Teenagers and Reading is an AATE Interface Series title edited by Jacqueline Manuel and Sue Brindley. As the name suggests, the audience is those who work closely with teenagers as they navigate the different texts they are exposed to in their teenage years. As the series title suggests, it provides an interface between theory and educational research and practice. The edited collection explores literacy heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices.

The opening chapter by Jacqueline Manuel sets the tone for the publication. Manuel writes, “Teenagers and Reading is about re-discovering and re-focusing on the actual and potential role and significance of reading in the lives of young people.” ‘Reading’ is defined in an expansive sense to include print, non-print, multi-modal, film, visual and non-verbal text and language. Reading is discussed as both an individual endeavour and social/learning activity.

So what are our teenagers reading and for what purposes?

In Jacqueline Manuel’s ‘Reading Lives: Teenager’s reading practices and preferences’, and a later co-authored chapter with Maxine Broughton, ‘What we know about teenagers and reading: a survey of research findings,’ a snapshot of contemporary teenagers’ reading experiences is presented which draws on research conducted with 12-16 year olds. Like other age groups, Manuel’s research showed that teenagers read for a wide variety of purposes with personal tastes in reading often established by the time they reached secondary school. They read for pleasure, to escape, for relaxation, affirmation, discovery, fun, to access information, to connect with others, to complete school-based tasks, to access,
to participate in, and to create and critique educational and broader cultural discourses (Manuel, 2011). By understanding the challenges of balancing all of these needs, Manuel believes teachers can then more affectively plan for and address these demands. Manuel’s key implication for classroom practice is to provide a wide and diverse reading program, allow for student choice, provide opportunity for reading – both independent and shared, to not associate reading with assessment, and to match texts carefully to student interest and ability.

In ‘Why Literature Matters’ author Libby Gleeson encourages us to connect stories with students’ lived experiences. This is a theme that is carried through to further chapters. Gleeson shares the ways she likes to read a work of fiction to students to encourage them, “to discuss the characters, the action and the way the writer made them feel.” Gleeson defines that reading is when children are ‘fully immersed in story’.

The book brings together international perspectives and the chapter that practitioners will perhaps find one of the most useful is that written by American authors, Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith. In their, ‘A Call to Action: Building Bridges between literacy in school and out’, both authors share their vast knowledge and experience of inquiry based pedagogies as a way to both engage teenagers in the process of reading in school, but also connecting with their interests outside of school. They write how inquiry gets both at, “the character and plot-driven readings as well as point and aesthetic-driven readings”. Through the use of questioning, students have to work to understand the author’s position on the essential question and how it compares to other authors. Questioning also provides the opportunity for students to make their position public. The authors present schemas for questioning and a sample unit planning template with suggested ways to weave a variety of independent and social reading experiences into the teaching and learning program.

In remaining chapters, the authors focus specifically on a genre, age group or strategy as relevant to teenagers. The themes of chapters range from life writing, to indigenous play texts, senior secondary reading lists, the MyRead resource, forum drama, blogging and reading film as text.

Alice and Christine Hall explore the reading of ‘life writing’, a term they use to encompass a range of biographical, autobiographical, documentary and fictional writing. Perhaps most interesting for the reader is their commentary on ‘misery literature’, which they define as ‘tales of unhappy and often abusive childhoods, usually narrated in the first person’.

Don Carter presents findings of a survey on Australian senior secondary English reading lists, with particular reference to states and territories with prescribed or recommended reading lists. Particular focus and interest is on ‘Australian writing’ and the range of Australian writing that is represented in these lists. Teachers of senior secondary will find the compiled tables of lists and commentary by Carter most interesting.

Matthew Clausen and Michael Anderson share their insight into intercultural playtexts and the challenges of keeping the original intentions of the playwright in a culturally sensitive way. Readers of this chapter will find the presented case study most interesting and an opportunity to have dialogue at a combined English/Drama faculty meeting.
Kerry-Anne O’Sullivan explores the growing repertoire of contemporary information and communication technologies in her chapter titled, ‘Books and blogs: promoting reading achievement in digital contexts’. Through investigating teenagers and their blogs, O’Sullivan gained insight into the discourses that students are participating in when online.

Miranda Jefferson’s, ‘How to read a film: Experiential approaches to film learning’ is a chapter on the importance of appreciating and making film and seeing the two as being co-dependent.

In Rita van Haren and Janette Vervoorn’s chapter, they encourage people to revisit the MyRead professional development resource. Now more than a decade since its first release, the site still contains resources of relevance to English teacher.

Of particular personal interest I found Kelly Freebody and John Hughes chapter on ‘ways to use drama to teach difficult texts’. They define difficult texts as ones containing difficult vocabulary or complex narrative structures as well as texts that address potentially controversial issues; sometimes avoided in the classroom. The authors base their dialogue around research studies that they have been involved in and what research has found to ‘work well’ and ‘not work so well’ when it comes to drama practice. Like Wilhelm and Smith’s chapter, this is another where practitioners will find many useful strategies that can be immediately applied to teaching, including ideas for teaching ‘forum theatre’, ‘hotseating’, and the ‘the brotherhood code’ (shifting context to create a safe distance). The examples provided illustrate these strategies in way that is useful for the reader interesting in exploring these ideas directly within their own teaching and learning contexts.

Teenagers and Reading compiles contributions by researchers, teachers and educators effectively. The diversity and specificity in content guarantees that there will be something in this edited collection for everyone. While some of the chapters have a more direct application for practitioners, others could be used to promote dialogue and conversation in English faculty teams.

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