

## CHAPTER 1

# UNDERSTANDING TEXTS

Texts are at the heart of literacy. All the observations in this chapter explore what counts as a text in literacy teaching and learning, teachers' knowledge of texts and the place of texts within the school and classroom.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) report *Reading by Six: How the Best Schools Do It* (2010) has at its heart the belief that learning to read is the most important thing that schools can teach children and looks at 12 schools which are deemed to be successful in this. The summary of findings and recommendations attributes the success of these schools to 'a very rigorous and sequential approach ... through systematic phonics.' (Ofsted 2010: 4) This is clearly very important and in Chapter 3 we consider some observations of strategies for teaching reading, including phonics. However, it is interesting that Ofsted makes no mention in the summary of findings and recommendations of what children read, and it is that which is the focus of this first chapter. I have deliberately called the first chapter 'Understanding texts' because it seems to me essential as teachers to

consider how the texts we use impact on children learning to be both readers and writers.

If I reflect on my own behaviour as a reader, I know that *what* I read greatly affects *how* I read. There are some novels which I read really quickly, skimming over descriptive passages because I only want to know what happens, yet I have just finished rereading Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and I read that really slowly, savouring in the delights of Austen's language. If I am reading a magazine, I skim over the text to get the gist of the subject matter but, if I am reading an academic textbook or article, I will read slowly, frequently rereading sections and sometimes reading aloud to make sure I truly understand. Think about your own reading behaviour and note how the text you are reading affects how you read.

My knowledge of texts also affects how I write. In writing this, I am imagining I am talking to my current group of students. I have particular faces in mind and am remembering how they respond in lectures. I am also remembering other textbooks I have read for trainee teachers and am recalling their style and 'voice' as I write. Earlier today I wrote a reference for somebody and wrote in a very different style; I used a set format and thought carefully about how each word would be interpreted. I have also been working on an article for an academic journal and before writing looked at several past editions of the journal, reading other articles to see the style of writing that was acceptable. This emphasises again, the centrality of the text in the processes of reading and writing.

### What counts as a text?

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It will be clear from the previous two paragraphs that I read and write a variety of texts and there are even more which are an integral part of my daily life. Just this morning I have read and written emails, updated my status on a social network site and read the statuses of friends, looked for information on lots of different Internet sites, read the post and yesterday's newspaper, checked my diary and written in two new appointments, written notes on sticky pads as I took phone calls, read and sent texts on my mobile phone, looked on a spreadsheet to find information for the accountant and checked the label on the yoghurt for the sell-by date. All that happened in the space of 4 hours. The texts I read and wrote were all very different in their purposes, formats and audiences. My teenage children read and create an even greater range of texts using, among other things, pencils, keyboards, visual images, sound, photographs and film.

What is common about all these different kinds of texts is that in both reading and creating them the communication of meaning lies at the heart of

all that is done. Texts may use a variety of methods or modes to convey or express meaning – words, pictures, images, photographs, video clips, sound files, hyperlinks. Some texts use several of these and they are known as multi-modal texts. Reading and creating a multi-modal text requires many more skills than reading or writing written texts and children in the twenty-first century need to be skilled in all these modes of communication. The knowledge required to be an effective reader and writer today is very different from when I learned a long time ago and I am often conscious that I am catching up in my skill base.

Whatever the nature of a text, what we are reading or creating matters and it is through encounters with texts that children learn what it is to be a reader and writer. Over 20 years ago Margaret Meek wrote a very influential book about this very thing, and in more recent times Vivienne Smith has written about why texts matter in the way in which children become readers.

### Read

Meek, M. (1988) *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*. Stroud: Thimble Press.  
Smith, V. (2008) 'Learning to be a reader: promoting good textual health' in P. Goodwin (ed.), *Understanding Children's Books: A Guide for Education Professionals*. London: Sage.

### Reflect

How does what Meek and Smith say relate to multi-modal texts?

The observations in this chapter put texts at the centre of teaching primary literacy and the first observation concerns a unit of work where the study of texts informed children's creation of their own texts.

