



# The Power and Pleasures of Reading

How Books Can Engage, Empower, and Enrich Us

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University of Edinburgh



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# Overview

Reading  
and  
Wellbeing

Reading  
Engagement

Reading  
Motivation

Research-  
Practice  
Partnerships

Literacy Lab





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# Reading and Wellbeing: Developmental and diverse perspectives

# Reading and Wellbeing

Quantitative research with children and young people suggests positive, albeit weak, relationship between reading and wellbeing (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018; Kennewell et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024)

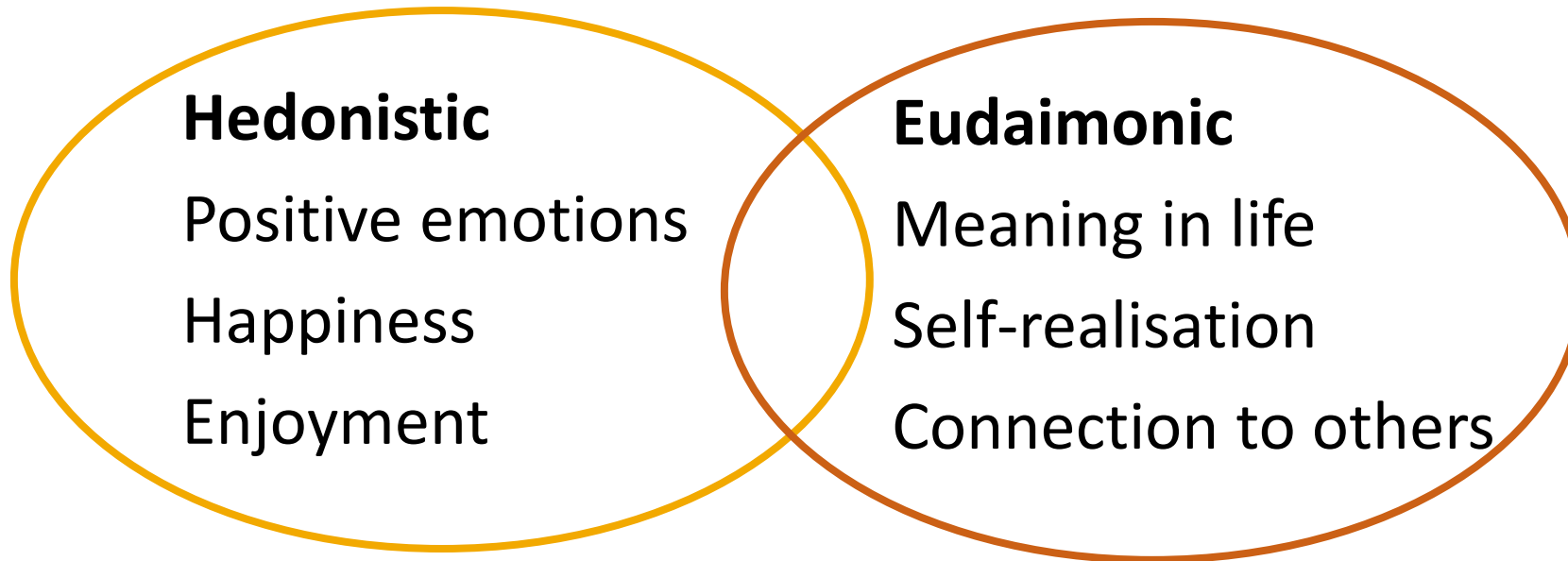
A more nuanced understanding of the relationship between reading and wellbeing is required, in addition to lifespan insights...

Qualitative study, 78 participants, aged 9-11, 15-17, 30-50, 63-83.



# Reading and Wellbeing

**What do we mean by wellbeing?**



# Findings: Positive affect

- Fiction book reading can elicit a wide range of emotions (happiness, sadness, excitement, tension, nostalgia, hope)
- Some readers report that 'negative' emotions can be enjoyable
- Emotions before, and after, reading
- Emotions elicited via book content and/or cueing of personal memories
- Readers differ in their predisposition to seek out/engage in emotionally meaningful content
- Book content/writing quality influences emotional experiences



# Positive affect

'it is genuinely one of the funniest things I've ever read. And then there's other moments where it's like hair-raisingly awful and it's-, yeah, it's just it's so good'

'I just love the thrill of it, I just love the magic...It just feels like I'm in another world'

'I've read a few books as well that that have like left me crying in tears, like, I'm not even kidding. But it's amazing'

'the way that that sentence was written terrified me...'

