



Edge Hill  
University

Department of  
Psychology



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

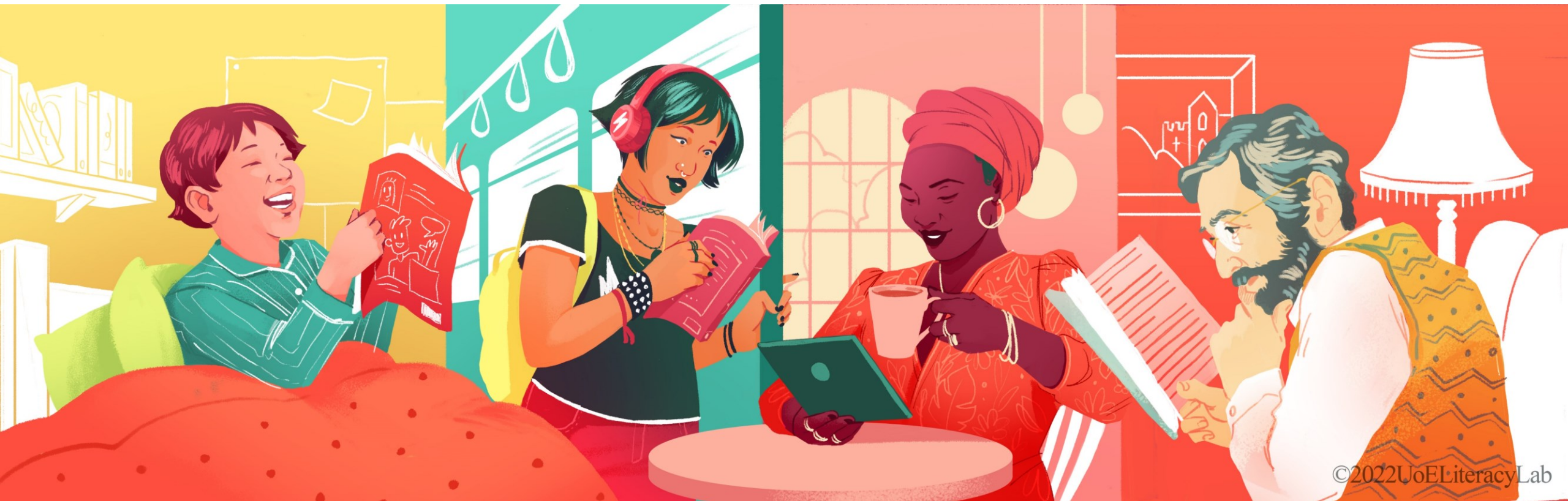
# Reading and Wellbeing: Developmental and diverse perspectives

FELA conference, June 2024

Sarah McGeown

Nicola Currie, Gemma Moss, Katherine Wilkinson and Christina Clark





©2022UoELiteracyLab

Readers' perceptions of the relationship between their fiction book reading and psychological wellbeing (positive affect, connection, personal growth)

Research across the lifespan



**Reading  
& Wellbeing**

# Reading and Wellbeing

Surprisingly little research exploring the relationship between reading and wellbeing...

- Large scale quantitative studies with children and young people: UK (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018), Australia (Kennewell et al., 2022) and US (Sun et al., 2023).
- Small scale qualitative studies across the lifespan: UK (McGeown et al., 2020), Canada (Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018).
- Reviews: Eekhof et al., (2022); Mar et al., (2011).



# Psychological wellbeing

Complex concept, with research falling into one of two traditions:

- Hedonistic: Happiness (presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect).
- Eudaimonic: Meaning and self-realisation (e.g., autonomy, self-acceptance, mastery, personal growth, positive relatedness).

Ryan and Deci, 2001



# Psychological wellbeing

Complex concept, with research falling into one of two traditions:

- Hedonistic: Happiness (presence of **positive affect** and absence of negative affect).
- Eudaimonic: Meaning and self-realisation (e.g., autonomy, self-acceptance, mastery, **personal growth, positive relatedness**).

