

Institution: University of the West of England		
Unit of Assessment: 27		
Title of case study: This is why we read: changing the understanding and use of critical literacy in primary education and beyond		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008-2020.		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Ann Alston	Senior Lecturer	2005 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Ann Alston's work has promoted critical understanding of the ideologies underpinning children's literature and has led to significant changes in pedagogic practice, literature choice and children's responses to literature. Alston's work on critical literacy has reached and impacted on an estimated 15,000 children in over 30 schools across South Wales and South West England and has had wider impacts on understanding and practice, national and international. Her research interrogates ideologies within children's literature, revealing how it functions to condition children's attitudes and understanding of the family and gender roles, in particular through the values it silently endorses. Working with teachers and senior leaders, Alston has enabled teachers and children to read more critically across a diverse range, resulting in improved engagement and behaviour among pupils. Her impact extends to helping illustrators and publishers avoid endorsing problematic ideologies. During the Covid lockdowns, Alston also provided online resources, enabling practitioners, nationally and internationally, to plan new ways of advancing critical literacy.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The research underpinning Alston's impact functions on two levels: firstly it focuses on the significance of ideology across a range of children's literature from picture books to young adult fiction, analysing how it has worked to promulgate and disseminate ideals of family and domesticity for over 200 years. Secondly, Alston's research channels her concern with the ideology of domesticity through a single author, Roald Dahl, reading his works for children in the context of his own and others' biographical writing and his concern with national identity and language. Alston's work thus draws attention to hidden signifiers and exposes ideologies that may not be immediately apparent to many teachers of children's literature and of Dahl in particular. The former Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen, with explicit reference to Alston's work, has called for such analysis to be made more widely available (Twitter, October 2018). Alston' has answered Rosen's plea by ensuring that her research is not only made more accessible but that it becomes fundamental to shaping teaching programmes, lessons and new publications.</p>		

The 'right' kind of family: domesticity in children's literature

Alston's monograph argued that while children's literature had, over time, adapted to contemporary definitions and experiences of family life, it still presented idealised but outdated signifiers of domesticity (R1). Her research exposed this covert ideology, which has existed in children's literature since its inception, revealing its ideological power at home and in the classroom. For example, the 'good' mother is represented as homemaker, baker and book reader, while the 'bad' mother serves takeaways, watches TV, and wears implicitly sexualised clothing. Alston's research thus advances an understanding both of how literature functions in a disciplinary manner and of the values it silently endorses. The most ideologically influential texts are those which are most widely read and this led Alston to the 'number one storyteller', Roald Dahl.

Roald Dahl, domesticity and nationality

Remarkably, until Alston and Butler published their pioneering essay collection on Roald Dahl (R2), there had been little critical work on this popular children's author. Alston's contribution to the collection (R3) analysed Dahl's construction of the family, questioned his depiction of childless women, and suggested that, despite his reputation for anarchy, Dahl's texts were surprisingly conservative. Consequent upon the publication of the *Roald Dahl Casebook*, Alston was invited to contribute to an essay collection on Dahl and Wales (R4). Her co-written essay in this collection developed her research on the constructions of family to include the significance of Dahl's biography and his relationship with language, nationality and identity. This essay underpins Alston's work on Dahl for the classroom, uncovering negative aspects such as the 'othering' features of Dahl's work, specifically in *The BFG*, where The BFG's native language is both celebrated and dismissed, where the 'savage' giants are 'cannybulls' who are captured by the British Army and consequently displayed to London tourists. Issues of race and nationality, in combination with the instability of language, are mapped on to a hugely popular children's book, enabling the smooth transition from academic paper to continuing professional development (CPD) sessions which has been a primary pathway to Alston's research impact.

3. References to the research

R1 Alston, A. (2008) *The Family in English Children's Literature*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/1013519/>

R2 Alston, A. Butler, C., eds. (2012) *Roald Dahl: A New Casebook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/942187/>

R3 Alston, A. (2012) The Unlikely Family Romance in Roald Dahl's Children's Fiction. In: Alston, A. and Butler, C., eds., (2012) *Roald Dahl*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 86-101. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/942167/>

R4 Alston, A. and Worthington, H. (2016) 'There's Something Fishy about Wales': Dahl, Identity, Language. In: Walford-Davies, D., ed., (2016) *Roald Dahl: Wales of the Unexpected*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp.115-28. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/916382/>

4. Details of the impact

Bringing critical literacy to the classroom

Since 2016, Alston's CPD sessions, keynote speeches and teacher training sessions have reached an estimated 500+ student teachers, teachers, and senior leaders, mainly in South

Wales and the South West. Feedback from a sample of these events shows that 100% of participants gained key knowledge and intended to change their practice accordingly, including plans to discuss ideology (75%) and to diversify textual choice (78%) (S1, S2). Aspire Teaching Alliance in Hampshire confirmed that Alston's work '*deepens trainees' knowledge*' and is an '*essential part of English provision*' (S1).

