sample of data to be collected, thereby giving a broader basis for comparison and generalisation. Research conducted by Bullimore et al (1999) surveyed reading groups in the Yorkshire Arts region using a questionnaire to sample members of reading groups. This study demonstrated the popularity of groups and identified reasons why people join reading groups.

However, to answer this research question, the researcher needed to go beyond this and closely examine the reading group session and discover in more detail why people enjoy the reading group experience. As this is exploratory based, the researcher would argue therefore that only by participating in the activity can the richest and detailed opinions be obtained. Although a qualitative approach focuses on a smaller sample of people, it allows the researcher to delve beneath the surface and obtain a holistic picture rooted in the activity itself.

There are strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. However, the researcher must look to the research objectives and decide which approach will produce the fruitful data required.

As Lofland and Lofland (1995) clearly express “your overall goal is to collect the richest possible data....to earn ‘intimate familiarity’ with the sector of social life that has tickled your interest” p16.

2.2 Case studies

The benefit of concentrating on a smaller sample of cases is that more detailed data can be obtained. Furthermore due to the time restraints of a three month study, concentrating on six cases is more manageable.

“The case-study approach is particularly appropriate for individual researchers because it gives an opportunity for one aspect of a problem to be studied in some depth within a limited time scale” (Bell:1999:10).

The case study approach is especially relevant to this research, as it offers the researcher the opportunity to identify why certain outcomes might happen, more than just finding out what the outcomes are (Denscombe:1998). One of the key research questions is not only to discover the successful aspects of reading groups, but the processes that contribute to this success.

A further advantage of the case study approach, as Busha and Harter (1980) express, is that it allows the researcher to have a concentrated focus, yet utilise an array of data-gathering methods, to build up a holistic picture.

One of the main weaknesses of the case study is the credibility of the generalisations. Arguably the findings are unique to the circumstances studied. The researcher makes it clear that this study is not intending to state the definitive factors that make reading groups successful, but instead look for commonalities across the cases studied. As Denscombe (1998) succinctly expresses “although each case is in some respects unique, it also a single example of a broader class of things” p36. The important factor to

consider is that each reading group is rooted in a specific 'culture' and therefore any generalisations made depend on the cases being similar.

2.3 Interviews

The first stage of data collection involved interviewing the librarian responsible for reading groups in each authority. The advantage of using one-to-one interviews allowed the researcher to gather both rich and relevant data. This is as opposed to casual questioning, which although gives the researcher and interviewee freedom to explore all areas, may hinder the researcher at the analysis stage when attempting to draw together themes.

A semi-structured interview pattern was chosen, that allowed the interviewer the freedom to probe behind answers, yet ensured key questions were asked. (May:1997). Also, as the researcher was new to interviewing, she had not yet developed the skills required to successfully carry out an unstructured interview.

2.4 Interview sample

The researcher had no input in choosing the interview sample. Through correspondence with the Chief librarians, the researcher was put in contact with the most appropriate person responsible for reading groups and Reader Development. This method of selecting interview subjects, although rather arbitrary, attempted to ensure that the most knowledgeable person was interviewed.

However, the researcher acknowledges that some may have had more involvement with reading groups than others and therefore more able to speak knowledgeably about reading group activity in the authority. To highlight this one authority employs a Reading Development Officer, whose sole job responsibility is Reader Development, whereas in other authorities Reader Development is integral to their job. This has important implications for the research topic. This is in terms of devotion of time given to reading group activity, and will be discussed in subsequent chapters. The researcher was also fortunate to interview Rommi Smith, Reader-in-Residence and training associate for Opening the Book. Her knowledge and expertise of reading groups provided many illuminating insights.

2.5 Interview design

Designing an interview guide is an important practicality. The task of the researcher, as Patton (1999) identifies should be to provide a framework with which people can respond in a way that represents accurately their point of view.

The researcher structured the interview questions based around themes. (Appendix 2). Theme A intended to identify reading groups within Reader Development. This was an important theme as it aimed to discover what

those involved with reading groups saw as the objectives of groups. Care was taken to ask a first question that eased the interviewee into the topic area. It is common practice that questions move from the general to the specific.

Theme B moves the discussion onto reading group activity in the authority and aimed to discover their opinions on the wider role of reading groups in library activities. Theme C explored the creation and sustainability of groups. This was a crucial area as the questions address directly what they deem what they feel makes a 'successful' reading group. Finally theme D investigated the role of the library in the reading group experience. This is also an important area, as it is central to discovering whether the public library reading group is in any way unique.

Using open-ended questions enabled the researcher, as Gorman and Clayton (1997) state, to tap into the interviewee's experience to "highlight self-perceived issues and relationships of importance" p45. The researcher decided to use a Likert scale, as part of the interview design, to discover individual's attitudes towards statements made about reading groups.

Using an attitudinal scale in an exploratory study is extremely productive. It often acted as a springboard for further discussion leading to insights and experience that may have otherwise been left uncovered. A further advantage in using a Likert scale, as identified by Kumar (1999), is that it provides an indicator that is reflective of an overall attitude, which aids the researcher in drawing generalisations.

2.6 Interview process

Conducting successful interviews is crucial to collecting data that is rich and relevant. Although the interview guide is essential, it is the researcher who must create a climate where the interviewee feels comfortable to talk openly and honestly to the interviewer. The researcher attempted to establish a relaxed atmosphere and build up a rapport with the interviewee before conducting the questions. Consequently the researcher felt able to enter into a dialogue with the interviewee and build on answers to gain further insights. As Mellon (1990) identifies “in-depth interviewing of naturalistic inquiry is based in discovery” p47.

2.7 Focus groups

In order to investigate what reading group members feel makes a successful group, what happens during the session and the leader’s role, focus groups were used. A focus group involves a group discussion of a topic that is the “focus” of the conversation. (Stewart and Shamdasani:1998). In this case the focus was reading group activity.

Rather than interviewing each member of the group individually, which would be hugely time consuming, focus groups allow the researcher to gather detailed information in one instance. A further advantage over individual interviewing is the interaction, that is at the heart of the focus group method. Focus groups are most commonly used when you want to gain insights into a topic that relatively little is known. (Stewart & Shamdasani:1998).

Understanding is gained based on the discussions, as opposed to testing a preconceived hypothesis. As Kruegar (1994) states focus groups are “not

intended to develop consensus, but determine perceptions and feelings”
p19.

The discursive nature of focus groups stimulates individuals, having listened to each other's comments and opinions. The researcher found these often guided individuals to re-evaluate their experiences within the group, leading to revealing and in-depth insights of the topic under scrutiny.

Another favourable aspect of using focus groups is that reading groups are already existing groups. The majority of time taken up organising focus groups is composing the groups. (Morgan:1998). However, the researcher was able to visit each reading group at their meeting session and hold a focus group after the meeting. The added advantage for the researcher having witnessed the group dynamics, was that it provided a context for the subsequent focus group. As the members knew each other and were comfortable speaking out, it provided a perfect platform for productive discussions around the topic. As Morgan (1998) echoes, to generate productive discussion a good dynamic is required. The researcher feels this was a strong feature in producing the rich and illuminating data collected.

Nevertheless, there are disadvantages of using existing groups. As they have to be group afterwards, Kruegar (1994) claims people may be selective in what they disclose so to not spoil the group's status quo. Furthermore, the researcher may miss the non-verbal communication and special meanings apparent in existing groups. However, as Kruegar (1994) argues, the researcher cannot know all the group dynamic factors that may have influenced the respondent.

2.8 Focus group sample

As with the selection procedure for the interviews the reading groups were chosen in the same manner. Those individuals chosen to be interviewed, put the researcher in contact with a group they felt would be willing to help. As the reading group study cases were randomly assigned, there was no bias involved in choosing specific groups to highlight certain issues. It is worth noting that each was very different. The researcher has chosen not to describe each reading group as group composition is discussed in the proceeding chapters.

2.9 Focus group questions

The researcher based the questions on Kruegar's (1998) questioning route. Typically there are four to five questions beginning with an introductory question and then key questions and then finally a closure question. The researcher had five questions, that were chosen to relate to the themes used in the interview guide. This was to aid the researcher in assimilating the data in the analysis stage.

The introductory question aimed to ease the group into discussing the topic. However, the researcher used the question to elicit important factual data such as the number of members in the group. Question two, a key question, asked what happened during the meetings and sought to discover the role of the leader. This question relates to what those involved with reading groups saw as the aims of reading groups, together with the leadership role. Question three, another key question, takes the reading group experience a step further to investigate why members attend reading groups. This was to discover whether reading groups are fulfilling the

expectations of reading group members, but also those involved in setting up groups. Question four, a key question, considers the group's connection with wider library activities. Lastly, Question five examines what members consider makes a successful group. Although a direct question, individuals drew extensively on their experiences and therefore were providing true and rich accounts of the reading group experience. (Appendix 3).

The focus group is a social experience and thereby it is the researcher's role to create an informal environment open to discussion. Using probing questions was an effective technique, that elicited additional information and thereby maintained the flow of the conversation.

2.10 Focus group process

Ultimately when holding a focus group it is the researcher and their skill in anticipating the flow of the discussion, that determines the richness of the data collected. This is a skill that requires practice and therefore as a new researcher this should be taken into consideration when deciding whether to use this data collection method.

There is the danger that discussions may digress and people fail to answer the question. It is one of the researcher's jobs to keep the discussion on track. At times this did occur and although much of the discussion was not of use, amid the discussion somebody disclosed illuminating insights. It is therefore left to the researcher's discretion to 'feel' when the conversation has lost its focus and when to let the discussion flow.

Despite criticism that focus groups do not yield 'hard' data synonymous with a quantitative approach, (Stewart and Shamdasani:1998),

the researcher believes that focus groups were an appropriate method of data collection to explore reading group activity. This is clearly demonstrated by the illuminating and varied data that was collected. As Stewart and Shamdasani (1998) state “The key to using focus groups successfully in social science research is assuring that the use is consistent with the objectives and purpose of the research” p510.

2.11 Notes on transcription

Given that direct quotations are the basic source of data in qualitative inquiry (Patton:1999), the researcher decided to use a tape recorder, to capture the most truthful and varied array of opinions. This, however, may have deterred some people from being fully open and forthcoming with their opinions, especially in the focus groups. Nevertheless, using a tape recorder did ensure that the total breadth of opinion was obtained and the researcher was able to stay as true to the conversations as possible.

When transcribing the interviews, the researcher has attempted at all times to remain as true to the tape recordings as possible. Where a series of full stops appears in the quotations this denotes a pause or shift to another point. Where words appear in capitals this denotes spoken emphasis. Also when the respondent has indicated something non-verbally this is included in brackets. Laughter was present in many of focus group interviews. The researcher has attempted to convey this as it demonstrates the atmosphere of the reading group. Nevertheless, the researcher does acknowledge as Denscombe (1998) states, that inevitably the data will be stripped of some of its meaning.

