

Research report & Guiding Principles, Strategies and Approaches

(Deliverable #12 - Framework Part B)

1. Introduction

PISA publishes statistics about reading literacy levels in more than 60 countries across the world. “Reading literacy” is defined by PISA as “understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society.” This definition makes evident the close link between reading and lifelong learning. Out of the 24 EU member states that participated in the PISA 2009 survey, only 5 states were ranked above average, 8 were ranked as average, and 11 below average. The *Teaching Reading in Europe* report (EACEA, 2012) emphasizes that “In 2009, approximately one in five 15-year olds in the EU-27 countries had difficulties using reading for learning” (13). These numbers reflect the grim picture of literacy in European education which, of course, needs to be reversed, if Europe is to achieve its ambitious educational, social, political, and economical goals.

In *ET 2020*, the Council of the European Union acknowledges the dire need for improvement in this area, emphasizing that “the major challenge is to ensure the acquisition of key competences by everyone.” Referring to key competences, the LLP Call for Proposals 2011-2013 clearly states that “The development of key competences should build on solid basic skills in reading literacy, maths, and science and include both subject-based and transversal competences that will motivate and equip [students] for further learning” (10). It should be noted that, both in this statement and in many other EU policy documents, reading literacy is mentioned as first and most important in the list of basic skills, since successful acquisition of all other skills depends heavily on reading competence.

The LiRe consortium asserts that high levels of reading literacy are directly correlated to positive stances towards reading and strong reading habits. The 2006 PIRLS International Report firmly concludes that “In PIRLS 2001, and again in PIRLS 2006, students with the most positive attitudes toward reading had the highest reading achievement” (2006: 6). This direct correlation between strong reading habits and high reading skills outlines the motivation behind the Lifelong Readers (LiRe) project. About one third of the EU member states are faring well in both fields, while the rest of the EU is lacking behind. We content that the countries which are faring well are the ones that have established sustainable reading promotion programmes, reading cultures, and reading communities. These countries have long since

realized that “The development of a love for reading is too important to be left to chance” (Spiegel, 1981: 4). LiRe aspires to contribute to the enhancement of positive reading habits and attitudes as well as reading skills and learning competences in all EU countries, in accordance to EU educational objectives and priorities, by bringing together reading promotion experience and expertise from across the EU and the world and building a reading promotion framework and school staff training modules for European primary schools.

This document (*LiRe Research report & Guiding Principles Strategies and Approaches*) is Part B of the LiRe Framework and provides the background on which the entire framework is built. The report aims to communicate to policy makers, academics, teacher trainers, administrators and school staff an international body of *research results* regarding reading promotion, as well as guidance through a series of guiding principles, strategies and approaches, to be used when designing and implementing a reading promotion programme. The next section of the report deals with the attributes of a lifelong reader, section three analyzes the benefits of reading engagement, while the final section focuses on what the research says about schools, teachers and librarians who promote reading effectively.

2. Attributes of a lifelong reader

A lifelong learner is first and foremost a lifelong reader. Reading is perhaps the most essential life-skill, as it plays a decisive role in a person's social empowerment, professional success, and personal development. A lifelong reader is self- motivated, finds value and pleasure in reading, and thus reads, learns, and evolves throughout her/his lifetime. LiRe aspires to contribute to the effort of creating European schools that are populated by thousands of lifelong readers. As Atwell purports, this should be the central objective of language education: “And this is the goal: for every child to become a skilled, passionate, habitual, critical reader” (Atwell 12).

Miller, who like Atwell is both an educator and researcher, describes the central attributes of her lifelong reading students: “You see, my students are not just strong, capable readers, they love books and reading. Building lifelong readers has to start here” (Miller 4). The emphasis on finding enjoyment in

reading is evident. Research suggests that pleasure in the reading experience itself is a key factor in motivating readers:

People who do not find reading pleasurable tend to view book reading the way most people view preparing an income tax return: it is hard to do, done under compulsion, and requires long blocks of uninterrupted time. Confident readers, in contrast, find reading effortless. They say that they pick up a book whenever they have a few spare minutes and frequently carry books with them in case they have to wait in line. (Ross 4)

Lockwood also highlights its importance: “Reading for pleasure is one very important and common manifestation of having a positive ‘attitude to reading’, which is another term frequently used in the research and writing in this area. Having a positive attitude to reading is obviously closely related to the concepts of ‘reading engagement’ and ‘reading motivation’” (Lockwood 1).

