

WHAT ON EARTH!

Magazine Engagement Study

Phase 2 (May 2025)



Executive Summary

The Open University



Introduction

The Phase 2 *What on Earth!* Magazine Engagement study extends The Open University's research in collaboration with *What on Earth!* magazine into how this particular non-fiction publication may foster reading for pleasure (RfP) among primary-aged pupils. It is built on Phase 1 findings (Ashley, 2023), which explored initial responses to *What on Earth!* magazine by pupils aged 9–10 years from one London school. Phase 2 investigated the impact of regular, in-class engagement with the magazine on the reading enjoyment and reader identity of pupils of the same age from 13 schools across the UK in both urban and rural contexts. The study is situated within a well-established body of literature recognising the significance of intrinsic motivation, social reading practices and reader response theory (Cremin et al., 2014, 2025; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rosenblatt, 1978). Nonetheless, Phase 2 addresses a notable gap concerning the educational potential of children's magazines, especially with regard to reluctant readers.

Project Aims and Research Questions

Phase 2 aimed to examine whether access to and engagement with *What on Earth!* magazine could enhance reading enjoyment and support the development of positive reader identities, particularly for 'reluctant readers.' This phase of the research responded to the limited existing literature on the use of non-fiction magazines in classrooms and their effect on readers' engagement. Phase 2 explored three core research questions:



1. How does the *pedagogic environment* affect the use of the magazines in weekly sessions?
2. What is the nature of *pupils' engagement* with the magazine?
3. Does the children's engagement with the magazine influence their *reader identities* and if so in what ways?

Project Organisation

A mixed-methods design was employed across 12 weeks (October–December 2024). The project involved 24 Year 5 classes (481 pupils, aged 9–10) across 13 UK primary schools who were recruited through advertising in OU RfP networks and via the *What on Earth!* website. Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was secured for participating pupils and teachers. The 24 teachers and their participant classes were randomly allocated to one of three groups:



- **Group 1 (Teacher-guided):** The timetabled 30-minute, weekly magazine sessions to explore *What on Earth!* began with a brief (5 minute) teacher-led 'magazine moment' which involved adults highlighting key information and sharing organisational features. This was followed by time and space for children to explore the publication informally with peers and adults, as they chose.
- **Group 2 (Student-led):** The timetabled 30-minute weekly magazine sessions created time and space for pupils to explore the magazine informally with peers and adults, as they chose, without a structured introduction from their teacher.
- **Group 3 (Control):** Pupils followed their usual reading routines without weekly magazine access during the study.

