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# Reading for pleasure: scrutinising the evidence base – benefits, tensions and recommendations

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**ABSTRACT**

Compelling international evidence illustrates the potential of reading for pleasure for enhancing student reading achievement along with other learning and wellbeing outcomes. Yet profound challenges exist for nations seeking to encompass attention to students' volitional reading. In this paper we critically review the growing research evidence in this area by drawing systematically on cognitive psychological studies of reading attainment and motivation, educational studies of classroom practice, and the work of literary scholars and medical professionals. We consider and critique the methodologies deployed and read between the lines, exposing contradictions and complexities across this interdisciplinary field before considering the demands of operationalising this agenda in education. Through a dual focus on England and Australia, where, exemplifying international trends, young people's voluntary reading continues to decline, we examine difficulties and dilemmas which play out in policy and practice contexts. Our points of commonality and comparison surface key issues for consideration in countries working to reconcile the push and pull of performativity and reading for pleasure agendas in order to nurture children's volitional reading. To conclude, we examine ways forward for research, policy and practice which deserve increased global attention, and offer future-focused recommendations to advance this significant social justice agenda.

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## Introduction

Evidence from around the globe is highlighting the potential of reading for pleasure and its association with reading achievement and other learning outcomes (e.g. Sullivan and Brown 2015; Mullis et al. 2017; Torppa et al. 2020). The influential Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) not only report reading attainment scores, but also provide data about young people's engagement in reading - their enjoyment and the frequency with which they choose to read. While the resultant league tables prioritise reading outcomes and drive education policy and practice worldwide (Breakspear 2012), data on reader engagement is increasingly being

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mined by researchers and brought to the attention of policy makers. As the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognise, the term reader engagement has a wide and encompassing remit:

> Engagement in this context [PISA 2019] implies the motivation to read and comprises a cluster of affective and behavioural characteristics that include an interest in and enjoyment of reading, a sense of control over what one reads, involvement in the social dimension of reading and diverse and frequent reading practices (OECD 2019, 29).

Reading for pleasure, which is often viewed as a proxy for such engagement, is also variously referred to as recreational reading, free voluntary reading, the habit of reading, leisure reading, choice-led and independent reading. Defined by the International Literacy Association (ILA 2018, 12) as 'the opportunity to read freely, voluntarily, and with delight', reading for pleasure does not encompass written responses or related tests. In this paper we position it as volitional reading, driven by the reader's own goals and interests – which may include social and relational ones – in anticipation of some form of satisfaction. Such reading for pleasure has been recognised as the right of every child (ILA 2018).

While not formally assessed in classrooms, the OECD assert that engagement in reading is associated with increased confidence in reading, enhanced reading proficiency and better learning outcomes (OECD 2011, 2019; Mullis et al. 2017, 2023). They also recognise it as a mediator of gender and socio-economic status and argue that it can help leverage social change (OECD 2021, 28). Arguably therefore, being a reader in childhood can play a role in reducing educational inequalities. It is not only every child's right, but a matter of social justice that each child is enabled and supported to become a keen and motivated reader. Recognition of the potential of children and young people developing the habit of reading is prompting what might be described as a reading for pleasure turn in several countries. For example, in England, Scotland, Finland, and Singapore, the term, or a cultural equivalent, is evident to varying degrees in public discourse, in policy and in practice (e.g. DfE 2014; Loh and Pang 2022). In New Zealand, after decades of being eschewed in policy and positioned as a home-based practice (Boyask et al. 2021), reading for pleasure has been included in the recently refreshed draft English curriculum (Ministry of Education 2023).

High level international interest in this area is also being driven by concern about the widespread decline in young people enjoying reading or choosing to read in their own time (ILA 2018; OECD 2019, 2021; Mullis et al. 2023). However, nurturing a love of reading in the young, alongside, and as complementary to the development of prescribed and assessed reading skills, represents a considerable challenge for schools and teachers in high accountability cultures. Those who seek to harmonise the push and pull of these performative and volitional reading agendas (Cremin and Moss 2018) face inherent and persistent dilemmas, particularly in the wake of the Covid19 pandemic which appears to have intensified inequalities in recreational reading and reading attainment across the world (Mullis et al. 2023).

This paper is therefore timely. It reviews the extant research literature, revealing the evidenced benefits associated with being a childhood reader and the complexities inherent in this growing body of work. It highlights the significant issues which countries face in developing rigorous and research-informed reading for pleasure policy and practice and illustrates the ways in which these issues play out through a focus on young people's volitional reading in two national contexts, England and Australia. In these countries, in a manner similar to the international trend, voluntary reading continues to fall.

In the UK, the number of children and young people who report enjoying reading is now at its lowest level since 2005, with 48.9% report only enjoying it 'a bit' or 'not at all' (Cole et al. 2022a). In the last PIRLS, whilst England ranked 4th in relation to reading outcomes, only 29% of pupils reported that they liked reading, compared to a far higher, yet still worrying international median of 46%. Additionally, 24% of pupils reported that they did not like reading (Lindorff, Stiff, and Kayton 2023) exceeding the international median of 18% (Mullis et al. 2023). In Australia, enjoyment for reading is also declining markedly. In the last PIRLS, Australia ranked 21 out of 50 nations and 26% of students reported they did not like reading, with 45% only enjoying it somewhat (Hillman et al. 2023). Older student reports of enjoying reading also declined markedly between PISA 2000 and 2018; with a 16%-point increase for female students and a 15%-point increase for male students reporting 'I read only if I have to' (Underwood 2021).

