



Children's Reading Choices

What are children choosing to read and how do they choose?



Foreword

The positive impacts of reading for pleasure have been generally accepted by the educational establishment for some time, and yet this does not always seem to match the priorities laid out – either in terms of time within the curriculum or funding provided to support it. Education is now facing one of the biggest challenges, in supporting children’s recovery from the impacts of the pandemic and reading and wellbeing are at the top of the list.

This new report from the Open University, based on data from BounceTogether and the School Library Association, shows the importance of creating time to explore and discover new books as a reader. The fact that children under the age of 11 have a favourite book is to be celebrated, but it remains concerning that a significant proportion stated they did not have one, while others said they ‘like all books’ – a valid response but which indicates a lack of reading maturity. With only 14% of children saying they’d ask an adult; all school staff need to do more to ensure children’s reading progresses.

The importance of choice, reading role models, the ability to browse, having a range of alluring and tempting resources, and spaces which show books at their best and make reading a comfortable experience cannot be overstated. Reading is a skill essential for a successful life. It is not enough to hope that children find their way through a forest of dull, high pressure, unenjoyable reading activities to independent and pleasurable reading. Let’s make sure every step on the path adds to the fulfilment and excitement reading can create, through rich, varied, supported and enjoyable reading experiences.

- **Alison Tarrant, CEO, The School Library Association**



As well as being one of the greatest indicators of academic success, it is also generally accepted that reading for pleasure positively affects mental health, self-esteem, empathy, mood and stress.

Books are powerful wellbeing tools in their own right! Reading provides children with endless opportunities to escape from day-to-day worries and explore new situations and different emotions. The process of engaging with many different characters helps children develop their empathy and learn about cultures and relationships. It is also no secret that in difficult times these characters can provide a sense of comfort and help children and adults feel less alone.

- **Bob Wilkinson, MD, BounceTogether**



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Teresa Cremin and Becky Coles

Introduction

If we want to motivate young readers, then knowing what they like to read and enabling them to choose is essential. Choice and agency in reading matter. In this short report, we draw on data from an Attitude to Reading Survey, undertaken by 1194 children aged 8-11 years as part of their schools’ engagement with BounceTogether. BounceTogether offer wellbeing and other surveys to schools, and we are working in partnership to research the relationship between reading and wellbeing, drawing both on quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data with children and their teachers.

At the start of our partnership with both organisations, we analysed responses to the Attitude to Reading Survey from children in 14 state schools across England in 2021. The gender balance of the children was equal and the proportion receiving FSM meals was average (21%). The schools were spread across the country, from Essex to Manchester, and from Norfolk to Cumbria. Whilst the survey was broad, we focus in this short report on their responses to just three questions:

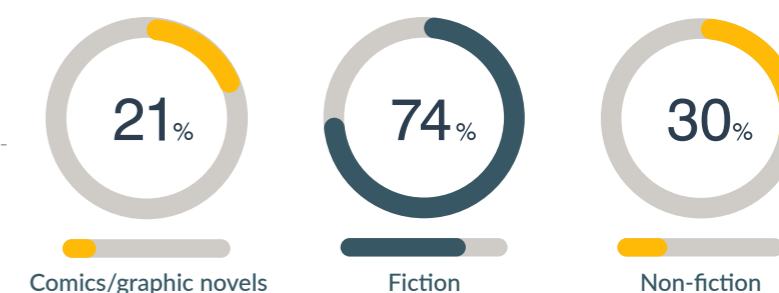
- i) what kinds of texts the children report reading most
- ii) what their favourite book or story is
- iii) how they choose what to read next.

We acknowledge this is a partial picture, but consider these findings to be both relevant and illuminating when placed alongside wider research studies of children’s reading practices and preferences.

What are the young people reading?

