

# **“Running with the Question” - Action Research and Evaluative Practice in developing an Adolescent Reading Program.**

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*This paper describes how Action Research methodology developed the wider reading programs for children from 9-13 years at Wesley College over a 5-year period. The central question revolved around how the library team could engage every child in years 5 to 7 in wider reading. Strategies used in the program were: Engaging interactive online components, Highly responsive collection development approaches, Hard data collection on usage, and Qualitative measures undertaken by the team in adopting evaluative practice. Interesting and unexpected results began to inform decision making for the team highlighting gender issues in adolescent reading, and a need to re-examine some basic assumptions about the ways students select books for personal reading. The paper chronicles how the team learned from experience to bring about new defined cycles of development and improvement to the program, which has evolved and expanded far beyond the initial concepts*

## **Context and methodology**

Fan clubs involved a 6-year action research process to create a reading program for Wesley College. The research was undertaken initially by Marie Turnbull and myself, and later became the work of our group of around 7 to 8 librarians. The action research involved the development of our team of librarians becoming participants in inquiry, actively reflecting as individuals, and ultimately evolving into a group of practitioners in establishing a reading culture with adolescent and preadolescent children. Our research concerns key questions on establishing a wide reading program for 9-13 year olds, and engaging in the questions on increasing reading with the age group, and to discern which practices on our libraries made an impact on the reading patterns of the students.

## **Influences**

We have drawn on the work of Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. We drew inspiration from local practitioners such as Anita Cherry and Yolande Wadsworth, but

in the very beginning, we were fortunate to have the assistance of a process consultant Glen Barnes who set us on the journey of evaluative practice.

Many of you will know action research draws on many influences including critical thinking, and how it relates to the body of writing around organisational improvement. We feel an affinity with this, as we moved towards a participatory research approach. A helpful definition of the implications of such works is beautifully coined by Reason as ‘...action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people...’(Reason)

## Methodology and Impacts of the process

Our leadership role with the Reading Fan Clubs has changed as we have become more experienced in working with the Action research framework. We learned to work more mindfully and understanding the relationships we created as leaders with our team, and began to actively reflect on this. Hence, we have come to embrace an enquiring approach to our own life and practice. It is fair to say that we integrated ourselves in the action *and* the research. This examination of self in relation to the action and evaluation of data is sometimes described as single person research. (Reason)

When working with our team the model can best be described as second-person action research. Here collaborative inquiry is done in small groups in, and where the work is face-to-face with others on the issues. In our paper, we hope to describe key incidents and cycles of learning. Some if this related to deeper understanding of our own roles and how our attitudes, beliefs shaped our action, and development of the program. Related to this is how we evolved as a group to work within the context of our reading program, and develop it and our practice simultaneously.

For this to happen we needed action research to be more than a problem or issue resolving process, or an innovation development strategy, but genuine and hard-yards learning as individuals and as a group. Key to this learning is to be truth seeking and be prepared to examine our personal values, beliefs and our assumptions.

## Developing the Program

Wesley College, an independent school in Melbourne, Australia, covers three campuses about 20 km apart. In years five, six and seven, there are about 700 students. It is a “notebook computer “school; each student from year five on has their own notebook computer to use at school and home. All laptops connect to the Wesley network and to the Internet.

In 1999, Marie and I were working to restructure the entire library service across the campuses. We had been employed to not only bring the six libraries under one umbrella but also to implement new educational library programs.

The very first question that started our process and our Fan Clubs was

“How do we reach every child?”

This library service was understaffed, and under skilled for such an endeavour. In fact, there were only three librarians across the three campuses to cater for the age group educationally. We had slim resources then, and no identifiable strategy for a program. Our combined group had some experience and knowledge of wide reading promotion, and one or two had knowledge of children's literature. We knew this would not be enough. Marie and I pondered this late one afternoon in my office, and we had no answers, only a question and what seemed like insurmountable odds.

