

BUILDING A READER FOR LIFE: A SUSTAINED SILENT READING PROGRAM FOR K-11 – JUST READ

By Gabrielle Mace and Merrilyn Lean



GABRIELLE MACE

Currently the Head of Library and Information Services at Queenwood School since 2015. Prior to this appointment she worked as the Head Librarian at Pittwater House for several years. As the Head of the Queenwood Literacy Committee (QLiteracy) she is leading a team that are focused on a number of key literacy initiatives and developing strategies to enhance students reading and literacy engagement across K – 11. Leading the current AIS research project to implement a K - 11 daily reading program is the committees' key focus.

Gabrielle presented **Building a reader for life: a sustained silent reading (SSR) program for K – 11** at the ASLA Literacy Research Summit in November.



MERRILYN LEAN

Currently a member of the Teaching Development Team and Queenwood Literacy Committee (QLiteracy), Group Leader of Teacher Learning Committee, and Teacher of HSC (Science) and IB (Science, TOK). She has many years of experience in other roles at Queenwood, including the Executive and Head of Science. As Assistant Coordinator of QLiteracy she is presently involved in the development and implementation of a research project to evaluate our K to 11 reading programme.



Queenwood

Queenwood is an independent, non-denominational girls' school located in Mosman, Sydney, that offers a contemporary liberal education from Kindergarten to Year 12. Queenwood is an academically non-selective school where approximately 14% of students receive additional learning support to address literacy needs.

DEVELOPING READERS FOR LIFE AT QUEENWOOD: A DATA-DRIVEN JOURNEY

The QLiteracy committee was established at Queenwood in 2017 and consists of 7 specialist and non-specialist teachers across Junior and Senior School who contribute a range of expertise and experiences. We all share a deep passion for literacy. Our key objectives in the formation of the committee were:

- **Develop and articulate a school wide vision for ensuring all students acquire the literacy skills necessary for academic and future success.**

- **Develop and refine a consistent set of literacy strategies and practices used across Senior School and Junior School.**
- **Provide staff with relevant and practical professional development and support to execute these strategies confidently, to the point that they become embedded and sustainable.**
- **Refine the processes used to track the progress of students and the sharing of that information for instructional purposes.**

As a school we were observing declining rates of leisure reading amongst our students, which follows a worrying worldwide trend (National Literacy Trust, 2020). With increasingly digitally dominant lives, it is evident that the number of children and teens choosing to read for enjoyment is dwindling. As Teachers and Teacher Librarians, we recognize the importance of reading for enjoyment and how this differs from functional reading.

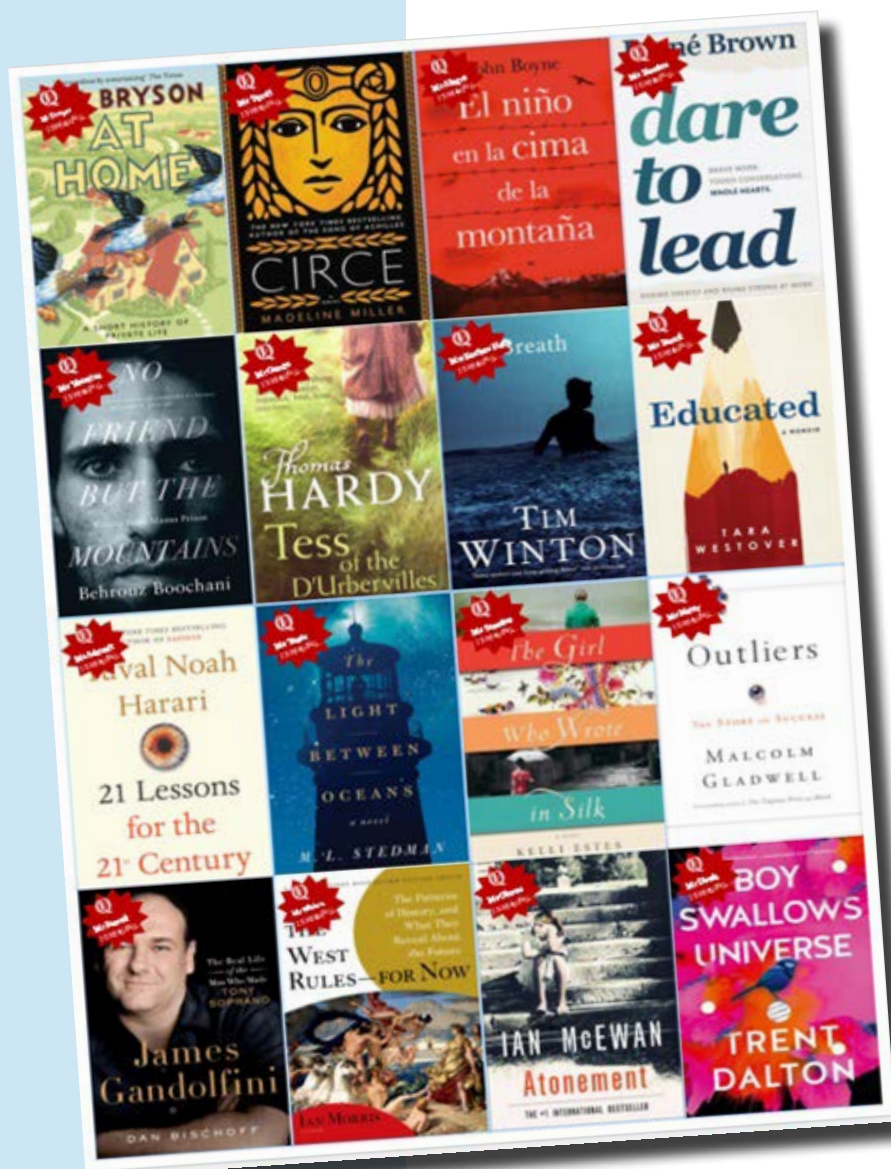
Reading impacts so many parts of students' lives, not only academic but also their emotional and social development. Such strong connections can be made in the areas of Bibliotherapy and reading for wellbeing and increasing student's resilience. This has been especially important during 2020 through a worldwide pandemic.

