

UNDERSTANDING THE RECREATIONAL READING PATTERNS OF SECONDARY STUDENTS

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In an age where multi-media, such as video games and computer generated games, are consuming the lives of young adults, students are reading fewer novels and engaging less in recreational reading activities. Because of the ever-changing diverse student population teachers are searching for ways to be competitive motivators. Today, teachers need to know what students are doing outside of the classroom to better motivate students in the classroom. Do middle school and high school students read for pleasure? If so, what are they reading and how much time to they spend reading independently? If we can better understand the recreational reading patterns of secondary students then perhaps we can increase their tendency to read. This article will address reported research and discussion on the recreational reading patterns of secondary students.

Introduction

Studies suggest (Campbell, M. & Kmiecik, M.M, 2004; Gallik, J.,1999) that recreational reading habits are acquired fairly early in an individual's school life, probably in elementary school given that numerous studies show a decline in time spent reading that begins in middle school. Students who are motivated are more likely to enjoy reading and will choose to read more often. There appears to be a link between student self-esteem and reading frequency. If children are enjoying reading then they will read more, therefore attitude of the student and willingness to read plays a large role in reading improvement. Promoting reading engagement is a concern for educators. It is important for students

to become active, strategic readers who choose to participate in reading activities. Readers who are active participants in the learning process tend to be engaged readers. Much more work needs to be done as challenges arise for educators that might renew reading as common practice for middle and high school students. What intervention strategies can teachers use to promote student-literacy success? Aspects of academic and recreational reading affecting self-esteem and attitude in secondary education students require research attention.

Reading Programs

Reading skills are essential for academic success for adolescents. After seven

or eight years of elementary education, students often lack the ability to be successful in secondary education. In order for young adults to be successful, they must have a desire to learn. The desire to learn, often referred to as intrinsic motivation, usually declines during the adolescent years. Teachers, however, can help students regain their motivation and improve their reading performance by connecting reading assignments to real-world learning experiences (Holloway, 1999). Recreational reading or pleasure reading can stimulate the imagination and create links to real-world experiences. In an age where standardized test scores dictate the classroom curriculum, when can students find the time to read for enjoyment and pleasure? One of the goals of literacy education should be to help students become lifelong readers. Investigations have led to the conclusion that recreational reading habits are acquired early in an individual's life. If students are to have good reading skills and positive attitudes toward reading, then schools should provide opportunity for students to participate in recreational reading.

Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) or some form of independent reading practice, such as Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) and Accelerated Reader (AR), has been incorporated in many classrooms throughout the United States over the past decade. These programs were developed to encourage students to read more frequently. It is widely known by theorists, researchers, and practitioners that reading is learned by reading. It is also common knowledge, based on hundreds of studies, that the best readers read the most and the poor readers read the least.

Accelerated Reader has been in existence since 1986 and has become one of the most popular recreational reading programs in public schools today. It seems logical that incentive reading programs would promote reading engagement and students would read a variety of materials for leisure for the remainder of their life. With this particular incentive program students select books that have been designated as AR. The books are given two numbers: reading level, which is determined by the Flesch-Kincaid reading index, and points, which is determined by book level and length of the book. The student's reading level is determined by a STAR placement test. Given a specific reading range, the student is to select books appropriate for their range. After reading the book, students take a computerized assessment that scores them based on their comprehension of the book. Students earn points based on their computerized assessment. However, in a recent study that assessed the effects of the Accelerated Reader program revealed that many parents and librarians only purchased books that were on the AR list for computerized tests. This limits the choices that students have in order to meet their mandatory AR goal because many students do not prefer to read only books. Magazines, comics, popular movie or television based-books, and drawing books are not considered in the AR collection. The overall results of the study found that students do not continue to read independently after they no longer participate in the AR system (Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Cipielewski, 2002).

Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) was first established with the idea that it would

teach skillful reading (Byran, Fawson, & Reutzal, 2003). The idea behind this program is to give students a specific amount of time to read in school. Specific reading material is not required in most classrooms. Students are allowed to read virtually anything of their choice as long as it is school appropriate. During SSR the teacher is suppose to model silent reading. Yet, it appears to also have its limitations. While students are engaging in independent reading for approximately twenty minutes of undisturbed reading time they often are not actually reading. In fact, it was not uncommon for several children to use their books as a prop for pretend reading (Bryan, Fawson, & Reutzal, 2003). Given the amount of time a student is to remain silent and read poor readers have the opportunity to misbehave and become off-task. Unengaged students also distract those that are engaged, thus causing intervention by the classroom teacher.

