Why study about children's literature?

This piece of research is concerned with what a group of second year undergraduate students on an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) degree course know about children's literature and whether they believe it to be an important subject to study. This has been an area of interest for some time since a regular group activity that is undertaken as part of recruitment for the ECEC course asks potential students to rank twelve statements that relate to desirable qualities for those working with children. One of these is 'a love of books' and is consistently placed in either eleventh or twelfth place. Whilst the other statements are all relevant, the question arises as to why these adults do not give books a higher priority. An overall lack of interest in personal reading for pleasure continues to be anecdotally evident once students begin the course and continues throughout. The rationale for undertaking this piece of research is based around the well- established idea that reading has the power to transform lives. Experiencing a range of books opens readers of all ages to new worlds that are enriching and exciting, building imagination, helping us to relate to others and to the world around us. Although this is not a vocational course, links to practice are made throughout and many students go on to become teachers and other practitioners working with children and their families in a range of settings. In order to convey the importance of books and reading for pleasure to children, it seems relevant to establish how these students view the subject prior to studying a specialist module about children's literature. The research aims to find out whether these views could be further stimulated and challenged as a result of studying the subject as an optional module over a period of twelve weeks.

Is children's literature important?

We all learn to be readers through the kind of books we first experience in our childhood, whether it be at home or at school and adults also 'teach what we think reading is' through the kind of texts we provide for children (Meek 1992: 182). This contributes to how we learn to understand the wider world and Spufford (2002: 10) describes how his childhood was 'enriched by the knowledge that their own particular life only occupied one little space in a much bigger world of possibilities.' The books that children learn to enjoy from an early age can clearly shape later attitudes to reading and determine whether this is largely regarded as a sometimes difficult chore or a pleasure. The National Literacy Trust (2006:5) defines reading for pleasure as that which 'we to do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading'. So how do children develop the ability to do this and what part do adults play? Many children first experience looking at books in their home environment and develop a positive disposition towards reading for pleasure as part of this. Whitehead, 2010:120) points out that these early encounters with books are often associated with warmth, embraces and total security that sets a pattern for the enjoyment of reading in the future. This seems desirable since, reading for pleasure can also help to combat isolation, help develop confidence, self-esteem and promotes enjoyment which contributes to long term well-being. These early experiences with books also contribute to what the child brings to the skilled task of reading, often described as 'reading readiness. Clark (2014: 13) points out that many children are already fluent readers when they start formal schooling and that this 'does not necessitate a minute analysis of each aspect of each

letter or word but only sufficient to extract meaning from the printed page'. Whether or not this happens in the home, early reading needs to be an equally positive experience in an education setting.

The Bullock Report (Department for Education(DfE), 1975) explains that ' the teacher should have an extensive knowledge of fiction appropriate for the various needs and levels of reading ability of his (sic) pupils. 'Chambers (2011: 21) emphasises the potential power of what he describes as 'the enabling adult' in conveying a passion for books to children and strongly emphasises the need for an up-to-date, enthusiastic working knowledge of children's literature in order to make informed choices and recommendations. He explains that ' reading is both an art and a craft- that you only know from experience and can only be passed on by those who've learned them by experience'. Wyse et al (20131:44) also suggest that teachers, and by implication, all those who work with children, need to read 'widely and analytically' in order to make informed judgements about the books they use. It is an advantage if adults begin their training with a wide knowledge of children's literature since Collins and Safford (2008:419) point out that few training institutions provide any courses about the subject and that an interest in this 'now depends on the individual interests of teachers and policies of schools.' This is supported by research which collected responses from 1,200 primary teachers from eleven Local Authorities in England (Cremin et al, 2008) indicating that teachers' knowledge of children's literature is severely limited.

