

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Library Services for Children and Young People**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/78369>

Published paper

Birdi, B. (2012) *The changing shape of reading - the 21st-century challenge*. In: Library Services for Children and Young People. Facet Publishing , 39 - 48.

http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=7128&category_code=504

Chapter XX

The Changing Shape of Reading – the 21st Century Challenge

Briony Birdi

Experience will have shown the readers of this book that a highly literate child is not necessarily a reading child, and similarly that not every child with reading difficulties will dislike reading. Our work to develop literacy and to encourage reading has changed in recent years, in part due to developments in the educational curricula, in part due to rapidly changing technologies.

This chapter presents six themes through which to consider the challenges facing libraries and the whole of the book trade, and makes suggestions as to how both public and school libraries can meet them head-on.

Reading, the Family and the Library

Reading research has recently broadened in scope to consider the way in which social contexts influence reading ability. The development of reading skills is now accepted to occur not only in the classroom, but also within social settings, at home and in the wider community. Children and family members combine languages, literacies and cultural practices from a variety of contexts. In many examples grounded in ‘real world settings’, in other words, beyond the school gates, children’s learning and their development as readers are supported and in turn support those of others, in ways that are not necessarily recognised or understood within the school.

The most obvious example of a child or young person’s ‘real world setting’ is the family. The term ‘Family reading’ tends to be interpreted in two ways; firstly as family members supporting each other in the development of their literacy skills, and secondly, as family members sharing their enjoyment of reading and storytelling.

Unfortunately, a number of barriers have been found to prevent effective family reading, as described below:

- **Lack of early language and reading experiences:** where children are not encouraged to talk and take part in extended conversations with those they spend their time with, their understanding of the spoken and written word is poorer than that of their peers.

- **Intergenerational barriers:** where parents have not enjoyed reading, or were not read to themselves, they do not necessarily see its importance. Reading is consequently seen as a chore.
- **Poor basic skills:** where parents' own basic skills are low, they are less confident and able to support their own children's reading.
- **Economic and financial barriers:** in periods of poverty due to debt, poor housing, health problems or unemployment, reading becomes a luxury rather than a necessity.
- **Cultural barriers:** for reasons of language, tradition or economic circumstance, some communities do not see the reading habit as part of their culture.
- **Institutional barriers:** people's needs may not be recognized by the infrastructure that should support them, because some institutions – schools, libraries - fail to engage effectively with them.

How We Can Help

In order to break down these barriers, a **model of effective family reading**ⁱⁱ could include the following elements:

- Reading for pleasure being recognized, at school and in the home, and promoted by the library service, as an important part of the process of learning to read.
- Providing a safe and fun space for children to feel comfortable to read in.
- Providing support to families in reading together; reading in the home being encouraged and supported by schools, the library service and the local community.

Realism and Children's Reading

Titles we may describe as 'realistic fiction' are often popular with young readers, as they represent an author's attempt to reflect their everyday reality, a reality which may not be sufficiently well represented in popular culture. Although not exclusively, the term tends to be associated with older readers, covering potentially controversial issues such as religion, alcohol and drug use, friendships and betrayals, first sexual experiences and sexual orientation. What are the benefits of reproducing such issues in narrative form? Critics argue that it can encourage children to consider how they would act in similar circumstances, in theory to help them to develop into

'responsible adults'. Also, as the narrative is often written in the first person, from the perspective of a young narrator, this arguably helps the reader to identify more easily with the characters and situations presented.

So in theory we have a realistic portrayal of life for the child to read and adapt, using relevant extracts to support his or her personal development. Or do we? Although the majority of titles seen as 'controversial' are intended for 11-16 readers rather than younger children, this issue is nonetheless relevant to the primary age group. The bestselling picture book 'And Tango makes three'ⁱⁱⁱ, telling the story of two male penguins hatching a penguin egg and successfully raising the young female chick, has been at or near the top of the ALA's annual list of the most frequently challenged books for four consecutive years. The challenges made are that the book has homosexual themes, is 'anti-family', and is unsuited to the intended age group. In the UK, the reaction to the book has generally been less negative than in the US, and it continues to sell extremely well. For older readers, certain books published from the 1990s onwards have been described as 'über-realistic': in 1994 Anne Fine wrote about domestic violence and bullying in 'The Tulip Touch', and Melvin Burgess in the following year about young heroin users, in 'Junk'. There were many supporters of these novels, and a number of awards made to the authors, but they were not without their critics.

