

Article

Responsible Reading: Children's Literature and Social Justice

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Abstract: In high accountability cultures, primary phase literacy education tends to focus on improving children's test scores. Driven by each country's performance in international league tables, this results in narrow, predominantly skills-based programmes designed to address attainment gaps. While scores may have been enhanced in recent years, there is little evidence that policy directives have positioned literacy in the lives of learners in ways that have become meaningful for them or been transferred into ways of thinking that promote social equity. Indeed, teaching practices that exacerbate the challenges for those young people who are already disadvantaged by circumstance have become more prevalent. Teachers, therefore, have an ethical responsibility to redress this through their teaching. This paper argues that literature is core to more equitable literacy development. As not all reading practices are equal, developing literacy education for a more socially just society needs to challenge the dominant pedagogic hegemony. Literature has the potential to spark the kind of mindful disruption necessary to shift standardised paradigms of thought, so literacy education should have children's literature at its heart. By examining the value of literature through a set of complementary lenses, this paper seeks to reveal its affordances in young people's lives. Then, through commentary taken from a pair of vignettes drawn from professional learning contexts, we illuminate shifts in teacher perception gained through scaffolded introduction to reading literary texts. The insights teachers gained reveal reconceptualisation of reading and the role of literature in primary education. This has the potential to redirect their future classroom practice. Consequently, we propose that for teachers to be adept at improving literacy outcomes through productive adoption and use of literary texts, they need: an aesthetic appreciation and knowledge of children's literature; personal experience with reading such literature as social practice; and pedagogic insight into how to use literature to teach literacy and develop volitional readers. We call this knowledge set the additive trio, noting that no 'step' or understanding is sufficient on its own, and that together they can enable the development of Reading Teachers who work with literature to advance the social justice agenda.



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1. Introduction

In many countries across the world, education policy and practice are shaped by an individual nation's rankings on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These OECD assessments, of 10 and 15 year olds, respectively, create what has been described as 'PISA envy' [1] (p. xiii) on the part of policy makers. The resultant league tables undergird the neoliberal reform agenda, which is arguably de-professionalising education and educationalists [2,3]. The accountability race to the top of the PISA ladder requires all children to meet baseline standards, which significantly constrains and commodifies literacy through the use of skills-based programmes to bolster outcomes. This reduction of literacy to a quantifiable measure, largely with a focus on economic purpose, 'makes shallow a world that is deep; it makes dull a species that should be complex' [4] (p. 32), and, almost inevitably, wages 'a

frontal assault on the imagination of students through disciplinary measures that amount to pedagogies of repression' [5] (p. 510).

The inherent problem with this 'autonomous' conceptualisation of literacy [6,7] is that it conceives of literacy as a set of self-contained and transferrable skills and competences and fails to take account of differences and of the influence of text and context on the learner. Furthermore, its emphasis on predetermined sets of knowledge and skills to be taught and tested can lead to judgements and the labelling of some children as 'deficient'. The teaching practices instantiated as a consequence of such narrow views of literacy mask the reality of differential access to learning, where experience of a broad and rich literacy curriculum is, as Anyon [8] argued four decades ago, saved for the privileged. Society remains divided by educational opportunity and debates persist as to what counts as reading, what comprises success in reading and how to nurture the habit of reading in our technologically driven and unjust society.

These debates connect to the Matthew Effect, the concept that an initial advantage in a capacity leads over time to cumulative advantage and a virtuous cycle of continuous gain. In applying this to reading, Stanovich [9] argued that strong, engaged readers spend more time reading than weak and unmotivated readers. The former, the engaged readers, are both more likely to be placed in 'high-ability' groups in school and to read by choice at home [9–11]. The latter however, those children with the lowest literacy levels, are more likely to be placed in 'low-ability' groups and to experience a more limited reading diet with simplified texts and more time in school spent practising discrete reading skills [12]. Hence, the problems faced by poorer and less engaged readers are exacerbated. Furthermore, low-level literacy activities are more prevalent in areas of low socio-economic status (SES) [13].

