Who's Reading and Why: Reading Habits of 1st Grade through Graduate Students

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The habit of reading develops over a period of time. This study explored reading habits across a wide range of students. An open-ended survey of reading habits involved 242 participants from grades 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, undergraduate non-education majors, undergraduate elementary majors, and graduate reading majors. As data were analyzed, themes emerged to categorize participant responses. Discussion of data offers suggestion to both teacher educators and classroom teachers about ways to develop and maintain the habit of reading.
The habit of reading, like other habits, develops over a period of time. Motivation and the ability to read are only two aspects of a complex series of factors contributing to the habit of reading. Why is it, educators, politicians, and parents ask, some students love to read and do so every chance they have and other students—often in the same family or classroom—dislike the whole idea of reading anything. Perhaps, because "reading is an effortful activity that often involves choice, motivation is crucial to reading engagement" (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004, p. 299).

Learning to read is an essential aspect of one's education, and literacy development is often compared to athletes who train for competition. The world's greatest athletes do not achieve that ability quickly or without practice. They spend hours and hours in activities to stretch, develop, and maintain muscle tone and control. Such is the nature of learning to read, which includes development in phonemic awareness and phonics and maintenance in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. However, knowing how to read does not complete the whole picture of the reading habit. Practical advice from Trelease (2001) is the more students read the better they read, and the better they read the more they read. Research published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000), states, "The importance of reading as an avenue to improved reading has been stressed by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike, no matter what their perspectives. There are few ideas more widely accepted than that reading is learned through reading" (p. 21). For various reasons, however, developing enthusiasm for reading is often as difficult for students as is mastering the vocabulary or comprehension of the text selection. Therefore, "both skill and will must be considered in the conceptualization of the ideal reader, the one with broad interests who samples widely and deeply from available sources of text and is motivated to read on a regular basis" (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 554). So, readers need to both see themselves as readers and have the ability to read for the habit of reading to develop and be maintained.

Just as all teachers are teachers of reading, all teachers must also encourage and model the habit of lifelong reading and learning. Most teachers are effective at teaching their students how to read, but often
neglect teaching them to want to read. Armstrong, Johnston, Bridges, and Gessner (2003) state, "with today's rapid technological advances, the scientific information explosion, the need for critical thinking and the advent of evidence-based practice, the professional" educator must promote lifelong learning (p. 20). These authors further point out, "A hallmark of professional behavior is the personal commitment to the ongoing acquisition of new knowledge" (p. 19). One ongoing way to acquire new knowledge is to develop the habit of reading, which "develops a capacity for focused attention and growth" (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, p. 38).

**Purpose of Study**

A challenge for educators is to reinforce students who possess the reading habit, fueled by motivation, then encourage unmotivated students to acquire the lifelong habit of reading. The purpose of this study was to examine the reading habits of students across age groups. By analyzing the responses given by several academic levels of students, teacher educators reflect upon the developing and expanding areas of literacy development, preview how students see themselves as readers, and get a snapshot of reading habits of multi-age students.

**Participants**

There were 242 participants in this study from grades: 1 (n = 20), 4 (n = 24), 6 (n = 40), 8 (n = 36), 11 (n = 25), undergraduate non-education majors (consisting of math, business, and science majors) (n = 35), undergraduate elementary education majors (n = 41), and graduate reading education majors (n = 21). The participants in grades 1, 4, 6, 8, and 11 were from a large public school system, and the university students were from a large public university. Both the public school and the university were located in the mid-western United States. The targeted grade levels gave a varied perspective from emerging readers, then progressing readers, and up through professional educators who teach literacy to children.

Participation in the survey was on a voluntary basis, and all were informed their responses would remain anonymous. Parents signed
consent forms for students in grades 1, 4, 6, 8, and 11. The regular classroom teacher volunteered to conduct the survey in each of the classrooms in large-group fashion.

The Survey Instrument

For this study, an open-ended survey instrument was used rather than a Likert scale, which requires a forced answer from respondents. The researcher did not want to supply pre-conceived choices of language and terms that might influence the participants' responses. Applegate and Applegate (2004) supported this belief in their study by stating, “We used open-ended questions largely because we wanted to invite students to share their experiences...and provide us with as effective an opportunity [as possible] to listen to student voices” (p. 557). With a Likert scale, respondents typically indicate the extent of their reading habits. However, “with an open-ended instrument, respondents presumably are providing an explanation” of their reading habits (Allison, Okum, & Dutridge, 2002, p. 245).

