

## PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

# Choosing to teach with quality literature: from reading (through talk) to writing



## Background

Teaching is an intellectual exercise where teachers make pedagogic choices according to the context in which they teach and the students they have. In the face of media hype and policy debates about the need for increased testing to improve literacy outcomes, teachers need to take a stand on their approach to the teaching of reading and writing, informed by research and backed up with evidence from their own practices. To develop [agency](#) in response to such pressures teachers need to be

*reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change*

Donaldson, 2011, p. 4

Therefore, choosing to teach with quality literature is an example of professional intent.



Alyson Simpson, the Pro Dean of Education at the University of Sydney, presents findings from a professional learning project designed to assist teachers when selecting quality literature to support the teaching of reading and writing in the *NSW English K-10 syllabus*

This paper presents findings from a professional learning project designed to assist teachers when selecting quality literature to support the teaching of reading and writing in the [NSW English K-10 syllabus](#) (2012). It proposes a pathway leading from reading through talk to writing as a way of supporting student learning and addressing the challenge of being an agentive professional. Using the results of the recent TARDIS study (Simpson, 2016a) and other international research from the UK, Canada and USA as the basis for its stance, it addresses the importance of choosing children's literature for teaching reading through an exploration of a dialogic inquiry approach (Simpson, 2016b; Wells, 1999) to professional development. It provides an example of a school based approach to developing teachers' productive learning experiences gained from engaging with the nexus between reading quality literature and teaching writing. Commentary from teachers recorded during collegial dialogue helps contextualise theory in practice demonstrating the through thread that connects reading, writing, responding and composing.

## Introduction

To work with literary texts a teacher needs to demonstrate specific pedagogic and personal knowledge as well as take a stance in a political context that emphasises achievement of literacy skills as a key assessment of learning (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell and Safford, 2014). [Recent NAPLAN results](#) reveal marginal improvement in reading scores but indicate that more work is needed to reverse the downward trend in results for writing. An agentive response to these results would be for teachers to build literacy programs based on quality literature in order to provide rich models for student reading and writing.

The use of demanding literary texts for the teaching of reading and writing ensures that students develop not only skilled reading practices but also more engaged responses to text with the additional benefit of improved reading test scores (Dombey, 2009). However, burgeoning international emphasis on improving test results has impacted heavily on teacher agency in some countries, limiting their approaches to the teaching of reading. For example, the recent [policy directive in England](#) to mandate systematic synthetic phonics in the early years of teaching reading (Department for Education, 2013) has compelled teachers to use easily decodable texts rather than literature (Simpson, 2013). In these classes the potential of teaching reading with quality literature is precluded (Ellis and Moss, 2014). This is problematic, as a tight focus on teaching reading, mainly through skills-based approaches, frames students' experience of learning to read within limited concepts of literacy leading to lack of engagement with reading (Barrett, 2009; Bearne and

Styles, 2010; Wyse and Styles, 2007). In Australia, past commentary [PISA](#) results in the years prior to 2009, suggested that decline in critical reading skills was partly due to schools focusing more on basic achievement levels and not so *much on the development of sophisticated reading of complex text* (McGaw, 2010, p. 5).

Fortunately, literature is now positioned at the core of the [Australian Curriculum: English](#) as well as in the [NSW English K-10 syllabus](#) (2012). Teachers have been given the mandate to base their teaching of English on quality literature. The *NSW English K-10 syllabus* requires teachers to incorporate critical as well as personal response to literary texts in the teaching of reading and writing, achieving a balance between affect and intellect to support higher-order thinking. However, the challenge remains that not all teachers are familiar with a wide range of quality literature that could inform their teaching, and not all teachers know how to approach an unknown literary text and explore its potential for teaching both reading and writing (Cremin et al., 2014). Therefore, it is vital that teachers are provided with opportunities that support them to develop personal engagement with, and critical understanding of, quality literature.

The aim of the research reported in this paper is to examine how interactive engagement with quality literature supports the development of teachers' pedagogic agency designing learning experiences connecting reading with the teaching of writing. The study explores how texts exhibiting literary qualities form the basis of productive learning experiences through two research questions.

1. How does quality literature scaffold productive exploration of the *NSW English K-10 syllabus*?
2. What impact does working with a dialogic inquiry approach to quality literature have on teachers' pedagogic agency?

## Research informing the design of this project

Quality literature and good pedagogy work best hand in hand (Gibson and Ewing, 2011; Miller and Saxton, 2004), hence the need for teachers to have professional confidence to plan lessons from literary texts (Jenkinson, 2012). Varying definitions of quality literature exist, however, the commonalities amongst these definitions highlights:

- the power of language
- the existence of complex story worlds that engage reader's imagination
- the careful craft of authors and illustrators whose creations are to be enjoyed as well as appreciated aesthetically.

