



GPA coffee — Research Review

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Raising (Gifted) Readers

The state of reading in America is often bemoaned in the press, often with dire statistics like the ones in this article:

*Recent findings indicate that Americans are reading less over time; more specifically, results showed a decrease in the rates of voluntary reading from childhood to late adolescence, with **only one-third of 13-year-olds reading daily**. Furthermore, the study showed that over the last 20 years, the **percentage of high school students who never or hardly read anything for pleasure has doubled from 9% to 19%**. Among college seniors, only one in three students reported reading for pleasure each week. Due to these alarming trends, we believe that reading motivation is an increasingly important research topic, [especially since] past research has shown that achievement in reading is related to students' reading academic motivation.¹*

What is the most important factor in keeping kids reading?

INTEREST.

It's simple, but it's true: students continue to choose to read when they are personally interested in what they are reading; research has borne this idea out again and again.

The good news is that gifted kids are usually readers to begin with; it's like they are wired that way from birth:

Gifted readers may read into the night, or read twice the number of books than average-ability readers. Reading fulfills an extra sense of urgency about

¹ Ho, A., and Guthrie, J. T. (2013) Patterns of association among multiple motivations and aspects of achievement in reading. *Reading Psychology*, 34:101–147. Also cited in this passage: National Endowment for the Arts (1997) and Guthrie & Wigfield (2000).

If you have questions about this article or would like more information or resources on this or any other topic, please contact Jill Williford Wurman, Director of Research & Development: JWW@TheGraysonSchool.org.

“needing-to-know” that gifted children seem to have. These reading behaviors are tied to the perception that reading is fun, and therefore, it is a preferred activity.²

Even so, how do we get them *really* interested in reading, and how do we *keep* them interested?

It's easy — let them read.

Let them read whatever is around, whenever possible.

Lego Club magazine? Counts as reading.

Hundred-volume series about fairies, devoured in 20 minutes each? They count as reading.

Anime books or graphic novels, which feel an awful lot like picture books, but cooler? They count as reading.

Books based on movie characters, or cartoon characters, or TV show characters? They count as reading.

Websites full of hundreds of awful jokes and terrible, painful puns? They count as reading, too. (No, really.)

And the parent's immediate question, after reading all of that: why should we indulge them and let them read these silly little things when it is clear to us that they are capable of *so much more*? (See mantra above.) Frankly, it's how they began reading, in the first place, probably — the STOP sign at the corner, the bumper stickers on cars you drove past, the signs at the grocery store — for a while, it was perfectly fine with you for them to read whatever they saw and could figure out...and it should still be that way.

Note: the “danger zone” of beginning reading happens when they have just started to learn to read on their own — the books they can read for themselves are flat, boring, and overly simplistic, especially when compared with the richly imagined, exciting stories they have been hearing their parents and teachers read to them. This may be a gifted child's first encounter with a frustrating reality, in fact: sometimes their brains are faster at one thing than they are at another (note: this precise problem will often occur or recur when students learn to write, as well, and they find that their thought

² Vosslander, A. (2002) Gifted Readers. *Gifted Child Today*, 25, 14-21. Vosslander also cites the following in this passage: Hartley, 1996; Halsted, 1998; and Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985.

processes zip along much faster than their little hands can record). Parents must keep reading aloud then, more than ever, to keep the spark of interest in stories and books alive while their child is building up the capacity to read independently.

It's true that gifted students are capable of tremendous things, and of advancing amazingly fast through ever more complex material. Those things are not likely to happen unless the student is *interested* in doing them, however. Short of being the Tiger Mom and strapping your child to a chair with nothing but a stack of Oxford World's Classics in front of her, there's no way to force your child to love reading — but there is a way to let children fall in love with reading: *let them read what they want to read*.

Why would you let them read whatever they want? Because if they do keep reading outside of school assignments, research shows that there are long-term benefits that the kids who learn to hate reading will miss:

- in one study, researchers found that the amount of independent out-of-school reading that a student does accounts for 16% of the variance in the reading comprehension of 5th graders;³
- another study found that amount and breadth of reading predicted growth of reading achievement during elementary school on different measures of reading comprehension;⁴ and
- the amount of reading a student chooses to do in his or her spare time even predicts participation in community organizations.⁵

The critical piece is that the child must be the source of motivation for reading. A great deal of research has been done on motivation, with regards to reading and to a plethora of other topics, and the pivotal factor in almost all cases comes down to **intrinsic motivation** (choosing to do something for its own sake or for the sheer pleasure of doing it) versus **extrinsic motivation** (doing an activity for an external reason, like a paycheck or a grade or to make someone else happy). Intrinsic motivation is also how we get to that “flow” state where we “lose ourselves” in whatever it is we are doing — and it is in that state, not coincidentally, that great creative insights are found and insightful connections are made.

³ Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1998) cited in Wigfield, A. and Guthrie, J. T. (1997) Relations of Children's Motivation for Reading to the Amount and Breadth of Their Reading. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 420-432. — This is one of many revised versions of their seminal 1995 work about reading motivation in students, funded by the National Reading Research Project of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland.

⁴ Cipielewski and Stanovich (1972), cited in Wigfield and Guthrie (1997).

⁵ Guthrie, Schafer, and Hutchinson (1991), cited in Wigfield and Guthrie (1997).

