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Exploring teachers' positions and practices: a case study of one poetry teacher

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Drawing upon research into teachers' reading habits, practices and identities, and data from a United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) project which sought to widen teachers' repertoires and practice with regard to reading for pleasure, this chapter explores the interplay between one teacher's developing knowledge and enthusiasm for poetry, and the subtle shifts in her positions and practices as a teacher of poetry. In tune with US studies which show that 'Reading Teachers; teachers who read and readers who teach' (Commeyras, Bisplingoff and Olson, 2003) offer significant support to child readers, it focuses on a single 'Poetry Teacher' – who both reads poetry for her own pleasure and who teaches poetry to young learners. In the project, this primary phase professional sought to document her own reading habits and practices as she read poetry, and also scrutinized the reading practices and positions enacted in her classroom. As a consequence she sought to widen these and came to share more explicitly her own enthusiasm and engagement as an adult reader of poetry with the children.

The chapter highlights the significance of considering the relationship between teachers' positions and practices and those selected and enacted in the literacy classroom in relation to poetry. It reveals the advantages that can accrue when teachers recognise they are responsible for framing what counts as poetry in school and share a developing love of poetry with younger learners.

Teachers' reading habits and practices

There is evidence to indicate that teachers are adult readers (Cremin et al., 2008a) and that student teachers come to teach English due to a love of literature (Peel, 1999; Gannon and Davies, 2007). However, whilst a UKLA *Teachers as Readers: Phase 1* survey of 1200 primary practitioners found that three quarters of the sample had read a book in the last three months, less than 2% of the respondents had read any poetry over this period and only 1.5% noted poetry as their favourite childhood reading (Cremin et al., 2008a). In relation to these teachers' knowledge and use of poetry in the classroom, there was even more cause for concern. It was evident that they had extremely weak subject knowledge in relation to poetry: 22% did not name a single poet, 58% named two, one or no poets, and only 10% named six (Cremin et al., 2008b). Overall there was considerable reliance upon the work of poets and particularly named poems by authors that the teachers were likely to have known since childhood. The English inspectorate survey also noted that teachers tend to lean upon a limited range of poets and poems in school, relying upon those presented in publishers' resources or from childhood (Ofsted , 2007). There is a strikingly similar 'canon' of children's poetry noted in their list of the most well used 'primary poems' – 'poems regularly used for study in literacy lessons' such as Stevenson's 'The Railway Carriage' and Milligan's 'On the Ning Nang Nong' (Ofsted, 2007).

In the UKLA survey, the highest number of mentions was for Michael Rosen (452) with only five others gaining over a hundred mentions, namely: Allan Ahlberg (207), Roger McGough (197), Roald Dahl (165), Spike Milligan (159) and Benjamin Zephaniah (131). After these, only three poets were mentioned more than fifty times: Edward Lear (85), Ted Hughes (58) and A.A. Milne (57). Only

thirteen women poets were mentioned: Grace Nicholls received the most mentions (16), followed by Christina Rossetti (11) and Eleanor Farjeon (9), Carol Ann Duffy (not then Poet Laureate) received 3 mentions, and Jackie Kay and Valerie Bloom two each, whilst Wendy Cope received just one. Although this gender imbalance may reflect wider ideological, cultural or publishing practices, it has potential consequence for the classroom. In addition to this lack of knowledge, and Ofsted's perception that many primary and secondary teachers are neither keen nor regular readers of poetry, concerns have also been voiced about a perceived over-emphasis on the study and imitation of poetry's forms and features (Wilson, 2005; Grainger et al., 2005) and the relatively infrequency with which teachers read poetry aloud. For example in the UKLA survey, less than 2% of the teachers who had read aloud to their classes for pleasure in the preceding six months, mentioned reading any poetry (Cremin et al., 2008b).