This paper draws upon a narrative review of the evidence base which explored the benefits associated with reading for pleasure. The review, which sought to consolidate and summarise the extant research literature, drew mainly on peer reviewed studies of the volitional reading of 5–18-year-olds from 1990-2023. However, in order to illuminate the two countries' contexts, some national policy documents and surveys from national charities were also included, alongside a few seminal early studies. Several research indexes, including the British Education Index, the Education Resources Information Centre, Scopus, EBSCO, and Web of Science were used. Additionally, reference list searches of relevant meta-analyses were conducted (e.g. Mol and Bus 2011). A range of search terms were deployed, including: 'reading for pleasure', 'reading for enjoyment', the habit of reading', 'volitional reading', 'voluntary reading', 'leisure reading', 'engaged reading', 'independent reading' and 'recreational reading'. Studies not written in English, and those focusing on volitional reading in a second language and EFL studies were excluded.

In this paper, after presenting the findings of the review, we foreground the nuanced complexity of the extant literature and consider the different methodological perspectives deployed, before turning to consider the demands of operationalising this agenda in education. We show how difficulties, dilemmas and possibilities intertwine in relation to policy and practice in England and Australia. Our points of comparison are intended to help fine tune understandings of our specific national contexts, and prompt consideration of what might be generalisable to other countries and in what ways. We then identify and discuss the key issues which deserve attention in countries working to develop young people's volitional reading. Finally, we offer some recommendations to move this significant agenda forward and nurture more positive attitudes to recreational reading amongst the young.

## Benefits associated with reading for pleasure

Prior to the establishment of PISA (2000) and PIRLS (2001), studies of reading indicated the influence of intrinsic and social motivation on the engagement of young readers (e.g. Wigfield and Guthrie 1997), revealing for instance that unmotivated disaffected readers fail to benefit from reading teaching (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000). Additionally, a mutually reinforcing relationship between reading engagement and reading achievement was documented (Campbell et al. 1997). This was shown for example in the relationship between the amount of reading children do outside school and their reading achievement in school (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988). Children with high reading proficiency who view

themselves as capable readers tend to spend more time reading for pleasure, and select more difficult texts, driving both their progress as readers and their desire to keep reading (Guthrie et al. 1999). This has been described as a 'Matthew effect' (Stanovich 1986) in which 'the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer', with skilled motivated readers making rapid progress, while weaker, often disengaged readers, remain behind.

Since the turn of the century, analysis of the international data set offered through PISA and PIRLS has provided further evidence of a bi-directional relationship between the will to read and the skill - between the desire and pleasure found in reading (which leads to more frequent recreational reading) and assessed reading achievement (e.g. Kirsch et al. 2002; OECD 2002; Brozo et al. 2007, Cheema 2018; McGrane et al. 2017). Multiple studies indicate that intrinsic reading motivation, 'liking reading', print exposure and recreational reading are all positively correlated with reading competence. For example, in PIRLS 2021, the 10 year olds in England who reported liking reading the most, scored, on average, 34 points more than their peers who reported that they did not like reading (Lindorff et al. 2023).

Whilst recognising that studies scrutinise specific aspects of reader motivation, engagement and attainment. (e.g. intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reading attitudes, frequency, volume, fluency, and comprehension) and define these constructs differently, numerous positive associations between the will and the skill have been evidenced. These have been noted in comparative data across countries (Cheema 2018) and in national studies from multiple countries. These include: Belgium (Rogiers, van Keer, and Merchie 2020); England (McGrane et al. 2017; Lindorff et al. 2023); Australia (Scholes 2021a); Finland (Torppa et al. 2020; van Bergen et al. 2020); Germany (Schiefele et al. 2012; Schaffner et al. 2016; Miyamoto, Pfost, and Artelt 2018; Locher and Pfost 2020); Ireland (Gilleece and Eivers, 2018); Israel (Vaknin-Nusbaum et al. 2018); Jordan (Mahasneh et al. 2021); the Netherlands, (Rogiers, van Keer, and Merchie 2020); Nigeria (Tunde-Awe 2014); South Africa (Sibhekinkosi Nkomo 2021); Turkey (Tavsancil et al. 2019); the UK (Sullivan and Brown 2015; Malanchini et al. 2017) and the US (Taboada et al. 2009; Lupo, Jang, and McKenna 2017; Schugar and Dreher 2017; Troyer et al. 2019). It is even argued that enjoyment of reading can predict as much as 18% of variation in reading achievement at the country level, as noted in cross-country analysis of PISA data (Cheema 2018).

However, these studies do not claim causality, rather they assert correlations between variables, demonstrating for instance multidimensional relationships between aspects of motivation and reading comprehension (e.g. Troyer et al. 2019), and the influence of background characteristics on the relationship between enjoyment in reading and reading proficiency (e.g. Rogiers, van Keer and Merchie 2020). One longitudinal study, drawing on a nationally representative sample of scores from 5, 10 and 16-year-olds indicates that being a frequent reader of choice in childhood is linked to higher literacy scores, cognitive growth, and improvements in mathematics and vocabulary (Sullivan and Brown 2015). This 1970s British cohort study, which follows the lives of 17,000 plus people born in England, Scotland and Wales in one week of 1970, concludes that reading for pleasure is more strongly linked than parental education to cognitive progress in adolescence.

