

‘Because it reminds me of my culture.’ ‘Because I want to challenge myself.’ ‘Because I like all the stars and the swirls.’ What influences children’s independent choice of text?

Alice Reedy  and David Reedy 

Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives of children in two East London primary schools on what influences their independent choice of text, in the context of developing reading for pleasure in schools. All children in three selected year groups (ages approximately 6, 8 and 10) were invited to take part in the research, and from those that volunteered, six children per year group were randomly selected in each school. These focus groups were then observed choosing reading material from a range of pre-determined texts which varied in genre, recommended age-range and representation of diverse groups. The children were then interviewed, with the two researchers seeking to understand the factors that influenced their decisions. A thematic analysis was subsequently conducted to determine the most prevalent of these factors; the researchers identified seven key themes, which will be discussed in this paper. Practical implications that were identified for supporting children to read for pleasure are then suggested, based on these themes.

Key words: children’s literature, identity, primary education, response to literature, reading for pleasure, text choice, text selection

with a wide range of carefully selected, high quality books that reflected the cultural and ethnic diversity of both the school populations where the research was carried out and the population of the United Kingdom as whole. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that other diverse groups such as LGBTQIA + and persons with disabilities were represented in the selection of texts offered. The following review of current literature on reading for pleasure and diverse representation within children’s literature will provide the contextual basis for these decisions.

Reading for Pleasure (RfP) has long been seen to have positive educational, personal and social outcomes, both for individuals (Clark and Rumbold, 2006; Glead, 2013; OECD, 2002) and for whole nations (Boyask et al., 2021). Although Reading for Pleasure has been defined in different ways (Bearne and Reedy, 2024), choosing to read for oneself is central. The definition chosen for the purpose of this article is as follows:

‘Reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading.’ (Clark and Rumbold, 2006, p. 5).

Children’s choice to read for pleasure is therefore associated with intrinsic motivation, but children also respond to external encouragement (extrinsic motivation) which can then develop into this intrinsic motivation. Schools and the staff within them can therefore play an important role in supporting and developing children’s intrinsic motivation to read through external means, if they have the sufficient knowledge and skills required (McGeown et al., 2020). This complex understanding of how to build children’s motivation to read is important for educators, as encouraging engagement in reading is regarded as a key aspect of the reading curriculum/pedagogy by schools, researchers, and

Introduction

This paper draws on a small-scale research project carried out by the authors of this paper at two East London primary schools in 2023. One school was located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and the other in Newham. The aim was to explore what children said about how they chose a text/texts to read when given autonomy of choice in a school setting. There was an additional focus on presenting children

Funding information The researchers are reporting that they have received no funding or sponsorship for this research.

policy makers (DFE, 2015, 2023). This is particular to the context of schools in England, where 'reading for enjoyment' has become a more specific focus of the DfE's *Reading Framework* (2023) and Ofsted inspections (Ofsted, 2022). Schools are now expected to develop children's reading enjoyment alongside their reading skills (Cremin et al., 2014), and therefore are encouraged to develop the components of an RfP pedagogy within schools (Cremin, 2019). Although this growing prominence of reading for pleasure in schools is highly welcomed, Oxley and McGeown (2023) found that some common reading for pleasure practices in schools, such as providing rewards and requiring children to use reading journals, can potentially undermine children's intrinsic motivation to read through an overemphasis on extrinsic factors. This suggests that there is a need for teachers to be involved in more professional development opportunities that focus on developing effective reading for pleasure pedagogies, for example, through the use of research-practice partnerships (McGeown et al., 2023).

Wigfield et al. (2008) outline a series of factors that influence students' reading motivation:

'(a) autonomy support and choice, (b) use of interesting texts in classroom instruction, (c) having conceptual goals for reading instruction, and (d) supporting collaboration in reading'. (Wigfield et al., 2008 p. 432)

In their research summary, McGeown and Wilkinson (2021) identify similar principles which should underpin the approach that schools and teachers take in shaping children's motivation and engagement in reading. These principles include access to reading resources that are of interest, giving children control over choice, time to read independently, resources reflective of their lived experiences, as well as texts where they can find themselves reflected in the characters and settings. During the subsequent discussion of findings, it will become apparent how relevant these similar sets of principles were to the responses that the children gave during our interviews. A particularly notable strand in promoting engagement in reading, as noted above, is the encouragement of autonomy in children when making choices about what they wish to read independently. Having free choice of text promotes agency and is central in supporting children's motivation to read, and thus the possibilities of finding satisfaction and pleasure from reading (Reedy and de Carvalho, 2021). However, in schools, children's choice of text is dependent on the selection that is available to them, which varies widely in scope and quality from school to school. One quarter of disadvantaged primary schools in England, such as the two which provided the context for this research, do not have a school library, and 40% of all primary

schools have no dedicated library budget, which directly impacts the selection of texts that children have access to choose from (Todd, 2021). This raises important questions about how educators can fulfil their responsibility to develop their provision of available texts, in order to allow children to successfully and enthusiastically identify reading material that appeals to them and reflects their identity and interests. More financial support for, and recognition of the importance of, libraries and book stocks in primary schools is something that needs to be considered by all stakeholders (Todd, 2021).

