

DIVERSE STORIES: A PATHWAY TO DEVELOPING ADVENTUROUS

YEAR 8 READERS

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Abstract

In 2018, I invited 14 Year 8 boys to take part in a reading challenge in which they were expected to read books from genres and formats they were not familiar with or had never read. I was curious to see if engaging in a diverse range of stories could encourage boys to become adventurous readers. The boys made selections from a list of themes, genres, and formats, and I suggested a wide range of books during the research period. Throughout the reading challenge, the boys completed video and written journals, responded to surveys, and participated in interviews. These data were transcribed, coded, and categorised. The results suggest that offering choice and a wide variety of reading materials, along with frontloading opportunities to familiarise readers with themes, formats, and specific titles, help to develop adventurous readers.

Introduction

The 2018/2019 IBSC action research topic, *Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning*, provided an opportunity to further investigate my interest in the recreational reading habits of teenage boys. Recreational reading, for the purposes of this research project, is defined as the reading done outside of educational and vocational expectations and chosen by the reader.

I have spent much of the last 20 years working as both a teacher librarian and young people's librarian in a large public library. My passion is putting books into the hands of readers. Encouraging reluctant readers is a large part of my role, and I noticed many of our students at Toowoomba Grammar School rarely read outside their favourite genre, author, or series. I was keen to research if we might develop adventurous readers by engaging them with a diverse range of texts, in both theme and format.

My timetabled classes are with Years 7 and 8. I see each class once a fortnight for a Reading lesson. During these lessons, I give book talks to introduce boys to various themes, genres, formats, and individual titles. Each year in Semester two, I invite the Year 8 boys to take part in a reading challenge. Involvement is voluntary and the challenge is to read beyond their regular recreational reading. For example, they may read a fantasy novel if they have not previously read this genre, or a verse novel, or manga. While I have discussed their reading with them at

the end of the challenge, I had never tracked the boys' reading experiences and choices. I decided to formalise this project by conducting an action research project that focused on the following question: *How can engagement with a diverse range of stories develop adventurous Year 8 readers?* I planned to not only document the boys' reading but also expand the challenge to include direct discussion with the boys during their reading and to provide assistance with the selection of reading material. I hoped to look closely at my current practices so that I could make informed decisions for changes in future practice.

Action research, to summarise Mertler (2017), is research done by teachers for the purpose of looking closely at an area of their teaching and/or classroom in order to improve or change the area of study. Notes Mertler, "it focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action must be taken" (p. 4). This method of research, thus, was the most appropriate for my topic as it had direct relation to my teaching practices in both context and students, and the results would inform future practice.

Literature Review

The importance of recreational reading of books for teenagers is well documented, with Merga and Moon (2016) outlining several advantages, including success in reading, comprehension, vocabulary and word recognition. In addition to improved literacy outcomes, recreational reading of long form texts has been shown to increase self-confidence and cultural understandings (Rutherford, Merga, & Singleton, 2018). Improved cognition is another benefit; Manuel and Carter (2015) cite a recent study that highlights how reading for pleasure between the ages of 10 and 16 is more important for children's cognitive development today than when their parents were the same ages. Koss and Teale (2009), in their analysis of books written for teenagers from 1999-2005, make the point that "reading allows teens to play with their identities in a safe and controlled manner, and to explore who they want to be in this ever-changing world" (p. 569). Reading allows teens to see themselves and others in the books they are reading, portraying a different perspective to that presented in the mainstream media (Meminger, 2011). Merga and Moon (2016) also posit that reading books recreationally may alleviate some of the influences today's teens are presented with, such as media multi-tasking on concentration and thinking.

The recent trend in books written for teens, including a shift from bildungsroman (coming of age) stories to those dealing with fitting in, major life changes, and understanding oneself could be the result of changes occurring in society and the changing nature of literacy (Koss &

Teale, 2009). As Rutherford, Merga, and Singleton (2018) see adolescence as a “key period for the enculturation of social attitudes and practices” (p. 45), it is important to allow teens to become adventurous with their reading choices, thus exposing them to a diverse range of stories. The following research supports this theory.

