Chapter 1
Is there a problem?

The first step in addressing any problem is admitting that there is a problem. The reality is that the Connors and Emilys do exist in all schools across all jurisdictions. Today, more and more secondary schools request training workshops on how to support struggling readers. Ten years ago, they did not see this as their issue. They were discipline experts and that is what they taught. They often scoffed at the suggestion that they were teachers of literacy and held tight to their beliefs that all students enter high school equipped to read the textbook. When they defined reading, they equated it with sounding fluent when reading aloud (often judged in round-robin experiences). In as much as their definitions were limited so were the strategies used to support students struggling to read.

Fortunately, more and more secondary schools care to catch students who have ‘fallen through the gaps’; they know that without adequate reading skills, students cannot comprehend their discipline-specific texts. They have broadened their understanding of reading to include comprehension rather than focus on the ‘read aloud’ performance of students. They also understand that if they do not reach these students, there is no-one waiting in line to offer support. For most secondary students, it is their last chance. It begs the question – Why are more and more students entering high school struggling to read? Who, if anyone, previously intervened on behalf of the student? Who answered their parents’ concerns? How were they not identified and offered effective support prior to Year 7? What have these students been doing on a daily basis in the K–6 classrooms? There can be no excuses. The following observations have been made in several published reports.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), Australia, 2011 to 2012 (reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013) claims that around 3.7% (620,000) of Australians aged 15 to 74 years have literacy skills below Level 1, a further 10% (1.7 million) at Level 1, 30% (5.0 million) at Level 2, 38% (6.3 million) at Level 3, 14% (2.4 million) at Level 4, and 1.2% (200,000) at Level 5. Overall, 44% (3.7 million) of men and 45% (3.7 million) of women have literacy skills at Level 2 or below. At Level 1,
the reader is required to recognise basic vocabulary, determine the meaning of sentences, and read a paragraph of text. At Level 2, the reader is required to match text and information, paraphrase or make low-level inferences.

- The *Closing the Gap Report* 2015 shows that between 2008 and 2014 the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standards in reading and numeracy has shown no statistically significant improvement nationally in any of the eight measures (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in reading and numeracy). The 2014 Naplan Test results show that only 2 out of 10 children in very remote parts of the NT are achieving at or above the minimum standard for reading in Year 3. This drops to only 1 out of 10 by the time a child reaches Year 9. *OECD’s, Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* reports that there is about 2.5 years gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous literacy rates in Australia.

- In the United States, the majority of students leave high school without the advanced reading and writing skills necessary to succeed in college or in a career. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009), claims that more than 60% of twelfth-grade students score below the proficient level in reading achievement, and 27% scored below the basic level in reading.

- An estimated 32 million adults in the USA – about one in seven – are saddled with such low literacy levels that it would be tough for them to read anything more challenging than a children’s picture book or to understand a medication’s side effects listed on a pill bottle. (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2009)

On one level there are questions pertaining to students like Connor and Emily who for many reasons fail to make satisfactory benchmarks in reading. On another level, there are questions that relate to resistant (aliterate) students --those who can read but choose not to. Experts in the field of reading motivation identify the lack of student engagement with literacy as one of the most severe crises of our schools (Guthrie, 2004). Why do so many students avoid reading, or claim to not like it? Why do students look mystified when asked the name of the last book they read and enjoyed? Why do they not see reading as meaningful in their lives? Why do students lose interest in reading as they get older? Research evidence reinforces the decline in student’s attitudes to and enjoyment of reading.


- Thirty per cent of Australian children like reading, 52% somewhat like reading and 19% do not like reading. The Australian percentages were similar to international averages. (Thomson et. al., 2012)
Children enjoy reading less as they become older (Clark, Osborne & Akerman, 2008; Clark & Douglas, 2011).

Highest percentage of children who read for pleasure is in the 9 to 11 age group. A comparison of ABS statistics from 2003 to 2012 also shows that the decline in leisure reading in this age group has been less, while the highest decline has occurred amongst the 12- to 14-year-old age group (ABS statistics, 2012)

A greater proportion of girls (92%) than boys (83%) enjoy reading at home. (The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, LSAC, 2012)

Young children from households with more than 30 books are more likely to enjoy reading several years later compared to children who live in households with fewer than 30 books. (LSAC, 2012)

Children with high socioeconomic status are more likely to enjoy reading at home (just under 75%) compared to only 49% of children with low socioeconomic status. (LSAC, 2012)

Teens are reading less and for shorter periods of time and reading is a declining activity. (‘To Read or Not to Read’, National Endowment of the Arts, 2007)

Fewer Indigenous students like or feel confident in reading, compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Monitoring Australian Year 4 student achievement internationally:2012. p.83)

Undeniably, there is a problem; a problem that needs a concerted effort on behalf of students by teachers, principals, parents, policy makers, politicians and communities working together.

