



## Becoming a Reader: Significant Social Influences on Avid Book Readers

[Dr. Margaret K. Merga](#), School of Education, Murdoch University, South Street, Murdoch, Western Australia 6150

### Abstract

*Understanding how social influences can foster avid book reader identification is a key research goal that warrants further investigation beyond a limited early-years lens. The author's 2015 International Study of Avid Book Readers (ISABR) explored, as one of its key research questions, the influence positive social agents can have on avid book readers, relying on the retrospective reflections of respondents from a range of countries and supporting quantitative data to explore this research focus. Early influences were examined, with data suggesting that maternal instruction is the most prevalent source of early reading teaching. Most respondents (64.3 percent) were the recipients of positive influence from a social agent. Indirect avid reader influence, author influence, fostering access, shared social habit, reading for approval, recommendations and supporting choice, and exposure to reading aloud were recurring mechanisms of influence. The multiple mechanisms of influence identified constitute opportunities for engagement and subsequent intervention by literacy advocates, including librarians.*

### Introduction

Contemporary school and public librarians provide an increasingly diverse array of services across a range of contexts; however, they still play an important traditional role in reading advocacy and support. This role can manifest in provision of readers' advisory services to connect young and older readers with books that they are likely to enjoy (Ross and Chelton 2001). Supplying carefully considered resources to be responsive to preferences and trends in borrowing, and supporting initiatives such as book clubs, are among a broad range of possible supportive interventions in this area. Through the role libraries and librarians play in supporting readers and reading, libraries and librarians make a valuable contribution to the literacy levels in the societies in which they are placed (Liu 2004). Therefore, questions about what shapes or makes a reader are highly relevant to librarians, and particularly school librarians, who, through

their support and advocacy, play a crucial role in supporting young readers to adopt a lifelong identification of themselves as readers.

Social influences may exert a significant influence on leisure activities, as leisure activities are learned, and “acquiring the skills, experience, relational norms, equipment, attitudes and frequently the taste for participation” in leisure activities is part of a “socialization process” (Kelly 1974, 182). Recreational book reading is a leisure activity that may be fostered by key social influences (Merga 2016), with even indirect socialization, such as parents’ modelling reading, associated with positive effects (Mancini and Pasqua 2011; Mullan 2010; Wollscheid 2013). While recreational reading is a practice associated with diverse literacy benefits (Berns et al. 2013; Mol and Bus 2011), interest in reading books for recreation is in decline in recent times, with aliteracy becoming increasingly common (OECD 2010; Stedman 2009). In addition, understanding of the benefits of reading beyond learners’ early years has burgeoned in recent times, contributing to a strong argument for encouraging reading in later childhood and adulthood, and even old age, with reading books increasingly associated with resisting dementia in later life (Lopes et al. 2011; Vemuri et al. 2014; Verghese et al. 2003; Wilson et al. 2013).

Understanding how social influences can support increased frequency of engagement in recreational book reading and improved attitudes toward the practice is a key research goal that warrants investigation beyond a focus on early schooling. Much of the attention on the impact of social influences on reading focuses on young people’s reading at home and at school (e.g., Merga 2014a, 2015a; Wigfield and Asher 1984; Weinburger 1996). There has been comparatively limited examination of the potentially lasting effect these social influences can exert beyond the school years. The research focusing on socialization of young people to become readers suggests that the period of acute fostering of the practice by parents may be very brief indeed, and concerned primarily with skill acquisition. Recent Australian research found that “family engagement in shared reading and family engagement in home activities decreased across early childhood from age 2 to age 6 years” (Hayes 2015, iv), supporting a growing body of research contending that parents and teachers may lower their expectations about children’s reading once children acquire the skill to read, and as they progress beyond the early years of schooling (Guthrie and Davis 2003; Merga 2014a). As reading books for recreation offers benefits throughout life, attention to supporting recreational book reading after the period of skill acquisition is essential.

Retrospective data gathered from current avid readers who reflected on the role of key past and present social influences on fostering and developing respondents’ positive attitudes toward reading can provide valuable insight into how individuals can be effectively socialized into becoming avid lifelong readers of books. In the research reported here, the focus has been shifted away from readers’ early years to looking at reading as an important lifelong skill that offers benefits beyond the initial period of skill acquisition. Matthew Knoester and Mari Plikuhn (2016) recently adopted a similar approach, inviting university graduates to reflect on their earlier reading practices. Knoester and Plikuhn found that siblings were influential social agents in supporting literacy development, and socialization to read within the family may have improved reading skills and likelihood of self-identification as a reader. One of the multiple facets of my 2015 International Study of Avid Book Readers (ISABR) similarly focused on the influence positive social agents can have on avid book readers, relying on the retrospective reflections of respondents from a range of countries and on supporting quantitative data to explore this research focus.

This paper presents previously unpublished findings from the ISABR. It contains quantitative findings providing insight into extent of perceived significant social influences, and qualitative data providing insight into the mechanisms of social influence as perceived by study participants, with particular focus on the stimulus for readers' adopting the practices of an active reader and self-identifying as an avid reader. This paper primarily uses a social cognitive perspective. While social influences that foster reading behaviors and identification are scrutinized, ultimately these social influences are part of—but not the whole of—a shaping process with multiple inputs that produce a reader, as “social influences operating in selected environments continue to promote certain competencies, values, and interests long after the decisional determinant has rendered its inaugurating effect” (Bandura 2001a, 10). A social cognitive theoretical lens also accommodates a concept of social influence that “distinguishes between acquisition and performance” (Bandura 2001b, 274) in the same manner that literacy skill acquisition does not necessarily correlate with regular voluntary reading or self-identifying as an avid reader.

## Method

A mixed-methods survey tool was developed for the ISABR, partially adapted from the frequency and duration items from my 2012 West Australian Study in Adolescent Book *Reading* survey tool. The survey for the research reported here was available through Survey Monkey, a website that facilitates online cloud-based survey development and delivery. Institutional ethics approval was granted. Cognitive testing of the survey items (that is, asking interview subjects what they thought the questions meant) was performed, followed by a small (N=10) convenience-recruited multi-national pilot sample. The cognitive testing and pilot sampling led to minor changes to the survey tool. The data from the pilot were not included in the final sample.

