



# Supporting Teenage Reading: Enjoyment, Engagement and Enrichment

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# Supporting Teenage Reading

## Overview:

- (1) Rich and diverse benefits teenagers gain from reading books
- (2) Research-informed principles to support reading for pleasure
- (3) Beyond books: The essential role of high school librarians as champions for student inclusivity, autonomy and reader development.

# U.K. context

“...in 2023, we find that children and young people’s reading enjoyment is at crisis point”  
National Literacy Trust report 2023

- 2 in 5 (43.4%) of 8-18-year-olds said they enjoy reading, the lowest level reported since 2005.
- In the last 50 years, overall time spent reading for pleasure has declined amongst adolescents.
- Children often have high levels of reading motivation and engagement when they start school, but these often decline as they move through secondary school.

## References:

Picton, I., Clark, C., & Galway, M. (2023) Children and Young People’s Reading in 2023. National Literacy Trust Report.

Schiefele, U., & Löweke, S. (2018). The nature, development, and effects of elementary students’ reading motivation profiles. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 53(4), 405–421

Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2019). Trends in US Adolescents’ media use, 1976–2016: The rise of digital media, the decline of TV, and the (near) demise of print.

*Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(4), 329.

# Rich and diverse benefits from reading books

- Emotional experiences
- Academic, literacy and language skills
- Knowledge of the world, and expanding life experiences
- Personal enrichment: Representation, self-kindness, sense of belonging, future aspirations
- Understanding others: Empathy and perspective taking
- Mental health and wellbeing

# Emotional experiences

- Books elicit a range of rich and diverse emotional experiences, from feelings of happiness, calm, excitement or reassurance, to feelings of sadness (Wilkinson et al., 2020).
- However, even 'negative' emotional experiences can be enjoyable, enriching, and sought out by young people (Currie & McGeown, 2025).
- In addition, books can provide a way for young people to work through difficult emotions (Currie et al., under review)

'It's peaceful. It's a way for me to just calm down and just get away from the world'

'It just brings me like a huge sense of nostalgia because I read it so much when I was younger'

# Academic, literacy and language skills

## Academic:

Positive academic outcomes (OECD, 2002; Sullivan and Brown, 2015).

## Literacy:

Reading, but in particular (fiction) book reading has been linked with better reading skills (Jerrim & Moss, 2018) and growth in reading comprehension and spelling skills (e.g. Torppa et al., 2019)

## Language:

Book reading, but particularly fiction reading, is associated with better language abilities (Mol & Bus, 2011; Mar & Rain, 2015)

'I felt like after going-, like moving into high school, I really found my love for reading and it's really helped with my literacy and my, like, analysis and interpretation skills.'

'It has improved my spelling a bit in English because I'm very terrible at that. And it has helped me use my imagination more when it comes to other subjects like graphical communication and art.'

# Knowledge of the world, and expanding life experiences

- Books can inspire learning, broaden minds, and allow young people to explore topics and issues which are personally important, or discover new interests (McGeown & Wilkinson, 2021).
- Books can expand young people's life experiences, introducing them to more diverse groups, settings and contexts than they would otherwise encounter (Currie et al., under review).

'I know what neurodivergence I have, but I don't know about what it's like to have other neurodivergences, so I think I benefit from that by learning about others that have similar things to me, but not the same as what I have.'

'[Poetry] seems like a very social thing to me ... it's more about ideas in the world and important topics.'

# Personal enrichment

Representation of one's own life and experiences is important within books (Webber et al., 2023), and fiction can support young people's sense of belonging, self-kindness and support their future aspirations (Currie et al., under review).

'[It's] all about this girl going into uni and figuring out she's like queer and stuff and, like, that was really good because, like, I relate to her quite a lot.'

'Even fiction books, just reading about different concepts and topics, it really helps to define what I enjoy and what I want to do in the future.'

'it kinda did help me resonate with myself and realise that is OK for me to feel confused about what I want to do and eventually I'll find it. I'll find it at some point.'

'Made me felt good is not just like me experiencing those problems.'



# Understanding others: Empathy and perspective taking

- Books offer rich opportunities to see things from others perspectives and can develop young people's empathy (Eekhof et al, 2022; Santi et al., under review; Van der Kleij et al., 2022).
- Furthermore, books have the potential to reduce prejudice towards others (Vezzali et al., 2014).

