

# *What on Earth!* Magazine Engagement Study



BRITANNICA'S  
**What on Earth!**  
MAGAZINE



Impact report compiled by Kelly Ashley

Lecturer in Reading for Pleasure

The Open University

19 October 2023

## Introduction

The *What on Earth!* Magazine Engagement Study, conducted during a 12-week period between April and July 2023, explored the possibility of a children's monthly non-fiction magazine to increase reading engagement with Year 5 pupils. The aims, devised by partners What on Earth! Magazine (WoE), Sir Thomas Abney Primary School (Hackney, London) and The Open University (OU) were to:

- investigate how WoE magazine is able, with little or no assistance, to engage Year 5 children (particularly reluctant readers) and steer them towards becoming regular readers (those that are 'reading for pleasure');
- ascertain if WoE magazine is developing and growing informal discussion ('book talk') with families, teachers and school friends; and
- observe any difference between gendered engagement with the magazine materials.

The WoE study's focus on exploring avenues for increasing reader engagement is particularly relevant in light of recent results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which indicate that, in England, children's attitudes to reading are continuing to decline and are very low compared to their reading skills. In fact, one-quarter of pupils in England indicated that they 'do not' like reading and are not choosing to read in their free time. (Mullis et al., 2023:101)

Sir Thomas Abney Primary School was interested in investigating how WoE magazine might be used to increase Year 5 pupils' reading engagement, especially for the most disengaged. Magazines were not regularly used as part of the wider reading curriculum in school, nor were there current magazines available for pupils to read in the school library; therefore, this study presented an opportunity to introduce a new type of reading material to pupils. Teachers were interested to see if the inclusion of magazines would have a significant impact on reader engagement and the prevalence of reading for pleasure (RfP), especially for those children who are not regular readers.

Reading for pleasure (RfP) is defined as reading which is volitional and agentic – child and choice-led. The role of the teacher is to support the development of a reading culture in the classroom and school, that which encourages the development of authentic, reader to reader relationships, leading to book recommendations, informal discussion and draws on pupils' interests and reading choices. RfP is stated explicitly in England curriculum policy, as a core aim of the English National Curriculum - 'pupils should develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information' (DfE, 2014:13). RfP is also a central element of the DfE Reading Framework, providing guidance for schools on how to align their literacy provision around research-informed practices - 'It is impossible to mandate that pupils read for pleasure, but teachers can inspire pupils and engage them in reading widely' (DfE, 2023:91). Volitional, choice-led readers have access to myriad benefits of RfP including increased attainment in literacy and numeracy (Sullivan and Brown, 2013), improved vocabulary and general knowledge (McQuillan, 2019) and enhanced reader to reader relationships (Cremin et al., 2014).

WoE magazine initiated this study in order to investigate how this particular publication could impact on reader engagement, motivation and discussion (described here as 'book talk'). WoE magazine targets a readership of ages 7-14 and offers exclusively non-fiction content for readers.

The core aim of this UK-based monthly publication is to engage a wide audience by stimulating natural curiosity.

## Process

The 12-week WoE Magazine Engagement Study took place with **35, Year 5 (ages 9-10) pupils from two classes** - 19 boys, 14 girls and 2 pupils preferring not to indicate a gender. **Class A, described in this study as the ‘guided’ group**, consisted of 18 pupils. This group received 20-30 minutes of light-touch, weekly guidance from the WoE magazine representative and their class teacher to support them as they explored the magazine. **Class B, described as the ‘non-guided’ group**, consisted of 17 pupils. This group also had 20-30 minutes of weekly class time dedicated to reading the magazine, however, this time was pupil-led, not guided by the teacher. All Year 5 pupils received a new WoE magazine every 4 weeks during the project (one per month) and they were encouraged to take the publication home to share with parents and carers.



Surveys for pupils, families and teachers were designed to collect evidence related to project aims. The quantitative data obtained included insight into pupil’s engagement with reading and the frequency of reading and ‘book talk’ taking place at home and at school. Additional qualitative data was gathered through survey analysis (and followed up through focus group interviews) to ascertain specific preference points within the magazine (e.g., particular sections of preference, types of reading preferred) and whether or not there were gendered differences.