For example, author Libby Gleeson defines quality literature as texts that have [layers and depth ... the use of language that is rich and challenging](#). Her opinion is echoed by others, such as poet Michael Rosen who notes that authors write books to intrigue, entertain, educate, amuse, excite, stir up, challenge (Rosen in Powling, 2005). Researchers also provide definitions of quality of literature identifying them as texts that *promote sensory awareness, develop emotional sensitivity and provide a rich linguistic environment* (Saxby, 1993, p. 58).

Quality literature contrasts with the texts purpose written for the teaching of reading known as readers, which commonly use a limited vocabulary set and often lack complexity in narrative (Krashen, 2004).

*The great bear*, by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder (1995), is an example of quality literature (Figure 1). It was chosen as the stimulus for the professional learning project reported in this paper because it is the kind of literary text that can stand up to multiple readings and provide richly rewarding reading experiences continually surprising the reader (and often the teacher) with new revelations at each reading. It is the story of a circus bear who lives in a cage. The bear is taken to a village where she is taunted and made to perform for a crowd of villagers. In the telling of the story the interplay of text and image is crucial to the tension created. To interpret the narrative, the reader must pay close attention to both. It is nominated as an example of quality literature on the basis of its aesthetic appeal and its potential for leading readers into a deeply engaging reading experience. The fact that it won the Bologna Ragazzi Award for Fiction for Infants, a major international literary award, in 2000, is a bonus.

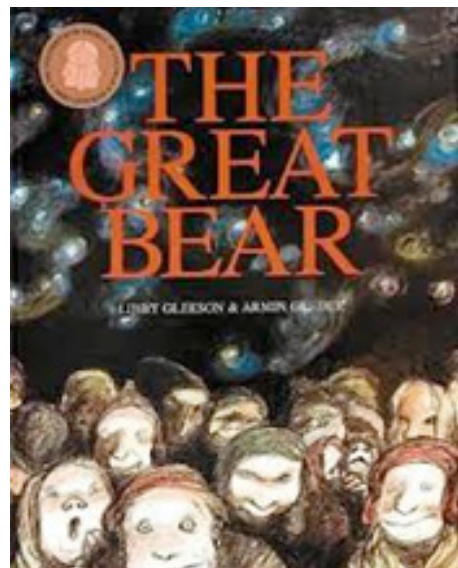


Figure 1 Book cover: *The great bear* by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder

Research has shown that the best way to help students learn about literary texts such as *The great bear* is to increase teachers' knowledge about literary

texts (Cremin et al., 2008). To build students' critical awareness, teachers need to be able to design learning experiences that provide opportunities for students to respond imaginatively with aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, teachers need to know how to make informed choices about the texts they use for the teaching of reading and writing. They need to know how to recognise the potential of a literary text to engage readers. Yet teachers continually face pressures on their professional autonomy to make such choices. Studies show that *contextual influences guide the majority of teachers' text choices* (Jorgenson-Hull, 2015, p. 26). Despite parameters, such as mandated curriculum, limited resources and other local constraints, teachers need to resist challenges that stand in the way of embedding children's literature in their teaching (Simpson, 2016a). When teachers work in collegial groups with other reading teachers, who act as a *catalyst of experts* (Jenkinson, 2012, p. 5), they will develop agentive action. The pathway is set to quality teaching when teachers have:

- direct resourcing through professional development
- time for private reading
- opportunities for dialogue
- the support of an expert teacher librarian
- access to a library of quality literary texts.

Many teachers recognise that children's literature can be a catalyst for inspiring agentive teaching. Research clearly shows that when strong conceptualisation of the reading process and good teacher knowledge

about rich texts are combined the result will be a richer reading experience for students with better learning outcomes (Gamble, 2007; Krashen, 2004; Roche, 2015). The freedom to choose quality literary texts affords teachers opportunities to shape teaching about English to suit the needs of students in their classrooms with the added benefit of creating high engagement. However, as choosing appropriate texts for a learning context is an example of professional judgement (Cullinan, 2000), for some teachers, this core strand in the Australian Curriculum is proving to be an unexpected challenge.

For many years the teaching of reading has focused on the pedagogies used for teaching rather than the body of literature that should be used to inspire the process. In the past, many schools purchased sets of benchmarked readers with pre-prepared comprehension activities. These materials did not require teachers to develop confidence in planning lessons from literary texts or to build complex knowledge about children's literature (Jenkinson, 2012). Even though some teachers have limited knowledge of literary texts beyond well-known titles, and limited time to learn about new books, the investment of time spent planning with literature at the core of learning reaps multiple rewards for teachers and students. Hence the call for teachers to become reading teachers, that is teachers who read, as well as teach reading (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff and Olson, 2003).

