

THE  
POWER  
OF A  
RICH READING  
CLASSROOM



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**POWER**  
OF A  
**RICH READING**  
**CLASSROOM**

**BY THE CENTRE FOR LITERACY IN PRIMARY EDUCATION**



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# ABOUT THE CLPE



This book is produced by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) a UK charity dedicated to improving the teaching of literacy in primary schools.

The charity has been in existence since 1972 and has a national and international reputation for the quality of its work and research. CLPE is based in London, England in a building which houses a library of 23,000 carefully chosen children's books and provides training and teaching resources for primary schools to help them to teach literacy creatively and effectively. The charity works face to face with around 2,000 teachers each year delivering training courses at the centre in London and around the country supporting teachers to understand all aspects of literacy development and to put quality children's literature at the heart of learning. CLPE writes and provides a range of online resources to support the teaching of literacy; these are all designed to support teachers' knowledge about children's literature, its creators and how to use it in the classroom.

In the face to face and online work CLPE makes research and evidence on pedagogy, subject knowledge and effective strategies accessible and visible. The charity aims to make the links between teachers learning and pupil learning explicit, showing how new knowledge and skills will impact on pupil progress and attainment.

CLPE's work has always added to the knowledge base around children's literacy and the effective teaching of literacy, undertaking research about literacy, literature and the best classroom practice to support children to become confident, happy and enthusiastic readers and writers, with all the benefits this brings.

To find out more visit <https://clpe.org.uk/>



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Each chapter in this book is written by one of the experienced staff at CLPE. The foreword is written by Aidan Chambers, a patron of CLPE whose work has inspired countless teachers and children. The editor of this book is Louise Johns-Shepherd, CLPE's Chief Executive.

## **Aidan Chambers**

Aidan Chambers is an award winning author of children's books and texts for teachers and librarians. His work has inspired generations of children and teachers and continues to inspire the work of the CLPE. Aidan is a Patron of CLPE.

## **Louise Johns-Shepherd – Chief Executive**

Louise joined CLPE as the Chief Executive in 2013. She has worked in education for thirty years and was the headteacher of two schools, a nursery school and a primary school. She also worked in education policy and was a senior leader in both the Primary National Strategies and the National College of School Leadership.

**Charlotte Hacking – Learning Programme Leader**

Charlotte joined CLPE in 2012 having taught across the primary school age range and been a leader in several primary schools. She leads the CLPE's ground breaking Power of Pictures research and developed the CLPE's Power of Poetry research project. She is an expert in the use of picture books across primary schools and the teaching of poetry.

**Ann Lazim – Library and Literature Manager**

Ann has been the librarian at CLPE for nearly 30 years. She is a qualified children's librarian and has an MA in Children's Literature. Ann curates the library at CLPE and the Core Books online resource. She has a wealth of knowledge about children's literature and a particular interest in international children's literature and traditional tales.

**Darren Matthews – Primary Advisory Teacher**

Darren is an experienced teacher who has taught across all phases in a range of London primary schools and held a wide number of different leadership posts. Darren worked for many years as an Associate Teacher for Power of Reading before joining the permanent team in 2016. Darren is a drama specialist and leads CLPE's Raising Achievement in Writing programme.

**Katie Myles – Primary Advisory Teacher**

Katie joined CLPE in 2015 and is a member of the expert teaching team and an experienced teacher who has taught across the primary phases. She leads CLPE's English Subject Leader programmes as well as developing cross-curricular programmes with fiction at their heart.

**Anjali Patel – Lead Advisory Teacher**

Before joining CLPE in 2014 Anjali worked in teaching and leadership positions throughout the primary age range. Her expertise is in Early Years and early reading development and she writes regularly for a range of publications such as *Teach Early Years* and *BBC Bitesize* as well as leading on the development of CLPE's Early Years programmes.

