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A Study of the Commonalities Among Adult Avid Readers

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SUNY COLLEGE AT BROCKPORT

A STUDY OF THE COMMONALITIES AMONG ADULT AVID READERS

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This study was designed to determine the common characteristics of adult avid readers, find out what through their lifetime has made them avid readers and how they have been influenced. Forty-four adult avid readers completed a researcher-developed survey. The responses from the surveys were reviewed and appropriate qualitative and quantitative analyses were made.

The findings from this study indicated that there were common characteristics and influences among the survey respondents. These commonalities included that most respondents read for similar reasons, most became avid readers as young children, most were influenced by parents or other close relatives or teachers, and most had exposure to or access to reading materials as children.

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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the common characteristics and influences of adult avid readers.

Introduction

Avid readers are truly interesting people. Most people who profess themselves to be avid readers are very committed to and passionate about their pleasure reading. Given the benefits of avid reading, it seems important to determine what influences a person to develop a love for reading and what the common characteristics of avid readers are.

Need for Study

Gallik (1999), Constantino (1994), Smith (1996), Bonacci (1989) and Ross (2000) all found that pleasure reading leads to other life successes. Rane-Szostak and Herth (1995) found a relationship between pleasure reading and decreased loneliness in later life. Kirsch and Guthrie (1984), and Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993) found

a significant relationship between pleasure reading and higher level jobs and higher levels of literacy. Given these benefits with respect to reading for pleasure, it is of compelling interest to study those who are avid readers. For the purposes of this study, avid readers can be described as those who read for pleasure often, with an aesthetic stance, who consider reading to be one of their most important sources of enjoyment.

We need to know about avid readers and their common characteristics, and what through their lifetime has made them avid readers. We can then use this information to point our young people in the right direction so they too can become avid readers. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985) make an interesting point on reading:

Reading is a basic life skill. It is a cornerstone for a child's success in school and, indeed, throughout life. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success inevitably will be lost. (p. 1)

And Dr. Seuss (1986) makes an important point on where reading can take you: "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go" (p. 41).

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

A Reader's Stance

Rosenblatt (1978, 1982) describes reading as a transaction between the reader and the text, a two-way process, that occurs at a particular time and under particular circumstances. Readers bring past experiences to the reading task and make new meanings produced in the transaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982, 1991). Readers must make constant choices and selections from a multitude of possibilities offered by the synthesis of the text and the reservoir of past experiences.

Key to the "transaction" is the reader's stance or mental set. The purpose for reading plays a significant role in determining the stance of the reader (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997). Rosenblatt (1978, 1982, 1991) describes the two main reading stances as efferent and aesthetic. An efferent stance is taken when the reader's purpose is to seek information, as in a textbook, manual, or political article (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982, 1991). If, on the other hand, the reader's purpose is to seek pleasure from the text with attention to what he is experiencing, thinking, and feeling,

then the reader has taken an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982, 1991).

According to Rosenblatt (1982), any text can be read with either an efferent or aesthetic stance.

We may approach novels as sociological documents, efferently seeking to accumulate evidence concerning, say, the treatment of children in the 19th century. The “pop” poet may select a “job wanted” advertisement, arrange its phrases in separate lines, and thus signal us to read it aesthetically, to experience its human meaning, as a poem. Sometimes, of course, readers adopt an inappropriate attitude – for example, reading a political article aesthetically when they should be efferently paying attention to the facts. And many people, alas, read the texts of stories and poems efferently. (p. 269)

A Focus on Aesthetic Reading

A study by Wiseman and Many (1992) found that teaching with an aesthetic approach “fosters the development of a reader’s understanding of a work’s personal significance” (p. 80). The purpose of their study was to examine the effects of aesthetic and efferent teaching approaches on students’ responses to literature. During the course of the study, the students’ responses in the aesthetic group were more personal and emotional than those in the efferent group. The students in the aesthetic group also enjoyed reflecting on the story experience, while the efferent

group found it to be a chore. In this study, Wiseman and Many (1992) also cite other research which has found that the aesthetic stance is related to higher levels of personal understanding.

Aesthetic reading, or reading for pleasure, is important in becoming a life-long avid reader. Murphy (1998) states that those “who do not enjoy reading, who do not learn to savor it, will never be committed to it.

. . . aesthetic experience plays an important role in motivating reading and in the development of lifelong reading habits” (p. 91).

