



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Understanding Reading for Pleasure for emerging adult readers

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## 1. Introduction

This report addresses the meaning and benefits of Reading for Pleasure (RfP) for adults. RfP is frequently discussed within educational contexts with reference to children's literacy and adult reading practices, yet it is a term rarely defined. The report is concerned in particular with RfP for adult emergent readers, those who consider themselves non-readers either because they feel they cannot or do not read.

It draws on a study that was designed to help inform the communication strategy being developed for the launch of the new set of Quick Reads in early 2013. Each year Quick Reads, a charitable organisation, commissions big name authors to write short books that are specifically designed to be easy to read. They are the same as mainstream books but are simply shorter and potentially easier to tackle for adults who are less confident in their reading skills. The books are then sold through major retailers, online booksellers and are loaned from libraries. Since 2006 Quick Reads has distributed over 4.5 million books and registered 3 million library loans.

The research aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What does RfP mean for adults/adult emergent readers?
2. What are the potential gains of RfP for adults/adult emergent readers?
3. What is emerging in emergent readers through RfP?

This research offers insights into the benefits of RfP in general for adult emergent readers, as well as the specific value of reading circles. It comprised a literature review followed by small-scale qualitative research conducted with two adult reading circles in December 2012. It has been informed by early discussions with Quick Reads stakeholders, in particular NIACE and the Reading Agency.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 What is 'Reading for Pleasure'?

To find out more about *adult* RfP, and emerging adult readers in particular, we need to examine not only educational research, but also the fields of literary and cultural theory, which have a long-standing concern with adult reading habits and pleasures

#### 2.1.1 A pedagogic label

One answer to the question ‘what is RfP?’ is that RfP is a phrase used within educational settings to describe a type and purpose of reading: reading which is, to some extent, voluntary, marked by reader choice, of a text of interest to the reader, usually narrative, and often, but not always, fiction. It usually denotes an individual, silent activity, with the notable exception of reading circles, and often indicates that reading will not be followed by the activities or assignments common to reading in many educational settings. In this sense, RfP is very similar to how the term ‘extensive reading’ is used in English Language Teaching studies (see, for example Day and Bamford 2001, Hafiz & Tutor 1989).

RfP is not, therefore, primarily defined by the type of text (though fiction or other narrative texts are characteristic), *or even whether the reading ends up actually being pleasurable or enjoyable*, but rather by the original purpose of the reading. RfP is not reading done for work, study or life administration purposes but rather *reading for its own sake*: reading because you want to, because it *pleases* you. Crucially, it is a term used within the contexts of educational research, policy and pedagogy, to describe just the kind of reading which it is imagined happens ‘naturally’ outside of these settings, for ‘leisure’ purposes. However, this is not a term used to talk about reading of this kind conducted in our ‘normal lives’. We do not say ‘*I’m going to bed to read for pleasure.*’ Or ‘*I read for pleasure a bit on the bus.*’ Rather we simply say ‘*I’m going to bed to read*’ or ‘*I read a bit on the bus*’, the lack of a stated purpose clearly indicating that the reading is for personal ‘pleasure’ purposes (because it pleases me). The phrase RfP therefore conjures a meeting – clash even – of contexts: education and the everyday, or research and the personal or familial. It also highlights the chasm between the unspoken ‘taken for granted-ness’ of leisure reading to those for whom it is a ‘native’ or habitual social practice, and the strangeness and mystery of this practice to its outsiders.

### **2.1.2 What pleasure?**

The second way to answer the question ‘what is RfP?’ is to focus on the word ‘pleasure’ and ask what kinds of pleasures it can bring. The literature suggests that these can be grouped under five headings: *pleasures of entertainment and escape; pleasures of cognitive work and narrative creation; pleasures of emotional stimulation, empathy and intersubjectivity; pleasures of ethical contemplation: the ‘should and could’ of reading*, and finally, *pleasures of companionship*.

#### **Pleasures of entertainment and escape**

Reading narrative texts (particularly fiction) is often claimed to offer a form of entertainment which allows one to master time (Manguel, 1996, Pennac, 2006), to 'pass the time' on journeys (Duncan, 2009), in prison (Wilson, 2002), or to escape a particularly difficult present time (Duncan 2009). This may be the first thing that comes to mind when one hears the phrase RfP. However, this escape and control over time relies on the other pleasures below.