**Dr Jonny Rodgers – Primary Advisory Teacher**

Jonny was the Head of a Power of Reading school before joining the CLPE team in 2016. He is an experienced teacher and senior leader, who has taught across the primary age range. Jonny has a doctorate in linguistics and leads the CLPE NQT programme.

**Farrah Serroukh – Learning Programme Leader**

Farrah joined CLPE in 2013. Before that she taught across the primary school age range and held several leadership posts. She is the author of CLPE's Reflecting Realities Survey and leads the ground breaking and award winning work in this area. She is an expert on the teaching of children whose first language is not English.

# FOREWORD

Everything changes, except what fundamentally matters, which always remains the same.

I've been a teacher in various sectors of education since 1955. In that time I've heard the same questions asked about reading and children. How should it be taught? The vast majority of children read very little; how can we help them become keen readers? Does it matter what they read? Why bother anyway?

What people who say 'they don't read' meant in the 1950s, and still do mean, is that 'they' don't read what we think they should read. This has never changed, ever, not from the first days of written and printed words till today. In fact, the young read and write more now than they ever have done. Think of 'social media': text messages, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc., etc., etc. Endless writing and reading, not only of words but of visual images.

Another change: in the 1950s you could leave school only functionally literate and still get a reasonably good job. Coal miners like my maternal grandfather could hardly read and write and didn't need to. My father left school aged fourteen with no paper qualification, trained as a joiner and ended his career managing a funeral department at the Co-operative Society. And here is a marker of the change since the 1950s. My father's successor as a department manager was required to have a qualification in business and funeral management.

The fact is that these days, unless you can write and read with great facility and cope with the complex writing and reading required by our computerised culture, you will be a third-class citizen. You are more likely to be out of work than those who are sophisticatedly literate. If you have a job, it is likely to be the kind that competent readers and writers don't want to do. Proficiency in reading and writing is not now an optional extra. It is fundamentally necessary. It is life-determining.

But what do we mean by 'read' and 'reading'? Is it enough to bore your way through texts, it doesn't matter what kind? Or does it make a difference what you read? And if so, why? (Same questions again!)

All reading involves interpretation: working out what the text means. What it *seems* to mean (superficially) and what it *actually* means. Ambiguity is at play in every text of every kind. Knowing how to interpret is an essential feature of reading. Let's call it, reading with thoughtful, discriminating and critical understanding.

We learn about this with the help of those who already know how to do it, which in our culture means with a teacher. Reading is a cultural activity; it is not genetically controlled: we are not born to be readers and writers. The human race invented both. And like all cultural activity, we learn by imitation. We learn to speak by imitating the sounds made by those who look after us when we are born and as we grow up. Similarly, we learn how to be a reader by imitating those who are already readers. Which means we tend to become readers like those we imitate. Ergo, it matters how good as readers those who teach us are themselves.

Reading is often said to be a private, solitary activity. People who say this are thinking of the time spent passing our eyes over words and images, doing it in silence (reading quietly for ourselves). But that is only a small part of our lives as readers. In fact, reading is a social activity. We choose what we read after hearing about a text from friends, from radio or tv or from social media. And we cannot help talking about what we read when it matters to us more than as a pastime activity. We feel impelled to share with friends, relatives, teachers, anybody. You could say that reading begins and ends with talk.

For teachers, this means a number of features have to be present in the effort to help pupils become thoughtful, discriminating readers who enjoy reading.

The first feature is that texts must be easily available. Books, to mention the old and still best form for deep rather than superficial reading, have to be there – around us – in large numbers and variety. And we have to be able to get at them easily. They have to be accessible, not shut away and hard to get at.

Next, we become readers by imitating, 'by hearing it done'. One change that has happened in recent times proves this beyond mere opinion: the neuroscientists who specialise in what happens in our brains while we are reading have shown how being read to helps open up the 'pathways' that make it possible for us to become readers. Reading aloud is essential.