She came back the next day with an inspired plan, a set of ideas, a webpage concept; all the result of waking at 2 pm in the morning. We would reach every child!

## The program outlined

Wesley College Reading Fan Clubs, or named "Fan Club", were established as a 'reading program' for students in years five six and seven (9-13 year olds) in 2000. Fan Clubs was created to provide a professional, planned reading program, with a shared rationale and professionally printed support materials.

Students were invited to choose and join a Fan Club. Their choices were

- The Harry Potter Fan Club
- The Alanna Fan Club
- The Rowena Batts Fan Club
- The Andy Griffiths Fan Club
- The Cairo Jim Fan Club

The clubs are draw cards to involve students in a form of genre for a term. There is choice, and students do not need to commit to a long term. Another club will take them to a different genre or "book grouping" next term. For instance If you joined the Harry Potter Fan Club you not only read Harry Potter books but also any books that "Harry" would like to read, books about magic, and boarding school. Based on the character in Tamora Pierce's Alanna series the Alanna Fan Club is about high fantasy, fighting fantasy, and other worlds. Rowena Batts is a character in Australian author, Morris Gleitzman's series Blabbermouth, Stickybeak and others. Rowena cannot speak and students who join this Fan Club would read books by Gleitzman, and books about families, friends, and children with disabilities. The Andy Griffiths Fan Club is for naughty children who like to read the marvellously funny books about Andy who features the "Just" series, and you would read humorous novels and stories. Cairo Jim is an archaeological adventurer invented by Geoffrey McSwimming, where readers might choose any adventurous or historical novel.

Students make their choices from the introductions to the clubs by the librarian, or they might investigate the web pages of the Fan Clubs. The web pages were created in house by library staff and are on the Wesley network and available from home.

These pages contain a description of the Fan Club, reasons you might want to read in this Fan Club, links to Internet sites that of interest to students who choose this Fan Club, a

recommended reading list prepared by library staff, and an interactive section for peer reviewing and recommendation.

When the student chooses a club they are issued with a professionally printed reading record which has the logo and name of the Fan Club, a place for the student's name, a place to record their reading, and a short recommended reading list.

Books are displayed under each Fan Club heading in the libraries, or students may choose books from the library shelf, or bring their own book from home. When the student finishes a book, they record it on their reading record. They come to the library on their next class visit, or at lunchtime or before or after school. When the library staff member is satisfied that they have read the book – usually by asking a question about the book, or asking the student to tell about their favourite part – they are issued with a Wesley College Reading Fan Club sticker on which they write their name and stick it somewhere on the Reading Map in the library. Each Club has its own Reading map, which is a full coloured A2 poster of the theme. We created these in house, based on an idea from the books.

At the end of term, a lucky spot is revealed on each map and the person whose sticker is closest to that spot wins a small prize. Every child who reads even one book has a chance to win the prize but the more books you read the greater your chance. Extra stickers can be earned by adding your review online to the Fan Club pages. These peer recommendations are viewed by other students online, and are often used by the librarian to promote particular books to a class. Next term you choose a different club and the game starts again.

This was our beginning.

Since 2000, the Fan Club program has grown to 18 Fan Clubs. Fan club library sessions always features book promotion, peer recommendation, time to return and choose new books to borrow, time to collect stickers, time to get help in choices from the librarian. At each campus, a programme of activities is published at the beginning of each term.

