EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF READING

by

Tonya V. O’Boyle

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ABSTRACT

by

Tonya V. O’Boyle

Reading interest levels among kindergarten through twelfth grade students is on a decline, according to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004. While this is the report’s finding, research and sales figures show interest in some genres of student reading such as graphic novels and urban literature is increasing. While some research has shown a decline in reading interest, there is evidence that reading has not declined, but changed. This review of research concerns the change in reading of children and young adults. Student interest is growing in the areas of urban literature, graphic novels, audio books, and series books.
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APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Research Paper Advisor

Committee Member

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the report of decreased interest in reading among students in the United States. A study conducted in 2002 and released in 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts showed that student interest in reading has decreased. Reading skill levels also decreased. A study conducted in 2008 by Newsweek, however, showed that reading interest may be increasing in recent years (Reno). This study reviewed research showing that if the definition of reading is expanded to cover online and nontraditional print materials, reading interest may be rising. In addition, reading promotions and programs in school library media centers play a fundamental role in increasing students’ reading interest and the development of lifelong readers.

Problem Statement

In 2004 and 2007, studies conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts concluded that reading interest levels are decreasing among American students, particularly at the middle school age in the United States. This inquiry examines how reading is defined and promoted in schools around the country. When educators measure only traditional forms of print reading, they ignore or discount reading of online and nontraditional content. By limiting the definition of literature to only traditional print materials, the spectrum of student interest in reading becomes narrower, and measures of it may falsely show a decline. If, indeed, students are shifting from reading traditional print materials and becoming more interested in non-traditional literature such as graphic novels and audio books, school librarians will need to meet the needs of these students.
Purpose of the Study

This paper reviews research reports, scholarly studies, school reading programs and promotions related to student reading interest levels and how reading is defined. The research shows that students’ interest in how literature is presented is changing; therefore, how reading is defined must change as well. There is dispute over whether nontraditional items such as audio books, urban literature, and graphic novels can be defined as literary genres. However, these are genres of growing interest for students, and this paper presents an argument that these formats should also be considered as acceptable materials for reading programs.

Research Questions

The research compiled has been studied to answer questions regarding an increase or decline of reading interest.

1. Are there any areas of literature that are growing in interest to American students?
2. Does changing the definition of reading affect the perception of whether reading is declining among American students?
3. In what ways do school librarians promote reading to students?
Definitions

Audio books- a recording of a text, generally in the format of a compact disc, cassette tape, or downloadable digital format.

Elementary school- public or private school usually housing grades kindergarten through fourth grades. The school may house up to eighth grade.

Graphic novel- similar to comic books but appear in book format. Includes Japanese comics, called manga, and all areas of genre, including biography, history, humor, and adventure. (National Coalition Against Censorship 2)

High school- public or private school that houses grades nine or ten through twelfth grade.

Literature- traditionally defined as works of prose or verse, generally in printed form; includes novels, short stories, poems, or plays in print or online.

Middle school- public or private school housing grades between fifth through ninth. Ages of middle school students are 9-14. Also referred to as junior high.

Playaways- a compact digital player, preloaded with one digital audio book, comes with headphone jack and basic playback controls.

Urban literature- genre of short stories and novels that often depicts drugs, violence, and sexual promiscuity in Black and Latino neighborhoods.

Information Search Strategies

Resources used for this study were gathered from databases, articles, books, and online resources. I began searching the online databases of the James C. Kirkpatrick Library using Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts; Library Literature and Information Science Full Text; and Quest, the university’s online catalog. I searched
by many different terms, including graphic novels, Playaways, audio books, reading
decrease, urban literature, young adult literature, e-readers, National Endowment for the
Arts, and reading promotions. Online searches included websites for the Missouri
Association of School Librarians, regarding information about the Truman Readers
Award, and Emporia State, regarding the William Allen White Award. Further online
searches included websites for the National Endowment for the Arts, and Playaways. I
also referenced Alfie Kohn’s book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars,*
*Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes.*

**Summary**

Chapter 1 has introduced the concern raised by recent research showing that
children are reading less. That research is based on a traditional definition of reading and
often does not take into account new genre of materials or new modes of reading that are
growing in popularity among children. This paper presents the idea of audio books,
graphic novels, and urban literature being included when studying American students’
interest in reading. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, statement of purpose,
research questions and definitions for words used throughout this paper.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature related to definitions of children’s
reading interests and the role school librarians play in supporting the reading of children.
Chapter 3 will provide answers to the research questions presented in Chapter 1.
CHAPTER 2:  
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading Interest Levels

