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# Benefits of Reading for Pleasure for Children and Young People

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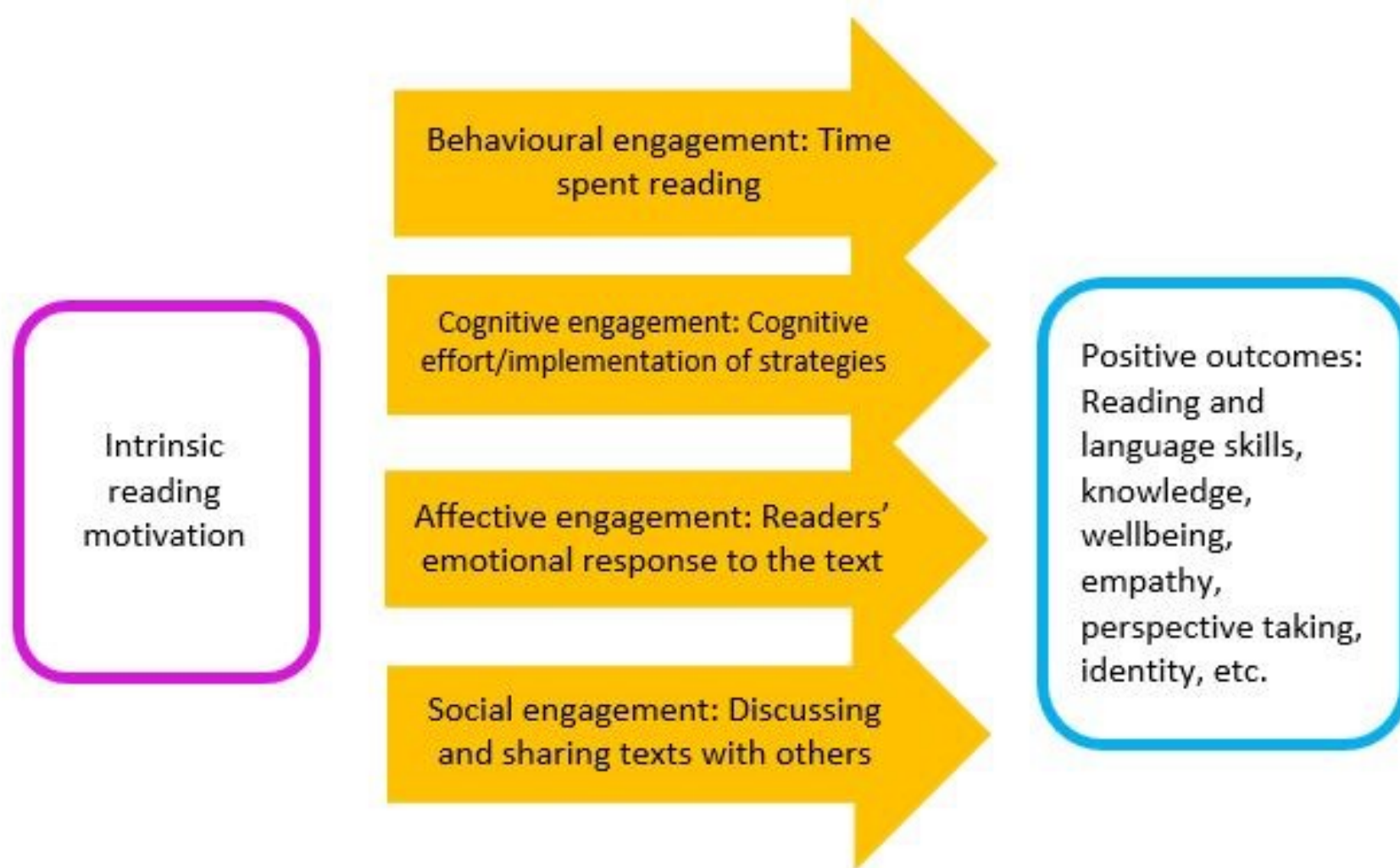
Literacy Lab

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# Benefits of Reading for Pleasure

- Whether called reading for pleasure, volitional reading, leisure time reading, or independent reading, the benefits of reading books are extensive.
- However, children and young people need to be **motivated** to read, and **engage** deeply with the books that they read, for the benefits to be fully realised.