Third, everyone needs time to read for themselves, otherwise we never become committed readers. For many pupils, perhaps the majority, the only place where this can be done without interruption and regularly is in school. Time for pupils to read for themselves in school is essential.

Fourth, because talk matters, teachers need to be skilled in the kind of talk about what has been read that best helps their pupils grow.

One final point. The texts which contain everything we need to become sophisticated readers are those we usually call 'literature'. By which I mean stories of all kinds, poetry, those visual texts we call picturebooks. Words and pictures composed as narratives. Why is this so? Because these texts are the ones that offer the most complex and profound of meanings. They are the ones which, by attending closely to them, we discover how to interpret meaning in the richest, most aware manner. That's why it matters what our pupils read. "I am what I read. And I read to find out who I am."

There is nothing more important in education than helping learners of all ages to develop as readers and writers. That is what this book is about, and I commend it to you.

Aidan Chambers

A dark grey silhouette of a person from the chest up, holding a white rectangular sign with both hands. The sign contains text in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The background is plain white.

# **PART 1**

**CHOOSING  
HIGH QUALITY  
LITERATURE IN THE  
PRIMARY SCHOOL  
CLASSROOM**



# CHAPTER 1

## REFLECTING REALITIES: NURTURING READER IDENTITY

FARRAH SERROUKH



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### ESTABLISHING A CONNECTION

Take a moment to think of a memorable book from your childhood. What is it that made this book special? What was it about the book that spoke to you?

There is something quite magical about forming a connection to a book: the way in which the words on the page can conjure feelings of excitement, fun, joy, laughter or tears, channelling the part of our being that fundamentally makes us human.

As educators, we invest a great deal of time and energy in ensuring children learn to navigate the words on the page so that they can draw meaning from the text. We equip them with the skills and strategies to process words, digest language, and generate a response.

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**“AS EDUCATORS, WE INVEST A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND ENERGY IN ENSURING CHILDREN LEARN TO NAVIGATE THE WORDS ON THE PAGE SO THAT THEY CAN DRAW MEANING FROM THE TEXT. WE EQUIP THEM WITH THE SKILLS AND STRATEGIES TO PROCESS WORDS, DIGEST LANGUAGE, AND GENERATE A RESPONSE.”**

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The journey that children take as they travel towards becoming a competent and confident reader can be a long, winding and complex road. So, as well as ensuring that children develop the skills and strategies to lift the words from the page, we must also make sure that they are developing a reader identity and that their reserves are well stocked with the resilience, motivation and enthusiasm necessary for the road ahead. The reading community that we cultivate in our classrooms needs to be underpinned by a learning culture that nourishes and values children's experience, as well as giving them the space to experiment, explore, grow in confidence and develop agency. The key to the success of this community is ensuring that we offer a rich and varied breadth and range of quality literature. Literature that speaks to the children, invites them to make connections with their own and others' lives, and lets them know that they have a place in this reading world. And literature that provides opportunities to discover people and worlds they may not yet know (Cremin et al., 2014).

'The most important single lesson that children learn from texts is *the nature and variety of written discourse*, the different ways that language lets a writer tell, and the different ways a reader reads' (Meek, 1988: 21). Time spent ensuring access to a wide and varied range of literature is therefore crucial to informing and shaping children's knowledge and understanding of language. That said, reflections about what constitutes the breadth and range of literature very quickly become absorbed in considerations about text types. This is of course both valid and important. However, we should also consider what it is that makes a book speak to us, and the extent to which this shapes our book choices and recommendations for the children we work with. By doing this, we are exploring the idea of reader identity and encouraging ourselves to think about how we support children to develop their own identity as a reader and their own literary tastes.

