

TEACHERS' USE OF FICTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND*

Stuart Marriott†
University of Ulster, Coleraine

Principal teachers and teachers of grades P3, P5, and P7 in all primary schools in Northern Ireland were asked in a postal questionnaire to provide information about the use of fiction in classrooms. Usable questionnaires were received from 376 schools. Generally, children's fiction was reported to play a significant part in the curriculum of schools, although particularly with the youngest children it often took a place subordinate to the use of reading schemes and associated material. The novels and stories in use in classrooms were often rather limited in range, but the organizational strategies and follow-up activities used by teachers were very varied.

Although substantial studies of the use of fiction in schools have been undertaken elsewhere (6), as far as I know a systematic investigation of the topic in primary schools in Northern Ireland has never been carried out. The 'Inspectors' Report' (5) of 1981, for example, commented on library provision and criticized the inappropriate or over-use of comprehension exercises and graded reading schemes, but said nothing specific about teachers' use of fiction. This is perhaps surprising since so many official and quasi-official prescriptions relating to the curriculum of the primary school stress the value of children's fiction (see, for example, 4, pp. 36-37).

The major purpose of the study reported in this paper was to investigate the use of children's fiction in the primary schools of Northern Ireland. The following questions seemed particularly relevant:

* This work forms part of a sequence of research studies which began with an investigation of reading in P7 classes of Coleraine primary schools in 1983 (2, 3) and is also related to a current and complementary study of the use of fiction in secondary schools in the province. I am very grateful to the many teachers who provided detailed and thoughtful responses to the questionnaire in the study. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues Brian McGarvey, Gordon Rae, Margaret Pailing, Mary Kennedy, Wendy Lake and John Voller for their help.

† Requests for off-prints should be sent to Stuart Marriott, Faculty of Education, University of Ulster, Cromore Road, Coleraine BT52 1SA.

- (i) What information about children's fiction is currently used in schools, and what further information or other assistance is needed (if any) in order to maintain and improve classroom practice?
- (ii) What types of books and quantities of books are used by teachers with their classes, do types and/or quantities vary between teachers of P3, P5, and P7 classes, and how can such variation be characterized?
- (iii) How does teachers' use of children's fiction relate to their use of other reading material, especially reading schemes and similar publications?
- (iv) How do teachers organize children's novel and story reading, and what follow-up activities do they use?
- (v) How do teachers relate children's fiction to work in other areas of the curriculum (if at all)?

METHOD

In April 1986, a questionnaire was sent to the principals of all controlled and maintained primary schools in Northern Ireland (just over 1,000 schools). A covering letter asked the principals to answer questions relating to the whole school and then to circulate the questionnaire to teachers of P3, P5, and P7 classes, for them to respond to questions about practice in their own classrooms.

After two reminder letters later in the summer term, 376 usable questionnaire were returned. The fact that teachers were at the time engaged in a well publicized industrial dispute may have lowered the response rate somewhat, so may the fact that many schools had been circulated with another substantial questionnaire only a week or two before mine.

Principals were asked to provide (i) basic contextual information about the characteristics of their school (e.g., size, type, location), (ii) an indication of the sources of information regarding children's books used within the school, (iii) an assessment of whether such information was sufficient and/or relevant to their needs, and (iv) their opinion of how the accessibility and relevance of information could be improved, if at all.

Teachers of target classes were asked to provide details of (i) the basic reading scheme or schemes and any supplementary reading material used in the classroom, (ii) names of novels and stories used with children by the teachers, (iii) the organization of novel and story reading in the classroom, (iv) follow up activities related to the texts used, and (v) the use of

novels and stories in the context of other curriculum areas.

It should be noted that in this and succeeding sections figures are presented as percentages of responses to particular questions, not as percentages of the total number of responding schools.

According to the responses from principals practically all schools (99%) cater for five to eleven-year old children (N=363) and 87% are co-educational (N=330). Schools are very varied in terms of size and catchment area, from very small schools, often in rural areas, to large schools often in urban areas. Broadly speaking, the range of schools that responded to the questionnaire is similar to the overall pattern of school size in Northern Ireland recorded in official statistics (1), except that the smallest schools are slightly under-represented and the largest schools slightly over-represented in my sample.

