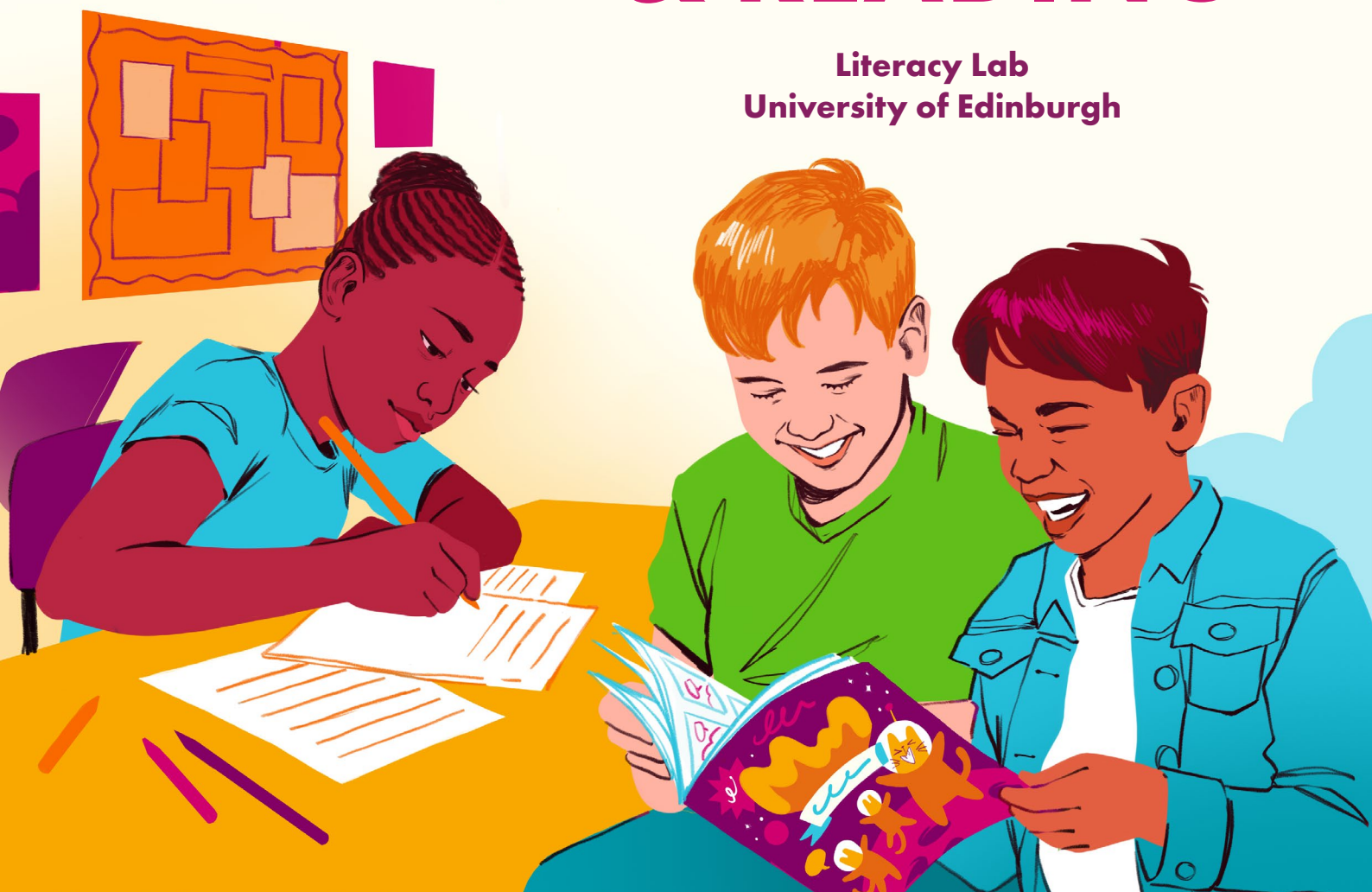




THE FUTURE OF BOOKS & READING

Literacy Lab
University of Edinburgh



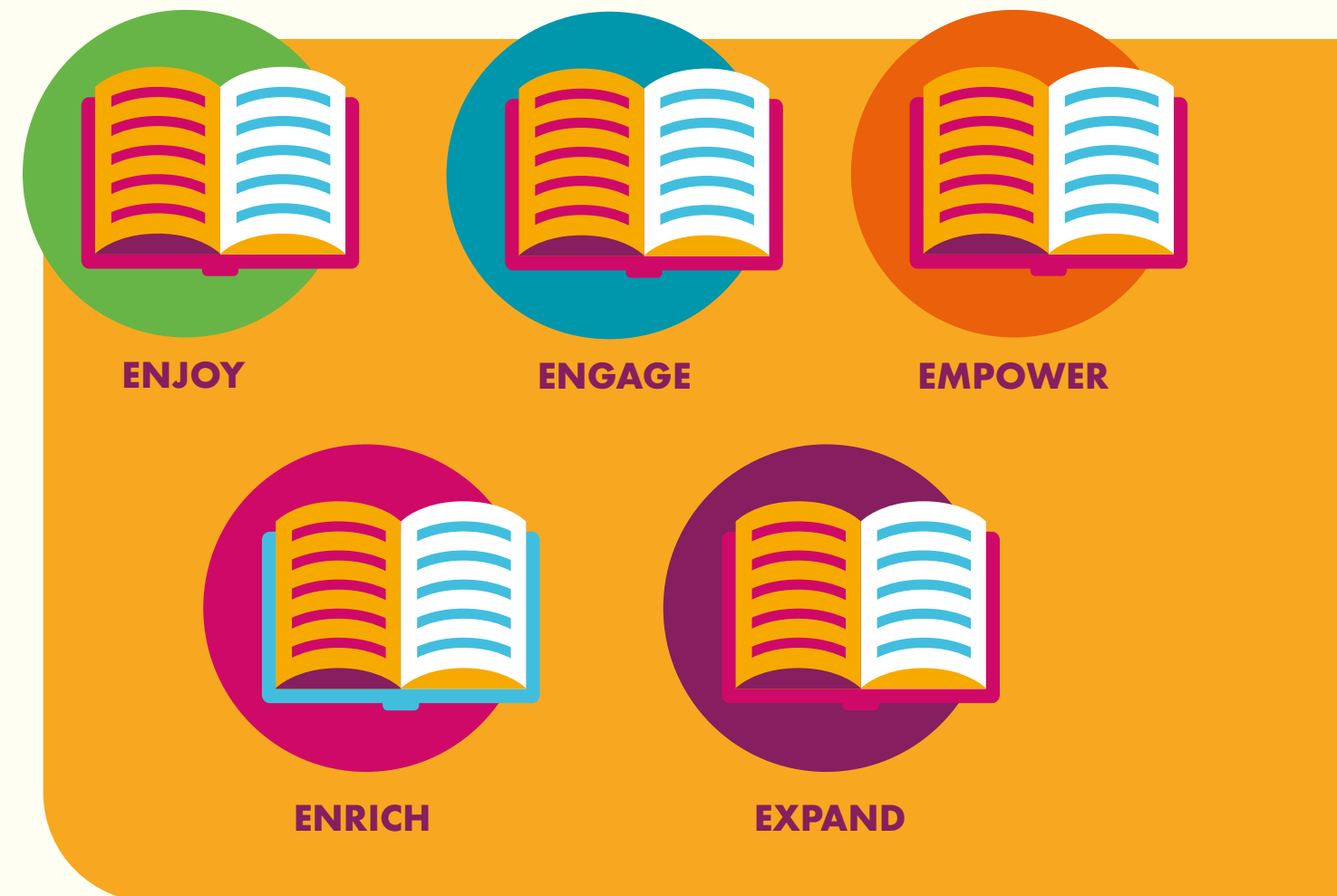
THE FUTURE OF BOOKS & READING

UK reading habits are changing. The last two decades have seen considerable shifts in the reading attitudes and practices of children and young people, with continued declines in reading enjoyment and engagement,¹ while declines in adults' reading are also evident.²

This is concerning, as there is strong evidence highlighting the importance of reading, often book reading, for positive life and learning experiences and outcomes.^{3, 4, 5} This is therefore a timely point at which to consider the **Future of Books and Reading**.

