

Reading for pleasure: challenges and opportunities

Introduction

Reading for pleasure, a term more commonly used in England than elsewhere, is essentially volitional, choice-led reading of any kind of text. Often described as ‘free voluntary’ or ‘independent reading’ in the US (Krashen, 2004) and as ‘recreational reading’ in Canada (Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer, 2006), such reading is undertaken for the personal satisfaction of the reader in their own time. Recently the OECD have come to widen their conception of reading literacy that they use in the influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. They state:

Changes in our concept of reading since 2000 have led to an expanded definition of reading literacy, which recognises motivational and behavioural characteristics of reading alongside cognitive characteristics. (OECD, 2016)

This re-conceptualisation serves as a reminder that teachers need to recognise more than the often narrow, assessed notions of decoding and comprehension so prevalent in national tests and policies, and also work to support young people’s emerging identities as readers, their reading behaviours, preferences and practices and their desire and capacity to discuss texts they choose to read.

Yet many schools, overburdened and overwhelmed by detailed curricula and focused assessment regimes fail to find the time support reading for pleasure, so balancing the will and the skill becomes a serious challenge. Senior management, often pressed to ensure standards are raised, tend to prioritise activities that promise to deliver short-term gains and side-line reading for pleasure, despite unequivocal evidence of the long-term benefits of reading in childhood. Schools can even get sucked into ‘performing’ reading for pleasure, without reviewing and then developing enriched practice.

This represents real cause for concern throughout the primary and secondary years, especially in the light of international evidence that reveals that the frequency with which young people, and particularly boys, engage in volitional reading markedly decreases as they move through the years of schooling (Mullis et al. 2012; OECD, 2010). Furthermore, in England in the recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (McGrane, et al., 2017), the 10 year old children’s attitudes to reading in England were comparatively low compared to their skills and in English speaking countries England had the lowest ranking for enjoyment and the lowest for pupil engagement in reading except Australia (McGrane, et al., 2017).

This chapter, examining the tensions and challenges which exist for teachers seeking to redress the balance argues that in order to build readers for life, not simply readers for the system, opportunities need to be seized to create interactive and reciprocal reading communities. Initially the benefits of reading for pleasure are discussed, then the evidence with regard to children's dis/engagement as readers presented, before the nature of reading communities and the challenges and possibilities offered by their construction are explored.

The benefits of reading for pleasure

Considerable international evidence reveals that reading for pleasure and reading engagement are strong predictors of reading attainment. Multiple studies from across the world and over time indicate that reading enjoyment has a strong bi-directional link with reading attainment (e.g. Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988; OECD, 2002; Sullivan and Brown, 2013; Chema, 2018). These large-scale surveys and cohort studies commonly indicate that the will influences the skill and vice versa. For example, examining data from the 1970 British Cohort study, Sullivan and Brown (2013) show that those children who read in childhood make substantial cognitive progress between the ages of 10 and 16. This is not only clearly linked to progress in vocabulary, but is also associated with progress in mathematics. In addition in the US, positive associations between students' information text comprehension and out-of-school reading engagement have been shown; the researchers posit that children who are motivated readers may be more prepared and able to handle the cognitive demands of reading information texts (Schugar & Dreher, 2017).

Nonetheless, digging down into the details of the studies which show an association between reading in childhood and success in formal schooling, subtle differences and patterns can be seen. For example, the PISA survey (of young people aged 15) showed that enjoyment of reading can predict as much as 18% of variation in achievement at country level, but this varies between countries (Chema, 2018). While enjoyment of reading on its own explained 17.6% of the variation in reading achievement in Australia, it explained only 0.1% of such variation in Tunisia. Analysis of the data shows that enjoyment of reading is positively associated with reading achievement mostly in high and mean academic performance countries. The authors hypothesise that cultural differences may play a part here, noting that in some countries, entertainments such as playing video games or reading books or comics may be seen as wasting time, such that parents may discourage children from reading in order that time for schoolwork is not reduced (Chema, 2018).

