

A National Agenda on Reading for Pleasure: Insights from Communities of Readers Research

A summary report of research prepared for the National Library of New Zealand as part of its Communities of Readers initiative.

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1) Introduction

Our aspiration is for Aotearoa to be a nation of readers. A place where all tamariki, rangatahi and whānau have opportunities to read and have access to books, rich reading environments, reading role models, library services and support to develop a love of reading. However, there are persistent inequities in access to these opportunities across the country. So how then do you create a nation of readers? It can't be left to chance or to individuals -you need to build, support and strengthen communities to be at the heart of this kaupapa (Director of Literacy and Learning, National Library of New Zealand, email correspondence 15 September 2021).

We are building up [a community of readers] within our schools, within our classrooms, within our Kāhui Ako. It is a spiral encompassing different communities, spiralling outward, bigger. We are a people who read and who enjoy it and we learn from other people. We share good things to read. We grow that passion of wanting to find new things to read and share with others. We are just known as this. It is who we are. This is what we do. We like to read (Primary School Deputy Principal, interview 24 September 2020, parentheses added).

I don't think New Zealand is a nation of readers. I think a lot of people, especially young people our age, only read because they have to. It's a requirement for either school or assessments or just something you have to do. I don't think a lot of people do it for enjoyment (Lizzie, Year 12 student, group discussion 2 September 2020).

I agree with Lizzie because, like she said, we are only reading for either school or work and most of the people here are practical learners (May, Year 12 student, group discussion 2 September 2020).

There has been little attention to children and tamariki's reading for pleasure as a topic for research in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reading for pleasure is central to the purpose of the National Library and other public or school libraries. The limited attention outside of libraries, especially in education and public policy where reading for literacy is prioritised, is demonstrated in the experience of children and tamariki. Reading as they progress through school is more likely to become something they do because they must and reading for pleasure regarded as a solitary activity that takes them away from their responsibilities. The collective good of reading for pleasure provides a compelling reason to change their experiences and beliefs.

Communities of Readers is an initiative of the National Library of New Zealand (National Library) that aims to connect more children and young people with reading. It is part of the National Library's wider agenda for embedding reading in the nation. This report brings together in one summary document significant findings from three pieces of research commissioned by the library as part of their broader initiative. The research is centred on children and tamariki's¹ reading for pleasure.

Reading for pleasure is associated with many cognitive, social and wellbeing benefits for individuals and their communities. There are also public benefits through greater participation, empathy, and willingness to take responsibility for others. These insights come from a literature review (the first of the three pieces of research reported here) of what is known from international and national research about reading for pleasure that is augmented by interviews with expert informants from the national library and group discussions with some young people (Boyask et al., 2021b). This is the first comprehensive review of

¹ Children and tamariki in this report are between birth and 18 years of age.

evidence and scholarly knowledge on reading for pleasure published in Aotearoa New Zealand. The review challenges beliefs that reading for pleasure as an activity is individualistic and solitary. It concludes that better understanding of reading for pleasure as a social activity and how to support it holistically will help distribute the collective good of reading within our national context, including the good of reading literacy.

The other two pieces of research are case studies of reading for pleasure within two of the communities involved in the National Library's Community of Readers initiative (Boyask et al., 2021a; Harrington et al. 2021).

The first is a study of the reading environment at Huntly College with student research associates co-researching with the AUT research team. The reading environment at Huntly College has changed in response to new leadership at the school, staff are changing their views of reading, more students are borrowing from the library and student researchers find that students are more positive about reading than their teachers believe.

The second case study involves a group of primary schools in Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā Community of Learners in West Auckland. The study uses observational and interview approaches to investigate the visibility of "Teachers as Readers" as role models who promote the value of reading for pleasure. Aspects of leadership and responsibility are also considered in terms of promoting reading for pleasure and its continued progress.

2) Literature Review

Communities of readers is a term in research associated with reading at school, but our literature review leads us to emphasise that networks and relations which sustain reading for pleasure extend well beyond school boundaries and so must plans for its further promotion and support.

