

The Most Important Lesson Schools Can Teach Kids About Reading: It's Fun



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In a 2005 speech to the American Library Association, then-senator Obama described his view of the importance of literacy: “In this new economy, teaching our kids just enough so that they can get through Dick and Jane isn't going to cut it,” he said. “The kind of literacy necessary for 21st-century employment requires detailed understanding and complex comprehension.”

Education secretary [Arne Duncan's response](#) to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress earlier this week reinforced a pragmatic approach to literacy: “If America's students are to remain competitive in a knowledge-based economy, our public schools must greatly accelerate the rate of progress of the last four years and do more to narrow America's large achievement gaps. It is an urgent moral and economic imperative that our schools do a better job of preparing students for today's globally-competitive world.”

Reading is indeed crucial to success in school and in careers. But we worry that discussions of reading, especially public policy discussions, focus almost exclusively on its utilitarian value. What's missing is the pleasure readers derive from the reading they do.

Our new research on the nature and variety of the pleasure avid adolescent readers take from their out-of-school reading ([Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them](#)) demonstrates that pleasure is not incidental to reading—it's essential. Indeed, we found that the young people with whom we worked spoke of their reading

pleasure with remarkable sophistication—and their pleasure supported the intense and high-level engagement with texts that schools seek to foster.

In our study of the out-of-school reading lives of 14 eighth graders who were avid readers of texts often marginalized in schools (romances, vampire stories, horror stories, dystopian novels, and fantasy), we strove to understand the nature and variety of reading pleasure. We found that our participants were remarkably articulate about why they read what they read. Here's what they taught us.

Play Pleasure

One reason our participants read was to experience the pleasure of entering a story world. Karen explained: "I like to get away kind of when I read...I choose a lot of fantasy because it sparks your imagination and lets you go somewhere else." We called this the pleasure of play, following John Dewey, who writes that play "puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond." Our participants so fully entered the world of the stories they read that the characters were almost real to them. As Rebecca explained, the characters "become like your friends. And you're so much in their lives they're like your best friends." The pleasure of play is what readers experience when they become lost in a book.

Inner Work Pleasure

Play pleasure was important to our participants as an end in itself, but it also was a prerequisite for others kinds of pleasure. Perhaps our most striking finding is that our participants drew pleasure from using their reading to help them become the kind of people they wanted to become, a kind of pleasure we termed "inner work." According to Jungian scholar Robert Johnson, "inner work is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move to an integration of the total self." Helen's comments about her reading reflect Johnson's definition:

Well, I learn about myself through books when I imagine myself in the different situations. I'm pretty sure other people do that, too. And then I really can think about what would I really do. Would I run and hide or would I, you know, stand up and take it? And then you say well I like to think that I would stay, but maybe I really would run away and the next time you've got that fight or flight thing going on, you kinda think back to which one you want to be doing. You can sort of help yourself change in that way, and when you really admire a character in a book who's really brave and stuff, you

kind of can idolize them and become more like them. So it's not really learning about yourself, it's learning about what you could be.

Intellectual Pleasure

The pleasure of play and the pleasure of doing inner work were the most intense pleasures our readers experienced. But they weren't the only pleasures. As Alex explained, reading also provided an intellectual pleasure: “[Reading’s] like being a detective almost. It’s taking the evidence and the information and everything that’s happened, taking all that and putting it together. Processing through it and seeing what ends connect, and then finding, once all those ends connect, what that last piece is.”

While schools embrace the pleasure Alex described, as Callie explained, schools also often interfere with it: “[In out-of-school reading] you don’t have the preconceived notion of school. You have ‘this looks like an interesting book, let’s see what it’s about.’ And that just broadens the horizon because without the preconceived notion of what you should be learning, then you don’t have the set limits and set expectations for yourself or for the book.”

Social Pleasure

Finally, our readers enjoyed a social pleasure from their reading, especially in the way they used their reading to connect to others. Jazzy explained the social dimension of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon:

I’m part of a cultural club that grew up with HP. It gave me a sense of belonging. I loved wondering what I thought was going to happen. Talking to my friends about that. Aligning myself with characters. Waiting so impatiently for the next book. No other group of kids will have that experience again. It kind of marks you as when you grew up and bonds you with other people your age.

We’ve come away from our study thinking that teachers of reading and literature need to make pleasure more central to our practice. We think that the implications of this resolution are enormous. For example, instructors should be mindful of the variety of pleasures that readers experience and not privilege intellectual pleasures, the characteristic province of school. Our participants enjoyed making thematic generalizations, figuring out metaphors, and analyzing the aesthetic choices an author makes—intellectual pleasures all. But more frequently, these young people experienced the deep pleasure of entering a story world, living through the character’s

actions, considering the character's perspectives, and pondering what it might mean for their own lives.

We're not the only ones who think pleasure reading is essential. An extraordinary new analysis done as part of the [British Cohort Study](#)—which is following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970—makes a compelling case for why pleasure should be more central to policy discussions about reading. This analysis establishes that reading for pleasure outside school had a significant impact on young people's educational attainment and social mobility because it actually “increased cognitive progress over time.” The impact of pleasure reading on life outcomes was more than three times greater than the level of parents' educational attainment.

We want to help our students fall in love with books in ways that foster a life-long devotion to reading. So what should schools do? We think the implications of our research are manifold, but two seem especially compelling. First, our data make clear that educators should consider *interpretive complexity* in concert with textual complexity, a centerpiece of the Common Core State Standards. Every text our participants read—from graphic novels to dark fiction to *Harry Potter*—required sophisticated strategies for entering a story world and absorbing the twists and turns of the plot line and character relationships. All fostered deep intellectual engagement.

Our data also convinced us of the importance of choice. Students should have regular opportunities to behave the way adult readers do and choose their own reading. They know the kinds of texts from which they will take pleasure. At the same time, teachers should expand the possibility of pleasure by introducing students to new books they might not select on their own.

If we want students to embrace reading now and always, then we need to keep at the forefront of our attention the rich, complex, and profound pleasures of reading.