

## The school culture of reading for pleasure: Perspectives of educators and students in Years 3-6

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Australian children read for pleasure less and less as they move through primary school, with a noticeable decline emerging in the middle primary school years (Scholastic, 2019). It has also been found that reading for pleasure at school has become de-prioritised in primary schools, with greater emphasis in the broader literacy education dialogue placed on instructional reading pedagogy and standardised literacy testing (Merga & Gardiner, 2018). The research presented in this paper focuses on the aspects of school culture that meaningfully support *Reading for Pleasure at School* (RfPS) in Years 3-6. It aims to explore the perspectives of five educators and 14 Years 3-6 children from one Western Australian independent public school. Consistent with a phenomenological perspective, this qualitative case study collected data through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews with the participants. The research found that there were notable discrepancies between the educators' and the children's perspectives of RfPS culture, highlighting the importance of children's perspectives being sought if schools wish to improve the quantity and quality of their reading for pleasure practices.

### Introduction

Despite reading pedagogy being consistently debated and researched in Australia, studies and resulting media interest have historically focused on evaluating and developing *instructional* reading pedagogy in response to standardised literacy achievement (Afflerbach et al., 2013). Instructional reading pedagogy is distinctly different to reading for pleasure pedagogy, as its goal is to teach discrete technical reading skills, such as decoding, fluency and comprehension, or reading strategies such as predicting, inferring and synthesising. The goal of reading for pleasure at school (RfPS), in contrast, is to promote personal engagement and intrinsic motivation to read and has taken various forms over the years, including 'silent reading', and 'Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading' (USSR) (Cremin et al., 2014; Gamble, 2013; Levine, 1984). Reading for pleasure is considered a life-long literacy skill, which is a key aim of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2019). According to Dewan (2016), "... the more leisure books people read, the more literate they become, and the more prosperous and equitable the society they inhabit" (p. 1).

Opportunities to engage in RfPS however, decrease as children move into middle and upper primary school (McGeown et al., 2015; Scholastic, 2019). There is currently a gap in the literature surrounding RfPS perspectives in the middle to upper primary years, and current knowledge of children's RfPS perspectives is inconsistent (Merga, 2017; Merga &

Mat Roni, 2018; Scholastic, 2019). This identified gap and inconsistency in literature regarding RfPS was the impetus for the research presented in this paper. This research defines RfPS as willingly engaging with texts for a sustained period of time (at least fifteen minutes) while at school, exercising personal choice, and having only informal or social tasks attached (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Kucirkova & Cremin, 2018). This definition was applied to investigate educators' and Years 3-6 children's perspectives of their school's RfPS culture, encompassing partnerships between home, school and community, whole-school values and practices, and individual values and beliefs.

## **Literacy**

While 'silent reading' as a strategy originally aimed to promote meaningful independent reading in Australian classrooms, its current perceived value and resulting implementation is generally inconsistent with the new dynamic definition of RfPS outlined above (Merga & Gardiner, 2018; Merga & Ledger, 2019). The Australian Curriculum, which upholds the values and priorities of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (MCEETYA, 2019), includes 'literacy' as one of seven General Capabilities, which acknowledges the "... value of literacy as a gateway skill for learning in other areas." (Merga & Gardiner, 2018, p. 38). The Australian Curriculum: English specifically focuses on high-quality children's literature as the 'vehicle' for effectively and meaningfully teaching primary school language and literacy, and embedded within the Year Level Descriptions is the expectation that all children from Pre-Primary to Year 6 will "... engage with a variety of texts for enjoyment." (ACARA, n.d.). Despite this general curricular support for RfPS, the lower and middle primary school years' English curriculum includes a small number of specific content descriptors indirectly supporting RfPS, such as the requirement that Year 3 children "... develop criteria for establishing personal preferences for literature". The Year 5 and 6 content descriptors do not directly refer to RfPS at all (ACARA, n.d.).

## **Benefits of RfPS**

When RfPS is effectively supported and promoted, literature explicates several benefits. Benefits can include increased positive affective factors relating to reading, such as motivation and enjoyment of reading (Collins et al., 2022; Merga, 2017). Positive affective benefits of RfPS can then affect subsequent reading skill acquisition (Cremin et al., 2014; Laurenson et al., 2015). RfPS has other literacy benefits such as increased vocabulary and improved grammar knowledge (Collins et al., 2022; Sullivan & Brown, 2015).

