



Supporting 'reading for pleasure' in primary schools: Examining the evidence and children's perspectives

Professor Sarah McGeown

Literacy Lab, Moray House School of Education and Sport
University of Edinburgh



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Overview

Current
context

Reading for
pleasure
practices

Reading
engagement

Reading,
reflections
and
resources



Current context

Current UK context

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who told us that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot between 2005 and 2025

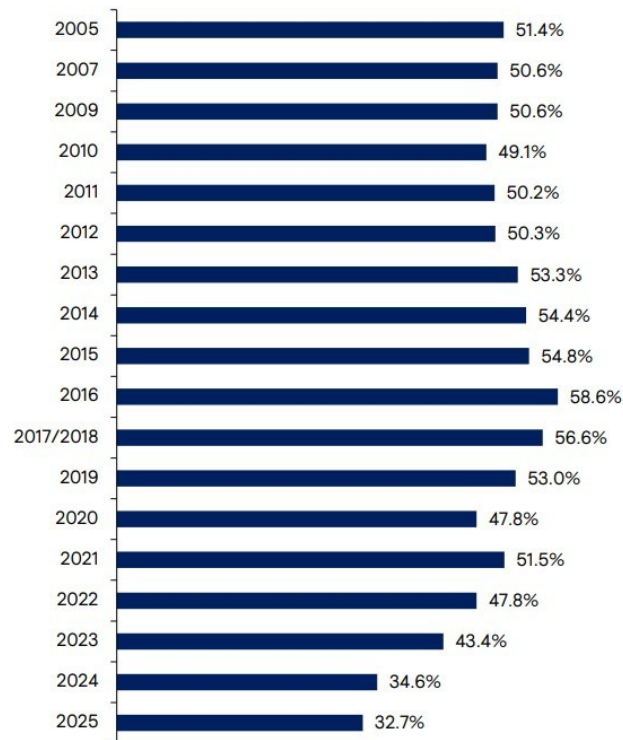


Table 1: Reading enjoyment levels for children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2005 and 2025 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Boys	Girls	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	FSM	Non-FSM
2005	46.1%	56.8%	67.5%	44.3%	32.0%	44.4%	46.5%	50.2%
2010	42.3%	55.4%	68.1%	45.8%	32.5%	45.5%	44.1%	49.7%
2011	43.7%	56.7%	73.0%	47.2%	34.4%	46.3%	45.3%	50.8%
2012	43.9%	56.8%	64.0%	45.5%	36.3%	44.8%	47.7%	50.7%
2013	47.1%	59.8%	65.8%	49.5%	36.7%	40.1%	49.6%	53.9%
2014	47.2%	61.6%	65.6%	50.3%	43.4%	55.3%	50.4%	54.9%
2015	47.8%	61.2%	72.6%	51.7%	40.2%	53.6%	53.4%	55.1%
2016	52.4%	64.9%	77.6%	55.2%	43.8%	56.0%	58.3%	58.3%
2017/18	51.1%	62.6%	77.0%	53.2%	44.3%	54.4%	53.8%	56.3%
2019	46.5%	60.3%	71.9%	49.5%	40.2%	56.5%	51.4%	52.6%
2020	46.6%	48.9%	66.6%	46.2%	42.3%	56.0%	45.9%	48.0%
2021	45.6%	55.9%	62.4%	50.7%	48.1%	58.9%	47.5%	52.1%
2022	42.4%	51.5%	59.8%	45.6%	45.3%	57.5%	43.8%	42.8%
2023	40.5%	45.3%	56.2%	40.4%	40.8%	56.2%	39.5%	43.8%
2024	28.2%	40.5%	51.9%	30.7%	29.7%	40.0%	33.9%	34.8%
2025	25.7%	39.1%	46.9%	29.5%	28.6%	41.4%	31.0%	33.0%