Resource limitations dictated a sample of one thousand respondents for the ISABR study, with the idea that the scope could be expanded later if findings were found to be noteworthy. The study was actively promoted through social networking and online, with the sample primarily recruited through Facebook posts on relevant communities' pages and advertisement on Goodreads.com. Data collection ran from 21 September through 2 November 2015.

Quantitative data were collected to test the following hypotheses (as well as other hypotheses described in other reports):

- That a variety of social agents will have had a key role in initial reading instruction.
- That most avid readers will have been the recipient of positive influence from a social agent.

Basic statistics generation was sufficient to determine the validity of the hypotheses, as they did not rely on complex statistical analysis.

Qualitative data were also collected to examine the scope of social agents involved in exerting positive influence and how positive influence is exerted. By understanding what positive influence looks like to avid readers who received it, and by examining the role of social agents in exerting social influence, mechanisms of efficacious influence can be identified for the purpose of informing future educational intervention to foster lifelong readers in childhood and beyond. Iterative thematic coding was undertaken, whereby the qualitative data were organized into

recurrent themes, with classification systematically refined through multiple readings (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2008).

## Participants

A total of N=1136 consenting respondents contributed to the final data set. While respondents living in 89 countries participated, representation was variable, ranging from 1 response from a country to 350 responses. Countries with at least 30 respondents are shown in figure 1.

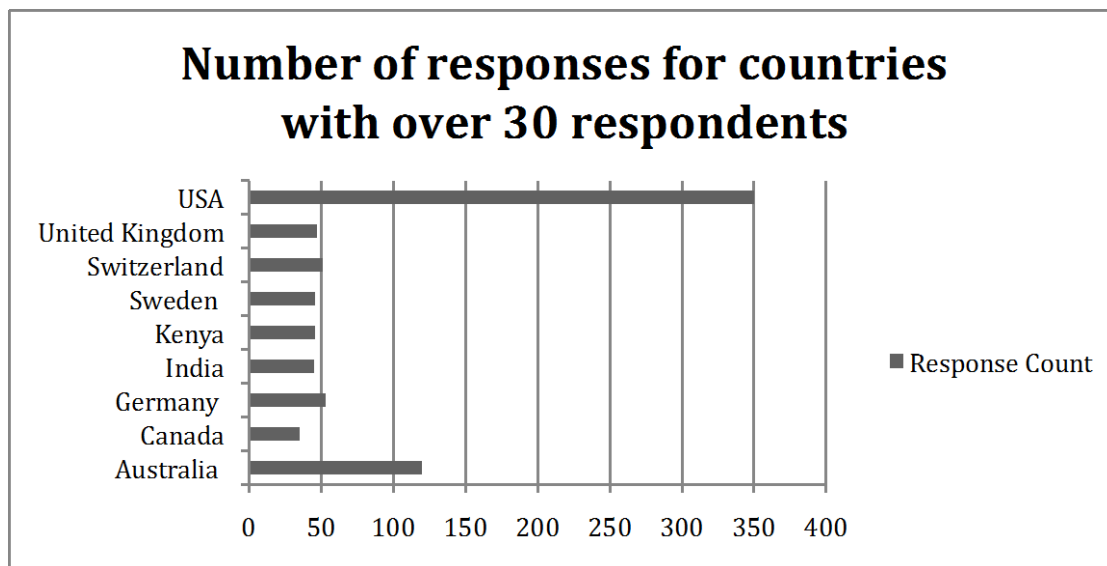


Figure 1. National distribution of survey respondents.

As reported previously, “nearly a third of respondents (31.3%) originated from the USA, with the second highest number of respondents originating from Australia (10.7%). Other countries with at least 4% of respondents included Germany (4.7%), Switzerland (4.6%), the United Kingdom (4.2%), Kenya (4.1%), Sweden (4.1%) and India (4%)” (Merga 2017, 55). The sample was predominantly Western, ostensibly due to the primary language of the survey being English, and the recruitment methods, which were limited by resource constraints. All respondents were likely to be English-speaking, with digital-literacy competence and access to the Internet. Therefore, this sample, while useful, could not be considered truly representative. However, while most respondents speak English as a first language (60.5 percent), people who speak English as an additional language were also well represented (39.5 percent).

The majority of respondents were female (83.2 percent), with 16 percent male and 0.8 percent identifying as other than the gender binary.

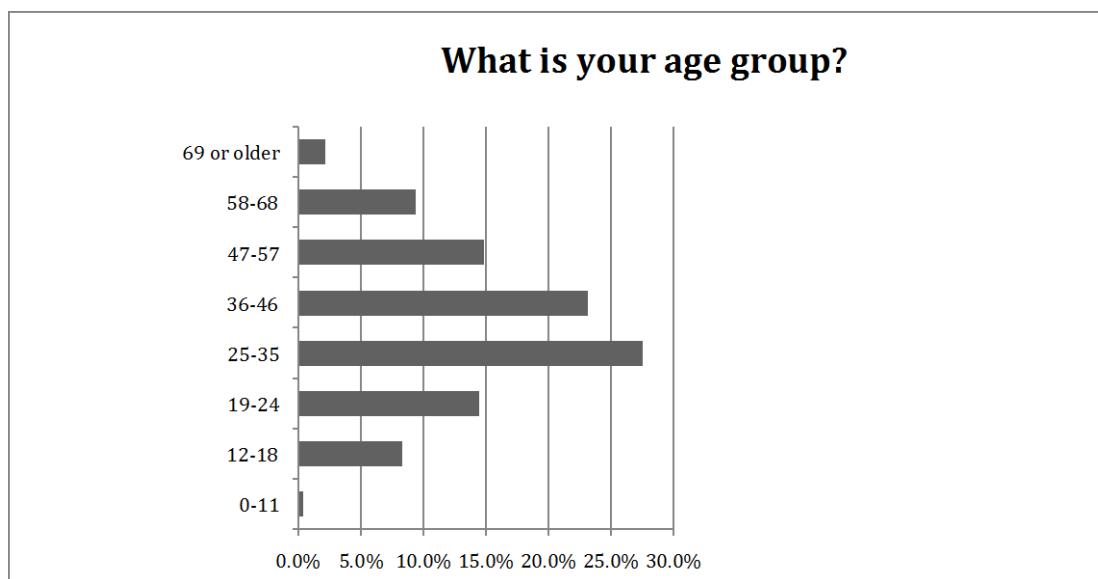


Figure 2. Respondents' ages.