From an economic modelling point of view, the long-term repercussions of the Matthew Effect are that those with ease of access to and established stores of the valued currency (i.e., reading skills) will gain more, whereas others without such currency will continue to struggle. Held back by a combination of limited early success, reduced access to quality texts that bear relevance to their lives, and an impoverished pedagogy in which they are positioned as passive learners, e.g., [14], some young people, particularly those from low SES backgrounds and marginalised groups, are caught in a hermetically sealed cycle of disadvantage.

Our argument for teachers to take increased responsibility to address such issues, underpinned by concerns for educational equity and social justice, and conceptions of literacy as ideological [6,7], is also motivated by findings from PISA. These findings consistently indicate that engagement in reading by choice 'is correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender and socio-economic status' [15]. Other studies also reveal that growing up in a home with books [16] and being a frequent reader promotes future success [17]. Significantly, research demonstrates that young people who read fiction books, in contrast to other genres, achieve far more highly in tests of reading attainment, e.g., [18]. Arguably, therefore, a teacher's careful selection and use of literary texts for teaching reading and nurturing young readers can be seen as an inclusive attempt to address educational inequities.

2. The Additive Trio

In considering the issues above, conceptually and empirically, we contend that literature has the potential to create meaningful learning experiences that can interrupt established patterns of failure for those who languish at the 'tail' of literacy achievement scales. To achieve this goal, teachers need knowledge of children's literature, knowledge about reading such literature and knowledge about how to teach with this literature. We have named these three complementary knowledges the 'additive trio'. The additive trio includes aesthetic appreciation and knowledge of children's literature; personal experience with reading such literature as social practice; and pedagogic insight into how to use literature to teach literacy and develop volitional readers. The word additive is meant to indicate that no single 'step' or understanding is sufficient on its own; rather, they need to work

together, as all are necessary to the growth of Reading Teachers who understand the nature, value and significance of literature in teaching reading and nurturing recreational readers.

To advance our argument and indicate the professional responsibility that teachers have to develop this knowledge set and competences, we draw on a range of research studies from different disciplines to identify, address and examine literature as a weapon of mindful disruption that can support student's academic, cultural, social and emotional development. To enrich our exploration of existing scholarship, we have chosen some illustrative empirical examples to illuminate the potential of the concept of the additive trio, both as an analytic tool and a pedagogic guide. We share the voices of teachers and teacher educators from initial teacher education and a professional development program where participants were learning about literacy through literature. The teachers' voices are linked to the additive trio and exemplify the principles at play and the possibilities evident when, as Reading Teachers, they recognise the power of literature to further the social justice agenda.

Research has shown that left unchecked, the ongoing result of the Matthew Effect leaves children with low educational capital further and further behind those who start school already enculturated into the literacy practices used as societal measures of success. Poverty in particular influences the presence, number and nature of the books in children's homes, with recent research indicating that almost 6% of children in the UK do not own a book [19] and also that in low-income families, the books available at home tend to be concept-based books (e.g., focused on shapes or numbers) rather than richly imagined narrative texts [20]. Young people living in low-SES areas may face multiple other forms of 'disadvantage', including discrimination, and may experience the consequences of persistent deficit discourses which inhabit educational institutions and lower staff expectations, e.g., [21,22]. These young people are less likely to read for pleasure at home or school. Practitioners' perceptions of children's intersectional identities, their gender, ethnicity and social class and the stereotypes associated with these further disadvantage children [23].

The risk is that deficit mindsets lead to inequitable opportunities with teachers feeling compelled to shrink the curriculum to give their students more test practice. So, children with poor reading skills experience reductionist literacy practices, which limit their potential even further. Indeed, the problem is so common that it has been entitled the 'pedagogy of poverty' [24]—a style of teaching recognised for its anti-intellectual patterns [5]. Such a pedagogy, commonly offered to children in low SES urban contexts, is seen to encompass considerable teacher control, with an emphasis on knowledge transmission, pupil compliance and passive positioning [25–29]. In this way the learning of the least advantaged is controlled through increased skills and drills and reduced time reading literary texts, whilst more proficient readers are supported to extend their reading skills and enabled to strengthen their desire—the will to read and offered more pleasure in the process [30]. The focus on basic skills for low SES learners not only diminishes children's volitional engagement and enjoyment in reading, it also reduces opportunities for them to engage in creative and critical thinking through peer discussion [31,32]. Furthermore, when structured literacy routines and practices hold sway, and teachers' understandings of reading are dominated by notions of proficiency, literature tends to be used merely as a tool to teach the prescribed literacy skills [29,33]. Limited access to literature constrains children's intellectual, critical and affective engagement in reading and fails to be inclusive of wider social, cultural and political contexts.

