

# Xavier College - Nurturing a reading culture

By Trish Trchala, Emily Jackson, and Keith McDougall

## Snapshot

Trish Trchala, Emily Jackson, and Keith McDougall, from Xavier College, outline their recent investigations into the role of school libraries in creating and nurturing a reading habit amongst students. They describe some of the resulting programming they have created as they continue to further explore supportive ideas and theories.

As school library professionals, we love to advocate for the life-changing rewards of reading books. But this is more than just our passion – it is backed up by research, which has consistently shown that the habit of reading books for pleasure has a wide range of benefits for young people (Manuel & Carter, 2019). Students who read every day are better at speaking, writing, arguing, negotiating, understanding, and empathizing. These skills lead to more successful careers, and greater financial and social outcomes. Reading is also good for mental health, so readers are likely to be happier people.

In the busy lives of today's Australian students, there are many obstacles to the development of a strong reading habit. With a crowded curriculum, numerous extracurricular activities, and the vast array of options for entertainment and recreation provided by current and future digital technologies, it is no wonder that many students do not have the time, the motivation or the attention span to sit down with a novel for a sustained period on a regular basis. To overcome these obstacles, school library professionals need to collaborate with teachers, principals, and everyone in the school community

on building a whole school reading culture. As part of this mission, Xavier College Libraries have recently created an initiative called RED15. The name is an acronym that explains its objective: to get students into the habit of reading for at least fifteen minutes

every day. It allows teachers and librarians to set a realistic expectation of the minimum amount of time students should be reading. The initiative involves informing students about the benefits of reading as a healthy habit, and encourages staff, parents, and all adults to become healthy role models who practise what they preach by developing their own lifelong reading habits.

The breadth of today's Australian Curriculum reflects the increasing complexity of today's world. Schools need to prepare young people for active citizenship in a diverse, complex society and for the many challenges of an uncertain future. Incorporating contemporary issues and values alongside



established skills and knowledge, the Australian Curriculum has been described as 'crowded' and 'cluttered' (Hickey, 2022), with little room left for a passive and old-fashioned leisure activity like reading for pleasure. Margaret Merga has noted that while in countries such as England, reading for pleasure is a mandated expectation, here it is 'peripheral, sitting outside the expectations of

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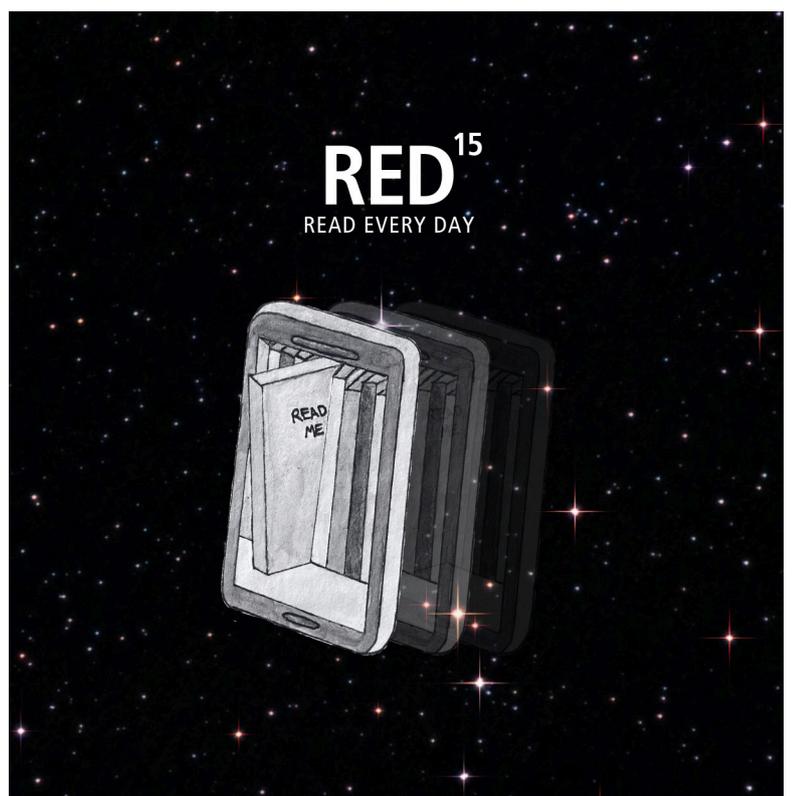
a crowded curriculum,' (Merga, 2023, p.6), despite the centrality of literacy skills. When combined with a high number of extracurricular commitments, today's class and homework expectations often leave students with little time to read, (Merga, 2014) which is unfortunate considering the evidence that 'beneficial returns for time invested in homework may diminish far more speedily than those of leisure reading.' (Merga & Mason, 2019)

