WHAT MAKES A CHILD A RELUCTANT READER?

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This article seeks to discover what makes a child a reluctant reader. It considers the underlying reasons for a negative relationship with reading and the resulting attitude that children may develop towards it. A survey and a study were conducted with 14 reluctant readers aged 9–10 years. The survey results clearly showed that, while they claimed to enjoy reading, in practice they found it difficult. This was followed by a further study that showed many of the children were not confident in their reading ability. The article concludes that reluctant readers must be given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own reading development—only when value is attributed to reading can it be fully appreciated by the child. However, it is vital that the child’s parents/carers are involved with helping to tackle their children’s reluctance to read. Parental input is crucial to a child’s education; if this input is provided at an early stage, then reluctance to read is more likely to be successfully overcome and may even offer prevention as well as cure.

Introduction

The term ‘reluctant reader’ is an umbrella term used in educational and related literature to denote a child who does not or cannot read, and who is likely to avoid such an experience at all costs. Moorefield, a teacher, asserts that reluctant readers may be divided ‘into three categories—those who can’t read, don’t read, and won’t read’ (2004, 1). The underlying notion is that children may not read because they lack the literacy or comprehension skills to do so and therefore are unable to read. However, a child may also be classified as a reluctant reader if they are able to read but refrain from doing so, either through dislike of reading itself or because there are other activities they find infinitely preferable. These basic premises are supported by Goodwin, who asserts that ‘Reluctance indicates unwillingness and disinclination—in other words, not an absence of skill or understanding, but an attitude. The idea that only incompetent readers are reluctant readers is untrue’ (1995, 2). Goodwin follows Moorefield’s strategy of identifying three groups of reluctant readers, namely struggling readers (cannot read), uninterested readers (will not read) and successful readers, ‘children who can and do read, but not at school’ (do not read) (Goodwin 1995, 2), a distinction that serves well in relation to any aspect on the subject.

Background

Much of the literature surrounding reluctance to read in children focuses on how reading should be taught, and therefore most of the methods advocated take place within the school environment. Interestingly, a key issue of vital
importance to the issue of reluctant readers is confidence. A large proportion of children who cannot or do not read feel daunted, and perhaps even scared, by the prospect of reading and will employ any number of tactics to avoid it. ‘Self-designated non-readers are affected by inner inhibitions as well as those outside their control. All these inhibitions feed into and add to a reader’s cycle of failure’ (Goodwin 1995, 45). It is this feeling of failure that can result in a child adopting a strategy of ‘if I don’t try, then I can’t fail’, or as Worthy explains: ‘Students who have continually met with failure see reading as the enemy. For struggling readers, then, the first focus of instruction should be to rebuild their damaged self-concepts through motivation . . . ’ (1996, 204).

A further element crucial to the success of overcoming reluctance to read in children is the notion that reading should be fun. If there is no intrinsic value placed upon the importance of being able to read and a child sees it as nothing other than boring and a chore, then what incentive is there for the struggling reader to negate their reluctance? ‘To hook students on books, teachers must approach reading in ways that don’t kill it, and they need to find the books that will catch the “electronic kids” attention long enough for them to settle into reading’ (Worthy 1996, 26). It is only then that comments such as the often-heard ‘reading is boring’ can be remodelled into more positive assertions, and arguably the fundamental path to achieving this is through demonstrating that reading is fun.

All of these notions provide a theoretical base from which to start but, as with many other things, their strengths and weaknesses can only be identified once they are put into practice. Reading schemes and programmes are one of the most popular ways of contextualising and implementing reading strategies. Much of the literature on this subject comes from America and very often the authors are teachers who describe the success they have had with various strategies. For example, Anderson, a school librarian, describes the outcome of an ‘Accelerated Reading’ (AR) programme: ‘I’ve heard people say that AR takes the joy out of reading. Just the opposite has happened with our struggling readers’ (Anderson 2001, 31). Conversely, Norton, a school teacher, decided to ‘set up an outside reading programme to emphasize the importance of reading for pleasure’ (1992, 271), the result of which was initial success—although ‘participation decreased as the weeks passed’ (Norton 1992, 272). Furthermore, online and computer resources are becoming more prevalent and are designed to help teachers and reluctant readers alike (Cammack 2001). There is a wide range of reading strategies that may be used when working with reluctant readers. However, the situation in the United Kingdom is somewhat different from that of America in that the education system is generally determined by central government and implemented by local authorities. Consequently, there has been a multitude of publications by the government in recent years relating to the issue of children’s literacy. These include Literacy across the Curriculum: Strand Tracker (Standards Site 2002b), Speaking, Listening, Learning: Working with Children in KS1 and KS2 (Standards Site 2003), and Including all Children in the Literacy Hour and Daily Mathematics Lesson (Standards Site 2002a), among others.
Moreover, useful lessons may be learned from other countries that are tackling literacy issues with measured success, such as Finland (OPH 2005).