Teachers' reading identities

In relation to research exploring teachers' reading identities and positioning in the classroom there is evidence to suggest that teachers' practice may be morally compromised in context of high stakes testing (Assaf, 2008; Dooley, 2005; English et al., 2002). Also that home, peer and institutional practices shape children's identities as readers (Hall, 2002) and that teachers' conceptions of reading identities, can frame and limit children's identities as readers (Hall et al., 2010). In addition, in the United States, autobiographical work suggests that an apparent continuity exists between teachers and children as motivated and engaged readers (e.g. Bisplinghoff, 2002; Dreher, 2003). Some of this work claims that teachers' pleasure in literature influences both their personal lives and their classroom practice (Rummel and Quintero, 1997; Commeyras et al.,

2003). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the US studies which foreground the conception of a Reading Teacher tend to rely on autobiographical self-reports from teachers on credit bearing courses. There is almost no observation in context, little or no attention to children's perspectives and a lack of documentation of the consequences of this stance for learners.

The Phase II study, on which this chapter draws, chose to focus not just on teachers, but also on learners. Children's development as readers was also tracked and observations were used to document some of the ways in which connections between the teachers' personal reading insights and their classroom practice were made manifest.

The project *Teachers as Readers Phase II*

Responding to the above concerns about teachers' habits and practices as readers of poetry, and the recognition that teachers' identities and conceptions of reading can frame and constrain children's literate identities, the UKLA project *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers (2007-8) Phase II* was planned. It sought to develop children's reading for pleasure through expanding teachers' knowledge and use of children's literature and to interrogate the concept of Reading Teachers. 43 primary teachers were involved from five Local Authorities (LAs) in England, nine of these were from Medway (3 KS1 and 6 KS2). This LA chose to focus on poetry.

In their local group as well as through National Days, the Medway teachers were challenged and supported to widen their working repertoires of adult and children's poetry. In local sessions in particular, poetry was read aloud, the teachers were invited to share their forays into the work of self-selected poets and they borrowed from a newly constituted collection of poetry anthologies. The first term of this year-long project was almost exclusively devoted to teachers' own reading and sharing of texts, individually and collaboratively, they engaged in explorations of poetry through art, drama, dance, discussion and writing. The teachers, as co-participant researchers were also invited to document their learning journeys, to reflect upon their attitudes, choices, habits, practices and preferences as readers of adult and children's poetry and to record their thoughts in reflective journals.

In terms two and three, whilst the teachers continued to read poetry, the core focus shifted to the classroom, they were encouraged both to consider their positions/stances as readers *and* as teachers of poetry and to explore any opportunities which emerged as a result of either stance influencing the other. The teachers also tracked the responses of three 'disaffected and reluctant' child readers to their changing pedagogic practice, Moss's (2000) category of 'can but don't' readers was employed for this purpose. In addition, Medway organised an end of year poetry festival for all the teachers and children involved (Wells and Swain, 2008).

In sum, the project involved considerable reflection on learning, the teachers were invited to:

- participate personally as well as professionally as readers
- develop their reflective awareness of themselves as readers' –their metacognitive knowledge about the social processes of reading
- explore the pedagogic consequences of their personal /professional engagement and reflection.

In order to document any teacher knowledge expansion and changes to pedagogic practice as well as understand any dispositional shifts on the part of the practitioners, the research team identified a random sub-sample of two schools per LA for case study enquiries. Baseline, mid phase and end of project data about these teachers' knowledge and practices was gathered (through surveys, interviews and observations in school), and three interviews were undertaken across the year with each of these practitioners as well as three with their headteachers and the disaffected readers respectively. The case study teachers' professional learning portfolios were additionally subject to meta-analysis, these large files included common project prompts, the teachers' own documentation about their reading and their observations and assessments of the focus children. One of the Medway case studies, Brenda, (a pseudonym) represents the focus of this chapter.