As seen in figure 2, respondents from a range of ages contributed, with half of the respondents (50.6 percent) aged 25 through 46.

*Avidity* can be defined as having high enthusiasm for something, and as such, it is associated with attitudinal rather than frequency factors. As such, it was appropriate to accept that those who self-reported that they were avid readers were considered to be avid readers for the purposes of this study. The survey recruitment material was clear that the survey was for those who perceived themselves as avid book readers, and, considering the way participants were recruited (via social networking), surprisingly few spam responses were received. Respondents took the time to fill out the survey for no remuneration or recognition.

## Results

### Learning to Read

Respondents were asked, “Who taught you to read?” and permitted multiple responses, as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Providers of early reading instruction.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Mother	63.0%	685
Father	34.5%	375
Stepmother	0.3%	3

Stepfather	0.3%	3
Primary school teacher	49.3%	536
Grandparent	11.2%	122
Brother	3.9%	42
Sister	6.3%	68
Aunt	3.1%	34
Uncle	1.6%	17
I can't remember	12.8%	139
Other (please specify)	8.5%	92
<i>answered question</i>		<b>1087</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>56</b>

Mothers had the most significant role in teaching reading (63 percent), with primary school teachers (49.3 percent) and fathers (34.5 percent) also playing a noteworthy role. Of the respondents who selected “other,” a number claimed to be autodidacts (that is, self-taught readers). Additional instructional sources included neighbors, babysitters, *Sesame Street* (a U.S. children’s television show with a literacy and numeracy focus), colleagues, cousins, friends, a family friend, and a parent’s partner. It also included educators and educational resources other than primary school teachers, including high school teachers and college professors, an online phonics program, reading specialists, and librarians.

## Social Influences

### Overview

Respondents were asked, “Has a person had a significant positive influence on your attitude toward reading books?” The majority of respondents (64.3 percent) agreed that a person had exerted a significant positive influence on their attitude toward reading books. The respondents who provided a positive indication were then asked to state who the influence was, and to “describe the influence this person has had on you.” An open field for qualitative data collection was provided.

The range of influences was very broad. As anticipated, maternal figures (e.g. mother, stepmother, female partner of parent) and paternal figures (e.g. father, stepfather, male partner of parent) were predominantly featured in the data. However, wide-ranging additional social influences were also reported, including school and public librarians, uncles and aunts, teachers (from the earliest years, up to and including university professors), sisters and brothers, grandparents, spouses and romantic partners (both current and former), work colleagues, cousins, and a range of other guardians and familial combinations, as well as inspirational public figures. The social influences of book clubs, YouTube contributors, and authors were also mentioned.

The description of the influence these key social figures exerted led to a significant body of rich descriptive data that needed to be carefully coded. Key recurring themes are explored below as

mechanisms of influence, which include both direct and indirect means. As mentioned previously, an iterative thematic-coding approach was used rather than a quantitative content-analysis approach. Therefore, reporting exact numbers of respondents who described each theme is not methodologically appropriate. I intend to do further quantitative research in this field to explore the degree of generalizability for each of the subsequent themes that emerged from the qualitative data.

Some quotes in the sections that follow were edited slightly to address typographical errors in the original responses, but only when these changes could be made without altering the meaning.

### **Indirect Avid Reader and Author Influence**

In cases of indirect influence on an avid reader, the respondent was exposed to a model that did not necessarily seek to assert any active influence, though often this indirect influence was coupled with other active influences. Respondents who were inspired to read by observing an avid reader enjoying the practice appeared to be motivated by curiosity and a desire to emulate that avid reader. A Kenyan respondent described his father as always reading “a book when I was a child, so I got curious to find out why,” whereas a young Malaysian respondent described being inspired by her host mother while abroad:

I went on a student exchange programme to the United States of America in the year of 2014. My host mother was constantly on her Kindle when she wasn't too busy running errands. My host mother seemed so engrossed with her Kindle and that sparked my curiosity. She seemed so wise for her age and perhaps it was from reading countless books. I'd like to be just as wise if not wiser.

This respondent felt both curiosity and a desire to emulate her host mother, whom the exchange student perceived as a model of wisdom to be attained.

Others similarly described experiencing intellectual respect for certain individuals, whom respondents subsequently desired to emulate. While the individual inspiring this respect was often a family member, sometimes the individual was from the public sphere. One Kenyan respondent described her respect for a local journalist:

He did a well-informed concise column for years in our local Sunday paper. On the several occasions that I saw him, he had a book in his hand—and sometimes this was in a public place like a banking hall. He is said to be better read than an average professor.

This instance provides a useful illustration of just how indirect influence on avid readers can be. It is not known if this respondent even knew the journalist personally; exposure to his work and the opportunity to see him in a public setting with a “book in his hand” was deemed sufficient by this respondent to constitute a significant social influence.

In most cases, the indirect influence was described as an older person or people. For example, one respondent from the U.S. described being “impressed” by a “friend's older brothers; they had a box in the middle of their bedroom where they tossed paperbacks as they finished them.” The indirect avid reader influence is an object of respect, and in some cases also loved, but this influential person need not necessarily be an acquaintance of the respondent.

## Author Influence

In some cases authors exerted a remote, passive influence by writing books that inspired respondents to develop or further their passion for reading books. In other instances, the affordances of modern technology enabled respondents to meaningfully connect with authors. That author influence emerged as a recurrent theme in an inquiry about significant social influences on reading also offers insight into a perceived relationship between reader and author. This is further explored in a parallel paper from other data gathered during ISABR (Merga 2017), which examines motivation for reading by avid readers of books, with the concept of books as friends investigated.

The opportunity to read and engage with the works of local authors had a transformative effect on some respondents, enabling them to connect with writing that they perceived as having relevance for them. A respondent who was born in Afghanistan described being inspired by the “random thoughts” of a local author:

When I was a teenager, I live in Peshawar, Pakistan, as a refugee. I could not afford many books, so I borrowed most of my books from a British Council Library. I did visit the local bookshop just to browse some books every now and then. I found a few really interesting and inexpensive books, the quality was very bad but it was readable and affordable. The writer was this guy who lived in the same city. I read all his books and he was the one who inspired me, he had this huge influence on my life... he did not publish anything else since then, it was probably that he could not afford to publish them, and it was probably his random style of writing that nobody appreciated. He, actually, had just written his random thoughts and published them.