Given the diverse nature of the pupil population in the United Kingdom, and particularly in East London where this research took place, the researchers wanted to ensure that the selection of texts that they were providing for children to choose from was sufficiently representative of this diversity to ensure that children could 'find themselves' within the selection available. The Reflecting Realities Report (CLPE, 2022) emphasises that:

In their schools, their homes, their libraries and their bookshops, children need to meet characters that look like them – and those that do not look like them, characters that inhabit similar – and different – worlds; stories that both reflect their lives and show them the lives of others. (CLPE, 2022, p. 3)

When giving children free choice of representative reading materials, the researchers were interested in whether the children would gravitate towards texts which reflected aspects of their identities, as this is something not always identified in previous research on diversity in children's literature.

In addition, there has been little research into children's perspectives on the strategies they use to choose texts to read, and the beliefs and attitudes that underpin their selections (Merga and Mat Roni, 2017) (McGeown et al., 2023) and therefore more information is needed for educators to build on in schools when developing a RfP pedagogy.

What and how children (and adults) choose to read reflects the way they see themselves as a reader; their reader identity. Reader identity has been defined as:

'Their (children's) ways of reading, of being a reader, and the extent to which they view themselves as "someone who reads."' (Sellers, 2019, p. 938)

Cremin et al. (2023, p. 7) develop this by noting that children actively shape and shift their reading identities:

'their literate identities are always in flux, influenced by the environment, the text, their past and present

experiences of literacy and by the identity positions as readers and writers that are made available to them by parents, peers, teachers and others, and those that they choose to adopt.'

This research aimed to investigate, drawing on pupil voice, how the choices children made when browsing a wide selection of representative books reflected their identities as readers, at that moment in time, but also their broader sense of themselves. Looking at the details of children's own reasons for their choices reveals both the range of the criteria they utilise and provides insights into the nature of their reader identities in the moment.

Research design and structure (methodology)

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of East London prior to the undertaking of the research. Informed consent was obtained from the headteachers of both schools and subsequently the process and purpose of the research was explained to the children through a video introduction from the researchers, which invited voluntary consent from those interested. This also allowed the potential participants to be visually introduced to the researchers, who were not known to them. Children were then provided with simplified participant information and consent forms, which also included visual prompts to support understanding. These forms included a note on the freedom to withdraw at any time. Parental consent forms were sent home to all households to ensure parental consent was obtained, these forms contained accessible information on right to withdraw and confidentiality, including how the data would be managed while maintaining the anonymity of participants.

All participant interviews were conducted within the respective schools in a semi-structured and informal environment, although as detailed below in the data collection section, the researchers acknowledge that the environment created was an unfamiliar one, with two unknown researchers observing and asking questions. The children were escorted by their class teachers and took part in the research in groups with their classmates to try and mitigate some of the impact that this unfamiliarity will have had on their behaviours and responses, but the researchers are aware that is still an ethical implication, as well as a potential limitation on the validity of the research. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms used in the coding process to protect the

confidentiality of the participants. All identifiable information was stored separately, and all data was kept in a password protected, secure location.

Data collection

This research was conducted using a case-study approach. Children in Years 1, 3 and 5 (ages approximately 6, 8 and 10) were invited to take part. Once consent forms had been returned, focus groups of six children per year group, per school were then selected by the researchers. The participant data provided by the school on age, gender and home background of the children was used to inform the selection of participants as the researchers wanted to ensure that the focus groups represented the diversity of the cohorts of the schools. Participants therefore ranged from five to ten years old and represented a range of genders, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For future research, the reading attainment and reading enjoyment levels of participants could also be obtained as part of the data collection process, as this may have a significant impact on children's responses to the texts provided. 36 participants were selected to take part, but due to absences on research days, the total number of participants that took part was 32.

A selection of 125 books was provided by the researchers for the children to browse. The selected books were chosen from a wider collection at the University of East London library, as well as the personal collections of the researchers. The collections were initially categorised into different text types and genres, before being further categorised through the identification of which books contained characters from different marginalised groups. The researchers then chose the 125 books for the study that they felt included a wide range of text types such as picture books, chapter books, graphic novels, non-fiction, short-stories and poetry, as well as a variety of genres and a mixture of 'classic' texts that children would likely be familiar with, alongside more contemporary children's literature. The researchers aimed to ensure that they included texts that varied in length and accessibility, creating a spectrum from lengthy chapter books through to wordless picture books, so that the diverse attainment, reading levels and ages of the children in each school were accounted for. As previously discussed, the researchers were also deliberate in their inclusion of texts that feature characters of different religions, cultures, appearances, disabilities and sexualities/genders. It was hoped that through presenting this considered book list, the children would have a sufficient range of texts that reflected their interests, identities and preferences. The researchers

acknowledge for future research that a more structured and informed approach to the text selection could be facilitated through the use of existing book lists, and also that other modes of text such as magazines and newspapers could have been included to widen the range of text-types further and appeal to children's potential wider reading preferences.

The books were presented to the children using a 'book blanket' approach, where the texts were spread across a series of low tables, to allow the children clear visual access to browse the full selection (Harris, *n.d.*). In both schools, this display was set up by the researchers in an unused classroom, with the focus groups coming in one at a time to browse, choose and then answer the researchers' questions. It is important to acknowledge that in both the layout of the texts, and the setting of the research, an artificial experience had been created for the participants, particularly with the presence of the two researchers. Their selections and responses may have been different had they been choosing from the shelves in their class book corners or libraries, where the experience is more familiar, and this may be an implication for future research. A brief introduction was given by one of the researchers at the start of each session, where children were asked to browse the books and choose the text they would most like to read. Time restrictions were not articulated to the children, and no suggestions of where or how to browse were given by the researchers; it was hoped that this would support the children to feel they had high levels of autonomy in their choice (Reedy and De Carvalho, 2021).

