

Inspire a Child to Read Initiative

Yarns in Barns: Wairarapa Festival of Reading

Since 2001, the [Yarns in Barns: Wairarapa Festival of Reading](#) has been fostering and inspiring a love of reading and the printed word in our community. A biennial event presented by local organisations from three sides of the book industry: publishers Fraser Books, booksellers Hedley's Books and the Masterton District Library and Wairarapa Library Service. We are connected by our mission to improve the lives of people in the Wairarapa through literacy and reading for pleasure.

It is a mission we have always known to be of great value. However, it feels more pertinent than ever as Aotearoa grapples with a growing literacy crisis, particularly in our young people. According to a recent report by The Education Hub ([Now I don't know my ABC: the perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa NZ, 2022](#)) a staggering 35.4% of 15-year-olds in this country are struggling to read and write. This report identified the need for a robust strategy to support students to read widely for pleasure, pointing to clear research that reading for pleasure is strongly correlated with better reading comprehension ([Reading for Pleasure, 2006](#)). This kind of reading leads to a range of positive individual and social outcomes with clear links to improved literacy and learning outcomes. Research by Guthrie J.T and Wigfield, ([Engagement and Motivation in Reading, 2000](#)) confirms this with their study's findings that learning opportunities generated by engaged readers were roughly equal to several years of education at school.

This same research also shows that reading for enjoyment develops:

- Holistic well-being in children
- Skills needed to develop social awareness, relationship skills, self-confidence and greater empathy for others
- Improved critical thinking skills and responsible decision making
- A flourishing imagination
- Improved communication ability
- Reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression

The body of research linking reading for pleasure and improved educational and personal development continues to grow. A report conducted by the UK Department for Education titled, '[Research evidence on reading for pleasure](#)' found that young people who reported not enjoying reading at all were 11 times more likely than those who enjoyed reading very much to read below the level expected for their age. While [Growing Independence: Summary of Key Findings from the Competent Learners at 14 Project](#) report found that students who love reading had higher levels of motivation towards school, higher scores on the cognitive and social/attitudinal competencies and consistently higher scores in mathematics, reading, logical problem-solving and attitude. Among many other positive findings.

Most incredibly, OECD research [Reading for Change](#) reports that reading for enjoyment is more important for children’s educational success than their family’s socio-economic status

In particular, reading *printed* books brings with it an opportunity to disconnect from the addictive digital screens that dominate our lives. Studies such as [Don’t Throw You’re your Printed Books](#), suggest that concentration, comprehension and enjoyment is increased when reading on paper – and that advantage is increasing.

Our extensive combined experience as booksellers, publishers and librarians tells us that one of the most effective ways to ignite a love of reading in people of all ages, genders and ethnicities is to connect them with our nation’s storytellers, with their community and put a printed book into their hands.

This is the primary tool for achieving the mission of Yarns in Barns: Wairarapa Festival of Reading. For 10 days in October, we bring together some of Aotearoa’s most engaging writers across fiction, non-fiction, poetry and children’s for a varied programme of reader events.

Inclusivity has been a key performance indicator for our festival since day one. The organising committee is keenly aware of the need for representation across different ages, genders, sexual orientation and ethnicities. One of the key tools we use to ensure the festival is available to all is to keep ticket prices very low – between \$5–20 with all children’s events free. This is, of course, made possible thanks to generous funding support of local organisations.

The Inspire a Child to Read initiative is aimed squarely at encouraging reading for pleasure among the tamariki of the Masterton district. The initiative is in response to the concerning findings of the [Education Hub think tank report ‘Now I don’t know my ABC: the perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa NZ’](#). This report identified decreasing literacy and reading for enjoyment in both primary and secondary school students, with particularly worrying inequality amongst young Māori, Pasifika and boys of all ethnicities. The report identifies “developing a robust strategy to support students to read widely for pleasure” as one of the key ways to address this decline.

These findings were backed up by the current Te Awhi Rito New Zealand Reading Ambassador and award-winning children’s author, Ben Brown. In the foreword to the [Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui published as *If Nobody Listens then No One Will Know*](#), written by Ben Brown, Peter Biggs cited OECD research that stated, “reading is the most important indicator of the future success of a child – more important even than socio-economic status”. Brown is a long-time advocate for the power of reading to – and with – our Tamariki, stating that one of the most effective ways to engage boys and young Māori and Pasifika in reading for pleasure, is for their male role models to read with them during the pivotal years of ages 7–11.

Thus, we were inspired to develop this idea that increases inclusivity and opportunity for the Tamariki of our region. The keystone being to put a book into the hands of a child and connect them with the book's author to help them open the first and start reading, while removing the financial barrier to both.

Studies show that persistently large literacy gaps remain between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders. For many children in our community, life is bookless. Providing a book of their own to children in our community, at no cost to the parents, might be the spark of opportunity a child needs to develop a relationship with books. Indeed, a [Progress in International Literacy study](#) has found that having access to books at home, and reading for enjoyment at home had a strong positive relationship with reading confidence. By bringing this gift together with an interaction with the book's author, role modelling from friends and whānau and generating a community of young readers around that book, we believe that spark has great potential to ignite into a lifelong love of reading for pleasure and benefit entire Wairarapa community.

This programme was first piloted in 2022, with the generous support of the Masterton Trust Lands Trust who share our vision and funded the entire programme. We are incredibly grateful for their contribution.

For more detailed reading on this subject, please see our sources below.

'Now I don't know my ABC: the perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa NZ.'
Nina Hood and Taylor Hughson, The Education Hub (2022).
<https://theeducationhub.org.nz/now-i-dont-know-my-abc/>

'Reading for Pleasure: A research overview'
Clark, C., and Rumbold, K, The National Literacy Trust (2006).
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496343.pdf>

'Engagement and Motivation in Reading'
Guthrie, J.T and Wigfield, A (2000)
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2000-07600-009>

'Research evidence on reading for pleasure'
Department for Education, Education Standards Research Team (2012)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/284286/reading_for_pleasure.pdf

'Growing independence: Summary of key findings from the Competent Learners at 14 Project'
Janet Rivers, New Zealand Council for Educational Research. March 2006

<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/2567/5983>

'Reading for Change: Performance Engagement Across Countries'

Kirsch et al, OECD (2002)

<https://www.oecd.org/education/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/33690904.pdf>

'Don't throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on reading comprehension'

Delgado et al, Educational Research Review (2018)

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1747938X18300101>

'The importance of access to books and New Zealand students' reading confidence'

Chamberlains, M and Essery, R. Educational Measurement and Assessment, Ministry of Education. (2020)

<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/pirls-2016-the-importance-of-access-to-books-and-nz-students-reading-confidence>

'If Nobody Listens then No One Will Know'

Ben Brown, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui (2020)

<https://www.read-nz.org/Images/Assets/61943/1/Ben%20Brown%20If%20Nobody%20Listens%20Then%20No%20One%20Will%20Know%20Read%20NZ%20P%C4%81nui%202020.pdf>

The National Library offers a great compilation of the best research around the positive benefits of reading for pleasure – see here:

<https://natlib.govt.nz/schools/reading-engagement/understanding-reading-engagement/reading-for-pleasure-a-door-to-success>