The lasting impact of Alston's research is demonstrated through her relationship with two large Cardiff schools with contrasting socio-economic and cultural backgrounds: Mount Stuart Primary and Marlborough Primary. Over four years, Alston delivered research-based class sessions, assemblies and CPD, empowering teachers to consider literature in a critically literate way, leading to long-term change in pedagogical practice. Alston's work gave teachers the '*knowledge and confidence*' to discuss stereotypes and '*traditional values*' (S3), and to '*question books*' through recognising '*the importance of patterns*', ultimately taking this enhanced critical literacy to other texts (S4), resulting in educators '*chang[ing] their teaching ...year on year*' (S3).

Teacher feedback confirms a fundamental change in pupil behaviour. At Mount Stuart children became alert to examples in their other reading, including non-fiction texts, asking questions they '*had never considered before... about subjects such as identity*' (S4). At Marlborough, they were '*more passionate not just about reading but about comparing books and looking for patterns*' (S3). By learning to read images and recognise ideologies, Marlborough's Year 6 were better prepared for high school transition. The Headteacher affirms, '*The sessions made our pupils into critical readers*' (S3).

Influencing strategic planning

In response to Alston's research, Mount Stuart has invested GBP15,000 in diversifying their library and noticed a '*tangible difference in how children respond*' (S4). Alston's expertise helped Mount Stuart gain a reputation as a 'Reading School', leading to an award of GBP4,000 from the Central South Consortium to showcase good practice in combining literature and science (S4). Post-lockdown, the school implemented a '*whole new curriculum*' across all subjects, based around literature and significantly informed by Alston's research. The Headteacher reports '*increased enthusiasm and interest in reading across the school*' (S4).

Cumberland Lodge educational charity

Alston's work on Dahl attracted the interest of educational charity Cumberland Lodge, identified by Alston as the BFG's 'home' (R3). This discovery, and Alston's wider research on Dahl, '*sparked a new stream of schools engagement work*'. Using workshops and resources developed by Alston, Cumberland Lodge now uses *The BFG* as a mechanism

'to explore 'difficult' questions with children, including how to build more inclusive, engaged communities'.

The workshops, which have reached over 450 children and their families,

'empower children to share their ideas and help them to build...communication, creativity, confidence and agency'.

Cumberland Lodge stated that

'Dr Alston's expertise in this field and her development of workshops for [us] has proved invaluable' (S5).

Influencing publishing and future animators

Alston's research *'has been hugely beneficial'* to independent picture book publisher Book Island. Over three years, Alston's advice has changed the company's editorial policy and publishing choices. Since working with Alston the Director is more alert to, and therefore less likely to publish, *'books perpetuating subtle gender stereotypes'* and is taking forward a proposal on a topic she *'would not have considered before working with Ann'*. Alston's advocacy for diversity in book choices has given Book Island *'greater visibility among a large readership and led directly to increased sales'* (S6).

Alston's research has had *'an enduring impact'* since 2014 on UWE's annual Pre-School Symposium for BA and MA Animation, enhancing trainee animators'

'aware[ness] of the sometimes unquestioned ideologies and received wisdom they may be reinforcing',

enabling them to *'be more daring and go beyond the formulaic when developing their ideas'* (S7).

Covid lockdown resources and ways of working

To assist with home-schooling during lockdown, Alston created two online videos for Book Island in May 2020. These had *'excellent'* viewing figures, led directly to increased sales and gave Book Island a new way to reach young readers directly; this is a priority for the company and Alston's work in lockdown showed how it can be successful. As a result, Book Island is *'now exploring other innovative ways to engage children and parents'* (S6). Alston recorded a webinar, 'The dilemma of Dahl: to ditch or defend?' for training provider Just Imagine, aired in July 2020 to 500 participants from countries including the UK, US, Australia, China and Pakistan (S8). This led to a commissioned article for *Primary Matters*, a critically-acclaimed magazine distributed to almost 3,000 primary practitioners in England and Wales (S9). The editor, primary English expert Janet Gough, says,

'Online training like Ann's webinar was very valuable during lockdown and, I believe, will continue to increase in popularity among teachers and school leaders' (S10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 Feedback from training delivered to Aspire Teaching School Alliance, October 2017, December 2017, October 2018

S2 Feedback from training delivered to Integra Schools, South Gloucestershire Council, January 2020

S3 Testimonial from Headteacher, Marlborough Primary School, Cardiff, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S4 Testimonial: Headteacher. Mount Stuart Primary School, Cardiff Bay, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S5 Testimonial from Education Officer, Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S6 Testimonial from Founder and Director of Book Island publishers, Bristol, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S7 Testimonial from Senior Lecturer in Animation, UWE Bristol School of Animation

Impact case study (REF3)

S8 Email from CEO of Just Imagine consultancy

S9 Ann Alston. 'It's Time to Talk About Roald.' *Primary Matters*. Autumn 2020: 21-26

S10 Testimonial: Editor of *Primary Matters* and National Association for Advisers in English committee member, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team