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# Exploring the role of parents in supporting recreational book reading beyond primary school

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## **Exploring the role of parents in supporting recreational book reading beyond primary school**

### **Abstract**

Levels of aliteracy have been found to rise in adolescence, and this paper explores the potential influence that parents may have on this trend. The views of adolescent students who took part in semi-structured interviews for the West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading (WASABR) provide insight into how parental support may change in the adolescent years. Student perspectives support earlier findings that there is an expiration of parental encouragement in many cases, though this sometimes occurs as children are avid readers and thus the support is no longer deemed necessary. The experiences of students with parents who provided continued encouragement into adolescence are examined, with consistent characteristics emerging from the qualitative data. The paper identifies optimal mechanisms through which parents can play an important role in supporting their children's recreational book reading into adolescence.

### **Introduction**

Personal enjoyment of reading is central to arresting aliteracy, the condition in which capable readers choose not to read. The trend toward aliteracy in adolescents is growing both locally and globally (Maynard, Mackay & Smyth 2008; Nippold, Duthie & Larsen 2005; Nieuwenhuizen 2001; Stedman 2009; OECD 2010). This has led to discussion of an "eighth grade cliff" (Grosso de

Leon 2002), which describes the state of literacy as students transition into middle and high schools, where they are found to comparatively display a “significant lack of interest in reading” (Greenburg, Gilbert & Fredrick 2006). Aliteracy is of concern, as recreational book reading is positively associated with higher levels of achievement across a variety of literacy indicators (OECD 2010; Samuels & Wu 2001, Anderson, Wilson & Fielding 1988; Clark & De Zoysa 2011).

Few studies focus on the importance of reading for pleasure (Clark & Rumbold 2006). Modern emphasis on testing, and debates concerned with literacy that centre around phonics and whole word approaches, potentially obscure the role of enjoyment in the reading experience. Wilhelm and Smith contend that most discussion of reading centres on its “utilitarian value”, which subsequently obscures the reality that “pleasure is not incidental to reading—it’s essential” (2013). The essential role of pleasure in instigating and supporting continuation of regular recreational book reading has been neglected. In addition to focus on skill, the *will* to read, which is the desire to perform recreational book reading, and anticipated pleasure from engaging in it, is a legitimate consideration. Learning is optimized by enjoyment; research suggests that in adolescents, enjoyment can be viewed as “a precursor, a parallel experience, a result of learning or all three” (Lumby 2011: 252). When pleasure is fostered and reading is increased, utilitarian benefit is experienced; research suggests that reading for enjoyment can have a

transformative effect on cognition, with recent analysis from the British Cohort Study suggesting that reading for pleasure outside school has a substantial influence on cognitive development in adolescence (Sullivan & Brown 2013). OECD findings also suggest that “in most countries, students who read fiction for enjoyment are much more likely to be good readers” (2011: 100).

Reading has social purpose and creates a context for shared enjoyment, communication and social connection (Baker & Wigfield 1999: 3). As influential social agents, parents may exert considerable positive influence on their children’s reading practices. Petscher’s meta-analysis of studies examining student attitudes and achievement in reading found parental attitudes and influences to be closely related to children’s attitudes and reading behaviours, asserting that “the parent influence on child attitudes and reading behaviour cannot be overlooked” (2010: 349). Clarke, Osbourne and Akerman found that adolescents whose parents transmitted confidence in their children’s’ reading ability, and encouraged them, were significantly more likely to have children who defined themselves as readers (2008). Parents of primary school aged students who were deemed encouraging were more likely to make links between reading materials and life events, and converse with their children about reading (Neuman 1986).

While there is a wealth of information available to inform parents about positive literacy practices for babies and young children (Nichols, Nixon &

Rowse 2009), the same volume of information is not available for parents of adolescents, despite that fact that “the literary development of adolescents is just as important and requires just as much attention as that of beginning readers” (Partin & Gillespie 2002: 61). In an Australian study, Nieuwenhuizen notes that one of the factors contributing to a decline in attitudes toward reading in adolescence is parental behaviour:

...when the children move to secondary school, very few parents continue to read to them, and many no longer actively encourage reading because they feel that the skill is acquired, and they can see the child reading school texts, which is considered to be sufficient (2001: 6).