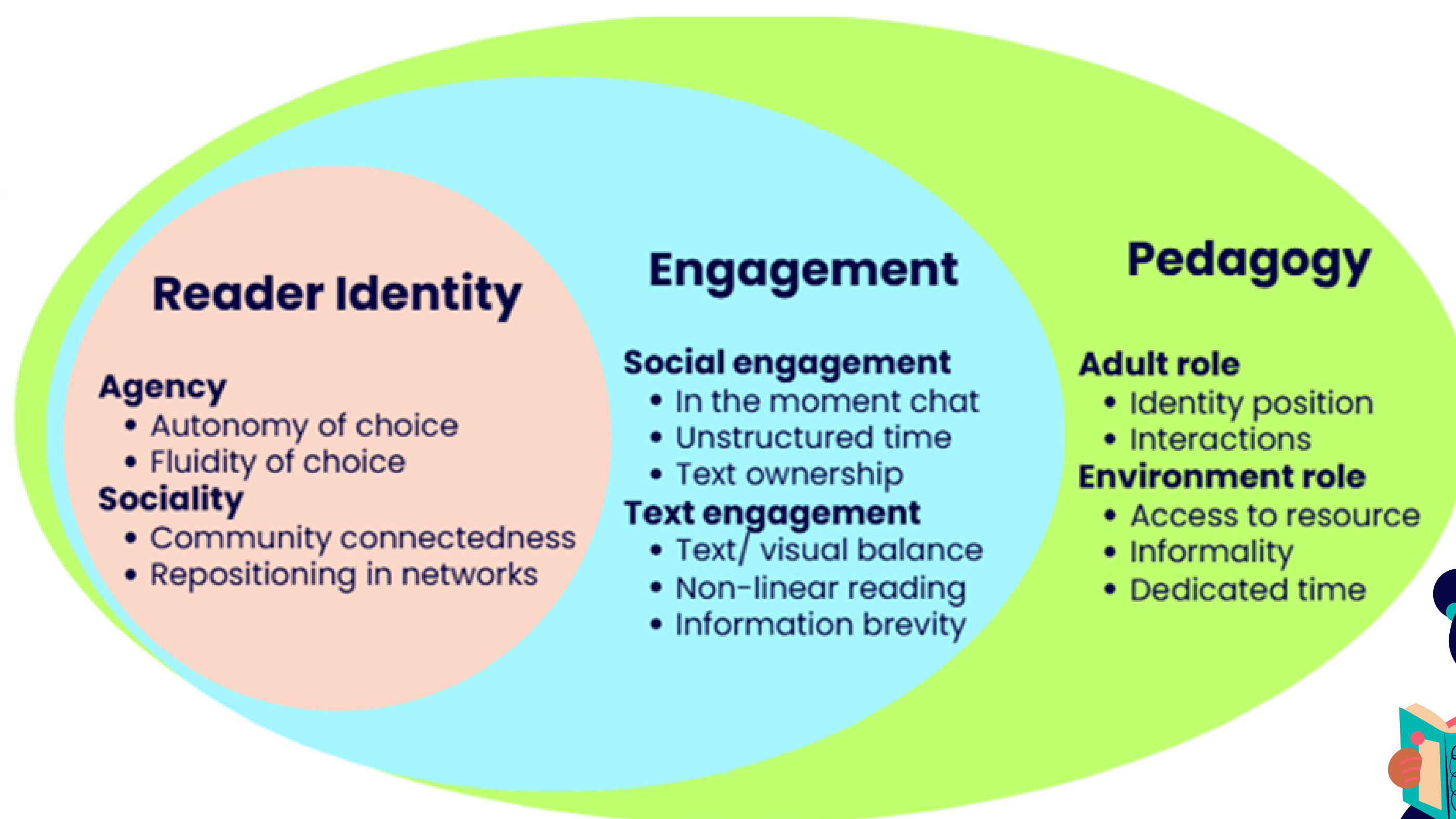
All pupils in Groups 1 and 2 received four issues of the magazine (individual copies of each issue supplied for every Year 5 child in participating schools) during the 12-week study. Children who did not have parental consent were still gifted magazines for use in the weekly sessions but did not complete online surveys or take part in focus groups. Pupils in Group 3 received their 4 issues of the magazine after the study concluded (between January and April 2025). Quantitative data were collected from all Groups via online entry and exit surveys measuring reading enjoyment and frequency. Pupil surveys measured reading self-perception on a 7-point, Likert scale from 1 (*I do not enjoy reading*) to 7 (*I absolutely love reading*). Pupils who indicated a scale point of 4, 3, 2 or 1 were considered 'reluctant' for the purposes of the study, whilst pupils who self-scored the reading perception measure as 5, 6 or 7 were considered 'not reluctant.' A score of 4 (median) was placed in the reluctant category as it was decided by the research team that a self-perceived neutral attitude to reading fit more into the category of reluctant versus not reluctant for the purpose of this study. Qualitative data were collected for Groups 1 and 2 only through mid-and end-point in-person pupil focus groups (with 53 self-identified reluctant readers) and class teacher interviews, which were analysed thematically.

Summary of Findings

Quantitative data revealed that regular access to *What on Earth!* magazine improved Year 5 pupils' enjoyment of reading, especially for those who self-identified as reluctant readers. Follow-up surveys confirm that both magazine Groups 1 and 2 showed significant improvement in reading enjoyment from the start to the end of the study but control Group 3 (without access to the magazine) showed no change. The increase in reading enjoyment was driven by improvement in the reluctant readers specifically as the engaged readers were already showing high levels of enjoyment at the start of the study. However, frequency of reading at school did not change for any of the children over the course of the study.



Qualitative data illuminated how the magazine, combined with time in a relaxed, RfP pedagogic context and opportunities for peer interaction, contributed to deeper engagement and shifts in reader identity.



Summary of qualitative findings by theme



These themes and sub themes offer insights into how *What on Earth!* magazine supported reading for pleasure amongst reluctant readers, with particular attention to the experiences of the readers themselves. The first theme, *pedagogy*, explores the roles that adults and classroom environments played in shaping reading experiences with the magazine. The second, *reading engagement*, examines both social and text-based forms of interaction, highlighting what was distinctive about pupils' interaction with the magazine format. The final theme, *reader identity*, focuses on the ways in which reluctant readers positioned themselves (and were positioned by others) as readers during the study, with a particular emphasis on autonomy, social interaction and reading behaviours.

