Current and Historical Perspectives on Australian Teenagers' Reading Practices and Preferences

By Dr Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter

Give them books . . . given them wings.
(In memory of Maurice Saxby, 1924–2014)

A recent piece in the *Australian Financial Review* (2014) reported that national book industry sales figures were being "propped up" by "young adult fiction – and its teen fans": "young adult fiction sales are up 26% this financial year, while adult fiction has declined by 11%" (p. 3). Book industry sales point to a flourishing young adult fiction market, depicting various trends in intentional reading preferences. From these statistics, however, it cannot be assumed that purchase patterns in any category of books are directly indicative of young people's actual reading lives, within and beyond the parameters of formal school-based education.

To more fully comprehend the lived experiences that lie beneath these sales statistics, it is necessary to consider the range of empirical and other research in the field, together with results of assessment programs, such as for example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Such research sheds light on: young people's motivations to read; the frequency of their reading in general and their reading for pleasure; the types of reading they choose to engage or not engage with; the satisfactions and benefits they derive from reading; and the correlations between reading habits, literacy development and student performance in reading and other literacy assessments. A deeper understanding of teenagers' reading lives may better equip educators and others to consciously nurture young people's "intrinsic purposeful engagement" with reading to "feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999, p. 3).

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With this in mind, and against the backdrop of national curriculum reform agendas and mounting pressures on teachers to 'teach to the test' (Gallagher, 2009), this paper reports on aspects of the findings of an Australian study of the reading habits of more than 2000 young people, aged 12 to 16 years.1 The research study sought to further explore the fabric of young people's personal, socially-situated and school-based reading lives. It was informed by a number of research questions addressing the 'what, when, where, how and why' of teenagers' reading. What are teenagers choosing to read and for what purposes? What are their attitudes towards reading? When are they reading and how are they reading? How do they spend their leisure time and where does reading for pleasure fit (if at all) within and beyond the classroom? What are the continuities and disjunctions between school and beyond-school reading? And what are the implications of these findings for classroom teaching and learning?

Background to the Study: Research on Young People's Reading Practices and Preferences

We know that reading as a communicative act requires the capacity to decode, interpret, respond to, and derive meaning from a myriad of print, visual, oral, nonverbal multi-modal texts. We also know that success in schooling is heavily dependent on a student's facility with and command of language across the spectrum of modes, although the modes of reading and writing continue to hold pre-eminent status in the curriculum and in assessment regimes in many subjects (Department of Education, 2012). It is equally evident that each experience of reading and the motivations that fuel our engagement with language can be as multitudinous and idiosyncratic as readers themselves – a factor recognised by Rosenblatt (1938) when she argued that "there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions . . . the novel or poem or play exists . . . only in interactions with specific minds" (p. 32).

Like other age groups, we know that adolescents read for a wide variety of purposes with personal 'tastes' in reading often well-established by the time they reach secondary school (cf. Clark, Woodley & Lewis, 2011). They may, for instance, read for pleasure, escape, relaxation, connection, discovery, affirmation, comfort, information, to complete required school-based (and workplace, personal and domestic tasks), and to access, participate in – and ideally contribute to, critique and shape – educational and cultural 'primary and secondary' discourses.2 (Gee, 1996, p. 127)

The Impact of High-Stakes Testing

The challenges of balancing and catering to the needs, interests, capacities and diversity of students' 'specific minds' are augmented when we consider that despite decades of English curriculum reform, along with a substantial corpus of research providing consistent evidence of effective approaches to developing students' reading accomplishment and enjoyment, there remains "the enduring imperative for schools . . . to ensure that their pupils perform well in national tests" (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (CSFC), 2008, p. 95). The consequences of such testing regimes are increasingly stark: "teaching to the test, to an extent which narrows the curriculum and puts sustained learning at risk, is widespread . . . test results are pursued at the expense of a rounded education for children" (House of Commons CSFC 2008, pp. 94-95). Gallagher and others have argued that 'teaching to the test' constrains students' proclivity for reading and diminishes opportunities to experience reading as a meaningful, enjoyable, 'normalised', socially productive and personally rewarding endeavour (cf. Gallagher, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

The Value of Reading and the Benefits of Reading for Pleasure

From recent international research there is accumulating evidence of the salient correlation between reading for pleasure and a wide range of educational, social and personal benefits (cf. Department of Education, 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011). For example, "reading enjoyment has been reported as more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status" (Department of Education, 2012, p. 3). A recent study concluded that "reading for pleasure was found to be more important for children's cognitive development between ages 10 and 16 than their parents' level of education" (London Institute of Education, 2013, p. 1).

Young people who "read for pleasure are likely to do significantly better at school than their peers" (p. 1), developing more accomplished skills in reading and writing, increased self-confidence, general knowledge, vocabulary, and cultural understandings (Department of Education, 2012, p. 9). According to the OECD (2011) report on PISA outcomes, "reading for enjoyment is associated with reading proficiency . . . On average, *students who read daily for enjoyment score the equivalent of one-and-a-half years of schooling better than those who do not*" (Emphasis added, p. 2). Similarly, the report on Australian students' performance in the 2012 PISA reading literacy assessment further reinforces the nexus between students' proclivity for and frequency of reading or pleasure in school and outside of school and their scores on reading and literacy tests (cf. ACER, 2010).