2.12 Observation

One of the main reasons in using the observation method was to gain further insights into how each reading group is structured and the leader's role within the group. The focus group interview sought to discover what happens in the sessions. However observing the group helps to establish, as Bell (1999) states to see if what they say, actually happens. The data gathered is therefore intended to be complementary to the focus group data. The two approaches mutually reinforce each other, (Patton:1999), leading to an enhanced understanding.

The advantage of observing a reading group meeting adheres to the ethos of naturalistic inquiry, where the social world should be studied in its natural state. (May:1997). Although the focus group permits the researcher to ask direct questions relating to the reading group experience, one cannot guarantee respondents will provide illuminating answers. However, the observation technique can often reveal the characteristics of groups that would have been impossible to discover through an interview. (Bell:1999).

A further reason for observing the sessions is to gain the 'flavour' of the group. It was important to this research to capture the atmosphere of each group to enhance the spoken data and thereby set each group in its 'culture', as mentioned previously. A number of criteria were observed including factual and atmospheric details. (Appendix 4).

A disadvantage of this method is people often behave differently when being observed. (Kumar:1999). The researcher did not inform the group that they were being observed and did not make notes. Every attempt was made to blend in with the group, to observe under natural conditions. The researcher made an effort to read the chosen book for that session, so could contribute to the discussion and therefore lessen the watchful factor.

Observer bias is another weakness, as the observer may select and omit data in order to confirm already established beliefs (May:1997). It is essential that the researcher attempts to maintain an objective viewpoint, recording events as they happen and not making judgements about what has occurred.

2.13 Limitations of research design

In discussing each stage of the research process the researcher has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of each method. However, there are a number of limitations that deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, the time restraint. As this is only a three month study it limited the researcher to the number groups and individuals that could be interviewed. Consequently this means that the data cannot be generalised to all reading groups. Another limitation concerns the questioning guides. The researcher found occasionally that questions were misinterpreted or unclear. In order to rectify this in the future, the researcher would suggest a pilot interview and focus group, to make sure the questions flow easily and are understood.

Chapter 3 Definitions and perceptions of reading groups

3.1 *The reading group defined*

The reading group, reader's circle, bookclub or bookchat, whatever one calls the activity, is simply a group of people who get together to talk about books. (Oliver:1999). The researcher, however, is a little uncomfortable with using 'simple' to describe the reading group experience. The concept may be simple, yet as the researcher has discovered the perception of a reading group does not always equate to its simple description.

It is the opportunity reading groups provide, for like-minded people to meet and share their love of books and reading, that seems to draw people back to reading groups' month after month. The sharing element, however is not a new idea, as "people love to talk about what they are reading and the conversations are casual as I walk through the library". (Kinnell & Shepherd:1998:54). We talk to our friends about a film we have seen that has excited or scared; talking in the same way about books is no different. What, therefore, makes the reading group experience different and special?

One possible factor is the formalisation of this sharing process, as opposed to the infrequent casual chat. As two focus group respondents express:

"At work you don't always get the time to discuss books"

“Not everyone’s a reader...erm...so it’s nice to have an opportunity where you can talk about books where people are interested...I think I joined the group because there’s nobody....really that I could discuss books with...”

As the respondent’s comment illustrates, it is being part of a formal group and having the chance to talk to like-minded people, about their love of books, that is an important characteristic of a reading group. As another response echoes:

“...there are so many times when you want to share your thoughts and feelings of the book and you’ve nobody to share them with...reading groups allow people to come together to do just that..”

Reading has long been seen as purely a solitary activity. (Byatt:1992). One librarian questioned her actions when deciding to start up groups, would people want to get together and talked about the books. She found a resounding yes. This is reflected in many of the reading group members reasons for coming to the group. As one respondent exclaims:

“ you hear different views on the same book...that’s what I find about it (reading group)...I used to read a book and think everybody thought the same thing”

Another respondent when asked why as dedicated readers you would want to come to the group fervently claimed:

“Well because you wouldn’t get to hear what everyone else thinks of it...would you...”

The individual reading experience is still an irreplaceable and special one, yet as Byatt (1992) states, it is one that can be shared. Reading is not

a passive activity, but a creative act, which “lies in the fact one reader can despair and another can laugh at exactly the same page. (Manguel:1996:93).

Formalising the process, therefore, allows for like-minded people to come together and share their opinions. However, formalising this sharing process does not necessarily mean it is any more formal or structured, as one group demonstrates:

“Would it have worked so well though if it had been so serious...”

“No, No (general agreement)”

“We sort have a bit of a banter and gossip”

“...and keep around the book”

“And sort of when we’ve read the book erm...it suggests something to us, doesn’t it...an incident in the book...so that’s why so and so...”

“When we did the one about the war, a couple of years ago...we had books on evacuees..it sort of brought a lot of reminiscences”

Observing this group it was clear that none of the enthusiasm or excitement of ‘shouting’ to your best friend about the latest book was lost. This was prevalent in all the groups the researcher visited and observed. Leaving the groups the researcher always felt rejuvenated and energised from being part of the experience. There was real delight and joy from discovering new authors and titles and having the opportunity to share one’s likes and dislikes. This is because the “imagination is free to explore”. (Jacobsohn:1998:54).

The individual, having read the book connects to the wider world and sparks off memories and reminiscences. One respondent claims how:

“The Forster book was wonderful in away because some of us were transported right back to childhood and yes we did...went off talking about liberty bodices....but that was good because it really stimulated you...I don’t think that was a necessarily a bad thing”

Clearly individuals value the opportunity to go off on tangents, and this should not be seen as a “bad thing”. It is an integral part of the reading group experience; sharing experiences and giving free rein to the imagination is an exciting proposition, which is why reading groups far from being staid and boring are dynamic and dangerous. As a convert to reading groups expressed, “what I discovered was an informal and unstructured form of entertainment that must be the most fun you can have with your clothes on”. (Schofield:2000:26).

Describing the reading group as a form of entertainment, best encapsulates the experience. No one knows what is going to happen and what will be said. Anything could happen and one has to wait and see on the night. As one group expressed:

“You never know when you come along...you bring something along...”

“...you take something away”

“You take a hell of a lot away...”

“They’re certainly stimulating, aren’t they”

“Yes, highly stimulating”

This informal sharing atmosphere, that permits free exploration, is clearly an important element in creating a successful group and will be discussed in subsequent chapters. It is the unknown that is enticing and which draws people back time and again.

3.2 Perceptions of reading groups

Clearly those belonging to reading groups know the benefit and fun that can be had from sharing reading experiences. However, librarians should not assume that everyone knows what happens in a reading group. The concept appears simple, yet the perceptions of reading groups demonstrate that this simple idea is not so straightforward to some people. It is worth noting people's perceptions of groups, as it informs those involved in setting up and publicising groups. One member of a group stated how:

“When I first came I thought you had to read it and like it...it was only when I heard other people say that....I couldn't get through this, that I thought...oh that gives me 'permission' not to finish it...”

This comment is reminiscent of the school experience where everyone is forced to read the same book and say something about it. However, the reading group experience is nothing like this, as the researcher has aimed to demonstrate. Both O'Rourke (1993) and Johnson (1998) make the point that beyond the classroom people it is very rare that people are invited to, or have the chance to talk about the same book everyone has read.

This is confirmed by recent findings from Usherwood and Toyne (2000), “It's great, I was worried it might be like school you know...but it's not all. You can say whatever you want” p37. If one assimilates the reading group experience to school experiences this may put some people off joining.

Personal experience demonstrates the detrimental effect this can cause. Being forced to read certain books and search continually for literary

meaning, put the researcher off reading for pleasure, even though an avid reader. It was a long time before she picked up a book again to read for pure pleasure. It is important therefore that those involved in setting up reading groups are aware of these misconceptions. As the National Reading Campaign (2000) advice states "...emphasise that the group exists to foster the enjoyment of reading and empower the reader". The reading group is a place where this pure delight is recognised and encouraged. The researcher believes, therefore reading groups have the potential to capture 'lost' readers.

A knock on effect of the scholarly association is people's perception that a reading group is a literary group and therefore not for them. A member of a group commented to the researcher that she was afraid the group would be too highbrow and literary. She also made the point that this may put some people off joining. However, she found through experience that the group was not like this. It was evident that the reading group clearly defined what sort of group they would be, as the comment illustrates:

"What we try to avoid is pulling the book to pieces and real literary criticism..."

"...we enjoy it..."

"...we don't take it, bit by bit and look at every deep meaning...every phrase that has been written..we just take it generally..."

People's perceptions that reading groups "are not for them", stems possibly from the media's influence. Rommi Smith believes "...the snobbery of book review sections in many of the papers sends out a message that talking about reading is for academics and those doing literature courses". This literary perception of reading groups raises the issue of the different types of reading group. Each group visited for this research, did not make any preference to particular authors or genres. The books were chosen primarily from reading group book lists and personal recommendations. No

book or genre was out of bounds. These groups did not seem to adhere to any particular type of group.

However, the researcher has identified reading groups that concentrate on specific topic areas, such as philosophy, travel and women writers. There is great potential with reading groups to examine all types of books and genres, depending on the group member's interests. What this diversity suggests is that each group needs to define themselves and decide the type of group, both in terms of what they will read and how the sessions will be conducted. Some people may want a more literary group that examines the text closely, whereas others may want to read a wide spectrum of titles, authors and genres. This is crucial for those that those setting up groups, as lack of clear information can cause people coming to the group to have the wrong impression, as one librarian demonstrates:

*"...I know in ***** there's one group person who was almost looking for a tutorial session...rather than just a bit of a chat about books...we made it clear at the outset that this was an informal gathering...but this person was feeling after a year or so that he thought it was losing its way, but it wasn't...he was the one who was losing his way...because it wasn't what HE was hoping it might be, but it was what everybody else wanted..."*

A simple idea it may be, yet each individual needs to be made aware what a reading group entails and what each particular group's objectives are. The publicity of reading groups, therefore, is an important issue to address. For example, one of the comments made on the Reading Group Toolbox (1999)³ states that reading groups are not like school and people should not feel intimidated. Definitions and perceptions are very important and have implications, not only for those joining groups in ensuring that the group

³ Comment made on the accompanying CD to the *Reading Group Toolbox* (1999), from Waterstones.

knows what to expect, but in encouraging new members. This issue will be addressed in the next chapter.

What this chapter has aimed to demonstrate is that although reading groups work on the same principle, the opportunity to share with like-minded people thoughts and feelings of books they have read, defining the reading group is not so clear-cut. Not only is each individual reading group different, but each time the group meets it is a new experience waiting to be discovered. The researcher has attempted to illustrate that reading groups can attract misconceptions, which can be potentially detrimental to a group's 'success'.

