The Decline in Volitional Reading

Evidence-Informed Ways Forward

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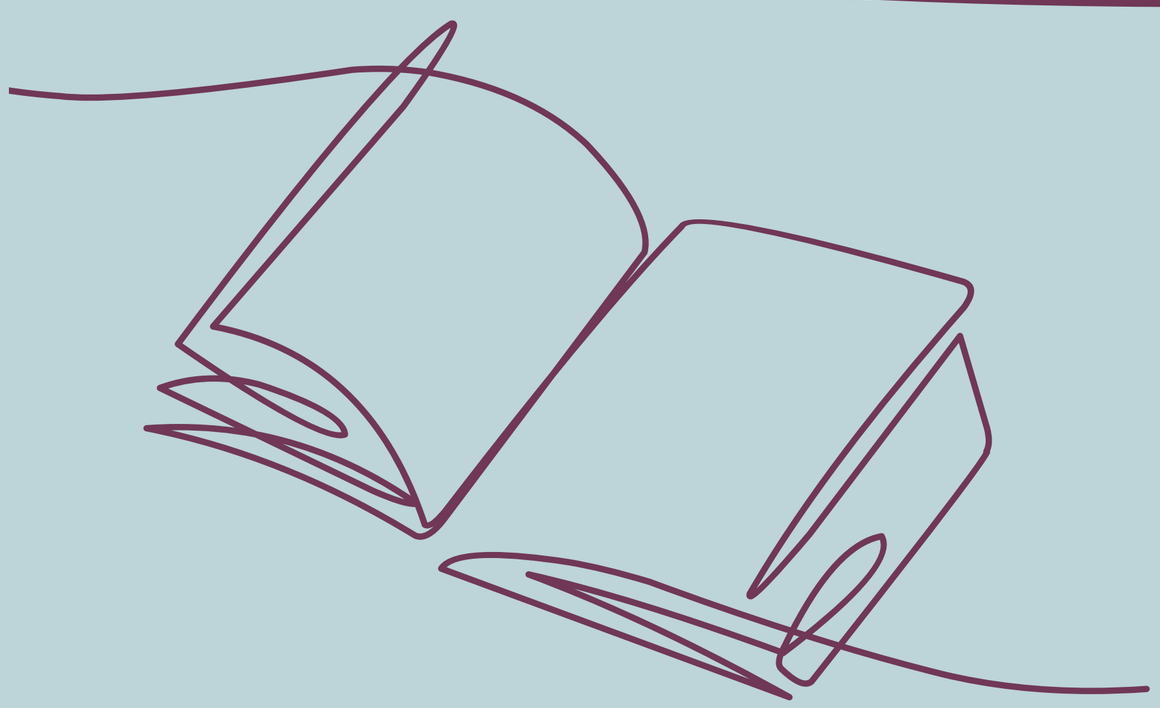

How to Cite:

Loh, C. E. et al. (2025) *The Decline in Volitional Reading: Evidence-Informed Ways Forward*. National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Acknowledgements:

This position paper was written with the support of the National Institute of Education, under its International Research Collaboration (IRC) Seed Grant (IRC 9/24 LCE). The opinions expressed are the authors' and not necessarily those of NIE, NTU or the authors' institutions.

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Global Decline in Reading

The global decline in young people's attitudes to reading and the frequency with which they read represents serious cause for concern[1]. Multiple factors contribute to this situation, which is parallelled in some countries by a decline in adult reading[2] . Are we facing an intergenerational cycle of disinterest and disaffection? Without adult reading role models in homes, schools and wider society, it is likely children will find it harder to develop the reading habit.

Additionally, access to and extensive use of digital media continues to impact upon children's recreational reading, creating an appetite for instant gratification that competes for their time and attention. Scholars argue that sustained surface skimming is reducing our cognitive patience and ability to tolerate ambiguity and engage in deep reading and reflection[3], orienting us towards consuming rather than understanding texts. In many countries an overemphasis on teaching and assessing the skills of reading, at the relative expense of attending to the development of the will – the desire to read – has also contributed to reduced engagement in book reading. Furthermore, overcrowded curricula leave scant space for children to consolidate their learning and pursue their interests through wider reading. Finally, in some countries, poverty, the availability of texts, and reductions in library services further exacerbate the decline. Given the power and potential of volitional reading to support cognitive growth, academic attainment, and psychological wellbeing, urgent action is needed.

Why Volitional Reading Matters

The latest international studies show that both reading skills and enjoyment are falling among young people. The Progress in Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) (2023)[4], which assessed 10-year-olds in 57 countries, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2019)[5], which assessed 15-year-olds from 79 countries, reported that young people are reading less and enjoying it less than before.

