The authors share findings from a recent study of teens who freely select to read texts typically marginalized by schools (dystopia, vampire, romance, horror, fantasy), revealing the distinct functional and psychological benefits of pleasure reading.

Over the last 30-plus years, we’ve both had numerous conversations and sometimes even debates with parents, administrators, and other teachers about the value of the books that students most want to read and that they read with the greatest joy and engagement. We confess that we’ve worried about some of the reading selections our students—as well as our own daughters—have made. We confess that we’ve been reluctant to embrace pleasure as a goal of instruction, and of pleasure reading as an end in itself.

But we also have to confess our amazement at the profound joy and zeal displayed by many of the readers of texts so often marginalized and worry-inducing: romances, vampire stories, horror novels, dystopian fiction, and fantasy. We’ve both seen many students who would spend hours upon hours reading outside school even as they often rejected the reading they were asked to do inside school. We wondered what these students were getting from their out-of-school reading of books that we would never deign to assign. So we decided to ask. Our research (Wilhelm and Smith) focused on the nature and variety of the pleasure adolescent readers experienced as they read those marginalized genres.

What we found, in a nutshell, was that these genres brought their readers four distinct kinds of pleasure: the pleasure of play, intellectual pleasure, social pleasure, and the pleasure of work, both functional work and psychological inner work. Our data strongly suggest that pleasure has enormous power in fostering reading engagement and development. Yet pleasure is not foregrounded in schools in ways that would leverage and develop student reading and that would help students grow as readers and as human beings.

Sophisticated recent research clearly establishes that potential for growth. Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores at Age 16: The Role of Reading (Sullivan and Brown) draws on data collected in the 1970 British Cohort Study, which follows the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1970. After doing a series of analyses, Sullivan and Brown come up with a conclusion so important that we think it’s worth quoting at length:

Our findings . . . [suggest] that children’s leisure reading is important for educational attainment and social mobility . . . and suggest that the mechanism for this is increased cognitive development. Once we controlled for the child’s test scores at age five and ten, the influence of the child’s own reading remained highly significant, suggesting that the positive link between leisure reading and cognitive outcomes is not purely due to more able children being more likely to read a lot, but that reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time. From a policy perspective, this strongly supports the need to support and encourage children’s reading in their leisure time. (37)

The increased cognitive processes is what accounts for the surprising finding that leisure reading was also correlated with increased math performance!

Little wonder that even in an age of accountability there have always been advocates for practices designed to foster reading pleasure and the development of lifelong readers (see, for example,
Miller and Gallagher). Robert Alter’s theoretical look at the “high fun” of reading literature (30) and Dennis J. Sumara’s exploration of what he calls intertextual desire are important reminders of the pleasures that reading can bring. However, the research community hasn’t pursued this line of inquiry. Although research on reading interests and motivation abounds, as Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold note, the investigation of “reading for pleasure has not been a research priority” (9).

**Why Is Pleasure Neglected?**

Why are the pleasures of reading so neglected? One reason may be because we tend to focus instead on the power of reading. Reading is certainly necessary to doing school, to the navigation of modern life, to functioning as an informed democratic citizen, to working in a knowledge economy. Using the Internet requires significant kinds of reading of various kinds of multimodal, multimedia, and hybridized texts working together. Being informed, especially about nuanced and complex issues, requires deep reading. Literacy is essential not only to accessing information and staying current, it is also essential to doing work in the world.

Janis Radway explores another possibility. In her 1986 article “Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor,” she argues that popular culture texts, the kinds of texts in which most readers take pleasure, are comforting and sustaining to their readers. This comfort, she contends, is not highly regarded as a goal of reading. Instead the charge so often leveled at mass-produced literature is not that it is bad or worthless, but that it is “capable of degrading, indeed, of corrupting those who enjoy it.” This charge, in turn, “is based on the further assumption that similar and simple texts fail to engage readers in creative, productive response to thoughts and ideas that challenge or call their own into question.” The reading experience of such books, critics contend, is characterized “by its passivity, by its complacency, and by its ability to promote the illusion that all is well in the best of all possible worlds” (7).

Radway’s data from her book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* demonstrates that such charges are unfounded. She found that “some romance reading at least manages to help women address and even minimally transform the conditions of their daily existence” (8). In other words, readers are not passive, but active and often transformative in the ways they transact with texts and use them. Society has, she argues, “failed to detect the essential complexity that can characterize the interaction between people and mass produced culture” (9)—including, we would argue, popular books for adolescents.

We think that research into the reading of popular texts, as well as into the experience of pleasure, might be lacking precisely because of the prejudices Radway describes. In keeping with the spirit of her research, we thought: Why not ask young people directly what they get from their reading of popular adolescent texts? Why not ask them how they experience and use these texts? And that is what we did.

**Our Method**

The students who participated in the study that we report here were eighth graders who nominated themselves as passionate readers of a kind of text...
that their parents and teachers tended to disapprove of. The students spanned a range of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, school achievement, and were split between boys and girls.