### **Pleasures of cognitive 'work' and narrative creation**

Writing of drama (so, spectatorship rather than reading), Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1996 translation) discussed two key literary pleasures: the pleasure of imitation (creating a text) and the pleasure of working out the imitations of others (the cognitive work of processing a text, of making sense of literature). Writing of the literary reading process, reader response and reception theorists, Iser (1972) and Fish (1980), similarly emphasised the pleasures of the active, interpretive nature of reading, as the reader fills gaps left by ambiguous vocabulary or syntax and interprets spaces between sentences. The reader is undertaking the cognitive work of interpreting, adjusting, creating. Similarly, narrative theorists Culler (1975), Perry (1979) and Rimmon-Kenan (1989) explore how the reader constructs and reconstructs the 'story paraphrase' as 'frames' of meaning are built, revised, rejected and rebuilt. Members of a reading circle within adult literacy provision spoke of how they enjoyed these acts of 'building', creating their story together (Duncan 2012). These are pleasures of intellectual/cognitive stimulation and creative satisfaction.

### **Pleasures of emotional stimulation, empathy and intersubjectivity**

Reading narratives (again, especially, but not exclusively, fiction) is also frequently reported (not least anecdotally) as emotionally stimulating. There are two elements to this stimulation: emotions which come from the act of reading itself (such as happiness at being able to read a novel, or unhappiness or shame at reading difficulties) and emotions which are felt as a result of plot or character developments (feeling happy when something goes well, or sad when a character is sad) (Duncan, 2012). The latter is the most commonly reported form of emotional stimulation from reading, the emotional experience of empathy (Cuban, 2001, Radway, 1991). Tackling 'Why We Read Fiction', Zunshine (2006) argues that we read novels precisely to exercise our 'mind reading' abilities (taking the term 'mind reading' from studies of autism to indicate our ability to read internal mental states from external signs), and therefore in novel reading we both *develop* our abilities to empathize and get pleasure from *practicing* this skill. Literary theorists borrowing from

psychoanalysis have taken the idea of empathy further and theorised how the reader takes on other subjectivities in the intersubjective activity of reading (Holland, 1978, Wright, 1982, Bakhtin, 1990). The reader takes on the subjectivity – the I position- of the narrator and/or characters within the narrative to become someone else for a glorious while.

### **Pleasures of ethical contemplation: the should and could of reading**

Reading, and particularly novel reading, has been damned as a silly mindless activity for silly minds (Radway, 1991), while at the same time, the very pleasures of reading have been argued the product of absolutely ‘serious’ matters (Yandell, 2007), political and ethical contemplation born from the perspective of seeing through other people’s eyes (Greene, 1995, Duncan, 2012). Sartre (1967) argues that the taste of “human freedom,” which the ‘building’ aspect of reading provides, necessarily makes it an ethical lesson as the reader feels their “freedom is indissolubly linked with that of all other men” (p. 46). Hillis Miller (1987) writes of the ‘ethics of reading,’ stating that storytelling embodies the ‘universal moral law’ of action and consequence. Booth (1988) similarly stresses the importance, or even inevitability, of ethical evaluation in literary study, given “the unique value of fiction: its relatively cost-free offer of trial runs [...] a relative freedom from consequence” (p. 485). John Irving (1993) writes of the importance of the novelist exploring good and bad actions, creating “what could have happened” (p. 9), and therefore allowing us to see the relationship between the ‘could’ and the ‘should.’ Manguel (2006) clarifies the ethical, and spiritual, importance of the possibilities that reading gives us:

books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or what is beautiful, and they will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us myriad possibilities, the possibility of illumination (p. 232).

We can see what may be possible.

### **Pleasures of companionship**

Through this engagement with other lives, emotions and possibilities comes community, both physically in the form of reading circles and communities of readers (Jackson, 1999, Long, 1993 & 2003, Hartley, 2002, Day, 2003, Fowler, 2004) and non-physically in the form of the ‘solace’ we get from the characters we read about (Forster, 1927), from the voices that greet us from across time (Manguel, 1996) and the companionship offered by reading itself: ‘We read because we know we’re alone.