Books such as these can divide public and professional opinion, winning prizes for originality and literary merit, while at the same time being criticised for not protecting children from the harsher realities of life. Two contrasting views of children's authors present both sides of the argument: firstly, Bel Mooney commented in *The Times* in 2002: 'Human beings can have too much reality and young readers especially require some sort of hope, a promise of redemption.' Secondly, Paul Jennings suggests 'We do not do our children a favour if we pretend that everything is easy. We cannot shelter them from the truth that there is pain, hardship and loss in life.' (Jennings, 2004:193-4)

How We Can Help

Recent research into the censorship of children's books^{iv} has provided some useful recommendations which can equally be applied to potentially controversial 'realistic fiction'.

- **Collection development policy:** as recommended by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)^v, a written Collection Development

Policy should be created for children's materials, available to the public and used to defend material if the need arises.

- **Guidance:** more staff guidance is felt to be needed as to what children can borrow, and the role that library staff and parents should take in this. Library staff should also have guidance as to how to act if a parent complains about a book.
- **Staff discussion:** potentially controversial materials should be discussed at staff meetings, to increase awareness and enable staff to prepare responses to any complaints they may receive.
- **Labelling:** to consider the possible identification and labelling of controversial material. Although this goes against the recommendation of the American Library Association (ALA)^{vi}, both parents and staff involved in this UK research felt that books and other resources about controversial subjects should be clearly identified. Curry also suggests that effective labelling can be the 'least judgmental and most impersonal way to alert patrons to possible offense'.

Reading and Identity

As they develop their awareness of themselves and the world around them, children will inevitably begin to explore complex identity issues, such as race and ethnicity, class, disability, gender and sexual orientation. Research and our own experience have shown us that the act of reading fiction can support children in forming both personal and social identities, helping them to understand both who they are and how they relate to others, and what roles they can play now and in the future (Cotterell, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1994; Ross et al, 2006). As Louise Rosenblatt neatly states, 'Literary texts provide us with a widely broadened "other" through which to define our world and ourselves.' (Rosenblatt, 1994,145).

To take the issue of ethnicity as an example, it is claimed that a child's reading of multicultural fiction can provide a 'route into empathy' (Elkin and Triggs, 1985), and that fiction can be a 'tool' with which to educate children and adults 'about understanding others' (Mar et al., 2006, 708). However, if the act of reading imaginative literature about cultures other than one's own has the potential to increase intercultural understanding, it follows that their portrayal within this literature must be accurate, and fair. An inaccurate or unfair representation could arguably have a negative effect on readers' views of other ethnic groups. It is felt that identity is shaped by positive recognition – whereby each identity is appreciated and

respected - and that a negative recognition can cause people to ‘...suffer real damage, real distortion, if the...society around them mirror[s] back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves’ (Taylor, 1992, 25). At the same time, an *absence* of references within stories to these issues of identity can have an equally negative effect. Having too few disabled characters in children’s fiction, for example, can convey the idea that disabled people are less valued by society, so to counter this, the inclusion of text and images of disabled children in storybooks enables them to become the norm (Wyatt, 2010).

How We Can Help

- Making sure that children’s fiction is selected with appropriate images and text relating (in particular) to race and ethnicity, disability, gender and sexual orientation. Guidelines are available from organisations such as Scope – In the Picture (for disability), and well-researched stock checklists are being compiled e.g. for sexuality^{vii}
- Many of the texts specifically written to address the lack of representation – or misrepresentation – of particular issues are published by lesser-known authors from smaller, independent publishers. As these will not necessarily be selected by library suppliers for purchase the library collection can be supplemented (where possible) by going directly to the publishers.

Not for Loners Any More: Social Reading and the Child

Reading has tended to be regarded as a solitary activity, but with the rapid growth of both the Internet and activities such as reading groups, reading is today seen as increasingly social, facilitating a wide range of social ‘connections’ between readers of all ages. Of course, for younger readers the introduction to social reading is generally made automatically, through hearing stories read aloud, and by learning to read in a classroom context. As they develop as readers, able to decode texts and enjoy stories without adult help, children are still engaging in a potentially social activity. To give two of the more obvious recent examples, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights* trilogy have sparked a seemingly infinite number of social interactions across the most diverse readership. It is argued^{viii} that simply reading popular novels such as these enables children to participate in these ‘conversations’, ‘even if one never speaks a word of it to anyone’.

Yet reading 'communities' do not only arise from the most popular titles; reading audiences can be as mainstream or as specialised as necessary, covering books from all genres and drawing together certain kinds of readers who may not otherwise have an obvious reason or opportunity to 'socialise'.

