The Benefits of Reading for Pleasure, and How to Instill a Lifelong Love of Reading in Students

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Introduction:

Reading is an integral part of life in academic and professional settings; however, its reach goes far beyond work and school. Words and phrases are everywhere: at the grocery store, on social media, in shopping malls, and on highways. For example, while driving, one can expect to see a variety of signs with words, including stop signs, street name signs, and guide signs. Reading is a skill people need to function in their daily lives; but, there is a vast difference between merely reading to get by with daily tasks versus reading for comprehension, understanding, and pleasure. In schools, students are expected not only to be able to read, but to have skills that enable them to converse and write about texts. Yet, this is a request that can be a burden: some students simply find reading assignments boring. On the other hand, there are students who are enamored with reading. These students not only participate in classroom readings, but they read for fun outside of school. What is the difference between a student who is disinterested in reading and a student who is fully engaged with it? Why do some students groan at the thought of reading, while others cannot seem to get enough of it?

Benefits of Reading for Pleasure:

Reading for pleasure[1] is defined as a hobby that is freely chosen. This type of reading is not forced upon the reader; for example, a student reading because a book was assigned for a class is not reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure looks like a child choosing to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* before bedtime, without being prompted by a parent or teacher to read it.

Researchers in the field of education began closely studying the effects of reading for pleasure, primarily its effects on cognitive development, in the early 2000s. As research expands, there is now a greater focus on how reading habits impact academic performance in K-12

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[1] As noted in the survey, audiobooks, e-magazines, and other digital texts also qualified as reading for this research.

settings. The findings overwhelmingly suggest that students are more successful in the classroom if they read for pleasure outside of school. I was not able to find a single study that presented disadvantages, in any context, of reading for pleasure. These findings show how reading should be prioritized in the classroom because of its expansive benefits for students.

To begin, reading for pleasure is linked to students having improved vocabulary, grammatical, and writing skills, in addition to higher levels of reading comprehension and engagement in classrooms (Sullivan; Ho; Gauder). Reading for pleasure is also attributed to better academic performance not only in English settings, but in math, science, and history, as well (Sullivan; Miller). Reading increases cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills (Wilhem). The more time students spend reading on their own, the higher their levels of reading achievement in classrooms (Da Naegehel). In fact, children who regularly read for pleasure are at more of an advantage in school than even children who were raised by parents with graduate degrees (Sullivan).

In addition to a student's increased success in school, reading for pleasure also leads to emotional and social growth. Reading introduces students to new ideas (Sullivan), provides new perspectives on the world (Kucirkova; Da Naeghel), and develops empathy in readers (Kucirkova). Reading is therapeutic, as it can be used as a way to relax or cope with personal problems (Aubry; Nell). Aubry explains, "In search of comfort and companionship, [readers] expect novels to validate their grievances, insecurities, and anxieties while confirming their sense of themselves as deep, complicated, emotionally responsive human beings" (1). Fiction especially allows people to escape from their realities and enter into characters' lives and worlds (Wilhem; Wolf). Wolf, who looks at the types of pleasures stemming from reading, says, "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" (27). Wolf adds that reading deepens the human experience: "The deep-reading brain is both a real, flesh-and-cranial-bone reality and a metaphor for the continuous expansion of human intelligence and virtue" (205). In essence, reading not only improves cognition, but it also builds emotional intelligence and empathy. Reading for pleasure does more than just provide entertainment. It enables people to better understand themselves and others.

There is no debate among educators that reading is beneficial to a person; there is only debate as to how best incorporate reading in the classroom. Some researchers, like Cantrell, believe students benefit the most from a set curriculum for reading; however, I argue that teachers should use simple, habitual methods in the classroom to cultivate a love of reading in students. Reading for pleasure and improving reader engagement in the classroom are usually studied as separate entities, but my research combines them. Reading for pleasure refers to a person's desire to want to read (without being prompted by an authority figure), while reading engagement refers to how closely people pay attention to a text while they are reading it. Since it is clear that reading for pleasure is beneficial in the classroom, there needs to be more research for teachers on the best practices for reading instruction. Furthermore, my findings go beyond K-12 settings, as I collected data from undergraduate and retirement communities. These age groups were selected because they could reflect on their time in K-12 school and discuss which classroom practices influenced their present reading habits. Although my research was focused primarily on what teachers can do, my findings also reveal ways that parents can cultivate a love of reading at home. Students should see teachers who value reading, but they should also come

home to family members that value reading. Learning is interconnected between schools and home.