Reading offers a kind of companionship that takes no one's place, but that no one can replace either' (Pennac, 2006, 174).

### **2.1.5 The obscurity/complexity of the term Reading for Pleasure**

The pleasures of RfP have therefore been identified in both educational and literary/cultural literature as pleasures of entertainment and escape, of intellectual and narrative activity, of emotional stimulation, ethical/political education and company. These are varied and complex joys, and unambiguously valuable. The word 'pleasure' itself, however, is more ambiguous. It often connotes sensual pleasure, or appetite, and frequently carries connotations of indolence, or at least a lack of 'seriousness' or attention to 'things that matter'. The word 'pleasure' is therefore not an obvious signal for the potentially intellectual, political, educative pleasures outlined above. This means that the nature and value of the reading practices referred to by the label 'Reading for Pleasure' is hidden from those who are not already 'in the know'. This has implications for access, cultural participation and reading identity.

## **2.2 What are the benefits of RfP?**

The National Literacy Trust (Clark & Rumbold 2006) reported a number of key benefits of RfP including: improvements in reading and writing attainment, vocabulary development, development of attitudes towards reading, confidence and enjoyment in reading, expanded general knowledge and cultural awareness, increased understanding of others and greater community participation. While focusing on child and adolescent literacy and the context of formal, compulsory education, Clark & Rumbold's literature review provides an excellent overview of research findings on the potential benefits of RfP for any readers, child or adult, new or experienced. Once again, educational, literary and cultural texts will allow us to examine RfP for adults in particular.

### **2.2.1 Personal skills**

There are obvious problems with trying to make claims about RfP and the development of personal skills, whether reading and writing skills, or organisational skills: how are these skills defined and measured and, if an advance in skills had been measured, how can anyone be sure that it is the RfP which has had this effect? However, researchers have tried. For example, Rodgers (1986) conducted a longitudinal study of 15-26 year olds to investigate if reading attainment continues to develop in adulthood and how, using the Watts Vernon (WV) reading test on participants at the age of 15 and then at the age of 26 and analysing the changes in



score against a range of factors, from school attendance to occupation. The majority of subjects showed an increase in reading attainment, though these gains were less connected to formal education and more to lives outside of education, “perhaps by the encouragement of reading as a leisure interest” (p. 13). Kirsch, Mosenthal and Rock (1988) researched the relationship between reading and other ‘proficiencies’ in young adults, finding that those who read a range of texts score higher on a range of standardized tests. Similarly, Smith (1996) demonstrated that those who read more, and of a wider range of texts, score higher on standardized literacy tests. Smith and Sheehan-Holt (2000), by contrast, found that those who participated in adult literacy classes did *not* show an improvement in literacy ‘proficiency,’ but did show an increase in novel reading, raising questions about how literacy ‘proficiency’ is defined, and what proficiencies are core to novel reading.

Research on the use of reading circles using fictional texts in secondary school English education has identified gains in reading comprehension and critical reading (Burns, 1998; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; D. Day & Ainley, 2008; English, Robinson, Mathews, & Gill, 2006; Hunter, 2003; Katz, Kuby, & Hobgood, 1997; Lloyd, 2004; Sutherland, 2003). English Language Teaching research in ‘extensive reading’ has argued that reading of large amounts of self-selected narrative texts can develop reading ability, reading speed, vocabulary acquisition and writing ability measured through standardized texts (see for example Constantino et al, 1997, Iwahori, 2008, Lituanas et al, 2001). More generally, work in reading in a second language has found that “one becomes a good reader [...] only through reading large amounts of material” (Paran, 1996, p. 60), a finding supported by literature on adult literacy development. Adult literacy participants in Duncan (2009), argued that they get better at reading from reading as much as possible, and Smith’s (1996) study of adult reading proficiency concludes that the best way to improve reading is simply practice: “there is a positive association between practice and the skilful use of particular cognitive abilities related to literacy” (1996, p. 216). Duncan (2009) also found that adult literacy learners felt that reading stories (a ‘hook’ to hang the words on), and reading aloud (listening to others and looking at words) both allowed them to develop their word-level decoding skills. Finally, Kendall (2008) suggested that young adult literacy learners made gains in reading comprehension and inference through practice RfP.

