

Reading for pleasure and wider reading

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Is there cause for concern?

International evidence suggests that children in England continue to read rather less independently and find rather less pleasure in reading than many of their peers in other countries (Twist, Schagen and Hodgson, 2003; 2007). In the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading attainment fell significantly in England and only 28% of the English children reported reading weekly compared to an international average of 40%. These results are largely in line with other studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2002) which, revealed that nearly 30% of English 15 year olds never or hardly ever read for pleasure; 19% felt it was a waste of time and 35% said they would only read if they were obliged to do so. This was despite high average scores in terms of attainment. The recent PISA (OECD, 2009) shows continued deterioration in enjoyment of reading, in contrast to the National Literacy Trust survey which suggests the decline may have halted, although the gender gap continues to widen and book ownership in children and young people has fallen (Clarke and Douglas, 2011).

This represents cause for concern, not least because the influence of reading achievement on academic attainment and life chances is widely recognised. PISA has shown that:

- Being a frequent reader is more of an advantage than having well educated parents
- Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change

(OECD, 2002:3).

Are teachers in a position to support wider reading?

Over the last decade, teachers from both primary and secondary sectors have had to cope with a wealth of new policy initiatives, increased prescription over the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of literacy teaching and ongoing accountability pressures. In addition, new technologies have changed the face of literacy. It is not surprising therefore that some schools have found it hard to find the time and space to foreground reader development and foster wider reading. The professional capacity to nurture readers who can and DO choose to read for their own purposes within and beyond school depends on a number of factors. These include teachers’ knowledge of engaging texts, their knowledge of young people as readers in the 21st century and their pedagogy and practice both in English and across the curriculum. School and home relationships with teachers, peers and family members can also influence whether young people find intrinsic satisfaction in the personal and social processes of reading.

A. Teachers’ knowledge of literature and other texts for young people

Internationally, research indicates that successful literacy teachers are knowledgeable about children’s literature, prioritise the importance of meaning and teach through whole texts (Block, Oakar and Hurt, 2002; Wray et al., 2002). Yet such knowledge is frequently taken for granted in lists of required teacher competencies and there has been a reduction in primary schools’ expenditure on books (Hurd et al., 2006). A United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) survey revealed that whilst teachers are adult readers of fiction and recognise the imaginative value which literature can offer, their knowledge and use of children’s literature is worryingly limited (Cremin et al., 2008a). The 1200 primary teachers in this survey, who were not literacy consultants in their schools, appeared to rely on a ‘canon’ of authors and their own childhood favourites. They had particularly narrow repertoires of poetry and picture fiction: 22% and 24% of the sample did not or could not name a single writer in these categories (Cremin et al., 2008b). Many of the teachers, (85% of whom reported relying upon their own repertoires to select books for school), were only using fiction and poetry as a resource for

instructional purposes. They were heavily over-dependent upon ‘celebrity’ authors, such as Roald Dahl and J.K. Rowling at the expense of a wider range and arguably were not familiar with a sufficiently diverse range of writers to enable them to foster reader development and make recommendations to young readers with different needs and interests.

Yet with support teachers can widen their knowledge and use of children’s literature, recognize a much wider range of texts which appeal to the young and take risks in their choices. Librarians have a key role to play here. In a later OU/UKLA study, as teachers became more confident, autonomous and flexible in using their enriched subject knowledge, they began to articulate a more informed and strategic rationale for selecting and using texts to support children’s reading for pleasure (Cremin et al., 2009).

B. Teachers’ knowledge of young people as readers in 21st century

Despite the reality of living in this digital age, school and societal conceptions of literacy arguably remain somewhat print-oriented and book-bound. The profession needs to find out about young people’s reading practices and preferences which may include multimodal texts such as comics, magazines, newspapers, picturebooks, novels and information books, as well as different forms of text accessed through mobile technologies and influenced by popular culture. Diversity is key: the OECD (2010) data indicates that those students who read varied types of texts in addition to fiction score the highest, and those who engage in extensive online reading are generally more proficient readers than students who do little online reading. So encouraging a wide reading diet should be a priority in all schools. Young people’s everyday reading practices deserve to be validated and built on, so that what ‘counts’ as reading is expanded and teachers recognise the significance of both texts and contexts in the creation of a reading curriculum that challenges and satisfies learners.