Sometimes this connection was felt to have a transformative effect, with one respondent from the U.S. describing J. K. Rowling as a significant social influence, as her Harry Potter series “made me believe in myself more,” as the respondent “began to be more confident and then started to speak up for myself.” This influence was strong enough to determine her ultimate academic pathway, as she “went to get my Bachelor’s degree in creative writing because I wanted to follow in her footsteps.” In contemporary times, some respondents have been able to surpass the traditional barriers between authors and their readers, as many contemporary authors can now be reached online and through book promotion tours. However, instances of interacting directly with authors were only rarely mentioned.

## Fostering Access

Fostering access could constitute a highly active or relatively passive influence in facilitating respondents’ access to books. In its active form, a social agent may make books available by taking the respondent to libraries and other sources of books. In passive contrast, sometimes influencers simply permitted the respondents to read the immediately available books in the influencers’ possession, without necessarily exerting themselves at all or providing any other support to the respondent. However, in many cases fostering access was combined with strong social support and encouragement for reading.

A relatively passive example was exerted by one respondents’ brother; this respondent of Indonesian origin but living in Germany described his brother’s influence, stating that “when I was kid I used to read his book collections,” and that for the respondent, “it was an indirect



influence because he never thought me to read something (sic) but he encouraged me by letting myself read his [books].”

However in many cases, providing access to books, in both passive and active instances, was related to a perceived general valuing of books and reading. For example, one respondent born in the Philippines and living in the U.S. described her father surrounding “us with books” and treating “the books with reverence.” Fostering access by giving books as rewards or presents strongly communicated the value the influencer placed on books. One respondent from the U.S. described her home as a place where “books were revered” and “often given as gifts.” A respondent who was born in Argentina and residing in Germany described her father’s choice to give her books:

My father always bought books for me, he always says that he will always buy me books, but not dolls. I stopped reading when my parents got a divorce, but Harry Potter helped me get back on track.

Similarly, one young respondent born in Denmark, but living in Spain, described her relatives, stating that “my aunt and uncle would always buy me books for presents, which was weird at the time but something I am grateful for now!”

When access to books was prioritized in the context of resource limitations and other socioeconomic and domestic issues, the result was often a memorable influence on a respondent. An Afghani refugee who subsequently settled in Germany described her father’s early priorities on arrival:

One of the first things my father did upon arriving in Germany as refugees in 1992 was getting my siblings and I memberships for the local library. He introduced us to books and we are all very thankful that he taught us to love and respect the written word.

The father of a Romanian-born respondent who subsequently settled in Spain similarly valued books. Despite challenging financial and political circumstances, her father’s love of books was evident in the vast number of books he collected, and, perhaps more tellingly, who he chose to propitiate under the Communist regime:

He would be always ready to suggest a book to read, to discuss books or simply dismiss a book as hairdresser literature, but he never pushed books onto his children. Books were just there, part of our life and draining on our budget. I recall him coming from the bookshop with a box full of books, at times, and my mother (who never had time to read, in spite of being a book lover herself) pulling her hair over the budget. We were under the Communist regime, where everything was scarce, but, whilst many people befriended food shop assistants, my father was befriending the bookshop ladies.

Access to books was positioned in both of these instances as absolutely essential, to the extent that they were viewed as having importance equal to—and sometimes even exceeding—the importance of the means of physical sustenance. A respondent from the U.S. stated, “No matter how tough times were,” his mother “always made sure I had something to read.” Books were similarly an exception to a frugal rule for a respondent from the U.S. who felt that “even though my parents were very budget-conscious when I was growing up, they would let me buy as many books as I wanted at the school’s book fair (the only time I had carte blanche in a financial decision!).”

## Shared Social Habit

Contrary to the common perception of reading as a solitary, potentially isolating pursuit, a number of respondents were influenced by the shared social habit of reading, either in their families or with friends, and this shared habit often extended well beyond childhood. One Egyptian-born resident of the United Arab Emirates described how the discovery of mutual love of reading led to “one of my friends at university” being “very happy when she knew I’m a reader, and encouraged me to suggest books for her to read,” adding that “we often discuss the books we read and share our views.” Another shared reading experience described by a respondent from the Philippines began as a coercive experience forced upon her by her older sister, but subsequently became mutually enjoyable:

When I was around seven or eight she used to force me into reading storybooks which I didn’t want to do during that time, ‘cos all I wanted to do was play with toys. But the stories she asked me to read were really interesting, so I kept on asking her for more and more books to read.

Some respondents described companionship in reading and enjoyment of reading together. One respondent from New Zealand described how a love of leisure reading with her “best friend” was developed through their shared experience, as the respondent was “always good at reading and fast at reading, but it wasn’t until I met her that I started doing it more [as a leisure pursuit].” Reading together was a social activity, as “sometimes we’d just spend time over at each other’s houses just reading” because “being in each other’s presence was enough.”

Interestingly, some respondents spoke of instances of refusal to share as the instigator of their own curiosity and interest in reading. One respondent from Germany, whose parents were avid readers, felt socially excluded when she was too young to participate:

My parents read a lot and talked enthusiastically about the books they were reading. When I was very young and wanted to know what they were talking about, they used the oldest trick ever and told me I was too young to understand. I guess that was how I got curious and wanted to read myself as soon as possible.

Similarly, one respondent from India was motivated to read when her granddad stopped reading aloud to her:

I started reading when my grandad refused to read out the comics on the daily newspaper and insisted I spell them out on my own when I was about four years old. Somehow I didn’t stop reading, when my cousins and elder sister did, even after he let us off the hook. Then it became who I am, as a part of my identity.