The international decline in volitional reading [34], particularly among less advantaged readers, also represents a significant cause for concern. In the UK for instance, a recent survey indicated that the gap in reading enjoyment between pupils from lower-income households and their peers doubled from 2020 to 2021 [35]. The pandemic is likely to have exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities in reading for pleasure and reading attainment across the world. As multiple UNESCO reports have stated over time "Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right" [36] (p. 136). It is a matter of social justice and every child's right. Those who cannot read well should be given support to

develop the basic skills of decoding as well as the capacity to engage in more advanced personal, aesthetic and critical responses to texts. In addition, the desire to read deserves to be nurtured, particularly since being a childhood reader confers significant cognitive advantages [37] and numerous other benefits. This paper proposes using the power of literature to challenge and disrupt reductionist conceptions of literacy and reading, enabling teachers to employ inclusive teaching practices and nurture readers in ways that can break the cycle of disadvantage into which some learners are locked.

3. Children's Literature and Its Affordances

In the classroom, the role that literature plays remains problematic due to the unresolved reading wars [38] and ongoing tensions between literature and pedagogy [39]. Part of the problem is the way literature is positioned in the minds of young readers, their teachers and policy makers. If we want all young readers to benefit from the affordances of engaging with literature, we need to reframe existing perspectives on the complexity, benefits and challenges of reading literary texts. We argue for increased knowledge, understanding and practice that goes beyond the 'intuitive' view that 'reading is valuable' [40], that eschews the myths that reading literature is 'merely' pleasurable, (and not therefore linked to learning), and that represents children's books as a utilitarian resource to teach and raise reading standards. We commence this discussion, by examining the power of narrative as a tool for thinking, and then consider the academic, cultural and psychological wellbeing benefits of children reading literature.

3.1. *The Power of Narrative to Stimulate Thinking*

Internationally, policy documentation tends to take literature for granted. In the primary phase of schooling its potency is rarely recognised in national curricula and explicit references to it are few. Policy commentaries on literature often refer to culturally specific literary canons or are confined to introductory sections, and not followed through into the prescribed programmes of study. The diversity and expansive value of literature is often reduced to its use as a stimulus for comprehension (as currently assessed), and as material for independent reading. Hence, the underpinning power of narrative as a critical mode of human thought and development remains largely unacknowledged in policy and practice, hidden within the confines of prescribed reading curricula. In contrast, scholars from diverse disciplines, including psychologists, linguists, literary theorists, philosophers and educationalists, uphold the prevalence and power of narrative as a fundamentally human endeavour, used to make sense of experience and the world, e.g., [41–46]. These scholars recognise that narratives take many multimodal forms, in which emotional, felt and aesthetic elements are always present, even from early childhood [47], and that narrative has a particular power 'to create possible and imaginary worlds through words' [44] (p. 156). Research with pre-schoolers has found, for example, that children are more likely to tell a story when sharing a narrative text, whereas when sharing an alphabet book, they tend to point and recite letters [48].

Furthermore, early narrative competence offers a strong foundation for emergent literacy, e.g., [49], for later reading comprehension, and long-term success in schooling [50]. In addition, constructing meaning through literary narratives enables children to engage with the complexity of the human condition, advance their current understandings and make imaginative connections to their own lives and those of others. As Hardy seminaly asserted, narrative is 'a primary act of mind transferred to art from life. The novel merely heightens, isolates, and analyses the narrative motions of human consciousness' [42] (p. 5). Thus, in the words of Cliff-Hodges [51] (p. 65), literature is 'a means by which to think, not a medium through which we are told what to think'.