Educators are often the most influential gatekeepers of literature, which means we have a responsibility to ensure that:

- children have access to a broad breadth and range of quality reading materials;
- we are able to draw on our knowledge of our children's interests, personalities and reading preferences, as well as our knowledge of the body of literature on the market, to make considered, discerning and informed recommendations;
- we allow children the time and opportunity to meaningfully engage with reading material. (Chambers, 2011)

In order to be able to develop literary tastes and preferences, children need to experience and encounter a broad range of text types from a wide range of authors, poets and illustrators whose works are representative of varied voices, perspectives, writing styles, literary traditions, contexts, themes, cultures and eras. Such variation is mainly achieved by having access to a large volume of books which of course requires a budget commitment.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Annual Poverty Report 2018 forecasts that the upward trend in child poverty over the last few years is likely to continue if urgent action is not taken. The poverty rates cited obviously have a direct effect on disposable income and purchasing power, making the purchasing of books a luxury. This increases the reliance on the school system and public library service to compensate for this, and can mean that for many children in classrooms across England the book corner or school library is their sole source of access to literature. Unfortunately, school budgets are increasingly strained and *The Bookseller* reported in 2018 that spending on the public library service dropped almost 4% in that year compared to the previous year's figures.

Economic forces don't just influence a child's reading diet in relation to how much they consume, they can also shape how balanced and varied that consumption is. If we consider the UK Book Industry in Statistics Report of 2016, produced by the Publisher Association, it is evident that there was at that point a diminishing presence of independent booksellers on the high street. This trend indicates a growing monopolisation of the bookselling market by major online retailers, chains or supermarkets.

This means we have seen an increase in non-specialised booksellers who will showcase stock that will often be limited to a narrow range of bestselling authors. This creates a self-fulfilling cycle of a limited range of literature being on offer on the high street, and that restricted range becoming the default "choice" of children who are able to purchase books.

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**"THIS CREATES A SELF-FULFILLING CYCLE OF A LIMITED RANGE OF LITERATURE BEING ON OFFER ON THE HIGH STREET, AND THAT RESTRICTED RANGE BECOMING THE DEFAULT "CHOICE" OF CHILDREN WHO ARE ABLE TO PURCHASE BOOKS."**

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This is perhaps borne out in Nielsen sales data, which indicates very little movement in the listings of top-selling authors between 2012 and 2017.

In the face of budgetary constraints, socio-economic challenges and the weight of market forces, teachers' role as gatekeepers responsible for ensuring experiences of a rich variation and large volume of quality literature becomes all the more vital.

## CONSIDERED RECOMMENDATION

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To recommend books effectively we must be well read and knowledgeable about the literature that is available, from well-established titles to the ever-growing contributions made from existing and emerging authors. The UKLA's research on the importance of Teachers as Readers (Cremin et al., 2006–7 and 2007–8) bears testimony to the importance of our knowing books beyond our own childhood favourites. At CLPE, we know from our work with our Power of Reading programme that widening teachers' knowledge of children's literature is a key factor in cultivating a community of readers.

Knowing the books is one thing, knowing which books will speak to our children is another. Through our work with schools around the country, and drawing on our own experience as teachers, we have found that the titles that children tend to make connections with have common features, which include:

- protagonists that children identify with;
- moral dilemmas;
- opportunities to explore risk;
- humour in subject matter, plot, character or dialogue;
- shared experiences.

The importance of connection cannot be overstated, and a core component of connection lies in the opportunity to experience fragments of your own reality reflected in the pages of a book. This ‘mirroring’ – a term coined by Dr Rudine Sims Bishop (Sims Bishop, 1990) – is a form of affirmation and legitimises the reader’s right to occupy the literary space. For young, developing readers this is profoundly important both for their reader and learner identity.

Dr Sims Bishop also discusses the value of texts offering ‘windows’ into worlds beyond the reader’s point of reference. It is just as important for children to experience realities beyond their own in the books they encounter, as this allows opportunities to broaden perspectives, encourage understanding and challenge prejudice.