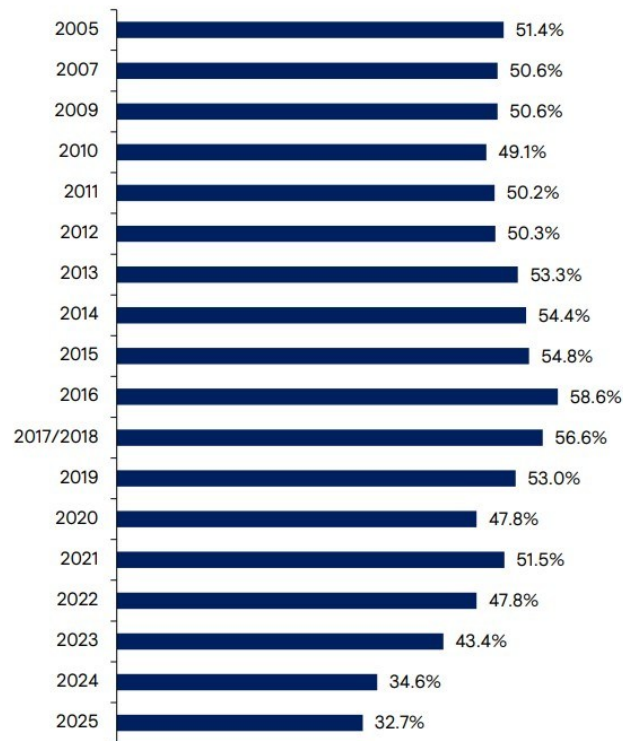
Decline in percentage: 20.6 14.8 3.4 3

Clark et al., (2025). Available here:
<https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2025/>



Current UK context

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who told us that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot between 2005 and 2025



Clark et al., (2025). Available here: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2025/>

Table 1: Reading enjoyment levels for children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2005 and 2025 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Boys	Girls	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	FSM	Non-FSM
2005	46.1%	56.8%	67.5%	44.3%	32.0%	44.4%	46.5%	50.2%
2010	42.3%	55.4%	68.1%	45.8%	32.5%	45.5%	44.1%	49.7%
2011	43.7%	56.7%	73.0%	47.2%	34.4%	46.3%	45.3%	50.8%
2012	43.9%	56.8%	64.0%	45.5%	36.3%	44.8%	47.7%	50.7%
2013	47.1%	59.8%	65.8%	49.5%	36.7%	40.1%	49.6%	53.9%
2014	47.2%	61.6%	65.6%	50.3%	43.4%	55.3%	50.4%	54.9%
2015	47.8%	61.2%	72.6%	51.7%	40.2%	53.6%	53.4%	55.1%
2016	52.4%	64.9%	77.6%	55.2%	43.8%	56.0%	58.3%	58.3%
2017/18	51.1%	62.6%	77.0%	53.2%	44.3%	54.4%	53.8%	56.3%
2019	46.5%	60.3%	71.9%	49.5%	40.2%	56.5%	51.4%	52.6%
2020	46.6%	48.9%	66.6%	46.2%	42.3%	56.0%	45.9%	48.0%
2021	45.6%	55.9%	62.4%	50.7%	48.1%	58.9%	47.5%	52.1%
2022	42.4%	51.5%	59.8%	45.6%	45.3%	57.5%	43.8%	42.8%
2023	40.5%	45.3%	56.2%	40.4%	40.8%	56.2%	39.5%	43.8%
2024	28.2%	40.5%	51.9%	30.7%	29.7%	40.0%	33.9%	34.8%
2025	25.7%	39.1%	46.9%	29.5%	28.6%	41.4%	31.0%	33.0%

Decline in percentage: 30.7 25.7 15.2 14.6



Reading for pleasure practices:
Exploring the evidence and children's perspectives

Reading for pleasure practices

Reviewed the research literature, and sought children's (n= 59, aged 8-11) perspectives on common 'reading for pleasure' practices, including:

- Independent reading (e.g., DEAR)
- Whole class teacher read-aloud
- Book-talk
- Reading diaries
- Quality book provision
- Annual 'reading celebration' events
- Use of technology
- Rewards

Note: Little existing research evaluating these practices, diversity in practice, and diversity of children's opinion in relation to each.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
2023, VOL. 65, NO. 3, 375–391
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2023.2236123>



OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Reading for pleasure practices in school: children's perspectives and experiences

Emily Oxley and Sarah McGeown

Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

Background: In many educational systems internationally, promoting reading for pleasure (RfP) is embedded within curricula and practice. Primary school teachers regularly and routinely engage in activities designed to encourage and sustain children's reading enjoyment. However, what are children's perspectives and experiences of these different practices?

Purpose: This study sought to: (i) identify relevant research aligned with common classroom RfP practices and (ii) understand children's perspectives and experiences of these.

Methods: For (i), a literature review was undertaken to identify research relevant to RfP practices. For (ii), a total of 59 children (51% female) aged 8–11 from four demographically diverse UK schools (2 in Scotland, 2 in England) participated in individual or small group interviews, depending on their preference, to discuss their RfP perspectives and experiences. Data were analysed qualitatively.

