

READING FOR PLEASURE – A SILVER BULLET OR A WILD GOOSE CHASE?

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ABSTRACT

Although we all inherently feel we understand the pleasure experienced when reading an engaging text, the application of these feelings to reading education can become conflated with subjectivity, socio-cultural partiality and personal bias, making the definition of ‘Reading for Pleasure’ highly subjective. This paper investigates the research around the phenomenon of ‘Reading for Pleasure’ and questions some of the assumptions made by that research particularly around the definition applied. It suggests that a more useful approach for educators would be to promote a commitment to reading in schools and, through research evidence suggests how this might be achieved.

Keywords: pleasure, enjoyment, commitment, motivation, utility, entertainment, self-fulfilment

‘Reading for Pleasure’ has become a ubiquitous expression in the world of education and the promotion of it in schools an expectation. The Mercer’s Company and Open University have just published a framework for practice (Cremin et al. 2024) and the DfE’s recently published Reading Framework (DFE, 2023) devotes a ten page section on ‘Developing a reading for pleasure culture’ with advice on how schools can promote it. Although the document acknowledges that it is ‘impossible to mandate that pupils read for pleasure’ (2023:91), it adds that it is a ‘collective responsibility’ (2023:91) and that ‘schools need a strategic approach’ (2023:91). However, if schools cannot compel children to enjoy reading, how can they be held accountable if they don’t.

Why is reading for pleasure considered so important? Schools might argue that it is enough that they teach children how to read fluently and let them discover the gratification of gleaning information and narrative fulfilment from texts. Schools are not expected to develop maths for pleasure strategies. Swimming coaches are accountable for ensuring children can swim sufficiently well to prevent drowning, they are not accountable for ensuring children gain

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pleasure from swimming; the fun derived from being able to swim is left up to the individual to discover once the skill has been learnt.

Nevertheless, it would seem that education's fixation with the promotion of developing reading for pleasure is well placed and embedded in sound and considerable research enquiry. The 'Research Evidence on Reading for Pleasure' (DfE, 2012) emphasises the growing body of research that illustrates the importance of reading for pleasure for both educational purposes and personal development. It cites Clark (2011) and Clark and Douglas (2011) who indicate a positive relationship between reading frequency, reading enjoyment and attainment. Reading frequency, however, is not reading for pleasure, and there should be no surprise that reading more leads to higher attainment; and is enjoyment the same as pleasure? Aristotle (2024) would not agree. Joy, he maintained, was not the same as eudaimonia or flourishing. The same issue is raised in Twist et al.'s (2007) study that found a link between positive attitudes towards reading and scoring well on assessments, but again, having a positive attitude is not the same as pleasure. The problem with definitions occurs again with the Anderson et al. (1988) study which reported that independent reading was the best predictor of reading achievement. This would suggest that motivated readers perform more highly in reading assessments but being well-motivated does not necessarily imply pleasure; it may imply an understanding and acceptance of delayed gratification or extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation.

However, the OECD (2002) research that found that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status seems to trump all the above sophistic considerations. It implies that if children can be induced to enjoy reading, then many of the educational disadvantages of any social injustice resultant from the accident of birth can be mitigated. This would truly be the educational silver bullet all education secretaries crave. A correlation rather than causation warning may just have lit up on your research analysis dashboard.

It is enlightening to look again at the Stainthorpe and Hughes (1999) study into children who read at an early age. This was a study over three years and most pertinently found that early readers came from varied socio-economic backgrounds and were in no way exclusively economically privileged. What seemed to make the greatest difference was the home environment and parental attitudes towards reading. Print was a strong feature in homes, children were read to from an early age, regularly and from a variety of texts. Children had an extensive acquaintance with story form – introduction, development, and resolution. Parents held positive attitudes towards reading and modelled these attitudes both consciously and subconsciously. Writing was evident in all homes with evidence of extensive list-writing. Crucially, these children had developed excellent alphabetic knowledge and high levels of phonological sensitivity – often through repetition of verse. What is perhaps most revealing is that these early readers were never forced to read by their parents, but their

