Reading Autobiographies: An Exploration of Avid Readers' Coming to Reading

Jane Costello Bonacci

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READING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES:
AN EXPLORATION OF AVID READERS' COMING TO READING

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development
State University of New York College at Brockport
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

by

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous desire and/or impulse to read, and the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Sixty avid readers responded to a questionnaire designed to explore their reading autobiographies. The collected responses were categorized and descriptively analyzed according to each question.

The findings from this investigation revealed that although there are myriad ways in which people come to reading, some general, common characteristics existed, to varying degrees, in the readers' experiences. Among these characteristics, described as 'conditions,' were: being read to as children, observing reading behavior in the home environment, having positive reading experiences with particular materials, active library use, exposure to and availability of books in the home environment, and the impact of receiving direct encouragement to read from parents, family, teachers, librarians, and/or friends. In addition, this study demonstrated that avid reading can develop at any point in a person's lifetime.

The data yield support for the current direction
of literature-based reading instruction and provide insight into the way in which parents, educators--society--attempt to ensure our students an opportunity to cultivate and sustain a genuine reading interest. The data suggest that instructional reading programs reconstruct the conditions common to avid readers' experiences within the school environment. Implications for future research include individual literacy development, as well as ethnographic and longitudinal studies of readers' coming to reading.
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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous search, desire and/or impulse to read, and to consider the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Questions

1. What are the characteristics of avid readers?
2. Is there a connecting thread common to individual ways of coming to reading?
3. What will experienced readers' testimonials bring to the existing theoretical knowledge of reading development?
4. Are there previously unconsidered factors which will reveal different perceptions and produce new insights into the philosophy behind instructional reading methods?
5. Aside from the practice of matching children with books of interest, what are other ways in which we can get the reading bug to bite the unbitten, to
broaden and expand their experiences with reading and literature?

Need for the Study

People read. Dillard dedicates her book Living by Fiction (1982) "to people who, if you told them that the world would end in ten minutes, would try to decide--quickly--what to read." There are readers by degree; those driven, compelled, whose very thirst for books is unquenchable, no matter the number of books devoured. For others, reading is a fact of life, there is time set aside for reading, whatever their schedules. Reading can be habit or conscious effort. How is it that the act of reading satisfies some particular need(s) in so many people and not for others? What actually happens when we read a book?

According to Rosenblatt (1978) reading happens--like an event--the reader is active. A text is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work (p.ix). The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of a reader (p.20). Not only is schema involved, but the reader's present state of mind, preoccupations, interests, and many other factors.
Rosenblatt's definition of reading literature is further described by Purves (1984):

Perhaps the best way to explain it is to liken a text to a piece of sheet music which doesn't become a song until someone sings it or plays it. A book sits on a shelf; when you pick it up and read it, it becomes a story or poem or a play. As a reader, you make the book come alive for you (p.127).

Books are important, then, because they are read. If we were fortunate enough, as children, to have had parents, older siblings, relatives or friends, whose lives incorporated the personal use and sharing of literature, we had a head start in written language exposure, a firm footing in the world of books-- and this, in a non-threatening, natural manner.

Young (1987) states:

From the beginning, our encounters with literature are facilitated, stimulated, supported and shaped by those who share books with us. Our first literary experiences are made possible by competent readers... who aid us in the realization of the literary experience. They are our first teachers of literature, and as they focus on our unconscious enjoyment of the experience, they share our joy (p.7).

A passion for books inevitably manifests the need to share that passion with others. In speaking of her seven-year-old daughter's literacy growth, Sanders (1987) stated that, "Her enthusiasm for the [Ramona] books affected others in the family" (p.620). In observing her own child, Sanders hoped to discover what
reading and writing meant to one child observed in one particular environment, to witness how she brought her own meaning to literacy activities, and the links she made between these "twin strands" of literacy.

Are these "twin strands"-- the reader and her/his meaning and the text and its context-- considered in reading instruction particularly when reading is divided into myriad skills areas and behaviors? These skills and subskills become detached and isolated from the content and subject areas to which they once belonged; meaning is lost.

Purves and Niles (1984) state:

In all subjects, children develop skills using language and other symbol systems; they develop the ability to reason; they undergo experiences that lead to emotional and social maturity. As children grow and learn about themselves and the world, they broaden and deepen their capacity for emotional, aesthetic, and social growth (p.11).

Freire and Macedo (1987) put it this way:

The act of learning to read and write has to start from a very comprehensive understanding of the act of reading the world, something which human beings do before reading words. Even historically, human beings first changed the world, secondly proclaimed the world, and then wrote the words. These are moments in history. Human beings did not start by naming A! F! N! They started by freeing the hand, grasping the world (p.xiii).

Educators must see well beyond short-term objectives. It is imperative that teachers understand
the reading process so that students' encounters with literature will be enhanced (Corcoran, 1987). Rosenblatt (1983) states that the research in reading has found the teacher to be a most important-- perhaps the most important-- figure in the educational process; this is quite a responsibility!

Ultimately, what we as teachers want to do is to provide a means for presenting literature in such a way so as to develop in our students an internal motive, or uncover the implicit desire to read and reflect upon literature. Reading widely enables a continuous construction of understanding of oneself, and an awareness of ourselves and our world.

In order to explore avid readers' coming to reading, this researcher developed a questionnaire entitled "Reading Autobiography" designed to gather and examine the characteristics and/or conditions common to the experiences of avid readers.

**Definitions**

**efferent reading**-- reading for the purpose of taking information from the text, focus is on what will remain after the reading, finding a solution to a problem.
aesthetic reading-- in aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused directly on what is being read, what she/he is "living through" during that particular reading; the same text can be read efferently or aesthetically.

transaction-- an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are aspects of a total situation, each affected by and affecting the other-- for example: a 'known' assumes a 'knower'; a 'knowing' is the transaction between a particular individual in a particular situation.

convinced reader-- an avid reader, an experienced reader, those who read-- not necessarily in enormous quantities-- but who incorporate leisure reading consistently into their day to day living.

Limitations

The respondents in this study were identified as avid readers either by themselves, librarians, colleagues or this researcher. The criterion used in determining an avid reader was largely subjective, though the assumption is made that reading is considered an integral part of their daily life.
Summary

The reading research on emergent literacy has focused on the young child coming to language. This study investigated the how and why of older, experienced readers using a collection of reading autobiographies. This was not a search for skills that make a good reader, rather, it was an exploration of the characteristics of avid readers and their perceptions of reading. This study attempted to uncover connecting threads in the responses of these convinced readers in order to illuminate further the myriad ways in which people come to reading. Implications for classroom teachers and instructional reading programs are drawn.
Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous search, desire and/or impulse to read, and to consider the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Growing With Books

In reading literature, we are cultivating the natural affinity children and adults have for imaginatively listening and storying. We begin to see evidence of minds actively participating in the creation of meaning through interaction of author and reader in the event of reading. Good literature, rich in word and idea, invites reflective and interpretive response.

According to Carlson and Sherrill (1988) it is known that in developing from childhood to adulthood, people move through an ego-centered stage toward an awareness of the world outside ourselves, and this is what appears
to happen with a person's reading. They begin to formulate understandings beyond the immediate projections of self into a text, eventually coming to realize and appreciate experience that is larger and different from their own.

For the fortunate child, early experiences with books and reading in the home are remembered as being warm, intriguing, sensual. Possessing books of your very own, receiving books as gifts, observing readers in your family, having the opportunity to share favorite stories, the excitement of your first library card and exploring the 'awesome' rows of books in the library—all contribute to a built-in enthusiasm for books and reading upon entering formal schooling. Once in school, being read to was the best part of the day (Carlson and Sherrill, 1988).

The writer Arnold Lobel (1986) describes returning from the library as a child:

What I would feel... was not the anticipation of the stories and pictures that I was to pore over and enjoy, but an overwhelming feeling of possession. These books were mine, all mine... I was the true owner of these pleasantly hard, rectangular objects I carried under my arm... (p.38).

Lack of interest, motivation and inadequate "readiness" are attributed to a minimal exposure of books and book language (Cohen, 1968). Cohen expected
that a positive involvement of "a conceptual and emotional nature" with a wide range of literature would facilitate and nurture children's literacy acquisition, or more accurately, their love of books and reading. Further, an environment rich in literature, both at home and at school, promotes the development of young voluntary readers (Morrow, 1985).

