

Social Reading Spaces

A book club trial for disengaged readers in Year 8

A collaboration between HarperCollins Children's Books, Farshore and The School Library Association

Executive Summary

A weekly book club in 17 secondary schools for disengaged readers aged 12-13 successfully changed many students' attitudes to books and reading. Over 12 school weeks, led by school librarians, small groups of students enjoyed a pressure-free social book club. They engaged in conversations, discussed books, relaxed, had snacks, and had the choice of whether and what to read. Feedback from 404 students at the end of the trial showed that **60%** were more interested in books and reading, **52%** were reading more and **82%** wanted to continue with book club. However, staffing levels and timetabling posed significant challenges to running the book clubs. Findings highlight lack of resource as a major obstacle, and without support from colleagues and the Senior Leadership Team, librarians are unlikely to continue with this approach. Nevertheless, innovative strategies are essential if we are to change attitudes to reading among adolescents.

Introductions

Alison David, Consumer Insight Director, HarperCollins Children's Books and Farshore

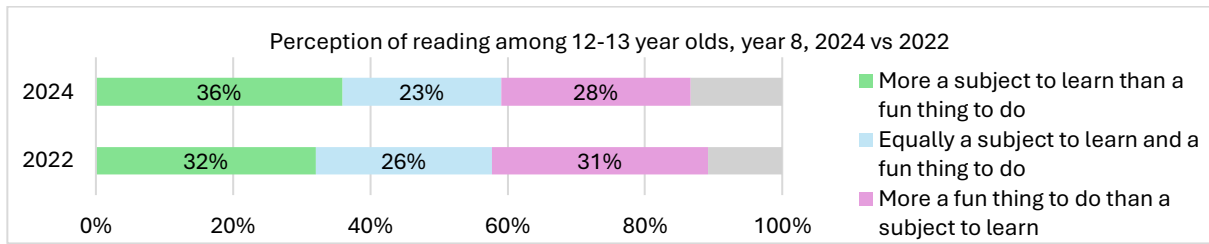
Many children see reading as a chore associated with the pressure of lessons and assessment. Our existing research corpus has found lifting the pressure, offering wide choice and free choice (a sense of agency and control) are important for motivating reading.

Our book club aimed to convert disengaged readers by providing a social environment under the guidance of a member of the library team. Students met regularly in small groups in a welcoming environment, away from the classroom, and with no pressure to read. With extensive book choices, students could find books they wanted to read, they would connect with their peers over book talk and change their minds about reading.

Why Year 8?

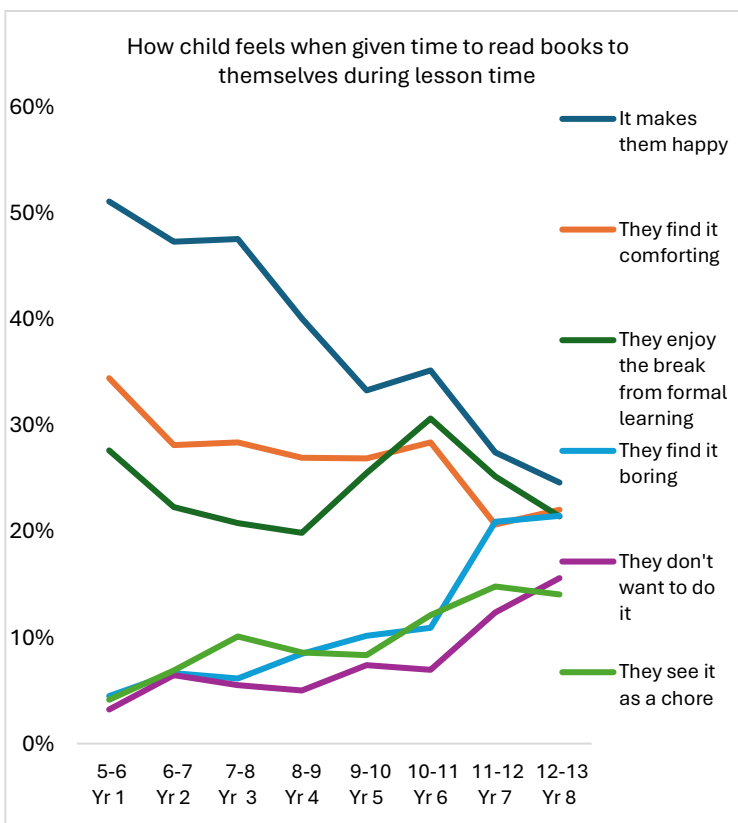
Year 8 is a significant time for adolescents, marking the transition to teenage years. It's a key marker in the journey of growing up and a psychologically significant year. And it's an age when many think negatively of reading:

- Only 12% of boys and 23% of girls aged 12-13 choose to read 'every day or nearly every day'
- 21% 'rarely or never' read for pleasure
- 56% don't think books are cool
- 80% would rather watch TV, go online or play video games than read books
- 65% of boys and 48% of girls 'don't really enjoy reading books'
- The majority of 12-13-year-olds think reading is 'more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do', and this perception has grown since 2022, see chart below:



Source: HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

Reading for pleasure is high priority in secondary schools and a common encouragement strategy is to tell students to always keep a book of their choice in their bag, so that they can read at given opportunities. We have found that on average 36% of 5-17s feel happy when given time to read a book of their own choice in class, rising to 63% among those who are keen readers¹: this approach appeals to those who already enjoy reading. Being told to read takes away the agency that young people want, even if it is their own choice of book, and if they don't already enjoy reading it is not likely to be a positive experience. By the time children reach Year 8, only 25% feel happy when given time to read a book of their own choice in class.



This chart shows changes in attitudes as children move through the school years, from Year 1 to Year 8.

Feeling happy about being given time to themselves to read books during lesson time drops from 51% in Year 1 to 25% in Year 8.

There is a peak in 'break from formal learning' in Year 6, which is the SATS year.

Negative perceptions increase as children get older.

