"I Don't Really Have a Reason to Read Children's Literature": Enquiring into Primary Student Teachers' Knowledge of Children's Literature

"No tinc cap raó per llegir literatura infantil": indagar en el coneixement de la literatura infantil en alumnat de mestre/a de Primària

"No tengo ninguna razón para leer literatura infantil": indagar en el conocimiento de la literatura infantil en el alumnado de maestro/a de Primaria

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Abstract

Research into in-service teachers' knowledge of children's literature indicates there is a powerfully symbiotic relationship between teachers' perceptions and projections of themselves as readers and students' engagement with reading as a pleasurable activity (Commeyras et al., 2003; Cremin et al 2014). Less is known about pre-service teachers' knowledge of children's literature or their attitudes towards reading and the Scottish context is unexplored in this regard. Inspired by and aligned with the work of Cremin et al. (2008) with in-service primary teachers in England, this project investigated the personal reading habits of more than 150 student teachers over a two-year period by capturing snapshots of their knowledge of children's literature and perceptions of themselves as not only readers, but as readers of children's literature, at various stages of their initial teacher education. Framed by understandings of literacy practices as socially and locally constructed (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and of literate identities as fluid, contingent and plural (Moje et al., 2009), this paper also outlines how project findings linked to knowledge of texts for children and reader identity have informed the teaching and learning of children's literature at university level.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, children's literature, identity, teacher knowledge, reading for pleasure.

Resumen

La investigación sobre el conocimiento de la literatura infantil en el estudiantado de Magisterio indica que hay una poderosa relación simbiótica entre las percepciones del profesorado y las proyecciones de sí mismos como personas lectoras y la motivación del alumnado respecto de una actividad placentera (Commeyras et al., 2003; Cremin et al 2014). Se sabe menos sobre el conocimiento de la literatura infantil o de sus actitudes hacia la lectura, y el contexto escocés está inexplorado a este respecto. Inspirado y alineado con el trabajo de Cremin et al (2018) sobre el profesorado en activo en Inglaterra, este proyecto investiga los hábitos personales de lectura de más de 150 estudiantes a lo largo de un periodo de dos años

a través de la captura de instantáneas de su conocimiento de la literatura infantil y las percepciones de sí mismos, no solo como personas lectoras, sino como personas lectoras de literatura infantil en diversos estadios de su formación inicial como maestros y maestras. En el marco de la comprensión de las prácticas de literacidad como social y localmente construidas (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) y de las identidades literatas como fluidas, contingentes y plurales (Moje et al., 2009), este artículo también señala como los hallazgos de proyectos ligados al conocimiento de textos para niños y niñas y de la identidad lectora han informado la enseñanza aprendizaje de la literatura infantil a nivel universitario.

Palabras clave: formación inicial de maestros/as, literatura infantil, identidad, conocimiento docente, lectura por placer

Resum

La recerca sobre el coneixement de la literatura infantil en l'estudiantat de Magisteri indica que hi ha una poderosa relació simbiòtica entre les percepcions del professorat i les projeccions de si mateix com a persones lectores i la motivació de l'alumnat respecte d'una activitat plaent (Commeyras et al., 2003; Cremin et al 2014). Se'n sap menys sobre el coneixement de la literatura infantil o de les seues actituds cap a la lectura, i el context escocés està inexplorat a aquest respecte. Inspirat i alineat amb el treball de Cremin et al (2008) sobre el professorat en actiu en Anglaterra, aquest projecte investiga els hàbits personals de lectura de més de 150 estudiants al llarg d'un període de dos anys tot capturant instantànies del seu coneixement de la literatura infantil i de les percepcions d'ells i elles mateixos, no tan sols com a persones lectores, sinó com a persones lectores de literatura infantil en diversos estadis de la seua formació inicial com a mestres. En el marc de la comprensió de les pràctiques de literacitat com a socialment i localment construïdes (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) i de les identitats literates com a fluides, contingents i plurals (Moje et al., 2009), aquest article també assenyala com les troballes de projectes lligats al coneixement de textos per a infants i de la identitat lectora han posat al corrent l'ensenyament-aprenentatge de la literatura infantil a nivell universitari.

