

## Reading for Pleasure: Reviewing the Evidence

The following literature review focuses on the key factors that influence secondary school students' reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure has only recently become a focus for education policyholders and researchers, in contrast to the historical focus on the mechanics of reading (e.g. Rose, 2006). Reading for pleasure has been associated not only with increases in reading attainment but also with writing ability, text comprehension, grammar, breadth of vocabulary, attitudes, self-confidence as a reader, pleasure in reading in later life, general knowledge, a better understanding of other cultures, community participation, a greater insight into human nature and decision-making (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Howard, 2011; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). A recent government report highlights this, noting that once decoding has been mastered, mature reading skills are '*best developed by instilling in children a love of literature*' (Reading: The Next Steps; DfE, 2015, p. 4).

Currently there is a large gap in achievement between secondary school students who read books for pleasure and those who do not (OECD, 2010; Mol and Bus, 2011), and the strongest predictor of reading growth from age 10 to age 16 is whether a child reads for pleasure (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). Interest in reading for pleasure, reading self-efficacy and positive reader identities have all been shown to decline during the teenage years and boys are more likely than girls to report that they spend no time reading for pleasure (Nippold, Duthie & Larsen, 2005; Smith, Smith, Gilmore & Jameson, 2012). International PIRLS data also found that children in England report less frequent reading for pleasure outside of school than children in many other countries (Twist et al., 2007; 2010). As a focus of educational policy, reading for pleasure is being widely discussed and studied; however, it is too early to measure the impact of this policy change using international data such as PIRLS.

### Background characteristics

Family history and socio-economic status have been shown to impact on literacy skills including single word reading, spelling and orthographic processing (Keiffer, 2010; Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed & Tucker, 2006). Yet research suggests that simply having access to print in the home and a positive reading attitude can help to eliminate differences due to socio-economic status (SES) (Kirsh et al., 2002). Parental involvement has also been shown to have more impact on reading than SES, family size or parental education (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004). If parents focus on the entertainment value of reading at a young age (primary school) over the need to pass tests, then it has a positive impact on children's motivation to read (Baker and Scher, 2002); unfortunately, no research has been conducted on the effects of parental attitudes on reading habits in secondary schools. Given that parental influence is so important, it is a concern to find that over 25% of children (aged 8-16) in Clark's (2013) study reported that their parents did not care if they spent time reading.

### Book Access

Having access to books at home is a key aspect of reading for pleasure; children who do not have books at home are more likely to report that they never read (Clark & Douglas, 2011). Accessing books through a library is one way to overcome the issue of book access to improve reading for pleasure. Douglas and Wilkinson (2011) suggest that a school library can foster reading for pleasure

by embedding it into the curriculum and ensuring that it is personalised to the student's needs. Unfortunately, Clark (2010) found that 28% of students thought the library did not have anything that would interest them. There is evidence from the US that when college librarians have tried to make spaces more appealing to adolescents, they have trouble with other professionals not recognising the importance of what they do: "*I constantly have to defend my sci-fi and fantasy purchases to folk who think students should be reading more intellectual material.*" (Gilbert & Fisher, 2011; p. 484). This highlights an issue around materials being chosen based on teachers' ideals rather than students' choice.

### Reading Material

Reading interest has been suggested to improve engagement and falls into two categories: individual (topic or personal interest) and situational interest (Clark & Pythian-Sence, 2008). Individual interest is related to what a student personally finds interesting and is relatively stable, e.g. an interest in sports fiction. Situational interest is short-lived and context dependent e.g. enjoying football fiction only while the World Cup is on TV. Unfortunately, the research on these topics appears to be conflicting due to differences in research methodology. Regardless of which type of interest is most important, they both have the ability to create intrinsic motivation, which is vital for continuous engagement with reading (Gurthrie et al, 2006). Cognitive engagement with text occurs when students show a willingness to overcome difficult reading tasks, by using self-regulation skills to guide their own reading. Guthrie, Wigfield & You (2012) proposed that both forms of engagement can be encouraged within the classroom when the learning and knowledge goals provide '*compelling cognitive reasons for learning the material*' (p.603), and that the learning is concerned with real-world interactions. In simpler terms, students are more engaged when they see the reading materials as relevant to themselves. Yet texts within school tend not to be reflective of real life text, as they are fragmented, decontextualized passage extracts; they are not whole books, but rather only extracts given to students to be analysed (Burns and Myhill, 2004). This decreases the amount of time children have to spend on the text and leads to less enjoyment of reading, in favour of textual analysis skills (Lockwood, 2008).