In April 2025, individuals from UK university, literacy, library, education, publishing, festival and museum sectors, all with a shared interest in books and reading, met to discuss their individual and collective interests in relation to this area. This paper focuses on **five themes** which were identified as central to support future thinking and discussion: **Enjoy, Engage, Empower, Enrich and Expand**.

Drawing upon our respective areas of knowledge, research, interest and expertise, as well as the voices of children, young people, adults and older adults in the UK, the aim of this paper is to share a range of insights to prompt thinking, discussion and action to support more children, young people and adults to engage in personally enjoyable, empowering and enriching reading practices.



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THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

ENJOY



There are many ways to enjoy a book, and research demonstrates that readers seek different types of reading experiences. For example, books offer opportunities for relaxation, adventure, humour, excitement, escapism and for learning about ourselves, others and the world around us.^{1,2,3} Nurturing reading enjoyment is about promoting reading in personally meaningful ways by identifying and supporting individual motives for reading and ensuring access to books (and other texts) aligned with individuals interests, preferences, lives, experiences and abilities.^{4,5} Developing skills in choosing books and other texts which align with personal reading interests is also essential to ensure all readers are able to select books they will likely enjoy.^{6,7} Further, if book reading is to become a sustained practice which people choose to do, it needs to both fit into and enhance their lives.⁸

However, book reading is becoming increasingly synonymous with school, learning or work, and/or is considered too difficult, time consuming or requiring too much effort.⁹ In messaging around reading for pleasure, it is not enough to say reading is enjoyable – children, young people, adults and families need to experience it. Book festivals, exhibitions, activities and other events also have an important role to play in supporting reading enjoyment and celebrating the diverse ways in which people can enjoy reading.

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

Child

'I read a lot. It's like the best thing for relaxing'

Young Person

'... and especially the ones that you'd read more than once and every time you read them, you get that feeling over and over again'

Adult

'The feelings that you get are just, I mean, he's so-, some of it is so funny, it's laugh out loud funny'

Older Adult



Kelly Maguire
BookTrust

In the early years in particular, engaging parents and carers with reading is critical and mutual enjoyment is a powerful motivator.¹⁰ Receiving reading advice or support from multiple sources, e.g. health visitors, nursery educators and schoolteachers, also increases the likelihood of families enjoying regular reading.¹¹ Facilitating positive reading experiences both in the home and in childcare and educational settings is important, as children are more likely to become independent readers when they experience reading with, and are inspired by, multiple people or 'reading influencers' from early in childhood.¹²

Dr Faye Smith
Newcastle University

Parents and children share books far less often after age 5,¹³ despite the continued benefits of shared reading.¹⁴ Many barriers exist to spending time reading with school-age children, but it is enjoyment that drives regular shared reading.¹⁵ It is essential to support adults' own reading enjoyment and confidence, alongside better supporting families to share books in ways that are enjoyable and sustainable for both parents and children. This is needed both during and beyond the early years, to impact children's lifelong reading habits and motivation.

Dr Emily Oxley
University of Glasgow

Schools play a crucial role in supporting children's reading enjoyment, through offering a wide range of reading for pleasure activities,¹⁶ yet sustaining enjoyment often depends on

connecting children with the 'right' books – books which are both enjoyable and at the right level of difficulty.¹⁷ In addition, other texts – for example, magazines, song lyrics, lists of facts, or digital texts – are also essential for children to enjoy reading.^{1,18}

Kate Sayer
World Book Day

The decline in reading for pleasure is paired with an increase in the perception that reading is something to learn, not a fun thing to do.¹⁹ Children state that having more choice, less judgement and making reading more social are all important for their reading enjoyment.²⁰ Teachers and children overwhelmingly agree that World Book Day is an opportunity to celebrate the fun in reading.²¹ However, reading for fun needs to be embedded within schools and homes, not just feature once a year.

