'For too long' - so begins a recently published book about literacy learning - 'teachers have been at the mercy of government programmes which have emphasized the acquisition of literacy as a set of skills' (Pahl & Rowsell 2005). But there are signs that the government's mood is changing. First the DfES produced a report that actually used the word 'enjoyment' in the title (DfES 2003), to be followed just three months later by an Ofsted report surprisingly using the word 'creativity' (Ofsted 2003). The report was entitled, somewhat ironically under the circumstances, Expecting the Unexpected. And these reports, unexpectedly enough, declared their intention to encourage a rich, varied and exciting curriculum to develop children in a range of ways. As Animating Literacy observes, this was, after almost ten years, a welcome change in the attitude of officialdom, indeed virtually a u-turn. Since then the move towards creating a broader, more inclusive approach to literacy has gathered momentum in various ways. These three books, and their associated projects, are part of the change.

'Reading Connects' is a DfES-funded National Reading Campaign initiative launched by The National Literacy Trust at the start of the academic year 2004. It is a campaign not only to promote a wider view of reading in school, but to involve in this the family, the local community and indeed society as a whole, to the mutual benefit of all. Reading Connects thus reflects the growing influence of the 'New Literacy Studies' which are increasingly drawing attention to the educational significance of literacy practices in the wider community (c.f. Pahl & Rowsell op.cit).
The already much-admired Reading Connections Handbook is attractively presented with an eye-catching and accessible layout. Both versions are brimming with an exciting range of practical ideas and novel initiatives aimed at creating whole-school and community reading cultures. There are, for example, classroom and school based activities, ideas for establishing a home reading culture, possibilities for primary-secondary transition and ways of developing local reading networks.

Schools can sign up to become 'Reading Connects' schools simply by completing (on line at the website above) a 'whole-school reading-for-pleasure audit'. Many schools are now members, and more and more are joining all the time. Schools get a logo (for use on school materials), a certificate, a copy of the Handbook, and a chance to win 500 worth of books, and it costs them nothing. Reading Connects is an excellent initiative which is much admired and has quickly achieved wide recognition. In my view, it is absolutely on the ball and all schools should visit the website and join without delay.

Animating Literacy is the latest in a long line of high quality educational publications emanating from the justly renowned Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE). It is the consequence of an ambitious initiative launched in 2003 which involved teachers and children working together with 'arts partners' in seven London schools. Not surprisingly, CLPE has a particular interest in the effect of such collaboration on children's literacy learning and, indeed, on teachers' thinking and practice too.

The book records many of the participants' 'action research experiences' and overall it was a truly massive undertaking involving many people and a large number of artistic organisation. A Year 2 class, for example, worked with storyteller Jan Blake in a creative endeavour to develop children's writing skills. The results were dramatic! A nursery class rented studio space and spent time with professional artists, and the children's gains in confidence and independence were notable. A particular outcome I enjoyed was the school's 'Advice to Artists Working with Children under 5'.

Another group of infants, teachers and dancers set themselves to answer the question: 'Is contemporary dance an effective medium to enhance the literacy skills of Key Stage 1 children?' The year's work is described with refreshing honesty, and it was not all plain sailing. But teachers from both the school and the dance theatre felt that the year had 'an enormous impact on all the children involved'. Seven-year-old Jasper spoke for all when he explicitly stated that 'dancing the text helped him to think of good ideas to include in his writing'. At the beginning of the year Jasper, working below level 1 in all areas, just ran wild in the dance sessions; he was the child in the class with the severest needs. 'Watching Jasper in a dance lesson now,' writes his teacher a year later, 'it is amazing to think it is the same boy.'

There are similar stories to tell throughout this attractively presented and fully illustrated book. It should be noted that these were not all homogeneous, comfortably situated children, but children from many countries and cultures, often speaking other languages, sometimes struggling at school or lacking in confidence. It was often these children who seemed to derive particular benefit from the enterprise. The dozen or so accounts of the work, by the teachers involved and sometime by the by their arts partners, are lucid and exhilarating, sometimes quite long and detailed and frequently charming when describing the effects on the children. There is no doubt that they loved being involved in these projects. For that matter, so did everyone.

A recent analysis by Waterstones the Booksellers has claimed that, with the coming of Harry Potter in the late 90s, there has, for the last five years, been a tenfold increase in the number of new children's books released every month. The figure seems almost unbelievable, but if it was difficult enough selecting the best books before, it surely must be a far greater problem now. All the more timely, then, is the appearance of the latest issue of CLPE's The Core Booklist, which aims, as previously, to separate the wheat from the chaff (and there's plenty of chaff), and select and categorise books of high quality in an organised way. This is the first revision for some years, and a great deal of work and investigation has gone into it, much of it undertaken by Ann Lazim, CLPE's dedicated librarian. What is especially useful is that it includes a comprehensive description of virtually every book listed. The Booklist, of course, is an accompaniment to the well-established and highly regarded The Core Book, which describes how good quality books ('real' books) can be organised into structured reading programmes. The new Booklist comes with introductory notes,
an index, details of book suppliers, and an order form. I cannot imagine how any school could do without it.

References:


Ofsted (2003) Expecting the Unexpected: developing creativity In primary and secondary schools, London: Ofsted


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Source URL (retrieved on Apr '20): http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/154/childrens-books/reviews/the-core-booklist-the-creating-a-reading-culture-handbook-primary-and-secondary

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