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Children reading alone and reading together: literary representations and lessons from a pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article first explores three literary representations of young people who are immersed in books by focusing on Alice's sister in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and *Matilda*. It argues that these characters create solitary reading experiences by being absorbed in books which provides escapism and company. It considers how representations of literary children immersed in books can provide a model of this type of reading behaviour for child readers, provided that these representations are sufficiently diverse. The article then focuses on primary literacy education in the United Kingdom and discusses how policy requirements can mean that children's school reading experiences are often shared, social ones rather than solitary ones. It draws on a recent study of children's reading habits (Topping, 2021) to highlight how children's increased enjoyment in reading during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic can be partly attributed to them having more time to read alone, which enabled them to become immersed in a story and made them feel better about being isolated. The article concludes by arguing that children need to have more opportunities in school to be alone with books in quiet spaces to allow for immersive reading experiences.

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1. Introduction

Classic children's literature is full of depictions of characters who are immersed in books. Hermione Granger, who is often found in the Hogwarts library, turns to books to find solutions and frequently it is her reading that solve a riddle or saves her friends. Ann Shirley, the protagonist of the *Anne of Green Gables* series, reads to seek escapism and enlightenment. She is often described as an avid reader and the series depicts the fictional journeys that books take her on, as well the literal journeys throughout her life such as gaining a job as a schoolteacher and attending college. Similarly Jo March's interest in books shapes her life turning her from a reader who hunts out places to be alone with books to a writer who seeks to challenge gender stereotypes. This article begins by exploring three literary representations to highlight how the characters create solitary reading experiences through being immersed in books, even when they are in the company of others. It focuses on Alice's sister in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* who sets in motion the events of the story by being absorbed in a book, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* who lives vicariously through her favourite novels and *Matilda* who uses reading to escape her oppressive family environment. The article discusses these representations by engaging with descriptions of the characters' encounters with books and by analysing illustrations which show the physical dimensions of immersive reading experiences. It then connects fictional children with child readers to discuss how these literary representations can act in a self-reflexive way as the image of the literary child immersed in a book

can draw in the child reader by modelling this type of reading behaviour. However, through engaging with ongoing work on diversity in children's literature, it also highlights the need for more diverse representations if children from all backgrounds are to have literary reading role models.

The article then further engages with the experiences of child readers, first by focusing on children's reading in the context of primary literacy education in the United Kingdom which may reflect the dominant approach to teaching early reading in the United Kingdom during the 21st Century. It then considers children's reading during the pandemic as the Covid-19 outbreak resulted in a national lockdown from spring 2020 which closed schools to most children shifting their reading experiences from educational settings to home environments. To explore this context the article discusses data that was collected by a recent study of children's reading habits in the United Kingdom (Topping, 2021), particularly during the lockdown when reading was largely a solitary experience. By engaging with children's views on these reading experiences it highlights how children broadly enjoyed the opportunity to read alone as it allowed them to become immersed in books and provided them with an 'escape' or a 'refuge'. However there is an acknowledgment that reading may not have had these positive effects for all children given the existence of disparities in the representation of different ethnic groups within stories and in access to books at home. By engaging with the concept of solitude from the perspective of children's literature and literacy, areas which lie at the intersection of Education and English, this article argues that children should have more opportunities for solitary reading given that being alone with books in quiet spaces seems to facilitate immersive reading experiences and counteract feelings of loneliness.

