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How to cite:

Kucirkova, Natalia and Cremin, Teresa (2017). How can digital library systems help teachers support-children's reading for pleasure. IOE London Blog, UCL, London.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2017/10/09/how-can-digital-library-systems-help-teachers-support-childrens-reading-for-ple>

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How can digital library systems help teachers support children's reading for pleasure?

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Children need to be able to read well to function in society and their engagement as readers needs nurturing from the birth. Digital library systems offer enormous opportunities to tap into children's interests and enhance teachers' skills as literacy mentors.

They can help teachers and children find relevant content, archive readers' responses to individual books and share them with others on a large scale. These systems can support reading for pleasure, acting as free book depositories (e.g., [International Children's Digital Library](#)), providing tailored recommendations for new titles on a regular basis (e.g., [Epic!](#)) and offering children multimedia story experiences as in a virtual library (e.g., [StoryPlace](#)). Teachers' resistance or openness to the sustained use of such technologies dictates their potential to make a difference to children's learning.

In our [new paper in the Cambridge Journal of Education](#) we explore the pedagogy behind many popular digital library systems in schools and outline how they could position teachers as informed listeners, mentors and co-readers. Currently teachers using these systems are more like substitute librarians, curators and monitors. The roles assigned to teachers through specific technological features are important, influencing not only the ways these systems are used, but the impact they have on children.

Digital library systems can hold unprecedentedly large and diverse amounts of content. Some integrate material such as social media, data gathering and analysis. By combining several data points about individual readers and their engagement in the readers' community, they carry considerable potential for personalisation. Yet, in analysing the key features of some popular systems we found them misaligned with dialogic and networked theories of learning, and noticed some patterns:

First, many of the features these systems offer *could* personalise the reading experience of individual children, but instead they remain customised for groups rather than individuals (e.g., giving readers a choice of titles based on crude categories of genres or difficulty levels).

Second, commercially viable and popular systems address immediate and pressing constraints in schools:

- They address curriculum constraints by re-positioning digital reading as a recreational activity not a technical or functional skill;
- They address time constraints by giving children the individual attention that is difficult for teachers with large classes or limited knowledge;
- They address professional constraints by holding a huge bank of titles beyond a human's capacity.

Third, in terms of pedagogy, popular digital library systems currently position teachers as librarians, curators and monitors.

Teachers as librarians, curators and monitors

Teachers are offered an at-glance view of which books have been requested or returned by individual children. They can curate the database by adding or removing titles and categorising them according to children's abilities. And they can request data and statistical comparisons of children's engagement with the database and individual book titles. However, we argue that in terms of the pedagogy envisioned by the current systems and ways in which they optimise opportunities for building dialogic and networked reading communities, the systems would benefit from being re-designed in order to position teachers as mentors, listeners and co-readers.

Teachers as mentors, listeners and co-readers

In addition to giving teachers' tools to monitor children's engagement, effective systems could help teachers to act as mentors, facilitating discussion around texts. Teachers as co-readers could model reading behaviours. And instead of acting as a substitute librarian, teachers could be listeners, supported and empowered to co-create the online reading space with pupils and enhance its personalisation features through a community-oriented dialogue around books.

Our recommendations for future design of digital reading spaces for young children reflect research evidence that teachers, particularly those who position themselves as Reading Teachers, can provide effective support for emerging readers' identities. Revisiting reading for pleasure pedagogy in the digital age will be the core of our forthcoming co-authored book *Children Reading for Pleasure in the Digital Age: Raising the next generation of readers* (Sage). In it, we intend to consider the nature of reading for pleasure in print and on-line, related pedagogical practice and approaches for supporting teachers' subject knowledge. This will be underpinned by our view of reading as social practice. We welcome comments and suggestions as we work on this publication, please contact us via email or add your thoughts below.