### **2.2.2 Confidence, attitudes, habits, practices and reading identity**

Many of the above studies reported shifts in reading attitudes, habits and confidences as well as gains in skills, highlighting the complexity of separating skills

from confidence and practices. For example, Kendall (2008) and Duncan (2012) both indicate that confidence and experiences of certain reading practices are part of the skill of reading comprehension. Confidence can produce gains in skills and skills can produce gains confidence (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1999, Zakaluk & Wynes, 1995). Jarvis (2010) researched what adults felt they gained from studying literature, and found critical analysis skills, historical and political awareness and confidence about how knowledge is produced and used to be significant.

Confidence and skills are both elements in the development of reading practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and united in the concept of 'reading identity' (Alverman, 2001, Duncan 2012, Bonafide 2011). The concept of a 'reading identity' is useful to highlight both the affects of an externally applied label (for example, the dangers of labeling someone as a 'struggling reader' Alvermann, 2001) and how participation in RfP can bring about an internal change from being 'scared to pick up a book' to feeling that they are now someone who reads (Duncan 2012). This concept is crucial for understanding the dramatic results which emerging readers may report from RfP, an almost instant shift from non-reader to reader (a shift not about skills, or very little about skills, and more about identity). The notion of reading identity is also relevant to better understanding labels such as 'non-readers' 'beginning readers' or 'emerging readers'- who has initiated these labels and what do they mean? Is a non reader someone who does not have the decoding skills to read, or someone who does not have the confidence to trust their reading? Or someone who chooses not to read?

Sharon (1974) explored the concepts of adult literacy and illiteracy in terms of life practices, rather than cognitive capabilities, making connections between reading, 'socio-economic index' and 'style of living' by researching the reading practices of a range of adult Americans. He found many 'blue collar' workers saw themselves as non-readers because, according to their own assessment of what reading is (reading books) and isn't (reading signs and packaging), they *didn't* rather than *couldn't* read.

### **2.2.3 Family**

The literature is full of examples of links between RfP practices and family interaction. The women in Zakaluk & Wynes (1995) study were working on their reading – and wider language skills- in order to help their children with their language and literacy. Adult literacy learner participants the wider research behind Duncan 2009 and 2012 spoke of wanting to improve their reading to help their children read and highlighted the role of the bedtime stories in this sharing of RfP. The Storybook Dads, and now also Storybook Mums, project allows parents in prison to record their

own voices reading stories for their children to listen to at home

<http://www.storybookdads.org.uk>. Parkinson (2007) reported on how the women in prison saw their storybook activities as education, as parenting and as a 'stepping stone' to other practices and educational opportunities, for their children as well as for themselves. Nicholas & Fletcher (2011) examined the role of the father in literacy achievement, finding that fathers support the literacy development of their children primarily through modelling practices such as "taking their child to the library, teaching spelling and encouraging reading for pleasure" (p. 1), creating positive cycles around culture and confidence (awareness of the nature and value of RfP practices and the confidence to know they can do it: reading identity). Within the family, the benefits of RfP are potentially shared and amplified.

#### **2.2.4 Community participation (including work and study)**

Research into reading circles in schools and adult education highlight gains in terms of community participation, as participants read together as a group, negotiating the text, taking control over their own learning (Day, 2003, Daniels, 2006, Anderson & Corbett, 2008, Duncan, 2012, Jackson, 1999). Their particular form of communal RfP helps to draw parallels between the organisational work and communal criticality of their circle formation and the community participation within any instance of RfP, as the reader makes links with past and present voices, communities, perspectives and ideologies (Long, 2003, Rose, 2010, Manguel, 1996, Yandell, 2007 & 2012).