## **Affective benefits of RfPS**

Studies have found that when delivered according to a consistent and informed framework, RfPS pedagogy positively influences affective factors such as intrinsic motivation to read, reader engagement and enjoyment of reading, for both children and classroom teachers (Collins et al., 2022; Merga, 2017). These affective benefits are closely intertwined and difficult to extricate from each other. Each affects the other and they work together to create more powerful RfPS outcomes for all children. Warrington and

George (2014) in Antigua and Barbuda reported increased confidence and intrinsic motivation to read in both 'tutors' and 'tutees' because of their multi-age peer reading program. In addition, Cremin et al. (2014) in England stated that when teachers engaged in 'book talk' in the classroom they encouraged child-led informal discussions around literature, which lead to book recommendations and social connections between peers. The increase in socially driven book recommendations then resulted in more engaged, self-confident learners (Cremin et al., 2014). In support of Cremin et al.'s (2014) assertion, Laurenson et al. (2015) found that most children expressed taking more enjoyment from English as a subject in general when RfPS was meaningfully incorporated. Similarly, in Australia, when interactive reading was used as a whole-class strategy for encouraging RfPS, children reported increased confidence, competence, and security (Merga, 2017). These affective benefits of increased reading confidence, engagement and motivation demonstrate the power of RfPS pedagogy to positively influence children's literacy experiences.

### **Link between affective benefits of RfPS and subsequent reading skill acquisition**

While it is difficult to establish a conclusive causal link between affective factors and reading skill acquisition, it is largely accepted in educational practice that motivation and engagement impact learners "...above and beyond cognitive characteristics such as intelligence or prior knowledge." (Schiefele et al., 2012, p. 427). For example, McGeown et al. (2015) found in England that reader confidence had the strongest relationship to reading attainment, while Merga (2017) established in Australia a positive relationship between teachers reading aloud for enjoyment and children's levels of competency and confidence when reading aloud and using reading strategies. Strong personal motivation to read for pleasure could also disrupt the 'Matthew effect' (Stanovich, 1986). While the 'Matthew effect' posits that RfPS would only benefit 'good readers', several studies concluded that when RfPS was effectively taught and supported, the resulting positive affective factors led to enhanced reading skill attainment for *all* children, not just the 'good readers' (Collins et al., 2022; Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2015; Laurenson et al., 2015). While it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between RfPS and improved reading skills, at the very least the "...relationship might be cyclical" (Clark, 2015, p. 18). In other words, focusing on teaching technical reading skills at the expense of promoting positive reading attitudes, motivation and engagement is unlikely to yield positive long-term literacy gains (McGeown et al., 2015).

### **RfPS culture**

RfPS culture can be identified as a complex interplay between individual, whole-school and community values and practices. Children's reading engagement can be meaningfully impacted by their teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards reading (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Merga, 2017). Merga and Ledger (2019) argued that "...as teachers, we influence our children's perspectives on the value of an activity through the manner in which we position it within the classroom" (p. 139). Teachers who adhere to the belief that 'good readers' are those who can competently decode and fluently read aloud for example, may be prioritising technical reading proficiency, and communicating through

their language and pedagogical choices that RfPS is not valued (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Laurenson et al., 2015). This can result in a ‘pedagogy of poverty’, further entrenching literacy inequalities (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018).

There are other ways that educators’ values and perceived limitations can affect RfPS pedagogy. Laurenson et al. (2015) reported that some teachers in Ireland were genuinely surprised by the positive attitudes their children expressed towards reading when asked directly by the researchers, highlighting the potential for classroom teachers to make false assumptions about their children’s reading attitudes and subsequently teach according to these false assumptions. Similarly in Australia, Merga and Mat Roni (2018) found that once children had acquired independent reading skills, teachers valued reading less, leading to a decrease in RfPS pedagogy, while Merga and Gardiner (2018) argued that RfPS is rarely pedagogically supported or meaningfully implemented, despite appearing regularly on classroom timetables in one form or another. Classroom teachers may also perceive their own limited professional knowledge as a primary challenge to prioritising RfPS (Kucirkova & Cremin, 2018). While these limitations may be exerting real and unavoidable pressure, classroom teachers hold much responsibility for RfPS, as their “...recognition of the multifaceted value of reading can drive them to embed it as an enjoyable practice that is an inextricable component of classroom culture.” (Merga & Ledger, 2019, p. 140). Garces-Bacsal et al. (2018) found in Singapore that even teachers who did not identify as ‘devoted readers’ were able to identify and discuss effective RfPS pedagogy, signifying that all primary school teachers *can* implement effective RfPS pedagogy, providing they reflect upon their own reading attitudes and approach RfPS positively and enthusiastically. As Merga (2016, p. 267) stated, “...teachers of reading can impart both reading skill and will”.