Many research studies that have analyzed classroom time for silent reading indicate that it is more successful with older students than with younger students. Older students seem to value the time they have to 'free-read.' They often do not have the time at home due to responsibilities such as jobs, extra curriculum obligations, and homework. Some students cannot read at home because they do not have access to books or the environment is not conducive to reading (Fisher, 2004). If schools would truly designate a specific amount of time simply to "free-read" then older student would value that time and take advantage of it. If the school establishes the "opportunity to read" standard and commits their schedule to this standard then students can

increase positive reading attitude and learn to develop reading as a habit.

Investigations have focused on the amount of time teachers and students are allotted for pleasure reading. The data is not encouraging. The time spent in silent reading has declined over the past two decades, and student interest in reading for pleasure has also declined (Block, & Mangieri, 2002). There are many reasons for this decline in classroom reading and one is the push to increase standardized test scores. Educators need to do their homework before they eliminate free-reading time and consider it as wasted class time. Recreational reading has been shown to increase student achievement.

However, one of the major problems that follow this time allotment in the classroom is not having books for the students that interest them. When students do not have an interesting piece of reading material in hand, then behavior problems may occur. This could also affect the outcome of attitude on this type of classroom activity. Knowing what materials to fill your classroom with is the bottom line in silent reading time in the classroom.

There is controversy over reading programs and reading instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) analyzed studies on SSR, AR and DEAR. The panel concludes that these programs have the purpose of stimulating greater amounts of reading. However, data from the studies are correlated and do not imply causation. It could be that if you read more, you will become a better reader; but it also seems possible that better readers simply choose to read more (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), Accelerated Reading (AR), and Drop Every Thing and Read (DEAR) seem to have been designed with the same purpose in mind, getting children to read more. The problem then may not be the program itself, but more closely related to the student's interest level and frustration level. A study conducted (Smith & Joyner, 1990), using the Fry Readability Graph to determine the difficulty level of library books. Fifth grade students were given an Informal Reading Inventory to determine their independent reading level. When the difficulty level was compared to the independent reading level of the student fifty-eight percent of the students chose books above their independent reading level. Within the fifty-eight percent, twenty-eight percent of the students chose material at their frustration level. Based on the variation of recreational materials, it is difficult to determine an accurate recreational reading level. Students choose books perhaps on personal experience, interest, and motivation (Smith, & Joyner, 1990). These factors must be taken into consideration when determining student reading choices. Since reading for pleasure is personal, and the interest level is higher than with academic text or required reading, students may be more determined to struggle through a more difficult read.

When considering motivational reading programs and independent reading levels, some teachers teach their students to use a "five finger" test for recreational reading selection. The Five Finger Test is designed specifically to be used by readers themselves (Schirmer, & Lockman, 2001). This procedure is quick and easy

for a middle and high school student to use. A page in the middle of the book or passage of around one hundred words is read by the student. While reading the student holds up a finger each time they come to a word they do not know. If the student holds up all five fingers before they finish reading the page or the one hundred word passage, then the book is too difficult to read independently. While this procedure may not be very scientifically sound, it may help students select less frustrating recreational material and it may also help students have more control of their personal reading preference.

Attributes to Recreational Reading

A child's attitude, motivation, and self-esteem toward reading play an enormous role in the choice to read for pleasure and recreation. A child's perception of their self is a factor a teacher must take into consideration. These perceptions are often referred to as paradigms. According to Sean Covey, a paradigm is the way you see something, your point of view, frame of reference, or belief (Covey, 1998). A paradigm in relation to successful reading can create limitations within the mind of the reader. Students who have struggled with reading in the past have developed a belief of failure. This sense of disbelief in ones self has to be over come by the reader when they are faced with text, whether it is reading for academic purposes or for pleasure. To make teens progress in reading, teens need to feel supported (Curtis, & Longo, 1999). Many readers are afraid to make mistakes. If teachers are more aware of the underlying fears students have, then students will feel safer. When students

feel safe, then they are more likely to attempt activities that are more challenging because they are not afraid to make mistakes. Giving teens a choice in choosing what they read allows them to have control in their education. As challenge leads to growth, motivation increases (Curtis, & Longo, 1999). For teens that are not motivated to read independently, and are often several grade levels behind, collaborative oral reading in small groups works well. Independent, recreational reading is something many students do not feel they have time for. To assist students with the feeling of reading stress, teachers can require reading outside of class as part of the course requirement. Most students view ten to fifteen minutes a day a manageable assignment. Teachers can check the weekly progress through questioning and checklists. However, required reading can be a vicious circle. Those students that lack motivation and have a poor attitude simply refuse the requirement and their grades often reflect the negativism.