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On this theme, the report by the Centre for Youth Literature (CYL, 2009) presents a rich amalgam of qualitative and quantitative research findings affirming that reading for pleasure matters because: it supports broader literacy development and learning; enables young people to develop their own, better-informed perspective on life; is a safe, inexpensive, pleasurable way to spend time; allows young readers to understand and empathise with the lives of those in different situations, times and cultures; and improves educational outcomes and employment prospects (p. 11). Importantly, key findings of this study of Australian students' attitudes to reading chime with those of earlier Australian and British studies (cf. Bunbury et al., 1995; Hall & Coles 1999; Thomson, 1987).

Similarly worth noting are the identified barriers to young people's reading for pleasure which include: a crowded school curriculum; young people's busy lives beyond school, including screen time, sports, leisure activities, music and work commitments; a lack of focus on reading for pleasure in secondary school; and the increased demands of academic tasks as students move into the senior years (p. 5). The report recognises that these barriers do "not affect keen readers, who will always make the time for books, but [they do] deter reluctant or uncommitted readers" (p. 5). These findings underscore the need to reconstitute our English classrooms as one of the few remaining spaces in the contemporary world where all students – particularly those who read little, if anything, for pleasure – can and should be 'turned on' to the value of reading as a fundamental entitlement.

Historical Studies of Australian Young People's Reading 1932–1980

While drawing on the findings of international studies (cf. Clark, 2012; Clarke & Osborne, 2011; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Department of Education, 2012; Hall & Coles, 1999; Sullivan & Brown, 2013) the present study builds on a range of Australian studies that have sought to map the contours of adolescents' reading practices and preferences. As early as 1932, for example, Browne examined the reading habits of 4,400 students aged 11 to 15 years in Victoria, reporting that a majority of adolescents spent part of their leisure time reading fiction, and most enjoyed reading "penny weeklies, sensational detective stories, and narratives about the Kelly gang" (Browne, 1932, p. 9 in Broughton, 2009). In 1943, Coates' research with 12 to 15 year olds concluded that reading prose fiction "was a favourite leisure activity for boys and girls aged between 12 and 15 years in both city and country, with girls slightly keener on reading than boys" (Coates, 1943, pp. 9–10 in Broughton, 2009).

In the 1950s, Robbins' (1952) research with Sydney teenagers noted the average number of fiction books read per month was 2.3 for 13 year olds, 1.6 for 14 year olds and 2.0 for 15 year olds (Robbins, 1952, p. 10 in Broughton, 2009). Tolley's 1977 study with 2,825 students in Victoria, identified reading as a preferred leisure activity although it ranked below watching television, looking after pets or animals, and sport (Tolley, 1977, p. 12 in Broughton, 2009).

At the same time, Watson's (1978) survey of 1,401 students across Years 7 to 12 in New South Wales found a steady decline (cf. Baker, 2002; Beers, 1998; Bintz, 1993) in the number of books read over one month from 3.8 in Year 7 to 1.6 in Year 12. However, Watson noted that where English teachers implemented wide reading programs in their classrooms, the number of books read averaged four per month from Years 7 to 9. Other Australian and international research consistently highlights the extent to which reading for pleasure diminishes for many adolescents as they progress through high school and the demands of academic reading and reading for assessment purposes increases. From the research literature, this trend is especially evident for adolescent boys (cf. Austin & Lovell, 1977; Benton, 1995; Broughton & Manuel, 2007; Clark & Douglas, 2011; Hall & Coles, 1999; Manuel & Robinson, 2002; Martino, 2001).

Subsequent Australian research began to identify the percentages of adolescents who did no reading for pleasure at all. Bayly's (1979 in Broughton, 2009) study of 180 Year 7-11 Melbourne students' reading found an average of 25 per cent did not read any imaginative literature. It is interesting to note that it was during the late 1970s that Young Adult literature (YAL) began to emerge as a distinct, marketable category of fiction. Lees' (1980) study of the reading habits of 500 students from a variety of Melbourne secondary schools found that in schools where reading was not actively promoted as a source of pleasure and enjoyment, students tended to read less for leisure (Lees, 1980, p. 13, in Broughton, 2009).

Understanding Teenagers' Reading

In the 1980s, Thomson's (1987) germinal research, reported in his book Understanding Teenagers' Reading, investigated the reading choices and practices of 1007 adolescents in Year 8 and 10, together with their television and video viewing habits. He found that "teenagers spend a lot of time watching television and video, and very little time reading". Thomson (1987) argued, on the basis of his research findings, that:

> (b)etween what we claim to be teaching in literature and what most of our students are actually experiencing and learning there lies a gigantic chasm:
> 1. We claim we are trying to develop a love of reading but our practices prohibit pleasure. Most students can read, but very few choose to do so for enjoyment.
> 2. We claim we are extending students' understanding of life and enhancing their personal development, but we often choose books that don't speak to our students about the issues that concern them . . .
> 3. We claim we are 'fostering enjoyment and the encouragement of reading interests, insight into human nature and the relationship of language and literature to it' . . . but we set examinations that test knowledge about literary methods rather than the quality of the literary experience . . . (pp. 12–13).

These conclusions find resonance in subsequent studies in the field, including the present study. Thomson's Australian-based research in 1987 coincided with heightened attention to reader-response literary theories and their application in classroom practice (cf. Rosenblatt, 1938; Iser, 1978, 1980; Holland, 1968; Fish, 1980). While reader-response theories have certainly influenced the nature of the 'pre-active' English curriculum (Goodson, 1992), the findings of Thomson's and later research point to the persistence of New Criticism pedagogical approaches, particularly at senior secondary level (cf. Patterson, 2008; Rosser, 2000) where high-stakes examinations tend to "test knowledge about literary methods rather than the quality of the literary experience" (Thomson, 1987, p. 13).