Sulzby (1985) cites the how of storybook knowledge as evolving from interactive parent-child shared reading experiences, which continue to grow through teacher-child interactions. Temple and Gillet (1989) state, "The cumulative experience of listening to stories once or twice a day, year in, year out, clearly trains children to think of the random phenomena of their lives in these orderly ways" (p.136). The authors ask, "Who can doubt that children, and we, come to understand our own lives in terms of the patterns we learned in books?" (p.136).

Reading, when viewed as a source of pleasure and coupled with the use of literature, will provide affective experiences in reading. The author Natalie Babbitt (1986) records her childhood growth with books:

...I didn't stop reading. More and more I was finding the charm, the excitement, the relief of sliding into the world of the stories I read, of escaping my own plain, ordinary life and becoming the hero I was reading about. So while my outer world stayed predictably the same, my inner world grew wider and wider, its possibilities infinite,
the choices it suggested for how I might live, someday, multiplying with each new story (p.45).

According to Carlson and Sherrill (1988) the reading patterns of children growing up in diverse circumstances are remarkably similar. Generally, a child begins with nursery rhymes, progresses to comics and primers, children's classics, adventures, mysteries, animal and sports stories, and finally to teen and romance novels. Somewhere between the ages of twelve and fifteen, "the process of reading has been internalized. It no longer takes effort" (p.19). This is, perhaps, too linear, and too broad a generalization to apply to the development of all avid readers. It is known that "part of what people read is determined by their cultural environment and the availability of materials" (p.27). It is also necessary to consider the frequency of the 'late blooming' avid reader. As one respondent in Carlson and Sherrill's report stated, "I realized that something existed in writing that I had been missing for these many years. From that time on I felt that I had begun to read as if for the first time. This was not the end of my growth, to be sure, but rather the beginning" (p.22).
Reading and Responding

What's going on while reading? What is active?

Rosenblatt (1978) writes:

Throughout the centuries, it becomes apparent, usually either the book or the author has received major illumination. The reader has tended to remain in the shadow... usually cast as a passive recipient. Within the past few years, the spotlight has started to move in the direction of the reader (p.1).

The relationship between the text and the reader is not linear, but situational, occurring in a context of time and space (Rosenblatt, 1983). The process of reading is ultimately a negotiation of meanings between reader and writer. It is not merely an interpretational mode where reader acts on text; nor is it a response model, where the text acts upon the reader.

Young (1987) cites Rosenblatt:

This transactional model of the reading process...underlies the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in a dynamic reading transaction. A person becomes a reader by virtue of his [her] activity in relation to the text, which he [she] organizes as a set of verbal symbols. A physical text, a set of marks on a page, becomes the text of a poem or a scientific formula by virtue of its relationship with a reader who thus interprets it (p.13).

Evans (1987) suggests that when reading, though you may not have actually lived through a particular
experience described in a text, you do relate this experience to what you have lived through, to what you do know. We make sense of what we read partly through comparison; between what the text is offering and what we know empirically. So, as teachers, we cannot assume a commonality in the readers' experiences. The world of the reader relates itself to the text, constructs and synthesizes whether consciously or unconsciously. This new experience is incorporated into our schema and "into the realm in which the experience of the world which we derive from literature plays a part in the totality of our knowledge of life, alongside what comes from actually living through it" (p.29).

DeMott (1988) states that the reader of literature should be a full partner with the author of the work. Good readers work with authors to bring a story or a poem to life, using their imaginations to enter personally into the situation of the text. "Reading well means being on intimate terms with the story, poem or play, possessing it, inhabiting as we might our own lives" (p.74). Like Rosenblatt, DeMott describes this as "living into a story--living through it" (p.74).

Essentially, then, the nature of the response is determined by what the reader brings to the text as much as the text itself (Purves and Beach, 1972):

Response consists of cognition, perception, and some
emotional or attitudinal reaction; it involves predisposition; it changes during the course of the reading; it persists and is modified after the work has been read; it may result in some overt action; and it may result in a modification of concepts, attitudes, or feelings (p.178).

Sanders (1987), as with Evans (1987), reiterates the importance of a reader's making connections/comparisons between themselves and the story's characters and events, relating them to one's perception of her/himself. Sanders records her daughter's response: "I know why I like the Ramona books, it's because she's like me" (p.622). This connectedness illustrates a metacognitive awareness of the reasons for her feelings. Empathy and insight are developed from the reading of someone else's experiences.

In exploring children's responses to stories, Benton (1979), outlines assumptions or truisms of the "reading state"—the imagined world we enter when we read a story. First, it is active; we are "conscious not of words on the page, but of meaning made." Secondly, it is creative, the reader makes a "secondary world," recreating something which approximates the author's original idea. The third truism of the reading state is its uniqueness; each reading is a unique event, even in repeated reading, the words have not changed, but the nature of the reader's personal involvement has changed.
Finally, the fourth truism, the reading state is cooperative. What the text offers (author's imagination) and what the reader brings (reader's imagination) to the text combine to create a unique "textual performance."

Purves (1984) further defines reading literature as "an aesthetic transaction because the reader is not only making decisions about the what the book is saying, but about how it is saying it" (p.127). Rosenblatt (1988) discusses the necessity of the reader's stance—the adoption, consciously or unconsciously, of a selective attitude. "A stance reflects the reader's purpose" (p.4). This stance can be defined in terms of efferent or aesthetic reading. The distinction between the two is explained by Rosenblatt (1978):

In efferent reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out...In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is what happens during the reading event...the reader's attention is centered directly on what he [she] is living through during his [her] relationship with that particular text (pp.23-25).

In reading literature aesthetically then, students acquire not so much 'information about' as 'experience of' something. The reader participates in the words, ideas, situations, images, personalities, emotions, "in
the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold" (Rosenblatt, 1988, p.5). At times, however, readings will fall nearer the center of this efferent/aesthetic continuum: "attention may turn from the experiential synthesis to efferent analysis, as some technical strategy is recognized or literary judgement is passed" (p.5).

Cramer (1984) cites Maslow's definition of an emotionally positive response to literature as a "peak experience," where full attention is concentrated on the percept (sense datum), and the perception becomes richer; it is ego-transcending and self-forgetful. While the experience may be otherworldly, it gives the perceiver a sense of strength, confidence, empowerment, for the here and now.

Bleich (1975) adds:

In some sense, all emotional experience is ineffable; this ineffability vanishes when a reader seeks to share his [her] experience by articulating it to others or to understand his [her] experience by articulating it to himself [herself] (p.112).

**Instructional Methods: Effects on Reading Habits and Attitudes**

The success of an educational system is judged by
the literacy rate of its 'products' (Carlson and Sherrill, 1988). "In general, American society is more interested in 'informational' reading. Early elementary reading programs have moved steadily away from recreational reading toward informational reading" (p.145). Most students and most citizens can read by minimalist definition of reading, but by the broader definition of a literacy that can inform the thinking of educated citizens, a great number of Americans are illiterate (Purves and Niles, 1984).

Giroux (1987) writes, "As both the mastery of specific skills and particular forms of knowledge, literacy had to become a precondition for social and cultural emancipation" (p.2). Freire (1987) explains, "Reading does not consist of merely decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected" (p.35).

Harste and Mikulecky (1984) write:

Reading is not merely a receptive process, not just a transfer of information where the reader is a reconstructor of the author's meaning. Writing is viewed as an expressive process, the key feature of which is transcription of a perfectly formed text from head to paper. On a social scale this translates to the practice of training individuals to have the appropriate decoding skills for reading and transcription skills for writing. Once these are mastered, one is presumably literate in all contexts. However, as many a failed educational program has demonstrated, literacy is a good deal more complex and a transfer
of 'skills' is far from guaranteed (p.72).

The research in language and language learning has increased our understanding of the comprehension process. 'New' reasons for reading books have surfaced, one of which is the recognition of the role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension. Very simply, the more a reader knows, the more she/he will comprehend (Wilson, Anderson, and Fielding, 1986). With exposure to books readers increase their knowledge of content, form and structure, and genre conventions. A function of this schema "is to free cognitive resources for other tasks, such as comprehending the new information in future texts" (p.74).

Reading books develops linguistic skills because we gain knowledge of the syntax and vocabulary of written texts-- which is different from spoken language in its complexity (Wilson, Anderson, and Fielding, 1986). Reading can be instrumental in building self-esteem, in offering emotional satisfaction, diversion or escape. Reading provides intellectual stimulation--cultural, political, social-- and moral insight and/or reinforcement (Purves, 1972). Thus, the pleasures of reading are not just recreational, but the pleasure of mastery, of answering a question, of learning, and of accomplishing a task (Sledge, 1986).
Many children are able to get reading scores indicating that they are learning reading skills, but not many are doing much reading. Although many can read, very few do (Wilson et al., 1986).