The students engaged in a series of four interviews. The first was about general reading interest and history. The second was about their love of their preferred genre. In the third we asked them to think aloud as they read favorite excerpts from their favorite texts. The fourth was a reflection on how their reading connected to their life and other interests.

After transcribing the interviews, we divided them into content units, segments of discourse designed to make a single point. Following Dewey, we then coded each content unit as to which of the four kinds of pleasure (play, intellectual, social, and work) was evidenced.

**Immersive Play Pleasure**

One of our most striking findings was the importance of the immersive pleasure of play. This is the pleasure that readers get from living through a story and getting totally lost in a book. John Dewey described this kind of pleasure as that which “puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond” (21). Jazzy described the pleasure of play succinctly: “I read it because I like it! I like living through the stories!” Rebecca made a similar comment: “[The characters] become like your friends. And you’re so much in their lives they’re like your best friends.” Even when students went on to describe other pleasures and functions of reading, they typically began by insisting that they read because it was playful, fun, enjoyable, and immersive. Paul put it this way: “And I read because I love it, I just get this joy reading. . . . It doesn’t have any restrictions to it.”

Our data demonstrate that the immersive pleasure of play is absolutely necessary to engaged reading, and is prerequisite to experiencing all the other pleasures, functions, and benefits of reading that could potentially follow. We conclude that this kind of pleasure needs to be overtly valued and celebrated, and kids need to be matched with books that immediately and sustainably provide this kind of immersive pleasure—both as part of the classroom project and as part of how they forge their own independent reading lives.

**Intellectual Pleasure**

The only one of the identified pleasures directly fostered to any degree in the schools where the study took place, or those where we ourselves have worked, is intellectual pleasure. As Dewey explains, there is a great pleasure that comes from working things through and figuring things out. Dewey labels the pleasure of figuring things out as intellectual pleasure, noting that, “When any one becomes interested in a problem as a problem, and in inquiry and learning for the sake of solving the problem, interest is distinctively intellectual” (83–84). Our student readers regularly experienced this kind of pleasure, and they sought out texts that would provide it to them.

Here’s Alex about what most thrills her as a reader:

> It’s that process of taking the information you have and coming up with possible solutions. Like, it’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.

This pleasure was often expressed in terms of figuring out what would happen next in a story—or even beyond the end of a story. As Helen explained,

> I like to think also about what the author could have written instead of what they did write, like different endings, like a dramatic part, I’ll stop and think about what could happen next, and then read and see what does happen. I just finished reading one, and it’s got a really cliffhanger ending, and I haven’t bought the next book yet, and I’m coming up with all these ideas about what happened next.

Michelle made a similar comment about the authors, such as J. K. Rowling, whom she most enjoys: “So, I like to see how they made the story happen.” At other times the intellectual pleasure consisted of figuring out character development, psychology, and motivation, in asking “What if?” and figuring out what would be different if setting or character changed in certain ways, and especially in thinking about themes and how the author worked to express these.
Intellectual pleasure seems to us to be fostered in some ways by common school practices: learning how to discern character, and to extract and justify themes, as just two examples. But the readers who talked most animatedly about intellectual pleasure also talked about how school interfered with it.

Here’s Callie:

[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.

Helen raised a similar concern:

When you pick up a book in school, you know that there’s supposed to be something you’re getting out of this, and that’s all you really think about, what does the teacher want me to understand from reading this. And then, when you read it by yourself, you don’t really know what you need to know about it, and it’s a little more spontaneous when it happens.

What’s also striking to us is the wide variety of texts that provided the intellectual pleasure schools so value. Some of the texts, from graphic novels to anime to romances, are not traditionally valued in school. But the kinds of intellectual pleasure our informants took from them certainly are.

Social Pleasure

Dewey explains that “social interest . . . is a strong special interest” (84). There were two ways in which our informants expressed social pleasures: the pleasure of using reading to connect to others and the pleasure of using reading to name and identify oneself.

Many of our informants read books because these texts were suggested by friends or family members. Many read books so that they could talk to other people about the book and compare responses. Here’s Callie again:

A lot of my friends, they started recommending these books. So I think the first real dark fiction book I read that I started realizing it was dark fiction and that I was into was Choke. All my friends were telling me I had to read this . . . I go to this writing group every Monday and they were telling me this. You’ve got to read it! And so I did because I wanted to talk to them about it and be part of the group doing that kind of reading.

The pleasure of naming and identifying yourself through reading was likewise salient in the data. Here’s Bennie: “I like to think of myself as a Harry Potter reader. As someone who has imagination and is a good friend. Who admires characters and people like Hermione for her friendship and Harry for his courage.” And Rebecca:

When I meet somebody and I’m holding a book, they’re like, “Oh, you like books?” I’m like “Yeah, I’m totally a bookworm.” That’s what I say. Everybody in my family is a bookworm so I’m a bookworm. That’s how I identify myself.