'I think it just makes you a more empathetic person because you read about, like, different stories and different, like, dilemmas and struggles.'

'It's always, like, an internal monologue. So, it makes me think like, if other people I know, they're not saying anything, but they're having troubles, they're constantly thinking about stuff that is never talked about, you know?'

# Wellbeing

- Large scale quantitative research studies suggest a positive, albeit weak, relationship between reading and positive mental health/wellbeing (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018; Kennewell et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023).
- While qualitative research is illuminating our understanding of the different ways in which reading supports wellbeing (Currie & McGeown, 2025).

‘It would, I think it would really affect my mental health if like suddenly I couldn't read books for some reason ... ‘cause I just really like reading.’

‘I think it helps to really relax, like, if you're stressed you can start reading and it just, like, relaxes you and helps you, like, go into, like, a different mood.’

‘...and when it was Covid, reading was very important to me ‘cause it helped me through when I was sad, bored...’

# Benefits of reading for pleasure

- Far reaching benefits for those who are motivated to read, and who engage deeply with the books that they read.
- While our focus is on books, other text types (e.g., poetry) can similarly offer positive experiences and outcomes.
- Efforts to support children and young people's reading motivation and engagement are so worthwhile, and much needed.
  
- But how can we motivate teenage reading? What can we learn from research, and from young people themselves?

# The Young People's Reading Project

## Research aims:

- (1) Explore teenagers' perspectives on their reasons for reading (or not reading)
- (2) Explore teenagers' perspectives on how can we inspire and sustain reading enjoyment and engagement

# What do we know already?

Synthesis of 38 peer-reviewed articles and research reports which have evaluated approaches for improving adolescents' (12–16 years old) reading motivation.

Reading & literacy skills programmes

Whole-school reading culture

Book clubs

Technology-supported approaches

Performance & theatre

 | Frontiers in Education

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## Approaches for supporting adolescents' reading motivation: existing research and future priorities

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Webber, C., Wilkinson, K., Duncan, L. G., & McGeown, S. P. (2023, August). Approaches for supporting adolescents' reading motivation: Existing research and future priorities. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 8, p. 1254048). Frontiers.

# Much research into adolescent reading has not meaningfully included adolescent voices

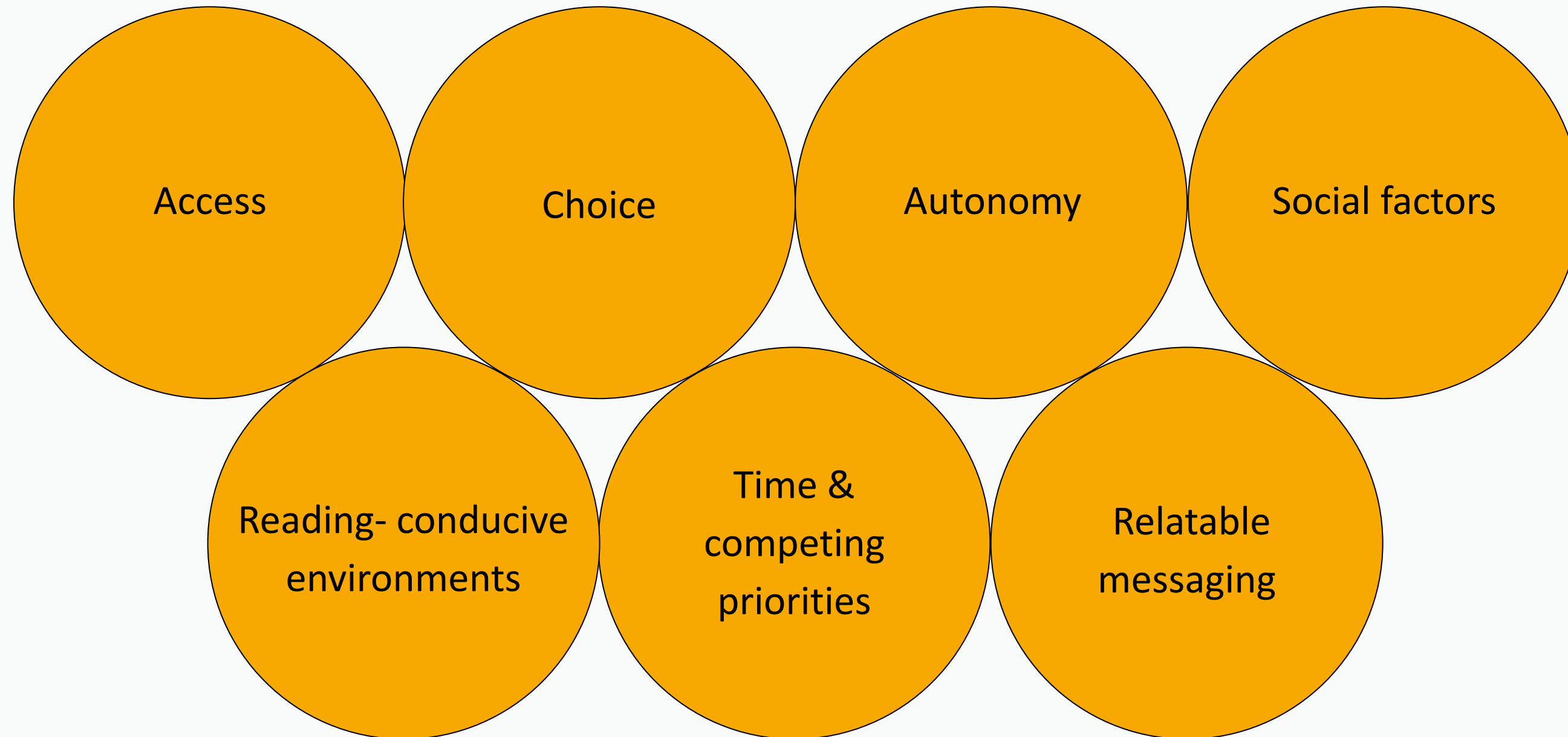
## Young People's Advisory Panel (YPAP)