Recent research and popular media provide conflicting reports about whether the United States is facing a literacy crisis. The National Endowment for the Arts, in 2004, proclaimed a serious decline in reading among young people (as cited in Fialkoff). According to the study, since 1982, younger adults (age 18 to 34) have shifted from being the group most likely to read to being the group least likely to read; second only to those 65 and older. The widespread use of reward programs in schools suggests that children must be bribed to read (Fialkoff 8). In contrast, Adrienne Schaltz and Ken Ghalambor, in their article “Do Children Like to Read,” wrote that young students in the United States, ages 12-18, are reading novels at unprecedented numbers (70). This paper will review the research that measures American students’ interest in reading and the research that calls for a broader definition of literature to incorporate genres of literature growing in popularity among students.

Evidence and Reasons for a Decline

The Reading at Risk study, issued in 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), indicated that fewer than half of the adult population in the United States read in their leisure time. The report also noted that barely more than one-third of males read literature. Literature, as defined in the NEA study, included novels, short stories, plays, and poetry. The study was widely criticized by school librarians, professors, and academics for focusing only on this narrow definition of literature. This study found that reading literature has declined among all age groups, education levels, and ethnic groups.
by 14%. The study also finds that the declines in leisure reading have civic, social, and economic implications. American 15-year-olds ranked 15th in average reading scores for 31 industrialized nations, behind Poland, Korea, France, and Canada. Sunil Iyengar, NEA Director of Research and Analysis, notes that the reading of literary declined for both genders, among all education levels, and in almost all age groups. Declines were steepest in young adults, accelerating at a greater rate than the general population (23).

In an Associated Press release, NEA chairman Dana Gioia stated that it is not a case of “Johnny Can’t Read,” but instead, “Johnny Won’t Read” (“Johnny Won’t Read: Report Shows Big Drop in Reading”). The percentage of people reading any kind of book, including nonfiction, had declined by 7% in the past decade. The National Endowment for the Arts concluded their 2004 report by calling for all libraries and cultural institutions to inspire a “nationwide renaissance” to bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of citizens (National Endowment for the Arts 2).

Much research has been conducted and many books and articles have been written about the possible reasons for a decreased interest in reading. As pointed out by Krashen, it is generally agreed that interest in school-related reading decreases as students get older. Numerous reasons can be found as to why interest in reading literature may decrease.

In his book, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes*, Alfie Kohn demonstrates, through examples and research, how rewards punish those who do not receive them, rupture relationships between students and between students and teachers, ignore reasons for a desired behavior, and discourage risk taking. The single most devastating conclusion, however, is how rewards
can actually discourage a desired behavior (64). Kohn argues that human beings deduce
that a task must be undesirable if it has to have some extrinsic payment for its
performance. He singles out the Book-It program used in many elementary schools
across the country. The Book-It program gives children pizza for reading a set number of
books. Kohn predicts that this type of reward system will create children who read not for
enjoyment but for a prize. He believes kids rationalize that if they have to be given pizza
to read, reading must be a bad thing (66).

Doug Johnson acknowledges that Kohn’s belief contradicts what most educators
are taught in mainly behaviorist-based schools. Many teachers and media specialists are
accustomed to using stickers, prizes, and food parties to encourage reading. Johnson
writes that middle and high school media specialists would prefer students come in with a
love of reading, not a desire to win a prize (Johnson, “Creating Fat Kids”96).

Dana Gioia, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) chairman, cites the rise of
Internet usage as a reason for a decline in reading interest and skills (Gioia, as cited in
Milliot 4). In the Reading at Risk study, specific reasons for declined reading skills were
not studied, but Gioia believes the decline of reading skills and increase of Internet usage
are not a coincidence. Gioia states once teenagers become more exposed to the “global
electronic culture,” their interest in reading plunges. Gioia cites statistics showing that
while reading skills have improved for 3rd graders, they have deteriorated for 17-year
olds. The percentage of college graduates who engage in reading literature fell
substantially between 1982 and 2002.