It should be noted that many of the writers on this subject are practicing teachers who are sharing the knowledge they have acquired through first-hand experience of working with reluctant readers. As a result, the solutions they offer are designed to be employed in the classroom. Many children do not have the opportunity to read at home so that the majority of their reading education takes place at school. For this reason it is crucial that teachers are ‘able to draw on techniques most suited to the learning needs and abilities of the child’ (National Inquiry in to the Teaching of Literacy 2005, 11). Therefore, the way in which reading is taught becomes of paramount importance if the issue of reluctance to read is to be overcome. Currently the National Curriculum states that literacy must be taught in accordance with the National Literacy Strategy (Literacy Trust)—during the summer of 2004 this combined with the Numeracy Strategy to form the new National Primary Strategy (Literacy Trust), as detailed by the Department for Education and Skills (Standards Site 2002a). In practice, this has meant that one hour in the school day must be devoted to teaching literacy although it should be noted that this is a broad remit and relates to any aspect of reading, writing, listening and speaking. A number of publications have been produced by the Department for Education and Skills to assist teachers and parents with helping children to read, including *Excellence and Enjoyment: A Strategy for Primary Schools* (Department for Education and Skills 2003) and *Help your Children Learn: A Guide to Supporting Reading for Parents of Primary School Children* (Parent Centre 2004). However, there is no specific guidance relating to reluctant readers or associated issues. Arguably, this is surprising given the trend for literature in this area to originate from teachers themselves. Yet there is a general recognition that more work needs to be done in the teaching and promotion of reading to children, which has resulted in a number of other, non-governmental organisations producing a variety of measures designed to tackle issues such as reluctance to read.

The past few years have seen an increase in the number of organisations that play a supporting but crucial role in the work already being done in schools. For example, the Literacy Trust website is updated daily and is extremely comprehensive in all aspects relating to literacy. It includes a section on primary school children and consists of various reports, articles and documents as well as links to other useful sites. Moreover, the United Kingdom Literacy Association (2005) and the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature (2000) also provide websites containing lists of publications they have produced in this area. Organisations such as The Reading Agency have introduced initiatives such as the Chatterbooks project (National Literacy Trust 2005) and the Summer Reading Challenge (National Literacy Trust 2005), both designed to encourage children actively to participate in a reading scheme outside school. Libraries have become increasingly aware of the problems concerning children and their reading education, and in 2002 the Chartered Institute of Library and Information
Professionals published *Start with the Child* (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2002), a document designed to help librarians meet the needs of young readers. Another organisation, Their Reading Futures (2005), has produced a website devoted to supporting adults who work with young readers so that they may encourage and promote a positive reading experience for children. Furthermore, publishers such as Barrington Stoke have begun to recognise the need for books specifically aimed at reluctant readers, and consequently specialise in publishing material in this area. They now publish books that are designed as low-ability, high-interest reads so that the reluctant reader will find them appealing without risk of feeling patronised.

However, it is all too easy to assume that reluctant readers simply need more help in acquiring reading skills. While this may be correct, it is just as important to ensure that the right help is given. Part of this entails giving reluctant readers direct responsibility for their reading. Many struggling readers are aware that they may be having more difficulty with their reading than their peers, and this can lead to feelings of failure and stupidity or the idea that they are simply not as clever as those around them. This idea is supported by Goodwin, who asserts that:

No matter how much care is taken, the rest of the class will be aware of the struggling reader striving to make sense of an ‘easy’ book or working on skills that others have accomplished years before. The embarrassment that such experiences cause leads to a lowering of self-esteem, the biggest barrier to progress. (1995, 10)

These feelings lead to a lack of self-confidence and the result is a decline in self-worth. Doubting their ability combined with fear of failure means the reluctant reader assumes they are incapable of the reading tasks given to them so that they will employ any number of avoidance tactics to circumvent participating in the task. This often results in failing the task, thereby proving to them that their fears are justified and so this destructive cycle continues. Therefore, even a child who enjoys reading but is not as good as they would like to be can become a reluctant reader. At this point, the child will often give up. Feeling devoid of any power or control over the situation, they absolve themselves of any responsibility for their reading. It is when this is allowed to happen that a further cause of reluctance to read occurs.