'It lived with me and I still think about it every once in a while'

'it gave me an experience that I haven't had in real life, but it was for me, it was quite a deep experience'

'remembering the days when you really could chase down the deck and grab the ropes that were thrown [laughing] reminds you of happy times.'

# Findings: Connection

Through personal reading experiences....

- To fictional characters, settings, story events
- To real-life others, both known and unknown





# Connection

'I felt as if I'd lived the whole life with her when she died. So I've really, I sort of lived and breathed the series'

'When they tell you about their personal feelings and you can tell how much it actually relates to you. How, I know it's just a book, but it feels like sometimes just yourself'

'It's always like an internal monologue. So it makes me think 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?'

'they show you how like the same problems that you are having and they help you get through them'

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

# Findings: Personal growth

- Intellectual and educational development
- Supporting self
- Understanding others
- Expand life experiences



# Personal growth

'I would say I went to India, I went to Africa, I went to, you know, there was all these countries I went to with all of these books'

'it makes me understand that like people are fighting battles that you have no idea about'

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

'but I think the quieter arena of reading is more likely to bring about change, or slow change. At least some self-questioning'

'it gives you an understanding and an insight and maybe hopefully an empathy into those experiences that you, were not gonna have yourself but help to be maybe, hopefully, a better human being'

'[through character] I can see that it is OK to not be perfect because it will always be OK, like, it will all be alright'

# Summary

- Fiction books offer a vast range of rich and diverse experiences.
- As readers, we bring so much of ourselves to the books that we read.
- For the wellbeing benefits of reading to be realised, we need to engage deeply with the books that we read....

Currie, N. et al., (2025). Reading Fiction and Psychological Well-being During Older Adulthood: Positive Affect, Connection and Personal Growth. *Reading Research Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.605>

Currie, N., & McGeown, S. (2025). Fiction Books and Benefits to Wellbeing. In *Reading for Pleasure: International Perspectives*. Cremin, T., & McGeown, S. (Eds.) Routledge.





# Reading Engagement

Exploring the concept

# Reading Engagement

A recent systematic review identified four dimensions of reading engagement: behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social (Lee, Gee Jang & Conradi-Smith, 2021).

Lee et al., (2021). A Systematic Review of Reading Engagement Research: What Do We Mean, What Do We Know, and Where Do We Need to Go?  
*Reading Psychology*,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2021.1888359>





# Reading engagement

- Cognitive effort
- Implementation of cognitive strategies (e.g., to support comprehension)
- Cognitive affordances of different text types/content



Cognitive



Behavioural

Affective



- Diverse affective experiences
- Reading personally enjoyable content
- Affective affordances of different text types/content

Social



- Reading behaviours (time spent reading - frequency, duration)
- Behavioural affordances of different text types/content
- Extending and enhancing reading experiences and outcomes through diverse social reading activities
- Social affordances of different text types/content

# Summary

- Our understanding of reading engagement is still in its infancy.
- Different disciplinary perspectives can bring important insights to this concept, e.g., psychological, sociomaterial....
- Reading motivation precedes reading engagement..... how do we motivate (book) reading?



# UK decline in reading

- Children's reading enjoyment and engagement is at an all time low (Clark et al., 2024).
- Education policy and practice commitment towards 'reading for pleasure'

## Report finds 'shocking and dispiriting' fall in children reading for pleasure

National Literacy Trust finds only 35% of eight to 18-year-olds enjoy reading in their spare time, a sharp drop on last year to the lowest figure yet recorded