While there is a gap in the literature regarding leadership perspectives of RfPS in Years 3-6 classrooms, some studies discuss a preliminary understanding of the crucial role that leadership plays in promoting RfPS. Western Australian primary school teacher librarians, for example, concluded that leadership’s personal attitudes and practices played a noteworthy role in creating positive schoolwide reading cultures (Merga & Mason, 2019). They indicated a reliance on leadership support through adequate resourcing and funding to provide diverse high-quality texts for children to choose from, and leadership educators who identified as readers were more likely to provide this support, as well as actively advocate for RfPS and promote reading initiatives (Merga & Mason, 2019). To summarise: “...where leaders were readers, the flow-on effects seemed to be highly positive, and therefore efforts to increase the reading engagement of school leaders could yield benefits for the school culture and beyond” (Merga & Mason, 2019, p. 186).

There are inconsistent findings regarding children’s perspectives of RfPS. Laurenson et al. (2015) found in Ireland that some children associated two separate meanings to the word ‘reading’ – one being a pleasurable task and one being instructional. Others have argued that many children hold predominately negative perspectives of ‘reading’ due to its assumed connection to schooling and academic achievement, and is not seen as a desirable leisure activity, particularly when competing with technology or structured extracurricular activities (Reedy & de Carvalho, 2021; Scholastic, 2019). Similarly in

Australia, Merga (2016) found that although most children said that reading was 'important', almost half did not know if their teacher enjoyed reading based on their classroom behaviours.

To ensure that schools are providing the best and most relevant opportunities to engage learners in RfPS it is important to identify potential limitations to RfPS from children's perspectives. For example, Merga (2017, 2018) asked children in Western Australia directly what factors would encourage them to read for pleasure more often, with her results supporting earlier findings that time allocation, choice, diversity of available texts and supportive physical environment are crucial factors. Merga and Mat Roni (2018) also found that some children shared the teacher perspective discussed earlier that pleasure reading decreases in importance once they can read independently. Contrasting this, Scholastic's (2019) report indicated that older children would like to continue RfPS beyond the point of independent skill acquisition, particularly when conducted as enjoyable shared reading experiences with educators. Children overwhelmingly identified choice and personal interest as important factors to consider and explained that, when given the chance to exercise autonomy or to read interesting material, they did view reading as a pleasurable option (Merga, 2018; Merga & Mat Roni, 2018; Reedy & de Carvalho, 2021).

### **Whole-school values and practices**

Although a small number of studies have investigated the value of whole-school support when fostering RfPS, more investigation in this area is needed (Cremin et al., 2014; Merga & Gardiner, 2018; Merga & Mason, 2019). Regarding leadership and literacy in general, Barton and McKay's (2016) case studies of Queensland high schools identified whole school culture, supported by leadership teams, as the driving force behind powerful literacy learning. There is a very limited number of studies investigating RfPS whole-school values from the perspective of leadership in primary schools. Of the studies that do exist, whole-school values and practices are found to be strongly influenced by leadership perspectives and, therefore, require ongoing investigation (Merga & Mason, 2019).

### **Community values and practices**

Merga and Gardiner (2018) asserted that the lack of meaningful and specific RfPS focus in the Australian Curriculum: English reflects the broader policies and educational culture in Australia that prioritises reading skill acquisition; this focus on instructional reading pedagogy and achievement therefore affects the stakeholders' awareness and effective implementation of RfPS (Merga & Gardiner, 2018). To illustrate this point, few schools in Western Australia meaningfully include RfPS in their schoolwide literacy programs and policies, instead favouring 'top-down notions' of reading, contradicting RfPS's strong social, collaborative child-oriented approach (Merga & Gardiner, 2018). There are many studies exploring the role that community values and practices play in early childhood reading experiences, particularly the importance of positive caregiver values and practices when promoting early engagement with texts for pleasure, however, there is a gap in the

literature relating to community values and practices that affect RfPS in middle to upper primary school.

