

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Reading for Pleasure](#), HC 1528

Tuesday 3 February 2026

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Dr Caroline Johnson; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sowards; Peter Swallow; Chris Vince.

Questions 1 - 37

Witnesses

I: Professor Teresa Cremin CBE, Professor of Education (Literacy), Open University; Dr Helen Hendry, Senior Lecturer in Education, Open University; Professor Jessie Ricketts, Professor of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London; Dr Jeanne Shinskey, Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London; and Dr Jo Taylor, Associate Professor at Language and Cognition, University College London.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Teresa Cremin CBE, Dr Helen Hendry, Professor Jessie Ricketts, Dr Jeanne Shinskey and Dr Jo Taylor.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this oral evidence session of the Education Select Committee. In our session this morning we are hearing about reading for pleasure. This is the first oral evidence session in our inquiry on reading for pleasure, in which we are exploring why there has been such a decline in the numbers of children who are choosing to read in their spare time, and what we can do to reverse that trend. I am pleased to welcome today witnesses who are academics with different specialisms in this field. I will ask each of you to introduce yourselves briefly to us, starting with Professor Ricketts.

Professor Ricketts: Hi everybody. I am Jessie Ricketts, a professor of psychology based at Royal Holloway, University of London. I have spent about 20 years researching language and literacy, and I am particularly passionate about reading as children move through upper primary and into secondary school.

Dr Taylor: Good morning. I am an associate professor at University College London, and my research focuses on the mechanisms that underpin reading and learning to read.



Dr Shinskey: Good morning. My area of expertise is cognitive development in infancy, especially symbolic sensitivity: understanding that you can learn something from a 2D platform and then generalise it to the real world, which involves things like picture books from the very earliest ages. That is my current research.

Dr Hendry: Good morning. I am Helen Hendry, I am a senior lecturer in primary education at the Open University. I started off with a career as a primary teacher and then a teacher trainer for many years, and my research focuses on pedagogy and teacher training for reading for pleasure. I currently work with my colleague Teresa in leading professional development with teachers and initial teacher educators across the UK.

Professor Cremin: Good morning. My name is Teresa Cremin. I work at the Open University. I am a professor of education in literacy and, like Helen, an ex-teacher from the primary classroom. I also worked in teacher education for 18 years, researching reading for pleasure throughout that time. Currently I am engaged in continuing that journey to understand better how we motivate young children to read, what kind of context, pedagogies and role models we need to provide to support them on their journey.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We have an interesting wealth of expertise in front of us today. I will start with an open question to get your introductory thoughts on this topic. There is a great deal of evidence setting out the benefits to children of reading for pleasure and also of being read to. Can you briefly give us an overview of these benefits? I don't know who would like to start with that—perhaps Dr Ricketts?

Professor Ricketts: I can start. I think that all of us on this panel are absolutely passionate about the importance of reading. It has a wide range of benefits. I will leave it to some others on this panel to talk about the benefits of enjoyment and so on, but for me, the main benefit of the volitional reading and engagement that young people do outside of school, is to support their leaning and their understanding of the world, particularly worlds that are not part of their lived experience.

When we pick up a book, there may be characters and environments that are not part of our lived experience. That is particularly important for people who are not moving around much and may not have access to those things. It is important in school as well to make sure that children have access to learning.

Dr Taylor: I will focus on the fact that books contain a rich variety of language that we do not get exposed to in other contexts. It is very clear from quite a lot of recent research that the book language is very different from the language you get in spoken context, in TV, in listening to podcasts—any of those other kinds of language that you get exposed to. Book language is rich in vocabulary and grammatical constructions—all the complex aspects of language. Of course, you cannot use those



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things in your own writing either if you are not exposed to them. The main thing I want to say about the benefits of reading is that you are being exposed to a rich variety of language through reading.

Dr Shinskey: I will add to that on sharing books with infants. I am looking at parents' motivations to read to their infants. Some of the benefits are language—not only can infants learn specific words from a particular book, but in general the more an infant is read to the larger their vocabulary is later. There is a snowball, kind of cumulative effect. Reading to infants also increases their own interest in books as something that they choose to do as an activity.

There is also symbolic thinking: children need to learn how to read books, read maps, interpret information on screens later on. Understanding that you can learn about the real world indirectly from something as simple as a picture book that teaches you the name of an apple, is a benefit. I also want to highlight relationships. Reading for pleasure with infants can be a bonding experience for parents and infants, especially if you need some quiet downtime before bed, for example. Those are some of the benefits of sharing books with infants.

Dr Hendry: I agree with a lot of what has been said already. Certainly the book language offering not only enhances vocabulary but enables early years and primary children to develop a more complex understanding of syntactic structures and expressive and receptive oral language, particularly through interactions with adults in book sharing experiences. Print exposure has been mentioned as significant, and there is some interesting newer research around the way that children develop emotional awareness and vocabulary about emotions through early interactions in reading, so there is a potential impact on behaviour and social emotional development through exposure to shared reading and interaction around reading.

In addition, it is probably worth talking about the way that comfortable experiences with text are likely to enhance motivation, moving forward through children's learning experiences in early years and primary schools. Those introductions through reading for pleasure enable children to want to continue reading for pleasure. They lay the foundation not only for literacy and language development but for motivation to continue to turn to reading.

Professor Cremin: I agree, but I want to clarify that there is longitudinal evidence available to us that shows the relationship between the children who have the choice and habit of reading, who are readers, who choose to read regularly—arguably, that is what volitional reading is: reading for pleasure, choosing to do it in my time, not necessarily when Miss reads to me, although that might be a pleasure. If they choose to do it in their own time, there are longitudinal studies that show us the range of associated benefits, including what colleagues have mentioned on



vocabulary and enhanced psychological wellbeing, the sense of academic grit and determination.

Potentially at least as powerfully, the choice and habit of reading is associated with a richer reading comprehension and wider attainment. Not only that, but there is enhanced cognitive growth, development of empathy, and potentially prosocial action, awareness of the consequence of my empathetic response to a particular text I am reading. There is very strong evidence too that our keen readers, those children who choose to read, have richer vocabulary, both spoken and written, so their writing is enhanced.

We have a wide range of benefits here that show the power and potential of being a reader—choosing to read in my time. That is not reading; that is being a reader. Let us make that clear distinction. The OECD describes a proxy for reading for pleasure as reader engagement and that has four strands. One is interest and enjoyment. The second is a sense of control—I am in charge, I am the reader. The third is frequent and diverse reading practices—I read a lot; I read what I want to read not what you want me to read, but what I want to read—and involvement in the social dimension of reading.

We want to distinguish between reading because reading can give you—no rudeness to colleagues—the skills and some of the language, but being a reader has consequences. That is, of course, correlational, not causal evidence, but it is hugely corroborated. Right from when PISA and PIRLS started, academics and researchers could mine the data on children's attitudes to reading and their engagement in reading under the definition I have given, and then the consequences. We see many studies right across time, as well as longitudinal studies, that show that if you are an early childhood reader and you choose to read there will be associated benefits for you.

I think that is why we are here, because that is the rationale, the underpinning research. I want to say at the outset that this is not about whether children can read; it is about whether children do read. Because we have been successful in the former, we have millions of children in this country who can read, but we do not have as many millions who choose to do so.

Chair: Thank you. We will explore all of these themes in a bit more depth. I will pass to Darren now to ask our next question.

Q3 **Darren Paffey:** Good morning. There is a clear long list of wide-ranging desirable benefits. What is it specifically about reading that secures those benefits as compared to other activities that children might be doing: social interaction, playing games, being with friends and family, physical activity, even watching TV and so on? Dr Taylor, you mentioned one of the benefits as the breadth and richness of vocabulary. What are some of the other things that reading specifically can do in pursuit of those benefits? Do you want to start, Dr Taylor?



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Dr Taylor: I will not repeat the point I made already. There is definitely evidence that the language in TV specifically is not the same as the language in books. People might be thinking about audiobooks as a kind of alternative to reading books—and of course audiobooks contain all of the rich language structures and vocabulary that reading books does as well—but audiobooks are not always an easy alternative for everybody. Listening to an audiobook can be hard for somebody; if they find reading difficult, they are likely to also find listening to an audiobook difficult. That is not in every case, but verbal memory can be challenging for people who struggle with reading. It is not always obvious that an audiobook is an easy alternative to reading. Reading also offers something that listening does not, which is the concrete form of the words on the page so that you can look back and check things that you have missed or you have not understood.

There is huge evidence from eye movement research that we do this all the time when we read. We do not just read linearly. We read and we go back when we miss something, and we are doing it in every single sentence we read. It is not just when we are misunderstanding things and we have to go back; we do it constantly during reading. You cannot do that with listening to language and it is much more challenging. Reading offers the language but it can be an easier format than listening for many people.

The other point I want to make is I think Jessie also mentioned that being a good reader is necessary in so many contexts. We cannot avoid it, and so of course you need to be doing loads of other activities—physical activity is important, socialising, all of those things. No one would ever want to take away from those wonderful activities for children and young people, but we all need to be good readers and to read in many different contexts. We cannot get away from that.

Professor Ricketts: To build on what Jo said, there is an important point that we must not lose sight of here. There are all the benefits of vocabulary and language, and there is also wellbeing for example; one route into those things seems to be through reading. I think part of the answer is that if young people have the proficiency to access those texts, it gives them access to lots of things that they will not get otherwise. That is important, but we must not lose sight of the fact that if we want them to access all of that wonderful material—maybe it is a book that resonates with them about a child that they do not see in their classroom, or that is beneficial to them as a child who has a particular set of interests that resonate, or a particular profile in their learning needs that resonates. They may not see that in their classroom or in their home, but they can see that in books.

The crucial point is that to access all of that they need to be able to read, and that is the point I want to make here. We cannot consider reading for pleasure if we do not consider reading proficiency. It is only open to those who have that proficiency. In the early years—in the work that



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Jeanne talked about—they are shared reading experiences, and those are quite different. What I am interested in is the independent reading experiences. Once there is some proficiency, if they get there—and most children do, thankfully—they can go off and seek all of that information for themselves in upper primary and secondary, but we cannot lose sight of the mechanism from reading to all of the benefits which comes through comprehension of the texts. If they cannot comprehend texts, they cannot get the benefits.

We cannot think about reading proficiency and reading for pleasure as separate at all. They are absolutely part of the same story, and they feed into each other, but crucially the proficiency has to come first, because you cannot read for pleasure if you do not have that proficiency.

Darren Paffey: Would others like to add anything to that? If not, I have a follow-up question.

