How can public libraries make ‘reading for pleasure’ accessible for children who may not achieve conventional literacy?

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1. Introduction

‘Reading for Pleasure’ has become a popular phrase in children’s education and literacy. The Open University and United Kingdom Literacy Association have a joint research portal dedicated to the phenomenon (The Open University, 2020), and many extol the benefits: if we can just get our children reading for pleasure, they will be less stressed, more eloquent, and have better opportunities (Serroukh, 2015, p. 29). No wonder that, as of 2013, the National Curriculum for English explicitly emphasises reading “for pleasure” (Atkinson, 2020). Despite all the research and promotion, two questions remain largely unanswered: what is the role of the public library in promoting reading for pleasure? And what does ‘Reading for Pleasure’ mean for children who, because of impairment, are unlikely to learn to read? In this essay, I will synthesise these two questions and interrogate how public libraries can make ‘Reading for Pleasure’ (RfP) accessible for children who may not achieve conventional literacy.

1.1 Definitions of Cohort

Flewitt et al. (2009) note that the Social Model of Disability – wherein people have impairments, but the extent of their disability is determined by changeable social barriers – is a crucial framework in discussions of ‘literacy’. Libraries must work with a definition of RfP (and subsequently ‘literacy’) that is accessible for all. The accessibility of RfP will derive from library workers’ theoretical understanding of terms such as “reading”, which may require a paradigm shift for some. This means disrupting the domination of “conventional literacy”, the “skills-based” ability of
being able to read and write conventionally and independently (Watson et al., 2004, p. 83).

How then are we to understand “children who may not achieve conventional literacy”? There is much research on how to enable a child to read/write, given certain barriers; yet this is not always possible. Of provision for people with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), Mencap write: “while many barriers can be challenged … ultimately we cannot change the nature of people’s disabilities. In doing so … we [respect] people’s differences” (2016, p. 2). Once conventional literacy is established as unrealistic, libraries must still ask how they can include that child in RfP. This should be balanced with a wariness of invoking the negative “legacies of special educational discourses” (Flewitt et al., 2009, p. 222), which wrote many disabled children off as ‘ineducable’. With this in mind, we can ask which children are in this category.

I know of no other research in which the cohort studied is “children who may not achieve conventional literacy”. Rather, research is organised by impairment (e.g. reading for children with sensory needs) or setting (e.g. reading in special schools). In the UK, learning difficulties that make a child unlikely to learn to read would most often be termed Severe or Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (SLD and PMLD) (Robinson et al., 2019). However, barriers to literacy come from many impairments, such as “deafblindness or sensory impairment with complex needs” (Watson et al., 2004, p. 85). Therefore, we are limited in this essay to an initial survey of research into different groups, which reveals the merit of further investigation.
1.2 Literature Review

RfP has been widely researched as part of its codification in the National Curriculum. An Institute for Education 2013 report (cited Serroukh, 2015, p. 29) found that reading enjoyment was more important than a family’s socioeconomic status for a child’s academic attainment, and that it could help “combat exclusion and raise educational standards” (Serroukh, 2015, p. 29). For “non-literacy outcomes”, a review commissioned by the Reading Agency found “distraction, relaxation, and knowledge development” were widely reported outcomes of RfP, which may undergird the “‘extremely observable’” and “measurable” material impacts (BOP Consulting, 2015, p. 4). However, existing research lacks specific definitions and study of the impact on particular groups (BOP Consulting, 2015, p. 5).

The RfP literature is indeed characterised by multi-definitionality: the 2013 National Curriculum for English states that children should “develop pleasure in reading” as an outcome of certain skills e.g. using dictionaries (Oxfordshire Schools, n.d., p. 1). Clark and Rumbold defined RfP as reading done “of our own free will”, that the reader chooses to “continue because we are interested” (2006, p. 6), centring agency; and the Reading Agency’s 2015 report defines RfP as “non goal oriented transactions with texts as a way to spend time and for entertainment” (BOP Consulting, 2015, p. 6). Thus, definitions of RfP at times gesture to levels of skill and agency not exhibited by some disabled children. The Reading Agency’s 2015 definition, useful in its open-ended phrasing of “transactions with texts”, is the model of RfP adopted here.

