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# READING AND LITERACY— ALIVE AND WELL

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Reading and English teachers often feel as though they are fighting a losing battle. After all, many critics claim that reading is a dying art in the United States. These critics believe that television has replaced reading as a leisure activity and contributed to a general decline in the standard of literacy. There is good news, however, for those who believe in the importance of reading and books. Reading is not dead, and many research findings suggest that the level of literacy and the amount of interest in reading may be higher than ever.

There is considerable data to support the contention that literacy is a healthy and growing part of American life. One nationwide survey found that 95% of the respondents were readers, and that the average American who can read spends one hour and 46 minutes reading each day (Sharon, 1972).

The data from this study also revealed that 87% of the respondents who were employed read as part of their job. These people spent a median time of 61 minutes each day reading at work. Furthermore, many said that reading such things as manuals, written instructions, forms and memos was a very important part of their job.

These figures indicate that reading plays an integral role in American business. Indeed, the figures would seem to suggest that effective reading skills are absolutely necessary for the efficient operation of American business.

John R. Bormuth (1978) went so far as to calculate the costs and benefits of literacy in the United States. According to Bormuth, literacy-related activities accounted for \$272.7 billion in 1972, or 23% of the Gross National Product for that year. He also estimated that the benefits of literacy amounted to at least five times the cost.

Bormuth cited other encouraging statistics indicating that the educational attainment of the average American is higher than ever before. He noted that in 1974, 98.3% of all elementary and secondary-aged students were enrolled in school, and 33.5% of the people aged 18-24 were enrolled in college. Furthermore, in 1976 the median number of years of education among adults over 25 was 12.4 years, an all-time high (1978, p. 127).

These and other data indicate that basic literacy is nearly universal in the United States. For instance, one national study

found an overall adult illiteracy rate of only 3% (Harris, 1970). Another study which analyzed the data from several surveys of functional literacy (that level of reading ability necessary to function effectively in society) concluded that U.S. schools at both the elementary and secondary levels are more effective than ever in helping create an increasingly literate society (Fisher, 1978).

A study of functional literacy skills conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress provides more good news about literacy trends in the United States. Seventeen-year-old students were tested for functional literacy skills in 1971 and 1975, and the students in 1975 showed an average gain of more than two percentage points (Gadway and Wilson, 1976). This seems to indicate that American schools are devoting attention to preparing students for the reading requirements of day by day life.

As Dr. Roger Farr, past president of the 65,000-member International Reading Association, stated during a Senate Subcommittee hearing on the teaching and learning of basic academic skills in school, "If basic literacy is defined as the ability to read at a certain minimum level—for example, at a second grade level—then close to 100 percent of the citizens of the United States are literate. Persons who cannot read at the minimal level are those who are hindered by physiological and psychological handicaps." (1979)

#### Reading for Fun and Profit

Not only are Americans able to read, but the value of reading stretches far beyond the workplace. The findings of several recent surveys support this contention that Americans read for "fun" as well as for "profit." For instance, according to a study of the reading habits of Americans aged 16 and older, 55% of the people surveyed had read at least one book during the six months preceding the study, and these people also read magazines and newspapers (Yankelovich, Skelly and White, 1978). Of these book readers, 45% had read more than ten books within the past six months. Another 39% of the people surveyed read magazines and newspapers rather than books. Only six percent read nothing.

In a similar report, Robert A. Ellis (1978) analyzed reader-ship surveys from the early 1970s and concluded that well over 90% of the people sampled read either books, magazines, or newspapers with some frequency. Furthermore, he noted that many of the five percent who were described in the studies as non-readers were characterized as having visual handicaps, or they were speakers of foreign languages.

The Ellis report also indicated that reading habits are established very early in life. Parents' habits and interests and the success that youngsters experience in the beginning school years were found to be two major factors in developing reading habits. This study also found that children whose parents read to them were better readers and had a greater interest

in books than children whose parents did not read to them.

A national survey conducted by Louis Harris in 1979 for Playboy magazine shows that reading is a frequent leisure time activity for many men. "The Playboy Report on American Men" surveyed men between the ages of 18 and 49 on a variety of topics, including leisure time activities. Respondents were given a list of 21 leisure activities and asked to tell which they did on a regular basis.

Fifty-six percent of the respondents reported reading regularly. Only sleeping, watching television, listening to music at home, listening to the radio, and fixing things around the house ranked higher as leisure activities (1979, p.52.) The figures show that more men read regularly than play tennis or attend football games. More men read regularly than play poker. In short, reading is highly popular with the American male.

Nearly 70% of the respondents said they had read three or more books during the past year. More than one man in every five (22%) reported reading more than 20 books a year, 12% read 11-20 books annually. Less than a third of the respondents (31%) were characterized as nonreaders or minimal readers, reading two or fewer books per year (1979, p.55).

The statistics also indicate that reading habits vary according to class status, with the highest percentage of regular readers found among those respondents categorized as upper middle class (income of over \$20,000). However, the study noted, "While the differences between groups are substantial, the generally high interest in reading does indicate that mass education in America has been more fruitful than is commonly acknowledged" (1979, p. 53).

These findings on the relationship between reading and class seem to say one of two things. Reading may be a by-product of socio-economic success in that successful men have more time to read. The other possibility is that reading is a contributing factor in the success of these men. Reading may give them the additional knowledge and insight which allows them to advance in their fields.

The clinching fact to show the popularity of reading and books can be illustrated in dollars and cents. Figures released by the Association of American Publishers, Inc., totalled book sales in 1978 at \$5.77 billion. This represents an increase of 12.6%, or \$644 million, over 1977 sales. The popularity of leisure reading is demonstrated by the fact that the category showing the largest increase was trade books. This category includes novels and paperbacks, the books which are most popular for pleasure reading. Sales of these books totalled \$940 million in 1978, an increase of 16.5% from 1977.

We can see that the level of interest in reading is higher than ever before. Literacy is not on its deathbed--it is well!

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