Paraules clau: formació inicial de mestres, literatura infantil, identitat, coneixement docent, lectura per plaer

1. Introduction

Learners' attitudes towards reading as a pleasurable activity can be positively influenced if their teacher identifies as a 'Reading Teacher', that is, as a reader who teaches and a teacher who reads (Commeyras et al., 2003; Cremin et al., 2014; Cremin, 2020). Research from England found that primary teachers' knowledge of children's literature was often limited to the books that teachers had read at school themselves, leading to what has been described as a 'Dahl dependency' (Cremin et al., 2008); in other words, an over-reliance on a limited range of dominant authors. Writing from a Norwegian context, Skaar et al.'s (2018) study of almost 250 pre-service and in-service teachers' narrative descriptions of themselves as readers found that literature was not part of the student teachers' lives and that there were "practically no genuine readers" among the pre-service teachers

in the study (p. 320). Such findings suggest that teachers will struggle to make recommendations that address the needs and interests of the increasingly diverse young readers in their classes (Cremin 2014; Clark & Teravainen, 2015). They also raise concerns about in-service primary teachers' awareness of the advantages that children's literature can offer pedagogically, for developing intercultural and empathic understandings (Short, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2013), and for cognitive and linguistic development (Smith, 2015).

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University-based initial teacher education (ITE) has the potential to offer a vital space in which to interrupt cycles of limited teacher knowledge by developing student teachers' understanding of what it means to be a Reading Teacher (Commeyras et al, 2003; Cremin et al, 2008) and by broadening their awareness of authors and texts for children. Doing so may also help student teachers towards an increased consciousness of their personal and professional identities as readers, given the shaping effects such identities have on classroom practice and their linked development to learners' "embodied competences" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p.107). This paper describes a project that has taken forward these ideas with the aim of gently disrupting student teachers' existing knowledge about children's literature in order to provoke change and further development in their literate identities.

2. Research Context

In the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Scotland's national educational framework for children and young people aged between 3-18 years, the status of children's literature is largely invisible. Organised around capacities and areas of learning rather than school subjects, the CfE aims to develop young people as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (Scottish Government, 2009). Literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing are highlighted as being of central importance to all, meaning that practitioners in all stages are held responsible for developing and evidencing them across the curriculum. Despite this centralised focus on literacy, children's literature is not named explicitly as a resource for readers and teachers to explore and exploit. While the practice of reading for pleasure is alluded to via a curricular strand labelled "Enjoyment and Choice" (Scottish Government, 2009), in which learners are expected to be able explore texts and explain why they are enjoyable, Smith (2015) has noted that reading in the CfE is largely framed by a "heritage lens" (p.614) that foregrounds literature "as a place where national and cultural identity can be formed and reinforced" (p.614). According to Smith, this can lead to the

privileging of texts for their "provenance and age" (p.614) over their relevance to children's tastes and lives. As the terms "heritage" and "age" suggest, such a lens reinforces the dominance of classic or Canonical texts for children without simultaneously making room for newer, more diverse and culturally-relevant voices that reflect young people's lives and experiences. As such, Smith notes that children's literature has tended to occupy an ambiguous role within UK education systems, despite the current boom in children's publishing (Chandler, 2020) and increased visibility of such texts in out of school contexts.

This ambiguous status of children's literature is visible in the findings of Cremin et al's (2008) study, where in-service primary teachers' knowledge of children's literature was shown to be largely confined to a narrow range of already familiar fiction writers, with participants showing little to no knowledge of poets and picturebook authors. In their conclusion, the authors called on initial teacher educators to ensure that student teachers are exposed to diverse, high quality children's literature prior to qualification, but as Smith (2015) has pointed out, there is little space within primary initial teacher education programmes for this to happen. Consequently, children's literature is often located on the margins of teacher education as a "optional extra" taken by only a minority of student teachers (Smith, 2015), meaning that its broader significance and implications for practice are missed by the majority.

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Such dynamics are reflected within the research context of this study: the third year of an initial teacher education programme at a Scottish university that leads to a primary teaching qualification after four years, with an integrated Master's level qualification available to those who graduate after five years. After an initial two years of macro-level educational studies, third year student teachers' timetable mirrors the curricular demands of the Scottish primary classroom and is structured around the CfE's eight areas of learning: expressive arts, health and wellbeing, languages (including English, Gaidhlig, Gaelic learners and modern languages), mathematics, religious and moral education, sciences, social studies and technologies. Students also undertake significant blocks of School Experience (practicum) within this year. Greater specialism is offered through a choice of seven electives that includes Children's Literature, meaning that around 20 Year 3 students can choose to study the subject to a greater depth. Given the element of choice, it is likely that those with a pre-existing interest in children's literature or reading will select it as an option. For the rest of the 140-strong Year 3 cohort who do not take the specialist elective, messages about children's literature are conveyed primarily via a series of literacy and English lectures and seminars, but, due to pressures of

time and space, coverage of children's literature becomes necessarily limited to whatever the teaching team can accommodate.

