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Reading for pleasure and its impact on student outcomes

Reading for pleasure – volitional reading – is sometimes seen as discretionary enrichment, permissible only if it doesn't interrupt the "real work" of education, like preparing for key stage tests or GCSE coursework.

However, nurturing young people's voluntary reading is not an optional extra or an add-on – it is a potent tool for raising standards and supporting students' psychological wellbeing.

So, unsurprisingly, it is given a complete section in the updated Reading Framework, which now encompasses key stages 2 and 3 (DfE, 2023).

The advantages of reading for pleasure

Reading, as schools minister Nick Gibb acknowledges in the foreword, is a "key indicator for success in further education, higher education and employment".

Being a frequent reader is associated with a range of academic, social and emotional benefits. But to commit time to developing young people's desire to read, staff need to be aware of these advantages. International evidence shows positive associations between recreational book reading and higher reading comprehension and academic outcomes (Lindorff et al, 2023; Torppa et al, 2020).

Choice-led reading also expands students' background knowledge about the world, and their understanding of subject-specific academic and technical vocabulary. Such knowledge enables them to access the whole curriculum with greater ease.

Equally as significantly, time spent reading has a positive impact on socio-emotional development, regardless of age or gender (Batini et al, 2021) and keen readers are seen to be better adjusted adolescents, able to cope with the demands of secondary school (Mak & Fancourt, 2020).

In addition, reading can be an enjoyable, intrinsically satisfying experience in its own right and can help create new social bonds and networks.

I have already written in *SecEd* about [how to build your school's reading culture](#), and here I would like to consider how we can use the new Reading Framework to raise the profile of reading for pleasure across your school.

The DfE's Reading Framework

Published in July, this non-statutory framework provides guidance and support about the teaching of reading and motivating students to read.

The latter is key since as National Literacy Trust data show attitudes to reading are at their lowest levels since 2005 (Cole et al, 2022; Clark et al, 2023) and many students report negative attitudes to reading, with boys and those students on free school meals least likely to find reading enjoyable.

Arguably these students are “reading for pleasure disadvantaged”. Urgent professional action is needed to address this.

As the framework makes clear, while specific programmes and interventions can provide targeted support for those who are still struggling to read, nurturing recreational reading is not a package to be delivered, nor a set of routines to timetable or deploy in form time and English lessons.

It involves the development of a reading for pleasure culture and ethos which is the “collective responsibility” (p94 of the framework) of all staff. Ways forward to build students’ desire to read include profiling choice and interest, reading aloud, informal book talk, enabling all staff to be “influencers”, and creating regular reading times.

Choice and interest

Ensuring young people can access culturally relevant diverse texts is key to developing their desire to read. When students find personal resonance and make connections with what they are reading, it increases their engagement, supports comprehension, and motivates further reading. Requiring young people to read particular texts for pleasure is counterintuitive – choice and agency matter.

Many students will need support to browse and select texts that suit their abilities and interests. Wise decisions create legacies of past satisfaction that power them forwards.

Reading aloud for pleasure

This is in addition to reading aloud as part of English teaching or other subjects. Reading aloud for pleasure, without comprehension questions, enables students to access rich, challenging texts, offers a model for silent reading, and prompts affective engagement and open discussion.

Through sustained commitment to “just” reading aloud, key stage 3 students showed significant comprehension gains in 16 weeks (Westbrook et al, 2018). The least experienced readers gained the most. The DfE’s framework notes that form tutors might consider using tutor time for this, describing it as “a powerful driver for improving students reading and all-round education as well as having a positive impact on their social and emotional wellbeing” (p104).

Time to talk about books

Students need regular space and time to talk informally about books and share recommendations. Do all your key stage 3 classes get regular library time that enables this as recommended by the framework? Research too suggests that the talk that fosters reading for pleasure is informal, student-led, and discursive (Cremin et al, 2014).

It can trigger a sense of connection, camaraderie and reader relationships that socially motivate students to read. Such relaxed talk about texts often develops as part of reading aloud, reading time and through book clubs run in class, tutor times, lunch-times and after school. In schools with rich reading cultures, incidental conversations about books in corridors and classrooms will be common.

Staff as reading role models and ‘influencers’

Alongside peers, knowledgeable teachers and librarians can skilfully introduce students to “old but gold” and “new and bold” writers, enabling them to encounter diverse voices and read outside their comfort zone.

Disciplinary specialists also make valuable reading role models and as “influencers” (p96 of the framework) can offer subject-specific recommendations of texts to tempt wider reading.

There are many ways of improving staff subject knowledge, including staff book boxes and swaps, and joining the Teachers’ Reading Challenge or an Open University/UKLA Teachers’ Reading Group (see links below). But a coherent plan to profile recreational reading across the school is needed, not just staff reading a few more books ready to recommend. Many organisations, including the Open University, offer CPD.

Reading time

Reading time can also help students develop pleasure and persistence as they “put in the reading miles” (p102 in the framework), although simply providing a time and space to read is not enough.

This is not a standalone activity. It is part of the school’s wider reading for pleasure provision and is supported and enabled by that provision. So, nurturing choice and establishing read aloud and time to talk and recommend texts needs to be in place before students will willingly spend this time reading.

In many ways reading time is the goal not the route, so requiring silent reading without wider pedagogic support is unlikely to be effective. However, once a rich school-wide culture of reading has been created, students will want time to read and talk about texts in school, will begin to shape and own this time themselves, and will make time to read at home too. In the process they will be driving up standards and enhancing their wellbeing.

Teresa Cremin is professor of literacy education at The Open University and co-director of the Literacy and Social Justice Centre. An ex-teacher and teacher trainer, she now undertakes research and consultancy. Her recent books include Reading Teachers: Nurturing reading for pleasure (2022) and Children Reading for Pleasure in the Digital Age (2020). Teresa supports volitional reading in various ways, including a dedicated research-informed website at <https://ourfp.org/>. Follow her on X (Twitter) @TeresaCremin. Read her previous articles for SecEd via www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/professor-teresa-cremin

Further information and resources

- *Batini et al: The association between reading and emotional development: A systematic review, Journal of Education and Training Studies (9,1), 202*
- *Clark, Picton & Galway: Children and young people's reading in 2023, National Literacy Trust, 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/bpak6jej>*
- *Cole et al: Children and young people's reading engagement in 2022: Continuing insight into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on reading, National Literacy Trust, 2022: <https://tinyurl.com/2studxst>*
- *Cremin et al: Teachers as Readers: Building communities of readers, Routledge, 2014.*
- *DfE: The Reading Framework, 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/y484m2cm>*
- *Lindorff et al: PIRLS 2021: National report for England research report, 2023*
- *Mak & Fancourt: Longitudinal associations between reading for pleasure and child maladjustment: Results from a propensity score matching analysis, Social Science & Medicine (253), 2020.*
- *Open University: Reading Schools Programme: <https://ourfp.org/schools-teachers/reading-schools-programme/>*
- *Open University & UKLA: Teachers' Reading Groups: <https://ourfp.org/schools-teachers/teachers-reading-groups/>*
- *Teachers' Reading Challenge: teachersreadingchallenge.org.uk*
- *Torppa et al: Leisure reading (but not any kind) and reading comprehension support each other: A longitudinal study across grades 1 and 9, Child Development (91,3), 2020.*
- *Westbrook et al: 'Just reading': The impact of a faster pace of reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms, Literacy (53,2), 2019.*