

## Reading for Pleasure and Empathy: Making the Connection

By Lauren Bull

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Empathic thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have the powerful potential to enrich the lives of young adults who practice them, as well as the lives of others with whom they interact. What has often been less certain is which methods and means are best for encouraging adolescents to develop this empathy in the first place.

For those of us who formed friendships with books long ago, the answer readily springs to our lips: *Why, reading, of course! As deeply, widely, and diversely as one can!* After all, what better way for teens to learn how to practice perspective taking and emotional sharing than by diving into the life and mind of a story's protagonist, fictional though they may be. Despite the seeming obviousness of this conclusion, however, the link between teens, reading for pleasure, and their development of empathy has remained somewhat fuzzy in the literature to date.

Reading in general has long been associated with a host of benefits, like cognitive gains and literacy skills development. Some researchers, however, have argued that the kind and quality of the reading affects its impact on the reader. Reading for pleasure is one such example.

### *Reading for Pleasure*

Much like empathy itself, reading for pleasure is more often discussed than it is specifically defined. A report on behalf of The Reading Agency in the UK defines it as “[n]on goal oriented transactions with texts as a way to spend time and for entertainment” (BOP Consulting [BOP], 2015, p. 6). In other definitions, the phrase is used “to describe a type and purpose of reading: reading which is...voluntary, marked by reader choice, of a text of interest to the reader” (Duncan, 2010, para. 2.1.1). Duncan (2010) makes the further distinction that reading for pleasure is not defined by “even whether the reading ends up actually being pleasurable or enjoyable, but rather by the original purpose of the reading” (para. 2.1.1).

Even given this lack of agreement about a hard-and-fast definition, such studies all provide consistent evidence that there are strong cognitive benefits associated with reading for pleasure, including enhanced vocabulary, sharpened critical thinking skills, and improved academic performance (Duncan, 2010; Howard, 2011; BOP, 2015; Galaxy Quick Reads, 2015), even when compared against mandatory or purpose-driven reading.

### *Social & Emotional Benefits*

What have typically been less-discussed in the research literature are the numerous emotional and social gains linked to the practice as well. One of the reasons for this omission may be that, as Duncan (2010) points out, personal development, in terms of things like attitudes, habits, and skills, can be extremely difficult to measure.

Nevertheless, many have persuasively linked reading for pleasure to increases in readers' self-esteem, confidence, communication skills, and interpersonal competencies (Duncan, 2010; Howard, 2011, BOP, 2015; Galaxy Quick Reads, 2015; Gray, Kiemle, Davis, & Billington, 2015). There is strong evidence to support the idea as well that those who engage in this kind of reading are provided with a sense of "connectedness'-of being connected to a language, a culture, an age...a group of people within a book, [or] a group of people who've read the book" (Duncan, 2010, para. 3.2.5).

### *Empathy (or the lack thereof)*

Much of the research to date discussing the social and emotional benefits of reading for pleasure does not explicitly mention empathy, even though elements of the concept itself are explored. These discussions have also generally revolved around the reading habits of either children or adults, rather than adolescents more specifically. As a result, while there are studies that draw a connection between teens' development of empathy and reading for pleasure, the list is short, and reveals many gaps in our current understanding of this phenomenon.

Across these studies, empathy is often simply mentioned as one of many benefits of teens choosing to read for pleasure (Howard, 2011; BOP, 2015). This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, none of the researchers provide a clear definition for the word when they use it, leaving it up to readers' individual interpretations. As revealed earlier in this issue, empathy is an inherently complex and multifaceted concept, made up of both cognitive and affective components, for which there is no singular standardized or shared understanding (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Decety & Cowell, 2015). For this reason, it is impossible to assume consensus among the findings of those studying teens and empathy, as they may be describing altogether distinct experiences.

At the same time, studies discussing reading for pleasure are often vague about exactly how this activity contributes to young adults' practice of empathy (BOP, 2015). Again, because of the intricate nature of empathy, as well as its subjectivity, this omission suggests the researchers' shallow understanding of what it is and how it develops in the first place.

Finally, there is the issue of currency. Investigations that arguably draw the clearest connection between teens, reading for pleasure, and empathy, like Howard's study with adolescent Nova Scotian readers, are over half a decade old, and based on research that even at the time of the research was significantly older. Furthermore, most of the literature published on the subject of reading for pleasure and empathy has taken place in the UK, and may not necessarily reflect the realities and responses of Canadian young adults today. Since this research is often conducted by private and not-for-profit organizations, accessing the information contained in their reports can also present a significant challenge.

### *What it all means*

In this sense, the topic of young adults, reading for pleasure, and empathy becomes something of a conundrum. On the one hand, many of us believe intuitively and experientially that reading is closely tied to empathic practices like perspective taking and emotional sharing, and that enjoying what one reads only strengthens this connection. On the other hand, support from the literature is definitively lacking, in terms of both its content and currency. While this insufficiency of research does not necessarily make our convictions less valid, it does indicate that there is work to be done. As we build a clearer understanding for ourselves of what it means to practice empathy, we need to ensure that we are equipping and encouraging our peers and colleagues, just as much as the young adults we serve, to do the same. Only then will we start to see a shift in the literature towards exploring what we already feel in our hearts to be true.

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