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# **College Students As Readers**

**Jan LaBonty**

The statistics on the reading habits of adult Americans are grim: 10% of the population reads 70% of the books while most adults never read for pleasure. Of the 159 members of the United Nations, the United States ranks a mediocre 24th in book production and 49th in literacy. The 27 million adult Americans considered functionally illiterate and the additional 35 million who have less than minimum survival skill comprise approximately one-third of the adult population. Their ranks are increased by 2.3 million each year (Larrick, 1987). Unfortunately, the data on the personal and professional reading habits of adults in education are also disheartening. Surveys of preservice and practicing teachers reveal inadequate and unimpressive figures in three areas: personal reading (or reading that is done for pleasure), professional reading, and an awareness of children's literature.

The lack of enthusiasm for, and involvement in, reading by those who teach it and stress its importance is serious, particularly since a frequently stated goal of reading instruction is the development of a lifetime habit of reading (Mour, 1977). Teachers have considerable potential for influencing the attitudes of their students toward reading. The acknowledged power of adults as role models for children is a fact that drives the companies who

select athletes and rock singers to sell their products. Teachers serve as role models for the kinds of benefits and rewards that reading promises (Manna and Misheff, 1987). Children are certain to be affected by the teacher who shows excitement and enthusiasm toward reading and just as likely to be influenced by the teacher who shows apathy (Mueller, 1973).

Research concerning the personal reading habits — novels, newspapers, magazines — of teachers is relatively scarce. Comparisons among studies are hazardous since both attitude and behavior are measured, typically with intact groups, and the methods for reporting results vary considerably. While some studies survey both undergraduates and practicing teachers, most focus only on the habits of teachers in the field. Nevertheless, those studies conducted had consistent results: as a group, teachers are not avid readers and the most prolific readers are the older teachers.

### **Personal reading**

Mueller (1973) gathered information about reading habits from two intact education classes, one of graduate students and one of undergraduates. Using a forced choice instrument where 42 respondents compared activities, only 23% of the undergraduates and 50% of the graduates preferred to spend an evening reading rather than watching television. Both groups reported that reading ranked fourth or lower as a leisure activity.

Using a stratified random sample of 224 graduate students employed in education, Mour (1977) conducted a survey and found that only 22% reported reading even one, two, or three books per month. In this study, the bulk of the reading was done by 25% of the subjects. In fact, 162 of the

professionals involved in the survey read two or fewer books per year. In a survey of 170 teachers taking graduate classes, Worden and Noland (1984) found, as did Mueller (1984), that television watching was a favorite leisure activity. Among their respondents, 67% ranked television watching as their favorite recreational activity. While 58% read the newspapers selectively, only 21% reported that they read at least one book a month. Gray and Troy (1986) surveyed 80 college juniors and seniors to determine what kind of reading they were doing on their own time. When asked if they were reading a book at the present, 64% indicated that they were not.

In an effort to discover what affects attitudes toward reading in the developmental stages, Manna and Misheff (1987) examined journal entries from 50 randomly selected subjects, 25 undergraduates and 25 graduate students. They hypothesized that by encouraging their students to reflect upon their own development as readers, they would then be able to discuss experiences that led to their present attitudes toward reading. Participants were asked to write an autobiographical narrative that described the people, places, and events that influenced them as readers. It was hoped that this introspective experience would sensitize them for their critical roles as reading models.

Among the responses given to their open-ended questions, many of which were intense and emotional, the researchers found that members of their sample named more positive influences from outside of school than from within school settings. The power of this information must be interpreted in light of the research of Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) which has shown that most students spend few minutes outside of school in reading. Recommendations from those surveyed included fervent

requests that teachers serve as role models, that they be aware of students' preferences in reading, and that children be exposed to a variety of types of reading by an enthusiastic instructor (Manna and Misheff, 1987). Those who felt they lacked a solid literary heritage considered themselves to be disadvantaged.

## **Professional reading**

The reading habits of teachers and education students in relation to professional materials has also been the subject of survey research. Two types of publications may be considered professional reading: professional journals and teacher magazines. Professional journals contain articles that are peer reviewed; these journals are connected with either a professional organization or an educational institution. For example, *The Reading Teacher* is published by the International Reading Association and *Reading Horizons* is published by Western Michigan University. By contrast, teacher magazines are not connected with either professional organizations or educational institutions. They rely on advertising to cover cost of publication and articles are not juried. An example of a teacher magazine is *Instructor*.

