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Mary Jane Gray
Loyola University of Chicago

Anne Troy
Loyola University of Chicago

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS OF READING AS MODELS

Mary Jane Gray and Anne Troy
Loyola University of Chicago

The teacher at all levels should devote his/her efforts to leading students into the other worlds that can be found in the pages of books. Whether these are make-believe worlds found in fantasy or the real worlds of science, geography, history, etc., each reader needs to become acquainted with the elements of all possible worlds. How is this to be accomplished?

Although there can be many avenues to follow in achieving this goal, one important means would be for the teacher to serve as a model. Children tend to observe parents first and then teachers, adopting many of the practices of these individuals. Since this is true, it becomes important that the adults observed are good role models when it comes to reading.

One might assume that an individual majoring in elementary education would be a reader. Is this a safe assumption? In an effort to determine the book reading habits of individuals in this category, some questions were put to them. All were either seniors or second semester juniors and in attendance at a state university.



Although questions were asked about all types of reading, the questions to be reported here are related to the reading of books.

1. Are you reading a book now? If so, what is the name of the book?

2. If you are not reading a book now, what is the name of the last book you read? When did you read it?

3. Where did you obtain the book?

4. Why read books?

5. What are your three favorite types of leisure activities?

One might hypothesize that there would be no difference in the reading habits of these young people. Let us see if this is true.

Findings

When asked if they were reading a book now, only 29 of the 80 elementary education majors responded affirmatively. Twenty-four of the books being read were novels. Four books were inspirational in nature, and one was a collection of short stories.

Of the 51 students who were not presently reading a book, a question pertaining to the last book read was asked. Thirty-two of these students had read a novel most recently. Eight of these students did not mention the name of the book they had read most recently. Five students had read an inspirational book, one had read a biography, and one had read a book of plays. Two students had read a book for children's literature which they listed, and one other had read only textbooks. In the last two instances, the reading could hardly be counted as voluntary. A final student listed a magazine rather than a book. Table 1 provides the percentages of students in each category.

It is of interest to note that 15 of the 51 students not presently reading a book had read one within the last month. For 19 of the 51 students the time since last reading a book was more than six months.

Table 1

Type of Book Being Read or Last Read				
Now Reading	Novel-30% Short St.-1%	Biog-0%	Insp.-5% Total - 36%	Child Lit-0%
Not Reading	Novel-40% Play-1¼%	Biog.-1¼%	Insp.-6% Not Spec-10% Total - 64%	Child Lit-3% Text-1¼% Mag-1¼%

Table 2

Source of Reading Material				
Now Reading	Purch.-10% Book Club-1% Library-1%	Friend-11% Lrng Ctr-1%	Home-4% No Rspns-5%	Gift-3% Total-36%
Not Reading	Purch.-23% Tchrs Lnge-1%	Friend-21% Library-2%	Home-8% No Rspns-4%	Gift-5% Total-64%

Table 3

Why Read Books?			
Now Reading	Enjoy-19% No Response-1%	Enjoy & Info-10%	Info-6% Total - 36%
Not Reading	Enjoy-31% No Rspns-5% Don't Read-1%	Enjoy & Info-12% Have to-4% Enrichment-1%	Info-7% Sp.Tme-3% Total - 64%

Table 4

Is Reading One of Your Three Favorite Types of Leisure Activity?			
Now Reading	Yes-31%	No-5%	Total--36%
Not Reading	Yes-24%	No-40%	Total--64%

When asked where they had obtained the book, a variety of sources was listed. For those who were presently reading a book, the greatest number, 9, had borrowed the book from a friend; 8 had purchased the book; 3 found the book at home; 4 did not indicate where they had obtained the book; 2 received the book as a gift, and the final three students listed one of the following sources: book club, learning center, or public library.

For students who were not presently reading a book, the greatest number, 18, had bought the book; 17 obtained the book from a friend; 6 students got the book at home; 4 received the book as a gift; 3 gave no response; 2 got the book at the library; and 1 found the book in the teachers' lounge. Table 2 shows the percentages of students using each source.

When examining reasons for reading, 15 of the 29 students presently reading viewed reading as something to do for enjoyment, 8 mentioned both enjoyment and information, and 5 mentioned information only as the reason for reading. One student gave no response.

For the students not presently reading a book, 25 indicated that enjoyment was the reason for reading, 10 students listed both enjoyment and information, 6 listed information only, 4 did not respond, 3 stated they read because they had to, 2 read to pass spare time, 1 read for enrichment, and 1 did not read at all. The percentages in each category are in Table 3.

The responses to the questions relating to favorite leisure time activities showed that 25 of those presently reading a book listed reading as one of their three favorite leisure time activities, and only 4 of this group did not mention it. For the students not presently reading a book 19 mentioned it as one of their three favorite leisure time activities while 32 did not include it. Table 4 shows the percentages.

Discussion

The most striking finding, one which would not be expected, was that only 29 future elementary teachers out of a total of 80 questioned were currently reading a

book. Fifty-one had no book "in process." Students currently reading seemed to be doing this voluntarily as the choice of reading material for all but 5 students was a novel. Four others were reading inspirational material, undoubtedly also their own choice. The final student was reading a collection of short stories.

In the other group 40 of the 51 students were reading in one of the two categories--novel or inspirational material. Three students were reading material for classes--surely not voluntarily. One was reading a magazine, and this does not fit into the category of book reading. Six others could not remember what they had read last. One student was reading a book of plays.

Only 41 students in all indicated that reading was for enjoyment. If we add those who included enjoyment and information, the number increases 20 to a total of 61. There were 18 students holding the belief that reading is for information only. One student did not respond and one said reading was for class assignments. The teachers who do not enjoy reading themselves would not be in the best position to lead children to develop an interest in reading as well as a desire to read.

What is the significance of these findings in terms of influence on young readers? Elementary teachers have a great influence on young readers since they are with them on a daily basis. If we have approximately one-fourth of those teachers who are most interested in reading as a process of obtaining information, the children in their classes are likely to be deprived of the recognition of the pleasure to be found in reading. Huck has told us that if there is anything omitted in our schools today, it is not the teaching of skills, but rather the demonstration to children of the pleasures to be found in reading. She states this very effectively.

One of the best kept secrets in education is that children learn to read by reading. Most teachers overteach the skills of reading to the detriment of reading practice and enjoyment. Many primary teachers spend over half of their day teaching children how to read without ever giving them the opportunity for reading (1976, p. 600).

Parents and teachers exert influence on the development of readers in future generations. Surely both of these groups need to make sure their influence is a positive one.

There is a message in this for teacher educators as well if the reading habits of future teachers in their classes are similar to those of the students in this study. Some provision would have to be made to acquaint the students with literature for children, and to instill in those future teachers an interest in reading and a desire to read themselves. While a course in children's literature would be a beginning, it would be only that. A continuing effort throughout the teachers' preparation would have to be centered on helping future teachers see the importance of reading--not only in the lives of their students, but more importantly, in their own. With this knowledge they would be better equipped to help ensure that reading does play a focal role in the lives of their students.

REFERENCES

Huck, Charlotte S. Children's Literature in the Elementary School. (3rd edition) New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, p. 600.