Teenagers and Reading: Factors that shape the quality of teenagers’ reading lives

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Abstract: This paper explores the key findings of a range of research on teenagers and reading, focusing on the implications for classroom practice and student engagement. There is a particular emphasis on addressing the needs of underachieving and reluctant readers and the ways in which promoting reading for pleasure and enjoyment can contribute to student achievement and satisfaction within and beyond the classroom.

Reading and writing are important because we read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn. Texts are places where power and weakness become visible and discussable, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts and actions become palpable. This is why the humble subject ‘English’ is so important. (Scholes, 1985, p. xi)

Now, we can watch a newspaper; listen to a magazine; curl up with a movie; and see a phone call. Now, we can take a classroom anywhere; hold an entire bookstore; and touch the stars… (Apple iPad advertisement, 2011)

Introduction

More than 25 years ago, Scholes argued for the centrality of ‘the humble subject “English”’ in our students’ lives. English remains one of the few curricular contexts wherein the ‘main game’ is the focus on language, texts, human experience and making meaning. The now ubiquitous role of digital technology in the lives of teenagers makes Scholes’s observation even more apposite for us as English teachers in the second decade of the 21st century: our students continue to ‘read and write’ their worlds, as well as their texts, ‘and are read and written by them in turn’. But the nature of these texts and the textuality experienced by today’s teenagers renders these acts of reading and writing far more complex and nuanced than they were for teenagers in 1985.

My purpose here is to provide a snapshot of the findings of prominent research studies in the field of teenagers’ reading. More specifically, I want to draw attention to the identified factors that can support and conversely inhibit reading achievement and satisfaction, particularly for underachieving or reluctant readers. As teachers, we can more effectively nurture students’ intrinsic purposeful engagement in learning when we extend our understanding of the forces that can motivate and shape their reading practices and preferences within and beyond the classroom.

The importance of reading for pleasure

It 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
It is axiomatic that for most students, formal education – and indeed daily living – involves reading as a communicative act. 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. It is equally evident that each experience of reading and the motivations that fuel our engagement with language can be as multidimensional and idiosyncratic as readers themselves – a factor recognised by Rosenblatt when she reminded us that:

[t]here 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, after all, only in interactions with specific minds. (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 32)

Like other age groups, teenagers read for a wide variety of purposes with personal ‘tastes’ in reading often well-established by the time they reach secondary school (Hall & Coles, 1995; Manuel, 2012a, 2012b). They may, for instance, read for pleasure, escape, relaxation, affirmation, comfort, discovery, information, to connect with others, 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 broader cultural discourses.

The perennial challenges of balancing and catering to the needs, interests, capacities and diversity of students’ ‘specific minds’ are intensified when we consider the contextual demands of assessments, examinations and testing that figure so prominently on the contemporary educational landscape. From Organisation of Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other studies, however, it is clear that there is significant correlation between the quantity and quality of students’ reading for pleasure and their level of achievement in reading assessments that require higher-order capacities for sustained engagement in ‘continuous’ texts, interpretation, speculation, reflection and evaluation. (ACER, 2010). Similarly, the 2009 Report from the Centre for Youth Literature pointed to the constellation of personal, social, cultural and educational benefits that can accrue from reading for pleasure:

- Reading for pleasure supports literacy and learning in school.
- It enables young people to develop their own, better informed perspective on life.
- It is a safe, inexpensive, pleasurable way to spend time.
- It allows young readers to understand and empathise with the lives of those in different situations, times and cultures; to walk in the shoes of others.
- It improves educational outcomes and employment prospects. (p. 11)

The findings of such reports are increasingly reinforced by the knowledge and understanding of human development offered by research in neuroscience that has ‘discovered that dynamic activity in the brain continues (beyond the age of six, when the brain is already 95% of its adult size) and the thickening of the thinking part of the brain doesn’t peak until around 11 years of age in girls, and 12 in boys’ (p. 12). At the time when students are making the transition from primary to secondary school, a further pruning-down process takes place. Cells and connections that are used will survive, while those that are not will be cut back:

[s]o, if 10 to 13-year-olds are not reading for pleasure, they are likely to lose the brain connections; the hard-wiring that would have kept them reading as adults. Reading after this age could become an unnatural chore, affecting young people’s ability to study at a tertiary level and perform well in the workplace. (Centre for Youth Literature, 2009, pp. 11–12) (My italics)

The implications of such knowledge are critical for our work as English teachers when it comes to fostering continued engagement with reading for pleasure and personal reward.