In England in this last PIRLS, children who reported liking reading the most, scored, on average, 45-points more than those who reported that they do not like it (McGrane et al., 2017). In a US single school study, students who achieved at or above grade level demonstrated more positive reading

attitudes to reading 'academic print', 'academic digital' and 'recreational print' than their below grade level peers, (Lupo, 2017) . Additionally, in a re-analysis of the 2009 PISA data Jerrim and Moss (2019) found a fiction effect- young people who read such texts frequently they claim have stronger reading skills than their peers who, whilst they might read frequently, tend to read non-fiction, magazines, newspapers and comics. Teachers will not be surprised by the presence of a 'fiction effect', the key question then becomes, how to nurture avid readers of such texts.

Other benefits claimed include a wider general knowledge (e.g. Clark and Rumbold, 2006), enhanced imagination, empathy and mindfulness of others (e.g. Kidd & Costano, 2013) enriched narrative writing (Sénéchal, Hill & Malette, 2018), and new reader to reader relationships and communities of readers (Cremin et al., 2014). Many readers, depending on text and context become affectively engaged in their reading, whether fiction or non-fiction and are motivated as readers by a legacy of past satisfactions in the text and in the interaction often triggered by it. Thus, multiple cognitive, social and emotional benefits as well as cognitive ones accrue for those readers who can do choose to read.

Young people's attitudes to and engagement in reading

In England as noted earlier, recent evidence not only indicates that more girls prefer reading compared to boys, but that those young people in the UK and internationally who report having more books at home also report much higher levels of pleasure in reading. (e.g. Evans, 2010; McGrane et al., 2017). In the latter analysis of England's PIRLS data, of those young people who report having 10 or fewer books in their homes, 42% report that they do not like reading, this is compared to just 12% of pupils who have more than 200 books in their home (McGrane, et al., 2017). Also in the UK, nearly twice as many children aged 8 to 11 than those aged 14 to 16 say they enjoy reading (77.6% vs. 43.8%) and boys are a key factor in this; they represent a core concern in terms of reading enjoyment (Clark & Teravainen, 2017). This gender disparity is not uncommon internationally, for example, an Australian survey of young people aged 12–16 years also reveals this difference (Rutherford, Merga & Singleton, 2018).

Some studies focus on the nature of the pleasure experienced by those young people who choose to read in their own free time. One, examining Macao-Chine data drawn from the 2009 PISA, claimed that fondness for reading (readers who follow their hearts), aspiration for reading, and good at reading are salient elements of readers' engagement which affect reading performance (Cheung, 2016). Another US study undertook interviews with secondary aged students who self-identified as passionate readers, and others who were 'highly engaged readers of genres typically marginalised in

school: romance, dystopia, fantasy, vampire and horror'. This study suggest that free readers (including the reading of marginalised genres) affords young meaning makers different kinds of pleasure, namely: the immersive pleasure of play; intellectual pleasure; social pleasure; the pleasure of functional work and the pleasure of inner work. However, the authors posit that whilst schools should nurture all five forms of pleasure they focus only on intellectual pleasure and as a consequence neglect to motivate young readers for life (Wilhelm, 2016).

Motivation is key in developing volitional readers; readers who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to be reading for their own pleasure and satisfaction. Studies have found that the greater the emphasis placed on performance and grades, the less students are motivated to read and that extrinsic motivation has a detrimental effect on reading comprehension (Schaffner, Schiefele and Ulferts, 2013). It is also claimed that the effect of intrinsic reading motivation on reading competence is mediated by reading amount and that challenging texts may play a particular role in this regard (Schaffner, Philipp & Schwefele, 2016). Such texts, the authors observe, may be more likely to be used in academic track schools than non-academic track schools, thus disadvantaging some readers.

The role of extrinsic motivational strategies, such as gold stars, stickers and other material rewards for reading independently have also been examined. These have been found to be less effective than the development of reading activities that support children's need for autonomy, belonging, competence, and meaning (Orkin et. al., 2018). The group whose intrinsic motivation for reading was fostered made significantly greater gains on measures of high-level reading skills and demonstrated enhanced engagement as readers, compared to those who received just material rewards. Although in another study focused on reading science information books, the pleasures derived were deemed to be both extrinsic and intrinsic, including for example participating in social aspects of reading - book-talk, and book-based activities as well as delight in the text and stickers and certificates (Alexander & Jarman, 2018). This it is not simply a case of a straightforward 'good versus evil' scenario; young people may well be motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects; they may read for their own pleasure and be obliged to (and derive some satisfaction from) reading for others' purposes. Nonetheless excessive extrinsic motivation and pressure to perform within the school system as a reader may destroy young people's interest in reading.