2. Literary representations: depictions of child characters immersed in books

2.1. Alice's sister

Whilst *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is one of the most well-known and enduring children's texts, it begins with a depiction of a young person immersed in a book that has received little scholarly attention. Carroll (1865/1961) writes that "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it [...] when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her" (p. 3). Carroll's words highlight that Alice is 'sitting by her sister' and furthermore that Alice attempts to distract her sister through 'peeping' into the book. Whilst Alice's sister, who is not named, is not physically alone she constructs a state of solitude through her immersive reading behaviour which Lim (2016) argues challenges 18th Century concepts of reading as a sociable activity. This state of solitude is primarily a mental one, but it has some physical manifestations; it is evident that Alice's sister feels physically alone as she does not react to Alice's distracting behaviour. The depiction of solitary reading is also one characterised by a sense of quiet and stillness on the part of Alice's sister. This constructed state of solitude connects to a point expressed by the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1979/2010) in his book *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* that "Reading is solitude [...] One reads alone, even in another's presence" (p. 147). Reading can be seen as solitude because through engagement with the words on the page the mind constructs and enters the world of the story. There is no qualification by Calvino that a certain type of book is needed for reading to be a solitary experience as for Calvino all reading is solitude. This also aligns with the experiences of Alice's sister who becomes immersed in a book without 'pictures or conversations', even though this is unfathomable to Alice. Whilst Alice is also not physically alone, she too experiences solitude because her sister is mentally, and to an extent physically, absent. It is the dissatisfaction with this solitude that allows Alice's mind to wander and to catch a glimpse of a late-running white rabbit which sets in motion the events of the story. Lim (2016) highlights the irony of Alice's relationship with books in this sense; Alice is initially positioned outside of her sister's book but through this positioning she then becomes a guide who navigates readers through a new book which is the story of her adventures.

John Tenniel, the original illustrator of Carroll's text, does not capture Alice's sister being immersed in a book but this scene has been envisaged in subsequent adaptations including one by Helen Oxenbury which was produced as part of Walker's series of *Illustrated Classics* in 2009. When discussing her adaptation in the book's peritext, Oxenbury (2009) comments that she found Tenniel's Victorian style "rather stiff" and wanted to make Alice "a child of our time" (n.p.). Oxenbury's approach to re-illustrating this classic text is evident through the relaxed posture and

clothing of Alice and her sister. Alice wears a casual blue dress and reclines against her sister with her legs sprawled on the grass in contrast to Tenniel's Alice who wears a starched dress and acts in a formal manner. Re-illustration can often have a significant impact on a story; Oittinen (2000) argues that illustrations "always take stories in new directions" (p. 103), such as by altering the meaning of the text, making readers pay attention to certain parts of the story or stressing certain qualities of characters or events. For the scene involving Alice's sister Oxenbury's illustration adds additional detail to Carroll's words, particularly in relation to the physical dimensions of being immersed in a book. Alice's sister is depicted as leaning into her book as one hand holds it in front of her and she rests her head on the other hand to bring herself into close proximity with the text. Similarly her gaze is directed solely towards the book and she seems unaware of the leaves fluttering around her or of Alice who is leaning against her looking out at the world. In conjunction with Carroll's words this image serves to model the behaviours of an engrossed reader to the child readers of Oxenbury's edition, as well as to visually depict how readers 'can read alone, even in another's presence'.

2.2. Belle

Whilst Carroll depicts a single encounter with a book, a wider range of reading experiences are shown in the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle, whose behaviour speaks to the trope of a 'bookworm', is often described as being on her own with books and choosing this activity over a myriad of social events. In one of the oldest versions of the tale that was adapted for children Beaumont (1756) contrasts the behaviour of Belle, who in this version is named Beauty, with that of her sisters writing "The two eldest...went out every day to parties of pleasure, balls, plays, concerts, and so forth, and they laughed at their youngest sister, because she spent the greatest part of her time in reading good books" (p. 233). The inclusion of the adjective 'good' sets up a further contrast between Belle and her sisters; there is an endorsement of Belle's behaviour by the author and an implication that her sister's activities are 'less good'. An additional aspect of this description is the derision of Belle's behaviour as her sisters laugh at how she chooses to spend her time reading. Walt Disney's (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) animated film version, which is one of the most well-known adaptations of Beaumont's fairy tale, similarly depicts how Belle is mocked for her reading behaviour.

MEN: Look there she goes, the girl is so peculiar!

I wonder if she's feeling well!

WOMEN: With a dreamy far-off look,

MEN: And her nose stuck in a book,

BOTH: What a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle!

Beauty and the Beast (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, n.p.)

In a song titled 'Belle' the inhabitants of the village describe Belle as "peculiar" and are concerned for her wellbeing because she has "her nose stuck in a book" which does not confirm to the behaviour expected of village girls. Belle, however, is broadly oblivious to their disdain because through immersing herself in books she constructs a state of solitude even when she is surrounded by groups of people. This constructed state of solitude is evident in the scenes from the film where Belle is shown with a book held directly in front of her face to the extent that her features are not visible. As with Alice's sister, this solitary reading experience is marked by an inner state of quiet for the reader with Belle unaware of the bustle of village life that surrounds her.

