Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers

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The book co-funded by the Primary National Strategy and UKLA is available for sale from UKLA. This provides support for professional development to extend teachers’ knowledge and enrich their practice, enabling them to build new relationships and increase children’s motivation and raise standards in reading. Available from http://www.ukla.org

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WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH?

This United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) project was planned in response to recurring evidence that suggests children in England continue to read less independently and find less pleasure in reading than many of their peers in other countries (Twist et al., 2003; 2007). In the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (n: 41 countries), only 28% of the English children reported reading weekly compared to an international average of 40%.

In addition, previous UKLA research, drawing on questionnaires from 1200 primary teachers nationally, showed that whilst the majority read independently for pleasure, professionally they rely on a very limited canon of children’s authors and can name only a narrow range of picture fiction creators and poets (Cremin et al., 2008a, b, c). This raises the question of whether teachers are 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. This lack of professional knowledge and assurance with children’s literature has potentially serious consequences for all children.

Placed alongside the documented decline in reading for pleasure and the reduction in primary phase book spending (Hurd et al., 2006), this research suggested a need for increased professional support to extend teachers’ knowledge and use of texts and to build new partnerships between teachers, schools, families, libraries and local authorities.
The project Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers (2007-8) therefore aimed to improve teachers’ knowledge and use of literature in order to help them increase children’s motivation and enthusiasm for reading, especially those less successful in literacy. In order to develop children’s independent reading for pleasure the project aimed to:

1. Widen teachers’ knowledge of children’s literature
2. Develop teachers’ confidence and skilful use of such literature in the classroom
3. Develop ‘Reading Teachers’, teachers who read and readers who teach
4. Develop teachers’ relationships with parents, carers, librarians and families.

The project was undertaken in five Local Authorities in England: Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Kent, Medway and Suffolk, LA coordinators worked within the given UKLA framework and held local CPD sessions with teachers. The 43 teachers involved also attended three national project meetings in London and as action researchers reflected on their own learning journeys as readers and as pedagogues.

The project made a positive impact upon children’s attainment, achievement and dispositions, and identified a coherent strategy to develop children’s reading for pleasure by enhancing teachers’ subject knowledge and pedagogic practice.
It was less successful in developing new reading relationships with families and community members. A new UKLA project Building Communities: *Researching Literacy Lives* (2009-10) is working towards this goal.

**WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OR IMPACTS?**

As the teachers widened their repertoires, reflected upon their own reading and began to find out more about children’s everyday reading practices beyond school, their conceptions of reading, initially somewhat book bound, broadened and they began to recognise textual and reader diversity more readily, re-framing their practice in response. This was multiply evidenced in both the quantitative and qualitative data, with typical comments including e.g. ‘I *feel it’s [my subject knowledge] developed immensely*,’ and ‘I *see reading differently now – I’m not sure why I didn’t recognise how social it is*.’ The reading for pleasure pedagogy which developed, encompassed marked improvements that were observed and documented in each of the case study classrooms, these included richer reading environments, read aloud provision, book talk and text recommendations, as well as quality time for independent reading. The teachers though took some time to develop these practices; they had to work hard to include this in a packed curriculum and in some of their schools where fostering a desire to read was not seen as a priority. The new reading practices were frequently constructed as open-ended opportunities and profiled learner agency and choice, fostering spontaneous talk about texts and strong communities of readers, e.g. ‘We’re enjoying books more together rather than me only using it as a tool for literacy’ and ‘There is a real sense of us all being readers, we constantly talk about our reading and recommend texts to one another’. The complex dataset support these claims.

The majority of the focus children’s attitudes improved considerably, as did their perceptions of their abilities and self-confidence as readers. These findings were multiply evidenced in the children’s questionnaires and interviews, the teachers’ records and interviews and the observations. Additionally, the data reveal that for a range of reasons, including more control, more or more preferable resources and more time, the numbers of children choosing to read at home and at school increased significantly over the year. The focus children’s more positive reading mindsets and the increase in voluntary reading at home and at school also appeared to influence their attainment. As the OECD (2002) argues, the will influences the skill.
Although this study did not set out to demonstrate the impact of reading for pleasure on reading attainment, teachers were asked to record children’s reading scores at the beginning and end of the project. It is evident (see Figure 1), that the children’s reading scores as measured by NC standardised tests improved considerably: 27% made four or more sub-levels progress, and 59% made at least three sub-levels progress, when two sub-levels progress is seen to be the expected norm across the year. Even the 5% who did not make significant progress in terms of the NC attainment measure made other forms of progress, e.g. being more confident or more interested in reading. Whilst a number of other factors will have contributed to the children’s increased attainment levels, the teachers attributed these gains to the project’s impact, to their own wider knowledge, changed pedagogic practice, access to diverse reading materials and the time and space made to profile reading for pleasure which, the teachers and the research team perceived, combined to influence the children’s desire to read.