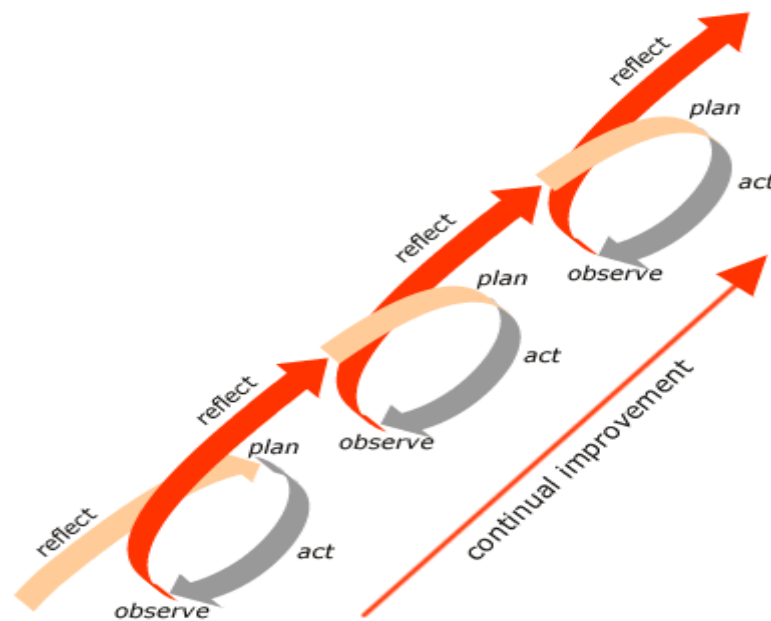
### *Research Questions*

In 2000 our program was based on the following premises or hypotheses

- Creating a vibrant and interactive web component will encourage reading participation.
- Wide reading was a lifelong process; it involves enjoyment, immersion and the creating of inner worlds in the child's mind and experience.
- Reading should not be "work", or need analysing or deconstructing. No formal assessment tasks are involved.
- Students in this age group are compulsive series readers and weaker readers can complete a series without making a jump to the next stage of reading
- Gender plays a significant role in reading; boys and girls respond to different motivators i.e. competition, and ways of making reading a concrete achievement

- Boys may be sensitive to cultural models of masculinity and not see positive connections between reading and masculinity (Moloney)
- Peer recommendation is a powerful way to connect students to wide reading choices
- We can create a passionate reading community with “Fan Clubs”

Action research allows for a cycle of reflecting, implementing a practice, analysing the practice, reflecting, changing the practice, analysing the new practice, reflecting as shown in this diagram.



Upon the first two terms of launching and running the program, we set aside a morning with the team to discuss the outcomes. We had hard data, and statistics on the uptake of the program, which was very positive, but we also were working with the experiences and observations of the librarians on the students’ participation. People were working in ways that they had not worked before, and they consciously felt that they were working together on a group endeavour. The meeting provided a much-needed opportunity to share.

In the early days of our program, we were not experienced researchers. More often than not, we had more data than we knew how to handle or make sense of. For every question or hypothesis, other data we found would throw up more questions; here is a flavour of our data.

In our first cycle of Fan Clubs, we were concerned to create a social environment around each club to support the reading within the clubs. We literally created social gatherings at lunchtimes for craft making, cooking, providing a film sessions, creating forums, debates, and more. It was exhausting!

Community online; we encouraged student’s participation on the WebPages, in the jokes section, reviews sections. We imagined that this was going to be entirely natural for students to do. However, participating in an online world was not as natural for students as we believed, probably because we had created the environment and they were really just

consumers...On the other hand, boys reading statistics went through the roof as they responded enormously to motivational strategies, and the competition elements. Girls were not reading much more than before, but were participating in numbers. Peer recommendation was happening spontaneously at lunchtimes in one library where shortage of space meant that Fan Club books were held in colourful tubs.

Students had gained a huge momentum in reading from the program, engaging with staff around their choices and telling the stories of their books. There was a lot going on in the conversations about the books.

Over the next months the following research questions emerged from the program as we began to implement and hold our first meetings

- What role is the interactive web technology bringing to influencing the participation and raising the profile of wide reading as with our students?
- What role does the communication between staff and students play in developing interest in reading?
- What role does peer recommendation play in students reading choices?
- What cultural factors play a role in our students reading?
- What role does gender play in adolescent readers choices?

### **Defining moments and action research tools**

#### *Boy's responses to the program*

One of our questions in 2000 was “why don't boys read as much as girls”? In fact, a recent book by James Moloney ‘Boys and books’ informed our practice in Fan Club. Moloney's contention was that “issues of literary quality matter less than the need to get our boys reading willingly, well and often” and “A culture of reading can be supported by reading matter that is valued by the culture of [boys] groups – like magazines, comics, books on sport and some websites.”

