

# *Reading Horizons*

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*Volume 50, Issue 2*

2010

*Article 4*

MAY/JUNE 2010

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## Are Avid Readers Lurking in Your Language Arts Classroom? Myths of the Avid Adolescent Reader

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Nance S. Wilson and Michelle J. Kelley

## **Abstract**

This article describes a pilot study conducted with 10 identified avid adolescent readers who completed the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) (Pitcher, Albright, DeLaney, Walker, Seunarienesingh, & Moggie, 2007) that includes both a survey to determine students' self-concept and value of reading and an interview that sheds light on what motivates them to read as well as yields specific information about their reading habits. The researchers use this data to challenge current myths regarding avid readers and to suggest that teachers look more deeply at the types of literacy experiences they offer in their classroom in order to draw these readers into their classes and enhance in-school reading.



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## Are Avid Readers Lurking in Your Language Arts Classroom? Myths of the Avid Adolescent Reader

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### Abstract

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This article describes a pilot study conducted with 10 identified avid adolescent readers who completed the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) (Pitcher, Albright, DeLaney, Walker, Seunarienesingh, & Moggie, 2007) that includes both a survey to determine students' self-concept and value of reading and an interview that sheds light on what motivates them to read as well as yields specific information about their reading habits. The researchers use this data to challenge current myths regarding avid readers and to suggest that teachers look more deeply at the types of literacy experiences they offer in their classroom in order to draw these readers into their classes and enhance in-school reading.

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*I read a little bit everyday, and then when I'm supposed to go to bed I turn on my light and read. I look at the summary [on the back], and I decide if I want to read it or not...books help me imagine things that I couldn't before I read the book. I just like reading the stories because it makes me think of my own stories. When I'm reading, it's like I'm in another world. I don't have to worry about my brother or homework or chores. I get into a world of peace and it's just so happy there. I can just be myself.*

This seventh grader's interview response reflects those of an avid reader. Middle and high school students who read often, like the one above, are the types of students that Language Arts teachers dream about. We asked some of these

students how they would describe themselves as readers, and their responses were what teachers hope for:

*Love, interested, and frequent.*

*Addicted.*

*Avid, fun, and adventurous.*

*I've never thought of that like that. Probably, avid. That's the only thing I can come up with. Reading's easy to me, it comes easy. I enjoy reading.*

These students like to read. They describe reading positively; it is easy for them and they are “addicted to it.” They truly enjoy the process, enough so that they choose to read in their free time, even when it’s not required. As teachers, we envision these readers as “students who perceive reading as valuable and important and who have personally relevant reasons for reading” (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996, p. 518). We think of these students as intrinsically motivated.

*I read the books, I read because I am interested in what it is about. For example, if I read a book on Greeks and Romans it is because I am fascinated with that time period. I am currently reading Gods and Generals because I am interested in American History. If I am interested in what the book's about I am encouraged to read more.*  
6th grader

Students who are intrinsically motivated read for enjoyment as it interests them, and they want to read just for the sake of reading. Intrinsic motivation is an important construct to develop in students because, for one thing, it is positively associated with standardized test scores and grades (Gottfried, 1990). In addition, students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to feel competent and engage in the task of reading (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999). The amount of reading that students do is also correlated with higher reading achievement (Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Therefore, we expect students who are intrinsically motivated readers to be successful in school, and to do especially well on reading achievement measures.

*...the more I read, the more words I add to my vocabulary and I notice some kids that don't read as often as I do and don't know as many words.* 7th grader

We also expect that these students enjoy and do well in Language Arts classes. However, “literacy in secondary classrooms is more than individual acts of reading, writing, and oral language” (Moje, 1996, p. 175). When students read for school

purposes there is a focus on gaining knowledge rather than on personal pursuits (Guthrie, 2007). Therefore, the single factor of being intrinsically motivated to read may not affect academic achievement for secondary students because the secondary classroom is affected by many factors such as beliefs and philosophies about knowledge regarding teaching and learning, previous experiences at home and school, and feelings and emotions about school and self (Moje, 1996).

In this article, we call for clarification of the term “avid reader,” and address some of the myths typically attributed to avid adolescent readers including those to which we have already alluded. We also offer suggestions to educators who may not realize they have these avid readers lurking in their secondary classrooms.