- **Pupil Entry Surveys** (April 2023) – Sample size of 35 (19 boys, 14 girls and 2 pupils who preferred not to indicate gender)
- **Pupil Exit Surveys** (July 2023) – Sample size of 34 (18 boys, 14 girls and 2 pupils who preferred not to indicate gender)
- **Family Entry Surveys** (April 2023) – Sample size of 16 (12 from families of boys, 4 from families of girls)
- **Family Exit Surveys** (July 2023) – Sample size of 13 (8 from families of boys, 5 from families of girls)
- **Teacher Entry Surveys** (April 2023) – Sample size of 3

**Pupil Focus Group interviews** were conducted at the mid-point (May 2023) and the end point (July 2023) with 3 boys and 3 girls from Class A (‘guided group’) and 3 boys and 3 girls from Class B (‘non-guided group’). Pupil interviews were conducted by the OU researcher via Zoom (recorded and transcribed) with the support of the WoE magazine representative who was present in school with the pupils during interviews. Pupil Focus Group questions centred on how attitudes and perceptions of reading were changing as a result of magazine access and provided additional, qualitative information to triangulate findings from surveys. Pupils were also encouraged to comment on

aspects of their reading that were most enjoyable at home and school (or not), why and how magazine reading stimulated curiosity and further interest in reading (or not).

**Teacher and senior leader focus group interviews** were conducted at the end of the project (July 2023). This additional data collection method was incorporated to triangulate findings from pupil and family survey data. Exit interviews with teachers and senior leaders were conducted by the WoE magazine representative. Scripted questions (provided by the OU researcher) focused on observed changes in pupils' attitudes, dispositions and engagement with reading throughout the project. Teachers also commented on their observations of 'book talk' and engagement with the magazine by parents and carers. Teacher and senior leader responses were audio recorded and transcribed.

## Findings

***Pupils' overall reading engagement increased from the start (86%) to the end (91%) of the project. A small number of pupils (12%) had access to magazines at home at the start of the project; however, teachers wanted to increase pupils' access to magazines to widen their understanding of the range of purposes of reading (beyond library books).***

Pupil Entry Survey data showed that 86% of pupils 'love reading' or thought 'it's ok.' 4 girls (28% of all girls surveyed) and 1 boy (5% of all boys surveyed) indicated that they were 'not bothered' or 'did not like' reading. 26% of pupils said they would like to see more non-fiction and magazines in school (closely followed by requests for comics, manga and graphic novels). Only 12% of pupils had magazines at home at the start of the project (3 boys and 1 girl) and teachers indicated that magazines were used in school 'a few times a year' or 'never.'

Pupil Exit Survey data showed that 91% of pupils said they either 'love reading' or 'think it's ok,' showing improved attitudes for 2 pupils (boys) in the class by the end of the project. 1 girl (7% of all girls surveyed) and 1 boy (5% of all boys surveyed) indicated that they were still 'not bothered' or 'do not like' reading. There was also an increase from 29% (entry survey) to 35% of pupils who indicated that they 'love reading' (as opposed to saying 'it's ok') on the exit surveys.

Teacher Entry Surveys showed 'good' knowledge of children's reading habits and preferences in school. Teachers reflected that they would like to see more 'current magazines' available in school as part of pupils' reading repertoire, but that 'cost,' 'lack of curriculum links,' and 'lack of age-appropriate publications' were reasons why magazines had not been used prior to this project.

Teacher A (guided group) comments on how magazines helped to extend pupils' reading repertoire-

*'At the start, very few children understood that they could access reading or develop reading through magazines. There's very little of that in our school library. Very few of them have exposure to magazine subscriptions or go to a newsagent to buy a magazine. Their understanding of how they consume reading is through books in the library or books that are at home. It's been a nice, other, added layer to how they can consume reading and develop knowledge, as well.'*

***There was not a significant difference between boys' and girls' engagement with the magazine through this project; however, there was an indication of increased interest in non-fiction reading material overall as a result of pupils' interaction with WoE magazine.***

Pupil Entry Surveys found that 26% of pupils would like to have more non-fiction reading material in school whilst 14% did not know what kind of books they would like to see more of, given the choice. 14% stated that they would also like more non-fiction reading material at home, however, 20% would have chosen to have more fiction and 37% wanted more access to comics and graphic novels at home. There was not a single mention of non-fiction reading at home on Family Entry Surveys. 100% of parents surveyed stated that pupils read either fiction or comics at home at the start of the project.



