

## WHAT IS READING: DO TEENAGERS READ? INTERVENIENT FACTORS

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### RESUMO

Foi realizado um estudo sobre os hábitos de leitura entre jovens de 15 a 18 anos. Existe uma clara diferença entre rapazes e moças no gosto de ler e na preferência de leitura. A natureza cultural parece ter pouca importância, mas ouvir histórias na infância tem uma influência positiva nos hábitos de leitura. As diferenças entre rapazes e moças nas suas preferências de leitura podem ser uma importante consideração para professores e bibliotecários que desejam trabalhar com a motivação de leitura dos adolescentes.

**Palavras-chave:** Hábitos de leitura; Adolescentes; Influência do ambiente.

### What is Reading?

What is reading? The complexity of the meaning of the word "reading" does not allow a clear definition.

According to Bellenger (1978): "Reading is to identify oneself with devotion or mysticism. It is only somewhat underground, it means abolishing the outside world, being carried away to fiction, or opening the imagination. Reading is often an escapism. It means the contact through touch, vision or even hearing (words can echo). People read with their bodies. It allows a person to be transformed by some life experience. It is expectation, a sign of life, an appeal, an occasion to love without the certainty that love will flourish. Little by little the pleasure of reading takes over the desire of reading"

What is reading? There is no point in looking for a simple definition of "reading". "Reading is no different from all other common words in our language, it has a multiplicity of meanings. And since the meaning of the word or particular occasion will depend largely on the context in which it occurs, we should not expect that a single definition for reading will be found, let alone one that will throw light on its mysteries" (Smith, 1985).

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According to Orlandi (1988): "Reading is a language pedagogy and social question all at the same time".

In view of the above mentioned definitions, we can begin to see why the decoding of words, called reading in schools, cannot be considered a pleasure activity and not even reading itself.

In the classroom, reading is not something the student associates with the comfort of his home where his mother would tell or read stories to him before going to sleep. On the contrary, the first thought of reading that comes to the mind of today's student is a boring and heavy chore.

"Letters, syllables, irregular verbs and other 'difficulties' imaginary and real, substitute the pleasure of reading and this way prevent the child from acquiring this pleasure" (Kleiman, 1993).

Many of the mistaken concepts of the literary text are problems of language, not of reading. After being taught to read and write, young children receive a misguided image of books and reading, transforming them into non-readers.

According to Valio (1984; 1993) studies on reading habits in Brazilian schools are rare. Some research is now being made for the very young reader. Today, the methods of teaching children how to read and write are reduced to repetitive and out-dated techniques.

A study carried out by Mellon (1987), on the reading habits of the adolescent, revealed some very interesting findings. Among these, some of the replies given by the young adults coincide exactly with the ideas of Bellenger (1978) on the base of reading mentioned above. One of the teenagers said: "I like to read because a lot of time the characters I read about influence the way I act after finishing a book. I like learning new words and reading about new situations. I try to imagine myself in the character's shoes. I think about what would happen and what I would do if faced with the situations in the books I read".

One student appeared to get more excited about reading as she wrote. Her reply began in small, neat script which read, "It's okay if there's nothing else to do." Then, in script of steadily increasing size and illegibility, her thoughts flowed across the page:

"Reading for fun takes you to different places and lets you be who you want to be. You could go to the moon, to New York City, or be stranded on an island thousands of miles from nowhere. Or, you can be an old lady in distress from robbers, or a beautiful young lady in love with the finest guy you've ever seen. With reading, you could be anything or anyone or go anywhere. It's great!"

Mellon (1987) found that 72% of males and 92% of females in North Carolina, where the research was carried out, are readers for pleasure. The adolescents like to read what pleases them and not what

the teachers push on them. Reading for pleasure is much more enjoyable than reading for obligation.

In England, librarians are also interested in discovering the intervening factors in teenager reading (Hill & Pain, 1988). Their research revealed that only 63% of young people used the public libraries, a percentage being made up of more girls than boys. The most important intervening factor in this investigation was said to be the distance from the homes of the students, despite this being no more than one mile at most. The main conclusion was therefore the lack of motivation to use the library. The adolescents said that going to the library was boring or they couldn't be bothered.

Interest is the greatest driving-force for the desire to read. It is behind all the attitudes that lead to the formation of a reader.

## Presumptions and Objectives

Investigations carried out in other countries have shown that the critical age for leisure activities lies between the ages of eight and thirteen (Cleary, 1972). This is the age that children demonstrate greatest interest in reading and going to the library. The subsequent group after thirteen years, show a sharp fall in reading interest. The study concluded that the main reason for this fall in interest is the lack of reading programs and opportunities to read in school and that the teachers do not try to revert the situation.

In Brazil, there is no similar study. For this reason, our proposal was to carry out such an investigation with second grade students, in order to verify what factors might underlie the lack of interest in reading in this age group. Although studies made in other countries can be used to formulate hypotheses, they do not necessarily serve as a model for our country. The research should be carried out for the social environment of this country where differences in habits, climate, and leisure and cultural activities will most certainly modify the results obtained. It is, therefore, our objective in this research to verify the factors that influence the desire to read among youngsters of the first to third series of the second grade.

## Environment of the Research

A sheet of questions was presented to students of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd series of the 2nd grade at two schools, a PRIVATE SCHOOL and a STATE GOVERNMENT SCHOOL.

Sixty students (30 boys and 30 girls) in each school answered the questions, regarding habits and factors that might influence their reading habits. The data are expressed as percentage of the total number of replies.

## Results

The results are presented in a Table 1, containing the data from both schools. The table is presented in the same format as the question sheet. The answers given by boys and girls are presented separately within the table, to facilitate comparison. The values represent percentages of the total replies for the question. Our discussion of the data will be restricted to overall conclusions and not to each question specifically.