National reading research tends to focus on reading literacy outcomes and within school instruction. When Fletcher and Nicholas (2016) spoke to adolescents in New Zealand classrooms about their perceptions of reading they found that reading was largely valued for its usefulness as a life skill and few "...students highlighted reading for pleasure as part of their everyday life" (p. 489). If reading and its support are conceived too narrowly, might it be contributing to children and tamariki's declining enjoyment rather than pleasure from reading, perhaps explaining evident declines in enjoyment and stagnation in achievement of reading (Medina & McGregor, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2017)?

In the review we examine reading for pleasure and associated terms "enjoyment of reading", "engaged reading", and "communities of readers". The main findings of the review are summarised here, organised in four thematic sections, and concluded in an overall summary of findings. The sections start by defining the benefits of reading for pleasure for individuals and communities, highlight the significance of reading for pleasure in social, educational, and public arenas and advance ideas for supporting reading for pleasure within these different spheres.

2.1 Reading for pleasure

- Reading for pleasure is one of several terms that have been used to describe reading that is absorbing, potentially to the point of complete preoccupation, for the reader (Nell, 1988; Garces et al., 2018; Paris & McNaughton, 2010).
- Early use associated this form of reading with play activity that is pursued for its own sake, but its associations have changed and therefore reading for pleasure is no longer regarded as for pleasure alone.

- The concept of reading for pleasure in Aotearoa New Zealand has been influenced significantly by literacy debates from the United Kingdom, in which official definitions associate the term with individual freedom (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; DfE, 2012) and counter-discourses align with social engagement through concepts like pluralism and participation (Craft, 2011).
- Individual benefits of reading for pleasure include improved school achievement (Jerrim & Moss, 2019), cognitive function (Sullivan & Brown, 2015), psychological wellbeing (Mak & Fancourt, 2020a), healthy behaviours (Mak & Fancourt, 2020b), and social inclusion (Wilhelm & Smith, 2016).
- While longitudinal international comparative studies of children's reading indicate enjoyment of reading is declining, there is little other research that examines their reading for pleasure in Aotearoa New Zealand, and further research on purposes for and experiences of reading would be valuable.
- Studies of reading from the adult population of Aotearoa New Zealand suggest that even when time spent reading increases through digital engagement, enjoyment of reading is declining in younger age groups.
- Reading for pleasure is motivated by others within cultural contexts and physical environments where reading is valued and promoted through real and virtual interactions with significant people and sometimes non-human influences.
- Books provided to children and tamariki may stigmatize or exclude some identities, including Pacific and Māori cultural identities, and some evidence suggests that while books enhance academic achievement complex oral language interactions between Māori mothers and their tamariki may be stronger in supporting cognitive development (Neha et al., 2020).
- When making their own selections older children and tamariki blur the lines between different media to discover and engage in the things they are interested in, yet not all media are of equal value to development, for example, reading of print media novels has a stronger correlation with enhanced cognitive skills than other kinds of fiction texts.

2.2 Communities of readers

- Communities are more than a collection of individual people (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016), and when talking about communities of readers categories that appear natural like readers or literacy are changeable social and cultural products that are defined by "interested parties, multiple activities, and different goals and circumstances" (Lave, 2009, p.204).
- Regarding communities of readers as variable and guided by multiple and sometimes contested activities and goals helps with understanding the totality of a community of readers; they are more than entities that support individual cognition, behaviours, or emotions (Cremin et al., 2014) or the exercise of free will (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Wilhelm, 2016).
- In research the community in the term communities of readers usually refers to communities in classrooms and schools, sometimes extending to libraries and home, although a broader concept appears in some research from the United States where it describes readers who interact in a social circle to discuss books and motivate each other's interest in reading (Strommen, & Mates, 2004,

p.193), yet even this definition does not adequately account for multiple interests, goals and contentions within communities.