There is a lack of literature pertaining to leadership perspectives of RfPS school culture, and it is unclear to what extent children's and classroom teachers' perspectives of culture are connected. There are inconsistent findings relating to the relationship between classroom teachers' RfPS values, their teaching practices, and their children's RfPS perspectives. Based on this analysis of the literature, the following research question was developed: What are the perspectives of educators and children regarding their school's RfPS culture in Years 3-6?

## **Research design**

This research applies a qualitative phenomenological case study to explore educators' and Years 3-6 children's perspectives of one school's RfPS pedagogy. It is underpinned by a relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology and interpretive phenomenological perspective. It utilised a single-case design that collected data from two key stakeholder groups: educators (consisting of school leadership and classroom teachers) and children in Years 3-6, through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data were analysed thematically, and findings reported through rich textural thematic descriptions. As the research focussed on the differing experiences and realities of the stakeholders, a constructivist and interpretivist approach was appropriate given that its primary aim is attributing meaning to human experiences through acknowledging multiple realities (Cohen et al., 2018; Vagle, 2018).

The overarching research question that framed the investigation was: *What are the perspectives of educators and students regarding their school's Reading for Pleasure at School culture in Years 3-6?* To respond to the research question, the following sampling and methods were applied.

## **Participants and sampling**

Sampling was purposive with participants from a small co-educational, independent community primary school located in the Perth metropolitan area comprising the sample (Table 1). Independent primary schools in WA maintain full autonomy over their culture, policies, and practices (Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia [AISWA], 2019). The participant school promotes autonomy and agency of children, connectedness to community, and individualised 'whole-child' values-based education (School website, 2021). The School Council as a governing body reflects their strong philosophy of community support and collaboration, and is responsible for the school's strategic direction, staffing, and ensuring the school adheres to relevant legislation (School website, 2021).

The school's total enrolment number was 90 children from Pre-Kindergarten to Year 6; due to this small population it has a teacher-to-child ratio of one to fifteen, allowing children to have the same teacher for two consecutive years (School website, 2021). The

school had an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 1168, indicating that it had a higher-than-average level of educational advantage based on various school and community factors such as geographical location, and parents/caregivers' education and occupations, and approximately 20% of the children identified as having a language background other than English (My School, 2021).

Table 1: Number of participants

		No.
Phase One: Individual semi-structured interviews		
Leadership team	Principal	1
	School Council member	2
Classroom teachers	Year 3/4 teacher	1
	Year 5/6 teacher	1
Total educators		5
Phase Two: Focus groups		
Children	Year 6 children	5
	Year 5 children	5
	Year 4 children	1
	Year 3 children	3
Total children		14
Total participants		19

### Ethical considerations

This research complied with all required ethical processes and considerations, including obtaining full human research ethical clearance from a tertiary institution (2021-035F), and obtaining informed consent from all participants or their guardians. This investigation considered issues of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality to show respect for people's rights and dignity. All participants were given an overview of the research procedures and assurances of confidentiality. Participants are referred to on transcripts using pseudonyms that refer only to their school position or year level (for example, 'LT1' for leadership, 'CT1' for classroom teacher and 'Year 6 Child' for a child in Year 6). Simplified language was used when explaining focus group information to minors to ensure they understood their right to withdraw at any time. All participants were provided with detailed information sheets and explicitly informed that their participation in this research was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any time prior to publication without negative consequences.

