The good, the bad and the ugly: teachers’ perception of quality in fiction for adolescent readers

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The good, the bad and the ugly: teachers' perception of quality in fiction for adolescent readers

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Abstract
Recent years have seen a great development in fiction written for the adolescent market - teenage fiction. This article seeks to explore the notion of quality in teenage fiction building on earlier research by Whitehead (1977), Hall and Coles (1999), and Benton (1995a) and using findings from interviews with teachers in secondary schools in the South West of England in 2003 and 2004, the first phase in a study into perceptions of quality in teenage fiction. Questions are raised about whether English teachers have sufficient knowledge of this genre of literature to support pleasure and progress in reading for adolescents and also whether teenage fiction should be more directly addressed in the curriculum perhaps through a school canon, which may apply educational criteria to define a body of literature that begins where the child is, but allows for clear progression in reading.

Key Words
Teenage fiction, quality, canon, reading
Introduction

Perhaps the greatest paradox for any young person's novelist is that first you have to please the adults. It's the parents, librarians and teachers who are the gate-keepers, and only when they are happy can you approach your target audience.

Keith Gray (2004)

when it comes to choosing what children should read, do adults really know best?

Clare Armistead (2003)

The bookshops are crammed with children's titles, but where is the quality in all that quantity?

Dina Rabinovitch (2004)

In considering the question of adolescent reading there appears to be a tension between what we want young people to achieve as readers and what we consider they should be reading. In addition there is another issue to resolve: the we, representing parents and educators, often has an agenda rooted in a cultural literary heritage (Underhill 2002) which may not take account of recent developments in both the writing and marketing of fiction for young people. At the University of Exeter School of Education we plan to examine multiple perspectives on quality in fiction written for adolescent readers. This paper reports on Phase 1 of this research in which the views of secondary teachers were investigated. Subsequent phases will investigate the views of secondary school age readers and parents.

Background to the study

What do we mean by quality in fiction for adolescents?

Greatness [in literature] is largely a conversation between academics...statements about greatness are nothing more than personal preferences. In other words, the texts we are compelled to read at school and university are simply the consequence of agreements in that conversation between academics. Nothing more or less. And these agreements may not coincide with the tastes, pleasures, values of millions of other people. (p. 156)

Michael Rosen (1992) in After Alice

This opinion expressed by Michael Rosen in the quotation above may be summed up by Benton's (2000) canon wars (p. 269). There is an assumed view of quality and an assumption that adolescent readers should experience certain texts (the canon) as part of a progression to adult reading skills and appreciation. This is made explicit in the United Kingdom National Curriculum for English (2000) which is dominated by
pre-1914 texts written by predominantly male, Caucasian authors. Benton (2000) P.274 reminds us that words such as *quality literature, literary heritage* and *classic fiction* appear throughout the document though there appears to have been no debate about how these judgements were reached at that point in time. The section referring to books written specifically for adolescents merely states: *recent and contemporary drama, fiction and poetry written for young people and adults.* Examples of authors are given but these do not include a wide selection of authors writing contemporaneously for adolescents. There is only minor reference to writers of books for adolescents compared with the range of other authors prescribed or recommended.

Of those recommended: G Ballard, Berlie Doherty, Susan Hill, Laurie Lee, Joan Lingard, Bill Naughton, Alan Sillitoe, Mildred Taylor, Robert Westall, none figure in the lists of most popular authors read by adolescents identified by Hall and Coles (1999) or in a survey carried out at the University of Exeter in 2002 Hopper, (2005). If we look at Whitehead’s (1977) list of Authors of Juvenile Quality Narrative Books (p.330) whilst there are many notable authors, many of whom figure in Spufford’s (2002) account of his childhood reading in the 70s, only Bill Naughton has made it to the National Curriculum (1999) list and only Roald Dahl to Hall and Coles’ (1999) list. This may indicate that, whilst adolescent fiction is a growing, changing and developing field, adults with a vested interest in adolescents’ reading and development do not always take account of this. Hall and Coles (1999) refer to this in their comment *that teachers should accept their pupils’ starting points as readers* (P.139). They also note that *good quality children’s fiction is generally what adult ‘discerning’ readers choose for their offspring* (P.143).