**Competing for the reading space**

English classrooms are one of the few spaces remaining in the contemporary world where our students can and should be ‘turned on’ to the value of reading in a supportive, guided, safe, stimulating and ever-challenging learning environment. There would be few English teachers who would not aspire for all of their students to leave secondary school as accomplished
readers embodying a love of reading. English teachers who enter the profession and remain in the profession do so because they have a passion for their subject and an equally verdant passion to inspire their students (Manuel & Brindley, 2005; Manuel & Hughes, 2006).

But such aspirations, ideals and passions are inevitably blunted when the demands to prepare ‘test-takers’ dominate the ‘reading space’ available to nurture capable and confident readers. What I mean by ‘reading space’ is:

- Unhurried time for immersion in reading for enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction, in and for itself.
- Space to read where reading offers pathways for students to explore, linger, reflect, speculate, wonder, imagine, awaken possibilities, contemplate, be receptive to the new, 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 ‘tested’, assessed or evaluated.
- The development of a community of learners: reading becomes a demystified, non-threatening, shared and gratifying experience; and each individual’s reading choices, tastes, discoveries and expectations are valued, respected and considered fundamental to their motivation, reading development and reading achievement. Individual reading is modelled and experienced as social practice.

For some 40 years, the ‘reading space’ in many secondary English classrooms in Australia (and in other countries) has been shaped by reading programs that merge:

- whole class reading where the same text/s is experienced by all students;
- small group reading where students work together according to shared reading interests and/or abilities; and
- wide reading where students are provided with legitimate class time to read and share text/s of their own choosing, which may or may not be linked to written or other assessment tasks.

Integrated reading programs place a high premium on the ‘reading capital’ – or what Gee calls the ‘Primary Discourses’ (Gee, 1996, p. 127) – that students bring to the classroom. Such programs also enable the teacher (and students themselves) to extend the reading horizons and capacities of students by ensuring they are ‘apprenticed’ in the prevailing ‘Secondary Discourses’ of the school and classroom: being immersed in a broad range of texts and reading practices that they may not otherwise have access to beyond the English classroom (Moje et al., 2004). This approach expands and deepens the abilities of those students who carry a storehouse of positive literacy experiences from their homelife. And it also enables students from literacy-impoverished backgrounds to gain access to what is every student’s birthright: the opportunity to experience the value and rewards – both intrinsic and extrinsic – that can accrue and flow from reading in their own lives within and well beyond school. To limit this opportunity is, as children’s author and poet Michael Rosen puts it ‘a crying shame ... It is discrimination if children come from a home where they are not reading regularly, and a school is not providing that opportunity. It is discrimination if the education system is failing to provide an environment in which every child can read widely and often’ (Rosen, 2009).

**Barriers to developing a love of reading: teaching for testing**

Kelly Gallagher, a veteran classroom teacher, has coined the term ‘readicide’ to describe the ‘systematic killing of the love of reading’ (Gallagher, 2009, p. 2) for young people. Gallagher attributes ‘readicide’ to the growing pressures on teachers and students wrought by standardised tests that have proliferated on the educational landscape of a number of countries over the last two decades. Gallagher’s analysis focuses on the detrimental consequences of narrowly ‘teaching to the test’ in contemporary American classrooms. But the contextual factors Gallagher identifies find strong parallels in both Australian and British research on the impact of such testing regimes on students’ holistic achievement as readers, their appetite for reading, and their proclivity for the kinds of enjoyment, satisfaction and pleasure offered by the experience of reading.

Like other research in the field (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Manuel, 2012a, 2012b; Thomson, 1985), Gallagher’s critique of the kind of ‘mind-numbing’ reading pedagogy created by a high-stakes testing environment exposes the actual and potential impacts on young readers. The consequences can be acute for those students who struggle with the literacy demands of the curriculum, have internalised images of themselves as inadequate readers, have experienced repeated ‘failure’ in formal schooling contexts, and for whom reading holds little value or significance in
their daily lives beyond the merely functional. Rather than cultivating ‘the love of reading’ in our students, Gallagher and others argue that current policy and practice can in fact erode it for both thriving and reluctant readers, alike. (Allington & Walmsley, 2007; Hinchman, 2008)