The Children's Choice Project

It was during the period of the emergence of new digital technologies that Bunbury et al. (1995) undertook and reported on a large-scale study of the reading and leisure activities of 11,461 Australian students from Years 5, 7, 9 and 11. The findings of the Children's Choice project revealed that young people in the 1990s engaged in a wide variety of leisure activities, with television continuing to play a significant role (relative to reading) in their daily lives (Bunbury et al., 1995, p. 129). Bunbury et al. gathered data about young people's motivations to read, the appreciation of reading as a source of insight into the self and others, and attitudes to reading as a vehicle for achieving success at school and in the workplace.

The Children's Choice project found that:

- more girls than boys in Years 9-11 regard reading fiction for leisure as a rewarding experience;
- the majority of students in Years 7-11 were reading one to two books per month for leisure and/or school tasks; and
- girls in Year 7 placed higher value on reading for pleasure, enjoyment and insight than did boys in Year 7; while boys placed higher value on reading for achieving success at school and in the workplace than did girls at this stage (Bunbury et al., 1995, pp. 86, 121).

The findings reported by Bunbury et al. are consonant with those from British studies undertaken in the 1990s (cf. Hall & Coles, 1999) as well as later data about adolescents' leisure activities collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006, p. 8).

Reading and New Technology

In light of the increased uptake of digital technologies, Nieuwenhuizen's research (Woolcott Research Pty Ltd, 2001) sought to gather data on the motivations, reading behaviours and habits of young people relative to their use of technology.

The findings of the study with 801 students, aged 10 to 18 years, correlate with studies completed in the 1990s, and earlier: that is, adolescents identified reading for pleasure as an activity they 'really liked' (30 per cent), with this activity ranked fifth after 'hanging out with friends' (87 per cent), playing sport (68 per cent), watching television (38 per cent) and using the computer (31 per cent) (Woolcott Research Pty Ltd, 2001, p. 18).

The report, now more than a decade old, also exposes the dramatic drop-off in reading for pleasure as a 'really liked' activity between primary and early secondary school students (45 per cent to 24 per cent, respectively). No other preferred leisure activities registered such a significant decline in the transition from primary to secondary school (Woolcott Research Pty Ltd, 2001, p. 19).

Other studies that explore the impact of new technologies on young people's reading have emerged in international research (cf. Clark, 2012). However, a recent review of the research literature in an Australian context noted that: "no Australian research could be located comparing Australian children's leisure reading across different formats or media" (Dickenson, 2014, p. 12).

While some Australian studies have examined the influence of technology on teaching, learning and new literacies in the classroom (cf. Rennie & Patterson, 2010), there is a need to gather further data on the role of technology in the academic and leisure reading habits, attitudes and preferences of young people in a contemporary Australian context.

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The Present Study

The present study utilised an online survey instrument that was completed by 2117 Australian students, aged between 12 and 16 years. The sample included 1105 females and 1012 males from a range of geographical and socio-economic backgrounds, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) postcode data. Participation in the study was voluntary. Through the state and territory English teaching professional associations, English teachers were provided with information about the study and links to the project website. They could choose to pass on this information, including online participant consent protocols, to secondary school students. Access to and completion of the online survey was at the discretion of the individual student and was anonymous.

The data was gathered over a period of five years between 2006 and 2010. The online survey required participants to respond to a series of multiple choice questions, each with an open field, along with short answer items, seeking responses to questions about: their reading practices and preferences; time spent reading relative to other activities; reasons for their 'best' and 'worst' reading experiences; 'favourite' and 'worst' books; attitudes to types of reading in English classes; preferred and least-preferred types of reading and genres of text; their self-image as readers; and self identified strategies for improving reading achievement.

Discussion of Results

The following discussion concentrates on selected relevant findings of the study and explores the results for the combined cohort.3 These findings are then considered in terms of the implications for teaching and learning in secondary English classrooms.

Student Responses to Survey Questions

Time spent reading self-selected materials, including online materials, on a typical day
The survey asked students to indicate the amount of time they spent on a typical day reading self-selected material, watching television and using the computer. Only 10 per cent of respondents spent no time at all on a typical day reading self-selected material, while around half of all respondents reported spending up to one hour on a typical day reading self-selected material not associated with school reading. This percentage mirrors that from the most recent Australian PISA data on young

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people's leisure reading habits (Thomson, 2012). Almost 30 per cent of respondents in the present study spent two or more hours on a typical day reading self-selected material. More girls than boys indicated that they read self-selected material for three of more hours on a typical day, which again, accords with the findings of other research about the differences between girls' and boys' leisure reading (ABS, 2012).

Time spent watching television on a typical day
In response to the question about television viewing habits, 85 per cent of the sample reported spending up to one hour each day watching television, with more than one quarter of these respondents spending more than three hours on a typical day watching television. More than 50 per cent of the sample watched two or more hours of television on a typical day, correlating with previous studies of Australian and British adolescents' television viewing habits (cf. Hopper, 2005; Thomson 1987; Whitehead, Capey & Maddern, 1977). It is important to note that the results from the present study suggest that there has been no significant reported change (including increase) in television viewing habits since the surveys conducted in the 1970s in Australia (cf. Tindall, Reid & Goodwin, 1977).