Children could select some or all of 10 text options. The data shows that whilst a range of texts were selected, fiction was significantly more popular than any other kind of reading. 74% of the children reported reading fiction (noted as story books), in contrast to 30% reporting non-fiction (information books), and 21% comics/graphic novels. All other categories, including poetry, text/instant messages and magazines, were selected by fewer than 15% of the 8–11-year-olds. Whilst boys still preferred fiction, they were slightly more likely to read non-fiction (B=35%; G=26%) and rather more likely to read comics/graphic novels (B=27%; G=14%) than girls.

¹ In 2021, 20.8% of pupils received FSM <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>



Girls were slightly more likely to read fiction than boys (G=79%; B=67%). This demonstrates that the potency of narrative fiction persists. In large scale survey data, fiction is consistently the genre of choice by children and young people aged from 8-18 (Clark and Teravainen Goff, 2019; Clark and Picton, 2020, 2021).

Scholars have long argued that children and adults use narrative to make sense of their life experiences and the wider world (e.g., Hardy, 1968; Bruner, 1986), so this preference is not surprising. Additionally, narrative has a particular power 'to create possible and imaginary worlds through words' (Bruner, 1986:156). Thus, the experience of reading fiction is not only enticing, it also offers readers opportunities for imaginative engagement, a sense of agency and self-direction. Furthermore, education studies indicate the presence of a 'fiction effect' (Jerrim and Moss, 2018) and show that through choosing to read fiction regularly, children and young people accrue multiple benefits including: high academic attainment (Jerrim and Moss, 2018), an enhanced vocabulary (McQuillan, 2019), and enriched narrative writing (Sénéchal, Hill and Malette, 2018). In contrast to non-fiction, studies show that fiction contributes more significantly to increased knowledge and verbal language skills (Mar and Rain, 2013). This makes logical sense since fiction frequently requires the reader to sustain their engagement, it demands perseverance, and supports the development of higher order thinking skills (Luo et al., 2020). Organizations and researchers have also begun to explore its impact on empathy. For a fuller examination of the benefits of reading children's literature and its potential as a tool to redress inequities, see Simpson and Cremin (2022).

Nonetheless, many young people do enjoy non-fiction and wise educators support young readers to find texts that tempt and engage them, since as multiple studies show a reciprocal relationship exists between print exposure and reading skills (e.g. Bergen, Vasalampi and Torppa, 2020; Troyer et al., 2019).

The young people's favourite authors

This survey offers a window into the favourite authors of the participating children, although it should be noted that the open question 'What is your favourite book or story?' did not ask the young people to name authors or picture fiction creators. This question generated a number of responses, some of which did not reference specific books, series or authors. Worryingly 12% (i.e., 135 children) responded neutrally or negatively, stating they didn't know, didn't like any books or stories, or had forgotten. A further 2% didn't answer, instead stating that they like all books or couldn't choose between their favourite texts or stories. Additionally, 6% named genres or kinds of books, including for example, animal and sport books, traditional tales, anime and Manga and texts connected to TV or films. It is also possible that some children named a book as their favourite, without having read it, but having watched the film perhaps. It is not possible to know. When a book, story or series or specific text was named, these were linked to an author (with the exception of traditional tales which were mentioned by 1%, and a small number of books which were unidentifiable). It was thus possible to discern the favourite authors of most of the children.



Those authors whose books received the most mentions were J. K. Rowling (122), David Walliams (86), Jeff Kinney (82) and Roald Dahl (58). The next in order, all of whose texts were mentioned by over 24 children, were Liz Pichon, Rick Riordan, Rachel Renée Russell, Andy Griffiths, and Dav Pilkey. See Figure 1. for all the authors whose work was chosen as their favourite book by ten or more children.



Figure 1: A wordle of the children's favourite authors

The fact that Dahl and Blyton appear in this list of authors is no surprise. These writers and other well-known and widely promoted authors have been topping children's lists for several decades (Whitehead, 1977; Coles and Hall, 1999). Teachers too assert that their children's favourite authors are such 'celebrity' writers. In 2021, Julia Donaldson, David Walliams, Michael Rosen, Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling were deemed by primary school teachers to be children's top authors (CLPE, 2022). But why do these authors continue to be so popular?