While there is indeed an ongoing debate about the efficacy and use of particular kinds of standardised reading tests in the development of students’ capacities as lifelong, engaged readers, few would dispute the need to prepare students for such tests by equipping them with ‘test-taking’ knowledge and skills. Of course, all teaching and learning should be informed by clear objectives, with the aim of ensuring students can demonstrate their knowledge, skills, understanding and values through authentic assessment for, as and of learning. All good teachers ‘teach to the test’ – if we understand ‘test’ in its broadest and most expansive sense where the ‘test’ is one measure in assessment underwriting, ‘normalised’, socially productive and personally meaningful, enjoyable, worthwhile, generative, illuminating, opportunities for students to experience reading as a compromised the once taken-for-granted classroom of schools, teachers and students – has seriously

What is emerging in the research literature, however, is evidence that the imperative to prepare students for standardised tests – the published results of which render the test scores high-stakes and have increasingly profound implications for the work and culture of schools, teachers and students – has seriously compromised the once taken-for-granted classroom opportunities for students to experience reading as a meaningful, enjoyable, worthwhile, generative, illuminating, ‘normalised’, socially productive and personally rewarding endeavour (House of Commons CSFC, 2008; Meier et al., 2004).

In Australia, the advent of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) – in 2008 and the MySchool website1 has the potential to imperil this opportunity for authentic ‘reading space’ in English classrooms (and as a consequence, thwart students’ love of reading) in ways that have been clearly identified in international contexts. For example, of the North American experience, Nichols and Berliner conclude that:

1We have amassed a significant collection of evidence highlighting the distortion, corruption, and collateral damage that occurs when high-stakes tests become commonplace in our public schools.

We found reports and research about individuals and groups of individuals from across the nation whose lives have been tragically and often permanently affected by high-stakes testing. We found hundreds of instances of adults who were cheating, including many instances of administrators who ‘pushed’ children out of school, costing thousands of students the opportunity to receive a high school diploma. We also found administrators and school boards that had drastically narrowed the curriculum, and who forced test-preparation programs on teachers and students, taking scarce time away from genuine instruction. We found teacher morale plummeting, causing many to leave the profession. (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 2)

Similar alarm bells have been ringing in the United Kingdom with educators and other stakeholders counting the educational costs of twenty years of a national curriculum and accompanying testing programs. The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee’s recent report is unequivocal in its conclusions:

teaching to the test, to an extent which narrows the curriculum and puts sustained learning at risk, is widespread...the Government’s approach to accountability has meant that test results are pursued at the expense of a rounded education for children...

We believe that teaching to the test and this inappropriate focus on test results may leave young people unprepared for higher education and employment...

A creative, linked curriculum which addresses the interests, needs and talents of all pupils is the casualty of the narrow focus of teaching which we have identified.

Narrowing of the curriculum is problematic...for those subjects which are tested in public examinations, the scope and creativity of what is taught is compromised by a focus on the requirements of the test. We are concerned that any efforts the Government makes to introduce more breadth into the school curriculum are likely to be undermined by the enduring imperative for schools, created by the accountability measures, to ensure that their pupils perform well in national tests (House of Commons CSFC, 2008, pp. 94–95).

For Australian educators, these findings offer yet further cautionary wisdom in the light of current educational reform agendas, which include the development of an Australian national curriculum. At the time of writing, the national body responsible for the development of this national curriculum – Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) – had released draft curricula in English, Mathematics, Science and History for the Years K–10. In the more than 300 mandatory content descriptions in the draft Australian Curriculum: English K–10 (ACARA, 2010), there is no reference to reading for pleasure or enjoyment. In fact, there is no mention at all of students’ own wide reading: not a single mandatory content description legitimates the ‘reading space’ for
students to engage in wide reading for pleasure, enjoyment and personal satisfaction in their years of formal English education from Foundation (Kindergarten) to Year 10 (approximately 5–15 years of age). There is a plethora, however, of mandatory content descriptions that lend themselves to the kind of testing typified by NAPLAN.

Although it is ‘early days’ in terms of the Australian national education reforms, the research from the United States and the United Kingdom is a forceful warning about the extent to which ‘teaching to the test’ can not only encroach on the available classroom time and opportunities for students’ holistic reading experiences: it can also erode the culture of learning and teaching, particularly the pedagogy of teaching reading.

While there is compelling evidence from research about the consequences for all students when reading in the curriculum is restricted, my purpose for the remainder of this discussion is to highlight what we know about teenagers who experience difficulties with reading: the so-called reluctant, resistant, struggling, disengaged, indifferent and even hostile readers. These are our most vulnerable students. I want to focus on the factors that contribute to and perpetuate their reading underachievement and draw attention to the evidence-based research that offers practical approaches for addressing their needs, interests and capacities as part of our work as English teachers.