In comparison to Alice's sister though, there are more obvious reasons for Belle becoming immersed in books. This form of reading is a means of escapism for Belle who is frustrated by the provincial and predictable village life that is her expected path. Through becoming immersed in books Belle can journey to fictional worlds and for her books are synonymous with adventure. This is evident in the lyrics of 'Belle' when she talks about books as "places" asking the librarian "Have you got any new places to go?" Alongside providing escapism, reading also offers Belle company a way to feel less isolated as whilst she is surrounded by people in her everyday life she still feels an acute sense of loneliness. This stems from how the people in the village appear vastly different to

her with their small-town mentality and stereotyped gender roles which Belle rejects as evident when she sings “There must be more than this provincial life!” In the tale Beaumont emphasises Beauty's (Belle's) love of books and creates a heroine who is a ‘reading woman’. Cummins (1995) argues that this was important at a time when “the general population was only just becoming a reading one and when literary heroines represented a new kind of female protagonist” (p. 23), specifically a protagonist who thinks and is valued for their mental abilities as opposed to just their physical appearance. Reading is a symbol of the difference between Belle and her community (Cummins, 1995) which is evident in Disney's lyrics when Belle says to one of the townspeople that she has been reading a book about “two lovers in fair Verona”, referencing Romeo and Juliet, to which he replies, “Sounds boring”. Similarly the disparities between the two parties of Belle and her community, which can be broadly conceptualised as ‘new’ and ‘old’, are acknowledged by the townspeople who sing “She's nothing like the rest of us, Yes, different from the rest of us is Belle”. There has been an argument made by scholars however that books in this version of Beauty and the Beast represent both tradition and imagination, as whilst Belle reads about adventures she also adores romance novels and dreams of her own Prince Charming which reflects traditional notions of femininity (Cummins, 1995; Bradford, 2012). Belle's reading may create a gap between herself and her community, but it also creates a sense of companionship by allowing her to meet like-minded individuals. The descriptions of Belle therefore provide a further example of how readers can create solitary reading experiences through becoming immersed in books. Furthermore they highlight how reading can offer escapism and company to counteract feelings of entrapment and loneliness.

2.3. Matilda

Matilda also seeks out and creates solitary reading experiences by becoming absorbed in books at the library or in her home. She is frequently described as being alone with a book at the library where she would “sit quietly by herself in a cosy corner devouring one book after another” (Dahl & Blake, 1998, p. 9). Here again the concept of quietude, of a state of being quiet, still and calm, is explicitly connected to solitary reading. Matilda is also often depicted alone with books in her bedroom and the illustrations by Quentin Blake have parallels with Oxenbury's illustration of Alice's sister through showing the physical dimensions of immersive reading experiences. On one occasion Matilda is shown sitting in a corner of her bedroom gripping a book using both hands and leaning into it with her gaze directed solely towards the page. These actions serve to bring her as close to the book as possible and to block out the surrounding environment. At this particular point in the narrative Matilda is four years old and therefore there is an evident disparity between her physical size and the size of the hardbacked adult novels she has borrowed from the library. Whilst Matilda is described as ‘devouring’ books, the illustration reverses the relationship between reader and book. It shows a scene where Matilda is hunched over a book that is almost consuming her, a metaphor which is indicative of a reading experience that is all-encompassing. Even when Matilda is not physically alone at home, she too constructs a state of solitude by being immersed in a book. This is particularly evident in the scene where “Matilda, happened to be curled up in an arm-chair in the corner, totally absorbed in a book. Mr Wormwood switched on the television [...] She kept right on reading” (p. 43). Matilda is immersed in her book to such an extent that she ignores this distraction or noisy intrusion into her previously quiet reading environment and “keeps right on reading” angering her father.