As Head of Libraries and the current Head of QLiteracy, Gabrielle has consistently drawn upon 9 key points when explaining to parents and students why it is so important that they keep reading, once they have learnt how to read. Reading for pleasure:

- **improves core literacy skills (vocabulary, listening comprehension)**
- **increases general knowledge, exposure to new ideas**
- **increases resilience and critical thinking skills**
- **builds empathy through connections to characters and stories**

- improves concentration through perseverance with challenging material
- increases opportunities to access language
- increases independence – through reading and constructing meaning for themselves
- improves analysis and evaluation – through encountering new ideas and language, and
- improves creative writing through exposure to various forms of literature, writing styles and genres.

When Gabrielle came to Queenwood as Head of Libraries in 2015 the library was an underutilized area of the school. Borrowing rates were not high and, although over the following years the Library team rebuilt the collection with high interest materials and worked hard to raise the library's profile, there was not a transference of increased student borrowing or patronage. As this needed to be addressed with a whole school focus, in 2018, the QLiteracy Committee conducted a Student Survey on leisure reading in Stage 4 and Stage 5 – targeting Year 7 and Year 9 students. The committee felt that it was particularly important to capture Year 7 as up until entry into high school, these students would have had access to weekly library lessons and engaged in a DEAR like program in primary school.



Data collection gave us a starting point of how our students regarded reading for enjoyment and how regularly this was undertaken. The data reinforced our concerns.

- **28% of students were reading for enjoyment less than once a week, or never.**
- **Of even greater concern, 10% of the students surveyed were not currently reading anything at all. Most of these girls were from the Year 9 cohort, which suggests reading for enjoyment declines as students get older.**
- **During their one period of wide reading a fortnight for English, most students cited they read their English text, indicating a lack of autonomous engagement or initiative with delving into a broader body of literature.**

Based on these figures the committee implemented a one term trial of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) one day a week in Term 4, 2018, where students and teachers read a book of their own choice silently for 15 minutes. This single SSR was not regular enough for students to develop the habit of bringing a book. We attempted to solve this by delivering a selection of library books each week to classrooms. Despite the fact that not all teachers and students were engaged in the reading, we could see the possibilities of the program.

RESEARCHING OUR PRACTICE

The committee then initiated discussion and planning with the Senior Executive as large-scale timetable changes were needed to facilitate this change. We proposed that this trial be extended to a daily SSR program and **a literature review** was completed to support this request.

In preparing our literature review we regularly came back to the work of Dr Margaret Merga (2015, 2019). We researched how leisure

reading impacts literacy outcomes, reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling and reading fluency. We located research on how quality literary fiction builds empathy in children and teens and we became familiar with terms such as Aliteracy and Orphaned Responsibility and their impact. Finally, we delved into the research on text types so that we could confidently answer the question that was sometimes posed to us – but aren't they reading (on screen) more than ever?

