

# What does one typical cohort of year nine students really think about reading and reading experiences?

By *Bronwyn Keane*

## Snapshot

Bronwyn Keane explores the results of a recent survey of the reading habits, and perceptions about reading, of the year nine cohort at John Paul College. The survey assisted in increasing the school's understanding of the students as readers and helped foster a better understanding of how to better support their needs.

Isn't that the question we ask ourselves as we strive to create programs, events and reading collections that will inspire, engage and excite our young people in reading for pleasure - so that in turn those students will reap the benefits that *we know* reading for pleasure will bring? (Merga, 2019, p 17, Daley, 2019, p 65, La Marca & Macintyre, 2006, Miller, 2009, p 51).

We ask ourselves constantly how we can widen reading ranges and build sustainable reading habits for now and the future in our students.

As school librarians, we know we have our avid readers who have already established their preferences and have strong personal reading communities amongst family and friends, as well as increasingly online. We are privileged to share conversations with them of the wonder and satisfaction of reading a 'good' book. They inform us of current trends and suggestions that assist us in maintaining relevant and current collections to our wider school community.

But what of the other students who may be observed choosing a book and politely appearing to attend to their reading during any scheduled, individualised reading time, but carefully putting the book in their hands back onto the shelving trolley at the end of the session? They are telling us they are not committed to reading outside of that timeslot or committed to the reading material they had in their hands. They are not interested in finding the 'right' book for them. Then we also have other students, who feel safe enough in your space to blatantly tell you their dislike of reading and have already built in many avoidance behaviours around reading, sharing reading and participation in reading communities.

Do these simplified groups sound familiar to you? As we navigate the road to encouraging young adults to enjoy reading for the many benefits reading will bring, we all attempt to find the solution, the perfect fit for that one student, the perfect fit for that one group of students or class. The joy and satisfaction for librarians and

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teaching staff who can find the one thing that begins a student's positive journey of reading (or turns them around from negative to positive) is second to none.

Building relationships with students is a vital key, for them to feel safe in expressing their opinions, their requests, their doubts, their difficulties and in turn trusting you to assist them to find what will be right for them.

Another key element is the power of **student agency and voice** when planning learning. Students who continue to be involved in decision making along their learning journey, right down to each class and assessment with differentiation built in are more likely to be active participants in their own learning (Norris, 2015, p 43). Empowering students so that they have more ownership of their learning and in turn can set goals, reflect on their progress and meet their own and our learning objectives plays a significant part in student engagement and commitment (State of Victoria: Department of Education and Training (2019, p 8).

## Strategy: Survey

To answer the questions that kept us wondering, it was decided in 2021 to simply take the step of asking one year nine cohort what we wanted to know.

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A survey was designed, 151 students were briefed, and the results were honest and enlightening. Students took the survey seriously and were pleased to be asked about what they wanted. Once the survey was completed and the trends analysed, students were interested to hear of changes to their learning in our Reading Program lessons.

Initially, the results were overwhelming as the trends were analysed with the additional consideration of the individual nature of student responses. In retrospect, it was thought that possibly the general survey themes were too broad, as any one aspect could be explored in so much further detail. Many overlapped. The cause-and-effect nature of prior reading experiences on current attitudes could become a metadata study. The effect of the 2020-21 remote learning on student attitudes was also discussed and this factor is an unknown influence on current reading attitudes. Incidental conversations and comments do lead us to believe that there are links between the required screen time during remote learning and the interest in voluntary reading. As this was the first year this survey was completed, there is no comparison data: the information could only be used on its own to give a snapshot picture of this cohort and how they could represent that age group generally. Future surveys may need to be narrowed down to specific areas of interest. The detail provided by each student, however, was powerful in understanding our learners on that individual level and provided teachers with deep insights into students. This in turn helps teachers devise the best strategies for improving reading habits for individual students.

With all that in mind, enough trends were found to assist with reviewing the overall service and programs currently in place, as well as further proposals to attend specifically to individual student needs.

One main factor that unfortunately became evident was that even though this cohort had provided us with valuable insight, they themselves would not benefit individually, as the Reading Program does not currently continue into year ten. However, with that in mind and aspiring to enable student voice in ongoing learning, several proposals were made. For example, it may be beneficial to survey incoming year sevens or established year eights whose voices can continue to contribute to their own learning. The data for this particular cohort could be shared with the following years' English teachers, in order to cater more appropriately to student backgrounds and needs.

Following the survey data analysis, current Reading Program learning objectives, success criteria and learning tasks were reviewed. Modifications were discussed in consultation with the English Learning Area. As year 7-9 students currently attend a Reading Program Class with their English class teacher once per fortnight within the allotted English periods, the English Learning Area are very much part of the program in collaboration with Resource Centre Teacher Librarians.

The results were valuable in providing us with goals for ensuring our Resource Centre space provided for their needs and desires and that our programs also catered to *student* expressed wishes and needs as well as our overarching goals.

## Conclusion

Did the 2021 survey of year nine student attitude to reading assist us in our quest to build our community of engaged readers?

Surveying students was resoundingly worthwhile. The survey answered, or confirmed, many of the wonderings we had about what students really think about reading.

