



Teenage Reading: Engaging Student Voices

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Teenage Reading: Engaging Student Voices

Executive summary

This report summarises a public engagement project that worked with teenagers and aimed to:

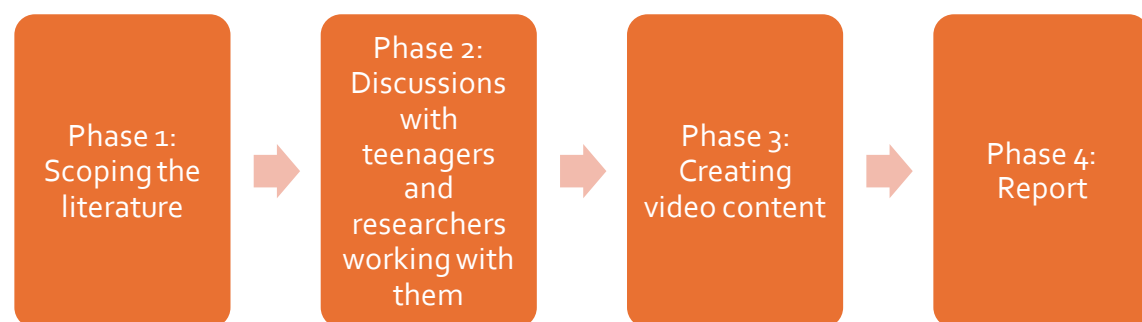
- 1) Communicate research evidence about teenage reading to teenagers
- 2) Enable teenagers to engage with the topic of teenage reading

We addressed these aims in three phases (See Figure 1):

- 1) **Phase 1: Scoping the literature** to understand the evidence on teenage reading and how to engage teenagers in research.
- 2) **Phase 2: Discussions with teenagers and researchers** to identify their opinions on reading (including their perceptions of barriers and facilitators) and how to engage teenagers.
- 3) **Phase 3: Co-creating video content** with teenagers, an author and BookTok content creator.

Consistent with previous research (Chapman, 2020; Rutherford et al., 2023; Strommen & Mates., 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2024a; 2024b), teenagers identified barriers to reading including time, access, social acceptance and device use. The proposed solutions included dedicated reading time in school and guidance around identifying interesting genres and books. This project highlights the importance of taking researchers out of the conversation and enabling young people to collaborate with their peers in order to organise their thoughts and communicate their views. We hope this report will empower researchers, teachers and policymakers to engage effectively with young people, and to ensure their authentic voices are amplified and embedded in research, practice and policy.

Figure 1. Workflow of Engaging Student Voices in Teenage Reading project



Background

The importance of reading for all people, but particularly teenagers, cannot be understated. For education, it enables young people to build their vocabulary and access knowledge. More broadly, it allows us to navigate our daily lives: to follow directions, communicate with friends, access public services such as healthcare and so on.

Research shows that reading abilities are extremely variable in teenagers and there are a substantial number of teenagers who find reading challenging (Ricketts et al., 2020; van der Kleij et al., 2023). In addition, as children move into the teenage years, the amount that they read drops and many proficient readers do not choose to read in their spare time (van der Kleij et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2023a). Research and practical resources are needed to give young people the tools they need to read more successfully and to engage more with reading.

This project focused on teenagers' perspectives on reading, motivated by two observations. First, our previous research indicated that strategies to promote reading amongst teenagers would be more successful if young voices were embedded more successfully (Shapiro et al., 2023). Second, engaging teenage voices was identified as a priority by the [Teenage Reading Network](#), which was formed in 2023 to bring together researchers, practitioners and policy makers to identify priorities for research, practice and policy.

Aims

This public engagement project had two main aims:

- 1) To communicate research evidence around teenage reading to teenagers
- 2) To enable teenagers to engage with the topic of teenage reading

Approach

Figure 1 summarises our approach in which we scoped the literature, held discussions with teenagers and researchers working with them, and developed an output package including videos and this report. Initially, we planned to host an event as our main outcome. However, discussions with teenagers quickly highlighted that an event would not be appealing to them as it would feel too forced and "school-like", so we revised our plans to develop video content instead (Figure 1). We aimed for videos that would make the content

accessible and increase its reach. Teenagers are engaging with apps such as YouTube and TikTok, so it made sense to harness these channels.