These immersive reading experiences are means of escapism and offer company as Matilda, who is described as possessing an extra-ordinary mind and ability to learn, longs to escape her home environment. This environment is one of neglect as her parents ignore her and actively discourage reading by maintaining that life should revolve around the television. The extent to which Matilda immerses herself books is evident through the numerous descriptions of the different journeys that they take her on. Dahl writes that “The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives [...] She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village” (p. 19). These descriptions lead Guest (2008) to describe Matilda's reading experiences as “imaginative flights” (p. 256), which aligns with how Belle conceives of books as “places” and sees them as synonymous with adventure. Matilda's reading

can also clearly be classified as an act to escape from the real world. Putri and Retnaningdyah (2018) argue that Matilda's literacy practices have three purposes that are pleasure, escape and power control, the last of which relates to her supernatural writing abilities. Even when Matilda cannot be physically alone, such as during enforced television viewings or family mealtimes, she uses books to remove herself from that situation. In relation to the scene with Matilda and her father, reading allows Matilda to mentally distance herself; as Putri and Retnaningdyah (2018) highlight "Her body is in the living room with her family member watching television, but her soul and her mind travel to the world inside the story" (p. 189). The parallels between the reading experiences of Belle and Matilda also extend to the facilitator of these encounters with books. In both *Matilda* and Disney's version of *Beauty and the Beast* a librarian gives access to books when this is not provided by those in their immediate environment such as the village people for Belle or the family for Matilda. Belle sings about visiting Père Robert who lends her books and says "Your library makes our small corner of the world feel big" (Menken, Ashman & Walt Disney Pictures, 1991, n.p.). Similarly the librarian Mrs Phelps, who Guest (2008) positions as a "nurturing female subject" (p. 253), encourages and facilitates Matilda's reading by selecting titles and allowing her to borrow books. Furthermore she helps Matilda to understand how to engage with books such as when saying "Don't worry about the bits you can't understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music" (Dahl, 2003, p. 17) which can also be interpreted as adult nostalgia for an imaginary childhood encounter with books (Guest, 2008). The depictions of Belle and Matilda therefore show how immersive reading experiences can provide escapism and company but require books, accessed through a facilitator, which allow a reader to go beyond their immediate environment.

3. From fictional children to child readers: Children's reading experiences

3.1. Children's texts as offering reading role models

These images of literary children immersed in books can act in a self-reflexive way by serving to draw in the child reader outside the text. This notion of children's literature taking in or capturing children sets up a power dynamic between the (adult) writer and the (child) reader. It is an argument made by Jaqueline Rose (1984) in *The Case of Peter Pan: the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* who maintains that children's literature hangs on an impossible and unique relation between the adult who comes first as the author, maker and giver and the child who is secondary as the reader, product and receiver. In Rose's line of argument, which views children's literature as something of a chase or even a seduction, adult authors create an image of the child inside the book "to secure the child who is outside of the book" (p. 2). This argument and view of children's literature is somewhat of a negative one; there are sinister undertones to the notion of a chase or seduction, particularly when involving adults and children. However within the current context of children becoming immersed in books, this power dynamic and argued purpose of children's literature may be viewed more positively. Through reading about and viewing child characters who fully immersed in books, children learn what this reading behaviour looks like and how it can enrich life by offering adventures as well as company. For example, Matilda provides a role model for children by modelling the behaviour of an engrossed and enthusiastic reader (Putri & Retnaningdyah, 2018) which may be valuable if children lack such role models in the real world.

In highlighting how children's texts can offer reading role models there is an important qualification to note. Whilst only a few literary representations have been discussed, drawn from established works of children's literature, these are homogenous ones that depict white British or European middle-class children. Ongoing work about diversity in children's literature has highlighted a significant difference in the number and type of mirrors that children's texts provide for readers from different backgrounds, drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) metaphor of how books can be mirrors that allow individuals to see their own lives and experiences. This metaphor of books as mirrors is depicted in Huyck and Park Dahlen's (2019) infographic based on publishing statistics for children's texts produced in the United States during 2018. It shows that 50% of the books depicted White characters compared to 10% for African American and just 1% for American Indians, both of whose mirrors were often negative or stereotyped depictions. Turning to a British context, the recent report *Reflecting Realities* by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (2021) highlights a similar gulf between fictional children and child readers. In 2020 33.9% of

children of a primary school age were from an ethnic minority background but only 8% of children's books published in that year featured a main character from a similar background. If children are constantly unable to 'see themselves' in the texts that they encounter in childhood, a formative period in their reading lives, they may come to view reading as an activity that lacks meaning for them (Meek, 2001). These attitudes have far-reaching effects; studies highlight how a lack of interest in reading negatively impacts upon attainment (Petscher, 2010), which consequently hinders children from fully accessing the wider school curriculum. It is important therefore that children from ethnic minority backgrounds are provided with mirrors in children's texts that include diverse representations of fictional children becoming immersed in books, which are signposted and shared in classrooms.