## **OBSERVATION: The first two lessons of a Year 4 (age 8–9) class unit of work with an author focus**

This unit of work formed part of cross-curricular work in Design and Technology, Art and Literacy. The intention of the whole unit was for the children in the class to make their own books, hopefully inspired by a visit from the author, Paul Gerhaghty. He is a South African, now living in London, who writes and illustrates children's books. The illustrations capture the light

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of Africa with its vibrant colours; they are bright and yet soft and full of curves. The stories are a strange mix of reality and anthromorphism – they explore human values, relationships and emotions but within the context of real animal behaviour. Many of the stories are based on observed real-life incidents from Africa.

The first lesson of the unit took place on the morning of the author's visit. There were two learning objectives:

- to be able to evaluate the work of an author
- to understand the relationship between text and images in a picture book.

The lesson began with an introduction to Paul Gerhaghty, giving a taster of information about him and informing the children that he was going to come and talk to them that afternoon. That generated a lot of excitement among the children.

### Comment

It could be argued that the children were not given much notice of the author visit and there was limited time for preparation. The teacher would argue that the immediacy of the visit gave a sense of urgency to the lesson and the children were highly motivated and engaged. What do you think?

The teacher then read the book *Over the Steamy Swamp* to the class using a visualiser so that they could see the illustrations. This is a story bringing the food chain to life. A mosquito flies over a swamp; behind her hovers a dragonfly; behind her sits a frog; and so it continues. The strong illustrations are colourful and there is a humour to the whole text. After the reading the children were asked to talk with their partners and share first impressions of the book.

### Comment

Notice how the teacher first asks the children to make a personal response to the book. It is really important that children are given the opportunity to do this before they begin any more detailed analysis of the text. Michael Rosen says: 'We read because it either gives us pleasure or because there is something we want to know. In other words, we read for the meaning.' (2010: 2)

Note also that the children are asked to talk about their responses with

their partners. We will see over and over again how important talk is in the learning process. It helps to clarify ideas, to extend understanding and develop thinking by engaging in debate.

An extremely useful framework for this has been established by Aiden Chambers. He suggests the following three 'sharings' as we talk about books we have read:

Enthusiasms – what is it that excites you about the book? These enthusiasms can be either positive or negative and can relate to plot, setting, character, style or anything at all.

Puzzles – what questions do you have about the book? What is it you don't understand? Are there any gaps for you? Where do you want to go 'behind the scenes'?

Patterns – what patterns or links do you notice as you read the book? Are there patterns in the language used, in the illustrations, in recurring elements of the plot, in characters' behaviours or in links to other texts you have read or to real-life experiences?

I have used this framework with children from age 3 upwards, with students and with my peers when discussing books we have read. **Read** more about it and the importance of giving children time to talk about books in:

Chambers, A. (2011) *Tell Me (Children, Reading and Talk) with The Reading Environment*. Stroud: Thimble Press.

You might also want to look at the work Pie Corbett has done on 'Booktalk' which will give practical ideas of how to implement Chambers' approach.

After the pair talk the class were asked to get into their well-established literacy groups to evaluate the book. First, as a class they discussed what it meant to evaluate a book and what they needed to look for when reading. Their discussion yielded a list which included such questions as:

- Is the story exciting?
- Is it funny?
- Is the language good? Does it help me to make pictures in my mind?
- Do the illustrations add anything to the words? Do they tell a different story?
- Do the characters seem real? Can we believe what they say and do?
- What are the best and worst bits?
- Would I recommend this book to a friend?

**Comment**

The questions generated by this class would indicate that they have had a lot of experience in talking about and evaluating texts. A class is unlikely to come up with such questions without these experiences. Consider how this helps the children develop their reading skills and behaviour as readers.

The children then worked in their groups. Each group produced a written evaluation of the text. They worked together; one child was elected as scribe. The groups were of mixed ability and so those less confident in writing were able to make as much contribution as others without the pressure of having to write all their thoughts down.

**Comment**

It is important to remember that because a child struggles with recording ideas this does not mean that the ideas are not as powerful as those of other children. This teacher used mixed ability groups with a more able child as scribe. What other strategies can you think of?