- Parental cultural capital is not evenly spread throughout different communities yet is very influential on children's reading, especially the accumulated capital from education, but also the amount of time they can spend with their children, take them to libraries, read to them or take part in school activities (Sullivan & Brown, 2015; J. Fletcher, 2018).
- Children and tamariki are members of many different communities and perceiving them as belonging to a single community of readers may lead to differences that are valued in one context being discounted or marginalised in another, such as differences between school and home knowledges, dis/ability, lingual differences, or ethnicities (Jackson, 2016; Simpson et al., 2020; Rona and McLachlan, 2018).

2.3 Communities of readers in formal educational settings

- Reading for pleasure appears in both Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum, but reading activities in early childhood centres, schools or even at home have other goals for reading different from enjoyment, and these other priorities can dominate children and tamariki's reading even during time set aside for reading for pleasure.
- The priority to raise literacy attainment can overwhelm attempts to support reading for pleasure through pedagogy and curriculum for schools in communities with low-socioeconomic profiles.
- According to Cremin et al. (2014) "reading teachers" motivate reading through their own knowledge and enthusiasm, are knowledgeable about children's literature, identify as readers themselves and can communicate their enthusiasm and interests in reading to others.
- Pedagogies for supporting reading for pleasure include reading aloud for pleasure, creating engaging reading environments, and creating space to talk about books where readers can choose their own texts and read independently (Cremin et al., 2014), and teachers who do not make space for these kinds of activities can expect their absence to have a negative effect on students' motivation to read (Merga & Ledger, 2019).
- School leaders may also promote or restrict children and tamariki's reading for pleasure, although there is limited research on leading reading for pleasure.
- School librarians are less likely to be limited by competing priorities for children and tamariki's reading and are freer to support reading for pleasure.

2.4 Reading Publics

- Enhancing the reading engagement of the nation may have tangible effects on the capacity of its citizens for informed decision-making, empathy and taking responsibility for others or the environment.
- According to UNESCO (2017) literacy develops naturally when social policy takes a broad view and aims to develop a literate society within literate rich environments rather than put all focus on literacy interventions for individuals.

- Building a literate society through national programmes is difficult as seen in Brazil and Portugal (Silveira, 2010, da Costa et al., 2015), where the intention to develop national plans for reading that extend into public life largely defaulted to educational programmes in schools where the infrastructure is more developed and amenable to reading reform.
- Public libraries are public institutions whose mission is more closely aligned with communities of readers than other public institutions and librarians can be supported to exercise leadership across organisations and agencies in building reading cultures (Pasini, 2018).
- Public institutions are channels through which the government serves the public good, but the good of reading circulates through channels more diverse than government and public services (e.g. the publishing industry, neighbourhood book clubs, internet communities and so on) and these may also need to be engaged to foster the collective good of reading for pleasure.
- There is a risk that library programmes become determined by the priorities of schools or other partners when working in partnership.
- There is a dearth of evidence on public benefits to Aotearoa New Zealand of children and tamariki's reading for pleasure or how to achieve public benefits other than through individual acquisition of literacy and educational attainment in systems of schooling.

2.5 Findings of the Literature Review

Reading for pleasure is a shifting, porous concept. It is sometimes contrasted with a view of reading as functional literacy skill, but it is also has transformed from play-based activity pursued for its own sake to a means to enhance performance and wellbeing. At its best the different purposes for reading for pleasure are integrated within wider purposes for social and cultural life.

Pleasure readers have higher literacy, advanced academic performance, some improved health and wellbeing outcomes, greater cultural, political, social, and economic participation and so on. If reading for pleasure is regarded just as a benefit to be accumulated and competed for, at risk is continuing marginalization of those who do not have access to its good.

This is especially the case when considering the benefits of reading for pleasure on reading literacy. Formal schooling is the dominant way that children and tamariki access support for reading. Greater disparities will likely emerge between children and tamariki if school reading literacy interventions are designed foremost to enhance performance or come at the expense of encouraging all to read for pleasure.