Findings: The analysis indicated the diversity of children's perspectives and experiences of RfP practices. It allowed exploration of a range of experiences in relation to independent reading, teacher read-alouds, book-talk, reading diaries, quality of book provision, use of technology, annual events and the use of rewards.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 December 2022
Accepted 10 July 2023

KEYWORDS

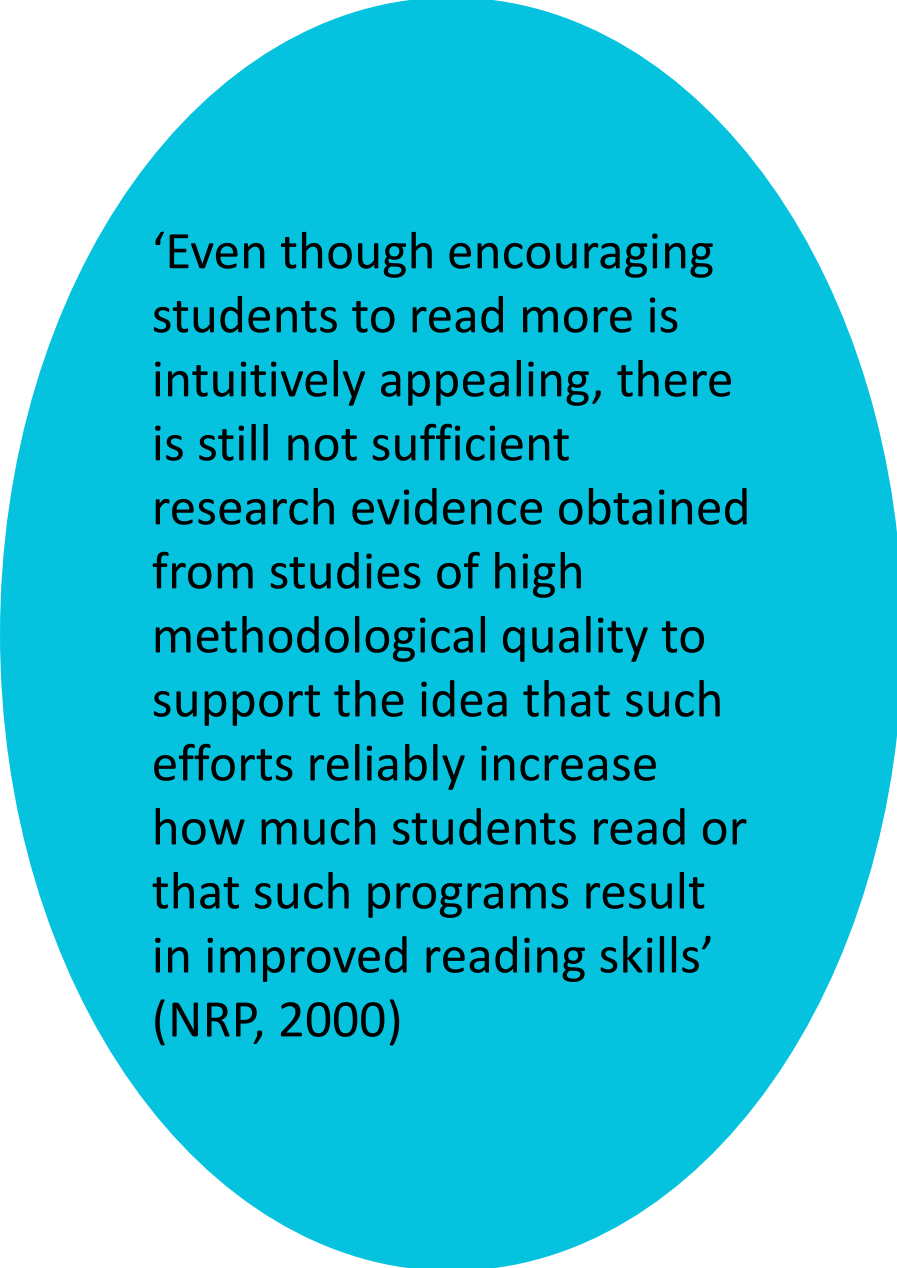
reading; pleasure; enjoyment; classroom practice; primary; literacy practices

Independent reading/DEAR

- Can be implemented in different ways: regularity, duration, opportunities for book choice, quality of book choice, etc.
- Leisure reading is associated with better reading skills (Torppa et al., 2019)
- Evidence of 'effectiveness' is unclear (n=14) (NRP, 2000)
- 'Effectiveness' will vary based on child's level of engagement with the book/text they are reading.

NRP (2000). <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/smallbook>

Torppa et al. (2019). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30927457/>



'Even though encouraging students to read more is intuitively appealing, there is still not sufficient research evidence obtained from studies of high methodological quality to support the idea that such efforts reliably increase how much students read or that such programs result in improved reading skills' (NRP, 2000)

Independent reading/DEAR

- Can be implemented in different ways: regularity, duration, opportunities for book choice, quality of book choice, etc.
- Leisure reading is associated with better reading skills (Torppa et al., 2019)
- Evidence of 'effectiveness' is unclear (n=14) (NRP, 2000)
- 'Effectiveness' will vary based on child's level of engagement with the book/text they are reading.