How We Can Help

In recent years we have all become aware of the online communities which have given children a forum to communicate about all manner of books and reading, but Ross et al. (2006) suggest that the virtual community is just one of three possible communities of readers. An understanding of the nature of these communities can help us to engage with our young readers, and to support them in their social development.

Local communities – as the name implies, these occur in the child's own neighbourhood, and are sustained by face-to-face interactions with people they know or meet on a daily/regular basis, to share reading experiences: neighbours, family members, friends, library staff, fellow pupils and teachers, etc. Shared activities might include recommending and sharing books with one another, meeting at their local library to talk about their reading experiences, or even joining a reading group at their library or at school.

Textual communities – also known as 'fictional communities', these are established when readers 'make connections with textual characters', identifying with an experience, feeling or character trait and thereby gaining a sense of belonging. A similar process can also occur when a reader identifies with the author of a text. Authors Jacqueline Wilson and Anne Fine (to give just two examples) have frequently referred to letters or emails received from fans who have clearly identified with characters in their novels, even to the extent that they now feel less alone in their particular situation.

Virtual communities – Members of such communities may never meet in person, but can nonetheless engage in extremely rewarding and enjoyable online discussion and activity, sharing reading opinions and experiences with individuals and groups of all sizes. Some online communities remain local, others will have a truly global scope, which if appropriately monitored by adults can improve a child or young person's social skills and connections, and can also motivate them to read more!

Complimentary or Antagonistic: the Role of Technology in Reading

As the title of this brief section suggests, technology is still viewed both as complimentary to, and antagonistic towards, the act of reading, and nowhere is this

debate more relevant than in considering the younger reader. Described as 'Generation M'^{ix} for the central role of media in their lives, even very young children are often comfortable and confident with multimedia and technology. For some, the term 'reading' still refers only to the reading of books and other printed materials, but to fully support children in their development as readers we must also take into account the other ways in which they may choose to 'read' on a daily basis. Our interpretations of terms such as 'literacy' and 'reading' are far broader today than previously, and take into account the more interactive processes through which children learn to read, and to develop a reading habit. The book children hold in their hands is linear, read from left to right, moving from the beginning to the end in the order intended by the author. The multimedia text is non-linear, having no set path for the child to follow, and in which he or she can decide where to go in an interactive text. The two activities can be entirely complementary, developing different skills and arguably giving children a more rounded reading experience.

How We Can Help

As Jennings (2003) writes, 'Most problems with computers relate to their over-use', and certainly we need to encourage children not to use computers as their only source of reading material, but to see them as a means of supporting and enhancing their printed book reading. When presented as complimentary rather than antagonistic, research has shown that younger readers can enjoy print and multimedia equally. The world has changed, and we should not be too concerned if our younger readers do not necessarily see book reading as the 'best' and most enjoyable form of literacy: often the child or young person who says he does not read is later revealed to enjoy a hugely diverse range of texts, and we can reassure him that he is indeed an avid reader.

Exploring Partnerships in Literacy and Reading Promotion

The rapid growth of reader development in libraries, and the impact of initiatives such as the National Year of Reading, World Book Day and The Reading Agency's *Summer Reading Challenge* have resulted in the relatively recent increase in the promotion of reading for pleasure across the whole of the book trade. All of these initiatives have involved partnership working, to a greater or lesser extent. The growth in reader development activities, in promotional ventures and in partnership working come together to affirm three principles of the book industry^x that:

1. Books play a central role in public library services, despite fears that they were being marginalised;
2. It is acceptable for library staff actively to encourage reading and to help customers with reading choices;
3. The public is best served when the skills of publishers, booksellers and librarians are combined to develop readers and the reading habit.

Activity is now more consistently planned and sustained, with more practitioners looking to incorporate reading promotion into their library strategy. There has been a concerted attempt across the book industry to promote not only the book project, but also the reading experience from which a market for book buying and borrowing can grow.

The Partnership 'Offer' of Individual Members of the Book trade^{xi}:

Although the world of publishing and bookselling has changed dramatically in recent years due to the market dominance of online bookselling, the growth of e-publishing and the global economic recession, each potential partner still brings – and stands to gain - a huge amount to any working partnership to promote children's reading.

Libraries – 'Reading is libraries' core business and it has huge partnership potential.^{xii} We know what libraries can offer. In short, they potentially provide access to the entire population, still considered a neutral space at the centre of the local community. Library staff know their readers, and work with schools and school libraries to encourage children to develop a reading habit, and as research shows that those who borrow books are more likely to buy them too, this is an obvious 'selling point' in brokering a partnership.

