

A Richer Read: Supporting Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper will describe an enrichment reading program that has been designed to expand the reading experiences of highly able students. The program supports students to improve their ability to engage critically with a text, to compare and contrast texts, and to evaluate them in light of set criteria. This enrichment reading program has been offered for the past seven years to talented readers from years five to ten at Genazzano FCJ College. This paper will also report on the results of a survey of all participants who undertook the program in 2015.

Keywords: Reading, Critical Analysis, Enrichment, Engagement

Introduction

This program is built around the novels shortlisted in the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards in the younger and older readers categories. The 'judging' takes the form of analysis, debate and evaluation in relation to set criteria and is led by a teacher-librarian who has previously served as a CBCA judge. The criteria are taken from the official CBCA Book of the Year Awards Policy Handbook used by the Australia-wide adult judging panel that allocates the awards each year. The criteria strongly advocate the recognition of literary merit and, in engaging with this criterion, the students are challenged to consider the novels through a critical lens. The criteria also informs the vocabulary with which the students evaluate and discuss the texts during the program, introducing them to ways of comparing and talking about texts with their peers.

The process followed by the student reading enrichment groups replicates, in part, the formal CBCA judging process and, in so doing, offers talented readers the chance to discuss and evaluate texts in a supported environment that fosters the value of reading and critical discussion. This has flow-on benefits to learning of all kinds throughout the school, but is particularly evident in the way it impacts upon the college's wider reading program and contributes to the vibrant reading culture of the college community.

The Program

The program was established at Genazzano FCJ College in 2009. Before this, as a consultant, I had worked with a variety of schools recreating a version of the judging process using picture books as an enrichment activity to support literacy development. My work as a CBCA judge in 2006/7 had led me to reflect on how valuable the process of judging was on one's own development as a reader and I felt there was value in considering how the beneficial aspects of the process could be used with other readers. The experiences in schools using the judging criteria of the CBCA to engage analytically with the award-winning picture books had been positive and I felt there were further opportunities in the model worth exploring.

In only the first few weeks of my new role as Head of Library Services at Genazzano FCJ College a chance conversation led to me offering up the concept as a model that could be developed. I had met with one of the members of the Learning Enhancement team at Genazzano, Eileen Bendall, and Eileen has shared that she was looking for an activity to enrich the reading experiences of a group of particularly talented year eight students. I suggested a version of this activity might work well. Since that first year, the program has grown to involve groups of students from years five, six, eight, nine and ten, with over 70 students involved in the program each year.

The program is conducted by the library service and is supported through a strong collaboration with the Learning Enhancement Department of the College. The program is one of a suite of offerings that the Learning Enhancement team offer in an attempt to enrich the opportunities of gifted and talented students at the college. The program has the full support of the English Faculty, and teachers in this area regularly recommend students to be considered for invitation to the program.

At each of the year levels the learning enhancement teacher identifies a group of around a dozen girls that have scored highly on testing for reading and comprehension ability. These students are then invited to participate in the program. If a student has participated in an earlier year and successfully completed all of the reading, they are in the first group of students considered for participation the following year. Places are limited and it is often difficult to keep the groups to a manageable size.

The students are withdrawn from class around the time of the CBCA shortlist announcement in April/May for an initial meeting to explain the process. They are given a copy of the criteria from the judge's handbook, the dates involved in the process, and some key terminology as well as a list of the shortlisted titles. Years five and six read the six younger readers shortlisted titles, and years 8, 9 and 10 read the six titles in the older readers category. The students, with my prompting, explore the terminology in the judging criteria, discussing what literary merit means and what elements they need to consider that contribute towards their judgments. This criteria is taken from the *CBCA Awards Book of the Year Awards Policy* (2015). We begin with this statement from the 'criteria for categories':

'The Children's Book Council of Australia Awards are for books with an implied readership under the age of eighteen. The Judges assess entries primarily for outstanding literary merit, including cohesiveness in significant literary elements; language chosen for its appropriateness to the theme and style of the work with proper regard to the aesthetic qualities of language; and originality in the treatment of literary elements as they apply to the form of the work. Judges also consider quality of illustrations, book design, production, printing and binding' (*CBCA Book of the Year Awards Policy*, 2015).