While these respondents were driven by a desire for satisfying their curiosity, some respondents also viewed reading as an opportunity to maintain and develop interpersonal connections that are of value to them. An Italian-born respondent living in Denmark sought to develop her relationship with her father, as she “always read(s) what he reads.” She explained that she did so as she had “never been let down by his tastes,” but, in addition, she was trying to understand him and “to get closer to him by reading his favourite books.” Respondents also used reading the favorite books of a deceased friend or relative to retain a connection with that individual. For one respondent from the U.S. who lost her mother in childhood, “reading was a way to connect back to her memory.” A respondent born in Argentina and living in Switzerland also extended the shared habit of reading with her mother beyond her death, explaining that “she was an avid

reader herself and we used to comment, discuss and exchange books,” and that “even after she died, I remember all the books that she most liked and I try to read them.”

### **Reading for Approval**

Some respondents read for approval, and while this was relatively common in childhood, as might be anticipated, reading for approval also extended beyond childhood, with some respondents seeking to impress social influencers encountered later in life. While as with indirect influences on avid readers, this reading for approval often involved respected or loved figures, it was also motivated by a desire for explicit extrinsic reinforcement of their reading practice. Thus, interaction was central to this theme. Respondents who recalled reading for approval during childhood were inspired to read for the positive reaction it engendered in others, with a respondent from Italy explaining that “people would tell me ‘oh, what a good girl!’ because I used to read while the other children were just messing around and I felt proud just hearing that.” A respondent from France similarly described reading because she noticed that her father greatly enjoyed reading, and she “wanted to please him.”

Reading for approval also extended beyond childhood, with a young respondent from the U.S. identifying an ex-girlfriend as a key influence; he described wanting “to read more to impress her.” A respondent from Kenya was motivated to read more after a visit from a respected university professor who “visited my apartment to discuss my graduate work, and several weeks later he said he respected me for the kind of library I had.” The respondent felt that “this coming from a mentor gave me the impetus to read even more.”

### **Recommendations and Supporting Choice**

Efforts of social influencers to support choice were characterized as supportive of recreational book reading. Librarians and teachers featured strongly in this context as key social influences that extended their role to connect respondents with books and genres that these readers subsequently enjoyed. A respondent from the U.S. described how her “elementary school librarian made it a priority to help her students find books that interested them and helped them gain a love for reading.” Another respondent from the U.S. described how an elementary school librarian’s support of a student ultimately determined his academic pathway:

My 5th grade librarian was the first person to explain the difference between fiction and non-fiction reading. She showed me the US history section of the library and I fell in love. Ten years later I’m in college studying history and philosophy. It was one of the most defining moments of my lifetime and she has no idea what she did for me.

A similarly inspired response from a respondent in South Africa likewise situates a public librarian as crucial for fostering reading:

She was the librarian in a tiny seaside town where we would take our holidays when I was a small child. My father would take me to the library the day after we arrived and she would welcome me as a long-lost friend and show me all the new books in the library. She was the first to show me big people’s books. I’ll never forget her.

Both of these influences were identified as “the first” to expand students’ potential choices through exposure to “big people’s books” or “history.”

Teachers, family, and friends were also mentioned as providing support for choice through recommendations. A young respondent from Estonia described receiving support from her teachers, “who in many lessons show us books and ask if we have read them or they just talk about some cool books they have recently read,” stating further that she always “write(s) the books down to read them in the future.” A respondent from India described the influence of his college friend, “an avid reader” who “pushes me to read brilliant books from accomplished author which range from sensitive human issues to political ones, from George Orwell to Khaled Hosseini.”

## Exposure to Reading Aloud

Time spent being read to as a young person, generally with family members, influenced a number of respondents. A young respondent from New Zealand stated that her father “would always read to me before bed from the age of probably zero until I was a teenager, and this was invaluable to me.” Some recalled the routine of the read-aloud extending beyond the period of skill acquisition, with a respondent from the U.S. recalling that both of her parents read aloud regularly to her and her siblings “even after we could read on our own.” The routine of reading before bed was sometimes established through this practice, with a respondent from the U.S. explaining:

My mother always read to me before I went to bed as a child. As I learned to read myself, I adopted this ritual as my own. Books and stories have since retained their comforting and constant presence in my life.

A respondent from Barbados described how her mother maintained a bedtime reading habit despite a significant obstacle:

She’s dyslexic and struggled with teaching me to read, but she kept reading to me (especially at bedtime) and I learnt to eventually pick up a book on my own and do my own reading. Haven’t looked back since. She also used to read to me aloud when she was pregnant with me. I believe my interest began there. Now I teach English, and continue to look for ways to get kids interested in reading!

Teachers’ reading aloud in their classrooms was also positively recalled, with a respondent from the U.S. recalling her fourth-grade teacher reading “*Box Car Children* aloud to our classes,” and remembering “being excited to find out what happened next!” Another respondent from the U.S. recalled, “My fifth-grade teacher read my favourite series to the class, just the first book, and encouraged me to finish it, and now I read it every summer.”

## Discussion and Limitations

The contention that a variety of social agents will have had a key role in initial reading instruction was to some extent supported by the data. However, maternal instruction, in which the mother takes responsibility for supporting learning (63 percent), remained the prevalent source of early reading teaching, with fathers significantly less likely to be early reading teachers (34.5 percent). As paternal support of intergenerational transmission of literacy has been generally found to be significantly lower than maternal support (Morgan, Nutbrown, and Hannon 2009), reading may be viewed as a feminine activity (Alloway et al. 2002; Martino 2001), a circumstance that could perpetuate the observed gender differences in frequency of engagement

in recreational reading (Merga 2014b; OECD 2010). However, fathers may be playing an increasing role in supporting reading (Nichols 2000), increased involvement that may not yet be reflected in the recollections of this primarily adult sample. This inequity has subsequent implications for literacy. However, excessive focus on gender differences without delving into their root cause can ultimately lead to perpetuation of unsubstantiated notions of reading and gender, such as the idea that males do not like reading or that males read only nonfiction.

Indeed, the low representation of men in the sample must be interpreted with care, as any number of factors could have skewed the data, such as the platform for recruitment, social networking sites, which could be a preferred medium for women. While maternal instructors predominated, teachers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings also played a role in the early instruction of the respondents, and contributions of these instructors should also warrant further consideration.