Project data analysis

A mixed methods approach was used for data analysis. Initially, the data was analysed inductively, with the Medway assigned researcher working independently to draw out themes from her case studies, one of which was Brenda. Subsequently, data were categorised under the project's themes/aims and new themes that emerged in the analytical process. The selection and segmentation of this data was undertaken through purposive sampling (Strauss

and Corbin, 1990), and was analysed for thematic content using the iterative process of categorical analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The multiple sources of data supported the reliability and validity of the findings and helped with the triangulation of the data. All data were analysed by more than one team member and were cross checked with an independent researcher.

Across the period of the project, an increase in all the Medway teachers' personal pleasure in and breadth of knowledge of poetry was noted, alongside shifts in pedagogy and new relationships with children (Cremin et al., 2009). Although some of the teachers expressed reservations about taking time to share something of their own poetry reading in school and perceived this might be time wasting, commenting such practice was neither recognised nor expected by the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006). Brenda however, sought to explore the transformative potential of this personal/professional identity shift and over time came to adopt a new stance - that of a Poetry Teacher. Four main threads emerged through analysis of the dataset which related to this teacher.

These included:

- Increased pleasure in reading poetry and widening repertoire
- Increased sharing of own poetry reading in school
- Increased awareness of her own reading strategies whilst reading poetry
- Influence upon the children

It is to an examination of the themes that this chapter now turns, seeking to illuminate the synergies between Brenda's own rekindled knowledge and pleasure in poetry, her sharing of this and the development of her pedagogic

practice which was re-shaped in response to a new metacognitive awareness of the social practice of reading poetry.

A case study of an emerging Poetry Teacher

Through the project, Brenda, who had been teaching for 31 years, was challenged to develop knowledge of poetry and share this with the 6-7 year olds she taught in a large two form entry infant school in Medway. In an early interview, this teacher who worked as the literacy consultant in her school, acknowledged that she had never thought of sharing her own reading habits and interests, she thought 'the children would 'be far too young... I just don't think they'll be interested in what I read'. However her journey as a Poetry Teacher was to indicate to Brenda that this was a misconception.

1. Increased pleasure in reading poetry and widening repertoire

In talking about her reading history, Brenda revealed that when she had learnt to read she had struggled and had felt labelled because she needed additional help. Many years later as a young teacher a pile of flashcards had fallen out of a cupboard and involuntarily her stomach had dropped, the memories of her early difficulties returned. Yet somewhere on her journey, (she was unsure when), she had found a deep satisfaction in reading. She perceived this was influenced in part because of her father's love of the sound and savour of words, and in part was prompted by friends who swapped books and shared their preparedness to read. From the first interview, Brenda framed herself as a keen reader, listing historical novels, texts about China (her new daughter in law was Chinese), newspapers and specialist magazines about making scrapbooks as her current

reading interests. She observed though that she had not read much poetry in years and set herself the challenge of getting to know the work of two contemporary poets each term. In the early phase interview she observed that she had selected Gervase Phinn,(as she had not appreciated he wrote poetry) and Sheree Fitch, a Canadian poet whose work she had found in one of the Medway book boxes as her first pair to get to know. Brenda also found considerable pleasure in revisiting some of her old school favourites, as she noted

‘I’m finding again how much I love the old fashioned poets like Christina Rossetti and Robert Louis Stevenson. I’d forgotten how much music and pleasure there is in their work- I’m reading a biography of Rossetti at the moment’. (Written reflection, Dec)

By the Spring term, Brenda was immersed in reading poetry and other texts and displayed increased interest in poetry, initiating conversations about particular poems and poets, making recommendations to colleagues on the project and borrowing regularly from the box. This enthusiasm began to be transferred into the classroom as she noted ‘This project has given me the freedom to revisit texts that I’m more passionate about myself It has allowed me into my teaching again - to share something of my own love of literature and particularly poetry. (Interview, Spring). It appeared that in being offered both time and texts, and being encouraged to read , research and share her expanding repertoire had rekindled her pleasure in the music of poetry.