With changes evident in literacy practices and the types of books written for young adults, along with the increased emphasis and use of social and multimedia in their lives, it is necessary for our teens to become diverse, critical readers of stories. They need to learn to critique, from information available, what is biased, and be discerning in the information they use (Koss & Teale, 2009). Reading a diverse range of stories enables teens to experience new forms of texts, preparing them to better understand these changing forms (Koss & Teale, 2009). An examination of The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, specifically the changes in reading literacy performance over a period of time, shows that Australian students declined in their reading literacy results from 2000 to 2009 (Broughton & Manuel, 2012). Broughton and Manuel suggest that the decline of higher-level cognitive skills, such as inferring, synthesising, speculating on and critically evaluating a range of unfamiliar texts, “may point to a decrease in students’ sustained engagement with and interpretation of whole texts” (p. 85). They state that:

What is clear from the PISA commentary is that students who reported spending more time reading for pleasure, who read a greater range of materials, and who expressed more positive attitudes towards reading, tend to be better readers regardless of their family background and the economic wealth of the country they live in. (p. 86)

It is clear, then, that our teens need to become adventurous in their reading and prepared to read a diverse range of texts and stories. However, simply exposing and providing a variety of books and literature is not enough. In order to choose reading material, non-adventurous readers need both the motivation to choose and the knowledge of what is available.

Choice is an important aspect of reading success. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) discuss the importance of boys choosing their own reading material, stating that when choice is offered, boys “may construe the classroom context and what is valued there in such a way that they do not feel they are really being offered a choice” (p. 34). Choice closely affects boys’ motivation to read; Csikszentmihalyi stating, “knowledge that is seen to be controlled from the outside is acquired with reluctance and it brings no joy” (as cited by Smith & Wilhelm, p. 33).

De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste, and Rosseel (2012) report that autonomous motivation (engaging in reading activities for enjoyment) is associated with more positive outcomes. Their study involving fifth grade students' recreational and academic reading motivation found the desire to read about interests aligned positively with the motivation to read for enjoyment, as "reading out of curiosity makes reading personally valuable" (p. 1016). Recognising interests and allowing choices directly correlate to Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study that found "the desire for choice and the ability to pursue one's interests as an exercise of freedom and possibility was pervasive" (p. 109). They discovered that boys wanted to read material that related to pre-existing interests, interests that "were developed before reading and then could be fed and nurtured through reading" (p. 108).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also report that boys like to form relationships with authors and characters, often re-reading series and books. Reading the familiar instead of reading diversely may enable boys to avoid tasks that might make them feel incompetent (Smith & Wilhelm). Smith and Wilhelm discuss the importance of "frontloading," where books are introduced to the boys so they are familiar with characters, settings and contexts before reading commences. Knowing the boys' interests and providing a range of diverse literature that incorporates these interests while also introducing new themes, genres and formats, should, therefore, engage young readers.

The literature confirms the importance of wide recreational reading. Encouraging our boys to become adventurous readers so they will read diversely will not only benefit them academically but will encourage empathy and the ability to experience others' lives, emotions and situations. While the ability to choose recreational reading material is paramount, so is the need to expose our teenage boys to a wide range of material from which to choose, thus promoting diverse stories. Diverse reading will also prepare them for the ever-changing world in which they live. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) reported the boys in their study were keen to do what was needed to secure their future, and if we want literacy to be part of our students' future, we "need to show them that literacy can be the "healthy work of the present" (p. 84).

Research Context

Toowoomba Grammar School is situated in the regional Queensland city of Toowoomba. Established in 1875, Toowoomba Grammar School is one of eight Grammar Schools of Queensland with an approximate population of 1,150 boys from Prep to Year 12, including about 300 boarders. There are approximately 950 boys in the senior school, with 139 Year 8 boys in 2018. With the school's vision being "quality education designed for boys," Toowoomba

Grammar School boys are encouraged to commit to their studies and co-curricular activities, with each boy encouraged to give their best effort to everything.