Olivia Job
Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books

In the landscape of rising concern around AI replacing creatives, community book and literary events²² can emphasize the innate human experience within stories. From authors, illustrators and storytellers to the audience, a network of unique perspectives are displayed and nurtured through these events. Indeed, community reading events (e.g., free exhibitions, group story times, book inspired craft sessions, book clubs) may provide a more attractive and accessible opportunity to support reading enjoyment.

ENGAGE



The concept of reading engagement is central to understanding readers' experiences and outcomes and reflects behavioural, cognitive, affective and social elements.¹

² Reading engagement is essential for positive academic, social and emotional development ³ with book reading in particular associated with positive reading skills, language opportunities and outcomes.^{4, 5} Understanding how to increase reading motivation and engagement across the lifespan ^{6, 7, 8, 9} is of interest among those working in research, policy and practice.¹⁰

Access to books and other texts is essential to ensure all children, young people and adults can engage in personally and collectively enjoyable reading experiences.^{11, 12} School and public libraries are essential for more equitable access to books, texts and digital resources,¹³ while librarians, teachers and other professionals play an essential role in nurturing reader engagement.^{14, 15} Research is increasingly recognising barriers to reading engagement with books, for example, difficulty focusing, social media distractions, low reading confidence or reading difficulties, among others.^{16, 17} Research-informed practices to support reading engagement ⁸ across the lifespan are therefore essential.

'You don't want to put it down, because every page you read, there's another cliff-hanger; 'Oh, what will happen here? What will happen here? Oh, can I just read for two more minutes?'

Child

It's quite nice to sort of feel like you're sort of letting go from whatever is happening around you, and you can go deep – by yourself – deep in the world of the book'

Young Person

'It feels like you've got one foot in either world; one foot in theirs and one foot in your own'

Adult

'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'

Older Adult



Alison David, Jemma Offley and Lizzi Jones
HarperCollins Publishers

Programmes to increase children's, parents and teachers reading engagement can, and do, make a difference,¹⁸ while guidance and resources to support teachers to develop children's personal reading engagement, alongside nurturing a school reading culture, are essential.¹⁹ Reading to children at home, and at school, beyond the early years, has been shown to have a meaningful impact on children's reading enjoyment and activity.²⁰ In addition, providing choice is a key factor for increasing reading engagement.²¹

Professor Sarah McGeown
University of Edinburgh

Research is illuminating our understanding of the complex nature of reading engagement which includes time spent reading (behavioural engagement), cognitive effort and strategy use while reading (cognitive engagement), emotions experienced during reading (affective engagement) and reading activities with others (social engagement).¹ These different elements of reading engagement play an integral role in shaping readers' experiences and outcomes.^{2, 22} To optimally support positive reading outcomes across the lifespan, pedagogies need to focus on both breadth and depth of reading engagement.

Sean McNamara
CILIPS

School and public libraries play an absolutely essential role in helping people engage with reading materials, but a vital part of this is the role of the skilled and trained librarians. Without them the library cannot truly fulfil its potential for engaging readers of all ages. For example, qualified, well-trained and motivated full-time school librarians are key to higher student reading scores and multiple literacies.²³ Additionally, the threats of access to books due to censorship requests ²⁴ further highlights the need for skilled professionals to ensure an evidenced stand is taken against this.