The research evidence for numerous benefits of reading for pleasure is mounting, but how to promote and distribute these benefits to all is less clear. There is some research on reading for pleasure pedagogies, but little on the kinds of environments and leadership that sustain them.

International ideas about reading for pleasure need to be evaluated and perhaps reconsidered for local conditions. Areas to investigate further through a national agenda include gaps in the international literature as well as:

- reading identities and knowledge of teachers in schools and kura,
- pedagogies that support reading for pleasure for diverse cultural communities,
- pedagogies that address socio-economic effects on reading,

- reading outside of school (in home or other environments like youth groups, on marae, peer groups, churches, digital environments and so on) and how to promote it,
- school and public library support of reading for pleasure of school-aged children and tamariki,
- and partnership working across agencies and interests to support reading.

There is some evidence that digital technologies are taking up time once spent solely on reading books. Sometimes digital technologies displace the time spent reading print materials. Sometimes print materials and digital technologies are used together, raising concern that digital technologies distract concentration in reading. While digital technologies facilitate some kinds of reading, and some digital technologies like e-Books are designed to facilitate reading, they generally do not support the same kinds of sustained, engaged reading as books.

While reading for pleasure can make significant contributions to profound social interaction its benefits are often perceived as benefits to individuals and as a solitary activity. This perception is likely reinforced when reading for pleasure is defined as an activity of individual free will or portrayed in schools as spending time alone with a book. Reading for pleasure seen as individual freedom may be undesirable or seem unattainable to members of a community where collectivity is valued highly. This may be in a digitally connected world but also within communities strong in communitarian values or a strong sense of social responsibility.

Research currently provides a very incomplete picture of how to support reading for pleasure in Aotearoa New Zealand, but it is suggesting some directions through policy and public service. School dominates as a means for addressing uneven distribution of reading, but the task is too big for schools alone and other public and community resources can be employed. Those that stand out from the literature review findings include supporting the publication of engaging and relevant reading materials; resourcing public and school libraries to assist with access to reading texts and act as transitional spaces of reading for pleasure between the life of children and tamariki within and outside-of school; and developing programmes that build supportive networks for reading through collective impact models or multi-agency working.

3) A Changing Story of Reading at Huntly College

In 2018 a new principal started at Huntly College bringing her experience of leading three other schools within a culture of innovative curriculum and reflective teaching. Huntly College was previously notable for its ongoing struggles to meet the expectations of the school inspectorate and the Ministry of Education. In her new role she set about changing narratives of Huntly College through pedagogical, curriculum and staff changes, and changes to narratives about leading and reading.

Vision Huntly College is associated with reading; leaders are readers

Mission Working together to support staff and the student leaders to promote and inspire Huntly College students to read for pleasure and wellbeing

This formal mission and vision statement were formed at a meeting in March 2020 between National Library and Huntly College before the closure of all schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. From this a programme of work was agreed for a project that consisted of three work streams: Staff as readers, student leaders as readers and researchers, and experiences for students. The full extent of the programme is reported in a final report of the research at Huntly College (Boyask et al. 2021a). It consisted of activities with staff and students at Huntly College, including sharing reading texts, professional development for teachers on reading for pleasure, and school trips to the National Library in Auckland, Auckland Museum and

Auckland Writers' Festival. The activity was focused on the school community, and the programme is planned to end in July 2021 with a Festival of Stories organised by the school that is to extend into the Huntly community.

The university research team interviewed and observed those involved in the organisation of the project from the school and National Library using a narrative inquiry methodology to see if there were narratives that suggested change in the reading culture of the school. The researchers also recruited a group of three student research associates to work with them on researching the reading culture at Huntly College. The student researchers used interview and survey techniques to find out about the views of their teachers and peers on reading.