The same concern may apply to those working with the youngest children in schools and other EY education settings since Schmidt (2012:7) suggests that they ' are in the privileged position of being able to push the boundaries for children by offering them a taste of what they might not yet have encountered…'. and will then become advocates for reading who will ' willingly invest in the contagious enthusiasm of another reader(Nicholson, 2008: 5).Whitehead (2010:122) believes that EY practitioners have a particular advantage when working with young children because ' there is less discernible threat or pressure linked with the cultural prestige of reading' at this time. This may be true to come extent, but other pressures are now in the mix whereby the skill of decoding print is increasingly prioritised and encouraged before the enjoyment of books. Whilst statutory curriculum guidance for EY practitioners briefly endorses the importance of providing a 'wide range of reading materials (books, poems and other written materials) to ignite their interest' (DfE,)i, 2014;8). The specific areas of learning in relation to reading do not mention books at all and focus on decoding skills. The professional standards to achieve EY Teacher status distil the requirement further with no mention of books at all, merely requiring practitioners to: 'demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics in the teaching of early reading' (DfE, ii, 2014: 3.4). In practice, the range of books presented to children is largely dependent on the choices made by the individual practitioners who work in particular educational settings. The extent to which these choices are shaped by the practitioner's own personal reading history, informed by positive early reading experiences and later professional experiences is important to understand, as is the fact that their initial and on-going training will have helped to determine their view of the role books should play in the child's educational experience. Knowledge and understanding of a range of children's books is very helpful here as Goodwin (2008: 6) suggests that 'it is impossible to judge the quality of a book without reading it – and even then personal opinion and taste will have a great

deal with any judgement.' She warns against relying on others' opinions and recommends that practitioners develop a critical stance through reading widely.

How does children's literature fit into the programme?

The ECEC course at Newman University is designed to explore theory relating to a number of related academic disciplines eg psychology and sociology. Traditionally, the subject of children's literature on the course has been linked to helping students to understand the development of language, literacy and communication, and to make potential links with relevant curriculum areas. More recently, an exploration of children's books across several modules has been used to also demonstrate how this literature is historically and culturally located; subject to ideology and market forces; representative of a range of childhood and family discourses; and as a force for influencing attitudes about social issues. It has been presented to students as challenging and complex for children of all ages and adults and consequently as a viable subject for academic research at undergraduate and post graduate level. For example, in the second semester of the first year, a mandatory module, 'Constructs of childhood', uses a variety of recommended children's books to explore how childhood is socially constructed. The students are then encouraged to read several of these texts by providing multiple copies available to borrow. References are made to these examples throughout the module and there are additional opportunities to reflect on them in regular book discussion groups. The module assignment requires the students to write an essay using one of these texts, or another by negotiation, as a vehicle for discussing how childhood is socially constructed.

All the modules undertaken in the first year of the course are mandatory, however, second year students can then select one optional modules from a choice of five more specialist interests. For the first time, 'Children's Literature' has been added to the list of options. Many of the students who chose this module made reference to enjoying 'Constructs of childhood' that they had studied and enjoyed in the first year. This one builds on the same range of texts alongside many others to explore definitions of the subject and links between theory and practice. It particularly focuses on the importance of the picture book in terms of challenging readers of all ages as, despite their importance as educational and cultural artefacts, some children do not see many picture books until they experience them outside the home in various educational settings. Students are also introduced to some traditional classic texts *The Secret Garden (*Hodgson- Burnett, 1911). These are explored with reference to the historical development of the genre and how this continues to be socially constructed in terms of what is deemed 'suitable' for young readers at particular times in

history. The module includes discussion about how some texts achieve classic status whilst others fall out of favour and consequently lose popularity. Students are encouraged to revisit books that they have read as children and reflect on how these are viewed differently from an adult perspective. They also explore some examples of social realism eg: *The Illustrated Mum* (Wilson, 2001); *Noughts and Crosses* (Blackman, 2002) and *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo, 2000). These are discussed in terms of reinforcing or challenging particular stereotypes as well as often covering controversial content. The assignment provides the opportunity to write an essay from a wide range of titles that focus on particular aspects of the course in order to encourage in depth research and reading.

