Myths about Children, Teenagers, Books and Reading

By Dr Margaret Merga

Literacy is a hot topic. The need for strong literacy skills is certainly not diminishing in a time where we have become increasingly reliant on screen-mediated written content. To meet our young people's needs both now and in the future, we need to ensure that we equip them with strong literacy skills and also the will to actively maintain their literacy development into adulthood and beyond. Both skill and will are needed, because attainment of a functional literacy skill level is not enough; US research exploring the impact of reading hiatus over the summer vacation period suggests that literacy skills can be lost when not exercised (e.g. Allington et.al., 2010; Mraz & Rasinski, 2007). The link between literacy and academic and vocational performance is well known (ABS, 2013; Daggett & Hasselbring, 2007; Kirsch et al., 2002; Marks, McMillan & Hillman, 2001; OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000).

Literacy attainment is also associated with quality of life, as it is also related to social participation and even health (Keslair, 2017). As such, it is unsurprising that recent international research suggests that "each country's literacy proficiency also influences its level of productivity and hence its future economic potential" (Keslair, 2017, p. 2). We care about literacy as it offers much for our children, but it is also a very important social and economic investment for communities and nations.

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We know that "time spent reading is related to reading success" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 102), and reading frequency is associated with an array of literacy benefits (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; OECD, 2010). We also know that increasing benchmarks and tests in literacy have not had the desired positive effect on the literacy attainment of our young people (ACARA, 2017). It may be a good time for schools to include greater focus on nurturing an enjoyment of reading, so that young people choose to read with greater frequency. Once our young people have attained the skill to read independently, we want them to continue to do so in order to both develop and maintain their literacy skills. Unfortunately, the connection between reading will and skill is not well-recognised in the current iteration of the Australian Curriculum, which has led to the production of whole-school literacy plans and policies that give very little consideration to reading engagement (as investigated in Merga & Gardiner, under review).

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We know that due to a wide range of factors, young people do not always receive strong or effective encouragement to read at home (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018), and that schools can inadvertently communicate that the purpose of reading is for testing (Merga, 2016a), rather than enjoyment. It is important that literacy advocates in schools, such as teachers and librarians, are active and effective supporters of literacy engagement, so that all children receive encouragement and support to read for enjoyment.

However, a range of myths have proliferated in the reading engagement space, making it difficult for literacy advocates to make sound resourcing and pedagogical decisions to support reading engagement. In recent times, I have been involved in a range of research initiatives which offer alternative perspectives and challenge the veracity of some of the most popular ideas currently active in this space. As this topic could really fill a book in its own right, I strongly encourage you to read more deeply, following up on the research exploring the myths that are of interest to you, by using the reading cited herein as a starting point. All of my cited works herein and more are available via request through my Research Gate page.

'All reading is equally beneficial'

'Read Anything!' is a thing. Libraries and classrooms wear posters that declare it. However, logic would suggest that all types of reading are not necessarily equally beneficial, and at this stage, research certainly does not

support this conjecture. Reading of books is most consistently associated with literacy benefits, with the reading of comic books, emails, social networking sites, newspapers, text messages and magazines not offering an equal positive effect (e.g. Baer, Baldi, Ayotte, & Green, 2007; OECD, 2010; OECD, 2011; Pfost, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2013; Spear-Swerling, Brucker & Alfano, 2010; Zebroff & Kaufman, 2016).

I have a suspicion (without research to back it up at this stage) that it is our struggling readers who we tend to push toward the non-book items, who get handed the pile of comics, or who are encouraged to read a magazine. If this is in fact the case, we may be inadvertently compounding inequity by steering our struggling readers towards text types that may not support their growth in literacy. I'm not suggesting that non-book text types are useless; it's important for young people to read widely and to master and enjoy a range of text types. However, I strongly suggest that until equal literacy benefit is found from other text types, books need to remain a key component of a beneficial reading diet.

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'Young people prefer to read books on screens'

It's easy to see where this myth comes from; it's not only young people who are entranced by their devices and their exciting affordances. As adults, many of us have walked into our fair share of poles in public places while quickly shooting off a text, and we also get excited when our phones ping out another notification. Those of today's youth who can afford such devices are spoiled for recreational choices.

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However, we can't assume that just because we see young people enjoying screen time that they would prefer to do everything on screens. Research with Western Australian teenagers found that overall, more than half of those with access to devices with eReading capability had never read a book on them. In addition, teenagers who had access to devices and were keen readers, choosing to read books for pleasure at least twice a week, did not frequently choose to read on their devices (Merga, 2014a). More recent research conducted in both Western Australia and Victoria suggests that teenagers generally prefer to read print books rather than eBooks. When I conducted similar research with younger children (aged 8-12) in 2016, we expected to find a higher level of reading on devices where keen readers had access, however where these children claimed to read books for pleasure every day, less than 5% read on an iPad, Kindle or computer, and only 8% read on a mobile phone (Merga & Mat Roni, 2017). In our 2017 paper, we also reviewed the available research in this area, finding that there is insufficient research to support the contention that young people prefer to read on screens.

This means that it is too soon to throw out all of the paper books in your library or relegate them to a back room, even though I know that this has happened in some Australian school libraries. While I think it's important to provide options for our students, and some will prefer to read on screens, we should resist the various forces that encourage the bookless library and information centre until all young people really do prefer to read books on screens. Until then, paper books should occupy an important place in our libraries.

'Boys don't like reading and they don't like fiction'

Just because girls typically indicate in general in the research that they enjoy reading more than boys (e.g. Merga, 2014b), it does not mean that all boys do not like reading, and that this attitude is somehow biologically determined. If someone asks the question 'Does he read?', it should not be sufficient for the teacher or parent to say 'Well, he's a boy', as though this answers the question. If you've even met one boy who is a keen reader, this idea is disproven from a biological perspective.