3.2. Children's reading in the context of primary literacy education

In the context of primary literacy education in the United Kingdom, policy requirements can mean that children's school reading experiences differ from the literary ones explored as they are often shared as opposed to solitary encounters. The English programme of study in the current primary National Curriculum (Department for Education [DfE], 2014) which covers Years 1 to 6 and children aged 5 to 11 frequently mentions how children should be given a range of opportunities to listen to and share books. For example, the Year 1 guidance for reading states that "pupils should have extensive experience of listening to, sharing and discussing a wide range of high-quality books with the teacher, other adults and each other to engender a love of reading at the same time as they are reading independently" (p. 22). Primary children's school reading experiences can be broadly characterised as involving two facets; children read to, or with, others and are read to. The former type of experiences encompasses reading practices such as shared reading where a teacher models the reading process with children and guided reading where children think collectively about the meaning of a text, both of which involve groups of children often of a similar ability (Tennent, Reedy, Hobsbaum & Gamble, 2016). Additionally they include one-to-one reading with an adult or peer. The latter type of experiences, where children are read to encompass the sharing of books in literacy lessons and story times. All these types of reading experiences are undoubtedly important and worthwhile ones. A wide range of research has highlighted the benefits of these shared experiences which include widening vocabulary, fostering awareness of reading practices, creating communities of readers, cementing word recognition skills and developing knowledge of reading comprehension to extract meaning from texts (Bus et al, 1995; Gonzalez et al, 2014; Hindman et al, 2008; Sénéchal, 2008; Torr, 2019). Additionally, it is by developing secure word recognition and reading comprehension skills through these shared experiences that children become fluent and independent readers, which is a key aim of early reading instruction (DfE, 2022; Rose, 2006).

What is notable for this article, which engages with the concept of solitude in relation to children's literature and literary experiences, is the lack of reference to solitary encounters with books alongside shared reading practices. A search of the current English programme of study (DfE, 2014) reveals that the word 'alone' is not mentioned in relation to reading; there is no reference to children having solitary reading experiences that equate to being alone with a book and having the mental as well as physical space to become fully immersed in the text. In fact the word 'alone' appears just once when defining root words as ones that can 'stand alone' (p. 93) as part of the glossary of grammatical terms primary pupils must understand. Whilst there are several mentions of how children should be able to read 'independently', this word is used to refer to reading ability as opposed to the state in which books are experienced. Similarly, the phrase 'read by themselves' relates to the skill of the reader and the need for children to be self-sufficient, rather than solitary reading experiences. The emphasis in current education policy on social as opposed to solitary reading can in part be conceived of as a return to historical practices. During the 18th Century reading was largely regarded as a sociable activity (Lim, 2016) with communities of readers forming and this practice of reading and thinking about books collectively is a defining feature of current Primary children's school reading experiences. The lack of references to solitary experiences strongly reflects the dominant approach to teaching early reading in the United Kingdom since the early 21st Century. Following the recommendations by *the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* commonly known as The Rose Report (Rose, 2006), children are taught to read using phonics. The centrality of phonics for teaching reading is evident in both the current National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) and in the recent government report that sets out the framework for reading (DfE, 2022). The National Curriculum stipulates that in the early years and Key Stage 1 (Years 1

and 2) teaching should focus on developing word recognition skills and knowledge such as mapping phonemes (sounds) to graphemes (letters) and blending phonemes to read words. Once these skills are then secure teaching focuses on developing reading comprehension skills. This aligns with the Simple View of Reading, the theoretical model of reading advocated by The Rose Report, which draws on the work of Gough and Tunmer (1986) and identifies the two core components of reading as word recognition and language comprehension. The features of high quality phonics work that are reflected in approved phonics programmes has resulted in a particularly strong emphasis on phonics teaching in Key Stage 1 before the shift to reading comprehension in Key Stage 2. This emphasis has been compounded through assessment with the introduction of a national phonics screening check for Year 1 children since 2012 and reading comprehension tests in the Year 2 and Year 6 Standard Assessment Tests [SATs]. The teaching of reading however was severely disrupted in Spring 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in national lockdowns, the first of which from March to June 2020 closed schools to most children and shifted their reading experiences away from schools and into home environments.

