



*What Kids Are Reading: summary

The Book-Reading Habits of Students in British Schools 2012

An independent study by Professor Keith Topping, Professor of Educational and Social Research, School of Education, University of Dundee.

1,237 schools
213,527 students
2,886,920 books
32,463,869,100 words

Welcome to a summary of the key findings from the 2012 *What Kids Are Reading* report, written by Professor Keith Topping of Dundee University. With comments from educators and contributions from popular children's authors, this report provides detailed information on the books school children from all Year Groups are actually reading.

The full report, which is available to view online at: www.readforpleasure.co.uk/wkaronline examines the book-reading habits of students in British schools using the Accelerated Reader (AR) software from Renaissance Learning. AR offers computerised quizzes on the literal content of real books chosen by children so that data on their free reading habits can be captured.



Renaissance Learning™
Advanced Technology for Data-Driven Schools™

Introduction

By Dirk Foch, Managing Director of Renaissance Learning UK

Welcome to Renaissance Learning's fourth annual *What Kids Are Reading* report.

This year the report is fully available online at: www.readforpleasure.co.uk/wkaronline - where you will be able to view in detail the Top 20 books read by students from Years 1-11 and read exciting contributions from popular children's authors and the thoughts of our new Panel of Educators. The importance of Reading for Pleasure and its positive impact on academic achievement, as identified in the recent PISA study, cannot be overstated and we are proud of the role Accelerated Reader (AR) is playing in raising literacy standards amongst students of all ages and abilities across the UK. I would like to thank Professor Topping and all the contributors to the 2012 report and hope you enjoy reading this summary of the key findings.



Dirk Foch,
Managing Director of
Renaissance Learning UK



Foreword:

By Jonathan Douglas, Director of the National Literacy Trust

Reading for Pleasure is again moving centre stage. Education policy since the 2010 election has focused on the mechanisms of learning to read, in particular the promotion of systematic synthetic phonics. Now politicians are increasingly identifying the importance of children's reading which engages their hearts, minds and imaginations in a way in which nothing else can.



Jonathan Douglas,
Director of the National
Literacy Trust

We know that reading for pleasure strengthens a child's reading and writing skills and has a significant long-term impact on their education and life outcomes. A young person who has the experience and habit of reading for pleasure has laid the foundations for lifelong learning. This for many will be the basis for the improved opportunities that politicians call "*social mobility*".

“ Research which helps us to understand the challenges and to see our experiences within wider trends is incredibly useful. This is why I hope this report will be widely read. **”**

This is a massive challenge and as a former children's librarian I know you need as much help as you can get.

Of course, the primary help is from the writers, poets and illustrators who do more than anyone else ever can to make reading irresistible for young people. It is great to read in this report how young people still recognise the power of writers like Rowling, Dahl and Morpurgo.

As well as the books and writers themselves, other resources are invaluable in helping teachers and librarians to promote reading for pleasure. Research which helps us to understand the challenges and to see our experiences within wider trends is incredibly useful. This is why I hope this report will be widely read.

The prize of successfully promoting reading for pleasure to children and young people is enormous, and not something to be apologetic about. Reading for pleasure may be a wonderful experience in itself, but promoting it to children is a powerful tool in improving their life chances and creating a society where more young people can fulfil their potential. Ultimately every librarian and teacher who is passionate about children's reading is an agent of social change. Every child who has enjoyed reading a book, reflected on it and completed a quiz is a milestone in this work.

2012 is the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens. In 1842 he spoke at the opening of the Athenaeum, a new education centre in Manchester, containing a massive library. Dickens spoke of the power of the library and of its impact: "*it is in the effect of such institutions upon the great social system, and the peace and happiness of mankind, that I delight to contemplate them*". This is what promoting reading for pleasure is about. This is our work and what this report helps us to achieve.

Summary of Key Findings:

From August 1st, 2010, to July 31st, 2011, more than 213,527 children in 1,237 schools read more than 2,886,920 books or an astonishing 32,463,869,100 words. During the quizzing period analysed for the 2012 report, slightly more boys than girls yielded data. **The average book difficulty rises as students get older, but not in proportion to the rate at which students should be improving in reading.**

After Year 9 the average book difficulty level declines, which is alarming. The Average Percent Correct (APC) on quizzes taken was in every Year lower than that recommended by the software manufacturers (0.69 – 0.70 cf. 0.85), but once tests not passed are disregarded, the figure is much nearer the 85% criterion.

This year there is evidence that a high number of quizzes taken and passed is sustained into the first two Years of secondary school (Year 7 and 8, except in Scotland), a change from previous years when a decline set in at this stage.