Ryan and Deci, 2001



# Positive affect

- Fiction reading elicits a wide range of positive emotions: happiness, reassurance, relaxation, excitement, comfort, emotional meaning, etc.
- Emotions can be elicited as a result of book content or personal memories
- Diverse emotions associated with fiction reading (e.g., sadness)
- Interaction between emotions and reading choices
- Emotional experiences can continue beyond reading experience
- Need to better understand the nuance and complexity of emotions aroused from fiction reading across the lifespan.



# Connection

- Fiction books often portray the social world we live in and have potential to fulfil basic human needs for connection.
- Potential for feelings of connection to fictional characters, settings, story events and real-life others through reading.
- Until now, these different dimensions of connection have not been studied simultaneously, nor have similarities/differences across the lifespan.

Eekhof et al., 2022; McGeown et al., 2020; Oatley, 2021; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018





# Personal Growth

- Fiction reading can improve language and literacy skills, and readers' knowledge and understanding of the world, themselves and others.
- Fiction reading can support identity development, perspective taking, empathy, and can prompt reflection on own life experiences.
- Essential to hear readers' perspectives of how reading supports their personal growth and explore similarities and differences across the lifespan.

Eekhof et al., 2022; Mar et al., 2011; Poerio & Totterdell, 2020; Torppa et al., 2019





# Method

- Children (aged 9-11, n = 24), young people (aged 15-17, n = 19), adults (aged 30-50, n = 21) and older adults (aged 63-83, n = 15) participated. All identified as fiction readers.
- Interview schedule was piloted prior to use, focusing on three dimensions of wellbeing, with very similar questions across all age groups.
- Study was preregistered: <https://osf.io/n6rfv> with interview schedule attached.
- Findings from children and older adults will be shared today...



# Children

## Positive affect

Positive emotions

Emotional variability

Interaction between emotions and reading choices

## Connection

Connection with books (characters, story)