A second challenge exists for teachers who wish to focus on literature as the starting point of their planning. Despite curriculum mandates giving literature high status, the current emphasis in policy and standardised testing, on a constrained set of

literacy skills, risks shifting teachers' attention away from the teaching of English as a broad discipline. Although teachers have their students' best interests at heart, as politicians and educators often work with competing conceptualisations of literacy (Simpson, 2013; Ellis and Moss, 2014), teachers often find themselves caught between policy and what research shows to be good practice. In some contexts, perceived restrictions on teaching have led to teaching to the test (Lloyd, 2011). However, research clearly demonstrates that when teachers follow prescriptive approaches to teaching reading to improve test scores, rather than plan lessons based on quality texts that engage their students, the end result is *possible compromise of student learning* (Plunkett and Dyson, 2011 in Simpson 2016a, p. 2). The double edge to this challenge is that as teachers increase emphasis on literacy without a connection to literary texts, students lose engagement with reading. Unsurprisingly, when the teaching of skills and subskills takes precedence over time made for independent reading, reading for pleasure diminishes (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell and Safford, 2009). It is important to note that reading for pleasure is not just an added extra to be encouraged after basic skills are accomplished. Rather, as research shows that reading for pleasure is related to the development of good reading habits that cut across issues of socio economic status (Cremin et al., 2014; Simpson, 2016a, p. 11), it should be seen as a primary goal for teachers to achieve. As the author Jackie French notes, *the secret to getting kids reading is to give them books that absorb them ... The kids have problems reading not understanding!* (French in Simpson, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, to counteract the impact of the globalised

*the secret to getting kids reading is to give them books that absorb them ... The kids have problems reading not understanding!*

fascination with reductionist measures of counting only what can be easily counted, teachers need to be supported to learn not only *the how* of teaching reading but also the what (Donaldson, 2015, p. 58). Teachers need to learn how to choose appropriate literary texts that will serve their teaching reading focus. For it is books – proper *books in all their richness, completeness and variety that lie at the heart of real achievement in both reading and writing* (Powling et al., 2005, p. 26).

The previous quote introduces the third challenge taken on by teachers who wish to inspire their students, not only to become good readers, but also to become confident composers through the reading of literary texts. For good teaching practice based on quality literature not only encourages deeper comprehension, but also stimulates richer vocabulary development (Krashen, 2004). Literary texts are a far richer base to explore than other texts as they reward revisiting and close study. Quality literature is *well crafted, artistic, multi-layered and diverse, and prompts the deep learning that students deserve and are capable of* (Greene, 2016, p. 29). Therefore, students need learning experiences to help them discover the ways texts are created so that they can experiment with textual concepts in

their own composing. Teachers need to develop the ability to create a logical pathway of learning experiences that engages readers with literary texts, provokes readers to respond to the author's craft and provides opportunities for readers to take on the role of emerging writers (Barrs and Cork, 2001; Cremin, Mottram, Bearne and Goodwin, 2008).

Again, research supports this stance as studies have shown the positive results that are supported when students learn about writing, not by sticking to *a template or a set of instructions, but as a result of imaginative engagement with a powerful text* (Dombey, 2006). Where teacher professionalism is alive and well, students are commonly found reading books, not text extracts (Simpson, 2013). They may be encouraged to make personal meaning through creative, dialogic approaches to teaching (Simpson, 2016b) and are given time to respond critically and aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1978) through talk leading to writing or some kind of multimodal form of composition. For example, through the use of drama strategies a student may embody the experience of a character spurring them to write from a point of view other than their own (Cremin and Myhill, 2011; Miller and Saxton, 2004). Teaching writing through reading in this way is not limited to a rigid (and decontextualised) progression from constrained skills (decoding/phonemic awareness) to unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005, p. 201). Rather, it takes a deliberate stance to introduce readers to whole texts, through thought provoking dialogue that provides the kinds of authentic reading experiences, which prompt readers to play in the meaning making spaces good literature leaves readers to fill (Williams, 1991). Teaching

writing in this way incites creativity and resists trends to *dumb down* the profession and the learning experience.

### Teaching writing using English concepts

The NSW *English K-10 syllabus* provides a structure that supports teachers to plan learning experiences that address the challenges outlined above where reading, responding and composing present a logical trajectory that can be followed from reading to writing (BOSTES, 2012).

A newly developed resource for teachers frames up a different lens on the English syllabus through the use of **concepts**. The concepts approach to teaching English sets out knowledge of English (what students learn about) and the ways this knowledge is acquired (the ways students learn to use the concepts). The synthesis of concepts and processes from the syllabus documentation is designed to help teachers plan as well as develop deep understanding of the conceptual basis of English. The list of concepts includes:

- point of view
- narrative
- theme
- other terms which are associated with the features of literary texts.

Programming can be based around text choice where books are chosen *because they are good examples of the concept in use or illustrate the concept in a variety of modes* (Greene, 2016, p. 29).

For example, because of the emphasis in language and image, and the deliberate and dramatic switch of

perspective part way through *The great bear*, this text is particularly suitable to the exploration of point of view. According to the description of point of view as an English concept – *Point of view in a text is a device which allows subject matter to be foregrounded or distanced and therefore it invites certain attitudes and feelings in response to the text*. Experimenting with Point of view allows students to explore other ways of seeing the text (Greene, 2016, p. 29). The English

concepts sequence (Figure 2) recommends an approach to point of view where it is introduced in ES1 (Foundation or Kindergarten) and then re-explored for deeper understanding at each stage until Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10).