When today's students have time off and are looking to choose a fun or relaxing activity to wind down and get lost in, they are spoilt for choice. With a digital device in hand, they have an endless plethora of ways to divert, engage

and entertain themselves. With so much competition, it is unsurprising that book reading may not be a contemporary young person's number one favourite pastime. Although young people are certainly reading a lot of text on screens, online reading does not provide the same benefits for reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Merga, 2023, p.19). Reading novels in print is still the best way to boost literacy skills. It may also be a healthy way of training the mind to focus on an extended task. Social media posts take mere seconds to consume, while a novel requires deep and sustained concentration. Merga (2014) suggests that the popular adolescent practice of 'media multi-tasking' (e.g., texting or scrolling while watching Netflix) may have negative effects on the ability to concentrate on a book. Giedd warns that dopamine-boosting digital media could raise the threshold for what brains deem rewarding, making a comparatively low-sensation activity like reading a book seem dull and unrewarding. (Giedd, 2012, p.104)

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At Xavier College, some students might have the habits of regular homework, regular gaming, and recreational internet use, but they are reluctant to regularly read for pleasure. Our goal is to inculcate a regular reading habit in our students. This requires time, consistency, and a unified approach. In her book *The Habit Revolution*, Dr Gina Cleo's advice on how to form a habit is simple: 'consistently repeat an action in the same context.' (2024, p. 75) To this end, our RED15 initiative allocates a fifteen-minute period every school day for sustained silent reading. Every classroom



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from Kindergarten to Year 8 has been filled with books that have a RED15 sticker on the back, so that in addition to borrowing and reading books in library class (which they only attend once a week or fortnight), students have time every day to pick up a book. This time is important because, as Merga warns, 'if sustained opportunities for reading for pleasure are not provided at school, there is no guarantee that it is happening at home.' (Merga, 2023, p. 26)

RED15 differs from the 'Drop Everything and Read' concept in its emphasis on regularity and consistency – promoting reading as something we do every day – and in its lack of emphasis on interruption: instead of being something we need to 'drop everything' for, reading is organically embedded in students' academic, social, and domestic lives.

The three stages of Cleo's habit-formation framework are 'initiation, training and maintenance.' (2024, p. 75) How can we initiate our reluctant readers into this new habit? From our observations and discussions with library professionals and educators, we may need to start with being still. Calm. With an increasing number of our students diagnosed with ADHD and on the Autism Spectrum, this can be challenging for many. So, the question is, can we expect children and young adults to be still and read? What does being still look like for them? Valarie Lee's 'Becoming the Reading Mentors Our Adolescents Deserve' (2011) describes a successful silent reading program in which she played soft instrumental music, took steps to minimize interruptions from other students and staff, allowed quiet talking as long as it wasn't distracting, and allowed students to find somewhere comfortable to read, even if it was on the floor or with their feet on a seat! The authors of a paper about Kenyan school libraries (Adebayo et al., 2020) recommend helping students with ADHD by providing 'flexible facilities that can be used for group reading and studying such as big round tables, couch airs, soundproof walls', timeout spaces to escape to and avoid distracting the others, and an environment that is free from sources of distraction. Like Lee's article, this paper also proposes the use of relaxing music as a tool to create a calm, focused environment for reading.