When teachers are equipped with a knowledge and understanding of what factors make students want to read, they become capable of fostering lifelong readers in the classroom.

Participants:

My research on reading habits included two different populations. The first population was undergraduate students at the University of Lynchburg, a small liberal arts college in Lynchburg, Virginia. Students were recruited through an email, which included an informed consent form and link to the survey via Google Forms. The email was sent to all Lynchburg undergraduates, so approximately 1640 students were invited to participate. No compensation was provided, and participants under 18 were not allowed to take the survey. Since this was an online survey, participants were required to have Internet access and a smart device, like an IPhone or laptop. The University of Lynchburg has those resources available to all students. From the university, 65 students between the ages of 18-25 chose to participate.

The second population was The Summit, a retirement community, in Lynchburg, VA. Participants were invited, through a weekly newsletter, to fill out a print survey. The survey included an informed consent form, and the survey's questions were the same as those sent to the university students. No compensation was provided for The Summit, and participants had to be at least 50 years of age to participate. Since this survey was not online, participants only needed a writing utensil to complete the survey. There were 25 members of The Summit community who chose to participate.

Both surveys were completely voluntary and anonymous. There was no personal information collected on participants, except for their general age range. Participants did not

have to share their exact age. They only had to check a box verifying that they were the correct age to participate in the survey. Since the focus of this research is not on gender or race differences in reading, I did not feel it necessary for participants to share anything more than their general age range.

Results from The University of Lynchburg:

Frequency of Reading

Of those Lynchburg students surveyed, 36.5% said they read for pleasure 1-2 hours per week. Only 9.5% of the population said they read more than 6 hours a week. On the other hand, 28.6% said they do not engage in any amount of leisurely reading. Three participants wrote that they have no time to read during the school year due to homework, but they enjoy reading over breaks and in the summer. These answers were important in revealing reasons as to why college students may not have enough time to read for fun.

Interests in Reading

The power of social influence and preference was focused on in this survey. When participants were asked if they were more likely to read a book if other peers and/or friends were talking about it, 87.3% of students said yes. Over 50% of participants said they have also participated in a book club or social gathering related to books during their lives (albeit the question did not account for if attending the event was mandatory or optional). When participants shared reasons why they like reading, one participant said, "If my friends have read [a book], then we can talk about it together and deepen our friendship." On the other hand, one influence that did not seem as far reaching on participants was literature as films. When asked if participants would be more likely to read a book if there was a movie based on it, 57.1% of them said no.

Participants were also asked if they would rather read fiction or nonfiction: 81% of participants chose fiction. Many students wrote that they enjoy getting lost in fantasy worlds, escaping from reality, and entering into characters' unique lives through reading fiction. One student wrote, "It is the healthiest form of escape there is!"

Influence of Family

Although the question about childhood experiences with reading was optional, all University of Lynchburg participants chose to answer it. The results were that 87.3% of participants had fond memories of being read to by their parents or teachers. Additionally, 76.2% of participants grew up in a home where their parents or siblings read for fun. These findings raise the question: do these past experiences influence students' willingness to read today?

Classroom Experiences

Since my overarching purpose of this research is to determine best practices for reading in the classroom, one of the survey questions was heavily focused on reading practices in school. When given a list of activities students found enjoyable, 85.7% of them said they liked being able to choose what book they used for an assignment. Discussing books in small groups with classmates had similar feedback, with 85% of participants agreeing. Creative assignments related to reading (such as writing a play, making character social media profiles, or designing art based on book themes) was selected by 52.4% of participants. Reading multiple types of texts (ex. poems, graphic novel, plays) was also popular, with 50.8% of participants saying they enjoyed a break from the traditional novel. Additionally, 38.1% of participants said they liked being read to aloud by a teacher. These findings support the best classroom practices for reading that are presented later in this paper.

Free Time and Social Media

When asked if participants wish they had more time to read for fun, 85.7% of them said yes. However, 65.1% of them said if they only had 30 minutes of free time per day, they would choose social media over reading a book. Additionally, 82% of students said they believe social media negatively impacts how much time they spend reading. On the other hand, some participants said they like reading because it is a break from social media. One student wrote, "I spend a lot of time looking at screens and it's nice to have an activity that is relaxing and not related to screens." Another person added, "Reading is more productive than being on my phone." Another participant's comment was, "My eyes don't hurt [when I read] like they do when staring at my phone."