3.2. *Reading Children's Literature and Academic Benefits*

International evidence demonstrates a strong association between reader engagement (evidenced by reading frequency) and reading attainment. Drawing on data from a longitu-

dinal study [37], Sullivan and Brown show that compared with those children who rarely choose to read, those who read for pleasure in childhood develop increased attainment in literacy and numeracy between the ages of 10 and 16 years. More recent studies also confirm that intrinsic reading motivation, reading amount and reading competence are positively correlated, e.g., [52,53]. The will to read influences the skill of reading and vice versa; a reciprocal relationship exists between intrinsic reading motivation and reading skill [54]. Children who frequently read fiction and are avid readers also benefit from an enriched vocabulary [37,55] and a wider knowledge of the world [10]. Additionally, several researchers highlight that the quality and degree of challenge offered by the reading materials, and the later discussion of the text, mediate the impact on reading comprehension and attainment, e.g., [56–59]. Moreover, regular readers of fiction show a more advanced understanding of literary form, writing stories that are more coherent and adhere more to narrative writing conventions than those young people who read less frequently [60].

Significantly, an investigation using the PISA 2009 database, drawing on more than 250,000 teenagers from across 35 industrialised countries, revealed a very sizeable ‘fiction effect’, demonstrating that those teenagers who read fiction books frequently possess markedly stronger reading skills than their peers who do not [18]. This relationship held for all but one of the OECD countries involved. The authors found no positive association between any other text types (non-fiction, newspaper, magazines and comics) and higher PISA scores. They thus concluded that fictional reading needs to be recognised more fully for its beneficial contribution to academic achievement, particularly since the attainment advantages that accrue to those who read for pleasure apply regardless of socio-economic status and parental education levels [61]. Longitudinal work also underscores this finding, showing that fiction, in contrast to non-fiction, contributes to increased knowledge and verbal language skills over time [62]. This is logical, as reading fiction, which often requires sustained time and persistence, supports the development of higher-order thinking skills such as ‘social and emotional knowledge, the construction of meaning, and narrative and inferential skills’ [20] (p. 214).

In addition, a recent study [63] using fiction combined with support for reminders (i.e., making connections to one’s life) challenged the somewhat linear relationship often assumed to exist between the apparent breadth and richness of children’s experience out of school and their comprehension capacity in school [64,65]. In this work, undertaken with nine year olds from two classrooms in highly contrasting SES areas, students were able to make layered connections to fictional texts regardless of their background. The aesthetic invitation that literature offers appeared to trigger life-resonant reminders of embodied sensations and emotions in families and friendships that were widely shared. Importantly, these connections enabled deep engagement and understanding [63]. This study further underscores the added value of fictional texts, indicating literature’s potential to increase access and enhance comprehension for all.

3.3. Reading Children’s Literature and Cultural Benefits

Furthermore, from our socio-cultural perspective, learning to read is a ‘multi-layered and culturally contingent social process’ [66] (p. 254), which calls into focus the possibility of broadening children’s experience beyond the ‘funds of knowledge’ [67] that they bring to school. Whilst these contextual influences represent an important base for teachers to tap into and value, they should not limit children’s learning. All children should be offered opportunities to build new knowledge by reading and discussing high-quality literature as this increases their cultural capital and wider understanding of the world. If we accept that literacy is fundamentally a “cultural practice that mediates human life” [13] (p. 5) then commencing this work in the early years of schooling is crucial to the attempt to reduce inequity.

When reading literary texts is core to their education, children can develop ways of being and knowing that both connect to and stretch beyond their everyday lives. All texts embody power relationships and represent ideologies at play, so by being given access to

ideas that matter and authors who write with authenticity and integrity, children can be prompted to understand different viewpoints and form opinions on challenging issues. In this way, literature contributes to young people's identity constructions, e.g., [68,69] and can help them make personal connections and come to understand their own culture [70]. The ability to identify, analyse and critique the literary construction of meaning as part of learning to read is far more complex than the ability to decode and encode words. It enables the reader to take an informed stance on real world issues. The demands of being a 21st century citizen require young people to develop the capacity for critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, applied imagination, empathy, and invention. These kinds of abilities can be encouraged by professionally responsible Reading Teachers [71,72] who situate literature as a valued cultural artefact at the core of their practice and thus offer more equitable experiences of becoming literate to all.