As for specific groups and settings, there is a lack of research into both how public libraries support RfP and RfP by those without conventional literacy. For
public libraries, this may be because the aim of their provision for children is already to “provide reading for pleasure”, with education and literacy secondary concerns (Aggleton, 2018). There is research on the role of public libraries with RfP as an outcome: for example Clark and Hawkins’ research (2011, cited Department for Education, 2012) found that young people who use their public library are nearly twice as likely to read both outside of class and every day (p. 27). But as for RfP for children without conventional literacy, “the academy presents little account of the impact of books … on a cohort of non-readers” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 95).

BookTrust’s “Spark” programme provides accessible books and guidance via special schools (BookTrust, 2019a). They commissioned Sheffield Institute of Education to analyse this provision, resulting in the field’s only comprehensive piece of research. It asks several RfP questions, such as “How do children with additional needs experience [RfP] … and what is the impact?” (Robinson et al., 2016, p. 4). This was updated in 2019, and the authors note they are “annoyed [that] … enjoyment of books by people with learning difficulties has been ignored”, and bemoan their reliance on small-scale, anecdotal studies (Robinson et al., 2019). In this dearth of academic research, special school’s curricula can give useful insight. Several special schools have discussed how they facilitate the National Curriculum requirement for RfP for students with a range of additional needs (Bluebell Park School, 2019; Cleaswell Hill School, 2019).

2. Rethinking what RfP looks like

Given the sparse research, one might be tempted to question whether we know if children without conventional literacy still enjoy RfP; yet what research there is answers with a resounding ‘yes’. When interviewed, carers never doubt whether their
children enjoy reading for pleasure. Rather the focus is on *how*, not *if* (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 102). After working with children with PMLD, Atkins concluded that “deriving pleasure from books is universal” (1999, p. 21) and the Special School Library Pack from BookTrust is received with “enthusiasm [that is] wonderful to watch” (BookTrust, 2019b). Therefore, it seems that libraries can include all children in RfP; but there is a need to expand both our definitions of ‘reading’ and ‘pleasure’, and reconsider what the benefits might be for those unlikely to achieve conventional literacy.

2.1 What counts as reading?
The word ‘literacy’ has been used around children’s learning since the 1980s, and has undergone three significant paradigm shifts since its inception (Watson et al., 2004, p. 83). Emphasis started on the “ability to read and write”. The first shift recognised the social dimensions of creating meaning through abstract symbols; the second acknowledged that children exhibit unprompted curiosity about texts; and the last recognised that, from birth, people try to understand and use symbolic systems (Watson et al., 2004). This challenged “chronological notions of literacy”, thus legitimizing all meaning-making activities as “literacy” rather than merely “pre-literacy” (Watson et al., 2004, p. 84). This led to definitions such as Heath’s “literacy events”: social interactions that revolve around books, such as mark-making and reciting rhymes (2006, cited Flewitt et al., 2009, p. 214). Understanding this history can help library workers evaluate their own definitions.

This updated model, which looks at “broader meaning-making activity around texts of varied types”, is known as “Inclusive Literacy” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 92). ‘Reading’, understood in this context, means engagement with “texts”, which are:
“any medium that participates in a sign relationship between social actors” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 94). In Manguel’s framework, most human activity is ‘reading’: deciphering symbolic relationships to extract meaning (1996, cited Park, 1999). This includes, for example, reading “objects of reference” - a communication technique for disabled people conceived by Jan van Djik (Park, 1999). Library workers must understand that, when a child learns that picking up a purse can signify shopping, they are ‘reading’ the object.

We must also recognise all engagement. “Total Communication” runs parallel to Inclusive Literacy: it seeks to acknowledge all the ways, intentional or not, that a person communicates (Watson et al., 2004, p. 86). “Multi-modal” communication, which comes through modes other than vocalised language, is particularly important (Flewitt et al., 2009). When facilitating RfP, library workers should be open to meaningful communication such as gaze and vocalizations, displacing the idea that spoken/written language is the most ‘legitimate’ mode of engagement (Flewitt et al., 2009). Taken together, Inclusive Literacy and Total Communication yield a new definition of RfP which is accessible to all children, adapted from Flewitt: “meaningful, gratifying social exchange around a multimodal text which may include print, picture, sign, gesture or artefact” (2010, cited Robinson et al., 2019, p. 95). This is a compatible expansion of the Reading Agency’s definition of RfP.