Connection with family

Connection with friends and peers

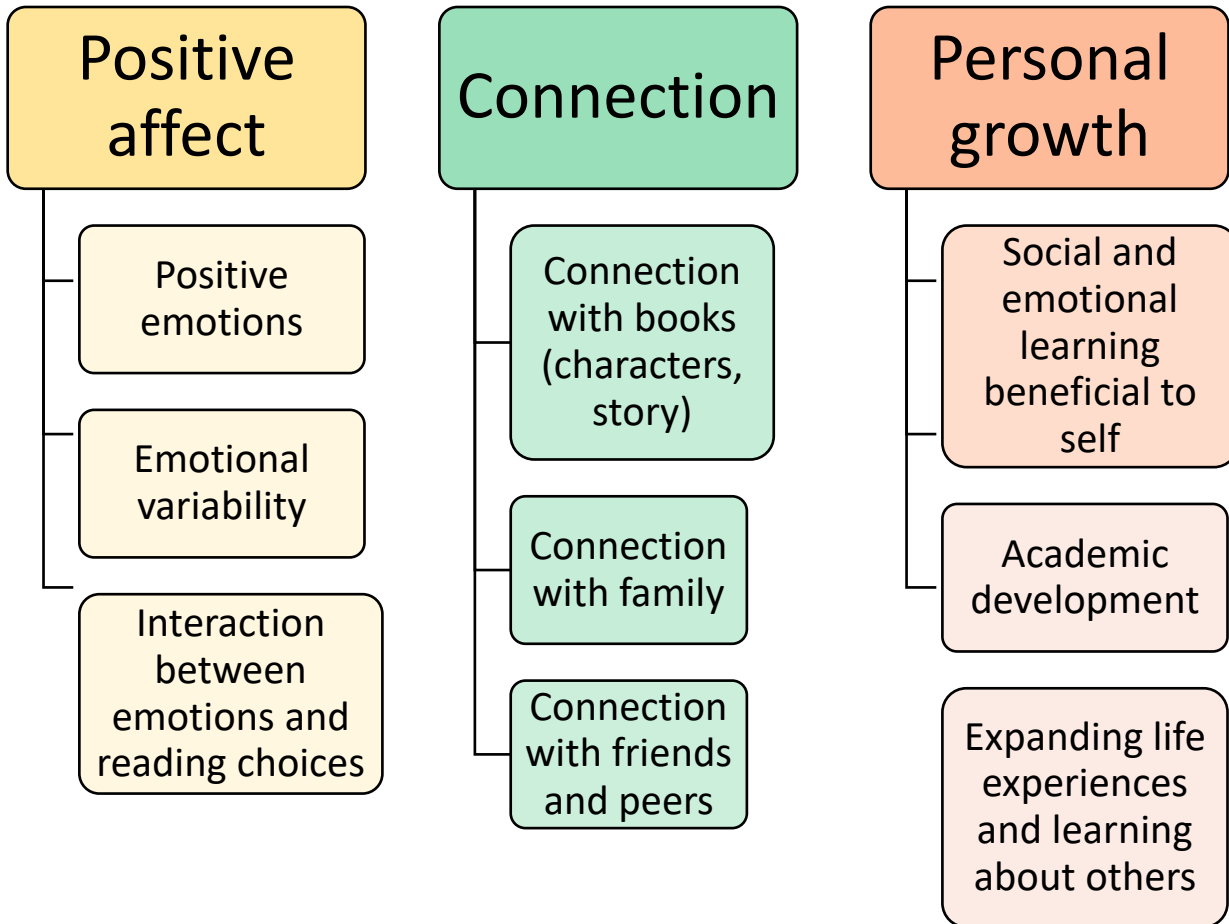
## Personal growth

Social and emotional learning beneficial to self

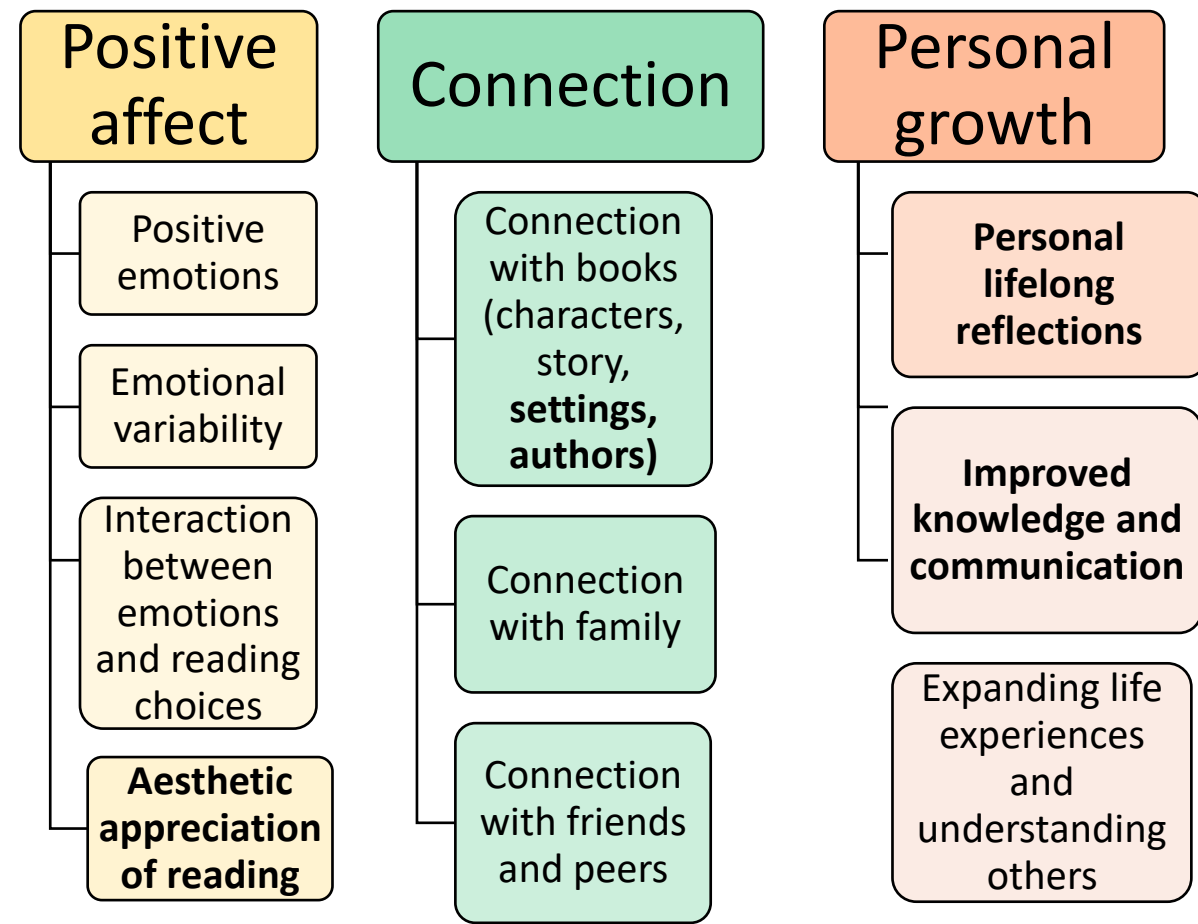
Academic development

Expanding life experiences and learning about others

# Children



# Older Adults



# Positive affect: Children

## Positive emotions

*'I feel excited and like don't wanna put the book down.'* (Girl, 10)

*'I just feel genuinely happy reading them. It's just like, a really happy thing'* (Boy, 9)

## Emotional variability

*'It makes me feel like excited and anxious for the character.'* (Girl, 9)

*'sometimes I might feel sad cause like a character has died that I really liked.'* (Boy, 10)

## Interaction between emotions and reading choices

*'I just choose the books that I like, and it doesn't matter which mood I'm in.'* (Boy, 10)

*'But then if I read a funny book I can use that comedy and also it just makes me feel up and good. Happy.'* (Girl, 11)

# Positive affect: Older adults

## Positive emotions

*'...and the feelings that you get are just, I mean, so he's so-, some of it is so funny, it's laugh out loud funny.'* (Female, 65)

*'It lived with me and I still think about it every once in a while.'* (Female, 70)

## Emotional variability

*'Definitely a sort of admiration and sympathy for the sister because her central problem is that she didn't want to be alive at all.'* (Male, 63)

*It's very, very tense and every, every chapter has got another challenge and problem and issue popping out and surprises around every corner... I enjoy things like that because it's so engaging.'* (Male, 74)