Methodology

This piece of research used a case study approach situated within an interpretative paradigm in order to 'understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors' and thereby 'provides a unique example of real people in real situations' (Cohen et al, 2000:181). It recognised that these individual interpretations are also powerfully influenced by historical, social and cultural context (Bassey, 1999; Dressman, 2008). As stated by Giddens (1993:168), 'Society is not concerned with a pre-given universe of objects but with one which is constituted or produced by the active doing of subjects.' In other words each individual, including the researcher, also influences history and culture to some extent by virtue of their lived experiences and professional perspectives. Radnor (2001:21) describes the role of an interpretive researcher as being to look at 'meanings and experiences of the people who function in the cultural web...'

At the same time, it is important to consider the reflexive nature of interpretative research that recognises variables such as the subjectivity and self-awareness of both the researcher and those being researched are of significance (Denscombe, 2000; Gilbert, 2008). It was necessary to recognize the emotional relationship invested in the research in terms of both the subject matter and the way it would contribute to the final analysis. There was an explicit agenda in carrying out the research in terms of providing a justification for teaching the subject of children's literature alongside a commitment to convey the importance of enthusing students and children to read for pleasure. The student participants' perspectives varied but all were motivated to achieve a pass mark in their assignments for the module and perhaps saw participation in the research as a way to achieve this.

The rationale for the research was based around a personal and professional interest in the subject of children's literature. Whilst the knowledge of the researcher in this study is based

on considerable experience of working with children's books in EY settings over a period of more than twenty years, the most recent was fourteen years ago. As Griffiths (1998) points out, a long period away from practice means that claims to be an 'insider' are questionable, as in this case, EY practice has changed in terms of pedagogy, policy and curriculum guidance. As already discussed, the emphasis on using books with young children to facilitate a love of reading alongside many changes to the teaching of reading in general continue to be influenced by developments in research alongside changes to government policies. It is likely that this researcher's perspective has also shifted because of working in a Higher Education context and therefore taking a more theoretical approach to the subject. Despite this, Stake (2000) places great value on the experiential professional knowledge of the researcher in contributing to the generalization of findings from case studies. Radnor (2001: 30) quotes Glesne and Peshkin (1992:104) who acknowledge the advantage of personal experiential knowledge when undertaking research as 'the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build.'

All twenty three students enrolled on the 'Children's Literature' module were invited to participate in the research. The resulting total sample for the questionnaires consisted of nineteen, several of whom were part time mature students. Mason (1996:79) suggests that all research methods should be designed to help answer the research questions and in this way contribute to 'solving parts of the puzzle.' In this way, the particular views of these participants gained through questionnaires and of focus groups hoped to provide a meaningful snapshot of how children's literature is viewed. As already discussed, the first year of the course seeks to challenge and shift this relative lack of priority so that second year students may be expected to have a more positive disposition towards reading for pleasure, particularly if they have chosen to study an optional module about children's literature. Although the short questionnaire asked several questions relating to the subject , its key purpose was to establish whether students thought that children's literature was important, and if so why. Another related question was to establish whether they could see potential links with working with children, young people and their families.

Establishing a baseline

As a starting point for this piece of research, it was useful to find out the extent of the students' knowledge about children's literature as a baseline at the beginning of the module through the use of a short questionnaire. Part of this invited them to participate in a later series of focus groups to discuss how this may be affected by the subsequent twelve teaching weeks. The questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the first session with a written statement: *This information will help to establish your existing knowledge about children's literature and thereby contribute towards planning the subsequent content of the module.* This was not an unusual request since individual questionnaires are sometimes given at the beginning of a module to establish a starting point as part of planning for the content for subsequent sessions. Despite their presumed interest in the subject

demonstrated by their module choice, several students only attempted very brief one word responses to the questions as demonstrated in tables 1- 5.

