

**Title: Creating a reading community.
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and literacy.**

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A reading community is one that not only values the act of reading – it is one where everyone reads! There is a culture amongst staff, students and families at Meriden where reading is more than valued – it is an integral part of our daily life.

Meriden is a P-12 Anglican day school for girls. It is situated in the centrally located suburb of Strathfield in Sydney, Australia. Through Meriden's recognition of its community's diversity it is a place where students are able to grow in faith, care and learning. Central to all teaching programs at Meriden is the belief that learning is a lifelong process.

Why do we want a reading community?

In this age of the information superhighway we often forget that reading begins with the book. We are, in fact, exposed to far more print than ever before and reading is crucial to success. Most children's first exposure to reading is in their parents' arms; the act of reading is a shared experience that brings about warmth and security (Scholastic's Read for Life Campaign).

The acceptance that reading is a vital and basic skill to success in our world underpins the motivation to create a reading community at Meriden. This community is inclusive of students, staff and families. Our reading community begins with the students' first experience of formal education in the pre-school (pre-kindergarten) and continues to beyond their completion of secondary school.

At Meriden we believe that the book creates a connection between people in a way that a computer screen does not. A book generates discussion, passion and a sharing of feelings, experiences and empathy. It also promotes an understanding of the ideas and concepts upon which our modern world is based.

In promoting English literacy one of the problems we faced is that Meriden's community is culturally diverse with a significant number of our students living in either bilingual or multilingual homes. Therefore the reason behind creating a reading community is stronger because of the added

challenge of encouraging both mother language inclusion and a strengthening of English. This is important because research clearly shows that those students who are underachieving in their mother tongue will not reach their potential. As well, a further imperative is that at the end of their formal education in NSW students face a rigorous examination process that is founded in the printed word.

Creating Meriden's Reading Community

At the heart of Meriden's success as a reading community are the libraries – both senior and junior. Through a close partnership between the Head of Library Services and the Literacy Co-ordinator, Meriden's Libraries are vibrant centres for learning and leisure.

Meriden has put in place a range of steps and strategies to create its reading community. In the late 1990s a ten minute silent reading component was embedded in the Senior School's English program. Along with this a fortnightly lesson for reading enrichment was conducted in the library with the teacher-librarian. This gave students access and exposure to a wide range of literature and print texts. It also forged links between the classroom, the library and the playground.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a big drop off of reading in Years 9 and 10 and adolescence must surely play a part in this – some take refuge in reading whereas others succumb to popular culture. Appearances, clothing and the like become important to them and although some come back to reading in Years 11 and 12, many do not. Our corollary is that the reading comprehension level of girls in Years 9 and 10 declines. Sometimes there will be a book that will appeal to this age group, such as *Walking Naked* by Alyssa Brugman, but certain of the writing for this age group is not good and is unable to compete with the distractions of popular culture.

In order to address this issue we have surveyed this age group and found that what they wanted was more sophisticated reading material: "What our parents are reading", "What we see people reading on the train", "Popular fiction". With this in mind a conscious decision was made to purchase a number of books that appear on current best seller lists. Not only did this see a rise in the students of this group borrowing books for reading pleasure – but also the staff began to take more of an interest in the fiction collection. This modelling by staff includes the English teacher reading for ten minutes with her or his class as well as casual encounters between staff and students over what each is reading. These casual encounters are especially important because it is inclusive of staff from curriculum areas such as Physical Education, Mathematics and Science. Reading at Meriden is a community act.

To capitalise on this staff interest a series of book reviews is published via email to all school staff before the beginning of each school holiday. At least a quarter of the school staff, both academic and ancillary, request and borrow the reviewed books. The Junior School staff, situated on a separate campus, is inspired enough by the reviews to make the journey to the Senior Library in order to borrow the reviewed fiction. The Senior Library allows borrowing by both staff and students across all school holidays, even the extended Christmas vacation. Many students and staff take up this option, borrowing up to ten books to take them through this time. This shows that the school library has become the library of choice for all the school members because it is seen to be fulfilling the reading needs for the whole community.

A different group is the early adolescent who reads widely and who also likes formula fiction and will 'devour' series (eg. *Royal Diaries*, *Lemony Snicket*, *Tamora Pierce*). They might become stuck on a theme (such as *Hana's Suitcase* and Holocaust literature) and continue to read voraciously along related themes. We have instituted a reading group for these younger students in order to encourage them, an on-line book chat where they can contribute recommendations and

fostered active participation in the Premier's Reading Challenge (a government initiative to encourage reading and literacy). Literature Circles (reading for pleasure in small groups) are also part of the Year Seven program designed to support and inspire reading for pleasure as a lifelong passion.