Once the children selected their reading material, interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on the factors that influenced their choices. Children were asked about why they selected the books that they did, what sorts of thoughts they have when they are choosing books to read, and if/why there were any books that they had browsed that they actively did not want to read. The children were then able to spend time reading and enjoying their chosen texts.

Data analysis

The method of data analysis used was thematic analysis, conducted collaboratively by both researchers. This allowed for the data to be 'segmented, categorised, summarised and reconstructed' (Ayes, 2012, p867) to ensure that the most prevalent and important themes were identified. The process of thematic analysis was informed by the six-phase guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006), which is helpfully exemplified and framed within a learning and teaching context by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Through this process

of data familiarisation, initial coding, then identifying and reviewing themes, the researchers were able to define seven key themes and devise a thematic map to represent these (Figure 1).

This map illustrates the predominant and important themes (and sub-themes) that were identified during the analysis. Each theme contributed important perspectives to the overall understanding of the key research question in the centre and will be discussed in the research findings. Before the findings are presented, the researchers wish to acknowledge their standpoint as two white, educated individuals and that their positionality will have influenced this project and the interpretation of the findings.

Research findings and discussion

The following section summarises the key findings within these researcher-identified themes. Some themes/subthemes are given more discussion than others, based on how prevalent they were during the coding process and how influential they might be in informing future practice in encouraging reading for pleasure. It is important to note that the themes varied in prominence when the age of the participants was taken into account, which will also be discussed.

Theme 1: Previous experiences

This theme relates to the influence of children's familiarity with a text on their independent choice of reading material. On multiple occasions, children chose books that they recognised as something they had previously read and enjoyed. The passage in Extract 1 provides an example of a child articulating how this familiarity was an influential factor in their choosing process:

Researcher 1	And why did you choose that book? (The Gruffalo)
Idris	So, so it's fun and funny.
Researcher 1	It's fun and funny? How do you know that? Have you read it before?
Idris	Yeah.
Researcher 1	Were there any other books that you might have chosen if you did not choose that one?
Idris	Yeah I'd choose this one. (Has also brought over The Tiger Who Came to Tea).
Researcher 1	And why was that one that you might have chosen?

(Continues)