However the issue of what may comprise an appropriate canon of quality literature for adolescents in the twenty first century is one which we appear to be far from resolving. Whilst Pike (2002) sees texts from what may be viewed as the traditional canon having real relevance to adolescents in today’s society, others question the whole concept of the canon. Benton (2000) gives us nine constructs of a ‘canon’ in which he begins by aptly foregrounding its *sacred origins* (270) and reminding us to look again at the literary idols we may be worshipping unquestioningly. Amongst his nine propositions of a canon he also states (271):

- that control of the canon is political power; that the unitary model of the canon is neither necessarily exclusive nor immutable;
- that the inevitability of the canon cannot be taken for granted;
- that the School canon is subject to special pressures in respect of its readership and institutional functions.
His expansion of the last point reminds us that of Cox's models of English teaching (which are summarised in the *Cox Report* (1989) as: personal growth, cultural heritage, adult needs, cultural analysis and cross-curricular needs) it is the cultural heritage model of English Literature which has gained ascendancy here. Benton asks fundamental questions about this: whether the list will ever change; the relationship between the lists and a wider view of literary culture; and, fundamentally, 'What is the relationship between these lists and adolescent readers?' (275). He suggests that in constructing a School Canon we return to the notion of reader-response, active reader engagement with text, and that we are also 'willing to trust - and therefore support - English teachers' professional judgement about the texts that are appropriate for their classes' (276).

Hall and Coles' (1999) propose that teachers should look at where pupils start as readers. Sarland (1994b) had illustrated the value of this when his contribution to a debate about 'quality' and 'canonicity related to material widely regarded as non-quality' (113). He interviewed children about their reading pleasure in the Point Horror series and discovered that children could deconstruct these books in a way which showed they could apply criteria relating to, for example, story structure, narrative perspective and genre conventions. They were able to demonstrate skills of literary judgement and discernment in the context of texts which were relevant to them. Sarland (1994b) goes on to remind us that social groups construct different canons and that 'in a diverse society with a complex and diverse entertainment industry, that pleasure and those judgements of quality will manifest in diverse ways' (129). He urges us to listen to the adolescent readers who, he notes, will look for something new but who will nevertheless use discernment in judging quality.

Ten years on from Sarland (1994a,b) the range of texts, fiction, non-fiction and electronic, available to young people has grown enormously. Hall and Coles (1999) acknowledge this when they suggest that magazine reading may be accepted as a starting point. Millard (2002) puts forward a view of reading that will permit movement from personal choice to shared appreciation of texts, thus encouraging a development of critical skills alongside pleasure in reading. Marsh (2004), considering the Primary Canon takes this further by suggesting that educators should offer 'children meaningful engagement with a wide range of contemporary texts' (249). She argues that there is now a canon which 'excludes those books which relate directly to children's popular culture' (256) and warns us that this 'marginalizes texts which many working-class children in particular enjoy' (259). She concludes by suggesting that that 'there needs to be a concerted effort by educationalists to challenge long-established notions of what counts as 'good quality' in relation to texts' (259). Although her comments apply to the primary curriculum they
may equally well be applied to the secondary curriculum for English too. The debate continues. Most recently responses to the English 21 Consultation (QCA, 2005) place the literary heritage at the forefront of Cultural Understanding. Here attention is drawn to the significance of ‘classic and traditional texts as models of good writing’ and the importance of gaining knowledge of ‘older and contemporary texts, print and graphics: looking at the full range of texts from modern comics to Middle English’ is noted. This appears to embrace the need to provide a potential bridge from the new texts where children may start their reading journey to the established canon of the literary heritage.