A child who does not assume responsibility for their reading development will develop apathy towards any measures taken to overcome their reluctance, and very often they will attempt to get the parent or teacher to do their work for them. These children have been called the ‘I don’t know how readers’, who rely on the teacher to give them all the answers (Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 1999, 46). In order to overcome reluctance to read, the child must accept responsibility for their reading. They must be taught the value and importance of reading, and this must be done in a way that is safe so that the child is not afraid to make mistakes for fear of ‘failure’. A number of measures may be used to achieve this, such as
letting the child choose their own reading book (a practice not always followed) and reading with the child on their own, allowing them to take their time. This reasserts the child’s authority, enabling them to regain the feeling of being in control. Put another way, ‘Choice is power . . . Simple choices such as choosing between two books, which part to read, or deciding between easier or harder material gives readers ownership’ (Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 1999, 46) Ultimately, the reluctant reader must take direct responsibility for their reading, but this must be permitted to happen in a controlled environment if it is to be successful. Therefore the way in which it is taught becomes of paramount importance if the issue of reluctance to read is to be overcome.

In many areas, the literature concerning reluctance to read is both useful and comprehensive. However, one area that is consistently neglected is that of the causes of reluctance to read. Much of the literature approaches the subject by outlining the main issues before offering strategies to deal with them. It may be argued the causes of reluctance to read are implied in the solutions offered, but similarly it could be posited that there is a distinct gap in the literature on the subject. Much of the literature is concerned with singular aspects of the problem of reluctance to read, most notably techniques that teachers and parents can employ in order to tackle it. While this is understandable, and may even be desirable, it is also helpful to provide context in the literature as this serves to maintain continuity. Thus an understanding of the fundamental nature of the problem and its possible origins help to give the proposed solutions additional support and meaning.

Moreover, while both governmental and educational bodies have published a wealth of literature designed for teachers and parents to help children with their reading, very little of this is concerned specifically with reluctant readers. One explanation for this may be that reluctance to read is considered to be one of a number of subsets connected with the overriding issue of literacy problems as a whole. Moreover, ‘while the evidence indicates that some teaching strategies are more effective than others, no one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties’ (National Inquiry in to the Teaching of Literacy 2005, 14). This means that generic material, while helpful, may not be suitable for drawing conclusions about reluctant readers in particular. Separate work is required with particular reference to the effect of initiatives such as the National Literacy Trust and The Reading Agency. This research was carried out as part of a Master’s degree at Loughborough University, UK. It represents an attempt to bring all of these elements together and includes both the empirical and epistemological perspectives involved.

Methodology

The overall aims of the research were to determine what makes a child a reluctant reader and how this reluctance can be overcome. In order to fulfil the aims, two main objectives were determined:
To assess reluctant readers’ attitudes to reading; and
to identify and make recommendations for those working with reluctant readers
to help overcome their reluctance.

To accomplish these objectives, a combination of observations, surveys and a
small-scale study designed to assess reluctant readers’ reading preferences was
devised. These methods were implemented in conjunction with four primary
schools in and around Loughborough, Leicestershire, UK to produce a multi-
strategy methodology.

**Observations**

Prior to commencing the study, observations of a literacy hour took place
in each of the four participating primary schools. These observations were of
classes studying Key Stage 2 and involved a mixture of Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5
children, depending on the individual school. The primary reason for undertaking
this set of observations was to determine the ways in which children are
introduced to literacy in general and, where possible, reading in particular. Also, it
was important to try and assess the flexibility of the National Literacy Strategy in
practice to find out the extent to which it accommodates reluctant readers.

