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Teresa Cremin & Helen Hendry

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Literacy histories as opportunities for learning: reflecting, connecting, and learning from Margaret Meek Spencer

Teresa Cremin and Helen Hendry 

The School of Education Childhood Youth and Sport, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on Margaret Meek Spencer's work, considers the value of reflecting on literacy histories, whether of children, teachers, authors or academics. Margaret argued that teachers need to be open to literacy as lived, and to look, listen and learn about literacies that develop *without* direct instruction and stretch beyond "schooled" expectations. She foregrounded the power of story and narrative play for children's literacy development, the importance of the texts themselves and the particular value of author-artists. We revisit these contributions and link to related national and international research studies which develop her work, registering nonetheless that many of her insights are not yet fully reflected in policy, curricula, or classroom practice. We close by reiterating Margaret's invitation to take a mirror to our literacy histories to enable us to reflect, to connect and to understand in order to support young literacy learners more effectively.

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Introduction

Our literacy histories matter – they reflect who we were, who we have become and what has shaped and continues to shape our journeys as literate adults. In revisiting Margaret Meek Spencer's work, we were struck by the thread of autobiography running through it, by her frequent reflections on the personal in the professional and the ways she deployed her own encounters with reading and writing to help her make sense of young people's literate engagement. Indeed, she expressed surprise at the:

apparent indifference to their own literacy history on the part of many scholars and researchers. Unlike poets and novelists who confront their struggles with words as part of their resource material, academics who write about literacy are notoriously reticent about how they learned to read and write. Yet everyone knows that no scholar, researcher or essayist chooses a topic at random. (Meek 1991, 232).

Tracing the intersections between our own early literacy lives and later research interests, there is much we can learn, both about ourselves as readers and the nature of reading and literacy. Margaret's work has influenced what we and so many other educators know, understand, and can do, perhaps even what we take for granted. In alignment with her

CONTACT Teresa Cremin  teresa.cremin@open.ac.uk  The Open University, Walton Hall Campus, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

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socio-cultural stance, which she openly related to the work of Britton and Vygotsky, Margaret foregrounded the social, always stressed the significance of text and context and the vital need to attend to what children as literate individuals actually do with texts and with each other. As she observed, our literacy autobiographies are “always in dialogue with others – those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even” (Meek 1991, 234). In looking back at her work, we revisit some of her core contributions and those who influenced her and link to later studies which have taken these insights forwards. In the process, we also ponder on our own literacy histories and practices, in order, like Margaret, to reflect, to connect, and to learn.

We begin our discussion by examining her focus on literacy as experienced,, then turn to her sustained interest in the power of narrative – oral and written – and finally consider her insights about authors and illustrators as children’s earliest literary companions. We relate each area to her autobiographical reflections and to her commitment to learn from individual readers’ perspectives. This was central to Margaret’s view that literacy needs to be constantly redescribed, that it is always changing, and that whilst understanding our own literacy histories is essential, we must always remain open to what the children of today can teach us about their lived experiences of literacy.

Learning about literacy as lived

Publishing predominantly in the 80s-90s, Margaret was acutely aware of the differences in her childhood literacy experiences from those of the young people she taught and wrote about nearly half a century later. Her Scottish upbringing was full of folklore, books, listening to the radio, and hymns and psalms in church. In mapping her early memories, she reflects on significant textual encounters with a range of texts, including traditional tales, a tactile copy of *Little Giddings*, *The People’s Friend* and Neville Chamberlain’s resonant voice on the World Service. Our early literacy lives were equally historically and culturally situated; Teresa recalls furtively swapping comics, particularly *Jackie* and *Mandy* of which her mother didn’t approve and learning lines and prompting from the wings in a junior amateur drama society. Helen recalls poring over detailed illustrations in a hand me down copy of *Peter Pan* and seeking out stories from the library that she’d watched on television, such as *The Phoenix and the Carpet*. Margaret stated:

Literacy has two beginnings: one in the world, the other in each person who learns to read and write. So literacy has two kinds of history; one in the change and development overtime of what counts as literacy; the other in the life histories of individuals, who depend on reading and writing as features of their lives in literate societies (Meek 1991, 13).