However, these and other studies also consistently show that when young people choose to read regularly, they become more proficient readers[6], do better academically[7], and experience greater wellbeing and social cognition outcomes[8]. Consequently, focusing on volitional reading is a vital strategy to address the decline in young people's reading.

To support the practice of volitional reading, it is essential to understand the rich reading lives of the young. While large-scale quantitative studies offer concrete evidence of the benefits of volitional book reading, studies that focus on the voices of young people allow for more nuanced insights of how such reading enhances their intellectual, social and emotional development. Such studies highlight the importance of young people's reading identities - how they view themselves as readers, their beliefs, habits and experiences of reading. Their sense of themselves as readers is constructed and re-constructed by the literacy activities in which they participate, both those required by school and those in which they choose to engage, at school or beyond.

This position paper draws on evidence to challenge some common myths about volitional reading that hinder effective action, and proposes principles and pedagogies, enabling teachers to include volitional reading more explicitly within the curriculum. It offers guidance for policymakers and educators on how to support the habit of reading both in and out of school, concluding with recommendations for future research and practice.

Myths about Volitional Reading

Myth 1: *Boys Don't Read*

It is often perceived that boys enjoy reading less than girls, partly because of stereotypes that position boys as reluctant readers. PISA and PIRLs surveys tend to show simplistic binary differences between 'boys' and 'girls', with boys reporting lower levels of enjoyment for reading. However, much of the complexity related to contexts and socio-economic background are lost in such surveys, making invisible the ways many boys do enjoy reading. In countries such as Brazil and Norway, for instance, boys and girls report little difference in their enjoyment for reading on PIRLS. Underestimating the range of interests and complexity in boys' preferences can curtail their reading confidence, competence and practices.

Socio-economic background plays a part: Regardless of whether they are boys or girls, many socio-economically advantaged students report enjoying reading more than less advantaged students. This phenomenon may be connected to issues related to resource access, school reading cultures and environments, teacher expectations and pedagogies of poverty[9].

Expanding boys' reading range: Reading environments are diverse, but reliance on boy baits related to war, sports and world records for instance, to nurture boys' reading can limit their engagement. It underestimates the range of boys' reading preferences and the changing nature of their interests as they develop as readers[10].

Some boys express a 'love of reading'! [11]

Jack is 8 years old, lives in Australia and '*loves to read*'. He happily talks about his friends who also love to read and the importance of sharing books in his peer group.

"Two of my best friends love reading, Matthew loves reading, Alex loves reading, Johnny loves reading. Jason loves reading. Most of my friends love reading."

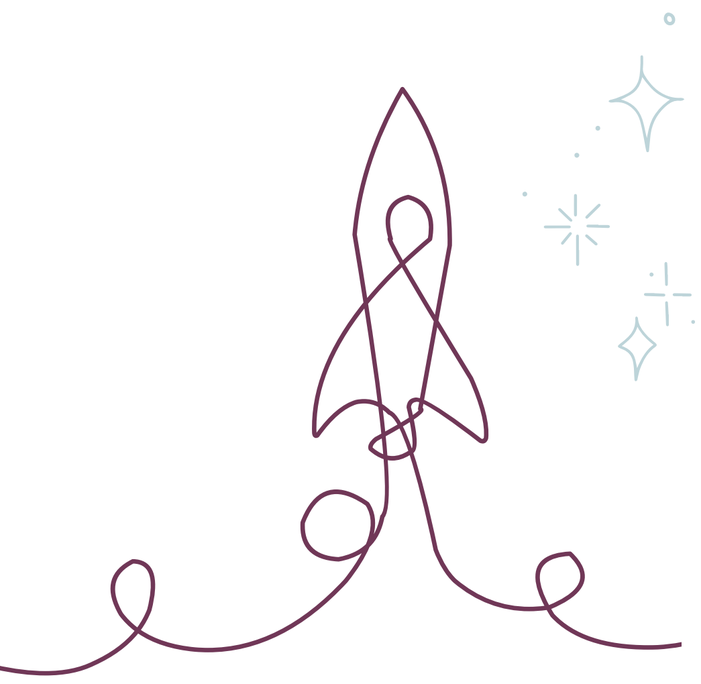
Similarly, Ned loves fiction, and when asked why he says:

"Probably because story books are more action packed, but fact books aren't that exciting [anymore]."

Myth 2: *Young People Should Only Read Novels*

It is widely assumed that only certain kinds of texts can be trusted to cultivate autonomous readers. Curricula, as well as public discourse on reading, tend to favour novels, specifically the literary rather than popular kinds – and novels that rely primarily on words rather than images.