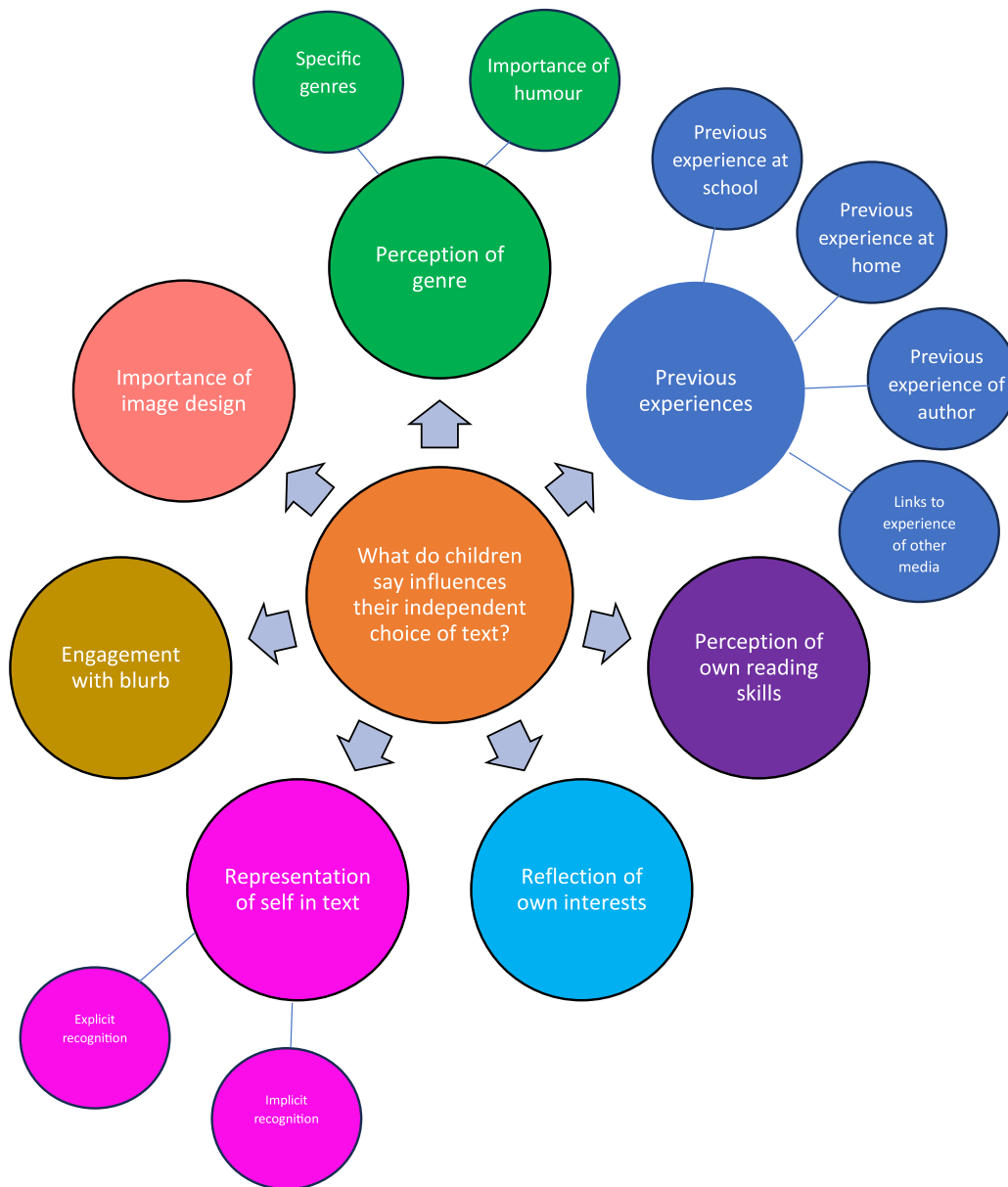


Figure 1: Thematic Map

Idris Er, cos like the tiger... I'm gonna look for the part that I like.
 Researcher 1 So have you read this one before as well?
 Idris Yeah.
 Researcher 1 When did you read this one?
 Idris When I was in Reception, when we were in Year 1 as well.

Extract 1: Idris (6 years old)

Idris' responses to the questions demonstrate how his previous experiences of reading and enjoying these texts in school led to his decision to choose them to read when given free choice. This is something that

was echoed in the responses of other children too, particularly those in the younger age group (5–6-year-olds), who often responded that they had chosen texts because they had read them at school or at home. This suggests that younger children in particular may seek familiar texts that they have engaged with in the past. This could be a result of a familiar text reducing the cognitive load (Sweller et al., 2019) for young children who are still developing their reading skills; the previous exposure to the vocabulary, content and patterns of the text could leave children with more capacity for enjoyment. The implications of this are that educators should ensure familiar and previously encountered texts are clearly available when children are freely selecting books, so that they have the option to

revisit them. Educators may also want to consider using pupil voice to seek children's opinions on the texts they have most enjoyed reading previously, and make sure these can be accessed when children are choosing texts to read independently (DfE, 2023).

The older the children were, the less likely they were to choose a book they had already read or to mention previous experiences with the text as a factor in their choices. However, some children in Year 3 and 5 divulged that they had chosen previously un-read texts by familiar or favourite authors, suggesting that although they may not have been looking for a text they had already read, they were using their previous experiences of enjoying the work of a particular author to inform their choice. This again has an implication for educators around listening to what children say about what they have enjoyed reading in the past, identifying authors that children have already engaged with and using this to inform the selection of texts in their reading corners and school libraries.

Theme 2: Representation of self in text

This theme represents a particular area of the researchers' interest, as in the initial design of the study one of the aims was to determine whether diverse representation within children's literature had a noticeable impact on children's choice of text. When conducting the analysis, the researchers noted that there were some instances where children explicitly stated that their choice was influenced by recognising an aspect of themselves in the text. It was also noted that there were additional instances where this seemed to be a factor, but the child did not actively express this in the interview, hence the decision to create two subthemes of explicit and implicit recognition. Extracts 2 and 3 show examples of explicit and implicit recognition.

Researcher 1	Can you tell me about the book that you chose?
Grace	Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale.
Researcher 1	And why did you choose this particular book?
Grace	Because Africa is part of my country and I'm from Nigeria.
Researcher 1	And what was it about this book that made you think of Nigeria?
Grace	(gestures to the characters on the front of the book) It's beautiful and pretty like my country. I really love my culture so much.

(Continues)

Researcher 1	Were there any other books that you saw that you were thinking about choosing?
Grace	(goes to collect the other book, which is You're Strong with Me by Chitra Soundar) This one because it also reminds me of my culture.

Extract 2: Grace (8 years old)

Researcher 1	So which was your first choice of book if you could only choose one?
Esther	Erm, this one.
Researcher 1	This one? Okay so let us have a look at that one. It's Her Story: Shirley Chisolm. So why did you choose that one?
Esther	Because it's kind of interesting and she was fighting for the black people to be... to be... paid fairly.
Researcher 1	Okay wow, so that's something that you thought was interesting? And were there any others that you chose? (Esther indicates other books she has brought over). So tell me about these, why did you choose these ones? Ecogirl, The Proudest Blue, Bodies Are Cool-what is it about these books that made you want to choose them?
Esther	They're interesting.

Extract 3: Esther (6 years old)

The above extracts feature two children whose ethnic backgrounds are recorded by their schools as Black-Nigerian and Other Black African respectively. Grace states that the appearance of the characters on the cover and the mention of Africa in the title are the main factors that influenced her initial choice of text, due to their connection to her culture. Grace sends a clear message with her choices and words that she wants to see herself and her culture reflected in the texts available to her, and later goes on to say that she does not think there are enough books like this in her school; this echoes the findings of the aforementioned *Reflecting Realities* report, which consistently notes that the amount of 'ethnic minority representation' in children's books is not reflective of the population of the United Kingdom (CLPE, 2022). In the second extract, Esther chooses a series of four books which all feature women or girls of the global majority on the front covers, she also chooses a final book later in the interview which fits with this pattern. Although Esther

does not explicitly state that she has chosen these books based on the diversity of the characters or the reflection of herself in these characters, it is difficult to ignore this pattern in her choices. Given that Esther is only 6 years old this factor is extremely salient.