Stage	Progression of conceptual understanding- <i>Point of View</i>
<b>Stage 5</b>	Students understand that <i>Point of view</i> is the position from which the subject matter of a text is designed to be perceived. Students learn that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narrators may be omniscient, limited, deceptive, masking the ideology of the text</li> <li>• there may be multiple narrators offering different points of view</li> <li>• <i>Point of view</i> may be through a focaliser</li> <li>• a narrator may adopt a satirical tone</li> <li>• the <i>Point of view</i> can create an emotional response</li> <li>• <i>Point of view</i> controls the meaning of a text and may be resisted.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4</b>	Students understand that choice of <i>Point of view</i> shapes the meanings, the values and the effect of the text. Students learn that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a narrator can tell a story, comment on a story or break out from the story to address the responder directly</li> <li>• <i>Point of view</i> is a device for persuading</li> <li>• <i>Point of view</i> directs the responder to the values in the text.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3</b>	Students understand that the narrator is different from the author and that <i>Point of view</i> positions the reader to respond in a particular way. Students learn that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a narrator may be inside or outside the story, in fiction and non-fiction texts</li> <li>• <i>Point of view</i> can create a more personal or distant relationship with the responder, evoking degrees of empathy or indifference</li> <li>• the author chooses the way a story is told and chooses language appropriate to that purpose in the different modes and media.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2</b>	Students learn that <i>Point of view</i> influences interpretation of texts. Students understand that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• different points of view affect a story</li> <li>• different modes and media convey <i>Point of view</i> in different ways</li> <li>• meanings of stories may change when viewed through the eyes of different characters in the story or different responders to the story</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 1</b>	Students know that stories may be narrated through a character's <i>Point of view</i> .
<b>ES1</b>	Students recognise that different voices are represented in texts.

Figure 2 Progression of conceptualisation for *Point of view*

The list of processes in the [English textual concepts](#) resource attempts to capture the actions students may undertake when reading, responding and composing. It includes:

- Understanding – making connections, asking questions and demonstrating new knowledge by responding and composing
- Connecting – recognising relationships between texts, and between texts and our own lives, which depends on awareness of personal framing and linguistic patterns
- Reflecting – thinking about what they have learned, articulating one’s own processes of responding to and composing texts
- Experimenting – manipulating language, form, mode and medium imaginatively.

[Editor’s note: See [English textual concepts](#) website for full list].

In the dialogic inquiry process reported in this article, the concept of point of view was chosen by the researcher as a way of helping teachers explore how authors and illustrators draw the reader into a relationship of empathy with certain characters. Through close reading of the text, the teachers recognised how point of view constructs *an attitude towards the subject matter in a text which the reader, listener or viewer is invited to adopt* (Greene 2016, p. 29). As it helped them understand, connect to, reflect on and experiment with a quality text, the inquiry process led teachers to examine how literary features, such as point of view, support readers’ engagement with text from reading through talk and into writing.

### Methodology: Using a dialogic inquiry process to prompt response to literary text

The study was located in the social context of school based professional development and took an interpretivist methodological approach to empirical inquiry supporting the exploration of complex phenomena in everyday life (Yin, 2009). The researcher was alert to contextual influences, such as the challenges made by standardised literacy testing on teacher agency, as well as the power of shared meaning making through dialogue (Simpson, 2016b; Wells, 1999). The study, therefore, explored the potential of quality literature to stimulate teachers’ pedagogic reflection on imaginative and aesthetic responses in reading and writing as framed in dialogic inquiry. View Neil Mercer’s *Exploratory talk* to find out more about dialogic inquiry (Figure 3).

The research reported here used descriptive case study (Yin, 2012) as a method to examine teachers’ experience as they engaged in professional dialogue with peers around a focus literary text. The researcher collected qualitative data in a multiple case study design working with participants from primary schools across urban Sydney and Melbourne, including field notes and spoken and written teacher reflections. In each of these contexts the researcher replicated the same sequence of activities based on discussions of the focus text, *The great bear* (Gleeson, 1995). The illustrative data samples reported in this paper are taken from a case study school in Sydney.

In each case study context, the same staged dialogic protocol was used to lead teachers through a series of reflective activities as a way of examining their appreciation of quality literature. The learning sequence on which the protocol is based can be used by teachers and students and is designed to ensure exploration of children’s literature by adults or children leading to quality learning outcomes.

#### The protocol:

- Step one: From reading
- Step two: Through talk about language
- Step three: Through talk in role
- Step four: Through talk about music
- Step five: To writing
- Step six: To reflection



Figure 3 *Exploratory talk - Professor Neil Mercer*

## Findings: Exploring *The great bear*



Figure 4 *The great bear by Libby Gleeson & Armin Greder*

As this paper is focused on describing the dialogic inquiry process as well as discussing its impact in general, the findings are reported as episodic narratives. Although only brief snap shots of data are provided in this paper, close analysis of the dialogue reveals teachers' developing understanding of the text. Thus, as each step in the process supports the same interpretation, the findings demonstrate *converging lines of evidence* (Yin, 2012, p. 13).

