

Reading Teachers: what's occurring over the bridge?

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In this article Jo Bowers and Simon Fisher, share how they have supported teachers' knowledge of children's literature set in Wales by authors and illustrators living in Wales within the Open University/UKLA Teachers' Reading Groups in Wales.

We have both run an Open University/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group in Wales for the last two years: Jo in Cardiff, South Wales and Simon in Wrexham, North Wales. One of the focuses of Teachers' Reading Groups is to support and widen teachers' subject knowledge of children's literature (Cremin *et al.*, 2008). Within the groups in Wales, we wanted to ensure that we included children's literature set in Wales, or written by authors based in Wales, to encourage and inspire teachers to use these within their classrooms and wider reading communities back in school.

The UKLA Teachers as Readers (TaRs) research findings supported us in this aim because knowledge of children's literature and other texts; Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach and developing reading communities, are essential for fostering children's reading for pleasure (Cremin *et al.* 2014). In the context of Wales, the new curriculum here has a renewed focus on literature firing the imagination and inspiring creativity. As part of this, children are 'encouraged to experience and respond to literature that gives them insight into the culture, people and history of Wales as well as the wider world' (Welsh Government, 2019). In other words, teachers should be providing opportunities to 'reflect the reality' of children in Wales.

At the start of the year, it was clear that children's knowledge of texts by Welsh authors or with a Welsh setting was limited. Some were aware that Roald Dahl had a Welsh connection due to work done in a previous class, but even where they had read a book by a Welsh author, they had not made the connection to Wales. Making these connections was key to raising the profile.

Our aims, with this focus in mind, was for the teachers in our groups to:

- be inspired by books set in Wales and by authors writing in Wales
- increase their own personal book knowledge
- see the value of having recognisable locations in books that children can relate to
- share their new book knowledge with the pupils in their classrooms and school

- be more aware of a Wales-based community of authors, illustrators and publishers.

What we did

Simon wrote to all the Welsh publishers and asked if they would donate books to each of the OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Group in Wales. He then distributed these amongst each of the groups. Each group received a box of books with a range of novels, picture books and bi-lingual books. These became part of our library of books to share, loan out and discuss with each other during the sessions (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Books from Welsh publishers and authors

As we also shared our activity widely on Twitter, authors nearby got in touch to offer to come to the group to talk and discuss their books with the group. Nicola Davies came to the first Cardiff Session and totally inspired the group talking

about her books and the reasons behind writing some of them. She also did a wonderful Q&A with the group. The new Children's Laureate for Wales, Eloise Williams (Figure 2) also came to the groups during the second year we ran the group. By this time, many of the teachers had already read Eloise's books and so were keen to ask questions relating to the texts during her visit and feedback on their pupil responses too.



Figure 2: Eloise Williams, Children's Laureate for Wales with pupils.

Engaging with the wider book community across Wales

Focusing on books set in Wales and by Welsh authors has given an identity to our groups and enabled us to develop a reading community across Wales with organisations such as the Welsh Books Council, Booktrust Cymru and Literature Wales to support teachers developing their reading for pleasure community in their school.

Classes have taken part in the shadowing of the Tir Na nOg Award – getting involved in whole school discussions about the merits of each book, choosing favourites and recommending to others (Figure 6).

Author visits from both the Tir Na nOg shortlisted authors, Catherine Fisher, and from Children's Laureate Wales, Eloise Williams, have been both rich and inspiring. They have allowed the class to focus on the work of a prominent and successful Welsh writer. These inspirational visits gave real encouragement to the children - allowing them to be seen as future authors and confirming the value of their reading habits.



Figure 3: A selection of recent shortlisted books from the Tir Na nOg Award

Impact on teachers and their classroom practice

The impact of bringing in books written by authors based in Wales and books with a Welsh setting has been positive in a number of ways. The teachers all said it has really widened their knowledge of children's literature. They have expressed how much they have enjoyed reading books set near where the children in their class live places they have visited on holiday or have relatives living. They also said that meeting and listening to some of the authors enriched their practice as it enabled them to focus on one author in depth in the classroom.