This double (or single for an individual reader) community participation points towards gains for future work and study, as reading identities are potentially transformed, providing confidence for the transferability and further development of skills and an increased sense of well-being through RfP as lifelong learning (Gouthro, 2010). It also suggests gains in terms of wellbeing through increased connection to others. When discussing a book readers can both "be themselves more" (Davis, 2009, p. 36) and be someone else (Iser, 1972), allowing us to talk more freely about what we most want and need to talk about (Long, 2003), while feeling connected, engaged in an "active and collaborative engagement [which] is simultaneously serious and playful" (Yandell, 2012, 340). Brown (2010) argues that the most important learning born of experience in social work is the understanding that "connection is why we are here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives." One thing that nearly all of the researchers cited in this paper share is the belief that what RfP can do is provide connections, whether to those sharing specific and difficult personal experience (Coffel, 2009), to those in distant times and places

(Manguel, 1996, 2006) or to those who can support our reading and allow us to see ourselves as readers (Duncan, 2012).

### **3. Evidence from reading groups**

The second source of data that this report draws on was collected through qualitative research with two adult reading groups in the Greater London area. Data was collected in three ways: observation, focus groups and interviews. One reading circle session of each group was observed. A focus group was conducted with each group, and individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with six reading circle members. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The resulting data were analysed using a coding and categorisation process, guided by themes from the literature review around reported personal and social benefits of RfP. Additional themes emerging from the data, and which depart from the themes present in the literature review, are discussed afterwards.

#### **3.1 Benefits of RfP for adult emergent readers as identified in the literature**

##### **3.1.1 Personal skills**

None of the participants identified themselves as not being able to read, but over half spoke of themselves as not being confident readers and several spoke of themselves as not having been able to read in the recent past. Around three-quarters of the participants referred to the fact that they didn't used to read, that before joining the reading circle, they were non-readers in the sense of not engaging in (narrative) reading practices, rather than not being able to read. This element of being a 'non-reader' (rather than not being able to read) seemed to be more significant to those interviewed (though several also described themselves as not having been able to read in the recent past). Significantly, several interviewees emphasised the two-directional link between not being able to read ('cannot') and not reading ('does not'), "if you don't read, you don't get the chance to become a stronger reader" and "if you know you can't read well, you just don't want to read".

Participants reported gains in *word, sentence and text level reading skills*. They spoke of expanding their vocabularies, increasing their confidence reading longer and less familiar words, of understanding more complicated sentences and paragraphs ("sometimes you have to read them over a few times to get what they are saying and then once you get it, it's clear- the sentence makes sense and you move forward"), of developing their *skills in interpretation and analysis* of plot and

characters and *critical reading*, of how when they discuss a book together they are able to explore how it relates to what they know of the setting/politics and are therefore able to critically analyse the author and/or narrator's perspectives (is this true? Do we agree? Why do they have that point of view? etc)

In both observed reading circle sessions, the discussions were at times political, as they discussed political situations presented in their books (one biography and one novel) and related these to their own experiences and to current events. In one case, the group discussed a particular political situation presented in the book and which several members had lived through. Their discussion quickly became much wider than the events in the book, and ended up as a discussion of racism in secondary schools today. Their individual reading and reading circle participation were vehicles for having informed, focussed political discussions.

### **3.1.2 Confidence, attitudes, habits, practices and reading identity**

Participants spoke of the development of their reading practices, how the reading circle encouraged/"forced" them to read books, more books, longer books, different kinds of books (in some cases books that they would have associated with more confident readers or "more educated" people) and so expanded their reading practices. Increased confidence was something every single participant mentioned. "I know I can do it now." "What have I gained? Confidence. That's it- confidence." "I didn't think I could do something like this. But I can." "I was nervous at first because I wasn't good at English or anything at school. I was scared. But it wasn't like that. We just talk about it and the talk takes over. We just do it."

This development of confidence was both cause and effect of the developments in reading skill mentioned above. One young woman explained it like this: "You start off nervous because you think you can't do it- or I did- I thought I wasn't clever enough or educated enough to read a long book and find its meaning or whatever and talk about it with a group of other people who might say 'rubbish- you're wrong..'. But it's not like that. You see others are thinking the same thing. And then when you read, you see you can understand the words- or most of them- and the sentences- and you get the characters and the story- and it's like you're on the train- it all works. And because you get the story and you get ideas of the characters- 'oh she does things like that, or he's a bad one'- when everyone starts talking, you feel like talking too. And then, before you know it. You're sitting there talking about a book, like you was born doing it! And you see you can do it, so it makes it easier to do it again. That's how it works. I never thought I'd be here talking about this but I am and I'm glad."