### Step one: From reading

Mirroring the philosophy behind teaching with literary texts recommended to use with students, teachers were given the chance to first hear the focus text read and view its images before any critique was attempted or response activity prompted. Each listener was given time to form their own personal response to the text before a section of the text was read again while the images of the double page spread were shown. Teachers were then prompted to become more engaged in the narrative first in terms of considering how they related personally to the characters. They were asked to think:

- where they were
- what they were looking at
- how they felt
- what they knew.

After considering their personal response, teachers were asked further critical questions to help them see how the strategic use of language and image, that the author and illustrator employed, positioned them in the narrative. Through these conversations, teachers were drawn to pay attention to the potential of this particular literary text to teach about point of view. A typical sample of teachers' oral responses follows.

*The pictures start small.*

*We see the characters coming closer.*

*The bear is shown off to one side in black and white.*

*I was surprised by the change in the pictures, the angry villagers were looking at me and then I was looking at the bear.*

*I want to know what happens next.*

### Step two: Through talk about language

After looking closely at a selection of the focus text, first teachers were asked to brainstorm their thoughts about how the language and the image contributed to their engagement with the narrative.



Sticks poke.  
Sticks prod.  
Chains yank.  
Stones strike,  
strike,  
strike.

Figure 5 From *The great bear* by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder. Text © 1995 Libby Gleeson. Illustrations © 1995 Armin Greder. Reproduced by permission of Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd

Then, teachers were asked to share with peers the particular wording that caught their attention from the double page spread. Each person was asked to give a rationale, including why they thought the language was evocative for them and how they felt about the characters as a result. After sharing a personal layer of connection, teachers were asked to consider how the language feature they noticed contributed to the shape and impact of the story. Through this discussion the teachers explored the emotional pull of language. A typical sample of teachers' oral responses follows.

*I notice the sentences have grown shorter and the emphasis has shifted from description of setting to violent action.*

*The language is threatening like the faces of the people.*

*The language has a rhythmic beat like music with a crescendo.*

### **Step three: Through talk in role**

Based on how they are feeling as a result of reading the text and viewing the images, teachers were then asked to take on the role of one of the villagers in the square. They were asked to privately consider their age, their emotion, and their empathy with the bear and signal it in their physical stance using facial expression but not movement. Using the text from the double page spread of the crowd tormenting the bear as the stimulus for a frozen tableau, teachers formed themselves silently into a scene from the village.

Each person was asked to think of what they would say to the bear or their neighbours given the chance. As each group formed and froze in place, a digital image was taken for later reference. At this stage, characters were *tapped in* to express their thoughts or teachers returned to their seats to write down their thoughts and comments for later reference. They then discussed in their groups which character they were portraying and why, to find out who was in the village that day and what their stories were. The digital images were used to prompt further discussion in terms of character portrayal as well as explanation of internal narrative. A typical sample of teachers' oral responses follows.

*I was a small child trying to look away as I was frightened.*

*I was an angry villager afraid the bear would attack my home.*

*I was late arriving and stuck at the back of the crowd so I was trying to push forward to see what all the fuss was about.*

### **Step four: Through talk about music**

As a contrast to a silent drama in role, the text also invites a musical response. For this activity teachers were asked to compose a 15 second soundscape to be played as accompaniment to the pages where the bear is being forced to dance. These double page spreads describe the sense of music building, so the music must end in a crescendo of sound when the bear roars. Teachers used the resources they had

in the room, such as keys, pencils, table tops, hands and voices. No special instruments were necessary. Teachers negotiated with their peers and composed, rehearsed and recorded their music on digital devices. The book was read again and the soundtrack was performed. (NB: Data cannot be shared from this step).

### **Step five: To writing**

The end goal of working through this kind of response sequence focusing on a particular concept was to develop stimulus for rich writing in role or an appropriate extension of the text. Therefore, the last step led teachers through an exercise to respond to the open-ended climax of the text. The second half of the book was read again. Teachers were encouraged to revisit their earlier thoughts and experiences and draw on them to inform their writing. Each person was asked to create a thought cloud, or more extended text, to add to the second last picture in the book, expressing their sense of what the bear would want to say to the villagers.

This writing exercise builds on the physical, emotional, and aesthetic responses from earlier steps and leads teachers to build on their learning from the text, as well as their understanding about the features of literary text exemplified by the author Libby Gleeson and illustrator Armin Greder. A different writing activity could have asked teachers to examine the rhythm of language patterns given to the villagers' actions and write an ending using contrasting language patterns for *The great bear's* flight. (NB: Data cannot be shared from this step).



### Step 6: Teacher's reflections

After completing the workshop, teachers were asked to reflect on their learning to examine how their engagement with the text had helped scaffold their future teaching. As the task was open ended, teachers had the chance to comment on:

- their personal experience
- how the exercise related to their sense of professional agency
- whether their appreciation of the potential of quality literature as a stimulus for learning had increased.