Trying to explain why some people engage in leisure-time reading more than others, researchers and practitioners have pointed to the importance of reading motivation. Guthrie and Wigfield define reading motivation as “the individual's personal goals, values and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes and outcomes of reading” and highlight its important role (2000: 405). Reading engagement is a wider term/attribute, which involves reading motivation but includes more than that. The OECD postulates that “engagement in reading” includes reading for pleasure, reading widely and attitude to reading. As Baket et al explain, when we say that someone is engaged in an activity we usually mean that s/he is involved at a deep level; some synonyms to this term would include absorbed, engrossed, interested, and involved (Baket et al, 2000: 2).

According to the same researchers, students are engaged readers when they read frequently for interest, enjoyment and learning. They analyze this trio of attributes (interest-enjoyment-learning) as follows:

The heart of engagement is the desire to gain new knowledge of a topic, to follow the excitement of a narrative, to expand one’s experience through print. Engaged readers can find books of

personal significance and make time for reading them. The investment of time is rewarded by the experience of immersion in the text itself. Engaged readers draw on knowledge gained from previous experiences to construct new understandings, and they use cognitive strategies to regulate comprehension so that goals are met and interests are satisfied. Benefits to readers may also occur through their satisfaction in processing valued information about a topic that plays a central role in their sense of self. Engaged readers are curious and involved in a literate lifestyle. (Bakker et al, 2000: 2)

The above excerpt summarizes the attributes of a lifelong reader. As will be supported in the next section, having this “literate lifestyle,” being engaged in reading, or put more simply being a lifelong reader, has been shown to be the most important factor in reading achievement.

3. The benefits of reading engagement/lifelong reading

The *Teaching Reading in Europe* report summarizes research findings about the importance and benefits of reading engagement:

It has been consistently shown that those who read more are better readers. With an increased amount of reading, reading ability improves, which in turn encourages more reading (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). Furthermore, Clark and Rumbold's meta-review (2006) showed that reading for pleasure is positively linked to text comprehension and grammar, breadth of vocabulary, greater self-confidence as a reader and pleasure of reading later in life. (EACEA, 2012: 114)

Another report (Allan et al., 2005: 5) summarizes research findings regarding the benefits of reading for enjoyment:

Children who say that they enjoy reading and who read for pleasure in their own time do better at school. Reading for enjoyment is positively associated with reading attainment and with writing ability (OECD 2002). Pupils who read for pleasure also demonstrate a wider general knowledge

(Wells 1986), a better understanding of other cultures (Meek 1991), and more complex insights regarding human nature, motivations and decision-making (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998, Bruner 1996).

The above findings are further supported and expanded through comparison of research results across fields. It is important to note, for instance, that EU member states with a high population percentage in reading for leisure (Eurobarometer 2002) feature average or above average reading literacy levels in the PISA 2009 survey. Further comparison of the two surveys reveals that states with a high percentage of “strong readers” (persons who read 8 books or more during a year) are highly ranked in PISA 2009. After looking at a larger body of research evidence, an additional source (Kovac & Sebart, 2006: 60) cites Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and the UK, as European countries with a high per capita usage of books; these same countries also rank high in PISA 2009, with Finland and the Netherlands having the highest mean score amongst the 24 participating EU states.

Guthrie and Schafer concluded that the engaged reader can even overcome obstacles of low parental education and income, as well as preferences and abilities associated with gender (Guthrie & Schafer, 1999). For instance, while students with less-educated mothers most often score lower in reading comprehension tests than students whose mothers have more education, these researchers found that engaged readers who had less-educated mothers achieved more highly than did disengaged readers who had highly educated mothers. The OECD report *Reading for Change: Results from PISA 2000* reaches similar conclusions:

- Being more enthusiastic about reading and being a frequent reader was more of an advantage on its own than having well-educated parents in good jobs.
- Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change. (OECD, 2002: 3)

Even more impressively, longitudinal studies have shown that engagement at a young age predicts achievement at an older age. Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that children who were highly engaged readers in grade 3, had higher reading achievement in grade 11 than students in grade 3 who

were disengaged readers. Stanovich has described the so-called “Matthew effect”: increasing competence is motivating, and a high level of motivation leads to more reading, which again improves competence (Stanovich, 1986).