Notably, in the School Library Association and BounceTogether survey of children's own views, the four authors whose work received over 50 mentions, (Rowling, Walliams, Kinney and Dahl) have all written multiple books, often, though not always as a series. Frequently too their work has been transferred from printed text to stage and screen. Associated merchandise for children and their parents to purchase is readily available, ranging from pencil cases to toys, games and clothing, and publishers market these authors' books assertively, often offering sizeable discounts to attract schools, libraries, bookshops and parents. Moreover, the work of these very popular children's authors is likely to have been read by the children's parents in their own childhoods, and children may well come to recognise the style of sustained author-illustrator partnerships, prompting trust, allegiance, and even reliance. Series fiction can also nurture adherences as children find pleasure in maintaining ongoing relationships with the characters (Merga, 2017).

Furthermore, as Coles and Hall (1999) observe, popular children's authors often use relatively simple narrative techniques that create exciting and alluring child-centred worlds. In referring to the work of Dahl and Blyton, they note:

“Children in these books are allowed a considerable measure of independence. They are given the freedom to go off and have their own adventures free from adult interference; children do good in a world where adults are often badly behaved.”
(Coles & Hall, 1999: 53)

This links back to the sense of imaginative agency offered by literature, and the argument that 'books in common' can create bonds that enable children and young people to connect both to the characters and each other (Cremin et al., 2014). The experience of having read the same book or watched the same film or TV programme of the book as their friends, enables young people to participate in reading as a socially shared activity. The text, acting as a common point of reference, facilitates conversations and collaborative re-enactments and may serve to support the creation of communities of readers, with teachers also positioned as fellow readers. Linked websites can also offer additional opportunities that satisfy, connect readers and build commitment to the texts and the author.

Teachers' knowledge of children's texts

Significantly, research suggests that teachers and student teachers have relatively limited repertoires of children's texts, draw on a narrow range of authors and are over reliant on books from their own childhoods (Cremin et al., 2008, 2009; Clark and Teravainen, 2015; Farrar, 2021). In all three of these UK based studies from 2008- 2021, Dahl and Rowling were dominant (noted within the top 4 authors), with Walliams, Morpurgo, Wilson and Donaldson also very widely named and known by the education profession (from both the primary and secondary phase). In the United States a recent survey also indicated that the books elementary teachers choose to read aloud are drawn from a narrow range of persistently popular fiction texts, the top three were *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012), *Because of Winn Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000) and *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952). Many were very dated. After removing classics such as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, the mean publication date of the fiction titles was 1995, which is potentially cause for concern.

Teachers' narrow repertoires of children's authors may constrain the breadth of texts and writers young people encounter. Indeed 65% of the children's responses in this survey referred to the 20 most popular authors (each one of whom was named by teachers in previous UK based research), so there was strong agreement about their favourite books/writers. Nonetheless, some children did name books by other authors. 156 authors' books were named once, and frequently in these cases, both the book and the author were noted, potentially indicating the presence of a particular personal favourite. Some favourites were texts from the children's earlier years (e.g. *The Gruffalo* and other texts by Julia Donaldson). However, very few authors from diverse cultural heritages were mentioned as favourites (although Onjali Q. Rauf, an author of Bangladeshi heritage was mentioned by 8 children), aligned perhaps to the low number currently published (CLPE, 2021).

Overall, there is considerable overlap between practitioner knowledge as documented over the last 14 years and these children's favourites. The limited range of authors noted by both the children and teachers is exacerbated by multiple factors, including for example, the reality that many school libraries do not have designated budgets or staff with qualifications or recent training. Initial teacher training in England does not include knowledge of children's texts as part of the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019), and the standards agenda continues to profile the teaching of reading skills which can sideline the importance of nurturing reading for pleasure. Additionally, reading children's literature and other texts is not yet widely recognised as a professional responsibility. Furthermore, it may be fuelled by the way in which publishers, bookshops and the media afford a small group of authors very high profiles, proffering them almost 'celebrity' status, alongside David Walliams (who was already recognised as a 'celebrity' when his debut novel *The Boy in the Dress* was published in 2008).