## Interaction between emotions and reading choices/behaviours

*'Reading fiction helps me through all the difficult times of my life. I've always got to have-, I've always got to have a book. I can't stand it if I don't.'* (Female, 65+)

## Aesthetic appreciation of reading

*'...you know, sometimes you're actually conscious that this is a beautiful paragraph or a beautiful scene... she's just such a wonderful writer'* (Female, 65+)



# Connection: Children

## **Fictional characters and the story world**

*'sometimes I already knew what they were going through and I feel sorry for them.'* (Girl, 11)

*'The more you relate to something the more you can like feel in the story.'* (Boy, 10)

## **Family**

*'I like to talk to my mum about it because my mum really likes reading too'* (Girl, 11)

*'what I quite like doing is reading with somebody else, like somebody else reading a book to me. I really like that actually'* (Boy, 9)

## **Friends and peers**

*'when I read a book that's like about friendship and stuff, I just see how good that friendship is and I want that to happen with my friends'* (Girl, 11)

*'its nice to share book recommendations and I've got some of the best books I've ever read from recommendations'* (Boy, 11)

# Connection: Older adults

## Books (characters, story, setting, authors)

*'The characters were so real that, you know, they were-, she drew the characters even with their flaws. You loved them, even with their flaws or hated them because of their flaws.... It just totally drew me in.'* (Female, 65+)