In response to this the students discuss the books they have read and brainstorm what factors they think contribute towards literary merit, breaking down the paragraph and considering the various phrases.

A permission letter is sent home to parents and the students cannot participate unless this is signed and returned. The letter states that some of the books may have mature content. This is particularly critical for the students in years eight to ten who are reading the older readers category where the books may be written for a readership up to the age of eighteen. Some of these texts may contain mature content and we recognize that the ability to handle confronting content varies from student to student, regardless of reading ability.

Before the initial meetings, the library purchases multiple copies of the shortlisted titles. The number required has grown with the program, and girls are encouraged to acquire the books from public libraries if they can, to relieve the strain on the library collection. Over the next few months, until early August, the students read the six shortlisted titles in their category. They must get each book marked off as read because reading all six titles is a requirement for participating in the final judging meeting. As they collect books and have their name marked off, I engage them in conversation about what they have just read, constantly refocusing the students on the criteria for the judging discussions. They are also encouraged to discuss the titles with the others in the group and to keep notes on their thoughts and ideas about the texts. They are encouraged to use the terminology we have discussed in relation to literary merit in their notes and to record evidence or examples from their reading to support their views. The students are given a bookmark that lists important dates for the program and the following terms:

- Language
- Descriptive elements
- Plot
- Originality
- Story construction
- Book design
- Clarity
- Audience appeal
- Characterisation
- Story arc
- Dialogue
- Consistency
- Illustration
- Metaphor
- Themes

This list gives the students terminology to consider while they read and they are encouraged to use these terms in the judging discussion. This list has grown out of the descriptions in the CBCA handbook and the discussions about literary merit held by groups in the past. The list helps to focus the students and it is most pleasing to find them using these terms in the final judging. For the 2016 program, I have decided to not only give the students the list of terms but also definitions of those terms to assist them in developing their understanding of each term and how it relates to their critical reflections.

Over the years, I have developed a web presence to further engage the students. Initially, this was a blog and now it is a page on our library website. These forums allow for comment and interaction. This approach has had limited impact but has been taken up by some of the younger students involved in the program. During the 2016 process, I plan to add occasional 'catch ups' with the students during their wider reading classes to help them remain focused on the needs of the program.

In August, just before CBCA Book Week and the adult judge's award announcements, each year level group participates in a judging meeting. The time available for this has diminished over time, but we have maintained the view that we need at least two hours for the discussion to be meaningful. Students are withdrawn from class but must make up any class work missed. They bring any notes they have made and come prepared to argue for the titles they feel hold the most literary merit. Language used must reflect the judging criteria, and all remarks must be justified by reference to the text. As in the CBCA judges' room, every 'judge' has a chance to speak about each title and the voting is a silent ballot with a rating system. These meetings are constructive, engaging and very enjoyable. After the votes are cast, we discuss which books the students think might best appeal to their year level. This encourages the students to consider the differences between popularity and literary merit, and enables the students to consider the different ways they think about books and the reading experience. We also discuss what the students think the adult judges will have chosen as the winner. Across the seven years of the program's operation, the students have only rarely agreed with the adult judges as to what titles deserve the top awards. They have, on occasion, correctly suggested what the adults will choose as the best title. This has led to very interesting discussions about how adults perceive children's and young adult titles, and why adults' views might be different to their own.

Facilitator Role

Throughout the program, I encourage and support each group of readers, while attempting to not influence their choices. I read as many of the twelve texts as I can, and will mediate in

a stalled discussion, but I do not offer an opinion until after the students have completed their judging, if at all.

Throughout, I see my role as that of a 'enabling adult' (Chambers, 1991) 'In summary, the ideal enabling adult is:

- supportive;
- perceptive;
- broad minded;
- a fellow reader;
- knowledgeable about their collection;
- generally widely read;
- knowledgeable of their students, their needs, and interests;
- a good listener;
- a good modeler of response and conversation;
- a good facilitator' (La Marca and Macintyre, 2006, p.27)

This list relates to the enabling adult's role in the creation of a reading environment, but it also serves to clearly elaborate the teacher-librarian's role in our enrichment program.