The children were given just 20 minutes to complete their evaluations. They were written in note form and were not particularly neat! In this instance that did not matter because the purpose of the writing was to record discussion in order to remember. This was writing used for an authentic purpose.

At the end of the lesson the class came together and shared key points. The teacher recorded these and ensured the children were able to give concrete examples from the text for each point that was made. There then followed a short discussion on any questions or comments the children might want to put to Paul Geraghty in the afternoon.

**Reflect**

How well prepared do you think the children were for the author visit? What knowledge and understanding had the morning's lesson given them?

Paul Geraghty visited in the afternoon and this further stimulated the children's interest in his work. Among other things he talked about how some ideas became books and how some did not! He showed actual examples of idea

doodle-sheets, presentation thumbnails (a kind of cartoon-strip miniature of the story used to show to editors), rough drawings, finished illustrations, proof prints, the book as a large running sheet – prior to cutting – bound proofs and, finally, the finished book, which was then read to the group, who then asked questions.

The next day the children began to plan their own books. The lesson began by looking at the structure and characteristics of a story. The teacher started by asking the children to remember stories they had particularly enjoyed and to tell their partners a simple outline of the plot. The class then came back together and the teacher showed them the story hill pro forma.

### Comment

This activity worked for several reasons. First, it began with the children's own experiences; they were talking about books they knew well and so were confident enough to share ideas. Secondly, they were telling the story to one other person; this gave them confidence to 'have a go' as mistakes would be relatively private. Thirdly, the 'theory' came out of the children's analysis and discussion of well-known stories and so they were able to make it their own. Deep learning is not about repeating what you have been told, it is about transforming knowledge into personal understanding.

All stories have basically the same structure:

opening → build up → climax/conflict → resolution → ending

Many resources are available to help with this, and the story hill is just one of them. It can be found on [www.primaryresources.co.uk](http://www.primaryresources.co.uk). Another idea is to take each part of a story and match it to one finger on your hand; you can then hold your story in your hand.

The teacher then read the class another Paul Geraghty book, *Solo*. This is about Solo the penguin chick who is left alone in the Antarctic when her mother leaves to search for food. The tension of the book comes from the uncertainty of Solo's survival.

The children shared their personal responses as before but this time focused more closely on the relationship between the illustrations and the written text. The teacher asked them to consider how Paul Geraghty had told the story through the different elements of the book. As a whole class they then matched the narrative of *Solo* to the story hill pro forma.

The children were then sent off to plan a story they were going to tell in the book they would make. They were given the options of brainstorming on their own, of talking about it with a friend or of drafting it out on the story

hill. They could choose any or all of these strategies as long as they had firmly fixed in their minds the story they wanted to tell.

### Comment

Note how the teacher allowed the children to choose how they planned their story. He offered them different ways of working, and in reality allowed other ways he had not offered. All he wanted was that, at the end of the allotted time, each child had the outline of a story in their head. He did not even worry if they had not written it down, as long as the children were sure they could remember it and were able to tell it to somebody else. Reflecting on your own learning will remind you that learners do best when they are allowed to work in the ways which suit them. For teachers it is important to keep focused on the learning objective and that will enable you to realise what is important and what is not.

There were several more lessons during that week in which the children worked on their story and each created their own book. They were then able to share their books with each other and eventually put them in the class library.

What can we learn from this observation?

- The first thing that needs to be said is that real texts are central to all the work. If we want children to be readers and writers they need to understand the purposes of reading and writing. By using real books as models for understanding and analysing what authors do to make a book successful, children come to understand what literacy is all about. Reading and talking about multilayered texts and listening to authors talk is a more powerful teaching strategy for effective writing than lots of exercises adding in ‘wow’ words and connectives to sentences.
- Secondly, this lesson reminds us that children learn in different ways and lessons need to cater for this and be flexible in the opportunities offered to children. Teachers need to be clear about the purpose of a lesson or a sequence of lessons and allow children the time to move towards it in the way which suits them best. One approach will not suit all children.
- Thirdly, working with texts means looking at every aspect of the text and not just decoding the printed word. The illustrations in Paul Geraghty’s books contribute to the meaning of the whole – the style, colour, shapes and light all evoke atmosphere and help the reader to make sense of the story. The choice of words and the order in which they are written also matter. The size of the pages, the arrangement of words and pictures and

the font used, all contribute to the whole. As pupils talk about books they will come to understand this, and these children, as they created their books, were doing much more than just writing a story – they were composing a whole text.

