

# Reading for pleasure and literacy achievement



By Marion Meiers

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*Helping children to develop an interest in books and reading can not only be enjoyable for adults and children alike but also have an important positive influence on reading achievement.*

**Marion Meiers** outlines research that emphasises the importance of engagement with reading.

Researchers agree that book reading is a powerful cultural influence in children's literacy development. In the late 1990s, Catherine Snow, an American researcher, chaired a committee established by the US National Academy of Sciences to examine the prevention of reading difficulties in young children.

This committee undertook a synthesis of research on early reading development. It found that evidence of accomplishments related to skilled reading emerges early. Amongst other things, the committee reported that three-year-olds can engage in book-sharing routines with caregivers, comment on characters in books, and listen to stories. Three to four-year-olds, when being read a story, can connect information and events to life experiences, and show an interest in books and reading (Snow, Burns and Griffin. 1998).



Photo: Walter Collato

When adults and very young children share book reading they listen, talk about the story and characters, delight in repeating the words of the text. These interactions are pleasurable and stimulating and enhance language development. Shared book reading can continue to provide pleasure, for both readers and listeners, even when children can read independently. Shared reading is one means of maintaining interest and engagement in reading and further developing reading skills.

Beyond the early years of schooling, engagement in reading continues to play an important part in learning. The 2000 OECD study, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) noted that 'attitudes [to reading] have been shown in many studies to be an important variable in relation to achievement level' (Lokan et al., 2001).

The PISA student survey of 15-year-olds included several items exploring attitudes to reading, finding that engagement in reading has a strong positive relationship with reading achievement. The engagement in reading scale showed the strongest relationship of any scale with reading achievement. The survey also found a strong relationship between reading achievement and interest in reading (Lokan et al., 2001).

These research findings indicate the importance of supporting and maintaining students' interest in reading. Evidence about interest in reading indicates a wide variation amongst teenagers. A recent Australian survey of the reading habits, experiences and attitudes of 10–18 year-olds found that 74 per cent of the age group claimed to 'like reading to some extent' (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001). In PISA, 15-year-old students were asked about the amount of time they spent reading for enjoyment. The finding was that 'a high proportion of students, particularly males, said they did not read for enjoyment. Thirty per cent of students answered that they spent no more than half an hour reading each day'. (Lokan et al., 2001)

Longitudinal research identifies links between literacy and numeracy achievement at school and later experiences. Key findings of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) show that the level of literacy and numeracy achieved by 14-year-olds is a major factor contributing to later

patterns of education and work. An analysis of students leaving school before the beginning of Year 11 using a national representative longitudinal survey of Australian youth who were in Year 9 in 1995 showed that 'students with low levels of school achievement (measured by performance in literacy and numeracy) are substantially more likely to leave school early' (Marks & Fleming, 1999). This research provides further support for efforts to foster reading and engagement with reading, as a central aspect of literacy achievement.

The Australian school curriculum includes a clear focus on the reading of a range of texts, with the underlying purpose of engaging students in reading and reflective discussion. In the Victorian English curriculum, for example, students in Years 9 and 10 are expected to be able to 'read a range of texts and use them to discuss different perspectives on complex themes and issues' (Board of Studies, 2000). Engaging students with reading in this way involves building on the interest that individuals bring to reading, as well as developing engagement, or situational interest in reading in the context of the classroom. Recent work by Harackiewicz (2004) has begun to explore the role of situational interest in promoting academic performance and long-term interest. Harackiewicz (2004) suggests the importance of 'catching' and 'holding' students' interest.

Teachers face the challenge of both catching and sustaining interest, and promoting the learning of students at many different ability levels in the same class. A recent US study over a year of a group of fourth and fifth grade students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a literature-based program involving reading, writing and talking about books provides one example of evidence of students increasing their participation in reading activities (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Over the school year, 'student conversations became more expert-like and focused as students learned to ask each other questions and to share their thoughts on topics of mutual interest. Their conversation shifted from focusing on factual information to fundamental questions of human existence as they learned to engage in critical and reflective talk about texts. Students also learned to appreciate

literacy texts and began to enjoy conversing with each other' (Kong & Pearson, 2003).

Enjoyment of shared reading does not, of course, happen only in school classrooms. Older students, like beginning readers, can share reading with adults. Popular books, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, can be just as engrossing when read aloud as when read independently. Sometimes, when an adult reads part of a long book like the *Harry Potter* books, the listener engages with the story, and continues reading independently.

Enjoyment of popular texts can lead to engagement with other texts. The *Shrek* movies draw on a range of cultural knowledge. Access to this knowledge extends understanding of the many-layered connections between the contemporary movie and a range of traditional stories. If a viewer of *Shrek* already knows Grimm's fairy tales, they have access to different understandings than a viewer who has not encountered these tales. Reading and talking about Grimm's stories after seeing the movie enriches appreciation of the ironies of Princess Fiona's situation.

The research evidence suggests that, at home or at school, conversations about books, shared reading of books, and connecting everyday experiences with reading are valued activities that help students to become engaged in reading and contribute to the enhancement of future learning. ■

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