When reading is a problem

Research identifies three particular subgroups of readers for whom reading is a problem.

Struggling readers

While research refers to these students as ‘struggling’, Miller (2009) refers to them as ‘developing’ and her label is hopeful, encouraging and implies that there is potential for growth. Emily and Connor fall into this category of readers. They are the readers who, for whatever reason, are not reading at grade level. Students like Emily and Connor usually stop receiving support and assistance beyond Grade 3.

With the support of concerned parents, they go on a treadmill of ‘possible solutions’ including seeking out interventions, tutors and labels. Understandably,
as the problem persists, their level of engagement decreases. Emily and Connor do not have effective strategies for reading, have limited comprehension and as a consequence ‘doing school’ becomes hard. Their self-perceptions are usually battered and feelings of anxiety are ever present. For most, it takes tremendous resilience to turn up to school on a daily basis to go through the motions of completing worksheets, assignments, and reading tasks (Refer to the case study of Olivia that follows).

Olivia, in Grade 4 was a struggling reader. She looked and acted defeated. At our first meeting, she read gibberish when asked to read a book below her instructional level. When I asked her to write six sight words – she wrote strings of random letters. Bnchu for school; hir for boy. I found her mother waiting in a nearby room. I explained my concerns and asked if it was possible that she believed she was ‘dumb or stupid’. Her mother acquiesced and described how Olivia’s father constantly told her she was stupid and while everyone wanted to go places with her younger brighter sister, no one asked her along. Why would Olivia succeed at reading? She was already defeated as a learner.

Olivia did succeed and her success was linked to her enthusiasm for Little Athletics – the only activity not attended by her sister. She photographed her friends, scrapped-booked events, wrote captions and built her literacy success around something she valued. Little Athletics gave her reason to shine.

‘Aliterate’ readers

These readers can read but choose not to read. They are reluctant, unmotivated and disinterested. Increasingly, the system is producing more and more ‘aliterate’ students – students leaving school not reading. These students’ disdain for reading is ‘justified’ in terms of a hodgepodge of factors – poverty, lack of parental education or support, impoverished literacy environments at home, second-language issues, unrealistic parental expectations, and the easy availability of other entertainment options (such as sport and technology) that entice them away from reading.

Regardless, students are reading less for pleasure and Gallagher (2009, p. 2) sees it as ‘readicide’: ‘the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in school’.

What causes ‘readicide’? Gallagher (2009) suggests the following:

■ schools valuing the development of test-takers more than they value the development of readers
■ schools limiting authentic reading experiences
Is there a problem?

- teachers over teaching books
- teachers under teaching books.

‘Aliterate’ readers read the minimal amount to pass the test or complete the assignment. They develop strategies to manipulate the system; for example, watch the movie, read summaries, and rely on others. For them, reading is not a pleasurable pursuit. It is simply work. However, aliterate readers can be tempted by the ‘right’ book. When it is the ‘right book’, they will find the time to read—in class, at the bus stop, or while waiting for friends. For some, like Sam below, there are compelling reasons for locating the next ‘hot’ book. (refer to the case of Sam that follows).

Sam had never read a book and was convinced that reading was work and ‘for nerds’. He explained how he changed this perception when he discovered the pleasure of reading ‘Harry Potter’. He explained how he felt compelled to ask his accomplices to wait for him to finish the last chapter before going on a crime spree. I am glad he discovered the love of a good book, the shame is that he didn’t have a few more chapters to read or someone to hand him the next one in the series so that he may have circumvented his trip to juvenile justice.

Resistant readers

Resistant readers are students who can read, do read, but choose not to read what they are asked to read at school. Miller (2009) refers to them as underground readers and describes them as sophisticated and successful readers who see little merit in reading the required text.