## Teachers choosing books

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If teachers are going to make texts the centre of their literacy teaching, they need to have an extensive knowledge of children's texts themselves. If they are going to choose texts which will demonstrate to children the power of the written word, they need to have read, thought and talked about these texts. It is clear, therefore, that teachers need to have a strong knowledge of children's books. The Teachers as Readers project (Cremin, Bearne, Mottram and Goodwin 2007–10) looked at this very issue and one of the main aims of the project was to discover the extent of teachers' knowledge of children's literature. They found that this knowledge was 'severely limited'. The research team suggested that the requirement of the National Literacy Strategy to focus on 'significant authors' has limited the authors which teachers use in their teaching.

The teachers in the sample knew such a narrow range of authors that they were unlikely to be able to make recommendations to their pupils beyond the narrow range that teachers already used in their classroom. Most of the authors named by the teachers in the sample were extremely well known.

### Read

Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Bearne, E. and Goodwin, P. (2008) 'Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38(4) 449–64.

How extensive is your knowledge of children's books?

## OBSERVATION: Talking to teachers about reading aloud to children

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A few years ago a colleague and I (Goodwin and Perkins 2009, 2010) did some small-scale research on reading aloud to children. We did this because, although reading aloud to children is a definite expectation within the Literacy Framework, anecdotal evidence suggested that it was not happening

frequently. Our underpinning belief was that reading aloud is much more than an enjoyable experience, although one hopes it is that, but is also an important lesson in any teaching of reading programme. We wanted to find out if teachers did read aloud to their classes, and the reasons they had for doing this if they did. We found that teachers did read aloud to their classes but saw it mainly as a good way to establish social cohesion in a class. It was not something which was planned and happened most often at the very end of the day. It tended not to feature in planning.

Reasons given for reading aloud included the introduction of different types of authors, books and texts to children. However, it seemed that the choice of texts read was mainly made by the children themselves, with teachers sometimes selecting their own favourite texts.

### Comment

Can you see any contradiction in these statements?

There were no surprises in the types of texts read to children: short stories, poetry, picture books, comics and magazines, and a few others including newspapers, e-books, charts, song words, non-fiction and a joke book. Our sample named 220 books, including fiction texts, children's novels and single stories, collections of short stories (5), picture books (mostly younger readers), traditional tales (myths, folk tale, legend), five poetry books (2 classic poems) and three non-fiction (all in narrative form).

### Comment

Imagine you are the teacher of a class in a particular year group. Can you list the key authors and/or texts you would want to be absolutely sure the children in your class encountered?

If we accept the view that the texts that children encounter are important in the learning process, as teachers we need to ensure we know the best texts to introduce them to. How can teachers do that? The Teachers as Researchers project (United Kingdom Literacy Association 2007–10) claims that teachers should be readers who model reading behaviours and create communities of readers. This means that they will provide children with time to get totally absorbed in a book, they will read aloud to them and offer books the children can read with ease. In order to do this, teachers need to be fully confident to make decisions about all the different texts used to teach literacy in their classrooms.

**Read**

Go onto the website of the United Kingdom Literacy Association ([www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)). In the research section look for the report on the Teachers as Readers project in the Research Projects in progress section.

What are the implications of this for you as a reader?

Finding your way through the hundreds if not thousands of children's books which are published and making an informed decision seems a daunting task unless you can turn to an expert for advice and support. Teachers urgently need librarians beside them when they set out to create confident young readers.

