

# ***What on Earth!*** **Magazine Engagement Study**

## **Phase 2 Report** *May 2025*



### **Research report compiled by**

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## Introduction

Phase 2 of the *What on Earth!* Magazine Engagement Study continues the Open University's (OU) investigation into how and in what ways *What on Earth!* non-fiction magazine engages children in reading. This research builds on the findings of Phase 1 (Ashley, 2023) by further exploring the influence of this particular magazine on reader identity and engagement, with a particular focus on reluctant readers, using two pedagogic approaches – teacher-guided and child-led. This report details the findings of Phase 2 which aimed to explore how reading *What on Earth!* magazine might guide children aged 9–10 towards reading for pleasure (RfP) and enjoyment.

Between September and December 2024 (for a period of 12 weeks), 24 Year 5 classes from 13 primary schools across the UK participated in this impact study. For 30 minutes every week, 481 pupils (ages 9–10) and 24 Year 5 teachers explored *What on Earth!* magazine in class time. The nature of pupils' behavioural and social engagement with the magazine was explored using survey data, pupil focus groups and teacher interviews.

To situate Phase 2 within the broader theoretical and educational context, the following review of literature explores key areas relevant to the use of non-fiction magazines as reading material in school contexts. We begin by considering the nature and design of *What on Earth!* (the specific magazine under investigation) before examining research on reading for pleasure, theories of engagement and motivation, the development of reader identity and the role of pedagogy in fostering positive reading environments. Together, these strands provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how this magazine might support young readers' engagement, motivation and evolving identities as readers.

### ***The magazine: What on Earth!***

*What on Earth!* magazine is a richly designed, award-winning non-fiction publication aimed at curious young readers aged 7–14, with content that is recognised within the industry as both visually dynamic and intellectually engaging. Each issue is curated to provide topic and layout variety, making it accessible and appealing to a broad range of interests. The running order is deliberately choreographed to begin with highly visual, low-text features such as *Factopia!* – a trail of quirky, interconnected facts – and *Snap It!* – showcasing stunning, global photography with informative captions. This design strategy is intended to gently draw readers into the issue before presenting longer feature articles with more complex text elements.

Throughout the publication, variation is key: articles range in length, style (e.g. illustration and photography), topic and reading difficulty, ensuring that there is 'something for everyone' in every issue. Features like *Eureka*, *Word Up!*, *Nobody Knows* and *Eye Don't Believe It!* explore themes of science, language, mystery and visual perception, catering to

a range of interests. The *Puzzles and Games* section provides an interactive break between longer reads, while the concluding pages include activities, contributions from readers and *Jokes & Riddles* — a joyful end to each issue.

Recognised for its creative excellence and reader-focused approach, *What on Earth!* was named Children's Magazine of the Year and Designer of the Year at the 2024 PPA Awards (recognising outstanding work across UK consumer brands and business media), also receiving accolades for Subscription Brand and Consumer Publication of the Year. This balance of content, format and tone positions *What on Earth!* magazine as a unique and versatile reading resource, particularly well-suited for use in upper primary (ages 8–11) and lower secondary (ages 11–14) classrooms seeking to promote wide reading, engagement and reader autonomy.

## Relevant Literature

### *Reading for pleasure*

Reading for pleasure (RfP) is widely recognised as a crucial aspect of children's literacy development and a major contributor to overall academic achievement. Defined as the voluntary act of choosing to read in one's own time and making meaning from text, reading for pleasure involves a habit that research shows can support personal and educational growth (see Cremin and Scholes, 2024 for a review of the associated benefits).

However, recent findings show a worrying trend. In England, only 29% of pupils reported that they liked reading (significantly below the international median of 46%) whilst 24% stated they did not enjoy reading at all, exceeding the international median of 18% (Mullis et al., 2023:101). This disengagement is particularly concerning given the strong body of research highlighting the reciprocal relationship between reading motivation and reading attainment— the will to read positively influences the development of reading skills, and vice versa (Cheema, 2018; Malanchini et al., 2017; OECD, 2021; Rogiers et al., 2020; Tavsancil et al., 2019; Torppa et al., 2020; Troyer et al., 2017; Van Bergen et al., 2021). In this context, magazines offer a potentially potent medium for encouraging reading among children, particularly those who may not be drawn to other reading forms offered in school.

Magazines are often overlooked by practitioners who may deem them to be less important than longer forms of reading and have infrequently been the focus of research. However, with their accessible language, engaging visuals and wide range of topics, magazines have the potential to play a valuable role in fostering children's pleasure in reading. Reflecting the importance of voluntary reading, RfP is embedded in the English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014), underscored in the Reading Framework (DfE, 2023) and is

evaluated by Ofsted (the schools' inspectorate in England) reinforcing the need to explore diverse text forms, like magazines, that can support reading engagement.

### ***Theories of engagement***

Engagement plays a pivotal role in the development of early reading proficiency and in children's long-term relationship with texts. According to Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) engagement theory, reading engagement is driven by motivation, interest and active participation—factors that increase significantly when children encounter texts that align with their personal interests. Magazines, with their vibrant visuals, varied formats and real-world topics, are well placed to stimulate curiosity and support self-directed reading. The Phase 2 study explored the benefits of allowing children to choose magazine features they wanted to read and how this choice might lead to deeper engagement.

The concept of reader engagement links closely to Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which identifies three key psychological needs—autonomy, competence and relatedness—as essential to fostering intrinsic motivation. We posit that magazines offer children *autonomy* by enabling choice in terms of content and format in each month's issue, foster *competence* through accessible, informative content and promote *relatedness* both by connecting to children's lived experiences and interests and by enabling these connections to be made with other readers as magazines are eminently shareable.

Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading further supports this view, suggesting that reading is not a passive act but a dynamic transaction between the reader and the text. While non-fiction is often approached from what Rosenblatt described as an 'efferent' stance—focused on extracting information—magazines also create opportunities for 'aesthetic' reading— which is focused on making an emotional connection to the ideas in the text and engaging with these issues.

Together, these theories highlight the importance of meaningful engagement in texts to develop positive reading habits. Potentially, magazines may represent a valuable way to support reader engagement, especially for children who may not yet identify themselves as readers.

### ***The role of 'identity' in reading***

Children's *reader identities*—the ways in which they see themselves as readers—are shaped not only by individual preferences and motivations, but also by social interactions in the environments in which they find themselves. Research in the field of reader identity highlights that reading is not merely a solitary, cognitive activity, but also a socially-influenced behaviour (Cremin, Hendry, Chamberlain and Hulston, 2025). Children's choices, motivations and reading habits are significantly affected by the interactions and

the support they receive from peers, teachers, family members and the wider reading community. Home reading habits, classroom environments, school and local libraries all contribute to shaping pupils' attitudes toward reading. If opportunities for discussion, sharing and collective engagement with texts of their own choosing are offered, children perceive they are competent enough to participate in these interactions and their voices and views will be valued, then they are likely to take part as readers and develop positive reader identities (Ivey and Johnston, 2015).