developing skills and interest in literacy activities ensured that they engaged in more of them – a Matthew effect was evident. Once in formal education they made rapid progress across all areas of the curriculum but especially in reading. This study supported Clark’s (1976) research (that built on Durkin’s 1966 study) that highlighted that a home environment that was rich in auditory language stimulation was far more important to early reading than social class or parental occupation - or even parental education. It was the warmth of the language interaction between parents and children that appeared to make the difference. The children again were not pushed by ambitious parents but appeared self-motivated by a curiosity regarding language and print. Again, these early readers exhibited high levels of auditory phonological discrimination and crucially were noted to focus on print rather than the illustrations in books. These children were also exposed to repeated readings of stories and significant rhyming verse. So, high levels of reading motivation may be promoted by a language rich environment and, critically for schools, the fast development of reading skills (particularly phonological discrimination) enabling swift access to narrative.

Is possessing a high level of motivation to read, however, the same as reading for pleasure? This lies at the heart of the problem of promoting ‘reading for pleasure’. What actually is it?

It may seem obvious. After all, we all feel we know what reading for pleasure is, don’t we? It’s Nell’s (1988) definition of being a form of play that allows the reader to, ‘experience other worlds and roles in our imagination...’ (1988:206). It’s Jane Austen’s, ‘I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book. (2003:146). It’s Rufus Choate’s (1854), “Happy is he who has laid up in his youth, and held fast to fortune, a genuine passionate love of reading.” It’s that delicious anticipation and the actuality of getting lost in a good book. Isn’t it? Well, there’s the rub. Jane Austen may have tired a little more quickly if she were reading a technical manual on the statistical analysis of non-parametric quantitative data or pulp fiction rather than a ‘good book’.

Mackey (2020) suggests what is meant by a ‘good book’ generally means fiction, and almost always literature and commonly a bound, paper book rather than any other format, and published by a company dominated by white, middleclass employees. This distortion towards literature is why, she argues, the National Endowment for Arts (2013) research has suggested such pessimistic reading rates in the USA in an age where print, and particularly digitalised print, is ubiquitous and voraciously consumed.

Additionally, literature has a huge advantage in the pleasure stakes – it can affect a deep psychological charm on the reader. Plato (1997) was acutely suspicious of this charm and felt that reading should be restricted to learning rather than imagination as imagination was a dangerous step from universal truth. Aristotle (2024), however, felt that this cleansing charm, or catharsis, could be psychologically beneficial and by avoiding slavish adherence to the

particulars of life had the power to reveal rather than obfuscate universal truth. This therapeutic effect of literature (and particularly tragedy) does have some basis in science with a particular application to the relief of PTSD (Shapiro, 2001). As literature has developed innovative, successful narrative devices over the centuries, so, Angus Fletcher (2021) argues, the success of each device is linked to a specific psychological benefit. Thus, he maintains, exposure to narrative can promote the release of endorphins – that instant pleasure hit delivered by the body’s drug pusher; the equivalent of a small, narcotic-induced high. But is that really pleasure? Epicurus (Slattery, 2007) would classify this as this as a dynamic pleasure – comparable to eating a custard cream biscuit, rather than the static pleasure derived from a healthy lifestyle. That narrative high is not exclusive to reading; it is available in the theatre, the cinema, on television, on video games, through storytelling and narrative formatted social media.

This skew towards literature as a proxy for reading and by implication reading for pleasure, has, Mackey (2020) posits, led towards prejudices in terms of gender, class and culture. Sullivan (2009) found that boys often see non-fiction not as a vehicle for finding specific information but as a way to better understand the world. In other words, they read non-fiction in the way that we expect children to read fiction. This was confirmed by Smith and Wilhelm (2006) who also found that numbers of men preferring non-fiction was double that of women. Furthermore, the publishing industry in English speaking countries is very white both in terms of personnel and product (Mackey, 2020).