Table 1: ***Is it important to know about children's literature?***

'Yes' with brief comment: *Benefits for children:* ***6*** *eg 'Helps cognitive and language development and learning right from wrong'* *Benefits for practitioners:* ***9*** *eg 'understanding diverse backgrounds and understanding children better'; 'the power of literature and its effects on children'; ' help children to explore their own imaginations and ultimately give ideas about what they want to see eventually for their own lives' ' to give ideas about potentially good books to include in the setting'; ' helping them with their identity and helping them to relate with others'* *Own development:* ***2*** *eg 'it allows you to become aware of the authors and the themes they base their books around';' You as an adult can understand the messages that books and their authors are trying to convey'* *Enjoyment or pleasure:* ***2*** *eg 'pass on the fun of reading children's books'*

The wide potential benefits of selecting this optional module had been pointed out to students at the end of the first year, so it was interesting to observe from these written responses that the emphasis was on practice as opposed to their own development. The fact that only two commented briefly with regard to enjoyment or pleasure also provided a challenge for the design of the subsequent module content.

Table 2: ***Are there potential links to working with children, young people and families?***

Not answered: ***1*** *Don't know:* ***2*** *'Yes':* ***4*** *'Yes' with brief comment:* ***12*** *Own development* *eg 'Stories romanticise families so I think it can be linked to how families interact and behave in comparison to books'* *Benefits as practitioner:* *eg 'Books can be used to help people understand many areas in their lives. Young children are intrigued by books and books can be a learning curve for everyone'; 'These messages can impress upon children positively and negatively'; 'A knowledge of books can help children and families to understand situations within society'; 'The children can gain a sense of belonging if they feel they don't fit in'; 'Identifying with characters'; 'Developing children's imagination'; 'We are able to give examples of books that families can read together'; ' 'Teaching parents about good storytelling'*

The relative lack of knowledge volunteered about the subject and the links that could be made between theory and practice was surprising in view of the fact that they had already completed modules about child development; equality and inclusion; working with families and the social construction of childhood as part of the course. Six students were unable to

offer any reflection at all with regard to potential links. There were also negative responses to other questions (see table 3).

Table 3: Negative responses to other questions

Have you studied anything about this subject before? Please give brief details *No* ***4***
Who is the Children's Laureate and what do they do? *Don't know* ***14***
Do you have any favourite children's picture books? Please name a maximum of three *No picture books or authors mentioned at all:* ***9***
Do you have any other favourite children's books? Please name a maximum of three *No books or authors mentioned at all:* ***3***

The responses to these questions were rather limited overall particularly as they had all studied the first year module: 'Constructs of childhood', which had used children's books as a lens for analysing the experience of childhood. Four did not refer to this prior knowledge at all. The lack of awareness of the Children's Laureate by the majority may say something about the lack of publicity about the role, although all students had been alerted to the person in post when they began the course. The number of students who were unable to name any book titles at all was also very low although perhaps the inclusion of the word 'favourite' was problematic for some. There was evident confusion with the definition of a picture book at this stage of the research as several participants put these in 'other' category. For this reason, the results have been merged and those book titles, authors and illustrator named were mostly very familiar (see table 4):

Table 4: Do you have any favourite children's picture books/ other children's books?

18 *named at least one : Going on a Bear Hunt x2; The Gruffalo x2;* *The Tiger who came to Tea; Charlie and Lola; Peter Rabbit; Winnie the Pooh; The Hungry Caterpillar; The Snowman; Dear Zoo; The Stick Man; Tin Tin; The Witches; Fantastic Mr Fox; The Illustrated Mum; Goodnight Mr Tom; The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe; Malory Towers; The Railway Children; Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*
13 *also named at least one author/ illustrator: Roald Dahl x3; Jacqueline Wilson x2;* *Lauren Child; Beatrix Potter; Julia Donaldson; Disney; C.S. Lewis; Enid Blyton; Nick Sharatt and C. Maxwell*

The range of books cited was narrow although it is reasonable to assume that the participants are likely to choose books by more prominent authors and illustrators in response to factors including nostalgia; their own experiences at school as children and as practitioners; and also successful marketing. Graham (2008:71) reflects that 'Publishers know that an illustrator's personal and identifiable style helps establish the public identification and loyalty which is important for sales.' This was discussed by Cremin et al (2008) also noted that the work of someone like Quentin Blake, who has a long history of illustration which includes a close collaboration with Roald Dahl, is very well known whilst more recent illustrators of picture books are rarely mentioned in their survey of teacher responses.

