

Practitioners need to ensure that all young children need to experience a range of children's books. Discuss this view with reference to relevant academic literature policy and practice.

This essay plans to give a detailed argument for all children needing to experience a diverse range of children's books, using academic literature to support this view and discussing the relevant policy and practice implications of this. The essay will begin by defining the terms used throughout so that it is clear what is meant by children's literature, children and practitioners. Secondly the essay will provide some historical context around the emergence of children's literature and how it has changed over the last two centuries. The main body of the essay will begin by discussing the importance of practitioner knowledge of children's literature and the role of the practitioner in promoting access to literature. The essay will then discuss the range of benefits for developing good reading habits and having access to diverse literature for children and young people. Next this essay will explore children's autonomy within child care, education and health settings and the benefits to this on children's reading motivation and success. Finally there will be a short conclusion to summarise the themes of the essay.

On the surface children's literature may seem like a simple term to describe books for those under 18 years old, however it has been said that it is impossible to define literature for children in this way as there is as much of a diverse and varied range of books and literature available from infancy to the verge of adulthood as that which is available for adults (Hunt, 1999, p.2).

Similarly to defining literature for children, defining what is considered a child may seem simple. While the word 'child' is generally accepted to mean a person under 18, it is widely recognised now that childhood is experienced differently depending on the time, place and social setting and that there is not one set structure of childhood, whilst there are general characteristics of childhood such as growth and development, they too are shaped by cultural context and there are many differing views on when childhood ends (Maynard & Thomas, 2009, p.7. Goodwin, 2008, p.2). Within this essay when using the word child, the meaning will be from birth up to 12 years old, the term young adult will be used when referring to children of 13 and up.

Practitioner/professional, within this essay will be used to describe any person working with children as a professional in the childcare, education and health sectors, including but not limited to; teachers and teaching assistants, nursery workers, school librarians, play therapists and social workers.

Literature specifically aimed at children began to emerge in the late 19th century, during this time the discourses surrounding views of childhood were shifting from a puritanical view, meaning children are seen as sinful and in need of rules - to a more romantic view of the child being in need of protection and being pure (Thurtle, 2005, p.168). Before the late 19th century literature that was available was mostly didactic in nature with aims to instil morals in readers of all ages (Hunt, 1999, p.6).

As ideas around childhood changed during the 19th century, the Education Act (1870) was passed which brought about the end of child labour and the first compulsory schooling for children in Britain. Prior to this time there had been very little provision for child care and education. Most children were cared for by their

mothers or extended family members such as grandparents. The facilities which were available before this time were either only available to the very rich or hospital and care settings for children with special needs and disabilities rather than provision focused on general care and education for children and young people (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009, p.35).

Since the 19th century there has been much change in children's literature, it can be seen that changes in society and culture are often seen to be reflected in the literature of the time, this is also true for children's literature (McCabe et al, 2011, p.198). Therefore modern children's literature is more diverse and better represents a range of family structures, gender roles, disabilities and different cultures. The value of children's literature began to be recognised in the 1970's, before this time literature for children was seen as trivial and there had not been much academic study around the area (Zipes, 2002, p.72). Since then there have been more changes in literature as result of greater understanding of children's learning and the benefits to reading, as well as marketing and media playing a great role in the production and availability of literature for children. It is clear to see that in modern Britain, there is much importance placed on children's reading habits with initiatives such as Book Start (Book Trust, 2014) providing reading materials for children from an early age, as well as children's literacy being a current topic in government policy and academic research with aims to enable children to achieve good standards of literacy (Morgan, 2015).

Practitioner Knowledge of Children's Literature.

It is acknowledged that professionals working with children have a difficult job in catching and sustaining the interest of a group of children who are all likely to have different interests and ability levels (Clarke and Rumbold, 2006, p.23). To be able to provide a diverse range of interesting and engaging literature for children it is paramount that practitioner in any child care, education or health setting has a good knowledge of children's literature themselves. Practitioners should be informed about the world of children's books, familiar with current and past illustrators, writers and publishers for children as well as having an in depth understanding about the vital role which books can play in children's intellectual, moral and spiritual development (Goodwin, 2008, p.2).