Resistant readers enjoy reading self-selected texts outside the classroom and can spend hours reading information on the internet, participating in social networking, gaming, reading magazines, comics, or books. Interestingly, resistant readers can be engaged in multiple types of reading simultaneously. Fifty-eight per cent of middle and high school students use other media while reading (‘National Endowment of the Arts, 2007). Resistant readers see no reason to read teacher-prescribed texts; particularly, if the teacher ‘does the book to death’ with worksheets, reports, analysis, or projects. Beyond the classroom, their reading choices are meaningful and relevant to their lives—they connect to their friends and interests.

Resistant readers can appear bored with school. However, in conversation, they are animated and talk enthusiastically about websites, books, blogs, Facebook sites, and the computer games they play at home. They are readers who love to sit and read at
the computer screen or have a book on hand. These students have a lot to offer and for teachers not to capitalise on their reading habits is a travesty as in the case of James.

James is in Year 6 and prefers to be the class clown. He has a positive, likeable personality. He is always late handing in his assignments and does what he can to avoid completing school work. His parents know James is extremely competent but to a certain degree they have become complacent about his lackadaisical attitude. When he has school work to complete, he relies on his friends. He rarely reads the assigned worksheets or prescribed texts. On occasions, he will read a chapter but shows no interest in the ‘Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’ and figures he can always watch the movie if he has to respond in class. At home, he prefers to spend his time in his room alone or with friends talking about the *The 39 Clues* which they are all reading. They spend hours playing the interactive Internet game associated with the series and enthusiastically swap books amongst their friends.

Much has been written on the decline of middle school students’ reading habits. The primary focus has been identifying the cause of the decline rather than identifying ways to keep students engaged (Beers, 1996; Feirson, 1997; Follos, 2007). The reality is nearly half of all Americans ages 18 to 24 read no books for pleasure (NEA, 2007). Understanding, valuing and catering for students’ reading choices ensures that reading is pleasurable. When Michael Morpurgo’s books were introduced to a Year 6 class, the teacher said they ‘took off like wildfire’. She did not realise how powerful books could be in impelling all students, even the most resistant, to outperform her reading expectations.

**When readers are seen to be the problem**

The problem is not restricted to knowing that the reading research clearly shows legitimate, pressing concerns, and that there are sub groups of readers who need urgent attention. The language associated with reading failure is negative and damaging. Students liked Emily and Connor are quickly labelled as having – ‘fallen through the gap, falling behind, below benchmark, bottom of the class’ to name just a few. These words sound fixed and permanent, insinuating an enduring condition. Images of being ‘less than’ or powerless are evoked. The struggling reader often feels alienated from teachers and peers and frustrated by these comparisons. When labels are imposed, what chance do a six-year-old, ten-year-old, or twelve-year-old have to reinvent themselves?
It is difficult for readers who already feel ‘inadequate, different, broken’ to separate who they are as people from who they think they are as readers. They describe themselves in negative terms – ‘I am just dumb’, ‘I am stupid’, ‘I am an idiot’. It is only through setting goals, and achieving success that readers can adjust and reframe their definitions of who they are as readers. Only by ‘doing’ reading can they transform their negative self-perceptions. The goals they set may be as simple as the number of pages they will read in a week.

Solution to the problem

While governments, education systems, and schools vie for the elusive dollar to reduce class sizes, improve resources, conduct more standardised assessments, or purchase the next intervention to eliminate reading failure, the stark reality is that the problem continues. There is a simple solution that embraces a complex set of factors, (structures, processes and stakeholders) and it is this solution that will make a difference to how reading and writing are taught and valued in classrooms.

A research synthesis of fifty-one studies by Krashen (2004) found that in order to improve students’ reading, ‘they simply need to read more’. They need ongoing, regular experiences of free voluntary reading (FVR). Students choose their books and read for extended periods of time. Free voluntary reading is an integral and consistent part of their daily reading regime.

No single literacy activity has a more positive effect on students’ comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, writing ability, and overall academic achievement than FVR (Krashen, 2004). Students’ motivation and interest in reading improves with frequent and sustained opportunities to read in school.