Smith, Smith and Mikulecky (1978) write, "... that a key goal in education is to develop lifelong learning habits, which, in most cases, means lifelong reading habits" (p.84). Learning to read must involve acquiring the reading habit: if we affect reading habits, we effect reading achievement.

All but the most avid readers would derive measurable academic benefits from more book reading. This, we feel, is the compelling reason for parents, schools, society at large, to help all students develop lifelong book-reading habits. If America's children read more books, America would be considerably more literate (Wilson et al., 1986, p.80).

Schools can encourage reading by setting examples, providing opportunities to read, and support and access to books. The presence of a variety of books in the classroom is absolutely crucial to the development of reading (Wilson et al., 1986).

We often hear teachers bemoan the fact that they cannot override the strong influence of the family and cannot overcome familial or parental neglect ... [yet] when the family exerts a strong literacy influence, the school can do little to interfere. When a family does not have this influence, then the school is the shaper of the adult interest or non-interest. Unfortunately, as many teachers turn young people off to reading as challenge them to become lifelong learners (Matheny...
Sledge (1986) speaks of impact of teacher-as-mentor:

You, the teacher, are the reader's mentor, whether that reader is your student, your colleague or your friend. No, more accurately, readers are mentors to readers and to future readers; close, experienced counselors and guides in the development and promotion of a wide variety of reading interests (p.242).

Sledge (1986) suggests that teachers talk about what they are reading personally, recommend books that have film or TV adaptations, read aloud riveting, opening lines, recommend brief books, and develop exciting classroom libraries; she writes, "Your enthusiasm for your own reading will ring more true than 'teacher-interest' in your students' reading" (p.246).

Galda (1988) and Morrow (1985) also emphasize the importance of teachers modeling the value and reading of books. Hickman (1981) agrees that the fact that a book has captured the teacher's attention gives it a special sanction which encourages children to pursue it. Teacher enthusiasm for literature has an enormous impact on students' behavior and cultivates positive reading attitudes (Morrow and Weinstein, 1986). In addition, Morrow (1985) noticed that interest in books was sparked when classroom discussions focused on the interpretive and critical issues within stories. Emphasis must be
placed on making voluntary reading a regular part of the "instructional" reading program.

Teachers as readers must be able to explore the possibilities that every encounter with a literary text holds; we must consider what the students can teach each other, as well as what they can teach us— we are co-learners (Galda, 1988). Helper and Hickman (1982) describe this as a "community of readers" where the "literary transaction, the one-to-one conversation between author and audience, is frequently surrounded by other voices" (p.279).

According to Schwartz (1979), the traditional way of teaching literature meant that the student was there for the literature rather than the literature being there to serve the student. Recently, the recommended adolescent literature encompasses those works that have meaning in relation to society, rather than exclusively literary exemplars. The context is such that it is significant to the youths' immediate world (p.7).

Carlson and Sherrill (1988) write, "Book reports do more to kill the young person's interest in reading, than to promote it," and, an intensive study of a single work can actually decrease the student's interest in the selection. Students experience a diminished enthusiasm for continually searching for "meaning" in a literary
work, their own response was "never enough." The authors state that there is a balance between response and substantiation in the text -- there is no "correct" meaning, and students should not be "mystified with literature" (p. 155).

Rosenblatt (1983) suggests that choices in literature must reflect an understanding not only of the reading material, but of the student's past experience and present level of maturity. Carlson and Sherrill (1988) emphasize freedom of choice in reading material, to encourage students to read what they liked, and set aside blocks of time for them to do so.

The results of Culp's (1985) study reveal that the percentage of high school students reporting specific influences of reading, both assigned and voluntary, has decreased. The data indicate students are generally reading less, and therefore, influenced less. Culp suggests possible causes for this trend as lack of time, interest in non-fiction, such as newspapers and magazines, television, jobs etc.

Rosenblatt (1988) states that teaching practices and curricula, from the very beginning, should include both aesthetic and efferent linguistic activity:

Especially in the early years, this should be largely indirect, for example, through choice of texts, phrasing of assignments, writing and reading, implications concerning the stance in the questions asked. Unfortunately, much of the current practice
is counter productive, either failing to encourage a definite stance, or implicitly requiring an inappropriate one. A favorite illustration is in a third-grade workbook that prefaced its first poem with the question, 'What facts does this poem teach you?' Small wonder that graduates of our schools (and even colleges) often read poems and novels efferently, or political statements or advertisements with an aesthetic stance (p.14).

Buncombe and Peetoom (1988) question the highly structured, lock-step procedures of a technological model of language "that presumes learning to occur when skills and concepts are isolated from their narrative framework and from the souls and unique identities of human beings" (p.27). They add, "This is not a good model for literature. Stories don't contain right answers. Literature luxuriates in tentativeness, risk, ambivalence, mystery" (p.28).

**Summary**

Literacy is a social and educational issue; it is our responsibility to nurture a reading interest, engender a reading habit, and make reading achievement possible for all of our citizens--children and adults alike. Furthermore, students must assert their right and responsibility to read. We have to examine ourselves, our teaching practices and societal influences so that we will be aware of the myriad ways in which people come to reading. In describing Freire's
view, Giroux (1987) states, "Literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment" (p.7).

What makes for an avid reader? There are those who consistently make time for leisure reading; those "convinced" readers who seek out books, and whose lives would be considerably less rich without the invaluable presence of literature.
Chapter III

Design

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous search, desire and/or impulse to read, and to consider the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Questions

1. What are the characteristics of avid readers?
2. Is there a connecting thread common to individual ways of coming to reading?
3. What will experienced readers' testimonials bring to the existing theoretical knowledge of reading development?
4. Are there previously unconsidered factors which will reveal different perceptions and produce new insights into the philosophy behind instructional reading methods?
5. Aside from the practice of matching children with books of interest, what are others ways and means by
which we can get the reading bug to bite the unbitten, to broaden and expand their experiences with reading and literature?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects of this study range in age from 10 to 82 and are approximately 64% female and 36% male. The respondents represent a wide range of occupations and geographically represent New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Illinois.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the questionnaire entitled "Reading Autobiography" designed by the researcher. The data form at the top of the questionnaire was optional; the respondents disregarded the questions concerning name, age, education and occupation if they so desired.

Procedure

The questionnaire was delivered to a local public library where the librarians themselves distributed it among their avid reader clientele. The questionnaire
was also mailed out to avid readers whose names the researcher collected from colleagues, friends and acquaintances.

The following questions were listed on the questionnaire:

(Name, age, occupation, education-- optional)

1. What ways did you come to reading? Can you remember an experience or series of experiences that inspired you to read?

2. Was there a particular person or several people who influenced your interest in reading?

3. If possible, describe the reading instruction you received in school and how you felt about it at the time.

4. At what point in your life did you realize how much you valued reading?

5. Why do you read? What role(s) does reading play in your life today?

6. Describe your reading habits: When do you read? What do you read? Are there specific purposes served by your reading of various materials?

7. I may have overlooked a significant aspect of the reading process; do you have additional comments or insights?
The questionnaire was designed to gather and record the individual experiences of convinced readers. A cover letter accompanying the questionnaire informed the respondents of the purpose of the study and how they had been selected to participate in the study. The respondents were asked to return the completed form at their earliest possible convenience.

**Analysis**

The returned questionnaires were categorized according to frequency and similarity of responses. All responses were then descriptively analyzed.

**Summary**

One hundred-twenty questionnaires, designed to investigate reading autobiographies, were distributed to avid readers. How people come to reading, sustain reading, and grow in reading was explored. From the questionnaires, anecdotes revealing commonalities and/or differences in individual reader's experiences were considered. Their individual perceptions, reading experiences, reading habits and insights were then categorized and descriptively analyzed.

The respondents' data form (located at the top of the questionnaire) provided the researcher with
information such as name, age, occupation, and brief educational history.

This exploratory study took place over a period of approximately six months.
Chapter IV
Analysis of the Data

Purpose
The purposes of this study were to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous search, desire and/or impulse to read, and to consider the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Analysis of the Responses to the Questionnaire
This study explored the perceptions of avid readers through a questionnaire designed by the researcher and the written responses to this questionnaire provided by sixty avid readers. The responses themselves were varied, not only in what was said, but in length as well. They ranged from single statements to one and two-page typed or hand written pages for each of the seven questions. Many of the responses overlapped and/or wove together two or more questions. The proceeding section lists each of the Questionnaire questions followed by sample quotes from the responses.
Question One

What ways did you come to reading? Can you remember an experience or a series of experiences that inspired you to read?