I conducted this research project with students in our Senior School. The participants were fourteen 13 to 14 year-old boys from my Year 8 Pastoral Care Group (PCG). Four of the boys were boarders from western Queensland properties and ten were day boys, living in or close to Toowoomba. The class met for one 50-minute lesson per fortnight and two ten-minute lessons each week. I also saw the boys during their fortnightly 1-hour Reading lesson while they were with their academic classes. The action occurred during Terms 3 and 4, a total of 18 teaching weeks. I chose this class because I saw these boys the most regularly and the heterogeneous nature of the group enabled me to work with a variety of types of readers. This age group was also appropriate as the action worked well within the content of the wider Year 8 Reading challenge lessons.

I sent a letter outlining the action research project to all parents, seeking both their consent and their son's. To maintain anonymity, each boy chose an alias to be used in the reporting of the research. I assured all participants that information gained would be used for educational research purposes only and that they could withdraw from the project at any time if they so wished.

The Action

The action took place over a period of two school terms, eighteen weeks in total. The first lesson involved showing the boys the Google Classroom set up for the purposes of the action and the reading challenge outline (Appendix 1) In the lessons immediately following and at regular intervals throughout the challenge, I introduced the boys to books from particular genres and formats. This included book talks to the entire group as well as recommendations with individual students.

For the project, the boys had to read a minimum of four books from a variety of themes, genres, and formats they had not read before, or were not familiar with. The boys read books from our school library, home collections, and my own personal copies. Many boys appeared overwhelmed with having to choose from the list of themes, especially those boys who were not established recreational readers. I added the extra theme *Free Choice* early in the action to allow for choice. I asked the boys to complete a journal after reading each book and gave them prompts to encourage them to think about the book they had read.

Data Collection

Data collection methods during the research project focused mainly on qualitative data and included surveys, interviews, and student journals.

I administered two surveys at the beginning of the project. The first was part of a larger survey given to all Year 8 boys, with the intention to gain an overall picture of their recreational reading habits in preparation for the semester's work in Reading classes. I then conducted a more specific survey with the research group to gain an insight into individual attitudes toward recreational reading and their reading identity; in other words, if they regarded themselves adventurous or conservative readers. A post-action survey measured and recorded any shifts in the boys' self-perceptions as readers. Questions on the surveys ranged from open-ended short answer responses to a Likert scale of one to five, asking the boys to rate themselves as a reader from poor to excellent.

I conducted regular interviews with each boy and recorded these sessions. The interviews allowed the boys to expand on their answers and to ask questions of the tasks required, as recommended by Mertler (2017). Both semi-structured and open-ended in nature, I designed the interview questions to gather information about each individual boy's reading and his progress through the challenge. The range of questions prompted a wide variety of responses from each individual boy. Due to the frequency and consistency of the interviews, I was able to develop a rapport and trust with the students.

I required the boys to keep a reading journal in which they discussed each book. At the completion of a book, they responded to a set list of questions intended to gauge any change in reading behaviour or attitude based on themes or genres. The boys had the choice to video record or type their journals. After watching and reading the journals, I sought clarification, if required, during interviews. I also collected quantitative data on their responses to measure a shift in boys' perceptions; for example, would they recommend the book to a friend (indicating if they enjoyed the book and theme) and if they would choose a book from the theme to read in the future. This provided an overall picture of the outcomes for the group.

I kept a journal, regularly noting the progress of the project and anecdotal observations. These "professional reflections" as Mertler (2017) refers to them, allowed for observations to be recorded as well as "feelings and interpretations associated with those observations" (p. 138).

Data Analysis

I transcribed all interviews and video journals and assembled written journals together. With a large range of data collected, I then established a coding scheme for analysis. Although the

collection of various types of data assisted the transparency of the process, the coding system ensured all data were represented. I assigned categories, noting any changes in reading attitudes of the boys, and where possible, linked back to the research question. I identified and analysed relationships, similarities, and contradictions. Students were re-interviewed if necessary, for example, if there was conflicting information from individual boys.