**Surveys and Study**

The same four primary schools were invited to take part in a three-week
study to discover the attitudes of reluctant readers towards reading and whether
they favoured particular types of reading material. Each school was asked to
identify four children to take part in the study, preferably two boys and two girls,
aged 9–10 years and who were considered by their teacher to be reluctant
readers. Not all of the schools were able to meet these requirements, so the study
was conducted with 14 participants (nine boys and five girls). It consisted of three
parts: an initial questionnaire designed to identify children’s attitudes to reading,
a three-week study centred on determining children’s reading choices, and a
feedback questionnaire. All work was carried out within school time and in the
library, thus ensuring that the child was in a safe and familiar environment at all
times. The purpose of the initial questionnaire was two-fold: to discover how
reluctant readers really felt about reading and the importance they attributed to
it; and to allow them to approach the study without feeling nervous or
intimidated by it. Initially, an introduction and explanation of the study and its
connection with the overall research being conducted were given, and each
participant was asked whether they were happy to be included. The first part of
the survey consisted predominantly of questions requiring one-word answers,
although some included follow-up questions in order to clarify the point being
made. It was consistently reiterated to the children that there were no right or
wrong answers to any of the questions, and that all responses were valid, thereby
creating the same conditions that would be present in the actual study. The second part of the questionnaire involved open-ended questions designed to provide an insight into how reluctant readers view their own experience with reading as well as helping to identify any patterns or trends of thought among this group of readers as a whole.

The study consisted of three 20-minute sessions with each participant. These were designed to discover participants’ reading preferences as well as to investigate whether lack of confidence is a major factor in a child becoming a reluctant reader. Prior to commencing the study, five different types of reading material were chosen to appeal to a variety of reading preferences:


At the beginning of each session, the child was asked to choose which material they would like to look at and then asked to explain their choice. If the book was fiction-based, participants were then asked to read from the beginning; in the case of non-fiction material the child was asked to look through the book and find a page they thought looked interesting and which they would like to explore further. Reading took place for the first 10 minutes of the session, and this was followed by 10 minutes of word-based games. The game playing allowed a relationship of trust to be built between the child and the investigator. This would help to build confidence levels, especially in relation to reading unfamiliar materials. This format was followed throughout the three-week period, the only difference being that the child was required to choose different reading matter each time.

The study concluded with a feedback questionnaire designed to determine how the participants had viewed the study. The questions posed sought to determine how each child had viewed the sessions as a whole and whether they felt it had been a positive or negative experience. The questionnaire was also concerned with the material that had been read so that conclusions could be drawn as to the most popular book as well as possible reasons for its popularity. The final part of the questionnaire related to how the individual felt their own relationship with reading had changed, whether they thought it had the potential to change and, if so, in what way.

**Pilot Study**

The questionnaire was piloted with a separate group of children of the same age to ensure that the language and meaning were suitable and easy to understand. These participants were reluctant readers with whom the investi-
Outcomes of the Study

The children concerned had specifically been chosen by their teacher as appropriate for this research since they were considered to be reluctant readers. Therefore, although the participants shared a common bond, it was noted that their reluctance might be the result of a variety of causes and consequently might manifest itself in a number of ways. Prior knowledge of the participants’ reluctance to read led the investigator to presuppose a number of ideas about their attitude to reading and the way in which they perceived it. It was assumed that as reluctant readers, the majority of participants would have negative feelings towards reading and that they would not consider it to be an enjoyable activity. This assumption was challenged in the first question of the survey. When asked ‘Do you like reading?’, only one of the respondents replied that they did not and another was unsure. This response was unexpected and not only questioned the notion that reluctance to read is synonymous with a dislike of reading, but also had implications for the way in which the issue is tackled. Clearly more work needs to be done in discovering how reluctant readers perceive their relationship with reading, especially given other results highlighted by the questionnaire. For example, all participants believed it important to be able to read, and all agreed that they would like to be able to read better (although the same participant was again unsure). These results, which are perhaps surprising, are presented together in Table 1.

The participants were also asked to give themselves a number on a scale of 1–10, where one meant ‘I hate reading’ and 10 meant ‘I love reading’. The responses to this request are presented in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 suggest that reluctant readers’ attitudes are not as implicitly negative as might have been thought. Yet the fact that these children had been considered to be reluctant readers by their teachers indicated that

| Table 1 |
|------------------|------------------|
| **Question** | **Number of ‘Yes’ responses** |
| Do you like reading? | 12 |
| Do you think it’s important to be able to read? | 14 |
| Would you like to be able to read better? | 13 |
there was an issue of some sort. The survey also included questions designed to find out how children felt about reading as well as what they thought about it—a subtle but important difference. The participants were asked what they liked best about reading, and this elicited a mixed response ranging from ‘Helps you learn better’ to ‘When I read poems’. Interestingly, when asked why they thought reading was important, many of the answers had a pragmatic slant, such as ‘If someone posts you a letter you won’t be able to read it because you won’t be able to understand it’ and ‘Because if you don’t read when you are a kid, you won’t understand words when you’re an adult’. Furthermore, the majority of the children identified a future need to be able to read well as this would enable them to go to university or get a good job.