Source: HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

The wider context around growing up was also significant to the way we designed our trial book club:

- Psychological reactanceⁱⁱ – resisting and rebelling when we perceive we lack choice and autonomy or are being induced against our will – is prevalent in adolescents. In school, this can lead to decreased engagement and negativity. Young people need to have a sense of agency.
- Friendships and peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence, when there is a strong need for social interaction and connection, to feel accepted and to belong.
- Adolescence is a time of increased emotional sensitivity and vulnerability to the development of mental health problems.ⁱⁱⁱ However, positive peer relationships do promote wellbeing.^{iv}

We wanted to utilise this and create a book club with the following elements:

- A supportive and friendly, enjoyable environment that encourages social acceptance, a safe space ‘to be yourself’
- Autonomy and agency (removing the potential for reactance)
- A relaxed environment, taking off the pressure associated with books and reading
- An opportunity for social interaction and fun

If we could give 12–13-year-old adolescents what they want and need **through** reading, could we change their ideas **about** reading?

Victoria Dilly, Chief Executive Officer, School Library Association

Some of my most rewarding experiences as a school librarian involved leading book groups and encouraging conversations between young people about reading, but opportunities to read for pleasure in school are in decline everywhere and almost non-existent in some schools. Fewer and fewer young people are choosing to read for pleasure, and some don’t have the access to books required to even consider reading as a pastime. The gifts of time, space, books, and help to discover them are priceless in the current school reading landscape. Being able to talk about and discover books is such an essential part of any young reader’s journey, yet the school library can sometimes be seen as a place for silent reading and study, rather than as a place where social interaction takes place. The opportunity to share stories and experiences related to books and reading, and to discuss opinions and ideas is key to creating a reading identity. This research project is a timely and important study to show just how valuable these opportunities are; and why the active use of a well-resourced school library led by a knowledgeable school librarian can be transformational. Not just on reading ability and engagement, but on areas such as wellbeing and social skills. These ideas are not new to the SLA or to the many school librarians working to build reading communities in their schools, but studies like this enable us to demonstrate the value of school library spaces. They also provide learnings about just how well-placed school librarians are to support social interaction across the whole school community. In addition, school librarians themselves can reflect on their practice to help develop positive relationships with their school communities. Evidencing the impact of school libraries through collaborative studies like this one is essential in helping us build the case for all young people to have access to books to read, social spaces in which to read them and time to talk about books with their peers, with a librarian on hand to support.

Research aims

Our objectives were to understand:

- The effectiveness of a social book club in engaging reluctant readers in Year 8.
- The challenges / barriers to participation among students.
- Challenges faced by librarians.
- Effective and less effective book club strategies.
- Benefits for students.

Book Club Design

The book club had consistent elements and also flexible guidelines to allow librarians to use their professional judgement to try different strategies.

- Each of the schools was gifted 200 children's and young adult books published by HarperCollins Children's Books, Farshore and Barrington Stoke, to offer choice and create excitement. The first 100 books were selected by the School Library Association and delivered at the start of the trial. We asked that the new books were kept for the sole use of the book club students for the duration of the trial.
- We asked librarians to involve students in selecting the second set of 100 books, to be delivered halfway through the trial.
- Eighteen HarperCollins children's authors wrote letters to the students; librarians were asked to read them aloud, at their discretion.
- We recommended group sizes of between 5 and 8, with the same students and member of the library team meeting each week.
- We asked librarians to make book club feel relaxed and social, to focus on student choice and agency, and to make it feel far removed from a lesson or a library lesson.
- Each school was gifted a £100 Amazon voucher to be spent, at their discretion, on accessories that would enhance the social reading experience e.g. cushions, blankets. Most schools supplemented this with additional budget to pay for snacks and drinks.
- We asked librarians to give students the choice whether to read during and between sessions.
- Students were not be set reading 'homework' or challenges.
- Students were not to be offered rewards or points for reading.
- Students had the right to choose their own book. They did not have to read the same book. The only books they were not allowed to choose were reading scheme books, digital books, or 'set texts' from the curriculum.
- We asked librarians to read book extracts to prompt discussions and introduce books.

See Appendix for details on what strategies worked well and what worked less well.

School Recruitment and Methodology

When School Library Association members were invited to take part, we received 96 applications from librarians. 21 schools were selected: a mix of school types, regions, sizes, student demographics and Ofsted performance rating.

The evidence for this exploratory project was collected over a longitudinal trial of approximately 12 weeks, which ran from November 2023 (after the Autumn half term break) to February 2024 (up to the Spring half term break). Data was gathered from students and librarians through pre- and post-trial online forms, focus groups, interviews and an online forum. Out of the 21 schools selected, 17 completed the project, providing feedback from 17 librarians and 404 students.

Findings

The Social Book Club was very enjoyable

Students flourished in the small group format. Most said that they felt relaxed, cosy and comfortable, happy and interested during book club. At the end of the trial students were asked to share any final comment about their experience, and fun and enjoyment, along with the hope that book club would continue, was what they wanted to convey.

- **84%** of students said book club had been a worthwhile experience
- **82%** would like to keep going with book club
- 16 of the 17 librarians said that all or most of their students enjoyed taking part in the trial

its my faveroutie i and i want to do this evrery week and its a very good experience and i think it should continue [girl]

i have found book club to be an amazing experience [boy]

IT HAS BEEN VERY FUN AND I HAVE READ MUCH MORE BOOKS. HOPEFULLY IN THE FUTURE WE CAN HAVE MORE OF THESE AND HAVE FUN [girl]

A sense of exclusivity added to positive feelings about belonging to book club. Students enjoyed having sole use of the gifted books for the duration of the trial. The accessories bought for the club with the Amazon voucher heightened the belief that book club was different and helped make students feel validated and ‘chosen’ for something special, rather than singled out for under performance. Authors’ letters added to this feeling and elicited great excitement and interest for some, with librarians saying that at first many students couldn’t believe an author would write to them and that the letters were genuine. One librarian said *“Anna James’s letter, which looked at the rights of the reader, kind of blew their minds a little bit. And one of the girls said I didn’t realise I could actually stop reading a book once I started it. And that just seemed to really change her whole outlook on reading which has been really lovely to see.”*

i got to respond to actual authors and ask them about my opinions and descisions and getting to respond to derek landy about him acusing us of eating the elderly wich i would never do :D [boy]

When I was little, I used to read the Beano and one of the people that did the letters was one of the writers and illustrators of the Beano, and it was really cool [girl]

There was a letter by Sally Gardner. And I think throughout, like her childhood, she wasn't really able to read, but she was like, now she's a writer and I. I think it's quite inspiring because not being able to read, but having the passion to read is very interesting. And the fact that she's become a writer now just shows that, like, you can really achieve anything no matter what [Girl focus group]

The Social Book Club changed students' attitudes towards books and reading

All librarians said that being in the book club had a positive impact on most students' attitudes towards reading, and **60%** of the students said they were more interested in books and reading since being in the book club. When students were asked what the *most enjoyable* aspect of book club was, just over half of their comments included reference to books or reading.