Pupil Exit Surveys indicated that 53% of pupils preferred non-fiction as their top reading choice in school (an increase of 27%). 29% of pupils specifically mentioned WoE magazine as their favourite reading choice in school by the end of the project. Interestingly, only 18% indicated that non-fiction was their top reading choice at home (12% chose magazines), showing an increase of only 4%. 'Story books' (fiction) was still the top reading choice (44%)

closely followed by comics and graphic novels (26%). Family Exit Surveys reflected a change in home reading preferences with 38% of families stating that non-fiction was now included in pupils' reading choices at home (an increase of 38%).

Pupil Focus Group comments reflect an increased interest in non-fiction content. 'I liked the arts and crafts part. I like the quizzes, too' (Focus Pupil E, girl). 'I like reading things that shock me, like in the What on Earth section when the two base jumpers on the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. It's just surprising how I would never do that and they did that' (Focus Pupil B, boy).

Teacher A (guided group) noticed changes in pupils' reading behaviour as pupils' preferences shifted more towards non-fiction content-

*'I've noticed a change in their reading behaviour as a result of using the magazine. I've also noticed that children are coming back from the library with more non-fiction texts now. This could be a knock-on effect of the magazine. Prior to using the magazine, I was looking at the kind of books that children get out from the library. It was predominantly fiction texts but I've noticed a bit of a shift there. They've found facts about history or geography in the magazine and then looked for books in the library that loosely link. They are willing to absorb this factual knowledge which has been quite nice.'*

Teacher B (non-guided group) also observed behaviour differences and linked this to pupils' changing engagement overall, as readers. 'They read the magazine differently than they read their library books or material for a lesson. They interact with it differently – more positively, more enthusiastically.'

**Teachers noted some differences in the way in which boys and girls accessed magazine content during the project. There was not a marked difference in the engagement levels of boys and girls; however, there appeared to be a difference in how boys and girls accessed content when reading independently. It is unclear whether or not the way in which pupils accessed the magazine was influenced by the teacher 'guiding' the weekly article exploration.**

Teacher A (guided group) noted gendered differences in access-

*'I think the girls have accessed the magazine in a slightly different way. They don't always gravitate towards the main features, but they are interested in the photography and quizzes. I've noticed that they want to engage in that a bit more. I've noticed the boys move towards the central feature of the magazine, the middle pages that are around that.'*

This group was guided by the teacher in each weekly lesson, exploring a central magazine article feature each time. It is unclear whether or not boys were interested in this central feature as this is what had been chosen/ directed by the adult or whether this was their true reading preference.

Teacher B (non-guided group) spotted differences in gendered engagement. 'The girls are quicker to explore the articles than the boys have been. The boys in this class have got to the articles... with a few exceptions, there are a few boys who will go straight for some articles of interest. The bulk of the boys in the class will do all the puzzles.' It is interesting to note that this group was not guided by the teacher. The articles, features and games that pupils chose to read each week were of their own interest.



When asked about which part of the magazine was their favourite in the mid-point Pupil Focus Groups, there was a mixed response from boys and girls. 'I liked the *Eureka* part (fun facts about different topics)' (Focus Pupil H, boy). 'I like the art sections' (Focus Pupil J, girl). 'I liked the quizzes and I did them with my family' (Focus Pupil K, girl). 'I liked the *Snap It* part (fun photographs)' (Focus Pupil L, girl). 'My favourite part was the *Factopia* (fun facts on a range of topics)' (Focus Pupil I, boy).