Our observational data in the first year included:

The boys took Fan Clubs up and enjoyed the competition. The competition made the activity of reading “cool”. Boys also responded to encouragement by men. Our one male role model for boys had a dramatic impact on choices boys made for Fan Clubs. In promoting the launch he had “played’ for a Andy club on one campus and a Cairo Jim club on another. The result was a very uneven participation in each club as they literally followed his lead.

The hard data proved interesting too. When we analysed the first six months statistics we found.

- The boys were borrowing more than they had before, but still not as much as the girls did.

- Statistics revealed the girls circulation increased, but not to the same extent as the boys.

However boys were placing stickers on reading maps at a greater rate to the girls, i.e. they were more competitive. It was definitely working as an incentive for the boys.

### *Running the programme two out of four terms*

After two years of running the program, we became concerned with our sustainability. Were we able to sustain this program, with our online resources, or book resources and our human resources? Most of our concern was about overexposure to existing Fan Clubs and how we would maintain a students interest over the three years from year five to seven. In truth, Marie and I had not contemplated this issue while we were developing and so we set about creating more Fan Clubs immediately, and began to rotate exiting ones.

In meetings with librarians, talk also revolved around activities we were not running because of the Fan Club program. Librarians were missing traditional activities that they may have run with before the Fan Clubs. They would have done extended introductions to the Children's book council of Australia annual award shortlist, introduced classic authors or titles, or analysed of the illustrator's role in picture books with classes for instance. Some librarians in the team had felt rewarded in these lessons rewarding, and they argued that the content of such material was important to cover.

To our mind, many of these activities would be characteristically "teacher centred" library lesson with students participating on queue. If time were measured most of the session would consist of talk by the librarian. We felt the methodology proven unsuccessful if the circulation statistics for reading before Fan Club had been any indication. Another issue raised was the expectation of English teachers who preferred to see us as an adjunct and support to the English curriculum, and who had been used to us playing this role. Another pressure!

There were multiple perspectives and conversations running and competing, and at this time, not much thinking made explicit in the meetings. However, it became a turning point for the program and for the teams learning.

### *A first person perspective and how it related to the second person action research.*

Wilma: In 2002 we were running Fan Clubs four times per year. My role was to support the program with the funding for the library budget to supply librarians and students with resources and collections. I succeeded well in this, and managed to create a high profile for the library and the reading program.

Being leader of the library service, I had a personal stake in the program. It had become a raging success. We had clearly lifted the volume of reading by the cohort across all campuses, judging by the statistics. Most obvious was the participation of boys, and their responses to the various elements of the program. Some things were simply a runaway success. I had many positive beliefs about the program, and its methodology. It became hard to separate myself from it. Moreover, I found myself defending the program, and Marie's wonderful work when there was negative feedback, or I would find myself dismissing this

feedback. . In truth I was not looking for critical incidents at the time, I wanted complete cohesion and uniform thinking.

My defensive thinking was typical of the traps that leaders can find themselves in; I realised I potentially could stifle feedback by my group by my intensity and my desire for the program to be successful. However, I could not help but notice the fatigue in the team and I had to concede that it was a demanding program. I stopped short of reviewing it, as I was fearful that the team might abandon it.

In my heart, I did not believe that the team would be capable of an alternative program. I sensed that I had an elaborate set of inferences in my mind, but I could see no alternative but to run with what we had and improve the program and the librarians practice.

When Marie would broach the librarians concerns with me that Fan Clubs may be limiting other approaches to reading, I would generally imagine the librarians doing what they had been criticised for as doing badly. Then I simultaneously had nagging thoughts about my distrust, but had no way of stepping outside of my perceptions.

