

# SEVEN FINDINGS FROM THE WEST AUSTRALIAN STUDY IN ADOLESCENT BOOK READING

Margaret Merga

*Dr Margaret Merga is a researcher who has taught in Australia, North America, Turkey, Thailand and India. In 2012 she was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award to undertake the West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading, which examined adolescents' attitudes toward reading books for recreation, and the impact of social influences on adolescent engagement in the practice. She has had findings from this study published in Australian and international journals.*

In early October The West Australian reported that only 1 in 5 teens survey read books daily. This finding was then picked up by ABC online, and it generated some discussion on the ABC 720 Facebook page.

I am really appreciative of media interest in my research, as it increases the chance that it may be of actual use in the real world, a tenderly nurtured researcher's dream. However, focus now rests on just one negative aspect of my research. When I set out to conduct the West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading (WASABR) I was not interested in producing research that simply points out a problem; my research also looked at possible solutions. In short, I wanted to find out how we could encourage our teens to read more books for enjoyment, and with greater frequency.

I'd like to share seven findings from my study. As experienced practitioners in the field of English teaching, you will probably already be familiar with the ideas that I raise here. That said, it is always handy to have research which is supportive of your goals. I already know of a handful of teachers who have used my research to gain support for a range of initiatives, from whole school Silent Reading

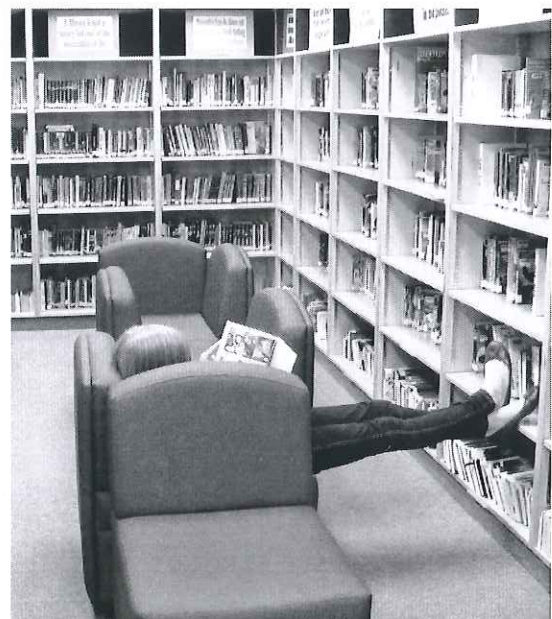
approaches, to increased funding for their libraries. I hope that you also find a use for my research.

## **What was the study?**

In Term Four of 2012, 20 supportive schools around Western Australia kindly allowed me to conduct the WASABR in their classrooms. Year 8s and 10s participated in a survey and interviews, which aimed to capture data across a wide range of issues under the umbrella of adolescent recreational book reading. For detailed information about the method I used, read any of my published papers, the list of which appears at the end of this article.

## **Why did I pursue this line of research?**

I was lucky enough to win an Australian Postgraduate Award to study my PhD in 2012. When the time came to decide on my PhD topic, my mind went back to my early years as a pink-haired and pierced high school English tutor, a job that I



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began while still at high school myself. Back then it became quickly obvious to me that if I wanted my students to jump up several grades, they would need to start reading books often. Where I was able to convince my students to read books regularly, and put them onto books I knew they would like based on their personalities and interests, their improvement was sensational, and I got to bask in the glory of success. It was awesome.

As an English teacher I tried to foster the same enjoyment of reading. This was often challenging in the context of constant curricular and reporting changes and the load of every day teaching. Sometimes it felt hard to justify what could be seen as taking time out from learning to encourage recreational book reading both in my classrooms and at home.

opinions about characters and books both loved and loathed.

- Using knowledge of students' personal interests and tastes to connect them individually with great books.
- Encouraging students to comment on reviews on Goodreads.com and engage in some of the numerous book trailers on YouTube.
- Reading out loud, as many teens still love being read to by their teacher.

