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CASE STUDIES OF THE INFLUENCE OF READING ON ADOLESCENTS

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In a study of the impact of reading on the concepts, attitudes, and behavior of adolescents, it was found that students exhibited varying responses from ambiguous, general, indifferent reactions to highly significant dimensions of self-involvement. Some subjects stated that no specific selection had influenced their concepts, attitudes or behavior; the responses of these students were frequently vague and appeared to disclose an indifferent attitude toward reading. On the other hand, the verbalizations of others appeared to reveal empathy and intense participation in their reading which, sometimes, led to re-oriented goals and actions implementing these goals.

Methodology

Students representing these extreme patterns of high and low influence were selected for case study by a quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses to a questionnaire. Out of four hundred and twenty responses, the reports of ten high school students with the highest number of influences and ten students with the lowest number of influences were examined. From this study, ten protocols representing the extremes in influence from reading were chosen.

The criteria for the selection of the five subjects of high influence are given below:

1. Evidence of a combination of concept, attitude, and behavior influence.
2. Statements disclosing the development of:
 - a. Self understanding,
 - b. Understanding of self in relation to others, and
 - c. Understanding and empathy for others.
3. Statements showing decisions formulated.
4. Statements revealing self-observed action taken by the subject regarding decisions formulated.

Since the aim of this investigation was to ascertain the impact of reading on the individual personality, the student's observations of his self image and behavior were of primary concern. The self observations might be of a positive or negative nature.

The criteria for the selection of the five cases of low influence were:

1. Assertion by the student that no specific book, story, poem or article had influenced his point of view, attitude or behavior.
2. Vague, general statements about the influence of reading.

Information pertinent to the impact of reading on the adolescents of this case study was obtained from questionnaires, interviews, counselors' records and teachers' observation and rating scales.

Through the questionnaire the students reported how books, poems or articles affected their attitude—tendency to act in a certain way—their ideas or behavior. As Strang¹ says, "Only the individual knows how he thinks and feels and what experiences mean to him" (p. 11). In Gestalt psychology, the individual responds to the "situation-as-perceived." The person himself knows how an event is immediately experienced. Therefore, the individual himself was asked to report any changes in concepts, attitudes, and behavior that he had noted as a result of reading.

The same information requested on the questionnaire was asked the students selected for case study in interviews that took place eleven months later. The twofold purpose of the interviews was elaboration and validation of the findings of the questionnaire. After the interviewee had responded freely to the same questions of the questionnaire, the investigator read from the individual's protocol the responses which the subject had written the previous year. The student was asked to comment and elaborate, if he wished, on his previous answers.

At the end of the interview, each subject was requested to respond freely to the question: "What kind of a reader am I?" After he had reacted to this question, he was requested to complete the following check list, evaluating himself as a reader:

What Kind of a Reader Am I?

-1. The indifferent reader who is uninterested and gets little or no pleasure from his reading.
-2. The observer type of reader who judges and criticizes the author's ideas or the character's actions.
-3. The participator who places himself in the position of one or more characters in the story and lives the part.
-4. The synthesizer who gets a new idea or concept from his readings.
-5. The synthesizer who achieves a better understanding of him-

self and his own strengths and weaknesses.

-6. The decision maker who has made a decision regarding future action.

The attitudes of the observer and the participator are similar to those of Squire's² qualitative analysis of the self-involvement reactions of his fifty-two adolescents (pp. 201-209). The other attitudes of the synthesizer and the decision maker evolved from a content analysis of the student's responses to the questionnaire.

The responses to the above check list showed varying patterns of reaction, as one student remarked:

(The spelling has been corrected in all the student's reports that follow.)

No one can actually maintain the role of an observer without at times becoming the participator, or in order to criticize the character's actions, one must say, "If I were the author's character I would (or would not) have done such an action; therefore, I believe the action is not (or is) realistic." I also get new ideas and concepts from my reading which often relate to myself.

The students' free responses to the question—"What kind of a reader am I?"—came closer to revealing more significant information regarding the subjects' reading attitudes and habits than the specific responses on the check list. One student wrote:

Well, for one thing, I'm a very slow reader. Whenever we had tests, my teachers couldn't believe it. They thought I must have been stalling, because I have a high stanine . . . but, of course, the stanines come out of reading comprehension. And I'm a very slow reader. I plod along, reading word after word, and it just takes me forever . . . I'm an interested reader. I mean, I don't read books because I have to make book reports on them. I mean I read what I want . . . I'm kind of an escapist in literature, though . . . I like to take things that will sort of just pick me up and carry me away.

Examples of Reported Maximal Influence from Reading

Case 1

A high school junior whose response disclosed maximal influence from reading commented as follows:

Before reading "If" by Kipling I didn't try to act in a certain way. After reading it I tried to almost live by this poem. But after reading *The Catcher in the Rye* I started doing what

I wanted to and didn't worry about making other people happy as much as I used to. In the past year or so I have been reading as much about Philosophy as I have time for and this has brought me to believe that the schools I have attended have not been doing their job of teaching me the way they should. Now I also realize that there is a great deal I want to learn and just not enough time to learn it all.

