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A review on exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature

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Abstract

In the context of the current debate about teaching reading, research to ascertain primary teachers' personal and professional reading practices was undertaken. The study explored teachers' reading habits and preferences, investigated their knowledge of children's literature, and documented their reported use of such texts and involvement with library services. The data were analysed and connections made between the teachers' own reading habits and preferences, their knowledge of children's literature, their accessing practices and pedagogic use of literature in school. This paper reports on part of the dataset and focuses on teachers' knowledge of children's literature; it reveals that primary professionals lean on a narrow repertoire of authors, poets and picture fiction creators. It also discusses teachers' personal reading preferences and considers divergences and connections between these as well as the implications of the teachers' limited repertoires on the reading development of young learners.

KEYWORDS: Teachers, Reading, Children

Introduction

The teaching of reading in the primary phase remains a site of contestation and debate, particularly with regard to the manner and significance of phonics instruction (e.g. Wyse & Styles, 2007; Brooks, Cook, & Littlefair, 2007; Goouch & Lambirth, 2007), and the reported decline in children's reading for pleasure (e.g. Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Clark & Foster, 2005). The former concern focuses upon the kinds of knowledge and skills young readers need; the latter around readers' attitudes and interests, their dispositions and desires. Both connect vitally to teachers' professional knowledge and understanding and their use of children's literature and other texts as they seek to develop young readers who can and do choose to read. It could be argued that the current international emphasis on phonics instruction in both the US and the UK has the potential to produce practice that is both fragmented and limited, practice in which the purpose of reading may be shortchanged and the pleasures of literature sidelined. In England for example, in the recent Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) the use of synthetic phonics is profiled and almost no explicit connections are made to children's books and meaningful motivating texts (Wyse & Styles, 2007).

The 'simple view of reading' espoused in this review, encompasses a two-dimensional framework that separates decoding and comprehension which may focus the attention of teachers and young readers on words not meanings, sounds not sense. However, it is also possible to argue that such a 'simple' model could encourage teachers to focus more explicitly on comprehension and response. Whichever perspective is adopted, what remains clear is that classroom practice is influenced by a myriad of factors, both local and national (Ellis, 2007), and that one of these is teachers' knowledge of children's literature. Such knowledge is surely a pre-requisite if teachers are to nurture positive attitudes and sustain and develop young readers.

In this new media age, children's reading preferences and the nature and form of what they choose to read continues to change. Outside school, children read a very diverse range of texts, with primary aged children reporting a preference for jokes, magazines, comics, fiction, TV books and magazines, signs, poetry and websites in that order (Clark & Foster, 2005). Similarly, other studies affirm that comics and magazines remain popular (Maynard, Mackay, Smyth, & Reynolds, 2007) and that children prefer engaging with multimodal screen-based texts (such as TV/DVD/ video/the internet) over those composed mainly of words (e.g. Nestle´ Family Monitor, 2003; UKLA, 2007). Whether there is a gap between what young children choose to read and what teachers provide as reading material (whether for in-class use or for private reading) is not known,

although such a gap has been noted by OfSTED (2003) in the secondary sector. The presence of such a gap in the primary phase also seems likely given the rapid advances in technologies and the challenge of keeping up-to-date with children's literature published in book form. In the twentyfirst century it is clear both that 'linear and hypertext models of narrative exist in parallel and compromise is inevitable' (Hunt, 2000, p.118) and that more diverse literary forms need to be made available to youngsters in school. Recently, research into new texts and technologies has burgeoned, alongside examinations of accompanying pedagogic practice and professional development in this area (e.g. Mackey, 2002; Gee, 2003; Merchant, 2003), but with the notable exception of Arizpe and Styles's (2003) research into picture fiction, much less attention has been paid to more traditional forms of children's literature. Whilst acknowledging textual diversity in mode and media, the research team which led this study sought to redress the balance and identify teachers' knowledge and use of print based narratives, poetry and picture fiction in the primary classroom.