An OECD (2003) report, identifying that children in the UK had good reading skills but did not enjoy the act of reading, argues that ‘those who spend more time reading for pleasure, read a great variety of materials and show more positive attitudes towards reading.’ In 2003 the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) UK identified a need for teachers to have a ‘wider knowledge of fiction for adolescents to support the development of reading within a school context’. In 2005 (Ofsted, 2005) the need to encourage reading in pupils of secondary age is reiterated, noting the difficulty for ‘teachers in finding time to keep up-to-date with newly published writing for children and young people’. In this latter report contemporary texts of good quality are specifically mentioned but again no criteria are given.

The study
In view of the crucial role teachers play both in mediating between conceptions of quality in children’s reading and as gatekeepers between pupils and what is required of them in the curriculum, a study was planned, within the context outlined above, to investigate current perceptions of quality in teenage fiction. This is part of a proposed three phase study: to investigate the views of English teachers in Phase 1; Phase 2 will consider the views of pupils of secondary school age (11 - 16); and, finally, Phase 3 will consider the views of parents.

In 2004 26 interviews were conducted for Phase 1 of this study. 21 of those interviewed for this phase of the study were English teachers; three school librarians; and one was a Teaching Assistant (TA). Teaching experience ranged from two newly qualified teachers (NQTs) but with the majority having over 15 years’ experience. Roles included Heads of Department, Literacy Co-coordinator, Head of KS3 English, Deputy Head and Head of Year, The interviewees came from 11 different schools, the majority being state comprehensive schools, and also including boys’ and girls’ grammar schools and independent schools. One interview was paired and the rest were one to one. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed and subsequently coded to identify patterns in the data.
The semi-structured interview schedule sought to elicit data about the interviewees' own reading preferences; their knowledge of personal engagement with teenage fiction; their own criteria for identifying 'good', 'bad' and 'appropriate' quality in such fiction; and finally to establish how they would define the notion of quality in books for teenagers. In exploring this concept, the interview schedule was designed to prompt teachers to reflect on narrative, style and structure, and issues in texts. The interviewees were also asked to refer to specific books and authors to illustrate their ideas and to link ideas on quality with their own knowledge of teenage fiction identified at an earlier point in the interview schedule. The interviews took place in a school context so reference was made to books used in the classroom as well as for private reading.

Initially, it was proposed that all the interviews should be with teachers of English but the librarians and the TA were also included because of their enthusiasm for the topic; the data these interviews provided may, however, be too small to be significant at this stage. All the interviewees were volunteers which means the sample may not include teachers with little interest in teenage fiction. It also became apparent that the detail of the interview schedule and time limitations on interviews led to richer data in some interviews than others.

**What is teenage fiction?**

During the interview process, it emerged that whilst there was an apparent shared understanding of what is popularly called teenage fiction; defining it was more problematic. Some of those interviewed found it unnecessary to create a divide between different types of literature. These people mentioned crossover texts, eg *The Amber Spyglass, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, and the blurred boundaries between teenage and adult fiction. Of the other responses there was a division between those who viewed the genre negatively as:

- stuff silly girls might read
- commercial
- in an almost derogatory light
- not the most exciting literature
- what appeals to teenagers
- lacks weight
- not real books - books set in school

and those who defined the genre in terms of what may be termed the content and who saw teenage fiction as having clear subject markers:

- books containing topics/ issues teenagers would identify with
- books which were technically aimed at teenagers
- books where authors were explicitly informing
- books which had subjects which would entertain teenagers
books which were relevant and accessible to teenagers  
books which gave opportunities to explore other things/cultures  
books containing words which mean something to children  
books which allow children to work out problems  
books which allow children to find out about themselves  
books which have teenagers as the main characters  

The two sets of judgements appear to represent polarised viewpoints. The first set of bullet points do not allow for any merit or seriousness of purpose in the genre whilst the second set embrace positive qualities of content, purpose and structure. Since all these opinions emerge from people with a professional desire to engage adolescents' interest in text we may detect attitudes which indicate a willingness to start where the child is or not. Do teachers who are unwilling to see merit in teenage fiction miss an opportunity to move their pupils forward in their reading?