3.4. Reading Literature and Social and Emotional Benefits

While reading literature is commonly perceived to offer social and emotional benefits, the extant research evidence is drawn mainly from studies not of children, but of adults suffering from depression and being supported through bibliotherapy, e.g., [73], as well as reading group studies that aim to support the psychological wellbeing of the elderly, e.g., [74], or those in prison, e.g., [75]. In such studies, reading and discussing texts is seen to create and extend social connections between people, thus reducing loneliness for instance. Other research suggests that reading narrative fiction can improve adults' emotional skills of empathy, perspective taking and mentalising [76,77]. Additionally, that the complex characters and stories offered by literary fiction (rather than those found in popular fiction) serve to augment the reader's empathetic understanding of others' mental states through fictional simulation, e.g., [78]. Researchers additionally posit that literary or award-winning fiction that creates space for reflection reinforces the reader's ability to make sense of the text, their own lives and those of others [79]. The development of empathy and social cognition is seen to be particularly marked for adult readers who are drawn deeply into the narrative and are emotionally transported into fictional worlds [80]. It thus appears that fiction that demands the reader's intellectual and affective engagement has the greatest empathy-enhancing effect, serving to increase understanding of the self as well as openness to others' experience. Empathy can also, many argue, lead to enhanced critical thinking, e.g., [81,82].

Research into the relationships between reading and wellbeing in children and young people, while more limited in nature, does indicate that those who own more books and report reading frequently also report higher levels of mental health [83]. In the UK, fiction was the most popular genre read during the pandemic, perhaps because it offers children the chance to step away from the challenges of the present [35]. Of the young people who responded to this survey of 42,502 8 to 18 year olds, 44% reported that reading made them feel better and helped them to relax (Opcit). Smaller-scale studies also indicate that young readers who are motivated to read narrative fiction do so because they value the feelings and emotions engendered (e.g., calmness, relaxation and laughter), the immersion and escapism fiction offered, and the opportunity to connect with fictional friends [84].

4. Exploring the Additive Trio in the Classroom

Having presented a multiple-lens view of research examining the value of literature in children's lives and the interrelated nature of its affordances, we now return to the concept of the additive trio introduced earlier. We use this concept as a way of raising awareness of the complex and interweaving knowledge and pedagogic understanding necessary for teachers to work well with literature and help address literacy inequities. As noted above, our trio includes aesthetic appreciation and knowledge of children's literature, personal experience of reading as social practice, and pedagogic insight into how to use literature to teach literacy and develop volitional readers. To instantiate our theoretical analysis of literature's potential, we offer observations on the voices of pre-service and

practising teachers engaged in professional learning. Researchers typically categorise papers according to ‘four cross-cutting categories: primarily theoretical, largely theoretical with empirical data, empirical yet incorporating a theoretical perspective, and empirical with little or no theory included’ [85] (p. 285). This paper is primarily theoretical, but with focused empirical examples, drawn from wider studies, which we use to illustrate our conception of the additive trio and to elucidate the importance of teachers developing as Reading Teachers in order to help advance social justice.

The first research site was a pre-service teacher education program in an urban university in Australia. Data were collected from one hundred fourth- and final-year students enrolled in a compulsory semester-long unit of study on teaching critical literacy through reading challenging literary texts. Dedicated time was set aside to discuss such texts and literature circles were deployed as the dialogic learning strategy [86]. The intent was that by learning about literacy through literature, pre-service teachers would develop responsive and responsible views of teaching reading and enabling reader development. A crucial part of this was their lived experience of reading and engagement in meaningful, collaborative dialogue about shared texts [87].

