



# Developing Teachers? Knowledge of Children's Literature: Teachers as Readers, Phase II

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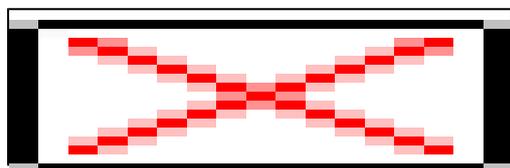
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**Fiona M Collins, Teresa**

**Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Sacha Powell** and **Kimberly Safford** report on the second part of the UKRA project.



For primary teachers, knowledge of children's literature and of individual children and their reading interests is essential in order to support the development of younger readers. If a shared knowledge of and enthusiasm for texts is developed between children and teachers, this is likely to prompt regular sharing and discussion and enrich reader motivation. The first phase of the UKLA **Teachers as Readers** project (2006-7) revealed that primary teachers were reliant upon a limited canon of children's writers and know very few poets or picture book creators (see **BfK** No 167, Nov 2007). The second phase of the project therefore aimed to promote knowledge of children's literature with teachers. **Fiona M Collins, Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Sacha Powell** and **Kimberly Safford** report on its impact.

Teachers need to be familiar with a wide range of authors and poets including contemporary writers and illustrators. Those who have a secure knowledge of a range of literature are not only more able to recommend the right text for the right child, they are also better positioned to create a community of readers in the classroom. Children, like adults, develop reading preferences and teachers need to be able to match texts to individual children's interests and needs. This intervention not only increases the child's reading repertoire but offers young readers the opportunity to make links between their readings. From this shared knowledge of texts, rich text talk can develop between participants who have read the same book, poem or other literature. As Aidan Chambers stated over 30 years ago:

*?Unless a school is staffed by people who enjoy books and enjoy talking to children about what they read then it is unlikely that they will be very successful in helping children to become readers.? (1973:22).*

## The second phase

Phase II: **Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers** (2007-8) placed a strong emphasis on developing teachers' subject knowledge of children's literature and other reading material. Throughout the project, which was undertaken in five Local Authorities (LA), books were shared with and by teachers on National Days and in LA professional developments sessions. The Book Talk sessions held on each of the National Days gave everyone involved the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the texts they had brought to share (one for adults and one for children). These sessions were extremely popular and peer recommendation became a significant way in which the teachers widened their repertoires.

It was clear from the outset that the teachers were at different starting points in relation to their knowledge of children's literature. They had completed an initial questionnaire which indicated that while a few were knowledgeable and enthusiastic, most were over dependent on their own childhood reading or only familiar with the texts (or even extracts from texts) which they used to teach PNS (Primary National Strategy) literacy objectives. In their interviews, several acknowledged the need to update their knowledge:

*?I think I have good knowledge of children's literature from say when I was young but my problem is that I haven't got knowledge of more contemporary children's authors. ?I read a lot when I was younger and perhaps I'm still stuck in the '80s.?*

It appeared that many of the teachers who had trained in recent years had a particularly limited subject knowledge, some considered that literature had not been profiled sufficiently in their teacher training, some acknowledged an over reliance on Dahl and others admitted that they had no idea what their pupils enjoyed reading. There was much work to be done.

### Broadening reading repertoires

In each of the five LAs teachers were encouraged to broaden their subject knowledge, set themselves personal reading targets and keep lists of what they had read with annotated notes alongside. Regular allocated time to share their personal and professional reading appears to have been crucial in developing their subject knowledge. As the year progressed the teachers' subject knowledge and attitude to children's reading material developed and became much more positive. Many of the teachers' final evaluations reflected the impact that the project had on their individual knowledge bases:

*?Huge! Previously familiar with books my own children read and a few regular favourites used in units of work with Year 5, eg Michael Morpurgo. Have found myself reading much more varied selections of books as a result of the project and now I have lists of recommendations that I intend to get to eventually.?*

*?Well, we are so much more confident ? both of us. We? if we're honest we cheated on the first questionnaire. We just couldn't complete it so we looked on the internet. Now we are moving away from the traditional British authors.?*

All of the teachers extended their reading repertoires and began to travel from known and familiar territory into new and unknown terrain. They acknowledged the need to diversify and to broaden their reading repertoires and some engaged with texts that they would not otherwise have read. Several, for example, read a graphic novel for the first time, challenged either by their children's interest in them or as a result of a friend's recommendation. This freedom to choose and to talk about what they read enhanced their pleasure in reading:

*?I feel like the project has given me permission to read again, to choose, connect and enjoy books for their own sake in school and out.?*

One teacher set up boxes of books for her reluctant Year 6 boys. The texts were deliberately chosen to engage these unenthusiastic boys ? which they did! In order to be able to discuss these texts with her pupils, this female teacher read all of them but acknowledged she would not have normally have read them as they were ?books for boys?!