Engagement

The students who participate in this program are all highly able readers, but this does not necessarily mean that they are keen, engaged readers; most are, but not all. Engagement is encouraged amongst the students by supporting them to view the shortlisted texts through a critical lens. Greater understanding can lead to engagement and enthusiasm for the process. This deeper understanding of the texts is enriched through debate with their peers. Many years ago, the commentator Margaret Meek suggested the task of teachers was to 'make skillful powerful readers who come to understand not only meaning but also the force of texts' (Meek, 1988, p.40). Offering the students the opportunity to analyse, reflect and discuss with peers who have read the same group of literary texts creates powerful readers who learn from each other. Engagement is fostered by 'providing active negotiations with reading materials, so that students are likely to continue to read with success, and employ critical and analytical skills' (La Marca & Macintyre, 2006, p.19). The students' responses to the survey in 2015 bear out this assertion.

Curriculum Relevance

The language and literature strands of the Australian English Curriculum outlined by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) contain many content

descriptors that clearly align with the objectives and outcomes of the CBCA enrichment program. For example, from the Year Eight Strand on Literature for the content descriptor - Responding to Literature, students are required to: 'Share, reflect on, clarify and evaluate opinions and arguments about aspects of literary texts (ACELT1627)' (ACARA, 2010). From the Year Nine Strand on Language the content descriptor Text Structure and Organisation states: 'Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects (ACELA1553)' (ACARA, 2010). And from the Year Ten content descriptor - Responding to Literature in the Literature Strand, we are informed that students are required to: 'Reflect on, extend, endorse or refute others' interpretations of and responses to literature (ACELT1640)' (ACARA, 2010).

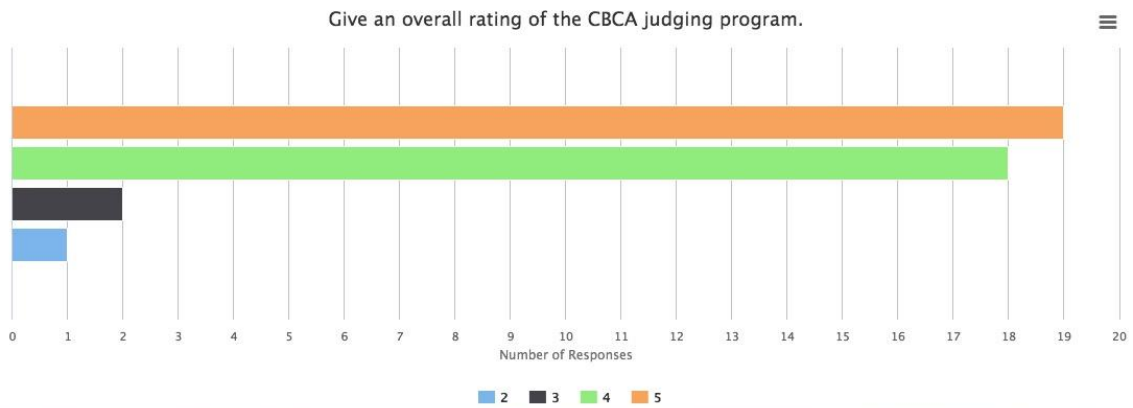
All of these content descriptors are enacted by the activities undertaken in the enrichment program, so this is only a sample. A further analysis of the strands and content descriptors of the Australian Curriculum clearly demonstrate that the program supports and enriches the ACARA's English Curriculum. It is for this reason that the program has the full support of the English faculty and the Deputy Principal - Curriculum, Standards and Innovation at the college.

2015 Survey Results

The survey results are significant, as they report on the students' considered opinions about the program. At the end of the program for 2015, the students were asked to fill in a simple survey created in the libguide platform used by our library service. Forty students from years five to ten completed the survey. Illness, absence and interruption meant not all participants were able to complete the survey, but the majority did. While some students had completed the program for the first time in 2015, many of the students, particularly those in year ten, had participated in the program over a number of years.