Pauline Bird
Scottish Book Trust

Since the invention of the printing press, the written word has dominated meaning making. Today we see this dominance being challenged through the emergence of new and evolving modes. At Scottish Book Trust we nurture reading engagement by positioning *all reading as good reading* – looking to texts children and young people are engaging with and nurturing their unique and growing reader identities.²⁵

EMPOWER



Underpinning personal reading enjoyment and engagement is the ability to read – it is essential that children and young people receive instruction which provides them with the best possible chance of becoming independent, skilled, motivated readers ^{1, 2} who feel empowered to use literacy in ways which support their personal goals, learning and lives more generally. ^{3, 4} In addition, it is important for adults to feel confident and empowered to support the reading practices, experiences and outcomes of others. ^{5, 6}

Further, all readers have the right to books which fit their needs, interests and abilities, with diverse formats essential to ensure quality and accessible provision for all. ⁷ Research highlights the empowering effects of representation ^{8, 9} to enable all readers to see themselves reflected in what they read ^{10, 11} and access personally meaningful content. Numerous marginalised identity characteristics are currently underrepresented in literature ¹² and therefore books and other texts need to more accurately reflect the diverse society we live in, as well as better reflecting the diverse ways in which readers want to, and are able to, engage with texts. Nurturing new writers to write and share in personally meaningful and relevant ways is essential to support this. ¹³

'...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's it feels like sometimes just yourself'

Child

I think it made me quite happy, you know, having characters who sort of have disabilities that you can relate to. It's a very good thing'

Young Person

'Even though it's fiction, it does bring a sense of reality almost, something you can identify with, something you maybe know'

Adult

You know, there's lots of things I understand about myself which books have shown to me. Doesn't mean we change, but does mean I see myself more clearly'

Older Adult



Dr Miriam McBreen
Institute of Education, UCL

There is extensive evidence that the development of reading abilities and motivation are closely intertwined, with early skills predicting later motivation and later motivation impacting growth in reading. ¹⁴ This means that to best support learners, skills and motivation should be addressed in combination; and indeed, interventions that focus on both reading skills and motivation have been found to be more effective than those which focus on skills alone. ¹⁵

Professor Mel Ramdarshan-Bold
University of Glasgow

When racially-minoritised young readers see themselves in stories, they feel valued, inspired, and recognised in a world where they may otherwise lack power. ¹⁶ But systemic inequalities in publishing and education create a vicious cycle: lack of representation leads to disengagement, fewer role models, and fewer racially-minoritised authors. ^{17, 18} To break this cycle and truly empower young readers, we need racially-minoritised voices leading change across publishing, education, and research, challenging the power dynamics that perpetuate these disparities. ¹⁹

Dr Charlotte Webber
University of Strathclyde

Encountering nuanced representations of neurodivergence (e.g., ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia) can help neurodivergent readers understand and accept themselves, develop self-confidence, identify strategies for navigating everyday challenges, and feel less alone. ² Whilst books featuring neurodivergent characters can also be a useful tool for learning about neurodivergence (for both neurotypical and neurodivergent readers), ensuring they do not stigmatise or sensationalise neurodivergent experiences is essential for normalising and affirming different ways of being.

Kirsten MacQuarrie
CILIPS

Emerging research into historic borrower records has revealed a long, strong herstory of women – the majority of both library professionals and patrons – turning to reading as a means of making sense of their lives, even and especially within socio-economic systems designed by and for men. ²⁰ One powerful example of this effect today can be found in the field of 'menstrual literacy' as libraries across Scotland combine their statutory duty to provide free period products with engaging, evidence-based reading collections that challenge stigma and misinformation around menstruation, menstrual health and menopause. ²¹

ENRICH



Reading can enrich lives through its potential to support intellectual, social and emotional development across the lifespan, for example skill development,^{1, 2} empathy³ and wellbeing.^{4, 5, 6} In addition, reading engagement can mitigate against economic disadvantage⁷ while reading skills are associated with positive economic and life outcomes, for example financial capability⁸ and life expectancy.⁹ Understanding how different texts types, formats and ways to engage influence personal and collective enrichment is essential. These texts types may include short and long-form – books, poetry, graphic novels, picturebooks, web articles;^{10, 11} in varied formats – digital, paper, or combined;^{12, 13, 14} and a range of ways to engage – personal reflection, shared reading, book clubs etc.^{15, 16, 17}

Beyond independent reading practices, engaging in diverse social reading activities – whether through book clubs, bibliotherapy, festivals or other literary activities^{18, 19} – has the potential to support intellectual, social and emotional development across the lifespan; understanding the added-value that these can bring to people’s lives and learning is essential.