In recognising generational and individual differences, Margaret often reiterated the need for teachers and researchers to “read again with the young”, “to remain open” and move beyond the “tramlines of our expectations” (Meek 1990, 3). She warned that taking account of difference, complexity and inequalities of opportunity are more challenging than we want to think, and that educators, whose own agendas and pasts may be hidden even from themselves, must wake up to their own literacy histories and avoid imposing their perspectives and expectations upon the young.

In particular, she was interested in children's own reflexive understandings of reading and literacy and, to explore this, she regularly revisited her personal experiences of literacy. Considering her secondary school and undergraduate years for instance, Margaret came to appreciate that she had conformed to institutional expectations. She remembers remaining silent about reading girls' school stories and the works of Christina Rossetti and Virginia Woolf, pretending to read Zane Grey, and hiding her love of poetry. She recalls ensuring her essays were always supported by textual evidence, since, as she observed, to offer her own views or feelings "was to bring forth something indecent, so many responses were secrets indulged in social silence" (Meek 1990, 5). This realisation may have powered her desire to appreciate what children themselves discover about reading and writing, and what they learn through engaging in literacy for themselves *without* direct instruction.

In exploring this, Margaret made links to detailed child-focused accounts available at the time (e.g. Tizard and Hughes 1984; Barrs 1988), but took issue with the notion of "emergent literacy" (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982). Rather she maintained that children actively search for and create meanings, and that their understandings are shaped by cultural practices and what counts as literacy in different contexts. Her arguments, moulded by her own experience, were also influenced by the "kidwatching" work of Ken and Yetta Goodman (1985) and by close attention to her pupils' own uses for literacy beyond those framed by school. In her writing and edited collections, she underlines the fact that school learning is only part of all learning (Kimberley et al., 1992; Meek and Mills 1988; Meek 1992).

Further research and developments in literacy as experienced

The tradition of looking, listening, and learning from young people's volitional, often unofficial and spontaneous literacy practices has developed significantly since this time. From studies revealing children's agentic and playful appropriation of texts as toys in their peer-defined classroom practices (e.g. Dyson 1997; Maybin 2013; Rowe 2008), to those on playgrounds where their creative and subversive language play has been documented (e.g. Grugeon 1999; Willett et al. 2013). Research in homes and communities has revealed children's different ways with words, shaped by language, culture and context (e.g. Brice-Heath 1983; Levy 2009), and their digital and multimodal practices (e.g. Potter and McDougall 2017; Marsh et al. 2018). Collectively, these studies affirm the adaptive, situated and intentional nature of young people's diverse literacy practices and identities. These were also recently apparent in England where children exercised their agency as multimodal text creators and expressed their gratitude to the NHS on pavements, windows and in parks (Chamberlain et al. 2020). This multiplicity of studies, albeit an inevitably partial selection, highlights what Margaret maintained over two decades ago, that:

Learners have to discover, in their own ways, what reading and writing are good for, what is in these things for them. They have to want to read with *desire* and to write with *intent* beyond that of pleasing adults (Meek 1991, 77).

In accountability cultures that view literacy as a set of autonomous skills (Street 1984), young people's practices in school are often constrained by the "schooled game" called literacy. In the last Progress in International Literacy Study for instance, children's attitudes to reading in England scored low compared to their skills; England was positioned 10th internationally for reading attainment, yet English ten-year-olds reported the lowest level of enjoyment in reading in English speaking countries, above only Australia (McGrane et al. 2017). This suggests the system is developing children who can read, but who do not choose to do so for themselves. This is an especial concern since being a childhood reader is associated with multiple benefits, including academic attainment (e.g. Schaffner, Philipp, and Schiefele 2016; Cheema 2018).

To work towards social justice, policy makers and practitioners urgently need to support volitional reading and recognise and legitimise young people's everyday literacy practices beyond school. The dominant discourse, with its limited conceptions of school literacy, still needs to be challenged and more expansive versions of literacy as lived developed. The notion of "living literacies" advanced by Pahl and Rowsell (2020) takes a broader approach to literacy, and from a posthumanist perspective explores the role of affect, embodiment and emotion. In this, traces may be discerned of Margaret's view of reading as "dialogue and desire" (Meek 1991, 231), albeit her perspective was ontologically different. For some young people, the desire to read is driven by the affective power of narrative and it is to this we now turn.