C. Teachers’ wider reading pedagogy

Young people who are not motivated to read, fail to benefit from reading teaching (Cox and Guthrie 2001), so whilst instructional work is essential, teachers also need to plan a reading for pleasure pedagogy which fosters learner engagement. It is a key professional responsibility to teach reading/literary appreciation and to support wider reading from 5-18 years. This subtle balance may involve staff in discussing the distinctions between fostering both the skill and the will to read (see figure 1). Currently, the profession tends to concentrate on the former at the expense of the latter, yet as the OECD (2002) states - the will influences the skill.

Reading Instruction is oriented towards:	Reading for Pleasure is oriented towards:
Learning to read	Choosing to read
The skill	The will
Decoding and comprehension	Engagement and response
System readers	Lifelong readers
Teacher direction	Child direction
Teacher ownership	Child ownership
Attainment	Achievement
The minimum entitlement (A Level 4)	The maximum entitlement (A reader for life)
The Standards Agenda	The Wider Reading Agenda

Figure 1. Distinctions between reading instruction and reading for pleasure

The wider reading agenda, whilst distinct from, although closely related to, the standards agenda, foregrounds the volition and personal interest of young readers and focuses on their development as lifelong readers. To be effective, it requires building reciprocal reading communities in school, communities which research evidence suggests encompass the following features:

- a shared concept of what it means to be a reader in the 21st century;
- considerable teacher and student knowledge of young people's literature and other texts;
- pedagogic practices which acknowledge and develop diverse reader identities, including: reading aloud, dedicated reading time, space to talk about and recommend texts in a positive physical and social environment that celebrates the power and possibilities of reading;
- new social spaces that encourage choice and ownership;
- a shift in the focus of control to encourage the young to exercise discrimination and choice as readers;
- Reading Teachers- teachers who read and readers who teach.

(Cremin et al., 2009)

D. Teachers who read and readers who teach

Teachers who share their own reading lives, find out about their students' practices and recognise the significance of reader identity in reader development are in a strong position to influence young readers. If teachers choose to adopt a Reading Teacher stance – as a teacher who reads and a reader who teaches – they may begin to share their reading lives with the young, remain attentive to the processes, practices and texts that make up the ongoing and contextualised experience of reading, and seek to explore the consequences of this for younger readers. Whilst avoiding a 'do as I do' frameset, professionals can model their engagement and capitalise upon connections between their reading habits and those of the students they teach, considering the consequences for classroom practice and for positioning readers differently. An enhanced awareness and deep pleasure in reading can, the UKLA study indicates, nurture young readers who, like their teachers, are engaged, self-motivated and socially interactive readers who read widely (Cremin et al., 2009).

E. Working with parents and carers

Whilst prioritising reader relationships within school, teachers can also seek to build home-school reading communities that highlight the power and pleasure to be found in reading. Readers' identities matter and young people's reading identities are influenced by their parents', peers and teachers' identities as readers. Research evidence suggests that many

home-school projects are one-way; (Muschamp et al, 2007) they may seek to impose upon parents a version of what reading at home 'should' be like or frame reading as book bound. New approaches to working with parents, families and communities need to be developed that build on young people's reading lives and practices, connect to the diverse 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzales et al, 2003) in 21st families and foster two-way traffic between families and schools. Whilst not sidelining the significance of literature in reader development, new relationships need to be built on increased equity and new understandings of reading; this will support both attainment and achievement in reading.

Reading for pleasure and wider reading urgently require a higher profile in education to raise both attainment and achievement. Many schools already plan to support this agenda, honour and expand young people's choices and seek to sustain a rich reading culture amongst staff, parents and students. Though problems of time, space, resources, knowledge of young people's preferences, of literature and other texts as well as strategies to involve parents and caregivers often constrain practice and create challenges for the profession. The possibility of establishing stronger communities based on new understandings of young people as readers, parents as readers and teachers as readers offers considerable potential for supporting wider reading and learning.

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Trustee UKLA, Booktrust, and the Poetry Archive

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