Chapter 4 Membership

The concept of a reading group has been established - a place for the informal sharing of personal individual opinions and thoughts of books. However, creating the atmosphere and climate for this sharing to transpire seems to depend on a number of contributory factors. The researcher has split these into four areas, for ease of discussion. However, as the discussions aim to illuminate, each area is interwoven.

4.1 Leadership

The pattern to emerge from the data was that the presence of a leader was a key figure in a reading group. The leader's role, however, is seen to encompass a number of roles. One of these roles, which the researcher will call the organiser, emerged as a significant and important role. The organiser takes care of practical matters. As one respondent stated:

“ opening up...and making tea.....and choosing the book as well...”

This may seem a trivial matter, but without having someone who will take responsibility for the organisation of the session itself, could cause problems, as one group highlighted:

*“We've found that sometimes...erm...there's not been any books...but that might be because **** hasn't been here...”*

“But that's like organisation with the library...we've had problems in the past with rooms haven't we...getting the books...”

“There does need to be someone...otherwise we couldn’t get the books or anything...”

Clearly this organiser role is a crucial one, as some groups where the leader had left folded. One respondent states:

*“It was a **** bookclub but the lady who was leading it...her husband fell ill and she no longer felt able to give that lead and the minute that went it failed”*

Another states:

*“I think the key thing probably would be the librarian because there was a reading group here years ago ran by someone called **** ...that was very structured...much more structured than this but when she left it just folded...”*

This seems to support much of what is written about starting up reading groups. Oliver (1999) states that although there are three basic ingredients, a group of people, a list of books and a venue, the secret ingredient is a good leader or organiser. In America where reading groups have been in existence for many years, reading group members still recognise the importance of the leader. “Without our group leader, we could not continue our discussions. She’s irreplaceable”. (Jacobsohn:1998:136).

Many group members also view the leader as the person to instigate discussion and keep it going. In one of the groups the librarian, who is the group leader, introduces the book at each session, gives a brief synopsis of the story and highlights the key themes. This clearly would not work for all groups, but this group certainly valued having this input. The group used this as a stimulus to encourage discussion. In other groups, the facilitator is

seen as sustaining the group dynamics. This was evident in the majority of the groups visited, as the following comments highlight:

“...to keep order...”

(General agreement from group)

“Some people wouldn’t have an input otherwise...some would sit there and do nothing...”

“She keeps us in order when we begin to digress...”

*“...It’s very useful having **** as a leader cause she brings in people who haven’t said things...everybody has a fair crack of the whip...”*

Observing the leader’s role in maintaining the flow of conversation and keeping the discussion on track varied immensely, which serves to demonstrate that each group is very different and welcomes a different style of leadership. Whilst some clearly welcomed the more structured leader, who introduces the book and asks questions and stimulates further discussion, other groups merely wanted the leader to maintain the group dynamics. It is finding the correct balance of leadership.

One group mentioned a leader who was very military in her style of leadership that they felt did not fit the group. They instead enjoyed the freedom that discussing books can generate. It was stated to the researcher that the present leader achieved a “good balance”. She led, but allowed the group to evolve as the discussion dictated.

Achieving this balance, the researcher believes, is key to creating an open atmosphere for healthy and stimulating discussion. This builds on Slezak (1995) who states that groups benefit from leadership that is subtle and invisible, that nudges and initiates. It is “unofficial leadership”. The

consequence of a balanced leadership, the researcher, believes is the creation of a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere for discussion, which allows the imagination freedom to explore.

This reiterates to the perceptions of reading groups being like school. The leader may be judged as superior and the ultimate expert on the book, and therefore possibly dissuade people from expressing their own opinions. A leader must therefore be aware of how they present themselves. As one respondent expresses:

“You’ve (indicating the leader) made it possible...you’ve given us ‘permission’ in a way...by your example to like or dislike the books...”

The leader is instrumental in the process of creating a permissible and open atmosphere and should be aware and sensitive to the group dynamics. Rommi Smith, at a reading group seminar⁴, spent much of the session talking about the role of the reading group leader and the importance of this role in creating a non-intimidating and relaxed environment for discussion. Equally Oliver (1999) from her experience states that a leader, who establishes themselves as the arbiter of correct thought, has been the cause of many bookclubs failing to retain members. Getting the balance right, therefore, is crucially important.

However, not everyone naturally possesses the skills to be a successful facilitator. It is not just having a style of leadership that fits in with the group, but possessing the basic skills to guide discussion and encourage members to talk. As one librarian believes:

⁴ Comments taken from *Joined up Reading*, seminar, as part of the Off the Shelf festival, November 1999.

“...it’s quite hard to facilitate...you have to be a certain type of personality...I think that’s how reader’s groups can die...sort of disappear because the facilitator is a KEY person...”

This was echoed in another librarian’s comments:

“...I don’t necessarily think it’s (facilitating) something that everybody can do...I think they’ll be the people who’d be good at this and people who won’t...it might be a case of just trying to identify who those people are and maybe giving them some specific training...”

Any skill, arguably, can be learnt, and therefore training potential reading group leaders in facilitation techniques is a key consideration for those intending to start up groups. Staff training will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, dealing specifically with managerial issues related to creating and sustaining groups.

Equally damaging to group dynamics is having a leader who does not actually want to lead the group and has been forced into it by group pressure. The presence of a leader is a crucial ingredient, but a group with a leader lacking enthusiasm and commitment is clearly heading for failure. A leader who possesses a dynamic and enthusiastic approach towards the group, was cited by many of those involved in setting up and leading groups as a crucial factor in sustaining a group. One librarian believes ardently:

“...the place where reading groups REALLY work is where the member of staff is keen and committed and will mention it to all the people who come in the library...”

A consequence of having commitment and enthusiasm comes a desire to see the group flourish and keep going. One of the reading groups

has been meeting for ten years with the same leader. Her strong and committed leadership to the group is quite certainly the backbone to sustaining the group over the years. The group members clearly value and appreciate her committed enthusiasm to the group and have a great deal of respect for her leadership. A group member from another group, with a similar enthusiastic leader expresses what this means to the group:

*"I think in our case **** unbounding enthusiasm and knowledge certainly helps to make this group go well...I mean it could go well without you (laughs) I don't know..."*

Leader: "...it's the rest of your's enthusiasm as well...of everything you read"

"That as well.."

*"But it's contagious ****, isn't it..."*

Part of this and the previous quoted group's success is certainly, the researcher would assert, down to the enthusiasm of its leader. They both have achieved balance, as organiser, facilitator, listener and encourager of opinions. This is demonstrated not only by the member's comments but by observing the meetings. Enthusiasm is certainly "contagious" and therefore a leader who lacks the passion and excitement towards the group will unfortunately fail to inspire the members who join the group. Group members are clearly aware of this and will recognise a leader who is not committed.

Encourage, support, inspire, excite - are all words that have been used to describe the leadership qualities of a reading group. As Oliver (1999) expresses all groups benefit from someone to guide them. However, the researcher believes, whatever style of leadership, it is an enthusiastic leader who will encourage a group to share experiences. A leader who finds that balance and inspires group members is a "blessing and a motivating force to a group". (Slezak:1995:112).

4.2 Make-up of reading groups

The make-up of the groups the researcher visited were composed mainly of women. There were only four men within all the groups. In each group there was an average of twelve people and therefore this number is significantly low. There certainly appears to be a definite gender divide in reading group members. This issue did not just arise from the observations. In the course of every focus group and interviews the lack of male participant's in reading groups was commented upon.

This has certain implications for recruiting new members and therefore the researcher will spend some time considering the possible reasons why men do not join reading groups. This is based purely on comments made from the interviews and is in no way meant to generalise to the entire male population.

One librarian suggests the gender difference in groups is because more women read and use libraries than men. This would seem to support the research by Book Marketing Ltd & The Reading Partnership (2000) who found that women and girls do tend to read more.

However, it seems to deeper than this to the issue that is at the heart of the reading group experience, is the sharing factor. As one group expresses:

“Men at work...a few men at work...I keep seeing these books and say where do these books come from...they (men) swap books...they bring them and swap them...but they never talk about them...they suddenly appear on this desk...they must read”

“Oh yes I'm sure they do (laughs)...but they wouldn't for some reason...see this as a social activity...”

Another group observed:

“Women chat...”

“They don’t wander from the subject...”

“In my experience the men I know don’t read...it’s newspapers they read...working manuals...car magazines...”

“My family do...but they don’t talk about it...”

“If you say is that a good book...they go...mmm good”

It is quite possible that the sharing factor is a deterrent to men joining reading groups. However, one has to consider that if men see that groups are predominantly female they might think that it is not a male activity and may be put off joining. The researcher witnessed the reaction to a new male member joining the group for the first time, which seems to adhere to this suggestion. Talking to him, he certainly conveyed a sense that it was not a ‘macho’ thing to be seen doing, meeting and talking about your opinions of books.

This seems to support the suggestions by a male reading group member in America, who states that “many men have been conditioned to be suspicious of reading and socialising...and terrified of showing and sharing our feelings...” (Slezak:1995:205). Consequently, therefore, men see it as a feminine activity.

It is certainly recognised that there is a gender divide. As part of the National Year of Reading initiative, the Lads and Dad’s scheme was set up purely because boys are found to be put off reading at a primary school age, because it is not seen as macho. (Bright:1998:9). The researcher believes the reading group experience has the potential to rekindle an interest in reading because it is fun and enjoyable, nothing like the reading experiences many encounter at school.

The gender issue is an important one, especially when considering how to recruit new members. However, it is worth noting that the make-up of groups does not seem to fall to any ideal composition. As one librarian claims:

“I think a good mixture of people...not in terms of age or gender or whatever although that helps but in terms of their viewpoint...”

A group of people with diverse reading tastes to stimulate discussion and the sharing of opinions is ultimately what is important. Having people who come and are prepared to contribute to the discussions was seen as a significant factor by reading group members.

However, contributing to the discussions does not mean making grand outpourings of literary criticism or feeling under pressure to say something. Instead it purely about making your opinion heard. As one reading group member eloquently states:

“We’ve got a mix...you know...in everything...the people we are...ages...the lot...it doesn’t matter what age you can still say what you think about the book”

This sums up clearly the nature of a reading group. No comment is worthless, as everyone has a voice and an opinion to make. There are no definitive readings of a book. Each time a book is plucked off the shelf it awaits a reader. It is only then that it comes alive in the mind of the reader and their experience. In a reading group, therefore “anyone who enjoys reading can take part - you don't need A Levels or a degree to have opinions

about books” (Oliver:1999:8). It is arguably part of a leader’s role to create the atmosphere where people feel that their opinions are worthy and are comfortable expressing them to the group.

In terms of the size of reading groups there does not seem to be an optimum number. However, one group felt that thirteen that was too many and that with a smaller group a more in-depth discussion could take place. Observing this group one or two people tended to break off in pairs and start their own conversations, that meant not everyone could hear the opinions. It was felt by one member that this interfered with the group dynamics:

“When you have alot of people...you’re going to have to have a chairman to try and stop the conversations...”(mimics tapping on the table as a possible way to do this).