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts released the results of To Read or
Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence, a comprehensive analysis of reading
patterns in the United States. *To Read or Not To Read* expanded on the 2004 investigative study, *Reading at Risk. To Read or Not To Read* compiled statistics from over 40 studies on the reading habits of children, teenagers, and adults. This study found that fewer than one-third of 13-year-olds were daily readers, a 14 percent decline from 20 years prior. In areas of academics, the NEA found that reading scores fell significantly from 1992 to 2005 for 12th graders. The study stated that a decline in reading also has social impacts. Students who read literature are more likely than non-readers to engage in civic activities such as volunteering, attending sports and cultural events, and exercising (National Endowment for the Arts.).

**Evidence of Increase**

In 2008 Scholastic, an international publishing company, along with Yankelovich, a consumer trends researcher, conducted *The 2008 Kids and Family Reading Report*, a national survey of children ages 5 through 17. Of the children polled, 75% agreed with the statement, “No matter what I can do online, I’ll always want to read books printed on paper” (4). Sixty-two percent of the children surveyed said they prefer to read printed books rather than read on a computer or a handheld device (4). The Scholastic report also found that children who go online extend the reading experience by going to book or author websites or connecting with other readers. These children were more likely to read for fun on a daily basis (5).

*Newsweek* reported in 2008 that teen readership was on the rise (Reno). Reno cited a survey by the Children’s Book Council showing sales of young adult fiction, aimed at ages 12 to 18, increased 25% over the previous few years. A 2008 opinion poll was conducted by Adrienne Schaltz and Ken Ghalambor. Schaltz is founder and
Executive Director of Book Trust. Book Trust is a growing national literacy program based in Colorado. A survey was given to 2,822 middle grade students, specifically grades 4 to 6. The participants were in a variety of rural, urban, and suburban schools with from fewer than 10% to almost 100% poor students. The results of the survey showed that 42% liked reading very much with very few disliking reading. The majority said they enjoyed spending time in libraries, and said they could “get lost in a book.” Fifty-six percent of the respondents said that they found people who liked to read to be fun and interesting (71).

Adrienne Schaltz and Stephen Krashen, Emeritus Professor at the University of Southern California, conducted a literacy survey in 2006. Schaltz and Krashen surveyed students in grades 1 through 6 in four elementary schools in Fort Collins, Colorado. The students were from a variety of lower and higher socio-economic levels. Students were asked the basic question, “Do you like to read?” Krashen and Schaltz kept the survey to this one basic question, believing that asking students too many questions about reading confused the results. They decided that asking students simply if they enjoyed reading gave a solid result in whether or not there is a decline in student interest in reading. In the lower grades, 1 through 3, the majority of students responded they enjoyed reading “a lot.” In the upper grades, 4 through 6, there was some increase of “kind of” responses over “a lot,” but still only 10% students responded “not really.” The findings of the four schools showed that even as students got older, there was some decrease of interest in reading, but the students still enjoyed reading for pleasure (47).

David Levithan (qtd. in Reno), author of several young adult (YA) books such as *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* and *Boy Meets Boy*, and executive editorial director of
Scholastic, Inc., cites several reasons for the increased interest in young adult literature. Levithan claims there is more sophistication and emotional maturity in teen books and a new freedom for authors of this genre. Jack Martin (qtd. in Reno), assistant coordinator of young adult services at the New York Public Library, states the most important reason for the rise is that young adult books are more diverse and readers are responding. “They’re telling better stories, and there is such variety, something for everyone” (4).

Levithan also commented that bookstores and libraries are separating young adult novels from the children’s section, thus drawing the attention of young adults. Teens do not want to walk past *Curious George*, Levithan states, to find a book of their choice. Levithan also credits the way teens communicate with each other via Facebook, blogs, and even author and publisher websites. They electronically communicate instantly their like or dislike of something. Teens and young adults are the pulse of pop culture. Levithan claims if teens see, for instance, that *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* will be made into a movie, they are highly likely to get the book and read it before seeing the movie.

