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Reading attitudes matter

At the start of this new school year, I wonder what messages about reading and being a reader are emerging as new school spaces are inhabited? What does your physical environment and ethos suggest about what it means to be a reader inside the school walls? Significantly, what do your staff know about the young people as readers?

Many schools seek to establish children's 'reading ages' and comprehension capacity and then create intervention groups and set tailored targets. Fair enough, such knowledge is needed. But teachers also need to pay attention to young people's reading attitudes, everyday practices and sense of themselves as readers.

Declining attitudes to reading deserve attention

Reading for pleasure -choosing to read in your own time- is in decline. The National Literacy Trust report the lowest levels of enjoyment in reading across 8–18-year-olds in 18 years (bar a slight uplift during Covid lockdown (Clark et al., 2023). This represents serious cause for concern.

Young people who express negative attitudes towards reading, who rarely read recreationally and find scant pleasure or engagement in so doing are deeply disadvantaged. Their peers, who not only can, but do read in their own time, benefit academically, socially and emotionally from the childhood habit of reading. The evidence is unequivocal; reading for pleasure is associated with increased confidence in reading, enhanced reading proficiency, and better learning outcomes as well as enriched psychological wellbeing (e.g. Toste et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). The OECD (2021) also recognise it is a mediator of gender and socioeconomic status and argue it can help leverage social change.

'Can but don't' readers

Worryingly, those young people who can but don't choose to read, often have a low sense of sense of self-efficacy as readers. In turn this predicts reading attitudes and the frequency with which they engage in recreational reading. These youngsters are caught in a double bind, they don't feel good about themselves as readers, they are not positively disposed towards it, so they rarely engage in reading of their own volition. Their disaffection deserves our attention if they are not to fall even further behind and lose access to even more of the curriculum.

Limited and limiting reading assessments

But in school, reading assessments pay little attention to students' attitudes, dispositions and sense of self as readers. Consequently, the very young people who are detached from the experience, who don't see themselves as readers and have not yet found what reading is good for, are obliged to attend intervention classes that prioritise reading skills, not the development of desire, curiosity and imaginative engagement. Surely given the will to read influences the skill (and vice versa) (Toste et al, 2020), we need to understand both their competencies as readers *and* their attitudes and offer balanced interventions that nurture both? Children who have no desire to read, inevitably make little effort to develop their skills.

Taking a broader view

Whilst we cannot measure children's pleasure in reading, and want to avoid reductive frameworks, educators have a professional responsibility to understand and support young people's attitudes and

identities as readers. Many schools use surveys, and whilst they are useful, they are never enough. Young people right across the nation now know they should 'love reading' and social desirability bias kicks in inflating the positivity of their responses. So, a range of tools need to be used to get a more rounded picture, particularly of disengaged readers who urgently need responsive support.

Staff can though build in time for observation, conferences, focus groups, pupil voice, undertaking reading rivers, 24 hour reads, or reader identity explorations. They will also want to read the vital information passed on from the previous teacher/ school- that is if it includes knowledge about children as readers, their sense of self efficacy, and their affective, behavioural and social dis/engagement as readers. Then planning can be fine tuned and appropriate opportunities offered.

Alongside knowledge of children's reading skills, nuanced knowledge of children as readers is needed to enable all youngsters to benefit from becoming readers who not only can, but do choose to read and who read frequently.

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 forthcoming book with Sarah McGeown is *Reading for Pleasure: International Perspectives* (2025), her last *Reading Teachers: Nurturing Reading for Pleasure* (2022). Teresa leads the OU's Reading for Pleasure research and practice coalition, which includes a [website](#) and the yearlong [OU Reading Schools Programmes: Building a Culture of Reading](#) (Primary and KS3).

Further information and resources

Clark, C., Picton, I. And Galway, M. (2023) *Children and Young People's Reading in 2023*. London: National Literacy Trust. [Available here](#)

OU Reading Attitude Surveys for KS1, KS2, KS3. [Available here](#)

OECD (2021) *21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world* Paris: OECD Publishing.

Sun, Y-J., Sahakian, B. J., Langley, C., Yang, A., Jiang, Y., Jujiao K., Zhao, X., Li, C., Cheng, W. and Fen, J. (2023) 'Early initiated childhood reading for pleasure: associations with better cognitive performance, mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence'. *Psychological Medicine* 1–15.

Toste, J.R., Didion, L., Peng, P., Filderman, M.J. and McClelland, A.M., (2020). A meta-analytic review of the relations between motivation and reading achievement for K–12 students. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(3)420-456.