**Survey data indicated that the content or topic of magazine articles was a key driver of which material pupils chose to engage with in the magazines as opposed to visual appeal, graphic design, photography or layout. Pupils did show an interest in some articles that were linked to recent curriculum study; however, this wasn't the prime reason for choosing to read a particular section of the magazine.**

Rather than gendered engagement, or the feature or layout itself, pupils tended to be driven by their interest in the topic. Pupil Exit Survey data showed that 62% of pupils preferred the 'games and puzzles' provided in WoE magazine, whilst 33% preferred the 'facts and photographs.' Those who preferred not to indicate gender chose games and puzzles as their preference (5%). 67% of all boys surveyed and 64% of all girls surveyed preferred 'games and puzzles' as their preferred content, whilst 33% of all boys surveyed and 35% of all girls surveyed showed a preference for facts and

photographs. This indicates that there was not a significant gendered preference of specific magazine content for this group.

Parent Exit Surveys echoed these findings, indicating that ‘puzzles and games’ were the most popular sections read by their children at home. 77% of parents, however, indicated the ‘facts and quizzes’ were their own personal favourite part of the magazine to read.

End project Pupil Focus Group comments reflected a range of interests with regard to magazine content. ‘I liked reading about all of the different facts’ (Focus Pupil D, boy). ‘I really liked reading about the first 3D printing of the space rocket’ (Focus Pupil A, boy). ‘I liked reading about the national flags of each country. I also thought it was very interesting about how they used spy pigeons in the Second World War. I mean, how could they put a camera on a pigeon and make them fly over military bases and take photos? We learned a bit about World War 2 in history lessons’ (Focus Pupil B, boy).

Teacher A (guided group) noticed that most pupils were interested in puzzles and games at first, however, preferences appeared to shift over time. ‘When thinking about individual children that I’ve observed throughout our time using the magazine, I’d say, predominantly there was gravitation towards the puzzles and the games at first. That was definitely true of the individual children I’m thinking of. But over time I did start noticing them gravitating towards the articles a bit more.’ It would be interesting to explore this finding further, considering whether or not prolonged exposure to the magazine changed or widened pupils’ preferences.



***The introduction of the magazine did not appear to increase engagement or ‘reading for pleasure’ for those pupils who were already keen readers; however, there was some indication that the magazine engaged those who were less interested in choosing to read, increasing the overall reading enjoyment for these pupils.***

At the end of the project, Focus Pupils were asked about how the magazine affected their interest in reading, overall. ‘I don’t think it (the magazine) made me more interested since I was already really interested in reading. I like to read books that don’t have pictures and are quite long like action and adventure books’ (Focus Pupil E, girl). ‘I was already really interested in reading so it was hard to make me more interested’ (Focus Pupil B, boy).

Whilst pupils themselves didn’t indicate that their interest in reading had changed, teachers did notice a marked change in pupils’ preferences, behaviours and reading engagement as a result of interaction with WoE magazine -

*‘There’s almost an element of being ‘tricked’ into reading. They are reading for pleasure, but because it’s so tailored towards their age group and their demographic that they feel it’s not the same as conventional, library-book reading. That’s been quite nice. I’ve noticed a steady engagement in the magazine and that’s been reflective of the weekly watches I do in class, as well’ (Teacher A, guided group).*

*‘For children who are reluctant readers, it’s been really apparent that they don’t have the same association with the school work aspect, the chore aspect, the need to do it aspect of reading. They are always very keen to open that magazine. To see some children where it’s very difficult to get them to open any literature, to see them desperate to open it and find particular bits... for these reluctant readers, there’s been a noticeable change in enthusiasm for reading’ (Teacher B, non-guided group).*

**Over time, access to the magazine provided opportunities for pupils to develop stronger reader-reader networks. Access to shared reading material over an extended period of time provided opportunities for readers to engage in more informal ‘book talk’ in school, unprompted by the teacher.**



When asked on the Pupil Entry Survey, ‘Do you ever chat about what you have chosen to read with others in school?’ - 34% of pupils said no. Of the 66% who said that they did talk about their reading with others in school, 59% said they chat to ‘friends,’ whilst 17% said they chat to their ‘teacher’ about their reading. Teacher Entry Survey responses reflected that teachers think that all pupils talk about their reading ‘daily’ or ‘weekly’ in school. 63% of pupils responded that they chat with others at home about their reading, with 40% chatting to family members and 31% chatting to friends. Exit Pupil Survey data did not reflect a significant change in the

amount of book talk taking place at home and school; however, teachers noticed a marked difference in pupils’ social reading engagement as a result of magazine interaction in school.