Reasons for Conflicting Information about Reading Interest

In his article “Head for the Edge: The Decline of Reading,” Doug Johnson, director of Media and Technology at Independent School District 77, Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools, points to access to electronics as a reason for students’ declining interest in reading. Johnson writes that in 2004 the average American child lived in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer. Johnson notes that, according to the Associated Press, in 2004, 4 out of 10 American adults turned to video games as their primary source of
entertainment. For most American children and adults, time spent on the Internet appears to come at the expense of time spent on hobbies, reading, and TV viewing. *SparkNotes*, Johnson writes, allows students to download short versions of assigned literature and content area study guides onto their cell phones or iPods. They can read or listen to lessons without obtaining the actual book. Strategies such as reading *SparkNotes* and blogs leads Johnson to question whether a decline in reading literature as defined by the NEA is the same as a decline in reading (98).

Prior to Schaltz and Krashen’s 2006 literacy survey, Stephen Krashen had studied possible reasons why some surveys seem to show a decline of interest in reading. In a 2002 article, “Is There a Decline in the Reading Romance?” Young children may experience what has been referred to as a “reading romance, an intense interest in picture books then learning to read on their own.” But this begins to disappear around grade 4 and continually decreases through adolescence (11).

Krashen wrote that the way survey questions were presented to students caused conflicting results. Many studies that Krashen reviewed show that as students got older, their interest in academic reading dropped. Unfortunately, some of the surveys given to them did not specify whether they were being asked about their interest in academic reading or leisure reading (15).

Krashen felt that questions asking students to compare reading to other activities did not provide a fair result in students’ reading interest. An example of survey questions that Krashen found problematic was “Would you rather read or draw a picture?” One student might be a dedicated artist and only a slightly dedicated reader. Another might dislike both, but not dislike reading as much as drawing. One survey reviewed by
Krashen found that students had been asked “How do you feel about reading instead of playing.” Even a dedicated reader might choose playing over reading. Another survey question Krashen found problematic was “How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?” Generally, those that do the most pleasure reading tend to read narrowly, choosing series books or the works of a particular author or genre. A reader deeply involved in the *Harry Potter* series might temporarily show a lack of interest in a large range of reading (12).

Stephen Krashen’s 2005 article, “The Decline of Reading in America: Poverty and Access to Books and the Use of Comics in Encouraging Reading,” criticized the *Reading at Risk* study for only including novels in book form, poetry, and plays in its definition of literature. Krashen points out that *Reading at Risk* excludes magazines, online reading, and graphic novels. Krashen found only scattered evidence for a decline in interest in reading and little evidence for dramatic drops in reading attitudes. The conclusion of his research was based on leisure, voluntary reading. He expressed little doubt that attitudes toward school-related reading show a decline as students grow older (16).

Reasons for Increased Interest in Reading

While there are studies that show reading skills have declined in the United States in the past decade (National Endowment for the Arts), several studies and arguments show reading interest may not be on a decline (Clark 23). Some researchers even believe that reading interest may be increasing (Brey-Casiano 5).

American Library Association President Carol Brey-Casiano notes that the 2004 NEA study did not include library usage. The report reviewed the cultural, sports, and
leisure activities of adult participants but omitted local library visits. Brey-Casiano argues that library use has doubled in the past decade, reaching 1.2 billion visits per year (5). Brey-Casiano continues that the survey asked respondents if they read books, but it did not ask if they read magazines, newspapers, or novellas. It also did not mention online publications. The survey may indicate not a decline in reading but a change in reading habits (5).

African Americans have typically been a faction of the population considered reluctant readers (Meloni 38). Overall readership in this demographic is currently rising. Christine Meloni, adjunct professor at Palmer School of Library and Information Science at Long Island University, writes that the increase in African-American student readers is caused by the explosion of urban fiction, also known as urban lit. This genre attracts both male and female readers. According to Meloni, it is one of the hottest current trends in publishing. The books are especially popular with young urban males between the ages of 14 and 25, a large audience that typically does not read for pleasure.

Urban lit is not a new genre. Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim (as cited in Meloni 38) broke new ground in the 1970s by documenting the dark side of the inner city. The recent revival can be traced back to Sister Souljah’s 1999 breakthrough novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (cited in Meloni 38). Through word of mouth, this urban story became a bestseller in the young adult genre despite the fact that the graphic sexual scenes classify it as an adult novel.
Meloni writes that some claim that “urban lit” depicts the worst part of street life, drugs, and crime; supporters respond that underneath the entertainment, the stories teach a lesson. Authors of this genre argue that by creating exciting books with an authentic voice, they are encouraging people to read who would otherwise never go to a bookstore or library.