My research explored how teacher interventions influenced students' attitudes toward reading, turning some staunch non-readers into ravenous book devourers. Your praises were sung during my research, so feel empowered to justify continuing to put that chunk of time aside to encourage

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*“...feel empowered to justify continuing to put that chunk of time aside to encourage recreational book reading in your classroom. It might not change every student, but influencing even one student is enough to have a significant positive impact on that child's literacy outcomes...”*

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My PhD topic evolved from these experiences. I decided to investigate how social influences, such as English teachers, parents, friends and the peer group can influence teens' attitudes towards, and frequency of engagement in recreational book reading.

### **Some findings you might find handy**

While my study tackled a really broad range of research questions, here are a handful of the findings that you may find useful.

1. **English Teachers can significantly influence their students' attitudes toward recreational book reading.** For years great English teachers have been effectively encouraging recreational book reading. Teachers have used a wide range of strategies. Here are some examples of strategies students liked:

- Fostering student-centred discussion about reading for pleasure, particularly sharing

recreational book reading in your classroom. It might not change every student, but influencing even one student is enough to have a significant positive impact on that child's literacy outcomes, and subsequently their lives.

2. **All reading materials do NOT offer the same literacy benefit.** The research I read to support my study did not substantiate the “read anything” line. Findings from international studies suggest that the literacy benefit of reading newspapers, comic books, magazines and non-fiction books is not equal to the benefits of reading fiction. Reading for information on the Internet also does not offer the same benefit, as research suggests that the cognitive processes involved in reading online are different.

3. **Silent Reading is still important.** Don't feel guilty for putting time aside for in-class reading. As long as you've allowed your students to choose their own books and are not forcing them to read



something they hate, Silent Reading can be really beneficial, not just for supporting literacy levels and encouraging further recreational reading, but also potentially for improving concentration.

4. **We should let parents know what they can do to influence their child's attitude toward recreational book reading.** They need to keep expecting their teens to read, provide supportive encouragement, and provide access to books. Reading time should never be a punishment. While conducting the study, I had some teens tell me that they no longer bother reading at home because it was obviously no longer important. They had drawn this conclusion from the fact that their parents and teachers no longer expected them to do it. Parents also need to have some control over their children's screen time, but don't get me started on that!

5. **It's way too soon to empty our libraries of paper books.** While some schools in the US and Australia have removed all paper books from their libraries on the assumption that e-readers are preferred by teens, there is no sound research evidence at this stage to support this idea. My research found that most keen readers with ready access to e-reading technology did not frequently read books in this form, still preferring traditional books.

6. **We should explain the benefits of reading to teenagers.** Just as we need to get serious about the sit ups and core training if we want a really defined six-pack (or so I hear), if we want to knock it out of the park with diverse vocabulary and argument annihilating comebacks, we need to be reading books every day. We know that having strong literacy is not just about getting into the university or vocational training course; it's about having power in our society, where literacy demands are ever-increasing. We should talk openly about this, because strong literacy skills are practically a super power!

7. **Books are not uncool.** The vast majority of respondents in my study (yes, even the boys!) did not agree that books are "uncool." It is possible that the surge in movie adaptations of young adult books recent times has raised the profile of books. If we talk more about books, if we can increase access, appeal and interest, if we can situate them as fun, infuriating, brain-twisting and exciting and value our students' opinions on books, this will help us to encourage students to read more. In order to do this effectively, we need to know our students, and we need to read widely ourselves.

I hope that you find some of these ideas helpful. I have avoided cluttering up this article with references, but here is a list of my recent papers from this study:

Merga, M.K. (2013). Should Silent Reading feature in a secondary school English programme? West Australian students' perspectives on Silent Reading. *English in Education*, 47(3), 229-244.

Merga, M.K. (2014). Peer Group and Friend Influences on the Social Acceptability of Adolescent Book Reading. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 57(6), 472-482.

Merga, M.K. (2014). Exploring the role of parents in supporting recreational book reading beyond primary school. *English in Education*. 48(2), 149-163.

Merga, M.K. (2014). Western Australian adolescents' reasons for infrequent engagement in recreational book reading. *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years*. 22(2), 60-66.

Merga, M.K. (2014) Are teenagers really keen digital readers? Adolescent engagement in eBook reading and the relevance of paper books today. *English in Australia*. 49(1), 27-37.

Merga, M.K. (2014). Are Western Australian adolescents keen book readers? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 37(3), 161-170.

Merga, M.K. (2014). What would make them read more? Insights from Western Australian adolescent readers. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2014.961898>.

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