Psychologist Erik Erikson explains this impulse to identify oneself by arguing that the central psychosocial conflict of adolescence is identity versus role confusion. That is, adolescents have to make a place for themselves in the social worlds they inhabit. Doing so, he claims, depends on a confidence in one’s sameness and continuity that’s matched by a sameness and continuity in one’s meaning for others. Identity work, according to Erikson, has a social dimension.
Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith

The Pleasure of Work

A fourth pleasure is what Dewey calls the pleasure of work. Work pleasure is the pleasure one takes from using a text as a tool to accomplish something. For the most part, our readers weren’t thinking about instrumental ends such as college and career. They had much more immediate and personally compelling goals that involved writing, talking, understanding others and their perspectives, and using reading to get things done, to think and act in new ways.

Several of our informants, like Michelle, read to inform and shape their writing:

Well, I like reading books that I can write about. Like I’m very interested in writing government conspiracy stories, so I like to pull things from other books and I can kind of think okay, well this worked really well in this story so how can I do something like that in a book I am writing.

Helen focused on the work her reading did to inform her in debates and conversations:

I guess I just have a lot of the stuff, just sort of in my brain [from my reading] and then when that kind of subject comes up, they’ll need the information I have. And then, I can usually just tell people, “Oh, I just read this book, and it turns out yadda-yada” or sometimes I won’t even tell them I read the book. I’ll just say, “Did you know?” or “Oh I heard about that.”

Terry, like many other readers, read to understand other people and perspectives:

I like to understand people better than what I could do in real life. Like I can’t, as I said, stick a tube up your brain and know what you’re thinking. When people write books . . . , you can know what they were thinking at the time, what they recounted they were thinking.

The work to which students put their reading were of two fundamentally different sorts. On the one hand, they experienced the pleasure of work to accomplish practical ends, but on the other, they experienced the pleasure of work designed to engage in developing and actualizing themselves as human beings. Perhaps our most striking finding was that the informants drew deep pleasure, in all cases, 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 the psychologist Robert Johnson, “Inner work is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move toward integration of the total self—to actualizing the full possibilities of our human potential” (13).

Helen gave a typical response:

Well, I learn about myself through books when I imagine myself in the different situations . . . . You can 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.

Alex had this to say:

When I read I kind of find a character that I relate to the most. I kind of watch them through the book, just because having a character that’s so much of yourself, kind of following the character along through events and the problems and [unclear] so it kind of, the problem come up, and you kind of have that, you feel more like you can handle it. You’re thinking about where you connect. And also at the end, I usually do look back and think about it because I am very reflective when I read anyways.

Yet another example: a couple of girls in the study wore WWHD bracelets (What would Hermione [from the Harry Potter series] do?). They did this to remind themselves to be good friends during tense situations. As Bennie explained: “And then we would use Hermione to think with, and to figure out what to do to be a good friend.” These readers were clearly using their experience as readers of the Harry Potter series to do a profound kind of inner work. The novels provided an imaginative rehearsal for negotiating difficult situations.

Our takeaway: when given choice, kids tend to read what they need. Our informants gravitated toward books that challenged them both to
be better readers and to be better or more whole people, books that assisted them to outgrow themselves, that helped them consider new perspectives and see new possibilities in themselves and the world, that helped them to do functional work, to socialize and to identify themselves.

Our informants read for pleasure, but of kinds that go well beyond our conventional thinking. Our informants drew a hard line between school reading and “real reading” (to quote Callie). School reading was reading you had to do. Real reading was reading that helped you on your life’s journey, that immersed you in all four of the pleasures described here.

Conclusion: Recognizing and Leveraging the Power of Reading Pleasure

So what would have to happen for us to recognize the power of pleasure? Doing so would require us to encourage students to playfully enter a story world, for example, by using short, scriptless dramas that cast them as characters in the imaginary worlds we want them to inhabit. At the same time, we’d have to recognize that we need to avoid teaching that devalues play by focusing primarily on technical issues. Doing so would mean that we’d have to allow students to experience the intellectual pleasure of figuring out authentic problems instead of playing “guess what the teacher already knows.” Doing so would mean that we would have to allow students to use their reading to name themselves and to affiliate with others, something that can’t be done unless we provide plenty of opportunities for choice. And doing so would mean that we would have to provide opportunities for students to use their reading to do work in the world, perhaps by motivating social action and service learning projects (Wilhelm, Douglass, and Fry), and certainly by raising questions that encourage them to do the kind of inner work that might help them become the people they can be.

Reading pleasure has enormous power. We need to make it more central to our practice.

Works Cited


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READWITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this lesson from ReadWriteThink.org, students brainstorm texts that they have read recently and map their choices using an online tool to rate and make notes about them. Students then look for patterns connecting the texts that they enjoyed the most and those they enjoyed the least. Once they’ve analyzed their past readings, students complete a reading plan by first listing categories of books they want to read. Then they use booklists, book reviews, and other resources to create a wish list of books they hope to read in the future. http://bit.ly/1zl7wum