Dr Hendry: Yes, about the early starting point for reading for pleasure, we are probably all in agreement that the skills for reading are really important. They go alongside reading for pleasure, and both of those things need to happen, but I was interested in Jessie's comment that the skills need to happen first. That is not really true in the early years. The skills need to be developed in the early years, but reading for pleasure right at the beginning of children's lives through into early education involves talking about and listening to stories, as you said, shared reading experiences. The playing that you mentioned is also part of reading for pleasure because reading for pleasure involves those responses to texts as well as eventually moving on to learning the skills to read them to yourself.

You can read for pleasure without being a completely skilled reader in those early years. That is where the benefits become incredibly important, as well as the oral language development, which we have mentioned. It is that disposition to reading so that you don't move into a school situation where you feel deskilled, where you feel that that is not for you and that you are not going to be regarded competently. It is not something that you will enjoy. All those enjoyable experiences really lay a core foundation for the later skills, which are absolutely vital.

To go back to one of the original parts of your question—what makes a difference about reading for pleasure experiences in early years and primary particularly—it is not just the vocabulary that is different in the book language that the children are exposed to. As I mentioned right at the beginning, it is the complexity of sentence structures. There is some really interesting research that looks at how children interpret characters within literature, as opposed to characters in popular fiction that are perhaps more simplistic. There are opportunities there for children to develop theory of mind, a greater understanding of how other people operate, that other people have ideas that you might not have. They are working those out through engagement with characters in stories,



whether they are hearing about those characters through listening and shared reading and talking about it, or whether they are later on moving on to being able to decode and read about them themselves.

There are some really complicated things at work. You can develop oral language through playing activities and social experiences; of course they are part of that rich experience, but reading engagement in the round provides that in more depth and detail and in a more complex way.

Q4 **Darren Paffey:** One or two of you mentioned in the initial answers that there is evidence of reading developing emotional strength and development and so on. We have seen some evidence specifically around the development of empathy that comes through reading. According to the evidence, what is it about reading that helps children develop empathy more effectively than other activities? Is that true to say?

Professor Ricketts: I think this speaks to exactly what Helen was just saying, and what I was trying to say earlier, that you can expose yourself to other people's perspectives and people who resonate with you in different ways. It gives you a way of developing that understanding of yourself as well as that understanding of others. Essentially, the route is through theory of mind development towards empathy. Many of us have done some work on that, and it is really interesting. My take has been thinking about teenagers reading independently, although Helen is absolutely right. Earlier on, when those reading experiences are more shared and it is not an independent thing, that manifests a little bit differently. It is the rich language around the reading that is important as well, and I know that Jeanne talked about this.

Dr Taylor: I am thinking of a good example of a very early storybook I read to my son, who is two, "Not Now, Bernard". Bernard finds the monster, the monster eats him, and then the monster basically pretends to be Bernard. Bernard is being ignored by his parents, and the child is basically learning about this whole concept of potentially being ignored, how that might make you feel and what you might do in response. You might pretend to be a monster and bite your daddy if you are being ignored. I have been reading to him since he was born. It is a really early example of that. It is very complex, actually. I am sure he does not understand it all, but he is getting a much more complex set of emotional experiences through that book than he might be getting—because we don't ignore him—through his everyday experiences.

I will pick up on your point about why reading develops that emotion thing, as opposed to something else. Usually that would not be the comparison. I imagine there probably have not been studies where they have said, "Here are some children; they are going to read. Here are some children; they are going to play. We are going to directly compare their emotional outcomes." That kind of study would not have been done because it does not feel very nice to make that kind of comparison. It is not a very ethical experiment to do.



Instead, these studies will be a long-term follow-up of what are their books, what is their language and what are the emotional experiences in those books? Does that seem to lead to later, stronger development of these emotional skills? They will try to control for lots of other things, but we should probably get away from a tension of is it reading or do we do something else? I know we have to think about the time children have to spend doing things, but no one necessarily wants to say children should read rather than play. We are just thinking about encouraging reading in a broader context.

Q5 **Darren Paffey:** I might have phrased it wrongly. It is more that they will be developing them in all these contexts. Is there one in which you see accelerated development rather than others?

Dr Taylor: Yes.

Professor Ricketts: Yes, there is great potential with reading. I think we all agree.

Professor Cremin: It relates to that kind of development of comprehension, of understanding, of understanding others' worlds as well as my own fictional worlds, the rich relationship between choosing to read in my time and developing skills. Jessie is absolutely right. The will and the skill operate by direction. They feed each other, "I become more skilled as a reader. I choose to read more regularly. I am choosing to read more regularly and finding it enjoyable and I am succeeding and the stories are great, or the non-fiction is fascinating, and I am moving to develop my skills." They are richly mutually reciprocal. That is what studies show us again and again, that the interplay between the will and the skill is really effective and important.

Darren Paffey: That is great. Thank you.

Dr Hendry: Something has just occurred to me that we probably should have made clear. Those emotional benefits are in engagement with fiction, which I think is pretty clear from Jo's response. There are lots of other good reasons for reading different kinds of texts. Non-fiction can be engaging and do all sorts of wonderful things for children's learning, but the socio-emotional development comes with reading fiction, and particularly talking and interacting about what is happening and what you have read. There is a layer that takes that even further than just, "I read it and I thought about it", which might happen perhaps in an older age group where you have those reflective skills. The engagement around it really enhances your social development.

Professor Cremin: Can I add to that?

Darren Paffey: I think we will have to move on.

Chair: I will move on to the next question, if that is okay.

Q6 **Peter Swallow:** Dr Taylor, can you describe what actually happens in a



child's brain when they are reading? We are talking about cognitive development. How does the actual mechanism behind that work?

Dr Taylor: Sure. That is a big switch of context.

Peter Swallow: It is a big question.

Dr Taylor: Yes, I can definitely talk about that. On what is happening in a child's brain when they read, when you see a written word on the page, first of all the bits of your brain that do vision have to process the letters that are in that word. Then the really clear response is that all the areas of your brain that are active when you speak and areas of the brain that are active when you listen all become engaged. Essentially, the process of reading is learning to connect the visual forms of words to spoken language. That is the process of learning to read. There is some evidence that very young children and older children who activate the spoken language areas more when they read show greater reading proficiency. That is a correlation.

We are not saying that there is something about the brain changing that is changing their reading, but the point is that the activation of those spoken language networks is related to you being a good reader. What you have to do when you read is connect written forms to all that spoken language information that you have. That is what is happening in the brain when we read. What was the other part of your question?

Peter Swallow: That was it.

Dr Taylor: Okay, fine. I want to emphasise that the neuroscience evidence backs up what we know from psychology, that the skills you need to be a good reader are to be able to go from the written form to the spoken form. That is what we are doing with phonics instruction, teaching kids to link the letters in a word to the sounds in a word. That link enables you to then activate all those spoken language areas and knowledge that you need to understand the words that you are reading.

Professor Ricketts: What we know about the brain is that it does not evolve very quickly. Evolutionarily, reading and writing are quite recent things that we are doing. As Jo says, we are relying on parts of the brain that are evolutionarily much more ancient, the ones that support language. That tells us something really interesting, as Jo says, about what underpins successful reading, which aligns very well with the theoretical frameworks that we all use. They basically say that reading is about connecting print to sound and being able to read words through phonics or through recognising words and being able to do that fluently, but it is also about comprehension and bringing those things together.

That links in with what we know about the brain, because if we have a language system that is working well in the brain, and in our behaviour, we are in a really good position to learn to read well. That is why it is fantastically important that when we are thinking about reading, we



never lose sight of the fact that it is a language activity. Alongside learning to read, reading engagement and so on—whether that is a shared experience or independent—we need to be fostering language and spoken language. This is why it is so encouraging to see this emphasis on oracy in what people are talking about, along with the idea that reading and writing and literacy and oracy frameworks need to be together. We need to support schools so they can work around language and literacy together. They are not siloed things. They are part of the same story.

Q7 Peter Swallow: That emphasises what Dr Hendry was saying about how important it is not just to read but also to talk about what you are reading.

Professor Ricketts: Absolutely. English teachers exemplify that, don't they? If you ever go into an English lesson, it is just absolutely fantastic to see not just the texts but also all of that talk and oracy around it.

Professor Cremin: The way that talk is volitional, too. Successful comprehension clearly does involve complex cognitive skills, but it also involves the willingness to make meaning, the willingness to voice my view and to have my view debated by others and to share our perspectives, rather than to have my view questioned and then checked by the teacher. That kind of interaction is very much a low-key discursive space in which we make meaning together, as Helen described, rather than necessarily a question-answer. That is the teaching of English, potentially: checking your comprehension, your inference, your deduction, but we are trying to foster volitional reading, choice-led reading, trying to create a space in which our voices are shared and reviewed.

Dr Shinskey: Getting back to the question of brain development, it is not just language. For infants who are doing shared reading, obviously they are not reading the print. They do not understand the function of the print yet, although they will as they get more experience. It is not just language areas of the brain for infants that will be stimulated. It will also be things like areas of attention. Listening to a story requires some sustained attention, but also memory because a story will have a sequence. For infants, obviously, it would be a very simple sequence, but it will be other areas of the brain, in addition to language, that are getting stimulation.

Q8 Peter Swallow: When I was reading with my nieces when they were younger, they could not read the words but they could look at the pictures and I could say, "Where is the monkey?" That is part of how we get them to engage with the whole process of reading.

Dr Taylor: I wanted to pick up on one more point about what we know from the neuroscience about reading development. It is the really reciprocal relationship between how the brain develops and reading activity. It is definitely not the case that we have a brain that is fixed and that will determine our reading ability or our reading engagement. The



research does not show that. It shows that the brain changes in response to our abilities and also our experiences. There is a really good opportunity to think about how education and experiences for children can support good brain development. The relationships are much clearer that way round than to say we have got a fixed brain and that will determine our outcomes. There is definitely stronger evidence the other way round, that we can change things from our abilities and our actions.

Q9 Jess Asato: To explore that a little bit more, sometimes parents may say, "Well, I was never a reader, so that is probably just inherited. You have probably just not got a reading brain." It is a bit like people who say that they have a maths brain or a social sciences brain. Could you tell me a little bit more about how that is not necessarily the case?

Dr Taylor: Yes. We should not ignore the fact that there are genetic influences on reading ability, much more clearly than on how much children read. There are clear genetic influences on reading ability, but they only account for a certain amount of what will happen to a child. There is very strong evidence that educational experiences and the way they are taught can also hugely modify that. It is definitely not that you have a fixed outcome in any way, but there are genetic influences on reading ability in particular, yes.