This reiterates the comments previous about the facilitator’s role. Having a larger group is viable as long there is clearly some sense of order and that people listen and respect each other. At the opposite spectrum one of the groups had just five members, however this appeared to have no detrimental effect on the discussions that ensued. The key fact is that a discussion can take can place with just two people, as one group member highlights:

“It doesn’t fall if one of us isn’t here...we still have a good time...even if there’s only three of us...”

4.3 Recruiting new members

Recruiting new members to reading groups is important if groups are going to continue and thrive. Many groups clearly have a core membership of regulars, however this should not make leaders complacent. Librarians running reading groups, seen as a method of Reader Development, should arguably be seeking ways to promote the reading habit to everyone and demonstrate the enjoyment to be had from being part of a reading group.

Encouraging males to join reading groups is clearly a significant issue for librarians. As one respondent claimed:

“...In Reading Development I am seeking out non-traditional library users to get them in the library...men are a major group here and I don't think we're tackling that effectively through the reading groups”.

This raises an important issue that is the general low usage of males in public libraries. Therefore when attempting to recruit males or any new member who may not usually use the library, librarians need to reach further afield. A poster in a library will only arguably get the attention of the already converts to reading. It is not just reaching those who already read but those sceptics of reading and its benefits. However, when asked how group members heard about the reading group, no one mentioned the publicity in the library, even though in the majority of the libraries there was publicity advertising the reading groups.

This seems to support Houghton (2000) who claims that posters do not succeed in encouraging new members. The quality of the publicity material may be a factor, although one authority had some exceptional high quality and glossy publicity material for the reading groups. However, this

was paid for with outside funding. Generally, not all authorities can afford to have such glossy publicity. This issue was raised by one librarian who stated:

"...I would LOVE to be able to have lots of glossy leaflets...but we have very limited marketing publicity resources....if I could live in a utopia I'd like nothing more than outreaching... and cyber cafes...cinemas and pubs...really trendy publicity...to make books look exciting and stimulating..."

It is not just encouraging people to come to reading groups but raising the whole profile of reading and libraries. People with negative images of the library are not going to come to a reading group that is held in a library. If posters are not succeeding to encourage those to join groups, who already use libraries, then using posters to encourage non-library users is less likely to work.

Possibly the best way to encourage people to join reading groups is through demonstration. If people see the fun and enjoyment that can be had from reading and sharing opinions then this will possibly have more of an impact, than words alone. People may be curious, but are reluctant to take that step to come along to a meeting, as they do not know what to expect. It reiterates those comments in the first chapter, the idea may be simple, yet it can have many perceptions. One possible way to be visible is through holding the reading group in the library. One authority does this and it seems to work:

"...some of the groups we run when the libraries are open and...you know at first we thought is that going to annoy other people but in actual fact in some libraries it attracted other people to join it because they see a group of people sat around enjoying a cup of tea or coffee and making discussion going"

Taking this idea further is to holding reading groups in other venues. One authority sees this as a specific aim of reading groups:

*“we hold our reader’s groups in other venues...so we will take the reading group to the ***** in *****...so we are actually taking the groups to other areas and stimulating interest there...so it’s not just in the library and completely isolated...”*

Other ways reading groups have spread the word is through holding social events in the library that are open to everyone. This is a subtle and non-threatening way to encourage new members and stimulate interest.

The media can have a significant impact on encouraging new members. One of the members of the groups heard about reading groups on the radio and as a result of this enquired at his local library about setting up a group. The media is undoubtedly a powerful source of publicity, as it reaches so many people. Therefore librarians should seek ways to get the press and media interested in local groups. The Branching Out initiative recognises this potential and aims to help librarians achieve press interest in reading groups. (Dealing with the Media:2000).

Librarians clearly need to be pro-active in recognising that there are many opportunities out there to generate interest in reading groups. Rommi Smith recognises that outreach is part of her work as a Reader-in-Residence, to encourage interest in reading groups. As she expressed it is “...going to people and making a link, opening people up to the relevance of books in their lives”.

Librarians need to look beyond the four walls of the library and recognise that reading groups can take place anywhere. Encouraging groups in the workplace, takes the reading group experience beyond the

library. One feature of the workplace group is that more men attend and there is a mix of ages, as one librarian noted:

“There is a good cross-section of people...well they’re all working age of course because it’s a work placed group...but they’re more sort of 30’s and 40’s in that group...”

This seems to support the findings from The Orange Talks Books at Work initiative that has set up reading groups in the workplace. As Palmer (1999) found there was an equal division of men and women. She goes on to say that often social groups not connected with work tend to be dominated by women. This latter point seems to reflect the groups the researcher visited. There is possibly a role for libraries to become involved in setting up reading groups at work. Although the four walls of the library building have been removed the library can still play a potentially significant role.

4.4 The reading group meeting

Lastly in this chapter the researcher will consider the reading group session itself, in terms of creating and sustaining groups. It was paramount from all the groups was there was no typical meeting. As one respondent expresses:

“There’s no real format...cause the shape the introduction takes...goes very much on who it is...so you get like...a different style each month...”

A couple of the groups expressed to the researcher this was not a typical meeting. However, there is not such a thing as a typical reading group meeting. The reading group experience is one that changes from month to month, depending on the book, the people that come and the discussion that is started. One cannot predict the outcome and therefore one cannot plan how the session will progress.

However, the structure or formula of a session can be planned and many of the reading group members appreciated some sort of structure to the session. This can be, for example, the start and finish times, coffee breaks and opportunity to recommended books to each other, but also how the discussion will be instigated. Reading the same book and exchanging views was echoed in a number of groups as an important feature of the session:

“We’ve always, basically done one book, sometimes we chose a type of book”

“...we did try once everybody reading a different book and that didn’t work...”

“Chaos...because you can’t discuss it...”

It is the sharing element that is important to the reading group members, hearing each other's opinions on the same book. This structure however, should not be too rigid as previous comments demonstrate, as this can be too imposing and stifle discussion. Instead a structure fulfils the need for a pattern that is not prescriptive, but the way things are. (Slezak:1995:37).

Nevertheless, although groups certainly favour following the same formula, it is possible that doing the same thing month after month could possibly make the meetings become staid and rather tedious. The danger if this happens is that enthusiasm will be lost and membership may start to fall.

One librarian claims one of the successful principles of groups is maintaining variety in the sessions. As she states:

"I think it's keeping it varied...introducing ideas into the group...I think having everybody doing the same thing every month can become incredibly tedious...I think you have to do different things..like have authors...review books...relate a book to a piece of fruit..you do different things to make it exciting..."

This raises an interesting point. Reading group members enjoy the unknown element to a discussion and hearing each other's opinions. This on its own is enticing, yet this experience could be made possibly even more exciting by introducing other stimuli to generate discussion about the book. Group members certainly appreciated leaders taking time to find extra material. The leader is therefore integral in keeping the meetings fresh and exciting. As one librarian strongly feels:

“I think people who are running groups have to THINK about the evening and not just supply a pile of books and think that’s it we’re going to talk about this book...I think you have to think alot further than that...”

Other ways' leaders, in the groups the researcher visited, have helped to sustain people's interest was through social evenings, theatre trips and annual events at Christmas. A particularly favourable activity was watching videos of books that were read by the group, which were felt to “really bring them alive”⁵. It is taking the reading group experience further. However, it is an enthusiastic leader who will think beyond the book, to how else sparkling discussion can be stimulated.

As the researcher stated at the beginning, the areas of discussion are closely related. What this chapter has aimed to illuminate are the benefits of a leader to create and sustain reading groups. It is having a leader who creates the atmosphere for sharing to take place, seeks outreach opportunities to encourage new members and is ultimately enthusiastic and committed to the group's success.

⁵ Note taken from a booklet celebrating the reading group's birthday.

Chapter 5 Functions of reading groups

In terms of sustaining reading groups it is vital that those involved in setting up groups and the reading group members themselves see the reading group working towards the same agenda. Obviously as librarians involved in setting up and running reading groups they are working within a wider spectrum of library related issues. However, it is important that the reader's needs are maintained as the paramount concern.

5.1 The Reading Development agenda

Reading and raising the profile of reading is certainly on the government's agenda. Public libraries especially have been placed as having a crucial role to play in promoting reading to adults. (DfEE:2000). This was given high priority throughout the National Year of Reading with numerous reading groups being set up to build this reading nation, that the government is seeking to create. Librarians working in this climate, therefore have a responsibility to be pro-active in encouraging people to read and developing existing readers. Setting up reading groups is a key way, as they are increasingly becoming one of the most successful methods of Reader Development. (Usherwood and Toyne:2000).

The concept of Reader Development is a much debated one. However, one common factor that those interviewed seem to agree is that it is primarily about developing the reading of individuals.

“Reading development is about extending the reading of adults...with particular regard to the library service...”

While another states:

“...it’s basically moving people’s reading on from where it’s at by widening choice and introducing new things...”

In theory it appears that all those involved with setting up groups are clear that the principle of Reader Development is to broaden and encourage individuals to try something new. However, does this work in practice? Reading groups do seem to be fulfilling the Reading Development agenda, as these opinions from reading group members demonstrate:

“I suppose during the past two years there’s been authors we’ve read that I wouldn’t have read that I’m now reading...so it’s already widened the type of reading...”

*“I mean I came here to broaden my reading...and you know the only way of doing that is by having someone like *** who can pick books for you...”*

The reading group is not only seen as a place to broaden ones reading. For some it is one of the reasons why they come to the reading group. As one respondent claimed:

“Well I like coming cause I never know what to choose and it sort of chooses it for me...”

The reading group acts as a kind of choosing mechanism for books and is clearly valued function of the group, as this comment illustrates:

“The group does give you an introduction to something you might not have read otherwise...and I think that’s a good thing because sometimes you can go into a shop or go to a bookshelf and look and you can’t think what it is you want but if someone has said Oh this is good...it’s something to go on...”

Readers do want help in choosing their books. They value introductions to new titles and authors that they may not have chosen themselves. This acknowledges the range of work that has been done in the past to help readers choose books. The Well Worth Reading campaign was set up to directly address the problems of not knowing which book to choose. (McKearney and Baverstock:1990).

Reading groups are built upon this principle, yet they seem to take it a step further. Whatever the display and promotional material, it will not make the reader pick up a book. However the reading group subtly ‘forces’ the reader to read a book that they would not usually pick, with often surprising positive consequences:

“Sort of books I would never think of reading really...and I think oh god have I got to read this...and you know...you find something in it...”

“You do read books that you wouldn’t chose yourself and that’s when you’re surprised...cause you read them and enjoy them..but you would have never have looked at them normally”.