Learning about the power of narrative

In reflecting on her literacy history, Margaret comments not only on written but also on oral narratives: Scottish legends read and told by her grandparents, Biblical and moral stories voiced from the pulpit, and numerous others. Spoken stories and those read individually or by family members appear intertwined in her memory as supportive. Reading became "a form of displaced action for an asthmatic: I could talk about things as if they had happened to me" (Meek 1988, 5). Considering our own literacy histories, Helen recalls being transported to Swiss chalet schools, American garnet mines and the Seychelles before she ever left the UK, and Teresa remembers tales which came to characterise her siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles and those repeatedly retold about her as the "reader" in a family who rarely read recreationally.

In *The Cool Web*, Margaret underlined the power of story, and argued that it lies at the heart of children's affective and moral development (Meek, Warlow, and Barton 1977). In this text, Hardy stated that "narrative is a primary act of mind, transferred to art from life" (Hardy 1977, 12) and in her later work, Margaret frequently returned to this assertion, stating that "we must see the value of narrative as a means by which human beings everywhere, represent and structure their world" (Meek 1991, 103). Here, in tune with Bruner (1986), she was emphasising narrative as a linguistic and cognitive tool. Narrative discourse begins long before children can read and continues when they become readers through their language and play, with stories on the page echoing the familiar structure of language, thought and action. Indeed, Margaret likened the experience of fiction to play, positing that both fiction and play are created by the "power of fictive imagining" and that they represent a dialogue with a child's future (Meek 1991, 108).

These arguments were no doubt also shaped by working alongside Professor Harold Rosen at the Institute of Education, London and by Carol Fox, one of her PhD students. Rosen's (1988) studies demonstrated the value of teenagers' oral narratives, despite their dismissal in the official curriculum, whilst Fox's (1993) research showed that pre-schoolers with extensive experience of stories being read and told to them produced complex narrative and linguistic structures that combined lived experience with literary models. Through their oral stories the children explored physical laws, logical thought, and their social world, yet, as with the teenagers' narrative capacity, their remarkable competence remained completely unrecognised in school.

Further research and developments in the role of narrative

Within the research community, there continues to be widespread agreement about the importance of narrative in the early years and the need for children to engage with and play inside stories (e.g. Kerry-Moran and Aerila 2019; Rodriguez-Leon and Payler 2021). Paley's (1990, 2004) story-based curriculum highlights storytelling as a social and communal phenomenon and has been shown to enrich children's vocabulary and narrative development (Nicolopoulou et al. 2015). Additionally, related research shows that when telling their stories as part of this approach, children borrow, repeat, re-use and re-version narrative themes and texts (Faulkner 2017), and that telling and enacting their stories can apprentice young writers, prompting self-initiated authoring and scribing (Cremin 2020).

Other studies also show the benefits that accrue from the untaught lessons of child-initiated narrative play, including a sense of belonging, shared family values (Congleton and Rajaram 2014) and creativity (Craft, McConnon, and Matthews 2012). As Margaret advised and others have documented, narrative competence supports children's early literacy development (McCabe and Bliss 2003), contributes to reading progress (Piasta et al. 2018), and may predict comprehension (Kim, Park, and Park 2015), as well as advancing writing and academic skills (Zanchi, Zampini, and Fasolo 2020). Furthermore, oral language, developed through reading, listening to and enacting stories, supports readers (Dickinson, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek 2010; Shahaieian et al. 2018), and choice-led recreational reading is closely associated with children's literacy development (Sullivan and Brown 2015; Troyer et al. 2019). As Margaret clearly recognised long before these recent studies, literacy lives built on narrative are fundamental to young people's future reading and academic success.

Significantly, since Margaret's statement some thirty years ago that "the great secrets of reading lie in narrative fiction" (Meek 1991, 41), its potency has been underscored by PISA analyses which demonstrate a strong relationship between reading fiction (in contrast to other text types) and reading outcomes (Jerrim and Moss 2019). The authors, who examined PISA data from 2009, contend that this "fiction effect" may relate to the sustained engagement and concentration required to interpret longer texts, and the social networks which such reading support. Other studies also reveal that literature has the capacity to enhance young people's knowledge about the world (Mar and Rain 2015), to connect them to themselves and one another (Rothbauer 2004; Kuzmičová and Cremin 2021), and to support their psychological wellbeing (Clark and Picton 2021). Additionally, it is argued that literature is central to equitable literacy development and thus it should be at the heart of literacy education across the age phases (Simpson and Cremin 2022).