Benefits of Aesthetic Reading

Research supports that reading for pleasure leads to life successes. In her study, Gallik (1999) found a significant relationship between the cumulative grade-point average of college students and the time they spent reading for pleasure. She also cites other research which has shown that reading for pleasure leads to improved reading comprehension, writing style and skills, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development. Similarly, in his study of the relationship between reading practices and literacy proficiencies, Smith (1996) found that engaging in a diversity of reading practices is strongly associated with

superior literacy abilities. Also, linguistic skills are developed when reading books because knowledge of the syntax and vocabulary of written texts is gained. (Wilson, Anderson, & Fielding, cited in Bonacci, 1989). Reading also provides intellectual stimulation (Purves, cited in Bonacci, 1989; Carlsen and Sherrill, 1988).

Constantino (1994) found an improvement in reading abilities in her students who read for pleasure. In a six week study several of her non-American students who were struggling to read English expository texts were encouraged to read books in the English language for pleasure. After the six weeks, these students were able to read the expository texts more proficiently than those who did not participate in the pleasure reading. Reading with an aesthetic stance gave them confidence, self-assurance, and helped them read for more global comprehension.

Rane-Szostak and Herth (1995) found in their study of older adults that those who read for pleasure were less lonely than those who did not. Reading is free of external factors such as physical function, financial resources, and social contacts.

A study by Ross (2000) found that reading for pleasure helps readers in their everyday lives. During her interviews of avid readers, she

found that these avid readers often encounter information that helps them. They are not seeking information but, nevertheless, helpful information crops up. She states that, "readers choose books for the pleasure anticipated in the reading itself but then, apparently serendipitously, they encounter material that helps them in the context of their lives" (p. 72).

Reading also contributes to the enlargement of a person's experiences. Rosenblatt (1938) states:

In its simplest terms, literature may offer us an emotional outlet. It may enable us to exercise our senses more intensely and more fully than we have otherwise time or opportunity to. Through literature we may enjoy the beauty or the grandeur of nature, and the exotic splendor of scenes in far distant lands. Furthermore, it may provide experiences which it would not be either possible or wise to introduce into our own lives. (pp. 44-45)

Many people see escapism as a major benefit of pleasure reading. Several participants in Carlsen and Sherrill's (1988) study remembered books as a way of escaping from the reality of their own lives (p. 85). Many subjects in Nell's (1988) study also responded that escapism is their reason for reading. When discussing his thoughts on reading, Fritz (1986) states, "When I was young, reading books was always a chance for me to go somewhere else. (It still is.)" (p. 27). Babbitt (1986) expressed similar feelings, stating: "More and more I was finding the charm, the excitement,

the relief of sliding into the worlds of the stories I read, of escaping my own plain, ordinary life and becoming the hero I was reading about” (p. 45).

Literacy in the Workplace

Literacy is becoming increasingly important in all jobs (Barton & Kirsch, 1990; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1984; Kirsch, Jungeblut, & Campbell, 1992). As Kirsch and Guthrie (1984) point out, “occupations requiring little or no literacy are rapidly disappearing while newly created or changing jobs require employees to be more skilled and literate” (p. 214). Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993) also state that although Americans are better educated and more literate today than ever before, many employers are unable to find enough workers with the reading, writing and mathematical competencies required in the workplace (p. x). Interestingly, Kirsch and Guthrie (1984) found that professionals and managers spent more leisure time reading than other groups in their study (technicians/skilled, clerical, and semi-skilled/service workers). Similarly, Kirsch et al. (1993) found that individuals with higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, work more weeks

per year, and be in professional, technical, or managerial occupations than survey respondents who displayed lower levels of literacy skills.

Reading Aloud

Many adults have fond memories of being read to as children. Many participants in Carlsen and Sherrill's (1988) study had memories of being read to by their parents or other adults. In summing up their participants' memories, Carlsen and Sherrill state, "Almost always, the reading situation with a parent is associated with love, comfort, and security" (p. 7). Tinsley and Kaestle (1991) also make references to family read-alouds and the happy memories associated with them.

Avid Readers

Bonacci (1989) states that there is "no one way for a person to become an avid reader, rather, there are as many ways as there are readers" (pp. 70-71). Still, it is of interest to note the commonalities among avid readers in order to better understand them. In Bonacci's (1989) study, some of the common characteristics among the avid readers she surveyed were: being read to as children, observing reading behavior

in the home, enjoying positive experiences with reading materials, obtaining a library card, exposure to and availability of books or other printed material, and being influenced by parents, family, teachers, librarians and friends. Many of the readers Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) studied had similar experiences and recollections.