### 3.1.3 Family and community participation

Strikingly, both reading circles were about an expansion of social/familial practices as well as individual practices. Several members spoke of how they shared their books with family members, friends or neighbours and encouraged them to read. In one case, one woman got her teenage daughter to read most of the books and “then we talk through them”; another woman lends all her reading circle books to her neighbour, her neighbour reads the books, they talk about the book and she reports her neighbour’s ideas, as well as her own, back to the reading circle. Two participants had young children. One seemed to have a home full of a range of literacy practices already. Reading books seemed to be much newer/more alien to the home environment of the other. She spoke of how “good” it would be for her daughter to see her reading books and “see that it’s fun and see what I’m learning”

In both cases, the libraries and the reading circles themselves emerged as locations of community cohesion: gathering people together in their local areas, to talk together about the books they had read (books in common), to talk more about social/cultural/political topics of interest, to talk about their families. Their reading and discussions are acts of participation in smaller (the circle), medium (the library, the local areas within Greater London) and larger (the country, the society, the culture) communities. “I really like being part of this group – these people. I enjoy the chat, the reading, the tea and biscuits. We can talk about all sorts. We talk about the book, of course, but we also talk about our families, about work, problems, the news, the world really. I love being part of this library but also I know that other reading groups are reading the same books and sometimes I look at what they think on websites, or reviews of the book on Amazon and so I feel part of something much bigger. We’re all talking about the same book. And there’s a film of it coming too. I’m going to see that and see what people say about it.”

## 3.2 Additional themes

Additional themes emerged from the data: achievement, telling the stories of who we are, learning, libraries as community hubs and ‘connectedness’. These themes address the benefits of reading for pleasure, of the talking inherent in RfP, of working in groups and of groups within libraries. They are broader, therefore, than RfP, and offer valuable insights into adult reading practices.

### 3.2.1 Achievement

The overwhelming message of every single interview was that participants saw their reading as a significant *achievement*. The concept of achievement, as it emerged

from this data, is multidimensional. It is achievement, or development, of personal literacy and learning gains (see 3.1 above); it is achieving, completing something of personal value (“I remember when I finished my first book. That was a day.”) and it is achieving, or completing, something of clear social and cultural value (“I like reading books that I see other people reading and talking about.”). It is also, crucially, about ‘holding one’s own’ in a socially esteemed practice of reading and discussing a book in a group which may be comfortable or informal, but it is not familial. This itself has two elements: it is about taking part in a far wider, and valued, cultural discussion (participants are aware that people all over the world are reading these very books and that reading circles exist all over the world, where people read and discuss in very similar ways) and it is about being able to do this, developing this mixture of literacy, communication, general knowledge and social skills, a transferable bundle of skills, knowledge, practices and confidences which can be used to good effect in a range of domains, not least the workplace.

“You feel that if you can do this you can do other things, take part in other groups, parent groups or work groups, things I never did before [...] Reading something and talking here, listening, agreeing or not but being polite, respectful [...] Feeling that how you’ve read it is ok, feeling worth others listening to you, that’s something, isn’t it?”

### **3.2.2 Telling the stories of who we are**

As they talked *in* their reading circles, and as they talked *about* their reading, participants seemed to be telling the stories of who they are and where they came from: forming and reforming their identities by telling stories. This was apparent not only in how they talked about their past and present reading experiences, but also as they talked together about the books they had read. For example, one group were talking about a particular period in Jamaican history and in the history of Jamaican immigrants in London. A member of the circle started talking about her own family’s history, her upbringing, her education, her career history. Others did the same. In the other circle, a woman remembered how “one week, we talked for twenty minutes about marriage, and about our own marriages.”

