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## Literature in Common: Reading for Pleasure in School Reading Groups

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## Literature in common: reading for pleasure in school reading groups

Cremin, T. and Swann, J. (2016) Literature in Common: Reading for Pleasure in School Reading Groups'in L. McKechnie, ,K. Oterholm, P. Rothbauer and K. I. Skjerdingsstad, (Eds). *Plotting the Reading Experience: Theory/Practice/Politics*.pp. 279-300. Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

### 1. Introduction

This chapter considers the reading experiences of voluntary reading groups in schools, their collaborative interpretation of children's/young adult literature, and their construction of reader identities. We focus on a study of secondary school reading groups in different parts of the UK as they took part in a scheme to 'shadow' the judging of two prestigious children's book awards: the Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal. The groups spent part of the summer term reading and discussing books that were short-listed for one or both of these awards. They were then able to compare their views with those of the judges. Our study of this process was carried out in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), who run the awards and the shadowing scheme and wished to evaluate the success of shadowing. The work was funded by the Carnegie UK Trust.

A strong theme that emerged in the study was that, despite their institutional settings and, to some extent, their alignment with curricular priorities (e.g. many were reported as contributing to their school's literacy strategy) the groups presented themselves as determinedly extracurricular. While reading for pleasure is part of the curricula for English in the UK, group leaders and members saw English as dominated by objectives-led approaches to reading and by assessment. By contrast, reading group experiences were characterized as being about 'fun', 'enjoyment' and 'choice'. Groups were partly defined by their contrast with curricular reading, and considerable work went into creating and sustaining this distinctiveness. But also, in a context in which reading is often regarded as 'geeky', an activity for 'boffins', groups sought to create reading communities in which the pleasure of reading could be shared.

In the chapter we consider, in turn, evidence from interviews and conversations with reading group members, and observations and audio-recordings of reading group meetings. In combination, these demonstrate how 'non-school' reading practices, relationships and identities are worked at and maintained: both accounted for in talk about reading and enacted within reading group practices.

### 2. Theoretical and policy contexts for the study of school reading groups

Our study of school reading groups, here shadowing the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway book awards, has two starting points. The first of these is the recent emergence of a discourse analytic approach to literary reading (e.g. Allington and

Swann, 2009; Swann and Allington, 2009). This has much in common with other approaches to the study of reading experiences that see reading and readers as historically and socially positioned, such as aspects of the history of reading (e.g. Crone and Towheed, 2011; Halsey, 2009); qualitative media reception studies (see review in Staiger, 2005); and ethnographic studies of contemporary reading practices and reading events, including reading groups/book clubs (e.g. Cherland, 1994; Long, 2003; Radway, 1991; papers in Rehberg Sedo, 2011; and Lang, 2012). Such approaches are characterized by Hall (2006) as 'literature as social practice', an echo of Street's (1984) somewhat larger conceptualization of literacy as social practice. For Hall, applying this to literature provides a much-needed emphasis on 'people's reading and writing activities in the broader context of their lives and interactions ... what people do with texts and how they find value in literature within the constraints of their own social contexts' (2006: 451).

As its name suggests, a discourse analytic approach adds to this an interest in the discourse through which people construct reading experiences: both the accounts readers provide of their reading (e.g. in interview data) and, of more recent interest, the discursive interpretation of literary texts evident in joint reading activities. Examples would include Allington and Swann (2011) on historical and contemporary evidence of reading; Benwell (2009) on the reception of diasporic fiction; Ericksson and Aronsson (2004, 2009) on school 'booktalk'; Peplow (2014) on the discursive construction of reader identities; Swann (2012) on creative interpretive activity in reading groups; Whiteley (2011) on 'professional' and 'non-professional' readings of poetry. Discourse analysis may be used to identify recurrent themes in discourse. It may also focus on the communicative strategies employed by participants - in literary discussion, for instance: how interpretations are collaboratively co-constructed between readers; how they are developed sequentially within interactions; how they are embedded in particular sets of social and interpersonal relations; and how they are, in other respects, socially/culturally and historically contingent.

For those adopting such a contextualized approach to reading, school reading groups provide an interesting instance of literary reading in a particular institutional setting, where the informal practices associated with reading groups rub up against, and may be in tension with, certain institutional preoccupations, roles and relationships. We were concerned to document the kinds of reading experiences, and literary discourse, that would be constructed in such settings.