Equally frustrating is the myth that boys don't like fiction, as research suggests that in general, boys typically prefer to read fiction rather than non-fiction (as I outline

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in Merga, 2017b). There are girls who only like non-fiction, and there are boys who like fiction and don't mind a bit of romance (I interviewed a teenage boy who shyly admitted reading Twilight). As I reiterate later on, we need to know our students and their interests, and not rely on socially constructed notions of gender that lack a biological basis when it comes to recommending books.

I also feel that we shouldn't be steering boys toward non-fiction, unless that is where their preference lies. We need to avoid re-enforcement of unhelpful stereotypes of masculinity. In addition, the perpetuation of such myths may contribute to the literacy gap between boys and girls, as the reading of fiction is more strongly associated with literacy benefit (e.g. Mar & Rain, 2015; OECD, 2010). Research also suggests that the reading of fiction may be associated with fostering empathy and perspective taking (e.g. Comer Kidd & Castano 2013; Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009), so we should want this for our boys.

'You should stop reading aloud to your students/children once they know how to read'

I've discussed this at length in the media previously, but I probably can't stress this enough so I don't feel bad about repeating myself; we need to make sure that both parents and teachers know that the acquisition of independent reading skills should not signal the end of shared reading aloud. Research suggests that in many cases, reading aloud at home is curtailed too soon, while children still enjoy the practice. Reading aloud continues to offer a wide array of literacy benefits beyond the early period of independent reading acquisition (Merga, 2017d).

As I've explained elsewhere, high school students also enjoy being read to (Merga, 2015b). It's an easy way to scaffold access to complex vocabulary and ideas in texts that exceed the reading ability level of your struggling adult readers, and it doesn't involve them being put on the spot or receiving potentially embarrassing one-to-one support. Producing a 'read aloud' is the first homework task that I give my Secondary English student teachers. I have them video themselves reading aloud and we analyse what makes an effective read aloud. As school librarians, I know that many of you already read aloud to your students, which is awesome, but please also remind your parents and teachers to keep reading with their children for as long as possible.

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'School librarians, teachers and parents can't really make a difference'

You'll be heartened to hear that most avid adult readers have had someone in their lives who fostered their positive attitudes towards reading (Merga, 2017c), highlighting the power of social influences in fostering keen reading habits and identity. Many different kinds of people can make a significant difference, and librarians, teachers and parents were well-represented in the data. As we can and do make a difference, we deserve the support of our administrators, and we should also work to support and encourage each other as literacy advocates.

We also know which strategies, attitudes and ideas make a difference to young people. I've specifically asked both children and teenagers to describe what would make them read more books (e.g. Merga, 2017a; 2016b), and there's a lot that we can do as school librarians, teachers and parents. If one thing doesn't work, we can try something else. I'll touch on some of these ideas below, but my research papers explore these ideas in greater breadth and depth (such as this one, which you can request through Research Gate).

Some things that we can do

I know that you are doing amazing things to foster reading engagement in your schools as librarians and teachers, however sometimes it is handy to have some extra research support to refresh your ideas, teach others or argue effectively for time and resourcing in your schools. The first and most obvious thing that we

need to do is to know our students and understand their interests. Like our own interests, these are likely to be subject to change, so this involves knowing the current and evolving interests and aspirations of your individual students, and being a wide reader so that we can make recommendations that reflect this array of interests. When this was done, students appreciate it. For instance, Kylie praised her English teacher, explaining that:

> *She shows you what books are really good. And she listens to what interests we have. So, she offers me books as well, because she knows what I like, and, yeah, she's really good. She listens to people so she knows what books they like* (Merga, 2015b, p. 43).

Similarly, Natalie talked about how her school librarian helped her to find the best book that she'd ever read, explaining that:

> *When I went to the library, there was a whole table of separate books she told me to go look at, and that was in it. So obviously, I think she influenced that on me, helped me pick that, which is good* (p. 43).

As such, it's not just a matter of knowing students' interests and expecting that they read beyond the early years, although these considerations are important. It's a matter of using these interests to recommend and supply books.

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Supporting regular access to books during class time is really important. We recently found that even where students have access to school libraries, they are underutilised by teachers during class time. This is an issue, as older children are less likely to visit libraries during their free time (Merga & Mat Roni, 2017b). You can use this research to make sure that every child in your school has the opportunity to access the library to choose books to read for pleasure during class time, as when we reduce the access of our older children to the school library during class time, we risk inadvertently communicating to them that reading is no longer important for them – the phenomenon of expired expectations that I discuss at length elsewhere (e.g. here).

In order to increase reading engagement, we need to normalise reading cultures in our classrooms and libraries, and allow opportunities for social exchange around books. We can model keen reading habits ourselves and show insight into how we make good choices; this is particularly important as both children and teenagers have indicated that they experience difficulty choosing books, and sometimes fall back on unreliable strategies (Merga, 2017a; 2016b). When we encourage students to share recommendations and talk about books in the context of pleasure, this kind of discussion can promote common enjoyment, critical exploration and comprehension, and can reduce gaps in reading where students seek their next book (Merga, McRae & Rutherford, 2017).

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We might need to counter school cultures where reading for testing is the norm by bringing pleasure to the fore, and create time and space for reading, bearing in mind that some of our students do not have opportunities and spaces conducive to reading at home. Perhaps the most important thing we need to do, however, is maintain our advocacy role in the face of contemporary work pressures and recruit teacher, parent, administrative, leadership and community allies to help support our efforts to encourage young people to read more.

As I mentioned previously, this is just a brief introduction to the research I have done in this area, so please feel free to request any of my papers through Research Gate. I hope that you find them useful to support your initiatives as a keen literacy and literature advocate in your school.

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