- 6 young people (13-14 years old) from 3 secondary schools
- Mixture of readers & non-readers
- Involved in project planning, data collection, interpretation of findings and generating ideas for implementation

## Interviews with young people

- 46 adolescents (13 - 15 years old) from 6 secondary schools
- Interviewed by adult researcher (CW) or peer (YPAP member)
- Questions about the barriers and motivators to volitional reading in adolescence

# Factors affecting young people's reading motivation \*



\*The data was split into three datasets (1) barriers, (2) motivators, (3) perceptions; the findings have been integrated for the purpose of this presentation.

# Access

*"...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 barrier:

Finding it hard to physically access books at home and/or at school

As a motivator:

Perceiving reading material to be readily available and having regular opportunities to access it



- Updating library and home book stock
- Regular trips to the library (school and local)
- Making it easier to find recommendations
- Being gifted books to have at home
- Make books cheaper to buy
- Book subscription service



# Choice

*“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 barrier:

The books young people don't feel able to choose books which are relevant to their lives

As a motivator:

Pupils can choose from a wide variety of texts and have the skills to make effective and successful decisions



- Link interests to particular texts
- Make it easier to find recommendations based on interests
- Provide more experience with different books and genres
- Be able to access reliable information about likelihood of enjoying a book before starting it

# Autonomy

*“In school, it feels more like you're getting told to do it, which like, makes me feel like, ‘oh, why am I even doing it?’ There's not really any point 'cause at that point I don't, really...I don't have the motivation to read.”*

As a motivator:

Young people feel a sense of control over when, where, what, why, and how they read



- Having more time in the school day for extended, free reading
- Having a reading routine which fits around their lives
- Linking reading to personal goals
- Setting their own standards for success
- Not feeling pressured to read at times they don't 'feel like it'

# Social factors

As a barrier:

Reading does not fit with young people's social goals

As a motivator:

Focusing on and/or seeking out social aspects of reading

*“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.”*

- Talking to friends, parents and teachers about reading
- Modelling: seeing teachers, parents, friends and celebrities reading
- Challenging perceptions that reading isn't a social activity
- Linking reading with social media (e.g., BookTok)
- Book clubs (based on interest, not skill level)



# Reading-conducive environments

“Yeah, and having somewhere that’s, like, comfortable and not, like, plastic chairs to sit on and that. And it’s like not, not like it’s, like, formal, you know like what you do in, like, Reg and English....so like, if it was a nicer environment you know, like, cosier.”

As a barrier:

Mismatch between the ways young people want to read and the ways reading is facilitated in school

As a motivator:

Receiving encouragement from teachers/librarians, having comfortable space to read, time to read, minimising distractions.