‘Part of the same cloth’: Teenagers who experience difficulties with reading

Adolescents who struggle with reading are part of the same cloth from which good readers come. Neither group stands alone in opposition to the other; both are bound up in the cultural contexts they inhabit. (Alvermann, 2001, p. 680)

What we know from research is that a student’s level of accomplishment in reading directly influences the quality and nature of his or her entire school and post-school life: ‘the consequences of a slow start in reading become monumental as they accumulate exponentially over time’ (Torgensen, 1998, p. 32). Further, these consequences ‘do not diminish over time and continue into adulthood without appropriate intervention’ (Grossen, 1997, p. 6).

The research is consistent in its assertion that only a small minority of struggling adolescent readers have problems attributable to a learning disability: ‘weak reading comprehension, rather than an outright inability to read, is the main affliction of most struggling readers in middle and high schools’ (Allen, 2000, p. 1). My Read: Strategies for teaching reading in the middle years confirms that:

for all but the 5–10% of students who have intellectual, sensory or learning disabilities the issue is one of underperformance rather than ability. For the majority of students reaching the middle years of school, recurrent experience of failure and negative perceptions about themselves as readers will be the major obstacles to learning. For these students, performance in reading is likely to be a consequence of a well-learned self-preservation strategy of non-engagement. (DE s T, AATE, ALEA, 2003)

Under-performing students are variously identified as ‘reluctant’, ‘resistant’, ‘struggling’, ‘disaffected’, ‘disenchanted’ or ‘at-risk’ individuals who ‘for whatever reason, are not achieving their full potential’ (Alvermann, 2001, p. 679). And there are those students who have opted-out of participation in classroom language activities altogether, representing the ‘physical embodiment of silencing’ (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 34).

We know that there remains a disproportionately high number of adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged and non-English speaking backgrounds whose educational and other opportunities are compromised by inadequate literacy skills in reading (Brozo, 2009; Birsh, 1999). Notwithstanding this evidence, however, there is no simple, one-dimensional causal relationship between contextual factors such as gender, socio-economic, cultural, ethnic or linguistic status, and underachievement in reading: ‘students’ ethnicity, social class, and language do not automatically determine their level of academic achievement’ (Au, 1993, p. 2). Indeed, educational policy in Australia, as it is articulated in the Melbourne Declaration, emphasises ‘the capacity of all young people to learn, and the role of schooling in developing that capacity’ (MCEECDYA, 2008).

Adolescents who experience difficulties with reading cannot be treated as a homogeneous group. The research in the field warns strongly against policy or practice that considers it can meet the needs of all adolescents with reading difficulties with a one-size-fits-all program or a neatly packaged solution (Alvermann & Rush, 2004).

Fundamental to any consideration of adolescents’ reading is an understanding that not all ‘struggling
adolescent readers are beginning readers … Rather, they are inexperienced readers who need help acquiring and extending the complex comprehension processes that underlie skilled reading in the subject areas.’ (Greenleaf et al., 2001, p. 8) This critical distinction between ‘inexperienced’ and ‘experienced’ readers has significant implications for the reading pedagogy we implement as teachers and for the attitudinal receptivity of our students.

What follows is a synthesis of research, identifying the key factors that influence reading achievement in secondary school.

Factors that influence reading achievement in secondary school

The Learning Environment

We human beings are programmed to learn. If learning environments are purposeful and stimulating, challenging our current perspectives with new ideas and ways of doing things, if learning is pursued as fun and edgy and with a kind of joy, all students can and will learn. They will grow their brain. They will widen their world-view. They will become better thinkers, readers, and writers, and quite possibly better people to boot. (Wilhelm, 2010, p. 40)

Repeated research studies – and common wisdom – underscore the importance of creating an optimal learning environment for adolescents with reading difficulties. Alvermann, for example, argues that many mainstream schools tend to privilege certain kinds of school and classroom literacies over others. In so doing, schools often fail to adequately legitimise and make connections between the literacy knowledge that students bring to school and the often unfamiliar literacy demands they encounter within the school:

Youth are more likely to succeed academically and go on to be successful in adulthood when they see themselves as able and authorized members of learning communities … Yet many adolescents who possess talent, energy, and intelligence find themselves in school settings where these abilities may go untapped … The failure to align school curricula with students’ interests and outside-of-school competencies is thought to be behind the general erosion of engagement in reading and learning experienced by many youth as they make the transition from elementary to secondary school. (Brozo, 2009, p. 278)

If individuals do not readily identify with or belong to the prevailing culture of the school – a culture that is manifested in such things as for example, choice of textbooks, reading matter selected by teachers, the language and experience that is valued in the classroom and school – then these individuals may struggle to succeed according to what is often, to them, an apparently arbitrary and meaningless set of academic assessment tasks and expectations.

