



The Reading Challenge

JESSICA PAWLEY COPPING | WESTLAKE BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

KIA MOEMOEĀ: IBSC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023

8 JULY 8.30-9.30AM

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The Reading Challenge

Global literacy rates are falling. Can we improve reading-for-pleasure in our secondary classrooms *without* a full-school culture shift?

- Overview of the evidence
- Background of the Junior Reading Challenge here at WBHS
- Setting sail on a new course: The Adventure Journal
- Student & teacher response – lessons learned
- Where to from here? The future at WBHS and my pending PhD research



About Me

BA English & Media Studies, MA in English, PhD
Education Candidate

English teacher and TIC Reading Challenge and Writers
Club at WBHS

Have been a Teacher Aide, Library Assistant, & book
charity Reading Ambassador

Award-winning YA and children's author as J L Pawley

Qualified bibliophile!

Why is reading for pleasure important?

Improved vocabulary	Increased empathy
Improved spelling & grammar	Increased community/civic involvement
Increased reading & comprehension speed	Better mental health and wellbeing...
Better academic achievement	

(Clark & Rumbold, 2006)

Studies show that students with disadvantaged backgrounds with *good access to books* at school and home tend to have *better* academic outcomes than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds with few or no books in their lives.

(McNaughton, 2020; NEA, 2008)

52% of NZ teens say:
“I read only if I have to”

(Clarke, 2020)

71% of teen respondents in Texas
“did not value reading”

(Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016)

The evidence on reading motivations:

KEEN & ABLE READERS...

Enjoy talking about and sharing books

- Participate/view themselves as in a “**reading community**”
- Consider: #BookTok, book clubs

Prefer to read what personally interests them

- **Agency & access** (choice)
- Often finish assigned reading ASAP
- Ditch books they aren't enjoying

Devote **time** & effort

- Reading stamina takes time to develop

RELUCTANT & “POOR” READERS...

See reading as an isolating activity

- Teens tend to be drawn to social activities
- Reading is “uncool”
- “SSR” does not help!

Don't know how to find books that might interest them

- Lack of access
- Frequently only encounter assigned reading that is “boring” or “too hard”
- Intimidated by the length – don't even start

The “Matthew effect”...

(Clark & Rumbold, 2006)



“the Matthew effect”

Students who like reading will choose to do it, thereby getting better at it, enjoying it more, so choose to read more, and so on.

Students who don't like or find it difficult to read will avoid it, thereby not improving, and find it more and more difficult as they are left behind by their peers, thus avoiding it more, etc...

(Clark & Rumbold, 2006)



FACTORS THAT ARE LIKELY TO (RE)ENGAGE TEENS WITH READING:

Make it **social** → reading community
(→ *new NZ curriculum outcome!*)

Support **agency** → access &
flexibility

Time investment → re-prioritization

Dominant theme in successful
programs: **Whole school involvement**

What does this look like in 21st century classrooms?

WHAT EVIDENCE LINKS THESE FACTORS AND EREADING & DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES?



Ebooks & Audiobooks

Differences in comprehension between print & screen and audio & written have been linked to the behavioural habits and existing attitudes, not the mode

Very limited research at high school level and/or into *reading for pleasure*, however...

Keen & able readers tend to prefer print

Audiobooks show likelihood of useful literacy effects and improving reading attitudes, but little dedicated research

Evidence strongly shows "tech's appeal" increase appeal of ebooks, audiobooks, and reading for *reluctant* readers



Baron, 2016; Best & Clark, 2021; Heiting, 2015; Picton & Clark, 2015



The Junior Reading Challenge @ WBHS

THE IDEAL: All Year 9 and Year 10 students read as many books as possible in the school year. By December, the top reader in each year gets a prize at prizegiving, and the class with the highest total in each year gets a pizza party.

THE REALITY: Very few boys were aware of the challenge and even fewer entered.



The Junior Reading Challenge @ WBHS

WHY?