Time spent using the computer
Almost half of all respondents reported spending two or more hours on a typical day using the computer. This finding represents a marked increase in computer usage in this age group compared to earlier studies reported in the research literature a decade ago (cf. Manuel & Robinson 2002). The present study did not collect data on students' use of other digital devices (such as, for example, Kindles and smart phones); with the proliferation of these technologies, there is a clear need to account for their use and the implications of this for teaching and student learning, through further studies of young people's digital reading behaviours and choices.

Preferred and least preferred leisure activities
Students were asked about their preferred use of their leisure time and were invited to indicate, on a scale of one to five, their most preferred and least preferred activity, selecting from a broad range of options. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Most preferred and least preferred leisure activities*

Leisure activity	Most preferred (per cent)	Least preferred (per cent)
Hang out with friends	64.0	1.5
Use computer (including internet, games, social media/ networking)	61.0	3.0
Listen to music	36.0	1.0
Watch a movie	28.0	1.0
Watch TV	27.5	7.5
Other – work, surf, text, pets, hobbies	26.5	12.5
Play sport	24.5	21.0
Read a magazine	22.5	6.5
Listen to the radio	21.0	6.5
Read a book	19.5	32.0
Read a newspaper	3.5	67.5

* Students were able to indicate more than one preference in each category. Results in each category do not total 100 per cent, since the table presents responses to 'most' (5) and 'least' (1) preferred leisure activity, and does not include responses that fell within the 2–4 range.

The results show that reading books ranked as a preferred leisure activity for around one-fifth of respondents, while 32 per cent would prefer not to or never read in their spare time. Computer (and internet) usage figured as a preferred leisure activity for 61 per cent of the sample. Reading magazines (print-based) was preferred by 22.5 per cent of students, compared with only 3.5 per cent who preferred to read print-based newspapers.

Fiction preferences and antipathies
This series of questions sought from students information about: whether or not they had a 'favourite' and/or 'worst' book; how they came to read this book; how many times they had read their favourite book and why; what broad generic category it fell into; and the reasons why it was considered as their best or worst experience of fiction.

Table 2. Favourite fiction titles

Female favourites	Male favourites
Pierce, *Wild Magic*	Jennings, *Goosebumps* Series, *Deadly*, 'Un' Series
Andrews, *Magic* series	Gleitzman, *The Gizmo, Once, Now, Boy Overboard*
Sachar, *Holes*	Reilly, *Scarecrow, Contest*
Marsden, *Tomorrow* series; *The Ellie Chronicles*	Marsden, *Tomorrow* Series
Klein, *Came Back to Show You I Could Fly; Polly Pollard's Scrapbook; Hating Alison Ashley*	Rodda, *Rowan of Rin* Series
Carmody, *The Gathering*	Paulsen, *Hatchet*
Winton, *Lockie Leonard*	Rodda, *Deltora Quest* series
Jennings, *Round the Twist; The Gizmo*	Full Moon Fever
Gleitzman, *Once, Now*	Colfer, *Artemis Fowl* series
French, *Hitler's Daughter*	Sachar, *Holes*
Rodda, *Deltora Quest* series	Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*
Clark, *Mango Street* series	Rowling, *Harry Potter* series
Meyer, *Twilight* series	Pratchett, *Nation*
Cabot, *The Princess Diaries* series	Muchamore, *Cherub* series, *Maximum security*
Rowling, *Harry Potter* series	Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*
Jacques, *Redwall* series	Snicket, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*
Brashares, *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* series	
Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*	
Mead, *Vampire Academy* series	
Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*	

Favourite and worst books read (fiction, non-fiction)
83.5 per cent of the sample (91 per cent of females and 76 per cent of males) could name a favourite book. Conversely, 87.5 per cent of the sample (84 per cent of females and 91 per cent of males) indicated that they could name the 'worst' book they had ever read (or attempted to read) and provided a range of responses to the questions about how they came to read this book and why they considered it to be their 'worst' experience of fiction.

The responses to this question illustrate the great variety and diversity in students' reading tastes. There emerged from these responses a handful of very popular 'favourite' books. With the exception of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, the favourites nominated here are all located within the category of Young Adult Literature. Many of these titles will be familiar to English teachers and may have indeed become staples of the junior secondary English reading program. The titles encompass the concerns and characteristic of YAL: the protagonist/s is typically an adolescent; the narrator and viewpoint is that of a young adult, rendered through the first person or third person narrative; the story generally revolves around young adult/s dealing with conflict – with peers, adults and the 'self', or a combination of these; and an exploration of darker, gritty themes, 'coming-of-age' issues and violence. The titles represent the key adolescent tropes of facing and overcoming adversity, triumphs of the human spirit, and an emphasis on interiority:

> [t]itles such as Victor Kelleher's Taronga, John Marsden's Tomorrow When the War Began *series,* Back on Track: Diary of a Street Kid *by Margaret Clark and Isobelle Carmody's* The Gathering *thrust young characters into sinister and confrontational situations and infuse settings with dark thematic concerns such as incest, drug abuse, paranormal powers, invasion and war, and suicide* (Carter, 2012, p. 132).

Introspection and the quest for self-realisation characterise these types of YA fiction. Dystopian texts populate the favourite books lists, as do comic and light-hearted situational stories such as those by Jennings and Snicket.

