



Forum: helping the teachers of reading

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Mary Sutcliffe shares good practice with trainee teachers.

Are trainee teachers being helped to find a way to get their pupils to enjoy books? Following concerns expressed by Children's Laureate Michael Rosen that 'there is no longer time for this question during PGCE and Education degree courses', Mary Sutcliffe wrote to **BfK** (No 171, July 2008) to say that there is in fact plenty of good practice at some teacher training institutions that could usefully be shared. Here **Mary Sutcliffe** discusses the approach taken at Westminster Institute of Education.

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Recently, I received an email from a former student now in Australia. She wrote of her excitement when, her principal having noted her passion for children's literature, she was asked to give presentations at two Sydney schools as part of their Literacy Week celebrations. At her own school, 350 parents and grandparents listened while she read to them and shared her knowledge of and enthusiasm for children's books, responding with enjoyment and enthusiasms of their own. One example of this was grandparents 'vowing they would go that afternoon to choose five special books to keep at their house to read to their grandchildren'.

This represents the latest episode in the story of Alison's development as a reader and as a teacher of reading. Her story is not an unusual one in the context of our work here; rather it is representative of the stories of many students who join us lacking in confidence and experience as readers and who, through their encounters with literature for children, develop an enthusiasm and depth of knowledge which enable them to make a difference in schools. Another student, contacting me shortly after completing the PGCE course, wrote, with reference to Chambers' terms*, 'As you know, I deemed myself to be a 'flat earth' reader, and in many ways determined to stay so at the start of the course. But I can safely say that, although I may not yet be an 'intergalactic reader', my spacecraft has at least taken off!'

We can't claim this degree of success with every student, of course, but the fact that this knowledge and understanding is essential for all primary school teachers is what drives our programmes; what we are as readers ourselves is what defines us as teachers of reading. So, one of our primary purposes is to help our students become, if they are not already, enthusiastic and informed readers, eager to share their enthusiasm and passion 'yes, we use that word' with the children they will teach.

Reading takes time

At the heart of this lies the need to read and share literature for children regularly and through this to develop as critical, reflective readers, able and willing to engage with the challenges it offers. There is no secret formula or magic answer to what we do; it is fundamentally a question of time. All readers know the significance of this: reading takes time. We need time for choosing what we read, time for reading and rereading, time for sharing what we read, time for talking about reading and for developing deep understanding of how fiction and poetry work, of how choices authors and illustrators make affect our reading experiences.

The environment also matters, just as it does in the primary classroom. Two rooms house our Standing Collection of children's books – picture books, novels and stories in one; poetry and traditional tales in the other – and provide our teaching environment and a space for personal reading. We try to ensure that the collection is updated and, like teachers in schools, are imaginative in acquiring funding to facilitate this. Sets of books are used in seminars for group and class discussion and Book Boxes provide additional loan copies.

Establishing priorities from the outset, we ask students to prepare by spending their summer reading and investigating books for children. Every programme, undergraduate and postgraduate, begins with discussion of that summer reading and the shared reading of a novel. Throughout English modules, the thread of reading and exploring children's books continues, in our efforts to create a community of readers, supporting and encouraging each other. All undergraduate students undertake a discrete module on children's literature, enabling them to deepen knowledge and understanding of theoretical principles and their relevance.

Which brings me to make a point about cake and icing. It is now a week since our third 'Read to Inspire' conference, provided by Nikki Gamble of www.writeaway.org.uk/ [3] who does such sterling work to support teacher trainers in their efforts to promote reading for pleasure. Students and staff are still 'buzzing' about the morning that saw four distinguished picture book authors – Helen Cooper, Mini Grey, Chris Wormell and Anthony Browne – talking about their work. Their visit, and those by authors we've welcomed in the past, provides the 'icing on our cake'. My colleagues and I, in our day-to-day encounters with students, do the groundwork in the hope that our students will do the same for children – we make the cake. Of course, the icing makes the cake more interesting and gives purpose to the eating of it, and the conference has motivated us all to read more and to read even more carefully. As I said in my closing comments, there are days when I feel very fortunate and privileged to have the job that I do.

* Chambers, A (1991) **The Reading Environment**, Stroud: Thimble Press.

[image:Mary Sutcliffe.jpg:left]

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Do you have some good practice to share? Contact the Editor if you would like to submit an article to this Forum.

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