The first question asked the students to rate the overall program – thirty-seven of the forty students thought the program was either very good or fantastic, the most common response was given by nineteen students who rated the program 'fantastic'.

Table 1: Overall Rating of the CBCA Program

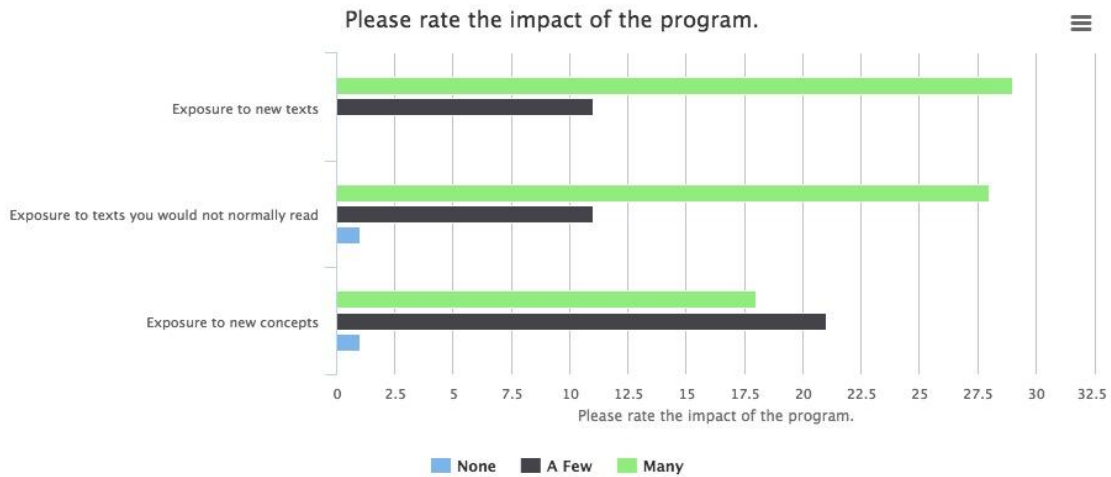


(Response category descriptors: 1= Not Enjoyable, 2= Okay (blue), 3= Good (green), 4 = Very Good, 5= Fantastic! (orange))

The students clearly enjoyed the activity. Since the students chosen to participate in the program were all highly able readers, the majority of them read often for pleasure, one could assume that they would find pleasure in most reading activities. Therefore this response is not unexpected. Nevertheless, the program did require them to read six titles in only a few months and to engage with a set agenda – it was a great deal more than just reading for pleasure alone. The students’ responses indicate that the direction to read set texts, and the addition of analysis, did not mar the pleasure gained from reading; one could argue it may have even enhanced it.

Of further interest was the students’ responses to the other questions in the survey that clearly indicated the power of the program to enrich reading analysis skills. The second question asked students to rate three aspects of the enrichment program: exposure to new texts, exposure to texts they would not normally read and exposure to new concepts.