Librarians had the time to get to know the students and so they were able to match them with books aligned with their interests. **50%** of boys and **53%** of girls said they had discovered new books e.g. *"I'm getting into manga as its coooool"* [boy], and *"reading ww2 and computer book"* [boy]. Among these students, previously disengaged and who associated reading with a chore, this is an important shift towards wanting to read.

It made me realize I just haven't found the right book [boy]

Before, I wasn't really interested in reading because all of the previous books I read. But now that I know there are some great books that I can enjoy [girl]

What I liked most was that I got some books that I liked [boy]

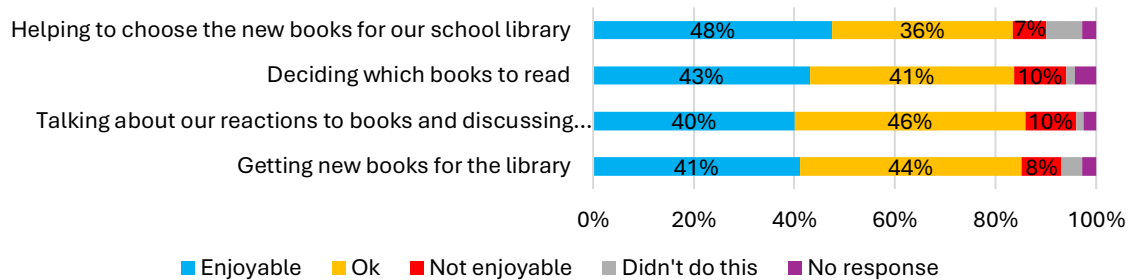
"Seeing how some students, who didn't class themselves as readers, or found it difficult, found a book that they enjoyed and felt so proud of reading it, was a privilege" [School Librarian]

Across all the schools, librarians recounted stories of breakthroughs, describing how students who'd never previously read for enjoyment, or had never finished a book, found a book they loved. Some didn't just read one book: having found a series or author they loved, they became regular visitors to the library, dropping in to chat to the librarian and to get more.

"Some students who had never read a book to the end were encouraged to read the smaller books and had a sense of achievement when they could say they actually read it all. One student came to me the day after one of the book clubs to return his book and pick another one as he had finished it during afternoon reading time and he wanted to let me know" [School Librarian]

At the end of the trial, 17% of boys and 21% of girls said yes, they *would* in future visit the library more often. And a further 42% of boys and 38% of girls said they *would possibly* visit it more often. So, in total, 59% of students expressed intent to visit the library more often in the future.

Enjoyment of Book Club linked to books



The Social Book Club changed behaviour: students read more

The trial approach was very different from many popular Reading for Pleasure strategies adopted by schools, in which reading is instructional, linked to quizzing, is incentivised through points, and is often carried out in whole class settings in silence.

this book club has helped me find books I really enjoy reading because before this I never really liked reading books. When I came to secondary school, I felt a bit pressurised to read because teachers are always saying, Can you read this? Can everyone read? It was quite boring, to be honest, or you'd get a behaviour point if you didn't read the book [girl, focus group]

By giving students free choice on whether and what to read, book club participants were far more likely to drop their negative attitudes and be open to reading. Choice and agency were important to them:

I was allowed to read any book I want to instead of having to choose from my AR level [girl]

i got to read more books that i actually like [girl]

it was just good to be in a small group and not be told we have to do something but given a choice [girl]

I really enjoyed the experience and Miss was nice, she listened to us and didn't judge us when we said we didn't like something or we didn't want to do something. She told us we didn't have to finish a book if we weren't enjoying it and it was good to be able to put something down and try something different [girl]

51% of boys, and **53%** of girls said they were reading more since book club. The sessions were a catalyst: *"I just read more books during book club and books have become more fun."* / *"becuase i realized how much more there is to reading"/ "before book club I wouldn't read at all. Now I like to try to do at least 10 minutes of reading a day".*

I've learned about, like, how much, like, books are quite important to me because I found quite a new passion now because I, whenever I go to bed now, I'm starting to like, read the Harry Potter series. And I've just started it and it's probably been on the, my, like, shelf on my bedroom for like ages now [boy, focus group]

Students enjoyed social interaction

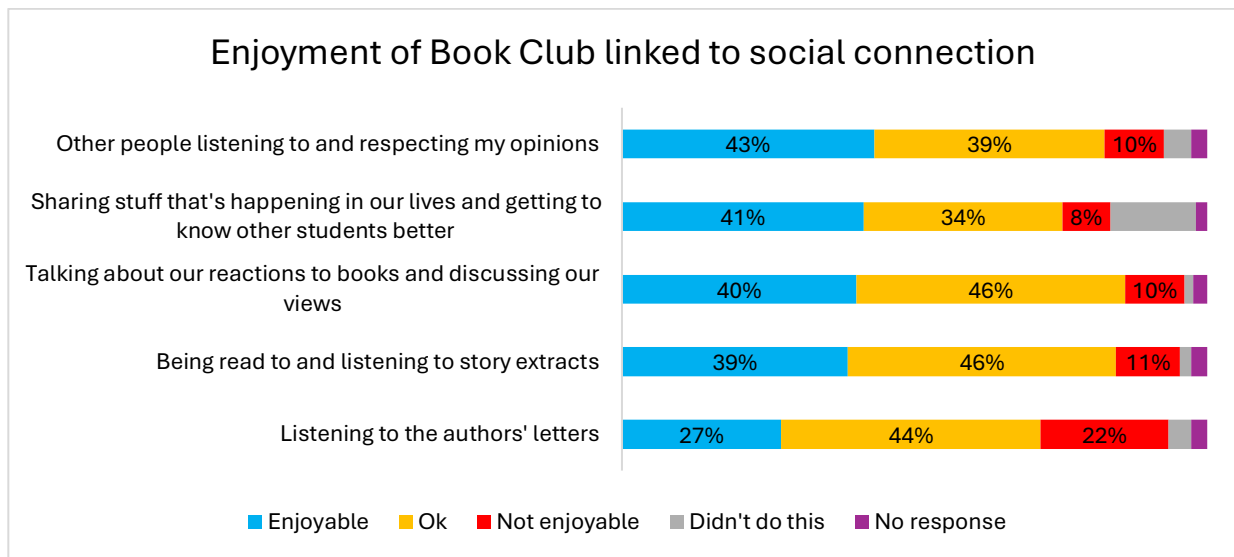
Students bonded through conversations, book talk and biscuits. Many talked about making new friends. The most enthusiastic advocates were those who'd switched on to reading through this social aspect of book club: *"I'm with friends"* [boy] / *"talking and interacting with friends and new*