**WHAT WAS THE INTERVENTION/TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS?**

In this project, the pedagogic focus in local and national meetings broadly mirrored what teachers were encouraged to do for themselves as readers: to develop and share individual...
preferences and enthusiasms, to acknowledge family and cultural influences on reading, and to consider the pleasures of reading for enjoyment. These aspects of experience informed teachers’ development and pedagogy throughout.

The teachers were introduced to a wide range of literature, set themselves reading challenges and considered children’s reading preferences and practices beyond school. They were also supported in developing practices such as reading aloud, independent reading time and informal book talk sessions. As a consequence they began to reconceptualise reading in the 21st century, offer a wider range of texts, explore the rights of readers, share their own reading habits and recognise the role of teachers in modelling their own pleasure and socially motivated engagement in reading. Particularly in the classrooms of the Reading Teachers, who capitalised upon the synergies observed between child and adult readers.

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

The project was funded by the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, by UKLA and by the five Local Authorities involved. The design for the project involved data collection at individual, school and LA levels and employed a range of methods and tools. The spread of evidence allowed the team to gain insight into the progress made by individual children, teachers and schools, and to explore patterns and trends across the 27 schools. These included one primary-level pupil referral unit, five infant, two junior and nineteen primaries. 43 teachers were involved, 80% of whom were not responsible for literacy in their schools. The teachers identified three ‘focus’ children in their classes who were not motivated to use their competence as readers and were perceived as disaffected and reluctant (n:129).

A random sub-sample of two schools per LA was selected for case study enquiries which offered a richer picture of the development and impact of changes in pedagogy and practice, which was drawn from observed evidence and interviews with the 49 focus children, 17 case study teachers and 10 head teachers. This sample of children comprised 73% boys and 27% girls, was in line with findings nationally that boys perceive
reading as less interesting and display more negative attitudes than girls.

The data collection tools included:

- Baseline and end-of-project surveys of teachers (n:43) and children (n:1200)
- Focus children’s NC reading levels and observation proformas (x 3 n:129)
- Ongoing teacher reflection proformas on aspects of the project (x 6 n:43)

The additional case study school data collection tools included:

- Semi-structured teacher interviews (x 3 n:17),
- Semi-structured headteacher interviews (x 3 n:10)
- Semi-structured group interviews with children (x 3 n:49)
- Structured observations of classroom activities (x 2 n:17)
- Drawing and discussion around children’s constructs of readers (n:49)

Further material was examined in the form of teachers’ reading histories and researchers’ field notes on national days, as well as LA coordinators’ ongoing reports and additional material in teachers’ portfolios (e.g. reading diaries, lesson plans, staff meeting notes and photographs). A mixed methods approach was used for data analysis.

**WHAT MIGHT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH BE FOR POLICY MAKERS/ PRACTITIONERS**

The UKLA project makes clear that reading for pleasure requires a higher profile in primary education to raise both attainment and achievement and increase children’s engagement as self-motivated and socially engaged readers.

It indicates that teachers need considerable support to help them find the time and space to widen their reading repertoires, develop a pedagogy which fosters reading for pleasure and develop as ‘Reading Teachers’, professionals who help children develop positive identities as readers through exploring the potential connections between their own and the children’s reading habits and strategies.
There is still much work to be done to address the widening gap in reading experiences in and out of school and to extend conceptions of reading in the 21st century. Strategic support is needed to enable the profession to find more reciprocal ways of working with families and communities that connect with their everyday reading practices, experiences and lives.

It is recommended that, primary schools, teachers and student teachers are supported to:

1. Take responsibility for developing reading for pleasure alongside, and as complementary to, reading instruction and to plan systematically to achieve this.

2. Widen their conceptions of reading and being a reader in the 21st century.

3. Develop as ‘Reading Teachers’: teachers who read and readers who teach.

4. Make space and time to build reciprocal reading communities in their classrooms that blur the boundaries between children’s home and school reading worlds.

5. Expand their knowledge of:
   - literature and other texts
   - everyday reading practices and experiences
   - individual children as readers.

6. Develop practice and pedagogy that encourages reading for pleasure, fosters ‘inside text talk’ and builds positive reading identities for all children.

7. Foster children’s autonomy as readers who can exercise discrimination and choice both within and beyond school.

8. Construct new and more equivalent reading relationships with families and community members, exploring the potential synergy between their own, the children’s and their parents’ reading lives and practices.
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Key Publications