### Data collection

The researcher conducted and audio-recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the educators using a hard copy interview protocol to ensure the interview stayed focused (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were structured to begin with informal ice-breaker questions to build rapport, followed by a brief overview of this investigation's key terminology and concepts. Several open-ended questions were asked, along with a range

of probing sub-questions as needed to provoke rich, experiential responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Three focus groups were also conducted consisting of four to five children of similar age (that is, a Year 6 group, a Year 5 group and a Year 3/4 group). The focus groups took place in a neutral classroom to provide a relaxed and inviting setting. Three children from the Year 3/4 group requested that their parent/caregiver be present during the focus group to increase their sense of comfort and ease. Each focus group included a 20-30 minute talking session (5-10 minutes for creating rapport and 15-25 minutes for semi-structured discussion) followed by the option of free writing and/or free drawing to clarify and draw out further meaning if the child chose to do so (Cohen et al., 2018). None of the 14 children chose to write or draw any further ideas. See Appendix 1 for interview and focus group questions relevant to this paper.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is a flexible data analysis approach appropriate to many qualitative research designs; it seeks to find themes, that is, recurring patterns of responses or meanings that are relevant to the research question and appear across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As this research stems from a constructivist, interpretivist and phenomenological framework, its underpinnings acknowledge that individual perspectives are embedded in sociocultural and structural factors and therefore data analysis takes the form of latent thematic analysis, looking to interpret what is 'underneath' the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is an iterative process that begins during data collection and required ongoing reflection and consideration moved back and forth between coding, analysing and writing. The process of thematic analysis comprised a combination of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps and Corbin and Strauss's (2008) general guidelines, that include thoroughly familiarising oneself with the data, performing open and axial coding, constantly creating memos, and searching for and refining themes before producing the final written discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017).

A two-step process as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed. Firstly, all coded data extracts were re-read in full to ensure that each theme presented a cohesive and accurate representation of the data extracts within it. The themes were reviewed in relation to the data set as a whole to evaluate the extent to which they effectively reflected the 'big picture' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process occurred several times before the thematic map was considered to satisfactorily represented the data set and themes could be refined and defined. Data were displayed through written thematic descriptions, adhering to phenomenological principles, case study methodology and thematic analysis processes, consisting of compelling verbatim extracts to increase the investigation's credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Elo et al., 2014). Verifications and conclusions were then drawn to finalise the data analysis process.



## Findings and discussion

### Community partnerships

The positive impact of the home environment and family support on RfPS emerged as a strong finding from leadership and classroom teachers. All (5) educators spoke of the perceived positive impact that home support has on their school's RfPS culture, even though the partnership between school and home was not a focus for this study, as the emphasis was specifically on the school culture. LT2, for example, stated "...we probably have a lot of parents who would read for pleasure, so they'd be modelling that." CT1 commented that "...the culture we have at school is very much at home as well, it's actually developed at home." It is noteworthy that the educators expressed a strong perception of the home's influence on RfPS in middle to upper primary years, despite this not being the focus of the interview. Given the community's demographics and educational advantages, this finding indicates potential for the school to rely on home support as opposed to cultivating a strong school based RfPS culture.

Having said that, the educators also perceived the whole school's positive reading culture as having a substantial impact on RfPS. LT3, for example, stated that "...the school provides – again I'll come back to the word culture – but just a supportive, really supportive environment for pleasure and joy to be a part of the learning everywhere," while CT2 commented that "...we [educators] all discuss ways and means of working with that [child] to increase the value of that [RfPS] happening more often for that child." Classroom teachers also expressed strong views that RfPS was encouraged by leadership and woven into the school's values and learning philosophies, aligning with Merga and Mason's (2019) assertion that leadership attitudes play a vital role in creating a positive school reading culture. Of the two classroom teachers interviewed, both expressed a sense of support and encouragement from leadership that fostered a positive school RfPS culture. CT1 stated that leadership "...encourages all the teachers to get the kids reading" and CT2 said leadership was "...very supportive" of classroom teachers using their budgets to purchase new books.

Leadership also spoke frequently and confidently of the school culture's impact and influence on RfPS. Two of the three leadership team participants spoke of the school's leadership explicitly supporting the school's RfPS culture. LT2 commented that leadership "...very clearly" supported RfPS in Years 3-6 classrooms, while LT3 stated that "...there's a very collaborative and trusting relationship between the coordinator [principal], the teachers...I think that it certainly is something that is important to the leadership in the school time but at the same time it remains important to the teachers." Despite the perception of a strong, positive reading for pleasure culture, none of the educators were aware of RfPS explicitly appearing in any whole-school literacy policies or documents, supporting Merga and Gardiner's (2018) finding that few schools in W.A. include RfPS in their literacy documents. Leadership values that explicitly support a positive RfPS school culture, while vital in influencing RfPS pedagogies, must still translate into practice, as classroom teachers may not have awareness or accountability for RfPS if it does not appear in their school's literacy policies.

