

Reading for pleasure: Recent research insights

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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 'recreational' or 'free voluntary reading', it is undertaken for the personal satisfaction of the reader in their own time and has been positioned as every child's right (International Literacy Association, 2018)¹.

Interest in such self-directed reading - reading for pleasure - has grown in recent years. Whilst librarians have always recognised the value of choice-led reading, nowadays we find policy makers, researchers, literacy organisations and educators all turning their attention to young people's desire to read. This is partly due to an international decline in the number of young people who are choosing to read in their own time (e.g., International Literacy Association, 2018¹; McGrane et al., 2017²), and partly in response to research evidence which reveals that volitional reading is associated with greater engagement with learning and stronger academic outcomes (Mullis et al., 2017³; OECD, 2019⁴; Sullivan and Brown, 2015⁵). Increasingly this is also acknowledged as a matter of social justice, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stating that 'being a frequent reader is more of an advantage than having well educated parents and that finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change' (OECD Publishing, 2002, p. 3⁶). Recently the OECD (2021)⁷ affirmed that engagement in reading, framed by a desire to read for pleasure can mediate socio-economic status and may help address endemic inequalities.

This article offers a summary of some recent research evidence in this area in order to widen knowledge and understanding and enable informed conversations about timetabling and budgets between librarians and senior management. In such discussions, I recommend highlighting societal concerns about the decline in young people's recreational reading, and through the use of attitude surveys, indicating any school based challenges in this regard, as well as drawing attention to the associated benefits of being a childhood reader.

¹ International Literacy Association (2018) *The Case for Children's Rights to Read*. Available at: <https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/the-case-for-childrens-rights-to-read.pdf> (Accessed 27 July 2021).

² McGrane, J., Stiff, J., Baird, J.A., Leinkeit, J., Hopfenbeck, T., 2017. Progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS): National report for England.

³ Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Foy, P., Hooper, M., 2017. ePIRLS 2016 International Results in Online Informational Reading.

⁴ OECD, 2019. PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework, OECD Publishing.

⁵ Sullivan, A., Brown, M., 2015. Reading for pleasure and progress in vocabulary and mathematics. *Br Educ Res J* 41, 971–991. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3180>

⁶ OECD Publishing, 2002. Education at a Glance 2002: OECD Indicators [WWW Document]. URL https://library-search.open.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=cdi_proquest_ebookcentral_EBC516082&context=PC&vid=44OPN_INST:VU1&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=PrimoCentral&tab=Everything&query=any,contains,OECD 2002&offset=50 (accessed 7.5.22).

⁷ OECD, 2021. 21st-Century Readers. OECD Publishing.

Declining attitudes to and engagement in reading

International studies document a decline in the number of children who enjoy reading (OECD, 2019)⁴. In England for instance, in the most recent PIRLS, despite being 10th internationally in relation to reading achievement, 20% of the 10-year-olds reported that they did not like reading at all (McGrane et al., 2017)². This exceeded the international median of 17% and positioned England in a rather contradictory context. Are we developing readers who can score well in reading tests, but who do not care to read?

In the most recent National Literacy Trust (NLT) survey, **disinterest in reading** was again evidenced (Cole et al., 2022)^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}. In examining over 70,000 responses from young people aged 8-18 years, the team found that less than half (47.8%) reported enjoying reading. This is the equal lowest level recorded by the NLT since 2005. Additionally, studies continue to indicate that reading enjoyment declines towards the end of primary school (Nootens et al., 2019)⁸ and deteriorates across the years of adolescence (e.g., Cole et al., 2022)^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}; Merga et al., 2018⁹). Book ownership is also seen to decrease with age, with far fewer young people aged 14 or above reporting that they had a book of their own at home compared with their younger counterparts (Clark et al., 2021¹⁰). Unsurprisingly, those young people who report having more books at home report much higher levels of pleasure in reading (e.g., Cole et al., 2022)^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}; McGrane et al., 2017²).