Q10 Peter Swallow: Dr Taylor, earlier you spoke about audiobooks and the way in which they don't necessarily trigger the same sort of development, but obviously, for children with special educational needs and disabilities, including those with dyslexia or visual impairments, audiobooks can be a beneficial way to get into text and reading. What benefits do audiobooks offer, how does that differ from reading physical texts, and how can we use that as a way of supporting young people with special educational needs to get some of these benefits that we have been talking about?

Dr Taylor: I did not want to be negative about audiobooks at all, because I think audiobooks are really great. They contain all of that fantastic language, complex syntax, complex vocabulary, complex emotional interactions, all of that. Audiobooks are amazing. My point was more that audiobooks are not necessarily easier for children who struggle with reading. This comes back to thinking about why a child struggles with reading, and Jessie has done lots of work in this space, thinking about the aspects of reading that they are struggling with.

If you are a very clear case of dyslexia, in the way that we can think about it scientifically, where you only have a problem linking the letters to the sounds—that is a very basic way of describing dyslexia, the core problem might be in learning to link the letters to the sounds—and you do not have any problems with any of your listening or your oral vocabulary, audiobooks will be amazing for you. I have numerous examples of people I know where that is the case, and it gives you all of that. However, children who have reading difficulties often also struggle with listening and understanding spoken language, so an audiobook will still be challenging for them. In some cases, it might be a good idea to



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have both of those forms available at the same time, so you might be able to read while listening along, because then you have the printed form to be able to refer back to.

My point was not that they were not good, but more that we have to think about why children are struggling with reading, and that audiobooks might not always be an easy option for somebody who struggles with reading.

Professor Ricketts: Yes, I agree. As Jo said, I have done some work on this, and I think it speaks to what Jeanne was saying earlier about the other demands that we need to think about and the other ways that this deploys the neural circuitry but also our cognitive skills. Listening and reading are somewhat similar they draw on the same knowledge base. It is the language base, the words and so on that they draw on, but what you are doing when you are listening versus reading is quite different. It places different demands, particularly on attention and memory, which is what Jeanne mentioned.

I have a real interest in thinking not only about teenage reading and upper primary but also about how we can harness reading to best purpose. What is special about reading? What does that give us that spoken language does not give us? I think the answer is that when things are on the page, they are there and they stay there. You can very quickly see how that might reduce the demands on your attention and on your memory. Even if you are approaching that text with slightly less skill than the person sitting next to you in your class, that may still have some benefits for you.

It is Jo's point about how we cannot assume just because a young person is finding reading a bit tricky that reading is not still the best way for them to experience that information. We can check and probe that and think about what the barriers are to their successful reading, but we certainly should not make that assumption. Spoken language is really tricky. It comes and goes, and it is quite hard to keep it in mind. That is why we have been so interested in the idea of harnessing reading for the purpose of learning because of those different attentional and memory demands.

Dr Shinskey: I would also be careful about using audiobooks with very young children as a substitute for face-to-face reading, because children under two do not understand the language that comes out of screens at all. Even after the age of two, they need an adult who knows what that child's own experience is to help them interpret the context of what is being read. I do not know that parents use audiobooks very often with young children, but—

Peter Swallow: If you have been on any long car journeys, they can be a lifesaver, but let us carry on.

Dr Shinskey: Age-dependent, I would say.



Peter Swallow: Yes, of course.

Q11 **Manuela Perteghella:** I would like to put on record that before becoming an MP, I used to teach for the Open University. I want to focus on the printed book in our digital age. How does reading from a digital device differ from reading from a physical book?

Professor Cremin: It is not my area of expertise, but there is clearly a great debate in education around what Maryanne Wolf called “deep reading” and “surface reading”, skimming and scanning. We have evidence from various studies of young people who are not accessing complex prose in various forms, whether that is in a picture book, like “Not Now, Bernard”, or in a novel, which could still be very complex, and the visuals to go with it. Those young people are developing understanding through sustained stamina, maybe through dialogue, through support by a parent, but none the less they are sustaining their engagement with the text over a longer time than one might on a phone or a digital device when you can move to the next piece. There is an argument around developing cognitive patience through an extended prose, whereas we may not be developing that same kind of cognitive patience and tolerance of complexity when we are skimming and scanning in digital. Then again, it is not the case that we always use digital to skim and scan. It is a complex space, and that is all I wanted to offer.

Dr Hendry: I have only a little to say about this because it is not a particularly strong area of my research, but the research that I am acquainted with suggests—and we were talking about this before we came in—that the challenge probably lies for the youngest children in where screens might replace interaction. That is a particular issue. If there is not a lot of talk and context going on around interacting on screen and looking at a book together, you are missing out on a lot of those learning opportunities. Screens may offer some learning benefits for over a certain age range, but certainly in the home there is a danger that they might replace the really rich interactions that we have been talking about already this morning.

Dr Shinskey: I will add that there have been studies that have directly compared stories on screens with stories on printed books with the very youngest children where there are more distractions. Even if the only difference between the two is that there is a button on the digital book that lets you turn the page, that causes more distraction than turning the physical page in a physical book. When parents are sharing a digital book with the child, there is more conversation—meta conversation—about what the buttons do, things like that. Things like hotspots will also distract children from the content that is being read.

Jessie and I had a PhD student who taught nursery-school children letter sounds using an app from a well-respected educational television producer. She used exactly the same content in a printed book. Half of the children had the app that taught them some letter sounds and half of



the children shared a book that had exactly the same content, where the experimenter was reading the content instead of a voice reading the content. The children learned more letter sounds from the physical book interaction but they also showed more enjoyment. There was more smiling, more laughing and also more vocal practising of the sounds themselves. They did that more with the printed book with the real person than with the digital book that had exactly the same content.

Q12 Manuela Perteghella: Would you say there are more benefits for young children, early years, to have physical books rather than digital ones?

Dr Shinskey: Yes.

Dr Taylor: I do not know very much about this, but I do know that there has been some work trying to bring together the literature from older children and adolescents looking at this, comparing comprehension from written text in a book versus written text on a screen. There is some evidence that comprehension tends to be better from written text, even in older children, but it is not my top area of expertise.

Professor Ricketts: I think it is the right question to ask though. It is fantastically important that we are thinking about this now. We know what is happening in schools is that there is access to physical books but there is also access to a lot of digital materials, including digital books. I work with hundreds of secondary schools, and there are certainly secondary schools that have very little access to physical books and have a digital library instead, so this is a really pertinent question. This is something we need to really be thinking about. We have heard lots of important views. I think the research evidence is quite early on this, so that is definitely something to take into consideration. We do not have the right kind of evidence yet to give you a definitive answer but we need to find those answers.

One reflection that we have not really talked about so far is experience and also infrastructure in schools. We need to keep in mind the experiences that young people are having and what that is doing for them in reading encounters. If they have lots of experience of reading physical books, that will give them that practice with reading physical books. That may translate into reading digital books in a certain way. If they have lots of experience of reading digitally, that might look quite different. We need to think about the kind of experience that young people have when they come to that kind of particular learning task with that text in that format. We must also remember that young people are very variable. If we know anything about reading proficiency and engagement, it is incredibly variable. It is variable in young children and hugely variable in teenagers. Those are my quick reflections on that.

We need to think about the situation in schools, which is that there is a lot of digital reading happening, because it is cheaper to buy digital libraries to buy real libraries. We need to be really careful about that. It is welcome, of course, to see a lot of emphasis in trying to make sure that



young people have access to school libraries and local libraries at the moment. We have the National Year of Reading, so there is a lot of wonderful work happening at the moment. We need to remember that maybe 10 years ago when that work was being done, children had done very little digital reading. If we did it now, they have done a lot more digital reading. We need to think about their experience and the variability in their knowledge and skills.

Dr Shinskey: Also that their parents will be doing more digital reading with generation Z.

Dr Hendry: I want to add something that came to me. I have been reading some grey literature, not peer-reviewed research, that is coming out from parents recently. There are some large surveys: one has 1,000 teacher responses; one has a couple of thousand parent responses. Their concern is that children are arriving in reception and “swiping” physical books, which you may have seen. I think it has been picked up on in the media because it is something interesting. Conversely to the secondary school experience, there are not digital libraries in primary and early years classrooms, so children are in a space where there is that transition. You might be doing lots of digital reading at home or swiping on your iPad with your parents, and then you go into the school context. Of course, there are iPads in early years classrooms, and they are used sometimes for some things, but there is a disconnect between home experience and school experience there, which can only serve to be a challenge for children making that adaptation and a challenge for the teachers in supporting their learning.

Dr Taylor: It is massively different across the socioeconomic status spectrum as well.

Dr Hendry: Yes, exactly.

Dr Taylor: You have disadvantage that is then compounded by difference when they get to school with a new environment.

Dr Hendry: Yes, so there are a lot of different variables at work in children’s early experiences of reading. The concern is that screen use at home and children not having early book handling—that is how we talk about it—may limit knowing which way around you hold a book, that you need to turn pages and you follow it in one direction. Those things may be limited by screen use at home.

Professor Ricketts: I don’t think anyone is saying here that digital reading is less good or not good. It is just about making sure that young people are prepared for the kind of reading that they need to do to access their learning. Actually, it is not just about accessing learning, it is also about accessing assessments. Some of the assessments that young people are doing are digital as well and the way that we assess that learning.



It is just about making sure that our young people are prepared and they have the experience, the knowledge and skills that they need, whatever the task is that they are needing to do, however the reading is coming at them.

- Q13 **Jess Asato:** Very quickly, is there any evidence that suggests that there is a tactile dimension to holding and reading a physical book that helps with the retention and comprehension versus, say, a Kindle, or are you just as likely to remember, retain and comprehend a book on a device as you are in the physical object?

Professor Ricketts: I think that is a fantastically interesting question. I do not know of any research that looks at that.

Dr Taylor: This is what I was talking about with older children and young adults. There is a meta-analysis, which is like a review of the existing literature, that says that there is a benefit for comprehension for reading on paper as compared to screen. Why? There is not that evidence so I do not know if it is about the physicality or the touching or whatever. I imagine that effect is really strong in young children though, the physical interaction type thing.

Dr Shinskey: Physical interaction with books for infants can increase their engagement. There is not any research on whether it improves their retention or learning of whatever the content of the book might be.