The hypothesis that most avid readers will have been the recipients of positive influence from a social agent was also generally supported, with 64.3 percent of respondents agreeing that a person had exerted a significant positive influence on their attitudes toward reading books. This result means that over a third of respondents did not agree that their attitude had been significantly shaped by another person, a finding that brings into question the legitimacy of uniformly situating social influences as an essential causative factor in the development of an avid reader. The fact that not all avid readers in the study could identify a positive social influence that affected their attitude toward reading books also brings into question the legitimacy of theories that postulate that all avid readers must have been socialized to love reading books. This finding—that a significant percentage of self-identified avid readers did not perceive themselves to have been influenced by another—suggests greater complexity in motivational factors, which extend beyond the social. However, as the greater quantity had experienced a key social influence, the role of social influences does remain a vital consideration, and the ability to identify key social influences could be affected by issues with recall.

The retrospective nature of the data is both a strength and a limitation; with 12.8 percent of respondents unable to remember who taught them to read, it is likely that issues with recall may also complicate identification of significant social influence on reading. Interestingly, when the 12.8 percent of respondents who could not recall who taught them to read were filtered from the group for closer scrutiny, the data were not skewed toward older age, with 49.6 percent of the respondents who could not recall being 35 or younger. When respondents were the beneficiary of a key social influence shaping their positive attitudes toward reading, indirect influence, author influence, fostering access, shared social habit, reading for approval, recommendations and supporting choice, and exposure to reading aloud were all noteworthy recurring themes.

Previous research has found that passive influences (such as modelling) can have a noteworthy impact on their observers, particularly when the modelling occurs within the family (Merga 2014a), and the emergence of indirect avid reader influence as a key theme is not novel. This research does, however, build on earlier findings by showing how indirect influence on avid readers can be effective beyond the early years, also documenting the role that authors can play as social influences. The indirect avid reader influence could be virtually any person respected or loved by the recipient. This finding demonstrates the importance of exposure to such influences in youth and beyond. If these influences cannot be found in the immediate family, they need to be available in the school, in the community, and in the media.

While fostering access to books is recognized as essential for enabling young people to read (Krashen 2011; Merga 2015b), fostering access can also constitute a significantly encouraging social influence, and communicate the value of reading, and in this paper I consider fostering access through this lens (that is, as a positive social influence on developing avid readers). In addition to the comparatively incidental, passive provisions of access, participants recounted remarkable instances of reading and books being regarded as having high priority. These reflections highlight the fact that access to books can extend beyond providing opportunities to read; the reflections communicated a powerful valuing of books and book reading, especially in challenging circumstances in which books and reading were positioned as life essentials.

A number of respondents had or desired a shared social reading habit, which initiated or reinforced their avid reading behavior. This shared habit strengthened some friendships. While choice in reading is situated as paramount (Fisher and Frey 2012; Ross 2000), and “being ‘forced’ to read may ultimately reinforce a negative attitude toward reading” (Merga 2014a, 156), within the context of shared social habit, coercion may be acceptable, and even, ultimately, welcome.

The role that refusal of adults to share played in increasing some respondents’ desires to engage with books was also an interesting finding, with implications for how important communicating a valuing of the practice of recreational book reading is, and the diversity of mechanisms through which this communication can effectively be achieved. That this shared social habit is strong and significant enough to be drawn upon after the death of a person significant to the reader offers insight into how meaningful the shared social experience of reading can be. This finding also illustrates how, in some instances, the practice of recreational book reading is inextricably entwined with deep social purpose.

Reading for approval is ultimately a mechanism of social influence reliant on extrinsic motivation subsequently evolving into intrinsic motivation. Educators’ view of this evolution is complicated by the somewhat dubious position that extrinsic motivation holds in the eyes of some educational researchers, who have concluded that extrinsic motivators are unsuccessful in encouraging reading (McQuillan 1997). This perspective is succinctly characterized by Stephen Krashen who stated “rewarding behavior that is intrinsically pleasant can extinguish the behavior because it sends the message that the activity is not pleasant and that people need to be bribed to do it” (2011, 45).

However, provision of extrinsic motivation is not always viewed as negative. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2017) described how the effect of praise can be dependent on the nature of the praise given, with praise that is informational likely to be related to intrinsic motivation, but praise that is controlling or evaluative may not have the same positive effect. A distinction must be made between extrinsic motivation in the form of positive feedback, which can be associated with fostering intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation in the form of tangible rewards, which tend to have a negative influence in intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2017). Praise had a positive effect on participants of the study reported here. The avid readers who described reading for approval made the shift from being extrinsically motivated readers, who read for social reward, to being intrinsically motivated readers who continued to read for enjoyment once fostered through the extrinsic pathway. This finding somewhat challenges the often-articulated position about the ineffectiveness of extrinsic rewards. However, previous researchers studied the effectiveness of rewards for reading. In contrast, in this study the extrinsic motivators identified as effective were praise and recognition. Using social reward as extrinsic motivators

should be considered on its own merits, distinct from consideration of material motivators, as reading for approval cannot be considered the same as reading for reward.

The provision of recommendations and support for choice (by fostering supply and being responsive to needs and preferences of readers) operated to encourage continuance of reading. Previous research has also indicated that difficulties with choice can impede young people from engaging in recreational book reading, with avid readers describing “periods of reading drought, where their preferred genres, series or authors were exhausted, and they needed to wait for new instalments to resume reading” (Merga 2016, 413). Thus, greater attention to supporting choice is indicated not just by this research, but by previous work, with supporting choice linked to supporting reading momentum and breadth.

A theme of initiation also predominated in the ISABR findings; librarians were reported to be the first to connect students with meaningful genres or progress them onto increasingly complex works. The ultimately transformative potential of these influential individuals has been adversely affected recently by increased cuts to both school and public library funding in many countries (see, for example, Guarria and Wang 2011; Softlink 2015), and by a change in the personality and functionality of contemporary public libraries toward a greater focus on community service and information-service provision (Boudreau-Henry 2016), and away from a focus on recreational book reading. This research would indicate that both school and public libraries should ensure that they retain some capacity for supporting choice in their recreational book reading clientele.