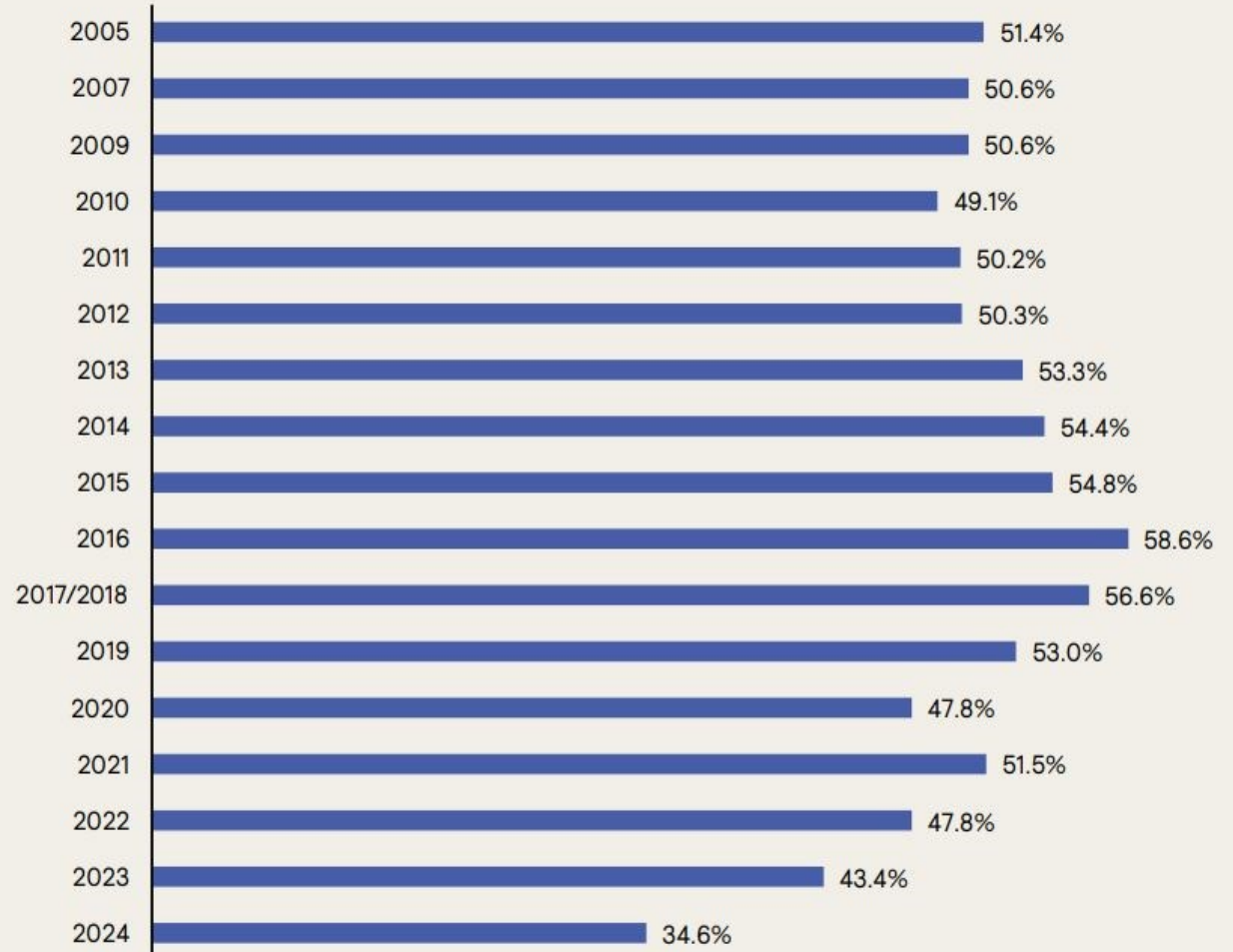


Source: The Guardian, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2024

# UK decline in reading

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- Education policy and practice commitment towards 'reading for pleasure'

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to 2024





# International decline in reading

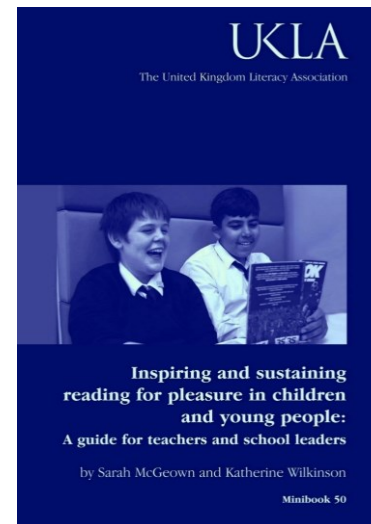
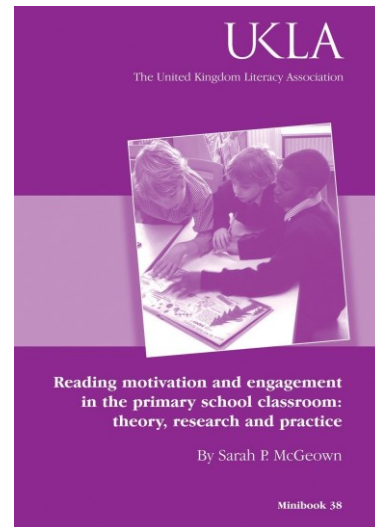
- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)
- Reading attitudes measure reflects reading enjoyment and out of school reading



# Reading motivation

The *‘drive to read, resulting from... an individual's beliefs about, attitudes towards, and goals for reading’* (Conradi et al., 2014).