'There is no doubt that the Teachers as Readers Group improved by knowledge of books from Wales and hence my ability to recommend books to my class.' Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

'It's been really interesting to see all the beautiful books that I never knew about. It makes me slightly ashamed that I was ignorant of them but I am delighted to know them now!' Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

'I've found some excellent quality books that I can recommend to my class.' Wrexham OU/UKLA participant 2018-2019

'When thinking about the new curriculum, providing our children with rich literary experiences that give an insight into the culture, people and history of Wales as well as giving children a greater sense of identity, will be even more paramount. Our spotlight on Wales in books is supporting our literary choices within schools to deliver this.' Claire, Cardiff OU/UKLA 2018-2020

'The children in my book club were instantly interested when I told them I had some books by Welsh authors with Welsh settings.' Gethin, Cardiff OU/UKLA 2018-2020

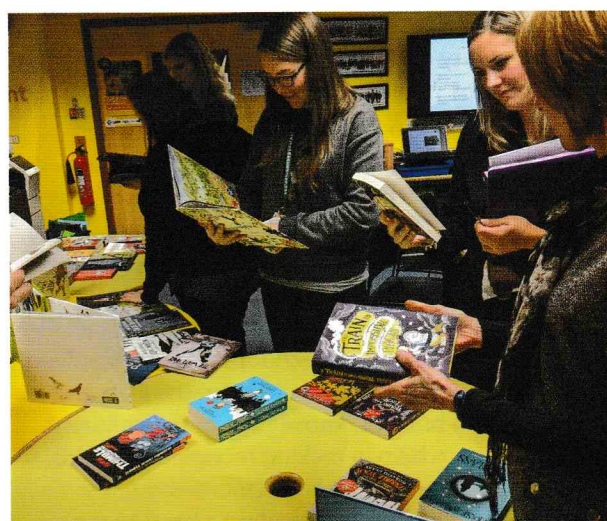


Figure 4: Teachers book browsing at the OURfP Teacher Book Group.

Finding out about books based in Wales with a class of 8—9 year-olds: Simon Fisher

To introduce children to books from Wales we used many of the strategies and examples of practice written by teachers and available on the Open University RfP website. Book

Blankets and Reading Cafes are a great way to introduce children to new authors and books. Reading Cafes allowed the children to consider whether the menu of books they were currently reading was nutritional and balanced.

There is a huge amount to be said about just having the books available and making time for children to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Keeping track of what is popular can direct conversations and asking children to make a 'reading pledge' to read specific texts gave direction and purpose to their reading in terms of the aims of this project (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Children have time to explore and make choices

We have also held extra-curricular opportunities for pupils to engage with texts from Wales. Our book clubs have read *Charlie Bone*, *The Clockwork Crow*, *The Snow Spider* and *The Secret Dragon*. What has been interesting about all of these books is that they have been quite different reading matter to what the children are used to experiencing. *The Snow Spider* by Jenny Nimmo was a revelation because of the conversations that opened up during reading. Whilst on the surface it is a book about magic, a spider friend and a strange grandmother, the children were guided to look deeper and see the themes of loss, anger, and blame. They identified with the Welsh community depicted in the story and the isolation of such communities. It helps, of course, that *The Snow Spider* is an absolute top-quality classic in the Welsh canon.

'I can't believe I've not read this before.' Pupil, age 8.

This inspired a 'recommendation board' in class for children to share books that had made an impression. Pupils are also encouraged to leave a post-it note inside a book if they have particularly enjoyed it. School staff have involved themselves too and it is a great way to learn the likes and dislikes of pupils and build up knowledge of the children's reading preferences to help in making recommendations. Equally, the children have also learned more about my reading habits and will often recommend a book to me. These teacher-to-pupil, pupil-to-teacher, pupil-to-pupil recommendations are now a fulfilling cornerstone to our reading classroom. "Gradually two-way reciprocal recommendations and 'books in common' between teachers and children developed. These prompted discussions and life connections and enabled new relationships to begin." (Cremin, 2019)

One strategy we used was to take every opportunity to highlight, linking with themes and topics. For example, during our 'Revolution' topic, we looked at environmental activists around the world, inspired by *Earth Heroes*, a book by Monmouthshire based author and adventurer Lily Dyu. In 'Awe and Wonder', we studied weird and wonderful fantasy locations and used Penarth author PG Bell's *Train to Impossible Places* as a class reader.

We have engaged with reading competitions and activities that allow the pupils space to further explore and extend their knowledge – such as the #WeLoveLibraries campaign. Children made a short video to explain why libraries were important to them – Literature Wales championed their work.

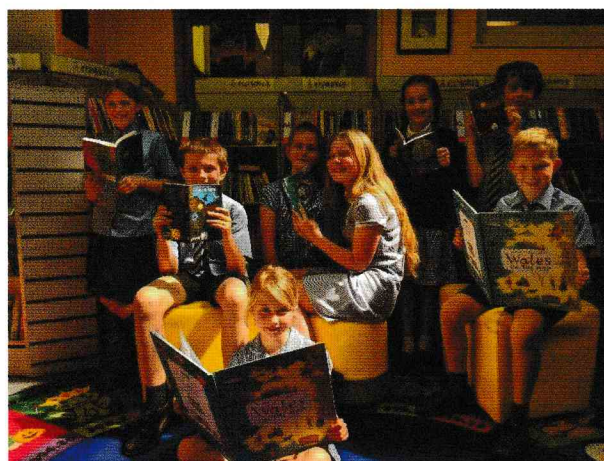


Figure 6: Shadowing the Tir na n-Og Award 2019

Engaging with writers on Twitter has shown the pupils that authors are real people – they have been able to question and challenge authors and illustrators as well as give their support and celebrate the books.