‘It makes me understand that like people are fighting battles that you have no idea about...’

Child

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’

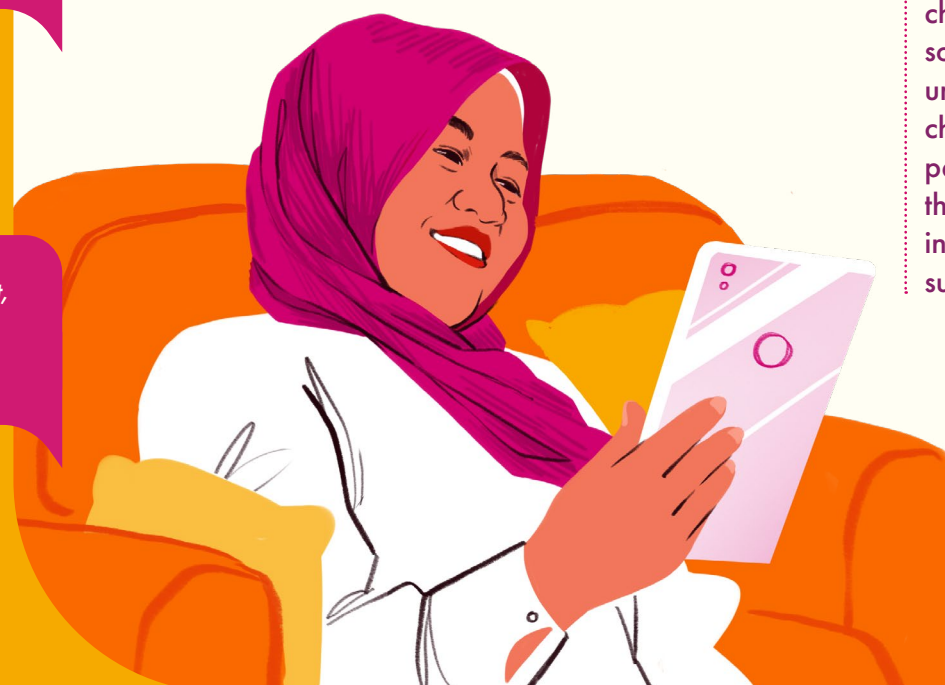
Young Person

‘I’d say that reading has always been a way of learning about, well, life in general, but certainly people as well’

Adult

‘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’

Older Adult



Dr Nicola Currie
Edgehill University

Reading can offer diverse wellbeing benefits for readers of all ages, including positive emotions (e.g., excitement, escapism, resolution); connection (with characters, locations, family, friends) and personal growth (through reflection on personal life experiences and opportunities to expand understanding of others and the wider world).^{4, 5} Considering ways to encourage reflective reading and furthering understanding of the experience of different reading formats (e.g., audiobooks) and genres (e.g., non-fiction) are important to support more readers to experience the powerful wellbeing benefits of reading.

Elena Santi
University of Edinburgh

Reading experiences and outcomes are influenced by the interplay between characteristics of both the text and the reader, so the same text can affect each reader uniquely.²⁰ Supporting young people in choosing and engaging with stories which are personally meaningful to them can enhance their understanding of themselves and others, increase feelings of empathy for others, and support their social relationships.³

Katherine Wilkinson
Scottish Book Trust

At Scottish Book Trust²¹ we witness the enriching impact of reading every day through our programmes for families, children and young people, adults and communities. It is vital that we learn more about how this impact is created and experienced²² so that we can continue to advocate for its importance, both with individuals and with practitioners, such as learning and health professionals. We must also work harder to listen to those less likely to be readers (or to be perceived as readers) to support more people to access these life-changing benefits.