people” [girl] / “i made a friend” [girl] / “i really liked how we all got closer” [boy] / “talking about what we did over the weekend” [boy]. In student focus groups, participants described how finding common interests through books had motivated the entire group to read the same book, which in turn had led to closer friendship ties across the group.

The relationship between librarian and students was also strengthened. Students said they had enjoyed spending time with the librarian who led their group. Librarians talked about students being switched on to reading and popping into the library at other times to chat with them about books.

It was fun to get along with my peers and with the librarian [boy]

reading with miss and eaten biscuits and missing English [girl]



Students gained improved confidence from a feeling of belonging

With strengthened relationships and connections, students became more confident about expressing their thoughts and engaging in discussions. Five librarians said that, by the end of the trial, all of the students were contributing more to the discussions, and nine librarians reported that more than half were. Students echoed this in their own free text responses, describing book club as a safe space for listening and being heard. Only 10% of students said they had not enjoyed sharing their opinions with others.

It's like a place where you can just, like, be yourself and express your views, cos nowadays people think that if you read books, you're considered a nerd and like it's ok to read books in here. [boy, focus group]

i liked that it wasnt too many people so it was nice [girl]

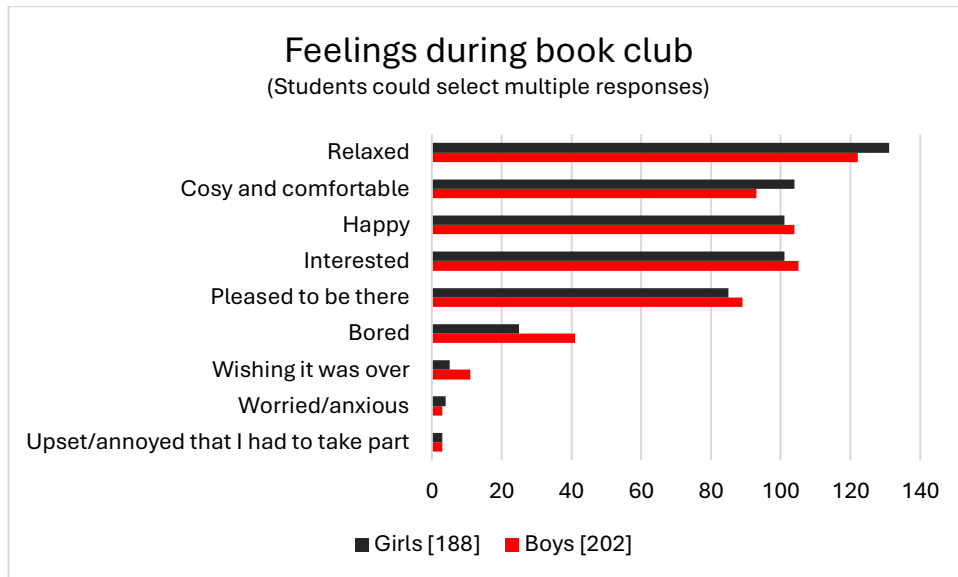
Being able to sit and talk without getting things wrong [girl]

i liked being able to share my opinion about the books we've read [girl]

we can express are feelings about the book [boy]

Students had a strong sense of wellbeing

Almost all students said that book club had prompted positive feelings of being relaxed, cosy and comfortable, happy and interested. This was reinforced in their free text responses in the survey, and feedback in the focus groups.



Some students contrasted their feelings in book club with those in a normal classroom lesson, in which they struggled to concentrate and read.

(I liked) getting to be in a small group instead of a big class [boy]

(I liked) that it was calm and i could actually get to read but normally i don't read [girl]

(I liked) the conversations we had and how peaceful it was [boy]

Nearly all librarians chose to provide biscuits and treats for students during the sessions, and for many ever-hungry 12-13-year-olds, this was hugely enjoyable: 50 boys and 41 girls mentioned food, hot drinks or snacks in their feedback about what they liked about book club.

(I liked) Snacks, Coming to library in small groups, finding out what books I like that it was calm and i could actually get to read but normally i don't read [girl]

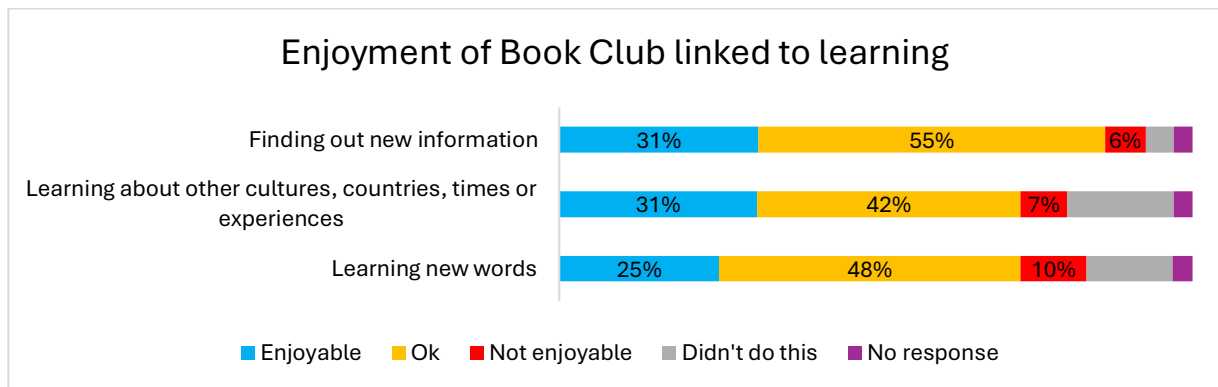
(I liked) cushions and cosiness [boy]