3. Practical Steps for Libraries

Literacy is a field in which children are “apprentices”, so must be familiarised with the “environment of the community” (Flewitt et al., 2009, p. 225). The public library can represent the environment of the literate community, and by striving to be an inclusive space, play a role in inducting all children into literacy regardless of the
specific skills they may attain. As Patel reminds parents of children with learning difficulties, “libraries are for ALL children” (Patel, 1999, p. 14).

3.1 Inclusive Literacy Resources

Libraries can make use of techniques derived from Inclusive Literacy. The BookTrust Special School Library Pack contains resources that could be integrated into loanable library collections alongside conventional stock, e.g. Sensory Trays, in which students discover objects, hidden in a tray, that connect to a story read aloud (BookTrust, 2019c). Libraries should also supply accessible books: books with tactile pages, large font, and cloth books that are hard to tear (Robinson et al., 2016). With home-use guides, these do not need the high staff-to-children ratios assumed of special school libraries but uncommon in public libraries.

Where staff are available, public libraries can draw programming activities from special schools that might not previously have been considered relevant to RfP: drum club helps children follow a beat, enabling a “sense of rhythm, pattern and order” fundamental to literacy (Bluebell Park School, 2019). Other public libraries also provide ideas: Patel notes some already offer MSST (Multi-Sensory Story Time) kits for loan and library use (1999). MSST is a “well developed … powerful, practical expression of Inclusive Literacy” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 95). Conceived by Fuller in the 1980s to solve communication problems (Preece and Zhao, 2015), MSST pairs a short story with “meaningful sensory experiences”, e.g. a spritz of water on the hand when someone in the story gets splashed (BookTrust, 2018, p. 2). Since its inception, MSST has been used to create storytelling “opportunities … for enjoyment” (Preece and Zhao, 2015, p. 430). Public libraries can build this legacy into RfP.
When library workers facilitate such programming, they can use whole communication theory to evaluate successful impact. This is modelled by BookTrust’s inclusion of a P-Scale (performance attainment measurements for pupils with SEN) guide within their MSST guide. It gives specific examples of pupil response, e.g. at P1, “[children] may experience periods when they appear alert and ready to focus their attention on certain people, events, objects…” (BookTrust, 2018, p. 5). Knowledge of such a framework would enable library workers in pairing Total Communication with Inclusive Literacy.

3.2 What are the benefits?

RfP is often justified through the economic benefits of a literate workforce, so benefits unique to children unlikely to work profitably can be overlooked (Robinson et al., 2019). One such benefit is participation in a mainstream cultural activity for disabled children who are consistently categorised as ‘special/other’. Books have a “special ordinariness” as “symbols of literate citizenship” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 103). Children with learning difficulties must be “included in storytelling culture” since “storytelling is often considered an unsuitable activity” for them (Ten Brug et al., 2016, pp. 1043–1044). Enjoyment of literacy events like MSST “is universal” (BookTrust, 2018, p. 4), so inclusive sessions can be enjoyed by children without disabilities too, increasing community cohesion.

Furthermore, Watson argues that literacy events are the only “vehicle for communication” that some children with sensory needs have (2004, p. 85). For children with severe disabilities, “literature is a bridge to everyday interaction” rather than the inverse, as is conventionally assumed (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 100). The need for RfP in a child with learning difficulties may surpass that of the average child,
with its potential benefits to memory and communication (Cleaswell Hill School, 2019). Many children with learning difficulties experience mental health issues, but storytelling can help them “define, articulate, comprehend, and organize experiences” (Brooks, 1987, p. 547). For children “learning in a purely sensory way”, techniques such as MSST enable meaningful experience through sensory modes (BookTrust, 2018, p. 2). Thus RfP may be beneficial in facilitating the neurological and mental health of children without conventional literacy.

However, it is important to note that these outcomes are not necessarily derived by delivering RfP activities in the same way as one would for children without disabilities. Robinson et al. have developed the theory that “combination of the book and a responsive significant other” (emphasis author’s own) is critical to enabling RfP benefits for children with complex additional needs (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 100). This Responsive Significant Other (RSO), most commonly a parent, is indispensable in facilitating a high degree of personalisation (Preece and Zhao, 2015) and repetition (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 101) also needed to enable RfP.