As Alexander and Jarman (2018:83) note, 'many information books lend themselves to being looked at by a couple of children together, which naturally facilitates discussion.' This emphasises the specific potential of non-fiction magazine reading to spark social interaction. When children are part of a community of readers that values and talks about reading, their motivation can be reinforced by both personal interest and social validation.

The Reading and Writing for Pleasure Framework (Cremin et al., 2025), recently developed from an empirical study of six literacy charities and an extensive review of the research literature around what motivates readers and writers, outlines the interplay of cognitive, social, affective and behavioural factors in the development of positive reading identities. Within this model, magazines could play a salient role – appealing not only to children's individual interests through accessible, high-interest content, but also providing social reading opportunities (e.g. sharing articles, discussing topics, reading with and to peers) that further support the formation of confident, motivated young readers. By fostering these socially supportive reading environments, educators and families can help children see themselves as readers, both independently and within the wider community.

For the children aged 9–10 in the Phase 2 study, an age where reading confidence and preferences are still developing, access to engaging reading materials that reflect both personal interests and social opportunities could be argued as especially important. Pupils of this age may be beginning to identify themselves more overtly as readers (or not) based on their experiences with texts and the reading environments they encounter. Magazines could be a valuable tool of influence, offering accessible, visually engaging and interest-driven content that supports both independent and shared reading experiences. The structure of magazines – short articles, diverse topics, puzzles and real-world connections— may cater well to the needs and wealth of interests of this age group, particularly those who may find longer texts overwhelming. In practice, magazines could be used in classrooms and libraries not only for individual reading, but also as prompts for discussion and collaborative inquiry. The social and affective dimensions of reading are crucial to young readers; they can help to build confidence and a sense of belonging.

## ***Reading for pleasure pedagogy***

Pedagogical choices across school reading environments play a significant role in shaping pupils' opportunities to develop positive reader identities and sustain engagement with reading. Evidence informed RfP pedagogies – *social reading environments, reading aloud, informal book talk* and recommendations and *choice-led reading time* – can be explicitly planned into reading provision, providing space and time to foster agency and autonomy (Cremin et al., 2025; Cremin et al., 2014).

Well-structured, inclusive reading environments offer a range of texts, flexible reading spaces and regular opportunities for choice and discussion – all of which are known to support children's motivation and self-perception as readers (Cremin et al., 2014; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Central to the environment is the role of the teacher, acting not only as an instructor but as a reading role model and co-reader (Cremin et al., 2022). Research indicates that when teachers connect by actively sharing their own reading lives, make tailored text recommendations and engage in informal book talk, they can help foster a classroom reading culture that is both socially supportive and personally meaningful (Cremin, 2010; Collins & Safford, 2008; McDowall, 2021, 2022 ).

The *adult role*, however, extends beyond encouraging reading; it involves noticing and nurturing each child's reading identity – respecting their choices and valuing diverse forms of reading, including for example fiction, poetry, non-fiction, comics, magazines and newspapers. Moreover, a responsive environment where pupils' interests are reflected in the reading materials provided can significantly enhance engagement and signal that all such reading is valid (Merga, 2016; Miller, 2013). Classrooms that embrace these principles enable children not only to engage with texts but also to see themselves as readers who belong to a community that values their voices, preferences and experiences.

An effective reading for pleasure pedagogy must be both intentionally and thoughtfully designed – not left to chance. Central to this is the concept of LIST: pedagogy that is Learner-led, Informal, Social and built around Texts that tempt (Cremin, 2019). A *learner-led* approach respects and responds to children's individual interests, allowing them autonomy in choosing what and how they read. *Informal* opportunities, such as unpressured reading aloud, casual book talk and shared recommendations, create an environment where reading is associated with pleasure rather than performance. *Social* reading communities, where participants can discuss their reading preferences, share discoveries and engage in collaborative meaning-making, are critical for the development of positive reader identities. Finally, providing *access to tempting, high-interest texts* that reflect diverse experiences is key to ensuring all children feel represented and inspired. Here, Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) concept of books as 'mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors' is especially influential: children need texts that *mirror*

their own realities, offer *windows* into the lives of others and invite them into new worlds through which they can engage and empathise (*sliding glass doors*). Magazines, with their rich variety of topics, formats and voices, are well positioned within this model; they offer accessible, visually engaging texts that can meet a wide range of interests and abilities, encourage informal sharing and discussion and reflect diverse realities. With LIST-influenced RfP pedagogy, magazines could, therefore, be a vital, often underused resource for fostering choice, conversation, connection and, ultimately, a love of reading.

## The Phase 2 Study

Existing research highlights how the complex interplay between reader identity, motivation and engagement, alongside socially supportive environments and responsive adult involvement, can potentially enrich children's reading experiences, especially for more reluctant readers. However, to our knowledge, this interplay has not been explored in depth in relation to non-fiction magazines.

The Phase 2 study investigated whether exposure to *What on Earth!* magazine in 30-minute, weekly sessions within Year 5 classrooms in UK primary schools might enhance children's reading engagement and reader identity with a particular focus of the impact of this opportunity on disengaged or 'reluctant' readers. Furthermore, two pedagogic approaches were applied and compared in weekly classroom magazine sessions – teacher-guided (Group 1) versus purely student-led (Group 2). There was an additional control group (Group 3) who continued lessons in the usually timetabled way during the 12-week period without access to *What on Earth!* magazine, however, these children had access to the magazine for 12 weeks after all data was collected (between January and April 2025).

### Phase 2 research questions

The Phase 2 study explored the following questions:

1. What is the effect of the *pedagogic environment* when using the magazines in weekly magazine sessions?
2. What is the nature of *pupils' engagement* with the magazine?
3. What is the effect of the magazine on *reader identity*?

### Design

The 12-week, Phase 2 study was conducted across 13 primary schools located in both urban and rural areas of the UK, encompassing a diverse mix of small, medium and large school settings. In total, 24 Year 5 classes (pupils aged 9–10) participated. Four of the participating schools were classified as 'small schools' (1 form entry – 1 Year 5 class),



seven were 2-form entry (2 Year 5 classes) and two were large, 3-form entry schools (3 Year 5 classes).

Sampling of school participants was drawn from existing OU RfP networks and contacts. *What on Earth!* also posted very brief study information on the magazine's website to invite participation. Once schools registered interest and headteachers confirmed involvement, the 24 selected classes were randomly assigned to one of three study groups.