School support for volitional reading

Whilst several studies have examined the benefits of volitional reading, young people's attitudes to reading, and specific pedagogical practices, fewer have sought to document the nature and construction of reading communities within schools. One UK based study, *Teachers as Readers* (TaRs) which was undertaken in 27 schools with 43 teachers in five areas of England took up this

focus across a year (Cremin et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2014). The research team developed and tracked teachers' knowledge and practice, the impact on children's identities as readers and later observed the creation of reading for pleasure pedagogy, the development of Reading Teachers and in time, the emergence of communities of engaged readers (See Figure 1).

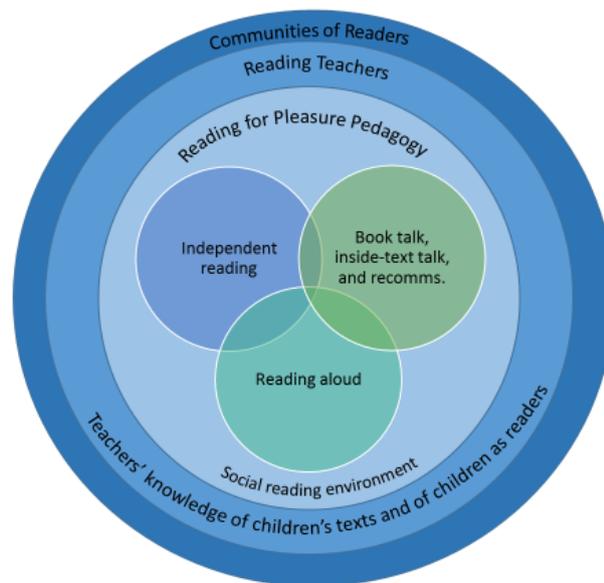


Figure 1: Research insights regarding the effective development of reading for pleasure (based on Cremin et al. 2014)

The research revealed that when the teachers widened their knowledge and pleasure in reading children's literature and other texts, and become more aware of their own and the children's reading practices, they began to reconceptualise reading from the inside out, and more effectively built a reading for pleasure pedagogy and strong communities of readers in school. These reading communities took time to build. They were relationship strong and highly interactive, and shifted reading in these teachers' classes from an individual private pursuit to a more collaborative social activity (Cremin et al., 2014).

Nonetheless challenges remain with regard to each of these areas; it is not straightforward for teachers to widen their knowledge, enrich their pedagogy and take time to build such reading communities. In high accountability contexts, with the pressures of high stakes testing and overloaded curricula, teachers often feel pressured into allocating time to the standards agenda in order to reap short-term gains. This leaves considerably less time to nurture young people's engagement in their own reading, less time to create 'books in common' and almost not time to build reader to reader relationships across the school. Such relationships have the potential to create significant long-term benefits for

young people, for their academic success as well as their personal and social development. But relatively few schools prioritise volitional reading, and teachers, often obliged to work individually within a year group or department, are not always enabled to make a sustained difference.

In some schools in the UK and internationally however, reading for pleasure has become a core focus, (perhaps more at the primary phase than in secondary education), and ways to showcase the school as a reading community are sought. Many have refurbished or reclaimed their libraries, and some schools have purchased buses, tents, sheds, tree houses and caravans to deck out, as well as cushions, carpets and sofas to enrich classroom reading areas. These often-colourful spaces overtly indicate to parents, governors, inspectors and the young people that the school values reading. The reality though will be in the lived experience of the young who will be quick to discern if this merely an empty institutional demonstration of community, a 'reading for pleasure performance'.

In order to consider the challenges of developing reading communities in line with the TaRs research, each of the findings (see Figure 1) will now be discussed.