RESULTS

Information about Children's Fiction

According to the replies from principals, the most valued sources of information about children's fiction were the Schools Library Service (highly or very highly rated by 60.1% of respondents; N=335), publisher's catalogues (49.3%; N=343), and 'other teachers' (35.4%; N=333). Least valued were journals and magazines (rated low or very low by 45.6% of respondents; N=193), bookclubs (29.1%; N=278), and bookshops (22.6%; N=297).

Although journals and magazines were not often highly rated, nevertheless 48 different titles were mentioned as significant by a total of 142 respondents. The most commonly mentioned were *Child Education* (51%), *Junior Education* (39.2%), *Spider's Web* (12.6%), and the *Times Educational Supplement* (11.9%). Specialist magazines about children's fiction (e.g., *Books for Keeps*, *Children's Literature in Education*, or locally produced material other than *Spider's Web*) were mentioned very rarely. On the whole, it seems that primary-school teachers, as generalists, read only general magazines about education, if anything.

Thirty-six other sources of information were mentioned by 168 respondents; the most common were television programmes, especially 'Booktower' (17.3%), courses (9.5%), and newspapers (8.3%).

The majority of respondents thought that the information available was both sufficient and relevant (66 6%, N=323) although a sizeable minority (23%) felt that neither was true. Suggestions for more or better information were provided by 112 respondents, most commonly that publishers should provide more or better information (31 3%), that better information regarding age and characteristics of target children should be provided (23 2%), that practising teachers' views of particular titles should be made available (19 6%), and that the Schools Library Service should provide more adequate information (17 9%).

Reading Schemes and Supplementary Reading Material

Teachers from almost all schools listed the published reading scheme(s) they used. No respondent stated that he or she did not, as a matter of policy, use such a scheme.

Eighty-nine different publications were mentioned by at least one respondent each, although the less common schemes, when listed, usually appeared to be used as supplements to one or two familiar main schemes. For example, one of the less popular schemes, 'Breakthrough to Literacy', mentioned by one or more respondents from 7 8% of schools, was on only one occasion the sole scheme in use, and in many other cases was clearly used as a supplement to other more traditional schemes. In contrast, the most popular schemes were quite often used as the only or, even more frequently, main scheme.

Respondents from most schools listed publications specifically used for supplementary reading purposes, in the great majority of cases, several publications were listed and the spread of titles (194 in all) was much greater than for reading schemes.

For both schemes and supplementary material, a sizeable proportion (between half and three quarters) of respondents mentioning any particular publication also specifically praised it, very few respondents made negative comments about any of the reading material they used.

Although the 'Reading 360' scheme is very popular, it is notable that it is particularly often used within the largest (52 6%) and the most urban (47 6%) rather than in the smallest (33 1%) and most rural (37 4%) of schools. The exact opposite is true of more traditional schemes such as 'Ladybird', which is disproportionately popular in the smallest and most rural schools. It is not possible to be sure about the reasons for this, it

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGES OF SCHOOLS USING READING SCHEMES
AND SUPPLEMENTARY READING MATERIAL

Schemes Title	% of schools (N=372)	Supplementary Material Title	% of schools (N=356)
Reading 360	14.4	Wide Range Readers	52.8
Wide Range Readers	34.7	Reading 360	26.1
Happy Venture	23.4	Ladybird	21.6
Ladybird	23.1	Puffin/Young Puffin	15.4
Through the Rainbow	20.4	SRA	14.9
Link-Up	11.8	Through the Rainbow	12.6
Kathy and Mark	11.3	New Interest	10.1

may be that smaller schools find it financially difficult to invest in an expensive new scheme such as 'Reading 360' as quickly as larger schools.

The 'Wide Range Readers' feature prominently in the list of schemes, but this may be slightly misleading as they are almost always regarded as appropriate for older (i.e., P5 or P7) children, rather than as an initial reading scheme. Nevertheless, the popularity of these publications in primary schools is truly phenomenal, and even more so if one adds on the associated material often mentioned as supplementary reading, such as 'New Interest' (10.1%), 'More Interest' (5.1%), and 'Reading On' (2.0%).