A second motivation for the study had to do with educational issues: the increased attention afforded, in recent years, to the significance of reading for pleasure. Successive international surveys have documented a decline in young people's participation and enjoyment in reading in England relative to other countries (OECD, 2002, 2010; Twist et al., 2003, 2007, 2012). UK studies have affirmed these findings, highlighting in particular that young people's interest in choosing to read and find pleasure in reading declines with age (Clark et al., 2008; Maynard et al., 2007); the two most recent UK survey revealed highly significant differences between 8 to 11-year-olds, 11 to 14-year-olds and 14 to 16-year-olds in terms of their reading enjoyment (Clark, 2012; Clark, 2013). In the autumn 2012 survey, which drew on the views of 34,910 young people from

8-17 years, over half of the 11-14 years olds (the most common age range in the current study) reported only enjoying reading 'a bit' or 'not at all'. In this age group, daily reading and the time spent reading showed continual decline, with three quarters noting they read for less than 30 minutes at a time and nearly a third reporting reading one or no books in the last month (Clark, 2013).

Such findings are of considerable concern within education. Reading for pleasure is seen as a worthwhile activity in its own terms, but has also been associated, directly and indirectly, with reading attainment (Clark, 2012; OECD, 2010; Sullivan and Brown, 2013; Twist et al., 2012). It is suggested that being a frequent reader affords more of an advantage than having well-educated parents (OECD, 2002), and an examination of 27 nations' family practices argues that children growing up in homes with a wealth of books receive the advantages of approximately three years more schooling, as measured by their national tests, than children from 'bookless homes', a finding that is independent of parents' education, occupation, and class (Evans et al., 2010).

Alongside such research studies, reports from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in England have expressed concern about the lack of a coherent policy for reading in many schools. In a review of evidence from their last three English surveys, they comment:

In recent years the view has developed, especially in secondary schools, that there is not enough curriculum time to focus on wider reading or reading for pleasure.

(Ofsted, 2012: 29)

The development of wider reading/reading for pleasure forms part of the national curricula for English/literacy in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It enjoys increased prominence in the new national curriculum for English in England, which includes a persistently repeated statutory requirement that pupils 'should be taught to develop pleasure in and motivation to read' (DfE, 2013: 26). The accountability and assessment regimes associated with English as a subject have not altered, however, and it is argued that the new curriculum fails to recognise the diversification of young people's contemporary reading preferences and practices (Maynard et al., 2007; Clark, 2012). The curriculum also makes the assumption that teachers have sufficient knowledge of children's literature to foster reader development and their motivated engagement in fiction, although evidence suggests that, at least at primary level, this is not the case, with teachers over-dependent on a narrow range of well-known authors (Cremin et al., 2008a, b).

Given such concerns about young people's reading for pleasure, the potential of extracurricular reading groups to increase participation in reading, as well as the potential of specific initiatives such as shadowing children's book awards to broaden reading opportunities for children and young people, becomes of interest within education. Our study was carried out in the light of this. The evidence we provide also contrasts with the documentation of general trends in large-scale surveys, whether national or international. While we did examine UK-wide data on shadowing, our study, in common with contextualized and discourse analytic approaches to the reading experience discussed above,

included a major qualitative component, exploring the ways in which readers interact with others around texts, their discursive practices and identities as readers. It is these latter aspects of the reading experience that we focus on in this chapter.

### 3. The shadowing study

The shadowing study took place over two years (2011 and 2012). As mentioned above, it included a quantitative component, focusing largely on the demographic characteristics of groups, the motivations of group leaders registering for the scheme, and the reading activities reported for their groups. In addition, a qualitative component allowed the exploration of 'shadowing in practice' in a small number of groups: we carried out semi-structured interviews with the leaders of 31 shadowing groups in different parts of the UK; we also visited and observed a sub-set of these groups, four in 2011 and six in 2012. Of these ten groups, seven were secondary-school extracurricular reading groups that undertook shadowing in the summer term. We focus on data from these seven reading groups in the paper.<sup>1</sup>

The groups were selected to ensure as diverse a range as was possible along several dimensions: geographical location; a social and cultural mix; the inclusion of boys as well as girls; and a range of abilities across the sample (see Appendix). Most groups were visited two or three times across the shadowing period during the summer term. In two groups, as well as observing shadowing, we were able to observe an English lesson participated in by some group members. Our data for the groups included:

- Semi-structured interviews with group leaders (mainly librarians; one English teacher); and other adults involved in the groups (e.g. teachers, a voluntary helper)
- In most cases, semi-structured group interviews with young people in the groups; in two cases timetabling made this difficult and group members completed adapted interview schedules individually and in writing
- 'As and when' informal conversations with group leaders/members
- Observations of meetings, recorded as fieldnotes
- Audio-recordings of activities, allowing a closer focus on group interaction
- In two schools, observations of an English lesson
- Mapping of physical spaces: diagrams plus photographs
- Collection of any documents or other evidence (e.g. posters, book reviews written by some group members).