The second half of the questionnaire aimed to encourage the child to think in more depth about the way in which they viewed reading as well as to provide insight into how this relationship could be improved. When asked to describe how they felt when asked to read, the responses were mixed, although the majority said they were happy about it. However, a significant minority did not respond in a positive way and replies included ‘Nervous’, ‘Shy’ and ‘Not very happy’. When asked what activity they would choose to do instead of reading, the responses were again varied, although this may be attributed to the idea that the answers reflected the participant’s individuality and preferences. Perhaps more significantly, the final question caused the most amount of difficulty: ‘Is there anything you can think of that would make reading more fun?’ One-half of

### TABLE 2
Participants’ ratings of their level of enjoyment when reading

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<th>Rating (scale 1–10)</th>
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<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Child 4</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Child 4</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>School C</td>
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<td>Child 1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Child 2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Child 2</td>
<td>10</td>
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the respondents could not think of anything and replied ‘No’ or ‘Don’t know’. There are two possible reasons for this: either the respondents already believed reading to be fun and could think of nothing to improve the experience, or they did not connect their understanding of reading to their experience of what is fun. It is argued that this second possibility is the more likely because, when asked ‘What do you like best about it [reading]?, only one of the 14 participants replied that they thought it was fun. This notion of fun may provide a useful starting point in how to provide a solution to the problem of reluctance to read in children.

The survey was followed by a study designed to investigate the reading preferences of reluctant readers. After responding to the questionnaire, the children were asked to choose an item of reading matter from the five offered to them and then asked to explain that choice. The participants were not allowed to make the same choice more than once, so in the three sessions that took place each child experienced three of the five books available to them. This allowed a pattern to emerge, highlighting the kinds of material most popular with this group of readers (see Table 3).

Table 3 shows that the two most popular kinds of material were the non-fiction and rhymes book, supporting the notion that reluctant readers prefer non-fiction. It is suggested that this is because reluctant readers are more easily able to appreciate the value of non-fiction material. It is fact-based and a source of useful information, having a clear purpose with which the reluctant reader can identify. By contrast, reluctant readers often fail to attribute the same kind of value to fiction-based material—they feel they do not learn from it and therefore think there is little return for the expenditure they make in reading it. Thus comments made by the participants such as ‘I love information books’ clearly demonstrate that non-fiction material is more popular with reluctant readers.

However, this does not identify the reasons for the rhymes book being almost as popular. The majority of reasons for choosing a particular book involved some analysis of the front cover. If the cover was appealing then this alone seemed to account for a large part of the decision to choose the book and investigate it further. In addition to comments about the front cover, the two

<table>
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<th>Reading material</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-fiction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhymes (poetry)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic/magazine</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossover (fiction/non-fiction)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
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TABLE 3
Reading material chosen by the participants
recurring reasons for choosing the non-fiction book were because it was an information book and because it was about dinosaurs (a popular subject). The two main reasons for choosing the rhymes book were because the cover was colourful and made it look fun as well as containing rhymes (another popular subject matter). One of the reasons rhymes—indeed all forms of poetry—are popular with reluctant readers could be attributed to the format and style, which governs how they are read. Poetry involves rhythm and often tells a story or describes something in a unique way. Furthermore, poems and rhymes are often short, especially if directed at a younger audience. Therefore the sense of achievement on completion of reading a rhyme is much quicker than when reading a story, especially if the rhyme involves humour. This may account for the rhyme book’s popularity with the participants in the study.

Another area of interest relates to the comic. This was not chosen as often as had been expected, but perhaps more surprising was the fact that the participants who did choose it became bored with it quickly. The cause of this may be that the comic contained very little substantive information (it was mainly devoted to advertising) and therefore the child received no incentive to continue reading it. This further supports the argument that information books are a key component in overcoming reluctance to read, as this group of readers clearly values the benefits reading can bring if presented to them in a way they feel is relevant to them.

Having established the group’s attitudes to reading and identifying their reading material preferences, it was necessary to investigate their thoughts on the study itself. For example, did they feel that this one-to-one structure was helpful to their reading development? Had they found the sessions useful or fun? Given the opportunity, would they want to continue them? These questions were important as the answers could provide an indication as to the best way of approaching the issue of reluctance to read and the ways in which reluctant readers can participate in this. To this end, the first question the participants were asked was ‘Have you enjoyed these sessions?’ All of the respondents replied that they had. This was further supported by 13 of the 14 participants believing that they would like reading more if they could continue with the sessions, while the remaining participant was unsure. Twelve participants stated that they preferred reading with someone, while the remaining two liked reading on their own.