Fiction in Schools

The questionnaire asked teachers of P3, P5, and P7 classes to list the novels and short stories they used with children, in each case dividing titles between those regarded as appropriate for 'good', 'average', and 'poor' readers. Many respondents listed not only titles of individual books, but collective works such as 'all the Roald Dahl books' or 'the Narnia series' or, inevitably, the 'Wide Range Readers'. In addition, some respondents listed titles for 'all' the children of a particular age range without separation into those deemed suitable for 'good', 'average', or 'poor' readers. Thus the picture is somewhat complex, and even more so when the large number of different titles and other works mentioned (over 1,500 in all) are taken into account. Table 2 presents the salient features of the responses. Very vague responses, such as 'library books' or 'paper-

TABLE 2
NUMBERS OF TEACHERS CHOOSING VARIOUS BOOKS
BY GRADE LEVEL

Book Title	Type of reader				Total	% of Teachers
	Good	Avg	Poor	All		
<i>P3 Teachers (N=291)</i>						
Easy Reading (S) ¹ (Ladybird)	22	23	32	3	80	27 5
I Can Read (S) (Puffin)	15	25	15	2	57	19 6
Read It Yourself (S) (Ladybird)	12	22	19	4	57	19 6
Nippers (S) (Macmillan)	7	9	11	0	27	9 3
Janet and John (S) (Nisbet)	11	5	7	0	23	7 9
Starters (S) (Macdonald)	9	8	4	0	21	7 2
Breakthrough to Lit (S) (Longmans)	2	4	12	2	20	6 9
Fantastic Mr Fox (Dahl)	14	3	1	1	19	6 5
Link Up (S) (Holmes McDougall)	8	4	3	1	16	5 5
The Magic Finger (Dahl)	10	3	1	1	15	5 2
<i>P5 Teachers (N=343)</i>						
Charlie and Chocolate Factory (Dahl)	58	25	4	3	90	26 2
Charlotte's Web (White)	51	14	6	8	79	23 0
James and the Giant Peach (Dahl)	32	8	7	5	52	15 2
Wide Range Readers (S) (Oliver & Boyd)	7	21	20	3	51	14 9
Danny the Champion (Dahl)	27	12	3	6	48	14 0
Fantastic Mr Fox (Dahl)	10	17	14	2	43	12 5
Stig of the Dump (King)	31	5	0	0	36	10 5
The Lion Witch and Wardrobe (Lewis)	22	10	1	1	34	9 9
George's Marvellous Medicine (Dahl)	13	9	8	1	31	9 0
'Roald Dahl's books'	13	8	3	6	30	8 7
<i>P7 Teachers (N=345)</i>						
The Silver Sword (Serraillier)	51	31	2	6	90	26 1
Charlotte's Web (White)	15	20	14	3	52	15 1
Stig of the Dump (King)	8	25	12	2	47	13 6
Danny the Champion (Dahl)	12	15	15	3	45	13 0
Charlie and Chocolate Factory (Dahl)	7	20	12	0	39	11 3
'Roald Dahl's books'	8	11	12	4	35	10 1
Tom Sawyer (Twain)	23	7	2	2	34	9 9
I am David (Holm)	22	10	0	2	34	9 9
The Railway Children (Nesbit)	22	5	1	2	30	8 7
The Lion Witch and Wardrobe (Lewis)	15	9	5	0	29	8 4

¹ S indicates a series

backs' have been omitted; otherwise, the ten most commonly listed titles and series for each age-group are included. In this table, both the number of teachers listing a title and (in the final column) the percentage of teachers listing a title are provided.

A number of interesting features emerge from examination of Table 2. First of all, it is clear that the responses of P3 teachers were different from the others. Fewer P3 teachers responded to the question and comments such as 'no such books used' were quite frequent. Those teachers that did respond often clearly thought that material associated with or arising from reading schemes constituted a sufficient and adequate reading diet. Thus, apart from the two Roald Dahl books, individual titles were not frequently mentioned. Particularly notable was the absence of picture books from the list of most popular titles/series for P3 children and in fact no picture book came anywhere near general popularity. Titles and series by authors such as Burningham, Briggs, Sendak, Hutchins, Carle, Biro, and Hughes were rarely listed. This is perhaps a pity given the range and generally high quality of modern picture books but, of course, they are relatively expensive to purchase compared to titles in the Ladybird series.

A striking feature of the responses was the ubiquitous popularity particularly among teachers of P5 classes of Roald Dahl, author of no less than six of the ten most commonly listed books. Teachers clearly view his irreverent humour as very relevant to mid-primary school children and his work appears to form a bridge between the structured reading materials of P3 and the more substantial novels of P7.

