

Building communities of readers to promote cultures of literacy

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Introduction

In April 2025, the LitPlus research and professional learning community secured funding from the AUT Research Engagement and Translation Fund to conduct a community engagement project with two schools in the Auckland area. The aim of the project was to share and action findings identified through LitPlus research on children's reading for pleasure by co-designing school-based community engagement events with families and whānau. LitPlus research indicates that pleasurable reading experiences shared within communities through affective relationships supports children's literacy and wellbeing; however, reading for pleasure is rarely considered among the solutions to declines in children's literacy. Throughout the 2025 school year, LitPlus worked with Northcote Intermediate School (NIS) and Balmoral School to help them implement school community events to strengthen their schools' existing reading cultures, spread the importance of school/community affective relationships, and share the critical work of AUT's School of Education.

Northcote Intermediate and Balmoral School were selected based on their longstanding relationships with AUT. Both are partner schools in the Master of Teaching and Learning and study abroad programs, and host/employ AUT student teachers and graduates. These schools also participated in the 2024 LitPlus case study research where classroom observations and student and teacher interviews informed findings on children's affective relationships with reading at school and at home. Moreover, additional factors recommended these schools. As part of the case study research, NIS had requested help identifying how to engage their largely Māori and Pasifika school community and whānau in reading. Participating in this school community engagement activity offered a clear follow-on activity to continue the previous research. Working with Balmoral School also furthered previous research, for example a 2023 intervention on sustained silent reading and buddy reading¹. The partnership also built off of the school's refined and well-researched pedagogical practices. Most importantly, leaders at both schools were keen to work with AUT to co-design school community engagement events that put into practice findings from prior LitPlus research.

The School Community Events

The original activity design proposed three key activities:

1. A facilitated workshop in Term 2 to co-design community engagement activities; participants to include school staff (deputy principal, teachers, literacy coordinators, librarian), LitPlus team members (researchers and research assistant), two student representatives and two whānau representatives.
2. Four community events over 2025, (four held at each of the two schools) to promote a culture of literacy and enhance reading for pleasure for learners, teachers, and whānau and to support transition for children from early learning services to the school and from primary to intermediate.
3. An evaluation survey after each event to document what happened and ascertain which events are most valuable for the community.

The events at each school were designed based on the unique needs and interest of the individual schools. At both schools an initial planning meeting was held and a final evaluation survey was conducted. However, rather

¹ See Bernay, R. & Harrington, C. (2024). Enhancing reading for pleasure for 9-12 year olds. *Literacy Forum* 39(2), 7-21.

than planning four events over the course of the school year, both schools opted to focus on one larger event in Term 4 that would build off of literacy activities already in motion at each school.

Northcote: Collaboration with NIS for a community event began with an initial meeting in April. At the meeting, the AUT researcher met with the deputy principal and the school reading specialist to brainstorm a list of literacy-related activities for the year based on school interests and existing plans and informed by LitPlus research findings. Over the course of subsequent meetings, NIS suggested an event for Term 4 to correspond with the launch of a student publication. NIS was partnering with COMET, an Auckland-based-education non-profit (<https://cometauckland.org.nz/>) to help Māori and Pasifika students write short texts on issues of importance to them. The writings would become a published book. NIS suggested using the book launch as the basis of a community event. This made good sense, as NIS already had several other events planned for the year: author talks, book week, Storylines book visit, participation at the Secondary School writers' festival, and a summer reading activity with Onepoto Primary School and Northcote College. The book launch was co-designed and run by a team consisting of the reading specialist, several of the student writers, and the researchers. AUT had five student teachers at NIS in 2025 (semester 2) who were also enlisted to help with the event and to assist with editing the students' writing.



On the evening of 16 October, the event took place in the school library. Students who participated through writing and illustrating the book were celebrated by family, friends, teachers, and school leadership. Each received a certificate of achievement from COMET. Local Kiwi-Samoan author and artist Michel Mulipola (<https://www.read-nz.org/writers-files/writer/mulipola-michel>) shared congratulatory and encouraging remarks and AUT researcher Ross Bernay shared about the importance of reading for pleasure based on recent LitPlus research. After a few photo ops, students, whānau, and friends mingled while looking through copies of the published book.