The second research site was a professional development program for teachers in a semi-rural area of Scotland. Data were collected from educators working in schools with low-SES populations, involved in an intervention designed to raise reading attainment. Instead of focussing on basic skills, however, the program introduced teachers to reading as a social, cultural and personal endeavour and supported them to engage in professional discussions about teaching reading in their local contexts [88]. The intent was to deepen teachers’ appreciation of the appeal and the quality of the texts that they recommended to their students. Twenty-five teachers chose to participate in a semester-long formal Masters unit on children’s literature and six schools joined an informal reader response [89] network that ran at the same time. Nine teachers took part in both interventions. In both contexts, teachers were encouraged to read literature, read about literature and explore pedagogies, enabling them to teach with literature in ways that were responsive to the texts and to individual children’s engagement.

In what follows, we share the voices of teachers to illuminate our conceptual argument, choosing quotes that are representative of patterns occurring within and across the cohorts. Seeking evidence of the impact of their engagement with literature, we thematically coded transcripts of teacher talk using the additive trio tags of aesthetic appreciation, personal experience and related pedagogic insight. We define each concept and explicate them with quotes from the teachers, offering additional quotes to highlight how the knowledges interact productively to disrupt ways of thinking about literature that the teachers had previously held without critique. Their personal and aesthetic engagement and critical commentaries evolved in part due to the nature of the texts and in part due to the pedagogic framing. We commence by highlighting the teachers’ growing awareness and response to the aesthetic construction of the texts.

5. Aesthetic Appreciation

A reader demonstrates aesthetic appreciation when they recognise, consciously or unconsciously, the textual codes or elements that have affected their meaning making through awareness of ‘text constructedness’ [89,90]. It is the response that causes “an emotional reaction in the reader/viewer to a literary text, which leads them to consider and even evaluate the artistic representations created in the text” [91] (p. 30). For example, in the quote below, Adam, a pre-service teacher, responds to *Crow Country* [92]. The book describes a historical episode of unjust displacement from an Indigenous perspective using devices such as time slip and multiple narrators. One narrator represents modern Australia and the other speaks with culturally appropriate knowledge. Adam voiced deep appreciation for how the text led him to consider contrasting perspectives.

“The book *Crow Country* was tied in with Aboriginal spirituality . . . You needed to know that this author had pieced together this novel for a particular purpose,

reason, audience. That the themes of the book that we all see, that they are not by accident. I think what's really important in the process for both teachers and participants is this acceptance that there may not be just one way of looking at a text, so, acknowledging that there are different viewpoints within the text then we bring our own viewpoints to the text as well."

Adam's language suggests that he had attended to the textually shaped, experiential layers inherent in the reading event and critically noted the power of the text to provoke conversations about Indigenous rights, while retaining his perception of multiple story lines. He voiced "a sense of the work as well as one's response to it" [93] (p. 132). Thus, Adam's sensory perception of the literary object as an artistic representation demonstrates the characteristic behaviours of aesthetic response [94].

The next quote, from the Scottish study of practicing teachers' CPD, indicates that engaging in rich textual practices impacted on Joanne, rekindling a perhaps forgotten appreciation of literary texts. She observed "I have discovered that there are many inspirational modern children's books, which as an adult I found aesthetically enjoyable and often surprisingly thought provoking. Deep emotions were triggered, and distant memories vividly returned to my consciousness".

Joanne's comment reveals the value of enabling teachers to read children's literature and giving them both permission and time to do so as a source of inspiration for teaching and learning [71]. It also underpins the call from researchers for teachers to explore how textual qualities influence readers' responses by building their awareness of children's literature, e.g., [93,95]. Findings from numerous studies of pre-service teachers' reading habits, knowledge of children's literature and self-perceptions as readers echo the imperative to foster teachers' positive reader identities [96–99].

6. Personal Experience

A reader demonstrates personal experience when they express resonance with a literary text in terms of making a connection to their lives. It is the response that enables readers to recognise aspects of their own and others' lives in a literary text [100]. This can validate their 'funds of knowledge' [67] and help readers locate their place in the literary landscape. For example, in the quote below, Jessica, having read *Mahtab's Story* [101], engaged in extensive discussions with her peers about it, particularly around the theme of cultural displacement. The book depicts a refugee's struggle in escaping from Afghanistan. Jessica not only made a direct connection to her family history, but also came to recognise how reading about and connecting to a character's experience can help deepen one's understanding.