Time spent reading recreationally is also associated with and predictive of enriched vocabularies (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Jeon and Day 2016; McQuillan 2019). This is unsurprising since books directly expose readers to new words and sentences which are rarely encountered in conversation and widen their oral and written repertoires, enriching their language development (Nation, Dawson, and Hsiao 2022). One meta-analysis

comparing the impact of 'free reading' and explicit language instruction on children's vocabulary for instance, found that free reading was far more efficient in both the short and longer-term (McQuillan 2019). It seems likely, as the author claims, that reading for pleasure provides a bridging function or 'conduit' to more challenging academic reading and sub-technical vocabulary.

Studies additionally indicate that through reading recreationally, young people develop a wider general knowledge and understanding of the world (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998; Mol and Bus 2011). Volitional reading, it is argued, affords a distinct cognitive advantage and the development of 'information capital' essential for successful learning in every curriculum subject (Neuman Susan & Celano 2012). The association found between 165,000 US children's out-of-school reading engagement and their information text comprehension in school (Schugar and Dreher 2017) underscores this. Frequent readers are better positioned to handle the academic reading and cognitive demands of the curriculum.

Furthermore, some studies indicate positive consequences of recreational reading on children's writing, particularly narrative (Jouhar & Rupley 2016; Sénéchal, Hill, and Malette 2018). Drawing on a systematic review of experimental studies from 1970-2019 that examine the relationship between independent reading and writing, and specifically the impact of reading on the writing performance of 10–16-year-olds, Jouhar and Rupley (2016) conclude that, independent reading enhances the quality of both narrative and descriptive writing. They posit that volitional reading offers models of written texts on which writers can draw and that this improves their text organization, content, spelling and grammatical accuracy. In addition, Sénéchal et al (2018), analyzing a cohort of 300 students, demonstrate an association between reading for pleasure and text cohesion in narratives written by 9–10-year-olds.

Recent studies also indicate that social and emotional benefits are associated with choosing to read regularly. For example, survey data indicate that frequent readers report both higher levels of wellbeing (e.g. Kennewell et al. 2022), and of social-emotional development and 'academic grit' (Bozgün and Akın-Köstereliogˇlu 2020). A UK millennium cohort study shows that daily reading for pleasure at age 7, is independently associated with lower levels of hyperactivity/inattention and emotional problems at age 11, as well as better prosocial behaviour (Mak and Fancourt 2020). A large-scale US national cohort study, with 10,000 plus teenagers, additionally evidences a longitudinal association between early reading for pleasure and better mental health, as well as higher levels of cognitive performance in adolescence (Sun et al. 2023).

Predominantly, the empirical studies reported above and those drawn on in meta-analyses are quantitative in nature. Qualitative studies which focus on the benefits associated with reading for pleasure are far fewer. Nonetheless some, which use other methods than surveys to discern children's views, reveal that whilst their reading motivations differ, many young people, regardless of whether they are from Australia (Scholes et al. 2021), Namibia (Kirchner, 2019) Scotland (McGeown et al. 2020) or the US (Wilhelm, 2016) for instance, report reading books to escape, to relax, to be comforted and entertained. Additionally, studies show that fiction in particular evokes emotions, cueing memories that help children to make connections, thus fostering deeper engagement (Kuzmičová & Cremin 2021; Mar and Rain 2015). Literary scholars have long asserted that narrative nurtures the imagination (Nikolajeva 2009; Arizpe et al. 2014) and demonstrate that it offers a context for the development of perspective-taking and empathy (Mar and Oatley 2008; Kidd and Castano 2013;

Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014). Experimental psychologists working from a clinical tradition also assert that fiction reading impacts on social cognition (Dodell-Feder and Tamir 2018), although they recognize that how this effect occurs remains unknown.

Furthermore, some home and classroom-based studies highlight that socially supportive reading environments, which foreground young people's autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ryan and Deci 2000) as readers, enhance their intrinsic motivation to read (Cremin et al. 2009, 2014; Kennedy and Shiel 2010; Villiger et al. 2012; De Naeghel et al. 2014, 2016; Ivey and Johnston 2013; Coakley-Fields, 2018; Ng 2018; Kirchner, 2019). Collectively, these studies indicate that young people's autonomy and self-efficacy as readers, and opportunities to connect to others through reading (both fictional and real), combine to encourage more volitional reading, and can lead to the development of positive reader identities and engaged communities of readers.

In sum, multiple cognitive benefits as well as social and emotional ones are seen to accumulate and are associated with choosing to read recreationally in childhood and beyond.

## Reading between the lines: acknowledging complexities

Notwithstanding the associations noted above, nuances in the data abound and reading between the lines is essential to avoid the adoption of an overly optimistic view of the potential of reading for pleasure. Studies have found that variables such as national, immigrant/native, school type, age, grade levels and socio-economic contexts are influential. For example, Schugar and Dreher (2017) noted that the relationship between recreational reading and information text comprehension was most marked in children from higher-income households. Moreover, positive effects of intrinsic reading motivation on reading achievement have been seen to make the most impact on children working at or above their grade level (Vaknin-Nusbaum et al. 2018), and on students who attend academic track schools (Schaffner et al. 2016). Additionally, Cheema (2018) notes, that whilst enjoyment of reading on its own explained 17.6% of the variation in reading achievement in Australia for instance, in Tunisia it explained only 0.1% of such variation. He thus concludes that positive associations between choice-led reading and reading achievement occur mainly in high and mean academic performance countries, and that variations are shaped in part by cultural differences. In some countries, Cheema (2018) reasons, entertainments such as playing video games, and reading books or comics may be seen as wasting time; parents may discourage children from recreational reading to ensure schoolwork is prioritised.