The skills and knowledge offered by librarians have never been as necessary as they are now when successive governments have imposed a didactic reading curriculum and many teachers have lost confidence in their intuitive use of literature with their pupils. In education we need the support and positive input of librarians to reinvigorate the teaching of reading. (Goodwin 2011)

## The role of libraries

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Libraries have always provided access to the worlds of information and literature for everyone. Wherever I have worked, there has always been a public library from which to borrow books whether I have needed books for information, to learn something new or for the delight of a well-written tale. Most schools have a library – whether it be a purpose-built area with space for books, browsers and displays, or a few shelves in an old stock cupboard – a school with a library shows a commitment to literacy. There is little national support for teacher librarians in primary schools, which makes the School Library Association (SLA) well worth joining as it offers advice and support to anyone who organises a school library. Some (but increasingly fewer) local authorities fund a School Library Services (SLS) with centralised book collections and support staff. The SLS usually provides schools with collections of books to support learning. These days, most local SLS have to charge a fee for its service. However, several hundred pounds would be nothing compared with the thousands it would cost to buy the books – not to mention the advice. Public libraries also do their best to support schools with literacy learning. Baby Bounce and Rhyme Time, storytelling for the under 5s, Summer Reading Challenge events and book awards all invite children into the world of reading. It is unfortunate that teachers do not always make the most of these very valuable assets.

**Read**

Look at the website of the Schools Library Association and see what support they can offer you as a teacher ([www.sla.org.uk](http://www.sla.org.uk)).

In particular download the Primary Schools Library Charter and use it to reflect on libraries in schools where you have observed. There is more about libraries in schools in Chapter 5.

**Children's views on texts**

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Having considered the importance of teachers' understanding of texts, the next section looks at what children think about the texts they read. I talked to groups of children in Foundation Stage 2 (age 4–5) and Year 1 (age 5–6) and Year 2 (age 6–7) about their views of the books they read. I sat with groups of children in the school library and asked them to tell me about reading. It was not possible to record the conversations but I made detailed notes immediately afterwards.

**OBSERVATION: Conversations with children**

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**1. Reception children (ages 4 and 5)**

All the children said that they liked reading and their choice of favourite book seemed to be either the book they were reading at present or had read recently, or something they had seen on the television or at the cinema. All the children said reading happened a lot at home; they read to their mums and their mums read to them. They talked about going to visit the local library with their mums to choose books. They enjoyed this time of reading; it happened on the sofa or in bed and was associated with cuddles and was a cosy social time. Reading at home was all about enjoying a text together.

In contrast, they described reading at school as 'work' and they identified those in the class who were 'good readers' as those who were good at decoding. Reading in school was a serious business and not to be taken lightly; one little boy said to me: 'If we read it quickly, we might be trying to get on to another book but that's not really learning.' All their comments on reading in school were dominated by the colour of the book they were reading. One child said, 'I was the first one in our group to be on green books'.

**Comment**

These children had been in school for only two terms and were already making a clear distinction between reading at home and reading at school. They talked about books at home in terms of what they were about and whether they liked them or not; they talked about books in school as to how high up the scheme they were.

**2. Year 1 children (ages 5 and 6)**

Again all these children said they liked reading. They had all brought their school reading book to the library with them and when I asked them what their favourite reading book was, every child chose that one. All of the children said they read at home but several said they only read school books at home to practise for reading at school. One boy told me that his mum had bought him a complete reading scheme so he could practise more at home. Reading at home was, as with the younger children, associated with a sociable comfortable time, on the sofa or in bed.

Every child knew which colour book they were on in school and, indeed, they all knew which colour book everybody in the class was on. I had no way of knowing if they were correct or not but there was a strong and confident consensus in the group!

Of the children who told me they were reading a different book at home, the books they described were significantly more challenging to read than the reading books from school they had with them; for example, one child said he was reading a book from the Horrible Histories series.

**Comment**

For these children, who in their reading experiences at school were beginning to decode independently, reading was measured by the success they had achieved in doing this. Reading in school was almost a competition and success was measured by how much was achieved. The children were not able to tell me what their school reading books were about, all that mattered to them about these books were their colour.