Krashen illustrates best the importance of reading engagement, and reading for pleasure in particular: “Those who do not develop the pleasure reading habit simply don’t have a chance--they will have a very difficult time reading and writing at a level high enough to deal with the demands of today’s world” (Krashen 2004: x). The important benefits of reading engagement should be taken into serious account by schools and educators:

These benefits of engaged reading for achievement are real and cannot be explained away as an artefact of another factor. A range of predictive studies documents that engaged reading increases achievement when such factors as intelligence, home income, ethnicity, and school grades are statistically controlled. In other words, if teachers can enable students to become ‘self-starters’ as readers, they increase the children’s chances of success in immediate and distant futures, and this benefit accrues for a wide range of students. (Baker et al, 2000: 9)

The next section presents research results about schools, teachers and school librarians who are effective in promoting reading engagement.

4. Schools, teachers and librarians who promote reading effectively

Most contemporary texts seem to convert about the characteristics of successful reading promotion. Regardless of the methodology they use, most scholars seem to arrive in the same, or quite similar, conclusions. Miller argues that what needs to be done to achieve successful reading promotion should be “common sense” for experienced readers: “Anyone who calls herself or himself a reader can tell you that it starts with encountering great books, heartfelt recommendations, and a community of readers who share this passion” (Miller 4). As common sense as it may sound, though, in practice the overarching majority of schools and their staff place much more emphasis on other aspects of reading, such as testable and measurable reading skills. Miller comments: “When did reading become such a

technocratic process that we lost the books and the children in the debate? I am convinced that if we show students how to embrace reading as a lifelong pursuit and not just a collection of skills for school performance, we will be doing what I believe we have been charged to do: create readers” (4).

Acclaimed British authors Philip Pullman comments about the same issue:

I am concerned that in a constant search for things to test, we’re forgetting the true purpose, the true nature, of reading and writing; and in forcing these things to happen in a way that divorces them from pleasure, we are creating a generation of children who might be able to make the right noises when they see print, but who hate reading and feel nothing but hostility for literature. (Powling et al., 2003: 10)

And an OECD report emphasizes that schools should strive for both skill and motivation: “cognitive skills and reading motivation are mutually reinforcing... rather than being alternatives, schools need to address both simultaneously” (OECD, 2002). A language teacher that focuses only on teaching children how to read is failing her/his students:

Our message is that teaching students to be competent readers is necessary but not sufficient. Because engaged reading includes equal parts competence and motivation, teachers should allocate attention evenly to each of these twin goals. Neither can be neglected. A balanced program is cognitive and motivational. It teaches the skills of reading, and it also nurtures the disposition for reading. These dual priorities on skill and will, or competence and motivation, can be attained. But without both, reading engagement is unlikely. And without engagement, text comprehension will not increase in the long term. (Baker et al, 2000:11)

The report *Raising Standards in Reading: Achieving Children’s Targets* clearly observes that in schools that are effective in raising attainment in reading, “teachers place great emphasis not just on children acquiring specific reading skills but also on promoting engagement and pleasure in reading and they know what to do when a child does not seem motivated to read” (DfES, 2005: 4).

According to Baker et al, three things that teachers know and do, especially for their disengaged or “reluctant” readers, are:

- to enhance students’ sense of **competence** by providing them with materials to read that are challenging yet manageable;
- to reinforce students’ sense of **autonomy** by encouraging them to choose books of personal interest;
- and to support students’ sense of **relatedness** by giving them the opportunity to discuss what they are reading with others. (Baker et al, 2000:10)

Krashen supports similar ideas, but in a stronger voice:

Our problem in language education, as Frank Smith has pointed out, is that we have confused cause and effect. We have assumed that we first master language “skills” and then apply these skills to reading and writing. But that is not the way the human brain operates. Rather, reading for meaning, reading about things that matter to us, is the cause of literate language development. (Krashen 150)

Providing students with opportunities to choose and read texts that are personally meaningful and important to them is a factor that keeps coming up in all texts about reading promotion. But in order for students to be able to do this, the teacher also needs to provide them with *time*; time for in-class, free, voluntary reading: “FVR, which means reading because you want to. Free voluntary reading is what avid readers do every time they pick up a book to read for pleasure. The connection between voluntary reading and powerful literacy is that people learn to read by reading” (Ross 4). A print-rich environment, as well as teachers and librarians who function as reading models are two factors that seem to move students towards successful FVR.

