

## **TEACHERS AS READERS AND WRITERS**

Teresa Cremin

Since being able to read and write are critical skills in the twenty first century, the teaching of English is always a matter of contention. Ways to teach phonics and grammar in particular are often hotly contested. Another longstanding debate, rather less to the forefront, is the notion that ‘teachers of writing must write’ and ‘teachers of reading must be readers’. This purportedly common-sense view - that to be effective, teachers of literacy must be skilled role models - has long been deliberated. The notion that teachers must be readers is arguably presumed, the notion that teachers must be writers has received more attention, but both are debated, since teachers are expected to be literate role models in the classroom. The power of role models in education has been recognized at least since 1966 when Bruner described this as a ‘day-to-day working model’ to support children’s learning.

The rationale underpinning such modelling is that through engaging reflexively as writers and readers within and beyond the classroom, teachers will be more authentic role models, with enriched understandings that may inform and shape their pedagogy, impacting upon their students’ achievements (Gennrich and Janks, 2013). Teachers’ attitudes to English and their assurance and self-esteem as readers and writers has been shown to influence their practice; research indicates that teachers’ conceptions of literacy, their literate identities and pedagogic practice, frame, shape and often limit students’ identities, both as writers (Ryan and Barton,

2014) and as readers (Hall, 2012). So, it is important to explore pre-service teachers' literate identities, to support positive dispositions and to enhance their awareness of the consequence of being a reading/writing role model in the classroom.

In this chapter therefore, after exploring the relationship between literacy and identity, the focus turns to teachers' literate identities and the debate around the positioning of teachers as writers and readers. Following this, a more applied consideration of the ways in which teachers can choose to position themselves as readers and writers is offered and attention paid to the possible consequences of such positioning on children's literate identities. Through the chapter, a number of questions are addressed, including:

1. What does research indicate about the debate around teachers' roles as readers and writers in the classroom?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of teachers becoming role models as readers and writers for children?
3. What range of ways exist for teachers to reflect upon their literacy lives and practices and shape their practice in order to support children's development as literacy and language users?

### **Teachers' and children's literate identities**

In recent years research into teachers' and children's identities has developed apace (Moje and Luke, 2009). Different notions of identity exist, but most coalesce around the conception that teachers are likely to be different at home from how they are at work, and in both contexts, will position and reposition themselves continually. In this way, identity is not something that one 'has', but is something one actively pursues; it involves on-going work

and is multiple and enacted in interaction (Moje and Luke, 2009). Underpinning this view of identity is an understanding that such identity positioning is fluid and relational. When teachers construct their literate identities in the classroom, they do so in relation to others – children, other teachers, head teachers, teaching assistants, volunteer helpers and parents for example. How teachers both perceive themselves and are perceived by others, (including children) as readers or writers is important since their literate engagement enables them to model the value, pleasure and satisfaction in leading a literate life, and induct children into leading their own literate lives (Kaufman, 2009).

Children's conceptualisations of what it means to be a reader or writer are constructed at an early age through their interactions with others at home and school (Bourne, 2002; Levy, 2009). They learn what counts as reading and writing and what it means to be a writer and reader in different contexts. Since literacy and identity are intertwined, classroom literacy practices have a direct bearing on the literate identities of children and create 'spaces for them to construct their identity as readers/writers and build their personal theories of literacy' (Seban and Tavsanlı, 2015 p. 220). Children quickly come to experience the consequences (both negative and positive) associated with the various literacy identities that are made available to them in the classroom.

Research suggests teachers may come to ascribe labels to children through applying narrow schooled definitions of reading and writing and using ability grouping based on these definitions. These tend to imply some children have 'below average' reader or writer capabilities and identities. Research also reveals the negative impact of such identity labelling. In Hall's (2012) study for example, children were categorised as 'poor' readers, 'good' readers, or 'becoming good' readers which had consequences for the kinds of

instruction and support they received. This was evident in a recent study of struggling boy readers where in one typical classroom, the reading group which spanned from Dickens (the top group) to Dahl (the bottom group) experienced significantly different opportunities to engage as readers (Hempel Jorgensen, Cremin, Harris and Chamberlain et al., 2018). The negative impacts of ascribing children 'below average' writer identities as a consequence of their perceived 'readiness' for school literacy learning has also been shown (Yoon, 2005). Whilst children can, in principle, accept or reject the identity positions made available to them, their classroom positions are difficult to challenge due to unequal power relations, so young people's literate identities are at least in part framed and shaped by teachers' conceptualisations of readers /reading and writers/ writing and their pedagogy.