3.3. Children reading during a pandemic: immersion through isolation

This article turns now to the most recent edition of an annual, large scale study of children's reading habits (Topping, 2021) to explore reading experiences during the first lockdown. The study authored by Keith Topping provides insight into children's reading practices and what types of books they are engaging with. The discussion will focus particularly on the findings about children's reading enjoyment during the first lockdown and the reasons supplies for this level of enjoyment because of the apparent connections to solitary reading experiences. Within Topping's study, the data on reading enjoyment in the United Kingdom is collected by the National Literacy Trust as part of their annual literacy survey. This survey focused on children aged 9 to 18 and therefore only the Key Stage 2 phase of primary education is represented. At the beginning of 2020, the survey of over 58,000 pupils revealed that less than half of children (47.8%) said that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot, which was the lowest since 2005 when reading enjoyment began to be measured (p. 17). However the survey of children during May and June 2020, which had a notably smaller sample size of 4,000 pupils, showed an increase in reading enjoyment of 8.1% with 55.9% of children saying they enjoyed reading. When focusing on the subset of the data that looks at Key Stage 2 children the increase is even greater; 58.5% of children aged 8-11 enjoyed reading before lockdown compared to 69.4% during lockdown (p. 17). Alongside collecting this quantitative data on reading enjoyment, the lockdown survey gathered some qualitative information by asking children to explain why they enjoyed reading more during lockdown. Some of the most relevant themes identified in this data (Topping, 2021, p. 18-19) are summarised below in Table 1 with supporting quotations from children's responses, though there is an element of overlap between the themes.

Table 1. Selected themes identified in children's responses about reasons for increased enjoyment during lockdown drawn from Topping (2021, p. 18-19)

Theme	Examples of children's responses connected to the theme
More time to read and become immersed in a story	"At home I can be myself and read, write and listen to what I want and need to. By myself and not get interrupted."
	"I have had more time to focus on reading and really engage with a book."
Change in reading behaviour prompted by lockdown	"I think before I read because I was made to. When the coronavirus came, I was bored, and I started to read. Now I read because I like to read."

Theme	Examples of children's responses connected to the theme
	"I have had more free time during quarantine, so I have been reading more and have unearthed, once again, my love for reading."
More choice about what to read and ability to read and the purpose of reading	"I am more able to choose what I want to read...without any pressure from having to analyse and write lots of essays..."
Reading aided mental wellbeing	"...it is more important than ever to read books and go into fictional worlds because we can't really go outside and do much in real life at the moment."

The first theme identified, which was that children enjoyed reading more because they had a greater amount of time to read and become immersed in a story, is of particular relevance. This immersion in books during lockdown is connected to reading alone with one child highlighting that they enjoyed the opportunity to read "by myself and not get interrupted". This solitary state of reading entails being alone with a book and is characterised by a state of quiet which distinguishes the experience from the social, noisier reading experiences that dominate school environments. An interesting point emerges when connecting this first theme with the final one drawn from Topping's research as it appears that in being alone with books during lockdown children felt less lonely. Children liked the state of reading alone but also the connection that reading allowed through "go[ing] into fictional worlds" when they couldn't "really go outside and do much in real life". There are parallels between these views of real readers and some of the fictional representations previously discussed, as reading also enabled Belle and Matilda to go beyond, or away from, their current state of being. The similarities are particularly evident when comparing a child reader's comment about going into fictional worlds with the description of how books "transported [Matilda] into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives" (Dahl, 1988, p. 19). Drawing on Putri & Retnaningdyah's (2018) argument about Matilda's experiences with books, the reading practices of primary children during the lockdown can also be classified as acts of escapism. Books created distance between themselves and a specific context, though in the case of child readers Topping's findings suggest that this distance was less between themselves and the home environment and more between themselves and the environment outside the home. Children's literature may be particularly good at offering escapism for readers because of its ability to make the familiar strange (Sipe, 2008). It has been argued that children's books often retain an association with the world child readers inhabit, increasing the accessibility and transferability of stories, but alter this world to take children beyond their current state of being. Adventure fiction is a genre that offers considerable escapism and excitement for readers (Butts, 1992) and it is telling that this genre of fiction was the most popular one during lockdown with 64.9% of children surveyed reporting that they had read adventure fiction (Topping, 2021, p. 20).

