

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING FICTION

by

Lisa Garro

An Abstract

of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
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May, 2014

ABSTRACT

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People are reading a lot less fiction than in the past. Many states have adopted new standards that require teachers to increase nonfiction reading to at least 50% in all subject areas. This indicates reading fiction has diminished in importance when trying to raise student achievement in reading. This literature review explains the benefits of having students continue to read fiction. This paper presents how reading fiction helps with student achievement, what obstacles people meet that cause them to not read fiction, and solutions that might help encourage the practice of reading fiction.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Reading fiction is beneficial to student achievement. However changes in pedagogy now trend toward teachers requiring additional nonfictional reading. Many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards which emphasizes reading more nonfiction in the classroom. Also, with the emergence of technology, there are many new ways to read. People reading online often find time to read short passages of informational text, but prefer participating in other leisurely activities. Fictional reading is not among the most popular leisure activities.

Purpose of the Study

Educators want students to read deeper and uncover evidence from nonfiction to answer the questions posed inside and outside the classroom. Students' instructional strategies may work well when searching for information, but evidence presented in this paper shows fictional reading to also be beneficial to student learning. Studies show that through reading fiction students gain knowledge of the world. Research demonstrates how reading fiction improves brain function and increases human intelligence. Researcher evidence shows how reading fiction improves memory functions in the brain as well. Reading fiction is also beneficial in gaining empathy. Moreover studies show that people who read fiction are more likely to score better on tests, even those that involve nonfiction reading.

Research Questions

This study answers several questions concerning fictional reading and the direction the practice is going in the world of pedagogy. The questions that guided this research are as follows:

1. How does voluntary reading support learning?

2. What do reading statistics show about reading fiction?
3. What are some obstacles that keep people from reading fiction?
4. What are some ways to stop obstacles that get in the way of voluntary reading?

Limitations of the Study

Limitations to this study are related to the impact of the Common Core State Standard. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards in schools is too recent to have led to a sizable body of research. Therefore, the impact of integrating more nonfiction reading into the curriculum is still an unknown.

Definition of Terms

Literary Fiction – Fiction that is considered to have more literary merit. It has deeper, complex meaning with moral and philosophical dilemmas.

Experience-taking – the ability to step into a fictional role and experience situations the characters experienced, causing the real person to act in a particular way.

Multitasking – the ability to perform multiple tasks at one time.

No-TV Week – also called “No-Screen Week” or “Digital Detox Week.” An event where families turn off their televisions for one week in order to encourage other forms of entertainment such as reading, exploring, or spending time with family.

Research Design

This study was conducted using information from previously completed research on the topic of reading fiction. The information was gathered using online databases such as *Academic Search Complete*; *ERIC*; *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*; and *Library Literature and Information Science Full Text*. Research was collected from this array of literature and organized into this study. No actual research was performed in this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, regardless of whether reading fiction is important to learning, statistics and trends in school curriculum show that there are obstacles that deter people and students from the practice. This is happening even though it has been proven through research that reading fiction helps to develop such things as memory retention, vocabulary, empathy, and world knowledge. The information provided in this literature review will show educators and parents the importance of reading fiction.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING FICTION

Introduction

Reading fiction helps students in scholarly ways and it helps people to make better decisions in everyday situations. With the emergence of technology, researchers have had to change the way they measure how much people read. People are now not only reading printed materials, but they are reading on their computers, by listening to audio technology, and through eReader devices. To get an accurate measure of how much people are reading, researchers must calculate what people are reading in print as well as what they are reading digitally. There have also been changes with the pedagogy of reading in schools. Many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which encourage schools to integrate more nonfiction reading (Young). There are, however, many benefits to reading fiction for readers of all ages. Scientists and psychologists who have studied brain function, have found ways to measure how fiction reading affects it. In turn, reading fiction impacts human intelligence and behavior. This research will explore the importance of reading fiction, the pedagogy that has affected reading fiction, obstacles and distractions that hinder voluntary reading, and some possible solutions to help promote voluntarily reading of fiction.

Voluntary Fiction Reading Supports Learning

Parkhurst reports findings that show differences between readers. Those who read more often are able to understand more complex text, they have more knowledge, and they have a bigger range of vocabulary than those who read very little. Parkhurst claims that reading for fun helps with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency (15). Parkhurst also reports that reading short texts, such as magazines and newspapers, does not help with the understanding and

growth that is needed for reading more difficult text (15). He also says that fiction provides opportunities that other genres of books do not provide such as presenting moral choices, requiring the use of imagination, and depicting role models. Moral choices that fictional characters make in books, help individuals make better choices in real life. Imagination fueled by reading fiction helps people rehearse situations in their own lives. Fictional role models show how to act in various situations; or on the flip side, how not to act as a villain (16).