Other genres that have contributed to a rise in adolescent and teen reading interest are series books. Ruth Cox Clark, associate professor in the Department of Library Science and Instructional Technology at East Carolina University, conducted an online survey of older teens about their reading of series books. Of those responding, many mentioned popular series such as *Gossip Girl*. The first volume of *Gossip Girl* was published in 2002. Cox Clark reported that even after six years, readers eagerly waited for the next volume, at the time number 12. Cox Clark writes that librarians also mentioned they see high check-out rates on series such as *The A-List, Pretty Little Liars, Alphabetical Hook-Up, and Seven Deadly Sins*. Teen series, such as Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, have appeared on the *New York Times* Bestseller list (Cox Clark 23). Series books appeal to teenage male readers as well, Cox Clark found.

The National Endowment for the Arts 2004 study defined reading as novels, short stories, plays, and poetry. A roadblock to measuring whether American students’ interest in reading is increasing or decreasing is the definition of the term “reading.” As argued above, interest in other genres is strong and it appears it will continue. However, in order to measure interest in reading, one must look at how reading is changing.

Some teachers do not view graphic novels as real reading. Graphic novels are similar to comic books in lay-out but differ because they are in book format. Cox Clark
points out that graphic novels, in years past, were not allowed in sustained silent reading time and are still not allowed in some schools. The ready availability of graphically formatted, serial reading materials, such as the numerous manga series now are published, has brought many teenage boys and girls back to reading. No matter how a “series” is defined, Cox Clark writes, there is currently a plethora of graphic novel series in all genres and formats, for adolescent and teenage readers of diverse backgrounds (Cox Clark 22).

Graphic novels as a genre have exploded in popularity with adolescents. Long ignored in North America and considered puerile and pulpy, book-format graphic novels are now being used in both K-12 classrooms and higher education classrooms for everything from early developmental reading tools to serious literary texts (Hudson 22). Milton Griepp, CEO of the pop culture news site ICv2.com, and Diamond Comics sales manager John Shableski note sales of graphic novels to libraries and schools increased from $1 million in 2001 to more than $30 million in 2007 (as cited in Hudson 22).

Educator and graphic novel specialist Peter Gutierrez (as cited in Hudson) attributes much of the growing interest from schools to the support and advocacy of librarians, many of whom responded to growing mainstream interest in graphic novels by developing significant library collections.

There’s been an explosion of interest, spurred by the popularity and obvious quality of graphic novels in libraries. It’s created more fertile ground for the kind of lateral movement of sequential art narratives into the classroom itself. (22)
Shableski (as noted in Hudson) calls the school market a sleeping giant that is about to wake up. He refers to the National Council of Teachers of English conference, attended by 8,000 to 9,000 English teachers. Historically, graphic novels have been mentioned at one or two out of 300 presentations at the conference. In 2008, at the conference in San Antonio, there were 11 dedicated graphic novels presentations. An in-depth evaluation at the University of Maryland examined the motivational impact of the Comic Book Initiative, a program that involved using comics in the classroom through focus groups of teachers, students, and parents. Darla Strouse, director of the Comic Book Initiative, was pleased with the results of the program, stating the students would not put the books down (23). By the summer of 2008, the program’s success led to expansion from eight schools in the beginning focus group to 160 schools participating.

According to Hudson, Francoise Mouly, founder of Toon Books and art editor of the New Yorker, believes that literacy isn’t simply being able to understand the written word,

But being able to extract meaning from a printed page. There’s a kind of visual literacy that is innate. There [are] a lot of kids that are able to understand an enormous amount of complexity that can be used. It’s like poetry; deceptively simple, and levels and levels of meaning can be brought out. (23)

Playaways, a type of audio book, are a new option in reading (Playaway). Students and adults are being introduced to new and classic literature in this form. The Playaway device is a compact audio player that comes preloaded with one digital audio book and has a headphone jack and basic playback controls (Teicher 35). The device is
available through retail outlets, but has focused most of its energy on the library market, and more recently, the military. On July 25, 2008, Playaway, a division of Ohio-based Findaway World, sold its millionth unit. Playaways can be loaded with language-learning programs, self-improvement books, spiritual titles, and bestselling novels.