Teachers' knowledge of young people's texts and them as readers

Teachers' knowledge of texts is the cornerstone on which interactive communities of readers are built, but such subject knowledge cannot be taken for granted. In England with the emphasis on teaching systematic synthetic phonics and comprehension, often from a class book, teachers' professional repertoires of literature for the young have not been foregrounded. Some student teachers may not be keen readers themselves as US research has shown (e.g. Nathanson, Pruslow and Levitt, 2008) and pre-service teachers' literacy histories will impact upon their repertoires (McPhee & Sanden, 2016).. This study found the experience of being graded constantly through schooling served to distance and discourage student teachers from reading for pleasure, as one noted about her experience of reading in school 'I found myself choosing the books not because I wanted to read them, but because I wanted to read a book with a high level of points to reach my goal easier' (McPhee & Sanden, 2016:32). In Singapore, researchers again found that trainee teachers were largely unmotivated and unenthusiastic readers; only 27% reported reading primarily for pleasure. They neither recognized nor took any responsibility for fostering readers for life and viewed themselves instead as experts of their discipline - English (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2018). As such they were conscious of the need to be skilled at teaching decoding, comprehension and text analysis for instance, but eschewed the idea that their subject expertise needed to encompass knowledge of children's literature.

Practitioners also reflect a limited knowledge of texts and tend to be over-reliant on 'celebrity' authors and childhood favourites (Cremin et al, 2008 a). In this *Teachers as Readers* Phase I study, over half the 1200 primary teachers surveyed could not name six children's authors, 24% were unable to name

a single picture fiction creator and 22% couldn't name a single poet. Roald Dahl was the unrivalled favourite both from teachers' childhoods and from his use in school. His pre-eminence was evident in the other categories too. In a predominantly secondary phase teacher survey undertaken some five years later (n: 2300) in the UK, Dahl was again in a league of his own, with J.K. Rowling and Malorie Blackman following, but some way behind (Clark and Teravainen, 2015). A US survey also found that teachers possess a limited range: only 'classic titles' and books in 'realistic fiction' and 'fantasy' genres were noted (Akins et. al., 2018).

This Dahl dependency and over reliance on a 'canon' of well-known writers represents cause for concern. It suggests teachers are unlikely to be able to help pupils make discerning reading choices from the diversity available and that they will not be in a strong position to support volitional reading. Consequently, staff may become over-reliant on the new digital library systems which, whilst they offer considerable potential, tend to position teachers as 'librarians, curators and monitors', rather than as 'listeners, mentors and co-readers' who build dialogue and reading communities (Kurcikova and Cremin, 2017).

Professional knowledge needs to include knowledge of the young people as readers within and beyond school as well. In the TaRs Phase II research, when practitioners enriched their repertoires of children's literature *and* began to get to know the interests and practices of the young readers they were more able to skilfully book match and tailor their recommendations to particular individuals (Cremin et al., 2014) . Finding out about the children's everyday reading experiences and honouring and celebrating these in school, is important as it helps to highlight each reader's uniqueness and the diversity of texts that are popular with the young. Many of the TaRs teachers also gradually became more open and interested in receiving text suggestions from the young people, and over time two-way reciprocal recommendations and 'books in common' between teachers and children developed. These prompted discussions, life connections and new reader to reader relationships. Teachers noticed children exchanging texts too and began to recognise the value of these emerging reader networks.

RfP pedagogy

A coherent Reading for Pleasure pedagogy which encompassed planned time for reading aloud, independent reading, and book talk, 'inside-text talk' and recommendations, all in the context of a social reading environment was developed by the TaRs project (Cremin et al., 2014) . Such practice is dependent upon teachers' knowledge of texts and their children as readers and was seen to be effective in motivating young readers and developing their autonomy and desire. However, it is not simply a case of employing these four strands of practice in tutor time, library time or within the reading curriculum. Setting time aside for each will not support the development of reading communities unless the invitation to engage is reader-led, informal, social and with texts that tempt. It

is genuinely challenging for teachers in performative cultures to create relaxed spaces for reading which are owned and shaped by the readers themselves and are not misappropriated by the standards agenda, such that reading aloud becomes a space for oral comprehension practice and vocabulary work for instance, as seen in a study of struggling boy readers aged 9-10 (Hempel-Jorgensen, Cremin, Harris and Chamberlain, 2018).