NRP (2000). <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/smallbook>
Torppa et al. (2019). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30927457/>

'I had a book that I didn't really like so I swapped it for a book that I really do like'

'The thing I don't like about that is I don't know when the teacher is going to say stop so I don't know whether to read another page or not'

Whole class teacher read-aloud

- Can increase children's access to a wider range of books/texts than they would/could read independently.
- Can lead to positive reader identities (Merga, 2017) and support language (Nation et al, 2022).
- Book/text selection is essential – reflect contemporary interests (Cremin et al., 2014; Conradi-Smith et al., 2022).
- Diversity of book type (Yopp & Yopp, 2016)
- Diversify book type and invite children's input into book choice.

'Conventional wisdom might suggest that teachers who read more books share a greater diversity of genres with their students. However, students' read-aloud experiences were no richer, in terms of relative exposure to different genres, when their teachers read multiple books' (Yopp & Yopp, 2016).

Merga, 2017: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1160840.pdf>

Yopp & Yopp, 2016: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1207/s15548430jlr3801_2

Whole class teacher read-aloud

- Can increase children's access to a wider range of books/texts than they would/could read independently.
- Can lead to positive reader identities (Merga, 2017) and support language (Nation et al, 2022).
- Book/text selection is essential – reflect contemporary interests (Cremin et al., 2014; Conradi-Smith et al., 2022).
- Diversity of book type (Yopp & Yopp, 2016)
- Diversify book type and invite children's input into book choice.

'because when we read the book, you see that it's not that boring and you want to read more'

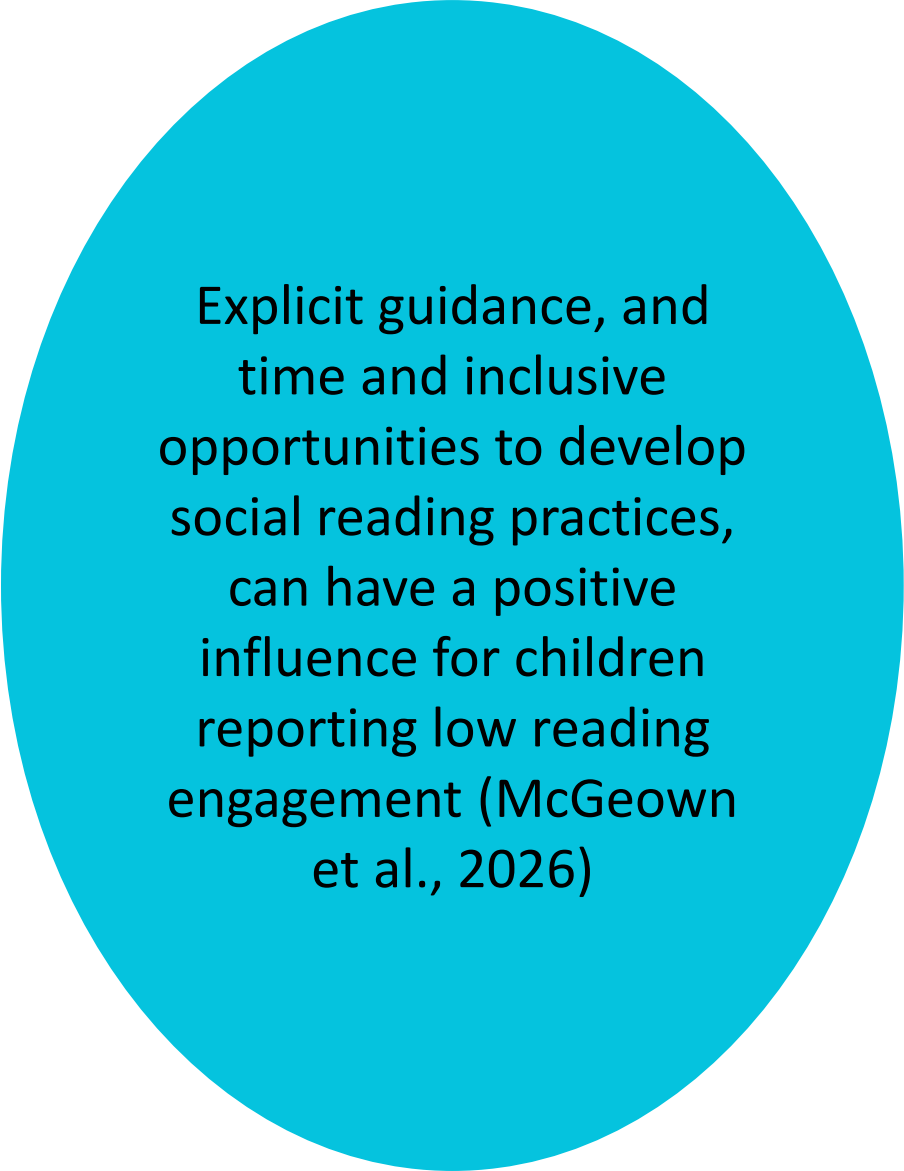
'someone reads it and you can sit back, draw, and just relax and listen to the book'