The first conclusion we may reach is that there is very little difference between the two schools on nearly all questions. This, in spite of the cultural level of the student's family being higher for the private school (data not shown). There was a clear difference between boys and girls for many questions, but not all. In general more girls like to read than boys and less girls said they did not like reading than boys (Q4).

This is reflected in several reading habits. More girls read story books than boys whereas more boys read comics than girls (Q5). Nevertheless, the great majority of readers, both boys and girls, prefer magazines. Here, we did not ask which kind of magazines the students preferred, which might be important. In general those who said they liked reading story books were the same as those who liked reading whereas those who read comics were those who do not like reading (data of Q5 crossed with Q4, but not shown). Girls also preferred long stories to short in contrast to boys which also reflects the situation that more girls like to read.

There was no special tendency with regard to reading difficulties (Q6); the great majority of students find words to be neither easy or difficult to understand. Perhaps surprising is the low number who find words easy (less than 10%). Again, the majority (over 60%) of the students say they always understand the story that they read while almost no one said they do not understand (Q13). In these questions (Q6 & Q13) there was no difference between boys and girls. Most students prefer to read stories than listen to them (Q8 - above 62%) and there was a tendency for girls to prefer reading to listening more so than boys. Crossing the data of Q9 with Q4 we find that those who do not like reading prefer to listen to stories (81%), while those that like reading do not prefer to listen (7%).

**Table 1: Answers in percentage of the total for individuals of the 15 to 18 year group**

Items	Answers	Private School		State Government School	
		Boys (N=30)	Girls (N=30)	Boys (N=30)	Girls (N=30)
Q1-Do you read story books?	Yes	20	30	25	36
	No	18	13	18	8
	Sometimes	62	56	56	55
Q2- Did anyone read or tell you stories when you were little?	Yes	38	73	28	41
	No	13	2	30	18
	Sometimes	48	25	42	40
Q3- Who told or read you stories when you were little?	Father	7	5	5	7
	Mother	63	82	53	47
	Nobody	13	0	30	18
	Teacher	3	3	2	12
	Others	3	3	7	8
	Brother or sister	3	0	3	7
Q4- Do you like reading?	Yes	30	55	35	62
	No	15	7	20	3
	Sometimes	55	38	45	35
Q5- Which do you prefer:	school books	0	0	2	8
	story books	25	28	12	52
	comics	10	3	20	3
	newspapers	12	3	23	3
	magazines	53	65	33	33
Q6- Do find the word in a book:	difficult	15	3	12	17
	easy	10	3	10	7
	intermediate	75	93	78	77
Q7- What do you like besides reading?	listen to music	3	10	10	30
	watch television	8	2	12	2
	go dancing	2	67	8	57
	doing sports	80	12	55	5
	meeting friends	5	10	7	7

## Continuação

Items	Answers	Private School		State Govern- ment School	
		Boys (N=30)	Girls (N=30)	Boys (N=30)	Girls (N=30)
Q8- Which type of books do you prefer:	adventure	60	10	30	20
	mystery	17	13	27	15
	funny stories	15	5	17	10
	love stories	2	72	2	55
	science fiction	17	0	25	0
Q9- Do you prefer:	listen stories	35	22	38	17
	read stories	65	78	62	88
Q10- Do you prefer:	long stories	32	40	25	47
	short stories	68	47	75	53
Q11- Which do you most like?	sad stories	8	3	13	3
	happy stories	42	23	37	25
	or both	50	73	50	72
Q12- Which do you most like:	fairy-tales	8	28	13	27
	stories of witches	8	43	8	28
	ghost stories	83	28	78	45
Q13- Do you understand all the story you read in a book?	Yes	60	62	63	67
	No	5	3	2	0
	Sometimes	35	35	35	33

Reading preferences showed a marked difference between boys and girls at both schools. The great majority of girls (55% and 72%) prefer love stories while boys do not (2% or less!), preferring adventure, mystery or science fiction books (Q8). Again, in Q12, girls go for books about witches and fairy-tales whereas boys show a strong preference for ghost stories.

With regard to factor that might influence the student's reading habits, Q7 shows that the great majority of girls like to go dancing (55 - 80%).

An important result is that more girls than boys were told stories when they were small (Q2). The person mainly responsible for telling stories to young children is the mother (between 53 and 82%). It is

interesting to note that the role of the mother was much greater for students of the private school, which may be related to the cultural level of the family. Surprisingly, the father plays an insignificant role (less than 7%) but this may not mean that the father did not tell stories to his children, but that the mother predominated in this role.

## Conclusions

1. The number of girls that like reading is much greater than boys, for the 15 - 18 age group.

2. The different reading preferences between girls and boys is so strong that it is recommended that teachers with an interest in motivating the reading habit should take this into account when asking the students to read books.

3. The influence of the mother on the reading habits is strong and it is clear that telling stories to young children increases the possibilities of becoming readers.

4. The type of school that the students attend (private or state), which might in part reflect the cultural level of the family, does not seem to have a great influence on the student's reading habits. Although this may have some influence it is not the most important.

5. A more detailed study on leisure habits might reveal the importance of the many distractions present on the student's reading habits. In this study, we can conclude that girls show a great preference for dancing and boys for sports, but it is not clear to what extent these and other distractions are affecting reading habits.

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## SUMMARY

A study was made of the reading habits among 15 - 18 years olds. There was a clear difference between boys and girls in terms of the desire to read and reading preferences. The cultural environment appeared to be of little importance, but being told stories when young had a strong influence on reading habits. Different reading preferences between boys and girls may be an important consideration for teachers wishing to increase reading motivation of teenagers.

**Key words:** Reading habits; Teenagers; Environmental influence.