Teacher A (guided group) notes how more reluctant readers used the magazine as a shared tool for more frequent book talk with peers-

*‘I also noticed in a few individual children, whereby they are reluctant readers and didn’t always want to do solo reading, when they then had the opportunity to explore the magazine as part of a group - those children I’m thinking of mainly boys, low self-esteem readers - they did seem to want to gravitate towards that. All of those boys formed a small group and they would navigate, what started off as games, and then they would navigate articles together. I did notice more of a collective with those children that were more reluctant to do independent reading in class, as well.’*

Teacher B (non-guided group) also noticed these emerging social behaviours and ‘book talk’ in the classroom-

*‘They certainly talk to each other while reading the magazine. Often when they are reading, they are doing ‘quiet’ reading. There are very good reasons why that’s useful at certain times. It’s also very apparent that there’s a really nice atmosphere in the room when they*



*are talking. The fact that they are all reading similar things, that's much more achievable when you have something like a magazine instead of 20 different novels being read. They do talk to each other more about what they are reading more when they are reading the magazine.*

A member of the school's senior leadership team also noticed changes in reading behaviours. 'I've seen them looking through the magazines and using the magazines through the school day. That's been really powerful, I think, in lots of ways, seeing them using the magazine outside of that specific curriculum time' (Deputy Headteacher).

***Whilst all pupils were given a copy of the magazine to take home during the 12-week project, not all shared this with family members. For those who did share the magazine at home, positive reader to reader relationships and book talk were developed. Pupils will have continued access to the magazine at home and in school during the 2023-24 academic year.***

Exit Pupil Surveys showed that 92% of pupils were reading WoE magazine at home - 15% reading 'every day,' 59% '2-3 times per week,' 18% 'once a week.' Only 8% commented that their reading of the magazine was 'not very often.' Pupil Exit Surveys also positively showed that 18% more pupils were choosing to read more frequently at home by the end of the project.

Family Entry Surveys showed that 66% of parents thought that having a magazine at home would increase pupils' enthusiasm for reading. Family Exit Surveys indicated that 83% of pupils were reading regularly at home (from a range of materials). 54% of pupils shared the magazine with 'siblings or other family members' at home and 38% were sharing with 'friends.' 69% of parents thought that their child's curiosity, interest and enthusiasm for reading had increased and 38% thought that the amount of talk at home about reading had also increased since having the magazine. 100% of families and pupils surveyed would like to continue to receive WoE magazine at home.

Focus Pupils reflected on their experiences of reading and sharing the magazine at home in end of project focus group interviews. 'I liked sharing the magazine with my mum and dad. I quizzed them. They said it was really cool and my dad sometimes reads it when he goes to bed' (Focus Pupil A, boy). 'I like reading at home, basically like every day I like to read this and also books about fantasy and magic and stuff like that' (Focus Pupil C, girl). 'My dad has read some of the magazine... the AI computer programming part that reads people's minds. My brother might want to read it next time' (Focus Pupil D, boy). 'I did bring the magazine home, but I didn't really share it with anyone' (Focus Pupil E, girl). 'One time I chatted with my mum about the Pokemon part' (Focus Pupil G, boy).

There was mixed feedback with regard to teachers' knowledge of pupils' engagement with the magazine at home. 'There have not been that many children mentioning sharing at home, but there have been a few' (Teacher A, guided group). 'They were very keen to take it home. I haven't heard from them what they've done with it at home so I'm not quite sure. They seem very keen to take it home. I suspect that's to do with wanting to show someone at home what this cool thing is they've been doing at school. Whether or not they've shared it with anyone, I'm not sure' (Teacher B, non-guided group). Exploring how engagement with the magazine has changed over time would be an interesting area to investigate further with this group, especially as they will continue to have access to the magazine subscription throughout their time in Year 6.