Students who participate in FVR:

- improve in reading
- increase their quantity of reading
- discover that reading is pleasurable
- develop superior general knowledge
- improve spelling, writing, grammar, reading comprehension, writing style, and vocabulary
- boost their understanding of English (ELL)
- increase scores on reading tests and other subject matter tests
- become better thinkers
- increase their reading speed
- become motivated and interested in reading. (Krashen, 2004; Wu and Samuels, 2004; Gallagher, 2009; Allington and Gabriel, 2012b).
Sadly, those who need the most support in reading – those in remedial reading programs and reading interventions – read approximately 75 per cent less than their peers in regular classrooms (Allington, 2013).

FVR is dependent upon teachers' trust, student choices, allocated time to read and quality reading resources.

**Trust: Can I trust my students to make appropriate reading choices?**

The power of choice, I believe, had the greatest impact on some of my struggling readers....They would find a series that they could read and then make a plan to read every book in the series. They had ownership over the book they chose, which translated into confidence in their reading abilities.

Hudson & Williams, 2015. p.535

All students can make choices about what they read. Can we trust their choices? This for some is a more daunting question. Trusting students to make appropriate reading choices is embedded in a bigger question relating to how much trust do students have to make decisions and take responsibility for their learning. When teachers trust them, students:

- invest more effort.
- persevere more.
- have greater confidence and less anxiety. (Bandura, 1986)

Trusting students to make reading choices has a lot to do with teacher beliefs about who controls the learning. Students can be trusted to make choices. They might not always make the right choice but nor do mature readers. When necessary, they just choose again. For many students, considering the gravity of choices foisted upon them outside the safety and security of the classroom, making a reading choice at school pales into insignificance.

The way we respond to student choices and respect their opinions has a profound bearing on how students view themselves as readers. It also influences how they relate to each other, the classroom climate and the level of mutual respect that develops. Readers' choices reflect their interests, desires, and thirst for knowledge. For some the choice will be the topic, the series, the genre, the movie; for others the tactile nature of the book, the illustrations or humour.

Making the choice to read something is the preferred option to reading nothing. The student who is excited to read the few words in *Where is Wally?* is a long way ahead of the student who refuses to open a book. That is not to say the reading journey ends with *Where is Wally?* It is just one possible beginning of many invitations into the world of books.
Understanding the interests and aspirations of students goes a long way to building trust. For some students knowing that someone cares enough to ask ‘What do you like to read?’ means the world. Effective teachers understand the importance of knowing their students – their families, interests, hobbies, sports, the significant people in their lives and recreational pastimes. Building trust is crucial for all learners and particularly for those who are most vulnerable in the world of reading. The language of the classroom must shine a light on where students can ‘move to’ rather than continue to reinforce where they are temporarily stuck. It takes trust to move.

**Time: How long should students engage in FVR?**

At least 20 non-negotiable minutes a day of uninterrupted FVR is required. Reading books every day is the only activity that reliably relates to proficiency in reading and creates avid readers (Atwell, 2010). It is only when readers lose themselves in books that they discover what it means to read. They create new understandings about the world and who they are and over time, they build reading stamina.

Twenty minutes a day is a minimum for all grades K–6. While some teachers doubt the capability of primary students to read independently for an extended period of time each day, research by Mounla, Bahous, and Nabhani (2011) negates this. They found that first graders on various reading levels were capable of reading independently for 30 minutes each day.

**Reading resources: What can students choose to read?**

Of all the things effective teachers know, the powerful role of children's literature in developing good readers is central to their expertise. ...effective teachers of reading realise that commercial core reading programs provide too little opportunity for students to actually read, if the goal is the development of effective readers.’ (Allington, 2015, p. xv)

Books in abundance -- all shapes, sizes and genres -- are important in free voluntary reading. The class library is the hub of the literacy classroom. It needs to be accessible, inviting, organised and filled to overflowing. The class library needs to be located in a space that allows for at least five students to browse at the same time and not crammed into a corner where access is limited. In classrooms where children have access to e-readers, the world of books is boundless. Students have access to libraries rather than shelves of books!

The number of books in a class library is a statement in itself about the value placed on reading. The recommended number of books in a class library varies from ten books per student (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002; Stoodt, 1989) to five to eight books per student (Christie, Enz, Vukelich, & Roskos, 2013). I endorse the notion of a 'book flood' coined by Warwick Elley (New Zealand, Emeritus Professor of Education).
‘Book floods’ created in urban low socio-economic schools resulted in significant growth in students’ fluency, comprehension, and enjoyment of reading (Mc Quillan cited in Ericson, 2001).