In addition to books offering an escape for readers during the pandemic, the metaphor of a refuge is also applicable. Topping's study found that 59.3% of children surveyed during lockdown said that reading makes them feel better with over half (50.2%) also indicating that reading encourages them to dream about the future. These findings led Topping to argue that "reading has, for many, offered a refuge in this difficult time, providing a valuable source of calm, escapism and relaxation" (p. 19). Books provided Belle and Matilda with a haven from the judgement and derision of their community or family. Similarly books offered child readers sanctuary from the 'storm' of the pandemic that isolated them from friends and enabled them to see beyond this storm to brighter days. This finding aligns with studies such as Magnet and Dunnington's (2022) that highlighted how picturebooks which address loneliness and its antidotes can help to fight feelings of loneliness in children. Moving beyond childhood, a research report also found that reading books significantly

reduced feelings of loneliness for people aged 18 to 64 (Hilhorst et al, 2018). The sanctuary that reading offered and how it aided mental wellbeing is particularly significant given that recent studies have identified how the pandemic had a substantial impact on children's wellbeing and mental health. The pandemic saw a considerable increase in referrals for children and young people's mental health services (Morris & Fisher, 2022) and between March and June 2020 when schools were closed to most children there was a significant increase in symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder for children aged 7.5 to 12 (Bignardi et al, 2020; Wright et al, 2021). There is a qualification here however which connects to the discussion of representation, visibility and diversity in children's literature. To draw on Sims Bishop's (1990) metaphor if books are not mirrors for all children, it is possible that reading may not have counteracted loneliness during the lockdown and offered a sanctuary for children from ethnic minority groups. Indeed reading could have served to heighten feelings of loneliness and isolation if children who were separated from their peers and wider family also did not find visual and verbal representations of their community in the books they encountered. Topping's study did not investigate the characteristics of books that aided mental wellbeing the most or least, but the possible significance of differences in representation within the context of the pandemic reinforces the importance of ongoing movements to increase diversity in children's literature.

Whilst Topping's main finding about children's reading enjoyment during the pandemic was a positive one, particularly in relation to older primary school children, there were some more nuanced and negative results. The increase in reading enjoyment over lockdown was not experienced equally for all groups of pupils with findings indicating the existence of a gender gap. In early 2020 46.6% of boys enjoyed reading compared to 48.7% during lockdown with the same figures for girls as 48.9% and 60.2%. It is therefore evident that girls' reading enjoyment during lockdown improved more than boys' with an increase of 11.3% compared to 2.1%. Additionally the gender gap appears to have widened over lockdown, which Topping (2021) highlighted by saying how findings "suggest that lockdown has magnified the reading enjoyment gap between boys and girls, increasing it from a 2.3 percentage point difference at the beginning of 2020 to an 11.5 percentage point difference during lockdown" (p. 17). Statistics about gender are only given for children aged 8 to 18 and therefore specific conclusions cannot be drawn about primary pupils, but these findings align with the results of earlier studies that have identified a gender gap in primary children's attitudes towards reading and reading attainment (DfE, 2019; Mullis et al, 2017). Topping's findings suggest additional nuances in children's experience of reading during lockdown that are based on the home reading environment, particularly inequalities in access to books. Most children (90.1%) reported that they had their own books at home, but some children highlighted the effect of school and library closures which impacted on their ability to read with one child commenting "I honestly am finding it very difficult to read since I don't have reading books" (p. 19). Clearly a prerequisite for children becoming immersed in books and for reading to counteract loneliness is the availability of a plentiful supply of high quality reading material. The differences in children's access to books at home that was keenly experienced during the pandemic reinforces the value of school and public libraries that can provide the resources necessary for immersive and rewarding solitary reading experiences. Therefore although themes in Topping's overall data suggest that lockdown provided more opportunities to become immersed in books which helped to counteract feelings of isolation, this finding may not apply equally to all groups of pupils with differences based on gender and home reading environments.