(The following responses to question one were categorized among 28 categories which have been rank ordered according to the number of times mentioned; see Table 1.)

Being read to as children was the most frequently expressed reading experience in the responses. Thirty of the 60 reading autobiographies listed this as a source of inspiration and/or a very early positive experience. Of those 30, three people mentioned being read to by a teacher, one person mentioned being read to by a librarian, and twenty-six stated that their parents or grandparents read to them. "Dad read the Sunday comics [aloud] with proper accents and intonations."

Seeing other people read, particularly family members, was the next most frequently mentioned experience that inspired the respondents to read. "[I] came to reading naturally, as all my family are avid readers." Twenty-one respondents spoke of seeing others in the household demonstrate a love or enthusiasm for reading, and one person mentioned having a teacher who
modeled reading.

Nineteen responses described having powerful and/or positive reading experiences with particular books or materials at a particular time in their lives. "...Fifth or sixth grade reading took on a mysterious power--it became probably the first thing in life for me that had the charm of 'initiation' into some mystery or realm of hidden special knowledge." Mentioned were nursery rhymes, comics, classics, and everything in between. "My reading began early in life starting with comic books...after reading our own we would trade."

Libraries were fondly remembered (sixteen responses) as havens of escape and intrigue, evoking sensual memories, thus creating positive attitudes toward reading and books. "And there was the public library with its distinctive smell of wax on the brown linoleum floors." Regular trips to the public library and receiving a library card were often regarded as an early impetus to read. "When I was seven or eight years old...I was given at the earliest age they would do it, my own personal borrowing card at the public library...from then on I have been an avid reader."

"Our house was full of books and our parents were never too busy to read to us." Fifteen reading autobiographies attributed much of their reading
inspiration to the abundance of books in the home environment--"Books proliferated at home." As children growing up in print rich environments, books and reading were understood as valuable. "The purchase of a set of encyclopedias was a cause for celebration in our family... we were always inquisitive and encouraged to research our questions."

Positive experiences with reading included being taught to read at an early age (twelve responses); this teaching usually occurred at home and was done by 'mother,' before formal schooling. "I learned to read at the age of four--mother taught at my request."

Twelve of the respondents felt that reading involves a certain amount of natural ability ("It seems now that I was 'born to be able to read'"), and/or being of a naturally curious disposition ("I just remember looking at books and trying to imagine what pictures and stories were all about").

Exposure to and availability of books and magazines—whether at home, at school, or at the library—contributed to the respondents' enthusiasm for reading. Ten of the autobiographies included these criterion. "I had access to so much to read that it would have been hard not to read."

Nine respondents mentioned the benefit of direct
encouragement to read. "Both my parents were readers...[and] encouraged us to read, expressing enthusiasm."

Seven respondents fondly remember books as gifts--"Nancy Drews were the best gift I could receive." Another states, "Books were part of our belongings, and were often gifts."

The desire to learn more about a particular area of interest became the driving force behind several of the avid readers' experiences. "I was intensely curious about many non-fiction things, often of a scientific or artistic nature, and found books sated that curiosity."

Seven responses acknowledged reading for specific information--"I loved geography and history...when I was twelve years old...I went to the library for my first card and read all I could on these subjects."

"I cannot ever remember a time when I didn't read." Seven reading autobiographies mention specifically that they always seemed to know how to read and enjoyed it right from the very beginning, while one respondent states that she "can't explain how I came to like reading...no recollection of what inspired me to read."

The performance aspect of reading was related to building self-confidence according to seven responses. "I... quickly memorized each page, so I could put on a
show of reading by knowing when to turn each page as I recited the story. This, above all, led to an urgent desire to really read." And, "My mother taught me to read when I was three and it really impressed people that I could read, so I did."

Illustrations were mentioned in six responses as an inspirational element in early reading experiences. "I usually interpreted the pictures in books and made up my own stories from the visual." Another response describes having the pictures made spontaneously, "My father would read or make up stories and then illustrate them on the chalk board."

Six reading autobiographies attribute early reading inspiration to comic books. "This was really living—finish my homework after school and then sit in the living room with my father and select my comics for the night."

Printed media other than books or comics was the catalyst for reading in six of the responses. "I remember as a wee tot of maybe two or three, riding with my folks in the car at night. The headlights would fall onto the roadway signs, and [I] would (no doubt) bore [my] elders to death by spelling out 'S-T-O-P--STOP!'" Another respondent offers, "My reading skills were inspired and aided by going daily to the movies and
reading the credits, title, etc. Prior to that, reading from the printed page was extremely difficult for me."

Six respondents mentioned having lengthy illnesses (resulting in restricted activity) which inspired their reading. "... when I was eleven or twelve... an accident that left me unable to walk for some time...began reading heavily then." Another autobiography states, "In high school I developed a back problem and needed bed rest for nine months. I began to develop a love of books."

Five of the responses noted the lack of distractions during their early reading experiences. "I lived during a time when... there were no TV's, few radios, movies were black and white silents one night a week, and money wasn't available for such a luxury..." Another respondent wrote, "Until I was in eighth grade my family did not have a radio. The main amusements were reading and games."

A total of five responses attribute some of their early reading inspiration to a school environment. "The series of books that helped teach me to read were very humorous and enjoyable. I think that my teacher and the atmosphere of the school influenced me to read." And another respondent, "...my first grade teacher who made learning so much fun that we did not even know that we
were working; we thought we were playing games and having fun when she taught the alphabet, etc."

Sharing books with family and friends inspired five of the respondents. "Thanks mainly to friends who share my enthusiasm, I read many of the best books of the Twentieth century." Observing this enthusiasm, another respondent wrote, "...and I remember my mom telling her friends about some good book she was 'into'...it would pique my curiosity."

Five respondents isolated their love of print and/or oral language as being an inspiration to reading. "I don't remember learning to read, but I'm sure learning seemed the next logical step in my love-affair with print." Another respondent remembered that, "...my father would make up stories...of adventure that would include myself and my brother as the protagonists. I recall this as a ritual I loved."

A change of environment inspired four of the respondents to read. As a child who traveled to Europe, one respondent wrote, "...once abroad, I began to read Time magazine avidly to fill in the void of home and feel as if I wasn't missing out on anything... also began reading another type of informational literature, that is, about what I was seeing... remember reading a young person's history of England." After having moved
frequently while growing up, another respondent wrote, "... through books I was often able to escape the pain of separation and the stress that go along with the process of transferring yourself to a new environment."

Indeed, the need to escape and the need for companionship often resulted in profound reading experiences. Four readers discussed the circumstances surrounding these early experiences with books. "My mother died when I was twelve. My father had to work everyday. I was lonely, so as an escape, I read. Books became my companions." Another response stated that, while in school, "I had problems [and] ... became frustrated and turned to reading for both entertainment and escape."

Three reading autobiographies described their desire to write as being closely tied to their reading experiences. "I think that if you love to write, reading comes naturally." After listening to stories read aloud, one respondent stated, "The books...not only inspired me to read but also to write."

'Peer pressure' was regarded by three respondents as an early 'inspiration' to reading. This pressure manifested itself in enthusiasm--trading comic books with anxiously awaiting friends--and in competition--being eager to join the 'top' reading group. "I recall
in first grade that there was a small group of advanced readers. Oh, how I wanted to be a part of that group."

Two respondents stated that they just 'discovered' reading: "Only recently have I become an avid reader... forced to take a semester off I suddenly found myself with a lot of extra time... now that I've discovered reading, I think I'll keep it up no matter what."

One respondent's reading enthusiasm was reaffirmed through joining book clubs. "After college... I belonged to book groups and subscribed to book clubs."
Table 1

Categories and number of responses to question one
(What ways did you come to reading? Can you remember an experience or series of experiences that inspired you to read?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Being read to as a child</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Seeing reading modeled</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Positive experience with reading</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Home environment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Taught to read at an early age</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Reading is a natural ability, or occurs naturally stemming from curiosity about books</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Exposure/Availability</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Encouragement</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Books as gifts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Information</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Always seemed to know how to read, always liked it</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Performance/Self-confidence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Illustrations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Comics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Printed media other than books or comics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Illness/Restricted activity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. No distractions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. School environment</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Sharing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Love of printed and/or oral language</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Change of environment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Escape/Companionship</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Reading to write</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Peer pressure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Recently discovered reading</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Book clubs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. No recollection</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question Two
Was there a particular person or several people who influenced your interest in reading? (The responses to this question were categorized among thirteen categories; see Table 2.)

