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Teachers' knowledge of children's literature: the cornerstone of reading for pleasure

Young people who choose to read in their own time benefit markedly from their engagement as readers. Research demonstrates that reading for pleasure contributes to increased attainment in literacy and numeracy (1), enriched narrative writing (2) and a wider vocabulary and knowledge of the world. In the recent PIRLS study, the ten year olds in England, in line with others internationally, who reported liking reading the most, scored an average of 45 points more than those who reported not liking reading (3). Indeed as Sue Ellis recently argued on this site, the positive effects of volitional reading on attainment apply regardless of socio-economic context (4).

Yet unless teachers have a rich and wide knowledge of children's literature and other texts, and a working knowledge of the young as readers, I would argue they are not well positioned to nurture reading for pleasure or to enable the will to influence the skill. Young people need role models who voice their passion and pleasure in reading and teachers who can tailor their text recommendations to different individual's interests and needs. Such focused support not only increases the chance of young readers finding books that will satisfy them, but also leads to significant book bletcher.

Research indicates that knowledge of children's literature and of other texts is the cornerstone on which interactive communities of readers are built (5). But do teachers have sufficiently rich repertoires? Do they even have time to read their own books, let alone texts for young people? Primary practitioners tend to be over-reliant on 'celebrity' authors and childhood favourites (6). In the *Teachers as Readers* study, over half those surveyed (n: 1200) could not name six children's authors, 24% were unable to name a picture fiction creator and 22% couldn't name a single poet. Roald Dahl was the unrivalled favourite both from teachers' childhoods and from his use in school (744 mentions). The closest others were Michael Morpurgo (343), Jacqueline Wilson (323), and J.K. Rowling (300). His pre-eminence was evident in the other categories too. In a predominantly secondary phase teacher survey (n: 2300) by the National Literacy Trust, Dahl was again in a league of his own, with J.K. Rowling and Malorie Blackman following some way behind (7).

This Dahl dependency and over reliance on a 'canon' of well-known writers represents cause for concern. It suggests teachers are unlikely to be able to help pupils make discerning reading choices from the diversity available- they may not be able to support reader development. This will constrain the profession's capacity to respond effectively to the First Minister's Reading Challenge and nurture readers for life.

Practitioners' subject knowledge of literature and other texts for the young is not an optional extra. However it is not easy to carve out space to revisit 'old but gold' texts as well as keep up with the 'new and bold', whilst also paying attention to texts which represent realities. The last challenge is particularly hard since of the 9115 children's books published in the UK in 2017, only 4% featured Black or minority ethnic characters (8). Nonetheless young people deserve to see themselves and all society reflected in books and teachers need to be able to use and recommend relevant, riveting texts in which pupils realities are reflected.

In responding to the need to widen teachers' repertoires, the Open University (OU) has launched a practitioner website devoted to reading for pleasure (9). This draws upon OU research into volitional choice-led reading and the role of teachers' subject knowledge and offer resources to support the profession, including: self-reviews, PowerPoints for CPD, classroom clips, interviews and handouts of practical strategies, as well as Top Texts, Author Spotlights and over 200 engaging examples of teachers' research-informed practice. Many of the examples reveal, as research has also shown, that as practitioners read more widely and develop their reading for pleasure pedagogy, their professional assurance and practice is enriched, with positive consequences for young readers.

The website has triggered the creation of 80 OU/UK Literacy Association Teachers' Reading Groups across the country. These research-led CPD opportunities seek to develop the profession's reading for pleasure knowledge and practice in order to impact on young readers. Some of these Reading Groups are also developing in Scotland linked to the First Ministers' Reading Challenge.

Teachers who want to expand their repertoires may want to check out the site, sign up for monthly updates or join a Reading Group. Others may prefer to undertake an Alphabet of Authors or do a self-review quiz to identify areas for growth and then set targets. Such challenges might include reading Award winners (e.g. UKLA, Branford Boase, Carnegie, Kate Greenaway), focusing on poetry or non-fiction, reading knee high in books or even taking the 52 book challenge.

Nurturing reading for pleasure is a professional, moral and social responsibility. It is dependent upon teachers having strong subject knowledge of a range of texts, this underpins an effective reading for pleasure pedagogy and helps build communities of readers, communities characterized by engagement, reciprocity and interaction.

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