**Quantitative** and **qualitative** research aimed at understanding the **causes** and **consequences** of children and young people's reading motivation.



<https://ukla.org/product/reading-motivation-and-engagement-in-the-primary-school-classroom-2/>

<https://ukla.org/product/inspiring-and-sustaining-reading-for-pleasure-in-children-and-young-people-a-guide-for-teachers-and-school-leaders/>

Conradi et al., (2014). Motivation Terminology in Reading Research: A Conceptual Review.  
*Educational Psychology Review*,  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-013-9245-z>





# Love to Read

Aim: To co-create and evaluate a programme to increase children's (aged 8-11) reading motivation and engagement.



# Love to Read

## Development

## Evaluation



### Research

Review:  
Different disciplinary  
perspectives /  
methodological  
approaches

SIX PRINCIPLES



### Children

Individual and group  
interviews to seek  
children's  
perspectives and  
experiences.



### Teachers/ professionals

Programme co-design  
informed by research,  
children, and teachers'  
professional and  
pedagogical expertise

PROGRAMME  
DEVELOPED



### Evaluation

Feasibility study,  
examining  
implementation and  
effectiveness, using  
mixed methods.

PROGRAMME  
REFINED

# Principles to support children's reading motivation and engagement





# Choice

Children need to have choice over their independent reading activities: schools need to have the structure, and children need to have the skills, to ensure good reading choices.

*"I liked that we could discover new things what we liked. I found out that I quite like the diary kind of books, which I didn't know I liked before"*

*"they weren't necessarily understanding how to choose books... you now see them take much longer to select their books" [and know when to change]*

*"This was the most useful lesson, the class really didn't have the skills to choose a book and I found children who disengage with reading quickly were finding books they found interesting and reading consistently"*

*"highlighted that many children did not have strategies on how to select a book.. the weaker children in particular began to make better choice of reading material"*

*"I used to just like pick up a book and look at the front cover and be like, 'Oh, that's interesting'. But now when I pick up book I look at the front cover... I think about what story could be about..."*

*"I used to not read books, and I've started to like books more and more ... because I've found books that I like!"*

# Connection

Children need to be able to access and choose books, and book reading activities, which are personally relevant, and relevant to their reading goals.

*"a child, he said that the music today didn't match what I was reading today, which I thought was really interesting. He said that's too slow, I'm reading a chase scene and that's too slow. And I thought, that's fascinating. He was really reflective after that"*

*"I feel like you almost like connect more to the characters"*

*"for me reading isn't just a thing you do anymore, it's sort of like another life"*

*"Before I just thought that reading was like, you read a book and then you finish the book, but now I feel that you can like think a lot more about the book and like relate yourself to the characters and the storyline and stuff"*

*"I gave the class the task of finding a book that they connect with and to share it with someone who they think would connect with too. The class really enjoyed this as many children were able to connect and read with people other than their friends"*

*"I think I'm a lot more into the world of the book, and like the characters, so I think that's probably one thing it's helped me with, cause when I used to read, I never really got into the books"*

# Success

Children need to have a range of rich and diverse positive reading experiences, be able to set meaningful goals for themselves, and recognise their growing success as readers.

*"The 'what makes a successful reader discussion really hit home for some children. It's not just the kids who read the massive Harry Potter books that are good readers!!"*

*"What is a successful reader? This activity worked well on post it notes and allowed for anonymity and lots of discussion"*

*"I think that the love to read just like showed us the better sides of reading not just that you had to do it for your homework, you could actually do it as a like hobby and stuff"*

*"Probably cause I've now like experienced what reading, and how fun reading can be, and it's yeah. It's just been a lot more fun ever since"*

*"for our SEN child to really be like I love reading now, I will sit and read, is amazing"*