4. Conclusions: Reading beyond the pandemic

This article started by exploring literary representations of children who create solitary reading experiences through being immersed in books. Alice's sister is not physically alone but constructs a state of solitude by becoming absorbed in her book to the exclusion of her surroundings. Belle is often depicted as being on her own with a book, but even when in company of her village's inhabitants she too creates solitary reading experiences by being immersed in a text. For Belle, this form of reading is a means of escapism and a way to feel less alone by encountering like-minded individuals and going on adventures to far-off places. Matilda also seeks out and creates solitary reading experiences that are equally characterised by a quietude by becoming absorbed in books at

the library or in her home which offers her escapism and company. There is the potential for these literary representations of children immersed in books to draw in child readers through modelling this type of reading behaviour, however for this to be inclusive a diverse range of representations are needed.

By drawing on the findings of a study of reading habits in the United Kingdom (Topping, 2021), this article has then highlighted how primary children's reading during the pandemic was largely a solitary experience, which seems to contrast with the shared reading experiences that often dominate primary school settings. Findings suggest that children enjoyed the opportunity to read alone in a state of quiet which allowed them to become immersed in books without distractions and made them feel better about being isolated. It would seem to be important therefore that children are provided with more opportunities for solitary reading experiences in the post pandemic educational environment to balance the numerous occasions for shared reading, though as highlighted curriculum requirements place considerable constraints on the time that can be allocated to different activities. Schools could facilitate reading alone through the provision of individual quiet reading spaces around the school environment. These spaces should create the sense of being physically and mentally alone with a book to generate the conditions required for immersive reading, such as areas that are divided up into individual quiet reading nooks as opposed to more open and often noisier book corners. Such spaces would allow children to retreat from the world around them and into the world of their book with the associated benefits that Topping's (2021) research has highlighted. Given that quietude is a distinctive characteristic of solitary reading experiences and that silence in educational settings can often be a punitive measure, schools could also position quiet reading positively to children as something that allows them to become immersed in the world of a book. It is important to note however that solitary reading experiences should not be forced as attempting to mandate such experiences could have a negative impact on some children's attitudes towards reading. Rather these experiences should be facilitated through provision such as that described above so that those children who do want to read alone have the physical conditions and time within the school week to do so. Additionally it was evident from Topping's work that children valued the opportunity to have greater choice over their reading material. Interest in the reading material is another key condition for becoming immersed in a book and therefore children should be able to regularly select a book of their choosing from school libraries alongside a book from a graded scheme that aims to develop their literacy skills. Educators' knowledge of a range of children's literature is crucial here to effectively support children to find books that align with their interests or that they can 'see themselves' in.

Facilitating these opportunities for solitary reading experiences may help to improve attitudes towards reading as children have the physical and mental conditions to become immersed in a book. This call for more solitary reading opportunities seems to align with ongoing movements to promote reading for pleasure in schools that is about children having more occasions to read by and for themselves without this being linked to a learning objective. Clark and Rumbold (2006) highlight that reading for pleasure has been found to have a wide range of benefits beyond improving attitudes. These benefits include educational ones like improving reading attainment and writing ability, as well as broader ones like increasing self-confidence as a reader and fostering a better understanding of other cultures. Additionally, allowing more opportunities for solitary reading would seem to help improve children's wellbeing. Topping (2021) emphasises that there is a need for schools to recognise the connection between reading and wellbeing and inform pupils that reading can be a source of relaxation or escapism as their peers have reported. In conclusion, this initial exploration of solitary reading experiences through the lens of children's texts and the views of child readers during the pandemic has indicated the value of these type of experiences. In being alone with books child readers, like some of their fictional counterparts, can become immersed in the world of a story and consequently feel less lonely.

Declarations

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