It was not until I was replacing one of my librarians taking classes myself, that I came face to face with the day-to-day work design I had shaped for my library team. I was taking the session of grade 6 students. I was doing all the things that were part of the session; long conversations with students about their reading, listening to their accounts of the stories, keeping check on their interactions with each other, monitoring the borrowing, handing stickers out, finding books with students; it was engaging but intense, and it was exhausting.

I sat back afterwards and contemplated what it would really be like to run with Fan Clubs day after day, month after month. I wondered that I might have created a monster, created a workload that no one could realistically sustain

I realised that even though we had held many frank and open meetings to evaluate the program, and we were in cyclical improvements, this was one of those classic “unspokens”. Despite the terrific results in the uptake of wide reading, the program was too hard to run.

Marie had asked me to come to the next planning meeting and she felt there was some resistance that she could not place a finger on, Librarians were not challenging outright but finding obscure reasons for resisting.

It was a strange meeting. We spent at least an hour talking around small problems, hitches and small things that were bothering them. It was like tinkering around the edges and not tackling the bigger issues. I listened for a long time and felt the need for an intervention. I put it to them that perhaps Fan Club was too hard to do; perhaps we needed to give it up.

They responded vehemently; the program was good, they did not want to give it up, it was great, ...they and the program had a profile, and we could not give it up now!

I asked them how they felt,

Then they admitted they were exhausted, and were running out of steam

Clearly, something or someone had to change...



I put it to them, ...”how about we run Fan Clubs twice a year, instead of all four terms.

There was silence, and then what seemed a sigh and a relief, and wholehearted agreement that that would be great.

Strangely contrasting with the earlier dynamic of the meeting there was no discussion agreement was universal. They then asked, “But what would we do in the other terms?”

What would we do instead? Responses came quick and fast ...We could run with some of the things we used to do; we could introduce new books, author profiles... we could run CBC' Book week programs

It was a defining moment.

What had happened? I sensed that the Library staff had been loyal to us despite some bad work design issues. They wanted to believe in the program, and had wanted to own it, and run it. It had been a new opportunity to play a role in the college. What role had I played in this? My sense was that I had played a conventional leadership role to them, even though I wanted their participation in review and decision-making. In this, perhaps I had unconsciously invited them to play the supporting and subservient role.

Their success was tied in with mine. They needed me to be leader, and did not want to bring me down. However, herein lay the issue, in that the things that needed addressing could not. We had some unspoken, some taboo subjects. Addressing the way *they felt rather than what they thought*, this compact had been broken, and I had altered myself in role. There was permission and encouragement them to speak about how they felt.

### *Locked into model one thinking*

It seems so obvious now, but it did not seem obvious at the time how we were locked into this predicament. I feel this is a typical example of the interplay between the personal and the group interplay of action research. It brings to mind the single loop and double loop-learning model by Argyris, who identifies that leaders can be the ones who find it hardest to openly appraise programs weaknesses, and will resort to “rational” interpretations of what needs to happen. In my instance I was rigidly adhering to the concepts, we had put together. Moreover, even in the face of exhaustion of my team I had been reluctant to review or reconsider.

Leaders also have difficulty with espoused theories vs. the things they actually do.(Chris Argyris) Here was a case of a leader, me, espousing inquiry, but finding it genuinely difficult to actually engage in it myself. (Chris Argyris) Finally for real learning (double loop) to take place in the team, leaders need to model behaviours of advocacy with inquiry to their team. One of these is to encourage people to challenge your thinking. Until this point I classically had been using defensive reasoning, I was interested in keeping a program “successful” in so doing I had lost some of my capacity for listening. It was being in the program itself that afternoon with grade 6 that I could step outside this mental “trap” and experience it for myself. In letting go of the program to rest it and the staff, (why hadn't we thought of it sooner?) our group would in the future arrive at a new way of working.

From that incident on, a different conversation became possible. We never locked horns again over minor mechanical things. We were able to raise more complex understandings. It was as though we had reached a different understanding of one and other.