Rachel Laburn
Edinburgh International Book Festival

Attending festivals or events related to books and reading has the potential to provide social and shared experiences for collective enrichment and entertainment.¹⁸ Further, having the opportunity to engage with a variety of different text types in an accessible event format ensures that children, young people and adults are able to participate in the experience in a meaningful way, for example through community events as authors deliver outreach visits to settings such as local hospitals and prisons.²³

EXPAND



Notions of reading are continuing to evolve as the reading activities of children, young people and adults continue to expand.^{1, 2, 3} Understanding contemporary and shifting perspectives of reading is important, not only for shaping our future understanding of reading, but also for acknowledging the range of reading skills, practices, provisions and experiences that will be essential for children, young people and adults to thrive in their lives and learning.^{4, 5}

Research also needs to expand beyond the predominant focus on children and young people, to understand and support reading across the lifespan.^{6, 7} Meanwhile, research findings from different methodological approaches and disciplinary perspectives need to be synthesised and effectively communicated and embedded to ensure a greater breadth of research informs reading policy and practice.^{8, 9, 10}

Finally, collaborations need to expand across organisations, sectors and countries with aligned interests.^{11, 12, 13} For example, professionals within the literacy, library, education, bookselling and publishing sectors bring unique and important insights which can be synthesised to inform future thinking and research. Further, learning from different international contexts can improve reading research, policy and practice.^{12, 14} Meanwhile participatory approaches which involve children, young people and adults are essential to ensure their lived experiences are included in our collaborative efforts to enhance reading experiences and outcomes.¹⁵ Working together can expand and enhance research, and improve advocacy efforts for improved provision, training, and practice.

'Sometimes when I'm a bit too tired to read, it's nice to listen to somebody else reading to you'

Child

'I don't go online to read exclusively, but if it's there, then I may as well read it'

Young Person

'Hearing different perspectives and involving teachers gives an on the ground experience of what research will be like to implement in the classroom'

Adult Teacher

'I think libraries are essential. And as you get older, you feel they're more and more essential'

Older Adult



Dr Christina Clark
National Literacy Trust

Expanding what we mean by “reading” is essential to meeting children and young people where they are.¹ Many already engage with stories in diverse and evolving ways that are often overlooked or undervalued in traditional literacy contexts, and narrow definitions risk alienating those whose experiences fall outside conventional expectations. By recognising and valuing all forms of reading, we affirm existing practices and, by encouraging further exploration, help nurture a lifelong relationship with reading.

Ailie Finlay
My Kind of Book

There is a huge amount of work being carried out by families, teachers and other to make books accessible for children with additional needs, particularly those with severe or profound additional needs.¹⁶ Books are being taken apart and re-assembled in an accessible format. Text is being edited. Props, actions, music, signs, symbols and sensory stimuli are being added. This work takes place in schools, care settings and at home and is largely invisible to those who produce our children's books. It essential to expand thinking around books,¹⁷ and this includes the forms they need to take to be accessible and enjoyable for children with profound additional needs.¹⁸

Leah Higgins
CILIPS

Libraries are often the last free, non-commercial space, supporting all members of society. We have a panoptic view of society and the canon of research must expand to encompass this universal offer, showcasing how we lessen inequity amongst users and reduce barriers to access vital services. The non-judgemental space entitles users to

expand their notions of ‘what counts’ as reading, as library professionals are there to support and guide users’ interests. Our ethical code¹⁹ maintains that ‘[...] society should have equitable and ready access to knowledge, information, data and works of imagination appropriate to their needs, wants and aspirations.’

Dr Patrick Errington
University of Edinburgh

There are myriad dimensions along which our conceptions of reading must expand to reflect the current practices and environments of today's readers, and these might propel (or be propelled by) expansions in the field of reading research and indeed who is considered a researcher. Such expansions might also coincide with, and be supported by, an enrichment of conceptions of reading processes beyond the standard decoding – potentially by borrowing from literary theory research (e.g., reader response theory, formalist theory), cognitive and aesthetic psychology, and creative writing/translation practices.