*'And this is fiction. But they said an awful lot of truth in it and because I had been there... I was able to connect up between the two, you know?'* (Male, 83)

*'...but she's such an intelligent woman [author], and she's, she's steeped in her own culture.'* (Female, 65+)

## Connection with friends and family

*'My sisters in particular, one in-, my two sisters read very different books, so I have different conversations with them.'* (Female, 70)

*'I think, it's quite nice to have a conversation with somebody else who's read the same book and just see what the-, you know, whether their views are same as yours.'* (Male, 74)





# Personal growth: Children

## **Social and emotional learning**

*'be yourself' and that's something that I don't often do. So I'd say that's quite helpful from a fiction book.'* (Boy, 9)

*'And it's just made me feel happy, sad, confused, question myself and, I think that's why I'm now at this stage that I can actually like, say my feelings out loud...'* (Girl, 10)

## **Academic development**

*'Definitely drawing because I never used to like to draw. But now when I see a book and the character it doesn't have a picture, I like to try and draw them'* (Girl, 10)

*'I think its improved my writing, especially like my descriptive writing and describing like a character.'* (Girl, 10)

## **Expanding life experiences and learning about others**

*'it makes me understand that like people are fighting battles that you have no idea about'* (Boy, 11)

*it's given me a lot more empathy for different people. It's made me learn, learn about people from different cultures'* (Girl, 9)



# Personal growth: Older adults

## **Personal lifelong reflections**

*'But I think the quieter arena of reading is more likely to bring about change, or slow change. At least some self-questioning.'* (Male, 63)

*'And you know it's always so powerful to hear other people talk about things that you've experienced and, you know, sometimes change your mind about what you've experienced.'* (Female, 70)

## **Improved knowledge and communication**

*'But now I do some writing, poetry and stuff, and I think the fact that I have a good vocabulary 'cause I read a lot, is probably helpful.'* (Female, aged 72)

*'But you know, I've only just realised that in the last 10 years I think, that that's what I was doing. I was educating myself.'* (Female, 66)

## **Expanding life experiences and understanding others**

*'now that I'm older and I have read more, I can imagine more what some of these poor people were going through and why they were all so angry all the time.'* (Male, 63)

*'So that's really the real core of reading. It gives you an understanding and an insight and maybe hopefully an empathy into those experiences that you, you were not gonna have yourself but help to be maybe, hopefully a better human being and more understanding human being.'* (Female, 65+)

# Summary

- Captured nuanced, rich and diverse wellbeing benefits from reading fiction.
  - Similarities and differences across the lifespan.
  - Limitations - diversity.
  - Potential wellbeing benefits from reflecting on reading experiences.
- 
- Full dataset available from 2025.
  - Encourage you to reflect on your own reading experiences....

*‘it does really make you think about why you do what you do, the impact it has on you. And it's actually been a real joy talking to you about books and how it makes me feel’*



# University of Edinburgh: Literacy Lab

## Research-practice partnerships and participatory approaches

### Increase reading/writing motivation and engagement

- Love to Read Primary
- Love to Read Reception
- Love to Read Libraries
- Young People's Reading Project
- The Writing Lives of Children and Young People

### Understand and deepen reading experiences

- Reading and Wellbeing
- Reading and Narrative Fiction
- Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction
- ReWriter Poetry App
- Augmented Reality Books
- Disability Representation in Picturebooks



# Thank you for listening

Dr Nicola Currie: [ncurrie2@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ncurrie2@ed.ac.uk)

Email: [s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk](mailto:s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk)

X: @DrSarahMcG and @UoELiteracyLab

Website: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>



Many thanks to the children, young people and adults who participated in this project and shared their reading experiences.



Postdoctoral researcher: Nicola Currie

Co-I's: Gemma Moss (IoE), Katherine Wilkinson (SBT) and Christina Clark (NLT)