Our literature review informed our planning of a SSR program. Books needed to be self-selected, with a minimum of 15 minutes reading time and that daily practice produced the greatest results. Additional parameters were that all books needed to be in English and in print form. No digital devices were part of the program and it was crucial for students to have time to discuss books with their peers. We entitled the peer-based discussion 'Book Talks' and these were scheduled to take place once a week, normally in Tutor time in Senior School or with the classroom teacher in Junior School. Most importantly students would not be required to produce any kind of written work on what they were reading.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

And so our research project was born with the aim to study the impact of SSR on both literacy levels and also student motivation to engage in reading for enjoyment. We wanted to develop a SSR model that supported student learning and engagement that could be embedded in other schools.

After much research, reading and analysing - our research question came quite easily and simply. **'Would engagement in daily timetabled SSR improve K – 12 students literacy skills, attitude and motivation to read for enjoyment?'**

The strength of our literature review and project proposal led us to apply for an AIS Research grant in July 2019 with Dr Margaret Merga as our specialist mentor. We were thrilled when we were successful in this application, but then the hard work really started.

At this point the Communications department at Queenwood suggested the transformation of the slightly clunkily named SSR into '**Just Read**'. Our project and program was effectively re-branded prior to its official launch to staff, students and parents in late 2019. 'Just Read' became a commonly used phrase very quickly within Queenwood.

We must acknowledge the importance of having an academic mentor on a project of this magnitude. Not only was Dr Merga's work seminal in the design and development of the project – it was absolutely critical. Experts add a knowledge and dimension to a school-based research project. If a project such as this is being considered in your school, we suggest that you follow our example and reach out to an expert. While the decision and ideas were ours, Dr Merga guided us through the ethics process, the data design and collection processes, which saved us much time and thought. She has always been available to discuss, problem-solve and trouble shoot throughout the project.

The QLiteracy committee created 5 key aims of the 'Just Read' program and we continue to come back to these aims in our communications with teachers, parents, students and the wider community. They are:

- the development of lifelong habitual readers
- increased student enjoyment of reading
- building empathy for others and an understanding of the world, and
- to test and develop a best practice high frequency model of SSR.

We have used these as our building blocks to create a successful school wide reading program.

The design of this project is a mixed methods approach with the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This is designed as a two year project with three phases (see image below). All data was

collected initially in late November 2019 prior to the commencement of 'Just Read' in January 2020, and this data collection was repeated at the end of 2020.

Data under analysis includes:

■ **Attitudinal & Motivation to Read**

Changes in student motivation to reading and changes in staff attitudes to reading and Book Talks are being measured using online surveys.

■ **PAT Progressive Achievement Tests**

ACER's PAT-Vocabulary and PAT-Reading Comprehension tests are being administered pre- and post-intervention to determine if 'Just Read', our student led Book Talks plus the many other programs that we have initiated in our school, have had a measurable effect on vocabulary development and reading comprehension.

■ **Borrowing statistics**

Overall borrowing rates from both Junior and Senior Libraries pre-and post-implementation were collected and analysed. Parents and teachers across K – 11 were surveyed early in Term 1, 2020 to address any concerns and gather feedback on the program.

'Just Read' is a silent time, this is highly unusual in a vibrant, busy K – 12 school such as Queenwood. In all areas of the school everyone, including our Administration staff, picks up a book and reads. Teacher modelling of good reading habits is critical to the success of this program, therefore all teaching staff are expected to read during this time. The Executive continue to visit classrooms and open learning spaces during these sessions to model this practice. 'Just Read' occurs at the same time each day in the Senior School with their subject teacher at that period and at staggered times during the day in the Junior School with the classroom teacher.

This translates to 80 minutes of silent reading each week and this dedicated time has led to a powerful realization amongst the Queenwood community that this equates to a Young Adult

(YA) novel being read in its entirety every 4 weeks or so. The QLiteracy committee acknowledge and celebrate the realization that prior to 'Just Read' some of our students had not finished a novel in years, apart from the set English text. Staff moving around the school regularly overhear increased informal student discussion around books, reading and literature.

As we settled into Term 1, 2020 and began our 'Just Read' program we were delighted with the early buy-in from students and the positivity radiating from our staff during 'Just Read'. In a sticky Sydney summer, the opportunity to down tools, pause formal teaching and learning, and pick up a book for 20 minutes was proving very popular.

