



Evidence Summary

Pleasure Reading Offers Educational, Social, and Personal Benefits for Young Teenagers

A Review of:

Howard, V. (2011). The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of young teens: Self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 43(1), 46-55. doi:10.1177/0961000610390992

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate the role that pleasure reading plays in the lives of young teenagers.

Design – A series of focus groups were used.

Setting – Focus groups were held in nine junior high schools in an eastern Canadian municipality.

Subjects – Participants consisted of 68 students in grades 7, 8, and 9, ranging in age from 12-15 years old. Seventy percent of participants were girls and 30% were boys.

Methods – A semi-structured interview protocol was used. Responses were coded and

categorized by using QSR NUD*IST, and a grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data.

Main Results – This study found that young teenagers derive numerous benefits from pleasure reading. From an educational perspective, pleasure reading helps improve literacy and thinking skills, and helps young teenagers clarify and explore career goals. From a social perspective, pleasure reading helps young teenagers understand historical and current events, helps them develop compassion and empathy, empowers them to develop and act on their beliefs, and helps them to understand the consequences of risky behaviors. From a personal perspective, pleasure reading provides young teenagers

with entertainment, relaxation, reassurance, a creative outlet, and a means of escape.

Conclusion – Reading for pleasure provides a means of everyday life information seeking for young teenagers. It helps them improve skills and learn about themselves, their relationships, and their values, all of which help them to make the transition to adulthood.

Commentary

This study elaborates on the benefits of reading for pleasure (also called pleasure reading or recreational reading or voluntary reading) and describes how those benefits operate within the lives of young teenagers (ages 12-15). This work is consistent with the results of other studies that show that the impact of pleasure reading is considerable. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* reports on the numerous correlations that exist between voluntary reading and academic and career success. The NEA also describes some of the benefits of pleasure reading and reports on the troubling decline in reading that often occurs during the teenage years.

Because of this decline, it is important for librarians and educators to be able to better advocate for the importance of reading and to help teenagers understand the benefits that reading can provide to them. Howard's study is significant for its focus on this age group and its identification of the role that reading plays in the process of maturing to adulthood. The researcher collected information from both active readers (85% of participants) and reluctant readers (15% of participants), and this variety of participants may have added to the diversity of the responses. By collecting data through focus groups, Howard enables young teenagers to discuss the advantages of reading from their own points-of-view and by using their own language.

Although the focus of this study was limited to a single municipality, the researcher randomly selected the schools and classes to be targeted.

The use of focus groups is appropriate for this age group and is well-suited to an exploratory study that is designed to gather a range of different thoughts, ideas, and feelings about the benefits gained from pleasure reading. In addition, the author made an appropriate choice in using a grounded theory approach to the data, which enabled a hypothesis about the benefits of pleasure reading to emerge from the data collection process itself, rather than being formulated beforehand. However, this study is also limited in its use of the focus group methodology, which restricts the kinds of conclusions that can be made from the research. Thus, no correlations can be drawn between certain reading benefits and age, gender, reader type, reader habits, or other characteristics.

This study emphasizes that pleasure reading serves several functions for young teenagers – functions that go beyond the provision of mere entertainment. The author points out that, for young teenagers, pleasure reading can be understood in the context of everyday life information seeking, a model which emphasizes the social and psychological factors that influence information-seeking choices in everyday contexts (Savolainen, 2005). Thus, young teenagers do not intend to seek information when reading for pleasure; rather, they acquire information as a secondary benefit of this activity. In addition, this study provides support for reader response theory, which emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning from texts (Ross, 2005). In accordance with reader response theory, this study argues that works written for teenage readers should not be diminished because their primary function is to provide entertainment. Rather, "active critical reading can take place with any text as stimulus" (p. 54) because readers bring their range of experiences, interests, ideas, feelings, and needs to the act of reading.

Overall, this study is theoretically solid and carefully executed, and the study results have been clearly presented in the paper. While the author eloquently describes the role of reading in the childhood-to-adulthood transition, the strength of this study lies in its usefulness for

librarians and other educators who serve this population and who advocate for the benefits of reading. Not surprisingly, teenagers' views of reading differ from those of adults, and librarians and other educators would benefit from understanding the teenage perspective. For youth librarians, this study can certainly aid in decisions related to programming and collection development, but even more important, it can also help to improve their conversations with teenagers about the importance of reading.

References

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