A total of 42 responses attributed their early reading interest to one or both parents. Twenty-one reading autobiographies stated that both parents influenced their reading, while sixteen emphasized their mother's influence, "I knew something drove my mother to bury herself in books... there had to be something great about them and I just had to know what that was!" Five emphasized their father's being an influence, "... my father who, while only completing school through the ninth grade, was an avid reader... [he] strongly believed in and modeled good reading habits."

Sixteen responses identified a teacher as having an influence on their reading at some point during their formal schooling. "In tenth grade I had an extraordinary English teacher who changed my life... his entire pedagogy was about reading..." And another, "The first teacher who encouraged me to read above and beyond textbooks was... my sixth grade teacher."

Nine respondents described their entire family as readers. "Reading was nearly as much a part of our
family life as eating and sleeping." Family reading attitude and influence are mentioned in another response, "Words were wonderful things-- to be savored, and used in describing, sharing our thoughts and feelings." Eight respondents were influenced by siblings. "I had two older sisters and I wanted very much to be like my sisters because they already could read."

Librarians influenced eight of the respondents. The librarian at the local public library "... was probably the most influential person in my becoming an avid reader. She and her staff made me feel special for reading a lot of books."

Seven respondents felt that there was no particular person who influenced their reading. "No one in my family was a big reader when I was young."

Six respondents named six different influences ranging from a quote ("you can bet on being well educated if you enjoy reading"), to the "people in bookstores."

Five respondents noted the influence of friends on their reading. "... my best friend... loves reading ...we have been trading books for as long as I can remember."

College courses influenced two respondents' reading,
"Not until college did I begin to read widely, critically, and creatively."

Two respondents state that their spouse greatly influenced their reading, "... my husband, in his teaching career has exposed me to all the classics."

As a child, one respondent's reading was influenced by an author, "... a long series, Carpenter's Travels... I think he must have written maybe forty of fifty of these books."

**Table 2**

Responses to question two  
(Was there a particular person or several people who influenced your interest in reading?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parents</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mother</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family-- including relatives and grandparents</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Siblings</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Librarian(s)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. No one</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Other</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Father</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Friends</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. College courses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Spouse</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Author</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question Three
If possible, describe the reading instruction you received in school and how you felt about it at the time. (The following responses were categorized among twenty four categories; see Table 3.)

Twenty six responses described a positive reading experience at some point during their formal education. Within this category, there were eight positive elementary reading experiences ("... first and second grade...I loved that teacher, so I'm sure that helped make learning to read a pleasant experience"), eight positive junior high and high school reading experiences ("...one thing that stands out in my mind is that during junior high school one of the assignments that often accompanied our reading was the making of picture notebooks which described the books and the poems we read... this was an activity I enjoyed"), and two positive college reading experiences mentioned, ("... in college I was challenged... by one excellent teacher in short story and novel").

Twenty avid readers had little or no recollection of their formal reading instruction. "[I] don't recall how I was taught to read in school. I don't remember there being books (novels, etc.) only textbooks..."

Thirteen respondents related negative school reading
experiences either in elementary (nine), "...reading time was a flaming bore: regimented procedures, stern teachers, fumbling peers, boring lifeless tales..." or, in junior high/ high school, a respondent recalls "...reading Tale of Two Cities which no one understood at the time."

Dick and Jane books were remembered by ten respondents. Five had positive feelings ("... and for me, that method worked"), one respondent had a negative feeling toward these books, and four respondents remained neutral ("... felt OK by instruction, but never challenged").

Eight responses mentioned phonics instruction specifically; of these, six readers had neutral feelings toward this instruction ("... reading was well taught... but ideas and concepts of imagination were not emphasized... we learned precision, accuracy, usage..."), while two responses were negative ("... difficult because, although I could read, my new teacher was using phonics with which I was unfamiliar").

The "See and Say" instructional method was mentioned in seven of the autobiographies. Six of these responses were neutral ("I have a clear memory of discovering in the early months of first grade the difference between 'God' and 'good'"), while one response was positive, "I
felt competitive and fascinated."

Six respondents were taught to read before entering school. "In Russia, during the revolution and subsequent civil war... my mother would not send me to school since conditions there were dangerously unhealthy and disorganized, so I was taught at home by my mother."

Five responses mention their teacher's reading aloud. "In the nineteen thirties it was the custom that on Friday afternoons, the teacher in the second, third, and fourth grades would read from a continuing story for about an hour-- which the children anticipated with great enthusiasm."

Reading aloud in school was described positively in two responses ("We read chorally and enjoyed it"), and negatively in two responses ("I was a bit shy and was always worried about reading out loud in front of everyone").

Class discussion of books was remembered favorably by three readers. "If it hadn't been for discussions in class, I probably would never have passed... English." One reader experienced this as an unpleasant activity, "I feel like I have to dissect a book in class discussions."

Preparing book reports was mentioned negatively by two respondents, while two others recall book reports
positively. "In the fourth grade, the students in my class gave oral book reports on a book we had read each week. It was a fun time."

Comprehension was a focus in reading instruction discussed by four respondents. One was positive, ("... had an interesting teacher who asked 'different' questions that really made you think..."), while three were negative ("... fourth or fifth grade I recall with some rancor... lessons became obtrusive and methodical... we had to read stories and answer questions by filling in the oval...").

Four readers recalled reading instruction materials as boring. "A reader [we] used went something like this:

Dick said, 'Look at Spot run.'
Jane said, 'Look at Spot run.'
Mother said, 'Look at Spot run.'
Father said, 'Look at Spot run.'"

Another respondent remembered that, "second grade books were boring... in third grade, the textbook had real stories."

Four respondents remembered the reading materials used in school positively, "...used to love the stories and pictures in our reading books in second grade and on up." Another respondent wrote, "The first grade teacher had puppets as characters that were supposed to
represent the vowels. 'Olly Octopus,' 'Iggy Indian,' etc. helped me learn my vowels."

Four respondents remembered reading ahead in their readers. "I would read quickly, and then pass the time daydreaming or surreptitiously reading other sections of the book." One respondent writes, "The teacher would rubber-band the pages together so the better readers would not jump ahead."

Ability grouping was mentioned by three readers, two of which were negative, and one, relatively neutral: "I read constantly as a girl, but was not always in the top reading group."

Two responses discussed the importance of choice of materials or texts, "... but in second grade we got to pick out our own books-- lots of assortment. I liked reading better in second grade."

Workbooks were unfavorably recalled. "Up until this year we've done workbook pages-- I hated workbook pages and thought they were boring."

The SRA method was remembered by two readers, one neutral, the other negative, "...I did not care for the system... did not enjoy reading for the sole purpose of answering questions." The Open Court method was mentioned by another respondent, "I thought it was fun."

One respondent remembered "the point at which the
symbols on the page became words to be read." Another respondent has little recollection of reading instruction, but remembered penmanship instruction, "being really excited when I went from print to cursive, pencil to pen..."

One respondent felt the instruction she received emphasized speed and has now found it difficult to adjust her reading rate for more complicated material.

One respondent enjoyed the classroom composition of a letter and the teacher's writing it out on large lined paper. Another respondent enjoyed the opportunity of being a peer tutor, "we were able to be the tutors for those children who were struggling to read."
Table 3
Categories and number of responses to question three (If possible, describe the reading instruction you received in school and how you felt about it at the time.)
The responses are rated '+' positive, '-' negative, 'o' neutral if applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Positive reading experiences in school</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) No recollection of reading instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Negative reading experiences in school</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) &quot;Dick and Jane&quot;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Phonics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Instructional materials</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) &quot;See and Say&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Taught to read at home before formal instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Reading aloud in school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Teacher reading aloud</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Class discussion of books</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) Book reports</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Comprehension</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) Reading ahead</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) Ability grouping</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16) Choice of materials important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17) Workbooks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18) SRA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19) Remembers when symbols became words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20) Penmanship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21) Peer tutoring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22) Writing as a class</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23) &quot;Open Court&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24) Speed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question Four
At what point in your life did you realize how much you valued reading? (The following responses were categorized and subcategorized among thirteen categories; see Table 4.)

Thirty-six respondents realized they valued reading at some point during their childhood, "... valued reading before I even learned how to read... always knew [it] was special." Another respondent wrote, "I valued reading the first time I read Curious George all by myself... was utterly amazed that I understood what I was actually reading."