Research suggests that adolescents who maintain a positive attitude toward reading into the secondary years tend to come from an environment where family supports them, forming “communities of readers” (Bintz 1993). Broad reading and discussion characterize these communities, essentially “to share information, facilitate communication within the community, and to legitimate and perpetuate the value of participating in a reading family” (1993: 608). However, there is limited research, and subsequently limited information disseminated in the community, about the important role that parents can play in supporting recreational reading into the adolescent years.

Parents typically assume dramatically reduced responsibility toward their adolescent children's literacy practices once the critical period of learning to read has been overcome. In their UK study comparing parental interaction between primary and secondary aged children, Clark and Foster found that parents were more likely to read with primary pupils than secondary pupils (Clark & Foster 2005). It was also found that the parents of primary pupils were more likely to encourage their children to read, and talk with their children about reading, and that primary aged children reported that their parents spent more time reading than reported by secondary pupils (2005). A US study of parents' participation in their early adolescent children's literacy practices found that "it is not that they don't want to be involved, but somehow they feel they are not supposed to be" (Morris & Kaplan 1994: 130). Children have been found to echo these attitudes of ambivalence and expiration of effort; a UK study found that many boys "suggested that now they could read they no longer needed to do so" (Millard 1997: 38). These findings suggest that in many cases, by adolescence, the skill to read has been fostered, but not will, and that there may be an implicit expiration date on parental encouragement.

As affirmed by international OECD studies in reading performance into adolescence, "students are never too old to benefit from their parents' interest in them" (OECD 2011: 4). This paper will explore data from the recent *West Australian Study in Adolescent Book Reading (WASABR)*, exploring how

parental support of recreational book reading into adolescence, or lack thereof, is perceived by West Australian adolescents. Subsequently, optimal mechanisms through which parents can play an important role in supporting their children's recreational reading into adolescence are identified.

### **The WASABR**

The WASABR was a mixed method study conducted in Term 4 of 2012. It was undertaken at 20 schools throughout West Australia. The focus of the study was to examine adolescent students' attitudes toward recreational book reading, and the impact of social influences on these attitudes.

#### *Research instruments*

A survey and a semi-structured interview schedule were the research instruments employed.

The surveys contained 41 question surveys to collect primarily quantitative data on demographic, behavioural and attitudinal dimensions. Consenting students completed surveys on site during class time.

While the semi-structured interviews were supported by a schedule, frequent departures occurred to allow the students' viewpoints to be foregrounded (Schutt 2012).

### *Participants*

School selection ensured an optimally representative sample of West Australia's diverse population. The final data set of 20 schools included single-sex and co-educational schools, government and non-government schools, and schools in varying socio-economic environments. In most cases, one class of Year 8s and one class of Year 10s participated from each school. Students were aged between 13 and 16 at the time of the study.

Participants were required to provide both parental and individual consent in order to participate. N=520 students completed surveys and n=34 students were interviewed.

### *Method*

The study was piloted at a metropolitan school in Term 3 of 2012, and ethics-approved adjustments were subsequently made to the research instruments.

Schools were approached via email to participate in the study. School Principals who sanctioned their school's participation signed Site Manager Consent forms. Parent and student information letters and consent forms were distributed and then collected by the primary researcher.

After participating students completed the survey in class, one student was randomly selected from each class for the interview, with selection controlled



for even gender distribution where possible. The primary researcher conducted, recorded, and later transcribed all of the interviews.

### *Analysis*

The data that is the basis of this paper was gathered from the semi-structured interviews. The data was primarily derived from the answers and discussion from two questions from the semi-structured interview, which focus on perceived parental valuing of the practice of recreational book reading, and comparison of parental encouragement received in primary and high school. Students also provided additional relevant information as part of discussion of other, indirectly related questions, and where this occurred the data has been included. The WASABR study was not designed to solely investigate parental support of adolescent book reading, and thus the data exploring parental influence is a component of the broader study.