I know from subsequent conversations that librarians felt more trusted now they could run other sessions for a good half of the year. I know they came with a new preparedness to work within the group, and intercampus rivalries became rare. The upshot for the program was that it became revitalised, we came out with new data that we could use to compare with the Fan Club data.

*Here is the term one program from 2003.*

1. Orientation for new students with lively introduction activities
2. Activities to support speaking and listening skills
3. Activities to encourage student participation and sharing of reading
4. Confidence building it title selection
5. Reflective thinking on titles that are “favourites”, in order to develop awareness and articulation of thought and feeling in the reading process

A visit by the poet Steven Herrick focussed all classes to read and discuss Steven’s poetry and verse novels, and lunchtime “Original verse and Rhyme Competition” was held. We dedicated term three to the idea of “What makes a good book?” with various activities. In 2003 and 2004, this pattern continued and it was interesting to see the circulation figures showing that the Fan Club term resulted in higher circulation than the others did.

*The affective domain; and teasing out directly observable data*

When evaluating any of the programs the librarians would generally view the participation, enthusiasm, responses from students as unilateral and unquestionable data to support that the reading program was doing well. **How** they measured it was not really questioned and I was inclined myself to believe that if the librarians were enjoying the sessions, so were the students. I felt they were responding to synergy, which was no bad thing of course. However, Marie and I were interested and curious as to what other measures we might use to gauge effectiveness of the programs and the sessions.

One such opportunity arose when we devised a term program around narrative and international story telling. We collected as many titles as we could to represent the world of stories across cultures, countries, and historical times. Our program involved members of our teaching and school community who were from different cultural backgrounds telling favourite folktales, or personal stories. Students were fascinated, and enthusiastic, full of questions and interest. They wanted to tell stories too, and came prepared with sessions to run in their own classes. This terms program scored very high in the affective domain, participation, and enthusiasm.

However, our circulation figures showed a substantial drop in borrowing, and we had to consider what role affect might really play in the program. We had so much affect, such

palpable positive energy in our libraries during this term but it did not seem to translate into reading by the students of our libraries collections as other programs did.

Questions remain for us around this topic; we all feel that positive energies and enthusiasm, and warm ongoing relationships are an important factor around ambience and library culture. Current research has investigated the nature of relationships that support reading, with evidence that ongoing relationships are a critical component for success (LaMarca) However, our sense is more may be at work here and that deeper internal processes may happening in student's own reading experience that draws them back over again. Marie and I feel we have got the place and people right, but remain curious about the inner life, the inner world of the child's experience and processes thereof and what role this plays in sustaining the reader.

### Create your own Fan Club; new challenges

One of our key principles was to support and encourage children's choices without making value judgements on what was 'good' or 'better' reading.

We decided to run a "*Create your own Fan Club Competition*" throughout term four. We set aside library class time for students to work in groups. They need to come up with a character to base their Fan Club on, and needed to specify which types of students their Fan Club would appeal to. They needed to design a logo and a story map, and to give us at least five examples for the recommended reading list. The winning entry on each campus was to be made into a fully-fledged Fan Club, with reading records, "recommended reading lists, printed story maps, and a webpage page on the Fan Club site. The names of the winning team would be displayed on all materials and the website.

The competition was wildly popular and led to the creation of the Singenpoo, Sherlock Homes, and Garfield Fan Clubs, which ran with the others in 2002. The challenge was to keep every thing looking professional and using the students' own work. "Garfield" challenged us to defend the right for kids to choose comic books as a legitimate reading option as this led to much discussion and a considerable purchase of new comic books. We were starting to "put our money where our mouth was."

### *Dolly vs. Mad; the great gender divide – A case study*

In 2002, we again ran the Create Your Own Fan Club Competition and the winners were "Martin the Warrior", "Suze (Soap Opera)", and "The Dolly vs. Mad Fan Club". Martin the Warrior and Suze's were no problem however Dolly vs. Mad caused lots of heartache. Marie's brief notes say "Dolly vs. Mad not run this year because of ongoing discussions about the suitability of Dolly magazine." A very brief line describing feelings that ran very high. It was a confrontational meeting. Marie had chosen the winning entry. She thought it was a great idea a different sort of "genre", about the different type of books that appeal to boys and girls. It validated the choice of magazines as reading.