Feeling calm and relaxed put students in the right cognitive state for learning, listening, concentrating, and focusing when they were reading. Some librarians observed book club was a positive safe space students with behavioural issues, who struggle in large class settings.

book club was very relaxing and helped me to get into reading more which im thankful for. i would love to be in the next book club thingy [girl]

Students benefitted academically

The trial was short, but academic benefits came quickly for some students. In one focus group, students discussed and agreed that they had all done better in a creative writing exercise, and they put it down to book club: “*when we did the creative writing test, all four of us did really well in it because of this lesson. It's really helped us with it. I'm Pretty sure*”. One of the boys who took part in a focus group relayed with pride how his Reading Age had gone up from 9 years to 12 years and one month. “*It's above my age by one month. So I can see that I've improved in my reading.*” A librarian shared that there was a boy whose reading age jumped dramatically: “*He really engaged with the Elizabeth Wein’s White Eagles – Barrington Stoke – because he's Polish. I gifted him the set, the three of them, and he went from 9 years 10 months at the start to 12 years, four months at the end of the trial.*”



What did students like least about book club?

We also asked students to describe what they liked least about book club. The biggest response category was from those who said ‘nothing’.

- A third of boys, and just over a quarter of girls said that there wasn’t anything they didn’t like, with some of these framing it more positively: “*nothing because it was so amazing x*”. An additional 18 girls and 4 boys said that the fact it was coming to an end was the thing they liked least. “*It was only for a term.*”
- Among those who commented on what they did not like, reading was the most commonly mentioned reason. This was the case for 45 boys and 36 girls.

See Appendix for **Student** and **Whole School** case studies

Librarians' feedback

Prior to the trial, librarians shared that finding the time and opportunity to get to know students is challenging. They said that Year 8 is a difficult year group - one said *'the hardest to reach'* group. They said many students would rather be on their screens, that there was often negative influence of peers and an 'anti reading culture'. *"Attempts to help them select a book are often laughed off, and I feel this is often due to them wanting to impress their friends and fit in with what the other boys are doing"* explained one librarian. Reluctant and disengaged readers are also less likely to visit the school library unless lessons are timetabled. With many libraries functioning as multi-purpose spaces, some students do not even associate its primary purpose as being a place of reading and books. Book club provided a terrific opportunity to address these challenges.

- 14 out of 17 librarians said they enjoyed running the social book club.
- 16 out of 17 librarians said that they would recommend running a regular social book club for disengaged readers to peers or colleagues.
- 14 out of 17 would like to keep going with social book club.

Librarians got to know students better

Book club was a highly effective way for librarians to learn more about the students and discover their likes and dislikes.

"It is lovely to be able to form positive relationships with students that wouldn't normally choose to come to the library in a no pressure environment"

"They've just loved the attention, and they've loved someone going, oh, I think you'd really like this. And as librarians, that is what we want to be doing all the time"

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the trial was contingent on librarians' connection with students.

"I think the most important thing I've taken from this is that relationship building is absolutely key to encouraging reading for pleasure"

For students who've 'switched off' reading (or never switched on to it), books can be intimidating, and the library can seem an alien place. Some librarians described students' reluctance to even handle the books at the start. Overcoming this barrier was the first step to changing minds,.

"We spent a lot of time just looking at the books, evaluating their covers and then reading the blurb on the back to see if the cover did it justice. This was to try and get students to actually touch the books as many started off just not actually picking the books up as if there was a block there"

There was surprisingly little negativity among the students

Psychological reactance was initially evident in some students – perhaps not a surprise since being selected for book club had been decided for them – this runs counter to the importance of young people feeling they have agency. One boy said *"... when I first found out that I would be participating in a reading group, I felt a little bit nervous. I didn't know, like, who else would be in the group and I didn't know how many people. So at first I was like a little bit sketchy about it."* One librarian described how she challenged a disruptive student and gave her the choice to leave, which removed the perceived reason for rebellion and the student chose to stay:

“I kind of said look we can't have that negativity. If you don't want to be here you can go. It's voluntary, you know, you don't have to stay. But she chose to stay and once I addressed it she became one of the most avid readers and she actually comes into the library now . . . every Friday to read”

Students could decide whether they wanted to drop out, and a few were asked to leave by librarians. In total, 84 left, leaving 404 participants. As expected, some students displayed more enthusiasm than others. One librarian who observed the post-trial focus group her students attended was very surprised at just how much they enthused about book club, saying she had no idea they had enjoyed it that much. For some students there was an element of ‘too cool for school’ and indeed one boy fed back that *“it seemed like i wasn't interested but it was really nice”*.

Students who were engaged and enjoying book club became advocates for their peers who were not so keen:

“There was an occasion when someone said 'I hate all books' another student said 'have you listened to Miss? You just haven't found a book you like yet'”

Librarians struggled with the workload and lack of support

Despite the overall success of the social book club, only one librarian indicated that the school would continue running sessions for disengaged readers and most said that it was extremely unlikely that they would be able to continue.

The biggest barrier to continuing was timetabling. Students were released from other lessons (typically English, tutor time, and library lessons) to take part, and staff in other departments were concerned over students missing out on curriculum learning. This was despite anecdotal feedback from colleagues that some students who were taking part in the trial were more focused in lessons and remained on task during whole class independent reading. (42 girls and 34 boys out of the 404 expressed delight at missing a lesson – and several cited without irony, that the best bit was missing English e.g. *“the best bit was reading and missing English lesson”*.)

- Two thirds of the librarians said that they were not sure whether they would have the support of colleagues in other departments if the trial were to continue.

“Unfortunately, I think continuing to run sessions of this nature would be borderline impossible within the current constraints of our school timetable and the other demands on staff”

- Fewer than half said that they would have the support of their Senior Leadership Team, should they ask for the trial to continue. *“Our school leadership is very, very reluctant to take students out of their timetabled lessons for any reason apart from sporting competitions, so even organising the timetable for this short period of the trial was a struggle”*

Library staff said they were stretched to capacity. Many took on the organisation, planning, and running of book club on top of their other responsibilities and said that the amount of extra work simply isn't sustainable. Others had to limit the library opening times for book club, limiting other students' access. The dropout rate for this trial was relatively high – 4 out of the 21 schools which started the trial did not complete it – illustrating the capacity challenge.