Boys continue to represent a concern in terms of reading enjoyment, the long-standing trend that more girls enjoy reading than boys persists, indeed the NLT survey suggests the gender gap in relation to daily reading has significantly expanded over the past three years, increasing from 4.6 percentage points difference in 2019 to 7.8 percentage points difference in 2022 (Cole et al., 2022)^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}). This disparity is common internationally, with an Australian survey of 12–16-year-olds also revealing this ((Merga et al., 2018⁹). Also in Australia, research indicates that boys' reading volition may be constrained by educators' underestimating the range of their reading preferences and the changing nature of these as they develop as readers (Scholes, Spina and Comber, 2021¹¹). It may be that if boys cannot access the books they desire at the right time – they simply do not read at all.

There are too many young people who can read, but do not choose to do so - disengaged and even detached - they are unable to access the benefits associated with being a recreational reader.

⁸ Nootens, P., Morin, M.F., Alamargot, D., Gonçalves, C., Venet, M., Labrecque, A.M., 2019. Differences in attitudes toward reading: A survey of pupils in grades 5 to 8. *Front Psychol* 9, 2773. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2018.02773/BIBTEX>

⁹ Merga, M.K., McRae, M., Rutherford, L., 2018. Adolescents' attitudes toward talking about books: Implications for educators. *English in Education* 52, 36–53.

¹⁰ Clark, C., Teravainen-Goff, A., 2018. Mental wellbeing, reading and writing. <https://doi.org/10.1044/1092>

¹¹ Scholes, L., Spina, N., Comber, B., 2021. Disrupting the “boys don't read” discourse: Primary school boys who love reading fiction. *Br Educ Res J* 47, 163–180. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3685>

The benefits associated with reading for pleasure

International studies indicate that reading enjoyment has a strong bi-directional relationship with **reading attainment**. This is seen for example in England (McGrane et al., 2017²), Ireland (Gilleece and Eivers, 2018¹²), Germany (Schiefele et al., 2012¹³), the Netherlands, (Rogiers et al., 2020¹⁴), and the US (Troyer et al., 2019¹⁵) to mention just a few. 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 (2015⁵) show that those children who read in childhood make substantial cognitive progress between the ages of 10 and 16. In addition, in the US, positive associations between all students' out-of-school reading engagement and their information text comprehension in school have been documented. For children from low-income households however, the association, while present was not as strong as that of their peers from higher-income households. The researchers argue that the former group may have less access to reading resources at home, but that nonetheless recreational reading does help children handle the complexities of information texts, and arguably therefore approach the curriculum with more ease.

Interestingly, reading fiction seems to have a positive effect on young people's **reading comprehension**, as those who read fiction get better results in PIRLS and PISA (Harjunen and Rautopuro, 2015¹⁶; Jerrim and Moss, 2019¹⁷; Sulkunen and Nissinen, 2014¹⁸). Librarians will not be surprised by the presence of this 'fiction effect', since they are fully aware of the sustained time and commitment required to read fiction, the high cognitive demands and the willingness needed to concentrate when reading richly layered literary texts. UK research also indicates the positive impact of teenagers hearing challenging, complex novels read aloud and at a fast pace, to all readers, including less experienced 12–13-year-olds (Westbrook et al., 2019¹⁹). Reading aloud was seen in this study to influence the young people's attitudes, motivation and engagement as readers. It also contributed to enhanced

¹² Gilleece, L., Eivers, E., 2018. Characteristics associated with paper-based and online reading in Ireland: Findings from PIRLS and ePIRLS 2016. *Int J Educ Res* 91, 16–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJER.2018.07.004>

¹³ Schiefele, U., Schaffner, E., Möller, J., Wigfield, A., Nolen, S., Baker, L., 2012. Dimensions of Reading Motivation and Their Relation to Reading Behavior and Competence. *Read Res Q* 47, 427–463. <https://doi.org/10.1002/RRQ.030>

