



Promoting Reading for Pleasure in the Primary School

Michael Lockwood

"This book
is first class"
Philip Pullman



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Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

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To my fellow flood-survivors, Kate, Amy and Grace – with love

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Preface	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Becoming a 'Reading for Pleasure School'	14
3 Promoting Reading for Pleasure in the Early Years	47
4 Promoting Reading for Pleasure in the Later Primary Years	75
5 Getting Boys Reading for Pleasure	100
6 Conclusions	116
7 Resources for Promoting Reading for Pleasure	126
References	143
Index	147

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Preface

I do not remember the teachers who taught me to read or the first book I read unaided. In fact, I remember no books at all from my primary school, though books of some sort there must have been. I also have no memory of being read to at home, though I'm sure this must have happened.

What I do remember, though, is the first library I belonged to and the books I first borrowed from there. It was a small branch library located on a parade of shops on the Bradford council estate where we were living at the time. I ought to thank the enlightened councillors who decided to put it there. It had large plate glass windows, wooden shelving and librarians who kept a stern eye on your behaviour: 'Would you do that at home?' they would ask, if you treated the books roughly. The answer I was too scared to give was that we had no books at home, apart from my mother's Agatha Christie collection in a corner bookcase. I remember going to this library with my sisters when I was about 9 or 10 and borrowing the *Corrigan* adventure series by R.B. Maddox, the *Biggles* books by W.E. Johns and Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*. These were books I chose: the librarians, whatever they thought of my choices, made no comment. I consumed them avidly, in great quantities and with simple pleasure, and the imaginative world of these adventure stories fed into the games I played. Later, at the start of secondary school, I wrote a book review of a *Biggles* novel and can remember my English teacher's icy comment: 'Are you *still* reading those, Lockwood?' That particular seam of pleasure reading was from that moment closed off as I started on the study of 'English Literature'. I carried on reading comics and annuals, though, such as *Tiger* and *Roy of the Rovers*, with the same enjoyment, and devoured my dad's *Daily Mirror* when he came home from his night shift and we passed briefly at breakfast time. I would read this, starting with the back pages where the sports section was, and work my way towards the front, a habit I still have today. However, I would no more have mentioned this leisure reading to my teachers than I would have invited them home for afternoon tea. School and home reading were two separate planets on orbits that could never meet. I did not think that what I was doing even counted as reading: it was more like a bad habit or a way of wasting time better spent on something else.

When I look back, I see that popular series fiction, comics and newspapers were where I got the pleasure reading habit, not from school. From school I got a feeling of guilt about my home reading, a feeling that I ought to be

reading something more improving or serious. As the study of 'Literature' gradually took over, I cultivated a different sort of appreciation for some of the books we studied, an enjoyment of a different kind, more complex, subtle and reflective and bound up with essays and exams. It wasn't until I became a middle school teacher myself and then later a parent, and rediscovered children's books, that the simple joys of reading I experienced with my first library books returned, unalloyed by guilt: it was all right to read these books because it was part of my job or my parental role.

Action Point

Jot down some notes for your own reading autobiography. What texts did you read for pleasure up to the age of 11? Were they ones that you read at home or at school? Were they texts that were read aloud to you or did you read them yourself? Did your parents/teachers approve of them? What influence did this early reading have on you?

I went back to look at my old council house and the local library a few years ago. Both were empty, boarded up and in disrepair. For the children of that community today, the local school is now the place where they will need to develop the pleasure reading habit, if it is not part of their home life. I have written this book to try to suggest ways in which all primary schools, whether on council estates or in leafy suburbs, can help young readers today discover enjoyment in reading within the school and the classroom, and make links between home and school reading so that each nourishes the other.

This book has been informed by a research project in the area of promoting reading for enjoyment, funded by the British Academy. The aim of this research was very straightforward: to identify primary schools and teachers who have demonstrated good practice in the area of promoting the pleasures of reading and to disseminate what seems transferable from these good schools to other schools who want to improve their practice.

Over a two-year period, from 2005 to 2007, I used written questionnaires to survey the views of teachers, children and parents. I began by writing to a sample of 100 primary schools within a region in the south-east of England to find out about school policy and practice with regard to promoting reading for pleasure and positive attitudes to reading. I eventually received responses from teachers in 40 of the schools, drawn from nine different local authorities. These volunteer schools were clearly a self-selecting group of enthusiasts, as their responses to my questionnaire made clear. I carried out reading surveys with over 1,400 of their Year 5 (9–10-year-old) pupils, eliciting their

views on reading and on themselves as readers. I also sent further questionnaires to parents of these pupils, then in Year 6, and received over 300 replies. The results of the pupil reading surveys led me to identify a smaller group of schools which were clearly having particular success in motivating their pupils to read for enjoyment. I visited each of these schools to interview the English subject leaders at length about the strategies they had used to promote reading so effectively with their pupils.

I have used the quantitative and qualitative data from these questionnaires and interviews throughout this book to support and illustrate the points I make. In particular, I have provided regular case studies of schools where I found examples of good planning and good practice that had been shown to work. I have also deliberately let the children's voices be heard, as well as those of teachers and parents, since they are often ignored in debates about reading, and important lessons can be learnt from them. Where the children's words are used, spelling, punctuation and grammar have been silently corrected when necessary, since it is what they have to say which is important rather than presentational features.