**3. Year 2 children (ages 6 and 7)**

Pleasure in reading was not unanimous among these children; some enjoyed

reading but some did not. It tended to be that the girls said they enjoyed reading but the boys did not. When I probed deeper, however, the picture was slightly different. One boy said he only likes reading comics and magazines. He gave me a very detailed description of the magazines he read, which were all related to the Playstation 3. He told me he reads the magazines to find out about games and to help him decide which ones he wants to play. Another boy was adamant that he did not like reading at all. He went on to tell me that he supports Arsenal and every day reads the sport pages of the *Sun* newspaper. He explained to me how by doing this he can find out how Arsenal is doing and that by looking at the tables and reading the match reports he can work out if they are going to win their next game. He was describing some very sophisticated reading behaviour but according to the colour of the reading book he had been given in school he was not a very good reader.

### Comment

A lot of work has been done on boys and reading, and the observations above are very limited and small examples of the issue. They raise some important points however. The boys who said they did not like reading and did not read, actually engaged in some very demanding reading. I do not know how much help they received at home but it was evident that this reading served a particular purpose related to the boys' interests.

The Ofsted report *English 2000–05: A Review of Inspection Survey* (2005: 32) said that, 'Boys tend to give up independent reading more easily than girls and, as they get older, seem to have greater difficulty in finding books to enjoy'. Lockwood (2008), in his research on reading for pleasure found that 77 per cent of boys claimed to like to read a book compared with 91 per cent of girls. Seventy-two per cent of boys enjoyed non-fiction compared with 57 per cent of girls. These patterns seem to be becoming established in these young children.

All the children in this Year 2 group said they did not read much at school and only read when the teacher told them to do so.

### Comment

All the children clearly read a lot in school in the course of a day's activities but they did not recognise it as such unless they were reading from something which had been given the label 'reading book'. What are the implications of this for classroom practice?

The children also seemed to think that reading in school was all about decoding. They did not mention enjoyment of the books they read at all. They told me that there was supposed to be a story time at school when the teacher read to them just before they go home from school but usually it was a bit late and they missed it because they had not finished their work or were still getting changed from PE. One girl told me, 'In hard books there are more sounds which make up a word. You use up quite a lot of sounds and letters to make a word'.

### Comment

The children in this school achieve highly in standard assessments and are very competent at one aspect of reading. A lot of emphasis is placed on the teaching of decoding through systematic phonics teaching and it is clearly successful. However, in one aspect of reading they are not so competent. As Dombey (2010: 5) said:

'A balanced approach means, that, as well as working to master the mechanics of reading that allows them to lift the words off the page, children are encouraged and supported to focus on making sense of written text, and to see its uses in ordering, enlarging, enjoying and making sense of their lives. It means ensuring that classrooms are filled with interesting written texts – on screen as well as on paper – and that children are given rich experiences of putting these texts to use.'

### Read

Dombey, H. (2010) *Teaching Reading: What the Evidence Says*. Leicester: The United Kingdom Literacy Association.

### Activity

Talk to children in a Year 5 or 6 class and see if they think differently from these Key Stage 1 children.

The attitudes reflected in the observations above pose an interesting challenge for literacy teachers and the next two observations pick up on Dombey's comment that classrooms should be full of interesting written texts. Before

you read the observations, think what this means to you and consider what sort of texts you would want to put in your classroom.

## The classroom as a reading environment

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If teachers want to encourage children to read and write, it is important that they create classrooms which are stimulating literacy environments that offer time, space and resources for reading. What might such a classroom look like?

### OBSERVATION: Looking at a Year 1 classroom

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The classroom is colourful, light and airy. It is one-half of a very large room which is shared with the parallel class. The windows are large. There is a large book corner which has bookshelves on three sides of it and a Kinderbox (a box containing large picture books) as well. There is a rug on the floor and several large cushions. On the edge of the book corner there is an old armchair covered with a throw and filled with cushions. The teacher sits here for read-aloud sessions and children are frequently curled up here reading; it is known in the class as the 'story chair'.

On top of a unit just to the side of the book corner is a display entitled 'Our Book of the Week'. This week it is Mo Willems's book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*. There are several copies of the book here and children can read them at any time. There are also laminated copies of pages from the book with laminated speech bubbles, some blank and some containing the words from the text. The children are encouraged to re-create the text or to invent their own version. This book has been used in shared reading and class activities throughout the week.