"Because in my role we were looking at the refugee experience and my parents and another girl's parents were boat people from Vietnam. So, we understood the experiences Mahtab, and her family had coming to Australia looking for a better life. We both agreed that we felt really privileged being in Australia, not having to endure all those dramatic experiences our parents had face coming here."

This suggests that through considering the impact of dialogic learning on her intellectual and affective responses, Jessica developed an enhanced meta-awareness of the experience of reading. She critically reflected on the personal relevance of this text, which offered her a "window" through which she could view others' lives [100]. The example illustrates how reading children's literature is a deeply cultural practice [13] that can increase readers' worldly knowledge and understanding [10].

Recognising the salient role of drawing on personal experience in reading literature, Megan, a teacher in the CPD study, commented on a child's close textual engagement which evidenced the conscious act of 'mirroring' text to self: "He [the child] empathised with the character and regularly referred to how the character was feeling or her behaviour using the phrases "same as me" or "I was like that too". Through her engagement in the reader response network, Megan came to appreciate the importance of sharing her personal responses and consequently of the value of this reading event to the boy who struggled

with reading. No longer a passive learner, he was enabled to express his active engagement with a book that held personal significance for him [14]. This example underscores the need for teachers to develop knowledge of diverse and multicultural literature and a principled approach to text selection in order to enable equity of access and support all children in making personal responses to texts [102,103].

7. Pedagogic Insight

A teacher demonstrates pedagogic insight when they are able to reflect on the impact that learning design has on students' engagement and understanding. Through such reflection, Reading Teachers make their multiple knowledges visible and deliberately interweave them to avoid offering reductionist literacy experiences and to ensure an inclusive and rich reading diet is offered [9,12,13].

For example, in the comments below, Kayla, a pre-service teacher, recognises that her professional growth was triggered through engaging with children's literature, but that challenges remain. Despite her assurance as a reading pedagogue, she admits her knowledge about teaching reading for aesthetic appreciation and understanding needs strengthening. Kayla's tentativeness, which was commonly echoed across the pre-service teacher group, demonstrates the need for continued professional development after graduation to ensure young teachers develop strong identities as Reading Teachers—teachers who read and readers who teach and who explore the synergies therein [72].

"I actually really like being able to do the activities ourselves and sometimes when I'm on prac(tice), like, it's hard for me to remember things from a reading but if I remember, oh, we did this in class, then the learning was embodied and I think it was really fun, then I'm more likely to implement it in my own stuff. I feel fairly confident with this. The main difficulty I find is knowing how to ask the 'right' questions that are going to show a clear understanding and lead to a further discussion about a book/story."

These comments reveal Kayla's emerging understanding that there are pedagogical issues to consider when developing children's reading skills, their personal responses and aesthetic awareness of literary texts. As she reflects on the intellectual dance and balancing act needed to teach skills and ensure deep understanding, she is beginning to be aware of the inclusive discursive practices needed to increase equitable student engagement potent literature [31,86]. By providing access to relevant quality children's literature, and teaching a broad literacy curriculum through interactive, dialogic pedagogies, teachers can interrupt autonomous literacy regimes [6,33].

8. Working towards Complexity

Through the final voices below, we highlight the interplay between the elements of the additive trio and the benefits of the structured interactive experiences of literature. Through the collaborative dialogue, the pre-service teachers' aesthetic appreciation and personal experience was scaffolded in a cumulative fashion [87].

"Had I not been part of a literature circle I wouldn't have a deeper understanding of the text. I wouldn't have realised how relevant the text was to other readers, to their experiences, to other texts as well and other world events." Jessica

"Yeah, if you want to create some sort of social change within your class you've got to know the book. And you've got to know the book well". Adam

In these examples Jessica and Adam comment on their engagement with texts, noting the impact that the peer-led exploration of literary qualities had on their ways of thinking about literature and its role in the classroom and their agency to create engaging learning experiences with literature that would expand students' repertoire of literacy practices. Feasibly, this is the beginning of their journey towards becoming Reading Teachers [72] who are knowledgeable about children's literature, identify as readers themselves and are able to create authentic and empowering reading experiences in their classrooms.