Addressing everyday interests: Any subject matter can deeply resonate with a child's life, only the form of these resonances varies[12]. Rather than mediating a narrow sliver of culture, education should aim to address the diversity of children's everyday personal interests and practices. Research that centres children's inner experiences argues in favour of encouraging broad reading.



Diverse genres support reading: When children reflect on what different text types add to their lives, the results can be surprising. Series books can create expanded universes that peer groups bond over, which particularly benefits marginalised children[13]. Similarly, encyclopaedias and other nonfiction support peer sharing better than novels thanks to their prominent visuals and shorter text segments[14]. Teachers should therefore invite young readers to choose from diverse genres other than novels to foster their growth and self-initiated creative activities[15].

Non-fiction can encourage imagination [16]

In a Czech study, 10-year old Vincent declared that he did not enjoy story reading and thought himself a non-reader. But he turned out to have read reams of nonfiction on the topic of space and used this creatively when staging his everyday pretend play, making art, and more. Thus, he spun his own stories rather than reading them in novels. Nonfiction offered him a fantasy realm to enter at will and to try out ideas.

"I take a piece of information and roll it around in my mind, how things might go or not go, how we might end up a thousand years from now, maybe destroyed by a meteorite."

Myth 3: *Reading is Solitary*

Historically, reading has been viewed as a solo activity — a description of individual engagement. Education systems tend to affirm this, minimizing the social nature of reading and the pleasures in reading together. Yet children's reading can never be separated from their engagement with others; family, friends, peers, librarians, and teachers all influence children's interests and identities as readers in diverse ways.

Motivation is social: Motivation is not simply an individual internal characteristic, it is experienced in a social context, so attention needs to be paid to reading environments. Developing a sense of connectedness around reading supports the growth of reading networks, on and offline, which can nurture and sustain young people's volitional reading[17]. Successful school-based communities are characterized by high degrees of interaction and reciprocity.[18]

Sharing reading experiences: Sharing the experience of reading with others prompts closer reading and enhances the depth of young people's understanding of texts[19]. Enabling child-led conversations about being a reader and texts matters[20]. Informal interactions nurture social and relational connections between readers and strengthen children's interest in and commitment to volitional reading.

Reading is social [21]

Over a year, a US class of 6–7-year-olds, who initially saw reading as an isolated silent school-based skill, experienced reading as socially shared. This, alongside reading time, nurtured positive attitudes.

"We like to read and be quiet, but we are a little loud. That's because we like to read!" (Desiree)

During a discussion, Alexis announces, *"I love talking about books!"*

Myth 4: *Reading Only Matters in the Primary Years*

Many mistakenly believe that once children have developed the necessary skills for reading, sustained support for volitional reading is no longer required. This comes from a skills-oriented perspective which fails to recognize young people's continual growth and development as readers and learners, engaging with both print and digital texts in their everyday lives[22]. Developing lifelong readers requires support from childhood through adolescence.

Adolescence matters: Adolescence offers another opportunity for young people to take control over their own learning. They are often exposed to a wider variety of texts and more challenging reading materials. When they are given the chance to choose books on topics that interest them, they become more engaged and use these texts to make sense of their lives and the world around them[23].

Teenagers want reading support: Teenagers say they would like more support with their reading, including more time to read and book recommendations[24]. When they find purpose in reading and books that interest them, they are motivated to read more. Teens read to relax, learn about themselves and others, find information and as a way to develop friendships.

Teenagers Read Too[25]

Although teenagers are often seen as distracted by social media, entertainment, and busy schedules, they can be motivated to read when they find books of interest, as these Scottish readers share:

"I read a lot. It's like the best thing for relaxing."

"I get into books quite a lot and I just forget about my surroundings."

"I'm just interested in reading other people's views on things."

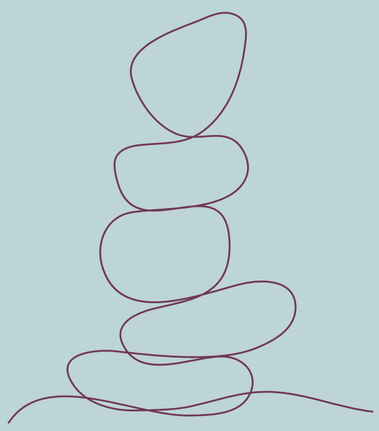
Principles that underpin volitional reading

Research-informed principles underpin young people's volitional reading and can support both print and digital reading experiences and outcomes.

