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Helping teachers develop their knowledge of children's literature and other texts

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Some teachers are avid readers of literature and other texts for the young; the readers of this magazine probably devour books for breakfast. However the OU/UK Literacy Association research suggests that many practitioners are less hooked, less knowledgeable and rather over-reliant on celebrity authors and their childhood favouritesⁱ. Whilst this *Teachers as Readers* survey of practitioners' subject knowledge of children's texts was undertaken in 2008 (in 11 local authorities), the percentages remain shocking. For example 54% of the 1200 teachers couldn't name six children's authors, 24% were unable to name one picture fiction creator and 22% couldn't name a single poet. Carol Ann Duffy received only one mention, in contrast to Roald Dahl who was in a league of his own. In 2015, the National Literacy Trust survey of 2300 teachers asked the same question, with reference just to authors.ⁱⁱ This revealed that the profession remains Dahl dependent; he was the most frequently named 'good' children's author in both surveys (good referred to writers whose work teachers valued and found successful in class). This was despite the fact that the OU/UKLA survey was completed by primary teachers and the NLT one by predominantly secondary practitioners.

Professionally this lack of subject knowledge raises cause for concern. It led to a research project *Teachers as Readers* Phase II which showed that developing teachers' knowledge of potent literature can make a marked difference to practice, serving to enrich reading for pleasure pedagogy and support the creation of reciprocal and interactive communities of readers.ⁱⁱⁱ Nonetheless it remains a genuine challenge for classroom teachers to find the time and energy to expand their repertoires. The culture of accountability in England largely conceives of reading as a matter of proficiency, an individual activity which can be taught and tested, and the prime focus for many schools remains decoding and comprehension. This can and often does sideline children's pleasure in reading, and despite the policy rhetoric and its inclusion in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013^{iv}), there is no requirement for teachers to develop this essential aspect of their subject knowledge in teacher training or through continuing professional development (CPD).

In responding to these challenges, the Open University developed a RfP practitioner-focused community website based on the research. <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure> This has myriad resources, including classroom film clips, video interviews (with teachers and researchers), PowerPoints for CPD, self-reviews, Top Texts, Authors in the Spotlight and nearly 200 examples of teachers' research-informed practice. Other OU linked initiatives include the creation of nearly 80 Teachers' Reading Groups with UKLA; work with 21 Initial Teacher Education organisations/universities; Academy Trust projects in Birmingham and Macclesfield; annual OU/UKLA conferences; and the Egmont Reading for Pleasure Award in collaboration with the OU and UKLA. In essence, we are trying to help teachers find and share pleasure in reading and build new communities of readers, on and offline.

Such communities are needed since developing a broad and deep knowledge of children's literature and other texts is no mean feat. To keep it updated requires passion, perseverance and very considerable commitment. This is being shown by the Reading Group leaders and members, who are not only teachers but librarians, teaching assistants, student teachers, early years practitioners, reading volunteers and even parents. Groups meet six times a year to enrich their knowledge, understanding *and* practice in order to nurture children's desire to read. Group members seek to use their enriched repertoires to create social reading environments, tailor their reader recommendations, make wise choices for reading aloud, and engage in book bletcher, a highly significant and somewhat underrated aspect of being a reader.

In these and other CPD contexts right across the country, teachers are exploring ways to establish staff knowledge of authors in order to create a baseline of strengths and areas for development. Many staff teams use the original *Teachers as Readers* survey, others create an Alphabet of Authors (both available on the OU website^v). In the latter, through allocating particular letters of the alphabet to small groups, the collective knowledge of all can be shared. It's a fun way of highlighting knowledge gaps, maybe in world literature, poetry or texts reflecting realities? Analysing their results, one school found an over-reliance on popular authors, so the literacy lead checked the list of books that had been read aloud to children across the previous two terms. To her consternation every single text had been published before the turn of the century! There is nothing wrong with 'old but gold', but children deserve to meet a wide range of writers.

Building on the baseline, literacy leads, working where possible with librarians, seek ways to widen their own and other staff members' repertoires. These might include: setting personal reading goals linked to gaps, e.g. reading a poem a day, focusing on graphic novels, picture fiction, non-fiction, comics or magazines; reading around a theme or topic (e.g. refugees, empathy, Egyptians); reading Award Winners (e.g. the UKLA/Carnegie/Kate Greenaway, Blue Peter Awards); following finders on Twitter (e.g. Mat Tobin @Mat_at_Brookes and Simon Smith @smithsmm who recommend picturebooks); reading *Books for Keeps*; taking the 52 book challenge; inviting children to set the staff reading homework; running a staff book club and reading to your knee or thigh in books!

This is likely to result in the need to buy new books and persuading the leadership team that, as the OECD (2002)^{vi} state, the will influences the skill (and vice versa), and that in any case books are worth reading for their own sake, not just to raise reading scores or widen children's vocabulary! Schools are also building in time for teachers to share texts, seizing five minutes at the start of each staff meeting, creating book assemblies, staff book blankets, speed dating with books, showcasing practitioners' current reading and establishing teachers' mini-libraries of known and loved texts. If a child or adult wants to borrow one of these books, the teacher's views can be shared, leading perhaps to a reciprocal book swap and another informal blether, reader to reader. Most of these ideas are described more fully on the OU website - do visit, explore and share. The monthly newsletter too may be of interest; it'll keep you up to date with reading for pleasure research, resources, events and innovative practice.

Developing one's knowledge of children's literature and other texts is not an optional extra for teachers; nor can it be assumed. It is surely a professional prerequisite and a moral and social responsibility.

ⁱ Cremin, T., Mottram, M. Bearne, E. and Goodwin, P. (2008) Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature *Cambridge Journal of Education* 38 (4): 449-464.

ⁱⁱ Clark, C. & Teravainen, A. (2015) *Teachers and Literacy: Their perceptions, understanding, confidence and awareness*. London: National Literacy Trust.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cremin, T. Mottram, M. Powell, S, Collins R and Safford K. (2014) *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure* London and NY: Routledge.

^{iv} DfE (2013) *The National Curriculum. Key Stages 1 and 2 framework document*. London: DfE.

^v <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/teachers-knowledge-of-childrens-literature-and-other-texts>

^{vi} OECD (2002) *Reading for Change: performance and engagement across countries: Results from PISA 2002* NY: OECD.