The two selected extracts are not the only instances of children choosing books that represent aspects of their identities; for example, there were two separate occasions where female children in Year 5 chose books based on the 'powerful' and 'confident' women and girls that featured on the covers. There were multiple occurrences of children choosing texts where the character, or characters, on the cover shared a distinct characteristic with them, such as gender, ethnicity or a combination of both. The evidence here suggests that the diversity of characters in the texts presented to the children did have a bearing on the choices that some of them made, and that there is a clear desire from children to have access to books that they feel reflect their own self and identity. The implications of this are notable and have been detailed by other researchers and organisations: children need to have access to texts that feature diverse representation and that reflect themselves and their experiences (Harris et al., 2019), (CLPE, 2023). Educators have a duty to ensure that the texts available in schools are representative of the children within their setting, and that positive self-identity is fostered through these texts. Concerns have been raised that many schools currently lack quality inclusive and representative books (Todd, 2021) and so educators need to audit their current stocks to identify the gaps in their material. This implication does not mean to say that children will always pick or immediately respond enthusiastically to representative texts or texts that may reflect their lived experiences in classrooms or libraries. Some researchers (Gamlet, 2021), (Hanna, 2022) have found that children can be circumspect about reading such texts if they are presented by teachers. As Bearne and Reedy note 'it is wise to allow space for children to express their responses in ways that they choose' (Bearne and Reedy, 2024, p. 484).

Theme 3: Reflection of own interests

Children often responded to questions about their book choice by noting that it was about something they 'liked'. For example, Leo (10 years old) said he chose *Baller Boys* 'because it's about football and I like football,' while Oscar (6 years old) chose *Helping a friend: Alice the Aspiesaurus* explaining it was 'because I like dinosaurs'. This is a finding that will come as no surprise to most; children are likely to be drawn to a book that features a hobby or curiosity of theirs. The children were often excited during the browsing

process when they found texts that reflected these interests, and this frequently led to very quick choices—particularly with books relating to football. Despite choosing quite quickly, the children tended to hold on to these books and read them in a sustained way throughout the session.

This theme was identified as the most frequently occurring within the data set; a range of children in each focus group expressed an inclination to choose books that featured an area or object of personal interest to them. The 5/6-year-old children mentioned they were interested in football, dragons, dinosaurs, and history. For the 7/8-year-olds, football was again mentioned alongside vampires and the Stone Age. The 9/10-year-old children stated that space, history, football, and animal content was of interest. What was evident from the interviews was the particular popularity of books about football. The initial selection that the researchers provided did not include very many football books, resulting in many boys in the first school trying to choose the same football-focused novel (*Baller Boy*). By the time the second school was visited, a few more football stories had been added to the selection, including one with a female main character. This latter text was immediately chosen by two of the girls in the second sample who were interested in girls' football.

For schools, monitoring and updating the reading materials children can choose from should be informed by what children are interested in and passionate about. Educators should consider the following question: are children's interests and hobbies currently being acknowledged and used as part of the process of stocking and showcasing books? To support children's interest in reading for pleasure, it is therefore once again recommended that pupil voice is used to identify children's individual hobbies and likes, and that these responses are used to inform the books that they have access to during their free time, or that can be recommended to them. The findings from both this theme and theme 2 have implications not only for educators' engagement with pupil voice around reading, but also for teacher knowledge of children's literature. Educators need to develop their own knowledge of children's literature in order to be equipped to source and recommend high-quality texts that reflect children's personal interests and diverse identities. Research has previously explored teachers' relationships with reading (Akins et al., 2018) and advocated for the importance of teachers broadening their knowledge of high-quality children's literature to support reading for pleasure in their classrooms (Cremin et al., 2009), (Burgess et al., 2011). The authors hope that this research can support these recommendations and build on them by suggesting a particular focus on the importance of teachers developing their knowledge of texts that feature characters from a range of

diverse groups, and that the development of this knowledge is based on the reader identities of those children in their care.

Theme 4: Engagement with blurb

Engagement with the blurb of the text was another theme that varied greatly in prominence between age groups. None of the 5/6-year-olds mentioned the blurb or were observed to engage with the blurbs during their choosing time. Two of the 7/8-year-olds mentioned reading the blurb as a factor that influenced their decision-making process, and this was also the case for four of the 9/10-year-old children. While this is a very small sample, it does suggest that as children get older, they become more likely to engage with the blurb of a text when they are independently deciding what to read, indicating a widening or shifting of strategies that they can use to support their choosing.

Theme 5: Genre

This theme relates to the participants' knowledge and use of genre to influence and inform the choices they made. The younger children often expressed a simple desire to find 'funny' or 'scary' texts, and older children echoed this, but also started to express more understanding of narrative forms including adventure and mystery stories. However, at all ages this more general understanding of genre was limited. For the 7/8-year-olds, adventure stories were identified on many occasions, but children often struggled to articulate how they knew that the text they had chosen fit into this genre. In the 9/10-year-old focus groups, 'adventure' was also identified by a number of children as a favourite narrative form which influenced their choices, with magical and mystery stories also proving popular. However, again, even when prompted, the children used a limited vocabulary when talking about genre. Categories such as fantasy, science fiction, novel, poetry anthology, superhero, comedy, biography, detective, historical and so on were not evident – only adventure. Children benefit from developing strategies to support their reading choices (Merga and Mat Roni, 2017); to help children to identify their preferences and be able to select books that they will enjoy, adults could use discussion and recommendation to develop and guide younger readers' understanding of more nuanced genres and make more informed choices. Explicitly introducing children to, and discussing, a wider range of genres could lead to increased reading comprehension, interest in text and reading motivation (Durgin, 2016), (Gingerich and Adler, 2020).

Theme 6: Perception of own reading development

Children showed through their responses that they were reflecting on their current competences as readers as they selected their chosen texts. They were clear about not choosing texts that were considered to be too hard, too long or too easy. Extracts 4 and 5 indicate typical factors that were considered when choosing texts.

