

Teachers as Readers:

Building Communities of Readers

Hands up all those who think it is a good idea for primary teachers to know a lot of good children's books. What? Everybody's hand in the air? Common sense you say. Unfortunately, in the world of education policies, common sense cuts no ice. Things that are blindingly obvious to some are perceived as highly suspicious by others. What is your evidence? We need facts. Where are the statistics? If we want education policy makers to consider 'common sense' views there must be measurable evidence to demonstrate the validity of any claim. And that, my friends, is why for the past two years I have been working with a team of colleagues from the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) on a research and development project called Teachers as Readers (TaRs).



Teachers working with children's books at TaRs local and national days

In 2006, a group of UKLA members – academics, teachers and local authority advisers – proposed research to explore teachers' knowledge about and use of children's books in literacy learning. The Teachers as Readers (TaRs) project was set up to carry out the research which seeks to explore:

- primary teachers' personal reading habits and preferences
- primary teachers' knowledge of children's literature
- primary teachers' reported use of children's literature in the primary classroom
- primary teachers' involvement in local area (YLG) /school library services (SLS)

The project consists of two phases:

PHASE 1 to be an audit, undertaken through a questionnaire, of teachers' reading habits, knowledge and classroom practices:

PHASE 2 to be a development phase, responsive to Phase 1 and involving groups of teachers and librarians in a number of local authorities.

Gathering evidence

During 2006-7, the questionnaire was completed by over 1200 teachers. Deceptively simple questions proved to be thought-provoking and far from easy to answer in a straightforward manner. How, for example, would you answer the following without feeling the need to add explanations or have time to think about your responses?

- What was your favourite book as a child?
- What do you think is the most important book you have ever read?
- How do you decide which books to use in your classroom?

However, the responses provided intriguing and valuable insights into primary teachers' literary experiences and their literacy

teaching which could be expressed either as statistical or anecdotal information. To give you a taste of each aspect explored, here are a few statistics:

Teachers' personal reading habits

93% had read for personal pleasure during the previous three months. The most frequent choice (40%), was popular fiction, including women's popular novels, thrillers and crime novels.

Teachers' knowledge of children's literature

When asked to list six 'good' children's writers, responses indicate that a number of authors are known but 58% of the respondents could only name one, two or no poets. 23% could name no poets at all. 47% were only able to name one, two or no picture book creators.

Use of literature in the classroom

Although not happening as often as perhaps it should, the practice of reading aloud to a class for pleasure remains a popular activity. Not every class, however, is being read to as 9% had last read aloud over 6 months ago or never.

Use of local and school library services

Only 52% of respondents use the local library facilities for school.

Building Communities of Readers

Phase 2 of the TaRs Project, Building Communities of Readers, is now underway in five local authorities. Each group is focusing on literacy development in their authority as well as providing more evidence for research. National Days, when all the teachers, advisers and researchers involved meet to discuss the progress of the project, will be organised three times during the year. The day spent together provides an excellent opportunity for sharing ideas about books, teaching and ways to involve the wider community in the very exciting work going on in each local authority. More and more statistical evidence is being accumulated that clearly indicates that it is a good idea for primary teachers to know a lot of good children's books. Perhaps a little common sense and a few excellent teachers will, at last, make an impact on the national debate about literacy standards.

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The RNIB Library Service

by Liz Farrell

A library service should provide an adventure playground of reading for everyone but in particular for children and young people.

But what if a child is blind, partially sighted or dyslexic? What is available for the twenty-five thousand people aged between 0 and 18 years who are registered blind or partially sighted in the UK?

The RNIB National Library Service was created when RNIB and the National Library for the Blind merged in January 2007. Our vision is for blind and partially sighted people to enjoy the same access to library services as those who are sighted. In particular we want to offer children with sight loss a more complete reading package than previous generations have received. This means not only extending the range of titles, but also devising exciting new ways for children to make more independent reading choices and get involved in reading activities.



Using the library and reading a giant print book

I work full time as Children's Librarian with the National Library Service. My aim is to open the door to children's imaginations by giving them a personal experience of books, one that will grow, change and develop with them.

We stock over two thousand titles in braille, giant print (24 point type) and unabridged audio on CD for children and young people from around the age of four upwards. From contemporary novels to older favourites, we have books by authors such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, Michael Morpurgo ... too many to mention! We also stock non-fiction including poetry, cookery and braille music scores.

But we mustn't stop there. It may come as a surprise to learn that only 5% of books published in the UK for children and young people are produced in alternative formats. We would love to liaise with publishers and increase this statistic.

And whereas sighted people are able to browse in their local library or bookshop, blind and partially sighted folk do not have this luxury. So we provide online catalogues, themed book-lists and regular book reviews in our reader magazine. However, while we happily provide the resources for blind and partially sighted children, we strongly believe that young people should enjoy the whole library experience. For example we provide reading materials to enable children with sight loss to participate in the National Summer Reading Challenge so that they can also join in activities in their local public library with their sighted friends.

We also encourage blind and partially sighted students to join in the Carnegie shadowing scheme by providing them with the shortlisted titles in braille, giant print and audio. They discuss the books and can then add their comments to those of the adult judges.

Now that 2008 has been designated as National Year of Reading, we will be working with public libraries to enable blind and partially sighted children to discover and explore books just like everyone else. We will be launching our special celebration activities on World Book Day. Pat Beech, Manager of National Library Service, remarks: "We cannot know what will make each child love reading. But we believe that if we have the widest range of books possible and the staff to bring them to life, we have the chance of connecting the child to the right book at the right time."

If you would like to know more about books in alternative formats for children and young people, there is a new leaflet available called *Ways of Reading*. This gives contact details for a number of organisations who produce and loan books in audio, large print and braille including RNIB. Copies can be ordered online at www.rnib.org/shop or telephone 0845 702 3153.

You may also be interested to know that Revealweb, the national database of over two hundred thousand titles in alternative formats, has now moved to UnityUK. This means that public library staff can search for titles on behalf of young customers and order via interlibrary loans.



Reading a braille book

The RNIB National Library Service has already been a godsend for many children.

As this proud parent remarks, talking about her daughter: "The large print library has been a great help to Sarah, helping her to develop a real love of books and reading. Her present ambition is to be a writer!"

You can't get much better than that!

To find out more, please contact Liz Farrell on 0161355 2061 or email liz.farrell@rnib.org.uk