Exploring the settings of books from Wales allows us to make connections (to the books and between the books) and supports our ability to improve knowledge of books from Wales. The Tir na n-Og Award Shadowing Scheme is a great starting place for this (Figure 6). Teachers and children can connect to books and locations that have personal relevance to them and look at others that might improve their cultural and historical knowledge.



Figure 7: Display of books by Welsh authors

Conclusion and reflections

Bringing in children's books set in Wales, written and illustrated by authors and illustrators in Wales (Figures 7 and 8), and published in Wales has been a valuable part of the books discussions within our groups. It became clear to us as group leaders that if teachers are not knowledgeable about the authors and publishers within Wales then children will not be experiencing them - and it has become a real focus and challenge of all the OU/UKLA groups in Wales to raise awareness.

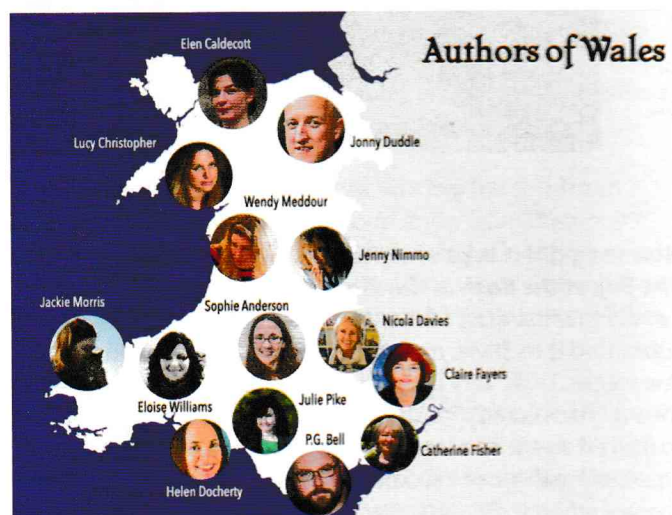


Figure 8: Map of Wales featuring some of the authors and illustrators living in Wales.

Online resources

Open University RfP website:

www.researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-forpleasure

Tir Na nOg 2019 Shortlisted Book resources for teachers:

www.cllc.org.uk/gwasanaethau-services/plant-children/gwobrau-tir-na-n-og

Family Bookworms:

www.familybookworms.wales

Children's books

Dyu, L. (2019) *Earth Heroes*, Nosy Crow.

ISBN 9781788008525

Bell, P.G. *Train to Impossible Places*, Usborne Publishing.

ISBN 9781474957410

Davies, N. (2017) *King of the Sky*, Walker Books.

ISBN 1406348619

Nimmo, J. (2009) *Charlie Bone and the Red Knight*, Egmont Children's Books.

ISBN 9781405280990

Fayers, C. (2019) *Storm Hound*, Macmillan Children's Books.

ISBN 9781509895045

Fisher, C. (2018) *The Clockwork Crow*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 9781910080849

Fisher, C. (2019) *The Velvet Fox*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 9781913102081

Meek, M. & Leblond, V. (2018) *Wales on the Map*, Rily Publications.

ISBN 9781849670555

Nimmo, J. (2004) *The Snow Spider*, Egmont Children's Books.

ISBN 9781405211383

Clarke, E. (2019) *The Secret Dragon*, Puffin Books.

ISBN 9780241360514

Day, S. (2019) *Max Kowalski Didn't Mean It*, Puffin Books

ISBN 9780241351390

Weatherill, C. (2019) *Where the Magic Hides*, Gomer.

ISBN 1785622994

Williams, E. (2018) *Seaglass*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 9781910080801

Williams, E. (2017) *Gaslight*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 9781910080542

Williams, E. (2020) *Wilde*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 1913102181

Williams, E. (2011) *Elen's Island*, Firefly Press.

ISBN 9781910080801

Gemin, G.R. (2016) *Sweet Pizza*, Nosy Crow.

ISBN 9780857636300

Gemin, G.R. (2014) *Cow Girl*, Nosy Crow.

ISBN 0857632817

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Acknowledgements

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