Children's literature in the classroom

This creative tension has been particularly evident since the introduction of the government's prescriptive framework for teaching literacy (DfEE, 1998) in England, and concerns have been voiced about the positioning of children's literature and its use in the classroom. In particular the practice of relying upon extracts, downloaded or purchased as part of publishers' packages, has been heavily criticised (Dombey, 1998; Frater, 2000; Sedgwick, 2001). Professional writers too have articulated their concerns, perceiving that their literary works are being subjected to inappropriate levels of analysis and that an atmosphere of 'anxiety' exists around reading literature (Powling, Ashley, Pullman, Fine, & Gavin, 2003, 2005). Many have argued that if comprehension and assessment are seen to dominate over reading and response, this will lead to reduced pleasure in texts and adversely influence children's desire to read (King, 2001; Martin, 2003; Woods, 2001; Cremin, 2007). There has also been a perception that teachers' creative use of literature is restricted by centralised systems and their attendant pedagogic practices (Marshall, 2001; Grainger, Goouch, & Lambirth, 2005). Furthermore, it has been suggested that teachers' confidence in knowing and using children's literature may be limited, particularly by a lack of time to read personally for pleasure.

Studies which have examined the most effective ways to teach literacy in the primary phase, show that teachers need much more than knowledge of reading skills and cueing systems; they also need extensive knowledge of children's literature (Medwell, Wray, Poulson, & Fox, 1998; Block, Oakar, & Hurt, 2002). Primary teachers'

knowledge of children's authors, poets and picture book creators is an assumed element of their professional repertoire; yet such knowledge is rarely included in any countries' list of required teacher competencies. It is not included for example in the new Standards for Teachers (TDA, 2007) in England, and despite significant literacy training in recent years, little has been done to extend and develop teachers' familiarity with a wide range of children's literature.

Limited by a primary canon It is not known whether the teachers' overdependence on a relatively narrow range of very well known writers is linked to the influential epithets enshrined in an earlier National Curriculum (DfE, 1995), which states that for primary aged children the literary texts shared should be written by 'significant children's authors'. However it is possible that this requirement, which was expanded for children aged seven to 11 years to include 'long-established children's fiction', 'good quality modern poetry' and 'classic poetry', has remained influential. When the English National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998) was established, these categories were reiterated and detailed examinations of literary texts at word, sentence and text level ensued. It is perceived that historically, this labelling has shaped and framed the knowledge indicated by the teachers in this survey, whose repertoires it could be argued represent a primary canon of 'significant' children's authors. Additionally, the media profile given to the top five authors mentioned in the survey, three of whom have been Children's Laureates, may also be influential, as may the teachers' childhood favourites – many of which appear to be relied upon and revisited years later in the classroom. Whilst it is possible that other writers are known to the respondents andthat in the context of the classroom with its attendant bookshelves, the teachers' knowledge might have reflected a wider base, the number of responses which reflect a narrow range of writers remains a genuine cause for concern.

Many have argued that the inclusion of the term 'significant authors', served to institutionalise a cultural heritage model at the centre of English in schools (e.g. Benton, 2000; Maybin, 2000) and it has been suggested that 'the work of a restricted number of children's authors has become established as a classic set of texts with which primary children should become familiar' (Marsh, 2004, p. 255). The findings from this current research would appear to reinforce these views. It is possible that the establishment of this canon may have been strengthened in recent years by the dominance of such 'significant' writers in the NLS web materials and other publications produced for teachers. The contribution of these writers to young children's reading is not being contested, indeed they have an important role to play, but the creation of such a canon of texts and their

potential purchase as class sets has implications for pedagogy and practice. It may contribute to the regulation and framing of the primary English curriculum, particularly in the later stages, and may create situations in which teachers annually focus upon the same books, with all the challenge of stasis and loss of personal as well as professional interest that this may imply. The work of Roald Dahl for example remains very popular with teachers, yet surveys suggest that he is widely read by young people; the Roehampton Reading Surveys (undertaken in 1996 and 2005), indicate that Dahl was one of the top three favourite children's authors in both years (Maynard et al., 2007, pp. 57–58) and in the National Literacy Trust survey he was the second most frequently read author noted by 10–11 year olds (Clark & Foster, 2005). His work is also likely to be well known to parents and grandparents, suggesting that it is perhaps time for the profession to look further afield for writers to introduce to young readers. Whilst developing in-depth knowledge of the work of particular authors is important, breadth and diversity also remain crucial if children are to be extended and challenged as readers.