Yet in school, tensions persist between reading instruction and volitional reading, and reading curricula and policies rarely recognise the underpinning power of narrative – oral or written. When literary texts are primarily positioned as tools for instruction their potential as texts for recreational reading, and for imaginative and aesthetic engagement beyond school is side-lined. In England, reading for pleasure has been mandated (Department for Education (DfE) 2014), yet multiple challenges remain, including: professional understanding of the value of this discursive social practice (Cremin et al. 2022a); teachers' knowledge of texts and child readers, (Cremin et al. 2014); impoverished pedagogy (Hempel Jorgensen et al., 2018); and young people's access to texts, particularly those that have personal, social, emotional, cultural or historical relevance (Neuman and Moland 2019). Reiterating her focus on understanding learners' views, Margaret observed that the "important texts are those that are important to their readers" (Meek 1991, 64). Yet textual hierarchies tend to persist in schools, with long novels and classics positioned as the gold standard in both primary and secondary education. Additionally, the English inspectorate (Department for Education (DfE) 2021) expect planned progression and challenge in the literary texts offered, so schools tend to set required reading lists or develop hierarchically framed reading spines. These can seriously limit young people's agency and choice as readers, especially if these lists are not continuously updated or constructed in collaboration with the students. Young readers' identities, practices and preferences change over time, but educational policy and practice often fail to recognise this (Scholes, Spina, and Comber 2020).

Learning about author-artists as educators

Arguably, one of Margaret's richest contributions was to draw attention to the "reading lessons" offered by skilful authors and illustrators whom she viewed as critical companions on children's journeys as readers and writers. Her core exposition of this argument, found in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (Meek 1988), is closely aligned with her continual consideration of the unofficial lessons learned by reading, not those officially taught about reading. Memorably, she stated:

What texts teach is a process of discovery for readers, not a programme of instruction for teachers (Meek 1988, 19-20).

This belief may have been brought into sharp relief for Margaret through self-reflection on her son Jo's extended "addiction" to the adventures of *Asterisk the Gaul* (Meek 1990). Her mistaken assumption that Jo was interested in the intertextual references to French politics was altered years later when he explained that his delight was simply in the familiar cast of comic characters who did amusing things. Holding a mirror up to this misunderstanding, Margaret observed this "was the kind of lesson I thought I needed to learn" (Meek 1990, 5). So, perhaps unsurprisingly, she scrutinised and illuminated some of the implicit lessons offered by "author-artists" who introduce children to storytelling conventions in a memorable manner. She asserted the presence of a "social bond" between fiction author and child reader through the creation of "self-contained and self-consistent" narrative worlds in which the child can lose themselves, experiencing events both as memories of the past and anticipations of the future (Meek, Warlow, and Barton 1977, 9).

To help her consider the role of illustrators, Margaret drew on another personal memory; a specific response to the image of Samuel in prayer on the cover of her Children's Bible. She described this as a "thrill of not quite fear" and maintained that such striking pictures, depending on the experience the reader brings to the text, may be retained forever as evocative "icons" (Meek 1991, 117). In commenting on particular children's texts, such as those created by John Burningham, Quentin Blake and Shirley Hughes, she details the benefits of the "distinctive kind of imaginative looking" (Meek 1991, 116) involved when children read comics and picturebooks, and the literary play and pleasure to be found within them. Teresa recalls paying close attention to the eyes of the teenagers in the comic photo-stories she devoured, to discern their hoped-for romantic intentions, and Helen recalls turning the page quickly past images of the tiger in *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, because of her concern that he might arrive on the doorstep. Yet she read it again and again. These autobiographical memories are deep-rooted, re-experienced in mind and body and retain strong "affective traces" (Waller 2019, 90), that resonate, revealing much about individual readers and the act of reading itself.