- *Group 1* (4 schools, 7 Year 5 classes) implemented a more structured- 'teacher-guided' pedagogic approach in which each weekly 30-minute magazine session began with a 5-minute, teacher-led 'magazine moment' designed to highlight specific features and engage pupils with specific content. Pupils in Group 1 then spent the rest of their weekly magazine session time each week informally exploring the magazine with peers and adults.
- *Group 2* (5 schools, 9 Year 5 classes) implemented an initially less structured 'student-led' pedagogic approach (not including a 5-minute teacher-led magazine moment introduction). Teachers and pupils in this group interacted informally for the duration of each 30-minute magazine session, reader-to-reader.
- *Group 3* (4 schools, 8 Year 5 classes) was a 'waiting' control group. Pupils and teachers completed entry and exit surveys but did not receive magazines in school until the end of the study.

Schools in Groups 1 and 2 received four different issues of the magazine (one per child at no cost to the school), between September and December 2024. Group 3 schools did not receive magazines between September and December 2024, but did have access to all four issues between January and April 2025. Every Year 5 pupil in each participating school received individual copies of four full editions of the magazine, regardless of whether consent was granted for participation in data collection.

Pupils in Groups 1 and 2 retained the magazines in school for the duration of the 12-week period to allow the opportunity to revisit, discuss and compare previous issues during weekly sessions (if they chose to do so). All pupils in Groups 1 and 2 were then free to take magazines home at the conclusion of the study. Pupils in Group 3 were also gifted magazines and were allowed to take each issue home after enjoying them in school time.

### ***Quantitative and qualitative methods***

The Phase 2 study employed a mixed methods approach. Combining quantitative and qualitative data methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the broad



trends across participating schools and the deeper, individual experiences of pupils (especially reluctant readers) and teachers with the magazine.

Pupil surveys were administered at the start (September 2024) and end (December 2024) of the study to compare readers' perceptions and reading frequency across the three groups. Focus groups of children identified as 'reluctant' readers (both from pupil survey responses and class teacher feedback) along with the Year 5 teachers engaging in weekly magazine sessions were interviewed at the mid-point (October 2024) and end (December 2024).

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,' 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.

Reading frequency at school was measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*not very often*), 2 (*once a week*), 3 (*two or three times a week*) to 4 (*every day*). Survey responses were received from 481 pupils at entry and 465 at exit. However, some of the entry pupils did not complete the exit survey and some children completed the exit when they didn't originally complete the entry survey. Consequently, the quantitative data analyses were conducted on 459 children, an attrition rate of 5%.

Pupil focus groups were conducted with 53 'reluctant readers' (identified using the self-perception scale on the pupil entry survey) at the mid-point (23 from Group 1 and 30 from Group 2) and 49 pupils at the end (22 from Group 1 and 27 from Group 2). Between four and six pupils from each Year 5 class (depending on availability on the day) participated in focus groups with researchers lasting approximately 20 minutes, during which eight questions were discussed.

Teacher interviews were conducted with 15 teachers at the mid-point (5 from Group 1 and 10 from Group 2) and 12 teachers at the end (5 from Group 1 and 7 from Group 2). There were several Year 5 teachers who completed baseline and exit surveys but were unavailable for final interviews due to lack of class cover or absence on the scheduled day of interviews.

Pupil focus groups and teacher interviews offered rich, contextual insights into reluctant readers' experiences and perceptions of the magazine. Pupils shared if (and how) their enjoyment of reading had changed over the 12 weeks following the introduction of

magazine materials. They also shared their likes and dislikes of the publication and how they navigated the publication during magazine sessions. Teachers discussed the impact of the specific pedagogic approach employed during weekly magazine sessions (teacher-guided in Group 1 or student-led in Group 2) and in what ways (if at all) the magazines engaged children in reading, with a particular focus on reluctant readers.

### ***Data analysis methods***

Quantitative survey data were analysed using the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) [IBM SPSS Statistics](#), with a focus on changes in pupils' reading self-perception and reading frequency over time. Comparisons were made between entry and exit surveys, across the three groups and between the general Year 5 cohort and a reluctant reader subgroup.

Qualitative data were analysed using a cross-team, thematic analysis approach. Pupil focus groups and teacher interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. A coding framework was developed iteratively, guided by themes emerging from the range of data and informed by existing literature on reader identity, motivation and reading environments. Key themes included engagement with magazine content, shifts in reading self-perception, the influence of peer and teacher interactions and the role of choice and autonomy in reading. Particular attention was paid to contrasting the experiences of pupils in Group 1 and Group 2 to explore how teacher-guided versus student-led pedagogic approaches using the magazine influenced engagement and identity development.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2018) and received full ethical approval through The Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee (#2024-0563-2). A Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) was also completed and approved to ensure compliance with data protection requirements, particularly in relation to the handling of pupil and teacher data (#1194-2024).

Prior to commencement, headteachers from all participating schools were formally approached by email and provided with detailed information sheets outlining the study aims, procedures and ethical safeguards. Once this level of gatekeeper consent was obtained, teachers and parents from participating schools also received information sheets with accompanying consent forms. Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was secured for both pupils and teachers before data was collected.

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.

To ensure transparency and clarity, schools were offered an online briefing session of one hour via Zoom by the research team at the beginning of the study (September 2024) to clarify information and the timeline of activity. All schools from study Groups 1, 2 and 3 attended except one school in Group 2 and one school in Group 3 who were provided with the recording following the event. Key study details and resources were also made available to the schools on a password-protected section of the *What on Earth!* magazine website. The research team held enhanced DBS certification prior to visiting schools to conduct interviews. The Phase 2 study was enabled by an external funding agreement between The Open University and *What on Earth!* magazine.

## Results

### Quantitative survey analysis

This section presents the findings from entry and exit pupil surveys.

#### ***Pedagogic group comparison***

Survey analysis was conducted on the complete sample of 481 children. The three pedagogic groups; *Group 1* (magazine, teacher-guided), *Group 2* (magazine, student-led) and *Group 3* (no magazine, control) were compared for reading enjoyment and reading frequency in school time at the start of the study using the entry survey and at the end of the study using the exit survey.

A series of Mixed ANOVAs with pedagogic group as the between-subjects factor (three levels, Groups 1-3) and time as the within-subjects factor (two levels, entry and exit survey) were conducted, with the two dependent variables: *enjoyment* and *frequency school*. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics.

	Entry			Exit		
	<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 3</i>	<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
Reading enjoyment (/7)	5.06 (1.54)	4.76 (1.91)	5.12 (1.65)	5.46 (1.45)	5.23 (1.78)	5.15 (1.62)

Reading Freq: School (/4)	3.49 (.83)	2.81 (1.21)	3.14 (.99)	3.29 (.99)	2.94 (1.07)	3.28 (.91)
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Table 1: Means (and standard deviations) for reading enjoyment and reading frequency at school scores in the entry and exit surveys per each of the three pedagogic Groups: 1 (magazine, teacher-guided), 2 (magazine, student-led), 3 (no magazine, control).