Ellie	These ones. They're very long. Indicates Amari and the Night Brothers.
Researcher 1	Why would you not want to read that one?
Ellie	Because it's too long to read.

Extract 4: Ellie (8 years old)

Researcher 1	So you look inside them first?
Kai	Yeah.
Researcher 1	And how do you know if it looks good?
Kai	I know cos like I can read the words, that's how I like it.
Researcher 1	So if you could not read the words you would not want to read it?
Kai	No, I would.
Researcher 1	You would?
Kai	Yeah because every day I'm learning how to read.

Extract 5: Kai (6 years old)

Ellie does not want to be faced with the 300 plus pages of a fantasy novel aimed at 10–14-year-olds. She recognises that she does not have the reading stamina to find them enjoyable. Kai, on the other hand, is happy to choose to read a text where words might be unfamiliar because he feels he will become a better reader if he does. Kai may, of course, be saying this because he thinks it will be pleasing to the researcher in showing he is always challenging himself to be better as a reader.

Frequently, the older children expressed a wariness to choose anything that seemed too easy or that would not help them to become 'better readers'. Extracts 6, 7 and 8 show this concern about choosing challenging rather than 'easy' texts.

Arkady	This one- it's too short and it's too easy.
Researcher 1	Let us see that one- Alice the Aetosaurus. So too short and too easy for you?
Arkady	Yeah.

Extract 6: Arkady (8 years old)

Researcher 1	So, were there any books here that you thought you really would not want to read?
Damien	Yeah- the big books.
Researcher 1	What do you mean by the big books?
Damien	The ones that do not have many words that would be really short to read (indicating picture books).

Extract 7: Damien (10 years old)

Researcher 2	Were there any things when you were looking that you thought 'No I do not want to read that.'?
Avani	Probably like small books, like the short books. Picture books maybe.
Researcher 2	Yeah. You're just not interested in those any more
Avani	I want to challenge myself really with long books and try to finish them. Cos sometimes what I do is I put a timer on and see how long it takes me to read a book, to finish a book.
Researcher 2	OK. And do you challenge yourself to do it even quicker?
Avani	Yeah.

Extract 8: Avani (10 years old)

Arkady is clear that short texts and some picture books are likely to be too easy and is convinced that these will not help him to develop as a reader, again wanting to experience a wider vocabulary of words. The same concerns about 'small' books and picture books are present in the oldest children with the explicit desire to choose something that is challenging. Avani not only wants a challenging text, but she is determined to read them faster; this raises some interesting questions about extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, as previously discussed. Reading quickly to finish a book could be seen as an extrinsic motivator, which could potentially detract from the enjoyment and intrinsic motivation to read (McGeown et al., 2020).

The children here were demonstrating explicitly that they had clear identities as readers which included being aware of their own reading development, alongside their current reading preferences and interests. However, the common misconception that picture books are not challenging and that reading very long books very quickly is what is needed to progress as a

reader might need to be addressed by teachers. Having challenging picture books in classrooms and as the basis for English lessons where they are pored over and enjoyed together might help.

Theme 7: Importance of design of the texts and associated images and pictures

Throughout all the interviews, children noted the crucial importance of the visual aspects of the texts they were considering. Colour, design, illustration, size of the book and the typeface all featured in their comments at all three ages. These features were seen as both positive and negative factors when deciding what to choose.

The younger children had differing views about the colourful cover of *Rainbow Grey*. Telia said that she was attracted by the colours on the cover, but Rayan had the opposite view. He stated that he would not have chosen the book 'because it's like too colourful'. James (10 years old) explained that a particular book 'caught my eye because of how colourful it was.'

The cover design and illustration were, unsurprisingly, significant in gaining the attention of the children and motivating them to explore further or pass on quickly to something else. The cover had to be 'interesting' in order to attract the reader. As mentioned above, colour was an important factor, but the illustration or design was crucial in giving a clue to whether the book was worth investigating. Griffon (8 years old) was not keen on the front cover of *Handa's Hen*; 'it's not funny', he said after a quick glance. Extract 9 shows Avani's more positive approach as she talked about the cover of *Rainbow Grey*:

R1	What made you pick that one up?
A	Erm, the front cover.
R1	What do you like about it?
A	I like all the stars and the swirls and how they done the rainbow.

Extract 9: Avani (10 years old)

Pictures/illustrations seemed to be crucial to the choices that many of the children made. George (6 years old) chose 'Owl Babies' in part because the pictures were 'cute' and Ibrahim (8 years old) said, 'I like the pictures and the designs on the pictures.' For the 9/10-year-olds, some responses explained what it was about the pictures that made a difference:

'I think it is interesting because of the way the pictures look. I look for pictures that have these friendly things that are telling me that I can get that book and it will make me feel like I'm in a world of my own' (Ulla, 10).

'The pictures like do not really hit me Just like, it does not look like actiony'. (Harry, 10)

'If (the pictures) were funny or good I would probably pick them.' (Noel, 10)

Children's choices are influenced by the way the text looks; school and class libraries therefore need to have a wide range of texts with a variety of designs and vibrant colours. The same design might be attractive to some but not to others, so a range seems essential. In addition, it may be important to display texts in a way that the front covers can be easily seen by students when selecting a text to read, this aligns with the recommendations of the DfE's (2023) Reading Framework, which suggests having texts displayed facing outwards where possible.