The school leadership and national library informants for the university researchers' inquiry suggest that the Communities of Readers project has contributed to a significant change in the reading culture at Huntly College. There is evidence from the library that more students are accessing reading texts and using the library than in previous years. The senior leadership report that teachers are more aware of reading and believe the leadership team are better supporting reading at the school. The main challenge for the school is maintaining the momentum and building on what the Communities of Readers project has achieved beyond the life of the project. The student research associates found there were differences between students' views of reading and what their teachers believed were the views of the students.

Through all the studies done by both teachers and student researchers with the AUT research team we found that even with there being many improvements in students' reading for pleasure at Huntly College over the past few years there are still many beliefs and conceptions about what students think about and read (Mounsey in Boyask et al., 2021a).

These and some other points of contradiction emerged during the project. Recognising and reflecting upon them alongside successes are important to future growth and understanding for those committed to building reading cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand. The main insights emerging from researching the reading culture of the school are that:

- Through the school leadership and National Library personnel the Communities of Readers project at Huntly College has generated new experiences for students and staff and has contributed to new narratives about reading within the school.
- Student research associates at Huntly College have identified two areas that may have implications for future pedagogical development at the school: that the importance students attribute to reading is higher than their teachers believe, and the breadth and diversity of students' out-of-school and pleasure reading activities may be a platform for future growth.

Viewing these insights in the light of other research suggests some general implications for supporting and developing reading cultures within schools:

- School leaders, teachers and young people in schools interpret narratives about reading differently based on their different experiences and responsibilities in multiple communities, although common experiences in school might bring these interpretations closer together.
- Reading for pleasure in schools may be understood and promoted in a way that aligns with students' other roles and group memberships; an example can be seen in an increase in borrowing of graphic novels, which meshes with students' outside of school interests in reading online comics and is supported through social groups.

- For secondary schools to assist in distributing the value of reading for pleasure they must work hard, because reading for literacy is dominant in the New Zealand Curriculum and qualifications framework and reading for pleasure is marginal.
- Finding time and space for curriculum and professional or personal development that is crucial to building a richly literate environment may come into conflict with other priorities for schools.
- Some of these challenges, while apparent, were mitigated by a willing school leadership with an enthusiasm for reading and the support of high resourcing and expertise from the library indicating the importance to reading cultures of interest, commitment, knowledge, resourcing, authority, and collaboration, including collaboration across organisations.

4) Making Reading for Pleasure Visible in Five Primary Schools from Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā

Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā community of readers chose to approach the aims of Communities of Readers through focusing on developing “Teacher as Readers” within their schools, meaning they aspired to have teachers who present themselves to their school community as role models in reading for pleasure (Harrington et al., 2021).

While the first planning meetings were in early 2020 the project was not officially launched until Tuesday 13 October 2020 at Te Manawa public library with over 120 teachers, principals, and librarians in attendance, following delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. At this launch event, National Library staff made presentations explaining the value of reading for pleasure, enticing attending readers to share books with children and offering some strategies that could be used to encourage an interest in reading books with different themes. A second event was held in March 2021 for all teachers in Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā aiming to develop awareness of teachers’ own identities as readers.

A core group of school librarians, teachers, leaders, and National Library staff coordinate the project. The focus of their meetings has changed over time, from discussing the National Library’s implementation of the project to sharing what has been happening in schools and planning future events (led more by school staff, with input from the National Library as to how they can support those initiatives) which has seen a shift in the responsibility for the project. The Communities of Readers project has raised the profile of the National Library in the schools, and they are now engaged in doing what might be useful with teachers and leaders within the schools rather than just the school librarian.

During the Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā project, four themes related to the support for reading for pleasure in communities of readers emerged from the interviews conducted and from the meetings and events held. The themes of leadership, teachers as readers, access and texts are useful for considering ongoing success in the five schools, and to inform decisions about the shape of future projects elsewhere that aim to develop communities of readers.