It is from within such a context that this project was conceived to explore the extent of student teachers' knowledge of children's literature and their perceptions of themselves as readers. In particular, this study aimed to:

● Explore and develop student teachers' knowledge and understandings of children's literature;

● Stimulate student teachers into actively and independently developing their knowledge of children's literature as a result of engaging with the study's tools;

● Create a case for the repositioning of children's literature from the margins towards the centre of ITE programmes at an institutional level;

● Explore the relative structural invisibility of children's literature in education with an interest in how this may contribute to teacher knowledge and perceptions of the subject.

Building on Cremin et al.'s work (2008) with in-service primary teachers in England, this paper presents a first tranche of findings from an enquiry into undergraduate student teachers' knowledge of children's literature at a Scottish university and site of initial teacher education. It reports on the findings of a questionnaire that was adapted from the original Cremin et al. (2008) study to explore pre-service teachers' personal reading habits, their knowledge of children's literature and initial perceptions of themselves as not only readers, but as readers of children's literature. Data was also collected using two autobiographical written tasks distributed an academic year apart, which asked participants to reflect on different aspects of their reader identity: these will be analyzed in separate publications.

In summary, the specific questions this paper addresses are:

● What is extent of student teacher's knowledge of children's literature at the outset of the curricular phase of their initial teacher education?

● What are student teachers' perceptions of themselves as readers and as readers of children's literature?

● What are the implications of these findings for teacher educators in the field of children's literature?

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framing

As mentioned above, this project utilised research tools developed by Cremin et al. (2008). With permission, I adapted the original survey to suit the profile of student teachers who were still in the process of gaining classroom experience and might therefore not be able to answer questions related to the use of children's literature in school.

Data were collected from the Year 3 cohort of undergraduate students during 2017-18 (a pilot study); 2018-19 (sample size 80) and 2019-20 (sample size 70). This paper discusses the findings from the 2018-19 and 2019-20 cohorts. The questionnaires were distributed during an induction day held prior to the start of the new academic session. Scheduled slightly before the start of the new academic term, the induction days were not attended by every student in each of the cohorts (which usually comprise 120-140 students, compared to the 70-80 present at induction). I decided to circulate the questionnaires that day given that it represented an opportunity to capture the students' knowledge about children's literature and self-perceptions as readers before any lectures or seminars had taken place. Ethical permission to conduct the study was granted by the host institution; participant information statements and consent forms were distributed to all in attendance at the induction day after a brief talk to explain the aims of the project. To ensure a wider take-up, the questionnaires were completed during the induction session, with students able to indicate whether or not they wished to participate.

The questionnaire comprised a mix of open and closed questions. The latter were tabulated and translated into graphs to support the process of analysis for any patterns. The former, which included slightly longer responses to questions about reader identity, were coded using key steps of the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A benefit of reflexive thematic analysis (TA) is that it can be applied in diverse ways, including inductively, deductively and for semantic purposes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Intended to offer researchers theoretical flexibility and thereby a wide range of applications, an aim of reflexive TA is to support the identification of patterns of meaning across data sets, while acknowledging the inherently shaping influence of researcher subjectivity throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After an initial period of data familiarisation, the qualitative data were coded and then grouped under themes that expressed the overarching narrative emerging from my interpretation of the participants' responses. These themes are explored in the Findings and Discussion section of this paper.

Theoretically, this project is framed by understandings of literacy as socially and locally constructed (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). This perspective has implications for initial teacher education by highlighting a shift away from perceptions of literacy learning and teaching as predominantly skills

based, towards a view of literacies as plural, contingent and mediated by an individual's fluid and socially constructed literate identity (Moje et al., 2009, p.416). For student teachers, this perspective highlights a need to recognise the ways in which their own assumptions about reading and related values about being a reader can significantly impact their future classroom practice.

For the purposes of this paper, student teachers' knowledge of children's literature is conceptualized as one of the multiple, intertwined strands of "funds of identity" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) that inform teachers' personal and professional beliefs and practices (McAdam & Farrar, 2018). Under this view, it becomes vital for student teachers to interrogate their funds of identity in order to become more aware of the shaping influences at work. Without such a heightened awareness, there is a risk that taken-for-granted cultural scripts will continue to dominate, silencing the diverse and less dominant identities that exist within any classroom setting (McAdam & Farrar, 2018). In the context of children's literature, this equates to the diversity of texts shared within classrooms and teachers' awareness of the "possible selves" they make available to younger readers through their text selections (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p.237). According to McCarthey and Moje, the choice of books and teachers' mediation of them has a profound effect on children's development of self.

4. Findings and Discussion

For ease of discussion, in the paragraphs that follow the 2018-19 cohort are referred to as Group A (sample size 80), with the 2019-20 group referred to as Group B (sample size 70). The questions are presented in the order the student teachers encountered them in the survey.