Encouraging people to read books they might not normally read is not about saying you must read this and enjoy it, but providing an opportunity for

experimentation. If reading group members do not 'get on' with a book, it is fine not to finish it, as long as you give it a go - experiment. A great way to view the reading group is as a laboratory, a testing ground for readers to see whether it works for them. For some it is a pleasant surprise and stimulates an entire continued interest in the subject, as one person expresses:

"...I picked one up to do with Queen Mary and it centred around the abdication and as a result of reading that...I read a book on Edward, Mrs Simpson...all books around it to get somebody else's point of view of the abdication...just from that one book...it DOES widen your reading...it does ...I would of never have done that otherwise"

However, in many cases the experiments do not work. As one group member illustrates:

"...I wouldn't have read ANY of them at all and I haven't liked any of them (laughter from group)...until we get to this one..."

"Do you think that's been a waste of your reading time?"

"Not a waste of my reading time, no...it has told me that I don't like modern authors very much..."

Experiments that do not work are, therefore, not a failure, but actually form part of the reading group experience. People thrive on disagreement:

"...the discussion always gets lively when there's a disagreement about a book..."

Through discussing and sharing opinions individual tastes are recognised and most importantly respected. This is a key function of the

reading group experience allowing for freedom of individual expression, in a comfortable and supportive environment, as this comment illuminates:

"I remember once when we were talking about books we liked and I said I liked Catherine Cookson...there was a deadly hush..."

"Horror shock"

"There was a deathly hush, but I STILL read Catherine Cookson...I read something other than Catherine Cookson...and then I drift back..."

This seems to reflect Bachelor's observations (1999) that "successful reading promotion schemes can make those who love reading feel more positive about it because they see reader's needs are being recognised and treated with respect" p80. This increases confidence and enables people to take risks and therefore get out of the comfort zone of books that usually read. It lifts them out of a rut, which is how many reading group members view their reading habits:

"I think you'd get in a rut...if I couldn't come to the group I'd find an author I like and then you'd exhaust them and just keep with them..."

Another stated:

"...I keep on reading the same thing for example Anne Tyler...I know I like her alot...you need to be challenged a little bit and this group allows you to do that...you don't need a degree...or get overwhelmed with a booklist".

Both Oliver (1999) and Stewart (1995) both recognise that reader's languish in a comfort zone that can have the danger of limiting and stifling

the reader's experience. Reading groups help to lift the reader out of this rut, by providing the opportunity to take a risk and experiment.

5.2 The social function of reading groups

Another function reading groups seem to fulfil is a social function. This came across very strongly in the groups the researcher visited. When asked if not coming to the group would have any effect on their reading, one group member stated:

"I'd probably...I don't know...it wouldn't affect my reading so much...but what I'd REALLY REALLY miss is the opportunity of meeting people and enjoying the book..."

It was evident in all the groups that they were good friends and felt relaxed in each other's company. There was much laughter and joking that often stemmed from the discussions. It was clearly a fun night out, a social event, as this illuminating response demonstrates:

*"I say...**** will bear me on this one...every time when she takes me home...I say O have enjoyed it...every time...I do...I HAVE enjoyed myself...it spurs me on to read..."*

Another member equally expressive as to what the group means to her states:

“You come away on an evening on a relative high...you’ve had a good discussion about something you’ve read...it’s informative education but on the other hand it’s fun...you know you’ve shared something and you get real buzz out of it”

These responses reflect the general ethos of most of the groups the researcher visited. The reading group seem to take on a special quality, that is much more than just getting together to talk about books. This quality is probably best captured by Slezak (1995) who describes it as a reading community. Through a process of sharing, acquaintances become friends. The books create the structure, but it is the individuals who contribute to its uniqueness and help from a social group. Reading groups make members feel they belong and feel part of something.

Clearly this has implications for the social inclusion agenda in public libraries. The reading group can not only bring isolated readers together, but it emerged from the data that the reading group can fulfil the function of bringing together isolated and lonely people for purely this reason:

“...we have a girl who comes to our group tonight who actually came from every abusive relationship...she was completely on her own and this reader’s group has actually saved her life...and I know it sounds dramatic but she actually made friends and so much so that she would like to meet fortnightly...”

Another response illustrates this social function:

*“Well I came to the group because I was new to **** about fourteen months ago...and I’m joining everything I’ve got time to join, to make new friends...I’ve made two here already...but I’ve also enjoyed the reading...”*

Librarians should not under estimate the social function of reading groups. It is clearly important to people’s lives to have this place to come and meet like-minded people and make new friends, whilst sharing their love of books. It seems that reading groups are, as the Branching Out slogan states, “Reaching Readers through Libraries”. (Branching Out:2000).

However, it emerged from the data that librarians see the aims of reading groups and reader’s aims as two sided:

“...the library service are doing it to try and promote the library and getting people interested in reading but on the other side you’ve got the personal side...there are just times when you want to talk about what you read...”

Whilst another librarian expresses:

“I suppose it just enhances the whole utilisation of the stock...that’s what we would see as our aim...aside from people coming into the library and enjoying the experience...”

Undoubtedly librarians view reading groups within a wider picture of Reader Development. However the evidence seems to suggest that promoting libraries and the stock are part and parcel of the reading group experience and should not necessarily be seen as conflicting agendas.

Stock is certainly being utilised through reading groups. Some groups mentioned how they got to re-read books, whilst others were encouraged to read books from current promotions in the library and they certainly 'enjoy the experience', as the following comment illustrates:

"...a while ago they (library) were doing a promotion on gay literature and so in addition to the ones we usually read we were asked to take away either something by a gay author..."

"I'd read some of those again as well..."

"That caused some...controversial discussion"

"..lively..."

"..stimulating discussion..."

Reading groups seem to be fulfilling Reader Development aims, demonstrated by being exactly what reader's want in terms of their reading experience. It certainly seems to support the findings from Bullimore et al (1999) who concluded that:

"..Reading groups are providing the opportunity for members to develop their reading habits through shared experience. Exactly what librarians would wish....library staff should not look to radically alter their support of reading groups but rather concentrate on continuing support and encouraging a wider range of members".

Reading groups clearly have the potential to be a recipe for success, but unfortunately if not careful they will be victims of their own success. Librarians working towards fulfilling the Reader Development agenda are going out and setting up as many groups as possible. However, as discovered pure incentive is not enough. There are a number of factors that

require consideration, such as a committed leader and access to books. There is a potential danger as one respondent predicts:

*“I think **** has embraced it (reading groups) very dynamically and we are succeeding and in many ways we’re to be the victim of our own success because demand for reading groups is going up and up and we’ve only got so many sets of books”*

This is echoed in a response from Usherwood and Toyne (2000) whereby the popularity of reading groups are seen to be posing further problems for librarians, “We have a maximum of twelve in each group...but more and more keep turning up...so we are regularly splitting the groups up..it’s a great problem to have” p54. The popularity of reading groups is certainly flourishing as the abundance of evidence appears to suggest (Dearden:1999, Bullimore et al:1999, Schofield:2000 and DfEE:2000).

It is a great problem to have, yet it is a problem that arguably requires consideration, to ensure that libraries can cope with the surge of popularity and create successful groups that will entice people back month after month. This leads the researcher, therefore to the next chapter that aims to consider the managerial issues likely to be associated with creating and sustaining reading groups.

Chapter 6 Management Issues

The issues addressed in this chapter emerged as a result of the discoveries in the previous sections. The concept of a reading group maybe 'simple', however creating and sustaining a reading group as the previous chapters aimed to illustrate is 'complex'. Complexity in terms of ensuring there is a committed and enthusiastic person to the lead the group, having a mix of people of committed members, books to read and a place to meet. Additionally groups benefit from sessions that are varied and readers are continually having their reading choices widened.

There are multiple of factors working together to it appears ensure the 'success' of reading groups. On top of this is the role reading groups play in Reader Development, that is now high on the government's agenda (LIC:1998). Ensuring the success of groups therefore, cannot be a half-hearted concern. In this climate of renewed recognition "...the needs of readers are being seen as one of libraries' managerial priorities". (McKearney:1999:106).

6.1 Training

There are two key management issues that emerged from the data. The first of these is training. By using the Likert scale, those involved with reading groups where asked if staff should be trained in setting up and running reading groups. Four responded with '*strongly agree*', whilst the others choose '*agree*'. Respondents felt that potential leaders and leaders already running groups could benefit from some sort of training.

As one response demonstrates:

“Leaders aren’t always born, they need training...quite often when you’re struggling for a reading group leader there is somebody who would take it on board IF they were trained...I think also reading group leaders do need particular skills...I feel librarians welcome training when it’s offered and I think it has improved people’s confidence and performance as reading group leaders”

However, it was also strongly felt that it should be staff who possess the enthusiasm and commitment in the first place:

“...I think it has to be staff who are very keen and who read and have a passion for reading...”

This is mirrored in another librarian’s comments:

“...I don’t believe in flogging dead horses...I mean if staff aren’t keen then I think you’d really be struggling...”

This echoes comments made by reading group members in Chapter 4. Reading groups want leaders who are enthusiastic, and therefore, library managers should, arguably, employ staff who possess a passion for books. There was a definite, unanimous strength of feeling from those interviewed that librarians should possess an interest in reading. Many mentioned they now ask at interviews what people are reading and what they like to read.

One librarian stated he would not employ staff who did not demonstrate an enthusiasm for reading⁶. The present situation, however, finds that staff recruitment and competency is one of the largest issues facing library managers. (Usherwood and Toyne:2000). This is a management issue that should be seriously addressed when recruiting new staff into libraries.

As the popularity of reading groups increases, new groups will require leaders with the willingness and desire to run them and take them forward. Readers-in-Residences can be used to run reading groups, as not only do they possess the enthusiasm, but it is their job to work with readers in libraries to develop and encourage their reading choices. A number of the authorities currently had Reader-in-Residences working with reading groups. One of the perceived advantages of employing a Reader-in-Residence, is that it is part of their job remit to go out and set up reading groups:

“...they’re running them for a period of time and then they are leaving the groups to either run themselves or to be supervised by another member of staff and then they’re going on somewhere else...”

It seems the foresight behind this idea is that groups will then be self-facilitated, thereby taking ownership for their group. However, whilst this may work for some groups where there is a committed person who wants to take on the leadership role, others may fold as no one wants to take on this role.

⁶ Comment made at the *Checking the Books* workshop, 19th July 2000

Nevertheless, the advantage of encouraging groups to be self-facilitated, is that further groups can be set up, therefore reaching as many people as possible. For example, one Reader-in-Residence has set up a group at a local pub. (News:1999). It seems the key advantage of employing a Reader-in-Residence is that they have the time as it is their specific job.

Time is clearly an important factor as a Reader-in-Residence expresses "...forming new reader's groups takes time and commitment and a chairperson..." (Houghton:2000:51). Having someone whose particular focus is Reader Development is therefore an advantage. The researcher witnessed the benefits of Reader-in-Residences. For example, in a newly established group the Reader-in-Residence was the backbone to the group. She obtained the books, organised the venue, encouraged new members, whilst also introducing new and fresh ideas to stimulate conversation.