I read through the interview transcripts numerous times, identifying recurring codes and using constant comparative analysis (Boeije 2002; Kolb 2012). I used TAMS Analyser to record these codes and create a coding frame. I was careful to adopt an objective perspective to avoid my preconceptions guiding the coding process, deriving the codes from the data, rather than imposing existing theory onto it (Walker & Myrick 2006). Students were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## **Expired expectations**

As part of the interview schedule, I asked most participating students to compare the levels of parental encouragement they received at primary school to current levels of encouragement at high school.

For many students, once the skill to read was acquired, parental encouragement also dwindled. Max explained that his parents encouraged him “less,” as, “I had to learn how to read then, and now I know how to read, so, yeah, don't need to keep learning that”. For this student, encouragement to read was purely concerned with skill acquisition. Max still read occasionally, when his mother selected a book for him. He refused to choose books for himself.

Cal similarly viewed his parents as formerly encouraging, but “not exactly anymore. They're starting to say, you know, "Do what you want”. Cal felt that they were of the opinion that once he had the skill to read, it was no longer necessary:

They do think reading's important, but they're not exactly worried about it as much anymore. Because, they know that I know a lot of stuff now, and I did it for such a long time. But they definitely think it's important at a younger age.

While Cal had been a keen reader at primary school, he characterized himself at the time of the interview as a reluctant reader. Cal had no intention to increase his frequency of recreational reading at the time of the interview, preferring to spend the bulk of his leisure time engaged in interactive first-person shooter gaming. He had, however, noticed that his decreased time spent reading had impacted upon his literacy, in that, “it doesn't really make a difference to the making of sentences or anything, but it does take me a little bit longer to *spell* certain words”.

Tony, a migrant from the UK, recalled enjoying reading with his mother in primary school:

When I was in primary school in England, my mum knew that we'd always have a book, and so she'd read with me, in my room. She'd sit on my beanbag with me, and, yeah, she used to help me out. But yeah, I kind of just fell away from the reading, when it came optional. But when it was ... compulsory, I used to do it, so.

Tony exclusively read books during Silent Reading period at school, only reading when he had to. Though some of his time after school and on weekends was spent playing sport, and in casual employment at a fast-food restaurant, Tony enjoyed social networking, particularly texting, and he spent a lot of time involved in media multi-tasking; for example, watching a movie on

his laptop, while texting a friend. Despite his relative reluctance toward book reading, he enjoyed the time spent reading at school, and described slowly working through novels, such as *Harry Potter and the Philosophers' Stone*, by reading them in increments during class reading time. Neither of his parents read books for recreation. Tony had developed the skill to read, but not the will, so when reading became “optional” he had no desire to continue to engage in the practice.

### **Fostered will**

For some students, withdrawal of parental encouragement occurred after both skill *and* will were fostered in their children. Luke’s parents were satisfied that their son was engaged in reading books, so they no longer provided consistent encouragement. He stated that, “they know that I enjoy doing it myself, so they expect me to just do it, yeah”.

Lee was in a similar position; while he still received book recommendations from his father and grandfather, who shared similar tastes in reading materials, his parents did not need to encourage him to read. Instead they focused their efforts on his younger sister, with Lee explaining that, “they don't need to encourage me as much, they're more dedicating their time to encouraging my sister, 'cos my sister has a bit of a problem with reading. She doesn't find it as fun as I do”. Parental time, which is a finite resource, can be viewed as “input to children’s human capital development” (Baker & Milligan

2013); Lee's parents were allocating their input to where it could be of most value.

Sara, a keen reader, also found that her parents did not need to encourage her directly. Instead, her encouragement was derived from viewing her parents invest significant time and effort into encouraging her older brother to read:

S: I guess...my brother, he's not very into reading and so he's always tried to be encouraged to read, so I've- I guess I've sort of picked some of that up too. I've been encouraged to read through them telling *him* to read. Even though he doesn't read that much.

I: How often would you say he reads?

S: Not very often. We have to force him to read [laughs].

Sara viewed both of her parents as keen readers, and she had joined the team of her brother's reading supporters by identifying as part of the "we" that "force(s)" him to read". Sara couldn't remember ever not reading, and described coming from a richly supportive environment:

I've always had family members, like my grandmother's always been, she's very into reading books, so I guess I've always had grandparents, parents, they've always read, and I guess I've just picked that up. And, as well, it's just like, it's- I like reading books anyway, so, I can't remember where exactly, but when I was younger, I was always around reading people.