However, if teachers become more conscious of their own literate identities and diverse practices and preferences beyond the classroom, it is argued that this will prompt them to consider younger readers' identities, practices and preferences. In addition, they may come to consider the identity positions made available to children by their own classroom routines and seek to alter their practice. Scholars argue that if teachers see themselves as readers/writers this will impact positively on their practice (Andrews, 2008; Commeyras, Bisplinhoff and Olson, 2003).

But do teachers see themselves as readers/writers? Do they reflect upon their own practices and experience of reading/writing in order to nurture young learners? Is there evidence that their literate identities impact on those of the children they teach? It is to these issues that we now turn.

### **Teachers as writers**

The notion that to be effective, teachers of writing must control the 'inseparable crafts' of both 'teaching and writing' (Graves, 1983, p.5) has been intensely debated over decades. Whilst the process approach that Graves and other colleagues advocated has been heavily criticised (Beard, 2000), his assertion that teachers of writing must be writers has remained the focus of research and professional discussion. Many scholars who were committed to the process approach to writing became advocates of this notion (Murray, 1985; Calkins, 1994). In addition, scholars who valued teachers' writing as practitioner researchers joined the 'teachers as writers' movement (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) and the US National Writing Project adopted the tenet that 'teachers of writing must write' (NWP and Nagin, 2006). In New Zealand a government funded NWP in 1987 also gave a central role to teachers as writers. Myriad researchers in these projects have made clear their support for this notion and have claimed for example, that children benefit if teachers share their compositional difficulties (Root and Steinberg, 1996), and that young writers are highly motivated by teacher enthusiasm (Kaufman, 2002).

However, many scholars have argued against the positioning of teachers as writers (Jost, 1990; Robbins, 1996; Gleeson and Prain, 1996). Some of these assert that if teachers write, this reduces the time for instruction and increases their susceptibility to being exposed as less than skilled writers (Gleeson and Prain, 1996). Also, that teachers' perceptions of the importance of writing influences their efficacy far more than their involvement as writers in the classroom (Robbins, 1996). This early work comprised a series of claims and counter claims.

As a consequence, a systematic review of the literature of the field sought to lay this debate to rest (Cremin and Oliver, 2016). Encompassing the years 1990-2015 the review focused on teachers' identities and practices as writers in peer-reviewed empirical reports. Of the 439 papers identified, only 22 met the criteria applied since much of the early work was somewhat journalistic and anecdotal in nature. The review found a tendency towards negativity about writing amongst teachers and student teachers, and noted that considerable self-critique, doubt and discomfort was expressed (Cremin and Oliver, 2016). It showed that school and university experiences shaped teachers' attitudes in various ways with pedagogical consequences and ramifications for the dispositions and identities of younger writers. It also found that teachers have rather narrow conceptions of what counts as writing or what makes a 'writer'. They often associate 'writing' with 'creative writing' connected to literary print-based publications (McKinney and Giorgis, 2009; Woodard, 2015). Teachers' limited views of writing serve to reinforce a dichotomy between school and personal writing, which may limit their capacity to explore connections between real life writing and school writing.

The review also showed that whilst teachers and student teachers perceive there may be consequences if they position themselves as writers, few studies followed through to the classroom to examine if this is the case. Where teachers engaged in writing workshops at their own level however, they perceived this enhanced their understanding of the writing process and their self-confidence as writers (Locke and Kato, 2012). After such workshops, teachers express their intentions to make classroom changes, including: creating more secure writing environments and offering more social/emotional support for writing and positive feedback (Morgan, 2010; Gardner, 2014).

Studies which do follow through to the classroom indicate that there are challenges for teachers who seek to be writing role models. They suggest that teachers often find demonstration writing an emotional struggle as they are both writer and teacher. Their desire to demonstrate agency as authentically engaged authors is complicated by their personal confidence, the subject matter, and their need to control the class (Cremin and Baker, 2010; Woodward, 2015). As teachers are expected to model writing and demonstrate their proficiency as writers, it is problematic if they lack confidence as writers, which will also influence their ability to respond flexibly to policy requirements and narrow skills-based writing models (Woodard, 2017). Other challenges include perceived discrepancies between curriculum policy and assessment priorities and teachers' own values and beliefs about writing (Cremin and Oliver, 2016).

Nonetheless, Yeo (2007) argues that teachers who develop their writing identities and become more assured writers, will transmit the benefits of this in their teaching of writing. So, despite the difficulties, it is arguably important for teachers to develop a richer sense of their own identities as writers, to engage in workshops and consider how they position themselves and their students in the writing classroom.