The benefits of exposure to reading aloud at home for the development of language skills, reading achievement, and subsequent academic outcomes are increasingly well understood (Kalb and Van Ours 2013; Lawson 2012). Increasingly, research also reveals the importance of teachers’ using reading aloud as a strategy beyond the early years, with older students noting that continuance of the practice encouraged them to read with greater frequency (Beers 1998; Ivey and Broaddus 2001; Merga 2015a). This research suggests that exposure to reading aloud in early childhood and beyond is likely to play a key role in readers’ self-identification as avid lifelong readers. The establishment of a bedtime reading habit emerged as noteworthy, as did the actions of the parents who read to their children beyond the period of skill acquisition. Another model of persistent reading despite barriers or resistance was provided here, with the considerable efforts of the mother of the respondent from Barbados to maintain a regular read-aloud practice despite the challenges of her own dyslexia. This mother’s efforts were well rewarded by her child’s subsequent success. Reading aloud also introduced young people to memorable books and introduced them to series, fostering further reading.

In addition to the limitations mentioned previously, this study must be considered in light of a number of additional limitations. Incorporating qualitative items within the survey, a traditionally quantitative tool, posed a noteworthy limitation, as in this instance, qualitative data were collected well beyond the point of saturation, after which data became “repetitive and, eventually, superfluous” (Mason 2010, para. 2), but this approach was necessary because of resource constraints imposed upon the project, and in this instance, too much data was preferable to too little.

Unlike other qualitative data collection methods such as focus groups or interviews, surveys provide the researcher with no means to tease out and seek clarification of respondents’ ideas. Because of this limitation, to avoid arriving at incorrect interpretations, when responses were not clearly and unequivocally expressed, they could not be used. However, this circumstance could

also be deemed potentially advantageous because, as researcher, I had no direct interactions with respondents and was, therefore, unable to inadvertently shape the qualitative data by exerting influence on participants beyond the initial framing of the questions and the design of the collection tool. In addition, extensive cross-national comparisons potentially reflective of cultural differences were not possible because, while the sample size was robust, a much larger quantitative sample would be needed for such comparisons to be valid.

## Conclusion

The ability to focus on an international group of avid readers of books for the purpose of determining the role that social influences played in shaping them revealed a group with surprising recurrent commonalities. A common thread that wove through the recurring themes discussed in this paper was the importance of valuing and privileging book reading despite any odds or opposition. When respondents were exposed to a love of reading, whether through observation of a loved or respected figure, a social influencer's taking the time to actively provide access or support choice, or through social interaction and shared enjoyment, a lifelong reader could be fostered.

The multiple mechanisms of influence identified constitute opportunities for engagement and educational intervention. Reading experiences during the early years were formative for many avid readers. However, greater research attention on what occurs beyond this point is warranted, due to the range of experiences that further shaped and strengthened the avid book reading habit—or even initiated it—beyond early childhood. Thus, while focus on early reading propagation through reading aloud is essential, subsequent experiences that can strengthen motivation to read and maintain a commitment to reading despite the multiple leisure opportunities and other distraction individuals face in contemporary life are worth further investigation. Indirect avid reader influence, author influence, fostering access, shared social habit, reading for approval, recommendations and supporting choice, and exposure to reading aloud in the early years and beyond can improve an individual's attitude toward recreational book reading, increasing engagement with the practice, subsequently offering a range of literacy and other benefits.

Librarians can draw upon these findings to support lifelong reading in their clientele or students. School and public librarians can play a powerful role in communicating to parents the importance that they:

- model avid reading behaviors;
- regularly foster their children's access to books through frequent library visits, thus not only providing books but also communicating a valuing of books, libraries, and reading;
- discuss books and reading in a positive social manner with their children; and
- provide encouragement and recommendations for their children.

As seen in this research, librarians can also play an influential role in connecting young people with books by:

- teaching them how to self-select reading materials appropriate to readers' skills and interests,



- encouraging regular library visits, and
- sharing information and ideas about books that are tailored to young people's reading interests.

Numerous other positive interventions are possible. Librarians can also facilitate opportunities for young people to meet authors and interact with other readers. Clearly, librarians can and do make an important difference in shaping lifelong readers.

## Works Cited

- Alloway, Nola, et al. *Boys, Literacy and Schooling: Expanding the Repertoires of Practice*. Canberra City, Australia: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. <<https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/637/1/BoysLiteracySchooling.pdf>> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Bandura, Albert. 2001a. "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective." *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (1): 1–26.
- . 2001b. "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication." *Media Psychology* 3 (3): 265–99.
- Beers, Kylene. 1998. "Choosing Not to Read: Understanding Why Some Middle Schoolers Just Say No." In *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers*, edited by Kylene Beers, 37–63. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Berns, Gregory S., et al. "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain." *Brain Connectivity* 3 (6): 590–600.
- Boudreau-Henry, Kathryn Elizabeth. 2016. "Libraries Where Life Happens: Non-Traditional Settings for Public Libraries." *International Journal of Books, Publishing, and Libraries* 14 (4): 1–10.
- Fereday, Jennifer, and Eimear Muir-Cochrane. 2008. "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5 (1): 80–92.
- Fisher, Douglas, and Nancy Frey. 2012. "Motivating Boys to Read: Inquiry, Modeling, and Choice Matter." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 55 (7): 587–96.
- Guarria, Charles I., and Zhonghong Wang. 2011. "The Economic Crisis and Its Effect on Libraries." *New Library World* 112 (5/6): 199–214.
- Guthrie, John T., and Marcia H. Davis. 2003. "Motivating Struggling Readers in Middle School through an Engagement Model of Classroom Practice." *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 19 (1): 59–85.