This also had two key aspects. One aspect of this *telling stories of our identities* may be particular to reading in reading circle formation. Long (2003) has noted that reading circle members use their circles to talk about what they most want and need to talk about, usually who they are or who they want to be. Yet, there is more to it. The other aspect is about the personal experience of reading narrative text (fiction or

biography). These data suggest that as we read the stories of other's lives, as we read lives being told, structured, explained, understood, a model is created for us to tell and retell our own lives, to structure our own identities as narrative. The narratives we read become models for us to use to find meanings in our own lives, a way to make sense of who we are, a way to make even the problems and pain fit into a redemptive pattern. So, Anna Karenina isn't just the story of a particular woman's life, but it is a particular way a life can be told, a particular model or way of understanding. As we read it, we internalize its ways of telling and use them to rethink or rewrite our own situations or identities. This seems to be the driver behind the impulse in reading circle members to talk about their own lives as they are talking about a book, and why we all, according to the participants of this study, need to talk about, and from what we have read. This is a key pleasure of RfP.

### **3.2.3 Learning**

Participants spoke of what they were learning from their reading and reading circle participation, far beyond literacy skills or practices. They discussed how they had learnt about (for example) different religions, history, about different languages, about circuses, about geography. They described learning from both fiction and non-fiction.

“I can't believe how much I'm learning. It's like school- but in a good way, but fun.”

“The book had a lot of religion in it, and different languages. It was hard, but I kept going and learnt a lot.”

“I had no idea before. You just learn so much. Every book- it's something else, you keep learning”

“...there are things that I didn't really know about. I didn't know these things. So to me I'm so glad I could read this book for myself and learn about these things- for myself. I'm so happy. I want to tell other people to read it and tell them all about it. I'm so glad to be able to do this.”

This is about individual educational gain, distinct from personal literacy gains.

Additionally, the learning, participants stressed, was not just from the book, but from each other - a type of book-driven peer education:

“See one book was set in India. We talked a lot about that. Some of the women are much older and know much more and they can tell us about it.”

### **3.2.4 Libraries as community hubs**



Both groups visited were based in libraries. They were different. One library was smaller; the other much larger, in a complex that also included a swimming pool. One group met once a month, but had no contact between meetings, apart from when the librarian notified them of when they could pick up the books. The other group also met once a month, but the members come in to see the young librarian who runs the group throughout the month, to update her on their thoughts on the book, to chat, and when they cannot make a session, they give her their ideas orally or in writing (one woman gave her an envelope covered with notes when she couldn't attend the session). This group also has what could be called associate members (though they didn't use this term), who read the monthly books and talked to the librarian about them, but never attend circle sessions (the librarian thinks one is building up to attending, getting over personal shyness; the other can never attend due to child care problems). This group also has a notice board in the library where they post up reviews and other thoughts about their and other books.

Despite the differences in how these groups meet and work, for both groups the library location is crucial. The librarian, in both cases, chooses the books, sometimes from suggestions from the members, and gets hold of multiple copies (from the library system). In both cases, members stressed that they know they can get in contact with the librarian if they needed to, because they know when she is in the library. This seemed to provide a sense of security and continuity. In both cases, the librarian brings tea/coffee and biscuits to the sessions, both held in rooms slightly off the main library rooms. At least one member from each group joined the group after seeing them at work in the library and being curious what this group of people was doing sitting down talking with cups of tea.

Both were very impressive examples of how a library can be a community hub, creating and coordinating a community group who then see themselves as part of the library- see the library as for them. The fact that each member sees the library as "ours" is a significant gain for most of the participants, who would previously have been unsure of libraries. Perhaps just as the term 'the church' can mean (at least) three things: the physical building, the formal institution and its structures of authority, and the group of people who attend, 'the library' can have these different meanings. 'The library' was, in both cases, the books within it and the people who used it: the readers, the children and parents, the teenagers studying for exams and using the computers, and the reading circles. This means that the relationship between the librarians and the reading circle members is very different from the relationship between a teacher and a group of students, or even a lifeguard and the swimmers.

The librarian and reading circle members are all valued participants in the community practices of the library, practices which include individual reading and peer learning. The encouragement the library offered to both individual and group reading practices was absolutely fundamental to the achievements (see above) of the reading circle members.

