

Young Australians Reading: from keen to reluctant readers



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In the April 2001 issue of *inCite* (p12) I mapped out the work of the Australian Centre for Youth Literature (ACYL) and how we set about undertaking some research into young people's reading.

Why it happened

A culture and society that preaches the importance of literacy but pays scant attention to reading is not practising what it preaches.

As part of its role as a leader in the field and in order to understand the place of reading in the lives of young people, the ACYL commissioned research into the reading habits, experiences and preferences of Australian 10–18 year olds. We wanted answers to many questions and to test and perhaps challenge some attitudes, perceptions and practices.

The Young Australians Reading research report indicates how the Australian Centre for Youth Literature intends to respond to the findings and also sets out specific recommendations for the various stakeholders. Recommendations that apply to library policy makers and librarians can be found at the end of this piece.

Some of the questions

Do keen readers in primary school become increasingly reluctant readers as they progress through secondary school? Do current education policies and practices support the development and maintenance of a reading culture and environment? How important are family attitudes and practices, peers and role models? Are the mainstream media correct when they assume that most teenagers do not want to read? Does the emphasis on new technologies, sports and entertainment stars contribute to perceptions, especially amongst young males, that it is 'uncool' to be a reader? What is the role of the local library? Do young people find their local library attractive and welcoming?

These are some of the questions addressed in the groundbreaking national research project carried out in 2000 by the ACYL and the Australia Council's Audience and Market Development Division. Other partners in the project were the Australian School Library Association, the Australian Publishers Association, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English and Victoria University. The broad community value of this research was further recognised in the generous contribution from the Percy Baxter Charitable Trust.

Sydney-based Woolcott Research Pty Ltd carried out the research that included significant quantitative and qualitative compo-

nents. Young Australians Reading was published in April 2001.

The research findings are overwhelmingly and, perhaps to some, surprisingly positive. They show clearly that the majority of young people want to read, want more time to read and understand the value of reading. Those surveyed claim that they read for pleasure no less frequently than they play computer games or use the internet.

Some key findings

Of the 10–18 year olds surveyed:

- thirty-one per cent are 'avid, confident readers' — keen, interested, only need to be encouraged to maintain current enthusiasm and reading patterns;
- twenty-four per cent are 'book positive rebels' — they want to read but do not want to be told what to read all the time and generally do not like the books they are made to read at school;
- twenty-four per cent are 'book neutral light readers' — less enthusiastic or aware of benefits, but still more positive than negative;
- twenty-one per cent are 'reading irrelevant' — often see themselves as slower readers and reading does not form part of their social interaction;
- seventy-four per cent claim to like reading to some extent;
- eighty-four per cent of adults, in a related survey, considered it 'really important' for young people to read for pleasure;
- seventy-six per cent of primary and forty-six per cent of secondary students read 'every few days';
- sixty-four per cent would like to read more (seventy-three per cent primary, sixty-one per cent secondary);
- fifty-six per cent of primary and seventy-eight per cent of secondary students considered required school reading as 'boring';
- there is an eighty per cent correlation between significant numbers of books in the home and frequency of reading;
- in secondary schools sixty-eight per cent said they did not have enough time to read.

What about public libraries?

Fewer than twenty per cent of the target group consider their school or public libraries inviting or able to meet their recreational needs and the local librarian is considered as a 'main source of advice on good books to read' by only nine per cent of 10 to 14 year olds, and seven per cent of 15 to 18 year olds.

The findings indicate conclusively that there is a huge amount of work to do but also that there is much fertile ground on which to work. Public Library policy makers, managers and librarians could respond by:

- focusing on the more than sixty per cent who are keen readers or ready to be encouraged, informed and enthused;
- making it a national, state and local priority that all public libraries have designated, knowledgeable young adult librarians;
- ensuring that time and resources are put into promoting books and presenting book related programs, author visits and displays;
- ensuring that library collections are relevant to the local community and its needs, are up-to-date, well displayed, sign posted and accessible;
- encouraging peer reviews and recommendations that are attractively and prominently displayed;
- working closely with local schools, book-sellers and organisations such as the CBC and ACYL; and

- ensuring adequate resources for professional development, attendance at conferences and festivals.

The ACYL will respond to the report by developing its -ongoing program of events for young people, families and professionals. Resources permitting, a number of initiatives and projects are being planned. We look to other stakeholders for inspiration and support.

We can be contacted at 03 9669 9796 or acyl@slv.vic.gov.au.

The full Young Australians Reading report is available online at <http://www.ozco.gov.au/resources/research/yar/>.

Or it can be purchased in hard copy from the ACYL at the State Library of Victoria \$15 per copy (inc GST and postage). Order form available on <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/acyl/>. ■

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A national research report on the reading experience of 10-18 year olds
April 2001

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