One of the interviewees is a Reading Development Officer. This post has been specifically established to work on Reader Development projects and thereby reading groups have a significant role. It was mentioned that because this post is established, their work will become embedded in all aspects of library work⁷.

Often Reader-in-Residence posts are short term, as they are funded externally. Therefore there is a perceived advantage of established posts such as the above mentioned, as they can help to support and sustain projects such as reading groups. However, the money for this post was also funded by outside money, therefore not all authorities can have the luxury of such posts.

Having witnessed and heard of the work Reader-in-Residences do, they clearly are an advantage to reading groups. However the funding issue

⁷ Comment made at the *Checking th Books* workshop, 19th July 2000

is clearly a barrier to ensuring all groups can benefit from their skills and enthusiasm.

One way to benefit from the work of Reader-in-Residences, to ensure their work is not wasted, is to use them as a form of training for potential reading group leaders.

“...the word training I would take to not necessarily mean a formal training course but what Readers-in-Residences are doing are training people informally and by example...”

Potential leaders, who may feel they lack the appropriate skills, can benefit from informal training. What this form of informal training allows is front line staff to become involved. One librarian illustrates the potential benefit of this training:

“...library staff are often in libraries cause they like reading and on an informal basis they'll stand behind a counter and they'll recommend books...that's only a very small part of what they see as their job...so training pushes it a bit more forward in their minds it also gives them confidence because alot of people know they do it but they don't think they do it well...so it gives them that extra little bit of confidence and experience to enable them to do it better”

This is the crux of the issue. It is recognising that library staff have the Reader Development skills, of recommending and promoting fiction to their users, but giving them the added confidence to use and exploit these skills. This supports the work done by Van Riel (1992b) who was funded by the Arts Council to run training workshops with library staff in promoting creative reading. As a result of the workshops' staff expressed how their

confidence had increased by reinforcing ideas that they now felt they could put into practice. Library staff are the resource, that is already present in libraries. Therefore it appears, that it is a key managerial opportunity for library managers to exploit these skills to ensure they are put to good use.

This has been helped incredibly by the present government who recognise the key skills of librarians. Yet they also state that to “realise this potential, staff need to be trained”. (LIC:1998:58). One such formal training opportunity for librarians is through the Branching Out initiative, that is helping to deliver key elements of the government’s agenda through Reader Development. (Branching Out:2000). It is a three year scheme involving 33 librarians two of which the researcher interviewed for this research. Training is a key part of the scheme and has included working with reading groups. One of the Branching Out librarians illustrates the rewards of these training opportunities:

“..this is the first time that people have actually specialised in training librarians and promoting books in libraries...it is a brilliant scheme...it’s wonderful...”

Clearly from the work this librarian does with her reading group, the additional training seems to have been effective. She exudes a great deal of enthusiasm by continually seeking ways to promote the group and making the whole reading group experience a lively and stimulating one. This work certainly seems to support one of the Branching Out aims “...to increase the skills and confidence of librarians in providing direct reader services and in training other library staff to support these”. (Van Riel & Fowler:1999b:58).

Having had this training, the benefits can potentially be disseminated around the authority to other professionals and staff. As Houghton (2000) proposes “If more Reader-in-Residence type training was made available to education officers and librarians, this work could become more widespread” p51.

Training opportunities are also being provided for those not involved as Branching Out librarians. The Reading Development consultancy, Opening the Book, has announced a new training course looking at how to run successful reading groups, that appears to recognise the potential benefit to be gained from additional training. However, as with most training courses there is a cost involved.

Besides the formal training schemes such as those mentioned, there are a number of other ways librarians and library staff can learn about reading groups. For example, Van Riel & Fowler (1996a) have written *Opening the Book*, that aims to help librarians set up and run groups. The researcher has also identified a wealth of information on the internet about setting up reading groups which libraries could potentially benefit.

Librarians and library staff already possess the essence of Reader Development work in their daily work as they act as reading promoters and guides. (LIC:1998). It is recognising and building on this knowledge, to maximise the hidden potential. Training whether formal or informal can build on these skills and develop the confidence in staff to set up and run reading groups. Furthermore, leading and facilitating a reading group, seems to be a skill, which unfortunately not everyone is equipped. Therefore, investing in training is arguably the way forward, to ensure reading groups benefit from well informed and skilled leaders.

6.2 Funding opportunities

The second management issue that emerged from the data was the benefit of sponsorship and outside funding. Although it does appear there are significant benefits for reading groups from outside experience, this often comes with a price. Reader-in Residence and other literature worker posts are often funded through external money, that librarians have had to bid into. Unfortunately this is not always successful and as one librarian expresses:

“I’ve recently tried to employ a Literature Development Officer with funding from our Regional Arts Board but we have tried twice and failed...at the moment we have an Arts Development Officer but that again comes from cultural services so they’re a limit of what we can do in libraries...we don’t have anybody at the moment who deals specifically with literature or reading”

They are missing out on a wealth of experience and support that could possibly help in setting up and sustaining reading groups. For one authority this outside money was seen as essential:

“...we’ve never been able to get funding from the authority for a Reader-in-Residence and I can’t see certainly in the near future we will be able to and that’s why the money from elsewhere is absolutely vital for us...we have to keep bidding all the time to keep our readers with us...”

External money and support therefore would seem to be an important factor in helping to sustain activities such as reading groups and the work they do.

One authority that had been successful in obtaining funding illustrates this:

“we’ve just been successful in getting DCMS Wolfson money for a project called Bibliotherapy...we will be employing what we are calling Bibliotherapists which is sort of Readers-in-Residence by another name and one of the things they’ll be doing is setting up reading groups in health centres...”

The DCMS appear to recognise the importance of helping to create and sustain Reader Development projects. They have made available £2 million pounds for Reader Development to ensure the work, generated by the National Year of Reading, is extended and developed and that good practice is widely disseminated. (DfEE:2000).

However, Reader-in-Residence posts are funded for a short term basis and libraries are often libraries are unable to secure extra money for the post. Therefore, there is the potential danger that groups will then fold as the leadership disappears. This seeks to reiterate the need to disseminate the work of Readers-in-Residences, while working in authorities, so that when they do leave the skills and knowledge remain.

Reading groups can potentially benefit from both training and sponsorship opportunities. However, this is not to say that existing group leaders should have training and groups will fail if they do not receive money to keep them going. Clearly those reading groups who did not have any external support appeared to be ‘successful’ and were managing without external funding. However, it does appear that if the popularity of reading groups continues to increase then more and more groups will be required. Therefore, training new leaders and bidding for extra funds could help to ensure libraries cope with this increased popularity.

Chapter 7: The public library connection to the reading group experience

7.1 Impact on wider library activities

Reading groups appear to have a great deal of potential. They are seen to help utilise stock, raise the profile of what libraries do and encourage people to read. The benefits from a reading group are, not it seems, confined to those who go to the group. What the above points appear to have in common, is their impact on wider library activity.

One way that reading groups have an impact on wider library activity is through writing reviews. Most of the groups wrote book reviews or it was indicated that they would in the future. Writing reviews appears to have benefits in three key areas. Firstly, undoubtedly they are seen to directly benefit the reading group members, as the following comments illustrate:

“I find that when I have to write a review I find that I’ve GOT more out of the book...it sounds ridiculous cause I’ve read it but by putting it on paper I appreciate what I’ve read more...”

“From other people’s reviews we sometimes think “mmm” I’ll try that”

Some groups were also being encouraged to write reviews that would circulate in the core collection books for reading groups. One librarian was also considering starting a newsletter to enable all the groups to benefit from the reviews, as he recognised the readers respond to recommendations. This reiterates comments made in previous chapters, where readers appreciated the role of the reading group in widening their choice of reading.

However, reviews can also wider impact, by widening the reading experience for *all* readers, as one librarian demonstrates:

“What generally happens is when the reading group gets their sets of books, there’s a review sheet inside the cover with room for four reviews on it and so as it goes around the reading groups it should end up with four reviews and they will stay with the book when it goes back into general circulation...”

As Sylge (1997) states it is spreading the word to help the next reader find a way into the book. Therefore, not only do the reading group members benefit from recommendations, but all readers. Many of the groups, the researcher visited, also produced reviews for noticeboards in the library that again helps to reach a wider spectrum of readers. Noticeboards and displays were recognised by many of those involved with reading groups as a key method of encouraging readers to try something different, as one librarian commented:

*“...the senior library assistant at **** makes a display of books read by the reading group and they vanish...like that, which I think shows that readers want to try something that has been recommended by someone else....*

This supports the findings of McKearney & Baverstock (1990) who found that displays were extremely successful with 44% of people claiming the reason for picking up a book was due to the display. Lastly, reviews can be used to review potential stock.

One group reviewed a selection of children’s books. Apart from adding variety to the reading group experience, it helped to benefit the library, as this respondent expresses:

“...we did a review of some children’s books...and that had an effect on what they decided to stock”

Reviews also have the potential to reach people other than those who come into libraries, by placing reviews on the web. Many of those interviewed recognised this potential and were encouraging groups to write reviews to go onto the web, as one librarian expresses:

“...another way of taking our experiences out there is the fact that...we will write reviews that we send on the internet...”

One authority took this further and have a web site totally devoted to reading groups. This site included reviews, but it was also a publicity tool to promote the reading groups in the authority. There is clearly great potential here to reach readers that may not necessarily use the library and encourage them to join a reading group. A current dissertation by Walkey (2000) is looking into the role of the web page in Reader Development and fiction promotion on the web. It will be interesting to see the impact of web based promotional activity.

Apart from reviews, another way reading groups have an impact on wider library activity is through producing booklists, that are seen to be directly beneficial to all readers:

*“...what we try to do is disseminate the work of the groups to other people in **** that use the libraries...alot of the groups produce booklists and they’ve had events in the evenings...so everybody can come to those...so the idea is to spread the benefits...”*

One of the key benefits from reviews and booklists reiterates the recommendation issue. Reading group members express how they value the reading group because it widens their reading. However, not everyone will want to join a reading group so how do these readers have their reading horizons broadened? Van Riel, as quoted in, Kinnell & Shepherd (1998) argues that nothing is done for the majority of users who are not sure of what and states that 50% of all issues come from the returns trolley. Readers want help in their reading choices, as the data collected seems to indicate.

Therefore, reviews and booklists, produced by reading groups can help to develop these readers and widen their reading choices. The added benefit from using reading groups for this, is that as Dearden (1999) acknowledges "...these reviews provide a refreshing contrast to the marketing hyperbole that often leads to disappointment and mistrust..." p45. This type of activity has the potential to "develop a reading community"⁸, embracing reading group members and readers everywhere.