While the difficulty of books read declines after Year 9, this is more positive than previous reports, in which the difficulty declined after Year 6. However, it is still the case that **if the older readers challenged themselves more, better reading outcomes could be anticipated.**

Against this has to be set the tendency for AR to move out of the mainstream in the later Years of secondary school, generally being used as an intervention resource. **There are signs of difficulty of books rising since last year,** which is indeed to be welcomed.

In the nine Years, there was an increase in difficulty in six of the Years. This may indicate that teachers are becoming more proficient at guiding students towards books of an appropriate level of difficulty.

“The popularity of Robert Muchamore, Jeff Kinney and Anthony Horowitz is pleasing to note as they write very ‘boy orientated’ books, and the fact that they are so high on the report bucks the previously perceived ‘boys don’t read’ trend.”

Bev Humphrey, Literacy Consultant

The difficulty level of books read by boys in the report is no longer generally lower than girls’.

Across the Years, there are four cases where boys’ difficulty is greater than girls, three cases where girls’ difficulty is greater than boys and two cases where it is equal. We can no longer claim that boys read at a lower level of difficulty than girls so overall under-achievement must be caused by other factors.

Turning to Average Percentage Correct (APC), this also shows signs of rising. In three (early) Years, APC is well above 85%. In a further three (middle) Years, APC falls below 85% only in one or two cases. In each of a further three (upper) Years, APC falls below 85% in five cases out of 20. However, in general this represents an improvement over last year. Again, it may well be that teachers are guiding students more effectively in the book and quizzing choices.



Robert Muchamore, author



This may be hyped as a digital age, but words and reading remain at the core. Try using Facebook without being able to read the posts, composing an entertaining Tweet without a vocabulary of concise words, or seeing how many views your new YouTube channel gets if you don’t tag it with carefully targeted and correctly spelt keywords.

As an author I get my share of starry moments...but none of that was as

satisfying as a signing at a tiny bookstore on a wet February evening. An 11-year-old reached the front of the queue and while I signed his stack of *CHERUB* books, he eagerly told me how his best friend had nagged him into reading my first book, *The Recruit*.... The boy’s mum told me how she’d worried when her son had been 10-years-old with no interest in books and a reading age of eight. After a summer holiday in which he’d read eight of my books it shot up to 10.8... his mum reckoned he was doing better in class too.

Read Robert’s full thoughts on Reading for Pleasure in the full 2012 *What Kids Are Reading* report which is available to view online at:

www.readforpleasure.co.uk/wkarauthors

* Voting for Favourite Books:

In addition to completing quizzes on books to assess their understanding, children also have the opportunity to vote for books in terms of whether they enjoyed the book or not. **In the first Years children were reading very difficult books with a high degree of success** – it is remarkable what reading motivating books does for children.

Chief among these were the *Harry Potter* books – **J.K. Rowling** might have declined in the quiz lists, but among these favoured books she clearly remains a significant force: Years 1-5 children were reading favourite books at far above their chronological ability,

while maintaining a high rate of success in terms of high APC.

This trend goes higher up the Years than it did in 2011. In Year 6 relative difficulty declines somewhat, then there is a marked decline after secondary transfer. Some of these books are aligned with the quiz lists, but many of the authors are not (particularly in the early and late Years). Why are children in the quiz lists reading books they do not prefer? Possibly because they only know their favourites after the book has been read. **Schools should implement systems for students to recommend books to each other.**

* Popularity of Authors:

Overall, **Roald Dahl** remains the top author. **Roderick Hunt** has many mentions, all with young children. Next in a great surge comes **Jeff Kinney** with his *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, notable for its relatively high readability

After this comes **Francesca Simon**, again proving the popularity of her *Horrid Henry* series amongst boys and **J. K. Rowling** has regained some of her former position. **Allen Ahlberg** has lost a good deal of popularity from last year, but still does relatively well, especially with girls.

For girls, **Stephenie Meyer** is now more or less equal with **Jacqueline Wilson**. For boys, **Dav Pilkey**, **Michael Morpurgo** and **Robert Muchamore** feature. Girls tended to choose books with female role models.

“I think the children’s voting reflects the ‘class novel vs. independent reading’ pattern. Truly established and independent readers will have a wider range of books they like.”

Leslie Humphries,
Education Consultant

* High-Achieving Kids:

Books read by high-achieving kids were defined as books read by students who were reading at two or more years above their actual chronological Year level. **Students up to Year 4 were reading books more than two years ahead of their Year level.** This compares very positively with last year when no high-ability students

were reading books at the ability-appropriate level.

In all but one Year the difficulty of books read by these high-ability students had increased. High-ability students enjoy **J. K. Rowling**, who has 38 mentions in 2012. **Roald Dahl** has only 21, a reversal of their positions from last year.



Andy Briggs,
author



I have met plenty of kids who would never be seen with a book in their hand, yet will happily read a comic or the on-screen story in a video game - so I asked myself, why is this happening? I believe the answer is: they think books are not entertaining.