In Greaney's (1980) study he found that two strong predictors of leisure reading were gender and reading attainment. His research shows that girls tend to devote more time to reading. It also shows a correlation between those who obtain low scores on reading attainment and those who devote little time to reading.

CHAPTER III

Design

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the common characteristics and influences of adult avid readers.

Research Question

What are the common characteristics of adult avid readers?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 44 adults who are avid readers.

Materials

A researcher-developed survey was completed by each of the study participants. A copy of the survey is attached as Appendix A.

Procedure

The survey was completed by each study participant. Avid reader participants were recruited and identified in a number of ways:

(1) responses to a classified advertisement that was posted on the researcher's intranet site at work; (2) family members and friends of researcher who are avid readers; (3) third-party identification of avid readers via researcher's family members and friends.

An explanatory cover letter and return envelope were sent along with the survey to each participant. After completion of the surveys, the participants returned them to the researcher for analysis.

Analysis of Data

The responses from the survey were reviewed and qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data were made, from which conclusions were then drawn.

CHAPTER IV

Results of the Study

The results of the survey were very interesting. Some of the respondents were passionate enough on the topic to attach extra pages or write on the backs of the survey pages. Other responses were short and succinct.

The 44 respondents were quite a diverse group of people. Several worked at one of the country's largest law firms and were from offices in Rochester, Buffalo, New York City and Garden City, NY, Washington, DC, and San Francisco, CA. Other respondents were from book clubs in Rochester and San Francisco. Still others were researcher's friends and acquaintances from Rochester and elsewhere in upstate New York. Respondents were lawyers, clerical workers, technical workers, customer service representatives, business managers, retirees, a paralegal, a nurse, among others. While location and occupation were not questions on the survey, it is certainly of interest to note the diversity of the respondents.

There were 12 questions on the survey. Following are the questions and responses.

Question 1 – Please indicate your gender.

Thirty-seven respondents were female and 7 were male. Translated into percentages, approximately 84% of the respondents were female and approximately 16% were male.

Question 2 – Please indicate your age.

Zero respondents marked the 18-24 category; 4 were 25-34; 6 were 35-44; and 34 were ages 45 and older.

Question 3 – Please circle the highest level of education you have completed.

Seven respondents, approximately 16%, completed high school. Five respondents, approximately 11%, completed one year of college. Six respondents, approximately 14%, completed two years of college. Two respondents approximately 5%, completed three years of college. Fourteen respondents, approximately 32%, completed four years of

college. Ten respondents, approximately 23%, completed five or more years of college.

Question 4 – Please indicate the approximate number of hours you spend each week on recreational reading (not required for work or college classes).

Four responses could not be calculated for this question as the respondents either left it blank or did not give a number value for their answer. Since the question was open-ended with no specific categories to select, the responses varied. Subsequently, the responses were categorized to make analysis more manageable. Seven respondents indicated between one and five hours spent on reading each week. Twenty-one respondents spent between 5 and 10 hours reading per week. Eight respondents spent between 10 and 20 hours reading per week. Four respondents spent between 20 and 35 hours reading per week.

Question 5 – What types of books do you prefer to read?

The answers to this question were so varied that it was impossible to collate or sort them in any meaningful way. Most respondents listed

several different types of books or genres that they prefer to read, and many included their favorite authors. The types of reading materials they preferred included: historical novels, science fiction, mysteries, legal fiction, political non-fiction, mysteries, fantasy, true crime, horror, action/adventure, biographies, cookbooks, humor, books by black authors and South American authors, romance, spy novels, stories about women and families, classics, fiction set in other cultures, essays/editorials, how-to books, craft books, golf books, books on health issues, newspapers, and magazines. The most popular books were mysteries, romance and biographies.

Some respondents simply listed their preferred reading materials while others wrote more narrative responses. Some of these responses follow:

- “Horror, science fiction, fantasy, but will read anything and appreciate it if it is well written.”
- “I find I want to read only books that are well-written, whose authors have been praised for their talent . . . rather than just a ‘quick’ read or a ‘trashy’ novel.”
- “I do not like Harlequin type stories where the female is swept off her feet and lets a man take over her life as if she has no will of her own and no value until she is defined by a man.”

Question 6 – From where do you generally obtain the books you read?

Most survey respondents said they get their books from a variety of places. Twenty-eight people said they purchase books at retail, wholesale or on-line stores; twenty-four said they borrow books from the library; fifteen respondents said they obtain books through an exchange with friends and family; eleven said they get books from a book club; five people said they get books from garage or rummage sales; and two respondents indicated that they receive books as gifts. Purchasing books and borrowing them from the library were by far the most popular choices for obtaining books.