The very nature of our work demands that teachers be not only capable practitioners but also competent scholars (Cogan and Anderson, 1977). Keeping abreast of the many issues on which teachers need information – mainstreaming, parental involvement, accountability, bilingualism, censorship, and teaching methodology – requires ongoing professional growth, often through reading. The research in the professional reading habits of teachers consistently shows that teachers do little professional reading and the publications read are typically ones that contain practical teaching suggestions, such as

teacher magazines, rather than professional journals. As in personal reading, older teachers tend to read more widely than their younger colleagues.

Cogan and Anderson (1977) surveyed teachers in 100 elementary schools in Minnesota, using a stratified random sample, to determine what type of professional reading they did. In the schools selected, a teacher from each grade level participated in the survey. The two most popular publications read were teacher magazines: *Instructor* and *Teacher*. There was a strong positive correlation between the journals read and those that were available in the building library. Age was again a factor in determining professional reading habits, much as it had been in determining personal reading habits. Respondents between the ages of 20-30 read less than did teachers over 50 years old. Cogan and Anderson (1977) concluded that, in general, teachers do not do much professional reading. Mour's (1977) conclusion was similar. He reported that less than half of a sample of 224 graduate students read professional material on a regular basis. The publications read were teacher magazines: *Instructor* and *Teacher*. Worden and Noland's (1984) survey of 170 full-time teachers had similar results: the most popular publications were *Instructor* and *Teacher* and teachers with 11 years of experience or more were people who read more extensively.

### **An awareness of children's literature**

The classroom teacher is the most dynamic model of reading in the instructional world of the child. It is teachers who must translate their own knowledge and enthusiasm about reading to children by exposing them to books and providing opportunities for recreational reading (Mangieri and Corboy, 1981). An intensive study of how children

spend their time outside of school showed that, on the average, only four or five minutes a day was spent reading (Anderson et al., 1988). Therefore, the importance of in-school experiences that promote enjoyment in reading is magnified. At every level, teachers should devote their efforts to leading students into the exciting world of literature (Gray and Troy, 1986).

Even though we know that personal recommendation is a most powerful tool for instigating reading, it is doubtful that teachers are able to guide children and students in their selection of reading materials. Mangieri and Corboy (1981) surveyed 571 elementary teachers and administrators in three states to determine their knowledge of children's literature and recreational reading activities. Ninety-one percent of the respondents could not name three children's books written in the past five years; 71% could not even name a single book. When asked to name a children's book published within the past seven years according to literary genre, 98% could not name a biography, 91% could not name a fictional title, and 97% could not name a poetry anthology. Only 11% could name three or more classroom activities that would promote recreational reading.

The results of a survey conducted for this paper support these findings. One hundred fifty-eight undergraduate educational students from two universities were surveyed concerning their reading habits. The findings reported above were confirmed. Eighty-five percent of the students did no professional reading on a regular basis. In one class of all senior students, 80% indicated they did not do any professional reading. Of the remaining percentage who did read a professional publication, their reading choices were teacher magazines: *Instructor*, *Teaching K-8*, etc. Even though all of these students were

either taking or had taken a course in children's literature, 59% did not have a favorite children's poet and 39% did not have a favorite author for children.

### **The need for change**

The research findings on the personal and professional reading habits of teachers in the field are clear. Teachers' lack of knowledge of children's literature is also supported by research. Among the recommendations for a remedy for this situation is a call for change in the content of education courses. Teachers should be encouraged to read professionally through university courses (Mour, 1977; Worden and Noland, 1984). Gray and Troy (1986) emphasize the need for teachers to be readers: "The teacher at all levels should devote ...efforts to leading students into the other worlds that can be found in the pages of a book" (p. 179). They go on to recommend a change on the part of teacher educators in order to acquaint them with children's literature and instill in future teachers the desire to read and to see the importance of reading in their own lives as well as the lives of their students. Manna and Misheff (1987) concluded their research of the personal development of a reader with a call for studies involving the subjective and transactional nature of reading.

### **The project**

Undergraduate and graduate students in reading-related classes were asked to set their own reading goals in two areas: personal reading and professional reading (either professional journals or teacher magazines and children's literature). The participants in this project were 65 undergraduates (54 females and 11 males) and 62 graduate students (50 females and 12 males).



To introduce the activity, the instructor prepared a bulletin board of magazine, journal, and book covers and shared her own reading goals for the course. A discussion that summarized research on the reading habits of educators was conducted. Students discussed their own preferences for reading. Many of them indicated that since college they had done little or no reading that was not required in a class. The instructor emphasized the importance of the teacher as a role model and the need for that person to be an enthusiastic reader. As part of the requirements for the course the students were then asked to set their own reading goals for the quarter/semester.