• Pedagogy

Informal, socially supportive reading environments with time to read the magazine and in which teachers acted as co-readers—created space for curiosity and playfulness, allowing reluctant readers to engage with *What on Earth!* without fear of judgement. Teachers considered that the lack of outcome and assessment-driven pressure seemed to relax these readers and encourage them to take greater initiative in their reading. Across Group 1 and 2, the inclusion of the adult as a fellow reader was key for encouraging children to share magazine preferences. In classrooms that invited discussion and participated in shared discovery of magazine content, pupils were more likely to vocalise interests, share what they were reading and seek recom-



mendations from others. Many reluctant readers and their teachers commented that these interactions were notably different from more traditional reading instruction times, noting the informal, dialogic nature of the weekly sessions. Teachers also commented that an open structure enabled some pupils to develop reading stamina and confidence over time.

- **Engagement**

Reluctant readers valued *What on Earth!* magazine's visual appeal and brevity and navigated it in non-linear ways jumping between sections, revisiting favourite pages and dipping in and out. This flexibility was cited as enjoyable and freeing and allowed readers to follow their interests rather than adhere to a particular reading path. The bite-sized content, interspersed with pictures offered a format that rewarded curiosity and enabled access to new information. For these reluctant readers, this may have made reading feel more manageable. Magazine reading sparked spontaneous conversations, peer recommendations and visible excitement among reluctant readers. These 'in-the-moment' conversations occurred organically as children encountered new and interesting material and often involved pointing out facts, images or surprising content to peers. Teachers observed that these interactions were frequent and enthusiastic, particularly among certain pupils who were less likely to contribute during other reading activities and created peer connection around reading. A personalised copy of each issue of the magazine was a key factor in fostering engagement, alongside the autonomy they had to decide what to read, in what order – and whether to read silently or share with peers and adults.

- **Reader Identity**

The autonomy to choose personal reading pathways and the shared experience of having the same text as their peers, appeared to help reposition reluctant readers' self-perception as readers. Children commented that they valued navigating the magazines in their own ways, selecting articles, topics and features based on interest; this helped them feel more in control of their reading. This fluidity was encouraged by the diverse, multi-topic nature of *What on Earth!* magazine, enabling pupils to explore a range of content without the constraints of genre, level or prescribed reading paths. Teachers observed that this helped disrupt fixed notions of reading preference or ability, allowing reluctant readers to redefine their reading identities through their evolving choices. As children engaged with the magazine and shared interests, they began to be seen and to see themselves as readers. Teachers noted how previously disengaged readers began to contribute to reading conversations, recommend features and respond to peers in reader-to-reader exchanges, participating in the sociality of reading. Weekly sessions created space for reading identities to be reconstructed beyond the constraints of more formal labels or ability group reading experiences.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The Phase 2 study reveals that Year 5 children who had access to and ownership of four copies of *What on Earth!* magazine and who were afforded regular weekly time to read the publication, reported increased reading enjoyment at the close of the 12-week period. *What on Earth!* magazine provided a flexible, inclusive and engaging format that supported reluctant readers in particular by extending new pathways into reading for pleasure. Findings highlight that this magazine afforded participating young readers space for autonomy, authentic interaction around issues of personal and common interest and enabled the experience of reading to be shared. Additionally, accompanying relaxed pedagogical spaces and reading environments were created which enabled open exploration of the magazine. This dynamic combination of text and context served to prompt children's social engagement with reading and fostered meaningful experiences that were both valued and valuable.



What on Earth! magazine helped to positively reposition some pupils within the reading community, particularly those who may not have typically seen themselves as readers in traditionally conceived book-focused opportunities. Shared access to a high-quality, owned resource appeared to help create more equitable reading spaces, where all pupils had something to contribute. This sense of community connectedness helped pupils feel valued as readers. While pupil survey results showed that reading frequency at school remained unchanged, the findings suggest that enjoyment and engagement — especially among those who self-identified as reluctant readers — was meaningfully enhanced through sustained, informal magazine use in classrooms. Offered the same materials as their peers, many reluctant readers were re-positioned and repositioned themselves as interested and engaged readers. The magazine sessions appeared to level the reading playing field.

These insights have important implications for educators, policymakers and publishers seeking to broaden which types of texts 'count' as reading and what kind of classroom reading environments and interactions nurture diverse reader identities.



It is therefore recommended that schools and teachers seek to:

- Introduce engaging non-fiction magazines, such as *What on Earth!*, to broaden reading into more diverse forms and foster reading for pleasure for less engaged or reluctant readers, in particular.
- Offer texts in common to encourage children to share the experience, enhancing the view of reading as a social act.
- Create regular, relaxed reading time in which pupils can explore such texts freely. Dedicated time provides space for young people to see themselves as capable readers, potentially shifting reading attitudes and broadening identities.
- Foster child-led reading environments that support autonomy and identity development. Foregrounding choice and agency during relaxed reading times that are social in nature supports motivation and engagement.



Research Team

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