### **Teachers as readers**

Studies focusing on teachers as readers are fewer overall, perhaps since writing is more commonly viewed as a challenging craft - an artistic act of production. Nonetheless there are studies which highlight connections between teachers and children as engaged and self-motivated readers (Dreher, 2003) . Some claim that teachers' lives and classroom practices are influenced by their pleasure in literature which nurtures both adults and children as readers (Rummel and Quintero, 1997). One study of teachers in the US coined the phrase

‘Reading Teachers- teachers who read and readers who teach’ - to denote, with a capital R and a capital T - that these teachers are aware of their own reading passions and preferences and share these in the classroom (Commeyras et al., 2003). These US studies argue there is a link between a teacher’s reader identity and their pedagogy. However, they rely almost exclusively on self-reports of classroom practice and none include observation or children’s views on their teachers as readers.

The stance of being a Reading Teacher was examined within the OU/ UK Literacy Association Teachers as Readers (TaRs) project which documented the difference made by Reading Teachers to children’s reading identities and pleasure in reading (Cremin et al., 2014). Through considering their own reading lives and practices, some of the 43 TaRs practitioners transformed their understanding of the nature of reading and creatively adapted their pedagogy and classroom positioning as a result. They became highly interactive reading role models in the classroom.

However, the notion of being a Reading Teacher was not without challenge. Many project practitioners expressed reservations about taking time from teaching to share their reading lives and practices and remained unconvinced that adopting a more authentic and personally engaged stance as a reader would influence children’s attitudes or attainment. For example:

*My work is to develop children as readers, not to share my reading life* (Teacher, Suffolk)

*I have found this hard and don’t get it yet – I’m still not sure it would really make a difference* (Teacher, Medway).

Practitioners found the open-ended stance of a Reading Teacher created indecision and uncertainty. In a highly prescribed culture of teaching, they expressed concerns that no

reading objectives were being 'covered' when they shared their experiences as readers. For example:

*I'm not used to working without specific objectives* (Teacher, Birmingham)

*I'm not sure I see the point of this, I mean I need to know them as readers, but do they need to know me?* (Teacher, Barking and Dagenham).

Some teachers were reticent to risk introducing this more individual dimension and initially felt that taking time from instruction and the curriculum was unjustified and might be 'exposing'. They were unsure if reflecting on their own reading histories and experiences and inviting the children also to reflect on theirs was of value, and wanted assurance that this would result in raised reading standards. Yet much depends upon the long-term goal - is this to achieve the 'expected standard' or to develop lifelong readers?

Other research has shown that there are negative consequences for young learners when their teachers lack passion for reading and that teachers who share their enthusiasm for reading help to motivate young readers (Commeyras et al., 2003; Kaufman, 2002). A number of the TaRs teachers reflected deeply on their habits as readers and began to teach 'from a reader's point of view'. By the close of the project a continuum of practice existed (Cremin et al., 2014). Significantly, the teachers who developed most fully as Reading Teachers positively influenced children's attitudes towards reading; frequency of reading for pleasure at home and school; teacher-child reader relationships; and children's knowledge and perception of their teachers as readers (Cremin et al., 2014). Reading became a more shared, sociable, relaxed experience in school and the young people developed reader relationships and reader networks.

Bruner's (1966) conception of practitioners as role models was someone with whom children would engage with and interact. . As the TaRs research and recent classroom studies have shown, (Cremin, Thomson, Williams and Davies, 2018; Cremin, Williams and Denby, 2019), Reading Teachers engage in considerable informal conversational dialogue with children about reading which highlights diversity, authenticity and agency, enabling readers to make their own choices, state their own preferences and voice their own views. Nonetheless, challenges persist for teachers who wish to teach from a reader's point of view, especially in pressured contexts where the assessment agenda drives the curriculum and reader relationships are backstage, whilst the standards agenda remains frontstage.

### **Exploring literate role models in the classroom**

Having explored the research evidence and debate with regard to teachers as readers and writers in the classroom, we now consider the practical application of this stance. A continuum of literate identity positioning is offered (Figure 1). You may wish to decide whether and where to position yourself on this.

Figure 1. A continuum of teachers as reading/writing role models

*As the left of the continuum indicates, teachers who read and write and find some satisfaction in the process share their positive dispositions in school and make recommendations based on children's texts they enjoy. But is this enough? Your preferences for certain kinds of texts may constrain children's choices and if, as a writing role model, you select particular text types in response to curriculum requirements and only model composing these texts, this will*

also be limiting. As a literate role model, you may, inadvertently, be shaping children in your own making, not allowing them to be unique literacy learners with their own interests and preferences.