Results from The Summit Community:

Frequency of Reading

Of the 25 participants from The Summit, 64% said they read 6 hours or more during the week. Following that was 32% who said they read 4-6 hours a week. The remaining participants do not read for fun. Whereas university students said they did not have enough time to engage in pleasure reading because of school, many survey takers from The Summit attributed being retired to having more time to read.

Interests in Reading

When participants were asked if they were more likely to read a book if other peers and/or friends were talking about it, 56.5% said yes. Over 50% of participants said they have also participated in a book club or other social gathering related to reading. When prompted to give reasons explaining why they like reading, there were a variety of answers, including reading as a way to escape from reality, gain knowledge, and pass the time. One participant said, "It does

away with loneliness." Other participants added that reading is a great way to connect with their grandchildren and keep up with current events. Similar to the university survey results, 72.2% of participants from The Summit preferred fiction to non-fiction. Also, the influence of literature as films was not far-reaching. Of the residents surveyed, 88% said they would not be more inclined to read a book just because there is a movie based on it.

Influence of Family

Over 50% of participants said they did not have fond memories of being read to aloud by a parent or teacher. However, 76% of them said they grew up in homes where their parents or siblings read for fun on their own. Although these participants may not have had many fond memories of being read to, they still had much to say about their experiences with reading in school.

Classroom Experiences

When given a list of activities participants found enjoyable in school, 70.8% said they liked getting to pick a book of their choice for classroom assignments. In second place, 50% said yes to reading multiple texts. Following that was 45.8% who said they enjoyed being read to by a teacher. Next, with a 33.3% response, was discussing books in small groups with classmates. According to survey results from The Summit, only 12.5% liked doing creative assignments related to books. However, some participants added that in earlier years, such as the 1940s, teachers did not use creative assignments like social media profiles for book characters. Therefore, that could possibly be attributed to why this option received a low rating.

Free Time and Social Media

When asked if participants wish they had more time to read, 56.5% of them said no. However, 87.5% of them said that if they only had 30 minutes of free time a day, they would

choose reading a book over getting on social media. Yet, the impact of social media was still evident on these participants with 54.2% admitting that social media negatively affects how much time they spend reading. One participant added that they like reading because it is better than getting on social media and it "keeps the mind working."

Comparison of Populations:

By surveying different ages, the goal was to identify factors that keep people reading throughout their lives. Although participants were not required to share their exact ages, some survey takers from The Summit wrote that they were over 90 years of age. When comparing some of these Summit participants' ages to university students' ages, there was approximately a difference of 70 years! University students began K-12 school during the early 2000s, while participants from The Summit were finished with high school by 1989 at the latest. The difference in survey responses may show the influence of societal norms and life stages on both age groups.

First, one of the most drastic differences between Lynchburg and Summit participants was how much time per week they read for pleasure. Only 9.5% of college students said they read 6 or more hours a week, contrasting with 64% of Summit residents who said they read that frequently. Based on participants' explanations, the business of life affects how much a person can engage in reading for pleasure. College students wrote, "I usually read during the summer only because I have more free time," "I read a lot over breaks but not during the school year," and "When on break, usually about 3 hours. When at school, 0 because I can't find the time to do so." On the other hand, Summit participants said they have an abundance of free time. One Summit resident wrote, "I'm retired and have plenty of time to do what I want!" Another said, "I

have plenty of time and read a great deal." This suggests that young people may read less than older people due to a lack of time, not because of a disinterest in reading.

Looking at the results of peer pressure as related to reading, it also seems that the college students were more influenced by people around them than residents at The Summit. In fact, 87.3% of surveyed Lynchburg students said they are more likely to read a book if their peers and/or friends are talking about it, but only 56.5% of Summit participants said the same. However, participants at the Summit had a higher engagement in book clubs or other social events related to reading. At The Summit, 52% of participants said they have been involved with these activities, with one participant saying, "I'm currently part of 2 book clubs!" At the university level, only 44.4% said they have attended a book club or other social event related to reading. Still, these percentages are not drastically different, thus showing that social influence can affect one's reading practices.

As far as interests in reading, fiction was preferred to non-fiction in both populations. Of university students surveyed, 81% preferred fiction. Similarly, 72.2% of Summit participants also preferred fiction. Multiple participants from the University of Lynchburg and The Summit used the word "escape" when they gave reasons about why they enjoy reading. This shows that educators need to understand what parts of reading are enjoyable, like escapism, in order to increase students' engagement with texts.