Far and away the most important factor was the establishment of a classroom library. I bought interesting books to my students. I surrounded them with a variety of high interest reading materials. I now have 2,500 books in my classroom, and I am convinced that developing this ‘book flood’ ... is the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS?

Know your students.
Take time to get to know your students – weekly conferencing in reading and writing
Trust your students.
Conduct free voluntary reading daily.
Provide uninterrupted time to read – minimum of twenty minutes.
Stock your class library with an abundance of ‘hot books’.
Locate the classroom library in a prime location – ‘hub’ of the classroom.
Expect all students to read and write.
Sell books and authors with passion.
Read aloud daily from a range of genres.

STRATEGIES

1 Know your students

Donald Graves, described as the ‘guru of writing’ and ‘father’ of process writing, is thinker, researcher and a strong, vocal advocate for children. He often caused teachers to pause when he asked: ‘How well do you know your students?’ The following strategy used by Graves is a powerful way to find out:

_Divide a piece of paper into three columns. In the first column, list your students’ names. Avoid using alphabetical order, seating arrangements, or reading groups as an aid to remember. Just write student’s names down as they come to mind._
In the middle column, next to each student's name, write one thing you know that student likes to do or cares passionately about. In the third column, put a ✓ if you're sure the student knows that you know this about her or him.

What did your list highlight for you? Who did you forget? What don't you know about your students? How will you rectify this? What does your list tell you about the children you had the most difficulty recalling?

Teachers are often humbled by this exercise and commit to spending more time with the children they know the least about.

2 What I need to know about my students

Set up post box in the classroom. Students respond in writing to the following prompt:

If there is one thing I wish my teacher knew about me, it would be...

Use this information when conferencing with students to connect their interests to reading and writing. For example, ‘I know you are really interested in beekeeping. Are you interested in going to the library to find factual texts about bees?’

Draw on the information as a way of introducing students to members of their learning community. For example, ‘I know Ryan knows a lot about surfing. He might feel differently about the media report on sharks?’

Acknowledging students' interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes is a powerful way to build self-esteem and unite members of a community.

3 The choices that readers make

Survey students using the following questions to gain insights into their reading choices.

What are you reading?
Do you read at home? Yes No
What do you like to read at home?
How do you find books to read for pleasure?
How many books have you read and enjoyed?
Name a book that you have read and enjoyed in the last six months.
Name a book you would recommend to your friends.
How many books do you have at home?
How long would you read books at home each day?
Do you use the computer at home?
How long would you spend on the computer each day?
What do you do on the computer?
4 Create a book flood

The class library makes a statement about what counts in the classroom. Consider where it is located and the number and quality of books in it. In order to create a ‘book flood’, think creatively. Some ideas follow:

- Students donate a book from home that remains in the class for the year. The student’s name is in the book and the book is returned at the end of the year. When students notice their peers reading the books they have donated, they feel valued.
- Bulk borrow books from school and local libraries.
- Ask parents to donate books that older children have out-grown. Set aside one day to collect. (Schools often choose a day in Book Week as their collection day).
- Befriend the local charity shop and ask if they could put aside quality books that are donated. One teacher recently described the arrangement she had established with the charity shop and each week she drops by to pick up a bag of books.
- Garage sales are also a way to save costs and find book treasures.
- Kindles and e-readers are also a possibility. They allow an expansive choice of books.

5 ‘Market’ books on a daily basis with passion and enthusiasm

Entice students into the world of books by establishing sharing circles where children ‘talk’ books to each other. Make a word wall of ‘Books we love’ – students write their recommendations on it. Include author studies and book clubs in literacy group time. Focus on a poem each week and encourage students to find poems they like and leave them on post-it notes in random places. Instead of having the librarian choose a bulk loan, every two weeks visit the school library and allow students to choose two books – one to read and one that they think someone in the class might like read. (It is not necessary for them to name the student…it is the thought that counts).

Discover authors and share their biographies. Sharing the lives of published authors helps children gain a perspective on their writing journeys. Let students select a specific author and complete an author study – it can be digital or print based. Schedule times over a few weeks for students to introduce the author to the class. Locate authors' websites.

Most importantly, share books that you love – books of different genres, books chosen for different reasons (illustrations, feel of the book, novelty factor) or books that are special to you (a gift, your first chapter book, the book you could not put down.) Share your love of reading!