4.1 Q1. What Was Your Favourite Book as a Child?

When asked to name a favourite book from their childhood, the majority of student teachers across both cohorts were able to provide an answer. From Group A, 4% did not provide an answer; 3% of student teachers in the Group B left this question blank. A wide range of texts were provided - over 70 separate titles - with some texts and authors receiving multiple mentions. All of the texts mentioned were works of popular fiction. The authors most dominant across both cohorts were Jacqueline Wilson (Group A: 18%; Group B 21%) and Roald Dahl (Group A: 14 %; Group B: 29 %), with some respondents choosing to enter "Anything by Jacqueline Wilson" as a blanket response to the question. Other authors mentioned several times included Enid Blyton, Michael Morpurgo and JK Rowling, with 'Harry Potter' given as a response by three people in Group A and seven in Group B. The majority of texts mentioned were chapter books, with only a small number of students citing picturebooks or illustrated texts as their childhood favourites. Those mentioned included *Hairy MacLary* by Lynley Dodd (2 mentions in both Group A and B); Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (3 mentions in Group A); *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler (3 mentions in Groups A and

B); and Judith Kerr's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* (2 mentions in Groups A and B). No works of poetry or nonfiction were recorded.

4.2 Q2. What Children's Books Have You Read Recently for Pleasure?

This question did not elicit as many responses as the first question, with 36% of Group A and 49% of Group B choosing to leave it unanswered. Of those who did answer, the author most dominant across both cohorts was JK Rowling, who is sometimes described as a cross-over author, with texts read by adults and children. Rowling received a total of 12 mentions from respondents in Group A and 11 from Group B. Other authors recording multiple mentions included Julia Donaldson (12 mentions in Group A; 5 in Group B); Roald Dahl (9 mentions in Group A; 6 from Group B) and The Hungry Caterpillar (5 mentions from Group A only). As these results suggest, there were close overlaps between the most dominant authors read recently (Donaldson, Dahl and Carle) and those cited as childhood favourites in response to the first question.

4.3 Q3. When Did You Last Read a Children's Book?

For this answer, respondents could choose from the following:

A) In the last month

B) In the last 3 months

C) Within 6 months

D) Over 6 months

From an overview of all responses provided, it was clear that another option had emerged: that of a blank response. Therefore, under option E, I calculated the percentage of respondents who had decided not to fill this in, presumably to indicate they had not read any children's books within memory. As Table 1 shows, around a third of the total number of students in Groups A and B had read a children's book within three months of the survey. Yet at the opposite end, according to the combined figures from options D and the student-generated option E, 47% of Group A and 63% of Group B had not read a children's book in over six months, if not longer. Such figures might be considered worrisome, given these primary student teachers were at the mid-way point of their initial teacher education, but another concern is that fact that the construction of their timetable up until that point had not facilitated engagement with children's literature, meaning that if reading children's books was not already a pre-existing feature of their literate identity, it was unlikely to become a core activity without prompting or support. This idea is explored in more detail in relation to some of the other questions.

Answer	2018-19/A	%	2019-20/B	%
A) In the last month	11	14	10	14
B) In the last 3 months	18	23	10	14
C) Within 6 months	13	16	6	9
D) Over 6 months	14	17	19	27
E) No answer provided	24	30	25	36

Table 1. When did you last read a children's book?

4.4 Q4. List 6 'Good' Authors for Children.

When asked to name six 'good' authors for children, where 'good' was explained as an author they would consider worthy of reading in the classroom, 84% of both Groups A and B could list four or more names. Only one person per group failed to name a single author, with one person in Group B able to think of only one name. Dominating the lists was Roald Dahl (with 75 mentions by Group A and 59 from Group B); followed by Jacqueline Wilson (with 57 mentions from Group A and 49 from B); closely followed by JK Rowling, who attracted 57 mentions from Group A and 43 from Group B. The next highest scores came from David Walliams (24 from Group A; 33 from Group B); Julia Donaldson (25 mentions from Group A and 21 from Group B); Enid Blyton (18 from Group A and 27 from Group B); and Michael Morpurgo (18 from Group A; 29 from Group B).