Despite their being acknowledgement in current literature and amongst professionals in the child care, health and education sectors of the importance of the reading enjoyment and access to literature research suggests that because of constrictions on space, time and funding many classroom reading environments are not appealing enough to children to motivate reading for pleasure, moreover because of the current educational discourse in the United Kingdom (UK) many teachers feel pushed to focus on children's attainment and levels rather than individuals being able to read and enjoy it for its own sake which is said to be leading to a decline in children reading for pleasure (Gamble, 2013, p.21). In the modern age of children's literature books and traditional texts must compete with new technologies being introduced to children. Living in a society which is constantly evolving; children's literature and the modes in which it can be accessed are evolving therefore practitioners need to be regularly reading and investigating children's literature and the formats in which they are able access it (Anderson, 2006, p.25). Save the Children (2014, p.16) estimates that 1.5 million children left primary school in 2013 without being considered able

reader. It is shown through current research that attainment levels are directly affected by reading motivation and reading enjoyment consequently despite the current focus on reading within the curriculum many children are still not connecting with literature in a way which helping them to achieve their targets as well as develop a love of reading (Wang and Guthrie, 2004). It can be seen through research that children and young people who do not attain expected levels of literacy are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds furthermore it is widely recognised that a person's literacy level has a significant and lasting impact on on their life chances and a person with poor literacy levels is more likely to live in poverty therefore through the effective promotion of children's literature practitioners may encourage young readers to become able and enthusiastic readers as well as improving individual life chances and breaking the cycle of poverty often seen from children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (The Reading Agency, 2013).

It is not only good practice for practitioners working with children to have an in-depth knowledge of a diverse range of children's books but it is a requirement under the Early Years Foundation Stage (2014) which states "Children must be given access to a wide range of reading materials to ignite their interest." (EYFS, 2014, p8). This is an acknowledgement in current practice and policy of the importance of getting children interested in reading at an early age. There is evidence to suggest that children lose interest in reading with age, therefore through being introduced to the world of reading and a diverse and exciting range of literature within the early years, practitioners can help to ensure that a love of reading is developed and maintained throughout their childhood and into adulthood (Clarke and Rumbold, 2006, p.2). It is recognised that children's literature is one of the earliest ways in which children experience stories and can be an important part in shaping who we

become (Wasik, 2004). National programmes such as book start encourage parents to read to children from birth by providing free books and evaluations of such programmes suggest advantages to children's early literacy development because of this early interaction (Hardma and Jones, 1999, p.222).

As technology has progressed, the way in which children and families acquire literacy has changed therefore it is important for professionals working in care and education to remain up to date on children's literature and the issues around it as well as accessing it as a valuable tool for children's education and enjoyment (Ann & Lord, 1996). As a professional working with children individuals should be aware of their role in selecting the books that will be made available to children and providing children with time to read alone and with an adult, as well as the importance of discussing what has been read (chambers, 2011, p.15). The role of the enabling adult in children accessing a wide range of literature is key, having an informed and enthusiastic guide children are more likely to take risks with what they read, and be encouraged to read beyond their own comfort zones (Gamble, 2013, p.10).

Adults working with children should provide not only encouragement and recommendations on literature but a variety of times and spaces for children to enjoy reading. Professionals should ensure stimulating spaces for reading and good access to areas such as school libraries as well as an understanding of the importance of their role as a professional in supporting early readers; especially those who may be less able to access literature (OSI, 2013, p.14-17). Despite research to support the need for best practise through effectively utilising time, staff and resources within child education, care and health provision there are many constraints that hinder this within such as lack of funding, time and knowledge of children's literature (Ofsted, 2011, p.14).

The Matthew Effect (1986) is a term used in relation to literacy development to describe the widening gap between more and less able readers, often it is seen that better readers continue to improve whereas less able readers make less and less progress over time. Considering the theory of the Matthew effect; it is said that children with lower attainment levels in reading, may be less likely to be motivated to read and have less confidence when doing in turn leaving them at a lower reading ability than their peers (Stanovich, 1986). This is a cycle in which many children find themselves trapped, leading to low attainment levels across all areas of the curriculum and negatively impacting on their future socio-economic status. If professionals are to be successful in encouraging children to be able and willing readers and to enjoy reading for pleasure professionals with enthusiasm and an in-depth knowledge of children's literature is essential (Goodwin, 2008, p.5).

