

Why We Should Stop Scolding Teenagers and Their Schools: Frequency of Leisure Reading

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I argue in this paper that contrary to popular opinion, there is no evidence that teenagers are less engaged in literacy activities today than teenagers of the past. Teenagers today do just as much book reading as teenagers did 65 years ago, and it appears that they are more involved in reading and writing in general when we include computer use in the analysis. The true problem in literacy is not related to convincing reluctant teenagers to read: It is providing access to books for those living in poverty.

How Much do Teenagers Read?

It is a common perception that teen-agers don't read as much as they used to. A look at data from NAEP questionnaires administered to 17-year-olds from 1984 to 2008, as well as an earlier report (Link and Hopf, 1946) seems to show that this is true (table 1). There is some improvement between 1946 and 1984, and then the decline begins.

TABLE 1. Responses to the Question: How Often do you Read for Fun?

	nonreaders	inactive	active
1946	8	15	77
1984	9	10	81
1988	9	10	81
1990	10	12	77
1992	11	12	78
1994	12	12	78
1996	16	12	72
1999	16	12	63
2004	19	14	67
2008	24	16	59

From: http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltr_2008/ltr0013.asp?tab_id=tab3&subtab_id=Tab_1#chart, Link and Hopf (1946).

Note: Link and Hopf's "active" reader category included reading at least once a month or more and is equivalent to NAEP's "once or twice a month," "once or twice a week," and "almost every day" categories combined. Link and Hopf's "inactive" and "nonreader" categories were identical to the NAEP "never or hardly ever" and "few times a year" categories respectively.

Asking questions like "how often do you read for fun," however, may seriously underestimate how much teenagers read.

First, some respondents may not consider the kind of reading they do as really reading. Mellon (1987) administered a questionnaire to ninth graders asking if they read in their spare time. Although 82% said they did, Mellon concluded that respondents "didn't trust" that the questionnaire was really dealing with self-selected pleasure reading. The respondents did not consider the kind of reading they liked as "legitimate" (p. 30). Here are three illuminating comments by her subjects: "I don't like reading except for comic books or magazines," "... I hate reading unless it's a magazine about something I like," and "I don't like to read much except for romance, mystery, and scary books" (p. 30). Of the 66 respondents in Mellon's study who claimed they never read in their spare time, 49 checked several categories of leisure reading when asked what they liked to read. Rothbauer (2011) reports similar findings, concluding that "when we shift our research focus to teen-generated perspectives on reading habits, preferences, and attitudes, we are likely to find a deeper and more meaningful engagement with texts than is found in the popular adult discourses on teen reading or in the quantitative findings of large-scale national surveys."

Second, other, more focused measures of "reading for fun" give results that differ from those in table 1. In several studies respondents were asked if they read a book yesterday. For teen-agers, the available data suggests no decline between 1946 and 2004 in book reading, with a dip in 1999 (table 2).

TABLE 2. Percent of Respondents Who Said They Read a Book "Yesterday"

study	age	books %
Link & Hopf, 1946	15-19	34%
Roberts et al, 1999	14-18	30%
Roberts et al, 2005	15-18	34%
Gallup, 2005	13-17	33%

Other measures also include estimates of the average number of minutes teenagers say they read (table 3).

Table 3: Average Number of Minutes Per Day of Reading

study	age	books	mag/np	websites	total reading
Link & Hopf, 1946	15-19	22"	42"		54"
Roberts et al, 1999	14-18	14"	23"	9"	46"
Roberts et al, 2005	15-18	24"	20"	19"	63"
Rideout et al, 2010	15-18	21"	13"	16"*	50"

Mag/np = magazines and newspapers

*3" for newspapers and magazines on line, 13" for "other" websites.

Just considering book reading, there is little difference between the 1946 estimate and the most current (2010) estimate. Considering all types of reading, there is also little cause for concern. The only true drop is the clear decline in reading newspapers and magazines. The winners, if we also include reading websites, appear to be teenagers in the Roberts et. al. (2005) study, who spent over an hour a day reading.

Let's look at what teen-agers do on the internet, other than school-work and reading websites (table 4).

Table 4: Non-Schoolwork Internet Activity

study	email	social	inst mes	games	you tube
Roberts et al, 1999	5"	5" *		10"	
Roberts et al, 2005	6"	3" *	27"	19"	
Rideout et al, 2010	6"	26" **	14"	14"	16"

inst mes = instant messaging *chat rooms; **social networking (facebook)

Table 5 compresses "email," "social" and "instant messages" into one "written communication" category, and "games," and "you tube" into one "entertainment" category.