Heather Nicholson gathered information from several studies, including studies from Barbara MacAdam; Rathe and Blankenship; Gauder, Giglierano, & Schramm; Dewan; and Daane. Nicholson says there is evidence that says reading fiction helps people become more intelligent and it helps them in school and in their jobs. Reading is important for the development of critical thinking and writing skills (179). She says there is evidence that points to reading fiction as a key to bringing critical thinking skills to the surface. Not only does it improve comprehension skills but it helps when having to decipher more difficult academic texts, to understand the world, and to possibly see things in a different light. Nicholson cites research that reading skills are directly linked with writing skills (182). The earlier children experienced reading and the earlier children were exposed to literature, students were shown to exhibit better writing skills (182-183).

Nicholson cites Rathe and Blankenship as saying that if students like to read fiction for fun, they will more likely visit the library where they will get to know the librarians. They claim that this is beneficial to students because when it comes time for them to do research, students will feel more comfortable going to the library. They are also more likely to ask for help from the librarians who work there (182).

Sanders found that “heavy readers” achieve the same kind of goals as do those who

participate in higher education. These “heavy readers” do not intentionally seek out information but through reading, they learn the same as college students. “These include: awakening new perspectives/enlargement of possibilities, models for identity, connection with others, awareness of not being alone, and courage to make a change” (176).

Everhart, Angelos, and McGriff studied the benefits of independent reading, such as improving fluency. In their free voluntary program study, they found that students who read more often performed better on standardized tests. They also said that students who scored higher on these standardized tests also were known to read more than other students (46).

Psychologists have found many reasons why reading fiction is important to learning and to the learning process. Reading stimulates play which in turn, stimulates imagination. They say it is a child’s job to play because it teaches them how to manipulate objects, understand behavior, share experiences, and gain world knowledge. This is important for cognitive development (Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein). Fiction readers are able to show more empathy, fare better in social situations, and have a better emotional intelligence according to Pam Belluck.

Those who enjoy reading as a leisurely activity have many reasons why they like it (Hughes-Hassell and Rodge 22-25). One reason students gave for reading in their spare time was that they found it fun and relaxing. Most of the students in Hughes-Hassell and Rodge’s study said they enjoyed using their imaginations while reading. Other students said reading was better than watching television. Some of the students in this study who liked to read said it allowed them to learn new things. One student stated she liked to read about abuse and abandonment issues, issues she has experienced in her own real-life. The reason she gave for wanting to read this type of literature is because it helped her to cope. These students were also aware that voluntary reading has helped improve their grades. Other reasons students gave regarding their

enjoyment of reading were that they read when they were bored, as a form of escape from reality, and they read to be able to travel to other places in their mind (24-25).

Fiction reading also shows positive effects on the brain. Reading fiction strengthens the language processing parts of the brain, and it also affects the person through the part of the brain that processes language. This allows the ability for the language to develop meaning (Berns, Blaine, Prietula, and Pye 599). Fiction readers become more empathetic toward people or situations when they have read fictional stories portraying the same problems and situations they themselves or others have experienced. Jacobs found that reading literary fiction helps people deal with ideas that are unclear and helps them to not make rash decisions or judgments.

As Christine Hsu reported, some people take on the personality of a fictional character they identify with from a novel they are reading. She gave the example that readers who had read about the struggle to vote were more likely to vote in the next real election, even though the real election was not until sometime later. Researchers call this “experience-taking” where the reader is so immersed in the story, they place themselves in that character. However, merely watching a movie does not give a person the ability to play-out “experience-taking” because people consider themselves spectators to the characters in the movie rather than being able to take the time to walk in the shoes of the character in the book. It also does not work if readers are reading in front of a mirror. The readers continuously remind themselves of their own identity and cannot “get lost” in the story as they can accomplish only by reading alone (Hsu).

Reading Statistics

Studies have shown that voluntary reading was on the decline between the years of 1984 through 2008. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) research revealed American students across all age levels have chosen to read for fun consistently less between the

years of 1984 through 2008 (National Center for Educational Statistics. Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale scores and percentage distribution of students, by age, amount of reading for school and for fun, and time spent on homework and watching TV/video: Selected years, 1984 through 2008.). The following studies indicate where exactly this decline may be happening. A 2012 report revealed that, for students ages sixteen and older, only 36% read for pleasure daily while 20% never read (PEW Research Center). A report printed in the *Reading Research Quarterly* by McKenna, Conradi, and Lawrence, states that attitudes of students worsen as they progress from fourth to eighth grade (287). Boys are less likely to read for pleasure than girls according to another study that found students stop voluntary reading at about the time they reach middle school (Hughes-Hassell and Rodge 22, 24; Parkhurst 14). In 2013 students are reading, but fewer than half of the public in the United States are reading at a proficient level or above. A National Report Card, produced by the NAEP, shows that in 2013, in grades 4 and 8, only 34% of public school students performed at or above proficient in reading (National Center for Educational Statistics - Fast Facts. Fast Facts).

