

The OU Education Conference 2024

Developing reading for pleasure in the classroom with student and early career teachers

Speakers:

Helen Hendry

HELEN HENDRY: Well, welcome everybody to this session about developing reading for pleasure in the classroom, with a special focus on student and early career teachers. But you will find really the things I'm talking about today are relevant for any teachers. And I come with a sort of primary lens because that's my background. But there are lots of elements that are really transferable into the secondary phase as we are currently working at the OU with our Reading Schools programme which runs through primary teaching and into secondary teaching and part of my work here.

So, I'm Dr Helen Hendry, I'm a senior lecturer in primary education, but I also lead a student teacher Reading for Pleasure Ambassador programme which is with ITE (initial teacher education) providers across the UK. And I'm co-director for our Research Centre for Literacy and Social Justice. So, there are lots of different arms of work at the OU which are supporting teachers and student teachers with this particular area of practice.

So, I think we've had some introductions in the chat, but do carry on chatting to each other and raise any questions for Kate or myself as we go along. But we will have a chance to collaborate and discuss later in the session. So, what we're going to focus on today is really a recent piece of research which looked at the starting points and challenges for students and early career teachers related to reading for pleasure.

And building on that, we're going to have the opportunity to think about some strategies and resources that might support student and early career teachers with reading for pleasure and linking those to their own identities as readers, which appears to be quite important as we'll see in the research.

So, the research that I'm going to share develops from some long-standing OU expertise and research around reading for pleasure. So, my colleague Professor Theresa Cremin, research made very clear, and this is in 2014, that to develop children's reading for pleasure effectively. Teachers have a really crucial role and they need themselves considerable knowledge of children's literature and other texts, they need to get to know the children that they're working with as readers and they need to develop a reading for pleasure pedagogy, which is beyond the sort of formal talk curriculum around teaching reading skills, but actually developing informal talk about books, opportunities to listen to books read aloud and chat with one another.

So, it's a really lovely space for children and teachers to occupy together. And the teacher role in that also involves teachers reflecting on their own reading experiences and talking with the children and other staff and parents to develop a reading community which is quite equal. Which is quite different from that sort of normal teacher pupil relationship, where the teacher is the one who's the expert and is trying to support children to develop skills and knowledge.

More recently, Theresa and I and other colleagues have been involved in a big piece of research reviewing 20 years of research around reading for pleasure globally, and this has supported a lot of those earlier findings from the research I just showed you. One of the key things to draw out here from our Reading and Writing for pleasure framework is the role of adult involvement. And this is where, which we're really going to be talking about today.

The adult role in supporting children to read and write for pleasure is so crucial. Helping them to select text, to talk responsively with children about reading that they're interested in, to find things that link to their interests and create those conversations and community and those really informal ways that I've previously mentioned. And if you want to look at this particular piece of research, there's a QR code on the slide you can follow up because there's a lovely, beautifully illustrated, might I say by Onyinye Iwu, who's a children's illustrator who worked with us on that. So, you can follow that up and find out a bit more if this is something you're interested in.

So, then we bring this all together to think about student teachers or new teachers in their first role or early roles in the classroom, motivating reading for pleasure. And those two big pieces of research, drawing on other international research literature as well, really emphasize that early career teachers need to have the knowledge underpinning what they're talking to children about in terms of reading and what they're recommending that children might be interested in reading.

But they also need to be reflecting on their own identity as readers and understand that reading for pleasure, pedagogy and experience is really different from that sort of traditional teaching role that they might be taking on in other subjects. And more and more, as we research this area, we uncover that social motivation is key.

So, feeling part of something where you want to talk to your peers about what you're doing, you're teacher's part of that fun chat and the teacher, and when I say teacher, I'm also talking about other adults in a sort of teaching role. So, librarians, teaching assistants, reading volunteers, that you're all in it together and you're creating a culture of reading for pleasure that feels like an enjoyable place where everybody's individual interests are recognized.