In this research, despite the discourse of head teachers, school reading leaders and class teachers, who indicated their intentions to nurture volitional reading, conceptions of reading were primarily a matter of proficiency, the teaching focus was on reading ability and scant recognition was given to children's agency, to reading aloud, or to talking about texts. Indeed, in only one class was a teacher heard to recommend a text and in three of the schools, reader relationships were absent; there was no sense of a reading community (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018). The pedagogy intended to foster RfP (namely reading aloud, independent reading time and a reading environment) was, in the same three schools, strongly influenced by a highly performative pedagogy (Bernstein 2000). As a consequence for example, the classroom displays and signs reflected the 'reading domains' from the English National Curriculum, particular reading skills (e.g. inferencing, deducting, summarising) and in one class the children's reading 'ability' offered in hierarchical lists. In addition, independent reading time was highly routinised, silence was insisted upon in the three classes and in these rooms the young people were expected to sit at school tables, despite the presence of a book area with cushions. These areas were used for time out for bad behavior or as extra work spaces, not as invitational relaxed reading environments. As a consequence of these constrained RfP practices, the children's engagement with RfP was limited; their positions as strugglers reinforced.

In order to avoid holding the reading reins too tightly, teachers need to ensure that their RfP pedagogy is reader-led, reader-directed and reader-owned and that they actively engage the young people in peer book talk for example. This was the focus of an Australian study into adolescent readers' attitudes to book discussions, which sought to foster positive social interactions around reading in order to increase young people's reading frequency (Merga, McRae & Rutherford, 2018.) Factors which shaped their engagement in book discussions included their previous exposure to discussion opportunities and mutual texts, peer interest, and the maintenance of their social status. They valued sharing books with those who had common interests (whether peers or family), and participating in informal, non-assessed discussions and debates. Arguably this enabled the young people to experience literacy as a social event and provided them with an opportunity to articulate their thinking about books and listen and respond to others' views. Such booktalk is a key feature of effective RfP pedagogy, (Cremin et al., 2014) enriching young people's desire to read.

Reading Teachers

The concept of being a Reading Teacher – a teacher who read and readers who teach - first coined by Commeyras et al., (2003) has potential value in fostering positive reader identities and communities in school and beyond. The TaRs research team referred to those teachers who read, reflected upon their adult experience of reading as adults, and then sought to consider the classroom consequences, as Reading Teachers (capital R, capital T) (Cremin, 2013; Cremin et al., 2014). These practitioners really opened up as readers in class and shared their personal affective responses with children. Sharing an emotional response to text was one of the ways in which Australian children recognise their teachers as readers (Merga, 2016) and appears a salient marker of an affectively engaged reading role model, an adult who not only reads widely, but is socially interactive about their reading. Such enthusiasm and interest were seen to motivate young readers.

Children's views about whether their teachers enjoy reading appear to be shaped by their teachers' conversations and recommendations about text, within and well beyond the class novel, by their read aloud practices and the emotional connections expressed therein as well as by their visible desire to read independently whenever they can (Merga, 2016). In this study, children recognized their teachers as readers since even when they were not actually reading (during independent reading time for instance), they carried materials with them or these were to hand. Reading Teachers, through mapping their own reading histories, keeping reading logs and being highly reflective about reading, widen their awareness of reading and being a reader in the 21st century and are likely to consider children's rights as readers, thus transforming what counts as reading in their classrooms

However, the lack of specific learning objectives related to this stance caused difficulties in the TaRs research and some teachers questioned the value of such personal involvement, perceiving that they should not waste time sharing their reading lives or views. Many were challenged by having to mediate the assessment system which focuses on a narrow set of reading competencies and skills, not on readers' identities, engagement and pleasure. Furthermore, it is not easy in a busy classroom to make the time to talk informally about texts, to engage in spontaneous 'inside text talk' - conversational talk that includes text referents. Initially as one study showed, teenagers are likely to assume that their teacher is going to ask questions to check their understanding of events or vocabulary (Cremin and Swann, 2016, 2017). These young people perceived curriculum-focused reading was not only a key driver in English but was for them, unrelated to reading for pleasure. They voiced the view that since the extracurricular reading group that they attended was not assessment-driven, their teachers and the librarians present were differently positioned, such that book talk was 'easier' and 'less hierarchical'. As one noted:

'When you read in class and at primary school, it's reading for the sake of reading, sort of thing, it's reading so that the teachers know you can read... but when you're here, (in the

extracurricular group) you read because you enjoy reading and you want to broaden your horizons of books' (Cremin and Swann, 2017:132)

In these relaxed reading groups and in classrooms of Reading Teachers, young people come to realise that adults too are readers, readers genuinely interested in their thoughts, feelings and views. Such reading role models can make a difference to children and young people's attitudes to reading and the frequency with which they read at home and at school (Cremin, 2013, 2019).