On the noticeboard above the book corner is a display featuring Mo Willems. There is a picture of him with some brief facts about his life. There are also pictures of the covers of several of his books with a label which asks, 'How many books by Mo Willems have you read?' All the books are available in the book corner.

Also in the book corner is a large plastic box in which the children are encouraged to put the books they have read and really enjoyed. If children do not know what to read, they are encouraged to look in that box first. Often the teacher will put books in there too.

In the book corner is also a listening centre with earphones so children can choose a book and listen to the audio version.

The children are encouraged to re-enact the stories in the role-play area and in the small-play area. The role-play area is set up as a bus station for this week and in the small-play area are different types of vehicles and different animals. The children will often be heard saying things like, 'Don't let the cow drive the tractor'. This all relates to the overall theme for the half-term, which is Transport.

There are other examples of different kinds of texts around the classroom. All the displays are constantly used and referred to in lessons; children use them as a source of information. On the whiteboard the teacher has written the date and there are also several scribbled reminders which the teacher has written to herself to not forget to send messages home. The children know what these say and draw her attention to them at the end of the day. By the side of the whiteboard is a list of the activities of the day, in order. These are on laminated cards and at the beginning of each day the day's timetable is created with the children.

There are also opportunities for the children to create texts. There is one table for writing; it contains lots of paper of different colour, size and type, lots of different things to write with and a wire tray in which to put the finished writing. This is available for the children whenever they are free.

There is a music table which contains a few musical instruments and song books. On a stand is a copy of the song which the children have been learning that week. Children can be observed standing at this table playing the instruments and singing the song as they 'read' the musical notation.

There is also an alphabet display. Behind it is an alphabet chart with the lower case letters arranged in a rainbow shape.

### Comment

This arrangement makes it easier for children, especially those with dyslexia, to find particular letters.

For other ideas look at:

Morris, M. and Smith, S. (2010) *Thirty-Three Ways to Help with Spelling: Supporting Children Who Struggle with Basic Skills*. London: Routledge.

There are also boxes of magnetic letters, arranged in sets of the letters the children have learned in phonics lessons. Some of these are joined where a grapheme consists of two or more letters. There are A4-sized magnetic boards in a box. Available for play are also wooden letters, sandpaper letters and letter-shape moulds. There are charts showing phoneme-grapheme correspondences and children are free to use these at any time.

**Comment**

As you read this observation and look around any classroom in which you find yourself, what are the messages that environment is giving out? The classroom I have described above tells me:

- Books are important – there is a space for books which is furnished with care and maintained.
- Readers make choices – the box of favourite books shows that different people will like different things.
- Authors write books – the emphasis on the author teaches children that books are essentially about communication.
- Composition is important – the opportunities to re-create stories through play are teaching children compositional skills.
- I can try out different things – the writing area allows children to experiment with writing.
- Different texts are for different purposes – enjoyment, reminding, informing, asking, and so on.

**OBSERVATION: Year 5 classroom (ages 9 and 10)**

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The classroom is one of several which go off a long corridor in a building typical of those built in the 1960s. The wall opposite the door is almost all window and the tables are arranged in groups. At the back of the room is a sink.

There is no reading area as such, but there is a clearly defined class library. This consists of two bookcases arranged in an L-shape. One contains non-fiction books. These are coded according to a very simple Dewey system and there is a chart above the bookcase explaining this. The other bookcase contains fiction. This is mainly paperback novels of various sizes and thicknesses. I did not see any poetry books. There was a variety of authors represented on the shelves and a variety of genres that would appeal to different preferences. On a table next to this bookcase was a computer which was permanently on and had a selection of book covers and titles stuck around the screen. On the screen was a form:

Title:  
 Author:  
 Why you should read this book:

If the children had particularly enjoyed a book, they were invited to go and fill in this form and log it on the database of books that had been read by the class. The comments were unedited and brief; they often were in note form and contained lots of exclamation marks and question marks. If a child did not know what to read next, they could go through the database and select a book that one of their peers had already enjoyed. They were encouraged to go and ask the other child to elaborate on what was written.