Interestingly, many of the same authors were cited by the in-service teachers surveyed by the Cremin at al. (2008, p.15) research team over a decade earlier, when Dahl, Morpurgo, Wilson and Rowling topped the lists of mentions. The close alignment of the student teachers' selection of 'good' authors with those already named by their more experienced colleagues in England is perhaps a reflection of the authors who continue to be promoted by larger publishing houses that feed into UK booksellers but is perhaps also indicative of the point raised earlier: that teachers' knowledge of children's literature can often be limited to the books they read as children, which is then passed on to their classes (Cremin et al., 2008). To some extent, this is borne out by the recurrence of Dahl, Wilson and Rowling, and to a lesser extent, Morpurgo and Blyton, in the student teachers' responses to questions 1, 2 and 4. The emergence of David Walliams as a 'good' author in the eyes of the student teachers but not the in-service teachers in the earlier study can be explained by the fact that Walliams' first book, *The Boy in the Dress*, was published in 2008, the same year Cremin et al.'s work was published. Since then, Walliams has gone onto dominate the lists of best-selling children's books. Certainly, the prevailing dominance of authors such as Dahl, Wilson and Blyton in the student teachers' mentions

suggests the narrowness of their knowledge about texts for children that would, if left unchecked and undeveloped, construct cultural scripts of a limited range within Scotland's increasingly diverse classrooms.

4.5 Q5. List 6 'Good' Poets for Children.

With 'good' intended to be understood in the same manner as question four, this question tasked student teachers with identifying the names of six poets writing for children. According to the responses provided by Group A, 73% of students could not name a single children's poet; for Group B the figure was 56%. Some student teachers could name one poet (16% of Group A and 23% of Group B) but no-one in Group A or B could name 5 or 6 poets. In Group B, three people were able to name four poets each, the highest achievement across both cohorts. Of the poets named, the highest number of mentions was for Dr Seuss (with 13 mentions by Group A and 20 from Group B); with Robert Burns the second most frequently named poet for children (9 mentions by Group A and 10 by Group B). Of interest here is the student teachers' identification of Robert Burns, (the 18th century writer who is commonly referred to as Scotland's national poet), as a poet for children, when in fact Burns primarily wrote for adults. Yet many of his poems are taught to children in Scottish schools, with recitations of Burns' verse still a traditional feature of many primary and secondary classrooms in February, when Burns' Night is celebrated to honour the poet's life and works.

Other writers listed as poets named included Roald Dahl (with 3 mentions from Group A and 11 from Group B); AA Milne and Spike Milligan (both with 4 mentions each from Group B), Michael Rosen (2 mentions from Group A only); while Carol Ann Duffy, a poet many Scottish teenagers study (sometimes alongside Robert Burns) as part of a national secondary school qualification, received single digit votes from both groups (Group A: 1; Group B: 3). As these results illustrate, the student teachers' knowledge of poets writing for children was extremely limited, raising possible questions about the level of exposure to children's poetry the student teachers had during their own time at school. Interestingly, the in-service teacher participants in Cremin et al's (2008) study in England also found the poetry question to be a challenge, with only 10% of respondents able to name six poets, and 58% able to name only one, two or no poets at all (2008, p.15).

4.6 Q6. List 6 'Good' Picturebook Authors/ Illustrators.

As with the question about children's poets, the questionnaire results revealed that the student teachers were not familiar with picturebook authors and/or illustrators. In fact, as with the poets, the majority of student teachers were unable to name a single picturebook author and/or illustrator. In Group A, 72% of respondents did not answer the question; for Group B, the figure was 50%. Some students could name one picturebook author and/or illustrator (12% of Group A; 20% of Group B),

with a handful of people able to provide the names of four author/ illustrators (1 person in Group A and 6 in Group B).

The most frequently named author-illustrator was Quentin Blake, with 10 mentions in Group A and 22 mentions in Group B. Other picturebook author and/or illustrators with several mentions included Julia Donaldson, Nick Sharratt, Dr Seuss, Eric Carle and Judith Kerr. In most cases, works by these authors had also been cited in answer to previous questions. An exception to this was Nick Sharratt, a picturebook author and illustrator in his own right, who is also well known for his illustrative work for the written works of Jacqueline Wilson and Julia Donaldson. In amongst the short list of author/illustrators who received a single mention were some writing in languages other than English (Yuri Morales and Herve Tuller), and those best known as comic book artists (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby). Therefore, while the responses to this question were limited, in a sense they were more diverse than the answers given to any of the other questions. Yet overall, the student teachers' responses showed significant gaps in their knowledge of children's literature and indicated to the literacy teaching team where some targeted support was required.

4.7 Q7. Rank the Following Statements in Order of Importance, Where 1 is the Most Important.

To answer Question 7, the students had to read the following statements and then rank them from most to least important.

Children's Literature is important because:

1. It develops reading

2. It develops writing

3. It widens knowledge

4. It engages the emotions and helps to develop empathy

5. It develops the imagination.

Responses to this question were interesting in that they highlighted the student teachers' pre-existing assumptions about children's literature before they encountered it formally within the context of their initial teacher education. The majority of students across both cohorts felt that children's literature played an important role in developing the imagination (Group A: 45%; Group B: 34%). Children's literature's role in developing reading received the second highest rating (Group A: 26%; Group B: 27%), with option 3 (widening knowledge) receiving slightly more ratings than number 4 (developing emotions and empathy), putting them into third and fourth place respectively. The option that

received the least number of ratings was the one related to writing, with only 3% of ratings from Group A and no ratings at all from Group B.