Teachers have participated in numerous surveys all over the United States and have asked questions about the challenges a teacher faces in public schools, students attitude, and teaching strategies that are used to encourage and motivate. In one such study high school teachers identified student motivation to read, write, and do other literacy-related activities as their greatest challenge (Campbell, & Kmiecik, 2004). Teachers unite on the feeling that much of the class assigned reading is often boring and not relevant to the student's past experiences and personal interests. They have also reported that students who choose not to read are at the same disad-

vantage as those who can not read.

Predictions of Recreational Reading

How can educators help students develop a positive attitude toward reading? Older reluctant readers need to feel empowered and respected in their quest for literacy. Older reluctant readers or struggling readers generally have a negative attitude toward reading, read less frequently, and consequently fall further behind their peers (Taylor, & McAtee, 2003). A positive attitude towards reading may sustain an interest in reading in the upper grades.

Aliteracy is a general condition used by literacy specialists to describe readers with poor attitude who choose not to read. In a national survey conducted by McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth (1995), children's attitudes toward recreational reading and academic reading were assessed in grades one through six. Students were asked to respond using a pictorial rating scale. The

McKenna Model was an effort to construct a more conductive way to consider long-term development of reading attitudes. Because reading is an on going process rather than a discrete act, this model seemed to be an effective way to survey student's reading attitude. The McKenna model postulates that an individual's attitude toward reading will develop over time as the result of normative beliefs, beliefs about the outcome, and specific reading experiences (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). As children grow older and more leisure options are available to them, the act of engaging in reading will be weighed by alternatives which are associated with attitude. If students have had negative reading experiences then they

will grow more negative over time and will choose other activities for leisure. Television, video games, and computers may compete with reading outside of the school setting.

Results of the study conducted by McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) indicate that recreational reading and academic reading grows increasingly negative as the student gets older. When considering gender, girls possessed a more positive attitude toward recreational reading and academic reading than boys. Ethnicity was observed to play a small role in recreational reading and academic reading. The overall trend in reading attitude can be linked to the increasing impact of poor ability in the upper grades. The results of this study lead educators to find ways to increase student ability therefore increasing positive attitude toward recreational and academic reading.

Taken into consideration the lack of motivation to read and the negative attitude that appears to develop as students get older, how can educators motivate students to read? The number of motivated, enthusiastic readers that read on a regular basis is actually a very small amount. Intrinsically motivated readers engage in reading for its sake and enjoy satisfying their own curiosity (Applegate, & Applegate, 2004). Intrinsic motivation is the presence of the inner desire to read to for pure enjoyment. Students who have this intense interest are ideal readers. If educators can understand this concept then perhaps we may better be able to understand the growing problem of literacy. According to Louise Rosenblatt, a leading scholar on literacy, a reader must be able

to actively draw upon past experience and call forth true meaning from the text. Readers that engage in non-aesthetic reading must focus attention primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). This reading event causes the reader to read to retrieve information. Reading a textbook, nonfiction, or even a newspaper requires the reader to focus attention toward concepts and ideas. The reader must use tool-like techniques to decipher important ideas. Intrinsic motivation is needed due to the desire to gain knowledge from the written text.

Aesthetic reading differs from non-aesthetic reading because emotions and feelings are evolving as the reader is absorbed into the written word. Senses, imagination, and relation to one's self becomes the primary motive for reading aesthetic literary work. The reader becomes enthralled in the characters and the plot. At the end of the episode, the reader's purpose is fulfilled during the reading event, and he fixes his attention on the actual reading experience. The active, aesthetic reader will immerse themselves into the book and draw from personal experiences to actually become a part of the text as it is revealed page after page.

Understanding the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic reading is important for the teacher. Students who have had the experience of being totally immersed in a novel, poem, or short story will be more likely to read on a regular basis. Teachers have the obligation to model this for their students. They must share their personal reading experiences as to the way that reading has enriched their lives. It would be beneficial for the

students to see teachers model the love of reading.

In an interesting study involving older children and teens, attitude toward reading and factors associated with the love of reading were analyzed. The students were categorized as "readers" and "not-readers." A small number of students were interviewed and the results indicate a profile for students who are considered to be "readers" and "not-readers." A reader believes that reading is a worthwhile way to spend leisure time because it was pleasurable, while "not-readers" found reading was boring, tedious, and a waste of time (Strommen, & Mates, 2004). The profile also indicated that reading starts at home. Parents who establish routine reading, provide a variety of books in the home environment, and model recreational reading are more likely to have children who are "readers." The relationship of parent and child is an important role for the development for the love of reading. The relationship between teacher and student is also of interest particularly for the student that does not have a literacy-rich home environment.