Conclusion and implications

From the data set, seven themes that affect children's text choice were identified and discussed. The evidence suggests that the most prominent of these themes were: previous experiences, reflection of own interests and representation of self in text. Although these, and other themes, have been discussed discretely, the children's responses suggested that multiple themes combine to influence each choice they make, and so these themes are interlinked in practice. For example, one child, who chose a book with a female footballer on the cover, expressed that she was influenced by her interest in football, her excitement to see a reflection of herself as a female football player in the text and by the length of the text providing sufficient challenge for her. Multiple themes and factors simultaneously affect children's thought processes when choosing something to read. The multitude of strands that influenced the choices the children made were intertwined with their own identity as a reader at that moment. Their personal interests combined with their view of their competence as readers, their knowledge of their preferred genres and their desire to find themselves represented in the text. Their reader identities are dynamic and influenced by their own personal histories, and they always affected the choices they made.

These findings both align with and build on the principles of reader motivation and reading for pleasure in schools outlined in the literature review (McGeown and Wilkinson, 2021; Wigfield et al., 2008). These children used the offered autonomy, within the research context, to select texts of interest that reflected their own lives and identities. This research found that these principles were not separate influences on the

reader, but combined together to influence the choice of each individual.

A series of implications for practice based on these interlinking themes have been discussed. Teachers and schools are often concerned with extrinsic motivation, to encourage readers and reading, but their approach to this should not rely on rewards or incentives for reading lots of texts quickly, it should be concerned with building knowledge of the children's reading identities and preferences; thus developing reader to reader relationships. It is in this way that extrinsic motivation can best lead to intrinsic motivation to read.

Most importantly, this paper has again highlighted the need for educators to utilise pupil voice and pupil identity to inform the selection of texts available to children, confirming the findings such as Ng (2018) who concludes:

'Student voice is crucial for developing engaging reading practices to motivate economically disadvantaged students to read.' (p. 700)

When deciding on texts to include and showcase in libraries and book corners, educators should ensure that they are:

- Including familiar texts and authors; educators should consider what texts children will have previously encountered in story times and literacy/reading lessons during their time at school, including in previous years. They should combine this knowledge with pupil voice information on which of these texts children enjoyed the most, and use their findings to adjust the showcasing of books in the classroom to include these previously enjoyed texts, as well as new texts by the authors that wrote them.
- Including texts that reflect the children's diverse identities; educators need to reflect on and identify the diverse backgrounds of each child in their class through data-analysis and pupil voice, and use this information to ensure the books in their class/school selection are representative of the children who will encounter and engage with them.
- Including texts that reflect the children's evolving likes and interests; teachers need to use ongoing discussions with children and observations to consider their current individual and general interests/hobbies, they can then use this knowledge to identify books which focus on these interests and showcase them in the classroom/school.
- Introducing children explicitly to a range of genres, discussing the similarities and differences between, for example, science-fiction, fantasy, detective novels, historical-fiction and so on and developing a shared vocabulary to support children to identify

genre-based preferences, thus supporting their ability to select texts they are likely to enjoy.

- All of the above will require educators to engage in a self-audit and improvement process in regard to high-quality children's literature, to ensure that they have the awareness of suitable authors and texts that reflect familiarity, diversity and interests.