Table 2: The Impact of the Program

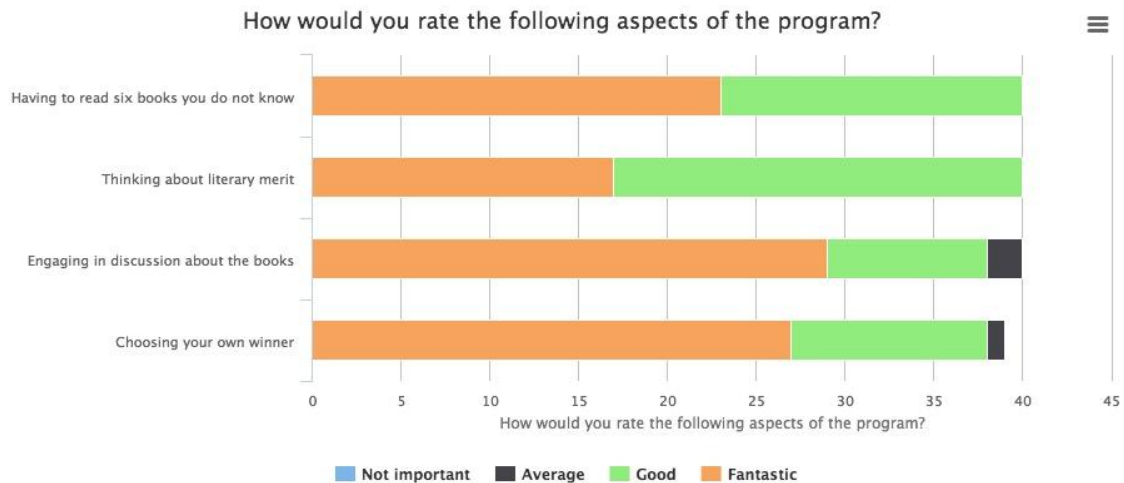


These responses indicate that the overwhelming majority of students have been exposed through the program to many new books as well as books they would not normally read. As one of the program’s main aims is to enrich the reading experiences of the students beyond their current ability and comfort zone, this result is pleasing.

The third response, exposure to new concepts, indicates that the vast majority were exposed to at least a few new concepts and almost half of the students felt they were exposed to many new concepts. As all of the concepts discussed are extremely relevant to their English studies, this suggests the value of just such an intensive activity with a very structured focus as this one. It is also a good example of how targeted discussion can elucidate understanding of concepts without the need for formal assessment or testing.

The third part of the survey asked students to comment on four particular aspects of the program – having to read six books they did not know, thinking about literary merit, engaging in discussion, and choosing their own winners. The results are displayed in the graph below.

Table 3: Ratings of Particular Aspects of the Program



Again, the responses are overwhelmingly positive. Reading the six books and choosing a winner were rated as fantastic activities by more than half of the students involved. Thinking about literary merit rated the lowest, with seventeen students rating it a fantastic activity, while twenty-three found it 'good'. Not a negative response at all, but a lower score than the other categories attracted. This could be because this part of the activity is the most taxing – asking the girls to engage with specific criteria and terminology and expecting them to compare and contrast while using evidence from the text to defend their assertions. This is difficult, and it is a testament to the style of the activity and the way this was approached, that the students found it enjoyable at all.

Notably, more than two thirds of the students found the discussion 'fantastic', a clear indication of the power of talk in relation to texts, a factor noted by many commentators in the field.

Discussion or 'Book Gossip'

Aidan Chambers, in his book *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk* (1993), stresses the importance of talk to the growth of 'discriminating, thoughtful, pleasure-taking readers' (p. 9). He uses the phrase 'book gossip' to describe what it is that readers do when they get together with other readers to consider a book that they have read.

There is also a great deal of pleasure to be found in 'book gossip'. Anyone who has ever been involved in an animated discussion about a book that they feel strongly about can recall the pleasure that can be gained from engaging with the ideas, structure or language of a good book. Talking about it, constructing arguments, and putting views forward to the group is fun. The experience can also be revelatory as we discover things we did not think of, or begin to view a book in a different way.

In my experience as a CBCA judge, the times when the judges' room for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards is firing, when every one of the eight judges is engaged and on task, is exactly what it is like; a wonderful example of targeted, constructive 'book gossip'. It was this engaging experience, this level of analysis and knowledge building that I have sought for my students in developing a program that replicates the judging process. Like Chambers, I saw value in talk within a defined structure to aid and extend engagement, understanding and enjoyment, and I was particularly interested in assisting students to read in a targeted way and engage with set criteria, in this case the CBCA judging criteria.

Guthrie and Alvermann, in their book *Engaged Reading*, contend that:

....'In isolation, intrinsic motivational goals cannot sustain engagement in reading...Students who are socially inclined, talk with their friends, share books, and discuss their writing are more likely to become avid readers. Thus, motivations for reading cannot be considered in isolation from their social and cultural contexts' (Guthrie and Alvermann in Guthrie and Alvermann, 1999, p.24).

This social context of reading was very evident in our enrichment program. The judging groups brought capable readers from across a year level together in a forum that celebrated their reading experiences, cementing alliances and the sharing of insights in a very powerful way. The students were able to build on the experience of the group and collectively increase understanding. One student said of the discussion 'as we spoke I think we all realised something new about the book'.