One area of particular interest was highlighted in response to the question ‘What was the best thing about them? [the sessions]’. Over one-half cited playing games at the end of the session as being the best thing, as they were fun and interesting. Games were considered a ‘reward’ for the hard work the child had done with their reading prior to the game. However, although the participants regarded the games merely as fun, they also had an educational remit. Hangman was played and the words chosen were from the text that had just been read; often a word with which the child had struggled was selected. The game helped to reinforce the spelling and learning of the word, giving the child a sense of achievement. By working in this way, the child was able to make mistakes
without fear of failure, thus promoting a positive learning and reading experience. This method was successful as demonstrated by the feedback questionnaire. When asked what the worst thing about the sessions had been, nine participants replied that they were unsure or that there had been nothing bad about them. Of those that had felt there had been a negative aspect to them, the main complaint was that they had been made to read. However, as this was a manifestation of the individuals’ reluctance to read, the fact that all participants had enjoyed the sessions and an overwhelming majority were keen to continue with them would suggest that this reluctance is not an immovable barrier. Instead, it may be viewed as an obstacle that can be removed effectively if managed in the right way.

**National Curriculum**

It has been posited that the ‘early identification of children experiencing reading difficulties means that interventions to provide support for these children can be put in place early’ (National Inquiry in to the Teaching of Literacy 2005, 13). As part of this research, the investigator observed a Key Stage 2 Literacy Hour in the four participating schools. The principle reason for this was to determine the ways in which the National Literacy Strategy is interpreted and applied. In part, this meant observing the actual practices taking place and the techniques and activities employed by the teacher. However, it was equally important to identify the response of the class to what they were asked to do and the manner in which they approached the tasks they were set. Several key factors were focused upon, namely the purpose of the hour, the ways in which it was segmented and the atmosphere surrounding it. In many respects, each school was found to conduct the Literacy Hour in the same way. Predominantly divided into two sections, the first part of the hour involved discussion with the whole class with the children sitting on the floor around the teacher. Although the topics were varied (designing an advertisement or constructing a story, for example), each was clearly planned to encourage the children to think in a methodical way using examples to which the class could relate as being relevant in ‘real life’.

The second half of the hour was devoted to group work with around five or six children in each group. The groups were given separate activities, which were determined by the ability level of each group. The observations highlighted two areas of particular interest to the investigator. Firstly, three of the four schools included guided reading sessions in the Literacy Hour. Furthermore, the group taking part in guided reading was also the group with which the teacher would work. It was clear from the observations that a large amount of emphasis is placed on guided reading, and the majority of the children who took part seemed to be happy with this way of reading. However, a significant minority did not want to participate and only became involved when directly instructed by the teacher. It was not possible through passive observation to determine
whether these children were reluctant readers, but it is suggested that group reading is not the best method for all children, especially those who are reluctant to read. This is because they are asked to read aloud in front of their peers, which is a challenging task for any child who finds reading difficult. Therefore it may be argued that one criticism of the National Literacy Strategy is that it does not recognise issues such as reluctance to read.

The observations also allowed the investigator to assess both the atmosphere surrounding the Literacy Hour and the responses of the class to the context and format of the subject matter. The key factor appeared to be how much fun the children attributed to the topic under examination. Direct involvement, relevant examples and interaction between the class and teacher all contributed to an exciting lesson in which the children wanted to participate. This was further supported when the teacher showed an obvious interest in what they were teaching. However, this was not the case in every school—in two of the observations the class were clearly uninterested in what they were being asked to do. This would suggest that the Literacy Hour has scope for flexibility and can be adapted to suit the needs of every class. However, in relation to reading, questions are raised in connection with reluctant readers. Reading is part of a wider spectrum of objectives with which the Literacy Hour is concerned and often takes place in a group situation which may not always be the most suitable for a struggling reader. However, the ways in which this method of taught reading is helpful or otherwise to reluctant readers is not clear, and therefore further research is required before any definite conclusions may be drawn.