It reminded us to continue to value and incorporate student agency and voice. It told us that our program is valued by our students generally and that we must remain committed to our overarching goals of linking this learning to reading for pleasure and enabling student choice in selection of their own reading materials. It helped us to further inform our visible learning around the benefits of reading. It urged us to continue to build relationships and assist those less avid readers who may be looking for the one factor that could make a difference to them personally. It prompted us to look at the physical environment we offer to ensure it provided features expressed by students as favourable to reading.

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Most importantly, the results and proposed actions will keep us moving forward alongside our student learners and teachers to undergo continual review with student agency voice as we strive to meet every readers' needs.

## Summary Results

The main themes revealed from this cohort about their reading habits, attitudes and needs can be summarised as follows:

### 1. Student consideration of the importance to overall learning of reading for pleasure

41% of students stated that reading for pleasure is somewhat important to overall learning. 6% stated it was extremely important. A further 24% were neutral and 18% felt it was somewhat not important. The remaining 8% stated that reading for pleasure was extremely not important to overall learning.

### 2. Student enjoyment of reading for pleasure

Students enjoy reading *when* the story is interesting, when they are hooked in and when they are in the mood. This leads to the notion that *for reading to be pleasurable, certain positive factors must be present* (i.e. reading ability, book choice and content, mood and choice of when to read). Linked to this notion are the responses from students who claim they do not enjoy reading, *'but' if it is a good story then I do like it and will read.*

### 3. Student attitude towards silent reading

82 respondents answered favourably towards silent reading with two main reasons: a) it is a way to take a break from other schoolwork and have peaceful time and b) reading in a silent atmosphere allows them to concentrate, to become involved in the book and to better understand what they are reading. Many of the negative responses stated that it is 'boring', but there were no elaborations on this. Other conditional responses related to book choice suitability, setting, personal skills in focus and preferring to talk to others whilst reading (sociability factor). These themes are recurrent throughout the survey responses.

### 4. Time spent reading for pleasure

A significant proportion of students (33%) claim to never read for pleasure and a further 33% of students only read monthly. Of the remaining cohort, 25% of students read weekly; with only 8% reading daily for pleasure.

### 5. Choice of reading materials

82% of students stated that they know what kinds of reading materials and genres they prefer. However only 41% of students had confidence in their ability to find materials to satisfy themselves.

### 6. Reading competency

Student perceptions of their own reading competencies revealed honest comments and a wide range of self-efficacy for reading amongst the group.

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### 7. Reading and social behaviours

Students' willingness to engage with others around the notion of reading was conditional upon - knowing that others are readers; if the text was enjoyed or inspiring and worth sharing; personal profiles of readers: avid social, avid detached, avid

solitary; occasional social, occasional detached, occasional solitary; reluctant social, reluctant detached, reluctant solitary. (Howard, 2008). Even some reluctant readers will share books and book chats given the above conditions. However, the range of responses also included a small group of students who unashamedly stated they do not like to read and therefore would not share their ideas.

### **8. Prior memories and experiences of reading (through Primary School)**

Students had both positive and negative memories of prior reading experiences. Positive memories of flexible seating and furnishings, links to school library settings and staff, quiet, relaxing environments, sharing reading with peers, opportunities to escape to another world, specific books and authors, reading at home, advancing reading skills, regular reading sessions, choice of reading materials.

Negative memories of reading being boring, forced and lack of choice, reading skills, 'disturbed' sessions that did not allow for satisfactory individual reading, lack of routine, spasmodic or non-existent opportunities to read individually at school, lack of choice of reading materials.

### **9. Preferred settings**

To be able to read more and enjoy reading, students referred to their homes as well as the school setting. Dominating were references to a setting where: there were no distractions, it was comfy, cosy, calm, warm, safe and intimate (e.g. in an enclosed smaller room rather than an open space), they could be on their own (in a room by themselves or away from everyone in a corner), it was a quiet or silent environment. There were several specific references made to reading in or on beds at home. A couple of students preferred outside settings.

### **10. Student recommendations for helping them to read more**

- Individual space (furnishings can allow for nooks and crannies for students to be on their own)
- Quiet atmosphere with teacher regulation to ensure students are respectful and not causing distractions
- Opportunities for individual silent reading
- Comfortable furnishings
- Relaxed time
- Assistance to find books to suit themselves
- Time – e.g. less homework to accommodate reading time; dedicated time in English class or more reading sessions allocated; finding personal time to read
- Social reading opportunities (to talk and read, to read with your mates, to share books with others)
- Improving personal skill capabilities that influence enjoyable participation – reading skills; focus skills; self-motivation

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**Bronwyn Keane** first trained as a Librarian, specialising in Children's Librarianship many years ago, Bronwyn then worked in Public Libraries before completing further study in Teaching, Diversity Services, Literacy interventions and Literacy Leadership to begin working as a teacher and subsequently a leader in schools. In 2019, she returned to her library roots and is currently Head of Information Services at John Paul College in Melbourne. Bronwyn finds her passion, interest and background across literacy and diversity gives her a unique perspective on creating and managing a library service. She loves inspiring students for lifelong reading and learning.