Librarians said:

- “Dolly” discusses dating and “sex” stuff and is not at all suitable for students in year 5 and 6. A discomfort arose they maybe seen as endorsing sexual curiosity.
- Students will only read magazines. Magazines are not real reading. A discomfort about not promoting “good books”, but trashy ephemera
- In a co-educational school, we go to some lengths not to discriminate between boys and girls, and we should not be encouraging them to think differently about reading. Would we be reinforcing the stereotypes in gender?

Dolly vs. Mad did not run in 2003.

This incident was a painful one for Marie and I. We believed until then that librarians were fully supporting and respecting students reading choices. Perhaps our librarians were not open to exploring the issues and their own values as we had thought. They seemed happy to support conventional approaches and books, believing that these were “student choices”. Was it lip service only? When “Dolly Vs Mad”, became an option, they resisted this student-designed club and they appeared to abandon our shared belief in validating student choices.

Marie and I assumed this was the case and upon leaving the meeting, we felt an overwhelming sense of failure. We spoke about it often, and these conversations were despondent. We were disappointed, and locked ourselves down into this. Our team was defective in some way!

We let “Dolly Vs Mad” go for at least six months and came back to a review meeting with the proposal. The same issues surfaced, but this time we paid more attention to the expression of feelings than to what was being said. It seemed to me that there was real discomfort about Dolly vs. Mad, and at the same time, there seemed to be more willingness to engage in what the concerns were. Two issues emerged that were much more systemic in nature than we first had been able to recognise.

One issue was around gender, and gender constructions in the college, and the other was around a related concern of sexuality and gender. Initially these concerns were expressed as resistance by our team, but now we reflected on them.

The college had been coeducational for 20 years after 100 years of being a high profile boy’s college. With the introduction of coeducation, the college underwent a cycle of “equal opportunity” policy for staff, which lapsed over the years. It was conventional wisdom at the time of coeducation that “the girls fitted in well”, and that boys and girls were really not very different after all. *Equal opportunity seemed to be confused with equal access.* Hence, we found no programs supporting the special needs of either gender. It seemed taboo to be thinking about or acting upon gender difference.

One of these older librarians had worked for many years with the current head of the Junior School. She was very aware of his values, and his long association with the college. She eventually explained that she could not run Dolly vs. Mad because it would run counter to the trust relationship she had established with him. She could express in personal terms something the other librarians could only register as a vague sense of going against the cultural grain.

We reflected on the gender constructions that were part of the college culture and wondered that there was a curious omission of sexuality. It was peculiarly missing. Perhaps out of sight out of mind, deriving from an earlier Methodist tradition or a perhaps sense of leaving sleeping dogs lie. Perhaps sexuality was best left unspoken in the college.

I understood then the nature of our team's conflict with this issue expressed with such anxiety and vehemence. We were now looking well beyond our conventional view of life in our college, and examining beyond our norms (Chris Argyris) and encouraging our group to challenge us and put forward their beliefs, not mere motherhood statements on what students should be allowed to read.

We reflected upon the anxiety expressed in the group how this might be symptomatic of a systemic issue at the college. What did the people in our group really "feel" they were "up against". Was why the whole issue of "Dolly vs. Mad" had felt so irrational and so difficult to understand?

**Marie;** in planning for 2004 we discussed the Dolly vs. Mad Fan Club again.

The underlining issues raised were many but now the overriding concern was that we were breaking faith with the students who had won the competition. The respect for children's' choices came through and the question became not if but how we could run the club.