# Reading motivation and engagement



# Benefits of reading books

- Rich and diverse emotional experiences
- Academic, literacy and language skills
- Knowledge of the world, and expanding life experiences
- Personal enrichment: Representation, self-kindness, sense of belonging, ambitions and future aspirations
- Understanding others: Empathy and perspective taking
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Connection with others: family and friends
- Leveraging social and economic change

# Emotional experiences

- Books elicit a range of rich and diverse emotional experiences, from feelings of happiness, calm, excitement or reassurance, to feelings of tension or sadness (Mar et al., 2011; McGeown et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020); however, even ‘negative’ emotional experiences can be enjoyable, enriching, and sought out by children and young people.
- These emotions can be experienced during reading (as a result of book content, or reflecting on personally meaningful content), or experienced after reading (through later reflection) (Mar et al., 2011).

# Positive emotional experiences

'I just feel genuinely happy reading them. It's just like, a really happy thing'

'I feel very calm when I'm reading them, and I kind of just lose out anything that's around me'

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

'You don't want to put it down, because every page you read, there's another cliff-hanger'

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

'I feel excited and like don't wanna put the book down'

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

# Diverse emotional experiences

'It makes me feel like excited and anxious for the character.'

'... sometimes I might feel sad cause like a character has died that I really liked.'

'and it's just made me feel happy, sad, confused, question myself and, I think that's why I'm now at this stage that I can actually like, say my feelings out loud'

'and it's about like her grief on that, you know, it's like eating away at her. So, you know, I guess you feel like quite a lot of sympathy'

'I feel like I can accept change and stuff, because in real life I find that really difficult, but when I'm reading a book it's like, mind blowing ... I'm not upset about it. I can, like go through the change without being stressed.'

# Academic, literacy and language skills

## **Academic:**

Positive academic success (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; OECD, 2002; Sullivan and Brown, 2015).

## **Literacy:**

Reading, but in particular (fiction) book reading has been linked with better reading skills (Jerrim & Moss, 2018; McGeown et al, 2015) and growth in reading comprehension and spelling skills (e.g. Mol & Bus, 2011; Torppa et al., 2019) as books provide higher quality opportunities for children and young people to develop their reading skills.

## **Language:**

Book reading, but particularly fiction reading, is associated with better language abilities (Mol & Bus, 2011; Mar & Rain, 2015; Sullivan & Brown, 2015) as books provide more varied and rich vocabulary, and complex syntactic structures, than experienced in everyday conversation (Nation et al., 2022).



# Academic, literacy and language skills

'I think it's improved my writing, especially like my descriptive writing and describing like a character.'

'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.'

'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.'

'...chapter books have a lot more words, and they're developing my reading skills'

'I think it's very important because I'm learning new words. I'm learning how to spell more things'

# Knowledge of the world and expanding life experiences

Books can inspire learning, broaden minds, and allow children and young people to explore topics and issues which are personally important, or discover new interests. (McGeown & Wilkinson, 2021).

Books can also introduce children and young people to new ideas or thinking that excites or inspires them (Currie & McGeown, 2025).

Books can develop children and young people's understanding of the world, as they read to pursue their own interests, and learn about new topics (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; McGeown et al., 2020).

# Knowledge of the world and expanding life experiences

'It makes me understand that people are fighting battles that you have no idea about.'

'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.'

'in some books, it's fiction, but they put facts into it and you can read the story while also being interested by the facts and things'

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

# Personal enrichment

Book reading can support personal enrichment, for example when children and young people they see their own lives, emotions, experiences, interests, and/or characteristics reflected in what they read (CLPE; 2023; McGeown et al., 2023)

Indeed, books provide opportunities for readers to engage with personally meaningful content, develop and consolidate their identities, improve self-awareness and understanding, and reflect on important life events.

In doing so, it can encourage self-kindness and offer opportunities for children and young people to feel a sense of belonging (Currie & McGeown, 2025; Hooper et al., 2005; Kuzmicova & Cremin, 2021; Webber et al., 2024).

Reading may also support children and young people's ambitions and future aspirations.

# Representation

'it had an autistic main character ... I could relate to a lot of the situations that happened in that book, like, accidentally hurting people, not being able to control emotions well. Yeah, I could relate to those situations.'

'when [the characters] 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.'

'There is this book called "Heartstopper", it kinda, like, remind me of, like, the trouble I've got through in life in the same ... kinda, like, relates.'

'[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.'

# Self-kindness

'It was about accepting that [being Autistic] is a thing that you have, and that it has strong points as well. That it is not all bad.'

'It's-, it's helped me ... helped me have empathy for myself as well.'

'...it has got me thinking about the progress that I've made with, like, my abilities with, like, my dyslexia and stuff like that.'

'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.'

'[through the character] I can see that it is OK to not be perfect.'

# Sense of belonging

'It makes me feel, like, a bit good, because, like, tells me about, like, even if it's not a real person, like, shows that someone else at least went through the same things that I went through.'