2. Increased sharing of own poetry reading in school

When Brenda engaged her class in discussing their own reading histories, memories and favourite books from home and the nursery, she also chose to share her own childhood difficulties and noted they seemed ‘frankly amazed’ and ‘genuinely interested’(Researcher notes after an interview, Spring). This may have prompted her to share more in school of her own self set challenges and current focus on poetry, which had immediate consequences, as she noted:

‘I told them that I’m trying to get to know new poets and three children brought in collections from home for me to read- so I’ve lent them some of my books too’ (Interview, mid-phase)

Whilst Brenda perceived she read regularly, several times a week to her class, this was nearly always picture fiction and very rarely poetry, however with a wider repertoire to draw upon, from the spring term she sought to read poetry aloud at least three times a week. She set up her own class poetry book box (she had borrowed a collection from the local library), and was observed reading and recommending particular books from this to individual children In one case her suggestion to Gurjit to read Claire Bevan’s *Mermaid Poems* was to prove pivotal.

In addition, Brenda talked to the class about the frustrations and pleasure of reading and how she had ‘fallen in love with words’ when listening to the radio and as a consequence of her father reading aloud to her. She brought in some of her adult poetry reading, the Rosetti biography and scrapbook magazines as well as multiple other texts over time.

3. Heightened awareness of own reading/comprehension strategies in relation to poetry

As Brenda read poetry outside school and talked to other project teachers about her favourite poets from childhood as well as new writers, she sought to document her own reading habits, preferences and practices. She kept a reading journal in which she reflected upon her own reading of fiction, poetry and multiple other forms and in this way began to develop an increased awareness of the strategies she employed when reading. In relation to poetry she noted for example that she engaged in extensive re-reading of whole poems, verses and lines, in visualising elements of poems and also revisiting her own life through creating connecting visuals prompted by poems. Her journal also included multiple references to subvocalising and a sense of felt/physical engagement with some poetry as well as frequent questioning of and pondering on the text and subtext. Recognising that these were ways of her making sense of the poetry she was reading, Brenda came to re-consider her practice and the extent to which she was affording opportunities for the children to ponder and wonder, ask questions, engage physically with poems, and represent the musical tenor of words.

As a consequence, Brenda began to share her personal feel for the pattern and rhythm in poetry and her love of classic verse in particular with the young children in her class. She noticed that her enthusiasm and pleasure in reading and re-reading child and adult texts had consequences in relation to the children's attitudes and this encouraged her. For example she observed 'I had been repeatedly reading R L Stevenson's 'From a Railway Carriage' and was delighted when I heard Harry during ERIC time quietly reading it out loud, with the same rhythm and evident pleasure. It spurred me on (Interview, early stage).

She described offering much more time for reading poetry aloud and responding to the children's requests for particular poems, such that re-repeated readings became the norm. For example she commented 'They love My Cat Cuddles- It feels like I'm reading it nearly every day- "Again" they say- "Cuddles again! "' (Interview, mid-phase). In addition she felt there was 'more time to ponder and wonder'... you know just read them, hear them and then NOT discuss them'. The observational notes evidence considerable informal discussion about poetry developed as well as peer to peer and child to teacher, teacher to child recommendations.

Other pedagogical consequences included a more integrated focus on art craft and display relating to poetry, and opportunities to re-read and add percussion and drama as well as dance. They also performed poems and wrote poetry together in the playground, on school trips, and at the poetry festival. Much of this work involved the children selecting ways to represent their poems, though there was also teacher modelling. Additionally, appreciating that at home she would often read poetry in the comfort of an armchair or in the bath, Brenda set up an undersea role play /reading area based upon Claire Bevan's mermaid collections, and encouraged the children to read poetry in class reading time, and she too read alongside them. As she commented in the final interview:

It is surprising how you think the children would obviously know you are a reader and enjoy reading - they don't necessarily – unless you explicitly tell them and give examples and show them the adult books you are reading.... I now teach from a reader's point of view. (Interview, Summer).