Of these thirty-six, sixteen respondents stated that this realization of the value of reading occurred during primary or elementary school (see Table 4 for specific breakdown). "By about fourth grade I knew that recreational reading was something that I valued."

Fifteen respondents wrote that they did not begin to value reading until adulthood. "Reading... a treasured skill I had ignored until I was twenty or so... as a young adult, I rediscovered the pleasure of recreational reading." Another reader states, "When I retired... at age sixty-five, I developed a taste for literature and began to read quite seriously."

"I valued reading most in adolescence as it was an
Thirteen respondents realized they valued reading during their pre-teen or teenage years, "that first flickering came when I was fifteen... and read Gone With the Wind." Of these thirteen responses, six mentioned specifically valuing reading in junior high or high school.

A total of twelve respondents stated that they always valued reading and/or that reading seemed natural. "It's very hard to pinpoint a time. Reading has always seemed like second nature to me." Another avid reader stated, "I don't remember not valuing reading."

Five respondents wrote that receiving a library card impacted their valuing reading, "...getting my library for the first time... I knew I could read, but wasn't sure I could print my name for the librarian under her (to me) forbidding eye..." After receiving a library card as a child, another respondent stated, "from then on I was an avid reader."

"Reading was always a part of my young life, but I don't recall its value until becoming a mother." Three responses mentioned the advent of motherhood as the time when they valued reading. "I realized how important reading was in my life when I had small children and responsibilities that limited the available free time
for reading."

College courses prompted the realization of the value of reading for three respondents, "I don't think I've equalled that level of immersion since." One autobiography stated, "I value reading because with reading, I learned writing."

Table 4

Categories, subcategories and number of responses to question four (At what point in your life did you realize how much you valued reading?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Childhood</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Adulthood</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Adolescence</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Always there, seemed natural</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Library card</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Motherhood</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Writing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Subcategory Number of Responses

a) Primary and elementary .......... 16
b) Junior/high school ............ 6

*formal education

53
Question Five
Why do you read? What role(s) does reading play in your life today? (The following responses were categorized among 12 categories; see Table 5.)

Forty respondents stated that they read for pleasure. "Reading for pleasure permits me to enjoy those things I cannot afford-- travel, art, photography." Another response described a reason for reading as "for the sheer pleasure of going someplace else... meeting new and interesting people..."

Reading for information was mentioned in 32 of the reading autobiographies. "Reading continues to be a way to teach myself more about the subjects I am interested in... getting new perspectives." In addition to being informed, these responses stated that the role of reading was "to keep me aware and on target," and (another) "so my mind doesn't turn to mush."

Seventeen responses described reading as playing a major role in their lives, "Every free minute I have I like to spend reading,... I can always turn to a book." Another response was, "Reading is truly a fundamental part of my life... we've decorated with books instead of furniture." And still another example: "I live to read, stop, re-read, think, read."

Escape was listed as a reason for reading in
thirteen responses. "I suppose the greatest role reading plays in my life today is escape, to another time, place, or way of thinking about things." Another respondent wrote, "reading allows me to enter someone else's world, but see it in my own way."

Reading for relaxation was mentioned in 12 of the autobiographies. "Reading is a very relaxing part of my day; I work outside all day and so I love to get inside and 'snuggle up' with a blanket and a book."

Twelve respondents stated that their love of language and idea was a reason for their avid reading. One respondent wrote, "To experience the beauty of literature... to involve myself with the written word." Another stated, "Books, rather than other media, come closest to the best illuminating ideas."

Nine respondents wrote that much of their reading was job related. "In nursing, reading is invaluable... [to] keep up with the changes in medicine." Another wrote, "I read a variety of texts and educational journals for school/work... [and] instructional information in the field of electronics."

Five readers described their reading as stemming from curiosity. "I am intensely curious... reading helps me revel in mystery." Another wrote, "I'm always curious about different authors' views and perceptions
Four of the readers' autobiographies mentioned reading in order to understand "where I am in the universe, in time, and in the scheme of things." Another respondent wrote that "reading provides a 'form of introspection'... through literature we discover ourselves."

Three readers stated that a reason for their reading is inspiration, either spiritual (one) or, for the writing style of an author (two). As a writer, a respondent explained "one always harks back to the best which has come before... to inspire the best continuing standards."

Problem solving was mentioned specifically in three responses as a reason for reading; "to learn how people face life, handle problems, and enjoy living."

Two readers stated that visualization is a reason for their reading. "In my mind I have my own private TV and when I start reading it turns on and starts setting the scene inside my head."
Table 5

Categories and number of responses to question five
(Why do you read? What role(s) does reading play in your life today?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Pleasure</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Information</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Major role</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Escape</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Relaxation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Language/Idea</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Work/Job Related</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Curiosity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Understanding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Inspiration</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Problem Solving</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) Visualization</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question Six
Describe your reading habits: When do you read? What
do you read? Are there specific purposes served by
your reading of various materials? (The following
responses were categorized among four main categories:
'when,' 'what,' 'additional habits' and 'purposes,'
then subcategorized; see Table 6.)

Forty-one respondents stated that they read mainly
in the evening or night ("nighttime reading is a
ritual"). Twenty respondents stated that they read
during the daytime ("in the middle of the day, between
housework chores"). Eleven respondents stated that they
read anytime ("whenever I can, wherever I can" and,
"every chance I get, and I can't get enough"). Ten
respondents stated that they read in the morning ("I
love reading over breakfast").

Thirty-one respondents stated that they read fiction
("most of my reading has been devoted to fiction").
Twenty-five respondents read non-fiction ("books with a
sociological of philosophical bent"). Regular magazine
reading was mentioned in 23 responses ("currently, much
of my reading is from magazines directly related to the
topics in which I'm interested"). Twenty-two
respondents mentioned reading a daily newspaper ("I'm a
news addict").
Biographies and autobiographies were mentioned in 16 of the responses ("of worthwhile people"). Nine readers mentioned reading a variety of materials ("a well balanced diet--no junk" and, "I like to be eclectic in my choice of material"). Eight respondents read historical novels. Six mentioned reading professional journals regularly.

Six respondents read poetry ("poetry, especially, serves often as medicine"). Five respondents stated that they read and reread classics.

Four readers enjoyed reference materials ("How I ever did without the New Columbia Encyclopedia...I'll never know"). Four respondents mention their fondness for regional reading materials ("...anything with a Maine background"). Three respondents read the Bible regularly.

Two responses specifically mentioned a fondness for satire and humor. Two readers enjoy best sellers ("I watch the New York Times list"). One respondent reads plays ("...for the scenes that I practice in class").

One respondent stated that she read spiritually oriented material ("I am finding new and relevant sources of spiritual guidance").

Additional reading habits mentioned in the responses
include belonging to book clubs (e.g. Book of the Month Club and Quality Paperback), regular use of the library, periods of reading one author ("...notice that I read in stages" and "tend to read all of an author's work"), and regularly perusing bookstores. Three respondents mentioned the quantity of reading they did ("at least one book a week").

The responses mentioned six purposes served by reading various materials (some of these overlapped question five): Information, work/job related, pleasure, enrichment, research, and reading to write.
Table 6
Categories, subcategories, and number of responses to question six (Describe your reading habits: When do you read? What do you read? Are there specific purposes served by your reading of various materials?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) When:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evening/night</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daytime</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anytime</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morning</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) What:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-fiction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>magazines</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspapers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biography/autobiography</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>historical novels</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>variety of materials</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional journals</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regional</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satire/humor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best sellers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plays</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spiritual reading</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Additional habits:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>takes books along when traveling</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discusses/shares books</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belongs to book club(s)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reads library books</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>always carries a book</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reads books by one author</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or of a certain genre</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a specific quantity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peruses bookstores</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Purposes served by reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>various materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work/job related</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleasure</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enrichment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading to write</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Question Seven
I may have overlooked a significant factor of the reading process; do you have additional comments or insights? (The responses to this question were categorized among 17 categories; see Table 7.)

"One of the powerful things about reading... somewhere in the translation between object and symbol, or experience and conceptualization, a uniquely human form of magic occurs." Four respondents emphasized the powerful nature of reading. "Sometimes, I feel that the people in books revolve around my life... I get lost in a book--like I'm living it."

Four respondents stressed the importance of the library. "I was never a good, fast reader but I think that my love of being in the library and of being sure my kids were surrounded by books has helped to keep me reading and enjoying reading."