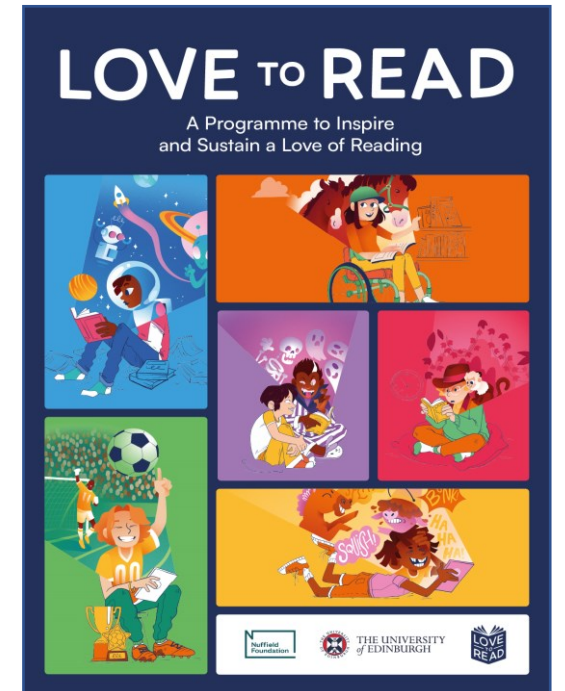
*"I used to just think that I wasn't that good at reading and I could only read short stories. But when I started reading bigger books, I realized that you achieve it if you put your mind to it"*



# Summary

Full details of the project can be found here:  
<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/lovetoread/>

Love to Read Libraries

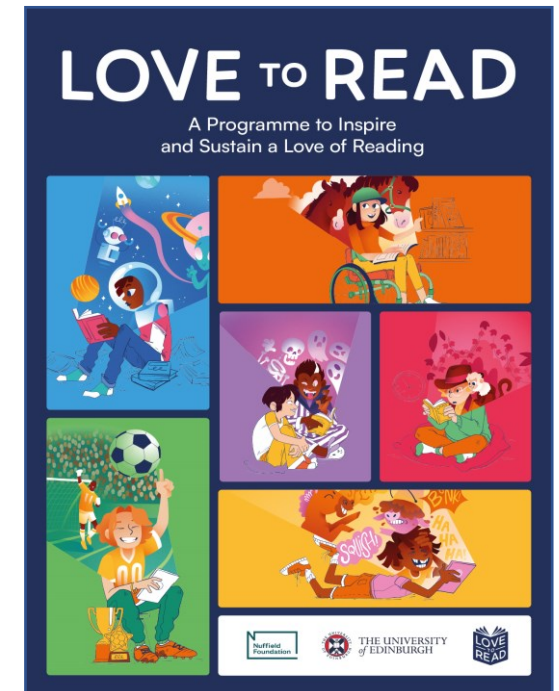


# Summary

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Methodological approach

- Research-practice partnership / co-design



# Research-practice partnerships

Collaborative research which draws upon the knowledge, expertise and experience from those working in research and practice.



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<https://lalco.org.uk/>

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## Participatory Approaches in Literacy Research SIG

Bring together practitioners, teacher educators, researchers and allied professionals, from different disciplinary backgrounds, who have a shared interest in understanding and improving children and young people's literacy skills and experiences, through participatory research approaches.

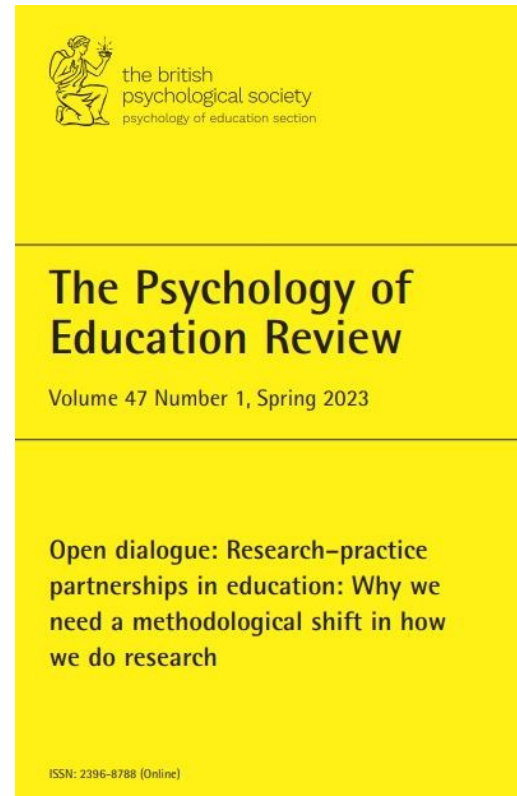
<https://ukla.org/special-interest-groups/participatory-approaches-in-literacy-research-sig/>