- Academic performance (assessment) pressures means limited “pleasure” or “free” time during lessons
- Y10 lost their library period some years ago
- Declining reading attitudes and rates = too hard, not important enough
- Few teachers promoting it = few entrants

Offered to me at the end of 2020



2021

Simplified and digitised the submission through a Microsoft Form

- Regular faculty reminders: “do nows” and leaderboard updates
- Introducing staff to library website and elibrary
- Spot prizes
- **Y9:** 1052 entries
- **Y10:** 326 entries



2022

- Embedded the form in each class's Team
- Even easier to find, but different platform (Education Perfect) in an attempt to make the school contest more visible for the boys ... did NOT work out
- Y9: 825 entries
- Y10: 292 entries

In the background: Constantly looking for more ideas, resources, evidence → my PhD

READING CHALLENGE

2023

ADVENTURE
LOG



2023:

Charting a
new course

A RESOURCE FOR ALL Y9
LIBRARY SESSIONS

Reframing & Restarting

A booklet resource for all Y9 classes

- Avoiding yet more apps / BYOD issues
- Visual progress
- Kept *in* the library
- Support non-expert teachers

Overall theme of adventure to reframe the idea of reading as *exciting*

Opening gate to all learners

Updating the criteria to be more appealing and achievable...

WELCOME, ADVENTURE APPRENTICE

When you enter a library or listen to a story, you are following in the footsteps of the greatest men and women in history.

The wisdom, knowledge, and dreams of the ages are encoded in our stories, preserved for those brave enough to enter the labyrinth of shelves, physical and digital, in our library.

The sea of stories holds many fascinating places to visit, whether they are familiar or fantastical. This booklet will be your guide and journal, tracking your progress through the world of reading. As you absorb books, tackle tasks, and complete challenges, you will earn **experience points (XP)**.

Where will your adventures take you this year? What seas will you sail? What craft will carry your imagination? A waka, a kalia, a wasen, a yacht, a jetski, a submarine, a spaceship?

Draw a picture, find a photo online, or write a description of it here:



JUNIOR READING CHALLENGE AWARDS

Throughout the year there are spot prizes to be won. To be eligible, all you have to do is meet your personal reading goal each week!

Students who achieve Silver or above in the Challenge are invited to a Winners Lunch in Term 4, and the student who reads the most books in each year level receives an award at school Prizegiving!

Bronze 8,000 XP 	Silver 20,000 XP 	Gold 50,000 XP 	Platinum 100,000 XP 
Achieved by 15% of Y9s	Achieved by 4.5% of Y9s	Achieved by 1% of Y9s	Achieved by 0.3% of Y9s
4 novels per year 1 novel per term	10 novels per year 2-3 novels per term	25 novels per year 6-7 novels a term	Ultra Rare! Unlocked by 2 x Golds

To achieve **Bronze**, you need to read at least 1 hour per week.





To achieve **Silver**, you should read 2-3 hours per week.

To achieve **Gold**, you will read 7-10 hours per week.

EXPERIENCE POINTS (XP)