With the rise of streaming services and Americans today having movies at their fingertips, participants from both populations still did not deem movies based on books as very important. Of Lynchburg students surveyed, 57.1% said they are not more likely to read a book if there is a movie based on it. Of Summit residents surveyed, 88% said they are not more likely to read a book if there is a movie based on it. In a world where movie streaming services, such as

Netflix, are increasingly popular, it might be easy to assume that students will get more excited about a book if there is an accompanying movie with it. However, these results suggest that may not always be the case.

What is worth noting is the influence of social media not only on people between 18-25 years of age, but on people over the age of 50. Of the college students who participated, 82.5% believe social media negatively affects how much time they spend reading. Even at The Summit, where some of the participants said they do not use social media, 54.2% believe social media negatively affects their reading habits. Overall though, reading is still more popular than social media at The Summit, with 87.5% of Summit participants responding that they would choose getting lost in a book over getting lost in the social media sphere. This contrasts with only 34.9% of college students choosing a book over social media.

For classroom practices, both populations' top selection of favorite activities was getting to read a book of their choice for a class assignment. For Lynchburg students, 85.7% said they found this enjoyable and 70.8% at The Summit agreed. The least popular choice for both populations was being read aloud to by a teacher, though participants at The Summit positively responded to this choice more than university students.

Lastly, the influence of adults on children's reading habits is different between the populations. For the University of Lynchburg, 87.3% of participants said they have fond memories of being read aloud to by a parent or teacher. However, only 44% of Summit participants could say the same. What is interesting though is that 76% of participants, at both the university and Summit, said they grew up in homes where their parents or siblings read for fun. The difference seems to be that children who are in college now were read to more by their parents/teachers than people of retirement age. However, due to the small sample size, that claim

is only an inference rather than a fact. Regardless, it is important to look at the influence of adults on children's reading habits, as they are often the ones who shape students' attitudes towards reading.

Reading Engagement in the Classroom:

Previous findings on reading engagement in the classroom are similar to the results of these two surveys. Students are more likely to be engaged in reading if they are given a choice of texts and opportunities to read for fun during class (Groneke). Groneke writes, "I encourage teachers to remember what it was that made reading fun for them as children...having opportunities to make choices about what to read" (1). It is also important that students are allowed to read some books in class only for enjoyment instead of being forced to always analyze them (Groneke). There should be pleasure in reading; however, when students associate reading only with graded assignments, it diminishes the pleasure aspect (Groneke; Gauder). In fact, there is a term "aliteracy," which describes the pattern of students being capable of reading, but choosing not to as a result of academic burnout (Gauder). Students should be able to see the value and purpose of reading in academia, but they also need to understand that reading is pleasurable outside of school.

Making reading into a social activity is another way to keep students engaged. Discussing texts with peers can introduce new feelings and perspectives not previously experienced in individual reading (Healey). In a study conducted at the University of Dayton, 1,600 sophomore students were invited to participate in a reading program called The Porch Reads (Gauder). Students were given free copies of the assigned book, then met in small groups with peers and faculty members to discuss the reading. The Porch Reads program, which expanded across two semesters, was successful: 75% of students said they liked at least one aspect of the program

(Gauder). Gauder notes, "Perhaps local, small-scale, voluntary projects such as this will help to bring back the pleasures of recreational reading and sharing books with others to an age group that is forgetting how much fun they can be" (17). In addition to book clubs, students may benefit from watching interviews from authors and meeting authors because experiences like these give students real-life connections to texts (Miller). Another way to bring students together is by playing games related to books, such as open-ended matching games on characters or plot details (Smutny).

Another facet of reading engagement, which the Summit and University of Lynchburg surveys did not focus on, is the role of digital texts. In an increasingly digital world, sometimes educators push back against e-books and audio books; however, new research suggests that they are beneficial to students too. Especially in the genre of children literature, digital books can be more interactive than print books due to the incorporation of hyperlinks, moving illustration, and other story-embedded audio (Kucirkova). Instead of a child just reading that there is a thunderstorm, audiobooks and e-books can produce the sounds of thunder and lightning thus making the child feel more engaged with the text. Hyperlinks allow for further exploration of information presented in texts, as well (Kurcikova). For example, if a text includes a cultural reference that readers do not understand, there may be hyperlinks to take readers to more information about the reference. Likewise, unfamiliar words may be hyperlinked to dictionary definitions, which makes the text more understandable for readers. Kurcikova says, "These novel affordances of digital books can significantly alter the reading experience, and have been found to support pleasurable reading engagement in the home and in the classroom" (72). As noted in the surveys, both populations enjoy social media, which is screen time. If people are already spending time on screens, why not find a way to incorporate reading into it?