4. Influence upon the children

There was evidence that Brenda's increased knowledge, pleasure and use of poetry widened the children's repertoires and experience of poetry, and made a particular positive impact upon the case study readers' attitudes. As the year progressed children were observed choosing to read poetry aloud to one another, choosing to perform poetry in 'golden time', writing poetry from choice and swapping poetry books. This was a significant change from the early observations in which poetry was 'on the shelf' and no child was observed choosing to access it in these ways.

In a final interview the -three initially reluctant readers, offered an extensive list of their favourite poets, including Eleanor Farjeon, Robert Louis Stevenson, Wes Magee, Edward Lear, Tony Mitton, John Agard, Christina Rossetti, Sheree Fitch and Gervase Phinn. It was clear that the opportunities to read, re-read, hear, perform and write poetry had created a rich set of 'texts in common' for these children, who spontaneously quoted from some of their favourite poems in interview.

Gurjit: I still love poetry best, though I like Anne Fine too

Jonah: My favourite reading is poetry too

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Jonah: Well it's kind of short- though not all poems are short and it's enjoyable.

You can choose what you like in a poetry book you don't have to read it all -you

just read the ones that interest you- like My Cat Jack and the Boneyard Rap-
who's that one –you remember?

Toby: Wes Magee I think.

Gurjit: Yeah it is.

Gurjit and Jonah and Toby: (together)

It's a boneyard rap and it's a scare

Give your bones a shake up if you dare

Rattle your teeth and waggle your jaw

And let's do the boneyard rap once more

(Interview, final phase)

This practice of spontaneously quoting extracts and talking about their reading with ease and interest was a noticeable change from the autumn, it often had a performative element about it and reflected the children's new pleasure in word play and poetry, shaped perhaps by her intonation and engagement during reading aloud. As Toby, commented: 'When she reads some poems she slows down and kind of does actions and descriptions - so when the people turned into stone in the haunted house one she kind of did this (he imitates his teacher going into slow motion) and made it slow and we could see them turning into stone and it was brilliant... I love her reading aloud'.

Additionally, the children's perception of their teacher as a fellow reader shifted considerably; in the autumn, they were unable to offer information about her reading habits or preferences. As Brenda shared more of her reading life and pleasure in the sense, sounds and savour in poetry, her passion and practice was mirrored by the children and they developed an increased awareness of her as a

reader, when asked what their teacher was reading, their responses were revealing.

Jonah: 'Silver' by Walter de la Mare – we've heard it on a tape too, she remembers her dad reading it to her when she was a child.

Troy: She's also reading Christina Rossetti's poems – like 'Hurt no living thing'- it's about animals and Mrs. Longing has been talking about how Christina Rossetti likes nature so she writes about it. You can choose what you write about if you are a poet.

Jonah: She's doing a scrapbook and she chose this William Wordsworth poem and she's made the page with his poem- but she didn't know all of it- so we found it for her... the scrapbook is hers to hold onto stuff that's important to her

Gurjit: Also she's been reading Sheree Fitch, she's a new poet and she's still alive although lots of poets are dead.

(Interview, mid phase, Y2, MBB).

Overall, the data suggest there was a complex interplay between Brenda's enhanced repertoire, her pedagogic practice and her positioning as an adult reader. She was socially interactive about what she read and this influenced what was available to be learned about poetry and being a reader of poetry in her classroom.

Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of subject and pedagogical content knowledge, as well as personal passion and teachers' positioning. Brenda's stance strongly influenced the children's knowledge about and pleasure in

poetry, and this contributed to the children's development as motivated and developing readers (Cremin et al., 2009). Teachers such as Brenda, for whom reading is significant in their own lives, who read more than the texts they teach and explicitly share their reading practices and preferences with children appear to have the confidence to teach both effectively and affectively and draw in reluctant readers. Such teachers recognise, as Martin (2003:16) acknowledges, that 'a poem is worth reading for its own sake not simply in order to teach something about poetry'.

If we are to alter the challenging poetry landscape in the primary years, then teachers' and student teachers' need to consider their identities and attitudes as poetry readers and as teachers of poetry and more research needs to explore the dynamic between teachers' and children's reading practices and identities .

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