All participants provided responses to the following questions:

1. Why do you read?
2. Who taught you to read?
3. What are your strengths as a reader/What do you do well as a reader?
4. What do you do when you come to a word you cannot pronounce?
5. What are your favorite books and/or authors?
6. Do you read at home? If so, how often?
7. How does reading make you feel?

Data Analysis

Emerging themes developed as data were organized and analyzed. The researcher and two graduate assistants in Reading Education evaluated each survey response independently creating categories into which comments were placed. After reading the surveys, the three readers discussed outlier responses that did not seem to fit into any
precise category, thus establishing intercoder reliability. Consensus was reached on placement of most of the outliers. For some responses, however, it seemed more appropriate to simply leave them as outliers and report the results of the majority of responses. Results of each survey question follows. Verbatim comments add to the rich store of anecdotal material and provide an affective perspective into the reading habits and unique experiences of the students.

**Question 1 – Why do you read?** - The purpose of this question was to discover students’ reasons for reading. Survey participants mentioned three reasons for reading most frequently: for fun, to learn something new, and because they had to (assigned in school or job-related). Results (see Figure 1) indicate students in grades 1, 4, 6, undergraduate elementary majors, and graduate reading majors read for fun at least fifty percent of the time. Students expressed their reasons in several ways. The exact words and spellings are used for emphasis. Grade 1: “Becos it is fn.” “Its fun too red.” Grade 4: “I read because it is very fun and intresting.” Grade 6: “Because some books are fun to read and keep me interested.” Undergraduate elementary major: “I read because it’s fun and it makes my brain feel good.” Graduate reading major: “Pure enjoyment for me personally and for my kids at school.”

One third of 11th graders indicated they read because they have to. Reasons they gave: “Because I was told to by the teacher.” “I don’t know. Teacher makes me.” “I don’t read at home that much unless I’m told to.” Students in grades 8, 11, and undergraduate non-education majors included being bored or just killing time as reasons for reading. Even though undergraduate non-education majors reported boredom or killing time as reasons for reading, they gave reading to learn as their highest percentage for reading.

**Question 2 – Who taught you to read?** - Most frequent responses indicated: teacher, family, teacher and family, and self. (see Figure 2). Evidence of teachers’ influence was noted as highest in grades 1, 8, 11, and graduate reading. Sample comments, Grade 1: “Mrs. Stapleton tot me.” Grade 8: “My kindergarten teacher taught me.” Grade 11: “I learned how to read in 2nd or 3rd grade.” Graduate reading: “In grade
school, I remember sitting in circles in Mrs. Messina’s room for reading groups.”

**Figure 1.** Question 1 – Why do you read?

![Bar chart showing reasons for reading across different grade levels and majors.](image)

Fourth graders noted *family* played a huge role in literacy instruction. Grade four comments were mainly related to mom and dad reading to them at home, the help given at home on school assignments, and making them read aloud at home. One comment in particular gave credit to mom “Mom read to me and taught me when I was 3 how to say the ABCs then she taught me to pronounce them then she taught me how to spell and say words.”

Undergraduate non-education and undergraduate elementary majors indicated *teachers and family* played an equally important role in teaching them to read. Some of the outlier statements not included in the percentages indicated they were “born with it,” “from the computer,” and “from TV.”

*Self-taught* reading rated the lowest in all grade levels except for grades one and four where it was equal to *teacher and family*. One fourth grade comment: “I taught myself cause nobody else wanted to do it.”
Question 3 – What are your strengths as a reader/What do you do well as a reader? The choices of participants for their strengths were comprehension, reading fast, and pronouncing words (see Figure 3). Graduate reading majors cited comprehension highest with comprehension cited lowest by 1st and 8th graders. Graduate reading majors used the term comprehension in their responses while first graders’ comments often focused on how good they were at reading. In their minds, that statement most likely meant they understood what they read. Eighth graders’ comments were often about reading aloud and studying for tests. Comprehension was also rated highest in grades 6, 11, undergraduate non-education, and undergraduate elementary.