Furthermore, in a longitudinal German study of 4,600 students, reciprocal effects between intrinsic reading motivation and reading competence were confirmed for native secondary school students, but not for immigrant students (Miyamoto, Pfost, and Artelt 2018). Whilst higher reading skills led to increased intrinsic reading motivation for immigrant students, the reverse effect was not found. The authors posit that being intrinsically motivated may be of less importance to immigrant students who, they perceive, are highly driven and committed to learning overall. The longitudinal Finntwin12 study also asserts a uni-directional influence of skills on enjoyment (van Bergen et al. 2020), although this study has a wider focus on literacy. Additionally, through tracking students' reading from 5-15 years (via parental reports of print exposure and school-based comprehension tests), van Bergen et al. (2020) found that whilst the

will and skill reciprocally influenced each other throughout development, the reading habits of 9–10-year-olds particularly predicted reading fluency and comprehension in adolescence.

Another factor shaping the desire to read and reading achievement is the texts themselves, although fewer studies encompass attention to the influence of the reading material. Closer links between fiction book reading and readers' skills, compared with other texts have been found (Spear-Swerling et al. 2010; McGeown et al. 2016; Jerrim and Moss 2019; Jerrim et al. 2020). Drawing on PISA data from 35 OECD countries of 250,000 15-year-olds, Jerrim and Moss (2019) show that the association between volitional reading and higher reading scores is confined to fiction. This may be due to the sustained time and commitment required to read fiction, extending the amount read, and the experience of new vocabulary and syntactic structures.

Other quantitative studies reveal that text quality, the degree of challenge offered and the opportunities for discussion, mediate the association between reading motivation, reading amount and reading comprehension (Schaffner et al. 2016; Troyer et al. 2019). Moreover, they show that the text type and readability of the book influence readers' motivation. Locher, Becker and Pfost (2019) found for example that reading 'classic literature' correlated negatively with teenagers' intrinsic reading motivation. Classroom based research in England, using mixed methods, further affirms the significance of the text: reading high-quality fiction at pace across 12 weeks impacted on adolescents' comprehension skills, particularly the less experienced readers (Westbrook et al. 2018). These researchers conclude that the combination of sophisticated novels that intellectually and affectively engaged the 'poorer' readers, raising teachers' expectations of these students' abilities, and the social experience of reading and discussing texts in groups, enabled the marked growth in reading attainment recorded.

Such layered findings, across and within studies, indicate the need to avoid generalizations, to pay close attention to cultural and contextual details, to definitions of key concepts, and to each study's scope and research methods. As previously noted, work in this area is predominantly quantitative. Whilst mixed methods are occasionally used, most studies rely on large scale survey data, often deploying linear regression analyses or structural equation modelling and making use of propensity matching methods in order to match frequent readers with those who read less often, but show similar individual, social, familial and behavioural characteristics (e.g. Mak and Fancourt 2020). Drawing on large-scale self-report data from surveys can offer valuable correlational insights, yet seen through the lens of such surveys, reading is framed more as a measurable result than a socially lived experience. Surveys alone cannot capture young people's affective, textual, social and relational engagement as readers.

In contrast, qualitative studies of young readers in classrooms, homes, or communities that document their motivations, dispositions, preferences and reading behaviours, and acknowledge the influence of the environment and those within it, seek to examine the shaping influence of text and context. Using more ethnographic methods and often adopting an identity lens, such studies tend to investigate the complex socio-cultural factors which interact to develop young readers' engagement (e.g. Cremin et al. 2009; Hall, 2012; Francois, 2013; Scholes 2018, 2020, 2021b; McGeown et al. 2020; Scholes et al. 2021; Scholes and Asplund 2021) and some seek to track their changing identities over time (Compton-Lilly 2016).

## Challenges in England and Australia

Building on our review of the significant benefits associated with being a volitional reader and reflection on the affordances of the different methodologies deployed, we focus on the challenges that exist for educators who seek to nurture young people's reading for pleasure. Through considering the ways in which volitional reading has played out in England and Australia, we foreground the way in which the performativity and accountability agenda has tended to sideline reading for pleasure, creating policy and curricula that prioritise skills-based approaches while also, in England, requiring attention is paid to developing a love of reading. Drawing on key insights from international classroom research into motivating a love of reading, we also consider tensions and dilemmas with regard to provision and practice in both countries.

### *Reading for pleasure: policy and curricula*

How reading for pleasure is positioned in a nation's curriculum influences each educator's capacity to facilitate and nurture children's reading volition and enjoyment, and their everyday engagement as readers within and beyond school. In this way, the key messages reflected in policy agendas influence curricula and shape school reading practices (Moss 2021). Driven by concerns about the changing role of education in our globalised world, governments worldwide have sought to consider how schooling can be more efficiently harnessed as part of economic policies (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Curriculum initiatives have also been influenced by globalized accountability discourses, particularly in areas such as literacy education where high-stakes national benchmark tests have enhanced competition on the world stage, creating 'PISA envy' (Thomson et al. 2014, xiii) and further focusing policies on the skills-based standards agenda. These discourses represent major steering mechanisms on schooling systems (Lingard 2010). Arguably, within these agendas, the place of volitional reading in Australian and English curricula has been inversely valued.