- Hayes, Nicole. 2015. "Continuity and Change in Family Engagement in Home Learning Activities across the Early Years." PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, School of Early Childhood.  
<[https://eprints.qut.edu.au/84653/1/Nicole\\_Hayes\\_Thesis.pdf](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/84653/1/Nicole_Hayes_Thesis.pdf)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Ivey, Gay, and Karen Broaddus. 2001. "'Just Plain Reading': A Survey of What Makes Students Want to Read in Middle School Classrooms." *Reading Research Quarterly* 36 (4): 350–77.
- Kalb, Guyonne, and Jan C. van Ours. 2014. "Reading to Young Children: A Head-Start in Life?" *Economics of Education Review* 40: 1–24.
- Kelly, John R. 1974. "Socialization toward Leisure: A Developmental Approach." *Journal of Leisure Research* 6 (3): 181–93.
- Knoester, Matthew, and Mari Plikuhn. 2016. "Influence of Siblings on Out-of-School Reading Practices." *Journal of Research in Reading* 39 (4) 469–85.
- Krashen, Stephen. 2011. *Free Voluntary Reading*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.
- Lawson, Kit. 2012. "The Real Power of Parental Reading Aloud: Exploring the Affective and Attentional Dimensions." *Australian Journal of Education* 56 (3): 257–72.
- Liu, Lewis G. 2004. "The Contribution of Public Libraries to Countries' Economic Productivity: A Path Analysis." *Library Review* 53 (9): 435–41.
- Lopes, Marcos Antonio, et al. 2011. "High Prevalence of Dementia in a Community-Based Survey of Older People from Brazil: Association with Intellectual Activity Rather Than Education." *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* 32 (2): 307–16.
- Mancini, Anna Laura, Monfardini, Chiara and Silvia Pasqua. 2011. "On the Intergenerational Transmission of Time Use Patterns: Is a Good Example the Best Sermon?" *IZA Discussion Paper No. 6038*, October 2011.
- Martino, Wayne. 2001. "Boys and Reading: Investigating the Impact of Masculinities on Boys' Reading Preferences and Involvement in Literacy." *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 24 (1): 61–74.
- Mason, Mark. 2010. "Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11 (3).  
<[www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1428/3028](http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1428/3028)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- McQuillan, Jeff. 1997. "The Effects of Incentives on Reading." *Reading Research and Instruction* 36 (2): 111–25.
- Merga, Margaret K. 2014a. "Exploring the Role of Parents in Supporting Recreational Book Reading Beyond Primary School." *English in Education* 48 (2): 149–63.

- . 2014b. “Are Western Australian Adolescents Keen Book Readers?” *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 37 (3): 161–70.
- . 2015a. “‘She Knows What I Like:’ Student-Generated Best-Practice Statements for Encouraging Recreational Reading in Adolescents.” *Australian Journal of Education* 59 (1): 35–50.
- . 2015b. “Access to Books in the Home and Adolescent Engagement in Recreational Book Reading: Considerations for Secondary School Educators.” *English in Education* 49 (3): 197–214.
- . 2016. “What Would Make Them Read More? Insights from Western Australian Adolescents.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 36 (3): 409–24.
- . 2017. “What Motivates Avid Readers to Maintain a Regular Reading Habit in Adulthood?” *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 40 (2): 146–56. <[www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/1567](http://www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/1567)> (accessed September 18, 2017)
- Mol, Suzanne E., and Adriana G. Bus. 2011. “To Read or Not to Read: A Meta-Analysis of Print Exposure from Infancy to Early Adulthood.” *Psychological Bulletin* 137 (2): 267–96.
- Morgan, Anne, Cathy Nutbrown, and Peter Hannon. 2009. “Fathers’ Involvement in Young Children’s Literacy Development: Implications for Family Literacy Programmes.” *British Educational Research Journal* 35 (2): 167–85.
- Mullan, Killian. 2010. “Families That Read: A Time-Diary Analysis of Young People’s and Parents’ Reading.” *Journal of Research in Reading* 33 (4): 414–30.
- Nichols, Susan. 2000. “Unsettling the Bedtime Story: Parents’ Reports of Home Literacy Practices.” *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 1 (3): 315–28. <<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/ciec.2000.1.3.7>> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada. 2000. *Literacy in the Information Age*. Paris: OECD and Minister of Industry, Canada. <[www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/41529765.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/41529765.pdf)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). 2010. *PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary*. Paris: OECD. <[www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46619703.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46619703.pdf)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. 2000. “Making Choices: What Readers Say about Choosing Books to Read for Pleasure.” *Acquisitions Librarian* 13 (25): 5–21.
- Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, and Mary K. Chelton. 2001. “Reader’s Advisory: Matching Mood and Material.” *Library Journal* 126 (2): 52–55.
- Ryan, Richard M. and Edward L. Deci. 2017. *Self-Determination Theory*. New York: Guildford.

- Softlink. 2015. 2014 *Australian School Library Survey*.  
<[www.softlinkint.com/downloads/2014\\_Softlink\\_Australian\\_School\\_Library\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.softlinkint.com/downloads/2014_Softlink_Australian_School_Library_Survey.pdf)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Stedman, Lawrence C. 2009. *The NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment: A Review of Its Transformation, Use, and Findings*. Washington DC: National Assessment Governing Board. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED509383.pdf> (accessed September 25, 2017).
- Vemuri, Prashanthi, et al. 2014. "Association of Lifetime Intellectual Enrichment with Cognitive Decline in the Older Population." *JAMA Neurology* 71 (8): 1017–24.
- Verghese, Joe, et al. 2003. "Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly." *New England Journal of Medicine* 348 (25): 2508–16.  
<[www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMoa022252](http://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMoa022252)> (accessed September 16, 2017).
- Weinberger, Jo. 1996. "A Longitudinal Study of Children's Early Literacy Experiences at Home and Later Literacy Development at Home and School." *Journal of Research in Reading* 19 (1): 14–24.
- Wigfield, Allan, and Steven R. Asher. 1984. "Social and Motivational Influences on Reading." *Handbook of Reading Research* 1: 423–52.
- Wilson, Robert S., et al. 2013. "Life-Span Cognitive Activity, Neuropathologic Burden, and Cognitive Aging." *Neurology* 81 (4): 314–21.
- Wollscheid, Sabine. 2013. "Parents' Cultural Resources, Gender and Young People's Reading Habits—Findings from a Secondary Analysis with Time-Survey Data in Two-Parent Families." *International Journal about Parents in Education* 7 (1): 69–83.

## Cite This Article

Merga, Margaret. 2017. "Becoming a Reader: Significant Social Influences on Avid Book Readers." <<http://www.ala.org/aasl/slr/volume20/merga>>



**School Library Research** (ISSN: 2165-1019) is an official journal of the American Association of School Librarians. It is the successor to *School Library Media Quarterly Online* and *School Library Media Research*. The purpose of *School Library Research* is to promote and publish high quality original research concerning the management, implementation, and evaluation of school library media programs. The journal will also emphasize research on instructional theory, teaching methods, and critical issues relevant to school library media. Visit the [SLR website](#) for more information.



American Association  
of School Librarians  
**TRANSFORMING LEARNING**

The American Association of School Librarians empowers leaders to transform teaching and learning. Visit the [AASL website](#) for more information.