Lastly, another way reading groups can have an impact on wider library activity is through social events, which have already been mentioned as a way to encourage new members. It emerged from the interviews that those involved with reading groups viewed reading groups as a significant resource, as these two comments appear to illustrate:

"...we've had what we call Read Arounds...where member of the reading group have chosen excerpts from books to read...sometimes it will be just members of the group or it will be an open invitation to any member of the public but the readers group are the bare bones of the event..."

⁸ Comment made by Rommi Smith at the *Joined up Reading* seminar, Off the Shelf festival, November 1999.

“...having readers group members is a brilliant way of asking them about stock selection...asking them about promotion and getting their advise and feedback...you’ve got them ready and able so to speak..we also use them to organise events...”

Using reading group members in this way not only benefits the members, but enables all library users to reap the benefit. This seems to build upon one of the Pontefract reading group’s aims, which as Dearden (1999) states, is to work closely with staff to promote stock and widen the reading experience of other library readers.

A further issued raised in the above response is potential to involve reading group members in stock selection. The general consensus from those involved with reading groups viewed this as a potentially good idea. Although, reservations were made as to how this would work in practice, it emerged from the data that most reading groups, are in fact, indirectly involved in selecting stock for the library. This response, was reflective of many:

“Well they are almost in a certain way because we do say to readers groups if there is anything you want to read let us know and we’ll buy it...and they do..so we do...(laughs)...once those books have done the rounds of the readers groups they get put into ordinary lending stock...”

One of the key benefits, as the researcher identifies, is the needs of the reading public are being consulted. Librarians should not assume that they know what readers want. Consulting the user helps to ensure stock is chosen to reflect readers needs, as one librarian expresses:

“...I think they help with book selection because quite a lot of the books they read are not necessarily block busters they're fringe interest titles...but we might buy them in perhaps one or twos...but I think if they pick those as their reads and they actually write reviews then it helps to popularise them with other people...”

Librarians have a priority to buy what the reading public want, which often includes a large number of popular 'blockbuster' titles. However, by consulting reading group members this choice can be widened. It is what the readers want but consequently it develops the reading experience of readers. There is exciting potential here which arguably librarians should seize upon. The researcher identifies, there are benefits in consulting reading group members in stock selection, as it helps to widen the choice's librarians make.

Reading groups clearly have the potential to make an impact on wider library activity. The key factor to note is that writing reviews and choosing stock are often integral to the reading group experience. It is this opportunity, that those involved with reading groups, should arguably seize upon. The reading group is not an insular activity, but one that can affect a much wider audience. Reading group members are a great resource as the responses appear to indicate. However, it is recognising that “readers are the greatest resource libraries have”. (Van Riel & Fowler: 1996b:54).

7.2 Unique role of the public library reading group

“...we’ve got the stock...we’ve got the trained staff...we’ve got the experience...we’ve got the venues in the community...we’ve got the contacts...need I go on?...we’ve got practically everything...we ought to be at the forefront on the national agenda...” (Interviewee response)

It was apparent having interviewed those involved with reader's groups and talking to reading group members that the public library's role in the reading group experience is particularly significant. The researcher would go as far to say that this strength of feeling was extremely impressionable as the above response illuminates.

There appears to be many advantages of a public library reading group. The researcher identifies a number of key reoccurring factors that emerged from the data. Firstly, the advantage of a public library reading group is that libraries are free. You do not have to pay to join a reading group and there is no pressure to buy anything. This has significant benefit for the reading group members as they do not have to pay for the books, unlike groups that meet in Waterstones, for example. This was seen by many as a strong advantage:

“...they know they’re not under any pressure to buy anything...whereas a reading group in a bookshop you have to buy the book...in a library you get it for nothing...no commitment to it...”

For many reading group members having access to free books through the library was extremely favourable, as the responses illustrate:

“...that’s what’s so wonderful here...it is an expensive hobby...buying books..a paperback is now £7.99”

“I mean I was shocked you get books free...you usually have to cough up...”

For one individual this was viewed as extremely important:

“The thing is I do that I read reviews and write them down if it appeals to me but unfortunately I’m strict with money so I’m relying on the library...”

In the majority of instances the books chosen to read are not going to be liked everybody, therefore buying them may be judged by many as a waste of money. Consequently readers are more unlikely to take risks. However, the public library reading group enables members to take these risks because you can bring it back to the group and exchange it for another. As Rommi Smith expressed “a book costs only the time you make to read it”.

Closely related to the free issue, is that the public library is open to everyone. Regardless of class, age, gender, education and knowledge, anyone can enter the public library. (Greenhalgh et al:1995, Kerslake & Kinnell:1997, Green & McKrell:1997). Many saw this as an advantage of a public library reading group:

“I think it’s one of the selling points of the library...cause it’s open service and it’s a public building where people are welcome from any social background...”

In previous responses, members have commented how the reading group is non-intimidating or threatening. Anybody is welcome to join the

group. Some groups as Slezak (1995) and Jacobsohn (1998) highlight seem to adopt an exclusive approach, choosing and dropping members, depending on whether they 'fit' the group. Under these circumstances a hierarchy may form and cause tension within the group.

However, the reading group affiliated to a public library has an open membership and is therefore neutral ground. This is important to the reading group experience, as has been expressed in previous chapters. One of the key factors to stimulating discussion is feeling able to express openly your thoughts and opinions. As Leonard, quoted by, Messenger (1990) states the "the place where a democratic freedom of encounter with literature has occurred is in the free public libraries" p28.

Another advantage of reading groups connected to the public library is groups who meet in the library may be prompted to use other library resources:

"...if they're in the library then they're also in a position to see what else the library does and nosy around the shelves..."

"...if you get people through the door then you'd get them to use all sorts of other services too...it also kind of reinforces in people's minds the function of what a public library is..."

The reading group, therefore can act as a kind of promotional tool to the library service, but also benefit the reading group member. It seems apparent that a public library reading group benefits greatly from its association to the library. The researcher views the library's role as a supporting mechanism that helps to create and sustain reading groups. This network of support ranges from access to books, obtaining further information for reading groups, staff expertise in recommending books to providing the venue for groups to meet. Groups can meet anywhere, pubs,

cafes, people's homes and the workplace. However, the library can still play a supporting role, as one librarian's comments illustrate:

"..what we're trying to do is set up a library reading group...yes if they choose to meet in the library fine...I think what we're trying to do is not get too directly involved because there's a limit to how much time and energy that we can give to groups...there's maybe other ways we can help"

The library still plays a significant role in creating and sustaining the group, through advice on setting up groups and ways to sustain them and providing access to books, However the direct running is left to the group. This approach was unique to the groups visited, however, it illustrates the important supporting network that the library provides. As this librarian claimed, not all groups may want to meet in the library and therefore this allows them to meet in their own homes while still getting the support from the library. This builds upon Usherwood & Toyne (2000) who interviewed reading groups that did not meet in the library, yet the inspiration came from the library.

The great thing about reading groups, is that they are so different. While some want to meet in the library, meet new people, have an expert librarian and facilitator to run and inspire the group. Others may be groups set up with friends, who want the support of the library in terms of books, but not the venue or facilitator. This was raised at the *Checking the Books* workshop⁹ by librarians currently involved with reading groups. Each group has differing needs, yet the researcher would argue that the library, as a support mechanism is the catalyst that helps to create and sustain 'successful' reading groups.

⁹ Taken from *Checking the Books* workshop, 19th July 2000.

Chapter 8 Conclusions and recommendations for future research

The primary aim of this research was to identify what makes a 'successful' reading group, in order to inform librarians and those involved in setting up and running groups. It was also hoped the findings would be of practical benefit to established groups seeking fresh motivation and enthusiasm. As the literature illustrates reading groups are becoming increasingly popular, yet little is documented on the underlying processes of these meetings. Ultimately, therefore this research aims to illuminate the practice of reading groups to inform anyone who is interested and inquisitive about this experience.

8.1 Chapter conclusions

Firstly, **Chapter 3** examined the definitions and perceptions of reading groups. It was apparent that, the concept of a reading group was understood by those involved, as a group of like-minded people coming together to share views on books they had read. It is the sharing element that denotes the reading group experience. The long held perception that reading is purely an isolated and solitary activity, is eliminated by the fact that people do want to get together and talk about the books they have read.

Sharing is the pivotal factor that everything else seems to hinge upon. To enable this sharing to take place you need books to read, people who are willing to exchange their view, someone to encourage discussion and a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for discussion to transpire. The group dynamics have to be in place.

Although a reading group formalises the sharing element, it is the informal atmosphere in which this takes place that seems to appeal to members. People clamour for a reading group because often there is no one with an interest in books to share your opinions. Additionally, it may not always be an appropriate time to share your feelings. The reading group, however, brings these people together. It is time put aside to share experiences of books. It is the discussions that form the informal aspect, as they are based on each individual's opinion of a book. It is this combination, that if achieved, is the foundation of a 'successful' reading group.

The analysis of the membership of reading groups, **Chapter 4**, led the researcher to a number of definite conclusions. The leader's role emerged as a key contributor to a group's 'success'. Leadership encompasses everything from the organisation of the group, to facilitating group discussions. However, it is crucial that integral to this leadership role is commitment and enthusiasm towards the reading group and its continued success. It is an enthusiastic leader who will also inspire and enthuse the group members. While this leadership role is vital to a group, it is not rigid leadership that is required. It is a leader who achieves a balance. They create the environment for sharing to occur and may instigate the discussion, but they recognise that the sharing will come naturally from the reading members.

The make-up of reading groups is primarily women. Although this based on the groups interviewed, the literature does appear to support this finding. In terms of recruiting new members to reading groups this has particular implications for the way groups are publicised in the future.

However, the issue to take precedence over this in terms of the make-up of reading groups, is having a good mix of people. It does not matter

who you are, your age, gender or what you have read before. Everybody has an opinion to make and this is the important feature. Each individual brings a unique experience of reading the book to the group that is equally valid.

In terms of recruiting new members, publicity within the library does not appear to be the most successful or strongest method of encouraging new members to groups. Trying to capture in words the reading experience is extremely difficult. Therefore, the researcher would conclude reading groups need to demonstrate why they are so popular by showing people exactly what happens. As the saying goes, 'actions speak louder than words'. It is recognising that reading groups are not insular. A reading group can take place anywhere. The outreach potential is, therefore, enormous. If people can see what a reading group is about, that reading and sharing opinions is a fun and exciting experience this will achieve much more than a poster saying the same thing.

Lastly, this chapter examined the reading group session. There is no typical reading group meeting. This supports the first chapter's conclusions that no-one can predict what someone will think of a book or where the discussion will finish. However, the researcher discovered that reading group members do like the session to follow a similar formula. Reading and exchanging views on the *same* book was seen to be the essence of a reading group session.

As the analysis of **Chapter 5** demonstrates, reading groups are meeting the expectations of reading group members, whilst fulfilling the Reader Development agenda in libraries. Reading groups broaden and widen people's reading experiences, through recommending new titles and authors, getting people out of the rut of choosing the same types of books and helping individuals to choose books for further individual reading.