These complementary data enabled us to construct 'rich descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of reading experiences, examining the social construction of readers and reading, the particular reader identity positions of both young people and adults, the nature of reading activities, and the development of group interpretations of

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<sup>1</sup> While shadowing most frequently involves school reading groups, particularly at secondary level, it may also take different forms: e.g. a one-off initiative; integration into the literacy curriculum. Given our focus on voluntary, extracurricular reading we do not discuss such initiatives here.

literary texts. We addressed several research questions, of which two are particularly relevant here:

- How do group members and group leaders account for their experiences in reading groups; how do they position themselves as readers within these groups?
- What is the nature of the groups' reading practices and how are these collaboratively constructed and maintained?

We consider these separately below.

Ethically the work was guided by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2011). All data are anonymised and pseudonyms are used throughout.

#### 4. Accounting for reading experiences: interviews and conversations

In interviews and informal conversations, group leaders and members represented reading groups, and particularly shadowing, as a high-culture activity concerned with 'good quality literature', 'the best of children's reading', 'something worthwhile'. Shadowing was widely seen as extending young people's reading repertoires beyond popular fiction, e.g.:

[it] pushes them up from Roald Dahl etc (group leader)

it opens your eyes and makes you read different things (group member).

This allowed young people to try on new identities as readers. In a striking example Katie, identified by herself and by her group as a keen reader of vampire books, recounted a dramatic shift: on reading *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece*, she put aside her vampire books to complete the whole Carnegie shortlist:

... with *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece* it's like really good, 'cos like you would like read it and it would just make you want to read more and I was actually starting to read it and I think 'Hang on I could actually put my Twilight- my Vampire books to aside for a bit and actually read these ones'.

Katie's 'conversion' to Carnegie became a recurrent theme in this and other discussions, referred to, often jocularly, by herself and other participants.

While reading in English is also about high-quality literature, group leaders and members distinguished their activity from English and indeed tended to define their groups in contrast to English, an observation also noted by Hippisley (2009). A major focus was on different reading practices. Reading in English was described as more prescriptive and less volitional, as in the following comments from group members:

We had to, we were told which book to read and then we had to read them and it was sort of like, our teacher suggested that we did reading over the holidays and he gave a list of books that he suggested for us to read, but it was like books that he had read and books that he thought were good in a literary way, whereas we wanted books that had a good plot and story and things that aren't in English.

When you read in class ... it is reading for the sake of reading, sort of thing, it is reading so that the teachers know you can read and everything. But when you are here, it is like, you read because you enjoy reading and you want to like broaden your horizons of books that you like to read.

Reading groups granted readers greater choice and autonomy in terms of how they read:

There is no set book, so you can see what appeals to you and think 'I'll try that'.

You just sort of pick up a book and read it if you like it and you can stop half way through if you really think you can't go on with it.

Interestingly, while books such as those shortlisted for awards were seen as good-quality literature, distinguished from popular fiction, they were also represented by some group leaders as differing from 'English' texts:

I want to make them realise that reading isn't all about Shakespeare and Dickens and what they have to read in English, as much as those authors are exciting and are enjoyable. I don't want them to feel that that is what it is all about. Reading is a choice and there is a lot of choice out there, and for them to explore. So, you know, it is reading for pleasure.

I know ... they do *Great Expectations* and *Lord of the Flies* and things, whereas these [Carnegie shortlist] are more modern and [have] been written recently, so they are about events that will, or could occur presently or have done, so [young people] kind of understand them more.

Reading groups were therefore seen as extending young people's reading in two directions: both beyond popular fiction and also into worthwhile contemporary literature outside the traditional literary canon.

In contrast to the perceived task-focused nature of English, and the dominance of assessment, reading groups and shadowing were about pleasure and enjoyment. A group leader commented:

... we are doing it for fun, we are doing it to enjoy the books, to share a group activity that they all like doing ... nobody is going to be marking what they are doing ... I mean you do try and make group activities in English fun and [include] group discussion, but you always want an end product in a class situation, you want something you can assess, tick a box ...

Both group leaders and members repeatedly referred to pleasure and enjoyment in reading – the single most commonly-used word was 'fun'.

In emphasising reading as a pleasurable activity some group leaders contrasted this with prevailing perceptions of reading as something for 'geeks' or 'boffins', for instance:

I would say there is quite a lot of negativity towards reading, and if you are a reader that you are a bit of a boffin - that term 'boffin' comes up quite a lot.