In 2016 the print book of the playscript ‘Harry Potter and the Cursed Child’ (Rowling et al., 2016) sold 2 million copies in the first two days. In the same year Pokémon Go app was released. It had over 100 million downloads in the first few weeks. Both formats require significant reading, but the taxonomic precision required to access the substantial text in the guidebook and rules for Pokémon contrasts with the narrative expansiveness of Rowling’s creation. The readers of both derive considerable pleasure from the experience, but when researchers analyse reading for pleasure only the Rowling text counts. Pokémon cards were routinely banned from primary schools 20 years ago (bbc.co.uk, 2000) despite the considerable text covering them. There was no equivalent ban of Harry Potter books. This bias towards the printed, narrative book has class and cultural implications according to Mackey (2020) who cites UNESCO’s (2014) findings that people read more, enjoy it more and read to children more on mobile devices. She highlights the politicisation of the library closures in the UK as driven by class rather than access to books for those who cannot afford them implying that digital libraries may be far more democratic. Kemp (2018) also highlights the importance of the mobile device for areas of the world with reduced access to education with internet access rates in Africa growing 20% year on year.

The Reading Framework (DFE, 2023) states that schools ‘should also acknowledge pupils’ developing interests and changing habits as they move

from primary to secondary school' (2023:91). Acknowledging 'interests and habits' would seem appreciably different from the promotion of pleasure. To be able to promote reading for pleasure, we need to be able to define it.

Sociologist Robert Stebbins (2012) more usefully describes the 'committed reader' and applies this commitment to three distinct areas: reading for utility, pleasure, and fulfilment. He does not distinguish in importance between the three areas but applies equal weight to them. Each area, though important, is fulfilling a different function. This is perhaps significantly more useful than merely focusing on pleasure. 'Utilitarian reading' he suggested, is carried out both in formal education and self-education as part of human curiosity and a commitment to being a lifelong learner and as such has a practical and self-rewarding aspect and can be 'interesting, powerfully motivating and rewarding' (2012:56). 'Reading for pleasure', Stebbins (2012) maintains is active entertainment (it requires effort), launches imaginative play or, as Nell (1988) defines this, as promoting daydreams. Stebbins (2012) adds that pleasurable reading may lead to sociable conversations and has the benefits of serendipitous discovery, edutainment, personal regeneration, interpersonal engagement, and well-being. Self-fulfilling reading, he explains, is the acquiring of knowledge for its own sake: fulfilling the desire to be well-read; to be a Renaissance person. Often the expression of this knowledge is important both in terms of prestige and interesting others. The areas may include sport, the arts, science, philosophy, and other areas of the curriculum, and it might be argued that this relates to the building of an expansive schematic framework.

In terms of schools, it may well be more practical to encourage children to become committed readers rather than promote reading for pleasure exclusively. As such, schools can articulate and promote the importance of reading in becoming an educated lifelong learner, experience the joys and structures of entertaining narratives and the value of reading across the curriculum to create rich schematic constellations.

Reading for pleasure has not always been seen as the educational panacea promoted today. Einstein was very sceptical of its benefits, insisting that anyone who, 'reads too much, uses his brain too little...' (Viereck, 1930:430), as was Lord Chesterfield (2022) who likened reading for pleasure to cows grazing and thereby aligning with Johnson's (2003) quip that reading for pleasure was reading without the fatigue of attention. Reading, as a sedentary activity, has even been associated with obesity (Poortinga et al., 2011) – although it should be noted that it is the inactive sitting rather than the reading that is in the dock. Elder and Paul (2006) described reading for pleasure as an activity that requires 'no particular skill level' (2006:57) and Emile Ciaron (1973), the existentialist philosopher, wrote that, 'Whereas any sentence one has to write requires a pretence of invention, it takes little enough attention to enter into a text, even a difficult one. To scribble a postcard comes closer to creative activity than to read *The Phenomenology of Mind*...' (1973:42). Bernard Shaw (2022) was equally cynical, suggesting that reading was merely