Sara's story suggests that while positive parental and indeed, familial encouragement and modelling is valuable and important, it is not always enough. It may be the case that her older brother encountered a similarly supportive environment, and yet he chooses to not read, as is imaginably the case with Lee's sister, who is also a reluctant reader. This reinforces the understanding that adolescents are a heterogeneous group, who will react differently to similar stimuli. Factors such as gender or sibling order may potentially impact on the nature of parental and family encouragement, as well as adolescents' reception of it, and these are areas for future consideration. In this small sample, both males and females are frequent and infrequent readers, with both older and younger siblings deemed reluctant, so conclusions about gender or sibling order are not substantiated in this limited group. Lack of direct access to Sara's brother and Lee's sister also limit further interrogation of this area.

It is also possible that if Sara was herself the direct recipient, rather than the indirect recipient, of her parents' style of encouragement, she may have reacted in the same manner as her brother. Being 'forced' to read may ultimately reinforce a negative attitude toward reading. It seems that due to different motivation levels, these two siblings were recipients of different parental approaches to encouragement.

### **Continued encouragement**

Many parents continued to encourage their children to read books into adolescence, with some parents even increasing their levels of encouragement at this time. Most of these children responded positively to this encouragement, and were keen readers. These observations are limited by the issue of causality; whether parents continued to encourage students because the students were keen readers, or if they were keen readers due to parental encouragement, cannot be discerned.

The following four studies illustrate types of child and parent supportive interactions that go beyond the skills acquisition phase in primary school. These encouraging relationships in secondary school are more accurately perceived as recreational reading apprenticeships, and they are characterized by similar interests in books between the parent and child, keen parental interest in reading, parental recommendations, and parent mediated access to books, with parents buying books or taking children regularly to the library.

Encouragement was positively received from the parent of a different gender to the child, as well as the parent of the same gender, suggesting that similar taste, rather than commonality of gender, was potentially a more powerful determinate of parental apprenticeship in this sample.

### *Daughter and father*

While Lana had brothers who were not keen recreational readers, when they moved out of home, she became interested in reading:

It's changed, probably, 'cos in primary school, I wasn't a big reader, and I had my brothers living with me, and they weren't readers either. So, it's like having, with my brothers living with me, we played a lot more, and there wasn't the time for reading. But now that they're all moved out, I have a lot more time to read, and I'm older, too. Find interest in other books, and stuff.

While both of her parents enjoyed reading for recreation, and both parents were encouraging, Lana's interest in books was closer to her father's, "because he enjoys more of the thriller and action things, and I like that stuff as well". In contrast, Lana's mother was interested in "more of the drama ones. I'm not interested in that". Lana's father not only provided regular encouragement, he also provided access to books, as well as guidance; in



that Lana's family "have lots of bookcases, and everywhere, so, he shows me what books are good".

While her mother still made recommendations, such as Stephanie Meyer's *The Host*, Lana treated these with relative trepidation, stating, "she told me that it's a really good book, but I don't know if I wanted to read it!" In this instance, personal taste and interests have a more powerful influence on the fostering of a recreational reading apprenticeship than commonality of gender.

#### *Son and mother*

Satish came from a single-parent family, and he described his mother as being instrumental in fostering his love for books from an early age:

Well, my mum really likes reading, she reads a lot of books, and I think I just picked it up from her, really- watching her read, perhaps. Just before going to bed, she'd be just sitting there and I'd crawl up next to her and pick a book myself and start reading, yeah.

Satish was able to search for good books every Saturday, as he was a keen tennis player: the library was adjacent to his Saturday tennis practice courts. He also borrowed his mother's books sometimes. He was quite an autonomous reader, with clearly defined preferences and well-developed strategies for choosing books. He did not see his father, and thus his father's

attitude toward reading is likely to have had minimal impact on him. In Satish's instance, the power of the passive influence of parental modelling of reading is apparent.

### *Son and father*

While both of Alistair's parents were actively involved in teaching him to read, his mother was never observed to read for recreation. While he enjoyed learning to read, he did not become a keen reader until Year 5:

When I was able to understand my dad's books, I started reading a lot more than I did before. My mum used to buy me younger books, but I didn't really ... I used to finish a lot of them quickly. And ... until I got into Dad's books which take forever to finish [laughs], yeah.