*The midpoint on the continuum* suggests that you can choose to offer more than a positive disposition; you can reflect on your literacy life and share your reading and writing practices beyond school, inviting children to share theirs also. You could create a 24-Hour Read/Write or Reading/Writing River. Such collages prompt consideration of the diversity of one's literacy life. The staff at Peover Superior primary in Cheshire created their own 24-Hour Reads and discussed these in a staff meeting. Some had read recipes, online and off, others had dipped into holiday brochures and other non-fiction texts, and emails, workload planning and road signs alongside some fiction, newspapers, junk mail and magazines. Differences were evident and areas of commonality too, offering opportunities for connections. In the process, the staff learnt much about diversity in reading and later about the children's reading practices and preferences beyond school.

Such strategies are also useful when considering writing practices. Joanna, an NQT, was surprised to find she wrote eleven different kinds of texts in one Sunday: a Mother's Day card, tweets, emails, texts to her children, a list, a shopping note, redirecting post, an ISA application, school marking, lesson planning and a draft of a haiku for the next day's demonstration writing. This highlighted that in her own words "I do a lot of writing and I find some satisfaction in it, but it's all very quick often to get things sorted, pass messages on and such". Her Writing River caused Jo to wonder if the writing she expected children in her class to do was 'schooled writing', writing for the system and not for themselves. As scholars have argued, such writing constrains children's engagement as writers, as it has almost no

personal purpose or audience. Through recognising the diversity of your own writing life and sharing this, you model being a writer and demonstrate the everyday and real-world relevance of writing in all its modes and media.

*The far point on the continuum* suggests that if teachers offer a positive disposition and reflect upon the nature of their literacy lives, they frequently come to widen their understanding of the uses and value of reading and writing and notice their affective engagement in literacy. Significantly, this may prompt pedagogical changes to support the young on their journeys as readers and writers. Learning about children's practices beyond school may trigger the provision of a wider choice of texts for example and more child-led writing opportunities. In addition, through reflecting on your own reading/writing practices, for example skipping descriptive passages or giving up on a book, or what you do when faced with a blank page or lose your way as a writer, you may come, like Jo, to question what counts as reading and writing in school. In turn this may prompt you to re-conceptualise literacy, consider children's rights as readers and writers and develop more authentic tasks which offer a higher than usual degree of congruence with writing in the real world.

## **SUMMARY**

The debate about the value of teachers being literate role models and assured readers and writers has long been the focus of professional examination. It is your choice how authentically you engage as a reader and writer in school, but it seems possible that if you choose to learn more about your practices and preferences, this will prompt you to widen your understanding of what counts as reading and writing in your classrooms with consequences for the teaching of reading and writing. This, some of the evidence suggests,

has the potential to impact on young people's attitudes, motivations and their journeys as readers and writers, supporting them in developing positive identities as young literacy and language users.

Looking forwards, more research is needed to offer nuanced accounts of the small but potentially significant insights developed by Reading and Writing Teachers as they seek to teach from a reader's and/or a writer's point of view. The pedagogical implications of these insights deserve to be closely documented, especially in the context of a dehumanising trend in education (Feilding, 2006). Additionally, since children's literate identities are laid down in the primary years and notoriously hard to alter, it is vital for the profession to consider the ways in which their routines and practices position and constrain or enable young readers and writers.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Looking back on your literacy history, what were in your view some of the significant experiences or people that shaped the kind of reader and writer you are?
- To what extent do you conceive of yourself as an experienced and assured adult reader or writer?
- Recognising that you wish to develop lifelong readers and writers, to what extent do you plan to position yourself explicitly as a Reading and/or Writing Teacher in the classroom?
- Where do you intend to try and place yourself on the RT/WT continuum?

### **FURTHER READING/RESOURCES**

- <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure> This research-informed reading for pleasure website offers support materials for teachers. It has sections on Reading Teachers and Developing Knowledge of Children as Readers, and self-audits to support reflection, as well as classroom strategies for developing as a Reading Teacher, videos and examples of teachers' research-informed practice to inspire.
- Cremin, T. Mottram, M. Powell, S, Collins R and Drury, R. (2015) *Researching Literacy Lives: Building home school communities* London and NY: Routledge. This won the 2016 UKLA Academic Book Award. It explores how re-positioning teachers as researchers of children's home literacy lives challenged them to reflect on their own literacy lives and re-consider what counts as literacy in school. The journey enabled new understandings about children and families to develop, and different literate identities to be enacted by teachers and children.
- Gennrich, T and Janks, H. (2013) Teachers' literate identities in K. Hall., T. Cremin., B. Comber and L. Moll, *The Wiley Blackwell International Research Handbook of Children's Literacy, Learning and Culture* pp. 456–468. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell. This chapter pays attention to the digital practices and identities of literacy teachers. It offers a case study from the University of the Witwatersrand which explores how, through teacher education, the complex literacy identities of future teachers born in the digital era can be addressed.

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