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Do You, Like these Teachers, Value Readings?

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Do You, Like these Teachers, Value Readings?

Evelyn F. Searls

Abstract

For several years I have used Smith et al.'s book as the text in a graduate course, Curriculum and Supervision Problems in Reading. They say: "The reading habits of teachers have been studied enough to validate the suspicion that reading is being taught by teachers who do not themselves turn often to reading for personal fulfillment and enrichment. It is deplorable that many teachers in this country, especially elementary school teachers, are not reading enthusiasts" (Smith et al., 1978, p. 74). Having worked with large numbers of both pre- and inservice teachers for the past decade, I felt that these statements did not accurately reflect the reading habits and attitudes of those teachers; however, I had no data to support this opinion. Hence, I undertook the following pilot study.

DO YOU, LIKE THESE TEACHERS, VALUE READING?

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"Teachers should be buyers of one of the most important products they want to sell to the students: reading" (Smith, Otto, & Hansen, 1978, p. 76). This succinct quote encapsulates the view of virtually every reading authority who has ever written a textbook on methods of teaching reading. All are agreed that the ultimate goal of reading instruction is to produce readers who not only can read but do read, and will continue reading during the rest of their lives. Achieving this goal requires that students be taught by teachers who themselves value reading, as demonstrated by their reading habits and attitudes.

The relatively few studies in the last twenty years that have described teachers' reading habits and attitudes are discouraging. Duffey (1973) surveyed reading habits of elementary teachers in 1966 and again in 1972. Finding little change, he deplored the amount of non-reading reported by both groups. Mueller (1973) concluded from responses to an open-ended questionnaire administered to student interns and graduates (experienced teachers) that these individuals did not place a high value on either professional or recreational reading. Using a random sample of 100 elementary teachers, Cogan and Anderson (1977) confirmed that teachers did little professional reading; periodicals they did read were ones that contained ideas that could be directly implemented in the classroom (Instructor, Teacher, etc.). Finally, Mour (1977) surveying 224 graduate students (all working teachers), concluded that teachers were not avid readers of non-professional materials, and he presented evidence which supported Cogan and Anderson's findings that teacher's preferences for professional reading also favored periodicals that offered practical ideas rather than those dealing with theory and research.

For several years I have used Smith et al.'s book as the text in a graduate course, Curriculum and Supervision Problems in Reading. In addition to the quote at the beginning of the paper, they say: "The reading habits of teachers have been studied enough to validate the suspicion that reading is being taught by teachers who do not

themselves turn often to reading for personal fulfillment and enrichment. It is deplorable that many teachers in this country, especially elementary school teachers, are not reading enthusiasts" (Smith et al., 1978, p. 74). Having worked with large numbers of both pre- and inservice teachers for the past decade, I felt that these statements did not accurately reflect the reading habits and attitudes of those teachers; however, I had no data to support this opinion. Hence, I undertook the following pilot study.

As an assignment in one section of my course, I asked my students to give the following questionnaire to five elementary classroom teachers in their schools (located in four area counties). My students were also to fill out the questionnaire; all to be done anonymously. I received 64 usable questionnaires divided as follows among grade levels: kindergarten (7), grade one (16), grade two (8), grade three (10), grade four (4), grades four/five combined (2), grade five (6), grades five/six combined (2), and grade six (9). The questionnaire is presented below, complete, with the results given in terms of response percentages as well as comments on open-ended questions. As you read, try answering the questions yourself.

* * * * *

1. Which of the following do you read regularly?

Newspapers <u>77%</u>	Professional journals <u>52%</u>
Magazines <u>91%</u>	
Novels <u>68%</u>	Nonfiction books <u>36%</u>

2. Do you read for information other than that required by your job or studies? Yes 94%

If so, what do you read?

Newspaper <u>22%</u>	Magazines <u>42%</u>
Nonfiction books <u>28%</u>	

3. Do you read for pleasure? Yes 95%

If so, what do you read?

Fiction <u>68%</u>	Magazines <u>44%</u>
Nonfiction books <u>16%</u>	

4. Have you read a novel in the last year?

Yes	<u>80%</u>
--last six months?	<u>75%</u>
--last month?	<u>61%</u>

5. Have you read a novel that you enjoyed so much that you recommended it to friends? Yes 72%

If so, what was it? (Almost all "yes" respondents provided the name of the novel.)