Across the last decade in England, increased attention to reading for enjoyment can be seen in government policy directives and national initiatives. Prompted perhaps by the sustained deterioration of children's attitudes to reading, particularly boys, compared to their peers internationally (Twist et al. 2007, 2012; OECD 2011; Mullis et al. 2012), an All-Party Parliamentary Literacy Group Commission on boys' reading was held in 2012. This raised questions about the consequences of a largely female workforce and potentially feminised reading repertoires of children's texts (APPLG 2012). Concurrently, a government research review into reading for pleasure highlighted some of the cognitive and psychological benefits of being a childhood reader (ESARD 2012). This also helped lay the ground for mandating reading for pleasure in 2014. The national curriculum, which is still in place, states that teachers must ensure 'children develop the habit of reading widely and frequently for both pleasure and information' (DfE 2014, 13).

Teachers cannot however require children and young people to enjoy reading voluntarily, and finding the time to nurture recreational reading remains a professional challenge, particularly in the light of the sustained profile given to systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), to comprehension and their assessment (Wyse and Bradbury 2022). Nonetheless, the creation of 34 government funded primary English Hubs in 2018, whose third aim is to nurture children's reading for pleasure, has increased the attention given to recreational reading.

The Hubs were selected on the basis of their phonics screening check results however, not their capabilities in motivating young readers, and SSP provision remains their principal focus. Even so, a number of initiatives indicate that increasingly, volitional reading is being recognised as part of the national agenda. These include for instance: the creation of reading for pleasure awards, a Quality Mark, myriad PD courses, shifts in phonics publishers' provision (e.g. with the introduction of accompanying mini-libraries for recreational reading) and the consideration afforded reading enjoyment and school reading cultures in the non-statutory Reading Framework for 5–14-year-olds (DfE 2021/2023).

Traditionally, Australia had a history of promoting reading enjoyment in schools. Across jurisdictions, teachers heralded considerable autonomy in their approach to teaching reading. Australia's engagement with a national curriculum and standardised testing is relatively recent. Introducing such accountability measures was resisted by state education departments and unions who represented teachers, and the 2008 policy to mandate standardised literacy assessment presented many professional challenges (Comber 2012). Federal financial resources became explicitly tied to various forms of compliance and each schools' ability to measure gains in standardised performance. School leadership teams needed to organise the year around the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and collect, analyse and report on data. Preparing students for this became a priority – culminating in pressure to teach to the test (Comber 2012). Little attention is currently afforded the act of recreational reading in the nation's policy documents; the closest are curriculum references to opportunities to appreciate, enjoy, analyse, evaluate, adapt and use the richness and power of the English language (ACARA 2021). However, there is evidence of reading for pleasure programs being trialled in individual schools (Collins et al. 2022) and in classrooms where teachers have an interest in fostering volitional reading (Van den Dool and Simpson 2021).

Recently in Australia, a renewed focus on phonics in English has become evident in the updated rendition of the national curriculum and directives to pre-service teacher education programs. While phonics and other code-based literacy practices have always been widespread and integrated in early years contexts, many educators are concerned that SSP and the phonics screening check, borrowed from England, is now limiting pedagogical approaches and being proposed as the 'right' way to teach reading (Henebery 2022). The push for such an approach has created tensions for teachers and a potential imbalance that may make other salient strands of developing as a reader, such as motivation, engagement and pleasure, less visible. These challenges are further underscored by the prescriptive and narrow nature of the curriculum (Comber 2016) and lack of resourcing in many disadvantaged schools (Merga 2017a; Scholes et al. 2021).

Research with Australian pre-service teachers, indicates that their desire to develop reading for pleasure is compromised by the lack of policy valuing of this agenda, by children's diverse skills and levels of development, and by their perceptions of families' negative views about recreational reading at home (Pink 2022). The absence of policy recognition is also likely to influence teachers' perceptions of reading for pleasure, prompting it to be seen as an additional activity, one to introduce only once students have attained reading proficiency (Van den Dool and Simpson 2021). This point of view pushes volitional reading backstage, implying it needs to be undertaken at home and does not need to be afforded much attention in school. In England too, evidence suggests that some practitioners' conceptions of reading still remain focused on proficiency,

constraining their practice and children's reading for pleasure (Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018).

Moreover, both countries place a high value on testing, and grades and accountability measures continue to have consequences for how educators think about what matters in literacy (Moss 2012; Comber 2016; Wyse and Bradbury 2022). Indeed, over the last decades, the increasingly set nature of curricula in many countries, including England and Australia, has had implications for the autonomy of teachers, schools, and school authorities (Ball 2000; Hardy 2015; Lundström 2015; Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2023). Nonetheless, the enhanced profile afforded recreational reading in England has arguably prompted many education professionals to contemplate how best to align and balance the development of both the will and the skills of reading, albeit teachers remain cognisant that the phonics agenda is pre-eminent in policy directives.

