The Young People's Reading Project: Exploring motivators and barriers to reading from young people's perspectives

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Illustration designed with input from the Young People's Advisory Panel

Research background

Adolescence (12-16-years old) is associated with declines in:

- Reading enjoyment (e.g., Cole et al., 2022)
- Reading attitude (e.g., Allred & Cena, 2020)
- Reading frequency (e.g., Twenge et al., 2019)
- Reading engagement (e.g., Clark, 2019).

Young people's literacy practices are diverse (e.g., Bokhorst-Heng & Periera, 2008; Cole et al. 2022; Loh & Sun, 2022)

Project phases

Phase 1:
Convening a young people's advisory panel to work alongside the academic research team

Phase 2:
Conducting interviews with adolescents about their reading motivation and engagement

Phase 3:
Working with Scottish Book Trust to develop and pilot projects for supporting teen readers
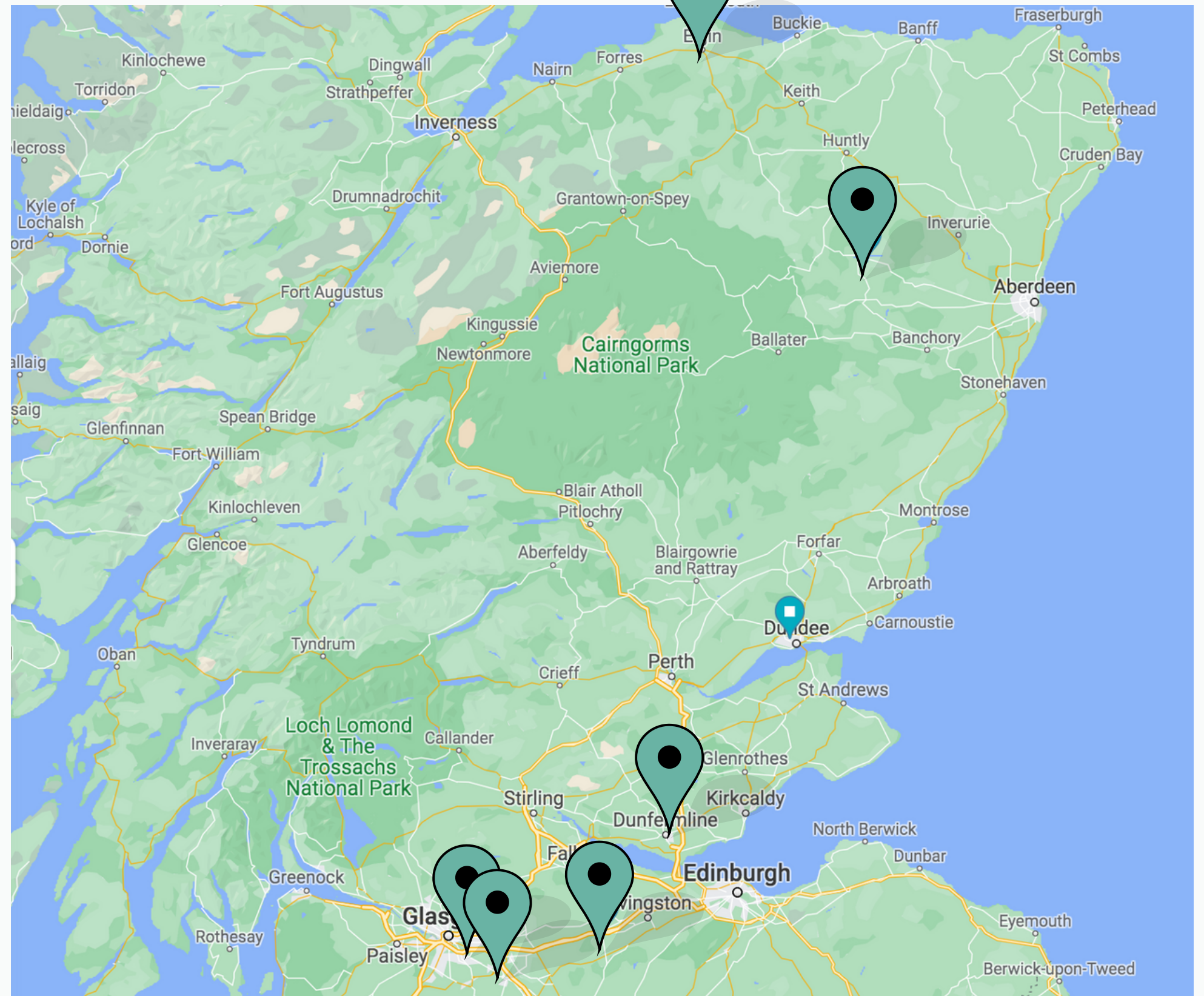
Phase 2: Interviews