Dr Taylor: We can come back to more general ideas, though, of something being physically present and that is much easier in a printed book than it is on a Kindle. It is really easy to know that in a printed book you can just go back a page. That is somehow a bit less obvious with a screen that you have to swipe. It is very easy to swipe too many pages at once, go forwards instead of backwards, whereas the physical book is very concrete and easier to go back and forwards in and compare whether it is the same on the previous page.

Even very young—I have already noticed that my two-year-old says, “It is the same on the next page,” if it is the same thing happening from the previous page, and that is very concrete, isn’t it? I think there is something about the concreteness of books that is easy to go back and forth.

Professor Ricketts: One of the things that Jeanne and I have been really interested in looking at with very young children is tactile features in books. Actually the jury is out a little bit, we are just beginning this particular area of research, but we have found some evidence that tactile features in books increase engagement. If engagement is the route through which children get into those books, there might be a mechanism there, but we are just looking into that.

- Q14 **Manuela Perteghella:** My next question is about multimodal texts, such as comics and graphic novels. We know that these type of books have



retained their popularity while overall reading has declined and that might be because we are living in an increasingly visual culture. However, what does the academic evidence tell us about the benefits of reading this type of text compared to more traditional books? Shall I start with Professor Ricketts?

Professor Ricketts: Yes. I don't know that I have a huge amount to say on this, except that when we think about motivation we can think about lots of different principles. Sarah McGeown's work, for example, is really interesting about this in her Love to Read project. She sets out principles around motivation and some of them are about choice, access, time, resonance and social interactions. If you think about what is motivating young people in that way, giving them choices of different kinds of text to read is really important.

One of the things I have been quite interested in thinking about—I have not done any work on this yet—is different structures of novels. We have seen an increase not just in graphic novels but also verse novels. I don't know if you have come across those. I wonder whether there are some really interesting things to find out about novels that are just structured slightly differently. My take on it, resonating with a lot of what we have said today, is about the demands that that places on young people and thinking about that. If you have a graphic novel or a verse novel, things are being structured in a slightly different way, which I think lends itself to engagement comprehension in a slightly different way from a traditional book. That is my offering on that.

Dr Taylor: My point comes back to the complexity of the language that is in these different types of reading materials. The complexity of the language in a graphic novel will not be the same as the complexity of a language in a traditional novel. The story structures might be as complex and the theory of mind stuff might be as complex, but there will definitely be some language things that you are not getting from a graphic novel that you might get from a novel, for example.

Professor Cremin: One of the key things we need to revisit here is the power of narrative, the power of the nature of story that draws us in, that tempts us to want to know, that tempts us to turn the page. That will be evident in a verse novel, a graphic novel, a story in a magazine or a comic and, indeed, in a more traditional novel. There are many studies, from Jerome Bruner's work onwards and before, that show the power of talking through story, not just in the book but in the day when I have taken the child to the park and we are telling the story of the day.

We think through story. People argue we dream through story, we structure our lives through story. The power of narrative is seen not only in the large-scale studies that look across—say, Jeremy Moss's work—35 countries, OECD data showing a strong relationship between reading fiction and reading attainment. That does not show up in the same way for newspapers, or in the other OECD features, comics, newspapers, non-fiction and magazines. I think it is the narrative arc that is making the



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difference here and tempting young people in, but in a graphic novel, you have got the visuals as well as the story. Even if I can't read all those complex words, I can interpret, intuit that story. Perhaps I am seven years old and I don't have the language skills yet to read it all, but it feels like a real book.

It feels to me perhaps more of an upstep than the picture fictions that I used to be read to or read still. You can read picture fiction to key stage 3, that is not a problem, but if I don't feel that is a good book, if my identity wants me to think that is a low-key book, I can read a graphic novel, so I can become a reader. I can join the reading community in this class and be seen as a reader and accepted as a reader because I am reading the graphic novel. Whether I am solving every word on the page, I don't know, and I don't know of research that compares the two.

Going back to what Jessie started with, we need to respect the reader's choice. This is about reading for pleasure, therefore it is their reading, so it is volitional. We have many studies that show that to support reading for pleasure, we need to give agency, respect choice and allow it to be their reading, and therefore give them the autonomy that they need to make their own choices. If that is graphic novel after graphic novel after graphic novel, and I am the teacher, I am not worrying about that but I am paying attention, noticing and thinking how can I introduce other texts so they do not get stuck in a genre. But if they are motivated to read the genre for the first time, aren't I pleased?

Professor Ricketts: Yes, it is so important as an entry point, I think. It is not just about choice, it is about having that very supported choice. That is where professionals in schools—a teacher or a librarian—are supporting you with that choice to broaden your horizons, but once you have a child hooked, I think that is half the job done.

It is also about feeling success. One of the things that we know about motivation, and is a current topic of research at the moment, is the fact that it is not a static thing so we are not either a motivated reader or an unmotivated reader. That will be true of all of us in the room as well. It depends on what we are reading and part of that "it depends" is about whether we feel success in what we are reading. If we feel successful, if it is not taking up too much bandwidth, too much effort, we can engage with it, we enjoy it and we will carry on. If it is a topic that we are less interested in or it is just really hard—when I am reading the physics papers of my colleagues sometimes at work, I find that incredibly hard. I don't feel much success, I don't enjoy that as much as I do when I am reading my very familiar psychology papers.

The point about success and getting children hooked in whatever way we can is really important. Librarians are so important for doing that and we see that every day.

Dr Taylor: I will pick up on that point about the success. There is some evidence—in fact I think you are on this evidence, it is one of your



papers—actually maybe this isn't yours—looking at children with dyslexia and typically developing children, thinking about whether they enjoy reading in the moment. It is just an overall question about whether they enjoy reading but giving them an excerpt from a text and asking them about their enjoyment. Children with dyslexia can report enjoying reading as much as typical children, but they sometimes show that they are less willing to read more because they find it effortful. They can enjoy it, but if they find it hard that can have a knock-on impact on their willingness to do it again. Again, this comes back to the success point that you need to not only want to read but also be successful at reading to read again.

- Q15 **Jess Asato:** We hear that there has been a 36% decrease in children who enjoy reading in their spare time since 2005. How important is reading ability in motivating children to read for pleasure compared with other factors? I know we have discussed this a little bit so we don't have to go too much into it but who might want to take that forward?

Professor Ricketts: I can start with that. Again, I think it is important to think about different stages of the reading process. We have very young infants before they go to school, preschoolers, those who are in the early years of school developing their reading skills and also hopefully having lots of rich reading encounters. Then we move into where I am most based, which is thinking about independent reading and making sure that young people can read independently and do read independently. That proficiency is fantastically important, like it is the access point.

We want young people to get into this wonderful virtuous circle of feeling success in their reading and being good at reading, then reading more and then practising that reading skill so they get better at reading. That is where we want everyone to be but importantly, and what comes from my research and also research of others, is that proficiency is the access point. If you are talking about independent reading where they really are doing it on their own, we are talking about being able to read words accurately and fluently, being able to do all of the comprehension stuff that is involved in building the complex mental models of what is going on. That is the vocabulary knowledge, the grammar knowledge, understanding the background knowledge about a particular situation or developing knowledge of the particular protagonists in the story or particular non-fiction topic.

There is a lot going on. Reading is an incredibly complex process, doing it proficiently and doing it with success. We need all of that to be happening to see the motivation and engagement.

I have two more points very quickly before I pass on. Proficiency in children and teenagers is hugely variable as I have said. There are also quite high levels of need as we move through upper primary and into secondary school, so we know that that is the situation. That is something that we need to think about. If we want to increase access, motivation and engagement, we need to be mindful of the fact that proficiency is incredibly variable and that is a challenge for any teacher in



any classroom to try to negotiate all of that. It is a challenge when children go home and we are hoping that they will read of their own volition as well.

The final point I want to make is about motivation not being a fixed thing. We need to keep in mind that it will vary according to what children are reading and what the context and the text is. When we think about the reading process we need to remember it is the child or the reader, adult reader it could be, the knowledge, skills and background knowledge and so on that they bring to the task but also the complexity of the text that they face. All of that together will determine the success and proficiency, and also the engagement.

- Q16 **Jess Asato:** I will come to Professor Cremin. We know that there are often motivating factors used with children, such as rewards, targets, competitions, to encourage them to read. Is that a positive or a negative benefit in the overall pleasure in reading?

Professor Cremin: I think the research shows pretty clear that intrinsic motivation—reading because I am personally involved, I am invested in it, I am curious, I am setting myself some personal challenges, for example, because I want to find out more about it—is much more closely associated with reading for pleasure, volitional reading, than is extrinsic motivation. We see that commonly across multiple studies in different countries.

The challenge of extrinsic motivation, reading for other reasons, reading for rewards, for recognition perhaps, for praise in the classroom, the challenge of that is it is often a kind of uptick, a pick up, “I want to be part of this competition, I want to win the competition,” but when I realise that the peers in my classroom are rather more skilled than me, I begin to fade away. Then, of course, the initial piece of motivation is dissipated over time. Study after study shows that. It is a complex piece because you can be extrinsically motivated to read something that then becomes intrinsically engaging. It is not black and white or extreme in one direction or the other. It is a complex relationship and it depends on the measures that have been used in different studies.

I want to introduce another strand here, though. I think there is evidence that young people are also socially motivated to read. They are motivated for relational reasons. Their peers perhaps are reading a particular story and “I want to read it too,” like the Harry Potter phenomenon that came round. “I want to connect to others,” perhaps. “I want to hear what others say.” We are reading chapter 6 and I want to go, “I read chapter 6, I want to know what they think. Did you think this? I didn’t. I was surprised by that.” There is that sense of engaging.

Helen and I are involved in a study now, which I have not done the full analysis of, but we can see that in years 5 and 6 at primary school, young people are motivated as readers by each other, that sense of a community, not the whole class but a subgroup of three here, four good



friends over there who are reading together, perhaps different books, but also talking about those books and motivating each other to continue as readers.

However, I want to push back a bit on what Jessie said about proficiency being the access point in some ways because whether children choose to use that access point is a matter of motivation—"I can have the access. I could read. I could choose to read. I do not want to. It is not for me. It is for the boffins or it is for the others. It is not my thing. I do football," or whatever it is. You can see that I am being a bit stereotypical. We have to support not only the skillset but the will. Developing a balanced provision where we are offering support for developing the desire to read at the same time as developing the skill is absolutely crucial. There are studies that show that when we get that balance better, we have readers who choose to read and they can read, but they take that skill further forward.

Q17 **Jess Asato:** This leads me very nicely to my next question. What would you suggest are the main causes of the decline in reading for pleasure among children in recent years? I will start with you, Teresa, and then go down the panel.

