Improving reading engagement for aliterate readers through the Year 7 Wide Reading Programme: A VIT Inquiry Project

By Kathryn McKendry

Snapshot

Kathryn Kendry describes her work for her VIT registration and the inquiry project she created centred on reading engagement. Kathryn outlines the research she completed and the reading that supported her exploration.

Note: Lauriston is a P-12 independent girls school with a high level of educational advantage.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2018 I found myself as a newly minted teacher librarian, having just completed the Master of Education (Teacher Librarian), but only holding provisional teacher registration. Gaining experience in my new profession was the priority and by early 2020 I felt that the time was right to undertake the Inquiry Project: Evidence of Professional Practice required for full teacher registration with the Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT).

There was never any doubt in my mind as to the focus of the VIT Inquiry. My own reading experience (and its intrinsic benefits) and careful observation of student reading (avid readers and non-readers) supported the professional literature on reading, firmly fixing in my mind the crucial role played by reading (for pleasure and especially fiction). Simply, the more we read (volume and frequency), the better we become at reading and the better our literacy skills become. In short, practicing reading makes us better readers. Strong literacy skills also have flow-on benefits in terms of social (interpersonal) and vocational life skills (Merga, 2019, p. 6).

> *...practicing reading makes us better readers.*

I have been reading about reading since the beginning of my M. Ed (TL), however the particular sources on which I based my Inquiry Project are the recent publications by Dr. Margaret Merga, Reading engagement for tweens and teens: What will make them read more? and Raising readers: How to nurture a child's love of books by Megan Daley (teacher librarian). I also dipped into The book whisperer, by Donalyn Miller (teacher librarian). If you have not already read these, I can highly recommend each, from a research perspective (Merga) and teacher librarian practice (Daley and Miller).

The importance of the 'social influences' on reading

An important takeaway for me from Dr. Merga's book was the notion that teacher librarians, teachers and parents/significant others are the social influences on a child's reading. These ideas became the foundation underpinning my Inquiry Project. By raising the profile of books and

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reading through discussion and role modelling (and supportive practices) we can all positively influence a child's attitudes to reading and build long-lasting reading habits. If we as social influences cease 'expecting' children to read (once they can read independently), many will oblige us, leading to what Merga calls 'expired expectations' (2019, p. 25). If we do not appear to value reading, why should a child?

We need to pass on what we know about how to support reading to parents as well so they can play their important role as a social influence for reading. Communication between parents and teachers/teacher librarians is vital, so that responsibility for reading does not become what Merga terms an 'orphaned responsibility' (2019, p. 30) whereby parents expect the teacher/teacher librarian to take responsibility and vice versa. Everyone needs to be on board. The English teachers at Lauriston share that questions and concerns by parents about the amount and frequency of reading by their child are raised regularly at parent-teacher interviews. Most parents understand the importance and value of reading in their young people's lives.

Choosing my Inquiry question

So, how could I (as a social influence, together with the class English teacher) encourage my students to read more – to practice their reading?

Dr. Merga's book in particular resonated with my own experience of reading engagement in wide reading classes. Apart from a small number of enthusiastic readers, the majority of the classes were relatively indifferent to reading (both at school and home). Most complied when asked to, but a significant number put the book back at the end of the session, choosing not to borrow (ie. continue reading). Or the same book reappeared each fortnightly class with little progress made in between. I consider these students as 'aliterate' – they can read but choose not to (Merga, 2019, p. 23). This was reflected in their responses to a reading profile (unrelated to my Inquiry Project) conducted at the beginning of the year. Given the importance of reading in developing foundational literacy skills I wanted to focus on improving the reading engagement of my students. The Inquiry Question posed therefore became:

How can I improve/increase the reading engagement of aliterate or struggling readers through the Year 7 wider reading programme?

The Inquiry Project

As a teacher librarian, (not a classroom teacher) I had to make some adjustments to comply with the requirements of the VIT full registration process. I involved two Year 7 classes (rather than one, approximately 50 students), and the Inquiry ran for a semester (rather than 4-6 weeks). In place of formative and summative assessment I conducted Pre and Post Surveys to measure if reading engagement had changed. There were other adjustments too and I will make mention of these where relevant.

To begin I needed to design a programme for Year 7 wide reading to improve or increase reading engagement. Reflecting on the professional reading (Merga in particular) I brainstormed all the questions and ideas that I had in relation to reading engagement. I used headings such as: How do I measure reading engagement? What does success look like? What specific interventions do I need? What factors do we need to consider in relation to students? What will be my scaffolds? I returned to this sheet continually to make sure I stayed true to the central ideas of the Inquiry.

The programme that I designed to improve/increase reading engagement was based around the following supportive practices identified by Merga (2019) and Daley (2019):

- Increase the social value of reading through regular discussion of books/reading in the context of pleasure (Merga, p. 36, 37, 99, 105, 112)

- Provide access to new and interesting books (have a broad knowledge of the collection and be able to recommend based on student interests) (Merga, p. 92-93, 112)

- Connect readers to other readers through online reader communities and book clubs etc. (Merga, p. 42)

- Teach strategies for choosing a book to enjoy (Merga, p. 89-92; Daley, p. 48-49)

- Read aloud to students (Merga, p. 70, 72, 111; Daley, p. 70)

- Introduce different genres (Daley, p. 110-112). (I focused on indigenous literature – a favourite of mine, but also a requirement of the VIT Professional Standards and Descriptors.)