“Overall, the trial was a very time-intensive initiative, which is another reason that I think if it were ever to run again at my school, a lot of changes would be necessary in the timetable more broadly. I

am the only member of library staff here, so I was solely responsible for organising the selection, timetabling when sessions would take place, ordering books, carrying out the sessions, and recording responses, all while work from my other tasks began to pile up”

“I would love to continue it but . . . it took up a lot of my time (I work part-time) and that would not be sustainable long-term, without increasing my contract”

Some assumptions about Reading for Pleasure have been challenged

Several librarians said the trial had made them reconsider their assumptions about Reading for Pleasure. They said if they were not able to implement a full-on weekly social book club going forward, they could make adjustments to existing approaches and interventions.

One key area is around choice, with many prompted to ask themselves, ‘What does wide choice look like for disengaged students?’ Several librarians said they were rethinking how they support students’ book choices to make book selection less daunting, concluding that curated choice is effective, as being told you can read anything in the library may be off-putting for disengaged readers. One successful tactic was the unboxing of the gifted books.

Librarians concluded silent reading in library lessons and in the classroom may not be the best approach. For reluctant readers, social reading in small groups was found to be a more effective strategy than whole class reading.

The importance of a relaxed environment was acknowledged, and several librarians said they were reflecting on the spaces they use for social reading.

Four of the 17 librarians said that if they were to extend book club, they may be able to run it at reduced frequency, perhaps fortnightly may be more achievable.

See Appendix for Librarian case study and for details on what strategies worked well and what worked less well.

Conclusion

By giving adolescents what they want and need *through* reading, we were able to change their minds *about* reading. Our schools had only around 12 weeks (two half terms) of book club sessions, which makes the outcomes even more remarkable. The trial indicates that taking part in a regular, timetabled book club session in a small social relaxed group, led by a member of the library team, can be an effective intervention converting disengaged readers. Based on feedback from students and librarians, the success of the approach was clear. Books and reading became associated with pleasure not learning. Students had agency: they could decide whether and what to read. The relaxed atmosphere and social environment meant they felt they belonged, their opinions were accepted, and this encouraged book talk. They read more. And, for some students with entrenched negative attitudes, taking even the first step towards associating books and reading with fun and enjoyment was an achievement and positive outcome.

Please carry it on, I love this new experience [boy]

I LOVE IT SO MUCH AND I DONT WANT IT TO END ITS AMAZING [Gir]

it was very chilled fun and interesting. overal it was a very fun atmosphere. I am more interested in books and reading. let me do it agsin please

I would absolutely love to have it again and again until i leave the school

In spite of this, feedback from all but one of the librarians suggests it is unlikely book club will carry on in these schools. Resource and timetabling issues mean most schools cannot support a weekly timetabled social book club, in school hours, for students. Currently, most book clubs offered by schools take place in extracurricular time such as after school, and while these attract enthusiastic readers, they also deepen the divide between readers and non-readers.

The Department for Education highlights the importance of Reading for Pleasure and many schools are saying it is a whole-school priority. However, lack of resource is a barrier to encouraging reading for pleasure. Time and resource are the essential components to making it happen. Instead, strategies that are squeezed in to a school day – for instance, silently reading a book in class – and not effectively addressing the challenge.

We believe that if the Reading for Pleasure agenda is to succeed, libraries must be better resourced and time allowed in the day for small group interventions, which enable all children to experience the genuine pleasure of reading. Without this, reading for pleasure will continue to decline; fewer and fewer students will choose to read for pleasure each year and the majority will miss out on the enormous benefits of being a reader.

APPENDIX

Case Study: How, in one school, the Social Book Club turned reluctant readers into reading advocates

- *“I've definitely gained more confidence in my reading skills after the reading book club . . . And I just feel like every time I now read, I read without thinking, oh, when is this gonna end? This is so boring. Now I just want to keep on reading . . .”* [Oliver]
- *“after the club (people) would ask like, what did you guys do? And I would say read. And then most of the time they would just be like, oh, you guys are doing nothing. It's just boring. But then I tell them, like, we don't just always read. Like we say what we've done on the weekend and then . . . we read and that actually . . . it's really fun reading with people that you know . . .”* [Lucas]
- *“I've learned, like, how much books are quite important to me because I found quite a new passion now because whenever I go to bed now, I'm starting to like, read the Harry Potter series.”* [Josh]

These are the words of boys from one of 21 schools selected to take part in a book club pilot for reluctant readers in Year 8. The school is a non-selective, all-boys state academy in London with high levels of EAL: 54% of students do not speak English at home, and 62% are EAL. While independent reading is embedded into the curriculum, this is typically a whole class approach, and book talk is limited.

A group of 5 boys took part in a one-hour focus group with the project's researcher to tell us why they had loved being part of a reading group, and how it had changed them.

Initially, pupils were sceptical about taking part.

“. . . when I first found out that I would be participating in a reading group, I felt a little bit nervous. I didn't know, like, who else would be in the group and I didn't know how many people. So at first I was like a little bit sketchy about it.” [Oliver] It wasn't just the format that prompted this; these were students who didn't like reading. *“I didn't really like reading that much. It wasn't my favourite thing.”* [Josh]

However, being part of a small group encouraged them to share not just opinions, but feelings too.

Each session began with inviting the boys to share the highlights from their week, before moving on to book-related activities, chat and reading, and then wrapping up with biscuits or cakes.

The boys all enjoyed the small group format, describing it as non-judgemental and supportive. *“because like we're not in the big class anymore . . . so like you can like express your emotions and your feelings here.”* [Lucas] *“I really hope that other people get a chance to experience this feeling of being able to speak privately about your hobbies, what you like.”* [Max]

Friendships flourished as students connected over book talk

“. . . it's just a fun way of communicating and getting to read more books and become friends at the same time,” Oliver explained.

Through getting to know the boys better, the librarian steered them towards books they wanted to read.