Of particular significance is the number of favourite books that form part of a series.

The source of students' 'favourite' book
The research study sought to gather insights into the ways in which students came to read what they considered to be their favourite book. The range of responses is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Source of favourite book

Source	Female per cent	Male per cent	Total per cent
Family and friends recommended	44.0	28.0	36.0
Teacher/class novel/ compulsory	22.5	14.5	18.5
TV/movie	8.0	10.5	9.25
Bookshop/advertising	12.0	4.0	8.0
Gift	7.5	1.5	4.5
Library	6.5	2.0	4.25
Other (e.g. 'Found it in a shop for a good price')	1.0	2.0	2.5
No response/Invalid/Can't choose just one favourite	15.0	43.0	36.5

More than a third of boys identified the source of their favourite book as family, friends or a movie. Only 12 per cent of boys said that their favourite book had been recommended by an English teacher or figured as compulsory school reading. Girls' responses showed that in more than half of all cases, a favourite book was recommended to them by family, friends, television advertising and movies. Slightly more girls (18.5 per cent) than boys (12 per cent) said that their favourite book had been discovered through a teacher or through compulsory school reading.

For both male and female participants in this study, the required reading in English yielded less than one fifth of all favourite book experiences compared to the book choices influenced by friends, family and other sources.

How many times a favourite book was read
Table 4 provides a breakdown of students' responses to the question about how many times they had read their 'favourite' book.

Table 4. Frequency of reading favourite book

Times Read	Female per cent	Male per cent	Total per cent
1	48.0	27.0	37.5
2	19.5	16.0	17.75
3	9.0	7.0	8.0
4	4.5	2.5	3.5
5 +	3.5	3.0	3.25
No response/ Invalid	14.5	44.5	29.5

42 per cent of boys had read their favourite book more than once, with 18 per cent having read their favourite book three or more times. For girls, 42 per cent had read their favourite book only once, 40 per cent had read their favourite book two or more times, and 16 per cent had read their favourite book three or more times. The proclivity to re-read a particular book is often motivated by a desire to re-encounter the imaginary world and its protagonists that brought comfort, pleasure, enjoyment and insights when first experienced. Re-engaging with characters with whom the reader strongly identifies, along with plots and settings that excite and stimulate, can transport the reader anew, bringing with it the consoling and affirming sense of belonging and memory akin to that experienced with an old friend. In this sense, "we read deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are" (Bloom, 2000).

The high proportion of students in this study who reported repeated readings of their favourite book also suggests the extent to which young readers are hungry for the continuity that is afforded through recapturing and re-connecting with a familiar, resonant and appealing imaginary world of fiction. The proliferation of fiction series, as mentioned earlier, similarly points to young readers' appetite for sustaining this connection with their favoured fictional world and its characters – characters who may represent and enact perceived or idealised versions of the reader's 'self'. For the reader, such characters can even figure as imaginary proxies for friends, confidantes and role-models, confronting and overcoming adversity, navigating archetypal adolescent crises, and dealing with the manifold inter- and intrarelational challenges and rites of passage that typify the focus of much YAL.

Re-reading a favourite book can also rekindle memories of the places, experiences and emotions associated with the first reading and, as some have theorised, "as we become accustomed to a world in which change is the only real constant, the familiarity of the book . . . is something to cling to" (Anderson, 2014, p. 1).

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While students in this study were enthusiastic about identifying their favourite book, many were equally forthright in their attitudes about their worst experiences of reading.

The source of students' 'worst' book
87 per cent of the respondents could name their 'worst' book and the reason they came to read, or attempt to read it. The responses are provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Source of worst book

Source	Female per cent	Male per cent
Teacher/class novel/compulsory	62.5	78.0
Friend recommended it	3.0	4.5
Cover looked good/advertising/movie/TV	9.5	4.0
Boredom	2.0	2.5
Reading groups	7.0	1.0
Other (e.g. 'Only book left')	7.0	2.5
No response/Invalid	9.0	7.5

When asked how they came to read what they considered to be their worst book, 71 per cent of girls compared to 82 per cent of boys said it was compulsory reading in English. A total of 43 per cent of students persisted with the worst book they had ever read and reported completing it. This reasonably high figure may partially be accounted for because the book was compulsory reading in an English class, providing a reminder that teacher selection of compulsory class reading materials, especially when it comes to fiction, can powerfully shape students' attitudes to reading. The adverse consequences of such selections, together with the pedagogical approaches to required class reading can be lasting and determinant.

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The results here also prompt broader philosophical and conceptual questions about the role of the English teacher and compulsory class reading in fostering, or undermining, student engagement and satisfaction. Students were articulate and unequivocal in their responses to why they disliked a particular book (or books), once again providing instructive insights for teachers when planning an effective reading program.

What did you dislike about this book?
Overwhelmingly, the responses from students to this question about why they disliked a particular book included the word 'boring', once again underlining the importance of engaging adolescents in reading by empowering them through opportunities for a measure of choice in a classroom reading program. According to other research studies, when adolescents are permitted to "assert their independence by making choices" (Podl, 1995, p. 57) their inclination and capacity to read increases dramatically.

These results from the present study confirm the need for the judicious selection of prescribed texts for class reading, with choices informed by knowledge of each student's reading preferences. This is not to say students should not be exposed to and encouraged to engage with texts that they would otherwise not encounter if they were not introduced to them in English classes. The point here is the need to balance a reading program with a mix of teacher- and student-selected material (a point which is addressed in the context of classroom practice later in this paper). For this reason, the survey sought to gather insights into students' preferences for the kinds of texts and the genres of texts that most engaged them.