Discussion of Results

An analysis of the data showed that conservative readers experienced a change in their reading habits, identifying as more adventurous readers after this project. Furthermore, all boys were reflective about their reading choices and verbalized shifts in their reading identities.

Additionally, the following major themes emerged, which warrant specific attention: the importance of choice, developing a new appreciation for picture books, and frontloading through book talks to encourage adventurous readers.

Reflecting on Reading Identity and the Shift from Conservative to Adventurous Readers

Out of the fourteen boys who participated in this project, four identified as adventurous readers and ten as conservative readers in the initial survey. I asked the boys the same question in the final survey (Figure 1), with ten boys identifying as adventurous and four as conservative. Six boys changed their identity from conservative to adventurous, four remained with adventurous, and four with conservative. No boys changed their identity from adventurous to conservative.

Throughout the challenge, Aech, a prolific reader and member of the school book club, read 8 books from a diverse range of themes and formats, yet described himself as a conservative reader in both surveys. When asked why he still considered himself a conservative reader, he remained loyal to his favourite genre, stating, "I like fantasy and magic (excluding Harry Potter), especially alchemy." Percy, who had read very little since the illustrated series he enjoyed in Grades 2-3, read his first full-length novel during the challenge. He shared, "I am still conservative but am getting more adventurous as a reader." Of the six boys who changed their reading identity, Jeff said, "I like to read many types of books." Bill was articulate when discussing his change of reading identity from conservative to adventurous: "Um, 'cause at the start I only read like a couple of books that I was familiar with but then now I've had, like, the chance to read more books out of my usual reading zone."

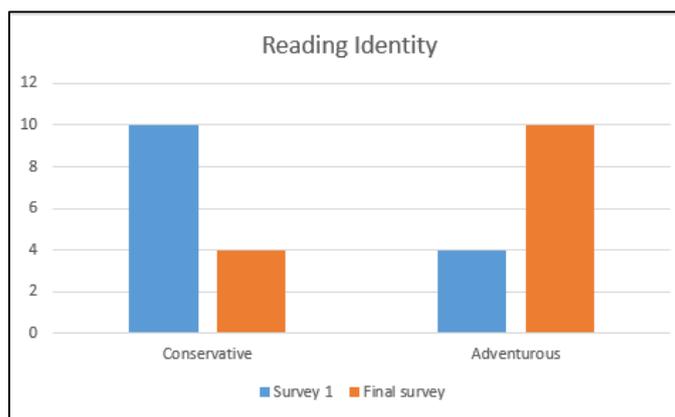


Figure 1: Change in reading identity from conservative to adventurous.

With the change over the course of the research in reading identity from conservative to adventurous came a change in attitudes to reading themes and formats. In the final survey, I asked the boys to rate their change in attitude to reading diverse literature using a Likert scale, with 1 being no change and 5 being the most. Three boys indicated little change in attitude, eight boys indicated moderate change, and three boys indicated significant change. When asked which themes they did not previously read, but would now read for recreation, all themes but one were chosen more than once, showing a clear change in attitude and willingness to read diverse literature in the future (Figure 2).