Marianne Cole Fues is a library media specialist at Jefferson City High School in Missouri. Fues explores how library media specialists promote reading to active high school teens who have homework, extracurricular activities, and work, all competing for their time and attention (54). She argues that Playaways may be the key to reaching busy students. Fues writes that Playaways are an exciting way to get students interested in books and reading by using their ears. At her high school library the Student Library Advisory Committee is involved in the selection of Playaway titles as well as printed books. Surprisingly, the Student Library Advisory Committee titles chosen tended to be some of the classics such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*. These have had multiple checkouts at Fues’ library. Some of the other more popular titles are *Eragon* and *The DaVinci Code*.

While still a relatively new product, Playaways are being used in libraries to encourage interest in books. Fues writes that contrary to some parents’ concerns, listening to books encourages reading. She concludes that libraries must compete for the attention of today’s students. Incorporating technology is an essential part of the library (54).

Reading Promotions and Programs

Library media specialists around the country promote reading in various ways. This section discusses how middle school students can present specific problems. Students in this age group are beginning to outgrow children’s literature. Middle school is
typically the age when male students begin to read less. Eighth grade students offer librarians and English teachers a challenge when it comes to matching the student with just the right book. They have one foot in the childrens’ world and one in the young adult world (Collins 44).

Chris Gustafson is the library teacher at Whitman Middle School in Seattle, Washington. In her article, “Reading Motivation Through Competition: Boys as Readers,” she describes how she drastically increased circulation when she created a reading competition at her middle school. If students read books from a suggested list and could answer a few questions asked by Gustafson or the library assistant, she would enter the student’s name in a drawing. Realizing that boys are visual learners, she hung a chart showing if boys or girls had more entries. After creating the chart, the number of boy participants rose dramatically, by 49% from the previous year (16). Though Kohn argues that extrinsic motivation may not work, Gustafson has found a way to increase student readership. Creating a gender-based competition motivated the young men to read more.

Joan Collins, librarian at John Glenn Middle School in Bedford, Massachusetts, has eighth grade students participate in a program called Booked Conversation. Instead of talking about books with classmates, this program encourages student to have a conversation with an adult about a specific book. Collins suggests getting participation from a variety of staff members. When students see the math or gym teacher reading for pleasure, it speaks volumes to them about how adults feel about pleasure reading (45).

Dennis LeLoup, media specialist at Sycamore Elementary School in Avon, Indiana, writes that changing themes and staff participation are key to good reading promotions. In 2008, Sycamore Elementary had 96% of the student population achieve
the recreational reading goal (11). Sycamore’s recreational reading goal primarily measured the number of books or number of pages a student read. Prizes were awarded to students reaching the assigned goal for their grade level. LeLoup also stated that themes can help draw parental involvement. “Parents will respond to success when they see how their children react to you and the media program” (11).

The Missouri Association of School Librarians offers several reading award programs for students in first through twelfth grades. The Show Me Readers Award is selected by students in grades one through three. To vote for the winner, students must have read or listened to a minimum of six books from the nominated list. The Mark Twain award is targeted at students in grades four through sixth. Students must read at least four titles on a master list. Students who read at least four books from the appropriate list are eligible to vote for their favorite in the spring semester. The Truman Readers award is comprised of titles deemed to be interesting to sixth through eighth graders. Students at this grade level must also have read four of the nominated books to vote. Students in grades nine through twelve select the winner of the Gateway Award. Gateway student voters need to read three of the nominated books.

Similar to the Mark Twain and Truman awards in Missouri, the William Allen White book awards program, sponsored by Emporia State University and the Trusler Fund, is encouraged in Kansas. Though the award is called the William Allen White award for all reading levels, different lists are compiled for various age groups. One list is distributed to third through fifth grades, and a second list of slightly higher reading level books is compiled for grades six through eight.
The Texas Lone Star Reading List helps middle school students choose books to satisfy their curiosity and become lifelong readers (Smith 10). The Lone Star List comprises 20 recently published books recommended for grades six, seven, and eight. Unlike other lists, such as the Mark Twain Readers Award and the William Allen White award, students do not participate in a statewide vote for their favorite book. Instead, librarians across the state use the list in various promotions (Smith 10). In Abilene, students who read 15 or more Lone Star books attend a luncheon. At San Juan Middle School, the media specialist uses the list to teach technology by hosting a book talk teleconference with another school (11). Author Roland Smith stated that many of his fans are from Texas and know of him because of the Lone Star List. “Their emails usually begin, ‘I’m reading the books on the Texas Lone Star List and…”” (qtd. in Smith 13).