### **Avid Defined**

Avid, as defined by Dictionary.com, means “enthusiastic; ardent; dedicated; keen” (¶ 1). Thus, an avid reader would be one who chooses to read often, keeps at reading, and is intent on reading. An avid reader elects to read when he or she does not have to (Lesesne, 2006), which is amplified by this sixth grader’s response to the question, “What makes you an avid reader?”

Well, I read at least one book every day, although I usually read more than that. I choose to read instead of doing other things in my free time. Even though I do other things, there are times I want to just read.

During the reading process, a reader has a transaction with text to derive meaning (Rosenblatt, 2005). Therefore, an avid reader is someone who reads to create meaning, often regardless of school assignments. An avid reader takes time to read outside of school and reads to fulfill a personal need. Like motivated readers, they often read for a purpose; but their purpose is not derived from an outside agent, such as the school. Avid readers become so “fully immersed in reading that time and place are unimportant” (Lesesne, 2006, p. 8), as illustrated in our opening quote. In essence, the avid reader reads for personal reasons, not only for school.

### **Learning from Avid Adolescent Readers**

Our research came from our curiosity about what motivated avid readers so, in the spring of 2007 we interviewed ten avid readers who ranged from sixth to eleventh grade. We wondered what motivated these students to read and we wanted to know more about their reading habits. A middle school media specialist and high school reading coach nominated students they classified as avid readers, and the

researchers met with each to confirm that they were indeed avid readers according to the definition above.

The students completed the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Survey (AMRP) (Pitcher, Albright, DeLaney, Walker, Seunarienesingh, & Moggie, 2007) which includes statements about reading related to self-concept and value of reading, two important constructs related to motivation. It uses a 4-point weighted response scale to rate students' reading self-perceptions and the importance placed on reading. A score of 4.0 represents the highest attainable score, as well as the highest degree of self-concept and value that a student can exhibit. Students responded to statements such as, "Reading a book is something I like to do," and "I share good books I've read with friends" to determine their attitude towards reading. Positive responses to statements like, "My friends think that I am..." and "When I read out loud I am ..." reflected a high self-concept. Each statement was analyzed to determine the mean for individual statements, and an overall average was obtained for the areas of self-perception and value of reading. On the AMRP our students exhibited both a high self-concept ( $M= 3.25$ ) and high value of reading ( $M= 3.20$ ), thus supporting the students' self-proclamations of being avid readers.

In addition, students were individually interviewed using the Adolescent Motivation to Read Conversational Interview Format (Pitcher et al., 2007). Supplemental questions were asked to provide a more detailed picture of these students as avid readers, such as, "Use three words to describe yourself as a reader," "What is your favorite school subject?" and, "What is your least favorite school subject?" All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. As patterns emerged, the mean score for individual AMRP survey statements were revisited to corroborate the initial patterns from the interview data. In reviewing this data, categories developed and through discussion, the researchers eliminated some categories and combined others.

Gee (2000) defined identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context" (p. 99). The students we interviewed ascribed themselves with the identity of an avid reader. We interviewed the students in schools and we expected that their self-described identities would positively impact their school achievement. We also expected that our avid readers did well in school. What we found was that many did not do well and this led us to believe that this identity, that of an avid reader, may have been oversimplified. Alvermann (2001) noted that when adolescents were labeled as a certain type of reader, this assumption prevented others from seeing the reader as more than just a label. Our results compelled us to delve more deeply into research associated with avid readers and to question whether our image of an avid reader was really an accurate depiction. Specifically, we wanted to research the following common myths:

1. Avid readers enjoy Language Arts.
2. Avid readers are highly successful in school.
3. Avid readers read a variety of texts.
4. Avid readers seek to converse about books they have read.

### **Myth 1: Avid Readers Enjoy Language Arts**

Although the students who participated in this study liked reading, their enjoyment of reading did not transfer into Language Arts classes. Only 10% identified Language Arts as their favorite subject, while 30% identified it as their least favorite subject. This could be because the classes were not relevant to the type of reading they applied in the real world (Cordova & Lepper, 1996). In fact, when asked what was his/her least favorite subject, one avid reader replied, “Language Arts, personally I don’t really care what the anatomy of a sentence is.” Another noted, “Strange, it would have to be Language Arts. I love to read, but I don’t like learning what an adjective is. I already know what an adjective is. I don’t like the process that we do during class to learn about it.” Students in this study did not enjoy the material in Language Arts classes because the material was unconnected to what they considered reading; it was not engaging or motivating. Although this issue may be limited to our student population, it is important to consider the gap between what is considered school literacy and outside of school literacy.