# Research-practice partnerships

## Opening article

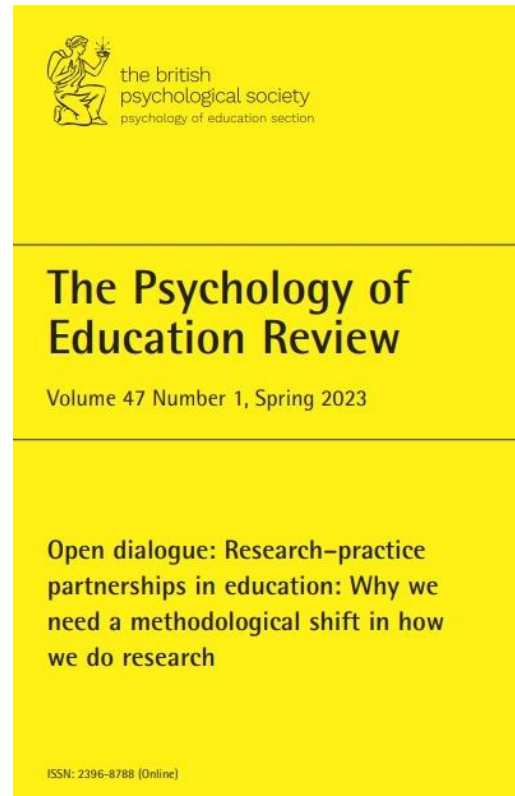
- Benefits
- Methodological considerations



# Research-practice partnerships

## Closing article

- Summary
- Enablers for change



Responses from:

Professor Laura Crane  
Megan Dixon  
Robin MacPherson  
Professor Courtenay Norbury  
Professor William Penuel  
Dr Simon Sjolund  
Professor Maggie Snowling  
Dr Emma Vardy

Edited by Dr Andrew Holliman

# Research-practice partnerships

## Europe

Enablers for systemic change: Infrastructure, funding, training and incentives

## UK

### Research Excellence Framework

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding  
Engagement and Impact  
People, Culture and Environment



Blog post

Part of series: The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029

### Research-practice partnerships: Implications for REF 2029

Sarah McGeown, Professor of Literacy at University of Edinburgh · 7 Apr 2025

# Summary

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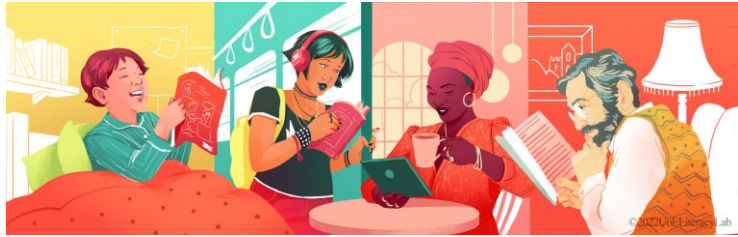
Reading  
Motivation

Research-  
Practice  
Partnerships

Literacy Lab







Reading and Wellbeing



Reading to Dogs



Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction



Reading Engagement



Fiction Reading: Understanding ourselves and others



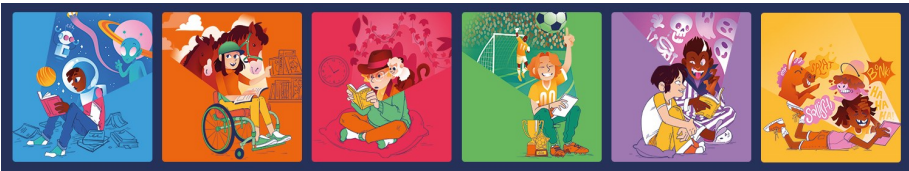
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Augmented Reality Book Reading



The Young People's Reading Project



Love to Read



Disability representation in picturebooks



Growing Up A Reader



Love to Read: Reception



The Writing Lives of Children and Young People





## Engage

**Motivate/engage** children, young people and adults in literacy activities which are enjoyable, empowering and enriching.

## Empower

Empower children, young people and adults with the **skills, confidence and resources** to use literacy to positively affect their own and others' lives.

## Enrich

Enrich children, young people and adults' lives through literacy, supporting **intellectual, social and emotional growth**

# Thank you for listening



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