Non-compliant students are then labelled as ‘at-risk’ or ‘reluctant’ readers because they quickly deduce that if they have little chance of winning the game, they will not play the game at all. Instead they become at best passive and dependent learners, unwilling to take risks, and at worst, disaffected learners who develop a concept of themselves as ‘failures’:

[The] possibility that as a culture we are making struggling readers out of some adolescents who for any number of reasons have turned their backs on a version of literacy called school literacy is a sobering thought … Literacy education is less about skill development and more about access to cultural resources and to understandings of how schools that promote certain normative ways of reading texts may be disabling some of the very students they are trying to help. (Alvermann, 2001, p. 680)

Indeed, there is repeated evidence in the literature that the very pedagogy and culture that are assumed to assist readers who are struggling may in fact produce readers who experience difficulties, who disengage, who lack motivation or who actively resist many or all kinds of reading (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Ma’ayan, 2010).

Remedial reading programs in secondary school

Unfortunately the disabled (sic) reader has often been so removed from reading as a tool for living and learning, that he or she has given up. (Decker, 1996, p. 2)

It has been demonstrated that one such practice which can further institutionalise deficit models of adolescent readers has been remedial reading classes in secondary schools. An important distinction must be made here between the well-established Reading Recovery Program that has enjoyed wide success in primary schools, and the kinds of remediation typically encountered in a secondary school context. Adolescent students in the latter remedial programs in high schools are often withdrawn from their mainstream classes (where they may have already established strong social relationships) into special classes. This, in turn, can confirm in the student’s mind, and the teacher’s eyes, the already established view of their lack of reading competence.
In addition, remediation of this kind tends to focus on decontextualised skills, age-inappropriate reading material and the constant lock-step monitoring and evaluating of the student by a teacher. Reading becomes a chore, and too often, 'a testing ground for self-worth' (Decker, 1996, p. 2) merely reinforcing all of the negative perceptions that the struggling adolescent reader has hitherto internalised about reading (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

Rarely does remediation of this kind focus on reading for meaning and enjoyment in a purposeful context (Fischer, 2000), or on building the autonomy and agency of the individual student, each of which is critical in arresting and reversing the trend for the unmotivated or struggling adolescent reader who, after all, may already have experienced many years of 'failure', and who may perceive reading as something to be done only for dry writing exercises, limiting assessment, low-level information retrieval, or 'busywork'.

Pikulski proposes that these kinds of remediation programs that 'slow down' the processes of reading instruction can mean that struggling readers are 'doomed to remain behind' caught in a 'cycle of failure' (Pikulski 1997, p. 2). They fall behind in the curriculum areas that they have been withdrawn from for remediation, and are therefore severely impeded in their efforts to maintain synchronicity with their peers (Pikulski, 1997). When they continue to struggle, they are usually 'given more of the same' – ‘heavy skills instruction’ that assumes good reading is ‘all about getting the word right rather than an act of making sense of the material’ (Decker, 1996, p. 3).

Essentially, such programs tend not to balance the four dimensions of informed, critical and effective reading:

1. semantic and syntactic decoding of what has been read;
2. understanding and comprehending what has been read;
3. the critiquing or questioning of what has been read and why it has been written; and
4. enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction.

Instead, such programs often concentrate almost exclusively on the first of these dimensions at the expense of the others, each of which demand increasingly higher-order thinking skills, reflexivity and knowledge about how and why texts operate within, through, and beyond certain contexts (Brozo, 2009).

**Reading pedagogy**

It is often assumed that primary school is a time when there is a heavy focus on *learning to read*: in the transition to high school, however, there is a paradigmatic shift in emphasis to *reading to learn*. Once students reach high school, they are required to 'grapple with texts that are expository, dense, and full of new, more difficult vocabulary, especially in maths, science, and social sciences ... But students are not taught how to read those types of texts' (Allen, 2000, p. 1).

A number of studies have highlighted the extent to which many teachers 'resist their role as reading teachers, citing a lack of time, skill, and support' (Holloway, 1999, p. 80). Yet, there is an overwhelming amount of research linking reading failure, reading resistance, reading reluctance, apathy or a decrease in motivation levels in adolescents to ineffective and even counter-productive classroom reading pedagogy.