Remarkably, the student teachers' top and bottom choices (imagination and writing respectively) mirrored those of the in-service teacher participants in Cremin et al's (2008) study. The student teachers' selection of imagination as the primary role of children's literature is perhaps reflective of the predominance of fiction in the texts identified in their responses across the questionnaire and, as Cremin et al. noted in relation to their own project, may also indicate respondents' recognition of the escapist pleasure that reading can provide (2008, p.18). That the student teachers did not yet perceive connections between reading children's literature and writing provided a clear opportunity for the teaching team to emphasise the interconnectedness of reading and writing pedagogies in subsequent sessions. It also foregrounded the need to actively engage student teachers with ways of using children's literature as much more than an imaginative "treat", by supporting them towards deeper understandings of children's literature as "a resource that aids in the exploration of self, others and knowledge of the world" (Arizpe et al., 2013, p.241) in and through a variety of modes, including writing.

4.8 Q8. Are You a Reader?

All of the students provided a response to the question "are you a reader?". In broad terms, 52% of Group A recorded a 'yes' and 48% a 'no'. Group B's responses painted a slightly different picture, with 66% responding with a 'yes' and 34% with a 'no'. Reasons given for 'being a reader' included: students' perceptions of reading's helpful role in unwinding and relaxation; reading as a means of escaping reality and the sheer enjoyment that reading can bring to individuals. The list of reasons for 'not being a reader' was longer, and included:

- Lack of time

- Lack of interest or enjoyment

- Competing interests, specifically technology

- Impact of university pressures/ coursework demands

- Difficulties with reading, such as dyslexia and low concentration.

4.9 Q9. Are You a Reader of Children's Literature? Give a Reason.

Again, all respondents provided a response to the question "are you a reader of children's literature?" In Group A, 23% of respondents responded with 'yes', while 77% recorded a 'no'. In Group B, the proportion of 'yes' responses was 29%, with 71% registering a 'no' vote. As this indicates, the majority of student teachers did not identify with describing themselves as readers of children's literature.

To explore these results in more detail, the following paragraphs unpack some of the reasons the participants provided alongside their yes/no answers. As noted in the methodology section, responses to open questions in the questionnaire were coded and then organised under common themes, which are listed below. Themes common to both Groups A and B are discussed in this section.

4.9.1 Lack of Time

Many students reported time as a barrier to reading children's literature, including students who answered 'yes' to the question "are you a reader of children's literature?" For some people, reading children's books was a habit they had fallen out of in recent years, often as a result of academic pressures ["I read many children's books growing up and for going into school but not so much now as when I was young…"], whereas others depicted the difficulties of finding time for reading children's books, using phrases like "it's a struggle…"; "time management" or the simple and direct "not enough time." Some conveyed a sense of guilt with responses such as: "Not as often as I should", suggesting a recognition that reading children's literature would be a helpful pastime for a future teacher.

4.9.2 Relevance

In response to Question 9, a minority of student teachers expressed a desire to engage with children's literature and explained why they felt it was relevant to their studies. According to one respondent: "I have not explored children's literature yet, but it is something I need to do soon as it very important for teaching." Another reported that she already read children's literature to her young family but noted "this questionnaire has highlighted how much it should be a focus going forward." It is interesting that these final respondents appeared to use the questionnaire as an immediate prompt for reflection, caused perhaps by their awareness of missing knowledge (possibly from questions they could not answer), or from a recognition of questionnaire's role as teaching tool at this stage in their initial teacher education.

Some students' responses indicated that they did not regard children's literature as being relevant to their on-going studies as a primary school teacher. This was strongly communicated through answers such as:

> "No, I don't really have a reason to read children's literature."
>
> "No, children's literature does not really cross my mind."
>
> "I haven't ever considered reading children's books."

As indicated by the phrases "don't really have a reason" and "haven't ever considered", the concept of children's literature appeared to be removed from these respondents' perceptions of what they ought to be concerned with as student teachers.