Student Long Answers

To complete the survey students were then given three opportunities to describe their experience of the program in their own words. The first question they were asked was – 'Did the program impact upon your understanding of literary merit? Please describe why or why not'.

This question garnered some very sophisticated and thoughtful responses and also demonstrated concrete ways that the program has impacted on learning. There were no negative responses. The following is a sample of the responses:

- This program has definitely helped me to understand what literary merit means and how many different aspects of a book there are. I have definitely learnt more about novels and how much needs to be learnt about when both reading and writing.

- It enhanced my understanding of this term and increased the thought and consideration I complete when reading.
- I learned to look at books in a different way. Rather than deciding whether I enjoyed it or not, I was focused on how well specific elements were written.
- Firstly I finally understand what literary merit is, and how to critique a book in a good way, and not critique it for stupid little things. I am a more perceptive reader now, and understand the intricacies of books a bit more (and of the publishing and editing business).
- Yes because we spoke about things I usually wouldn't think about when reading a book.
- It definitely did for me, it gave me a new perspective on books and prompted me to approach reading in a new way. I saw different sides of a book than I usually would.

The impact of the program is extraordinary. The participants have clearly had their approach to their reading altered, if only briefly, and there is little doubt they have been stimulated to consider reading from different points of view and to think about the way words, structure and style work upon the reader to evoke a response. This richer reading experience has improved their capability to think critically about texts.

The second long answer question allowed the students to reflect on their own views about how their abilities might have been influenced. It asked: 'Did the program impact upon your reading ability in any way? Please describe'. Six students out of the 40 answered no, they thought their abilities were not impacted upon in any way. The remaining responses were all positive, though the students interpreted the phrase 'reading ability' differently.

A number of students commented that the program helped them to improve the speed at which they read. A large number also commented on how the program exposed them to new and different texts, from different genres, often outside of their usual reading comfort zone.

The following sample reflect the range of other responses:

- I don't think it impacted my reading ability, however, I do think it impacted my analytical ability and improved how I regard books.
- I think it developed my reading skills because it exposed me to more complicated texts.
- I think it has. This program has exposed me to different styles and genres of books that I wouldn't normally read. Some books we have read have been quite unusual and they have challenged me and definitely improved my reading.
- It did because it encouraged me to look at books in greater detail.

- It enabled me to look past the literal meaning of the book into symbolism and metaphors.
- It made me look at books in a different way.
- The program has exposed me to new genres and has forced me to read books which I would not normally pick up. This has been positive as I've enjoyed many of the books.
- Yes because I have learnt new ways to understand books and improve my learning.
- It opened me up to different concepts, themes and genres.
- Yes, helped comprehension skills
- Yes, I now am more critical and understanding of books. I have been moved to read books that I would not traditionally read, and delve into genres which I would never have read without this program.
- Yes, it increased the range of books I read, time I take reading, and how I think about books.
- I learnt to pay more attention to the little details and the underlying messages in the books.
- Yes, made me grow as a reader.

Critical Analysis

From the students' responses, it is clear that the program has assisted students in seeing their reading in a different light. Being asked to look at the texts with set criteria in mind has honed students' ability to think analytically. Most importantly the students' confidence in their abilities has increased, as well as seeing themselves as readers, the program encourage them to consider themselves judges. The process in the student judging meetings had each student give their opinion about each book. In doing so, they were attempting to address the criteria and also convince their fellow students that their views were worth considering, with evidence to justify their opinions. This process helped the students to see themselves as critical readers it could be suggested that it also assisted in the development of their public speaking and conversational skills as well as their skills in creating and presenting an argument.

Moving Out of Their Comfort Zone

As evidenced by the students' comments in the list above, many students were moved out of their usual reading comfort zone by the program. To complete the activity, students are required to read the six books in the appropriate category for their age. They must read them all, regardless of whether the books are ones they would normally read or not. This results in students having to read books in genres they would not normally ever pick up and they may also have to read books more appropriate to a different gender or a different age group, as the award category span is broad.