For **reading enjoyment** there was a significant main effect of time,  $F(1, 456) = 15.68, p < .001$  and a significant interaction effect between time and group,  $F(2, 456) = 3.58, p = .02$ . 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 showed no change. Groups 1 and 2 improved by the same amount, .4-.5 of a point. There was not a significant main effect of group.

For **reading frequency at school** there was a significant main effect of group,  $F(2, 454) = 4.65, p = .01$  and a significant interaction effect between group and time,  $F(1, 454) = 14.24, p < .001$ . Follow-up surveys confirm that Group 2 shows the lowest reading frequency at school compared to the other two groups at both the start and end of the study. However, there was not a significant main effect of time indicating that none of the groups showed any change in their reading frequency at school from the start to the end of the study.

### ***Reluctant versus engaged readers***

This analysis concentrated just on the children from the magazine Groups 1 and 2 (293 total pupils including 112 reluctant and 181 engaged pupils who completed both surveys). Given that being teacher-guided or student-led in the magazine sessions made no difference in terms of the amount of improvement in reading enjoyment over the course of the study, the groups were collapsed together. Each student was categorised as either a 'reluctant reader' or an 'engaged reader' depending on the score they provided on the reading enjoyment scale in the entry survey at the start of the study.

A series of Mixed ANOVAs with reading type as the between-subjects factor (two levels, reluctant, engaged) and time as the within-subjects factor (two levels, entry and exit survey) were conducted with the two dependent variables: *enjoyment* and *frequency school*. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics.

	Entry		Exit	
	<i>Reluctant</i>	<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Reluctant</i>	<i>Engaged</i>
Reading enjoyment (/7)	3.16 (1.21)	6.09 (.84)	4.22 (1.56)	6.05 (1.23)
Reading Freq: School (/4)	2.74 (1.17)	3.43 (.94)	2.68 (1.11)	3.39 (.89)

*Table 2: Means and standard deviations for reading enjoyment and reading frequency at school scores in the entry and exit surveys per each of the two reading types, reluctant and engaged.*

For **reading enjoyment** there were significant main effects of reading-type,  $F(1, 291) = 371.61, p < .001$  and of time,  $F(1, 291) = 45.88, p < .001$  and a significant interaction effect between time and reading-type  $F(1, 291) = 55.42, p < .001$ . Follow-up surveys confirm that although engaged readers show more enjoyment of reading compared to the reluctant readers at both the start and end of the study, the reluctant readers did show an improvement in their enjoyment of reading over time while the engaged readers showed no change. This shows that the improvement in reading enjoyment over time for the magazine groups was driven by the reluctant readers.

For **reading frequency at school** there was a significant main effect of group,  $F(1, 289) = 51.78, p < .001$ . Follow-up surveys confirmed that engaged readers read more often at school compared to reluctant readers. There was not a significant main effect of time or interaction effect showing that the frequency of reading at school did not change for either the reluctant or engaged readers over the course of the study.

In summary, the quantitative analyses have confirmed that reading enjoyment increased in those groups of children receiving the weekly magazine lesson compared to no change in the control group. 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.

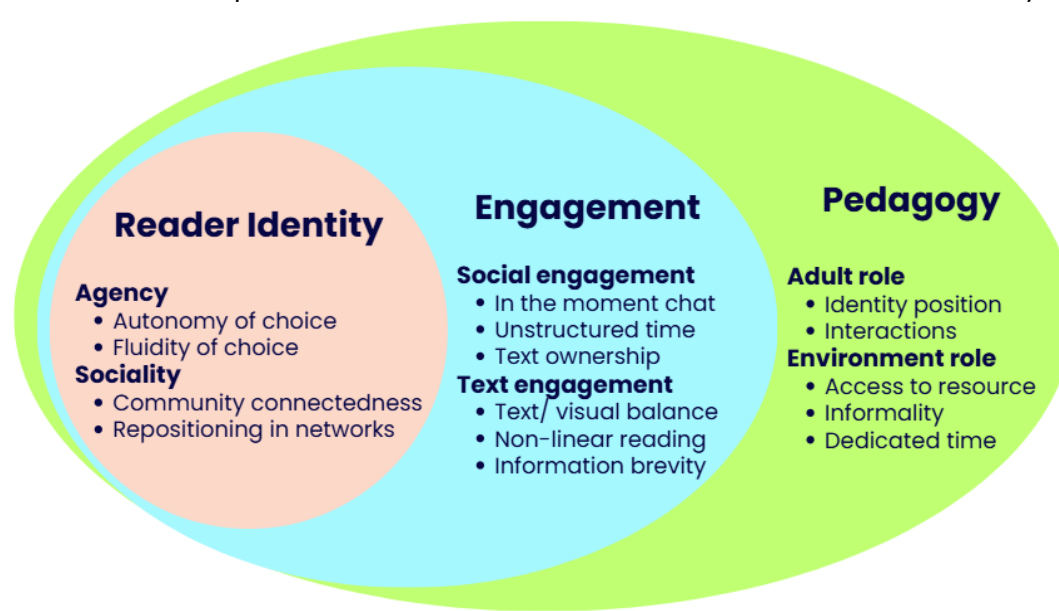
## Qualitative analysis

### Pupil focus groups and teacher interviews

This section presents the qualitative findings from the study, organised around three key thematic areas: *pedagogy*, *engagement* and *reader identity*. Each theme includes two sub-themes that provide further insight into how the magazine supported reading engagement for 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 theme *engagement*, examines both social and text-based forms of interaction, highlighting distinctive aspects of pupils' interactions with the magazine format. The final theme, *reader identity*, focuses on the ways 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.

Each theme is supported by illustrative quotations from pupil focus groups and teacher interviews at the mid-point (October 2024) and end (December 2024) of the study.



Summary of qualitative findings by theme

## Theme 1: Pedagogy

The pedagogical context (teacher-guided or student led) in which *What on Earth!* magazine was introduced appeared to play a significant role in shaping reluctant readers' engagement and their developing reader identities. Some pedagogical elements were controlled by the research study team (access to magazines, insistence of 30 minutes per week of magazine-focused time across 12 weeks and teacher and pupil

interaction during weekly sessions). Two sub-themes emerged in relation to pedagogy: *the role of the adult* and *the influence of the classroom environment*.

### **1.1 The Role of the Adult**

#### **Identity positioning of the adult**

The identity and role of the adult as a reader was an important aspect of the reading experience. In Group 1, where teachers initiated each session with a 'magazine moment,' pupils were somewhat guided into the magazine's content through teacher-led exploration. Teachers in this group often positioned themselves as more knowledgeable readers who could highlight intriguing content or draw attention to specific features. In contrast, teachers in Group 2 adopted a more informal stance throughout, interacting with pupils at the same level, reader-to-reader, for the duration of each magazine session. Across both groups, the inclusion of the adult as a fellow reader within this space was key for encouraging pupils to share their reading preferences.