Professor Cremin: What are the main causes? I did not make notes on this one. I am just going to go with my sense of understanding. One is the ubiquitous use of technology, for sure, and another is poverty. Then there is access to text, the closure of libraries and the opportunity for young people to get books that are demanding, engaging, and motivating. There is some American research showing that some children live in book deserts, areas where the only access to any kinds of text is low-level, no quality, that would not engage your two-year-old, Jo, or any other two-year-old, and that holds young people back.

Another particular pressure is the curriculum pressure and the backwash of assessment, where, in England, teachers feel the need to work towards the SATs, but whatever the assessment framework is in accountability cultures, that is where teachers work to first. Reading for pleasure can often be seen as a sideline, a nice-to-have, an extra, rather than a core part of we need to be supporting our young people to be readers and to choose to read, to develop a habit that gives them the benefit. I think these various factors interplay. There are many more societal inequities in various ways, class, gender, a range, but those are the key ones that are problematic.

Dr Hendry: I do not have a great deal to add to that but I think we have to frame it slightly as a societal decline. We know that there is research, particularly coming out recently, about adults not choosing to read. That has been going on for a long time. Then, as Teresa has mentioned, there is the impact of assessment and curriculum. However, our teaching profession is part of the adult societal group whose habits have changed and whose own knowledge of reading and engagement in reading has



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shifted over time, so there may be influential factors in that. I am not saying that there is a direct piece of research that says that is the reason but they are things that we know from other pieces of research have influence on what is going on in classrooms and how teachers are prepared to support reading for pleasure. That is my contribution to the list of causes.

Dr Shinskey: I want to add a qualification to Professor Cremin's point about screens. I think there might be some evidence that reading motivation was in decline even before the most recent surge in tablets or phones for toddlers. Shared reading with infants has been declining, as well as in adults and children. Among the reasons for that are parental beliefs that reading is a school activity or an educational activity; it is not something we do for fun at home or for pleasure. If parents do not enjoy reading, they will be less likely to read to their child. If parents had negative reading experiences when they were of school age, they might not feel confident about sharing books with their child. Stress is also a number one factor in why parents say they do not read to their children more often, even though they may value it and know it is a good thing to do. Then it is about lack of time. If you are stressed, your child is stressed and it is bedtime, sometimes a screen is a lower-effort thing than sharing a book.

Dr Taylor: We probably all know that we do not know the answer to that question. There is no definitive piece of research that will tell us the answer to that question. I think all of these points are valid.

I want to pick up on Jeanne's point about parents reading with their children and how one way that we might help with that is to do with parents perhaps not having the skills base to do it. Parents will not feel confident reading to their children if they feel they will struggle over the words in the book and that might be true for large numbers of parents. There is some evidence that upskilling parents, giving them letter-sound knowledge, decoding ability and helping them with their vocabulary can help to increase their confidence in the amount that they might read with their child. All parents value it, they think it is important and they want to do it, but some of them just do not have the time, may be too stressed and also may not have the skills. Not having the skills, or feeling that they do not, can also be causes for parents not reading with their children.

Dr Shinskey: It might also be more common in multilingual households, if parents do not feel that they have the skills in whatever the language is that the child is learning or speaking at school. They worry about doing the accents properly or just not being able to read properly.

Dr Taylor: Yes, and there is lots of evidence that they should just be reading in their home language. That is super important and really good. Parents should not be feeling that they only have to read in the language of school. They should not see it as a school thing. If they are reading



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with their kids in their home language, from books in their home language—which might not always exist, in which case talking with them is good—that is equally important, probably more important than reading in the school language.

Professor Ricketts: Two things, quickly. The first is that these are all important points. I agree with Jo that we do not have a definitive answer to this but it is an important question. We can interrogate the decline in thinking about what kind of reading we are talking about and what children are saying. I assume we are talking about evidence where young people are reporting that they read less than their equivalents did some time ago and I guess we need to think about the way that they are conceptualising reading. This slightly relates to Jeanne Shinskey's point about whether it is a school thing or is it a home thing. I wonder if young people increasingly feel that reading in that very traditional sense of reading books is a thing that is associated with school and that they are doing a lot of reading that does not feed into their responses to those questions because the kind of reading they are doing is not what they think we are asking about.

In thinking about this question, we need to try to get our heads around where young people are coming from and we have been trying to do this recently. In a recent project we very much tried to engage with young people to empower them to ask their friends why they do not read and what they think about reading. We found out some quite interesting things by doing things that way. Sometimes if you ask children yourself, they give you a mixture of what they think and what they think you want to hear. They are trying to work out, "What are they asking me? Is it their framing of reading? Is it our framing of reading?" There is quite a lot going on in that situation. We have tried to get away from that by empowering young people to be the researchers, to work with their peers, to try to understand the answer to this question. We will be continuing that work.

Meanwhile, a couple of useful insights have come up already. One thing that young people say is that they do not see reading as a social activity. We know that these people are teenagers and we know that teenagers are very much guided by their peers. We know from a lot of the developmental neuroscience evidence, as well as other evidence, that young people, especially teenagers, are very much guided by what their peers think and what their peers say. They told us that they do not see reading as a social activity and so feel that it is somewhat selfish. That is one of the things that they said, that it is a kind of internal thing. That might be a really interesting thing to unpack in this decline.

There is something about how we are framing reading and whether young people are thinking of reading in the same way that we are thinking about reading and I would say that that impacts the interrogation of the decline. Is it a real decline or an apparent decline? The jury perhaps is somewhat out. It depends a little bit on how we



define things, but one thing that we could be doing more is asking young people themselves.

Q18 **Jess Asato:** It covers eight to 18-year-olds, so not just teenagers?

Professor Ricketts: Yes.

Q19 **Jess Asato:** Also it is about those who said that they enjoyed reading in their free time, trying to make that distinction between school and home.

Dr Taylor: It also might be worth picking up on what young children count as free time and whether there has been a decline in free time. That might be something to investigate in thinking about that question. Maybe they are not reading as much because they do not feel that they have as much free time.

Q20 **Jess Asato:** Is there any evidence that reading time is being replaced by time on screens in any of your research?

Dr Hendry: Not in my research. Some of the parent reports of what is going on in the home, those large-scale surveys, which are grey literature, suggest that is the case, but not in our own research.

Q21 **Jess Asato:** You mentioned curriculum pressures. Is there any evidence that the actual curriculum, particularly an over-focus on grammar, can diminish a love of reading into something that is so much about the analysis of the work that it may detract from just the love of just reading the story to understand the narrative and the characters?

Professor Cremin: I know of no evidence about that. Curriculum, per se, is very rarely studied. It will be studied within the context of a particular school that might enact a curriculum differently from the school 20 yards away down the road. How each school creates a curriculum, makes the curriculum manifest, will be very different even if it is a national curriculum. Reading for pleasure, volitional reading, choosing to read in your time, has been mandated in our national curriculum since 2013 and here we are exploring it in 2026. That is fabulous. I am delighted that it was mandated but it does not mean it is suddenly delivered. There is a difference between policy, curriculum, and local enactment.

However, we want to remind ourselves here—and I am linking it to Jessie talking about identities and young people's peer identities—is that it matters how children see themselves as readers, "My sense of self-efficacy as a reader is that I feel good about myself as a reader." There are studies that show that young people who feel successful, and are successful, as readers tend to be more intrinsically motivated and that intrinsic motivation is related to self-efficacy and reading attainment. Again we revisit that sense of, "If I desire to read and I feel good about myself, or at least if I feel good about myself as a reader, I choose to



read, then I develop my skills as a reader." There is that kind of revisitation.

We do not pay enough attention to readers' identities in school. We tend to see a reading for pleasure activity over here and a reading skill activity over here. We are developing an identity of a human who sees themselves as a reader. As we have seen from the state-of-the-nation work from The Reading Agency in this country, in Bohn et al, as Helen was saying, in the US, adult reader identities are on the decline. More adults are saying, "I do not see myself as a reader. I have never been a reader. What are you asking me about? Reading has nothing to do with me." If we do not have reading role models in the home or potentially in school, how do we support our young readers of tomorrow?

Dr Taylor: I come back to your point about how the way things are taught might turn people off. We can think about that with respect to the curriculum and assessment at different points of development and points in children's school careers. Often it is not the recommendations that might be wrong or off-putting but what teachers feel they have to do with them. There are ways of teaching grammar and syntax and getting children to understand that stuff that are rewarding and enriching and enable children to use complex constructions in their own writing. They enjoy that, but it can be taught in different ways. It might not be the recommendation that is wrong, but more about giving teachers more information about how they might teach that thing. Some teachers will feel really confident about it, and some teachers will feel less confident.

We can see the same thing when we are thinking about phonics in very early assessment. That is certainly not, by definition, in any way a turn-off, and it is usually taught extremely well, but when teachers feel under pressure about assessment, they might devalue other things. We need to think about the recommendations and then that the way they are interpreted in schools and are enacted might not always be the same.

Q22 Darren Paffey: I will move on to think about best practice in early years settings and schools. My initial question is to Dr Hendry. Based on what we know about young children's development in particular, what does best practice look like in early years' settings so that they develop not just the habit of reading but of becoming a reader and having a love of reading? How do they best achieve that?

Dr Hendry: I will take the phonics and skills teaching as a given in the curriculum, so I am focusing on that reading for pleasure and the best practice in developing children's choice to read and their wanting to be involved in book-related activities. There is quite a strong consensus across the research that one of the things that we have been talking about already this morning, interactive shared reading and an approach that is referred to as dialogic reading, is absolutely core. That will be some of the things that you will have experienced as family members—I



am talking about sharing text together—but it is characterised by active participation by the children.

It is not strongly teacher-led; it is not just hearing stories that are read aloud to you, although that has its place. It involves encouraging children to share pictures, talk about words, the adult adapting their own interaction, tuning into the children's verbal and non-verbal responses. There is lots of reinforcement around text going on, and that is key. It sounds so simple, but we know from the research with early years practitioners that there is a number of barriers that mean that reinforcement might not always be happening to the extent that we would like. That is key, and there is some work around supporting early years practitioners and teachers to ensure that that is happening in a way that is open-ended and child-led, because it takes some sophisticated practitioner engagement and some time and focus to make it work and not become directed by the adult.

We know something about repeated reading and this moves through into the primary phase. Encountering a book that you have heard several times has a particular benefit from the familiarity and confidence in being able to talk about it. We know from the research behind it that reading the same thing over and over again, which very small children often ask for at home, makes a big difference to how much children and adults gain from that experience.