### Comment

The teacher told me that he had set this up for two reasons. First, he wanted to move away from the children having to write a book review every time they had read a book. Secondly, he wanted to create an environment where children were talking about books they had read and sharing opinions. In both respects this had worked. When I observed, he was considering making another database available of books which children had not enjoyed and had abandoned. What do you think about this? What would be the purpose of it?

This opportunity to respond to texts on screen was just one of the many types of texts evident in the classroom and a large number of them were on screen. The interactive whiteboard (IWB) was in constant use and it was an integral part of classroom activity, not just a resource for the teacher to use. The teacher used a tablet to write on as he walked around the classroom and this was recorded on the IWB; children were encouraged to record on the IWB or on one of the four computers in the room and were often flicking back and forwards between screens, some of which were created by them and some of which were from the Internet. Some of the displays consisted of these screens which had been printed out.

The whiteboard was used as a working wall and had notes and diagrams all over it. Teacher, teaching assistant and children wrote on it and, again, it was constantly referred to during lessons.

**Comment**

What were the children in this class learning about texts through the uses of written language in their classroom? It is a tradition in English primary classrooms that a display is always designed to look good – work is triple mounted, boards are backed with carefully chosen borders, and the font and size of print is carefully chosen. It is understandable why this is so; teachers want children to feel that their work is valued, they want to set good examples of standards of presentation and they want children to take pride in their work. I have observed the complete opposite in many primary classrooms in France. There I have seen notes made on flipcharts, the paper torn off and pinned on the wall with one drawing pin to be taken down the following day, referred to and added to. That was much as the whiteboard was used in the observed classroom. Consider these two almost extremes of examples of the printed word and identify the advantages and disadvantages of each. Is there a middle way?

Anybody visiting primary classrooms will soon realise that although there are some differences, there are many more similarities. Most primary classrooms contain the same things to a greater or lesser extent, for teaching and learning literacy. Brian Cambourne (2000:513) makes a very important point, however, when he says: ‘artefacts are only valuable when students are engaged in meaningful tasks with the artefacts.’ It could be said that the same argument applies to all texts used in a classroom, and so we need to be sure we understand what is meant by a ‘meaningful task’ in this context. How do you think Cambourne’s argument relates to the views of Meek and Smith discussed earlier?

**Summary**

This chapter has encouraged you to think what we mean by the use of texts in the classroom. This is important because, although it is essential to teach children the skills of word recognition and language comprehension, it is imperative that teachers understand the impact that the texts which are used have on those processes.

- In reflecting on your own experiences of and creation of texts, you will have realised that texts come in many different forms. The essential characteristic of all texts is that their basic purpose is the communication of meaning. The nature of the text determines how that meaning will be created and/or accessed. Literacy teaching needs to take this into account.

- Planning for literacy teaching is best if texts are at its heart. Children will learn what makes for effective writing if they have talked about many examples of writing that have had an impact on them. Foregrounding the role of authors and writers shows children that effective writing involved many decisions which are often much more complex than the simple addition of more connectives or ‘wow’ words.
- Learning literacy involves knowing the purposes of different texts, and this is demonstrated by the way texts are used and displayed within the classroom. Giving children opportunities to create and read texts for authentic purposes will establish literacy as a powerful and essential tool.
- Reading aloud to children and talking with them about texts will introduce them to a range of authors and texts and will empower them to make their own choices as readers and writers.
- In order to do all this, teachers need to have a secure knowledge of texts which is relevant and up to date. This is challenging for teachers.
- There are experts in this who will help teachers, and the Schools Library Association will provide support and resources to teachers and schools.

The text is at the heart of literacy teaching and learning and must be considered in all our observations.

### Further reading

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Goodwin, P. (ed.) (2008) *Understanding Children's Books: A Guide for Education Professionals*. London: Sage.

Lockwood, M. (2008) *Promoting Reading for Pleasure in the Primary School*. London: Sage.