'Yeah, there is, like, a few [books] that, like, I realised that that person was going through the same thing that I went through that I didn't know that I was going through, so, like, kind of show me the reality of my life.'

'I think "[book]" showed me a bit of, like...uhm...comfort in a way? 'Cause the girl in the book went through a few of the same things that I went through in life...so, like, comforted me a little bit in some ways.'

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

# Ambitions and future aspirations

'books have morals and stuff, and a very common one is 'be yourself' and that's something that I don't often do. So I'd say that's quite helpful.'

'It sort of encourages me to keep on pushing hard.'

'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.'

'That life is an adventure and just go for it.'

'To never give up.'

If the book has a happy ending or happy times and it's a character like me or, like, someone who has any difference in how they are ... it would be important [to see that] people who go through this stuff.. they come out more stronger.'



# Understanding others: Empathy and perspective taking

- Fiction books often reflect the social world we live in, and provide opportunities for children and young people to encounter more diverse individuals, groups or settings than they would otherwise be able to (Oatley, 2016).
- Books offer rich opportunities to see things from others perspectives, develop empathy and social cognition (Eekhof et al, 2022; Gasser et al, 2022; Mar et al., 2006; Van der Kleij et al., 2022).
- Furthermore, books have the potential to reduce prejudice towards others (Vezzali et al., 2014).

# Empathy and perspective taking

‘...sometimes I already knew what they were going through and I feel sorry for them.’

‘I think it just makes you a more empathetic person because you read about, like, different stories and different, like, dilemmas and struggles and if the characters are written well enough, you can, like, really empathize with them.’

‘They’ll have, like, a character going through quite a lot, but they never talk about it. It’s always, like, an internal monologue. So, it makes me think like, if other people I know, you know, they’re not saying anything, but they’re having troubles, they’re constantly thinking about stuff that is never talked about, you know?’

‘Almost every time I read, I can just imagine, like, all of my friends, they’re all different and they all have different lives to mine and everyone else. And I can just sort of imagine ... like, how they feel and sometimes it makes me empathise with them.’

# Wellbeing

- Large scale quantitative research studies suggest a positive, albeit weak, relationship between book 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 (McGeown et al., 2020; Currie & McGeown, 2025; Wilkinson et al., 2020).

# Wellbeing

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

'I can drain all my emotions out on the book, so if I've had a hard day, I can just read.'

'I think it's very good for your mental health anyway, because...it's just really good for your brain to, like, feel better.'

'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.'

'... if I read a funny book, it just lightens my mood.'

# Connecting with others: Friends and family

- Beyond the solitary act of reading, books can connect children and young people with others, as they recommend, discuss and share books with friends, peers and family.
- Books can exemplify positive relationships, and initiate and sustain important connections.
- When considering reading for pleasure, it is important to support both independent and social reading activities (Cremin et al., 2014; Cremin and McGeown, 2025).

# Connecting with friends

'...its nice to share book recommendations and I've got some of the best books I've ever read from recommendations from friends.'

'Well, obviously me and my best friend were more, when we started reading together, we grew a lot, a lot closer, and now she's like my best friend in the whole world.'

'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.'

'...like, we're always chatting about what book we just finished or, like, what book recommendations we're giving each other...'

'I remember my friend gave me a book because she mentioned it and it had kind of like, issues I was dealing with at the time and she was like, you should read this book.'

# Connecting with family

'And even now [my older brother] is at uni, even though he just started, he like-, every now and then I'll get a text saying "read this book" or like, "oh my goodness, I really like this book".')

'I think what I quite like doing is reading with somebody else, like somebody else reading a book to me. I really like that actually.'

'I talk to my parents quite a lot because me and mum have a very similar book taste.'

'It's-, it's nice, it brings us closer together, definitely...it sort of, just brings you together in a way that it's like, you all feel connected by the same thing.'

'I feel happy because I can connect with my mum and talk to her, alone sometimes. Because we don't really get to talk to each other that much because I have many siblings and she's always very busy.'

# Benefits of reading for pleasure

- Extensive benefits are felt for those who are motivated to read, and engage with the books that they read.
- While focus is primarily on books, other texts (e.g., poetry, comics) can similarly offer positive experiences.
- Efforts to support children and young people's reading motivation and engagement are so worthwhile, and much needed.
- Reading books for pleasure can leverage social change, providing opportunities and life chances for those from lower-income backgrounds.