**Teachers' perceptions of quality in fiction for adolescents**

There was a sense of a considerable development in the quality of literature for teenagers over the last ten years. Indeed one person expressed the opinion that there was a fashion in what was seen as quality and another thought that quality was simply the last book a reader had read and enjoyed; others felt that literature of quality was something rooted and timeless. These three comments alone, each referring to a different aspect of text, illustrate the problem in coming to a shared understanding of quality.

There was a strong feeling that literature of quality for young people was not always on a perceived heritage list and that there could be an element of *literary snobishness* in assessing quality. There was a divergence of opinion on whether it was possible to define a canon of books which teenagers should read. The traditional Literary Heritage canon was seen as both male dominated with few female role models but also as a guide to reading progression. On the other hand certain texts, eg, *To Kill a Mockingbird, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* and *Jane Eyre* were seen to be both classics and teenage fiction. Although the classics were referred to as significant there was less clarity about what this significance was beyond being part of the literary heritage; however there was a general consensus that the classics *should be read.* This was encapsulated in a view that *by GCSE teenagers should be reading 'proper' literature rather than modern fiction.* More generally a view was expressed that books were either well-written or not but eliciting full definitions of what was meant by well written was problematic: a shared understanding of this was assumed but could not easily be defined.

Although examination and curriculum imperatives were key elements in teachers' thinking about quality in fiction for teenage readers, they also
saw that reading, particularly private reading, had considerable wider relevance. The three predominating aspects mentioned were that reading could give adolescents:

1. **Pleasure through:**
   - providing a means of escape
   - being an opportunity to do something useful
   - enjoyment
   - getting inside the mind/character of someone else
   - inspiring to read other books
   - providing fun and amusement

2. **Improved understanding of English through:**
   - textual analysis
   - developing vocabulary
   - developing pupils' own writing

3. **Individual personal growth through:**
   - challenge
   - enhancement and enrichment of experience
   - finding out about themselves
   - finding out about the world around

Above all, they thought that a book should have something to say; link to a teenager's experience; be honest but not patronising; and be an intellectual as well as an emotional read. Thus a view of quality emerged which ranged from dismissive of the genre to enthusiastic of possibility; and which embraced what may be termed traditional literary criteria with a sense of development of the adolescent in the world on a personal level.

**A model of quality in teenage fiction**
The study aimed to examine notions of quality in teenage fiction beyond statements of content and possibility. Analysis of the interviews showed that the teachers saw quality demonstrated in structure through narrative, character, language, genre and themes; and through potential outcomes including levels of challenge provided by a text. These areas also relate to the Reading Objectives laid out in the National Curriculum for English Key Stage 3 and 4, particularly in Section 1, *Understanding texts*.

**Narrative**
Teachers conceptualised quality of narrative in teenage fiction with particular reference to how plot was structured. They felt that there should be a *driving plot* which might include some plot complexity typically using devices such as time shifts, parallel narratives, or the story told from differing perspectives such as we see in the *His Dark Materials*
Trilogy by Phillip Pullman. It was felt important that there should be a strong narrative voice and a variety of narrative styles, possibly including multiple narration. This is a technique which appears in several recent and successful teenage fiction books: Alan Gibbons uses this technique effectively in The Edge and Caught in the Crossfire; Malorie Blackman makes use of it in Noughts and Crosses. Layout features also support the multiple narration through use of different font or symbols on pages to represent narrative perspective.

Use of pace was also frequently mentioned as a key element of quality in these texts. Some specified that short chapters, again a feature of work by Alan Gibbons, could contribute to a fast pace and tension in the writing; and plot construction, particularly getting right into the story, was also seen to give pace. Whilst quality was felt to exist in surprise, secrecy and tension it was also seen as important that all the plot strands were satisfactorily brought together in some kind of recognisable resolution at the end although this could lead to another feature identified as poor quality - predictability.

Sarland (1994b) notes that it is precisely this predictability which the target audience may enjoy - he is writing of the Point Horror series. It may be that through a recognition of predictability in the books which the child chooses and which represent the vital starting point will come the ability to make more searching and intuitive judgements at a later point in reading development. In the study predictability was seen by teachers to have a place but should be accompanied by the potential to stretch and develop the imagination if a text were to be defined as having quality.