While our avid readers reported they enjoyed reading what they were interested in, they definitely understood the importance of reading beyond enjoyment. In fact, when asked whether it was important to be a reader, all of the students responded that reading was important. The reasons cited included vocabulary development, learning/school, and “for our future.” None mentioned anything about enjoyment. One boy described reading as a “two-fer-deal. If you’re reading you’re expanding your mind and your vocabulary. You’re actually learning and doing stuff that’s fun while doing stuff for school at the same time.”

These students saw reading as multifaceted; they recognized the efferent side of reading for knowledge while indulging in aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 2005), yet they appeared to have “difficulty in grasping the importance of the school literacy” (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003-2004, p. 306) and therefore were less likely to engage in school literacy. In contrast, they readily engaged in out-of-school literacy which is a broad term used to encompass interactions with text completed beyond the walls of the school building. These include, but are not limited to, reading on the Internet, email or instant messaging, comic book reading, magazine reading, and the reading of series books (Alvermann, 2003; Alvermann,

Hagood, Heron-Hurby, Hughes, Williams, & Yoon, 2007; Lesesne, 2006; Moje, 2002; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Manga, a style of Japanese graphic novel, was of particular interest to many of our readers as sixty percent specifically mentioned reading Manga. These texts, while not traditionally sanctioned by schools, made up a significant portion of the reading reported by our students. In fact, one student shared that he only read Manga at home because the teachers would not let him read it in school thus, solidifying that lack of acknowledgment of their out-of-school literacies may have led these students to be resistant to in school literacy (Lenters, 2006).

### **Myth 2: Avid Readers are Highly Successful in School**

School success can be defined using a multitude of measures. The school district that the students in this study attended defined school success as attaining a higher than average score on the state mandated assessment and those who fell below this mark were required to take an extra reading course. As researchers we extended our definition of school success to include student grades in academic classes, specifically Language Arts or English.

The avid readers in our study did not experience consistent success in either their test scores or grades despite correlational research indicating that students who are intrinsically motivated and choose to read do better on standardized tests and get better grades (Gottfried, 1990; Guthrie et al, 1999). As previously mentioned, the students in this study were part of a school district that had separate reading classes for those who did not attain higher than average scores on the state reading tests. One of our middle school students was in both the extra reading class and a Language Arts class and all of the high school students were enrolled in both an English class and a reading course, demonstrating that being an avid reader did not always equal to what schools call “success.” Most of the students were “B” students and, although this is worthy, it does not necessarily match our image of an avid reader. One reason for this disconnect may be that the literacy of school is not the literacy in which students are intrinsically motivated to engage.

Cordova and Lepper (1996) found that children’s intrinsic motivation in school decreases beginning in third grade and continues through high school, possibly because schools present material in its most decontextualized form. The middle and high school students in this study reported that they read mostly for themselves and not for school. It could be that these students were not experiencing as much success in school because the outside reading in which they were engaging was not consistent with the knowledge and skills necessary for school success. As Jago (2008) pointed out, avid readers often “care more about their personal reading than assigned reading” (p.37).



In addition, these students may have had a different view of the purposes for reading for themselves and reading in school. Schraw and Bruning (1999) described two implicit models of reading that affect motivation: transaction and transmission. The transaction model indicates that students believe “that meaning exists in the minds of the reader and must be actively constructed from text” (Schraw & Bruning, 1999, p. 282). This is the model necessary for engaged reading. Alternatively, the transmission model is when the reader sees his or her role as extracting information from the text (Schraw & Bruning, 1999). The reader is traditionally passive in this model. The transaction versus transmission model may help to explain our avid readers. We propose that the students in this study read school materials from the standpoint of the transmission model and self-selected readings from a transaction standpoint.

It appears that the students in this study did not view success in the same way as their school and teachers. They were motivated to read for personal reasons; but not to achieve high test scores and better grades. Thus, our avid readers were not always successful in school.