Our own research has looked at informal book talk, which you can imagine is a bit of a given in those situations, but it is not just child to adult. It is also child-to-child when you allow time for children, even if they cannot read books independently yet but they have heard them lots of times, have remembered the stories and want to share the pictures and talk about it with their friends. They get much out of that informal interaction where they are relaxed and comfortable. In our research, we have seen children snuggling up to each other, sharing pictures, they are laughing and they are remembering what has happened. All that is creating the language foundations that we talked about earlier. It is another key feature.

Warm, positive relationships between practitioners and children sounds simple and a given, but it is not necessarily so. An interesting piece of research involved 820 children and looked at practitioner relationships with children in the classroom around reading and how children felt about themselves as readers. The research showed a shift in self-concept and motivation to read between kindergarten and the following year, so there are some interesting subtleties going on in early reading interactions.

I am sure that we could be here all day, but I will mention two more key things. The first is playful interactions. You mentioned play earlier, the idea that practitioners need to know and support children to respond to text with their whole bodies. There is some interesting early years research about how children not just copying adults' gestures but



responding in their own way to a text enables them to remember it, enjoy it and get more out of the experience. That is because children learn with their whole bodies at that point in their development. It is fascinating stuff. Playful and embodied responses to text, going away and playing out the story, allows children to really get into what has happened and learn much more from it.

Lastly, in best practice in early years settings, adults need to monitor and respond to that engagement. Some of that is to do with responding in the moment, that spontaneous reflection on practice and noticing what the children are doing, but also—moving through earlier settings into the early stage of primary school—it is about noticing children's interactions with each other, noting down what they have been interested in, what is motivating them to read and building on it, seeing reading for pleasure as a space to engage with formative assessment, informing practice as it would in any other subject discipline. That may sometimes be where things have fallen down. Rather than seeing playing out being something nice that children are doing, it could be dramatically enhanced if a bit more serious attention were paid to it and there was some support for practitioners in how to do that.

Q23 Darren Paffey: On that point, would you say that at the moment the early years workforce in the country has the right knowledge and training to be able to deliver those approaches?

Dr Hendry: It is a very mixed picture. I have not researched the early years workforce but I am very familiar with the research in that age group. We know that there is some confusion currently around the role that skills play and where and when phonics should be happening. We know phonics is part of the curriculum and that it is really important as a foundation of skills but in the early years workforce there is a sort of drip-down effect coming from school curricula. There is a worry that practitioners need to get children ready for school and they might need to do lots of phonics but they may not have the appropriate training and skills to do it. Also, it is not developmentally appropriate for the very youngest children that they are working with. Thus there is some confusion.

The short answer to your question is that early years practitioners need help. We could do a lot more in that area, but that is a particular challenge that they are experiencing. There is such a varied range of qualifications and skills in the early childhood workforce. I know that there are some sensible things in the inspection framework, for example, about shared reading, but they are about the how. There are statements that Ofsted will inspect early years settings and look at whether shared reading is happening, but do the practitioners know how to develop the kinds of interactions that are supporting children to want to read, to talk about reading with their friends and all of the wonderful things we have already talked about this morning? There is definitely more work to be done there, and in the teacher workforce too, not just with early years



practitioners. There is still some confusion. The focus, perhaps rightly, has been on skills, but the balance has been missing for some of our workforce.

Dr Shinskey: Can I jump in on best practice at home? Children are coming into reception, hopefully having had some home experience with shared reading. Parent modelling is probably one of the first points of best practice—show your child your own love of reading—but also have realistic expectations. Expect children to have a short attention span, expect them to wander away at some point and that you might have to come back and repeat something. Frequency is also important. Even if for just five minutes, reading daily is one of the best practices that parents can engage in, and also engaging in the dialogic. Shared reading is a dialogue. Extending answers to their child's questions or relating them to their own lives are some of the sorts of things that parents might not know about but can do at home for best practice in bringing their children up to be readers before they even get to school.

Dr Taylor: Can I come in on that? Some work is going on at the moment on parents who do not know how to do that kind of thing and might struggle with it. It can be helpful to have safe environments where parents can come with their children and watch those kinds of things happening, have a go at it themselves, experience that kind of shared love of reading in a really safe space with a professional who understands how to do those processes well, modelling it in a safe and kind of welcoming way. We cannot just assume that if we tell parents to do things, they will know how.

Chair: I will bring in Peter Swallow, if there is something more to explore there, because I think we have strayed into his question.

Q24 **Peter Swallow:** The question that I was about to ask about how we support parents of young children to read with their children has been more or less answered. Let me therefore take the opportunity to ask a specific question? Is this something that, for example, the Government should look at delivering through Best Start family hubs or other mechanisms?

Dr Taylor: That would be great.

Professor Ricketts: One caveat though is that we need to make sure, if we want to engage parents with this and we want to engage particularly those parents who may feel that education has not served them very well or that reading is not for them, that those spaces are shared, safe spaces. That is important. It matters where those hubs are.

Dr Taylor: Yes.

Professor Ricketts: Where this has been most successful, people have used community spaces that those families feel they have ownership of. It is important to make sure those spaces are shared spaces.



Dr Taylor: There is some really basic stuff to think about, such as transport and all sorts. There is no point having something in central Reading if there are no bus services from the pockets of Reading that need these services most. You just set them up. You need to embed them. Talk to the communities and find out what they want and get them to lead it. It is not an easy thing to do.

Professor Ricketts: We need a place-based approach.

Q25 **Peter Swallow:** Presumably local libraries would be great, where those libraries still exist in communities, which is not everywhere.

Dr Shinskey: Yes, but a lot of families might find libraries to be intimidating, inaccessible or inconvenient places where they do not feel comfortable so even more-community-based approaches can help.

Professor Ricketts: Libraries can take that role. We see a lot of excellent practice in libraries and bookshops where people might initially feel a bit intimidated but there are things that those places can do to make the environments more accessible. It is about proactively knowing that not every family, not every person, will feel able to walk into a bookshop, a library or even a community hub. There may be barriers. We need to think about what the different barriers are in any area.

Professor Cremin: Making sure that whatever the support for parents is, it starts from a respectful point of view, assuming that they are already engaged with their young people, that they are already reading with their young people in many ways—digital and in print—and building on what they do rather than trying to impose a set of apparent panaceas on them.

Peter Swallow: Meet them where they are at.

Professor Cremin: Absolutely.

Q26 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** How do we stop it from being a case of “There is a right way to do this and a wrong way to do this,” leading to parental anxiety that they are getting it wrong? I have noticed that some children like to read a chapter from this book and then a chapter from that book and then a chapter from another one and then go back to the first one and then round to the fourth one instead of picking up a book and reading it from start to finish. Should that be encouraged or discouraged? Does it really matter, as long as they are reading something?

Professor Cremin: We need to respect the reader’s right to make their own choices to read in their own way, at their own pace, at their frequency, with their friends, without their friends, or one chapter to the next chapter. Clearly, if they have the skills they are deploying an exploration at that moment of saying, “How will this work?” I have adult friends who read that way. I am in a book club and some of the members are reading four books at a time and I am going, “I don’t do that. I am



just reading this one”, but we are different as readers. Respecting that uniqueness is important but it would probably apply to a more able reader who has that kind of way.

Professor Loh Chin Ee, an academic in Singapore, is documenting ethnographically teenagers’ reading in the lived world of reading. In that fascinating study, we are beginning to find out that young people are reading in many different diverse ways, on and offline, in print, in books and in other texts and making their own journeys as readers. These are skilled readers, children who are choosing to read, they are volitional reading, but let’s respect that rather than intervene and say that there is one way to do it here.

Q27 Jess Asato: Do we have time to come back to best practice in schools a little bit? What are the best evidence-based approaches that schools can take to promote reading for pleasure? I will start with Teresa. I will call this the parents’ question. Does World Book Day work?

Professor Cremin: There is evidence to suggest that there is a variety of different individually and socially oriented approaches that are optimal. I am in a classroom, for example, or I am running up to World Book Day and what am I doing? What is my provision for reading for pleasure? What is my intentional plan to nurture these readers to choose to read in their own time and to develop the habit? That is my responsibility. I am an educator. Somebody earlier in their lives may have developed their skills or I may still need to be developing everybody’s skill in this classroom but I have a responsibility also to nurture them as readers in their own spaces.

I suggest, going back to what Helen was connecting to, that those individually and socially oriented approaches are hugely influenced by the responsive involvement of the adult who is mediating those practices and planning intentionally to support the individuals who are finding reading challenging and may need more skill support. At the same time I need to support them to motivate the young people to continue to read because it is hard if I do not feel good about myself as a reader and I have a negative self-identity. I may be in year 6, I may have had four or five years now of feeling I am no good at this. People have tried to help me, I have been in intervention groups but I still do not feel good. That year 6 teacher has a responsibility to work at supporting both the skill and the will.

To give you a brief summary of the individual and social, an individually oriented approach is looking across the range of data that we can gather from classroom practice data so pedagogically oriented data is around resourcing and encouraging young people to create positive reader identities, thinking of the individual and getting to know the individual. That is absolutely crucial. Jessie referred earlier to assessing their skillset but also trying to understand them in the round and understand their friends, to understand their reading practices at home, to understand



their reading lives knowing those readers in the round. We need subtle tools to help us understand, not surveys only that say, "I like it," or, "I don't like it." What is the lived experience of that young person as a reader? How do we know that?

Then as a teacher we need knowledge of texts to be able to recommend to them, and we have seen many studies, our own and others across the world, that show that teachers tend to rely upon a canon of texts from their own childhood, unsurprisingly. What else can we rely upon except what we have read and encountered? That canon is of yesterday. It may have some brilliant books in it and I am not disrespecting our individual canons but it is not contemporary. It is not now. It is not the texts that are being literally produced today and onwards and it does not reflect today's society. We need to help teachers recognise and celebrate their canons but update them so that they are reading contemporary texts and are able to recommend those texts to others.

Then critically in individually oriented approaches we are not only knowing the reader and recommending and supporting their choices, and developing much more time on supporting choices in various ways, but we are also giving them agency. We are giving them agency and, back to our success argument earlier on, developing a sense of self-efficacy and competence as a reader. There is a batch of practices that I am trying to deploy or good teachers are trying to deploy in classrooms individually. Socially it is recognising that reader identities and habits are developed in a social world. We need to have socially-oriented pedagogies that enable young people to make connections with others, to have affinity groups or friendship groups. The three of us are trying to finish this graphic novel, or whatever, we only have one copy and we are sharing it—back to your comment—between us because we are moving it around, we have promised to have one chapter each and we are so excited, and now I am reading something else different but us three are connected. As a teacher then, back to our book talk research, we found that those socially-oriented pedagogies help children feel they belong. They belong as a reader in this classroom because they are readers, not that they are doing reading but they are readers, which is a very different point.