Limited poetic resonance

In relation to poets, the teachers in this survey appeared only able to name a few. They tended to lean towards those whose poetry might be seen as light-hearted or humorous (e.g. Rosen, Dahl, Ahlberg or Milligan) and towards the work of poets whose work is likely to be studied as examples of 'classic poetry' (e.g. Rossetti, Shakespeare, Browning, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Stevenson, Hughes or Milne). Arguably the work of over a quarter of the poets named could be assigned to the category 'classic poetry'. As a recent report on poetry notes, since the majority of primary teachers are not English specialists and 'tend not to be keen or regular readers of poetry' they may rely upon poets or poems they know from their own childhood or on poems presented in publishers' resources (OfSTED, 2007, p. 13). There was evidence of the former in the survey results, since of the poems named by title, these were mostly classics which teachers were likely to have studied in their own school days (e.g. R.L. Stephenson's 'From a railway carriage' and W.H. Davies' 'Leisure'). The findings led the researchers to wonder whether some teachers are focused more on poems than poets, and whether they are using poetry to teach literacy at the relative expense of reading and responding to poetry for its own sake.

Whilst recent research has suggested that an emphasis on poetic form and feature has begun to dominate primary practice (Hull, 2001; Wilson, 2005; Grainger et al., 2005), it is not known whether the teachers in this survey were selecting individual poems for instructional purposes or as models to imitate, both of which have been noted as common features of primary practice (OfSTED, 2007).

Limited knowledge of picture fiction

What is surprising however, especially given the wealth of books available which exploit both word and image, is that primary teachers' knowledge was poorest in the area of picture fiction. In terms of multiple mentions, a small group of the rich range of authors/illustrators who are publishing for children today were mentioned and this is problematic, especially since a relatively large number of authors/creators of other kinds of book were inadvertently mentioned in this category. It is worth noting that many of the picture book makers who received numerous mentions create texts largely targeted at nought to seven year olds, that knowledge of authors who create more complex visual texts targeted at older readers was limited, and that teachers of older readers knew fewer picture fiction authors. What is also worrying is the remarkably large number of teachers who work with children aged five to seven years who found it hard to name just half a dozen picture book creators. It may be that many of these named book titles instead, but this is of little help to children whose tentative early journeys as readers could be nurtured through an affinity for a particular Shirley Hughes' character or Martin Waddell's writing. Young readers deserve to be introduced to the notion of authorship and to develop their pleasure and preferences for writers and illustrators. The data that suggest teachers with less experience in the profession knew fewer picture book creators are also of interest. Whether these teachers were predominantly 'functional' or 'detached' readers – as in a study into pre-service teachers as readers in Singapore – is not known (Cox & Schaetzel, 2007), but it may suggest that recently trained teachers have engaged in a less literature-informed curriculum, both perhaps in their training institutions and in their school-based experience. This finding may also relate to the time needed to build such a repertoire, especially for mature students, whose own memories of childhood books may be somewhat distant.

In this picture fiction category, the work of the established canon of significant writers is again evident, for example Quentin Blake is widely mentioned, influenced Cambridge Journal of Education 457 perhaps by his role as Children's Laureate and exhibitions of his work. Although whether he is known for his own texts such as Zagazoo or Clown or his many illustrations of Roald Dahl's books such as The twits, The giraffe, the pelly and me, The enormous crocodile and Revolting rhymes is unknown. His popularity does however correlate with the findings from the fiction and poetry categories which indicate that Dahl is pre-eminent within his field in terms of teachers' knowledge of his work.

Conclusions

Furthermore, the infrequent mention of poetry in teachers' personal reading and their lack of knowledge of poets, as well as the relative absence of women poets and poets from other cultures writing in English is also a concern, as is the dearth of knowledge of picture book creators, and the almost non-existent mention of picture book writers for older readers. It is debatable therefore whether teachers are familiar with a wide enough range of children's authors in order to plan richly integrated and holistic literacy work. The evidence suggests that if units of work or author studies are undertaken they are likely to be based around the work of writers from the canon, whose writing may already be very well known to children. The wide popularity and teacher reliance on the prolific work of Dahl may restrict children's reading repertoires, since child-based surveys suggest he is also a core author of choice for children. This convergence of choice by adults and children is likely to narrow the range still further. Teachers surely need to be able to recommend books to individual learners, suggesting named authors and actual books which will excite their imaginations, foster their desire and enhance their pleasure in reading. It is argued that the choice of books and teachers' mediation of them has a profound effect on 'how [children] see themselves and who they want to be' (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p. 237) and informed recommendations can enhance both progression and development. Lamentably however, evidence suggests that few children perceive that their teachers help them choose books, in contrast, mothers are seen to play a key role in recommending texts and connecting children with books for personal reading (Maynard et al., 2007). Mothers however are likely to draw upon the same canon of well known authors, many of whom have attained celebrity status and whose work is accessible, available and heavily promoted.

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