Choosing what to read next

In response to the question 'When you've finished reading something, how do you choose what to read next?' children could select multiple answers from a multiple-choice selection.

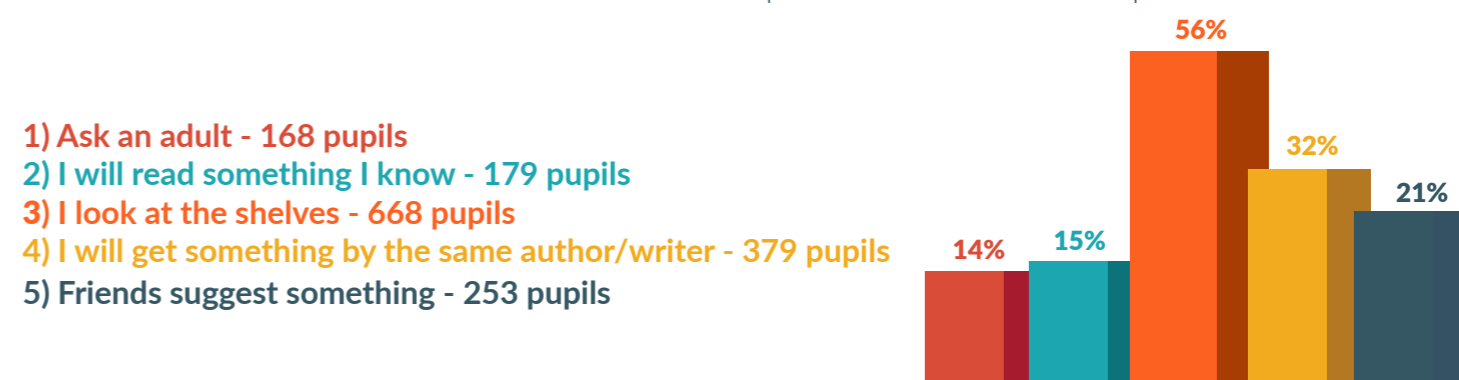


Figure 2: Responses to the question: When you've finished reading something, how do you choose what to read next?

As the young people's responses indicate, there is more to be done to support children in learning how to find texts that tempt, that may stretch and satisfy them as unique readers. The preferred way to choose the next book was simply to look at the shelves (56%). This highlights the significance of school's creating rich reading environments with books displayed in an enticing manner, perhaps themed around subjects of interest to each class, and regularly changed in order to draw attention to new authors, subjects and text types. It also highlights the importance of teaching students how to browse, so they can engage effectively and meaningfully and make wise choices.

Choosing a book by the same author/writer was the second most popular strategy (32%), which, given the popularity of a small number of authors, may hold some children back from reading beyond their comfort zone and even lead to them getting stuck in a reading rut. Much will depend upon the child's reading identity, their assurance and journey as a reader. Much will also depend upon the teachers' knowledge of the young reader and the child's own personal preferences and previous experiences.

It is a cause for concern that only 14% of the children indicated that they would ask an adult for support in selecting what to read next. Perhaps the young people do not see adults as readers, do not often experience adults reading and have limited access to reading role models. Or perhaps they perceive that the adult - a teacher, parent or librarian will prescribe a text, not offer a choice, and follow this up with some form of checking or assessment? It could also be that children are unconvinced adults can or will offer recommendations of interest, or they may believe that to demonstrate their independence as readers they should avoid asking for help.