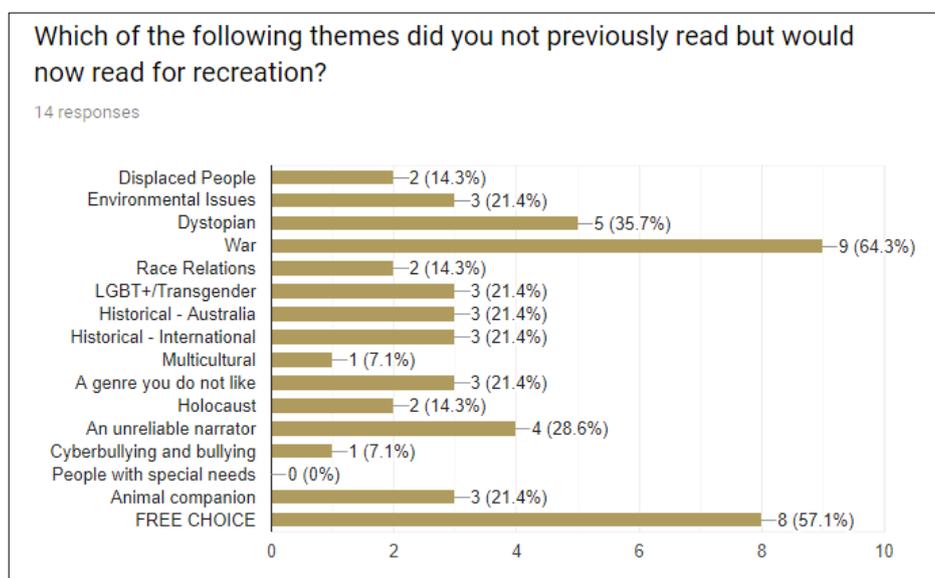


Figure 2: Change in attitudes to reading different themes

When asked what he thought of the different themes at the beginning of the challenge, Jeff said: “I wasn’t too confident on doing it but now that I’ve read ‘em all I’ve really enjoyed ‘em.”

Most boys were comfortable reading different formats or formats they had not read before. In Gerald’s video transcript, he said “I don’t really like reading backwards, in books. Format was manga so you have to read backwards, and it is a little difficult to get. I’ve never read a manga before and it was interesting.” Kobe read *Astro Boy: Omnibus 1* (2015), commenting:

I thought these types of graphic novels and comics were more for kids and it’s actually really good to read and quite fun and takes a bit of understanding to get all the pictures and even if you don’t it’s still fun to read.

Some boys read only one format, the prose novel, but for non-readers, this proved to be a new format for them as several reported to me during our discussions they had not read a novel. As Bob said in his final interview, when asked how he felt about reading different formats, “I only read novels during this challenge. But I used to only read like little picture books and like. I didn’t really read much novels.”

As shown in figure 3 below, the boys were more willing to read different formats at the end of the research period than at the beginning.

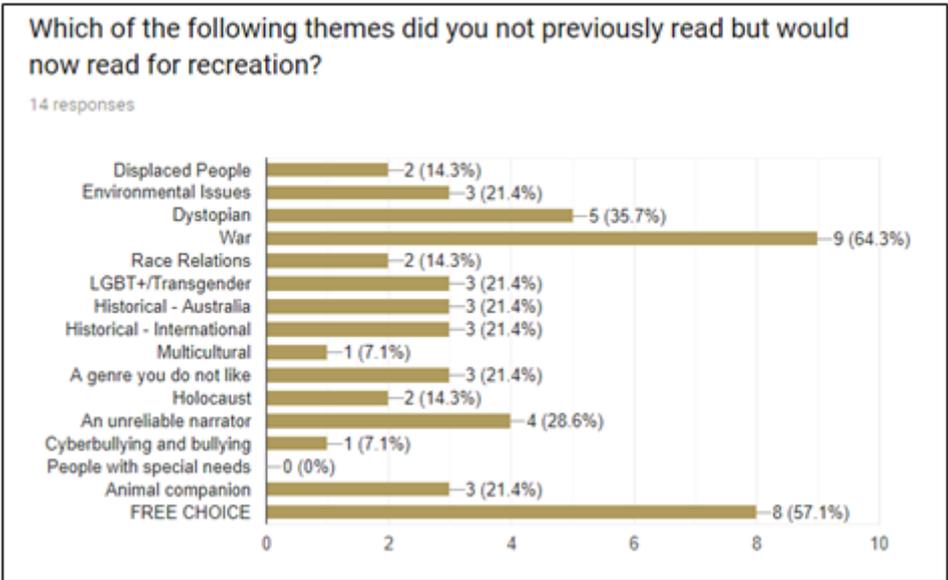


Figure 3: Change in attitudes to reading different formats.