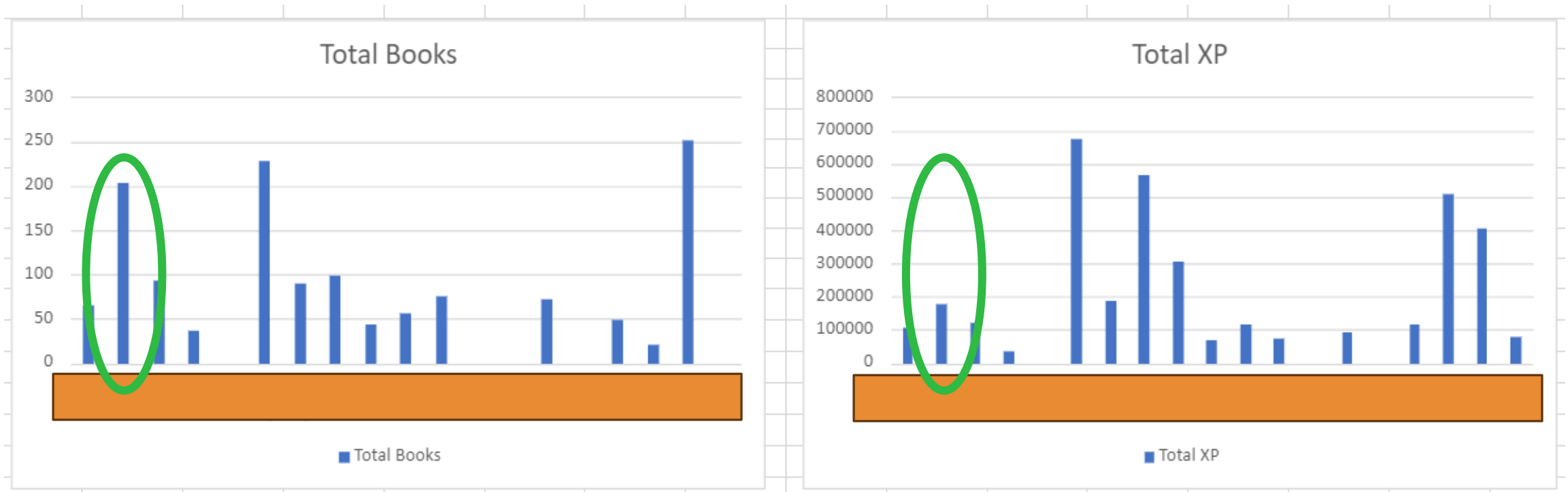
HOW TO LEVEL UP YOUR READING

Every time you read something, you gain experience and improve your literacy. However, reading a novel will level up your reading skills faster, so it is worth more XP.

	Format	XP
	Novels/narrative non fiction	10 XP per page
	Audiobooks	5 XP per min
	Illustrated chapter books (e.g. <i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid</i>)	4 XP per page
	Graphic novels / comics	2 XP per page

Gamification: Levelling Up Their Reading

- Statistics from reading challenge entries 2021 & 2022
- *External/extrinsic* motivation designed to drive & develop *internal/intrinsic* motivation



Tracking XP and Books Read

“Books read” is not a reliable measurement of how much (how many words) they have actually *read* – one prolific manga reader claims to have read 100 in 2 terms. Thus, the XP is a more useful data point.

Challenges & Complications

6-day rotating timetable means inconsistent and irregular sessions

Different teachers taking library lessons (often not English faculty)

Frequent missed periods due to various external real-world disruptions (teacher strikes, weather events, whole-school events)

Teachers “needing” to use library time as catch-up “work” time

‘Map’ to track weekly reading goals not working – no weekly reading sessions!

Report Card:

The boys LOVE the gamification / XP

- “One boy is so motivated his dad was actually concerned: ‘How much does he have to read?’”
- “the right balance between gamification and rigor”
- “getting points without finishing [the book] is good”

Report Card:

Quantifying & genrefication is motivating boys to tackle “harder” books (i.e. a novel over illustrated chapter books)

- “boys who typically struggle to read have been hugely engaged and made noticeable advances in their literacy development”
- “genre framing at the beginning ... is helpful, as is the library scavenger hunt”
- “...effective, they give each other advice and recommendations, it really worked”

Report Card:

Ebooks & audiobooks have been a game changer for some boys

- Non-readers “love clocking up the audiobooks”
- Small groups read ebooks on the same screen together
- Finding titles that interest them by **searching online** rather than the shelves

“The success, like anything, is largely teacher dependant, but the way that the challenge is resourced and designed means that it is user friendly for staff and students alike”

Report Card:

“It’s been really hard as there have been so many disruptions”

“One of the biggest challenges is actually making the time to teach them the skills to *find* books”

“It has taken half a year to even get them settled and into routines and expectations for the library”

“It works best when you can have several [weekly sessions] consistently in a row”

“I’m thinking about taking the box into our usual classroom and making the reading log the Friday ‘do now’”

The biggest obstacle
is lack of TIME

ROUTINE IS KEY!



2024 & beyond

WBHS Junior Reading Challenge: Slightly simplified version for next year Y9, much more pared-down reading log tracker for Y10

IBSC: Reading culture Special Interest Group spearheaded by Trish Cislak & team

- overwhelming interest with at least 50 responses
- there is an awareness among librarians, teacher librarians, and English teachers of this need

My own path...

My doctoral study 2023-2025

- “Design based research” methodology (*very similar to Action Research, but bigger and with multiple iterations*)
- Recruiting teachers around Auckland by the end of this year, implementing in classrooms in 2024
- **Collaborative educational design**
- Developing evidence-based strategies and resources to foster **reading communities of practice** in individual classrooms
- Special focus on how to leverage digital technology (ebooks, audiobooks, and social edtech) to reconnect teens with reading

Key Takeaways

Reading for pleasure is a key literacy practice

Effective engagement with reading for pleasure requires social benefits, student agency, and significant time investment

It is *possible* on your own, but it takes effort

Ebooks & audiobooks are a valid, useful, and appealing option for teens

Gamification works

It *is* worth it.





Q & A

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Key Bibliography & Further Info

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