In contrast to these strong educator perspectives of community partnerships creating a positive RfPS culture, the Years 3-6 children did not articulate culture as a factor in their RfPS experience, focusing instead on observable teacher practices and the physical environment. Two children mentioned Book Week or Book Day as a school-wide practice supporting RfPS, while one focus group did not produce any statements that could be attributed to the school's RfPS culture. This noteworthy discrepancy between the adults' strong positive perspective of school culture and the children's almost non-existent perspective of a schoolwide reading for pleasure culture highlights the importance of RfPS research that investigates multiple perspectives and prioritises children's voices. It is clear from these findings that children do not perceive the school culture to be as powerful or influential on their experiences as the educators do. This finding is supported by the inconsistent understandings of children's RfPS perspectives represented within current literature (Laurenson et al., 2015; McGeown et al., 2015). The researcher acknowledges that the discrepancy between the educators' and the children's perspectives may be influenced by the children's lack of understanding or vocabulary to articulate the complex concept of 'culture', despite probing questions during the focus groups. It may also reflect the fact that educators and children can view the world around them through significantly different lenses, even when viewing the same school context. Educators may believe that RfPS is supported through the school culture, which they then may assume permeates through to the children's perspectives, and therefore de-prioritise other key RfPS pedagogical elements, such as teacher practices and the physical environment. Therefore, practical RfPS pedagogies such as embedding RfPS into school-wide policies, teacher practices and the physical environment must be considered and implemented, even if there is an established school-wide reading culture from the educators' points of view.

Community values and practices were also inconsistently regarded across participant groups; similarly to the impact of positive home and whole-school support, educators placed a much higher value on the local community's positive reading culture than the children did. The idea of community values and practices was addressed with the children by using the example of collaborating with the local public library and how that affected their perspective of RfPS. All five educators commented on the local community's general support for RfPS; most (4) participants specifically mentioned the proximity of two local bookshops, the local library and one local literature centre. Author visits were referred to by all three focus groups as an example of partnerships with the local community, with a small number of children making specific supporting statements such as: "...I wish we could go to the library, like we used to when we were younger...cos they got like a thousand new books in the library" and "...It [visiting local authors]'s really cool and [author] was really funny." However, most children did not articulate a sense of community culture influencing their RfPS practices, preferring to discuss teacher behaviours and the role of the physical environment.

Despite a strong perception of positive local support for RfPS from the five educators in general, leadership identified a decline in RfPS dialogue amongst leadership colleagues. The leadership perspective indicated that current primary school literacy education dialogue tended to focus on instructional programs, standardised testing and the dichotomy between phonics and whole language. LT1 for example stated: "...You hardly

hear it [RfPS]...it's not promoted very much... I feel like other things have overtaken it... it seems to have lost some emphasis along the way...", while LT3 commented on "...the pressures in schools to focus on phonics and decoding... it's the dichotomy of that that creates a barrier [to promoting RfPS]". LT1 also commented that they "...felt like other things have overtaken it, maybe that's based around NAPLAN and then you want to give the phonics tests to the Year 1s and that tends to be what you keep hearing about." LT3 also stated that "...your interpretation of the curriculum is also often driven by all the other 'wars' that are going on on the side... and that's political." One of the leadership participants felt that RfPS used to feel important when they were starting in education, but that it "...seems to have lost some emphasis along the way." As Merga and Gardiner (2018) argued, schoolwide promotion of RfPS is inextricably linked to the broader community's RfPS values and practices, and both leadership and classroom teachers cannot effectively promote RfPS until there is a broader conversation about its value in middle to upper primary school.

### **Individual RfPS values and beliefs**

The general concept of reading for pleasure was highly valued by participants, and most educators self-identified as enthusiastic readers who enjoyed a variety of texts when time permitted. Four out of the five educators named preferred genres and/or specific authors that they enjoyed reading for pleasure and expressed genuine personal interest in the practice. CT1, for example, stated: "...Most of the time I read for pleasure when I'm on holidays...I like crime book, mysteries...that's what I tend to read". Three of the five educators explicitly acknowledged personally valuing RfPS in the middle to upper school; TL1 commented, "...I do value it highly," T2 stated, "...I think it is a bit of a critical stage, for them to get that [reading] bug," and CT1 specified, "...I'm a great advocate of reading for pleasure...I really do encourage it."

