

IDEAS IN PRACTICE 1

This professional development booklet provides details of how to support teachers in building communities of readers in and beyond their schools. It could be used by LA personnel working with teacher groups, by school literacy consultants working with the staff of their school and by ITE lecturers who wish to develop their student teachers' knowledge of children's literature and their practice in fostering children's independent reading for pleasure.

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Building Communities of Readers

Section One Building Communities of Readers - the project	4	1
1 Introduction and background	4	
2 Reflection on the Project <i>Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers</i>	6	
Teachers' knowledge of children's literature	6	
Teachers' use of children's literature	6	
Teachers' relationships with parents, families and librarians	7	
Teachers as Reading Teachers	7	
Action research	7	
Collaborative partnerships	7	
3 Project Principles and Aims	8	
Project principles	8	
Project aims	8	
Aim 1: Widen teachers' knowledge of children's literature in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	9	
Aim 2: Develop teachers' confidence and skilful use of such literature in the classroom in order to foster reading for pleasure.	9	
Aim 3: Develop teachers' relationships with parents, carers, librarians and families in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	9	
Aim 4: Develop Reading Teachers, teachers who read and readers who teach in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	9	
4 Framework for Building a Community of Readers project	10	
Action research	10	
Research ethics	11	
The project process	12	
Data gathering	14	
Teachers' professional learning	14	
Pupil data	14	
Autumn Term: Getting started and planning	14	
Spring Term: Implementing the plan	15	
Summer Term: Continued implementation and examining outcomes: reflection, analysis and evaluation	15	
Ongoing review and evaluation	15	

5 Implementing the project aims	17
Aim 1: Widen teachers' knowledge of children literature in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	17
1 a) Widening knowledge of children's authors and contemporary writers	17
1 b) Extending knowledge of challenging picture fiction creators for KS1/2	18
1 c) Widening knowledge of children's poets, both contemporary and classic	19
1 d) Extending knowledge of children's comics and magazines	20
Aim 2: Develop teachers' confidence and skilful use of children's literature in the classroom in order to foster reading for pleasure.	21
2 a) Planning, organising and sustaining regular opportunities for children to read independently for pleasure	21
2 b) Finding ways of sustaining regular reading aloud to the class for pleasure	22
2 c) Planning, undertaking and sustaining regular book promotion activities in school	22
2 d) Making individual as well as whole class text recommendations using their knowledge of the learners and of texts	23
Aim 3: Develop teachers' relationships with parents, carers, librarians and families in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	24
3 a) Discovering useful information about children's out-of-school reading habits, cultures and practices	24
3 b) Forming understandings with families and communities about what it means to be a reader in the 21st century	25
3 c) Re-shaping classroom reading pedagogies in ways that value and build on children's out-of-school reading experiences	26
3 d) Building sustained and mutually beneficial relationships between schools, families and local library services	27
Aim 4: Develop Reading Teachers, teachers who read and readers who teach in order to support independent reading for pleasure.	28
4 a) Reflecting upon personal reading histories and current practices and exploring the consequences for classroom practice	28
4 b) Developing new ways of sharing their own reading preferences, processes and reading identities with the children	29
4 c) Developing the children's rights as readers, demonstrating that readers can and do choose what, when and where to read	30
6 Recommended Reading and Websites	31

Section Two Teacher Portfolio Support Materials	32	3
A1 Children’s Reading Survey (before and after the project)	33	
A2 Children’s Reading Profiles (before and after the project)	35	
A3 Termly Observations of Case Study Children	36	
A4 Additional Child Information	37	
A5 Parent/Carer Consent Guidance	38	
Documenting Teachers’ Professional Learning	39	
B1 Teachers’ Questionnaire (before and after the project)	39	
B2 Personal Reading History Sheets	41	
B3 Termly Reflections on Being a Reading Teacher	42	
B4 Termly Reflections on Impact	44	
B5 Additional Teacher Information	45	
B6 Support for Teacher Presentation of Findings	46	
B7 Final Project Evaluation	48	
References	50	
List of Figures		
Figure 1 The <i>Building Communities of Readers</i> action research cycle	10	
Figure 2 Termly priorities for the project process	13	
Figure 3 Planning for Change	16	

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Building Communities of Readers - the project

1 Introduction and background

Recurring evidence suggests that children in England continue to read less independently and find less pleasure in reading than many of their peers in other countries (Twist, Schagen and Hodgson, 2003; 2007), so actively fostering positive attitudes to reading in the primary years has become crucial. The 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) also revealed that reading attainment in England has fallen significantly since the 2001 PIRLS (Twist *et al.*, 2007). The earlier PIRLS study, which involved comparing ten year olds in 35 countries, revealed that 13% of the English children disliked reading, compared to 6% on average (Mullis *et al.*, 2003; *et al.*, 2003). In the later study, which involved 41 countries, only 28% of the English children reported reading weekly compared to an international average of 40%. These results are in line with other studies which suggest a decline in children's reading for pleasure (e.g. OECD, 2001; Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004).