¹⁴ Rogiers, A., Merchie, E., van Keer, H., 2020. What they say is what they do? Comparing task-specific self-reports, think-aloud protocols, and study traces for measuring secondary school students' text-learning strategies. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 35, 315–332. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-019-00429-5>

¹⁵ Troyer, M., Kim, J.S., Hale, E., Wantchekon, K.A., Armstrong, C., 2019. Relations among intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation, reading amount, and comprehension: a conceptual replication. *Reading and Writing* 2018 32:5 32, 1197–1218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11145-018-9907-9>

¹⁶ Harjunen, E., Rautopuro, J., 2015. Thinking about language use and language thinking: Learning outcomes in mother tongue and literature at the end of basic education in 2014.

¹⁷ Jerrim, J., Moss, G., 2019. The link between fiction and teenagers' reading skills. *International evidence from the OECD PISA study*. *Br Educ Res J* 45, 181–200.

¹⁸ Sulkunen, S., Nissinen, K., 2014. Reader profiles of Finnish youth. *Finnish Journal of Educational Sciences* 45, 34–48

¹⁹ Westbrook, J., Sutherland, J., Oakhill, J., Sullivan, S., 2019. 'Just reading': the impact of a faster pace of reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms. *Literacy* 53, 60–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12141>

reading attainment; on average they made 16 months progress over a 12-week period.

Additionally, research reveals that young people who read for pleasure at home will be widening their treasure chests of words – the **vocabulary** upon which they can draw (e.g., Sullivan and Brown, 2015⁵). In comparing the impact of 14 studies of ‘free reading’ to studies of the impact of explicit language instruction, McQuillan (2019)²⁰ found that free reading was far more efficient for vocabulary acquisition than direct instruction. He argues that choice-led recreational reading offers incidental vocabulary gains and provides a bridge to more challenging academic reading and sub-technical vocabulary.

Other benefits claimed by researchers relate to the habit of reading include enriched narrative writing (Sénéchal et al., 2018²¹), enhanced imagination, empathy and mindfulness of others (Kidd and Castano, 2019²²) and new reader to reader relationships (both adult-child and child-child), which can, in turn, help build socially supportive communities of readers in schools (Cremin et al., 2014²³; Ng, 2018²⁴). Research into adult reading for pleasure also asserts its potential to foster connections and help assuage loneliness (Billington, 2013²⁵) and recent studies indicate a mutually positive relationship between reading for pleasure and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018¹⁰), although more work is needed in this area.

In sum, whilst challenges persist in nurturing the desire to read, particularly in cultures of accountability where reading for pleasure is somewhat side-lined, it is critical that librarians and teachers, redouble their efforts to motivate and support young people as readers, building a legacy of past satisfactions that power them forwards. Readers who can and *do* choose to read regularly and widely, are giving themselves unofficial reading lessons of significant value - cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Reading for pleasure matters.

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²⁰ Mcquillan, J., 2019. Where Do We Get Our Academic Vocabulary? Comparing the Efficiency of Direct Instruction and Free Voluntary Reading. *The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal* 19.

²¹ Sénéchal, M., Hill, S., Malette, M., 2018. Individual differences in grade 4 children’s written compositions: The role of online planning and revising, oral storytelling, and reading for pleasure ☆. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2017.12.004>

²² Kidd, D., Castano, E., 2019. Reading Literary Fiction and Theory of Mind: Three Preregistered Replications and Extensions of Kidd and Castano (2013). *Social Psychology and Personality Science* 10, 522–531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550618775410>

²³ Cremin, T., Motram, M., Powell, S., Collins, R., Safford, K., 2014. *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure*. Routledge, London and NY.

²⁴ Ng, C., 2018. Using student voice to promote reading engagement for economically disadvantaged students. *J Res Read* 41, 700–715.

²⁵ Billington, J., et al. 2013. Literature-based interventions for older people living with dementia. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 133, 165-173.

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