

# Leisure Reading

A JOINT POSITION STATEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION,  
THE CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK CENTRE, AND THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH



There is a story or poem to raise a goose bump on the toughest skin, and we are well advised to help each child find it. A child who has never thrilled to words will remain indifferent to reading and writing them. (Sloan, 2003, p. 12)

## Definition

Leisure reading, also known as recreational reading, pleasure reading, free voluntary reading, and independent reading, is independent, self-selected reading of a continuous text for a wide range of personal and social purposes. It can take place in and out of school, at any time. Readers select from a wide range of extended texts, including but not exclusive to narrative fiction, nonfiction, picture books, e-books, magazines, social media, blogs, websites, newspapers, comic books, and graphic novels. Leisure reading is generally intrinsically or socially motivated and a pleasurable activity for the reader.

Students' home environment, where parents/caregivers encourage reading and model their enjoyment of reading, has a substantial positive impact on children's performance in reading (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012; OECD, 2010). In classrooms, leisure reading often takes place during times designated as SSR (sustained silent reading), DEAR (drop everything and read), LTR (love to read), or POWER (providing opportunities with everyday reading), which are the most common terms for classroom leisure reading. It may take place within individual classrooms or be part of a schoolwide activity.

## Position Statement

Research shows that leisure reading enhances students' reading comprehension (e.g., Cox & Guthrie, 2001), language (e.g., Krashen, 2004), vocabulary development (e.g., Angelos & McGriff, 2002), general knowledge (e.g., Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), and empathy for others (e.g., McGinley et al., 1997), as well as their self-confidence as readers, motivation to read throughout their lives, and positive attitudes toward reading (e.g., Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Eurydice Network, 2011). The benefits of leisure reading apply to English learners (ELs) who read in English as well as in their native languages. Because interesting texts provide comprehensible input as well as practice with reading, leisure reading offers many benefits for ELs.

Given the ample evidence showing the benefits of leisure reading, the International Reading Association (IRA), the Canadian Children's Book Centre, and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) take the following position on leisure reading.

Policymakers and administrators should support teachers in providing opportunities for leisure reading in classrooms. Teachers and family members should support students in developing leisure reading habits

that will continue throughout their lives. Teachers should facilitate leisure reading in students' daily lives outside the classroom by encouraging them to engage in leisure reading at home as an extension of classroom activity and by communicating to families the positive influence on reading achievement of home environments where families value children's reading and have a wide range of reading materials available for children.

To ensure that students experience the benefits of leisure reading, teachers and families should support students' reading choices by making available a wide range of print, digital, and multimodal texts that align with and expand on students' interests and that students are able to read without great struggle. These reading materials can come from classroom, school, public, home, and online libraries and other relevant sources.

Across the grade levels, teachers should provide daily opportunities for leisure reading. They should model fiction and nonfiction book selection, conference with students during SSR, and hold students accountable for their reading (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). Teachers should provide time for students to talk with peers or perhaps blog or write reflections about what they have been reading, a practice that enhances students' enjoyment and understanding of texts, as well as their sense of accountability for engaging in independent reading. Teachers and families serve as good role models of lifelong readers when their students see them reading and when they talk with students about the books that they have read.

Policymakers and administrators should not require teachers to conduct formal assessments of leisure reading. In place of formal assessments, teachers should anecdotally record their observations of students' engagement with texts and the range of texts they select for leisure reading. Listening to students' conversations or reading their blog interactions and reflections provides anecdotal evidence of their understanding and enjoyment of what they are reading.

## Context

### *Leisure Reading Is on the Decline Across Continents*

Results from international surveys of reading conducted across countries suggest that variation in reading achievement is related to motivation, engagement, and enjoyment of reading (Mullis et al., 2012). Young people who view reading as enjoyable and read outside of class on a daily basis are much more likely to experience success as readers. In a U.S. study, high school students who regularly engaged in leisure reading scored significantly higher in reading than did peers who did not regularly read for pleasure (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).



Many young people are not experiencing this success, however. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; Mullis et al., 2012) survey of 10-year-olds reported that although 74% of students described themselves as motivated readers, on average only 28% actually liked to read. Similarly, a 2012 survey by the National Literacy Trust of the United Kingdom (Clark, 2013) found that just over half of young people ages 8–16 enjoyed reading very much or quite a lot, and 12.2% did not enjoy reading at all. Just over half (56%) read outside of school at least a few times a week. Between 2005 and 2012, the proportion of survey respondents who reported enjoying reading very much or quite a lot decreased slightly (from 51.4% to 50.3%).

The likelihood that children and young adults will enjoy reading and engage in leisure reading outside of school is influenced by a number of factors, including their gender, age, and reading ability. Trends in young people's leisure reading habits and enjoyment of reading with respect to these factors are outlined below.

**Gender.** Surveys of children and young adults over many decades and across continents have shown that girls are more likely than boys to enjoy reading and to spend more time reading beyond the reading requirements of schoolwork (Clark, 2013; OECD, 2010). However, in the 2012 PIRLS study (Mullis et al., 2012), there were fewer achievement differences between the genders when the reading passages were informational text. These findings suggest that daily engagement with a balanced range of text genres and modes of texts, in both nonfiction and fiction texts, has the potential to motivate and engage both boys and girls.