Gallagher writes that while sitting next to the president of a multimillion dollar company on an airplane flight, he told Gallagher that they often recruit employees from top universities but that it has proved to be more difficult over the years to find workers who are qualified. The people they are interviewing are smart but they are not able to think critically (36). At that time, Gallagher blamed programs such as No Child Left Behind. He said that schools were so focused on teaching students how to take a test and covering huge amounts of material, but they neglected teaching students to think and read critically. Gallagher quotes psychologist Robert J. Sternberg when he suggests “schools should nurture attributes and skills that are foundational to

becoming expert citizens, such as solving problems creatively, working well in teams, and knowing how to lose as well as knowing how to win” (36).

With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (*National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)*), teachers are required to include more non-fiction reading in the curriculum (Kern 71). Schools are being pushed to teach more using informational texts. She says NAEP expects them to teach using informational texts 50% of the time by 4th grade, 55% by 5th grade, and 79% by 12 grade. (Kern 71). The CCSS Web site explains the changes that were made to the English literary standards. In reading, teachers are to require a 50-50 balance between nonfiction and fiction in grades K-5. The site does not give an exact percentage or ratio between reading nonfiction and fiction for grades 6-12 but indicates this ratio should include more than 50% nonfiction texts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers).

Voluntary Reading Obstacles

Many obstacles prevent people from reading fiction. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge report that adolescents who said they did not enjoy reading preferred other types of activities over reading. Some of these activities included flirting, watching TV, hanging out with friends, surfing the Web, and playing video games. Other students indicated they struggled with reading or they had trouble finding interesting things to read in their school library (25). Some studies indicated that boys felt reading is an activity for girls. These boys implied they felt feminine or “girly” if they read for fun (Harrison 42). Harrison reports that from early on, boys associate reading with women because often it is women who read to them when they were younger.

Later, when these boys reach school-age, it is usually women teachers who read to them in class (42).

The most significant reason, studies show, that hinder reading for fun is television watching. In recent years, studies found the availability of digital multimedia is an obstacle that also hinders reading for fun (Ennemoser and Schneider 359; Lee, Bartolic and Vandewater 129; Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 11). Lee, Bartolic, and Vandewater conducted a study that showed watching television to be the activity that took up most of a person's time. This study also revealed that time spent reading fell below time spent playing video games and on the computer doing other tasks (129).

Ennemoser and Schneider tested college students over a four-year span on how much time they watched television and sorted them into three categories; light viewers, medium viewers, and heavy viewers. Reading ability scores dropped with the medium television viewers, and the scores of the heavy television viewers dropped significantly (359). The researchers also measured younger students' reading abilities, breaking these down into two groups in grades 3-5 and grades 5-7. In both groups the light television viewers scored much higher in their reading abilities. For these younger cohorts, television exposure in the earlier years had a clear, negative impact on their reading skills that remained as they became older (361). Although the college students showed decreasing reading scores as a result of television watching, the difference was not as substantial as the results indicated by the younger cohorts.

The ability to view television programs has changed over the decades. In the past, people watched broadcast shows that were scheduled on a regular basis and people were limited to watching television in their homes. People are now able to record shows and watch them later when it is more convenient. Portability makes it possible for people to watch television as they

travel. The rise in the availability of portable technology has also caused an increase in television watching. This, in turn, gives people less time to read for fun.

According to Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald Roberts in the Kaiser Family Foundation Study printed in January 2010, young people who watch scheduled television shows average 2 hours and 39 minutes a day of viewing time. In addition, they watch pre-recorded shows or DVD's on a television set or through cell phones or iPods for an average of 1 hour and 50 minutes per day. This comes to a total average of 4 hours and 29 minutes per day for television watching alone. Coming in second place competing for students' time is listening to music and other audio, averaging 2 hours and 31 minutes per day. Computer use takes third place at a daily average of 1 hour and 29 minutes, while playing video games comes in at fourth, with a daily average of 1 hour and 13 minutes. Reading is a distant fifth, with a daily average of 38 minutes. This is followed by watching movies in a movie theater, which averages out to 25 minutes daily (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 11). This comes to a daily average total of 10 hours and 45 minutes of consuming media in all of its forms.