Summary

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report of 2004 received publicity in part because it showed a decreased interest in reading literature among American students. However, that report was criticized by some for how the study defined literature by limiting the definition to literary titles and excluding other popular genres such as graphic novels and audio books. Other studies, such as a 2008 study conducted by Newsweek, (Reno 2008) show areas of readership to be increasing.

Key to understanding student interest in reading is the definition for “reading.” If researchers include genres of high interest to students, they may find that interest in reading is not in a decline at all. Those genres include teen series and urban lit, graphic novels, digital audio formats like Playaways. Whether readership is on a decline or
increase can also be affected by how reading is promoted. Though Krashen and Kohn do not support prizes for reading, librarians such as Gustafson, LeLoup, and Collins are finding ways to connect with students by offering extrinsic rewards to promote reading. In order to have a true measure of student interest in reading declining, the definition of literature must be redefined to include audio books, Playaways, urban and teen lit, series books, and graphic novels.

Chapter 2 has presented research and an argument for redefining the definition of reading. Chapter 3 will answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1.
CHAPTER 3:
CONCLUSIONS

Whether reading among American students is declining or increasing has been studied and debated a great deal. There is dispute over whether nontraditional items such as audio books, urban literature, and graphic novels can be defined as literary genres. These genres are growing in interest for students, and these formats should be considered as acceptable materials for reading programs. This chapter will look at the researched reviewed in chapter 2 to answer the questions presented in chapter 1. Those questions are as follows:

1. Are there any areas of literature that are growing in interest to American students?
2. Does changing the definition of reading affect the perception of whether reading is declining among American students?
3. In what ways do school librarians promote reading to students?

Each question is addressed separately below.

Areas Increasing in Interest

Research shows that there are areas of literature that are increasing in interest among students. Newsweek reported that teen readership is on the rise. Sales of young adult fiction have increased in the past few years. Urban literature is an area increasing in readership among African American students. Series books such as Gossip Girl and Twilight are also popular among adolescent and teen readers. Graphic novels are a genre that has exploded in popularity among students of all ages. Playaways, a type of audio book that is quickly rising in interest to students as well.
Changing the Definition of Reading

From a review the studies, literature considered nontraditional reading is growing in interest to students. Studies conducted in 2004 and 2007 by the National Endowment for the Arts that showed reading was declining among students did not include series books, graphic novels, urban lit, or audio books. American Library Association President Carol Brey-Casiano criticized the NEA study for not reviewing library usage. Library usage has doubled in the past decade. Brey-Casiano believes the NEA study may not truly show a decline in reading but a change in reading habits. The NEA’s definition of literature should include audio books, graphic novels, urban lit, and series books. Expanding the definition of literature to include these genres would be a more accurate measure of how and what students are reading. Changing the definition of reading will affect the perception of whether reading is declining among American students.

Reading Promotions by School Librarians

One study indicated that a simple way librarians and book stores may have helped increase readership among young adults is by separating the young adult section from the children’s section. Separating the areas draws teens’ interest. Teens do not want young adult books mixed with children’s books.

Another way librarians are aiding in areas of increased interest is by being aware of and adding the items of interest to their collection. In 2008, the number of schools participating in the Comic Book Initiative grew from 8 to 160. Marianne Cole Fues, library media specialist in Jefferson City High School, believes Playaways could be the way to reach busy students. Fues writes that libraries are competing for student’s attention and incorporating technology is essential.
Librarians continue to promote reading as well through traditional promotions that involve drawings and prizes. Many states promote reading through awards programs such as the Mark Twain Award in Missouri and The William Allen White Award in Kansas that allow students to vote for their favorite books on the list. The Texas Lone Star Reading List does not involve student voting, like the Mark Twain and William Allen White awards, but instead librarians use the suggested list in various ways to create promotions in their own schools such as book talks or luncheons.

Conclusion

While some research has shown a decline in reading interest, there is evidence that reading has not declined, but changed. Student readers are increasingly more interested in audio books, graphic novels, series books, and urban literature. In order to accurately measure student interest in reading, studies and surveys should include these areas of interest. School librarians need to continue to be aware of, shelve, and promote all areas of interest to keep students reading.
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