I understand that. As a child, I preferred comics and films. They excited my

imagination and required little effort to enjoy. Then, to my surprise, I discovered that one of my favourite characters, *Tarzan*, was also in a book. An entire book devoted to the Ape Man. That story that would last longer than a comic or a film... this had to be explored.



Read Andy's full thoughts on Reading for Pleasure in the full 2012 *What Kids Are Reading* report which is available to view online at:

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*Struggling Readers:

Books read by struggling readers were defined as books read by students who were reading at two or more years below their actual chronological Year level. Especially in the middle Years, struggling readers tended to choose the same books that appeared on the lists for average readers, but at a lower chronological age.

The difficulty of the books read started almost at the right level (two years behind chronological age), but very quickly the difficulty fell away until the readers were very much under-challenged. However, this was less so than in previous years, so perhaps there are signs that students and/or teachers are becoming more proactive in this regard. However, the Average Percent Correct also declined in some cases, suggesting that **for teachers the problem is not simply to encourage struggling readers to read harder books - it is to get them to understand what they read.**

“Struggling readers usually have low self-esteem about their reading and in order to encourage more regular reading, and make them more positive, they need to experience regular success in the Reading Practice Quiz to reinforce their self-belief.”

Julie King, English Teacher

*Non-Fiction Titles:

As part of the study the Most Read Non-fiction Books were also considered. All the books in the average readers', high-ability readers' and struggling readers' lists are fiction – storybooks. We know that boys in particular are interested in non-fiction. So why is it that so many fiction books are chosen?

In the lower Years, difficulty was above the chronological age of the students. Non-fiction difficulty began to decline once beyond Year 5, just as with average fiction books. Thus there was no evidence that students read harder non-fiction books than fiction. Additionally, especially in Years 3-6, Average Percent Correct (APC) tended to be lower than was the case for fiction – it seemed that the non-fiction books were not read or understood as fully as the fiction books.

However, from Year 7 onwards, **APC tended to be markedly better than for all books, and all**

Years had improved over 2011. There has been a substantial improvement in the reading of non-fiction titles by older students.

From Year 5 on the data suggests that children began to develop preferences for particular non-fiction authors. Also at Year 5 the beginnings of a male orientation began to be found in non-fiction books listed. From Year 7, the male orientation became very strong. Unfortunately the difficulty of the books read from Year 7 declined substantially.

School Spotlight: Maltings Academy

Aislinn McFadden,
Librarian at the
Maltings Academy,
knows the importance of
daily reading practice
and its effect on
literacy standards.



“Since becoming an Academy, the staff and students of The Maltings Academy have seen lots of changes...many new initiatives have meant even more significant change, but NONE have matched the impact made by Accelerated Reader (AR). Prior to its arrival in September 2008 the library was used as a bolthole for individuals who struggled to ‘fit in’.

Fast forward three years and the transformation is dramatic. Every day the library is buzzing with students happily quizzing on their latest read and searching keenly for their next, all happy to recommend their latest find to friends, and encourage those who are more reluctant.

In simple terms, reading is now ‘cool’.

When AR first arrived 150 students in Year 7 were the only participants. Today ALL 470 students in Years 7-9 participate, with 85%+ participating at any time - boys reading equally as well as the girls - Year 9 students participating as enthusiastically as Year 7!

From the librarian’s perspective, it doesn’t get better than this!”



Conclusions:

Overall, then, there were some modest changes in the most popular author lists from 2010, with **Jeff Kinney** a rising star to be watched and **Roald Dahl** and **J. K. Rowling** continuing to recover.

Difficulty showed good signs of increasing, but still needs to rise more if students are to achieve their full reading potential.

Books children liked after reading them showed much higher difficulty and a high Average Percent Correct

(APC), but even this difficulty dropped away in later Years, although less so than in previous reports. Many of these books were quite different to those appearing on the general quiz lists, and should be studied by teachers seeking to maximise child performance.

Difficulty also stayed higher for longer than in previous years amongst high-ability readers, but eventually began to drop away even for this capable group, especially after secondary transfer.

Struggling readers read easier books, but their APC showed some increase this year. However, the difficulty of easy reading texts certainly needs monitoring as closely if not more closely than ordinary books. **Girls no longer tended to read harder books than boys of the same age. Boys certainly showed more interest than girls in non-fiction books,** especially in the secondary Years, but these were not more difficult and boys certainly did not read them any more carefully.

In general, **it is clear that Accelerated Reader is effective in helping a greatly increased number of students maximise their reading capability.** Of course, without the software, none of these data would be available.

“As the PISA study concluded ‘The challenge for parents and educators is to instil a sense of pleasure in reading by providing reading materials that students find interesting and relevant’. I would add to this ‘and challenging’, again I return to the fact that schools need to ensure their book stocks are current and exciting – the fact that so many boys are reading Jeff Kinney books that are above their expected levels show the motivating power a popular book has.”