Reading fast rated as the top choice only for eighth graders while fourth graders rated it as tied with comprehension. Most eighth grade comments about reading quickly referred to reading fast to complete assignments at home, and did not mention anything about reading fast to complete a recreational book.

Both first and fourth graders indicated their highest strength was in pronouncing the words. For first graders, at least, it makes sense based on their low percentage for comprehension. Many comments from first
graders were about sounding out words as a strength, for example: "Sowding owt wrds," "I’m gud at wrds," and "Sonding out wrds."

**Figure 3.** Question 3 – What are your strengths as a reader/What do you do well as a reader?

![Graph](image)

**Question 4 – What do you do when you come to a word you cannot pronounce?** Participants’ responses fell into one of these categories: *sound it out, skip it, or ask someone* (see Figure 4). In grades 1, 4, 6, 8, undergraduate non-education, and undergraduate elementary *sounding it out* was chosen more frequently than any other way of encountering unknown words. In all but eighth grade, these levels mentioned it more than twice as often as the other two choices. While first graders had great difficulty spelling the word *sound* (e.g., sowd, saldt, soit, sond), they certainly favored that choice for a word identification strategy. Fourth and sixth graders indicated they first separated the word into chunks ("brok it in parts") then used the sounding out method.

Eleventh graders and graduate reading majors used the second method of *skipping* the word most frequently. First and sixth graders used this method least frequently.
The three lower levels used ask as their second choice. Two fourth grade responses: "If I can’t figurr it out I go ask somone older," and "When I don’t no it I finly ask my teacher."

**Figure 4.** Question 4 – What do you do when you come to a word you do not know?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Book Series</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td><em>The Franklin</em> (Bourgeois &amp; Clark)</td>
<td>&quot;I lv the trtl boks.&quot; &quot;Fraklen boks.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter</em> (Rowling)</td>
<td>&quot;Harry Potter is the oly won I lik.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td><em>Goosebumps</em> (R.L. Stine)</td>
<td>&quot;My abslute favorite is books by Stine.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>More students indicated <em>none</em></td>
<td>than any particular title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>More students indicated <em>none</em></td>
<td>than any particular title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergrad</td>
<td>Non-education majors</td>
<td>indicated titles by John Grisham and any romance novel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergrad</td>
<td>Elementary majors</td>
<td>overwhelmingly listed children’s books as their favorite followed by</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Question 5 – What are your favorite books and/or authors?* Participants indicated the fiction genre as their overwhelming favorite. Following is a sampling of the most selected books for each grade level. Grade 1: The *Franklin* (Bourgeois & Clark) books, comments: "I lv the trtl boks." "Fraklen boks." Grade 4: *Harry Potter* (Rowling) books, comment: "Harry Potter is the oly won I lik." Grade 6: *Goosebumps* (R.L. Stine) books, comment: "My abslute favorite is books by Stine." Grade 8: There was a tie between books by S.E. Hinton and Gary Paulsen. Grade 11: More students indicated *none* than any particular title. However, those who offered a title chose books by J.R.R. Tolkien tied with newspapers and magazines. Undergraduate non-education majors indicated titles by John Grisham and any romance novel. One student listed nine books by Grisham. Undergraduate elementary majors overwhelmingly listed children’s books as their favorite followed by
mystery. For graduate reading majors, Mary Higgins Clark books tied with mystery novels.

Question 6 - Do you read at home? If so, how often? - Participants indicated four levels of reading at home: daily, weekly, sometimes, and never (see Figure 5). Daily at home reading was indicated as the most frequent choice by participants in grades 1, 4, undergraduate non-education majors, undergraduate education majors, and graduate reading majors. Sample comments, Grade 1: “Yes, evre nit.” Grade 4: “I read 2 chapters a night.” Undergraduate non-education major: “I try to read 1-2 hours every night, but sometimes I get caught up in a book and read most of the night.” Undergraduate education majors: “Yes, I always have at least one book going.” Graduate reading majors: “Yes, I read every day to relax after teaching all day and taking care of my four children and husband.”

No grade level chose weekly as their top pick for reading at home. However, sixth graders indicated a tie between weekly and daily; and undergraduate elementary majors chose weekly almost as much as daily.