The impact of the teachers? new found enthusiasm for books cannot be understated. There was considerable evidence that it spilled over into their relationship with the young readers in their classes and made a significant difference to the children?s own interest and attitudes towards reading and texts (Cremin et al., 2009):

*?It has made me look again at new books, authors, illustrators ? all which has given me enthusiasm to share with the children in the class.?*

*?Reading again has given me back enthusiasm when I am reading to the children. Their enthusiasm has been rubbing off on me as they love their daily story time and so I?ve given myself more time for my own reading ? it works both ways.?*

Some teachers began to consider the books they used with their pupils in relation to the children?s out-of-school interests. A reception class teacher in one authority focused on Lauren Child as she knew that her pupils enjoyed the ?Charlie and Lola? cartoon television series. She used the children?s prior knowledge and enthusiasm for the series as a springboard to introduce them to Lauren Child?s books. Before being involved in the TaRs project she admitted that she had no knowledge of Lauren Child titles.

### **The power of recommendation**

Two National Days were held at Scholastic?s headquarters in London and during the lunch break everyone had an opportunity to peruse the books on display. Generously, Scholastic gave out free ?goody? bags on each occasion with proof copies and information about titles. One proof copy was of **Ways to Live Forever** by Sally Nicholls, a first novel.

This amusing and sensitive book moved all those who read it. It became part of the participants? shared book knowledge, featuring in many later book talk discussions:

*?I couldn?t put it down ? I loved it. I read an extract to my son because his godmother has leukaemia.?*

*?I passed it onto Poppy, who told me she cried too and now it?s being read avidly and loads of children have come to talk to me about it. I can?t wait to get a final copy to see if it?s laid out differently ? that?ll be fascinating.?*

Across the five authorities certain texts, through the power of recommendation, became popular and were widely circulated. Alongside **Ways to Live Forever**, they included: **The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas** by John Boyne, **Our Big Blue Sofa** by Tim Hopwood, **The Snow Dragon** by Vivian French and **Little Mouse?s Big Book of Fears** by Emily Gravett. In addition, adult books such as **A Thousand Splendid Suns** by Khaled Hosseini and Alan Bennett?s **The Uncommon Reader** were widely read. Teachers began to recognise the power, potential and importance of peer recommendation for themselves and sought to establish opportunities for their children to talk more informally about texts and make recommendations to each other. As a result reciprocal recommendations occurred in many classes, where the children took it on themselves to suggest titles to their teachers and the teachers read and discussed these with interest.

### **Thoughtful responses**

Teachers also began to consider the impact of books upon them personally and started to respond to new texts 'aesthetically' and to understand how reader response is affected by personality, needs, interests, knowledge and culture (Rosenblatt, 1978). For example one commented:

*?I have thought more about the books I have read, rather than racing through a book and then on to a new one.?*

In the National Day Book Talk sessions teachers' responses reflected this sense of thoughtful consideration and there was evidence of them responding to children's books more as readers, than as teachers/pedagogues:

*?Very cleverly written ? with repeated phrases. The realisation and innocence of it all. There?s a moment in the book when he has his hair cut and the realisation of what could happen hits you.?*

This teacher's comment reflects her understanding of the significance of a haircut in **The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**. In this response she brought together her prior knowledge of the atrocities of WWII, with her reading of a modern children's novel, thus reflecting the power of narrative on the reader.

The focus of the teachers' National Day Book Talk discussions shifted across the year. Initially these had focused on the value of a book in relation to its potential to teach particular literacy objectives and to the amount of work which might be developed from the text. Later in the year discussions were much more focused on a text's meaning, how it affected them as readers and what connections it triggered. Their arguably limited initial perceptions of children's literature as a tool to teach literacy was both widened and questioned through their engagement in wider reading, through their involvement in a community of adult readers and through their attention to developing children's reading for pleasure, which was the core aim of the project.

For more information about the project and the Executive Summary and recommendations see [www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org) [7]

## References

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