The boys couldn't wait to tell us about the books they had discovered through book club. This was, for some boys, the first time they had chosen to read a book, purely for enjoyment. The right book was not only at the right level, but was also relevant to their hobbies and interests, as Josh explained: *"This book right here is the book that really helped me read . . . It's not too easy, it's not too hard. It's perfect for me. And also, this is a book about history and I like, I really like history."*

The librarian described the wider benefits of taking part in the trial.

While these 5 boys were particularly enthusiastic about their experience, the school's librarian described the wider benefit for all the boys who took part: "I gained great insight into our boys' world – their interests, their sources of information for news (TikTok for the most part), the competition for time and attention from social media and gaming (on average 4+ hours daily). The time we have had to chat informally and build a relationship will definitely help me with guiding their book choices going forward. I gave boys free rein to choose the books they wanted to read extracts from. Some boys chose different books each week. Others wanted to stay with the same book over a period of weeks. I gifted some of the books to boys who showed an interest in particular books. They were very happy!"

The trial students also scored better in their reading tests.

For this school, the impact went beyond changing students' attitudes and reading behaviour: there was also a noteworthy value-added improvement in the Reading Ages of the 32 boys who took part in the trial. Based on pre- and post-trial STAR Reading Assessment data, these students' Reading Ages increased by an average of 1 year and 3 months, compared with a five-month average growth in reading age for the entire year group. One of the boys who took part in the focus group relayed with pride how his Reading Age had gone up from 9 years to 12 years and one month. *"It's above my age by one month. So I can see that I've improved in my reading."*

The trial has ended, but all the boys at the school want to carry on with book club, with some 'begging' their librarian to continue in some way.

In the words of one of the boys: *"I would just like to say thank you very much for letting us be here today and for all the books we're definitely going to be reading."* [Max]

"I hope book club continues in the future. And if it does still happen, that Miss still brings some cookies." [Lucas]

Student Case study: Jade's story

Jade is a sporty, confident and articulate 12-year-old girl. A gifted footballer, she plays for her local club, and most days involve after-school practice or matches. She also enjoys cricket and netball. She was one of 4 students at one of the trial schools who wanted to attend a focus group to tell us about the difference book club had made to her.

Before the book club trial, Jade didn't see herself as a reader, and although teachers at the school tried to promote books she just *'didn't like them'*. Reading was *'boring'*. It was also hard to fit reading into her packed day: *"every day I have a sport going on, so I don't really have enough time to read because my journeys are quite far."*

From the get-go, book club felt different from other lessons.

Firstly, the space set aside for book club was welcoming and invited students to feel at home.

"... when we come here, we sit on the beanbags and we can stretch our legs out and we can just sit really nicely and comfortably. And we have the biscuits as well, so it feels quite homey."

Unlike the pressure she felt from other teachers, in book club, students decided whether and what they wanted to read. *"it's not like we've been forced to read a book and we get to actually pick it..."* The librarian curated a selection of books for students to choose from during book club, and encouraged the students to talk about their preferences, sharing what they liked and didn't like. *"So when we came here, there's like a wide selection of books we can choose from. And then because we have like a rack full of books, I could just choose from one of them."*

Being in a small group was key to the success

The book group had four members: two boys, and two girls, both friendship pairs. Although all were in the same class, the friendship pairs didn't know each other well. They discovered they have similar reading interests, and all went on to read the same book, enriching their book discussions and bonding the group together more tightly. *"if it's just us, we're in a group and no more, we can kind of feel like not embarrassed to be talking about our books or... to share our honest opinions... I feel like this has made us all like closer friends to be honest."*

Jade also attributes her recent success in a writing assessment to book club

Being exposed to a wider range of books, which students enjoy listening to, has benefitted students' own writing skills. *"... sometimes Mr S reads us out like extracts from the book. And it kind of like helps me stretch my imagination out of it. So when we did the creative writing test, all four of us did really well in it because of this lesson. It's really helped us with it. I'm pretty sure."*

Thanks to book club, Jade now sees herself as a reader

"[Before] I really didn't like books. I didn't fancy it. It just wasn't my thing. I'd always be doing something else instead of reading. But when I'm doing this now, it's kind of encouraging me to read and I read more often now... [Book club] was a really good idea because it has brought us all so much closer together and it's really helped me understand and like books more."

Librarian Case study: Maddie's story

Setting up a book club for reluctant Year 8 readers: one librarian's experience

Maddie is the only librarian at a smallish 11-16 school in Norfolk. Organised and led by her, the school has a rich programme of activities aimed at promoting reading for pleasure, including frequent author visits, taking part in the BookBuzz programme for Year 7s, and participating in the Excelsior Awards, Carnegie Shadowing Scheme, Poetry By Heart and the National Reading Champions Quiz. However, the school's decision to drop library lessons has made it harder to reach reluctant readers as they are less likely to visit the library. Although reading is promoted through whole class form time reading, students don't choose the books they read. *"I would like more students to pick up a book because it is their choice"*, Maddie said in her trial application.

Student agency and choice informed the planning and delivery of book club

The first step was to involve students in creating a welcoming cosy space for book club. Using the £100 voucher gifted by HarperCollins as part of the trial incentive, topped up with a contribution from the school's finance team, students chose fairy lights and beanbags. The snacks of biscuits and hot chocolate at each session weren't just a bribe: Maddie wanted students' experience to be modelled on adult book clubs. *"When we as adults go to book club we have snacks, it's social. I wanted them to feel it was like an adult group."*

At the start of each session, Maddie invited the students to talk about their week. This was an important step in creating a 'safe space' for building relationships based on trust. *"I tried to follow their conversational tangents, so it wasn't just me talking at them. We had some rules: respect each other; don't talk over someone. Basic rules and giving them the space to talk."* This approach worked. In a separate focus group with a few of Maddie's students one of them described book club as: *"...a place where you can just, like, be yourself and express yourself cos nowadays people think that if you read books, you're considered a nerd ..."*

One of the breakthroughs was when they listened to a poem by Karl Nova, a rapper and poet whose exploration of his own childhood memories encouraged the students to share their own stories. *"That was a turning point, because they wanted to tell their own stories. They were able to see themselves in the books and poems we chose."*

Drawing on digital and social media boosted engagement

Many of the most successful sessions involved watching film clips or videos and listening to podcasts or audio books. When some students said that they enjoyed listening to true crime podcasts, Maddie did some research and found a site that was suitable for teens and encouraged the students to pick one. They also read or listened to book reviews on Epic Reads, prompting some students to create their own podcasts of books they'd read. The school's social media ban meant they couldn't set up a social media group for book club students, but Maddie noted that this would be an effective strategy. *"Kids like short bursts – TikTok, YouTube. Social media is a big thing. It's a way of getting them to read."*

How successful was the trial?