Merga, 2017: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1160840.pdf>

Yopp & Yopp, 2016: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1207/s15548430jlr3801_2

Book talk

- Creates communities of readers (Cremin et al., 2014).
- Personalised book-talk and recommendations can support reading motivation and engagement (Neugebauer & Gilmour, 2020)
- Ensure inclusive and guided/supported opportunities for book talk (McGeown et al., 2026)



Explicit guidance, and time and inclusive opportunities to develop social reading practices, can have a positive influence for children reporting low reading engagement (McGeown et al., 2026)

Book talk


- Creates communities of readers (Cremin et al., 2014).
- Personalised book-talk and recommendations can support reading motivation and engagement (Neugebauer & Gilmour, 2020)
- Ensure inclusive and guided/supported opportunities for book talk (McGeown et al., 2026)

'if there's somebody that's read a lot of books before, then it might be quite easy for them to tell about the books'

'Yeah like I'm reading a book right now from one of the recommends, and I'm really enjoying it'

Reading diaries

- Reading diaries can cause some children to disengage from reading (Pak & Weseley, 2012)
- Different ways to document personal reading histories, e.g., reading river (Cremin, 2019)
- Encourage input from children on best ways to 'track/celebrate' their journeys as readers



'Students with mandatory logs expressed declines in both interest and attitudes towards recreational reading in comparison to peers with voluntary logs' (Pak & Weseley, 2012)

Reading diaries

- Reading diaries can cause some children to disengage from reading (Pak & Weseley, 2012)
- Different ways to document personal reading histories, e.g., reading river (Cremin, 2019)
- Encourage input from children on best ways to 'track/celebrate' their journeys as readers

'you put a personal comment, like what you enjoyed about the book and what you didn't enjoy about it'

'maybe encourage us to try to like finish more books but also like read them properly because we have to do like a personal comment'

Annual book events

- World Book Day, Summer Reading Challenge, etc.
- Evidence that summer reading programmes (albeit skill focused) can have positive outcomes (Dujardin et al., 2012)
- Can support reading engagement, but primarily for those already engaged readers (Kennedy & Bearne, 2009; NLT 2020)
- Think carefully about ways to encourage reading, in ways which support all children.

‘An evaluation of the Summer Reading Challenge.. found that taking part in the challenge saw an increase in enthusiasm around reading... Children who took part tended to have positive attitudes towards reading to start with’
NLT (2020)

Dujardin et al (2022): <https://hal.science/hal-04116298/>

NLT (2020): https://cdn-literacytrust-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Reading_challenges_-_How_to_design_and_run_them_to_make_them_work_-_Final.pdf

Annual book events

- World Book Day, Summer Reading Challenge, etc.
- Evidence that summer reading programmes (albeit skill focused) can have positive outcomes (Dujardin et al., 2012)
- Can support reading engagement, but primarily for those already engaged readers (Kennedy & Bearne, 2009; NLT 2020)
- Think carefully about ways to encourage reading, in ways which support all children.

'I discovered lots of books in that competition'

'it's a competition and everyone wants to read more books and I don't think people enjoy reading books when they're doing rushed reading'

Dujardin et al (2022): <https://hal.science/hal-04116298/>

NLT (2020): https://cdn-literacytrust-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Reading_challenges_-_How_to_design_and_run_them_to_make_them_work_-_Final.pdf

What about young people?

Systematic narrative review including studies which had evaluated approaches for improving teenagers' (12–16 years old) reading motivation.