In her analysis of children's literature, and her many book reviews, Margaret paid particular attention to the ways skilful authors and illustrators use artistic devices to draw the reader in, including: the multiple perspectives, irony, and intertextual links offered that enable the young to become "both the teller and the told" (Meek 1988, 10). She highlighted that by making the words and visuals mean more than they say, these author-artists recruit children's imaginations (Bruner 1986) and noted:

The authors who exploit their art and the illustrators who make pictures with secrets, link what children know, partly know, and are learning about the world to ways of presenting the world in books (Meek 1990, 19).

Further research and developments in understanding the contribution of author-artists

Building on her work, (Arizpe 2013) investigating children's responses to polysemic picture fiction, found that young people were deeply engaged, able to discern artists' methods and keen to discuss the issues raised. Later studies have explored how children navigate this multimodal space (Ommundsen, Haaland, and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2021), and the value of offering time and space to discuss emotional connections (Garner and Parker 2018), to debate meanings (Maine 2015) and to imagine in response to wordless picturebooks (Arizpe 2013). Recent neurological research with 4–5-year-olds suggests that picturebooks, when compared with audio or animated stories, may offer a uniquely valuable experience for cognitive growth, scaffolding language development and related imagery (Hutton et al. 2018).

Despite the substantial research base that reveals the benefits of reading picture fiction, classroom practices today, as in Margaret's era, are not always well aligned with this. In many schools, "texts of worth, literature especially" have yet "to become the core of the reading curriculum" (Meek 1992, 122). In part, this is because, as research continues to assert, schools prioritise phonics teaching in the early years (Wyse and Bradbury 2022; Carter 2020), and comprehension teaching in the later years (Aukerman 2013). The sharing of picture fiction is often side-lined (Campbell 2021). However, more primary

schools are embedding literature into the curriculum, supported by organisations such as the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, whose work builds actively on Margaret's insights (Royal Society for the Arts/ Education Endowment Foundation 2021). The recent "Seeing beneath the surface: a picturebook framework" (Mukherjee et al. 2022) also seeks to deepen practitioners' own reading of books whose author-artists offer layered messages of hope, understanding and acceptance. Drawing on Halliday (1978) and Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013), this framework connects with Margaret's work in trying to make explicit the layered ways such texts enable children to construct meaning and understand the world.

Conclusion and looking ahead

In her writing, her research, her MA teaching, PhD supervision and many other roles, Margaret always showed enormous respect for those who took young people seriously as readers and writers. While she was not alone in highlighting individuals' engagement in literacy as lived experience, and in insisting that we need to attend to text and context, her commitment to this, her perceptive, self-reflexive insights and her accessible writing have ensured her legacy as a scholar of considerable repute. Her work helps teachers to develop an understanding of the significance of each learner's uniqueness and of more than school literacy – of the untaught nature of many literacy lessons. In addition, she enabled us to understand more about narrative and the lessons that skilled author-artists teach, as well as the value of looking back to learn. As she observed in *On Being Literate*:

Whenever I needed to clarify a point, a position or a procedure in these pages, I was driven to reconstruct the experience or something like it in my own literate history (Meek 1991, 232).

Perhaps because of her personal reflections, Margaret was also interested in how childhood literacy experiences provide touchstones for future work. This is exemplified in her discussion of Spufford's (2002) reading autobiography and consideration of the impact of story reading on adult thinking and writing (Meek 2004). Her insights have been explored in more depth by others, through memoirs (Mangan 2008; Ahlberg, 2014), auto bibliographies (Mackey 2016), and young adults' digital maps of places (real or imagined) that reflect their literate youth (Mackey 2022). In the last example, Mackey (2022) explores how children's reading development and textual interpretations are affected by the spaces and places of their early literacy lives. In addition, Taylor (2019) examines the complex relationship between literary reading and lived experience, noting that many of the women she interviewed had incorporated fiction into their life stories, and saw this as enriching and empowering. The shaping influence of early fiction reading has also been documented on academics' later research interests (Cremin 2021), in literary authors' writing (Le Guin 2004; Morpurgo 2006) and on the writing identities of scientists, historians, and journalists (Cremin et al. 2017). Margaret's particular contribution in this space was to indicate that, through considering our literacy histories, we become aware of what we have learnt about literacy *without* instruction. All her publications emphasise the need to recognise and value such learning, for ourselves and in the lives of the young people with whom we work.