Characters
The development of credible and interesting characters through imaginative characterisation also emerged as a feature for defining concepts of quality. Whilst predictability was also seen in the kind of characters who typically appear in teenage fiction this was not necessarily a criticism, indeed there was a definite difference between the predictable teenage hero or heroine of teenage fiction and stereotyped characters who did not contribute to quality. Typical characters in the pages of teenage fiction were perceived to be 'normal' teenagers, people the reader could readily identify with. This possibility of reader identification was seen as a particularly important aspect of quality and it was generally thought that characters should be convincing. Sarland (1994b), in analysing Point Horror, notes: 'the characters have to have enough individuation to engage the readers' interest' (121). One teacher supported Sarland's view in the comment that it was 'important that the reader could get in the character's skin'.
It was felt that characters often provided a clear contrast between good and evil and that there were often strong female role models: both these attributes were viewed as aspects of quality. Quality was seen in characters who grow, learn and develop and it was generally felt that there should be depth in characterisation. Teachers hoped that through learning about other characters, standing in their shoes, teenage readers would learn to make judgements, to identify with others with different experiences in order to get a more humane view of the world and make sense of existence. This is turn reflects Erikson's (1974) view that the adolescent years are a search for identity through experimentation with role; literature can provide a means of exploring this in safety. It was this ability for a text to allow for engagement beyond narrative which appeared to the teachers to be a mark of quality.

Language
The way in which a book was written was also seen as an important aspect of quality. In general terms this was described as the presence of imagery and description and lively writing: the right words in the right order, as one teacher put it! The language would be good and the vocabulary would be interesting but teachers struggled to define what they meant by these words assuming a shared professional understanding, which, in reality, was imprecise.

It was felt that there was a need to avoid being patronising. When pressed the teachers found it easier to explain what they felt made poor quality in terms of language: this included controversial and graphic language, and swearing and American slang. They felt there was a need for a variety in sentence structure and criticised texts which were limited in this respect. They found that texts with long sentences which used Latinate vocabulary, complex grammar structures or complex linguistic structure were equally problematic and therefore not necessarily of good quality. There was strong feeling about inaccurate use of punctuation. Above all it was considered important that the language flowed. Poor quality was seen in colloquial or simplistic language; poor characterisation and over developed description.

Genre and themes
Whilst teenage fiction was seen as a specific literary genre' teachers also identified issues and sub-genres which they saw as typical of teenage fiction. Of the sub-genres horror, Sci-Fi, time travel, fantasy and other worlds were seen as the most common. However, the hallmark of quality in teenage fiction was seen to be its thematic addressing of current issues. It was considered that children liked to read about issues which are real and which concern them and their own growing up. It was also considered that issues would engage children's interest in reading but that the storyline needed to be strong enough to support the issues
content. It was felt that authors often had intent to inform but that there should be truthfulness. Many of the issues identified as typical concern: relationships - family, love, sex and sexuality, romance; teenage worries - keeping up, friendship, outsiders, school, bullying; wider social concerns particularly relevant to teenage readers - drugs, child abuse, racism, environmental issues, homelessness, mortality, spirituality and broad considerations of good versus evil. This list might appear rather bleak but humour was also seen as important!

Teachers found books with universal themes important but also mentioned their potential dangers. Some felt that teenage fiction was pushing the boundaries too far. This was particularly true in relation to themes related to violence, racism and sexuality and there were reservations about the merit of texts which included overtly graphic or pornographic scenes. There were polarised views on Doing It (Burgess, 2004) with some seeing quality in its frank and open approach whilst other deplored it for the same reason. What was evident was that fiction perceived as tackling issues in a patronising fashion, or which confirmed prejudices, was seen as of poor quality - pretentious drivel. Censorship was not specifically explored in this context however; it is clear that teachers saw their role differently in terms of texts they would use in school and texts they would recommend for private reading. This may be an issue to explore in more detail later.