Sharing was emphasized in four of the responses to question seven. "There is something very companionable about reading together, sometimes sharing an insight, sometimes each engrossed in our own book."

Three respondents stated that what was read was extremely significant, that we become readers when "... a book had touched us deeply, has sparked some kind of recognition inside us--heart, soul, whatever."
"Reading provides escape and information... not easily obtained from other media." Three responses emphasized the importance of reading as an informative medium. "It seems there is a relationship in everyday life between reading and knowing. Many people... do not know, feel, think, and/or believe they can learn what is happening in the world by reading."

Two responses briefly discussed instruction. One respondent felt that many children were being taught to read too early and were "being robbed of the importance of play and of having adults read to them." The other respondent, a retired teacher, emphasized her confidence in current methods, stating "[I] am sure there are significant advantages over the traditional methods."

Two respondents stated that reading was an inherent skill. "I really do not believe that one person can necessarily influence another. Rather, I feel that there is something within us... that makes us love to read... you would call it heredity."

In contrast, another respondent wrote, "I think that becoming an avid reader comes from being surrounded with the right kind of people." Two respondents emphasized the impact and influence another person can have on other readers and emerging readers.

Motivation was stressed in two responses. One, from
a former teacher, wrote, "... after second or third grade, kids generally don't like the routine of reading groups, but enjoy a lot of other motivational techniques-- oversized books, etc."

Two responses discussed the element of time in relation to lifelong reading. "Maybe one of the rewards of the golden years will be the ability to change old ways and make more time to read just for fun."

The importance of environment was recognized as essential in two responses. Two others commented on the ill effects of television in today's society. "Television is a real problem-- not simply that it exists, but how bad it is, how intellectually lazy, cliched, and sweetly seductive..." The other respondent wrote about the passivity that results from watching TV, "... neither stretching the imagination nor allowing for individual conception of the various events making up the story."

"I developed a strong dislike for anything the teacher made me read." Two respondents emphasized the need for self-selection of books. "I have always benefited more from reading I chose to read rather than when I was required to read the material."

Two respondents wrote about the understanding achieved through reading. "We can only really
understand things through reading. Unfortunately... a great time lapse ensues with our reading habits after we leave school because we are so preoccupied with other matters."

The therapeutic effects of reading were briefly described in two responses. "... The reading I do is a mild form of escaping the world, but one that is not self-destructive."

One respondent wrote of the negative effects our present economy has on the family, and on reading in particular; "...with two incomes considered a necessity, there is very little time to spend reading [with the children]... although they have the books, they are not encouraged to read them."

Another respondent, a retired librarian, writes, "... it still gives me a thrill when something clicks and you see a child begin to decipher words, put sentences together, and finally understand what he [she] has read."
### Table 7

Categories and number of responses to question seven

(I may have overlooked a significant aspect of the reading process; do you have additional comments or insights?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Reading is powerful</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Library important influence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Sharing important</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) What is read, significant</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Reading, informative medium</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical of 'pushing'</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive 'new' method</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Reading interest inherent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) People can influence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Motivation is key</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Change/time element important</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Environment important</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) TV distraction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Self-selection of books</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) True understanding through reading</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) Therapeutic effect of fantasy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16) Negative effect of economy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17) Joy in seeing a child read</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

The analysis of the data of this research was organized according to the Questionnaire questions. The responses to each question were categorically arranged, tabulated, and rank ordered in accompanying tables.

The results of Question One revealed that the five most frequently mentioned 'ways of coming to reading' and/or 'experiences that inspired their reading' were: being read to as children (50%); observed reading being modeled while growing up (35%); had positive experiences with various reading materials (32%); had experiences using the library and/or received a library card as a child (27%); and grew up in a print-rich environment (25%).

The results of Question Two revealed that the five most frequently mentioned responses to the 'particular person(s) who influenced their reading interest' were: parents (35%); mother (27%); a teacher (27%); family, including relatives and grandparents (15%); siblings (13%).

The results of Question Three indicate that the five most frequently mentioned responses to 'instructional reading programs experienced and how you (the respondent) felt about it' were: positive reading experiences in school (43%); no recollection of reading experiences
instruction (33%); negative reading experiences in school (22%); "Dick and Jane," (five positive, one negative, four neutral) remembered by (17%); and phonics instruction (two negative, six neutral) remembered by (13%). The results of Question Four ('the time in your life when you realized that you most valued reading') demonstrate that for 60% of the respondents, this happened at some point during childhood. For 25% it happened during adulthood. Twenty-two per cent state that this realization occurred in adolescence. Reading 'was always there' for 20% of the respondents. Eight per cent of the readers wrote that receiving a library card for the first time was the catalyst for valuing reading.

The results of Question Five reveal that the five most frequently mentioned reasons in the responses for reading and the roles reading plays in their lives reading were: pleasure (67%); information (53%); that indeed, reading did play a major role (28%); escape (22%); and relaxation (20%).

The results of Question Six ('reading habits: when do you read?, what do you read?, and specific purposes served by your reading of various materials') indicate that 68% read mostly at night, and 33% during the daytime, 52% read fiction, 42% non-fiction, 38%
magazines, 37% newspapers, and 27% biography. The four most frequently mentioned purposes served by reading various materials were: information (32%), work/job related (17%), pleasure (10%), and enrichment (10%).

Question Seven asked for further comments and/or insights to the reading process. Many respondents chose not to address this question. Thirty-four (out of 60) respondents did comment, however, and the five comments/insights mentioned by three or more respondents were: reading is powerful and empowering; the library is an important influence; sharing books and reading enthusiasm are necessary; what is read is important; and reading is seen as informative.
Chapter V
Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to investigate avid readers' perceptions of themselves as readers, the reading act, the world of books and other printed media, the reason for their continuous search, desire and/or impulse to read, and to consider the pedagogical implications of these perceptions.

Conclusions

The results of this investigation substantiate much of the previous research in reading interest/attitude, reader response, and literature-based learning. In addition, the data gathered from this study support many of the tenets of the whole language philosophy and, indeed, reassure us that the current surge in holistic learning and student-centered teaching is on the right track. Furthermore, additional research in reading education is indicated so that we may at once fine-tune our methodologies and broaden our pedagogical base to encompass the general and the specific.

The most important conclusion is that there is no one way for a person to become an avid reader, rather,
there are as many ways as there are readers. Individuals are unique in their development as readers. However, some generalizations can be made about the characteristics and conditions common to avid readers' experiences. A combination of two or more of the following conditions were present, to varying degrees, in each of the reading autobiographies explored in this study:

1) being read to as children
2) observing reading behavior in the home
3) enjoying positive experiences with reading materials—particular books or comics
4) obtaining a borrowing card and having the opportunity to use the local public library
5) having books and other printed material present in the home (exposure and availability), and/or access to books in other environments
6) being influenced by and receiving direct encouragement to read from parents, family, teachers, librarians, friends

The respondents were affected to some extent by these (largely apparent) conditions. This complex is by no means absolute and conclusive, rather, it is a sketch of general characteristics common to the subjects of this investigation. What is not evident are the 'in-
the-head' cognitive processes.

In addition, it is interesting to note that: 1) less than one half of the respondents recalled a positive reading experience in school; 2) just over half of the respondents realized that they valued reading during childhood; 3) that becoming a reader is a possibility that can develop at anytime-- childhood, adolescence, adulthood; 4) that people read for information almost as frequently as they read for pleasure; and 5) these respondents read non-fiction at a rate just slightly below fiction.

There were similar patterns of development among many of the avid readers in this study which coincide with the Carlson and Sherrill (1988) findings. As early readers, several respondents typically began reading comics eventually advancing to more complex material as they grew older.

A number of responses supplied evidence for the positions of Sanders (1987), Evans (1987), and Demott (1988) who emphasize the reader's role in making meaning from a given text. Responses contained anecdotes dealing with the impact and understanding of particular books. This supports the theory that readers make connections and relate their empirical experiences, part of which is experience with other literature (Temple and
Gillet, 1989), to the particular event described within a piece of writing. In addition, data from this study support the idea of the uniqueness of the reading state (Benton, 1979) and the importance of the imagined world entered when a story is read, in the number of responses referring to the companionship and escape found in reading.

**Implications for the Classroom**

Several of the respondents were not read to as children, did not come from a family of readers, and were not exposed to books and book language until formal schooling. The fact that these respondents emerged as avid readers despite conditions not conducive to reading, is certainly an indication that schools are able to positively influence and cultivate a reading interest in such children, through supplying them with reading opportunities, encouragement, enthusiasm and access to books.