However, the book is not an academic account of my research project: that would not be appropriate here. It takes a wider brief. It is an attempt to make what I have found out from my research and related background reading, along with my own ideas, available and accessible to a wider audience of interested professionals; to try to translate research findings into a more practical form that can help spread successful practice in promoting reading for pleasure.

Lessons from the children

At the end of the multiple choice Reading Surveys I carried out with primary pupils, I asked them to write or draw anything else they would like to say about reading, in the box that was provided. This qualitative data, both words and drawings, proved just as interesting as the quantitative data, the numbers, mentioned throughout the chapters that follow.

The first lesson from the children who responded was an important one: there is more to life than reading and certainly more to childhood than books! These pleasures have their place and time, in the classroom, library and at home, but out in the playground there are other, more serious matters to attend to. In response to two questions in my Reading Survey which asked what your 'best friends' think about reading, one child wrote a scathing reply (see Figure 1).

Please write or draw anything else you would like to say about reading in this box.

I think question
1st are extremely dast
questions This is because
I do not talk about
such trivial matters outside in
the playground.

Figure 1.1 One child's response to a question about friends' attitudes to reading



Chapter 1

Introduction

Summary

Chapter 1 defines the term 'reading for pleasure' and related terminology, and looks briefly at the history of reading for pleasure. It then explores the background to the current concern about children's attitudes to reading resulting from the PISA and PIRLS international surveys, along with the official government responses and initiatives which followed, such as Reading Connects and the National Year of Reading. The chapter also considers the evidence from national and international research in the area of reading engagement and motivation, and from previous surveys of British children's reading attitudes.

Reading for Pleasure

This book takes as its subject the promotion of 'reading for pleasure'. I chose this term because, along with 'reading for enjoyment', it is the one used most often in official British curriculum documents. 'Pleasure' and 'enjoyment' are both words that occur, for example, in England's National Curriculum (NC) programmes of study for reading (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 46). Within reading for pleasure, I include the reading of popular as well as literary fiction, of comics and magazines as well as books, non-fiction as well as fiction, and electronic as well as printed texts. Reading for pleasure can take place in or out of the school, at home, in the public library or indeed anywhere, and often involves what is called 'wider reading' or 'independent reading'. Related terms used in the United States are 'free voluntary reading' and 'recreational reading'. Reading for pleasure is one very important and common manifestation of having a positive 'attitude to reading', which is another term frequently used in the research and writing in this area. Having a positive attitude to reading is obviously closely related to the concepts of 'reading engagement' and 'reading motivation', which link to a much wider literature on learning motivation

generally. 'Reluctance to read' is a term most often used in British education to describe readers who do not take pleasure in reading and avoid it if they can.

Reading for pleasure has not always been seen as a good thing, particularly reading fiction for pleasure. This is difficult to grasp at a time when the leisure reading of fiction by adults and especially children meets with general approval, and when reading groups and television book shows are more popular than ever. However, novel reading was widely seen as frivolous and a waste of time when the genre first appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The term 'novel' itself suggested something slight and ephemeral, trading on its 'novelty value' and giving instant gratification; metaphors of drug-taking and addiction or over-indulgence were commonly applied to its effects. At that time, the new genre was firmly part of popular rather than literary culture and its readers were looked down upon by the cultural elite. When the novel later achieved the status of literature worthy of attention by educated readers, there was still a clear divide between popular fiction, seen as sensationalist and a bad influence on its susceptible readers, and 'serious' literary fiction, seen as morally improving and aesthetically pleasing. This divide remains today in the attitude we take to different forms of reading for pleasure: we are likely to be much more disapproving of the Mills & Boon reader than of the reader of Jane Austen and the Brontës, although the reading experience may be equally enjoyable for the readers concerned. Also today, of course, we are ambivalent about the enjoyment of other popular cultural forms of reading, particularly ones involving young people, such as teenage magazines, graphic novels and all forms of electronic texts.

Victor Nell, in *Lost In a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, traces this prejudice against the pleasure principle back to the Protestant work ethic and further back to restraints on storytelling in earlier cultures. He sees teachers and librarians, the gatekeepers of literary culture, as having been important figures in our society in counteracting the 'noxious influence' of popular fiction, seen as the 'plague of the spirit, death of the mind' (Nell, 1988: 26). Nell describes as an 'elitist fallacy' the idea that as readers become more sophisticated they leave this 'trash' behind (Nell, 1988: 4). The early public libraries, certainly, saw their role as providing information rather than entertainment to their members; fiction-lending generally was treated with suspicion and had strict limits. Even when public libraries bowed to the demands of readers and freely lent fiction, they were still reluctant to stock anything other than literary texts and adult-approved classics for children, rather than say popular series fiction. Fortunately for me, this had changed by the time I joined my local library in the 1960s. Even today when two-thirds of adult borrowing is fiction and the emphasis in reader advisory services is put 'not on the quality of the book, but on the quality of the reading experience, as determined by the reader' (Ross et al., 2006: 213), there is still debate about to what extent libraries should be in the entertainment rather than the education business, particularly when it comes to children's collections.