Reading & literacy skills programmes

Whole-school reading culture

Book clubs

Technology-supported approaches

Performance & theatre



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Zhengdong Gan,
University of Macau, China

REVIEWED BY
Yuan Yao,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong
Kong SAR, China
Xuyan Qiu,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong
Kong SAR, China

*CORRESPONDENCE
Charlotte Webber
✉ c.webber-1@sms.ed.ac.uk

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

Charlotte Webber^{1*}, Katherine Wilkinson², Lynne Duncan³ and Sarah McGeown¹

¹Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, ²Scottish Book Trust, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, ³Department of Psychology, University of Dundee, Dundee, United Kingdom

Webber, C., Wilkinson, K., Duncan, L. G., & McGeown, S. P. (2023). Approaches for supporting adolescents' reading motivation: Existing research and future priorities. In *Frontiers in Education*.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1254048/full>

Benefits of reading

‘Reading for pleasure’ practices are only effective when children are engaging with the books/texts they are reading.

Reading engagement is multidimensional: behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions (McGeown & Conradi-Smith, 2023)



Teaching and Learning in Action | [Open Access](#) | 

Reading Engagement Matters! A New Scale to Measure and Support Children's Engagement with Books

[Sarah McGeown](#) ✉ [Kristin Conradi Smith](#) ✉

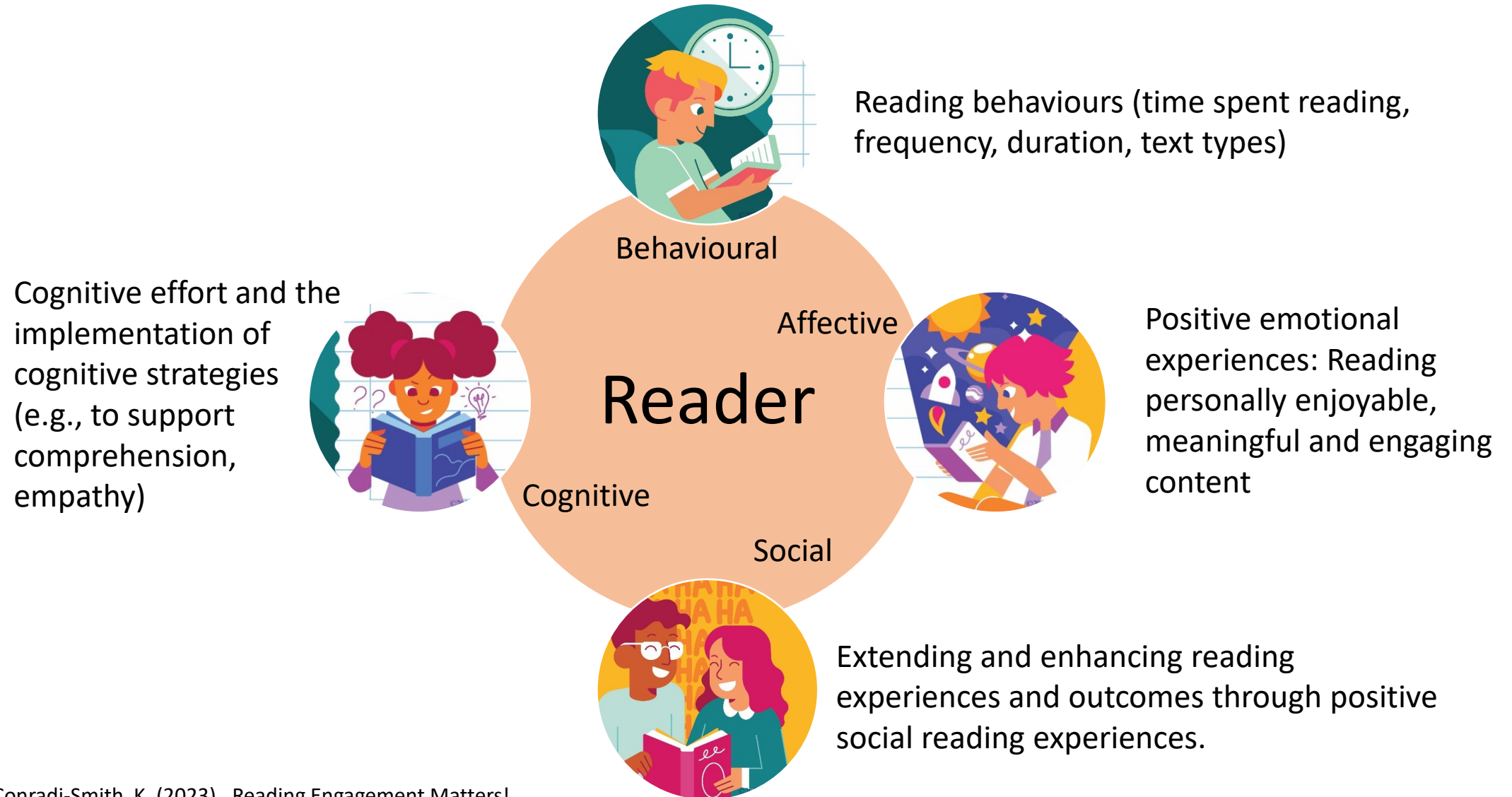
First published: 23 November 2023 | <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2267> | [VIEW METRICS](#)