Since national policies are mediated by teachers in and through dynamic classroom contexts (Moss 2021), we now consider practice-based research studies, while continuing to offer points of connection and comparison with reference to England and Australia.

## *Reading for pleasure: provision and practice*

In contrast to the wealth of quantitative studies examining correlations between reading for pleasure, reading attainment and other associated outcomes, far fewer studies examine actual provision and practice in this area. Nonetheless, cognitive studies of reader motivation and educational studies of autonomy-supportive reading practices, highlight the significance of several key issues which research reveals impact upon recreational reading. These include professional subject knowledge of texts and readers, library provision, text access and choice, and socially supported volitional reading pedagogies (e.g. Cremin et al. 2009, 2014; Moses and Kelly 2018, 2019; Ng 2018; Ives et al. 2020; McGeown et al. 2020; Reedy & De Carvalho 2021). We explore each in turn.

In England, appreciation of reading for pleasure within the curriculum has raised interest in how best to resource and enable this – discussions that are notably absent in the Australian educational context. English research examining teachers' knowledge of children's texts has revealed narrow repertoires, over-dependency on books from educators' own childhoods and the work of 'celebrity' authors whose texts are promoted through multiple media and merchandise (Cremin et al. 2008a, 2008b; Clark and Teravainen 2015; CLPE, 2021). More recently, limited literary repertoires and restricted subject knowledge have also been evidenced in the US (Conradi Smith et al. 2022), in Scotland (Farrar 2021) and in a comparative Finnish-English study (Cremin et al. 2024). Professional reliance on a popular childhood canon which fails to reflect the diverse realities, interests and contemporary lives of young people is likely to constrain their pleasure in reading and restrict classroom practice (Scholes et al. 2021; Simpson and Cremin 2022). In response to these and other concerns, initiatives in England such as Teacher Reading Groups (led by a partnership between the Open University and the UK Literacy Association with 100+ free groups per annum), book awards judged by teachers and an annual UK Teachers' Reading Challenge have been developed. Additionally, a Great School Libraries Campaign seeks to raise the profile of school libraries and secure funding. In the UK it is not a requirement for schools to have trained librarians, and the Campaign's recent survey indicates less than a third of primary schools have a

dedicated member of staff working in the library, and over one in ten secondary schools have no librarian (BMG 2023).

By contrast, Australian schools traditionally employ highly qualified teacher librarians (Ryan 2018) whose remit encompasses promoting enjoyment in reading and supporting children's reading interests. In Australia as in England, school libraries are in transition; digital library systems and web technologies not only reposition librarians, but can change the nature of reading (Kucirkova and Cremin 2017; Mills, Unsworth, and Scholes 2022). In both countries too, local studies indicates that the role of school librarians is often poorly understood by school leaders (Cremin and Swann 2017; Merga and Mason 2019), that children may experience limited access to school libraries (Merga 2017b; BMG 2023) and that many school based library spaces are under-resourced (Scholes 2020) and under-used (Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018).

In England, a rise in local library closures over the last decade has been accompanied by a hollowing out of children's library services (Robertson and McMenemy 2020) which represents a key concern. Furthermore, UK survey data shows that students in schools where a high percentage of children are eligible for free school meals are least likely to access a school library space or support from a dedicated librarian (BMG 2023), and that these young people are far less likely to own a book (9.7%) than their peers who are not eligible for free school meals (5.8%) (Cole et al. 2022b). Such economically marginalised children, in both England and Australia, are more likely to be offered limited experiences as readers and encounter teachers who primarily focus on raising standards (Scholes 2018; Hargreaves et al. 2023). Additionally, in such contexts, pedagogies of poverty may prevail, with strong teacher control and reduced child choice and agency as readers and as learners (Hempel-Jorgensen 2015; Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018).

Affording children's choice is widely recognised as vital in order to nurture volitional reading, alongside staff knowledge of individual readers' interests and preferences (Cremin et al., 2014; Ng 2018; McGeown et al. 2020; Reedy and De Carvalho 2021; Webber et al. 2021; Tegmark et al. 2022). However, Australian research indicates that boys' reading volition may be constrained by a lack of understanding of their range of reading preferences and the changing nature of these as they develop as readers (Scholes et al. 2021). Furthermore, young people's access to and choice of texts is influenced by each school's economic contours, families' socio-economic contexts, and text provision within the community (Neuman and Moland 2016; Scholes 2020). Third sector organisations, which enable after-school clubs, book gifting and volunteer reader support schemes for instance, as well as place-based community initiatives also enrich text access and in Australia, since reading for pleasure is not mandated in school, it is arguably devolved to such national, community and not-for-profit groups. In contrast in England, reading opportunities run by charities and organisations are positioned to enrich, not to replace school provision and practice.

To facilitate recreational reading successfully, research across the globe indicates educators need an understanding of how to implement socially supportive pedagogies (De Naeghel et al. 2012; Cremin al. 2014; Moses and Kelly 2018; Kennedy, 2019; Boyask et al. 2022). In the Australian context, little is known about the nature of volitional reading pedagogies, and whether schools actively foster reading cultures that impact on leisure reading (Merga and Mason 2019; Gagen-Spriggs 2020). In England, although interrelated strands of reading for pleasure pedagogies have been documented, including reading aloud, book talk and recommendations, time to read and social reading environments (Cremin et al.