- Connect books to movies/series – this can be a powerful motivator, and connecting to socially influential pop culture enhances a book's appeal. (Merga, p. 43-50; Daley, p. 95)

The first two points were a feature of **every** lesson. I created a roster of students to share their books with their class each fortnight, and I discussed new and interesting YA books that I had read with each class. During remote learning I utilised our Wheelers eBook/audio book collection, highlighting new releases as well as older novels that I consider to be high quality in terms of their storyline and writing. The remaining points became a **'mini-strategy'** for subsequent lessons throughout the semester. Each lesson had a comprehensive lesson plan with one or two Learning Outcomes and corresponding Learning Intentions.

To connect students to online reader communities, we first watched a YouTube clip of the wonderful author Lauren Child talking about why reading is important to her. I then introduced classes to websites such as goodreads, insideadog and LoveOzYA. In another lesson classes

shared their strategies to find a book to enjoy and we built a discussion around this. I later created a poster with all their suggestions and placed this up in the library. For the focus on reading aloud, I read the Epilogue to the novel Stepsister by Jennifer Donnelly, in an expressive way, and then asked students to tell me of the images conjured in their minds as I was reading. When exploring genre – in this instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) literature – I played a clip of author Lisa Fuller reading aloud from the Epilogue to her novel Ghost Bird, as I wanted the students to hear the story in authentic 'voice'. (We began that lesson with 'connection to reading' discussion on the importance of ATSI connection to country – and a sharing of a place that is special to us).

I knew I could create lessons around these supportive practices (the mini-strategies), but how to grab the attention of the aliterate and struggling readers, and persuade them that reading is fun and a really pleasurable activity? Merga states at the beginning of her book that "fostering positive attitudes towards reading is essential to form and build reading skills. Enjoyment of reading is positively associated with literacy achievement" (2019, p. 2).

My solution was to come up with a **'Connection to reading'** activity at the beginning of each class, with the focus on recapturing the enjoyment of reading most of us have from a young age. I was hoping my students did too! Lots of girls reported on the reader profile conducted earlier in the year that they used to enjoy reading but no longer do so. So I wanted to remind them of the real pleasure and joy that can be found in those early reading experiences, particularly if they were shared with a significant other. Examples of these 'connections to reading' include, share your favourite book from childhood (could include picture books), share your favourite place to read/strangest place you have read a book, share a memory of being read to by someone special and share your favourite book to movie/series.

The students responded really well to these connections, and as a number of the lessons were conducted during remote learning, via Zoom, students utilised the chat function, and I was able to make positive and encouraging comments as their responses came in. There was an overall positive response to this activity in the Post-Inquiry survey. 60% of one class and 59.1% of the other class either liked sharing their favourite things connected to reading or liked hearing other people sharing their favourite reading memories.

...share a memory of being read to by someone special...

Assessment

As formative and summative assessment tasks for this Inquiry I designed a Pre-Inquiry Survey (10 questions) and Post-Inquiry Survey (7 questions) on reading engagement. The questions on both aligned as much as possible to the supportive practices that were implemented in the wide reading programme. For example, on the Pre-Inquiry survey I asked students to rate how they felt about being read to, how many strategies they employed to find a book to enjoy and whether students knew where to look online for book recommendations/communities. The Post-Inquiry survey questions were on the same themes and the responses to these helped me measure if students felt better supported in their reading as a result of the implementation of the supportive practices.

Results

Overall, the results of the Post-Inquiry survey were very encouraging. There was strong support for book discussions: 95% of one class (59% of the other) felt that hearing about what others were reading made them want to read more books/feel more interested in reading. 75% and 77.3% of respective classes now felt they had more strategies or were more confident in choosing a book to enjoy. 70% and 63.7% of students in both classes wanted to either borrow the book or felt more engaged with the story, when an excerpt (of Stepsister) was read aloud. 80% of one class and 36.3% of the other thought that listening to an excerpt of Ghost Bird made them more interested in ATSI history or culture. Interestingly, less than half of both classes felt that they would go online to find books or connect to reader communities (45% and 32.3% respectively). Perhaps age is a factor in this, as they are still quite young, or perhaps in a year where they have been required to switch to online learning, they simply did not want to spend more time on screen.

The final question (and my most anticipated) asked students if they felt more motivated to read following the activities we had focused on during the Semester. (I chose to use the word 'motivation' rather than 'engagement' as I felt this was more appropriate for a Year 7 audience.) 80% of one class and 63.6% of the second class felt either 'slightly more motivated' or 'much more motivated' to read after the semester programme. Although pleasing, more thinking and planning is required to engage the students who reported their motivation to read did not change (20% and 36.4% respectively). If time had permitted I would have liked to interview students to discover their reasons why. Thankfully not one student felt 'less motivated' to read than before!

Conclusion

This Inquiry was a relatively small sample and only a snapshot in (a rather strange) time, but I think it does demonstrate that the more we (the social influences – including very supportive English teachers) support/champion students' reading, the more we can create a community of readers out of each class, and the greater the benefit the students derive from the wide reading experience.

As I write this, we are about to implement the programme outlined above for the second year with a few minor tweaks. I will continue with my professional reading and will refine and incorporate more supportive practices (as appropriate) that will help students with their reading engagement. Raising the social profile of books and reading, amongst all the other distractions favoured by teenagers (especially social media/devices, other commitments etc.) is not easy, but when compared with the academic, social and vocational benefits of regular reading, can we afford not to? An enthusiastic teacher librarian (together with the other social influences), championing books and reading, with appropriate supportive practices can do much to improve the reading engagement of young people.

References

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Kathryn McKendry is a teacher librarian at Lauriston Girls' School in Melbourne. She graduated from Charles Sturt University with a Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship) in 2018. Kathryn loves all aspects of her work in a school library, in particular teaching research skills, fostering reading engagement and creating a reading community in her school. She has an emerging interest in action research, use of data and teacher collaboration to guide future programmes and planning.