Most educators also indicated a strong belief in RfPS's value and perceived benefits for Years 3-6 children. The perceived benefits ranged from increased positive affective factors towards literacy in general such as those proposed by Laurenson et al., (2015) to the positive effect on wellbeing as identified by Collins et al. (2022). Despite the difficulty in establishing a causal link between RfPS and technical literacy proficiency, one classroom teacher confidently stated a connection between RfPS and improved literacy skills in writing, spelling, and reading comprehension. These strong beliefs about RfPS's perceived benefits, along with the previously discussed strong personal valuing of RfPS, are in opposition to Merga and Mat Roni's (2018) assertion that as children become independent readers, teachers may value reading less, leading to a decrease in RfPS pedagogy. The inconsistent implementation of RfPS pedagogy (as perceived by the Years 3-6 children) therefore appears to be more attributable to a lack of teacher knowledge of recommended RfPS teacher practices, rather than the educators' personal beliefs or the cultural positioning of RfPS. This potential limitation corroborates Kucirkova and Cremin's (2018)'s conclusion that professional knowledge is one of the primary challenges of prioritising RfPS.

The children's responses indicated a genuine love of reading for pleasure. This may reflect the school's educational advantages and strong RfP home support, as it contradicts the findings of several studies that indicate reading is not a preferred leisure activity as children move through primary school (Reedy & de Carvalho, 2021; Scholastic, 2019). Instead, the results may support Laurenson et al.'s (2015) findings that teachers can make false assumptions about their children's reading attitudes, and therefore de-prioritise it in their classrooms. To illustrate this point, CT1 admitted they were "...really shocked" by how enthusiastically their classroom engaged in an informal whole-class conversation about their reading for pleasure habits and opinions, even within a school setting where the educators felt a strong sense of positive RfPS culture and support. This raises an interesting question when combined with the previously discussed influence of teacher values and practices: what comes first – the children's or the teachers' change in reading values and attitudes?

Community partnerships and individual RfPS values and practices reflect the key emergent thematic findings in response to the research question: *What are the perspectives of educators and children regarding their school's RfPS culture in Years 3-6?* These findings indicate that there are notable discrepancies between educators' and children's perspectives of their school's RfPS culture, with educators placing greater emphasis on its impact on the school's RfPS pedagogies than the children. Despite strong cultural RfPS support within a school, personal educator values may impact on their RfPS classroom pedagogies, and educator knowledge and implementation of practical and observable RfPS pedagogies is still needed to ensure that RfPS is meaningfully occurring in middle to upper primary school.

### **Recommendations**

The findings indicate that educators perceived culture as significantly impacting the school's RfPS pedagogies, whereas the Years 3-6 children did not. These inconsistent perspectives contrast with McKool and Gespass's (2009) findings that teachers with positive reading attitudes and personal practices are more likely to implement RfPS pedagogies, and Merga and Mason's (2019) findings that leadership members who supported RfP as a concept were more likely to provide tangible support for RfPS. This incongruity between reading values/beliefs and the children's perspectives of RfPS pedagogies in the school and classroom environment indicates that professional knowledge of RfPS pedagogies and implementation of RfPS policies is crucial.

From the findings, schools are encouraged to acknowledge the discrepancies between educators' and children's RfPS perspectives and critically evaluate any assumptions educators may hold that potentially influence RfPS pedagogies in Years 3-6 classrooms. The findings about personal values and practices, for example, suggest that Years 3-6 classroom teachers should engage in open-minded and ongoing discussions with middle to upper primary school children to accurately determine their RfPS attitudes and practices instead of inadvertently applying their own values or making assumptions about the children's attitudes. At the leadership level, RfPS should be embedded explicitly into schoolwide literacy policies and communicated clearly to classroom teachers, to ensure

that RfPS is afforded some priority alongside instructional reading (Merga & Gardiner, 2018). Additionally, RfPS needs to be drawn into the public discourse and afforded a place in the ongoing primary school literacy dialogue; stronger support from literacy associations for example could boost RfPS awareness in schools and increase educators' RfPS professional knowledge.