Group members also commented on negative reactions to their interest in reading, a point developed in the following dialogue:

- A: I think it is quite hard to find a place to go and read because it gets quite noisy in the library.
- B: And if you go and sit on the field people take it as, see it as -
- C: 'boffin'
- B: Yeah, 'boffin'.
- B: You are being a geek if you sit and read because you are not doing what everyone else is doing, because they promote, round here they like, they like big up all the sports, if you don't do that then you sit and read, even if you sit and do your homework on the field they will call you a 'boffin' because you are doing it in school.
- I: How do you handle that, because you are readers?
- A: I just ignore it.
- Sev: Yeah
- A: I had umm, we were allowed to revise for our exam in English yesterday and umm and I instead sat on the field and read outside, and it was like they try to distract you because they think it is funny that you are reading, because they don't, because you are -
- B: like different
- A: Yeah, like a minority.

(I = interviewer; A, B and C = reading group members)

Such perceptions are consistent with evidence from larger surveys. For instance, a third of the upper primary/lower secondary students questioned in Clark et al. viewed readers as 'geeks' or 'nerds', while a quarter perceived them to be 'boring' (2008:17).

In the context of such negative perceptions of reading, our interviews highlighted the perceived value of reading groups in providing space for communities of readers. A group leader noted:

Sometimes I think even if you're in a top set that culture in the classroom might not exist where you can sit and rave on about your favourite books 'cos there'll always be one or two people in the class who are like - oh that's a bit geeky em whereas here they're quite secure and feel quite safe about you know being passionate about something that they're reading...

This was also a frequent theme in interviews with group members:

It's like being with other people that love books as much as me. So yeah, I kinda like fit in.

It gave a great sense of community because if you read books you often read on your own, and the Carnegie Medal - it gave a sense of community in a group and we could come along and share ideas and discuss the books.

In one group, members humorously reclaimed the perceived difference/minority status of being an avid reader. A young reader commented positively on the 'weirdness' of some of the group in reading 'two, three, four different books at a



time' and also recounted a story of when she was caught reading a Carnegie book under the desk in a biology lesson:

I usually get them [books] taken off us 'cos I'm trying to read during lessons  
((laughter))

I do it's like (xxx) with *A Monster Calls* I was into an interesting bit so I was leaning back on my chair in biology with the book under the desk

((laughter))

And it was like Miss was like:

- Amy

- Yes

- Can you answer this question

- No ((other participants join in to chorus this response))

((laughter))

- And why not

- I was kind of distracted

With the book under the desk

((laughter))

This is a well-known and much enjoyed story within the group. Other participants in the interview respond with laughter to the representation of the teacher and the student, Amy, in the dialogue and chorus Amy's long-drawn-out 'No'. The story humorously fuses 'high-culture' reading with an activity more usually thought of as counter-cultural.

As communities of readers, reading groups are characterized as informal and, importantly, non-hierarchical. Young readers talked about being 'free' to express opinions and 'say what we actually think'. Group leaders and other adults referred to being 'on a level' with young people during meetings, and English teachers often contrasted this with their experiences and positions in class. For example:

I come in part because in this group I can be a reader – you know one of the group, whereas in class I have to be the leader and the teacher. Here it's different, I can be me.

It's vastly different and I enjoy this so much more because with Carnegie they tell me about the book, rather than me asking questions, and sometimes I've not read it and even if I have, it's different and we're more equal.

Some of the young people commented that the English teachers who attended their shadowing groups were different, and less teacher-like in this context:

G: Miss K is different when she is here because normally she is like a Drama teacher and an English teacher...

M: ... more relaxed.

G: And she like, she treats you as one of the pupils like everyone else, but when we come here she treats us like ...

M: Friends.

F: Friends – like, someone that we can talk to, we can talk about the books and have our own opinion whereas like in drama if say, we say something like, we didn't like what we are doing, we would be made to do it anyway.

G: And she is more relaxed here

The transition for English teachers was not, however, always straightforward. One teacher pointed out that she became 'a little bit more task-oriented' in her library reading group, which she felt might take the enjoyment out of reading. The extent to which it may be possible for teachers to step out of their teacher frame, characterised by one as an 'objectives/assessment focused literary mindset', was pondered upon by several group leaders, including in the following reflection from a school librarian contrasting her own role with that of a teacher:

As an English teacher I don't know whether you'd be able to switch off that English teacher bit of your brain that says you know kind of right now we need to talk about the plot, what did you think about the character what did you think about the - and I don't tend to do it like that particularly. I'll try and draw it out of them sometimes but often - I mean they've all done it today - just spoken naturally about those sorts of things as it's occurred to them, rather than making it a focus point and getting in the way of their enjoyment of the text maybe.