Multitasking makes it possible to use more than one type of media at a time. While they watch TV, people also check cell phones, reading text messages or listening to voicemail. They are also on the Internet checking social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Almost one-third of teenagers said they liked to talk on the phone, watch television, surf the Internet, or listen to music while they do their homework (Lin, Lee, and Robertson 185). With this type of multitasking, many people believe that they are able to perform multiple tasks at once and accomplish all of the tasks efficiently. Studies have shown this is not the case. Lin, Lee, and Robertson report, "A guiding theoretical principle in cognitive research is that human processing is highly constrained by strict capacity limitations that make us inherently unable to cope with an

overload of simultaneous stimuli" (Gardner qtd. in Lin, Lee, and Robertson 186). College students who multitask and use media heavily have a more difficult time filtering out interference from other tasks. They performed worse when given a test of task-switching ability than college students who are considered light media multitaskers (Ophir, Nass, and Wagner qtd. in Lin, Lee, and Robertson 186). This relates to reading comprehension in that a person may not be able to fully understand the content of the text they are reading if there are a lot of other distractions going on at the same time.

The Kaiser Family Foundation media use study by Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, categorized students into three groups based on how much time they spent using media. These groups were heavy users, moderate users, and light users. When asked what types of grades they usually received, light users of media were found to receive higher grades than that of heavy users of media (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 4).

When the brain is stimulated with too many activities at once, the short-term memory portion of the brain is not able to move information into long-term memory storage to be recalled later. This is especially true for critical thinking (Lin, Lee, and Robertson 186). Multitasking when doing menial tasks such as household chores is not as critical because one usually does not need to store this information long-term. Menial tasks are tasks that one already knows how to perform and the brain is already pulling the information from long-term storage. This means the brain does not have to work as hard when performing menial tasks.

In order to remember new information, humans must first process it into the working memory of the brain. When engaging in a new task, the person must have full concentration on the task. The brain is trainable. For example, someone who is new to driving may not be able to carry on a conversation or listen to the radio while driving. As they get older and are able to gain

experience, they may be able to perform multiple tasks with ease. The same thing happens while reading and listening to the radio or having the television on in the background. At first, a person may not be able to comprehend what they are reading with radio or television background noise. If training and experience come into play, they may be able to understand what they are reading with ease after time (Lin, Lee, and Robertson 187-188).

Remedies for the Decline in Reading Voluntarily

Since it has been determined that reading for pleasure has been on the decline for the last several years (Hughes-Hassell and Rodge; National Center for Educational Statistics. Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale scores and percentage distribution of students, by age, amount of reading for school and for fun, and time spent on homework and watching TV/video: Selected years, 1984 through 2008. June 2009), those who have researched this decline in reading offer several solutions.

Parents help children form a love of reading fiction by sitting down and reading with them when they are younger. Parents can model to their children by setting aside time to read, especially when children are older. Mark Powell mentions in his article about the No-TV week event. Every spring, families turn off the television and leave it off for one entire week. Powell reported that families had more time to not only read, but to play together, cook together, play card games, and talk (44). Today the National Day of Unplugging is an event that encourages people to turn off all of their devices for a 24-hour period and do other things such as relax.

McKool and Gespass report that if someone is expected to learn how to do something such as reading, he or she must be able to see a demonstration (265). McKool and Gespass say that teachers should be avid readers even when they are not at school. When they are avid

readers, it reflects in their teaching practices. If they value reading, they will pass on this value to their students (273).

For schools, Gallagher suggests educators go back to developing readers instead of test takers and to teaching fewer concepts at a deeper level to teach students to think. Gallagher says that teachers often condense fiction books too much. He gives an example of a reading guide for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The guide was 122 pages long. He says when teachers chop up great books, it results in students hating the book and not really getting it. He suggests that teachers give just the right amount of support for students to learn the complex text. At the other extreme, Gallagher says teachers sometimes *under* teach books. Students need at least *some* guidance when reading more complex fiction. Gallagher recommends that teachers not turn students loose without any background information or support (37-40).

Stephen Krashen states that providing entertaining and engaging reading materials is often a last resort to improving reading skills, when it is the most pleasant, least expensive way to accomplish that task. It is sometimes not even mentioned as a way to improve reading skills (25). Krashen states that motivation is key when encouraging students to read. If there are interesting reading materials available at the student's reading level, students will read regardless of the usual objection (21). He also says that more access to books encourages students to read more. Nicholson states that if students are allowed to read what is interesting to them, they will become engaged and will probably become readers who will eventually read for enjoyment (183).