It is impossible to discuss children's access to literature without mentioning the importance of the role of their parents. Parental involvement and the home environment are key factors in children's success as readers and their attitudes towards reading (Clarke and Rumbold, 2006, p22). Many parents are unaware of the importance of their role in supporting their child's early literacy development or do not have the resources or capabilities to provide effective scaffolding at home therefore practitioners working with families offering appropriate assistance can enable parents to effectively support and encourage their child to access a diverse range of literature and develop an interest in reading. (Clarke and Rumbold, 2006 p.22). Past research has found evidence which shows that children from homes where parents view reading as an enjoyable, leisure activity are more likely to become more intrinsically motivated to read themselves. (Baker, Serpell and Sonnenschein, 1995). Professionals working with children and young people need to

have an understanding of the importance of parental involvement and work closely with parents as partners to achieve the best outcomes for children. Practitioners should consider that parents may have a great deal to offer in relation to children's literature knowledge and that through parental partnerships attainment levels can be raised and a view can be given into literature from a diverse backgrounds and cultures (Close. 2001, p.18).

Benefits of Reading and Access to Diverse Literature.

It is acknowledged that reading is an essential life skill in the developed world and that the benefits of reading stretch far wider than children's attainment and academic achievement, (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014). Through literature children are able to develop an understanding of the world around them, other cultures and if they wish to – escape their own world through fantasy and adventure. Through reading promotion and access to a varied and diverse range of literature children are seen to benefit through general knowledge, better understanding of other cultures and a greater insight into human nature and decision making. It has also been shown that promoting reading and encouraging children to read for pleasure has a range of benefits for children and their future including; positive reading attitudes, pleasure in reading in later life and greater self-confidence as a reader (Education Standards and Research Team, 2012, p.5).

Fantasy and adventure in children's literature can offer an escape from everyday life and it has been said that children can experience through imagination other worlds and other roles (Sainsbury and Clarkson, 2008 p.3). This genre's offer the reader a world of infinite possibilities and can stretch the imagination of children whilst adding excitement to daily life. While some children may choose escapism in literature

much of children's literature can be seen to reflect things which are familiar to children in their lives and by seeing their own lives reflected in the stories that they read children are encouraged to read more enthusiastically and likely to want to continue reading (Waugh, Neaum and Waugh, 2013, p.92).

Children's literature can be used as a tool to support children and young people who are experiencing difficult situations such as loss or trauma, through access to literature that is relatable to their circumstances children can understand and cope with difficult feelings in a developmentally appropriate manner (NASP,2013, p.1).

The range of difficulties that children experience is diverse and therefore the literature used to support it needs to be just as diverse. Popular authors such as Jaqueline Wilson, Ann Fine, Robert Munsch and Benjamin Zephaniah have all written books for children and young people that address difficult issues such as; family breakdown, dysfunctional families, gender attitudes and the asylum process from a child's perspective which have become much loved by children who may or may not be dealing with similar circumstances to the characters in the stories.

It has been proposed that children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can in some settings be approached with low expectations by practitioners because many are not reaching typical levels of attainment (Flewit, Nind and Payler 2009, p.231). It should be recognised in any child care/education or health setting that children with SEND can still offer valuable contributions to literacy based activities such as group or paired book reading and should not be excluded. It is vital for all children including children with SEND, low ability or gifted children to be exposed to and offered interactions with a range of varied texts. It should be noted however that while topical books can be used as a tool to support children's social

and emotional development there is an ongoing tendency for disability in children's literature to be only seen as problem books rather than all children's books showing a diverse range of characters inclusive of children and adults with SEND (Waugh, Neaum and Waugh, 2013, p.119).

Children's books can be a useful tool in promoting understanding of diversity, there is a wealth of literature available for children and young people that challenges gender roles and promotes diversity within society such as family structure, disability and special educational needs. Children's laureate Malorie Blackman was quoted as having said "We need children's books that reflect more than just one worldview." (Book trust, 2012). Books which depict acceptance and promote empathy rather than pity and overall demonstrate respect for all diverse groups can be effective in exposing children to diverse cultures or minority groups that some may not see in their everyday life (Waugh, Neaum and Waugh, 2013, p.83).