This outcome of the program is one of the most rewarding. Over the seven years of the program's operation it has been gratifying to see students find reading experiences that they really enjoyed in areas that they never would have explored. For some readers, this has meant finding new reading opportunities opened up to them, experiences they may never have explored otherwise.

Transferable Skills

One particularly full comment from a student touched on a range of benefits of the program. The student said:

Yes, this program definitely impacted on my understanding of literary merit - hearing other's insights on each book in comparison to my own opinion. I also learnt to look at books through different eyes, perhaps to not only take into consideration my own likes, but also looking at it from another. These skills are also transferable to subjects such as English, and it gives a chance to connect to peers with a similar level of ability.

The student recognised the benefit of close analysis to their own reading experience, but also went on to comment on how skills from the program are transferable to other areas of study. The ability to analyse texts, the skill of creating an argument and using supporting evidence, and the skills of listening to others and effectively communicating one's own ideas are all to be found within the program. Benefits have also been noted by the teacher-librarians who work in our reading program, Sandra Hardinge, a longstanding member of staff, said:

I have noticed there is a positive flow-on effect in our R.O.A.D. (Reading Opens All Doors) classes when one or more students have taken part in the Reading Enrichment program. These girls are happy to discuss the novels they have read and demonstrate the deeper appreciation of language and story that they have gained in the program. They share ideas about their reading with the whole class in ROAD. This encourages other class members to look at a novel from a different perspective and, so, we often develop a higher level of discussion with other members of the class participating and everyone benefiting from the discussion (Hardinge, 2016).

Community of Readers

As well as the impact on discussion in our wider reading classes, our staff have also witnessed a flow on from the program to our work in creating a community of readers.

One of the great pleasures of being a reader that we want our young readers to experience is to recognise that you belong to a community of like-minded people across local communities, states, countries and continents. Schools formally and informally, consciously and unconsciously, communicate how they value a community of readers and the successful relationships at its heart. (La Marca and Macintyre, 2006, p.57)

The culture of reading, the idea that reading is pleasurable and worthwhile, is an intrinsic part of the fabric of our school and the enrichment program supports and extends this perception. Beyond our wider reading classes from years five to ten, we offer a range of student book clubs, reading related competitions and activities to the college community and the enrichment program helps feed an interest in these initiatives.

“Anything to Add?”

For the final question of the short survey, the students were asked: ‘Is there anything you’d like to add?’ This open question gleaned a range of interesting responses from a number of students. Many chose not to respond at all. I presume, they had nothing to add. A number of students suggested more time for discussion and also for a longer period of thinking. Such suggestions are difficult to act upon due to the time constraints imposed by curriculum requirements. It would be hard to negotiate more time out of class for discussion. Then length of time the students have for reading and thinking is also constrained. While the program focuses on the shortlist of the CBCA we must work within their timeline of announcement, of the shortlist in April/May and the winners in August.

Amongst the other comments were students suggesting that we invite an author of one of the titles in order to get a different perspective on the text. This is a very interesting suggestion that we hope to act upon in the future. We also had the following thoughtful suggestions:

- I would like a list of suggestions of books like the ones we just read to be made available if we really liked them.
- Maybe doing a version where we read American books?
- Maybe have a kind of debating aspect of it, having to pitch your opinions directly against others.

Two of the most endearing comments offered by the students in the last section of the survey demonstrate the extent to which students enjoyed the program and also the power of an activity such as this to enable students to fully embrace the importance of reading in their lives. The students said:

- Thank you very much for me being invited to do this, I really enjoyed it and I can't wait to do it next year.
- I love this program and I absolutely LOVE LOVE LOVE reading!

In Conclusion

The reading enrichment program at Genazzano has operated very successfully since its inception seven years ago. It has grown considerably and is highly regarded within our community. We continue to modify what is offered, improving the experience of the students and enriching their understanding of the programs analytical approach. Our aim has always been to offer our students a richer reading experience within a community culture that values reading of all kinds. The aim is to offer the students opportunities to extend their understanding at the same time as offering them an activity that is intrinsically engaging and enjoyable. The anecdotal evidence and the responses gathered in the small survey in 2015, clearly indicate that we are achieving our aims.

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