The researcher would conclude, that not only is the reading fulfilling the Reader Development aims but reaching much further. The social function of a reading group is equally important. What came across from visiting each group was how important the reading group was as social occasion. Although a reading group is based on the sharing of individual experiences of a book, the social setting in which this takes place is equally important to members. Laughter and chatter are an integral part of the whole reading group experience. For those intending to set up reading groups, this social function is an important feature and should not be regarded as superficial.

The conclusions drawn from **Chapter 6**, have direct implications for library managers. Reading groups require leaders with the skills and enthusiasm to sustain groups. One way in which library managers can help to create 'successful' reading groups is by seeking out potential leaders in libraries with the enthusiasm for reading groups, and offering informal training.

An example of an informal training opportunity is developing and building upon the work of Readers-in-Residences and other staff who may already be involved in running reading groups. Disseminating expertise and knowledge not only enables more groups to be set up, but these groups benefit from having skilled and knowledgeable leaders.

Grasping the opportunities for informal training are important, as money for Readers-in-Residences is often scarce. Even if authorities manage to acquire money for specialist posts such as these, securing extra funding once the initial fund has disappeared is difficult. Therefore, spreading the experience and knowledge is even more crucial.

Lastly, **Chapter 7**, which clearly demonstrates the advantages of having a reading group linked to the public library. Group dynamics related to creating and sustaining reading groups can arguably be associated to all reading groups. However, a reading group connected to the public library not only benefits the reading group members but also wider library activities. The researcher would state that the public library reading group is a selling point of the library itself. It is free to join, the books are free, anybody is welcome, it is a non-threatening and relaxed experience, it is non-judgmental, there is staff expertise and a venue.

Similarly, groups that do not want to meet in the library can still benefit from the library support mechanism, in terms of staff expertise and access to books. Libraries are an unrivalled resource for creating and helping to sustain reading groups. Library managers should recognise this and seek ways to make the most of this powerful resource.

There is no single model of a 'successful' reading group. People are the core of reading groups, as without their 'voice', the reading group experience would cease to exist. Each person has a different voice and a comment to make. Therefore, just as there is diversity in people, reading groups will be equally diverse. Not only is each group different, but each time the group meets it is a new experience waiting to happen. No-one can predict what will take place as it is a blank space waiting to be filled with discussion.

However, what the findings from this research demonstrate to those involved in setting up and running reading groups is that they can help to ensure they run 'successfully' by being aware of a number of issues. A group clearly benefits from an enthusiastic and committed leader who can create an open environment, where people feel relaxed to share their opinions. Maintaining variety in the sessions, in order to sustain people's interest and enthusiasm in the group, is also a key consideration.

If the 'stage' can be set and the group dynamics are right, who knows what will happen. One thing is for sure, when people get together and share their love of books it is a fun, exciting and stimulating experience.

8.2 Recommendations for future research

The researcher believes that this research has fulfilled the aims and objectives as set out in the research proposal to examine *What makes a 'successful' public library reading group. How good practice can be created and sustained.* As the project has emerged the researcher has recognised the scale and potential impact of the reading group movement in libraries. The opportunity to delve into the reading group experience has exposed a number of possible research topics related to reading groups.

Firstly, the research identified the low number of men who make up reading groups. It is recognised in the literature that men do not read as much as women and a number of reading initiatives have sought to encourage men to read.

Reading groups could be a way to encourage men back to reading. Those setting up reading groups could benefit from research that seeks to identify why men do not join reading groups.

Research related to this area is reading groups for young people. Evidence suggests that the reading habits of young people, especially boys decline during the teenage years. *The Daily Mail Reading Clubs (2000)* initiative has set up reading clubs in schools to help counter the backward slide in reading by young people. An evaluation of the impact of this initiative and similar schemes could provide useful data as to the benefits of reading groups.

Reading groups have the potential to fulfil the government's aims for social inclusion, building a reading nation, lifelong learning and developing literacy skills. This is potentially a key area of research that could have far reaching benefits for libraries.

Lastly, in the time scale of this project the researcher was unable to look at reading groups that cater for different groups. There is an area of future research to examine reading groups in prisons, the workplace, elderly care complexes. Also in libraries there are reading groups for housebound library users and the visually impaired. Additionally, there is an area of research to look at different types of groups, in terms of literary and specialist subject groups that seem to be becoming increasingly popular.

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APPENDIX 1

Department of Information Studies
University of Sheffield
Regent Court
211 Portobello Road
Sheffield
S1 4DP

26th May 2000

Dear

I am a postgraduate student of Librarianship, in the Department of Information Studies, at the University of Sheffield. For my dissertation I am researching *What makes a 'successful' public library reading group? How good practice can be created and sustained*. This topic originates from a AHRB funded project currently being undertaken by Bob Usherwood and Jackie Toyne, at the University of Sheffield called *Checking the Books - the Value and Impact of Public Library Book Reading*.

In order to research my topic I hope to interview the Librarian responsible for reading groups and Reader Development, as well as holding a focus group with a particular reading group, possibly after a meeting session. All the information given will be treated in the strictest confidence. I anticipate that neither session will last more than an hour.

I would appreciate if you could pass my letter to the most appropriate person and advise them to contact me, by email: liq99cs@sheffield.ac.uk, phone (0114) 2751315 or letter by the 14th June 2000. I enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,

Claire Scothern.

APPENDIX 2

Interview schedule: Librarian responsible for Reader Development/reading groups.

Time: 1/2 hr - 1hr approximately

Introduction

My name is Claire Scothern and I am studying for an MA in Librarianship at the University of Sheffield. For my dissertation I am looking at public library reading groups. I am interested in gaining your opinions about reading groups and reading group associated activity in.....(Name of authority).

Would you object if I used a tape recorder? This is purely to ensure I capture all your responses. I assure complete confidentiality will be maintained in the final report. The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes. The questions begin generally about reading development and move to more specific questions about reading groups. As part of the interview I have a number of statements made about reading groups whereby I will ask for your strength of agreement about these.

Link: Is that all clear? OK, I shall start with my first question that is about Reader Development.

A General issues about Reader Development

A1 What do you understand by reading development?

A2 Does(Name of authority) have a Reader Development policy/strategy?

If YES When was this established?
Is it possible to have a copy?

If NO Is there going to be a policy established in the future?

Link: Now I am going to move on to reading groups as part of Reader Development.

A3 What are the objectives for reading groups in your authority?

A4 (Only ask if they have a written policy) Are they included within the Reader Development policy?

Link: The questions now move on to specifically about reading groups within(Name of authority).

B Reading group activity

B1 How many readers' groups are there in.....(Name of authority)?

B2 Has the authority ever employed a Writer-in-Residence or Reader-in-Residence?

If YES What has been their involvement with reading groups?
Have they been involved in any other Reading Development activities?

If NO Are you considering employing them in the future?

B3 Do the reading groups have any impact on wider library activities?

For example, book reviews

B4 Do you think reading group members should be involved in stock selection?

Link: Here is the first of 4 statements made about reading groups.

“Reading Groups signify a shift in attitude towards reading - a move away from the lonely subjectivity of private experience into a social context”

B5 Referring to these cards how far do you agree with this statement?

Could you expand on why you choose that?

Link: The next statement and following questions relate to evaluating and sustaining reading groups.

C Creating and sustaining readers’ groups

C1 *“Staff should be trained in setting up reading groups and running them”*

What is your strength of agreement?

Can you explain why you said this?

C2 Should librarians be readers?

C3 *“Reading groups, once established are an excellent source of publicity material”*

Using the card what is your strength of agreement?

Why do you say this?

C4 How far do you see it as your role to ‘market’ readers’ groups?

C5 Do you think the make-up of reading groups reflects the whole community?

C6 What do you think could be done to encourage a wider range of members?

C7 What do you think makes a reading group successful?

C8 Have you heard of the ‘Reading Group Toolbox’, from Waterstones?
What do you think of this?

C9 Why do you think some groups fail?

Link: The last statement made about reading groups refers to funding.

C10 *“Corporate sponsorship is helping to nurture the growth of reading groups”*

Using the cards, how far do you agree with this statement?

Can you tell me why you think this?

Link: The last few questions relate to the role of the public library

D The unique role of the public library reading group

D1 Reading groups, arguably can take place anywhere. However, what do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of a reading group linked to the public library?

D2 What, if anything, is unique about a public library reading group?

Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about reading groups?

Thank you very much for giving up your time to answer my questions. I appreciate all your help and I am sure the information will be of use in my project. Thank you again.

APPENDIX 3

Focus group interview schedule: Reading Group

Time: 45 minutes approximately

Introduction

My name is Claire Scothern and I am studying for an MA in Librarianship at the University of Sheffield. For my dissertation I am looking at public library reading groups. I am interested in gaining your opinions and experiences as members of a reading group.

Would you mind if I used a tape recorder? This is purely to ensure I capture all your responses. Please do not feel put off by the tape recorder. Please treat this as a discussion and feel free to express your opinions. However if I could ask you to speak one at a time for the sake of the tape, I would be grateful. If you do not have anything to say this is fine. There is no pressure to answer. I assure you no individual names will be mentioned in the final project.

I have 5 basic questions that ask about your group, what happens during the meetings and why you come to the reading group.

Could I ask each of you, in turn, to go round and introduce yourselves.

Link: Thank you. OK, I'll begin with my first question

Q1 Can you begin by telling me a little about the group?

Probes: What do you see as the groups' aims?
How long has it been going?
The average number that comes each time?
What types of books are read?
Who chooses the books?
How do you get hold of the books?

Link: Moving on to the sessions themselves

Q2 What happens during the meetings?

Probes: Does the group have a leader? What is their role?
Do you follow a set plan each time?
Apart from the book itself, how else do you encourage discussion about the book?
Have you heard of the 'Reading Group Toolbox', from Waterstones? Have you used it as part of the meetings?
What do you think of this?

Link: I am now going to ask about your reasons for coming to the group.

Q3 What does membership of the group contribute to your reading experience?

Probes: What do you enjoy about coming to the reading group?
Have you been to any other group? How do they differ?
If you could not come to the group, how would this affect your reading, if at all?

Link: I am now going to move on to discuss the public library connection with your group.

Q4 What connection does the reading group have with wider library activities?

Probes: For example, do you do book reviews?

Are you involved with selecting stock for the library?

Link: OK, could I ask

Q5 What do you think makes a reading group successful?

Probes: Do you think this group is successful and why? Please be honest!

Why do think some groups fail?

Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about your group or reading groups in general?

Thank you very much everyone. I appreciate you staying behind to take part in the discussion. It has been very interesting talking to you and I am sure your comments and opinions will be of use to my project. Thank you again.

APPENDIX 4

Observation criteria

Factual data:

- Number of members at the meeting
- Approximate ages
- Number of males and females
- Venue and arrangement of the room

Group dynamics:

- What happens during a meeting
- Leader's role
- Overall atmosphere and climate of the group