Research has shown there are differences in what children choose to read in the home and what they are required to read at school (Gregory and Williams, 2000), thus it is important to examine what effect choice has on reading. When students were asked which book they had enjoyed most, 80% of them responded it was the one they had selected themselves (Gambrell et al., 1996). Casey (2010) found that students actively want more choice and to engage in discussions around texts that they have read. Research has also shown that children can read and comprehend more complex texts when it is on a topic they enjoy; students who read a text above their reading age were more likely to persevere with the task if they perceived the topic to be enjoyable (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011; Wigfield et al, 2008), possibly due to the fact that texts that are perceived as more interesting require less processing demands on the individual (Daniel, Waddill, Finstad and Bourg (2000). Giving children choice in their reading can also help them to become more aware of their own reader identities (Bang-Jenson, 2010). For these reasons, it is imperative that adolescents are given choice and control over the materials they are reading. When children are given a choice in their book selection, they

begin to develop a positive reader identity by taking more control over their reading habits. Driscoll (2013) reviewed class practices around the popular novel series “Harry Potter,” and found that popular texts such as this can still be used to teach contemporary literacy, as well as to promote social inclusion and psychological development. Making reading relevant to adolescents and to real life (outside of classroom experience) is key (Gambrell, 2015).

Being able to choose a book is an important skill; this has now been included in the KS3 curriculum ‘*pupils should be taught to: choose and read books independently for challenge, interest and enjoyment*’. However, it is not known how many schools do teach their students how to select books. Historically, research suggests this is not explicitly taught in schools (Ross, 2006). Thus, if children are not taught how to choose a book at home, they are unlikely to select a book for reading as they do not possess the necessary skills. Moss and McDonald (2005) found that in classroom libraries, when teachers gave children space to choose their own books to read without monitoring them, it produced reading networks and positive reader identities; this shows the positive impact that free choice has on reading development.

Clark and Phythian-Sence’s (2008) review highlights that choice is important for empowering and engaging students; however, it can have negative effects if the choices are not presented systematically or in a way in which the students are able to make an informed decision. Struggling readers have been shown to read less for pleasure due to classroom influences such as lack of engaging materials (Garbe, Gross, Holle, & Weinhold, 2006). Ross (2001) highlights several ways to help make informed meaningful choices; these include: looking for clues about the story on the cover, looking at specific elements of the book (e.g. genre), looking for cautionary clues (e.g. specific elements that the pupil does not like), thinking about the desired reading experience (e.g. does the pupil want to feel sad/happy, or read for information), thinking about recommendations (from peers or teachers) and thinking about readability (i.e. text difficulty). Teaching students how to select a book is important for encouraging reading engagement as this can help to create a reading culture within the classroom (Pachtman & Wilson, 2006).

### Reading identities

Reader identity has been specifically shown to become more negative when children move from primary to secondary education (Clark et al., 2008; Lenters, 2006). An identity is a combination of the way one views themselves in relation to environmental norms, their experiences within the environment, and how they perceive these experiences (Hall, 2012). Thus, a reader identity is shaped based upon what norms the school presents as ‘good reading’ and the experiences of reading that an individual has, along with their interpretations of them. Research into reader identities tends to focus on in-depth qualitative research, thus no longitudinal results are available. Moreover, existing studies are mainly from outside the UK. Adolescent readers (in American high schools) have been found to only identify as a ‘reader’ based on book reading; if they read outside of school in non-traditional formats (e.g. comics), then they do not tend to see themselves as readers (Kolb, 2014; Hall, 2012). Thus, it is important that the school environment presents a broad model of reading and ensures that children have positive experiences of reading.

Associated with the development of a reader identity is self-concept. Self-concept relates to how the reader perceives their own abilities (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). If secondary school students have positive attitudes about their ability, they tend to perform better (Aunola, Leskinen, Onatsu-Arvilommi, & Nurmi, 2002; Chapman & Tunmer, 1995; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000). Adolescents have specifically been shown to read less for pleasure when they think they are 'not good at reading' (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007; p.27). Twist et al. (2012) also found that for UK children, greater confidence in reading was associated with higher achievement, supporting these findings.