Additionally, teachers' attitudes towards learning also influences students' levels of engagement. Students respond best to teachers who are respectful, enjoy the content they are teaching, and incorporate a student-centered approach in lessons (Sekulich; Groenke). Teachers need to have a love for reading that they can share with their students (Miller). If a teacher is not fully engaged with what they are teaching, they should not expect that their students will be either.

Implications and Applications for Educators:

Based on previous research on reading in the classroom and the two aforementioned surveys, there are many effective practices that teachers should incorporate into their classrooms to develop a love of reading in their students.

To effectively engage students in reading, teachers must understand the obstacles that hinder students from reading. While it would be nice to think that all students are on the desired reading level by certain ages, that is not always the case. Students' reading levels need to be assessed so that teachers can set goals for them based on their current skills and their future potential in the classroom (Navarro). If a student is struggling with specific content, such as decoding words, providing opportunities for students to get additional help can help them overcome that obstacle (Navarro). Students have various needs in the classroom when it comes to reading, and the needs have to be acknowledged if they are to be properly met. Students may suffer in their reading performance if needs go unnoticed and unaddressed. In "The Impact of Supplemental Instruction on Low-Achieving Adolescents' Reading Engagement," Cantrell explains, "If students experience repeated failure in reading, they increasingly disengage as they fall behind with their peers and are faced with increasingly complex texts" (36). Early intervention in reading is key for students. If struggling students view reading as challenging and

even humiliating, it is not likely they will ever want to read on their own due to their negative associations with it.

Next, model educators should learn what texts their students like and dislike, then plan their lessons accordingly. This is not to suggest that students should get to rule the classroom; however, there should be some student-influenced teaching. For example, both surveys from the University of Lynchburg and The Summit showed a strong preference for reading fiction over nonfiction. So, how could this affect lesson planning? Provide opportunities for students to read fiction in class. As a K-12 teacher, it might be easier and even expected of teachers to rely on textbooks; however, using only textbooks is not always what is best for students. A textbook may include a chapter on the Vietnam War, and while it is necessary for students to know the facts of historical events, what about students understanding the feelings of people who lived during the war? That is when a teacher can incorporate fiction by pairing the textbook chapter with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* a historical fiction novel written by an author who served in Vietnam. As previously mentioned, there is power in fiction. It is not something that is just fun to read, but it has academic, intellectual, emotional, and social benefits for readers (Wilhem). Allowing students to read genres they like is not taking away from learning; it enhances it.

Another way to actively involve students in learning is through course evaluations, as focused on in Maxwell Winchester's "If You Build It Will They Come? Exploring the Student Perspective of Weekly Student Evaluations of Teaching." Also known as Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETS), these are opportunities for students to anonymously share what is working best in the classroom and what could be better. Having been around for decades, the overarching goal of SETs is that teachers will be able to increase learning in the classroom by making modifications to their teaching methods based on students' feedback (671). Studies on the

effectiveness of SETs have shown that "students generally considered the improvement of teaching outcomes to be the most attractive outcome of a teaching evaluation system and support for student evaluations show that faculty recognizes the importance of students' involvement in shaping the module" (672). In other words, SETs give students a voice in the classroom, which leads to positive student-teacher relationships. When teachers take students' feedback into consideration, and modify their lessons accordingly, it shows that students' needs and wants are valued in the classroom. As a result, Winchester explains that this "improves student learning" and increases "student achievement" (673).

For the reading classroom, SETs can be modified to focus on specific aspects of reading engagement, such as focusing on students' opinions on a selected text. While SETs are traditionally given at the end of a course or degree program, Winchester argues that they are most beneficial to teachers if they are conducted weekly and are focused on specifics rather than generalizations. For example, a reading teacher may give students a SET with questions like "Are you enjoying reading *The Great Gatsby* right now?", "What parts of reading this book are difficult for you?", and "Is there anything I can do that would help you better understand *The Great Gatsby*?" Students may fill out SETs anonymously during class time, then teachers can improve the following week's lesson plans to reflect students' answers. In addition to receiving negative feedback, teachers can also use SETs to determine what they are doing well in lessons. If most students say pre-teaching vocabulary for a new book is helpful for them, a teacher would know to continue pre-teaching vocabulary for new books. Winchester describes that SETs can, "Reassure a teacher that he or she is doing the right thing" (673).