What kinds of texts are teenagers choosing to read?

Preferred kind of text (more than one kind could be identified as a preferred kind of reading)
Students were able to select from a range of options in response to the question about their preferred kind of text. More than one kind of text could be nominated. The results are set out in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Preferred kind of text

Kind of text	Female per cent	Male per cent	Total per cent
Online materials	56.0	62.0	59.0
Fiction	48.0	32.0	40.0
Multimedia	34.0	18.0	26.0
Nonfiction (e.g. historical, scientific, factual)	22.0	18.0	20.0
Magazines	21.0	18.0	19.5
Other (joke books, puzzle books)	6.0	8.0	7.0
Short story	12.0	2.0	7.0
Poetry	2.0	2.0	3.0
Newspapers	2.0	4.0	3.0
School materials	1.0	0.5	0.75
No response / Invalid	11.0	16.0	13.5

Half of all students in the sample preferred reading fiction to reading other kinds of texts. Reading school-based materials ranked last in terms of preferred reading. Reading poetry was poorly ranked as a preferred kind of reading, along with newspapers and school-based materials. Girls showed a stronger preference for reading magazines, in comparison to boys. Students were then asked to rate their preferred genres of prose fiction and the results are given here for both female and male participants. Again, students were able to identify more than one genre in their response. The responses are provided in tables 7 and 8 below.

Table 7. Preferred prose genres – Females

Genre	Most preferred per cent	Least preferred / Do not read per cent	Don't mind per cent	No response/ Invalid per cent
Romance	4.0	42.0	48.0	6.0
Science fiction	12.0	38.0	40.0	10.0
Detective	34.0	22.0	38.0	6.0
Action and adventure	32.0	24.0	36.0	8.0
Auto/biography	4.0	58.0	18.0	20.0
Travel	4.0	50.0	36.0	10.0
Nonfiction	53.0	26.0	21.0	0.0
Fantasy	68.0	16.0	12.0	4.0
Mystery	62.0	10.0	24.0	4.0
Horror or thriller	16.0	28.0	52.0	4.0
Classics	0.5	28.0	18.0	46.5
Other (sport, joke books, comedy, Medieval books, history books)	32.0	18.0	2.0	48.0

Table 8. Preferred prose genres – Males

Genre	Most Preferred per cent	Least preferred/ Do not read per cent	Don't mind per cent	No response / Invalid per cent
Romance	0.0	64.0	28.0	8.0
Science fiction	42.0	24.0	18.0	16.0
Detective	64.0	18.0	8.0	10.0
Action and adventure	82.0	10.0	6.0	2.0
Auto/biography	20.0	58.0	20.0	2.0
Travel	20.0	50.0	22.0	8.0
Nonfiction	54.0	36.0	8.0	2.0
Fantasy	74.0	14.0	10.0	2.0
Mystery	60.0	18.0	14.0	2.0
Horror or Thriller	38.0	10.0	28.0	24.0
Classics	0.5	42.0	7.5	50.0
Other (Sport, Dragon books, joke books, Comedy, War books, Comics, Medieval books, history books)	36.0	0.0	0.0	64.0

Females in this sample preferred Fantasy, Mystery, Nonfiction, Detective and Action and Adventure. Action and Adventure, Fantasy, Detective, Mystery, Nonfiction and Science Fiction figured as the most popular genres for males. Action and Adventure, Fantasy and Mystery were the overwhelming preferences for both males and females. Preferences and antipathies were diverse, reflecting a diversity of taste and interests. Major studies by Whitehead et al. (1970s), Thomson (1980s) and Hall and Coles (1990s) also identified these genres (Action and Adventure, Fantasy and Mystery) as the most popular kinds of imaginative literature for adolescents in this age group.

The findings of the present study, and those of prior similar research cited above, align with the Australian book industry data on the most popular fiction for this age group, with best-seller lists typically dominated by Fantasy, Action and Adventure and Mystery genres, and fiction series.

Teenagers' preferred and least preferred kinds of reading in English
Students were asked to rank their preferences for the experiences (and pedagogy) of reading that commonly occur in their English classrooms. Table 9 provides the results to this question.

Table 9. Preferred and least preferred kinds of reading in English*

Reading Activity in Class*	Most preferred per cent	Least preferred per cent
Reading stories selected by student	38.0	2.0
Teacher reading out aloud	25.5	11.0
Silent reading of self-selected material	23.5	4.5
Acting out plays or scenes	18.5	18.0
Reading magazines	14.0	3.5
Reading plays out aloud in class	12.0	21.0
Reading stories selected by teacher	12.0	18.5
Reading poetry selected by student	4.5	29.5
Reading out aloud around class	4.0	41.5
Reading poetry selected by teacher	1.0	43.0

* Students were able to indicate more than one 'most preferred' activity.

More than one third of students identified the activity of reading self-selected material as their most preferred experience of reading in English. The teacher reading out aloud, silent reading of self-selected materials and acting out plays or scenes were favoured by a significant percentage of the sample, reinforcing the importance of enjoyment, choice and student ownership of reading experiences.

There was strong resistance to 'reading around the class'. This finding is supported by other research studies that highlight many students' fear of being forced to read aloud in class where their deficiencies might be displayed for all to observe (Cope, 1997, p. 21).