Bev Humphrey, Literacy Consultant



Marcia Williams,
author



When I was very young and learning to read I found no pleasure in books. My parents lived abroad and I was moved from school to school.

The first thing I was made to do in each new class was to stand up and read aloud, so the teacher could judge which reading book I should be on. I was a chronically shy child and found this agonizing and as a result both school and books seemed hateful.

Then I moved to a boarding school and met Miss Duncan - the scariest teacher ever! Miss Duncan walked with a stick and the tap, tap, tap of it along the paths and corridors sent shivers down the spine of everyone in the school. One glance from Miss Duncan's beady eyes and even the most unruly pupil

would fall silent. She had a viper's tongue and seemed always in a bad temper. Little did I realise that this harridan would give me one of the gifts I treasure most in life - the gift of reading for pleasure.

Her speciality was the books of Mr Charles Dickens. Miss Duncan seemed to become each character and as a result I was no longer in the world of the school that I hated, but transported to a rich, new and fascinating world. In this year of Mr Dickens's bicentenary, I would like to share my passion for reading aloud and being read to. So - what the Dickens - why not read aloud to someone today just for the sheer joy of it!

Read Marcia's full thoughts on Reading for Pleasure in the full 2012 What Kids Are Reading report which is available to view online at:

www.readforpleasure.co.uk/wkarauthors

Recommendations:

Recommendations for the future seem clear. Students should be encouraged to:

- Pass all quizzes
- Sustain a higher level of challenge in their reading, especially on transfer to secondary school
- Sustain Average Percent Correct at or above 85% level

“It can be a minefield choosing books for children: if we choose books that we know are good for them, but that they may find challenging, their immediate response can be that the book is boring... **”**

David Edwards, Assistant Headteacher

Teachers should be aware of the very different student preferences for reading over time and the marked differences in the preferences between boys and girls.

Boys are particularly likely to read books that are too easy, and their reading needs closer monitoring than that of girls.

Even **high-achieving readers do not challenge themselves enough** as they grow older. Boys are more interested in non-fiction but need encouragement to read it carefully.

Books popular with children should guide school purchasing decisions in the future, but even on these books difficulty eventually declines.



Tommy Donbavand,
author



Do you remember *that* book? The one with the story that grabbed your attention and wouldn't let go the book that started you reading for pleasure? I remember mine as clearly as if I had found it yesterday.

It was 1977 (or thereabouts)...I was sitting in my granddad's rain-soaked caravan near Rhyl with a glass of weak orange squash, a rapidly melting Club biscuit and a tattered library book...Then, during a brief break in the bad weather, I ran to the

small campsite shop to buy some sweets, and spotted a book on the wire rack near the door: *Alfred Hitchcock and The Three Investigators*, in *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot* by Robert Arthur... I'm getting goose bumps now as I remember how I devoured that book, and then tracked down every other title in the series as soon as I got back home. So, as you flick through this wonderful list of what children are currently reading, ask yourself this - which of these brilliant books will be the 'the one' for children you know?

Read Tommy's full thoughts on Reading for Pleasure in the full 2012 *What Kids Are Reading* report which is available to view online at:

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**To share your thoughts
on this report with us
please email
wk@renlearn.co.uk**

*About the Author

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Keith Topping is Professor of Educational and Social Research at Dundee University.

Keith's published works exceed 300 (books, chapters, peer reviewed journal papers and distance learning packages), with translations into 12 languages. Prior to entering Higher Education he worked for a number of Local Education Authorities and in Social Services and Health. Keith's own main research focus is Peer Learning (including peer tutoring, cooperative learning and peer assessment) and other forms of non-professional tutoring (e.g. by parents, assistants or volunteers) – in core skills (e.g. reading, spelling, writing, thinking skills, science, mathematics and information technology) and across subject boundaries, in all sectors and contexts of education and lifelong learning. He also has interests in computer aided assessment, peer assessment and formative assessment.

Other contributors:

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- **Dirk Foch**, Managing Director of Renaissance Learning UK
- **Jonathan Douglas**, Director of the National Literacy Trust
- **Robert Muchamore**, Author of spy books for children such as *CHERUB*
- **Andy Briggs**, Author of many children's books including the new *Tarzan* series
- **Aislinn McFadden**, Librarian, The Maltings Academy
- **Tommy Donbavand**, Author of the popular *Scream Street* series
- **Marcia Williams**, Children's book writer and comic strip illustrator of the classics
- **David Edwards**, Assistant Headteacher, Hazelgrove School
- **Leslie Humphries**, Education Consultant and professional of 33 years' experience
- **Bev Humphrey**, Literacy, School Libraries & Technology Consultant
- **Julie King**, English Teacher, Hucknall National Primary School