These implications will only be possible through engaging in a partnership with children, where the perspectives and individualities of these children are explored, discussed and valued. Opportunities for children to share their interests through 'show and tell' including bringing in texts from home and class questionnaires are just two ways in which educators can start to obtain this vital information. It is hoped that this paper can add to, and build on, the current literature on reading for pleasure pedagogy; particularly the strands that focus on children's choice and autonomy, diverse representation in children's literature and teachers' knowledge of appropriate texts.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- AKINS, M., TICHENOR, M., HEINS, E. and PIECHURA, K. (2018) Teachers' knowledge of children's literature: what genres do teachers read? *Reading Improvement*, 55.2, pp. 63–68.
- AYRES, L. (2012) 'Thematic coding and analysis', in L. GIVEN (Ed.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 867–868.
- BEARNE, E. and REEDY, D. (2024) *Teaching Primary English: Subject Knowledge and Classroom Practice*, 2nd edn. Abingdon: Routledge.
- BOYASK, R., WALL, C., HARRINGTON, C., MILNE, J. and COUCH, D. (2021) Reading For Pleasure: For the Collective Good of Aotearoa New Zealand. National Library of New Zealand.
- BRAUN, V. and CLARKE, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2, pp. 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- BURGESS, S. R., SARGENT, S., SMITH, M., HILL, N. and MORRISON, S. (2011) Teachers' leisure reading habits and knowledge of children's books: do they relate to the teaching practices of elementary school teachers? *Reading Improvement*, 48.2, pp. 88–102.
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2022) Reflecting realities: survey of ethnic representation within UK Children's Literature 2017–2021. London: CLPE Available at: https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/2022-11/CLPE%20Reflecting%20Reality%202022%20WEB_0.pdf [Accessed 10 August 2023].
- Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. (2023) Reflecting realities: survey of ethnic representation within UK Children's Literature 2022. [Online]. clpe.org.uk. Available at: <https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/2023-11/CLPE%20Reflecting%20Reality%202023%20v8%20web.pdf> [Accessed 1 December 2023].
- CLARK, C. and RUMBOLD, K. (2006) *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview*. London: The National Literacy Trust.
- CREMIN, T. (2019) Reading communities: why, what and how? NATE Primary Matters, Summer. 4–8.
- CREMIN, T., MOTTRAM, M., COLLINS, F., POWELL, S. and SAFFORD, K. (2009) Teachers as readers: building communities of readers. *Literacy*, 43.1, pp. 11–19.
- CREMIN, T., MOTTRAM, M., COLLINS, F., POWELL, S. and SAFFORD, K. (2014) *Building Communities of Readers: Reading for Pleasure*. London: Routledge.
- CREMIN, T., HENDRY, H., CHAMBERLIN, L. and HULSTON, S. (2023) *Approaches to Reading and Writing for Pleasure: An Executive Summary of the Research*. London: The Mercer's Company Available at <https://www.mercers.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Reading%20and%20Writing%20for%20Pleasure%20-%20An%20Executive%20Summary%20of%20the%20Research.pdf> Accessed 06/12/23.
- Department for Education (2015) Statutory guidance: National curriculum in England: Primary curriculum. www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-primary-curriculum (accessed 9 August 2023).
- Department for Education. (2023) The reading framework. [Online]. gov.uk. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1168 [Accessed 10 August 2023].
- DURGIN, J. (2016) How to teach genres in elementary school. Clutter-Free Classroom. <https://www.cfclassroom.com/> [Accessed 1 December 2023].
- GAMLET, A. (2021) Finding mirrors and looking through the window. *English*, 4-11.73, pp. 2–6.
- GINGERICH, J. and ADLER, M. (2020) The importance of reading across genres. *Kansas English*, 101.1, pp. 46–51.
- GLEED, A. (2013) *Booktrust Reading Habits Survey 2013: A National Survey of Reading Habits and Attitudes to Books Amongst Adults in England*. London: Booktrust. Booktrust Reading Habits Survey 2013 accessed 15 August 2023.
- HANNA, H. (2022) Recognising silence and absence as part of multivocal storytelling in and through picture books: migrant learners in South Africa engaging with *The Arrival*. *Literacy*, 56.1, pp. 40–49.
- HARRIS, B. (n.d.) Book blankets. [Online]. ourfp.org. Available at: https://cdn.ourfp.org/wp-content/uploads/20210205160600/Book_Blankets_Benjamin_Harris_002-2.pdf [Accessed 1 February 2024].
- HARRIS, C., STIELL, B. and LEATHER, D. (2019) Time for change: Black and minority ethnic representation in the children's literature sector. [Online]. shu.ac.uk. Available at: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/time-for-change-black-and-minority-ethnic-representation-in-the-childrens-literature-sector> [Accessed 1 December 2023].
- MAGUIRE, M. and DELAHUNT, B. (2017) Doing a thematic analysis: a practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 9.3, pp. 1–14 <http://ojs.aish.org/index.php/aish-j/article/view/335>.
- MCGEOWN, S. and WILKINSON, K. (2021) *Inspiring and Sustaining Reading for Pleasure in Children and Young People: A Guide for Teachers and School Leaders*. Leicester: United Kingdom Literacy Association.
- MCGEOWN, S., BONSALL, J., ANDRIES, V., HOWARTH, D. and WILKINSON, K. (2020) Understanding reading motivation across different text types: qualitative insights from children. 597–608.
- MCGEOWN, S., OXLEY, E., RICKETTS, J. and SHAPIRO, L. (2023) Working at the intersection of research and practice: the love to read project. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 117, 102134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102134> [Accessed 1 February 2024].
- MERGA, M. K. and MATRONI, S. (2017) Choosing strategies of children and the impact of age and gender on library use: insights for librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57.6, pp. 607–630.

- NG, C. (2018) Using student voice to promote reading engagement for economically disadvantaged students. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 41.4, pp. 700–715.
- OFSTED. (2022) Curriculum research review series: English. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-english/curriculum-research-review-series-english>. Last accessed 6th Jun 2023.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2002) Reading for change: Performance and engagement across countries. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/programmeforinternationalstudentassessmentpisa/33690904.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2024).
- OXLEY, E. and MCGEOWN, S. (2023) Reading for pleasure practices in school: children's perspectives and experiences. *Educational Research*, 65.3, pp. 375–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2023.2236123> Accessed 1 February 2024.
- REEDY, A. and DE CARVALHO, R. (2021) Children's perspectives on reading, agency and their environment: what can we learn about reading for pleasure from an East London primary school? *Education*, 49.2, pp. 134–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2019.1701514>.
- SELLERS, C. (2019) 'Fitting in' and 'standing out': the peer group and young people's development of reader identity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40.7, pp. 938–952. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1622407>.
- SWELLER, J., VAN MERRIENBOER, J. J. G. and PAAS, F. (2019) Cognitive architecture and instructional design: 20 years later. *Educational Psychology Review*, 31, pp. 261–292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09465-5>.
- TODD, T. (2021) The future of primary school libraries. [Online]. <https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/>. Available at: https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/The_Future_of_Primary_School_Libraries.pdf [Accessed 1 February 2024].
- WIGFIELD, A., GUTHRIE, J. T., PERENCEVICH, K. C., TABOADA, A., LUTZ KLAUDA, S., MCRAE, A. and BARBOSA, P. (2008) Role of reading engagement in mediating effects of reading comprehension instruction on reading outcomes. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45.5, pp. 432–445. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits>.

Author Biography

CONTACT THE AUTHORS

Alice Reedy, University of East London, Stratford Campus, Maryland E15 4LZ, London, UK.
email: areedy@uel.ac.uk

David Reedy, United Kingdom Literacy Association, London, UK