Several student teachers said that children's literature was not relevant because they did not "have any children at home to read to". The converse of this also emerged: many respondents identified as readers of children's literature largely because they spent so much time reading it to their own families. In a couple of cases, respondents who read to their families added caveats that put a distance between themselves and the idea that their decision to read children's literature was representative of a personal choice. For example: "I read to my young family members and at times re-read old childhood favourites. However, it is not my main source of literature," and "I only read children's literature with my little cousins." While this notion of distancing is explored again under another sub-heading, it is interesting to consider is as a possible expression of a "folk theory" about being literate, that is an example of "common-sense linkages which are popularly accepted as facts about the social effects and consequences of literacy" (Luke & Carrington, 1997, p. 97). In this instance, such a literacy folk theory could be the apparently taken-for-granted assumption that the 'simple' world of children's literature becomes less relevant once readers become adults, leading to these student teachers disregarding its significance for their developing careers as teachers of primary-aged children.

> **The converse of this also emerged: many respondents identified as readers of children's literature largely because they spent so much time reading it to their own families. In a couple of cases, respondents who read to their families added caveats that put a distance between themselves and the idea that their decision to read children's literature was representative of a personal choice**

4.9.3   Children's Literature is for School

As a sub-theme also related to 'relevance', responses of this sort categorized the reading of children's literature as an activity that would take place predominantly in school. Many students across both groups responded with comments like: "I read children's literature on placement: that is all"; "I only read children's literature for professional purposes" and "I don't read it outside of school experience." A strong sense of engagement with children's literature as conditional on context emerged through the students' repeated use of the word "only", which was peppered across responses under this

theme: "I *only* read texts to prepare for lessons"; "I *only* read children's literature for research"; "I *only* read children's literature if I intend to use it on placement"; and "*only* in early educational settings".

As with the themes already explored, there emerged a strong sense that some students aimed to displace or distance themselves from children's literature, by keeping it at a remove - for classroom use only. Under this view, children's literature would remain marginalized from future practice in ontological and pedagogical terms, as a tool to be lifted (and lowered) when required, but without deeper understandings of children's literature's scope and potential (Arizpe et al., 2013).

4.9.4 Personal Preferences

When providing a reason for their 'yes/no' answer to the question, *'are you a reader of children's literature?'* some students framed their responses using the idea of choice or

preference. For some respondents, this was connected strongly to a sense of enjoyment. For example: "children's literature is creative, and I enjoy stimulating my imagination"; or "children's literature is often very engaging and enjoyable and explores interesting messages"; and "I like reading children's books as they are fun." One respondent connected this sense of taking pleasure from children's literature to her developing career as a teacher: "I enjoy exploring children's literature and exploring how it may help my future practice."

For other respondents, reading children's literature emerged as something they would prefer not to do, for a variety of reasons. One such reason was that, as adults, they preferred to read texts aimed more squarely at their grown-up status. This could be seen within comments such as: "I don't feel it is for my age", or "I read according to my age category" and "I try to read more mature literature to develop different parts of myself" and finally, "I prefer to read books inappropriate for children".

Another reason the student teachers preferred not to read children's literature was linked to a perception of it as being too basic for adult readers. According to one respondent, "Children's literature is too simple to read for enjoyment", while another noted: "I feel it would not expand my knowledge and challenge me." One student teacher expressed a concern about "being judged" by others if they were found to be reading children's books; a worry that also spoke to the concerns conveyed by another respondent who felt that children's literature was "not intellectually stimulating", although, with some self-deprecation, also noted as an after-thought: "I would probably be very surprised if I tried."

What many of the more negative-sounding statements have in common is the perception of reading as an activity that is individual, preferably bounded by age and linked to self-development, with little recognition of the idea that reading texts for children might support the development of adults too,

both personally and professionally. They also convey the outdated idea of children's literature as simple, a view long contested (Nikolajeva, 1998) and one that is challenged by the increasingly complex texts available for young readers. That one of the students expressed a fear of 'being judged' if caught reading a children's book highlights the tensions that exist between some student teachers' pre-existing assumptions about children's books – the "folk theories" mentioned above (Carrington & Luke, 1997) and the fact that there are so many high quality texts for children available.

But, as the comment "I would probably be very surprised if I tried" conveys, there is an expectation of learning still to come, while the words of the student teacher who read for enjoyment with one eye on her developing teaching practice shows that such learning is already happening. As the last section of this paper outlines, these responses have been used to inform the teaching and learning of children's literature at university level, a project that is on-going. Before that, the results of the survey's last question are described.

4.10 Q10. How Do You Rate your Knowledge of Children's Literature?

To answer this question, student teachers had to select from one of the following answers;

1. Very good

2. Good

3. Satisfactory

4. Patchy

5. Needs work.

Overall, across both groups, nobody rated their knowledge of children's literature as 'very good', while 15% of Group A and 20% of Group B considered their knowledge as 'good'. For both groups, the individual label that attracted the most self-ratings was "satisfactory" (40% of Group A and 34% of Group B), conveying a sense that these respondents were content with their level of knowledge. The next highest response was 'patchy', with 34% from Group A and 30% from Group B, while the group with the smallest numbers of ratings overall belonged to 'needs work', with 11% and 16 % from Groups A and B respectively.