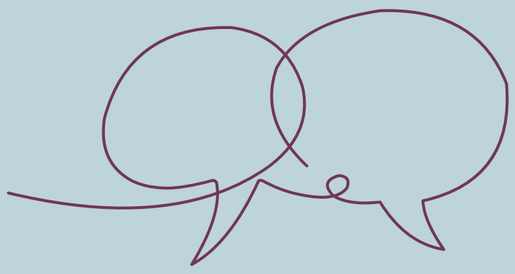
Provision/access: Young people need access to books and other texts which reflect their interests, preferences, lives, experiences and abilities. Access to such texts is essential to initiate and sustain volitional reading[26].

Agency/choice: Young people need support to develop knowledge and strategies to independently and successfully choose books and other texts which reflect their interests. Opportunities to be introduced to and experience different text types is crucial for engagement[27].

Time/routines: Young people need to be given quality time to read books/other texts that they enjoy during the school day, and be encouraged and supported to develop positive reading routines that extend beyond school[28].



Reflection/connection: Young people need opportunities to explore personally meaningful content as they read, reflecting on text content and connecting it with their own personal, social, cultural interests, lives and experiences[29].



Interaction/social: Young people need positive social reading experiences. These include opportunities to connect with others (adults and peers) to recommend, discuss and/or share books/other texts in ways that are personally enjoyable and relevant. Such interactions can enrich both individual and social reading practices[30].

Positive experiences/success: Young people need a range of rich and diverse reading experiences that are not only enjoyable, but also supportive of the development of self-efficacy and positive reading identities[31].

Enabling Pedagogies for Volitional Reading

Drawing on research, and linked to these principles, we offer a blueprint for pedagogies that enable volitional reading. Enabling pedagogies are strategies that are culturally responsive, based on a view of young people as agentic learners who have the potential to be engaged readers.

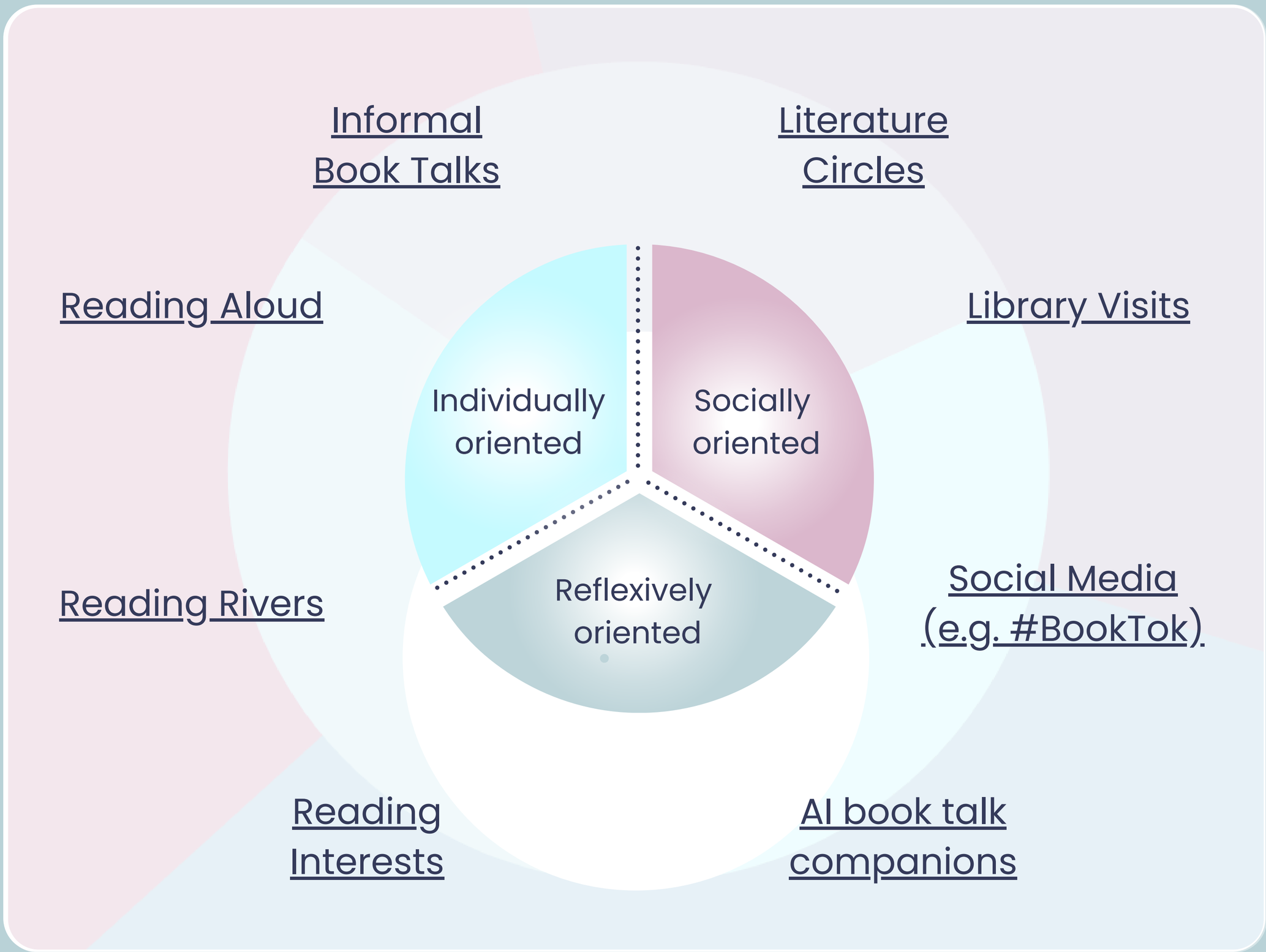
Pedagogies to support volitional reading can be categorised into three interrelated orientations: (1) individually oriented, (2) socially oriented, and (3) reflexively oriented pedagogies.