**Age.** The results from the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; OECD, 2010) conducted with 15-year-olds suggest that enjoyment of reading declines as students advance through school. Over one third of students reported that they did not read for enjoyment, 41% indicated that they read only when they had to, 24% considered reading to be a waste of time, and only one third agreed or strongly agreed that reading is their favorite hobby. This trend was repeated in the U.K. National Trust's survey (Clark, 2013), as younger children (64% of 8–11-year-olds) were more likely than older children (45.5% of 11–14-year-olds and 36.3% of 14–16-year-olds) to indicate their enjoyment of reading as “very much” or “a lot.” Results of a large sample survey conducted with middle-grade students in the United States suggest that attitudes toward recreational reading tended to decline as students progressed through the grades in school (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012).

**Reading Ability.** Because struggling readers tend to read less during and beyond the school day, they are in need

of additional opportunities for leisure reading (Miller & Moss, 2013). They also need support in selecting books. Often, struggling readers select books that are too difficult for them, become frustrated, and lose interest in reading (Donovan, Smolkin, & Lomax, 2000).

When struggling readers engage in leisure reading and receive support for selecting books (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008), time to read outside of school (Allington, 2009), and opportunities to discuss books, they make gains in reading achievement (Kamil, 2008). Additionally, e-books provide scaffolding for struggling readers through customizable features such as text-to-speech functionality, font size variation, a built-in dictionary, and the possibility to annotate the text through digital thinkmarks (Dwyer & Larson, 2014) and adjust the readability level of the text.

### ***Pressures to Reduce Amount of Time Spent on Leisure Reading in Classrooms***

The U.S. National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) opened up a debate about the contributions of leisure reading to overall reading development in its review of 14 experimental studies conducted with K–12 students that were published in peer-reviewed journals between 1990 and 2000 (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008). Although the panel conceded that there is extensive research showing that good readers engage frequently in leisure reading, its members found no conclusive evidence of research demonstrating that silent reading as an instructional activity in school enhances reading skills and fluency. The National Reading Panel did not discourage leisure reading but cautioned against assumptions that it would develop reading skills and fluency. The panel has been criticized, however, for their failure to seek out research showing relationships between leisure reading and vocabulary development or reading comprehension (Sanden, 2014).

The National Reading Panel's (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) conclusions regarding the use of scientifically based reading research to inform reading instruction have been used to support policy initiatives that lead to a decrease in classroom leisure reading. The goals of fostering a love of reading and developing a lifelong habit of reading for pleasure have been supplanted by the goal of supporting students' performance on high-stakes literacy tests (Pearson & Goodin, 2010).

## **Recommendations**

Two guiding principles organize recommended practices for supporting leisure reading in classrooms and beyond the school.

**Principle I:** Readers should choose their own reading materials (Krashen, 2011). Students are better able to choose engaging and appropriate reading materials when

teachers and family members scaffold their selection of leisure reading materials (Reutzel, Jones, & Newman, 2010; Sanden, 2014).

### **Suggestions:**

1. Make available for students a wide range of genres and topics representing appropriate levels of challenge and interest for student readers.
2. Partner with school and public libraries or consult the following websites to learn more about reading materials that students might enjoy for their leisure reading:
  - Children's Choices (cosponsored by IRA and the Children's Book Council): [www.reading.org/resources/booklists/childrenschoices.aspx](http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/childrenschoices.aspx)
  - Young Adults' Choices (sponsored by IRA): [www.reading.org/resources/booklists/youngadultschoices.aspx](http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/youngadultschoices.aspx)
  - Teachers' Choices (sponsored by IRA): [www.reading.org/resources/booklists/teacherschoices.aspx](http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/teacherschoices.aspx)
  - NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children: [www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus](http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus)
  - The Canadian Children's Book Centre (where you can sign up for their monthly newsletter): [www.bookcentre.ca](http://www.bookcentre.ca)
3. Introduce students to reading materials that they might enjoy by reading aloud chapters, paragraphs, or sections; discussing them; and showing delight in the texts. Make publisher-developed or student-created trailers about books and other reading materials available for students to view when selecting leisure reading texts (Gambrell, 2011).
4. Create a "Recommended Reading" bulletin board in the classroom, in online settings, or in the school hallways for students to post titles and recommendations for others (Gardiner, 2005).

**Principle II:** The benefits to students' fluency, comprehension, and motivation from engaging in leisure reading are increased when teachers scaffold school-based leisure reading by incorporating reflection, response, and sharing in a wide range of ways that are not evaluated (Parr & Maguiness, 2005; Pilgreen, 2000; Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008; Walker, 2013) and when students' home environments support their self-selected reading (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000).

### **Suggestions:**

1. Encourage students to talk to peers about the texts that they read as part of classroom leisure reading activities to develop a reading community and reading culture where students interact socially around texts.

2. Consult ReadWriteThink's website ([www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)) for guides on supporting students as they read independently during leisure reading time.
3. Encourage students' families to show their children the enjoyment of reading rather than try to develop reading skills.

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