These final self-evaluations are interesting when considered against the survey's headline findings, including the fact that most student teachers could not name a children's poet or picturebook author/illustrator, and few very student teachers saw reading children's literature as relevant to their lives. Yet many of the respondents chose to rate their knowledge of children's literature as either 'satisfactory' or 'patchy'. While 'patchy' suggests a recognition of uneven or threadbare coverage

when it comes to knowledge of children's literature, the label 'satisfactory' conveys a sense of 'ample sufficiency' – in other words, a level of knowledge that is 'just enough.'

> **Overall, most students did not view their knowledge of children's literature as particularly problematic. Such a perspective makes sense when considered holistically, for it is unlikely that student teachers would be able to necessarily recognise the gaps in their knowledge when they were not yet aware of what else was possible.**

Overall, most students did not view their knowledge of children's literature as particularly problematic. Such a perspective makes sense when considered holistically, for it is unlikely that student teachers would be able to necessarily recognise the gaps in their knowledge when they were not yet aware of what else was possible. Indeed, to blame the students for lacking knowledge would be to take a deficit approach and would also disregard the systemic and socio-cultural conditions that have shaped their experiences of, and exposure to, children's literature, including at school and university.

5. Next Steps, Conclusions and Implications: Putting the Findings into Practice

The picture of student teachers' knowledge about children's literature that emerged from the survey data is both interesting and challenging. While it is important to acknowledge the limits of this project's sample size, it is interesting to note the similarities in results across the two years and the points in common with Cremin et al's (2008) study. In particular, it is interesting to note the continued dominance of a small group of fiction authors and the lack of diversity therein. The student teachers' limited knowledge of poetry and picturebooks is concerning, but – again - interesting as it also suggests that more work needs to be done to understand why such imbalances exist. Looking ahead, it will be fascinating to see what commonalities can be traced from the Scottish data to students on ITE programmes in Sydney, Australia and Galicia, Spain, where the survey is also being used.

The curriculum of initial teacher education programmes is already a crowded and contested space but when used as an audit tool, the questionnaire provided a clear rationale for a closer focus on children's literature within the undergraduate literacy course, starting with 3rd year, where curricular time was already allocated. Inspired by what we knew about good literacy teaching, we aspired to create a children's literature-rich environment within our institution. For example:

- We created a children's literature book-browsing and borrowing library within our building; a small but colourful space for the students to talk about books, to share ideas and to take books home. Inspired by the look and feel of many children's libraries, there are comfy chairs and

squashy stools; wooden book boxes full of picturebooks that invite rummaging, tall shelves for novels and wall displays that showcase the students' work around texts for children.

- We started up lunchtime book clubs, including some that shadowed children's book awards. These successfully moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic,

- We developed seminars on Reading for Pleasure pedagogies (Cremin et al., 2014) that tasked student teachers with engaging with creative activities that explored their own identities as readers, including a River of Reading (Cliff Hodges, 2010).

- We based a lecture around the survey results to help highlight the significance of children's literature, the gaps in the students' existing knowledge and to direct them towards some wonderful poets, picturebook authors and illustrators.

- We squeezed even more children's literature into our teaching and encouraged our student teachers to write reflectively about their own development as Reading Teachers (Cremin et al., 2014), a facet of this project that will be discussed in subsequent publications.

Through this approach, we started to weave together the "social fabric of new reading communities" (Cremin et al., 2014, p.154) in which we initiated explorations of what reading 'looks like' in the 21st century, modelled reading behaviours, stimulated the development of student teachers' knowledge of children's literature and created online and in-person spaces for students to talk about children's texts and reading. By doing so, we also aimed to make visible the socially-constructed nature of such reading communities and the sorts of work that underpins them.

Writing about the concept of the literate habitus, Carrington and Luke (1997) have noted that "each individual's literate practices reflect his or her cultural and social capital resources and contribute to the further development of habitus and subsequent life trajectory across fields" (p104). Following this, the survey results can be recognised as expressions of the student teachers' literate identities. Given the indeterminate status of children's literature within the Scottish school curriculum and initial teacher education, it is possible to begin to understand why so many student teachers within this project did not connect or identify with children's literature in the questionnaire and why the range of knowledge was so limited in cultural terms. To return to Esteban-Guitart and Moll's (2014) "funds of identity" concept, the challenge for teacher educators becomes how to meaningfully embed knowledge and understandings about the rich diversity of children's literature in such a way that it can become part of a student teacher's literate identity and therefore an integral part of their future practice.

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