In the context of socially-oriented, we need adult role models that have been referred to of parents and teachers. To go back to your question about World Book Day, if you had a rich reading pedagogy in your classroom, every day is World Book Day. Every day I am trying to support you 32 as readers. It is my job because I know the research evidence says academically, socially and emotionally if you are a reader it will make a difference. I think we need to be clear about that. It is not an occasional piece and World Book Day, the organisation itself, does not argue that. We have just finished some podcasts with them about how you spread World Book Day practice right through the year.

Q28 Jess Asato: Do any of you have any particular approaches that work best for boys? We know there is a gender divide and that boys in



particular are at their lowest level ever of reading for pleasure. Only if you have any evidence specifically for supporting boys in school. No. Are there any particular approaches that have been demonstrated not to have an impact on promoting reading for pleasure? Are there any things that are regularly done in school settings that the research shows do not really work?

Professor Cremin: Back to your question about extrinsic motivation, the orientation to positioning reading for pleasure as an “ought to, you should” obligation, requirement—a school I worked with called it required reading time, which is tempting, or not. We cannot make them read for pleasure but we can entice, invite, model, engage but there is a pressure in some schools to read. Perhaps the worst case scenario would be, “We have independent reading time and you will read”. We are not giving them book talk time, we are not supporting them to make choices, we are not reading aloud to them but they will read in this time. There is no infrastructure to encourage them.

Q29 **Peter Swallow:** Many of the primary schools in my local area have reading champions, young people who are chosen to promote reading within the class. From your experience, what effect does this have on the social aspect of reading on young people feeling agency but also on the way that schools attempt to foster student voice and a sense of democratic engagement with the school day around reading?

Professor Ricketts: I think that sounds like a very positive approach. It sounds like a very good approach. Coming back to the question before about what might be less desirable to see in a school is activities, very much as Teresa Cremin said, where maybe space or time has been created for reading or books have been provided but you are not connecting up all of the dots. If we think about young people and how susceptible they are to their peers and how important that peer-to-peer encouragement can be and also support, there is some fantastic work showing peer-to-peer support in not just reading for pleasure but also in proficiency, I think that can only be a good idea. I do not know if there is any evidence per se about what that looks like but it absolutely resonates with what we know about what encourages young people to read, having that social aspect. It seems like a very good idea to me.

Dr Taylor: I think the same thing can be true in the parent-parent interactions and parent hub-type things you were talking about. If you have people in the community who have different networks and that they know lots of people and they want to be pro this community thing happening, they are the ones who can bring the rest of the community in rather than some top-down person. It is a similar kind of interaction.

Dr Hendry: From our work with universities, student teachers and schools, there is definitely the peer relationship and interaction and encouraging each other for pupils but we have also seen it with student teachers. I work with 45 higher education institutions who have initial teacher training routes and they nominate student reading for pleasure



ambassadors to support their teachers, their student teacher peers, to develop their practice for reading for pleasure. That has a special space even in that student age group where, because it is being led by peers, they are able to tune into each other's needs. They are not already set up with the fear of failure in front of their lecturer, "I don't know the right answers. I don't have all the information I need." They are able to negotiate and develop some very interesting initiatives during their teacher training that support them to embody as pedagogies. It is a tangent from your question but the peer influence is an important one.

Q30 **Darren Paffey:** Professor Ricketts, given that we know reading for pleasure drops off at secondary school age, what should secondary schools do to rekindle that passion for reading effectively?

Professor Ricketts: There are a lot of things that can be done. We can see a lot of evidence of good practice in secondary schools. I should say that. I have seen a lot of good practice. I will say two things. From the evidence base we know more about what motivates primary age children to read and what best practice looks like in motivating primary age children to read than we do about secondary pupils. I would caution against assuming that what works in primary will work in secondary. Indeed there has been some work to try to translate primary practice to secondary and it has not gone all that well, including in our own work. We need to not assume that what works in primary will work in secondary but we need to take an integrated approach to thinking about what is happening in primary, through the transition into secondary and what might be going on for young people that reading is falling away for.

There are lots of things that could be at play. As young people move from primary to secondary school, the challenge that they face in the curriculum and in the reading materials that they encounter very much shifts and changes. Some young people who felt success in their reading, felt that they were a good reader and could do the reading thing and therefore were going off and reading for pleasure because it was very much part of their identity, can find as they move into secondary, as the challenge shifts, that reading becomes a much more difficult task. We talk about this often for late emerging reading needs. You can see reading needs emerging in secondary school as the challenge shifts and that can change the relationship that a young person has with reading. That could be one part of the story.

In thinking about what we might do to support all of that, we need to think about the whole system. That is the pupils, the teachers, the texts, whether they are curriculum texts or extracurricular texts, and we need to think about how to bring all those things together and what the barriers to making that work might be. When we think about that we can draw on many decades of research that suggests that reading is an incredibly complex thing to do and also to be willing to do. Motivation to read is a shifting thing and it is also very complex. One of the things that I have been very engaged in trying to do in the secondary space is to



ensure that secondary teachers feel more empowered to work with their young people on reading. The reason I came to this was working across a huge number of secondary schools and hearing time and time again that there are lots of kids in their schools who do not read as much as they would like, who find reading trickier than they would like and do not have the confidence, the capacity and the capability that they feel they need and the knowledge to best support them.

We have talked a bit about this already and the answer is about professional development. I have done a lot of professional development work with teachers for that reason. One answer to this challenge about young people not being able to read as well and as much as we would like is ensuring that the whole workforce understands reading a bit better and then they will be better positioned to ensure that everybody in their class is engaging with this task.

A perfect example of that is an initiative that you see in many schools where they say, "Okay, we want to engage young people with reading more. We want to improve their reading ability across our cohort. We also want to increase social capital and we want to do all these things. What are we going to do? We might put in place an initiative that involves creating space and time in the curriculum for reading." That is a fantastic thing to do but you need to make sure that in that time you are very clear about what the goals are and about making sure that every young person in that time and space, in that form group, for example, is engaging with the reading activity. Just putting a book in front of someone does not mean that they will necessarily read. That is about making sure there is choice, different reading activities, making sure the teachers know what to do and know what to look out for if people are not reading and how to engage them in that activity. There is a lot to think about but one answer to this question is making sure that our secondary workforce feel more confident and more capable to support reading progress.

We have been working with the Department for Education to develop some CPD and what we are seeing is very encouraging. We are seeing as a result of sometimes some quite quick CPD that only takes an hour teachers reporting that they feel they have much more knowledge about reading and the complexity of reading. They feel more confident about supporting reading. That is reading proficiency but also reading engagement and they feel that they have much more capacity for it. We are seeing some very positive signs. There is a lot to do but one answer is to ensure that teachers have that confidence.

- Q31 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I want to ask about the themes that you see in what are often grouped as teenage and adult books or a teenage group of books. There is quite a range of maturity within that age group. One of the things that I know can make some people concerned is ensuring that when their children pick up a book they are not going to be exposed to themes that are more mature than they would wish or specific things that



they do not want them to be exposed to at that age group. What sort of information is available for parents, teachers and young people to see what sort of themes there are and what they will learn from a book before they read it?

Professor Ricketts: I have talked about the importance of librarians before. I think this is where librarians are fantastically important. It is a very difficult task. I am a parent of teenagers and, as a teacher, I work a lot with teachers and I think it is very challenging to be up to date. We have heard about the shifting canon and having knowledge about books and the content of books is very challenging. It is really important to engage with librarians and to try to create opportunities for supported choice in schools and public libraries.

However, there is another way of thinking about this, which is that we as parents, as educators, as those who work with young people, can talk to them about the content of books. One of the realities of modern life, especially with the digital world as it is, is that our young people will encounter things that shock them, make them feel upset, that maybe we do not want them to see. That will happen to all of them, so maybe it is more about making sure that we have the lines of communication and conversations about the material so that we can help to structure it and reassure our young people. It is not trying to stop them from doing it in the first place but making sure we are aware of what is going on and that we have open lines of communication so that we can talk to our young people about any content that they find shocking, or disturbing, or that they maybe were not quite ready for.

Q32 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Would you recommend a recommended age for reading? We would not do that with a film, would we?

Professor Ricketts: We do it for films. It is quite challenging because every child is very different and what they find shocking and difficult to encounter will be very different. That is true for all of us as adults as well. It is quite a difficult thing. We could probably come up with a set of topics that we think are inappropriate for 12-year-olds, for example, but that is only ever going to be a guideline and we can never be sure that young people are not going to access the kind of material that we do not want them to access anyway. I think it is about shaping that and trying to have age-appropriate conversations with our young people about any content that they encounter in books or elsewhere.

Q33 **Manuela Perteghella:** My question is for Dr Hendry. Will teachers and other school staff be trained and supported to deliver the initiatives that then foster a lifelong love for reading within the school community? Perhaps you can talk about the role of school libraries and school librarians in this. If not, what more needs to be done?

Dr Hendry: I am sure that other people have things to contribute, but to start with we know from some of our recent research that there is the challenge, that Teresa already mentioned, in the teaching workforce and



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the student teacher population about their own knowledge of current contemporary literature and a range of different types of texts. While the need to teach or engender reading for pleasure is part of ITT curricula, the focus on assessment for teachers is really more around skills. Although they are being directed to create a culture of reading for pleasure, there is a tension because the teacher standards measure specifically whether they are ready to teach systematics and phonics. There are those kinds of tensions going on.

We do work with a lot of ITT providers who are embedding reading for pleasure pedagogy and yet at the beginning of teacher training we know that students are coming in with a very low knowledge base of texts. In a study we did recently of nearly 600 student teachers across 10 ITT providers, 31% of the students who said they read frequently in their own time could not name a single author for children at the beginning of their teaching practice. If you can imagine, teacher training routes are often nine months in a PGCE, so it is very short. To get all of the subject knowledge across the primary curriculum and knowledge of children's literature and reading for pleasure pedagogy is hard work but also very significant work.

The student teachers in those studies also showed that they did not really have a grasp of what reading for pleasure pedagogy was at the beginning of initial teacher training and you might say, "Well, why would they?" but again they were harking back to their own experiences in things such as lists of who has read the most or star charts and their history as readers some time ago in the classroom, so they did not have a lot that they were coming in with to build on. Then of course when you are training to teach you are navigating your university-taught content with your school-based experience.