*'Once I've done my bit, they all want to come and show me the bit that they like.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'With the magazine, they're really, really engaged with it. They want to get it out. They're using it in sessions that aren't planned. For reading for pleasure, they're coming out. They do really like them. They like our little input bit as well. I'll say, "I found this page about x" and then "Now you find a page that you'd like to tell a partner about" so they're quite engaged with that.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'I tend to just go around and stick my nose over to see what's going on. I listen to the discussions and then, from there, I might just say, "Oh, that's interesting! Where have you found that?" I like to try and find out a bit more about what they're reading about.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'Just the idea that it's a magazine, I think the facts can be exciting. I think they're enjoying those key facts because when I'm mingling around and listening to them, they'll stop me and say, "Did you know x?" And generally, I didn't know!'* (Teacher, Group 2)

#### **Interactions between adults and children**

Interactions between readers (teacher-pupil, pupil-teacher, pupil-pupil) during magazine sessions were also key moments of influence in both Groups 1 and 2. In classrooms that invited discussion and participated in shared discovery of magazine content, reluctant readers were more likely to vocalise interests, share what they were reading and seek recommendations from others. Many pupils and teachers commented that these interactions in magazine time were notably different from more traditional reading instruction times, with feedback in interviews noting the informal, dialogic nature of the weekly magazine sessions, in particular.

*'One of the things that I've found with reading for pleasure time is it's not a silent activity. So much of it is the children speaking to each other and sitting in the book corner, having a chat or recommending something.'* (Teacher, Group 1)



*'There will just be a little gang of them around one magazine, looking at it together or pointing things out to each other... so I think they are using it very socially.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'The first time we got the Blast Off issue out, there was something about Isaac Newton and we'd just talked about gravity in science, so they were all interested as we'd been learning about it and I think that really captured interest. They come to me to share different facts.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'The thing that I enjoyed most were the questions, because there was quite a few and then I'll do them with my friends and one of them would be on the answers and one of us would be then doing the questions but that was ok.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

## **1.2 The Role of the Environment**

### **Access to resources in the classroom**

Across both Groups 1 and 2, the physical presence of the magazine, one copy per pupil, was noted as a significant factor for both access and inclusion. Pupils appreciated having their own copies to read and return to. Teachers also observed that having this dedicated, high-quality resource available contributed to the perceived value of the reading material (magazines) and children were asking for more!

*'I think just giving them the freedom to explore it has been great. We've been very free and easy with it. It's been brilliant for them having one each.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'Now they all want a copy in their drawer of this one (holds up Spiders). They get it out and pretty much some of them will literally look at that the whole reading time! They will have that in front of them and they'll go back to it and back to it and back to it.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'They ask for more magazines now generally in school. Why don't we have magazines in the book corner? Can we have more magazines in our library?'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*I think I've got more interested in magazines with my own one. I want to read them.* (Pupil, Group 1)

### **Informality of the weekly magazine session**

Magazine sessions were characterised by a degree of informality not typically associated with more structured reading activity in school time. Pupils described magazine time as relaxed, with freedom to explore the publication at their own pace. This informality created space for curiosity and playfulness, allowing more reluctant readers to engage with *What on Earth!* without fear of assessment or judgement. Teachers also noted that this open structure enabled some children to develop reading stamina and confidence over time as the following reflections also indicate.

*'They like being sat with their partner and relaxing. They turn to this page or that page and they're very engaged like that... As I'm going around, the talk is usually about something that's happened to them that's related in the magazine.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I could read it for a bit and not be rushed... before, when you read, we would move onto the next lesson. So we've got more time to read now (with the magazine).'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'I like the magazine because it's beautiful and peaceful. It helps your mind to relax.'*  
(Pupil, Group 2)

### **Dedicated time to explore the magazine**

The weekly commitment to a 30-minute magazine session signalled to all Year 5 pupils that this reading experience was valued and intentional. For many schools, this was the first time magazine reading had been allocated a consistent slot in the timetable. The regularity of this time not only reinforced reading routines but also allowed readers to become familiar with the magazine's format, anticipate new issues and build sustained engagement over multiple sessions. Teachers reported that this consistency helped foster a sense of reading habit and expectation, especially with those who were not previously reading regularly for pleasure.

*'There are more children sharing the same thing and that's quite nice.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'...we get to do half an hour of reading on a Friday, but I would love it if it wasn't just on a Friday!'*  
(Pupil, Group 1)

*'We get 30 minutes a week to kind of look at our magazine, chat to our friends.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

## **Theme 2: Engagement**

Pupils' engagement with *What on Earth!* magazine took on both social and textual dimensions. Reluctant readers and their teachers expressed that the nature of this engagement was often distinct from behaviours associated with other more formal, skill-focused forms of reading in school time, such as guided reading or individual silent reading. Two key sub-themes emerged: *social engagement* and *text engagement*.

### **2.1 Social Engagement**

#### **In-the-moment chat**

Unlike the more structured, teacher-led discussions (e.g. during whole-class or group skill-focused reading lessons), children described spontaneous, 'in-the-moment' conversations that occurred during weekly magazine time. These chats often involved pointing out facts, images or surprising content with their peers and these behaviours occurred organically as new and interesting material was encountered. Teachers observed that these interactions were not only frequent but also enthusiastic, particularly with reluctant readers who were less likely to contribute during other reading activities. This form of live, reactive talk appeared to foster a sense of excitement and peer

connection around reading. Readers commented that they enjoyed 'shocking facts' and this also encouraged the spontaneous sharing of interesting findings with friends.

*'For my class, the biggest thing I noticed was this compared to silent reading. This is a lot more interactive and with discussion which I really like. They look a lot more engaged. And the talk is, "Oh, we've been on this page..." and discussing it rather than just reading quietly.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'It feels a bit more like leisure time in our classroom when we read the magazines. And it's a lot more relaxed. And it's that time to connect with each other really. It's really time to actually get to know them a bit more, which is nice.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'Before we had these (magazines), while we were reading, we wouldn't usually be talking a lot. But now that we have them, we talk about the activities and stuff. And it's OK. So you've got more of a chance to talk to your friends about what you're reading now.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

### **Unstructured time owned by pupils**

Even though Group 1 schools offered a 5-minute, teacher guided magazine moment at the start of each weekly session, the time that followed was unstructured and informal. Group 2 schools' magazine time was informal from start to finish, void of a teacher-guided magazine moment. In this sense, readers in both groups were given the autonomy to decide how they used their magazines during this protected, weekly time – what to read, in what order – and whether to read silently or to share their discoveries. This element of freedom was consistently mentioned by reluctant readers as a reason they enjoyed the sessions. Many described the experience as 'their time,' where they could explore without fear of doing something 'wrong.' Interestingly, pupils in Group 1 also held ownership of this time, even with the brief teacher-guided magazine moment at the start of each session. Teachers reflected that the lack of outcome and assessment-driven pressure seemed to relax reluctant readers and encourage them to take greater initiative in their reading.