Such tensions, reflected by English teachers themselves, by librarian group leaders and by young group members, connect to Wenger's argument that the multiple identities of any individual - including here the contrasting identities of English teacher and reading group member - create a nexus of multi-membership which is the living experience of boundaries (1998: 78). As Wenger observes it requires work to reconcile these different forms of membership, which may well be in tension. Despite this, however, it appeared that for some English teachers the reading group offered an opportunity to engage personally, and to adopt a more dialogic and discursive stance towards reading. In so doing, positioned as fellow-readers, they arguably altered the lived experience of reading both for themselves and other group members.

## 5. Reading in practice: observations and recordings of discussion

The group and individual interviews discussed above provide accounts, by reading group members and group leaders, of their reading experiences and associated sets of values. Observation provides a different kind of evidence, allowing the researcher to catch reading/interpretive activity on the hoof, as this occurs in particular settings. Audio-recordings of discussion enable a more detailed **analysis of the co-construction of reading: how readers jointly produce interpretations of literary texts. This is, necessarily, embedded in interpersonal activity: literary interpretation involves the co-construction of particular sets of social relations between readers.** In our data, both observations and the analysis of discussion provide evidence of the enactment of

relatively informal and non-hierarchical relations between readers, broadly consistent with the accounts provided by group members in interviews. We illustrate this aspect of reading group activity below.

Evidence of informal/non-hierarchical reader relations was immediately apparent in the layout of reading spaces. In the schools in which we were also able to observe English lessons, the contrast was striking. Figures 1 and 2 below provide illustrations from a school in which we followed children directly from an English lesson into their library reading group. In the classroom children sat in regularly arranged desks facing the front of the room. In the library, they sat round larger tables rather more haphazardly arranged. While there was a library desk, there was no obvious 'front' to which members oriented. Adults sat amongst children around the tables. In other groups, members sat around tables like this, or, in smaller groups, around a single large table, adults and children usually together.<sup>2</sup> In one classroom setting desks were moved together to make a large table. In another setting, the group moved from a classroom to a conference room in which they could sit more comfortably. Group members sometimes sat on the tables. They lounged back in their chairs. In one group a teacher lay on her side on the library issue desk, whilst another in a very relaxed mode sat with her feet on the desk eating her lunch. This adult behavior was not a focus of attention by younger group members who were also sitting informally. Adults and young people did not always remain in the same place - sometimes they moved around from one table to another to join different groups.

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<sup>2</sup> An exception was a group of younger secondary school children who enjoyed games and competitions. The librarian often stood up to manage these.