Progression through the phases was not linear, nor were the phases mutually exclusive. We continued to discuss plans with teenagers and the researchers who have worked with them across phases. This enabled us to keep teenage voices at the forefront of the project and ensure that resulting outputs were going to be interesting, engaging and relevant to teenagers.

Phase 1: Scoping the literature on teenage perspectives on reading

Large-scale surveys of teenagers show that compared to younger peers, teenagers are less likely to engage with reading and enjoy reading (Clark et al., 2024). Further, most teenagers report not enjoying reading. For those who enjoy reading, they see it as an opportunity to learn more, they find it entertaining, they feel a sense of autonomy over choosing what to read, and reading provides a common ground for socialising with peers (Gervais, 2010; Rothbauer, 2011; Caseiro, 2021).

Given that most teenagers report that they don't enjoy reading (Clark et al., 2024), it is particularly important that we understand the barriers to reading. This has typically been explored in researcher-led studies where the focus and design of the research is determined by researchers. In these studies, teenagers report that they do not read because they find it difficult and boring, they lack access to books or time to read, they cannot relate to books or struggle to choose reading materials, and reading is not a priority compared to other activities like going on their phones (Chapman, 2020; Rutherford et al., 2023). They also report that it is not something that is always encouraged by family and friends (Strommen & Mates., 2004). These studies are important for informing our understanding of teenage reading. However, these studies have neglected the importance of including teenagers in the research process in a meaningful way. Teenagers were included as participants, but these interactions may have been impacted by power differences in roles (e.g. researcher vs. participant, adult vs. teenager; McPartlan, 2024).

There is a body of research on teenage reading that has adopted a youth participatory action approach, embedding young people as active researchers as well as participants, and ensuring that their needs, priorities, and opinions are integrated at all levels of the research process (Wilkinson et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). Youth participatory action research is on the rise in educational and developmental psychology (E.g., Webber et al., 2024a; McPartlan, 2024; Henning, 2023) due to its role in bridging the gap between research and practice and ability to give teenagers an opportunity to use their voice.

Wilkinson et al. (2020) interviewed adolescents about the barriers and facilitators to reading. They also trained these adolescents to go off and interview their peers. This research revealed many facilitators, including escapism, learning and school. Barriers included time, difficulty choosing and accessing books, and reading not being encouraged as much as when they were younger (both in school and at home).

Webber et al. (2024a; 2024b) took a different approach by convening a youth panel and collaborating with them to design the study, as well as collect and analyse data via peer-led interviews. The six themes that emerged from this research were:

1. access
2. a mismatch between reading materials and teenagers' interests
3. social factors (e.g. portrayal in media, judgement from others)
4. reading experiences in school
5. reading affect
6. time and competing activities

Existing research has indicated a range of barriers and facilitators to teenage reading. An important next step is to identify how to mitigate the barriers and bolster the facilitators. In this public engagement project, we chose to do this by taking a youth participatory action approach (Webber et al., 2024a; 2024b; 2024c), communicating research on teenage reading to teenagers in an engaging and acceptable way, and working with them to identify the next steps in overcoming these barriers. By drawing on best practice in including teenage voices, we hoped to ensure that the process and outcomes of this project are reflective of their perspective.

Phase 2: Discussions with teenagers and researchers

Discussions with teenagers

We drew on our existing network of school contacts to identify teenagers to work with. We worked with four groups of teenagers aged 13-17 years from three schools. Two groups met with us online (one meeting with each school). The other two groups spent 5 days doing work experience placements with us. All groups took part in discussions in which we introduced the topic by giving a summary of the research, why we wanted to do the project, and asked the group how we could achieve our aims. A semi-structured approach was adopted for all discussions, yielding the following key points:

Making things as fun and interesting as possible. Teenagers reported not being interested in reading, and they struggled to foresee any clear way to make reading appealing to other teenagers. They noted a lack of information for teenagers around the educational benefits of reading and why it is important. Others suggested that by overlapping reading with fun things that already appeal to teenagers, this might capture their attention better. One example was author visits and talks because they found them exciting and could say they had met an author. From this, we decided to involve an author of teenage fiction.