The literature provides compelling evidence that specific classroom practices, above all else, are a fundamental factor in enhancing or imperilling students' success in reading. Studies by Benton (1995), Bushman (1997), Bintz (1993), and Hall and Coles (1999) demonstrate the ways in which reading, particularly reading for pleasure, diminishes for many adolescents – avid and struggling readers alike – as they progress through high school. This is especially evident for adolescent boys (Hall & Coles, 1999; Manuel & Robinson, 2003; Martino, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006).

Importantly, gaps in reading pedagogy can and do lead to a failure to equip students with the specific skills they may require to handle the interpretive demands of reading within subject specific contexts. Explicit teaching is a vital aspect in harnessing, adapting and translating the reading ability that students already possess, across the curriculum. This entails clarifying the expectations and codes of the language that operate in the subject, giving clear directions to students, modelling reading practices and explicating the learning goals of each class. Good teachers also provide instructional support through meaningful and contextualised intervention at the point of need (as distinct from the often decontextualised approach to texts).

The Hall and Coles (1999) survey showed that over '90% of students in each age group (10-, 12-, 14-year-olds) considered themselves to be average or better readers, although the older children were less likely than the younger ones to claim that they are "very good" readers' (Hall & Coles, 1999, p. 14). Similarly,
described by other researchers as ‘aliterate’ (Beers, 1998, p. 39). For a student to knowingly or unwittingly adopt such a position bespeaks a form of political and personal action that very cogently comments on the delimiting impact of certain structures and cultures of schooling.

Yet, despite evidence from these and other studies of readers’ self-image, research such as that conducted by Atkinson et al. shows that ‘up to seventy per cent of eighth grade students think reading is boring ... these are the same children who started their reading education with enthusiasm and interest in first and second grade’ (Atkinson et al., 2002, p. 159).

Some researchers argue that this noted decrease in reading for pleasure inevitably occurs as students move through the secondary school system committing more and more of their time to school-based learning tasks, thus slicing into the available time for reading for pleasure. This is cause for concern since the literature, and common sense, stresses the link between reading for pleasure and reading achievement (Moss & Young, 2010) – confirming that reading, like any skill, will improve with immersion in a wide variety of enjoyable and stimulating reading materials.

Bintz (1993) noted that as little as 3 per cent of all secondary school classroom experience is spent on reading – and an even smaller percentage of this on reading for pleasure. Hence, if students are not reading at home, there is little opportunity for them to read at school. For those students who are already carrying the baggage of a negative attitude towards all kinds of school reading, this general trend is even more disturbing when we consider the consequences for personal, cognitive, and overall academic development for the struggling reader.

Similarly, Nunn (1993) found that for many 15- and 16-year-olds the pressures of study, exams and social activities left ‘little time for sustained private reading’, and for these students, reading tends to become a labour associated with ‘other tedious aspects of school work’ (Nunn, 1993, pp. 90–91).

While ‘passive readers’ do the majority of their reading at school in order to ‘comply with teacher-assigned tasks’ or to just ‘get by’, ‘reluctant readers’ on the other had, ‘actively avoid reading whenever possible’ and are far more likely to experience reading difficulties and apathy (Bintz, 1993, p. 609).

It’s not that these students cannot read, argues Bintz, but that they choose not to: these students have been
autonomy, in addition to honing the collaborative and group-work skills necessary for life within and beyond the school and family. Yet, ironically, it is the struggling adolescent reader who is often given the least amount of choice and ownership when it comes to the what and the how of reading material.

Being forced to read ‘difficult’ texts which hold little interest for them diminishes student motivation, fosters feelings of resentment (Bintz, 1993) and creates doubts about the student’s abilities and competencies as a reader (Cope, 1997). Others propose that a decline in reading is a direct consequence of the kinds of reading school and teachers require of students and the ways in which such reading is or is not supported by teachers (Alvermann, 2001; Atkinson et al., 2002; Decker, 1996; Fischer, 1999; Moss & Young, 2010).

Further, the evidence suggests that ‘students do not lose interest in reading per se’ (Bintz, 1993, p. 613). Rather ‘they lose interest in the kinds of reading they are typically required to do in school, such as reading textbooks and certain teacher selected texts’ (Ivey, 1999, p. 2).

