

Choice, time and enjoying together are the recipe to our Reading for Pleasure curriculum

By Anna Szpakowska, Lead Practitioner for Reading



Context

In 2023, I started as Lead Practitioner for Reading at St Ignatius College in Enfield where I inherited a programme called 'Reading for Pleasure'. These are timetabled lessons once a week for students in years 7 and 8 (we have since expanded into year 9 too). Initially, I was asked to ensure the text choices were linked directly to the English curriculum. The year 7 book – *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* had been chosen prior to my appointment. It had been selected for its classical allusions that would complement year 7 units on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In year 8, I chose Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*, thinking that the fear with which the telepaths are treated might chime nicely with the study of *Frankenstein* in year 8.

However, what became apparent very quickly about the choice of these texts was that the students were not engaged; there were episodes of poor behaviour and staff didn't enjoy reading them with the students.

OU Research Inspiration and Rationale

I realised that the RfP curriculum needed to be overhauled if we truly wanted to inspire our Key Stage Three students to enjoy reading.

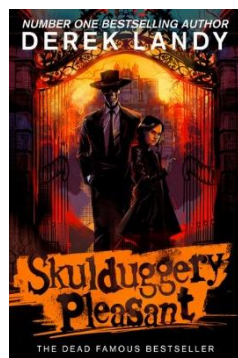
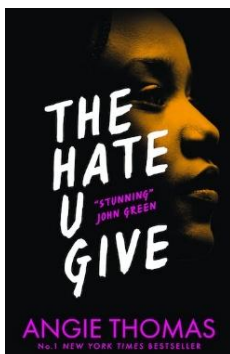
Student disengagement had come from a lack of choice and the fact that they felt that the texts were just more of what they'd get in English. A far cry from what we wanted to nurture in a RfP curriculum! Drawing on the Open University's research on reading for pleasure, we knew we would need to develop a reading

for pleasure pedagogy but that we would also need to draw on knowledge of children's literature. We wanted to harness our [‘knowledge of children's literature’ but also to dedicate ‘time and space’ to developing ‘social reading environment\[s\]’.](#)

Aims, outline and impact

Firstly, we had to ensure that the text choices we were making were based on understanding of children's literature. We sought feedback from our Key Stage Three students, asking them for recommendations. I visited bookshops and asked them for up-to-date recommendations of what eleven- to fourteen-year-olds wanted to read. I drew on my own experience of reading children's and young adults' literature. From here, we were able to create shortlists for each year group. Each class was presented with a choice. Then they cast votes. In year 7, they opted for Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant* and Malorie Blackman's *Pig Heart Boy*. In Year 8, we read Tia Fisher's *Crossing the Line* and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*.

Our texts:



These novels provide exposure to genres students don't experience elsewhere in the curriculum. They're age appropriate, both in terms of reading age and interest level and they've proved really popular with our students. I believe this is for several reasons, as highlighted by the Open University's research. Firstly, students have had a choice in the texts we read with them. Secondly, because they feel that these texts are [‘culturally relevant and reflect their lives and interests’](#) (Cremin et al, 2024: 6)

This has clearly paid dividends. In our latest survey, over half of the students reported enjoying reading more as a result of reading these novels in class. Our library data supports this too, with many students subsequently taking out more of the *Skulduggery* series and other books from *The Maze Runner* series which we have since introduced in our year 9 reading for pleasure lessons. I've even seen

some students who've managed to convince their parents to buy them the entire Skullduggery series and bring them into school.

The second area of the Open University's Reading for Pleasure research that we've drawn on is reading aloud. In our Reading for Pleasure lessons, we either use Audible – where the production is engaging – or the teacher reads aloud, modelling fluency, intonation and expression. Teachers articulate their thought processes and ask students questions as they read. This provides opportunities for '[inside text talk](http://www.ourfp.org/finding/rfpp/booktalk-and-recommendations/)' (www.ourfp.org/finding/rfpp/booktalk-and-recommendations/). However, this interactive process also ensures that reading becomes a social activity. We enjoy the books together, discuss them together and ask questions of them together. Crucially, these lessons are dedicated time set aside to simply enjoy reading. As the Open University's research has suggested, [time is one of the 'synergistic connections'](#) required to nurture reader motivation and engagement (Cremin et al, 2024: 2).

As well as leading this area of the curriculum, I have also taught the lessons for the last three years. I've found it a truly rewarding aspect of my teaching role. If you're someone who loves reading, is there anything greater than enjoying reading with others? It also allows for an hour of curriculum time where enjoyment is really at the heart of things and also where we can slow down a little. [As Megan Dixon suggests](#), we are responsible for educating students in the 'broadest sense' and 'reading together can create a powerful sense of being in the moment – surely an active ingredient in the education of every child!' (Dixon: 2020).

Our next steps

We're delighted with the impact this has had on young people's attitudes to reading. It has clearly increased enjoyment for many of our students. It has shown that setting curriculum time aside for reading for pleasure is valuable. Of course, there are still young people who have not reported an increase in their enjoyment of reading, and this is where we must now focus. We hope to give all students the opportunity to give us feedback about what they want to read. We'll also endeavour to tempt them with even more quality and enticing texts to engage them with reading for pleasure.