Reading communities

Whilst reading communities will differ in response to the context and those involved, engaged reading communities are characterised by reciprocity and interaction, not by conformity (Cremin et al., 2014). To reiterate the argument, to create such communities teachers need rich repertoires of children's texts, knowledge of the young readers, a responsive pedagogy and an understanding of reading developed through adopting the personal stance of a Reading Teacher. Such communities are typified by the recognition and valuing of diverse reading preferences and habits, and a shift in the locus of control around reading for pleasure. Enjoyment will be prioritised in the classroom and within the school, persistently and consistently. Enjoyment is not only a crucial motivational element for young learners, it is also central to parents' motivation to reading with their children (Merga and Ledger, 2018), where once again more attention needs to be given to the social and emotional elements of reading, the affective processes and reading behaviours of teachers, children and their families.

Research reveals that young people's pleasure in reading is strongly influenced by reading networks and relationships: between teachers and the young; between peers of all ages; and between the young, teachers, families and local communities. In schools where staff and senior leaders share their reading lives and baffle about books and thus about life, a sense of connection and community will develop (Cremin et al., 2014). Other studies have also shown that classroom relationships and social interactions are influential in shaping young people's motivations, identities and willingness to persist in reading or writing activities, alongside the relevance of the texts to their lives and interests beyond school (Cantrell et al., 2017). For support materials to develop reading communities informed by the TaRs research, see the OU website devoted to sharing this work (<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>)

Conclusion

Whilst in principle it is desirable to shift the locus of control to foster reader agency, develop diverse reader identities and build reading communities, it is, as this chapter has indicated, not easy to progress this agenda in a culture of performativity where conceptions of reading are framed by limited notions of proficiency and national assessment rubrics. Young readers' preferences and practices may

not be well aligned with those espoused in the prescribed school curriculum, and teachers have limited time to read, to reflect on the nature of reading and to establish informal spaces to build reciprocal reader to reader relationships. Indeed, some practitioners may consider this is not their responsibility, and that regardless of the potential impact on academic success, young people's rights as readers *not* lose themselves in a book and *not* to talk about texts have to be respected. As a teacher in the struggling boy readers research observed 'I have given him the chance, we have reading time, there are books to choose from, so if he doesn't want to read that's up to him, up to his parents, it's not my job'(Hemple-Jorgensen et al., 2018) This is a matter for debate - does the profession have a moral, social and professional responsibility to nurture readers for life? Perhaps this teacher was caught - experiencing what Ball (2003:221) call a 'kind of values schizophrenia' and justifying her stance.

National curricula in many countries now include attention to reading for pleasure, but can young people be required to read and find pleasure and satisfaction in the process? Now that policy makers recognize the links between such reading and reading attainment, there is a danger that as Ellis and Coddington (2013: 236) observe 'technocratic solutions to problems of pedagogy and curriculum design' may be imposed upon schools, teachers and children. If such 'solutions' were imposed does the profession have a sufficiently wide and encompassing understanding of reading as social practice to respond appropriately? Does the profession have sufficient subject and pedagogical content knowledge to effectively create readers for life? There is a real danger the young may be led towards performing reading for pleasure for their teachers and the system, just as some schools perform this for Ofsted and parents. Surely reading for pleasure and reader engagement cannot be mandated.

Further reading

Cremin, T. Mottram, M. Powell, S, Collins R and Safford K. (2014) *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure* London and NY: Routledge . This book details the evidence from both phases of the TaRs project, revealing the complexities and challenges encountered as 43 teachers, supported in 5 local authority groups, sought to read, reflect on their own journeys and identities as readers and foster reading for pleasure in school.

<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure> This research-informed reading for pleasure website offers support materials for teachers. It is based upon the Teachers as Readers research and has self-audits to support reflection, as well as classroom strategies, videos, PowerPoints and examples of teachers' research-informed practice to inspire.

Orkin, M., Pott, M., Wolf, M., May, S. & Brand, E. (2018) 'Beyond Gold Stars: Improving the Skills and Engagement of Struggling Readers through Intrinsic Motivation' *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 34.3 203-217 . A rigorous study of the effects of incentives on struggling readers' motivation , indicating that increased engagement and skill building was more influential than systems which rely on external motivation and incentives.

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