### **Limitations**

Further exploration of RfPS pedagogies in more diverse school contexts is required to begin compiling comprehensive insight into the current state of RfPS in Australia, such as larger public/private schools and rural/remote schools. This investigation's findings emphasised children's perceptions of RfPS culture and acknowledged that children have valid perspectives that should be considered. Further studies are needed that centralise children's voices and explore Years 3-6 children's perspectives of RfPS on a larger scale.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation was premised on exploring educators' and children's perspectives of their school's Years 3-6 RfPS culture in response to an established decline in RfPS behaviours in middle to upper primary school children, using a single-case qualitative case study design. Findings clearly indicate noteworthy discrepancies between educators' and Years 3-6 children's perspectives regarding RfPS culture. Such discrepancies highlight the importance of educators interrogating their own assumptions about RfPS culture and giving children a voice to express their perspectives. This research has determined that a strong positive RfPS culture alone may not translate to meaningful implementation of RfPS pedagogies and practice, from the children's perspectives. More professional awareness and knowledge of RfPS pedagogy is needed for RfPS to be effectively implemented by classroom teachers and supported by leadership. Findings have also recognised that there is a lack of RfPS support in the broader education culture and therefore is at risk of continuing to be de-prioritised in schools.

Based on these preliminary findings, it would seem that broader public discourse and cultural support of RfPS in middle to upper primary school is needed to provoke educators to interrogate their own RfPS values and assumptions and challenge the role of culture within their school's RfPS practices. This would ideally lead to educators seeking out Years 3-6 children's perspectives and broadening their RfPS knowledge and skills through professional development. More accurate understandings of both children's perspectives and professional knowledge of RfPS has the potential to lead to more meaningful promotion of RfPS in middle to upper primary school. The challenging question that needs to be asked of the Australian primary education system is this: If RfPS is left to the discretion of individual school leadership or Years 3-6 classroom teachers, without broader cultural and structural support and the presence of strong home support as perceived in this school setting, will inequitable outcomes be the result? Will some children never experience a positive reading culture or supportive RfPS pedagogies during their middle to upper primary years? RfPS will continue to be deprioritised and inconsistent if these questions are left unanswered.

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## Appendix 1: Semi-structured interviews with educators

### Questions within the scope of this paper

#### *Leadership educators*

1. What do you believe to be the value of reading for pleasure at school (RfPS) in middle to upper primary school?



- a. What are your personal RfP practices?
2. What RfPS pedagogy do you believe to be in place at your school?
  - b. What is your perspective of RfPS within your whole school literacy plans and policies?
  - c. What are your perspectives of your school's RfPS culture?
  - d. What do you believe classroom educators need in order to support RfPS?
3. What external factors do you believe impact on your school's RfPS pedagogy?
  - e. What is your perspective of RfPS within the Australian Curriculum and broader educational policies?
  - f. What do you believe the value of RfPS is within your broader school community?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add about RfPS at your school?

#### *Classroom teachers*

1. What do you believe to be the value of RfPS in middle to upper primary school?
  - a. What are your personal RfP practices?
2. What RfPS pedagogy do you believe to be in place in your classroom?
3. What is your view of the RfPS pedagogy in place in your classroom?
  - b. How does the school culture influence RfPS?
4. What external factors do you believe influence your ability to implement RfPS pedagogy?
  - c. What is your perspective of RfPS within the Australian Curriculum and broader educational policies?
  - d. What is your perspective of RfPS's value within your school community?
  - e. How do leadership educators influence your school's RfPS pedagogy?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add about RfPS at your school?

## **Appendix 2: Focus groups with Years 3-6 children**

### **Questions within the scope of this paper**

*The following questions will be introduced after the 'ice-breaker' activities.*

1. What do you think it means to 'read for fun' at school?
2. How do you feel about reading for fun at school?
3. What does your school do that makes it easier / harder for you to read for fun?
4. What does your classroom teacher do to make it easier / harder for you to read for fun at school?
5. What else affects your decision to read for fun or not at school?
6. Would you like your school / classroom teacher to do something else that would encourage you to read for fun more at school?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about reading for fun at school?

The children will then be provided with pencils and paper and asked to draw and/or write their perspective of what reading for fun looks like/feels like/sounds like in their school (Y-chart - facilitator to model).

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