## Conclusions

The What on Earth Magazine Engagement Study aimed to explore how WoE magazine could be used to increase reader engagement whilst also growing informal discussion ('book talk') in school and at home. Through this project, pupils were given the opportunity to deepen their access to 'wide reading' (DfE, 2014:13) as they read material beyond what was currently available in the school library, extending their understanding and interest in the wide range and purposes of reading.

As this was a small-scale study, with a relatively small number of pupils and families sampled, further investigation would need to take place to test the validity and reliability of findings. The preferences of pupils noted in the study may not be reflective of the wider preferences of this age group; however, this does give an indication of how the **preferences of this particular group of pupils changed over time, as a result of engagement with WoE magazine**. It would be interesting to study emerging pupil preferences in a further study to ascertain whether these interests continue to develop over time with prolonged access to the magazine in school and at home.

One of the most powerful findings was the **informal and social nature of reading that emerged as pupils started to talk to each other about aspects of the magazine that they had read, strengthening reader to reader relationships in both classrooms**. When 'reading for pleasure,' avid, volitional readers often choose to informally talk about their reading choices with others. This regular opportunity for informal book-talk within the social reading environment is a powerful force for fostering reader volition (Cremin et al, 2014; Laurenson et al., 2015). Future investigation should involve closer observation of pupils' specific reading conversations (not just those led by teachers). What different kinds of conversation does magazine-reading trigger? What is the nature and value of this type of talk in the primary classroom and how does this impact engagement?

The particular power of reading, sharing and discussing non-fiction material is also referenced in work by Alexander and Jarman (2018) who uncovered the power of several children looking together at non-fiction material which stimulates talk about 'factoids' - small pieces of information that are easily read and remembered. It would be interesting to see how book talk opportunities stimulated from magazine discussion feed into other aspects of pupils reading over time, both in school and at home.

Ultimately, 'reading is a social act... listening to and engaging in reading experiences involves other people' (Cremin et al., 2022:58). **This social nature of reading emerged as a particularly powerful catalyst for engaging disengaged readers in this study**. Pupils' access to the magazine over an extended period of time appeared to be **important for stimulating reader engagement both at home and in school**. The emergence of social environments feeding into home reading practices were not as apparent, but this might have been due to the short time frame of the study.

The Headteacher reflects on the positive impact of pupils' participation in the study, 'The children at STA are huge fans and it has been fantastic to see them enjoying reading and learning so much and sharing their enthusiasm with each other.'

## References

Alexander, J. and Jarman, R. (2018) The pleasures of reading non-fiction. *Literacy: UKLA*, 52.2, pp. 78-85.

Cremin, T. (2023) Reading and Motivation: Focusing on Disengaged Readers. *Teaching English: NATE*, Issue 32, pp. 32-36.

Cremin, T., Hendry, H., Rodriguez Leon, L., and Kucirkova, N. (2022) (eds) *Reading Teachers: Nurturing Reading for Pleasure*, London: Routledge.

Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, F., Powell, S. and Safford, K. (2014). *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure*, London and NY: Routledge.

DfE (2023) *The Reading Framework*, London: DfE

DfE (2014) *The National Curriculum Programmes of Study*, London:DfE

Laurenson, P., McDermott, K., Sadleir, K. & Meade, D. (2015) From national policy to classroom practice: promoting reading for pleasure in post-primary English classrooms. *English in Education*, 49.1, pp. 5-25.

McQuillan, J. (2019) [The Inefficiency of Vocabulary Instruction](#). *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 11.4, pp. 309-318.

Mullis, I. V. S., von Davier, M., Foy, P., Fishbien, B., Reynolds, K. A., Wry, E. (2023) *PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading*. Boston College, [TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center](#).

Sullivan, A. and Brown, M. (2013) [Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading](#). CLS Working Paper 2013/10. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies

**For more information about the work of The Open University's Reading for Pleasure team,**

**visit <https://ourfp.org/>**

**or connect with us through social media  [@OpenUni\\_RfP](#)**