In "If" the whole mood of the poem influenced me. It almost quieted my whole spirit. *Catcher in the Rye* made me laugh and cry at the same time. It showed what most teenagers are going through. I think the personality of Holden influenced me because he wasn't a snob and wasn't afraid to be honest. He made me see that you only have to live with yourself and I now look at the people whom everyone likes and they seem to be shallow and without a true personality. By reading such books as the *Story of Philosophy* I have found even more that you have to be yourself. In this case I think the philosophers themselves and not what they thought is what influenced me most. I read *Catcher in the Rye* because my mother and teacher told me I shouldn't. My dad however said it was great and told me to go ahead and read it. I am reading philosophy because I feel dissatisfied with life and reading it gives me a reason to be dissatisfied. It also puts me in with a group of people older than I am and I have more fun with them and they make me feel like I'm worth something.

In the interview a year later, the student felt that the world was not as idealistic as pictured in the poem, "If." She mentioned that she would still enjoy reading the poem, but she could never live by it as she had previously stated. Also, her reaction to *Catcher in the Rye* had changed. She now feels that one cannot go around just being oneself. One has to conform to a certain extent so one can achieve something much greater. ("You have to get along with people." "You have to understand them." "You have to fit in with them.")

The subject's responses a year later gave evidence of growth. Her replies were thoughtful and showed greater maturity. Her verbalizations disclosed continued high influence from reading, but she had developed a new emphasis in readings in the areas of political science and current events.

Case 2

Another case revealed a high school senior who reported a strong negative reaction after reading books on the theme of naturalism. Her

comments on the questionnaire were as follows:

After reading *McTeague* by Norris and *The Grapes of Wrath* I became mildly depressed. These novels were written by naturalists and I seemed to give up many things that were a challenge. The novels were depressing and hopeless and that is how I began feeling toward everything.

After reading so many books of the same nature, I began to lose my drive and want for challenge. I would give up easily at things I usually stuck to. My personality hit a new low in soberness. Things didn't seem quite as jolly as before. I was told that I hardly laugh any more. Before starting the project on Naturalism, I was active in many things. But afterwards I lost interest in most of my extracurricular activities. These results are extreme but that is how the books affected me.

In her free responses during the interview a year later, the subject confirmed the above reaction of depression after reading books on the theme of naturalism. However, the influence on her attitudes and behavior was not as severe. She was reading more objectively, and her emotions were not so intensely involved with the characters that she didn't understand the author's meaning. As was revealed with the previous case study, this student also showed more maturity in her verbalizations a year later.

Examples of Reported Minimal Influence from Reading

Case 1

An "Honors" student who had been in accelerated classes in high school reported little influence from reading. She wrote on her questionnaire:

I'm sure that sometime during my life I have read something that influenced my point of view, behavior or attitude but I can't remember exactly what materials. Poems and magazine articles have a tendency to do this more than books. These articles make me think about whatever the situation was about. I usually don't do that much reading so when I prepare to read it's usually on class time. I feel like reading was a task and unless I enjoyed it, I really don't get that much out of it. Since most of the reading I do is in class, afterwards we discuss it and I voice my opinion on it.

In the interview a year later, the girl gave vague, general responses about the influence of reading specific materials on her concept, attitude and behavior as she did on the questionnaire. She said that students in "Honors" programs did not read as extensively and did not possess

as advanced a vocabulary as teachers assumed. She commented as follows:

I know some people have had a better background in English than I have. But I know that a lot of teachers, you know, think just because you are higher—more intelligent than the rest of the students—they think, well, she's read a lot and she does a lot of reading outside. But I know there are a lot of people in "Honors" English who don't read that much . . . and their vocabulary is really low.

Case 2

Another high school student reported little influence from reading. He wrote on his questionnaire:

I believe that your attitude or behavior may be changed by reading, but I do not think I have had my personality changed. I definitely believe it can change your point of view.

I think there are too many constantly moving things going around a person that affect his personality, so that a book you read is merely of someone else, or something, and doesn't change you too much, or permanently.

In the interview, the boy confirmed what he had written on his questionnaire. He asserted that no book, story, poem or article had influenced him. "I don't think I've been affected by any books," he declared.

Review

Interesting distinctions were noted between the five cases of high influence and the five cases of low influence. The five students of high influence reported more total influences, more materials that had influenced them, and also more self-involvement reactions.

It would appear that the students of the case study who were highly influenced usually continued to be highly influenced—if not by the same materials—by other books, stories, poems or articles they had read. The five students of low influence continued to report little or only moderate influence from reading.

There appeared to be no significant difference between the two groups in intelligence as measured by the Otis Beta test and reading ability as measured by the California Reading Test. This relationship was also confirmed by a comparison of the influence reported by the fifteen most intelligent and best readers and the fifteen least intelligent and poorest readers as measured by the group tests. However, for the entire sampling of four hundred and twenty students, there was a

slight, positive relationship between the total influences reported and intelligence, vocabulary, and comprehension, a finding which was not supported by the ten case studies.

Implications

The case study method might be used to explore further the dimensions of influence from reading. A content analysis of the verbalizations of those individuals who appear to be maximally or minimally influenced from reading might shed more light on the influence of reading on personality development as well as on the thinking process involved in reading.

Further investigation is recommended on the elements in the content of literature that influence adolescents adversely. One case study disclosed a reaction of hopelessness and depression after reading materials of a naturalistic nature.

The influence of reading on the personality at various stages of child and adolescent development might be pursued. Some of the case studies of this investigation showed more mature development when interviewed a year later.

It is recommended that teachers be alerted to the effects of reading on personal development. Attempts should be made to implement a reading/discussion program to develop understandings of the ways characters in books have worked out solutions to personal problems. Discussion of the varied reported effects of reading on individuals in a class may help participants realize that others have similar problems and may also help these individuals gain self-understanding and insight.

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