This self-enquiring stance towards literacy is echoed in research studies which explore teachers' identities as readers and writers (e.g. Commeyras, Bisplinhoff, and Olson 2003; Gennrich and Janks 2013; Cremin et al. 2014, 2017). Those related to reading argue that to support young readers more effectively, practitioners benefit from developing as Reading Teachers. These are not simply teachers who read, but teachers who reflect on their reading identities, habits and histories, and model what it is like to be a reader, whilst also making time to get to know the young readers they teach. Enhanced professionals and reading role models, Reading Teachers adjust their work in school in response to their ongoing reflections, seeking to make the experience of reading more authentic, more relevant, and more engaging for the young (see Cremin et al. 2022a).

Just as Margaret deployed her literacy life as a tool to think with, Reading (and Writing) Teachers, hold a mirror up to their own practices and ponder on their present and past uses of literacy. In the process, they are likely to recognise that their "literacy autobiographies reveal riches and gaps" and that their narratives, like those of the children they teach, "are not tales of solitary journeys" (Meek 1991, 642), but are shaped by encounters with others, and by different texts and contexts. Becoming conscious of the social, situated, and cultural nature of literacy can help educators realise that literacy "changes and is changed by those who find uses for it" (Meek 1991, 238). This may lead them to question what counts as literacy in their classrooms and schools, and work to widen this.

Looking ahead, we argue that student teachers need opportunities to reflect upon their literacy histories in order to shape their trajectories as informed and effective literacy teachers. In the context of the knowledge-centred framework for teacher training in England (Department for Education (DfE) 2019) this may seem somewhat counter-cultural, yet knowledge about literacy as lived is essential subject knowledge. We also argue that researchers and teachers would benefit from considering their own literacy histories and current practices and that young people too should be invited to engage in this self-reflexive process. There are many ways to do so. Cliff-Hodges (2010) suggests creating collages of significant experiences in one's literacy life, shaped as reading rivers or as a historical montage of key texts, places and people. In school, children can also borrow books from younger classes to revisit and reconnect to once loved texts. Additionally, class and family literacy histories can be constructed, reflecting the "books in common" which are significant. Each strategy will demonstrate difference and diversity, and, through thoughtful examination, may reveal the potency of the many untaught literacy lessons and interactions on the journey thus far.

Our literacy histories matter. Margaret Meek Spencer's life and work showcase this and so much more.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Teresa Cremin is Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University and co-Director of the Literacy and Social Justice Centre. An ex-teacher and ITE tutor, Teresa's socio-cultural research focuses on volitional reading and writing, teachers' literate identities and practices and creative

pedagogies. Her recent books, with colleagues, include *Reading Teachers: Nurturing Reading for pleasure* (Routledge, 2022), *Children Reading for Pleasure in the Digital Age* (Sage, 2020). A Fellow of the English Association, the Academy of Social Sciences, and the RSA, Teresa is currently a Trustee of UKLA, a Great School Libraries Champion and an appointed DfE reading for pleasure expert. Teresa is passionate about developing readers for life and leads a research and practice coalition to support the development of children's and teachers' reading for pleasure <https://ourfp.org/>

Helen Hendry is a lecturer in Education at The Open University and co-Director of the Literacy and Social Justice Centre. Drawing upon her previous roles as a Primary and Early Years teacher and ITE tutor, Helen's research centres around professional development for Primary and early childhood practitioners, including student and new teachers' developing pedagogy for reading, and support for play-based pedagogy in lower income countries. Her recent co-authored books include *Reading Teachers: Nurturing Reading for pleasure* (Routledge, 2022) and *Harnessing Professional Development for Educators: A Global Toolkit* (OUP, 2022). Helen leads whole school CPD through the OU Reading Schools Programme, works in partnership with the UKLA leading the OU/UKLA student teachers RfP ambassador scheme for UK HEIs and co-designed the Teachers Reading Challenge with Teresa Cremin and the Reading Agency. <https://teachersreadingchallenge.org.uk/>

ORCID

Helen Hendry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9615-1652>

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