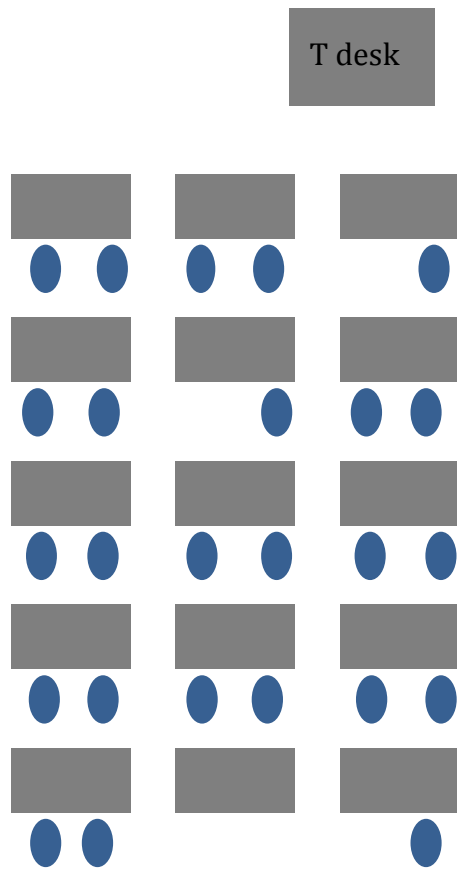


Figure 1: Seating arrangements, English classroom

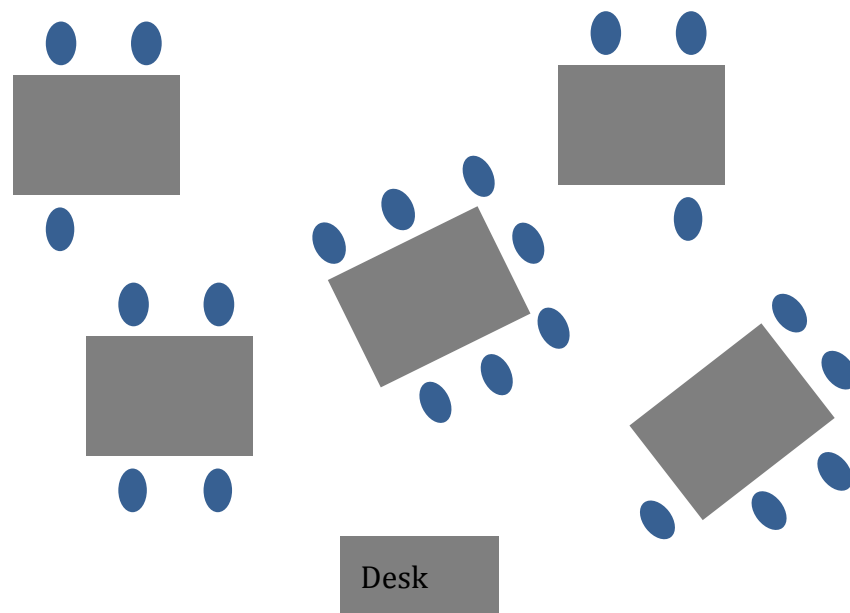


Figure 2: Seating arrangements, library reading group

In all the settings we observed, reading was accompanied by the consumption of food and drink: children brought lunches or snacks. Group leaders often provided biscuits. In one group, members took it in turn to bring cakes that they had baked themselves. Group members often made jocular references to food ('I know the biscuits are important to you ...'). Figure 3 below comes from a group website announcing the start of their shadowing activity in 2012. The reference to eating biscuits or crisps 'which is strictly forbidden..ahem', accompanied by its smiley, seems to position the activity, humorously, as mildly counter-cultural.



Figure 3: Eating in the library: group web site extract

The creation of such physical spaces for reading, how group members occupy these spaces (body orientation, movement etc), and the consumption of food and drink as an accompaniment to reading are indicators of, and arguably also help to construct, the informal and relatively non-hierarchical relationships that obtain in reading groups and that are highlighted in interviews. Where we have comparative evidence, these differ from practices in English lessons. While the reading activity the groups engage in is clearly high-culture, some practices may have elements of the counter-cultural (the consumption of food and drink where this is not meant to happen, highly relaxed body positions including lying prone on the issue desk), something we also referred to earlier in relation to the story of reading Carnegie books under the desk.

Relatively non-hierarchical relationships were evident in frequent humorous episodes in the groups, produced in interaction between group members and group leaders and other adults. We mentioned jocular and food above, but there were many other sources of humour. Humour is consistent with interview accounts of reading group experiences being about 'fun'. The following examples come from fieldnotes from a group meeting in which, following earlier discussion, group members give brief presentations on a favourite book:

A boy down to present later leaves the room briefly, commenting 'I'll be back in two seconds', then in a sing-song voice 'dum dum dum!' The

librarian calls out 'You'd better be back!' and everyone laughs. A teacher offers humorously: 'I'll take over – I'll just dance!'

There is a sports match taking place outside the library and the shouting can be heard clearly through the window. The librarian comments: 'I love the way that Lily gives a really nice speech and outside we're all hearing ... (in a rough voice, she imitates the loud exclamations from the sports field)'. Group members laugh at this.

As he walks to the front, a boy comments ironically on the presentation he is about to give: 'I may have achieved a new level of choosing ... clichés but we'll just have to see!' The audience laughs.

The construction of reading relationships is also accomplished discursively in group members' discussion of literary texts. In facilitating the discussion of texts group leaders often position themselves as co-readers, albeit more experienced than young people in the group. Our observations and recordings show that group leaders both elicited contributions from group members, and also gave their own interpretations alongside those of group members; group members raised questions and issues about the texts, responded to by others, and some took extended speaking turns without adult intervention. Sometimes they disagreed with group leaders, as in the extract in Figure 4 from a mixed-aged group discussing *The Bride's Farewell* by Meg Rosoff.

*Two group members, Emily and Rosie, have negative views of the central character of The Bride's Farewell – they say there is not much to like about her and she is 'not a moral character'. The interaction continues between the librarian group leader (L) and group members Emily (E) and Sarah (S):*

- 1 L: I don't think that's necessary and I don't know why you don't like her because I think she is an amazingly strong character, why doesn't she work for you?
- 2 E: She just doesn't really do a lot [pause] if you think about what she does.
- 3 L: She moves away and therefore is going to get married to Mr O' Reilly!
- 4 E: But she didn't consider that and that ended up with her [unclear]. I think if you're going to be -
- 5 S: I agree with Emily.
- 6 L: Do you?
- 7 S: Absolutely 100% because the very narrative moves from one haphazard event to another and I think she's very gullible, a victim of her own naivety ...