Keira Brown
Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature

Working within an international network of UNESCO Cities of Literature²⁰ we see how our learning²¹ can be enriched by expanding to other cultures and cities globally, whether it's Norwich City of Literature's Day of Welcome project,²² the research and reading strategy that Lillehammer City of Literature²³ is focussed on, or collaborative projects such as Story Valley²⁴ which saw many Cities of Literature coming together in Edinburgh to forge new ideas to improve literacy skills. Expanding our knowledge and learning from this international network of passionate professionals can widen our cultural understanding of reading, trends and shifts in patterns, that can inform the work that we do.

Recommendations for action

This paper aims to prompt thinking, research and action by highlighting five key ideas to frame discussions around the Future of Books and Reading. While there is considerable knowledge, experience and expertise in the UK to support reading, a lack of funding considerably limits opportunities to take action. Despite this, collective action is urgently needed to reverse the decline in reading attitudes and practices, and positively impact people's lives and learning through enjoyable, engaging, empowering and enriching reading experiences. This proposal for action centres around eight* themes:

Policies

National and/or local policies are required to empower professionals to support both the skill and will (i.e., motivation) in reading, to strengthen statutory protections for professionals, improve support for families, mitigate against systemic inequalities, and ensure improved and more equitable reading provision across schools, communities and other contexts.

Professionals

Professionals working across a wide range of contexts (e.g., early years, schools, libraries, health, social care, etc.) need sufficient time and quality professional learning/development opportunities to support the reading practices, experiences and outcomes for those for whom they are responsible.

*

The 8 ideas for action are based on a synthesis of 16 individual contributions to this paper.

Provision

Quality reading provision (books and other texts) is essential, specifically provision which is aligned with the interests, needs, lives and abilities of individuals, communities and society more widely. This includes accessible and diverse texts, formats and spaces which can support the reading practices, experiences and outcomes of all individuals. Funding to support well-resourced libraries in schools, communities and other settings is essential to achieve this.

Pedagogy

Pedagogies need to be informed by research and professional expertise to be implemented in contextually appropriate ways. Pedagogies implemented across different settings and sectors (e.g., schools, communities, prisons) should focus on developing both the 'skill and will' (i.e., abilities and motivation) needed for individuals to engage in reading practices which will support and enrich their lives and learning.

Promotion

Efforts to promote reading (whether of books or other texts) need to reach individuals through relatable messaging which aligns with individuals own interests, goals, lives and ways of communicating. Reading promotion can take different forms and can be disseminated via distinctly different routes, but evaluations of these are essential for more effective future messaging.

Publishing

Books and other texts need to be published which support both reading enjoyment and reading development, and which reflect the diverse reading interests, needs and abilities of our society. Further, the publishing industry has a key role to play in supporting and elevating writers and creators to better reflect the society we live in.

Participatory approaches

Reading research, policy and practice needs to be informed by those whose reading experiences and/or outcomes are the focus, whether children, young people, parents, adults or those from minority or marginalised

groups. Participatory approaches should also proactively seek out those whose voices are not represented (i.e., hard to reach/easy to ignore) in order to improve equity in provision and quality of experience.

Partnerships

Greater collaboration among individuals, organisations and sectors with aligned interests is essential for effective action. This includes encouraging and synthesising diverse types of knowledge, experience and expertise (e.g., from frontline professionals to academic researchers and national organisations), in addition to multi-agency working and partnerships on local, regional and national levels.

This paper aims to exemplify the value and contribution that diverse perspectives, experiences and expertise can make to future thinking, research and action to enhance reading experiences and outcomes across the lifespan.

Contributors

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Katherine Wilkinson
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Katie McPherson

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References have been organised by theme, with references from both academic and grey literature, reflecting different disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches.

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Enjoy

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The Future of Books and Reading

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