A writers-in-residence program is conducted each August for students in Years 7 to 11. This program enables students to work with a published author and/or illustrator practising the skills and capitalising on the first-hand experience of those experts. Students enjoy these programs greatly and are inspired in their own writing. In the run-up to these programs students study the works of the visiting authors so they are well prepared with questions that reflect their developing critical awareness of texts.

For the past four years we have conducted literary luncheons with guest speakers. This has also proven to be an opportunity that strengthens connections between staff from wider curriculum areas than English and students. The students enjoy being part of what is basically an adult concept and respond positively to the excitement of a meal and a speaker. Preliminary instruction has helped out with the students' awareness of protocol and procedure and they benefit from the added pleasure of having a famous writer sitting with them for lunch. The students have always taken the opportunity to ask intelligent questions and to learn from the authors. Feedback from these days has been extremely positive and a number of parents have appreciated the fact that their daughters have been experiencing the 'social side' of reading.

Meriden has begun to build a collection of resources and literature in languages other than English. The concept behind this is that the strengthening of a student's first language enables that student to learn a second language more competently and confidently. The NESB student who can read the class text, for example *Jane Eyre*, in her own language, is far more able to take part in classroom discussion than the student who has painfully and painstakingly worked her way through a complicated classic with a language dictionary. These students are also better able to write about the texts studied in common assessment tasks (that are always English based) as they have a real understanding of the novel or fiction work.

As well as sourcing class texts in languages other than English the library has bought popular fiction in a variety of languages. A student was delighted to pick up not only *The Da Vinci Code* in Korean, but also Phillip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (which had been a class text she had studied) so her mother could read them and they could discuss these together. The excitement of even this one student made the purchases worthwhile. While this collection is in its infancy it will continue to grow due to its popularity. Once again the library has catered for the wider Meriden community.

In the Junior School parents and grandparents from a variety of different backgrounds come in and read picture books to our younger students. For example the classic 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' is read to the girls in a range of languages including Korean, Tamil, Chinese, Greek, French, amongst others. The benefits of this activity are twofold: firstly is that it supports the language and cultural background of NESB students; secondly it fosters acceptance and harmony between cultures.

Our library is very much a library for the wider community. Many of our students not only borrow for themselves but their parents or siblings. One girl is borrowing Agatha Christie for her mother and another has a brother now reading our Matthew Reillys. A mother of another student has used our library as her first-stop place for research for her own course assignment!

Promotion is an important part of the successful reading community at Meriden. 'Book of the Week' is an accepted part of weekly assembly and the queue for the promoted book is pleasing. Students were heard recently suggesting a book to another student because they remembered it

being promoted on assembly over a year ago. Students accept that reading promotion is as valid as sports or music. As well both Junior and Senior Librarians contribute to the school's fortnightly newsletter with items that advertise the activities and resources of the libraries.

The importance of literature is also celebrated in other ways. Competitions, celebrations and displays in the library also promote literature. For example, there are activities on Shakespeare's birthday with all age groups (students to staff) taking part. During specialist subject weeks, such as Maths or Science, special displays and activities reinforce the library as a place for research and non-fiction is also promoted as being appropriate for leisure-reading. Major cultural festivals such as Chinese New year or the Moon Festival are also celebrated in the library with fun activities thereby promoting the library as a busy, exciting place that has something to offer each and every student. At Meriden the library is *the* place to be!

Book Week is an important celebration in NSW and Australia. During this week in August many special events take place state wide including festivals and the judging of the best books for young people across a wide field of candidates. The winners of the Best Picture Book etc are guaranteed increased sales of their books; such is the standing that this week of celebrations has in the community. At Meriden there is a competition where students try to pick the winning books in each category and this is well supported by all the staff who not only bring their classes but take part themselves. Prizes are awarded for this competition during a Book Week Chapel service which celebrates the importance of the written word. The library is brightly decorated in keeping with the Children's Book Council's nominated theme. During this week Kindergarten students visit the Senior School to have picture books read to them by senior students. As well a large Book Fair is held in the Junior School to which extended family is invited to celebrate the importance of books. Thousands of dollars worth of books are sold to students at this fair.

A service the library offers to staff and senior students is the major daily newspaper at a special student price. This brings both those groups to the library each day to collect their paper and enables a relationship to be built with them by the library staff. The library's DVD collection is housed in the same place as the newspaper pick up, so it too is used widely by the senior school staff and is further inducement to come into the library.