Nicholson also mentions a couple of ideas to motivate readers. She says an emerging practice that is common on college campuses today is a One Read or one book program. Participants read the same book to which they discuss. If possible, they might ask the author to

visit campus to speak to students. She also suggests having book lists strictly to encourage reading for fun and to promote them through blogs, Web sites, and social media (185).

eReaders have become a motivational tool to encourage students to read fiction. Library Coordinator, Patricia McClune, of Conestoga Valley High School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, wrote a letter to *School Library Journal* on the impact her library has felt since acquiring Kindles through a grant. Having the new Kindles sparked a surge in student reading. Students in literature classes began to ask for the free, public domain books available to download. McClune says that students are able to use the Kindles to highlight and take notes directly onto the electronic devices. She describes her new library atmosphere as excited and energized (10).

Conclusion

In conclusion, fiction reading is important to the learning process of individuals. It helps them to become more empathetic and to think about problems before making rash decisions. By researching the obstacles that get in the way of reading, people can begin to diminish or even eliminate these distractions which hinder fiction reading. This research suggests that educators and parents encourage more fiction reading, model fiction reading, and provide interesting and engaging reading materials and activities.

CHAPTER 3 THE IMPORTANCE OF READING FICTION

Introduction

Many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to guide teachers in preparing students for college and careers. CCSS urges schools to require students to read more quantities of nonfiction than previous standards in language arts. With less emphasis on reading fiction in schools, one would assume fiction is not as important to education and learning. Many questions arise from this style of pedagogy. Is reading fiction beneficial and important to intelligence and learning, or will reading more quantities of nonfiction or informational texts suffice? What do the fiction reading statistics show, and how has the field of education carried out instruction on reading fiction? What obstacles prevent people from reading fiction? What can people do to encourage others to read fiction?

The Benefits of Reading Fiction

As the Common Core State Standards push schools to integrate more nonfiction into their curriculum it causes people to think reading fiction does not benefit students educationally. There are many benefits that come from reading fiction, however, to people of all ages. People who enjoy reading fiction say it helps them to relax and have fun. They are able to escape from their own reality for a while. They are able to travel virtually to other places and experience the situations of others.

People who read fiction are able to comprehend other, more difficult texts. They have better vocabulary and are able to read fluently. Reading fiction helps to develop critical thinking and writing skills. Reading fiction creates new perspectives and helps people to empathize with others. Students who are heavy readers tend to score higher on tests. Fictional reading encourages the imagination, play, and emotional intelligence. Reading fiction also shows

positive effects in the brain. In the brain, reading fiction can strengthen language processing and helps move information into long-term memory.

Fiction Reading Statistics and Pedagogy

There are many statistics available concerning how much and what people are reading. Previous years have shown a drop in reading fiction; and the records show that as students get older, starting in the middle school years, they tend to read less for fun. Today, reading scores have held steady, but the nation's report card tells us that fewer than half of public school students are proficient in reading.

Many people in the educational field blame governmental programs such as No Child Left Behind. Today, many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards that push for an integration of at least 50% of nonfiction into the curriculum. This instructs teachers to bring more nonfiction reading into the curriculum, which in turn creates less fiction reading.

Obstacles of Reading Fiction

There are many barriers that keep people from reading fiction. Some people simply prefer other types of activities over reading in their spare time. Some people have struggled with reading and therefore do not like to read. Boys tend to think that reading is an activity for girls.

Television watching is the number one choice of preferred activities. The rise in improved technology has allowed people to take their television watching on the go and to be able to watch it at convenient times. This has caused the television watching statistic to go even higher. Also, with the surge of superior technology, multitasking is another venue that hinders reading comprehension. The statistics show that the more people watch television, the lower their test scores are in school. Their vocabulary is also lower and they do not seem to have as much world knowledge as those who read fiction.

Motivation to Read Fiction

Parents can encourage reading by creating a comfortable reading environment and by modeling reading to their children. Teachers encourage reading by providing more time to read fiction. Also they can motivate children to read in the classroom by providing interesting reading materials at the level of students. Creating reading events such as a One Read and using technology to create and talk about books can also promote reading fiction. Some suggest using new eReading technology such as Kindles to encourage children to read. No matter how they read, the key is to find what students are interested in reading.

Conclusion

Schools that adopt the Common Core State Standards are being pushed to read more nonfiction in the classroom. This indicates that reading fiction is not as important to education as it used to be. The statistics show that reading fiction is beneficial to people's brain function and helps them to make better world and life decisions.

There are many distractions that cause people to not read. With a lack of interesting reading materials and as technology improves, reading activities decrease. Parents and teachers have the capability to encourage students to read more fiction by reading with them and providing a fun, interesting, and exciting environment for reading.

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