*'It doesn't feel like onerous reading... it feels like a relaxed way to be enjoying texts. They definitely enjoy that informal side.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'What I've noticed with more reluctant readers is that they stick with it more than they do other things. If they've got the option, they'll go to the bookshelf and they'll pick a picture book, but two minutes later, they want to go back and change it. Whereas with the magazine, they'll stick with it. They're more engaged.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I like them (the magazines). I like them very much! It's quite educational and there's some fun stuff that we can learn about. It's making it very fun for us, so it just gives us a lot of choices. I like that.'*  
(Pupil, Group 2)

*'I like the magazine because you can read it in little chunks, in little sections, and you don't have to read the whole thing at once. You can also go back to it and chat to your friends because everybody's got the same magazine and that's not always the thing with a book.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

## Text ownership

Having personal copies of each issue of the magazine was a key factor in fostering engagement. Children frequently referenced the excitement of getting the new issue and the sense of ownership it brought. This personal connection for reluctant readers fostered a sense of pride in text ownership. Being able to talk about a shared text with peers appeared to boost confidence and social status within reading communities.

*'Having a text that everybody's looking at, but they can choose what they look at has helped... there's a lot more sharing going on and talking about the text.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'They (the magazines) become very personal. Yeah. They've all got their names. So, "that's mine and those are my answers to that quiz" is what I hear them say.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

## 2.2 Text Engagement

### Balance between text and visuals

Reluctant readers frequently commented on the magazine's balance of visual and written content, noting that the layout made reading feel approachable and enjoyable. High-quality illustrations, photographs and design features supported understanding and sustained attention, particularly for those who might struggle with large chunks of written prose. Teachers reported that this multimodal format was particularly effective for engaging more disengaged readers as it provided multiple entry points into the text depending on both interest and reading skill. Analysis of the four magazines (the sections most closely read and the time spent reading) was not part of the current study but has salience regarding motivating readers.

*'The quality of the articles are really rich and accessible... a lot of time it's sharing these sorts of nuggets of information or wisdom or their own prior learning or understanding.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'They love the wild photos in the Snap It section. It engages them as talking points. I've heard a couple of them in conversation about the photos which is nice.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I like the way these magazines are laid out. There's not a lot of pages. It's mainly like a picture book, like where the words are. It still has, like a picture underneath the words.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'I really like that it's not just about one thing. It's about all different things and it's got big pictures and puzzles.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

### Non-linear reading experience

One of the most distinctive features of reluctant readers' engagement with the magazine was the non-linear way in which the publication was navigated. Children described jumping between sections, revisiting favourite pages or reading out of order – behaviours that are less common in traditional narrative or fiction texts. This flexibility was cited as

enjoyable and freeing and allowed readers to follow their interests rather than adhere to a fixed reading path. For some reluctant readers, this open structure may have reduced pressure and made reading feel more accessible.

*'They don't have to read a magazine in order... they open it naturally. Like the colour may be captivating or the image. I think they like the lack of order. It feels more free and less structured.'*  
(Teacher, Group 1)

*'They like to just flick through... and then they might just read a little bit and flick back.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'If you think about their lives... things for them now are just so quick, this and that. The thing with non-fiction is you can do that – you can flick. It's similar to scrolling, isn't it? Whereas with fiction, with a story book, you have to keep the thread of the characters of what's happening and what happened before. This is easier to read because you can jump in and out.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I really love the puzzles and I also like the little pictures. I also like 'Find the difference' and I like the jokes. The jokes are really funny! You don't have to read the magazine like the whole way through. You can go one time, open up to that page and you can go back again or you can go forward. That's the nice thing about it. You don't have to read it a certain way.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

### **Brevity and accessibility of information**

The concise nature of much of the magazine's content – fact boxes, short articles and captions – was identified as an important factor in supporting engagement. Reluctant readers expressed appreciation for the manageable chunks of information, which allowed them to feel successful and informed without the cognitive load of longer texts. In this sense, *What on Earth!* magazine offered a format that rewarded curiosity and encouraged continued reading through bite-sized content, interspersed with pictures.

*'I think with some of my reluctant ones, they would avoid pages where there is quite a lot of text. But then there are other things for them that they might do, like this page where they could see the escape routes or they'll go to the joke page at the back. I think there's something for everybody. So I think we've never really had a problem because everybody can find something that they like.'*  
(Teacher, Group 1)

*'I can definitely say I think they like the little chunks of writing. So someone like (x) who does find reading very tricky, he can read enough of this magazine to kind of make sense of it. And then you can lean over and say, "Oh, that means...," and he kind of gets more out of it. So I think he has definitely enjoyed that.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'It has made me feel less pressure... with magazines, there's less to read... it's fun.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'It's not got like a lot of words on every page. It's like, really cool. Yeah. Because there's like drawings and pictures. And there's like the words and they are big and it's more interesting.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'Some books have like, way too many words. Lots of words. Sometimes this (the magazine), it has a word and it has funny pictures as well. Yeah. So, it keeps you interested.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

*'I think I'd rather read this than like any other books, because when it's a whole big page all the letters swarm. So then my eyes get all confused. This (magazine) isn't a whole page. So this I can read and I think more easily than when there's a whole page blending together.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

### **Theme 3: Reader Identity**

A core aim of the study was to explore how *What on Earth!* magazine might support pupils' reading identity development, particularly among those who self-identified as reluctant. Findings suggest that regular access to the magazine and the way *What on Earth!* was integrated into classroom routines contributed to meaningful shifts in how reluctant readers saw themselves as readers. Two key sub-themes emerged within the broader theme of reader identity: *agency* and *sociality*

#### **3.1 Agency**

##### **Autonomy of choice**

Pupils' ability to choose how and what they in read each issue was central to shaping their *agency* as readers. Weekly sessions consistently allowed pupils to navigate materials in a choice-led way, selecting articles, topics and features based on their interests. Many described enjoying the freedom to make these choices, which helped them feel more in control of their reading. Reluctant readers indicated enjoyment of this sense of autonomy and empowerment in focus group feedback, sharing that the lack of restriction by ability groupings or external expectations helped them engage on their own terms.

*'It's been really nice for me to just sit and enjoy that time... removing that expectation and just letting them be children with the magazines.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'I'd say, just let them get through it. Just let them look and don't guide it as much as you normally would in any other lesson. Let them have creative control. Let them look through like they want to. Let them explore everything and then you can have that conversation with them and then they can tell you what they like.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I struggle reading sometimes and I also don't really like it. But I like more of the magazines than the stories. I didn't really like reading that that much when I started in year five, but now I've kind of started to like it because I've started to read these magazines.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'I like reading the magazines because they have lots of facts. Facts about real things around the world. Real facts.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

##### **Fluidity of choice**

Closely linked to autonomy was the idea of fluidity of reading choice. Children often reported that their interests changed from week to week, influenced by what their peers and teachers were reading, what caught their eye visually or what they felt curious about

on that day. This fluidity was encouraged by the diverse, multi-topic nature of the magazine, which enabled readers to explore a wide 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 varied and evolving choices.