Another component of SETs that can give students a voice in the classroom is in-depth interviews. While time constraints make it difficult to conduct these weekly, it would still be

beneficial to incorporate in-depth interviews a few times during the school year. Whereas traditional SETs are a few questions on paper (or through an online system like Moodle), in-depth interviews are conducted verbally. Winchester recommends either selecting a few students or getting volunteers for the interviews. In these interviews, teachers ask students several questions about an overall learning experience. For a reading teacher, these interviews could include questions on several texts that have been taught. For example, a question might be, "If you had to choose between reading *The Great Gatsby* or *Mudbound*, which one would you choose?".

As with any evaluate criteria from real students, there are challenges for teachers to overcome due to biases. In his research, Winchester said students were likely to leave harsher feedback, on any topic, for teachers who assigned large amounts of homework (672). Also, there might be students who refuse to leave any positive feedback, even on methods that were helpful to them, if they dislike the teacher. As Winchester points out, not every SET will be helpful or even worth considering, but most SETs do provide helpful insight for teachers.

Teachers sometimes wonder how they can get through to students and make them engage in learning; yet, they fail to ask the students themselves. There is much value in giving students opportunities to provide feedback on their learning. If something is not working for students, teachers should find out what works better. If a whole class hates a book to the point where they stop doing their readings, how will that benefit the teacher or students? Once students are disengaged with a text, their capacity to learn from it drastically decreases. Students' levels of reading engagement need to be regularly assessed for effective teaching in reading.

In addition to figuring out what students like to read, teachers need to determine how students like to approach reading. For the surveys, 85.7% of University of Lynchburg

participants and 70.8% of Summit participants agreed that getting to read a book of choice for a classroom assignment was their favorite activity. Previous research on choice in the classroom supports these results. In "The Power of Pleasure Reading: What We Can Learn from the Secret Reading Lives of Teens," Wilhem concludes, "When given choice, kids tend to read what they need" (29). Students face many challenges on a daily basis in schools. Many of them are carrying burdens that their teachers and peers do not even realize. Getting to choose a book for an assignment may help students breathe a little easier. Instead of worrying about not being able to understand a text, students can select books that are accessible for them, which will increase their confidence in reading.

Along with book choice, survey participants also expressed a liking for discussing books in small groups with their peers. Reading, contrary to society's stereotypes of "book nerds," does not have to be an isolating activity. It is a way to connect with others in all areas of life. Think about a typical conversation in a grocery store checkout line. Two customers may start discussing an article they read about COVID-19 or another current event. What is worth noting is that many conversations stem from reading, whether people realize it or not. Texts are everywhere in society: magazines, newspapers, articles, books, blogs, and the list continues. Even scrolling through social media posts requires reading captions. Da Naghel says, "In today's society, being proficient in reading is an indispensible competence" (1018). Reading as a social activity is something teachers should use to their advantage. Social influence on reading is powerful, especially in younger age groups. From the University of Lynchburg survey, 87.3% of participants said they are more likely to read a book if all their friends/peers are talking about it. When it comes to interpretive literature, like poems and novels, every reader has a unique perspective on a text. No student's reading of a book is the same as another student's; all students

have something to bring to the table. Giving students the opportunities to discuss texts in small groups can lead to meaningful contributions and discoveries (Healey).

Additionally, having shared reading assignments is a way to develop positive peer relationships in the classroom. There might be two students who lead drastically different lives; however, reading the same book brings them together in at least one way. Reading and discussing literature also further develops empathy in students. Kucirkova writes, "Good books can create empathy, which may facilitate children's understanding of shared values and their corresponding social relations" (73). Kucirkova goes on to explain that reading about the lives of characters "enables young readers to develop the complex social skill of 'mind-reading' in order to understand others' mental states" (73). It is important that students have positive environments for learning, and forming healthy relationships with peers through small group discussion is one way to achieve this goal.

Though reading is a social activity amongst peers, it should also be viewed as an activity that strengthens familial relationships. One Summit participant said her grandmother read to her every night before bed, and that was the participant's favorite part of the day. From the University of Lynchburg survey results, 87.3% of participants said they were read to aloud by a parent or teacher. Additionally, 76.2% of them said they had parents, guardians, or siblings in the home that read for fun. This shows how adults can influence children's attitudes towards reading. These survey participants, even some at the Summit who were over 90 years of age, still remembered positive childhood memories of reading. Students can read in school, but what truly will impact them is their experiences with reading outside of school. That is why teachers, especially at the elementary level, should encourage parents to read to their children a few times per week. While not all parents are able to dedicate that time to their children, other parents may

simply lack books to read to their children. Students should have the opportunity to take home a book each week that their parents could read to them. It might be a book that is assigned to the whole class or one of the student's choosing. Ultimately, the parents are the ones who choose whether or not to read to their children, but by providing students with books, it at least gives them a great opportunity to be read to at home.