While it can be said that there is now more than ever a range of diverse literature available for children on almost all topics, it has been criticised by children's author Catherine Johnson that while marketing and publishing of children's literature within the UK lacks diversity, so will the literature published within it and that more black and minority ethnic publishers and authors are needed so that children's literature can be truly diverse and representative of the true experiences of more than just the dominant culture (Book Trust, 2013).

Children's autonomy.

While we think of literature for children to be books children want to read, it should be considered that adults are the first and final censors of what children are permitted to access and that children's literature has been written, illustrated,

marketed and purchased by adults with few exceptions (Zipes, 2002, p.44).

Considering this, it can be said that children's books are developed to appeal to adults as much as they are aiming to appeal to children and that children's literature should be considered as having a dual audience. Research with children as participants has indicated that adult censorship is a growing issue in relation to children's literature and can negatively impact children's reading motivation and enjoyment as well as restricting autonomy and neglecting individualism (Maynard and Warren, 2012). In recent years there has been an increase in censorship of children's literature in line with changing societies and the adult desire to protect children and the impact this can have on children's reading motivation (Kidd, 2009). It is important that any professional working with children or young people understands that it benefits children not to dictate what they may read but to support and encourage their access to diverse whilst child-appropriate literature which should be negotiated by the child, parents and practitioners to ensure children are not exposed to harmful materials whilst still enabling autonomy.

There is evidence to suggest that through enabling children's autonomy in relation to accessing literature; children can benefit from higher levels of intrinsic motivation to read as well as to higher levels of enjoyment. (Rumbold and Clarke, 2006, p.22. Ginsburg and Bronstein, 1993, p.1461. Gottfried, Fleming and Gottfried, 1998, p.1448). This is supported by child development theory which suggests that by involving children as active participants in their own learning they become more involved and get the most out of learning experiences, such as reading (Pound, 2005, P.52). Additionally research suggests that children who enjoy reading do so more frequently and tend to become more able at it than their peers who enjoy it less (Clark and Osborne, 2007). The vast benefits to encouraging children's choice

in what literature they access further argues the case for the previously stated argument on the importance of practitioner's knowledge on children's literature.

It was previously outlined in research by OFSTED (2004) found that not enough schools were taking an active interest in their pupils reading interests and built on this in relation to what literature is made available within the setting. If professionals are to be able to recommend and support children in accessing a varied range of literature, it is essential they keep up to date on what is available for children as preferences vary among individuals as well as over time. Literature which is valued by a generation may fall out of favour with the next, along with changes in the cultural climate and it has been said that in the age of mass publication of children's literature what is popular is not always in line with what is regarded as quality literature (Hackman and Marshall, 1995. p.16). Research into reading for pleasure suggests that in fostering lifelong readers; choice is a key factor and that there is a positive relationship between choice and reading motivation (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). It has also been proposed that children's reading enjoyment is seen to decline by age therefore it is essential that children are encouraged and given access to a wide range of literature and the opportunity to choose what they read to keep children from losing interest in reading (Clark and Foster, 2005, p3).

Conclusion:

While the benefits to all children being enabled to access a diverse range of literature are clear, it is important to consider that without resources and support of enabling adults this is unlikely to happen, therefore the role of the professional working with children is crucial to this. Additionally if children are not introduced to a diverse range of literature which captures their interest at a young age and do not

enjoy reading for pleasure they are unlikely to do so as a young adult or into adulthood. Policy and practice state that professionals working with children and young people must ensure they are provided with a wide range of literature, this indicates recognition of the significance of children's access to diverse literature however current research would suggest that many children are still leaving primary school without being able readers. The current market for children's literature is dominated by white western society and till diversity is embedded within marketing and publishing as well as children's stories, full inclusion and diversity in children's literature will not be achieved.

If we are to enable current and future generations to develop a love of reading and good lifetime reading habits there needs to be greater thought given by professionals in the child care, education and health sectors on the significance of access to a range of diverse literature.

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