2014; Westbrook et al. 2018), the extent to which these are manifest in practice is unknown. The English Hubs lead an annual programme 'Transforming Your Schools Reading Culture' linked to such studies, but this has not been evaluated and the contours and consequences of current practice remain undocumented.

Furthermore, the requirement to 'teach' children to enjoy reading has created professional challenges. In contrast to the resource made available to part fund phonics programmes in England, no extra finance has been assigned to help schools enrich or update their reading materials, timetables remain tight, and acts of institutional window dressing have been evidenced - with refurbished reading spaces being almost exclusively used for time out for bad behaviour or extra workspace (Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018). In addition, pressured teachers have been observed to appropriate newly instituted time to read aloud for pleasure as an opportunity to sustain a skills-led vocabulary and comprehension focus (Hempel-Jorgensen et al. 2018). Moreover, whilst in both countries, researchers have documented the importance of school principals and teachers positioning themselves as readers and reading role models (Merga and Mason 2019; Van den Dool and Simpson 2021; Hendry et al. 2022), it is not known how widely this is understood or enacted.

Although as we have shown, the way reading for pleasure is positioned in policy discourses contributes to professional practice, the picture is multifaceted. Moreover, personal values, rather than explicit knowledge of an aligned pedagogic framework, can become the driver for creating classroom reading cultures (Pink 2022; Van den Dool and Simpson 2021), and practitioners' experience and the identity positions they enact and make available, also frame and shape young people's engagement in volitional reading.

## Discussion

In the last two decades, the international evidence base on the benefits associated with reading for pleasure has grown exponentially. In addition to extensive mining of the PIRLS and PISA database by researchers, several large scale, longitudinal studies and myriad national studies reveal the potential of volitional reading. Collectively, these studies demonstrate positive associations between children and young people's recreational reading and cognitive development, academic attainment, comprehension, general knowledge, and vocabulary. In addition, as noted earlier, studies also identify links between reading for pleasure and social and emotional well-being, and most recently, brain size in adolescence (Sun et al. 2023). The habit of reading in childhood, particularly fiction, has been established as an invaluable one that can play a role in redressing educational inequalities. Nonetheless, complexities abound, and we argue for close attention to the nuanced nature of each of the studies, their cultural contexts and methodologies.

There is far less research focused on the lived experience of volitional reading, and on related provision and practice in classrooms, but the literature indicates key areas which deserve attention if schools are to nurture students' desire to read. These include professional knowledge of texts and of readers, young people's text access and choice, and attention to pedagogical practices that support the development of autonomy, competence and a positive sense of a reader identity, a reader who is connected to others and supported by a social and relational culture of reading.

Increasingly, educational policy and practice discourses are recognising the value of volitional, self-directed reading for addressing inequitable student experiences and fostering

reader engagement and proficiency. There is divergence however in whether and how nations enable teachers' engagement in this area, and ongoing challenges about how this autonomy-oriented agenda can be promoted, enacted and indeed measured. In this paper, in the light of educational performativity agendas internationally, we have highlighted the differing situated responses to reading for pleasure in two countries, noting key antecedents of its inclusion in the English national curriculum (DfE, 2014) and in later developments.

Despite the policy presence of reading for pleasure in England and absence in Australia, tensions, dilemmas and positive initiatives exist in both countries. Drawing on this analysis of commonality and contrast, we suggest there are a number of issues that countries working to nurture volitional reading need to consider. There is a pressing need to reconcile the often-competing agendas to deliver both prescribed reading programmes (connected to accountability measures) and foster a love of reading. There is no clear route to resolve such inherent tensions, but since the number of young people who read in their own time continues to decline worldwide, and attitudes to reading deteriorate further (OECD 2019, 2021; Mullis et al. 2023), ways forward must be found.

Drawing on the extant research literature we assert that reading for pleasure deserves to be given a legitimate place in school and share equal value with traditional skills-based instruction. We also argue that nations should examine how they can promote the profile of reading for pleasure to raise achievement and increase children's engagement as self-motivated and socially interactive readers. This is fundamental and requires educational leadership. Eschewing this volitional reading agenda is not an option, it is a matter of social justice.

As the reading achievement gap between young people widens and some students, schools, and communities are increasingly marginalised due to poverty, disadvantage, and limited access to texts (Neuman and Moland 2016), we suggest enrichment needs to be targeted in specific locales. The recent health pandemic with its associated school closures and lockdowns illustrates how particular communities needed situated responses and benefitted from moral and ethical leadership in overcoming local challenges (Bradbury et al. 2022). For many however, the Matthew Effect was intensified – with some students accessing rich reading resources through family and school communities, and others falling further behind due to lack of access to even basic reading materials. Working towards parity of participation in volitional reading raises questions about recognising and responding to readers' needs across demographics and the redistribution of reading resources (Scholes 2020). Attention also needs to be paid to staff and student access to and knowledge of contemporary as well as classic texts, and in particular texts that reflect young people's diverse realities and cultures. This is nothing less than 'a basic human right' (Bennett et al. 2021, 785).