- **Individually oriented pedagogies** are directed at resourcing and encouraging the young person, to create opportunities to develop positive reader identities.

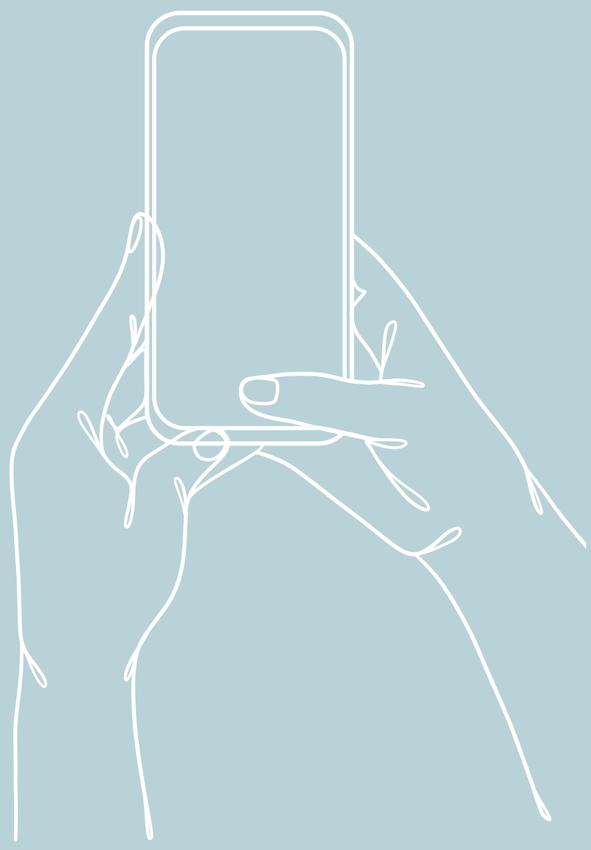
- **Socially oriented pedagogies** recognize that reading identities and habits are developed in a social world. They focus on communal and relational strategies to build reading communities in schools.

- **Reflexively oriented pedagogies** help young people to become more aware of themselves as readers across home and school contexts. They are encouraged to reflect on what they read, and what it means to be a reader, supporting the development of positive reader identities.

The diagram below details the interrelated pedagogies and various strategies that can be used to encourage volitional reading. Examples of these strategies are illustrated in the linked articles, illuminating the different ways they nurture individually, socially and reflexively oriented pedagogies.



Moving forward



In a technologically mediated age of global information flows and connections, young people require ever higher levels of literacy in order to meaningfully engage with the world. Furthermore, they need to develop the capacity for deep reading and lifelong learning[32]. Reading in childhood and adolescence is key for building the foundational skills and dispositions for self-directed learning[33], so education systems must intentionally integrate volitional reading into policy and everyday practices of reading in schools, classrooms and libraries. In an ecosystem which supports volitional reading, young people flourish and encourage each other as readers and learners[34].

Recognising the power of volitional reading for young people, education systems around the world must do more to ensure equitable access, in the form of reading resources, time for reading and support for reading. Additionally, researchers, school leaders and teachers must continue to document and evaluate their practices so that the community may learn from such evidence-based practices to meaningfully improve policies and practices within their own contexts[35].

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