Table 5: Written Social Interaction Compared to Entertainment Use of the Internet

study	written interaction	entertainment
Roberts et al, 1999	10"	10"
Roberts et al, 2005	36"	19"
Rideout et al, 2010	46"	30"

Teen-agers in the 2005 and 2010 reports spent more time on written interaction than on entertainment. Communication with their peers is clearly important to them. In terms of total "voluntary reading and writing," teenagers in the 2005 report and the 2010 report are nearly even (99 and 96 minutes respectively, adding the "total reading" figure from table 3 to the "written interaction" figure from table 5). "Kids these days" appear to be reading and writing on their own an average of about an hour and a half a day.

We have no baseline data on letter and note-writing among young people, but I doubt that teenagers engaged in this much written social communication at any previous time in history.

Is this a good thing or bad thing? To be sure, they are reading peer writing, not Hamlet or the Federalist Papers. And they are writing to each other, not composing essays comparing and contrasting Edgar Allen Poe with Longfellow. We know, however, that reading means encountering new ideas and as well as literacy development. In addition, writing on topics of deep personal concern stimulates cognitive development (Krashen, 2003) and can contribute to emotional health (Pennebacker, 1997). We should probably not dismiss written interaction on the internet as trivial.

The Real Literacy Crisis

Many teen-agers are reading, but undoubtedly many are not. The tables presented above contain averages, not details, and even if there has been no decline in book reading and reading in general, we should always be concerned about non-readers.

Pundits have proclaimed that lack of interest in reading is because "kids these days" are lazy and easily distracted, and because schools are "broken," continuing a long tradition of scolding teenagers and their schools (see below) without sufficient cause.

There are other possibilities. One is time pressure, which is considerable for teens, thanks to the increased demands of schooling and our obsession with testing. Another is lack of access to books: For those living in poverty, books can be very scarce, as extensively documented and discussed in several places (e.g. Krashen, 2004, 2011).

Teens living in poverty who become dedicated readers managed to get access to books but this is not the norm. Here are two recent cases that show that when access is provided, and young people start reading, very good things can happen.

In his autobiography, Geoffrey Canada, the founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, credits reading for his own school success, despite growing up in poverty: "I loved reading, and my mother, who read voraciously too, allowed me to have her novels after she finished them. My strong reading background allowed me to have an easier time of it in most of my classes" (Canada, 2010, p. 89). (Ironically, Canada promotes longer school days, increased accountability, and "data to drive instruction" for children of poverty (New York Post, October 13, 2010), despite the lack of data supporting these approaches and the overwhelming data supporting wide reading.)

Liz Murray, as related in her autobiography Breaking Night, was also a child of poverty. As reviewer Kathryn Shanahan points out (Shanahan, 2010), Murray had access books that her father took out from the local public library, which she says provided all she needed to complete elementary school: "Any formal education I received came from the few days I spent in attendance, mixed with knowledge I absorbed from random readings of my or Daddy's ever-growing supply of unreturned library books. And as long as I still showed up steadily the last few weeks of classes to take the standardized tests, I kept squeaking by from grade to grade" (p. 112).

Homeless at 15, she was able to continue reading, again thanks to the library: "The public library on Forty-Second Street became one of my favorite places ...I lost myself in the stacks. (p. 190).

Instead of dissing high school students, let's make sure they have access to books and some time to read what they want to read. This is a far easier and far less expensive approach than the current mania for standards and testing. It may not be sufficient to ensure that all teen-agers become readers, but it is certainly necessary.

Postscript: Our Proud History of Dissing Teenagers and High Schools

There have been complaints about teenagers and their schools for well over the last 100 years in the United States.

In 1874, Harvard University instituted written entrance examinations, and more than half of the applicants failed. Ten years later, another study yielded the same results, which resulted in the establishment of remedial writing classes. As a result of an analysis of essays written in 1894, the Harvard Board of Overseers criticized high school writing teachers for the poor performance of the students. James Berlin (2004) points out that these were the best students in the country attending the best university of its time (cited in “The Role of Prebaccalaureate Programs (AKA Remediation) in the California State University” (<http://www.calstate.edu/AcadSen/Records/Resolutions/2004-2005/2687.shtml>)).

According to Hofstadler (1963), Thomas Biggs of Teachers College, in 1930, wrote that high school English classes resulted in written English that was “in a large fraction of cases shocking in their evidence of inadequate achievement” (Hofstadler, p. 304).

Ravitch and Finn, in 1987, asked *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know*, and of course the answer was that they didn't know much about history or literature. (Ravitch and Finn also reported that those 17-year-olds who knew more, read more: Those who lived in a print-rich environment did better overall on tests of history and literature, and there was a clear relationship between the amount of reported leisure reading and performance on the literature test.)

If we believe these reports, our high school students were terrible in 1874 and have been getting even worse ever since. Another interpretation is that there has been no decline in performance, that we have always been expecting too much, and are, for some reason, over-eager to scold teen-agers and their schools.

For additional evidence against the claim that performance has been declining, Bracey's discussion of “knowledge nostalgia” in Bracey (2004).

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