A typical sample of teacher comments follows.

*I am excited!*

*It is essential that students use quality literature to explore vocabulary, aspects of writing – language devices, grammar, etc.*

*Quality literature is a wonderful stimulus to engage students – it allows them time to reflect, make connections to the text, their own experiences and personal responses.*

*This approach deepens an awareness of purpose and audience.*

*I feel as if this kind of approach is really beneficial for me especially as a beginning teacher. It helps me focus closely on the text which in turn affects my lesson.*

### Discussion

The two research questions driving the study relate to the need for teachers to take an evidence based stance on the teaching of English in a complex social context where intense pressures are exerted on them (Simpson, 2016a). The study showcases how teachers benefit from involvement in collegial reflective practice taking up opportunities to inform their practice (Cremin et al., 2014). A side benefit for these teachers is increased motivation to make pedagogic choices for teaching reading and writing based on improved knowledge of quality literature (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff and Olson, 2003). The discussion following speaks to the success of the dialogic inquiry process helping teachers relate reading to writing as well as evidence of its impact on professional agency.

As the intent of the study was to give teachers experience of rich engagement with a literary text in the lead up to writing, the inquiry process emphasised that focus. Through the work achieved in Protocol Steps 1 to 5, teachers actively explored the formation of cognitive, perceptual, ideological, aesthetic and emotional awareness and learning to read text for meaning as well as textual features (Roche, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1978; Williams, 1991). After analysing teachers' responses to the inquiry process in different contexts, a set of principles is proposed that could underpin an exploration of any quality literary text.

#### Principles of response:

- engage in sensory awareness through different modes
- pay attention to language patterns and visual features

- create space to capture reflection in action as well as in thought
- use digital recordings for future learning cycles
- prompt writing that emerges from literary experience
- base assessment on authentic learning using dialogue and writing.

More than just a way of examining literary texts to discover what opportunities they offer for good teaching, these principles recommend that a text should first be experienced for its powerful narrative. Only after a story is read and appreciated as a work of creative artistry should it be critically explored for features such as those found in *The great bear*, dramatic effect of language patterns and bold symbolic landscape created in evocative visual imagery.

It is clear that the professional development response steps were designed to explore the concept of point of view through sensory engagement. What is less obvious is how the protocol aligns with NSW *English K-10 syllabus* outcomes and conceptual learning processes leading from reading to writing. The following brief summary indicates some of the ways the steps prompted this trajectory of learning.

**Drama:** response to *The great bear* through the physicality of drama positions the reader to consider their embodiment of ideological stance (Miller and Saxton, 2004). *Understanding* is derived from text and image filtered through personal engagement. By providing the learner with a digital recording that captures the ephemeral moment, the learner is prompted to *reflect* on their learning gaining

greater awareness of their action and given dialogic opportunities to justify and explain.

**Music:** response to *The great bear* through music positions the reader to create appropriate pitch/rhythm matching the emotional intensity of the scene. *Connecting* personal understanding of the narrative thread through awareness of patterns in the language of the text by extension into a musical composition allows the reader to express their comprehension.

**Writing:** response to *The great bear* through writing in role, positions the reader potentially to take the authorial stance of character insight (Cremin and Myhill, 2011). *Experimenting* with the current story demonstrates the reader's ability to comprehend and critically interpret the potential what next of the open-ended narrative.

Two of the possible English outcomes that align with this learning sequence are:

### EN3-7C

- Students learn to identify personal ideas, experiences and opinions about literary texts and discuss them with others. They learn how to recognise areas of agreement and difference, and how to develop and refine their interpretations through discussion and argument.

### EN3-1A

- Students learn how to use personal knowledge and literary texts as starting points to create imaginative writing in different forms and genres and for particular audiences. Using print, digital and online media, students develop skills that allow them to convey meaning, address significant issues and heighten engagement and impact.

[Editor's note: A unit about *The great bear* based on the Australian Curriculum suitable for Years 3 and 4 (NSW Stage 2) can be found on the [Reading Australia website](#).]

Teachers' reflective comments revealed that the inquiry process enabled them to explore the alignment of teaching writing with quality literature more closely (Dombey, 2010). Some responders spoke of the potential of quality texts in supporting learning indicating their aesthetic awareness. Others employed explicit affect in their remarks, for example, *I am excited*, to indicate their level of emotional engagement. Part of the target aim of the project was to provide teachers with a productive exploration of the NSW *English K-10 syllabus* through quality literature. The findings suggest that this goal has been met.

In addition, the study aimed to stimulate pedagogic agency. The dialogic basis of the inquiry approach was deliberately designed to lead to high levels of interaction to prompt challenging discussion (Simpson, 2016b). This strategy scaffolded peer

*The dialogic basis of the inquiry approach was deliberately designed to lead to high levels of interaction to prompt challenging discussion*

dialogue within and across stage groups, which prompted contrasting and complementary views increasing levels of complex understanding. The use of digital recordings at steps three and four supported an additional layering of critical self-awareness, as teachers examined their responses to the text in retrospect through further peer discussion.