For those with learning difficulties, we aid comprehension in storytelling if we “make it relatable” (BookTrust, 2019c, p. 5), one form of ‘personalisation’; the other is the adaptation of materials to make them accessible (Kucirkova and Cremin, 2018). RSOs reported a lack of BookTrust materials for multiple disabilities, e.g. tactile books did not also use sign symbols (Robinson et al., 2016). The RSO understands what their child needs for personalisation, and should be consulted in resource creation (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 101). For children with complex needs, anticipating pleasure is scarce in a world often beyond their prediction. Repeating RfP activities gives “the chance to safely experience and re-experience” pleasure (BookTrust, 2018,
Libraries can support this with extended loans, and pairing “big books” for group sessions with loanable copies to be taken home and enjoyed (Robinson et al., 2016). Again, the RSO is best positioned to identify and enact opportunities for repetition, if properly equipped.

3.3 Policy and Special Considerations

As discussed, new understandings of Inclusive Literacy should be integrated into policy to expand the resources counted as RfP. Further, specific policies can be adapted to public libraries from special schools, e.g. using many different reading schemes, so children who stay at one reading level can still find a variety of books (Cleaswell Hill School, 2019). Such examples can also be derived from a broader accessibility framework, such as Kaeding et al.’s (2017) “Inclusive Library Model”. This states that an inclusive library relies on accessibility in six areas: programs, collections, training, space/equipment, partnerships, and marketing, all connected by supportive management. New understandings of RfP should be integrated into a broader accessibility policy to ensure barriers are removed.

Although we cannot say which socio-cultural issues will affect our cohort, we should be aware that they may be more likely than peers to be outside mainstream schooling, less financially well-off, and to come from an ethnic minority: children unlikely to achieve conventional literacy would normally receive an education, health and care plan (EHC) (Public Health England, 2020) (the higher-intervention level of SEN plan (TheSchoolRun, 2020). Those with an EHC are more likely than peers to be entitled to free school meals, while children from Irish Traveller and Black Caribbean backgrounds represent the highest rate of EHCs per ethnic group (Department for Education, 2019). Having a SEN of only PMLD occurs at 25% above the average rate
in children from the Bangladeshi, ‘other’ Asian and ‘other’ ethnic categories. Students with an EHC are most likely to learn in a state-funded special school (44%) (Department for Education, 2019).

Public libraries must therefore not only consider accessibility through the lens of disability, but through intersectionality. For example, libraries could work with the local authority to facilitate free travel to RfP events, and make sure that the programming and materials are available in community languages. The need for materials in different languages was frequently cited by caregivers evaluating BookTrust’s provision for children with additional needs (Robinson et al., 2016, p. 11). Although this should always be part of public library programming, the critical importance of including RSOs places extra necessity on considering their access needs also.

Some demographic factors have also been neglected in content, as seen by the lack of cloth books with content relevant to teenagers (Robinson et al., 2016, p. 10). We must consider Serroukh’s “11th Right of the Reader”: “the right of every reader to be visible” (2015, p. 30). Especially where libraries create accessible materials, they should not only include characters with disabilities, but also those from ethnic minorities. It is important that pre-existing diversity policies for library collections are not lost when extending that collection for disabled children: there is a risk that the child is reduced to their disability, rather than a complex member of intersecting communities.

4. **Conclusion**
We have limited the scale of this essay to a broad survey. Nevertheless, it suggests that all children can participate in RfP, and that the benefits to children without conventional literacy merits further research and provision. The first step for public libraries does not require any expensive equipment, but rather an ontological shift in what ‘reading’ and ‘pleasure’ look like, to Inclusive Literacy and Total Communication. These can summarised in three observations: “books do not have to be conventionally read to be enjoyed”, “stories do not have to be conventionally understood to learn from them”, and “stories do not have to be conventionally written down to convey meaning” (Lawton, 1999, p. 28). However, this does not mean that the printed book should be abandoned. We must recognise books as “portable, traditional and mainstream artefacts of importance” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 95), valuable in their very ordinariness.

Nor should we expect benefits to look exactly the same for children with disabilities as they do for other children, or expect them to be delivered through the same means: personalisation and repetition are key, as enabled by a Responsive Significant Other (RSO). The intersection of other access factors, such as language/cultural differences, must also be thought of, both for the children concerned and their RSOs, and integrated into a broader accessibility framework. However, from these theoretical considerations, and by looking to successful examples enacted by special schools, other libraries and organisations such as BookTrust, there is a wealth of practice all public libraries can enact to make Reading for Pleasure accessible for everyone.
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