While this research was being conducted, changes were taking place in the education system. At the same time that the government delivered its report *Excellence and Enjoyment: A Strategy for Primary Schools* (Department for Education and Skills 2003), it also announced a new initiative called ‘The Primary National Strategy’ that came into force in the summer of 2004. This incorporated both The National Literacy Strategy and The Numeracy Strategy under one overall initiative. The government is keen to state that ‘Literacy remains vital and at the heart of the Primary Strategy. The Primary Strategy aims to build on the success of the National Literacy Strategy’ (Literacy Trust 2005a,b), and therefore it would appear that little will change in terms of how literacy is taught in the classroom. However, this may develop or alter in time and serves as a useful reminder that it is important to be aware of such changes affecting the education system and other factors associated with children’s reading development, as they are constantly evolving.

*Parental Input*

When discussing the possible causes of reluctance to read, the emphasis is often placed on the educational environment or the reading materials being used. However, the home environment also has a significant bearing on a child’s learning experience as ‘research shows that parents who support their child’s
reading make a big difference to how well their children do at school’ (Reading is Fundamental, UK, no date). Very often, the first encounters with a book or comic will take place within the home at a pre-school age. These experiences will have a cumulative effect so that, by the time the child is ready to attend school, an attitude and opinion of reading will already have been formed. Parental influence and the home environment will continue to play a vital supporting role throughout the child’s education and this is why it is crucial that this involvement is positive and constructive. However, this is not always the case. Various reasons, including work commitments and time constraints, mean that parents do not always have sufficient time to spend reading with their children. Anecdotal evidence acquired by the investigator through informal discussion with both teachers and children would suggest that in some households, televisions, computers and computer games along with games have all but replaced books in terms of birthday or Christmas presents. Therefore, if the parent does not actively promote the importance of reading, then it becomes probable that the child will not attribute importance to it either.

However, there may be other reasons as to why a parent does not read with their child on a regular basis. It may be that they do not enjoy reading or that they feel it is the school’s responsibility to teach their child these skills. Furthermore, they might not enjoy reading and may themselves be reluctant readers. Thus they may think that they are not in a position to help their child with their reading education. Cooper presents this idea under the heading ‘Children who don’t expect to become readers’. She writes:

This is a problem with the child’s self-image. For example, it might be that Mum has not learnt to read and therefore Maria does not expect she will be able to either. On the other hand, it might be that Maria sees herself as not very clever and believes that only clever people learn to read (which of course isn’t the case at all). (Cooper 1996, 54)

Moreover, the survey conducted as part of this research found that two of the 14 respondents only read at school and never at home. Although a seemingly low number, if this percentage were representative of a larger group it would indicate that a significant minority of children do not read at home. While further research is needed in this area, it is argued that parental input is vital if children are to be prevented from becoming reluctant readers, and even more so in the case of overcoming reluctance to read.

**Conclusion**

Reluctance to read can have a negative impact on a child’s future if it is not tackled early on in their reading development. As a consequence, the primary aim of this research was to investigate the various aspects of what makes a child a reluctant reader. The survey conducted as part of this research has led to the conclusion that many reluctant readers view reading as somewhat of a necessary
evil; they find it only sometimes enjoyable, but recognise it is always important. A further conclusion drawn from the survey is that the reading material given to reluctant readers must be both interesting and pertinent as they often regard the purpose of reading as a means to an end (the end being information). Furthermore, the research has shown that reluctant readers’ attitudes towards reading are dependent not just on the material, but also on its purpose and relevancy to the individual. Consequently, it is concluded that in order to overcome reluctance to read, a person-centred approach must be taken, rather than a reading-centred approach.

Children are often aware how well they are doing academically and will use their friends as a barometer to measure their own success. If they believe themselves to be ‘failing’ this can create or reinforce feelings of low self-esteem. One consequence of this can be for the child to relinquish personal responsibility for their reading development. Thus, a child who believes themself to be a poor reader can risk becoming the very thing they are afraid of, and it is at this point that reluctance to read can occur. Yet, if an individual feels they have control over what is happening this will allow other changes to happen more quickly, such as adopting a more positive attitude and an increase in confidence levels. For this reason, reluctant readers must be allowed some control over their reading choices as this encourages them to take responsibility for their own development. Furthermore it is essential that in order to overcome their reluctance, reluctant readers must be encouraged to develop a positive attitude towards reading and regard it as fun, since without this aspect it is unlikely that other strategies will work.