 SECTIONS  PDF  CITE  TOOLS  SHARE

Abstract

While there is a considerable body of research demonstrating benefits of book reading, the quality and depth of engagement children experience while reading is essential to ensure positive reading experiences and outcomes. In this article we describe four dimensions of reading engagement: behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social, illustrating how each dimension is essential to ensure children benefit from the rich and diverse experiences that books have to offer. We next share a new scale, developed with

Reading engagement matters!



Reading engagement matters!

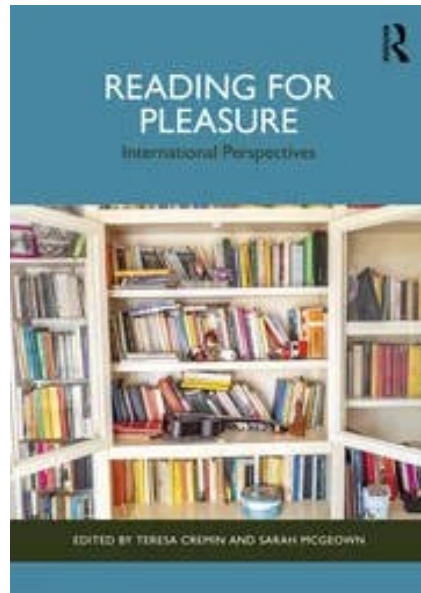
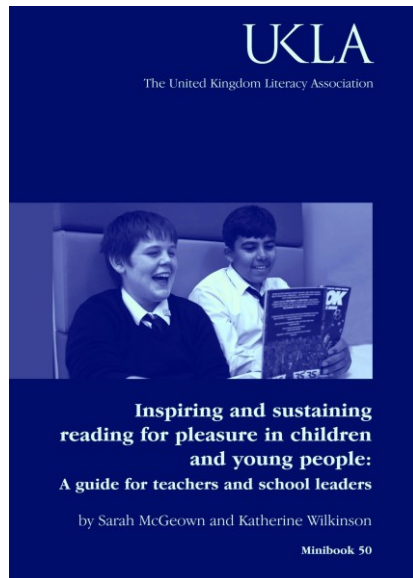
- Whether independent reading, teacher read aloud, book-talk, reading diaries, or reading promoted by annual events – fostering reading engagement is what matters....



Reading, reflections and resources

UoE Literacy Lab

- Understand and improve children and young people's literacy experiences and outcomes
- Enrich lives through literacy



EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
2023, VOL. 65, NO. 3, 375-391
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2023.2236123>



OPEN ACCESS [Check for updates](#)

Reading for pleasure practices in school: children's perspectives and experiences

Emily Oxley and Sarah McGeown

Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

Background: In many educational systems internationally, promoting reading for pleasure (RFP) is embedded within curricula and practice. Primary school teachers regularly and routinely engage in activities designed to encourage and sustain children's reading enjoyment. However, what are children's perspectives and experiences of these different practices?

Purpose: This study sought to: (i) identify relevant research aligned with common classroom RFP practices and (ii) understand children's perspectives and experiences of these.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 December 2022
Accepted 10 July 2023

KEYWORDS

reading; pleasure; enjoyment; classroom practice; primary; literacy practices



Original Article [Open Access](#)

Reading and Empathy: Qualitative insights into adolescents' experiences with fiction books

Elena Santi , Katie Cebula , Sarah McGeown

First published: 16 June 2025 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilit.70006> | [VIEW METRICS](#)

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
2025, VOL. 67, NO. 1, 79-97
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2024.2445618>



OPEN ACCESS [Check for updates](#)

Motivating book reading during adolescence: qualitative insights from adolescents

Charlotte Webber , Katherine Wilkinson , Lynne G. Duncan and Sarah McGeown

^{*}Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; [†]Research and Evaluation, Scottish Book Trust, Edinburgh, UK; [‡]Psychology, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

Background: Research demonstrates a wide range of benefits associated with reading books, from academic and cognitive to social and emotional. Reading motivation has been shown to drive the volitional reading of books; however, international research consistently demonstrates a global decline in reading motivation from childhood to adolescence. As a result, there is considerable research, policy and practice interest in understanding how to increase adolescents' volitional reading. To date, very little research has centred on adolescents' views within this exploration.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 June 2024
Accepted 18 December 2024

KEYWORDS
Volitional reading; motivation; books; adolescence; qualitative research; peer research



TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 07 September 2023
DOI 10.3389/educ.2023.1254048

[Check for updates](#)

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Zhengdong Gan,
University of Macau, China

REVIEWED BY
Yuan Yao,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China
Xujun Guo,
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China

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

Charlotte Webber^{*}, Katherine Wilkinson[†], Lynne Duncan[‡] and Sarah McGeown[†]



Research Article

The Development and an Acceptability and Feasibility Study of a Program to Support Children's Reading Motivation and Engagement

Sarah McGeown , Emily Oxley , Miriam McBreen , Laura Shapiro & Jessie Ricketts

Received 22 Aug 2024, Accepted 10 Mar 2026, Published online: 19 Mar 2026

[Cite this article](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2026.2644962> | [Check for updates](#)

Reading engagement matters! Supporting behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social aspects of engagement will ensure all children have positive, rich, and diverse experiences with the books they read.

UoE Literacy Lab

- Blogposts/online articles
 - Poster summaries
 - Recorded talks
 - Resources for teachers
- + more

Connecting With Fictional Characters: The Power of Books

Authors
 Charlotte Webber Katherine Wilkinson Lynne G. Duncan Sarah McGeown

Young Reviewers
 Ben



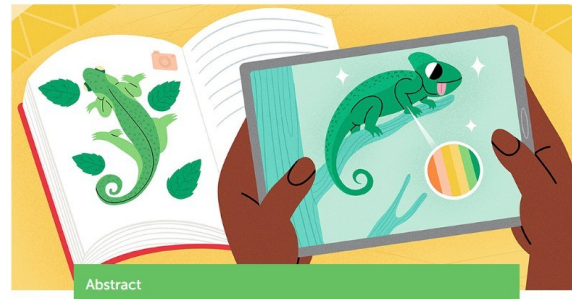
Abstract

Books have the power to take us on great adventures, immerse us in fantasy

Augmented Reality Books: Reshaping Our Reading Experiences

Authors
 Kawlia Alhamad Andrew Manches Sarah McGeown

Young Reviewers
 Mark Mayur The Meadow Community Primary School



Abstract

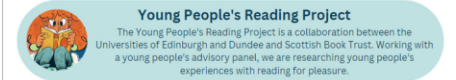


Research overview: Supporting young people to read for pleasure

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 synthesised 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.

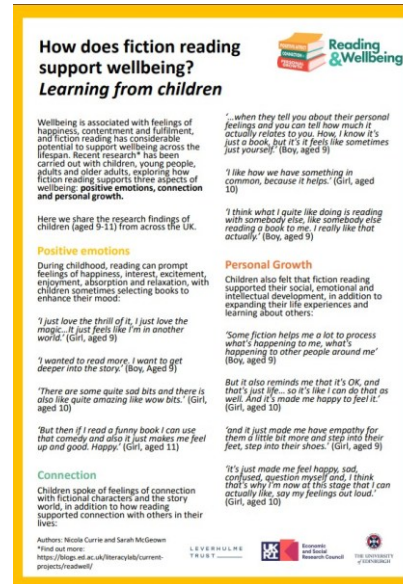
In this summary, we provide an overview of these 5 types of approach, outline what is missing from the current research, and give recommendations for practice.



Reviewing the research: our process

To find relevant research, we used a narrative review framework. This involved searching 3 research databases to find publications which have evaluated literacy interventions for supporting teen reading motivation. We used search terms such as 'adolescent', 'reading motivation' and 'intervention' to find publications which might be relevant and reviewed these to make sure they fit our inclusion criteria (e.g., that the participants were aged between 12 and 16 years old).

Funded by: ESRC and Scottish Book Trust (ES/P000681/1)
 Managed by: Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences



Professional development course

Improving children's reading and writing: Connecting research and practice

Course summary

Start date

From 30/04/2026

Cost

Starting from £15.00

Delivery mode [?]

Online (Fixed Schedule)

CPD hours

Up to 10 hours

Delivered by

Moray House School of
Education and Sport [?]

Duration

Varies



Book now

Session 1: Learning to read – Thurs 30th April

Session 2: Reading motivation and engagement -
Thurs 14th May

Session 3: Learning to write - Monday 1st June

Session 4: Writing motivation and engagement –
Monday 22nd June

All from 4-5pm online (not recorded)

<https://shortcourses.ed.ac.uk/course/improving-children-s-reading-and-writing-connecting-research-and-practice>



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Thank you for listening



University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab:

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



Opportunity for questions and discussion

Thank you to the funders, children, young people, literacy organisations, teachers, professionals, and researchers who have contributed to this research.