What did the focus groups demonstrate?

Although seven students initially volunteered for the next stage of the research when invited at the beginning of the module, the eventual focus group sample at the end of the twelve weeks consisted of four students in groups of two. This method was chosen in order to build upon the information gathered through the initial questionnaires to encourage more in depth debate and reflection about the subject. Although the dynamics of a focus group are always unpredictable, it seemed that this research method could facilitate potentially rich content. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013: 70) explain that this research approach benefits from a number of prompts from the researcher that are 'open ended and that allow participants to *take over* (italics in original) discussions.' In order to facilitate this depth of response, the participants were provided with optional prompt questions and left to discuss without the influence of the researcher in the room. They had all agreed to be video recorded which had some influence on the initial stages of the conversations in terms of eliciting a rather formal performance. However, as they became used to the camera they all relaxed. The resulting two separate conversations were loosely based on the written prompts and as the participants gained confidence, they talked very freely about how the experience of the module had made them think about children's literature in a different way.

On analysis of the focus group data it was soon evident that these four students were now able to discuss the importance of children's literature in considerable depth. Their conversations drew on their own experience as students observing practice as part of a recent placement module and one as a practitioner. Three of these participants had children and so discussed their own role as parents. They also explored the subject from a personal perspective that focussed on their own changed perceptions as a result of studying the module.

The practitioner perspective

The module had made some explicit links to practice although the pedagogical aspects of children's literature were not over- elaborated as this would have given it a very different emphasis. However, it was expected that students would be able to make links to theory and to look at the ways in which curriculum guidance gave status to the subject, or not.

Nadina is a part time mature student and has past and on-going experience as a Teaching Assistant with children between the ages of four and eight. She talked about her positive childhood memories of listening to stories at school:

At the end of the day we were read to… it used to bring up this thirst to want to go home and read so I remember enjoying it

She went on to reflect on how her experience of practice is now different:

I realised especially going into schools and working as a TA that children are not read to anymore… the higher they get the less they are read to.

This concern was echoed by Kelly, a full time mature student, who felt that there was insufficient emphasis in the curriculum about reading for pleasure:

We're going to grow up with a generation of children who don't read…

This concern led to some discussion with Kiran, a younger full time student, about the need for individual practitioners to give status to books in the setting. She reflected on some positive experiences whilst on placement

The teacher that we had in the setting, she was quite passionate about books … it's not even about being passionate it's about providing the children with opportunities…

Despite this, she went on to describe how this teacher had been replaced by another that appeared to lack this dimension in her practice. Ashleigh, another full time mature student, had also seen some very good practice where regular reading of stories was given priority, opportunities for extra reading were seized and felt that this was down to effective, flexible classroom management:

It just depends on how the teacher manages the time

Reference was made to Aidan Chambers' book which most students bought as a result of his inspirational module session as a visiting speaker:

He is brilliant because he is asking the adult, the enabling adult to think about their experience of literature as a child

He had used *Where the Wild Things are by* Maurice Sendak with the whole group which he used as an example of using a picture book to inspire book related talk. Kelly reflected positively on this experience and how she now took more time to look at picture books with children:

I love it how intense you can make the turn of the page- you can put as much tension on it as you want.

Ashleigh reflected on the responsibility that she now felt about introducing children to books:

The practitioner has to be a literate practitioner

As a result of studying the subject, Kiran explained that she was now much more likely to encourage children to read and that reading for enjoyment was not necessarily age related:

> *We're limiting the child's ability – some children do understand intense books. It's important that children get a positive experience of children's literature- if you give them a negative experience early they won't want to read.*

The parent/ family perspective

Three of the participants had their own children and it seemed that the study of children's literature had made them think more about why books were important. Kelly was now more aware of what her children contributed to the reading experience that helped her enjoy books more fully:

> *We're that busy reading the words- the children read the pictures as well and get a different meaning so when me and my kids read Rosie's Walk, it was them that pointed out there was a different story going on in the pictures. I just read the words and briefly looked at the pictures- at the end of the story we had two different versions*