## TEXT CHOICE AND CURRICULUM PLANNING

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We know that children who read often and routinely will become competent and confident readers over time. In view of the time constraints and the implications for how many focus texts can form the basis of a class’s core study, it is important to choose quality texts that ensure a breadth and balance over the course of the term and more widely across the academic year. Text choices will convey implicit and explicit messages about whose voices and stories are valid and valued. The content and subject matter should allow opportunities to centre a range of voices, perspectives and experiences. By ensuring this, we are able to reinforce the idea that the literary space belongs to us all not only as consumers but also as producers of writing.

A heavily-loaded, subject-focused curriculum will inevitably constrain teachers who are required to ensure coverage. One solution is often to tie in text choices to curriculum study. It is important to think about these choices and to make sure that they neither compromise the quality of text choice nor skew the learning foci towards a narrow, Eurocentric outlook. In the English Programme of Study in the 2013 National Curriculum, the word ‘book’ is mentioned a total of 71 times across 88 pages. This emphasises the importance of ensuring children experience a broad range of literature over the course of their primary school years, and lists the types of text children should expect to encounter.

When mapping out an overview of potential texts to share and explore as part of your core literacy and wider curriculum planning, it might be useful to keep the following key considerations in mind to ensure that traditionally marginalised voices and narratives form an integral part of your curriculum and wider reading programme.

## CONTEMPORARY AND CLASSIC POETRY

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Poetry is a powerful medium that allows us to express our thoughts, ideas and emotions. As readers, we bring our world of experience to the page to help us make sense of what we read, as do writers and poets. Therefore the wider the range of poets we encounter, the richer our experience will be.

Do you and your pupils take time to savour and enjoy the poetry of poets from a range of backgrounds? Established poets such as Grace Nichols, Valerie Bloom, John Agard, Jackie Kay and James Berry bring a range of voices to any book corner, as do newer award winning poets such as Karl Nova, Joseph Coelho and Ruth Awolola. More information about the range of poets that can be included in your book stock is available in Chapter 5.

## STORIES AND KEY STORIES

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The Year 1 Programme of Study detailed in the English National Curriculum states the requirement that children become ‘very familiar with key stories, fairy stories and traditional tales, retelling them and considering their particular characteristics’ (Department for Education, 2013: 21). It is interesting that the curriculum should use the term ‘key’ – we might ask key to whom and why? Stories provide a blueprint for our understanding of how language works and narrative structures are formed. Do children have the opportunity to encounter stories that exemplify a wide range of literary styles and perspectives? As well as contemporary Key Stage 1 classroom classics from the likes of Ahlberg, Donaldson, Kerr, Rosen and Sendak, are children experiencing the talents of authors like Atinuke, Emily Hughes, Ken Wilson-Max, and Joseph Coelho, whose works provide authentic inclusive representations of children from a range of backgrounds?

## TRADITIONAL STORIES

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Traditional stories were crafted to be told and listened to, the rhythms, patterns and structure moulded to be memorable to recount and easy to share and pass on. This type of story should form the bedrock of the primary classroom experience. Given that every culture has their own tradition in this regard, it can sometimes feel like the obvious place to start in terms of broadening access to a wider representation of cultures. This is therefore often the space on the shelf where there is a disproportionately higher level of representation in terms of ethnic minority presence. The study of traditional stories from around the world is a valid and valuable enterprise, however it is always important to reflect on whether this is the only form of story/literature that is studied that features an ethnic minority presence. If this is the case, what might pupils infer about the cultures and societies from which the stories originate? If children only encounter ethnic minorities in stories located in ancient or long-gone eras and in no other reading matter, this might convey the idea that the cultures and societies portrayed have not progressed beyond this point.

## MODERN FICTION

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If the reading culture of the school is strong, you will have reading routines inside and beyond the classroom that allow for wider experiences of texts. It is in this space that it will be important for children to encounter books in which the ethnicity of the characters are not plot points. Children need to access books in which ‘otherness’ is not the underpinning feature, and books in which the ethnically inclusive cast are simply living life, having fun, and experiencing every day, sometimes new and often interesting things. In other words, books that allow readers to see themselves and others just existing and co-existing.