### **Myth 3: Avid Readers Read a Variety of Texts**

As already alluded to, the research suggested that avid readers read a variety of texts including, but not limited to, comic books, magazines, and series books (Lesesne, 2006), but in contrast our avid readers did not read widely. In fact, they had definite preferences related to genre. Sixty-percent of our avid readers read primarily Manga and 90% reported reading series books most often (including Manga series). When asked to list books they wanted to read, 90% identified the next book in the series they were currently reading. One seventh grade student said:

The 7th Harry Potter book, definitely the 7th Harry Potter book. I'm reading a Manga book called *Fruits & Baskets*, and I want to read the next one, because it's one of those books that you really don't want to stop reading...the way the authors put everything on paper, the story line, the plot, the characters, they just want to make you keep reading. And you can usually relate to something that has happened to one of the characters.

Jago (2008) warned that avid readers can “get stuck reading a particular kind of book” (p. 37). Our avid readers' intrinsic motivation to read was often linked to a connection they developed with the author, plot, or study of text. Jago (2008) suggested that avid readers “value speed over reflection” (p. 36) and she also purported that they dive from one series book into another because they can submerge into the next book without much thought, as they already have familiarity with

the characters, plot, and setting. Interestingly, this is why teachers often recommend series books to struggling readers. Another seventh grader said:

I like series. I get mad 'cause some books don't have a series. They make it, and then they don't end it. Like in *The Boy Who Spoke Dog*, and I was looking for another one, and they don't have it.  
7th grader

This finding was not surprising; the lure of these types of subliterate among adolescents has been reported by Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and was evident among our avid readers. Subliterature includes all types of literature that appeals to popular taste rather than meeting the artistic qualities often present in style and content in the literature taught in schools (Lesesne, 2006). These are the kind of texts that our students preferred to read.

#### **Myth 4: Avid Readers Seek to Converse over Books They Have Read**

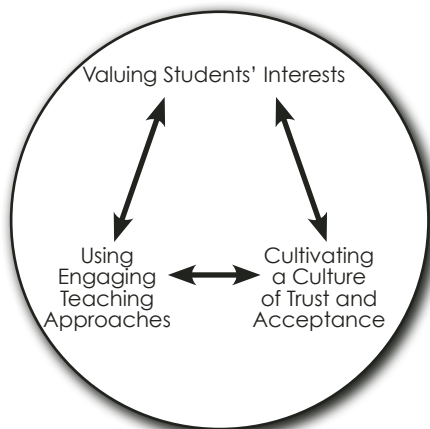
Although research suggests that adolescents prefer peer interactions when learning (Kellough & Kellough, 2008), our avid readers did not wish to share their reading with friends. Even though 100% of our readers reported that reading was important and 70% mentioned that they read an hour or more a day outside of school, less than half admitted that they share what they read. AMRP survey responses confirmed this notion as these readers were uncomfortable in groups talking about books ( $M= 2.4$ ) or texts, and they almost never shared good books with friends ( $M= 2.5$ ).

In fact, our avid readers were highly self-conscious about their reading in relationship to others. This phenomenon could be explained by the vulnerability that adolescents often exhibit as they seek their own identity (Scales, 2003). Despite the fact that 100% of the readers reported understanding what they read ( $M= 4.0$ ), and 90% noted that reading was easy for them ( $M= 3.8$ ), they lacked confidence when reading aloud in class ( $M= 2.7$ ). They were especially worried about what other kids thought about their reading ( $M= 3.4$ ). As Scales (2003) purported, these readers appeared to be self-conscious and were perhaps overly sensitive to perceived shortcomings. In secondary schools there are consequences to the identities students are perceived to have. "Readers locked into 'special' identifications know all too well which side of the enabling or disabling binary they occupy and the consequences such identities carry" (Alverman, 2001). Additionally, these readers may not talk about books because the in-school literacy experiences they have engaged in do not support discussion.

## Implications for Teachers and Schools

In this study we learned that our chosen avid adolescent readers were intrinsically motivated to read out of school. They engaged with texts for personal reasons, valued skills gained from literacy, and understood its life-long implications. Yet, our avid readers did not enjoy literacy classes, were not exceptional in school, limited themselves to reading preferred genres, and read in a cocoon. So, how can teachers and schools capitalize on the strengths of these readers in order to encourage them to come out of hiding and realize their full potential?