The collection of written texts predicting a focus for future teaching was included as an iterative step providing teachers with opportunities for one final reflection. The teachers' comments provide evidence of teachers making decisions at an emergent level of pedagogic agency (Simpson, 2016a). For example, they forecast their plans for lessons justifying their choice of quality text on the basis of how such texts will address student outcomes. There is a sense from their responses that they feel empowered to explore unknown texts through a new process.

In contrast, there were very few examples of teachers commenting on the relevance of the process to their professional learning. The new scheme teacher who recognised the importance of critical reflection supported by this kind of approach was able to stand as a critical observer to her own pedagogic practice. The findings suggest that the impact of the inquiry process was not so successful in helping teachers recognise their role as agentive professionals.

## Conclusion

This paper has given an example of a dialogic inquiry process where teachers participated in professional development designed to inform their understanding of children's literature with evidence based on research into their own classroom practices. The impetus to use children's literature as the motivation to improve children's writing is based on sound principles as literary texts have the power to engage readers to read.

*Reading is the only way, the only way, we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers.*

Krashen, 2004, p. 37

It appears from the study that the process of investigating the potential of quality literature supported teachers to develop more knowledge about a small number of literary texts and the skills to investigate the potential of many others. This will support them to effectively design powerful learning experiences that make strong connections from reading to writing. It is important to note, however, that knowledge and skills are not enough for appropriate pedagogic choices to be made relevant to context and student need. Teachers need to enact agency in their daily lives to ensure that they are responding appropriately to the complexity of being professional educators (Donaldson, 2011). Choosing to teach writing through the reading of quality literature is an example of professional intent.

## References and further reading

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2016, [NAPLAN 2016 summary results](#), accessed 11 October 2016.
- Barrs, M. & Cork, V, 2001, *The reader in the writer: The links between the study of literature and writing development at Key Stage 2*, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, London
- Barrett, B. 2009, 'No Child Left Behind and the assault on teachers' professional practices and identities', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, pp.1018-1025.
- Bearne, E. & Styles, M. 2010, 'Literature for children', in D. Wyse, R. Andrews & J. Hoffman (eds), *The Routledge international handbook of English, language and literacy teaching*, Routledge, London, pp.22-29.
- BOSTES, 2012, [NSW English K-10 syllabus](#), Board of Studies Teaching & Educational Standards (BOSTES) NSW, accessed 11 October 2016.
- [Children's Book Council of Australia](#), accessed 11 October 2016.
- Commeyras, M., Bisplinghoff, B.S. & Olson, J. 2003, *Teachers as readers: perspectives on the importance of reading in teachers' classrooms and lives*, International Reading Association, Newark.
- Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Bearne, E. & Goodwin, P. 2008, 'Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp.449-464.

Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, F., Powell, S. & Safford, K. 2009, 'Teachers as readers: building communities of readers', *Literacy*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp.11-19.

Cremin, T. Mottram, M., Collins, F., Powell, S. & Safford, K. 2014, *Building communities of engaged readers: Reading for pleasure*, Routledge, London

Cremin, T. & Myhill, D. 2011, *Writing voices: Creating communities of writers*, Routledge, London:

Cullinan, B. 2000, 'Independent reading and school achievement', *School Library Media Research*, 3, pp.1-24.

Department for Education 2013, [The National Curriculum in England: framework document for consultation](#), Department for Education, UK, accessed 11 October 2016.

Dombey, H. 2006, '[Waiting for a Jamie Oliver: Beyond bog standard literacy](#)', *Books for Keeps*, No.160, September 2006, accessed 11 October 2016.

Dombey, H. 2010, 'Interaction and learning to read: Towards a dialogic approach', in D. Wyse, R. Andrews & J. Hoffman (eds), *The Routledge international handbook of English, language and literacy teaching*, Routledge, London, pp.110-121.

Dombey, H. 2009, [The simple view of reading](#), ITE English: Readings for Discussion, accessed 11 October 2016.

Donaldson, 2011, *Teaching Scotland's Future - Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland*, Scottish Government, Edinburgh.

Donaldson, G. 2015, *The Donaldson Review of Curriculum and Assessment*, The Welsh Government, Cardiff.

Ellis, S. & Moss, G. 2014, 'Ethics, education policy and research: the phonics question reconsidered', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp.241-260.

Gamble, N. 2007, 'Children's literature', in T. Cremin & H. Dombey (eds), *Handbook of primary English in initial teacher education*, UKLA, Canterbury, pp.96-114.

Gibson, R. & Ewing, R. 2011, *Transforming the curriculum through the arts*, Palgrave Macmillan, Melbourne.

Gleeson, L. & Greder, A. 1995, *The great bear*, Walker Books, NSW.

