

# Turning over a new page: building our knowledge of children's literature

Drew Warren and Rhea Sanders

# Context

We are third year BA Primary Education (7-11) students at the University of Greenwich. We are preparing for final placements where we hope to demonstrate secure subject knowledge and a well rounded understanding of children's literature. A seven-week specialist course exploring primary-related literature, has extended our knowledge and understanding, particularly concerning reading for pleasure. This will benefit our future teaching practice and, of course, we have far more to discover.

Over the past seven weeks, our study has developed as follows: exploring the effective teaching of English; developing a reading for pleasure pedagogy; reading for pleasure through poetry; the usefulness of subversive texts; the relevance of picture books; and the representation of BAME and Gender across texts. All of which have been equally influential on us.

<u>Drew</u>	<u>Rhea</u>
<p>Reflecting on my own experiences of education, I would never have described myself as a reader, or someone who saw reading as a pleasurable experience. In all honesty, I would have described reading as a tedious activity, used by teachers to fill gaps or manage behaviour.</p> <p>Rather than taking part in or understanding the process of reading, or cultivating a continually motivating relationship with books, with age, I became even less interested in reading.</p>	<p>When I was younger, reading never really appealed to me; I always found it to be very tedious. I was only happy to explore and read books if it was my choice and not a set task, and that happened rarely. As a pupil, I never really understood why we had to read and saw reading as a gap fill for when we had no other activity to do.</p> <p>Instead of trying to read and find a genre that was appealing to me I stuck to my thought that reading was pointless. It is hard to reflect on my reading history, as there is very little of it. However through the 'Exploring children's literature' course I have realised and understood the essential role that both literature and reading have in the classroom, and therefore, would like to highlight the importance of reading to my class and provide them with an enjoyable reading experience. In order to do this, I need a fuller understanding of children's literature myself, and this course has set me on the pathway of learning.</p>

# OU Research inspiration and rationale

2.  
Knowledge  
of children's  
reading  
practices

3.  
A reading  
for pleasure  
pedagogy

4.  
Reading  
Teachers:  
teachers who  
read and  
readers who  
teach

5.  
Reading  
communities  
that are  
reciprocal and  
interactive

Although all five strands are important to inspire reading for pleasure, we chose to focus on strand one...

1. *Teacher's knowledge of children's literature and other texts*

Findings represented by this strand of research demonstrated the need for teachers, or trainees such as ourselves, to widen and update our knowledge of children's literature. Not only did this inspire updates to personal reading, but made us seek texts that were of relevance to the children in our classes.

OU Research has inspired us to address our limited subject knowledge, which impacts on effective teaching and learning. Collectively setting aims to address and fill gaps in our knowledge of children's literature and other texts allowed for us to develop our ability to differentiate in the selection or recommendation of books, so to find the very best texts to suit a particular child.

The OU's research into Teachers as Readers (TaRs) has identified 54% of their sample of teachers as unable to recall or identify more than 6 authors, whilst 22% couldn't name a single poet. This encouraged us to identify gaps which were likely to negatively impact our own understanding and pedagogical effectiveness. Where we placed ourselves in relation to these findings so spurred us on to kick start our journey in developing a greater understanding of literature (which we take to include novels, poems and picture fiction).



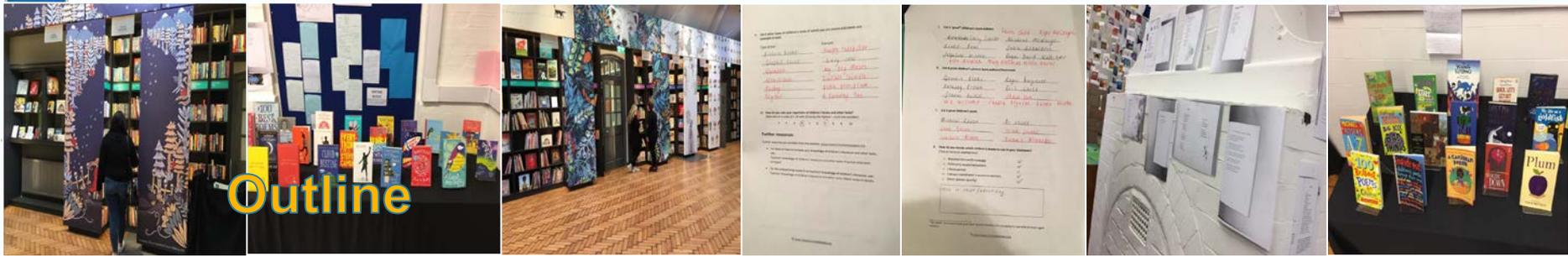
# Aims

We agreed that our limited reading histories were an impediment to our teaching. Our overriding aim was therefore for each of us to:

**To develop a stronger and more secure repertoire of authors, illustrators and texts.**

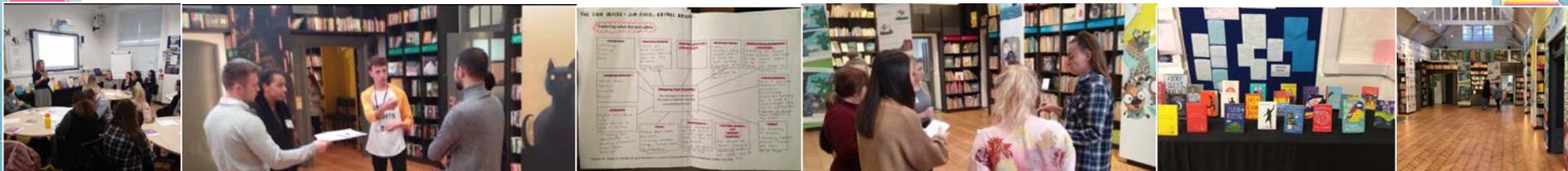
This would mean:

- developing as trainee teachers who value the influence of a growing understanding of children's literature on our own personal as well as our professional development;
- seeking out opportunities to engage meaningfully with familiar, and especially with unfamiliar, texts and text types;
- seeking an understanding of why we, in common with many children, lacked the stamina to read a novel;
- to benefit from improved subject knowledge in terms of improved levels of confidence in our the teaching of reading and literature.
- eventually to use our improved confidence and knowledge to contribute to the development of reading communities as 'both the tellers and the told' (Cremin, 2007).



Here are three of the activities we undertook in order to develop our knowledge and understanding of strand one...

- Developing a Reading journal** - this entailed a personal reading journey for each of us, focusing on the book 'Wonder' and providing responses to it such as character descriptions, diary entries, emotion graphs etc, whilst following the story and the characters involved.
- Mapping text potential** – This encouraged us to explore unfamiliar texts and identify what they had to offer for the experience of primary school children, as well as ourselves, in order to build confidence in our ability to select quality texts.
- A visit to CLPE** – Here we developed not only an awareness of the importance of children's literature in their school experiences, but also had opportunities to update subject knowledge and explore authors and poets beyond those identified as part of our canon of celebrity authors. We were also actively engaged in the analysis and performance of poetry, something that pushed the boundaries of our comfort zones completely!





**Developing a Reading journal**

**Impact**

Being immersed in a series of texts in such a way has helped us to recognise the need for teachers to continually extend their subject knowledge. It has also shown us how the exploration of one text in many ways, can help children to develop a range of skills relevant across the curriculum.

Taking part in tasks such as analysing the front cover, key font, images or themes, encouraged us to make predictions and draw conclusions, demonstrating a level of engagement we aspire to achieve with our pupils. Not only did this boost interest in a novel but likewise enabled us to demonstrate characteristics of effective learning ( communication, cognitive conflict, metacognitive thinking, risk taking and building connections).

**Mapping text potential**

We expect this activity to impact positively on the effectiveness of our pedagogy, by highlighting to us the importance of text relevance and potential in allowing meaningful and well rounded opportunities for children to read for pleasure.

It is pivotal to foster RfP for children and also ourselves. Being able to draw out potential in a text means drawing out different characteristics to establish its relevance and understand all of the elements which contribute to the development of the story. We now understand a story not just as words, but of pictures and various levels of meaning that interact and come together to allow pleasurable engagement.

**Visiting CLPE**

Our visit to The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education impacted positively on our own familiarity with a range of authors . We were able to develop a greater awareness on the impact of various activities and resources, all of which were examples which we could develop to apply them effectively within our own lessons. The main learning we took away was the importance of understanding different genres of text, and the value of creating relevant reading experiences for children if we are to support communities of children who read for pleasure.

At the very beginning of our course we completed an audit, a self review document designed to help us consider our current knowledge of children’s literature. The outcomes of our audits mirrored the findings of the TaRs research: we had very limited repertoires of authors, poets and creators of picture fiction. However, since this visit we have already experienced some growth, and have now updated our reviews to demonstrate significant changes, in particular our increased knowledge of poets.

We have used the social media platform twitter to help sustain our awareness of authors and illustrators. We have followed accounts such as the UKLA, Teresa Cremin and CLPE to keep up to date with their publications, so that we can select those that we think will work best in the classroom.

Our development over the past seven weeks has created a positive mindset towards taking responsibility over our own development in literature, as well as a confidence towards being able to foster reading for pleasure in our own classrooms.

We have been able to tackle our own unfamiliarity with the value of the TaRs and now understanding that even brief encounters should be potent.

## Reflections on the impact of TaRs research on practice

We now understand how being a frequent reader is academically beneficial and how RfP benefits people's progression, both personal and academic. This is as true for teachers as for students.

Promoting the RfP strategy is a positive way to continue with our development and to see our aims through into teaching practice.

There is no quick fix strategy in enforcing RfP, or in fact in developing a teacher's knowledge of children's literature, due to the vast range now available to us. Instead, it is something that we will have to persist with throughout our careers.

All in all, the TaRs motivated us to start to think about and challenge our inadequate knowledge and to overcome our reliance upon a canon of 'celebrity authors'. We are hopeful that doing so will positively impact on our school experience. By enabling relationships between the teacher, text and child, in the context of a supportive classroom climate, we hope to inspire and enrich early literacy experiences. By fostering the TaRs approach, we feel more confident in setting children on a path as we mean for them to go on, whilst stimulating an environment which nurtures reading for pleasure.