Wholly teacher-selected reading materials leave little room for students’ diverse interests to be catered for or indeed to be recognised and valued as part of the curriculum. In fact, a wide variety of reading material that is accessible and selected by the student at least as regularly as that selected by the teacher is a critical factor in ongoing reading achievement. (Bintz, 1993; Cope, 1997; Fischer, 2000; Hall & Coles, 1999; Ivey, 1999; Manuel & Robinson, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006)

How many adults, for example, would tolerate having all of their reading materials selected, without consultation, by someone who may or may not know or understand their reading preferences and practices? Why then, should adolescents, particularly adolescents experiencing difficulties with reading, tolerate this form of educational disenfranchisement in secondary school classrooms?

These findings of these research studies illuminate the dangers of forcing students to read – without engaging, explicit and supportive teaching strategies – material that they do not like, do not immediately recognise the relevance of, or that they find linguistically or culturally opaque, unyielding and inaccessible. Bintz argues that, for this reason, so-called reading failure should in fact be considered as a ‘temporary learning problem’ (Bintz, 1993, p. 610) capable of being surmounted with skilled intervention.

Disjunctions between classroom/school reading and beyond school reading

Instead of outright resistance to classroom-based and assigned reading, research suggests that many adolescents who have internalised an image of themselves as ‘non-readers’ demonstrate resistance through the use of well-honed ‘survival strategies’ (Bintz, 1993, p. 611).

Quite sophisticated avoidance mechanisms are adopted by some students in order to accommodate the need for completing assessment tasks and to cope with texts imposed upon them that are simply too difficult to navigate. These mechanisms include selectively reading parts of the assigned text, avoiding reading the entire text, and reading selected material only in order to respond to assessment tasks, rather than for meaning and understanding.

Interestingly, one study found that many students who viewed themselves as competent readers but whose teachers did not share this view, reported an expectation that school texts would be ‘boring’ – which is often code for ‘uninviting’ or ‘too difficult’. These students ‘rarely re-read school texts’ yet many of these same students reported reading ‘extensively’ at home deploying a range of literacy skills such as note taking, predicting, scanning and skimming (Bintz, 1993, p. 611). This phenomenon tends to confirm that many students adjust their reading practices and attitudes depending upon the context and purpose of the reading task at hand.

On this point, it is worth recalling Rosenblatt’s axiom that readers use reading for their own purposes: the reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl. If the subsequent words do not fit into the framework, it may have to be revised, thus opening up new and further possibilities for the text that follows. This implies a constant series of selections from multiple possibilities offered by the text and their synthesis into an organised meaning. (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268)

If ‘the joys of reading depend on both the reading experience and the life experience of the reader’ (Bechervaise & Sneddon, 1995, p. 4), then the principle of purpose and its impact on motivation is the fuel that drives the reader forward. Without purpose, motivation, and a sense of ownership and control of the process – manifested through a reader’s genuine engagement with a text – reading becomes a task devoid of any personally relevant meaning.

It is often the struggling reader who requires added
pedagogical support in the ‘engagement’ phase of the reading process. Without such support, these readers are at risk of becoming incrementally disempowered by many of the literacy practices, assumptions, and processes enacted within institutionalised classrooms.

**Teacher perceptions of reading in subject areas**

Secondary teachers must help the low achieving or low performing student break the cycle of failure. Low performing students need the opportunity to revalue themselves. They need experiences with texts that are relevant. They need to acquire strategies that will result in comprehension. Building confidence is essential to improving performance of secondary readers. Assisting and motivating low performing students is a requisite to improved performance. (Decker, 1996, p. 3)

Apart from English teachers, secondary school subject specialists have not traditionally considered the teaching of reading to be part of their role in the secondary school. The teaching of reading has been confined to the primary school domain, and teachers can assume that by the time students arrive in Year 7 they are ‘inoculated’ against reading failure.

As teachers, we do not always adequately account for the fact that learning to read is an ongoing cognitive need for all students. Reading is not a ‘once-and-for-all’ skill that having been acquired can be considered complete for life. Fortunately, in recent years, thanks to high profile effective campaigns and professional development by education departments, there has been a growing awareness and understanding among secondary school teachers for the need to be unambiguous about the literacy demands of their subject and to address the literacy needs of students in their classes in an integrated and explicit way.

Repeatedly the literature confirms that success in reading is intimately bound up with the web of teacher attitudes, expectations, reader choice, pedagogy and, crucially, the relationship between the teacher and the learner.