6. Do you feel "uneasy" if you don't have an ongoing reading project? Yes 43%

7. Do you always carry reading material with you when you expect to be in a waiting situation (doctor's appointment, barber/beauty shop, etc.)? Yes 60%

8. Do you always carry reading materials with you on a journey that lasts an hour or more? Yes 74%

9. Could you accept the loss of your hearing easier than the loss of your sight? Yes 87%

10. What do you like to do for recreation?

The three activities mentioned most often were: reading (87%), sports (73%), and sewing (26%)

If reading was included, where does it rank?

First 40% Second 32% Third 15%

11. Rate yourself as a reader:

Excellent 35% Good 53%
Fair 6% Poor 0%

12. Do you feel the need to make any changes in your reading behavior? Yes 42%

If so, what? The three changes mentioned most often were: spend more time reading (46%), read a variety of materials (22%), and read faster (18%)

(Answers to the next four questions are reported separately for teachers in kindergarten-grade two (N=31) as opposed to teachers in grades three-six (N=33) in order to examine possible differences between the groups.)

13. Do you read aloud to your students? If so, how often?

	K-2 tchrs	3-6 tchrs
Yes	<u>97%</u>	<u>82%</u>
Every day	<u>67%</u>	<u>44%</u>
4 days per week	<u>03%</u>	<u>---</u>

3 days per week	<u>10%</u>	<u>11%</u>
2 days per week	<u>03%</u>	<u>19%</u>
1 day per week	<u>---</u>	<u>11%</u>

14. Do you have a period of Sustained Silent Reading in your classroom? If so, how often?

	K-2 tchrs	3-6 tchrs
Yes	<u>39%</u>	<u>55%</u>
Every Day	<u>50%</u>	<u>67%</u>
4 days per week	<u>08%</u>	<u>---</u>
3 days per week	<u>17%</u>	<u>---</u>
1-2 days per week	<u>17%</u>	<u>17%</u>

15. Do your students see you reading for pleasure or information (not related to your instructional duties)?

	K-2 tchrs	3-6 tchrs
Yes	<u>61%</u>	<u>61%</u>

16. "A fondness for reading is something that a child acquires in much the same way as he catches a cold--by effectively being exposed to someone who already has it" (Johnson, 1956, p. 123). Do you think reading can be taught effectively by teachers who do not love reading themselves?

	K-2 tchrs	3-6 tchrs
Yes	<u>29%</u>	<u>33%</u>

It is difficult to compare results across questionnaire studies because the questions are different and results are reported in diverse ways. Other investigators have summarized their data and drawn pessimistic conclusions. I here present each question with its percentages for two reasons--the first is that you should draw your own conclusions; personally, I am encouraged by these data. The second reason is that I hope reading the questions caused you to think about your own reading habits and attitudes.

I realize that this sample is probably biased in favor of reading, due to the selection procedure for the participants. However, in light of the pessimistic conclusions of earlier studies (and, for that matter, the "bad press" that education in general is receiving these days),

I welcome some favorable bias. Naturally, as a reading educator, I would have preferred teacher responses indicating that they all read aloud to their students every day, and that they all provided a daily SSR period in their classrooms; nevertheless, the percentages reported here are encouraging.

The response to the last question was the only one that disturbed me somewhat. Approximately one-third of the respondents thought that reading could be taught effectively by teachers who do not love reading themselves. However, a number of teachers questioned the meaning of the word "effectively." I believe that, if the question had been worded, "Do you think that students will learn to love reading when taught by..." the responses might have been different.

More important than the data presented here are the possible effects that the questionnaire had on those who participated and may have on readers of this article. As Mueller (1973) stated:

The point is not that teachers "should" value reading more highly than they do, but to urge teachers to confront, acknowledge and clarify their own values in this important subject. If a teacher finds, for example, that he himself views reading simply as a tool which enables him to follow written directions, pass exams, or read the headlines, he may be able to lead his pupils to value reading at least as a necessary skill to be mastered. If he finds that he has a resistance to reading anything not required, he may be able to better empathize with the reluctant reader in his classroom. Or the teacher who realizes he prizes reading, or who learns to appreciate reading through self-study, can also apply this knowledge to teaching. In any event, the teacher who has clarified his own values can help his pupils understand, accept, or possibly change their reading values (p. 205).

It is hoped that reading this article encouraged you to confront and clarify your own values with regard to reading.

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