The Importance of Choice

Free choice, chosen by seven boys, allowed flexibility in the allocation of themes, thus enabling engagement in a diverse range of stories and formats. Kobe used his free choice to read the graphic novel *Astro Boy: Omnibus 1* (2015), a format this prolific reader had not previously read.

The multiple themes on the books allowed the boys to change allocation of themes to suit both their choices. For example, Joe changed several themes to accommodate his diverse reading choices:

Yeah, I want to change *Wolf Brother* from animal companion to historical and change *War Horse* to animal companion, so I can open up war so I can put in *When the War Began*. Then I can do the other book I have for free choice.

A New Appreciation for Picture Books

Eight boys chose to read picture books for older readers. Some boys chose the format for its ease of reading and time required to read compared to a novel. Fred, a competent but reluctant reader, chose the picture book format because “it’s different and it’s probably an easier read.” This proved to be good support and encouragement for readers who needed it. Most appeared to be surprised by the content and the impact it had on them as readers. When asked to comment in the video journal if the book inspired him to think differently after reading *The Rabbits* (1998), Ace said “Yeah, it did inspire me to think differently because it really showed what we did I guess to the Aboriginals, it is a really good book, very interesting.” Gerald was also insightful in his comments after reading *The Mediterranean* (2017):

Yeah, it has sort of changed my idea about picture books. I thought they were mostly for younger readers but this one is more in depth and is a lot harder to understand if you don't really..., you have to look at the pictures a lot to try and figure out what they mean.

Book Talks Encouraged Adventurous Reading Selections

Developing and building interest in various themes and formats was important in encouraging adventurous readers, as was connecting the boys to potential books through their interests and past experiences. Gerald, when asked why he picked *The Turners* (2015), answered “Because you did a book review on it and I thought it was a good book.” The book talks made the list of themes achievable as the boys became familiar with the books.

Various frontloading opportunities occurred during the reading challenge and were successful in helping the boys select reading material. Joe stated in our final interview:

Well when I saw the list I was kinda just like, whoa, I wonder what I’ll read. Then you said that you’d show us all the books that we could read so I started to listen to them to see if I could find anything that I wanted to read.

When asked what he liked about the book talks, Spiderman stated, “Well, just ‘cause I struggle to find books out of the ones I normally read, the ones I enjoy. After the book talks, I read some of the books and enjoyed them.”

The book talks also enabled the boys to learn the meanings of the themes and become familiar with unknown formats. During individual discussions, many boys said they did not know what dystopian fiction was. I was then able to explicitly explain to the group and share some titles they might like to read. When encouraged to read an unfamiliar genre, Timothy read a dystopian novel, Mark Smith’s *The Road to Winter* (2016), and stated that it “Probably had changed my view about the genre because I’ve never read one and it’s pretty good and I will read another one day.”

Conclusion

When analysing the data in depth, it was evident there is much involved in engaging Year 8 boys in diverse stories to develop them as adventurous readers. The accumulated data provide information and ideas about how to help teenage boys read beyond their boundaries. It is obvious to me, that in the right environment where one allows reading choice and offers frontloading opportunities to book talk and teach about themes, genres and formats, we can develop adventurous readers.

Engagement on all levels is the key, before, during, and after the reading process. The reading journals gave the boys a goal to reach; as Fred said, “There is an incentive to read, like the journal and stuff.” When asked if anything surprised them about the challenge, Jeff said, “I didn’t really expect to be liking it that much, but I really did,” and Fred said, “Yeah, it made me read more. Just ‘cause we had to I guess but then I kind of did want to do it.” As I will continue to see these boys regularly for PCG, I will be asking if they are continuing to read diversely for recreation. I will be very interested to see if their reading identity continues to evolve in future years.

There are many implications for further research. My research group was made up of a variety of readers including alliterate readers, those who can read but choose not to, and regular readers. I would like to research practical strategies to engage alliterate readers to become invested in recreational reading. I know from past professional reading that this has been researched widely in the past, but a review of current literature and research into practical strategies would be worthwhile. I would also be interested to research and find new ways to introduce boys to potential reads other than book talks.