The selection of reading at home sometimes was chosen most frequently by 6th, 8th, and 11th graders. First graders made this their selection least frequently.

Fortunately, never reading at home was not the top selection of any grade level. However, both 6th and 11th graders did indicate never as one of their choices for at home reading. This choice was not indicated at all for 1st graders, undergraduate elementary majors, and graduate reading majors.

Question 7 - How does reading make you feel? - Participants’ responses (see Figure 6) were easily categorized into positive, neutral, and negative feelings. All grade levels except 11th responded most frequently with positive feelings. Sample comments, Grade 1: “happy in good.” “Hpe.” Grade 4: “Reading makes me fell happy and like I’m a character in the story.” Grade 6: “Warm and fussy inside.” Grade 8: “It makes me feel good because I know I did something for me.” Comments by undergraduate non-education majors included: Reading makes them
laugh and cry at the same time, great, warm, cultured. Undergraduate education majors: "Sometimes my brain says 'read something so you can feel good.'" Graduate reading majors: "It takes me out of myself and lets me forget my troubles for a while. It makes me feel wonderful." Eleventh graders rated positive feelings as their lowest and neutral as their highest. Several eighth grade comments indicated their feelings depended on the book.

Figure 5. Question 6 – Do you read at home?

Students in grades 1, 8, 11, undergraduate elementary, and graduate reading rated negative feelings last. Boredom was the selected term for most who indicated a negative feeling toward reading.

Discussion of Results

Question 1 - Why do you read? Metsala, Sweet, and Guthrie (1996) studied children’s motivations for reading, and found, “A typical child possesses several motivations, but not all are equally powerful...[They] are multidimensional and diverse” (p. 660). The reasons and benefits of reading seem obvious to those who read. Without that ability, however, much of what goes on in the world is lost. Reading is important, not only in school-related activities but in all aspects of life. A classic document
written over twenty years ago stated, “Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success will inevitably be lost” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 1). Recreational reading improves reading comprehension, style of writing, vocabulary development, and spelling (Gallik, 1999; Krashen, 1993). Perhaps teachers need to offer reasons they read and continue to offer suggestions and purposes for students’ reading.

Figure 6. Question 7 – How does reading make you feel?

Question 2 - Who taught you to read? Results indicate the strong implications of teachers’ and parents’ role in children’s reading development. A study by Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, and Radencich (2000) found family members’ influence rated “equally among students who had both high and low motivation for reading” (p. 187). Parents and teachers were the main support of instruction in a study by Furi-Perry (2003). She continued by stating, “Reading to and with one’s children is likely to increase their reading success in the future” (p. 24).

Teachers should develop, promote, and support parental involvement programs and keep parents informed about what literacy skills children are learning. They can offer parents options in how to work with their child. Teacher educators should research effective
parental-involvement programs and teach inservice and preservice teachers how to establish those programs in their individual districts followed by continued support from the university level.

**Question 3 - What are your strengths as a reader?** Acknowledging and recognizing personal abilities in any given area is a strength. It is equally true in reading. Mature readers at all levels realize reading is more than saying words across a line of print. They know comprehension must be attained for real reading to occur. When comprehension breaks down, mature readers rely on fix-up strategies to regain meaning of the text selection. Immature readers, on the other hand, often believe reading is simply pronouncing the words one after the other until the selection is completed.

Data analysis for this question provides meaningful implications for primary grade teachers. Emerging readers from this study indicate their best attribute of reading is *word calling*. Primary grade teachers might ask themselves if there is a disparate amount of attention on phonics especially in first grade. Perhaps there should be more explicit attention on comprehension instruction. Teacher educators can help inservice and preservice teachers in learning strategies to improve comprehension at all grade levels.

**Question 4 - What do you do when you come to a word you cannot pronounce?** In maintaining the habit of reading, readers cannot always rely on someone to tell them an unknown word. That is a dependent word recognition strategy. Readers need independent word recognition strategies, such as phonics and context clues, to use when they encounter unknown words. Teachers must teach strategies to students to equip them to become fluent, independent readers. As both children and adults increase their experiences with written language, word development and ownership is increased. Nippold, Duthid, and Larsen (2005) found “a consistent link between amount of time spent reading and word knowledge in both children and adults” (p. 94).