**Teacher perceptions and expectations, and the relationship between the learner and the teacher**

Teacher expectations play a profound role in student success. This role cannot be underestimated in the context of reading performance and outcomes for the struggling reader. Research tells us that a student’s underachievement in certain reading tasks is not an accurate measure of that student’s overall reading competence or literacy skills: so deficit labelling arising from the low expectations of one or more teachers can have a deleterious impact on the self-image and motivation of the reader across the curriculum. (Ma’ayan, 2010; Thomson, 1987)

When students repeatedly ‘fail’ within one or more subject or learning area, they begin to believe they are incapable of success so they lose confidence and motivation (Moje, 2008). They may even begin to display a kind of helplessness in the face of tasks that they don’t fully understand.

Teachers need, therefore, to believe that all students can acquire the skills and knowledge to enable them to be successful readers and to share with students the belief that literacy skills are not impossible to acquire: there is no secret knowledge that the struggling reader must discover in order to read well and to derive benefits from their efforts. Indeed, the knowledge, skills, understanding, and attitudes of a successful reader – what they know and can do – are not mysterious ‘prizes’ to be ‘won’ by an elected, privileged few.

When teachers trust in students’ ability to work for personal literacy excellence, communicate to students a belief that reading competence is achievable, and model effective reading practices themselves, then such students, according to the literature, can reach their goals (Atwell, 2007).

The research is clear on this point: given the appropriate conditions and reading materials, high teacher expectations, and a genuine relationship between the teacher and the student, students experiencing difficulties with reading are capable of achieving reading success (Alvermann, 2001; Atwell, 2007; Brozo, 2010; Ma’ayan, 2010; Williams, 2001). Teachers can work to demystify the reading process. Professional craft knowledge about the reading process and teachers’ willingness to implement literacy strategies within their curriculum area, their expectations of individual students, and the relationship between the teacher and the learner, have a decisive impact on reading outcomes for the adolescent experiencing difficulties.

**Factors associated with the learner and/or the learner’s background**

There is a lurking assumption that an adolescent struggling with reading, resistant to reading, or simply refusing to read is somehow responsible for his or her own reading failure. It is a genetic problem, a behavioural problem, a ‘learning disability’ or deficit within the student (Westwood, 2001).

The research literature stresses that this may indeed
be the case for a small minority of students. The overwhelming majority of students struggling with reading, however, do so because of factors other than their own inherent inability to attain the necessary skills to thrive.

A number of studies shed light on the importance of considering the history of the adolescent’s literacy experience by getting to know a student’s background. Researchers have identified a number of factors that can be common in the history of under-performing readers and these include:

- Few positive early childhood reading experiences with the result that children do not associate reading with aesthetic pleasure and personal value (Beers, 1998); ‘Frequently, students who are not successful in the classroom have not had experiences with language in meaningful, social situations’ (Decker, 1996, p. 2).
- Reading is perceived predominantly as something that occurs in formal learning contexts, leading students to consider reading as ‘something done solely for learning purposes’ (Williams, 2001, p. 588), rather than in addition, for lifelong personal pleasure, edification, insight, satisfaction and aesthetic reward.
- Poor self-image as readers, compounded by negative school experiences.
- Students who have not acquired or been taught how to read strategically and for a range of purposes in the range of learning areas.
- Literacy skills that students do possess are not valued, utilised and connected to the formal literacies privileged in the school, or worse, are devalued and marginalised by the formal and operational academic curriculum.

In sum, the research indicates that it is not uncommon to find that limited experience with reading is often mistaken for limited ability in reading (Ivey, 1999, p. 373). Teachers and school communities must work towards dismantling the hidden curriculum that labels and disenfranchises the adolescent who is experiencing difficulties with reading.

Conclusion
We know that reading is co-extensive with the multiple literacies that shape an individual’s and a community’s life. The key points raised here are intended to contribute to our understanding of the often complex and nuanced experience of teenagers when it comes to reading – within and beyond the structures of schooling. When considering our role as educators, Wilhelm urges us to be ever mindful of ‘meaningful literacy’ practices that promote relatedness to the self, to others, to the worlds we inhabit, and to far greater ends than mere test scores and text-bound busy-work:

(meaningful literacy always serves a higher purpose, is situated and holistic, and moves beyond specific tasks and functions. Personally meaningful literacy is about not just doing things in the world, but is also about being in the world. (Wilhelm, 2006, p. 58)

Understanding the factors that can influence our students’ achievement in reading is, of course, only part of the enterprise of teaching and learning for meaningful literacy. Equally imperative is our capacity to enact the kinds of pedagogies that can transform for the better teenagers’ experience of reading within and beyond the parameters of schooling.

Note
1 NAPLAN – national tests for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. MySchool website provides data on individual school performance in NAPLAN, along with data on school funding. See www.naplan.edu.au and www.myschool.edu.au

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