*'As a class they are picking up more non-fiction books. That's noticeable and I think the selection that you've got there, I think it has broadened their horizons. They are looking at different things now. They do seem to be more engaged with other non-fiction texts.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'They're so colourful and the layout is so clear and, you know, (x) happily just flicks through and picks up on words that she can read.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'Some of them... if you asked them what they've read today, they would say, "I've not read today. I've looked at the magazine, but I didn't read!"'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'I don't really like my guided reading books. I'm not really too keen on those books. But now that I read What on Earth!, there's some things in it that I like in other books and that's why I like lots of other books now.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'...after I've read What on Earth I read more non-fiction.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

### **3.2 Sociality**

#### **Community connectedness**

Personal copies of the magazine appeared not only to support pupil autonomy but also to create a shared sense of community in Year 5 classrooms. Reluctant readers expressed pride in owning the magazines and described how this enabled them to contribute meaningfully to conversations with their peers. Every child had individual copies of the same resource and an equal opportunity to engage in every weekly magazine session. Pupil focus group comments often referred to belonging and it was these very children, who in more structured environments, may have been positioned as less engaged (or positioned themselves in this way). Magazine sessions appeared to level the reading playing field.

*'They are talking to people about it, they're talking to their friends. I think it has engaged them in that way as they've got something in common with everybody.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'My stronger readers have chatted about it (the magazine) and got my reluctant readers talking. They've shared that knowledge of what they found out. Some stop and talk about the facts. The whole table will go, "Oh wow! Everyone read about this!"'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'They're spending more time talking with each other. Just earlier, we had some getting out the Blast Off issue and some started to talk about the SpaceX article because they've seen in the news yesterday about the SpaceX craft. So, they were getting really excited about that. It was also one of*



*the stories on Newsround this week. It's nice because they can keep going back to them. And I think they're just enjoying the social aspect of it, whereas they wouldn't normally get a chance to do that in a normal lesson.'* (Teacher, Group 2)

*'When it comes to a book that has a lot of pages, I only like to read in my head. But when it comes to like magazines, me and my friend like talking about it. We like talking about the words in the magazine and we also chat about the word searches.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'Most in our class don't like reading big stories..., they like reading fact chunks... the magazines actually have a lot of, like, small little bits and pictures we can talk about.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

## **Repositioning within reading networks**

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts observed among reluctant readers was how magazines helped to reposition these children within existing classroom reading networks. As all readers engaged with the magazine and shared their interests, reluctant readers began to be seen and to see themselves as readers. Teachers noted how those who were previously disengaged with reading began to contribute to reading conversations, recommend features and respond to peers in reader-to-reader exchanges. These interactions were often described as spontaneous and authentic moments, highlighting how the magazine created spaces where reading identities could be reconstructed beyond the constraints of more formal labels or ability group reading experiences.

*'For a kid that is a reluctant reader or that has found reading difficult, that's a challenge. It's a big thing for them to get into a novel and I think the magazine has been brilliant because they just see it and they think, "Oh, I'll probably read that." Without even realising it, they're reading. They're being drawn in. Getting the balance with reading is a big challenge for us.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'It's inclusive. It's something that all of the children pick up and can access even if their level of reading is lower than others. Anyone can flick through it.'* (Teacher, Group 1)

*'The magazines might make you more confident with reading because it makes you read more. I'm more confident when I read the magazine.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'I think ... I used to read some short books. But then having What on Earth! magazines, I started reading more of them than my little books.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'I used to never read, really. They (the magazines), like, really help now.'* (Pupil, Group 1)

*'We do reading fluency and there's like, fluency 1, fluency 3, fluency 8 and I'm on reading fluency one. I wouldn't be the worst, but I'm someone who struggles with reading. And I'm that one... I think I'd rather read this than like any other books, because when it's a whole big page all the letters swarm. So then my eyes get all confused. This (magazine) isn't a whole page. So this I can read and I think more easily than when there's a whole page blending together... I think it's (magazine reading) has changed me because it's made me more enthusiastic with reading.'* (Pupil, Group 2)

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study offer new insights into how *What on Earth!* magazine can support reluctant readers' engagement and inclusion in the reading community. Through a mixed methods approach, Phase 2 research highlights the interconnected roles of *pedagogy, engagement* and *reader identity* in fostering reading for pleasure.

We turn now to discuss the three research questions in relation to the quantitative and qualitative findings. These were:

1. What is the effect of the *pedagogic environment* when using the magazines in weekly magazine sessions?
2. What is the nature of *pupils' engagement* with the magazine?
3. What is the effect of the magazine on *reader identity*?

### ***Pedagogy: The role of adults and reading environments***

Quantitative survey findings showed that both the teacher-guided (Group 1) and student-led (Group 2) approaches employed in weekly magazine sessions were successful in enhancing the reading enjoyment of reluctant readers, over time. Whether or not teachers formally initiated weekly sessions by directing readers to particular sections of the magazine didn't seem to matter; children's enjoyment of reading increased either way over the four months of the study.

However, qualitative findings relating to pedagogy show the crucial nature of informal interactions between adults and children (irrespective of a formal 'magazine moment' offered at the start of each session) and reaffirm the importance of the *adult role* as a fellow reader and the *classroom environment* in shaping reading experiences (Cremin et al., 2014, 2022; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). As the Reading and Writing for Pleasure Framework (Cremin et al., 2025) suggests, classrooms that provide relational, informal spaces for reading allow pupils (and adults) to engage more meaningfully with texts and with each other. Other studies also evidence the significance of informality and relaxed opportunities to interact around self-chosen texts in motivating young readers and promoting positive dispositions towards reading (e.g. Batchelor and Cassidy, 2019; Moses and Kelly, 2018) although none of the studies noted above focus exclusively on the opportunities afforded by magazines. Additionally, many teachers in this study positioned themselves as co-readers of the magazine and this appeared to enable reluctant readers to engage without fear of judgement, promoting intrinsic motivation and a sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Furthermore, the structure of the *classroom environment* – especially the regular, dedicated time for informal reading and equal access to individual copies of the

magazine — played a significant role in promoting engagement. This supports previous research showing that socially supportive and resource-rich environments foster motivation and positive reading habits (Alexander & Jarman, 2018 Gambrell, 2011; Ivey and Johnston, 2015). Weekly magazine sessions created a low-pressure but intentional space where reading was normalised, valued and shared.