At Maddie's school, 16 out of the 21 students who completed the end-of-trial questionnaire wanted book club to continue. For some, the impact was more profound than just a positive and enjoyable experience with books. Inspired by the books she'd discovered, one student had started writing her own poetry. *"...after reading like some books and snippets and TikTok, I've actually been starting to like write myself. So it's actually had like a big impact on me."*

Turning non-readers into students who read for pleasure and enjoyment takes time and involves getting to know students. If she'd had longer, Maddie said that some of the groups would have done better with a different mix of students. *"I feel as if I've only just got started and got into the swing of it. If we had more time in the curriculum to spend on social reading... then I think slowly this would change their habits or at least sow the seeds for when they are older- showing them how it could be done and what they can get out of it."*

Despite the success of the trial and the impact it has had on students' attitudes towards books and reading, the barriers to continuing it are high. Too high. Planning and running five sessions a week, while also delivering pastoral support, careers advice and coordinating events in the library is simply not sustainable for Maddie. That's beside the fact that the library space is taken over for exams in summer.

What's next?

Many school-wide reading initiatives require students to read a book chosen for them, in silence, for a full lesson. This trial has confirmed that for reluctant readers, social reading in small groups is a more effective strategy than whole class reading. Maddie has reported back to the SLT and based on her observations of 'what's worked', they're reconsidering their approach to engaging reluctant readers. Building on the success of using audio books and podcasts, Maddie would like to start up a listening station in the library. Rather than fighting social media, Maddie believes that librarians need to work with it. *"Reading has to move with the social media times to become more cool for the majority of young people."*

Most importantly, the success of a book club for reluctant readers depends on the librarian's ability to connect with young people, listen and respond to their interests, and co-create an approach that is relevant and meaningful to them.

Librarian feedback: aspects and tactics of Book Club that worked well

- Small groups: The 'optimal' number of students, according to the majority of librarians' feedback, was six; eight librarians suggested smaller groups of under six.
- Inviting students to share highlights from their week at the start of the session, to 'settle' them, make them feel listened to, and get to know each other better. *"The time we have had to chat informally and build a relationship will definitely help me with guiding their book choices going forward"*

- Structuring the session around a variety of activities to maintain the pace and keep students interested. *“their attention spans were very short . . .”*
- Shorter books were popular
- Introducing book-related games, e.g. *“after reading Skulduggery Pleasant we did an activity connected to names given the importance of names in Skulduggery Pleasant. Students researched the meanings of their own name to create something new.”* / *“They also liked the 'one lie, one line' game I made up, where they would read some of a book of their choosing and then I'd ask them to read out two lines, one from the book and one that they'd made up to sound like a line from the book, and we'd all vote on which one was the fake.”* / *“Quizzes to encourage better listening to each other, genre activities.”*
- Keeping the sessions flexible and responding to students' interests. Some librarians adopted ideas which were suggested by students. *“One of the boys suggested that whoever read an extract would then ask the group a question about what they read. They really liked this and it meant they tried to listen.”* / *“... I would follow their ideas – so not stick to the actual plan but veer off if the group take it in a different direction. I tried not to be too rigid on the plan as I wanted the students to feel they had some control.”* / *“The set up was informal and pupil led.”*
- Making it clear to students that they didn't have to read in between sessions.
- Making it clear that this wasn't another 'intervention'. Typically, when students are taken out of lessons for small group work, it is because teachers have identified gaps or weaknesses in the students' learning, and they need additional support. When informed that they had been selected for book club, the default assumption among many students was that they had underperformed. Librarians said that it was important to convey to students that they had been specially chosen for the trial, and to emphasise the differences between book club and other lessons. *“Knowing that they were getting to experience something special which excluded their classmates was generally seen as a positive thing.”*



- Emphasising that they wouldn't be set homework or reading tasks, and wouldn't be tested after reading. The **'Rights of the Reader'** poster was a revelation for some groups, prompting discussions around what 'being a reader' means.
- The social aspect: being with friends, in a small group, and chatting boosted their confidence and enjoyment in most instances. Some librarians said that clashes between students needed to be addressed quickly. Confronting and, if necessary, evicting antagonistic students was important for the group to work. Most librarians noted that behaviour during book club wasn't problematic, due to the size of the groups, the lack of pressure students associate with learning tasks, and the informal approach. However, it could be difficult encouraging very quiet groups to participate in the discussion, and more confident groups could become too

noisy during group chat.

- Agency: examples included allowing students to make decisions over adopting a more relaxed uniform, and the activities they did during the session, along with the crucial importance of choosing the books they wanted to read.
- The biscuits and snacks. Always a winner, and best kept to the end!

- A couple of librarians chose to include a keen reader in the book club. Their enthusiasm got the discussions going, they were role models and so encouraged other students to engage.

What didn't work as well

- The author letters didn't work for all students. Response was very individual, with some loving them and some not relating to them. Librarians chose to read only those they thought would resonate with their students, and some missed the mark. Professional judgement was needed because the very letter that some groups loved, others disliked.
- Some students who were engaged with book club, enjoyed selecting books, reading the blurbs and even doing some reading *during* book club, remained resistant to reading *between* sessions.
- Three librarians were less positive about their own enjoyment of running a book club for reluctant readers. They said that students remained non-communicative throughout, and it was a struggle to engage them. *"It was agonising, sitting with silent students who just wouldn't communicate . . . I really felt as though I was failing."*
- One participant felt insufficiently supported through the trial. *"I feel it could've done with more support in terms of session structure. A lot of it was left up to me and I did feel unsupported in this regard."* This highlights a need for more guidance on how to run book clubs.

ⁱ HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

ⁱⁱ Brehm 1966

ⁱⁱⁱ Blakemore 2019

^{iv} Interpersonal risk model, Coyle et al 2021