A further conclusion determined by the research concerned the efficacy of the National Curriculum. While the Curriculum recognises the importance of reading through its Primary National Strategy, it fails to meet the needs of reluctant readers. As discussed, many reluctant readers feel self-conscious about their reading skills. The National Curriculum involves group reading situations that can hinder the progress of self-conscious readers. It does not appear to take into consideration the specific needs of groups and/or individuals for whom this approach does not work, and currently the Curriculum does not acknowledge the necessity of individual reading sessions with the teacher alongside guided reading. This was apparent from the observations conducted for the research, which showed that a significant number of children were uninterested or disinclined actively to take part in the guided reading. Given that reluctant readers may have issues of low self-esteem or feel vulnerable if asked to read aloud in front of their peers, guided reading inadvertently creates the environment least conducive to their needs. It is argued that this approach, while appropriate for many children, is not suitable for tackling the problem of reluctance to read and results in the conclusion that the National Curriculum has not yet generated an effective strategy to recognise and help reluctant readers.

The principal conclusion of this research is that parental input is the most significant factor in overcoming reluctance to read. If a parent is involved with
helping their child’s reading development, the likelihood of success is greatly increased and the outcome is more likely to be positive. Children are often first introduced to books in the home at a pre-school age. If they do not get support with their reading at home, then it is more difficult to help them develop reading skills elsewhere. Therefore, it follows that their attitude and relationship with reading are shaped by these initial experiences. If the parent does not place any significant importance on reading as an activity, the child will have no reason to do so themselves. This may cause the child to make slower progress with their reading later on, but it might also reinforce the idea that reading is neither enjoyable nor important. If a child is conditioned towards a negative attitude when they are young, it is probable that they will become a reluctant reader as they get older. For this reason it is crucial that positive parental input is given at the beginning of a child’s reading development, as failure to do so can result in difficulties later on.

Based on these conclusions, there are several key recommendations that may be offered to those working with reluctant readers, as a way of helping to overcome their reluctance. Initially, it must be recognised that no child chooses to become a reluctant reader; however, once caught in this cycle they will need help to break it. A reluctant reader will quickly acquire a narrow perception in terms of what reading has to offer them, and it is this perception that must be altered. It is vital that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s reading development. In most cases, parents are a source of consistency and continuity throughout their child’s education and it is from them that children acquire many of their behaviours and learning patterns. The success of a child adopting a new attitude and understanding towards reading is greatly increased if there is parental involvement in the process. Furthermore, it should be remembered that not all children are interested in the same things—time should be taken to establish what their individual interests are and the type of reading material they like.

Moreover, it is important to try and read with the child on a one-to-one basis and to recognise that reading may be an intimidating and frightening experience for the reluctant reader. Alongside this, efforts should be made to offer continual reassurance to the child. Mistakes are part of the learning process and this highlights the importance of acknowledging the child’s efforts, even if they get things wrong. The reading experience can be daunting but can also be made enjoyable—children should be encouraged to be creative with words. For example, playing word games can help to develop the child’s confidence and promote a positive reading experience. Essentially, all of these observations are nuances of one overarching recommendation—Make Reading Fun! If reading is associated with being fun, it is automatically granted a purpose and requires no further justification; it is given status and becomes something the child wants to do.

It may be seen that many of these recommendations are interrelated and dependent on each other—this is necessary if the overall goal is to be achieved.
However, further research is needed if comprehensive and specific guidelines are to be put forward as a feasible strategy for helping to solve the problem of reluctance to read. The research upon which these conclusions and recommendations are based was conducted with 14 participants. A similar study could involve a larger sample in order to confirm the findings on a wider scale. Furthermore, additional work needs to be done in investigating the causes underlying reluctance to read; only when these are properly understood can solutions be proposed and implemented and success anticipated. This is because each solution must incorporate the child’s individual needs and circumstances, and must seek to negate the causes underlying their reluctance. Therefore, solutions proposed without a comprehensive understanding of the causes involved are unlikely to be wholly successful.

Yet it is perhaps with regard to parental input that the most pressing research is needed. All the evidence gathered in this research points to this as one of the most important factors in a child’s reading development. Parents who take direct responsibility for helping their child overcome reluctance to read are likely to have the greatest impact on their child’s attitude, confidence and approach to reading. Parental involvement is the most important factor in a child’s reading development, and it is this hypothesis that provides an interesting angle for further research to be conducted regarding reluctant readers. Naturally, the answer to ‘What makes a child a reluctant reader?’ is dependent upon the individual concerned; however, the solution to overcoming reluctance does not fundamentally lie within academia, but within the home.

Note
1. Throughout, the term ‘parent’ denotes also a carer or another adult responsible for the child.

References
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What Makes a Child a Reluctant Reader?

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