*Group members continue to voice their dissatisfaction with the central character, though the librarian views her more sympathetically ('... it sort of feels like my life you know ...'). The librarian concedes that people tend to have strong opinions about Meg Rosoff's writing!*

Figure 4: Extract from discussion of *The Bride's Farewell* by Meg Rosoff

While Sarah aligns her interpretation of the central character with that of Emily (Turn 5), interpretations from the librarian and group members are constructed in opposition to one another. The librarian maintains her positive reading of the novel, but also explicitly recognises and shows interest in the young people's views, despite their divergence from her own.

Figure 5 below is a longer extract from a discussion that is more clearly 'led' by the librarian group leader – the librarian takes virtually every second turn in the interaction. The transcript adopts discourse analytic conventions that include details of the pattern of turn-taking between participants (see Figure note). We include a brief commentary on the discursive strategies adopted by the librarian.

	Speaker	Discussion	Commentary: L's strategies
1	L:	Cos this is so completely different to anything you normally read Katie	L shows awareness of K's reading preferences; engages K in talking about her favourite book.
2	K:	It is	
3	L:	I can't believe that this is your favourite	She encourages K to say more, and to give reasons for her views.
4	K:	It- I know but I actually read it and I actually enjoyed that one out of all the ones that I'm busy– even this one I enjoyed that one the most	
5	L:	Right so why do you think that is	
6	K:	It's like cos like the story is really exciting the way it's like been set out it's made the story intense and it makes want to read on (.) I think I got like to chapter four uhm like I put it down cos I was so tired (.) I actually didn't want to put the book down it like it leaves you like on a bit of a cliff hanger	L encourages a focus on narrative structure: plot and characterization.
7	L:	Is it the way the story is set out and the way the story develops or is it the characters do you think that [pull you	
8	K:	[it's	K overlaps L's speaking turn.
9	L:	along and [makes you determined	
10	K:	[it's the way the	K overlaps L's speaking turn.
11	L:	[to finish it	
12	K:	[it's both it's the way the story and	

		the characters are developed that makes you want to read on it has got that (xxx) tension that makes you want to sit on the edge of your seat	
13	L:	(xx[x] right come on Ella	
14	E:	[I	L starts to address another group member but picks up on E trying to get in, and brings her into the discussion.
15	L:	[you are bursting to say something	
16	E:	[I used to have a very bad reputation of putting a book down after a few chapters and you are like 'I will read you' (.) (xxx) I forget it exists	L and E overlap here and below.
		this one I was like 'Mam I'm not going to bed yet [no' ((laughter))	
17	L:	[Because this is not the thing- the kind of thing you read either [Ella is it	L shows her awareness of E's reading preferences.
18	E:	[No I usually never finish one in a day and I finished it in an entire day I was like 'Ahh you amazing book'	
19	?:	What-	Others comment on E's experience
20	?:	You're like me	
21	L:	So can you explain [what it is that	L encourages E to say more.
22	E:	[I just loved it there was like mini plots in it er as well as the main one that you just had to know what is happening 'Oh my god that's happened wait how does that affect that'	
23	?:	Yeah	
24	E:	'Why does he hate that	
25	K:	so much'	K completes E's turn.
26	E:	Yeah like why	
27	L:	So you were trying to keep one step ahead of the story all the time ...	Librarian acknowledges/ reformulates E's reading.

Figure 5: Extract from discussion of *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece* by Annabel Pitcher

Notes:

1. L = librarian; K = Katie; E = Ella
2. In the transcript we include some interactional features:



square brackets indicate the beginning of overlapping speech;  
(.) = a brief pause;  
double curved brackets = nonverbal features, here ((laughter));  
quotation marks indicate reported speech or thought;  
(xxx) = unclear words that could not be accurately transcribed.

While the librarian tends to direct the discussion (usually selecting speakers; at Turn 7, encouraging a focus on plot and characterization) this can be seen largely as a facilitator role (eliciting interpretations from Katie and Ella, encouraging them to expand on these). Across the interaction as a whole this ensures that all speakers are able to say something about the book(s) they have read. The librarian demonstrates her awareness of Katie's and Ella's reading preferences, a feature commented on by group members, and contrasted with practice in English lessons where the focus is on texts selected by the teacher and students' own interests are not acknowledged. Group members themselves comment on others' interpretations of the books, and their reading practices (though here only minimally, Turn 20). The interaction is characterised by overlapping speech and speakers completing one another's turns (here Katie completes Ella's turn – Turns 24/5). Overlaps and joint speaking turns are characteristic of relatively informal dialogue. It is noticeable that the librarian is frequently overlapped by other speakers, and on one occasion (Turn 13) she abandons what she was about to say to support Ella, who had overlapped her. In their discussion of books, then, the librarian and group members are also discursively constructing particular reader relations. Although the librarian leads the discussion, this still has features of informal and relatively non-hierarchical dialogue and the librarian's turns are facilitative, supporting other speakers. Such broad characteristics are shared by other groups in our sample, although specific interactional strategies may differ (compare the interaction in Figure 4).