*“PISA data consistently shows that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender or socio-economic status” (OECD, 2021)*



## Further information

McGeown, S., & Wilkinson, K. (2021). Inspiring and sustaining reading for pleasure in children and young people: A guide for teachers and school leaders. UKLA Minibook

Quotes to exemplify benefits have been taken from multiple projects within the University of Edinburgh's Literacy Lab, including:

Growing Up A Reader

Reading and Wellbeing

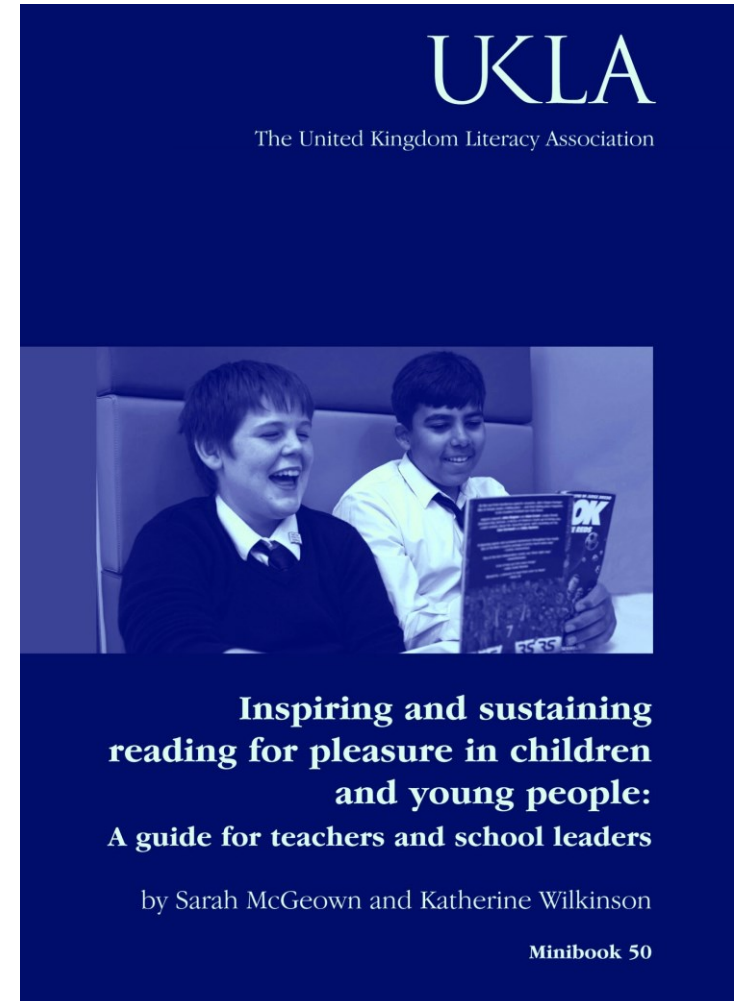
Neurodiversity and Narrative Fiction

Narrative Fiction: Understanding Ourselves and Others

ReWriter: Poetry Engagement





For details of research, publications and resources, please visit:

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



Many thanks to all the children and young people for so generously sharing their reading experiences with us

Promoting reading for  
pleasure with

 **Reading**   
 **Schools** 

# What is Reading Schools?

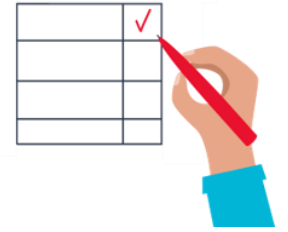
- A national, whole-school accreditation programme, **championing reading for pleasure**
- Framework linked to the **Curriculum and HIGIOS4?**
- Actions based on **research informed practice**
- Evidence to support **improved attainment**, wellbeing, critical thinking and literacy
- An **accreditation** for every school
- Professional **development opportunities**
- Ideas to develop **learner voice, leadership and confidence**
- Opportunities for **collaboration** within and across schools
- Pathways to engaging your **families and wider community**
- Scottish Book Trust **training and support**



**Find out more here!**



# A supportive framework



- 1.2 Leadership of Learning
- 1.3 Leadership of Change
- 1.5 Management of resources to promote equity
- 2.2 Curriculum
- 2.3 Learning, Teaching and Assessment
- 2.5 Family Learning
- 2.7 Partnerships
- 3.2 Raising Attainment and Achievement

- Reader role modelling
- Staff development
- School environment
- Access to high quality books
- Interdisciplinary book projects
- Creating social networks
- Engaging with authors
- Responding to reading
- Raising the profile of reading with families
- Rewarding progress and recognising personal achievements

*“The framework is robust and relevant – flexible enough to encompass a whole array of different approaches within individual schools and authorities”*

– Dr Janet Adam, FVWL RIC

# Thank you

## Please get in touch

[www.readingschools.scot](http://www.readingschools.scot)

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