My own research focused on tracking a small number of PGCE students into their first year as teachers and there is this constant to-ing and fro-ing that is borne out by other people's research between your belief system as a teacher, what your university or other provider is saying is important, what the curriculum is saying is important, and then what is happening in the school. There is more work to be done to broker that. I am not suggesting it is a simple task for ITT providers because I have been in that role and had to attempt to do it myself, but there could be some more positive work done around things such as the ITAP, the intensive teaching placements, that have been introduced in initial teacher training to use those for reading for pleasure.

There are also opportunities with helping mentors in schools to support the students in reading for pleasure that, certainly in the information that I am aware of, has been slightly sidelined in favour of the skills agenda. The skills agenda is, of course, very important and you have to demonstrate it in the standards, so it trumps everything in initial teacher education and culture. That is not to say that there is not lots of great work going on in some of these providers but there is always that



tension. The thing that is measured often wins out in a very small and time pressed area.

Q34 Mark Swards: It is such a fascinating session today and the time has absolutely flown by. I certainly have advice that I will take back and use on my four-year-old and one-year-old. I want to get into the testing and assessment question a bit more. You have already touched on it quite a bit today. What is the impact of testing and assessment in schools on children's ability to read for pleasure? I would like to start with Professor Cremin and then Dr Hendry and then open it up to everybody else.

Professor Cremin: I do not think we have, or I do not know of, any studies that have tracked that, so I am not dealing here with an academic, peer-reviewed argument coming to you. We have worked now with nearly 450 schools across the last eight years trying to support them in intentionally planning strategic support for volitional reading, reading for pleasure. One of the initial positions that schools often come to us with is the sense of, "Well, we have one thing cracked. We know what we are doing. We are delivering the phonics and we have fidelity to that particular programme," or whatever and then they are pushing through to the SATs at the other end. "Where are we going to squeeze this in, Teresa? We have done it because we want to, because we have a belief that it will make a difference but where is the time?"

The orientation in many schools is to try to deliver what will be assessed. I think it is a challenge for the profession to try to balance developing the skills that are absolutely essential and the will, which is also absolutely essential. Currently we have a skew between the two. Let me give you an example. Teachers will say, "Well, we read aloud. We read aloud every day. We are reading aloud. It is comprehension. We teach the children to comprehend the text through our read aloud." We argue that there should also be a complementary space for reading aloud a wide range of different texts as well as stories that is a relaxed space, a down time, a time when we can initiate, as young people the questions we want to discuss, rather than answer Miss's or Sir's questions. There is that whole tension of balance that I think is difficult.

The other piece is that the curriculum for English and other parts is quite focused on the entitlement, the national curriculum, what we need to cover and so this is quite culturally different. This is about facilitating the autonomy of the children in my class to make choices when they go home. I am here trying to deliver the history curriculum or cover whatever it is, the science that we have agreed to do in term 2 and I teach year 4, whatever. At the same time I am trying to nurture the children to make choices in their own time, this weekend, to give themselves that 10 minutes of reading to enjoy or 15 minutes or however much they wish.

I think those two are in tension with one another but we see fabulous journeys of schools as they travel. When they prioritise it they can do this, but it takes determination and it takes what Helen referred to as



high levels of professionalism. It is much more demanding professionally to develop reading for pleasure, volitional reading outside your classroom, than it is to deliver a phonics programme within your classroom. Back to the professional development argument, we need to upskill the profession and support them. They are keen to do so to develop a professional nuance that is autonomy-focused for the young people.

Dr Hendry: I do not know that I have a great deal to add to that, but I think the core things are around time and curriculum overload, or at least perceived curriculum overload by teachers, and that is what we hear when we are working with them. As I have said already this morning, reading for pleasure is mandated in the curriculum but not tested. I am not at all advocating that we should test it or could test it, by the way. The balance in the timetable is not given over to reading for pleasure. Teachers are genuinely worried about a time in their day that does not feel like they are teaching something. It feels like they are not satisfying their job description. It is only when we give them the power to understand the importance of open child-led spaces, they understand that that is doing something very significant of educational benefit to the children they are working with. Then they can go, "It is okay. I can be in this space reading alongside children. I can be in this space talking about what we have read. I do not have to lead the lesson in a traditional English curriculum type of way." I think that is influenced by their expectations. The external assessment expectations make teachers focus on what needs to happen and it is just normal.

In early years we also see very similarly at the end of reception there is some small-scale research that talks about the pressure of the GLD. I do not know if you know all the terminology. It is the good level of development that children are expected to reach at the end of reception. I am sorry, I use that voice in a not professional way. There is nothing wrong with having standards and needing to support children on their developmental journeys, but it is a developmental journey. There is some interesting research about parents being horribly disappointed because their children are not reaching the good level of development and then worrying about it, children in reception already feeling that they are not good enough and of course teachers and the bit before school, the early years practitioners, stressing about how they will get children to reach that.

I do not have simple solutions and, having been a teacher and a teacher educator in research for many years, I understand that all these things have to interplay. We need to have standards in curricula that drive us but something has gone wrong in that balance to a certain extent when we know that those things are coming strongly from the classroom. I am afraid I cannot offer easy solutions but I am aware that that is a genuine challenge happening now.

Q35 **Mark Sewards:** Thank you. Are there any other contributions on that



open question? I just have a couple of follow-ups if not.

Professor Ricketts: It might come up in the follow-ups, but I will say that it is important to frame assessment and frame the relationship between the assessment and what we want our young people to learn. We can, of course, have high stakes assessments and low stakes assessments. It is very important that we assess the learning that is happening in schools. That happens all the time and in every classroom and almost for every unit of work that happens in school.

Low stakes assessment is not only important for knowing what young people already know but also encouraging the learning process. What we know from a lot of psychological research is that that testing—and I do not mean high stakes testing, I mean very low stakes formative assessment—is part of the learning process. It helps us to recall and apply the knowledge that we have. It is important to think about assessment as part of learning and think about those things in the round together. We always need to be mindful of what the unintended implications of a particular assessment might be and how it will direct attention within the school and by teachers and school leaders and also how it will land with our young people.

The last thing I will say is that we need to think about what kind of assessment we are talking about. What we have in education is, broadly speaking, two different kinds of assessment. We have assessment that is criterion referenced and that is what we usually use. We use that as university lecturers and it is used in schools to say, “Here is a curriculum target. Have our young people met this target?” That is what phonics screening checks, key stage 2 assessments and GCSEs do.

Then we also have assessments that acknowledge the fact that young people variable. If we think about reading proficiency or reading for pleasure, it will be very variable. We know that proficiency varies on roughly a normal distribution, like height and weight, and we need to take that into account.

Those two things need to be thought about together because we cannot expect all children necessarily to meet a target if the target is set at the average. Not all children will be average. We need to think about those two things together so we want to know what the minimum required targets are for our young people to make sure that they have met the curriculum aims but we also want to acknowledge that young people are variable. It really speaks to what Helen says about young people’s identities as learners. If they feel they have failed to meet the curriculum target, really it is just that it is not a bar that should be applied to everybody. That is important.

Q36 **Mark Sewards:** The Government announced last October that they are going to introduce a new reading test for year 8 students. I think you welcomed that, Professor Ricketts. Would you mind elaborating on that very briefly?



Professor Ricketts: Very briefly, just to say that in principle, yes, I have long been advocating in secondary schools that there is a need to go beyond the information that secondary schools already have to put in place, not assessment for assessment sake, not lots of assessment, just very carefully selected assessments that give them the information that they need to know who among their cohort has a reading need and what they need to do to support them. I think that a combination of a screening assessment that everybody does alongside a diagnostic assessment that confirms that need and also specifies what that need is and therefore what we should be doing is really important.

On the year 8 reading assessment, it is important to know—and we do not yet know—what the structure and purpose of that assessment will be. Supplementing information about demographics and about key stage 2, which of course is a criterion reference assessment that tells us how young people did in the primary English curriculum, something that complements that by saying, “Is this young person entering into secondary school with a reading need that will hamper their ability to access the curriculum?” is a different question. It is really important that we pick up those children because we cannot just pick them up early in primary. We are doing very good work early in primary but, as I have said, some reading needs emerge later. We need to continue to monitor and support reading needs as they move through the school system. Assessment is good but we need to think very carefully about opportunity costs and what we are doing.

Mark Sewards: There will trials of the assessment, but I would have to understand how that applies in this context too. Are there any final thoughts about that year 8 assessment that is getting introduced? No.

Q37 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We have reached the end of our time this morning, but I want to ask a final question. You have given us an enormously rich and varied amount of information today and it sets the context brilliantly for the further evidence sessions that we are holding in this inquiry. In no more than two sentences, because we are out of time, what should the Government do to harness all the information that comes from your research and improve the numbers of children who choose to read for pleasure? I will start with Professor Cremin but no more than two sentences.

Professor Cremin: The Government need to support teachers and the wider profession to focus on intentionally, strategically supporting the development of young readers’ identities so they develop the choice and habit. There are multiple ways that can be done but it needs to be higher profile and in an intentional way within the curriculum. To add, it would be therefore learner-led or pupil led and autonomy facilitated.

Dr Hendry: It would be helpful to offer some more training for early years practitioners around responsive child-led opportunities for reading for pleasure and perhaps take a look at the balance in our initial teacher training around reading for pleasure versus skills.



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Dr Shinskey: First, to focus on parental motivation and enjoyment, for example launch a public campaign about reading for fun, connecting in short daily moments with your child. It is also if we could fund community-based programmes that do not just provide books but provide interactive guidance about how to share books with small children.

Dr Taylor: I am glad you said that, otherwise I was going to. I will pick up on how we are doing work with phonics very well in primary schools, and I definitely do not want that to go away but it sometimes leaves schools feeling they do not have time for other aspects of language and literacy that are very important. Broader oral language and language comprehension activities are important, so it is trying to get primary schools the space and time to do lots of oral language and spoken language activities with children.

Professor Ricketts: I will say something slightly different, which is that we need to think about proficiency and reading for pleasure together in an integrated way. I think we are all agreed on that. We also need to think about the whole education system and the journey that young people make through the education system. It is ensuring that throughout that period they get the kind of support that is targeted to their age and their level of proficiency and engagement and that we are connecting what is happening with primary school with what is happening in secondary school.

Chair: Thank you very much. If there is anything that you did not feel you were able to get across to us this morning that you think we should take into account, please do write to us afterwards. We would certainly welcome that. Thank you very much for coming to be with us this morning. That brings our evidence session to a close for today.