In P7 classes, the most common titles were more varied than in P5; Serraillier's *The silver sword* was remarkably popular. One oddly neglected genre was fiction written by Irish authors or set in Ireland, north or south. Only Walter Macken's *Island of the great yellow ox* and *Flight of the Doves* were occasionally mentioned; other titles and authors (e.g., Lynch, Sefton/Waddell, McBratney, Dillon, McCaughran, Lingard) were very rare.

Finally, and this is difficult to demonstrate from the tables but is an overall impression, while many respondents demonstrated awareness and use of a wide and varied selection of titles, the majority of responses were rather narrow. Frequently, only one or two texts were mentioned, nearly always the very common ones. For teachers of P7 children, for example, in addition to the titles mentioned above the pool of popular books included *The secret garden*, *Carrie's war*, *Watership down*, *Wind in the*

willows, and *The turbulent term of Tyke Tiler* For many teachers, then, the titles listed in the tables plus a few more do not seem to be 'first among equals' as it were, but the total range of books from which one or two specific titles are chosen

Organization

Respondents were asked to indicate how they organized novel and story reading in the classroom Some 86 different organizational and managerial strategies were listed by teachers, often idiosyncratically related to the demands of particular groups of children However, some strategies were very common and Table 3 lists those mentioned by 1 in 10 of all respondents

Inevitably these strategies, have a rather bland look, they are the bread-and butter of teachers' professional life Looking at the responses as a whole, however, a variety of other ideas were evident, if less common For example, some of the more unusual practices were 'partner reading' (i.e., two children reading to each other) (0.4%), teacher *telling* stories (2.1%), the use of parents in classroom reading activities (2.1%), and a variety of record-keeping practices (8.0%) However, one slight surprise

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGES OF TEACHERS REPORTING VARIOUS NOVEL AND STORY READING STRATEGIES BY GRADE LEVEL

Strategy	P3 (N=309)	P5 (N=338)	P7 (N=339)	All (N=986)
Teacher reads to whole class	62.1	56.8	50.1	56.2
Use of class library	34.0	35.5	29.2	32.9
Group reading	25.9	25.7	26.8	26.2
Class silent reading	18.1	31.4	27.7	26.0
Discussion of story	16.8	26.6	30.1	24.7
Reading as homework	22.6	19.8	15.3	19.2
Reading around the class	14.5	16.9	19.2	16.9
Individual reading	10.4	11.8	17.7	13.4
'Library period'	11.0	14.8	12.4	12.8
Reading in "free" time	16.5	10.7	8.6	11.4
Use of school library	8.4	11.8	10.3	10.2

was that the use of audio-visual materials was rarely mentioned. Among the materials mentioned were radio (1.0%), tape-recorders (3.9%), filmstrips (0.1%), television (0.6%), and video (0.4%).

Follow-up Activities Based on Reading

Respondents were asked to say whether novels and stories were used as a basis for follow-up activities related to the text. Even more than in the previous section, a huge variety of follow-up activities were suggested, no less than 114 in all. Many were interesting and unusual, but the most commonly used (by 10% of teachers or more) are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4
PERCENTAGES OF TEACHERS REPORTING
VARIOUS FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES, BY GRADE LEVEL

Strategy	P3 (N=252)	P5 (N=300)	P7 (N=310)	All (N=862)
Writing book reviews	15.9	40.7	50.6	37.0
“Creative writing”	34.1	31.3	29.6	31.2
Artistic illustrations	36.5	23.0	20.0	25.9
Written accounts of characters	17.5	29.7	25.8	24.7
Discussion of text	21.8	16.7	19.0	19.0
Dramatization of text	23.8	15.3	18.4	18.9
Use text in other curriculum areas	18.7	14.0	14.8	15.7
Vocabulary and comprehension work	15.1	15.0	11.9	13.9
Description and summaries of text	11.5	10.7	11.9	11.4

The range of follow-up activities was rather more varied than appears from the table. Some of the more unusual responses were the use of cloze procedures (5.7%), making maps and plans of the locations of stories (0.7%), writing to authors (1.3%), and constructing a flow diagram of the sequence of events in a story (1.0%). Once again, however, the use of audio-visual materials featured rather infrequently: tape-recorders 0.8%, television 1.7%, radio 0.3%, filmstrips 0.1%, video and film 0.3%, and computers 0.8 percent. A number of teachers (4.1%) cautioned against the over-use of follow-up activities. They clearly have a point; it is possible for a story to be submerged under a welter of activities.