Question 7 – Why do you read?

Again, most respondents each listed several reasons for reading: Twenty-three said they read for relaxation or to relieve stress; twenty-three responded that they read for pleasure, enjoyment, entertainment or fun; twenty-one people said they read to learn, stimulate their minds, or expand their perception of the world; fifteen people said they read to escape; eight people said they read to use their imagination, visit other

places, and take place in adventures; one person said she reads for inspiration; and one person said it is simply a basic part of her lifestyle. Relaxation and enjoyment were the most common reasons that these respondents read, with learning a close second. Escapism was also a significant reason for reading.

Question 8 – What role does it play in your life?

As with question 5, the answers were so varied that an attempt to sort them in any meaningful way was futile. Many respondents expanded upon their answers to the previous question. Several people said that the role it plays for them is one of relaxation or a release from stress. Others said it plays an important role in their social interaction with friends with whom they discuss books. Some felt that it offers them an escape from the responsibilities of life. Some people said that reading exercises their brain, makes them well-rounded, increases their use of the English language, and allows them to see things from different perspectives. For some, reading helps them pass time while commuting, or helps them get to sleep at night. Several people mentioned that reading plays such an important role in their lives that they always carry a book with them.

Selected responses to this question follow:

- “Reading has always been a good friend to me. There have been times when I could let it take over much of my time. When I was young, books were my closest companions.”
- “A very important one. Has been there for me and with me my entire life. It is a bond that brings my mother and I closer and has found me new friends.”
- “Very important – It is like eating for me – If I don’t do it one day, then I feel down.”
- “I became a school teacher because I wanted children to realize how much learning was fun and how all of it could relate to their lives. I love reading to my grandchildren and make a story come alive for them. They can get excited or scared, reacting to the way you read to them. What fun!”

Question 9 – Have you always been an avid reader? If not, at what point in your life did you become an avid reader?

The responses to this question were very interesting. Thirty people (68%) said they have always been avid readers or have been since they were young children; three people (7%) began avidly reading as teenagers; nine (20%) became avid readers as adults; and two people (5%) became avid readers as senior adults.

Clearly, the majority of avid readers who took part in this study became avid readers at a very young age. This is an important finding and the classroom implications regarding this are vast.

Selected responses to this question follow:

- “When I was in 5th grade, the teacher had to order new reading material and the library had to get more books because I had read everything they had.”
- “Yes, I used to read under the covers with a flashlight as a child after I had been sent to bed at night.”
- “Since the first time I could read a sentence without pictures or prompts, I have been an avid reader. I started writing as a hobby when I was 7 years old. My enjoyments of reading and writing fuel each other.”

Question 10 – Was there a particular person(s) who influenced you to become an avid reader?

Some people said they were not influenced by anyone in particular, while others were influenced by one or sometimes more than one person. Twenty-three respondents said they were influenced by a parent or parents; seven people were influenced by other close family members; seven mentioned being influenced by teachers; five were influenced by

friends; and two people were influenced by particular authors or book series.

This finding is also of particular significance. Twenty-three people, over half, said they were influenced in some way by a parent, whether by being read aloud to by the parent, observing the parent reading, being given books by the parent, or some other way. This would surely seem to dictate implications for the home.

Selected responses to this question follow:

- “Miss Middleton, 6th grade, read out loud ‘The Secret Garden.’ I loved it!!”
- “My father was also an avid reader and he probably influenced me because books were also given as gifts on special occasions.”
- “My mother and my grandmother always encouraged me to read and recommended books to me.”

Question 11 – What childhood memories of reading do you have? Were there any experiences that inspired you to read?

Some people could not recall any childhood memories of reading, while others had many memories. Several people had memories of specific books and places where they read. Others had memories

associated with their family, being read to or taken to the library or bookmobile. The one common thread in nearly all of the responses is that they all had a great deal of exposure to or access to books. For example, they had books in their home, library cards, and books at school.

Selected responses to this question follow:

- “I remember becoming so absorbed in books that I would miss dinner because I did not hear my parents call me.”
- “Reading old favorites – Tom Sawyer, Black Beauty – being read to.”
- “I remember rowing out into the bay in our flat bottomed row boat with my book and a fishing pole. I would hang a line over the end of the boat and settle into my book.”
- “I had a very painful and shy childhood. Reading was a wonderful escape for me.”
- “When I was young, I would ride my bike to the library in the summer and read row by row in the young readers section of the Charlotte library because I never knew what might be there that I might miss because I didn’t like the cover or title.”