It appears that when a family has a strong positive influence for developing literacy, the school has relatively little effect on the students' reading attitudes. When the home has a negative impact on the student, either permanently or temporarily, the school probably has the greatest opportunity to influence attitude (Matheny and Lockledge, 1986, p.1).

Barring actual disabilities, it is apparent that one
of the most effective ways to improve reading ability is
simply to do more reading. According to the Wilson,
Anderson, and Fielding (1986), book reading time emerged
as the best predictor of reading achievement; many
children's reading achievement scores would rise if they
spent more time reading. These researchers agree that,
in our schools, priority should be given to independent
reading by providing opportunities to read, motivation
to read, and access to books.

It is possible that many a potential lifelong reader
is lost or completely discouraged when confronted with a
reading program emphasizing skills, as do some current
instructional methods. The functional literacy focus
does not encompass the whole of reading. The emergence
of the 'whole language' philosophy in American schools
has done much to counter the lock-step, skills-centered
approach to reading.

The data from this study support much of the theory
behind the current literature-based programs. In
reconstructing these 'conditions' conducive to
reading within our school environments, they become an
integral part of this pedagogy.

The collective responses demonstrated a paucity of
teachers' modeling reading behavior and/or reading to
their students (only 3 respondents mentioned being read

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to by a teacher on a regular basis). It would be interesting to investigate whether or not the incidence of teachers-as-readers, imparting a genuine enthusiasm for books, is now higher due to the advent of literature-based language arts curricula, and the awareness of individual reading development that curricula presupposes.

The data gathered from the responses in this study support the Galda (1988) and Morrow (1985) positions emphasizing the importance of teachers' modeling the value and reading of books, the impact of teacher enthusiasm (Sledge, 1986), and the positive effect of literature that is meaningful to the students' immediate world (Schwartz, 1979).

Responses from this investigation suggest a need for the classroom 'community of readers' (Helper and Hickman, 1982) that "furnishes an eager audience as well as a pool of resource ideas for response activities that go beyond talk-- using a story as the core for a drama...basis for writing or interpretation with paints or collage" (p. 281)

It is clear that test scores must not be the only standard by which to assess the efficacy of instructional reading programs, rather, evaluation must be global in nature, the scope ever widening. Students'
reading attitudes and interests must be considered in evaluation. Education should accommodate the general as well as the specific needs of students; it must also recognize the subtle. Our reading programs must empower, invite exploration, and encourage self-discovery. This type of assessment examines process as opposed to product.

Bader (1987) cites Moffet:

Literacy needs to be taught in an organic, social way and that literature should be an endless extension of bedtime stories. With this approach we will not only have children who can read, but children who will want to read (p.67).

In examining these reading autobiographies, this researcher has concluded that a child has the opportunity to become a reader, an avid reader, despite coming from a family of non-readers, if the supportive conditions are consistently provided, not in an authoritative "READ!" manner, but rather, in a subtle, gently encouraging way by the people surrounding the child. Parents, teachers, librarians, coaches, friends-- the people she or he encounters on a daily basis-- can all serve as reading models and guides.

**Implications for Research**

While this study provides additional support for
much of the research in reading attitude/interest, reader response, and literature-based reading instruction, there remains much to explore in the area of reading development. Throughout these reading autobiographies we witness the highly individual, highly unique ways of readers' coming to reading and realize that no single instructional method is going to meet the needs of, or be appropriate for, all students in all situations.

In speaking of future research methodologies and research designs, Rosenblatt (1988) states that they "will need to be sufficiently complex and sufficiently varied and interlocking to do justice to the fact that reading and writing transactions are at once intensely individual and intensely social activities" (p.14).

Research must examine individual reading development from a personal, social, and educational aspect. Future research should include ethnographic and longitudinal studies. In gathering case studies and accumulating histories, we will be able to see (predictably) the emergence of corresponding patterns of development from one case study to another, and so on. These data will bring a greater understanding of reading development and enable educators and theorists to adapt and modify our present teaching practices. With new information
continually building upon the old, we will ensure our students an education that is thorough and equitable. "If research is to serve education, the linguistic transaction should be studied above all as a dynamic phenomenon happening in a particular context, as part of the ongoing life of the individual in a particular educational, social, and cultural environment" (Rosenblatt, p.14).

Helper and Hickman (1982) cite Meek:

For all the reading research we have financed, we are certain only that good readers pick their way to literacy in the company of friends who encourage and sustain them and that... the enthusiasm of a trusted adult can make the difference (p.193).

Summary

Sixty reading autobiographies provided anecdotes describing experiences which affected individual reading habits/interests. It is recognized that reading development is a highly individual process. This recognition must be the basis of instructional reading programs. In analyzing the characteristics common to these avid readers, it is apparent that schools can do much to ensure reading achievement by providing opportunities and encouragement to read.

Literacy is fast becoming a national priority.
Reading books is a direct and uncomplicated way to nourish the literacy development of our citizens. A school environment conducive to reading will increase the number of lifelong readers.

Reprise
The following quotes are taken directly from the reading autobiographies collected for this study.

"...but my mom definitely was the most influential in my interest in reading. Can you imagine the awe I felt when I realized my teacher read books? She might be as smart and as interested in books as my mother!"

"I remember one time my teacher read that book [The Phantom Tollbooth]. She was reading a particularly long sentence, about a paragraph long, and was all out of breath at the end of it. I remember thinking it would be fun to read a sentence like that."

"One of the greater reading events of my younger school days came in the sixth grade where a great women [the teacher] read The Secret Garden to us THREE TIMES! To this moment I have a vivid memory of what the room looked like during those readings-- the color of the air (the air of the Garden) which inspired us."

"I read Uncle Tom's Cabin in translation [Russian] at least three times before I left my home town to go to America at the age of seven and a half."

"... I was not interested in seeing Muff run when I could see Grable dance."

"As a kid, I read biographies and adventure stories, but only for pleasure. This worked against me in school. Ivanhoe is the kind of book I would have loved. When I had to read it as an assignment, I got absolutely
nothing out of it. This is probably irrational, but that's what happened, and it has stuck with me."

"A good piece of writing connects the work, the writer, and the reader in a most interesting and fulfilling method of enchantment."

"Being a truly avid reader, a critical reader, and a voracious reader did not consolidate itself until college."

"My father still loves to read out loud whenever he comes to an interesting article or part of a book he wants to share. We all joke about it, but I'm sure it is a trait which has encouraged me to read-- probably in self-defense."

"One of my lifelong, deeply etched memories is the evening scene-- my mother sitting under a tall floorlamp, reading."

"Reading is like being with a friend."

"There are many subjects, profiles, descriptions, stories that I have started reading without knowing that it was something I was likely to find interesting."

"I pay attention to that 'mystic beckoning' which seems to come out of nowhere-- an urging to reread a certain book."

"I'll always believe that if you start children reading at a very early age, they will grow, learn and experience life to its fullest, and be happy, free adults."

"I took walking for granted until I broke a leg. I took the ability to read for granted until through Literacy Volunteers I met people who could see but could not read. I realized for the first time that reading is not just an enriching and ennobling experience, but that our society, the quality of our lives, our very survival,
depend on our ability to read."

"I suppose there is a level of sheer distraction in most people's lives in America right now that simply pushes reading off the agenda. I see it happening in my own life, and so it must really be happening for the average grade school kid. Television is a real problem-- not simply that it exists, but how bad it is, how intellectually lazy, cliched, sweetly seductive... As a culture, a collection of spirits who commune with each other in complicated mental and emotional ways, America is really on the way out; it's never been more clear to me..."
References


Questionnaire

Reading Autobiography

(The following information is optional. Please disregard if you wish.)

Name: 

Occupation(s):

Age: 

Education: elementary 
middle school 
high school 
college (yrs) 
grahuate school 
other 

Phone:

The following questions will be listed together, please use the attached pages for your responses. Answer the questions to whatever extent you wish.

1. What ways did you come to reading? Can you remember an experience or series of experiences that inspired you to read?

2. Was there a particular person or several people who influenced your interest in reading?

3. If possible, describe the reading instruction you received in school and how you felt about it the time.

4. At what point in your life did you realize how much you valued reading?

5. Why do you read? What role(s) does reading play in your life today?

6. Describe your reading habits: When do you read? What do you read? Are there specific purposes served by your reading of various materials?

7. I may have overlooked a significant aspect of the reading process; do you have additional comments or insights?