Despite concerns about a lack of emphasis in the statutory curriculum, she expressed positive views about their school's attitudes to books

My children's school is good – teachers push books

Ashleigh reflected on how her eight year old twins, both avid readers taught her about books she didn't know about:

They tell me what books are about and give me a little review of what they have read

Nadina explained that she now felt well equipped and enthusiastic about using children's books to help build a new parental relationship:

> *I found this module useful as a 'to be' mother to an eight year old step daughter.. I'm thinking about how I am going to help her understand children's literature and the importance of it. I mean children's literature opened up a whole new world of imagination…*

They went on to speculate on how sharing books with one's own children could be an on-going common interest providing opportunities for discussion and debate as well as fostering a secure relationship.

The adult student perspective

The recognition of changed perceptions about children's literature was clearly expressed by all of these students. Kelly felt that she now looked at children's books very differently:

It changed my perspective as a whole …I wouldn't have thought about reading a children's book until doing this module. I've really enjoyed reading children's books… I really enjoyed Goodnight Mr Tom and The Illustrated Mum- they were fantastic… A year ago if someone had said to me do you want to read children's books, I'd have been like… what?

Kiran also felt that the module had given her the opportunity to read a range of texts:

To be honest I didn't give children's books that much importance -maybe I should have…they're not books that I would pick up if I was not doing this module, like Skellig I wouldn't have picked up… and a few that I wouldn't have touched. I'm glad I did because I can see how authors portray meanings and views in a different way.

Although the students had been encouraged to read all the books discussed throughout the module, Kelly stated that she had hated *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and found it 'mentally traumatic' and went on to explain that individual tastes were valid:

People have different views – I liked The Railway Children but The Secret Garden bored me to death, whereas Lisa loved it. I tried to read it five or six times and gave up half way through… it just didn't interest me at all.

Goodwin (2008:7) highlights the importance of being confident about book selection and the need for all those working with children to 'read the books rather than be at the mercy of others' opinions.' Hopefully the experience of reading a variety of books and discussing them with peers would in turn help them to make discerning choices as practitioners. As Ashleigh reflected:

We need to read more…. What kind of books would I like in my library so the kids would be reading what I like ?

The most noticeable change experienced as a result of studying this module was a better understanding of the complexity of picture books. Ashleigh explained that:

I had never looked at a picture book in the same way as I do now. So the people at the charity shop know me now because I go through the picture books and they probably think I have a massive crèche of children!

Kiran made several references to what she had learnt by reading and researching about picture books for the assignment essay:

Each time you read a book you read it from a different perspective… the pictures and words work together… without the pictures maybe the story would be different.

She reflected on her reaction to experiencing *Granpa* by John Burningham which had been read as a group in one of the module sessions:

At the end the chair was empty and we were all thinking about where he had gone. I was looking more at the pictures than the words – I was blocking them off.

Ashleigh and Nadina talked about the impact of Lauren Child's books as an example of their changed attitude to picture books:

A *I've always loved Charlie and Lola but I didn't understand the lines and the squiggles.*

N *I think Lauren Child is phenomenal as an author and illustrator. Once I read 'Who's afraid of the Big Bad Book', whoa – that is a brilliant book. I was blown over… what she does is very clever as she uses past stories like Cinderella so she takes a theme or a story to tell a story… some children came to our house a couple of weeks ago and they were just running riot in my mum's house and she was like 'Oh my gosh-getthem to sit down' and we sat down and we were there for about 45 minutes just reading the same book and they were turning the book upside down… mushy peas on the page… it was incredible.*