However, teachers do have control of how often students are read aloud to in the classroom. From the University of Lynchburg survey, 38.1% of participants said they enjoyed this activity in school. The Summit was a higher percentage, with 45.8% who agreed that being read to aloud was fun. Though the preference for this activity is not as high as getting to read a book of choice, it was still an activity some participants liked. Depending on grade level, teachers should find ways to incorporate read alouds into their lessons, even if only once or twice a month.

Another way teachers can make reading a priority in the classroom is through creating a classroom library and providing free time for reading in class. Used books are relatively inexpensive, but they can go a long way in the classroom. Teachers may also meet people, like former teachers or students, who are willing to donate books to schools. If a teacher wants to include free time for reading during the week, having a classroom library guarantees that all students will have something to read. Some teachers may allot 10 minutes of free time for reading every day, while other teachers wait until Fridays to give their students a longer amount of time to read. Whatever the schedule, all English classes should have free time set aside for reading each week because research shows this is beneficial in shaping students' love for reading. Miller, an award-winning language arts teacher and author, explains, "I learned long ago that the only way I could guarantee that my students read was to dedicate time for them to read

in class and watch them read in front of me every day" (89). She goes on to say, "Time to read

motivates my students to read more at home, too. Captured by the books they read in class, they

cannot wait to read until the next school day" (90). If time is set aside in class for students to

participate in reading of their choice, this gives them the opportunity to see that reading can be

fun and interesting.

Based on the surveys, another effective method for reading engagement is doing creative

assignments related to books, such as creating plays, character social media profiles, or designing

art based on book themes. From the University of Lynchburg results, 52.4% of participants said

they enjoyed these activities in school. Only 12.5% of Summit residents agreed; however, many

of them noted that during the time periods they were in school, activities like this were not used.

To be engaged with books, students need to go beyond just reading them. Doing creative

activities requires that students have a deeper understanding of characters and themes. An

example of this could be creating an Instagram post from the perspective of Edward Rochester

from *Jane Eyre.* Students could use hashtags and create comments from other social media users

(book characters), like Bertha Mason. These assignments allow students to use their modern

cultural knowledge to analyze classic literature. When students have to step into characters'

shoes, it makes them consider new perspectives on characters.

Additionally, games centered around books are a great way to engage students. Smutny

writes, "Games are an avenue to engage and motivate students to grasp new ideas and apply their

understanding in consequential contexts" (518). Playing games as a class builds positive peer

relationships and requires students to actively participate in the lesson's content. It is easy to not

pay attention while a teacher is talking, but it is harder to do that if students know their

classmates are depending on them to earn points for the team. Reading is supposed to be fun, so lessons related to readings should be fun, as well.

Lastly, educators must consider the role of social media on today's students. Participants at the University of Lynchburg and the Summit said they believe that social media negatively affects how much time they spend reading. For the university, 87.5% of survey takers said if they only had 30 minutes of free time per day, they would choose getting on social media over reading a book. The reality is that social media is not going away in future generations. If anything, social media platforms will continue to evolve and expand, infiltrating into students' lives. What can teachers do about this problem? Perhaps the first step is to stop viewing social media as a problem. Although there are several negative effects of social media on young lives, there are also benefits that can be used to a teacher's advantage. Platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are places where students can connect with each other and share what is happening in their lives. Many students have great talents related to social media, such as photo editing, video splicing, and crafting clever captions. What teachers often fail to remember is that social media users, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are constantly thinking about their audiences. That is exactly what good readers and writers do.

Therefore, relating social media usage to reading is beneficial because there are similarities between the activities. It is possible for students to use their social media skills in an academic way. For example, FlipGrid is a program that allows students to film brief videos, typically 30-60 seconds, then share them with their teachers and classmates. Does that sound familiar to anything students use outside of school? FlipGrid, though designed for educational uses only, is just like Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, and TikTok videos. For FlipGrids, students have to think about the best way to cover information in a short amount of time with the

knowledge that an audience (usually other classmates) will be seeing their videos. This requires students to not only be able to summarize important information, but also use rhetorical tactics they have learned from reading persuasive writing. After students make their individaul FlipGrid videos, a teacher can play the videos for the class. By doing this, students have the opportunity to learn from their peers' perspective instead of only learning from the teacher.