Reflection

I found this action research project incredibly fulfilling. I was able to research an area I have always been interested in, in a structured and supportive manner. I learnt a great deal about boys' education and boys' literacy from my readings and from the boys themselves. They were incredibly supportive and helpful and tried hard to stay on track with their reading. The action research with the boys meant I got to know them better, and I feel we have a much better rapport than previously. As is the intention of action research, I learnt a lot about my own practices and will be able to use this learning to inform future practice. For instance, I did not realise the lasting effect of the book talks, that they stayed with the boys for so long. I have learnt not to assume the boys know what a particular genre and format is, and that having many examples for the boys to choose from is important.

There have been some important people throughout this project I would like to thank. The support from my Headmaster, Mr Peter Hauser, to apply for the program, gave me the confidence to embark on the project. My school-based mentor, Dr. Alison Young, was supportive and knowledgeable, and during our conversations challenged me to think deeper during many stages of the project. My team leader Laura Sabo offered support, suggestions and guidance. Likewise, thank you to Di Laycock and Margot Long for their support throughout the process. My team of fellow researchers, although spread across the globe, were always there for support and friendship, making this personally and professionally fulfilling.

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Appendix A

Welcome to the 2018 Reading Challenge

The Challenge

Your challenge is to read a minimum of four books, from various themes. These are listed below.

A list of suggested titles for each theme will be placed on Google Classroom.

When you read a book please complete the grid on page two.

Themes

1. Displaced People
2. Environmental Issues
3. Dystopian
4. War
5. Race Relations
6. LGBT+/Transgender
7. Historical - Australia
8. Historical - International
9. Multicultural
10. A genre you do not like
11. Holocaust
12. An unreliable narrator
13. Cyberbullying and bullying
14. People with special needs
15. Animal companion
16. FREE CHOICE (can be selected once only during the challenge)

You may choose another theme, however you must discuss this theme with Mrs Derouet first.

Formats and titles

- You may include:
 - 1 picture book for older readers (check title with Mrs Derouet before reading)
 - 1 graphic novel/manga
 - At least 2 prose/verse novels
- When you have read 2 prose/verse novels, you may read a second picture book or graphic novel.
- There is no limit to the number of books you read, but you must read a minimum of four books.
- The book lists in Google Classroom are a guide only.
- If there is a title we do not hold, please ask and we will get it in for you.
- Books can be borrowed from Grammar Junior Library.

After you have read a book

When you have read each book you are to complete a reading journal entry.

This may be written, or you may video yourself talking about the book and your reading experience.

Mrs Derouet will have regular meetings with you during Terms Three and Four to discuss your reading.

Reading Journal

Your reading journal will include the following points:

1. Why did you choose this theme?
2. Why did you choose this format?
3. Why did you choose this title?
4. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why/why not?

Your reading journal will include at least 1 of the following:

1. If this book involves an issue, such as refugees, how did it make you feel about this issue?
2. What character did you identify with and why?

3. If the book has inspired you to think differently, how and why has it done this?
4. Did you feel challenged during the reading of this book? How and why?
5. Sometimes books can evoke strong feelings in readers. Did you experience this during the reading of this book? How did you feel and why?
6. If you could meet one of the characters, who would it be and what would you say to him/her?

You do not need to limit your journal entries to the above. Include anything else you want to say about your reading experience of each book.

Reading Grid

The first is an example

Theme: Displaced People Title: The Mediterranean Author: Armin Greder Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D. 	Theme: Title: Author: Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D. 	Theme: Title: Author: Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D.
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Theme: Title: Author: Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D. 	Theme: Title: Author: Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D. 	Theme: Title: Author: Format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture book • Graphic Novel/Manga • Prose/Verse Novel • Reading Journal submitted to Mrs D.
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Tip: To tick each box, right click your mouse and insert tick icon.

Add more rows if you read more books.