Regardless of the possible reasons, in order that children can develop their reading tastes, and exercise discrimination and choice within and beyond school, the adults involved need to be doing more, both as reading role models and as interested partners in reader-to-reader conversations. Widening their own repertoires of children's texts (fiction and non-fiction) will enable adults to make more regular recommendations - orally, through personal post - it notes, and in displays, whether in classrooms, corridors, libraries or on the playground. In addition, capitalising on the survey finding that friends' suggestions are valued (21%), more time and space for informal book talk between peers needs to be made. Informal book talk and recommendations, in the context of rich socially interactive reading environments, are key strands of an effective reading for pleasure pedagogy and deserve to be carefully planned and evaluated (Cremin et al., 2014). Time for relaxed book bletcher can be enriched by the presence of adults who do not seek to lead or to question, but instead ensure they listen and learn about the young readers and share their own views about books without attendant expectations.

Conclusion

In summary, the 8-11-year-olds in the Reading Survey chose fiction as their genre of choice, predominantly the books named as favourites were written by a common pool of just 20 writers, and most of the young people sourced their next book simply by checking the shelves. Whilst respect for their choices must be upheld, and fiction has a particular potency for readers, nonetheless there is work to be done to enable young readers to access a wider range of texts, texts in which they can see themselves and others through books as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors (Sims Bishop, 1990). Principled approaches to selecting texts are needed in order to support reader development and nurture recreational reading which stretches beyond the children's 'comfort zones' as readers (Hartsfield and Kimmel, 2020).

Teachers and librarians will want to introduce children to 'old but gold' and 'new and bold' writers to enable them to encounter the richest variety of diverse voices, to widen their repertoires and to find texts that serve their personal purposes for reading. In addition, teachers, librarians and schools will want to strengthen the opportunities for sharing text recommendations within, between and beyond classrooms and offer tailored support for choosing. In this way children's assurance and skill in making wise selections can be developed, and their pleasure in reading enhanced.

To reference this report:

Cremin, T. and Coles, B. (2022) Children's reading choices: What are children choosing to read and how do they choose? The Open University for the School Library Association and BounceTogether.

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Resources to support areas highlighted in the report

Finding Books

- Information books - <https://www.sla.org.uk/information-book-award>
- Books for empathy - <https://www.empathylab.uk/2022-book-collections-and-guides>
- Books for topics - <https://www.booksfortopics.com/>

Building Enticing Reading Environments

- Creating the Environment for the Primary School Library - [https://www.sla.org.uk/prod-
uct/designs-for-all-reasons-creating-the-environment-for-the-primary-school-library](https://www.sla.org.uk/product/designs-for-all-reasons-creating-the-environment-for-the-primary-school-library)
- Digital reading resources - [https://www.sla.org.uk/school-closure-resources-books-and-
reading](https://www.sla.org.uk/school-closure-resources-books-and-reading)
- Summer Reading Challenge - [https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-reading-agen-
cy-partners-with-science-museum-group-for-innovation-themed-summer-reading-chal-
lenge.html](https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-reading-agency-partners-with-science-museum-group-for-innovation-themed-summer-reading-challenge.html)

Building Enticing Reading Environments

- Creating the Environment for the Primary School Library - [https://www.sla.org.uk/prod-
uct/designs-for-all-reasons-creating-the-environment-for-the-primary-school-library](https://www.sla.org.uk/product/designs-for-all-reasons-creating-the-environment-for-the-primary-school-library)
- Digital reading resources - [https://www.sla.org.uk/school-closure-resources-books-and-
reading](https://www.sla.org.uk/school-closure-resources-books-and-reading)
- Summer Reading Challenge - [https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-reading-agen-
cy-partners-with-science-museum-group-for-innovation-themed-summer-reading-chal-
lenge.html](https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-reading-agency-partners-with-science-museum-group-for-innovation-themed-summer-reading-challenge.html)