Another aspect of social media that educators can use in their classroom is Bookstagram, which is a community of over 70 million users on Instagram. Bookstagram, like the name suggests, is all about books: pictures of books, hyperlinks to books, captions using book quotes, fan art based on books, and so much more. One of the University of Lynchburg students who took the survey is a well-known "Bookstagrammer," with over 1,000 followers. She spends her time on social media discussing books with other readers in the United States and around the world. She even gained a pen pal in Hong Kong through Bookstagram, and they send books to each other for their birthdays.

In addition to Bookstagram, there is also BookTok, a community within TikTok. In the BookTok community, users make short videos discussing books, reviewing books, and recommending books to their followers. BookTok has gained such popularity that Barnes and Noble has a section on their website and in stores called "#BookTok." This shows the power of social media on reading. Social media does not have to be something that takes away from reading. There are ways it can be used to *promote* reading, and that is not limited to only Bookstagram and BookTok. There are other social apps, like GoodReads and Pinterest, where users can delve into the reading world.

Although there is plenty of research on the disadvantages of social media on adolescents, there are not many studies on how social media can be beneficial. This is an area of opportunity

for future research. Social media can be advantageous in the classroom if educators use social media platforms in strategic, purpose-driven ways.

Conclusion:

Overall, in order for students to love reading, teachers need to make finding effective reading practices a priority in the classroom. Just like the University of Lynchburg and Summit populations had varying answers, no class is the same as another. All students have different needs, so allowing for peer feedback is key in determining best practices for reading. If students are going to become lifelong readers, they need to have a positive attitude towards reading. This attitude is one that teachers can pass down to their students. If a teacher treats reading in the classroom as an undesirable or boring activity, how will students ever view it differently? Reading is something that is relevant and beneficial to everyday life. Students can discover this by choosing what they read in class, using social media to further engage with reading, talking about books with peers, and having access to diverse classroom libraries. My survey results show that becoming a lifelong reader is not something that happens only because of one factor. There are multiple ways people are influenced to read, so it is important that teachers incorporate multiple reading practices in the classroom.

My enjoyment of literature today is because of teachers and parents who shared their love for reading with me. I can still remember sitting on my mother's bed as she read stories to me throughout my childhood, with my favorite book being *Babar the Elephant*. During my high school years, I had an English teacher who ultimately was the reason why I majored in English when I got to college. As aforementioned, a person's passion for reading does not appear spontaneously; it must be cultivated throughout one's life.

Though my research is a start to better understand the factors that affect reading habits, there is more to consider. I was not able to focus on gender or race due to the parameters of this project. These are factors that I believe should also be considered in order for educators to further meet students' needs in reading. Obstacles in reading must be addressed so that students can feel confident and engaged in reading instead of viewing it as an impossible challenge. The impact of reading for pleasure reaches far beyond the classroom. Reading is something that should be celebrated and appreciated because of how it positively affects lives. Therefore, let teachers do nothing that will hinder students from reaching their fullest potential in reading.

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Appendix A

1. How often do you read for fun? (Audiobooks, e-books, magazines, and other digital texts qualify as reading. Please check ONE answer).*
   - I do not read for fun
   - 1-2 hours a week
   - 4-6 hours a week
   - 6+ hours a week
2. Are you more likely to read a book if you know there is a movie based on it?*
   - Yes
   - No
3. If all your friends/peers are talking about a book, does this make you want to read it?*
   - Yes
   - No
4. Have you ever participated in a book club or other social gathering related to books?*
   - Yes
   - No

5. Which genre do you prefer to read for fun?*

    ● Yes

    ● No

6. Do you have fond childhood memories of being read to aloud by a parent or teacher?

    ● Yes

    ● No

7. Circle which activities you found enjoyable as a student:*

    ● Getting to pick a book of your choice for book reports, projects, etc.
      instead of being assigned a book by the teacher

    ● Being read to aloud by a teacher

    ● Discussing books in small groups with your classmates

    ● Creative assignments related to books (ex. Creating plays, character social
      media profiles, designing art based on book themes etc.)

    ● Reading multiple types of texts (ex. Poems, plays, novels, graphic novels)

8. Did your parents/guardians or siblings read for fun at home?*

    ● Yes

    ● No

9. Do you wish you had more time to read for fun?*

    ● Yes

    ● No

10. If you only had 30 minutes of free time a day, would you rather spend it on social media
    or reading a book?*

    ● Social media

    ● Reading a book

11. Do you think getting on social media negatively impacts how much time you spend
    reading for fun?*

    ● Yes

    ● No

12. If you like reading for fun, please give answers as to why you like it.