The findings also highlight the efficacy of the simple, but under-utilised practice of reading aloud to students: in addition to the edification such experiences can afford, reading aloud by the teacher serves to model accomplished reading practice, demonstrate enthusiasm and enjoyment, and potentially generate reading confidence through naturalising reading for pleasure in this way.

Reading poetry was almost universally unpopular with the sample of students in the present study. No other category of reading experience rated as poorly in terms of a least preferred activity. Dias (2010) encapsulates the state of poetry teaching when he observes that:

> while there is a long and widely held belief that poetry matters and is a necessary component of the school curriculum, such convictions are at odds with the way poetry is taught and the general antipathy that students, especially in secondary school, hold towards it (2010, p. 21).

Students' self-image as readers
Students were asked to rate their reading skills as excellent, very good, good, average, or poor. A strong majority of students (74 per cent) self-rated as excellent, very good, or good readers. Of these students, 28 per cent rated themselves as excellent readers, while only three per cent of students self-assessed their reading skills as poor. When asked how they may improve their reading skills, the predominant response was 'read more'. Other responses included:

- Read when I come home from school
- Ask more friends about good and boring books and try to read the good books
- Choose books that I'm interested in and read them
- Spend more time reading

Students' responses demonstrated their self-awareness as readers and revealed a recognition of the relationship between the amount of their reading, opportunities to read appealing material of their own choosing and the perceived quality of their reading skills.

A Synthesis of Key Findings

There are a number of key findings from this research that can offer teachers, parents and others a range of worthwhile insights into young people's reading practices and preferences. Of most significance are the following:

1. Reading fiction (sustained imaginative texts) is maintaining a place as a leisure activity in the lives of teenagers, although television viewing and computer usage rank higher as preferred leisure activities for the majority of 12-16 year-olds sampled in this study.
The most popular forms of reading for those teenagers who engage in reading for pleasure are magazines and fiction, particularly the fiction genres of Adventure, Action, Fantasy and Mystery and fiction series. Reading preferences are usually well-established by the time students reach secondary school (cf. Hall & Coles, 1999; Whitehead et al., 1977).

2. Text selection and pedagogy in classrooms have a powerful impact on reading practices and preferences.

Of particular relevance to teachers is the evidence that the selection of reading material and reading pedagogy can and does have a decisive impact on the 'best' and 'worst' reading experiences for adolescents. Selection of inappropriate texts for compulsory reading, and/or ineffective pedagogy associated with the study of these texts, can have deleterious effects on the longer-term attitudes and practices of teenagers. Conversely, this study also confirms that appropriately selected texts for class reading can act as a catalyst to enliven and nourish students' attitudes and reading behaviours. From this study, for instance, 18.5 per cent of students reported that their 'favourite' book was introduced to them by their teacher, underscoring the pivotal role of teachers' decisions about reading materials in the English classroom.

Effective reading programs value the 'reading capital' – the 'primary discourses' (Gee, 1996, p. 127) – that students bring to the classroom. Such programs also enable the teacher to extend the reading horizons and capacities of students by ensuring they are 'apprenticed' in the prevailing 'secondary discourses' of the school, classroom and society that they may not otherwise have access to beyond the English classroom (cf. Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000).

The findings reinforce what other research has consistently shown: one of the most counterproductive
aspects of English classroom practice when it comes to reading is the detrimental impact of inappropriately selected compulsory reading material coupled with pedagogy that did not sufficiently incorporate reader response theoretical principles. (Cope, 1997; Bushman, 1997). Cope (1997), echoing Thomson, suggests that for many students the problem is not reading per se, but what they are forced to read at school and how they are required to read and respond to it: "even the most exciting pieces of literature lose some of their lustre when they are forced upon readers" (p. 22).

This is not to suggest, however, that teacher-selected reading material will not be valued by students: the findings of this study referred to above – and of other studies – underscore the strong positive impact of informed teacher choice on students' reading practices and enjoyment.

In practice, an effective reading program incorporates a balance of:

- Teacher-selected materials, based on the teacher's understanding and awareness of the students' needs, interests and capacities and the resources available to them.
- Teacher-student negotiated materials, whereby individuals or groups of students discuss and plan their reading choices and reading goals with the teacher.
- Student-student negotiated selections, through, for example, Literature Circles, reading groups and Book Clubs.
- Student self-selected reading material, as part of a wide reading program.

Equally important is a balance and variety of classic, contemporary and popular texts in print, multimodal and visual media. English programs, for every year and stage of schooling, should include three kinds of reading experiences for all students:

1. Whole class or shared reading where students are encouraged to engage with and communally experience, discuss and reflect upon texts; build their skills in critiquing through collaboration and mentoring; and develop their taste in and appreciation of literature.
2. Small group or pairs reading experiences where students are provided with regular opportunities to choose from a wide range of texts and to experience these within more intimate settings.
3. Individual reading experiences where time is allocated for students to select books freely and read these for pleasure (cf. Manuel, 2012).

One model explicated in the MyRead (DEST, AATE, and ALEA 2003) resource is based on a Vygotskian learner-centred paradigm: the teacher and learner are engaged in a scaffolded exchange, learning with and from each other. An overview of the model in Table 10 below demonstrates the way in which the teacher and student move through various domains with an ebb and flow of teacher instruction, modelling and support, encouraging the evolving autonomy and agency of the student (DEST, AATE, ALEA, 2003). This orchestrated 'dance' between the learner and the teacher reflects the dynamic nature of the reading process and recognises the capacity of the learner, with support, to make good and appropriate choices about the what, the how, and the why of their reading.