As previously mentioned, recurring factors can be identified in research results about classroom practice that increases motivation to read identifies. Gambrell identifies the following:

- a teacher who is a reading model;

- access to a book-rich classroom environment;
- being able to choose books oneself;
- being familiar with books;
- social interactions with others about books;
- incentives that reflect the value of reading. (Gambrell, 1996: 20)

And Turner lists the following features of literacy activities that foster motivation:

- specific meaningful contexts, holistic activities;
- autonomy: motivating activities promote learner choice and control;
- social collaboration: peer teaching and learning;
- emphasizing metacognition;
- setting high expectations;
- open tasks. (Turner, 1997: 183)

Guthrie and others list similar factors (Guthrie et al., 1996: 323), and Lockwood summarizes as follows:

The elements of successful classroom practice which keep appearing in these and other research findings are the need for activities that are open and authentic, that take place in a reading environment where there is easy access to plenty of suitable texts and to an enthusiastic reading teacher, that feature pupil choice, collaborative learning and an approach where pupils are aware of what they are doing and how and why they are doing it. (Lockwood 12)

Baker et al identify these “Design Principles for Promoting Engaged Reading”:

1. Building the word-level foundation for engaged reading
2. Helping children who experience reading difficulties
3. Fostering reading for learning
4. Creating a print- and technology- rich classroom library to entice children to read
5. Promoting collaboration, social interaction, and engagement with text
6. Facilitating children’s reading motivation

- opportunities to choose books
 - interesting texts and challenging tasks
 - foster self-confidence and teach necessary reading skills
 - encourage reading-related collaboration
7. Determining the suitability of Assessments
 8. Using instructional time effectively
 9. Building towards coherent instruction
 10. Facilitating reading instruction through school-wide coordination
 11. Fostering home and community connections to support children’s reading
 12. Achieving expertise in teaching reading

(Baker et al, 2000: 317-319)

Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer conclude that what the research shows is that

- people become readers by doing lots of reading of extended text;
- that what motivates novice readers is the pleasure in the reading experience itself;
- and that libraries, schools and communities need to support pleasure reading by making the books accessible,
- by helping readers choose books,
- by celebrating and modelling the love of reading,
- and by creating communities of readers--either face-to-face or in an electronic environment-- who share the excitement of books. (2006: ix)

Taking into account the agreement of researchers on most aspects of effective reading promotion, the LiRe consortium suggests a comprehensive list of guidelines and strategies for a teacher or librarian who strives to help children become lifelong readers, shown below.

A Teacher or School Librarian who promotes reading engagement:

- Is a reading model and communicates daily her/his enthusiasm about reading
- Is informed about and has read a high volume of quality texts for children and YA

- Creates a print- and technology- rich classroom library to entice children to read
- Organizes a reading environment where there is easy access to plenty of suitable texts (in print and on screen)
- Promotes “light reading” as well (comics, magazines, popular print, on-line reading, etc.)
- Encourages and enables students to choose texts that interest them
- Helps students become familiar with books and other texts
- Plans for social interaction and collaboration about books and reading: peer-to-peer recommendations, teaching and learning
- Provides incentives that reflect the value of reading
- Enhances student autonomy: motivating activities which are open and authentic tasks that promote learner choice and control
- Has high expectations and encourage students to do so as well
- Ensures that pupils are aware of what they are doing and how and why they are doing it
- Establishes ‘real world interaction’
- Achieves expertise in teaching reading and helps children build the word-level foundation for engaged reading
- Helps children who experience reading difficulties
- Fosters reading for learning
- Provides sufficient time for in-class/library reading
- Reads aloud to children
- Builds towards coherent instruction
- Facilitates reading instruction through school-wide coordination
- Fosters home and community connections to support children’s reading
- Avoids giving a negative message about reading

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