So, the piece of research we're focusing on very quickly this afternoon, took place between 2020 and 2022. It was a two phase online, quite a detailed questionnaire which was with students right at the beginning of their higher education initial teacher training programmes across the UK. So these were 13 different teacher training providing programmes in the UK and ended up with nearly 800 students responding to this questionnaire. And the questionnaire covered a wide range of areas around their identities, their past experiences, and their sort of expectations as a reading teacher.

A key thing coming out from this questionnaire, sadly, was that a very large proportion of the teachers were not readers. So, at the beginning of their teaching journey well over a third in both phases of this survey. So, we did it twice, once with a smaller group and once with a larger group. Between 2020 and 2022, over 1/3 reported that they are never themselves read for pleasure or they very rarely read, for pleasure, and bearing in mind this was an anonymous questionnaire and students could choose not to answer it at all. So, these are the students who bothered to answer and complete this questionnaire. There were probably a lot more students who saw this question, thought I don't read, and left the questionnaire online. So, we think this is the tip of the iceberg. We think the reality of those statistics is probably even more worrying.

And then we looked at their knowledge about authors and what we found was that both the keen readers, those who said they loved reading and read regularly and the ones who said they really didn't, could only share with us quite a limited knowledge of authors. And this is sadly in common with current experienced teachers in the UK, with Theresa's earlier research, with teachers in England who were class teachers who've been teaching for some time that they tend to have knowledge which is about childhood favourite authors or authors who are really well known through film and television. And so we see those, that kind of limited canon of knowledge about children's authors again in this student teacher sample.

Then we asked them some questions around what they thought they were going to do to support the children they were working with, with reading for pleasure. And that was slightly more encouraging, although there are some gaps. They did have some sensible ideas about supporting children with reading for pleasure. Bearing in mind they haven't experienced their teacher training provision at this point, but they were quite focused around text access, so having a lot of books would solve the problem.

There were some sort of hidden messages in this where sometimes they said things that sound

all right, so encourage them to find books they like and suggest similar ones. That sounds OK, but things like having suitable levels of reading materials for that age group. Well, yes.

I mean, we didn't get the chance to unpick this a bit more because it's an online survey. But perhaps they're thinking about the skills for reading and they've got that background assumption about they've got to be levelled at a certain level for children to be able to access them. Whereas we know older readers love to read picture books and can get all kinds of meaning and enjoyment out of picture books. And sometimes having access to a book that you can't quite read yourself, but someone helps you to read is also really good for you. So, you know, we need some more information about what was underpinning some of these responses.

This is the breakdown of things that they said they thought were important. They prioritised text provision and helping children to select text. But of course, if they haven't got a reasonable amount of knowledge of contemporary text that children might be interested in, how are they going to help the children to select text? How are they going to recommend things?

A smaller percentage thought that talking about books was important. That's quite small, isn't it, if you think about how important that is in reading for pleasure generally. So, there's some work to be done, not surprisingly because this was the beginning of their initial teaching journey. But I think it's worth thinking about that if, as in a lot of courses in the UK, they're one year. So, the PGCE course is one year of training to teach, and this is what you think of at the beginning of that year.

How much will things have moved on by the end of your training course? Some of these assumptions and challenges will still remain. And across both bits of the sample, the keen readers and those who said that they didn't, there was a real gap in terms of understanding the power of themselves as a reading role model. So tiny percentages here from that big sample, they were not really aware that their values, their identity as readers is going to have a really big influence on the class.

So not just their knowledge of text, but what they said about reading and how they feel about reading and how they convey that to the children or young people that they're working with. And they really weren't aware of that at the beginning of their teacher training journey. So, there is some more encouraging news. So, this is a particular teacher who we took several of the responses from the survey and sort of put them together in this little vignette. And she said that she didn't read.

She was classified as a rarely reader. And it shows that even when the students said that they were not currently reading, it doesn't mean that they don't think reading for pleasure is important. So, they still value reading. And they may have had positive childhood experiences of reading as Daria has here. But you can see at the top, I used to read all the time, but work, housework and extended family commitments take priority at the moment.