In summary, although only limited windows into our data have been offered, collectively, the teachers' voices show how positioning them as readers of literature who teach reading had two effects. Firstly, it enabled the teachers to connect more closely with the texts themselves, and secondly, it prompted them to consider how they might harness literature's potential for children's learning. Gradually, the educators began to articulate their understanding of literature in relation to its affordances and began to recognise the complex interaction of the aesthetic, the personal and the pedagogic. In making this new knowledge visible to themselves, the teachers became far more alert to the opportunity to respond to the challenges and inequities facing their students by placing literature at the heart of literacy education.

9. Conclusions

The place and role of children's literature deserves increased attention in debates about literacy and social justice. Arguably all educators have a professional responsibility to know a rich range of children's literature and to understand how to capitalise upon its affordances in the classroom; this is essential subject knowledge for raising readers and addressing inequities. Yet, studies have shown that there are barriers to the widespread and effective use of literature in primary phase teaching. There is a decline in teachers' own desire to read, particularly among pre-service teachers, who, researchers suggest, have 'non-existent or marginalized literary experiences' which constrain their capacity to teach effectively [104] (p. 320). Additional obstacles include: narrow repertoires, with teachers relying on books from their own childhoods or 'celebrity' authors whose work is widely known and promoted [97,99,105–107]; a lack of confidence teaching with literature [108]; and limited awareness of the advantages which accrue for childhood readers [109].

The perception that children's literary texts are predominantly tools for literacy instruction also limits literature's potential to contribute to the social justice agenda. This is particularly marked in cultures of high-stakes testing where the backwash of assessment frames children's experience of reading [29]. This can lead to young people reading for the system, rather than reading for themselves, and conceptions of reading as solitary, not as a social, discursive practice. In addition, the pressure to improve test scores disconnects the act of reading from critical appreciation and from children's personal experience of literary texts [3,24].

To work against such reductive anti-intellectualism, teachers need opportunities to learn more about the affordances of literature. The additive trio could be employed as a strategic guide for future programs designed for pre-service teachers and professional development. If all elements were included in an integrated manner, then teachers would be supported to: develop an aesthetic appreciation and knowledge of children's literature; widen their reflective personal experience with reading such literature as social practice; and build their pedagogic practice in order to maximise literature's potential to teach literacy and develop volitional readers. As a result, teachers may come to appreciate the impact of children becoming avid readers of fiction on their academic attainment and psychological wellbeing, thus advancing equitable outcomes for all. Support may also be needed to help teachers understand that making text choices for their classrooms is not an ideologically free undertaking and that the breadth of texts made available must reflect children's diverse lives [103]. All children deserve opportunities to connect, to escape from reality, to imagine alternative worlds and to expand their cultural understanding through life-resonant and life-expanding literature.

In the light of the educational inequities intensified by entrenched disadvantage, increasing poverty, and more recently the pandemic, it is critical that teachers take their responsibilities as Reading Teachers seriously and use literature to address the social justice agenda. Responsibility in this context is less an accountability issue and more of an ethical stance, since teaching is a relational practice, focused on human relationships that are based on care and recognition [110]. Reading Teachers recognise that it is their professional, social and moral responsibility to nurture the habit of reading in childhood, and that literature is

fundamental to developing more equitable literacy learning [111]. Positioning themselves as fellow readers, Reading Teachers determinedly pursue literacy as an achievable goal for all, and avoid constraining it; rather, they create space for personal, critical and aesthetic responses to literature. They develop effective pedagogic practices around literary texts that help children learn how to think, to question, and to challenge their own and others' understandings, widening their cognitive, social and emotional capacities in the process. Reading Teachers exercise their responsibility to work towards addressing educational inequities through making children's literature the cornerstone of the literacy curriculum.

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