Social media. It is well known that teenagers spend a lot of time on social media (Anderson et al., 2023) and this was reflected in the conversations. TikTok is a platform that came up multiple times. Within TikTok, there are communities based around common hobbies and interests. One such community is known as BookTok, a space where TikTok users can talk

about books. Some examples include recommending new books ("If you liked Book X, you should try Book Y and Book Z"), sharing recent book purchases, and authors promoting their new books. BookTok was mentioned by a few of the teenagers that we spoke with, indicating that this might be a useful lever for motivating teenagers to read.

Social pressure. Reading is not seen as "cool" by teenagers. The words "nerd" and "boring" were mentioned in almost all of the discussions we had. One teenager used the example of "If Molly-Mae Hague [a popular influencer] were to post a video of her reading, I reckon more people would read". Peer pressure and a desire to fit in is more prevalent in the teen years (Blakemore, 2018; Harter, 1998; Hartup, 1996; Helsen et al., 2000). This indicates that to get more teenagers reading, we would need to find a way to make reading seem less "boring" and "nerdy".

Asking teenagers about barriers to reading. All of the groups identified that to truly get a sense of teenage reading, it is best to ask teenagers themselves. Many reported that there are hobbies they would rather do than reading and they feel that they do not have the time to read as well as doing their preferred hobbies and going to school. Scrolling on their phone and watching Netflix feels easier as it "requires a shorter attention span".

Discussions with researchers who have worked with teenagers

We spoke with four researchers who have either worked directly with teenagers in research settings or have experience of producing engaging content about research for teenagers. From these discussions, the following key points arose:

Young people acting as "researchers". One researcher had completed youth participatory action research in which young people act as the researchers (McPartlan, 2024). The benefits of this approach are that it removes any hierarchical inequalities that might impact responses, promoting authentic interactions. It also promotes autonomy for the adolescents acting as "researchers". Finally, this approach reveals not only the perspective of the teenagers being surveyed, but also how teenagers interpret the research findings.

Incentives. When working with a youth panel it is important to provide incentives to encourage and maintain engagement and to acknowledge the time that they have committed. This might be particularly important for a topic that teenagers are not well-engaged with like reading.

Feedback from young people. It is important to get feedback from the young people you are working with during and after the project. This allows you to continue to check that you are meeting your original goals for working with young people i.e., is it still beneficial and acceptable to both you and the teenagers? To truly capture teenage voices, it is important to take yourselves out of the picture as much as possible.

Engaging content. Keep it short and sweet so young people are not overwhelmed by the amount of information and then lose interest. It can be beneficial to link the content to

popular culture references like films and TV shows. This provides a more fun and interesting example for the young people to relate to.

Phase 3: Creating video content

The main outputs to come out of this project are the video package (described below) and this report. We decided on videos to make the content accessible and increase its reach. Teenagers are already spending a lot of time on video-sharing apps such as YouTube and TikTok, so it was logical for us to use these platforms to share the videos.

Teenager-led videos

Two videos were produced by two different groups of teenagers that completed week-long work experience placements in the Psychology department at Royal Holloway, University of London. We took inspiration from the youth participatory action approach by introducing teenagers to research on teenage reading with discussions (Phase 2) and providing training on conducting interviews and research ethics. Then, teenagers:

1. generated questions to explore peers' perspectives on reading (See Table 1);
2. interviewed peers to collect responses to their questions;
3. integrated research findings with their interview responses to generate video scripts;
4. recorded a voice over and added this to copyright-free clips to create their videos.

You can watch both teenager-led videos here:

- [What Do Teenagers Think? Part 1](#)
- [What Do Teenagers Think? Part 2](#)

Table 1. Questions generated by groups of teenagers to collect data from their peers

Group 1	Group 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you know the benefits of reading? Why do you think you should read? 2. What does "reading" mean to you? 3. Where/when do you read? Can you set aside time each day? 4. Do you like reading? Why/why not? 5. How accessible books are to them? Do you know where you can access books/reading materials? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Characterising their peers (e.g., gender, reading interest, language ability) 2. How do you spend your free time? How much free time do you have that you could use to read? 3. What barriers do you experience that prevent you from accessing resources? 4. How much do you use social media? What social media do you use? 5. How can we help people to read more?

Teenager recommended videos

Our discussions with teenagers in Phase 1 indicated that we could promote teenagers' engagement with reading by involving authors and influencers. Therefore, we decided to include videos created by an author and an influencer. The influencer was a "BookToker" or TikTok user who creates content around reading and books.