Table 10. A model for selecting reading material

Action	Teacher chooses material	Reading material negotiated and matched to student needs	Student chooses reading material
Teacher role	I DO	I DO/YOU DO	YOU DO/I WATCH
Student role	I WATCH	I HELP/YOU HELP	I DO/YOU WATCH

3. There is a strong correlation between motivation to read, student choice of reading materials and dedicated time for reading for pleasure

Replicated research studies and reports (such as, for example, from the OECD) provide considerable evidence of the direct and strong correlation between teenagers' motivation to read, the amount of time spent reading – both for leisure and because they are required to by a teacher – and students' reading achievement. It is telling, in the light of this well-documented evidence, that the current Australian Curriculum: English (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, ACARA, 2012) contains hundreds of mandatory content points, with not a single content point requiring or advocating reading for pleasure.

Implications for Classroom Practice

How do these research findings contribute to our understanding of effective pedagogy and approaches to supporting young people's reading development?

As teachers and parents, we can undertake to learn more about our students'/children's reading practices
and preferences. We can validate their perspectives and proclivities by building in class time and time at home for reading for pleasure (not only reading imaginative texts, but reading in its broadest sense), sharing reading experiences and deliberately implementing strategies for enhancing enjoyment and the rewards derived from reading.

English programs in particular can legitimate the space to read where reading offers pathways for students to explore, linger, reflect, speculate, wonder, imagine, awaken possibilities, contemplate, be receptive to the new, have fun, be invited into another's world, discover connections, generate confidence and autonomy, daydream, think and act creatively and critically, and feel – without such learning (and all of these experiences do constitute learning) always and inevitably being associated with assessment, testing, formal written responses, and examinations, or regarded as the means to an end apart from personal satisfaction. Teachers can manifest in practice the fundamental role of student choice as a motivating factor in students continuing to read for pleasure through ensuring a wide range of reading experiences.

The findings of this study point to the need for YAL may be more fully utilised in the classroom in wide
reading programs. With current book industry sales figures indicating the market trends and popularity
of YAL, it is a timely moment for teachers to reconsider the importance of integrating this category of fiction in classroom reading programs as one means of re-engaging and supporting their students' reading and reading for pleasure. This, in turn, according to the body of research, has positive and marked impacts on reading ability, literacy development and broader learning and development.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the pressing need to re-focus on the actual and potential significance of reading in the lives of the young people we teach. While it is evident that opportunities for reading for pleasure are increasingly threatened and diminished by the imperatives associated with high-stakes testing, it is equally evident that time spent reading for pleasure directly correlates with reading proficiency and reading achievement, including performance in reading tests and assessments. As Nieuwenhuizen so aptly concludes:

> [i]t is evident from research and numerous international reading initiatives, that becoming and being a confident, committed reader has wide-ranging positive effects on the personal, intellectual, social and educational wellbeing of people from early childhood to old age. This much broader view of the place and value of reading has significant implications for the classroom and requires a radically new approach to the role of reading in schools (CYL, 2009, p. 11).

"A radically new approach to the role of reading in schools" means that as teachers, we cannot afford not to legitimate the role of reading for pleasure in our classrooms by creating visible, regular time for students "to lose themselves in learning . . . as they become caught up in the process of engaging with new ideas, notions and experiences" (Halpin, 2008, p. 380). To limit or erode such opportunities is, as Rosen (2009) frames it, "a crying shame, and it's a form of discrimination . . . It is discrimination if the education system is failing to provide an environment in which every child can read widely and often" (p. 6).

Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, 'teenagers' is a term used to refer to young people in Years 7-10, which generally includes an age range inclusive of 12-16 years.

2. According to Gee, discourses are "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, gestures, attitudes and social identities . . . A Discourse is a sort of identity kit, which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise . . . Primary discourses are those to which people are apprenticed early in life . . . as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings . . . (and they) constitute our first social identity . . . They form our initial taken-for-granted understandings of who we are and who people 'like us' are . . . Secondary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialisations within various . . . groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization . . . They constitute the meaningfulness of our 'public; (more formal) acts' (Gee, 1996, p. 127, p. 137).

3. The scope of this paper does not allow for a more detailed analysis and interpretation of disaggregated data according to, for example, age and gender.

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Jacqueline Manuel is Associate Professor in English Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work atthe University of Sydney. She holds a BA (Hons 1) in English, a Dip Ed and a PhD in English Literature from theUniversity of New England. She is Program Director of the Master of Teaching (Secondary) in the Faculty. Jackie's teaching and research interests include teenagers' reading; creative pedagogies in secondary English; pre-service English teacher motivation; and English curriculum history.

Don Carter is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the Australian Catholic University (Strathfield). Don has also held numerous senior positions including Inspector, English and Inspector, Registration & Accreditation at the Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards (BOSTES); K–12 English as a Second Language/ Multicultural Education Consultant for the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET); has extensive experience in the teaching of English (head teacher) and has been a senior marker and an assessor of English examinations for the NSW HSC. Don also has extensive experience in the development of curriculum materials for English in NSW and was responsible for the development of the new K-10 English Syllabus and the Stage 6 English Studies course.