Alanna Max Publishers do this exceptionally well. The beautiful, considered attention to detail in both the *Lulu* and *Zeki* picturebook series perfectly captures the simple pleasures of toddler life in an authentic, warm and playful way.

Zanib Mian's award-winning title *The Muslims* that has since been republished under the title *Planet Omar* is being heralded as the next *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. This comedic take on the life of a young boy who happens to be Muslim is a crucial contribution to the world of children's literature and society. The normalisation of Muslim family life is a much needed and important antidote to the hostile times in which we find ourselves. Sharna Jackson's *High-Rise Mystery* is a fun and lively detective adventure with two young black leads. It is very rare to have ethnic minority leads located in comedy or adventure titles. By making these simple but tremendously important casting choices, both Mian and Jackson are challenging conventions and shifting the narrative by altering the ways in which readers view both themselves and others. For a very long time the only instances in which a reader might encounter an ethnic minority character would be if the subject matter was about struggle, strife, subjugation or success. From exposure to such books a reader might infer that individuals from an ethnic minority background are only worthy of visibility when exploring their points of difference. Furthermore these differences are usually focused on highlighting exceptional qualities that correlate with an exploration of the pain or success of overcoming challenges. If these are the only titles on the shelf featuring characters from minoritised backgrounds, this can lead to limiting and skewed perceptions of whole communities of people.

That is not to say that books that document the successes and struggles of individuals and communities of people are not important. Books like Vashti Harrison's *Little Leaders* series form part of a significant and ever-growing body of literature that celebrates the achievements of inspirational women, and in this case in particular women from minoritised backgrounds. These books are important in exemplifying the best of who we are and what we can achieve. They bear testimony to our core humanity and invaluable attributes of strength, determination and resilience. What is crucial is that we remain mindful of the balance of representation within and across the books we curate for our classrooms and school libraries.

## BOOKS FROM OTHER CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

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The CLPE Reflecting Realities report highlighted the stark extent of under-representation of ethnic minority presence in children's literature, with only 4% of books published in 2017 featuring black and ethnic minority characters and only 1% of main characters being from ethnic minority backgrounds. We observed only a slight improvement in these figures in the second report that reviewed output from 2018, rising from 4% to 7% and 1% to 4%.

The publishing industry is making efforts to redress this imbalance, but in the interim this can sometimes mean that a greater burden of responsibility can weigh on each title that does make efforts to be authentically representative.

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**“THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY IS MAKING EFFORTS TO REDRESS THIS IMBALANCE, BUT IN THE INTERIM THIS CAN SOMETIMES MEAN THAT A GREATER BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY CAN WEIGH ON EACH TITLE THAT DOES MAKE EFFORTS TO BE AUTHENTICALLY REPRESENTATIVE.”**

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One book cannot be expected to be all things for all readers. However when marginalised voices are given a platform the brightness of the spotlight can be blindingly unforgiving. This is why in recommending and sharing books from other cultures and traditions it is important to pick carefully and ensure that your curation is as balanced as possible, and that your book corner showcases the breadth and diversity of experiences of any one community in order to reduce the potential to reinforce stereotypes or convey narrow portrayals.

If we are not mindful in our considerations of which texts to stock and utilise in our classrooms, this can compromise the reading diet and subsequent emerging reader identity of all the children in our care.

As educators, we must consider how limited reading diets can influence children's sense of self and their place in the world.

When making book choices for classrooms, it is always important to consider the balance of your book stock and the extent to which it reflects the reality of the children in your class, your school community and wider society. It is important for the developing identity of all your readers that you ensure a balance and breadth of quality, inclusion and representation.

We are all made up of the stories that we tell ourselves, that have been told to us and about us. Who we are and who we become as individuals and a society is bound up in the fabric of these stories. As gatekeepers of the literature, teachers have a responsibility to nurture the readers of tomorrow through the stories we share today.

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