Gleeson, L. & Blackwood, F. 2015, *The Cleo stories: a friend and a pet*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

Gleeson, L. & Blackwood, F. 2014, *The Cleo stories: the necklace and the present*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

Gleeson, L. & Blackwood, F. 2014, *Go to sleep Jessie*, Little Hare, Richmond, VIC.

Gleeson, L., '[What makes a good book for young kids](#)', *Schoolatoz*, Department of Education, NSW, accessed 11 October 2016.

Greene, P. 2016, '[Finding the heart of English](#)', *Scan*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp.26-31, accessed 11 October 2016.

Jenkinson, A. 2012, 'A second golden age of Canadian children's literature', *Booknews*, Summer 2012, vol. 5, no. 3, pp.4-5.

Jorgenson-Hull, O. 2015, *Contextual influences on primary teachers' text selections*, unpublished honours thesis.

KOALA, '[Kids Own Australian Literature Awards](#)', accessed 11 October 2016.

Krashen, S. 2004, *The power of reading: Insights from research*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

Lloyd, S.M. 2011, *Beyond sentiment: A descriptive case study of elementary school teachers' experiences selecting children's literature for read-alouds*, University of Northern Colorado, Ann Arbor.

[Magpies: talking about books for children](#), accessed 11 October 2016.

McGaw, B. 2010, *Reducing the impact of social background in education: Fond hope or realistic aim?*, Murdoch Lecture, Perth, 17 March 2010.

Miller, C. & Saxton, J. 2004, *Into the story: Language in action through drama*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

Paris, S. 2005, 'Reinterpreting the development of reading skills', *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 2, April/May/June, 2005, pp.184-202.

PETAA 2016, '[The PETAA teachers' guide to the CBCA Book of the Year Awards](#)', Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA), accessed 11 October 2016.

Powling, C., Ashley, B., Pullman, P., Fine, A. and Gavin, J. 2005, *Waiting for a Jamie Oliver: Beyond bog standard literacy*, National Centre for Language and Literacy, Reading, UK.

[Reading Australia](#), Copyright Agency, accessed 11 October 2016.

Roche, M. 2015, *Developing children's critical thinking through picture books: a guide for primary and early years' students and teachers*, Routledge, London.

Rosenblatt, L. 1978, *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*, Southern Illinois University Press, USA.

Saxby, M. 1993, 'Children's literature: What to look for in a primary reading Program' in L. Unsworth (ed.) *Literacy, learning and teaching: Language as social practice in the primary school*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, pp.55-92.

Simpson, A. 2008, *Reading between the covers: Helping children to choose books*, PETA, Marrickville.

Simpson, A. 2013, 'Standardised tests and the threat to creativity', *Book 2.0*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp.17-22.

Simpson, A. 2016a, *The use of children's literature in teaching: A study of politics and professionalism within teacher education*, Routledge, London.

Simpson, A. 2016b, 'Dialogic teaching in the initial teacher education classroom: *Everyone's voice will be heard*', *Research Papers in Education*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp.89-106.

Wells, G. 1999, *Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

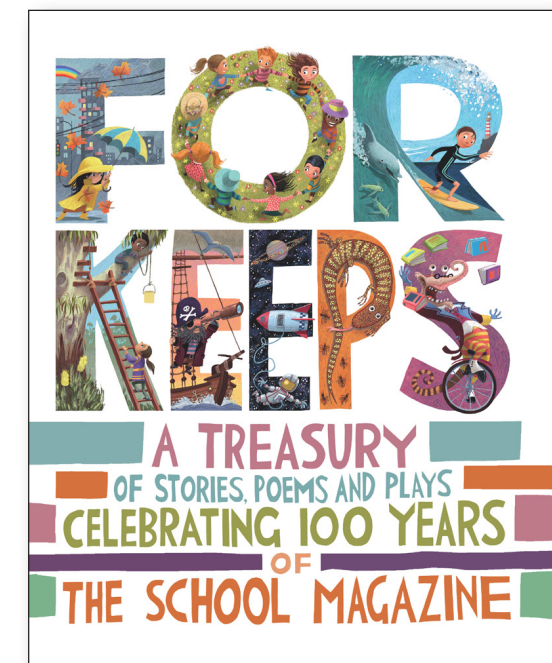
Williams, G. 1991, 'Space to play: The use of analyses of narrative structure in classroom work with children's literature', in M. Saxby and G. Winch, (eds), *Give them wings: The experience of children's literature*, 2nd Edition, Macmillan, Sydney, pp.355-368.

Wyse, D. & Styles, M. 2007, 'Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's *Rose Report*', *Literacy*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp.35-42.

Yin, R.K. 2012, *Applications of case study research*, 3rd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Yin, R.K. 2009, *Case study research: Design and methods* 4th edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

## CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF THE SCHOOL MAGAZINE!



Jump into a collection of literary gems including stories, plays, poetry cartoons and more.  
Available now at all good bookshops.

For more information go to  
[www.theschoolmagazine.com.au](http://www.theschoolmagazine.com.au)

RRP \$29.99