Participants:

59 adolescents (13 - 15 years old; 22 male, 37 female; 5 from YPAP) from 6 high schools in Scotland

Interview types:

- Peer-led interview (N=11) - in-person with CW present via Microsoft Teams
- Adult-led interview (N=47) - online using Microsoft Teams
- Written responses (N=1)

Phase 2: Interviews

Interview schedule: developed with the panel based on:
(1) The consensus definition of reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014)
(2) Existing measures (e.g., Motivation for Reading Questionnaire; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2004)
(3) Group discussions

Q3. Thinking back to when you were aged 9–10, do you think you were reading books more, less or about the same amount in your free time as you are now? Why do you think that might be?

Q8. Can you think of reasons why you, or others your age, wouldn't choose to read books in their free time?

Q9. Can you think of anything that would encourage you to read books more often in your free time?

Phase 2: Analysis

What do adolescents perceive as the barriers to reading for pleasure?	What do adolescents perceive as factors which motivate reading for pleasure?	What are adolescents' priorities with regard to reading for pleasure?
Access	Access	Positive personal experiences
Mismatch between provision and needs	Making reading relevant	Strengthening relationships and interpersonal skills
Social factors	Social factors	Academic attainment and skills
Negative reading experiences in school	Affirming reading practices in school	
Negative affect associated with reading	Affirming reading practices outside of school	
Time and competing activities	Recognising the benefits of reading	

Access

As a barrier:	Young people find it hard to physically access books at home and/or at school

"…well, this is going to sound really bad but, like, our school library, it doesn't get updated a lot…I feel like if you update that and gave us more access to different kinds of books that would help out."

As a motivator:	Reading material is readily available from multiple sources and young people have opportunities and skills to access it

"So I just started reading, like, a few months ago, to be honest. Maybe because I have come to [a new] school, like, in my previous school…like, our library wasn't actually good, we just had, like, a lot of general knowledge things and nothing really fun."

Relevance

As a barrier: The books young people have access to don't feel relevant to their lives

"Because we're forced to read a lot of, like, old books like old poetry, like Shakespeare and everything, that we're not really interested in. So, like, when you're forced to read stuff like that it makes us think negatively of reading as a whole."

As a motivator: Reading material is matched with young people's interests and goals

"[W]hen you're reading and there's, like-, you can really relate to a character and, like, you watch them overcome their struggles you can apply it to your daily life. So if you're ever in a situation, like, similar to what they went through you know you can go through it. That makes you want to, like, read it more."

Social factors

As a barrier:	Reading does not fit with young people's social goals

"[On] social media, like, so people actually judge people who read books. They's be like 'oh my gosh, she's such a nerd', and then like, you just feel so insecure and then you just stop reading."

As a motivator:	Emphasising the social aspects of reading and building relationship around books

"Yeah, there's like a specific group of my friends that read a lot of books and recommend me their books. And then, yeah, like, we all borrow each other's books. It's like a tiny book club. So you want to read it to, like, be able to talk about it with them."

Time and competing activities

As a barrier:	Young people have less free time to read for pleasure than when they were younger and/or prioritise other activities in their free time

"*Some people prefer to watch TV…it's more interesting with, like, you can see people's facial reactions. Like, it's more, like, fun, I guess. And then, it's just- it's a bit more, like, engaging and not as hard. But like, when you're reading…it's like, to get through it can be quite, like, tiring, I guess."*

Recognising the benefits of reading

What do adolescents' perceive as the benefits of reading for pleasure?

- Having positive personal experiences

- Strengthening relationships and interpersonal skills

- Improving academic attainment and skills

As a motivator:	Young people recognise that reading can benefit them in a number of ways and recognise the reasons why reading is valuable to them

"Once you've found a book that you really love, you'll just, like, keep reading and, like, keep reading more books, so I think if someone doesn't read, once they find that one book…yeah, I think that will help them read more."

"Once you find that one book it's like they'll never, ever find it boring again."

Concluding thoughts

Adolescents are expected to take personal responsibility over their reading lives, yet we don't give them the power to do so

Adolescents usually have very little control over the curriculum, policy, and classroom practices which dictate their in-school reading experiences – these are predominately created, monitored, and modified by adults. Meaningfully involving adolescents in reading research and practice puts their experiences and needs at the heart of this work.

The absence of barriers is not the same as the presence of motivators

Although they are related, 'barriers' and 'motivators' should be distinguished from one another (Coddington, 2009) – it is important not to conceptualise them as sitting at either end of a continuum, but as "qualitatively different affects" (Guthrie et al. 2009; p.341)

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With thanks to:

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