Balmoral: An initial meeting was held during the school day in April with the deputy principal, school librarian, and eight Year 8 students and their parents. Ross Bernay shared LitPlus research findings, which led into a discussion of various school community reading events planned for the 2025 school year. Balmoral School engages in many literacy-related events each year, with 2025 activities including author visits, read your height



in pages, class reading challenges, and milk and cookies story time for younger children. This year, the school was also conducting a survey of the school's favourite books and genres – Balmoral's Best Books – spearheaded by the deputy principal and several Y8 students. During a follow-up meeting with the deputy principal and three of the Y8 students, Balmoral decided to hold a book fair to show case the results of the best books and genres survey. Each hub of classrooms would be assigned a genre based on the survey results and tasked with creating a booth to display books and information about the genre. At an evening event, students, friends and whānau could come to see the booths and be inspired about reading. The Y8 students were a driving force behind the event, assigning each school hub a genre, setting expectations for the booths, informing the school leaders, teachers, students about the event, organising the venue (school hall), the food, and designing the event evaluation questions. Five AUT student teachers based at Balmoral also supported the design of the genre booths and setup/take down of the event. On the evening of 6 November over 120 people came to school for the event to wander among the 12 booths. Parents were observed reading to their children, looking at pictures and writing samples, and accessing book promotional videos available

through QR codes. A display of AUT research reports was also presented as a display booth. The evening was a great success, with the school community coming alive that evening through a shared love of books and reading.

At both Northcote and Balmoral, the AUT-supported community engagement events built off of the momentum of planned school activities and allowed the schools to consider how their events could bring to life LitPlus research findings about the social and affective aspects of reading. To support the process, the AUT researcher sharing LitPlus findings multiple times and in various ways – at the initial meetings, at subsequent planning meetings, and at the events themselves in a format that best fit the occasion – in an oral presentation at NIS and as a display booth at Balmoral.

Results and Findings

An evaluation survey was conducted at each of the school events. Questions for the survey were designed through a collaboration between Balmoral (deputy principal and three students) and AUT researchers. The Balmoral survey was then shared with NIS and adaptations were made based on feedback from the school reading specialist and several students. As university ethics had not been sought, the survey was for the schools to ascertain student, whānau and community opinions about reading within their school/community and at their events. NIS had a smaller number of event participants and received eight survey responses. Balmoral achieved 107 respondents owing to the strong motivation of the student representatives. In both instances, the findings mirrored those of other LitPlus research regarding where students (and other family members) prefer to read (at home, in their bedrooms), when they like to read (before going to sleep, holidays and weekends), and who most influences their choices of books (friends, family, not teachers or librarians). Personal choice in book selection and reading time/place were evident. In all instances the respondents were positive about the school community engagement events and interested to have more.

Other interesting findings emerged during further discussions with the school leaders, student representatives, and AUT researchers. In the case of NIS, findings that students prefer to read at home led to a discussion about how to recreate the same feeling of comfort and choice for the students at school. The reading specialist suggested perhaps they could open the library during lunch. The question also arose whether it was better to promote reading outside of school time, perhaps opening the library before and/or after school, since the students overwhelmingly reported that they didn't like to read at school (in the classroom). The idea of forming book clubs, perhaps based on genres, was also discussed. For Balmoral, the student representatives were surprised by the high attendance at the event and that so many respondents said they liked to read. They noted, however, that the ethnic make up of the survey respondents (overwhelmingly Pākehā) did not reflect that of the general school population, perhaps indicating which families were more likely to attend a book/reading event and/or to complete the survey. They also identified that most people who attended probably already liked to read, and that it might be helpful to find out more from students who don't identify as readers, perhaps through a survey during school time.

Next Steps

Both NIS and Balmoral were interested in repeating their events. NIS said they might try another writing activity but manage it themselves. They are also considering book clubs, author visits targeting families, and hosting a book fair with feeder primary schools as part of their book week next year. The Balmoral student representatives were keen to repeat the book fair, every two years, and to invite other schools to attend and/or encourage them to hold their own similar events. The students felt the night had brought together a community of people who like to read, proving that people in the school community really do value reading. They also noted that survey findings suggested book clubs may be a way to bring people together as a community of readers. LitPlus has also identified school-based book clubs as a potential activity for next year. Based on findings from the school community engagement surveys and expressed interests of the two schools, book clubs could be an appropriate

follow-on activity from this year's events. In addition, both schools have been approached to write their reflections of the events for publication and Balmoral has published in their own school community newsletter.