Serafini (2009:11) sees the reading of picture books as a skill that needs to be learned and suggests that teachers must 'familiarize themselves with various approaches for analysing and understanding visual images' alongside comprehending written language. When children encounter them they are usually selected by adults, whether at home or in Early Years settings, to provide an accessible first experience of literature. They are often read and re-read with the support of these adults, providing the child with a gateway through which they can make links to their personal experiences and giving them new ways of looking at the world. They require the child to pay close attention to what is conveyed by the pictures and how these are 'explained' by the adult, but also with what lies behind the picture in terms of the subtext - and it is the adult who needs to help develop these complex perceptual and semantic interpretive skills (Meek, 1982; Chambers; 1991; Baddeley, Eddershaw, 1994). Whitehead (2010:129) neatly captures their unique quality when she says that 'the very lack of written text means that a picture book is rich in narrative spaces that must be filled by the reader.' These students were now tuned into the possibilities of using a range of picture books as well as valuing them aesthetically. Ashleigh and Nadina felt that their research had given them a good understanding of picture books as having value beyond their instrumental purpose in providing a stepping stone to books that rely on written text and felt that adults are ' so text orientated'. As a result of reading for the module and investigating books by very different illustrators they felt that they now knew ways in which they could interpret the visual grammatical devices:

N *Picture books were a new phenomenon to me – I didn't really pay much attention to them before.*

A *The codes that go with picture books… the gate means what and the window means what and the water… you look at the frame and how it goes out and in*

All four students reflected on the breadth of the subject and the consequent challenge of writing a 3,500 word essay, but nevertheless seemed satisfied with what they had experienced, and Kelly was eager to continue her research for her final dissertation. Kiran concluded:

I would do this module again… I would definitely advise level 4 students to pick this module

Although she described herself as an enthusiastic reader of children's books before she started the course, Nadina went on to say that:

Taking this module has allowed me to read

Conclusion

Despite the questionnaire results for the whole group that demonstrated a generally limited knowledge and understanding of the subject of children's literature at the beginning of the module, the overall attendance and participation was consistently good and the resulting essays showed some examples of excellent knowledge and understanding of the subject by the majority of students. The premise of the research was concerned with reading children's literature for pleasure as important in its own right, but this was not reflected in the questionnaire findings. This finding influenced the subsequent module content in order to provide opportunities for in-depth discussion and debate. This provided students with the impetus to undertake further specialist research and reading on the subject and to therefore look at children's literature from a more informed perspective. Part of this exploration required students to read and re-read a selection of children's books more critically and explore what they liked themselves and why. Other beneficial content included the close reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 19xx) as a group under the expert guidance of the author Aidan Chambers, which allowed them to discover the many layers of a picture book. This was a new and enjoyable experience for many students and resulted in enthusiasm for exploring other picture book texts.

After twelve weeks of teaching, the focus group conversations provided a glimpse of how four students from the group had reflected on their own reading experiences and preferences. This research method was risky in that the written prompts only provided a loose structure for the discussion between each pair of participants, but it proved to be fit for purpose as the conversation flowed within these boundaries. The taught module content, alongside relevant reading and research for the assignment, helped these students with further evidence to articulate their views on the subject with confidence and passion. Most importantly, they all expressed a desire to continue reading children's books, learn more about them and to advocate reading for pleasure in educational settings.

This research has shown that four second year undergraduate ECEC students have been able to reflect upon the value of children's literature in relation to their positive experience of reading a range of texts alongside the potential links to working with children and their families in a way that may have been unlikely if they had not studied a module that was dedicated to the subject. The findings show how the module enabled these students to express an enthusiasm for the subject of children's literature which had not been in evidence at the outset. As Eccleshare (2003:5) suggests: 'Lifelong readers are only made if they can enjoy reading in this kind of way. It is why it is so important that though schools are the place where reading is most actively promoted, it is through individual experience that real readers are made'. These students would probably give 'a love of books' a

relatively high rank in the activity described in the introduction to this article. This connects to how books are used with and given status to children as Kiefer (1985:706) proposes that the key question to ask may be 'how is it that children come to love the books that are good for them. The answer may lie in how they are presented and given value'. Taking this optional module suggests the benefits of increased knowledge and understanding about the subject from a personal perspective and for students to thereby to be well equipped for sharing books with their own children and in helping children and their families to enjoy books as part of future professional practice. As such- perhaps it should be a mandatory module for all ECEC students?

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