I made a proposal that we run it as a reading poll. What do girls like to read? What do boys like to read? The idea was for the students to decide if the book was more "Dolly" or "Mad" and contribute to recommendation by photocopying the front cover and placing it around the board. If you put your cover near the middle then you thought it was equally suitable for boys or girls to read. If you put it on the Dolly side then you thought girls more likely enjoyed it. It was a device for the students to reflect on their reading and the construction of gender in their own minds, while imagining the standpoint of the "other". It was popular. Students liked examining the boards. They referred to it often for recommendations and just to see who else was reading something they had read.

Significantly, the Dolly vs. Mad data became a piece of research into gender constructions. It is an interesting age group to explore as gender difference begins to become more apparent and girls and boys behaviour towards one another changes. The activity was an interesting test to see of I.e. Girls want to identify as a particular gender and will possibly construct an "opposite" of what they themselves wish to be in order to differentiate from boys and vice versa. What we then might be seeing in our version of Dolly vs. Mad program were peer groups formulating responses to books and to ideas of gender.

In retrospect, it was right that Marie and I had walked away and experienced what we then thought was "failure" in our leadership. If it had not been for this critical incident we would never moved beyond our own inferences and learned what we did. Had we not allowed for deeper space for reflection and simply rushed a decision, the team and we might not have had the more complex conversations about the life at the college. We would not have learned a deeper appreciation of own context, one that we could have scarcely imagined.

Again, this incident taught us much about our own inferences, and how practice is often based on a curious mix of conventional wisdom, the tried and but not really tested! Action research enabled a much deeper examination of how gender may be playing a role in

our programs and in the college at large. It seemed that having a single question could lead to many more, and that with every discovery a greater mystery seemed to lie before us.

## Conclusion

The paper is too short to identify and fully explore the hard and statistical data on our students reading and borrowing patterns as a result of running the program over the last five years; however suffice it to say that many patterns emerged and enabled more decisive and informed decision making on the way the program evolved. We can also not report on the sustained professional development program that we ran for the college team which involved experiential learning and understanding group and team dynamics, and had a bearing on how our team learned to work together.

The most influential factor on the Fan clubs' evolution remains the action research processes, which involved learning, discovery and working at a deeper and ultimately more satisfying level for the entire group.

So what did we learn by developing the program with the evaluative practices as the guiding principle?

- Action research has the potential for profound learning for leaders and team; if you want the team to learn, you need to be prepared to open yourself to learning, and unlearn previous ways of relating and behaving.
- Action research is more than identifying problems, it means contextualising learning across many intersecting domains, such as the cultural the affective, the cognitive, and the system theory. It helps to learn to work with tools like Argyris' ladder of inference, and single loop and double loop learning.

We are not suggesting that we mastered these, or even that we fully grasp their significance.

However, these concepts and understanding help to inform thinking, responding, and decision-making and engender a far deeper understanding of what it is to work together in a shared undertaking.

I can say with confidence after these five years that our team cannot imagine working in another way. They committed to developing a new program for 13-15 year olds for 2006, and have lived the practice in a completely new context for eight months as we prepared and are looking forward to launching in a month from now. They chose to work across the entire group and to travel for the meetings rather than develop units on their campuses; speaking of the strength and energy that they receive from the collective endeavour.

Personally, Marie and I have felt humility in the face of the commitment and the love of learning that has emanated from the group. We have collectively moved from wanting certainty to embracing the unknown. We look for more than affirmation of our hypotheses, and are now curious about what we may not have anticipated.

Our journey began around the question "How do we reach every child?" Our new questions are about

Where might we reach the child?

What do we do when we reach them?

And

How might we join with them where they may be?

Thank you

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### *Author Note:*

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Marie Turnbull is a librarian working in Melbourne, Australia; Her career has embraced both the school and public library sectors. Her skills range from cataloguing to storytelling, from designing reading programs to statistical analysis and reporting. As Technical Services Librarian for Wesley College she has been involved in implementing structural and cultural change. Marie holds a B.Sc and a Graduate Diploma in Librarianship.





Figure 1 - The First Fan Clubs Page



Figure 2 - The Current Fan Clubs Page

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