### ***Engagement: Social and text-based interactions***

Qualitative findings reinforce the idea that reading engagement is shaped not only by text content but also by how and where engagement is experienced. In line with Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) engagement theory, pupils' motivation was heightened when *What on Earth!* magazine content was relevant, enjoyable and presented in a socially supportive context. The unique qualities of this publication's format — rich visual design, short-form content and flexible reading structure — supported a non-linear, curiosity-driven approach to reading. These features offered effective support for reluctant readers who were able to follow their interests, move quickly from one item to another or pore slowly over visuals. It may be that these young readers may have previously experienced challenges or been intimidated when expected to read more traditionally presented, linear texts and may also have felt positioned as less able by the texts they were given (or could choose from). The accessibility of *What on Earth!* magazine in this case may have offered more reluctant readers an enhanced sense of competence (as they were reading the same material as their peers) and this, alongside the accessibility of much of the magazine may have afforded reluctant readers, in particular, an enhanced sense of accomplishment (Deci and Ryan, 1995).

*What on Earth!* magazine's capacity to foster in-the-moment *social engagement* is particularly significant. Unlike post-reading discussions common in school reading activities that are more skill-focused, pupils engaged in spontaneous, real-time dialogue with peers during weekly magazine sessions. This kind of socially situated and motivated engagement aligns with the Reading and Writing for Pleasure Framework findings (Cremin et al., 2025), highlighting the value of informal talk, peer-to-peer interaction and unstructured time in building a community of readers. In contrast to some other reading activities (in which young people may read a text different from their peers) in the weekly magazine sessions offered as part of this study, the reading material was the same — one of the four magazines gifted to them. *What on Earth!* magazine represented a 'book or text in common' which previous research has shown to support readers engagement (Cremin, Harris and Courtney, 2022). The highly shareable nature of this publication deserves closer examination as a tool to support readers.

The presence of children's own copy of *What on Earth!* magazine further enhanced a sense of ownership – both of the text and from the reading experience. Studies have persistently noted the value and positive impact of text ownership on young people's dispositions to reading (Evans et al., 2010; Lindsay et al. 2010), although these have tended to relate books at home. Novelty, this study enabled each child to receive four, gifted copies of this publication, which were housed in school during the 12-week study and sent home with children at the conclusion. The influence of the sustained and cumulative nature of the children's personal magazine collection represents another area for consideration in future research as this is likely to have contributed to their increased enjoyment.

### ***Reader identity: Agency and sociality***

The Phase 2 study indicates that regular access to *What on Earth!* magazine supported both the development and repositioning of reluctant readers' identities. The magazine provided opportunities to read on their own terms and with the same materials as their peers. Quantitative survey data confirmed that reluctant readers showed an increase in their enjoyment of reading over the four months. This was in contrast to Group 3 children who, reluctant or engaged, did not report more enjoyment in reading across this period without access to the magazine. The qualitative theme of identity showed that reluctant readers' ability to choose reading content freely within the publication each week supported both their sense of autonomy as readers and the fluidity of their personal interests – key drivers of *agency* (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, which emphasises the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's experience. Reading was shaped by individual interest, but also by the evolving social context.

The data also point to a shift in *sociality* – reluctant readers who may have been marginalised within more formal or ability-grouped reading tasks were repositioned within the reading culture that developed in magazine sessions. 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 children feel valued as readers, echoing the findings of Cremin et al. (2014), Boyask and Derby (2025) and the DfE Reading Framework (2023) on the importance of inclusive reading cultures and shared reading practices. The significance of magazine ownership represents a focus for future enquiries.

However, quantitative survey data did not show an increase in reading frequency during school time over the course of the study, reluctant or otherwise. We suggest possible reasons for this finding. Firstly, children may not have complete autonomy over when and

what they read in school and this may have skewed the data. For example, some schools may encourage children to read an assigned book every day, whilst others allow children more freedom of choice. Secondly, the reading frequency question on entry and exit surveys didn't differentiate between reading the magazine and other reading materials in school, e.g. fiction books. Therefore, even though reluctant readers clearly enjoyed reading the magazines during weekly sessions, it doesn't necessarily follow that there would be a knock-on effect to reading other types of text more frequently in choice-led reading time. Future studies should seek to take text types and the nature of school reading opportunities into account when measuring reading frequency.

## **Limitations**

While the mixed methods design provided a rich and nuanced understanding of how *What on Earth!* magazine supports reading engagement and identity formation for reluctant readers, there are some limitations to consider. First, participation was limited to schools that opted into the project, which may have introduced a degree of self-selection bias; schools with a pre-existing interest in reading for pleasure may have been more inclined to take part. Second, the identification of reluctant readers relied on self-report measures, which, while valuable, can be influenced by pupils' perceptions at a single point in time. Third and as already outlined, reading frequency measures weren't as nuanced as they might have been. In addition, the intervention period spanned only one academic term of 12 weeks (for Groups 1 and 2), which may not have been long enough to capture sustained changes in reading frequency beyond magazine use. Furthermore, while the qualitative sample was robust, with a wide range of pupil and teacher voices represented, the insights garnered cannot be generalised across all Year 5 settings without further study.

## **Conclusion**

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 wider reading community, particularly those who may not have typically seen themselves as readers in traditionally conceived, book-focused opportunities. These insights have important implications for educators, policymakers and publishers seeking to broaden which types of texts 'count' as reading and how classroom reading environments and interactions nurture diverse reader identities. The final section of the report offers practical recommendations for future research and practice.

### ***Implications and recommendations***

The Phase 2 study has demonstrated that *What on Earth!* magazine plays a meaningful role in fostering reading enjoyment and supporting the development of positive reader identities for reluctant readers in participating schools. At this stage in children's reading lives, where attitudes toward reading often either flourish or falter, access to diverse, engaging and socially shareable texts matters. The use of *What on Earth!* magazine provided an alternative to more traditional reading formats and, in particular, offered accessibility, choice and a diverse range of subject matter increasing the potential of its relevance to young readers. When offered with regular, dedicated time and space to explore, these texts motivated children's engagement and enabled both independent and collaborative reading experiences.

The findings underscore that decisions made in schools about reading provision, pedagogy and time allocation are not without consequence: they have a direct impact on how children see themselves as readers (Anderson, 2025; Compton Lily, 2025). When teachers provide regular, inclusive opportunities for reading that respect pupils' autonomy and acknowledge their personal and social identities, children are more likely to engage meaningfully with texts. Wide reading is essential and so too is teachers' knowledge—not only of a broad range of texts, including magazines and non-fiction, but also of readers as individuals with diverse preferences, needs and identities.

Moreover, the study reinforces the importance of recognising reading as a social act. Reluctant readers' engagement, in particular, was strengthened through interaction, real-time discussion and informal exchanges with adults and peers, highlighting the relational dimensions of reading in school (Cremin et al., 2025). Reader identity is not fixed; it is fluid, socially shaped and responsive to the contexts in which reading takes place. By creating classrooms that value choice, community and conversation, educators can help all pupils — especially those who may not yet identify themselves as readers or who haven't yet found joy in reading — find meaningful ways to connect with texts and with each other.

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.



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