Alistair did not find the themes in children's books particularly engaging. He described reading more once his reading skills, particularly fluency, were established, enabling him to read the challenging, extended texts in his father's collection:

Around Year Five I started reading a lot of Dad's books, because all of his are ... are teenage to adult fiction, so, yeah, he didn't really give me *The Dragonlance* until about Year Seven, 'cos *Dragonlance* uses a lot of complex words and ... I would have to read a chapter, and then I

would go back and read the chapter again, because I didn't understand what happened in it. So, it's ... most of the books he has are really adult words and stuff like that, complex.

It is clear that Alistair worked very hard to develop his reading skills, motivated by his desire to read his father's books. Alistair's father was enthused by his son's increased skills and interest in books, and he responded by rewarding his son with increased access to books in his personal collection:

Once I started reading the books that he showed me, and I started reading, he realized I liked it, so, he started putting me on some of his, and, he's got stores and stores and *stores* of books. Like, they're in plastic containers he's just got sitting in the shed, full of books, four of them or something like that. And then he's got a bookshelf that goes to the roof in his study. And, I've got a bookshelf in my bedroom that's full.

Alistair became part of a supportive reading triad, composed of himself, his aunty, and his father, as "he likes the same books as me, and so does my aunty, so ... she normally gets the books from me or my dad, but my dad always puts me onto a good series that he reads". He described his discussions with his father about books:

Once we're reading a book or that, and once we've both finished it, we like talking about what happened it [laughs] and, yeah, if he's read it before me and I get up to a certain part, I'll say something and he'll laugh at that.

For Alistair, his relationship with books was closely linked to his father's tastes, guidance and provision of access. It was characterized by warmth and shared enjoyment. His mother was excluded from this apprenticeship, and as Alistair was an only child, there were no siblings to compete for paternal attention. Alistair did not have any friends at school that shared his interest in books, stating, "most of them don't read," so his relationship with his father appeared to be a key social support to his reading.

#### *Daughter and mother*

For Kiara, her enjoyment of reading came primarily from her mother. Kiara stated, "I've always liked English, I like that, and ... Mum. Probably Mum reads books so, you just, you know, wanna be like Mum". When asked where she normally accessed her books, Kiara replied, "Mum. Yep, I get it from home. I read lots of Danielle Steel, 'cos then Mum had them, and then I just read them, yeah". Her mother owned a large number of books, and most of the books that Kiara read were recommended to her by her mother, who had already read them.

Kiara's father was also a keen reader. Kiara stated that, "he reads different types of books", suggesting that her father's tastes generally differed from her own and her mothers, though he read and enjoyed the *Twilight* novels. Kiara was attempting to read one of her father's favourite books, *Clan of the Cave Bear*, and was enjoying it. Kiara only had one friend with similar taste in books, and she would recommend books for this friend.

Like Alistair, Kiara had to wait to be able to read her mother's favourite books, though for slightly different reasons, as she "really wanted to read Mum's Danielle Steel books from a younger age, but (it) wasn't really age appropriate at that stage".

### *Summary*

In all of the above cases, in addition to the 'primary' apprenticing parent, the other parent, where applicable, was supportive of reading, and in most cases, keenly engaged in the practice. Even though peer support was not a constant, all of these students were keen readers who could identify with the tastes and interests of at least one of their parents. Parents provided a model of an enthusiastic reader, and made informed recommendations to their children. Parents were also an important, and in some cases exclusive, source of books.

### **Student resistance to parental influence**

Not all forms of parental encouragement will have a positive effect on all adolescent readers, as the cases of Sara and her brother, and Lee and his sister, clearly illustrate. While most of the children who received ongoing parental encouragement into their adolescent years were keen readers who responded positively to this encouragement, research suggests that students may resist or appreciate different strategies adopted by their parents to encourage increased engagement (Love and Hamston 2003).