We concur with the research that supports engagement by making school literacy relevant (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). All too often, teachers don't take the time to ensure that curriculum is presented in a way that highlights what makes it interesting. They generally assign texts and tasks that are isolated from students' interest or background knowledge. We encourage teachers to tune in to their students' lives in order to understand what they find relevant and why. Then teachers can begin to "redesign instruction so that it is more obviously relevant to students" (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 16). A relevant curriculum means that the teacher takes into account his or her students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, interests and motivations when planning instruction. In doing so, these teachers "are much more likely to make the connections that adolescents crave" (Ivey & Fisher, 2005, p. 11). Creating a school environment that is relevant requires that teachers value students' interests, create a positive classroom/school culture, and employ engaging teaching approaches. Figure 1 demonstrates a model of how teachers and schools can make in-school literacy more relevant for adolescent avid readers.



**Figure 1.** Model for making in-school literacy relevant

Teachers can build connections with students by making learning personally relevant (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). We suggest that teachers begin by getting to know their students through surveys and other getting-to-know-you activities. These assessments can serve as a baseline of knowledge from which teachers determine their students' interests, needs, and goals. The teacher must then connect these to course goals (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). Research in motivation demonstrates that students who feel a personal connection to the content are more likely to be engaged (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Our avid readers were engaged in out-of-school literacy because they felt a personal connection with the books they chose to read and teachers might more successfully engage these students by incorporating these personal connections into the curriculum. For example, the students in this study expressed a dislike for the Language Arts. If the teachers made the curriculum more relevant, these students might be more likely to value and enjoy the class.

As teachers intentionally make personal connections with students they are simultaneously creating a classroom culture of trust and acceptance. This environment is the foundation for making in-school literacy relevant for students as they are empowered to engage in the curriculum. Classroom structures that support student engagement, promote ownership of learning objectives, and focus on caring are indicators of a positive learning environment. Oldfather (1994) found that when students did not have a stake in the curriculum they were angry and did not want to complete the required tasks. An ownership of learning objectives comes from sharing these objectives with students and developing interactive activities that build students' background knowledge and connect to students' interest. These approaches encourage investment in the content.

Teachers and students should work together to build collaborative understanding of content material. Noddings (1984) made a distinction between the student and the subject; thus, a teacher who pays more attention to the students' needs is more likely to create a nurturing environment that empowers students and motivates them to learn (Oldfather, 1994). A nurturing environment is cultivated by thinking about what the students need in order to learn the curriculum versus how the curriculum needs to be given to the students. The learning environment supported through a culture of trust and acceptance would value the strengths of our avid readers while engaging them in new content in a non-threatening manner. The students in our study did not feel as competent with in-school literacy and were uncomfortable reading in school. A positive learning community might lead these avid readers to feel more proficient and share their strengths.

Making in-school literacy relevant also requires engaging teaching approaches. Typically, middle and high school instruction is departmentalized and

decontextualized from the real world (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Maclver, & Feldlaufer, 1993). Students work with difficult textbooks in isolated subject areas, thus creating yet another disconnect between the content and the students. While the whole-class organization and focus on subject matter can lead to disengagement (Eccles, et al., 1993), teachers can take multiple steps to assure deeper connections between students and the subject matter.

We suggest a few approaches for engaging students in the subject matter. One approach that might add relevance to the environment is to use trade books over textbooks and to provide students with enough time to learn necessary background information. In this approach, the culture of the school moves away from the subject areas and towards meeting students' needs. For example, Language Arts teachers can use trade books to support content taught in other classes. This can be done through relevant student-led book talks and teacher read-alouds that build students' background knowledge and interest while also stimulating a community of learning across content areas. Teachers might also strive to build student interest through stimulating hands-on activities, offering students choice of product, and asking intriguing questions as Ivey (1999) noted that students were motivated to read when they had authentic purposes for doing so. Students who see connections between content and learning might be more engaged in their Language Arts classes. Participatory approaches to instruction emphasize student learning through discussion and student involvement with the content (Alvermann, 2003).

## Conclusion

The avid adolescent readers we interviewed and surveyed were not connected with in-school literacy. We encourage teachers and schools to make the curriculum relevant to these and all students. This can be accomplished by valuing students' interest, creating a positive classroom culture, and enacting engaging teaching approaches. One of our 10th graders said it best: reading "gives you a wide range of understanding, a more thorough opinion on a particular subject, and a heightened vocabulary." If avid readers like this one are hiding in our classrooms, shouldn't we try to find and encourage them?



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