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Kathleen M. Ngandu
Hood College

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WHY DO KIDS READ?

Kathleen M. Ngandu

READING CENTER DIRECTOR, HOOD COLLEGE, FREDERICK, MARYLAND

We can learn much about how individuals approach reading by examining their feelings about the nature of reading. Although several authorities (i.e., Lapp and Flood 1978, Smith, 1978) believe that one's reasons for reading influence reading habits, motivations and abilities, few studies have actually examined these reasons for reading.

A fairly comprehensive study of adults indicated that most read for knowledge or for pleasure ("The Consumer Study on Reading and Book Purchasing"; 1978). Much less is known about children's reasons for reading, however. Denny and Weintraub (1966) questioned first-grade students about why they wanted to learn to read, but most of these children were just speculating on a process in which they were not yet fully involved. There is a need to examine the reasons of children who are able to read.

In addition to knowing children's reasons for reading, it is also important to know how teachers perceive student's reasons for reading, since teachers have the potential to influence children's opinions.

This study attempts to answer two questions. First, what do elementary students believe is the most important reason for their reading? The second question also examines children's reasons for reading, but from the teacher's perspective—what do elementary teachers believe is the most important reason for their students' reading?

Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted with 257 elementary students to determine their major reason for reading. These children attended a Nebraska school specifically selected because it was representative of various racial groups, nationalities and socioeconomic groups. In most cases the children had attended at least one other school, therefore being exposed to a variety of teaching styles and instructional programs. The findings of this study can be generalized only to similar schools.

Students in grades one through six who could read were asked, "What's reading good for? Why do you read?" Transcriptions of their statements were made. In cases where several responses were given, the student was asked to clarify which was his/her most important reason. Each child's reading level (above average, average, or below average) based on teacher judgment, and sex were also noted. These two variables were later used in data analysis.

One hundred and fifteen teachers in six Nebraska counties were asked to complete a written response in which they listed what they believed to be elementary students' most important reason for reading. These

teachers were either enrolled in university reading education courses or were members of a local International Reading Association.

Results and Discussion

A content analysis of students' and teachers' statements led to the development of a classification scheme. This scheme was later used to categorize all the responses. Validity and reliability of this scheme was verified as acceptable by several university and elementary school staff members who cross-checked the researcher's classifications. The six main categories and representative quotes or paraphrases follow:

Classification of Reasons for Reading

1. Reading is needed to *survive* or function in school and/or society.
 - to do well in school
 - to do the workbooks
 - to get a diploma
 - to read signs, labels, newspapers
 - to get a job
 - to cope with life
2. Reading enables one to gain *knowledge*, as comprehension and/or learning occurs.
 - to learn
 - to know how to make things
 - to know what other people write
 - to find out about other people or things
 - to find information one wants to know
 - to understand information in print
3. Reading enhances *personal development* and/or self-concept.
 - to experience success in being able to read
 - to improve one's self-esteem or self-concept
 - to learn about oneself
 - to broaden one's experiences
 - for life enrichment
 - to learn to think for oneself
4. Reading gives *pleasure*.
 - for enjoyment or fun
 - to make one happy
 - for excitement
 - for entertainment
 - to pass the time
5. Reading encourages a *shared experience* with family or others.
 - to read to family or others
 - to discuss a book, story, etc. with others
 - to read to one's own children or others some day
 - to teach one's own children or others to read in the future
6. *No value identified*.
 - non-meaningful responses given

Students' vs. Teachers' Responses

To investigate the effect of role as student or teacher on the main reason for elementary children's reading, a 2 x 6 chi-square analysis was performed. The data indicate a significant difference between children's reasons for reading and teachers' perceptions of why students read ($X^2_5 = 33.4$, $p = .001$). As Table 1 indicates, the first four reasons (survival, knowledge, personal development and pleasure) were identified about equally by the teachers. No teacher mentioned the shared experience reason, however, or failed to identify some rationale for reading. There was a notable range, on the other hand, among the proportions of students in the six categories. The greatest percentage, 37%, stated that reading's most important value was knowledge. The second most frequent choice, reading as a survival skill, was given by 26% of the children. Considerably fewer students, 13% stated that they read for pleasure, while 11% felt they read to enhance their personal development. Nine percent didn't identify any reason for reading. Finally, the smallest percentage of children, four percent, emphasized the value of reading in connection with a shared experience.