### **3.2.5 RfP and ‘Connectedness’**

Expanding an idea from the literature review that RfP can provide connections between people, this research strongly suggests that the pleasures and benefits of RfP are largely based on different forms of what could be called ‘connectedness’- of being connected to a language, a culture, an age, a city, a locality, a library, a circle, a group of people within a book, a group of people who’ve read the book, a group of people who ‘get’ RfP, who ‘get’ the joys of reading a novel or biography. The sense of achievement from RfP is based on knowledge that one can read a book, understand it and talk about it, that one can ‘hold one’s own’ in any discussion, and may therefore feel more confident in job interviews or other potentially daunting situations. Connectedness may be feeling one can operate externally, as part of the world, as a legitimate member, rather than having to hide away from the world. RfP means both connections over time and space (to someone in a book, to the writer of a book, or to past or distant readers of the book) and connecting in a new way with a colleague or neighbour over a book. The concept of ‘connectedness’ is central to the potential gains of RfP: connectedness in the sense of accessing literacy practices (being able, for example, to understand what an email is communicating and be able to write an appropriate response) and in the sense of relating to others in smaller and larger communities. The answer to the question ‘what is emerging in emergent readers?’ could well be *connectedness*.

## **4. Summary of findings**

### **4.1 What does RfP mean for adults/adult emergent readers?**

RfP means reading for oneself, not directly for work or family, reading something for one’s own enjoyment and education in the broadest sense. It is reading for enjoyment, for learning, for personal development. RfP is also about taking control over what you read and how, and what you learn and how. RfP, with its implication of a longer, narrative text (like a novel or biography), is also where practices meet skills: “to read a whole book, it’s not just reading lots of words or reading lots of sentences”,

it is also an act of creation, something active, interpretive, and often communal. In this sense the reading practice of RfP is also particular reading skill (or set of skills). The participants of this study remembered this as they described their sense of achievement: “it’s great to think; I did it; read that book. It’s not easy but I did it, I can do it. It’s another dimension.”

#### **4.2 What are the potential gains of RfP for adults/adult emergent readers?**

- Word, sentence and text level reading skills (including critical literacy)
- Expansion of reading practices, personal, familial and community
- Development of confidence and reading identity
- *Achievement*: literacy, communication, learning, community and cultural participation/contribution (transferable skills, knowledge and confidences)
- Pleasures of reading: fun
- Pleasures of reading: social, being part of a group
- Pleasures of reading: cognitive work/’brain exercise’
- Pleasures of reading: emotional engagement
- Pleasures of reading: connection with the text
- Wellbeing: social/cultural/community participation
- Political engagement
- Narrative pleasure: telling the story of who we are
- Learning: from books and from others
- (potentially) being part of a library as a local community hub

#### **4.3 What exactly is emerging in emergent readers when RfP?**

The above gains, but also (or including):

- A developing confidence, reading identity, achievement
- Becoming a slightly different person within different ways of telling and in the context of different books and different conversations
- Being someone who can learn and teach, teach and learn
- Being in control of one’s own education (talking about what you feel is important)
- A connection, or connectedness, to the book, to the characters in the book, to a circle of readers, to wider circles: to all the other readers of that particular book, a link to those talking about it on the radio, a link to a global community of people concerned with, for example, animal welfare, or racism in schools, and to all those around the world who also take pleasure from reading

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This report has addressed the potential meaning and value of RfP for adult emergent readers, in and out of reading circles, first investigating this issue through a literature review and then a piece of small-scale research. It has argued that there are complex personal, familial, and community gains in RfP, and introduced the notion of 'connectedness' inherent in the pleasures and benefits of RfP. This is an area which would warrant future, and larger scale, research.

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National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

## **Understanding Reading for Pleasure for emerging adult readers**

**Dr Sam Duncan, NRDC Institute of Education, London**

Reading has been central to the work of NRDC over the last ten years. In our research and development work we have been able to talk to adults about their practices and attitudes to reading, we have explored the difficulties faced by adults in learning to read and we have looked at effective teaching and learning of reading in the classroom, identifying promising practice.

In recent years, in collaboration with the Reading Agency, NIACE and Quick Reads, we have focused specifically on reading for pleasure, particularly at Entry level. Now NRDC has carried out new research into reading for pleasure in the context of adult reading groups of emerging readers. The research, designed to inform the launch of the new set of Quick Reads in 2013, has enabled us to ask what reading for pleasure means, what people gain from reading and why they might benefit from reading in groups.

This is a report of a small-scale piece of qualitative research that addresses those questions from the perspective of the adult emergent reader.

*NRDC, March 2013*

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