Access to reading materials and child-led choice is a first step, but taking a social justice perspective to develop children's repertoires as readers also requires research-informed understandings of volitional reading pedagogies that nurture, sustain and develop positive reading identities. Leadership is again vital to support this agenda. Although building a culture and ecology of reading within a school is the collective responsibility of all staff, this needs to be led, and support must be offered to help staff develop sophisticated understandings of the concept of reading for pleasure. Potentially the term can create confusion, it is perceived by some educators as an 'optional extra', in contrast to the serious work of learning, thus perpetuating the notion that fostering a love of reading is somehow less

rigorous than explicit reading instruction. Reading for pleasure deserves the profession's respect and to be taken seriously. So, working towards conceptual clarity is vital, helping staff to understand the different facets of reader engagement – cognitive, behavioural, affective and social (Boyask et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2021) and to recognise that readers' identities, practices and preferences change over time (Scholes et al. 2021).

Additionally, practitioners are likely to need help facilitating young people's autonomy as readers. In countries where knowledge-based curricula hold sway, and teachers are positioned as the 'sage on the stage' (McWilliam 2008), the volitional reading arena can be seen as somewhat counter-cultural. In contrast to delivering intervention programmes, such as phonics packages that require fidelity, developing reading for pleasure as a personal, social and relational practice is more flexible and culturally responsive, shaped in and through the lived experience of reading and being a reader. In this regard it has the potential to offer enhanced professional autonomy and personal engagement, and may, we posit, support the retention of teachers committed to social justice.

Whilst fostering the volitional habit of reading in the young requires a high degree of knowledge of texts, of readers, and of the nature of reading, it also requires pedagogical flexibility in response to context with research indicating effective reading for pleasure practices are partly led and shaped by the young readers themselves (Ivey and Johnston 2013; Cremin et al. 2014; Ng 2018). Thus, promoting a volitional reading agenda that motivates all students may look different in response to situated places – with no one size fits all. What might this look like in rural Australia, or inner-city London? Or in schools where digital library systems prevail? School leaders will need to harness the talents of teachers, librarians, and others with expertise in the community to address the place-based challenges in their contexts. Through a distributed leadership approach, the skills and experiences of school and broader communities can be leveraged and the impact of development work to increase recreational reading monitored.

Internationally however the challenge of 'measuring the pleasure' persists. Modelled by PISA and PIRLS, reading attitude surveys tend to dominate and are increasingly deployed nationally and in schools, particularly perhaps in test-based accountability systems. Such surveys, which rely on self-reports of readers' dispositions and time spent reading for instance, are prone to social desirability bias, and need to be supplemented at a local level by enhanced professional noticing, creative documentation of reading attitudes and behaviours, and attention to pupil voice. Such formative information, combined with an appreciation of the fluid nature of readers' identities, can support responsive planning. However, this is time consuming, and educators are likely to need help to document, understand and build upon the practices and experiences of diverse student readers within and beyond school.

## Conclusion

In order to advance this internationally significant agenda, we drew on a narrative review in this paper to scrutinise the rapidly growing body of research into the advantages which are seen to accrue for young readers who choose to read in their own time. Whilst collectively the evidence base reveals there are myriad academic, social and emotional benefits associated with volitional reading, our scrutiny highlighted the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the findings, and as a result we warn against overclaiming and generalisations on

the part of policy makers, practitioners and literacy charities committed to translating and appropriating such research. Attention needs to be paid to the methodologies deployed and the specific cultural and social contexts and consequences of the findings for different groups of young people. Additionally, our dual nation focus on the policies and practices related to young people's recreational reading in England and Australia was designed to prompt consideration of the associated challenges and dilemmas of instantiating this agenda and of what might be generalisable to other countries. We identified a number of unresolved issues, tensions and possibilities which exist in developing volitional reading, particularly in countries where high levels of accountability hold sway.

Expanding these contributions to the field, we close by asserting that global action is urgently needed to redress the decline in reading enjoyment. While not a panacea, attention to reading for pleasure in educational policy is clearly critical. The key messages reflected in educational documents and agendas flow into classrooms in diverse ways and impact on students' everyday experiences of reading curricula and pedagogy. Balancing tensions between fostering young people's desire to read and teaching the skills of reading would benefit all involved, teachers and students. Professional support is needed to achieve this however, and as we have shown, the extent to which this is offered by policy makers, schools and literacy organisations varies markedly, both within and across England and Australia. We discern a need for increased consistency in the delivery of professional development and recommend common national and international conceptions of reading for pleasure are advanced and articulated. Alongside enhanced awareness of the social, affective and relational nature of reading, this would further support the profession, as would drawing stakeholders together locally and nationally to participate in robust, research-informed discussions. This could widen understanding of the evidence base, demonstrate the importance of volitional reading and involve trialling distributed leadership models to empower staff and local communities to overcome contextually laden barriers and develop effective pedagogies.

Additionally, more qualitative research is needed in the reading for pleasure arena; the field is currently dominated by quantitative measures that fail to capture the nuances of students' lived experience of reading. Such research could usefully foreground young people's own purposes for reading, exploring how their preferences and practices are shaped by the texts (print and digital) and contexts they encounter. It could also explore how children living in high poverty communities relate to the materials they are offered, and, in the rapidly changing world, could seek to understand how young learners find their place and sense of belonging in society through reading. In addition, research that ascertains the impact of out-of-school literacy projects and third sector initiatives on children's recreational reading would be advantageous, as limited resource often prevents such work being independently scrutinised. Finally, longitudinal classroom-based research is clearly needed. Building on previous studies and research informed principles, this could provide a flexible framework to nurture reading for pleasure accompanied by tangible strategies that can be appropriated and contextualised in diverse school communities across the globe.

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