Question 12 – Do you have any additional comments or insights on reading?

The responses to this question were very interesting and some were even quite passionate. It is easy to see that being asked about their favorite pastime really struck a nerve, in a good way, with many of the

respondents. Most of the respondents took advantage of this open-ended question and described more about why they like to read, how they read, what reading can do for you, and why others should read.

Selected responses to this question follow:

- “I plan my reading in advance. It makes it more a part of my life and I find that I make sure I devote time each day to reading – e.g. I read a Dickens novel every December – I’m scheduled to re-read War & Peace in Jan. and Feb., Shakespeare in April.”
- “I read to my son from day one until he closed the door in my face. We used to look for Goldbug in a Richard Scarry book every night. He read for pleasure all the time now.”
- “It increases your vocabulary and spelling skills. I think the people who read have a more well-rounded attitude on life. They use their brains as opposed to having it force-fed to them. It really is a crime that there are still illiterate Americans. I don’t know how they survive.”
- “I can’t think of anything more important for young people in terms of helping them understand other cultures, other ways of viewing the world.”
- “I believe it is a very healthy pastime and have always encouraged my children to read. Friends that are avid readers are usually smarter and more interesting.”

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the common characteristics and influences of adult avid readers.

Conclusions

The survey respondents seemed to have common reasons for reading. To ask an open-ended question such as why a person reads and get so many similar responses substantiates this. Most of the respondents read to relax or for enjoyment, to learn or to escape.

The most significant finding in this study is the large number of these self-professed avid readers who became avid readers as young children. This is incredibly important because it gives more validity to the idea that children need not only to learn to read, but learn to love to read. It is not enough for them to just know how to do it. They need to be able to enjoy it so they will continue to do it.

Another important commonality is that so many of these respondents were influenced by parents or other family members,

teachers, and friends. As children they were read aloud to, taken to the library or bookmobile, or observed the adults in their lives reading. Many have fond memories of reading or discussing books with adults when they were children.

Similarly, most of the respondents had access or exposure to reading material as children. They had books, magazines and newspapers in their homes, they visited libraries, they were given books as gifts, and they had access to books in schools. In turn, most of the respondents who were avid readers as children have very fond memories of reading and of the books they read. Even as adults, they can remember the names of their favorite books and authors. Clearly they are devoted to and passionate about their reading.

Implications for the Classroom

Many of these avid readers developed their love of reading at an early age. Schools need to positively influence and cultivate an interest in reading so that children will continue to read beyond the school walls and beyond the required reading. They need to motivate the children by supplying them with access to a variety of books and reading

opportunities. Teachers need to encourage students and show enthusiasm about reading.

Implications for the Home

Many of these avid readers were positively influenced by parents or other relatives. There were stories read aloud, books in their homes, trips to libraries, etc. Many of the respondents had memories of special times with parents centered around reading. Many credited parents with influencing them to read. Several also indicated that they too now try to influence their own children to love and appreciate reading.

Implications for Future Research

A great deal of data was collected in this study with respect to why people read. It might be interesting to compare the same data to a survey of non-avid readers with questions of why they do not read. This data would be very useful and would seem to result in vast implications for the classroom.

Research should continue to be done in this area. The more we can find out about what influences a person to love reading, the more we

can apply that information to our young people. As the research indicates, reading breeds success. Of course, as teachers, we strive to make our students successful.

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APPENDIX A

AVID READER SURVEY

Name: _____
: (optional)

Feel free to write on the back or attach an additional sheet of paper if necessary.

1. Please indicate your gender: Male _____ Female _____
2. Please indicate your age:
18-24 _____ 25-34 _____ 35-44 _____ 45+ _____
3. Please circle the highest level of education you have completed:
High School College Years 1 2 3 4 5 or more
4. Please indicate the approximate number of hours you spend each week on recreational reading (not required for work or college classes): _____
5. What type(s) of books do you prefer to read (e.g., romance, mystery, horror, science fiction, non-fiction, biographies, etc.)? Please feel free to elaborate on your reading preferences.

6. From where do you generally obtain the books you read (e.g., library, book store, book club, book exchange group, etc.)?

7. Why do you read?

8. What role does it play in your life?

9. Have you always been an avid reader? If not, at what point in your life did you become an avid reader?

10. Was there a particular person(s) who influenced you to become an avid reader?

11. What childhood memories of reading do you have? Were there any experiences that inspired you to read?

12. Do you have additional comments or insights on reading?