- Include young people in text choice/lesson planning
- Provide more extended opportunities for reading in school
- Provide comfortable spaces for reading
- Support reading skills, but don't (only) use reading levels to determine text recommendation

# Relatable messaging

*“If someone I look up to would say ‘read more, it's good for you’, then probably would read a bit more. So I, uh, I like rugby and stuff, so I'd say if my favorite sports person, Stuart Hogg, were to say ‘reading really helps with rugby’, I'd probably starting reading a bit more.”*

As a motivator:

The messages young people receive about reading are relevant to them and support them to make autonomous, well-informed reading choices



- Peer-to-peer recommendation and book discussion
- Utilising social media
- Link reading to young people's own goals (rather than only adult-defined goals)
- Share genuine enjoyment for books

# Time and competing priorities

*“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.”*

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



- Having more time in the school day for extended reading
- Having a reading routine
- Link reading to personal goals
- Having access to audiobooks and online texts to read 'on the go'

# Guide for teachers and librarians

- Teenagers' perspectives on why reading for enjoyment is/could be important to them.
- Teenagers' perspectives on what stops them from reading for enjoyment.
- Teenagers' perspectives on what could help them to read more.
- Suggestions for how to apply the findings in your classroom or school library setting.

## Access via Literacy Lab

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/previous-projects/yprp/>

and Scottish Book Trust websites:

<https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/our-research/the-young-peoples-reading-project>



## Supporting Teenagers' Reading Enjoyment and Engagement: A Guide for Teachers and Librarians

This guide has been created for secondary school teachers and librarians to support teenagers' enjoyment and engagement with books.

The guide was created as part of The Young People's Reading Project, a collaboration between the Universities of Edinburgh and Dundee, Scottish Book Trust, and a Young People's Advisory Group.

### Authors:

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### Relatable messaging

Teenagers told us that it was important to see reading being promoted, but that it should be promoted in ways which resonate with them and which are genuine and relatable.

They said that the messages they receive from adults about reading didn't always align with their own goals for reading. To make messaging more relevant, they suggested:

- Being given information about how reading can support a variety of outcomes which are relevant to them (e.g., mental health and wellbeing, learning about others)
- Being recommended books by friends or teachers whose opinions they trust
- Being recommended books on social media or other sources which use language they are familiar with
- Seeing those they respect and look up to being genuinely positive about reading

*"They do need to advertise reading a little more...it's the same thing over and over again if they do advertise it like, you know, is it way to escape or something like that, which is true, but it's on every single poster or every single advertisement."*

*"If someone I look up to would say 'read more, it's good for you', then probably would read a bit more."*

How to make the messaging around reading more relatable to teenagers:

- Link reading to their own goals and interests - ask pupils themselves what outcomes from reading they would value most and centre your messaging around these
- Look for existing messages from sources which are more relatable to teenagers (e.g., using Tiktok recommendations)

### Ideas from practitioners:

- Build book lists based on pupil recommendations
- Improve staff knowledge of current trending books on social media - even if they're not in the library, you could recommend similar titles
- Display books recommended by social media
- Support pupils to make short 'Booktok-style' video reviews
- Encourage pupils to write book reviews for one another, emphasising why others will enjoy the book
- Particularly highlight the mental health and wellbeing benefits of reading for pleasure
- Organise author visits
- Support pupils to reflect on their own goals for reading, for example through reading journals or discussion



# Beyond books

Semi-structured interviews (online):

- How do library staff support young people's reading?
- What are their/their pupils' perceptions of these approaches?
- Are there other approaches they'd like to use and are there any barriers to these?

Librarians and staff responsible for school library services in Scotland (N=18)

**Part of Scottish Book Trust's broader libraries advocacy work**

<https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/our-research/the-impact-of-scotlands-libraries>



# Beyond books

## Findings

### Reader development: beyond reading for attainment

1. Cultivating a love of reading
2. Supporting diverse reading activities
3. Ensuring book provision reflects the school community
4. Aligning reading with pupils' contemporary lives

"We've new children almost every week who are seeking asylum or are refugees. We have got a lot of poverty, and I've brought in some new books like *The Young Team* by Graeme Armstrong, and just, I want them all to see themselves in stories."