With the ongoing decline of recreational reading in our society, this study is concerned about what students are choosing to read for recreational as well as academic purposes. If classrooms are going to provide school-time for free, recreational reading, what materials should a teacher have in the classroom to motivate, stimulate, and encourage reading as a worth-while past time and hobby? Several surveys have been conducted in this area. One specific survey questioned sixth grade students in four schools. Preference sur-

veys and open-ended questions about favorite material were administered. The five most preferred materials among students were scary books and stories, comics and cartoons, magazines, sports, and drawing books (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner 1999). The least preferred were expository text, reference materials, books about history, and surprisingly adventure novels. When students were questioned about where they got their reading materials, the majority responded through purchased sources rather than school.

Since this study has been reported, there has been an influx of fantasy with the beginning of Harry Potter, and The Series of Unfortunate Events. The current thrust for fantasy recreational reading may help close the gender gap between boys and girls.

Alarming statistics indicate year after year that females out perform males in reading and this gap continues to increase. One argument for this gap is the true definition of literacy. Many researchers have found that boys are reading, but they are reading materials that schools do not consider academic text. As a whole, boys read more magazines than girls, and they read less fiction than girls (Taylor, 2004). In order to stimulate recreational reading in males, interesting material that matters to boys must be available during free-reading time. Taylor suggests that each child is unique and teachers must have a keen sensitivity to the interest of the boys in the classroom. Typically, stereotyping of traditional male appeal may not work for every boy in the class. Boys tend to like a choice and like to have control in their reading. Boys also tend to avoid types of

reading that do not lend themselves to success. It is also becoming quite clear that boys have stereotyped reading as "feminine."

A recent study surveying high school student's perception of themselves revealed that boys felt that reading and writing were "girl" activities (Luttrell, & Parker, 2001). This study used a wide variety of subjects in four high schools and the results are quite interesting. When polled about reading attitude and self-esteem, the boys also went on to say that they felt girls were better readers than boys. When asked about what they preferred to read, boys often reported that they liked the sports page of the newspaper, car and sport magazines, and they liked to trade them with their friends. Few boys reported actually liking to read novels, but those that did stated they wanted to read thrillers.

Girls, in this same study, often said they like to read the newspaper for the horoscope and comic sections. Many girls reported their preference to be teen magazines. When asked about novels, several claimed to enjoy Shakespeare because it was recommended by their teacher. They also stated that their favorite genre was romance and thrillers. Both boys and girls perceived that athletes were not readers and that readers are "nerds." In conclusion to this study, Luttrell and Parker (2001) found that a student's social relationship influenced their reading interest.

It may not be enough to simply provide a variety of material to read and the time allotted to read the materials. Unmotivated, reluctant readers with a negative attitude may need more than encouragement. While putting this review of literature into per-

spective, it seems logical to include strategies or techniques that are used with a variety of reading materials to create passionate readers. Several researchers have suggested "book clubs" as a way to stimulate discussion and to help students form social reading relationships. These have become popular among all ages of readers. Most literature suggests that book-clubs work well for a group of teachers. Book-club suggestions include meeting away from the school once a month, to enjoy literature and to bond with colleagues (Brown, 2003). Perhaps if they work well for adults, why not try this technique for young adults as well? One suggestion is to implement boys-only book clubs and girls-only book clubs. A boys-only book club would provide an opportunity to give boys a choice of books and topics and would allow them to discuss their unique interests and ideas at their own pace (Taylor, 2004). The same then would apply for girls as well. Gender-specific book-clubs can provide the social stimulus needed for motivation and a positive attitude toward reading.

As studies have been analyzed the topic of comics has surfaced on several occasions. Comic books, magazines, and newspapers have been at the top of the student preference list for sometime, yet it seems that they may not count as "serious" reading material. For years debates have raged about the value of comic books within education. Many educators feel that it is a waste of time and should only be used for fun. Others feel that they have opportunity in the classroom especially for reluctant, struggling readers. Academic texts can limit a child's creativity. Comic

books may not take the place of academic texts, but they certainly have their place during recreational reading time. In one particular study supporting the use of comic books in the classroom, it states that comic books allow the reader to associate with ownership of the text. This sense of ownership gives children the confidence to engage with comic books energetically and critically (Norton, 2003). The challenge for educators is to consider how we can develop activities much like we have done for novel studies to incorporate a variety of reading material such as comic books, newspapers, and magazines, into the class curriculum to promote recreational reading.

Summary

In conclusion, it is the responsibility of all educators to find a reading niche for each student sitting in our classroom. Collaboration among parents, teachers, librarians, and administrators is required in order for students to develop the skills and motivation needed to be a life-long reader. While there are many factors that have lead to the decline in recreational reading, and there is not one specific answer to the problem, there is a need to determine what our students prefer to read. With this knowledge, we can tap into their interests and incorporate materials of the student's choice into the language arts curriculum.

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