### Reading Motivation

According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), reading motivation can be defined as "*the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading*" (p. 405). Motivation towards reading can be split into two separate components: intrinsic motivation, which relates to personal enjoyment of texts, and extrinsic motivation, which relates to reading for rewards or due to environmental demands, e.g. passing tests (Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997). Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) reported that several aspects of intrinsic motivation predict reading motivation; these include importance (belief that reading is valuable), curiosity (desire to learn about a particular topic of personal interest), involvement (enjoyment of reading) and preference for challenging text (satisfaction of mastering or assimilating complex ideas in text). Taboada et al. (2009) found that when controlling for previous reading performance and background knowledge, students' (aged 9-10) intrinsic motivation could still significantly predict their performance on comprehension reading assessments, which suggests that students who were driven more by intrinsic motivation did better in reading tests. Conversely, Morgan and Fuchs (2007) argued that early experience of failures in reading motivates poor readers only to read when they have to, which in turn leads to poorer reading skills.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) reported that several aspects of extrinsic motivation also form part of reading motivation: reading for recognition (pleasure in receiving recognition for success), reading for grades (desire to be favourably evaluated by the teacher) and competition (the desire to outperform others in reading). Reading due to extrinsic motivation has been associated negatively with reading performance in longitudinal studies (Becker, McElvany, and Kortenbruck, 2010). The negative association between extrinsic reading motivation and reading performance might arise due to extrinsically motivated students focusing on social rewards rather than on the text (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Less research has been conducted to investigate extrinsic types of motivation. Twist et al. (2012) found that UK students are less motivated to read compared to other English speaking countries (e.g. Northern Ireland, Australia and Canada). Students with the highest reading performance actually reported the lowest levels of reading motivation. The survey used in Twist et al.'s (2012) study, however, may have a methodological flaw. The questionnaire included a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic factors; if these had been separated, two different relationships may have been seen (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Motivation levels can also be affected by emotions. If a student feels stressed, nervous or anxious whilst reading, they are less likely to engage with reading in order to avoid these emotions (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012). Therefore, it is important to alleviate these negative emotions within the classroom. In order to motivate children in the most effective manner, it has been suggested that reading needs to be of high-interest whilst being moderately challenging, and be complemented with tasks which are also moderately challenging (Gambrell, 2015).

In order for students to be interested in choosing books, it is important to ensure that their personal interests are met, or to encourage pupils to be more interested in books. Schraw, Flowerday, and Lehman (2001) used research evidence to put forward several suggestions for increasing interest (or intrinsic motivation) within the classroom. These included: providing students with meaningful choices (see previous paragraph for more detail), using well-organised texts (organised by themes, or structured in a familiar way), pre-selecting vivid texts (i.e. rich imagery), using familiar texts (authors, themes), encouraging active learning (thinking about what they have learnt/would like to learn), and highlight the relevance of reading (emotional engagement, gaining knowledge, enjoyment). It is important to note that interest and choice are highly related concepts; if students have the correct strategies in place for knowing how to choose a book, it is highly likely that they will choose a book that is of interest to them.

### **Role Models**

Teachers have been shown to have a big impact on children (Cremin et al 2009), and thus it is imperative that they model the behaviours they want to encourage. Unfortunately, many primary teachers tend to rely not on current books but on books they remember from their childhood (Cremin, Bearne et al., 2008; Cremin, Mottram et al., 2008). It is likely that a similar phenomenon is occurring within secondary schools. It has been suggested that teachers need to model reading in order to create reciprocal reading relationships and to help children develop their own preferences and reading identities (Cremin et al., 2014).

### **Digital identities**

Within modern society, the way in which teenagers' access reading material has changed. They now read via tablets, I-phones, Kindles, magazines and websites, as well as traditional print materials (Clark & Douglas, 2011; Maybin, 2007; McTavish, 2014). Due to the fact that most teenagers are using and reading via digital technology (Lenhart, 2015), it is important to examine identities and attitudes surrounding new media reading. PISA reports that young people who are extensively engaged in online reading activities are generally found to be more proficient readers than those who are not engaged in online reading (OECD, 2010). However, Kolb (2015) found that when non-traditional print (print via a screen) was brought into the classroom, both teachers and students alike still identified reading as something to do with books. Picton & Clark (2014) reported that when students from primary and secondary schools were given e-books to use over the course of several months (schools were free to use the e-books as they wanted, thus the timeframe was not consistent for all students), it could improve reading motivation. However, the effect could only be observed for boys, whilst girls remained stable in their reading motivation. Out of those eligible for FSM, enjoyment of reading on a device remained stable, but enjoyment of reading via traditional paper methods decreased. Despite

this, those receiving FSM did improve on their attitudes to reading, with fewer reporting that they found reading difficult. This suggests that digital reading specifically helps boys in low socio-economic groups to improve their perceptions of their reading ability, though this could be at the cost of a reduced enjoyment of reading via traditional paper methods. Research into digital reading is an emerging field. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between digital reading and factors relating to reading for pleasure in secondary school students before firm conclusions can be drawn.

### Summary

To summarise the key influences on reading for pleasure:

- Reader identities – schools need to foster positive reader identities
- Create environments where students feel comfortable to read
- Ensure students have choice over the text they are reading
- Ensure students know how to select a text they will want to read (i.e. a text they will find interesting, enjoyable or suitably challenging)
- Make sure that reading material is relevant to everyday lives
- Ensure that students have access to reading material, both at home and in school
- Avoid overuse of external motivators – try not to focus on exams/grades
- Encourage parents to emphasise the enjoyment gained from reading

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