Table 1

Students' and Teachers' Reasons for Elementary Children's Reading		
Reasons	% Students	% Teachers
Survival	26	28
Knowledge	37	27
Personal Development	11	21
Pleasure	13	24
Shared Experience	4	0
No Value Identified	9	0
Total	100	100

The teachers seemed to feel that students read for pleasure more often than students indicated this reason. Teachers also put a greater emphasis on children's reading for personal development. As this latter reason is fairly sophisticated, it is understandable that fewer children would supply it. The difference between teachers' and students' emphasis on pleasure is more difficult to rationalize without looking at specific influencing factors such as reading education experiences or impact of television as an entertainment medium.

It is encouraging that children gave a priority to the knowledge value, although they less often emphasized that several students did not see any reason for reading. This feeling probably has a great impact on their reading behaviors and may even lead to avoidance of reading situations in some cases.

Typically teachers read aloud to children as they share books in many different situations; however, instructors apparently believe that this shared experience is not a primary reason for children's reading. A few students gave priority to this reason, which seems to indicate that

they have a strong desire to relate to others during the reading process, instead of only reading to themselves. When specific grade levels were examined, it was apparent that lower-grade children were more inclined than intermediate children to value this reason.

Above vs. Below Average Readers

No significant relationship existed between students' reading performance levels and their main reason for reading. As shown in Table 2, it appears that above average readers tended more often to read for knowledge and pleasure than below average students did, which one would intuitively expect to find. On the other hand, below average students felt the shared experience of reading was more important than above average children did. Also, below average students were more inclined to state that reading had no value.

Table 2

Above Average and Below Average Readers' Reasons for Reading

Reasons	% Above Average Readers	% Below Average Readers
Survival	26	28
Knowledge	42	32
Personal Development	12	11
Pleasure	13	8
Shared Experience	0	6
No Value Identified	7	15
Total	100	100

When children succeed at what they do, generally they feel good about the activity promoting this feeling. So it makes sense that above average students, those experiencing success, enjoyed reading more than those who did not attain the high level of success. It also follows that the above average, successful reader will probably gain more knowledge from what is read. Indeed, the above average students more often supplied the knowledge reason, as compared to the below average students' lesser emphasis of this reason.

Below average readers frequently are involved with tutors or special reading classes, as stronger students are encouraged to independently pursue their reading interests. This may parallel the finding that no above average reader supplied the shared experience reason while several below average readers mentioned this reason.

Girls vs. Boys

The profiles of girls and boys were also quite similar, as no significant relationship was identified between sex and reason for reading (see Table 3). Nearly the same percentage of girls and boys identified survival, personal development, and shared experience as reasons for reading, but 10% more girls than boys supplied the knowledge reason. Boys, on the other hand, supported the pleasure reason slightly more

often than girls did. Boys were also somewhat more inclined to say that reading had no value.

Table 3

Girls' and Boys' Reasons for Reading		
Reasons	% Girls	% Boys
Survival	24	24
Knowledge	43	33
Personal Development	11	12
Pleasure	10	15
Shared Experience	5	3
No Value Identified	7	13
Total	100	100

The greater proportion of boys supplying the no value reason as well as the lower percentage who read for knowledge may, in part, be a result of social, cultural and emotional factors. These elements may negatively influence boys' attitudes about school and reading experiences within the school (Stauffer 1978). The data in this study cannot fully explain why boys gave the pleasure reason a higher rating than the girls did. Possibly in an attempt to counteract negative factors, these boys' teachers made a special attempt to emphasize their reading for pleasure.

Conclusions

To understand how our students approach reading situations, it seems reasonable that we assess their reasons for reading, in addition to the more traditional skills and abilities we typically measure. After the children's reasons are identified, we need to also look at our own beliefs about why children read. Then we can better determine if we want to reinforce student's reasons for reading or attempt to modify them.

Considering the teachers at the school described in this study, they were proud of their students' high emphasis on reading for knowledge. They wanted to maintain this attitude. Several staff members, however, decided to put a renewed effort on reading as a pleasurable process. To help achieve this goal, one suggestion might be to spend less time on repetitive ditto skill exercises and more time with self-selected reading materials. Expanding students' accessibility to print materials other than books, including magazines and taped stories, is a second way to promote reading enjoyment. Book reports written after completing a selection might be replaced with more diverse creative dramatics or art activities based on the stories. Book report projects could also be replaced by additional reading time in many cases. These teachers decided that in addition to a general focus on reading for pleasure, they wanted to put a special emphasis on providing positive reading experiences for those students who believed reading had no value. In this situation, it seemed the most logical starting point was to base a portion of their

reading activities on personal interests of the students, rather than using only the basal reading materials.

If we take time to talk to our students, as well as to observe their behaviors, we can better determine how children feel about reading including their reasons for reading. We need to consider this information carefully to understand our students more fully and then plan instruction accordingly.

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