There's a genuine challenge and those of us who've been teachers, myself included, know that that that time challenge is real. For Daria, books had been incredibly important as a child. Books were her company, you know, so she was passionate about reading earlier on, but it has fallen away. So one of the things that makes us think is how do we tap into that previous love of reading and reignite that for students, early career teachers, or even experienced teachers who've found it's been pushed away just because of other real life demands?

So overall, these challenges are this kind of push and pull from identity as readers. Are we too busy? Do we love it? Perhaps. And I've met some people I work with actually at the OU who are readers now who research reading and had awful childhood reading experiences and didn't have access to books and didn't read. They really didn't. So, if someone asked them as an adult now about their reading experiences as a child, they immediately are kind of clam up and feel really uncomfortable because it doesn't meet what they feel the outside world is expecting of them. So, it's a sensitive area.

We know we've got this over reliance on a limited canon of childhood favourites and sometimes some kind of sort of grey area about what the student teachers or new teachers might think is appropriate reading for pleasure pedagogy based on their own experiences, the

real challenge of time, and of course, student teachers only get so much from their teacher training programme, however long it might be.

They need to experience these conversations and the support to really embed and develop this understanding as they move through their careers, and perhaps even to hang on to it. You know, even if you've been teaching for a while, you could perhaps find that this is pushed out a little bit by other demands, so that environment that you're in as a new teacher is really important.

So, we're moving on, just having a little look at my timing. Doing OK, we're going to move into some activities in a second. So, thinking about some strategies that might support early career teachers, these are just a few examples of ways to find out about new teacher starting points, reviewing their reading habits and discussing them in as informal and non-threatening way as possible. So, things like setting out a book blanket of lots of different types of books in a classroom and just wandering about, chatting with other members of staff about their preferences and familiarity with different authors.

Maybe having a group conversation about what reading aloud looks like in year one or year six, or wherever you might be teaching to start to uncover any assumptions and creative ways of sharing and reflecting can be fun. So, there's some here. This teacher got the children to draw her. So, to draw what they thought about her as a reading teachers. That was really interesting.

And she also, this is Claire Williams collected a bookshelf of things that she'd been reading overtime, filling that in, sort of colouring in and giving, putting the titles on the shelves. So, these are nice ways to get this conversation going with less confident or new teachers who might be feeling a bit threatened about this agenda. This is my reading history and teachers can do this with just with each other or with their children and talk about it. This is some of the things that I read from 5 to 13, and it's just a good way to think "What types of texts might the children like?" "What did I like when I was a child?".

So not to say I'm going to get them to read some of these very ancient books, but what's the modern version of something that's here that the children might like, whether it's poetry or nonfiction? Why was I drawn to it? Why will the children in my class also be drawn to it? So that idea of reflecting on yourself as a reader and discussing more can really help. And my last slide before we do some activities, and we're going to really unpick this in our activities next.

There's a range of possible resources, loads of support available through the OU and lots of different sites and examples I'm going to share with you on our padlet, to support early career teachers to develop this knowledge and pedagogy for reading for pleasure. And you can see some examples here which are really building in time to get to know new authors and texts during the school day. So, whether it's having an author of the month, some displays around authors, something to borrow in the staff room, reading assemblies, the teachers are then getting time to read and find out about new texts and authors actually alongside the children.

So, it's giving them a bit more space to do that rather than it just being a demand on their own time at home. Although that is something that's important too. And in terms of thinking about pedagogy, focusing again on one thing at a time, not trying to change everything, can also be really supportive. So, in a bit we're going to have the opportunity to look at some resources around OU reading groups, the teachers reading challenge, some of the ideas on this slide and sort of unpick those, decide what might be useful and share other ideas.

But our first activity is coming up next, which is a chance to talk to each other about how do you and I can see when the people I met in the room right at the beginning maybe are not involved in doing this now. So it might be a how would you or how did you find out about early career teachers' starting points for reading for pleasure? What might be good ways of doing that? And I'm going to stop sharing now because I've got a jam board link which gives you the prompts questions to think about. How might you find out about read your identities, knowledge of texts, or understanding of RFP pedagogy? So it's a chance to have a little chat, time to digest and reflect, and maybe share some ideas on the jam board link.