And then Covid-19 hit. Queenwood, like so many schools entered into a 100% remote learning phase at the start of Week 9, Term 1, 2020. The QLiteracy committee along with our Communications team worked quickly prior to this to produce documents to ensure 'Just Read' stayed on the daily timetable. This

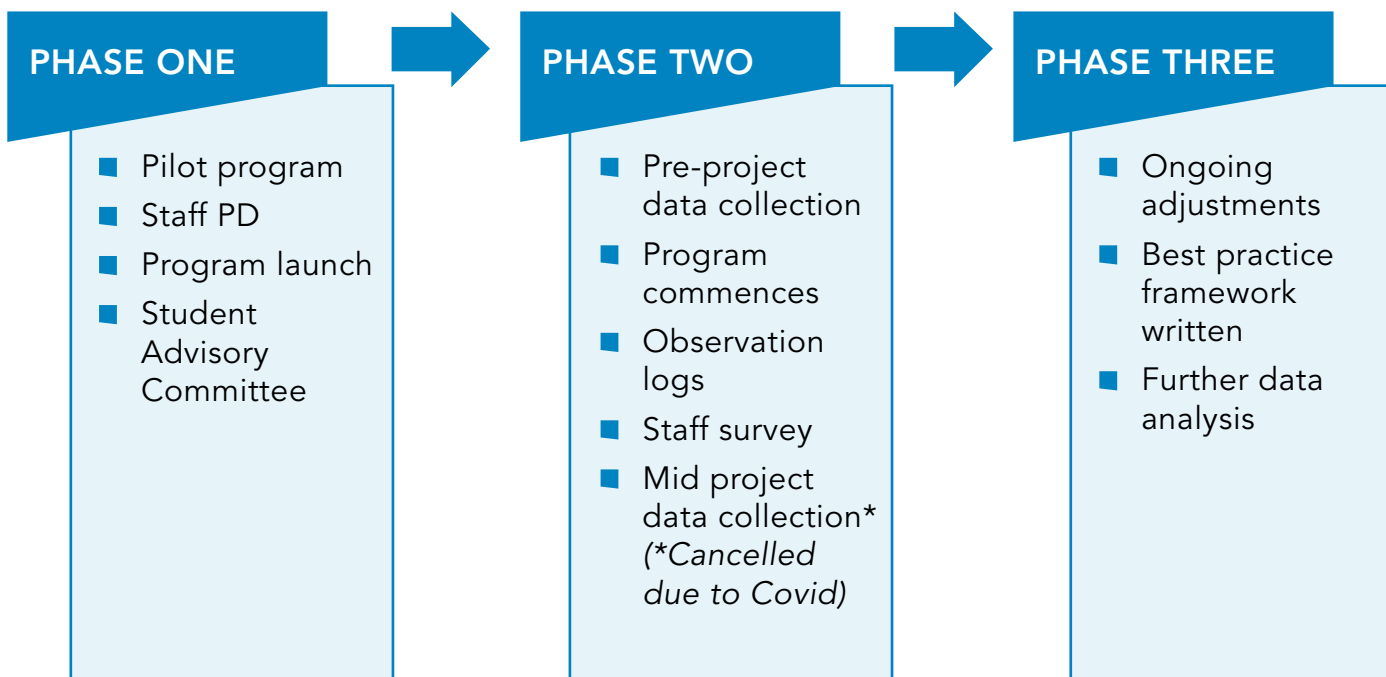
communicated to students (and their parents) our commitment to the 'Just Read' project was unwavering. As 'Just Read' remained on timetable we did as much as possible to continue to support student borrowing during this period. The Junior and Senior School libraries offered 'Click n Collect' and we lifted any kind of borrowing restrictions on the amount or length of loans. As school returned over a staggered period over weeks 2 to Week 4, Term 2, 2020 'Just Read' continued as originally planned. With the Covid disruption we made the decision to omit the data collection from the middle of the year.

The move to evidence-based practice informing Just read is summarized below:

FEEDBACK INFORMING PRACTICE

Based on staff and student feedback and our own observations we have altered aspects of the 'Just Read' program. This included the scope and design of Book Talks, working with the Head of the Junior School and JS Curriculum Coordinator to synchronize the 'Just





Read' timetable for 2021 to decrease the noise as other students moved around the school. At the start of Term 4, 2020 we incorporated 'Just Read' into the Year 12 timetable, which presented its own challenges.

We are looking to analyze our completed data collection in 2021 with the help of our academic mentor. We anticipate a longitudinal study forthcoming based on this data and future data collection. The QLiteracy Committee are also working on a number of knowledge translation opportunities to share our project and what we have learnt with others.

The 'Just Read' project has taken a number of a years and a number of very committed committee members, including strong support from our Senior Executive and the AIS, to get to this point but what we are seeing is real change amongst our students in our observations of their reading engagement. We have moved from an almost non-existent reading culture at Queenwood to one that is daily, embedded, vibrant and consistent at Queenwood. Our students, parents and teacher widely support and value this dedicated reading time and the whole program.

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