What primary children choose to read continues to change; outside school they read a diverse range of texts and report a preference for jokes, magazines, comics, fiction, TV books and magazines, poetry and websites in that order (Clark and Foster, 2005). Other studies also affirm that comics and magazines are popular (Maynard *et al.*, 2007) and that children prefer engaging with multimodal screen based texts (such as TV/DVD/ video/the internet) over those composed mainly of words (e.g. Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003; Bearne *et al.*, 2007) although this is not necessarily to the detriment of their involvement in written texts (Bearne *et al.*, 2007).

In relation to the use of children's literature in the classroom, in the last decade the practice of relying upon extracts has been heavily criticised (Dombey, 1998; Frater, 2000; Sedgwick, 2001) and professional writers too have voiced their concerns, arguing that an atmosphere of 'anxiety' exists around reading literature (Powling *et al.*, 2003, 2005). Many have suggested that if comprehension and assessment are seen to dominate over reading and response, this may adversely affect children's desire to read (King, 2001; Martin, 2003; Cremin, 2007). In addition, it has been noted that teachers' confidence in knowing and using children's literature may be limited (Arts Council England, 2003).

Studies of effective teachers of literacy show that teachers need much more than knowledge of phonic skills and comprehension strategies, they also need extensive knowledge of children's literature (Medwell *et al.*, 1998; Block, Oakar and Hurt, 2002). Yet such knowledge is not recognised as part of a primary teachers' professional repertoire in the new Standards for Teachers (TDA, 2007) in England, despite the fact that research from the US suggests continuity between teachers and children as engaged and self motivated readers (Morrison *et al.*, 1999; Bisplinghoff, 2003; Dreher, 2003; Commeyras *et al.*, 2003).

In response to this context, the United Kingdom Literacy Association undertook a study entitled *Teachers as Readers 2006-7*, which, drawing on questionnaires from 1200 primary teachers nationally, suggested that the majority are committed readers: three quarters had made time for their own independent reading within the last month. It also indicated that many of the teachers' own childhood favourites and poems that they were introduced to in school are still popular with them today and are used in their classrooms.

When asked to list 6 'good' children's writers, 64% of the teachers named five or six writers. 46% named six. Roald Dahl gained the highest number of mentions (744). The nearest four were: Michael Morpurgo (343), Jacqueline Wilson (323), J.K. Rowling (300) and Anne Fine (252).

When asked to name 6 good poets for children, 58% of the respondents named only one, two or no poet, 22% named no poets at all, only 10% named 6 poets. The highest number of mentions was for Michael Rosen (452) with five others gaining over a hundred mentions: Allan Ahlberg (207), Roger McGough (197), Roald Dahl (165), Spike Milligan (159) and Benjamin Zephaniah (131). With reference to picture fiction, over half the sample (62%) only named one, two or no picture fiction writers, 24% named no picture fiction authors/illustrators, whilst 10% named six. Many of these picturebook makers were also named as 'authors' in the first list. The highest number of mentions by far was for Quentin

Blake (423) with four others being mentioned over a hundred times: Anthony Browne (175), Shirley Hughes (123), Mick Inkpen (121) and Alan Alhberg (146). There were also 302 specifically named books rather than authors.

These findings raise the question of whether teachers are familiar with a sufficiently diverse range of writers to enable them to foster reader development and make informed recommendations to emerging readers with different needs and interests. The lack of professional knowledge and assurance with children's literature demonstrated and the minimal knowledge of global literature indicated has potentially serious consequences for learners. Furthermore, the infrequent mention of poetry in teachers' personal reading and their lack of knowledge of poets, as well as the relative absence of women poets and poets from other cultures writing in English is a concern, as is the dearth of knowledge of picture book creators, and the almost non-existent mention of picture book writers for older readers.

The evidence also brings into question the capacity of the profession to draw upon a wide enough range of children's authors in order to plan richly integrated and holistic literacy work and suggest that if units of work or author studies are undertaken, these are likely to be based around the work of writers from a limited canon of children's authors, whose writing may already be very well known to children. The wide popularity and teacher reliance on the prolific work of Dahl for example, may restrict children's reading repertoires, since child-based surveys suggest he is also a key author of choice for children.

Placed alongside the documented decline in reading for pleasure (Twist *et al.*, 2003, 2007) and the reduction in primary phase book spending (Hurd, 2006), the lack of teacher knowledge of children's literature evidenced in this research suggest a real need for increased professional attention and support in this area. Practitioners need ongoing opportunities to enrich their knowledge base and need to know how and where to access advice about books and writers. Local libraries and librarians are surely central to this, although evidence suggests they are not extensively drawn upon (Ofsted, 2004a; Cremin *et al.*, 2007).

Teachers' knowledge also deserves broadening in other ways, to encompass both the knowledge that develops through being a reader, and the rich pedagogical content knowledge that can support the development of independent, reflective and creative readers. Alongside gaining insights into their own practices and habits as readers, more emphasis is needed in this era of personalisation, on teachers working from children's own reading interests and preferences as they seek to introduce them to texts which motivate, build reading stamina and foster reader development.

Continuing professional development opportunities are urgently required to help teachers develop more diverse repertoires and to understand the value and role of literature in the growth of readers, so that they can foster, what Britton (1993) called, a potent 'legacy of past satisfactions'. Following the original phase of the UKLA research and development project *Teachers as Readers* (2006-2007), the second phase *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers* (2007-2008) offers just such a model for professional development.