BookToker

The BookToker used their video to speak about how TikTok can be used to find books based on previous reads, other people recommendations, interests and others with similar interests:

[What is BookTok?](#)

Author

The author used their video to speak about the variety of different book types that you can read, with a particular focus on verse novels (the author's genre). The author created one video that we divided into three videos to ensure content was short and accessible:

1. [Conversations with an author Part 1: "Crossing the Line" by Tia Fisher](#)
2. [Conversations with an author Part 2: What are verse novels?](#)
3. [Conversations with an author Part 3: Tia's verse novel recommendations](#)

Researcher video

In Phases 2 and 3, we were able to communicate research on teenage reading to a smaller group of teenagers. In order to reach a wider range of teenagers, we created a video summarising evidence on the benefits of reading, teenager perspectives and teenage reading behaviour:

[The Never-Ending Benefits of Reading](#)

Social media channels

To go along side the video package, we set up social media channels to store and promote the videos. We decided to upload the videos to YouTube and TikTok. You can view our accounts below:

4. YouTube: @TeenageReading_StudentVoices
5. TikTok: @trn_studentvoices

Feedback from teenagers

To assess whether our video package had met our aims, we asked teenagers to watch them and provide feedback (see Appendix A). We successfully communicated reading research to teenagers (Aim 1) and engaged them with reading (Aim 2), complementing the discussions in Phases 2 and 3.

Whilst we were able to get some teenagers to provide feedback, the response rate was low (9 teenagers). Therefore, the next step in this work will be to not only work closely with teenagers to develop content but also include them in plans to disseminate content and seek feedback.

Conclusions

This report summarises a public engagement project that was effective in communicating research evidence on teenage reading to teenagers and enabling teenagers to engage with the topic of teenage reading. We approached this by scoping the research literature and undertaking discussions with teenagers and researchers working with teenagers. This provided insights on how to engage teenagers with reading and underpinned collaboration with teenagers to develop video content.

Consistent with previous research (Chapman, 2020; Rutherford et al., 2023; Strommen & Mates., 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2024a; 2024b), teenagers identified time, access, social acceptance and device use as barriers to reading and proposed dedicated reading time in school and guidance around identifying interesting genres and books as solutions. They also highlighted the need to make it seem as fun and interesting as possible to teenagers, hence the inclusion of the author and BookToker.

This project highlights the importance of taking researchers out of the conversation and enabling young people to collaborate with their peers to establish their views. We hope that this report will help other researchers, teachers and policymakers to engage effectively with young people to ensure that we capture their authentic voice so that their perspectives can be amplified and embedded in youth-centred research, practice and policy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Teenagers' responses to the feedback questions

Feedback from teenagers

Our teenage respondents were aged 13-17 years (mean age= 15 years). See Table 3 for the main messages that the teenagers reported taking away from the videos:

Table 2. A summary of the key messages that teenagers took away from the video package

Key messages
Social media can be used to encourage reading and recommend materials (BookTok)
What a verse novel
Reading is beneficial for sleep and mental health
Not many teens consider reading a hobby and most prefer their phone
Reading can expand the imagination
Reading is good for vocabulary development

Only one of the nine teenage respondents was unable to relay any of the key messages from the videos.

Next, respondents were asked if there was anything they particularly liked/disliked. See Table 4 for their responses:

Table 3. A summary of what the teenager's liked/disliked about the video package

Likes	Dislikes
The inclusion of the different viewpoints of teenagers	That social media was portrayed in a negative light
The mixture of facts and opinions	How many videos there were (only one teenager reported this opinion)
The inclusion of a real author	

The respondents were also asked if there was anything else they would have liked to see, or anything included that they did not think was necessary. None of them reported anything that they thought was unnecessary to include. See Table 5 for their suggestions of further things to add:

Table 4. A summary of teenagers' recommendations of what could be added to the video package

To add:
Movie adaptations of books as an incentive to get people to read them e.g., "if you liked this film, check out the book that it is based on"
Different ways to read e.g., audiobooks, eBooks
Different genres of books

Finally, respondents were asked to rate how likely they were to read more after watching these videos on a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). See Table 6 for a summary of their responses:

Table 5. A summary of responses to "How likely are you to read more after watching these videos?"

Response	Number of respondents
Very likely	5
Somewhat likely	3
No change	0
Somewhat unlikely	0
Very unlikely	1

Members

This work was led by Courtney Hooton and Professor Jessie Ricketts

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