**Question 5 - What are your favorite books or authors?** If, indeed, one becomes a better reader by reading more, then educators need to ascertain what students are reading recreationally and share that
information with all students. Reading for fun, of course, does not mean it must come from a book. There are other types of materials, such as selected magazines, newspapers, and websites that are effective models of language and grammar. Educators should also emphasize reading these forms of texts. Many magazines geared toward adults also have a teen version such as *Teen People* and *National Geographic Kids*.

Even though some may think teenagers do not like to read, Furi-Perry (2003) found, “Contrary to the common stereo-type, many young adults do enjoy reading in their free time” (p. 24). Fiction that relates to their lives is the most selected reading material. “Reading is how teenagers escape their bodies and enter new worlds, escape their minds and try out other ways of thinking, escape their environments and imagine other ways of being” (Aronson, 1999, pp. 29-30). Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, and Radencich (2000) found that university-aged students often made book selections based on recommendations from family, friends, and professors, with many students acknowledging their enthusiasm for discussing the books with those who recommended them.

**Question 6 - Do you read at home?** First graders responded with *daily* as their most frequent response to reading at home. Perhaps that was because emerging and developing readers are often assigned daily reading homework. The choice of *daily* for undergraduate non-education majors might reflect the large amount of reading required of undergraduates.

There is a relationship between reading at home and academic achievement. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found, “Among all the ways children spent their time, reading books [outside of class] was the best predictor of several measures of reading achievement” (p. 285). In addition, they stated, “The case can be made that reading books is a cause, not merely a reflection, of reading proficiency” (p. 302). Likewise, reading achievement was found to be a predictor of time spent reading books outside of class (Greaney, 1980).

A relationship also exists between the amount of recreational reading and scores on standardized reading tests. Morrow (2006) found that elementary students who read 5 minutes per day may score at the 50
percentile rank on a reading test. However, if that time is doubled to just 10 minutes per day, the percentile rank increases to 70. She takes it a step further to 20 minutes per day and a child has a percentile of 90.

Question 7 - How does reading make you feel? Survey data suggest a downward trend of student attitudes toward reading until grade 11 then begins upward, again. One explanation might be overall attitudes about school issues often decline toward the end of high school. Or perhaps students who lack interest in reading do not go to college, thus they are eliminated from the data pool of college respondents.

Early experiences with books should be enjoyable ones so, intrinsically, readers develop the habit of reading. “Intrinsic motivations are more likely to inspire long-term literacy commitments” (Metsala et al., 1996, p. 661). A positive encounter with books, of course, begins with parents and caregivers. However, teachers play a crucial role in “motivating children to read, [and] a lukewarm or task-oriented attitude toward reading can be problematic” (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 556). They continue by stating, “Early success is of paramount importance to many children, particularly because early failures frequently evolve into permanent ones” (p. 561). Teachers must express excitement and enthusiasm for reading in the classroom.

Conclusions

Teachers and teacher educators have a huge influence on the reading habits of K-12 students, inservice, and preservice teachers. Teacher educators are “concerned about the reading and writing habits and attitudes of our preservice teachers and the implications that these habits and attitudes hold for their future practice as teachers and for their future students” (Draper et al., 2000, p. 190). In addition, teachers and teacher educators must find ways to encourage the enjoyment of reading and continue to be role models as lifelong readers and learners.

The teachers and data in this study revealed trends that both support and challenge teacher educators. Finding ways to promote the reading habit through professional development avenues is a challenge and will continue to be so as classroom teachers further their educational goals
Educators acknowledge "Advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit that depends on a great many educational, cultural, and economic factors" (NEA, 2004, p. 2).

As stated in many of the comments from the survey questions, acquiring the reading habit has positive benefits that continue throughout life. Particular benefits include growth and progress in academic learning, development of word knowledge, social development, and increased world knowledge.

Issues for future studies on reading habits might focus on: issues raised in the above discussions, gender differences, survey only one age group, use a more detailed survey instrument, survey different-sized school districts (public, private, urban, rural), interview participants to gain a richer understanding of each response, and include parent information for reading habits of preschool children.

References


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