**Creating and nurturing a reading culture requires a consistent whole school approach...**

It is not enough to simply tell students to be quiet and enjoy a book! For students to find the pleasure in regular reading, they need to see the value in it. Values are culturally formed, so we need to foster a whole school culture that values reading. This means that everyone in the school community – not just library professionals but also teachers, curriculum leaders, parents, and those in executive roles (school managers, board members and the like) need to demonstrate and encourage the idea that reading for pleasure is important and valued. Creating and nurturing a reading culture requires a consistent whole school approach across all faculties, an approach that is embedded in the daily routine of students.

Encouraging students to read needs to be about showing as much as telling. Young readers need adult role models to show them how it is done, to normalise reading as a popular everyday

pastime, to demonstrate how enjoyable books can be, and to make books part of the school's cultural conversation. Merga believes that 'every teacher should be a teacher of reading' and stresses the crucial role of school leadership in building a reading culture. (Merga & Mason, 2019) The principal is a significant role model who can author articles about reading, use literary quotes, and read to the kids in Book Week.

In his book, *Connecting Boys with Books* (2003), Sullivan writes that many boys rarely see men read. Men often read alone in their 'cave,' giving the false impression that reading is just for women. Sullivan challenges men to read in public and to convince boys that reading is a social activity. So, at Xavier we want to make the expectations of RED15 apply to people of all ages – men as much as women – and make this visible to the students. When busy teachers take a class to the library, it is understandable that they may be tempted to use the time to catch up on their work while their students read, but as Pilgreen (2000) has pointed out, this only undermines the silent reading program and creates the impression that teachers don't have the time or desire to read books. To model healthy habits, staff must read alongside the students.

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A recent program at Xavier Libraries aimed to highlight staff reading habits to students through the power of conversation. Firstly, students were shown pictures of various staff around the Senior Campus. In each picture the staff member was shown reading an unidentified book (the book's cover was concealed with a page with question marks). Staff members ranged from teaching and support staff to receptionists, groundskeepers, library professionals and sports coaches. The message was that all the adults around the school participate in RED15. The question marks indicated a mystery the students had to solve – they were required to find out what staff members were reading. A worksheet was given to each student on which they would record the name of the book, audiobook, magazine, newspaper, comic etc. being read by nine separate staff members. To complete the worksheet, they would need to ask each staff member 'What

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are you reading?' Staff were briefed on the program and encouraged to allow the question to lead into a broader conversation. We also include regular Teacher Reader Profiles in the fortnightly newsletter for parents. In this way, families in the community are also becoming aware of the reading culture amongst staff.

We are also endeavouring to shine a spotlight onto the parents and families who are great models of reading habits. How often do they read? What are they reading? Are their kids readers and how do they encourage their kids with reading? Do they discuss reading as a family? Research into the parents of Australian primary school children found that less than half of parents enjoyed reading (Thomson et al., 2012) and Merga suggests that many parents do not think encouragement of reading is their job (Merga, 2023, p.4), blaming schools and libraries

for their children's poor reading habits. Educators therefore need to make parents aware of the importance of modelling, and to remind them that they need to encourage their kids to read at home.

## Conclusion

Helping form reading habits at an early age is the best way to set children up to develop strong literacy skills. In today's complex world this is a challenging task. With our RED15 initiative, Xavier College Libraries are seeking to tackle this challenge by expanding it far beyond the library walls, making it the responsibility of everyone, and by aiming to give books a broader role in young people's lives. Once RED15 has been rolled out and established within the school, the next step is to gather data that will inform how the initiative proceeds moving forward. Aided by our analysis of this data, we will strive to find better ways to have a school with a healthy reading culture, and students with established reading habits.

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**Trish Trchala** is Head of Learning Resources at Xavier College managing four libraries across their Junior and Senior Campus. The Library Team, encompassing Teacher Librarians, Teachers, Librarian and Library Assistant are motivated to nurture reading for pleasure within library spaces that are vibrant and welcoming.

After teaching Secondary English for 25 years, **Emily Jackson** has recently moved into a Senior Libraries Teacher role. Promoting reading for pleasure and creative writing, she accompanies students in exploring literary interests.

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