Outcomes and challenge

Teachers' conceptualisation of quality embraced not only the complexity of texts, but also the extent to which the texts allowed for adolescents' personal growth. In this, there appeared to be a degree of tension between their own role as English teacher and as enthusiast of literature. On the one hand was the need to promote development in reading skills and appreciation in line with curriculum requirements, and on the other hand the desire to encourage enjoyment, excitement, daring even, in private reading.

Thus outcomes teachers hoped for from reading teenage fiction of quality were often couched in curriculum objective terms. For instance, issues based texts were thought to be a means of encouraging discussion on sensitive topics; of developing cross-curricular themes; or of providing links with citizenship. Teachers hoped that literature of quality would encourage adolescents to ask wider questions, to explore other social contexts, other worlds. It was also hoped that teenage fiction could develop understanding of historical and social context - terms which link very closely to GCSE requirements. It would also contribute to the improvement of the readers' own English and vocabulary.

However, there were also expectations from reading literature of quality
that went beyond school-based curriculum needs. Teachers felt that a book that made challenging demands on the reader could clarify the readers’ own ideas and give them an understanding of self. *It could have an effect*, the reader would learn from it in a way which went beyond issues or historical background: *something that allows us to make sense of existence, of things that connect us with the past and indeed lead us on to the future.*... *It would have the power to switch on a light.* It would *stretch imagination and hold the interest.*

In considering development and progression in reading the teachers were conscious of the need to address curriculum requirements but also to enable pupils to move to being independent and enthusiastic readers. Teachers were very willing to start at the point the child was (Hall and Coles, 1999, and saw magazines and non-fiction texts as stepping stones to an engagement with fiction. They also considered knowledge of quality texts important in order to provide recommendations and new challenges. Some teachers had lists that moved a child forward, perhaps by author (Colfer to Pullman) or perhaps thematically. There was a feeling that the teacher should assume the role of ‘expert’ in providing appropriate recommendations to adolescent pupils and this would seem to support Ofsted’s (2003) concern about teachers’ knowledge of teenage fiction.

**Conclusion**

The National Curriculum places emphasis on literary heritage and literature of quality. The aspiration is that during Key Stages 3 and 4 pupils will be able to:

- **read classic and contemporary texts and explore social and moral issues**

- **be keen readers who can read many kinds of text and make articulate and perceptive comments about them**

- **read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study. They become enthusiastic, discriminating and responsive readers, understanding layers of meaning and appreciating what they read on a critical level.** (NC online)

There is an overt intention to encompass both required curricular reading and private reading in these statements and it is was evident that the teachers in our project were aware of this duality of objectives and wanted to address both aspects in their teaching.

We live in a multi-media society surrounded by multi-media texts. There may be a tension between expectations of what teenagers should be
reading and what they will read in reality. Curriculum choices of text are still heavily influenced by the literary heritage model and as Benton (2000) writes:

*Its (National Curriculum) lists came without debate or commentary, they delimited and dictated choice, and they were unrepresentative of many of the cultural traditions that had prevailed in the past and remain important today.* (P.274)

Referring back to the quotations at the start of this article, we may add that the National Curriculum lists may have been devised by adult gatekeepers who neither took into account literature available for the adolescent reader, nor clearly defined precisely what is meant by ‘quality’. There is a fast growing body of literature for the teenage reader and this readership is becoming a force in the market place. The teachers we interviewed were aware of the existence of this literature but not all had extensive knowledge of either texts or authors beyond those highlighted by curriculum initiatives.

Ofsted (2003) has stated that teachers need to have a greater awareness of the available teenage fiction but perhaps the time has also come to reconsider our understanding of teenage fiction and its place in the curriculum. The responses to English 21 (QCA, 2005) also indicate a willingness to include a range of texts in the curriculum. It was clear from our interviews that much teenage fiction is seen by teachers as being of quality: having both literary merit allowing exploration of *social and moral issues* and the possibility of *understanding layers of meaning and appreciating what they read on a critical level* and that it also has qualities which allow teenagers to move to becoming *keen readers who read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study*. The themes of teenage fiction allow us to do what Hall and Coles (1999) see as necessary in the developing reader: start where young readers are in terms of understanding and experience, but also allow them to investigate a view of the world.