Linking Reading with Other Areas of the Curriculum

Finally, the questionnaire asked what links with other areas of the curriculum (e.g., history) had been established. Rather fewer teachers responded to this than to other questions. Of a total of 51 suggestions, six links were mentioned by 10% or more of respondents (Table 5). Other links with music, sport, science, and even woodwork, among others were suggested, but the general impression was that many teachers did not use novels and stories across the curriculum at all and others did so infrequently, indeed, several teachers cautioned against such use, feeling that it detracted from children's enjoyment of the story, which should be the first consideration.

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGES OF TEACHERS REPORTING LINKING NOVEL AND
STORY READING WITH OTHER AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM,
BY GRADE LEVEL

Link	P3 (N=210)	P5 (N=262)	P7 (N=271)	All (N=743)
Link with History	28 6	17 2	67 9	38 9
Link with topics and projects	40 0	38 9	36 5	38 4
Link with Geography	16 7	25 5	31 4	25 4
Link with Art and/or Craft	25 2	17 9	12 9	19 9
Link with Nature Study	30 5	15 3	8 5	17 1
Link with Religious Education	12 9	10 7	9 2	10 8

DISCUSSION

One respondent very reasonably enquired 'To what ends will such info be directed - will the results be given to primary schools, the inspectorate, the press? What practical long and short term recommendations do you envisage?'

Although this paper is intended as an objective summary of the evidence, clearly this work has implications for classroom practice. But perhaps more important than these comments is the possibility that this account may provide starting points for teachers themselves to reflect on and perhaps vary their classroom practice. Such a process can be persuas-

ively argued to be of much more relevance than a series of supposedly authoritative recommendations from a researcher who is necessarily distanced from day-to-day interaction with children in classrooms. For this reason, no prescriptive advice is offered though possibilities are implicit in the remarks that follow.

It is noticeable that the three most valued sources of information about children's fiction (Schools Library Service, publishers catalogues, and 'other teachers') are all easily accessible to teachers, whereas bookshops are not available in many areas, and bookclubs, journals, and magazines require positive choices by teachers to have any effect. Busy teachers, it seems, do not often have the time to go out of their way to seek information. It was, however, rather surprising to find that neither public libraries nor 'pupils' were often highly rated as sources of information. The case of bookclubs is interesting since, although they were rated low by many teachers, they were also rated highly by a substantial minority (24.5%; N=278). It is not possible to be sure, but it seems likely that teachers who actively make use of bookclubs value them highly.

It is clear that teachers' judgments of the value of fiction in the primary classroom are very varied. At one extreme, some teachers reject the use of such material altogether on the grounds that the enjoyment of stories is a luxury for which there is no time or place in schools whose function it is to equip children with basic skills ('The novel approach used in some schools tends to place emphasis on characters, plots and opinions which may be of no consequence'). On the other hand, some teachers provided details of cross-curricular and even whole-school events ('Bookweek') in which children's fiction has a central and honoured place. Most respondents' views lay between these extremes and, as a broad generalization, one could say that fiction plays a significant role in the curriculum of the primary school, especially for older children.

Throughout the primary school, but particularly in the earlier years, teachers believe in the importance of structured and highly organized reading through the use of schemes and supplementary material. In some cases, this may lead to the devaluing of other forms and types of reading. For example, some teachers of P3 classes clearly feel that fiction has little to offer. This may be one reason, other than financial, why stories in general and picture books in particular seem to be rather less frequently used in P3 than in other classes.

In addition to many teachers' concentration on the use of schemes and similar material, the range of 'children's fiction in-use' is sometimes rather narrow. This of course is understandable, but it may lead to a situation in which children's experience of fiction is rather limited in range and style. For example, Roald Dahl is a very fine writer but, from this point of view, it is perhaps regrettable that his work is so dominant.

In contrast, the wide variety of interesting follow up activities (and to a lesser extent organizational practices) reported by teachers was notable. In the space available, it has not been possible to provide much detail, but the collective ideas, knowledge, and practices of teachers could be made more widely accessible within the profession, to the benefit of all.

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