

Is Comic Book Reading Harmful?

Comic Book Reading, School Achievement, and Pleasure Reading Among Seventh Graders

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The available research on comic book reading is supportive of comic book use: Children who read comics do no worse in school and sometimes do better than children who do not read comic books. Comic book readers also read just as much non-comic material, and sometimes more. In addition, there are case histories supporting the hypothesis that comics can serve as a conduit to more demanding reading (Krashen, 1993).

The time has come for another look at comic books. Most of the research on comics dates from the 1950s and 1960s. With the renaissance of the comic book in the United States, and the consistent popularity of comics in other countries, we need to confirm that comics cause no harm, that they do not take the place of more "serious" reading.

In this study, 292 seventh-grade students provided information about their comic book reading. All students were middle class, and nearly all were native speakers of English. Included in the sample were 156 students enrolled in a "Talent Achievement Program," for gifted students, and 136 "regular" students. Students filled out a questionnaire in their English class that probed comic book reading, book reading, amount of pleasure reading in general, and reading enjoyment.

Before examining the issue of comic books, we first attempted to determine whether gifted students like to read more than regular students. The data in table 1 show that gifted students enjoy reading more than regular students do. The difference between the groups is highly significant and large (effect size = .70). These results are consistent with those of Swanton (1984), who reported that sixth

TABLE 1: Do you like to read?

	yes	only when I have nothing better to do	no
Gifted	70% (107)	17% (27)	14% (22)
Regular	37% (50)	42% (57)	21% (29)

chi square = 31.146, df = 2, $p < .01$

TABLE 2: How often do you read comic books?

	always	sometimes	never
Gifted	14% (22)	55% (85)	31% (49)
Regular	9% (12)	60% (81)	32% (43)

chi square = 2.069, df = 2, n.s.

graders classified as "gifted" owned more books than "regular" students did.

According to table 2, gifted and regular students do nearly identical amounts of comic book reading. These results are consistent with those of earlier studies showing that comic book reading has no negative effect on grades and school performance (Krashen, 1993), as well as research by McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1991), who found no significant difference in comic book reading between good and poor readers for older children.

Overall, 12 percent of the students surveyed said they were heavy comic book readers, while 68 percent said they read either "always" or "sometimes." This result confirms that comic book reading is still popular. During the "golden age" of comic book reading (1938-1954), 50 to 80 percent of junior high school students said they were comic book readers (Krashen, 1993). McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1991) reported in 1991 that 50 percent of sixth-

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TABLE 3: How often do you read for pleasure?

	<i>daily</i>	<i>weekly</i>	<i>monthly/never</i>
Heavy comic book readers	65% (22)	24% (8)	12% (4)
Occasional comic readers	43% (71)	38% (59)	22% (36)
Non-comic book readers	37% (34)	28% (26)	35% (32)

chi square = 12.974, df = 4, $p < .05$

TABLE 4: Do you like to read?

	<i>yes</i>	<i>only when I have nothing better to do</i>	<i>no</i>
Heavy comic book readers	65% (22)	24% (8)	12% (4)
Occasional comic readers	55% (91)	31% (52)	14% (23)
Non-comic book readers	48% (44)	28% (26)	24% (22)

chi square = 6.187, df = 4, $p < .10$

TABLE 5: Do you read books?

	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
Heavy comic book readers	71% (24)	29% (10)
Occasional comic readers	77% (128)	23% (38)
Non-comic book readers	78% (72)	22% (20)

chi square = .852, df = 4, n.s.

grade girls and 75 percent of sixth-grade boys said they were comic book readers, a result nearly identical to ours: 82 percent (113/137) of our male subjects read "always" or "sometimes," compared to 56 percent (86/154) of our female subjects.

The results of tables 3 and 4 are similar: More comic book reading is associated with more reading for pleasure and more enjoyment of reading. The difference was statistically significant in table 3, but not quite significant in table 4, reaching only the .10 level of significance. There was no relationship between comic book reading and book reading (table 5), confirming that more comic book reading is not associated with less book reading.

Summary and Conclusions

Our study confirmed that comic book reading is not harmful. Gifted students do as much comic book reading as regular students do, and more comic book reading is associated with more reading in general and more enjoyment in reading. In addition, comic book reading does not seem to take the place of book reading.

An important limitation of our study is that it was done with middle-class students. If comic book reading is useful as a conduit to more challenging reading, all students should have access to comics. The fact that today's comics are very expensive makes it unlikely that less affluent children have this access. It is therefore up to the school library to meet this need.¹

References

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1. The boys in our sample reported far more comic book reading than the girls did (chi square = 64.171, df = 2, $p < .001$). We therefore performed a post-hoc analysis using only the boys ($n = 139$). As with the combined sample, "gifted" boys and "regular" boys did not differ in amount of reported comic book reading (chi square = .801, df = 2); more comic book reading was significantly associated with more pleasure reading (chi square = 14.922, df = 4, $p < .01$); and those who read comics were more likely to say that they liked to read (df = 15.284, df = 2, $p < .001$). For the combined sample, no relationship was found between comic book reading and book reading. For the boys alone, however, those who read comics were more likely to be book readers, with the chi square value falling just short of the .05 level of significance (chi square = 5.392, df = 2, $p < .10$). This finding is very important: McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) reported a steady drop in attitudes toward reading from grades one to six, with a very steep decline occurring for boys' recreational reading. Comics may be the cure.