The results of our study have not produced absolute criteria conceptualising quality in teenage fiction. However, we are able to report on consistent patterns in relation to teachers’ thinking as a result of this phase of the study. *Quality in a work of teenage fiction from the teachers’ perspective would appear to be a text that allows the reader to operate at several levels through:*

- a well-structured and imaginatively structured plot which may well move beyond simple chronological narrative to include time shifts or differing perspectives;
- a text with pace and a sense of secrecy, surprise and tension which engages attention and encourages the reader through narrative hooks and excitement;
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- characters who in some way reflect the experience of the teenage reader - this often means a teenage hero or heroine and increasingly a strong female protagonist;
- characters who allow the teenage reader to experiment or empathise with roles outside immediate experience thus allowing the reader to learn and develop in their own life through the fictional experiences of the characters;
- language which is imaginative, lively and varied in vocabulary, correct in grammatical and sentence structure, yet which is accessible and neither patronises through over simplicity nor confuses through lexical density or complexity;
- themes which inform truthfully about the wider world and allow the reader to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to their immediate interests or global concerns;
- allowing the possibility of personal growth through the inclusion and challenge of engaging with pertinent issues;
- providing the challenge which will lead to development of reading skills.

Certain texts were mentioned frequently as strongly exemplifying the concept of quality; amongst these were *His Dark Materials* by Phillip Pullman; *Skellig* by David Almond and *Holes* by Louis Sacher which were all identified as meeting many of the criteria listed above. All these have been published recently and thus none of them appear on the National Curriculum recommended authors' list referred to at the beginning of this article. However, it is also worth remembering that *Holes* and *Skellig* have both been widely promoted through the Key Stage 3 Framework for English and *His Dark Materials* has been widely publicised.¹ There was also a lack of range in texts mentioned by teachers.

This returns us to the concern raised by Ofsted (2003) that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the fiction currently available for teenagers. All the texts mentioned above have been published within the last seven years and are representative of a growing development in fiction. Evidence shows (Whitehead, 1977; Benton, 1995, Hall and Coles, 1999, Hopper, 2005) that teenagers are choosing to read from this new body of literature with their choices largely informed by peers and the media (Hopper, 2005)). In order to switch on a light, to develop enthusiastic, discriminating and responsive readers, educators, as sympathetic gatekeepers of reading development, need to not only know what is available but also have criteria to support challenge and support the young readers' experience at both a personal and curriculum level.

¹NATE, for example, publishes a pack of teaching materials based on the play version of Pullman's text. (Editor)
It may be time to give Benton’s (2000) School Canon serious consideration if children are to be encouraged to move beyond technical expertise to an enjoyment and enthusiasm for reading which will extend beyond school to embrace a lasting pleasure and enthusiasm for books. In a recent international survey of primary children, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (OECD, 2003), it emerged that English children were third in the world in reading skills, but did not necessarily enjoy the activity of reading yet Foster, in Kennerley (1979), reminded us that ‘in order to help pupils read efficiently, critically and habitually... the keystone... must be the development of the individual’s personal reading interests’ (P.111).

The study thus far indicated what teachers interviewed see as marks of quality in teenage fiction and the findings here need to be developed into clearer criteria. The next stage of the project will be to discover what children see as quality in books for which they are the target audience, building on Sarland’s (1994) findings. It may be time to reappraise our understanding of a new and developing genre with its own market forces. We need to reconsider what we want from children as readers and how we can help them achieve this both at school and also in a social context where they have choices too. What is clear is that we can neither ignore this developing field of literature, nor the need to look at reading progression which acknowledges the child’s starting point and outlines a body of literature with defined criteria, to encourage pleasure and progress in reading. We need to consider how to support teachers in making the best use of teenage fiction to help teenagers grow in their understanding both of literature but also of themselves.

References

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