Some of these characteristics are evident in adult reading groups meeting outside institutional settings (e.g. Peplow, 2014; Swann, 2012). These latter are equally diverse (they may or may not have a facilitator; occasionally one member takes on this role informally, or temporarily) but they share a general orientation towards supportive and non-hierarchical dialogue. Informality and lack of hierarchy are evident in the physical space. And, famously, literary discussion is accompanied by food and drink (one of us was recently given a fridge magnet with the words: 'My reading group only reads wine labels'). The idea of a reading group brings with it certain expectations about reading experiences and reading practices that, in schools, come to characterise this type of extracurricular event and differentiate it from more formal schooled reading.

## 6. Conclusion

School reading groups seem to occupy a liminal space on the fringes of education, concerned with a high-culture literary activity consistent with the aims of reading for pleasure in English curricula yet identified as apart from, and in contrast to, curricular reading. Reading groups in general represent a kind of reading experience that is positioned outside and sometimes against 'the academy', and we have suggested that they bring with them certain expectations (informality, reading for fun and enjoyment) that persist in their importation into schools.

We have discussed how this identification is accomplished in the accounts group leaders and group members give of their reading practices and themselves as readers; and in the conduct of reading itself – from the layout of rooms and the presence of food and drink through to the interactional detail of literary discussion. The work we have discussed reflects a broadly qualitative, contextualized approach to literary reading, focusing on the way a particular reading experience is embedded in certain reader identities, and sets of relations between readers.

The research raises educational issues in a context in which there is a desire to increase young people's participation in reading for pleasure and enjoyment, and few schools are seen to attend to this challenge (Ofsted, 2012). The effective promotion of reading for pleasure/enjoyment seems unlikely to be achieved in current approaches to literary reading in secondary school classes, a distinct reading practice that takes place in a hierarchical setting in which young people are obliged to attend to and make sense of a text generally chosen by someone else (a teacher, head of department, examination board), and where they will be assessed on their response to the text. It is interesting to consider what benefits might accrue if the discussion of literature in English classes were approached more like a reading group, with young people exercising greater choice, and a greater focus on both individual and social experiences of reading. Are the reading experiences evident in school reading groups, defined as extracurricular, more effective if their distinctiveness is maintained? Or do such experiences have something to offer educationists as ways are sought to alter the decline in adolescents' attitudes to and pleasure in reading?

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## Appendix: Case study groups

### Groups visited in 2011:

A reading group in a girls' secondary school in the West Midlands, with a high number of ethnic minority students. The group shadows the CILIP Carnegie Medal. It is run by an English teacher, with an active membership of up to 15 students in Year 8 (aged 12-13 years).

A reading group in a mixed independent school in the South West of England shadowing the CILIP Carnegie Medal from the long list through to the final decision. The group is run by a librarian, with an active membership of up to 20 members from Years 7-10 (aged 11-15 years), who met in two subgroups.

### Groups visited in 2012:

A mixed-gender reading group (more boys than girls) in a comprehensive school in Scotland. The school includes students from a mix of cultural backgrounds. The shadowing group is made up of 24 S1-S3 (aged 11-14) students. It is led by the school librarian and three English teachers also attend meetings. The group shadows the CILIP Carnegie medal.

A mixed-gender (though only one boy) and mixed-ability reading group in a comprehensive school in North East England. Students are mainly white British. This is a group of 15 older students – Year 10-13 (aged 14-18). The group is led by the school librarian, and shadows the CILIP Carnegie medal.

A mixed-gender and mixed-ability group in a comprehensive school in the East Midlands. The school includes students from different cultural backgrounds and has a relatively high number of students eligible for free school meals. The group has 14 members in Years 7 and 8 (aged 11-13). It is shadowing both the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Awards and is led by the school librarian.

A mixed-gender group of Year 7-8 (aged 11-13) students in a comprehensive school in South East England. The school includes 13 students from a range of cultural backgrounds. The school librarian, who runs the shadowing group, describes group members as 'very able' in terms of reading ability. They are shadowing the CILIP Carnegie Medal.

A mixed-gender group (though with only one boy) in a comprehensive school in a rural area of the South West. Most students come from a white British background. The group is mixed-age, with 25 members drawn from Years 7-10 (aged 11-15). It is run by the school librarian and is shadowing the CILIP Carnegie Medal. Three members of the English department and two volunteer helpers also attend meetings.