Leadership

It is important that the Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā project is given explicit significance by leadership within the school and teachers feel “allowed” to spend time just reading for pleasure with their students. As the project has developed school leaders have become visible to staff and students as readers through staffroom libraries, talking to others about books, and “passive ‘duty time’ when staff took books out in the playground at break times to read” (School Librarian, interview 6 May 2021). Discussion amongst the community project

leaders in this project has developed from being about leadership to responsibility, and that a project of this sort requires everyone to take responsibility for those aspects that relate to them.

Teachers as readers

The project was an opportunity for teachers to be the reading role model for children and families in their school community. Staff recognised that they face many of the same pressures as parents and did not read as much as they used to or would have liked. The two large events for all staff in Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā aimed to address these issues. At the conclusion of the first event school staff took nearly 500 books away with them to share with their class, each other, and to read themselves. The second event focused on developing teachers' identity as a reader. A group of teachers said that they do not read for pleasure, but they love reading to their classes. Through the discussion they came to realise that this was reading for pleasure and that the social aspect of reading is important.

Access to texts

Access to books and other reading resources is a challenge for families within the communities connected to Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā. Digital provision of reading texts can be a barrier to access. As a result, some schools developed their own programme to address this issue by opening school libraries over the break and providing access to books. One school librarian in Te Kāhui Ako o Tiriwā has a long-standing project in the local community where old refrigerators are used as community libraries for the local community to access and exchange books. The National Library supported this project through the supply of books to the "fridge libraries", as well as other in activities such as events and directly through contact with schools, teachers, and school librarians.

Reading texts

All interviewees talked about the range of things that young people are reading currently. They have observed them getting pleasure from texts that they may not have considered before, raising the need to be careful not to impose their own limits onto others in terms of what texts might be read. The importance of talking to others about books as part of the process of reading for pleasure has been commented on in numerous interviews, and some have observed students sharing books and talking about them which they now see as reading for pleasure when they may not have before.

Implications

An idea from this project that may be useful for the future is recognizing reading for pleasure extends further than an individual with a book to wider engagement with communities within a school or classroom and beyond. It could also involve broadening ideas about the traditional role of the teacher librarian to a role that extends across the whole school beyond the physical bounds of the library.

Part of what is required is for schools to make a shift from seeing reading aloud and modelling reading for pleasure as an incidental part of the programme to a valued school-wide approach that is consistently visible to students. Those involved in the project from the schools suggested that they saw a change in the intentions of the staff demonstrated by acts of reading that showed children that they valued reading, more books in classrooms and not only the library, and teachers sitting in the playground reading as opposed to marking papers or supervising play.

The National Library facilitators too have found that their involvement in the project enabled them to be involved with schools and school staff in different ways.

We've been able to visit and react because we've been in this project, they were able to do more in the project than we would be able to do as a normal facilitator in a school (National Library capability facilitator, interview 10 May 2021).

5) Implications for a National Agenda on Reading for Pleasure

Reading for pleasure is related to many beneficial behaviours in children and tamariki, such as improved educational performance, cognition, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

There are positive associations for communities and nations with reading for pleasure, such as greater participation in decision-making, empathy, and willingness to take on responsibility for others or the environment.

Reading for pleasure is supported and better distributed when social and educational policy takes the broad view towards creating a literate society rather than focusing solely on interventions for individuals.

There are gaps in knowledge on how to better distribute the collective good of reading for pleasure in Aotearoa New Zealand, but current knowledge suggests some key factors are:

- Reading initiatives should be aligned with the multiple and varied group memberships of children and tamariki, such as recognising existing reading practices amongst peer groups or building bridges between their lives at school and those out-of-school (in more environments than home).
- Assumptions about reading for pleasure that negate its benefits may be improved by learning what it means to others, sharing experiences of reading with one another and recognising that while reading is sometimes a solitary experience it is primarily a social activity.
- The limits of one type of organisation may be transcended by creating alliances and working across different groups (for example, different public institutions, publishing industry, internet groups, cultural communities, or neighbourhood groups) to promote reading for pleasure in locally relevant ways.

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