Building knowledge of modern children's literature

- OU Developing Reading for Pleasure Course - [https://www.open.edu/openlearn/educa-
tion-development/developing-reading-pleasure-engaging-young-readers/content-sec-
tion-overview?active-tab=description-tab](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education-development/developing-reading-pleasure-engaging-young-readers/content-section-overview?active-tab=description-tab)
- Get Everyone Reading - <https://www.sla.org.uk/get-everyone-reading>
- The School Librarian - <https://www.sla.org.uk/the-school-librarian>
- Teacher Reading Challenge - <https://www.teachersreadingchallenge.org.uk>
- Teachers Knowledge of Children's Texts - [https://ourfp.org/finding/teachers-knowl-
edge-of-childrens-literature-and-other-texts/](https://ourfp.org/finding/teachers-knowledge-of-childrens-literature-and-other-texts/)



BounceTogether is an online mental health and wellbeing survey platform designed for schools. It gives you access to the largest repository of research based surveys for pupils, staff and parents and provides clear, presentation ready reports to give you clarity and confidence in making decisions that drive improvement across all aspects of school life.

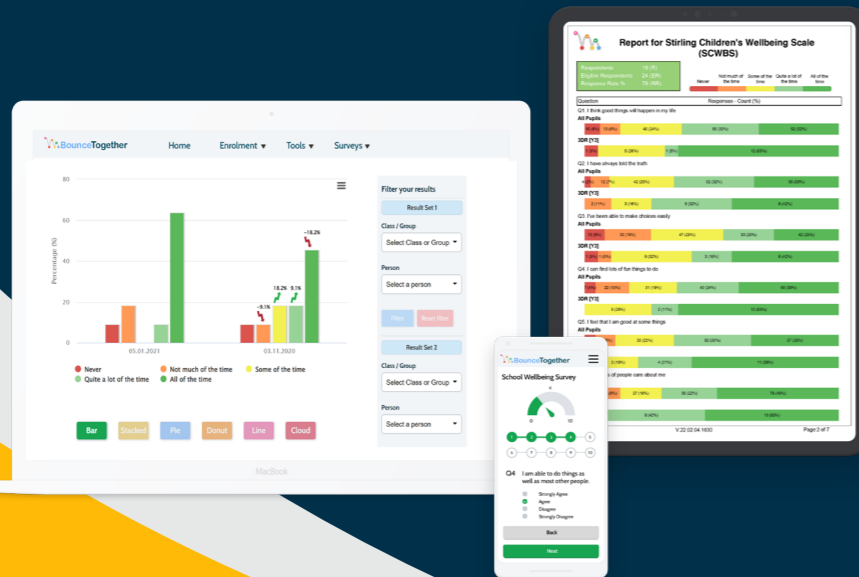
BounceTogether also provides access to The Attitude to Reading Survey for primary and secondary schools. This survey, created in partnership with the School Library Association and National Literacy Trust, captures information about reading habits, perceptions and attitudes.

If you want to know more about reading attitudes or the wellbeing of children in your school, have a chat with BounceTogether.

@BounceTogether



<https://www.bouncetogether.co.uk/>



The Centre for Literacy and Social Justice, The Open University

Aligning to the OU's mission of being open to people, places, methods and ideas, The Centre for Literacy and Social Justice aims to understand and influence how literacy in its broadest sense can open up children's worlds. Its mission is to build systemic, collaborative capacity - within and between teachers, schools and homes - in order to address inequity for young readers and writers.

<https://wels.open.ac.uk/research/laj>

Its flagship programme, the reading for pleasure community coalition, seeks to support schools, librarians and teachers in enhancing their research informed practice in order to enable children to develop the habit of reading and redress social injustice.

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<https://ourfp.org/>



The School Library Association

The School Library Association works towards all schools in the UK having their own (or shared) staffed library to help all children and young people fulfil their potential. School staff and children should have access to a wide and varied range of resources and have the support of an expert guide in reading, research, media and information literacy. We provide training and access to resources to support the running of school libraries and the continuing development of all staff, as well as advocating for and allowing other educational staff to maximise their understanding and use of school libraries.

<https://www.sla.org.uk>