The fiction section in the senior library is an attractive and comfortable area where students like to sit and read and staff conduct discussions with small groups of students. A few years ago there was no designated area of fiction in which to read comfortably and this was seen as a discouragement to reading. An opportunity for some real life learning then presented itself. Money was obtained from a parent group to buy new furniture and a year 9 technology class was asked to redesign the fiction area to create an attractive and inviting space complete with new furniture and re-arranged shelving. The technology class conducted a survey of students to determine the vision and needs of the student body and then they submitted designs complete with specifications for furniture and layout. The best design was then implemented and the area was re-organised to create an inviting and appealing space for students and staff to use. New books are displayed around this area and coffee table books are rotated.

Year 7 students work with the Teacher-Librarian on a three term program called Reading and Research. This program introduces the students, new to high school, to the skills that are needed for senior work. The students learn how to complete research assignments, how to evaluate web sites, how to find a good book to read, how to write a book review and complete a bibliography and many other skills. These lessons are always conducted in the library and in this way the students are connected to the library and its services right from the start of their high school career and come to view it as the heart of the school. Many students stay after school to research and to read as the library is open to 5.30pm.

Year six students are situated on a separate junior school campus ten minutes from the senior school. An extension English class of twelve year 6 students comes up to the high school library each school day to undertake an enrichment English course with the Head of Literacy. As well the year 6 classes in general come to the senior library to work on particular research assignments despite having their own junior school library. These students benefit enormously from coming to use the senior library facilities. Not only do they have access to a wider range of resources but they also have the opportunity to interact with the older students using the library. This ensures that their transition to the senior school is a smooth one the following year because they are already accustomed to the senior campus and have met some of the older students. As well they are exposed to the research and study practices of the senior girls and to the senior staff as they come in and out of the library. All of this casual interaction helps the girls to settle in easily and well the following year.

At lunchtime the library is busy with girls reading, researching, finishing homework, completing crossword puzzles and playing chess and scrabble. It is an intense and often noisy time but it is also lively and vibrant and a place where the students want to congregate. They peruse the new books, search among the existing collection and ask for help with something good to read. All the four library staff read widely from the collection and are able to recommend books to students. The students are able to request books to be added to the collection and if their request is bought they have the pleasure of being the first to borrow that book. The year 7 students are able to recommend books on the Meriden intranet in the "Year 7 Recommends" section and also to take part in "Meriden Reads", our online book club which takes contributions from all the Meriden community including parents and former students.

A Book Club exists for girls in the junior years. This meets once a fortnight and discusses themes such as "Movie or Book, which is better", "the most irritating female character in literature", "my favourite picture book" and other topics. The original group of girls have progressed right through the school and are now in university but they still meet together with staff and discuss books. We are very pleased that it was the library that first provided the students with this opportunity to explore literature and books in a lively and social way.

The Junior and Senior School Library staff meets once a week over morning tea. Each session provides time for a professional development topic as well as informal sharing about the activities of the week. Joint projects are planned such as the juniors using the senior library for specific items or for the expansion of the multilingual books. Common goals are reinforced and enthusiasm generated. One of the problems of library staff in schools, that of isolation, is overcome in this fashion as staff feel part of a wider faculty. These meetings are as important for morale building as they are for learning and sharing.

All of these measures have come together to help create a community that values reading and the printed word. One of the end results of this has been the school's excellent marks in the state wide final high school examination, the Higher School Certificate, particularly in English. As well the younger students are rated consistently above the state average in all aspects of literacy in state wide standardised testing.

A further result is in seeing the pleasure that reading brings to young people. It is wonderful to see young minds set on fire by the ideas they have read in books. An example of this is the Year 7's reading of a small holocaust story "Hana's Suitcase" by Karen Levine. Before any formal assignments were even set by the staff, students were researching the background to the story. This story had whetted their appetite, so they set out on a journey of discovery; they had to know the facts.

The value that reading can bring to young people is immeasurable. It enlightens, it inspires, it comforts, it develops critical thinking and it entertains. Reading for information and pleasure is as vital a skill as ever in this technological age and it should never be downplayed in school libraries and curriculum or given second place to technology.

Essentially Meriden's libraries are the heart of our learning community. Traditional views of the library being a place for the misfit and playground recluse do not hold true for us. Certainly these students do find haven in our libraries but because it is such a social place they are able to connect with others and find acceptance and friendship. Our girls and staff interact in the library – it is place where we meet, we talk, we engage. It is our centre for communication, for learning, for connectedness.

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