Publishers – Ranging in size from the small, local and independent organisations to the large multinational publishing houses, publishers provide access to authors and illustrators, publicity materials about specific titles and authors, support for themed promotions, and much more. Sometimes the less well-known imprints of larger publishing houses can provide useful titles for partnership, promoting new authors or a specialist interest. The smaller, local publishers are logical partners for work with a community focus.

Booksellers – Although fewer than before, there are still a huge number of bookselling outlets. All offer the potential for partnership, providing (for example) venues for events, areas to display promotional materials and bookstalls at library events. Booksellers often work with local schools and their libraries to bring children to the shop to meet authors, participate in storytelling or other reading-related activities.

The reading landscape in the 21st century is undoubtedly very different from that of the previous one: new formats and media have emerged, and new practitioner and publisher approaches have developed in order to use them in creative and imaginative ways. Yet as this chapter has hopefully shown, the basic principle and purpose of reading remains the same, and the role of both public and school libraries in developing and supporting the reading child cannot be underestimated.

References

- Cotterell, J. (1996) *Social Networks and Social Influences in Adolescence*, Routledge.
- Elkin, J. and Triggs, P. (1985) *The Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Books for a Multi-cultural Society*, Books for Keeps.
- Jennings, P. (2003) *The Reading Bug...and How to Help Your Child Catch it*, Penguin Books.
- Mar, R. et al. (2006) Bookworms Versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction Versus Non-fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds, *Journal of Research in Personality*, **40** (5), 694-712.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1994) *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: the Transactional Theory of Literary Work*, reprint, Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.
- Taylor, C. (1992) *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press.
- Wyatt, A. (2010) *A Portrayal of Disability in Children's Fiction: the Availability and Promotion of Such Resources in Public Libraries*, University of Sheffield Masters dissertation,
<http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/publications/pgtpublications.html>

- i. ¹ Olmedo, I.M. (2004) Storytelling and Latino Elders: What Can Children Learn? In Gregory, E.,
- ii. Long, S. and Volk, D. (eds), *Many Pathways to Literacy: Young Children Learning with Siblings, Grandparents, Peers and Communities*, Routledge.
- iii.
- iv. ¹ Adapted from suggestions made by the National Literacy Trust Family Reading Campaign, 2006. See http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/information_pages/families for details of the National Literacy Trust's ongoing work with families.
- v. ¹ Parnell, P. and Richardson, J. (2005) *And Tango Makes Three*, Simon & Schuster.

- vi. ¹ Stannard, T. (2008) *The Guardians of Children's Literature? A Study into the Attitudes of Public Library Staff and Parents Regarding Issues of Censorship in Children's Books*, University of Sheffield Masters dissertation, <http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/publications/pgtpublications.html>
 - vii. ¹ MLA (2009) *Guidance on the Management of Controversial Materials in Public Libraries*, MLA, <http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/~media/Files/pdf/2009/ControversialMaterialReport.ashx>
 - viii. ¹ ALA (2004) *The Freedom to Read Statement*, American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/ftstatement/freedomreadstatement.cfm>
 - ix. ¹ See Chapman, E. (2007) *Provision of LGBT-related Fiction to Children and Young People in Public Libraries*, University of Sheffield Masters dissertation, <http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/publications/pgtpublications.html>
 - x. ¹ Ross, C.S. et al. (2006) *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries and Community*, Libraries Unlimited.
 - xi. ¹ Roberts, D.F. et al. (2005) *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 year-olds*, Kaiser Family Foundation, <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds-Report.pdf>
 - xii. ¹ From Thebridge, S. and Train, B. (2002) Promoting Reading Through Partnerships, *New Library World*, **103** (1175/1176), 131-140.
 - xiii. ¹ From Thebridge, S. et al. (2001) *Reading Together, Working Together: Guidance for Booksellers, Librarians and Publishers on Promoting Books and Reading*, Birmingham City University, <http://www.ebase.bcu.ac.uk/cirtarchive/projects/past/promotion.htm>
 - xiv. ¹ Wyatt, R. (1998) Reader Development and Literature Promotion, *Public Library Journal*, **13**(6), 86.
 - xv. ¹ *Off the Shelf – a survey of non-users of Kent Libraries*, (2002), Kent County Council.
 - xvi. ¹ Underhill, P. (2009) *Why We Buy – the Science of Shopping*, 42-4, 80-81.
-