the substitution of 'literature for life' (2022:64) and both Ralph Waldo Emerson (2007) and Ortega Y Gasset (1963) were disparaging of the 'Hobgoblin' (2007:40) of received wisdom repackaged and articulated with little or no thought as imposed opinion by the execrable 'mass man'. Perhaps Walter Benjamin (2007) went the furthest, implying that text required the reader to commit so much attention and time to the medium that its demands verged on tyranny.

Where does this leave schools in the promotion of 'reading for pleasure', and how should they answer the inevitable OFSTED inspection question on how they are promoting reading for pleasure?

First, reading should inflict no pain on the reader. Epicurus (Slattery, 2007) defined pleasure as the absence of pain. This may be the first and most important role for schools as this is the fundamental imperative for reading. If children find reading painful then they will never gain any utility from it. To avoid pain, children must master the skill of deciphering text: able to decode, read words instantly and develop fluency. This requires excellent phonics teaching, decodable texts, opportunities to develop orthographic processing and reading fluency (Perfetti, 2007). There will be no pleasure without this. A language-rich environment (Rayner et al., 2012) is imperative from the outset. Initially, this will be oral and aural. Stories need to be read and reread regularly. Text should be highlighted as well as illustrations so that children develop an understanding that stories come mainly from the words rather than the pictures (Fisher et al., 2010). Rhyming verse and the learning of verse aids in developing phonological sensitivity (Bradley and Bryant, 1991). An exposure to diverse texts from the outset builds an inherent understanding of narrative and non-narrative structures. Home engagement and action early in the language development of a child is greatly beneficial to reading development. Access to numerous books is not essential. Access to some books is. Rereading of books is important. Forcing children to read is not motivating. Developing curiosity around text is (Stainthorpe and Hughes, 1999).

Second, children need to be supported to think deeply about texts in order to develop metacognitive strategies that ensure reading enables them to flourish as opposed to derive pleasure alone from reading (Shanahan, 2020). Deep reading of texts with the support from teachers needs to occur across the curriculum with a focus on both narrative and expository texts. This may not promote pleasure in the short term but develops strategies to develop deep understanding of texts (Shanahan, 2020). Reference to the type of reading and its benefits are made explicit (Elder and Paul, 2006). Opportunities for reading for utility, entertainment and self-fulfilment occur across the curriculum (Stebbins, 2012). Teachers read regularly to children and do so in a manner that promotes enjoyment of more complex texts (McQuillan, 2019).

Finally, children need to be self-motivated to choose texts to read for utility, pleasure, and self-fulfilment (Becker et al., 2010). This is the data that suggests children are becoming committed readers. It is the desire to read and the

manifestation of that desire in action that is the data (Baker and Wigfield, 1999). Although books may be regularly sent home as part of school protocols, this is not choice. School and local libraries offer the opportunity to choose but not the motivation. For many children, reading digitally may be the most effective option for accessing text and expressing this choice (Mackey, 2020).

So, perhaps the response to the inevitable Ofsted question of how schools promote reading for pleasure should be, ‘we don’t, we develop committed readers.’ However, it would seem that Ofsted are questioning the validity of reading for pleasure as a barometer for good reading protocols. Their recent Ofsted English subject report (2024) indicated that schools’ canons of books should not merely contain books that children may want to read but books of literary worth. It stated that, ‘While pupils can learn from all books, English curriculums should give careful consideration to texts of literary merit that would support pupils in their understanding of English now and in the future. Other books should form an essential part of the wider curriculum or reading for pleasure.’ So, it appears that pleasure may come from ‘other’ books, but real understanding comes from ‘texts of literary merit’.

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