One student with highly encouraging parents, attending a high performing independent public school, described being a reluctant book reader, who still read books regularly to meet his parents' expectations. Like Sara's perception of her brother's reading, Rob saw his reading as "forced". The main purpose of reading, for Rob, was to improve his academic outcomes:

Yes, they're both readers who- they read a lot. Then they tell me to read some books, and then- they, they've got me reading one now because they- because my English isn't as good, like my spelling and that, they got me reading books in order to improve.

As his parents both preferred to read "factual" books, they provided non-fiction works for their son. When I asked if he was enjoying reading his current non-fiction book, Rob was relatively non-committal:

I guess I am. It's kind of a forced reading though 'cos I- I don't really enjoy it as much as I probably like did Harry Potter, or something, but it's good for reading, it's a good book I've kind of found, so. I'm kind of enjoying it, but I'd rather be doing like sport or something in my spare time than reading it. My parents still have a hard time trying to make me read it [laughs].

Rob preferred engaging fiction to non-fiction texts, but he read the parent selected materials provided for him. Rob's situation was indicative of a trend Van Duinen identified in the disparity in the desired outcome of literacy practices of American teen males and their parents. While boys were more concerned with the immediate enjoyment or otherwise through engaging in the reading experience, parents were more concerned with the cultural capital and academic advantages to be gained from reading (2011).

Rob would only read under one of two conditions. Either his parents would say, "read it or you can't do something", or Rob would seek a book as a calmative, "like, when I'm tired, and when I'm not tired at all, sometimes, I'm just like, "Oh, reading makes me sleepy", so then I just read a bit, so. That kind of also works". This led to him reading around twice a week during his recreation time. Before his parents began to demand that he read, he claimed to have only read, "once every month or two".

That Rob was reading more is undeniably of significant benefit for his literacy outcomes in short-term. What is questionable, however, is if this parental approach will foster a life-long commitment to reading.

## **Conclusions**

The findings suggest that parents who maintain encouragement beyond their child's acquisition of independent reading skills can influence their children to become life-long readers. Love and Hamston found that keen readers tended to experience "a strong sense of the mutuality of reading and reading practices that provide a context for shared spaces, physical contact, emotional connection, intimacy, and appreciation of the worlds of others (2003: 51), and parents of keen readers in this study often did much to facilitate this experience for their children.

This study outlines key findings that can be used to inform interventions to increase parental engagement in fostering a positive attitude toward recreational book reading in their children. Firstly, the notion of expired expectations is found to have some currency in this context. Students described their parents withdrawing encouragement to read based on perceived skill acquisition, perhaps as a response to a desire to increase the independence and autonomy of their adolescent child. Withdrawal of parental encouragement after skill is achieved, but before will is fostered, may subsequently lead to aliteracy.



Secondly, withdrawal of encouragement was sometimes a reaction to a successful fostering of will to read; when students were already demonstrating a keen interest in reading for pleasure, continued support for, and insistence on the practice was not required. In some of these cases, resources were redirected to less-responsive siblings, which continued to maintain the impression that recreational reading was highly important to the parents, even though the student was not directly targeted. This no doubt impacted on students' conception of the value of the practice.

Thirdly, four cases of continued encouragement into adolescence were explored. In these cases, personality and individual taste appeared more important than gender in determining who was deemed the key apprenticing parent. Parents who continued to encourage their children's recreational book reading into adolescence were encouraging and responsive to their children's individual taste and preferences. They were active in modelling keen reading, providing informed recommendations for their children, and facilitating access to books.

Finally, while recreational reading is linked to improved performance on literacy indicators, parents who make academic improvement the basis of encouraging reading may be compromising their ability to encourage the enjoyment of this leisure activity. As the choice to engage in recreational book

reading is more likely to occur if pleasure is anticipated, avoiding a solely academic focus, and accommodating differing interests, may increase student engagement. Also, while parent mediated provision of access is valuable, students should ideally retain a role in selecting their reading materials.

There is limited information available to parents of adolescents wishing to support their children's reading into adolescence. Considering the value of this practice for literacy outcomes, making parents aware of the important role they can play is of considerable social importance. Small changes may have substantial positive results. Parents' "genuine interest and active engagement" (Kirsch et al., 2009: 10) can do much to support their children's reading, and these findings provide insight into how this encouragement might be best structured in order to be successful.

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