# Beyond books

## Findings

### Reader development: beyond reading for attainment

1. Cultivating a love of reading
2. Supporting diverse reading activities
3. Ensuring book provision reflects the school community
4. Aligning reading with pupils' contemporary lives

### Personal development: inclusivity, autonomy and building a safe space

1. Supporting personal development
2. Expanding pupils' worldview through books
3. Supporting aspects of pupil's lives
4. Providing support for marginalised pupils
5. Creating a safe and social space
6. Supporting pupil autonomy

“I think, never underestimating the power of a really small gesture, like, literally just hanging up a pride flag can create so much buzz among certain pupils, and then you get the confidence of them asking for certain books.”

“The most important part of my job isn't about reading, it's not about information. It's about having that safe space.”

# Beyond books



## Read the full open-access publication:

Webber, C., Bohan, K., Collins, H., Ewens, J., Wilkinson, K., & McGeown, S. (2024). Beyond books: High school librarians as champions of pupil inclusivity, autonomy, and reader development. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006241230101>



## Read the Scottish Book Trust web article:

*Beyond books: School libraries as sources of safety, inclusivity and wellbeing.*  
<https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/articles/beyond-books-school-libraries-as-sources-of-safety-inclusivity-and-wellbeing>

Scottish Book Trust have also created a kit for families, parents, teachers or learning professionals to advocate for their school's library. The kit is free to download from their website [www.scottishbooktrust.com](http://www.scottishbooktrust.com)



# Additional resources

Scottish Book Trust blog posts:

[www.scottishbooktrust.com/articles/authors/charlotte-webber](http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/articles/authors/charlotte-webber)

Project website and resources:

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/previous-projects/yprp/>



## Research overview: Supporting young people to read for pleasure

Research shows that teenagers' levels of reading enjoyment and engagement are at an all-time low. A range of approaches for supporting teenagers' reading motivation have been explored, yet research on the different types of approaches available has not yet been brought together in a way that makes it easy to navigate.

As part of the **Young People's Reading Project**, we carried out a review of 1,032 academic papers to find those which have evaluated approaches for supporting teenagers' (12-16 years old) reading motivation. We synthesized the findings and categorised the approaches into 5 types: reading and literacy skills programmes, whole-school reading cultures, book clubs, technology-supported approaches, and performance and theater.

In this summary, we provide an overview of these 5 types of approach, outline what is missing from the current research, and give recommendations for practice.

A screenshot of the author page for Charlotte Webber on the Scottish Book Trust website. The page features a navigation bar at the top with links for 'Reading and stories', 'Writing and authors', 'Learning and resources', and 'Browse and search', along with a 'Donate' button. The main content area includes a profile picture of Charlotte Webber, a short bio, and a 'Read articles from other authors' button. Below this are six article cards with titles like 'Why is reading especially important for teens?' and 'Collaborating with teen researchers to understand teenage reading experiences'. The bottom of the page shows the 'LITERACY LAB' logo and 'THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH' logo.

# Additional resources

## Adolescents' perspectives on the barriers to reading for pleasure

Webber, C., Wilkinson, K., Duncan, L. G., & McGeown, S. (2023b), Literacy.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12359>

## Working with a young people's advisory panel to conduct educational research: Young people's perspectives and researcher reflections

Webber, C., Wilkinson, K., Duncan, L. G., & McGeown, S. (2024), International Journal of Educational Research.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102308>

## Adolescents' perspectives on the barriers to reading for pleasure

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### Abstract

Adolescence is often positioned as a particularly vulnerable period for reading motivation and engagement, both for academic reading and reading for pleasure. However, closer scrutiny of the literature reveals a much more nuanced pattern of changing inter-

taking and well-being (Howard, 2011; Wilhelm, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Eekhof et al., 2022), understanding the barriers to reading for pleasure during adolescence is necessary to support personal reading practices beyond childhood.

Reading motivation is a complex concept (Schiefele et al., 2012; Tsatsis et al., 2020) and has been described



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## Working with a young people's advisory panel to conduct educational research: Young people's perspectives and researcher reflections

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### ABSTRACT

Participatory Action Research (PAR) with young people aims to centre their knowledge and experience in research which is meaningful to them. In recent years, there has been an increase in PAR approaches within education, yet there is still a need for greater methodological insight into this approach. In this project, which explored adolescents' reading motivation and engagement, a young people's advisory panel was convened to ensure the perspectives and experiences of young

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Copies of all papers and other resources can be found on the Literacy Lab website

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