Reading goals were separated into two categories: personal goals and professional goals. For personal reading each student had to select at least one book and either a magazine or newspaper. Professional reading had to include at least one professional journal or teacher magazine and children's literature. The exact number of books, magazines, and journals was an individual choice but students had to read the newspaper daily and at least the three issues of the journal or magazine that would be published during the course. After the students wrote their reading goals the goal sheets were given to the instructor for perusal and then returned to the students for their anecdotal comments throughout the duration of the course. Goal sheets were collected at the end of the course.

Among the 65 undergraduates participating, reading goals varied. Thirty-six students chose fiction to read. Twenty-five chose non-fiction which included biographies and self-help books, and four read classic literature, or good literature that had stood the test of time. Twenty-two students read from more than one teacher magazine, with *Instructor* being the favorite choice. They chose from fifteen

different professional journals. *The Reading Teacher*, a personal recommendation from the instructor, was the second most widely read professional publication.

All of the undergraduates read at least one magazine or daily newspaper for their personal goals. Preferences in children's literature varied considerably, with the majority of the students choosing to read favorite authors or books appropriate for a specific age student.

The preferred professional publication of the graduate students was also *Instructor*. The second most widely read publication was *Phi Delta Kappan*. Students read in 20 different publications with 23 students reading more than one during the course. Fiction was read by 32 students, 15 read non-fiction, and 10 read classic literature. Magazines and newspapers were also selected and read.

The goal sheets contained the personal reactions of the students to the assignment. Comments regarding the attitudes and experiences of the students have relevance to this study. Many graduate and undergraduates reported an enjoyment in reading for pleasure that had nearly been forgotten:

*I enjoyed the opportunity to set my own reading goals and work toward achieving them.*

*This assignment was great! It gave me an excuse to read.*

*This assignment made me re-evaluate my reading habits. I haven't read much for personal enjoyment for a long time. I thoroughly enjoyed the two novels. I had the first one read in three days.*

*Thank you so much for this assignment. I haven't read a novel for years. My daughter cut three new molars during this*

*session of summer school. I read my novel and rocked my baby.*

*I think the most useful thing I gained from this assignment was the self-awareness that I had been slipping into aliteracy.*

The emotional involvement with literature was reflected in the responses of the students:

*I've never had a great fondness for anyone from Texas (just because I don't know anyone) but after reading Texasville I missed the characters for days. I'd think of them while doing the dishes.*

*Of Mice And Men left me speechless.*

*At least three novels I read had main characters and descendants with red hair. Is there something I should know?*

*I thoroughly enjoyed Beaches. I purchased the paperback during a trip and read it till I finished it. I cried, laughed, and went through emotions I never realized I had.*

*The best thing I did this summer was read The Count of Monte Cristo. I loved it!*

*I was spurred on to read a short Kurt Vonnegut play, "Happy Birthday Wanda June." Now I want to read another of his novels.*

*I would have missed something had I not discovered J.D. Salinger.*

*No one can compare with Mark Twain.*

*I read The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby (the drama version of Dickens' novel). I am now exploring the possibility of cutting this play down to a two or three hour show for production at the high school.*

Both undergraduates and graduates indicated that they had been affected by their professional reading:

*I had never heard of metacognition or deconceptualizing or activating a student's schema. I was so surprised by all the things I didn't know that I decided to remedy the situation by subscribing to a least one educational journal.*

*The back issues of Instructor have solved my art class problem.*

*In The Middle (by Nancie Atwell) provided me with inspiration for teaching my literature course.*

*I loved the journal, Young Children.*

*All teachers should read The Hurried Child.*

*One issue of The Kappan made me realize we need some changes in our use of in-school suspension.*

*I spent a good deal of time with The English Journal – a fine publication.*

*The Reading Teacher is a great professional magazine. I will continue reading it even after I graduate.*

The third area for personal reading, children's literature, was also reported:

*I became obsessed with children's books this summer. When reading Beat The Turtle Drum I had a difficult time putting it down. I knew something tragic was going to happen. When Joss died, my first thought was never to let my daughters climb trees. And we don't even have any.*

*You were right; Sara Plain and Tall is wonderful.*

*The Indian in the Cupboard was outstanding, one of the best books I have read. In fact, I read it out loud to my fiance and he couldn't wait to hear the next chapter each day.*

*I can't believe all the great books I missed growing up.*

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that we value literacy. It is also clear that any behavior we value in college students needs to be modeled by instructors. If education students are to become effective role models of reading and competent guides for their students then they must leave college with these skills. Inspiring education students to become active readers so that they can, in turn, instill those attitudes in children cannot be left to chance. Research on the reading habits of adults, and in particular, teachers, clarifies a need for change.

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