Here are a few other nuggets of information about students who are allowed to read what they are interested in:

Comprehension — Studies show that college students comprehend material significantly better if they are actually interested in it; a study of 5th and 6th graders yielded the same results: high student interest resulted in much better comprehension, even if the material was very challenging for the students.⁶

Girls vs. boys — Yes, there are differences between what boys choose to read and what girls choose to read. Generally speaking, boys choose books with male characters as the protagonists, while girls are fine with male or female protagonists. There is an argument to be made that boys' preferences for nonfiction texts can be ill-served in American classrooms, where the majority of teachers are female and have instead designed their curricula around narrative fiction (females' preferred genre). Additionally, girls generally respond to any book recommended by a teacher, while boys respond only to books clearly designated (with the inclusion of a male protagonist) for them.

Genres — While all children start out mostly interested in stories that fall into the fantasy genre, they all move slowly towards “realistic” fiction; boys move there more slowly than girls, who are by 5th grade reading almost exclusively “realistic” fiction.⁷

Breadth — When hundreds of students from different states were asked to name their favorite books, researchers found enormous variability of individual titles named in and across classes for all grade levels. Most books were named only once, fewer than 2 dozen were named 2 or more times, and fewer than 1 dozen named 4 or more times.⁸ Also, it turns out that students who were introduced to reading through a wide array of genres, story types, topics, and authorial styles were more likely to continue to read a wide variety of books as adolescents and adults: just as children who are exposed to different types of food when they are very young tend to maintain that adventurous palate for their lifespans, so too do readers develop a sort of “literary palate” that can be established early on as either very narrow or quite broad and wide-ranging.

Who influences what they choose? — Teachers and peers have a greater impact on title and genre preference than geographic/socio-economic factors, but they impact differently on a reader depending on their age and other factors. Classroom differences (which include effects from the teacher, peer, and environment) are greater across than

⁶ P. A. Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton (1994), cited in Wigfield and Guthrie (1997).

⁷ Boraks, N., Hoffman, A., and Bauer, D. (1997) Children's book preferences: patterns, particulars, and possible implications. *Reading Psychology*, 18, 309-341.

⁸ Boraks, N., Hoffman, A., and Bauer, D. (1997).

within regions, suggesting that gender and classroom play a critical role. In multilevel classrooms, this “classroom effect” varied for children at different grade levels.⁹ Children will sometimes pick a book just because another student in the class read it, which is a miniature version of what adults do all the time. Just because he set aside his favorite book on planets to read about volcanoes does not mean he won’t return to volcanoes; it just means he’s exploring new things that an intellectual peer also seems to like.

Teacher-directed reading vs. student choice — Teachers still assign books to the entire class, an approach both time-honored and still valuable, since group discussions of a text often lead to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the book at hand. However, the “reading workshop” model, espoused perhaps most notably by Lucy Calkins of Columbia University’s Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project, is increasingly appearing in classrooms. This method relies on students to select their own books (with teacher approval), which results in a more engaged reader who is more willing to spend time on more challenging books. It continually rewards students for taking small intellectual risks over and over again, and can be beneficial in helping gifted students overcome the avoidance they often display at the prospect of trying something unfamiliar. Studies reflect that reader’s workshop students score as well, if not better, than peers with teachers who assigned 100% of their reading materials. When one 8th grade teacher instituted the reading workshop approach in her classroom, 15 of her 18 students “exceeded requirements” on state testing, while the prior year she had taught those very same students as 7th graders, and only 4 had reached that level.¹⁰

Developmentally appropriate changes in reading choices — One thing you can count on is that their reading choices will change, and dramatically; generally, children move from picture books and fantasy toward realistic fiction by grade 5, for example. And a reader who will only bring home books with puppies or dinosaurs on the cover for weeks at a time will not be reading those books forever, so let them pass through this phase like they will so many others. Students will meander from topic to topic in their reading as often they change their favorite color (or their shoe size). Letting them evolve naturally and exchange one passion for another is an excellent way for you to let them explore the enormous variety of ideas and stories out there.

Finding books for themselves — While librarians are willing and able to help students

⁹ Boraks, N., Hoffman, A., and Bauer, D. (1997).

¹⁰ Motoko Rich, “A New Assignment: Pick Books You Like,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2009. Retrieved 8 March 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/books/30reading.html?pagewanted=all&r=1>

find books, there is a lot to be said for having them make discoveries on their own. The “open stack” library model is one that allows for serendipitous moments when a student comes across a volume on a topic that he or she might not have asked for or sought out, but is interesting to them, all the same.

Quality of reading material— Will students who are allowed to choose their own books shy away from difficulty? Will they ever read the classics — the canon of Western literature? (This is the, “Hey, I had to suffer through *Ethan Frome* in high school, and you should, too,” perspective.) These questions are fair ones, and there is still a role for assigned classroom texts, but students who make their own reading choices actually choose books with more complex language and ideas than their teacher would choose for the whole class, generally — and student choice is the most differentiated, individualized reading program possible, which allows your student to grow as much as possible.

So is there still a place for book lists and assigned reading and classic novels? (Will your child have to suffer through their version of *Ethan Frome*, too?)

Absolutely. But we are learning that the most important thing in creating readers is **letting them read** — as many texts as possible, in as many writing styles as possible, and on as many topics as possible. Let them think of the library as a playground of sorts for their brains, and see what they discover, what they try out, what they reject and what they love. It’s the best way we know to feed their hungry brains, and to grow a lifelong reader, while you’re at it.